

Preparing reports for parole decisions: Making the best use of our information — and time

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Parole officers of the Correctional Service of Canada prepare reports to help Service and National Parole Board decision makers manage the offenders' sentences. Their decisions cover issues ranging from custody and program assignments to detention past an offender's statutory release date.

Processing decision reports is a high-volume activity that involves many people — authors, quality controllers and end users — and consumes a tremendous amount of time. It is estimated that the Service creates more than 150,000 decision reports each year.²

The Service wants decision makers to have the best information possible. At the same time, it is concerned about the time its staff spends producing and reviewing reports — time that could be better spent intervening with offenders to help them return to the community as law-abiding citizens as quickly and safely as possible.

Although the Service has done much to change and streamline the case management process to improve this situation, one problem persists: case assessment reports tend to be too long and often lack critical analysis.

The author suggests that the source of this problem is a need to adopt a consistently professional approach to report writing. This article examines how this can be done, and how it will produce concise, focused reports that take less time to create and read and contain more useful information.

What information is required?

Essentially, the decision maker requires information in the following categories:

- **Static Risk Information:** a review of important (from a criminogenic perspective) elements related to the offender's social, psychological and criminal history that provide the background for an accurate assessment of the nature and level of the offender's risk at the time of her or his admission to custody;
- **Dynamic Risk Information:** a review of the offender's current level of risk in relation to such dynamic risk factors as progress in the criminogenic need areas;

- **Actuarial Instrument Results:** actuarial risk prediction to increase the accuracy of decisions and simplify the decision process (see the discussion below);
- **Risk Management Plan:** the correctional authority's long-term strategy for managing the offender's static and dynamic risk; and
- **Current Assessment and Recommendation:** the case assessor's proposed action (or response to an offender request), which should conform to the risk management plan; information in this area must be structured to meet legislative and policy requirements.

The good news for Service case assessors is that most of this information is already on file. Critical analysis in relation to static and dynamic risk and a plan to manage the risk are found in the intake assessment report, the criminal profile report and the correctional plan, three reports completed during the assessment of all newly admitted offenders. Intake staff also complete three actuarial instruments:

1. Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale – Revised (SIR-R1), for predicting general recidivism;
2. Custody Rating Scale, for determining initial custody level; and
3. Offender Intake Assessment, for producing a risk/needs level and ranking criminogenic need areas for intervention.

With all this material already on hand, the only extra materials required are an up-to-date assessment of dynamic risk factors and an assessment of any risk associated with the proposed action (e.g., institutional transfer, conditional release).

The precise nature of information requirements will vary according to the decision to be made. The choice of information should be based on the purpose of the report. Decisions for which Service case assessors prepare reports include:

- initial and revised inmate security classification;
- penitentiary placement;
- institutional transfer;
- fence clearance;
- program participation;
- conditional release consideration (e.g., work release, temporary absence, parole, statutory release); and
- interruption of conditional release.

risk/needs assessment form the basis of the offender’s correctional plan.

Correctional Plan: The correctional plan is pivotal. A well-developed correctional plan should be the most important document that a correctional jurisdiction produces on an offender. It is a strategic map that contains the best professional opinion on how the agency intends to manage the offender’s sentence and what expectations the agency has for the offender. It includes long-term, time-referenced goals (particularly for important sentence milestones like conditional release eligibility dates), program requirements and their sequence, offender-specific supervision techniques, and behavioural indicators related to the offender’s crime cycle.

The correctional plan is initially the direct product of the risk assessment completed at intake. Plan updates should reflect the ongoing reassessment of risk. The case assessor should be able to rely on the correctional plan as the starting point in preparing a decision report. The decision report should be, in fact, based on the plan.

Community Input: Significant information from collateral sources and parole staff in the community is necessary to ensure that the risk-assessment information in a decision report is complete and accurate. Input of this sort should be sought both at intake and when preparing decision reports.

What is the most efficient way to gather and analyze case information?

Offender Intake Assessment:

Correctional jurisdictions should obtain and analyze information as soon as possible after an offender is sentenced, when the information is available, recent and useful for creating a correctional plan. One payoff is that correctional officials can immediately begin to use the analysis to support decisions regarding the management of the sentence. This is a particularly wise investment of assessment resources, especially if the correctional jurisdiction can avoid repeating this whenever a decision report is prepared.

In 1994, the Correctional Service of Canada implemented the offender intake assessment (OIA) process, a systematic approach to assessment at admission to replace existing penitentiary placement practices. Information is obtained from diverse internal and external sources including the courts, police, probation, victims, family, employers and offenders themselves. The OIA may also include supplementary assessments in such areas as education/vocation, psychology, family violence and psychopathy. Using a multidisciplinary team approach and case conferencing, case managers at centralized intake units then integrate the information into a comprehensive summary report. For each offender, case managers provide an overall risk/need rating ranging from “low/low” to “high/high”. The results of the intake

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What constitutes a professional approach to report writing?

Although it is important that the assessor understand all file information, analyzing the case factors critical to a decision report should not take long.

The author of the report reviews and evaluates available information and chooses the information he or she considers relevant to the administrative decision at hand. In this regard, maintaining a professional attitude is crucial. The author should be asking:

“What information is important enough to include in my concise report?” Keeping the analysis brief and consciously *limiting* the discussion to essential information related to the current risk assessment will help quality controllers and decision authorities focus on critical elements in the decision process. In most cases, less is better. This approach will also reduce dramatically the amount of time spent developing, writing and reading decision reports.

Analysis is usually expressed most clearly in well-organized sentences. However, judicious use of point form may be appropriate when many elements are being considered (e.g., positive and negative factors) or to summarize important case circumstances (e.g., primary reasons for a reclassification of security level).

Important information from secondary sources should be summarized succinctly to capture essential factors related to the decision. The source must always be cited. The assessor should comment on the nature of the sources (e.g., offender self-report, family support, behavioural observations, specialized assessment), and the quality of information obtained (e.g., recency, credibility). The assessor should also point out and comment on any conflicting opinions.

The key is that the report author is in control and must, therefore, manage the selection of pertinent information. This does not mean summarizing all file information or providing detailed descriptions of past or current offender performance, it means including information that illustrates particularities of the assessment. The report should be succinct and focused on an analysis of the current criminogenic factors and level of risk.

Actuarial versus clinical assessment

The Correctional Service of Canada has the benefit of being able to offer its professional assessment staff the best in statistically based

instruments to assist in decision making. In addition to the assessment protocols mentioned earlier, other tools currently used include the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale, screening inventories for suicide prevention and living-skills programs, and supplementary assessment protocols such as the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument.

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The ultimate purpose of actuarial scales used in corrections is to assign a relative risk level to the offender (i.e., a ranking compared with other offenders). Decision makers use this ranking to help determine a level of intervention or management response (e.g., custody level, incarceration or conditional release, minimum frequency of supervision contacts, release conditions).

Why should we use actuarial methods in our decision practices? The Office of the Auditor General and the Correctional Investigator, two important federal government review agencies, have recommended that the Service increase its use of objective assessment in determining and reviewing inmate security classification. Research literature and studies clearly demonstrate that actuarial prediction tools consistently outperform methods based exclusively on clinical assessments. Actuarial methods

offer particular advantages over clinical approaches:

- they are generally more systematic and consistent;
- they are usually more accurate;
- they represent a more equitable assessment (clinical judgment tends to be more conservative to avoid “false negatives”);
- they offer greater legal protection for the assessor; and
- they are more efficient — the assessor is not required to explain his or her approach to the assessment and conclusions for each case.

This article cannot undertake a detailed treatment of this issue. However, the author refers readers to published works by Grove and Meehl³ and by Webster and colleagues⁴ that provide a particularly thorough examination of the issue of clinical versus statistical judgment in prediction and decision making.

Limitations to actuarial assessment

Although the use of statistical methods should be integral to the assessment process, report authors must be aware of some limitations of these tools. The SIR-R1, for example, predicts *general* recidivism, not the nature or the seriousness of the recidivism (i.e., it is not used specifically to predict violent, sex or drug recidivism).

Furthermore, actuarial results should probably be used with caution for gender- or culture-based subgroups of the offender population. Because of limitations imposed by the sample on which the original SIR was validated, the Service's policy at this time is that SIR-R1 results need not be considered when making decisions in the cases of female, Aboriginal and provincial offenders. The Service's Research Branch is now recalibrating the SIR-R1 to ensure that it is accurate for the current admission population and can be used with confidence on all federally incarcerated offenders, including female and Aboriginal offenders.

The Service employs a variety of actuarial tools and structured assessment protocols to measure risk and treatment gain. This ensures that potential limitations of a particular actuarial instrument do not affect the quality of assessment for a subgroup.

How can the Service's information management system help?

A structured approach to the electronic management of offender file information can help enormously in the production of decision reports. The information management system can do this by organizing information logically and automatically arranging information into

specific sequences when a decision report is needed. The system is able to assemble a draft report from information input by the various case managers who worked with the offender at previous stages of his or her sentence, and the current assessor reviews the draft for accuracy, adds new information and information related to the current decision, and edits the assembled product to make it flow properly.

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To perform these tasks, the Service has developed a procedure called the Risk Re-assessment and Management Process. It was based on the results of a two-year pilot in the Ontario Region, which produced a computer application called COMS (for Community Offender Management Strategy).⁵ COMS proved to be effective for linking risk assessment to correctional planning.

One of the objectives of the Risk Re-assessment and Management Process is to develop a fast method for creating professional reports. This task demands an approach that:

- is based on a strategic correctional plan;
- builds on the comprehensive assessment completed at intake;
- reflects ongoing assessment of the offender's risk/needs (combined review of static and dynamic risk factors); and
- takes advantage of electronic movement of file information to provide structure and consistency and to avoid duplication of report-writing effort.

Figure 1 demonstrates the key components of this process.

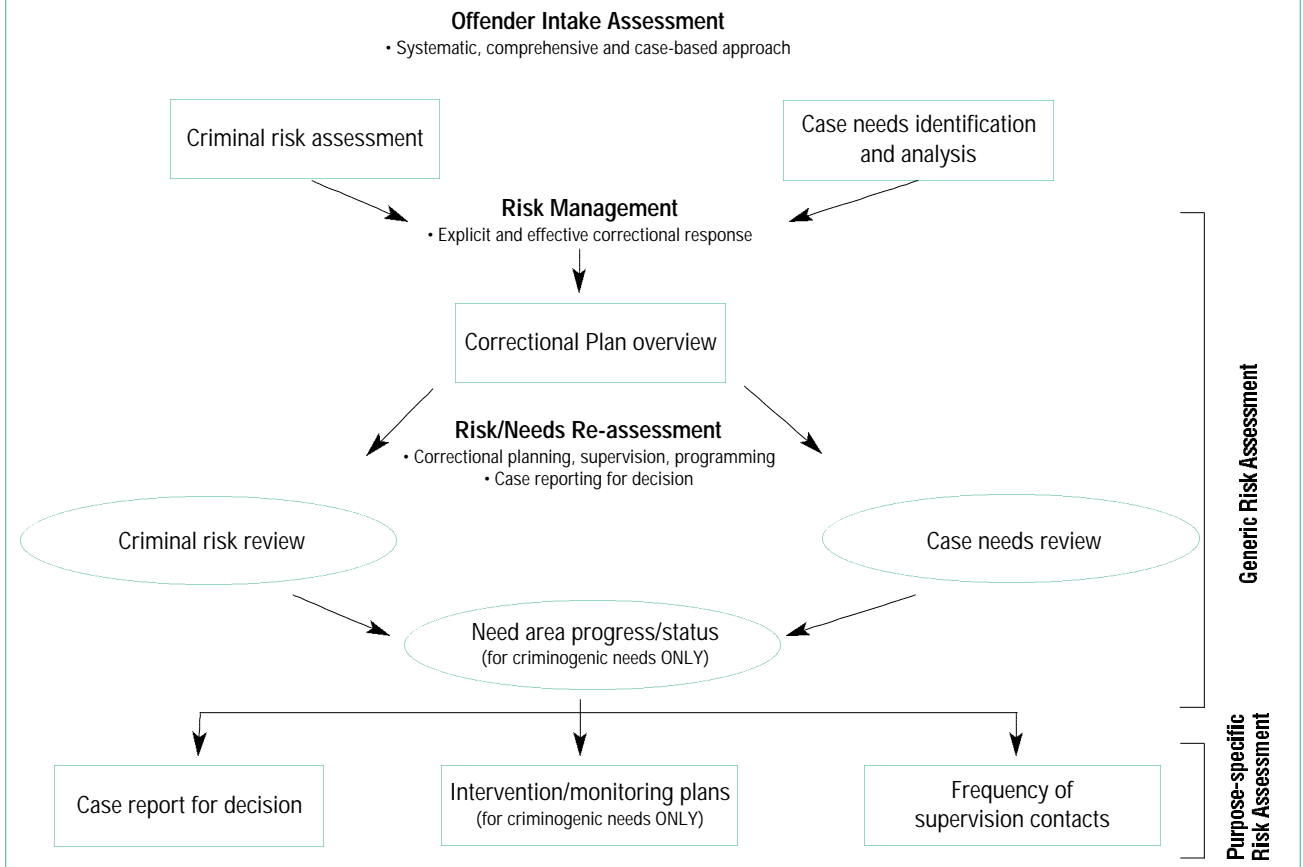
The Service is examining the new process as part of a national review of case management procedures that is currently under way.

The future of assessment in the Correctional Service

The Service is working constantly to improve its assessment and reporting processes. Recent case management reviews have emphasized the need to focus on static and dynamic risk

Figure 1

Offender Risk Assessment and Management Process



assessment and to use actuarial methods to their fullest in our decision practices. Results of the application of actuarial tools are being used to profile local and regional offender populations for community reintegration potential.

The Service is improving its actuarial instruments and developing new tools:

- the SIR-R1 is being recalibrated;
- the Custody Rating Scale has recently been validated again and has been adjusted to yield scores that reflect current assessment practices;

- an objective security reclassification scale has been developed and is being validated for national implementation by December 1998; and
- plans are being made to update the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale and expand its use for release planning.

We can expect these improvements to help the Correctional Service of Canada make better-informed, more accurate decisions — in less time. ■

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² Offender Management System, Correctional Service of Canada, March 31, 1998.

³ William M. Grove and Paul E. Meehl, "Comparative Efficiency of Informal (Subjective, Impressionistic) and Formal (Mechanical, Algorithmic) Prediction Procedures: The Clinical—Statistical Controversy," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 2, 2 (1996): 293–323.

⁴ C. D. Webster, G. T. Harris, M. E. Rice, C. Cormier and V. L. Quinsey, *The Violence Prediction Scheme: Assessing Dangerousness in High-Risk Men* (Toronto, ON: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 1994).

⁵ C. Townson, "An Improved Risk-assessment Process: Ontario Region's Community Offender Management Strategy," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 6, 3 (1994): 17–19.