



Measuring Evidence-Based Practices Implementation

Developing and Validating an Assessment
Tool

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Introduction

Senate Bill 678 (SB 678) provides incentive-based funding for California county probation departments to reduce the number of probationers going to state prison through the use of “evidence-based practices.” SB 678 mandates that the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) gather information on the extent to which each probation department has implemented evidence-based practices. To meet this requirement, the AOC developed an assessment tool that combines quantitative and qualitative measures of how counties are implementing evidence-based practices into a comprehensive measure of how far along each county is in its implementation. The assessment tool is also designed to provide meaningful information on the ways in which individual counties are pursuing the broad goal of using evidence-based practices in California probation. This report discusses how the assessment tool was developed and validated.

Evidence-based practices in probation

Evidence-based practices (EBP) are defined in SB 678 as “supervision policies, procedures, programs, and practices demonstrated by scientific research to reduce recidivism among individuals under probation, parole, or postrelease supervision.”¹ In practice, EBP refers to a set of practices believed (based on empirical and meta-analytical research) to induce and support individual behavioral change in people who have committed a criminal offense in the past. In the context of probation, EBP can be split into five main areas, outlined below. EBP is multifaceted, and these descriptions are intended to provide basic context to the following discussion, not to be comprehensive.

1. Risk and Needs Assessment
 - Accurate assessment of an individual’s risk to reoffend allows probation departments to appropriately target resources and interventions where they will be most useful. This is best implemented through the use of an actuarial risk and needs assessment tool to determine supervision levels and drive supervision plans.
2. Effective Supervision
 - Research indicates that the probation officer/probationer relationship is very important in affecting behavioral change. Probation officers can encourage or discourage positive change through the use of motivational techniques. At the same time, probationers must be held accountable for their behavior. Accountability is reinforced by the use of swift and proportionate responses on the part of probation officers whenever probationers misbehave.
3. Treatment/Targeted Intervention
 - Treatment programs should address a probationer’s assessed criminogenic needs and should follow treatment protocols that have been evaluated for successful recidivism reduction.

¹ Senate Bill 678. (2009). Chaptered. Accessed at: <http://www.courts.ca.gov/sb678.pdf>

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4. Collaboration

- Though collaboration is not strictly demonstrated to reduce recidivism, it is very difficult for probation departments to implement EBP without buy-in from other justice partners (such as judges, sheriffs, district attorneys, public defenders, and community-based organizations).

5. Management and Administration

- Similarly to collaboration, management techniques do not themselves affect individual probationer behavior. However it is difficult, if not impossible, to effectively implement EBP without organizational change. This includes the need for support and evaluation of probation officer work as well as departmental use of data for planning and management purposes.

Measuring evidence-based practices

Because of the complex set of principles and practices making up EBP, it is difficult to measure its implementation in a comprehensive and easy-to-understand way. To meet this challenge, the AOC created the Annual Assessment, an EBP implementation assessment tool, with the following five goals in mind:

1. Provide meaningful measures of EBP implementation to the state legislature that can be compared across counties.
2. Give probation departments a guide for what full implementation of EBP might look like in a California probation department.
3. Provide actionable information to county probation departments and to the state legislature based on assessed areas of strength and weakness in EBP implementation.
4. Measure change in EBP implementation over time by creating an instrument that would be able to capture both the expected low levels of implementation in the first year and future progress.
5. Carry out goals 1-4 in a low-impact and low-cost way that could be easily deployed in 58 counties.

The Annual Assessment was developed in the fall and winter of 2010 in consultation with staff from California probation departments as well as national experts in evidence-based practices Dr. Latessa of the University of Cincinnati and Dr. Taxman of the University of Virginia. To ensure that it was capturing the correct information and was easy for probation departments to use, the AOC went through a pilot and validation process in February and March of 2011. The final version of the assessment tool was reviewed by probation staff again in April and May of 2011.

The Annual Assessment was designed to be taken by the Chief Probation Officer or another manager at each probation department. There are three major sections in the Annual Assessment. The first section focuses on “caseload” questions, in the form “what percent of medium and high-risk probationers are assessed with a validated needs assessment?” Each question specifies the subject group and asks for a percentage range. Respondents are given the option to indicate whether this number is “tracked,” that is, whether this is a precise number from a data system or

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an estimate. The AOC's assumption is that, at least in the beginning, responses will be mostly estimates.

The second section is made up of qualitative questions. Each question is a general statement about evidence-based practices in the department, followed by four options describing ways that the department might carry out the practice in the original statement. These options serve as a continuum from no implementation of the practice to full implementation.

Questions from the first and second section of the Annual Assessment are designed to be rolled up into scores, including both an overall score and area scores matching the areas of EBP noted above, to give the legislature an easy way to compare levels over time. The scoring will also allow counties to compare their level of implementation to the average level across the state. The original draft of the Annual Assessment had 37 total scored questions.

The third section of the assessment asks about programs and services available in the county and is designed to give the AOC descriptive information. It is not included in the scoring of the assessment.

Pilot and validation

The Annual Assessment was piloted with eight counties, which received total scores ranging from 17% to 61%. Pilot counties were given an opportunity to comment on the tool and comments were incorporated into a revised version. Five of the pilot counties were chosen to be part of the validation process. Validity was only measured for the 37 scored questions, since the other contextual questions, 1) will not be used to measure the progress of the county, and 2) tend to be factual questions drawn from case management systems with less possibility for error.

Validity is, in colloquial terms, a measure of whether a survey question is getting the response it is supposed to be getting. Validity is calculated by comparing the survey response to some "true" or "gold standard" version of the thing being measured. Validity is reported as a correlation coefficient between the survey response and the "true" value (it can take a value between 0 and 1, where 0 means no validity and 1 means perfect validity).

The AOC's validation process began with site visits to five probation departments where the AOC conducted on-site evaluations of EBP implementation using interviews and case file reviews. The AOC then scored each county on the same questions that that county had assessed themselves on during the pilot of the self-assessment tool. Comparing the self-assessment scores to the AOC-assessed scores, the AOC found that the Annual Assessment as a whole had a validity of .89, above the generally acceptable cut-off of .80. However, this masked some problematic questions. Some of the questions on the self-assessment were answered in percentage terms, while some used strictly qualitative levels. The qualitative questions had much lower overall validity - .58 instead of .90 for questions that were answered in percentage terms. While the .80 cut-off for acceptable validity is not set in stone, .58 is too low of a validity

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coefficient to entirely trust the information coming from those questions.

The AOC identified the specific qualitative questions causing low validity and revised them in consultation with probation staff. In some cases compound questions were split into two questions. The final Annual Assessment has 41 scored questions. Information on specific revisions is available upon request.

Conclusion

While no quick and easy assessment will provide perfectly accurate results on difficult qualitative questions of implementation, the validation process showed that probation departments were generally able to accurately assess their own levels of EBP implementation using the Annual Assessment framework. The Annual Assessment will be deployed for the first time in July, 2011. The AOC plans to re-validate it in the following year with a focus on reviewing the new and revised questions and improving the rigor of the site visits.