

# How Screening and Assessment Work: Prison, Jail & Community Correction

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Assessments and screenings are essential in each process of the criminal justice system (CJS). These tools are usually used to create and/or prioritize management plans for offenders while incarcerated and post-release. Research supports the use of screening and assessments that result in a more productive and effective transition in-and-out of correctional facilities, in that they assist with identifying needs and risk factors that allow correctional staff and programming to target specific reentry needs.

Due to their utility to CJS process and reintegration, it is important to distinguish the differences between screenings and assessments, as well as acknowledge how the two supplement each other (Johnson & Hardyman, 2004; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004; Lowenkamp et al., 2006; Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015).

This brief is an overview of the distinctions between screening and assessment in the CJS. A commonly used model of the components necessary for effective screening and assessment is the Transition from Jail-to-Community (TJC) toolkit established by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) which will be reviewed as an illustration of the issues involved in screening and assessment that can apply in many domains.

**The TJC model<sup>1</sup>** uses what is known from research and evidence-based practices on prisoner reentry. The model consists of the following five elements:

***Leadership, Vision, and Organization— Collaborative Structure and Joint Ownership— Data-Driven Understanding of Local Reentry— Targeted Intervention Strategies— Self-Evaluation and Sustainability***  
*- for details see Christensen et al., 2012*

Finally, the Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS) will be discussed, providing an example of an effective tool currently used for offender management in the CJS and reintegration in the community by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) (Lowenkamp et al., 2006; Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015).

## Screening

In order to provide effective interventions including coordinated reentry initiatives in the CJS, evaluation of offender risks (likelihood of an offender re-offending) and needs (what is targeted in treatment) is essential in beginning the process through the CJS, as well as in offender management and community transition post-release (Christensen et al., 2012). The screening element of the CJS process detects potential risks, (criminogenic factors that influence the likelihood of reoffending) and needs of an offender as they enter each stage of the CJS (Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015). Screening tools assist correctional staff professionals when identifying who the offender is and why they are incarcerated, along with which general system resources would be beneficial to the effectiveness of an offenders' length of time in the CJS.

<sup>1</sup> While most of what is discussed is framed in terms of jails and release from jails, the basic steps and concepts are similar and beneficial in community corrections and additional settings.

**5 W's & 1 H in Screening**— *The TJC model uses the following 5 W's & 1 H method to help those using screening tools understand why they are important and how they are intended to make the processes within CJS most effective.*

**Who:** Any offender entering a correctional facility, or beginning a term of community supervision.

**What:** Screenings for physical & mental health status, substance abuse/withdrawal, and suicide risk should be administered to each new offender arriving. Risk-to-reoffending and pre-trial release screening should also be conducted in order to sort the offenders into risk categories (low, medium, high) and identify an offender's risk of failing to appear in court and risk of harm to the community during adjudication. Essentially, an offender's risk or potential for danger, inside the jail and/or in the community, should be evaluated during the screening process.

**When:** Screening should be an initial step in entering an offender into a correctional facility, or beginning a term of supervision. Upon arrival at the jail, during booking, before the first court appearance or at probation intake are among examples of the initial phases in the CJS in which screening is essential and most effective.

**Where:** During intake or soon thereafter (i.e. – central booking).

**Why:** Capturing the basic information about a person's need and risk will assist correctional staff when assessing who the offender is, why the offender is in the facility or on supervision, and what groups, programs, or system re-sources may be beneficial to the offender.

**How:** A valid and reliable screening process with valid screening tools must be used. This requires:

1. Systematically validated screening instruments.
2. A productive process to utilize the tools during offender intake.
3. Properly trained staff to administer the screening.
4. Administering the screening tools to the offenders.
5. Utilizing the information to flag those who will need further assessment .

Universal screening for all offenders at intake with validated screening instruments is an essential part of the criminal justice process. These instruments have produced positive results in offender reentry and tend to place the offenders in relevant criminal justice system interventions (i.e., drug treatment, anger management) that identifies, targets and alleviates certain risk factors (Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015).

## Assessment

The assessment stage in the CJS process is used to further examine and more fully document the risks and needs identified during the screening process at the time of correctional intake. The goal of assessment is to gather more detailed and specific information about the type, nature and extent of various risk and need factors that may have been identified in the earlier screening process, so that specific programmatic elements can be targeted to these risk and need factors. The assessment is needed in an offender's transition strategy when creating and prioritizing a treatment or reentry plan to be used and accessible at all stages of the CJS.

**5 W's & 1 H in Assessment**— *The why and how of individual assessment is explained in the TJC model by also using the 5W's & 1 H. It helps those who disseminate the assessment understand the importance of identifying offender risks and needs in the CJS.*

- Who:** Assessments are mostly used for a specified target population in need of rehabilitative and/or reentry interventions and recognized as having a risk for reoffending.
- What:** Commonly, individuals who are screened and score in a medium to high range are subjected to further, comprehensive assessment of criminogenic risks and needs, meaning environmental, psychological and/or physiological factors that contribute to criminal behavior.
- When:** Most assessments occur on an ongoing basis, beginning at intake and continuing throughout pivotal timeframes during the offender's time in the correctional facility or during supervision, as well as post-release. These assessments take place during all stages of the CJ process to address the changes or developments in risk and needs to contribute to an effective transition from jail to the community.
- Where:** There are several places where the assessment process can take place in the CJS. However, the privacy of the offender remains the primary concern when seeking to cultivate an effective, structured dialogue between the offender and the staff administering the assessment.
- Why:** Assessments help inform correctional staff about programming, mental and physical health care, facility placement, supervision levels and transitional care upon release. Identifying the individual's risk and needs, developing informed and effective offender treatment plans while incarcerated and post-release, prevalent criminal risk factors are identified and the level of support, training and time needed from staff, pre and post-release, are identified.
- How:** The development of a valid and reliable assessment requires:
1. Creation or selection of validated assessment tool based on the risk and needs identified in each offender (i.e. – low/medium/high risk, substance abuse, physical abuse, etc.).
  2. Have staff properly trained and familiar with assessment tools in order to administer them in a timely, effective fashion.
  3. Implement universal protocol for the administration of these assessments.
  4. Identify the inmates who are categorized in the subsets of inmate risk and need areas and will partake in further assessment.
  5. Administer the assessment to those in need of further evaluation at all stages of the CJS process.

The reliability and consistency of assessments is vital to effective treatment, interventions, and programming in the CJS. Using these tools as a means for comprehensive identification of offender risk and needs, at each stage of the CJS, will benefit offender transition from the facility back into the community and/or successful performance while being supervised in the community, will provide correctional administrators and staff with the proper tools needed to maintain effective and orderly management of the offenders under their supervision.

## **Screening and Assessment in the CJS**

Screening and assessment are essential and complementary to one another when developing a successfully, prioritized intervention plan for offenders. While screenings help correctional staff identify offenders who are in need of further evaluation of risks and needs, assessments are used to further this process and identify the specific treatments and interventions needed to ensure that individual criminogenic factors are addressed during an offender's duration in the CJS. Without the other, neither screening or assessment tools could operate at maximum capacity when identifying and focusing on the risks and needs of an offender that contribute to initial criminal behavior and risk of recidivism (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004; Lowenkamp et al., 2006; Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015).

It is important to ensure that the screening and assessment tools selected are easily accessible, user friendly, and bear in mind resources available to the facility while yielding accurate depictions of the offenders' risks and needs (Christensen et al., 2012; NIC: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015). Screening and assessment tools must examine specific offender risk and needs. Below are a list of some general questions that jail administration and staff should consider before selecting these instruments.

- Is the screen or assessment valid and reliable?
- Is the screen or assessment copyrighted?
- Is there any cost to use the screen or assessment?
- How much staff time is needed to complete the screen or assessment?
- What is the cost of administering the screen or assessment, including staff time and training?
- How much training is involved to administer the screen or assessment?
- Is medical, mental health, or substance abuse training necessary to administer the screen or assessment?
- Is the screen or assessment available in other languages?
- Is the screen or assessment available in electronic format?
- Can I administer the screen or assessment in an environment that respects the offender's privacy?

*(Source: Transition from Jail to Community Toolkit, 2015; NIC)*

Although these methods of risk and needs screening and assessment may be perceived as costly, in terms of staff time and other facility resources, it is imperative to ensure that these instruments are reliable, valid and versatile when addressing different levels of criminogenic risks and needs in order to provide the most effective jail to community transition possible.

## **Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS) as an Example**

The TRAS is a two-stage screening and assessment tool used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and other correctional agencies in the state, to detect specific risk and need factors in offenders, and then more thoroughly assess the level of these risks and needs, in order to determine the facility and/or community resources necessary for effective rehabilitation efforts during the offenders' time in the CJS (TDCJ, 2015). The TRAS was modeled after the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS) which was developed at the University of Cincinnati by a group led by Dr. Ed Latessa to aid in correctional management case plans, reentry efforts, community supervision, and post-release care (TDCJ, 2015). As knowledge of the ORAS's success became widespread, states needing a system-wide assessment tool in their CJS began to formulate their own model of the ORAS. Under the supervision of the Texas Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD) the state introduced and validated their own version of this tool to serve as a standard assessment tool for all stages in the Texas CJS (TDCJ, 2015).

The TRAS assists correctional administrators and staff by identifying offenders exhibiting risk and need factors contributing to their criminality and to their risk of reoffending. This detailed information then provides insight into the appropriate methods of supervision and transitional care planning for offenders in the CJS. Overall, the TRAS has become a useful tool throughout the Texas CJS and serves as an example of the contributions of increasingly more sophisticated and evidence-based screening and assessment efforts. The TRAS demonstrates how the instruments are supplemental in addressing criminogenic needs, risks of reoffending and aid systematic planning while promoting success CJS that transitions offenders throughout a correctional facility and back into the community.

Using the TRAS as an alternative assessment has been shown to be significantly beneficial in that it allows for a comprehensive overview of individual offender risks and needs. The TRAS highlights:

1. Criminal History	2. Mental/Emotional Health & Substance Abuse
3. Education & Employment Status	4. Social & Familial Ties

The domains provided above display many of the necessary layers found in correctional rehabilitation and community reentry efforts suggested to address factors that may reduce future criminal behavior; allowing correctional staff to effectively identify, address and deliver services aimed to meet the risks and needs of offenders.

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**For CMIT online:** [www.cmitonline.org](http://www.cmitonline.org)

**For additional info on 'risks & needs model':** [http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/risk\\_need\\_200706-eng.aspx](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/risk_need_200706-eng.aspx)

**For additional info on 'screening & assessment':** <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412669-The-Role-of-Screening-and-Assessment-in-Jail-Reentry.pdf>

**For additional info on 'risk assessment':** <http://nicic.gov/Library/Files/period269.pdf>.

**For the TJC toolkit:** [www.jailtransition.com/toolkit](http://www.jailtransition.com/toolkit)

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