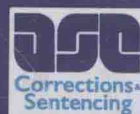


# **Handbook on Risk and Need Assessment Theory and Practice**

Editor: Faye S. Taxman

Series Editors: Pamela K. Lattimore and John R. Hepburn



# HANDBOOK ON RISK AND NEED ASSESSMENT

Theory and Practice

*Edited by Faye S. Taxman*

MANAGING EDITOR

AMY DEZEMBER

First published 2017  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-92776-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-68232-7 (ebk)

Typeset in BemboStd  
by codeMantra

Risk and need assessment has been one of academic criminology's biggest achievements and biggest disappointments. Although assessment tools are ubiquitous across correctional systems, they have fundamentally failed, to date, to alter the culture of correctional practice. In this urgent new volume, the most important and influential assessment researchers take stock of the successes, failures, and futures of the practice, exploring both the evolving science of risk prediction and the art of implementation. A most promising start to the new DCS Handbook Series.

—**Shadd Maruna**, *Professor of Criminology, University of Manchester, UK*

Accurate assessment of offender risks and needs is the bedrock of efforts to improve public safety. This handbook provides a critical foundation for advancing science and policy by illuminating the tremendous progress in assessment that has occurred. It is a must-read for anyone seeking to create a safer and more just society.

—**Daniel P. Mears**, *PhD, Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology, Florida State University College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, USA*

At virtually every stage of the justice system, new methods are being employed that enable decision-makers to use risk to the public as a criterion for justice system control. Yet even as these methods diversify, the empirical foundation for risk assessment remains a work-in-progress. Too little is known about the practical significance of risk as a core justice construct and the corresponding operational significance of risk assessment as a technique. This collection brings together superb studies of risk in the correctional system, both as an idea and as a practice. It is a welcome new contribution to our understanding of the most important development in the current generation of tools for the justice professions: risk assessment.

—**Todd R. Clear**, *University Professor of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University-Newark, USA*

The major strength of the *Handbook on Risk and Need Assessment* is that it provides researchers and practitioners with a comprehensive collection of chapters that helps chart the topic from its history to the implications for practice and policy. It is a must-have for anyone working or studying in the field of corrections.

—**Edward Latessa**, *Professor and Director, University of Cincinnati, USA*

One of the most intense activities by the many agencies responsible for managing accused or convicted offenders these days is assessment of their needs and of their treatment needs, especially for addiction or mental illness, or their risk in the community, whether that be on pre-trial release rather than bail, sentencing, and parole or probation release or recommitment decisions. This volume has pulled together a rich array of chapters from the wide variety of perspectives involved in assessing risk and needs from both methodological and implementation perspectives.

—**Alfred Blumstein**, *J. Erik Jonsson University Professor Emeritus, Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University, USA*

# HANDBOOK ON RISK AND NEED ASSESSMENT

The *Handbook on Risk and Need Assessment: Theory and Practice* covers risk assessments instruments used in justice settings, regardless of whether it is for those confined in prisons or jails, on probation or parole, on pretrial status, at arrest, or for other key decision points in the justice system. As the United States begins to examine how to move away from ineffective, expensive, and unfair policies that grew out of crime control efforts aimed at mass criminalization, risk and needs assessment tools have emerged as practices to recalibrate decision-making.

The ASC Division on Corrections & Sentencing Handbook Series will publish volumes on topics ranging from violence risk assessment to specialty courts for drug users, veterans, or the mentally ill. Each thematic volume focuses on a single topical issue that intersects with corrections and sentencing research.

**Faye S. Taxman**, PhD, is a University Professor in the Criminology, Society and Law program at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, and Director of its Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence. She is a well-regarded scholar and researcher who served as Chair from 2013–2015 of the American Society of Criminology's Division on Corrections & Sentencing.

## **The ASC Division on Corrections & Sentencing Handbook Series**

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The American Society of Criminology's Division on Corrections & Sentencing sponsors a series of volumes published by Routledge on seminal and topical issues that span the fields of sentencing and corrections. The critical essays, reviews, and original research in each volume provide a comprehensive assessment of the current state of knowledge, contribute to public policy discussions, and identify future research directions. Each thematic volume focuses on a single topical issue that intersects with corrections and sentencing research. The contents are eclectic in regard to disciplinary foci, theoretical frameworks and perspectives, and research methodologies.

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# INTRODUCTION

It is with pleasure that we introduce this annual handbook series as a forum for compelling and integrative research on topics that crosscut research, policy, and practice in adult and juvenile sentencing and corrections. This handbook series reflects a collaboration between the Division on Corrections & Sentencing of the American Society of Criminology and Routledge Press. The Division was established as a constituent unit of ASC in 1999 with multiple objectives, including “to facilitate and encourage research on corrections and sentencing for adults and juveniles,” “to facilitate and encourage research pertaining to sentencing, rehabilitation, punishment, community and institutional corrections, diversionary programs and alternatives,” and “to facilitate and encourage interaction and dissemination of research among ASC members, practitioners, funding agencies, policy-making bodies, corrections and sentencing organizations, and other relevant groups.” This Handbook provides one means to address these objectives.

We are at an interesting juncture in the United States with respect to criminal and juvenile justice reform and the implications of reform for sentencing and correctional policy. Following decades of growth in correctional populations (both institutional and community supervised), we are currently witnessing calls from multiple quarters to reduce “mass incarceration” through reforms focused on multiple avenues including decriminalization, diversion, and decarceration through either alternatives or reduced sentencing. These calls for reforms provide an excellent opportunity for thoughtful scholars, policy makers, and practitioners to examine current practices, to take advantage of natural experiments associated with changes in policy and practice, and to explore alternatives that may change the face of sentencing and corrections in the United States. Whether we are witnessing a true turning point that will return the size of criminal justice populations in the United States to historical levels or simply a leveling off of growth remains to be seen; however, there does appear to be a national appetite for moving beyond the policies and practices that derived from the “War on Crime” and the “War on Drugs.”

Of course, this Handbook is intended to reach beyond the shores of the United States. We anticipate comparative works, as well as international research and evaluation, as major contributions to the series.

The Handbook is an alternative venue for peer-reviewed publication beyond the traditional journals. Over the past 15 years, the Division has periodically addressed the issue of supporting a publication that would reflect the objectives of the Division. After exploring the possibility of sponsoring a new journal, the Division decided that a Handbook Series would provide a forum for longer “think pieces” and critical examinations of emerging issues in corrections and sentencing,

and their interstices. In particular, the Handbook is intended to provide scholars with an opportunity to write to specific cross-cutting themes with less concern about page limits and format. We are pleased to introduce this inaugural volume focused on risk and needs assessment and look forward to upcoming volumes that will address topics related to disparity and collateral consequences.

We would like to thank the wonderful members of our editorial board for their support and contributions, the editorial and marketing staff of Routledge Press for their support, and the editor of our inaugural volume, Professor Faye Taxman, for her efforts in assembling this important collection. We hope you find this volume informative and useful and that you will consider contributing to future volumes.

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# 1

## THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF RISK AND NEED ASSESSMENT (RNA) IN CORRECTIONS & SENTENCING

### An Overview of the Handbook

*Faye S. Taxman with Amy Dezember<sup>1</sup>*

Missouri's Chief Justice Ray Price (2010) in his State of the Judiciary speech: "There is a better way. We need to move from anger-based sentencing that ignores cost and effectiveness to evidence-based sentencing that focuses on results—sentencing that assesses each offender's risk and then fits that offender with the cheapest and most effective rehabilitation that he or she needs."  
*(cited in Casey, Warren & Elek, 2012: pg. 12)*

Policymakers' need to know the subsequent strategies for public safety and recidivism reduction might begin with a simple question: Do risk assessment instruments reliably predict recidivism? The short answer, according to years and volumes of research, is resoundingly: yes. But we must be mindful of what saying yes may mean. Adoption of a risk assessment tool goes hand-in-hand with fundamentally altering approaches to reentry and correctional management, supervision, services, and more broadly criminal justice practice. Ultimately, the process of implementing risk assessments within an agency should consist of more than simply adding a tool to the agency portfolio; it should result in a shift of corrections culture, practices, and policies.

*(cited in Desmarais & Singh, 2013)*

The Public Safety Performance Project at Pew put out an issue brief titled:  
"Risk/Needs Assessment 101: Science Reveals New Tools to Manage Offenders"

*(The Pew Center on the States, 2011)*

Most advancements in managing individuals in the criminal justice system *begin* with a discussion of the need for the adoption of a standardized risk and need assessment (RNA) tool. Standardized, valid tools are research-based in that they are built using statistical methods to predict desired (or undesired) outcomes. RNA tools are generally recommended at all decision points along the criminal justice system—from booking to pretrial release to sentencing to release from prison or jail to services. Standardized RNA tools, in theory, offer a science-based approach to regulate decision-making to avoid or minimize biases, decrease unnecessary discretion, improve proper use of resources, and/or increase fairness. As noted above in the various headlines of recent policy pieces, RNA tools are considered the panacea to better practice. Great promises are tied to the use of RNA tools, primarily better performance of the justice system at the system level to deliver