

# Using a Proxy Score to Pre-screen Offenders for Risk to Reoffend

February 1, 2006

Brad Bogue, William Woodward, Lore Joplin

**Background:** Evidence-based practice requires that offenders who are of higher risk be supervised and managed at higher levels and offenders who are of lower risk be supervised and managed at lower levels. We know from the research that to supervise low risk offenders too aggressively will increase their risk of recidivism and to supervise/treat high risk offenders too little will increase their risk of offending. Often probation, parole, and community corrections agencies find themselves in a situation where to provide additional services and oversight for high risk offenders, they must systematically move lower risk offenders to administrative or minimum supervision. In fact, why take the time and resources to conduct a third generation assessment instrument on low risk offenders who may end up in minimum supervision anyway? This leaves many jurisdictions with a conflict: if they don't assess using a third generation risk instrument, how will they know which offenders may be moved to minimum supervision and still remain at low risk to recidivate?

In an effort to resolve this conflict, some jurisdictions have adopted a *proxy* instrument, to act as a pre-screen for the third generation instrument. The *proxy* is designed to get a *first cut* assessment of offenders simply for the purpose of moving as many low risk offenders as possible to a minimum supervision caseload and avoid using the more resource intensive third generation risk tool.<sup>1</sup> The following is a discussion of one such proxy tool used in the state of Hawaii.

**Overview:** This proxy tool may be used to pre-screen offenders for risk to reoffend. Pre-screening allows community supervision agencies to triage offenders prior to conducting a full assessment with a third generation risk and needs assessment tool. The pre-screen process described here is a simple, three-question tool and scoring process that has been validated and is currently in use in Hawaii. The proxy score generated by the pre-screen provides a method of triaging offenders, separating higher-risk offenders who will move on to receive a full assessment from lower-risk offenders who may be placed in a case banking system, administrative caseload, or other non-invasive supervision.

**Instructions:** This pre-screen tool and its scores must be adjusted to match the characteristics of your jurisdiction's population. The following steps will take you through the process of developing a tool that is tailored to your offender population. A mock sample of offenders from *Agency X* is used only for illustration purposes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The NIC/NIJ *Implementing Effective Correctional Management of Offenders in the Community: Outcome and Process Measures* matrix recommends that jurisdictions committed to evidence-based practices collect certain data elements to build analytical models. The matrix measures fall into two basic categories: required and recommended, including approximately 20 required measures and at least as many recommended. The matrix's required measures include the three measures of the proxy screening tool described in this document. The matrix document can be found at <http://www.crjustice.org/cji/evalmeasures062205.pdf>

The predictive results of the proxy score are enhanced when systems norm and calibrate the scoring to their population. Actuarial risk norms can shift regionally or even across and within a single jurisdiction. Therefore, given this heterogeneity in how risk factors are distributed, deliberately and precisely norming and calibrating each version of the tool on a specific state or local jurisdiction population can help ensure enhanced predictive ability.

- 1) **Select Population Sample:** Begin by selecting a random sample (at least 300 cases) of active probationers including data for current age, age at first arrest, and number of prior adult arrests (Table #1).

<b>Offender ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Current Age</b>	<b>Age at First Arrest (AFA)</b>	<b># of Prior Adult Arrests (Priors)</b>
John	M	31.9	16.4	5
Bill	M	30.8	21.2	2
Robert	M	35.0	19.5	3
Meganne	F	30.4	21.9	5
Andy	M	24.2	22.0	3
Craig	M	30.7	15.6	4
Mike	M	26.9	17.3	0
Dave	M	28.7	12.2	2
Jim	M	36.1	16.8	2
Jack	M	24.7	22.5	0
Roger	M	29.4	20.2	0
Juan	M	29.9	23.1	1
Bobby	M	28.6	18.1	1
Gary	M	22.3	14.2	5

- 2) **Determine Proxy Score Criteria:** Use the formulas below to determine the proxy score ranges for your population. Ranges for age, age at first arrest (AFA), and number of prior adult arrests (Priors) are assigned based the following:

**Current Age:** A value of 0, 1, or 2 is assigned based on the offender's age, relative to that of the remainder of the population. Where a score of 2 = within the first third of the population (youngest), 1=within the middle third of the population, and 0=within the last third of the population (oldest).

**AFA:** A value of 3, 2, or 1 is assigned based on the offender's age at first arrest (including juvenile arrests). Where a score of 3=within the first third of the population (youngest), 2=within the middle third of the population, and 1=within the last third of the population (oldest). The use of offender self-report for age at first arrest is generally reliable. A question such as "How old were you the very first time you ever got into trouble with the law, arrested, ticketed, or given a summons?" will help to elicit this information.

**Priors:** A value of 3, 2, or 1 is assigned based on the number of times an offender has been arrested as an adult. Where a score of 3=within the last third of the population (highest number of priors), 2=within the middle third of the population, and 1=within the last third of the population (least number of priors). Use of offender self-report for number of priors may be more reliable than official records.

**Notes:**

- Arrest is usually defined as *not free to leave the contact with police*.
- For both AFA and Priors, reasonable verification of official records should be completed, so that in the rare case where records show earlier AFA and / or more priors, the younger age and / or higher number is used. Preceding the conversation with the statement that “I will be checking collateral sources of information to ensure accuracy of the data you give me,” will also help ensure the accuracy of the self-report data.

A sample of probationers was drawn from Agency X’s offender population as noted above. Using the “1/3, 1/3, 1/3” formulas described above, the proxy score criteria (Table #2) were identified.

<b>Table #2 Proxy Score Criteria for Agency X</b>				
	<b>0</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<b>Current Age</b>	>=31	27-30	0-26	
<b>AFA</b>		>=21	18-20	0-17
<b>Priors</b>		0-2	3-6	>=7

**Current Age:** This criteria assumes that Agency X’s case sample had the following breakdown of current age:

- 1/3 were 31 years old or older,
- 1/3 were between 27 and 30 years of age, and
- 1/3 were 26 or younger.

**AFA:** This criteria assumes that Agency X’s case sample had the following breakdown of reported age at first arrest:

- 1/3 reported they were 21 or older at their first arrest,
- 1/3 reported they were between 18 and 20 years old at their first arrest, and
- 1/3 reported they were 17 years old or younger at their first arrest.

**Priors:** This criteria assumes that Agency X’s case sample had the following breakdown of number of prior arrests:

- 1/3 reported 2 or less prior arrests,
- 1/3 reported 3-6 prior arrests, and
- 1/3 reported 7 or more prior arrests.

**3) Apply the scoring criteria to the population:** Based on the identified scoring criteria, scores are applied to the values within each of the three fields (Age, AFA, and Priors). The scores are totaled to provide a proxy score for each offender (Table #3).

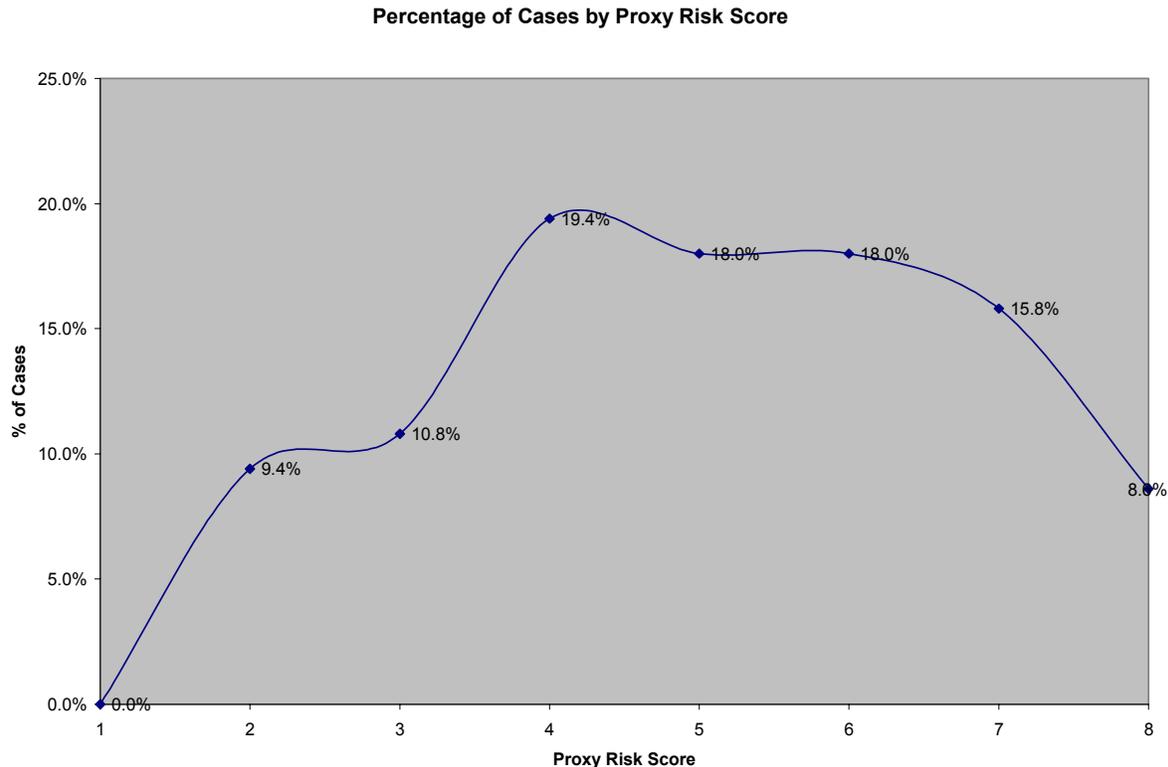
<b>Table #3</b> <b>Applying the Scoring Criteria (example cases)</b>								
Offender ID	Gender	Current Age	Age Score	AFA	AFA Score	Priors	Priors Score	Total Proxy Score
John	M	31.9	0	16.4	3	5	2	5
Bill	M	30.8	1	21.2	1	2	1	3
Robert	M	35.0	0	19.5	2	3	2	4
Meganne	F	30.4	1	21.9	1	5	2	4
Andy	M	24.2	2	22.0	1	3	2	5
Craig	M	30.7	1	15.6	3	4	2	6
Mike	M	26.9	2	17.3	3	0	1	6
Dave	M	28.7	1	12.2	3	2	1	5
Jim	M	36.1	0	16.8	3	2	1	4
Jack	M	24.7	2	22.5	1	0	1	4
Roger	M	29.4	1	20.2	2	0	1	4
Juan	M	29.9	1	23.1	1	1	1	3
Bobby	M	28.6	1	18.1	2	1	1	4
Gary	M	22.3	2	14.2	3	5	2	7

Tables #4 and #5 illustrate the distribution of the proxy scores for Agency X’s sample population. Figure #1 graphs the score distribution, illustrating a relatively normal curve.

<b>Table #4</b> <b>Proxy Score Distribution of Full Sample</b>	
Proxy Score	% of Cases
1	0.0%
2	9.4%
3	10.8%
4	19.4%
5	18.0%
6	18.0%
7	15.8%
8	8.6%

<b>Table #5</b> <b>Proxy Score Distribution Analysis of Full Sample</b>	
Mean	5.1
Median	5.0
Mode	4.0
Range_min	2.0
Range_max	8.0
N=	139.0

Figure 1



**4) Determining Triage Cutoff Scores & Triage Method:** Agency management must identify cutoff scores for determining which offenders will be triaged away from regular supervision and into an alternative or minimum supervision status. Examples of alternatives to regular supervision may include case banks in which offenders receive no supervision, but may be monitored for new arrests or law enforcement contact; administrative caseloads with high offender to officer ratios, and which are monitored only for basic supervision conditions; and mail, phone, or kiosk reporting.

Proxy cutoff points can be based on the percentage of the population desired by management to be supervised administratively, to free up officers to more aggressively supervise the higher risk offenders. For example, Hawaii found that they needed to place 40% of their case load on administrative supervision. Assuming the chart above is representative of a jurisdiction such as Hawaii, notice that using “4” as the cutoff point will allow 40% of the offenders to avoid the assessment by the third generation tool AND provide additional resources to supervise the more risky offenders. Proxy score cutoff points can also be determined simply by policy. For example if a jurisdiction only wished to have 5% of their offenders on administrative supervision, the cutoff point could be set accordingly. Finally, proxy cutoff points can be set based on correspondence with the third generation risk tools. So for example, if it is agreed that an LSI score of “18” or less is the appropriate level for administrative cases, the sample can be assessed using both the LSI and proxy. An analysis of the data can then tell management what proxy score most closely approximates the LSI score of “18.”

**5) Override Policy:** Develop your agency's override policy. An override policy allows an officer to override the proxy score and to conduct a full assessment on an offender based on specified criteria. There are two types of overrides: policy and individual.

**Policy Overrides:** Standard overrides based on agency policy regarding certain types of offenses, i.e., sex offenses, DUII, DV.

**Individual Overrides:** Overrides based on extenuating circumstances or concerns that an officer may have regarding an offender's risk to reoffend (despite a low proxy score). Agencies often require written supervisor approval to allow for individual overrides.

**Conclusion:** Adopting the use of a *proxy* instrument such as the one described in this paper equips corrections agencies with a cost-effective tool for pre-screening offenders for risk to reoffend. It provides a method for triaging those offenders with a low risk to reoffend into a minimum supervision caseload and allows agencies to prioritize and focus resources towards those offenders who are of higher risk to reoffend. This methodology aligns with the research, which indicates that agencies should focus their resources on supervising and treating those higher risk offenders.