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**Assessment of Evidence on the Quality of the Correctional Offender
Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS)**

Prepared for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)
By the Center for Public Policy Research
University of California, Davis

December 26, 2007

Authors:
Jennifer L. Skeem, Ph.D.
Jennifer Eno Louden, M.A.
University of California, Irvine

Disclaimer: This is an independent assessment of evidence on the psychometric properties of the COMPAS. The authors have no vested interest in commercial risk assessment products, processes, or services. The authors' interpretation of evidence does not necessarily state or reflect the views of CDCR.

Assessment of Evidence on the Quality of the Correctional Offender
Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS)

Prepared for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) by:

Jennifer L. Skeem, Ph.D.

Jennifer Eno Louden, M.A.

Contact:

Jennifer L. Skeem, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Psychology and Social Behavior
3311 Social Ecology II
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, California 92697-7085
Tel: (949) 824-3782 (Lab 4-1455)
Fax: (949) 824-3002
Home Page: <http://www.soceco.uci.edu/faculty/skeem/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The Office of Research, Adult Research Branch of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) commissioned this independent assessment of evidence on the Correctional Offender Management and Profiling Alternative Sanctions, or COMPAS. The COMPAS is a commercially available, computerized tool designed to assess offenders' needs and risk of recidivism to inform decisions regarding the placement, supervision, and case management of offenders in community settings. The department has been using the COMPAS to assess offenders systematically, 240 days before release to parole (virtually all offenders are assessed), and less systematically, upon entry into the system at reception centers (only some offenders are assessed). Ultimately, the department plans to administer the COMPAS to offenders upon entry into the system, regularly during incarceration, and upon exit to parole. The goal is to use the tool to summarize offenders' needs to guide rehabilitation programming in prisons and on parole, and to inform decisions about release and placement of individual offenders.

CDCR provided us with three reports to assess, two of which were produced by the developers and marketers of the COMPAS, Northpointe Institute for Public Management, Incorporated. Because these reports omit some methodological and analytic details, we advise readers to interpret our attempts to extrapolate these details with caution. We could not locate peer-reviewed or published articles on the development and psychometric properties of the COMPAS, but obtained the COMPAS user's manual from a probation agency.

This report presents an **assessment** of current evidence on the quality of COMPAS. It is to be distinguished from an upcoming empirical **evaluation** of the performance of the COMPAS, based on CDCR data. That evaluation will be completed by investigators at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The present assessment can inform the COMPAS evaluation (see "Directions for Future Research," p. 27). We strongly recommend that UCLA investigators evaluate the utility of the *existing* COMPAS scales in predicting recidivism. As shown in this report, investigations conducted to date have altered the COMPAS scales to increase the measure's apparent predictive utility. This will result in "overfitting" (see p. 9) of the risk formulas to the data, where enhanced predictive utility is more apparent than real.

Overview

In this report, we first describe the COMPAS, present principles from correctional and risk assessment research relevant to evaluating the tool, and distill the psychometric properties that the tool should have. Having provided this context, we next individually summarize and evaluate each of the three reports provided. Finally, we integrate the first two sections to evaluate the current state of evidence on the quality and utility of this tool. We conclude with the current suitability of the COMPAS for meeting the department's goals, and provide directions for further evaluation.

Part I: Principles for Evaluating the COMPAS

We evaluate the COMPAS in light of current research on offenders' risk of recidivism and criminogenic needs, or changeable risk factors for reoffense. Much of this research is underpinned by the "Risk-Needs-Responsivity" (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990) model of correctional treatment, which focuses on systematically assessing offenders' risk and needs, matching the intensity of services to offenders' level of risk, and targeting services to focus on reducing criminogenic needs and the likelihood of recidivism. Emphasis is placed on risk state (an offender's propensity to commit an offense at a given time) rather than risk status (the offender's risk of offense in comparison to other offenders). Risk state changes over time, and in response to intervention: risk status does not.

Our review of theory and research indicates that, to be responsive to CDCR's needs, the COMPAS must rest on sound evidence of:

- Predictive utility: it must contain a standard scale(s) that has been shown to predict *future* re-offending; its actuarial prediction formulae must be cross-validated with independent samples; and it must emphasize criminogenic needs that predict future reoffense;
- Construct validity: it must measure the criminogenic needs it purports to measure; for example, it should relate coherently to other measures of needs and capture change in risk state over time;
- Reliability: at the most basic level, it should produce scores that are consistent over short periods of time (test-retest reliability), different items (internal consistency within scales), and different evaluators (interrater reliability).

Part II: Summary and Evaluation of Three Reports

Having distilled the psychometric properties the COMPAS should possess, we reviewed the three reports provided by CDCR. In the first report, "*Evaluation of reliability and validity of COMPAS scales: New York Probation Sample (Updated with 24 month outcome study)*," Northpointe authors Brennan and Oliver (2002) analyze data on a sample of approximately 600 probationers. The authors use this sample to (a) describe the scores probationers obtained on the scales, (b) compute actuarial formulae that maximally correlate some COMPAS items with other COMPAS items (e.g., whether violence was part of a past offense), and (c) compute an actuarial formula that combines some COMPAS scales with other items to maximally predict whether these probationers had a future offense over roughly a two-year follow-up period. Although most of the report was devoted to (a), this was the only of the three reports that provided any data on the COMPAS's ability to predict future offense (c). However, the report does not indicate whether the original scales that comprise the COMPAS actually predicted offense in the sample. Instead, the report describe the creation of new actuarial formulae to predict recidivism in this particular sample, leaving the questions of whether (a) these new scales now comprise the COMPAS, or if the COMPAS still consists of the original scales, and (b) these new scales will cross-validate in an independent sample that was not used to generate the formulae. With respect to (b), we do not know whether the COMPAS will predict CDCR offenders' recidivism.

In the second report, *Parolee Needs in California: A Descriptive Analysis of 2006 COMPAS Data*, the Center for Evidence-Based Corrections author, Jeffrey Lin (2007), uses COMPAS data to describe parolees' criminogenic needs, in an effort to inform CDCR's rehabilitative programming efforts. In March of 2006, parole staff began administering the COMPAS to (a) prisoners with a new commitment who were soon to be released to parole, and (b) parole violators with a new court sentence who had served longer than six months. Lin uses COMPAS data collected between March and July of 2006 on this select group of 11,140 offenders to estimate their educational, vocational, financial, and substance-related needs. The data provided in this report are purely descriptive, and provide little information relevant to evaluating the tool.

In the third and final report, *California Department of Corrections, Parole and Community Services Division: COMPAS Pilot Psychometric Report*, Northpointe authors Brennan, Dietrich, and Oliver (2006) analyze data on 1,077 inmates that predate the much larger sample described by Lin (2007). The authors use this sample to (a) describe the scores that these inmates obtained on the scales, and how these scores compare with a (largely undefined) COMPAS normative sample of 7,381 offenders, (b) correlate scores on 11 original COMPAS scales with criminal history variables available in the CDCR database, (c) correlate the COMPAS scales with one another, and (d) compute actuarial formulas that maximally correlate some COMPAS items with other COMPAS items (e.g., whether violence was part of a past offense). Although there is some data to suggest that the COMPAS scales described in this report are internally consistent (a form of reliability), this report provides no data about the ability of the COMPAS to predict offenders' future reoffense. Further, as noted in Lin's (2007) report, the representativeness of the sample used in this report is questionable, given that certain groups of offenders (e.g., those serving less than six months; those not released from these 29 CDCR institutions; those with identified mental health or substance abuse problems) were excluded altogether from sampling.

Part III: Conclusion and Recommendations

The strengths of the COMPAS are that it appears relatively easy for professionals to apply, looks like it assesses criminogenic needs, possesses mostly homogeneous scales, and generates reports that describe how high an offender's score is on those scales, relative to other offenders in that jurisdiction. In short, we can reliably assess something that looks like criminogenic needs and recidivism risk with the COMPAS. The problem is that there is little evidence that this is what the COMPAS actually assesses.

On page 27, we summarize the psychometric properties of the COMPAS, based on the three reports reviewed. As shown in that table, available evidence provides sound support only for the internal consistency of the COMPAS scales. There is no sound evidence that the COMPAS can be rated consistently by different evaluators, that it assesses the criminogenic needs it purports to assess, and (most importantly) that it predicts inmates' recidivism for CDCR offenders.

Given the current state of evidence, we cannot recommend that the CDCR utilize the COMPAS with individual offenders. Although the COMPAS has a number of strengths, we strongly believe that more research and information are needed before CDCR can rely on this tool to meet its needs. At the conclusion of the report (pp. 28-29), we provide directions for future research, including the UCLA evaluation of the COMPAS.

PART I: DESCRIPTION AND ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

Describing the COMPAS

Understanding Research that Contextualizes the COMPAS

Distilling Desirable Properties of a Risk-Needs Tool for CDCR

Describing the COMPAS

The Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) is a tool for assessing risk and needs for offenders in correctional settings developed by Northpointe Institute for Public Management, Incorporated. Risk may be defined as the likelihood of re-offending in the future. Criminogenic needs are dynamic factors that, when changed, may or may not reduce risk of recidivism (see p. 7, below). The COMPAS assesses risk and needs to inform decisions regarding offender release, placement and management. The description that appears here is based primarily on the COMPAS manual by Brennan, Fretz, and Wells (2003).

The COMPAS is comprised of five types of scales: basic scales, higher order scales, validity tests, professional judgments, and risk scales. First, the basic scales tap Criminal Behavior (five subscales), Needs and Social Factors (eight scales), and Personality, Cognitions, and Social Isolation (three scales). Second, the higher order scales select items from the basic scales to tap three concepts deemed particularly relevant to reoffending: Delinquency Problems, Criminal Opportunity, and Resources/Social Capital. Third, the two validity scales are designed to assess when offenders respond defensively or carelessly to self report survey questions. Fourth, the professional judgment scales are criminal justice professionals' subjective judgment about the offender's risk. Fifth, risk scales are provided for four "outcomes:" violence, recidivism, failure to appear, and community non-compliance.

Practically speaking, the COMPAS is software designed for easy and efficient use by such criminal justice professionals as probation officers and parole agents. It is not clear whether professionals are trained on the COMPAS, and how intensive that training might be. However, agencies are permitted to select particular COMPAS scales and leave others out, depending upon their needs and resources. COMPAS relies upon two types of data: (1) data gathered from an offenders' official record by a criminal justice professional, and (2) offenders' responses to questions that may be administered via either a paper and pencil survey or interview with a professional.

These data are entered into the COMPAS software. This software appears to compute two main variables: (1) a description of how high the offender's scores are across scales, relative to normative data, and (2) an estimate of the offender's "risk" of violence, recidivism, FTA, and community non-compliance (note that authors change the number and nature of risk scales over time). First, the software collects normative data for each agency so that an offender's scores on the scales can be compared with those of other offenders in that agency. Normative data simply describe the distribution of COMPAS scores in a given sample of people to tell the user whether the offender's score is low, medium, or high, compared to that group of people (COMPAS attempts to generate deciles and quartiles to convey this information). Second, the software uses actuarial formulas to compute "risk" scores. Specifically, statistical criteria are applied to select variables from the COMPAS and attach weights to them to maximally postdict four "outcome" variables. Most of these outcomes do not occur in the future. Instead, they are variables drawn from the COMPAS itself. For example, the outcome variable for violence is a COMPAS item that codes whether the offender's *past* offense was violent, not an independent measure of whether a violent re-offense occurred in the *future*, after the COMPAS assessment. These "risk" variables are normed for the agency and interpreted as low, medium, or high, compared to other offenders in the agency.

In addition to providing normed scores across all scales, and “risk” estimates, the COMPAS yields a case-management plan for each offender. The bases for the plan, or how the plan is derived, are not described. The COMPAS manual lists four other uses, but they are not described in the manual or supplementary materials: tracking criminal justice decisions, tracking treatment and intervention, monitoring outcomes, and monitoring program implementation.

According to the materials provided by Northpointe, the COMPAS was developed based on criminological theory and empirical research on risk and needs factors for offenders. The manual asserts that the COMPAS was validated using a three-stage approach described by Millon (1997), which includes initial item selection, subsequent scale development and scale refinement, and external criterion-related validation. Although the manual does not detail the development of the COMPAS, some relevant information is provided in the reports summarized later.

Understanding Research that Contextualizes the COMPAS

In this section, we summarize two bodies of research that are directly relevant to evaluating the COMPAS. First, we provide a synopsis of the principles of effective correctional treatment, given that the CDCR wants to use the COMPAS to improve correctional programming to reduce recidivism. Second, we define key principles from the risk assessment literature, given that the COMPAS may essentially be viewed as a tool for assessing and reducing risk.

Correctional Treatment: The Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model

The COMPAS appears derivative of the “Risk-Needs-Responsivity” (RNR; Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990) model of effective correctional treatment, and assessment tools specifically designed to support that model (Andrews & Bonta, 1995; Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2004). In this section, we define the elements of the well-validated RNR model because (a) the reader must understand some of these elements to evaluate the COMPAS, and (b) the field’s awareness of empirical support for this model largely is responsible for the reintroduction of rehabilitation efforts in corrections.

The following excerpt from Dowden and Andrews (2000, pp. 451-452, emphasis added) describes these three principles of effective correctional treatment.

The principles of risk, need, and general responsivity answer questions relating to the who, the what, and the how of correctional intervention.... The risk principle states that the level of treatment services must be appropriately matched to the risk level of the offender. More specifically, higher-risk offenders should receive more intensive and extensive services whereas lower-risk clients should receive minimal or no intervention. The risk principle has received some empirical support from within both primary (Andrews and Kiessling 1980; Baird, Heinz, and Bemus 1979; O'Donnell, Lydgate, and Fo 1979) and meta-analytic (Andrews et al. 1990; Dowden and Andrews 1999a; Dowden 1998) studies.

The need principle focuses specifically on offender needs and classifies them into two separate categories. The first category, **criminogenic needs**, are defined as dynamic risk factors that, when changed, are associated with reduced levels of criminal activity (Andrews and Bonta 1998; Andrews, Bonta, and Hoge 1990; Andrews et al. 1990). Examples of criminogenic needs include antisocial attitudes, antisocial feelings, chemical dependencies, and poor parental affective and supervision skills. The second category, termed **noncriminogenic needs**, are also dynamic, but changes in these particular need areas are not associated with subsequent reductions in criminal activity. Examples of noncriminogenic needs include level of self-esteem [or] focusing on vague emotional/personal problems unrelated to criminal activity...

The need principle provides important information regarding the types of offender needs that should be targeted within a correctional treatment program. More specifically, **the need principle states that if the end goal of treatment is reduced recidivism, then the criminogenic needs of offenders must be targeted.** Although the need principle recognizes that targeting noncriminogenic needs of offenders may also be important for reasons other than reducing

recidivism, it warns that targeting these areas should not be expected to reduce reoffending. Therefore, when public protection is a goal of correctional programming, programs should predominantly focus on targeting criminogenic as opposed to noncriminogenic needs.

The third and final principle of effective correctional treatment, responsivity, has received the least amount of attention in the research literature. This principle is directly concerned with the characteristics of program delivery, and it states that the styles and modes of service used within a treatment program should be matched to the learning styles of offenders (Andrews and Bonta 1998).

The need principle bears emphasis. The effectiveness of programs is positively associated with the number of criminogenic needs they target (i.e., dynamic risk factors for crime, like negative peer associations), relative to noncriminogenic needs (i.e., disturbances that impinge on an individual's functioning in society, like anxiety; Andrews et al., 2006). **Thus, a risk-needs tool should emphasize criminogenic needs that have been shown to predict future re-offense.**

Risk Assessment: Purposes, Principles, and Tools

The COMPAS is, in large part, a risk assessment tool. In this section, we review contemporary risk assessment principles that are directly relevant to evaluating the COMPAS.

Assessing Risk to Reduce Recidivism: The Importance of Risk State

The CDCR intends to use the COMPAS to inform programming and to monitor and reduce individual offenders' risk over time. Given this purpose, it is crucial that COMPAS be sensitive to relevant intrapersonal and contextual changes that occur during incarceration and community supervision. In other words, the tool must capture both an offender's risk status and risk state (see Douglas & Skeem, 2005). **Risk status** is *interindividual* risk level: it identifies an offender who is at high risk of recidivism, relative to other offenders. Risk status highlights static, unchangeable risk factors for recidivism like age of first offense and number of prior offenses. High risk status gives professionals an idea that supervision and treatment services should be intensive, thereby providing CDCR with the means to follow the RNR model's risk principle in planning rehabilitation programs (see above). However, risk status does little to direct specific management or intervention efforts toward meaningful targets. It also provides offenders with little incentive to participate in programming, engage in pro-social behavior, avoid infractions, and generally make an effort to change. A parole board cannot advise an inmate to "undo" his past commission of an assault. They can, however, advise him to work on developing more pro-social attitudes.

A tool must go beyond risk status to tap risk state (a) to provide offenders with such incentives, (b) to guide risk management and reduction efforts, and (c) to permit CDCR with the means to follow the RNR model's need principle in planning rehabilitation programs (see above). **Risk state** is *intraindividual* risk level, or an individual's propensity to commit an offense at a given time. Risk state highlights such dynamic risk factors as substance abuse, recognizing that even a high risk offender's potential for recidivism ebbs and flows over time. As noted by Dvoskin and Heilbrun (2001, p. 8):

An individual's risk [state] may be seen as changing over time and in response to interventions, as contrasted with the single, unchanging risk [status] estimate

yielded under the prediction model by actuarial tools that use static (unchangeable through planned intervention) risk factors.

Leading risk assessment tools have been shown to overlap in tapping such static factors as criminal history and problematic personality traits (Kroner, Mills, & Reddon, 2005), and they possess similar levels of predictive utility (e.g., Douglas & Webster, 1999; Grann, Belfrage, & Tengstrom, 2000; Kroner & Mills, 2001). **To be responsive to CDCR's needs, the COMPAS must be capable of capturing change in risk state over time.** To do so, the tool must emphasize dynamic risk factors, also known as criminogenic needs. Any actuarial formulas must include such factors to capture risk state. To the extent that the COMPAS meets this goal, it's classification as a risk assessment tool that can guide supervision is justified (see Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006).

Classifying the COMPAS: Basic Types of Risk Assessment Tools

Research robustly indicates that unstructured clinical risk assessments are less accurate than those that rely upon assessment tools (e.g., Grove & Meehl, 1996). Two basic types of risk assessment tools have been shown to improve accuracy: actuarial tools and structured professional judgment (SPJ) tools. **SPJ tools** focus the evaluators' attention on a set of risk factors that have been shown empirically to relate to recidivism. Evaluators use their judgment to make final risk decisions of low, moderate, or high for recidivism. **Actuarial tools** make decisions mechanically, in the tradition of predicting insurance hazards or tornadoes. Ideally, information is routinely collected on variables that may predict recidivism, based on a very large sample of offenders. That information is analyzed statistically using regression-based actuarial risk assessment models. Items are statistically selected and weighted in a formula that will optimize the prediction of recidivism in that sample.

It is important to note two things about actuarial tools. First, although these tools could, in theory, include dynamic risk factors, **extant actuarial measures heavily weight static variables.** Second, it is **crucial to cross-validate actuarial tools in independent samples.** These actuarial formulas are developed in a manner that will tightly fit ("**over fit**") the sample in which they are developed. The formulas are constructed based on associations between variables in that particular sample - including chance or error associations - and are apt to lose predictive power when applied to new samples (Monahan et al., 2005). In other words, the accuracy of the tool is overestimated in the derivation sample, and prediction error will be underestimated. It is necessary to determine whether the formula developed in one sample actually generalizes to, and "works" in, another sample.

The COMPAS is a complex tool that is difficult to classify. First, it has five types of scales and numerous items, but only a small number of scales and items seem to contribute to risk estimates. Second, because agencies are allowed to select or omit particular COMPAS scales, this tool has no standard structure. Leading risk/needs tools have a standard structure and yield scores that easily can be assessed in independent investigations for predictive utility.

Despite these complications, **the chief risk assessment scales of the COMPAS are actuarial.** The COMPAS shares some features of the SPJ approach, including logical item selection and the inclusion of structured professional judgment scales. However, the available reports cast these judgments as variables eligible for inclusion in actuarial formulas (see pp. 18-19), rather than final products of the risk assessment process.

Distilling Desirable Properties of a Risk-Needs Tool for CDCR

There are a number of properties a risk/needs tool should have, to meet the needs articulated by CDCR. These include predictive utility, construct validity, and reliability. Each feature is defined here.

Predicting Future Recidivism: Predictive Utility

The form of validity that dominates the risk assessment enterprise is predictive utility. **The COMPAS must have sound evidence that it predicts future re-offending.** Given the parole release context, the most relevant forms of re-offense include violent recidivism, general recidivism, and technical violations. If CDCR is interested in using the tool for institutional placement, the COMPAS should also predict institutional violence and other forms of infractions.

In evaluating the predictive utility of the COMPAS, two elements are particularly important. First, the **COMPAS should generate a standard score that can be evaluated across studies as the “predictor.”** Second, because a risk assessment tool is only as good as the criterion against which it is validated (Thorndike, 1949), **the outcome variable of recidivism must be measured in the future.** Although some risk assessment studies involve “postdicting” offenses that occurred *prior* to the risk assessment, they provide little evidence of a measure’s predictive utility. Prediction infinitely is more difficult than postdiction, largely because measuring the criterion retrospectively can contaminate the criterion and inflate postdiction estimates. Criterion contamination is exacerbated when the criterion is drawn from the risk assessment tool itself. Here, the predictor and criterion share method variance: they will be correlated because they both were measured by the same rater(s), using the same source(s) of information. In essence, the investigator may be viewed as correlating something (e.g., whether an index offense was violent) with itself (e.g., other aspects of the index offense and larger criminal history).

To interpret the estimates of the COMPAS’ postdictive and predictive utility, the reader should have a conceptual understanding of the statistic most often used, and how it compares with other leading risk assessment tools. The **Area Under the Curve (AUC)** describes the chance that a randomly selected offender who reoffends will obtain a higher score on a risk assessment tool than a randomly selected offender who does not reoffend. True studies of predictive utility involving prospective designs and (when relevant) cross-validation samples suggest that leading risk assessment tools are moderately effective in predicting recidivism, with estimates generally hovering at hovering at $AUC \approx .70$ (see Glover, Nicholson, Hemmati, Bernfeld, & Quinsey, 2002; Kroner & Mills, 2005).

Note that the COMPAS has validity scales that are designed to detect when offenders are distorting their responses. These scales can be evaluated for their utility in predicting whether an individual is, or is not, distorting responses. Typically, this is done in an experimental design because it is difficult to determine when offenders are dissimulating.

Capturing Criminogenic Need: Construct Validity

The overriding concern for predictive utility is the degree of successful prediction of recidivism, regardless of whether one can explain the process that led to the reoffense. If one found that accuracy in playing street dice correlated highly with reoffense, street dice accuracy would be a

valid measure for predicting recidivism (see Nunnally, 1978). Predictive utility in a risk assessment tool will allow the CDCR to follow the risk principle in the RNR model. However, CDCR wishes to go beyond matching high intensity services to high-risk offenders. The department also wishes to develop programs that will reduce risk.

To achieve this end, CDCR must use a tool that captures criminogenic needs or dynamic risk factors for re-offense. **The COMPAS must have evidence of construct validity, or evidence that it measures the criminogenic needs it purports to measure.** Construct validity can be inferred through logical analysis, internal structure analysis, and cross-structure analysis (Pedhazzer & Schmelkin, 1991), each of which is defined below.

Logical analysis involves the selection of items on the COMPAS and the manner in which they are scored and combined. One may analyze the content of the COMPAS to determine how well its item content comports with the abstract concepts, or constructs they are designed to measure. Do the items on the 'substance abuse' scale comport with the literature on that particular criminogenic need? One may also assess the extent to which scores obtained may be due to the measurement procedure used. Does an offender obtain a particular decile score because of the scaling procedure used?

Internal structure analysis involves determining whether there is correspondence between the structure of a set of items and the constructs they are said to reflect. One can use confirmatory factor analytic techniques to test (a) whether the relationships among items selected for the COMPAS can be explained by the scales they are supposed to reflect, and (b) whether the items on each of those scales measure the same construct. The latter point is about whether the scales actually "hang together," or are homogeneous. It makes little sense to combine a set of heterogeneous items into a scale because they cannot be measuring the same thing.

Cross-structure analysis is a necessary, and relatively demanding, condition for construct validity. Finding that the items on a scale are homogeneous does not preclude the possibility that the single construct being measured is different than the one the investigator meant to tap. Cross-structure analysis involves examining the relationship between the COMPAS and external measures of theoretically related constructs. First, there must be evidence of **convergent validity**: measures of the same construct obtained through different methods or measures should correlate with one another. For example, the COMPAS substance abuse scale should converge with clinicians' independent diagnoses of substance abuse disorders. Second, there must be evidence of **discriminant validity**: there should be divergence in measures or methods designed to measure different constructs. For example, COMPAS self report measures of criminogenic thinking should not be so highly correlated with self report measures of antisocial personality as to raise doubt about whether distinct criminogenic needs are being assessed.

An important aspect of assessing the construct validity of scales designed to assess criminogenic need involves determining **whether (a) offenders' scores on these scales change over time, and (b) whether those changes shift the offenders' risk of recidivism** (see Douglas & Skeem, 2005). These features, in conjunction with those listed above, would provide strong evidence that the concepts being measured were, in fact, criminogenic needs.

Meeting the Most Basic Requirements: Reliability

Reliability, or low measurement error, is the most basic requirement for a risk assessment tool. A tool must be reliable to be valid; but the reverse is not true. One can reliably measure

something other than the criminogenic needs intended, and one can reliably assess something that does not predict future recidivism. Three forms of reliability are particularly relevant to assessing the COMPAS: test-retest, internal consistency, and interrater reliability.

Test-retest reliability indicates that an offender is likely to obtain similar scores on the COMPAS when tested at two different time points. COMPAS scores should be stable over the short term (i.e., reliable over 6-8 weeks), but not over longer periods of time. As noted earlier, if the COMPAS assesses criminogenic needs, scores should change over time.

Internal consistency reliability indicates that the items on a given COMPAS scale are homogeneous. The coefficient alpha often is used to assess internal consistency on scales. Alpha ranges from 0 to 1.0. Generally, values of .70 and greater may be considered appropriate for measures that will be applied to make important decisions about offenders (see Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). It is important to note two things about internal consistency. First, even if the correlations among items is weak, alpha can be large if the number of items on a scale is large. Second, a scale that is unidimensional is often internally consistent. However, a scale can be internally consistent but not unidimensional. To test for dimensionality, internal structure analyses (see above) or the DIMtest (see Stout, 1987) are required.

Interrater reliability indicates that one criminal justice professional will score an offender on the COMPAS similarly to another criminal justice professional. It is important to ensure that an offender's score is a function of his or her "true" scores on the COMPAS, rather than the particular criminal justice professional selected. Interrater reliability is assessed by having the same offenders rated by different criminal justice professionals, and then assessing their agreement on offenders' COMPAS scores. A variety of statistics (kappa, intraclass correlation) can be used to do so.

PART II: SUMMARIZING & ANALYZING THE
COMPAS REPORTS PROVIDED

Northpointe Institute (2002): New York Probation Sample

Lin (2007): Parolee Needs in California

Northpointe Institute (2006): California Parole Sample

General Overview

We could not locate any peer-reviewed, published articles on development and psychometric properties of the COMPAS. CDCR provided the authors with three reports, two of which were produced by the developers and marketers of the COMPAS, Northpointe Institute for Public Management, Incorporated. We were unable to obtain further information to clarify some methodological and analytic details. When note when these details are uncertain, and advise readers to interpret our attempts to extrapolate these details with caution.

CDCR provided us with three reports for this evaluation. In the first report, *“Evaluation of reliability and validity of COMPAS scales: New York Probation Sample (Updated with 24 month outcome study),”* Northpointe authors Brennan and Oliver (2002) (a) present data that describe the COMPAS scores of a sample of New York probationers and (b) develop an actuarial formula to predict these probationers’ future recidivism, using the COMPAS and other variables. In the second report, *“Parolee needs in California: A descriptive analysis of 2006 COMPAS data,”* UCI’s Center for Evidence-Based Corrections author Lin (2007) presents descriptive data based on a sample of CDCR inmates who completed the COMPAS in late 2006. The goal was to distill needs to inform CDCR’s rehabilitation programming efforts. In the third report, *“California Department of Corrections, Parole, and Community Services Division: COMPAS pilot psychometric report,”* Northpointe authors Brennan, Dietrich, and Oliver (2006) describe the COMPAS scores of a sample of CDCR offenders. Each of these reports is summarized in detail in this section.

Northpointe Institute (2002): New York Probation Sample

Overview

In the first report, “*Evaluation of reliability and validity of COMPAS scales: New York Probation Sample (Updated with 24 month outcome study)*,” Northpointe authors Brennan and Oliver (2002) analyze data on a sample of approximately 600 probationers. The authors use this sample to (a) describe the scores probationers obtained on the scales, (b) compute actuarial formulas that maximally correlate some COMPAS items with other COMPAS items (e.g., whether violence was part of a past offense), and (c) compute an actuarial formula that combines some COMPAS scales with other items to maximally predict whether these probationers had a future offense over roughly a two-year follow-up period.

Of the three reports, this report is the only one that provides information on “c” above, the predictive utility of the COMPAS. However, the bulk of the report is dedicated to “a,” above, describing the pattern of probationers’ scores. Specifically, a description is provided individually for each of 18 COMPAS scales, in nearly identical format. First, a short sketch of the scale is provided and linked with some criminological literature suggesting that it relates to recidivism. Second, the scale’s items are described and listed in a table. Third, the scale’s items are subjected to a principal components analysis (a form of factor analysis) that draws out three components to reflect their associations with one another. Typically, the scale is asserted to be dimensional because the first component is large, relative to the others. Fourth, the scale’s reliability is presented in terms of a coefficient alpha. Fifth, basic statistics that describe how the sample scored on the scale are presented, and the distribution is cut into ten groups or “deciles,” as well as larger “quartiles.”

Risk Interpretation of Original COMPAS Scales

The authors suggest these deciles, which are simple normative scores, be interpreted in terms of “risk,” with 1-4 as low risk, 5-7 as medium risk, and 8 or higher as high risk. As noted on p. 9 (Brennan & Oliver, 2002), the score of 8 or more “indicates that the offender has a high degree of risk for that construct, and is at the eighty percent level.” Although the authors sometimes issue caveats (e.g., p. 14), **such risk-related interpretations are problematic for the original COMPAS scale scores because:**

- (a) There is no evidence that the original COMPAS Basic Scales, Higher Order Scales, or Risk Scales predict recidivism. These scores merely describe how a given offender scored, relative to other offenders, on a scale meant to assess needs or to relate to specific aspects of past offenses (e.g., whether the offense was violent). The only data relevant to risk of future offense are described in Section 8, and involve newly developed actuarial scales that include pieces of the COMPAS, along with other variables. These scales are discussed later.
- (b) The “deciles” for COMPAS scales are actually ordinal rather than continuous ones, and
- (c) Point predictions about individual offenders (e.g., this client scored in a category with an “80% risk”) often are inaccurate. This is true of even well-validated actuarial assessment tools. Tools that estimate risk based on population-averaged estimates often are uninformative in predicting whether a specific individual will recidivate (see Hart, Michie, & Cooke, 2007).

General Psychometric Properties of Original COMPAS Scales

Although the authors evaluate several psychometric properties of the COMPAS in the description of the individual scales, as well as in Sections 3 and 5, their definition of these properties is less rigorous than in the standard psychometric literature (see above, “Distilling Desirable Properties...”).

1. Theory & Tool Development. The authors created the COMPAS by choosing a pool of potential COMPAS items, based on a body of criminological literature. No theory is articulated that underpins the scale as a whole, although some “mini-theories” about the relation of some risk factors to recidivism are included. Although the literature that informed the development of the COMPAS is not well defined, the authors often reference Gendreau, et al.’s (1996) meta-analysis and a report by the National Research Council, (1993) in describing the individual scales. To the extent that such literature informed the development of the COMPAS, the tool does not bear a strong relation to its conceptual roots. For example, some COMPAS scales (e.g., Financial Problems, Residential Instability) are not included in, or have been dropped from, other risk-needs tools because they have been shown to predict recidivism poorly. Nevertheless, referencing modern reviews of major static risk factors and criminogenic needs (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006), the names of the COMPAS scales relate to most of the eight major areas. In short, **simple logical analysis of content suggests that many, but not all, of the COMPAS Basic Scales have labels that are consistent with important risk and need areas suggested by the literature.**
2. Internal Structure. After choosing potential COMPAS items, the authors reportedly subjected them to within-scale principal component analysis and dropped items that did not cohere with the other items of the scale. This process is not described for the development of the COMPAS, but is presented in this report as a means of validating COMPAS scales. **Such analyses cannot establish the factorial validity or unidimensionality of COMPAS scales.** With respect to factorial validity, the authors present little evidence that the basic scales and higher order scales they believe make up the COMPAS actually exist. To test the scale’s factorial validity, the entire COMPAS item set could be subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether the items relate to one another in the manner the authors assume. With respect to dimensionality, the authors do not use appropriate statistical tests (e.g., DIMtest) to determine whether the items within their scales are unidimensional.
3. Reliability. The authors present evidence that most COMPAS scales are reliable, in the sense that they are internally consistent (with alpha and item-total correlations). The authors interpret alphas of .60 or greater as acceptable. As noted earlier, we interpret alphas of .70 or greater as acceptable. **By the latter criterion, 16 of the 21 COMPAS scales listed have acceptable internal consistency** (p. 9).
4. Predictive Utility of “Risk Scales.” To develop “Risk Scales,” the authors use some COMPAS scales to develop equations that maximally relate them to other COMPAS items. For example, items that include *whether the most recent offense type was assaultive* are combined with other items in a formula to maximally relate to *whether there was violence in the most recent offense*. The product is called a “Risk” scale (e.g.,

Risk-Violence). The process for developing these actuarial formulas is not detailed, including which COMPAS variables were entered into the analyses, what statistical method was used to generate the equation, and what sample of offenders was used to develop the formula. With respect to the latter point, it is critical to know whether these “risk” formulas were derived from an overall COMPAS sample, or were derived specifically for this New York sample of probationers. A comparison of the variables included in the Risk-Violence scale for Northpointe’s New York (Table 75, p. 62) and California (Table 8.20.4, p. 155) reports suggests that the authors change the scales over time. As noted earlier, this introduces problems for validating the scale. It may also exacerbate problems with overfitting, inflating estimates of accuracy (AUC= .71-.82, p. 13). More fundamentally, the label of “Risk Scale” is misleading. Without assessing something external to the COMPAS, one cannot provide evidence of “external criterion validation.” **Given issues of criterion contamination reviewed earlier, the available data provide no evidence that the original COMPAS Risk Scales predict reoffending of any sort (including Violence, FTA, and CNC).**

5. Construct Validity. The authors examine the pattern of correlations among the COMPAS scales and assert that the pattern provides some evidence of construct validity. The authors do not comprehensively examine the convergent and discriminant validity of COMPAS. For example, they could use validated measures of substance abuse (e.g., the SASSI) to determine whether they correlated more strongly with COMPAS substance-related scales than non-substance related scales. They could use measures of psychopathy (e.g., the PCL-R) to determine whether it relates as expected to such COMPAS scales as “Criminal Personality.” They could use a leading risk-needs tool (e.g., the LSI-R) to determine whether the COMPAS scales relate as they should to the individual scales of that measure. **However, the authors do not include any external, validated measures to examine the construct validity of COMPAS.**
6. Validity Scales. Recall that two COMPAS scales are designed to assess whether offenders respond to the self report sections of the measure in a manner that is biased (Lie Scale) or careless (Random Responding). The authors compare probationers’ responses with responses generated at random by a simulation program. Although this provides **evidence that the COMPAS is sensitive to careless responding, there is no evidence that the measure can detect when offenders consciously distort their responses (e.g., “fake good,” or minimize their problems).**

Newly Developed Recidivism Risk Scales

Description

Genuine outcome data on recidivism are described only in the final section of this report (Section 8, pp. 79-92) for a subsample of probationers. Arguably, this is the most crucial information provided in this report or any other report provided as part of the present evaluation. The subsample of New York probationers were followed for about two years after their COMPAS assessments to determine whether a new crime occurred during that period. Although the criterion variable is not precisely defined, it appears to reference whether the probationer was arrested during the follow-up. The subsample includes 375 offenders (of nearly 600 in the larger sample) who had some access to the community during that two year period.

The authors do not report tests of whether the original COMPAS scales predict probationers' recidivism. For example, they do not test whether the COMPAS Risk-CNC scale, which is meant to convey risk of probation revocation, actually predicts new crimes. **Instead, the authors use the New York data to create several new actuarial formulas for predicting these probationers' recidivism.** Rather than relying on the original COMPAS scales to generate these new formulas, the authors include external variables from the New York dataset (e.g., "age at first arrest"), and newly created scales, to do so.

The authors describe a multi-stage process for developing the "COMPAS Recidivism Risk Scales," which are three scales that each predict the same outcome (new arrest), but use different sets of predictor variables to do so. First, the authors identify variables that maximally predict new arrests. Although they indicate that both empirical and theoretical concerns drove their selection of variables, the specific selection process is not described. To the extent that the authors relied upon correlations apparent in their data to select variables, this will exacerbate issues of over-fitting (see above, p. 9). Four sets of variables are selected that maximally predict new arrests:

1. Three Non-COMPAS variables available in the New York dataset.
 - Age at sentencing, which predicts recidivism at $r = -.18$.
 - Age at first arrest, which predicts recidivism at $r = -.28$
 - Arrest rate, which predicts recidivism at $r = .29$
2. One newly created Drug Problems scale, which is described for the first time in this section (p. 83). The authors do not describe how this scale was developed, including whether it contains only COMPAS items. The scale involves summing 7 items. This scale was probably needed because the original COMPAS Substance Abuse scale did not predict recidivism ($r = .03$, see Table 95). The newly created Drug Problems scale predicts recidivism at $r = .22$.
3. One apparently newly created Professional Judgments scale, which is described for the first time in this section (p. 83). To create this scale, the authors average 7 COMPAS items reflecting the screeners' ratings of the likelihood of various negative outcomes into a single scale. This scale predicts recidivism at $r = .34$.
4. The original COMPAS Basic Scales (16 of 16) and Higher Order Scales (2 of 3). As shown in Table 95 (p. 85), the majority of these scales (10 of 18) weakly predict recidivism ($r < .15$). In fact, only 11% of the original COMPAS scales predicted recidivism strongly enough to be included in the final Recidivism Risk Scales: Criminal Involvement ($r = .20$) and Vocational Educational ($r = .22$), and even these correlations are limited.

After identifying these four sets of variables that relate to recidivism, the authors grouped them into three "candidate sets" of predictors and ran three logistic regressions to create actuarial formulas to predict new arrests. These Candidate sets were as follow:

- Candidate Set A: New York variables (#1 above) + original COMPAS scales (#4 above).
- Candidate Set B: New York variables (#1 above) + the new Drug Problems scale (#2 above) + some number of COMPAS scales and items that maximally predicted recidivism (unspecified).

- Candidate Set C: New York variables (#1 above) + the new Drug Problems scale (#2 above) + some number of COMPAS scales and items that maximally predicted recidivism (unspecified) + the new Professional Judgments scale (#3 above). Note that the latter scale often was missing, so analyses with Candidate Set C involved only 255 offenders.

Next, the authors present the predictive utility of the models they created, using Area Under the Curve (AUC) estimates. Because the authors do not cross-validate their model, they attempt to correct for overfitting with bootstrap validation. The resulting AUC figures are .70, .72, and .72 for Candidate Set A, B, and C, respectively. First, there is essentially no difference in the predictive utility of these different variable sets. Second, these figures are comparable to those often reported for leading risk assessment tools (AUC \approx .70). In essence, the results mean there is a 72% chance that a randomly selected recidivating probationer will obtain a higher score on Actuarial Formula B than a randomly selected non-recidivating probationer.

In the COMPAS tradition, the authors conclude by explaining how to compute scores for Actuarial Formula B and transform them into decile and quartile descriptions, based on the New York probationers' distribution of scores.

Assessment

There are two fundamental issues with this presentation of evidence for the COMPAS' predictive utility.

1. What is the COMPAS? The authors do not report the predictive utility of the original COMPAS Risk Scales. The authors also do not use *only* the original COMPAS scales to develop a new formula to predict recidivism. Given that the majority of the COMPAS Basic Scales and Higher Order Scales do not predict recidivism (see Table 95), we suspect that the predictive utility of such a COMPAS-based formula would be limited.

The authors have shown that relatively small pieces of the COMPAS can be combined with other information to predict recidivism. To score their new, Actuarial Formula B, we would not administer the full COMPAS. Instead, we would administer only 2 of its 19 original scales (Criminal Involvement and Vocational Educational), administer its newly created Drug Problems scale, and collect basic information about age at first arrest, age at sentencing, and arrest rate. This raises a question about what the COMPAS is, as a risk-needs tool.

In short, **it is unclear whether these new scales and formulas should be regarded as “the COMPAS.”** Leading risk assessment (e.g., VRAG, HCR-20) and risk-needs assessment (e.g., the LSI-R) tools include a set number of items, a standard format for scoring those items, and a single total score that can be evaluated for predictive utility across sites by independent investigators. New formulas that combine select pieces of the original instrument with other variables are not generated and regenerated, largely because this would raise questions about (a) the instrument (e.g., What is the tool?), and (b) its generalizability to various groups of offenders.

2. Will the results generalize to other samples? **Because the authors do not cross-validate their newly created scales, there is significant risk of overestimating their accuracy (see above, p. 9).** Although the authors used bootstrapping techniques in an effort to address this problem, this cannot substitute for genuine cross-validation. For example, the COVR

showed strong bootstrap-corrected estimates of accuracy in predicting violence in the derivation sample (AUC= .88; Banks et al., 2004), but this estimate shrunk considerably on cross validation in a new sample (AUC=.70, or .63, depending on the criterion selected; Monahan et al., 2005).

Typically, actuarial formulas are generated in samples of thousands of individuals. The present formulas were developed with fewer than 400 offenders. This greatly increases the risk that the formula will not generalize to other samples (see Hart et al., 2007). The authors acknowledge this limitation.

It is particularly important to note that **it is unclear whether the formulas will generalize from this New York sample of probationers to other samples of offenders.** Prisoners were excluded from the authors' analyses. To the extent that the predictors of recidivism differ across groups, these formulas may not work in some of CDCR's primary populations of interest (e.g., inmates, parolees). Given how actuarial formulas are derived and issues of over-fitting, it is necessary to cross-validate actuarial formulas with a sample of individuals from the population of interest.

Lin (2007): Parolee Needs in California

Description

In the second report, *Parolee Needs in California: A Descriptive Analysis of 2006 COMPAS Data*, the Center for Evidence-Based Corrections author, Jeffrey Lin (2007), uses COMPAS data to describe parolees' criminogenic needs, in an effort to inform CDCR's rehabilitative programming efforts. In March of 2006, parole staff began administering the COMPAS to (a) prisoners with a new commitment who were soon to be released to parole, and (b) parole violators with a new court sentence who had served longer than six months. Lin uses COMPAS data collected between March and July of 2006 on this select group of 11,140 offenders to estimate their educational, vocational, financial, and substance-related needs. He does so by presenting simple descriptive statistics on COMPAS items (not scales) in these need domains.

As shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4 (pp. 12, 13, and 15), the results reflect a CDCR population with limited education, limited job training or experience, and frequent substance abuse. For example, only 56% of inmates said they graduated high school or received a GED, and 67% felt that they needed more job training or a new career skill, and 36% and 17% said they thought they would benefit from drug treatment or alcohol treatment, respectively. Only a small proportion of inmates were obtaining services to address such needs. For example, only 14% of inmates were currently enrolled in treatment for alcohol or drugs. Typically, those receiving services had characteristics suggesting a lower risk for recidivism (e.g., more likely to be female, and older) than those who were not receiving such services. This contradicts the RNR Risk principle of effective correctional treatment (see above, p. 7).

Assessment

Lin observes that the COMPAS represents the first time that CDCR has used a tool to systematically assess risk and needs among inmates. As such, it is a 'welcome improvement.' However, Lin notes that the CDCR COMPAS data are "seriously biased" (p. 5) and notes that the measure omits some crucial variables for analyses (p. 19), like age at first commitment and number of prior offenses (variables that should be included in the CDCR COMPAS database, given that Northpointe pulled them from the New York probation database to build new formulas to predict recidivism)..

As Lin notes, the COMPAS data described in this report **cannot be viewed as representative of the CDCR population of inmates**. He estimates that the 2006 data represent fewer than 1 in 3 CDCR releases (31%, p. 7). Several groups of inmates with potentially greater needs were not assessed, using the COMPAS. For example, inmates with a mental health classification (EOP or CCCMS) and inmates targeted for the State's Substance Abuse Program were among eight groups who were not included in the CDCR COMPAS sample.

Also as noted by Lin, although the portrait of CDCR inmates presented here is one of needy offenders, it is not clear how these offenders compare to offenders in other states. Moreover, the data are largely based on offenders' self-report, and there is **no protection against reporting bias**, including exaggeration or minimization of needs.

Finally, **these data are purely descriptive**. They provide no information on the reliability, construct validity, or predictive utility of the COMPAS.

Northpointe Institute (2006): California Parole Sample

Overview

In the third report, *California Department of Corrections, Parole and Community Services Division: COMPAS Pilot Psychometric Report*, Northpointe authors Brennan, Dietrich, and Oliver (2006) analyze data on 1,077 inmates that predate the much larger sample described by Lin (2007). The authors use this sample to (a) describe the scores that these inmates obtained on the scales, and how these scores compare with a (largely undefined) COMPAS normative sample of 7,381 offenders, (b) correlate scores on 11 original COMPAS scales with criminal history variables available in the CDCR database, (c) correlate the COMPAS scales with one another, and (d) compute actuarial formulas that maximally correlate some COMPAS items with other COMPAS items (e.g., whether violence was part of a past offense). No data on the predictive utility of the COMPAS are provided.

Description and Assessment: Issues Overlapping with New York Report

The opening material in, and format of, this report are highly similar to that of the report provided on the New York probation data. Thus, many of the principles reviewed in detail above apply to the California data, and will not be detailed here. We note briefly that:

- The authors present evidence that many COMPAS scales are **reliable**, in the sense that they are internally consistent. In this CDCR sample, 13 of the 20 COMPAS scales listed have acceptable internal consistency (p. 18).
- The bulk of the report focuses on the simple distribution of scores among offenders. The authors demonstrate that the **CDCR sample obtains scores that generally are comparable to those of offenders in their data store**. The fact that CDCR inmates sometimes obtain higher scores makes sense, as they are deeper end offenders than most of the offenders in the authors' data store (e.g., probationers).
- The analyses presented cannot establish the **factorial validity or unidimensionality** of COMPAS scales;
- The authors do not include any external, validated assessment tools to examine the **construct validity** of the COMPAS. The association among the COMPAS scales themselves provide only limited evidence of convergent and discriminant validity.
- Although there is evidence that the COMPAS is sensitive to careless responding, no data are provided to support the assumption that the measure can detect offenders' exaggeration or minimization of risk and needs.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the data presented for CDCR provide **no evidence that COMPAS Risk Scales predict reoffending in this sample**. For the reasons noted earlier (criterion contamination), the fact that some COMPAS Scales correlate with indices of past offending (e.g., see p. 28) provides little compelling evidence of predictive utility. Moreover, many of these correlations are weak. For example, of the 11 COMPAS scales, the Substance Abuse scale is the one maximally correlated with past probation revocation, at only $r = .19$.

Also for the reasons noted earlier, **risk-related interpretations of decile scores are misleading for COMPAS Risk Scale scores, given the lack of cross-validated evidence that they predict the future behavior of interest** (see pp. 19-20). For example, the Risk Potential for Failure to

Appear Scale uses 22 COMPAS items to develop a formula that maximally relates to another COMPAS item on whether the offender has ever failed to appear to court on time in the past.

In this report, the authors repeat the description of developing the Risk Scale(s) for Recidivism, with the sample of about 400 New York probationers. It appears that the authors ultimately chose “Candidate Set B” to represent this scale (bootstrapped AUC= .72). **The scale was not cross-validated, and no data on the predictive utility of this formula for CDCR inmates are provided.**

Notably, the authors introduce a new “Risk Scale for Technical Violations” here, based on the single New York sample of about 300 probationers, described earlier. It appears that the authors were able to access the new criterion of technical violations from New York State. In the construction sample, the accuracy of this formula was somewhat limited (bootstrapped AUC=.67). The formula is not cross-validated, and no data on the predictive utility of this formula for CDCR inmates are provided.

Finally, the authors present a “Risk Matrix” for CDCR, based on the distribution of this sample of 1,077 inmates on their “Risk of Violence” and “Risk of Recidivism” scores. The matrix is meant to classify offenders into four risk levels (low to high). No data on the validity of this matrix in predicting re-offending is provided. The Risk of Violence scale rests on no evidence of predictive utility. The Risk of Recidivism scale was developed on a single sample of 300 probationers and has not been crossvalidated. For these reasons, **whether and how this Risk Matrix will relate to risk is unclear.**

Representativeness of the Sample

Given Lin’s (2007) concerns about the representativeness of his larger sample, it is important to examine this smaller set of 1, 077 CDCR inmates. These inmates were assessed in 29 CDCR facilities between July 2005 and October 2005. It appears that these inmates included the two groups of inmates in Lin’s (2007) report, that is, (a) prisoners with a new commitment who were soon to be released to parole, and (b) parole violators with a new court sentence who had served longer than six months. These authors added a third group, however: parole violators who were returned to custody. Recall that Lin (2007) estimated that a similar sample was “seriously biased,” representing less than 1 in 3 inmates who would be released from CDCR. In this pilot, Northpointe used a sampling and weighting strategy that may reduce, but not eliminate, bias. It appears that certain groups of offenders (e.g., those serving less than six months; those not released from these 29 CDCR institutions; those with identified mental health or substance abuse problems) were excluded altogether from sampling (see Lin, 2007, Figure 2, p. 8). Moreover, of those in the Northpointe pilot sampling frame, only two-thirds (68%) were actually assessed.

Given these sampling issues, these data on 1,077 inmates cannot be viewed as representative of all CDCR releases. In our view, it would be problematic to interpret this sample as “normative data” for CDCR, particularly when the data are divided by gender (n=291 women, n=786 men). Developing a ‘risk matrix’ on this sample that will be used to make crucial decisions about thousands of offenders seems unwise.





PART III: CONCLUSION











Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses, in Light of CDCR Needs

Direction for Future Research

Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses, in Light of CDCR Needs

In Part I, we distilled the desirable properties of a risk-needs tool for CDCR. In the table below, we summarize these properties for the COMPAS, based on the three reports provided for this assessment. The rating system is as follows:

 sound evidence
  substantial evidence
  weak evidence
  no evidence

Property	Evidence (p. of report)	Rating
<u>Predictive Utility and Supervision Utility</u> Emphasizes criminogenic needs that predict recidivism	Only 1 of 8 original COMPAS “Needs and Social Factors” scales are predictive enough to enter actuarial risk scales (see p. 18). For 5 of 8 scales, $r < .13$ (NY Table 95)	
Captures change in risk state over time	No evidence.	
Predicts future reoffense	“Risk Scales” are moving targets, and most have not been shown to predict recidivism. The two exceptions were developed on a small sample of probationers and have not been cross-validated (pp. 15-20; 22-23)	
Validity scales detect careless responding and response distortion by offenders	Some evidence that the COMPAS detects random responding, but not “faking good” or “faking bad” (pp. 10, 17, 22)	
<u>Construct Validity</u> Logical analysis or “eyeball test” suggests that the tool measures criminogenic needs suggested by the literature	Basic Scale labels suggest that many, but not all, tap risk and needs areas suggested in the literature (p. 16).	
Internal structure analysis indicates that COMPAS items are organized into the scales the authors assert exist	No evidence (p. 16).	
Cross-structure analysis indicates that COMPAS scales relate as expected with external measures of theoretically relevant constructs	No validated measures of relevant constructs have been examined. Associations within COMPAS scales and with impoverished variables available in databases are provided (pp. 17, 22).	
<u>Reliability</u> Test-retest reliability indicates an offender will obtain similar scores over short time intervals	No evidence.	
Internal consistency reliability indicates that scale items are homogeneous.	The majority of scales have acceptable internal consistency (pp. 16, 22).	
Interrater reliability indicates that one professional will score the offender similarly to another professional	No evidence.	

The strengths of the COMPAS are that it appears relatively easy for professionals to apply, looks like it assesses criminogenic needs, possesses mostly homogeneous scales, and generates reports that describe how high an offender's score is on those scales, relative to other offenders in that jurisdiction. In short, we can reliably assess something that *looks* like criminogenic needs and recidivism risk with the COMPAS. The problem is that there is little evidence that this is what the COMPAS actually assesses.

First, it is not clear that the criminogenic needs that ostensibly are being assessed are being assessed in reality. For example, the authors created a new Drug Problems scale to predict recidivism, perhaps because the existing Substance Abuse scale did not do so. Which of these scales actually assess the criminogenic need of alcohol and drug problems? This question could be addressed by assessing how these COMPAS scales relate to a validated measure of drug abuse and dependence. Because no rigorous evidence of construct validity is provided for any of the scales, it is unclear whether they measure the needs they purport to measure. **If CDCR wishes to use the COMPAS to inform rehabilitation programming in prisons and on parole, they must have evidence that the tool validly assesses offenders' criminogenic needs.** This will be key to developing effective rehabilitation programs (see pp. 7-8).

Second, there is little evidence that the COMPAS predicts recidivism. Ideally, the COMPAS would combine all of the criminogenic needs and static risk factors that it assesses into a single, total score that would predict recidivism. It does not. In our view, the reader must wonder why the COMPAS produces no single "risk" score that can be evaluated by independent investigators. Instead, the authors create various "Risk Scales" that change from evaluation to evaluation, and often combine parts of the COMPAS with other variables. Although two of these scales were actually created to predict reoffending that occurred in the future (new arrest or probation revocation), these scales were created with small samples of probationers and have not been cross-validated. Whether they will generalize to "deeper end" CDCR inmates and parolees is an open question. Moreover, no COMPAS scale has been shown to predict violent recidivism, and no COMPAS scale has been shown to predict violence or other infractions within institutions. **If CDCR wishes to use the COMPAS to inform decisions about release and placement of individual offenders, they must have evidence that the tool accurately predicts offenders' institutional infractions and post-release recidivism** (see pp. 9-10).

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is no evidence that the COMPAS assesses risk state, or change over time in criminogenic needs. Only small parts of its risk scales tap such needs. There is no evidence that COMPAS scores change over time, and that those changes predict proximate recidivism. Without such evidence, there is little need to administer the tool to offenders repeatedly. **If the CDCR wishes to use the COMPAS to inform rehabilitation and supervision of individual offenders over time, they must have evidence that the tool assesses offenders' risk state** (see pp. 8-9).

In summary, CDCR is to be commended for attempting to assess risk and needs to inform release and placement decisions about offenders and to guide rehabilitation and supervision efforts. When validated tools are used to do so, this is a key to evidence-based practice. Given present limitations in evidence on interrater reliability, predictive utility, and construct validity, we cannot recommend the COMPAS for application to individual offenders. As noted earlier, UCLA is using data from CDCR to empirically evaluate the COMPAS. In the next section, we summarize some directions for this research in addition to those outlined earlier (Part I).

Directions for Future Research

As a whole, this report provides a roadmap for future research with the COMPAS, including the ongoing UCLA evaluation. First, a primary consideration is predictive utility. We strongly recommend that UCLA investigators evaluate the utility of the *existing* COMPAS scales in predicting recidivism. Investigations conducted to date have altered the COMPAS scales to increase the measure's apparent predictive utility. This will result in "overfitting" (see p. 9), where enhanced predictive utility is more apparent than real. Second, we recommend that CDCR data be used to examine the construct validity of the COMPAS: are we assessing criminogenic needs that, if targeted in rehabilitation efforts, would lead to reduced recidivism risk? Third, we recommend that the department examine the ability of the COMPAS to capture change in risk state over time. Repeated assessments of offenders are only helpful if the measure is sensitive to reductions in such risk factors as criminogenic attitudes.

The larger risk-needs assessment literature enhances this roadmap for research, and points toward alternative instruments that may better meet the needs of the CDCR. Two tools have particularly promising research bases to model or adopt. The first is the Levels of Services Inventory-Revised (LSI-R; Andrews & Bonta, 1995), and its modern variant, the Levels of Services/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI; Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2004), which has been shown to predict not only general recidivism, but also violent recidivism. LSI-R and LS/CMI total scores are computed the same way in every sample, based on a set of risk and needs factors. LSI-R total scores have been shown to change, and changes in scores have been shown to predict recidivism (Andrews & Robinson, 1984; Motiuk, 1993; see Douglas & Skeem, 2005 for a review). This suggests that the tool taps criminogenic needs and is useful as a whole tool for monitoring risk of recidivism.

The second tool is the Correctional Assessment and Intervention System (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2007), which is rooted in the Wisconsin system (Baird, 1981), and shares the COMPAS system's ease of use. The CAIS's risk scores have been shown to predict recidivism in two states. More importantly, use of the CAIS has been shown to *reduce* recidivism. In Texas, 2,551 parolees were randomly assigned to parole agents who did, or did not, use the CAIS in supervision, and then followed for one year. Of high risk cases, 23% of non-CAIS parolees had warrants issued for their arrest during that period, compared to 15% of CAIS parolees. A similar study conducted with 44,000 offenders in Florida suggests a 29% reduction in revocation with CAIS supervision. To the extent that the goal is to target criminogenic needs to reduce recidivism, this provides strong support for a risk-needs tool.

We thank CDCR for the opportunity to review these reports on the quality of the COMPAS and would be happy to respond to any questions about this evaluation. Although the COMPAS has a number of strengths, we strongly believe that more research and information are needed before CDCR can rely on this tool to meet its needs.

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