

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Offenders With Mental Illness Have Criminogenic Needs, Too: Toward Recidivism Reduction*

Skeem, J., Winter, E., et al. (2014). "Offenders With Mental Illness Have Criminogenic Needs, Too: Toward Recidivism Reduction." *Law and Human Behavior* 38(3): 212-224.

**Key Words:** Crime, violence, mental disorder, psychosis, risk factors, criminogenic needs

### Summary/Conclusions

In the present study, researchers tested whether factors unique to individuals with mental health concerns contributed to recidivism (new charge or revocation) of parolees. The study found parolees with mental health concerns were no more likely to be charged with a new crime, but significantly more likely to have a revocation than the comparison group with no mental health concerns. The mental health group had significantly more generalized risk factors. Finally, factors unique to mental health parolees (e.g. medication adherence) did not increase individual recidivism rates.

### Limitations of Information

The study consists of parolees in a large western United States city, which may not accurately represent the population of Colorado probation. While the individuals assessing parolees did complete training and follow-up for inter-rater reliability, it is unclear if they were accurately assessed risk factors. Individuals with mental health issues may be more or less forthcoming with information than individuals with no mental health concerns.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Unique Mental Health Factors Do Not Increase Risk

Severe mental health issues can create difficulty for individuals in all aspects of life. While prior research has found that mental health issues are not a primary cause for criminal behavior, some criminal justice professionals disagree. Researchers sought to discover the differences in risk factors between parolees with and without mental health issues, explore the general risk factors of parolees with mental health issues, uncover which risk factors are better predictors of recidivism, and whether unique mental health risk factors impacted recidivism for parolees.

The study consists of 221 adults recently paroled. Of the 221, 112 had serious mental health issues while 109 did not. Researchers made every attempt to create groups that were demographically similar. The parolees completed a battery of self and administered assessments to determine risk and mental health factors (e.g. symptom severity, medication adherence). Researchers tracked recidivism, new crime and technical violations, through official state records one year following the initial assessment.

There were no significant differences in likelihood of arrest when comparing parolees with mental health concerns and those without, but parolees with mental health concerns were more likely to return to custody for a technical violation of parole. Individuals with mental health issues had more general risk factors. They had significantly higher education/employment, family/marital, procriminal attitude, anti-social personality pattern,

and total risk score. Criminal history, leisure/recreation, and anti-social peers significantly predicted time to new crime, while criminal history, leisure/recreation, and substance abuse significantly predicted time to technical violation. Finally, there were no significant effects of unique mental health risk factors on time to new crime or technical violation.

### Practical Applications:

- ✓ Remember having a mental illness does not place someone at a higher risk to reoffend.
- ✓ Address the criminogenic needs for all probationers.
- ✓ Instead of spending time on medication adherence and symptom severity, prioritize conversations on anti-social thinking/behavior, peers, and other criminogenic needs.
- ✓ Recognize that probationers with mental health issues might require different communication strategies and collaboration to be successful.
- ✓ Find opportunities to discuss and address anti-social behaviors and statements. These present good opportunities for individuals to learn pro-social attitudes and behaviors.
- ✓ Collaborate with mental health therapists to create a holistic (e.g. mental health and criminogenic needs) approach to rehabilitation.

State Court Administrator's Office  
Colorado Division of Probation Services, Evaluation Unit  
720.625.5760; www.courts.state.co.us  
**Nov. 2017**