

Supervising People at Low Risk

According to the risk principle, corrections professionals should match the intensity of supervision and intervention to a person's likelihood of recidivism, as measured by an actuarial assessment. For people at low risk of recidivism,¹ that means ensuring they are complying with their conditions of supervision and addressing their stabilization factors rather than providing behavior-change interventions. Aligning supervision practices with a person's risk level can both improve community well-being and safety and preserve limited resources.

Tip Consider separating caseloads by risk level. Staff working with people at low risk might have caseloads of 200–300 people (or higher if staff have assistance or if a portion of their caseload is nonreporting).

What Does It Mean to Be Low Risk?

People who are low risk have a low probability of violating the law again even without programming focused on behavior change. They usually regret the decisions that led to their involvement in the justice system, tend not to have serious dynamic factors² that would increase their likelihood of violating the law again, and can be self-correcting. They often have the following characteristics:

No Criminal Record



Lack Antisocial Thinking



Supportive Family



Prosocial Friends



Engaged in Positive Activities



Some people at low risk have low needs, while others have high needs. Having “high needs” means that people might have a substance use or mental health disorder, or they may require significant social services to address pressing concerns, such as chronic homelessness, food insecurity, or a lack of basic job skills. For this population, addressing their challenges in an effective manner is often sufficient to reduce their likelihood of recidivism.

Common Tools to Determine Clinical Need

Addiction Severity Index (ASI)

American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) Criteria

Risk and Needs Triage (RANT)

¹ For purposes of this brief, “risk” refers to the likelihood of recidivism; it does not refer to the severity of the law violation. People assessed as low risk who have committed violent offenses should receive a higher supervision level and increased programming to address their dynamic factors. For information on supervising this population, see the brief *Supervising People at Moderate and High Risk*.

² To avoid confusion, this brief uses the term “need” to refer to a mental health or substance use disorder or a challenge that requires significant social services; the term “dynamic factor” is used instead of “criminogenic need.”

How Should We Supervise People at Low Risk?

Research and experience have suggested a balanced approach when it comes to supervising people at low risk.

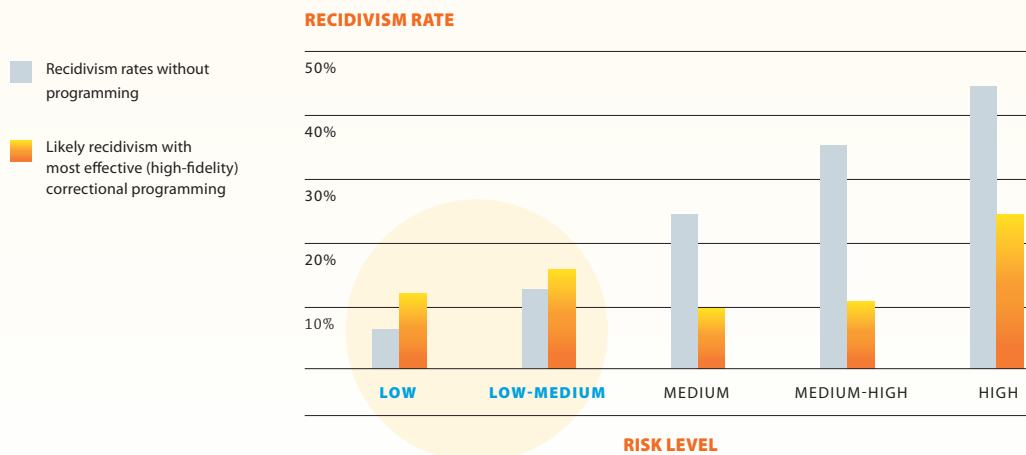
- Only detain people who are low risk if they are an immediate risk to themselves or the community.
- Provide stabilization services rather than services that target behavior change, with more intensive services (e.g., treatment and social services) for those with higher needs.
- Provide staff with resource guides so they are aware of appropriate, available, evidence-based treatment options and social services, and deliver services as early as possible.
- Reduce the frequency of contacts for people who are low risk/low need. Consider if it would be appropriate for some of this population to be nonreporting.
- Schedule more frequent contacts for people who are low risk/high need to ensure their needs are being met.
- Consider options for conducting reporting (e.g., in person or by mail, phone, computer, kiosk, or another electronic means).
- Conduct in-person reports for people at low risk on different days than for people at higher risk to reduce interactions between people of different risk levels.
- If interventions are provided to people at low risk, avoid placing them in treatment or programs with people at higher risk.
- Incentivize compliance by offering a reduction in charges; the ability to have the charges withdrawn, vacated, or expunged; or early termination opportunities.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE OVERSUPERVISE PEOPLE WHO ARE LOW RISK?

People who are low risk are unlikely to benefit from correctional interventions designed to change their behavior. In fact, their recidivism rates might increase when they are oversupervised and when behavior-change interventions are overdelivered. The graph below shows that when people at low and low-medium risk do not receive programming, their risk of recidivism is 7%–15%; however, when they do receive programming, their risk of recidivism increases to 12–17%. This increase is referred to as an iatrogenic effect, where interventions unintentionally have a harmful impact.

There are several reasons why overdelivering interventions might have a negative impact:

- When we engage people who are low risk in programming that they do not require to change their behavior, we can take them away from those circumstances that contribute to their low risk (e.g., positive family and friends, prosocial leisure activities).
- People who are low risk may be placed in programming with people who are higher risk, which can increase their risk level.
- Engaging people who are low risk in justice system interventions may reinforce a criminal or failure identity.



Source: Compilation of meta-analysis studies; see National Center for State Courts, EBP Curriculum