



# Research In the News

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## PREDICTING CRIMINAL PROPENSITY

Nowhere is needs assessment more needed than in predicting the risk of recidivism among applicants for parole. In the 1920s, sociologist Ernest Burgess studied previously released inmates' criminal histories and classified them on the basis of 22 variables as hobos, ne'er-do-wells, farm boys, drug addicts, gangsters, and recent immigrants. Illinois had used a classification similar to this for 30 years, while other states relied on "clinical judgment." Now, most states use a quantitative risk assessment tool in which risk predictions are based on identified correlates of future criminality, such as age at first arrest, job and relationship history, history of drug abuse and gang activity, and behavior while incarcerated.

1. If you were going to conduct a study that examined whether using a risk assessment tool to predict recidivism was more effective than other methods (such as a parole board going over a person's file and making a subjective assessment), how would you design your study?
2. Why is it important to evaluate new criminal justice tools such as quantitative risk assessment tools?

*Source:* Neyfakh, L. (2011, February 20). You will commit a crime in the future, true, false: Inside the science of predicting violence. *Boston Sunday Globe*, pp. K1, K4.