

# Lessons from Two Decades of Strategic Planning in Federal Probation and Pretrial Services

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**AS WE COMMEMORATE** the centennial of the federal probation and pretrial services system, we naturally look back at the system's origins and how it evolved. This is a useful exercise because it gives us a chance to understand how we got where we are and prompts us to think about where we may be going next.

Based on hard-earned experience in the past two decades, we are convinced that strategic planning has been critically important to the continued success of the system and must play a prominent role in its future. What is next for the system needs to be based on the solid foundation of what we have learned from the past.

## The Strategic Assessment

Perhaps the most significant development in the system's recent history is the 2004 Strategic Assessment,<sup>2</sup> a comprehensive, multi-year examination of the entire

system that was conducted at the request of the Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts (AO) in consultation with the Criminal Law Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States.<sup>3</sup> For the past 20 years the Strategic Assessment has helped guide system leaders to set goals and priorities toward creating a results-driven organization at the national and district level. It has also enabled the system to embrace evidence-based practices (EBP) that promote public safety and positively impact the lives of people on supervision. Central to the system's embrace of EBPs has been the adoption of the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model (RNR) to guide effective assessment and supervision practices in the federal system.<sup>4</sup> More will be said about EBPs and the RNR model later in this article.

### *A. Why Was the Strategic Assessment Undertaken?*

The effort was undertaken amidst 1) rapid caseload growth, 2) growing demand in

Congress for proof of program effectiveness and accountability, and 3) the emergence of an exciting new body of empirical research in community corrections known as evidence-based practices (EBPs).

#### 1. Rapid Caseload Growth

The rapid growth in probation and pretrial services caseload was due to a dramatic increase in federal prosecutions, with greater emphasis on serious offenses such as narcotics trafficking, violent crimes, firearms offenses, and repeat offenders. Also, the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 and various new mandatory minimum sentences had led to significantly more prison sentences and longer prison terms. As a result, the number of defendants admitted to federal prisons and the length of custody terms each rose almost threefold.<sup>5</sup>

In turn, the number of individuals completing sentences and coming out of prison under the supervision of probation officers also rose significantly.<sup>6</sup> Having served long prison terms, many of these individuals presented greater reentry challenges, adding complexity

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<sup>2</sup> See "Strategic Assessment of the Federal Pretrial Services and Probation System," September 2002, IBM Business Consulting, the Urban Institute, and Harold B. Wooten and Associates.

<sup>3</sup> The Judicial Conference of the United States is the policy-making body for the federal Judiciary. The Conference divides its work among various committees of appellate, district, and magistrate judges. Its Committee on Criminal Law has jurisdiction over the probation and pretrial services system.

<sup>4</sup> Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Evidence-Based Practices, Accessed August 5, 2025. <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/probation-and-pretrial-services/evidence-based-practices>.

<sup>5</sup> Sabol, W. J., & McGready, J. (1999, June). *Time Served in Prison by Federal Offenders, 1986-1997*; United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1981 and 1999). *Annual Probation Survey and Annual Parole Survey*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Justice. (The total number of individuals on post-conviction supervision increased by 45 percent between 1981 and 1999.)

to the increase in workload volume.

## 2. Growing Interest in Effectiveness and Accountability

At around the same time, there was growing interest in Congress in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of government agencies and programs; i.e., how well did they achieve their mission, goals, and objectives and how well did they use available resources to achieve them.

The first legislative attempt to move in this direction was the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA).<sup>7</sup> Technically, the law applied only to executive branch agencies, but leadership in the Judiciary quickly recognized that annual budget requests and programmatic matters before Congress would likely be evaluated and judged in terms of performance and results just as they would be for executive agencies. Judiciary leadership chose to embrace the spirit of GPRA.

While traditional annual reports were commonplace among government agencies, GPRA now required five-year strategic plans that clearly laid out each agency's mission, goals, and objectives. Further, agencies were required to develop performance indicators and measures to track progress toward stated goals and to submit annual performance reports to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The GPRA made it clear that the focus must be on achieving mission-critical results in an effective and efficient manner.

Congress later reinforced its support of the results-based approach with passage of the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA).<sup>8</sup> This legislation emphasized that agencies must set priorities within their mission and ensure that resources are aligned with those priorities. Policy, budget, and management decisions were to be based on empirical data and evidence of effectiveness. Further, agencies were encouraged to work together and coordinate efforts to achieve common goals.

## 3. The Embrace of Evidence-Based Practices

In the time leading up to the Strategic Assessment, there was widespread enthusiasm for EBPs in the federal system following decades of dominance by the voices of "nothing

<sup>7</sup> Public Law 103-62; Government Performance and Results Act of 1993; 107 STAT.285.

<sup>8</sup> Public Law 111-352; Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010; 124 STAT.3866.

works" and "tough on crime."

"Nothing works" had become a dominant theme in criminal justice following the work of Robert Martinson and his colleagues in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Martinson reviewed more than 230 evaluations of offender "treatment" and found that none were effective. Despite questions about the review's methodology and doubts about its conclusions, the damage was done. This led politicians and policymakers to abandon the pursuit of rehabilitation in favor of punishment and deterrence. With faith in rehabilitation shaken, the "tough on crime" movement took hold.

George H. W. Bush, for example, called for "more prisons, more jails, more courts, more prosecutors" as the main thrust of his national drug strategy.<sup>10</sup> Not to be outdone, Bill Clinton signed a major crime bill that called for hiring 100,000 police officers and provided \$9.7 billion for prisons.<sup>11</sup>

In community corrections, "tough on crime" translated to increased emphasis on timely detection of, and punitive responses to, noncompliance.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Ready for Something New

As the 20th century ended, most chief probation and pretrial services officers had grown weary of both the "nothing works" and "tough on crime" themes and welcomed the potential of EBPs and the renewed proposition that people can change their behavior for the better with proper interventions. After all, probation and pretrial services professionals were the only group whose role embraced working with people under court supervision to

<sup>9</sup> Robert Martinson, "What Works?—Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," *Public Interest*, no. 35 (1974): 22–54; Douglas Lipton, Robert Martinson, and Judith Wilks, *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment: A Survey of Treatment Evaluation Studies* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975). Martinson, 1974; Lipton, Martinson & Wilks, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the National Drug Control Strategy," September 5, 1989, available from the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu>.

<sup>11</sup> William J. Clinton, "Remarks on Signing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994," *The American Presidency Project*, September 13, 1994, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-violent-crime-control-and-law-enforcement-act-1994>.

<sup>12</sup> The Reinventing Probation Council, "Broken Windows" Probation: The Next Step in Fighting Crime," The Civic Report, Manhattan Institute, August 1999.

prevent their future criminality.

Along with widespread enthusiasm, however, questions arose about how to go forward at the local and national level to integrate EBPs into probation and pretrial services policies and practices. Given the system's decentralized structure, eager chiefs had started to introduce EBP in relative isolation. EBPs were springing up in a scattered and often piecemeal manner around the system. Claims were being made based on questionable research. Many realized there was disagreement about basic terms such as "recidivism," as well as questions about training and evaluation.

Further, system leaders saw that we lacked a case management system capable of collecting the data necessary to track EBP implementation, generate actionable intelligence, and support data-driven decision-making. The technological and analytic gap left the system without the empirical evidence that would be needed to break free from the "nothing works" and "get tough" narratives and respond to the demands of Congress to provide evidence of program effectiveness.

For the AO Director, the Criminal Law Committee, and others in key leadership positions, it was time to get a better handle on the sprawling, decentralized system as it grew rapidly, was being held more accountable, and grappled with introducing a new approach to its work without the necessary infrastructure. As one key leader stated at the time, "It's time to hold a mirror up to the system and take a good look at what is reflected."<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Awarding the Contract

In September 2000, the AO entered into a contract with PricewaterhouseCoopers (later to be purchased by IBM Business Consultants) and its subcontractors, the Urban Institute and Harold B. Wooten and Associates, to conduct this strategic assessment. IBM Global Services had a history of helping companies manage their operations and resources and offer consultation services. The Urban Institute is a not-for-profit policy and research organization that helped facilitate government decision-making and performance related to societal problems and efforts to solve them. Harold B. Wooten had over 30 years' experience in probation and pretrial services, including having worked at the AO, which provided a link to many current and former experts in the federal probation and pretrial

<sup>13</sup> Clarence "Pete" Lee oral statement to author in 2000.

services system.

### B. How Was the Strategic Assessment Conducted?

It was understood early on that such a huge undertaking would require wide and deep stakeholder engagement. Information was sent out to the courts via formal announcements and newsletters, and discussions were held with the AO's various advisory groups. Most significantly, a biennial national chiefs conference was held in 2000 at a most opportune time and coincided with the beginning of the assessment.

#### 1. Landmark Chiefs Conference

The Federal Judicial Center (FJC) has long held biennial conferences for chief probation and pretrial services officers with a variety of special themes. The conferences are quite popular and give leaders at the district and national level a chance to meet and discuss important issues. In 2000, the FJC dedicated the event to identifying a shared vision and developing goals for the system. FJC and AO staff worked collaboratively to plan the agenda. The theme fit perfectly with early ideas for the strategic assessment and proved very successful at engaging attendees.

Chiefs eagerly signed up for various working groups as a follow-up to the conference. The plan was to continue working in groups after the conference ended to develop a document that embodied the entire effort. The goal was to finalize that document before the next biennial conference in 2002. The effort was hugely successful, and the result was the Charter for Excellence.<sup>14</sup>

The enthusiasm generated by the chiefs' conference and work on the Charter transferred quite well to working with the Strategic Assessment contractors during and after the Charter's development. A palpable synergy emerged as chiefs readily made themselves and their staffs available to the contractors for workplace observations, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys. This will be discussed further below.

#### 2. Assessment Methodology

The contractors assembled a high-level "study

team" whose members had the skills and expertise to collect and analyze information about each of the system's major functional areas. The study team reviewed legislative changes, regulatory directives, policy and program guidance, and outside research findings in both state and international systems that had an impact or might have had an impact on the work of the system. They analyzed the system's growth both in terms of offender and defendant workload and staffing and budget requirements.

As a complementary process, focus groups were held, with staff from 20 districts participating. Individual interviews were held with over 300 people, including representatives from the Department of Justice, the defense bar, the FJC, the U.S. Sentencing Commission, the General Accountability Office, and the Senate Judiciary Committee. To gain wider input, in-depth surveys were conducted of federal judges (with a response rate of over 70 percent) and chief probation and pretrial services officers (with a response rate of 99 percent).

#### 3. Key Observations

The study team made several key observations during the assessment, including that:

- the system lacked an outcome measurement system to determine how well the system is performing;
- new legislative requirements such as DNA collection and reporting of sex offenders impacted the work of officers but were not being recognized in the staffing formula;
- an increasing emphasis on officer field-work naturally puts officers in dangerous situations more frequently, leading to a greater need for firearms and safety training; and
- probation and pretrial services staff were highly regarded by the external stakeholders with whom they interacted. In each functional area 97 percent of responding judges found the work to be "good" or "very good."

#### C. What Developments Followed the Strategic Assessment?

The strategic assessment produced one overarching recommendation and three sets of sub-recommendations for the probation and pretrial services system to consider.

#### 1. The Recommendations

The overarching recommendation was to become a result-driven organization with

a comprehensive outcome measurement system. The sub-recommendations were organized into three groups in support of the overarching recommendation. The first was to organize, the second was to staff, and the third was to resource the probation and pretrial services system in a way that promotes mission-critical outcomes.

#### 2. Setting Priorities

The first step for system leaders was to confirm with stakeholders the need to implement the recommendations. This was accomplished in consultation with decision-makers in the AO, the Criminal Law Committee, and chief probation and pretrial services officers. There was evident consensus and enthusiasm to pursue the recommendations.

Priority was given to the post-conviction supervision area because it presented the single largest component of the system's work and received the most resources. There was clear consensus that officer safety should be the second priority. In the 20 years since the Strategic Assessment, the pretrial services arena and the presentence report arena have also been adapted in ways that include defining outcomes and embracing the use of research-based practices.

#### 3. Defining Mission-Critical Outcomes

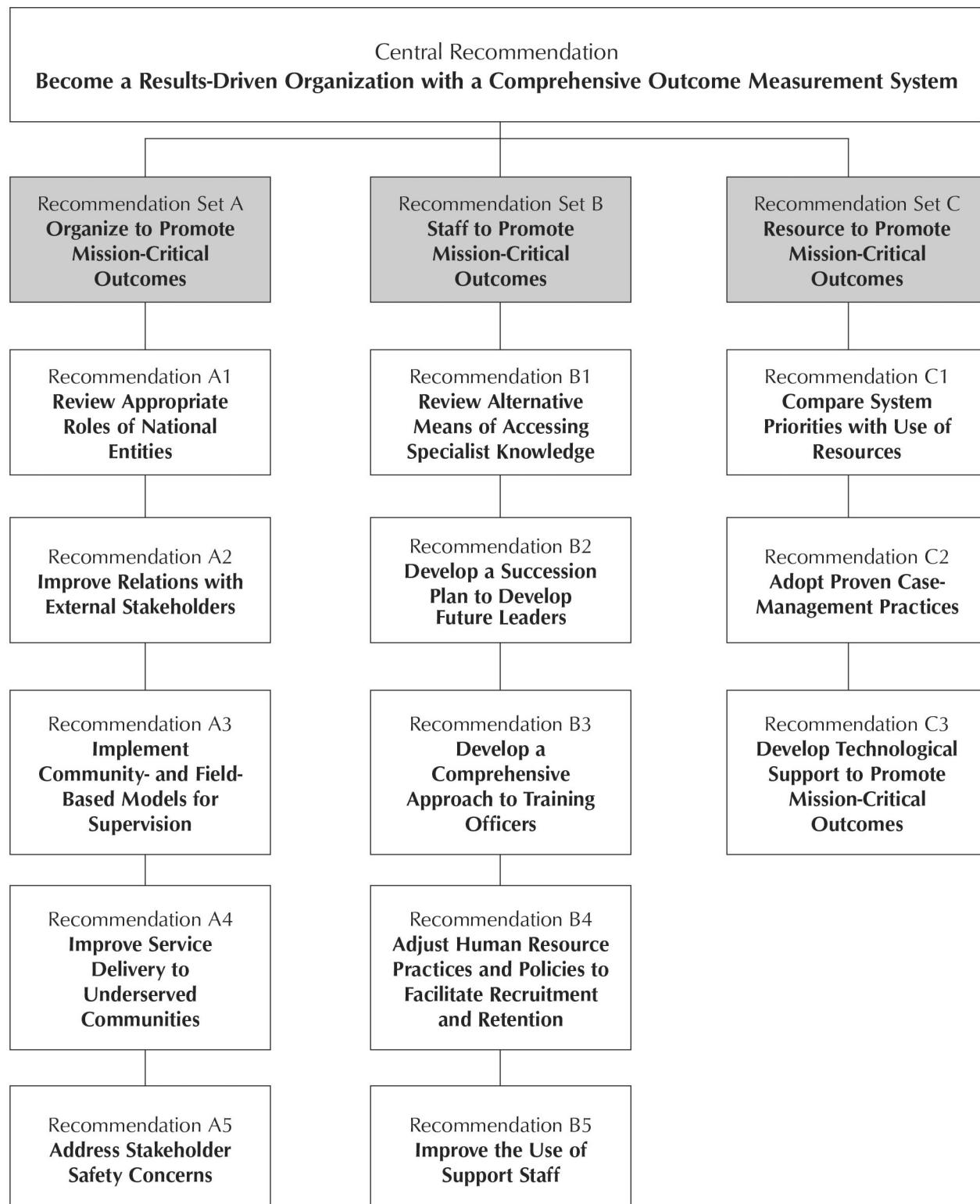
Policy statements within the *Guide to Judiciary Policies and Procedures*—which probation and pretrial services officers rely on to guide their supervision practices—were revised to emphasize the importance of defining "desired outcomes." For post-conviction supervision there were three outcomes:

1. execution of the court-imposed sentence;
2. reduction in reoffending; and
3. protection of the community from future offenses committed by the individual under supervision, both during the supervision term and beyond.

While this framework provided a clear articulation of the optimal outcomes, it was, by design, aspirational. In practice, the ideal is not always achievable due to a range of criminogenic, systemic, and situational factors. As such, retrospective analysis suggests the value in further articulating a hierarchy of outcomes, recognizing that some non-optimal scenarios, though falling short of the ideal, may still be preferable to others.

For instance, the least desirable outcome would involve undetected or unaddressed violations of court-imposed conditions,

<sup>14</sup> Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, The Mission of Probation and Pretrial Services, Accessed August 5, 2025 (includes link to Charter for Excellence) <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/probation-and-pretrial-services/history/probation-and-pretrial-services-mission> The Charter for Excellence

**Figure 1: Recommendations Overview**

reoffending, and new victimization during or after supervision. A system equipped to distinguish and respond to varying degrees of supervision failure can target interventions more effectively and refine its definition of success in line with evolving accountability demands.

#### 4. Becoming Results-Driven

In the context of post-conviction supervision, a compelling body of evidence led to the adoption of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model.<sup>15</sup> That model calls for all efforts of the probation officer to be driven by and tailored to the individual under supervision. The cornerstone of the model is a risk assessment instrument that is based on the jurisdiction's specific population and is tested and adjusted as needed with some regularity. The Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA) was developed in-house for this purpose (relatedly, the Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA) was developed shortly thereafter for use with the pretrial population). The PCRA replaced earlier versions of a risk assessment tool and provided officers with a state-of-the-art instrument that could be used repeatedly to measure and address the individual's issues at hand, as well as changes over time. The risk principle calls for all efforts by the officer to be based on the level of risk presented by the person under supervision. Those presenting a higher risk should receive more intense and comprehensive interventions. In fact, the risk principle states that using more than needed interventions on low-risk offenders actually causes harm and increases the low-risk offenders' likelihood of rearrest.

The need principle states that officers should focus their interventions on the specific factors that put the individual at risk of re-offending. These needs include criminal thinking, antisocial networks, employment issues, and substance abuse. The PCRA delineates each of these for each individual.

The Responsivity principle addresses the "how" in the delivery of the interventions called for by the needs assessment. The officer should deliver interventions in the manner most likely to evoke a positive response from the person under supervision. For many, though not all, that would be receptivity to a cognitive behavioral intervention.

The PCRA gave the officer the needed

information to tailor the supervision process to obtain the best results, based on the latest and most conclusive research. This was an important and necessary first step in becoming results-driven.

To further strengthen implementation of RNR and other evidence-based practices, the AO created a grant program titled \*Research to Results\* (R2R). This initiative enabled 22 voluntary self-selected districts to obtain additional staffing and operational resources to embed empirically supported methods into daily practice. Complementary training events and regional forums were provided to promote fidelity to EBPs, refine officer skillsets, and encourage peer learning.

While these R2R districts received the extra attention of the trainers nationally, all districts received training on the PCRA and were expected to use it with their supervision cases. The R2R program has grown and been improved over the years, and the funding provided continues to be necessary to promote the use of EBPs and becoming a results-based organization.

Implementation of EBPs proved more demanding than initially anticipated, requiring sustained support and a thoughtful balance between scientific rigor and practical application—where professional judgment is essential to adapt EBP principles to individual cases. Moreover, districts varied widely in terms of readiness and capacity to adopt new practices, contributing to inconsistencies across offices.

#### 5. Creating an Outcome Measurement System

The Judiciary's efforts to modernize and systematize its approach to measuring outcomes in probation and pretrial services were anchored in the creation of the "Decision Support System (DSS)"—a suite of case management and display tools designed to serve both operational and analytical needs. This investment aimed to unify data, allowing officers, administrators, and researchers to rely on consistent, up-to-date, and accurate information. By entering data once and using it many times, the DSS improved efficiency, enhanced precision, and ensured that all stakeholders were "reading from the same book."

One of the system's foundational principles was "contextualized collaboration." Rather than relying solely on internal probation and pretrial services data (e.g., revocation rates), DSS was designed to integrate external data-sets, such as arrest and charge information

from the FBI, state, and local law enforcement systems; financial data from clerk's offices concerning fines and restitution; and even IRS information related to tax payments and dependent support. Work in this area also related to the 2004 assessment report recommendation to improve stakeholder relationships. These integrations allowed for a richer, more nuanced understanding of client behavior and supervision outcomes.

Importantly, DSS was made accessible to researchers, fostering the development of tools that would ultimately shape supervision practices. It supported the empirical work that led to the Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA) and Post-Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA)—actuarial instruments that have since become central to case planning and supervision strategy. These devices not only assist officers in dynamically managing criminogenic risks and rehabilitative needs of people under supervision, but also establish consistent measurement controls across cohorts and time frames, providing empirical grounding for performance evaluation and research.

However, implementation revealed important lessons about the limits of data-centric systems. While DSS offered visibility and analytical power, its usefulness depended on the quality and interpretation of the data itself. Overemphasis on quantitative measurement—particularly when data were incomplete or poorly contextualized—risked misrepresenting program effectiveness.

For example, a study by the Federal Judicial Center, which partially relied on DSS data, found that judge-led supervision programs exhibited higher recidivism rates and greater cost than traditional supervision. Yet, individual courts involved in these programs reported markedly different experiences, citing qualitative benefits and contextual factors not captured by the data alone. In these instances, practitioners emphasized that data must inform practice—not dictate it—and viewed measurement tools as aids to decision-making, rather than constraints on professional judgment.

Implementation also revealed the strength of some practitioners' reluctance to accept the results of a data-based analysis of a favorite program, even while properly addressing qualitative information, if the analysis conflicted with their own one-off experience.

#### 6. Performance Reviews

The AO is required under 18 U.S.C. § 3672 to review the work of probation offices and

<sup>15</sup> The Risk-Need-Responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation was developed in the 1980s and formalized by Andrews, Bonta, and Hoge in Canada.

has had a long-standing office review process. In response to the strategic assessment and its recommendations, the review process was revamped to better incorporate outcome data and empirical indicators of policy adherence, complementing the traditional sample case examinations and interviews. Follow-up procedures and expedited re-reviews were developed, relying in part on ongoing outcome monitoring, to ensure progress on any material findings and recommendations.

An additional review process was created to examine individual cases involving serious or violent reoffending while under supervision. This “root cause” analysis incorporated into these case reviews went beyond individual probation officers’ handling of cases to look at systemic issues as well. This included looking at the total workload assigned to the officer, the supervisory support they were given, training, and the practicality and usefulness of applicable policies and procedures prescribed.

Common findings for office and case reviews and related trends were shared with all probation and pretrial offices, as well as stakeholders within the AO and Criminal Law Committee, Federal Judicial Center, and U.S. Sentencing Commission, Department of Justice, and Federal Defenders. The goal was to increase awareness and promote collective effort to address challenging issues.

While the revised protocols were generally well-received, there was recognition among practitioners that the framework was heavily weighted toward problem identification, often overlooking the strengths and innovations present in district practice and failing to sufficiently account for structural challenges—such as staffing constraints and budgetary instability—that impacted fidelity to policy and procedure. Subsequent efforts have sought to rebalance the review process by integrating more constructive and context-sensitive elements.

## 7. Resourcing and Evidence-Based Guidance

Following the strategic assessment, significant changes were made to the staffing formula and training programs for probation and pretrial services. Input from AO workgroups, district court staff, and personnel serving on temporary duty assignments at the AO informed a departure from the simplistic per-case allotment approach. In its place, a more nuanced resource allocation model was adopted based on case characteristics, officer workload, and

the actual time spent on supervision and investigative responsibilities. Offices supervising higher risk individuals, determined by actuarial assessments and supervision intensity, along with those handling complex pretrial and presentence investigations, received increased resources.

These improvements, however, introduced several operational challenges. The staffing formula became substantially more complex and resource intensive. Demand for Research to Results funding often exceeded capacity, leaving some districts unable to participate.

## 8. National Training Academy (NTA)

With funding from Congress, the AO established a six-week-long training academy for new probation and pretrial services officers at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Charleston, South Carolina. Early in the planning stages, many had envisioned the academy as part of the FJC’s education framework. However, due to resource limitations and prioritization constraints, the FJC could not accommodate the initiative, prompting the AO to pursue development separately under the auspices of the Criminal Law Committee of the Judicial Conference. (As noted below, the NTA necessarily incorporated firearms and safety training, which was beyond the purview of the FJC.)

The purpose of the AO’s training academy at FLETC was to address core duties such as pretrial and presentence report writing, testifying skills, and basic supervision techniques. A main thrust of the academy, however, was to help instill the principles of EBPs in new officers at the beginning of their federal careers. At a basic level, this includes a belief that people can change for the better under the right circumstances, and that officers are expected to help them do that. Instilling such a foundational attitude in newly appointed officers represents a kind of antidote to the “nothing works” era and gets the officers off on the right foot.

The NTA squarely addressed a major concern raised during the assessment about officer safety. Specifically, the assessment study group had observed that new approaches to supervision would likely increase the need for officer fieldwork and thus put those officers in dangerous situations more frequently. In response, the NTA and subject matter experts developed a state-of-the-art firearms and safety program for all new officers that uses realistic settings and scenarios to provide a valuable training experience that will help protect them when

performing their duties.

The NTA also served as the hub for all training related to safety and firearms for those officers who served as their district’s instructor and provided ongoing training locally.

## 9. Comments on Implementation Issues

For each of the steps taken forward, there were noteworthy implementation issues, some expected, some not.

**Defining success.** In defining mission-critical outcomes, there were lively discussions around the best ways to identify and define “success.” Some believed that a supervised releasee who is not rearrested within a specific time frame is a success. Others believed that a supervised releasee who is reincarcerated for a minor infraction—before the releasee may have committed a major crime—is a success. Still others believed that a supervised releasee who gains employment and is drug free is a success. Each of these viewpoints could lead officers or districts to approach their work differently.

**Gathering and using accurate recidivism data.** A major accomplishment, more difficult than most had imagined, was the creation of a national rearrest database. Historically, recidivism studies have depended on data from small jurisdictions, limited study populations, and brief observation periods. These constraints stemmed from a lack of uniform data standards across jurisdictions, significant challenges in compiling longitudinal datasets, and a widespread absence of reliable case disposition information. Even more elusive has been documentation detailing the rationale behind prosecutorial decisions—such as plea negotiations, charge deferrals, or dismissals—making it difficult to fully understand the full extent of recidivism.<sup>16</sup>

The AO was successful, however, in developing an innovative system to consolidate and standardize rearrest data from disparate federal, state, and local law enforcement systems across the country. In addition, the AO created study cohorts of all persons under supervision, quickly totaling hundreds of thousands of people, and tracked rearrest data on those cohorts for years, establishing rearrest rates both during and after periods of supervision.

**Acquiring in-house technological and**

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal History Record Disposition Reporting: Findings and Strategies, United States Department of Justice, March 1992.

**research talent.** The AO provided the probation and pretrial services leadership with appropriate staff to both: a) build the technological solutions needed to gather the data and b) conduct the studies and analyses from that data to provide leaders with information that can help shape changes in policies and procedures. Early accomplishments included the development of risk assessment instruments for both pretrial defendants and post-conviction offenders, which have been the basis of many improvements in practice. When combined with other data sources through DSS, this rearrest data provide a rich source of information—both operational (for officers' casework decisions) and analytical (for broader systemic decision-making).

The AO recognized that, without a staff of highly motivated technicians and analysts who understood the work and are immersed in the functions of the officers, they could not provide system leadership with the data needed to truly be a results-based organization with an outcome measurement system. Numerous systems have been developed that are both operationally helpful to officers and analytically helpful to leadership.

**Prioritization.** As the leadership focused on post-conviction supervision practices and developed a training program for officers to address established criminogenic needs in a somewhat uniform way, pretrial services staff grew impatient with the lack of attention their important work was receiving. In response, the AO, in consultation with the Chiefs Advisory Group, adapted some of the post-conviction strategies and training modules to the pretrial supervision setting. This may or may not have been a helpful response. At a time when the system was changing to become evidence-based, the system was also using resources to adapt proven post-conviction strategies to a

group of defendants for whom these strategies had not been tested or proven. The wisdom of doing so is likely still an unanswered question, but it is mentioned here because it is a very practical risk any time one part of the whole is prioritized.

**Coordinating with other organizations.** Buy-in from complementary agencies is a consideration when implementing the recommendations of the assessment. Coordinating with other related agencies can be challenging. For instance, while the AO trained new officers on criminogenic needs and applying updated risk assessment tools to guide officer priorities, the Federal Judicial Center, responsible for training more seasoned officers, used a different method for setting training priorities. As a result, there was not a consistent message or focus across training efforts.

**Good and passionate discussions.** The follow-up discussions of the assessment recommendations brought to light some discontinuity in values. Included among the measures of successful reintegration for a person under supervision are having a good job, a solid home life, and a substance-free lifestyle. How best to address each and in what circumstances was a valuable exercise. Some believed a supervised releasee must first have a job—and other issues would work themselves out. Some believed that same person must first have a solid place to live—and all other issues would work themselves out. Some believed that same person must first address substance abuse—and all other issues would work themselves out. These discussions were key to entering a new era where previously held beliefs about successful reentry should and must be reconsidered as new information becomes available—a requirement for an evidence-based system.

## Conclusion: Strategic Planning for the Next Chapter

The 2004 strategic assessment marked a watershed moment in the federal probation and pretrial services system's journey toward becoming a mission-driven, results-oriented enterprise. It did more than diagnose operational challenges (an invaluable contribution in itself); it introduced a systemic framework for aligning practice with purpose, rooting policy in evidence, and embedding strategic planning into the very fabric of the system.

Yet the promise of the now 20-year-old assessment is hardly static. The system will likely confront new caseload complexities and new technological transformations, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence. There will also be shifting criminological insights and dynamic community needs requiring system leaders to iterate—not just replicate—the strategies of the past.

The next era likely will demand performance measures that more clearly distinguish impact from activity, planning processes that empower field innovation without eroding coherence, and outcome frameworks that recognize both individual trajectories and broader system pressures.

The historical insights shared in this edition of *Federal Probation* reinforce a simple truth: strategic assessment is not a one-time undertaking. It is a mindset, a habit of leadership, and a commitment to adapt to changes with sustained integrity. System leaders need a compass like the one they have had for the past 20 years. We now know that what comes next will depend not only on what is measured, but also on what is valued. Strategic planning has proven critical to the continued success of the probation and pretrial services system and must play a prominent role in its future.