



Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

January 2024

Responses provided by Salisbury, E. and Seawright, J. (rev. January 2024)

General

Why does the WRNA focus on women?

Between 1980 and 2019, the number of incarcerated women in the U.S. increased by 700%. When considering the latest available data from 2020, the increase since 1980 reduces to 475% due to COVID-related correctional policy changes. Regardless, women continue to be the fastest growing segment of the criminal justice system (The Sentencing Project, 2022). Over half of all incarcerated women are detained in local jails (BJS, 2021a; 2021b), and they generally comprise approximately a quarter of probationers nationally (BJS, 2021c).

References cited:

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2001). Substance abuse and treatment, state, and federal prisoners, 1997. Bureau of Justice Statistics. U.S. Department of Justice.
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/satsfp97.pdf

The Sentencing Project. (2022, May). Incarcerated women and girls. Fact sheets. Author.
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

What is a risk/needs assessment?

For agencies working to adhere to the scientific principles of effective correctional treatment (namely, Risk, Need, and Responsivity; Bonta & Andrews, 2017; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2022), risk/needs assessment tools play a crucial role. While the instruments are not intended to reduce recidivism outcomes directly, when they are implemented with fidelity, they allow those working with system-involved individuals to promote behavior change by identifying the person's criminogenic needs that drive behaviors that lead them into and back into the criminal justice system. Further, they allow the staff to guide the individual to appropriate treatment programs and interventions.

References cited:

Bonta, J., & Andrews, D. A. (2017). The psychology of criminal conduct (6th ed.). Routledge.



Salisbury, E. J., & Van Voorhis, P. (2022). *Correctional counseling and rehabilitation* (10th ed.). Routledge.

Our agency uses a different risk assessment or risk/needs assessment, how is the WRNA different?

There are multiple validated risk/needs assessments available for use today. However, while the gender-neutral instruments like the LS/CMI have certainly shown extensive predictive validity with samples of system-involved women (Smith et al., 2009) and is in widespread use with women, there is also significant evidence that it works less effectively with women who follow gendered pathways to crime (characterized by significant prior and current trauma, symptoms of depression/anxiety, unhealthy intimate relationships, etc.; Reisig et al., 2006; Morash, 2009). Moreover, there is a general consensus in the academic risk assessment literature that male-derived instruments display a pattern of over-classifying system-involved girls' and women's risk (Belisle & Salisbury, 2020; Hardyman & Van Voorhis 2004; Skeem et al., 2016). Instead of adjusting cut-off points or applying weights to various gender-neutral items on a risk/needs assessment, the WRNA was formulated with women in mind from the beginning in order to attain a true and accurate measure of women's criminogenic risk and their strengths.

More specifically, the WRNA is one of the few assessment instruments that:

1. Measures clients' strengths and protective factors that reduce women's likelihood of recidivism. This is crucial to recognize among the people we work with in order to enhance motivation and case planning strategies.
2. Includes a trauma-informed interview process. Staff trained as end-users on the WRNA are trained on how to deliver trauma-informed interview practices and will not be certified as an end-user without proper demonstration of this skill.
3. Measures women's criminogenic needs that are not addressed on gender-neutral assessments, such as unhealthy intimate relationships, symptoms of depression and anxiety, parental stress, etc.
4. Measures prior trauma and victimization, as well as PTSD and complex needs.
5. Is specifically designed from the theories and evidence-base that focus on women's risks, needs, and strengths.

The WRNA is a recommended instrument in various toolkits and manuals surrounding the implementation of gender-responsive correctional strategies. For instance, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recently listed the WRNA as a recommended instrument for prison classification (UNODC, 2020) to support the UN's Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (i.e., the "Bangkok Rules"). Additionally, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), the original funder of the WRNA, continues to support and widely disseminate research evidence and strategies for supervising and treating system-involved women.



References cited:

Belisle, L. A., & Salisbury, E. J. (2021). Starting with girls and their resilience in mind: Reconsidering risk/needs assessments for system-involved girls. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 48(5), 596-616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820983859>

Hardyman, P. L., & Van Voorhis, P. (2004). Developing gender-specific classification systems for women offenders. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

Morash, M. (2009). A great debate over using the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) with women offenders. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8, 173

Reisig, M. D., Holtfreter, K., & Morash, M. (2006). Assessing recidivism risk across female pathways to crime. *Justice Quarterly*, 23, 384-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820600869152>

Skeem, J. L., & Lowenkamp, C. T. (2016). Risk, race, and recidivism: Predictive bias and disparate impact. *Criminology*, 54(4), 680-712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12123>

Skeem, J., Monahan, J., & Lowenkamp, C. (2016). Gender, risk assessment, and sanctioning: The cost of treating women like men. *Law and Human Behavior*, 40(5), 580-593. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000206>

Smith, P., Cullen, F. T., & Latessa, E. J. (2009). Can 14,737 women be wrong? A meta-analysis of the LSI-R and recidivism for female offenders. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 8(1), 183-208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2009.00551.x>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). Handbook on the classification of prisoners. Author. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/dohadeclaration/Prisons/HandBookPrisonerClassification/20-01921 Classification of Prisoners Ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/dohadeclaration/Prisons/HandBookPrisonerClassification/20-01921%20Classification%20of%20Prisoners%20Ebook.pdf)

What settings can the WRNA be used in?

The suite of WRNA instruments are considered fourth-generation validated risk/needs assessments. Three core versions reflect instruments validated for adult women in post-conviction settings: (1) Institutional Intake; (2) Pre-Release; (3) Community/Probation/Post-Release. The WRNA includes the needs and strengths most pertinent to women as identified in multiple validation studies (see the validation studies on the site for the [Women's Risk Needs Assessment Lab](#) for more information).



What populations was the WRNA validated for?

Generally, the WRNA has been validated with adult, system-involved women assigned to institutions, pre-release, community residential settings, probation, and parole/post-release supervision after having been adjudicated guilty for an offense. The WRNA is not currently validated for use for women on pre-trial status. And although some jurisdictions may decide to use the instrument to inform judicial sentencing decisions, it was not designed specifically for this purpose, nor for determining an “in or out” decision (i.e., incarceration versus no incarceration). Such decisions should be based on local sentencing guidelines and the larger correctional philosophies of each jurisdiction.

The WRNA was found to perform differently depending on the environment; some needs predict institutional adjustment problems better than they predict community recidivism. It is important for your agency to consider what needs are more potent in the setting you are providing services in.

Please note that the WRNA has not been validated with system-involved persons who identify as male. It has, however, been successfully piloted with men with serious mental illness in a Las Vegas Mental Health Court. Further, nothing precludes agencies from using the WRNA assessment with these clients since the major criminogenic needs for male populations are included in the WRNA (i.e., antisocial attitudes, antisocial friends, etc.). In such a case, a validation study is strongly recommended.

Additionally, the WRNA has not been specifically validated across race, ability, sexual orientation, or with gender-expansive people (e.g., transgender women, transgender men, non-conforming, non-binary, gender-fluid, etc.), s. However, the validation sites represented a diverse array of individuals (see Hawai’i samples).

Our agency is interested in the WRNA, what does it cost to use?

The WRNA is a public-domain instrument. However, there are conditions of use, a license agreement, and training and certification costs associated with its implementation. A sublicense/user agreement must be signed by any interested agency before WRNA training can occur. Agencies should also consider the cost to automate the WRNA in their Management Systems, or to adopt software through a third-party.

If the WRNA is in public domain, what is required to gain access?

The WRNA was developed through federal monies, and are in the public-domain, distributed with no charge. The copyrights for the assessments are held by the University of Cincinnati and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. However, the Utah Criminal Justice Center at the University of Utah currently maintains oversight and distribution of the most current versions of the instrument (Version 7 and beyond).



Intended users must provide legal assurances that the tools will not be altered without permission, nor provided to third parties or commercial interests. Intended users must also provide assurances that appropriate training will protect against unintended uses, poor administration, parochial or inaccurate interpretations of specific needs, and other unintended consequences.

End-users and agency leadership are not permitted to copy, modify, or distribute the WRNA instruments, Scoring Criteria, User Guide Manual, or other ancillary documents associated with the WRNA instruments to any third-party unless they are legally permitted to do so.

All agency adoptees of the WRNA signed a sublicense agreement outlining its legal conditions of use. Individual end-users/interviewers are not permitted to distribute WRNA materials outside the agency in which they were trained without expressed written approval from their WRNA training experts.

Is there a Train the Trainer option?

Agencies interested in a Train the Trainers event are welcome to contact NIC for more information or apply for technical assistance from the National Institute of Corrections.

What needs to be in place prior to pursuing training and implementation of the WRNA for our agency?

Prior implementation experience indicates that agencies consider the presence of the following prior to adopting the WRNA: 1) resources to offer gender- and trauma-responsive programming to address women's risks and needs; 2) presence of political will and/or leadership support to modify administrative/agency policies regarding the use of a male-based assessment with women; 3) appreciation that gender-responsive risk factors are relevant to future offending; or 4) indicators of strong commitment to a larger gender-responsive strategic agenda throughout the correctional organization, particularly at the executive level.

Practitioner/Interviewer-specific

When should the WRNA be used for case planning?

For the WRNA, it is generally recommended that case planning takes place with individuals who score moderate risk or higher. Individuals who score low risk on the WRNA may not have needs that necessitate case planning and doing too much with these individuals may backfire. This guidance is not transferable to other validated risk/needs assessments because these instruments may not adequately capture gender-responsive criminogenic needs.



Does the WRNA guide dosage?

Research guiding contact hours and dosage is still emerging in the field of correctional rehabilitation and feminist criminology. There are multiple ways to measure dosage, but the most common is to measure hours of treatment. What we know is that while hours and intensity are important aspects of dosage, it is also important to tailor the dosage to the specific needs of the client and to account for specific responsivity factors. Currently, there are very few dosage studies to date that have been completed with women specifically. Therefore, it is recommended that your agency consider tracking outcomes internally as well as participating in the development of research in this area.

Should we reassess clients with the WRNA?

The WRNA Interview + Survey should be updated annually with clients or in the case of a significant event (i.e., a new offense, relapse, change in case manager, assault, etc.). An update should include a review of the last assessment with the system-involved person and the creation of a new assessment based upon the modification of the previous WRNA. To be clear, an entirely new WRNA interview and survey should be conducted with the client, and not completed solely through collateral information.

Can we override specific questions or general risk scores in the WRNA?

As a general rule, overrides on specific questions should occur only when information in the official record contradicts the system-involved person's stated response to the question. They should not be the result of the interviewer's perception of the issue in question. Within the interview guide, items which may be overridden are noted on the assessment with an asterisk (*) next to the question number. These are the only items which may be overridden in the scale.

WRNA end-users are permitted to override the overall risk level up or down, but by no more than one risk level. Agencies should periodically analyze how often their end-users are overriding the total risk level, since best practices indicate this should not be occurring more than 15% of the time.

How do you recommend introducing the WRNA to clients?

Taking time to provide an introduction is vital to gathering accurate information and to trauma-informed interviewing. Agencies should have developed important points for an introduction during end-user training. The important topics to cover include:

- A general overview of the WRNA, its purpose, the various scales including the structure (i.e., interview, survey) and duration (i.e., approximately 45 minutes)
- Detail about the expectations for the Trauma/Abuse Scale and permission to skip
- How results will be used by your agency
- Who will see the results of the WRNA
- Mandatory reporting for threats of violence to self or others



- Acute suicidality or crisis
- Solicit questions and feedback from the client before starting and again when concluding the interview

What is the WRNA doing to attend to inequity?

As noted earlier, the WRNA has been validated with women in different correctional settings. Additional demographic detail is provided within each validation study.

The WRNA assessment is most successful when implemented in an environment that is gender-responsive and trauma-informed. Being gender-responsive, in part, means considering the holistic person including how they see themselves while also keeping in mind what it means for them to be in society.

The WRNA as an instrument is improved when the interviewer does not hold the client to a rigid individual identity. Simply put, their gender cannot be separated from the additional experiences due to racial or ethnic identity, gender or sexual identity, and disability.

No matter where your agency is located, the experiences of those you serve should be considered with regard to the impact of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Decades of research supports the acknowledgment, respect, and empowerment of individuals facing societal oppression. Due to the position of power you hold as an interviewer and case manager, you must accept the responsibility to understand the experiences of those you serve.

Further, Batastini and colleagues (2022) describe how having a criminal record as a component of their identity can have multiplicative implications for a person whose other identities may also face judgment and oppression. This is yet another reason we expect the use of person-centered language. If you personally do not have experience being involved in the justice system or being system-impacted, it is important to consider the impact of system-involvement to a person's sense of self both in an institution and in the community.

The WRNA is a comprehensive risk/needs/strengths assessment that was developed by women for women involved in the justice system. With a foundational ethos of equity and justice, the current version of the WRNA attends to intersectionality in the following ways:

- The interview allows for open-ended questions and responses.
- The instrument reconsiders what criminogenic needs are and has validated the use of scales, including the trauma scales, that were more relevant to the societal impact of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class.
- The WRNA was created to support collaborative case planning not solely classification of system-involved women.



Further, a cooperative agreement between UCJC and NIC in 2022 has provided the resources necessary for ongoing updates to training materials and the instrument itself with feedback from end-users.

For instance, at the time of this writing, a diverse group of women with experience working with justice-involved women and the WRNA (some of whom are formerly justice-involved themselves) were convened to discuss ways in which the WRNA instrument and training materials can be updated to improve outcomes for racially minoritized women. This Diversity Review Team, or DiveRT for short, provided valuable insights for ongoing improvements. Additional components of intersectionality will become the focus of future DiveRTs, such as sexual orientation and disability.

Additionally, your agency will need to develop internal policies and practices to attend to your population. These policies and practices should support the personal and social identities of the system-involved persons you are serving. They should empower those who are being interviewed with dignity and consciousness around their experience. Overall, when completing the WRNA assessment and collaborative case planning process, support the individual's choice of identity, empower them to identify strengths, and authentically acknowledge their lived experience with oppression and discrimination.

It is highly recommended that regular ongoing training and support is provided by leadership for WRNA end-users to support assessment skills with respect to understanding the identities and experiences of those you serve. This includes consideration of the dynamic policy changes on a national, state, county, and city level. It is not enough to practice a blanket acceptance of diversity without critical reflection and ongoing invested empathy that is rooted in your community.

References cited:

Batastini, A. B., Jones, A. C., Patel, M., & Pringer, S. M. (2022). Why correctional service providers and researchers should focus on intersectionality and recommendations to get started. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 49(6), 930-946.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548221074369>

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>



What is best practice for administration?

Best practice includes the following:

- Ensure collaborative practices between your end-users, leadership, and data team to capture whether an override occurs and to which level and why. Leadership should take note of whether or not the interview environment felt safe, comfortable, and trauma informed. Discuss with the case worker if they have any thoughts on what may have led the client to withhold the truth. Remind the assessor to non-threateningly inform the client that many questions will be verified through official record.
- Ensure that leadership can regularly generate a report on all override detail (specific questions and risk level overrides). A research team should investigate how often overrides are occurring across assessors. The cutoffs were determined by the original NIC/UC research sites. And an internal review will highlight that cutoff scores may need to be adjusted for your population.
- A validation study should always be examined for each site, ideally after end-users are comfortable with the instrument. Allow for at least 12 months of follow-up to determine if cutoffs need to be re-calibrated with each jurisdiction