

PRETRIAL SERVICES RISK ASSESSMENT (PTRA)

Frequently Asked Questions

Why was the PTRA developed?

The PTRA was developed as a standardized empirically-based risk assessment instrument for use by federal pretrial services. The use of a standardized instrument will help reduce the disparity in risk assessment practices and provide a foundation for evidence-based practices. It will allow for the development of policy that provides guidance to pretrial services agencies regarding release and detention recommendations, including the use of alternatives to detention.

How was the PTRA developed?

The PTRA was developed by capturing data collected from all the persons charged with criminal offenses in the federal courts between October 1, 2001 and September 30, 2007 who were processed by federal pretrial services. The data set included all of the federal districts, with the exception of the District of Columbia, and consisted of 565,178 defendants.

What does the PTRA measure?

The PTRA is an objective, quantifiable instrument that provides a consistent and valid method of predicting risk of failure to appear (FTA), new criminal arrest (NCA), and revocations due to technical violations (TV) while on pretrial release. The PTRA comprises of 11 scored and 9 un-scored items that are divided into two categories: criminal history and other. The scored items are as follows: prior felony convictions, prior FTAs, pending cases, offense type, offense severity, age, residence status, employment, education, substance abuse and citizenship status. Alcohol use and foreign ties are not scored at this time. The un-scored items will be analyzed for future revisions aimed at improving the tool.

Is the PTRA valid?

The PTRA is an actuarial instrument, which means it gives the probability of failure for a given group of defendants and not any particular defendant. The PTRA was validated using the data mentioned above, as well as a construction and validation sample. The instrument was also reviewed by a panel of experts. Concurrent validity was assessed based on its correlation with another known predictor of risk, the RPI. Face validity was confirmed through review by an expert panel and officers in the federal pretrial services.

What are the benefits of using the PTRA?

The PTRA is an additional tool that officers will use to determine what level of supervision and conditions a defendant, once released, requires. The PTRA standardizes the estimation of risk and thereby allows for the strategic allocation of scarce resources. Finally, the PTRA will assist districts in evaluating the impact of supervision and conditions.

How long does it take to administer the PTRA?

The PTRA is in sync with completion of the initial intake interview. All of the information the officer requires to complete the PTRA is obtained during that initial interview.

What training is required prior to using the PTRA?

The initial training is 3 hours and covers the principles of effective risk assessment, an overview of the PTRA, detailed discussion of the items on the PTRA, administration and scoring, and a series of exercises related to scoring the PTRA. An online certification process is also required prior to administering the PTRA. Modified training presentations are available for judges, public defenders, AUSAs, and other interested stakeholders.

When will the PTRA be available to my district?

The PTRA tool has been used and evaluated by two districts. Adjustments were made following their feedback. The tool will be made readily available to districts that have participated in the initial training and online certification.