



ADVANCING RESEARCH IN CORRECTIONS

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Phase 1 Interim Report: **Understanding Release Decision-Making and Release Readiness in Iowa** **Corrections**

Across the United States, prison populations have risen substantially since the 1970s with the implementation of policy changes that moved away from rehabilitative practices to more punitive approaches. This rise contributed to mass incarceration, placed increased strain on institutional staff,^{1,2} and left many states operating near or above prison capacity while attempting to maintain institutional safety, staffing, and rehabilitative conditions of confinement.³ As correctional populations continue to exceed available capacity, state agencies face increasing pressure to identify strategies that safely reduce prison populations while maintaining public safety and supporting successful community reintegration.

Iowa reflects this national trend as the state prison system has been operating above capacity since 1989. As of mid-2026, Iowa's prison population was approximately 28% above capacity,⁴ creating substantial pressure to reduce the population. Notably, the Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC) has set a goal to reduce its prison population to 100% capacity by December 2027. This effort reflects a commitment to fiscal stewardship and effective resource management by ensuring that limited correctional resources are reserved for individuals whose confinement provides the greatest public safety benefit. As they work toward this goal, understanding their release decision-making process has become increasingly important.

Parole release decision-making occupies a particularly complex position within correctional systems. The IBOP filters decisions through the Iowa Code Ch. 915, or the victims' rights policies,⁵ where they must prioritize public safety, victims

Research Summary

Iowa's prison population currently sits at approximately 28% above capacity, and state administrators and staff are working to reduce overcrowding. Policies allowing incarcerated individuals to be released prior to the end of their sentencing, have increased the authority of Iowa correctional staff and parole board members to manage prison populations. As practitioners balance correctional resource constraints while prioritizing public safety, understanding how release decisions are made becomes increasingly salient. This report examines how practitioners within the Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC) and Iowa Board of Parole (IBOP) assess release readiness, interpret available information, and navigate challenges throughout the release process.

Data were collected from interviews and focus groups with IDOC staff and IBOP members conducted between October 2025 and January 2026. Findings indicate that release decisions are not based on a single assessment; rather, they reflect an ongoing, collaborative process that was described as "informed release."

Four key findings emerged: (1) release readiness is assessed through patterns of behavior change over time, (2) decisions rely upon interpreting information that may be incomplete, inconsistent, or imperfect, (3) differing perspectives between the IDOC and IBOP shape how readiness is evaluated, and (4) broader structural constraints influence release opportunities.

The findings from this phase will aid in the development of a risk-needs assessment tailored to Iowa that supports more consistent, evidence-based release decisions while maintaining public safety.

concerns, and statutory limits, while balancing institutional population pressures, resources, individual rehabilitation, and successful community reentry.⁶ Commonly, IDOC provides recommendations to the IBOP. The parole board will then consider these individuals either for release or continued detention. Interviews are conducted selectively rather than routinely, most often when required by victim notification statutes or when there is disagreement regarding a case. However, both correctional staff and board members are tasked with evaluating large amounts of information—often without sustained engagement with incarcerated individuals—related to institutional behavior, treatment participation, criminal history, risk, and release planning to determine whether an individual is prepared for release.^{7,8}

Iowa provides a particularly informative context in which to examine these decisions. Under Iowa Administrative Code (IAC) 205.8 (2008),⁹ incarcerated individuals may be considered for release at any point during their sentence, provided any mandatory minimum sentencing requirements have been satisfied. This policy affords the IDOC substantial discretion to determine eligibility, review timing, and decide which cases are brought forward for consideration, while the IBOP exercises discretion over release decisions within that pool. This makes Iowa an ideal setting for examining the factors that influence recommendations and release decisions.

In partnership with the IBOP and IDOC, this project seeks to better understand the parole release decision-making process and identify opportunities to support practitioners responsible for recommendation and release determinations. Findings from this phase of the project will inform the development and subsequent experimental evaluation of a parole decision-making tool designed to assist IDOC staff and IBOP members in identifying appropriate candidates for recommendation and release while preserving public safety. The current research brief provides Phase 1 findings.

Research Questions

The first phase of this project sought to better understand how release recommendations and release decisions are made within Iowa's correctional system. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the release decision-making process currently operate across the IDOC and IBOP?
2. What indicators do practitioners use to assess readiness for release?
3. What challenges arise when evaluating release readiness and interpreting available information?
4. What institutional and structural factors influence recommendation and release decisions?

Literature Review

Parole Board Authority and Discretion

At the center of the release decision-making process is the parole board. Historically, parole boards emerged during the nineteenth century. By the mid-1940s, they had become commonly used in some capacity across the United States.^{10,11} However, starting in the 1970s and carrying through the 1990s, they lost some perceived legitimacy and authority.¹²

Corresponding with this shift, the purpose of parole boards has changed. Originally grounded in rehabilitative and social work principles, parole boards have increasingly adopted more punitive and supervisory orientations following policy changes beginning in the 1970s with the influence of the tough-on-crime movement. Today, as states seek to reduce prison populations, parole boards are faced with competing objectives of rehabilitation and risk management,^{11,13,14} while also balancing public safety concerns and increased prison overcrowding.^{14–16}

Parole boards influence roughly two-thirds of all release decisions nationwide.¹⁷ However, their decisions are based, in part, on recommendations received from correctional staff. Given the substantial impact on both prison populations and reentry outcomes, it is critical to understand how correctional staff and parole boards assess release

readiness and the information used to support those decisions.

Indicators of Release Readiness

Studies have identified several factors that are consistently viewed by correctional staff and parole boards as indicators of readiness for release. One of the most prominent factors is *institutional behavior*, including both disciplinary rule infractions and evidence of positive behavioral change.^{8,15} Another commonly identified factor is *active engagement in treatment and programming*, particularly when participation results in the application of skills learned through courses and observable behavioral change.^{6,15} *Realistic release plans*, including protective factors such as social support, housing, and employment, also play an important role in parole board release decision-making.^{6,15} The final factor frequently discussed in the literature is *criminal history* and the nature of the most recent offense; especially when there is a record of serious violent or public offenses (e.g., homicide, sexual offenses, use of drugs during offense).^{7,18,19} Collectively, these factors represent many of the indicators practitioners examine and deliberate when assessing an incarcerated individual's readiness for release.

Institutional and Structural Constraints on Release Decision-Making

Importantly, release decision-making occurs within a complex institutional environment shaped by competing demands while also navigating fluctuating caseloads, limited community resources, and public and media scrutiny.^{6,16,19} Though parole boards are tasked with helping manage prison populations, they also maintain a central responsibility for protecting public safety, which can directly influence release decisions.^{6,7} Public and media backlash further influence willingness to release individuals, as boards face pressure to limit releases following high-profile cases of community supervision failure.^{12,17} These external pressures provide important context for understanding the institutional and societal factors that play a role in release decision-making and showcase the

intricacies of balancing multiple and sometimes competing goals.

To summarize, the literature highlights that release decisions are shaped by a combination of individual indicators, institutional priorities, and broader structural constraints. However, there is little research examining the understanding of how correctional practitioners evaluate individuals' readiness for release in practice and how information is translated into recommendation and release decisions. The current report addresses this gap by examining the perspectives of both correctional staff and parole board members involved in Iowa's release decision-making process.

Data and Methods

This report draws on qualitative data collected between October 2025 and January 2026 from 27 individuals involved in Iowa's release and supervision system. Participants include members of the IBOP, the Board's victim liaison and parole liaison, the parole revocation team, and IDOC staff responsible for assessing and preparing individuals for release consideration.

Data collection occurred in two stages. During the first stage, two site visits were made to the IBOP office in Des Moines, IA, where individual interviews were conducted with the five Board Members, the victim liaison, and the parole liaison to allow candid discussion without the influence of coworker dynamics ($n=7$). The parole revocation team participated in a single in-person focus group to elicit the group's shared understandings and deliberative norms ($n=3$).

During the second stage, IDOC staff participated in four focus groups and two individual interviews conducted via Zoom. Focus groups were organized by institutional role to facilitate discussion among participants with similar responsibilities and familiarity with the release process. Participants represented a range of institutional roles including administrators, counselors, treatment directors, and reentry coordinators from facilities across Iowa ($n=17$). Given the small sample distributed across multiple roles, findings should be interpreted as

illustrative rather than representative of all IDOC staff.

Across both stages, interview and focus group questions were tailored to each participant group. Discussions focused on release decision-making, release readiness, the use of risk assessments, consistencies across facilities, and barriers and facilitators to implementing a structured risk assessment decision-making tool.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, compared interpretations, and collaboratively identified recurring themes across participant groups using analytic software. This process ensured analytic consistency across the range of participant groups and data collection formats.

Key Findings

The term “early-release” is often used to describe efforts to reduce prison populations by releasing individuals prior to the expected period of imprisonment.²⁰ Iowa practitioners, however, argue this label inadequately captures the complexity of recommendation and release determinations. Instead, participants described the process as “thoughtful,” “well-planned,” and consisting of “a lot of work behind the scenes” before any decision is made. As one participant emphasized, “informed release,” better reflects the deliberate and multifaceted nature of the process. Within the IDOC, incarcerated individuals are assessed from intake through incarceration, with multidisciplinary staff evaluating risk, treatment progress, and release readiness before making recommendations to the IBOP.

The IBOP then conducts its own review of available information to reach a final decision. Through our study, a clear pathway emerged illustrating the flow of information from institutional assessments to release decisions. When this information is clearly communicated and expectations align between the IBOP and the IDOC, this process runs more efficiently. However, participants identified opportunities to strengthen this interdependent

process. Four major themes regarding the release-readiness process emerged through data analysis of the focus groups and interviews: (1) behavioral indicators of readiness, (2) data quality and limitations, (3) differing agency goals, and (4) external structural barriers. We review each thematic area in detail below.

Key Finding 1. Release Readiness is Evaluated Through Patterns of Behavioral Change

Practitioners from both the IBOP and the IDOC consistently describe release readiness as a cumulative process reflected in patterns of change across multiple domains. Rather than relying on a single indicator or assessment, they describe evaluating patterns of behavioral change, accountability, mentoring others, internalizing prosocial skills, and decreased entitlement.

One of the most frequently discussed indicators of readiness across both the IBOP and the IDOC is *institutional behavior*, which corresponds with prior research.^{8,15} Participants from both agencies describe behavior within the institution as a meaningful signal of how individuals may function following release. Frequent infractions may signal an elevated risk of post-release recidivism, whereas sustained positive behavior change may indicate greater readiness to engage in prosocial behavior in the community.^{6,21}

More specifically, IDOC staff emphasize that daily interactions allow them to observe how individuals respond to rules, authority, treatment expectations, and interpersonal conflict. Frequent rule violations, arguments with staff, refusal of treatment, or repeated behavioral issues within prison—a highly structured environment—are viewed as indicators that an individual may struggle to comply with expectations in the community, which has much less structure. As one IDOC counselor explained:

“If this individual's willing to use drugs in this building [prison facility], he's certainly going to use day one on getting out.”

This perspective reflects the commonly conveyed belief among participants that behavior inside the

institution will reflect their behavior in the community upon release.

However, participants also emphasize that readiness extends beyond simple compliance. Individuals from both agencies describe looking for evidence of *decreased entitlement, increased accountability, and improved emotional regulation*. IBOP members frequently describe examining institutional documents shared by IDOC and conducting interviews to identify evidence of change through incarcerated individuals' tone, humility, and genuine guilt. These indicators, in tandem with volunteer work and accountability, provide evidence of what one IBOP Board Member described as "sincere real change."

Treatment participation emerged as another prominent indicator of readiness among both the IBOP and IDOC participants. However, participants stress that completion alone is insufficient. Instead, practitioners focus on active engagement, not just mindless attendance, and whether individuals appear to have internalized the lessons and skills provided through treatment and programming. One IBOP Board Member explained they need to see:

"[W]hether they've actually participated in the treatment, or if they're just a body sitting in the chair. If they've learned from other people while they're in there, if they've learned from the therapy or from the classes that they've taken, or, you know, if they're like at all sorry for what they did."

This distinction between attendance and active engagement was repeatedly stressed across interviews and focus groups.

Furthermore, mental health and substance use treatment were particularly salient areas of treatment participation evaluation. Participants noted that successful engagement often involves adherence to mental health treatment, medication compliance, and the development of strategies to manage issues that may have contributed to criminal behavior. As described, diagnosis, medication, and treatment are closely related to broader concerns of risk and

stability. Following treatment planning is considered closely with following their designed release plan.

Participants also identified *release planning* as a central component of readiness. A well-developed, realistic, and comprehensive release plan was described as necessary for successful reintegration and a critical factor in release decisions. Participants explained that release plans need to cover all aspects of life: employment, treatment, housing, support, and even free time. However, the quality and realistic nature of a plan was often considered more important than its complexity. As one IBOP Board Member noted, a plan may appear comprehensive on paper, but the question remains: "is it unrealistic what they share?" Similarly, an IDOC Treatment Director described the importance of ensuring that there is "buy-in with the plan" and that while incarcerated individuals work closely with staff on the plan, they must take ownership of the planning process and their future goals.

Like prior research, our study found institutional behavior, treatment engagement, accountability, and release planning are not just independent indicators.^{6,15,22} Participants from both agencies consistently detailed readiness as a pattern of behavioral and attitudinal change across multiple domains rather than the achievement of any singular benchmark. And practitioners look for the development of skills needed for successful reentry, as well as the demonstrated ability to apply those skills in the community.

Key Finding 2. Practitioners Evaluate Readiness Through Imperfect Information

While IBOP and IDOC participants emphasized the importance of comprehensive assessments, many also described concerns regarding the quality, consistency, and reliability of information available to them. Release decisions require synthesizing multiple sources, including institutional records, case notes, treatment reports, interviews, risk assessment instruments, and criminal history information. However, participants noted that certain information sources may be unreliable: risk assessment scores could be inaccurate, case notes

could be biased, and generic notes were often unhelpful for decision-making. As a result, practitioners often evaluate the credibility of information sources before evaluating release readiness itself.

One of the challenges commonly discussed involved *case manager notes* and *shift reports*. Participants indicated that these records can vary substantially in quality and may occasionally reflect personal biases, limited observations, or incomplete or vague information. One IDOC Treatment Director noted that staff know they: “shouldn’t use...personal biases with someone when it comes to looking at a release.” However, they also acknowledged that it can be challenging to dismiss past interactions and preexisting opinions, particularly when they have worked with an individual during previous incarcerations.

Notes and reports were also often described as being “generic” and, at times, lacking the context or display of familiarity with an individual that permits a full understanding of behavior or progress. This variation may stem from workload demands and time constraints, particularly given the staff-to-incarcerated individual ratio. As a result, institutional documentation may not always reflect potential meaningful behavioral changes that have occurred over time. These concerns were particularly salient for IBOP members, who rely heavily on institutional records to understand behavior they are unable to observe daily.

Participants across both agencies also expressed concerns about the use of *risk assessment instruments*, particularly the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument (IVVI) and the Dynamic Risk Assessment of Offender Re-Entry (DRAOR).^{23,24} The IVVI is a static risk assessment tool originally developed for the IBOP to predict future crimes of violence and victimization, while the DRAOR is a dynamic risk assessment tool originally developed for Canadian probation and community supervision staff to track real-time changes in an individual’s likelihood of reoffending. Although both tools are incorporated into the decision-making process, participants said they use

assessment results with caution, reluctance, and in conjunction with other information. Neither instrument was viewed as a sufficient measure of readiness on its own.

The primary concern regarding risk assessments was the perceived mismatch between risk scores and an individual’s actual behavior. Concerns on the IVVI center on its reliance on static factors upon prison entry and, therefore, the inability to account for subsequent behavior, treatment progress, or new offenses. As one IDOC Counselor explained:

“That tool is mainly a static tool, so it's really looking at no present-day behavior. So, I don’t love that part about it... I don't think that assessment captures a ton of stuff.”

The DRAOR generated similar concerns, though for different reasons. Participants question whether scores truly reflected actual risk. They describe completing the DRAOR as an obligation and suggested that scores could be influenced or manipulated, undermining its reliability. One IBOP Board Member summarized this sentiment stating:

“Do I have to use the DRAOR? Yes. Do I like the DRAOR? No.”

Overall, given their concerns, individuals from both agencies suggest risk assessments should be used as one source of information among many.

The final area of contention relates to the role of *criminal history* in release decisions. While there was no suggestion to remove criminal history from consideration, several question whether distant offenses are given disproportionate weight when assessing current readiness. One IDOC Treatment Director suggested that readiness evaluators may “reach back too far” when reviewing an individual’s history because people can change over time. Similarly, an IDOC Counselor noted that determining “where you draw the line as far as how far you go back” remains an ongoing challenge when determining readiness for release. This reflects a broader tension identified throughout our study: participants are not questioning the relevance of criminal history but rather how historical behavior should be weighed against evidence of current

change, which also ties in with concerns regarding the IVVI assessment tool.

Based on this evidence, release decision-making appears to involve evaluating both individuals and the information used to assess them. Participants describe weighing the reliability, completeness, and credibility of available information before incorporating it into readiness assessments. In this way, their professional discretion ultimately takes the brunt of responsibility for the release decision-making process.

Key Finding 3. Release Decisions are Shaped by Differing Institutional Perspectives

Release decision-making is a collaborative process that requires integrating information and expertise across agencies, while also navigating differences in how readiness is understood and evaluated. IDOC and IBOP participants described strong communication and mutual respect between agencies with the shared goals of promoting successful reintegration and maintaining public safety. However, our participants described *key differences in how readiness is assessed and interpreted* across agencies.

IDOC staff rely heavily on daily interactions with incarcerated individuals and the observed behavioral changes they see over time. In contrast, IBOP members primarily rely on institutional documentation, and the occasional interview, prior to the parole board hearing when evaluating release suitability. As a result, each agency has a distinct perspective regarding the release decision-making process. These differing vantage points of evidence can disrupt the communication between the two parties.

Several IDOC participants indicate that *past Board decisions often influence future recommendation practices*. They also describe how recommendation practices may shift over time in response to perceived IBOP expectations. One IDOC Treatment Director explained:

“We're constantly trying to be consistent on a moving target...sometimes our decisions shift a bit because of the expectations of the Board.”

For example, some counselors described delaying recommendations for release until the one-year mark because earlier recommendations had frequently been denied by the IBOP despite favorable risk scores or treatment completion.

Participants described release decision-making as collaborative process shaped by the different roles and perspectives of the agencies involved. While both agencies work toward common goals, their distinct roles and sources of information influence how readiness is assessed and how release recommendations and decisions are ultimately made.

Key Finding 4. Structural Constraints Shape Release Outcomes

Importantly, release decisions do not occur in isolation from institutional, community, and societal conditions. While readiness remains central to recommendation and release decisions, participants describe a range of structural constraints that influence who can be released and when. These include prison overcrowding, limited community resources, and concerns regarding public accountability. These pressures operate alongside the statutory mandates and administrative rules that legally direct their actions, including Iowa Code § 906.4, creating additional factors for practitioners to consider with each recommendation and release.

A central challenge identified by participants is the *tension between efforts to reduce prison overcrowding and the responsibility to protect public safety*. Both agencies describe these goals as important, but acknowledged that public safety is priority, challenging the balance of these goals.

IDOC staff describe pressure to identify individuals for release in response to ongoing population concerns. As one IDOC Counselor explained:

“We get quite a bit of pressure to kind of identify individuals on our caseload to release, just to release.”

They went on to suggest that these pressures can create situations where recommendations are driven by population concerns and not based on readiness.

IBOP members similarly described concerns regarding the available candidate pool and the limits of further population reduction. One IBOP Board Member characterized the situation as reaching “the bottom of the barrel” and expressed concern that additional releases may increase public safety risks. This tension was further reflected in another IBOP Board Member’s observation:

"I think we're doing the best we can with the candidates that we have... we've been working closely with [I]DOC to get the best candidates out on supervision, and we've done that... the candidates that are left are just less than optimal."

Public safety was highlighted as a non-negotiable consideration, even as pressures and expectations to reduce prison population continue to increase.

However, participants explain that even when both agencies identify suitable candidates for release, external structural constraints impact release opportunities. *Housing* emerged as one of the most commonly cited challenges. An IDOC Counselor said there is “a lack of stable housing and housing opportunities” for previously incarcerated individuals, which directly influences release decisions as having a formulated release plan—including stable housing—is essential.

More specifically, participants told us that there are limited placement options for sex offenders and individuals with significant health needs. Therefore, sex offenders often remain incarcerated despite being ready for release.

Additionally, *treatment options* both in institutions and in communities emerged as a challenge. Participants pointed to incarcerated individuals needing access to more mental health and substance abuse programming, stating that needs cannot be fully met without them. Indeed, participants described how in-prison programming was limited-to-nonexistent for mental health and substance use. One IDOC counselor detailed this stating:

“Unfortunately, we don't offer substance use evaluations. So you either have to find an agency that will do it on, a sliding fee scale, or a guy has to pay for it out of pocket... another huge thing that we're missing is we're getting so many guys with mental health diagnosis. Significant mental health diagnosis. These are guys that don't meet group home placement because they're considered violent, most of them have stopped medication, and then they start actively using drugs, there's some sort of violent offense, and then here they sit.”

IDOC staff and IBOP members frequently mentioned the need to address mental health and substance abuse problems, but this is challenging to accomplish without the proper programming.

The final structural constraint identified as influencing decision-making is the *pressure of accountability and public scrutiny* on release decisions. The IBOP Board Members, as the final decision-makers, seem to feel this most saliently.

Board Members discussed how high-profile cases involving parole failure can shape their risk tolerance and influence decision making. As one IBOP participant explained:

“We get caught up in the media. We get caught up in the political, how that will look”.

Therefore, release decisions are influenced not only by evaluations of risk, but also by concerns regarding how those decisions may be perceived by the public, elected officials, and the media.

Several IBOP Board Members describe fear, anxiety, and reluctance to be associated with decisions that could later become the focus of public criticism. One IBOP Board Member characterized this concern as a desire to ensure that a problematic release outcome would not be related to them saying, it is “not going to be on my name.” This external influence on release decisions indicates that those with more public or heinous crimes could be rejected despite being deemed ready for release due to unwanted backlash, making it a powerful informal framework that the IBOP operates within. Prior research

supports this claim, indicating how such crimes can increase risk-aversion with parole boards and potentially influence decisions.^{6,12}

Ultimately, it became evident that release decision-making does not occur in isolation. While readiness assessments remain central to recommendation and release determinations, broader institutional and community constraints frequently influence release opportunities. Overcrowding, limited community resources, and accountability for release outcomes influence not only how decisions are made, but also who is even considered suitable for release.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that informed release is not a singular evaluation of release indicators, but a multi-layered process where practitioners assess patterns of behavioral change, sort through (un)reliable evidence, and manage institutional and structural constraints while operating within an uncertain environment. Although release readiness remains central to recommendation and release determinations, participants described a process that extends beyond evaluating individual characteristics alone.

Participants described readiness for release as a culmination of institutional behavior, active program engagement, behavioral change, accountability, and release planning.^{6,15} These indicators were rarely, if ever, discussed independently. Instead, practitioners described that they evaluated whether individuals demonstrated meaningful behavioral change over time and whether they had developed the skills, supports, attitudinal changes, and protective factors necessary for successful community reintegration. In this way, readiness is not a simple checklist. Instead, it is sustained evidence that change has occurred and could be sustained beyond an institutional setting.

At the same time, release decisions require more than assessing behavioral change. Participants described the challenge of making decisions using information that may be incomplete, inconsistent, or imperfect. Case notes, risk scores, and criminal history information can provide valuable insight, but may also have limitations that require practitioners

to carefully evaluate the quality and relevance of information when assessing readiness.

The findings also highlight the interwoven system that exists between the IDOC and the IBOP. Individuals in both agencies work toward shared goals of public safety and successful reintegration. Both agencies also contribute different forms of information and expertise to the decision-making process. IDOC staff use observational data from the daily interactions with incarcerated individuals to assess changes and readiness; while IBOP staff rely on interviews and administrative documents to make assessments. Together, these perspectives shape how readiness is evaluated and how release decisions are ultimately made.

Importantly, participants were direct in emphasizing that release decision-making does not occur in a silo. Concerns regarding public safety, population overcrowding, and media scrutiny all shape release opportunities.^{6,10} In some cases, participants described situations where incarcerated individuals may demonstrate evidence of readiness for release but remain incarcerated because community resources are unavailable. Similarly, public scrutiny can shape decision-making, particularly for the IBOP.^{12,17}

Collectively, the findings suggest informed release is a multifaceted process dependent on more than just readiness indicators. It is shaped by practitioners operating within an uncertain environment, filtering through potentially unreliable information and mitigating structural constraints.

Overall, this first phase of the larger project provides a foundation for understanding how release decisions are currently made across Iowa's correctional system and identifies opportunities to improve consistency and efficiency. Critically, participants described their existing risk assessments instruments (i.e., IVVI and DRAOR) as limited sources of information that often fail to capture behavioral change, contextual factors, and other indicators practitioners view as central to release readiness. Rather than serving as stand-alone tools, participants described a need for assessments that

complement professional judgement, reduce potential biases, and provide a more comprehensive picture of readiness for release. These findings highlight opportunities to develop a more responsive and useful risk assessment instrument grounded in the experiences and concerns of practitioners working directly within Iowa's correctional system.

Board members and correctional staff were also asked about the impact of prison overcrowding on treatment availability, practitioner-to-incarcerated-person ratios, institutional safety concerns, the factors necessary for an effective risk assessment that can be integrated into existing decision-making processes, and challenges with implementing a new risk assessment. Analyzing these responses will provide additional insight into the practical challenges facing practitioners and help inform the development of an evidence-informed risk assessment intended to reduce bias, assist in balancing static and dynamic factors, improve data sharing between agencies, and support informed release decision-making while maintaining public safety.

The second phase of the larger project will focus on developing a new parole decision-making tool using administrative data provided by the IDOC. We will combine information from the IVVI and DRAOR with other administrative records, including criminal

history, institutional misconduct, program participation, and outcomes following release. Then we will assess which factors are most useful for predicting both general and violent recidivism and test the tool to ensure that it performs consistently and equitably across groups. The strongest-performing models will then be used to develop the tool's scoring system. IDOC and IBOP will be involved in reviewing the tool to ensure that the final product is practical and aligns with agency needs and they will be trained in its use, so they understand the mechanics and reasoning behind the tool. The tool will be designed to incorporate dynamic information, allowing individuals' scores to change as their circumstances and behaviors change over time. Following implementation, the tool will be experimentally evaluated to determine its effectiveness at identifying appropriate individuals for release, as well as maintaining public safety concerns.

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