What are parole guidelines; how they work

The Michigan Department of Correction developed parole guidelines in 1984 to "reduce the potential for disparity in parole decisions and to explicitly define the bases upon which rational and equitable parole release decisions should be made," according to an MDOC report. That is, they were initially conceived to make decisions more objective and consistent, not to statistically assess risk.

The ability of the instrument, as a whole, to predict an individual's risk of re-offending was validated in 1992, 1993 and 2001. However, the predictive value of each individual factor scored in the guidelines has not been established. That is, the instrument as a whole successfully separates prospective parolees into categories based on their likelihood of committing either an assaultive felony or any felony at all, but the actual impact of most specific factors is unclear.

All prisoners receive a parole guidelines score before they are considered for release except those serving parolable life sentences. (CAPPS recommends calculating scores for parolable lifers before their five-year reviews so that their actual risk for re-offending is taken into account.) The score is determined by counting the numbers, either positive or negative, assigned to variables in seven categories: offense, prior record, institutional program performance, institutional conduct, statistical risk, age and mental status.

MCL 791.233e(7) says, "The parole board may depart from the parole guidelines by denying parole to a prisoner who has a high probability of parole as determined under the parole guidelines or by granting parole to a prisoner who has a low probability of parole as determined under the parole guidelines. A departure under this subsection shall be for substantial and compelling reasons stated in writing."

People who score high probability of release can be paroled without an interview unless the crime involved a sexual offense or a death. Those who score low probability can be denied parole without an interview.