

case 3-271-143

July 27, 2026

Christopher I. Rider

Algorithmic Fairness in Broward County: COMPAS and the Cost of Classification Errors

On a Wednesday morning in late May 2016, Belinda Torresⁱ arrived at her cubicle in the Broward County Office of the Public Defender to find a printout of a news article on her keyboard. Someone had circled the headline in red ink and written in the margin: *Belinda—can you look at this? I need to know if we should be fighting this algorithm.*—HF

The article, published two days earlier by the investigative newsroom ProPublica, was titled “Machine Bias.” It opened with the stories of two defendants in Broward County, Florida. The first was a Black woman named Brisha Borden, 18 years old, who had been arrested for petty theft—she and a friend had taken a child’s bicycle and scooter that had been left on a porch. Borden had a few juvenile misdemeanor charges on her record but no adult convictions. Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS),ⁱⁱ the risk assessment algorithm used by Broward County judges to inform bail decisions, had scored her an 8 out of 10: High Risk.

The second defendant was a White man named Vernon Prater, 41, who had been arrested for shoplifting \$86.35 worth of tools from a Home Depot. Prater had a long criminal record, including an armed robbery conviction that had sent him to prison for five years. COMPAS had scored him a 3: Low Risk.

Two years later, Borden had not been charged with any new crimes. Prater was serving an eight-year prison sentence for breaking into a warehouse and stealing thousands of dollars’ worth of electronics.¹

Torres set down her coffee and read the article twice. She recognized the initials on the note: Howard Finkelstein, the Broward County public defender, her boss’s boss. Finkelstein was a well-known figure in South Florida criminal justice—a former television legal commentator who had served as public defender

ⁱ Belinda Torres is fictional. The case study otherwise is factually based.

ⁱⁱ COMPAS was a risk assessment tool developed by Northpointe, Inc. (later Equivant). It assigned defendants a score from 1 to 10 based on responses to a 137-item questionnaire covering criminal history, employment, substance abuse, community ties, and other factors. Race was not among the inputs.

Published by WDI Publishing, part of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

©2026 Christopher I. Rider. This case was written by Christopher I. Rider, Thomas C. Kinnear Professor and Associate Professor of Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. The case was developed using public sources and was prepared as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a situation. The case should not be considered criticism or endorsement and should not be used as a source of primary data.