

Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 Training Event
Improving Case Outcomes Through the Use of Risk and Needs Assessments
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Presented by: Derek Hitchcock, M.A., Michele Bell, B.S. , and Joseph Hall, M.A., LPC

Report By: Patrick Sussex

A large body of research has indicated a strong correlation between being able to identify criminogenic risk in juvenile offenders and a reduction in recidivism. A criminogenic risk assessment helps determine if a youth is at relatively low or relatively high risk for reoffending or engaging in violent behavior. A criminogenic risk assessment provides an objective evaluation of dynamic and static factors that predict the risk of recidivism and help guide decisions on placement, supervision, and treatment services.

Criminogenic risk assessments are research-based, scientifically developed tools that predict group behavior based on actual past behaviors and indicators. The domains that are most significant in predicting future criminal behavior are: Anti-social history, anti-social cognitions, anti-social companions, and anti-social personality or temperament. Less significant but still predictive domains are: Family, substance abuse, school/employment, and leisure and/or recreation.

Although often significant treatment issues for juvenile offenders, self-esteem, mental health issues, victimization issues, and learning disabilities are domains that are *not* predictors of recidivism. In addition, criminogenic risk assessments do not predict risk for youth with significant mental health issues or predict the risk for youth with sexual offending issues. There are other types of assessments that predict risk for youth with sexual offending issues, and a broad milieu of assessment and evaluation types that help inform responses and treatment strategies for youth with significant mental health issues.

Criminogenic risk assessments are actuarial-based systems. Actuarial systems predict group behavior, the same as an insurance underwriter will use actuarial data to determine the likelihood of insureds from a certain group getting into an auto accident, providing a basis for setting insurance coverage premiums. Just like the insurance company cannot predict the risk of a specific driver getting into an accident—only the risk posed at large from a pool of drivers—criminogenic risk assessments do not predict outcomes for a particular youth but do predict outcomes for groups of youths that fall into different risk categories.

There are four principles to effective classification of juvenile offenders; risk, need, responsivity, and professional discretion:

- The Risk Principle—this principle proposes that the intensity of service be matched to the risk level of the offender. In practice the risk principle calls for focusing resources on the most serious cases, with high risk offenders benefitting the most from intensive services and treatment. Conversely, low risk clients require little to no intervention.
- The Need Principle—this principle focuses on targeting appropriate dynamic risk factors. Dynamic factors are those factors that, when changed, have been shown to result in a

reduction in criminal conduct. An example of a dynamic risk factor is an anti-social attitude.

- The Responsivity Principle—this principle involves matching dosages, treatment styles, and modalities to the client. General responsivity means using treatment modalities that have been shown to work with the offender population. Specific responsivity means tailoring programs to meet individual needs.
- The Professional Discretion Principle—also referred to as the override principle, this principle states that it is important that professional judgment not be eliminated completely from the risk assessment process. Dependent on the particular criminogenic risk assessment instrument used, demographics, jurisdiction, and other pertinent factors, assessment users should identify a specific list of overrides that reflect local priorities and concerns. Examples of overrides include but are not limited to: An offense history that includes severe violence or arson, mental health issues, medical problems, sexual offenses, pending adult criminal charges, severe medical problems, and previous unsuccessful intervention.

Based on research evidence, there is emerging consensus on characteristics of effective programming as listed in these additional guiding principles:

- Punitive sanctions without effective services do not have a significant effect on re-offending.
- Identification of offender strengths—or so-called protective factors—should be built upon in treatment planning.
- Most low-risk youth are unlikely to reoffend even if there is no intervention, but mixing them with high risk youth can make them worse.
- When services are matched to the youth’s “crime-producing” (criminogenic) needs, the lower the chance of repeat offending.
- The goal is to have the right services for the right youth.

A comprehensive survey of risk assessment use in Michigan, conducted by Juvenile Justice Vision 20-20, determined that 70% of Family Courts use some type of risk assessment. The most commonly used tools were the Youth Level of Service / Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI), the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI), the Michigan Juvenile Justice Assessment System (MJJAS), and the Juvenile Inventory for Functioning (JIFF). The current Department of Human Services classification and risk system is being replaced by the MJJAS. The MJJAS was designated as the state’s risk assessment system in 2013.

