

Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 Training Event
Use of Structured Risk/Need Assessments to Improve Outcomes for Juvenile Offenders
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Research suggests the effectiveness of juvenile justice professionals using risk/need assessments to estimate and manage future outcomes by providing crime-detering interventions. A risk/need assessment is a comprehensive evaluation that is most valuable when given multiple times since probabilities change across time. These assessments can be unstructured, but they are most useful when given in a structured format.

When assessing juvenile offenders, it is important to give special attention and consideration to the youth's developmental state and change, as well as to protective factors. These protective factors are any characteristic that reduces the risk of adverse outcomes. These protective factors need to be integrated into risk/need assessments in order to give a balanced view of the offender, increase predictive validity, increase incremental validity, engage youth and caregivers in the change process, and because juvenile justice professionals are mandated to do so.

It is also crucial to assess juvenile offenders in regards to context. Juvenile offenders are embedded in multiple systems that have the ability to affect their behavior. Recognizing the influence of these systems better equips a juvenile justice professional to address these behaviors. Juveniles are also very dependent on their caregiver. Juveniles' ability or inability to create change in their lives heavily depends on the environment the caregiver provides them with. Juveniles are less able to create change in their environment because they are bound by the rules and boundaries that are set by the many systems they are involved in. Juveniles are also very susceptible to peer influence at their age and many of the negative decisions that are made can be attributed to another juvenile or group of juveniles.

When looking at a juvenile assessment, criminogenic needs and treatment needs must be accounted for and included in an overall treatment plan. Criminogenic needs are factors that contribute to offending, whereas treatment needs are mental health or other health related concerns that are unrelated to the juvenile's criminal behavior. Studies show that treating criminogenic needs can help reduce recidivism. Although addressing treatment needs does not always reduce recidivism, it can help improve overall functioning.

Past risk/need assessment approaches can be understood as a series of generations that have evolved and improved with each generation. These generations can be understood as follows:

- First Generation: Unstructured professional judgment
- Second Generation: Empirically-based, comprised of static risk factors
- Third Generation: Empirically-based and include a wider variety of factors
- Fourth Generation: Integration of risk management, treatment targets and modalities, and assessment of progress

In the United States, there is an increased requirement and use of structured risk/need assessments. There are many different tools available, all of which vary in evidence, intended population, intended

outcome, content, approach, length, cost, and more. A challenge that juvenile justice professionals face is choosing the right risk/need assessment. There are five questions that need to be considered to assist a juvenile justice professional in selecting the right risk/need assessment tool:

1. What is the evidence?
 - No one instrument produces the most reliable and most accurate risk/need assessments.
2. What is your outcome of interest?
 - Some instruments are designed for and perform better in assessing likelihood of particular outcomes.
3. What is your population?
 - Some instruments are developed for specific populations.
4. What is your setting?
 - It is important to know the information and time available to complete the assessment, staff training and background, assessment and prediction time frame, and evidence supporting use of tools in that setting.
5. What are the costs?
 - Costs associated with training, materials, license, and integration with existing records or IT systems need to be considered when choosing a risk/need assessment.

The ultimate goal of structured risk/need assessments is to improve outcomes of juvenile offenders. This is done through increased standardization, consistency, and transparency of risk/need assessments, matching juvenile needs with the intervention, reducing risks associated with over- or under-intervening, communicating better with different agencies, monitoring individual progress, and by promoting youth and caregiver involvement. In addition, it is important to note that the risk assessment alone will not improve outcomes. Staff must implement them with fidelity, communicate the results with others, integrate the assessment with case management, and review and amend it as needed.

It is clear that there are many benefits for both juvenile justice professionals and juveniles offenders who implement structured risk/need assessments into treatment plans. An evolving development of these assessments has created many reliable and valid assessments that meet the needs of a variety of youth. In addition to simply using these assessments, they must be implemented successfully by staff in order to ensure that they are best meeting the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system.