Screening, Assessment, and Structured Decisionmaking
Samantha Harvell, Hanna Love, Elizabeth Pelletier, Chloe Warnberg, and Constance Hull

WHAT DOES THIS FACT SHEET COVER?

A research overview for why juvenile probation should use screening and assessment to inform structured decisionmaking.

Suggestions for how to screen and divert youth.

Suggestions for how to use validated assessment tools to comprehensively assess risk, needs, and strengths.

Suggestions for how to use risk information to inform decisions at key points.

Suggestions for how to use information on needs and strengths to inform case planning.

Effective juvenile justice interventions target youth at high risk of reoffending (the risk principle); address the specific criminogenic needs that will reduce the youth’s likelihood of reoffending (the need principle); and are delivered in a way that is responsive to the youth’s individual learning styles, motivations, abilities, and strengths (the responsivity principle). Using this risk-needs-responsivity framework during youth probation can inform case processing decisions, guide case management, support more efficient use of resources, and reduce recidivism.

SCREEN EACH YOUTH AT INTAKE, AND DIVERT YOUTH FROM FORMAL SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT WHERE APPROPRIATE

WHY: Juvenile justice interventions are most effective when targeted to youth at high risk of reoffending. And, youth who are diverted from the system at initial referral are less likely to engage in future delinquent behavior than those who are formally processed.

HOW: Administer brief screening tools at referral or intake for all youth. Ensure tools have been developed for adolescents, can be administered in a standardized way, and have established reliability and validity.

HOW: Carefully document results of all screening and assessment instruments.

HOW: Divert youth with a low risk of recidivating from further system involvement.

HOW: Consider targeted programming through informal supervision for youth at medium risk of reoffending. Programs that use a restorative justice model, take a cognitive-behavioral approach, and promote skill development align well with research.

HOW: Refer youth at low risk of recidivating who have significant needs to services outside the juvenile justice system.

HOW: Avoid “net widening.” Use diversion programs to serve youth who otherwise would have been formally processed.

USE VALIDATED ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO ASSESS RISK, NEEDS, AND STRENGTHS

WHY: Matching interventions and services to each youth’s unique needs is instrumental in reducing recidivism. A comprehensive, high-quality assessment process is necessary to tailor system responses for each individual youth and to account for the ongoing physical, emotional, psychological, and social changes that define adolescence.
HOW: Before administering an assessment, **clearly explain** to youth and caregivers its purpose, use, and importance.

**HOW**: Use a **validated tool** to assess youth’s risk of reoffending and criminogenic needs.

**HOW**: Ensure that each youth is reassessed regularly. This could be every six months, when supervision levels change, and/or when significant changes occur.

**HOW**: Assess mental health and substance use needs where indicated by the initial screen. Refer youth to a specialist where required by the chosen tool.

**USE RISK INFORMATION TO INFORM RECOMMENDATIONS AND DECISIONS AT KEY POINTS (INCLUDING INTAKE, DISPOSITION, AND SUPERVISION)**

**WHY**: Because youth are growing and changing so quickly, assessment results are only reliable and valid for a limited time. Assessments should be re-administered to account for the dynamic nature of adolescent development and to provide opportunities to step down the level or intensity of supervision.

**HOW**: Use screening at intake to divert youth assessed as low risk away from formal court processing.

**HOW**: Use a structured process to incorporate risk scores into disposition recommendations without eliminating flexibility to tailor decisions to individual cases. Recognize that a "high risk" assessment does not automatically warrant residential placement. Ensure that recommendations for confinement are consistent with the shortest period necessary.

**HOW**: Base the intensity of supervision on risk to reoffend. Use updates in risk level to reduce system contact.

**USE INFORMATION ON NEEDS AND STRENGTHS TO INFORM CASE PLANNING**

**WHY**: A growing body of research suggests the importance of aligning intensity, duration, and type of services to needs and strengths of a specific youth in order to successfully reduce recidivism, and interventions that expand youth’s competencies and help them develop in a supportive environment are the most successful in positively shaping the ongoing development process.

**HOW**: Clearly explain to youth and caregivers the purpose and use of any strengths-based tool used.

**HOW**: Target case plan requirements to address criminogenic needs.

**HOW**: Use conversations with youth and caregivers to enhance targeting by tailoring services to address underlying issues (such as trauma) that might be causing other needs.

**HOW**: Take into account things that may affect a youth’s ability to respond to interventions—or responsivity factors—when determining an appropriate case plan. Consider learning disabilities, a history of trauma, and access to transportation.

**HOW**: Support youth, caregiver, and community strengths in a case plan. Work with youth and supportive adults to examine strengths on which to build; use strengths and interests as motivation to engage in prosocial activities.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**ON IMPLEMENTING RISK ASSESSMENT**: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s *Risk Assessment Guidebook*

**ON DETENTION RISK ASSESSMENT**: Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Practice Guide*

**ON BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS**: OJJDP’s *Resource Guide*

This fact sheet summarizes chapter 2 of *Bridging Research and Practice in Juvenile Probation: Rethinking Strategies to Promote Long-Term Change*. The full report includes citations for the research summarized here.