

Disposition Matrices: Design, Development, and Use

Design

Disposition matrices focus on the intersection of the current offense and the youth's risk level. This focus helps to inform disposition options and decisions, and helps to collect and understand valuable practice data. To capture every possible combination of offense, risk level, and sometimes service needs as well, the matrix structure comprises many different classification cells, each of which captures a different balance of the characteristics and recommends a corresponding disposition decision.

Disposition matrices typically have two axes to determine classification cells. One axis represents the seriousness of the current offense (higher or lower). The other axis represents the youth's risk level and likelihood of future offending (higher or lower). Together, these two axes can structure dispositional decision making.



What Is a Disposition Matrix?

A disposition matrix is a tool designed to structure decisions about the most appropriate level of supervision and custody for an adjudicated youth at the time of case disposition. Through the use of matrices, judicial officers are able to make more informed decisions that enhance practices and policies for safer communities and more successful youth. Disposition matrix examples are provided on page 3.

Disposition matrices ensure consistent decision making, are based in evidence and data, and ultimately allow for the allocation of resources to where they are most needed, efficient, and effective.

Development

Disposition matrices are developed through a consensus-building process that involves judges and other hearing officers, agency leaders, attorneys, and a wide range of other stakeholders. This leadership group helps shape how current offense information should be structured and how risk levels should be represented, which together determine the different classification cells and disposition recommendations.

The composition of current offense classes and their levels of seriousness should be determined by local policy makers and follow local statutes. Offense classes are typically placed along the left axis of the matrix.



Unlike the current offense seriousness axis, which is grounded in policy and consensus, risk levels are grounded in data and research. Risk items with statistical relationships to reoffending are combined to classify youth according to their overall likelihood of future offending. To be most effective, risk assessment validity should be examined regularly with local data. Risk levels are typically placed along the upper axis of the matrix.

Once the axes are labeled with the appropriate current offenses and risk level categories, the disposition matrix cells can be labeled with the different combinations of current offense class and risk level. Typically, local policy objectives drive the disposition recommendations that are applied to each classification cell. That way, each jurisdiction can locally determine how their available dispositional options will be categorized based on their resources and level of restrictiveness.

Use

In practice, for each youth pending disposition, the user of the matrix would identify the cell that corresponds to the youth's current offense and risk level. The disposition matrix acts as an agreed-upon

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starting place for disposition decisions; but, if unique circumstances have not been captured adequately, a different disposition decision can apply.

This design allows disposition matrices to help ensure decision making is consistent, data-informed, and evidence-based. Disposition matrices help guide decisions, allow for more effective practice evaluation, and are powerful tools for helping systems achieve their goals.

The following examples are actual disposition matrices used in jurisdictions throughout the country.

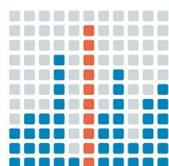
Disposition Matrix: Example 1

Type of Offense	Risk Level		
	High	Medium	Low
Violent Felonies	Youth Treatment Center Commitment to Department of Youth Services	Probation Alternative to Probation Youth Treatment Center Commitment to Department of Youth Services	Dismissal/Abeyance Probation Alternative to Probation Youth Treatment Center
Person Felonies	Residential Placement Youth Treatment Center Commitment to Department of Youth Services	Community Services Community Monitoring Probation Alternative to Probation	Dismissal/Abeyance Community Services Probation
All Other Felonies	Probation Alternative to Probation	Dismissal/Abeyance Community Monitoring Community Services Probation Alternative to Probation	Dismissal/Abeyance Sanctions Community Monitoring Community Services Probation
Misdemeanors	Community Services Community Monitoring	Community Services	Dismissal/Abeyance Sanctions ¹ Community Services

Disposition Matrix: Example 2

Most Serious Current Offense	Risk Level		
	High	Moderate	Low
Class I: Most serious violent felony offenses (e.g., murder, rape, armed robbery, etc.)	Out-of-home placement	Out-of-home placement or alternative to placement	Alternative to placement or probation
Class II: Other felony offenses against the person (e.g., felony weapon and felony drug distribution)	Out-of-home placement or alternative to placement	Alternative to placement or level 3 probation	Level 1 or 2 probation
Class III: Felony property and public order offenses	Alternative to placement or level 3 probation	Level 1 or 2 probation	Level 1 probation or adjournment in contemplation of dismissal
Class IV: Misdemeanor offenses	Level 1 or 2 probation	Adjournment in contemplation of dismissal	Adjournment in contemplation of dismissal; or short-term, one-time consequence; or dismissal

¹ Sanctions here means restitution or other low-level sanctions as defined by the court.



For more information, please contact research@nccdglobal.org; visit our website, www.nccdglobal.org; or call (800) 306-6223.