

# Risk Assessment for Targeting Resources and Interventions

## Use and Purpose

Risk assessment is a decision-support process to help juvenile justice systems identify the system-involved youth on whom they should focus. It helps to answer “who?” questions based on identifying which youth are most likely, on a statistical basis, to later reenter the juvenile justice system.<sup>1</sup>

Risk assessment also helps answer the “who not?” question. Given all the youth who are referred to the system, which youth are unlikely to reenter the juvenile justice system? For these youth, interventions can actually increase their risk of reentry.

## Allocate Resources for Impact

Because risk assessment helps structure decision points around which youth to focus on, it allows juvenile justice systems to allocate resources to where they are most needed, and to target interventions



*Risk assessment is a core practice to promote safer communities and more successful youth.*

to where they have the most potential to prevent future system reentry of youth. Risk assessment is a core practice to promote safer communities and more successful youth.

## What It Is Not

Risk assessment does not say much about “why?” questions. It does not suggest why some youth are more likely to get in trouble again or why some youth are more likely to reenter the juvenile justice system later. These are good research questions but not questions the risk assessment addresses.

In addition, risk assessment does not say much about “how?” questions. Risk assessment gives an indication of which youth to worry about but not which interventions are most appropriate or what kind of service plan should be adopted for a particular youth.

Once the risk assessment answers the “who” question by identifying a young person’s likelihood of reentering the system, systems should develop individualized case plans. These case plans should be informed by the young person’s risk score; his/her strengths and ambitions; input from family members; and the available local resources, including but not limited to positive youth development approaches aimed at building stronger prosocial attachments and

<sup>1</sup> Reentry refers to a youth’s return to the juvenile justice system, such as at intake.

therapeutic interventions like multisystemic therapy, family functional therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

In developing plans, it is important to keep in mind that young people who pose a low risk should, on the whole, receive limited or court-ordered interventions. Out-of-home placement should be reserved for youth who score high risk and for whom no other viable community-based alternative is available.

*“Who is most likely to reenter the juvenile justice system?”*

*“Who meets our eligibility criteria for programmatic interventions?”*

*“To whom should we allocate our limited resources?”*

## Method

Risk assessments are most commonly actuarial tools, similar to those used to set car insurance rates. Using available data, rigorous statistical analysis, and predictive analytics approaches, the factors most associated with juvenile justice system reentry are identified. It is important that local data and practices are incorporated into the process. Youth with more risk factors score higher, and youth with fewer risk factors score lower. Thresholds then classify youth according to low, moderate, or high risk.



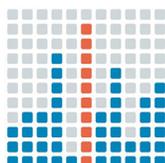
Risk assessment instruments must be evaluated against set criteria to ensure that they function appropriately.

These testing criteria are:

- *Validity*, to test for accuracy;
- *Reliability*, to test for consistency,
- *Equity*, to test for fairness; and
- *Utility*, to test for how useful the instrument is in practice.

## Practice and Impact

Risk assessment works as a decision support—not to shape decisions a particular way but to ensure that decision makers are more likely to “get it right.” Research has demonstrated that decisions lead to better outcomes when they are structured. Individual decision makers still maintain discretion to use professional judgment and consider the uniqueness of each individual youth.



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