



Risk Assessment for Targeting Resources and Interventions

“Who should we be most worried about?”

“Who should we target our evidence-based programs to?”

“Who should we allocate our scarce resources to?”

Use and Purpose

Risk assessment is a decision-support process to help juvenile justice systems identify which system-involved youth they should focus on. 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.

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 recidivism.

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 target interventions 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.

Risk assessment also does not say much about “how?” questions. Risk assessment gives an indication of which youth to worry about but not how to worry about them, which interventions are most appropriate, or what kind of service plan should be adopted for a particular youth. Once the risk assessment helps identify which youth to target interventions to (the “who” question), systems should use known evidence-based practices, including therapeutic interventions such as multisystemic therapy, family functional therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy as well as positive youth development approaches that build stronger prosocial attachments with others and the community.

Method

Risk assessments are most commonly actuarial tools, similar to how car insurance rates are set. 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. Validity tests for accuracy, reliability tests for consistency, equity tests for fairness, and utility tests 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.