HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF RISK ASSESSMENT IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

by Gina M. Vincent & Laura S. Guy

The adoption of risk assessment instruments to aid in structured decision-making has become a popular practice in juvenile justice, particularly since it was strongly recommended by Congress ten years ago in the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA). Many state and county juvenile justice agencies have adopted risk assessments in the past decade, however, research suggests that few may be using these instruments appropriately in their decision-making (Shook & Saari, 2007). If implemented well, a risk assessment instrument can improve allocation of resources and lead to fewer youths being removed from the home or incarcerated, while still protecting public safety. This article briefly describes how to effectively implement a risk assessment instrument in a juvenile justice system and presents research findings on the changes that can result. But first it is important to define risk assessment and what it does. For more information about any of the topics in this article, readers are encouraged to download the *Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Implementation guide* (Vincent, Guy, & Grisso, 2012; http://www.nysap.us/Products.html#RiskAssessment).

RISK ASSESSMENT IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

DEFINING RISK ASSESSMENT

A risk assessment is an instrument designed to estimate the likelihood that delinquent behaviors will continue for a youth if nothing is done to intervene. Most risk assessment instruments will categorize individuals according to risk levels, such as relatively low, moderate, or high risk for re-offending. Comprehensive risk assessment instruments (sometimes referred to as *risk/needs assessment instruments)* will also try to assess what is likely to be causing the youth to offend.

Risk assessments can be informative for decisions made at several stages of processing within the juvenile justice system, including probation or juvenile court intake (where case screening takes place), pretrial detention, disposition or juvenile corrections. The reasons for completing a risk assessment can vary depending on the stage at which it occurs. For example, a risk assessment conducted at the intake or pretrial stage may assist with deciding whether to place a youth in detention. A risk assessment conducted after adjudication should be helpful for informing the disposition, deciding whether to allow a youth to reside in the community and for identifying the best type of interventions or services expected to reduce the youth's risk of reoffending.

A substantial amount of research has been conducted during the past three decades to learn about the types of problems that increase youths' risk for engaging in criminal activity. These problems – or *risk factors* – can be related to "internal" factors of the youth or "external" factors related to the youth's circumstances or situation. Examples of some risk factors that research has shown to be related to juvenile delinquency include associating with a deviant peer group; abusing alcohol or drugs; having callous, impulsive or other types of problematic personality traits and attitudes; having poor engagement with or achievement in school; having caregivers who are poor role models or fail to provide structured and fair discipline; and having a history of engaging in delinquent activity. As may be apparent from this brief (and incomplete) list, risk factors may or may not be capable of being changed. For example, once a youth has engaged in a serious delinquent behavior, he will always have that history. But a youth who has difficulty controlling her anger may be taught ways to reduce or otherwise manage that anger such that it ceases to increase her risk for engaging in delinquent activity. Risk factors that cannot change are referred to as "static" risk factors. Those that are capable of being changed are known as "dynamic" risk factors. Another term used to describe risk factors that are changeable and, if changed, can reduce the probability of future offending is "criminogenic needs." Criminogenic needs are essentially the dynamic risk factors that are most strongly related to elevating the risk of a particular youth.

In addition to studying risk factors, research has been conducted on protective

factors. A protective factor is something in the youth's life that can decrease the potential harmful effect of the risk factor. A protective factor can be seen as a buffer that reduces the strength of the link between a risk factor and subsequent delinquency. Protective factors sometimes are thought of as strengths of a youth or his or her situation that help the youth deal with challenges more effectively, such as having a strong social support system, being engaged in sports, or having high academic achievement. Some, but not all, comprehensive risk assessment instruments assess protective factors or strengths.

HOW ARE RISK ASSESSMENTS COMPLETED?

Research has shown that informal evaluations of risk for delinquent or antisocial behavior that are not guided by a valid risk assessment instrument generally are no more accurate than chance. Optimally, a trained professional should conduct a risk assessment using a structured instrument that research has shown to be accurate or valid for assessing risk. In this case, "valid" means that research has demonstrated a good degree of correspondence between scores on the instrument and subsequent delinquent activity. In research terms, this is referred to as the instrument's ability to "predict" a future outcome. An instrument with excellent predictive validity is one where most of the youth in a sample who scored high on the instrument and received no intervention or poor interventions reoffended in a relatively short period of time (usually one year). Typically, before researchers undertake examinations of an instrument's predictive validity, they should demonstrate that the instrument has adequate inter-rater reliability or agreement. That is, when independent evaluators rate the instrument using the same information, they should generate similar scores.

Several valid measures of risk have been developed and tested. However, a risk assessment instrument is only as good as the information used to score it. Therefore, it is critical for the probation officer to obtain information about the youth

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and his or her living circumstances from multiple sources. Interviews always should be conducted with the youth and his or her parent(s) both together and separately. School records and interviews with teachers can be helpful for learning about how a youth behaves in that environment, the types of friends she or he has, and how she or he is performing academically. Mental health records also could offer important information about a youth. Speaking with the youth's former probation officer and reviewing juvenile court records would also be a critical component of a risk assessment.

Several risk assessment instruments for youth exist that have good data from multiple studies to support their use. Two of the most researched instruments for assessing future offending among juveniles are the *Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory* (YLS/CMI; Hoge & Andrews, 2006) and the *Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth* (SAVRY; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2006). Both instruments in essence are checklists of risk factors that have been shown by research and consultation with professionals to be related to reoffending among youth (the SAVRY also contains protective factors). The main difference between the instruments is the way in which the evaluator uses information about the risk factors. With the YLS/CMI, the evaluator sums the number of items that were rated as "yes, present" to compute a total score that corresponds with an estimated level of risk (Low, Medium, High, or Very High). Risk assessment instruments that involve pre-determined rules about how to combine such information and leave no room for discretion are referred to as *actuarial* instruments. Although many people use the YLS/CMI in this way as an actuarial instrument, the manual encourages evaluators to subsequently consider whether any of several additional items related to the youth or his or her family are relevant for the case. After engaging in that step, evaluators then should decide whether the initial risk level associated with the total score should be adjusted upwards or downwards. This is known as an "over-ride" option.

In contrast, evaluators using the SAVRY consider not only whether any of the risk items are present, but also how relevant each item is for the given case. Considering all of this information, as well as any relevant case-specific information, evaluators are encouraged to engage in "case formulation" techniques that involve developing theories about how the particular risk and protective factors work together to drive the youth's risk for delinquency. Typically, evaluators using the SAVRY make a judgment about whether the youth is at relatively low, moderate, or high risk for engaging in violence or general delinquency. The model of decision-making that the SAVRY follows is termed *Structured Professional Judgment*.

HOW CAN A RISK ASSESSMENT BE USED TO REDUCE RISK FOR FUTURE DELINQUENT ACTIVITY?

A comprehensive risk assessment lays the foundation needed to develop an

effective plan to reduce and manage a youth's risk for future delinquent activity. Risk assessment instruments that comprise only static risk factors – factors that cannot ever be changed, such as age at first violent act or number of contacts with law enforcement – are essentially useless for developing risk reduction and case plans. Only risk assessment instruments that contain dynamic risk factors/criminogenic needs (again, we refer to these as comprehensive risk assessment instruments or risk/needs assessment instruments) can identify the particular factors that are contributing to a specific youth's delinquent behavior. Different youth engage in delinquent behaviors for different reasons. Once the probation officer or other juvenile justice personnel understands which risk factors are most relevant to a particular youth, she or he will be in a solid position to make recommendations about the strategies that should be followed to reduce or manage that risk. For example, if the risk assessment shows that dysfunctional parenting is the primary factor driving a youth's delinquent behaviors, this should be the target of intervention.

Although the rehabilitative focus of the juvenile justice system is widely accepted for moral reasons, it also is supported by financial and public safety objectives. Research has shown that rehabilitative strategies that address the specific criminogenic needs of youth are less expensive and more effective in preventing reoffending compared with punitive sanctions such as incarceration (Drake, Aos, & Miller, 2009; Lipsey, 2009).

Along these lines, one of the most effective approaches to case management is the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) approach (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Hoge & Andrews, 2010). Basically, this means that the highest risk offenders should receive the most intensive monitoring and services to reduce their risk of reoffending. Low risk youth have a lower chance of reoffending even in the absence of services and, therefore, should be able to function well with minimal attention. This concept is known as the *risk principle*. The *need principle* suggests that only those factors associated with reductions in reoffending should be targeted for services. Merely piling on services as usual for each youth is unlikely to have an effect on reoffending and can, in fact, make youths worse, especially low risk youth. The *responsivity principle* suggests services should address the youths' specific characteristics that may affect their response to treatment. The last principle suggests there should be room for *professional discretion* that can deviate from recommendations in certain circumstances. Including an override option on a risk assessment instrument is an example of the professional discretion principle.

The importance of developing an individualized risk management plan cannot be overstated; even though two youth may have the same criminogenic needs, one youth may be better or less suited for a

particular intervention compared to another youth. For example, in general, counseling or programs that use cognitive-behavioral principles are most effective at reducing reoffending. However, a youth struggling with intellectual impairments may not benefit from this type of intervention.

In order for the practice of risk assessment to help reduce risk of reoffending in a given youth over time, it is critical that the risk assessment remain "up to date." Risk factors change over time in terms of how they are exhibited by a particular youth. For example, substance use could be a risk factor for a youth at the beginning of probation because she is using marijuana, but her substance use could expand over time to include cocaine use, which could have implications for how this risk factor is targeted with a service. Also, the degree to which a particular risk factor is relevant for a youth can change over time. Continuing with the previous example, suppose that the youth used marijuana at home alone and that her use never led to violence or otherwise antisocial behavior. But then she begins to use cocaine and decides that she needs to engage in theft to fund her drug habit. Because of the inherently dynamic nature of risk assessment – that is, the presence and relevance of risk factors can change over time for a given youth – risk assessment works best if it is updated over time. Typically, it is recommended that risk assessments be updated every six months or when a major event occurs in a youth's life, such as a re-offense, change in living circumstances, or loss of a strong social support.

HOW WELL DO THESE RISK ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS WORK?

Typically, when people ask this question, they want to know how well an instrument "predicts" future delinquency. The best kind of research studies that answer this question are ones in which large groups of youth are rated using the instrument and then followed-up several years later to see which youth engaged in delinquent behaviors (which can be defined in different ways – physical violence? any type of offending? - and using different sources – arrest records? convictions? - across researchers). Researchers then examine whether there was an association between a youth's ratings on the risk assessment instrument and whether she or he reoffended (see the discussion above about "predictive validity").

A useful statistical approach that can help make sense of all the research that has been conducted on an instrument is called meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is a way of combining the results of independent research studies to generate an overall estimate of the results of all the studies on a particular risk assessment instrument. Results of one meta-analysis that examined both the YLS/CMI and SAVRY (Olver, Stockdale, & Wormith, 2009) indicated that there was a moderate association between ratings on each of the instruments and subsequent delinquency. As such, the scientific literature tells us that the most well researched risk assessment instruments perform significantly better than chance, but that they do not have perfect

accuracy. Generally, the research shows that there is an approximately 70 percent chance that a youth who actually was delinquent would score above the instrument's cut-off for delinquency and a youth who actually was not delinquent would score below the cut-off.

Given the extremely complex nature of risk assessment and the dynamic contexts in which it occurs, it is not surprising that exceedingly high levels of predictive accuracy have not been reached. However, one factor that research to date has not investigated thoroughly is the impact of taking steps to prevent reoffending after a youth has been identified via risk assessment as being at elevated risk. Ideally, research on the "predictive accuracy" of risk assessment instruments would show these instruments to have low levels of accuracy. This is because, in a perfect world, youth identified as being at high risk would receive monitoring and treatment to target their specific criminogenic needs, thereby reducing their risk for reoffending (and proving the risk "prediction" to be wrong). For example, a youth whose delinquency was related to deviant peer associations and substance use could be referred to treatments to target those risk factors. Or a youth whose parents were having difficulties providing appropriate discipline could be taught some better strategies.

IMPLEMENTING RISK ASSESSMENT IN A JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The importance of thoughtful and structured implementation of a risk assessment instrument cannot be emphasized enough. Simply selecting and adopting a risk assessment instrument will not accomplish the desired result, it must be implemented properly. One reason that appropriate implementation efforts are so important is that people in the juvenile justice system need to know how to use it. One of the most effective uses of a risk assessment instrument is to apply the principles of the RNR approach for managing risk, allocating resources and reducing the chances of reoffending. Another reason that appropriate implementation is so important is because one of the key steps in the process involves gaining buy-in from the essential stakeholders. Risk assessment is unlikely to effectuate change if players in the system, such as judges, attorneys and probation officers, have not bought into its use.

The *Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Effective Implementation* guide outlines eight steps of implementation. These steps were derived from research and the experiences of many practitioners in the field. In the descriptors below, we assume that a risk assessment instrument is being implemented in a probation or probation intake setting. Some modifications would be necessary for correctional settings.

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STEP 1: GETTING READY

This step refers to getting the right team of people together and creating an optimal environment to allow the instrument to operate effectively. It starts with establishing a *steering committee,* which includes at least one representative from each stakeholder group (e.g., judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors, probation administrators) before a risk assessment instrument is selected for use in the jurisdiction. The group will eventually identify an objective risk assessment expert to advise them and a local university partner to help conduct an evaluation once the instrument is in place.

STEP 2: ESTABLISHING STAKEHOLDER AND STAFF BUY-IN

This step involves activities that can be used to obtain buy-in from the essential stakeholders (e.g., judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors, service agencies) and staff members. One strategy is to provide short orientation trainings about the value and expected outcomes of implementing risk assessment to judges, attorneys and probation officers. Such trainings would permit these groups to voice any concerns or ideas about the way they think the assessment should be used. Stakeholders also should consider potential barriers to adopting a risk assessment, such as the multiple assessments many youth could be subject to from other agencies to discuss the overlap across instruments and how to minimize over-assessing youth and families.

STEP 3: SELECT AND PREPARE THE RISK ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

What is the 'best' risk assessment instrument depends on the quantity and quality of its research evidence, the resources of the agency and, most importantly, the point in the system where the instrument will be used and for what purpose. Different decision-points in the juvenile justice system (e.g., detention, probation, or in a correctional facility) have different questions to answer about youth processing and, therefore, require different types of assessment instruments. With respect to research evidence, we recommend an instrument have at least two studies demonstrating inter-rater reliability and at least two studies demonstrating validity. Ideally, a few studies should have been conducted by independent parties who do not have a vested interest in the instrument. Further, the instrument must have been validated for the setting in which it is being used in order to have confidence that it will accurately categorize youth according to their risk. Some agencies decide to create and validate their own risk assessment instrument, which can be labor intensive and difficult to do well. The Guide discusses an alternative approach, which involves adopting an existing risk assessment instrument that has already been well researched for the specific purpose.

STEP 4: PREPARING POLICIES AND ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS

Implementation of a risk assessment instrument does not stop once an agency has selected the instrument and trained probation staff on how to complete it. Instead, it involves implementing an assessment system, which includes a structured process regarding how the instrument will be used in various decisions. Therefore, Step 4 involves developing the appropriate policies and essential documents to integrate risk assessment routinely into decisions. Some of the policies to consider include how risk level will be used to guide the youths' supervision level, who will complete the risk assessment instrument, the required level of staff training for conducting these assessments, how the risk assessment will be used in various case processing decisions and how often youth will be reassessed.

If an objective of the steering committee is for the risk assessment to be used in disposition decisions, there should be a policy about how this information will be communicated to the court. At a minimum, a pre-disposition report should include the youth's risk level and primary need areas to target for intervention. Ideally, judges and attorneys would be involved in the development of this policy to ensure they receive the information they need to inform their decisions while protecting the rights of the youth.

If an objective of the risk assessment instrument is to guide case planning, then it is important to construct policies about how to match youths' risk level and criminogenic needs to services. The case plan will be easier to use if it is structured according to the need areas that the risk assessment is designed to identify. Another document that can be helpful is a *service matrix* for each jurisdiction. A service matrix categorizes the services available in the community according to the criminogenic needs the service addresses and the risk level for which it is appropriate. Intensive services are most appropriate for high risk youth. Probation officers will require training on the art of developing a case plan that will maximize the possibility of reducing youths' risk.

Other trainings that will maximize the effectiveness of the whole implementation process include training judges and attorneys in the jurisdiction about the instrument and how it works, including the available research evidence.

STEP 5: TRAINING

Once the policies and new documents are drafted, it is time to conduct training. Training should be planned at many levels. Probation officers or whoever will be conducting the risk assessment, should receive rigorous training on how to complete the instrument, ideally using a train-the-trainer model whereby probation officers are trained by master trainers who are also probation officers. Individuals tend to learn better from their peers than from an expert in risk assessment from a different state. The second training to provide for probation officers is training on how to use the risk assessment instrument to provide disposition recommendations (if applicable) and in case planning. It is wise to provide booster training on the risk assessment instrument and subsequent decision-making for probation officers every six months.

Other trainings that will maximize the effectiveness of the whole implementation process include training judges and attorneys in the jurisdiction about the instrument and how it works, including the available research evidence. Finally, training the supervisors of probation officers on how to check the quality of the risk assessments conducted and the case plan is essential for quality control.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT PILOT TEST

It is always a good idea to pilot test the risk assessment instrument in a couple of jurisdictions (for statewide initiatives) or with a few stakeholders and probation officers (for county-level initiatives) before it is fully implemented. As such, Step 6 pertains to pilot testing the instrument and the policies. A pilot test would involve sound data collection to determine whether the instrument is being completed properly and reliably and whether it is being used in decisions. The pilot test enables the steering committee to identify and work out any obstacles that prevent the process from running smoothly.

STEP 7: FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Once the pilot test is complete, Step 7 is to roll out the instrument to the rest of a single probation office or the state. For statewide implementation in states with many counties, the implementation process will be easier to manage thorough training and quality control if the new counties are started in groups of ten or so.

STEP 8: ON-GOING TASKS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Maintaining the integrity of the risk assessment instrument and use of risk assessment results in decisions is an on-going process. The final step, Step 8, refers to how to sustain the benefits of this evidence-based practice. One strategy to ensure sustainability is to provide booster training for probation staff on the risk assessment system every six months. Another strategy is to conduct on-going data monitoring that is shared with stakeholders, administrators and all staff. Monitoring data is the best way to know when and where to make adjustments to improve the process. Moreover, staff will be

more engaged in the process if they can see tangible data on the outcomes of using risk assessment.

POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF SOUND IMPLEMENTATION OF A VALID RISK ASSESSMENT

The outcomes of the implementation process for risk assessment just described were examined in the Risk/Needs Assessment in Juvenile Probation: Implementation Study (Vincent, Paiva, Cook, Guy, & Perrault, 2012; Vincent, Guy, Gershenson, & McCabe, 2012). Risk/needs assessments were implemented in six juvenile probation offices in Louisiana and Pennsylvania. Louisiana used the SAVRY and Pennsylvania used the YLS/CMI. Both instruments measure risk level and dynamic risk factors, and both have considerable evidence of reliability and validity for predicting re-offending among young offenders. Standard methods of implementation and training on an assessment system were used at each site.

We examined two kinds of changes: changes in attitudes and decision-making by the juvenile probation officers, and changes in how cases were processed. Researchers interviewed probation officers at three time points: before implementation of the assessments, and at three and ten months after implementation. Our goals in these interviews were to understand how the officers used the instruments, to see if they made any changes in their practice and to determine whether there was sufficient *implementation integrity* to study other impacts of adopting the assessment. We also wanted to see whether changes that resulted from the initial training (those we saw at three months post-training) were sustained over time (at the ten-month point). To determine whether implementation of the assessment instruments made a difference in the handling of young offenders, we compared groups of youths adjudicated consecutively for six to 12 months before implementation to those adjudicated after full implementation of the assessment instrument and policies for the instruments' use.

CAN PROBATION OFFICERS CONDUCT RISK/NEEDS ASSESSMENTS RELIABLY?

As described earlier, an assessment instrument is reliable if different interviewers (in this case, probation officers) using that instrument to assess a given youth obtain the same results. Although many assessment instruments have been shown to be reliable when used by trained researchers, people have been skeptical as to whether juvenile probation officers can reliably conduct these assessments in the field. This study looked at the field assessments by two officers using the same instrument on 90 youths, and found good to excellent agreement between raters. Moreover, the consistency with the SAVRY assessment was actually better when officers were trained by a peer master trainer (another probation officer in their office) than by an outside expert on the SAVRY (Vincent, Guy, Fusco, & Gershenson, 2011). This means the costs of training can be low.

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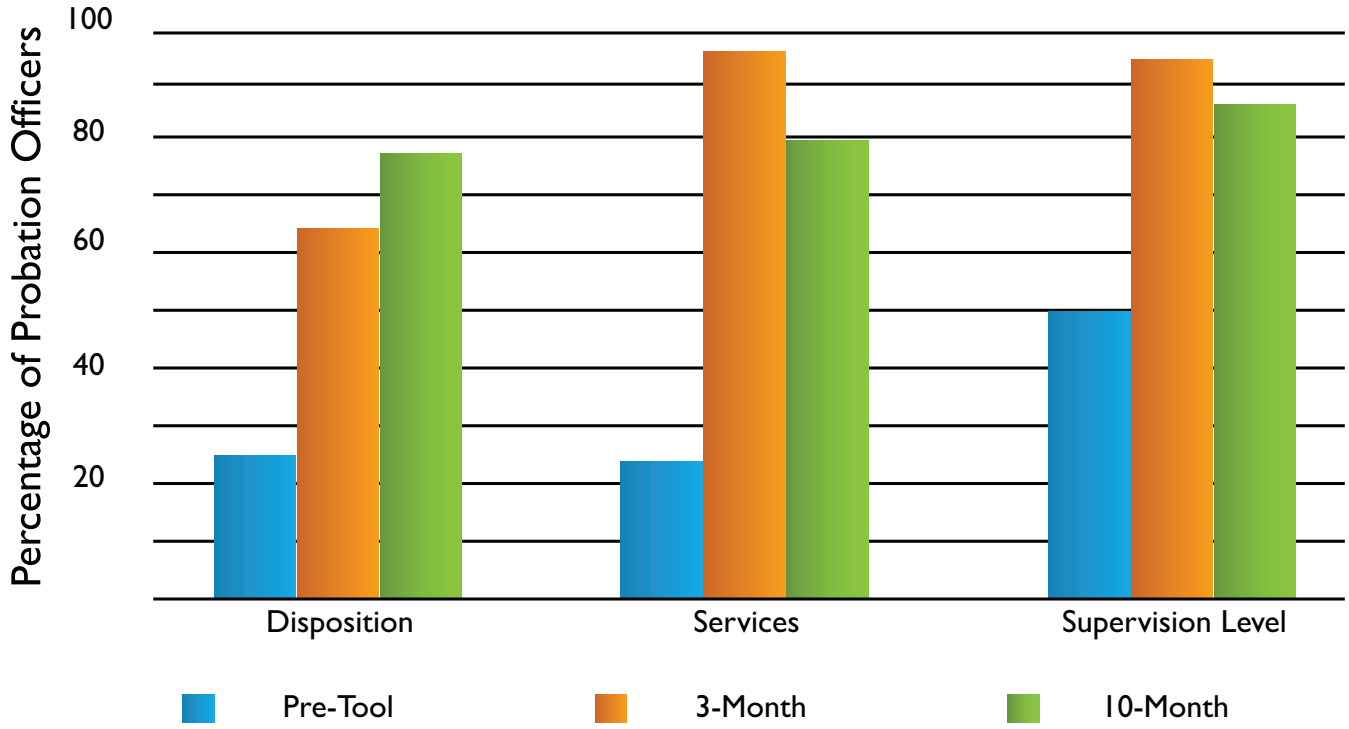
DOES THE USE OF RISK ASSESSMENT CHANGE JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS' PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS OF RISK?

Training and use of either assessment instrument led to a significant reduction in the number of youths the probation officers perceived as likely to re-offend (based on their general perceptions when no risk assessment instrument is used). After taking into account the specific site and several characteristics of the officers (such as years of experience working in juvenile justice and authoritarian beliefs), we found that officers changed from perceiving 45 to 50 percent of their youths as likely re-offenders to thinking that only 30 percent were likely to re-offend. A control sample of probation officers in an office that did *not* implement an assessment instrument did not significantly change their estimates of youths' recidivism.

Among officers using an assessment instrument, there was a significant increase in the number who considered evidence-based risk factors when they made their disposition recommendations. They also were significantly more likely to consider a youth's dynamic risk factors (criminogenic needs) when recommending services in

FIGURE 1

Use of risk assessments in different areas of decision-making by juvenile probation officers from six jurisdictions before and after implementation (at 3-months and 10-months after) of the SAVRY or YLS/CMI.



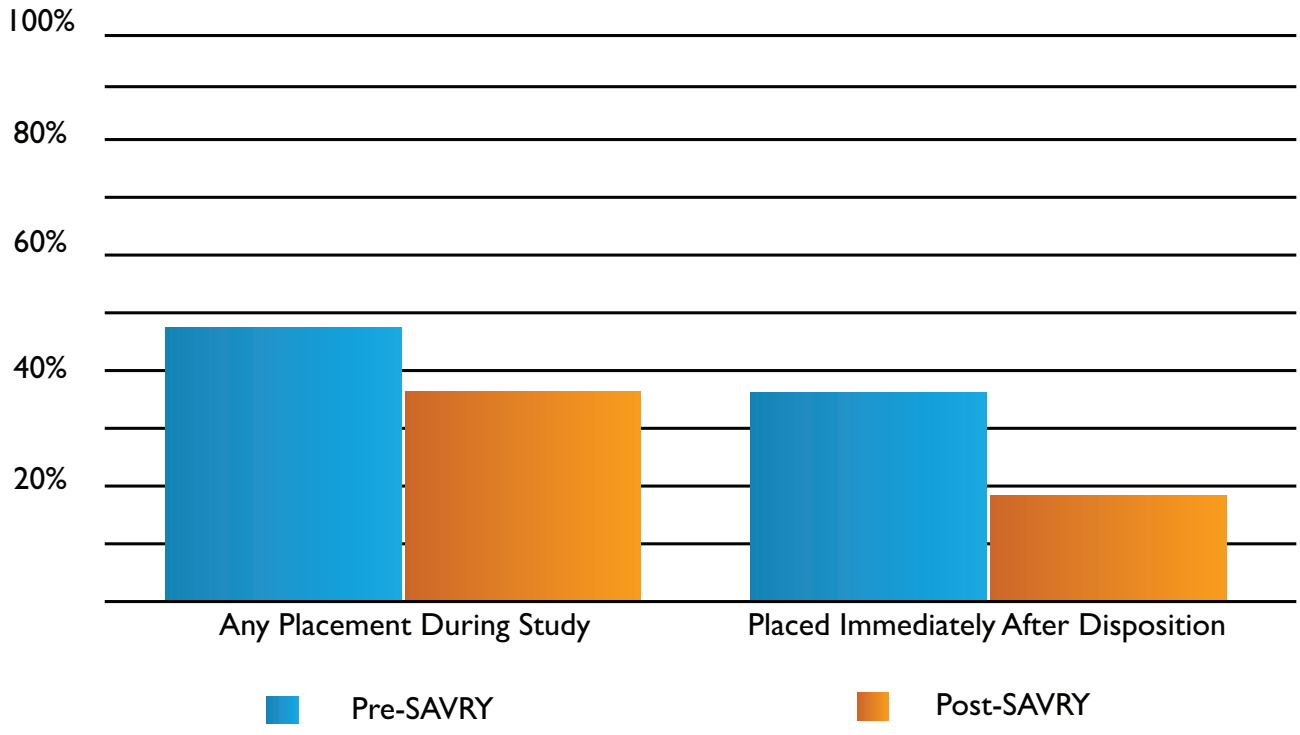
the community. And supervision levels on probation were assigned according to an individual youth's level of risk, rather than using a "one size fits all" approach. All of these changes, illustrated in Figure 1, were statistically large effects.

DOES THE USE OF RISK ASSESSMENT IN JUVENILE PROBATION LEAD TO CHANGES IN THE WAY YOUTHS ARE HANDLED?

The most important question of the study concerned post-adjudication placement outside the home in secure correctional or residential centers, group homes, detention centers or wilderness camps. The study had a mix of sites with historically high placement rates (roughly 50 percent of adjudicated youths were being removed from the home at least once) and low placement rates (less than 20 percent of youth were removed from the home). Two of the three sites with historically high placement rates saw a substantial drop in the number of youths being placed out of the home up to 13 months after their adjudication. After

FIGURE 2

Change in post-adjudication, out-of-home placement rates in one site before and after implementation of the SAVRY using propensity-score matching. Before the SAVRY was put in place, youth were over 2.5 times more likely to be put in some form of placement immediately following their disposition and almost twice as likely to receive any placement at some point during their probation.



conducting all of the appropriate statistical controls (propensity score adjustments to balance out the groups), the data showed that youths were about half as likely to be put in a placement after an assessment instrument was implemented (see Figure 2 for an example from one jurisdiction).

Conversely, in two of the three sites that historically placed very few youths, youths were more than twice as likely to be placed outside the home after an assessment instrument was used. Although this difference may appear dramatic, very few youths were removed from their homes before or after the risk assessment was put in place. For example, in one site, 25 youths (10 percent of the pre-assessment sample) were put in some sort of placement during their first eight months of probation before the instrument was used, compared to 22 youths (20 percent of the post-assessment sample) after the instrument was implemented. Put simply, there was a reduction in the number of youth placed; however, there was an increase in the percentage of youths placed due to the small number of youth who had been adjudicated after the risk instrument was adopted. Therefore, users should be aware that the outcomes of implementing risk assessment will differ depending on the way an agency is currently operating.

In five of the six sites, after implementation of the assessment instrument all placement decisions were significantly related to the youths' level of risk, and most high-risk youths were still kept on probation rather than incarcerated or sent to some other out-of-home placement. Therefore, a label of "high-risk" was not used as a reason to automatically send youths to placement. Instead, probation officers sought the least restrictive but appropriate disposition for each youth. In four of the five sites where data on supervision levels was available, the use of medium and maximum levels of supervision for low-risk youths decreased substantially after assessments were implemented. In most sites, there was also a shift to provide more services to high-risk youths and fewer to low-risk youths.

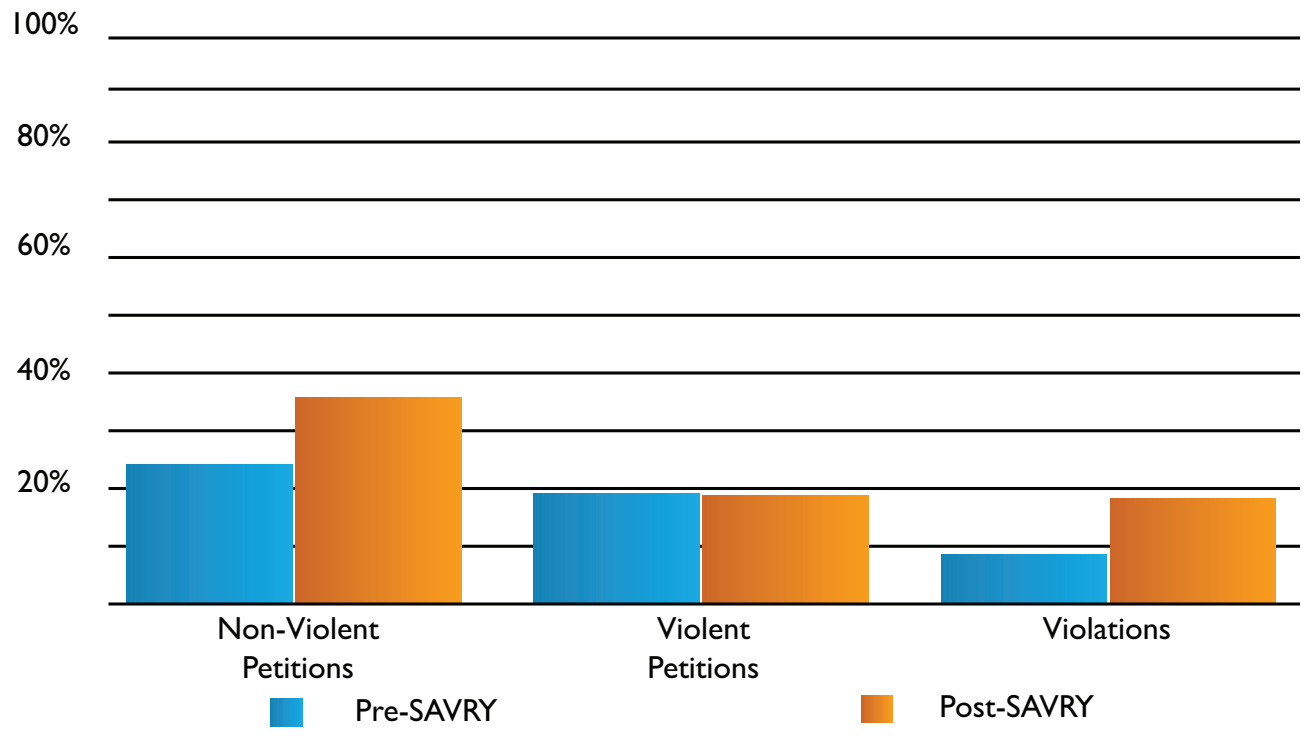
DOES THE USE OF RISK ASSESSMENT CHANGE RECIDIVISM?

The answer to whether sound implementation of risk assessment has an impact on recidivism is "not necessarily." This study examined changes in rates of both petitions and adjudications for new offenses before and after risk assessment instruments were put in place for the samples of youths tracked over time. In most sites, there was no significant change in the rates of violent or non-violent offenses petitioned or adjudicated up to 18 months following the youths' initial adjudication (see Figure 3 for an example from one site). In one site, however, the rates of all types of reoffending were cut in half after the YLS/CMI was implemented. The rate of non-violent reoffending dropped from 20 percent to 10 percent and the rate of violent reoffending dropped from 10 percent to five percent.

WHY IS GOOD IMPLEMENTATION OF RISK ASSESSMENT IMPORTANT?

In one site, juvenile probation officers who were trained on the assessment instrument began to use the instrument before they were trained how to apply it in their decision-making—that is, before it was fully implemented. This allowed the researchers to investigate the relation between risk level and decision-making before and after full implementation of the risk assessment system while the risk assessment (the SAVRY) was being conducted. Prior to full implementation of the decision-making policies and additional staff training, this site was placing almost 40 percent of both their moderate- and high-risk youths outside the home. After full implementation, however, placements were related to risk level: 39 percent of high-risk youths received placement compared with 21 percent of moderate-risk and 15 percent of low-risk youths. Moreover, before the probation officers were trained in how to use the SAVRY in their decision-making, they

FIGURE 3: CHANGE IN RATES OF NEW PETITIONS (RECIDIVISM) AND PROBATION VIOLATIONS IN ONE SITE BEFORE AND AFTER IMPLEMENTING THE SAVRY. THE BAR GRAPH ILLUSTRATES THAT THERE WAS NOT A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN ANY TYPE OF REOFFENDING FOLLOWING PROPENSITY-SCORE MATCHING.



were giving low-risk youth more services than high-risk youth.

In one other site, sound implementation of the YLS/CMI was never achieved. Probation officers had been thoroughly trained on the assessment and some appropriate policies were put in place, such as a structured case plan and service matrix. However, probation officers were not permitted to use the YLS/CMI in their disposition recommendations or their assignments of supervision level due to a lack of buy-in from their judges. In this site, there was absolutely no change in types of dispositions, placement rates, service referrals or supervision levels. The lack of change was particularly unfortunate in this site because a significant proportion of youth were removed from the home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Regardless of whether the SAVRY or YLS/CMI was used, implementation of these risk/needs assessment instruments led to many positive changes in juvenile probation practices. It changed the way probation officers perceived a youth's chances of re-offending, how they thought about dynamic risk factors, and how they made case-level decisions. In all but one of the sites, implementation of the assessment instruments resulted in improved use of resources, with higher-risk youths receiving more supervision and services and lower-risk youths getting minimal attention. In addition, among sites that implemented the assessment instrument properly, there was decreased use of correctional dispositions and placements at offices that had previously been placing a relatively large percentage of their youths. Thus far, these changes in use of resources have occurred without any increase in re-offending rates.

On the whole, evidence suggests the use of risk/needs assessment in probation will lead to better intervention practices and will conserve resources. However, it is important to keep in mind four key points.

Use a valid risk assessment instrument designed for the particular setting. The importance of using an instrument that accurately categorizes youth cannot be understated. Use of an invalid risk assessment could cause more harm than good. Some agencies choose to create their own instruments, which can be labor intensive to do well. For probation-type decision-making, there are more commonalities than differences across youth who have been adjudicated with respect to the characteristics that relate to their future delinquency. Therefore, it is absolutely reasonable to adopt an existing assessment instrument that has been well-validated.

Sound implementation and buy-in are key. The benefits of risk assessment will not be realized without proper implementation of an integrated system that includes appropriate case planning and policies about how risk level should be used in

decision-making. Without buy-in from key stakeholders, such as judges and attorneys, assessment instruments are unlikely to make a difference. Moreover, designating a single project coordinator to oversee the implementation of risk assessment will be crucial.

The impact of risk assessment will vary by site. Jurisdictions that are over-servicing or over-placing youths will likely see a significant decline in service use and placement rates, whereas sites that under-place or under-service youths are likely to see some (but still relatively few) increases. Our interpretation of this is that the implementation of risk assessment leads to sounder, more evidence-based decision-making in line with risk/need/responsivity principles of case management.

The potential for cost-savings is great. Every probation office that had sound implementation achieved significant decreases in the use of costly, intensive levels of supervision. This conserved staff time by focusing more on youths in greater need and less on low-risk youths. Overall, there was a decline in unnecessary use of services in every site. Moreover, in sites where placement rates declined the decrease was fairly substantial. Although these procedural changes would surely reduce costs for a jurisdiction, the potential reduction should be balanced against the costs of the risk assessment adopted. Some are more expensive than others, particularly those that charge more than a couple dollars per case (or administration).

In conclusion, there are many positive reasons for a juvenile justice agency to adopt and integrate a system for using risk assessment to promote well-informed decisions about youth processing. This article has outlined some important steps in the implementation process that should maximize a jurisdiction's success. As part of that implementation process, it is also important to consider some potential barriers, such as costs of the assessment instrument and staff trainings and the amount of staff time involved in completing assessments. Our research indicates that both of these barriers get better over time, since most costs are incurred upfront and staff get more efficient in completing these assessments as they gain more experience. Nonetheless, these barriers are very real and best addressed ahead of time.

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