

Making the 'What Works' Actually Work: Risk-Need-Responsivity in Action

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Recommendations For Juvenile Justice Reform & Preventing Youth Reoffending

National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (2013). *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach*

- **Use** structured risk and need assessment instruments to identify low-risk youths who can be handled less formally in community-based settings, to match youths with specialized treatment, and to target more intensive and expensive interventions toward high-risk youths.
- Risk-need-responsivity



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Three Topics

1

Use valid risk-
needs
assessment
instruments

2

Align policies
and procedures
with Risk-Need-
Responsivity
(RNR)

3

Follow critical
implementation
steps

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USE VALID RISK-NEEDS ASSESSMENT

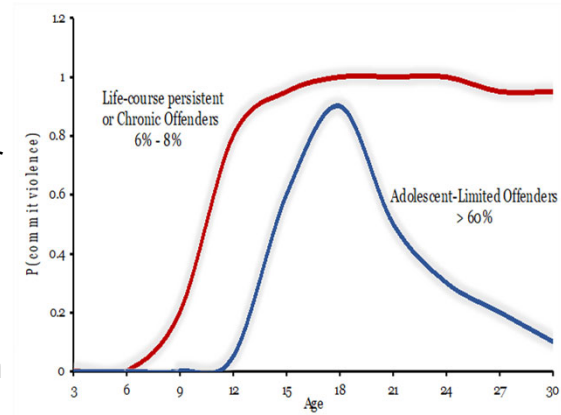
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ADOLESCENCE & OFFENDING

1. Some offending is near normative behavior during adolescence & young adulthood
2. Low-risk youth are unlikely to reoffend or be violent even if no interventions – but we can make them worse
> 40% of JJ referrals today are low-risk*
3. Violence and offending desist for most in later young adulthood; malleable

*Skeem et al. (Sept 2025).

<https://repository.escholarship.umassmed.edu/entities/publication/5589f595-0009-4276-9a0a-3985d18a332d>



(Farrington, 1995; Gatti et al., 2009; Lipsey et al., 2009; Loeber et al., 1991; Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001)

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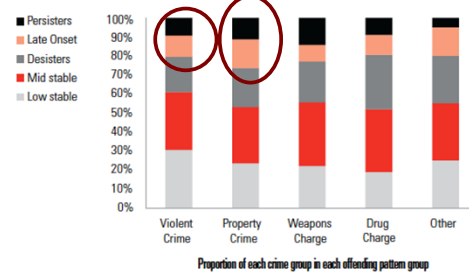
So How Do We Tell Who is Likely to Continue Engaging in Violence or Serious Offending?

- ❖ Severity of a youth's offense is not a strong indicator of the future pattern of offending (Mulvey et al., 2010).



- ❖ What about number of prior offenses?

Figure 2. The type of crime does not predict future criminal careers (similar proportions of persisters, for example, are found in each type of crime group)



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Activity



Write: What would be your top 2 or 3 indicators that a youth is likely to commit a serious or violent reoffense?

Pairs: Do you have consensus? If not, can you reach consensus?

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Strongest Predictors of Violent Recidivism

Dynamic Risk Factor Domains

1. Disruptive Behavior Problems
2. Substance Misuse
3. Family/Lack of Parental Monitoring
4. Negative Peer Influences
5. Attitude Supports Crime
6. Employment/Education
7. Use of Leisure Time



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Youth Reoffending: Prevalence and Predictive Risk Factors in Two States



The Youth Protective Factors Study: Effective Supervision and Services Based on Risks, Strengths, and Development

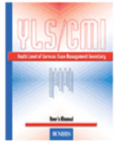
The Youth Protective Factors Study is an unprecedented multistate, multyear examination of which risk and protective factors matter most when it comes to reoffending—particularly for more serious offenses that involve physical harm to another person (person offenses)—for youth ages 10 to 23 in the juvenile justice system. This brief is the first in a series that shares key findings to guide jurisdictions on research-based juvenile justice supervision, case planning, and service strategies to improve public safety and youth outcomes. These findings are especially pertinent during a time of rising concerns about youth crime, violence, and victimization.

This brief is based on analysis of over 32,000 youth who had a new delinquency or status offense complaint over 3 years (2015–2017) in 2 states and received a risk assessment from the probation department. Most of the youth ended up on some form of supervision. Supervision could have included involvement in a diversion program, informal supervision, probation, a secure placement, or any combination of the above, and incorporates the time from their risk assessment until their case was closed (including any supervision extensions). Researchers obtained the records of all new juvenile court petitions and adult charges for these youth during supervision and for an average 2.5-year post-supervision follow-up period. The study analyzed recidivism during and after supervision, including for person offenses (offenses ranging from simple assault to robbery and homicide), and identified which risk factors were most associated with reoffending for youth overall and of different ages (see Appendix for details).

<https://www.umassmed.edu/lawandpsychiatry/law-and-psychiatry-research/NIJ-Youth-Protective-Factor-Study/>

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Risk-Needs Assessment



YASI
Youth Assessment & Screening Instrument



1. Who is most likely to reoffend seriously? Who do I need to be most concerned about?

2. What should I do about it?

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Use Risk-Needs Assessment

Ideally, courts would use a risk assessment on ALL delinquency cases to help guide decisions and:

1. Train ALL court personnel how as to the relevance of the information information (Risk-Need-Responsivity)
2. Conduct it as early in the process as possible (implementation)

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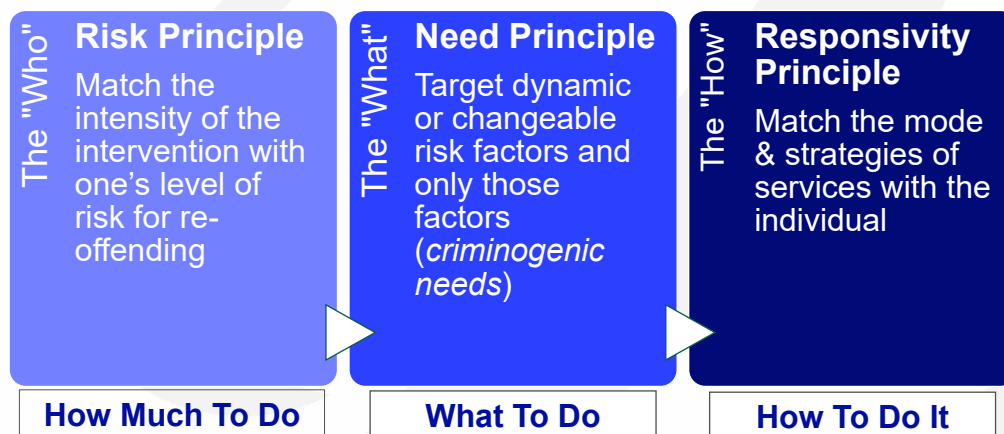
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ALIGN POLICIES & PROCEDURES WITH RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY

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Risk/Needs Assessment Should be Paired with Risk-Need-Responsivity



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Risk Principle

- **Low risk** – unlikely to reoffend even if we do nothing
 - *Minimize contact with the system*
 - *Divert/handle informally with few to no services*

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BENEFITS OF DIVERSION

CROSSROADS STUDY (CAUFFMAN ET AL, 2020)

5-year study comparing first-time offending 'divertable' youth who were diverted vs. not-diverted

Relative to youth handled formally, diverted youth were LESS likely to:

- Be re-arrested or incarcerated
- Have poor control of their aggression
- Affiliate with peers who were delinquent
- Have poor school enrollment or not graduate
- Have low perceptions of opportunities

Development and Psychopathology (2020), 1, 14
doi:10.1017/S0954579420000200

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Special Issue Article

Crossroads in juvenile justice: The impact of initial processing decision on youth 5 years after first arrest

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Abstract

The current study advances past research by studying the impact of juvenile justice decision making with a geographically and ethnically diverse sample ($N = 1,210$) of adolescent boys (ages 13–17 years) for the 5 years following their first arrest. Importantly, all youth in the study were arrested for an eligible offense of moderate severity (e.g., assault, theft) to evaluate whether the initial decision to formally (i.e., arrested before a judge) or informally (i.e., diverted to community service) process the youth led to differences in outcomes. The current study also advanced past research by using a statistical approach that controlled for a host of potential promising vulnerabilities that could influence both the processing decision and the youth's outcomes. Our findings indicated that youth who were formally processed during adolescence were more likely to be re-arrested, more likely to be incarcerated, engaged in more violence, reported a greater affiliation with delinquent peers, reported lower school attendance, were less likely to graduate high school within 5 years, reported less ability to suppress aggression, and had lower perceptions of opportunities than informally processed youth. Importantly, these findings were not moderated by the age of the youth at his first arrest or his race and ethnicity. These results have important implications for juvenile justice policy by indicating that formally processing youth not only is costly, but it can reduce public safety and reduce the adolescent's later potential contributions to society.

Keywords: adolescence, diversion, inverse probability weighting, juvenile justice policy, processing decision, moderation, risk-taking, social policy

(Received 1 September 2020; revised 22 October 2020; accepted 22 October 2020)

Juvenile justice practitioners are tasked with evaluating cases of suspected juvenile offending and determining which youth to channel into the justice system and which to divert from formal processing. Although the juvenile justice system's ability to utilize discretion was intended to benefit youth and society, little is known about the actual consequences of various paths through which the system can process and sanction youth (Lan, Rensselaer, Walker, Tu, & Adams, 2018; Portillo, Gatti, Vines, & Treviño, 2013). For instance, youth can be processed either formally (i.e., arrested before a judge) or informally (i.e., diverted to community service), leading to very different juvenile justice system experiences and possibly divergent long-term outcomes.

In spite of the potential long-term impacts and outcomes (Lieberman, Kili, & Kim, 2014; Radice, 2017; Verbeegden, van der Grint, & Bickland, 2016), there is little research examining the extent to which justice system decision making positively or negatively influence youth's subsequent behavior and development. Instead, most studies in the area of juvenile justice have

examined the risk factors for recidivism (i.e., repeat offending), particularly among adolescents who have committed serious offenses (Loughran, Piquero, Fagan, & Malvey, 2011; Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, & Mulvey, 2009, 2013; Mulvey et al., 2004, 2010), and the impact of specific interventions, particularly whether programs that aggregate young offenders (which are common in the juvenile justice system) lead to desistance (Dolan, McCord, & Pech, 1999; Dolan, Pech, & Burman, 2001; Lipsey, 2008). However, there is very little research examining how system processing in and of itself is related to desistance (i.e., offending abstinence) and other positive outcomes. Considering that the juvenile justice system handles over a million cases each year, it is important to examine whether the way in which an adolescent's first contact with the system was handled impacts his life in a variety of domains, whether the effects are sustained long-term, and whether the nature of the impact varies based on critical demographic factors, such as age of first arrest, race, or ethnicity.

What is known about formal processing and diversion during adolescence?

One of the juvenile justice system's key goals is to promote desistance from crime (Steinberg, 2010; Rotherham et al., 2010). Given the enormous impact of crime on society, victims, and offenders,

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Risk Principle

- **Low risk** – unlikely to reoffend even if we do nothing
 - *Consider for diversion/handle informally whenever possible*
- **Moderate risk** – Some likelihood of serious reoffending
 - *Risk factors should be matched to proper services (roughly 2) & supervision level*
- **High risk** – likely to reoffend seriously if we do nothing
 - *High intensity services (2 to 3) & supervision/management*

***Does not mean the youth must be confined to protect public safety – depends on whether well-matched resources exist in the community*

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The Risk Principle Applies Across the Continuum

Legal decisions

- Eligibility for diversion/informal handling
- Eligibility for detention
- Severity of disposition
- Readiness for reentry/early probation termination

Placement Decisions

- Where to place/level of security

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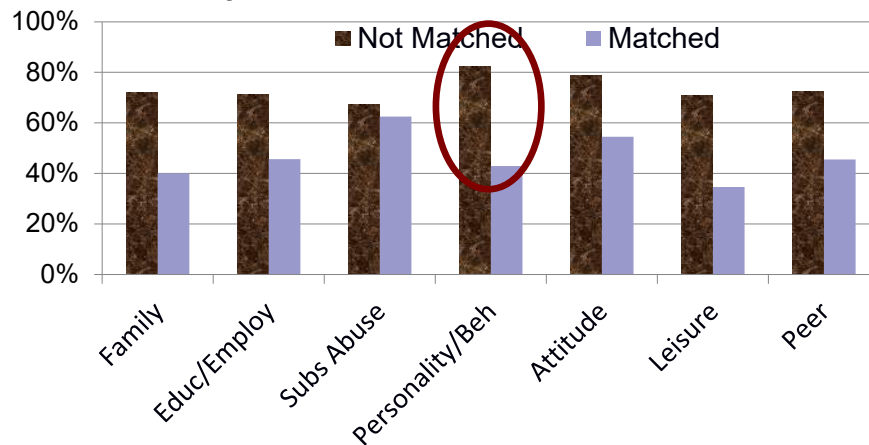
Need Principle:

Individualize services to target youths' 'changeable' risk factors (need-to-service match)

End one-size fits all case planning

More services do NOT equal better outcomes

Example: Recidivism of 148 Probationers



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The Need Principle Applies To....

Case Planning/Release Planning

- Target the priority dynamic risk areas for services/programming = 'Match'
- More intensive for high risk

'Condition' Setting?

The NCJFCJ recommends the use of validated risk and needs assessments to guide dispositional and programming decisions.

The NCJFCJ recommends juvenile probation that emphasizes individualized case management to provide youth with services that are responsive to their criminogenic needs.

The NCJFCJ encourages an emphasis on the use of incentives—rather than sanctions—to modify youth behavior.

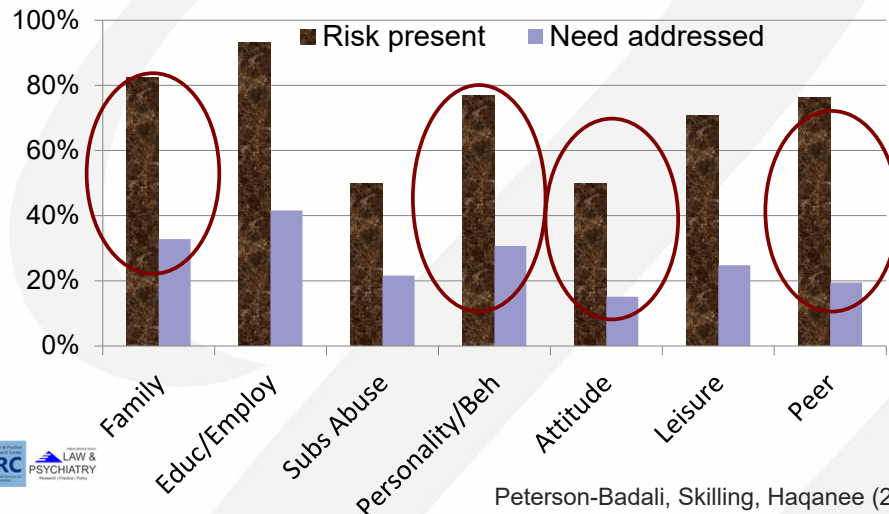
The NCJFCJ recommends that courts cease imposing "conditions of probation" and instead support probation departments' developing, with families and youth, individualized case plans that set expectations and goals.

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What Typically Happens in Practice? Need-to-Service Matching (Need Principle)

% of Probationers with each risk domain that received an appropriate service (n = 148)



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Implementing The Risk & Need Principles

Pre-Disposition Recommendation Template

RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY COMMUNICATION TEMPLATE FOR PRE-DISPOSITION REPORTS

A number of risk and strength factors associated with future serious re-offending and violence in youth have been consistently identified in the literature. *The Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth* (SAVRY) summarizes the available research on risk and protective factors for youth and was used to assist in estimating the risk of future serious re-offending and/or violence.

Existing strengths and protective factors that may mitigate risk and can be leveraged in the case plan

Strengths/protective factors	Relevance to service plan

At the present time, _____ presents as _____ risk for serious re-offending in the community. The following need areas (i.e., risk factors) were identified as contributing to _____'s recent delinquency, which is likely to continue if these are not addressed:

Priority Need Areas	Explanation of the concerns within this area

Recommendations: Based on the SAVRY results, dispositions that fit the youth's risk level would include _____ (consider informal vs community supervision, intensive supervision, commitment). Services/programs that may address the priority need areas include:

Priority Need Areas	Service/Intervention/Supports to address needs

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Responsivity Principle

- Adjust case plans to meet characteristics of individuals or their environment that may affect their response to interventions. May be....
 - Internal or external barriers (e.g., transportation, insurance, location, learning disabilities)
 - Strengths
 - Youth characteristics that might 'cause' the risk factors (e.g., mental health symptoms, trauma)
- These characteristics or circumstances are typically NOT risk factors

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Connection: Mental Health, Risk Factors, & Recidivism

(Guebert & Olver, 2014; McCormick et al., 2016; Schubert et al., 2011; Skeem et al., 2008)

Youth with mental health needs tend to have higher levels of risk factors than their peers

Youth with mental health needs are no more likely to reoffend than those without mental health needs

Matching services to youths' risk factors = lower recidivism.
Giving mental health treatment to those with mental health needs did NOT

Treating BOTH risk factors AND mental health **results in the most significant reductions in recidivism**

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*Take Home Message
for most youth:*

*DO NOT treat mental
health/trauma
symptoms without also
addressing risk factors*

Responsivity: What Works

- Mental health symptoms are important because they....
 - Can exacerbate existing dynamic risk factors, and/or
 - Interfere with the ability to benefit from risk-reduction services
- Clinicians needed to assess the severity of the mental health concern and its association to youth's violence

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Question



What is the most common service prescribed to youth by the U.S. juvenile justice system?

Youth Protective Factors Study: Effective Supervision and Services Based on Risks, Strengths, and Development



Also found in: Vincent, Perrault, et al. (2021). RNR Meets Mental Health

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What DOES Work to Reduce Violence Among Youth?

• Top Tier

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) & its variants
- Multisystemic Therapy (MST)
- Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT)
- Functional Family Therapy (FFT)

• 2nd Tier

- Parenting with Love and Limits
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care
- Brief Strategic Family Therapy
- Parent Management Training



Vincent, G.M, Davis, M., & Rao, J. (Dec 2024). *Identification of Effective Early Intervention Services for Youth Violence: An environmental scan.*
iSPARC at UMass Chan Medical School, Worcester, MA

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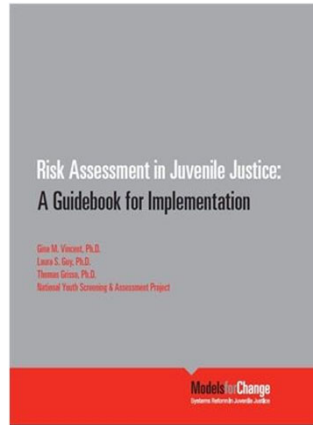
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IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

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Steps We Follow For Effective Practice



Vincent, Guy, & Grisso (2012)

Models for Change
Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

Steps for Implementation

- Getting ready
- Establish buy-in from all appropriate parties
- Select the risk instrument
- Develop policies & procedures
 - Includes decision tools (e.g., Pre-disposition template)
- Sustainability Steps (Review Data, QA & Staff Coaching)
- Training Staff on Administration & Use of Instruments

Judicial
leadership
essential

<https://www.nysap.us>

MacArthur Foundation

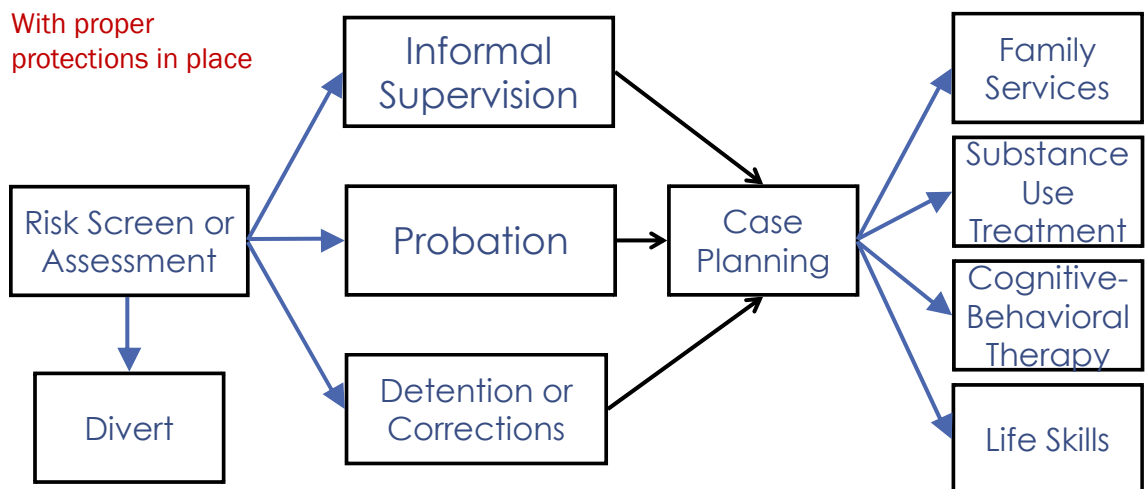
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Conduct Risk Screening or Assessment Early & with Everyone

Pre-Adjudication

With proper
protections in place

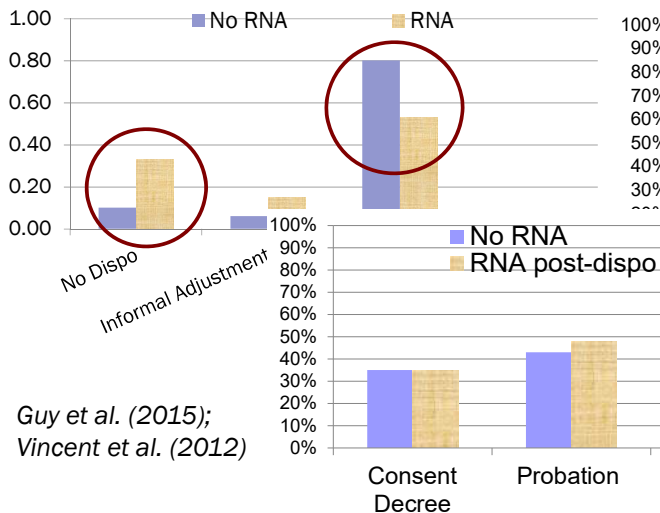


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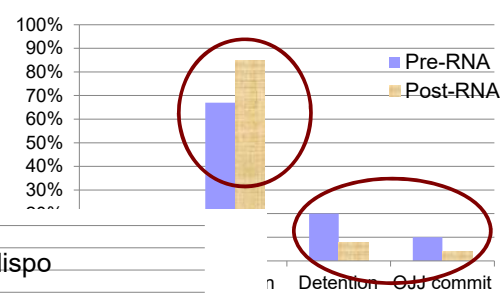
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Influence of Risk Assessment Depends on When it is Administered and Whether it is Shared with the Court

Pre-adjudication assessment



Post-adj/Pre-disposition assessment



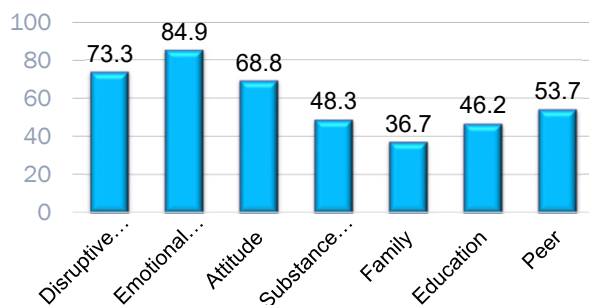
← No change when RNA done post-disposition

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Influence of Risk Assessment When Implemented Properly Faulkner County

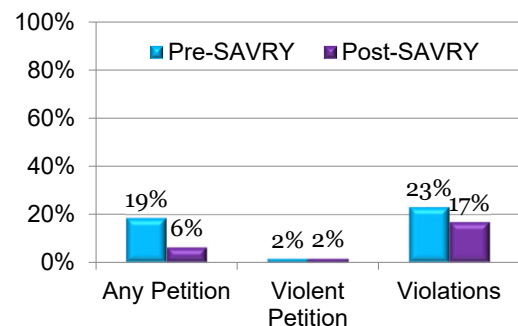
Matched Services to Youths' Risk Areas



Vincent & Perrault (2021)

1. Pre-disposition assessments & strong judicial leadership
2. Strong probation supervisor
3. Well-resourced with services

Decreased Recidivism



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Summary: Effective Use of Science to Improve Outcomes

Inform & re-inform all court personnel about RNR and adolescent development

Do risk assessment as early as possible & use a standard template for sharing with the court

Align policies & procedures with RNR – enable the POs to follow the approach in case planning

Prioritize services known to reduce offending & violence



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What Does NOT Work

Basing decisions primarily on juvenile records or mandatory policies for specific offenses

Not completing risk/needs assessment before disposition (UNLESS court orders permit flexibility for POs to generate the plan)

Focusing on mental health counseling while neglecting risk factors

Over-supervising and over-servicing low risk youth



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