

National Context: Principles of Model Screening, Assessment, and Service Delivery

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The emerging consensus within the juvenile justice field is that punishment and sanctions alone do not deter juvenile re-offending to a degree that would be considered effective. In fact, studies have shown that for some youth, exposure to the juvenile justice system — even interventions like community service or probation — may actually be counterproductive in reducing recidivism (Vincent et. al, 2011). Successful jurisdictions are slowly transforming their juvenile justice systems to more effectively, efficiently, and fairly serve their young people. Officials are developing systems aligned along a continuum of care, which can meet a range of service and public safety needs, from the most minimal to the most intensive. In a growing number of jurisdictions and states, an emphasis has been placed on establishing **evidence-based programs**, which are standardized, replicable



practices that are implemented with fidelity and have been researched and demonstrate positive outcomes in repeated studies. Incorporated within this continuum is the use of validated **screening** and **assessment** instruments, which are tools supported by statistical analyses showing that they can successfully classify youth into levels of risk and help identify their needs (Vincent et. al, 2011).

Screening and assessment instruments have distinct roles in identifying a youth's needs and risks and determining an appropriate course of action. **Screening** instruments are generally used with most, if not all, youth at a specific point of juvenile justice intake and can determine who might have a particular characteristic (e.g. mental health need). Often, these screens will sort youth into categories — typically, low, medium, or

high — to signal potential emergencies or to prompt a more detailed and individualized assessment.

Assessments, on the other hand, are used as a follow-up on youth who are “screened in,” to inform what interventions may be most appropriate to serve specific needs, like mental health or substance abuse, or address risk and protective factors that could contribute to or inhibit youth's recidivism. Information gathered from these assessments can then be used to pinpoint what services are most appropriate to match the youth's identified needs and create individualized service delivery plans.



Ensure Youth Receive Timely and Appropriate Services

At the heart of any effective juvenile justice system is the ability to provide youth with services that ensure they successfully remain in the community. To accomplish this goal, research has shown some important elements that should be considered in service delivery.

- First, interventions should be targeted to a youth's risk level, since allocating more resources toward higher risk offenders (as measured by a validated risk assessment instrument) has been found to be both the most cost effective and most effective in reducing recidivism (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006).
- Second, a youth must have timely access to programming that appropriately reflects their needs (which can be no programming needed at all) (Lipsey, 2010).
- And finally, when necessary, a sufficient amount of programming (also known as the “dosage”) must be provided, and these services must be of high-quality to have the desired effect (Lipsey, 2010).

Together, these findings have important practical implications for how officials should design and structure their service offerings — namely, programming should be reflective of the population of youth entering different system points (both in terms of assessed risk and needs) and provide only the services required to assure the appropriate outcomes at these particular points.



Provide Individualized Services that Build on Strengths

In order to ensure genuinely individualized and effective services, programs should emphasize and capitalize on the young person’s strengths and skills, rather than focus solely on problems or weaknesses. Drawing from literature on positive youth development, what youth often need more than formal treatment are opportunities for recreation, mental stimulation, healthy peer interactions, role models, and a range of other support mechanisms.

Promote Family Functioning and Involvement

An overwhelming body of research and experience indicates that parents, legal guardians, other family members, and even larger community structures are crucial to a youth’s successful development; effectively engaging and supporting these natural resources is a pivotal strategy for support services (Nelson, 2008). Programs that emphasize family interactions are thought to be the most successful because they focus on “providing skills to the adults who are in the best position to support the child” (Greenwood, 2008).

Embrace the Diversity of Young People and their Families

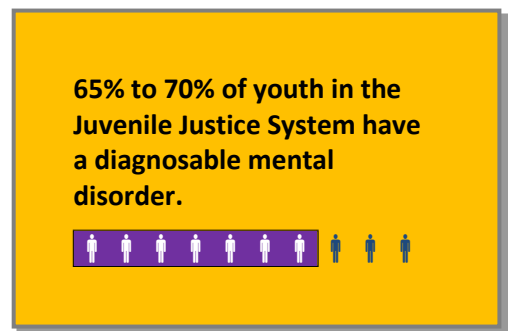
Screenings, assessments, and services should be carefully designed to embrace the array of cultural, racial, and gender differences among young people and their families.

Monitor the Effectiveness of Tools and Services on a Regular Basis

Because any information that is gleaned from screening and assessment tools should ideally be used to inform decision-making about where a youth is placed, it is critical to continually assess how effective they are in identifying particular needs. Together with rigorous evaluation and monitoring of programs and services, this information can help gauge whether juvenile justice systems are, in fact, matching youth to the programs that will result in produce positive outcomes for young people and their families.

Establish a Healthy Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment System to Accompany the Juvenile Justice System

The prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorders among youth involved in the juvenile justice system is staggering. According to national prevalence estimates, 65 to 70 percent of youth arrested, detained, and/or incarcerated in the U.S. have a diagnosable mental disorder, and over 50 percent meet criteria for having two or more disorders simultaneously -- also called co-occurring diagnoses (Shufelt & Cocozza, 2006). Unfortunately, many of these youth are sent to the juvenile justice system due to the behavioral symptoms of their mental illness and removed from opportunities, where they do exist, for community-based, research driven alternative interventions that have demonstrated higher likelihoods of decreasing both delinquency and symptoms of mental illness and substance use (SAMHSA, 2009; Robbins & Szapocznik, 2000; & Alexander et. al, 1998).



For more information download the entire report, “Sustaining Juvenile Justice System Reform: A Report to the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission,” at <http://publichealth.lsuhsu.edu/iphj/sustainingreform.html>