

Innovation Brief

Using Risk Assessment to Meet Needs and Reduce Recidivism

A growing number of juvenile justice experts are suggesting that an effective approach to reducing recidivism is to evaluate a youth's risk of reoffending, then match services to his or her specific risk factors. With support from the Models for Change initiative, most of the county-based juvenile probation offices in Pennsylvania have adopted the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS) for this purpose. The near-statewide adoption was a significant accomplishment in a state without a centralized juvenile probation system.

A study of the impact of YLS in the probation offices of three counties showed it improved their ability to assign appropriate community-based services and levels of monitoring to individual offenders, and significantly decreased reoffense rates in one county. The study also showed that success requires buy-in from key stakeholders. Pennsylvania's experience provides a model for how states with decentralized juvenile justice systems can implement statewide innovations.

The Issue

There is emerging consensus among juvenile justice professionals that sanctions often do not deter reoffending. This is true whether the sanctions are mild ones like community service and probation, or strong ones like confinement in a secure facility and other out-of-home placements. In fact, studies have shown that for some youths, even mild sanctions *increase* the likelihood that they will be arrested as adults.

There is a better way to help young offenders make a successful transition to adulthood. Research suggests that instead of basing sanctions solely on the offense, a more effective approach is to assess each youth's risk for

reoffending, and reserve the most intensive monitoring and interventions (including both therapeutic services and sanctions) for those at highest risk, who are more likely to benefit. Those at lower risk are far less likely to reoffend, even in the absence of interventions. In addition, evidence suggests that the best results come from matching services to youths' specific "dynamic risk factors"—that is, risk factors that can be changed, such as substance abuse, poor school achievement, or lack of parental monitoring.

The first step in promoting best practices is to identify a youth's risk of reoffending and dynamic risk factors using a validated risk/needs assessment tool. These tools have only recently become available, but their use is increasing.

In 2009, the chief probation officers in ten Pennsylvania counties agreed to adopt one such tool, the YLS, and to serve as pilot sites for the rest of the state.

The YLS is one of the most well-researched instruments for assessing the risk of general reoffending for male and female juvenile offenders ages 12 to 17. By rating 42 static (unchangeable) and dynamic risk factors and youths' areas of strength, the YLS helps in making decisions about level of service, supervision, and programming for individual offenders. Probation officers and others can plan services to address each youth's risk factors and build on their strengths.

Innovations

Building risk assessment into the way an agency handles youths involves more than selecting a risk assessment tool and training probation officers to use it. First, the agency must decide at what points to use the tool. Most offices in Pennsylvania decided to have probation officers complete the YLS for each youth at intake, before adjudication.

This is an ideal point for risk assessment, as long as there are legal protections against the use of self-incriminating information at adjudication proceedings. This was the case in Pennsylvania.

Second, the agency must decide how to use the tool in case management decisions. Pennsylvania adopted a risk-needs-responsivity approach: *risk level* identifies which kids to target, *needs* indicate what problems should be addressed, and *responsivity* guides the selection of services to address a given youth's unique characteristics—for example, lack of fluency in English, a learning disability, or a mental illness.

With buy-in from stakeholders such as judges, attorneys, service providers, and probation officers, the participating counties took the following steps:

- **Assess risk.** Each office followed a policy defining when to conduct assessments, with which youths, and when reassessments would occur.
- **Use risk in case planning.** Each office adopted a policy describing how the risk level would be used to make decisions about a youth's need for supervision and at what level. (High-risk youths receive the most intense monitoring.)

- **Target changeable risk factors.** Probation officers used structured case plans to recommend interventions targeting each youth's changeable risk factors, responding to their unique learning styles or limitations, and building on their strengths.
- **Measure outcomes.** A data management system was used to track youths' progress as well as appropriate use of services, placements, and supervision according to individual risk levels.

Pennsylvania has 67 counties, each operating its own juvenile probation system—a challenging structure for statewide change. But the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission, which sets standards, and the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers jointly started the ball rolling on YLS as a pilot project in 10 counties. With data from a few of these counties, procedures were modified for the rest. A committee identified master trainers, and trainings were held for staff and administrators in 16 additional counties, then expanded in waves until 65 counties and all state-operated residential facilities for adjudicated delinquents had adopted the YLS. This is an outstanding accomplishment in a state with no centralized probation system. In addition, many private providers of residential and community-based services now routinely use the YLS to assign appropriate interventions to the youths they serve.

Use of the YLS in probation intake has led to better intervention practices and has conserved resources.

Results and Lessons

Researchers conducted an in-depth study in three of the original counties to see if using the YLS made a difference in the handling of young offenders. They compared groups of youths adjudicated before implementation of the YLS to others adjudicated after YLS-informed case management was in place, tracking reoffense data for 18 months.

They found that on the whole, use of the YLS in probation intake has led to better intervention practices and has conserved resources.

- Use of the assessment changed the way probation officers perceived a youth's chances of reoffending, how they thought about dynamic risk factors, and how they made case-level decisions.
- All but one of the sites saw improved use of resources in at least some areas, with higher-risk youths receiving more supervision and services and low-risk youths getting minimal attention.
- These changes occurred without any increase in reoffending rates. In fact, one county cut reoffense rates in half.

Surprisingly, though, the practice has had little impact on placement rates. (Keep in mind that data were collected from only three probation offices and it was relatively early in the adoption process.)

Changes in handling of youths. The study examined several areas of case processing: post-adjudication placements outside the home (secure correctional or residential centers, group homes, detention centers, and wilderness camps), levels of supervision on probation, and use of community services. (One of the three sites is not included in this and the following paragraph, for reasons discussed in the second bullet point below.) Both sites provided more community-based services to high-risk youths and fewer to low-risk youths (figure 1). One site cut its service referral rates in half by following this process. In the one site where data on supervision were available, the use of medium and maximum levels of supervision for low-risk youths decreased substantially.

Median number of service referrals for youths on probation, by their YLS risk level

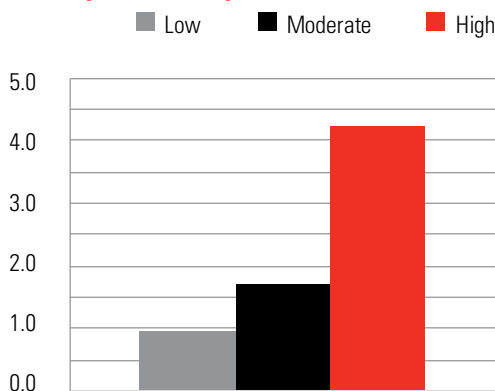


figure 1

Implementing the YLS had little impact on placement rates in this study, but placement decisions were aligned with the youths' level of risk, and even high-risk youths were generally put on probation rather than placed outside their home.

Effects on reoffending. In one county, the rates of new delinquency petitions (recidivism) and probation violations were cut in half (figure 2). This reduction occurred even though fewer (mainly low-risk) youths were referred for services and fewer received the maximum levels of supervision. In the second county, where there was a better allocation of resources and staff time, there was no change in reoffense rates.

Change in rates of new petitions and probation violations in one county

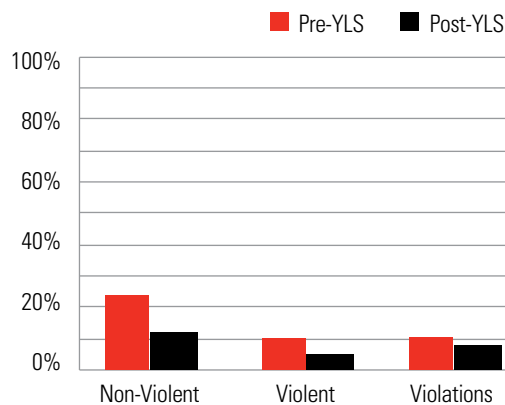


figure 2

Important lessons emerged from the pilot project and research:

- **Probation officers can conduct the YLS reliably.** An assessment tool is reliable if different interviewers using that tool to assess a given youth obtain the same results. This study examined the field assessments by probation officers and a second rater for approximately 60 youths and found good to excellent consistency between raters.
- **Without buy-in from judges, attorneys, and other key stakeholders, assessment tools are unlikely to make a difference.** In one site, use of the YLS did not lead to any changes in case management, despite good practices by probation officers and reliability of the assessment. Qualitative interviews with administrators

and probation officers suggest this stemmed from lack of buy-in from judges and ineffective policies about when to administer the YLS. Clearly, the benefits of risk assessment will not be realized without proper implementation of an integrated system, including appropriate case planning and policies about where and how risk level should be used in decision-making.

- **The use of risk assessment leads to sounder, more evidence-based decision-making.**

Jurisdictions that are over-using services or unnecessarily putting youths in placement will likely see a significant decline in service use and placement rates, while sites that refer too few youths to services or placement are likely to see some (but relatively little) increase. In other words, the use of risk assessment leads to sounder, more evidence-based decision-making.

- **There is great potential for cost-savings and other benefits.** Both of the probation offices that used sound implementation achieved significant decreases in the use of costly, intensive levels of supervision or services. Besides saving money, this makes more effective use of staff, who can spend more time with youths in greater need. Of course, lowering recidivism rates also increases public safety.

Looking Forward

The Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory has become a cornerstone of Pennsylvania's ongoing, system-wide reform effort, the Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy. An Assessment/Case Planning

Committee meets regularly and has developed a case planning document that can be used by probation officers throughout the state. A monograph describing the assessment case planning, and other evidence-based practices adopted in Pennsylvania is being widely disseminated inside and outside the state.

In addition, information from the YLS and the case planning documents is now being incorporated into the Juvenile Case Management System, a data warehouse for Pennsylvania probation offices. As a result, the state will be able to monitor and assess the use of services and the outcomes for youths in all participating counties—an essential step in continuing efforts to improve juvenile justice throughout the state.

Resources

Screening and Assessment in Juvenile Justice Systems: Identifying Mental Health Needs and Risk of Reoffending, Gina Vincent, 2011 <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/328>

Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory <http://www.mhs.com/product.aspx?gr=saf&prod=yls-cmi&id=overview>

Monograph: Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/342>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from Models for Change, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. Models for Change is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.