

## Risk Assessment Instruments: How To Use Them And Why They Matter

**GINA M VINCENT, PHD**  
Associate Professor, UMass Medical School  
Co-Director, Law & Psychiatry Program  
President, National Youth Screening & Assessment Partners



MacArthur Foundation



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What is a Risk Assessment Tool?

Risk = risk for serious or violent offending



Brief risk tools – designed to answer the question “Is this youth at relatively low or relatively high risk for reoffending or engaging in violent behavior?”

Comprehensive risk tools - also address “What is possibly causing the youth to be at low or relatively high risk for reoffending?”

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Risk Assessment Comes in Different Forms

- Brief instruments vs comprehensive instruments
- Depends on the purpose of the tool and the decision-point where it is used.....
  - Pretrial detention decisions (RAI's)
  - Institutional classification
  - Diversion decisions
  - Dispositional and case planning (similar types of tools would be used for reentry and release decisions)
- 'Off-the-shelf' vs. 'home-grown'

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What is a Risk Factor?

- Anything that increases the likelihood of reoffending. Two types:
  - **Static Risk Factors** – do not change
  - **Dynamic Risk Factors (Criminogenic Needs)** – can change
    - Antisocial attitudes/orientation
    - Disruptive behavior problems/Personality traits
    - Family dynamics/parenting
    - Substance abuse
    - Poor school achievement
    - Negative peer associations
- Both types are important for measuring risk
- **Protective Factors** – buffer the risk



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## WHY DO WE DO IT?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Recommendations For 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.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Nationwide Use of Risk Assessment (May, 2015)



Andrew Wachter, MS  
Research Associate, NCUJ

Updated May 2015

*Juvenile Justice GPS (Geography, Policy, Practice & Statistics) is an online repository providing state policy makers and system stakeholders with a clear understanding of the juvenile justice landscape in the states. The site layers the most relevant national and state-level statistics with information on state laws and practice and charts juvenile justice system change. In a landscape that is highly decentralized and ever-shifting, JJGPS provides an invaluable resource for those wanting to improve the juvenile justice system.*

### Statewide Risk Assessment in Juvenile Probation

Research on the use of validated risk/needs assessments in juvenile justice, herein referred to as risk assessments, has grown significantly in the last decade. Innovations in the use of the U.S. to determine the extent to which these tools have been adopted across the country. as Massachusetts and West Virginia that have adopted the practice at the state level but are still in the process of implementation.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Reasons Why We Do It: Research Evidence

### There is emerging consensus on characteristics of effective programming for young offenders:

1. Punitive sanctions alone do not have a significant effect on re-offending (Gatti et al., 2009).
2. Severity of a youth's offense is not a strong indicator of the future pattern of offending (Mulvey et al., 2010). Tested static and dynamic risk factors for offending are (e.g., Lipsey & Derzon, 1998).

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

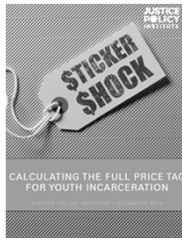
---

---

## 3. Confinement is Expensive

Justice Policy Institute (2014)

- Direct costs of confinement in the US per youth per year = up to \$148,767
- Total costs of youth confinement in US per year = \$8 to \$21 bil
- Confinement has diminishing returns after 6 months (MacArthur Foundation, Pathways to Desistance Study)



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Cost of Evidence-Based Services Is Less: Benefits Per Dollar Invested

- For every \$1.00 spent on the following services, you save (Aos, 2001):
  - ▣ Functional Family Therapy: \$28.34
  - ▣ Multisystemic Family Therapy: \$28.81
  - ▣ Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care: \$43.70
  - ▣ Adolescent Diversion Project: \$24.92
  - ▣ Juvenile Boot Camps: \$0.81
  - ▣ Scared Straight: -\$477.75 (NET LOSS)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Why We Use Risk Assessment

### 4. To be more consistent with adolescent development

Delinquency and aggression are not uncommon during adolescence

Risk changes over time and desists in early adulthood for most (Mulvey, 2011; Piquero & Moffitt, 2005)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Why We Do Risk Assessment

### 5. Dispositions based on risk level and needs related to delinquent behavior are more likely to be effective

Most lower-risk youth are unlikely to re-offend even if there is no intervention (Lipsey, 2009). But mixing them with high risk youth may make them worse.

When services are **matched** to youth's level of risk, strengths, and what might be driving their delinquency (*criminogenic needs*), the lower the chance of reoffending (Vieira et al., 2009).

---

---

---

---

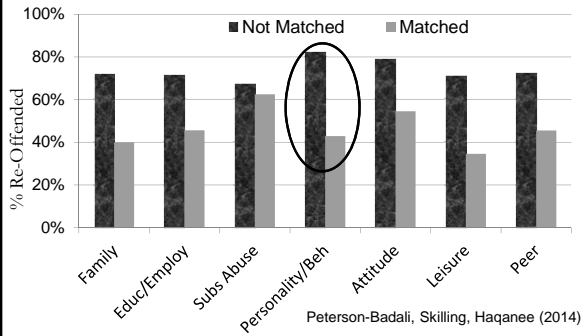
---

---

---

---

## Matching Criminogenic Needs to Services



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Fundamental Fairness

- Combined with the professional judgment of staff, **valid** risk assessments enhance the decision-making process.
- Structured decision-making provides for consistent, evidence-based, objective, and fair decisions at critical junctures in the juvenile justice system
- Caveat:** If the instrument is NOT valid and has not been tested for racial bias— may do more harm than good.
- Caveat:** Risk assessment is not intended to replace judges' discretion — it is intended to 'guide' it.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## HOW TO USE IT

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) Approach

Effective and individualized case management requires valid assessment & RNR principles

- **Risk** – Match the intensity of the intervention with one's level of risk for re-offending
- **Need** – Target dynamic or changeable risk factors (aka *criminogenic needs*)
- **Responsivity** – Match the mode & strategies of services with the individual

---

---

---

---

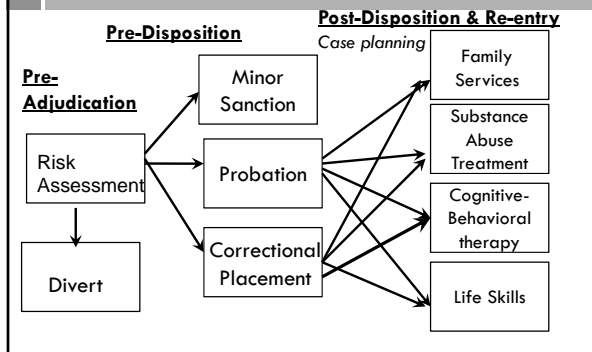
---

---

---

---

## Starts With Valid Identification As Early As Possible: Risk Assessment



---

---

---

---

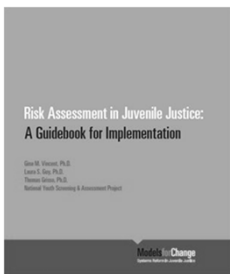
---

---

---

---

## Nothing Changes Without Quality Implementation



### 8 Steps to Implementation

1. Getting ready
2. Establish buy-in
3. Select tool
4. Develop policies & case plan format
5. Staff training
6. Pilot test
7. Full implementation
8. Sustainability/Data

Vincent, Guy, & Grisso (2012) Funded by MacArthur Foundation

---

---

---

---

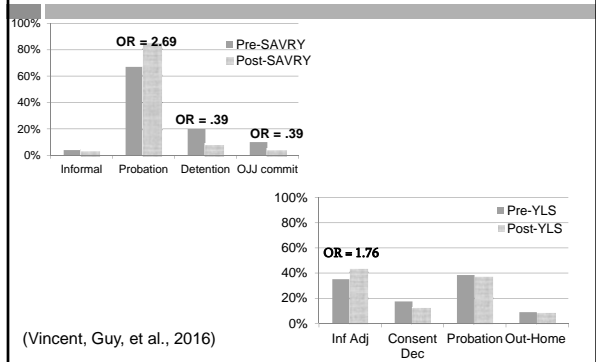
---

---

---

---

### Potential Impact on Dispositions




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

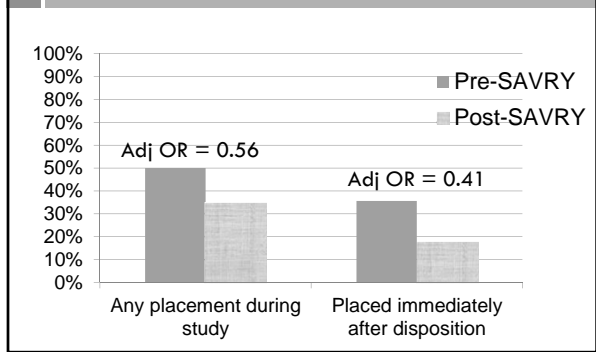
---

---

---

### Potential Impact on Placement Rates

(Vincent et al., 2016)




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

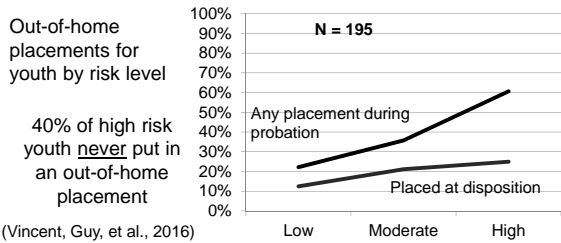
---

---

### Risk in Placement Decisions

#### % Youth Identified as High Risk to reoffend:

- Probation - ranges 13% to 17%
- Pre-adjudication – ranges 4% to 8%




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Areas of Inquiry/What to Ask

- Has the tool been demonstrated to be reliable and valid, ideally by independent parties?
  - ..demonstrated for minority youth?
- Was the assessment conducted as outlined in the manual?
- Was the individual completing the assessment properly trained?
- Are results of the assessment at odds with the recommendations? Is there programming in the community that can address the needs?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Conclusions

- Justice systems should adopt **valid** risk assessment tools
- Risk assessment tools can conserve resources and improve outcomes for defendants, while decreasing confinement rates and still protecting public safety
- Without quality implementation, quality assurance, and court monitoring the benefits will not be realized

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---