

Principles and Practices Associated with Reduced Recidivism and Improved Outcomes for Youth

Summarized directly from Elizabeth Seigle, Nastassia Walsh, and Josh Weber, *Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2014)

Juvenile Diversion programs should make an effort to implement the following principles and practices to achieve the goals of a quality juvenile diversion program to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for the youth being served.

Principle 1: Base supervision, service, and resource-allocation decisions on the results of a validated risk and needs assessments.

The principle of Risk, Need, and Responsivity (RNR) has been shown to reduce the likelihood that a youth will reoffend.

- The *Risk principle* focuses supervision and services on youth most likely to reoffend. Prioritizing system interventions for youth at high risk of reoffending can lead to a significant reduction in recidivism. Conversely, intervening with youth who are at low risk of reoffending has a limited impact and can even lead to adverse outcomes.
- The *Need principle* addresses a youth's greatest criminogenic needs. Systems can have the greatest impact on recidivism when they attend to the specific, individualized needs that are the primary causes of youth's delinquent behaviors, such as substance use or negative peers.
- The *Responsivity principle* identifies a youth's barriers to learning and improving his or her behavior, and tailors services to help overcome them. The Responsivity principle can enhance the impact of services by addressing needs or conditions, such as mental disorders, that interfere with service engagement, and by motivating youth to change.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. *Objectively Assess Risks and Needs:* The use of validated assessment instruments has proven the most reliable, objective way to identify youth's risk of recidivism, criminogenic needs, and responsivity to treatment. The results from risk and needs assessments, in conjunction with mental health and substance abuse screening and assessments, should be the primary contributing factor in determining how to match youth to the supervision levels and specific services most likely to reduce recidivism.
2. *Target Higher-Risk Youth:* Research shows that juvenile justice systems can do more harm than good by actively intervening with youth who are at low risk of reoffending. Programs should prioritize supervision and services for youth who are at a higher risk to reoffend. Programs should provide minimal supervision and services, if any, to youth whose assessment scores indicate a low risk of reoffending, while reinforcing the importance of holding these youth accountable for their actions through some form of restitution, such as community service.

3. *Address Youth's Greatest Criminogenic Needs:* Dynamic risk factors are the primary cause of youth's delinquent behavior. Although static risk factors are strong predictors of reoffending, these dynamic risk factors can be stronger predictors of certain types of reoffending (mainly violent), than the static risk factors, such as offense history and age at offense. Programs should use a validated assessment tool to identify the primary cause of a youth's delinquent behavior and focus the intervention on addressing those causes. Addressing dynamic risk factors results in a reduce likelihood of reoffending, rather than system interventions that focus on creating fear of punishment. Programs can also increase the impact of matching services to youth's dynamic risk factors by ensuring that service case plans leverage youth's strengths, such as family support, positive peers, skills, and interests, as well as account for their barriers to change.
 - a. **Dynamic Risk Factors** are those that can be changed as part of the normal developmental process or through system interventions. Some of the most prevalent factors for young people include:
 - i. Family/parenting problems
 - ii. Negative beliefs and attitudes
 - iii. Negative peers
 - iv. Poor school performance
 - v. Substance use
 - vi. Lack of social attachments
4. *Assess to Identify Youth with Mental Health and Substance Use Treatment Needs, and Match them to Services:* Mental health is a critical factor in whether youth engage with and respond to programs and services, and substance use is one of the most common and difficult dynamic risk factors. Risk and needs assessments typically don't assess mental health, and they are not always able to identify youth with significant substance use disorders. Youth assessed as having significant but not immediate mental health or substance use treatment needs, and who are also identified through validated risk assessments as being at low to low/moderate risk of reoffending, should receive minimal supervision or services from the juvenile justice system. Instead, being referred to the behavioral health system to ensure the youth's behavioral health and community-support needs are met primarily by the behavioral health system.

Principle 2: Adopt and effectively implement programs and services demonstrated to reduce recidivism and improve other youth outcomes, and use data to evaluate system performance and direct system improvement.

Many interventions aimed at deterring youth from delinquent behavior are ineffective at reducing recidivism and improving other youth outcomes - primarily programs based on control, discipline, fear, surveillance, or punishment. Programs and practices that fail to address the underlying cause of youth's behavior consistently demonstrate negligible or negative effects. Therapeutic interventions, counseling, mentoring, etc., are generally more effective than punitive ones.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. *Employ Effective Services:* While traditional supervision can suppress delinquent behaviors short term, youth that are no longer under system supervision tend to revert to their previous delinquent activities if their attitudes, beliefs, skills, and support system have not fundamentally changed. Programs and practices focused on promoting youth's positive development are most effective interventions. Cognitive behavioral interventions that help youth change the thinking patterns that contribute to delinquency and to develop the skills to make more pro-social decisions have proven to substantially improve youth outcomes. Effective service approaches for youth also seek to strengthen parenting skills and youth-family interactions and to connect youth to other positive adults, peers, and activities in their schools and communities.
 - a. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** Services focused on changing the way youth think, especially through cognitive behavioral therapy, can improve outcomes for youth. Trained staff can use CBT to help youth identify and change the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to their delinquency. The most effective CBT approaches are action-oriented, helping youth develop and practice skills needed to make better decisions, particularly when confronted with circumstances that could lead to further delinquent behaviors.
 - b. **Family and Community-Centric Approaches:** Youth's families, peers, schools, and communities exert significant influence on their behavior. As such, many of the programs that have demonstrated the most success focus not only on facilitating youth behavioral change, but also seek to strengthen youth-family interactions, improve parenting skills, and connect youth to other positive adults, peers, and activities in their schools and community. This approach can help family members learn how to rely on each other and local supports—rather than continued services from external providers—to meet their needs.
2. *Prioritize Implementation Quality and Evaluation:* Close fidelity to evidence-based programs and practices produces the largest effects on recidivism, while poor fidelity can result in limited or even negative effects. A system of implementation standards, the ongoing assessment of program quality including ensuring youth receive the proper “dosage” of services, improvement processes, such as ongoing training and coaching, and data collection and outcome evaluation activities can facilitate high implementation quality and achieve expected results.

Principle 3: Employ coordinated approach across service systems to address youth's needs.

Many youth involved in the juvenile justice system have mental health, substance use, child welfare, and education needs that can contribute to their likelihood of reoffending into adulthood and prevent them from achieving other positive outcomes. Following best practice recommendations on what works will effectively address some of the dynamic risk factors a youth has, but no system has the resources or expertise to successfully address the multifaceted needs of the youth.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. *Coordinate Services Across Systems*: Programs should partner with other key service systems in which youth are or should be involved in order to assess and effectively address their needs. The program needs to coordinate services with behavioral health, child welfare, education, and other service systems to address the youth's needs. Besides improving outcomes, other benefits of coordinating services across systems will create less duplication of efforts and systems working at cross-purposes; streamlined agency and provider decision making and service delivery; clearer delineation of the role of juvenile justice to reduce tendency to push low-risk youth into the juvenile justice system only to access needed services that they should be receiving from other service systems; and increased utilization of available services and an identification of service gaps so juvenile justice and other service systems can cost-effectively address youth's needs across systems.
 - a. **Mental Health**: While mental health is not directly linked to a youth's likelihood of delinquent behavior, the failure to accurately identify and appropriately treat youth's mental disorders can exacerbate their conditions and make them less able to participate effectively in programming to improve behavior. It is important for juvenile justice providers to partner with the mental health system, as the juvenile justice system has limited expertise on service providers, barriers to accessing services and navigating payment reimbursement policies. The best way to treat a youth's mental health needs with limited resources would be interventions that utilize cognitive behavioral and family-centric approaches. Using telepsychiatry to provide mental health services through videoconferencing can also be a cost effective way to address a lack of local treatment capacity.
 - b. **Substance Use**: Substance use is one of the primary causes of delinquent behavior. Research has demonstrated that the presence of a substance use disorder and the level of youth's substance use are strongly related to reoffending well into young adulthood. Providing substance use treatment has been shown to have a measurable and long-term impact on youth behavior. Juvenile justice agencies should invest in effective substance use treatment and collaborate with behavioral health to deliver and oversee these services both while youth are under juvenile justice supervision and after supervision ends. Effective interventions should:
 - i. Be community based;

- ii. Provide a comprehensive, integrated response to youth’s substance use and/or mental disorders, as well as the primary cause of their delinquent behaviors;
 - iii. Be at least 90 days in length;
 - iv. Involve families;
 - v. Utilize cognitive behavioral approaches and other techniques to motivate youth and families to engage in services and help youth develop the skills needed to make better choices; and
 - vi. Recognize that relapse is typical and youth require ongoing access to treatment beyond the period of supervision for long-term success.
- c. **Child Welfare:** It is estimated that as many as 65 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system may have past or current involvement in the child welfare system. These “crossover” youth generally remain in the juvenile justice system longer than their peers and receive more restrictive supervision than warranted by their risk level. These youth are also at greater risk for reoffending and having poor long-term outcomes than youth in the juvenile justice system who have not been involved with the child welfare system. Given that the juvenile justice and child welfare systems can have competing goals and values, while exhibiting clear differences, both systems should work together to:
- i. Share information to ensure youth’s involvement in each system is easily identifiable by the other system;
 - ii. Provide joint case planning and assessment resulting in a unified service plan to address primary cause of delinquent behaviors while also promoting youth safety, well-being, and better family functioning;
 - iii. Coordinate services delivery and case management to minimize the use of resources and the potential for systems working at cross-purposes; and
 - iv. Engage families in all major cross-system decisions, plans, and services.
- d. **Education:** Youth in the juvenile justice system are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled, have academic skills below their grade level, possess a learning or developmental disability, and drop out of school. Enrollment in school and academic achievement is associated with better recidivism rates and outcomes into adulthood, and degree attainment is strongly associated with future earning potential. Programs should collaborate with the schools to keep youth in school, address the youth’s barriers to learning, and promote continued academic progress. With both systems working together, they can develop a graduated response policy to the youth’s misbehavior to use more developmentally appropriate alternatives to suspensions and expulsions, reduce the number of school based offenses and referrals to the juvenile justice system, identify and address problem behaviors before youth are rearrested, and help promote their school attendance and achievement.

Principle 4: Tailor system policies, programs, and supervision to reflect the distinct developmental needs of adolescents.

Research on the relationship between age and crime shows that most youth “age out” of delinquent behavior without formal system intervention. Young people are not mini-adults. Their families, peers, schools and communities have a significant influence on their beliefs and actions. A developmentally appropriate approach to working with youth should be the basis for all policies, programs, and supervision in the juvenile justice system.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. *Supervise Youth in a Developmentally Appropriate Manner:* Traditional supervision of youth alone has a small, if any, impact on recidivism and other youth outcomes once it’s over. This impact is particularly muted when contact is brief, authoritarian, and concentrated on monitoring and enforcing requirements instead of engaging youth and promoting positive youth behaviors. Supervision is most effective when less focused on catching youth doing something wrong and more focused on helping them do right. Long-term positive impact on youth behaviors can be achieved by promoting three key developmentally appropriate policies and practices:
 - a. **Establish appropriate conditions of community supervision:** Do not set youth up to fail by establishing a laundry list of conditions that are difficult to understand and unrealistic to achieve. Ask yourself if this “requirement” will make it harder for this youth to succeed.
 - b. **Reposition the role of supervision officer:** Programs should spend less time monitoring the conditions of supervision and more time helping to address the primary cause of youth’s delinquent behaviors. This can be done by:
 - i. Allow for more frequent and meaningful contact between the officer and youth;
 - ii. Use the youth’s assessed risk level to determine the frequency of contact;
 - iii. Require regular contact with family members and other important members of youth’s support network;
 - iv. Allow supervision sessions to be held in youth’s home or other environments in which they feel secure and more likely to engage and respond to interventions; and
 - v. Support training for officers in evidence-based techniques, such as cognitive behavioral approaches, for engaging youth and facilitating changes in their attitudes and behaviors.
 - c. **Institute graduated responses to youth behavior:** Given that adolescents are particularly responsive to external rewards and are relatively insensitive to degrees of punishment, programs should mostly use incentives and rewards, rather than threats or punitive consequences, to promote youth compliance with conditions. At the same time, a fundamental part of adolescence is making mistakes and learning from them. When youth fail to adhere to supervision mandates, a graduated response system should be used to employ a continuum of interventions to address youth misbehavior,

as warranted by youth's assessed risk level and the nature of their non-compliance, rather than jumping immediately to more extreme responses such as termination from the program and a court filing. A graduated response system also helps the agency to hold themselves accountable for whether a youth's risk levels were initially assessed appropriately and their priority needs identified and addressed effectively, and make ongoing adjustments to the youth's supervision and services, as necessary.

2. *Engage Families and Youth:* Youth whose caregivers fail to provide consistent structure and support are at a far greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior than those with supportive caregivers. Families and other supportive adults should be involved in system decisions and services by:
 - a. **Supporting the identification of appropriate caregivers:** Programs should immediately identify and engage with youth's family, primary caregivers, and/or other supportive adults.
 - b. **Requiring family involvement in system decisions:** Programs that involve families in a meaningful and respectful way in case planning are more likely to identify youth's priority needs and how to best address them, obtain family buy-in and support, and encourage family to take a more active role in the child's success.
 - c. **Promoting family engagement in system interventions:** Many of the most effective programs give a central role to parenting-skill development and behavior change.
3. *Hold youth accountable for their actions in ways that address the harm caused to victims and communities and that support positive behavior change:* Holding a youth accountable is different than using punishment and assigning youth to restrictive supervision levels and enact harsh conditions of supervision as a way to "teach youth a lesson." A restorative justice model should be used to emphasize the need for youth to understand and take responsibility for their wrongdoing and acknowledge and repair the harm caused to individuals and the community. Restorative justice can encompass a range of activities, including community service, monetary or other forms of restitution, family conferences, and victim offender mediation. These activities are more likely to improve outcomes for victims and communities when focused on the impact of violent crime and individual victims who can meet directly with youth.