



RFK
COMMUNITY
ALLIANCE

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER
FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF YOUTH JUSTICE

LinkedIn Feature

Youth Justice: Unpacking Best Practices

FULL INFOGRAPHIC SERIES

ADVANCING BEST PRACTICES IN YOUTH JUSTICE



Comprehensive and accessible
research on the core practices
driving youth justice transformation



ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT & EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Why is Youth Justice Separate?

The youth justice system was established in the early 1900s to prioritize rehabilitation, based on the logic that youth delinquency is distinct from adult offending. The rapid growth of research in developmental neuroscience since the 2000s established the mechanisms of how development shapes behavior, reinforcing the rationale of separating youth and criminal justice. Supreme Court decisions that regulated the sentencing of minors relied on this evidence distinguishing youth from adults through diminished culpability and greater potential for rehabilitation.¹

What Makes Youth Different?

Adolescents are...

- 1 **Less able to regulate their behavior in emotionally charged contexts**
- 2 **Highly sensitized to external influence, particularly the presence of peers and the immediacy of rewards**
- 3 **Less able to make informed decisions that require long-term consideration²**

Cold Cognition When adolescents have time to reflect with relevant information, free from emotional/social pressure, and supported by trusted adults, their prefrontal cortex is mature enough to make sound decisions.³



Developmental Neuroscience

Various regions of the brain mature at different rates. Regions that govern basic functions like emotions, motivation and reward, and responding to social stimuli are fully developed around age 13. The prefrontal cortex is the last region to develop, serving complex cognitive functions like controlling impulses, regulating emotion, assessing risk, and long-term planning.¹

Hot Cognition In emotionally charged, high-pressure situations, the brain's reward and emotion centers override the still developing prefrontal cortex, making careful reasoning far less accessible.³



Emerging Adulthood

While brain development was long thought to plateau between ages 18 and 21, evidence has emerged that extends the timeline somewhere between the mid-to-late 20s. Recent research suggests that the behavior of 18-21 year olds aligns more closely with adolescents than that of adults, a consideration that has been integrated in many U.S. courts.³

DID YOU KNOW?

Risk taking is a normal, essential part of adolescence, and is one of the primary ways that young people build life experience which develops capacity for making better, more informed decisions.⁴

FUN FACT!

The neural paths that 'light up' in response to rewards are more active in adolescents than in children and adults, and activity peaks even further when young people are among their peers.³

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & GROWTH-FOCUSED CASE MANAGEMENT

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) emphasizes a young person's strengths, protective factors, and prosocial skills by fostering supportive relationships and engagement in constructive activities. PYD is built on research showing that young people thrive when they feel connected, capable, and that they matter, and that investing in their strengths and assets improves life outcomes more reliably than focusing on deficits and preventing bad behavior.¹

Developmental Assets



Developmental assets are protective factors that promote healthy development for young people. The Search Institute conducted decades of research to identify 40 assets that help youth thrive across internal and external domains, including positive values, constructive use of time, empowerment, and more.²

FUN FACT!

The more assets a young person has, the more likely they are to succeed in school, practice healthy behaviors, and delay or avoid high-risk behaviors.³

DID YOU KNOW?

Focusing only on recidivism:

- Can lead to overly punitive responses
- Misses chances to support positive change

Focusing on desistance:

- Encourages realistic, developmentally-informed support
- Embraces the evidence that most youth grow out of delinquent behavior with the right guidance and opportunities⁴



Growth-Focused Case Management

Growth-Focused Youth Justice Case Management (GFCM) is an enhanced case management approach that strengthens the use of risk and needs assessments. It uses strengths-based, developmentally informed strategies to help justice-involved youth build a positive identity, set meaningful goals, and envision a future aligned with success. By engaging youth as active partners in the process, GFCM empowers them to understand how their choices shape their path and supports long-term growth and desistance.⁴

Phases of GFCM⁴

1. Engage and Stabilize

Intake and Initial assessment

Facilitate self-exploration

Assist youth to imagine and verbalize their future ideal self as alternative to offending (informs long-term goal)

2. Assess and Discover

Comprehensive Assessment

Facilitate self-discovery

Frame ideal self in an achievable way; help youth discover strengths and weaknesses or barriers in relation to it

3. Plan and Deliver

Service Matching and Court Conditions

Facilitate self-efficacy

Involve youth in planning action steps that they believe they can achieve

4. Monitor and Transition

Supervision Activities

Facilitate self-realization

Support youth's growth toward ideal self; taking small action steps to move toward their future self/identity

¹ ACT for Youth. (n.d.). Scientific Foundations of Positive Youth Development. <https://actforyouth.org/pyd/foundations.cfm>

² Search Institute. (n.d.). Developmental Assets. <https://info.searchinstitute.org/hubfs/Developmental-Assets-Download.pdf>

³ TEDx Talks. (2011). "Peter Benson – Sparks: How Youth Thrive". <https://youtu.be/TqzUHCW58Us?si=n8TxKjxctfYMXnO>

⁴ Cloud, J. & Martin, J. (2024). Growth-Focused Youth Justice Case Management Guidebook. <https://nrctyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Growth-Focused-Youth-Justice-Case-Management-Guidebook.pdf>

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF FORMAL PROCESSING

The Crossroads Study

When a youth is referred to the justice system, a decision is made for the case to be handled in the court system (formal) or diverted to community services (informal). The Crossroads Study followed 1,216 teenage boys after their first arrest for an offense eligible for informal processing to evaluate the long-term impact of a youth's case being formally processed. Compared to diverted youth 5 years after arrest, formally processed youth were:

- More likely to be rearrested
- More likely to be incarcerated
- Engaged in more violence
- Less likely to graduate high school
- More affiliated with delinquent peers
- Had lower perceptions of life opportunities¹



When participants turned 24-25, a follow-up study aimed to identify the trajectory of their desistance from offending. Youth who were diverted after their initial offense overwhelmingly maintained a very low probability of offending. Even after controlling for relevant factors, formal processing predicted a significantly higher likelihood of reoffending at different rates across the follow-up period. Notably, among those who did reoffend, formal processing was more strongly associated with gradual escalation of offending than initial recidivism with early decline.²



Labeling Theory

So, why is it that formal intervention is correlated with further offending and poor outcomes? Labeling theory is often used to understand how deeper system involvement has a negative influence on young people, positing that when the system defines a young person as delinquent, they internalize the label and begin to reshape their sense of self and behavior accordingly. Negative reaction to the label from non-deviant peers can push the young person out of prosocial social circles, either because non-deviant peers pull away or the youth preemptively withdraws to avoid social rejection. This social exclusion funnels the youth toward other “labeled” peers who validate their new identity, narrowing their social prospects in ways that reinforce delinquency.³



DID YOU KNOW?

Certain demographic groups of youth are far more likely to be penetrate deeper into the justice system than their counterparts, even when controlling for relevant factors. For example, dual status youth (involved in both the justice and child welfare systems) face deeper system penetration than youth who are only justice-involved.⁴ Despite similar rates of offending, minority youth are disproportionately represented at every stage of the youth justice system, and are significantly more likely to be formally processed than white counterparts.²

FUN FACT!

From its peak in the mid 90s through 2019, youth offending fell by 71% overall, and by 67% for serious violent crimes. A small surge in youth arrests briefly disrupted this downward trend after the COVID-19 pandemic, but arrests fell below pre-pandemic numbers in 2024 as the downward trend continued into 2025.⁵

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

DIVERSION FROM FORMAL RESPONSES

What is Diversion?

Because research consistently shows that formal processing has negative effects on both young people and public safety, diverting youth from the justice system when their behavior can be addressed outside of court is a strategic approach to accountability, rehabilitation, and addressing underlying needs through informal intervention. While diversion holds different meaning in every jurisdiction, it is a practice that reflects principles of developmental neuroscience through recognition that criminalizing age-typical behavior is counterproductive.¹



Racial and Ethnic Disparities

When compared to white youth with similar backgrounds and offense severity, youth of color are far more likely to be denied diversion opportunities – especially black youth. Broadly, this represents an unacceptable imbalance of justice. Beneath the surface, these disparities create cumulative disadvantage for youth of color, as formal court interactions inform the outcomes of any subsequent referrals to the system. Without clear guidelines, diversion decisions are left to practitioner discretion, and restrictive eligibility rules further limit which youth are diverted. Factors that exacerbate the disparity include inadequate family engagement, burdensome participation requirements, financial barriers, and insufficient support for youth at risk of failing diversion programs.²

Jurisdictions are using diversion as a tool to address racial and ethnic disparities by:

- Broadening eligibility for diversion
- Mandating diversion for specific offenses
- Implementing mechanisms to evaluate overrides
- Dedicated funding to programming
- Standardizing guidelines across jurisdictions
- Strengthening data collection and oversight²

Benefits of Diversion

- Improving public safety & reducing recidivism
- Providing treatment and services
- Reducing fiscal costs
- Avoiding labeling effects
- Reducing unnecessary social control
- Improving education and career outcomes for youth¹

FUN FACT!

While the U.S. diverts around half of delinquency cases, countries like Norway, Germany, and New Zealand divert 76% - 83% with high success rates. But, the gap is closing: jurisdictions across the country are expanding diversion programs, creating new laws, and keeping young people out of the formal court system more than ever before.³

DID YOU KNOW?

Diversion programs incorporating principles of restorative justice have proven particularly effective for youth because they do what formal interventions often fail to – help young people meaningfully connect their actions to impact and consequences. By centering victims' rights and needs while giving youth the opportunity to take responsibility and collaboratively determine how to repair harm, these programs promote desistance through a positive experience that leverages adolescents' heightened capacity for growth.⁴



¹ Tuell, J. (2023). Diversion and Alternatives Reform Team Guidebook. National Resource Center for the Transformation of Youth Justice. <https://nrctyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Diversion-and-Alternatives-Reform-Team-Guidebook-2023-1.pdf>

² Mendel, R. (2022). Diversion: A Hidden Key to Combating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Juvenile Justice. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Diversion-A-Hidden-Key-to-Combating-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparities-in-Juvenile-Justice.pdf>

³ Mendel, R. (2024). Protect and Redirect: America's Growing Movement to Divert Youth Out of the Justice System. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2024/03/Protect-and-Redirect-Americas-Growing-Movement-to-Divert-Youth-Out-of-the-Justice-System.pdf>

⁴ Mendel, R. (2026). Restorative Justice Diversion: A Better Way to Provide Meaningful Accountability for Youth. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2026/03/Restorative-Justice-Diversion-A-Better-Way-to-Provide-Meaningful-Accountability-for-Youth.pdf>

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

CASE PROCESSING DECISION-MAKING AND TIMELINE STANDARDS

Why Does the Case Processing Timeline Matter?

KNOWLEDGE CHECK!

An adolescent's ability to consider actions in connection to long-term and abstract consequences is diminished because of the asymmetric development among regions of the brain.¹

To effectively deter offending, sanctions must be:

- *Delivered swiftly*
- *Appropriately severe*
- *Certain to be imposed*

This principle applies to offending generally, but is especially critical for youth delinquency. When too much time passes between a youth's offense and its consequence, several problems arise: their developmental immaturity makes it harder to connect cause and effect, the deterrent effect weakens, and the delay itself creates a window for further delinquent behavior before any sanction is imposed for the first offense. Delays in case processing take a toll on youth in two ways: they create prolonged uncertainty and anxiety, and they undermine the young person's perception of the justice system as fair and predictable. Both work against the system's goal of changing behavior.¹



Best Practices for Case Processing



Hearings are held as close as possible to the initial law violation



Court response to adjudication is swift, and needed services are readily available



The time of court staff, prosecutors, defense counsel, victims, witnesses, youth, family, probation, and service providers is respected and used efficiently



Processing is designed to eliminate duplication, delay, and waste of resources



Court dates are credible, with continuances kept to a minimum



Sufficient time is allocated to each hearing so that it can be completed within the assumed time frame^{2,3}

FUN FACT!

Language barriers can contribute to extended processing times, but jurisdictions can combat this by allocating resources to interpreter services and informational materials translated to prominent languages of their community other than English.²

DID YOU KNOW?

Lengthy processing may increase recidivism.

One study in Florida evaluated the association between case processing time and rearrest for nearly 112,000 youth, and found that longer case processing times were associated with higher odds of rearrest among first-time offenders, with cases exceeding 60 days between referral and disposition showing the strongest effect.¹

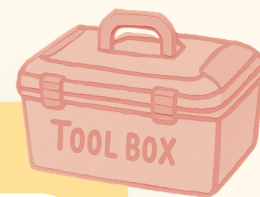
¹ Novak, A. & Hartsell, E. (2022). Does Speed Matter? The Association Between Case Processing Time in Juvenile Court and Rearrest. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08874034211035500>

² National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. (2021). Bench Cards: Enhanced Juvenile Justice Guidelines. <https://www.ncjfcj.org/bench-cards/detention-or-initial-hearing-enhanced-juvenile-justice-guidelines/>

³ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). Timely Justice: Improving JDAI Results Through Case Processing Reforms. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/timely-justice-improving-jdai-results-through-case-processing-reforms>

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

GRADUATED RESPONSE SYSTEMS



Rethinking Youth Probation

Probation is the most common outcome in adjudicated cases, yet traditional compliance-focused models often fail to deliver on the field's own stated goal: long-term behavior change. Sanctions for a probation violation, such as detention and court returns, not only fall short of reducing recidivism but actively push youth deeper into the justice system without any real benefit to public safety. With increasing attention to developmental research, probation departments across the country are reconsidering their approach.^{1,2,3}

KNOWLEDGE CHECK!

Adolescent brains are still developing the capacity for self-regulation, making non-compliance with probation terms a predictable result rather than a sign of moral failure.¹

Benefits of Graduated Response Systems

Graduated response systems focus on accountability rather than punishment by balancing sanctions for non-compliance with incentives and rewards for positive behavior. When probation has more “tools” in their toolbox, jurisdictions have realized benefits such as:

- ✦ Higher successful probation completion
- ✦ Lower recidivism rates
- ✦ Reduced system penetration
- ✦ Consistency and equity in practitioner practice promotes fairness
- ✦ Youth carry strengthened abilities to succeed outside of supervision
- ✦ Judges receive more information on the interventions that have been used
- ✦ Documentation to support violations and case closure become easily accessible^{1,3}

Respond Smarter, Not Harder

Research in justice and school settings shows that rewards and incentives to promote rule-following are highly effective for young people — a finding backed by neuroscience, which reveals that adolescent brains are hypersensitive to rewards. Effective graduated response systems capitalize on this by swiftly delivering proportionate responses to noncompliance and using positive reinforcement to reward positive behavior. When youth understand expectations, see consistent and fair responses, and are involved in planning for success, they are more likely to comply with probation conditions.^{1,3}

What Incentivizes Youth?

One study asked nearly 500 youth on probation what kinds of incentives motivate them to comply with conditions and complete probation successfully. The results aligned with research that adolescents are particularly sensitive to social praise, as recognition-based incentives (e.g. probation officer informing the judge or family of their positive efforts) were the most motivating. Autonomy-based incentives (e.g. fewer meetings, later curfew, permission to attend special event) followed and were more motivating than monetary incentives (e.g. gift cards, reduced fines/fees), but ultimately, youth were particularly attuned to feedback and acceptance from their probation officer.⁴

1 Harvell, S. et al. (2018). Bridging Research and Practice in Juvenile Probation. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99223/bridging_research_and_practice_in_juvenile_probation_8.pdf

2 Robin, L. et al. (2023). Juvenile Probation Structure, Policy, and Practice in the United States. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Juvenile%20Probation%20Structure%20Policy%20and%20Practice%20in%20the%20United%20States%20brief.pdf>

3 Sharp, C. & Lahue, H. (2025). Performance Incentive Funding: Rewarding What Works in America's Juvenile Probation and Parole Systems. Cicero Institute. <https://ciceroinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Juvenile-Probation-Reform-paper-9-26-2026.pdf>

4 Richardson, J. T., et al. (2025). What Youth Want: Youths' Perceptions of Incentives in Juvenile Probation. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/law0000433>

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

The Case for Family Engagement

Familial dysfunction can certainly produce criminogenic risk, but a supported family can foster resilience. Because youth almost always return to their home environment, working with their families is a prime opportunity for the system to achieve its goal of long-term behavior change. Families of justice-involved youth report that approaches of involvement alone leave them feeling blamed, stigmatized, excluded, and overwhelmed. Many families of justice-involved youth already feel distrust toward the system rooted in their own involvement and/or experiences of racial bias. Despite these barriers, research consistently demonstrates that when families are meaningfully engaged, it is a strong predictor of positive outcomes for the youth.^{1,2}



Shifting Focus from the System to the Family

Engaging families in youth justice reduces recidivism, enhances public safety, and promotes culturally responsive practices. For young people themselves, family involvement reduces mental health issues, strengthens social-emotional skills, and improves academic performance. When families are left out, the system loses the opportunity to support the family in building skills alongside their child to manage behavior when the system steps back. A true family-centered, meaningfully engaging approach distributes decision-making authority to families, individualizes engagement to reflect each family's circumstances, and builds the staffing, resources, and accountability structures necessary to make that partnership last.^{2,3}

	<i>System-Centered (Minimal Involvement)</i>	<i>Family-Centered (Engagement + Involvement)</i>
<i>Power Dynamics</i>	Professionals make decisions; families are informed	Shared decision-making between families and professionals
<i>Communication Style</i>	One-way: "We'll tell you what's happening"	Two-way: "Let's discuss and decide together"
<i>Program Design</i>	Uniform services with limited family input	Tailored services reflecting family culture, strengths, and needs

When Families Pull Back

86% of families of incarcerated youth express wanting to be more involved in their child's treatment.

When families pull back because they feel stigmatized or unsupported, it falls on the system to persist, rebuild trust, and create conditions where participation feels worthwhile. Given that engagement improves outcomes for youth and public safety, disengagement shouldn't be an option.²

DID YOU KNOW?

A narrow definition of family can inadvertently exclude the adults who are most present and invested in a young person's life. By accounting for non-traditional family structures, the court draws on the full strength of the youth's support network.^{1,3}

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

COLLABORATION & MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAMS

Collaboration is Crucial

Effectively addressing the criminogenic risks youth face requires collaboration among stakeholders both within and beyond the justice system. By working alongside other agencies through multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs), youth-serving practitioners can pool their perspectives to build a more comprehensive response to support healthy development for justice-involved youth, giving young people a greater chance at a successful, pro-social future. Collaboration also benefits the system itself: when agency goals intersect, service delivery is streamlined, resources are freed up, and low-risk youth can be diverted to more appropriate services, reducing their likelihood of reoffending.^{1,2}



Mental and Behavioral Health Services

70% of justice-involved youth have a diagnosable mental health disorder, compared to estimates under 30% for their counterparts. Professionals that collaborate to coordinate screening and treatment planning can reduce the service gaps that interfere with the effectiveness of interventions. Many justice systems and residential placements lack the capacity to provide sufficient behavioral health resources themselves, and system partnerships to meet those needs expand access to evidence-based interventions that strengthen rehabilitative efforts.^{2,3,4}

Education Systems



Finishing high school is linked to better life outcomes and reduced recidivism, but justice-involved youth are far more likely than their peers to fall behind academically, face suspension or expulsion, and ultimately leave school without a diploma. MDTs can drive school engagement and promote effective alternatives to exclusionary discipline that undermines public safety.^{2,4}

Child Welfare

Youth involved in both the child welfare and youth justice systems face greater risk factors and harsher court outcomes than their peers. Multi-disciplinary teams and system collaboration can enhance service planning and delivery, and reduce the increased system penetration that dual status youth endure.²

The Continuum of Care

The continuum of care refers to the progression of services and supports from prevention and early intervention through diversion, supervision, treatment, and reentry. Rather than relying on isolated systems that often produce fragmented care, this model brings agencies and communities into alignment around a young person's evolving needs. At the front end, collaboration among schools, mental health providers, youth justice practitioners, and community-based organizations enables earlier identification of risk and timely intervention before a young person is formally justice-involved. Communities remain engaged throughout, participating in interventions, reducing risk factors, and building the protective factors that keep youth safe, supported, and positively connected. This engagement is especially critical at the reintegration stage, when coordinated efforts among professionals and community members help connect youth to the employment, education, services, and pro-social activities that are linked to desistance and long-term success.^{2,5}

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA SCREENING

The Impact of Trauma on Development

During a time of developing the emotional and cognitive skills that prepare adolescents for adulthood, trauma has a profound impact on behavior and cognitive function. Research suggests that the brain mediates severe mental health symptoms by employing maladaptive regulation strategies of avoidance, like impairing external emotion recognition. Neuroimaging has also shown altered brain activity that disrupts age-typical regulation of emotions, executive functioning, and memory. Several aspects of development make youth delinquency likely, but trauma exposure presents an additional layer of risk that further impairs self-regulation and decision-making.^{1,2}

Prevalence of Trauma in Youth Justice

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire contains ten categories of potentially traumatizing events occurring before age 18. Research has shown that the effect is cumulative: with each additional exposure to an ACE, the risk of negative physical and mental health outcomes increases. Several (but not all) ACEs are linked to recidivism among justice-involved youth, who also report higher rates of ACE exposure than non-delinquent peers.³

ACEs Exposure Among Justice-Involved Youth

Family violence	51%	Household substance abuse	29%
Incarceration of household member	48%	Overall neglect	25%
Emotional neglect	43%	Physical abuse	25%
Emotional abuse	31%	Sexual abuse	16%
Physical neglect	29%	Household mental illness	14%

Trauma Manifests in Behaviors

At the system level, a fundamental best practice in youth justice is to screen for trauma, not only because of its prevalence among justice-involved youth, but also because of the way that trauma manifests in behavior. Behaviors that would traditionally be seen as disruptive, defiant, or withdrawn frequently reflect a trauma response rather than a character deficit. It is essential for court practitioners to receive training on what to look for and how to respond to behaviors resulting from trauma.⁴

Trauma-Informed Courts

While court involvement can intensify trauma symptoms, young people are resilient and can heal when the right supports are in place. Jurisdictions are increasingly working to embed trauma-informed principles into youth justice practice by reforming trainings, policies, and procedures that reflect that knowledge to ensure that the court experience reflects safety, transparency, and empowerment rather than retraumatization. Courts that commit to these principles of trauma-informed approaches hold youth accountable while mitigating the cycle of trauma.⁴

Advancing Best Practices in Youth Justice Series

RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY TOOLS

Risk Assessments

Validated risk assessments are generally grounded in the RNR model, which estimates a youth's likelihood of reoffending through evaluation of static and dynamic factors. Static factors are fixed and unchangeable, such as age, prior court involvement, and living environment. Dynamic factors are malleable, such as association with delinquent peers, poor school performance, and negative beliefs and attitudes. While courts have traditionally placed significant weight on static factors, a growing body of evidence points to the distinct advantage of identifying dynamic risk factors — the root causes of delinquent behavior — as criminogenic needs that can be addressed. Validated risk assessments provide a more consistent prediction of recidivism and give practitioners an evidence-based method for gathering information about a youth's case.^{1,2}



The RNR Model

Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) is a model that aims to reduce recidivism and promote pro-social behaviors by structuring responses to offending effectively.



Risk Principle The intensity of supervision and intervention should match the assessed level of risk for recidivism.

Needs Principle The dynamic criminogenic factors directly associated to the youth's delinquent behavior should be targeted to reduce their risk.

Responsivity Principle The approach and intervention should be tailored to the youth's motivation, strengths, cultural background, etc. to promote success.¹

Benefits of RNR Tools

When implemented well, the use of risk assessments provide great benefit to youth justice jurisdictions. Studies show that both over-serving low-risk youth and under-serving high-risk youth are associated with higher recidivism, making proportionate service allocation critical. These tools help to optimize resources by directing time, funding, and programming toward youth who need them the most, while also enabling practitioners to move beyond one-size-fits-all supervision by identifying and targeting the specific factors driving a young person's behavior. This individualized approach increases the likelihood of positive behavior change. Additionally, incorporating assessment results into key decision-making points reduces reliance on informal judgment, leading to more consistent outcomes with less opportunity for bias to influence a youth's case.^{1,3}



Implementation Challenges

The benefits of assessment tools are significant, but many jurisdictions face barriers to implementation accompanied by negative case processing outcomes. These challenges are often a result of inconsistent practices across staff/agencies, inconsistent scoring and frequent overrides, lack of use in initial case planning, lack of communication of results, and results not being used for service matching.^{4,5}

Embracing Strengths

Several RNR tools incorporate strengths or protective factors, as research shows that these have a strong influence on reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Even when youth exhibit moderate or high risk levels, factors like prosocial relationships, supportive family connections, involvement in productive structured activities and more can serve as powerful buffers against recidivism.²

1 Seigle et al. (2014). Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Juvenile-Justice-White-Paper-with-Appendices-.pdf>

2 Barnes-Lee, A. & Petkus, A. (2023). A scoping review of strengths-based risk and needs assessments for youth involved in the juvenile legal system. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chldyouth.2023.106878>

3 Vincent et al. (2024). Youth Reoffending: Prevalence and Predictive Risk Factors in Two States. <https://doi.org/10.13028/219x-vs03>

4 Vincent et al. (2018). Studying Drivers of Risk and Needs Assessment Instrument Implementation in Juvenile Justice. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/studying-drivers-risk-and-needs-assessment-instrument-implementation-juvenile>

5 McPhee et al. (2024). What's Risk Got to Do with it: Judges' and Probation Officers' Understanding and Use of Juvenile Risk Assessments in Making Residential Placement Decisions. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000528>