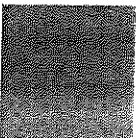
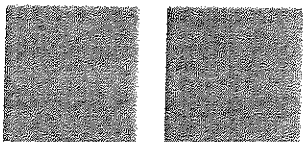




## Juvenile Justice Resource Series

# Screening and Assessment in Juvenile Justice Systems: Identifying Mental Health Needs and Risk of Reoffending





## ***What Are the Benefits of Screening and Assessment Tools for Mental Health Problems and Risk for Re-offending?***

The benefits of a sound screening and assessment system are wide reaching. First, they help agencies to assign youth to *proper levels of treatment intensity and/or degrees of security*. Such decisions are important for conserving scarce resources and are better for youth. For example, when decision makers face choices about placement of youth in an inpatient mental health facility, they should reserve such settings for the more severe mental health cases. Likewise, in juvenile justice, the most intensive interventions and placements should be reserved for the highest risk offenders, who need them in order to reduce their likelihood of continued offending. Conversely, low-risk youth have a much lower chance of reoffending, even in the absence of intervention, and therefore could do well with minimal attention (Andrews & Dowden, 2006). In this context, the term *interventions* can refer to a range of activities from intensive supervision and behavioral health services to incarceration for extreme cases. There is no good evidence that placement in juvenile justice settings is rehabilitative, and research has demonstrated that in fact it can make youth worse (Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009; Lipsey, 2009). Indeed, the deeper youth penetrate the juvenile justice system, the more time they spend with more deviant peers, making them more likely to offend as an adult and less likely to be rehabilitated (Gatti et al., 2009). Youth identified as low risk should be seen as eligible for diversion or should receive minimal levels of intervention whenever possible.

Second, assessment permits us to provide the *proper types of services*. A “one size fits all” approach to service utilization and treatment does not work. For example, youth who do not have a major substance abuse problem do not belong in substance abuse treatment. In juvenile justice, aside from mental health concerns that can jeopardize a youth’s safety and affect their response to treatment, interventions should target only those factors associated with increasing the youth’s likelihood of reoffending. These are known as “dynamic risk factors” (often referred to as “criminogenic needs”) and include issues like ineffective parental monitoring, antisocial attitudes, and poor school achievement. Youth who receive services that have nothing to do with their specific, dynamic risk factors are more likely to reoffend than youth who receive only targeted services commensurate with their dynamic risk (Vieira et al., 2009).

Finally, identification of the dynamic risk factors and mental health needs present among the youth served by a particular agency is a benefit because it provides a means to document *the need for services in a youth’s community*. Awareness of the extent of mental health concerns, well-being needs, and dynamic risk areas is critical for jurisdictions and communities to allocate resources and develop appropriate policy and management plans.

## Conclusion

This brief highlights the benefits of adopting screening and assessment tools for both mental health problems and risk of reoffending among many youth populations. The selection of tools depends on a variety of factors. The following are some key points that agencies should consider when engaging in this process.

- Agencies should choose their screening and assessment tools and plan the identification process wisely to ensure they receive the information they need about the youth they serve in the most accurate, timely, and feasible manner possible.
- Agencies must be aware that there are considerable differences across instruments in terms of the mental health concerns and behaviors they are designed to identify.
- There is no “one size fits all” tool that will identify both mental health needs and risk of reoffending or dynamic risk factors with any reasonable degree of accuracy. Further, risk assessment or mental health screening tools that were designed and validated to be used with youth located in multiple systems do not exist currently. However, some mental health assessment tools have been validated with multiple populations.
- Important considerations when deciding which tool or tools to use include the decision point, the purpose of implementation, and whether the tool or tools are evidence based. Other considerations include the costs of the tools (including the per-administration costs, manual purchase, software when applicable, and costs of training) and whether the agency has the staff resources to implement a specific tool well.
- Agencies should adopt a screening and assessment *system*, not merely screening or assessment tools, in order to ensure positive outcomes. This means thorough implementation, involving staff training and appropriate, thoughtful policies and procedures.
- All risk and mental health assessments should be seen as dynamic when dealing with youth populations. This means adopting tools that can measure changes in risk and/or mental health status, or viewing these tools as having a limited shelf life.
- Staff need to be educated on the meaning of what mental health and risk tools provide, rather than believing that scores automatically translate into specific decisions. The mere fact that a youth scores “high” on a mental health screening tool or “high risk” on a risk tool should not automatically translate into intensive treatment or a high-security placement.