
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

BACKGROUND

This white paper is written to guide leaders across all branches of government; juvenile justice system administrators, managers, and front-line staff; and researchers, advocates, and other stakeholders on how to better leverage existing research and resources to facilitate system improvements that reduce recidivism and improve other outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

The last two decades have produced remarkable changes in juvenile justice systems. An overwhelming body of research has emerged, demonstrating that using secure facilities as a primary response to youth's delinquent behavior generally produces poor outcomes at high costs.¹ Drawing on this evidence, the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative have provided the field with models for reform, research-based guidance, and technical assistance that has transformed many systems. In part due to these efforts, between 1997 and 2011, youth confinement rates declined by almost 50 percent.² During the same time period, arrests of juveniles for violent crimes also fell by approximately 50 percent, to their lowest level in over 30 years.³

The importance and value of these achievements can't be overstated. At the same time, these trends alone are not sufficient for policymakers to assess the effectiveness of their juvenile justice systems. It's critical that policymakers also know the recidivism and other outcomes of youth who are diverted from confinement and who return to their communities after confinement. Yet 20 percent of state juvenile correctional agencies don't track recidivism data for youth at all. Of the states that do track recidivism, most don't consider the multiple ways a youth may have subsequent contact with the justice system, which range from rearrest, readjudication, or reincarceration within the juvenile justice system to offenses that involve them with the adult corrections system.

To the extent that systems are able to measure their impact on rearrest, readjudication, and reincarceration rates, the results have been discouraging. It's not uncommon for rearrest rates for youth returning from confinement to be as high as 75 percent within three years of release, and arrest rates for higher-risk youth placed on probation in the community are often not much better. While there have been promising advances in the field, few juvenile justice systems can point to significant and sustained progress in reducing these recidivism rates.⁴

Recidivism rates for youth involved in the juvenile justice system have been persistently high for many reasons, but not because nothing works. In fact, a wide-ranging body of research exists on how to reduce recidivism and improve other youth outcomes. However, juvenile justice systems have historically struggled to fully understand this research, apply it in a cohesive way, implement it with fidelity, and hold agencies and service providers accountable for results.

The Need for Core Principles

The focus of this white paper is on what works to promote successful reentry for youth who are under juvenile justice system supervision—which encompasses a process that begins the moment any youth comes into contact with the system, no matter how brief or at what level—to support their successful transition from supervision to a crime-free and productive adulthood.

To help advance this goal, this white paper does the following:

- **Part One** distills and synthesizes into four core principles the research on what works to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system. The discussion of each principle includes the latest research and specific policy, practice, and resource-allocation recommendations, which when taken together, offer the potential for significant recidivism reductions and improvements in other youth outcomes. It also provides examples illustrating how state and local juvenile justice officials have established particular policies and system interventions to implement these principles.
- Recognizing that improved outcomes are possible only when research on what works is implemented with fidelity, **Part Two** details lessons learned from research and practice on how to implement the principles effectively, and provides examples of how state and local juvenile justice systems have operationalized the principles in practice.

Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Youth Outcomes

PRINCIPLE 1: BASE SUPERVISION, SERVICE, AND RESOURCE-ALLOCATION DECISIONS ON THE RESULTS OF VALIDATED RISK AND NEEDS ASSESSMENTS.

The first core principle for reducing recidivism and improving other youth outcomes—which sets an evidence-based foundation for everything that follows—is for juvenile justice systems to use validated risk assessments as the most objective way to identify youth who are least and most likely to reoffend. Policymakers should require juvenile justice systems to use assessment results to minimize system interventions for youth with a low risk of reoffending and to focus the most restrictive and intensive system interventions on youth most likely to reoffend.⁵

Systems should use validated assessments to identify and focus on the specific needs that are the primary causes of youth's delinquent behavior. Juvenile justice systems that use these assessment results, in conjunction with findings from mental health and substance use assessments, as the primary basis for developing case plans for youth and matching them with appropriate services, are best positioned to use system interventions effectively to reduce recidivism and improve other youth outcomes.

PRINCIPLE 2: ADOPT AND EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES DEMONSTRATED TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM AND IMPROVE OTHER YOUTH OUTCOMES, AND USE DATA TO EVALUATE THE RESULTS AND DIRECT SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS.

Validated assessments help improve youth outcomes by identifying who the juvenile justice system should supervise and prioritize for intensive supervision and services and what needs should serve as the focal point for case planning and system interventions. Juvenile justice systems should build upon this foundation by using research to guide how they effectively address youth's needs. Programs and practices designed to promote youth's positive development,

particularly through cognitive behavioral and family/community-centric approaches, have proven to substantially reduce recidivism and improve other outcomes for youth who are at high risk of reoffending.⁶

Policymakers should require or incentivize juvenile justice systems to implement these services in community and residential settings, and to match them to youth's needs, assess and support service quality, and measure the resulting outcomes to achieve the most significant impact. Policymakers also need to exert greater leadership to help systems to measure the recidivism rates and other outcomes associated with these interventions in an accurate and reliable way, and use this data to guide system decisions and to hold agencies and service providers accountable.

PRINCIPLE 3: EMPLOY A COORDINATED APPROACH ACROSS SERVICE SYSTEMS TO ADDRESS YOUTH'S NEEDS.

If juvenile justice systems implement validated risk assessments and divert low-risk youth from system supervision, most of the youth who end up in confinement will have an array of challenges impacting their transition to a crime-free and productive adulthood. Indeed, the majority of youth involved with the juvenile justice system has significant mental health, substance use, child welfare, and education needs. Policymakers and system administrators can improve service access, speed, and quality, and use system resources most efficiently by ensuring that the juvenile justice system collaborates with other service systems to address youth's comprehensive needs in a coordinated fashion and in ways proven by research to be effective.⁷

PRINCIPLE 4: TAILOR SYSTEM POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND SUPERVISION TO REFLECT THE DISTINCT DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS.

A growing body of research confirms that the differences between adolescents and adults are not happenstance but are developmental—the result of biological and neurological conditions unique to adolescence—and that ignoring these distinct aspects of adolescent development can undermine the potential positive impact of system interventions and even do more harm than good.⁸

As such, a developmentally appropriate approach to working with youth should undergird all policies, programs, and supervision in the juvenile justice system. Juvenile justice systems should more deliberately and systematically engage families, other supportive adults, and even youth themselves in system decisions and interventions. At the same time, juvenile justice systems should better train and support the adults who manage and deliver juvenile justice interventions to become agents of positive youth behavior change. Systems should adopt developmentally appropriate supervision and accountability policies and practices to help reduce recidivism and improve other youth outcomes while ensuring that resources are used efficiently.⁹ Finally, policymakers must also invest in meaningful efforts to reduce system bias and disparate treatment of certain populations to ensure that all youth equally benefit from the policies and practices recommended in this white paper.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES, STRUCTURES, AND SUPPORTS

Research and field experience has consistently demonstrated that how well interventions are implemented is as critical to reducing recidivism and improving other youth outcomes as the substance of a particular policy or practice.¹⁰ Yet the importance of implementation is frequently an afterthought, and legislative and executive policymakers may struggle to understand the role they can play in supporting the high-quality implementation of system policies and practices.

To address these challenges, juvenile justice systems should establish a system of ongoing and interconnected implementation structures and supports to maximize the potential of the policies and practices outlined in Part One of this white paper, including:

- Policies and quality improvement practices that guide how, when, and how often assessments are conducted; whether assessments are conducted reliably and consistently; and whether the results are used appropriately to make supervision and service decisions.
- Quality standards and implementation supports that ensure that the right youth are matched to the right services for the right amount of time, along with evaluation and assistance processes to promote service fidelity to research, accountability, and improvement.
- A formal structure for ongoing collaboration across government branches and service systems that advances shared goals, data sharing, and a coordinated approach to assessment, case planning, and service delivery.
- A guiding set of values on the importance of a developmentally appropriate approach, and policies, practices, and use of standardized tools that operationalize these beliefs in concrete ways for youth and families in the system and the adults who manage it.

¹ Richard J. Bonnie, et al., eds., *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* (Washington, DC: National Research Council of the National Academies Press, 2012); Jason Ziedenberg and Barry Holman, *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities* (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, 2006), available at www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/06-11_rep_dangersofdetention_jj.pdf.

² Melissa Sickmund, et al., “Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement,” (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2013), available at www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp.

³ Charles Puzzanchera, “Juvenile Arrests 2011,” (Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2013), available at www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/244476.pdf.

⁴ There is no nationally accepted juvenile recidivism rate. Individual recidivism reports from states show a wide range of outcomes, with many states exhibiting rearrest rates of more than 50 percent and sometimes as high as 80 percent for high-risk youth in the community over a 1- to 5-year follow-up period.

⁵ James Bonta and Don A. Andrews, *Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation* (Ottawa, Ontario: Public Safety Canada, 2007).

⁶ Mark Lipsey, et al., *Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs: A New Perspective on Evidence-Based Practice* (Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, December 2010).

⁷ Eric J. Bruns, “The evidence base and wraparound,” in Eric J. Bruns and Janet S. Walker, eds., *The Resource Guide to Wraparound* (Portland, OR: National Wraparound Initiative, Research and Training Center for Family Support and Children’s Mental Health, 2008); Beth A. Stroul and Robert E. Friedman, *A System of Care for Children and Youth with Severe Emotional Disturbances* (Washington, DC: CASSP Technical Assistance Center, Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy, Georgetown University Child Development Center, 1994).

⁸ Richard J. Bonnie, et al., eds., *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* (Washington DC: National Research Council of the National Academies Press, 2012).

⁹ David S. Lee and Justin McCrary, “Crime, Punishment, and Myopia” (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, no. 11491, July 2005); Richard J. Bonnie, et al., eds., *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* (Washington DC: National Research Council of the National Academies Press, 2012). Lawrence W. Sherman and Heather Strang, *Restorative Justice: The Evidence* (London: The Smith Institute, 2007).

¹⁰ Dean L. Fixsen, et al., *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* (Tampa, FL: The National Implementation Research Network at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute–University of South Florida, 2005).

Supported by

MacArthur
Foundation



Sponsored by and with guidance from

OJJDP

JUSTICE ★ CENTER
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS