



JUSTICE RESEARCH

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Greg Ridgeway • Acting Director, NIJ

Robert L. Listenbee • Administrator, OJJDP

PREDICTION AND RISK/NEEDS ASSESSMENT

This bulletin discusses our ability to predict whether a young adult will commit crimes based on information available from his or her juvenile years and reviews assessment tools used to make these predictions.

Predicting and Assessing Risk

Predicting the onset of criminal activity and whether it will persist depends on the early identification of serious and violent individuals and the risks, needs and protective factors that facilitate such identification:

- **Risk factors** are characteristics of youth or their circumstances that increase the likelihood they will engage in delinquency.
- **Needs factors** (i.e., dynamic risk factors) are risk factors that can be changed, and, if changed, could reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in delinquency.
- **Protective factors** are characteristics of youth or their circumstances that can protect youth from engaging in criminal behavior.

This publication summarizes Bulletin 4: Prediction and Risk/Needs Assessment by Robert D. Hoge, Gina Vincent and Laura Guy, NCJ 242934, available at NCJRS.gov. Bulletin 4 is one in a series of bulletins prepared for Transitions From Juvenile to Adult: Papers From the Study Group on Transitions From Juvenile Delinquency to Adult Crime. The study group was led by David Farrington and Rolf Loeber under award number 2008-IJ-CX-K402; to learn more, visit NIJ.gov, keyword "Transitions to Adulthood." This summary was written by Carrie Mulford, a Social Science Analyst at NIJ. See full bulletin for source citations.

Risk assessments are relevant to a range of decisions, from precharge diversion to sentencing and disposition. Selecting a risk assessment tool depends on the nature of the decision. For example, pretrial detention decisions often require an estimate of how likely a youth will be to commit a violent offense in the short term.

Decisions with longer term impact, such as disposition, case planning and management, call for an assessment of the individual's criminogenic needs as well as risk and protective factors.

Standardized Assessment Tools

A number of standardized and validated procedures have been developed to help practitioners collect and synthesize information about an individual and thus yield estimates of the individual's risks and needs.

Several types of procedures are available:

- In **unstructured clinical assessments**, practitioners form judgments about a youth's level of risk based on their subjective interpretation of information collected in an unstructured manner.
- In **actuarial decision-making**, practitioners make risk predictions based on a statistical formula that includes only historical measures and factors that do not change over time.

- **Static/dynamic actuarial measures** incorporate both static and dynamic risk factors (i.e., needs factors) that are known to be associated empirically with later offending. Practitioners can use these tools for reassessment and for planning interventions. They often include an override procedure at the final risk level to account for idiosyncratic factors that may affect an individual's risk level but not the overall score.
- Using **structured professional judgment**, practitioners impose structure on risk factors that should be considered and how they should be measured. How factors are combined is left to the discretion of the practitioner conducting the evaluation.

Research consistently demonstrates that standardized assessments, whether based on actuarial measures or structured professional judgment, better predict future behavior than unstructured clinical assessments.

Comparing Risk Assessment Tools

Twelve standardized instruments used in assessing risk — six applicable to youth and six to adults — are reviewed at length in *Bulletin 4: Prediction and Risk/Needs Assessment* (NCJ 242934), available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov>. Studies that compared the aggregate predictive validity of various actuarial and structured professional judgment tools indicated that neither approach has a definitive, consistent advantage in predicting who will reoffend.

Tools developed to assess risk and predict later offending among offending populations have progressed to where they are useful to the criminal and juvenile justice communities. Whether these tools maintain their predictive accuracy during different developmental periods, however, is unknown.

To address this gap, researchers conducted a preliminary investigation into the validity of tools for assessing risk at different periods between late adolescence and early adulthood (18 to 29 years). They found that tools demonstrating accurate predictive validity maintain that accuracy regardless of the developmental period in which reoffending occurred. For young offenders who were first assessed during adolescence, risk assessment tools predicted reoffending during early adulthood at least as well as

during adolescence. In addition, adult risk assessment tools conducted during early adulthood adequately predicted reoffending during this period.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The research provides some important guidelines for practitioners and policymakers:

- Based on what we know from the mental health, psychopathy and personality disorder fields, any risk assessment tool for youth should contain specific risk factors. These include impulsivity, remorselessness, callousness or lack of emotion, inconsistent or lax discipline, and the early onset of violence. The relevance of these risk factors, however, to the onset and continuation of offending in early adulthood is not well-established.

Factors associated with the onset of or desistance from criminal activity are not the same throughout the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Programs and approaches that are effective for adolescents may not be effective for those who begin offending in early adulthood.

- Most communities offer little assistance to individuals ages 17-21 who have shifted out of the juvenile services system. Providing counseling and other services related to substance abuse, employment and relationship issues arising during this period could ease the transition and help individuals avoid potential problems.

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