

# To Monitor Changing Risks and Needs, Repeat Assessments of Young Offenders Over Time.

## SUMMARY

Valid, practical screening and assessment tools are now available to evaluate juvenile offenders' risks for future criminal involvement and their case-management needs. Analyses from the Pathways study show that these risks and needs change significantly over time, influenced by how an adolescent's life unfolds. This suggests a two-part system for managing risk in young offenders:

1. Conduct periodic assessments throughout a youth's contact with the system. This will not merely help identify offenders most likely to harm the community; it will also identify changes in risk and intervention needs as the youth progresses through the system.
2. Match interventions to the youth's current risks and needs, so the most intensive interventions can be targeted at those with the greatest risk. Getting the right services to the right adolescents and families should help change the factors that lead adolescents to offend and promote positive development.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Juvenile justice systems should conduct ongoing assessments of adolescents' risks for reoffending and their case-management needs.

## Assessing adolescents' risks and needs is essential to an effective juvenile justice system.

The essential functions of juvenile justice, from intake to disposition, require "sorting" adolescents according to their risk of reoffending and types of interventions that should reduce that risk.

This stems from the court's efforts to follow three basic principles that are widely accepted in the field:

- **Do no harm.** The system should avoid intervening in the lives of adolescents when such involvement would be detrimental to the youth and would not increase public safety.
- **Focus on those adolescents most likely to continue offending.** The most intensive interventions should be directed at offenders most likely to do continued harm to the community.
- **Get the right services to the right adolescents and families.** Social services and other interventions should aim to help youth and parents change the factors that lead adolescents to offend and promote positive development in the process.

Meeting these challenges would produce a more efficient and effective juvenile justice system and would promote greater public safety in the long run.<sup>1</sup> However, each requires sorting adolescents according to the risks they pose for reoffending or rearrest, and determining what interventions they need to reduce that risk. Moreover, those assessments must be done at various points of contact with the juvenile justice system:

- At the front end, it is important to identify adolescents with a low likelihood of reoffending, in order to limit their penetration into the system and to connect them with appropriate community-based services when needed.
- Probation officials, who have limited resources for supervision and services, need to focus on those adolescents who, without those services, are most likely to have further involvement in the justice system.
- Judges need to order institutional placement for adolescents who present significant public safety concerns and who would benefit from a particular institutional environment.

### **Good assessment tools are available.**

Over the last few decades, researchers have developed valid, practical screening and assessment instruments to evaluate juvenile offenders' risks and needs. Several of them—like the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Revised YLS/CMI)<sup>2</sup> and the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY)<sup>3</sup>—have been widely endorsed by juvenile justice professionals.<sup>4</sup>

Instruments like these gauge the risk of future criminal involvement using research-based indicators of an adolescent's likelihood to be re-arrested or to continue offending. The indicators include both fixed items such as the youth's age at first arrest, and potentially changing aspects of life like the level of antisocial peer influence. Some instruments also identify protective factors, such as a supportive family, that could guide case management and make interventions more successful.<sup>5</sup> These scales allow for ratings that, taken together, not only provide an estimate of the chances of future offending but also identify factors that can be addressed and changed through interventions, thus reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

### **The goal is not to predict risk, but to manage it.**

The introduction of valid methods for risk/need assessment has promoted a more nuanced and fluid view of continued offending and juvenile justice involvement. Service providers are now able to think about a shift from *predicting* risk to *managing* risk in individuals with a higher likelihood of future involvement in crime or violence.

This approach says that risk of reoffending is determined by both pre-existing, *static* characteristics of the adolescent at the time of their involvement with the justice system, and changing, *dynamic* factors in their current and future lives. It recognizes that how an adolescent's life unfolds on a number of fronts might raise or lower their risk of future offending as measured at any given point in time. A current designation of an adolescent as "high risk" or "low risk" does not necessarily mean that a future assessment will produce

the same conclusion. Aspects of their lives may change for better or worse, and an assessment including dynamic factors therefore has a limited “shelf life.”

This more dynamic view of risk for future offending implies that adolescents need to be reassessed periodically while under supervision of the court. But periodic assessments alone are insufficient if they are not matched with interventions that address current risks and needs. To work effectively over time with an adolescent at high risk for reoffending, juvenile justice professionals need to know which dynamic risk factors have changed and where intervention efforts should be focused to reduce ongoing risk.

This approach to risk management makes good theoretical sense. It offers a framework for allocating social service resources to meet the needs of adolescents as well as the mandate for community safety. But before we have a blueprint for implementing this highly regarded reform, some basic questions need to be answered. We don’t yet know, for example, how much dynamic risk factors change over time, or to what extent these changes are related to continued offending. Relatively little work has been done so far on these basic issues, though what has been done is promising. For example, one group has shown that consideration of dynamic risk factors improves the overall performance of risk assessment instruments with juvenile offenders,<sup>6</sup> and another has shown that interventions targeted to identified dynamic risk factors can reduce rearrest.<sup>7</sup>

**Pathways findings support the idea that risk factors change significantly over time, even among serious adolescent offenders.**

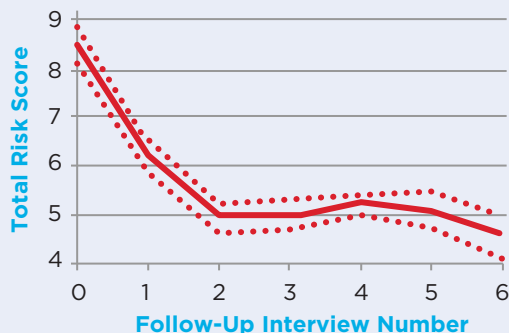
The Pathways to Desistance study provides an opportunity to address some questions about dynamic risk factors. The study followed 1,354 serious adolescent offenders in two metropolitan areas, conducting regular interviews over seven years—a time span that allows for ongoing reassessment of many of the factors that could be considered dynamic risk indicators. The study’s findings support the current efforts to implement dynamic risk assessment in juvenile justice.

To address issues related to dynamic risk, investigators used the Pathways data sets to construct risk indicators that mimicked those used in the most widely used risk assessment instrument, the YLS/CMI. They chose measures from the Pathways interviews that addressed the domains of interest in the YLS/CMI scales, and used them to generate a risk score for each subject every six months until they reached the age of 18 (the cut-off age for the YLS/CMI). To take one example, they used Pathways measures of parental monitoring and parental warmth/hostility to generate a score that is parallel to the YLS/CMI “Family” score. The process was not meant to replicate a completed YLS/CMI assessment; rather, it was a method for giving each Pathways youth a risk score in each of the matched domains. (The scoring method used was different from that used by the YLS/CMI; rather than an indication of the presence/absence of particular indicators, the Pathways scores reflect elevated risk relative to other Pathways study participants.)

Several relevant findings have emerged from the analyses done so far:

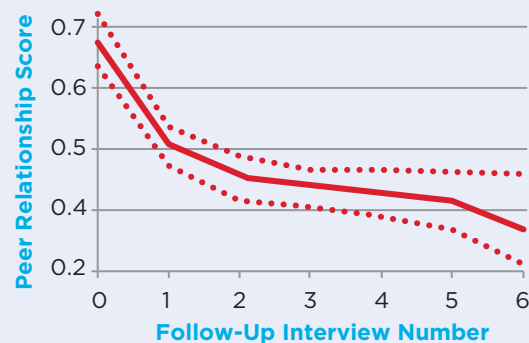
- Risk scores for adolescents in the Pathways study changed over time.** The scores generally depart more from the baseline with each successive interview, as would be expected if the scores are capturing dynamic risk and if changes on these indicators are occurring over time. It is notable that this shift takes place in a sample of serious adolescent offenders, where one might expect that many of the factors getting a youth to the deep end of the juvenile system are already “set.” That does not appear to be the case.
- Overall risk scores decrease over time.** The calculated risk scores at each follow-up interview generally decrease as time passes. Figure 1 shows the general curve of change in the sample over the successive waves of interviews, with the dotted line indicating the boundaries where 95 percent of the sample falls. The pattern is clearly for adolescents to be at decreased risk over time, indicating possibly less need for close supervision and intensive interventions. (More work is needed to explore the changes in the shape of the curve, which may be influenced by changes in the sample at each time point.)

**FIGURE 1: Change in Risk Scores over Time**

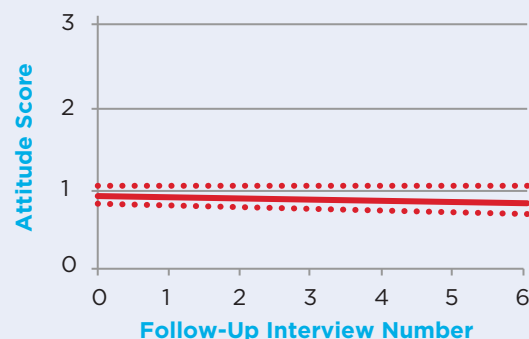


- Some domains change more than others.** Though all of the domains in which risk was assessed are considered “dynamic,” not all of them changed in the same way over time. Risk scores in domains that are most likely to change in adolescence, such as the influence of antisocial peers, showed the most change before age 18, while those in more stable domains, such as antisocial attitudes (for example, callousness, lying, and cynicism) showed little movement. Figures 2 and 3 below show the pattern of change for these two examples. The differences suggest that some domains may have more potential for positive change over this period.

**FIGURE 2: Change in Risk Scores for “Peer Relationships” Domain**



**FIGURE 3: Change in Risk Scores for “Attitude” Domain**



### More refined assessment of risk/need is key for building a more effective juvenile justice system.

As pointed out earlier, an effective juvenile justice system must be able to address the right cases with the right form of intervention at the right time in the lives of the adolescents. Determining what is “right” in each case will require ongoing evaluation of the risk and case-management needs of adolescents under court supervision. Considerable progress has been made in the tools to assess risk and need, and court systems across the country are already adopting these methods widely.

The next challenge for the system is to determine how to use the assessments to inform practice. The Pathways study results presented here are a promising beginning; they show that shifts in dynamic risk are a reality, even for serious adolescent offenders over their juvenile careers. Now investigators need to demonstrate how much these shifts are related to rearrest, other outcomes, and court interventions.

It is possible to envision a court system where ongoing, sophisticated risk/need assessments are used to determine what type and intensity of intervention is most appropriate for a young offender, to track his or her progress in the community or an institution, and to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention. Such a system would both benefit the adolescents in the system and increase the effectiveness of the court and service providers. The work being done today is the first, critical step toward achieving this vision.

### FURTHER READING

[Improving Professional Judgments of Risk and Amenability in Juvenile Justice](#), by Edward P. Mulvey and Anne-Marie R. Iselin, 2008.

[Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Implementation](#), by Gina M. Vincent, Laura S. Guy, and Thomas Grisso, 2012.

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The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders as they transition from adolescence into early adulthood. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in partnership with federal and state agencies and other foundations. For more information, contact Carol Schubert at [schubertca@upmc.edu](mailto:schubertca@upmc.edu), or visit the Pathways website, [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu).

Suggested Citation: Mulvey, E.P. and Schubert, C.A. (2014). *To Monitor Changing Risks and Needs, Repeat Assessments of Young Offenders Over Time*. Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation.

**Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice**, launched in 2004, is a multi-state initiative working to guide and accelerate advances in juvenile justice, to make systems more fair, effective, rational, and developmentally appropriate.

The **Resource Center Partnership** is expanding the reach of the *Models for Change* initiative—its lessons, best practices, and knowledge built over a decade of work—to more local communities and states. The Partnership provides practitioners and policymakers with technical assistance, trainings, tools, and resources for juvenile justice reform.



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Juvenile justice systems should conduct ongoing assessments of adolescents' risks and needs and integrate this information into practice.



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