

## Assessing Juvenile Offenders

The juvenile justice system has two primary goals: crime reduction and rehabilitation. Every day, juvenile justice officials must assess whether youthful offenders are likely to commit crimes in the future and whether they can benefit from interventions. These complicated questions must often be answered with minimal information and within a limited time frame.

The Juvenile Justice volume of *Future of Children* proposes that juvenile justice officials could do their job of rehabilitation and crime reduction/prevention more efficiently and effectively if they utilized advanced assessment tools. Assessment tools designed by researchers can be used to reliably determine the likely future course for juvenile delinquents—their likelihood to offend in the future and potential responsiveness to treatment. However, while such tools do exist, the juvenile justice system has yet to take advantage of their availability. Instead the tools used by the system are often not grounded in science—resulting in decisions that are often idiosyncratic.

### *Clinical and Actuarial Methods*

There are two classes of assessment tools currently employed by the justice system. The most common are “clinical methods,” unstructured approaches accounting for the youth’s personal characteristics and circumstances. Clinical methods allow for a flexible, individualized approach to decision making that, when done correctly, is more complex and accommodating of differences among the people being assessed. The downside of clinical methods is that they are time consuming and are impacted by the experience and interpretation of the professional making the judgment.

In contrast, “actuarial methods” are structured tools that have been proven reliable and valid by social science in predicting the likelihood of a particular event happening in the future, such as re-offending. The benefit of using proven actuarial methods is that they are quick, easy to administer, less subject to bias, and able to be standardized. However, critics of actuarial methods complain that they are rigid, fail to account for individual circumstances, and cannot provide the nuance and depth that a clinical method can. Moreover, the actuarial tools used in the real world are often not the effective instruments promoted by experts but rather are tools of unproven reliability or validity.

Clinical and actuarial methods address two sides of the decision-making coin. In order to capitalize on the advantages of each method, a combination of clinical and actuarial methods, termed “structured judgment,” is the ideal. In order to implement structured judgment in a way that is most effective, several guidelines are proposed.

### *Identification and Targeting*

- Proven actuarial methods should be used to screen and identify at detention and intake youth who are in need of a more in-depth clinical assessment in the areas of risk for future violence, re-offending, and need and motivation for treatment. For example, once youth with the potential need for mental health services are identified using an actuarial approach, the appropriate professional can provide a more comprehensive clinical assessment. This information can then be used to target specific interventions or sanctions toward youth who need them most. Numerous proven actuarial rating systems, such as the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY), Antisocial Process Screening Device, and Treatment Motivation Questionnaire (TMQ) are currently available.
- Both clinical and actuarial assessments must be updated frequently. Due to teens' continuing development across adolescence, youth are "moving targets." The teen that is impulsive, defiant, and easily influenced by peers at age fourteen may have outgrown these tendencies by seventeen. Assessments must be updated often or they may be inaccurate and unhelpful in decision making.

#### *Consistency and Accessibility*

- Structured judgment approaches are most effective when they are used consistently and employ universal standards and policies for using the information in the decision-making process. For example, if an actuarial method such as a self-report questionnaire is universally administered but its findings are discounted if the findings do not support the clinical judgment of the professional, the tool is no longer useful. Similarly, if recommendations for treatment resulting from an in-depth clinical assessment are not followed, then the clinical approach becomes equally ineffective.
- In order to maximize the usefulness of any structured judgment approach, the needed information should be readily available to the professional. Ability to gather confirmatory information—such as a youth's grades and school attendance, compliance with treatment or probation, or substance use history—is especially important when attempting to assess youth who may not always be forthcoming with needed information. For example, when conducting an in-depth assessment of risk for future offending, the professional must have the ability to access information from multiple informants—family, other professionals that work with the teen—in order to make an informed clinical judgment. Inability to access such information impedes the professional's ability to make appropriate recommendations.

#### *Accountability and Effectiveness*

- Actuarial tools can also be used to follow the progress of youth who are receiving a particular intervention or who are in various types of placements, including residential treatment, foster care, group homes, or incarceration. This information can then be used to inform future decisions by the court regarding the disposition

of the youth. For example, both the judge overseeing a case and the clinician providing services can make a more informed decision about discharge if the particular youth's progress in meeting treatment goals is tracked and measured by validated tools.

- Over time, charting the progress of youth can serve two additional purposes. First, it provides the judge with a ruler to measure the effectiveness of a particular service provider or intervention. Second, it requires that the service provider demonstrate that the needed services are actually delivered.

### *Conclusion*

Implementing structured judgment has many advantages. First, it serves to streamline the decision-making process within the juvenile justice system, increasing efficiency. Second, structured judgment allows the justice system to effectively identify and target appropriate interventions or sanctions to those youth who need them most, increasing effectiveness and decreasing waste by lowering the number of youth who are incarcerated or treated unnecessarily. Finally, treatment providers are held accountable for providing the requested services and demonstrating their effectiveness, allowing for ineffective interventions to be identified and reworked or discontinued.

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