Research and Resource Companion for High-Risk Youth and Challenging Cases Bench Cards

Overview and How to Use this Guide

Judges, policymakers, and communities are increasingly concerned about youth crime and violence. In response, some decision-makers are adopting sanctions-heavy approaches that are not shown to improve public safety. Judges play a critical role in identifying truly high-risk youth and applying timely, research-based dispositional decisions and interventions to reduce reoffending. They also need evidence-based strategies for cases when youth are struggling to comply with their probation conditions and/or make consistent treatment progress.

This research summary complements the "Judicial Decision-Making for High-Risk Youth" and "How Courts Can Best Support Post-Dispositional Success for Challenging Delinquency Cases" bench cards, offering a research "cheat sheet," brief summaries with references, and additional resources to help judges and other court stakeholders apply proven practices, supported by training and implementation tools.

What Research Shows

Identifying Youth's Risk to Public Safety and Assessing Case Progress

1. Risk predicts likelihood of reoffending, not the seriousness of the offense.

- The severity of a youth's offense is not a strong indicator of the future likelihood of offending.[1]
- "High risk" means a youth is at high risk of committing another delinquent offense. Risk levels predict *the likelihood* of future offenses, not their *severity*. Youth may have a high risk to reoffend without a high risk to commit violent or serious offenses.[2]

LOW

Youth assessed as **low risk** are unlikely to reoffend even with no intervention. The justice system should divert or handle these young people informally and minimize supervision and services.[3]

MODERATE

Youth assessed as **moderate risk** have some likelihood of reoffending. Risk factors should be matched to targeted services, with some monitoring.[4]

HIGH

Youth assessed as **high risk** are likely to reoffend *if there are no interventions*. These youth should receive high-intensity services and case management.*

This does not mean these youth must be confined to protect public safety; consider whether well-matched resources exist in the community.[5]

2. Mental health is an important consideration but needs to be addressed appropriately.

- Youth who are at high risk to reoffend do not necessarily have mental health issues, and having serious mental health issues does not make youth high risk to reoffend.[6] However, among youth in juvenile justice settings, those with mental health needs tend to have higher levels of risk factors than their peers.[7]
- Providing mental health treatment to youth with mental health needs does not lead to lower recidivism but is important for addressing their mental health issues and for ensuring they can fully participate in and benefit from risk-reduction services.[8]
- Treating risk factors *and* mental health issues results in the most significant recidivism reduction for high-risk youth with mental health needs.[9]

3. Protective factors are important responsivity factors.

- Protective factors increase the likelihood of success (reduce the risk of recidivism) especially in high-risk cases.[10]
- Protective factors can also be leveraged to increase successful completion of programming.[11]
- The protective factors with the most impact on reducing reoffending include self-control, self-efficacy, prosocial engagements (sense of purpose, school connectedness for younger youth), and social support from caregivers.[12]

4. Validated risk, strengths, and needs screening and assessment tools work; professional judgment alone isn't reliable.

- Risk of reoffending is best measured through validated risk assessment tools, rather than professional judgment alone. They are also more equitable.[13]
- These assessments include static risk factors, unchangeable elements like a youth's prior offenses, and dynamic risk factors, which are changeable.[14] Dynamic risk factors include disruptive behavior problems (personality/behavior); substance misuse; family/lack of parental monitoring; negative peer influences; attitudes supporting crime; employment and education; and use of leisure time.[15]
- The most risk reduction occurs by targeting the following dynamic risk factors: disruptive behavior problems; family/lack of parental monitoring; negative peer influence; and attitudes supporting crime.[16]
- Mental health and trauma screening is also important for identifying youth with additional needs to effectively match them to appropriate services that complement risk-reduction services.[17]

5. High-risk youth frequently do not receive the appropriate service or the right "dosage" of those services.[18]

- Juvenile justice systems should reassess high-risk youth at key intervals and prioritize case planning based on a youth's driving factors to ensure not only the right service but the right dosage and that those services are evidence based for this population and high quality.[19]

What Works (and What Doesn't) to Reduce Risk of Reoffending and How to Respond When Things Aren't Going Well

6. One-size-fits-all responses and services do not significantly reduce recidivism and can cause harm.[20]

- Adolescents are impulsive, risk-seeking, and don't consider long-term consequences.[21]
- Probation conditions, such as daily school attendance, are static and absolute; adolescents are inconsistent, and their behavior improvements will not be linear.[22]

7. Surveillance by itself doesn't help.

- High-risk youth should receive more intensive supervision and services, but supervision alone has little to no impact on reoffending, and intensive surveillance can increase recidivism and violations.[23]

8. Targeted services reduce recidivism.

- Services that target high-risk youth's individual dynamic risk factors are most effective at reducing recidivism.[24] Dispositional decisions for high-risk youth should reflect their individual risk of reoffending, protective factors and strengths,[25] dynamic risk factors as measured by a validated risk assessment, and any mental health needs as measured by a validated mental health screening and assessment.
- Research has shown that services such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy, and skill-building activities can reduce recidivism for high-risk youth[26] by targeting the dynamic risk factors[27] most strongly associated with serious offending.
- Key violence prevention and intervention strategies with promising evidence for reducing recidivism and violence among high-risk youth, when combined with risk-reduction services, include credible messengers, restorative justice,[28] and violence interrupters.[29]
- Research shows that youth of color are less likely to be referred for treatment-oriented or strength-based services than their White peers.[30]
- Younger youth may require different recidivism-reduction strategies than youth ages 16 or 17.[31]

9. Extensive probation conditions don't increase compliance or behavior change.[32]

- Traditional approaches to probation conditions don't hold youth accountable or address the underlying causes of youth's behavior. To improve public safety and reduce recidivism, conditions should be limited in number and written in developmentally appropriate language.[33]
- Research has shown a negative relationship between the number of conditions and successful compliance—adolescents in particular struggle to keep track of long lists of requirements.[34]
- Youth (and families) often don't understand probation conditions and related court orders that are written using legalese, vague terms, and academic language.[35]
- Research has shown that youth of color are often subject to a greater number of conditions, as well as more punitive and less "positive" conditions than their White peers, such as increased drug testing requirements and decreased access to restorative justice opportunities.[36]

10. Timely, proportional, graduated incentive-based responses are more effective than punitive ones.

- When youth are struggling to meet the goals in their case plan, incentives, graduated responses, and restorative practices are more effective than punitive sanctions, including detention, probation extensions, fines and fees, or more restrictive probation conditions.[37]

11. Longer supervision does not lead to better outcomes.

- In most cases, extending time in placement beyond 6–9 months and on probation beyond 6–12 months does not reduce reoffending and often has diminishing returns and creates more potential for violations.[38]

12. Placement should be rare.

- Research has consistently shown that, in most instances, placement is an ineffective public safety strategy—youth who are incarcerated are more likely to reoffend, commit felony offenses, and less likely to graduate from high school than similar peers who are served in the community.[39]
- Research also consistently shows a correlation between residential placement and greater likelihood of adult criminal justice system involvement,[40] as well as a higher likelihood to reoffend than youth in community programs.[41] There is also a much greater financial cost for out-of-home placements than community programs.[42]
- Even for high-risk youth, detention and post-dispositional placement should only be used when public safety is at imminent risk—as assessed by a validated risk/detention screening assessment—or youth have such intensive behavioral health needs that they require stabilization.[43]
- Institutional placement has diminishing returns for reduced risk and public safety after 6–9 months.[44]
- Research has shown that Black youth are three times more likely to be incarcerated in state custody for a technical violation than White youth.[45]

13. Youth need to be treated fairly.

- Adolescents are more likely to participate and buy into court, supervision, and service processes if they feel they have been treated fairly (procedural justice).[46]
- Treating youth (and families) fairly includes protecting due process rights, ensuring access to counsel throughout the case,[47] and giving them the opportunity to shape supervision and service decisions.
- Research has shown that youth of color are often wrongly perceived as less remorseful and more individually culpable—as opposed to being influenced by external factors—than their White peers.[48]

14. Avoid transfer to adult court.

- Youth in the juvenile justice system are less likely to recidivate than youth transferred to adult court.[49]
- Research has shown that youth of color are more likely than White youth to be transferred to adult court for similar offenses.[50] Black youth face an adultification bias in which they are viewed as older and more culpable than their White counterparts, resulting in disproportionately harsher outcomes, including a higher likelihood of interaction with adult criminal courts.[51]
- Youth in adult facilities experience higher levels of victimization than in juvenile facilities.[52]

Additional Resources and Support

Below are some of the top additional resources available on these topics.

Breaking the Rules: Rethinking Condition Setting and Enforcement in Juvenile Probation
(CSG Justice Center)

Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System
(CSG Justice Center)

Desktop Guide to Good Juvenile Probation Practice
(NCJJ and NCJFCJ)

Enhanced Juvenile Justice Guidelines
(NCJFCJ)

Pathways to Desistance
(National Institute of Justice)

The Role of the Judge in Transforming Juvenile Probation
(NCJFCJ)

Youth Protective Factors Study
(UMASS Chan Medical School)

National Youth Screening and Assessment Partners

Additionally, judges should understand foundational research and best practices related to the following:

Adolescent Development

Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR)

Validated Screening and Assessment Tools

Youth Due Process Rights

Effective Case Planning

Programs and Services

Youth and Family Engagement

Racial and Ethnic Disparities

Procedural Justice

For additional information, and support on these and other topics, please contact **Christina Gilbert** (*cgilbert@csg.org*) at **The Council of State Governments Justice Center** and **Hunter Hurst** (*hhurst@ncjfcj.org*) at the **National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges**.

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28. Lawrence W. Sherman and Heather Strang, *Restorative Justice: The Evidence* (London: The Smith Institute, 2007), https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/RJ_full_report.pdf.
29. Josh Weber, *Restorative Justice Practices and Credible Messengers: Promising, Innovative Approaches for Improving Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024) https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/restorative-justice-practices-and-credible-messengers-promising-innovative-approaches-for-improving-outcomes-for-youth-in-the-juvenile-justice-system; See also Gina Vincent, "What works with youth? Effective use of science to assess risk, improve outcomes, and enhance public safety," PowerPoint presentation, Courting Judicial Excellence Juvenile Justice Judicial Training Institute, Austin, Texas, August 20, 2025. Top-tier services that reduce violence among youth include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and its variants, multisystemic therapy (MST), multidimensional family therapy (MDFT), and functional family therapy (FFT). Other services that have been evaluated and proven effective include high second-tier rating: "Parenting with Love and Limits," "Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America," dialectical behavior therapy (DBT); low second-tier rating: multidimensional treatment foster care, brief strategic family therapy, parent management training).
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