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Juvenile Justice System Improvement: Implementing an Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform

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I. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the juvenile justice system in the United States has benefited from the tremendous growth in knowledge about effective policy and practice. Since the mid-1990s, we have seen the development of the components of an evidence-based decision-making platform, consisting of validated risk and needs assessment tools, structured decision-making tools to assist in the better matching of the needs of youth involved in the juvenile justice system with the correct level of supervision and types of services, and evidence-based programs and services. Today, that knowledge is readily available to policy makers and practitioners, with the challenge being to support jurisdictions in incorporating the components holistically into the operation of their juvenile justice systems.

This report draws on the experiences of jurisdictions that have worked to integrate these tools and practices into a platform for juvenile justice decision-making through two demonstration programs--the Juvenile Justice Systems Improvement Project (JJSIP) and the Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative (JJRRI). These jurisdictions have made significant progress in bringing the tenets of JJSIP and JJRRI to life in their communities and juvenile justice systems. It is our hope that the implementation experiences this report captures will help others to follow in their footsteps. It is our belief that the core tenets of JJSIP and JJRRI are at the heart of what juvenile justice systems across the country will look like in the future – and that the youth and families they serve will be better off as a result.

The report, therefore, is organized to help the reader understand the background of the initiatives and their essential elements. It draws on site experiences to depict key principles and implementation issues that can inform any effort by a jurisdiction to create an evidence-based decision-making platform. It demonstrates that successful implementation of an evidence-based platform requires an array of systems supports, including strong leadership, workforce development, data collection and analysis, partnership, communication, cooperation, and ongoing attention to quality assurance. In that regard, it should serve as a guide for agency leaders contemplating aligning their system improvement efforts with both JJSIP and JJRRI. In short, it is our hope that this report will provide foundational information about what a system leader needs to consider related to readiness for this type of system improvement effort.

II. Research on Ways to Improve the Juvenile Justice System

In 1993 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) published its *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders* (Wilson and Howell, 1993), a framework for integrating community-based prevention, immediate interventions, and institutional and aftercare services designed to reduce the risk factors

that contribute to delinquent behavior. Along with its comprehensive perspective, this framework was notable for its reliance on available research to identify ways in which the performance of juvenile justice systems could be improved with associated benefits for the youth served and the safety of the residents in their communities.

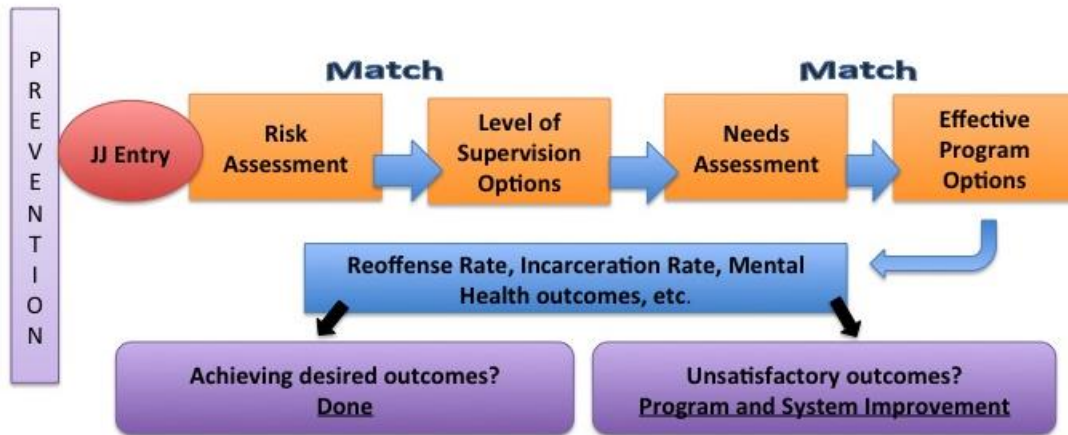
In the two and a half decades since the publication of the *Comprehensive Strategy*, there has been accelerated growth in the body of research evidence with actionable implications for juvenile justice systems. The results of longitudinal studies of children and youth have delineated the pathways to delinquency and identified multiple risk factors predictive of later antisocial behavior, some of which can be addressed as criminogenic needs to reduce that risk. Studies of the profiles of youth who enter the juvenile justice system have shown that a majority of offenses are committed by a comparatively small number of serious, violent, or chronic offenders. Evaluation research of interventions with juvenile offenders has discovered a number of programs that are effective in reducing recidivism, especially for high-risk offenders, and meta-analyses of those studies have highlighted the program characteristics most strongly associated with positive and, in some cases, negative effects on later offending. Other research focused on level of supervision has revealed that many high-risk offenders can be treated effectively in community-based programs and, further, that confinement for extended periods of time can exacerbate delinquent behavior.

Equally important has been the further development of structured decision-making tools that are based in this research. These tools allow juvenile justice practitioners to use the extensive body of relevant research to design and implement effective service delivery models and programs and efficiently allocate scarce resources, without requiring practitioners to have deep knowledge about that research. Among these tools are risk and needs assessment instruments that can guide decisions about the level of supervision proportionate to youth risk for further delinquency and the criminogenic needs most appropriate for intervention programs to address. The expected effectiveness of those programs for reducing recidivism, in turn, can be assessed with the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP™) that compares key features of the respective programs with those found in evaluation research to be most strongly associated with positive effects on recidivism. Identified shortfalls in that comparison can inform efforts to improve the effectiveness of those programs as part of a continuous improvement effort. Further, risk and program information can be brought together in a disposition matrix tailored to each juvenile justice system and designed to gauge the level of supervision and services likely to produce the best outcomes for each youth managed in that system.

There is currently great interest among juvenile justice practitioners and policy makers in using this large body of available research and the associated decision-making tools to improve youth outcomes, enhance public safety, and control costs. The most progressive juvenile justice systems are integrating these tools into an evidence-based platform that supports decisions aimed at increasing the probability of favorable outcomes at every stage as youth move through the system. As depicted in the diagram shown below (Figure 1), this platform integrates the best available decision-making tools to

Figure 1

An Evidence-Based Platform for Juvenile Justice Decision-Making



ensure that each youth who enters the juvenile justice system is screened using a standardized risk and needs assessment tool, matched to the appropriate level of supervision based on his/her risk to re-offend, matched to services based on the criminogenic needs identified during his/her assessment, and provided with program options that are effective in reducing recidivism. In addition, ongoing evaluation of the decision-making process helps to determine whether the platform is leading to the desired outcomes (e.g., reduced recidivism) and identifies potential areas for program and system improvement.

III. Two Demonstration Programs Focused on Implementing an Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform

In recent years, two separate demonstration programs—the Juvenile Justice Systems Improvement Project (JJSIP) and the Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative (JJRRI)—have focused on helping states and local jurisdictions develop and implement comprehensive, evidence-based, decision-making platforms to improve youth outcomes, protect public safety, and reduce system costs.

A. *The Juvenile Justice Systems Improvement Project*

In 2011, Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) solicited proposals from states interested in receiving intensive training and technical assistance (TA) to implement the components of an evidence-based decision-making platform in a demonstration jurisdiction (i.e., a city or county) within their states. The proposed

evidence-based platform incorporated use of the structured decision-making tools discussed in the *Comprehensive Strategy* (e.g., risk and needs assessment and disposition matrices) with the implementation of the SPEP™. The project aimed to help site teams improve outcomes for youth in the justice system through better identification of youth risk and needs, better matching of youth to supervision and services, improved services through the use of the SPEP™, more efficient use of resources, and reduced levels of risk and recidivism. Led by CJJR, the TA team included partners from the Comprehensive Strategy Group and Vanderbilt University's Peabody Research Institute, which developed the SPEP™. In addition, researchers from Georgetown University were designated to conduct a process evaluation of the project.

Following a rigorous screening process to determine the implementation readiness of each applicant,¹ the TA team selected four project sites--Arizona, Connecticut, Florida and Pennsylvania. Teams from each of the selected sites participated in a one-week intensive training on the evidence-based platform funded by OJJDP. The sites then contracted individually with CJJR for an additional 18 months of TA to help with implementation of the structured decision-making tools, the use of the SPEP™, and the alignment of local and state policies and practices to support evidence-based decision-making. The sites identified inter-disciplinary teams of juvenile justice practitioners and stakeholders to oversee implementation and agreed to provide the leadership, organizational support, and staffing necessary to implement the platform.

By the end of the 18-month contract period in January 2013, several of the JJSIP sites had begun to see improvement in the operation of their juvenile justice systems. Since then, most of the sites have extended their contracts with CJJR or Vanderbilt University to continue to receive TA to help them implement, refine, and evaluate components of their evidence-based platforms.

B. The Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative

In 2012, OJJDP issued a request for proposals to “provide funds to three state and/or local administering agencies for juvenile justice to develop and implement an integrated set of evidence-based and cost-measurement tools that will enable them to make informed decisions about resources and services for justice-involved youth.”² This multi-year initiative aimed to determine whether the systematic use of these tools would help grantees “realign services and costs and ensure the provision of the right services, for the right youth, for the right duration of time.”³ Funding for the program, entitled the Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Demonstration Program (also known as

¹ To be deemed ready for JJSIP implementation, sites needed to show evidence of the following: 1) a history of juvenile justice reforms, 2) commitment to quality systems improvements, 3) an existing validated risk assessment instrument in at least the demonstration county/jurisdiction, with progress being made to expand the risk assessment statewide, 4) a needs assessment procedure in place, 5) the capacity to collect the data required for the SPEP™ scoring, 6) a basic framework for a continuum of graduated sanctions/services, and 7) the willingness to use research to maximize program outcomes and inform future funding decisions.

² *OJJDP FY 2012 Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Demonstration Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, July 24, 2012), 3.

³ *Ibid.*

JJRRI), came from the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation (the Partnership Fund).

Three sites--the state of Delaware, the state of Iowa (for implementation in three judicial districts), and Milwaukee County, Wisconsin--received JJRRI funding. As a condition of the awards, OJJDP required that the sites contract with CJJR and its subcontractor, Vanderbilt University, for training and TA to help site teams implement the components of their evidence-based decision-making platforms. Mirroring the JJSIP platform, the JJRRI platform included the use of validated risk and needs tools to assess youth in the juvenile justice system, matching of youth to supervision and services, implementation of the SPEPTM and related program improvement, and the alignment of juvenile justice policies and practices to ensure effective implementation of the structured decision-making tools. Also, like JJSIP, JJRRI required that sites develop inter-disciplinary teams composed of juvenile justice practitioners and stakeholders to guide and support implementation of their evidence-based platforms.

But JJRRI differed from JJSIP in several ways. First, unlike JJSIP, which was largely funded with state funds, JJRRI was federally funded. Second, OJJDP required that JJRRI grantees identify a full-time project coordinator. Third, OJJDP assumed full responsibility for selecting the JJRRI sites. Finally, OJJDP contracted separately with the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center to conduct a process evaluation of the SPEPTM implementation in the JJRRI sites⁴ and an outcome evaluation to determine if improving services using the SPEPTM was associated with reduced recidivism and improved cost effectiveness and efficiency.

By the end of the four-year grant period, all three JJRRI sites had successfully implemented a number of the components of their proposed evidence-based decision-making platforms. To date, each site remains committed to using state and local resources to sustain and refine the platforms they developed under JJRRI.

IV. The Components of the Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform

This section provides an overview of the structured decision-making tools and practices that have been implemented in the JJSIP and JJRRI sites. It uses examples from these sites to describe how additional jurisdictions can build on the JJSIP and JJRRI experience and translate the extensive research on "what works" for juvenile offenders into a platform for juvenile justice decision-making.

⁴ See Liberman, A., and J. Hussemann, *Implementing the SPEP: Lessons from Demonstration Sites in OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, December 2016.)

A. Assessing Youth Risk and Needs

Effective use of risk and needs assessments is one of the more important evidence-based practices a juvenile justice system can adopt. It provides guidance to key decisions that are critical to a system's efficiency and effectiveness, in particular the level of supervision appropriate to each juvenile's risk of re-offense and the nature and extent of the intervention services most likely to result in significant positive behavior change. A valid risk score is also a necessary input into the SPEPTM scheme for rating, diagnosing, and improving the effectiveness of those intervention services. Moreover, risk scores are needed for proper interpretation of the recidivism rates for the youth served in a juvenile justice system. No matter how effective the intervention programs are, higher risk youth will naturally have higher recidivism rates than lower risk youth, albeit not as high as they would be with less effective intervention. Recidivism rates, therefore, can only be properly understood when the risk level for the youth involved is known.

The advantages of using risk and needs assessments to guide levels of supervision and treatment planning are twofold. First, when used systematically these assessments result in greater consistency in the treatment of juveniles with similar profiles and histories. That not only makes the process fairer to those juveniles, it can work against the racial and ethnic disparities in treatment that can creep into even the most evenhanded juvenile justice systems. Second, a long history of comparative research on the relative accuracy of clinical vs. actuarial predictions has demonstrated that, with rare exceptions, assessments based on empirical predictive factors perform better. This does not mean that the judgment of experienced practitioners is irrelevant, only that it is improved if it is informed and shaped by a well-developed assessment instrument with demonstrated predictive validity.

1. Defining Risk and Needs Instruments

Risk assessment instruments have been developed on the basis of research that identifies characteristics of juveniles, their families, and sometimes their neighborhoods that are predictive of subsequent delinquency. These predictive factors fall into two broad categories typically referred to as static and dynamic risk factors. Static risk factors are those that cannot be changed by any feasible actions that can be taken during the course of juvenile justice processing. Static factors include elements of juveniles' prior history, (e.g., previous arrests, school suspensions), as well as relatively fixed aspects of juveniles' family background (e.g., parental criminality). Dynamic risk factors are those that can change and, indeed, often do change during the course of adolescence (e.g., substance use, truancy, and delinquent peers). As such, they are potentially malleable and thus may be influenced by juvenile justice intervention. With that targeting in mind, dynamic risk factors are often identified as criminogenic needs when they are problematic for the youth. When not problematic, they may be identified as strengths rather than needs along with other positive characteristics associated with low rates of delinquency that are incorporated in some risk and needs assessment instruments.

2. Selecting Validated Risk/Needs Assessment Instruments

A validated risk assessment instrument is one that has been developed on the basis of research about the risk factors that are predictive of recidivism for juvenile offenders and then validated with a demonstration that it in fact is predictive of recidivism in actual practice in a juvenile justice system. A number of such instruments are available, some of which are in widespread use. A juvenile justice system desiring to implement validated risk and/or needs assessment instruments has several steps to undertake. The first is to review the risk and/or needs instruments that are readily available. A good starting point is the research conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) and sponsored by OJJDP on the performance of a number of the most commonly used instruments (Baird et al., 2013). Also, NCCD has done other notable work on risk assessment instruments as part of a structured decision-making scheme (see <http://www.nccdglobal.org>).

There are several important considerations in selecting instruments. One is whether to adopt a composite instrument that includes both static risk factors and dynamic needs factors in the same instrument. Such instruments have the advantage of consolidating risk and needs assessment in a single format that may be a convenience for the staff using the instrument. Moreover, this is the most widely used and available type of instrument. A consolidated instrument, however, cannot easily be optimized to be both a strong predictor of recidivism and a comprehensive needs assessment for purposes of case planning. Alternatives include using separate instruments for risk assessment and needs assessment or supplementing a composite instrument with additional needs assessment.

Other considerations relevant to the selection of an instrument or instruments are the length of the instruments, the availability of the data needed to complete them, and the associated burden on staff to routinely use the instrument. While longer instruments incorporate more information, the value of that will be limited if staff do not conscientiously complete every item in the instrument. A further consideration is the cost of the instrument and the associated maintenance of its use. Most of the available instruments are obtained through a vendor that licenses the use of the tools and provides training and possibly data system support. NCCD, however, has created a risk assessment instrument that is available on a public use basis.

3. Implementing and Sustaining Use of Risk/Needs Instruments

For a validated risk and needs assessment instrument to be effective in guiding decisions about levels of supervision and appropriate intervention services, it must be implemented in a manner that provides accurate, reliable, and current information for each youth who enters the juvenile justice system. Accomplishing that requires that all personnel who administer the assessment or use its results be well trained in both the procedures for conducting the assessment and the interpretation of the resulting scores. Further, such training must be part of an ongoing process as new staff come on board or change roles within the organization.

However, initial training by itself is not sufficient to ensure that the quality of the assessments will be sustained over time. Continuous monitoring for quality control is necessary with feedback to staff as needed to correct any drift that may occur over time from the prescribed procedures for administering the instrument or the care taken in applying those procedures. Supporting the assessment process with appropriate information technology may also enhance quality. The ease with which the assessment can be conducted is increased when the items can be completed online in a simple format with such useful features as dropdown menus, automatic population of responses on delinquent history, etc. from available records, and time stamps to record and separate successive updates to the assessments.

Sustaining high quality risk and needs assessment requires that routine procedures be established that ensure that each youth who enters the juvenile justice system receives an initial risk/needs assessment and follow-up assessments at regular intervals during their involvement with the system. Such information has proven to be generally informative regarding offender responsivity to intervention, but also may be predictive of behavior during residential placement as well as post-release (Baglivio et al., 2015). Routine follow-up assessment procedures should be specified in whatever practice manuals and policy documents the system uses and staff should be accountable for following those procedures in their performance reviews and personnel evaluations. It is advantageous in this regard if the data system not only facilitates completion of the risk and needs assessments, but also flags lapses when data are incomplete or overdue and generates reports to supervisors on the extent to which assessments are complete and timely.

4. Making Effective Use of Risk and Needs Assessments

High quality assessments, of course, have little value if their results are not actually used to support effective decision-making for the youth who have been assessed. The assessment results, therefore, must be made available to the juvenile justice personnel, court officers, attorneys, and judges who will be making the key decisions about each youth. Moreover, this must be done in a manner that optimizes understanding of the implications of the assessment results while respecting the procedures, standards, and roles appropriate to each decision-making context. As described later, one way to use risk assessment results in decision-making is to integrate them into a disposition matrix that provides guidance to decisions about the appropriate level of supervision and intervention services.

Summarizing Risk and Needs Information in a Form that is Easily Understood and Used

The risk and needs scores that result from validated assessments conscientiously applied do not necessarily speak for themselves about their implications for decision-making. It is therefore useful to develop a scheme that summarizes the risk and needs results in a form that speaks directly to the appropriate level of supervision and appropriate treatment services for each youth. A disposition matrix (see below) can be one important part of this scheme. As input to that scheme and as support to decision-making, however, it is advisable for risk and needs results to be converted into easily understood summaries that

clearly identify the risk level of each juvenile and highlight the major need areas. Many risk/needs instruments have such summaries built into associated reporting procedures but, if not, they can usually be rather easily developed.

Those summaries then provide a convenient and informative way to provide the risk and needs findings to the respective decision-makers at key decision points. For example, this information should be presented with whatever recommendations are appropriate to the juvenile court during relevant proceedings to inform the disposition and judicially ordered services. Where diversion decisions are made before that point, or case management plans are developed afterwards, this information should be made available to the probation officers or whatever other staff are involved in those decisions. A necessary adjunct, of course, is to ensure that those staff are well trained and supervised in the appropriate use of that information.

The selection of the intervention services prescribed for a juvenile, in turn, should be guided by needs assessment results, whether obtained as a component of a composite risk-needs instrument or as a separate assessment, with an attempt to focus on those criminogenic needs most closely linked to the delinquent behavior the services are expected to address. It follows that both needs and risk assessment results should be shared with the service providers who administer the intervention programs in which the youth will participate so they may tailor their case plans appropriately.

A further important use of needs and risk assessment information is tracking improvements in relevant need and risk areas that accompany and follow the supervision and services provided to the youth in the system. Positive increments in the most pertinent dynamic risk and needs factors, for instance, are early indicators of effective intervention and constitute important outcomes in their own right. Tracking such revealing changes, however, requires that risk/needs assessments be updated at regular intervals in as objective a manner as possible, reviewed for evidence of favorable trends, and used when possible to further tailor the case plan for each juvenile.

Local Validation of Risk Assessment Instruments

As noted earlier, it is important to select a risk instrument that has been validated with research that demonstrates its ability to predict recidivism. Though an essential starting place, that does not guarantee that the instrument will perform well with the local population of juvenile offenders managed by a particular juvenile justice system. This may result from some inherent limitations in the instrument for application to that population, or because the assessment is not being administered in a careful, complete, and reliable fashion by staff. It is, therefore, advisable to periodically validate the risk assessment for that local population. This can be done by examining the recidivism rates for juveniles at different risk levels to determine if those risk levels adequately differentiate juveniles with different recidivism rates. It is also relevant to attend to any discrepancies by race and gender. A risk assessment instrument should be neutral for those subgroups. While the proportion of males and females, or different racial or ethnic

groups, may vary across the risk levels identified by the assessment, the recidivism rates within each level should be similar for those different subgroups.

Although a full-scale validity study of their risk assessment tools was beyond the scope of the JJRRI project, staff in each project site conducted a simple analysis of their risk data as a low-level validity check. The staff extracted their site's risk data and examined the breakdown of risk level by recidivism (as defined by the site). These simple analyses—reflected in a cross-tabulation of risk by recidivism--gave the site teams and TA providers valuable insight into how predictive the risk assessment categorization was for a particular site. In some cases the level of risk and anticipated recidivism rates prompted additional analyses and revealed possible gender and/or race disparities that required further attention.⁵

As the JJRRI sites discovered, such a local validation study may well identify shortcomings in the predictive power or subgroup neutrality of the results of a risk assessment instrument. If so, attention should turn first to the administration of the instrument to ensure that it is being properly completed in a consistent manner by different staff and using the best information available to respond to each item on the instrument. If there are still problems with the risk results when that is assured, it may be possible to make adjustments to the way the instrument is scored that will resolve the problems (e.g., how different items are weighted or where the risk level cutoffs are placed). Maintaining validity and equity in risk assessment will require periodic revalidation of this sort in light of the potential for changes in the juvenile population served over time and drift in the quality with which staff administer the instrument.

B. Matching Youth to Appropriate Levels of Supervision and Services

Information on risk level and criminogenic needs can be used to determine the level of supervision and service options that are likely to produce the best outcomes for each youth involved in the juvenile justice system. In the context of evidence-based decision-making, this matching process is grounded in the principles of risk, needs, and responsivity (RNR) (Andrews, Bonta and Hoge, 1990). These principles are defined as follows:

The Risk Principle: The intensity of treatment services should match a youth's risk to re-offend, such that higher risk youth receive a higher level of supervision and services than their lower risk counterparts. In practice, this means that youth risk scores can be used to classify youth according to the level of supervision and intensity of services necessary to improve treatment outcomes.

The Need Principle: Treatment should target the criminogenic (dynamic) factors that are associated with a youth's delinquency and that can change through intervention (e.g., anti-social attitudes and behaviors, association with delinquent peers, poor family relationships, and poor school performance).

⁵ After preliminary review of risk and recidivism data in one site revealed sufficient evidence of possible validity and reliability issues, the site requisitioned a high-level validity study under a separate contract.

The Responsivity Principle: Rehabilitative services should be tailored to match each youth's unique abilities and learning style.

Research has demonstrated that using these principles to guide the matching of youth to supervision and services can result in significant reductions in recidivism (Latessa and Lowenkamp, 2006; Vieira, Skilling, and Peterson-Badali, 2009; Luong and Wormith, 2011). Indeed, matching youth to supervision and services based on a *combination* of risk and criminogenic needs has been associated with lower rates of recidivism than service matching based on youth risk alone (Vieira, Skilling, and Peterson-Badali, 2009). In addition, research also suggests that reduction in recidivism is directly related to the number of criminogenic needs addressed through treatment, such that the more needs that are addressed, the greater the reduction in recidivism (Latessa and Lowenkamp, 2006; Vieira, Skilling, and Peterson-Badali, 2009).

As discussed below, decision-makers in the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have used the RNR principles to guide the development of their disposition matrices and inform individualized case planning.

1. The Disposition Matrix

A disposition matrix is a structured decision-making tool that can be used at disposition to identify the most effective level of supervision or custody for an adjudicated youth. Typically, the matrix is derived by cross-tabulating risk level, as determined through the use of a validated risk assessment instrument, with the nature or severity of the presenting offense.⁶ In broad terms, the disposition matrix provides a range of graduated sanctions for youth at each risk level, such that low-risk youth remain in the community with low levels of supervision, moderate-risk youth remain in the community, but with more intense supervision than their low-risk counterparts, and high-risk youth receive the highest levels of supervision, including residential placement. Each cell of the matrix includes a range of supervision levels and service options deemed appropriate for youth whose risk level and offense place them within the cell.

Creating a Disposition Matrix with a Multi-Disciplinary Team

A disposition matrix is typically developed through a consensus building process that involves a variety of juvenile justice decision-makers in defining the appropriate levels of supervision and service options to include in each of the matrix cells. Although the responsibility for developing and utilizing a disposition matrix lies with the administering juvenile justice agency at either the state or local level, the full benefit of its use will not be realized without the understanding and buy-in of the community stakeholders who also play a role in the case disposition process and delivery of services. Consequently, while probation staff may assume responsibility for drafting early versions of the matrix,

⁶ Although the severity of the presenting offense is not itself a strong predictor of future offending, decision-makers in the justice system typically take account of the seriousness of the offense that is being adjudicated when making disposition decisions.

the final product usually reflects input from a number of stakeholder groups, including judges, prosecutors, and defense counsel. The latter may be asked to provide feedback after probation staff have drafted a matrix, or they may be part of the work group that designs the matrix.

For example, in a number of JJRRI and JJSIP sites, probation staff have drafted a matrix that they share with system stakeholders prior to piloting and finalizing the tool. Indeed, juvenile justice agency staff in one JJSIP site that entered this phase of the work took the time to meet with all stakeholder groups across the state, joining association and staff meetings and holding forums with key stakeholders to explain the direction the agency was heading and provide an opportunity for input and advice. Although these informational meetings did not always result in unanimity about the agency's agenda, they gave all of the key partners an opportunity to have their perspectives taken into consideration.

Alternatively, system stakeholders may be an integral part of the matrix design team. For instance, in one JJRRI site, a stakeholder committee composed of juvenile probation staff, judges and other family court staff, representatives from the prosecutor's and public defender's offices, and researchers from the state Statistical Analysis Center assumed responsibility for the design and implementation of the matrix. This multi-disciplinary structure allowed the various members of the matrix work group to keep their respective constituencies informed about the evolution of the matrix and helped to facilitate information sessions and encourage buy-in from the larger stakeholder community.

Reaching Consensus on the Appropriate Levels of Supervision and Services

In general, the matrix work group establishes guidelines regarding the range of dispositions deemed appropriate for the low-, medium-, and high-risk youth processed in their jurisdiction and also recommends the appropriate services for youth who fall within each matrix category (or cell). After reviewing available research on disposition tools and studying data from other jurisdictions that have implemented similar matrices, the work group reaches consensus on best practice regarding the appropriate level of supervision and service options (e.g., no or low intensity services, moderate level of services, or most intensive services) expected to produce the best outcomes for youth at each level of risk.

Ideally, the work group is also able to consider historical data on recidivism outcomes for youth who have been processed in their jurisdiction. For example, prior to filling the cells of their draft matrix, senior probation officers in Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) reviewed recidivism data on different risk levels, offense types, and service placements to identify which services and placements were most effective with which youth. These data helped inform decisions regarding the levels of supervision and services to include in each cell of the draft matrix. Probation staff then asked other stakeholders, including members of the judiciary, for feedback on the draft matrix, and made refinements to the disposition tool based on their input. Once the draft was finalized, DJJ staff used historical data on disposed cases to retroactively apply the matrix and assess how use of the matrix would have affected the caseloads of existing programs

and services had it been available when the cases were disposed. Then, the Florida DJJ used the caseload information to adjust program funding and align service capacity to match the projected need.

Training Staff to Use a Disposition Matrix

Once the matrix is in final form and ready to pilot, probation staff must be trained on its use. Since using a matrix often represents a departure from traditional decision-making practices, this training typically includes information on research that shows that using actuarial tools in conjunction with professional judgment results in better youth outcomes than relying on professional judgment alone. In addition, staff are given opportunities to practice using the disposition matrix to make recommendations for a set of mock cases and to compare and discuss their recommendations with other staff engaged in the same process. This helps to ensure consistency in staff use of the matrix and also helps to build staff confidence in using the matrix to formulate recommendations. Finally, staff also engage in role-play to practice making recommendations to the court, which helps prepare them for situations in which judges, prosecutors, or defense counsel may challenge the matrix recommendations. As follow-up to the training, supervisory staff mentor line staff and observe them in court until staff are confident in using the matrix to make recommendations. Also, periodic booster trainings for experienced staff and introductory trainings for new personnel help to ensure that staff use the matrix with fidelity over time.

Collecting Data and Monitoring Outcomes Following Matrix Implementation

In order to assess whether use of the matrix actually results in the desired recidivism outcomes, it is important that the work group collect data on youth whose cases are disposed using the matrix. At a minimum, these data should include information on each youth's demographics (race/ethnicity, gender, and age), risk and needs, offense history, disposition dates and types, service types, and subsequent juvenile and adult recidivism. In addition, it is important to monitor whether the disposition recommendations by probation staff and the judiciary are within or outside the range recommended by the matrix.

These data can be used to determine 1) how often probation staff and the judiciary comply with or deviate from matrix recommendations, 2) the reasons for deviations, 3) the rates of recidivism for youth who fall within each cell of the matrix, and 4) whether dispositions that adhere to the matrix result in lower rates of recidivism than those that deviate from the recommendations. These analyses can show whether youth outcomes improve as a result of using the matrix and whether modification of the matrix or its use is necessary to maximize recidivism reduction.

Providing Stakeholders with Feedback on Outcomes


One of the key dimensions of the evidence-based decision-making approach supported by JJSIP and JJRRI is that it provides accountability for all key partners: the administering juvenile justice agency and its staff, the attorneys and court personnel, and the provider agencies. Data on matrix use and associated outcomes can show whether probation staff are administering the risk and needs assessment tool with fidelity, utilizing the information yielded in a meaningful manner, and applying it to the disposition matrix. The data can also reveal whether judges are following or deviating from the recommendations being made by the probation officers (guided by a disposition matrix) and whether recidivism rates improve with use of the tools. Once these types of analyses are complete, staff can meet with partners to review and discuss the individual and collective performance of the core stakeholders.

This communication and feedback process starts with the juvenile justice agency communicating with each individual partner to discuss implementation of the evidence-based decision-making platform and the key indicators that relate to their respective roles. Florida is an example of a JJSIP site that has used this approach with great success. Prior to developing their vision for juvenile justice reform and creating their disposition matrix, Florida's DJJ staff visited with stakeholders in all 20 judicial circuits to solicit their input and feedback on the Department's plans for juvenile justice reform. Then, as they began JJSIP implementation, DJJ staff visited each circuit again, meeting with community stakeholders, court partners and DJJ staff to provide an open forum on the new case practices related to use of structured decision-making tools. Now, several years after the launch of their disposition matrix, DJJ staff continue to meet with court and attorney partners in each circuit to review data regarding case outcomes and investigate ways to improve practice.

Florida's Disposition Recommendation Matrix

Figure 2 shows the disposition recommendation matrix that has been used by the Florida DJJ since 2013. The matrix cross-tabulates risk level (as measured by the Positive Achievement Change Tool or PACT) with the most serious presenting offense. The offense categories range in seriousness from first time misdemeanors, which the matrix recommends be processed at arrest without probation recommendations to the court, to violent felony offenses. The matrix includes five different levels of sanctions, ranging from a low of Level 1 (alternatives to arrest) to a high of Level 5 (secure residential commitment). Level 1, which is restricted to use with youth who receive civil citations, is included in the matrix to demonstrate the Florida DJJ's commitment to providing alternative sanctions for all first-time misdemeanants. Levels 2 through 5 are supervision options for youth who are processed by probation officers. Each cell of the matrix (i.e., the place where offense and risk intersect) also includes service options that are deemed appropriate for youth whose risk level and offense place them within the cell.

Figure 2: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Disposition Recommendation Matrix

 Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Disposition Recommendation Matrix <small>(Staff must always begin with the least restrictive setting within a particular disposition category. See SDM guidelines)</small>				
Most Serious Presenting Offense	PACT Risk Level to Re-Offend			
	Low-Risk to Re-offend	Moderate-Risk to Re-offend	Moderate/High-Risk to Re-offend	High-Risk to Re-offend
1st TIME MISDEMEANOR ¹	Level 1	Level 1	N/A	N/A
Minor ²	Level 2 or 3a	Level 2 or 3a	Level 2 or 3a-c	Level 3a-c or 4
Serious ³	Level 2 or 3a	Level 2 or 3a-b	Level 3a-c or 4	Level 3a-c or 4
Violent ⁴	Level 2 or 3a-b	Level 2, 3a-c or 4	Level 3a-c, 4 or 5	Level 3a-c, 4 or 5

¹ - First time misdemeanor offenders with no history of arrest or participation in alternatives to arrest. Under Section 985.12, Florida Statutes, all first time misdemeanants are eligible for civil citation. Youth deemed ineligible for civil citation (based on community standards) should be reviewed under the "Misdemeanor" category based on their PACT Risk Level to Reoffend.

² - All misdemeanor offenses.

³ - Felony offenses that do not include violence.

⁴ - Violent felony offenses (does not include misdemeanor assault/battery, which is captured under "minor").

Level 1 - Alternatives to Arrest Level 3 - Community Supervision (3a) - Probation supervision (3b) - Probation enhancement services (ART, LifeSkills, etc.) (3c) - Day Treatment, MST, FFT	Level 2 - Diversion & Non-DJJ Probation Level 4 - Non Secure Residential Commitment (Low & Moderate-Risk Programs) Level 5 - Secure Residential Commitment (High & Maximum-Risk Programs)
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Source: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice at [http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-\(jjsip\)/disposition-matrix](http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-(jjsip)/disposition-matrix).

Probation officers use the matrix, as directed by specific guidelines, to make disposition recommendations to the court. These guidelines require 1) that officers select the least restrictive alternative in a given cell not previously tried with a given youth, and 2) that they not deviate from (i.e., move outside) the recommended cell without a clear justification for their recommended deviation and written approval of their chief probation officer or designee.⁷ Judges have the option to deviate from probation officers' recommendations, but when they do, they must issue a court order that is then subject to appeal.

The matrix allows for dispositions that are grouped into one of four categories (Baglivio, Greenwald, and Russell, 2015):

⁷ Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. 2014b. *Structured Decision-Making and the Disposition Matrix*. Retrieved September 6, 2016, from [http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-\(jjsip\)/structured-decision-making-and-the-disposition-matrix](http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-(jjsip)/structured-decision-making-and-the-disposition-matrix).

- Below guidelines—the disposition is less restrictive than the matrix would suggest (e.g., the use of diversion for a youth with a serious presenting offense and a moderate/high-risk to re-offend).
- Optimum placement—the disposition is the least restrictive option within the given cell of the disposition matrix that has not previously been attempted with that youth.
- Appropriate placement—the disposition/placement is within the suggested range of the given cell of the disposition matrix, but is not the optimum placement.
- Above guidelines—the disposition is more restrictive than the disposition matrix indicates (e.g., the use of day treatment for a youth with a minor presenting offense and a low risk to re-offend).

Using historical data on 38,117 youth who had received PACT assessments and were discharged from supervision/placement in the Florida DJJ between July 1, 2010, and June 30, 2011, researchers at the Florida DJJ retroactively assigned sampled youth to cells in the matrix according to the dispositions they had previously received (Baglivio, Greenwald, and Russell, 2015). They then examined the data to see, among other things, how many dispositions fell within the range recommended by the matrix (i.e., either optimum or appropriate placements), and whether youth who received dispositions within the recommended range recidivated less than youth who received dispositions outside the recommended range.⁸

The following are among the notable findings:

- The vast majority (92%) of sampled youth received dispositions that would have put them within the recommended range, with 73% receiving dispositions in the optimum range, 19% in the appropriate category, 2% below the guidelines, and 6% above the guidelines.
- However, rates of adherence to the recommended ranges varied by youth risk level. They were highest for low-risk youth (96.6%), followed by moderate-to-high-risk youth (85%), then by moderate-risk youth (84.4%), and, last, by high-risk youth (79.6%).
- Youth whose dispositions fell within the recommended range had a significantly lower average recidivism rate (19.4%) than youth whose dispositions fell outside the recommended range (38.7%).
- Youth who received dispositions below the recommended range (i.e., moderate-to-high-risk youth with a serious or a violent presenting offense and high-risk youth with any presenting offense) performed least well. In all instances, these youth were placed in diversion.
- Differences in recidivism were most pronounced for low- and high-risk youth who received dispositions outside the recommended range.

⁸ Recidivism was measured as adjudication/adjudication withheld or adult conviction for a subsequent new law violation within 12 months of release from placement.

- Low-risk youth placed outside (i.e., above) the recommended range recidivated at a rate of 28% compared to 13% for their low-risk counterparts whose dispositions were within the suggested range.
- The recidivism rate for high-risk youth placed outside the suggested range was 55.3% compared to a rate of 39.7% for high-risk youth placed within the suggested range.

These findings demonstrate that adherence to a disposition tool that combines risk and offense information can contribute to better outcomes for youth in the justice system and enhance public safety. Ongoing monitoring of the use of the tool (i.e., studying decisions that fall within or outside a recommended range) and related outcomes can provide valuable feedback on the decision-making process and on the need to modify the tool (i.e., the supervision ranges or service options within cells) and/or change practice to improve outcomes.

2. Matching Youth to Services

Once youth are matched to the appropriate level of supervision based on their risk to reoffend, they can be matched to specific services to address their unique criminogenic needs. Typically, the disposition matrix will include a list of service options deemed appropriate for youth whose risk level and offense place them within a particular matrix cell (see Florida's matrix above). That information serves as an important starting point for tailoring a case plan to meet the specific needs of each youth.

In addition, participation in the SPEP™ process and related performance improvement (see below) can help providers develop information on available services to increase the likelihood that the right youth are matched with the right services. For example, after participating in the SPEP™ process, a large, community-based provider in one JJRRI site now includes information on the criminogenic needs targeted and the duration of service required for each of its service offerings, which helps probation officers determine with greater certainty whether a particular service is a good match for a specific youth.

Developing a Case Plan

For youth on probation, staff typically work in partnership with a youth's family and with local providers to develop an individualized case plan that is based on factors such as a youth's risk level, criminogenic needs, protective factors, abilities, and stage of development. The case plan outlines services intended to facilitate the development of the skills and competencies needed to improve the youth's behavior and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

Creating a service matrix that cross-tabulates risk level by criminogenic needs and indicates the services that are available to address the needs of youth in each matrix cell can also be helpful in developing these case plans (Vincent and Lovins, 2015). As one JJRRI site has discovered, using a service matrix can also expedite case planning by offering staff a readily accessible tool for identifying available community-based services

to address each dynamic risk factor. It can also help to identify gaps in the service array by quickly alerting staff when services are unavailable to meet a particular youth's risk level and/or needs.

In residential settings, case planning is typically the responsibility of a treatment team composed of some combination of the youth, family members, education counselors, health and mental health staff, community or aftercare staff, other facility staff, and community representatives. The team develops a plan based on a range of information and matches each youth to services that are appropriate for the youth's level of risk and criminogenic needs.

In both community and residential settings, the case plan establishes goals for the youth's progress and a timeline for accomplishing the goals. It is reviewed regularly throughout the period of a youth's involvement with the juvenile justice system and adjusted to reflect changing treatment needs. That review typically includes information from an updated risk and needs assessment, which can be used to identify improvements in the youth's dynamic risk factors over the course of treatment and to modify the treatment plan accordingly.

Setting Priorities

Determining which criminogenic needs to address in the plan, how many needs to address at one time, and in what order depends on a combination of professional judgment and each youth's unique needs. Research suggests that it may be beneficial to limit the number of simultaneous services a youth receives (Vincent, Guy, and Grisso, 2012) and to start by addressing the criminogenic needs with the strongest association to delinquency (Latessa et al., 2013). In many of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, case plans initially focus on the top three criminogenic needs identified during the assessment process. New priorities may emerge and additional services may be added to the service plan as a youth's criminogenic needs change as a result of his or her participation in services.

Measuring Outcomes

It is important to monitor the effectiveness of the case planning process, not only to adjust plans for individual youth, but also to assess whether the case planning process is achieving desired outcomes. This may include measuring 1) improvement in dynamic risk factors, 2) the rate of successful completion of case plan terms and conditions, and 3) reductions in the rate of recidivism for youth who complete the conditions of their plans or whose risk/needs assessments show improvement. To facilitate efforts to monitor the progress of individual youth and evaluate whether case planning policies and procedures are achieving desired outcomes, some JJSIP and JJRRI sites include detailed case plan information in their automated data systems. In addition, at least one JJRRI site plans to monitor how well probation staff use information on dynamic risk factors to match youth to services that address those factors. The information will be used to assess the effectiveness of the case planning process and measure staff performance.

C. Providing Effective Program Options: Evidence-Based Programs and the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP™)

Ensuring that youth receive the best possible services to meet their needs depends not only on careful assessment of criminogenic needs and matching of youth to services that aim to address those needs, but also on the availability of evidence-based services offered at the appropriate dosage and for the appropriate length of time to address the needs of youth at different risk levels.

1. Evidence-Based Programs

There are multiple definitions and conceptions of what constitutes an evidence-based program (EBP) and even what is meant by “evidence-based” in the first place. The most common understanding of EBP involves credible research supporting the effectiveness of a specific program that is certified by an authoritative source such as Blueprints, OJJDP Model Programs, CrimeSolutions.gov, or the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). These sources identify programs that have been evaluated and rated according to their respective, but varying, standards. These programs are almost exclusively brand name programs, such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring, and Aggression Replacement Training (ART).

The SPEP™ is based on an alternative concept about what constitutes an evidence-based program. Like the conventional EBP approach, the SPEP™ encompasses interventions with valid research on effectiveness, but it is not exclusive to a specific name brand program. Rather, it takes into account the evidence for the effectiveness of different generic *types* of programs, for example, family therapy, mentoring, and cognitive behavioral therapy. These categories of program types include the brand name programs (e.g., FFT falls within the family therapy category), but also include many “home grown” and “one off” programs as well. This orientation to generic types of programs rather than specific named programs broadens the scope of evidence-based programs in two ways. First, it encompasses many more of the programs actually used by juvenile justice systems, few of which are brand name programs. Second, there is much more research evidence supporting the effectiveness of programs of the various generic types than there is for the brand name programs.

2. The Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP™) Process

The SPEP™ is more of a process than an instrument, but the central feature of the process is a set of ratings for programs based on the results of a meta-analysis of more than 500 controlled studies of interventions with juvenile offenders that has identified the characteristics of those interventions most strongly related to recidivism reduction (Howell & Lipsey, 2012; Lipsey, 2009). These characteristics include:

- The type of program delivered,

- The quality of service delivery,
- The amount or “dose” of service as indicated by the duration of the service and the number of contact hours, and
- The risk for re-offense of the participating youth.

The Type of Program Delivered

The type of program, as classified using the SPEP™ program typologies, is included because some types of programs produce larger average recidivism reductions than other types. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy programs have larger recidivism effects on average than individual counseling programs.

The type of program is identified through the SPEP™ classification screening process, which begins with identification of the services that juveniles are receiving in a particular juvenile justice system. This involves not only the creation of an inventory of program names but also the development of a component-specific listing of the services that are provided by those programs. Once those tasks are complete, each distinct service is matched to a SPEP™ program category to establish its evidence base.

Without accurate knowledge of specific program content, jurisdictions have limited ability to fully assess their available service array and establish targets for best practice (Chapman, 2016). The SPEP™ program classification process requires a close-up look at program content so that it may be accurately matched to research on existing juvenile intervention programs and services. This process requires considerable rigor to ensure that program content is captured accurately. For instance, at the start of their SPEP™ process, all of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites featured named programs, but the content of those programs was often difficult, and often impossible, to determine from their names or titles alone. Additionally, the description of the therapeutic content was often sufficiently vague that it could not be used to identify a specific program type as described or evaluated in research. As an example, the contract description of a program in one site mentioned that the juveniles should receive group counseling using a “cognitive behavioral approach.” The site’s program manager had listed the program as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), but examination of the program through a robust SPEP™ classification screening revealed that the juvenile offenders were actually receiving standard group therapy with a focus on anger management. Although group counseling sessions were well structured and encouraged peer supported process work, the very intensive cognitive behavioral components of CBT, such as employing “systematic training regimens aimed at creating cognitive restructuring and flexible cognitive skills such that offenders develop more adaptive patterns of reasoning and reacting in situations that trigger their criminal behavior,” were absent (Lipsey, 2001, p.145).

As another example of the importance of this depth of program content knowledge, the SPEP™ classification process helped one JJRRI site determine that a secure residential facility for high-risk youth was offering five social skills programs, no CBT services, and only a few counseling programs, which strongly suggested the need to rebalance the

service array. The facility had operated for several years with this limited list of service offerings for their high-risk and high need population of juveniles, without realizing that it was underserving the youth in some areas while over-serving in others.

The Quality of Service Delivery

The second factor in recidivism reduction is the quality of service delivery, as organized by the provider or local or state agency. That factor includes the following quality assurance indicators:

- The existence of a written treatment protocol or manual,
- The extent of provider training on that protocol,
- Systematic monitoring of adherence to the protocol during service delivery, and
- The existence of policies and procedures for taking corrective action when there is drift in fidelity to the protocol.

During the data-gathering phase of SPEP™ implementation, several sites discovered a lack of these basic data and/or inconsistencies in the oversight and application of these indicators such as gaps and/or notable reliability issues that were previously unknown to providers or juvenile justice practitioners in most of the project sites. To address these data issues, the JJSIP and JJRRI sites developed new policies and processes for standardized collection of the quality indicators required for SPEP™. This involved either creating a new method of quality data collection or modifying existing functional practices for quality data collection to include the SPEP™ indicators. Illustrative of this point, one site created and trained staff to use their first standardized program quality tool across all program sites in the state, and another site added the SPEP™ indicators to their existing quality assessment tool so these data would be collected as part of their annual assessment process.

The Duration of the Service and Number of Contact Hours

Another characteristic of effective programs is that they provide a sufficient amount or “dose” of service as indicated by the duration of the service and the number of contact hours each youth has received during an identified period of time. The supporting research for this SPEP™ characteristic allows appropriate target amounts of service to be derived for each different generic type of service; for example, the amount of group counseling service associated with positive average effects on recidivism is not the same as the amount of mentoring services associated with such effects.

In the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, the SPEP™- based data inquiry regarding dosage has generated the greatest disparities from evidence-based best practice. In every site, the most common recommendation for program improvement across all program types has been to increase the participation/engagement of youth. Examination of dosage even led staff in one site to discover that youth in some of its jurisdictions were being assigned to services up to four weeks after their assessments were completed, resulting in a delay in

the start of services and causing the youth to receive less than the amount of service recommended by the SPEP™ meta-analytic evidence.

The Risk for Reoffense

Finally, this body of research demonstrates that the risk for reoffense for the participating youth, as measured with a validated risk assessment instrument, is also a key factor in a program's average expectation for recidivism reduction. Higher risk youth have more potential for recidivism, and thus more room for recidivism reduction by effective programs, than lower risk youth.

In most of the implementation sites, examination of the data for this SPEP™ component has revealed validity and reliability issues. These issues were evident even in sites in which staff were trained to do the risk and needs assessments and policies were in place that specifically stated the frequency with which a juvenile was to be reassessed. The following highlight some of the issues encountered:

- Line staff demonstrated a significant misunderstanding of policy regarding reassessment.
- The extraction of data for analysis was inefficient (impossible in one site).
- Inconsistent data entry resulted in data errors and missing data, which prevented the tracking of risk scores over time.
- In many sites, even when data entry was completed in a timely fashion, scores were not incorporated into supervision or programming referrals (Chapman, 2016).

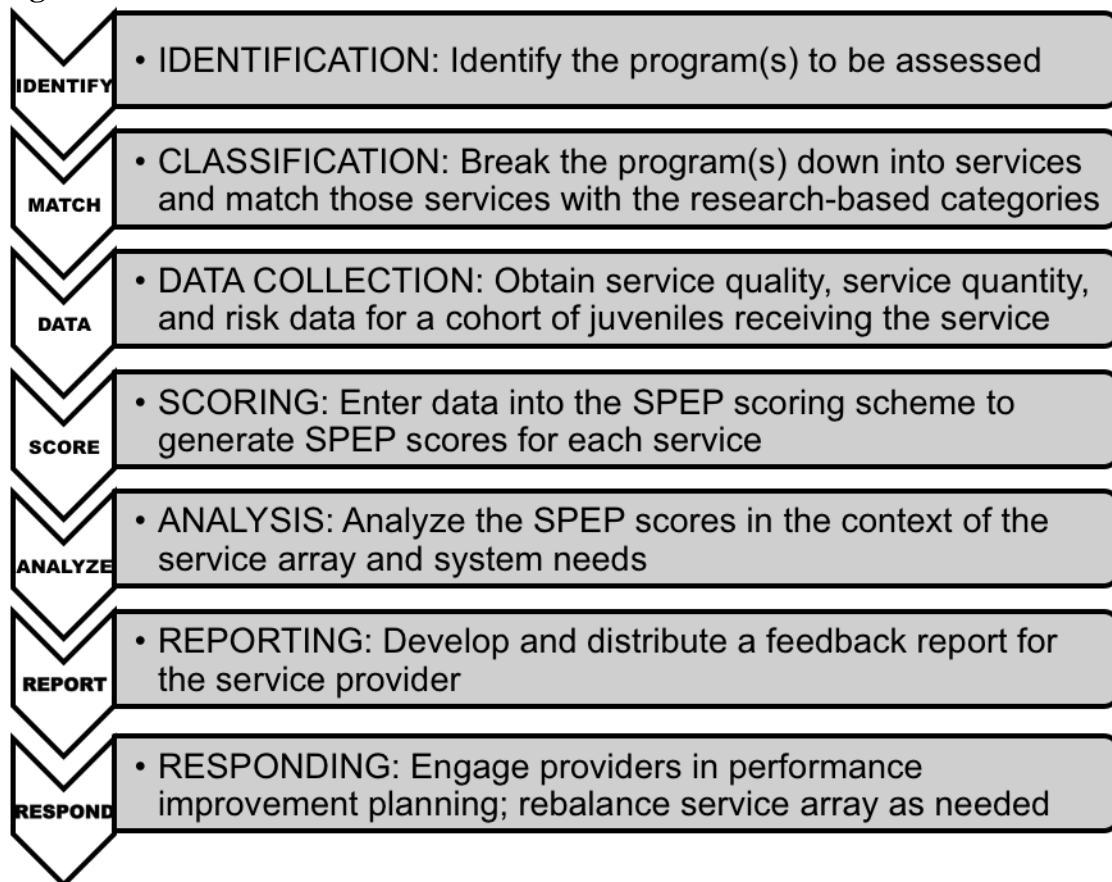
Putting the Components Together

The SPEP™ rating scheme is based directly on these four key factors. The components are weighted and combined to produce a SPEP™ score or rating. Using objectively derived information on program type and quality of service delivery, and client data for the amount of service received and the risk level of each youth served, each of the factors found in the research to be most strongly related to program effectiveness in reducing recidivism can be rated for any program of a type for which there is sufficient supportive research. SPEP™ ratings can therefore be generated for many programs used by a juvenile justice system and, at the same time, generic programs with no supporting evidence specific to their program name can be identified. The total SPEP™ score combined across the four respective components serves as an indicator of how closely an existing program matches the profile of characteristics associated with effective recidivism reduction in the corresponding meta-analytic research. The ratings of the individual factors that go into that total score, in turn, provide diagnostic information about the areas in which a program falls short and thus serves as a guide to program improvement.

3. How SPEP™ Works

The SPEP™ rating scheme discussed above is part of a larger SPEP™ process that allows juvenile justice professionals to determine the expected effectiveness for reducing recidivism of their existing programs and services for juvenile offenders in relation to what has been found in research on similar programs. There are several steps that must be completed before a program or service can be rated using the SPEP™ and several important steps afterwards that relate to constructively using those ratings. Figure 3 shows the sequence of tasks required to implement the SPEP™, obtain ratings of the programs being assessed, and use the resulting information to improve program performance.

Figure 3. The SPEP™ Process



A relevant side effect of SPEP™ implementation is that the very exercise of identifying, collecting, maintaining, and applying the required data often reveals aspects of a juvenile justice system's operation that are deficient and warrant attention. For example, in one JJRRI site where agency policy was to conduct risk assessments for each juvenile under supervision every 60 days, it became apparent once the risk data needed for the SPEP™ were collected and analyzed that many youth were not actually being reassessed every 60 days and, moreover, risk data were not being entered consistently into the data system when assessments were conducted. This inconsistent pattern had been occurring for

several years, but it was not until risk data were collected at a system level and reviewed for SPEP™ purposes that the problems were clearly identified in a way that allowed the administrators to recognize and address them.

The SPEP™ is designed as a continuous assessment and improvement process for generic and brand name programs, not as a one-and-done rating scheme. Based on experience with SPEP™ implementation in the JJSIP and JJRRI projects, as well as in several other sites, three operational principles support the SPEP™ process as drivers of effective services for juvenile offenders: 1) a strong partnership between juvenile justice personnel and private service providers, 2) active education and communication about the SPEP™, its evidence base, and utility, and 3) transparency about the obstacles, challenges, and objectives for youth services among all the participating agencies and stakeholders. These principles serve to reinforce efforts to improve youth services and outcomes via the SPEP™ process by facilitating constructive engagement of all stakeholders in that process and cooperative efforts to move it forward.

4. SPEP™ Challenges

Although each juvenile justice system is different in its internal organization, resources, and location within state government, experience with SPEP™ implementation has shown that there are several common challenges. The most notable of these relates to the validity and availability of program- and youth-level data. While juvenile justice systems generally maintain extensive data about current and prior offenses, dispositions, and related legal matters, it is rather remarkable how few have data systems that track the nature, amount, and quality of services youth actually receive and the relationship of those services to risk and needs data for those youth. This is especially surprising given that it is those services that are the primary means by which the behavior of the participating youth can be changed in ways that reduce reoffending and enhance other positive outcomes. As a consequence, a large part of the TA for SPEP™ implementation provided to juvenile justice systems is often devoted to helping them develop adequate and sustainable data capability to support the SPEP™ along with documentation of related aspects of their youth services.

Staffing continuity is also often a significant issue in SPEP™ sites. The gains in program effectiveness achieved by SPEP™ implementation can easily be lost when the staff that are most knowledgeable about the SPEP™ process leave or are assigned to other divisions or agencies. For example, in one site, all four of the people who were initially trained in, and involved with, the SPEP™ implementation left the agency soon thereafter. Their departure resulted in the loss of the internal leadership and institutional memory necessary to sustain the SPEP™ and retain the advances that had been made. Ultimately, the SPEP™ process had to be rebuilt with new staff. To address such problems with staff turnover, the SPEP™ implementation team has developed a two-level procedure that trains and certifies SPEP™ expertise at either a broad or more intense level so as to provide for more extended staff engagement and knowledge of the SPEP™ process. In addition, Vanderbilt has created a train-the-trainers program to give systems the

capability to sustain training resources that will be available internally to orient new personnel to the SPEP™ process as they come on board.

D. Assessing the Availability of Appropriate Services and Supports to Meet the Needs of Youth in the Justice System

To achieve the desired behavioral and recidivism outcomes, jurisdictions that implement an evidence-based decision-making platform must have an array of available services sufficient to address the criminogenic needs of the youth in the juvenile justice system. Services must be available to youth at all levels of supervision, and youth and their families should face few, if any, barriers to service participation (e.g., lack of transportation, long waiting lists, or scheduling conflicts).

Operationally, the availability of appropriate services and supports can be a significant concern for system stakeholders. For instance, in one JJSIP site, local leaders indicated buy-in to the core elements of the evidence-based decision-making platform, but wanted assurance that recommended services would be available for youth at each supervision level. In response to this concern, the juvenile justice agency in that site now monitors the availability of services for each cell of its dispositional matrix and, when services are unavailable, the agency supports their development. By routinely monitoring the service array, agency staff are also prepared when judges ask in court about the availability of services to address needs in a particular case (or cases).

In an effort to ensure the availability of services to address the needs of each youth, the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have focused on the following:

- Documenting the types of services that are available,
- Examining the match between service needs and service availability, and
- Monitoring the service array to ensure that it is aligned with the needs of the youth and families served.

1. Documenting the Service Array

To document the service array, some jurisdictions survey probation staff and/or providers to determine the types of services that are available. This information can then be used to map where each type of service is offered within a given jurisdiction (e.g., within each county in a state). Provider surveys can also help to identify service gaps that are unique to particular jurisdictions. For example, one JJRRI site surveyed providers and discovered that having more school-related services was the top need in one county, while nearby counties listed support for family housing and transportation as their key needs.

In other jurisdictions, documenting the nature and distribution of existing services has been a natural by-product of participation in the SPEP™ process. For example, one JJRRI jurisdiction discovered that more than a quarter of its SPEPed services involved

social skills training, while none focused on family crisis counseling, mixed counseling, or mediation. This finding suggested that a rebalancing of the service array might be necessary to address the full range of youth and family needs.

2. Examining the Match Between Needs and Available Services

Jurisdictions also need to identify the target population for each type of service offered. To accomplish this, they can examine data on youth assigned to services through the use of their disposition and/or service matrices. These data can then be used to assess whether the existing array of treatment services is sufficient to meet the demand and whether the types of services or service capacity needs to be adjusted in order to match demand.

The SPEP™ process and related performance improvement activities can also help in assessing how well available services match the needs of youth. For example, after the SPEP™ process revealed that low- and high-risk youth were being assigned to the same community service program, a JJRRI site determined that there was a need to create two types of community service programs to better meet the needs of youth at different risk levels—one for low-risk youth to perform community service tasks, and one focused on community restoration that would engage higher risk youth in restorative justice activities.

3. Monitoring the Service Array

The use of structured decision-making tools to match youth to services inevitably affects the distribution of youth in services. For example, use of risk assessment information to determine level of supervision is likely to reduce the number of low- and moderate-risk youth in out-of-home placement and increase their numbers in community-based care. At a minimum, this shift in service use is likely to affect the number of community treatment slots that are required to meet demand; it may also affect the nature and types of community-based services that are necessary to address the needs of the changing population of youth and their families. In addition, reduction in the use of out-of-home placement, which is typically more costly than community-based care, can create opportunities for reinvestment of savings in prevention and early intervention services. Ongoing assessment of the match between service needs and service availability helps to ensure that the service array is aligned with the needs of youth and their families and that decision-makers have current information to make important decisions regarding realignment of the service array and reinvestment in specific types of services. Routine examination of the service array also demonstrates to court personnel and related staff that the juvenile justice agency is attempting to fulfill its obligation to provide needed services and supports for each jurisdiction.

E. Systems Alignment to Ensure Consistent and Effective Implementation of the Evidence-Based Approach

Implementing an evidence-based platform creates considerable potential for systems

reform, but typically it also requires that juvenile justice agencies align their existing policies, procedures, and practices to support the use of the structured decision-making tools. Frequently, implementation of these tools also prompts changes in the ways juvenile justice agencies interact with each other and with their external stakeholders. Making these changes requires leadership and can involve considerable investment in training, data analysis, communication, and relationship building.

For example, in order for probation officers to effectively use risk and needs assessment tools to match youth to appropriate supervision levels and services, probation staff must be educated regarding the importance of the tools, trained on their use, and monitored by well-trained supervisors to ensure that the tools are used correctly. Periodic training of new staff and booster trainings to ensure that staff use the tools correctly over time are also likely to be necessary. Moreover, to ensure that staff have bought in to the use of the tools and understand their value in decision-making, probation agencies will likely need to create opportunities for routine communication among line and supervisory staff, and across staffing levels, to discuss and review the use of the tools. In addition, probation officers may need training and support to ensure that they are confident and prepared to make recommendations to the court that are based on the use of risk assessment tools. Finally, probation agencies may find that it is valuable to require consistent, accurate use of risk and needs assessment tools as a measure of staff performance, which also serves to reinforce the agency's commitment to evidence-based decision-making.

Probation agencies also need to conduct periodic reviews of the validity and reliability of the tools. At a minimum, these reviews require that staff are able to collect and analyze the required data, or that they have access to a research or university partner that can. In addition, conducting reviews of validity and reliability may require the creation or modification of data systems to assist in monitoring the use of the tools.

In addition, staff use of risk and needs assessments has implications for the probation agency's relationships with other parts of the juvenile justice system. For instance, judges, prosecutors and defense counsel may be concerned that use of risk tools will interfere with their traditional, decision-making process. Judges and prosecutors, respectively, may feel that the tools will limit their discretion to make sentencing and plea bargaining decisions. Defense counsel may be concerned that the assessment process will require their clients to reveal incriminating information prior to adjudication. Each of these stakeholder groups is likely to be more willing to consider recommendations based on risk assessments if they have an understanding of the information that is gathered and the ways that probation staff will use the information to inform supervision and placement decisions. Holding routine information sessions and trainings with members of these stakeholder groups can help to improve their understanding of the tools and moderate their resistance. Regular communication with key system stakeholders may also result in an awareness that procedural or statutory changes may be necessary to ensure that risk information is considered prior to disposition, or that potentially incriminating information gleaned through screening is not available for consideration prior to adjudication.

Lastly, probation agencies may need to alter traditional ways of interacting with provider organizations to ensure the routine sharing of risk and needs information with those providers and help them match youth to services based on their risk to reoffend and criminogenic needs. Probation agencies may need to conduct information sessions and trainings to help providers understand how risk and needs information is collected and used to inform and guide the provision of services to youth in the juvenile justice system. In turn, providers may want to share information on the screening tools they employ with the youth referred for services. Together, providers and probation staff may need to discuss how their various screening tools dovetail with, and differ from, each other.

To guarantee that screening issues are discussed routinely, probation and provider staff may want to develop a work group that is responsible for monitoring the process for sharing and use of assessment information. As an example, the juvenile justice agency in one JJRRI site invited representatives from several provider organizations to serve as “Provider Ambassadors.” These individuals meet regularly with agency staff to discuss such issues as the reliability of assessment data, data sharing, needs for staff training, quality assurance, and case planning. In addition, the Provider Ambassadors keep the larger community of providers up-to-date on the work group’s activities and progress.

F. Monitoring Effectiveness and Outcomes

The prime objective of an evidence-based decision-making platform is to produce better outcomes for the youth served and the local communities affected by their behavior, and to do so in a cost-effective manner. Among the most important of those outcomes is the reoffense rates of the youth who initially enter the juvenile justice system. When effective supervision and services yield low recidivism rates, the participating youth benefit by avoiding further delinquency and the associated sanctions on their behavior, their communities benefit by being less victimized by delinquent behavior, and the juvenile justice system saves the cost of having to respond to further delinquent behavior.

1. Monitoring Recidivism Rates

The first step in monitoring recidivism rates is to establish a procedure for collecting reoffense data for the youth who enter the juvenile justice system in a form that is linked to information about their prior history of involvement with the system including prior offenses, dispositions, and services/programs provided. It is not unusual for other agencies to maintain at least some of the offense data that is required in databases other than those kept by the juvenile justice system (e.g., by law enforcement and adult corrections). Linking those data with the juvenile justice records, therefore, requires that procedures be developed for data sharing that include sufficient individual identifying information to allow for matching of offenders across databases, preferably a common ID number.

An important question for such a monitoring system is what recidivism indicator to track. When the focus is on the extent to which youths’ delinquent behavior has been changed (e.g., by effective supervision and treatment services), rearrest recidivism within a

relatively short time after juvenile justice processing (e.g., 6-12 months) is most closely associated with that behavior. When the focus is on the resource burden on the system, however, recidivism indicators more heavily loaded with system-level decisions over a longer period of time are more on target (e.g., the number of new convictions, episodes of intensive community supervision, and, especially, out-of-home placements over several years). Because both these issues are relevant, it is appropriate to monitor more than one recidivism indicator.

2. Reporting and Using Recidivism Data for System Improvement

An important consideration for interpreting recidivism data is the risk level of the juveniles involved. Irrespective of the effectiveness of the interventions applied, low-risk youth can be expected to have lower recidivism than high-risk youth. To properly understand the recidivism performance of a juvenile justice system, therefore, reoffense rates must be examined separately for low, medium, and high-risk youth. Monitoring those rates over time for each of these groups provides a key trend indicator of overall system performance. Further analysis is necessary, however, to provide diagnostic information that can guide system improvement. Breaking out the recidivism rates for key demographic groups (e.g., age, gender, and race/ethnicity) within each risk level can identify subgroups for which the system intervention is more and less effective and provide guidance for where efforts to enhance performance should be focused. Additional diagnostic information can be obtained by exploring the recidivism rates for youth categorized into different cells of the disposition matrix the system uses with particular attention to juveniles over- and under-treated relative to the treatment recommended by the matrix. Such analysis will not only identify subgroups of youth for whom the interventions applied are not as effective as desired but, as noted earlier, can be used to refine the matrix itself so that it yields better recommendations.

Because additional resources are required to handle each reoffense episode for recidivating youth, the cost-effectiveness of a juvenile justice system is correlated with its success in reducing recidivism, especially for high-risk youth whose recidivism is likely to involve expensive out-of-home placements. Including indicators of cost per juvenile over the full history of the involvement of each juvenile with the system will reveal the resource side of the effectiveness equation. Such data then lends itself to analysis aimed at identifying the subgroups of juveniles responsible for disproportionate shares of the system resources. Examining the sources of those costs in relation to the associated recidivism rates for those youth, in turn, can guide system improvements geared toward changing the cost-outcome relationship for those youth. This might lead to a search for lower cost interventions that have similar outcomes or, preferably, more effective interventions at either the same cost or increased cost that is outweighed by the savings from their greater effects on recidivism.

Making effective use of data on recidivism outcomes and related factors, of course, requires that periodic reports be generated that summarize the different recidivism rates for juveniles at different risk levels, with different demographic profiles, in different jurisdictions, and the like. Especially useful feedback on system performance is provided

by summaries of the recidivism outcomes for juveniles handled at different levels of supervision, levels of services, and type of services in relation to need. If the system uses a disposition matrix, examination of the recidivism outcomes for those youth served within the guidelines and those outside those guidelines will help validate the disposition matrix and identify areas where it, or the way it is used, can be improved. In particular, focused analysis should be directed toward identifying the circumstances and the characteristics of the juveniles for whom the worst outcomes occur. Such reporting, accompanied by a process in which key leaders internal and external to the juvenile justice system review and discuss the findings of these analyses and enact changes in policy and practice to address the issues identified, is a critical component of a continuous improvement process in a juvenile justice system.

3. Broadening Outcome Indicators Beyond Recidivism

While recidivism is the key outcome for juvenile justice systems given their mandate to manage juvenile offenders, effective intervention also has the potential to influence a wide range of other positive youth outcomes, many of which are important way stations on the path to reduced delinquency. These outcomes include, for example, school attendance, achievement, and graduation; diminished substance abuse; improved peer and family relations; and better mental health. Some of the data needed to monitor positive youth outcomes of this sort can be obtained within the context of the juvenile justice system. Periodic risk assessment, for instance, should yield data on the extent to which dynamic risk factors trend in positive directions and those factors themselves are indicators of positive outcomes beyond recidivism. Monitoring other positive youth outcomes, however, may require collaboration with sources outside of the juvenile justice system (e.g., school districts or the state department of education, child welfare, and behavioral health/social services).

V. Key Considerations for Implementing an Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform

The experiences of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites suggest that there are a number of factors that facilitate the successful implementation of an evidence-based decision-making platform. These are highlighted below.

A. A Vision for Juvenile Justice Reform that Incorporates the Use of Evidence-Based Tools and Practices

For most juvenile justice agencies, making a commitment to evidence-based decision-making requires changing the way they have traditionally operated. Having a clear vision about their reform goals and the role of evidence-based tools and practices in achieving those goals can help agencies set implementation priorities, allocate staff and funding resources to support those priorities, develop the tools and capacities necessary to make research-informed decisions, plan for stakeholder engagement, and sustain the use of evidence-based tools and practices over an extended period of time.

In this regard, a number of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have developed detailed plans for juvenile justice reform that incorporate and support the use of evidence-based tools. For example, Pennsylvania created the *Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy (JJSES)*, which is a framework for achieving the State’s mission of Balanced and Restorative Justice through the use of evidence-based policy and practice. Similarly, Florida developed its *Road Map to System Excellence*, which is a blueprint for juvenile justice reform that is informed by “data, research-based practices, and measurable outcomes.”⁹ Also, Delaware published its *Blueprint for Success*, which outlines the guiding principles and philosophies of the state’s Division of Youth Rehabilitative Services and incorporates the key components of the evidence-based decision-making platform developed under JJRRI. Finally, Milwaukee County has released its *Juvenile Justice Blueprint: A Framework for Juvenile Justice*, which outlines the vision and operating principles of the County’s juvenile justice system. Each of these plans supports and reinforces the use of evidence-based decision-making to improve outcomes for youth in the justice system and their families.

B. Leadership that Supports the Use of Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Managing the implementation of an evidence-based decision-making platform requires leaders who are committed to using research to inform practice, who can effectively communicate that commitment to staff and stakeholders, and who sustain their commitment over time. Leaders who have guided successful implementation efforts in the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have promoted organizational change in a steady and non-threatening way by involving staff in all aspects of planning and implementation, training staff so they can consistently and accurately use evidence-based tools, and allocating resources to ensure that there are sufficient staff to support the data collection, analytic, and quality assurance tasks necessary for implementing and sustaining the evidence-based platform. These leaders routinely convene information-sharing sessions that encourage buy-in by affording opportunities for staff and external stakeholders to ask questions and provide feedback on the use of structured decision-making tools. These leaders are also willing to advocate for practices, policies, and legislation that help to institutionalize and sustain evidence-based decision-making as a central part of juvenile justice reform.

C. Interdisciplinary Teams to Manage Implementation

Forming interdisciplinary teams to direct implementation and address the array of systems alignment issues that can arise is an important step in ensuring implementation success. In the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, these teams have included representatives from a combination of state and local juvenile justice agencies responsible for screening youth and assigning them to services, other state and local agencies, organizations, and groups involved in juvenile justice decision-making, and provider organizations. Although the

⁹ Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. *Roadmap to System Excellence* (August 1, 2013), p.7. Retrieved November 29, 2016 from http://www.djj.state.fl.us/docs/town-hall-meetings/roadmap-to-system-excellence_8-1-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=0.

size and membership of the teams has varied by site, each team has included at least one leader with decision-making authority for the agency or organization they represented. This has been critical, since operational changes are often necessary as structured decision-making tools are incorporated into practice. Over time, as implementation has progressed, some sites have expanded their management teams or included additional stakeholders on work groups formed to address specific topics (e.g., development of a disposition matrix).

The management teams have had a range of responsibilities, including helping to outline the vision for how evidence-based decision-making will be incorporated into the existing juvenile justice system and defining goals and objectives for achieving that vision. In addition, the management teams have met regularly to monitor implementation progress and recommend organizational, procedural, and policy changes necessary for successful implementation. These tasks have included the following types of activities:

- Gauging the level of staff and stakeholder support for implementing an evidence-based decision-making platform that involves the routine use of structured decision-making tools and practices;
- Educating staff and stakeholders about the structured decision-making tools that compose the evidence-based decision-making platform to encourage buy-in;
- Guaranteeing that staff receive the training--including booster training--necessary to ensure that the tools are implemented and used with fidelity;
- Developing quality assurance (QA) procedures for monitoring the validity and reliability of the tools, defining and measuring outcomes, and recommending procedures and policies to align policies and practices to support evidence-based decision-making;
- Ensuring the availability and quality of data necessary to implement the structured decision-making tools and processes, evaluate outcomes, and guide policy development;
- Communicating regularly with juvenile justice stakeholders to review progress, celebrate successes, and address barriers; and
- Building partnerships with stakeholders and providers involved in the juvenile justice system to establish mechanisms for routine sharing of information and align local and state policies and practices to support the evidence-based platform.

D. A Structure that Facilitates Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Given the challenges of implementing the components of an evidence-based, decision-making platform, states and local jurisdictions that have centralized juvenile justice systems in which decision-making regarding the supervision and treatment of youth is the responsibility of a single agency, and in which data sharing is well-integrated across youth-serving agencies, may find it easier to implement an evidence-based platform than ones in which decision-making is decentralized (e.g., states in which local jurisdictions have substantial autonomy to make decisions regarding treatment and services).

Nonetheless, sites with decentralized juvenile justice systems have also experienced implementation success. For example, recognizing the need for statewide coordination of county efforts to adopt evidence-based practices, three state agencies in Pennsylvania—the Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission, the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers, and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency—formed a partnership to develop the state’s JJSES, which has helped to consolidate the many different evidence-based practices in use across the state and incorporate them into a comprehensive statewide strategy. In addition, as part of the consolidation process, the enabling legislation of the Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission was amended to require the agency to make recommendations to judges concerning evidence-based programs and practices, and the purpose clause of the State’s Juvenile Act was amended to require that courts employ evidence-based practices whenever possible.

E. A History of Using Validated Risk and Needs Assessment Tools

As discussed earlier, risk and needs information is the key building block of evidence-based decision-making. It is central to matching youth to the level of supervision and types of services likely to result in improved youth outcomes; it is a vital part of the SPEP™ process; it is essential to case planning and treatment; and it is critical to assessing recidivism outcomes. Consequently, to successfully implement an evidence-based decision-making platform, it is a great advantage if a jurisdiction has experience using a valid risk and needs assessment instrument. Ideally, that experience includes having staff who are trained to conduct the assessments and use the information to guide decisions regarding supervision and services for youth; a commitment to providing booster trainings to guard against implementation drift; QA procedures to ensure that staff use the tools consistently and appropriately over time; and regularly scheduled meetings with stakeholders to educate them about the use of risk and needs information and obtain their buy-in for using the information to guide decisions about supervision and treatment. Optimally, a jurisdiction that plans to launch an evidence-based decision-making platform will also have historical data on assessed youth that it can use to inform the development of its disposition matrix, generate SPEP™ scores, and evaluate outcomes.

F. Commitment to Workforce Development

Implementing an evidence-based decision-making platform inevitably transforms the way that juvenile justice agencies operate with associated changes in organizational structure, staffing requirements, and performance expectations. For example, in the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, probation agencies have hired and/or trained staff to complete the technical assistance, data collection, and analytic tasks necessary to support the SPEP™ process. They have created or modified quality assurance units to monitor the fidelity with which structured decision-making tools are implemented and used over time, and to recommend ways to incorporate the information produced by those tools at critical points in decision-making. In many instances, these agencies have also expanded their technical staff and/or created data systems to analyze outcome data and report results to stakeholders. Some

jurisdictions have also added the accurate and consistent use of evidence-based tools to their list of staff performance measures.

G. The Ability to Support Implementation Through Data Collection and Analysis

Implementation of an evidence-based decision-making platform requires that jurisdictions are able to compile accurate and complete data to support the use of the various structured decision-making tools. Ideally, at the outset of implementation, these data are readily available in a robust automated data system. However, the experiences of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites suggest that some jurisdictions will start implementation by having to combine data that are hand-collected from youth case files with data from existing automated systems. That process can be very time-consuming.

Not surprisingly, in the course of implementation, most of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have realized that they need to automate additional data to support an evidence-based decision-making platform. In some sites, automation has required relatively modest enhancements, such as adding information on dosage to the existing automated data systems; in others, it has resulted in significant changes to the jurisdiction's computer hardware and software, staffing levels, and analytic capabilities. Although ultimately very beneficial, these more significant changes have taken several years to accomplish.

Some sites have established state centers that support the use of evidence-based programs and practices (Thomas et al., 2016). For example, since 2008, Pennsylvania's Evidence-based Prevention Intervention and Support Center (EPISCenter) has helped organizations and local jurisdictions implement evidence-based programs and use evidence-based tools and processes such as the SPEPTM to prevent delinquency and promote positive youth development.

H. A Commitment to Quality Assurance

Successful implementation of an evidence-based, decision-making platform requires ongoing monitoring to ensure that evidence-based tools are used with fidelity and incorporated appropriately and consistently in decision-making. Some of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites have created QA units to provide that function. These units are responsible for such things as monitoring the case planning process to determine whether case plans account appropriately for a youth's criminogenic needs, tracking how staff use disposition and service matrices to make recommendations regarding supervision and services, and providing oversight to the SPEPTM process and the related performance improvement process. In some instances, QA staff also recommend policies and procedures for improving staff training, collecting and analyzing data, information-sharing with staff and stakeholders, and aligning systems to support evidence-based decision-making.

VI. Sustainability

Juvenile justice reform initiatives must, of necessity, be developed and moved forward by a small group of champions—possibly a single person—with the vision, positioning, and influence to bring about change. Often this is the top administrator, or a team of top administrators in the juvenile justice system. Implementing or expanding an evidence-based decision-making platform is no exception. As noted above, leadership is a critical ingredient for successful implementation of such a platform. Once implementation is complete, or as complete as feasible under the prevailing circumstances, however, there are many forces that foster drift back to pre-reform practices. Those prior practices are typically well engrained in a system and may be preferred by many personnel. Attention may wander from the key tasks required by the implementation under the influence of other demands. Turnover is often high in juvenile justice systems and new staff may not be adequately trained in the new procedures. And reform fatigue may motivate some personnel to simply wait out the reform initiative while investing minimal effort in compliance or even to undertake active sabotage.

Sustaining implementation of an evidence-based decision-making platform requires offsetting these regressive forces. In overview, that means institutionalizing the new practices and procedures, and the associated quality control monitoring, in the juvenile justice system in a way that makes them simply the way business is done in that system rather than aspects of a particular initiative from a small group of champions whose tenure with the system will inevitably be limited. There are multiple elements that may be relevant to this endeavor and no one of them is likely to be sufficient by itself. At the broadest level, having the key elements of the evidence-based platform written into legislative statute along with accountability for maintaining those elements can have a powerful influence on sustainability. In a similar vein, those elements can be built into whatever formal documents establish policy for the system, such as the plans and blueprints described above, as well as related procedure manuals and orientation and training materials used for new personnel.

On a more workaday routine basis, all personnel, of course, should be trained to fulfill their respective roles in the evidence-based decision-making platform, and receive refresher training as needed. That in itself, however, is unlikely to be sufficient to sustain the relevant practices and procedures if staff are not held accountable for maintaining those practices and procedures. Establishing accountability requires, first, that the required practices and procedures are monitored. Depending on the role of the respective personnel, this may require spot-checking performance, examining electronic records (e.g., completeness of risk assessment data), or appropriate supervision by an administrator. Feedback from that monitoring can then be used to initiate corrective action when drift from the appropriate performance occurs. In addition, including assessment of the required procedures and practices in the employee performance evaluation system can send a clear message about the importance of maintaining the new arrangements.

The ability of these undertakings to sustain evidence-based reform, however, will be compromised if there is not a consistent, positive message from the top administrative officials supporting an organizational culture in which key decisions are made with input from relevant data and there is respect for evidence and the structured decision-making tools that help translate that evidence into practice.

VII. Conclusion

A great deal of research has accumulated in recent decades that has implications for improving juvenile justice practice in ways that produce better outcomes for youth and for the community in a cost-effective manner. It would be unrealistic, however, to expect juvenile justice administrators to become familiar enough with that large body of research to be able to extract the actionable findings and translate them into practice in their agencies. Fortunately, there is a readily available bridge between that research and juvenile justice practice in the form of structured decision-making tools that are based on the research but configured in a way that makes them workable for routine use in juvenile justice systems. The evidence-based decision-making platform described here consists of an integrated set of such tools that are focused on the most central objective of a juvenile justice system—minimizing further offending by the juveniles served.

The key element in attaining that objective is effective behavior change programs in which youth participate under a level of supervision that holds them accountable for their problem behavior without being so punitive as to make that behavior worse. The SPEP™ provides a way to identify effective programs and, equally important, guide improvement of existing programs to make them more effective. But juveniles must still be matched to the programs and the levels of supervision that are optimal for reducing recidivism. Risk and needs assessment can guide those decisions, especially when incorporated into a disposition matrix constructed to sort juveniles according to the combination of supervision level and treatment intensity expected to produce the lowest reoffense rates.

While the tools and procedures that constitute the evidence-based decision-making platform are straightforward in concept, experience in the JJSIP, JJRRI, and other similar projects has highlighted the extent to which changes in organizational culture and routine operating procedures are required to implement and sustain this platform in a juvenile justice system. The challenge for juvenile justice systems, therefore, is not so much one of knowing what to do to optimize their impact on the delinquent behavior of the youth they serve. Rather, the challenge is bringing all parts of the system into alignment around the tasks, tools, procedures, and policies required to do so. Drawing on experience providing technical assistance and general facilitation to this process in the JJSIP and JJRRI projects particularly, we have attempted to describe both the basics of an evidence-based decision-making platform for juvenile justice as well as the preconditions, leadership, and organizational processes required to implement and sustain it.

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