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Youth Reoffending: Prevalence and Predictive Risk Factors in Two States

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The Youth Protective Factors Study: Effective Supervision and Services Based on Risks, Strengths, and Development

The Youth Protective Factors Study is an unprecedented multistate, multiyear examination of which risk and protective factors matter most when it comes to reoffending—particularly for more serious offenses that involve physical harm to another person (person offenses)—for youth ages 10 to 23 in the juvenile justice system. This brief is the first in a series that shares key findings to guide jurisdictions on research-based juvenile justice supervision, case planning, and service strategies to improve public safety and youth outcomes. These findings are especially pertinent during a time of rising concerns about youth crime, violence, and victimization.

This brief is based on analysis of over 32,000 youth who had a new delinquency or status offense complaint over 3 years (2015–2017) in 2 states and received a risk assessment from the probation department. Most of the youth ended up on some form of supervision. Supervision could have included involvement in a diversion program, informal supervision, probation, a secure placement, or any combination of the above, and incorporates the time from their risk assessment until their case was closed (including any supervision extensions). Researchers obtained the records of all new juvenile court petitions and adult charges for these youth during supervision and for an average 2.5-year post-supervision follow-up period. The study analyzed recidivism during and after supervision, including for person offenses (offenses ranging from simple assault to robbery and homicide), and identified which risk factors were most associated with reoffending for youth overall and of different ages (see [Appendix](#) for details).

Key Findings

Key Finding 1

Most youth referred to the juvenile justice system were assessed as low or moderate risk to reoffend. The majority of these youth did not reoffend after supervision, and of those who did, most did not commit a new serious offense.

Both states that participated in the study have used validated risk assessments prior to disposition for years but differ in when they conduct these assessments. In State 1, most youth receive a risk assessment as part of a pre-adjudication intake process before a diversion or dismissal decision is made. Of these youth, approximately 57 percent were assessed as low risk; 38 percent as moderate risk; and 5 percent as high risk to reoffend. In State 2, risk assessments are conducted later in the court process, typically post-adjudication and prior to disposition; thus, many of these youth end up on probation or placed out of home. Even in this state, 27 percent of youth were assessed as low risk to reoffend, 51 percent were moderate risk, and only 22 percent were high risk.

Reflecting the low risk level of the youth referred to the juvenile justice system in both states, 79 percent and 65 percent of these youth, respectively, did *not* receive *any* new juvenile court petitions or adult criminal charges within approximately 2.5 years after system supervision ended. And only 7 percent and 16 percent, respectively, of the thousands of youth in the study across the 2 states received a new petition or adult charge for a person offense within this timeframe.

Risk assessment scores generally predicted reoffending after supervision, with higher-risk youth more likely to reoffend and commit person offenses than low- and moderate-risk youth. Yet only 14 percent of high-risk youth in state 1 and 31 percent in state 2 received a petition or adult charge for a new person offense. Among this group, the most common person offense was simple assault (36 percent of new person offenses in state 1 and 66 percent in state 2), typically the least serious type of person offense (school fight, domestic conflict, etc.).

Table 1: Recidivism Rates for Person Offenses Post-Supervision, by State

Risk Level	State 1	State 2
Overall (N = 28,018)	7.4%	15.7%
Low (N = 17,513)	6.0%	9.8%
Moderate (N = 8,282)	10.6%	20.5%
High (N = 2,223)	13.7%	31.0%

As illustrated in Table 1, the two states showed substantial differences in post-supervision recidivism rates for person offenses, even across the same risk levels.

It's difficult to compare states, and many factors might have caused these differences. However, one factor that might account for lower recidivism rates in State 1 is that supervision and services were associated with a reduction in youth's risk of reoffending, as illustrated in Table 2. In contrast, in State 2, there were no observable differences in youth's risk levels from the start to the end of system supervision.*

Table 2: Risk Levels at the Beginning and End of Supervision for Youth, by State

State 1: Risk Level	Beginning of Supervision	End of Supervision
Low	57.3%	73.5%
Moderate	37.5%	22.3%
High	5.2%	4.2%

State 2: Risk Level	Beginning of Supervision	End of Supervision
Low	26.9%	27.0%
Moderate	51.1%	46.9%
High	22.0%	26.1%

Implications

- **Risk assessments are important tools to help guide system supervision, service, and resource allocation decisions.** The two states used different risk assessment tools in different ways. Although the tools' predictive power for recidivism during and after supervision varied, overall risk assessment scores helped predict reoffending in both states.
- **Jurisdictions should focus juvenile justice system resources on youth who are assessed as high risk to reoffend.** Most youth in the study did not receive a new juvenile petition or adult charge for a person offense almost three years after system supervision. This was true even for youth assessed as high risk to reoffend. At the same time, high-risk youth were significantly more likely to commit a person offense than low- and moderate-risk youth. Thus, study findings bolster existing research that shows that jurisdictions can use resources most efficiently to improve public safety and youth outcomes by concentrating system supervision and services on this

* State 2 also had a slightly longer post-supervision follow-up period (average 3 months longer than State 1), which might also have contributed to the differences in recidivism rates.

higher-risk population and by diverting lower-risk youth from formal system processing.¹

- **State juvenile justice policy and practice can measurably improve long-term public safety and youth outcomes.** State 1 has implemented a comprehensive juvenile justice strategy focused on evidence-based programs and practices for 15 years. Perhaps as

a reflection of this approach, youth supervised by the state saw their risk to reoffend decline, and post-supervision reoffending rates overall and for person offenses were low. As some policymakers push for sanctions-based approaches, this finding is a reminder that states can reap long-term public safety gains by remaining committed to research-based, data-driven practices.

Key Finding 2

The most prevalent risk factors among youth coming into the juvenile justice system were not the factors most likely to predict more serious reoffending after system supervision.

Across both states, substance use was one of the top two most common risk factors for all youth referred to court at the time of their initial risk assessment. Likewise, unstructured or poor use of leisure time was the single most common risk factor among all youth in State 1 as well as a common risk factor in State 2. Despite their prevalence, however, these two risk factors were *not* strong predictors of reoffending for person offenses after supervision. In fact, substance use was the least significant predictor out of all risk factors for person reoffending post-supervision in both states.

In contrast, the risk factors that best predicted recidivism for new person offenses after supervision were not the most prevalent ones among youth. These factors included past aggressive behaviors, personality and attitudes that condone crime, negative peer influences, familial supervision problems, and school behavioral problems.

Table 3: Top Risk Factors that Predicted Post-Supervision Person/Violent Reoffending by State

State 1: Top Risk Factors	State 2: Top Risk Factors
Personality and Behavioral Problems	Family Problems
Behavioral Problems in Schools	Skills and Problem-Solving
Family Problems, Negative Peers	Attitudes on Authority/Responsibility

These study findings are consistent with prior research that has shown that, among dynamic risk factors, negative peers, personality, and pro-crime attitudes are the strongest predictors of youth recidivism.² These findings also highlight the importance of family dynamics and parental supervision as significant drivers of recidivism. At the same time, research has shown that jurisdictions struggle to ensure that youth receive services specifically to address these underlying, often less transparent, needs (attitudes, thought patterns, etc.) that drive many delinquent behaviors.³

Implications

- **Jurisdictions should rethink the utility of “one-size-fits-all” supervision conditions and requirements for youth, such as mandatory drug testing.** Research increasingly shows that adopting one-size-fits-all probation conditions and supervision approaches for all youth is not an efficient use of staff time or resources. This is because surveillance alone has little to no impact on reoffending; adolescents are unable, developmentally, to make progress on multiple goals; and standardized approaches don’t address the varying risk factors that contribute to youth’s delinquent behavior.⁴ This study makes a valuable contribution to this research and bolsters the case for condition setting and case planning reform by suggesting that the more easily observed behaviors that probation conditions are typically designed to address—such as drug use, curfew compliance, and prosocial activity participation—may matter *the least* when it comes to mitigating longer-term, serious reoffending.

- Probation and corrections leaders should prioritize case planning, service delivery, and associated resource allocation strategies that target what matters most for serious reoffending. Research has shown that services such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy, and skill-building activities can reduce recidivism for higher-risk youth⁵ by targeting the risk factors shown by this study to

be most strongly associated with serious offending. Yet, in many communities, these services don't exist, they're understaffed, and/or youth and families face substantial barriers to accessing them, such as a lack of transportation. Policymakers concerned about youth crime should support and scale these community-based services and address barriers to service participation and completion.

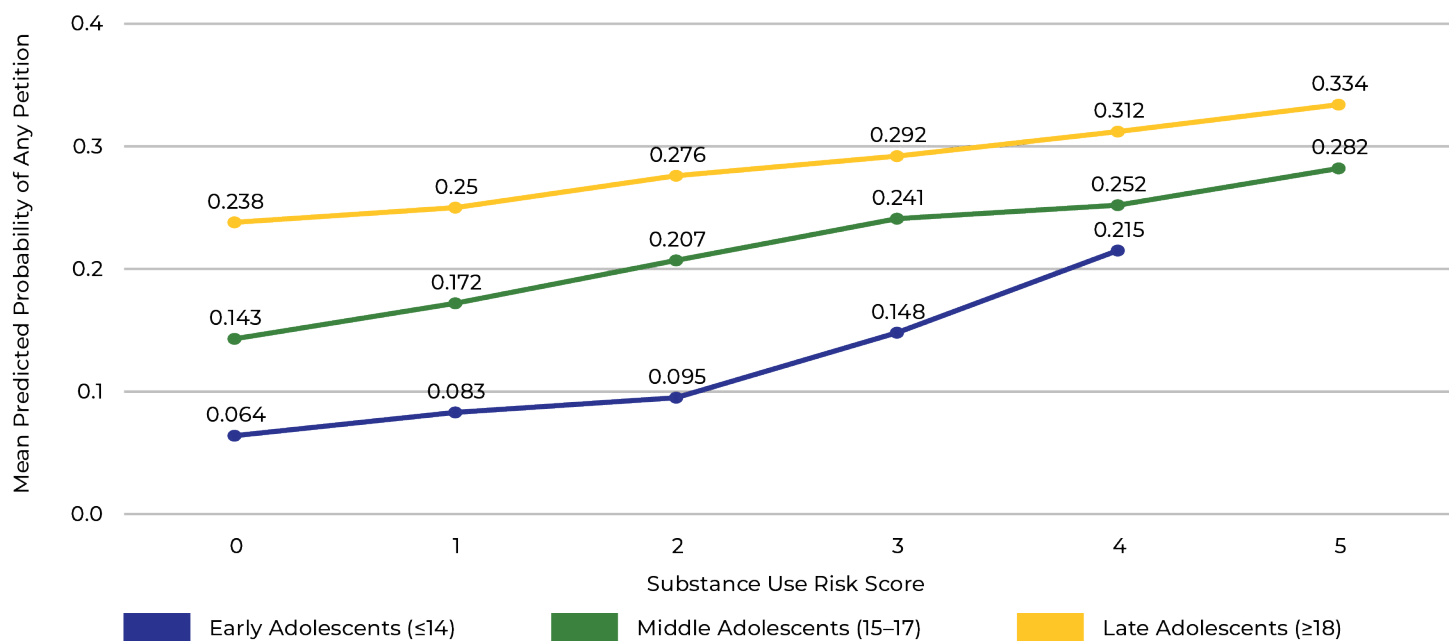
Key Finding 3

Although substance use weakly predicted person offending overall, more serious substance use was a relatively strong predictor of person offending among younger adolescents.

Justice systems have given increased attention in recent years to the developmental differences between adolescents and young adults and the need for supervision and service strategies that are tailored accordingly. However, jurisdictions and the field have given short shrift to the developmental differences among adolescents, and whether and how, for example, youth ages 12 or 13 may require different recidivism-reduction strategies than youth ages 16 or 17. This study makes a unique contribution to this underexamined question.

In both states, substance use was a poor predictor of more serious reoffending after supervision for all youth. However, while older adolescents are more likely to reoffend and more likely to use substances than younger youth, substance use was a statistically significant predictor for any type of recidivism as well as recidivism for person offenses after supervision for adolescents ages 14 and under compared to 15 and older youth. As illustrated in Figure 1, as substance use scores increased, recidivism rates increased more sharply for younger adolescents compared to older youth. As such, courts and probation departments should see substance use as a more pronounced public safety red flag for younger adolescents on probation even though it's less prevalent among this population.

Figure 1: Substance Use Risk Scores and Post-Supervision Petition Probability by Age Group (State 1)



Implications

- **Jurisdictions should give particular attention and support to younger adolescents in the juvenile justice system who are misusing substances.** While more research is required to draw firm conclusions, the study's findings suggest that courts and probation departments should ensure younger adolescents who engage in regular drug use are prioritized for community-based substance use treatment. This does not mean that juvenile justice systems should adopt blanket drug testing policies for all younger youth or refer them all to drug education programs. Instead, probation agencies should carefully use risk and needs screening and assessment tools to identify when substance use is a risk factor for younger youth; determine what is driving individual youth's drug use; match them with research-based programs; track and measure treatment progress and completion rates; and help families develop sustainable relapse prevention strategies that are based on incentives and community-based supports rather than sanctions and placement. In contrast, among older youth, experimentation with substances becomes more normative behavior and there may be limited value in giving it much attention over more important issues like parental supervision, personality and behavioral problems, and attitudes condoning crime.

Appendix

For this study, researchers acquired a retrospective sample of all youth who

1. Received a new complaint/referral in 2 states over 3 years (Jan. 1, 2015–Dec. 31, 2017) and
2. Who were given a risk assessment used by the probation department in the state.

We obtained the records of new juvenile court petitions and adult charges for this sample for a minimum 2-year follow-up period, up to December 31, 2019. The average recidivism data tracking lengths (follow-up) for both states were comparable: for State 1, the sample was 3.4 years (Standard Deviation) = 9.85 months), and the State 2 sample was 3.4 years (Standard Deviation = 10.66 months).

The primary goals of the project were to apply the most rigorous and accurate methods for measuring recidivism to do the following:

1. Identify which risk factor domains most strongly predicted person offense recidivism—i.e., *new person petitions or charges*—after juvenile justice supervision. These are offenses that involved actual or attempted physical harm to another person (such as assault, robbery, certain sex offenses, and threats with a weapon).
2. Determine how the predictors of person offense recidivism differed from those for any recidivism.
3. Determine how the strength of these risk factor domains differed depending on age.
4. The researchers used rigorous methods to address limitations in many agency-generated studies of recidivism, including the following:
 - Examining the serious subcategory of “person offense” recidivism separately from the larger category of “any” recidivism and counting only new delinquent offenses in any recidivism (excluding truancy and other status offenses, violations, etc.)
 - Excluding youth who were lost at follow-up (for instance, transferred out of state or were waived to the adult system) or in a placement out of the community during the entire follow-up period
 - Using survival analyses (a statistical approach that calculates the amount of time a young person can stay in the community i.e. “survive” without reoffending) to account for variability in the amount of time that each youth had an opportunity to reoffend and any time spent in a placement out of the community

- Controlling for differences in recidivism outcomes across sites that may be due to probation office-level characteristics (such as different policing practices) by including a cluster term (i.e., including a variable that indicates which jurisdiction each data point belongs to, so that potential grouping effects can be considered in analyses)
- Isolating youth's natural reoffending pattern, without the interference of services and supervision by examining recidivism occurring after juvenile justice supervision had ended (post-supervision recidivism) separately from recidivism occurring while on supervision
- Using results from the last or most recent risk and needs assessment conducted for each youth (close-out risk assessment) to predict post-supervision recidivism, rather than using the assessment conducted at intake

In addition to examining youth's recidivism after juvenile justice supervision, we also separately investigated recidivism that occurred during their supervision. We did so by statistically controlling for the number of days youth spent on intensive supervision. We defined *supervision* broadly as the time during which youth were involved with the juvenile justice agency, from the date of their petition until their case was completely closed (after including any extensions in supervision due to new offenses). Thus, supervision may include involvement in a diversion program, informal supervision, probation, a secure placement, or a combination of these.

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