



Research Matters

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Tools to Identify and Assess the Risk of Offending Among Youth

Issue: Can tools to identify and assess the risk of offending among youth be used and even recommended as part of prevention programs?

Context: The literature on crime prevention programs is increasingly focused on the importance of targeting the right youth for the right programs and providing services and treatment that address their specific needs. The use of identification and assessment tools would appear to be a promising approach to meet these expectations.

Method: A literature review was conducted to identify tools that have shown promise in identifying and assessing the level of risk and the needs of youth.

Results: Professionals specializing in youth crime prevention work essentially with a clientele that has not been involved with the criminal justice system. Most identification and assessment tools used in youth crime prevention programs are based on the youth psychological and cognitive development.

Description: The tools used in the field of child and adolescent psychology are mainly geared towards measuring the degree to which children and youth have acquired social skills and abilities, and exhibit early signs of cognitive and behavioural disorders. Tools used in prevention programs often serve to identify youth at risk of delinquency who would benefit from a program or referral to other resources. These tools are commonly known as

screening tools. Other types of tools (referred to as risk assessment tools) are used to measure the risk of offending and develop a customized intervention plan for the youth based on an overall assessment of his/her situation.

The screening and risk assessment tools used in prevention programs for young offenders are based on an actuarial assessment of the risk to re-offend. This means that the assessment is based on a statistical model that considers the presence of various risk factors to arrive at a level of risk for re-offending of low, moderate or high. Other identification and risk assessment tools are more focused on a clinical assessment of risk, which means that although risk factor models are used, practitioners also rely on their professional judgment to determine the risk youth pose. The use of these types of tools in prevention programs is recommended as they help in identifying warning signs for delinquency so that action can be taken to prevent behaviour from escalating.

Application: Screening tools are used primarily in programs supported by schools or local communities. These tools help refer youth to appropriate programs, resources and services. By identifying at-risk youth who would benefit from such programs, these tools build the foundation for a rigorous, targeted prevention approach. These tools can therefore be used to intervene early with vulnerable children and youth to reduce the risk that they engage in criminal behaviour.

Risk assessment tools are mainly used in the juvenile criminal justice system, schools, and health and addiction treatment services to provide a general picture of the youth's current and past circumstances. Such analysis helps identify key risk factors and assess the youth's overall risk level. This information can then be used to develop a customized and comprehensive intervention plan.

Implications: The use of screening and risk assessment tools in crime prevention programs offers several benefits, but has some limitations. Some of the advantages include, for instance, the fact that the tools help bring into line the various steps required to set up an integrated and consistent prevention plan and allow practitioners to reassess the youth and monitor their progress in the programs. Furthermore, because they are based on facts rather than perceptions, these tools reduce the level of subjectivity in evaluating the level of risk posed by the youth.

In terms of limitations, it should be noted that caution must be used in interpreting the results of these tools to reduce the risk of further stigmatizing an already vulnerable clientele. One must never lose sight of the fact that screening and risk assessment tools are not scientifically infallible or a guarantee of future behaviour. Studies have shown that in some instances an overestimation of the level of risk can lead to the use of more punitive measures against youth. Conversely, underestimating the level of risk may lead to the youth going unnoticed, precluding them from receiving services and programs that would otherwise benefit them.

Therefore, despite their advantages, screening and risk assessment tools should not be regarded as a universal remedy, and practitioners using them must at all times rely on their professional judgment and code of ethics.

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