

Best practices in juvenile justice

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What does the research show?

Any contact with the juvenile justice system increases the risk of recidivism.

- Most youth age out of delinquent behavior with minimal or no intervention, *with little or no impact on public safety.*
- Confinement leads to higher rates of recidivism compared to diversion or probation.
- Adjudicated youth are more likely to be rearrested and less likely to complete school.

Deterrence doesn't work.

- Fear-based punishment strategies are ineffective, and can increase likelihood of recidivism.
- Interventions focused on *support* rather than surveillance yield more positive outcomes

Less restrictive interventions reduce recidivism.

- Severity of offense is **not** a predictor of recidivism.
- Many youth (especially if low risk) will **not** reoffend, even with minimal intervention.
- Residential placements do **not** necessarily improve outcomes.
- Unnecessary placements can cause harm and traumatize youth.
- Mental health disorders and recidivism rates tend to increase as youth move deeper into the legal system.

Differences in youth and adult brains

The most effective interventions for youth take into account how brain development impacts youth's behaviors and decision-making impulses. What appears to be increasingly impulsive and delinquent behaviors may instead be developmentally appropriate thinking that will mature over time as the youth goes through adolescence. Research tells us that:

- Youth **prefer sensory and physical activities** over complex thinking exercises
- **Adolescent brains are poor planners.** They have not developed skills to consider the full consequences of their actions.
- Youth's ability to regulate their behavior and emotions is not fully mature until their 20's. **The latest research supports that the upper range may be 25-30.**

Research has shown that **most youth who exhibit impulsive and sometimes delinquent acts do not carry these behaviors into adulthood.** Given the right amount of positive support, even youth who are at high risk of recidivism can be redirected toward a healthy and successful developmental pathway.

Implications for policy and practice

Interventions should target dynamic risk factors associated with recidivism:

- Targeting these risk factors reduces recidivism.
- Interventions are most effective on the highest risk youth when they target the dynamic needs and risk factors most associated with recidivism.
- If the criminogenic needs are not addressed, youth will be more likely to revert to previous delinquent activities.

Dynamic risks that are amenable to intervention and treatment include:

- Antisocial behavior and aggression
- Substance abuse
- Low connection to peers and school
- Family dysfunction and ineffective parenting
- Poor school or work performance
- Association with delinquent or aggressive peers

Interventions should avoid restrictive settings:

- Prioritize interventions based on level of risk and least restrictive option. The least restrictive intervention appropriate for the youth's level of risk should always be prioritized.
- Whenever possible, diversion from further system involvement should be prioritized, especially for low-risk youth.

Youth
interventions
What do we know?



Research



Brain
development



Policy and practice

Youth are more likely to....

- Not consider consequences
- Take more risks Act impulsively
- Seek high excitement with low effort
- Seek short-term rewards

