

What is a disposition matrix?

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A **disposition matrix** is a tool used to guide decisions about the best way to hold youth accountable for their unlawful behavior, while also supporting the youth's chance for success. The matrix incorporates data-driven best practices and is designed to ensure that youth receive the most appropriate level of supervision and services based on the seriousness of the offense and their risk of recidivism.

The matrix is a critical component of the **Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) approach** to youth justice planning and decision-making. The RNR approach focuses on aligning the delinquent behavior with the level of risk associated with reoffending prior to deciding the most appropriate response. The response is then designed to target the specific dynamic factors (i.e. changeable) and related needs associated with delinquency. These needs are identified through a standardized, objective, and validated risk assessment administered to each youth entering the juvenile system.

Most Serious Presenting Offense	Assessed Risk to Reoffend Level			
	Low Risk to Reoffend	Moderate Risk to Reoffend	Moderate-High Risk to Reoffend	High Risk to Reoffend
Civil Citation Eligible 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

*sample of a disposition matrix from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

By aligning the offense committed with the youth's risk of recidivism, **the disposition matrix provides a range of recommendations regarding the disposition options and appropriate services.** It is typically formatted as a table, with risk level (low, medium, high) forming one axis, and offense level (least serious to most serious) forming the other. Based on the alignment of risk and offenses, different options are presented which follow a graduated sanctions approach consistent with the RNR model.

What are the benefits of a disposition matrix?

Many youth justice jurisdictions around the United States have developed disposition matrices as part of a structured decision-making process designed to meet the needs of youth and enhance their chances of success in life, while also protecting public safety. Benefits of using a disposition matrix tool to guide decision making include:

- More **consistent decision-making across courtrooms** within the same jurisdiction or state.
- More **efficient and effective allocation of resources** to address the highest-risk youth with the most need (*with fewer resources spent on unnecessary services for low-risk youth*).
- **Reduced recidivism rates for youth** who receive dispositions within matrix guidelines.
- **Reduced disparities based on race** and other factors between different populations of youth in similar circumstances

Will a disposition matrix change current practice in juvenile court?

The matrix does not change **Judicial discretion.** It is a tool for decision-makers, not a mandate.

The matrix does not affect the need to **advocate and negotiate at the disposition hearing.** Prosecutors and defense counsel have a continued responsibility to represent their clients interests.

The matrix is designed to further the goal of the **youth justice system** which focuses on holding youth accountable for their behaviors and preserving public safety, **while fostering rehabilitation and future success.**

The matrix is unique to each jurisdiction it represents and is developed through a process that includes feedback and input of all local groups involved in the system. (*i.e. jurists, prosecutors, defense, and service providers*).

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