



EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) is at the core of Pennsylvania's **Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy's (JJSES) Statement of Purpose**, which states:

We dedicate ourselves to working in partnership to enhance the capacity of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system to achieve its balanced and restorative justice mission by:

- Employing **evidence-based practices** with fidelity at every stage of the juvenile justice process;
- Collecting and analyzing the data necessary to measure the results of these efforts; and, with this knowledge,
- Striving to continuously improve the quality of our decisions, services and programs.

EBP is the application of evidence from sound research studies to inform decision-making within processes and systems. Such an approach is common within professions such as medicine, engineering, education, etc. During the past 30 years, a significant body of knowledge has been empirically established regarding which practices, interventions, and treatment approaches work most effectively to reduce recidivism with juvenile offenders.

The use of research evidence enables juvenile justice professionals to determine "what works and what doesn't work".¹ Researchers have identified a set of principles through **meta-analysis** that, if applied to juvenile justice interventions, can reduce recidivism. These principles are referred to as the **Risk-Need-Responsivity (R-N-R)**, plus **Treatment Principles**:

- The **Risk** principle tells us **Who** to target. In order to most effectively use resources and have a greater ability to reduce recidivism, high and moderate risk juveniles should be targeted for interventions.
- The **Need** principle tells us **What** to target. Research has shown that there are certain dynamic risk factors for recidivism or "criminogenic needs" that, if targeted with effective interventions, will reduce recidivism.
- The **Responsivity** principle tells us **How** we target supervision and intervention. It accounts for a juvenile's traits, learning styles and cognitive functioning which can affect the ability to respond most effectively to the intervention.
- The **Treatment** principle tells us **Which** programs should be used based on a juvenile's risk, needs and responsivity. Certain interventions or programs have demonstrated that they are effective in reducing recidivism. Other interventions or programs have proven to be ineffective, if not harmful.

¹Latessa, Edward J., Ph.D., From *Theory to Practice: What Works in Reducing Recidivism?*, University of Cincinnati



The following eight tenets for *effective intervention with juveniles* incorporate the Risk-Need-Responsivity, plus Treatment principles, and are essential considerations as departments and agencies in Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System transform their operations into evidence-based organizations.

- 1. Assess risk and needs using actuarial instruments** – Use assessments to guide case decisions by applying actuarial and statistically valid tools that describe the *who*, the *what* and the *how* of supervision and intervention.
- 2. Enhance intrinsic motivation** – Prepare juveniles for interventions and treatment and keep them engaged by using Motivational Interviewing, strength-based approaches, and incentives and sanctions.
- 3. Target interventions** – Focus upon the identified criminogenic factors that are proven to be linked to future delinquency. Enhance protective factors that serve as barriers to future delinquency and address responsivity factors.
- 4. Develop skill through directed practice** – Use cognitive behavioral interventions and techniques to help moderate and high risk youth learn thinking patterns, skills and behaviors that can reduce their risk of recidivism. Train juvenile probation officers and service providers to deliver and/or reinforce, in the community and family, pro-social skills that youth have learned in treatment groups.
- 5. Increase positive reinforcement** – Use incentives to encourage pro-social attitudes and behavior. Research has shown that a ratio of four to six positive affirmations to every message of disapproval yields the greatest result in having the desired behavior persist.
- 6. Engage ongoing support in natural communities** – Strengthen the influence of pro-social communities in juveniles' lives and support the ability of families to assist youth as they learn pro-social values, attitudes, beliefs, and skills. Involve families as partners whenever possible.
- 7. Measure relevant processes and practices** – Ensure that the department or agency is measuring and documenting key indicators that inform individual staff and the department as a whole whether practices, interventions and programs are performing as intended and have the desired effect. The identification and collection of this type of information is crucial for evidence-based organizations.
- 8. Provide measurement feedback** – Use the analysis of data to provide feedback, evaluate, and make adjustments. Outcomes are more likely to improve if feedback is offered to individuals responsible for providing service, developing policy and managing staff.

Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System's use of the Youth Level of Service (YLS), Motivational Interviewing, Case Planning Principles, Cognitive Behavioral and Skill Development Interventions, Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP) and other aspects of the Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy (JJSES) are Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs), and are grounded in the best research available in the field of juvenile justice.