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Assessing Risk for Re-Offense:

VALIDATING THE WASHINGTON STATE JUVENILE COURT ASSESSMENT

The 1997 Washington State Legislature enacted the Community Juvenile Accountability Act (CJAA) to test the use of “research-based” programs to reduce juvenile offender recidivism. The act required the use of a risk assessment to assign youth to these programs.

The Washington Association of Juvenile Court Administrators worked with the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to develop the Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment (WSJCA). An instrument was drafted following a review of the juvenile delinquency research literature and then modified, based on feedback from an international team of experts. The assessment was revised again following reviews by Washington State juvenile court professionals, including a pilot test with 150 youth.

The resulting 132 item assessment was implemented in 1999 as a two-stage process. The first stage is a pre-screen assessment completed for all youth placed on probation. The pre-screen is a shortened version of the full assessment that quickly indicates whether a youth is of low-, moderate-, or high-risk to re-offend. The second stage, a full assessment, is required only for youth assessed as moderate or high risk on the pre-screen. The full assessment identifies a youth’s risk and protective factor profile to guide rehabilitative efforts.

This report examines the validity of the pre-screen and full assessment. The findings for the pre-screen are these:

- The pre-screen classifies youth into three levels of risk, each with distinctly different recidivism rates. The felony recidivism rate for high-risk youth is nearly three times the rate for low-risk youth. The accuracy of the pre-screen is good and typical of assessments in the literature.
- The pre-screen classification may be improved by re-weighting some existing items and adding items. The juvenile courts will be reviewing possible changes to the pre-screen for the next version of the assessment.

This report documents the validity of the full assessment by showing how strongly each item and domain risk and protective factor score is related to recidivism. This documentation serves as a reference for understanding the relationship between recidivism and any particular item on the full assessment.

Washington juvenile courts can have confidence that their assessment produces a valid risk classification and that the risk and protective factors in the assessment have an empirically demonstrated association with recidivism. As a result, it is appropriate for the courts to use the assessment to assign youth to programs designed to address a youth’s risk profile and to expect that effective programs will reduce risk and increase protective factor scores.