

Overview of the Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform and Recent Demonstration Projects



Jill H. Adams and Madeline Silva

Knowledge about the effectiveness of juvenile justice policy and practice has grown immensely over the past three decades. This knowledge has contributed to the further development of a number of structured decision-making tools, including validated risk and needs assessment instruments and disposition matrices, in addition to evidence-based programs and services. Together, these tools can be integrated as components of an evidence-based decision-making (EBDM) platform to support decisions aimed at improving outcomes for youth at every stage in juvenile justice processing. This bulletin describes the components of the EBDM platform implemented by jurisdictions involved in two recent demonstration projects – the Juvenile Justice Systems Improvement Project (JJSIP) and the Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Initiative. It summarizes key findings from a longer report on EBDM entitled *Juvenile Justice System Improvement: Implementing an Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform*, which is available [here](#).¹

Jurisdictions that implement an EBDM platform aim to produce better outcomes for youth served by the juvenile justice system, promote public safety, and reduce costs. Typically, lowered recidivism rates serve as a good indicator that programs and services are meeting the first two of these goals, so jurisdictions implementing an EBDM platform must focus on defining and tracking recidivism as part of their process. It is noteworthy, however, that an

EBDM platform does not require implementation of brand name model programs, which can be expensive and may not match all of the needs of a particular juvenile justice system. Instead, jurisdictions can use the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol™ (SPEP™) to assess the expected effectiveness of their existing programs to reduce recidivism. While there are similar quality assurance tools, both JJSIP and JJRRI utilize the SPEP™. The SPEP™ can be used with many “home grown” and “one off” programs as well as brand name programs, and it can also be used to guide improvement in program effectiveness as part of a continuous quality improvement process.

Even with the availability of evidence-based decision-making tools, juvenile justice policymakers and practitioners still face the challenge of aligning the three major components and effectively implementing a cohesive EBDM platform within their systems. To address these issues, the jurisdictions involved in JJSIP and JJRRI received considerable training and technical assistance (TA) from a team of consultants. In 2011, the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University (CJJR), in partnership with the Peabody Research Institute (PRI) at Vanderbilt University, launched the first of these projects after issuing a call for proposals from states interested in implementing evidence-based decision-making platforms. One year later, with funding from the Office of

¹ *Juvenile Justice System Improvement: Implementing an Evidence-Based Decision-Making Platform*, by Mark Lipsey, Catherine Conly, Gabrielle Chapman, and Shay Bilchik. NCJ 250443. 2017.

Management and Budget's (OMB) Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) solicited proposals for participation in JJRRI, with the aim of providing "funds to three state and/or local administering agencies for juvenile justice to develop and implement an integrated set of evidence-based and cost-measurement tools."²

Through these initiatives, CJJR, OJJDP and PRI worked with participating sites to align their juvenile justice policies and practices to support the implementation of an EBDM platform. Through JJSIP, four states – Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, and Pennsylvania³ – received one week of intensive training on site at Georgetown, followed by 18 months of field TA from CJJR and PRI, with site-specific extensions to the effort. The three JJRRI sites – Delaware, Iowa, and Milwaukee County, Wisconsin – received training and TA from CJJR and PRI for four years (a three-year initial grant period followed by a one-year extension). This model of intensive training followed by field TA provided participating jurisdictions with the knowledge and technical support they needed to resolve challenges that arose while developing and implementing their EBDM platforms.

Components of the EBDM Platform

Risk and needs assessment instruments, disposition matrices, and evidence-based programs and services make up the central components of the EBDM platform developed through JJSIP and JJRRI.

Risk and Needs Assessments

Validated risk and needs assessments evaluate the static risk factors and criminogenic needs (also referred to as dynamic risk factors) that research has found to be predictive of recidivism for juvenile offenders. These assessment tools enable juvenile justice personnel to make accurate, evidence-based evaluations of each youth's risk factors and needs, rather than relying on intuition or "gut feelings" about a particular youth in making disposition recommendations. They are typically superior to clinical assessments in predicting recidivism and,

when used uniformly across juveniles, result in greater consistency in the treatment of youth served. Youth are also regularly assessed to determine whether their risk of recidivism has changed while they are receiving services. In practice, when combined with the expertise of a caseworker, this objective tool has the potential to result in the best outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Disposition Matrix

Disposition matrices incorporate information on youth risk level, offense, level of supervision, and available programs and services. Information on offense, risk level, and needs is used to match each youth to the level of supervision and types of services that will maximize recidivism reduction. In the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, decision-makers have taken a number of steps to tailor the disposition matrices to their individual juvenile justice systems. For example, one site consulted historical recidivism data, differentiated by youth risk level, type of offense, and service placement in an effort to ensure that their matrix relied on evidence as well as stakeholder experience. To further strengthen the accuracy of their matrix, many of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites received feedback from various stakeholders, either before drafting or before finalizing the tool. One site also took the step of traveling to meet with stakeholders throughout the state to ensure that the matrix reflected a broad consensus on how youth should be matched to supervision level and services.

In 2015, researchers examined the effectiveness of the Florida JJSIP with a sample of over 38,000 youth offenders and found promising results⁴. Youth placed within recommended range of the matrix had a significantly lower recidivism rate (19.4%) compared to youth placed outside of the suggested range (38.7%). This held true for youth in the study regardless of their overall risk to re-offend level. At all risk-levels, youth placed within the matrix's suggested range had lower recidivism rates than those of identical risk level receiving dispositions/placements that deviated from the suggested range.

² OJJDP FY 2012 Juvenile Justice Reform and Reinvestment Demonstration Program (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, July 24, 2012), 3.

³ This bulletin draws more heavily from the experiences of Florida and Pennsylvania, as Arizona and Connecticut both had somewhat slower implementation timelines for their respective EBDM platforms.

⁴ Baglivio, M. T., Greenwald, M. A., & Russell, M. (2015). Assessing the implications of a structured decision-making tool for recidivism in a statewide analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 14, 5-49. Doi: 10.1111/1745-9133.12108.

Evidence-Based Programs and Services

The final component of the EBDM platform consists of programs and services for youth that are evidence-based. As noted earlier, even if jurisdictions are not using brand name programs, they can use the SPEP™ to evaluate many of the programs and services that they offer. The SPEP™ is grounded in the available research evidence supporting the use of general program types, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy or mentoring, among many more. In creating a rating for a particular program, the SPEP™ considers program type, quality of service delivery, service dosage, and risk level of youth. The initial SPEP™ assessment also provides guidance for program improvement, rather than simply providing a one-time rating on program effectiveness. SPEP™ implementation requires that a jurisdiction have access to valid program- and youth-level data (most importantly on youth risk level and service dosage), providing further incentive to ensure that every juvenile justice jurisdiction uses a validated risk and needs assessment instrument in a timely manner as part of its evidence-based decision-making platform.

Lessons Learned from JJSIP and JJRRI

While the components of the EBDM platform outlined above may seem conceptually straightforward, the JJSIP and JJRRI sites found that the process of implementing them was actually quite challenging. Their experiences illustrated that a strong capacity to collect and analyze data, ongoing attention to quality assurance, strong leadership, commitment to workforce development, and collaboration across interdisciplinary teams were all essential in implementing and sustaining an EBDM platform.

Strong Data Capacity

In particular, the sites encountered challenges in compiling the accurate and complete youth- and program-level data required to conduct a SPEP™ evaluation of their programs and services. Some sites had to combine data from automated systems

with hand-collected data from youth case files. These experiences emphasized the importance of compiling accurate and complete data in an easily accessible way. Ideally, a jurisdiction or state interested in implementing an EBDM platform will begin that process with strong data capacity already in place – or will be prepared to develop that capacity.

Attention to Quality Assurance

In implementing an EBDM platform, it is also important for jurisdictions to regularly verify that evidence-based tools are used with fidelity and integrated consistently into the decision-making process. The JJSIP and JJRRI sites found that they had to either create or modify quality assurance units in order to ensure that their structured decision-making tools were being appropriately implemented and used. These QA units monitor whether risk level and needs are properly accounted for in the case planning process and how disposition matrices are used to match youth to services. They also play an important role in the SPEP™ process and related program improvement efforts, and make recommendations regarding how the information produced by the EBDM tools should be used at critical steps in the decision-making process. While the creation of a new QA unit may not be necessary in every jurisdiction, as some already have QA units in place, the JJSIP and JJRRI sites still found it necessary to expand the staff responsible for completing the TA, data collection, and other analytic tasks required to support the successful implementation of an EBDM platform. Additionally, several sites found it necessary to develop new data systems to facilitate the analysis and cross-agency sharing of collected data.

Leadership, Workforce Development, and Interdisciplinary Teams

Culture change played an essential role in successful EBDM platform implementation and juvenile justice system alignment. Successful JJSIP and JJRRI sites had leaders who promoted system-wide change in a sensitive, careful way. These leaders involved staff

When it came time for one JJRRI site to collect system-wide data in order to evaluate their programs using the SPEP™, they realized that their agency's policy of conducting risk assessments for each youth under supervision every 60 days was not being followed. Further, even when assessments were completed, the risk data were not being entered into the data system in a consistent manner. The site took steps to address these issues, ensuring that data on youth risk level would be collected and entered regularly and consistently. Their experience is in many ways similar to that of other sites, where administrative staff found there was a gap between their data collection policies and the ways in which information was actually being compiled.

in the development and implementation of the EBDM platform, trained staff on how to use evidence-based tools, and allocated resources to ensure that staff members were not overloaded with the tasks required to implement and sustain a new platform. Additionally, successful teams were interdisciplinary, comprising various juvenile justice system stakeholders. This inclusion of the perspectives of a range of stakeholders proved necessary in facilitating systems alignment.

In an effort to promote systems alignment regarding their EBDM platform, one JJRRI site's juvenile justice agency invited representatives from several different provider organizations to serve as "Program Ambassadors." The Ambassadors meet regularly with juvenile justice agency staff to discuss an array of issues related to the implementation and sustained use of EBDM tools. They advise on how to collect reliable risk and needs data, share youth and program data within and across agencies and organizations, ensure that staff are properly trained on how to use decision-making tools, and perform quality assurance. The Ambassadors also communicate with one another and with other providers to ensure that the full community of provider organizations understand the work being done, what is expected of them, and the progress being made system-wide.

Strategies for Systems Reform

Finally, many of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites realized that they required overarching strategies for systems reform and alignment to guide the EBDM platform implementation process. One site already had a guiding document in place when their participation in JJSIP began, which they updated throughout the process of implementing the various components of their EBDM platform. Another site also developed a guiding document for their work, although they did so contemporaneously with their implementation of structured decision-making tools. Two sites reached the conclusion that they needed similar frameworks articulating their visions and plans for reform, and both created blueprint documents describing their vision and plans at later points in the implementation process.

Conclusion

As highlighted in the JJSIP and JJRRI examples discussed above, the lessons learned through these demonstration programs have been profound. CJJR and PRI deepened their appreciation of the potential of the EBDM platform to transform and improve juvenile justice systems nationwide. Individually, each of the tools that make up the platform can help serve youth in a manner that both produces good outcomes for youth and promotes public safety. The JJSIP and JJRRI experiences, however, have led CJJR and PRI to believe that the EBDM platform may be able to further improve the outcomes achieved when using each tool alone.

CJJR and PRI also found that the combination of intensive training and on-site TA worked well for the JJSIP and JJRRI sites, as it provided them with the knowledge they needed to begin the EBDM platform implementation process, as well as support and expertise to rely on in navigating the challenges they encountered throughout that process. CJJR and PRI will be offering an EBDM Certificate Program in an effort to include more jurisdictions in the important work of translating available juvenile justice research into practice. Participating sites will have an opportunity similar to that of the JJSIP and JJRRI sites to receive five days of training at Georgetown University followed by one year of TA to assess site readiness and prepare for implementation.

Questions? Contact Us!

**Georgetown University
McCourt School of Public Policy
Center for Juvenile Justice Reform**

<http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/>
jjreform@georgetown.edu



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