



Risk and Needs Assessment Instruments (RAIs) for Juveniles

In their current form, RAIs are a component of an integrated case management plan system for juvenile justice systems.

These case management plan systems are based on the Principles of Effective Intervention: (1) to assess **risk** and **protective factors**, (2) address the youth's "criminogenic **needs**" (those associated with offending), and (3) accounting for **responsivity** of a youth.

Risk factors are characteristics correlated with delinquency. Protective factors are characteristics that reduce likelihood that adversity will lead to negative outcomes and behaviors.

Risk factors may include the following:

- Obtain their names/shields
- Legal history
- Family supports or lack thereof
- School
- Community/peers
- Alcohol/drugs
- Violence/aggression
- Attitudes
- Skills
- Use of free time/employment

Protective factors may include the following:

- High expectations and positive/resilient temperament
- Social competencies and problem-solving skills
- Healthy/conventional beliefs and commitment to community and school
- Positive family relationships
- Presence and involvement of caring/supportive adults
- Opportunities and rewards for prosocial bonding
- Good relationships with peers/positive peers
- High expectations and above average academic achievement

RAIs generally categorize youth into one of three risk levels: low, medium or high. Measuring risk, generally, can enable a jurisdiction to identify who is a priority for interventions, focus those interventions on youth with higher probability of recidivism, and provide most intensive treatment to higher risk youth. Be aware: Youth in trouble for the first time could fall into the "low risk" category even when their first offense is an extremely violent offense, like homicide.

The Need factor identifies what to target—what needs changing for this youth to avoid further contact with the juvenile or criminal justice system? The RAI should help identify the **criminogenic dynamic needs factors**, those characteristics that can be changed that are associated with changes in risk of reoffending so interventions can be tailored to the youth.

Dynamic risk/needs factors:

- Antisocial attitudes, values, beliefs and emotional states
- Negative peers/associates
- Antisocial personality patterns conducive to offending
- Family factors including criminality and psychological problems; low levels of affection, caring and cohesiveness; poor parental supervision and discipline practices; neglect and abuse
- Low levels of personal educational, vocational, or financial achievement
- Low levels of involvement in pro-social leisure activities
- Substance abuse

Responsivity factors (gathered from not just RAI, but through other sources):

- Low intelligence; IEP; Learning Disability
- Physical handicap
- Mental health issues; interpersonal anxiety; history of abuse/neglect
- Transportation
- Language; Ethnicity; Cultural Barriers
- Reading and writing limitations
- No desire to change (motivation)
- Childcare

RAIs may be useful in a particular locality, but they can be particularly useful in juvenile probation services that are all or mostly state administered.

The RAIs questions seek information about the youth's **dynamic factors** (items that could change) or **actuarial** or **static factors** (items that do not change).

The **actuarial model** involved scoring items related to reoffending from the assessment tool, then weighing and summing the items before using a statistical formula to calculate a total risk score. This score is cross-referenced with another table that provides an estimate of risk over a specified period such as 5 to 10 years. *The estimate, often a percentage, is based on the number of individuals who received the same risk score and recidivated during the development of the RAI.*

The percentage gleaned from the actuarial model does not represent that youth's likelihood to reoffend, but the rate at which other youth with the same score reoffended.

Under the **structured professional judgment approach**, the practitioner determines which risk factors to consider, how they should be measured, and then categorizes risk level (involving far more discretion than the actuarial model and allowing consideration of factors not on the list).

The actuarial model allows the least discretion and, according to studies, shows the most reliability.

Keep in mind:

- The RAI must be reliable, valid, and equitable. Evaluation of the RAI, through reliability testing and validation studies, should be a regular component of the practice.
- The Administrators of RAIs would benefit from national standards.
- Keep it simple: the list of factors considered by a RAI should include only those that have a statistically strong correlation with recidivism rather than weak correlation (including dynamic factors and criminogenic needs).

Limitations:

- General RAIs are not appropriate for identifying risk for violent or sexual offending.
- General RAIs are not mental health assessments and do not diagnose mental health issues.
- RAIs "were not designed to specify the action a court should take . . . they provide additional information, grounded in research, to enhance the decision-making process of the court."
- According to some researchers, RAIs may contribute to racial disparities in the juvenile justice system.
- RAIs can help practitioners understand likelihood of re-offense but cannot predict a person's behavior with certainty.
- While some RAIs are in the public domain, other RAIs are proprietary, trademarked products that can be costly to purchase, update, and train/certify those who administer the tool.
- The validity of a particular RAI can be difficult to study for a number of reasons (for example, if an initial pre-screening diverts low risk youth, then a study of the validity of the RAI's full screening when applied to referred youth will have a disproportionately high number of moderate and high-risk level cases).
- One source of variability in RAIs is inter-rater unreliability.
- Across RAIs and studies of RAIs, measures of recidivism differ.

Areas to explore with the administrator of the tool:

- Are you trained to administer the test? How frequent is the training? Booster trainings?
- Are you certified to administer the tool? How often does the tool require recertification?
- Do you have the credentials/qualifications to administer the RAI?
- Was this RAI/tool validated in this state/normed to specific population in [your jurisdiction]? Is it valid?
- Does the instrument measure what it is supposed to measure? Accuracy? Predictive validity?
- Is the tool reliable? Consistent across the board? Dependable? Inter-rater reliable?
- Can the tool predict whether the youth is at risk for committing a violent crime or non-violent crime?
- What is the difference between a low, moderate and high risk level result?
- What is the recidivism rate for each of those levels?
- Are the factors considered by the tool biased against a certain ethnicity, certain race, certain gender, certain neighborhood?
- How can you be sure that another PO or LCSW who administers this test won't come up with different results?