

Risk-Need-Responsivity Principles

Pennsylvania seeks to apply the most current research-informed practices across all counties and justice disciplines to promote law-abiding behavior. One of the core areas of research focuses on three key principles: risk, need, and responsivity. This brief helps answer the **who, how and why** we need to apply these principles to justice practices.

The Risk Principle—Who should be the focus of our efforts?

DO focus on those who will most likely benefit from a justice system response.

WHY? Research indicates that people who are most likely to recidivate benefit the most from justice system interventions.

DON'T overrespond (through supervision or programming) to those who are self-correcting and not likely to recidivate and avoid mixing people who are high and low risk in programs.

WHY? Supervision and programming for people who are at low risk of recidivism will not likely improve outcomes and may, in fact, increase failure by requiring them to attend events that disrupt the prosocial influences in their life (job, school, family). Supervision and programming may also increase exposure to (and influence from) people who are not supportive of prosocial norms.

DO use actuarial risk and needs assessments to identify who will most likely benefit from a justice system response.

WHY? Actuarial tools are significantly more accurate in determining a person's risk of recidivism and criminogenic needs than individual judgment.

DON'T rely on professional judgment alone when determining who to focus on.

WHY? Actuarial assessments outperform professional judgment in predicting future behavior and provide more transparency about the factors considered when making decisions.

The Need Principle—What factors are important for risk reduction?

DO address a person's criminogenic needs when seeking to reduce future violations of the law.

WHY? Research shows that law-abiding behavior increases when the justice system addresses a person's unique criminogenic needs identified through an actuarial assessment.

DON'T add unnecessary conditions that overload the person.

WHY? Too many conditions can overwhelm the person, distract them from addressing their driver (the criminogenic need that has the greatest influence on their illegal behavior), and increase hopelessness and failure. Noncriminogenic conditions of supervision do not reduce recidivism.

DO focus on the person's most influential criminogenic need(s)—that is, their driver.

WHY? The largest reductions in recidivism occur when programming addresses the driver. The driver is usually one of the three most influential criminogenic needs (cognition, temperament/coping skills, and associates).

DON'T overemphasize the lesser criminogenic needs.

WHY? While all the criminogenic needs should be addressed to maximize law-abiding behavior, focusing too much on the lesser influences (e.g., family/marital, substance abuse, education, employment, and leisure activities) will not yield the maximum impact.

The Responsivity Principle— How should we **customize** our responses?

DO address responsivity and stabilization needs even though they are noncriminogenic.

WHY? Responsivity factors (e.g., motivation, mental health, gender, developmental age, learning style and learning disabilities, and culture) and stabilization issues (e.g., housing, medication, physical health, finances, childcare, and transportation) are usually not criminogenic. However, if left unaddressed, they can interfere with a person’s ability to successfully participate in programming focused on their criminogenic needs.

DO customize the justice response based on the person’s unique set of conditions.

WHY? “Specific responsivity” requires a customized approach based on a person’s characteristics. Matching programming and ways to deliver that programming to a person’s unique characteristics—such as referring someone with a learning disability to a program that provides special accommodations—helps create an environment that is most conducive to learning.

DON’T keep a person in the justice system because of non-justice-related needs.

WHY? The justice system is primarily designed to address public safety. It is not the best approach for addressing other societal needs, such as mental health or substance use concerns, and can unintentionally harm a person’s well-being. For example, the justice system has become the default mental health service provider for many people, resulting in their being entangled in the system longer than needed for public safety. In such cases, a behavioral health approach is the preferred option.

DON’T use a “one-size fits all” approach in sentencing or supervision.

WHY? The likelihood of failure increases when we treat all people the same or send people to a program solely based on their offense, without considering their traits and the conditions that would lead to a more positive response.

Dynamic Risk Factors

