

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Evaluating the utility of 'strength' items when assessing the risk of young offenders

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Summary/Conclusions

This study sought to examine the role strengths play in the desistance of youth offenders. Utilizing a sample of 212 youth in Australia, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and completed the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) assessment. To determine the impact of strengths researchers compared assessment and recidivism data to determine. The data showed significantly better outcomes for youth that possessed at least one strength. They were 3.2 times less likely to generally re-offend than those without a single strength.

Limitations of Information

The present study was completed on a small population of Australian youth offenders. The population may differ considerably from the youth on probation in Colorado. Of the 212 youth, 142 were high or very high risk. While the researchers conducting assessments had strong interrater reliability, researchers noted that identification of strengths "lacked operational exactitude". It was unclear if the yes/no system was adequate to capture the strengths present in youth.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Strength Factors Lift Outcomes for Youth

The criminal justice field has been largely focused on the risk to re-offend. Researchers in this study explored how the presence of strengths can impact re-offending. The present study included a sample of multi-cultural in custody youth between the ages of 10 and 20.

Individuals in custody were approached about a voluntary study. Youth who agreed to take part in the study completed a semi-structured interview for approximately 90 minutes. Two formally trained clinician-researchers completed the YLS/CMI assessment. They indicated the presence of a strength in each subscale using a binary measure (yes or no). The rules for scoring strengths differ for each subscale. Researchers collected follow-up data on the youth to determine recidivism rates. For the study, recidivism was defined as any future police charge, except technical violations of orders and parole. The youth were followed for a minimum period of 6 months after they were released from custody. The average follow-up time was 112 days. Over 70% of the sample had re-offended within 100 days upon release.

The most frequently identified strength in the study was education/employment (19.8%), followed by peer relations (10.8%), and family relations/parenting circumstances (9%). Youth that possessed at least one strength were 3.2 times less likely to generally re-offend. This result held true even when controlling for risk level. There were no significant differences for the presence of strengths and violent offending. Re-

searchers also discovered significant differences in the number of strengths for various ethnic groups in the areas of education/employment, substance use, and leisure/recreation. Indigenous youth had fewer strengths in these areas than Culturally and Linguistically Diverse youth and English Speaking Background youth. Females were also significantly less likely to have a strength in education/employment.

Practical Applications:

- ✓ Provide normative feedback on completed assessments with probationers to highlight areas of strength.
- ✓ Document a probationer's strengths in narratives.
- ✓ Ask probationers about their motivation in various areas. While someone may not have employment or education, motivation to work on those areas may be a benefit.
- ✓ Create opportunities to ask individuals about their strengths.
- ✓ To avoid bias, use assessment scoring manuals to increase accuracy. An individual being overtly difficult may not pose increased risk.
- ✓ Use affirmations to highlight and reinforce probationer's strengths.
- ✓ Acknowledge and reinforce behaviors you want the probationer to repeat.
- ✓ Increase your skills by asking a supervisor or peer to coach you on how well you seek, acknowledge, and reinforce probationer strengths.