

# Appropriate Uses of Risk/Needs Instruments

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# OUTLINE

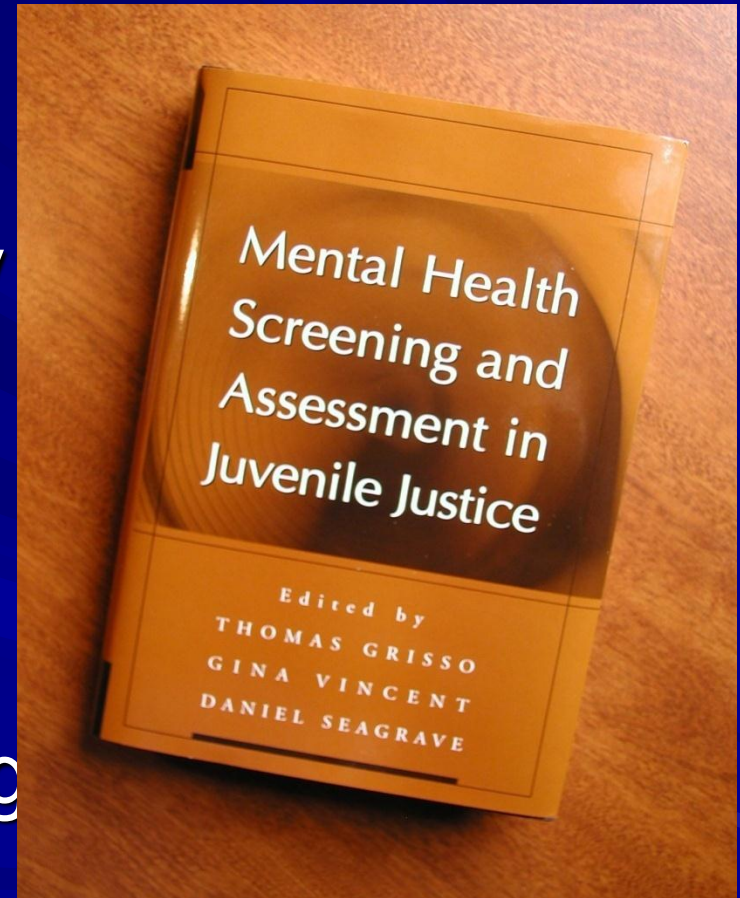
- **Definition and purpose of risk/needs assessments with youth**
- **General concepts about risk for re-offending**
- **Review of Instruments**
- **Questioning the use of specific instruments**

# What do we Mean by Risk?

- Risk assessment tools describe “risk” in different ways
  - Physical Harm to Others
    - Violence
    - Aggression
  - Criminality
    - Recidivism (re-arrest vs. reconviction)
    - Future delinquency
  - Conduct problems

# Resources for risk assessment methods in juvenile justice

- Why we need to identify risk in JJ youths
- How to choose risk assessment methods
- Reviews of 20 screening and assessment tools (by their authors)



Guilford, 2005

# Purpose of Youth Risk Assessment

# Risk Screen or Assessment tools can assist the court with....

- Need for secure **pretrial detention**
- Need for **out-of-home placement**
- Post-adjudication placement **(disposition)** decisions – what security level is needed?
- **Release/transition** planning
- **Treatment/intervention** planning

# Different Risk Assessments Measure Different Things, like:

- Likelihood of serious, imminent violence if no intervention
- Likelihood of violence risk to continue in adulthood
- Nature or frequency of the violence?
- Sex offending
- Violence risk for girls
- Age (children vs. adolescents)

# Goals of Risk/Needs Assessment

- **Identify** those at highest risk for recidivism and *guide intervention* efforts that could
  - *Prevent* later violence and recidivism
  - *Reduce risk of future harm* among youths who have recently engaged in harmful aggressive behavior
- **Intervention efforts** include:
  - Placement decisions (secure custody vs. community; level of supervision)
  - Referral to appropriate services (case management/service delivery)



# Goals of Risk/Needs Assessment cont.

- Problems can come with use of risk assessments designed from solely static historical variables

# General Concepts of Youth Risk/Needs Assessment

# General Principles of Risk Assessment in Youth

1. Aggression and delinquent activity are **near normative**
2. Violent and delinquent behavior will **desist** for most youths during late adolescence/early adulthood
3. Risk can **change** across adolescence
4. Many evidence-based **risk factors** exist

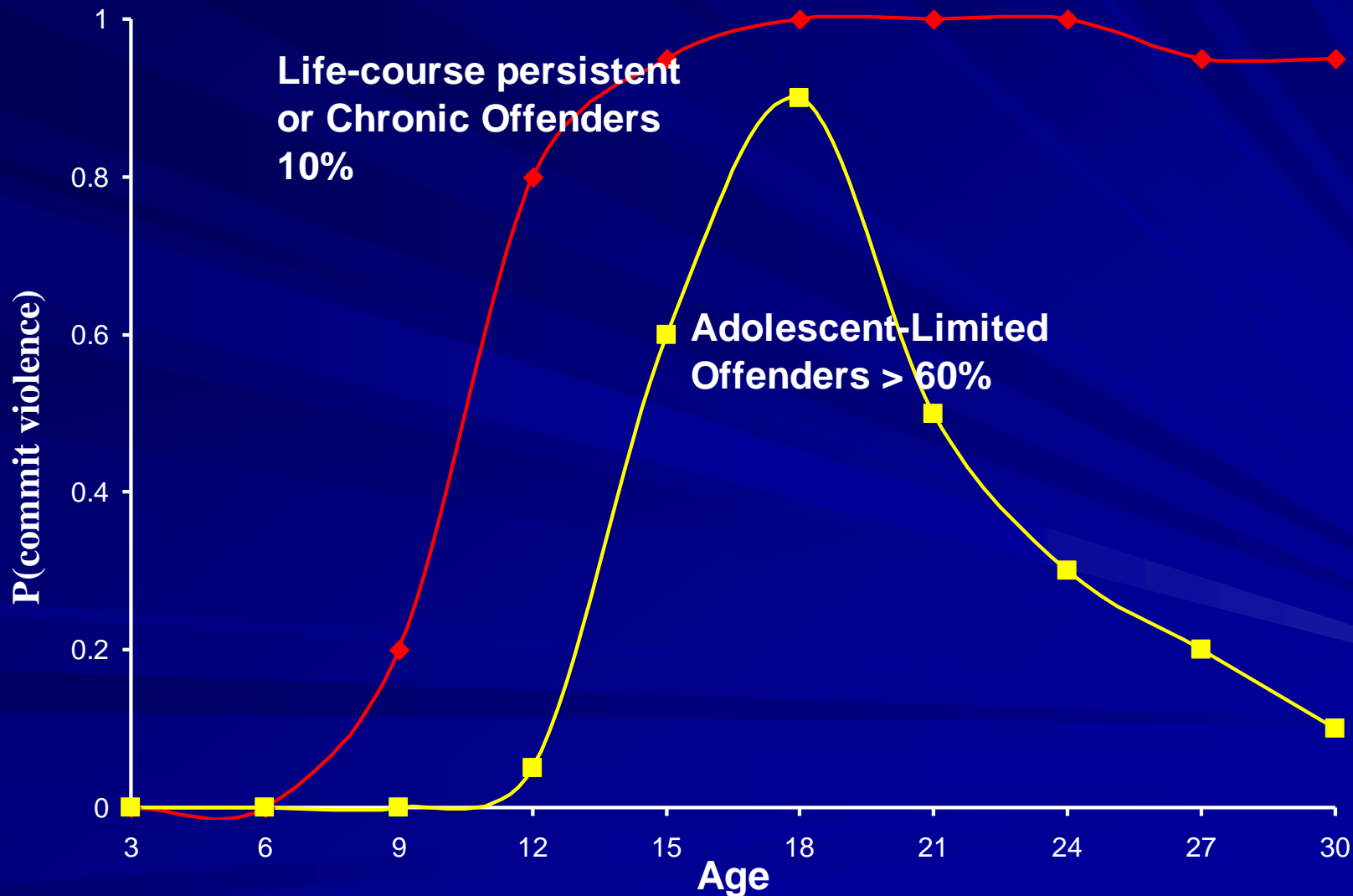
# Aggression is Normative During Adolescence

Among large community samples....

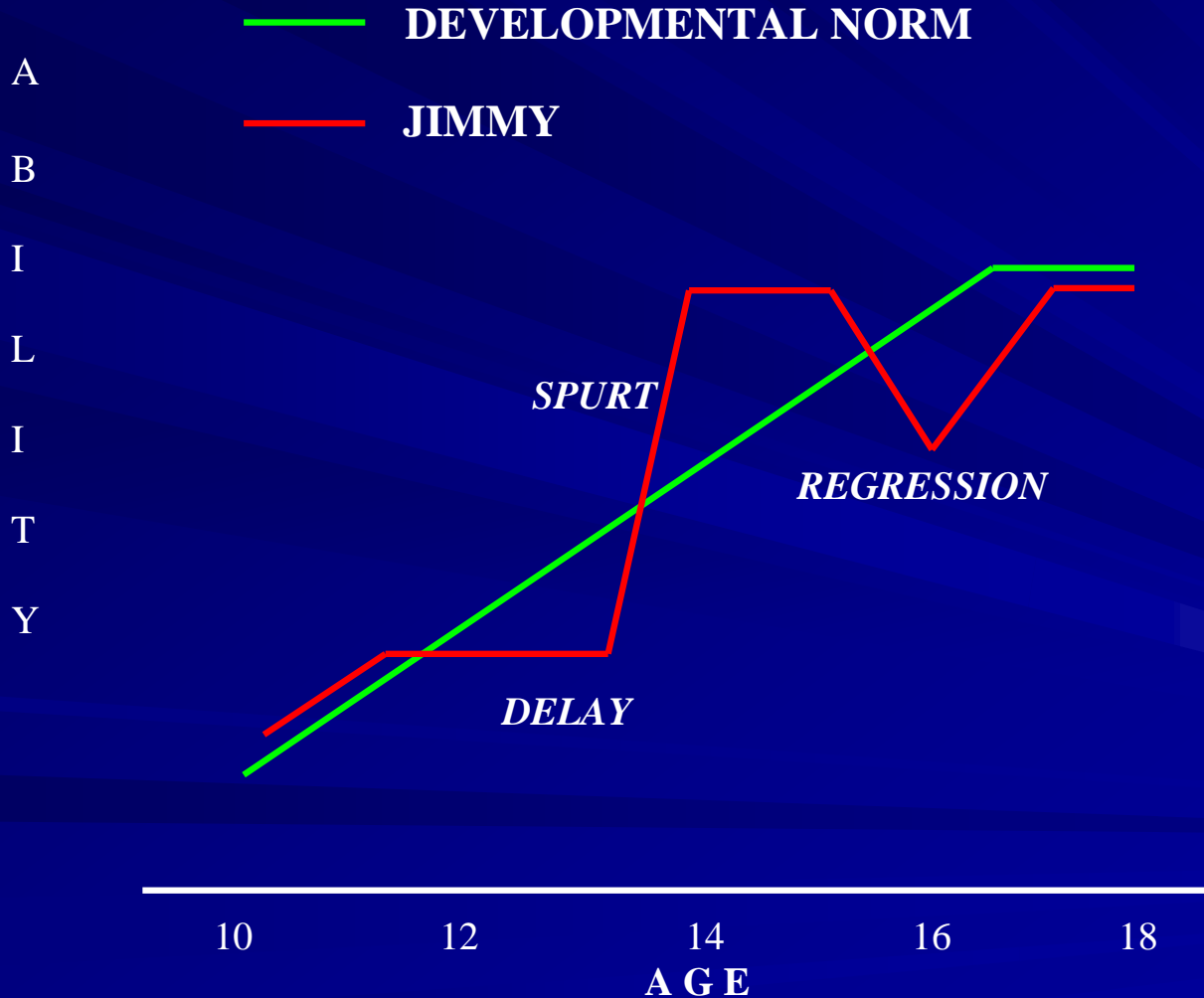
- **Police contact:** 8 in 10 (males)
- **Juvenile court record:** 6 in 10
- **Arrests, violent offenses:** 1 in 10
- **Report serious violent act in prior year:**  
1 in 4 for age 15-16 boys
- 1 in 15 for age 15-16 girls
- **Self-report a physical fight:**  
1 in 2 for age 15-16 boys  
1 in 4 for age 15-16 girls

# Offending Desists for Most Males

(Reference group = Community males; Farrington, 1995; Loeber et al., 1991 Moffitt, 1993, Moffitt & Caspi, 2001)



# Development Does Not Proceed Evenly Across Adolescence



# Evidence-Based Risk Factors (examples)

- **Individual Factors – Largest Effect**

  - **Personality traits – Lacks Remorse, Lacks Empathy, CD/ODD**

  - **Attention Deficit**

  - **Impulsivity/Risk-Taking**

- **Historical Factors**

  - **Early Onset History of violence**

  - **Early Onset History of arrests**

  - **Past antisocial and official delinquent behavior**

  - **Onset of Substance Use**

# Evidence-Based Factors cont.

## ↖ **Familial –**

↖ inconsistent discipline

↖ Antisocial/criminal parents

## ↖ **Environmental/Social/Functional**

- Poor School Achievement

- Deviant Peers

- **Other Variables**

- Past Intervention Failures, Availability of Services

- Parental Involvement

- Protective factors



# Difficulty With Violence History

**Past behavior is best predictor of future behavior, but it's not quite that simple...**

Frequency, Context, Chronicity

Importance of Early Onset: Proportion of youths continuing violent acts into adulthood, if first violent act occurred (self-report):

Prior to 11	5 in 10
During 11-13	3 in 10
During 14-17	1 in 10

# Basic Conclusions

These developmental facts make estimates of risk of future violence more difficult. Thus, risk assessments should....

- be seen as having limited “shelf-life” for most youths (Grisso, 2000)
- use evidence-based risk factors
- include risk factors capable of change
- identify needs that can be targeted for intervention

**Reassessment is very important**

## Advantages of Valid Risk/Needs Assessments When Used Appropriately

- The alternative is generally to assume risk based on the crime – which often can lead to worse consequences for the client
- May result in less restrictive placements
- Can guide risk management/intervention

What you want to know:  
Review of Risk/Need  
Assessment Instruments

# How Assessments are Conducted

- **Data Sources** – Most use interviews + record review
  - Interview Youth (almost always)
  - Interview Parent (optional)
  - Collateral information (always)
- **Time required** – Most cannot be completed in under 30 minutes
- **Examiner qualifications** – Require training. Some require clinical experience.

# Evidence-based risk assessment tools should be...

- **Standardized**

always done exactly the same way

- **Relevant**

will assist with making the necessary decisions

- **Reliable**

Two independent raters would reach similar conclusions

- **Valid**

research-based evidence that it measures what it is supposed to

# Criteria for Selection of Evidence-Based Instruments

- The tool purports to assess “risk”
- Has a test manual
- Developed specifically for juvenile justice  
....or, has been validated with a JJ sample
- At least 1 study (hopefully from an independent party) demonstrated **reliability**
- At least 1 study by an independent party demonstrated a strong relation to recidivism (**predictive validity**)

# Brief Decision-Making Tools

- Some jurisdictions have developed brief actuarial tools specifically for making a decision about....
  - Placement of youths in detention, or
  - The custody security level needed
- Most are “homegrown”
- Reliability and validity is often unknown



# Questioning the Use of Assessment Tools

# Questioning the Use of Tools

- Does the tool have a test manual?
- Has the tool been demonstrated to be reliable across examiners?
- Does the examiner have the right qualifications?
  - Few require no training. Some require clinical experience. How many have they done?
- Was the tool used in the way it was intended?
  - Risk management, placement decision, Classification
  - Likelihood of violence, re-arrest, conduct problems
- Does the tool have only static factors?

# Questioning the Use of Tools (cont.)

- In what setting was the tool validated (if at all) and does your client come from the same setting?
  - Community (FINS), detention, school
- Does your client fit the characteristics of the youth on which the tool was validated?
  - Girls? Minorities? Age?
- How did the examiner interpret the results of the tool?
  - Probability of re-offending? Or, relative risk standing?

# Questioning Risk Estimates

- Importance of statements estimating a youth's risk
  - We cannot make specific predictions about a youth's likelihood of violence or recidivism
- ....Johnny **will (or will not)** commit an act of violence in the future (**WRONG**)
- ....Johnny has an **80% likelihood** of committing an act of violence in the future (**WRONG**)

# Appropriate Ways to Estimate Risk: Judges' Decision-Making

....Johnny has a **high risk** for re-offending or committing violence in the future

....Johnny has a **high risk** for committing future violence **if placed** back in the home

# Take Home Messages

- Risk/Needs assessment is very helpful when a valid instrument is used **appropriately** and involves **re-assessment**
- Different assessment tools were designed for different purposes and different populations
- Not all assessment tools (few in fact) have sufficient research evidence