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Protective Factors and Strength-Based Services: Impacts on Long-Term Youth Reoffending

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The Youth Protective Factors Study: Effective Supervision and Services Based on Risks, Strengths, and Development

The Youth Protective Factors Study is an unprecedented, multistate, multiyear examination of which risk and protective factors are most significant when it comes to reoffending—especially for more serious offenses—among youth ages 10 to 23 in the juvenile justice system. This brief is the second in a [series that shares key findings](#) from the study to inform juvenile justice supervision, case planning, and service strategies aimed at improving public safety and youth outcomes.

Background

Decades of research have shown that addressing the dynamic risk factors underlying youth delinquency, such as negative peer influences, attitudes that support crime, and inadequate supervision at home, is crucial for reducing recidivism. Over the last decade, some practitioners have expressed concerns about the potential limitations of such “deficit”-based approaches and have become interested in whether focusing on youths’ strengths could yield equal, if not greater, benefits for improving their outcomes. Despite this interest, little is known about the impact of positive youth development, strength-enhancing, and asset-based approaches on youth reoffending.

The Youth Protective Factors Study addresses this gap by examining protective factors and strength-based services for youth in the justice system in selected counties across three states. The project’s research team partnered with

counties in each state to administer a protective factor survey at intake for all youth referred to or adjudicated in the youth justice system. Based on existing research, the survey assessed four promising areas, with nine specific measures, aimed at reducing youth recidivism:

- **Prosocial Identity:** Assesses the extent to which youth view and value their future possible selves as prosocial or moral (e.g., kind, honest, respectful).
- **Prosocial Engagement:** Measures how much youth have a sense of purposeful goals or career pursuits, are involved in community activities, and are attached to school.
- **Social Support:** Measures the extent to which youth have supportive relationships with peers and caregivers.

- **Self-Control and Self-Efficacy:** Assesses youth’s ability to control their emotional and behavioral impulses as well as their belief in their ability to handle life challenges.

Across the 3 states, 1,908 youth completed the protective factors survey.

In addition to the survey, researchers partnered with states to develop data systems that enabled states to track the type and length of services youth received, regardless of the payer (juvenile justice system, education system, child welfare, Medicaid, etc.) or whether the service was court ordered or self-referred. Using a categorization system developed with national experts, researchers classified these services as risk reduction, responsibility-related, or strengths-based.

Strengths-based services were defined as those targeting the development of competencies, skills, prosocial activities, and other protective factors to foster positive outcomes. Emphasis was placed on (1) learning/doing (building new skills, responsibilities, and self-efficacy) and (2) attaching/belonging (joining prosocial groups, serving others, and being part of a community). In the study, these services included educational supports, vocational training and work placement, structured recreational activities, life skills or social skills classes, and mentoring, to name a few.

In two of the three states (with sufficient sample sizes), researchers also examined the influence of strength-based services on reoffending (new juvenile/criminal petitions or filings), including violent reoffending, for an average of one and a half years post-supervision.

Key Findings

Key Finding 1: Protective factors matter for predicting long-term violent reoffending

In all three states, prosocial identity and self-efficacy were the most common protective factors among youth referred to the juvenile justice system. This indicates that most youth referred to the system viewed and valued their ideal future self as prosocial (e.g., generous, respectful, truthful) and were confident in their ability to overcome difficult situations. In contrast, 30 percent or less of surveyed youth scored high in protective factor domains that included prosocial engagements (e.g., a sense that youth have community responsibilities), social support from caregivers, and self-control, emphasizing the dearth of resources available to most youth to help them transition to a safe and healthy adulthood.

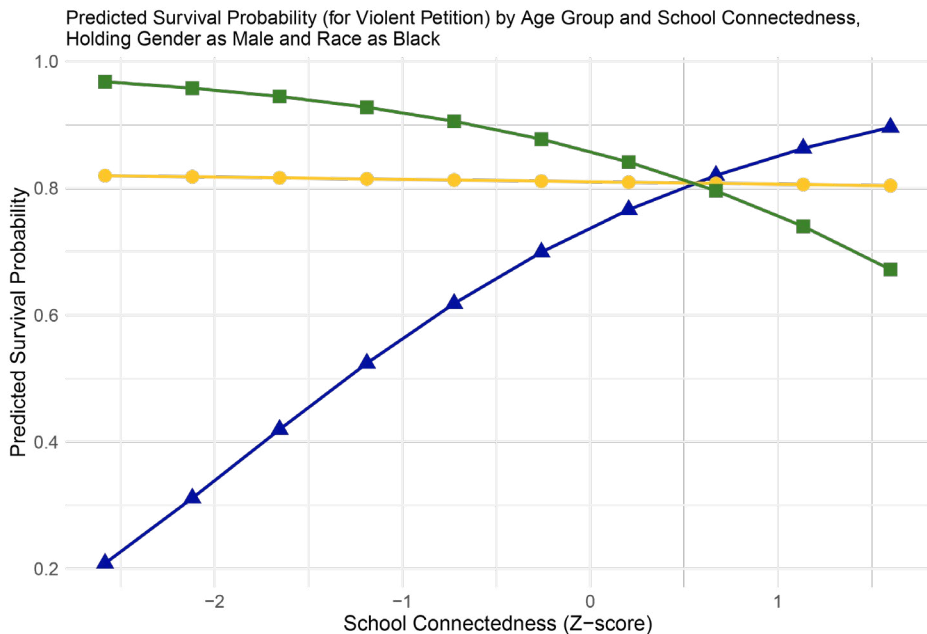
Table 1: Most and Least Common Protective Factors Within Domains Among Surveyed Youth (n = 1,908)

Most Common Protective Factors	Least Common Protective Factors
Prosocial Identity: Moral Ideal Self Scale: 80.7%	Prosocial Engagement: School Connectedness Scale: 16.5%
General Self-Efficacy: 65.5%	Prosocial Engagement: Youth Social Responsibility Scale: 18.7%
Prosocial Identity: Moral Internalization Scale: 60.8%	Social Supports: Caregiver Support Scale: 20.3%
	Self-Control: 24%

Across states, the protective factor most consistently associated with reduced serious reoffending was not a common factor: self-control. In two states, the self-control and self-efficacy measures predicted reductions in violent reoffending post-supervision beyond the youth’s risk level alone. In the state with the largest sample, which allowed for the ability to detect small effects, social support from caregivers and prosocial engagements (e.g., sense of purpose and school connectedness) also contributed to protection against violent reoffending post-supervision. A few protective factors were more significant for younger youth than for their older counterparts, with variability across the states. Not surprisingly, the most common age-related effect (observed in two states) was that school connectedness was more important for younger than older youth (see Figure 1). In the state with the largest sample, prosocial identity and having a sense of purpose also had greater importance for younger youth.

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Figure 1: School Connectedness Most Strongly Protects the Youngest Youth Against Post-Supervision



Note: This figure shows that the protective effect of school connectedness depends on the youth's age. As the level of school connectedness increases (plotted on the X axis), the likelihood of "surviving" in the community without having a new violent petition (plotted on the Y axis) sharply increases for the youngest age group (ages 9-12; shown in green)—but not for the older age groups (ages 13-16 and 17+, shown in red and blue, respectively).

Implications

- **Juvenile justice systems should consider incorporating a survey that assesses protective factors into their intake processes.** Some protective factors can help jurisdictions predict reoffending post-supervision above and beyond assessing youth's risk factors. As such, jurisdictions should consider adopting a brief survey that assesses youth's protective factors as part of standard screening and assessment protocols. The survey should focus on the factors most consistently associated with serious reoffending that have not been assessed by specific risk-needs assessment instruments, especially self-control and self-efficacy. Jurisdictions should also consider assessing other protective domains, given their significant effects in the largest sample.

Youth justice systems can use protective factor information to improve the precision of their intake and dispositional decisions. For example, systems can prioritize youth most at risk for serious reoffending for more intensive interventions. They can also incorporate a focus on enhancing

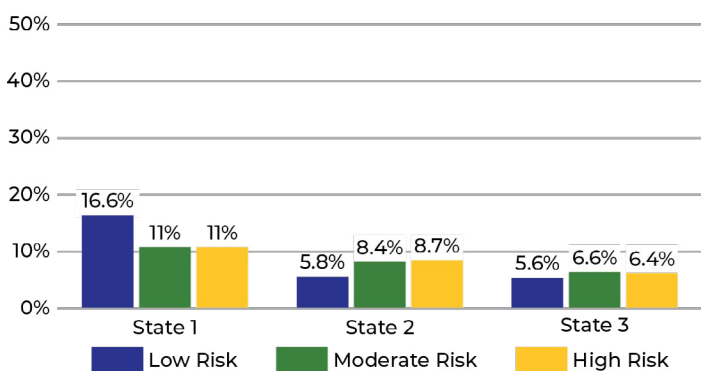
priority protective factors into case plans and service referrals.

- **The influence of self-control in mitigating violent recidivism reinforces the importance of juvenile justice systems operating from a foundational principle of "do no harm."** The [first Youth Protective Factor Study brief](#) reinforced long-standing research findings that most youth cease their delinquent behavior as they grow older. This brief sheds new light on the potential importance of self-control as a driving factor in this "aging-out" process since self-control improves as youth's brains mature into older adolescence and young adulthood.¹ Thus, these findings underscore key insights from the Crossroads and Pathways Studies² and other research³ that the most cost-effective public safety intervention that jurisdictions can employ for lower-risk youth—who comprise the majority of youth referred to the juvenile justice system across all states in the study—is allowing them the time to grow up without any justice system involvement.

Key Finding 2: High-risk youth were no more likely than lower-risk youth to get strength-based services

On average, across all three states, less than half of youth referred to the youth justice system received any services categorized as strengths-based. Engagement in strengths-based services did not differ statistically by youth's disposition or risk level, except in one state (State 1), where low-risk youth participated in a higher dosage of strengths-based services than moderate—and high-risk youth.

Figure 2: Average Dosage Units⁴ of Strength-Based Services per Month by Risk Level and State



The most common strengths-based services that youth self-initiated were school-based extracurricular activities and sports (5.9 percent) and sports-related activities outside of school (3.8 percent). The most common strength-based services that youth justice agencies referred youth to included work placements and job skills (17.8 percent) and mentoring programs (6.2 percent). It's unclear to what extent these services influence the protective factors that matter most for mitigating violent reoffending post-supervision, including self-control, self-efficacy, school connectedness, and social support from caregivers.

Implications

- **More research is needed to identify which youth populations involved in the system can benefit most from interventions aimed at enhancing protective factors.** The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) framework encourages justice systems to focus interventions on higher-risk youth to get the most “return on investment” in terms of recidivism reduction.⁵ In contrast, positive youth development (PYD) approaches don't typically advise this kind of service matching or resource prioritization.⁶ However, given that study findings suggest that enhancing youth's protective factors can have recidivism-reduction benefits for

youth in the system, more research is needed to guide jurisdictions on whether limited resources for not only risk-reduction services, but also interventions to enhance protective factors, require more deliberate population targeting. This implementation guidance is important because without it, higher-risk youth in the study were no more likely, and in one state less likely, to get strength-based services than lower-risk youth.

- **Youth justice systems should focus interventions designed to enhance youth's protective factors on those factors that most strongly influence recidivism.** While more research is needed to determine who can most benefit from interventions to strengthen protective factors, study findings provide clear guidance for youth justice systems on what protective factors are best targeted for recidivism reduction. Strength-based services may have benefits for positive youth outcomes such as education and employment. However, study findings suggest that youth justice systems that want to maximize limited resources to improve long-term public safety should focus on interventions designed to strengthen youth's self-control and self-efficacy.

Unfortunately, limited research exists on specific programs or practices that effectively enhance self-control to reduce delinquent behavior or recidivism. As detailed below, study findings indicate that there is still much to learn about whether and how strengths-based services can achieve this goal. There is at least some evidence from meta-analytic studies that interventions capable of improving adolescents' self-control and reduce disruptive behaviors include (1) social skills training targeting personal responsibility, conflict resolution, model behavior, and attention training and (2) family-based interventions such as skill building with parents and youth (e.g., Parent Management Training or Multisystemic Therapy).⁷ In addition, it's also possible that strengths-based activities and services that promote prosocial attachments could indirectly foster youth's self-control.⁸

Key Finding 3: Youth who participated in strength-based services were more likely to reoffend post-supervision, including violent reoffending, than youth who did not receive such services

In the two states where researchers could measure the influence of strength-based services on recidivism, youth who received any such services (compared to those receiving none) were *more* likely to reoffend post-supervision, both for any offense and for violent offenses. These analyses used inverse propensity score weighting⁹ to control for baseline variables associated with youth’s likelihood of receiving strengths-based services (e.g., demographics, economic status, risk level, disposition, severity of offense). The direction and strength of these findings held steady across a range of analyses. This consistency was observed when using alternative techniques for sample weighting and statistical tests that attempted to exclude youth who spent any time in placement and therefore may have greater peer contagion effects. Additionally, the results were consistent when examining differences between youth with lower versus higher dosages of strengths services. This effect does not appear to be a function of youth who received strengths-based services receiving less of other types of services given over half of them also received at least one risk-reduction service.

Table 2: Influence on Post-Supervision Recidivism for Youth who Received Strength-Based Services Compared to Those Who Received None

States	Any Post-Supervision Recidivism	Violent Post-Supervision Recidivism
State 1	HR = 1.35* (35% increased risk)	1.28* (28% increased risk)
State 3	HR = 1.53* (53% increased risk)	2.22*** (122% increased risk)

*Note: HR = hazard ratio and * denotes level of statistical significance.*

If protective factors can mitigate recidivism, then why do we observe the seemingly contradictory finding that youth in the study who received strength-based services were more likely to reoffend? More research is needed to understand this discrepancy fully, but a few potential reasons are proposed below.

1. Strengths-based services lack implementation guidelines for justice-involved youth. In the RNR framework, research shows that services have a limited impact on youth’s recidivism unless agencies follow specific implementation principles.¹⁰ In contrast, positive youth development and strengths-based approaches do not provide specific implementation guidance, at least regarding recidivism reduction. Instead, the assumption is that all youth will benefit equally from services that promote their learning, competencies, attachment, and belonging. In the

three states studied, the provision of strengths-based services did not vary based on youth risk levels, nor did these services target protective factors that most influence more serious reoffending, like self-control, self-efficacy, or school connectedness. This generality is likely due to a lack of insights—such as those gathered in this study—that could guide more targeted service delivery.

- Limited evidence exists on interventions that build recidivism-reducing strengths.** The field has amassed substantial knowledge about the impact of risk-reduction services—particularly cognitive behavioral and family therapy approaches—on reoffending.¹¹ But there is significantly less research on which interventions are effective at enhancing youth’s protective factors in ways that reduce recidivism and how to implement these with fidelity.¹² As such, it’s unclear whether the most common strength-based services that youth received in the study, such as extracurricular activities, sports, and job placements, are effective at reducing reoffending.
- Strength-based services can have negative peer contagion effects.** While the first two reasons might explain why strengths-based services did not reduce recidivism for youth in the study, they don’t necessarily explain why youth who received strengths-based services were *more* likely to reoffend. One potential reason for this surprising finding is that common strengths-based services that youth received, including leisure and recreational activities, are often provided in group settings. To the extent that these services did not target or reduce recidivism *and* brought together groups of youth in

the justice system (including high-risk youth), they may have inadvertently fostered negative peer influences. Research has shown that such interventions can lead to a “peer contagion” effect, which may undermine their intended benefits and increase the group’s net likelihood of reoffending.¹³

- 4. Strength-based services might inadvertently exacerbate youth’s risk factors, undermine their protective factors, or both.** Another plausible explanation for the increase in recidivism is that certain strength-based services may be ill-suited for youth with specific risk factors until those risk factors are addressed. For example, participation in work placements might exacerbate risk of reoffending for youth whose primary risk factors are aggression, impulsivity, and attitudes that support violence. These youth may struggle to navigate the norms and pressures of a work placement, which could undermine their ability to strengthen protective factors and increase the likelihood of aggression and impulsive behavior. It may be important to address risk factors, at least to some extent, before putting youth in these situations. And once in such settings, youth would need to be carefully supervised and supported to ensure such services are ultimately positive developmental experiences.

Implications

- **Positive youth development is not a one-size-fits-all solution for justice-involved youth.** An underlying assumption of PYD approaches is that strength-based services, supports, and opportunities have universal benefits for adolescents, including a belief in some quarters that such approaches should replace risk-reduction strategies altogether. The Protective Factors Study offers new insights into this belief system. It strongly suggests that, at least for recidivism

and violence reduction, strength-based services require a more tailored, individualized approach. Indeed, like risk-reduction services, jurisdictions might do more harm than good without carefully considering who should receive strength-based services, which protective factors are targeted, who else is participating in them (to minimize negative peer contagion), and overall service quality.

The Protective Factors Study provides an unprecedented contribution toward developing this implementation guidance by highlighting the recidivism-reduction benefits of focusing PYD interventions on self-control and self-efficacy. However, far more implementation research is needed to help jurisdictions determine whether and how positive youth development strategies can be effective public safety strategies.

- **More research is needed to understand what interventions effectively enhance youth’s priority protective factors and how best to implement them.** Jurisdictions and the field should experiment with various approaches for enhancing youth’s protective factors and increase knowledge on what works to reduce reoffending. This might include more deliberate targeting and implementation of strength-based services. But it’s also possible that the best way to enhance youth’s protective factors, particularly priority factors such as self-control and self-efficacy, is through risk-reduction services like cognitive behavioral therapy or supervision practices focusing on roleplay and skill building. At a minimum, jurisdictions must ensure that strength-based services do no harm. Ideally, they should invest in robust service tracking, data collection, and evaluation practices to identify how best to bolster youth’s protective factors to achieve long-term public safety gains.

End Notes

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11. Seigle, E., Walsh, N., & Weber, J. (2014). *Core principles for reducing recidivism and improving other outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system*. Council of State Governments.
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