Residential Positive Achievement Change Tool (R-PACT) Validation Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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PURPOSE AND APPROACH OF THIS STUDY

This executive summary describes key findings, recommendations, and priorities for future research that emerged in this validation study of the Residential Positive Achievement Change Tool (R-PACT).

The R-PACT is a survey instrument used by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) to (1) identify residential youths’ criminogenic needs and risks, (2) guide the development of intervention strategies, and (3) assess youth progress. It is administered to all residential youth within 30 days of admission and every 90 days thereafter; also, an exit R-PACT is conducted prior to release.

Each administration focuses on an extensive set of domains that are represented with multiple survey items. These domains relate to such things as the youth’s criminal history, academic status, family relationships, use of alcohol and drugs, prosocial/antisocial attitudes, and use of appropriate social skills for dealing with emotions, difficult situations, and interactions with others. For most of these domains, the R-PACT includes scores both for risk factors that should predict high involvement in crime and protective factors that should reduce crime. Additionally, most domains include both dynamic domain scores (that measure youth’s current circumstances) and static domain scores (that measure youth’s prior history).

This validation study was designed to assess two important substantive questions regarding the R-PACT:

First, do the R-PACT domain scales predict who will become a reoffender? For the R-PACT to be a valid instrument, its scales must be able to significantly predict which youth are most likely to experience new adjudications in the period after their release.

Second, what do the R-PACT domain scales reveal about the changes that youths experience during the residential stay? In other words, do they appear to be better or worse off at the end of their residential stay on key R-PACT domain scales? And related, are the youths who experience improvements during the residential stay at lower risk for reoffending? If the R-PACT provides a valid measure of changes in risk and protective factors, the answer should be yes.

Three important details bear emphasizing about this study’s approach:

- The questions above are assessed with data from a sample of 4,735 residential youths who experienced a residential completion during FY 2010-2011 and received at least one R-PACT administration.

This sample includes males (85%) and females (15%), and with respect to age, youth range in age at the time of intake from age 10 to 19 (the average age is 16.5). With respect to race and ethnicity, 35% of the sample’s youths are non-Hispanic whites, 53% are black, and 11% are Hispanic.
Our analyses of offender change focused on the Initial R-PACT administered within 30 days of admission and the Exit R-PACT administered just prior to release. And in using the R-PACT to predict reoffending, we focused on the Exit R-PACT because it was found to be more predictive of reoffending than the Initial R-PACT.

Reoffending is defined in terms of adjudications, adjudications withheld, and convictions for any new violation of law that occurred within twelve months of program completion. According to this measure, 40.21% of the youths (1,904 out of 4,735) are classified as reoffenders.

KEY FINDINGS

- The R-PACT scales can be used to predict which youths are at greatest risk to reoffend. Roughly 60% of the risk and protective scales (pertaining to different aspects of youth’s lives) significantly affected the odds of reoffending.

- Domain 1 Record of referrals, which measures the extent and seriousness of youths’ prior offending, is far and away the most predictive individual domain. Being high on this scale increased the odds of reoffending from about 40% to 53%. This represents an increase in the odds of reoffending of roughly 32%.

- A number of other R-PACT domains had consistent effects on reoffending that were at least moderate in strength:
  - Domain 3C Current academic status (values, excels in education)
  - Domain 5B Employability (employment knowledge, aspirations, and plans)
  - Domain 6B Current relationships (involvement with antisocial peers)
  - Domain 10 Current attitudes and behaviors (antisocial attitudes and behaviors)
  - Domain 11 Current aggression (attitudes about/involvement in aggression)
  - Domain 12/12A-12E Current social skills (use of social skills related to such things as dealing with others, dealing with emotions, and controlling impulses)

  These domains overwhelmingly relate to youths’ current circumstances (rather than their prior history of circumstances).

- Several of the domains just noted operated together to affect the odds of reoffending. In our most predictive risk model, youths low in risk on a combination of the variables noted above had a 26% chance of reoffending; conversely, scoring high in risk on this same combination of variables more than doubled the probability of reoffending (moving it from 26% to 55%). These large differences point to the predictive value of the R-PACT.
Some domains, however, were especially non-predictive—they rarely had significant effects on reoffending.

This group was comprised mostly of static “history” scales that reflect youths’ prior history. The non-predictive domains included:

- Domain 5A Employment history (prior successful employment)
- Domain 6A Family history (family antisocial/criminal history)
- Domain 8A Drug and alcohol history
- Domains 9A and 9B Mental health history and Current mental health.

These domains may be important for addressing the individual needs of specific youth, but they almost never predict reoffending.

Regarding the question of youth change during the residential stay, youths showed considerable improvements from the Initial to Exit R-PACT—the average youth experienced a 14% reduction in risk factors and a 28% increase in protective factors.

There was, however, variation across youths—some experienced more extreme levels of risk/protective improvement whereas others experienced no improvement or a small level of decline.

The greatest improvements often were in the use of social skills. For the risk scales, roughly 30% of youths were classified as major improvers on the social skills domains. For the protective scales, 50% or more of youths were classified as major improvers.

Thus, by the end of the residential stay, youth were much more likely—as observed within their facility—to effectively use social skills to deal with others, deal with difficult situations, deal with emotions, control impulses, and control aggression.

All demographic subgroups of the sample—including males, females, blacks, Hispanics, whites, and those who were above or below age 16 at entry—showed Initial-to-Exit improvements during their residential stays.

Youths who experienced the greatest improvements from the Initial to Exit R-PACT had lower odds of reoffending, but this pattern was limited in large part to improvements in social skills. Improvements in controlling impulses and dealing with emotions were especially likely to reduce reoffending.

For improvements in social skills to reduce reoffending, youth had to reach a level in which they used these skills at least sometimes or often—improvements at the lower end of the scale (e.g., advancing from lacking a skill entirely to rarely using it) did not reduce reoffending.
Initial-to-Exit improvements led to reduced reoffending primarily among youth with lower records of prior offending (in the lowest one-third of this sample), but an exception involved the reduced reoffending among those high in prior offending who improved their social skills in dealing with emotions and controlling impulses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The R-PACT should be used by DJJ to make assessments about which youths have the highest probability to reoffend, and these assessments should guide transition, release, and after-care decisions.

The R-PACT passed the most important validation test—it improved predictions about who would become a reoffender. Moreover, it did so across demographic subgroups.

Importantly, however, in making assessments about which youths have the highest probability to reoffend, the true predictive value of the R-PACT will come from attention specifically to the domains that significantly predicted reoffending. This includes most notably Domain 1 Record of referrals, but also the dynamic domains that relate to current academic status (Domain 3C), employment aspirations and plans (Domain 5B), relationships with peers (Domain 6B), prosocial/antisocial attitudes and behaviors (Domains 10 and 11), and the use of key social skills (Domains 12 and 12A-12E).

Recommendation 2: The R-PACT should be used to assess youth changes during the residential stay and to guide performance plans. This is especially important with respect to changes in social skills.

The analysis revealed that youths often showed notable improvements on R-PACT domains during the residential stay, and these improvements often reduced reoffending. It is important therefore to use the R-PACT for considerations of youth changes.

Attention should especially be devoted to assessing social skills improvements in such areas as handling difficult situations, dealing with emotions, and controlling impulses. Aside from youths’ prior record of offending, no R-PACT variables had more consistent and impressive effects on reoffending than the social skills domains. Moreover, social skills domains were marked by the greatest levels of Initial-to-Exit improvement, and these improvements often translated into reduced reoffending. Importantly, however, not all youths experienced social skills gains. Continued attention to social skills development is needed and is consistent with research indicating that best-practices programming emphasizes social skills training through cognitive-behavioral strategies (Andrews and Bonta, 2006).
**Recommendation 3:** DJJ residential facilities should continue to prioritize and where possible intensify attention to youths’ current academic status.

The extent to which youth did well in education and felt a strong commitment to doing well was a consistent predictor of reoffending. Moreover, many youths experienced improvement in this area during their DJJ residential stay, and improvements in this area predicted lower reoffending. Continued attention should be devoted to expanding these gains to a greater number of youth, given that a strong commitment to education can facilitate a stronger reintegration into conventional, law-abiding commitments in the period after release.

**Recommendation 4:** DJJ should closely track and where necessary increase the “dosage” of treatment that youths receive regarding social skills training, especially for moderate and higher risk youths.

One key principle of effective rehabilitation involves the intensity of services. The social skills training currently being administered in DJJ residential facilities may be just reaching the necessary dosage for youth with lower prior offending, but it may be falling short of the necessary dosage for youth with moderate to higher levels of prior offending. More intensive social skills training—in terms of the frequency, duration, and consistency of training—should be considered for moderate and high prior offending groups. Importantly, the suggestion is not the length of stay should be increased; rather, DJJ should consider an increase in the dosage of social skills training received during the residential stay.

**Recommendation 5:** DJJ should closely track and where necessary expand the intensity of post-release supervision and treatment, especially for moderate and high prior offending youths.

The analyses indicated that Initial-to-Exit improvements were quite common for the moderate and high prior offending groups, but these improvements often did not translate into reduced reoffending. Released youth with more extensive records of prior offending often face difficulty reintegrating into conventional institutions in their schools and communities. Greater intensity of post-release supervision and treatment can help address those challenges; in so doing, they may extend the social skills gains that are made during the residential stay.

**PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

**Research priority #1:** New research should examine the effects on reoffending of specific programs and program types.

The analyses revealed that different youth responded differently to their residential stay—some experienced strong improvements that translated into lower rates of reoffending, but this was not true for other youth. This variation may be attributable in
part to differences in the specific programs/program types and interventions to which they were exposed. New research should examine this issue to identify the most effective programs, program types, and interventions in DJJ facilities.

**Research priority #2:** New research should examine the differences across youth with respect to the dosage of social skills training—in terms of the frequency, duration, consistency, and fidelity of training—that was received and how that dosage predicts variations in reoffending.

Providing a sufficient dosage of services for moderate and high risk groups is a key principle of effective correctional intervention. At this time, however, it is not known what differences in dosage exist across DJJ facilities and the residential youth in this sample. Some youth may have been exposed to frequent and sustained social skills training; for others, the training may have been much more sporadic. New research should examine whether variations in reoffending are explained in part by differences in dosage. This research will provide insight into the best practices to be used in residential facilities.

**Research priority #3:** New research should examine the transition that youth make from residential facilities to post-release supervision and treatment, with special attention to the improvements/declines experienced in risk and protective factors.

A large percentage of youth receive probation services upon their release from a residential facility. As part of this, they receive administrations of the Community Positive Achievement Change Tool (C-PACT) that is closely related to the R-PACT. New research can examine the ways in which Initial-to-Exit improvements on R-PACT domains are extended—or not extended—after release into the community. These patterns should then be examined to further explain reoffending and to inform on best practices for transitioning residential youth into the community.

**Research priority #4:** New research should examine the scoring system used to create the R-PACT’s domain risk and protective scales.

The R-PACT includes hundreds of items used to create the different domain risk and protective scales, with each item scored in ways that determine its contribution to the overall scale. These scoring decisions must be made in ways that maximize the predictive accuracy of the underlying scales. An empirical examination of the current scoring system is needed to determine whether it in fact maximizes the predictive accuracy of the R-PACT.
R-PACT
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