

## Disposition Matrices: Purpose

A disposition matrix is a tool designed to structure decisions about the most appropriate level of supervision and custody for adjudicated youth at the time of case disposition. Through the use of disposition matrices, judicial and probation officers are able to make more informed decisions that enhance practices and policies for safer communities and more successful youth. This approach allows for the allocation of resources to where they will be most efficient and effective.

A disposition matrix organizes sanctions and programs by risk level and offense severity. It places youth along a continuum of disposition options, typically including secure out-of-home placements, placement alternative programs, probation, intensive services like multisystemic therapy, and other community options.



*A disposition matrix brings a greater degree of consistency, reliability, and equity to the assessment and decision-making process.*

Disposition matrices leverage valid risk assessments.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that a valid risk assessment instrument accurately classifies people into groups based on a set of characteristics, or risk factors, in order to identify cases most likely to be involved in future offending. The classification levels then show differential reentry rates at the various risk levels. Youth classified as low risk are typically placed in community or diversion programs with minimal supervision or are diverted from the system entirely. For youth classified as moderate risk, more structured community programs while under probation supervision may be appropriate. Youth classified as high risk may receive intensive probation supervision with appropriate alternative-to-placement services or may be placed out of the home.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on validity, see the handout titled "Understanding Validity of Risk Assessment Instruments," or this document: [http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdf/fire\\_study\\_results\\_graphs.pdf](http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdf/fire_study_results_graphs.pdf)

## Informed Decision Making

A disposition matrix brings a greater degree of consistency, reliability, and equity to the assessment and decision-making process. Once an agency has implemented an accurate and objective disposition matrix, decision makers have access to relevant youth information, disposition options, and corresponding disposition decision recommendations. This ensures that youth with similar characteristics will have similar and appropriate decisions made at their case dispositions.

Research has shown that disposition matrices lead to a more efficient use of dispositional resources and improved outcomes (e.g., lower reentry) by matching dispositions to the specific types of youth for which they were designed.

## Data and Analysis

The second and possibly less obvious purpose of a disposition matrix is to give agencies a platform from which to evaluate the practice of disposition in their jurisdiction by collecting accurate data on each youth, the disposition recommendation, and the



actual disposition decision. This information allows for comparisons of trends over time, across units, and according to local goals and objectives.

## Example

In the following example, the disposition matrix outlines the recommendations for each combination of risk and current offense. One simple analysis can compare how frequently each disposition type occurred for each risk level. A similar analysis could compare dispositions by offense type or by offense type and risk level.

**Table 1: Disposition Matrix Risk Level**

Offense	High	Medium	Low
Violent	Level 2 or 3	Level 2 or 3	Level 2
Serious	Level 2 or 3	Level 2	Level 1 or 2
Minor	Level 2	Level 1 or 2	Level 1

**Table 2: Disposition Analysis Risk Level**

Disposition	Low	Medium	High
Level 3	65%	31%	3%
Level 2	27%	47%	26%
Level 1	7%	23%	70%

The comparison between the disposition recommendation and actual disposition decision can help identify patterns in practice and reasons for these patterns. These data allow agencies to analyze youth classification distributions, examine outcomes by classification, understand dispositions and reoffending by risk, and see the relationship between disposition decision and reentry. This information is key to validating and revising the disposition matrix over time.