

Disposition Matrices: Design and Development

What is a disposition matrix?

A disposition matrix structures decisions about supervision and custody for an adjudicated youth at the time of disposition. Through the use of matrices, judicial officers, attorneys, probation officers, and other court officers are able to make more informed decisions and promote safer communities and more successful youth.

Design

Disposition matrices intersect the seriousness of the current offense with risk of future arrest. To capture every possible combination of offense and likelihood of future arrest, the matrix structure comprises many different classification cells. Each cell captures a different balance of characteristics and recommends a corresponding disposition.

Disposition matrices typically have two axes: One axis represents the seriousness of the current offense (higher or lower); the other represents the likelihood of future arrest (higher or lower). Together, these two axes present a consistent starting point for discussions around dispositional recommendations.

This design helps to ensure consistent, data-informed, and evidence-based decision making that leads to the allocation of resources where they are most needed, efficient, and effective. Disposition matrices are part of a larger decision-making model that promotes the use of assessment instruments that are valid, reliable, and equitable.

Development

Disposition matrices are developed through a data-driven consensus-building process that involves judges and other hearing officers, agency leaders, attorneys, and a wide range of other stakeholders. Local policy makers and statutes should determine the offense classes and their levels of seriousness.

Some disposition matrices include a section on mandatory commitments or out-of-home placements based on either local laws or policy. These items usually are considered separately from the other sections of the instrument and often do not indicate the likelihood of future arrest.

While the seriousness axis of current offense is grounded in policy and consensus, risk levels should be grounded in research and local data. Items with statistical relationships to rearrest are combined to classify youth according to their overall likelihood of future arrest. Risk levels are typically placed at the top of the matrix.

Once the matrix is labeled with the appropriate current offenses and risk level categories, the disposition matrix cells can be labeled with offense class and risk level combinations. Local policy objectives typically drive the disposition recommendations within the cells, allowing each jurisdiction to determine their dispositional options and service interventions based on local resources and levels of restrictiveness. Placement should never be the only recommendation in any cell.

After a disposition matrix is developed with stakeholder agreement for a particular jurisdiction, the matrix should be used to inform decision making and track both dispositional recommendations and use of the matrix in actual practice.

The following examples are based on actual disposition matrices from jurisdictions throughout the country.

Disposition Matrix: Example 1

Type of Offense	Risk Level		
	High	Medium	Low
Violent Felonies*	Alternative to Placement Treatment Center Commitment	Probation Treatment Center Alternative to Placement Commitment	Dismissal/Abeyance Probation Alternative to Placement Treatment Center
Person Felonies	Alternative to Placement Residential Placement Treatment Center	Community Services Community Monitoring Probation Alternative to Placement	Dismissal/Abeyance Community Services Probation
All Other Felonies	Probation Alternative to Placement	Dismissal/Abeyance Community Monitoring Community Services Probation Alternative to Placement	Dismissal/Abeyance Sanctions Community Monitoring Community Services Probation
Misdemeanors	Community Services Community Monitoring	Community Services	Dismissal/Abeyance Restitution Community Services

Disposition Matrix: Example 2

Most Serious Current Offense	Risk Level		
	High	Moderate	Low
Class I: Most serious violent felony offenses (e.g., murder, rape, armed robbery, etc.)*	Alternative to Placement Out-of-Home Placement	Alternative to Placement Out-of-Home Placement	Probation Alternative to Placement
Class II: Other felony offenses against the person (e.g., felony weapon and felony drug distribution)	Alternative to Placement Out-of-Home Placement	Level 3 Probation Alternative to Placement	Level 1 or 2 Probation
Class III: Felony property and public order offenses	Level 3 Probation Alternative to Placement	Level 1 or 2 Probation	Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal Level 1 Probation
Class IV: Misdemeanor offenses	Level 1 or 2 Probation	Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal	Dismissal Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal Short-Term, One-Time Consequence

*Statute or local policy may require mandatory commitment or out-of-home placement for certain types of offenses.