

# Breaking New Ground in Juvenile Justice Settings: Assessing for Competencies in Juvenile Offenders

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## ABSTRACT

### INTRODUCTION

Juvenile justice has made great strides in developing a research base of effective practices and principles, including an understanding of criminogenic<sup>2</sup> risk factors and needs. Youths are affected by many individual, social, and contextual factors—such as personality traits, parents, peers, schools, and neighborhoods—and the interaction of these factors. Research has now demonstrated sets of factors highly associated with juvenile delinquency (e.g., Browning & Loeber, 1999). The juvenile justice field has made progress in using this knowledge through implementing systematic and thorough risk and needs assessment of many groups of juvenile offenders (e.g., Mackin, Seljan, Tarte, & Yovanoff,

The field of juvenile justice has made great strides in developing a research base of effective practices and principles, including an understanding of risk factors and needs that contribute to juvenile offending. However, the research base and practice of systematic assessment has not yet fully incorporated youth, family, and community *strengths*. To address this need, three juvenile justice agencies in the northwestern United States participated in a pilot study to develop and implement an assessment tool (the Youth Competency Assessment) and process that would identify and utilize strengths to help balance the risk and needs focus of their assessment and case planning practices.<sup>1</sup> This article provides descriptions and implementation strategies of the three pilot sites. The article concludes with recommended system changes and policy interventions to support ongoing utilization of this kind of strength-based tool in juvenile justice settings, and a clear set of recommendations for other communities wishing to implement strength-based assessment in their own agencies.

2002; Schumacher & Kurz, 1999). However, youths and their environments are also full of skills, supports, and coping mechanisms that have helped the youths adapt and survive in often-difficult circumstances and may have previously been overlooked or underused. The research base and practice of including systematic assessment of youths, family, and community *strengths*, to augment its risk and needs assessments, has not yet reached its maturity.

A promising approach is a focus on strengths or competencies (Bazemore & Nissen, 2000; Clark, 1995, 1999; Nissen, 2004; Nissen, Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2005). This family of practice strategies and skills, developed in the last half of the 20th century, began in the mental

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health movement and gradually expanded to include a wide variety of other populations and levels of practice (e.g., individuals, family, community, and approaches to policy development; Saleebey, 1997).

Based on the challenge of a juvenile justice system in need of state-of-the-art methods for intervention, the strength-based approach was recently activated in a specific manner in three juvenile justice systems and communities in the northwestern United States. An assessment tool, titled the Youth Competency Assessment,<sup>3</sup> and its related training curriculum were developed: (a) to reliably and validly identify strengths of juvenile offenders in real world settings; (b) to connect newly identified strengths to service plans; and (c) to increase positive outcomes as a result of (a) and (b). The conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings for this tool include youth development, asset-based work, resiliency, and balanced and restorative justice, among others (Nissen et al., 2005).

### **Overview: The “Strengths” Project and the Youth Competency Assessment**

Through extensive work in the juvenile justice and adolescent substance abuse treatment arenas, it became apparent that a heavy focus on risks and needs, and infrequent or inconsistent inclusion of strengths, had created an imbalance in these service systems. This imbalance, it was feared, was limiting the effectiveness of these services and the sustainability of positive impacts. By facilitating restorative justice projects, training juvenile justice staff on strength-based approaches, and talking to many judges, victims, and community members, it also became clear that a strength-based assessment tool was needed to help professionals working with high-risk youths to focus on and build on youths' capacities, interests, and supports or potential supports in their families and communities. A strength-based assessment tool would also serve as a logical starting point for agencies working with youths to start to incorporate strength-based philosophy and practices.

To address this gap in knowledge and practice, the idea and need were championed and successfully gained the support of community, research, and funding partners<sup>4</sup> to facilitate development and testing of the tool and implementation process.

The initial phase of the “Strengths” project, as it became known, was focused on developing an assess-

ment tool based on restorative justice and positive youth development work. A conceptual and theoretical framework was developed through extensive literature review of juvenile justice, social work, and other human service fields. This review was followed by the convening of a National Advisory Panel of experts across many fields related to youth services to discuss and make recommendations for the tool. These efforts focused on formulating key domains related to identifying youth strengths, creating a structure and method for the instrument, and developing items and questions. The resulting tool covers three domains: (a) repairing harm and developing positive norms and values; (b) creating a healthy identity; and (c) forging connections with family, peers, and community.<sup>5</sup> It is a brief, flexible, qualitative strength-based instrument and process that can be incorporated into existing assessments, policies, and practices. Three juvenile justice agencies in the northwestern United States participated in a pilot study to develop and implement the assessment tool and process that would bring in strengths to help balance the risk and needs focus of their assessment and case planning practices.

### **Breaking New Ground: The Pilot Sites**

When the project began in 2000, Oregon was ideally suited to test the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) and protocol because the state had already developed a multifaceted approach to addressing juvenile crime. The Balanced and Restorative Justice model had been adopted statewide and formed the basis of the Oregon Juvenile Department Directors Association (OJDDA).<sup>6</sup> Several jurisdictions were participating as Comprehensive Strategy<sup>7</sup> counties. Oregon had also developed a statewide dispute resolution commission and model victim mediation programs. In addition, the Juvenile Crime Prevention (JCP) Initiative, signed into law in 1999, provided funding for counties to implement research-based programs to target high-risk youths. It also required every county to use a system of graduated sanctions and adopt a newly developed statewide Juvenile Justice Information System (JJIS).<sup>8</sup>

The juvenile departments, therefore, were experienced at trying new strategies. They had shown themselves to be receptive to research and willing to try new initiatives. The climate was ideal for developing and testing a strength-based assessment and protocol in Oregon.

**TABLE 1**  
Race/Ethnicity of Pilot Sites

County	RACE/ETHNICITY					
	White	Hispanic or Latino	Black or African American	Asian	American Indian or Alaska Native	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
Multnomah	82.6%	7.5%	6.8%	6.8%	2.2%	0.7%
Washington	84.9%	11.2%	1.6%	7.9%	1.4%	0.6%
Clackamas	91.3%	4.9%	0.7%	2.5%	0.7%	0.2%

**TABLE 2**  
Population Size and Median Household Income of Pilot Sites

County	Largest city	Population size	Population under age 18	Median Household Income
Multnomah	Portland	660,486	22.3%	\$ 51,118
Washington	Beaverton	445,342	26.9%	\$ 52,122
Clackamas	Lake Oswego	338,391	26.2%	\$49,455

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

The research team<sup>9</sup> and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation staff determined which Oregon counties would be invited to participate in the strengths project as pilot sites. Selection was based on interest, demographics, and current strengths climate, among other considerations. All three of the invited sites agreed to participate. The three sites were Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, Juvenile Services Division; Washington County Juvenile Department; and Clackamas County Juvenile Department.<sup>10</sup> All three pilot counties are located in the Willamette Valley on the western side of the state, the most populous portion of the state and the area with the most racial/ethnic and economic diversity. Tables 1 and 2 describe some key demographic characteristics of these three counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

**Pilot Site 1: Multnomah County**

**Site Description**

The Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, Juvenile Services Division, primarily serves three distinct populations: (a) youths 11 years and under (served through the Early Intervention Unit); (b) pre-adjudicated youths (served through the Informal Unit);

and (c) youths adjudicated and/or on probation (served through the Adjudication and Probation Counselors). The juvenile department also has several other units for providing specialized services for distinct groups of youths, including girls and gang-involved youths. The Multnomah County Juvenile Department interacts with about 3,000 youths a year. In addition, the Department tries to work with the whole family, especially siblings, whenever possible.

**Implementation**

Multnomah County planned to implement the YCA department wide but began the pilot study with a subset of staff representing department units. Counselors in the pilot group were asked to try the YCA with all their cases, but to do it in their own style. The challenge they anticipated, however, was to fit the YCA's three domains into the five domains of their existing risk assessment tool, the Oregon JCP Risk Screen/Assessment.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, they anticipated needing help applying the YCA, as well as thinking of different ways to assess clients and families:

We finally figured out how to fit it into our continuum of services. We have [a] risk assessment...and we [didn't] want to have strengths-

based be one more assessment, so we fit it in to the Adjudication Counselors so they can write a strengths-based reformation plan to be shared with courts. The [evaluator] talked to the judges so they understand [the reason for using this tool and approach]. The DA and defense attorneys were also there, and so we have their buy-in. We also use it in the field in our probation unit.

In addition to the ten juvenile counselors who participated in the pilot, three managers regularly participated in the project and represented the department at Local Advisory Board meetings.

### Post-implementation: Experiences with the YCA

Multnomah County found that the YCA is a useful tool for achieving its goal of involving families because it helps describe them in terms of their strengths and characteristics. A Multnomah County Juvenile Services staff person described its usefulness this way:

It's been beneficial for youth, too. Asking those questions on the YCA really opened up a door for the strengths. What they are good at and what motivates them. Parents are often shocked by the strengths-based focus, which is often helpful because sometimes the kids have put them through so much that they are having a hard time seeing the kid's strengths.

The strength-based focus, however, does not let the youth off "easy," as some feared. The accountability step is a piece of the case plan, and there is effort to link to positive tasks in the youth's probation. However, the focus is shifted to determining which types of services will have the greatest impact on the youth so he or she does not re-offend. According to a Multnomah County Juvenile Services staff member:

[The goal is to]...figure out what is right on the one day when they go to school rather than what went wrong on the days they didn't. The JCP risk assessment really tells you what the deficits are, and the idea for this [YCA] is to help figure out what the positives are.

### Future Directions

The Multnomah County Juvenile Department has planned an ambitious training and peer-coaching program that will attempt to accomplish the following goals:

1. Re-orient the intake staff and adjudicators to the strength-based principles as they take up new posi-

tions after the reorganization of their division (which occurred in November 2003).

2. Provide intensive assistance and coaching on strength-based interviewing skills to juvenile court counselors and treatment providers.
3. Help juvenile court counselors and treatment providers integrate motivational interviewing skills with the YCA and other case planning tools, including strength-based reporting.

Due to the YCA's success reported by the staff members who piloted it, Multnomah County has implemented the YCA for use by all court counselors. Additionally, the department plans to pilot a new case plan format that incorporates the YCA, youth development concepts, and the risk assessment.

### Pilot Site II: Washington County

#### Site Description

Youths involved with the Washington County Juvenile Department over an extended period fall into one of five categories/programs: (a) assessment (intake for lower level offenders); (b) early intervention (which supervises youths involved in lower level offenses but who are identified as high risk to re-offend); (c) substance abuse program; (d) shelter program; and (e) youths at the point of adjudication. These youths total about 600 to 800 each year.

#### Implementation

The Washington County Juvenile Department thought the YCA fit well with the early intervention population they were serving, especially since they seek to involve parents in the development and implementation of the child's case plan. The county case planning staff seemed the most appropriate people to incorporate the strength-based piece. In addition, the YCA was anticipated to be used with several other groups of youths: (a) first-time offenders (youths having their first involvement with the department); (b) youths who are going to court (as part of the reformation plan); (c) youths in shelter to determine the impact of that setting on their adjustment and long-term behavior; and (d) youths who are transferred to supervision (probation or formal accountability agreements).

The difficulty anticipated by Washington County was making the linkage to services. Despite this concern, staff members felt the philosophy itself was an

empowering one. A concern by some staff was that it would be a challenge to conduct the assessment (because of the length of the interview and explaining terms and concepts) with certain populations, including developmentally delayed youths or very young children. Additionally, there was some concern that Hispanic/Latino families would view the YCA as invasive and overly focused on asking questions directly to the youths rather than to the elder in the family, which is the cultural norm for many Hispanic/Latino families.

To facilitate the YCA's use and role, the staff conducting the assessment formed a monthly planning group to illustrate the combined functions of the Oregon JCP Risk Screen/Assessment, the YCA, and the youth's case plan. The department director also participated in these planning and feedback meetings and, along with two senior staff members, participated in the project's Local Advisory Board as well.

#### Post-implementation: Experiences with the YCA

Washington County staff felt that in many ways, the YCA formalized the type of information they already try to talk about with youths (e.g., "What are your interests?"). Having the YCA format helped staff put the framework into context and helped them define what it was they wanted to know. Staff members integrated the YCA questions and concepts into assessment templates and other department forms.

The staff noticed that establishing the level of rapport needed for effective communication with the youths seemed much easier when using the strength-based focus, and changed their perspective of the youths toward their skills and potential. According to one staff person, "It forces you to look at their positives. They come in automatically labeled with a crime. This lets us pull up more positives and integrate that."

The Washington County Juvenile Department found that the YCA has been an effective tool in many different ways. Some staff members complete a scaled-down version that can be used with youths before court. This version helps them obtain information to use in their court recommendations. Additionally, the YCA has been useful during the youth "transfer meetings" (when a youth's case is being transferred from one counselor to another) in which both counselors are present. The YCA makes the interview feel positive and elicits information

that otherwise may not have been available with traditional interviewing practices.<sup>12</sup>

#### Future Directions

The Washington County Juvenile Department has integrated the strength-based assessment at key decision points in the organization (including intake, shelter, and court). Case plans are developed using information gathered through tools and interviews that incorporate the YCA with other assessment questions, including the Oregon JCP Risk Screen/Assessment. Department forms have been revised to address strengths in a consistent way, and the advisory team (initially set up to develop and implement their strength-based approach) remains active, with responsibility for systematically reviewing and maintaining what is in place.

The emphasis on strengths has become a key element in the direction the department is taking. Its role is prominent in selecting new staff, and it is addressed in new employee orientations. By-products of integrating the strength-based approach include creation of a staff recognition board to acknowledge their own strengths and accomplishments, as well as a resource area for staff to contribute information about strength-based resources and other ideas to share with fellow staff members and to use in bringing case plans to life.

#### Pilot Site III: Clackamas County

##### Site Description

The Clackamas County Juvenile Department is structured to handle youths at two levels. Youths with minor offenses are diverted or handled informally and involved with juvenile department staff on a short-term basis. Youths with more serious offenses, those who are high risk and have high needs, are seen by the juvenile department counselors over an extended period, averaging 12 to 18 months. The juvenile department serves about 2,000 youths each year. In most cases, these youths served remain with the same juvenile court counselor from intake through case completion.

##### Implementation of the YCA

Clackamas County felt that there would be no real barrier to incorporating the YCA into its intake process. However, the juvenile department did express some concern that it would be difficult to show staff that they

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were doing something “new.” Their model of having youths remain with the same staff person throughout their involvement assists in building a relationship with the youth and family and reinforces their efforts in case management to develop or enhance protective factors (for instance, related to school issues). Because there was concern that the YCA would be viewed as duplicating the staff’s existing efforts, the department worked to show how by using the YCA protocol, each unit would build on what had already been accomplished with the youth.

A final concern of some Clackamas County staff was the protocol of administration. Counselors agreed that the YCA was a good interview technique to establish rapport with the youth by discussing the youth’s strengths, but some staff did not feel comfortable talking about social issues until they could present the youth’s legal issues and court requirements.

Clackamas County solicited staff volunteers from their department to participate in the pilot project. Three managers, ten juvenile court counselors, and the information systems staff person participated in team meetings every other month to implement the project, discuss progress and challenges, and provide feedback to the representatives who served on the project’s Local Advisory Board.

### Post-implementation: Experiences with the YCA

To accomplish the tasks of administering both the required Oregon JCP Risk Screen/Assessment and the YCA, Clackamas County modified their existing intake assessment template to include strength-based questions from the YCA. To simplify this work for the staff, the information systems manager incorporated the revisions into the county’s electronic assessment form.

Because there are more areas and items to discuss with youths due to this addition, staff found it took more time to conduct interviews (in part because of the additional information youths were willing to share given this approach). Staff reported that more than one interview session was often needed to get through the entire revised assessment.

Staff also observed that youths who were assessed at low risk (on the risk assessment) seemed to be low risk because they have noticeable strengths. The YCA

was reported to work particularly well with moderate-risk youths who have some strengths to build on, but not so many issues and concerns that building on those strengths cannot be a focus.

### Future Directions

The Clackamas County Juvenile Department has established implementation of the strength-based philosophy as a department goal sanctioned by their county commissioners. All initial trainings and introductions of department templates that have incorporated a strengths philosophy (i.e., Intake Assessment, Formal Accountability Agreement, Reformation Plan, and Action Plan) were completed by December 2003. Full implementation, including Action Plans, was completed in January 2005. The Clackamas County Juvenile Department’s pilot group is continuing to meet and develop ongoing training and support for juvenile counselors.

During Summer 2003, the department held a two-day training on strength-based philosophies in the juvenile justice field. Present at the trainings were community partners including the Oregon Youth Authority (state juvenile justice agency), Department of Human Services staff from Family Court (as well as their Foster Grandparent and Juvenile Drug Court participants), and therapists from Clackamas County Mental Health. In response to the positive feedback from staff regarding the training, a follow-up training (Part II) was held in Spring 2004. The juvenile department is now planning a two-day advanced strength-based training for June 2005, to focus on application of the Action Plan with youths and families.

The juvenile department also hired a new employee in March 2004, to assist in developing community connections for youths. The position has developed strong community partners with businesses, citizens, and private non-profit organizations that enable youths to participate in service projects in their own communities. This effort is building on the youths’ strengths through service learning and developing stronger attachments to their communities.

Finally, the staff at Clackamas County Juvenile Department developed a database for the pilot group to enter strength-based interventions and dispositions. This database was created to be an ongoing list that all counselors would be able to access to assist them in strength-based case management.

### **State Context**

While the YCA was being developed and tested in Oregon, the state's financial picture was deteriorating to the point of being a budget crisis. With fewer monetary resources available to them, the Juvenile Departments' probation officers/supervision counselors were responsible for increased numbers of youths, forcing them to look for ways to provide case services for less money. Many of the probation officers/supervision counselors reported that based on information about the youths' strengths that they gathered through the YCA, they were able to be creative with ideas for ways to connect youths with community resources that offered them a way to use their strengths at no monetary cost to the juvenile department.

### **Pilot Site Lessons Learned**

The experiences of the three pilot sites contributed to a greater understanding of the challenges and benefits of implementing this type of systems change, as well as the implications at many different levels (front-line staff, supervisors, management) of bringing a strength-based approach into a juvenile justice organization. The strategies and suggestions provided by these innovators can help other jurisdictions identify components of "readiness for change" that are already in place, and areas in which further thinking and planning would be beneficial to make implementation of strength-based practice a reality for their organizations and systems.

Addressing system and supervisor level considerations will make the workers' transition much smoother. Management and policy issues include promoting an organizational mission consistent with strength-based practice, creating paperwork templates that reflect this commitment, and providing supervisory and administrative support for strength-based practices.

The next section provides a discussion of basic steps for addressing the considerations listed above for implementing the YCA or other strength-based practices in a juvenile justice agency or system, based on the experiences of the pilot sites. Keep in mind that some agencies already have addressed some of these components, and they may each be tackled in a different order. However, taking the steps on this list (see Table 3) will facilitate the development of a balanced approach to juvenile justice that incorporates strengths as well as needs and risks.

### **System Level Considerations**

Organization or system leadership support for a strength-based approach helps to ensure successful implementation. This support does not necessarily need to be in place before introducing strength-based practices such as assessment, but it helps ensure integration of the approach into all facets of the organization or system if this support precedes implementation. Leadership needs to conceptualize its vision and mission in terms of a strengths approach, so that the YCA and other practices are consistent with the organization or system's overall goals.

Once administrators have accepted this philosophy and have been trained in the strength-based approach, it is advisable to share the department's intent with as many stakeholder groups as possible (such as judges, schools, parents, etc.) early in the process. Individuals at all levels of the organization, including staff who will eventually use the YCA, need to have a basic understanding of strengths approaches to working with youths and families. Management should consider where in the system the YCA fits and, consequently, who in the agency or organization will be expected to use the YCA or other strength-based practices. It is also worth discussing whether it is best to begin implementation with a pilot group of staff volunteers.

It is useful to assess whether current policies and paperwork support inclusion of strengths, and what adjustments will need to be made to them. Review existing forms to identify places where support for a strength-based approach is lacking or could be more explicit, particularly related to case plan development. For example, a department may have a policy that specifies the level of supervision (such as formal probation) that is expected based on the number or type of risk factors or criminal history a youth has. In addition, the probation contract may list areas of risk or need that will be the focus of the case. In implementing strength-based practices, the department may want to consider whether the policy related to assignment of supervision level might be altered to include consideration of a youth's strengths, such as a supportive, involved family. In addition, the probation contract could be revised to include sections specifically attending to the competencies to be developed or the strengths (support people in the youth's life or skills and interests the youth has) on

**TABLE 3**  
Steps for Implementing the YCA or Other Strength-Based Practice

**Step 1 Conceptualize the department or agency's strength-based vision or mission.**

- Administrators/leaders believe in and support S-B approach.
- Share S-B philosophy with as many stakeholders as possible (early).
- Decide who in agency will use YCA or other S-B practices.
- Consider starting with a pilot group of volunteers.

**Step 2 Review existing case/service plan forms and guidelines.**

- Do current forms support inclusion of strengths? Do they need to be adjusted?
- Incorporate YCA/strengths into assessment paperwork.
- Incorporate YCA/strengths into case/service planning forms.
- Incorporate YCA/strengths into report templates, such as progress and completion reports.
- Incorporate YCA into data management systems.

**Step 3 Train individuals at all levels so they have an in-depth understanding of the reasons for, and benefits of, using an S-B approach.**

- Train administrators.
- Train supervisors.
- Train line staff.

**Step 4 Establish working groups/team meetings to provide staff and supervisors support during change and a place for questions and problem-solving.**

- Use existing staff groupings or create regular (even if temporary) team meetings.
- Review expectations/skills, provide constructive feedback, share questions, problem-solve challenges.

**Step 5 Train staff in the YCA (or other S-B practices) and supplemental materials.**

- Train supervisors.
- Train line staff.
- Include hands-on practice/experiential learning opportunities.
- Consider training in motivational interviewing and other strategies.

**Step 6 Train staff in how to take information from the YCA and use it in case/service planning and monitoring.**

- Train supervisors.
- Train line staff.
- Ensure your system/organization allows staff to be creative about identifying new/different community resources. If it does not, consider efforts to remove those barriers.

**Step 7 Create a written list of S-B community resources.**

- Create a method for compiling resources as they are discovered (such as assigning a person or rotating this responsibility).
- Post or file the information somewhere accessible to staff (e.g., bulletin board, filing cabinet, directory).
- Discuss in team meetings resources/providers that are NOT S-B and how to address that (such as not referring to them unless they adopt a S-B philosophy).

**Step 8 Encourage staff to think broadly about strengths.**

- Use the S-B approach in your interactions with colleagues.
- Train or orient staff in other partner agencies/systems.



which the case can be built. If possible, incorporate the YCA into existing assessment paperwork and data management systems. Each pilot site eventually incorporated questions from the YCA into their existing assessment procedures and forms, and adjusted other department paperwork (such as case plans) to accommodate information about strengths and competencies.

Part of the process of implementing a strength-based approach is making sure the system or organization allows staff to be creative about identifying new or different community resources to support youths and their families and their particular interests and strengths. In addition to system level changes, implementation of the YCA may include the need for supervisor level changes in current policy or practice.

### **Supervisor Level Considerations**

It is important that staff members who supervise front-line workers understand the YCA and strength-based philosophy and are competent in implementing strengths into case/service plans and case reviews. All staff who work with youths and families, or who supervise staff members who do, must receive hands-on, experiential training (either through their own professional experience or as part of the implementation process) in strength-based approaches to service delivery and in how to translate strengths identified in an assessment into ongoing case management. Staff need to have or develop an in-depth understanding of the reasons for using a strength-based approach and the benefits of doing so.

Supervisors need to provide ample opportunities for their staff to practice what they have learned, and need to provide non-threatening, constructive feedback to staff about what they are doing well and how to improve.<sup>13</sup> Setting up structured peer feedback and support sessions, as well as providing one-on-one supervision and feedback, can help staff translate their training into practice.

Establish working groups/team meetings to provide a forum for staff and supervisors to support each other during the change to a strength-based approach and as a place to discuss questions and problem-solve challenges. Recognize that staff may already look for and use strengths, but that the YCA—like any assessment tool—makes those efforts more formal and consistent. These group meetings can be used as a place for ongo-

ing refresher trainings or technical assistance, and for staff to share ideas and successes with each other.

### **Worker Level Considerations**

Changes can be expected at all levels of the organization or system, but the staff who work directly with youths and their families will have the most direct responsibility for—and challenge of—implementing a strength-based approach. Staff will need adequate training in the YCA, and in the supplemental materials that are available. They will need practice opportunities and feedback, support, and recognition that change is difficult, even if it is intentional and even if it is for the better. Training needs to help staff build skills at both conducting the assessment and using that information in case/service planning and case management. Fortunately, staff at the front lines will also receive the most tangible benefits of using the YCA or other strength-based practices. Staff in the pilot sites reported higher staff morale, greater job satisfaction, increased youth and family engagement and follow-through, shorter case durations, and decreased need for use of detention as a sanction.

Create and maintain a written list of strength-based community resources that can be used in case and service plans to build on youth and family strengths and interests. Keep in mind that some traditional resources for children and youths, including certain social services and treatment providers, do not have a strength-based focus and/or do not welcome juvenile justice-involved youths. A list of resources, people, and agencies that work well with youths at risk are important and can help save staff time in the future. Staff in the pilot sites discussed the need that arose to train staff in treatment agencies and other community organizations about strength-based approaches and practices, so that youths and families would have consistent experiences when they were referred from the juvenile department to other services. Two of the pilot counties invited treatment providers and service agencies to participate in trainings related to strength-based practice and cultural competency, for educational purposes and as a prerequisite for receiving referrals and department funding.

Encourage staff to think about strengths broadly and to generalize the strength-based approach to other areas beyond their work directly with youths and families. For example, staff in one of the pilot sites decided to create a staff recognition board and routinely used

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staff meeting time to recognize each other's efforts and achievements.

The experiences of the pilot sites confirmed that some of the hypothesized benefits would result from implementing a strength-based assessment tool and process. These benefits included:

- Helping staff gather additional and qualitatively different information than through using their risk/need-based assessment, including identifying ideas and resources;
- Helping youths and families feel more comfortable, share more information, and engage more quickly and fully into the change process;
- Increasing staff morale and job satisfaction, including making follow-up appointments with youths and families more enjoyable; and
- Facilitating quicker completion of court requirements.

Use of the YCA substantially increased the amount of information about the three domains covered by the assessment (repairing harm and developing positive norms and values; creating a healthy identity; and forging connections with family, peers, and community), and pilot site case plans were more likely to have information about the healthy identity and connections domains than the comparison county. Pilot case plans were also more likely than the comparison county to have a balance of strength and accountability goals. Staff reported at case completion that 87% of their cases had been affected by using the YCA.

Despite early staff concerns that stakeholders, such as judges, would question the utility of a strength-based approach, pilot site judges were supportive of including strengths in case plans and court reports. One judge even began requiring that all reports coming to her include strengths in addition to risks and needs.

The willingness of staff in the pilot sites to try something new and share information with the authors also helped inform other jurisdictions and agencies about the steps that facilitate this paradigm shift and how to plan for and implement changes in policy and practices in their organizations and systems.

### The Comparison County

As part of the pilot project, a comparison county was selected that was demographically similar to the pilot counties. Marion County, Oregon, is located south

of the three pilot counties and contains the state capital (Salem). After participating in the study, the Marion County Juvenile Department decided to implement strength-based practices as well. This jurisdiction undertook the following efforts:

1. They sought out training on strength-based practice and assessment.
2. Staff members in the intake and assessment unit are talking to youths about strengths. In their summaries, they include the youths' strengths, interests, talents, and gifts.
3. Every probation officer is expected to write a strength-based plan on every youth on formal probation. While this plan can be minimal, this practice is enhancing their work and their court reports.
4. They created a new full-time Community Connections position, and in February 2005, hired someone for a 4-month pilot period. The department created a computer-based referral system so that any department staff person can request information and the Community Connections person will assist in connecting youths and their families with a community resource.
5. A department team focused on implementing a strengths approach meets monthly to keep the project's momentum. They started an incentive/rewards pool for probation officers and other staff to use with youths who are doing well.

### Limitations of the Pilot Study

The Youth Competency Assessment was tested in three juvenile justice agencies in three different communities, which had different organizational structures and served demographically different youth populations. However, as in any case study approach, the results are limited by the small sample.<sup>14</sup> The study sites were in close geographic proximity to each other in the same state. Therefore, the three sites share some political, economic, and social factors. Whether these findings and the lessons learned will be generalizable and relevant to other communities is an as-yet unanswered question, though the efforts of the pilot study's comparison county are promising. It is hoped that additional communities will use the YCA and the steps described above to see whether strength-based assessment could also be successfully implemented in their systems.

By participating in this pilot study, the sites all agreed to receive training, provide data, and send

representatives to attend local and national advisory board meetings. Their ongoing participation helped the authors develop and revise the assessment tool, training materials, and implementation guidelines. It also meant that the sites received support and feedback over the study period. This level of involvement with the trainers/consultants would not likely be replicated in other settings, so it is an empirical question whether sites without this level of involvement would develop the commitment to the process and to the institutionalization of the approach throughout their systems. In addition, the willingness of the leadership in the three pilot sites to participate in this project indicates an interest in strength-based approaches to service delivery and openness to changing department practices, which may not be typical of juvenile justice agencies in other jurisdictions.

Finally, while the pilot study involved many different data collection methods, several key questions remain unanswered. This project was focused on developing and implementing a strength-based assessment as a starting point for adoption of strength-based practice throughout the juvenile justice system. The authors gathered preliminary data about whether the sites would implement strength-based policies or practice more broadly in their organizations and systems, but further study is necessary to assess the pilot sites' retention of the assessment tool and protocols, as well as broader strength-based changes.

In addition, further study is needed to document the impact of using a strength-based approach, if any, on youths and their families. In particular, it is of interest to see whether youths will have better outcomes, including decreased future offending and/or risk factors for delinquency. Developments in the three YCA domains (repair-

ing harm, creating a healthy identity, and connecting with family, peers, and community) also need further testing.

The pilot study was limited in duration, which prevented the authors from collecting data from a sample of youths who were involved in these juvenile justice agencies after the strength-based assessment approach at these sites had been fully implemented. A comparison group study or trend analyses, to measure changes in youth outcomes at the system level over time, would be a useful contribution as well.

Studies in different geographical areas, using the training curriculum and supplemental materials, as well as policy level guidelines that resulted from this project, would be informative. The authors hope to conduct future studies to address some of these additional research questions.

### Conclusions

The three juvenile justice agencies that participated in this project, innovators in assessing the competencies of juvenile offenders, are helping to lead the way to more positive and productive interventions with at-risk youths. This project demonstrated that a strength-based approach could be integrated into existing juvenile justice practices, with existing staff, enhancing the quality of information obtained and relationships developed, while still allowing risks and needs to be addressed and youths to be held accountable for their problematic behaviors. Through the courage and hard work of these departments, tools, resources, and policy guidelines were developed to assist other agencies in following in their footsteps. It is hoped that the future will bring greater enhancements to their efforts to provide support and assistance to juvenile justice-involved youths and their families and communities.

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 Copies of the tool, training materials, and additional information are located at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com) or by contacting the authors. A detailed description of the tool can be found in *Identifying Strengths as Fuel for Change: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework for the Youth Competency Assessment* (Nissen et al., 2005).
- 2 Criminogenic refers to those factors that contribute to criminality, either through a person's history or experience or in their future risk of continuing to participate in illegal behavior.
- 3 The Youth Competency Assessment (YCA) is the strength-based assessment instrument and process developed by the authors and the basis of the pilot testing described in this article. Copies of the tool, training materials, and additional information are located at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com) or by contacting the authors.
- 4 The project to develop a strength-based assessment tool and pilot test the instrument was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- 5 A detailed description of the development of the tool can be found in *Identifying Strengths as Fuel for Change: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework for the Youth Competency Assessment* (Nissen et al., 2005).
- 6 The mission of the Oregon Juvenile Department Directors Association is to provide leadership and direction for Oregon's juvenile justice system; enhance the ability of communities to reduce juvenile crime; align and integrate state and local juvenile justice policies; create policy based on research and effective practices, and translate national and state policies into local practice; promote organizational and staff development in juvenile justice agencies; and develop, share, and implement juvenile justice information, research, and evidence-based practices.
- 7 The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Comprehensive Strategy for Serious and Violent Offenders is a balanced approach to juvenile justice that focuses on prevention and early intervention, but calls for strong, immediate, and well-planned responses to delinquent acts, including preventing and reducing delinquency, providing necessary treatment and services, holding offenders accountable, offering a range of graduated sanctions, and keeping the public safe. The Strategy also works to strengthen families and support core social institutions. Selected counties across the country (6 in Oregon out of 42 nationally) received training to implement the strategy.
- 8 JJIS has juvenile allegation and referral history data, as well as information on dispositions, risk factors, case planning, detention stays, and other youth information. It links all county and state juvenile justice agencies in Oregon.
- 9 The research team at that time consisted of Dr. Laura Nissen, researchers from NPC Research, and a representative from the Oregon Juvenile Department Directors Association.
- 10 For research purposes, a comparison county was selected and included in data collection efforts and analyses. The results of these analyses can be found in the project's final report at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com).
- 11 The Oregon JCP Risk Screen/Assessment was developed by the Oregon Juvenile Department Directors Association. Copies of, and information about, this tool can be found at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com) or [www.ojdda.org](http://www.ojdda.org).
- 12 During the pilot study, a set of interviews was videotaped and coded. YCA interviews were coded as significantly higher on ratings of strength-based practice characteristics than comparison interviews using a traditional intake assessment (for more information, see the project's final report at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com)).
- 13 Practice exercises, as well as guidelines and suggestions for reviewing actual casework, are provided in the Trainer's Guide that accompanies the YCA Training Manual, available at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com).
- 14 The pilot study included data on 54 youths and 61 parents/guardians from three test sites and one comparison site. For additional information, please see the project report, which can be found at [www.npcresearch.com](http://www.npcresearch.com).

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