

# Documentation for Back on Track!

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, working together with the Washington Association of Juvenile Court Administrators and Assessments.com, developed a validated, risk and criminogenic needs assessment instrument known both as the Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment (WSJCA) and Back On Track! (they are one in the same). The instrument, which has a combined caseload of over 20,000 cases that serve as the basis for its empirical validation study, is described in detail below. This occurred in 1998.

## **Organization of the Back On Track! Assessment Instrument**

The Back On Track! assessment tool has two components:

- An initial Pre-Screen, and
- A Full Assessment.

**Pre-Screen:** The Pre-Screen is divided into three domains:

1. Record of Referrals (Criminal History)
2. Social History
3. Attitudes and Behaviors.

The Pre-Screen contains approximately 30 question items, and is a shortened version of the Full Assessment. The Pre-Screen indicates whether the youth is of low, moderate, or high risk. The information collected during the pre-screen is carried forward for use in the full assessment.

Based on the initial risk assessment, the juvenile probation counselor can set goals for the youth, including the youth's court obligations, place the youth in diversion, or place the youth into an intervention designed for the youth's risk profile.

**Full Screen:** The Full Assessment is divided into 12 Domains:

- |                        |                           |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Record of Referrals | 7. Family                 |
| 2. Demographics        | 8. Alcohol & Drugs        |
| 3. Education           | 9. Mental Health          |
| 4. Use of Free Time    | 10. Attitudes & Behaviors |
| 5. Employment          | 11. Aggression            |
| 6. Relationships       | 12. Skills                |

The Full Screen contains approximately 90 questions, approximately 30 of which are identical to those found in the Pre-Screen. The Full Screen incorporates items related to criminogenic needs and protective factors (strengths). Each item offers several response options, allowing for narrative description of the risk, need, and protective factors being assessed. This allows for more detailed and insightful case profiling of the results of the assessment. Through rigorous item

definition, Back On Track! addresses some of the problems of "checklist" reliability, while increasing user-friendliness.

Additionally, the protocol includes interview material to guide the assessment interview process. It is directly transferable to client intervention and supervision, and offers excellent potential as a reassessment tool for measuring supervision progress over time. It provides a common language for talking about clients and communicating with other service agencies, and offers more objective criteria for assigning services.

### **Strengths of the Back On Track! Model**

- Includes both a short and long form (Pre-Screen and Full Assessment)
- 4th Generation, innovative assessment approach
- Includes both Risk and Protective Factors, and Static and Dynamic Factors
- Designed for administration using a semi-structured interview and motivational interviewing techniques
- Item level definitions are built into the tool for improved reliability
- Questions/Answers include multiple answer options, as opposed to a "checklist" format
- User-defined features and elements
- Strong validity supported by extensive research
- Noted increase in predictive accuracy (actuarial assessment versus clinical judgment)
- A reliance on a common theoretical model
- The identification of factors correlated with future criminal behavior
- The development of a case management plan based on needs and protective factors
- The identification and effective use of resources
- Standardization of the assignment of levels of supervision and service
- Noted increase of staff proficiency
- Noted increase in assessment and interview skills
- The application of the principles of effective intervention

### **Development of Back On Track!**

The initial development of Back On Track! relied on juvenile delinquency and risk prediction research that has been evolving for over 30 years, specifically:

- Recidivism prediction literature and instruments
- Theoretical models for juvenile delinquency
- Risk and protective factor research
- Resiliency research
- Research on effective juvenile delinquency programs
- Review by an international team of experts
- A series of reviews by Washington State juvenile court professionals

To ensure the validation process was complete, an extensive review of the prediction and treatment outcome literature was first completed. This included an examination of existing risk assessment instruments such as the Client Management Classification System and Wisconsin Risk Scale (1994) and the Youth Level of Service and Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI; Hoge and Andrews, 1996). Those risk factors consistently identified in the literature and empirically proved to be accurate predictors were incorporated in Back On Track!

In addition, a review of the protective factors research, such as the work of Hawkins and Catalano, was conducted, and those protective factors consistently shown to be accurate were included.

Back On Track! was developed from two types of risk and needs instruments. The first type of instrument consists primarily of historic or static information. The Wisconsin risk assessment is a well-known example of a static instrument. These instruments contain primarily objective information, explicitly avoiding more subjective or clinical information.

The second type of risk & needs instrument includes information that is more clinical in nature and subject to change. This information is known as dynamic risk factors. The youth Level of Service Inventory (YLSI) is a well known instrument of this type.

Back On Track! was created by combining the concept of both types of instruments using research on the theory of delinquency and recidivism. In addition, Back On Track! includes a life or social skills section that is derived from the cognitive behavior approach to dealing with juvenile delinquency. The assessment also includes protective factors based on the resiliency research in delinquency. The presence of protective factors should reduce the risk of re-offending. Protective factors are those positive things in a juvenile's life that help them overcome adversity or other risk-related challenges.

Also, a review of existing theoretical models was undertaken. Consistent with the empirical literature, a number of factors have been implicated by such theorists as Andrews and Bonta,(1994); Andrews, Bonta and Hoge, (1990); Elliodtat, Huzinga, and Ageton (1985); Hirchi (1969); LeBlanc, Quimet, and Tremblay (1988); and Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsay (1989). The theoretical model developed by Andrews, Bonta and Hoge (1990) also provides four principles that serve as guidelines to ensure the effective use of risk/need assessment tools.

Finally, Back On Track! was submitted to many national and international experts for a review. These experts reviewed a draft version of Back On Track! and provided written comments. The group included: Bob DeComo, Donna

Hamparian and Patricia Hardyman of the National Center on Crime and Delinquency; Del Elliot and Jennifer Grotperter of the University of Colorado; Scott Henggeler of the Medical University of South Carolina, Mark Lipsey of Vanderbilt University, Patrick Tolan of the University of Illinois at Chicago, two Canadian researchers Robert Hoge of Carleton University at Ottawa Ontario and Vern Quinsy of Queens University at Kingston Ontario, and David Farrington of Cambridge University, England.

### **Back On Track! Reliability and Validation**

A fundamental property of a standardized risk assessment is **reliability**. A reliable instrument should produce the same assessment and results for the same subject, when done by different assessors or when done shortly later. For an instrument to be used reliably, there must be clear definitions for the concepts being assessed and extensive training must precede the use of the assessment. Training for staff should often include the Risk Assessment Process, Motivational Interviewing and Case Management.

Both the design of Back On Track! and the features included in its assessment software, Assessments.com, enhance the “inter-rater” and “test/retest” reliability of the tool. First, Back On Track, the tool, has clear item-level definitions. Second, short summaries of these definitions are included and displayed in Assessments.com along with the questions. This allows users to read the definitions while administering the instrument, and better understand what information is to be included. Third, and perhaps most effective, Assessments.com provides “pop-up” windows of additional instruction and even sample interview questions for every question and answer option. These windows pop-up automatically as the user moves the computer mouse over the questions or answers in the assessment.

The second property of a risk assessment is **validity** – that the assessment accurately measures what it intends to measure: those factors related to the youth’s risk of re-offending. There are two types of validity: face validity and empirical validity.

**Face validity** means the assessment adequately represents the concepts/constructs related to re-offending so a practitioner has faith in the assessment providing a comprehensive and useful picture of the youth. Unless the risk assessment is considered by the practitioner to be a useful tool for working with youth, he or she will not consider the assessment valid. To enhance face validity of the risk assessment process using the Back On Track! assessment instrument, a thorough examination of the existing literature and field experience was used to guide the selection and development of the major domains and items.

**Empirical validity** means the assessment can be shown to accurately predict re-offending. The Back On Track! Pre-Screen assessment was initially validated using six-month recidivism as the criteria, and both the Pre-Screen and Full Assessment have since been re-validated by doing factor analyses to examine the psychometric properties. Like the assessment process itself, the validation research is also a process, not an event, and Back On Track! will continue to be validated using both six-month recidivism and eighteen-month recidivism results. Those results will be made available as they are completed. Moreover, any department implementing Back on Track! would want to collect the assessment data compiled through the implementation of Back On Track! and validate the risk levels and measure program and service delivery efficacy.

### **Proliferation of Back On Track!**

Back On Track! was initially developed, implemented and validated in Washington State. Other jurisdictions quickly recognized the efficacy of the model, as did the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and other professionals and professional organizations within the field of juvenile justice. Since then, Back On Track! and/or iterations of the Washington instrument have been implemented in many other state and counties across the United States, and in some cases has been customized and enhanced to meet the needs of local jurisdictional requirements or processes. Some of these jurisdictions are Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Montana, Mississippi, New York, Illinois, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.