



# THE STRENGTHS/STRUCTURED ASSESSMENT FOR YOUTH (S/SAY): WHAT DO SOCIAL WORKERS IN YOUTH DETENTION CENTERS THINK?

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## INTRODUCTION

### WHY TAKE STRENGTHS INTO ACCOUNT?

Considering the strengths of justice-involved youths contributes to a more complete, balanced and realistic assessment of their situation.  
For social workers: more satisfaction in clinical work (Nissen et al., 2005) and professional human skills support (Prescott & Willis, 2021)

### WHAT IS S/SAY?

A structured assessment tool that measures the strengths of justice-involved young people

- A *strength* precedes the development of a protective factor because it doesn't have a protective effect yet.
- 24 to 26 items in 7 life domains
- Combined with YLS/CMI assessment

### WHY THIS RESEARCH?

- The study of social validity (agreement on objectives, procedures and effects of a program) is complementary to the psychometric qualities analysis (Carter & Wheeler, 2019; Schwartz & Baer, 1991; Strain & Barton, 2012) for reliability and durability of a program or a tool.
- The effectiveness of an assessment tool depends directly on how social workers use it (Guay et al., 2015) and think about it.

## 1 INTRODUCTION



## STRENGTHS / STRUCTURED ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH

## 4 DISCUSSION

- Although they criticize it for its categorizing effect, social workers seem to adhere to the structured nature of assessment as presented in the 11th principle of Bonta & Andrews' (2023) rehabilitation model. As pointed out by Viljoen's team (2019), structure improves both risk prediction and risk management.
- By destigmatizing and valorizing youth, the formal consideration of strengths within a standardized tool seems to develop the therapeutic alliance between the social work practitioner and the justice-involved youth (Mengo et al., 2017; Serin et al., 2016). In this way, professional human skills (Prescott & Willis, 2021) and the general responsiveness principle to the RBR model are reinforced.
- As advocated by others (Glowacz et al., 2022; Ziv, 2016), through the opinions of social workers, our preliminary results defend the complementarity of the RBR model (Bonta & Andrews, 2023) and strengths-based approaches (Saleebey, 2006).
- Other researches (Miller & Maloney, 2013; Viglione et al., 2015) have shown that probation officers do not always use the actuarial risk level to inform the case management. Our results are no exception. It will be necessary to better understand this finding by analyzing our preliminary hypotheses in relation to our participants' unfamiliarity with the scientific underpinnings of an actuarial assessment and their preference for structured clinical judgment.

## DISCUSSION

## CONCLUSION

Treatment motivation, therapeutic alliance and success of the case management plan will be enhanced by the positive effects of formally integrating strengths into the assessment of justice-involved youths.

S/SAY introduces the principles of the strengths-based approach to the assessment of justice-involved youths, not just at the case management step.

Our preliminary results suggest that weighting strengths will lead to greater trust in the validity of the actuarial result and to better-oriented clinical override.

They also demonstrate the value of a social validity study to document acceptability to new practices, with a view to ensuring the fidelity and durability of evidence-based practice implementation.

## METHODOLOGY

### DATA COLLECT METHOD

- Semi-structured interviews

### SAMPLE

- Total sample : 34 Belgian social workers in three juvenile detention centers who use YLS/CMI and S/SAY
- For this poster, preliminary results based on 9 participants (77,78% female and 22,22% male, average age 36.56 years)

### ANALYSIS STRATEGY

- Miles and Huberman's principles (2019)
- Codebook based on inductive coding with essentially in vivo coding
- Analysis inspired by social validity theoretical framework (Wolf, 1978) and program implementation literature

## 2 METHODOLOGY

## RESULTS

- Participants recognize the importance of assessing a justice-involved youth's situation before managing the case.
- The use of a tool (YLS/CMI and S/SAY) provides structure and guarantees a complete assessment. However, it generates a categorization effect among experienced social workers.
- Participants recognize the value of integrating strengths into a structured assessment process. The use of S/SAY was recognized as encouraging greater consideration of strengths.
  - “ We saw the problem but not necessarily the strengths that the young could bring (a social worker) ”
- The possibility of destigmatizing and valuing the justice involved-youth, but also establish a positive relationship and balance risk factors constitute the main arguments for its use.
  - “ It makes it possible to share not only the negative, but as much of the positive as the negative, or even more of the positive than the negative (an educational manager) ”
  - “ If we only dealt with the risk side, creating a relationship, it would already be much more complicated (a psychologist) ”
- Participants describe a divergent use of the actuarial result. Some multidisciplinary teams use the risk level to inform the case management, while others will override the risk level to match the chosen intervention program. Strengths are used to clinical override downwards or not to override upwards.

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