

# Assessing and Tracking Youthful Offenders With The Web-Based Global Risk Assessment Device

Corrections professionals continue to search for ways to reduce the number of juvenile offenders in the juvenile justice system and otherwise improve the system's ability to respond to the needs of these youths and their families. One important tactic is the use of risk/needs-assessment tools. Unfortunately, few well-developed and easy-to-use instruments have been designed for juvenile justice professionals. Without appropriate assessment, professionals all too often make recommendations and referrals based on insufficient and inadequate information.

The development of an instrument known as the Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD) was initiated to help juvenile justice professionals make recommendations and referrals that are based on reliable and valid information about risk factors in a wide variety of relevant domains. These domains include prior offenses, family and parenting issues, peer relationships, substance abuse, mental health symptoms, accountability, educational and vocational issues, traumatic events and health-related risks. GRAD was developed for use on a personal computer and was originally part of a collaborative effort between Ohio State University and the Franklin County Juvenile Court in Ohio. Empirical work conducted with this original version of the assessment tool in juvenile justice programming efforts has generated initial evidence of its reliability and validity.

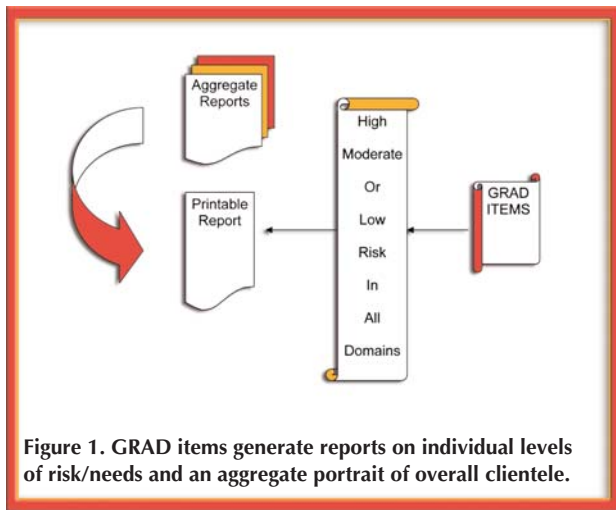
A subsequent effort translated GRAD into a Web-based instrument that now includes several important features. First, there is a user registration process that protects access to the court's database. In addition, cutoff scores have been developed that serve to instantaneously categorize youths as low, moderate or high risk in each risk domain. (Following a pilot data collection phase, the cutoff scores subsequently can be tailored to each court's unique youth population.) These risk scores are linked to important demographic information that is collected on each youth who is assessed, and all of that information is systematically aggregated and available to the user for reporting purposes (see Figure 1). Further, there is a case disposition tracking page that is designed to collect information on referrals and subsequent service provision, and the database has been constructed to facilitate the collection of information from multiple perspectives (youth, parent, professional) throughout the case management process.

Respondents are asked to indicate on a scale of 0 to 2 how much each item applies to their life. A 0 indicates no/never, 1 indicates yes/a couple of times and 2 indicates yes/a lot. Examples of items respondents are asked to rate include:

- Prior offenses — How often have the police or anyone else from law enforcement stopped you because of something you did?
- Family/parenting — How often do you get into fights with adults who live in your home?
- Education/work — Have you had a difficult time getting to school or staying in school for the entire day?
- Peers — Do you have friends who have been in trouble with the law?
- Substance use — Have drugs and/or alcohol played a role in disrupting your academic performance?
- Leisure — Do you ever have a lot of spare time?
- Internalizing/externalizing — Do you have difficulty controlling your anger?
- Psychopathy — Do you try to manipulate or use others?
- Trauma — Have you ever witnessed domestic violence in the home?
- Accountability — Do you ever feel more mad instead of guilty when you get caught doing something wrong?
- Health services — Have you gone without regular medical check-ups?

One of GRAD's unique features is that it was developed with the varied needs of different professionals in mind. The diversity of the GRAD development group, which included university scholars, direct service providers and former line staff, enabled the development of a psychometrically sound instrument, as well as a complete assessment protocol that looked and flowed much like the typical case management functions found in many youth-serving organizations. In fact, some of the earliest applications of GRAD focused on triaging youths and families into appropriate levels of both diversion and parole programming.

In addition, GRAD staff developed generic interpretations and recommendations for each of the risk domains as a way of offering empirically



**Figure 1. GRAD items generate reports on individual levels of risk/needs and an aggregate portrait of overall clientele.**

based explanations and recommendations, minus the academic jargon that often accompanies such material. Instead, the addition of these informational Web pages provides professionals with direct and uncomplicated answers to questions such as, “What does it mean to be high risk in a particular domain?” and “What should I do if I have a youth who is high risk in this domain?” (See Figure 2)

Finally, the GRAD project team was interested in creating an assessment protocol that simplified line staff’s daily routine instead of adding even more work to their already busy and often overloaded schedules. Using GRAD reduces the need for paperwork through an online aggregate reporting method built into the information system. On average, it takes about 25 minutes to complete the GRAD assessment. Based on their level of administrative access, staff and their supervisors are able to compile a variety of case reports (daily, weekly, monthly) with a touch of a button, thus providing more opportunity for line workers to be out in the community providing one-on-one case management.

## GRAD in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court

Testing the Web-based version of GRAD was initiated through a collaborative effort between Ohio State University and the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court, Ohio’s largest juvenile court. This court serves the state’s most populous county, which has 1.4 million people, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The court, founded in 1902, was the second juvenile court to be established in the United States. Cleveland is the Cuyahoga County seat as well as its principal city. Functioning as the juvenile division of the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, the juvenile court has six independently elected judges, each of whom has three magistrates to assist the judge hear the dockets. A court administrator is appointed by the administrative judge (who is elected annually by his or her peers) and manages the court on a day-to-day basis. Reporting to the court administrator are three departments: court services, probation services and detention services.

The court services department is responsible for all the legal and clerking functions and services necessary to ensure that the court hearing process is executed in a timely and efficient manner. In 2002, the court’s total docket

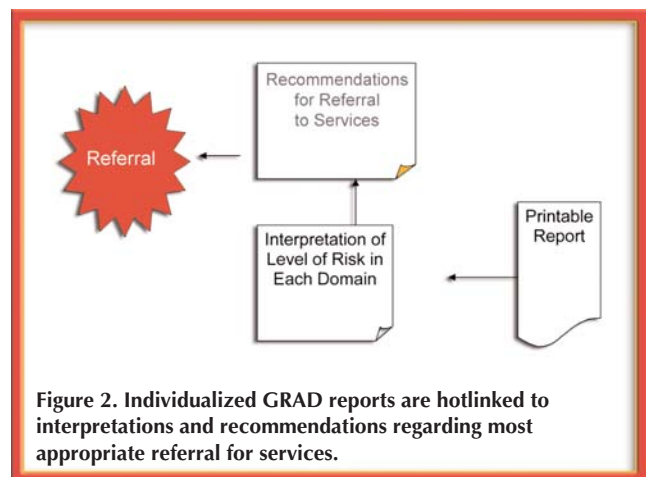
consisted of more than 34,000 cases. This included 8,927 delinquent cases and 2,904 status or unruly cases. Status offenders include youths whose behavior is illegal only because of their status as minors (e.g., curfew violations, truancy, underage drinking, etc.). Delinquent offenders include those youths whose criminal behavior is illegal regardless of age.

The probation services department provides predispositional social history to assist jurists in determining appropriate dispositions for adjudicated youths and their families, as well as post-disposition probation case management services to those ordered to probation. In 2002, the probation services department supervised an average of 2,000 youths and their families on any given day.

The detention services department provides a continuum of detention services ranging from most restrictive (lock-up) to least restrictive (release to parent/guardian pending court action) for youths who are arrested by law enforcement (fresh arrest) or court-ordered (remand). These services include secure detention as well as a variety of alternative detention services such as home detention, home detention with electronic monitoring, nonsecure shelter care and evening reporting. In 2002, this department admitted more than 3,100 youths into secure detention, with an average daily population of 136 and an average length of stay of 16 days. Alternative detention services had an average daily population of 258 youths among the services noted above.

The Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court’s initial motivation to become involved with GRAD arose from its need to maintain compliance with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention regulations regarding the holding of status or unruly offenders in secure detention pending court action. An internal task force, charged with reviewing the court’s compliance with these regulations, determined that the court needed to develop a program not involving the use of secure detention for repeat status offenders who were not amenable to its usual dispositional alternatives. Thus was conceived the Unruly Respite Care Program.

As originally developed, the program would provide a two-track system: one for low-risk offenders who were deemed not to require comprehensive community services, and a second one for high-risk offenders who would require such services, including nonsecure, community-based shelter care, until they could be reunited with their families.



**Figure 2. Individualized GRAD reports are hotlinked to interpretations and recommendations regarding most appropriate referral for services.**

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Hence, a fundamental task involved the classification of low-risk and high-risk youths. Additionally, such a determination needed to be made in a timely manner, given the OJJDP regulation regarding the holding of unruly juvenile offenders in secure detention for only 24 hours after a court hearing.

With the assistance of the Ohio Department of Youth Services Bureau of Grants Management, the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court was made aware of GRAD, which, upon further investigation and review, appeared to meet the dual need of being a valid screening tool that could differentiate unruly offenders on a continuum of low to high risk, while also being a relatively brief instrument to administer.

Formal implementation of GRAD as a screening tool for the Unruly Respite Care Program began in December 2002. To date, the GRAD implementation process has been both productive and beneficial for the court's staff. One of the more conspicuous advantages of GRAD's use comes from the fact that the staff training needed to implement GRAD is minimal. After a one-day training session that includes actual hands-on practice with GRAD, every staff member has been able to effectively use GRAD with youths and their parent/guardians. In addition, with consistent use of GRAD (e.g., at least once per week), the average time to complete GRAD with a single client is between 20 to 30 minutes — an amount of time that is both reasonable and practical.

Further, it appears that both clients (youths and adult caregivers) and professionals have had uniformly positive reactions to the implementation of GRAD in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court. No specific complaints have been registered, and there has been a range of reports that describe constructive dialogues being initiated by youths and adult family members as the result of information first touched on through use of GRAD.

Initial analyses of the data generated in the court have produced solid reliability evidence on the GRAD items, and the GRAD assessments conducted on the first 50 youths enrolled in the Unruly Respite Care Program have been compared with data collected from an additional 350 youths assessed at detention, probation and intake/diversion — the three main points of entry into the court sys-

tem. Interestingly, analyses indicate that the program clients are one of the two highest risk groups in eight out of the 11 GRAD domains, second only to the detention youths (one of the two highest risk groups in nine out of 11 domains).


## **Buy-In and Sustainability At The Local and State Levels**

Funding supplied by the Bureau of Grants Management for the juvenile court's Unruly Respite Care Program was meant to provide the means for the court to get back into compliance with federal guidelines. This support was contingent on three conditions: buy-in by the six judges who hear all juvenile cases, as well as the line staff who process and work with these youths; the development and adoption of a risk/needs-assessment tool; and an evaluation of the program's process as a whole.

First and foremost, the implementation of any new program demands buy-in from both administrators and practitioners. As such, it seems preferable to develop a marketing and educational strategy based on consensus and inclusion rather than authoritatively and unilaterally announcing to clients and related staff that they will begin to implement a given project. With regard to the Unruly Respite Care Program, the judges and the court administrator agreed that changes were necessary and, in turn, the court administrator empowered his employees to create opportunities related to the reallocation of resources and redirection of personnel in this effort.

Second, it was believed that the development and adoption of a reliable and valid risk-assessment tool was necessary to ensure proper planning for the needs of a diverse youth population would take place. Accurate assessment would assist in the decision-making process surrounding subsequent referral of these youths for necessary services. Over time, it became clear to many of the court's professionals that GRAD provided enough information on risk factors that it could be used as the beginning of the case management process. In turn, these line staff quickly realized that GRAD not only was relatively easy to administer but also provided enough behavioral and social context data to help them plan for prescriptive programming.

Finally, the need for evaluation was predicated on the twin issues of accountability and sustainability. It is axiomatic to state that a funded initiative should be effective. Therefore, a relatively sophisticated evaluation plan was adopted to examine the impact of the program on its clientele. However, the development of any implementation strategy must include strategies that focus on the sustainability of the project as well. Further, evaluation efforts and sustainability strategies need to be in place as close as possible to the beginning of the project. All too often, agencies and organizations get relatively close to the end of a funding period before dealing with questions surrounding "what next" and "now what," instead of capitalizing on the enthusiasm and energy typically present at the beginning of a project. At the GRAD project's inception, a project manager was appointed who formed an implementation team in the court to plan for the total implementation process, including both start-up concerns and longer-term issues sur-



rounding maintenance and modification in reaction to the ongoing evaluative process.

## Expanding Into Other Ohio Counties

After the online pilot effort in Cuyahoga County was initiated, the GRAD project expanded into the Franklin County (Columbus) and Licking County juvenile courts. Franklin County is a large urban center much like that of Cuyahoga County, which is home to the state capital and Ohio State University. It is using GRAD in probation, presentence investigation and intake/diversion. The primary focus of GRAD in Franklin County is twofold: to streamline the assessment process across multiple points of entry into the court, and to use a tracking system that monitors service delivery (i.e., gaps in service, quality of services and accountability of services) rendered to youths and their families as the result of contact with the juvenile court.

Licking County, on the other hand, is more geographically diverse than the other two more metropolitan pilot sites and contains a rather unique mix of small urban and rural communities. It is using GRAD in its diversion efforts. Here, the focus has been on collecting multiple perspectives (youth and parent interviews) with its status offender populations. This assessment effort is then used to enhance collaborative efforts with its mental health service providers.

## Becoming Involved In The GRAD Project

The GRAD project typically uses a three-step process in bringing a new court on board. The first step includes an introductory meeting with key administrative personnel to walk through the GRAD protocol, review the assessment site and discuss the specialized needs of the user agency. The second step includes a larger group presentation for line staff and other professionals who will become the direct users of GRAD at the new site. The final step includes securing funding (GRAD staff are made available to provide technical assistance for grant-writing efforts in support of the new site's pilot effort) and scheduling training dates. The one full day of training may be conducted at Ohio State University for up to 20 individuals at a time or in a setting that is more local to the new group of users where a technology training center can be accessed. Interested parties may visit the GRAD Web site at <http://projectgrad.osu.edu> for more detailed information.

Most recently, evidence has been generated regarding the concurrent validity of this instrument (Gavazzi and Lim, 2003), such that GRAD has been shown to measure substance use, mental health issues and family problems in a similar fashion to other well-known measures in the field. Further, initial predictive validity evidence also has been generated (Gavazzi et al., in press), whereby GRAD was able to accurately distinguish between youths in need of referrals to more intensive and less intensive services. Professionals working with court-involved youths may benefit from an exploration of GRAD's use as a tool to augment their professional decision-making regarding the referral and disposition process.

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