

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION**450 H ST NW
Washington DC, 20001**To:** [REDACTED]**From:** [REDACTED]**Date:** March 2, 2020**Subject:** Structure Decision Making (SDM) Tool**History of the SDM:**

DYRS began using the SDM tool in 2009. In 2013, Annie E. Casey and National Council on Crime and Delinquency validated the tool. The tool is designed to make a placement decision for newly committed or re-committed youth. The tool identifies the severity of the most recent offense for which a youth is found guilty and identifies a risk score and level. The combination of these 2 factors create a matrix by which placement decisions are made. The purpose of this tool is to create rationality, transparency, and uniformity to the placement process. This tool was designed to ensure that the most serious and violent offenders would be the only youth placed in secure residential treatment. Youth with lower risk of offending and/or less serious offenses would then be placed in the community or at home.

Historically, youth were rarely placed at home as an initial placement between FY2011-FY2017, even if their SDM recommended it. Additionally, out of state group homes used to be contracted as a residential treatment facility (High), but are now contracted as group homes (Medium). At times, out of state group homes are used as a way to place a youth with a medium placement recommendation in a more secure setting than a local group home without having to raise their level through an override/waiver process. They have also been used in situations when the committee felt that a youth with a high placement level recommendation from the SDM would do poorly in a traditionally secure setting.

Since FY2014, new commitment placement decisions have had an increased override rate from 36% in FY2014 to 63% in FY2018. In FY2019, that override rate began to decline down to 49% (with 1 youth still awaiting placement) and currently stands at 40% (with 10 youth currently awaiting initial placement) for FY2020. In FY2014-FY2017, the overrides were split approximately evenly between an override up and an override down. In FY2018, this began to change. In FY2018, there were twice as many overrides down as there were overrides up. In FY2019, that increased to 2.5 times the number of overrides down as up. So far in FY2020, every override has been an override down.

Recidivism rates for youth from FY2013-FY2017 showed that youth with a higher SDM level do have higher recidivism rates overall. However, recidivism rates also showed that youth with a high SDM tend to do best in a less restrictive environment.



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

450 H ST NW
Washington DC, 20001



What is it missing?

Although recidivism rates tend to indicate that the tool is differentiating risk of our youth fairly consistently, the fact that in practice, we have such high override rates indicates that the tool itself may not be aligned with agency philosophy of keeping youth in least restrictive placement settings. After review of the tool, participation in the placement review committee meetings, and in-depth research on existing tools used in other jurisdictions, ORE has identified a few key items that are missing or not working optimally.

To begin, the placement matrix as it is currently designed is very rigid and dated in comparison to other jurisdictions. Multiple jurisdictions using an SDM tool (e.g., St. Louis, MO and the state of Indiana) have adapted their matrix to be less rigid and instead make multiple recommendations within each cell of the matrix. This allows for additional social factors not included in the SDM to be considered in the placement decision-making process or for an alternate placement option if the current option under consideration does not meet the clinical needs of the youth. The proposed matrix also separates out of state group homes into its own category between local community group homes and secure residential placement facilities. In initial testing with a proposed matrix revision, ORE found that DYRS is already placing more consistently with that matrix as it eliminates overrides to a less restrictive placement option. The override rate for FY2020 so far would be 0%.

The SDM tool itself focuses overwhelmingly on offense and placement history with limited questions on social factors such as trauma that may impact placement decisions. The current questions that do exist in making placement decisions can be confusing, double-barreled, and vague. This can lead to poor inter-rater reliability i.e., different workers interpreting the questions differently and providing answers based on different time frames or other information. Because the tool includes limited information on protective factors, a common theme within placement review committee is to discuss the youth's SDM, CAFAS, and other factors. Often, there will be a discussion about a traumatic event that a youth experienced that may be a part of why they are behaving in a criminal manner. Research indicates that 92% of youth that are in the juvenile justice system have experienced at least one (1) traumatic event and that 84% had experienced at least two (2) traumatic events.¹ Youth that have experienced an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) have a significantly higher risk of offending. However, placement in secure residential facilities can further traumatize youth. For this reason, DYRS has not included protective factors in the SDM tool to limit further traumatizing youth and make an effort at better serving them with wrap around services in the community. The SDM currently captures only one (1) of the ACEs factors, which is parent incarceration. Although this factor has one of the highest correlation rates, it only accounts for one (1) point in the SDM. None of the other nine (9) factors are included, but they are often discussed within the context of placement.

In addition to the ACE factors that are frequently discussed, but often not tracked, the committee often also discusses Protective and Compensatory Experiences (PACEs)², which are

¹ Abram, Teplin, Charles, Longworth, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2004

² Different groups use different words for this acronym, but all speak to positive factors that create a buffer for ACEs



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

450 H ST NW
Washington DC, 20001



experiences that act as a buffer to risk factors such as trauma that a youth may have experienced, in the short, immediate, and long term. The engagement of youth in PACEs related interventions present opportunities for DYRS staff to facilitate positive relationships with peers or mentors (e.g., a teacher or coach), prosocial activity participation (e.g., hobbies ,clubs, and sports) which build and extend the access to resources beyond immediate familial social networks and local communities.

Finally, although there is an SDM override form, this paper document is limited in scope and simply gets uploaded to scanned documents once filled out. This handwritten document which explains the purpose of the override can be vague and often is illegible. This makes further research around overrides labor-intensive and difficult to aggregate which limits the ability to draw any substantive conclusions regarding results at this time.

Recommendations:

Adapting the matrix to allow for multiple options within one (1) cell of the matrix would make the tool more consistent with our current placement practices designed to keep youth in the community when possible and limit the number of youth placed in secure residential care to those that will truly benefit from the structured environment and/or treatment.

Clarify SDM questions and create a formalized Standardized Operation Procedures (SOP) with case management. Once this is completed, provide training for all case management staff with test examples.

The addition ACEs and PACEs assessments would allow for a formal and comprehensive discussion of protective factors we currently discuss and consider, but do not track. This will ensure consistency and transparency in placement decisions and the treatment planning process. Adding ACEs as a parallel assessment, but not a formal part of the SDM would help limit the possibility of further traumatizing a youth as prior known trauma history would be formally considered in the placement process.

Additionally, with each of the above factors, we should update the override process to a more formal mechanism that is also attached to the SDM form in FAMCare. This would include information on why the override was approved, who approved it, and what the placement decision was. Moreover, it will further differentiate whether the completion of an override was for clinical reasons associated with ACEs or PACEs needs of youth versus due to a lack of options in the placement level that would be appropriate for the youth.

Finally, ORE will further review assessments from other jurisdictions that incorporate ACEs and or PACEs to identify if there is a better overall tool that the agency should adopt. Examples of promising jurisdictions are Florida and Washington. ORE will also conduct further research on PACEs and the juvenile justice system to identify how they play into the risk and needs discussion of justice-involved youth.