

2025

# Pennsylvania Detention Risk Assessment Instrument



## Frequently Asked Questions



# **Pennsylvania Detention Risk Assessment Instrument (PaDRAI) Frequently Asked Questions**

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## **Introduction**

Prepared by the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers and the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission with support from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, this document responds to common questions raised by juvenile justice professionals about the PaDRAI and aims to clarify policies and practices related to its administration.

## **Purpose and Limitations**

### **1. What is the PaDRAI's purpose?**

The PaDRAI ensures that, in accordance with Title 42, Chapter 63, subsection 6325 of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Act<sup>1</sup>, secure detention is used only for youth who pose a significant risk to the community, who pose a risk of failing to appear in juvenile court on a new delinquency allegation, or both.

The PaDRAI is a brief, evidence-based, structured decision-making tool designed to assist in the critical decision of whether a youth should be released into the custody of a parent or responsible caregiver, placed in an alternative to detention (ATD), or securely detained pending their appearance before a Juvenile Court Judge or Hearing Officer on a new allegation. The PaDRAI focuses exclusively on measuring short-term risk (up to 60 days), which is the risk to reoffend and/or fail to appear for a hearing during the period between the PaDRAI's administration and the youth's court appearance.

The tool promotes risk-based, objective, and uniform decision-making to reduce bias, aiming to provide transparent and fundamentally fair assessments for one of the juvenile justice system's most consequential decisions.

### **2. What is the PaDRAI NOT designed to do?**

The PaDRAI is not intended to measure long-term (greater than 60 days) risk of failing to appear for, or reoffending while awaiting, their appearance before a Juvenile Court Judge or Hearing Officer. The tool is also not intended to assess treatment needs, accountability measures, or sanctions prior to a youth's appearance before a Juvenile Court Judge or Hearing Officer. Pennsylvania juvenile probation departments use other assessment and screening tools for such purposes, such as the Youth Level of Service/Case Management

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<sup>1</sup> See the [Pennsylvania Juvenile Act](#).

Inventory™ 2.0, Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument Version 2, and Child Trauma Screen. These tools, including the PaDRAI, must be used strictly according to their stated, intended, and validated purposes.

### **3. Why does the PaDRAI outcome tracking period end after 60 days?**

The PaDRAI is designed to assess a youth's short-term risk of reoffending while awaiting a court hearing or failing to appear in court. Its predictive value is limited to a 60-day window, beyond which reliability cannot be guaranteed. If no hearing occurs within 60 days of the PaDRAI's administration, and the youth does not commit any new delinquent acts, the case is considered a successful outcome.

Delays or continuances beyond 60 days reflect case processing issues rather than the PaDRAI's effectiveness. Extended timelines can negatively impact behavior, as adolescents perceive and respond to time differently from adults due to their developmental stage. Therefore, prolonged decision-making may increase the likelihood of deteriorating behavior and should be addressed with targeted strategies.

## **Uniform Point of Administration**

### **4. What is the uniform point of administration policy?**

Effective January 1, 2023, the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers' Detention Subcommittee recommends administering the PaDRAI to all youth referred to juvenile probation at the point of intake (i.e., when the allegation is first received), regardless of offense seriousness. This ensures that the same criteria are used to assess all youth, which supports transparency and documentation, and promotes fairness in decision-making. It is also crucial to complete a PaDRAI for every detention admission. This requirement reinforces the use of a standardized, impartial tool to guide detention decisions and maintain transparency throughout the process.

Completing a PaDRAI also provides defensibility if a youth reoffends or fails to appear while awaiting their Juvenile Court hearing. The PaDRAI does not mandate a specific decision, but rather assists in the decision, and again, offers transparency into how that decision was made.

### **5. Why complete a PaDRAI on all youth, even if detention is not being considered (e.g., youth who seem to be at low risk)?**

While it may not seem necessary to complete a PaDRAI for a youth who would not typically be considered for detention, doing so ensures transparency and consistent decision-making.

Excluding a youth from the PaDRAI process often means that subjective criteria or

assumptions, conscious or unconscious, have already influenced that decision. The PaDRAI serves as an essential mechanism for documenting and clearly articulating the criteria and/or reasons applied in the decision. By completing it for all youth, the system ensures fairness, prevents bias, and promotes objective decision-making, regardless of offense severity.

## **6. Why complete a new PaDRAI when seeking detention for a youth with escalating behavior whose intake PaDRAI resulted in a mitigating override?**

A new PaDRAI is required because the context, circumstances, and decision regarding detention have changed.

If the PaDRAI completed at intake indicated detention, but the youth was released or placed in an ATD through a mitigating override, that decision reflected the youth's circumstances at intake.

Later, if detention is reconsidered due to concerns about escalating behavior that indicates a threat to the community or failure to comply with ATD or release, without new charges, a new detention decision is being made. In that case, a new PaDRAI should be completed.

This is necessary because these are two distinct detention decisions. The rationale behind each decision must be **documented** and **transparent**. The initial decision was based on the new charge and the circumstances at that time. The second decision would still include the original charge (scored in #2 of the assessment) along with the new circumstances prompting reconsideration of detention. The data from each decision is vital, along with the need to have a PaDRAI assessment for every detention admission.

## **Overrides, Detention Decisions, and Professional Discretion**

### **7. What if I disagree with the PaDRAI's recommendation?**

The scoring of the risk factors is often sufficient to support the decisions that would have been made without using the PaDRAI; however, the instrument allows for professional discretion when necessary.

### **8. What is a Mitigating Override to Detention?**

Mitigating Overrides are discretionary decisions based on standardized or customizable mitigating factors to override a PaDRAI recommendation to detain a youth and instead opt to release the youth to a parent or responsible adult. Mitigating overrides can also be used to release a youth to a parent or guardian instead of to an ATD. Common mitigating factors may include a) new referred charge is not recent; b) youth is marginally involved in the offense; c) alleged facts are less serious than the charge suggests; d) youth has significant mental health or intellectual disability (MH/ID) concerns or is in MH/ID placement; e) the youth is doing well

while absent; or f) other reason. The PaDRAI requires a comprehensive written explanation detailing case-specific reasons and rationale for any override decision.

## 9. What is an Aggravating Override to Detention?

Aggravating Overrides involve discretionary decisions when the PaDRAI score recommends an ATD or release to a parent or responsible adult, but the recommendation is overridden in favor of secure detention or from release to an ATD. A juvenile probation officer may invoke an aggravating override if there are clear and compelling reasons to believe that a youth presents a significant risk to public safety or is a substantial risk to fail to appear for their Juvenile Court hearing. Specific documentation requirements apply to the use of aggravating overrides. Management or supervisory personnel should closely monitor the use of aggravating overrides.

## 10. What is a Mandatory Detention?

Mandatory Detentions are specific circumstances in which a youth is detained regardless of the scoring of the Detention Assessment Risk Factors on the PaDRAI. These are established through a written local policy or directive that is issued by the Juvenile Court Judge or Chief Juvenile Probation Officer. In circumstances involving Mandatory Detention, a juvenile probation officer *does not have the ability to exercise any professional discretion* and is bound by the local policy or directive. Local Mandatory Detention policies or directives should be reviewed frequently to determine if the Mandatory Detention reasons should remain in effect.

## 11. Why do I need to complete a PaDRAI for a Mandatory Detention?

Although Mandatory Detentions are established based on a written local policy or directive, it is still crucial to document and collect data on the scoring for these decisions. Regular reviews of Mandatory Detentions are necessary to ensure they are justified. For instance, if you consistently find that a reason for a Mandatory Detention is scoring for Secure Detention, it may indicate that there is no longer a need for it to be classified as Mandatory.

## 12. What is the difference between Aggravating Overrides and Mandatory Detentions?

Aggravating Overrides involve discretionary decisions by juvenile probation officers to override PaDRAI recommendations when public safety or court appearance risks are deemed significant. These decisions require documented justification and close supervisory oversight. In contrast, Mandatory Detentions are enforced under written local policies, irrespective of PaDRAI scores, leaving no room for officer discretion. These policies are issued by court authorities and should be reviewed regularly to ensure continued relevance.

**Note:** Aggravating Override and Mandatory Detention rates are calculated and reflected separately in the PaDRAI Dashboards. The processes and responsibility for Discretionary

Overrides and Mandatory Detentions are different and require different management strategies.

### **13. Should juvenile probation departments be concerned about higher rates of Mitigating Overrides?**

Not necessarily. If a youth who scores for secure detention is “mitigated down” to release or an ATD and does not reoffend or fail to appear for their hearing, that is considered a successful outcome. This provides useful data and information about the PaDRAI’s effectiveness. As an evidence-based instrument that relies on data to support decision-making, the PaDRAI should be subject to a continuous quality improvement process. This helps determine whether adjustments to the PaDRAI or processes are needed. Of course, any youth who reoffends or fails to appear also informs whether modifications are warranted.

## **Research**

### **14. Does research support the PaDRAI?**

Yes. Juvenile detention risk assessment instruments have gained substantial national research support. In addition, a Pennsylvania-specific initial validation study was completed in 2016 using data exclusively from Pennsylvania youth. This study found that the PaDRAI had a 92.9% success rate (N=954) in its ability to classify youth appropriately in terms of their presenting risk to reoffend or fail to appear in court.<sup>2</sup>

A second revalidation study was conducted in 2024. In addition to exploring various aspects of the PaDRAI’s effective use, this study confirmed that the tool performed as intended, with a success rate of <sup>3</sup>

### **15. Why is it important to enter data into PaJCMS about whether youth reoffend or fail to appear for hearings?**

These outcomes, entered in the PaJCMS Detention Decision screen, provide the data and information necessary to determine whether the PaDRAI is a valid and reliable instrument to assist in the decision to release a youth to a parent or responsible adult, use an ATD, or securely detain the youth. When data and information are entered accurately and promptly, juvenile probation departments can assess their success rates in real time using the PaDRAI Dashboards.

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<sup>2</sup> Maloney, C.L. (2014). *Pennsylvania Juvenile Detention Risk Assessment Instrument (PaDRAI): Results of a Three Month Implementation Pilot*. Pennsylvania Council of Chief Probation Officers. Available [online](#).

<sup>3</sup> Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission. April 2025. *Pennsylvania Detention Risk Assessment Instrument Revalidation Study Research Brief*. Available [online](#).

Simply put, when making decisions about a youth's life, it is critical to have confidence that the decision-making tool is actually doing what it is designed to do. If the instrument recommends releasing a youth to a parent/guardian/responsible adult, and the decision to release is made, we need to know if that assessment was accurate. This cannot be determined without this follow-up data.

The PaDRAI needs to be validated using your county's data, including outcomes for the youth under your jurisdiction, as well as statewide data. County- and state-specific data is what makes this tool uniquely designed to serve youth and the local and statewide juvenile justice systems optimally versus an 'off-the shelf' tool validated with national-level data.

## **Alternatives to Detention**

### **16. What are some examples of ATDs?**

Below are examples of ATDs. Most can be administered by juvenile probation departments or contracted out to private providers. Several ATD options are low-cost or no-cost but may require procedural adjustments.

- House arrest
- Automated calls or home checks
- Expedited intake and/or hearing scheduling
- Frequent court hearing reminders
- Home detention
- Electronic monitoring
- Day/evening reporting centers
- In-home detention or pre-disposition supervision
- Alternative living arrangements with a relative or responsible adult
- Shelter