



Frequently Asked Questions on the DCFS Risk Stratification Model

1. Why is DCFS pursuing risk stratification modeling after the State of California abandoned it?

In October 2018, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) began convening an exploratory group called the Community Workgroup on Risk Assessment and invited counties to participate in opportunities to use data analytics to support child welfare practice. An initial analytics model was developed and subsequently named the Comprehensive Risk Aid and subcommittees were formed to explore possible use cases. CDSS was very clear that this would not be used for decision-making on a case. In November 2019, this exploratory group concluded after CDSS shifted its focus to improved training for Structured Decision Making. No tools based on the Comprehensive Risk Aid were developed and no pilot was implemented.

2. What is the risk stratification model?

The model developed in Los Angeles County uses a computerized algorithm that draws upon available information maintained by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) from the state's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). Based on available data, the model identifies investigations recommended for enhanced support. This approach screens for factors and historical information that could heighten the likelihood of future reports of maltreatment and foster care placements. The model then informs supervisors so that social workers can focus on connecting families to services that bolster child safety and keep families safely together. It is important to note that the model does not use information from other county systems.

3. Who did the department work with to develop the model?

The Children's Data Network, with faculty and students at the University of Southern California and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, are leading the work in partnership with the Centre for Social Data Analytics at the Auckland University of Technology in Australia, the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at the University of California, Berkeley and the Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science. Mathematica is providing evaluation and implementation support.

DCFS leadership has also held presentations for internal and external community partners throughout the model's evolution.



4. How much will it cost? Who is funding the project?

DCFS is deeply appreciative that the philanthropic community continues to support the improved use of data to protect children and support families in Los Angeles County. The pilot project has been funded through grants from the Ballmer Group, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, the Reissa Foundation and First 5 LA. The model is non-proprietary and has been implemented to run within DCFS' server environment.

5. What is the difference between Structured Decision Making and the risk stratification model?

Currently, Los Angeles County uses the Structured Decision Making (SDM) suite of assessments, including the SDM Hotline Tool, the SDM Safety Tool and the SDM Risk Tool. One important distinction between the SDM and risk stratification is that SDM tools are manually completed by staff to generate a score, whereas the risk stratification model automatically integrates available data into its classifications. Use of the risk stratification tool can help guard against implicit bias and reduce data entry errors.

The risk stratification model uses existing data from the state's CWS/CMS and DCFS without any additional data entry. This means that hundreds of factors can be examined and incorporated into a determination that a family may benefit from enhanced support. Importantly, the model can also deliver information to supervisors at the outset of an investigation, allowing them more time to coordinate services and engage community partners.

6. Will risk stratification replace SDM?

Risk stratification will not replace SDM but work alongside it as an additional resource that will alert supervisors early on in an investigation if enhanced support is needed. It does this by automatically generating information that helps supervisors and social workers assess the family's needs in order to support children's safety and family unity. It is used to deliver information to supervisors and social workers, but it is not used to make any decisions.

7. What is an "enhanced support investigation"?

The enhanced support approach screens for factors and historical information that could heighten the likelihood of future reports of maltreatment and foster care placements. At the outset of an investigation, the risk stratification tool identifies investigations



recommended for enhanced support, and informs supervisors. This information is critical early in the process because it prompts additional feedback and expertise from supervisors to determine the most supportive response for families.

8. How will DCFS know if risk stratification is an effective tool and if it should be implemented in all DCFS offices?

The risk stratification pilot is currently underway at three locations: Belvedere, Lancaster and Santa Fe Springs. Pre-implementation analyses conducted by the research team documented that the risk stratification tool is very effective at identifying a subset of investigations with a significantly heightened risk of future system involvement. Additional analyses of the model during the pilot period confirmed the tool's accuracy.

Longer-term, improvements across several indicators are expected that would suggest DCFS is appropriately intervening to reduce future system involvement. Those will be defined and discussed with community partners, but several that have surfaced in conversations thus far include: (1) an increased number of family referrals to community services; (2) reduced re-reporting because earlier service needs have been met; (3) fewer missed assessments or mistakes during investigations; and (4) improved engagement with families.

9. How will you ensure that bias does not play a role when using this tool?

To help mitigate bias and address community concerns, several steps have been taken. Among them: (1) not including data from other systems; (2) excluding race and ethnicity from the model; (3) excluding zip code and geographic indicators from the model; (4) testing the model to confirm equivalent accuracy across racial and ethnic subgroups; (5) engaging external partners at Carnegie Mellon's School of Computer Science to confirm racial and ethnic findings; and (6) identifying screening practices, and community reporting patterns that may result in unnecessary investigations disproportionately burdening African American families.

The department welcomes feedback and other ideas for ways we can help guard against bias at all stages of our work.