

Background of Structured Decision Making (SDM) in Los Angeles County

The [National Council on Crime and Delinquency \(NCCD\)](#) was founded in 1907 to study, expand, and standardize the newly created juvenile justice system. In the intervening century, NCCD's focus and expertise has widened to include the fields of criminal justice, child welfare, adult protective services, and education. NCCD conducts research and data analyses, develops web applications, and provides training and technical assistance to help agencies make more consistent and equitable decisions for vulnerable individuals and to assist jurisdictions in reforming their policies and services.

In 1993, the NCCD established its nonprofit social research division, [the Children's Research Center \(CRC\)](#), to help family service agencies improve practice outcomes and organizational operations by using models that integrate evidence-based assessments, family-centered engagement strategies, and implementation science. CRC created the [Structured Decision Making® \(SDM\) model](#) and the [SafeMeasures](#) system to assist in these endeavors.

The Structured Decision Making® (SDM) model is a suite of assessment instruments that were developed with the goal of promoting safety, permanency and well-being for at-risk populations such as children in the foster care system and vulnerable adults. In combining research with practice strategies, the SDM model offers social workers a framework for consistent decision making at key decision points and helps agencies focus their limited resources toward those who can benefit most from them.

In 1996, the [California Department of Social Services \(CDSS\)](#) examined several available risk tools and decision models and decided to make the SDM model available to volunteer counties. Beginning in 1998, staff from seven (7) California counties (including Los Angeles) participated in workgroups to help design the California-specific versions of the SDM tools. CRC worked with LA County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) staff to plan and subsequently pilot portions of the SDM model. By 1999, the initial version of California's unique SDM model was developed.

In August 2002, the results of the [US Department of Health and Human Services' \(DHHS\) Child and Family Service Review \(CFSR\)](#) led the Interim Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services to commit to full county-wide utilization of the SDM model. SDM implementation was subsequently incorporated into the CFSR Program Improvement Plan (PIP) and the [Katie A. lawsuit settlement agreement](#). As part of this commitment, DCFS created an SDM Implementation Team who designed a comprehensive plan and ambitious roll-out schedule. DCFS began using some of the SDM tools in 2003 and achieved full implementation of SDM by February 2004.

In 2004 the State convened the California Safety Assessment Workgroup, in response to the Federal Child and Family Services Review. As part of the State's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), a comprehensive Statewide Safety Assessment System Matrix (and corresponding glossary of terms) was developed that established uniform standards for assessing safety, risk and family protective capacity. As a result of the statewide reform effort, California adopted a "statewide approach to safety" in 2005. This approach required that all counties adopt a set of decision points, and elements to consider at those decision points. While the SDM model met most of the requirements already, workgroups met to incorporate a few additional points, such as a screening tool and path decision tools.

In 2006, an electronic version of SDM, known as "SDM Live," was released and was updated periodically in subsequent years. In late 2015, [SDM 3.0 \(WebSDM\)](#) was released with numerous updated features, including mobile functionality.

SDM is currently being used in all 58 California counties for screening and assessment, is in use in multiple other state jurisdictions, and is used in several countries outside the U.S.