

ASSESSING A CLIENT'S RISK FOR VIOLENCE



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Assessing a Client's Risk for Violence

Individuals who have committed violent acts in the past pose difficult problems for those who must make recommendations about releasing those people from custody. There are many considerations involved with the decisions, and it is never easy to feel entirely comfortable with those decisions after making judgments that could have an impact on society as well as on the offenders.

Balancing Individuals' Rights with Public Security

Individuals with histories of violence involving others can become threats to their communities when released. There is no way to be certain that the offenders will not use violence again and possibly harm, or even kill, innocent victims. Those responsible for making recommendations about the offenders' releases must weigh the individuals' civil rights against the potential risk for the public.

Ethical Duty

Social workers have an ethical duty to become knowledgeable in the use of tools that can help them to make the best conclusions about the wisdom of recommending release or further confinement for each of their clients.

Liability

If individuals commit further violent acts after their releases, victims or their families

may file suits against those who make the decisions to recommend releases for the offenders. Therefore, those with the responsibility for making recommendations about offenders' futures may find that their decisions can possibly create risks for themselves as well as for others.

It is important for social workers to understand how to decrease the risk of violent results by conducting proper risk assessments using professional methodology and science. In addition, formal risk assessments can help to reduce the danger of liability for those who recommend releases for potentially violent individuals.

Risk Assessment

Formal risk assessment is actually a science that uses an extensive base of current research in arriving at conclusions. Risk assessment consists of exploring detailed information as well as understanding its limitations. Scientific, professional risk assessments can help social workers, mental health professionals and courts to make informed decisions as they attempt to determine the advisability of releasing individuals with a history of violence. Reliable risk assessments make use of collateral information from sources like family members and others acquainted with the offenders to help with the evaluation of primary information. Evaluators may also use anamnestic assessments to identify risk factors by conducting detailed studies of offenders' histories of violent or threatening behavior.

The assessments may lead to recommendations for discharge with certain conditions, diversion programs, probation or release. However, assessments can also reveal that keeping some offenders in custody is in the best interest of the offender as well as of the public.

Risk Evaluators

Professional risk evaluators need to be knowledgeable about unchanging, historical factors as well as about dynamic aspects that intervention or time can alter. Effective evaluators must be familiar with the science that exists pertaining to the specific populations or circumstances involved in each case as well as with specialty instruments that can help them with a variety of risk assessments. Risk evaluators can help make assessments regarding individuals like sex offenders, people with domestic abuse histories, violent criminals, juveniles, mentally ill people and those with lengthy prison sentences.

In addition to understanding the established science, successful risk evaluators know how to apply the science to each particular person. Efficient evaluators realize that they must examine issues exclusive to each individual that may influence the risk level involved. Using a variety of approaches to risk assessment according to the particular situations involved may be the best method for many cases.

Clinical Risk Assessment

Mental health professionals have

historically used the clinical risk assessment method to help them make their determinations. The clinicians gather interview information, test data and history. They combine and process that information and then present their clinical opinions and conclusions. The approach is not very structured, and it varies because the clinicians make their own decisions about which information is relevant and about the appropriate methods to use for processing the information. For those reasons, many mental health professionals consider the assessment to lack reliability and therefore believe it has limited validity.

Anamnestic Assessment

In anamnestic assessments, evaluators try to recognize risk factors for violence by conducting thorough examinations of clients' histories of threatening or violent behavior. Using clinical interviews and information from third parties, like hospital records, arrest records and statements from spouses or significant others, examiners attempt to discover commonalities or themes in incidents of violence. Those themes can communicate risk factors or defensive factors that pertain specifically to each individual. Anamnestic assessments may involve psychological testing or other forms of testing as well. The anamnestic assessments may have the same limitations as the standard clinical assessments because of the similarities of the two methods.

Guided or Structured Clinical Assessment

Guided or structured clinical assessments are comparable to traditional clinical assessments with some exceptions. Examiners acquire information through clinical evaluations, consider it and process it. However, they specify the information they seek in a straightforward manner, and the data must be associated with violence risk. The assessments still involve clinical judgments, but the clinicians base the judgments on information that has predictive value and ought to be consistent with all examiners who use the same approach.

Researchers have learned a great deal about the factors to consider when conducting assessments regarding the risk of violence in a variety of correctional, forensic and mental health populations. Examiners can use different instruments to assess different age groups and different kinds of risk. Therefore, guided judgments derived from structured assessments are likely to be more precise than are those derived from general clinical assessment.

Actuarial Assessment

The actuarial approach to risk assessment involves gathering data to enter into existing equations with known rates of accuracy or error using variables derived from experience, which decreases the amount of judgment used by mental health professionals. The professionals can limit

their involvement in the process to acquiring, calculating or sorting some of the data to code and enter into the equations. However, the pre-existing equation processes do the information processing. Reliability and known rates of error are some of the strong points of actuarial assessments.

Many studies show that actuarial formulas help examiners arrive at decisions that are comparable to or better than clinical judgments. However, the approach is not without some weak points. Adhering strictly to actuarial approaches keeps examiners from considering relevant information specific to each case if the formula does not include that information. In addition, actuarial formulas derived from certain populations but applied to different populations, while they may be reliable, may not have as much general validity and may have higher rates of error as well. The main problem with actuarial assessments is that there are not enough actuarial formulas available for different psychological assessment tasks. The few actuarial formulas developed to assess the risk of violence are most suitable for use with institutionalized individuals who have histories of criminal violence. Therefore, the formulas' effectiveness for other populations is unknown.

Adjusted Actuarial Assessment

Some professionals have proposed using adjusted actuarial approaches by setting the stage for assessments with actuarial formulas and allowing expert examiners to

adjust the assessments after they consider significant factors specific to each case but not included in the actuarial formulas. However, professionals who advocate using the strict actuarial approach state that pure actuarial predictions are normally as accurate, or more accurate, as are adjusted actuarial predictions.

Using a combined approach to assessing the risk of violence may be the best solution. Clinicians can become familiar with empirical literature concerning violence risk factors and organize their investigations and judgments according to those factors. Examiners can form the foundations of thorough evaluations that assess risk-of-violence factors by supplementing guided and structured clinical assessments developed concerning the existing research with anamnestic analyses of offenders' histories of violence.

Research

In the last several decades, new research has provided a variety of actuarial measures to use for assessing risk. Those actuarial instruments, in combination with clinical assessments, have increased forensic professionals' abilities to assess the probability of the occurrence of violent acts and to indicate the types of risk posed by different populations as well. Researchers continue to study, and they integrate new findings as they refine and develop the existing instruments.

Factors that Predict Future Violence

Clinical assessments and actuarial instruments consider a variety of factors in assessing the degree, imminence and recurrence rate of potential risk involving violence. According to the latest research, the following factors are valuable for helping to make accurate predictions:

- Base Rates
- Demographics
- Past Violence History
- Substance Abuse
- Psychiatric Diagnosis
- Severe Psychiatric Symptoms
- Antisocial Disorders
- Psychopathy
- Learning and Organic Disorders
- Biological Features
- Mental Disorders, Attachments and
- Criminality
- Childhood Experiences, Mental
- Disorders and Violence

Even with the use of scientific methodology, risk assessment will always include a degree of speculation. The results of assessments can have serious consequences for offenders as well as for the public, and no one should take those consequences lightly. However, formal risk assessments continue to be the best method of predicting whether offenders will or will not commit future acts of violence.

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