Domestic Violence Risk Assessments: Considerations for Selection and Use

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Risk Assessment

- Effective CJ policies and preventative strategies should begin with the knowledge of what factors elevate risk.

- We know from decades of correctional research that risk assessments can assist in making more informed decisions related to arrest, bail, sentencing, and treatment.

- Further, the application of intensive treatment to high-risk offenders has been shown to reduce recidivism by 26% (Andrews & Bonta, 2010).

Senate Bill 789

- Would require law enforcement officers to perform a lethality assessment after making a mandatory arrest for domestic assault.

- The use of risk assessment in DV situations may help identify which offenders are more likely to recidivate.

- However, there are many DV risk assessments available.

- There are also practical considerations for having law enforcement officers conducting these assessments.

Risk Assessments for DV Situations

- **Partner (Victim) Ratings**
  - *"Do you think the offender will do this again?"*

- **Structured Professional Judgment**
  - Uses some empirical risk factors
  - But the overall evaluation of risk is left to professional judgment

- **Actuarial Risk Scales**
  - Statistical formulas that combine risk factors to maximize predictive accuracy
  - Mechanical process – no discretion

- **General Risk Assessments**
  - Risk instruments designed for general or violent recidivism

Partner (Victim) Ratings

- The **Danger Assessment (DA)** is a lethality scale that was designed to measure the probability of being killed by a domestic partner (Campbell, 1985).

- The DA was developed in a hospital setting on a sample of battered women.

- Victim answers 20 yes/no items (see Campbell, 2003).

- Higher scores = higher risk

Structured Professional Judgment

- The **Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA)** is designed to assess the recurrence of spousal assault (Kropp et al., 1995).

- Developed on sample of probationers and inmates in Canada.

- Assessor rates 20 criminal history, psychological functioning, and current social adjustment items based on offender and victim interviews, and review of records.

- The final determination of risk is left professional discretion.

Actuarial Risk Scales

- The **Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA)** is designed to predict subsequent physical violence against domestic partner (Hilton et al., 2004).

- The ODARA was developed on a sample of men known by the Ontario police for an assault against a female partner.

- Assessor rates 13 items covering the domains substance abuse, history of violence, number of children, and barriers to support based on a review of records and interview with victim.

General Risk Assessments

- Are DV specific assessments even necessary?

- Could general risk/needs assessment instruments (e.g., LSI-R, PCL-R, VRAG) be used instead?

- The major risk factors of DV are similar to the risk factors of general recidivism (e.g., antisocial attitudes, cognitions; Gendreau et al., 1996).

Predictive Accuracy by Assessment Type

	k	n	Mean ES	95% CI
Partner (Victim) Ratings	5	2,179	.36	.26 to .45
Structured Professional Judgment	3	658	.36	.19 to .54
Actuarial Risk Scales	10	3,268	.40	.32 to .48
General Risk Assessments	4	1,438	.54	.42 to .66

Note. k = number of effect sizes; n = total sample size; ES = effect size (Cohen's *d*); CI = confidence interval.

Hanson et al. (2007)

Considerations for Selection and Use

- **Partner (Victim) Ratings (e.g., Danger Assessment)**
  - Relies on judgment of the victim
  - Items could be rated differently by different partners
  - Victim is not always available or willing to participate
  - Some evidence victims' perceptions can predict re-assault
  - Do we want law enforcement officers collecting this information?
    - What about questions related to victim's prior suicidality?
  - Could this information be used help the perpetrator?
    - The victim is mentally ill or the victim is not that concerned for her safety

Considerations for Selection and Use

- **Structured Professional Judgment (e.g., SARA)**
  - Recommended to be conducted by mental health professionals
  - Quality of assessments depends on skills and training of the evaluator
  - Extensive officer training and oversight would be required
  - How would officers conduct the assessment?
    - Requires interview with offender and victim, as well as a review of collateral records (i.e., criminal records, psychological assessments)
  - How much time can officers devote to conducting assessments?
    - SARA is estimated to take between 60 and 90 minutes

Considerations for Selection and Use

- **Actuarial Risk Scales (e.g., ODARA)**
  - Challenges of adopting tools developed elsewhere
  - Assessment may not generalize to other populations
  - Problems with acquiring similar data
    - Some ODARA items are not always available from state police records (e.g., determining the victim/offender relationship)
    - Other ODARA items require interview with victim

Considerations for Selection and Use

- **General Risk Assessments (e.g., LSI-R)**
  - Shown to have the highest predictive validity
  - Able to identify criminogenic needs/treatment targets
  - Its use raises issues of training and time
    - Instruments including the LSI-R can take between 30 and 45 minutes
    - Screener versions of the generalized tools (e.g., LSI-R:SV) can take between 10 and 15 minutes
  - May have more applicability for probation and institutional settings versus law enforcement during arrest

Considerations for Selection and Use

- There are many DV risk assessment options available.

- However, each comes with certain strengths and weaknesses.

- Another option is to construct an actuarial risk scale locally.

- This may help address some of the limitations raised here.
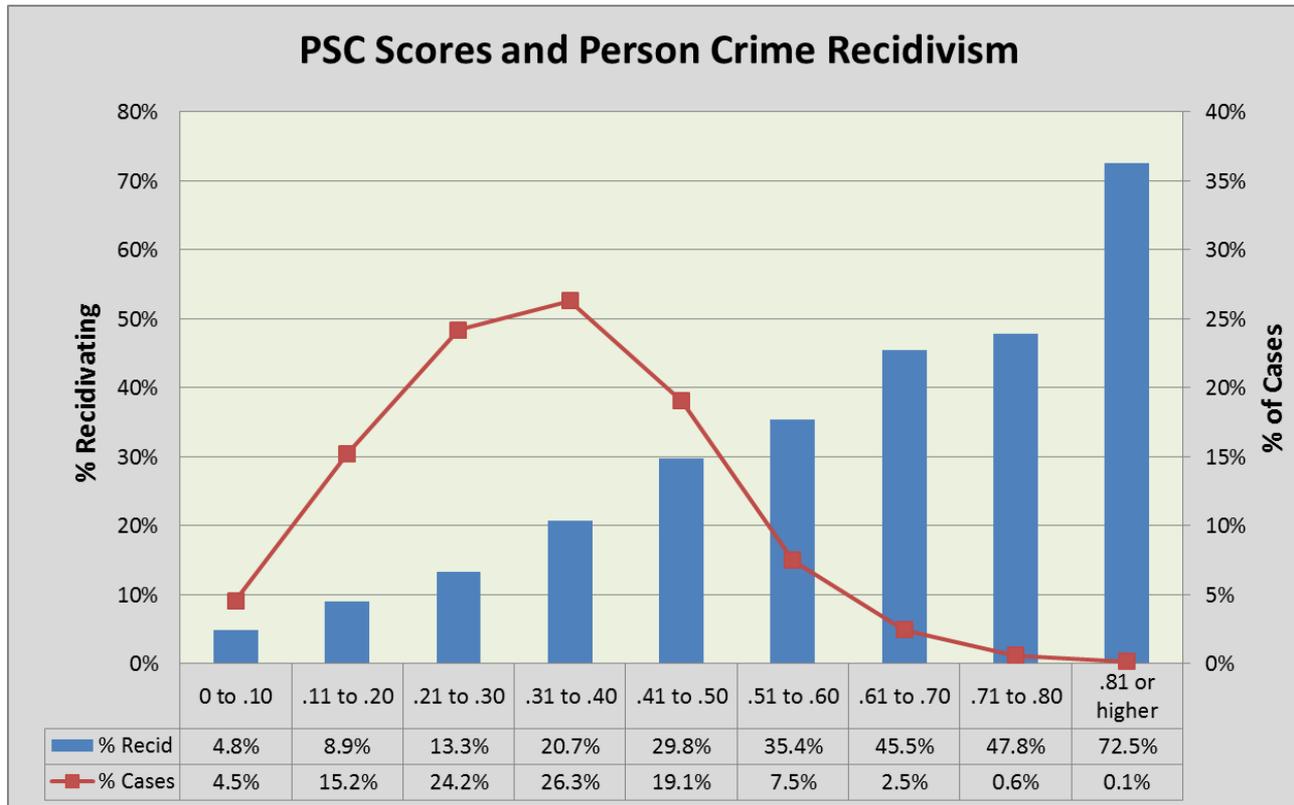
Creating a Localized DV Tool

1. Specify population you are trying to make predictions about
   - E.g., suspects of DV incidents

2. Specify what you are trying to predict (outcome)
   - E.g., new "person" crime within 3 years

3. Find a sample of cases to develop the scale
   - E.g., all suspects of DV incidents between 2010 to 2013

4. Collect information on each case (time 1)
   - E.g., offender information, state arrest records

Creating a Localized DV Tool

5. Collect outcome information (time 2)
   - E.g., yes/no arrested for "person" offense within 3 years

6. Identify individual risk factors that predict outcome

7. Combine individual risk factors to obtain the most efficient and robust prediction

8. Identify final items and weights

9. Calculate total risk score for each case by adding up points

Creating a Localized DV Tool

10. Examine distribution of scores and recidivism rates at different levels on the scale

PSC Scores and Person Crime Recidivism

	0 to .10	.11 to .20	.21 to .30	.31 to .40	.41 to .50	.51 to .60	.61 to .70	.71 to .80	.81 or higher
% Recid	4.8%	8.9%	13.3%	20.7%	29.8%	35.4%	45.5%	47.8%	72.5%
% Cases	4.5%	15.2%	24.2%	26.3%	19.1%	7.5%	2.5%	0.6%	0.1%

Creating a Localized DV Tool

11. Create risk groups/classifications

    - Low-risk: 10% chance of recidivating

    - Moderate-risk: 50% chance

    - High-risk: 70% chance

12. Implement scale by applying to new cases

Conclusion

- Risk assessments can have considerable influence on the responses of the police, courts, probation officers, and treatment providers and can be used to increase public safety.

- The use of DV risk assessments in Oregon is an important and worthwhile endeavor.

- However, there are several things to consider in mandating law enforcement officers to perform DV risk assessments as part of Senate Bill 789.

Conclusion

- These considerations include:
  - How will law enforcement officers conduct the assessment?
  - Will they have access to all necessary information?
  - What training is required to implement the assessment?
  - How much time can be spent completing the assessment?
  - What if the victim does not want to cooperate?
  - What outcome are we trying to predict (e.g., lethality, violence)?
  - What will the information be used for?
  - Are there any unintended effects of having law enforcement officers conduct the assessment?

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