



Predicting violence and recidivism in a large sample of males on probation or parole



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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the utility of items and scales from the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument in a sample of 1961 males from the state of Iowa who were on probation or released from prison to parole supervision. This is the first study to examine the potential of the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument to predict criminal offenses. The males were followed for 30 months immediately following their admission to probation or parole. AUC analyses indicated fair to good predictive power for the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument for charges of violence and victimization, but chance predictive power for drug offenses. Notably, both scales of the instrument performed equally well at the 30-month follow-up. Items on the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument not only predicted violence, but are straightforward to score. Violence management strategies are discussed as they relate to the current findings, including the potential to expand the measure to other jurisdictions and populations.

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In the last decade forensic and correctional psychologists have been increasingly called upon to make prognostications of violence risk for individuals who are incarcerated or placed within forensic settings. Relatedly, there has been an impetus to conduct risk assessments on individuals leaving secure facilities and returning to the community to both classify risk, but also to develop effective treatment strategies to reduce recidivism (Harris, Rice, Quinsey, & Cormier, 2015; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). Equally as important, is developing an understanding of risk for offenders who are serving probation while residing in the community. Risk identification and reduction are especially critical for these individuals given their practically unfettered access to the community and potential victims (Hildebrand, Hol, & Bosker, 2013). This need for understanding risk in this population is exemplified by 2005 data from the U.S. Department of Justice which found that approximately two-thirds of individuals released from prison were rearrested after three years and three-fourths rearrested after five years of release (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014).

The best approach for risk assessment with individuals released from prison remains a point of contention. Most of the extant research has been directed toward solutions of violence prediction and management with mentally disordered offenders. To this end, three primary strategies are used to make risk predictions: clinical judgment, structured professional judgment, and actuarial instruments. Clinical judgment is the reliance on a clinician's opinion or feelings regarding the likelihood an

individual will engage in violent behavior. Clinical judgments have been shown to be unreliable, invalid, and often fail to incorporate empirically-based constructs predictive of violence (Dolan & Doyle, 2000). Structured professional judgment is the reliance on pre-identified items empirically linked to violent behavior. This approach, embodied in instruments like the Historical, Clinical, Risk-20 Version 3 (HCR-20 V3; Douglas, Hart, Webster, & Belfrage, 2013) has evidenced improved reliability and validity compared to clinical judgment (Guy, Packer, & Warnken, 2012). Finally, strict actuarial risk assessment is mechanistic and relies on weighted items calculated on previously identified outcomes. This approach is embodied in the latest version of the Violence Risk Appraisal Guide-Revised (VRAG-R; Harris et al., 2015; Rice, Harris, & Lang, 2013), and has also been effective at predicting violence.

In each of the instruments cited above, there are levels of risk depending on item endorsement. Silver and Chow-Martin (2002) tested the inclusion of multiple risk levels within a single instrument and tested it on 11,749 individuals. Although the multiple model approach to predicting general and violent recidivism is now established, item selection and testing of items predictive of general and violent recidivism are imperative. To that end, a meta-analysis by Gendreau, Little, and Goggin (1996) evaluated 131 studies and found that a history of antisocial behavior and criminal behavior demonstrated the strongest relationship to future recidivism. In an updated meta-analysis, Campbell, French, and Gendreau (2009) compared risk assessment instruments and their ability to predict both institutional violence and violent recidivism. In considering violent recidivism, the authors found dynamic (changeable) factors slightly superior to static variables in the prediction of

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violence. Yet, as acknowledged by the authors, the overall difference between dynamic and static variables was slight. They wrote, “However, it is interesting to note the performance of the primarily static VRAG, which produced an effect equivalent to that generated by the dynamic measures” (p. 580). Skeem and Monahan (2011) suggested minimal differences exist between established risk instruments and decisions on instrument use should be guided by purpose of the evaluation, with consideration given to violence management and prevention. To that end, state-developed indices of violence risk may be well-suited to assist in properly predicting which individuals are most at-risk for committing violence and providing information relevant to violence reduction.

1. Predicting recidivism after release from prison

Several studies have highlighted the importance of criminogenic factors in predicting recidivism. For instance, criminal thinking has been linked to a variety of untoward outcomes, including institutional violence and community recidivism (Walters, 2011, 2014). Likewise, in a large sample of individuals released on probation, those who engaged in previous violence more indiscriminately were more likely to reoffend (Klein, Wilson, Crowe, & DeMichele, 2008). A common research finding is that individuals who engage in violence leading to incarceration are more likely to reengage in violence after release.

Another criminogenic risk factor evidencing strong associations to recidivism in parolees and released offenders is gang involvement/security threat group membership. Gang membership has been overlooked in measurement development, although it has demonstrated consistent predictive power when evaluated in risk assessment studies. For instance, in a sample of 1987 juvenile offenders, gang membership was a predictor of recidivism in both males and females. Likewise, similar results were found with 1804 adolescent offenders arrested for a violent crime (Trulson, Haerle, DeLisi, & Marquart, 2011). Similar results were reported with a group of adolescent offenders residing in Singapore (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, & Lim, 2012). In a statewide sample of over 4000 parolees from California, gang membership was predictive of both general and violent recidivism (McShane, Williams, & Dolny, 2003). In a large study with parolees in Illinois, gang membership was associated with a six percentage point increase in recidivism when compared to non-gang affiliated individuals (Dooley, Seals, & Skarbek, 2014). Gang membership warrants consideration when conducting violence risk assessments.

Several states have begun to use systematic or specialized risk assessment measures to attempt to classify individuals for risk who are released from prison. California, New York, and several other jurisdictions have implemented systematic use of the Correctional Offender Management and Profiling Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS). The COMPAS, which has multiple items that load onto either a General or Violent Recidivism scale. This instrument is premised on the risk-needs-responsivity model, and classifies individual's treatment needs while acknowledging that those with the highest risk are least likely to complete treatment (see Olver, Stockdale, & Wormith, 2011). Yet, data on COMPAS have demonstrated many limitations in generating accurate predictions. In a large study of over 91,000 parolees, Zhang, Roberts, and Farabee (2014) found that the COMPAS evidenced adequate predictive power for general rearrests over a two-year follow-up; however, less than adequate results were reported for violent recidivism during that same time period. Notably, using only four items (i.e., gender, age, age of first arrest, and number of prior arrests) from the COMPAS produced results equal with the full measure. In a critical review of the COMPAS, Skeem and Eno Louden (2007) discussed several weaknesses of the COMPAS including a lack of cross validation and potential problems with construct validity. Brennan, Dieterich, Breitenbach, and Mattson (2009) responded to the Skeem and Louden paper by asserting their paper relied on a subset of information, and

complete data indicate appropriate construct and predictive validity (see also Brennan, Dieterich, & Ehret, 2009).

Similar psychometric limitations have been reported for other measures designed to evaluate recidivism with individuals released from prison. These limitations include problems with both generalization and replication (Harris et al., 2015, p. 195; Quinsey et al., 1998; Rossegger et al., 2013). Beyond basic methodology, it appears that too much emphasis has been placed on the presence or absence of mental illness, and too little emphasis provided to criminogenic history (Skeem, Winter, Kennealy, Eno Louden, & Tatar, 2014). This article will focus on the value of criminogenic factors related to violence risk and recidivism in a large sample of probationers and parolees.

2. Risk assessment in Iowa parole release decisions

The Iowa Board of Parole has been using risk assessments since 1981 as part of their release decision-making process. In doing this, Iowa, through an iterative process, developed their own risk assessment instrument, based on static variables focusing on past criminology and risk. All previous versions were developed by Daryl Fischer, Ph.D., who later went on to develop a risk assessment model for the State of Arizona. Fischer's work is largely unpublished, with many papers instead being produced as state-level reports able to be relied on by individual states in classifying and managing their inmate population. Fischer's work revealed that it is not simply the volume of prior criminal activity that predicts offender recidivism—including violent crime—but also the seriousness of prior offenses, and how long ago they occurred. The Iowa risk classification system relies on empirically-based constructs in classifying risk with individuals supervised through parole or probation. Specifically, the goal is to determine those most at-risk for future serious offending and most in need of interventions to reduce offending. The last version of Iowa risk assessment Fischer developed in 1995 employed vector analysis of each conviction event, requiring meticulous documentation of incarceration time so that volume and recency could account for the time the offender was at liberty (“street time”). Revision of the 1995 version of risk assessment was necessary due to loss of statistical prediction.

3. Development of the Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument

The Iowa Violence and Victimization Instrument was developed by the Iowa DOC using a sample of 2662 individuals released from state prisons. Data collection included all current offenses, prior juvenile delinquency adjudications, and adult criminal convictions documented in both in-state and out-of-state arrest records. Admission and release dates for juvenile commitments and prior prison terms were also recorded, as were offender demographics including birth date and gang (security threat group) membership, which is documented in the corrections database.

Half of the sample was used to develop the risk assessment instrument, and then the final instrument was empirically tested against the other half of the sample held in reserve for this purpose.

Because violent crime recidivism has a lower base rate than property crimes, scale construction began with violence prediction; once a best-fit violence scale was developed, a victimization scale to predict combined violent and property crime was created, that built off of the violence scale. In creating these scales, risk factors were chosen based on predictive power of the individual items, with additional items added only when the result achieved a statistically significant incremental improvement in prediction.

Completeness of criminal history records has always been a concern in risk assessment. The prison study therefore evaluated the predictive strength of lifetime prior criminal history in comparison with criminal history only within the past five or ten years prior to the prison commitment. For nearly every type of prior conviction studied, criminal history within the past five or ten years before commitment to prison predicted

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