Appropriate Uses of Risk/Needs Instruments

Gina Vincent, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry
Co-Director, National Youth Screening Assistance Project
University of Massachusetts Medical School

&

Mary Ann Scali, JD, MSW
National Juvenile Defender Center

Law and Psychiatry Program
OUTLINE

• Definition and purpose of risk/needs assessments with youth
• General concepts about risk for re-offending
• Review of Instruments
• Questioning the use of specific instruments
What do we Mean by Risk?

Risk assessment tools describe “risk” in different ways

- **Physical Harm to Others**
  - Violence
  - Aggression

- **Criminality**
  - Recidivism (re-arrest vs. reconviction)
  - Future delinquency

- **Conduct problems**
Resources for risk assessment methods in juvenile justice

- Why we need to identify risk in JJ youths
- How to choose risk assessment methods
- Reviews of 20 screening and assessment tools (by their authors)

Guilford, 2005
Purpose of Youth Risk Assessment
Risk Screen or Assessment tools can assist the court with....

- Need for secure pretrial detention
- Need for out-of-home placement
- Post-adjudication placement (disposition) decisions – what security level is needed?
- Release/transition planning
- Treatment/intervention planning
Different Risk Assessments Measure Different Things, like:

- Likelihood of serious, **imminent** violence if no intervention
- Likelihood of violence risk to **continue in adulthood**
- **Nature** or **frequency** of the violence?
- **Sex offending**
- Violence risk for **girls**
- **Age** (children vs. adolescents)
Goals of Risk/Needs Assessment

- Identify those at highest risk for recidivism and guide intervention efforts that could
  - Prevent later violence and recidivism
  - Reduce risk of future harm among youths who have recently engaged in harmful aggressive behavior

Intervention efforts include:
- Placement decisions (secure custody vs. community; level of supervision)
- Referral to appropriate services (case management/service delivery)
Goals of Risk/Needs Assessment cont.

Problems can come with use of risk assessments designed from solely static historical variables.
General Concepts of Youth Risk/Needs Assessment
General Principles of Risk Assessment in Youth

1. Aggression and delinquent activity are near normative
2. Violent and delinquent behavior will desist for most youths during late adolescence/early adulthood
3. Risk can change across adolescence
4. Many evidence-based risk factors exist
Aggression is Normative During Adolescence

Among large community samples....

- **Police contact:** 8 in 10 (males)
- **Juvenile court record:** 6 in 10
- **Arrests, violent offenses:** 1 in 10
- **Report serious violent act in prior year:**
  - 1 in 4 for age 15-16 boys
  - 1 in 15 for age 15-16 girls
- **Self-report a physical fight:**
  - 1 in 2 for age 15-16 boys
  - 1 in 4 for age 15-16 girls
Offending Desists for Most Males
(Reference group = Community males; Farrington, 1995; Loeber et al., 1991 Moffitt, 1993, Moffitt & Caspi, 2001)

Life-course persistent or Chronic Offenders
10%

Adolescent-Limited Offenders > 60%
Development Does Not Proceed Evenly Across Adolescence
Evidence-Based Risk Factors (examples)

- **Individual Factors – Largest Effect**
  - Personality traits – Lacks Remorse, Lacks Empathy, CD/ODD
  - Attention Deficit
  - Impulsivity/Risk-Taking

- **Historical Factors**
  - Early Onset History of violence
  - Early Onset History of arrests
  - Past antisocial and official delinquent behavior
  - Onset of Substance Use
Evidence-Based Factors cont.

- **Familial** –
  - inconsistent discipline
  - Antisocial/criminal parents

- **Environmental/Social/Functional**
  - Poor School Achievement
  - Deviant Peers

- **Other Variables**
  - Past Intervention Failures, Availability of Services
  - Parental Involvement
  - Protective factors
Difficulty With Violence History

Past behavior is best predictor of future behavior, but it’s not quite that simple...

Frequency, Context, Chronicity

**Importance of Early Onset:** Proportion of youths continuing violent acts into adulthood, if first violent act occurred (self-report):

- Prior to 11: 5 in 10
- During 11-13: 3 in 10
- During 14-17: 1 in 10
Basic Conclusions

These developmental facts make estimates of risk of future violence more difficult. Thus, risk assessments should:

- be seen as having limited “shelf-life” for most youths (Grisso, 2000)
- use evidence-based risk factors
- include risk factors capable of change
- identify needs that can be targeted for intervention

Reassessment is very important
Advantages of Valid Risk/Needs Assessments When Used Appropriately

- The alternative is generally to assume risk based on the crime – which often can lead to worse consequences for the client
- May result in less restrictive placements
- Can guide risk management/intervention
What you want to know: Review of Risk/Need Assessment Instruments
How Assessments are Conducted

Data Sources – Most use interviews + record review
  – Interview Youth (almost always)
  – Interview Parent (optional)
  – Collateral information (always)

Time required – Most cannot be completed in under 30 minutes

Examiner qualifications – Require training. Some require clinical experience.
Evidence-based risk assessment tools should be…

- **Standardized**
  always done exactly the same way

- **Relevant**
  will assist with making the necessary decisions

- **Reliable**
  Two independent raters would reach similar conclusions

- **Valid**
  research-based evidence that it measures what it is supposed to
Criteria for Selection of Evidence-Based Instruments

- The tool purports to assess “risk”
- Has a test manual
- Developed specifically for juvenile justice
  …or, has been validated with a JJ sample
- At least 1 study (hopefully from an independent party) demonstrated reliability
- At least 1 study by an independent party demonstrated a strong relation to recidivism (predictive validity)
Some jurisdictions have developed brief actuarial tools specifically for making a decision about:

- Placement of youths in detention, or
- The custody security level needed

Most are “homegrown”

Reliability and validity is often unknown
Questioning the Use of Assessment Tools
Questioning the Use of Tools

Does the tool have a test manual?

Has the tool been demonstrated to be reliable across examiners?

Does the examiner have the right qualifications?
  – Few require no training. Some require clinical experience. How many have they done?

Was the tool used in the way it was intended?
  – Risk management, placement decision, Classification
  – Likelihood of violence, re-arrest, conduct problems

Does the tool have only static factors?
In what setting was the tool validated (if at all) and does your client come from the same setting?
  – Community (FINS), detention, school

Does your client fit the characteristics of the youth on which the tool was validated?
  – Girls? Minorities? Age?

How did the examiner interpret the results of the tool?
  – Probability of re-offending? Or, relative risk standing?
Questioning Risk Estimates

• Importance of statements estimating a youth’s risk
  • We cannot make specific predictions about a youth’s likelihood of violence or recidivism

    ....Johnny will (or will not) commit an act of violence in the future (WRONG)

    ....Johnny has an 80% likelihood of committing an act of violence in the future (WRONG)
Appropriate Ways to Estimate Risk: Judges’ Decision-Making

….Johnny has a high risk for re-offending or committing violence in the future

….Johnny has a high risk for committing future violence if placed back in the home
Take Home Messages

- Risk/Needs assessment is very helpful when a valid instrument is used appropriately and involves re-assessment.
- Different assessment tools were designed for different purposes and different populations.
- Not all assessment tools (few in fact) have sufficient research evidence.