

EVALUATION OF A VIOLENCE RISK (THREAT) ASSESSMENT TRAINING PROGRAM FOR POLICE AND OTHER CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

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Although a great deal of research has focused on the development and validation of violence risk (threat) assessment instruments, few studies have examined whether professionals can be trained to use these instruments. The present study evaluated the impact of a violence risk assessment training program on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of 73 criminal justice professionals, including police officers, civilian support staff, and prosecutors. The program covered principles of violence risk assessment, the nature of mental disorder and its association with violence risk, and the use of various structured professional judgment (SPJ) risk assessment instruments. Comparisons of pre- and post-training evaluations indicated significant improvements on measures of knowledge about risk assessment, skills in the analysis of risk in a case vignette, and perceived confidence in conducting violence risk assessments. Findings support the utility of risk assessment training for criminal justice professionals and the utility of SPJ violence risk assessment instruments generally.

Keywords: violence risk assessment; threat assessment; training; structured professional judgment; police; criminal justice professionals

Police officers and other criminal justice professionals, such as lawyers, social workers, and victim services workers, are increasingly using specialized instruments to assist in their decisions about violence risk assessment and management, an area of practice also referred to as threat assessment and management.¹ Most of the instruments being used were originally developed by forensic mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists) to be used in forensic mental health settings (e.g., forensic hospitals, outpatient clinics).

Two approaches to risk assessment have emerged, structured professional judgment (SPJ) and actuarial, with each guiding the development of several risk assessment instruments. In the SPJ approach, evaluators are provided with sets of critical risk factors, derived from systematic reviews of the scientific and professional literature, which should be considered

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