

The Structured Interview for Violence Risk Assessment (SIVRA-35)

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Abstract

American colleges and universities require increased ability to perform violence risk assessments as a function of their behavioral intervention and threat assessment teams. The Structured Interview for Violence Risk Assessment (SIVRA-35) is a thirty-five-item inventory used to assist Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) members and clinical staff in conducting a more thorough and research-based violence risk assessment to prevent rampage mass casualty attacks.

Introduction

The SIVRA-35 is an informal, structured set of items useful for those staff and faculty who work in higher education to use with individuals who may pose a risk or threat to the community. The SIVRA-35 is not designed as a psychological test and it is not designed to assess suicidal students. It is a guided structured interview useful for classifying risk into low, moderate, and high categories.

Risk and Threat Assessment

The ideal approach to violence risk assessment is found in utilizing an individual trained and experienced in violence risk assessment to interview the subject. The SIVRA-35 serves as a starting place for BIT members to conduct a more standardized, research-based violence risk assessment with individuals determined to be at an increased risk.

While risk and threat assessment cannot be predictive, multiple agencies (FBI, Secret Service, Department of Education, US Post Office, ASIS International, the Society for Human Resource Management, and ASME-ITI) have suggested risk factors to attend to when determining the potential danger an individual may represent. Several prominent experts in campus violence and workplace threat assessment have also recommended key considerations salient when assessing risk and threat (Meloy, 2000; Byrnes, 2002; Turner & Gelles, 2003; Deisinger, Randazzo, O'Neill & Savage, 2008; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2011).

Based on these risk factors, the SIVRA-35 places key research into the hands of those faculty and staff meeting as front-line decision makers to assign sanctions, treatment, and make determinations about continued enrollment for the student who poses a risk.

SIVRA Administration

The utility of the SIVRA-35 depends first on the rapport developed between the assessor and the subject. The assessor should avoid rattling off SIVRA-35 questions in a formal and

potentially off-putting manner. The best way to obtain accurate data is through a conversation with the individual based on mutual respect and a stated commitment to serving the best interest of the individual. This will decrease the individual's defensiveness (some degree of defense is normal given the nature of the interview) and will lead to more genuine responses.

There is no set of risk factors or list of concerning behaviors that can predict a future violent event. SIVRA-35 is a useful reference tool when conducting a structured interview during a violence risk assessment. Ideally, the assessment should take place after the assessor has reviewed incident reports, available documents related to conduct in the educational setting and in the immediate community, and any other information that has led to the initial concern. Any violence risk assessment involves static and dynamic risk factors, contextual and environmental elements, and mitigating factors. There is no current tool or computer model that can accurately predict future violent behavior, and no tool is ever a substitute for professional expertise. Therefore, the use of structured professional judgment in combination with documentation and consultation with trusted colleagues is the current best practice.

While the SIVRA-35 primarily assists those conducting violence risk assessments through narrative and structured questions, there is a quantitative, numeric scoring key to further assist staff in their decision making. A single administrator will either ask questions directly to the person being assessed or review relevant incident reports and other forms of data to determine a true or false answer for each item.

SIVRA 35 Items

1. ***There is a direct communicated threat to a person, place, or system*** (Deisinger, Randazzo and Nolan, 2014; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Meloy et al., 2011; Drysdale et al., 2010; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole (2002).
2. ***The student has the plans, tools, weapons, schematics and/or materials to carry out an attack on a potential target*** (Meloy, Hart and Hoffmann, 2014; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
3. ***The student harbors violent fantasies to counteract his/her isolation and/or emotional pain*** (Van Brunt, 2015; Mohandie, 2014; O'Neill, Fox, Depue, and Englander, 2008; ATAP, 2006)
4. ***The student has an action plan and/or timeframe to complete an attack*** (Meloy et al., 2011; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
5. ***The student is fixated and/or focused on his target in his actions and threatening statements*** (Deisinger, Randazzo and Nolan, 2014; Meloy et al., 2011; O'Toole and Bowman, 2011); ASIS and SHRM, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; Turner and Gelles, 2003).

6. ***The student carries deep grudges and resentments. He can't seem to let things go and collects injustices based on perceptions of being hurt, frustrated with someone, or annoyed*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Calhoun and Weston, 2009; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
7. ***The target is described negatively in writing or artistic expression. There is a narrow focus on a particular person that has a level of preoccupation or fascination with the target. There is a pattern of this behavior, rather than a one-time act*** (Van Brunt, 2015; Meloy et al., 2011; O'Neill, Fox, Depue and Englander, 2008).
8. ***There has been leakage concerning a potential plan of attack*** (Deisinger, Randazzo and Nolan, 2014; Meloy et al., 2011; O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
9. ***The student has current suicidal thoughts, ideations and/or a plan to die*** (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, and Guldemann, 2014; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; Dunkle et al., 2008; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil et al., 2002).
10. ***The student talks about being persecuted or being treated unjustly*** (Meloy et al., 2011; O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
11. ***The student has engaged in 'last acts' behaviors or discusses what he wants people to remember about his actions. Creation of a legacy token*** (Van Brunt, 2015; Meloy et al., 2011; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
12. ***The student seems confused or has odd or troubling thoughts. The student may hear voices or see visions that command him/her to do things*** (ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Drysdale et al., 2010; Dunkle et al., 2008; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
13. ***The student displays a hardened point of view or strident, argumentative opinion. This is beyond a person who is generally argumentative or negative*** (Meloy et al., 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002; Byrnes, 2002).
14. ***The student has a lack of options and/or a sense of hopelessness and desperation*** (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, and Guldemann, 2014; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).

15. ***The student is driven to a particular action to cause harm*** (Deisinger, Randazzo and Nolan, 2014; Meloy et al., 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
16. ***The student has had a recent breakup or failure of an intimate relationship and/or the student has become obsessed in stalking or fixated on another person romantically*** (ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Drysdale et al., 2010; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; Vossekui et al., 2002).
17. ***The student acts overly defensive, aggressive or detached given the nature of this risk/threat assessment. Seeks to intimidate the assessor or displays an overly casual response given the seriousness of the interview*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O' Toole, 2002).
18. ***The student displays little remorse for his actions, lacks understanding for the view for potential victims, and acts with a detachment or bravado during the interview*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ATAP, 2006; US Post Office, 2007; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
19. ***The student has a weapon (or access to weapon), specialized training in weapon handling, interest in paramilitary organizations or Veteran/Law Enforcement status*** (Meloy et al., 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; Vossekui et al., 2002).
20. ***The student glorifies and revels in publicized violence such as school shootings, serial killers, war or displays an unusual interest in sensational violence. The student uses weapons for emotional release and venerates destruction*** (Meloy et al., 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003, O'Toole, 2002; Vossekui et al., 2002).
21. ***The student externalizes blame for personal behaviors and problems onto other people despite efforts to educate him/her about how others view these actions. The student takes immediate responsibility in a disingenuous manner*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
22. ***The student intimidates or acts superior to others. The student displays intolerance to individual differences*** (Van Brunt, 2015; Meloy et al., 2011; O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
23. ***The student has a past history of excessively impulsive, erratic or risk taking behavior*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; Turner and Gelles, 2003).

24. ***The student has a past history of problems with authority. The student has a pattern of intense work conflicts with supervisors and other authorities (e.g. Resident Advisor, Conduct Officer, Professor or Dean)*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
25. ***The student handles frustration in an explosive manner or displays a low tolerance for becoming upset. This is beyond avoiding responsibility or calling mom/dad or a lawyer*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
26. ***The student has difficulty connecting with other people. The student lacks the ability to form intimate relationships. The student lacks the ability to form trust*** (Van Brunt, 2015; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; O'Toole, 2002).
27. ***The student has a history of drug or substance use that has been connected to inappropriate ideation or behavior. Substances of enhanced concern are methamphetamines or amphetamines, cocaine or alcohol*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003).
28. ***The student has serious mental health issues that require assessment and treatment.*** (Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; Dunkle et. al, 2008; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Turner and Gelles, 2003; O'Toole, 2002).
29. ***If the student has serious mental health issues that require assessment and treatment, they are not receiving mental health care and support.*** (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2011, Dunkle et al., 2008; ATAP, 2006).
30. ***Objectification of others (perhaps in social media or writings)*** (O'Toole and Bowman, 2011; O'Toole, 2002; Byrnes, 2002).
31. ***The student has a sense of being owed things from others such as sex, money, a relationship or grades. They act as if they deserve certain treatment and/or have an exaggerated sense of entitlement.*** (Van Brunt, 2012;2015; ATAP, 2006; O'Toole, 2000; U.S.Doj/FBI, 2017).
32. ***The student has oppositional thoughts and/or behaviors*** (Van Brunt, 2015; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; O'Toole, 2002).
33. ***The student has poor support and connection from faculty, administration and staff. The student has an unsupportive family system and peers who exacerbate bad decisions and offer low quality advice or caring. They experience evaporating social inhibitors*** (Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006; Vossekuil et al., 2002).

34. ***The student experiences overwhelming, unmanageable stress from a significant change such as losing a job, a conduct hearing, failing a class, suspension or family trauma. This stress is beyond what would normally be expected when receiving bad news*** (Drysdale et al., 2010; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006).

35. ***The student has drastic, unexplained behavior change*** (ASIS and SHRM, 2011; Randazzo and Plummer, 2009; US Post Office, 2007; ATAP, 2006).

SIVRA Scoring

The SIVRA-35 can be scored from 0-70, indicating a numerical level of risk. Scores from 1-20 indicate a low risk for violence, scores from 21-40 indicate a moderate risk, and scores from 41-70 indicate a high risk. The SIVRA-35 will help those assessing violence risks to organize their thoughts and perceptions in a standardized manner and bring the current literature to the task of evaluating an at-risk individual. Items 1-12 are critical items that carry with them an additional scoring rule. If 4 or more of these first 12 items are marked either 1 or 2, then the individual is placed into the high category.

The SIVRA-35 is scored online. More information available here:

www.nabita.org/resources/sivra-35/

Scores from 1-20 Indicate a Low Risk: Scores from 0 to 9 are more likely to indicate personality conflicts, abrasive social interactions and some potential mental health concerns. Low risk scores in the 10 to 20 range indicate the presence of some concerning information or observed behaviors without the evidence to suggest a direct-action plan towards a violent attack. Connection with the student by a trusted and caring staff member will help in monitoring the student behavior and hopefully keep it from worsening, instead encouraging more positive, risk-mitigating interventions such as developing social connections, focusing on academics, seeking counseling support, and looking for new ways to handle stress.

Scores 21-40 Indicate a Moderate Risk: Moderate risk scores require action from the BIT team or referral source to address the identified risk of violence. Scores in this range indicate the presences of a plan and/or a set of behaviors, attitudes or personality traits that could lead to a future attack. Immediate steps should be taken to address the individual's attitude, behaviors, and thoughts in order to redirect him/her from the path of violence the individual is clearly moving down. This may require counseling, residential life staff, student conduct, and law enforcement to each be actively involved in discussing the case and finding ways to lessen the risk and steer the individual away from the pathway towards violence. It may be that the student will need to leave campus for a time, depending on the severity of his or her actions.

Scores 41 -70 Indicate a High Risk: Decisive and quick action is required to thwart a potential violent attack on an individual or on campus. Multiple departments will be involved in this case

to better address concerns for the community and campus safety. If the student's whereabouts are not currently known, locating the student for further assessment is essential. Most extreme risk cases will require some separation —as permitted by law and campus policy— from campus to allow for further assessment, information gathering, and potential campus and/or criminal charges. Efforts should be made to notify and work with those who can help mitigate risk (e.g. parents, extended family, friends) while the BIT engagement continues.

Discussion and Implications

The SIVRA-35 is a front-line set of 35 risk factors useful for college and university BIT and threat assessment team members as a guide to initially assess the potential risk for rampage, mass-casualty violence. The SIVRA-35 draws from existing research and recent cases of rampage violence to create a starting place for administrators and decision makers to begin assessing the risk for danger of violence in their campus community.

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