Exploration of a Screening Tool for Predicting Increased Risk of Young People in Minneapolis Becoming Victims of Violent Crime

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this issue, we were interested in evaluating a set of indicators that could best identify adolescents who were at an elevated risk of being a victim of violent crime in order to direct early intervention resources to the young people who would benefit most from services. The study sought to identify the characteristics and experiences that best distinguished victims of violent crime from non-victims, and to calculate estimates of how well indicators accurately identified victims. Results indicated that existing data received from police and school disciplinary records did not successfully screen for victimization among this student population. School disciplinary incidents and experiences as a witness to a crime or a victim of a non-violent crime generally had low sensitivity and high specificity, which is not useful for the purpose of screening.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. The purpose of a screening tool is to rapidly identify individuals who may be at risk of experiencing a significant negative outcome. In this study, available data were not sufficient for use in the development of a screening tool to identify youth at risk of violent victimization. In the absence of a screening tool, how might you identify youth who are at risk of violent victimization? What tools do you have available to help you? In your role, how would you use this information?

2. With any screening tool, false positives (incorrectly identify the individual as having or being likely to experience a specific outcome) and false negatives (failing to identify an individual who has or is likely to experience a specific outcome) occur. What are the practical implications of having too many false positives? What about false negatives? How do these implications change when looking at different outcomes of interest (e.g., risk of future maltreatment vs. risk of experiencing homelessness)?

3. What screening tools do you use in your practice? For what purpose(s) do you use such tools? What are the benefits and limitations of using screening tools? What are the implications of false positives and false negatives in the tools you use?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. This study combined administrative data sets from several community agencies, including Minneapolis Public Schools, the Minneapolis Police Department, and the Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services. What are the benefits of sharing data between agencies (for youth, agencies, the larger community) to understand the characteristics and experiences of children and families that may put them at risk for experiencing negative outcomes? What are some of the barriers and limitations to sharing data between agencies?

2. Our field is currently experiencing a tension between the use of screening tools (such as Structured Decision Making assessments) and using predictive analytics. Both techniques use current and historical data to make predictions about future events but the way in which they do so differs. Have you heard about predictive analytics in your work? What might the strengths and limitations of both techniques be? What information does your agency need to make informed decisions about the use of these techniques in practice?