

Examining the Validity of Risk Assessment for Domestic Violence Shelters: Informing Clinical Practice and Fostering Research-Practice Collaboration

Angela Ghesquiere, PhD

Robin Waite, PhD

Edith Kealey, PhD and Kinsey Dinan, MA

NYC Department of Social Services

Office of Evaluation and Research & Office of Emergency Intervention Services

Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) Annual Conference

January 22, 2021

Background

Setting

- The “No Violence Again (N.o.V.A.) Program” of the NYC DSS Human Resources Administration’s (HRA’s) Office of Emergency and Intervention Services and the Office of Domestic Violence (EIS-ODV) determines placement into HRA administered domestic violence (DV) emergency shelters for DV survivors.
 - NoVA program also provides other supports, including referrals to community based DV programs and assistance with permanent housing placements.
- DV emergency shelter placements are intended to reduce risk for severe abuse recidivism and intimate partner homicide (IPH).
- At homeless shelter intake, applicants who indicate via intake paperwork that they may be a DV survivor are referred to the NoVA program and screened. Screen-positives are then assessed for risk level and placement determination.

NoVA Tool Content

- HRA copyright received in 2007, authored by HRA EIS-ODV Training Director: Based on the current research literature at that time.
- **Example screener item:** *Has [perpetrator] ever done anything to hurt you?*
- **Example assessment items:**
 - Current episode subsection: *“Do you think you are in danger?”*
 - Relationship history subsection: *“Has [perpetrator] ever threatened to kill you?”*
 - Health issues subsection: *“Are you pregnant? Have you experienced any abuse while pregnant?”*
 - Perpetrators’ information subsection: *“Has [perpetrator] ever been arrested for an offence that involved violence?”*

NoVA Tool Administration

- Administered by trained social workers, and based on both client self-report and clinician assessment.
 - Step 1. **Screenener** (13 items): Determines if abuse is current and meets the criteria for DV victimization in accordance with NYS Social Service Law 459.* *If yes, then:*
 - Step 2. **Clinical Assessment** (37 items): Determines the level of risk for IPH or DV recidivism.
- Eligibility for shelter placement (*high-severe* risk) based on high total score OR high subsection score OR having 1 or more of 8 “red flag” items.

Evaluation Questions

The NYC DSS HRA EIS-ODV partnered with the DSS Office of Evaluation and Research (OER) to ensure that their NoVA screener and risk assessment reflect the current evidence base:

- How similar in content and scoring are DV-related items on the NoVA screening and assessment to other validated DV assessment tools?
- Were other DV assessment tools validated in populations similar to that served by NoVA?
- Do the NoVA screener and assessment capture key IPH risk factors identified in research and clinical literature?



Methods

Review of DV Risk Assessments

- Internet (EBSCO, Google Scholar, Google) search using keywords including “measure OR assessment OR tool” AND “intimate partner violence OR domestic violence” AND “risk*” OR “homicid* OR femicid*”.
- Included assessments measuring risk for future DV events and focused on DV survivors. Some (but not all) focus on IPH.
 - Excluded assessments focused only on perpetrators, on identifying or describing the occurrence of abuse, or not DV-specific.

Comparison of Demographic Factors

- Used administrative data from the NYC DSS Department of Homeless Services to identify all clients referred for NoVA screening in calendar year 2017.
 - Focused on Head of case (HOC) sociodemographics: age, sex, primary race and ethnicity.
- Compared aggregate results to published descriptive statistics for groups administered other assessments.

Review of Risk Factors for IPH

- Searched EBSCO and Google Scholar using keywords “intimate partner violence OR domestic violence” OR “homicid* OR femicid*” AND “risk*.”
 - Also reviewed references included in identified articles.
- Evidence considered “strong” if risk factor was identified in 2+ studies that had high methodological rigor and/or was identified in systematic review or meta-analysis.
- Mapped IPH risk factors against the NoVA tool and selected DV risk assessments to determine overlap.

Findings

DV Risk Assessments

- While more than 15 assessments on DV risk have been developed and are summarized in several reviews (e.g., ^{1, 2, 3, 4}), most involve interviews with or record reviews of perpetrators.
- Only 4 of the 15+ assessments focus on survivors:
 - DANGER Assessment (DA) ^{5, 6}
 - Also has adaptations for immigrant women, same-sex relationships, and short form (5-item) ^{7, 8, 9, 10}
 - Domestic Violence Evaluation (DOVE) ^{11, 12}
 - Method of Assessment of Domestic Violence Situations (DV-MOSAIC)^{13, 14}
 - Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Screening Measure ¹⁵

Scoring of Risk Assessments

- NoVA assessment combines elements of an **actuarial assessment** (risk level scored based on presence of risk factors) and **structured professional judgment** (risk level determined based on expert interpretation within established guidelines).
 - The 4 comparison assessments are primarily actuarial assessments; DOVE is also a hybrid.
- Approach to scoring and categorization of risk level similar between the comparison assessments and 1 of the 3 NoVA assessment scoring methods.
 - Item responses summed to obtain total score, with level of risk categorized based on score.
- The other 2 NoVA assessment scoring methods used to determine risk level (use of “red flags” and subsection total) are unique to the NoVA assessment.
 - However, the DANGER Assessment and its iterations assign weights to higher-risk items in score, which is similar conceptually to “red flags”.

Populations Receiving Risk Assessments

Measure	Sample size	Area	Gender	Age (mean)	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Housing unstable
NoVA-referred sample	7,424	Urban	92% female	31	Black: 56%, White: 4% Hispanic: 38%	Less than college degree: 96%	Yes
DA ^{6, 16}	719	Urban	100% female	N/R but range from 18 to 50	Black: 36%, White: 34% Hispanic: 22%	Less than college degree: 86%	Yes
DOVE ^{11,12}	147	Urban	54% female, 46% male	Women: 34 Men: 35	Not reported	Less than college degree: ~75%	No
MOSAIC ¹⁷	1,307	Urban	100% female	N/R	Black: 28%, White: 10% Hispanic: 53%	Less than college degree: 91%	Yes

Target population for NoVA tools is similar to those reported in validated assessments.

IPH Risk Factors, DV Assessments, and the NoVA Tool

- Overall, NoVA risk factors most closely align with those included in the DANGER Assessment, which is also the most well-validated of the assessments.
- Based on the literature, primary risk factors associated with IPH include:
 - DV frequency and severity escalation
 - Perpetrator gun access
- Additional IPH risk factors in the literature include:
 - Perpetrator substance misuse that impacts abusive behavior, financial strain
 - Separation / estrangement of survivor and perpetrator, attempts to control survivor
 - Non-biological children of perpetrator in the home

Risk Factors for IPH: Perpetrator and Household Characteristics

Perpetrator characteristics, from research literature*:	On NoVA tool?	Other Assessments Including Factor
Current substance misuse that impacts abusive behavior ¹⁹	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC, LAS
Financial stressor, such as unemployment, job loss, or financial crisis ¹⁹	Assessment	DA, MOSAIC, LAS
Suicidality ¹⁹	Assessment	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC
Household Characteristics:		
A child in the home who is not the biological child of the perpetrator ¹⁹	Assessment	DA

*Perpetrator history of depression and other mental health conditions have also been identified as risk factors in the literature and are collected on some assessments, but were omitted because “mental health” is often defined inconsistently

Risk Factors for IPH: Relationship Abuse History

Relationship abuse history, from research literature:	On NoVA tools?	Other Assessments Including Factor
Perpetrator has access to a gun, and/or has threatened survivor with gun or other weapon ^{18, 19}	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA, MOSAIC, LAS
Perpetrator has threatened to kill survivor ^{18, 19}	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA, DOVE, LAS
Perpetrator choked/strangled survivor ^{18, 19}	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA
Perpetrator is highly jealous ¹⁸	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC, LAS
The survivor and perpetrator separated/estranged, or survivor tried to separate ^{19, 23}	Assessment (Red Flag)	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC, LAS

Risk Factors for IPH: Relationship Abuse History (cont'd)

Relationship abuse history, from research literature:	On NoVA tools?	Other Assessments Including Factor
Increase in frequency or severity of violence to survivor over time ¹⁹	Screening & Assessment	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC, LAS
Survivor predicts future violence ²²	Assessment	DA, MOSAIC
Stalking of survivor by perpetrator ²⁰	Assessment	DA, MOSAIC
Survivor was beaten by perpetrator during pregnancy ^{19, 21}	Assessment	DA
Unwanted sexual activity ^{18, 19}	Screening & Assessment	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC
Perpetrator attempts to control survivor's daily activities ^{18, 19}	Screening & Assessment	DA, DOVE, MOSAIC, LAS

Conclusion

Key Findings

- The NoVA tools show evidence of face and content validity.
 - Captures key IPH risk factors identified in research literature, especially in the “red flag” items.
 - Content also overlaps highly with that of validated assessments for DV survivors.
- One of the three methods of scoring the NoVA tool also similar to validated assessments.
- Validated DV assessments were tested in populations roughly similar to those referred for NoVA assessment re: gender, age, race/ethnicity, and education.
- Though no validated assessments were developed specifically for those experiencing housing instability, many samples included shelter clients.

Next Steps

- In this initial study, NoVA Tool has face and content validity. Work reflects established partnership between HRA Leadership, the NoVA Social Work Clinicians, the OER City Research Scientist & Leadership & the EIS-ODV Training Director & Nova Tool Author.
 - Findings are informing discussions of potential programmatic enhancements, such as abbreviating the tool (from current 37 items), simplifying scoring, and adjusting item weights, without lessening the demonstrated clinical validity of the tool.*
- Next steps in analysis will be to examine individual responses to:
 - Measure internal consistency reliability
 - Explore how responses cluster together through factor analysis, and how much each individual question contributes to the overall score
- **Future work** could explore whether the percentage of recipients who score as “high risk” on the NoVA tool corresponds to “high risk” scores on other assessments.

References

Full reference list available on request

1. Nicholls, T. L., Pritchard, M. M., Reeves, K. A., & Hilterman, E. (2013). Risk assessment in intimate partner violence: A systematic review of contemporary approaches. *Partner Abuse, 4*(1), 76-168.
2. Spencer, C. M., & Stith, S. M. (2018). Risk factors for male perpetration and female victimization of intimate partner homicide: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 15*24838018781101
3. Stith, S. M., Smith, D. B., Penn, C. E., Ward, D. B., & Tritt, D. (2004). Intimate partner physical abuse perpetration and victimization risk factors: A meta-analytic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 10*(1), 65-98
4. Hanson, R. K., Helmus, L., & Bourgon, G. (2007). The validity of risk assessments for intimate partner violence: A meta-analysis. Retrieved December 27, 2018 from: http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/rep/vra_ipv_200707-eng.aspx
5. Campbell, J. C. (1986). Assessment of risk for homicide for battered women. *Advances in Nursing Science, 8*, 36–51.
6. Campbell, J. C., Webster, D.W. & Glass, N. (2009). The Danger Assessment: Validation of a lethality risk assessment instrument for intimate partner femicide. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24*, 653–674.
7. Messing, J. T., Amanor-Boadu, Y., Cavanaugh, C. E., Glass, N. E., & Campbell, J. C. (2013). Culturally competent intimate partner violence risk assessment: Adapting the danger assessment for immigrant women. *Social Work Research, 37*(3), 263-275.

References (cont.)

8. Glass, N., Perrin, N., Hanson, G., Bloom, T., Gardner, E., & Campbell, J. C. (2008). Risk for reassault in abusive female same-sex relationships. *American Journal of Public Health, 98*(6), 1021-1027
9. Messing, J. T., Campbell, J. C., & Snider, C. (2017). Validation and adaptation of the danger assessment-5: A brief intimate partner violence risk assessment. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 73*(12), 3220-3230.
10. Snider, C., Webster, D., O'Sullivan, C. S., & Campbell, J. (2009). Intimate partner violence: Development of a brief risk assessment for the emergency department. *Academic Emergency Medicine, 16*(11), 1208-1216.
11. Ellis, D., & Stuckless, N. (2006a). Domestic violence, DOVE and divorce mediation. *Family Court Review, 44*(4), 658–671.
12. Ellis, D., & Stuckless, N. (2006b). Separation, domestic violence, and divorce mediation. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly, 23*(4), 461–485
13. De Becker, G. (1997). *The gift of fear*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
14. De Becker, G. & Associates. (2000). *Domestic Violence Method (DV MOSAIC)*. Retrieved January 2, 2019 from <https://www.mosaicmethod.com/>
15. Berk, R. A., He, Y., & Sorenson, S. B. (2005). Developing a practical forecasting screener for domestic violence incidents. *Evaluation Review, 29*(4), 358-383.
16. McFarlane, J., Symes, L., Maddoux, J., Gilroy, H., & Koci, A. (2014). Is length of shelter stay and receipt of a protection order associated with less violence and better functioning for abused women? Outcome data 4 months after receiving services. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 29*(15), 2748-2774.

References (cont.)

17. Roehl, J., O'Sullivan, C., Webster, D. & Campbell, J. (2005). *Intimate partner violence risk assessment validation study, final report*. Department of Justice. Document No.: 209731. Retrieved November 14, 2018 from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209732.pdf>
18. Spencer, C. M., & Stith, S. M. (2018). Risk factors for male perpetration and female victimization of intimate partner homicide: A meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1524838018781101
19. Campbell, J. C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., ... & Sharps, P. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: Results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(7), 1089-1097.
20. McFarlane, J. Campbell, J. C., Wilt, S., Sachs, C., Ulrich, Y., & Xu, X. (1999). Stalking and intimate partner femicide. *Homicide Studies*, 3, 300–316
21. McFarlane, J., Campbell, J. C., Sharps, P. W., & Watson, K. (2002). Abuse during pregnancy and femicide: urgent implications for women's health. *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. 100 (1):27-3
22. Cattaneo, L. B., Bell, M. E., Goodman, L. A., & Dutton, M. A. (2007). Intimate partner violence victims' accuracy in assessing their risk of reabuse. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22(6), 429–440.
23. Wilson, M., & Daly, M. (1993). Spousal homicide risk and estrangement. *Violence and Victims*, 8(1), 3-15.

Acknowledgements:

HRA Special Services and EIS-ODV Leadership (2018 – 2020):

- Annette Holm, LMSW, Chief, Special Services Officer, Special Services
- Marie B. Philip, MHS, Retired Deputy Commissioner, EIS-ODV (2018)
- Natasha Godby, Esq, Deputy Commissioner, EIS-ODV
- Karla Cordero, MPA, Chief of Staff for HRA Administrator, EIS
- Carol David, MA, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, ODV

HRA NoVA Social Work Clinicians: Clinical Consultants to Author (2002 – 2007):

- Hermine Patterson, LMSW Director, The NoVA Program of EIS-ODV
- Diane Watson, LMSW, Supervisor, The NoVA Program of EIS-ODV

EIS-ODV Leadership (2007): NoVA Risk Assessment Form (HRA Copyright 2007) :

- Cecile Noel, MSW, Former Executive Deputy Commissioner (1999-2015)
- Marie Philip, MHS, Retired Deputy Commissioner (2003-2018)

For More Information

Angela Ghesquiere, PhD

City Research Scientist

ghesquiere@dsa.nyc.gov