



Evidence-Based Practices for Assessing, Supervising and Treating Domestic Violence Offenders

Prepared for Chief Probation Officers of California

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Executive Summary

Community supervision agencies are struggling with budget cuts, high caseloads and pressure to reduce failure rates. In recent years there has been tremendous growth in what we know about cost-effective practices in community supervision that have been proven to reduce offender risk and improve public safety. With this in mind, CPOC commissioned this paper and companion training curriculum on what is known about evidence-based practices in assessing, treating and supervising domestic violence offenders.

Evidence-Based Practices in Community Corrections

Community supervision agencies are struggling with budget cuts, high caseloads and pressure to reduce failure rates. A growing body of literature points to four core practices that when implemented as a system can contribute to reductions in reoffending. These include (1) use a risk assessment tool to identify criminogenic risks and needs; (2) employ tailored supervision strategies and treatment plans; (3) implement a system of rewards and sanctions; and (4) provide skill-building support for probation officers.

Assessing Offender Risk and Needs

A robust body of literature has developed about the key factors associated with the risk of recidivism. This knowledge, gleaned from research and practice, has been translated into a variety of risk and needs assessment tools. These instruments typically include items measuring both static (unchangeable) and dynamic (changeable) risk factors that have been found to be associated with ongoing criminal behavior.

Assessing the change in offender risk level, however, requires an examination of dynamic (changeable) risk factors. Not all risk factors carry the same probability of future criminal behavior. Research points to what has become known as the “Big 4” risk factors—those factors which are most predictive of future offending. These include (1) history of antisocial behavior (static risk factor); (2) antisocial personality pattern; (3) antisocial attitudes; and (4) antisocial peers.

Assessing Domestic Violence Risk

Several specialized risk assessment scales have been developed for use with domestic violence offenders. While substantial strides have been made in risk assessment for general violent offending, the development of reliable risk assessment tools for domestic violence offenders still remains a work in progress. Generally, research has found moderate predictability of recidivism among the most commonly used domestic violence risk assessment tools. Research on understanding the risk factors specific to domestic violence and testing of risk scales in this area is still under-developed. No one tool stands out as superior in predicting the risk of domestic violence recidivism.

What is clear from the research is that use of a general risk assessment tool is an appropriate and effective correctional practice. No single risk assessment tool can predict behavior with complete accuracy. However, an objective assessment instrument combined with the skills and experience of probation staff will more accurately predict the risk of recidivism than purely subjective assessment based on a gut feeling. Research has consistently shown that systematically assessing an individual’s risk using an actuarial tool to develop a supervision and treatment plan that matches an offender’s risk level and needs results in less recidivism.

Predictors of Recidivism

Significant gaps exist in the literature about our understanding of the predictors of continued violence between intimate partners. Although the body and sophistication of domestic violence research has grown substantially over the last few decades, many questions remain unanswered. Among these is developing a better understanding of the predictors of reabuse. The paper reviews the body of research on factors associated with domestic violence recidivism and highlights key findings.

Effectiveness of Batterer Intervention Programs

Domestic violence offenders generally have a high rate of recidivism. Studies using direct victim interviews over a period of time estimate repeat violence in the range of 40 to 80 percent of cases. Although the body and sophistication of domestic violence research has grown substantially over the last few decades, many questions remain unanswered.

Among these is developing a better understanding of the predictors of reabuse. Also, we have yet to figure out what works for effectively intervening with batterers to reduce recidivism. Research to date has indicated that the most common court-mandated batterer intervention programs do not reduce recidivism or alter batterers' attitudes about violence. The research literature to date, however, has yielded some general conclusions about treatment effectiveness that are outlined in the full paper.

Supervision Practices and Policies

Most domestic violence offenders are released to community supervision. Given the limited evidence of effectiveness of current batterer interventions in reducing future abuse, community supervision is critical to ensuring victim safety. The paper discusses seven supervision strategies for domestic violence offenders.

- **Develop individualized supervision strategies and case plans.** Domestic violence offenders should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Case management plans and supervision strategies should be guided by information gleaned from the risk assessment.

- **Know your population.** Research has firmly demonstrated that domestic violence offenders come from all walks of life. Probation officers experienced in working with domestic violence offenders know that this population—despite their specific background or history—is particularly adept at using manipulation techniques.
- **Focus supervision time on criminogenic needs.** While it is important to spend supervision time discussing enforcement issues such as compliance with probation conditions, a fair amount of time should be reserved for discussing the offender’s progress in obtaining services and what the probationer is getting out of the treatment.
- **Communicate with victims.** Victims are often reluctant to report ongoing violent incidents to the police. A victim may, however, talk to a probation officer who makes an effort to stay in regular contact. Having periodic conversations with victims is important both to ensure that the offender is refraining from further abuse and to gauge how the offender is responding to treatment and supervision.
- **Swift and certain response to probation violations.** It is critical to respond to new incidents of abuse even if it did not result in an arrest or criminal charges.
- **Communicate with treatment providers.** Although batterer interventions have not been shown to significantly reduce future abuse, participation can be another monitoring tool for probation officers. Communicating regularly with treatment providers can provide probation officers another window into the offender’s world and the information gleaned could help officers focus on areas of concern.
- **Partner with treatment providers to conduct domestic violence risk assessments.** Probation departments could partner with treatment providers to conduct domestic violence trailer assessments following the general risk assessment. Doing so may free up more staff time for direct supervision, capitalize on the expertise of the treatment providers and facilitate the development of stronger collaborative relationships between domestic violence treatment providers and probation staff.



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