



The Youth Violence Potential Scale for practitioners

Summary

Youth are central to issues of interpersonal violence. South Africa has among the highest rates of intentional homicide globally, with many youth being victims and perpetrators. Given their vulnerability, there is a critical need for practitioner-friendly measurement tools to assess both the propensity for violent behaviours and changes in such propensity over time. This policy brief concerns adapting the existing Youth Violence Potential Scale¹ to a practitioner version (the YVPS-P) for youth development programmers who are unfamiliar with quantitative research in order to score youth violence risk. The conclusion is that the instrument can allow for follow-up assessment and basic programme evaluation through changes in the YVPS-P scores of an individual or across a cohort. Furthermore, as attitudes and associations change, potentially resulting from targeted intervention, change in the YVPS-P – and its dynamic constituents – could detect this attitudinal or behavioural change. In conclusion, the implications for policy and practice in the broader field of violence prevention and intervention are considered.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that young people are central to the issue of violence, both as victims and as

perpetrators. In South Africa, nearly half of the victims of homicide and murder are 10 to 29 years old;² nearly one-third of all crime-related murder suspects are 19 years or younger;³ and 76% of all youth offenders are victims of violence themselves.⁴ There is therefore a serious concern that if issues of youth violence in South Africa are not addressed, they will manifest in grave costs to the government and society as a whole. This has prompted the formulation of a range of policies and interventions aimed at addressing youth violence. However, in South Africa, there appears to be no established field of empirical programme evaluation of youth violence interventions, nor of testing violence-risk tools.⁵

Therefore, the objective is to adapt the YVPS⁶ for use by youth development programmers in order to score youth violence risk for targeted treatment, for group comparison purposes and for measurement of changes in risk levels. This adapted YVPS-P allows for violence-risk assessment and basic programme evaluation (through changes in the YVPS-P score) of an individual or across a cohort. As attitudes and associations change, potentially attributable to an intervention, changes in the YVPS-P (and its constituent elements) can detect this change. The intention is to make available a psychometrically-

validated violence-risk assessment tool, designed and tested among male youth in a violence-afflicted community, and propose a method for its application and evaluation.

Defining youth and youth violence

In this policy brief youth are defined as people between the ages of 14 and 35, consistent with the National Youth Commission Act No. 19 of 1996. In line with the World Health Organization, violence is defined as 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation'.⁷

Explanations of youth violence

Various disciplines have theorised about the onset and progression of violence, at individual and collective levels. At the individual level, biosocial theory explores the biological determinants of violence (including conditions brought about by nutritional deficiencies,⁸ hormonal imbalances,⁹ neurophysiological abnormalities¹⁰ and the heritability of potentially violent personality traits such as psychopathy¹¹). However, biosocial theorists have been criticised for bias, ignoring how oppression, racism and economic marginalisation produce racial and class differences in violent behaviour levels.¹²

Above the individual level, social disorganisation theory and its strands claim that violence and crime are likely a function of neighbourhood dynamics. The systemic strand¹³ focuses on social disorganisation between three spheres of networks: private networks (for example friendships and kinships), parochial networks (secondary, less intimate group relations) and public networks (groups and institutions beyond the neighbourhood level). The social capital/collective efficacy

strand holds that social disorganisation diminishes collective efficacy and social capital and, as a result, leads to increased violence.¹⁴ Social capital is believed to foster solidarity and trust between residents, while collective efficacy means that residents of a neighbourhood can control undesirable behaviour in their neighbourhood through collective means.

At the macro level, theories explore structural conditions such as poverty, inequality and deprivation that may relate to youth violence and crime. For example, strain theory asserts that young people are forced into crime and violence due to economic pressures and multiple individuals experiencing collective strain in concentrated areas of poverty or unemployment.¹⁵ Relative deprivation asserts that inequality and the subsequent feelings of frustration and resentment are the primary drivers of crime among young people.¹⁶

Assessing youth violence risk

In Western studies, assessment of youth violence potential is aligned with studies on child behavioural disorders. In these contexts, psychiatric approaches to the assessment of violence risk use tools such as the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised, which evaluates interpersonal aspects (arrogance, deceitfulness and grandiosity), affective or emotional traits (absence of guilt, remorse or empathy), and deviant and criminal behaviours.¹⁷ Its widespread adoption has blurred the distinctions between extreme violence and psychopathic and anti-social personality disorders.

This challenge of 'violence as psychosis' is acute in high-violence areas where a degree of 'normalisation of violent responses' has formed.¹⁸ Aberrant 'psychotic' disorders cannot account for extremely high incidences of interpersonal violence. Youth from such communities have described being forcibly recruited into gangs and

committing acts of violence in order to achieve social acceptance or to avoid their own further victimisation.¹⁹ Thus, the contextual similarities with existing Western research are limited; and 'it would seem that fundamentally different diagnostic tools and research approaches are required in communities where violence has become endemic, where many people engage in violence without displaying classic anti-social/psychopathic personality traits, yet still, large numbers of at-risk youth do manage to avoid such violent engagements'.²⁰

The study

The study on which this policy brief is based was conducted in the township of Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Khayelitsha has a population of approximately 450 000 people, 99% of whom are black Africans. Of the 118 000 estimated households, 75% live below the upper-bound poverty line and more than 50% live in informal dwellings, with limited access to water, sanitation services and electricity.²¹ In 2018, the Khayelitsha police precinct recorded a murder rate of 110/100 000 people – among the highest in the country.²² Many less severe contact crimes are alleged to be highly under-reported,²³ particularly in communities where poverty, overcrowding, inadequate policing and opportunities for crime are abundant yet residents doubt that reporting crime can yield beneficial outcomes.²⁴ It is estimated that 40% of all crimes in Khayelitsha may go unreported.²⁵

The study consisted of two waves conducted over a 12-month period (March 2013 to March 2014), with a sample of 318 males aged 12 to 24 years living in a 600-metre radius from a youth development initiative in Site B Khayelitsha. Many of the participants in the study reported backgrounds of poverty and exposure to violence in the home, school and community environments.²⁶

Table 1: The Youth Violence Potential Scale – Practitioner Version (YVPS-P)

Question	Response options/Scoring
Section A: Deviant peers/Criminal associates:	
Qa.1: <i>Have any of your friends bought drugs in the past year?</i>	0 = none of my friends 2 = 1 or 2 of my friends 3 = 3 or 4 friends 4 = 5 or more friends
Qa.2: <i>(no details but) Do any of your friends regularly use or sell drugs?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
Qa.3: <i>Have any of your friends dropped out of school?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
Qa.4: <i>Have any of your friends skipped school a lot without permission?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
Qa.5: <i>Do any of your friends smoke cigarettes on a pretty regular basis?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
Qa.6: <i>Do any of your friends go out in the evening with their parents' permission?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
Qa.7: <i>Do any of your friends drink wine/alcohol fairly regularly?</i>	(same as Qa.1)
The 7 peer deviance items are scored 0 to 4 and totalled (for a possible 28 points).	
Section B: Positive attitude towards gang affiliations:	
Qb.8: <i>I think you are safer, and have protection, if you join a gang.</i>	0 = strongly disagree 1 = disagree 2 = neither agree nor disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree
Qb.9: <i>I will probably join a gang.</i>	(same as Qb.8)
Qb.10: <i>Some of my friends at school belong to gangs.</i>	(same as Qb.8)
Qb.11: <i>I think it's cool to be in a gang.</i>	(same as Qb.8)
Qb.12: <i>I belong to a gang.</i>	(same as Qb.8)
Qb.13: <i>People think I'm a gangster.</i>	(same as Qb.8)
The 6 pro-gangs items are scored 0 to 4 and totalled (for a possible 24 points).	
Section C: Pro-violence attitude/Instrumental aggression potential:	
Qc.14: <i>It is sometimes okay for people to be discriminated against or physically harassed because of their nationality.</i>	0 = strongly disagree 1 = disagree 2 = neither agree nor disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree
Qc.15: <i>A guy shows he really loves his girlfriend if he gets in fights with other guys about her.</i>	(same as Qc.14)
Qc.16: <i>People from other races sometimes deserve to be discriminated against or physically harassed.</i>	(same as Qc.14)
Qc.17: <i>If people do things to make me really mad, they deserve to be beaten up.</i>	(same as Qc.14)
Qc.18: <i>It is sometimes okay for people to be discriminated against or physically harassed because of their sexual orientation.</i>	(same as Qc.14)
Qb.19: <i>If you mess with me/with my friends, you will get hurt.</i>	(same as Qc.14)
The 6 pro-violence items are scored 0 to 4 and totalled (for a possible 24 points).	
Section D: Actual physical violence engagement:	
Qd.20: <i>In how many physical fights have you been involved within the past year?</i>	0 = none 5 = 1 fight only 10 = 2 or 3 fights 15 = 4 or 5 fights 25 = 6 or more fights
The scores of the 4 sections are totalled for a possible score of 0 (no violence potential) to 101 points (maximum violence potential).	

Measures

The existing YVPS contains 19 items and was psychometrically developed and validated.²⁷ It consists of the following subscales:

- Deviant peers/Criminal associates: 7 items asking participants about their friends' risky behaviours.
- Positive attitude towards gang affiliations: 6 items aimed at measuring attitudes affirming gangs and personal gang affiliations.
- Pro-violence attitude: 6 items aimed at measuring tolerance for the use of violence.
- The YVPS-P is supplemented with an additional item (Actual physical violence engagement) measuring the number of fights in which participants had engaged in the past 12 months. This item provides critical information on the opportunities for engaging in violent offending, based on an individual's routine activities.

As shown in Table 1, the YVPS-P consists of a 20-item scorecard based on a 101-point scale. As the vast majority of scores fall below 50 points, scores can be rounded down to the nearest whole number – effectively a 100-point scoring system.

Several self-report indices were administered to yield information on risk behaviours and cross-validate the YVPS-P, including substance use/abuse, problem behaviour/violent offending, and victimisation.

Results

Predictive validity of the YVPS-P

There is evidence that the YVPS-P and its components are correlated with future measures and self-reported behavioural outcomes in the following wave. In particular, the Wave 1 YVPS-P score is significantly correlated with future self-reported victimisation and substance use/abuse.

Scoring risk and change

To develop scoring criteria for non-statistical practitioners, the Wave 2 YVPS-P scoring breakdowns were examined per percentile in relation to the prior 24 months' total of problem conduct. A YVPS-P score of 20 is at the 50th percentile and approximately corresponds with an average score of 1 for the frequency of incidents of problem conduct, suggesting the probability that a participant scoring 20 or above has committed potentially violent offending. Overall, among the 14- to 16-year-old age group, the average Wave 1 YVPS-P score was 16.5 and in Wave 2 it was 19.6; among 17- to 19-year-olds, the Wave 1 YVPS-P score was 19.6 and in Wave 2 it was 21.2; among 20- to 24-year-olds, the Wave 1 YVPS-P score was 26.9 and in Wave 2 it was 24.4. This suggests that there is increasing risk with age, both from wave to wave as respondents age and across the age groups at each point in time, although such increases may begin tapering off in the mid-20s as many young men 'age out' of criminality, according to classic age-crime curves.²⁸

Among risk assessment tool developers, there are debates on cut-points and the labelling of 'at risk' of psychopathy or violent behaviour.²⁹ Furthermore, due to the limited self-disclosure of actual violent behaviours,³⁰ there is no perfect method to 'score risk' and verify through available violent offending data. That said, the following are offered as departure points for severity of risk assessment: A total YVPS-P score between 15 and 19 reflects a potential concern; a score between 20 and 39, a serious concern; and a score of 40 and above, likely active engagement in serious criminal or violent acts. In Wave 2, 35 (11%) participants in the study had YVPS-P scores of 40 and above, with a maximum score of 70.

'YVPS-P change scores' can be derived by subtracting the YVPS-P pre-test (or initial) score from the post-test (or

follow-up) score. The result can then be interpreted as a change in percentage point terms (a positive score indicating increased risk of violence and negative indicating decreased risk). Furthermore, average group changes across treatment and control/comparison groups can be calculated and compared by averaging the change scores for each group.

Conclusion

In this brief, the YVPS-P (a risk assessment tool with a psychometric and empirical grounding that can be rapidly administered and scored/evaluated by those working with potentially at-risk youth) was presented. This responds to the dire need among intervention practitioners in under-resourced settings for a short and simple tool to measure violence risk and change. While the risk scoring and change assessment methodologies presented here are easily applied, they have yet to be tested sufficiently in other studies and intervention sites.

Recommendations

Based on the current levels of research and evidence-based youth violence intervention practice, there are implications for both policy-makers and practitioners:

1. Build a knowledge base of evidence of locally-tested youth violence interventions to understand evaluations and the comparative strength of evidence.
2. Incorporate this knowledge into the budgetary allocations for youth violence intervention (as a subset of national violence prevention funding from Treasury and provincial levels).
3. Encourage civil society (and all those involved in delivering/implementing violence prevention or violence reduction programmes for youth) to advocate for public budget allocations, based on locally tested (proven effective) programmes, as well as for the implementation of tools that can evaluate efficacy.

In this way, both government and civil society actors can foreground evidence-based practice in policy making, policy implementation and budgeting, and effective youth violence reduction programming.

Endnotes

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