

Review of the WAVR-21: A Structured Professional Guide for the Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk (Second Edition)

By Kristine Kienlen, Psy.D., Minnesota Threat Assessment & Forensic Professionals,

Introduction

A number of high profile shooting cases in the workplace and on college campuses have raised questions about how to effectively evaluate persons whose threatening or otherwise concerning behavior have raised questions about the potential for targeted violence. Since April 16, 2007 when a student shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, schools and employers across the country have established multidisciplinary threat assessment teams assigned the challenging and complex task of assessing the seriousness of threats and managing violence risk. Depending on the setting, the professionals from these multidisciplinary teams specialize in various areas of employment including: Human Resources, Legal, Security, Law Enforcement, Mental Health, Risk Management, Health and Wellness, Occupational Safety, Deans of Students or Academics, Residential Life, Disability Services, and various other types of Management or Administration. While some workplaces have established threat assessment teams, others pull their team of professionals together ad hoc in crisis situations. Sometimes a decision is made to seek an outside mental health professional or threat assessment consultant to further evaluate the situation, often in the context of a Fitness For Duty Evaluation or Risk Assessment.

While the professionals assigned the duty of managing threatening behavior in the workplace have various areas of expertise that provide an invaluable contribution to the multidisciplinary team, most have little to no training or experience in the assessment of violence risk. Yet, employees in various roles face the responsibility of determining the seriousness of a threat or violence risk of individuals in complex scenarios, like:

- An employee whose work performance has significantly deteriorated is angry because he did not receive a desired promotion. He begins sending emails to the employee who was awarded the promotion with statements like, "You better watch your back when you walk to your car. I went to the gun show Saturday."
- An employee reports to Security that she has obtained a Restraining Order against her estranged husband who also works for the company. He was violent towards her during their marriage and he began stalking her after the separation. He is extremely jealous and accused her of having an affair with her manager.
- A college student makes a report to the campus threat assessment team that his roommate has been depressed and has made suicidal statements. He has also started posting disturbing comments on Facebook about identifying with the Columbine shooters and wanting to kill more people.

When scenarios like these raise concerns about potential violence at work, professionals in various employment roles must devote an enormous amount of time to effectively manage the situation. The stakes are high when the question is whether an employee or another individual is capable of harming or killing others in the workplace. An inaccurate or incomplete investigation and assessment of a person's violence risk could result in the loss of an individual's job, freedom, or life and could have a detrimental impact on the organization overall. Persons who are charged with the task of assessing

potential violence risk may be unknowingly influenced by factors that are not at all associated with violence risk (e.g., fear/anxiety, stereotypes or misinformation gathered from media stories, stigma surrounding mental illness, etc.). It is crucial that the risk assessment be conducted in a valid, reliable, thorough, and consistent manner. Regardless of whether it is an internal multidisciplinary team of professionals or an outside mental health professional evaluating the situation, a complex array of violence risk factors must be considered in order to effectively evaluate the level of violence risk.

Historically, psychologists and psychiatrists have largely relied upon an unstructured approach to risk assessments based on their clinical knowledge, experience, and professional judgment. However, research found that relying on unstructured clinical judgment resulted in very low accuracy rates (Monahan, 1981; Grove & Meehl, 1996). In response to this dilemma, researchers developed structured violence risk assessment instruments. One type, the Structured Professional Judgment instrument, utilizes the rational or logical selection of risk factors based on a comprehensive review of the existing violence risk research and literature. Definitions are provided for each risk factor and guidelines for making final risk judgments (e.g., low, moderate, high, or immediate risk) are provided. While there may be some type of “scoring system” (e.g., whether a factor is absent, present, or prominent), there is not a total cut off score. Rather, there is flexibility for professional judgment when considering combinations of risk factors present on the instrument and whether there are additional unique risk factors that should be considered. Most studies of Structured Professional Judgment Instruments have found that their risk judgment (low, moderate, or high) was significantly predictive of violence and that they perform as well or better than other types of violence risk assessment instruments (Douglas & Reeves, 2010; Douglas, Yeomans, & Boer, 2005; Heilbrun, Douglas, & Yasuhara, 2009). Structured professional judgment guides have been developed to assess various types of adult violence, including:

- General violence (the Historical Clinical Risk – 20/HCR-20 by Webster, Douglas, Eaves, & Hart, 1997);
- Domestic violence (the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment/SARA by Kropp, Hart, Webster, & Eaves, 1994, 1995, 1999);
- Stalking (the Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management/SAM by Kropp, Hart, Lyon, 2008 and the Stalking Risk Profile by MacKenzie, McEwan, Pathé, James, Ogloff, 2009); and
- Sexual violence (the Sexual Violence Risk-20/SVR-20 by Boer, Hart, Kropp, & Webster, 1997 & the Risk for Sexual Violence Protocol/RSVP by Hart, Kropp, Laws, Klaver, Logan, & Watt, 2003).

Workplace Violence Assessment Utilizing the WAVR-21

The WAVR-21: A Structured Professional Guide for the Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk by Stephen G. White, Ph. D. and J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D. is the first and only instrument of its kind specifically designed to assess the risk of targeted violence in a workplace setting (the WAVR-21: First Edition was copyrighted in June 2007 and the WAVR-21 second edition was copyrighted in March 2010). In the WAVR-21 manual, the authors describe that “the WAVR-21 is a rationally-derived, 21-item empirically based instrument to structure professional judgment concerning violence risk and threat assessment in the workplace. The empirical foundation of the instrument is the combined research concerning violence risk and threat assessment that has

accumulated over the past half century.” The intended subjects in WAVR-21 assessments are essentially any adult who may pose a potential risk of targeted violence to the workplace (current or former employees, current or former intimate partners of employees, clients, customers, adult students or trainees, etc.). The authors note that the definition of workplace violence varies widely and they are careful to operationally define violence for the purposes of the WAVR-21 as an “ultimate physical act” that is sufficiently severe to cause injury to another person. While the authors emphasize that they are “most interested in workplace-related targeted or intended homicide or serious assault,” they indicate that the instrument can be used to identify and code other aggressive, intimidating, and disruptive behavior in the workplace (e.g., stalking, sexual or other harassment, yelling or angry outbursts, bullying, threatening or bizarre communications or behaviors, property damage, etc.).

A unique and tremendously useful aspect of the WAVR-21, is that two forms were developed: 1) A WAVR-21 Short Form for the Corporate User who is involved in threat management, but is not trained in the mental health field and 2) the WAVR-21 Coding Grid (long form) for the Professional User who is “a qualified clinical or forensic risk assessment specialist.” The Short Form is made up of 12 items that make up the acronym “VIOLENCE RISK” and are focused on observations of a subject’s behaviors and statements and workplace situational factors. The Short Form does not include the WAVR-21 items that require clinical expertise in psychopathology or diagnostic assessment. The authors emphasize that a workplace violence risk assessment using the WAVR-21 should only be conducted by qualified Professional users. However, the authors note that reading the entire manual and gaining familiarity with all WAVR-21 items is useful for all users in order to develop a fundamental understanding of workplace violence. A risk of this two form format is that unqualified users will go ahead and use the long-form of the WAVR-21 without consulting with mental health professionals. However, practically speaking, knowledge of both forms helps all users understand and gather relevant information to be analyzed by the multidisciplinary team or provided to the Mental Health consultant for further assessment. The Short Form is coded by determining whether or not a risk factor is “present” and the WAVR-21 Coding Grid (long form) is coded by determining whether a risk factor is “absent,” “present,” or “prominent” (with guidelines provided for each item to determine the category). Like most Structured Professional Judgment Instruments, there are no formal scores or cut offs. Rather, the instrument identifies various risk factors that are or are not present so that the sense of urgency or level of risk can be determined.

Both the WAVR-21 Short Form and the Coding Grid account for recent change (increase or decrease) in the risk factor which can be essential in understanding the sense of urgency or escalation/de-escalation in potential violence risk. The WAVR-21 can also be used to reassess cases across time when additional information has been obtained or to help determine the effectiveness of interventions in modulating risk.

Thorough definitions are provided for each WAVR-21 item based on the research. A particularly helpful aspect of the WAVR-21 is that it breaks down a subject’s thinking about violence into three categories: 1) Motives for Violence; 2) Homicidal Ideas, Violent Fantasies or Preoccupation; and 3) Violent Intentions and Expressed Threats. Distinguishing how an individual is thinking about violence in this three part manner helps assess how serious the individual might be regarding actually acting out violently (e.g., just because someone thinks about violence, does not necessarily mean that they intend to or will act out violently). Definitions are also provided for the Professional user

to draw a conclusion about the level of risk (e.g., low, moderate, high, or imminent risk). Consistent with findings in studies of other Structured Professional Judgment Instruments, a WAVR-21 interrater reliability study found good to excellent interrater agreement in ratings of the WAVR-21 among members of law enforcement, mental health, and human resources engaged in workplace violence risk assessment (please refer to www.wavr21.com for research details). The WAVR-21 is a new instrument and future validity studies are needed. Overall, the WAVR-21 provides a consistent, organized approach to collecting information about cases and promotes thorough consideration and discussion of the factors that need to be considered in threat management.

Having two forms of the WAVR to be used by the professionals with the appropriate qualifications expands usefulness of the instrument, especially since a multidisciplinary team approach to workplace violence is warranted. In my experience, the longer WAVR-21 Scoring Grid is more easily scored, likely because a comprehensive review of the research relevant to each item is provided in the manual which can always be used as a resource. The collapsing of items into a Short Form can add some confusion for team members. However, this can be avoided by careful review of the definitions provided with each item on the actual Short Form as the items are rated. A useful feature of the WAVR-21 Forms Packet is that sections are provided to document case intake information and summary information (e.g., critical risk factors, risk opinions, steps that could be taken to manage risk, and circumstances that might exacerbate risk).

The authors of the WAVR-21 have a wealth of experience and knowledge in the violence risk assessment and threat management field and their summary of the research in the WAVR-21 manual provides a valuable resource and desk reference. More importantly, the manual provides an enhanced understanding of important threat assessment concepts including that violence risk is dynamic (changes over time) and there is a detectable pathway to violence (Calhoun & Weston, 2003). The starting point with a grievance or perceived injustice is described along with how an individual progresses towards a violent act. General principals of preventing workplace violence and examples of threat management interventions are also provided.

At the end of the WAVR-21 manual are three case examples that should not be missed because they are very useful in understanding how the WAVR-21 Short Form and Coding Grid are rated and how case findings can be communicated from a threat management perspective. Training on use of the WAVR-21 specifically and threat management in general is advised. One important bonus of participation in approved WAVR-21 training is that practice exercises or case vignettes are utilized so that teams can gain experience using the instrument to think through cases. Feedback that I have received from WAVR-21 users is that the team practice exercises helped them feel comfortable with use of the instrument and more confident with threat management in general. Participants in formal WAVR-21 training are provided with an additional WAVR-21 tool, the "PROTECT" form, which identifies stabilizers and buffers against violence risk. The "PROTECT" form is important because it assists the assessor with considering the "good news" or positive traits of a subject that might mitigate risk. Because the "PROTECT" form is not provided in the WAVR-21 manual, there is some potential that the novice or untrained user will fail to consider these potentially protective factors or that they will be an afterthought.

As a forensic psychologist with threat assessment expertise, I find that the WAVR-21 provides me with an instrument to anchor my risk assessment and to ensure that I have carefully considered the most significant empirical risk factors in this specialized area of workplace violence. Utilizing the WAVR-21 keeps me mindful of how violence risk is dynamic or may change over time, depending on a number of factors including personal losses or stressors, mental health, organizational response, and even risk management interventions. Other professionals actually using the WAVR-21 on workplace or campus threat assessment teams have provided the following feedback:

The WAVR-21 is “easy to use” and provides a “vernacular” or language for the threat assessment team.

“I have found the WAVR-21 to be an invaluable tool in our toolbox for the Behavioral Assessment Team at our College. The WAVR -21 comes with a manual which describes in detail known risk factors for violence. For the laypersons, the WAVR-21 Short Form helps to organize and prioritize risk based on what information we have on hand about the individual in question.”

“As a clinical psychologist and college dean with over 16 years of experience assessing students for high risk behavior (suicide, other threats to self and others, violence, etc.), the use of the WAVR has been an invaluable tool. Not only has it helped me in my individual work with students, but it also has been extremely helpful for our Threat Assessment Team. The WAVR has given us a common language and orientation toward the task and process of assessing risk. The short form is accessible to non-clinicians and the longer form is helpful for more complicated cases. While there may be some subjectivity in individual ratings, the use of this with a team promotes good discussion, debate, and consensus. The protect factors are very important. The one caution I would use is that the WAVR must be one tool to make assessments of risk not the only data point.”

A limitation of the WAVR-21 and of Structured Professional Judgment Instruments in general is that they can not be used alone to assess violence risk. Cases involving potential risk of violence are complex and influenced by a number of behavioral, personal, situational, and organizational factors. In any given case, there may be unique factors that either escalate or diminish the risk of violence. Professional judgment is always needed when using this kind of instrument to assess risk. While violence risk and human behavior can never be predicted with 100% accuracy, the benefit of Structured Professional Judgment Instruments like the WAVR-21 is the consistent examination of pertinent risk factors for the particular type of violence and guidance in determining risk level. Given current societal demands for better violence risk management in the workplace and in schools, the WAVR-21 can be particularly helpful in determining areas that require further investigation and identifying higher risk cases that require more resources and intervention.

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*Correspondence to: Kristine Kienlen, Psy.D., Minnesota Threat Assessment & Forensic Professionals, Inc., P.O. Box 24477, Minneapolis, MN 55424, USA.

Email: DrKrisKienlen@mnprotect.com

Website: www.mnprotect.com

Telephone: 612-799-4181

Kristine Kienlen, Psy.D. is a clinical and forensic psychologist who has conducted forensic evaluations for the District Court of Minnesota for over 17 years. She is the president and founder of Minnesota Threat Assessment & Forensic Professionals, Inc. providing violence prevention policy development, training of threat assessment teams, and violence risk assessment/threat management consultation and evaluation services to employers and colleges. Dr. Kienlen is an approved trainer of the WAVR-21.