The ‘Worst of the Worst’: Detectives’ Beliefs about Dangerous Violent Offenders and How to Deal with Them

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Police detectives come into contact with a community’s most dangerous violent offenders, but there is little empirical research concerning detectives’ beliefs about their characteristics. Twenty experienced detectives compared the characteristics and attributes of two offenders they believed to be the most dangerous repeat violent offenders in their community with two violent offenders who they believed to be less dangerous. Eighty offenders were identified in total. Thirteen bipolar *dangerous–less dangerous* constructs that differentiate the most dangerous violent offenders from other violent offenders were identified. The most frequently identified themes, mentioned by three quarters or more of the detectives, are being a heavy drug user (particularly amphetamines), being impulsive, and not thinking of the consequences of one’s actions. The next three themes, mentioned by half of the detectives are extensive and regular offending, breadth of offending, and wishing to portray oneself as a ‘tough guy’. One theme detectives did not mention frequently is mental illness as being associated with the most violent offenders, suggesting that detectives may miss mental illness in their interactions with offenders. Detectives suggested responding to the most dangerous violent offenders with longer sentences, extensive monitoring and better intelligence.

Key words: crime; detectives; high-risk offenders; police; violence.

Introduction

Many authors have pointed out that there is a scarcity of research on how detectives investigate violent crime (Brodeur, 2010; Brookman & Innes, 2013; Westera, Kebbell, Milne, & Green, 2014). The most detailed research was conducted by the *Rand Corporation* in the 1970s concerning the investigation of crime generally rather than violent crime specifically (Chaiken, Greenwood, & Persilia, 1976). However, little research as thorough as that study has been conducted since then. This is surprising, as detectives come into contact with their community’s most dangerous violent offenders,

and for this reason it would seem worthwhile to ask them about the characteristics of these offenders. Detectives’ attitudes toward violent offenders are important because detectives get to see offenders close up, in raw circumstances when crime occurs, unfiltered by the delays and biases in the prosecution process such as having time to sober up, clean up, compose themselves and think of explanations for their behavior.

Detectives’ beliefs about violent offenders are also important because they shed light on the characteristics of a wider variety of violent offenders and offences than are included in conviction studies. For example, the ‘Stern

Review' (Stern, 2010) reports that conviction rates for violent offences are only around 6% – similar to that of rape. The reasons for such a low conviction rate are diverse: some assaults do not result in a conviction because the victims are intoxicated at the time of the offence and so not credible witnesses in the eyes of prosecutors (see, for example, Beicher & Spohn, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2014; Pilgrim, Gerostamoulos, & Drummer, 2014); some victims choose to withdraw from the prosecution process; and in some cases responsibility for the violence may be difficult to determine because it is one person's word against another (Stern, 2010; Wittebrood & Junger, 2002). Either way, this means that detectives may see a more complete side of the range of violent offenders than is reflected in conviction studies.

Despite these limitations, a great deal is known about violent offenders from research and risk-assessment tools based on convicted offenders. One of the first – and arguably the most thoroughly researched – 'actuarial' tool for assessing the risk of violence is the Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG; Harris, Rice, & Camilleri, 2004). An actuarial tool relies on statistical analysis and objective information to predict risk. In the case of the VRAG, this involves scoring 12 items: separation from biological parents; alcohol problems; school problems; marital status; criminal history; failure of conditional release (e.g., breaching bail conditions); age; victim injury; victim gender; personality disorder; mental illness; and psychopathy (Quinsey et al., 2006). A number of studies and reviews have indicated that the VRAG has good predictive validity for violence (Campbell, French, & Gendreau, 2009; Gray, Taylor, Fitzgerald, MacCulloch, & Snowden, 2007; Harris, Rice, & Camilleri, 2004).

The item on the VRAG that is most predictive of future violence is psychopathy (Quinsey et al., 2006), as measured by the Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R). This tool has been shown to be reasonably accurate in predicting offending, including

violent offending (Hare, 1991), although it does not outperform the VRAG (Quinsey et al., 2006). The checklist consists of 20 items, including factors such as impulsivity, need for stimulation/proneness to boredom, pathological lying, and lack of remorse. Importantly, with regard to psychopathy, one would expect low-risk individuals to have some risk factors present – but it is only a high score overall, where an individual has high scores on a substantial number of the 20 items, that leads to a categorization as being high-risk. A given cut-off score is used to determine increased risk (Hare, 1991). High-risk individuals may get to this score in different ways. For example, some may show a great deal of manipulation of victims, whilst others may show higher levels of violence (Cooke, 2008). This is important for the police assessment of risk because not all high-risk offenders will have the same characteristics and histories.

An alternative to actuarial risk assessment is structured professional judgment. With this approach, information collection is suggested by empirically-based guidelines and then the professional makes a judgment concerning overall risk. With regard to violence, the most frequently used tool is the Historical Clinical Risk Management-20 (HCR-20; Douglas et al., 2014). The historical factors include items such as a history of problems with violence, relationships and alcohol/substance abuse, while the clinical factors include items such as problems with insight, personality disorders and major mental disorders. The tool also includes dynamic factors associated with changing risk, incorporating items such as potential future problems with living accommodation and the presence or absence of personal relationships where additional support can be provided. The tool has recently been revised to take into account the most recent research and increase its practicality, but it retains similar items (Douglas et al., 2014; and for an example of its administration, see Logan,

2014). Clearly, there is substantial overlap with the VRAG.

The implication of the research on risk is that police detectives dealing with violent offenders should be able to recognize the key factors associated with violent offending in order to be able to effectively carry out their role. If they cannot this is concerning, and likely to impact on their ability to recognize dangerous offenders and reduce violent crime. Whilst it would seem logical that detectives should be aware of the key factors associated with violence, the literature is replete with examples where professionals in the justice system have beliefs that contradict the available empirical literature (e.g., Vrij, Akehurst, & Knight, 2006). It is also possible that detectives see risk factors that are not indicated in the literature because they are aware of dynamic, acute factors due to often seeing offenders at a time close to when an offence has been committed. While, as Douglas et al. (2014) state, 'there have been literally thousands of research studies on violence generally' (p. 95), it is remarkable how few have involved the police – something which this study seeks to remedy.

To do this, a method for developing a deep understanding is used in this study, derived from Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory: the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT). The RGT can be used to explore how respondents construe the world or their implicit theoretical beliefs about different constructs (Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2004; N. Smith & Flanagan, 2000). Kelly suggests that it is helpful to conceptualize belief systems as sets of linked bipolar constructs where the positive is grounded against a negative opposite. Hence, the RGT involves first defining elements. In the present study, described in detail later, the elements are what respondents perceive as the characteristics of the most violent offenders in contrast to less violent offenders. For example, one construct that might differentiate the worst offenders from other offenders might be *drinks heavily* versus *only drinks socially*.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to clarify experienced detectives' perceptions of the characteristics of the worst violent offenders by using a modified RGT to identify constructs and using semi-structured interviews to identify the key characteristics of the 'worst of the worst'. In addition, the presence of very violent offenders in the community is a cause for concern, so the detectives were asked why they are still at large and what can be done about it.

Method

Participants

A police service in Australia agreed to participate in this study. Twenty experienced detectives were nominated by their managers in their criminal investigation branch to participate because of their experience investigating violent offences. The detectives had all qualified by first working as a uniformed constable for at least two years and then completing a three-year detective training program. The detective training program combined classroom teaching with monitoring and coaching in the workplace whilst also conducting detective work. All detectives who were nominated agreed to participate in an interview for approximately one hour during work time. All interviews were conducted in person. The mean age of the detectives was 41 years ($SD = 5$); seventeen are male and three are female. The detectives are all experienced, having served in the police force for 9 to 28 years ($M = 19$, $SD = 6$) and as detectives for 3 to 23 years ($M = 13$, $SD = 6$).

Data Collection and Analysis

Each detective was interviewed using the RGT and a semi-structured interview.

For the RGT part of the process, each detective was asked to think of four violent offenders: the two offenders who they believed to be the most dangerous repeat

violent offenders in their community currently, and two more violent offenders who they considered to be less dangerous. The detectives were allowed to interpret dangerousness in whatever way they wanted. They were then given four square cut-outs with the letters A, B, C, D written on them and asked to write down the initials of the two most dangerous violent offenders on the back of the A and B squares, and the initials of the two less dangerous violent offenders on the back of the C and D squares. The idea for writing initials on the back of the squares was to ensure anonymity, and the squares were destroyed at the end of the interview. The detectives were then asked to make various contrasts between the characteristics of the dangerous versus less dangerous offenders through a series of comparisons, such as 'what is similar about A and B that is different to C?' and 'what is similar about C and D that is different to A?'. The idea is to list as many things that come to mind for each combination of the letters until all constructs are extracted. This happens when constructs start to be repeated. The authors had a repertory grid into which they put the categories (for a detailed explanation and description of using the repertory grid, see Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2004).

The authors read through each of the constructs and developed a 'dictionary' of terms. For example, one detective said that two violent offenders 'take lots of drugs' compared with a less violent offender who 'occasionally takes drugs'. Another said that a dangerous offender was 'always on drugs' whilst another said that one of the less dangerous offenders 'does not use drugs'. These phrases were combined into the dictionary term 'heavy drug user.' Fifty items were identified in total. The RGT procedure was adapted from Kelly (1955) but no numerical ratings were given to each construct, both for brevity and because previous experience has shown that police officers become frustrated at having to repeatedly give ratings on a scale. Once the dictionary was completed, the detectives' responses were coded into these

terms. To ensure that the coding scheme was reliable, the responses of four of the detectives (20%) were independently coded into the identified themes by a second rater. Kappa correlations were calculated between the raters for each detective (Fleiss, Levin, & Paik, 2004) and range from .77 to .88 with a mean of .82, meaning that reliability is satisfactory.

In the semi-structured interview, the detectives were asked to: 'Name three strategies that police could use to help reduce the risk of dangerous offenders reoffending'. The responses were probed with regard to how the strategies might work and how they might be implemented. Next they were asked: 'Name three obstacles to stopping dangerous offenders from reoffending'. Again, detectives were probed concerning each obstacle and how each obstacle could be overcome. Content analysis of the themes of reducing risk and overcoming obstacles was performed separately and the results were entered into a coding dictionary. Again, the responses of four detectives were independently coded into the identified themes by a second rater. For the theme of reducing risk, all Kappa correlations are 1.00 and so the average of the four is also 1.00. For the theme of obstacles to stopping dangerous offenders from reoffending, the Kappa correlations range from .63 to 1.00 with a mean of .91.

Results

Repertory Grid Technique

As described above, each of the 20 detectives compared the characteristics and attributes of what they believed to be the two most dangerous repeat violent offenders with two other violent offenders who they believed to be less dangerous. Thus, 80 offenders were identified in total. Thirteen bipolar, *dangerous-less dangerous* constructs were identified by at least 25% ($n = 5$) of the sample as differentiating the most dangerous violent offenders from other less dangerous violent offenders.

Table 1. Overall rankings and frequencies of attributes associated with dangerous violent offenders identified by 25% or more of detectives ($n = 20$).

Rank	Attribute	Number of detectives mentioning theme	%
1	Heavy drug user (mainly amphetamines)	16	80
2	Impulsive/does not think of consequences	15	75
3 =	Extensive offending history/regularly commits crime	10	50
3 =	Breadth of offending/range of offences	10	50
3 =	'Tough guy' image/reputation	10	50
6 =	Dysfunctional family/no family ties	8	40
6 =	Heavy alcohol use	8	40
8 =	High propensity for violence for little reason	7	35
8 =	Criminal associates/organized crime links	7	35
10=	Older	6	30
10=	Use of weapons (including firearms)	6	30
12=	Uncooperative/aggressive to police	5	25
12=	Grooms/coerces/selects vulnerable victims	5	25

These constructs are displayed in Table 1. Two constructs were identified as being most prevalent, identified by 75% or more detectives: the first is being a heavy drug user, with amphetamines being singled out as the drug that is particularly associated with extremes of violence, and the second is offenders being impulsive and not thinking about the consequences of their actions.

Three constructs were mentioned by 50% of the detectives. One construct is an *extensive* offending history which takes place over a long period of time and involves regular offending – for example, from childhood through to adulthood. The detectives also identified the slightly different construct of the *breadth* of offending, which concerns committing a wide variety of offences at any particular time – for example, engaging in multiple acts of assault, theft and fraud all in a short period of time. The final construct identified by half of the detectives is the desire to portray oneself as a 'tough guy', through appearance (e.g., displaying tattoos, driving 'gangster-style' cars and appearing aggressive) and/or enjoying a reputation for being violent.

Other factors include dysfunctional family and/or few family ties and heavy alcohol

abuse, both of which were identified by 40% of the detectives. Family problems can include ineffectual parenting of the offender and/or the parents of the offender having alcohol and substance abuse problems. For older offenders it often means few functional relations with parents or the offender's own children, partners and former partners. Heavy alcohol abuse was usually combined with additional drug problems.

Less frequently identified themes are a high propensity for violence for little reason, mentioned by 35% of the detectives. This includes, for example, 'road-rage' attacks, spontaneous attacks on strangers for little reason, and violence against vulnerable people such as elderly neighbors. Anti-social peers and in some cases links to organized criminal groups is another factor that was identified by 35% of the detectives. Being an older offender was identified by 30% of the detectives, with the most violent offenders often being in their thirties and forties. A factor identified by 30% of the detectives is using weapons, including firearms, which also makes the consequences of the violence more severe. Finally, 25% of the detectives identified the construct of being uncooperative

with police, for example by resisting arrest or refusing to be interviewed. The final construct is the manipulation and grooming of vulnerable victims.

Reducing the Risk of Reoffending

Detectives were asked what strategies could be used to prevent the most dangerous violent offenders from reoffending. Again, only the themes that were mentioned by 25% or more ($n = 5$) of the detectives are reported. The most frequent theme ($n = 13$) is the extensive monitoring of offenders. For most detectives this means the police checking what offenders are doing in their day-to-day lives – for example with a home visit – and determining if they are currently offending, although some also suggested that offenders should be placed on a formal register as part of this monitoring. The next most frequent theme is longer custodial sentences ($n = 9$), with many detectives saying that the violent offenders are back in the community and reoffending far too soon after they have been convicted for a previous offence. The detectives suggested that longer sentences for the most dangerous offenders would act as a deterrent and keep the offenders away from potential victims. The final theme is intelligence, which was identified as critical by some detectives ($n = 7$) for identifying who is currently a violent offender or who is likely to be commit a violent offence in the future.

Obstacles to Stopping Dangerous Violent Offenders from Reoffending

When asked what obstacles there were to stopping dangerous violent offenders from offending, only two themes were mentioned by 25% or more of the detectives: the punishment for the crime is too lenient ($n = 11$) and the lack of resources such as time or staff ($n = 8$).

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to explore detectives' beliefs about the characteristics of violent offenders. The rationale for this is that the views of detectives are rarely solicited, and therefore little is known about their attitudes and beliefs about violent offenders. If they have biases or gaps in their understanding then it is worth knowing what they are. Alternatively, they may have a unique perspective concerning offenders because they have close contact with them, without the filters that exist between offenders and the rest of the justice system. A great deal of consistency was found between how detectives perceive the most violent offenders and risk-assessment tools such as the VRAG (and by implication other risk-assessment tools that include the same or similar items, like the HCR-20). For example, the most predictive of the 12 items on the VRAG for future violence is psychopathy (Quinsey et al., 2006). While psychopathy was not identified per se by the detectives, two characteristics frequently identified are associated with psychopathy (Hare, 1991) – specifically the psychopathic traits of 'need for stimulation/proneness to boredom' and 'impulsivity'.

According to Hare's (1991) definition, the need for stimulation/proneness to boredom includes substance abuse, and the factor that was most frequently identified by the detectives is high levels of drug use – particularly amphetamines. Detectives' identification of amphetamines as amplifying violence is consistent with an extensive literature that links violence to amphetamine use (Boles & Miotto, 2003; Kosten & Singha, 1999). It has been suggested that the violence is more extreme because amphetamines have a longer duration of effect than other drugs such as alcohol and cocaine (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1998) and because after large doses of amphetamines, certain individuals may experience violent outbursts (Roth, 1994), with chronic use more closely related to violent behavior than with any other drug

(Boles & Miotto, 2003; McKetin et al., 2014). In addition to amphetamines, the detectives identified alcohol abuse as a factor in violence too, which is consistent with some of the literature on risk of violence (Harris, Rice, & Camilleri, 2004).

As previously mentioned, behaving impulsively and not thinking of the consequences of one's actions is also associated with psychopathy, and is consistent with a great deal of the literature that identifies impulsiveness as being a major personality factor associated with offending (e.g., Farrington & Welsh, 2007). Impulsive individuals attach more importance to the immediate gain (e.g., hurting someone who is annoying them, or frightening and intimidating victims) than long-term outcomes (e.g., being convicted; the impact on their employment), and this puts them at higher risk of committing a crime than those with lower impulsivity (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Impulsivity also appears reflected in the theme of 'high propensity for violence for little reason', in which the detectives suggested that violent responses are often unprovoked or disproportionate to the provocation.

With regard to the VRAG items of criminal history and failure of conditional release, the detectives identified several themes in this category – extensive offending histories, regularly committing crime and a wide range of offending beyond violence. In addition, pro-criminal attitudes were, arguably, identified by detectives saying that some offenders deliberately portrayed themselves as tough guys and were aggressive and uncooperative when interacting with the police and the justice system (for a discussion of pro-criminal attitudes as a risk factor, see Andrews & Bonta, 2010). The detectives also mentioned offending frequently whilst on bail, a topic of particular concern for the detectives as they felt that they had done their job in catching criminals only for the courts to immediately release them.

Dysfunctional family relationships, including with an intimate partner, was identified as

a factor, which maps onto VRAG items concerning separation from a biological parent and marital status, and is consistent with an extensive developmental criminology literature indicating the importance of stable family relationships in preventing criminal behavior (Farrington, 2007). Age at index offence was not mentioned by the detectives, although it was pointed out that many of the most violent offenders are older, indicating that they had persisted longer in their violence than their counterparts. Of course, another reason for this is that their offending may have taken place over a longer time period, which made them more memorable and gave them a greater opportunity to come to the attention of the police. Use of weapons was identified as a dangerousness theme; unsurprisingly, using weapons inflicts greater injuries and makes an offender more dangerous, and – whilst not included in the VRAG – this factor features in other risk-assessment tools (e.g., Kropp & Hart, 2000).

When detectives were asked how reoffending could be reduced and what barriers prevented them from reducing violence, one answer was given frequently: longer custodial sentences. Arguably longer sentences will incapacitate a high-risk offender and prevent him from harming the public, and may also allow for his criminogenic needs to be addressed – which in turn should reduce the risk of reoffending (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Indeed, longer sentences could include longer supervision in the community, including the monitoring of behavior and use of alcohol and drugs. Essentially, the implication of this is that violent offenders should be sentenced with consideration of their levels of risk with regard to violence. Of course, this is much easier said than done, as risk assessment is a far from an exact science (see, for example, Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick, & Lilienfeld, 2011) – particularly for police and judges who are not specially trained. The challenge is to identify those who are genuinely of high risk of continuing to be violent compared with the majority,

who will desist (Farrington, Ohlin, & Wilson, 1986).

Such a risk assessment might be useful as an intelligence and monitoring tool for prioritizing individuals that are in the community and likely to offend. This is the strategy for reducing the offending of dangerous violent offenders that was most frequently identified by the detectives, whose suggestions for preventing future violence focus on monitoring, intelligence and identifying serious violent offenders early in their criminal career. Potentially, adapting tools like the VRAG to also include intelligence could provide a framework for identifying high-risk offenders, which in turn could be useful for deciding how to prioritize offenders. The greatest limitation identified by the detectives is resourcing; they believe that they do not have enough resources to target everyone who is suspected of committing dangerous violent offences. Providing enough resources to target the most dangerous offenders may have the same solution; a risk-assessment tool could be used to prioritize the worst offenders and focus resources more effectively.

Whilst many risk factors that are well documented in the literature were mentioned by detectives, some were not. Mental illness is the most prominent oversight. For example, as well as being a VRAG item, in a recent review of the prevalence of severe mental illness in 33,588 people in prison worldwide, 3.6% of male offenders had been diagnosed with psychosis and 10.2% of male offenders had been diagnosed with depression (Fazel & Seewald, 2012). Of course, this does not include forensic mental health facilities, where the frequency of mental illness is much higher. The line between drug abuse and mental illness becomes blurred when one considers the use of cannabis and amphetamines, which have a complicated relationship with psychosis and violence (Green, Young, & Kavanagh, 2005; Topp, Degenhardt, Kaye, & Darke, 2002). It is possible that detectives are confusing mental illness

with drug use, or identifying drug use whilst being unaware of comorbid mental illnesses. This is an important point, and it seems that the detectives might need more training to recognize and respond to mental illness. Indeed, it may reflect a bias that has been found in detectives previously. Farsing and Ask (2015) found that detectives are much more likely to think of criminal reasons for behavior than non-criminal one. With regard to violent behavior, it is possible that they are more likely to think of factors that increase responsibility than those which may reduce responsibility, like mental illness.

Finally, the VRAG item 'school problems' was not identified. There might be two reasons for this: first, problems at school may seem minor compared with the more serious offences which the most dangerous violent offenders are now committing; second, police have no data concerning school or indeed offending as a juvenile (in this jurisdiction at least) because the records are erased at 17 years of age. However, knowledge of juvenile offending would seem to be important for predicting who will become future serious offenders.

Caveats do need to be applied to these findings. The detectives' perceptions may be different from reality, and there is some evidence to suggest that detectives' perceptions of offenders are biased (e.g., M. R. Smith & Alpert, 2007). Further, the characteristics of these violent offenders may not be the same in other jurisdictions, suggesting that offender targeting needs to be adapted for different areas.

Overall, a picture emerges of violent offenders that is broadly consistent with the literature on risk of violence. The most frequently identified themes are being a heavy drug user (particularly of amphetamines), being impulsive, and not thinking of the consequences of one's actions. The next three themes mentioned by half of the detectives are: extensive and regular offending, breadth of offending, and a desire to portray oneself as a 'tough guy'. The implication of this is

that risk-assessment tools are relevant to detectives, who might benefit from training in these tools – especially trainee detectives who need to gain experience so that they are better able to identify the characteristics associated with the most violent offenders. The omission of mental illness as a factor is concerning given the prevalence of mental illness in offenders. This suggests that detectives might benefit from education which provides a greater understanding of mental illness and its influence on offending. Finally, the detectives expressed a desire to have a better way of knowing who the most violent offenders in the community are. Identifying and communicating this risk to detectives would help here. Taken as a whole, this research suggests that detectives' knowledge of violent offenders can help to shed further light on the current understanding of violent offending, and that detectives need to know more about certain risk factors associated with offending – particularly mental illness. This information exchange between detectives and researchers of criminal behavior can potentially contribute to reducing the rates of violent offending.

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