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## **Psychological Evaluations for Firearm Ownership: Legal Foundations, Practice Considerations, and a Conceptual Framework**

Gianni Pirelli, Hayley Wechsler, and Robert J. Cramer

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# Psychological Evaluations for Firearm Ownership: Legal Foundations, Practice Considerations, and a Conceptual Framework

Gianni Pirelli

Independent Practice, Verona, New Jersey

Hayley Wechsler

Sam Houston State University

Robert J. Cramer

University of Alabama

In the present article, we present a framework we developed for practitioners conducting psychological evaluations in civilian firearm ownership matters. These evaluations should be grounded in forensic psychology principles and those specifically related to forensic mental health assessment (FMHA); however, they represent a unique class of assessments with a particular set of considerations. The framework we developed is based on a number of empirically driven considerations and domains that reflect the contemporary bodies of literature associated with firearm-related issues in the context of mental illness, violence and suicide risk assessment, and FMHA more generally. We also present considerations for research and practice.

*Keywords:* firearms, gun violence, forensic mental health assessment, forensic psychology, forensic evaluation

Violence is one of the leading causes of death and injury in the United States, resulting in an estimated 50,000 deaths per year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013), and death by firearm is one of the main sources of such violence (Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010). Furthermore, approximately 30 firearm-related homicides and 53 suicides are committed daily in the United States (CDC, 2013). According to the CDC, the rate of

firearm-related deaths in the United States is significantly higher than that of 25 other industrialized countries (i.e., 1.66 per 100,000 per year vs. 0.14 per 100,000 in other countries). Although some firearm-related deaths may be preventable, such can be quite challenging (Morabia & Costanza, 2012). Therefore, there is an ongoing need for strengthened legislation and evidence-based policies to prevent gun violence (Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy, 2013). Psychological evaluation represents a necessary component of such efforts.

Psychologists are often retained to assess firearm those who are flagged as a result of their mental health and/or criminal history, or to evaluate those seeking reinstatement of their firearms subsequent to a revocation. In the present article, we provide considerations for practitioners conducting psychological evaluations for civilian firearm ownership based on our delineation of relevant factors in the empirical literature. Specifically, we derived these considerations from existing bodies of literature associated with firearm-related violence as it relates to mental illness, violence and suicide risk assessment, and forensic mental health assessment (FMHA).

## Firearms, Violence, and Suicide

Having a firearm in the home is associated with an increased risk of firearm-related homicide and suicide (Dahlberg, Ikeda, & Kresnow, 2004); however, the relationship between mental illness and violence and suicide is nuanced and complex (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013a). Such issues are typically brought to the forefront following highly publicized tragic events, many of which have common denominators. Mass shootings, such as the infamous events at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Colorado movie theater, the Tucson, Arizona, constituents meeting, and the school shooting at Virginia Tech, may

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GIANNI PIRELLI received his PhD in clinical-forensic psychology from The Graduate Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He is a Licensed Psychologist in New Jersey (#4975) and New York (#019418). Dr. Pirelli maintains a private practice in clinical and forensic psychology, particularly in the area of forensic mental health assessment, whereby he conducts a wide range of clinical and clinical-forensic evaluations in a variety of criminal and civil legal matters (<http://www.gpirelli.com>). His primary areas of research include forensic mental health assessment, and ethics and standards of practice in forensic psychology.

HAYLEY WECHSLER received her MA in forensic psychology from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and is currently a fourth-year doctoral student at Sam Houston State University, where she will eventually receive her PhD in clinical psychology. Her areas of professional interest include forensic evaluation, firearm ownership, wrongful convictions, scientific evidence in the courtroom, and judicial decision making.

ROBERT J. CRAMER received his PhD from the University of Alabama in the Psychology & Law concentration of the clinical psychology doctoral program. He is currently a faculty member at the University of Alabama in the Department of Criminal Justice and Institute for Social Science Research. His primary areas of research are those related to personality, diversity, and law, namely, hate crimes and sexual minority issues, suicide, and witness testimony/trial consultation.

CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE should be addressed to Gianni Pirelli, 80 Pompton Avenue, Ste. 204, Verona, NJ 07044. E-mail: [gianni.pirelli@gmail.com](mailto:gianni.pirelli@gmail.com)

come to mind. The aforementioned incidents all involved a mentally ill shooter using firearms with large-capacity magazines (Barry, McGinty, Vernick, & Webster, 2013). Furthermore, perpetrators such as Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, were diagnosed with specific mental health problems (e.g., depression and anxiety), but received scant or no treatment for such, and many shooters responsible for mass casualties were socially isolative and bullied in school (Jenson, 2007).

The media attention surrounding these types of cases likely contributes to the perception that persons diagnosed with mental illnesses are dangerous (Corrigan et al., 2003). People diagnosed with mental illnesses may experience a wide range of mental health problems—and many of them already face social stigma and are not violent (Gostin & Record, 2011). In fact, only 3% to 5% of violent acts are attributable to individuals diagnosed with serious mental illnesses (Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010). Furthermore, most of those violent acts do not involve firearms (Monahan et al., 2001). These realities suggest that a perception of mental illness equating to dangerousness would be substantially exaggerated (Pescosolido, Monahan, Link, Stueve, & Kikuzawa, 1999). A history of engaging in violent crime is often considered the strongest predictor of future violence, even among persons diagnosed with mental disorders (Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010). Although having such a history would disqualify an individual from purchasing or owning a firearm legally, state and federal legislation in the United States has been increasingly aimed at restricting people diagnosed with mental illnesses, including substance use disorders, from purchasing, possessing, registering, obtaining a license for, retaining, or carrying firearms (Norris, Price, Gutheil, & Reid, 2006; Price & Norris, 2008).

Although perpetrators of gun violence who target others are more prominent in the media and gun control debates, suicide is arguably more relevant, or at least equally as important, to address in the context of mental illness and firearm safety. Firearms have been found to be 11 times more likely to be used in the commission of a completed or attempted suicide than to be used in self-defense (Kellermann, Somes, Rivara, Lee, & Banton, 1998). Moreover, suicide is the leading type of firearm-related death, and it accounts for approximately 61% of all firearm fatalities in the United States (CDC, 2013). In 2011, approximately 20,000 people committed suicide with a firearm, which is nearly double the amount of firearm-related homicide deaths in that year (Hoyert & Xu, 2012). According to Miller, Lippmann, Azrael, and Hemenway (2007), the 15 states with the highest rates of firearm ownership had almost twice the amount of suicides than the six states with the lowest ownership rates.

The public generally supports limiting access to firearms among certain populations, including children, violent criminals, and mentally ill persons (Gostin & Record, 2011), and contemporary legislation regarding firearm access in the United States has focused on classifying persons deemed to be at high risk of engaging in violence to themselves or to others (Price & Norris, 2008). The focus on dangerous individuals, as opposed to dangerous weapons, supports the notion that “Guns do not kill people, people kill people” (Gostin & Record, 2011); however, determining which persons diagnosed with mental illnesses possess the propensity to misuse firearms is a far more complex task than one might assume. As Cornell and Guerra suggested in the APA’s (2013a) Panel of Experts report, “rather than debate whether ‘people’ kill people or

‘guns’ kill people, a reasonable approach to facilitate prevention is that ‘people with guns kill people’” (p. 3). We agree, but would further propose, “Certain people with guns kill people.”

### Firearm Regulation in the United States

The U.S. government began regulating firearms in the early 20th century. For instance, the Gun Control Act of 1968 prohibits certain groups of people from purchasing firearms (Gostin & Record, 2011). Restricted categories include individuals addicted to controlled substances, those involuntarily committed to a mental institution or adjudicated as incompetent or dangerous, and insanity acquittees. Policymakers have also attempted to restrict the access of firearms to perpetrators of domestic violence (Frattaroli & Vernick, 2006). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994/2005) prohibited those subjected to restraining orders from purchasing or possessing firearms. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Lautenberg Amendment into law (Frattaroli & Vernick, 2006), thereby prohibiting individuals convicted Amendments of misdemeanor domestic violence assaults from accessing guns (Gun Ban for Individuals Convicted of a Misdemeanor Crime of Domestic Violence, 2005).

Permanent provisions of the Brady Bill (1993), which mandated the utilization of background checks, established the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). The NICS was introduced to establish a definitive list of prohibited individuals to be used by licensed firearm dealers (Gostin & Record, 2011; Price & Norris, 2008); however, some are never entered into the database. This is likely partially the result of a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1997, which held that Congress cannot require states to report to the Federal Bureau of Investigation when prohibited persons attempt to purchase firearms (Gostin & Record, 2011; *Printz v. United States*, 1997). As a result, participation among states has remained voluntary (Price & Norris, 2008) and reporting is frequently incomplete and/or inaccurate (Gostin & Record, 2011). According to Wasilewski and Olson (2013), only 27 states require pertinent mental health information to be reported to the NICS, and the U.S. General Accounting Office has estimated that it contains mental health data on less than two million people (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2000).

Incomplete data represents a problem associated with mental health and felony disqualifications (Price & Norris, 2008). It has been contended that the Virginia Tech shooting may have been prevented if the NICS had been updated and utilized the way it was intended (Luo, 2007). Seung Hui Cho was responsible for killing 32 people and injuring 17 others before killing himself (Mayors Against Illegal Guns, 2011). He was previously deemed mentally ill by a judge, which would have prevented him from purchasing firearms if it had been reported to the NICS. It was not reported and, as a result, Cho was able to pass several background checks, thereby allowing him to purchase the firearms he used in the mass shooting. After the Virginia Tech tragedy, the federal government responded with a new piece of legislation affecting the purchase of firearms by persons with a history of mental illness (Price & Norris, 2008): the NICS Improvement Act (2007). The act provided states with financial incentives to release relevant records, including mental health records, to the NICS.

Many states have also implemented their own databases that provide information regarding local restrictions on firearm access

(Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010); however, state laws differ in their disqualifying criteria related to mental illness, which corresponds to variability in reporting practices (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2008; Mayors Against Illegal Guns, 2011). Furthermore, states vary in the types of restrictions they impose, the management of otherwise confidential medical records, and their appeal processes (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2008). States also differ with regard to their civil commitment statutes and associated legal processes, further obscuring whether or not certain procedures fall under state or federal laws' definitions of disqualifying mental health adjudications (Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010).

Policies are already in place to repossess guns from those prohibited to have them. Court-ordered removal laws provide states with the ability to enforce federal laws pertaining to gun possession, and law enforcement removal laws extend the Lautenberg Amendment by allowing the temporary removal of guns in the absence of a conviction. However, after examining the gun removal laws in all 50 states, Frattaroli and Vernick (2006) concluded, "Among similar state laws, there is the potential for wide variation. This variation affects the substance of the laws in ways that may affect the implementation and ultimate impact of the laws" (p. 308).

In sum, Gostin and Record (2011) contended that prohibiting access to guns for certain categories of people, particularly people with mental illness, has proved to be difficult and largely ineffective. Specifically, they opined that categorical firearm restrictions have reduced neither homicide nor suicide rates. Nevertheless, the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings seem to encourage the state regulation of dangerous persons rather than of potentially dangerous firearms, and, therefore, policymakers are charged with the complicated task of finding precise ways to identify who is unlikely to use firearms appropriately. Such is consistent with the scope of forensic evaluations in this context.

### Existing Firearm Ownership Assessment Procedures

FMHA refers to the process mental health professionals engage in when conducting evaluations for the courts or for attorneys who have retained them (Heilbrun, 2001). Standards of care in FMHA are a necessary advancement intended to provide forensic evaluators with recognized practice guidelines (Goldstein, 2007), but they are not intended to provide evaluators with a forensic "cook-book." Nevertheless, numerous sources are available to practitioners that outline general forensic psychology practice standards, guidelines, and recommendations, or to forensic psychology, more generally, and include sections devoted to FMHA. Such contemporary and seminal resources include, but are not limited to, Goldstein (2001, 2007); Greenberg and Shuman (1997, 2007); Heilbrun (2001); Heilbrun, DeMatteo, Brooks Holliday, and LaDuke (2014); Heilbrun, Grisso, and Goldstein (2009); Lieberman and Krauss (2009); Melton et al. (2007); Otto, DeMeier, and Boccaccini (2014); and Weiner and Otto (2013). In addition, the APA's (2002, 2010) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology (APA, 2013b) offer guidance to forensic practitioners.

Nonetheless, it is incumbent on professionals engaging in practice and/or research in the field of FMHA to develop and maintain a high level of competence, which includes having a fundamental understanding and appreciation of the theoretical and practical

underpinnings of various types of evaluations. One specific type of evaluation is that pertaining to civilian firearm ownership.

Federal law includes a "mental health prohibitor," which prevents the sale or possession of firearms to individuals "adjudicated as a mental defective [*sic*]" or "committed to any mental institution" (18 U.S.C. § 922(d)(4)). Furthermore, some states are considering bills requiring psychological evaluations as a prerequisite to obtaining a firearms purchaser permit (e.g., New Jersey's A843, 2014–2015). The Obama Administration has also begun to address this issue via initial proposals to amend the existing language used in federal legal statutes in an effort to strengthen federal background checks for gun purchasers, with a particular focus on limiting firearm access for those with mental health problems (Pace, 2014). General criminal background checks are currently conducted on those applying for firearms identification cards, permits, and handguns. The application includes general mental health questions such as, "Have you ever been declared incompetent or involuntarily committed to a mental institution?" These inquiries are cursory and may serve solely as a screening mechanism in the future.

Nevertheless, psychological evaluations are already sought in certain cases involving firearms. For instance, they may be requested when a firearm is removed from someone's possession and/or when one's permit is revoked. Such evaluations are akin to fitness-for-duty evaluations in the context of assessing law enforcement personnel subsequent to a critical incident or when questions regarding an officer's mental health arise. These assessments would closely parallel violence risk assessments. The referral questions and ultimate issues involved in evaluating a civilian as part of a firearm-specific matter are qualitatively different, however.

As Melamed, Bauer, Kalian, Rosca, and Mester (2011) suggested in their article addressing the issuance of firearms licenses in Israel, conducting an assessment of risk that incorporates formal violence risk assessment measures is an important step in the licensing process. Gold (2013) provided further support in this regard in her editorial regarding psychiatrists' role in initiatives aimed at the reduction of gun violence. Furthermore, the APA's (2013a) Panel of Experts Report consists of recommendations for policy and for gun violence prevention at the community and individual levels, including the need to conduct behavioral threat assessments. Assessing violence and suicide risk are essential elements of an effective gun violence prevention initiative; however, such represents only one aspect of a firearm ownership evaluation.

As noted, there are important practical implications associated with conducting psychological evaluations as part of an initial firearm application process compared with those conducted when someone is seeking a reissuance subsequent to a revocation of their permits and/or firearms. Although an applicant's violence risk is one ultimate concern for those tasked with issuing firearms, evaluations conducted during the initial application process are often requested for reasons other than the presence of violent histories. Instead, evaluations may be requested because an applicant has a mental health history, a substance use history, or was involved in a domestic dispute in which the presence of violence is being contested. In these types of cases, most formal violence risk assessment measures could not be incorporated into the firearm evaluations when no violent referral incident or index offense has

been committed, because the items are generally based on referral incidents that meet the instruments' definitions of violence.

For instance, in the Historical, Clinical, Risk Management-20, Version 3 (HCR-20 V3; Douglas, Hart, Webster, & Belfrage, 2013) manual, violence is defined as "actual, attempted, of threatened infliction of bodily of another person" (p. 2). On the Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 2006), the outcome variable is "any new criminal charge for a violent offense," such as "homicide, attempted homicide, kidnapping, forcible confinement, wounding, assault causing bodily harm, and rape," as well as armed robbery and some sexual assaults (Quinsey et al., 2006, p. 156). The VRAG would be inappropriate for use because items are based on a violent (index) offense, and even if the HCR-20 V3 were used as a guide, the following items would likely have limited applicability in this context: Violence (H1), Other Antisocial Behavior (H2), Insight (C1), Violent Ideation or Intent (C2), Treatment or Supervision Response (C5), Professional Services and Plans (R1), and Treatment or Supervision Response (R4).

Furthermore, it is important to note that these measures were neither developed for, nor validated on, samples of civilian firearm applicants or those seeking reinstatement. The HCR-20 V3 was validated on forensic and civil psychiatric patients, and on criminal offenders in numerous studies across a wide range of countries (see Douglas et al., 2013, pp. 24–28). It has been subsequently studied in a myriad of other settings and samples, but not civilian firearm applicants per se. Such is also the case with the VRAG, which was developed to predict "violent recidivism for serious offenders in general" (Quinsey et al., 2006, p. 144). As such, the measure was validated on a heterogeneous sample of criminal offenders, and as the authors articulated, even "offenders who have committed only minor offenses, and citizens who committed no offenses, were not the population of interest" (p. 144).

In addition, although one's risk of engaging in future harm to self or others is a concern that underlies most, if not all, evaluations pertaining to firearms, the ultimate issues differ as a result of the nature of the referral. In a fitness-for-duty evaluation, for example, violence and/or suicide risk are frequently the most common referral questions; however, the ultimate issue pertains to a person's ability to return to his or her employment given that possessing a firearm is a job requirement. Firearm ownership is a means to an end in such contexts. In a civilian firearm reinstatement evaluation, the ultimate issue pertains to a person's risk of engaging in future violence in light of the incident or concern that led to the revocation (e.g., removing a firearm from the home subsequent to a domestic violence incident). In such evaluations, the appropriateness of returning a firearm or reinstating a license to someone is considered in the context of an identifiable concern or incident, which would typically not be the case in civilian firearm ownership evaluations for initial applicants.

Risk of future violence to self or others is a relevant consideration in evaluations for applicants, but other factors associated with firearm ownership may be just as salient in the absence of a history of engaging in harm to self or others (e.g., the reason for seeking the license, experience with and plans for the use and storage of the firearm, plans for developing increased competence and continuing education regarding firearm use and safety). Although these firearm-specific factors are important to consider in fitness-for-duty and reinstatement evaluations, they are more likely to be overshadowed by the referral incident in those matters. In

evaluations of new applicants, however, these factors may be as equally as important to consider as those typically accounted for in violence and suicide risk assessments.

## Proposed Firearm Ownership Assessment Framework

We are presenting psychological evaluations for firearm ownership as a unique area of FMHA, comprised of two main types of civilian firearm ownership assessments: (a) evaluations of new applicants referred subsequent to the discovery of identified concerns during standard application procedures, including routine background checks; and (b) evaluations of those seeking reinstatement of their firearm permits, licenses, and/or firearms subsequent to their revocation. The evaluation framework we have developed is recommended for use with civilians in both of the aforementioned referral groups. Certain states may adopt legislation requiring all new applicants to partake in psychological assessments in the future, and the evaluation framework we have developed should possess utility in those contexts as well.

We developed this assessment framework to be employed via a semistructured interview, consistent with the structured professional judgment (SPJ) approach of psychological assessment. From an SPJ approach, data are generated and considered within the context of empirically supported factors and associated guidelines. These guidelines are represented by items or domains to consider. From an SPJ-based approach, evaluators should consider all items as potentially equally as important, such that concerns on any one domain may raise concerns about examinees' appropriateness to interface with firearms. Furthermore, the domains are not scored or aggregated as they are in actuarial assessment models. Rather, the presence of a concern(s) within a domain is noted and delineated, and its relevance is considered in the context of the overarching assessment. Evaluators would likely focus their attention on certain domains over others depending on the referral question. For example, the violence and suicide risk domains would likely have more salience in a reinstatement evaluation compared with that of an initial applicant. This approach provides evaluators with such flexibility.

The 10 domains we have included in our firearm ownership assessment framework represent those that have been empirically found to be associated with violence, suicide, and firearm-related considerations more generally. They are related to both risk and prevention in this context. To identify these domains, we consulted the FMHA best practices literature as well as that which pertains to firearm-related violence (e.g., the APA's Panel of Experts Report; APA, 2013a). Additional references are included in the sections that follow.

### (1) Reason for Seeking Licensure/Reinstatement

Evaluators must distinguish between initial applicants and those seeking reinstatement. Presumably, those seeking reinstatement have lost their permit and/or firearm as a result of a particular circumstance, which would likely be the primary focus of the evaluation. It is essential to inquire about the examinees' reasons for seeking ownership of a firearm. Although evaluators should not impose judgment regarding what is justifiable from a moral standpoint, the nature of the questions for those seeking a firearm for hunting purposes would likely differ from those seeking home

protection. Kleck, Kovandzic, Saber, and Hauser (2011) found that perceived risk of criminal victimization, as well as past robbery victimization, increases the probability of obtaining a firearm for self-protection. As such, perceived risk, proposed as a powerful motivator of behavior, is suggested as a stronger source of motivation to obtain a firearm than simply the pleasure derived from sporting uses of firearms. Therefore, the motivation behind obtaining a firearm would likely impact the scope of the information sought in this regard. In addition, evaluators should also inquire about the type of firearm being sought, given that handguns are more likely than long guns to be involved in homicides, for example. It is important to note, however, that evaluators who choose to practice in this area should familiarize themselves with language and considerations associated with firearms. For example, it is important to understand what is meant by "semiautomatic" and how much ammunition is typically contained in a single box. Without such context and perspective, evaluators' biases may lead to ill-informed opinions.

## **(2) Experience With and Exposure to Firearms**

Cultural considerations are particularly important in forensic work, including when conducting firearm evaluations. People's experience with and exposure to firearms is likely to have impacted the way in which they perceive firearms. For example, some people grew up in environments wherein hunting was a significant part of their lives. Others were raised in military families or those with law enforcement personnel. Some may have been exposed to firearms in the context of street gangs or the like. Others still may not have had previous exposure to firearms at all. Hoskin (2011) found that counties in the United States with higher household firearm prevalence tended to also have higher rates of violent crime, including homicide and aggravated assault, which suggests that exposure to firearms, or at least increased access to them, is associated with greater likelihood of violence. Furthermore, Garbarino, Bradshaw, and Vorrasi (2002) asserted that "exposure to gun violence also can desensitize youth to the effects of violence and increase the likelihood that they will use violence as a means of resolving problems or expressing emotions" (p. 74). Nevertheless, applicants should not be judged solely by their experience with and exposure to firearms, but also on their perspectives, which have likely been shaped by such. Individual perspectives influence violence risk. Researchers have found that antisocial and proviolent attitudes, as well as social-cognitive distortions, such as misperceiving hostile and/or aggressive intent or justification of criminal acts, can increase violence risk (e.g., Borum & Verhaagen, 2006; Dodge & Pettit, 2003). As a result, factors in this domain should be considered in the context of the individual's experience with and exposure to firearms, as well as his or her cultural and individual perspectives on violence and firearm usage.

## **(3) Intent for Use and Storage and (4) Knowledge of Firearm Safety Precautions**

It is beneficial to assess the extent to which a person plans to uphold responsible firearm practices. Consistent with the National Rifle Association's (NRA) Gun Safety Rules, it is especially important to evaluate examinees' specific plans, such as where the

firearm and the ammunition will be kept, how it will be maintained, the anticipated frequency of use, and who will have access to it. Other general considerations may also be relevant in a particular case, such as how children in the home will be introduced to and educated about the presence of a firearm, or if anyone with any notable risk factors (e.g., history of violence, serious mental illness, and/or substance abuse) may have access to it. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics' Bright Future Pocket Guide (Hagan, Shawn, & Duncan, 2008), which includes counsel to parents who keep firearms in the home, access to guns in the home increases the risk for suicide among adolescents. However, it has been contended that safe storage and preventing access to firearms reduces up to 70% of injuries (APA, 2013a). Therefore, considerations regarding examinees' future plans related to the firearms, including who may have access to them, may provide useful information in firearm evaluations.

## **(5) Firearm Competence and Plans for Continued Education**

Although firearm owners with more than minimal competence in the use and management of firearms may be desirable, considerations in this regard are largely dependent on intended use. For example, an applicant who intends on using a shotgun to hunt daily during a particular season would likely be expected to have a relatively high level of competence using that type of firearm compared with the person seeking a handgun for home protection only and, as such, will likely never fire it outside of a practice range. Such is not to say that competence is not essential in all cases, but rather its importance is relative. In this regard, evaluators should review collateral documentation if available and applicable, such as any firearm-related written or physical tests taken by examinees. Some states require firearms training prior to purchasing or acquiring a handgun. For example, California's Basic Firearms Safety Certificate Program require individuals possess a Handgun Safety Certificate, which is acquired by passing a written test on firearm safety as well as successfully performing a safe handling demonstration (State of California Department of Justice Office of the Attorney General, 2014). Furthermore, it may be useful to assess the examinees' plans for seeking continued education. Evaluators may inquire about their plans for future firearm-related education, including frequenting shooting ranges, taking formal classes, learning more from family or friends, or via reading-related materials. Of note is that the NRA provides access to an online database of education and training courses held throughout the country (NRA, 2012). Therefore, evaluators should inquire regarding whether examinees have previously participated in such courses and assess their potential interest or desire to participate, if necessary, in these courses in the future.

## **(6) Knowledge of and Perspectives on Local Firearm Regulations**

Firearm regulation in the United States operates within two independent regulatory schemes (Harwood, 2002); therefore, prospective and current firearm owners should be adequately versed in federal and state law. Of course, laws can be complex and many in number, and therefore the expectation would not be to have an attorney's level of knowledge per se. However, evaluators would

assess if examinees have an awareness and understanding of the most basic and critical laws; for instance, those related to carry and storage. This consideration may have already been addressed in cases whereby an applicant has passed a written and/or hands-on examination as part of the application or reinstatement process. Nevertheless, it would behoove evaluators practicing in this area to also become familiar with relevant firearm laws in order to adequately assess examinees' levels of knowledge. In addition, it can be useful to seek examinees' perspectives on firearm laws and regulations and not simply their knowledge of such. Evaluators would not want to make opinions and/or judgments based on examinees' positions on firearm regulations and laws per se, but rather on their reasoning abilities when discussing such.

### (7) Violence Risk and (8) Suicide Risk

Although most people suffering from mental illnesses are not dangerous, decades of research have indicated that evaluators are moderately able to identify individuals who are likely to commit serious acts of violence via conducting risk assessments (APA, 2013a). Although an assessment of violence and suicide risk represents only one aspect of a firearm ownership evaluation, it is an essential component. The reasons for such are axiomatic and therefore will not be detailed here, but evaluators must decide how they will formally assess risk. As previously noted, most formal violence risk assessment measures will not be usable. Formal measures are more likely to be utilized in their intended and standardized manner in reinstatement evaluations. Nevertheless, a measure such as the HCR-20 V3 may be used as an aide-memoir because it includes empirically based items related to violence risk. Suicide risk assessment measures would likely be more readily usable across contexts because they do not necessarily require the occurrence of a self-injurious event. Regardless of the measure selected, personal and situational risk factors should be considered in concert with one another, in the context of an idiographic assessment. This is imperative considering empirical research has shown that acts of targeted violence are often carried out by individuals who are experiencing personal problems accompanied with feelings of desperation (APA, 2013a). In sum, assessment of violence and suicide risk is necessary, but not sufficient.

### (9) Mental Health and (10) Substance Use

A significant number of people meet criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In fact, 46.4% of those in the United States will meet criteria for a diagnosable mental illness in their lifetime (Kessler et al., 2005). This percentage was hypothesized to increase as a result of the publication of the *DSM-5* (Rosenberg, 2013). As such, the label "mental illness" is overly inclusive and, arguably, too general to use as an exclusionary criteria for firearm applicants, given that many, if not most, mental illnesses are not related to the misuse of firearms. Terms incorporated in certain legal statutes, such as "mental defect," lack utility for the same aforementioned reason. More specific standards, such as those prohibiting individuals who have been found incompetent or involuntarily committed to a mental institution, may be more pertinent, but can also fall short in this regard. Nevertheless, some mental health conditions are asso-

ciated with higher rates of violence and suicide. For instance, depressive and bipolar disorders are more closely associated with suicide than other psychiatric disorders, and borderline personality disorder is often associated with self-injurious behavior. Disruptive, impulse-control, and conduct disorders, including antisocial personality disorder, are typically associated with criminal behavior, which may include violence. Furthermore, incidents of violence and suicide often involve drugs and/or alcohol, which are associated with those who meet criteria for substance-related and addictive disorders. A functional assessment of mental health conditions must be conducted at the symptom level, given the heterogeneity within diagnostic categories. Again, evaluators should strive to consider each individual's symptom presentation in combination with other risk factors, and across diagnostic categories as well. Recognition of comorbid illnesses and other historical information is pertinent given that past research that has shown that mentally ill individuals with comorbid substance use disorders and histories of violence are more likely to be violent than others who do not meet these criteria, even if they were recently discharged from an institution (Wiebe, 2003). Nevertheless, a relatively low percentage of people commit acts of violence or suicide, even within the aforementioned diagnostic groups. Furthermore, firearm-related injuries and/or deaths may occur in the absence of a bona fide psychiatric disorder. The task for evaluators is to assess the examinees' risk levels for engaging in firearm-related violence and/or self-injurious behavior, given their mental health symptoms and overall psychological functioning. Traditional psychological assessment instruments, such as personality assessment inventories or intelligence tests, may be useful to incorporate in evaluations if evaluators believe constructs assessed by such measures may serve as moderating factors to consider in the appropriateness of examinees' firearm ownership. Moreover, personality assessment measures typically include validity scales, which can be useful in assessing response style—a consideration relevant to all forensic evaluations.

### Future Directions

A number of high-profile cases involving firearms have occurred over the past decade, which has led to governmental efforts to address firearm-related violence. Much of the focus of such efforts has been on restricting certain types of firearms (e.g., those with large capacity magazines) as well as certain types of people (e.g., those diagnosed with mental illnesses), despite the fact that most firearm-related violence is not associated with the presence of a psychiatric disorder per se. State and national laws are being revised, however, to include more specific language pertaining to those with mental health conditions and/or histories. Furthermore, a number of experts and professional groups have developed position statements and guides to inform practice, research, and policy. Such efforts represent important and necessary steps in the national effort to reduce and, ultimately, prevent firearm-related suicide and violence; however, civilian firearm ownership evaluations require perspective from a broader lens.

We have developed a framework that includes the consideration of 10 domains when conducting civilian firearm evaluations. Two domains address violence and suicide risk, two pertain to mental health and substance use concerns, and six represent firearm-specific factors. Practitioners may also find these domains useful to include in evaluations of applicants for positions requiring

firearms, such as armored car drivers and security guards. With the appropriate modifications, these domains may be of additional use to consider in the context of evaluations with law enforcement personnel as well, such as in fitness-for-duty evaluations.

Research is needed in this area. There is a relatively extensive body of research and commentary in the area of gun violence and prevention; however, there is an absence of such in the more specific area of civilian firearm ownership applications and revocations. It will be necessary to empirically investigate the utility of the 10-domain assessment approach we have developed, both by seeking the perspectives of experts and professionals practicing in this area, and by analyzing the relationship between the domains and relevant outcome variables. Specifically, we encourage researchers to investigate outcomes such as negligence in the handling, storage, and use of firearms, and not only violence- and suicide-related outcomes. Examples may include accounting for injuries and legal infractions involving firearms (e.g., improper licenses, failure to renew, improper storage and use). It is also essential to investigate the context of firearm-related problems, that is, to explore the situations wherein firearm-related violence and associated problems may occur (e.g., hunting and other carrying scenarios, domestic violence), and not simply the diagnostic categories or “profiles” of those who perpetrate gun violence.

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