



Elder Abuse Decision Support System: Field test outcomes, abuse measure validation, and lessons learned

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ABSTRACT

The Elder Abuse Decision Support System was designed to meet the critical need for improved methods for assessment and substantiation of elder mistreatment, using a web-based system with standardized measures. Six Illinois agencies participated in the field test. One-year pre/post analyses assessed substantiation results, using Illinois' standard investigation procedure as a comparison. Pre/post acceptability was assessed with caseworkers in focus groups with adult protective service staff. Validity of measures was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and receiver operator characteristic curve analyses with final substantiation decision as a criterion. Increased substantiation of abuse was found. Regarding acceptability, the two systems were found to have differing strengths and weaknesses. Outcome measures had high validity estimates, while focus groups indicated directions for improvement. This study was a successful proof of concept that data collected in the field would be useful for clinical purposes as well as for research.

KEYWORDS

Adult protective services; decision support system; measurement; substantiation decision; user acceptability

Introduction

With prevailing aging trends the problem of elder mistreatment is escalating, and abuse reports have increased by as much as 24% (National Adult Protective Services Association, 2009). Estimates are that 1 in 10 older adults has experienced some form of elder mistreatment (Dong & Simon, 2011), while underreporting remains high (Beach et al., 2010; Lachs, 2011). Yet, across the country, adult protective services (APS) budgets and support services have been cut. One result of chronic underfunding is that both APS research and practice suffer from lack of a solid knowledge base, evidence-based tools, and identification of best practices (Mixson, 2010; Mosqueda et al., 2016; Sommerfeld, Henderson, Snider, & Aarons, 2014). In addition, there has been scant research to address assessment, reporting,

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and intervention that is statewide or potentially national in scope (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013). To ensure that the effects of ongoing budgetary constraints are minimized, improved efficiency and quality of assessment along with user-friendly reporting and treatment planning are urgently needed, including outcome measures appropriate for both research and clinical use (National Academies Committee on National Statistics, 2010).

To address these issues, the Elder Abuse Decision Support System (EADSS) was designed and developed with funding from the National Institute of Justice (Conrad & Iris, 2015; Conrad, Iris, Riley, Mensah, & Mazza, 2013). The purposes of the EADSS were to (1) facilitate computer-assisted assessment of abuse, neglect, and exploitation allegations in order to standardize substantiation decision making, (2) provide user-friendly scoring and reporting, and (3) test measures of the five elder abuse subtypes (physical, psychological/emotional, neglect, financial, sexual) as well as measures of victim and abuser risk. The resulting reports and databases that EADSS generates could be used to monitor casework and track outcomes more effectively as well as compute agency and system-wide statistics useful in evaluation, planning, and research. However, until the current project, the EADSS had not been implemented or tested in actual elder abuse investigation and intervention programs.

Objectives

This article (1) describes implementation of the EADSS as an investigation system where successful implementation would be seen as proof of concept; (2) determines the efficacy of the EADSS for improving individual assessment by examining substantiation rates for each type of abuse and hybrid abuse via comparison to standard protocols used in Illinois, with six agencies serving as a test bed; and (3) estimates the criterion/predictive validity of the EADSS abuse measures listed above (excluding sexual due to scarcity of data) using the final substantiation decision as the criterion. To better interpret results, focus groups were conducted that informed a discussion of the challenges faced in implementing a decision support system into existing practice and the possible effects of programmatic changes on the outcomes of the study.

Significance

This is the first time a decision support system has been tested empirically in the field of elder abuse using a pretest/posttest comparison. It is also the first time that empirically developed measures of types of elder abuse have been used in field investigations and their validity tested against the final substantiation decisions made in those cases.