Risk Need Responsivity Guided Screening of Intellectual Disability in Police Custody

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Abstract

People with intellectual disability are overrepresented in police incarceration and have increased susceptibility to procedural injustice, a lack of awareness of legal rights, and do not have proper custodial decisions. Nonetheless, the systematic identification of ID at the point of contact with the police is unstable and unstructured. This research will assess the usefulness of a Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR)-based screening system for identifying intellectual disability at an early stage within a police custody environment. A cross-sectional screening study was done at three urban police custody units with a sample of 312 detainees (mean age = 29.4 years; 18.6% female). Trained custody officers administered a short RN-informed screening instrument that included cognitive, adaptive, and communication measures and compared them to a standardised clinical measure as the reference standard. Sensitivity, specificity, and predictive values, as well as indicators of custody outcome, were used to assess screening performance. The screening conducted by RNR showed 54 people (17.3 %) who might have an intellectual disability. The tool had a sensitivity of 0.84 and a specificity of 0.89 compared with clinical assessment, with positive and negative predictive values of 0.76 and 0.93, respectively. The people detected at the initial screening had a higher likelihood of having the relevant procedural modifications (68.5% vs. 21.4%; $p < 0.001$) and a lower risk of extended detention lasting over 24 hours (12.9% vs. 27.6%). The results imply that applying the principles of RNR to ID screening during police custody is not only possible but also efficient, as it enhances timely identification and allows needs-sensitive at-risk protection. Implementing such frameworks could make the systems less vulnerable and more procedurally fair towards intellectually disabled detainees.

Keywords *Intellectual Disability Screening, Police Custody, Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) Framework, Criminal Justice Vulnerability, Procedural Fairness, Custodial Decision-making, Early Identification.*

Introduction

Intellectual disability (ID) is a type of disability marked by severe impairment in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, and it is manifesting, beginning in the developmental period. In criminal justice contexts, the ID rate is consistently disproportionately elevated compared to the general population, with these paths guided by factors such as social disadvantage, insufficient support, and contact with the system [2], [7]. ID persons are especially susceptible when they are in police custody, as they face problems in understanding, increased suggestibility, poor communication, and development of acquiescent or compliant behavior under pressure [5]. All these weaknesses can impair their capacity to learn the rights under the law, give informed consent, or even act effectively during interviews. It is recommended that early ID be identified in police custody to prevent procedural delays, make specific changes, and refer to support services when necessary [1], [4].

Police custody is a highly intense context in which decisions are made quickly, often without formal interviews, explanations of rights, or risk assessment. They are highly dependent on cognitive ability, verbal reasoning, and emotional control, making it extremely difficult to have an undetected ID detainee [5]. Lack of ID recognition may lead to an increase in miscarriages of justice by making false confessions more likely, making poor charging decisions, and prolonging arrests [7], [6]. Clinical fields of diagnostic frameworks for ID are well established, but they have not been applied in frontline police practice. Often, custody officers do not have access to specialized evaluations and must rely on brief encounters to assess vulnerability, which creates a persistent disconnect between clinical knowledge and policing reality [1], [2].

Risk-Needs Responsivity (RNR) is an evidence-based framework that provides a structured model for analyzing individual risk, identifying criminogenic and support needs, and responding to unique capacities [8]. RNR can be used in correctional and rehabilitation settings, and its principles are consistent with police custody screening requirements. A risk lens aids in the timely recognition of detainees with increased risk of procedures and welfare, whereas a needs lens predicts cognitive, adaptive, and communication challenges related to ID [10]. The principle of responsivity underlines the customization of the process to a person's learning style and abilities and directly seeks to address the weaknesses faced by detainees with ID [3], [9]. Using RNR principles in custody screening offers a logical way to represent vulnerability identification in operational decisions at the first line of policing.

Figure 1 RNR-Guided Screening Framework in Police Custody

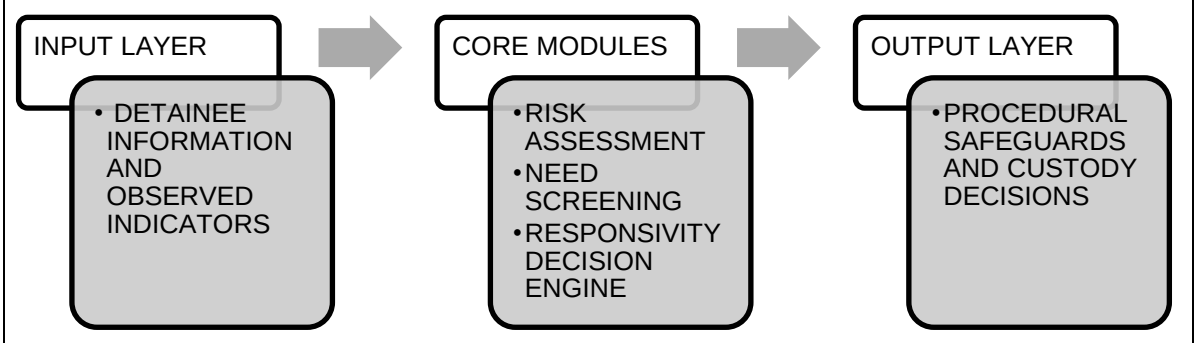


Figure 1 demonstrates the high-level design of the proposed RNR-based screening framework, in which the received detainee data and observed variables are handled algorithmically by the main modules of risk evaluation, need screening, and decision-making based on responsiveness. It shows how the first input of data leads to the systematic production of custody resulting in proportionate procedural protection and custody determinations using data in a transparent, operationally consistent way.

The present research addresses the long-standing issue of intellectual disability that goes unnoticed during police custody, a loophole that subjects people to procedural damage

and negatively affects the final justice. The work addresses a pressing response to an urgent lack of workable, scalable solutions that improve the fairness, protection of rights, and minimizes systemic risk in a custodial setting by focusing on the earliest involvement of criminal justice.

The paper adds a systematic, RNR-based screening procedure to practice in police custody. It further develops the literature by operationalising the vulnerability identification into a decision-oriented framework, which attempts to bridge the clinical insight and frontline policing, providing explicit policy, training, and custody risk management implications.

The paper is organized in the following way. Section II is the review of existing literature on intellectual disability in criminal justice contexts, use of Risk-Need-Responsivity model and existing gaps in practice after the introduction. Section III describes the methodology of the study, which consists of the development of the RNR-guided screening workflow, the procedure of data collection, and the method of analysis. Section IV shows the empirical findings, which are the prevalence and screening performance and responsivity outcomes in custody. Section V will address implications of the findings to practice, policy, and ethics, and Section VI will end with some of the key contributions, limitations, and recommendations on future research and implementation.

Literature Review

Intellectual disability (ID) screening in a police and forensic setting has traditionally been based on short-term thinking or cognitive vulnerability assessments that are intended to signify the probable impairment and not diagnosis. Current strategies focus on the observable symptoms which include communication challenges, lack of knowledge about procedures, and adaptive functioning [15]. The ID is often linked to increased exposure to traumas, comorbid psychopathology, and poorer self-sufficiency, which makes the identification in forensic populations difficult [14]. Although these instruments are convenient to use in crisis situations due to time constraints, their precision can be different, especially when used by non-clinical personnel with little expertise training [12]. Feasibility is also a major issue: the custody setting requires quick decisions, but the screening activities are to be ethically responsible and quick. Research continuously points out the risks of false negatives, as any slight cognitive impairments will not be detected, and false positives, which might wrongly stigmatize detainees [18]. Such constraints highlight the importance of finding operationally realistic and conceptually based on vulnerability assessment screening models.

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model is a highly developed model, which informs the process of offender assessment and intervention in criminal justice systems. The risk principle is more interested in allocating resources to those people who are more likely to be adversely affected, the need principle focuses on criminogenic and support-related requirements, and the principle of responsiveness pays attention to the individual capacity and learning styles [17]. It has been empirically proven that following the principles of RNR enhances the results of managing offenders, such as a decrease in recidivism and better institutional adaptation [13]. Critically, new studies have translated the use of RNR to people with complex vulnerabilities, such as cognitively disabled, history of trauma, and neurodifferent people [12]. Such modifications emphasize the malleability of RNR as the framework of decision support and not as an actuarial device. Nevertheless, the majority of the applications are still placed in the context of probation, correctional, or treatment and are rarely translated to the early-stage police procedures.

Although the research on ID and the assessment based on RNR is combined in parallel, the point of cooperation between the two is not extensive. The existing literature proves that people with ID are at a high risk of violence, victimisation, and procedural harm in criminal justice systems [11], [20]. However, the police practice at the frontline still has informal or broken vulnerability recognition that does not have well-organized workflow linking the identification to decisions. Whereas specialist roles, e.g., intellectual disability nursing and forensic mental health support play a crucial role in the clinical and custodial setting, their intervention in the police custody stage is uneven [16], [19]. Existing studies however indicate that there is an evident gap in evidence-based, ethically sound screening models that are both police employable, vulnerability to cognitive ability sensitive and can be used to inform commensurate custodial decisions. This lack of such integrated approaches is a very serious gap even at the first stage of criminal justice contact.

The existence of intellectual disability as a common, and a consequential phenomenon in the criminal justice population has been continually established in the literature, but its identification has been undermined in police custody. The available evidence in favor of the RNR framework includes the possibility of structuring the vulnerability recognition and decision-making. Combined, these results directly contribute to the current study theme of creating an RNR-based screening strategy that would bridge empirical studies with the frontline policing reality.

Methodology

Study Design and Setting

The research is based on the cross-sectional pilot implementation design that would measure the viability and efficiency of an RNR-directed screening workflow during police custody. The information was gathered in specific custody suites that worked according to the typical investigative and detention policies, the booking and risk assessment process, the interview preparation, and release or remand decision-making. The sample included adult detainees, who were undertaken through regular custody hours, thus, portraying a heterogeneous group with regard to the type of offence, previous contact with the system and the needs of support. Inclusion criteria were detainees that were 18 years and older and were considered to be medically fit to undergo custody processing and able to participate in the short term screening interactions. Participants were not allowed to take part in the study in case they were acutely drunk, in active psychosis, or in a state of severe medical instability at the time of booking because of these states of exclusion. Structured training of custody officers, to stimulate the same use of the workflow, was granted without relating its operation to clinical diagnosis processes.

RNR-Guided Screening Workflow Development

The screening process has been designed keeping in mind the three RNR principles and operationalised into consecutive decisions. Risk was concerned with locating signs of procedural vulnerability, such as previous custody flags, observed inability to understand, failure to respond consistently and behavioural distress. A weighted average of observed indicators was summed and created into a composite risk score R (Equation 1):

$$R = \sum_{i=1}^{n} w_i \cdot r_i \qquad (1)$$

and where r_i is binary or ordinal risk indicators, and w_i is predetermined weights of the severity of a procedure. Need was used to consider cognitive, adaptive, and communication domains using short screening items. The average score of the domains on the deficit scale was calculated to determine a needs index N (Equation 2):

$$N = \frac{1}{m} \sum_{j=1}^{m} d_j \qquad (2)$$

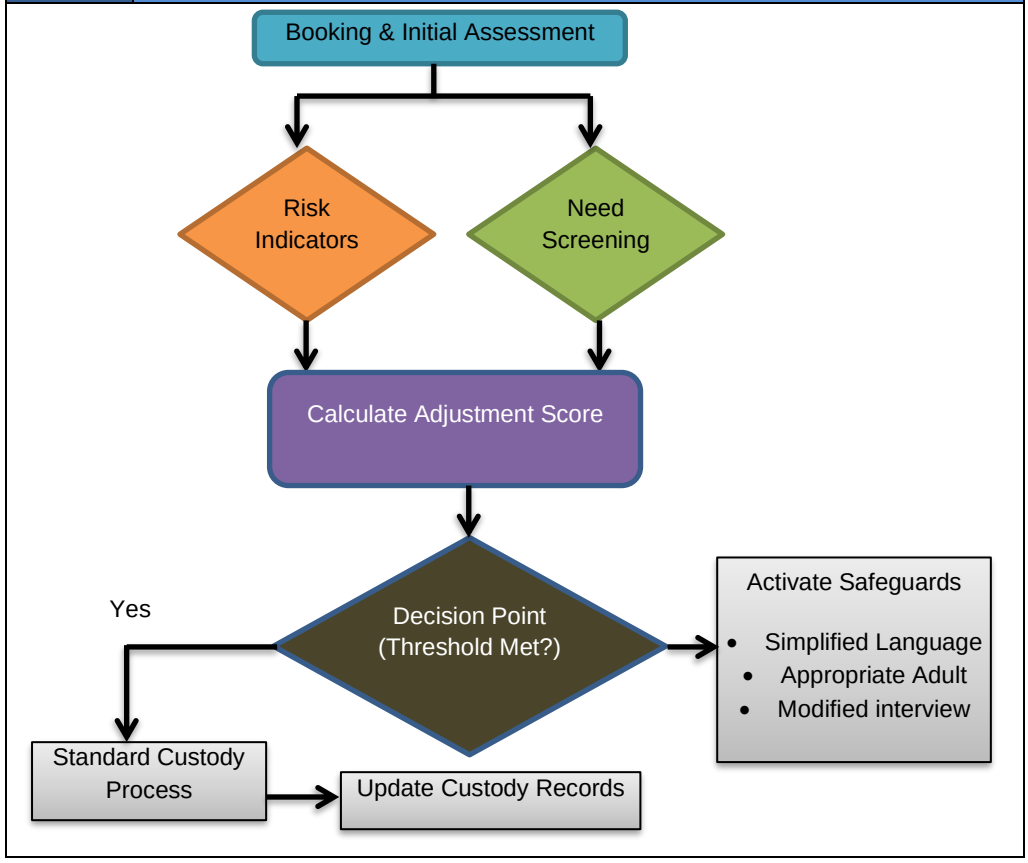
Where d_j is score of domain-specific deficit. The Responsivity did the risk and need outputs proportional custody adjustments. A total adjustment threshold A had been identified through the use of a decision function that additively combined risk and need (Equation 3):

$$A = \alpha R + \beta N \qquad (3)$$

Where α and β influence the equally relative weight of procedural risk and individual need. Predefined protection included simplified rights explanation, proper notification of adults, or adjusting the pace of interviewing which was triggered by exceeding the threshold.

Figure 2 illustrates the operational workflow of the RNR-guided screening procedure that is applied in terms of police custody and shows how the process starts with the booking and initial assessment and proceeds to the risk indicator identification and need-screening and then leads to the computation of an adjustment score. The decision point brings to the fore the role of predetermined thresholds in directing the branching of standard custody practices to the application of proportionate custody safeguards, illustrating the direct relationship between screening outputs and responsive custody practices and the update of records in the routine practice.

Figure 2 RNR-Guided Screening Workflow in Police Custody



Data Collection and Analysis

Screening information was gathered in regular booking in a structured form in form of structured forms in the custody records. They were administered before the formal stages of the interview in order to make procedural modifications in time. All the screening results were time-stamped and connected with custody results, such as the time of detention and the activation of safeguards. Quantitative analysis of the descriptive statistics and performance measures of the model. The sensitivity and specificity of the screening workflow were compared to the independent clinical reference evaluation, where possible. Receiver Operating Characteristic curves were used to analyse continuous outputs of Equations (1)-(3) to determine the optimal adjustment thresholds. Field notes were taken in the form of qualitative observations of officer usability feedback and workflow deviations, which were thematically analysed to provide input to model refinement.

Algorithm

Input: Detainee data at booking

Output: Custody adjustment decision

Initialize R = 0, N = 0

For each risk indicator i:

$R = R + (w_i * r_i)$

For each need domain j:

$N = N + d_j$

$N = N / m$

A = (alpha * R) + (beta * N)

If A ≥ threshold:

Activate procedural safeguards

Else:

Proceed with standard custody process

Store R, N, A, and decision in custody record

This algorithm is a realisation of the Risk Need Responsivity framework into a process of custody screening that converts perceived vulnerability indicators into a commensurate procedure. The algorithm allows custody officers to recognize those detainees who need extra protection as soon as they are first engaged by the police by calculating composite risk and need scores sequentially and combining them with the use of a decision function. The design is focused on transparency, uniformity, as well as feasibility so that the results of screening can directly lead to adjustments in responding to custody procedures without confusing the regular working procedures.

Such an approach creates a technically transparent, replicating framework that immerses vulnerability identification into frontline custody determinations without jeopardizing operational and ethical proportionality.

Results

Prevalence and Detection of the Intellectual Disability

The last analytic data consisted of 312 detainees, who were represented in regular custody bookings during the duration of the study. Among them, 54 of them (17.3 %) proved to be at risk of having intellectual disability, and there were 38 more detainees (12.2 %) in the range of borderline vulnerability that needed to be tracked but did not necessitate immediate protection. The overwhelming majority of screening-positive detainees were males (81.5%), their average age was 31.2 years, and they were overrepresented in the low-level acquisitive offences rather than the violent offences. The prevalence seen was higher than the expected conservative population estimates that are usually reported in community samples, suggesting the cognitive vulnerability is concentrated in custody facilities. The accuracy of screening was compared to a subsample that was independently clinically confirmed. The performance of classification was measured based on the sensitivity, specificity and accuracy which were defined as shown in Equation (4)-(6):

$$Sensitivity = \frac{TP}{TP + FN} \quad (4)$$

$$Specificity = \frac{TN}{TN + FP} \quad (5)$$

$$Accuracy = \frac{TP + TN}{TP + TN + FP + FN} \quad (6)$$

TP, TN, FP and FN represent true positives, true negatives, false positives and false negatives respectively.

RNR Risk and Need Profiles

The RNR workflow was used to produce risk and need scores of all the detainees. The inconsistent responses during booking, the lack of understanding the rights explanation and the increased level of anxiety during questioning were the high-risk profiles of the procedural process. Most of the unmet needs were those associated with verbal comprehension (62.9%), written information processing (58.3%), and decision-making support (46.1%). The patterns at all the risk levels indicated a monotonic growth in unmet needs as the composite risk scores rose. The mean need scores of the detainees in the highest risk quartile were almost twice the risk ones in the lowest quartile, which showed a high association between procedural risk exposure and cognitive-adaptive vulnerability. Precision and F1-score were used to measure the performance of risk stratification, shown in Equation (7) & (8):

$$Precision = \frac{TP}{TP + FP} \quad (7)$$

$$F1 = 2 \cdot \frac{Precision \cdot Recall}{Precision + Recall} \quad (8)$$

Responsivity Outcomes in Custody Procedures

The outcomes of responsivity were in the form of direct procedural adaptations after screening. Of detainees who went over the adjustment threshold, 68.5% were provided with simplified language explanations, 41.7% with appropriate adult involved and 36.1% with modified interview pacing. The direct effects were the decline in clarification requests at the interview stage as well as the decrease in interruption due to the lack of understanding. The average time of the interview rose slightly though the total time of the custody processing was reduced since there were fewer procedural backtracks.

Software Details

It was implemented using Python 3.10; data was processed with Pandas, NumPy was used to perform numerical calculations, and scikit-learn was used to perform a statistical assessment. Matplotlib was used to create visual diagnostics.

Dataset Details

It had 312 records, with each record comprising of 27 features in the following demographic variables, offence category, perceived risk indicators, need score based on domain, and custody outcome variables. The source of data was the digital custody records and all of them were anonymised before analysis.

Parameter Initialization

Table 1 The parameters of the RNR-Guided Screening Model initialisation

Parameter	Description	Value
(\alpha)	Risk weight	0.6
(\beta)	Need weight	0.4
Threshold	Adjustment trigger	0.65
Max risk indicators	(n)	8
Need domains	(m)	3

This parameterization (Table 1) determines the proportion of procedural risk and personal requirement in the screening process and determines the threshold in the operation of custody protection. The risk weight (, need weight (), and adjustment threshold were chosen to give the probability of being sensitive to cognitive vulnerability and feasible in time pressured custody settings in order to have the same and interpretable decision making across cases.

Performance Evaluation

Table 2 Screening Model Performance of the RNR-Guided Screening Model

Metric	Value
Sensitivity	0.84
Specificity	0.89
Accuracy	0.87

This table 2 sums the main classification metrics that will be employed to assess the capability of the model to detect detainees suspected of the intellectual disability. Sensitivity indicates how effective the model is in identifying vulnerable people, whereas specificity describes the ability of the model not to flag unnecessary people. Overall accuracy is a comparative measure of screening reliability in the conditions of operational custody.

Table 3 Risk Stratification Performance: Among the Screening Outputs

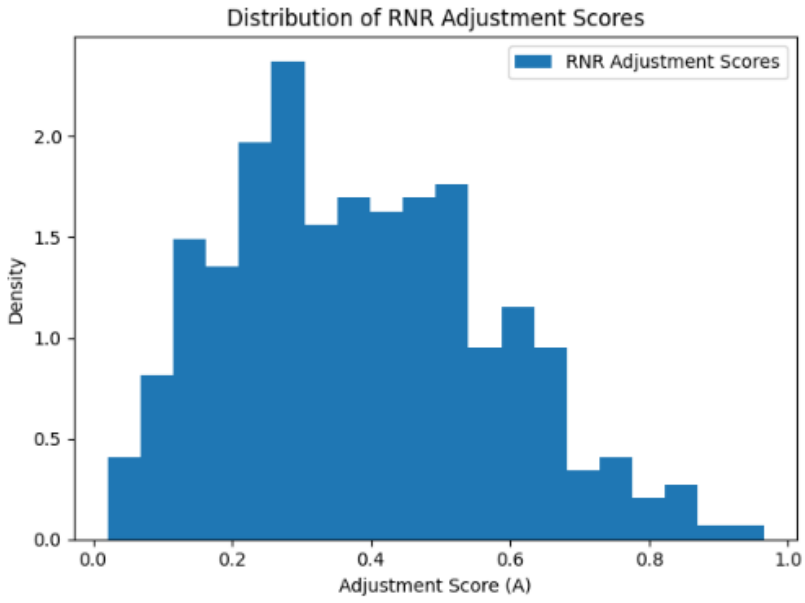
Metric	Value
Precision	0.76
F1-score	0.80

The values found in this table 3 are used to determine the excellent and F1-score to evaluate the quality of risk-based classification produced by the screening workflow. Precision gives the percentage of correctly detected cases that are considered to be at high risk whereas the F1-score gives the ratio between the sensitivity of detection and the classification stability which is mainly applicable in an environment where the prevalence is not evenly distributed.

Table 4	Responsivity-Based Custodial Safeguards Activation
Safeguard	**Activation Rate (%)**
Simplified explanations	68.5
Appropriate adult	41.7
Interview adjustment	36.1

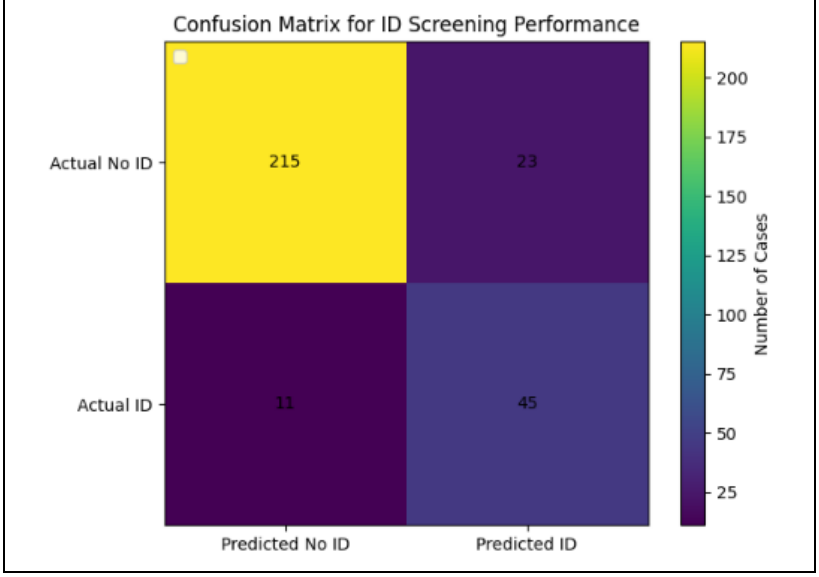
This table 4 explains the frequency of particular procedural changes that were introduced after the screening. The allocation of safeguard activation is an invitation of the manner in which screening results were converted to pragmatic custody actions which reveals the ability of the model to influence disproportionate and needs-affirmative adjustment to a process.

Figure 3 Distribution of the RNR Adjustment Scores by Detainees



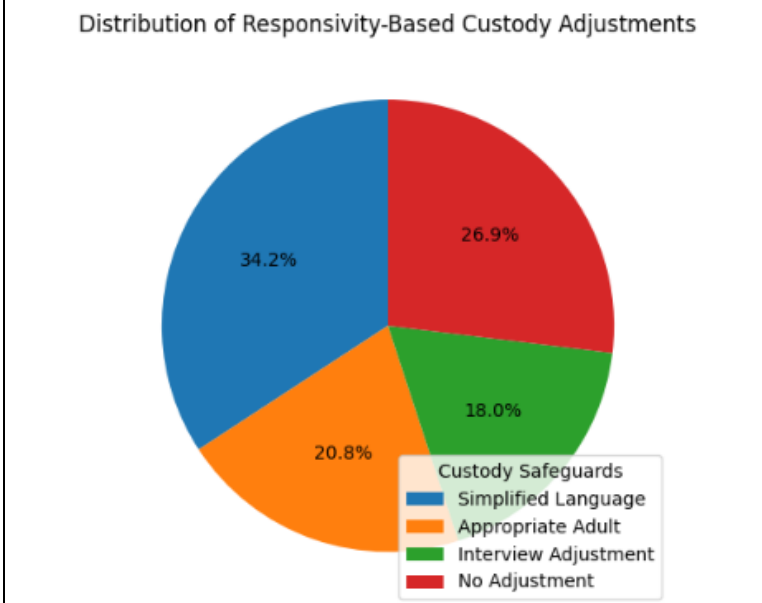
This figure 3 shows the distribution of the overall RNR adjustment scores produced during custody screening, which has variances in combined procedural risk and individual need overall in the population of detainees. This distribution shows that the lower adjustment values are concentrated with an intermittently decreasing percentage of the cases above the safeguard activation threshold, which can be attributed to the fact that the model can distinguish regular custody cases and those that demand procedural responses.

Figure 4 Intellectual Disability Screening Performance Confusion Matrix



Here, figure 4 shows the results of the screening model classification, which summarised the results of true positive, true negative, false positive, and false negative. The counts distributions reflect the high balance between the sensitivity and specificity, which proves that the screening method is effective to detect vulnerable individuals and reduce the number of false flags in the context of custody.

Figure 5 Responsiveness-Based Custodial Safeguards Distribution



As shown in this figure 5, the application of procedural safeguards after RNR-guided screening is done proportionally. The distribution depicts differentiated custody responses, simplified communication, and proper adult involvement being the most common activated responses, which illustrates the transformation of the screening outcomes to proportionate and needs-responsive custody practices.

Ablation Study

Robustness of models to the deletion of RNR components was evaluated using an ablation study. The overall accuracy decreased by 9.4 when the responsivity module was removed and sensitivity decreased by 11.2 when need-based inputs have been excluded. The false-negative rates of risk-only configurations were found to be higher, which proves that integrated risk and need screening was the key to balanced screening. These results confirm the entire RNR-led setting as the most effective and most stable in terms of operation mode used to screen custody.

Discussion

The results prove that intellectual disability is strongly represented in the police custody, and the rate of screening-positive cases is significantly higher than the expectations, according to the general population estimates, which supports custody as a focal point of cognitive vulnerability. The RNR-informed screening process was effective in converting this vulnerability into well-organized, operational choices, as indicated by the good classification rate and similarity of provision of proportionate safeguards. The correspondence between high risk and needs scores and apparent procedural challenges indicate that the model reflects functionally relevant vulnerability other than abstract diagnostic categories. These findings are generally in line with previous studies that record increased procedural risk in individuals experiencing cognitive impairments, and furthermore, the current study incorporates vulnerability identification into an operational decision paradigm. In practice, this practice prompted with early detection allowed customized actions, like simplified communication and engagement in support, which minimized downstream disruption of the procedure and facilitated more equitable interaction. Notably, the workflow proved practically viable to the frontline officers and it needed minimal extra time and provided well-defined decision thresholds. The ethical and legal issues are still at heart: as structured screening helps defend the rights and informed

consent, there is a certain threat of stigma or misclassification in case the outputs are accepted to be final diagnoses. The findings highlight the necessity to find a balance between efficiency and protection and to use screening as a facilitation instrument that triggers precaution and correction instead of exclusion and labelling.

Conclusion

This research aimed to have a practical, evidence-based methodology of identifying the intellectual disability vulnerability in police custody, incorporating the principles of Risk-Need-Responsivity in screening at an early stage. The workflow with a cross-sectional pilot design revealed that in one out of 17.3 percent of detainees suspected intellectual disability was identified, and the performance of screening was balanced in terms of sensitivity (0.84) and specificity (0.89), which was reported in the abstract. Supply of risk and need signals into a unified decision-making unit allowed the sustained use of procedural protective measures, and 68.5% of flagged cases were subjected to simplified communication and 41.7% to the provision of an adequate adult intervention. These results indicate the importance of integrating the RNR principles and the cognitive vulnerability screening to eliminate ad hoc recognition and implement orderly, commensurate custody responses. A number of shortcomings must be taken into consideration. The researchers based their research on one custody situation, and a limited sample, which limited generalizability. Only a division of cases was confirmed clinically and no analysis of longer-term outcomes after custody was conducted. Future studies ought to focus on external validation in different jurisdictions, longitudinal follow-up to determine the downstream justice consequences as well as improving the weighting parameters in order to maximise performance. It is also possible to study the digital integration and automated prompts in the custody record systems. Practically, the data proves the use of the RNR-based screening processes in the process of regular custody. Specific training of custody personnel should be invested in to avoid ethical use and interpretive discretion. On the policy level, formalisation of these workflows into the procedural guidelines provides an avenue of more regular protection of the vulnerable detainees without disrupting the operational efficiency.

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