Whenever we evaluate someone or something as dangerous we do a lot more than make a statistical prediction. We certainly are making some sort of prediction and of course that prediction is about harm, but the concept of danger carries more meaning than that. Another element is fear. We regard aeroplanes as more dangerous than airport buses because we are more fearful of air travel than land travel. Rational arguments may soothe our fears to some extent but the level of fear aroused by a risk is as important in determining whether we regard that risk as dangerous as the statistical probability of that risk materialising.

Human beings have always tried to foretell the future and of course they have never been able to do it exactly, even modern actuarial statistics tell us very little about particular individuals. Nevertheless at an ordinary level, we make predictions about human behaviour, which we rely upon, even though they are only crude probabilities, every day of our lives. We know which friends to trust and which we cannot rely upon, we know to whom it is safe to lend money and to whom it is not; we know who will succeed in carrying out a difficult task, and who will fail. The method we use is quite simple, we forecast the future by referring back to previous behaviour. Banks and other businesses formalise this by careful research into an individual's financial and business history. In this way society goes about its business in an orderly fashion and although some disasters occur, by and large the predictive system bears fruit.
Criminological Literature

Frances Simon, showed that criminological prediction studies, whether they relate to recidivism among juvenile offenders, probationers, or persons released from correction institutions, rarely achieve a correlation of more than 0.4 between the predicted and observed probability of recidivism. She suggested that this very low power is related to the considerable environmental influences which any individual comes under, but like all workers in this field Mrs. Simon's study showed that the best predictor of future criminal behaviour is early delinquent tendencies.

If we narrow our field of interest to violence then we find that the same general proposition holds true; the best predictor of future violence is previous violence. One of the best and most lucid reviews of this whole subject was published recently in the United States by John Monahan in an NIMH report on crime and delinquency. He reviewed the five major studies available at that time and showed that in practice, psychiatrists and others are bad at predicting future violence and conservative in their release policies.

Monahan's review leads him to the conclusion that there are a number of factors associated with violent behaviour: past violence, age, sex, race, socio-economic status, opiate or alcohol abuse. Estimated IQ, residential mobility, and marital status, are also related to violent behaviour. A point of considerable interest is that mental illness does not appear to be related to violence in the absence of a history of violent behaviour. Monahan also warns us that a surplus of information may actually reduce predictive accuracy and that for the best prediction we may need to rely upon a few hard demographic facts. Nevertheless he does accept that a disturbance or deficit in a person's support system, particularly in the family, or at work, may trigger violent mechanisms. Easy availability of victims, weapons, and alcohol in the environment may also heighten the probability of violence. Any assessment should take these into account.

An aspect of prediction which is of importance, is the usefulness of specifying time limits to a predictive judgment. Some observers state that the only prediction they wish to discuss in relation to a violent offender is whether or not he or she will ever be violent again. In other words they want a prediction until the end of the person's life which may be 40 or 50 years away. One only has to think of the declining accuracy of weather forecasting over increasing periods of time, or the way in which human personality changes as we grow older, or the major environmental changes which we are subject to as our life develops, to realise that such a task is a tall order indeed, and that short term prediction is much more likely to be accurate.