Overview

1. School shootings in the United States
2. Problems to avoid
3. Threat assessment and prevention

Contributing Factors
- Underachievement
- Bullying and teasing
- Developing mental illness
  - Paranoia
  - Voices
- Peer encouragement
- Media encouragement
- Available guns
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Carneal pleads guilty in shootings

Media--Inflamed Fear of School Violence

Students are not at high risk of being killed at school.

What is the likelihood of a student committing a homicide at your school?

- 93 student homicides cases in 10 years = 9.3/year (1992-93 to 2001-02)
- 119,000 schools
- 119,000 ÷ 9.3/year =
- 1 case every 12,796 years

- Accidents
- Homicide
- Suicide
- Cancer
- Heart disease
- Flu & pneumonia
- HIV
- School suicide
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Problems for Europe to Avoid
1. Over-emphasis on security measures and crisis response
2. Excessive punishment to deter others (zero tolerance)
3. Student profiling and warning signs

Fear-based Reactions to Shootings
Prevention cannot wait until the gunman is at the door.

Fear-based Reactions to Shootings
- Security guards
- Metal detectors
- Alarm systems
- Door locks
- Video cameras
- Shooter drills

Bullet-Proof Backpacks
Two businessmen are selling bullet-proof backpacks for $175.

The Expansion of Zero Tolerance
From No Guns to
- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting
No Accidental violations

The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices
Cub Scout utensil gets boy, 6, school suspension
First-grader brought it to eat his lunch with; now he's facing return to school

The Columbine Effect
- The Columbine Effect
- No accidental violations

dcornell@virginia.edu
The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices

5-Year-Old Handcuffed by Florida Police

Girl Was Misbehaving
April 14, 2005; NBC10 News

Zero tolerance is not effective. Suspension associated with poorer outcomes for students.

Zero tolerance policies are not as effective as thought in reducing violence and promoting learning in schools, says APA Task Force.

Download at www.fbi.gov

FBI Recommends Against Profiling

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

...transferring juveniles to the adult justice system generally increases, rather than decreases, rates of violence among transferred youth.”

Profiling

School Profiling
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

**APA Warning Signs Brochure**

*If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility:*
1. Loss of temper on a daily basis
2. Significant vandalism or property damage
3. Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
4. Increase in risk-taking behavior
5. Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
6. Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
7. Enjoying hurting animals
8. Carrying a weapon

**Profiling does not work.**
- School shootings are too rare.
- Profiles make false predictions.
- Profiles generate stereotypes.
- Profiles don’t solve problems.

**FBI Recommends Threat Assessment Approach**

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”

(FBI report p 1)

Download at: www.fbi.gov

**Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:**
- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

**Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence**

A collaborative project of:
University of Virginia Curry School of Education
Albemarle County Public Schools
Charlottesville City Public Schools
Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund

**Threat Assessment**

1. **Identification** of threats made by students.
2. **Evaluation** of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. **Intervention** to reduce risk of violence.
4. **Follow-up** to assess intervention results.
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal or Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Leads team, conducts Step 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required to serve on team Teachers, aides, other staff</td>
<td>Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.

Field-Test Schools

- 22 Elementary schools
- 6 Middle schools
- 4 High schools
- 3 Alternative schools
- 35 Total

What is a threat?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.

Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

What did the students threaten to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit/Beat Up</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut/Stab</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Bomb</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 188 cases

Continuum of Threats

- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.

- Obtain an account of the threat and the context from the student and witnesses.
- Write down the exact threat.
- Obtain student’s explanation of the threat’s meaning and his/her intentions.
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat’s meaning.
- Document your evaluation.

Typical Questions

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say and do?
4. What did you mean when you said/did that?
5. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
6. What was the reason you said that?
7. What are you going to do now?

Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Step 2. Transient or Substantive?

- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat.
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive.

Transient threats

- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.

Step 3. Responses to a transient threat.

- No need to take safety precautions.
- See that threat is resolved through explanation, apology, making amends.
- Provide counseling and education where appropriate.
- Administer discipline if appropriate.

Transient versus substantive threats

- Transient Threats: 70%
- Substantive Threats: 30%

Step 4. Serious or very serious substantive threat?

- Substantive assault threats are classified serious. ("I'm gonna beat him up.")
- Substantive threats to kill, rape, or inflict very serious injury are classified very serious. ("I'm gonna break his arm.")
- Substantive threats involving a weapon are classified very serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

- Take precautions to protect potential victims. May consult with law enforcement.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Discipline student for threat.
- Determine appropriate intervention for student, such as counseling or dispute mediation.
- Follow up to verify that threat has been resolved and interventions in progress.

Safety Evaluation conducted by a team.
- Principal leads the team.
- School psychologist or other mental health professional conducts Mental Health Assessment.
- School resource officer consults on legal issues.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.

Law Enforcement Investigation of Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Interview suspects and witnesses.
- Conduct searches for weapons and other evidence of planning.
- Serve as a resource for students with fears or information to share.
- Take appropriate protective action.

Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.

Step 7. Follow up with action plan.

- Determine action plan to reduce risk of violence.
- Identify appropriate interventions for student.
- Schedule follow-up contact with student to assess current risk and update plan.

How did schools respond to 188 threats?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspend</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

<table>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Carried Out Threat</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Violence</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Violation</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.
Memphis Field-Trial

Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.
- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out

*Behavioral Disorders, 2008*

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
- 131 using locally developed models
- 54 not using threat assessment

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

- School climate survey of randomly selected samples of 9th grade students in each school:
  - Bullying observed in school
  - Victimization experienced in school
  - Willingness to seek help
  - Positive learning environment

*Sample Items for Each Scale*

- Bullying observed in school
  "Bullying is a problem at this school."
- Victimization experienced in school
  "I was physically attacked" (this year in school).
- Willingness to seek help
  "If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school."
- Positive learning environment
  "Adults at this school ...treat all students fairly."

Sample Items for Each Scale

- Student victimization
- Student-reported bullying
- Positive learning environment
- Positive help seeking
Prevention of School Shootings in the United States
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

Findings for Virginia Model Schools
- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

Research Needs
- Controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment.
- Research on threat context and student characteristics.
- More follow-up studies of threat outcomes.
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction).

Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

Intensive Intervention
- Students with very serious behavioral problems
- Includes monitoring and supervision
- Ongoing counseling
- Alternative school placements
- Special education evaluations and services
- Social skills groups
- Peer mediation
- Parenting and other community support
- Special education evaluations and services

At-Risk Students
- Students with some problem behaviors
- School security program
- Programs for bullying and teasing
- Character development curriculum
- Conflict resolution for peer disputes

Schoolwide Prevention
- All students
- Clear and consistent discipline
- Positive behavior support system
- Social skills groups
- Peer mediation
- Tutoring and other academic support
- Special education evaluations and services
- Short-term counseling
- Mentoring and after-school programs
- Special education evaluations and services

Intensive monitoring
- Ongoing counseling
- Alternative school placements
- Special education evaluations and services
- Social skills groups
- Peer mediation
- Parenting and other community support
- Special education evaluations and services

http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu
Figure 1. Decision tree for student threat assessment.

Step 1. Evaluate threat.
- Obtain a specific account of the threat by interviewing the student who made threat, the recipient of threat, and other witnesses.
- Write down the exact content of the threat and statements by each party.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions.

Step 2. Decide whether threat is clearly transient or substantive.
- Consider criteria for transient versus substantive threats.
- Consider student’s age, credibility, and previous discipline history.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.
Typical responses may include reprimand, parental notification, or other disciplinary action. Student may be required to make amends and attend mediation or counseling.

Step 4. Decide whether the substantive threat is serious or very serious. A serious threat might involve a threat to assault someone (“I’m gonna beat that kid up”). A very serious threat involves use of a weapon or is a threat to kill, rape, or

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
- Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims, including notifying intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Consider contacting law enforcement.
- Refer student for counseling, dispute mediation, or other appropriate intervention.
- Discipline student as appropriate to severity and chronicity of situation.

Step 6. Conduct safety evaluation.
- Take immediate precautions to protect potential victims, including notifying the victim and victim’s parents.
- Consult with law enforcement.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Begin a mental health evaluation of the student.
- Discipline student as appropriate.

Step 7. Implement a safety plan.
- Complete a written plan.
- Maintain contact with the student.
- Revise plan as needed.
Use the power of teams to prevent violence

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D. and Peter Sheras, Ph.D.
Grades K–12

This timely manual should be considered one of every school’s most important references. It can help prevent the kind of violent situations that, unfortunately, have raised so much fear and concern in our schools.

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence offers practical information about forming school-based teams to conduct assessments on students who threaten violence. Team leaders (principals or assistant principals) will learn skills needed to make preliminary evaluations that determine if a threat can be quickly resolved or if more extensive assessment and intervention is required. In the latter case, a full-threat assessment team—typically consisting of the principal or assistant principal, school resource officer, school psychologist, and counselor—will take steps outlined in the manual to prevent a violent act from occurring.

This resource goes beyond “on-the-spot” prevention, taking a proactive approach to help team members understand why a student made a threat and how to identify the underlying cause that created his/her turmoil.

Grounded in research that supports team-based threat assessment, these guidelines offer a solid game plan for promoting safer, trouble-free schools.

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Illustrated with numerous case studies—many drawn from the author’s work as a forensic psychologist—this book identifies 19 myths and misconceptions about youth violence, from ordinary bullying to rampage shootings. It covers controversial topics such as gun control and the effects of entertainment violence on children. The author demonstrates how fear of school violence has resulted in misguided, counterproductive educational policies and practices ranging from boot camps to zero tolerance. He reviews evidence from hundreds of controlled studies showing that school-based school violence prevention programs and mental health services, which are largely effective, are often overlooked in favor of politically popular yet ineffective programs such as school uniforms, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, and Scared Straight. He concludes by reviewing some of his own research on student threat assessment as a more flexible and less punitive alternative to zero tolerance, and presents a wide ranging series of recommendations for improving and expanding the use of school-based violence prevention programs and mental health services for troubled students.

Key features include the following:

**Contrarian Approach**—This book identifies and refutes 19 basic misconceptions about trends in youth violence and school safety, and shows how the fear of school violence has been exaggerated through inaccurate statistics, erroneous conclusions about youth violence, and over-emphasis on atypical, sensational cases.

**Readability**—The book translates scientific, evidence-based research into language that educators, parents, law enforcement officers, and policymakers can readily understand and shows what can be done to improve things.

**Expertise**—Dewey Cornell is a forensic psychologist and Professor of Education at the University of Virginia, where he holds an endowed chair in Education. He is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project and is a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy. The author of more than 100 publications in psychology and education, he frequently testifies in criminal proceedings and at legislative hearings involving violence prevention efforts.

This book is appropriate for courses or seminars dealing wholly or partly with school violence and school safety. It is also an indispensable volume for school administrators and safety officers; local, state, and national policymakers; involved parents; and academic libraries serving these groups.

**Contents**

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The Fear of School Violence: An Overview
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What Can We Do About Bullying?
Are We Teaching Our Kids to Kill?
Does Prevention Work?
What Doesn't Work?
How Can We Deal With Student Threats?
What Do Our Schools Need?
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