Preventing lethal school violence: The American experience:

What we know about school shootings, and promising preventive approaches.

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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
  - Paranoid fears
  - Voices
- Peer encouragement
- Media encouragement
- Available guns

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Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for over 20 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 100 publications in psychology and education, including two recent books: Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence and School Violence: Fears versus Facts.

1997 Paducah school shooting

September 2002, Age 19
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Five Girls Killed in Amish School Shooting

“25 shootings at or near schools”

- Man shot in a school parking lot at night
- School van struck by a bullet while driving through city
- Students shot while walking down street near their school (3 cases)
- Intoxicated man found alone shooting air rifle at geese in a football field

How many shootings occur in the United States?

- 80+ people are killed every day by firearms in the United States
- 30,000 deaths per year
- 68,000 injuries per year
- ?? shootings without injury

Don’t be misled by false trends
With 80+ people killed every day, it is possible to find numerous pseudo-trends.

School homicides are not increasing.

Source: National Vital Statistics Reports, 54 (10), 2006

Source: http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/school_violence06-07.html

Source: http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=2521025
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Students are not at high risk of being killed at school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1999 Selected Causes of Death</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>9779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>2625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>1857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>1757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart disease</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flu &amp; pneumonia</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School homicide</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

For every problem there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong. H.L. Mencken

Problems for Europe to Avoid

Fear-based Reactions to Shootings

Prevention cannot wait until the gunman is at the door.

Bullet-Proof Backpacks

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

http://shop.safepackusa.com/main.sc
Missouri Governor Matt Blunt said because of the recent spate of school violence it would be worth considering proposals from lawmakers to allow teachers to carry firearms in schools. "It's an interesting idea worth discussing." Associated Press, Oct 22, 2006.

Wisconsin Legislator Frank Lasee stated: "Israel and Thailand have well-trained teachers carrying weapons and keeping their children safe from harm. It can work in Wisconsin." USA Today Oct 5, 2006.


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Nervous Officials No Longer Ignoring Threats by Students
Around the County, Children Are Being Arrested

- 4 Kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers during recess.
- New Jersey district zero tolerance policy resulted in 50 suspensions in 6 weeks, mostly in kindergarten and 3rd grade for verbal threats.
- 8 yr old suspended for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher, saying pow-pow.
- 10 yr old expelled for a 1" GI Joe toy gun
- 14 yr old convicted of felony for e-mail threat
- 17 yr old arrested & expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band

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

School violence is not increasing.

![Graph showing decrease in serious violent crime rate in U.S. schools from 1994 to 2005](image)

Who gets credit for the decline?

![Graph showing decrease in FBI Uniform Crime Reports from 1994 to 2005](image)
...transferring juveniles to the adult justice system generally increases, rather than decreases, rates of violence among transferred youth.

Why the decline in juvenile violence?

- Increased law enforcement efforts including community policing and efforts to reduce crack dealing and juvenile access to guns
- Increased mental health efforts, including school-based and after-school programs to supervise, mentor, resolve conflicts in youth

Numerous Effective Programs

- Anger management
- Bullying prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Parenting skills
- Problem-solving
- Social competence
- Substance abuse resistance
- Etc.

The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works....
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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.

Look for patterns, not a single profile.
Antisocial youth -- instrumental crime
Conflicted youth – reactive anger
Psychotic youth – delusional motive

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)

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.

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.
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

Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal
Leads team, conducts Step 1.

School Resource Officer
Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.

Mental Health Staff
(School counselors, psychologists, social workers)
Team member to conduct mental health assessments.
Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.

Not required to serve on team
Teachers, aides, other staff
Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

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

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.

Field-Test Schools

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

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Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

Number of threats
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What did the students threaten to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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>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.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.


Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

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?
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?

- Suspend: 94
- Expel: 3
- Arrest: 6

Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

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 Schools

95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model vs 185 other Virginia public high 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.

In press, School Psychology Quarterly

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 severe behavior problems
  - Intensive monitoring and supervision
  - Group counseling
  - Alternative school placement
  - Special education evaluation and services

- At-Risk Students: Students with some problem behaviors
  - Social skills groups
  - Peer-mediated interventions
  - Harper and other school programs
  - Parenting and other academic support
  - Community-based treatment

- Schoolwide Prevention: All students
  - Clear and consistent discipline
  - Positive behavior support system
  - School security program
  - Programs for bullying and teasing
  - Character development curriculum
  - Conflict resolution for peer disputes
  - Tutoring and other academic support
  - Special education evaluation and services

http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu