A Randomized Controlled Study of Student Threat Assessment

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Topics

1. Rationale for threat assessment
2. Our threat assessment model
3. Our randomized controlled study

1999 FBI Conference on School Shootings

- Profiling will not work because shootings are too rare, student commonalities are not specific, threats are too frequent and lead to numerous false positives.
- Threat assessment is a more promising approach.

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

Credits

Coauthors
- Korrie Allen, Eastern Virginia Medical School
- Xitao Fan, University of Macau

Thanks to Newport News Public Schools

The complete paper is in press with School Psychology Review. For a prepublication copy, email dcornell@virginia.edu

Download handouts from conference presentations page:
http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu/
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March 17, 2012

THREAT ASSESSMENT PROBLEMS IN SCHOOLS

1. Fear of violence is a wider problem affecting more schools than serious violence.
2. Many students are being arrested, suspended, and expelled from school because of fear and zero tolerance.

THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

• 2001 Developed guidelines
• 2001-2003 Field testing
• 2004 First published study
• 2006 Manual published
• 2009 Controlled study, adapted for use in Germany
• 2011 Controlled study
• 2011 more than 1,000 Virginia schools report using the guidelines
• 2012 RCT

Available from sopriswest.com

THREAT ASSESSMENT GOALS IN SCHOOLS

1. Prevent violence.
2. Resolve student problems.
3. Prevent over-reactions that lead to school removal.
4. Improve overall school climate.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN YOUTH VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL SAFETY PRACTICES

Has another student threatened to harm you in the past 30 days at school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent Yes</th>
<th>Not Really Mean It</th>
<th>It Was Serious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 3,756 students in 5 high schools
87.6% of all students reported no threat
Of 452 students who received a threat, only 26.3% told anyone
Of 107 students who said they received a serious threat, 48.6% told someone

THREAT ASSESSMENT IS MORE THAN JUST 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.
Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<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</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required to serve on team</td>
<td>Teachers, aides, other staff. 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.

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.

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

Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

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.
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Transient Threats
Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

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.

Transient Case Steps

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.

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

Step 2. Decide whether the threat is 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 need to make amends and attend mediation or counseling.


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.
- Other school staff as needed.

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.

Very Serious Substantive Threats
Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

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.

Mental Health Assessment

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

Step 6.
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Step 7.
Follow up with action plan.

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Threat Studies

1. Initial field trial
2. Memphis field trial
3. Virginia High school climate study
4. High school discipline study in Fairfax
5. Randomized controlled trial in Newport News

Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned to training or wait one year
- Data collected on 201 students identified as making threats
- Teams monitored for compliance

Randomized Controlled Trial

Hypothesis
Schools using threat assessment will be more likely to take a counseling approach and keep students in school compared to schools pursuing usual disciplinary approach.

Outcomes for Threat v Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistic regression examining Threat Assessment vs Control</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counseling services</td>
<td>3.98*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent conference</td>
<td>2.57*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term suspension</td>
<td>.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school placement</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01, N = 201 students in 40 schools
Controlled for student gender and race, school level, threat severity

Outcomes for 201 Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistic regression examining Compliance with Threat Assessment Model</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counseling services</td>
<td>1.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent conference</td>
<td>Ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term suspension</td>
<td>.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative school placement</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01, N = 100 students in 20 Threat assessment schools
Controlled for student gender and race, school level, threat severity
Research Needs

- More controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment
- More extensive outcome variables
- More follow-up on students and victims
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction)
- Improved compliance

Threat Assessment differs from Risk Assessment

1. Focus on threat behavior, not profiles or traits.
2. Risk is dynamic, not static.
3. Problem-solving strategies for prevention, not prediction.

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