The Value of Collaboration and Engagement: Threat Assessment as a Violence Prevention Strategy

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Overview

1. Exaggerated fears of violence have negative effects on our schools.
2. Our schools are safe.
3. Violence can prevented.
4. Threat assessment uses collaboration and engagement to prevent violence.

Fear-based Reactions to Shootings

- Increased security
- Shooter drills
- Guns for faculty
- Zero tolerance

Building Security Measures

- Bullet-Proof Building Entrances

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Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for over 25 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 200 publications in psychology and education, including: Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence and School Violence: Fears versus Facts.
Building Security Measures

Metal detectors and x-ray screening

Building Security Measures

Security and Police Officers

Building Security Measures

Security Cameras

Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost $4 million

School security measures could cost millions locally

Additional Florida School Security Could Cost $100 Million

School security wish list would cost Marion County $160M

Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost $138 million

NRA proposal would cost state schools about $138 million

(DeAngelis, Brent, & Ianni, 2011)

School Shooter Drills Are Widely Practiced

Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost $4 million

School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.

Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost $138 million

NRA proposal would cost state schools about $138 million

Every Per Pupil dollar spent for Security is a Per Pupil dollar NOT spent for Instruction.
Students are involved in shooter drills.

Students escorted from school during a shooter drill.

Simulated Injuries

Arcing our teachers is not that easy

Sandy Hook Shooting Inspires Bulletproof Kids Clothing

Fear mongering

Some schools hold monthly lockdown drills.

Many states mandate 1 or more lockdown drills per year.
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

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

6 year old pointed finger and said "pow!"

http://www.sott.net/article/255552-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot

Zero Tolerance Suspensions After the Newtown Shootings

http://www.sott.net/article/255552-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

9 year old with toy gun
12 year old doodler
Poem about Sandy Hook, "I understand the killings..."


Zero Tolerance Policies are not as effective as thought in reducing violence and promoting learning in school, says APA task force

Suspension Practices

Suspension is a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:

• Fall behind in their classes
• Feel alienated and rejected
• Continue to misbehave and be suspended
• Drop out of school
• Juvenile court involvement

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

The school-to-prison pipeline
Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

October 31, 2014

3.3 Million Suspensions Per Year Fuel the School to Prison Pipeline

Schools Are Safe: Risk of Violence Exaggerated

- School-age homicides rarely occur at school
- Most homicides occur in residences and other locations
- School violence has declined.

(Cornell, 20006; Nekvasil & Cornell, 2014)

Homicides At School vs Outside of School

“A any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years.”

What Can Be Done About School Shootings? A Review of the Evidence
Randy Borum, Dewey G. Cornell, William Mozzellah, and Shane R. Jamerson

School violence has declined.

Source: Indicators of school crime and safety, 2012. Table 2.1. National Crime Victimization Study data reported by National Center for Education Statistics

Source: FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) database.
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School homicides are not increasing.

Cases identified from records of the National School Safety Center.

Homicides by students on school grounds during school day

- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Uneven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation
- Group rivalry

Case example: How schools permit and even promote bullying

Three students killed, 5 wounded in shooting

Carneal pleads guilty in shootings
**Contributing Factors**

- Bullying
- Mental Illness
- Peer Influences
- Access to guns

**Prevention Opportunities**

- Bullying
- Mental Illness
- Peer Influences
- Access to guns

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**Why is snitching so reviled?**

**Snitch:** blabbermouth, canary, fink, narc, rat, sneak, squealer, stoolie, stoolpigeon, tattletale, etc.

**Teach students to distinguish snitching from seeking help**

**Snitching:** informing on someone for personal gain

**Seeking help:** attempting to stop someone from being hurt

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**FBI Recommendations on School Violence**

“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.

What is Threat Assessment?
Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.

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 means “to keep something from happening.”

Crisis response is not prevention.

A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.
Shootings seem unpredictable, but,
Prevention does not require prediction!

House Education and Labor Committee
Hearing on Campus Safety
May 15, 2007

Prevention does not require prediction.

We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

Prevention does not require prediction.

We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

Goals of Threat Assessment

1. Prevent violence.
2. Address problems such as bullying before they escalate.
3. Reduce use of school suspension
4. Improve student trust in staff.

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 is a collaborative process that attempts to engage all parties in a problem-solving approach to the conflict or difficulty that stimulated the threatening behavior.
Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

Brief review of the Virginia model

Field-Test Schools

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

Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Role Description</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 (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</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>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.

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
What did the students threaten to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat Type</th>
<th>Frequency</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>Vague</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Bomb</td>
<td>10</td>
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</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

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.

Threat is serious.
Threat is clearly transient.
Threat is substantive.
Threat is very serious.
Threat is serious or very serious.
Threat is clearly transient or substantive.

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?

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.

Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

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%

Very serious cases are relatively rare

- Very Serious
- Substantive Threats
- Transient Threats
**Threat Assessment**

**Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.**

**October 31, 2014**

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**Key Point**

*In a threat assessment, we try to determine why a student made a threat, and therefore how we can prevent the threat from being carried out.*

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**Very Serious Substantive Threats**

**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 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.**

**Step 7. Follow up on action plan.**

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**Very Serious Substantive Threat: Case Example of 8th Grade John**

- 8th grade John reported by another student to have a hit list.
- Tells former girlfriend, “I’m gonna get even with you and all your friends by blowing you all away with a shotgun.”
- John denies hit list or threatening statement. Later acknowledges anger at several classmates and at Alice, his former girlfriend.

**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.

**Immediate responses to a Very Serious Substantive Threat**

- Take precautions to protect potential victims.
- Consult with law enforcement promptly.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Begin Mental Health Assessment.
- Determine safety during suspension.

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**Step 6. Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat.**

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.
**Mental Health Assessment**

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

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**Key Point**

*Our mental health assessments are not designed to PREDICT violence, but to find ways to PREVENT violence.*

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**Numerous Effective Programs**

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

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**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.

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**Brief Review of Research on Threat Assessment**

1. Initial field-test study
2. Memphis field test
3. High school climate study
4. High school suspension study
5. Randomized controlled trial
6. Statewide study
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N = 188 cases

How did schools respond to 188 threats?

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

Follow-up interviews on student threats

- Interviews conducted with school principals at end of school year and again the following fall.
- Follow-up time periods averaged 148 days until end of school year.
- Four students did not return to school after the threat, 17 left within 30 days after threat.

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 Climate 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

High School Discipline Study

- Compared 23 high schools implementing threat assessment with 26 control high schools (no threat assessment).
- Used school records of suspensions and discipline infractions for baseline year prior to training and follow-up year after training.

NASSP Bulletin, 2011
High School Discipline Study

Long-Term Suspension Rates

Baseline Year Outcome Year

Rate per 1,000 students

Trained Schools (n = 23)
Comparison Schools (n = 26)

3.9 10.9
8.2 10.9

Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

Randomized Controlled Trial

Students in threat assessment schools...
- Received more counseling
- More parent involvement
- Fewer long-term suspensions
- Fewer alternative placements

Logistic regression odds ratios: 3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

2013 NREPP Listing

Students in threat assessment schools...
- Received more counseling
- More parent involvement
- Fewer long-term suspensions
- Fewer alternative placements

Virginia Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

Source: UVA training records and Safety Audit Survey records

Virginia Public Schools

- 133 school divisions
- 2,002 public schools
- 1.2 million students

Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

Logistic regression odds ratios: 3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

2013 NREPP Listing

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Association of Threat Assessment with Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19% fewer</td>
<td>8% fewer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Years Using TA Associated with Suspensions

<table>
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<th>Schools using Virginia TA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One year increase in number of years using UVA TA (1-5)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**p < .05 for both LTS and STS**

Same control variables

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**Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach**

- **Intensive Interventions**
  - At-Risk Students
  - Schoolwide Prevention
  - Students with some problem behaviors
  - Social skills groups
  - Short-term counseling
  - Morning and after-school programs
  - Tutoring and other academic support
  - Special education evaluation and services
  - Non-academic support and services

- Clear and consistent discipline
- Positive behavior support system
- School security program
- Programs for bullying and teasing
- Character development curriculum
- Conflict resolution for peer disputes

**Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach**

**Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy**

4-year project

1. Inventory of threat assessment practices
2. Identification of best practices
3. RCT of training in best practices

Schools using Virginia TA

Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs

**University of Virginia**

**http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu**