The Development of Behavioral Threat Assessment as an Evidence-Based Practice in K-12 Schools

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Topics

1. Case example
2. School-based threat assessment
3. Virginia threat assessment model
4. Statewide implementation study

Bullying in middle and high school:
- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Uneven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation

Bullying led to:
- Change in peer group
  - Freaks vs preps
  - Shoot up the school
- Mental deterioration
  - Depression
  - Threatening voices
  - Man under the house
  - You gotta do this

West Paducah, Ky.
DEC. 1, 1997

Three girls were killed when Michael Carneal, 14, opened fire on a prayer meeting that had assembled in school just before the start of classes. He had warned a classmate that "something big" would happen. When a friend pushed him to a wall to stop the rampage, Carneal said, "Kill me, please. I can't believe I did that." He faces trial as an adult.

A .22-cal.
Ruger pistol
was used.
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Prevention Opportunities

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

No one reported his threats

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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Threat Assessment For Schools

Applications of Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assassins</td>
<td>Bullying and fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalkers</td>
<td>Sexual harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>Racial/ethnic bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Shooters</td>
<td>School shootings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey of 3,756 high school students

Has another student threatened to harm you in the past 30 days?
464 threats (12% of students)

Did you tell anyone about the threat?
333 (74%) told no one.

What happened with the threat?
42 (9%) threat was carried out

Some particular challenges of student threat assessment

1. Compared to adults, students
   • frequently make threats;
   • often engage in fights;
2. Over-reactions to student misbehavior have serious negative consequences.
3. Schools have a duty to educate all students.

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 2001-04 by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund
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.

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.

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.
Transient versus substantive threats

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.

Substantive Threats

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.

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.

Training Workshops
Arkansas
California
Colorado
Delaware
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Kansas
Maryland
Massachusetts
Minnesota
New York
North Dakota
Ohio
South Carolina
Tennessee
Vermont
Virginia
Washington
Wisconsin

How can threat assessment become an established practice?
Many groups identify evidence-based practices

The Era of Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence Is Not Easy!

Research on threat assessment is not possible

• The base rate for shootings is too low.
• Threat assessment is an art, not a science.
• Threat assessment cannot be quantified.
• Threat assessment requires clinical judgment.
• Schools would never permit research on such a sensitive topic.

Research on Threat Assessment

Research on Threat Assessment

1. Field-test
   What happens when you try the model?

2. Cross-sectional study
   How do schools using the model compare to other schools?

3. Pre-post study
   How do schools change after adopting the model?

4. Randomized controlled trial
   How do schools randomly chosen to use the model compare to schools waiting to use
   the model or using a different model?

5. Large-scale implementation
   What happens when the whole state adopts the model?

Memphis Field-Test

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 Cross-sectional Study

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

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

Reducions in Long-Term Suspensions Following Adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Dewey G. Cornell, Anne Gregory, and Xitao Pan

Abstract
This quasi-experimental study examined the adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in 23 high schools. After training, school administrators and other staff members demonstrated substantial increases in knowledge of threat assessment principles and decreased commitment to zero tolerance approaches. Schools using the guidelines showed a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions from the preceding year to the posttraining year in contrast to a control group of 26 schools not using the guidelines.
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High School Discipline Study

Long-Term Suspension Rates

- 16.9
- 3.9

Rate per 1,000 students

Baseline Year | Outcome Year

Randomized Controlled Trial

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

*School Psychology Review, 2012*

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
- .13

Research on Threat Assessment

1. Threats are not carried out
2. Reduced suspension rates
3. Increased use of counseling
4. Improved school climate
   - Less bullying
   - More student willingness to seek help

2013 NREPP Listing

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

- Developed by the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) to establish a school-based prevention process designed to help school administrators, mental health staff, and law enforcement officials assess and respond to threats made by students or individuals who pose a threat to students at schools. The VSTAG guidelines are designed to promote school intervention and intervention for students who pose a threat to their peers or school community.

*http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=263*

Governor’s School and Campus Safety Task Force

- 40 members
- Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and Health and Human Resources
What is the “Virginia model”?

Model developed at University of Virginia in 2001 under direction of Dr. Dewey Cornell, recognized by NREPP as an evidence-based practice

Model developed in 2014 by Va Dept of Criminal Justice Services (with input from Dr. Cornell) that permits schools to use any model that conforms to its general guidelines, including the UVa model.

Types of Threats (%)

Unspecified | 33
Kill | 23
Use weapon | 21
Hit, beat | 18
Stab, cut | 13
Bomb | 5
Arson | 1
Sexual | 1

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

Intended Victim (%)

Student | 68
Teacher | 15
Whole school/group | 13
Staff/administrator | 7
Other | 4

Percentages for 1,8765 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one victim.
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**Threat Outcomes (%)**

- Threat Not Attempted: 97.7%
- Attempted and Averted: 2.6%
- Threat Carried Out: 0.7%

**Disciplinary Outcome (%)**

- Reprimand: 53%
- Suspension out of school: 44%
- Suspension in school: 16%
- Expulsion reduced to...: 5%
- Detention after school: 3%
- Placed in juvenile detention: 3%
- Arrested: 1%
- Expelled: 1%

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one outcome.

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**School Placement Outcome (%)**

- No Change: 84%
- Transferred to alternative school: 8%
- Homebound instruction: 5%
- Transferred to regular school: 1%
- Other: 2%

**Disciplinary Outcomes**

- No statistically significant differences for White vs Black or White vs Hispanic students

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Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

- In our initial year, preliminary analyses show positive results for statewide implementation of student threat assessment.
- Schools are making differentiated assessments, recognizing that most cases are not serious.
- Most students are able to return to school, with few arrests or expulsions.
- Similar outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and White students.

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Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

Variation across schools in....
1. Threshold for doing an assessment
2. Criteria for a serious threat
3. Threat response
Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

Educational programs to:
1. Increase school understanding of threat assessment
2. Increase serious threat reporting.

School Safety Online Educational Program

- **Students** (15 min)
- **Parents** (25 min)
- **Teachers/staff** (25 min)
- **Team members** (25, 20, 30 min)

Programs include anonymous survey questions to measure learning. Answers will be used for research purposes. For more information, contact Dr. Jennifer Maeng at jlc7d@virginia.edu

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Student Response to Program

- **My school has a threat assessment team.**
  - Pretest: 56, 44%
  - Posttest: 62, 58%

- **A threat assessment team will automatically suspend a student for making a threat.** (False)
  - Pretest: 66, 55%
  - Posttest: 66, 56%

- **A threat assessment team may try counseling to prevent two students from fighting.**
  - Pretest: 69, 59%
  - Posttest: 70, 60%

- **If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.**
  - Pretest: 56, 44%
  - Posttest: 62, 58%

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Staff Knowledge of Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall correct</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall percent correct</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Virginia public schools are required to have a threat assessment team</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools have a relatively high rate of shootings compared to other locations in the U.S.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat assessment teams investigate threatening statements or actions by students</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A threat assessment team will automatically suspend a student for making a threat. (False)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat assessment includes intervention with students whose behavior may pose a threat to others</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Parent Knowledge of Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall percent correct</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child's school has a threat assessment team</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat assessment teams include members with expertise in school law enforcement, instruction, and law enforcement</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat assessment teams investigate threatening statements or behaviors by students</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are automatically suspended for making threats. (False)</td>
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<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools have a relatively high rate of shootings compared to other locations in the U.S. (False)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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School Staff and Parent Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall percent correct</th>
<th>Parents (113)</th>
<th>Staff (283)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I found the information in this program to be clear and easy to understand.</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This program was a useful learning experience</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Safety Online Educational Program

Preview the programs at http://www.schoolthreatassessment.com/

- Students
- Parents
- Teachers/staff
- Team members

To obtain codes for previewing the programs, contact Dr. Jennifer Maeng at jlc7d@virginia.edu

Goals for Threat Assessment in K-12 Schools

1. Establish threat assessment as an evidence-based practice
2. Improve training for schools
3. Maintain standards of fidelity and quality

Virginia Youth Violence Project

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Research Team


How is threat assessment like Rubik’s Cube?

1. Not one problem - multiple problems
2. Not one solution - multiple solutions

Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy

4-year project (2015-2018)

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