The Evolution of Behavioral Threat Assessment: Future Directions for Violence Prevention

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Topics
1. Case example
2. Threat assessment vs risk assessment
3. Prevention, not prediction
4. Evidence-based practice

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

School shooting from "The Basketball Diaries"
Warning: Violent Content
The Evolution of Behavioral Threat Assessment

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

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

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

Three students killed, 5 wounded in shooting

Carneal pleads guilty in shootings

No one reported his threats
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Nov 17, 2015

Is threat assessment a kind of risk assessment?

Common Elements

1. Assess person’s potential for violence
2. Identify risk and protective factors
3. Recommend interventions

Risk Assessment

Threat Assessment

How is threat assessment distinguishable from risk assessment?
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Differences between Risk and Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Risk Assessment</th>
<th>Threat Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intended victim</td>
<td>Institutional decision</td>
<td>Usually identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Often open-ended</td>
<td>Relatively short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Goal</td>
<td>Accurate prediction</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention Strategy</td>
<td>Primarily detainment</td>
<td>Problem resolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most differences are relative rather than categorical.
Applications of Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assassins</td>
<td>Alcohol and drug-related aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalkers</td>
<td>Relationship conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>Community crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Shooters</td>
<td>Domestic, workplace violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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.

Three levels of Prevention

- **Primary Prevention**
  - All persons
- **Secondary**
  - At-risk persons
- **Tertiary**
  - Persons already engaged

“Shootings are unpredictable, so, prevention is not possible”

Shootings seem unpredictable, but, Prevention does not require prediction!

Prevention does not require prediction.

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

Prevention can reduce risk factors.

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

Universal, primary, or tier 1 prevention

Selected, secondary, or tier 2 prevention
Prevention to stop deterioration.

We can intervene to resolve crisis situations before they deteriorate into violence.

Intensive, tertiary, or tier 3 prevention

Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

Intensive Interventions
- Protect, active, and intercede
- Crisis counseling and triage
- Ongoing counseling and mental health services
- Community-based treatment

At-Risk Persons
- Some problem behaviors or conflicts

Campus Prevention
- All students, staff, etc.

- Student safety
- Rapid response teams and dispute mediation
- Job changes and transfers
- Emergency actions

Shootings Skew Perceptions of Campus Safety

Annual Gun Toll
32,000 deaths
84,000 injuries
116,000 total

318
Shootings per day

But 232,000 outside of schools
Homicide Locations

- FBI NIBRS (National Incident-Based Reporting System)
- 18,873 homicide incidents
- 2005-2010
- 1/3 U.S. population


Firearm Deaths
USA 2013

Suicide  21,175
Homicide  11,208
Accident  505
Legal intervention  467
Undetermined  281
Total  33,636

Source: CDC Causes of Death, Table 10
http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64_02.pdf

The U.S. is flooded with gun violence.

Floods spread everywhere.
A school flood would not panic community leaders into believing that schools are dangerous places. We do not sandbag our schools or stock them with life preservers.

The good news about crime

![Graph showing violent and property victimization, 1993-2014](image1)

![Graph showing college campus aggravated assaults](image2)

![Graph showing college campus homicides](image3)

- 243 homicides in 14 years, average of 17.4 per year
- 11,230 campuses ÷ 17.4 =
- Average campus has a homicide every 645 years

On-Campus Crimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of on-campus crimes</th>
<th>Number of PTE students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How can threat assessment become an established practice?

The Era of Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-Based Medicine

Evidence-Based Forensic Practices

Evidence-Based Policing
Evidence-Based Education

Many groups identify evidence-based practices

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.

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)

Available from Amazon.com
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Threat Reported to Principal

- Step 1. Evaluate Threat.
- Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.
  - Threat is clearly transient.
  - Threat is substantive.
- Step 3. Respond to transient threat.
- Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.
  - Threat is serious.
  - Threat is very serious.
- Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
- Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

Transient Threats

- Threat is transient.
- Threat is serious.
- Threat is very serious.

Substantive Threats

- Threat is substantive.
- Threat is very serious.

Serious Substantive Threats

- Threat is serious.
- Threat is very serious.

Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Threat is very serious.

Research on Threat Assessment

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**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?

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**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*

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**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*

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**Randomized Controlled Trial**

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

*School Psychology Review, 2012*

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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

Governor’s School and Campus Safety Task Force

40 members, Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and Health and Human Resources

http://dcjs.virginia.gov/vcss/SchoolCampusSafetyTaskForce/

Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy

4-year project (2015-2018)

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Student Threats to Harm Others

Selected sample of 1,470 threat assessment cases reported by 810 Virginia public schools during the 2013-14 school year
### Types of Threats (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kill</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit, beat</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stab, cut</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit, weapon</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomb</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages for 1,470 threat cases from 810 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

### Intended Victim (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole school</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages for 1,470 threat cases from 810 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

### Communication Method (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Direct</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal 3rd Party</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Direct</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic 3rd Party</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages for 1,470 threat cases from 810 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

### Threat Category for 732 Threat Cases

- Very Serious Substantive: 8%
- Serious Substantive: 16%
- Transient: 76%

### Threat Outcomes (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat Not Attempted</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted and Averted</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat Carried Out</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages for 1,470 threat cases from 810 schools. Caution: no control group for these outcomes

### Disciplinary Outcome (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suspension out of school</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reprimand</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension in school</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detention after school</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expulsion reduced to suspension</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expelled</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrested</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placed in juvenile detention</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1. Statewide inventory of practices
2. Identification of best practices
3. Assessment of outcomes by race
4. Technical assistance/training
5. Randomized control trial on training effectiveness

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Project

Next Steps....

- 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.

Virginia Youth Violence Project

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Research Team

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4-year project (2015-2018)

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How is violence prevention like Rubik’s Cube?

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