Prevalence of Aggressive Attitudes and Student Willingness to Report Threats of Violence in Middle Schools
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Abstract
The current study hypothesized that middle school students in schools where students endorse aggressive attitudes are less likely to report threats of violence. Our statewide sample consisted of 39,364 7th and 8th graders who completed school climate surveys in 423 schools. Students were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with two statements: (1) “If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school” (2) “If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.” Two multi-level logistic regression analyses found that student reports of aggressive attitudes are associated with a lower likelihood of reporting such incidents. These analyses controlled for student and school demographics.

Rationale
Authorities agree that student reports are key to the prevention of school shootings; many shootings have been prevented because students were willing to break the code of silence and seek help for a threat of violence. The present study hypothesized that the prevalence of student attitudes that support and justify aggressive behavior will be associated with less willingness to report threats of violence.

Study Questions
Does the prevalence of aggressive attitudes in middle school make students less likely to report the presence of a gun at a school or a threat to kill someone?

Methods and Results
The sample included 19,004 boys (48%) and 20,360 girls (52%) from 423 Virginia public schools. There were 20,510 (52%) seventh graders and 18,854 (48%) eighth graders. Racial/ethnic breakdown was 20,616 (52%) White, 7,184 (18%) African American, 5,027 (13%) Hispanic, 1,337 (3%) Asian American, 6,140 (16%) multiracial, and 3,275 (8%) another race.

The school climate survey was administered anonymously online to all public schools statewide in 2013. Overall school participation rate was 98% (Konold et al., 2014).

The two dependent variables were two questions answered on 4-point scales (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, 4-Strongly Agree): (1) “If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school” (M = 87%, SD = 8.3%, min. = 50.0%, max. = 100.0%) (2) “If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school” (M = 83%, SD = 8.0%, min. = 50.0%, max. = 100.0%).

The schools were divided into three levels of aggressive attitudes. The next chart shows that as the level of aggressive attitudes increased, students became less likely to report a threat of violence.

The graph above shows that as the student level of aggressive attitudes increased, the probability of reporting a threat of violence decreased.

Conclusion
Threats of violence are not to be taken lightly. Students are reluctant to report on their peers, but it is important to teach them to seek help for a threat of violence. Although a majority (82-86%) of students would report the presence of a gun or a threat to kill someone, a substantial proportion of students reported that they would not.

The prevalence of aggressive attitudes was associated with a decrease in the likelihood that a student would report a threat of violence, both at the student and school level. These results suggest that in order to successfully increase the likelihood that students will report threats of violence, the prevalence of aggressive attitudes should be addressed. Two study limitations are that the link between aggressive attitudes and threat reporting may be influenced by social desirability and shared method variance. Future studies might include independent assessment of aggressive attitudes by peers or teachers. Furthermore, studies should investigate whether efforts to reduce the prevalence of aggressive attitudes will increase willingness to seek help for threats of violence.

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As shown below, at the student level, aggressive attitudes were associated with a 19% decrease in the odds of reporting a gun brought to school (OR = 0.81, p < .001), holding all other variables constant. An increase in aggressive attitudes was associated with an 18% decrease in the odds of reporting a threat to kill (OR = 0.82, p < .001). At the school level, aggressive attitudes were associated with a 13% decrease in the odds of reporting a gun brought to school (OR = 0.87, p < .001), holding all variables constant. The pattern is also similar if someone threatened to kill someone (OR = 0.90, p < .001).

Being African American, Asian, Hispanic, multiracial/other, or a bully were each associated with a decrease in reporting a gun or a threat to kill.

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References