Student Threat Assessment as a
Violence Prevention Strategy
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Teach students to distinguish
snitching from seeking help

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

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

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.

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.
Student Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Available from sopriswest.com

- Legally defensible procedures for responding to student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Research-based and field-tested
- Covers K-12, regular and special education

Field-Test Schools
22 Elementary schools
6 Middle schools
4 High schools
3 Alternative schools
35 Total

What did the students threaten to do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 188 cases

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.

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.

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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

Transient versus substantive threats

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.

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.

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.
**Mental Health Assessment**

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

**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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**Follow-up on student behavior after the threat**

According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.

**How did schools respond to 188 threats?**

Short-term = 1-10 days, Long-term > 10 days

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**Threat assessment provides schools with an alternative to zero tolerance discipline.**

Under zero tolerance, students are immediately given long-term suspensions for any violation of certain rules.

**Zero Tolerance Expanded after Columbine**

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*
The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices

Suspension Practices

Suspension may be 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
- Disproportionate effects on minority students
- Juvenile court involvement

http://www.justicecenter.csg.org/resources/juveniles

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

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 Climate 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

- School climate survey of randomly selected samples of 9th grade students in each school:
  - Bullying observed in school
  - Victimization experienced in school
  - Willingness to seek help
  - Positive learning environment

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.

Cornell, Fan & Gregory (2011), NASSP Bulletin
High School Discipline Study

Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned to training or wait one year
- Data collected on 201 students
- 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.

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

Outcomes for Threat v Control

- Logistic regression examining Threat Assessment vs Control

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

Compliance Scores Predict Outcomes

- Logistic regression examining Compliance with Threat Assessment Model

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<tr>
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<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
Main Findings

- Threat assessment is safe and efficient.
- Threat assessment leads to less bullying.
- Threat assessment keeps students in school with fewer long-term suspensions.

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