Student Threat Assessment as a Violence Prevention Strategy

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Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for nearly 30 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 two books: Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence and School Violence: Fears versus Facts.

Overview

1. Are schools safe?
2. Rationale for threat assessment
3. Threat assessment guidelines and case studies
4. Research on threat assessment

Public concern over a recent series of mass shootings:

- Jan 2011 shopping center in Tucson AZ (6)
- Sep 2011 restaurant in Carson City NV (5)
- Jul 2012 movie theater in Aurora CO (12)
- Aug 2012 Sikh temple in Oak Creek WI (7)
- Sept 2012 business in Minneapolis MN (7)
- Dec 2012 school in Newtown CT (28)
- Sept 2013 Washington Navy Yard (12)

The media were quick to assert that mass shootings were increasing.

Why are mass shootings becoming more common?

Department of Awful Statistics: Are Mass Shootings Really On the Rise?

They're not, but the alarmist numbers are more likely to get media attention.

Mass shootings in the U.S., 1976-2011

Cases with 4 or more victims

http://boston.com/community/topics/crime_popular/2013/01/responding_to_mother_jones/deal
The Sandy Hook shooting was part of a national problem with gun violence, not school violence.

- Approximately 31,000 gun fatalities each year
- Suicide (62%), homicide (35%), & accidental shootings (3%)
- Approximately 85 deaths per day

Source: National Vital Statistics
http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html
Where do violent crimes occur in Virginia?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>2011 Virginia Murder Offenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence/Home</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway/Road/Alley</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking Lot/Garage</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. office)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field/Woods</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store/Restaurant</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/College</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from page 46, Crime in Virginia 2011, Virginia State Police. Data for schools k-12 and colleges are excluded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>2011 Virginia Aggravated Assault Offenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence/Home</td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway/Road/Alley</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking Lot/Garage</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. hotel, office)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store/Restaurant</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/College</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field/Woods</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from page 46, Crime in Virginia 2011, Virginia State Police. Data for schools k-12 and colleges are excluded.

One shooting does not change the fundamental safety of our schools.

Should we put armed guards in shopping centers?

2011 Tucson shooting, 6 killed

Should we put armed guards in theaters?

Colorado shooting at 'Dark Knight' opening leaves 12 dead

Colorado police have recorded the death toll for the Aurora movie theater shooting at a midnight screening of "The Dark Knight Rises". The unconfirmed estimates for the actual number of people killed are resulting in a key person search for the suspect at police and the victim’s home.

Should we put armed guards in school buses?

US school bus driver shot dead, child abducted in Alabama

Where do we need police protection?

- Location A -- highest crime rate
- Location B -- medium crime rate
- Location C -- lowest crime rate

Unless we have unlimited police resources, we should place any additional officers in locations with the highest crime rates.

What if the media devotes 95% of its coverage to crime in Location C?

- Location A -- highest crime rate
- Location B -- medium crime rate
- Location C -- lowest crime rate

Media coverage should not compromise an objective assessment of crime rates and security needs.

What is the likelihood of a student committing a homicide at your school?

- 93 student homicides cases in 10 years = 9.3/year (1992-03 to 2001-02)
- 119,000 schools
- 119,000 ÷ 9.3/year =
- 1 case every 12,796 years

School-Associated Violent Deaths 1992-2010

School violence is not increasing.

School violence is not increasing.

Crimes per 1,000 students

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

2013 data from CDC School-Associated Violent Death Study - http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/savd.html
School shootings generate increased fear that can lead to over-reactions.

Arming our teachers is not that easy

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

Sandy Hook Shooting Inspires Bulletproof Kids Clothing

Fear mongering

Zero Tolerance Suspensions After the Newtown Shootings

6 year old pointed finger and said "pow!"

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

9 year old with toy gun 12 year old doodler


Poem about Sandy Hook, "I understand the killings..."
How Can We Prevent Violence?

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.

Critics say, “We can’t predict who will be violent, so prevention is not possible.”

However,....

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.

3 Tier Model of Prevention

Intensive Interventions
Students with very serious behavior problems

At-Risk Students
Students with some problem behaviors

Schoolwide Prevention
All students

Profiling

FBI Recommendations on School Violence

"One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

Download at www.fbi.gov

What is Criminal Profiling?

Multiple terms and definitions

1. Retrospective profiling
   - Crime has occurred
   - Analysis of crime scene
   - Infer characteristics of offender

2. Prospective profiling
   - No crime has occurred
   - Checklist of possible characteristics
   - Speculate about future behavior
School Profiling

Federal Warning Signs

1. Social withdrawal
2. Excessive feelings of isolation
3. Excessive feelings of rejection
4. Being a victim of violence
5. Feelings of being picked on & persecuted
6. Low school interest/poor academic performance
7. Violence in writings/drawings
8. Uncontrolled anger
9. Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors
10. History of discipline problems
11. Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
12. Tolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
13. Drug use and alcohol use
14. Affiliation with gangs
15. Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
16. Serious threats of violence

Profiling does not work.

• School shootings are too rare.
• Profiles make false predictions.
• Profiles generate stereotypes.
• Profiles don’t solve problems.

FBI Recommends Against Profiling

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

Contributing Factors

Bullying
Mental Illness
Peer Influences
Access to guns

Case example: How schools permit and even promote bullying

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

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.
Threat Assessment

1. Focus on behavior, not trait characteristics.
2. Risk is dynamic, not static quality.
3. Strategies for prevention, not prediction.

6 Principles of the Threat Assessment Process
(abridged from Secret Service/DOE Guide)

1. Targeted violence is the result of an understandable process, not a random or spontaneous act.
2. Consider person, situation, setting, & target.
3. Maintain an investigative, skeptical mindset.
4. Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits.
5. Use information from all possible sources.
6. Making a threat is not the same as posing a threat. Ask “Is this student on a path toward an attack?”

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>Responsibilities</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</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</td>
<td>Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not required to serve on team</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.

No Magic Formula or Crystal Ball

There is no formula, prescription, or checklist that will predict or prevent all violent acts. School authorities must make reasoned judgments based on the facts of each individual situation, and monitor situations over time.
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.

What did the students threaten to do?

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

A primary goal of threat assessment is to prevent violence.
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

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?

Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?

All threats are not the same.

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)
“I’m gonna kick your butt.”
“There’s a bomb in the school.”
“Wait until I get my gun!”
“Let’s really make them pay for what they did.”

Context matters...
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.

Substantive threats: Factors to consider

- Age of student
- Capability of student to carry out the threat
- Student’s discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- Credibility of witness accounts
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

Presumptive indicators of substantive threats

- Specific, plausible details. (“I am going to blast Mr. Johnson with my pistol.”)
- Threat has been repeated over time. (“He’s been telling everyone he is going to get you.”)
- Threat reported as a plan (“Wait until you see what happens next Tuesday in the library.”)
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices.
- Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)
Case examples: Transient or substantive threat?

1. Two elementary students to throw paper wads pretending to bomb one another.
2. Two middle school students get in a shoving match. One says, “I’m gonna bust you up.”
3. A boy turns in an English essay that describes an especially violent scene from a war.
4. Two students get into a fight. After they are separated, both are sullen and quiet.
5. A student says he is being bullied. He was warned that if he told anyone, they would beat him up.

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

Substantive Threats 30%

Transient Threats 70%

Who made transient threats?

Students DO NOT have to be suspended for making a threatening statement.

Many threats can be resolved without suspension.
The disconnect between youth violence and school safety practices

Zero Tolerance

A policy that mandates a severe punishment that is applied to all violations regardless of the circumstances.

From APA Zero Tolerance Task Force Report, 2006

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

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

The school-to-prison pipeline

Zero tolerance is not needed for student threats of violence. Threat assessment is a more flexible and effective alternative.
Transient versus substantive threats

Substantive Threats 30%
Transient Threats 70%

Who made substantive threats?

Step 4. Serious or very serious substantive threat?
- Substantive assault threats are classified serious. ("I’m gonna beat him up.")
- Substantive threats to kill, rape, or inflict very serious injury are classified very serious. ("I’m gonna break his arm.")
- Substantive threats involving a weapon are classified very serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.
- Take precautions to protect potential victims. May consult with law enforcement.
- Notify intended victim and victim’s parents.
- Notify student’s parents.
- Discipline student for threat.
- Determine appropriate intervention for student, such as counseling or dispute mediation.
- Follow up to verify that threat has been resolved and interventions in progress.

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 7. Follow up on action plan.

Substantive Case Steps

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
- Interview the student who made threat and any witnesses.
- Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made, the student’s intentions, and the victims’ interpretations of the threat.

Step 2. Decide whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- Does the student express remorse and retract the threat?
- Is the student willing to make amends or resolve the conflict?
- What is the student’s history of discipline problems?

Step 4. Decide whether the threat is serious or very serious.
- Did this threat involve a weapon, or a threat to kill, rape, or inflict severe injury?

Step 5. Respond to the serious substantive threat.
- Take protective action by notifying parents of perpetrator and victims.
- Take disciplinary action consistent with school policy.
- Identify any other student support or intervention needs.
Very serious cases are relatively rare

Very Serious Substantive Threats

Transient Threats

Very Serious Substantive Threats


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.

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.

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.
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.

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

- Principal contacted SRO. They inquire about John’s access to firearms.
- Parents summoned to school. John is suspended, referred for evaluation.
- Parents of victims are informed of threat, reassured about school’s actions.

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.

Mental Health Assessment

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

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

Reviewed 221 studies of diverse school-based violence prevention programs
Average effect size = .25 for demonstration programs, which would reduce fighting 50% in a typical school
Numerous Effective Programs
- Anger management
- Bullying prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Parenting skills
- Problem-solving
- Social competence
- Substance abuse resistance
- Etc.

Mental Health Assessment
- **Who** – school staff member who is a mental health professional
- **When** – as soon as possible after a very serious threat
- **How** – Modify questions as clinically appropriate, use as much existing information as possible, concentrate on risk of violence

Sources of information for mental health assessment
Mental health professional will interview:
- Student
- Intended victim/witnesses
- Student’s parent
- School staff who know student (including SRO, school counselor, teachers)
- Outside professionals who know student

Mental Health Assessment FAQ’s
- **Parental Permission?** – not required in emergency, but otherwise necessary
- **Testing?** – use if clinically indicated, to supplement interviews
- **External evaluations?** – Not a substitute for evaluation by trained school staff

Student Interview
- Review of threat and relationship with victim
- Stress and situational factors, family support
- Mental health symptoms (depression, psychosis, severe anxiety, or suicidality)
- Access to firearms
- Previous aggressive and delinquent behavior, exposure to violence
- Peer relations and social adjustment
- Coping and strengths
- Bullying and victimization experiences
Beginning the student interview

- “Do you know why I wanted to meet with you today?”
- Explain purpose of interview to understand what happened, why it happened, and what should be done to resolve the problem.
- Information will be shared with school staff who will be deciding what to do about the problem. **No promise of confidentiality.**
- This is the student’s opportunity to tell his/her side of the story and have a voice in what is decided.

**Key Point**

Interviews conducted as part of a threat assessment are NOT confidential.

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

- John describes feeling rejected by Alice, teased by other boys.
- John admits hit list. Denies intent to hurt anyone. “They was messing with me and I was messing back.”
- John is willing to attend mediation sessions.

Parent interview

- Parent knowledge of threat
- Current stressors, family relations, childhood history
- Recent behavior and mental health
- School adjustment
- Peer relations and bullying
- History of aggressive and delinquent behavior, exposure to violence, access to weapons
- Willingness to assist in a safety plan
- Parent attitude toward school and Law enforcement

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

- John’s mother reports that John was treated for depression, stopped his medication a few months ago.
- John is stressed over parental separation and conflict.
- John does not have history of violence, does not have ready access to firearms.

Teacher/Staff Interviews

- Academics
- Teacher knowledge of threat
- Student’s peer relations
- Depression and/or suicidality
- Discipline
- Aggression
Mental Health Assessment Report Template

Identifying Information

Give the student's name, age, gender, school, and other relevant identifying information.

Reason for Referral

State that the evaluation was requested by the school principal because the student made a threat of violence that was judged to be a very serious, substantive threat. Describe the threat, including the exact statement or threatening behavior, and when and where it took place.

Sources of Information

Describe or list the sources of information used in this report, including information from the principal, interviews with the student and witnesses, any parent interviews, and any psychological tests or scales administered.

Major Findings

Describe how the child presented and any important aspects of his or her mental state, including any indications of mental disorder. Identify any stresses, conflicts, or unmet needs that affect the child's functioning or bear on the threat incident.

Review the child's understanding of the threat and its meaning from the child's perspective. Note whether the child has a history of violent or aggressive behavior, and any findings from the assessment that raise concern about the child's potential for violence, such as access to firearms, peer encouragement to fight, drug use, or inadequate home supervision.

Recommendations

In general, the mental health professional should not be expected to make a definitive statement that a child is or is not dangerous; such statements go beyond current knowledge in the field of risk assessment. The report may identify risk factors and protective factors, and express concerns where there appear to be compelling risk factors. More importantly, the report should include recommendations for reducing the risk of violence, and it is the nature of these recommendations that should convey the nature and degree of concern about the potential for violence. In all cases, the goal is to reduce the risk of violence rather than predict violence. Recommendations may include a wide range of strategies, but should address both any immediate safety needs to protect potential victims and broader efforts to resolve conflicts or problems that precipitated the threat.

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.

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

- John returns to outpatient treatment. Parents recognize impact of their conflict on John.
- Dispute with boys is investigated. John attends mediation sessions with other students. Mutual apologies are given.
- John meets with SRO, agrees to report further problems to him. School counselor establishes relationship.

Typical Threat 1

- An angry student says "I’m gonna kill you" to a classmate.
- What do you do?
Typical Threat 1

- On interview, the student says he has no plans to harm the classmate and that he just lost his temper. He offers to apologize.
- What kind of threat?

Typical Threat 2

- A student tells a friend that he is going to beat up Joe in the back parking lot after school today. The friend tells you.
- What do you do?

Typical Threat 2

- On interview, the student denies making such a statement. He says that what he does after school is his own business.
- What kind of threat?

Typical Threat 3

- A student sends an email threatening to “blow away the preps” at school. When interviewed, the boy says he has a right to free speech. He has a history of discipline problems and students say they are worried.
- What kind of threat?
- What do you do?

3 Pathways to Violent Behavior

- Psychotic Path
- Antisocial Path
- Conflict Path

Look for patterns, not a single profile.

Antisocial youth -- instrumental crime
Conflicted youth – reactive anger
Psychotic youth – delusional motive
Antisocial Youth

- Instrumental crimes
- Under-controlled aggression
- Antisocial peers
- Delinquent history
- Early childhood problems
- School discipline history

Psychotic Youth

- Delusional motive
- Auditory hallucinations
- Substance abuse
- Resentment over mistreatment
- Alienation from peers
- Odd behaviors

Seung-Hui Cho

Childhood Timeline

- 1984 Born in Seoul Korea, shy and frail as infant, did not want to be touched
- 1992 Family moved to U.S.
- 1997 Diagnosed "social anxiety disorder" receives counseling around acculturation
- 1999 Suicidal/homicidal writings, wants to repeat Columbine – diagnosed "selective mutism" and "major depression" antidepressants for 1 year, seemed successful

Adolescent Timeline

- 2000 IEP for shyness and lack of speech, no behavior problems
- Monthly language therapy in school
- Mental health counseling center until 11th grade, did not want to continue
- 2003 Graduates with 3.5 in Honors Program, seen as successful case
- Disability status not indicated in records sent to Va Tech

Main Reports

1. Governor’s Review Panel Report
2. VA Tech Internal Review
3. Report to President Bush on Virginia Tech
   http://www.hhs.gov/vtreport.html
Seung-Hui Cho

College Year 3
- Fall 2005 returned to dorm, suitemates try to befriend him, but he says little. They take him to parties and he sits alone. Stabs carpet in girl’s room, and they stop taking him places.
- Called suitemate and identified himself as Cho’s twin and “question mark. Posted Facebook messages as Cho’s twin

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Seung-Hui Cho

College Writing Class
- Fall 2005 Professor concerned with violent writing, withdrawn behavior. In paper wrote about other students in class, “I don’t know which uncouth, low-life planet you come from but you disgust me. In fact, you all disgust me. You low-life barbarians make me sick to the stomach that I wanna barf over my new shoes. If you despicable human beings… keep this up, before you know it you will turn into cannibals-eating little babies, your friends. I hope y’all burn in hell for mass murdering and eating all those little animals.”
- Students afraid to come to class. Photographing classmates with camera under desk. Professor refused to teach him. Removed from class, refuses counseling, Care Team reviews case.

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Seung-Hui Cho

College Stalking
- Nov 2005 Female students report Cho for stalking, IMs with strange aliases, going to room in disguise. Referred to Judicial Affairs, phone screening with counseling center.
- Dec 2005 Police tell him no contact with female student. Sent IM to suitemate “I might as well kill myself now.” Police take to CSB, where hospitalized as “imminent danger to self or others.” Diagnosed mood disorder NOS.

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Seung-Hui Cho

College Hospitalization
- Dec 2005 After overnight hosp stay, not seen as danger to self or others, so released by court but ordered to outpt treatment. Goes to college counseling center, seen as not psychotic. Does not return.
- April 2006 Professor concerned about his writing, Cho was angry and was asked to leave office.
- Spring 2006 Creative writing about man who hates students, plans to kill them and himself.

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Seung-Hui Cho

College Year 4
Fall 2006 Professor contacts dean, but dean finds no mention of mental health issues or police reports. Professor encourages counseling, which Cho declines. By now, 6 professors have expressed concern about Cho.

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Seung-Hui Cho

Prior to Attack
- Feb 2007 orders handgun online
- Mar 2007 rents van, buys 2nd gun, background check fails, practices, buys ammo
- April 8 videotapes manifesto in hotel
- April 13 bomb threats at 3 halls
- April 14 Asian male seen in hood, door reported chained, more ammo bought
- April 15 normal phone call to family
Statements from Cho Video

- You had 100 billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off.
- Do you know what it feels like to be spit on your face and have trash shoved down your throat? Do you know what it feels like to dig your own grave? Do you know what it feels like to have your throat slashed from ear to ear?
- Do you know what it feels like to be torched alive? Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and be impaled — impaled upon on a cross and left to bleed to death for your amusement?
- You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn't enough. Your vodka and Cognac weren't enough. All your debaucheries weren't enough. Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything.
- You sadistic snobs, I may be nothing but a piece of (EXPLETIVE DELETED) You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and tortured my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy’s life you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people.
- You just love to crucify me. You loved inducing cancer in my head, terrorizing my heart, and raping my soul all this time.
- I didn’t have to do this. I could have left. I could have fled. But, no, I will no longer run. It’s not for me. For my children, for my brothers and sisters that you (EXPLETIVE DELETED) I did it for them.

Conflicted youth

- Reactive violence of victims
- Over-controlled hostility
- Few previous overt behavior problems
- Over-sensitive to shame
- Intense need for approval, status
- Suicidality

Bullying motivated many of the school shootings

Dormitory Murder at Swarthmore College

- Honor student
- Poor family
- Teased by peers
- Shooting spree in dorm
- One student killed

What is bullying?

Bullying is the repeated use of one’s strength or status for the purpose of intimidating or injuring another person.

A conflict between equals is not bullying.
Forms of Bullying

- **Physical**
  - hitting, shoving, grabbing
- **Verbal**
  - teasing, name-calling
- **Social**
  - spreading rumors, shunning or excluding
- **Sexual**
  - inappropriate comments and touching
- **Cyber-bullying**
  - use of internet

Bullying is a Form of Peer Conflict

Peer conflict

Bullying

- Bullying is a form of peer conflict in which there is:
  1. Harmful aggression,
  2. Dominance, (one has power over the other)
  3. Persistence.

Bullying Can Be Criminal

Peer conflict

Bullying

Criminal Behavior

When is bullying a crime?

- **Assault**
- **Battery**
- **Extortion**
- **False Imprisonment**
- **Hazing**
- **Larceny**
- **Robbery**
- **Thefts**
- **Sexual Harassment**
- **Stalking**
- **Threats**

When is bullying a crime?

The decision to pursue criminal charges for behavior associated with bullying is a judgment based on severity and circumstances.

European study by Olweus found that 60% of bullies have a criminal conviction by age 24, compared to 10% of controls.
Sexual Harassment:  
Davis v Monroe Opinion

In May, 1999 Supreme Court ruled that a school board is liable under Title IX for student-to-student harassment if:
1. The sexual harassment was so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it deprived the victim of access to educational opportunities and benefits.
2. School authorities had knowledge of the harassment.
3. School authorities were deliberately indifferent to the sexual harassment.
(see www.streetlaw.org)

Liability for Bullying?

Scruggs v. Meriden Board of Education  
U.S. District Court of Connecticut
- Middle school boy receiving LD services was bullied repeatedly, and eventually committed suicide
- Family sued superintendent, vice principal and school counselor
- Court found the school to be negligent and deliberately indifferent

LW v Toms River Regional School Board of Education
- New Jersey boy repeatedly teased about perceived sexual orientation in elementary and middle school (called "faggot" "gay" etc., physically bullied and threatened)
- Court cited Davis V Monroe in finding for plaintiff, awarded 50K
- School ordered to revise policies, train staff, implement bullying prevention program

“Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504); and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II). Section 504 and Title II prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. School districts may violate these civil rights statutes and the Department’s implementing regulations when peer harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability is sufficiently serious that it creates a hostile environment and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees.”

OCR Dear Colleague letter, 2010

Be the Hero

Created by students at Alhambra High School
http://youtu.be/6LJLMRtllAo
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

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

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.

Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.
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

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

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009

Virginia High School Climate Study

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Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

School Psychology Quarterly, 2009
Reductions in Long-Term Suspensions Following Adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Dewey G. Cornell¹, Anne Gregory², and Xitao Fan³

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 51% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions from the pretraining year to the post-training year in contrast to a control group of 26 schools not using the guidelines.

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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

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High School Discipline Study

- Long-Term Suspension Rates

Randomized Controlled Trial

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

School Psychology Review, 2012

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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

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Outcome Odds for Students in Threat Assessment versus Control Schools

Odds ratios control for effects of student gender, race, grade, and threat severity. Table shows how likely an outcome would be for a student attending a school with threat assessment in comparison to a control school without threat assessment.
Virginia Public Schools

133 school divisions
2,002 public schools
1.2 million students

Association of Threat Assessment with Suspensions

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

Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

Years Using TA Associated with Suspensions

Schools using Virginia TA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One year increase in number of years using UVA TA (1-5)</td>
<td>17% fewer</td>
<td>5% fewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( p < .05 \) for both LTS and STS
Same control variables

Communication and Problem Solving

Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach that requires communication and cooperation among all parties.

This process must not be hindered by FERPA.

Confidentiality Versus Prevention of Violence

"Choice, choice—neither one or the other"
What can school officials disclose in an emergency situation?

“In an emergency, FERPA permits school officials to disclose, without consent, education records, including personally identifiable information from those records, to protect the health or safety of students or other individuals.”

Can school officials share their observations of students?

“FERPA does not prohibit a school official from disclosing information about a student if the information is obtained through the school official’s personal knowledge or observation, and not from the student’s education records.”

Can school officials share their law enforcement unit records?

“Under FERPA, investigative reports and other records created and maintained by these ‘law enforcement units’ are not considered ‘education records’ subject to FERPA. Accordingly, schools may disclose information from law enforcement unit records to anyone....”

Liability Protection

- Follow recognized standards.
- Make reasonable decisions. (Perfection is not required.)
- Maintain adequate documentation. (Post hoc records are inadequate.)

Training Workshops

California
Colorado
Delaware
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Kansas
Maryland
New York
Ohio
Pennsylvania
South Carolina
Tennessee
Vermont
Washington
Wisconsin
2013 NREPP Listing!

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (2013) is a school-based multirisk process designed to help school administrators, teachers, school staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threats made against students or educators. It includes a tiered response to promote students' safety through intervention, early identification, and response to students at risk. The guidelines provide a framework for school personnel to work collaboratively to prevent violence and to mitigate the impact of violence on students.


Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

Intensive Interventions

At-Risk Students

Schoolwide Prevention

- Intensive monitoring and supervision
- Community-based treatment
- Alternative school placement
- Special education evaluation and services

- Social skills groups
- Restorative counseling
- Tutoring and other academic support
- Special education evaluation and services

All students

- Clear and consistent discipline
- School safety plans
- Restorative counseling
- Character development curriculum
- Conflict resolution for peer disputes

http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu