Overview

1. Our schools are safe.
2. Threat assessment is an alternative to zero tolerance.

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

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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.
Student Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

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October 23, 2013

Homicides At School vs Outside of School
Ages 5-18

School-Associated Violent Deaths
1992-2010

School violence is not increasing.

Arming our teachers is not that easy

School shootings generate increased fear that can lead to over-reactions.

Fear mongering
How Can We Prevent Violence?

Zero Tolerance Suspensions After the Newtown Shootings

6 year old pointed finger and said "pow!"

http://www.sott.net/article/255553-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot

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 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

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

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.

Team roles

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

Available from sopriswest.com

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

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 Threats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat Reported to Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1. Evaluate Threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Threat is transient.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Threat is serious.

Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

Threat is serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

Threat is very serious.


Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

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.
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.

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

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.

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.

Key Point

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

Key Point

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.

Key Point

Students DO NOT have to be suspended for making a threatening statement. Many threats can be resolved without suspension.

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

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>Count</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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspend</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
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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

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

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

Dewey G. Cornell, Anne Gregory, and Xitao Fan

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 55% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions from the pretraining year to the posttraining year in contrast to a control group of 26 schools not using the guidelines.

NASSP Bulletin, 2011

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

High School Discipline Study

Long-Term Suspension Rates

School Psychology Review, 2012

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, and .13

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

Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

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>

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
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2013 NREPP Listing!


Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach

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

At-Risk Students
- Students with some problem behaviors

Schoolwide Prevention
- All students
- Early warning systems
- Restorative justice
- Trauma and violence education
- Character development curriculum
- School security programs
- Response for bullying and teasing
- Social skills groups
- Short-term counseling
- Mentoring and after-school programs
- Tutoring and other academic support
- Special education evaluation and services

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) is a student threat assessment process designed to help school administrators, school staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threat incidents involving students in K-12 school and non-public schools. It is guided by a set of principles that prioritize the safety and well-being of students, staff, and the community.

http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu

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