Student Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

Student Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia
434-924-8929
Email: youthvio@virginia.edu
Website: youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu

Overview
1. Prevention does not require prediction.
2. School shooting case example
3. How threat assessment works
4. Research on threat assessment

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.

House Education and Labor Committee
Hearing on Campus Safety
May 15, 2007
Is it possible to prevent college shootings?
It is difficult to predict who will be violent...

Prevention does not require prediction.
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.
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.

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

Contributing Factors

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

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)

Download at www.fbi.gov
**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 is not designed to determine whether a student has MADE a threat, but whether a student POSES a threat.**

---

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

---

**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.
Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

What did the students threaten to do?

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
- 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.
Transient versus substantive threats

- Transient Threats 70%
- Substantive Threats 30%

Very serious cases are relatively rare

- Very Serious Substantive Threats
- Transient Threats

Very serious cases are relatively rare

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.

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.

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.
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.

How did schools respond to 188 threats?

- Arrest: 6
- Expel: 3
- Suspend: 94

Follow-up on student behavior after the threat

- Carried Out Threat: 0
- Other Violence: 31
- Discipline Violation: 100

According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.

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
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

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

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

- Trained Schools (n = 23)
- Comparison Schools (n = 26)

NASSP Bulletin, 2011
Randomized Controlled Trial

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

*School Psychology Review, 2012*

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Odds Ratio Control Group</th>
<th>Odds Ratio Threat Assessment Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Term Suspension</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative School Placement</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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>
2013 NREPP Listing!

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) is a behavior-based intervention process designed to help school administrators, mental health staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threat incidents involving students or staff who are preoccupied by school-related issues. VSTAG also designed to provide students involved in threat incidents with appropriate mental health counseling services, with parental involvement, and reduce the number of long-term school suspensions or expulsions and alternative school setting placements. VSTAG also aims to reduce school bullying, prevent school violence, and ensure schools are safe environments. VSTAG provides a collaborative approach among staff, school resources, and student threat indicators through the use of a referral network, prevention, and intervention strategies.


Training Workshops

California
Colorado
Delaware
Florida
Indiana
Kansas
Maryland
New York
Ohio
South Carolina
Tennessee
Vermont
Washington
Wisconsin

Virginia Youth Violence Project

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

434-924-0793
Email: dcornell@virginia.edu

dcornell@virginia.edu

Slides available on website
Google
Virginia Youth Violence Project