Overview

1. How does threat assessment differ from risk assessment?
2. What are the particular challenges of student threat assessment?
3. What do we know about student threat assessment?

Risk Assessment Trends

- Increasing specialization of instruments (specific populations, forms of violence, and legal questions)
- Sophisticated analyses of predictive accuracy
- Greater consideration of risk management

Common Elements

1. Assess person’s potential for violence
2. Identify risk and protective factors
3. Recommend interventions

Is threat assessment a kind of risk assessment?

How is threat assessment distinguishable from risk assessment?
Student Threat Assessment
Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.

11-8-2014

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434-924-8929

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**Differences between Risk and Threat Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Risk Assessment</th>
<th>Threat Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intended victim</td>
<td>Often not specified</td>
<td>Usually identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Often open-ended</td>
<td>Relatively short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Goal</td>
<td>Accurate prediction</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention Strategy</td>
<td>Primarily detainment</td>
<td>Problem resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social ecology</td>
<td>Often not considered</td>
<td>Goal to improve climate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most differences are relative rather than categorical.

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**Risk Assessment**

**Threat Assessment**

**What Threat Assessment Can Gain from Risk Assessment**

1. More precise identification of risk factors
2. More specific assessment procedures and model delineation
3. More evidence of effectiveness

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**Applications of Threat Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assassins</td>
<td>Bullies and victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalkers</td>
<td>Teen romances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>Gang conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Shooters</td>
<td>Playground fights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Distinguishing Aspects of Student Threat Assessment**

1. School setting.
2. Facilitate learning and development.
3. Create a positive school climate.
4. Include parent involvement.

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**What are the particular challenges of student threat assessment?**

1. Compared to adults, students
   - frequently make threats;
   - often engage in fights;
2. Over-reactions are common and have pervasive negative consequences.
3. Schools have a duty to educate.
Survey of 3,756 high school students

Has another student threatened to harm you in the past 30 days?
464 threats (12% of students)

Did you tell anyone about the threat?
333 (74%) told no one.

What happened with the threat?
42 (9%) threat was carried out
What is Student Threat Assessment?

Student threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.

Threat assessment is part of comprehensive prevention

Intensive Interventions
- Students with very serious behavior problems
  - Behavioral monitoring and supervision
  - Program monitoring
  - Behavior contract
  - Alternate to school abscond
  - Special education evaluation and services

At-Risk Students
- Students with some problem behaviors
  - Social skills groups
  - Peer mediation training
  - Structured and after-school programs
  - Counseling and other academic support
  - Special education evaluation and services

Schoolwide Prevention
- All students
  - Core and integrated curriculum
  - Positive behavior support system
  - School security program
  - Programs for bullying and teasing
  - Cooperative development curriculum
  - Behavior contract for peer dispute

Crisis response is not prevention.

A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.
Fear-based Reactions to Shootings

- Increased security
- Alarm systems
- Shooter drills
- Guns for faculty
- Zero tolerance

School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.

School Shooter Drills Are Widely Practiced

Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost $4 million

School security measures could cost millions locally

- Additional Florida School Security Could Cost $100 Million
  - School security wish list would cost Marion County $180M
  - Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost $138 million
  - NRA proposal would cost state schools about $138 million.

School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.

- Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost $138 million
- NRA proposal would cost state schools about $138 million.

Every Per Pupil dollar spent for Security is a Per Pupil dollar NOT spent for Instruction.

Some schools hold monthly lockdown drills.

Many states mandate 1 or more lockdown drills per year.
The Expansion of Zero Tolerance

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

Objectively, our schools are safe.
Children are not in danger at school.

Zero Tolerance Suspensions

9 year old with toy gun
12 year old doodler
Poem about Sandy Hook, “I understand the killings...”

What Can Be Done About School Shootings?
A Review of the Evidence

“Any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years.”

125,000 schools ÷ 21 deaths per year = 5,952

Homicides At School vs Outside of School

Ages 5-18

2005-2010 Homicides in 37 States

Sources: CDC National Center for Health Statistics and School Associated Violent Death Surveillance Study. (All annual totals are approximate, using the school year for school homicides and the calendar year for non-school data).

Sources: FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) database.

Selected locations. School includes colleges.
School violence is not increasing.

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

School homicides are not increasing.

Cases identified from records of the National School Safety Center.

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.

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.

Case example: How schools permit and even promote bullying
- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Unven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation
- Group rivalry
Three students killed, 5 wounded in shooting

Contributing Factors
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)
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 positing a threat. Ask “Is this student on a path toward an attack?”

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

A collaborative project of:
University of Virginia Curry School of Education
Albemarle County Public Schools
Charlottesville City Public Schools

Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund

Available from Amazon.com

Download at:
http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu/
or
http://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/vcss/ocps/?menuLevel=11&mID=18
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.

Field-Test Schools

22 Elementary schools
6 Middle schools
4 High schools
3 Alternative schools
35 Total

Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal
Leads team, conducts Step 1.

School Resource Officer
Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.

Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)
Team member to conduct mental health assessments. Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.

Not required to serve on team
Teachers, aides, other staff
Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Number of threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit/Beat Up</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut/Stab</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Bomb</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 188 cases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 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?

Transient versus substantive threats

- Substantive Threats
- Transient 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.

**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.)

**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.
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.

Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Threat Reported to Principal
- Step 2. Evaluate if threat is clearly transient or substantive
- Threat is clearly transient
- Threat is substantive
- Step 3. Respond to transient threat
- Threat is serious
- Threat is very serious
- Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat

Very serious cases are relatively rare

Very Serious — Substantive Threats

Transient 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.
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.

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

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.

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

Mental Health Assessment Report Template

Identifying Information
Give the student’s name, age, grade, school, and other relevant identifying information.

Reason for Referral
State that this 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 where and when 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 his or her 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 are beyond current knowledge in the field of risk assessment. The report may identify risk factors and protective factors that are relevant to the child’s potential for violence. More importantly, the report should present 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, both educational and behavioral, as the needs of the child. It requires careful planning and implementation to prevent potential violence and broader efforts to reduce barriers to treatment and perpetuate the threat.

Behavior Support Plan

For use with:
• IEP
• 504 plan
• Any student

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.

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 Type</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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Frequency</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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carried Out Threat</th>
<th>Other Violence</th>
<th>Discipline Violation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Threat Assessment 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

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.

NASSP Bulletin, 2011

Randomized Controlled Trial

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

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

2013 NREPP Listing

Virginia Public Schools

133 school divisions
2,002 public schools
1.2 million students

Virginia Schools Using Virginia Guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>LTS</th>
<th>STS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>1127</td>
<td>1194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>1068</td>
<td>1127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UVA training records and Safety Audit Survey records

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

<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

Research Needs

- More controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment.
- Research on threat context and student characteristics.
- More follow-up studies of threat outcomes.
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction).

Governor’s School and Campus Safety Task Force

40 members,
Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and Health and Human Resources
http://dcjs.virginia.gov/vcss/SchoolCampusSafetyTaskForce/
2013 Legislation
HB 2344

A. Each local school board shall adopt policies for the establishment of threat assessment teams, including the assessment of and intervention with students whose behavior may pose a threat to the safety of school staff or students consistent with the model policies developed by the Virginia Center for School Safety....

Virginia Statewide Threat Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Number of Threats</th>
<th>Threats per School (min-max)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elem (1,110)</td>
<td>2,170</td>
<td>2 (0-37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (328)</td>
<td>1,644</td>
<td>5 (0-71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (319)</td>
<td>1,611</td>
<td>5 (0-100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (1,757)</td>
<td>5,425</td>
<td>3 (0-100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2013-2014 school year
Omits 216 other school types

Research Directions
- Statewide implementation data
- Inventory of practices and models
- Fidelity standards
- Assessment of outcomes
- Technical assistance/training
- RCT on training effectiveness