Student Threat Assessment as a Violence Prevention Strategy

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Main Points

1. School violence is a small part of a larger problem of gun violence; schools are safer than almost any other place.
2. Concern about school shootings has generated some counter-productive responses: excessive security and zero tolerance discipline.
3. Threat assessment is a useful strategy to identify students in need of assistance.

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• Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia.
• Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project
• Forensic clinical psychologist, worked with violent offenders
• Studied youth violence for 30+ years, 200+ publications in psychology and education
• Developed threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001.

Traumatic Effect of School Shootings

School shootings are so traumatic that they convince everyone that extensive schools are unsafe and require extensive security measures.

Shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida

We need both recovery from trauma and a factual analysis of the best way to prevent more shootings.
Annual Gun Toll
- 33,000 deaths
- 67,000 injuries
100,000 total
275 Shootings per day


5 yrs x 100,000 = 500,000 outside of schools

For every shooting in a school, there are 1,600+ outside of schools

If schools were impregnable, it would only stop .06% of shootings
Less than 1 tenth of 1 percent

The real problem is gun violence, not school violence.
March for Our Lives

Youth from across the country spoke out about the gun violence they experienced both in and out of school.

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Homicides of School-Aged Youth

Average of 22 homicides per year in schools
Average of 1,488 homicides outside of schools
Homicides outside of school are 65x more likely

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Why the Fear of School Violence Matters

1. School Suspensions
2. School Fortification

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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

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

125,000 schools ÷21 deaths/year


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Zero Tolerance Suspenions 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

Zero Tolerance Suspenions

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

3.3 Million Suspensions Per Year Fuel the School to Prison Pipeline

Why the Fear of School Violence Matters

Newtown Rampage Spurs $5 Billion School Security Spending

Building Security Measures
Bullet-Proof Building Entrances
Building Security Measures

Metal detectors and x-ray screening

Building Security Measures

Security and Police Officers

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 $189M.

Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost $138 million.

NRA proposal would cost state schools about $136 million.

(DeAngelis, Brent, & Lann, 2011)

We should prevent shootings rather than simply prepare for them.

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.

The FBI, Secret Service, and Dept of Education recommended a threat assessment approach nearly 20 years ago.

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.

Threat Assessment is a violence prevention strategy.

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.
Accurate Threat Assessment
Avoids 2 Errors ...

1. Over-reaction

School Suspends Second Grader for Eating His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun

Accurate Threat Assessment
Avoids 2 Errors ...

2. Under-Reaction

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

Key Point

Threat assessment is not designed to determine whether a student has MADE a threat, but whether a student POSES a threat.

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.**

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### Research on Threat Assessment

1. **Field-tests**
   - What happens when you try the model?

2. **Controlled studies**
   - Cross-sectional, retrospective study:
     - How do schools using the model compare to other schools?
   - Pre-post study:
     - How do schools change after adopting the model?
   - Randomized controlled trial:
     - What happens to students in schools randomly chosen to use the model?

3. **Large-scale implementation**
   - What happens when the whole state adopts the model?

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**Virginia mandates K-12 threat assessment in 2013**

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**Research on Threat Assessment**

1. 99% of threats not carried out.
2. Only 1% expelled, 1% arrested.
3. Suspension rates decreased.
4. Racial disparities reduced or absent.
5. Counseling used more often.

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**Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy**

4-year project (2015-2018)
Selected sample of 1,865 threat assessment cases reported by 785 Virginia public schools during the 2014-15 school year.

Types of Threats (%)

- Unspecified: 33%
- Kill: 23%
- Use weapon: 21%
- Hit, beat: 18%
- Stab, cut: 13%
- Bomb: 5%
- Arson: 1%
- Sexual: 1%

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one type of threat.

Intended Victim (%)

- Student: 68%
- Teacher: 15%
- Whole school/group: 13%
- Staff/administrator: 7%
- Other: 4%

Percentages for 1,876 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one victim.

Characteristics of Threats Judged to be Serious

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Odds Ratio as Serious</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weapon in possession</td>
<td>4.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator targeted</td>
<td>3.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary grade</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat of battery</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat of homicide</td>
<td>1.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Education status</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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</table>

Characteristics of Threats Judged to be Serious

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Odds Ratio as Serious</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race: Black</td>
<td>0.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity: Hispanic</td>
<td>0.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat communicated directly</td>
<td>1.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty targeted</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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Characteristics of Threats that Were Attempted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Odds Ratio Attempted</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judged to be serious</td>
<td>12.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat of battery</td>
<td>3.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat of homicide</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat communicated indirectly</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Disciplinary Outcome (%)

- Reprimand: 53%
- Suspension out of school: 44%
- Suspension in school: 16%
- Expulsion reduced to...: 8%
- Detention after school: 3%
- Placed in juvenile detention: 3%
- Arrested: 1%
- Expelled: 1%

Percentages for 1,865 threat cases from 785 schools. One case can involve more than one outcome.

School Placement Outcome (%)

- No Change: 84%
- Transferred to alternative school: 8%
- Homebound instruction: 5%
- Transferred to regular school: 1%
- Other: 2%

Concluding Points

1. School violence is a small part of a larger problem of gun violence.
2. Schools are much safer than the public thinks. We need to balance security with prevention efforts.
3. Threat assessment can help schools respond to student threats.