



Threat Assessments to Manage Threatening Situations and Create Safer Schools

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Why Threat Assessment?

“In their quest to avoid becoming the next statistic or headline, school officials have focused preventive resources primarily on increasing physical security (e.g., installing cameras and metal detectors), hiring school security officers, and developing tactical plans for responding once a shooting has occurred. Unfortunately, these responses are not likely to be effective in preventing planned school-based attacks.”

**EVALUATING RISK FOR TARGETED VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS: COMPARING
RISK ASSESSMENT, THREAT ASSESMENT AND OTHER APPROACHES**

US Secret Service and US Department of Education



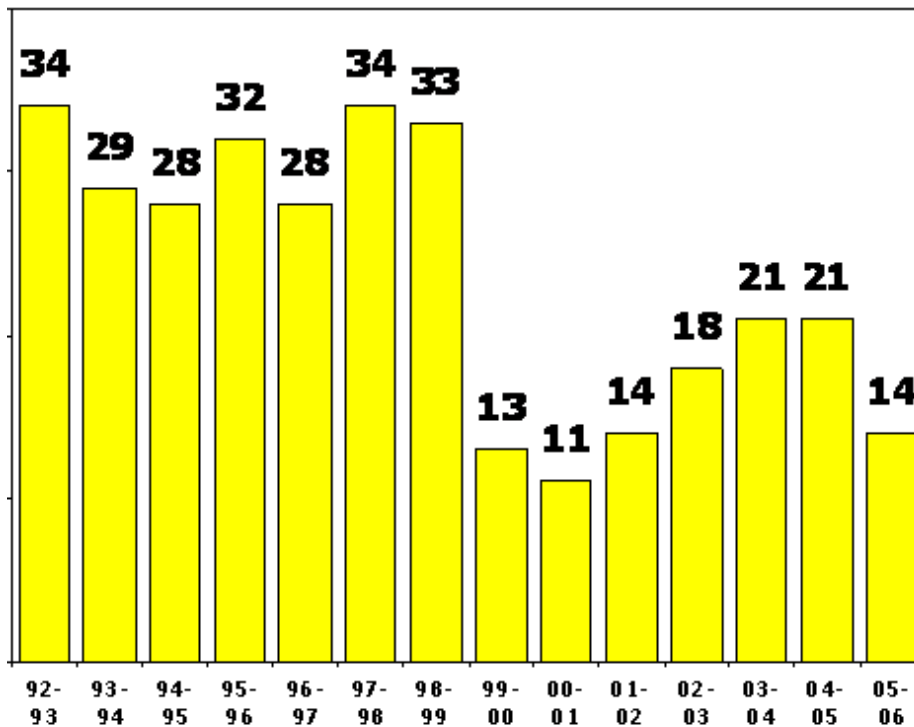
Purpose of Threat Assessment

- A threat assessment process provides school personnel with the ability to review a potential threat and determine the appropriate response.
- It helps to prevent two major errors in regard to potential threats: under responding and over responding.
- The primary goal is to prevent violence.
- Its purpose is not to predict violence

Understanding Violence

- Violence is a process, as well as an act.
- Violent behavior does not occur in a vacuum.
- Violent acts often are the culmination of long-developing, identifiable trails of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures.

Myths about school violence

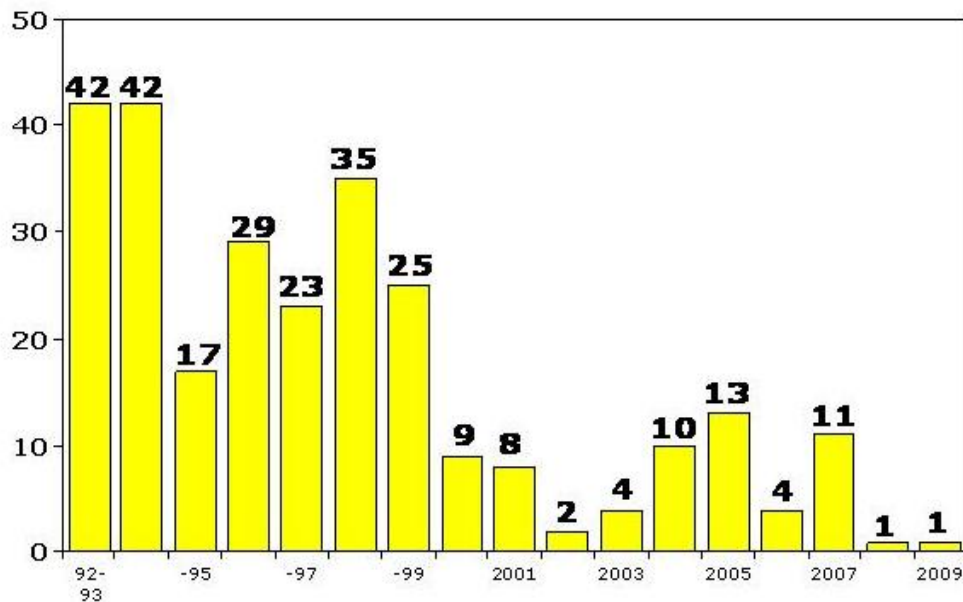


Rate per 1000 students age 12-18

Schools are more violent today

Statistics show that actual violent incidents in schools have decreased (National Crime Victimization Survey)

Myths about school violence



Homicides on school grounds during school day

Schools homicides are increasing

Statistics show school homicides have decreased significantly since 1994

(National School Safety Center)

The Expansion of Zero Tolerance

No Drugs
No Guns
No Knives
No Threats



No Toy Guns

No Nail clippers

No Plastic utensils

No Finger-pointing

No Jokes

No Drawings

No Rubber band shooting

No Accidental violations

Dark Side of Zero Tolerance

- A five-year-old in California was expelled after he found a razor blade at his bus stop and carried it to school and gave it to his teacher.
- A nine-year-old in Ohio was suspended for having a 1” knife in a manicure kit.
- A seventeen-year-old in Chicago was arrested and subsequently expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band.
- [8 year old suspended for Jesus drawing](#)

Zero Tolerance problems

- When students and staff know there is zero tolerance they don't report incidents because they don't want students to be expelled
- After four years of implementation, the National Center for Education Statistics found that schools employing zero-tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies.

The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?

Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson

American Bar Association says

Zero Tolerance makes Zero Sense

“...the ABA opposes, in principle, "zero tolerance" policies that have a discriminatory effect, or mandate either expulsion or referral of students to juvenile or criminal court, without regard to the circumstances or nature of the offense or the student's history.”

Threat Assessment Makes Sense

- Threat assessment considers the context and meaning of a student's behavior, not just the behavior itself.
- Threat assessment is designed to determine the seriousness or danger of a student's behavior, and to respond accordingly.
- Threat assessment permits flexibility in how schools respond and does not require the same severe consequence for all infractions

Targeted School Violence

THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS:

*A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND
TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES*

The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Services' "Safe School Initiative" made the following key findings:

ADVANTAGES OF A THREAT ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

- **Shared ownership, shared responsibility. Decreased liability.**
- **Multi-discipline, multi-agency.**
- **Expeditious but methodical.**
- **Community collaboration and ownership.**
- **Identification of risk in clear terms.**
- **Interventions and supervision strategies that fit the situation and accurately address risk.**
- **Safely keeps many students in school who would otherwise be removed through expulsion or by other means.**
- **Increases both the physical safety of a school and the psychological sense of safety.**
- **Derived from research and is legally defensible.**
- **Recommended by US Departments of Education, Justice, NAAG, IACLEA, NASPA, MHEC, and others**



Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 1:

Incident of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts.

- Student did not just “snap”
- There was a plan

Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 2:

Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack. In most cases, those who knew were other kids-friends, schoolmates, siblings, and others. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult.

Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 3:

Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

The *Safe School Initiative* found that most attackers *in fact* did not threaten their target directly and some made no threat at all. Instead, other behaviors and communications that may prompt concern should be investigated.



Targeted School Violence

Key Finding 4:

There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

Key Finding 5:

Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

- A student's family, teachers, friends and others may have information regarding aspects of a student's behavior that has raised concern.
- Educators and other adults can learn how to pick up on these signals and make appropriate referrals.

Key Finding 6:

Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.

Key Finding 7:

Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

- Feeling bullied is not the same as being bullied



Key Finding 8:

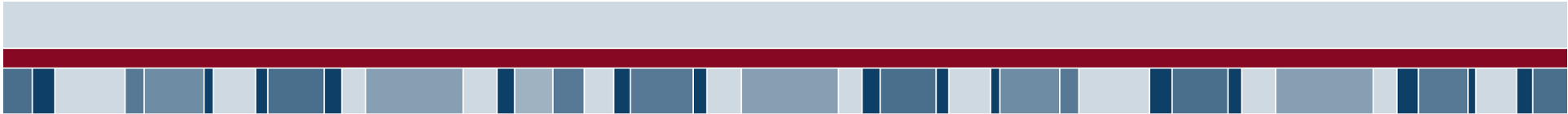
Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

Key Finding 9:

In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

What would you do if...?

- Several teachers report that a student's writing as well as his classroom behavior is disturbing
- He has been investigated for harassing female students
- Has documented mental illness
- Refuses to talk much of the time
- He has not broken any school rules



TASB RISK
MANAGEMENT FUND

Connecting the Dots...

The Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel to Governor Tim Kaine (Aug. 2007), included key findings...

“Although various individuals and departments within the university knew about each of these incidents, the university did not intervene effectively. No one knew all the information and no one **connected all the dots.**”



Connecting the Dots...

Report to President Bush on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy (2007, June 13), included key findings...

“improved **awareness and communication** are key to prevention.” Also, that referrals for individuals needing mental health services is critical.

School-based Threat Assessment



Connecting the Dots

What is Threat Assessment

- Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the risk of violence posed by someone who has communicated an intent to harm someone.
- Threat assessment considers the **context** and **circumstances** surrounding a threat in order to uncover any evidence that indicates the threat is likely to be carried out.
- Threat assessment includes interventions designed to manage and reduce the risk of violence.

What is the Purpose of Threat Assessment?

1. Reduce the risk of violence.
2. Identify educational needs and support services for students who have made a threat or display behavior of concern
3. Reduce legal liability by following reasonable and accepted practices for violence prevention.

A threat assessment process provides school personnel with the ability to review a potential threat and determine the appropriate response.

What is a Threat Assessment Team?

- Consultative in nature and designed to **“Connect the Dots”**
- Meets at least monthly or as necessary for high risk cases
- Creates synergy among team so goal of helping student is central, communication flows easily
- Recommends appropriate action per case
- Follows established policies & protocols

Who Conducts Threat Assessment?

A *multidisciplinary team* consisting of respected members of the school faculty or administration.

- School resource officer assigned to the school and/or Local Law Enforcement
- A mental health professional- School psychologist
- A social worker or guidance counselor
- Other professional-teacher, nurse, etc.
- Consider using your pre-existing team



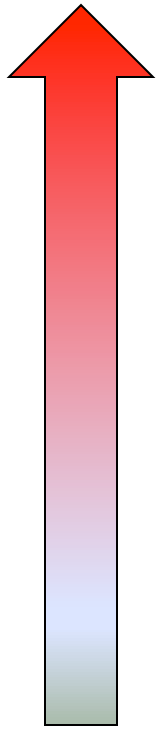
What is involved in a Threat Assessment?

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.

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. They do not have to be communicated to the intended victim or victims.
- Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise.
- When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

Continuum of Threats



- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech



School-based Threat Assessment

The student made a threat

vs.

The student poses a threat

School-based Threat Assessment

Training provides a threat assessment team the ability to

“...gather information, evaluate facts, and make a determination as to whether a given student poses a threat of violence” to self or others

6 Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

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?”

Assess for Student Needs

Reaction Error

Sole focus on
punishing

Threat

Assessment Error

Sole focus on nature
and severity of threat

Inconsistent
Discipline

Mistrust of
Staff and
Adults

Alienation

Poor Anger
Management

Abuse or
Neglect

Parent
Conflict

Drug/Alcohol
Problems

Poor Coping
Skills

Lack of
Empathy

Bullying

Sexual
Abuse

Depression

Suicidal
Ideation

What Happens Next

Intervention is Key!

May be legal or behavioral depending on outcome of assessment

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF SUPPORTIVE BEHAVIOR PLANS:

- Description of the behavior of concern
- Behavioral goals
- A plan for teaching and supporting the new behavior
- Description of success
- Plan for implementation
- Timeline for review

What Happens Next

Threat Intervention Continuum:

Solutions Equal to the Level of Concern

- Build the plan as a team
- Interventions, Treatment, Monitoring, Protection
- Give consequences, but also build skills and support (*Removed student will return to school someday*)
- Document your plan
- Monitor, monitor, monitor

FERPA concerns

“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.”

<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.html>

In an Emergency:

“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.”

<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.html>

HIPPA

HIPAA allows disclosure of protected health information, including psychotherapy notes, concerning a patient when it is considered necessary to prevent a serious and imminent threat to others. This can include disclosure to law enforcement, family members, potential victims and others if the disclosure can be justified as reducing the risk of violence.

See CFR § 164.512(j).

<http://www.publichealthlaw.net/Reader/docs/HIPAA.pdf>

Liability Protection

- Follow recognized standards.
- Make reasonable decisions.
(Perfection is not required.)
- Maintain adequate documentation.
(Post hoc records are inadequate.)
- Liability is shared amongst all team members

In other words....

- The consequence for a toy gun is not the same as for a real gun
- The punishment should fit the crime
- Intent is always considered
- Supportive interventions are applied and monitored

We may not be able to predict who will commit a violent act, but we can reduce violence by helping troubled individuals and responding to threatening situations. Dewey Cornell Ph.D. U. of Virginia

Questions?

References:

Threat Assessment in Schools: *A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND TO CREATING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES* The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Services' "Safe School Initiative"

The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools? Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson

The Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D. University of Virginia

Student Threat Assessment System

John Van Dreal, School Psychologist

Salem-Keizer Schools

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US Secret Service and US Department of Education

Threat Assessment Process Diana Browning-Wright California Department of Education

National School Safety Center <http://www.schoolsafety.us/>

