

Threat Assessment: Predicting and Preventing School Violence

Preventing school violence is a top priority for school and public safety officials today. Efforts include creating more positive school environments, establishing crisis response teams, increasing security measures, and improving school/community collaboration. Considerable energy also has been devoted to developing a process to identify students at-risk of becoming violent before they cause harm. Unfortunately there is no easy formula or "profile" of risk factors that accurately determines the "next school shooter." Most students who display multiple risk factors will never become violent offenders and some who pose a real threat will not demonstrate a prescribed level of risk. The use of profiling (i.e., ranking a student's behaviors and risk factors against a set of criteria) strongly increases the likelihood of *misidentifying* youngsters. Moreover, the process focuses solely on identification, not intervention, and fails to provide the necessary help to potential offenders.

A more viable approach is that of *threat assessment*, which uses a set of *strategies or pathways* to determine the credibility and seriousness of a threat and the likelihood that it will be carried out. Effective threat assessment must be conducted by a team of trained professionals as part of a comprehensive school safety program and with the support of all members of the school community (students, staff, parents, public safety). This process considers the full range of relevant factors and provides appropriate interventions for the potential offender(s).

Although there is no official model for threat assessment, experts in school crisis management, mental health, and public safety have identified common basic components of effective threat assessment procedures. The U.S. Secret Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have taken a leadership role in collecting data and developing recommended procedures and protocols. (Access full reports at http://www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac_ssi.shtml and <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>) The following information can help schools establish a threat assessment process, but school officials also should review comprehensive recommendations and arrange for formal training of staff.

Understand the facts about school violence and potentially violent offenders.

It is important to avoid misperceptions about the prevalence and causes of school violence. Perhaps most critical to keep in mind is that no *single* factor leads to violence; multiple factors cause a person to become violent. All approaches to prevention and intervention, including threat assessment, should be based on what we actually know about the phenomenon. Secret Service and FBI findings include:

- School violence is not an epidemic
- All school shooters are not alike and there is no accurate profile of the violent offender
- School shooters often have social difficulties, but they are not always loners
- Although a common factor, revenge is not the exclusive motivation for school shootings
- Most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them, but access to weapons is not the most significant risk factor
- Unusual or aberrant behaviors or interests are not the hallmark of a student destined to become violent
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive
- Prior to most incidents, the attacker told someone about his/her idea or plans
- Most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity
- In a number of cases, bullying played a key role in and could have been a predictor of the attack
- Prior to the incident, most attackers engaged in behavior that caused concern

Establish a clear district-wide policy.

It is important to have specific, well-articulated procedures for exploring allegations of actual or potential violence. These matters require prompt, discrete, and responsible action on the part of school officials. The policy should include protocols for:

- Assigning and training the threat assessment team
- Evaluating and interviewing the potential offender
- Notifying and working with parents
- Interviewing other students and staff

- Determining the level of intervention required
- Bringing in additional professionals (e.g., mental health, social service, law enforcement)
- Providing follow-up observation and services
- Responding to media should the need arise

Build an interdisciplinary, trained threat assessment team.

Effective threat assessment is based on the combined efforts of a threat assessment team, usually composed of trained school-based personnel and select members of the broader school community such as law enforcement, faith leaders, and representatives of social service agencies. School personnel should include top administrators, mental health professionals, and security staff. The interdisciplinary team approach improves the efficiency and scope of the assessment process, (which can be time-consuming), provides diverse professional input, and minimizes the risk of observer bias. ***Specific training for all members of the team is essential!*** The Secret Service now offers training on preventing incidents of targeted violence, responding to threatening situations, and creating safe school climates.

Create a climate of trust between students and adults.

Students often know of potential problems well in advance of adults. They need to feel comfortable telling a trusted adult about concerns they have regarding threats of violence of any kind. Parents and community leaders should be incorporated as part of the supportive and trusted school/community environment. Students, staff, and parents should understand the following:

- Violence prevention is everyone's responsibility
- The school has a threat assessment process in place
- How the process works and who is involved
- All information will be handled discreetly
- The purpose is to protect both the potential victim(s) and perpetrator(s)

Assess the threat's type and level of risk.

"All threats are not created equal." A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something. It can be

spoken, written or symbolic. But many students who make a threat will never carry it out and, conversely, others who pose a real threat never make one first. There are a number of different types of threats and levels of risk. According the FBI, these include:

1. *Types of Threats*

- **Direct** threat identifies a specific act against a specific target delivered in a straightforward, clear, and explicit manner.
- **Indirect** threat tends to be vague, unclear and ambiguous. Violence is implied, but threat is phrased tentatively, and suggests that a violent act *could* occur, not that it *will* occur.
- **Veiled** threat is one that strongly implies but does not explicitly threaten violence.
- **Conditional** threat is often seen in extortion cases. It warns that a violent act will happen unless certain demands or terms are met.

2. *Levels of Risk*

Low Level of Threat

- Poses a minimal risk to the victim and public safety
- Is vague and indirect
- Information is inconsistent, implausible or lacks detail
- Lacks realism
- Content suggests person is unlikely to carry out the threat

Medium Level of Threat

- Could be carried out, although it may not appear entirely realistic
- More direct and more concrete than a low level threat
- Wording suggests the individual has given some thought to how the act will be carried out
- Includes a general indication of place and time but signs still fall well short of a detailed plan
- No strong indication that the individual has taken preparatory steps
- Statements seek to convey that the threat is not empty: "I'm serious!" or "I really mean this!"

High Level of Threat

- Direct, specific, and plausible
- Appears to pose imminent and serious danger to safety of others
- Suggests concrete steps have been taken, i.e., stalking or acquisition of a weapon
- Almost always requires bringing in law enforcement

Consider all factors shaping the student's decision-making and behavior.

Threat assessment done correctly entails a deliberate and focused process for examining all relevant information, such as the student's personal history, relationships at home and school, recent life events, resiliency and coping style, etc. It is important to remember that you probably know less about the potential offender than you think and to try to view information through the student's eyes. The FBI has proposed a *Four-Pronged Assessment Model* that examines:

1. Personality of the Student

• *Behavioral Characteristics*

- Capacity to cope with stress and conflicts
- Ways of dealing with anger, humiliation or sadness, disappointments
- Level of resiliency related to failure, criticism or other negative experiences
- Response to rules and authority
- Need for control
- Capacity for emotional empathy or respect for others
- Sense of self-importance compared to others (superiority/inferiority)

• *Personality Traits*

- Tolerance for frustration
- Coping skills
- Focus on perceived injustices
- Signs of depression/other mental illness
- Self-perceptions (narcissism/insecurity)
- Need for attention
- Focus of blame (internalizes/externalizes)

2. School Dynamics

- Student's attachment to school
- Tolerance for disrespectful behavior
- Approach to discipline (equitable/arbitrary)
- Flexibility/inclusiveness of culture
- Pecking order among students
- Code of silence
- Supervision of computer access

3. Social Dynamics

- Peer group relationships and culture
- Use of drugs and alcohol
- Media, entertainment, technology
- Level and focus of outside interests
- Potential copycat effect of past incidents

4. Family Dynamics

- Parent-child relationship
- Attitudes toward pathological behavior
- Access to weapons
- Sense of connectedness/intimacy
- Attitude toward/enforcement of parental authority
- Monitoring of TV, video games, or Internet

Determine and implement interventions in a timely manner.

Specific procedures should be established in advance. Once the initial assessment has taken place, the team must decide the appropriate next steps. Interventions may need to be staged (e.g., immediately bringing the student in question under adult supervision versus recommending mental health counseling). Considerations should include whether or not the student can stay in school, what alternatives may be needed, when and how to notify parents, when and if to contact law enforcement, and what mental health, social service, and school-based interventions are needed to reduce/eliminate the student's risk of becoming violent.

Provide supportive interventions to potential offenders.

The goal of threat assessment is not only to keep schools safe, but also to help potential offenders overcome the underlying sources of their anger or hopelessness. Effective threat assessment provides adults useful information about a student's risks and personal resources. In most cases students will not carry out their threat, but may still be crying out for help. The assessment process should incorporate referral to appropriate mental health and social services, as well as a system for following up on the effectiveness of interventions. Among the other potential risks that can be identified and prevented are suicide, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse, dropping out, and criminal activity.

Although there is no way to guarantee eliminating school violence, a

comprehensive interventions-based approach can greatly minimize the risk to both the potential victims and perpetrators. Threat assessment must be an integral part of a system that fosters a positive school environment; trust between students and adults; respect for others; intolerance for violence of any kind; collaboration between home, school, and community; and the belief that everyone can build toward their strengths given the appropriate support.

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