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Student Threat Assessment as a Strategy to Reduce School Violence

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Abstract
The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines were developed in response to studies by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, and U.S. Department of Education that recommended schools should adopt a threat assessment approach to prevent targeted violence. This chapter describes the composition of threat assessment teams and the procedures they follow to investigate and resolve student threats. Three case examples illustrate how the guidelines can be used to address student conflicts and problems without resorting to zero tolerance disciplinary practices. The chapter concludes with a summary of four studies supporting use of the guidelines and identifies directions for future study.

Two months after the 1999 Columbine massacre, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) convened a national conference on school shootings that brought together experts in law enforcement, education, and mental health. Although renowned for its expertise in criminal profiling, the FBI cautioned against the use of profiling to identify potential school shooters (O’Toole, 2000). Instead, the FBI recommended the adoption of a threat assessment approach.

Why did the FBI’s own profiling experts advise against a profiling approach? Although it was possible to identify some common characteristics of students who carried out school shootings—history of peer mistreatment and bullying, symptoms of depression and suicidality, preoccupation with violent games and fantasies, among others—no set of such characteristics offered sufficient specificity for practical use. Far too many students would be falsely identified as potentially violent (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000). One example of this problem was that, because several school shooters had worn black trench coats to hide their firearms, many school authorities became suspicious of any student wearing a black trench coat and some decided to ban trench coats.
coats at school. Conference attendees used the term “black trench coat problem” to refer to all such misguided efforts at profiling potentially dangerous students.

The most promising finding from the FBI’s study of school shootings was that the students almost always made threats or in some way communicated their intentions to harm someone before carrying out their shooting, a phenomenon termed “leakage.” Moreover, the FBI identified a number of cases where school shootings were prevented because authorities investigated a student’s threatening statement and found that the student was engaged in plans to carry out the threat. These observations suggested that schools should focus their efforts on the identification and investigation of student threats as a violence prevention strategy.

Unlike wearing a black trench coat, making a threat is an aggressive behavior that can be meaningfully linked to potential violence, and, in some circumstances, constitutes a criminal act. Nevertheless, the FBI report cautioned that a threat in itself would not be sufficient to identify a violent student (O’Toole, 2000). As the report commented, “All threats are not created equal” (p. 5). Instead, school authorities must investigate the context and meaning of a student’s threat for the purpose of determining whether the student is engaged in other behaviors that demonstrate intention to carry out the threat. If the investigation indicates that the threat is genuine, the next step would be to take action designed to prevent it from being carried out. Although law enforcement intervention may be necessary in the most serious cases, in the majority of cases the principal strategy is to work toward resolution of the problem or conflict that precipitated the threat. From this perspective, threat assessment can be seen as a problem-solving approach to student misconduct that is compatible with current counseling and discipline strategies used in schools, such as conflict resolution, character education, and positive behavior support.

Along with the 2000 FBI report (O’Toole, 2000), a 2002 joint report of the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education recommended that schools train threat assessment teams in order to respond to student threats of violence (Fein et al., 2002). In response to a series of shootings on college campuses, a 2010 joint report of the Secret Service, Department of Education, and FBI recommended that college institutions also implement a threat assessment approach (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010). Although these authoritative reports made a compelling case for a threat assessment approach, there was no established model or set of procedures for schools to follow, and no research evidence to support this newly recommended practice. In response to these needs, the Virginia Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia took on the task of developing and testing a threat assessment model for schools. This chapter describes the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) and reviews a series of field-test and quasi-experimental studies supporting its use. Guidelines for use in college and university settings are described elsewhere (Cornell, 2009).

The Threat Assessment Team

The Virginia Guidelines recommend that each school form its own threat assessment team. A school-based team is more efficient because threat assessment requires an immediate response. If a student threatens to harm someone, school administrators cannot wait for a team of outside experts to assemble and begin an investigation. Threat assessment requires careful consideration of contextual and situational factors that would not be easily accessible to consultants unfamiliar with the day-to-day operation, culture, and climate of the school. Moreover, most student threats are not serious enough to warrant the assembly of an outside team. Many cases involve rash or foolish statements, some made in jest and others in a moment of anger, that are routinely resolved by a school administrator or counselor.

Perhaps the most important reason to have a school-based team is that threat assessment should not be limited to an initial assessment, but rather should involve an ongoing process of
prevention and intervention. The danger posed by a threat is not static; it changes in response to events and interactions among students. An effective threat assessment team will not settle for judging the seriousness of a threat at a single point, but will implement a response to a serious threat that is designed to reduce the risk of violence and will continue to monitor any interventions that are initiated.

None of these reasons for using an on-site threat assessment team negate the use of outside consultation in some situations. In a complicated case involving a serious threat of violence, the school-based team may want to draw upon the expertise of a mental health professional from the community, work closely with law enforcement, or consult with authorities in the school division’s administration. In the Memphis field test (Strong & Cornell, 2008; described below), a division-wide team responded to the most serious cases in a large school system, while less serious cases were resolved at the school level.

A threat assessment team should include representatives from three domains: administration, law enforcement, and mental health. The team leader, typically an administrator who has responsibility for student discipline and safety, conducts an initial triage evaluation to determine the seriousness of the case and then either takes the limited action necessary to resolve the threat, or if the threat is more serious, engages more team members in a full-scale assessment and intervention.

The ideal law enforcement representative is a school resource officer (SRO) who has training and experience working in school settings. The SRO can advise the team whether a student’s behavior has violated the law and can conduct criminal investigations and take appropriate action in the most serious cases. More generally, however, the SRO can be a role model and encourage law-abiding behavior by interacting with students and participating in school functions. School resource officers should adopt a problem-solving approach to crime prevention by identifying and monitoring potentially volatile conflicts between students or groups of students.

Depending on the school’s staffing pattern, a threat assessment team should include one or more mental health professionals (school counselor, school psychologist, social worker, etc.). A mental health professional is involved in both evaluative and intervention capacities. In the most serious cases, a school psychologist or other suitably qualified staff member conducts an evaluation of the student with two main objectives. The first objective is to screen the student for mental health problems that demand immediate attention, such as psychosis or suicidality. The second objective is to assess why the student made the threat and make recommendations for dealing with the problem or conflict that stimulated the threatening behavior.

Mental health professionals are also used to conduct interventions such as counseling for a troubled student or conflict resolution between two parties engaged in a dispute. There is a large body of evidence that school-based interventions can reduce aggressive behavior (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Examples of effective programs include social competence training, cognitive-behavioral counseling to improve social interaction and problem-solving skills, and conflict resolution programs. In all cases, there should be follow-up monitoring to ensure that a plan is working.

Overall, the threat assessment team follows a risk reduction or risk management approach, as distinguished from a predictive approach (Heilbrun, 1997). Although it is understandable for school authorities to want a formal prediction of whether a student will carry out a threat, such predictions tend to be unreliable and prone to error (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Violence risk should not be considered a static quality, but rather a condition that can increase or decrease based on circumstances and intervention efforts. Even though psychologists can make reasonably accurate short-term predictions of violence in some situations (Borum, 1996), little is known about the prediction of student violence. In any case, the goal of threat assessment is the reduction of risk for violence rather than the prediction of violence, so that static predictions (e.g.,
“30% risk of violence”) and classifications (such as “high,” “medium,” or “low” risk) are not very useful. For these reasons, the Virginia Guidelines discourage school mental health professionals from trying to make formal predictions of whether a student will carry out a threatened action.

Threat Assessment Guidelines

Threat assessment teams follow a seven-step decision tree (see summary in Table 37.1). Each step in the decision tree is accompanied by an extensive set of guidelines and case examples (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). These guidelines recognize that many threats are clearly intended as jokes or rhetorical remarks and that school personnel could not conduct a comprehensive threat assessment every time a student made an inappropriate statement or used seemingly threatening language. Therefore, the first three steps of the assessment constitute a triage process during which the team leader determines whether the case can be quickly and easily resolved or will require more extensive evaluation and intervention as a substantive threat. In the easiest and clearest cases, a threat might be resolved within an hour, but in more complex cases, there may be an extended assessment of the student, interviews with witnesses as well as meetings with parents, and then the formulation of a safety plan that is administered over an extended period of time.

Table 37.1 Steps in Student Threat Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Evaluate the threat. The principal investigates a reported threat by interviewing the student who made the threat and any witnesses to the threat. The principal considers the context and meaning of the threat, which is more important than the literal content of the threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Decide whether the threat is transient or substantive. A transient threat is not a serious threat and can be easily resolved, but a substantive threat raises concern of potential injury to others. For transient threats, go to step three and for substantive threats skip to step four.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Respond to a transient threat. If the threat is transient, the principal may respond with a reprimand, parental notification, or other actions that are appropriate to the severity and chronicity of the situation. The incident is resolved and no further action is needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>If the threat is substantive, decide whether it is serious or very serious. If a threat is substantive, the principal must decide how serious the threat is and take appropriate action to protect potential victims. A threat to hit, assault, or beat up someone is serious, whereas a threat to kill, rape, use a weapon, or severely injure someone is considered very serious. For serious threats, go to step five and for very serious threats, skip to step six.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Respond to a serious substantive threat. Serious substantive threats require protective action to prevent violence, including notification of potential victims and other actions to address the conflict or problem that generated the threat. The response to serious threats is completed at this step.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Respond to a very serious substantive threat. Very serious threats require immediate protective action, including contact with law enforcement, followed by a comprehensive safety evaluation. The student is suspended from school pending completion of a safety evaluation, which includes a mental health assessment following a prescribed protocol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Implement a safety plan. The threat assessment team develops and implements an action plan that is designed both to protect potential victims and to meet the student’s educational needs. The plan includes provision for monitoring the student and revising the plan as needed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At step one, the leader of the threat assessment team interviews the student who made the threat, using a standard set of questions that can be adapted to the specific situation. The team leader or another team member should also interview witnesses to the threat. The team is not concerned simply with the verbal content of the threat, but the context in which the threat was made and what the student meant and intended in making the threat. This approach differs markedly from a zero tolerance disciplinary approach, which treats all violations as equal infractions that deserve the same consequence.

Zero tolerance policies characteristically do not consider the context and meaning of the student’s behavior, and this practice has resulted in numerous cases in which schools have overreacted to situations that did not pose a serious danger to others. For example, students in the United States have been removed from school for misbehavior such as bringing a one-inch plastic toy gun to school, bringing a plastic knife to school for use at lunchtime, pointing a finger like a gun and playfully pretending to shoot someone, and making threatening statements in jest. The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) found that there is no evidence that such policies and practices have any beneficial impact on students or improve school safety.

At step two, the principal must make an important distinction between threats that are considered serious because they pose a continuing risk or danger to others, and those that are not serious because they are readily resolved and do not pose a continuing risk. Less serious threats that are readily resolved are termed “transient” threats and are distinguished from substantive threats. Transient threats are defined as behaviors that can be readily identified as expressions of anger, frustration, or humor that dissipate when the student has time to reflect on the meaning of what he or she has said. The defining feature of a transient threat is that the student does not have a sustained intention to harm someone.

A transient threat is readily resolved at step three without a comprehensive threat assessment. The principal may reprimand the student or impose some other disciplinary consequence, but is not compelled to take protective action because the threat is not serious. Ideally, the student should offer an apology and explanation to those affected by the threat. In cases where the threat suggests an ongoing problem, the student’s behavior may merit further counseling or some other intervention.

Any threat that cannot be resolved as a transient threat is regarded as a substantive threat. A substantive threat involves a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate incident or argument during which the threat was made. If there is doubt whether a threat is transient or substantive, the threat is regarded as substantive. Several features can be used to identify substantive threats:

- the threat includes plausible details, such as a specific victim, time, place, and method of assault;
- the threat involves planning and preparation, including efforts to recruit accomplices or invite an audience;
- there is clear evidence of intent to carry out the threat, such as a weapon, bomb materials, map, written plan, or list of intended victims.

Although the presence of any one of these features may lead the school administrator to presume the threat is substantive, none are absolute indicators; with additional investigation, other facts could demonstrate that the threat is transient. For example, a student might seek an accomplice to send an angry, threatening letter to a classmate. The threat is transient if the student does not intend to carry out the threat, but only means to frighten the classmate. Such an incident would be handled as a serious disciplinary matter, but not as a serious threat.
The example of a student who frightens a classmate with a transient threat illustrates another important point, which is that threat assessment and discipline are separate processes. In some cases, the disciplinary consequences can be quite severe even if the threat is transient. For example, a false bomb threat is not a substantive threat if the student only intends to disrupt the school, but nonetheless has serious legal consequences. In general, threat assessment is concerned with the risk of future harm to others and what steps should be taken to prevent the threat from being carried out, whereas discipline is concerned with administering appropriate consequences (ranging from punishment to restorative actions) for prohibited behaviors.

In essence, threat assessment teams must always consider the context of the threat and make reasoned judgments based on all the available information. The team should consider the student’s age and capabilities, mental stability, prior history of violent behavior, and other relevant factors. The guidelines assist the team in its investigation, but do not provide a prescription or formula.

If the threat is not transient, the process proceeds to step four. At this step, the substantive threat is determined to be serious or very serious, based on the intended severity of injury. A serious threat is a threat to assault, strike, or beat up someone. A very serious threat is a threat to kill, sexually assault, or severely injure someone. A threat involving the use of a weapon is generally considered a threat to severely injure someone. However, teams must always use their judgment. For example, threatening someone with a toy gun that could not seriously injure anyone would be viewed differently than threatening someone with a genuine firearm.

Serious substantive threats are handled at step five. At this step, school authorities are obliged to take protective actions appropriate to the circumstances. Immediate protective actions include cautioning the student about the consequences of carrying out the threat and providing supervision so that the student cannot carry out the threat while at school, and contacting the student’s parents so that they can assume responsibility for supervising the student after school.

The level of supervision should be consistent with the nature and seriousness of the threat. For example, a visibly angry student who threatens to beat up a classmate should be confined to an office or classroom under adult supervision. The school resource officer might meet with the student. More often, however, a student will calm down and can be permitted to return to class on the condition that the student not have any contact with the classmate. As a precaution, the student might be kept from a class attended by the classmate, and the student might be required to report to the office prior to school dismissal, rather than being released to ride the same bus as the classmate. Beyond the immediate response, the team might initiate some form of intervention (e.g., anger control counseling, dispute mediation) appropriate to the situation.

Very serious substantive threats are handled at steps six and seven. At step six, the team takes decisive action to ensure that the threat is not carried out. The student might be detained in the principal’s office until his or her parents have arrived. In addition, the law enforcement officer on the team must determine whether the student has violated the law, and if so, what law enforcement action should be taken. The team also notifies the intended victim (or victims), and if the victim is a student, the victim’s parents. The school psychologist should begin a mental health evaluation of the student as soon as possible, with the initial goal of assessing the student’s mental state and need for immediate mental health services. Although the threat assessment guidelines discourage use of long-term suspension, a short-term suspension is appropriate until the team can devise a plan. If a short-term suspension is necessary, it will likely also be important to work with the student’s family to encourage a plan for structure and supervision to be provided during the time the child is not in school.

At step seven, the team completes a safety evaluation that integrates findings from all available sources of information in a written safety plan. The safety plan is designed both to protect potential victims and to address the student’s educational needs. The plan includes mental health and counseling recommendations, findings from the law enforcement investigation, and dis-
disciplin ary consequences. At this point, the principal decides whether the student can return to school or should be placed in an alternative setting. If the student is permitted to return to school, the plan describes the conditions that must be met and the procedures in place to monitor the student when he or she returns. Threat assessment is a more flexible, problem-solving approach to violence prevention that represents an alternative to zero tolerance discipline practices. The Virginia model is intended to encourage students to seek help and generate a more positive and less punitive school climate.

**Threat Victims**

The guidelines address threat victim issues in several ways. In all cases, a team member should interview the recipient or target of the threat and consider this person’s perspective and his or her understanding of the meaning of the threat. In the case of transient threats, the student making the threat typically is encouraged to offer an apology and/or explanation to the person who was threatened. If a threat involves a dispute or conflict, the team will explore the possibility of conflict mediation, provided that both parties are willing to participate. If the threat is substantive, the team has a clear obligation to notify the victim (and if the victim is a student, also that student’s parents) for protective purposes. The guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) indicate when school authorities should make exceptions to confidentiality in order to notify potential victims and the guidelines include advice on procedures for keeping victims informed later in the process when decisions are made about a student returning to school.

**Case Examples**

The following three cases demonstrate how the student threat assessment guidelines can be applied to transient, serious, and very serious threats. These are composite cases with details changed to disguise identities and highlight best practices.

**Transient Threat Example**

Two middle school boys got into a fight in the hallway. After they were separated by two teachers, one boy shouted to the other, “I’m gonna kill you for that.”

**Threat Assessment Summary**

The principal interviewed the student, who admitted making the statement, but said he made the statement because he was mad and not because he intended to kill anyone. He explained what the other student had done to offend him and how the fight started. The boy was apologetic and agreed to meet with the other boy and try to resolve their conflict. The principal was familiar with both boys and knew their discipline records. The principal consulted with the teachers for any additional information about the conflict between them and concluded that the threat was a transient threat. Although the threat was transient, the principal administered a disciplinary consequence to both boys that was consistent with the school’s discipline policy for fighting. Their parents were contacted and the entire situation was reviewed. The school resource officer met with each boy and pointed out the legal consequences that could follow from fighting and threatening behavior. The boys attended a mediation session to resolve their conflict. After the mediation session, the guidance counselor interviewed each boy to assess whether the conflict had been resolved. The boys were encouraged to contact the guidance counselor if there was renewed conflict.
**Serious Substantive Threat Example**

Will and Dan had a history of teasing and mocking one another. One day Will became so angry with something Dan said that he sent Dan a note, “Meet me at the park tonight at 9 so I can kick your a--.” Dan showed the note to a teacher, who in turn contacted the principal. The principal regarded the note as a threat because it expressed intent to harm someone. The fact that the threat was in writing, and specified a time and place for the fight, suggested that the threat was probably substantive rather than transient.

**Threat Assessment Summary**

The principal met with Will and then attempted to mediate the dispute by bringing Dan into the meeting. Both boys had a number of complaints and grievances to air. Will was reluctant to apologize, which supported the principal’s concern that Will still wanted to fight Dan. At this point, the principal decided that the threat was substantive rather than transient. Because the threat was substantive, the principal was obligated to take some form of protective action, depending on the nature of the situation. The principal’s attempt to mediate the dispute was one form of protective action, and when this did not appear to be effective, she ordered both boys to stay away from one another. She asked the school resource officer to speak with both boys and to advise them of the legal consequences of threatening, fighting, or injuring one another. The principal also contacted the boys’ teachers and made arrangements so that they would not encounter each other between classes or during physical education class. She called both sets of parents to inform them of the situation and followed up with a letter that offered the services of the school counselor. Will was given a disciplinary consequence that was consistent with the school’s disciplinary policy for making threats.

**Very Serious Substantive Threat Example**

A middle school student named Dennis confided in two of his friends that he was “sick and tired of getting pushed around at the bus stop” by two older boys and that he was going to “bring an equalizer tomorrow and make them pay.” The friends understood this to mean that Dennis intended to bring a gun to the bus stop and one of the friends told another student, who in turn told the school resource officer. The school resource officer contacted the principal, who decided to investigate the report as a possible threat.

**Threat Assessment Summary**

The principal interviewed Dennis as well as the student who first heard Dennis make the statement. Dennis at first denied making the statement or having access to a firearm. He did, however, admit that he was upset with two boys who had been bullying him at the bus stop for several weeks. When the principal contacted Dennis’s mother, she said that Dennis knew that she kept a handgun in her nightstand. Based on his investigation, the principal decided that the threat could not be regarded as transient, and since it involved a threat to use a weapon, it was a very serious substantive threat. He contacted members of the school threat assessment team, who agreed with this assessment. Dennis was placed on suspension pending completion of a safety evaluation, according to the school’s written policy on very serious threats of violence. The principal and school resource officer met with Dennis’s mother and reviewed the seriousness of the situation, but also related their plans to investigate the bullying problem.

Following the protocol in the threat assessment guidelines, the school psychologist conducted an initial interview with Dennis that afternoon before he went home. She screened Dennis for
psychiatric symptoms that would merit hospitalization, inquired about homicidal and suicidal intention, and obtained information about the bullying he had experienced. The school psychologist met with Dennis’s mother and obtained background information about his family history, previous peer relations, and prior aggressive behavior. She assessed the mother’s willingness to cooperate with the school in taking actions to prevent Dennis from getting into serious trouble. The mother agreed to let a relative keep the handgun for the foreseeable future.

The school principal contacted the parents of the boys who were the presumed targets of the threat. The principal informed the parents what had happened and that the boy who made the threat had been suspended from school. Because this matter involved a threat of violence, the principal disclosed the name of the student and the actions that were taken for protective purposes. During the next few days, members of the threat assessment team gathered information from Dennis’s teachers and also interviewed the bus driver and students who used the same bus stop.

The threat assessment team held a meeting three days after the incident and decided on an action plan. Because Dennis had not directly threatened the boys or brought a weapon to the bus stop, he would be permitted to return to school under certain conditions. The first condition was that he expressed understanding that there was a better way for him to deal with the bullying situation and that his threat was inappropriate. He accepted the consequence of not being permitted to ride the school bus for the remainder of the school year. In addition, he agreed to check in with the school resource officer on a daily basis, and to advise him of any bullying incidents that took place. Dennis also began meeting with the school counselor to talk about his peer relationships. The counselor also met with the two boys who had been teasing Dennis.

Research on the Threat Assessment Guidelines

The first field test of the threat assessment guidelines was conducted in 35 schools spanning grades K–12 (Cornell et al., 2004; Kaplan & Cornell, 2005). The Virginia Youth Violence Project trained a threat assessment team in each school. A total of 188 cases were identified across the 35 schools during one school year. The most common threats were threats to hit or assault someone (41%), followed by threats to kill (15%), shoot (13%), stab (11%), or injure in some other way (5%). Approximately 15% of threats were too vague to be classified (e.g., “I’m going to get you”). Most threats (76%) were made by boys.

The teams investigated each threat to determine whether it was transient or substantive. The majority of cases (70%) were resolved as transient threats through an explanation or apology, although often with some disciplinary consequences and counseling. Approximately one-third (30%) of the cases were substantive threats that required protective action and the development of a plan to address the underlying conflict or problem that drove the student to make a threat. Only three students (each with a lengthy record of disciplinary violations) were given long-term suspensions. Approximately half of the students received short-term suspensions (typically 1–3 days), and nearly all students were able to return to their original school.

The following year, researchers conducted follow-up interviews with school principals and other team members. Principals were asked whether the student’s behavior had worsened, stayed about the same, or improved since the threat incident. Only 18% of the students were described as worse, 39% were the same, and 43% were improved. Similarly, principals were asked about the student’s relationship with the target of the threat. (For this question the sample size dropped to 126, because for various reasons the principal could not make a judgment, such as when the student was no longer in the school). The principals reported that the relationship had worsened in just 5% of the cases, while it remained the same in 63% and improved in 32%. Finally, principals were asked whether, to their knowledge, the student had carried out the threat. According to the principals, none of the threats were carried out. Although it is conceivable that some of the less
severe threats (e.g., to hit or strike someone) were carried out without the principal’s knowledge, almost certainly none of the more serious threats to shoot, stab, or otherwise severely injure the target were carried out.

A second field test (Strong & Cornell, 2008) was conducted in Memphis City Schools, a large urban school system serving a predominantly (87%) African American population. Approximately 75% of Memphis students were eligible for free or reduced lunch and 29% of students had been retained at least one grade. Memphis elected to use a centralized threat assessment team that would handle the most serious cases referred by each school. A total of 209 cases from 103 schools were referred for threat assessment because the principal deemed them to merit long-term suspension. There were 60 (29%) threats to hit or beat up someone, 48 (23%) threats to cut or stab, 32 (15%) threats to shoot, 30 (14%) threats to kill, 14 (7%) sexual threats, and 25 (12%) other threats (such as to blow up or burn down the school).

In each case, the team developed an individualized plan of mental health and educational services. All but five students were able to return to school or an alternative educational placement and just three students were incarcerated. Across all sources of information, there was no report of any of the threats being carried out. In addition, the study examined student discipline referrals before and after the threat assessment for 198 students with available records. These students averaged 6.4 referrals before the threat incident and 2.9 referrals after the threat assessment, a decline of 55% that was statistically significant even after controlling for the length of the school year and the dates of the assessments.

The two field-test studies demonstrated that a threat assessment approach could be implemented with seemingly positive outcomes, but both studies lacked comparison groups. A third study partially addressed this limitation (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009). Each year Virginia public schools complete a school safety audit, which in 2007 included questions about the use of threat assessment procedures. Based on the survey, it was determined that 95 high schools had adopted the guidelines, 131 schools used locally developed threat assessment procedures, and 54 did not use a threat assessment approach. The three groups were compared retrospectively using a school climate survey that was administered in the spring of 2007 to randomly selected samples of ninth-grade students in each high school as part of the Virginia High School Safety Study (Gregory et al., 2010).

Students in schools using the guidelines reported less bullying in the past 30 days, greater willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence, and more positive perceptions of the school climate than students in either of the other two groups of schools (Cornell et al., 2009). In addition, schools using the guidelines had fewer long-term suspensions during the 2006–2007 school year than schools using other threat assessment approaches. None of these statistically significant group differences could be attributed to school size, minority composition or socioeconomic status of the student body, neighborhood violent crime, or the extent of security measures in the schools, which were statistically controlled.

A fourth study examined the impact of staff training on threat assessment. Because school administrators are keenly concerned about the potential for a serious act of violence, many want to make use of zero tolerance policies, typically involving long-term suspension. Therefore, a key goal of the training model is to convince school staff members to use a threat assessment approach rather than zero tolerance. School teams are routinely trained in a six-hour workshop that explains the rationale for threat assessment and teaches participants to use the guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). To examine staff training effects, Allen, Cornell, and Lorek (2008) administered pre- and post-training surveys to 351 multidisciplinary staff from two school divisions, one serving a challenging urban population and the other a more affluent, suburban population. Comparison of pre- and post-measures showed that there was a substantial decrease among school staff members in support for zero tolerance and increased knowledge of threat
assessments of risk and threat. These changes were found among staff in both school divisions, with similar effects across school principals, psychologists, counselors, resource officers, and social workers.

**Directions for Future Study**

These field-test findings need replication in a controlled study with a comparison group of schools not using threat assessment. It would be useful to assess threat assessment outcomes using information from multiple sources, to investigate the relationship between the student and targeted victim in more detail, and to identify factors associated with successful outcomes. For example, how useful is peer mediation or other conflict resolution strategies when students make threats to harm one another? Although there is evidence that a variety of school-based violence prevention programs can improve student behavior (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003), we do not know how such programs affect students involved in various kinds of conflicts and threatening situations, or whether certain kinds of interventions are more effective.

It is important to consider the degree to which teams fully implement a threat assessment approach and how skillfully they follow its guidelines. In their landmark meta-analysis of school-based violence prevention programs, Wilson et al. (2003) found that quality of program implementation was critical. Similarly, in their review of over 500 studies, Durlak and DuPre (2008) found that the level of implementation affected the outcomes obtained in promotion and prevention programs. Schools that carefully implement and maintain a violence prevention program are more likely to achieve substantial reductions in student aggression and misbehavior than schools that implement programs in a less rigorous manner. It follows that the implementation of threat assessment programs must be carefully monitored for fidelity.

Threat assessment is not a substitute for other violence prevention efforts; it should be undertaken in the context of a more comprehensive approach that includes an array of intervention and prevention services (Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2004). The development and field-testing of threat assessment guidelines demonstrates that threat assessment is a promising procedure, worthy of further study. Threat assessment is an especially valuable component of school violence prevention because it uses resources efficiently and targets specific conflicts and disputes before they erupt in violence.

**References**


