School Safety and Threat Assessment

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia

434-924-8929
Email: youthvio@virginia.edu
Website: youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu

Main Points

1. School violence is a small part of the larger problem of gun violence. Schools are safer than the public perceives.
2. The fear of school violence has stimulated harmful consequences in school discipline and security.
3. Threat assessment is a useful tool to identify students in need of assistance.

Traumatic Effect of School Shootings

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

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

Shooting deaths from: National Vital Statistics
http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html

301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

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 emphasize the gun violence they experienced both in and out of school.
**School Safety and Threat Assessment**

**SSWAA Webinar**

**May 31, 2018**

---

### Homicides of School-Aged Youth

Average of 22 homicides per year in schools
Average of 1,480 homicides outside of schools
Homicides outside of school are 67x more likely


---

### 2005-2010 Homicides in 37 States

- Residence: 9,847
- Street: 4,455
- Parking/garage: 1,209
- Outdoors: 629
- Restaurant/bar: 533
- Store/gas station: 452
- Public building/business: 288
- Hotel/motel: 211
- School: 49

Restaurants are 10x more dangerous than schools.
Homes are 200x more dangerous than schools.


---

### What Can Be Done About School Shootings?

**A Review of the Evidence**

Randy Bonum, Dewey G. Cornell, William Modzelewski, and Shave R. Imerson

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

125,000 schools ÷ 21 deaths/year


---

### As schools cope with safety threats since Fla. shooting, parents and leaders try to balance concern with calm

As schools cope with safety threats since Fla. shooting, parents and leaders try to balance concern with calm.

- Copy cat hoaxes
- Attention-seeking
- Students in crisis

---

### 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
Zero Tolerance Suspensions

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


Poem about Sandy Hook, “I understand the killings...”

Zero tolerance is not effective. Suspension associated with poorer outcomes for students.

Suspension Practices

Suspension is a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:

- Fall behind in their classes
- Feel alienated and rejected
- Continue to misbehave and be suspended
- Drop out of school
- Juvenile court involvement

The school-to-prison pipeline

Soapbox - School threat assessment is a more flexible alternative to zero tolerance.

U.S. Suspension Rates

All Schools 2013-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent Suspended</th>
<th>All Students</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Latest available data April 2018
Why the Fear of School Violence Matters

Newtown Rampage Spurs $5 Billion School Security Spending


Building Security Measures

Bullet-Proof Building Entrances

Metal detectors and x-ray screening

High Security Military Entrances

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 $160M

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

NRA proposal would cost state schools about $138 million.

(DeAngelis, Brent, & Ianni, 2011)
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.

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.
There are opportunities for prevention years before the shooting starts and leading up to the day it happens.

We need a shift in mindset from security to prevention.

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. Family members, friends, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress or who is threatening violence.
2. The threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.
3. The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

The FBI, Secret Service, and Dept of Education recommended a threat assessment approach nearly 20 years ago.
Threat Assessment Takes a Problem-Solving Approach

The team takes action based on the seriousness of the threat.
- What protective action, if any, is needed?
- What problem stimulated the threat?
- What can be done to resolve that problem?

Threat assessment must be adapted for schools.
- Recognize developmental issues in children, social context of school.
- Goal is not punishment but successful education and healthy development.

Team roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal or Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Leads team.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)</td>
<td>Team member to conduct mental health assessments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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
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.

Transient Threats

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.

Very Serious Substantive Threats

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.

Key Point

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.

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.

Step 2. Transient or Substantive?
- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat.
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive.
**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.

**Transient versus substantive threats**

**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.

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.

Step 7. Follow up with Safety 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


Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.