



## Preventing lethal school violence: The American experience:

*What we know about school shootings, and  
 promising preventive approaches*

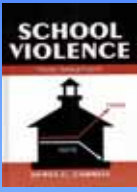
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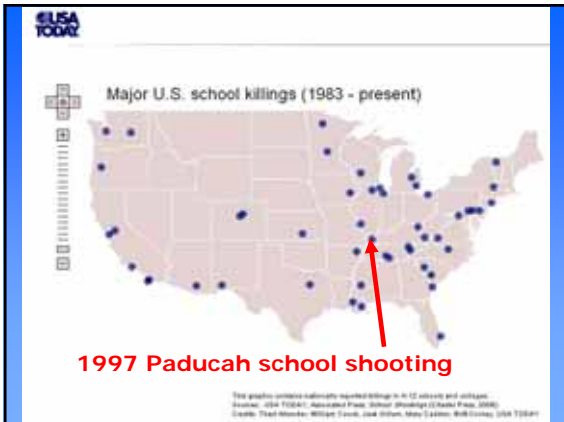
**Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.**, is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project and a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy.

**Dr. Cornell** has studied youth violence for over 20 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 100 publications in psychology and education, including two recent books: *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* and *School Violence: Fears versus Facts*.



# Overview

1. School shootings in the United States
2. Problems to avoid
3. Threat assessment and prevention


### Contributing Factors

- Underachievement
- Bullying and teasing
- Developing mental illness
  - Paranoid fears
  - Voices
- Peer encouragement
- Media encouragement
- Available guns



**September 2002, Age 19**

**THE SHOOTING MESSAGE**

"I never looked at who I was shooting. I didn't know who was shot until I read about it in the paper. . . . People would not simply answer for the attack - I just give it."

**SUICIDE ATTEMPTS**

"I thought if I killed myself I would make this world a better place. . . . I can't change anything that happened, by dying or anything else. I wish I could change things, but I can't."



### "25 shootings at or near schools"

- Man shot in a school parking lot at night
- School van struck by a bullet while driving through city
- Students shot while walking down street near their school (3 cases)
- Intoxicated man found alone shooting air rifle at geese in a football field

Source: [http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/school\\_violence06-07.html](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/school_violence06-07.html)

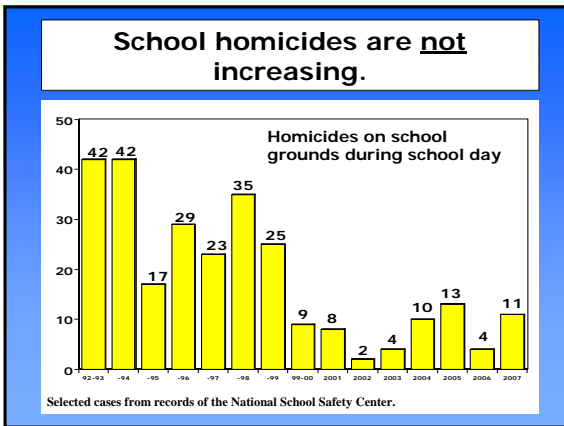
### How many shootings occur in the United States?

- 80+ people are killed every day by firearms in the United States
- 30,000 deaths per year
- 68,000 injuries per year
- ?? shootings without injury

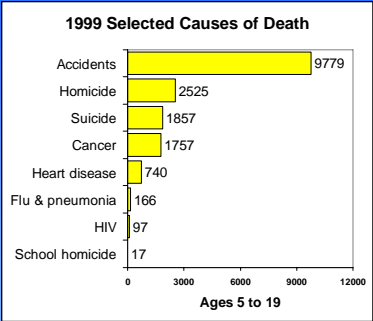
Source: National Vital Statistics Reports, 54 (10), 2006

### Don't be misled by false trends

With 80+ people killed every day, it is possible to find numerous pseudo-trends.



### Students are not at high risk of being killed at school.



### What is the likelihood of a student committing a homicide at your school?

- **93** student homicides cases in 10 years = 9.3/year (1992-93 to 2001-02)
- **119,000** schools
- $119,000 \div 9.3/\text{year} =$
- **1 case every 12,796 years**

For every problem there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong. H.L. Mencken



### Problems for Europe to Avoid



### Fear-based Reactions to Shootings

*Prevention cannot wait until the gunman is at the door.*



### Bullet-Proof Backpacks



Two businessmen are selling bullet-proof backpacks for \$175.  
Boston Herald, Aug 9, 2007.  
<http://shop.mjsafetysolutions.com/main.sc>



## Calls to Arm Teachers

**Michigan** Rep. David Agema introduced HB 5162 to permit teachers to carry concealed firearms at school. UPI Sept 10, 2007. <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2007-2008/billintroduced/House/html/2007-HB-5162.htm>

**Missouri** Governor Matt Blunt said because of the recent spate of school violence it would be worth considering proposals from lawmakers to allow teachers to carry firearms in schools. "It's an interesting idea worth discussing." Associated Press, Oct 22, 2006.

**Nevada** Sen Bob Beers announced he is preparing a bill to permit teachers to carry a gun while teaching. Las Vegas Review Journal, Dec 14, 2006.

**Wisconsin** Legislator Frank Lasee stated: "Israel and Thailand have well-trained teachers carrying weapons and keeping their children safe from harm. It can work in Wisconsin." USA Today Oct 5, 2006




## The Expansion of Zero Tolerance



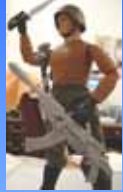

- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting

*No Accidental violations*

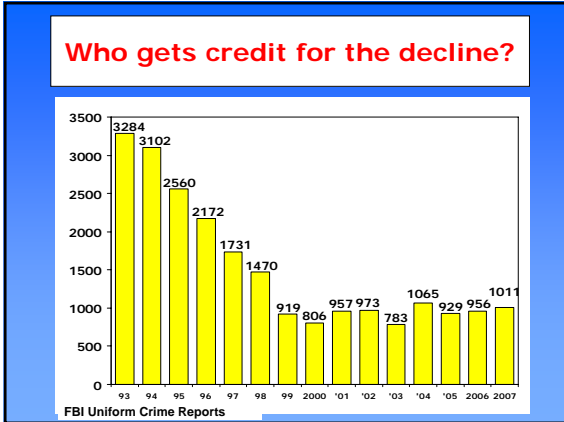
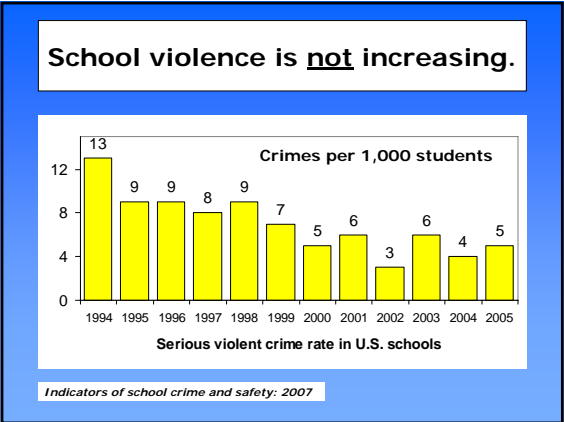
## Nervous Officials No Longer Ignoring Threats by Students


Around the Country, Children Are Being Arrested

- 4 Kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers during recess.
- New Jersey district zero tolerance policy resulted in 50 suspensions in 6 weeks, mostly in kindergarten and 3rd grade for verbal threats.
- 8 yr old suspended for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher, saying pow-pow
- 10 yr old expelled for a 1" GI Joe toy gun
- 14 yr old convicted of felony for e-mail threat
- 17 yr old arrested & expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band

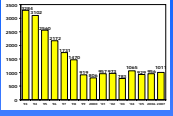
Zero tolerance is not effective. Suspension associated with poorer outcomes for students.






...transferring juveniles to the adult justice system generally increases, rather than decreases, rates of violence among transferred youth."

### Why the decline in juvenile violence?





- Increased *law enforcement* efforts including community policing and efforts to reduce crack dealing and juvenile access to guns
- Increased *mental health* efforts, including school-based and after-school programs to supervise, mentor, resolve conflicts in youth



- Reviewed 221 studies of diverse school-based violence prevention programs
- Average effect size = .25 for demonstration programs, which would reduce fighting 50% in a typical school


### Numerous Effective Programs

- Anger management
- Bullying prevention
- Conflict resolution
- Family therapy
- Parenting skills
- Problem-solving
- Social competence
- Substance abuse resistance
- Etc.

The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works....


### FBI Recommends Against Profiling



“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

Download at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)

**APA Warning Signs Brochure**



*"If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility."*

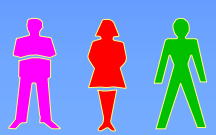
1. Lots of temper on a daily basis
2. Significant vandalism or property damage
3. Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
4. Increase in risk-taking behavior
5. Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
6. Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
7. Enjoying hurting animals
8. Carrying a weapon

**Profiling does not work.**

- School shootings are too rare.
- Profiles make false predictions.
- Profiles generate stereotypes.
- Profiles don't solve problems.

**Look for patterns, not a single profile.**

Antisocial youth -- instrumental crime  
 Conflicted youth – reactive anger  
 Psychotic youth – delusional motive




**FBI Recommends Threat Assessment Approach**



“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”  
 (FBI report p 1)

Download at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)

**Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:**




- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

Download at: [www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)

**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.



## Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

A collaborative project of:  
 University of Virginia Curry School of Education  
 Albemarle County Public Schools  
 Charlottesville City Public Schools

Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund



- Legally defensible procedures for responding to student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Research-based and field-tested
- Covers K-12, regular and special education

Available from [sopriswest.com](http://sopriswest.com)


## Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal	Leads team, conducts Step 1.
School Resource Officer	Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.
Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)	Team member to conduct mental health assessments. Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.
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.

## Field-Test Schools

- 22 Elementary schools
- 6 Middle schools
- 4 High schools
- 3 Alternative schools
- 35 Total**



## What is a threat?

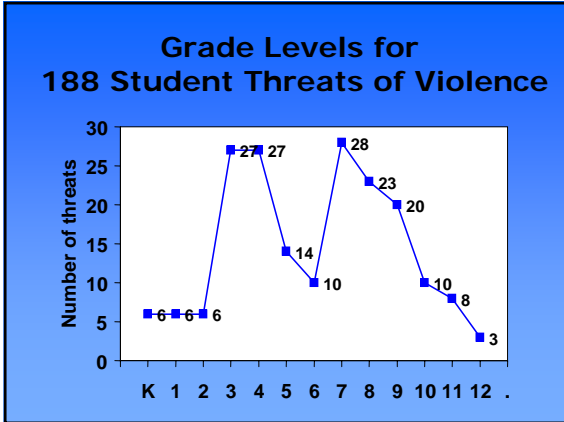
***A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.***

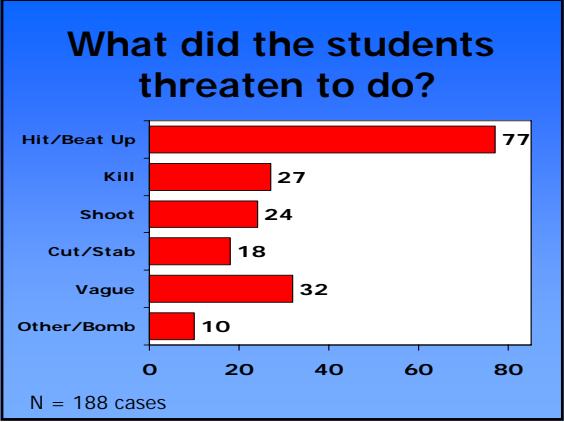
Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims. ("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise. ("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

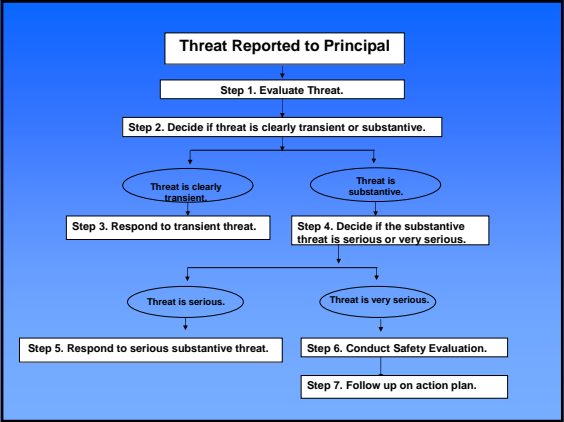
When in doubt, assume it is a threat.





### 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



### 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.

### Typical Questions

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say and do?
4. What did you mean when you said/did that?
5. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
6. What was the reason you said that?
7. What you going to do now?

### Witness Questions

1. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
2. What exactly did [student who made threat] say and do?
3. What do you think he/she meant?
4. How do you feel about what he/she said?
5. Why did he/she say that?

## 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.

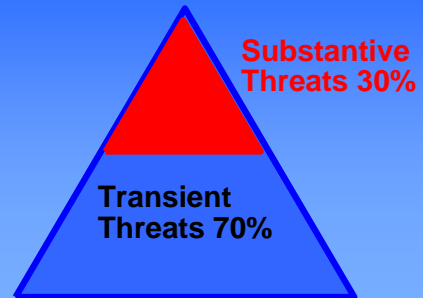
## Transient threats

- 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.

## 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.

## Transient versus substantive threats



## 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.

### Step 6. Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat.

- 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.

### Law Enforcement Investigation of Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Interview suspects and witnesses.
- Conduct searches for weapons and other evidence of planning.
- Serve as a resource for students with fears or information to share.
- Take appropriate protective action.



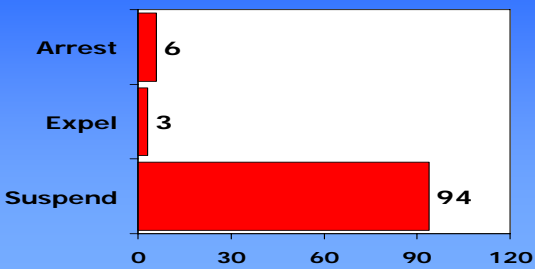
### Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.

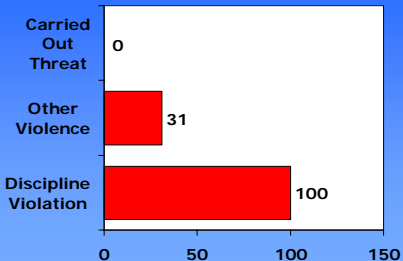
### Step 7. Follow up with action plan.

- 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.
- Document plan in Safety Evaluation Report.

### How did schools respond to 188 threats?



### Follow-up on student behavior after the threat



According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.




## Memphis Field-Trial

Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.

- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out

*Behavioral Disorders, 2008*



## Virginia High Schools

95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model vs 185 other Virginia public high schools.

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

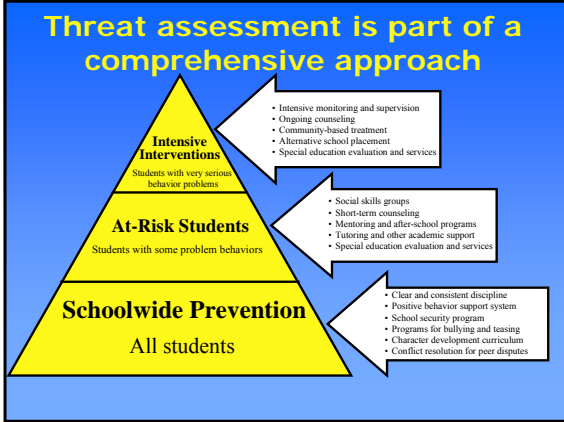
Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

*In press, School Psychology Quarterly*



## Research Needs

- Controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment.
- Research on threat context and student characteristics.
- More follow-up studies of threat outcomes.
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction).



<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

**Virginia Youth Violence Project**  
 Effective methods for youth violence prevention and school safety

**Aggressive Discipline Violations in Virginia High Schools**  
 (per 100 students)

**College Threat Assessment Project**