



School Guidelines for Responding to Youth Threats of Violence

Peter Sheras, Dewey Cornell, Sebastian Kaplan, Andrea Levy, David McConville,
Lela McKnight, Julea Posey, Chris Branson, & Joanna Cole

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Abstract

We developed and field-tested a set of guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence. We trained multidisciplinary teams in 35 schools using a decision-tree and detailed manual, then collected data on 188 student threats that were investigated using the threat assessment model. We found 70% of the threats were less serious transient threats while 30% were more serious substantive threats. Elementary school students (grades 3 and 4) made more transient threats and middle school students (grades 7 and 8) made more substantive threats relative to other grade levels. Approximately half of the students who made threats were suspended, 3 students were expelled, and 6 were arrested. Principals reported at follow-up that nearly 25% of students showed improved behavior after the threat and only 3% showed worse behavior.

Rationale

How should schools respond to student threats of violence? Highly publicized cases of school shootings have propelled many schools to adopt overly rigid discipline policies following a zero tolerance philosophy. In contrast, reports by the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education (Fein et al., 2002) advised schools to use a more flexible threat assessment approach. However, threat assessment has not been systematically implemented or evaluated in schools. The Virginia Youth Violence Project at the University of Virginia, with support from the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund, developed and field-tested a set of guidelines for schools to use in conducting student threat assessments.

A threat assessment model offers some important advantages over other kinds of risk assessment. Threat assessment focuses on situational and behavioral factors rather than student traits, and emphasizes threat management and risk reduction rather than violence prediction (Heilbrun, 1997).

Guidelines Implementation

Threat assessment teams from thirty-five schools participated in the field-test project over the course of a full school year. The teams followed a seven-step decision tree described in a detailed set of guidelines (Cornell, 2001). Teams consisted of a principal or assistant principal, a school resource officer, a school psychologist, and a school counselor for each school. The leader of the threat assessment team is the school staff member responsible for handling student discipline, usually the principal or assistant principal. When threats are reported to the team leader, he or she conducts a preliminary assessment or triage to determine the seriousness of the threat. Other team members -- such as school psychologists, guidance counselors, and school resource officers -- become involved if the threat is determined to be substantive.

What is a threat of violence?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone. Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured. They may be direct or indirect, and may or may not be communicated to the intended victim or victims (“I’m going to get them”). Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise.

Types of student threats

Here are brief definitions of three types of threats, listed in order of severity (complete explanations are found in the manual):

1) Transient Threats are defined as behaviors that can be readily identified as expression of anger, frustration, or perhaps humor, that dissipate in a short period of time. Transient threats are often resolved with an explanation and apology by the student.

Case example: A 2nd grader threatened to kill his classmates after being excluded. When questioned, he was tearful, apologized, and denied intent. The threat was inconsistent with his previous behavior and he participated in a meeting with his classmates to resolve their dispute. He was referred for counseling and was able to discuss feelings of loneliness and neglect at home.

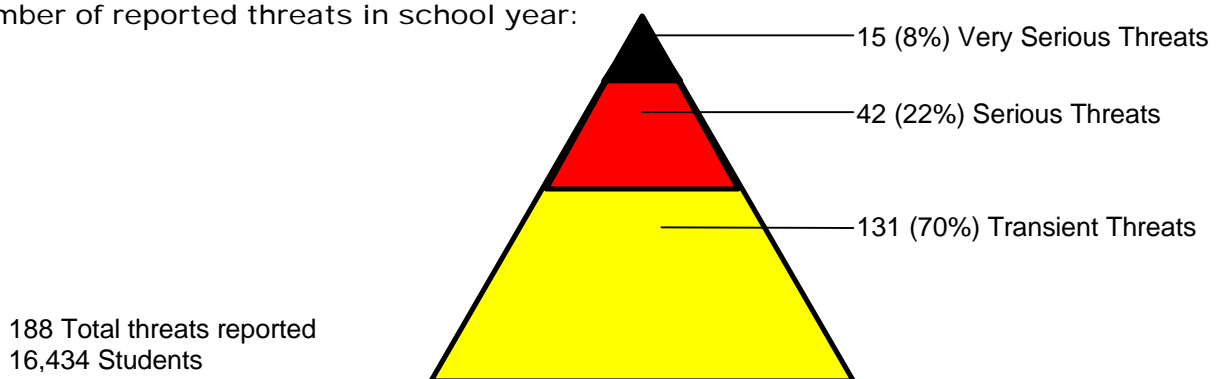
2) Serious Substantive Threats represent a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate incident or argument. Substantive threats may include plausible details such as a specific victim, time, place, method of assault, accomplices, and evidence of planning or such as a weapon, bomb materials, or written plan.

Case Example: A 7th grade boy with a history of fighting wrote a note to another classmate daring him to meet him in the parking lot and threatening to “kick his butt.” Upon interview, the boy did not express regret or apologize. The principal informed both boys’ parents, warned the boys about the consequences of fighting, and referred them for conflict mediation.

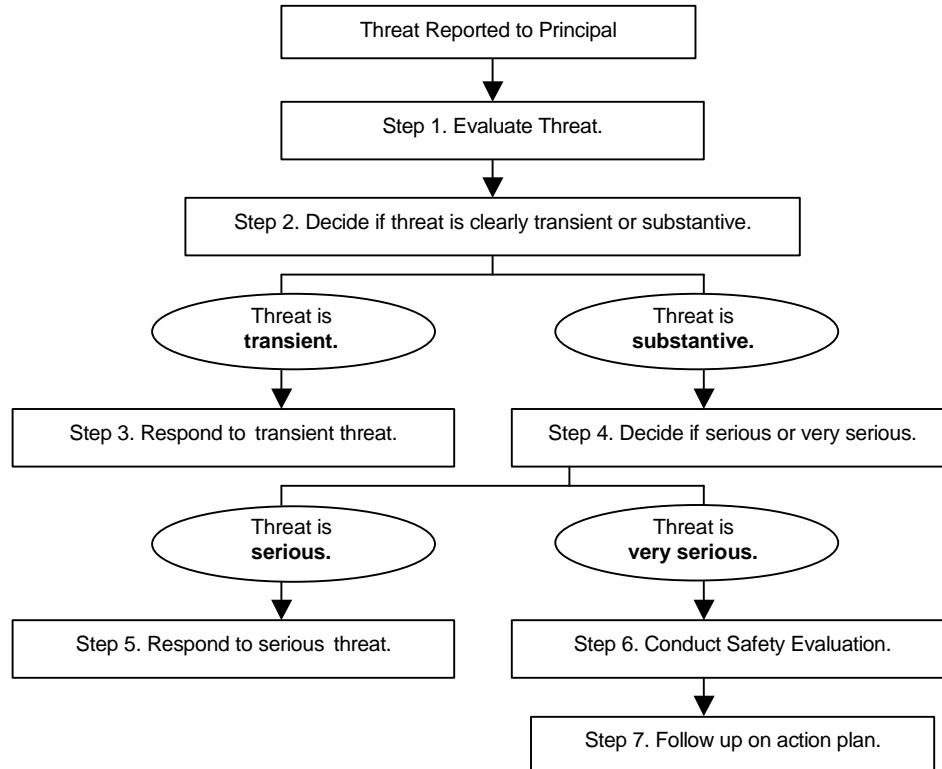
3) Very Serious Substantive Threats are threats to kill, sexually assault, or seriously injure another person. Very serious threats require a full-scale safety evaluation and follow-up plan involving the entire threat assessment team.

Case example: An 8th grade girl threatened her teacher and fellow classmates with scissors. She had a history of angry outbursts and disruptive behavior. The principal suspended her for five days and contacted the school resource officer. The school psychologist conducted a mental health assessment and the team developed a detailed plan before she could return to school.

Number of reported threats in school year:



Threat assessment decision-tree



Mental health assessment

The school psychologist is the team member called upon to conduct a mental health assessment of students who make very serious substantive threats. This mental health assessment is not intended to render a prediction whether the student will or will not commit a violent act. The prediction of violence is a complex and highly uncertain task, and communications about violence risk are easily misstated or misinterpreted (Borum, 1996). The assessment we recommend is concerned with identifying the student's mental health needs and elucidating the student's motivation in making the threat.

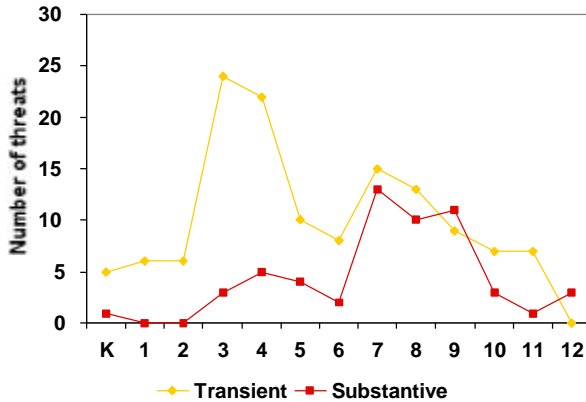
Ideally, the school psychologist will begin a mental health evaluation on the day the threat is made, in order to determine whether the student should be hospitalized or has other pressing mental health needs. The student may be depressed and the threat represents an act of desperation. The psychologist should screen all cases for suicidal as well as homicidal intent and make appropriate follow-up recommendations.

In addition to screening the student for mental health treatment, the school psychologist should investigate the student's feelings and attitudes toward the intended victim, and explore the grievances presumably underlying the threat. Our guidelines include an interview protocol with key topics and questions to cover in a threat assessment. Particular attention is paid to the student's history of violence and access to weapons, and to identifying immediate situational factors, such as bullying and peer conflict, that increase the risk of violence. Although a clinician might not be able to delineate the precise risk of violence, he or she should be able to make recommendations aimed to reduce risk.

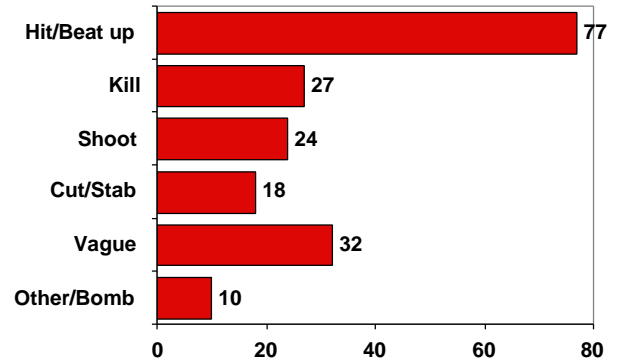
Threat descriptions and outcome

(The charts below present raw frequencies, not percents. N = 188)

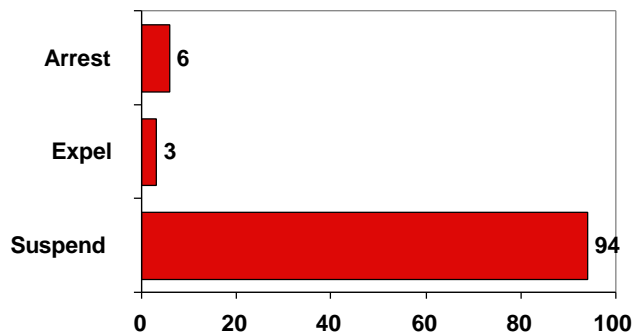
Number of threats by grade level:



Threat Content:

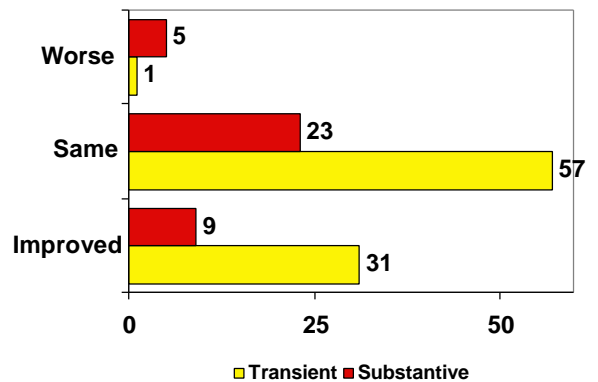


School responses to threat:



Based on 132 transient threats and 56 substantive threats. Arrests were for assaults at time threat was made.

Change in student behavior after the threat:



As rated by school principals, followed up after the school year. N = 176. Chi-square = 10.6, p < .01

Study limitations and future research

This study demonstrates the viability of student threat assessment, but lacks a control group. Future studies should compare schools with and without threat assessment training, gather additional information on threat context and student characteristics, and conduct more comprehensive follow-up of threat outcomes.

More information about our threat assessment model and training is available at <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>.

Borum, R. (1996). *Improving the clinical practice of violence risk assessment: Technologies, guidelines and training*. American Psychologist, 51, 945-956.

Cornell, D.G. (2001). *Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence*. Charlottesville: Virginia: University of Virginia.

Fein, R.A., Vossekuil, F., Pollack, W.S., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., Reddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

Heilbrun, K. (1997). Prediction versus management models relevant to risk assessment: The importance of legal decision-making context. *Law and Human Behavior*, 21, 347-360.

O'Toole, M.E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, Virginia: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation.