

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

Virginia Youth Violence Project

Curry School of Education

University of Virginia

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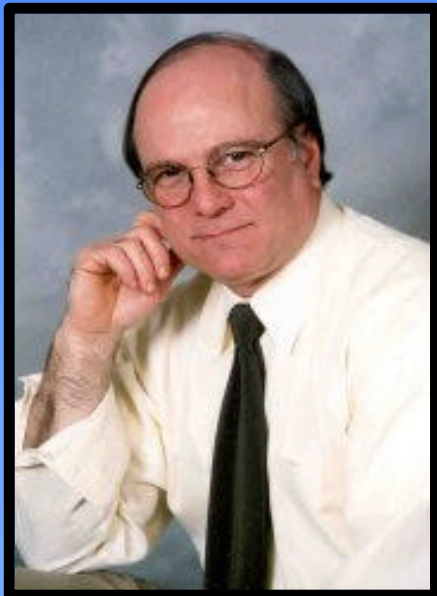
Website: youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu





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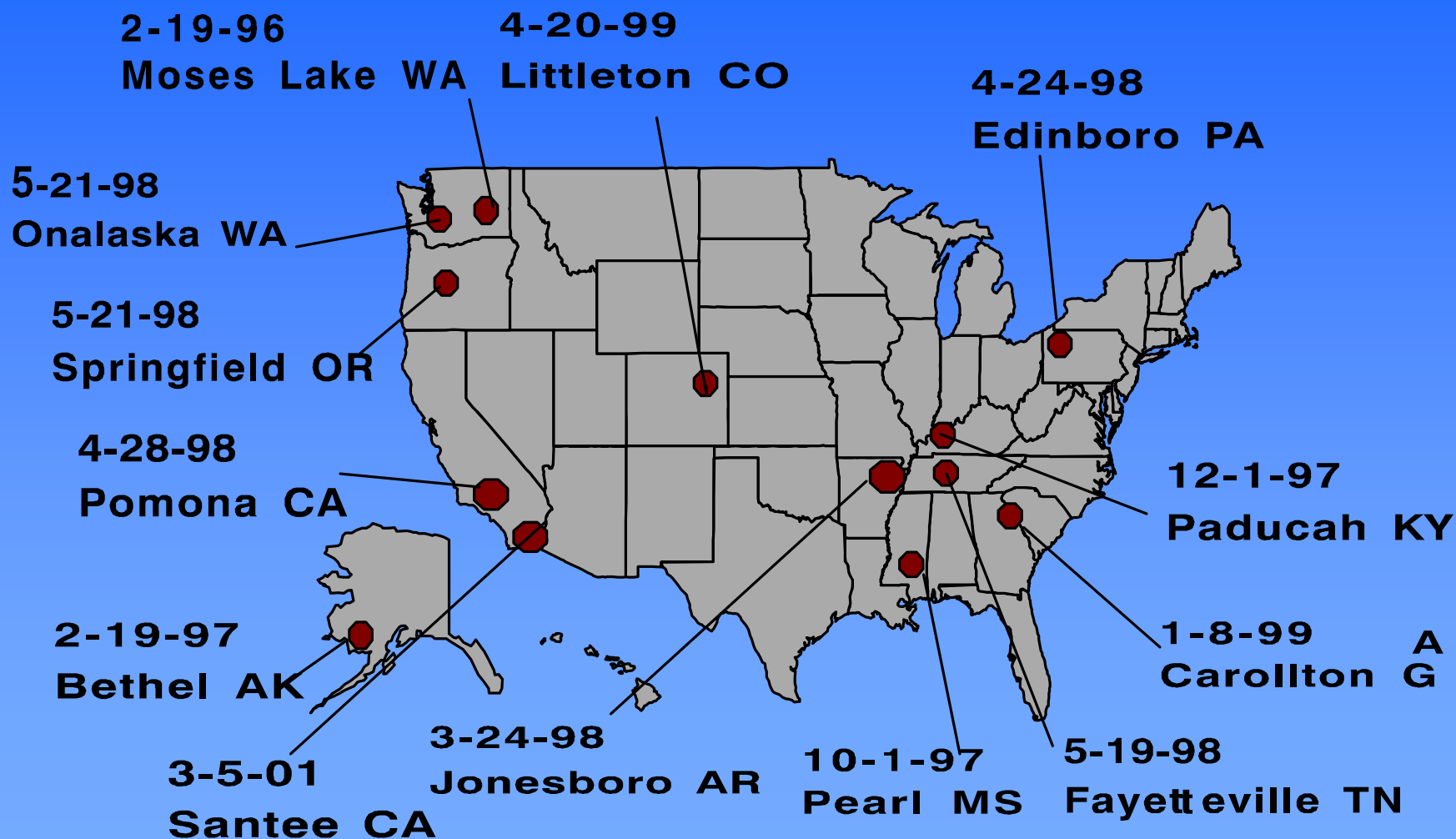
Ph.D. in Psychology, University of Michigan
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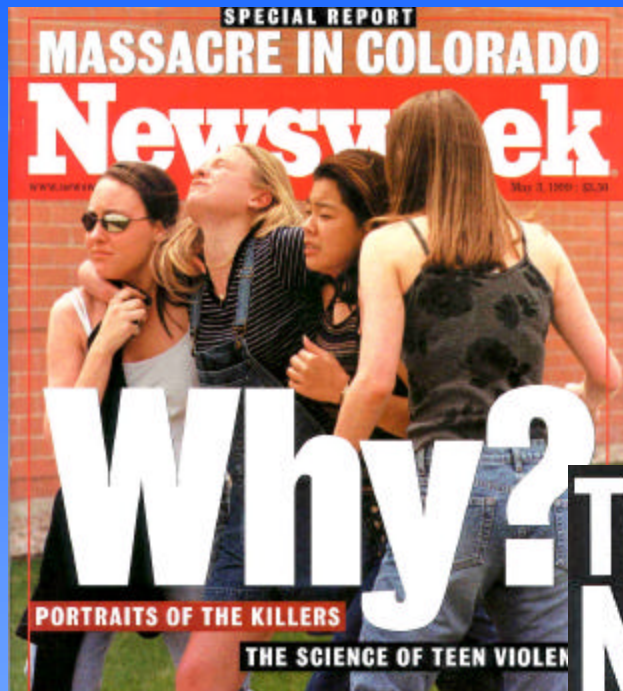
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Multiple Homicides at School



Selected incidents

Public Fear of School Violence



**THE MONSTERS
NEXT DOOR**



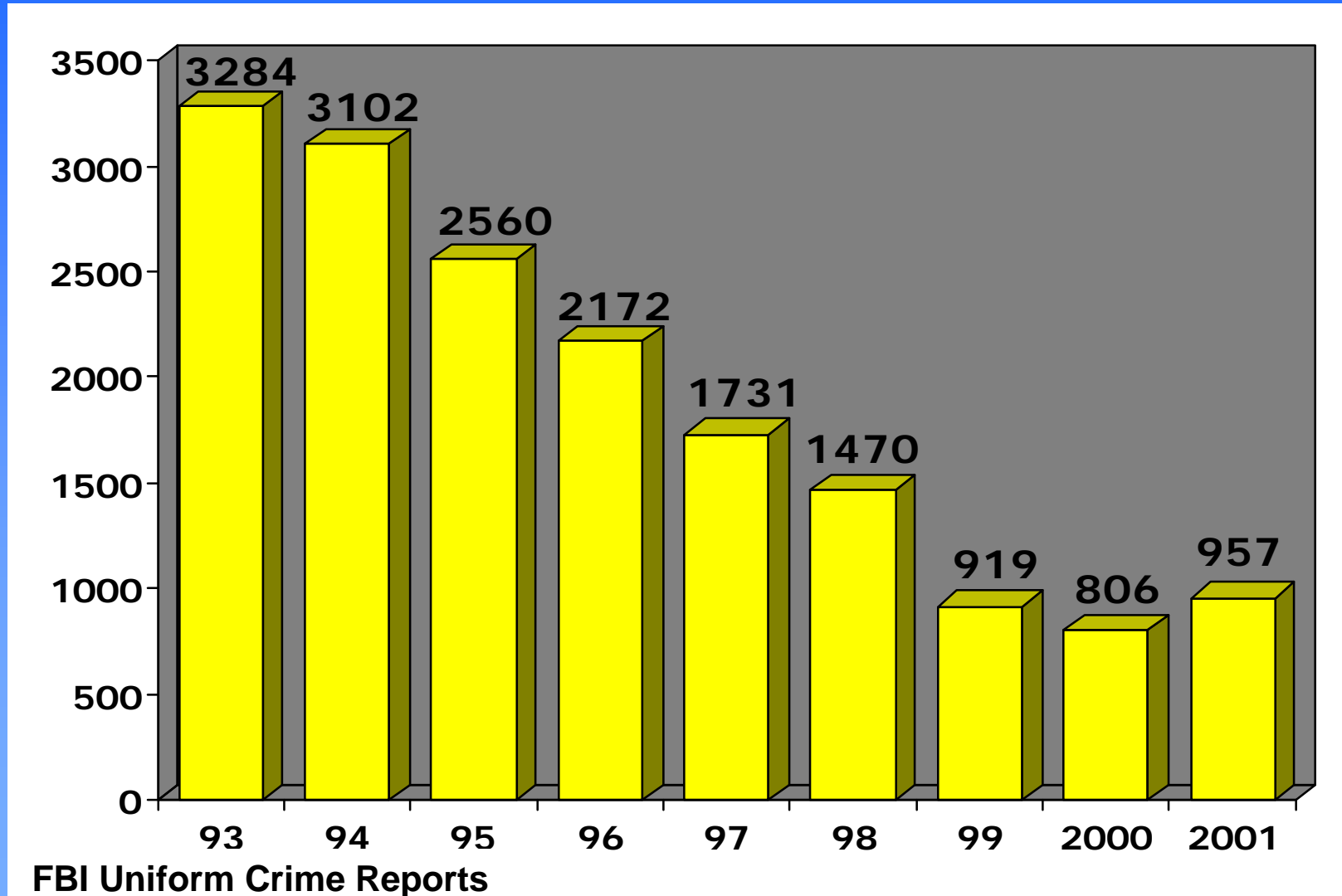
**WILD
IN THE
STREETS**

**WHAT MADE THEM
DO IT?**

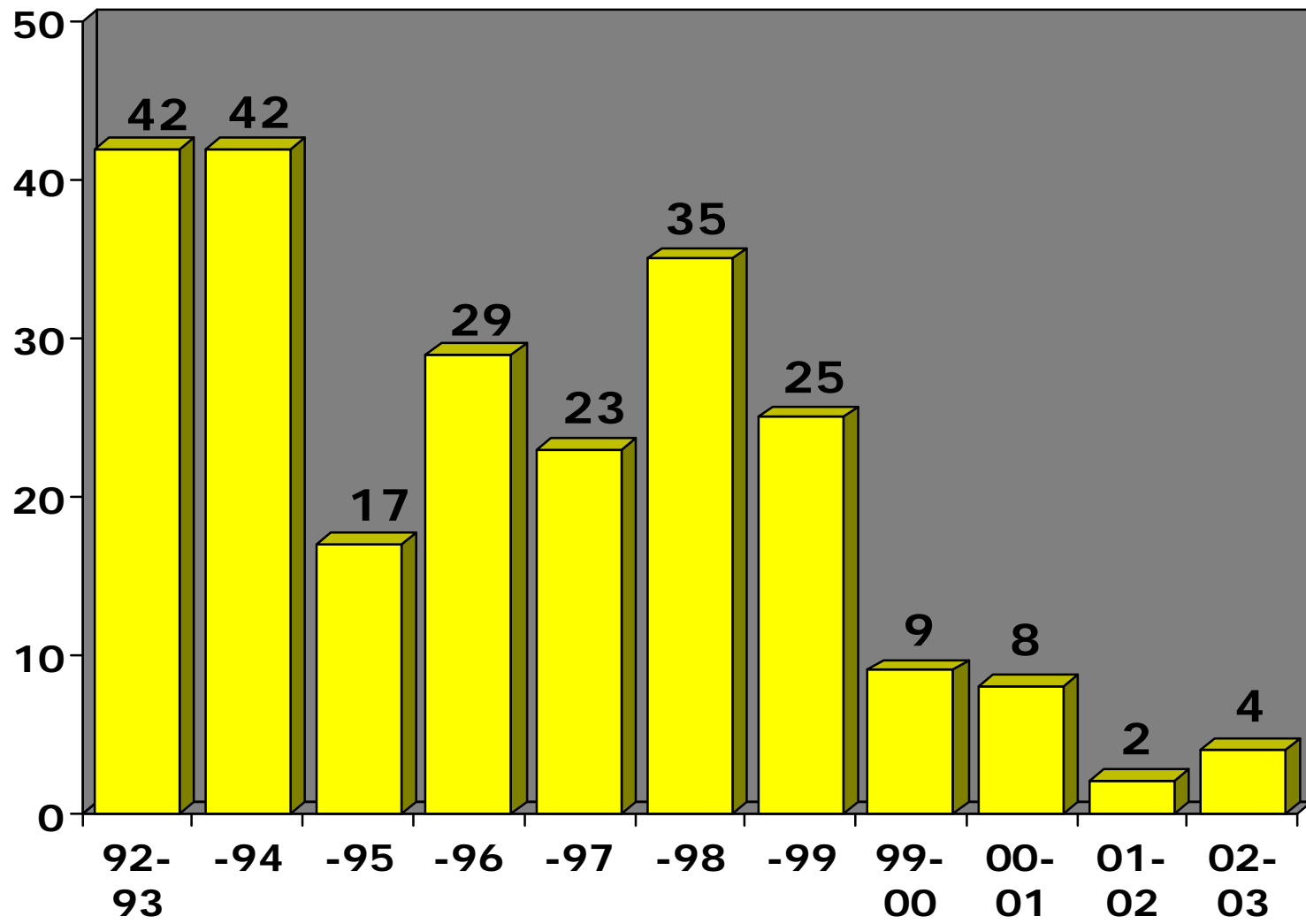
BLOOD EVERYWHERE!

“THESE ARE COLD-BLOODED, EVIL CHILDREN.”

Juvenile Arrests for Homicide: 1993 to 2001

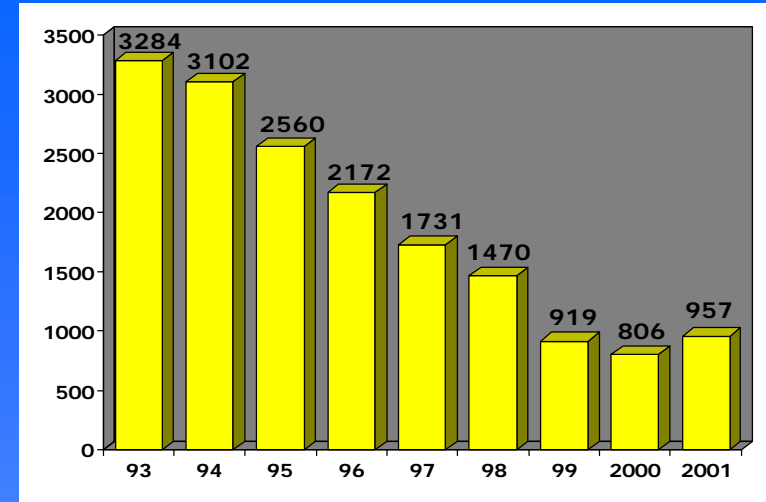


Homicides in U.S. Schools: 1992-93 to 2002-03



Cases on school grounds during school day recorded by National School Safety Center.

Why did violent juvenile crime decline?



- Economic improvement - More jobs for young adults and single parents
- Improvements in law enforcement – community policing, changes in crack market, fewer guns in hands of kids
- Education – massive increase in school and after-school programs

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.
- 7 yr old transferred to a different school after talking about his grandma's gun
- 3rd grader suspended for drawing a soldier with grenades and knives.
- 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

American Bar Assoc. Rejects Zero Tolerance

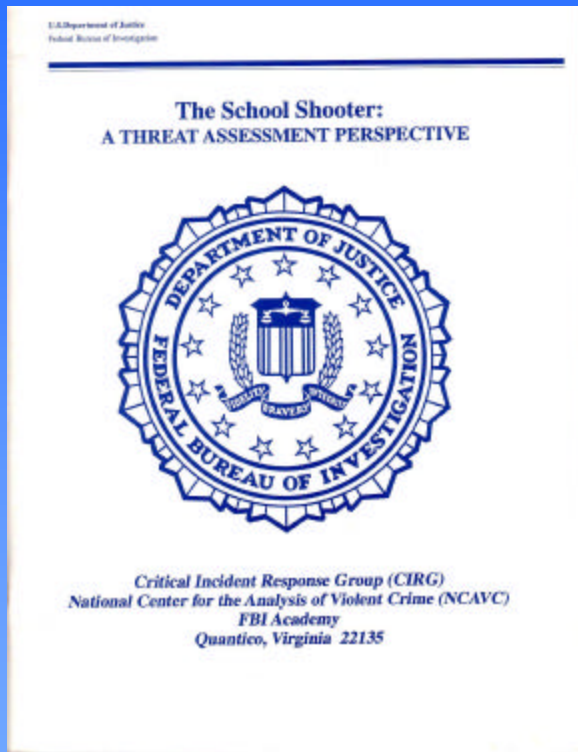
"1) schools should have strong policies against gun possession and be safe places for students to learn and develop;

2) in cases involving alleged student misbehavior, school officials should exercise sound discretion that is consistent with principles of due process and considers the individual student and the particular circumstances of misconduct; and

3) alternatives to expulsion or referral for prosecution should be developed that will improve student behavior and school climate without making schools dangerous; and

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the ABA opposes, in principle, "zero tolerance" policies that have a discriminatory effect, or mandate either expulsion or referral of students to juvenile or criminal court, without regard to the circumstances or nature of the offense or the student's history." Feb 2001

FBI Recommendations on School Violence

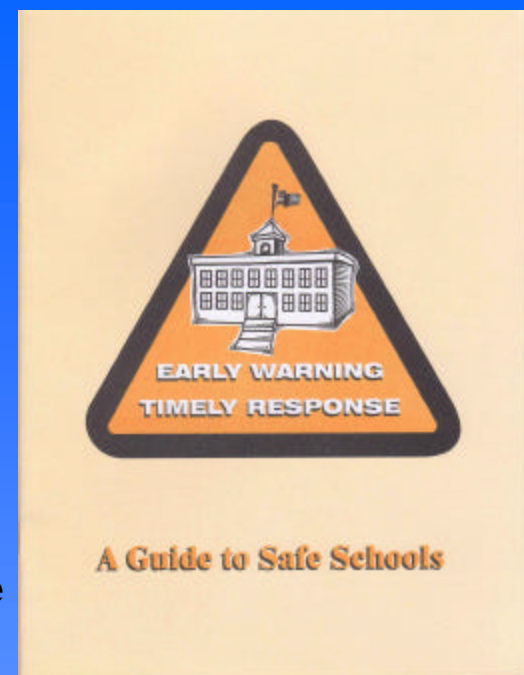


**Download at
www.fbi.gov**

“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)

Federal Warning Signs

1. Social withdrawal
2. Excessive feelings of isolation
3. Excessive feelings of rejection
4. Being a victim of violence
5. Feelings of being picked on & persecuted
6. Low school interest/poor acad performance
7. Violence in writings/drawings
8. Uncontrolled anger
9. Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors
10. History of discipline problems
11. Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
12. Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
13. Drug use and alcohol use
14. Affiliation with gangs
15. Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
16. Serious threats of violence



APA Warning Signs Brochure



If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility:

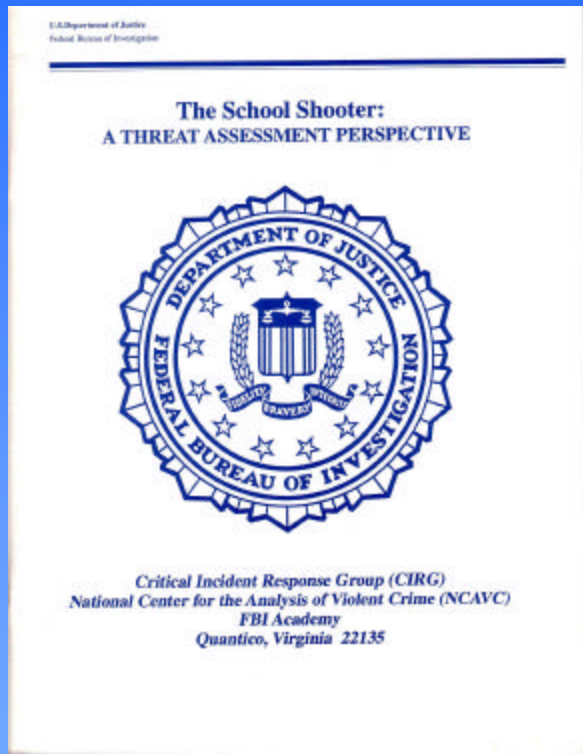
1. Loss of temper on a daily basis
2. Significant vandalism or property damage
3. Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
4. Increase in risk-taking behavior
5. Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
6. Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
7. Enjoying hurting animals
8. Carrying a weapon

Profiling does not work.



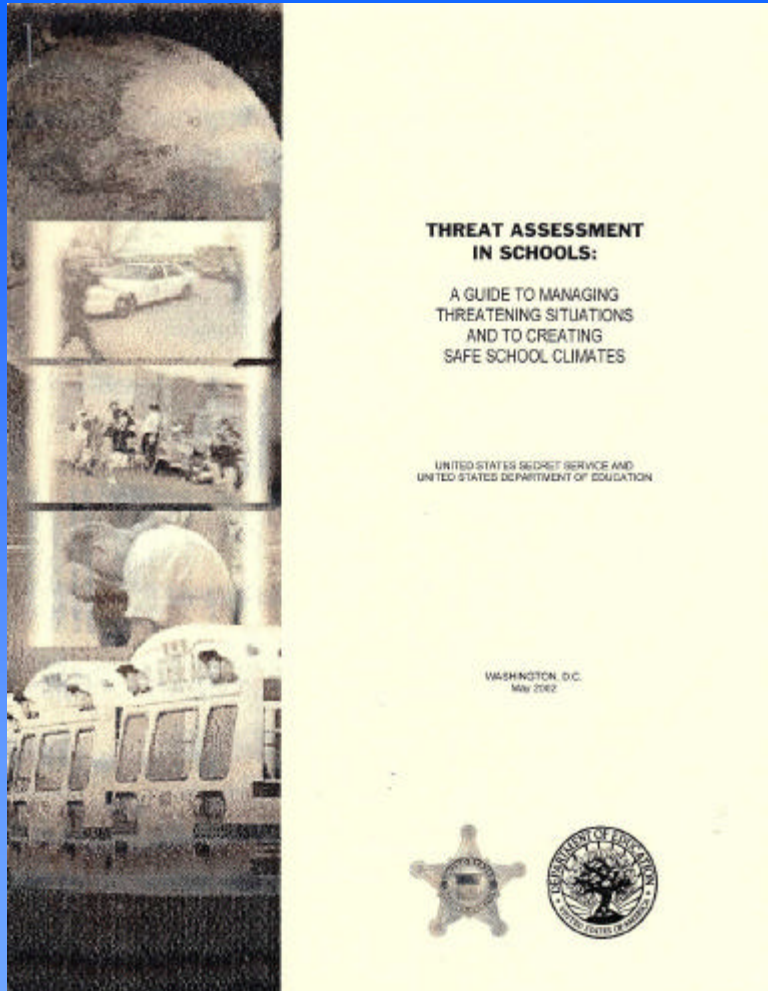
- School shootings are too rare.
- Profiles make false predictions.
- Profiles generate stereotypes.
- Profiles don't solve problems.

FBI Recommendations on School Violence



Download at
www.fbi.gov

“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.secretservice.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.

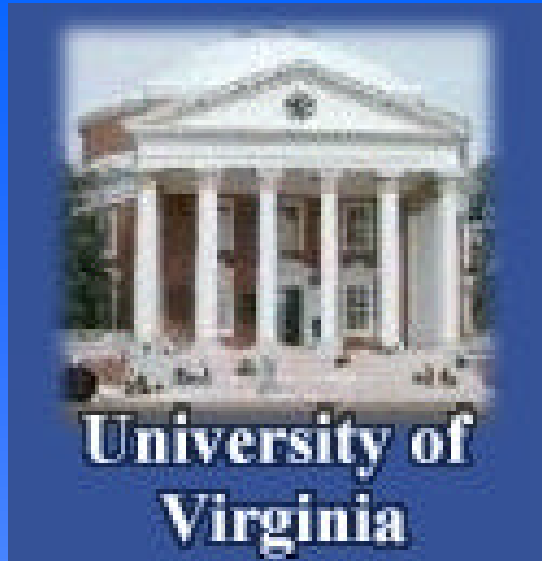
Threat Assessment

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.

6 Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

(abridged from Secret Service/DOE Guide)

1. Targeted violence is the result of an understandable process, not a random or spontaneous act.
2. Consider person, situation, setting, & target.
3. Maintain an investigative, skeptical mindset.
4. Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits.
5. Use information from all possible sources.
6. *Making* a threat is not the same as *posing* a threat. Ask "Is this student on a path toward an attack?"



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

Our Purpose...

...was to develop, implement, and evaluate guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence.





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).

Development of Guidelines

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

Purpose and Goals of these Guidelines

The purpose of these guidelines is to help school personnel deal with student threats of violence in a consistent, fair, and responsible manner. Our goals are to maintain a safe school environment and to respond to students needs that are indicated by threats.

Perceived risk of violence

Media attention to a series of school shootings has stimulated fears that schools are not safe, and generated inaccurate perceptions that all students who make threats are likely to engage in lethal violence. In fact, the risk of violence at school is very low relative to the risk outside of school.^{1,3,5} Contrary to public perceptions, violent crime by youth, including school homicide, has declined substantially since 1993. The overall risk of violence and injury at school has changed very little over the past 20 years, and weapon carrying at school has declined for almost ten years.¹

Schools have an obligation to take a factual, rational approach to student threats of violence -- to protect students and staff, and to maintain a safe and orderly school environment, but at the same time to avoid over-reacting to threats in a manner that is disruptive to learning or results in excessive consequences for students who engage in inappropriate behavior.

Predictions of violence

Reports by the FBI,¹ the Secret Service,² the U.S. Surgeon General,³ and the U.S. Department of Education^{4,5} emphasize that there is no profile or formula that will accurately determine whether or not a student will engage in lethal acts of violence. Severe violence is too rare, and can result from too many different factors, to be accurately predicted. However, there is useful scientific information about the behavioral and psychological antecedents of violence, and it is possible to reduce the risk of violence by appropriate interventions.^{6,7} Therefore, our approach is to evaluate student threats of violence, and to make measured and systematic responses aimed at reducing the risk of violence by addressing the problem or circumstances that precipitated the threat.^{1,2} These guidelines will be most useful in helping school personnel gather relevant information necessary to make an individualized assessment of student threats, and to make decisions based on their professional judgment, considering the unique circumstances and needs of their students.

For more information:

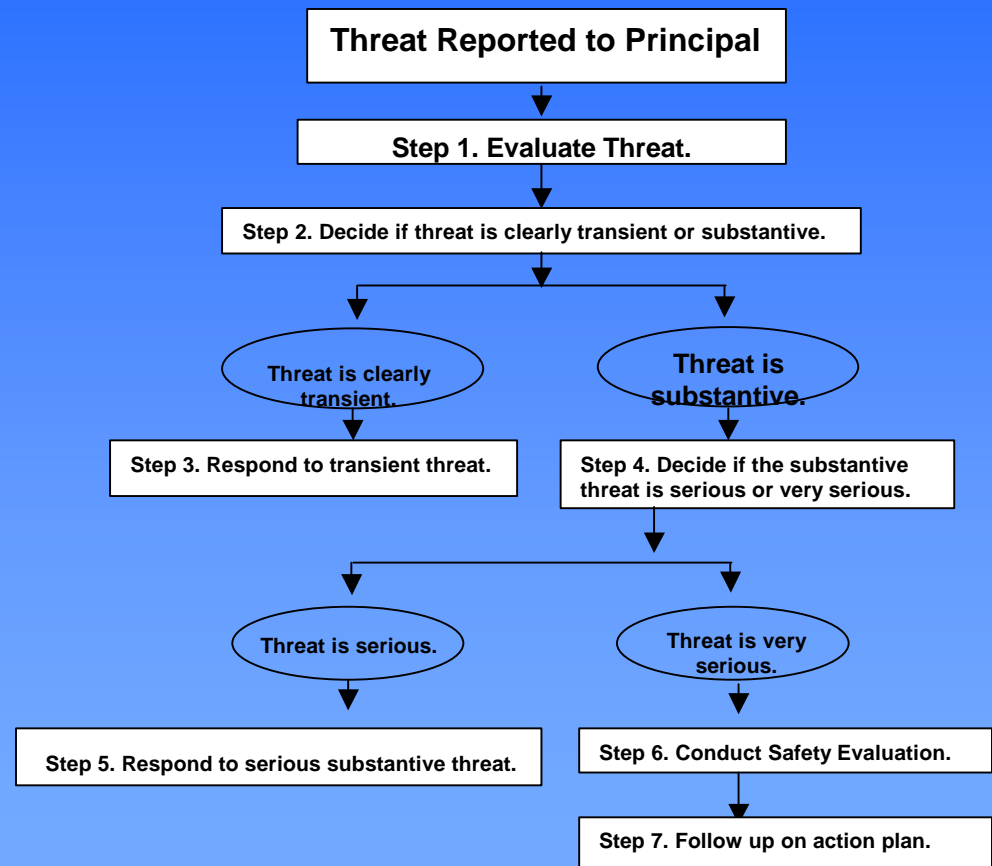
¹ O'Toole, M.E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, Virginia: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available at www.fbi.gov.

² Vondrahl, B., Felt, R., Ruddy, M., Berman, R., & Noddy (2001). *The threat report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. And Felt, R., Vondrahl, B., Pollock, W., Berman, R., Moshinski, W., & Ruddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening students and to averting self-harmful actions*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. Available at www.secretservice.gov.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Health violence: A report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: Author.

⁴ Kruttschnitt, P., Chen, X., Chen, S.P., Ruddy, S.A., et al. (2003). *Initiative of school crime analysis* (NCES 2001-401)9401-0841703. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education.

⁵ Dwyer, K., O'Neil, D., & Wanger, G. (1998). *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education.



Field-Test Schools

22 Elementary schools

6 Middle schools

4 High schools

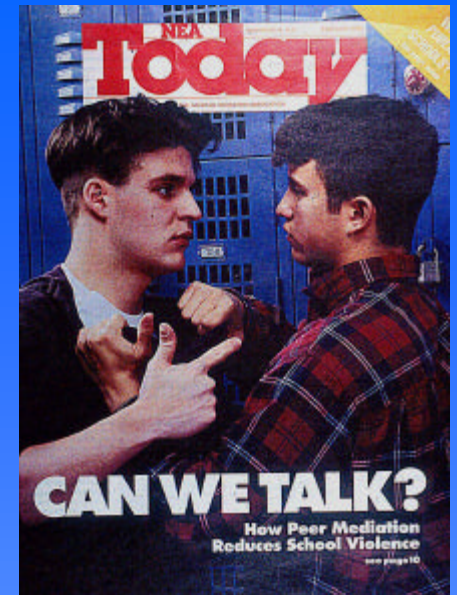
3 Alternative schools

35 Total



What is a threat?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.



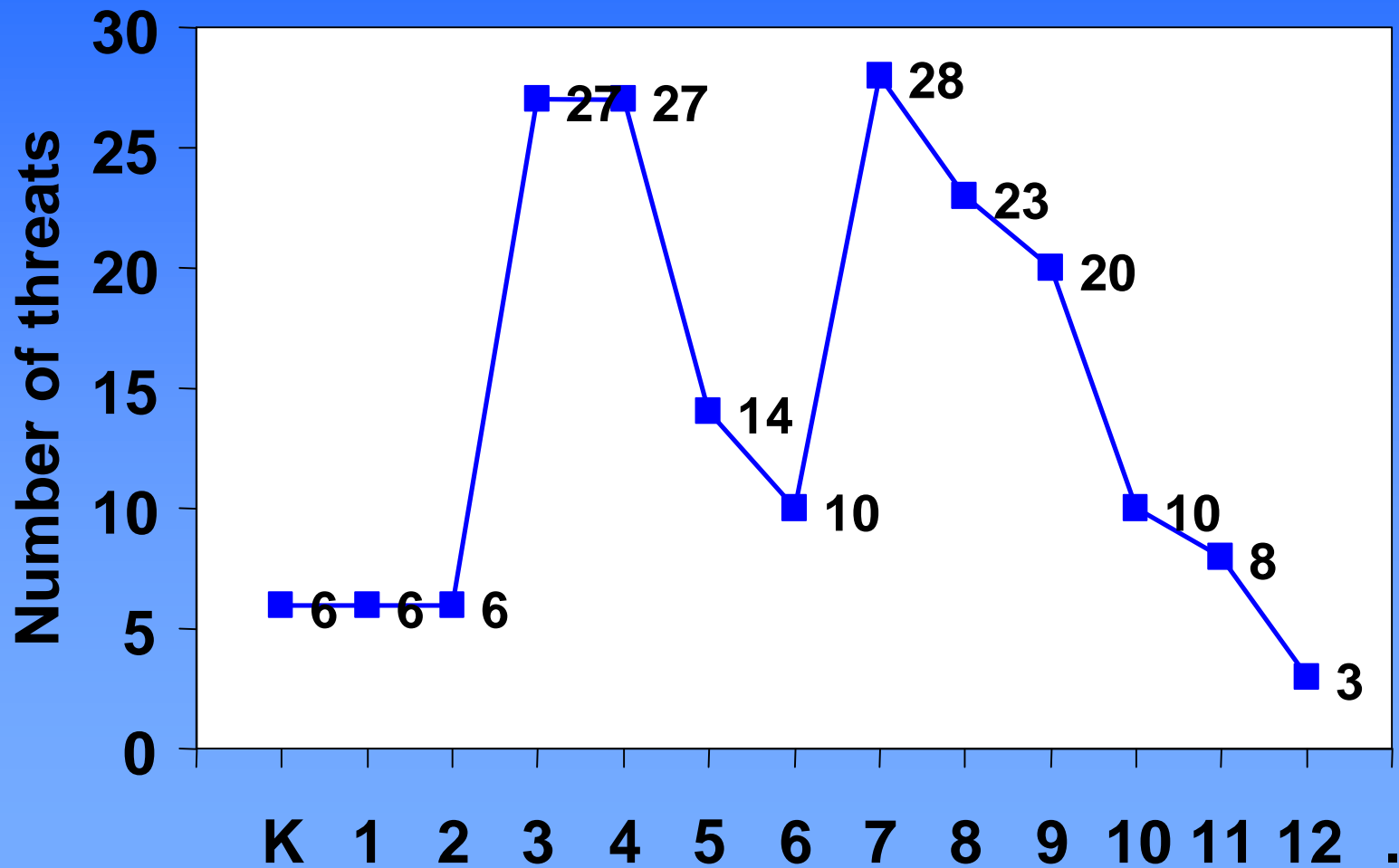
Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

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

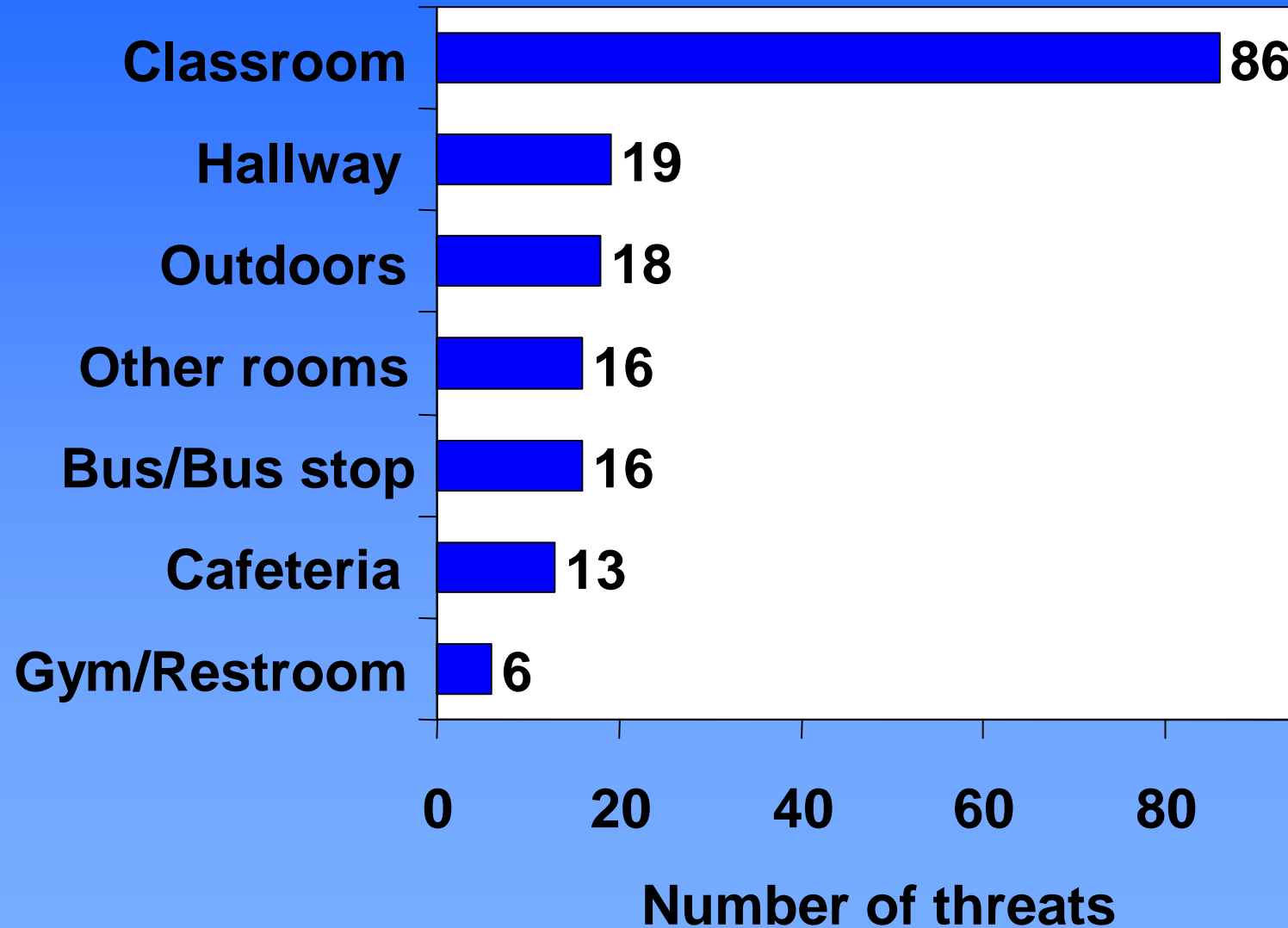
Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise.
("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

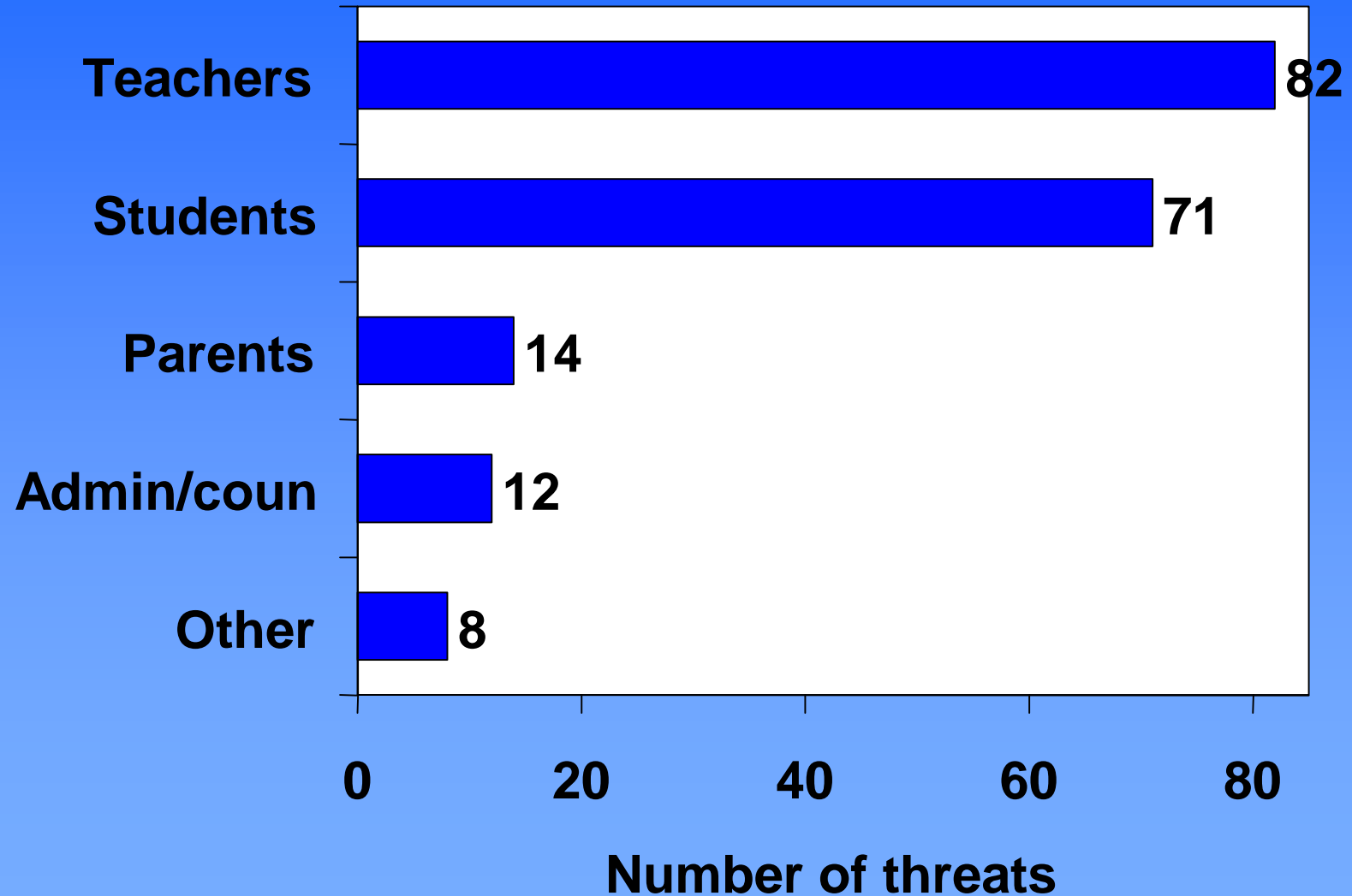
Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence



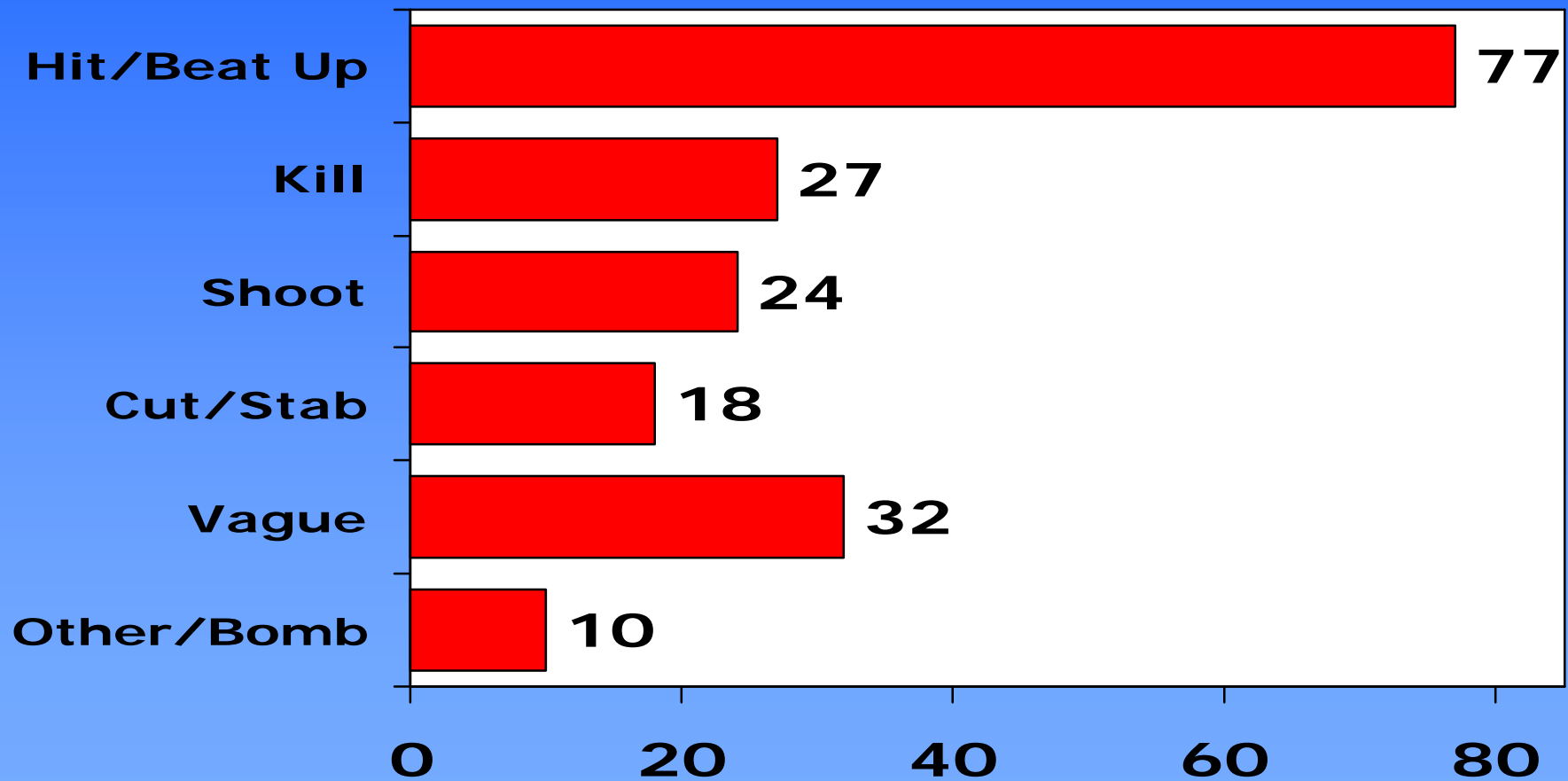
Where did threats take place?



Who reported the threats?



What did the students threaten to do?



N = 188 cases

All threats are not the same.

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)

“I’m gonna kick your butt.”

“There’s a bomb in the school.”

“Wait until I get my gun!”

“Let’s really make them
pay for what they did.”

Context matters...



Types of Threats

- Transient
- Substantative
 - Serious
 - Very Serious

Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Threat is clearly
transient.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Threat is
substantive.

Step 4. Decide if the substantive
threat is serious or very serious.

Threat is serious.

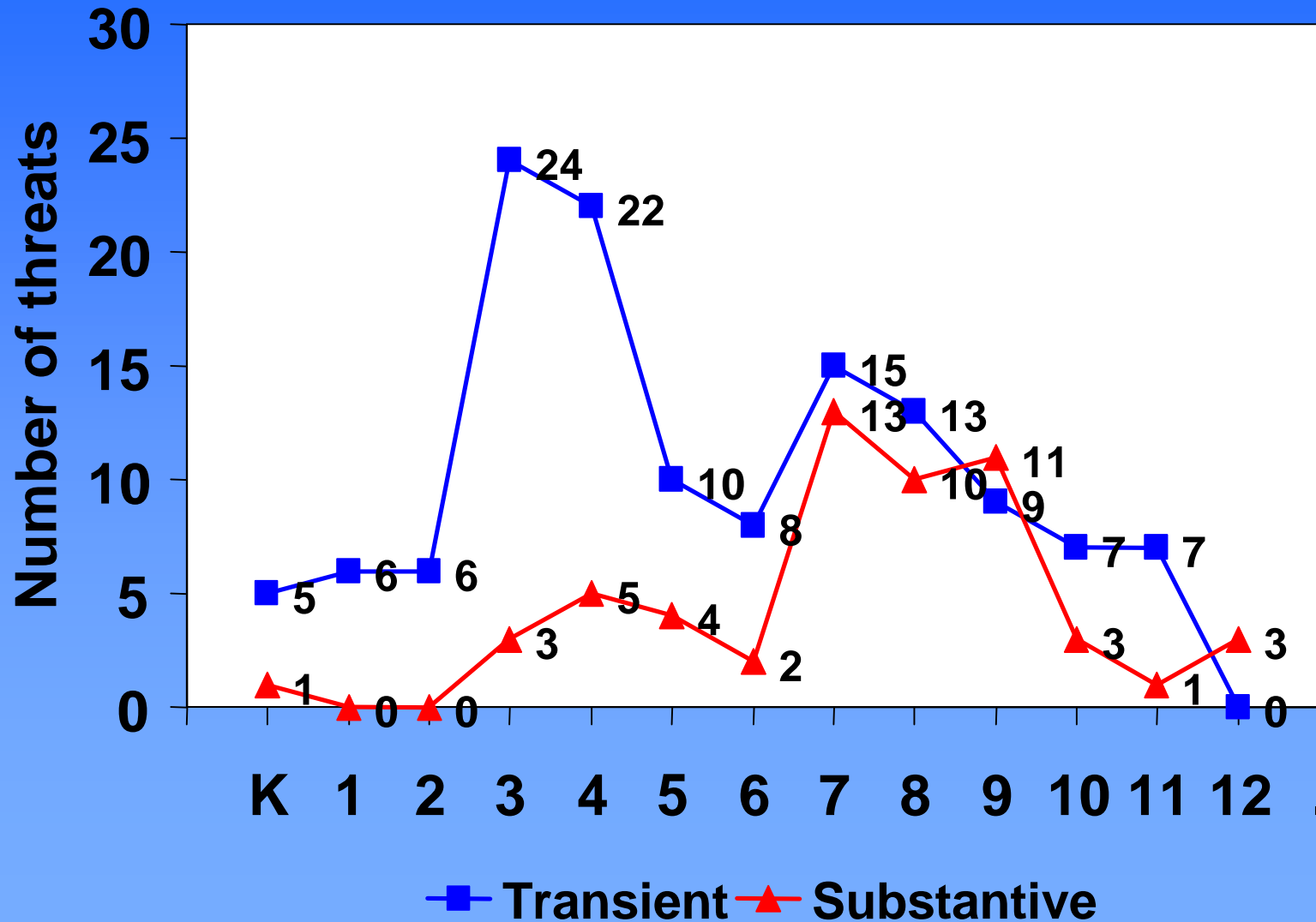
Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

Threat is very serious.

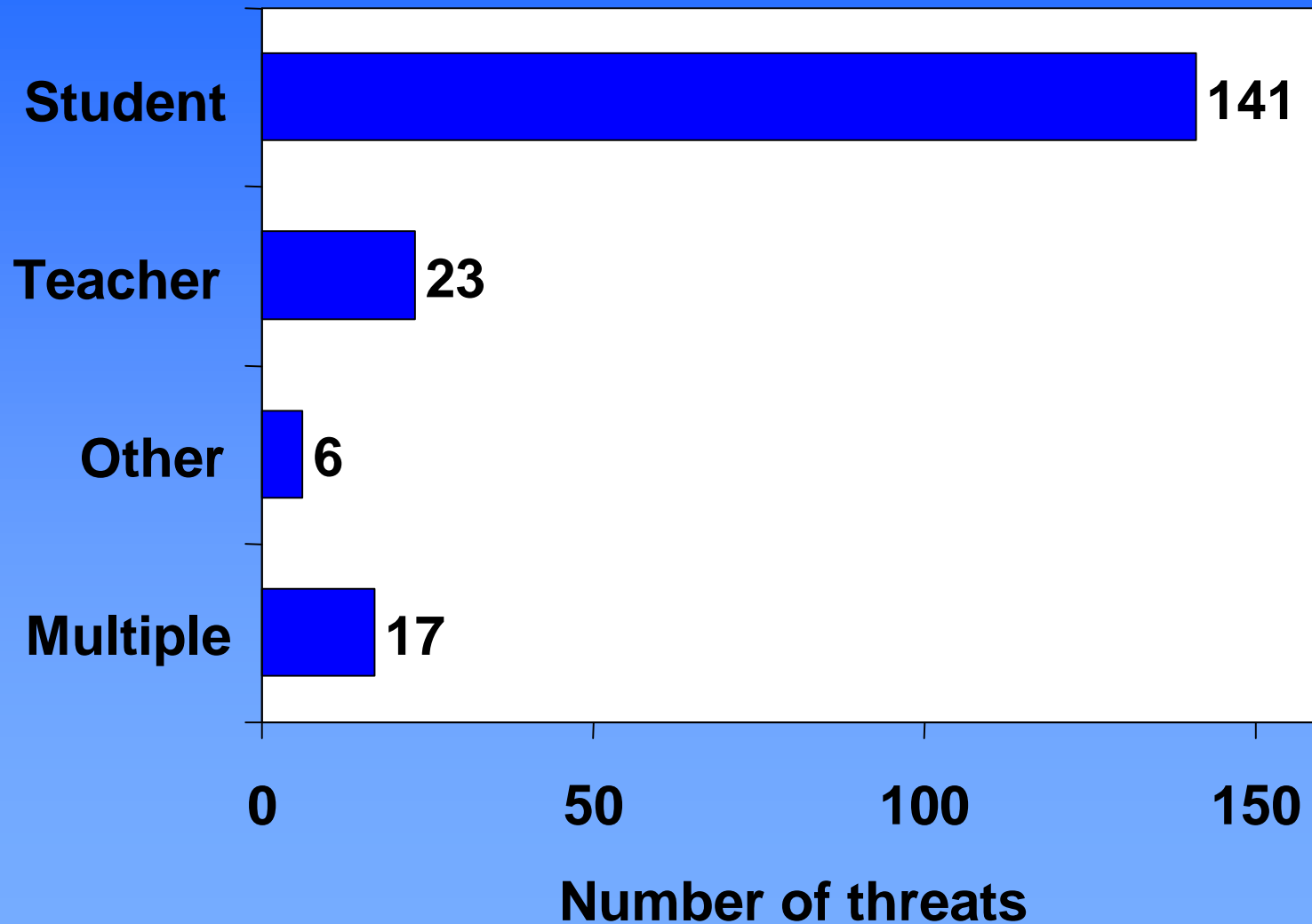
Step 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.

Step 7. Follow up on action plan.

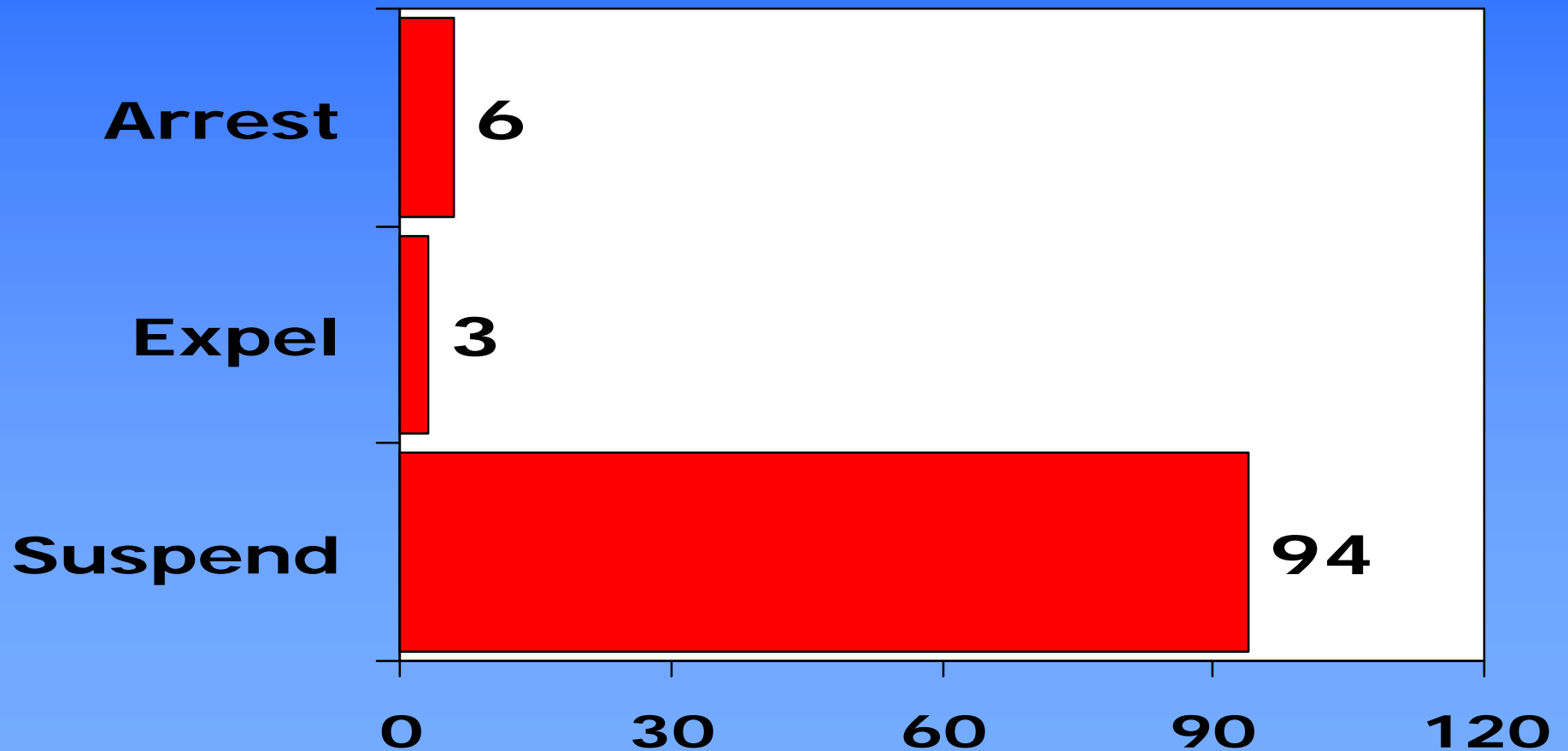
Grade Level Comparison of Transient and Substantive Threats



Who was the victim of threats?



How did schools respond to 188 threats?



Bullying and Violence

- Bullying is one form of violence prevalent in schools and school environments.
- All violence is not bullying.
- It is estimated that as many as 30% of school-aged children are involved as bullies or victims (NEA and others).

Bullying Is Pervasive in the U.S.A.

Aug 5	Hawthorne NJ	3 HS students hospitalized after initiation rite.
July 13	Scranton PA	Mother arrested for anthrax hoax to frame boys who bullied her son.
June 27	Putnam WV	Family sues school for failing to protect son from bullying.
May 21	Indianapolis IN	12 yr old stabs 14 yr old who bullied him.
April 26	Orange Co CA	Bully victim put in intensive care, suing school.
Mar 12	Lebanon OH	Father acquitted in threatening boys who bullied his 11 year old son.
From Raven Days website		

Bullying Is Worldwide.

Jul 00	England	Boys lose lawsuit against school that failed to protect them from bullying.
May 00	Canada	Girl convicted of bullying classmate who committed suicide.
May 00	New Zealand	Survey finds that gay students in fear.
Mar 00	France	Bullies kill father who tried to protect son
Mar 00	Brazil	Student shoots classmate.
Jan 00	South Africa	Bully victim dies from beating.
Oct 01	South Korea	Bully victim kills tormentor.
May 01	Germany	Bully victim sets self on fire.

From Raven Days website

What Is Bullying?

- ...Unprovoked aggressive behavior meant to dominate, hurt, or exclude another – in one way to channel aggression.
- ... The use of one's strength or status for the purpose of intimidating, injuring, or humiliating another person of lesser strength or status.

Who are Bullies?

- Bullies are defined by the behavior they exhibit, not their age, size, appearance, status or bank account

- Bullies are people too. They have developmental histories, experiences, choices and feelings

-

Forms of Bullying

- Physical bullying
- Verbal bullying (verbal harassment)
- Social bullying & exclusion
- Sexual bullying & harassment



Understanding Victims

- Differentness
- Vulnerability
- Isolation

Understanding Bullies

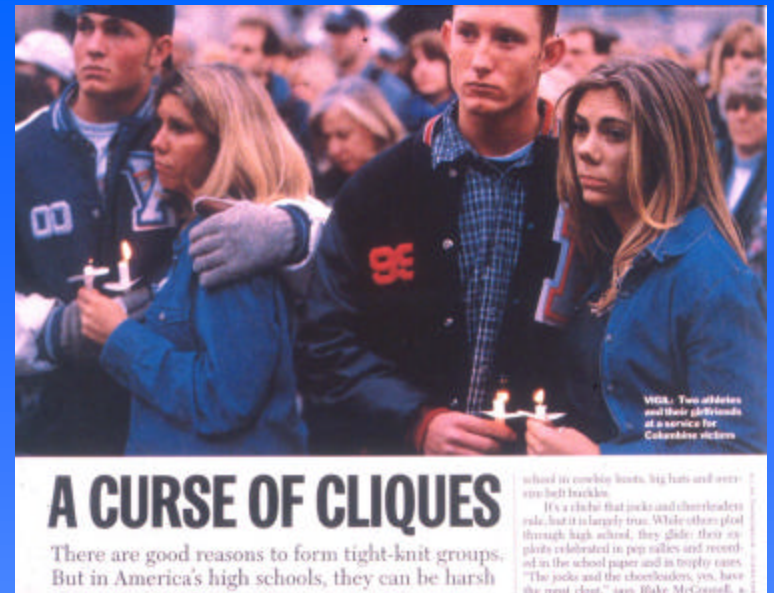
- Nearly 50% of bullies are or were victims
- Bullying is not innate, it is learned
- Understand context of the behavior
- Bullying is an attempt to get something
 - Attention
 - Love
 - Possessions
 - Control

What About Bystanders?

- Bystanders often feel guilty that they are not able to help those being victimized.
- Bystanders feel incompetent and ineffective at helping or standing up for their ideals.
- Many school aged children are frightened and anxious about their own safety when they see bullies at work.

Schools May Support Bullying

- Staff overlook bullying.
- Administrators fail to follow-up when bullying is reported.
- Teachers tease or belittle students.
- Coaches permit initiation and hazing.



YVP Research and Training Focus

- Create and implement threat assessment guidelines for all school students (including SPED)
- Research and understand bullying and effective school interventions to diminish it.

Research Presentations

- Understanding threats among special education students.
- Measuring the occurrence of bullying in schools.
- Evaluating bully prevention in schools