

Guidelines for Student Threat Assessment: Field-Test Findings

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Abstract. A demonstration project was conducted to field-test guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence. Results from 188 student threats occurring in 35 schools over the course of one school year are described. School-based teams used a decision-tree model to evaluate the seriousness of a threat and take appropriate action to reduce the threat of violence. Using threat assessment guidelines, the majority of cases (70%) were resolved quickly as transient threats. More serious cases, termed substantive threats (30%), required a more extensive evaluation and intervention plan. Follow-up interviews with school principals revealed that almost all students were able to continue in school or return to school after a brief suspension. Only 3 students were expelled, and none of the threatened acts of violence were carried out. These findings indicate that student threat assessment is a feasible, practical approach for schools that merits more extensive study.

In the late 1990s, a series of school shootings stimulated authorities nationwide to review school safety policies and to seek new practices for preventing student violence (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001; Walker & Epstein, 2001). The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) con-

vened a national conference on school shootings in 1999, and recommended in its report (O'Toole, 2000) that schools adopt a threat assessment approach to prevent similar acts of violence. Likewise, the U.S. Secret Service, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, advocated the use of threat assessment, and in 2002 began offering threat

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assessment training to schools nationwide (Fein et al., 2002). The present study reports on the field-testing of a set of guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence. The guidelines were developed to implement recommendations of the FBI report (O'Toole, 2000). This appears to be the first demonstration of this threat assessment approach in schools.

The initial reaction to the school shootings by many authorities was to develop a profile or set of characteristics that could be used to identify potentially dangerous students before they engaged in a violent act. The U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice disseminated to every public school in the nation a series of "warning signs" for identifying potentially violent youth (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). The American Psychological Association (APA) released a "warning signs" pamphlet (APA, n.d.) and the National School Safety Center (NSSC, 1998) published its *Checklist of Characteristics of Youth Who Have Caused School-Associated Violent Deaths*. Other state and national organizations have released their own checklists and warning signs (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000).

Profiling of potentially violent students is problematic. Sewell and Mendelsohn (2000) pointed out that the pressure to publish such profiles or warning signs has resulted in lists that exceed the boundaries of existing knowledge. There is no body of research demonstrating the validity of these profiles or lists of warning signs, and there is concern that profiling will result in the false identification of students as violent who are not in fact dangerous (O'Toole, 2000). Because serious acts of violence are relatively infrequent, and committed by a small proportion of students, it is difficult to identify items or signs that are sufficiently specific to them. Many risk factors correlated with violence are not specific indicators of violence, and can be found in a much larger population of students. The broader or more general the items in a checklist, the greater the rate of false-positive identification one can expect (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000).

Inspection of the existing profiles and warning signs checklists reveals that there are

many broad, general items that could result in false-positive identifications. For instance, the 16 warning signs in the federal government's guide (Dwyer et al., 1998) include such general criteria as "history of discipline problems," "drug use and alcohol use," "feelings of being picked on and persecuted," and "excessive feelings of rejection." The authors of this list cautioned about their potential misuse (Dwyer et al., 1998), but such cautions are easily overlooked by school officials anxious to prevent violence. The APA's warning signs pamphlet (APA, n.d.) was prefaced by the alarming statement, "If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility." Among the warning signs listed were "increase in risk-taking behavior," "increase in use of drugs or alcohol," "significant vandalism or property damage," and "loss of temper on a daily basis." The National School Safety Center's 20-item *Checklist of Characteristics of Youth Who Have Caused School-Associated Violent Deaths* (NSSC, 1998) included "has previously been truant, suspended, or expelled from school," "has little or no supervision from parents or a caring adult," and "tends to blame others for difficulties she or he causes." Although all of these items may be correlates of youth aggression, they are not specific indicators of violence and cast too broad a net in identifying potentially violent youth. For such items to be useful, a more focused approach that identifies a narrower group for evaluation and potential intervention is essential.

Reports by the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) concluded that valid profiles of homicidally violent students are impossible to construct, and that profiling is not a viable strategy for preventing school violence. The FBI report stated:

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 stu-

dents 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. (O'Toole, 2000, pp. 2-3)

Likewise, the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000) concluded:

The use of profiles is not effective either for identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted violence at school or—once a student has been identified—for assessing risk that a particular student may pose for school-based targeted violence. The personality and social characteristics of the shooters varied substantially. Knowing that an individual shares characteristics, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not advance the appraisal of risk. Moreover, the use of profiles carries a risk of over-identification—the great majority of students who fit any given profile will not actually pose a risk of targeted violence. Finally, use of profiles will fail to identify some students who in fact pose a risk of violence—but who share few if any characteristics with prior attackers. (p. 5)

In July 1999, shortly after the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the FBI's NCAVC convened a symposium on school shootings composed of experts in law enforcement, education, mental health, and related fields, as well as professionals who had been involved in a school shooting incident. The Critical Incident Response Group of the NCAVC released a report in September 2000 that advised schools to adopt a threat assessment approach to deal with potential violence, as distinguished from a profiling approach. This report, entitled *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (O'Toole, 2000), has been widely disseminated and is available at <www.fbi.gov>. On page 1, the report states:

This model is not a "profile" of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school. Those things do not exist. 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.

In this report, the FBI recommended that schools establish multidisciplinary teams to

manage student threats of violence. The report gave considerable latitude to schools in determining the composition of the teams and how they would function. In general, teams would be headed by a threat coordinator selected from the school staff and would include a mental health professional and a representative from law enforcement. Teams would evaluate reported threats of violence using a "four-pronged assessment model." The four prongs are: (a) the personality and behavior of the student who made the threat, (b) the student's family dynamics, (c) the culture and climate of the school, and (d) the social dynamics of the larger community. The FBI report did not determine how the evaluation would be conducted, but emphasized that no specific combination of factors would definitively identify a student as violent. The FBI report concluded, "There is a compelling need to field test, evaluate, and further develop these threat assessment recommendations, and to develop appropriate interventions designed to respond to the mental health needs of the students involved. This is a pressing public health need which could be addressed through multidisciplinary collaboration by educators, mental health professionals and law enforcement" (p. 31).

The purpose of the present study is to report the results of a demonstration project in which guidelines were field-tested for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence. A demonstration project is an important step prior to conducting a controlled study because it provides an opportunity to field-test, observe, and refine the procedures and methods that constitute the proposed intervention, and in this case, to show that threat assessment is a viable procedure that could be used by schools and is worthy of further study. This study reports on the successful implementation of threat assessment guidelines and on the resolution of 188 cases of student threats during one school year.

Threat assessment represents a potentially valuable component of a comprehensive approach to school violence prevention (Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2004). Sprague and colleagues (Sprague et al., 2001) investigated the effects of a school-wide approach that included

a school-wide discipline plan based on Effective Behavioral Support (Sugai & Horner, 1994) and a violence prevention curriculum. They studied the effects of the program in nine schools and reported both reductions in school discipline referrals and improvement in student knowledge of social skills (Sprague et al., 2001). Sugai, Sprague, Horner, and Walker (2000) recommended that school discipline referrals could serve an important role as a means of monitoring the effectiveness of school-wide interventions to reduce violent behavior.

More broadly, a recent meta-analysis of 221 school-based interventions that attempted to reduce aggressive behavior found an average effect size of .25 for well-implemented demonstration programs (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). These authors (Wilson et al., 2003) estimated that an effect size of this magnitude would eliminate approximately half the incidents of fighting in a typical school year. School-based violence prevention programs can serve at least two functions related to threat assessment: (a) *threat prevention* in the form of school-wide programs to maintain an orderly and positive school climate and thereby minimize the conditions and circumstances in which threats develop; and (b) *threat intervention* in the form of programs to work with individual students to resolve student conflicts after a threat has been reported.

Method

Sample

The participating schools consisted of four high schools (Grades 9–12), six middle schools (Grades 6–8), 22 elementary schools (Grades K–5), and three alternative schools (Grades 7–12) in two adjacent school divisions. The two school divisions span a single county in central Virginia of 736 square miles that includes a population of 129,000 in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The combined enrollment of the two school divisions was 16,273 students, of which 71% were Caucasian, 22% African American, and 7% other groups. Approximately 26% of the students were eligible for free or reduced meals.

The sample consisted of all 188 cases of student threats reported by school principals (or assistant principals) during the 2001–2002 school year. These cases included 146 boys and 42 girls distributed across grade levels as displayed in Table 1. The students making the threats were identified as Caucasian (54.8%), African American (43.1%), or Hispanic (1.1%). Fifty-one percent of these students were eligible for free or reduced school meals.

Procedures

Following release of the FBI's report, the Virginia Youth Violence Project developed specific guidelines and procedures for schools derived from the FBI's threat assessment recommendations. The process is described in more detail elsewhere (Cornell et al., in press). In brief, the purpose of this study was to translate general principles of threat assessment into practices that could guide the actions of school personnel in dealing with student threats of violence. This study began by convening a school work group consisting of school personnel from two local school divisions. Each school division assigned an assistant superintendent, a school principal, and a school psychologist to the group. The group also included the supervisor of school resource officers for each of the law enforcement agencies that serve the two divisions. In addition, over the course of 2 months of meetings, the group invited other school personnel and community leaders (e.g., special education personnel and local prosecutors) to participate in discussions.

The school work group was assisted by an expert advisory group that included two nationally recognized experts in violence risk assessment, two FBI authorities (the primary author of the FBI's school shooting report and another expert on juvenile crime), and three state officials with leadership roles in school safety and juvenile justice. These individuals provided invaluable advice and constructive criticisms as the guidelines were formulated.

The process of developing guidelines began by conducting telephone interviews with all of the school principals and psychologists in the two divisions. Principals were surveyed about the kinds of student threats that had come

Table 1
Student Threats of Violence in 35 Schools

Grade	Student Gender		Threatened Behavior						Total
	Girls	Boys	Hit	Kill	Shoot	Stab	Vague	Other	
Elementary									
K	3	2		4			1		5
1	0	6	1	1	2	1	1		6
2	0	7	3			2	2		7
3	3	24	11	4	5	4	1	2	27
4	5	22	11	6	4	1	3	2	27
5	3	11	8	2	2		2		14
Middle									
6	4	7	2	3	4	1	1		11
7	6	21	14	3	1		8	1	27
8	7	16	7	2	3	3	6	2	23
High									
9	5	15	10	1	1	2	4	2	20
10	2	8	6	1	2	1			10
11	3	5	1			2	4	1	8
12	1	2	3						3
Total	42	146	77	27	24	18	32	10	

Note. Threats to hit include physical assault without weapons. Vague threats include nonspecific threats to hurt or "get" another person. Other threats include bomb threats, kidnapping, or other indirect forms of injury.

to their attention in the past year and how these threats were resolved. They were asked what kinds of guidelines or policies would have helped them respond. The principals reported that student threats to hurt someone were a relatively common event, although few threats were regarded as serious. The most significant concerns were how to identify serious threats and how to respond to them. Principals from elementary, middle, and high schools expressed concern that there were no guidelines for evaluating student threats, and said that they relied on intuition in making decisions about the seriousness of a student's risk for violence. The

school psychologists expressed concern that they had little training in how to conduct psychological evaluations of students who made threats of violence.

The concerns of principals and psychologists made it clear that threat assessment required a set of written guidelines to assist staff in making triage determinations of the seriousness of a threat. It was recognized that an elaborate process of threat assessment would be burdensome to school authorities and that it would be necessary to design an efficient process to distinguish the commonplace threats, which could be easily resolved, from more seri-

ous threats, which would require a more labor-intensive response. It was decided that the school principals would conduct the initial evaluation of a threat and make a triage decision, either resolving the threat immediately because it was not serious or initiating a more comprehensive team assessment if the threat was serious.

The group considered the work of the Dallas Independent School District, which developed a risk assessment instrument based on 18 items that a literature review suggested would be predictive of student violence (Ryan-Arredondo et al., 2001). Under the Dallas system, a school staff member rates each item and derives a summary score that is used to classify the student's risk of violence as low, medium, or high. When work on the present study began in the spring of 2001, there were no data available on the reliability or validity of this instrument (Bert Rakowitz, personal communication, May 29, 2001), but the items chosen for the scale and the experiences of the Dallas school personnel were informative and useful in developing the guidelines.

Ultimately, it was decided not to adopt a formally scored instrument such as the DVRA, in part because of the complexity of the threat assessment process (O'Toole, 2000; Reddy et al., 2001) and the limited state of knowledge in the field of student threat assessment. It was concluded that a set of guidelines would be more consistent with the recommendations of the FBI report and also would offer school authorities greater flexibility in considering contextual and situational factors associated with a student's threat of violence, which might not be reflected in a single risk score.

Decision-tree model. A decision tree was developed that would guide school officials through the threat assessment process, starting with the report of a threat to the school principal or assistant principal. The decision tree was designed to follow a procedure that school staff would find to be most consistent with existing school practices and would permit them to make practical decisions in an efficient manner. The first step in the threat assessment process was for the principal (or assistant principal) to gather information about the threat for triage purposes—to determine

whether the threat could be quickly resolved or would require protective action and further evaluation and intervention.

As discussed elsewhere (Cornell et al., in press), the principal (or assistant principal) was identified as the head of the threat assessment team because principals are in charge of discipline and have ultimate responsibility for student safety and security. Our work group did not believe it would be feasible to have someone other than the school principal in charge of such a critical matter. Furthermore, it was anticipated that in most cases the principal would be able to investigate and resolve a nonserious threat with little or no involvement by the full threat assessment team, but that in more serious cases, the principal would involve the full team. This arrangement gives broad discretion and authority to the principal, but in fact, this is not a change from standard procedure in most schools for student discipline and safety matters.

The model specified important information the principal should obtain in interviewing the student who made the threat, but no formal training of school principals was attempted, recognizing that principals are experienced in interviewing children about disciplinary and behavioral matters. The *Guidelines* for the present study directed the principal to ask a series of questions intended to cover what happened, what the student meant by the threat, how the student perceived others to feel about the threat, the student's reasons for making the threat, and whether the student intended to carry out the threat. Therefore, the questions began with asking the student *what happened*—what he or she said, and what he or she did. The principals were instructed to write down exactly what the student admitted, and then to inquire what the student *meant* by his or her statements and actions (e.g., "What did you mean when you said that?") and what did the student think the other person or persons who were threatened (or who witnessed the threat) felt about what was said. Next, the principal should ask the *reasons* for what the student said and in particular, to find out if there was a prior history of conflict. Finally, the principal should ask what the student *intends* to do. All of this information would be consid-

ered in determining whether the student had made a transient threat that could be readily resolved or a more serious, substantive threat.

It was recognized that students might not be completely accurate or truthful participants in the interview, and principals were advised to interview witnesses using a parallel set of questions. Principals were also directed to err on the conservative side and to assume that a threat was serious if they had doubt about the accuracy of the information they obtained. A key point in training principals and all team members is that each threat must be evaluated within its own context; a threatening statement could not be judged out of context—the circumstances and manner in which the threat was expressed could completely alter the seriousness of the threat and how to respond to it.

A threat was defined as any expression of intent to harm someone. Consistent with the FBI report (O'Toole, 2000), it was recognized that threats could be spoken, written, or expressed in behavior such as gestures. Threats could be made directly to the intended victim, communicated to third parties, or expressed in private writings. Possession of a weapon such as a firearm or knife on school grounds would be presumed to constitute a threat, unless subsequent investigation found otherwise. In contrast to zero tolerance policies, toy guns were not considered the same as real guns, and common objects such as nail files or plastic knives were not necessarily considered to be threatening weapons. Any potential weapon was to be judged based on the threat of injury it posed to others. How the student used or threatened to use the weapon was most important.

If there was doubt whether a student's actions constituted a threat, the guidelines called for the team to investigate the behavior as a threat. However, all forms of aggressive behavior would not necessarily indicate a threat of future violence. For example, if two students insulted one another or even got into a fight, their behavior would not be investigated as a threat unless one of them expressed intent to harm the other in the future. Schools would follow their regular discipline practices for disruptive behavior or fighting; threat assessment would function as an additional component of

the school's response when there was some indication of future action. From this perspective, threat assessment is not an approach to student discipline, but rather a means of preventing future acts of violence.

Transient versus substantive threats.

Based on triage interviews and consideration of the overall context of the threat, the principal's next step was to classify the threat as *transient* or *substantive* (Cornell et al., in press). Transient threats were statements that do not express a lasting intent to harm someone and can be resolved with an apology or explanation. These were the threats that principals told us they encountered frequently and were able to address as a routine disciplinary matter. Transient threats reflect feelings that dissipate rapidly when the student considers what he or she has said. Transient statements might be made in a moment of anger, but are retracted when the student calms down. Transient threats also might be made as a tactic in an argument or during an exchange of insults, or they might be intended as jokes or figures of speech. The most important feature of a transient threat is that the student does not have a sustained intention to harm someone. Transient threats might merit a disciplinary response, but there is no need to take protective action to prevent a future act of violence because the threat is short-lived.

Substantive threats are serious in the sense that they represent a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate situation where the threat was made. If there is doubt whether a threat is transient or substantive, the threat is treated as a substantive threat. Substantive threats could be identified by five *presumptive* indicators, derived from the FBI report (O'Toole, 2000): (a) the threat has specific plausible details, such as a specific victim, time, place and method of assault; (b) the threat has been repeated over time or related to multiple persons; (c) the threat is reported as a plan, or planning has taken place; (d) the student has recruited accomplices or has invited an audience to observe the threat being carried out; or (e) there is physical evidence of intent to carry out the threat, such as a weapon, bomb materials, a map or written plan, or a 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 and it is possible that with additional investigation other facts could indicate that the threat is transient. For example, a student who seeks an accomplice to help in carrying out a threat might be presumed to have a serious intent to harm someone, but several cases were observed in which an angry student enlisted a classmate to help send a threatening letter to another student as an act of revenge or intimidation. Such an incident would be handled as a serious disciplinary matter, but not as a serious threat. In essence, threat assessment teams must always take into account the context of the threat and make reasoned judgments based on all available information. The guidelines assist the team in its investigation and guide it through a series of decisions, but permit flexibility in considering situational factors and circumstances.

The distinction between transient and substantive threats captured an important difference in how schools can respond to student threats at the lower end of the risk continuum, but how should schools differentiate among threats at the higher end? A genuine threat to shoot someone clearly warrants a more extensive response than a threat to hit someone. Therefore, a further distinction within the category of substantive threats was needed. The legal distinction between simple assault and aggravated or felonious assault was considered, and a legal requirement in Virginia for school officials to report felonious assaults to law enforcement was recognized. This led to the designation of substantive threats to assault someone as *serious* substantive threats, and to the classification of substantive threats to commit an aggravated or felonious assault as *very serious* substantive threats. Very serious threats would include all substantive threats to kill, sexually assault, or inflict major injury on someone. Threats to injure someone with a weapon also would be regarded as very serious, because of the potential to inflict severe injury.

All substantive threats require the school administrator to take some form of protective action to prevent the threatened act of violence from being carried out. Protective action would

begin with counseling the student against carrying out the threat and contacting the student's parents to enlist their assistance. In addition, the school administrator would contact the intended target of the threat, and if the target was a student, the student's parents. Further protective steps would be taken according to the nature of the threat, but generally involve consultation with other threat assessment team members, such as the school resource officer, the school psychologist, and the school counselor. After initial efforts to assure the immediate safety of all parties, the threat assessment team would conduct further assessment in order to develop an intervention plan to address any problems or issues (e.g., bullying) that precipitated the threat. In cases of very serious substantive threats, it is recommended that the student be suspended from school until a plan can be formulated.

Mental health assessment of very serious threats. The guidelines for the present study specify the role and function of school psychologists in threat assessment. As a threat assessment team member, the school psychologist may be asked to consult on any case in an advisory capacity, but responsibility for team leadership resides with the school principal. The school psychologist has the specific function of conducting a mental health assessment of students who make very serious substantive threats. The purpose of this assessment is twofold: (a) to determine if the student has mental health treatment needs associated with the threat (e.g., a student is psychotic or suicidal and in need of immediate treatment); and (b) to gather information about the student's motives in making the threat, so that the team might identify strategies for reducing the risk of violence (e.g., resolving a peer dispute or identifying a bully-victim relationship). This function was carefully delineated in order to prevent situations in which school psychologists might be asked to undertake evaluations that go beyond typical expertise and training (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994).

The training for this project emphasized that the mental health assessment conducted by the school psychologist 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 uncertain task, and communications about violence risk are easily misstated or misinterpreted (Borum, 1996). Although there is evidence that clinicians can make reasonably accurate short-term predictions of violence in some situations (Borum, 1996), little is known about the prediction of student violence, particularly in the context of active school intervention aimed at preventing violence (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

A 10-page outline of topics and accompanying questions that the school psychologist should consider in interviewing the student was devised. These topics included a review of the threat and a history of the student's relationship with the intended victims, but also a broader review of the student's mental status, current level of stress, and family relations. Students were to be asked about their access to weapons, their exposure to violence, and their previous involvement in aggressive behavior and bullying as either victims or perpetrators. There were no specific psychological tests for this assessment, but psychologists were advised to make use of specialized tests (e.g., a depression inventory or an anger scale) that are clinically indicated. There were also recommendations for interviewing the student's parents covering a parallel set of topics. The results of the mental health assessment were summarized in a written report prepared for the threat assessment team. There was a report template and a sample report in the training materials.

Staff Training

A training manual was created and a series of training sessions conducted for all principals, assistant principals, psychologists, counselors, and school resource officers in the 35 participating schools in two school divisions. Each training participant received a training manual, *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence*¹ (hereafter *Guidelines*). The initial version of the training manual, used in this study, consisted of four sections. The first section was an 18-page description of the threat assessment guidelines that explained each stage of the decision tree and provided short case examples. The second section described the process for conducting a

mental health assessment of students judged to have made very serious substantive threats. This section explained the purpose of the mental health assessment and presented a list of topics to cover in interviewing the student and the student's parents. The section concluded with a report template and a sample report. The third section contained copies of electronic/digital slides used in the training sessions, followed by a short paper entitled "Patterns of youth violence." This paper integrated key points from the FBI report on school shootings (O'Toole, 2000) with the broader research literature on juvenile homicide (Cornell, 1999).

Due to scheduling constraints, training was provided in somewhat different formats for the two school divisions. For the larger school division, consisting of 24 schools, a series of half-day training sessions was held. Separate sessions were held for school principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, and school counselors. School resource officers attended one of the sessions for principals or assistant principals. The session for the school psychologists included staff from both school divisions and covered additional material on the mental health assessment of student threats that was not covered in the other sessions. For the smaller school division (11 schools), individual sessions were held at each school for the school's threat assessment team members. Several weeks later, there was a final 1-hour session held during an annual division-wide training day that brought staff together from all schools. Although the training sessions followed a different schedule in each school division, the same information was presented in both divisions and all participants received the same training manual.

The initial training session for all groups consisted of a presentation that began with the rationale for student threat assessment; this included a review of research on rates of school violence and a summary of the findings and recommendations of the FBI study of school shootings (O'Toole, 2000). Next, the trainers presented a step-by-step review of the *Guidelines*, beginning with the definition of a threat and the steps taken when a threat is reported to school authorities. The *Guidelines* are anchored

by a decision tree that leads from the evaluation of a reported threat to a determination of whether the threat is transient or substantive and, in the case of a substantive threat, to the development of a plan to reduce the risk of violence. The training session reviewed examples of transient and substantive cases, and the steps to follow in response to each type of threat.

After presentation of the decision tree and a review of sample cases, there was a session on legal issues, with particular emphasis on very serious substantive cases. There was a review of the school's legal obligation and authority to maintain school safety, followed by discussion of the circumstances in which school authorities would contact law enforcement, disclose confidential information, and initiate an emergency mental health assessment of a potentially dangerous student.

After the session on legal issues, the participants met in small groups to simulate their responses to a series of practice cases. The group leader presented participants with a hypothetical report of a threat and asked them to identify the first steps they would take in evaluating the threat. The group leader then presented more information about the threat as the group worked its way through the decision tree to the resolution of the threat. After the groups completed three cases, they reconvened in full session to compare and discuss the practice cases. Immediately after this discussion, participants completed a written quiz on their knowledge of the *Guidelines*.

Data Collection

Several procedures were in place to monitor school use of the *Guidelines* and assure reasonable compliance. The superintendents of each school division directed the principals to use the *Guidelines* and the associate superintendents reinforced this expectation in meetings and phone calls. The most common problem observed was that principals would use the *Guidelines* to resolve a student threat, but delay completing the paperwork needed to document the case. School principals reported cases by completing an electronic form at a secure website maintained by the researchers. This form served the dual purpose of provid-

ing schools with printed documentation of their response to a student threat and informing researchers of a new case, so that they could follow up with the principal.

The website form provided an additional check on school compliance with the *Guidelines*, because the form required principals to identify key information about the threat and report what actions had been taken. The form collected demographic information (age, gender, grade, race) on the student who made the threat and the intended threat victim and provided space for a description of the threat incident and the classification of the threat as transient or substantive. The form also presented a checklist of actions taken in response to the threat (e.g., suspending or expelling the student, assigning detention, contacting police).

A graduate student research liaison was assigned to each school and remained in contact with the school principals over the course of the school year. The liaison was available to assist team members in interpreting the *Guidelines* and help assure that they were being followed. The liaisons conducted face-to-face follow-up interviews to collect additional case information. Follow-up interviews were conducted for each case on two occasions, during the final weeks of the school year and again the following fall. The average follow-up period from the date of the threat incident to the principal interview at the end of the school year was 148 days (range 3 to 282 days). The second follow-up interview occurred an average of 424 days after the threat incident.

In the follow-up interviews, researchers asked the school principals to describe the threat incident and what actions they took in response to the incident. Principals were asked whether the student carried out the threat and whether the student's relationship with the threat recipient was improved, about the same, or worse than prior to the threat. They were asked to rate the student's overall behavior at school after the incident as improved, about the same, or worse than prior to the threat.

Researchers were given an electronic data file extracted from the school's record of all disciplinary infractions for the school year. The file contained the disciplinary infractions

recorded for each student who made a threat and for a matched comparison group from each school. The comparison group consisted of students who had not made threats, selected at random from the homerooms of each student who made a threat. The comparison students were matched to students who made threats on gender, race, and grade level. Disciplinary infractions were grouped into violent incidents (such as fighting and battery), disorderly conduct (such as disrespect, using obscene language or gestures, and insubordination), and other incidents (such as vandalism, tardiness, and truancy).

Results

Description of Student Threats

There were 188 threats documented by school principals during the school year. Grade level, gender, and race (Caucasian versus non-Caucasian) for students who made threats and their intended victims were examined. Students at all grade levels made threats, as reported in Table 1. In 16 cases, a student made more than one threat, but for purposes of this study, each threat incident was treated as a separate case. Most of the victims of threats were other students (143), but there were 23 teachers, 6 other school staff members, and 16 cases involving multiple or nonspecific victims (e.g., "blow up the school"). In the 143 cases of a student threatening another student, the students tended to be in the same grade level; there were 23 cases in which a student threatened a student in a lower grade, 105 threats of students in the same grade, and 15 threats of students in a higher grade.

There were 146 threats made by boys and 42 by girls. Excluding 22 cases where a student threatened both a male and female victim, students tended to threaten persons of the same sex; in 84 cases (51%) boys threatened other males, in 44 cases (27%) boys threatened females, in 22 cases (13%) girls threatened other females, and in 16 cases (10%) girls threatened males. Gender concordance was 64%, $kappa = .19, p < .01$.

There were 103 threats made by Caucasian students and 85 by non-Caucasian students. Excluding 20 cases where a student threatened victims of multiple races, students

tended to threaten persons of the same race category (70%), $kappa = .40, p < .001$. In 76 cases (45%) Caucasian students threatened other Caucasians, in 16 cases (10%) Caucasians threatened non-Caucasian or minority students, in 34 cases (20%) minority students threatened Caucasians, and in 42 cases (25%) minority students threatened other minority students.

The most common threat was to hit or beat up the victim (77 cases, 41%). In addition, there were 27 threats to kill, 24 threats to shoot, and 18 threats to cut or stab. There were 32 cases in which the threat was vague or nonspecific ("I'm going to get you"), and 10 miscellaneous other threats, such as setting fires or detonating bombs.

Disciplinary Consequences

In 188 threat cases, only 3 students were expelled from school. The first case involved a sixth grade boy who was expelled after picking up a pair of scissors and threatening to stab a classmate. The second student was an eighth grade girl who was expelled for telling a classmate that she was going to shoot him. In the third case, a ninth grade girl was expelled after threatening to stab another student and found to have a knife in her locker. In each case, the decision to expel the student was based on consideration of the student's prior discipline infractions, as well as their behavior in making the threat.

Students were suspended from school in 94 (50%) cases. The modal suspension (32 cases) was 1 day, with a range of 1 to 10 days. In most cases, students were suspended from school as a disciplinary consequence determined by the school principal. In cases judged to be very serious substantive threats, students were suspended automatically according to the *Guidelines*. During this suspension, the school threat assessment team conducted a safety evaluation to determine whether it was safe for the student to return to school, and if not, what alternative educational arrangements would be appropriate. Out of 188 cases, only 12 students were placed in an alternative educational setting. This decision was not based solely on the threat incident, but took into consideration the student's entire disciplinary history and academic record.

Follow-up Reports

At the end of the school year school principals were interviewed to obtain follow-up information on each threat case in their school. In order to extend the follow-up period, each principal was interviewed a second time the following fall. Because of Institutional Review Board restrictions, no effort was made to contact students involved in the threats. School principals were asked three basic questions: (a) How has the student's behavior changed since the threat assessment? (b) How has the student's relationship with the threat recipient changed? and (c) Did the student carry out the threatened act of violence? In some cases, the principal did not feel he or she had sufficient information to answer the question (for example, if the student left school). In most cases ($n = 176$), the student's behavior was rated as improved (43%) or the same (39%), and in only 18% of cases did the student's behavior worsen. Principals rated the student's relationship with the threat recipient in 126 cases (excluding cases in which the principal did not feel sufficiently informed or the student did not threaten a specific individual). In nearly two-thirds (63%) of cases, the relationship was judged to be the same, in about one-third (32%) of cases it was improved, and in only 6 cases (5%) it was judged to be worse.

Perhaps the most critical question was whether the student carried out the threatened act of violence. According to the principals, none of the threats were carried out. (Data were available for 185 student threats; in three cases the principal was not sure if a student's threat to hit another student was carried out.)

Comparison of Transient and Substantive Threats

Of the 188 threat cases, 131 (70%) were judged by school authorities to be transient and 57 (30%) were judged to be substantive. The frequency of transient and substantive threats for each grade level is reported in Figure 1. Using school enrollment data, the rate of threats per 1,000 students for elementary, middle, and high schools was calculated. For transient threats, the rate was 11.33 per 1,000 students

(90% confidence interval 9.24 to 13.90) for elementary school, 11.97 (confidence interval 8.84 to 16.15) for middle school, and 6.73 (4.77 to 9.46) for high school. For substantive threats, the rate was 2.10 per 1,000 students (confidence interval 1.30 to 3.38) for elementary school, 7.86 (5.44 to 11.36) for middle school, and 4.27 (2.80 to 6.51) for high school.

A chi-square test comparing elementary, middle, and high schools in type of threat was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N=188) = 16.41$, $p < .001$; contingency coefficient $C = .28$. At the elementary school level, only 15% (13 of 86) of threats were substantive, whereas at the middle and high school levels, the proportion of substantive threats was much higher, 41% (25 of 61) and 44% (18 of 41), respectively.

Transient and substantive cases in the gender and race of both the student who made the threat and the recipient or victim of the threat were compared. Male students made the majority of both transient (104 of 132, 79%) and substantive (42 of 56, 75%) threats; the association between gender and threat type was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N=188) = .33$, $p = .57$. Minority students made 51% (67 of 132) of transient threats and 41% (23 of 56) of substantive threats, $\chi^2(1, N=188) = 1.48$, $p = .22$.

Males were recipients of 60% (73 of 121) of transient threats and 60% (27 of 45) of substantive threats, $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = .01$, $p = .97$. (The N was 166 because some cases involved both male and female victims.) Minority students were recipients of 40% (53 of 132) of transient threats and 45% (25 of 56) of substantive threats, $\chi^2(1, N=188) = .33$, $p = .57$.

The next analyses compared transient and substantive cases in disciplinary consequences. All 3 students who were expelled from school made substantive threats. Students who made substantive threats (45 of 56 cases, 80%) were more likely to be suspended from school than were students who made transient threats (49 of 132 cases, 37%), $\chi^2(1, N=188) = 29.40$, $p < .001$, $C = .37$. Students who made transient threats (16 of 132 cases, 12%) received more after-school detentions than students who made substantive threats (2 of 54 cases, 4%), but the difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 188) = 3.32$, $p = .068$. Similarly, stu-

dents (22 of 132 cases, 17%) who made transient threats were more likely to receive an in-school detention or time-out than students who made substantive threats (3 of 56 cases, 5%); this difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N=188) = 4.36, p = .037, C = .15$.

Finally, principals' ratings of student behavior during the remainder of the school year were examined. Principals rated the student's behavior as improved, about the same, or worse during the remainder of the school year following the threat. The ratings for students who made transient threats (51 improved, 57 same, 16 worse) indicated more positive behavior than for the students who made substantive threats (25 improved, 12 same, 15 worse), $\chi^2(1, N=176) = 10.59, p = .005, C = .24$. Similarly, when principals rated the student's relationship with the threat recipient, the ratings for transient cases (31 improved, 57 same, 1 worse) were more positive than for substantive cases (9 improved, 23 same, 5 worse), $\chi^2(1, N=126) = 9.35, p = .009, C = .26$.

Discussion

This field-test study was intended to demonstrate the viability of threat assessment as a school-based procedure for responding to student threats of violence. School administrators were trained to lead threat assessment teams composed of school psychologists, counselors, and resource officers. The teams used a decision tree to distinguish between transient threats that could be quickly resolved and sub-

stantive threats that required protective action. Substantive threats were classified as serious if they involved a threat of assault and very serious if they involved a threat of felonious assault that could result in severe injury or death to the victim. In very serious cases, students were referred for a mental health assessment designed to gain insight into the reasons for the student's threat and to identify strategies for reducing the risk of violence.

Threat assessment teams consisted of a principal, a school psychologist, a school resource officer, and a school counselor. Conceivably, team roles can be adapted to match the resources available in each school, but it was found that this arrangement worked well. A more detailed rationale for team roles is presented elsewhere (Cornell et al., in press). The teams were led by the principal or by an assistant principal designated with responsibility for student discipline. The team leader conducts the initial assessment of the threat to determine whether the threat should be classified as transient or substantive and then engages other team members as needed.

The school resource officer is contacted in an emergency, in substantive cases, or whenever a student's threat raises concern about a legal violation. In Virginia, threats can be legal violations if they put the victim in fear. In most cases, however, a school resource officer will not seek charges against a student unless there are additional accompanying violations, such as illegal possession of a weapon or bat-

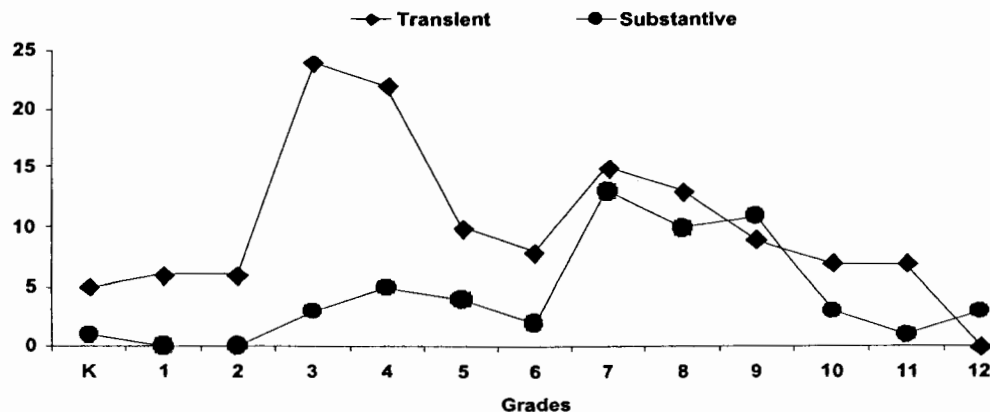


Figure 2. Number of transient and substantive threats for each grade level.

tery of the victim. Beyond law enforcement functions, the school resource officer assists in prevention efforts by monitoring students who have made threats and by warning and counseling students about conflicts that engendered threats. For example, in a number of cases the student who made a threat complained that he or she was being bullied by other students. The school resource officer became involved in making sure that the bullying did not continue.

In many cases, the school psychologist served as a consultant to the principal, clarifying the *Guidelines* and helping to identify indications that a threat was transient or substantive. This role is consistent with the view that school psychologists should have a central role in school violence prevention efforts (Cole, 2003; Furlong, Morrison, & Pavelski, 2000). The school psychologist becomes most fully involved in very serious substantive cases. The school psychologist should be notified immediately in such cases so that he or she can begin a mental health assessment of the student. It should be emphasized that this assessment is not designed to predict whether the student will carry out the threat, but has different objectives. The immediate objective is to determine if the student has mental health treatment needs that require services such as hospitalization or referral for other mental health treatment. School psychologists routinely engage in these kinds of evaluations when a student threatens suicide or is referred for immediate evaluation in a crisis situation, and increasingly they are asked to conduct some form of assessment of potentially dangerous students (Barnhill, 2003; Sandoval & Brock, 1996).

The school psychologist's secondary objective is to ascertain as much information as possible about the reasons for the student's threat, so that a plan can be formulated by the team to address the problems or concerns that underlie the threat. This objective can be understood as a *risk reduction* or *risk management* approach, as distinguished from purely a prediction approach (Heilbrun, 1997). This objective is consistent with the school psychologist's role, specifically in planning violence prevention programs (Furlong et al., 2000; Furlong, Paige, & Osher, 2003) and more

generally in conducting a functional behavioral assessment and developing behavior intervention plans to address problems in a student's relationships with others (Drasgow & Yell, 2001). These two objectives—identification of immediate treatment needs and development of a threat reduction plan—are consistent with school psychology training and practice, and so capitalize on the school psychologist's strengths and expertise (Cole, 2003; Furlong et al., 2000).

The school counselor is usually involved in counseling the student or providing other services—such as conflict mediation or resolution of bullying. In some cases, the counselor was the direct provider of these services and in other cases, the counselor facilitated services provided by others and monitored the student. It is recommended that threat assessment teams make use of well-established violence intervention programs as part of a comprehensive, school-wide approach (Nelson, 1996; Sprague et al., 2001; Walker & Epstein, 2001; Wilson et al., 2003).

The most extensively studied programs to reduce student violence are designed to enhance students' social competence (Wilson et al., 2003). A typical social competence program includes lesson plans to teach students how to resolve peer conflicts. Such lessons may use role-playing and demonstration exercises, and engage students in practicing communication skills such as how to deflect criticism and assert their opinions in a nonprovocative manner. An excellent example of a social competence program is the Second Step program described by Frey, Hirschstein, and Guzzo (2000) and used by Sprague et al. (2001). Some social competence programs include a cognitive-behavioral component in which students learn relaxation techniques, practice self-monitoring, or rehearse step-by-step procedures for thinking through problems (Wilson et al., 2003).

Data collected from 35 schools over the course of 1 school year revealed 188 student threats of violence reported to school authorities. These cases involved threats to hit (41%), kill (14%), shoot (13%), stab (10%), or harm someone in some other way (22%). Nevertheless, threat assessment teams demonstrated differential decision making in how they re-

garded these threats and considerable restraint in the disciplinary consequences they imposed. The overwhelming majority of threats (70%) were judged to be transient threats that could be quickly and easily resolved. Only 3 students were expelled from school. School suspension was used in 50% of the cases, with a modal suspension of just 1 day.

Follow-up interviews with school principals (185 of 188 cases) indicated generally positive outcomes from the threat assessment at the end of the school year. Student behavior was judged to be improved in 43% of cases and worse in only 18% of cases. The student's relationship with the intended victim was judged to be improved in 32% of cases and worse in just 5% of cases. Of most importance, the principals reported that none of the threats were carried out.

These positive findings must be tempered by recognition of several limitations. First and foremost, this was a field-test study and not an experimental comparison between different approaches to student threats. There was no comparison group to assess how threats would have been resolved using some other method. A formal comparison with one or more alternative methods would be an appropriate next step, now that the threat assessment model has been devised and field-tested. However, it is noteworthy that any school division following a strict zero tolerance policy for student threats would have had a much higher rate of expulsion.

The finding that none of the threats were carried out is encouraging, but we acknowledge that we relied on the observation of school principals. Although it is conceivable that some threats to hit a classmate were carried out without anyone having reported the incident to school authorities, it is highly unlikely that any of the threatened parties were injured, shot, or stabbed. The absence of violent outcomes in this study is difficult to interpret without knowledge of the base rate for student threats and the likelihood that threats will be carried out, topics that have received little research attention.

Student threats were investigated after they were brought to the attention of school authorities. Several studies have relied upon office referrals as an index of school climate or a marker of effective school discipline (Sprague et al.,

2001; Sugai et al., 2000). However, office referrals do not encompass the full range of students identified by teachers as exhibiting behavior problems warranting intervention (Nelson, Benner, Reid, Epstein, & Currin, 2002).

Anonymous self-report studies do indicate that student threats of violence occur with surprising frequency. Cornell and Loper (1996) reported results from a survey of 10,909 students (Grades 7, 9, and 11) in which more than one-fourth of students replied "yes" to the item "Someone threatened to hurt you at school" in the past 30 days. Singer and Flannery (2000) presented results of three school surveys totaling 9,487 students in three states; they found that among male students, more than one-third of elementary school students and more than one-half of high school students reported threatening someone within the past year. Among female students, more than one-quarter of elementary students and more than one-third of high school students reported making a threat in the past year. More than 10% of all students reported threatening someone frequently ("often" or "almost every day"). These findings suggest that students make far more threats of violence than are reported to school authorities. In the present study, 188 threats were reported in schools with a total enrollment of 16,273. If just 10% of students made a threat at school every month, one could very conservatively expect more than 14,600 threats over the course of the school year. Clearly there is a chasm between the numbers of threats that students report on self-report surveys and the numbers that come to the attention of school authorities for intervention. We do not conclude from this that students are in grave danger due to a multitude of serious, undetected threats. On the contrary, we believe that the pervasiveness of student threats indicates that most threats are not serious. This is a topic worthy of further study.

Singer and Flannery (2000) did not ask students whether they carried out their threats, but they did obtain reports of other aggressive behaviors during the same period. Their findings suggest that threats are linked to other aggressive behavior. Students who reported threatening others were 3 to 4 times more likely

to report aggressive behaviors such as hitting, beating, and attacking with a knife. Notably, high school students who threatened others frequently were nearly 20 times more likely to report beating someone, and 24 times more likely to report attacking someone with a knife, than students who had never threatened anyone. These findings must be tempered by recognition of the limitations of student self-report and the potential for exaggerated student responses (Cornell & Loper, 1998; Furlong, Morrison, Cornell, & Skiba, 2004), but they indicate the need for direct study of student threats, how threats come to the attention of school authorities, and how frequently threats are carried out.

Threat assessment seems to be relevant for elementary, middle, and high schools, because threats were reported in all grade levels. Even substantive threats were identified at all school levels, from kindergarten through 12th grade. As might be expected, transient threats outnumbered substantive threats by about six to one in elementary school; however, for middle and high schools, the proportion of substantive threats was more than 40%. A particular increase in transient threats was noticed at Grades 3 and 4. Anecdotally, school authorities reported that when students reached these grade levels, they began to demonstrate more competitive friendship networks. Students seemed more likely to make threatening remarks to one another in response to rivalries for friendship and peer status. Another spike in threats was observed in middle school, particularly Grades 7 and 8. Middle school principals observed that the increase in threats mirrored a general increase in disciplinary violations in these grades. Similarly, a decline in threats from Grades 9 to 12 is consistent with disciplinary trends in high school.

One implication of the findings in the present study is that students may benefit from instruction about the use of threatening language. Just as air travelers have learned not to make threatening remarks in airports—even in jest—so students may need to learn that threatening statements are taken seriously at school. One middle school invited a juvenile court prosecutor and a police officer to a school assembly, where they explained to students the

legal consequences of threatening others, stalking, assault, and related criminal behavior.

Threat assessment should be clearly distinguished from discipline. Discipline involves punishment for prohibited behavior, whereas the goal of threat assessment is the prevention of future behavior that would harm others. A threatening behavior might deserve serious disciplinary consequences even if the risk of future violence is determined to be negligible. For example, a student who makes a bomb threat may receive serious disciplinary consequences, even though the bomb is nonexistent and the student's behavior was intended only as a prank. Implementation of threat assessment is no substitute for an effective school discipline policy, and ideally should be used in coordination with a proactive and systematic discipline system (Nelson, 1996; Sprague et al., 2001; Sugai et al., 2000).

Transient and substantive threats.

These threat assessment guidelines introduce a distinction between substantive and transient threats. Although this is new terminology, we hoped it would reflect an implicit, practical distinction that school authorities have long made between threats that are considered serious and those that do not appear to communicate a sustained intent to injure someone. Further distinctions were considered, such as between threats that are communicated as jokes, sarcasm, insults, figures of speech, angry rhetoric, and so forth, but a practical advantage was not seen in doing so because for the purposes of threat assessment, the critical issue is whether the threat incident can be resolved immediately or requires that school authorities take protective action and conduct further assessment.

These findings lend support to the construct validity of the transient/substantive distinction, although certainly more study is needed. Students who made transient threats in this study generally exhibited fewer behavior problems during the remainder of the school year than did students who made substantive threats, and principals gave them more positive ratings for their overall behavior and for their relationship with the threat recipient. It is important to study the interpersonal circumstances and student behaviors that help distin-

guish transient and substantive threats, and how students who make a transient threat differ from those who make a substantive threat.

One of the important practical implications of this study is that school authorities need not respond to all threats in the same manner or with the same consequences. Most threatening statements can be addressed as transient threats in which the student retracts the threat and offers an appropriate apology or explanation that resolves the incident. Even in cases of substantive threats, where school authorities have an obligation to take protective action and formulate a plan to prevent an act of violence from occurring, the threat incident can be handled without resorting to expulsion or long-term suspension.

The qualitative distinction between transient and substantive threats shifts the focus of threat assessment away from highly uncertain efforts to quantify the risk of violence along a continuum from 0 to 100% and instead concentrates staff efforts on identifying interventions appropriate to the nature and circumstances of the threat. In essence, transient threats are cases in which the risk of violence after the threat incident is negligible, either because the student never intended to harm someone or some immediate intervention was successful in resolving the conflict or dispute that generated the threat. All cases in which there is a continuing risk of violence are regarded as substantive, and the further distinction between serious and very serious substantive cases is concerned with severity of injury, not a hypothesized likelihood of violence. Whether the risk of violence is 25%, 50%, or some other value, school authorities have a responsibility to take protective actions that are appropriate to the circumstances of the case. Such actions typically include counseling and warning the student, consulting with the school resource officer, and notifying potential victims. The threat assessment team also determines whether there is an appropriate psychological service or behavioral intervention that is reasonably related to the source of the threat or has the potential to reduce the likelihood that the threat will be carried out.

This approach to threat assessment does not preclude the possibility of developing quantitative measures of the risk of student

violence in future research, and using those measures to guide student interventions. However, schools have an immediate need to deal with student threats, and we contend that the distinction between transient and substantive threats has both practical and heuristic value in guiding school responses to student threats.

Future study. There are several directions for future study, beginning with the need for investigation of the rates of reported and unreported student threats. It seems important to learn how students respond to threats, how they determine that a threat is serious, and what factors influence their decision to seek help. Studies of bullying indicate that a large proportion of students do not seek help from adults when they are bullied, although most students do seek help if the bullying continues (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Evidently, most students do not seek help in response to student threats, perhaps because they do not regard the threat as serious or feel that they can resolve the situation without adult assistance.

More insight is needed into various means of resolving threats that do come to the attention of school authorities. Are there qualitative differences between reported and unreported threats, and do reported threats carry a greater risk of violence? And what methods (e.g., mediation, individual counseling, disciplinary consequences) are most effective for each kind of threat? Schools have an obligation to respond to reported threats, so a "no-response" comparison is not possible. However, it would be useful to compare threat-resolution strategies, recognizing that the critical outcome variables should go beyond whether the threat is carried out, because violent outcomes should be very low in all circumstances. It would be particularly useful to study emotional, social, and academic outcomes for the students who made threats as well as for threat recipients.

Finally, it would be useful to identify the key systems variables that contribute to the successful implementation of a threat assessment program. Our observations lead us to emphasize three factors. First, it is important for the team to have a common base of information about the nature and scope of school violence, and a shared conceptual framework

concerning student threats, to resist fears of school shootings that provoke extreme responses. Second, a multidisciplinary team-oriented approach is helpful for a variety of reasons, including the greater expertise and resources that can be brought to bear on a problem and the increased confidence of decision makers (i.e., school administrators) that they are taking a safe and appropriate course of action. Third, strong administrative leadership in the superintendent's office of each school division is critical in supporting the implementation of a division-wide approach.

In 1994, *School Psychology Review* published a prescient miniseries on school violence (Furlong & Morrison, 1994) several years in advance of the school shootings in Paducah, Jonesboro, Littleton, and other communities that gained nationwide attention and greatly stimulated the use of zero tolerance practices. In retrospect, the miniseries was a useful call for action in school psychology, and anticipated current concerns with topics ranging from bullying to crisis intervention to violence prevention. It is hoped that the positive results of this study will stimulate further work on threat assessment guidelines as a safe and effective means of responding to student threats of violence.

Footnote

¹The training manual was devised for use when accompanied by direct training in use of the threat assessment guidelines. Based on field-test experiences, the manual was revised to include two dozen case examples that were resolved by threat assessment and a section with answers to frequently asked questions. A more extensive, stand-alone publication is in preparation (Cornell & Sheras, in press).

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