



Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence

Student threats
of violence

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705

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Abstract A series of highly publicized school shootings in the USA generated the misperception of an epidemic of school violence. Fears of school violence stimulated an ill-advised expansion of zero tolerance school discipline policies and the widespread dissemination of profiles or warning signs of potentially dangerous students for use by school administrators. This article presents the rationale for student threat assessment as an administrative alternative to zero tolerance or profiling. It describes the development and field-testing of guidelines for school administrators to follow in investigating and resolving student threats of violence. Student threat assessment permits administrators to make reasonable judgments about the seriousness of a threat, to resolve most threats quickly and efficiently, and to reserve more labor-intensive procedures for the most serious threats.

There is a widespread misperception that violence in American schools soared dramatically in the past decade. This misperception was generated by excessive media attention to a series of tragic school shootings, like the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado that resulted in 15 fatalities. Even the most reputable news agencies in the USA bombarded the public with frightening images of bloody children, anguished parents, and traumatized teachers. We were reminded of these images again and again because the news media continued to present follow-up stories even years after the shootings. One of the largest national tabloids made the Columbine High School shooting its cover story three years after the shooting, when it obtained newly released photographs of bloody victims (*The National Enquirer*, 2002). Unfortunately, Columbine is probably the best-known high school in the USA.

Because our images of the school shootings are so vivid and memorable, we misjudge their prevalence and over-estimate their likelihood of recurrence. School administrators across the USA worry that similar acts of violence might occur in their school. Yet homicides committed by students at school are exceedingly rare events in a population of more than 53 million students

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attending 119,000 public and private schools (US Census Bureau, 2003). According to case reports compiled by the National School Safety Center (2003), 116 persons were murdered by students at school in 93 incidents that took place from the 1992-1993 school year through the 2001-2002 school year[1]. Considering that 93 incidents took place over nine years, the annual probability of a school experiencing a student-perpetrated homicide is about 1 in 11,520.

Is youth violence soaring in the USA? In 1996, the cover of a leading news magazine (*U.S. News & World Report*, 1996) declared that “Violent juvenile crime is soaring – and its going to get worse”. On the contrary, violent juvenile crime actually had been declining for three years and continued to decline for the remainder of the decade. National arrest statistics released each year by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1985-2002) document that violent crime by juveniles (persons under age 18) declined steadily and dramatically each year from 1993 until 2000. Most notably, juvenile arrests for homicide peaked at 3,284 in 1993 and then declined each year until 2000. By 2001 (the most recent year available), there were 957 juvenile homicide arrests, a decline of more than 70 percent. Even homicides in schools declined during the 1990s, with the exception of a two-year period when there was intense media coverage of such events (National School Safety Center, 2003).

Why was there a series of mass shootings at school during the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years? In part, these shootings may be attributable to copycat behavior stimulated by tremendous media publicity. When students all over the country learned that an angry disillusioned youth who felt bullied and mistreated decided to take revenge through a mass shooting at school, most students were shocked and dismayed, but a small number of psychologically volatile and vulnerable youth were impressed. News reports apparently inspired the two boys at Columbine High School to plan an assault they hoped would gain even more notoriety than others had received. As the news media reported (*Time*, 1999), these boys left a videotape describing their murderous plans and revealing their goal of attaining a death toll that would exceed all previous school shootings.

Zero tolerance

The fear of school shootings triggered an extreme reaction in American schools: the expansion of so-called “zero tolerance” policies. Originally, zero tolerance referred to a policy of automatic expulsion of students for bringing a gun to school, promulgated by the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994. Over time, the policy expanded to include all weapons and drugs, and in many school divisions, much more. The prohibition of weapons in many school divisions was defined to include toy weapons and objects that appeared to be weapons. In one case, a ten-year-old boy was expelled from elementary school because he brought to school a 1-inch (2.5-mm) plastic toy pistol that was an accessory to his G.I. Joe action figure. The boy discovered he had the tiny toy in his pocket

by accident when he checked to see if he had his lunch money (*Seattle Times*, 1997). Skiba and Peterson (1999) documented numerous cases of excessive punishment, which they referred to as “the dark side of zero tolerance”. Among the examples they cited:

- a five-year-old in California was expelled after he found a razor blade at his bus stop and carried it to school and gave it to his teacher;
- a nine-year-old in Ohio was suspended for having a 1-inch knife in a manicure kit;
- a 12-year-old in Rhode Island was suspended for bringing a toy gun to school; and
- a 17-year-old in Chicago was arrested and subsequently expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band.

A 2000 report by the Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project of Harvard University (*Opportunities Suspended: Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline*) pointed out that, “Zero tolerance has become a philosophy that has permeated our schools; it employs a brutally strict disciplinary model that embraces harsh punishment over education” (Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project, 2000, p. 3). The report raised concern that zero tolerance policies were resulting in high levels of suspension and expulsion of minority students. In 1998, more than 3.1 million students were suspended from school; although African-American children represent 17 percent of the public school enrollment, they constituted 32 percent of the out-of-school suspensions.

An article in the *American Bar Association Journal* (Tebo, 2000) sharply criticized zero tolerance policies as making “zero sense”. Tebo contended that the central problem with zero tolerance policies is that all threats of violence are treated as equally dangerous and deserving of the same consequences. For example, Ohio state law requires every school district to have a zero tolerance policy that makes no exceptions (Tebo, 2000). These kinds of policies provide no latitude for school authorities to consider the seriousness of the threat or degree of risk posed by the student’s behavior. In 2001, the American Bar Association passed a resolution condemning zero tolerance:

... 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.

Profiling

Another ill-considered reaction in American schools was the effort to develop profiles or warning signs to identify potentially dangerous students. The most widely disseminated profiles of dangerous students contained very general criteria that are likely to result in many false positive identifications, as well as

the development of stereotypes (Sewell and Mendelsohn, 2000). The US Department of Education and Department of Justice disseminated to every public school in the nation a list of 16 “warning signs” for identifying potentially violent youth that include such broad items as “history of discipline problems”, “drug use and alcohol use”, “feelings of being picked on and persecuted”, and “excessive feelings of rejection” (Dwyer *et al.*, 1998).

The American Psychological Association’s (1999) “warning signs” pamphlet sounds an ominous note with the statement, “If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility”. The list of “immediate warning signs” includes “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”. Most school authorities could identify students in their schools who appear to meet these signs.

Similarly, the National School Safety Center (1998) promulgated a 20-item “Checklist of characteristics of youth who have caused school-associated violent deaths”. This checklist includes some very general items, such as “has been previously 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”. The items on such checklists may well describe the small group of youths who committed school shootings, but this does not make them useful, specific indicators of violence. Because the base rate for severe violence is so low, checklists of student characteristics will invariably lead to the false positive identification of a very large number of students who are not violent (Sewell and Mendelsohn, 2000).

The practice of student profiling was critically examined by the leading authorities on criminal profiling at a conference on school shootings convened by the FBI (O’Toole, 2000).

The FBI report firmly rejected the application of profiling to school shootings, concluding:

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 (O’Toole, 2000, pp. 2-3).

Threat assessment

A critical finding from the FBI study of school shootings was that in almost every case the student shooter made threats of violence to his classmates days or weeks prior to the crime (O’Toole, 2000). Had these threats been reported to authorities, it would have been possible to investigate and prevent the shootings. The FBI found many other cases in which school shootings were

prevented because students did report a classmate's threats to authorities. These observations led the FBI researchers to conclude (O'Toole, 2000, p. 1):

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.

The FBI report recognized that "all threats are not created equal" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 5) and that each threat must be carefully investigated to determine what danger the student posed to others. Students who make threats differ in their motivation and capacity to carry out a violent act.

The FBI report advised schools to institute a threat management system that would provide a standard procedure for evaluating threats and responding with appropriate interventions and risk reduction strategies based on the seriousness of the threat (O'Toole, 2000). This process is called "threat assessment". In brief, a team of school personnel can conduct a threat assessment by interviewing the student who made a threat of violence and gathering information from others (e.g. the victim, witnesses, parents, and teachers) to determine the seriousness of the threat, based on the intentions and capability of the student, and what safety precautions are needed. The team then formulates a broader plan to reduce the risk of violence and respond to the student needs or problems represented by the threat.

Threat assessment was developed by the US Secret Service based on studies of persons who attacked or threatened to attack public officials (Fein *et al.*, 1995). Reddy and colleagues (Reddy *et al.*, 2001) advocated the application of threat assessment to schools and in 2002, a joint report of the US Secret Service and Department of Education recommended that schools train threat assessment teams in order to respond to student threats of violence (Fein *et al.*, 2002).

Threat assessment has the potential to overcome many of the limitations of both zero tolerance and profiling. In contrast to zero tolerance, threat assessment considers the context and meaning of the student's threat. The school's response to a threat is based on the danger posed by the student, so that possession of a toy gun or a small pocketknife would not be treated in the same way as possession of a handgun or a switchblade. A student who accidentally brought a weapon to school would receive different consequences than a student who brought a weapon to school after voicing intent to harm someone.

Unlike profiling, threat assessment is conducted only when a student has made a threat. Threat assessment concerned with the examination of specific behaviors directly linked to committing a violent act. Has the student voiced intent to harm someone? Has the student made specific plans to carry out the act? Has the student attempted to recruit accomplices or invited classmates to observe the threatened violence? More general student characteristics that are described in typical profile checklists play a secondary role in evaluating the potential for violence.

Development of student threat assessment guidelines

The FBI and Secret Service reports (O'Toole, 2000; Fein *et al.*, 2002) advised schools to establish threat assessment teams and presented sound arguments for the potential value of this approach; however, student threat assessment was a largely untested practice in need of further specification and field-testing. It remained to be determined how schools could conduct threat assessments and what the consequences would be. To bridge the gap between principle and practice, our group at the University of Virginia, the Virginia Youth Violence Project, undertook a project, funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, to develop and field-test a practical set of guidelines for schools to follow in conducting student threat assessments (Cornell, 2001; Cornell *et al.*, in press). Although the design of our study did not include a comparison group of schools not using threat assessment guidelines, the results of this field-testing nevertheless provide supportive evidence for the viability of student threat assessment.

We were fortunate to engage the cooperation and support of two Virginia school divisions as field test sites, one serving a small city of 40,000 residents and the other serving the surrounding county of 82,000 residents encompassing both suburban and rural areas. We chose to work with two school divisions in order to increase the size and diversity of our school population and to develop procedures that would not be idiosyncratic to the practices of a single division. These two school divisions gave us access to a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population of 16,400 students enrolled in four high schools, six middle schools, 22 elementary schools, and three alternative schools.

Our objective was to work collaboratively with the school divisions to develop guidelines that reflect the day-to-day needs of the administrators in the schools. We wished to avoid the pitfall of developing a program that would be impractical or inefficient for use in school settings. Accordingly, during the summer of 2001 we convened a work group consisting of an assistant superintendent, a principal, and a school psychologist from each school division. The municipal police departments from the city and the county sent their supervisor of school resource officers (police officers trained to work to schools) to join the group. Once formed, the group also invited input from other educators, law enforcement officials, and representatives from the local prosecutor's office.

To provide the work group with a wide base of information, we conducted telephone interviews with all principals, school psychologists, and school resource officers in both divisions to ask them about the types of student threats they had experienced and what kinds of guidelines would help them respond most effectively. We also asked them to identify any problems or barriers they could anticipate. Almost all principals reported that student threats to hurt someone were a relatively common event, although few threats were regarded as very serious. However, principals from elementary, middle, and high schools all expressed concern that there were no standards or rules to rely upon in making decisions about student threats. Principals reported

feeling uncomfortable relying solely on their own intuition when making decisions about a student who made a violent threat. Especially after the shooting at Columbine High School, a number of administrators faced strong parental concerns about something a student said, or was rumored to have said, that suggested a potential for violence. Principals felt pressure to take strong actions, such as expelling a student from school, even in situations where they did not regard the student's behavior as posing a serious threat.

The work group met over a two-month period to achieve consensus on a set of guidelines for threat assessment. Among the key questions we considered were: Who should be on the threat assessment team and who will be in charge? The most critical issues for the threat assessment team would be: How can we distinguish very serious threats of violence from the larger pool of threats that students make? And what do we do with a student who has made a very serious threat of violence?

Once the group drafted a set of guidelines providing answers to these questions, it was shared with an external, multidisciplinary advisory group, who raised additional issues and suggested further revisions. The advisory group consisted of both state and national experts in education, law enforcement, and psychology.

The work group decided that each school would form its own threat assessment team rather than establish a single team to assess threats for an entire school division or group of schools. We felt that school staff would be more likely to report threats to colleagues in their own school rather than an external team, and that school-based teams would be more knowledgeable of the student body and could respond more quickly to threats. Finally, we recognized the potential for conflict if an external team reached conclusions that were contrary to the perceptions of the principal and other school staff.

We decided that school principals or assistant principals, rather than other members of the school staff, should lead the threat assessment team because of their fundamental responsibility for student disciplinary matters and school safety. We also recognized that it would be potentially problematic for someone other than the school principal to be in a position of authority in making decisions about a student who had made a serious threat of violence.

Accordingly, we assigned the school principal with the primary role on the threat assessment team. The school principal or assistant principal conducts the initial triage to determine the seriousness of the threat, and if the threat is serious, calls in the team. The school principal leads the team and makes final decisions about what to do in response to the student's threat. Other team members have responsibilities intended to provide the principal with information and recommendations to consider in making these decisions.

Team roles

Another consequence of the school shootings in the USA has been the increased assignment of law enforcement officers to work in schools, particularly at the

middle and high school levels. Police officers who receive special training to work in schools are termed “school resource officers”, and ideally their work has preventive as well as enforcement functions. We followed the recommendations of the FBI (O’Toole, 2000) and Secret Service (Fein *et al.*, 2002) reports to place a School Resource Officer on every team. In schools where there are no resource officers, a police liaison officer can be identified from the local police department.

The school resource officer has several responsibilities on the team. First, the officer responds to emergencies or crisis situations where there was an imminent risk of violence. In very serious cases, the officer has legal duties and responsibilities just as he or she would have if the threat situation took place outside of school. For example, a student wielding a weapon, or a student who had injured someone else is subject to arrest. In other cases where the risk of violence is not immediate, the officer might also have investigative responsibilities as part of his or her law enforcement role. For example, an officer might investigate a suspected bomb plot by obtaining a search warrant for a student’s home. In these circumstances the school resource officer does not act under the authority of the school principal, but assumes independent responsibilities as a law enforcement officer. Most important is that the law enforcement officer and the school principal understand how they can work together in different types of threat situations.

In nonemergency situations, the school resource officer is a consultant on law enforcement matters. For example, the officer advises the team on matters of security or whether a student’s behavior constituted a violation of law. Virginia statutes (Code 22.1-280.1D) require that certain serious legal violations by students must be reported to law enforcement authorities, which can be accomplished through the threat assessment team. Finally, schools can make use of their school resource officers for prevention purposes, consistent with the philosophy of community-oriented policing that seems so well-suited to school-based law enforcement (Atkinson, 1997). School resource officers can have a positive impact on the school climate by establishing high visibility in the school; maintaining positive, friendly relations with students; and taking an interest in school activities and events as another member of the school staff. They can adopt a problem-solving approach to crime prevention, identifying potentially volatile situations or brewing conflicts between students or groups of students before violent actions take place.

The school psychologist and school counselor also serve on the threat assessment team. In very serious cases, the school psychologist conducts an immediate mental health evaluation that we designed to address the critical issues and concerns generated by a student threat of violence. We stress that the psychologist is not expected to predict whether the student will or will not carry out the threat, which is an unrealistic expectation in such situations. Cases are only referred to the school psychologist if it is determined that a

substantial risk of violence exists, so the focus of the evaluation should not be on forecasting the future, but on identifying the immediate mental health needs of the student, and attempting to understand his or her motivation in making the threat. With this knowledge, the psychologist can make practical recommendations that have the purpose of reducing the previously determined risk of violence. For example, in one case the school psychologist determined that the student was suicidal and required hospitalization. In another case, the school psychologist determined that the student was being bullied by a group of classmates and used the threat as a form of retaliation.

School counselors are involved primarily in follow-up interventions such as counseling or conflict resolution to reduce the risk of violence. The school counselor might implement the intervention in some cases, or in other cases, identify programs and resources that could serve the student. The school counselor subsequently monitors the student's participation in the intervention and assesses its effectiveness.

Teachers do not serve on the threat assessment team because their time must be reserved for the classroom. Their primary role is to report threats of violence to the principal and allow the team to handle them. Teams consult with teachers to learn more about the student and to keep them informed of the process and plans that are under way. It is important for teachers and all school staff members to understand and support the threat assessment procedures, and to support efforts to resolve threats and prevent future conflicts.

Overview of threat assessment guidelines

Threat assessment teams follow a seven-step decision tree explicated in an 18-page set of guidelines (Cornell, 2001)[2]. At step one, the leader of the threat assessment team, the principal or assistant principal, conducts a preliminary assessment or triage to determine the seriousness of the threat. The principal interviews the student who made the threat, using a standard set of questions that can be adapted to the specific situation. The principal also may interview witnesses to the threat and make notes on a standard form.

The principal must make an important distinction between threats that are serious, in the sense that they pose a continuing risk or danger to others, and those that are not serious, because they are readily resolved and do not pose a continuing risk. Less serious threats that are readily resolved are termed "transient" threats in the guidelines, and are distinguished from "substantive" threats. Transient threats are defined as behaviors that can be readily identified as expressions of anger or frustration, or perhaps inappropriate attempts at humor, but which dissipate in a short period of time when the student has time to reflect on the meaning of what he or she has said. 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 consequence, but there is no need to take protective action to

prevent a future act of violence because the threat is short-lived. Transient threats are resolved with an explanation and apology by the student.

Substantive threats represent a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate incident or argument where the threat was made. If there is doubt whether a threat is transient or substantive, the threat is regarded as substantive. Substantive threats may be identified by several features that are regarded as “presumptive” indicators. The presumptive indicators, derived from the FBI report (O’Toole, 2000), include:

- the threat has specific plausible details, such as a specific victim, time, place, and method of assault;
- the threat has been repeated over time or communicated to multiple persons;
- the threat is reported as a plan, or planning has taken place;
- the student has accomplices, or has attempted to recruit accomplices;
- the student has invited an audience of peers to watch the threatened event; and
- 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 might seek an accomplice to send an angry, threatening letter to a classmate. The threat is transient if the student does not intend to carry out the threat, but only means to frighten the classmate. Such an incident would be handled as a serious disciplinary matter, but not as a serious threat. This example illustrates another important point, which is that threat assessment is not a substitute for discipline, and both procedures may be appropriate in many cases. In some cases the disciplinary consequences can be quite severe even if the threat is transient. For example, a student who repeatedly disrupts the class with transient threats to harm others may receive serious disciplinary consequences. A false bomb threat is not a substantive threat if the student only intends to disrupt the school, but does not have a bomb; however, such actions can have serious disciplinary and legal consequences. The reason for the distinction between threat assessment and discipline is that threat assessment is concerned with the risk of future harm to others, and what steps should be taken to prevent the threat from being carried out, whereas discipline is concerned with punishing a student as a consequence for his or her actions.

In essence, threat assessment teams must always take into account the context of the threat and make reasoned judgments based on all the available

information. The team should consider the student's age and capabilities, mental stability, prior history of violent behavior, and other factors that seem relevant to the specific situation. The guidelines assist the team in its investigation, but do not provide a prescription or formula.

Although all substantive threats are regarded as serious, special provision is made for substantive threats to kill, rape, or assault with a weapon. Such threats to commit an assault that would be regarded as a felony by law enforcement are designated as "very serious substantive threats". "Serious substantive threats" involve simple assaults, usually phrased as threats to hit or beat up someone whereas very serious substantive threats imply more severe threats of bodily harm. In very serious cases, the school administrator must take immediate precautionary actions to assure that the threat is not carried out and to engage the efforts of all members of the threat assessment team. The student should be detained in the principal's office until the student's parents can arrive. At the same time, the law enforcement officer on the team must determine whether the student has violated the law, and what appropriate legal action should be taken. A student who threatens someone with a weapon, or is found to be in possession of a weapon, is likely to be arrested. The team must notify the intended victim, and if the victim is a student, the victim's parents. The school psychologist should begin a mental health evaluation of the student as soon as possible, with the initial goal of assessing the student's mental state and need for immediate mental health services. The student should remain suspended from school, pending a complete assessment of the threat and a determination of the most appropriate school placement. The guidelines contain numerous case examples of how different types of threats can be handled, and especially the procedures to follow in very serious cases.

Field testing of threat assessment guidelines

Threat assessment teams from thirty-five schools participated in the field-testing project. Over the course of a full school year, the schools recorded 188 student threats that were addressed using the guidelines. This sample represents threats that came to the attention of school authorities, recognizing that many threats communicated among students are not reported, just as police arrest statistics do not record all crimes that occur in the community.

The most common threats were threats to hit or assault someone (41 percent), followed by threats to kill (15 percent), shoot (13 percent), stab (11 percent) or injure in some other way (5 percent). Approximately 15 percent of threats were too vague to be classified (e.g. "I'm going to get you"). Threats were made primarily by boys (76 percent), although about one-fourth were made by girls. Threats were reported at all grade levels from kindergarten through twelfth grade, but the distribution was bimodal. There was a peak at grades three and four (each with 27 threats) and then a second peak at grades seven and eight

(28 and 24 threats, respectively). Altogether, more than half (56 percent) of the threats took place at these four grade levels. More detailed statistical analyses of the threats are reported elsewhere (Cornell *et al.*, 2003).

As anticipated, a large proportion of the threats (70 percent) were classified as transient threats, while the remaining 30 percent were substantive threats divided between those regarded as serious (23 percent) and very serious (7 percent). We interviewed school principals to learn what disciplinary consequences were imposed on the students after making the threat. The most common disciplinary consequence was a short-term suspension from school. Nearly all of the students who made substantive threats (88 percent) were suspended from school, with the modal suspension three days. In contrast, about one-third (34 percent) of students who made transient threats were suspended, with the modal suspension one day.

We were pleased to learn that very few students were arrested, despite the direct involvement of law enforcement officers. Only six of 188 students were arrested. The arrests were based on actions such as weapon possession and assault of a teacher or police officer. Two students who made false bomb threats were arrested. Just three students were expelled from school, and in these cases, their threat was one in a series of disciplinary infractions that culminated in a decision to remove them from school.

We were most interested in learning how the students behaved after the threat assessment. We conducted follow-up interviews with the principals at the end of the school year, and then again the following fall. We asked the principals whether the student's behavior had worsened, stayed about the same, or improved since the threat incident. Only 18 percent of the students were described as worse, 39 percent were the same, and 43 percent were improved. These seem like positive results, but they are subjective judgments by the principals, and we do not have a comparison group.

Similarly, we asked the principals about the student's relationship with the target of the threat. For this question our *n* dropped to 126, because for various reasons the principal could not make a judgment, for example, if either the student or target were no longer in the school. The principals reported that the relationship had worsened in just 5 percent of the cases, remained the same in 63 percent, and improved in 32 percent. In a future study we would like to find a means of obtaining information directly from the target of the threat to see if these individuals shared the same view as the principals.

We asked the principals if, to their knowledge, the student had carried out the threat. Our question focused on what the student did after the threat assessment was conducting, recognizing that some of the students had engaged in a violent act at the time of the threat—for example, some of the students made the threat after a fight, and in some cases, the student made the threat while attempting to assault the victim. According to the principals, none of the threats were carried out. Although it is conceivable that some of the less

severe threats to hit or strike someone were carried out without the principal's knowledge, it seems most unlikely that any of the more serious threats to shoot, stab, or otherwise severely injure the target were carried out.

Future directions

The field-test project demonstrates the viability and utility of student threat assessment by school-based teams and lays the groundwork for further research. Our findings indicate that it is possible for school administrators to use a threat assessment approach and to make practical distinctions among types of threats. Principals were able to make individualized determinations about the disciplinary consequences for students, and in contrast to the more draconian consequences of a zero tolerance approach, there were few arrests or expulsions. The most common disciplinary outcome was a short-term suspension from school. According to the school principals, many of the students exhibited improved behavior at school and only a small proportion worsened. Moreover, many students were observed to have an improved relationship with the target of their threats, and in only a few cases did the relationship worsen. The principals could identify no instances in which the student carried out the threatened act of violence.

Our findings need replication in a study making use of a comparison group of schools not using threat assessment. It would be useful to examine schools before and after implementation of a threat assessment approach, or to compare this approach with schools using zero tolerance policies, a profiling approach, and perhaps other, less systematic practices.

We introduced the conceptual distinction between transient and substantive threats in order to capture an important practical distinction made routinely by school administrators, but the validity of this distinction requires further study. What are the criteria that reliably distinguish transient and substantive threats, and are substantive threats more likely to result in a violent outcome? Of course, it will be difficult to show a differential outcome from substantive threats since schools will understandably make a concerted effort to prevent a violent outcome, but there may be other differences in the students who make such threats and in their behavior after the threat. There is evidence that students who make substantive threats are more likely to engage in further disciplinary infractions at school, including aggressive behavior such as fighting (Cornell *et al.*, 2003).

We need additional study of the outcomes of student threat assessment in order to confirm the apparently positive outcomes our principals reported. It would be useful to assess outcomes using information from multiple sources, and to investigate the relationship between the student and targeted victim in more detail. There may be important differences in the outcomes for students who threaten classmates as opposed to school personnel, and it may be possible to identify factors associated with successful outcomes. For example, how

useful is peer mediation or other conflict resolution strategies when students make threats to harm one another? Although there is evidence in support of certain general forms of youth violence prevention (US Surgeon General, 2001), such as conflict mediation and school-wide bullying prevention programs, we know of no studies that have examined the impact of such strategies on student threats or student conflicts that have risen to the level of an articulated threat of violence.

We must be concerned with the degree to which teams fully implement a threat assessment approach and how skillfully they follow its guidelines. In their landmark meta-analysis of school-based violence prevention programs, Wilson *et al.* (2003) found that quality of program implementation was critical. Schools that carefully implement and maintain a violence prevention program were more likely to achieve substantial reductions in student aggression and misbehavior than schools that implemented programs in a less rigorous manner. Therefore, we want to identify the best means of helping school administrators to implement student threat assessment. What is the best way to train school personnel and how much training is needed?

Finally, we must recognize the contributions of the school administrator and team to the threat assessment approach. The guidelines permit considerable latitude in deciding how to respond to a student's threat, so it may be useful to study the role of administrator judgment and the decision-making. What qualities of the school administrator and team are associated with positive outcomes in the resolution of student threats? In our view, a fair and reasonable resolution of student threats of violence inevitably relies on the good judgment and skill of the school administrator.

Notes

1. The National School Safety Center (2003) compiles an ongoing report of "school-associated violent deaths" that is available online at <www.nsscl.org>. This report broadly includes suicides and accidental deaths, and homicides that took place near school or on school property when school was not in session, as well as homicides committed by persons other than students, such as the murder of a teacher by an estranged husband. For purposes of this article, I counted only homicides committed by students, limited to cases that occurred at school during regular school hours or while students were traveling to or from school.
2. The training manual is available to schools that participate in training. Information on training is available at our website: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>. With further research, we expect to prepare a stand-alone manual for broader dissemination.

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