

Student Reports of Peer Threats of Violence

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Abstract

A sample of 3,756 high school students completed a school climate survey containing five questions about peer threat experiences. Students were asked: (1) whether another student had threatened to harm them in the past 30 days; (2) what the peer threatened to do; (3) whom the student told about the threat; and (4) what happened with the threat. Students who reported that they told no one about the threat were asked: (5) why they did not tell anyone. Statistical analyses showed that student reports of aggressive attitudes, marijuana use, and alcohol intake predicted experiencing serious threats; gender and threat specificity predicted threat reporting; and aggressive attitudes and threat specificity predicted threat outcome.

Rationale

Student threats of violence are a widespread concern in United States schools. Authorities have recommended that each school have its own threat assessment team (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002). In order to make informed judgments, however, school authorities need foundational knowledge about the nature and prevalence of threats, the typical outcomes of threats, and an understanding of why students often do not report threats.

Study Questions

- 1) What are the prevalence rates of student threat experiences?
- 2) What reasons do students give for not reporting threats?
- 3) What variables predict threat experiences?



Methods

The sample included 1,746 boys (47%) and 2,010 girls (53%) from 5 high schools in 2 public school divisions in central Virginia. There were 954 (25%) ninth graders, 974 (26%) tenth graders, 943 (25%) eleventh graders, and 885 (24%) twelfth graders. Racial/ethnic breakdown was 2,298 (61%) White, 498 (13%) African American, 335 (9%) Hispanic, 152 (4%) Asian American, 149 (4%) Multiracial, and 324 (9%) another ethnicity.

The survey was administered anonymously online during a two-week period in fall 2010 as part of a Safe Schools/Healthy Students program. Overall participation rate was 92%.

Measures. The threat section consisted of five questions. Threats to injure with or without a weapon were combined and contrasted with non-specific threats. Open-ended responses to the final question were coded into five categories by two raters trained to 87% agreement.

Threat Survey Questions

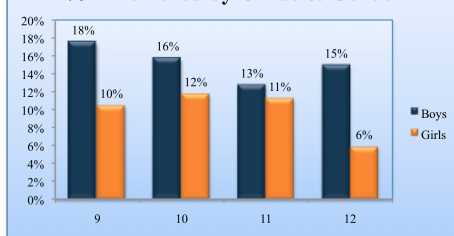
Question	Response Options
(1) Has another student threatened to harm you in the past 30 days?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have not been threatened. • I have been threatened, but the person did not really mean it. • I have been threatened and it was serious.
(2) What did the other student threaten to do to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Injure me without a weapon (e.g., hit me). • Injure me with a weapon such as a club, knife or gun. • Nothing specific, just a threat to hurt or harm me.
(3) Whom have you told that you have been threatened?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I told a friend. • I told a teacher or another adult at school. • I told a parent.
(4) What happened with the threat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The threat is over and nothing happened. • The threat is not over and might be carried out. • The threat was carried out and the person tried to hurt me or did hurt me. • Other, please specify.
(5) Please explain why you have not told anyone that you were threatened.	Open ended responses coded as: (1) threat not that serious; (2) help not necessary; (3) fear of retaliation; (4) concern over snitching; or (5) help would be ineffective.

The survey also included a 7-item Aggressive Attitudes scale that measured student endorsement of aggression (e.g., "It feels good when I hit someone"). Students were also asked about use of marijuana and alcohol in the past 30 days.

Results

A majority of students reported that they had not been threatened in the past 30 days ($n = 3,392$, 88%). Among the 464 threatened, only 107 (3% of all participants, 23% of those threatened) regarded the threat as serious.

% Threatened by Grade & Gender

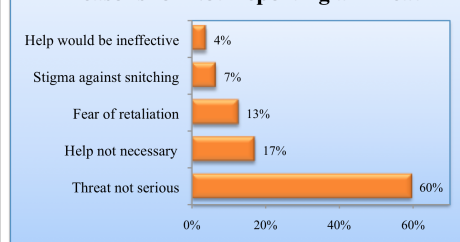


With regard to threat outcome, most of the students who were threatened ($n=364$, 80%) reported that "nothing happened" and only 42 (9%) reported that the threat was carried out.



Threatened students were asked whether or not they told anyone about the threat. Approximately 80% (205) of boys and 65% (125) of girls answered "no." Most students did not report a threat because they did not regard it as serious.

Reasons for Not Reporting a Threat



Chi square analyses showed that Minority students were more likely than White students to: (1) report being seriously threatened (4% vs. 2%); and (2) report that the threat was carried out (15% vs. 6%), all $p < .01$.

Hierarchical logistic regressions used demographics (race, gender, grade level), alcohol intake, marijuana use, and aggressive attitudes to predict whether a threat was (1) serious; (2) reported; and (3) carried out. Only the final step is presented here. Notably, most demographic variables dropped to non-significance.

Aggressive attitudes, alcohol intake, and marijuana use increased the odds of experiencing a serious threat, Nagelkerke $r^2 = .221$, $p < .001$.

Students were more likely to tell someone about a threat if they were female and the threat was specific, $r^2 = .081$, $p = .013$. Students were more likely to report a threat had been carried out if they endorsed aggressive attitudes and if there was a specific threat to injure, $r^2 = .484$, $p < .001$.

Predictors	Serious Threat	Threat Reporting	Threat Outcome
	OR	OR	OR
Demographics			
Gender	--	2.47(Y=0)*	--
Grade	--	--	--
Race/Ethnicity	--	--	--
Psychosocial Characteristics			
Aggressive attitudes	1.15*	--	1.16*
Alcohol intake	1.27*	--	--
Marijuana use	1.33*	--	--
Threat specificity	N/A	1.71*	9.96*

Note. * = $p < .05$; OR = odds ratio

Conclusion

Threats are a relatively common experience among high school students, but usually are not serious and not carried out. Threats are rarely reported—most often because the threat did not seem serious.

Students with aggressive attitudes were both more likely to experience a serious threat and more likely to report that the threat was carried out. Students who reported use of alcohol and use of marijuana were more likely to report serious threats. Finally, specific threats to injure were more likely to be reported and more likely to be carried out than non-specific threats. More research to identify serious threats and encourage threat reporting is needed.

These results are useful for school threat assessment teams and can be used in conjunction with our threat assessment protocol, described in *Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

References

- Cornell, D., & Sheras, P. (2006). *Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- O'Toole, M. E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, VA: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI.
- Vossekuil, B., Fein, R. A., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education.

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