

Student Threat Assessment in Memphis City Schools: A Descriptive Report

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ABSTRACT: Threat assessment has been widely recommended as a violence prevention approach for schools, but there are few reports of its implementation. Memphis City Schools adapted the Virginia threat assessment guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) for use by a centralized team serving 194 schools and a student population of 118,000. This article describes 209 student threats referred for assessment during a single school year and the resulting educational placements and disciplinary consequences. There were no reports of students carrying out any of the violent threats. These results support further examination of student threat assessment as a promising approach to dealing with student threats.

■ Since the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, school administrators have been under pressure to assure the public that schools are safe and secure (Cornell, 2006). The shootings in 2005 at Red Lake High School in Minnesota, in 2006 at the Amish school in Pennsylvania, and in 2007 at Virginia Tech received worldwide attention and have kept the issue of school safety in the foreground of national concerns. The purpose of this study is to report on the implementation of a student threat assessment program designed to prevent acts of violence in Memphis city schools.

Both the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and the Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) studies remarked on the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of students who engaged in acts of targeted violence but identified some general characteristics seen in many, but not all, of the student perpetrators. Many of the students were victims of bullying who had become angry and depressed, had family relationship problems, and were negatively influenced by peers. More than half displayed a preoccupation with violence through movies or video games. Unfortunately, both law enforcement agencies concluded that, because these characteristics can be found in so many students, it is not possible to develop a profile or checklist that could be used to pinpoint the small number of truly violent students among them.

Any checklist of warning signs would falsely identify many students who were not dangerous.

Nevertheless, the FBI and Secret Service emphasized that almost all of these students communicated their intentions to attack through threats and warnings. In most cases, the threats were not communicated directly to the intended victims but to third parties such as their peers. Had these threats been reported to authorities and investigated, the shootings might have been prevented; the FBI identified a series of potential school shootings that were prevented because students reported a threat to authorities that was investigated and determined to be serious (O'Toole, 2000). Based on these observations, both the FBI and the Secret Service, in collaboration with the Department of Education, recommended that schools adopt a threat assessment approach to prevent targeted acts of violence (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000).

What is threat assessment? Threat assessment was developed by the Secret Service to deal with persons who threaten to attack public officials, and it has evolved into a standard law enforcement approach to analyze a variety of dangerous situations, such as threats of workplace violence. Threat assessment is a process of evaluating a threat and the circumstances surrounding the threat to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out. Student threat

assessment can be distinguished from profiling in part because the investigation is triggered by the student's own threatening behavior rather than some broader combination of student characteristics.

Threat assessment is ultimately concerned with whether a student poses a threat, not whether he or she has made a threat (O'Toole, 2000; Randazzo et al., 2006). Any student can make a threat, but relatively few will engage in the planning and preparation necessary to carry out the threat. Threat assessment is concerned with determining whether a student has the intent and means to carry out the threat. Moreover, threat assessment includes efforts to prevent the threat from being carried out. Prevention efforts range from immediate security measures, such as notifying law enforcement and warning potential victims, to the development of an intervention plan designed to resolve the conflict or problem that precipitated the threat.

Although both the FBI and Secret Service reports (Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000) made a compelling case for student threat assessment, schools had no experience with this approach, and there were many questions concerning the practical procedures that should be followed and how the process would work. In response to these questions, researchers at the University of Virginia developed a set of guidelines for school administrators to use in responding to a reported student threat of violence. Threat assessment teams are trained in a 6-hour workshop that prepares them to use a 145-page threat assessment manual (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

The guidelines include a decision tree that consists of seven steps. At Step 1, the team leader (typically a school administrator) investigates a reported threat by interviewing the student who made the threat and any witnesses to the threat. The guidelines manual includes a basic set of interview questions that consider both the actual threat behavior and questions about the meaning and intent of the threat from each observer's perspective.

At Step 2, the team leader decides whether the threat is transient or substantive. A threat is considered transient if it is not a serious threat and can be easily resolved. Examples of transient threats are jokes or statements made in anger that are expressions of feeling or figures of speech rather than expressions of a genuine intent to harm someone. Any threat

that cannot be clearly identified as transient is treated as a substantive threat.

If a threat is transient, it is resolved at Step 3 through a brief counseling process intended to resolve the conflict or clarify the misunderstanding that might have stimulated the threat. The student might be reprimanded and could receive a disciplinary consequence appropriate to the seriousness of the behavior (e.g., creating a disturbance or being disrespectful to others). If this process is deemed successful by the team, the incident is resolved, and no further action is needed.

The first three steps are essentially a triage process designed to address simpler cases without an extended process. If a threat cannot be resolved as transient or appears to be substantive, the process becomes more complex. Substantive threats always require protective action to prevent the threat from being carried out. At Step 4, the threat is determined to be serious or very serious. A threat to hit, assault, or beat up someone is serious, whereas a threat to kill, rape, use a weapon, or severely injure someone is considered very serious. Serious threats are addressed at Step 5, whereas very serious threats are addressed at Step 6.

At Step 5, serious substantive threats require protective action to prevent violence, including notification of potential victims and other actions to address the conflict or problem that generated the threat. The response to serious threats is completed at this step.

Steps 6 and 7 are reserved for very serious substantive threats. At Step 6, the team takes immediate protective action, including contact with law enforcement followed by a comprehensive safety evaluation. The student may be suspended from school pending completion of a safety evaluation, which includes a mental health assessment following a prescribed protocol. At Step 7, the threat assessment team uses the results of the safety evaluation to develop and implement an action plan that is designed both to protect potential victims and to meet the student's educational needs. The plan includes provision for monitoring the student and revising the plan as needed.

The Virginia threat assessment guidelines were field tested in 35 public schools, encompassing an enrollment of more than 16,000 students in Grades K through 12 (Cornell et al., 2004). School-based teams evaluated 188 student threats that involved threats to hit, stab, shoot, or harm someone in some other

way. Most of the threats (70%) were resolved as transient threats such as comments made in jest or in a fleeting moment of anger. The remaining 30% were substantive threats that required more extensive assessment and protective action to prevent the threat from being carried out. The threat assessment teams placed special emphasis on understanding the context and meaning of the threat and developing a plan to address the underlying conflict or problem that stimulated the student to resort to threatening behavior. Use of this problem-solving approach meant that relatively few students received long-term suspensions or expulsions from school. Only three students were expelled from school, although half of the students (94) received short-term suspensions (typically 1–3 days). Notably, follow-up interviews with the school principals found no cases in which the threats were carried out.

Adaptation of the Threat Assessment Guidelines to Memphis City Schools

The present study examines the implementation of the Virginia guidelines for student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools (MCS). This was an uncontrolled feasibility study designed to determine whether the guidelines could be adapted and applied in a challenging setting such as Memphis. With 118,000 students, MCS is Tennessee's largest school district and the 21st largest in the nation. At the time of the study, there were 194 schools (115 elementary schools, 29 middle/junior schools, 2 KK-8 schools, 34 high schools, 6 career and technology schools, 6 alternative schools, and 2 special category) within the city's 280 square miles. The student body is predominantly African American (87%), followed by White (8.5%), Hispanic (4.5%), and other (1%) groups.

The MCS serves a largely disadvantaged population. Approximately 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 29% of students have been retained at least one grade. These students reside in a community with a high crime rate. In 2005, the city's murder rate (20.2 per 100,000) was nearly three times the national average (6.9) and 13th highest in the nation (Morgan Quitno Press, 2006).

During the 2004–2005 school year, the school district recorded 225,405 disciplinary office referrals for student misbehavior. Six percent (13,659) of these referrals resulted in

suspensions of 4 or more days, which were termed *board suspensions*. All students whose infraction resulted in a board suspension were referred to the Memphis Pupil Services Center (PSC), which serves as the disciplinary hearing authority for the school division to ensure due process.

Prior to the 2004–2005 school year, the mental health team located at the PSC decided to adopt a threat assessment approach to evaluating students who appeared to pose a risk of violence. The mental health staff identified the Virginia guidelines as a promising model because it included a detailed set of procedures based on recommendations from the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002) studies. The mental health staff obtained training from the principal author (Cornell) of the Virginia guidelines and established administrative procedures for conducting threat assessments in their setting.

Because Memphis is such a large system and was not ready to train threat assessment teams in every school, the threat assessment program was implemented on a trial basis through a single centralized facility. One consequence of this decision is that threat assessments were conducted only on students whose behavior was judged serious enough by the school principal to have merited a suspension of 4 or more days. Nevertheless, the Memphis procedures were designed to follow as closely as possible the Virginia principles by using the same decision tree model and the same criteria for distinguishing transient and substantive threats (Cornell et al., 2004).

Each case that was referred to the PSC for disciplinary violations was reviewed by a hearing officer who had the authority to uphold, modify, or overturn the principal's decision to suspend the student. As part of the hearing process, the student was seen for evaluation by the Threat Assessment Team (TAT). The TAT was charged with screening student threats and conducting mental health assessments in those cases in which there was concern about a continued threat to others. (A case example is included in the appendix.)

The TAT was composed of two school psychologists, two school social workers, and a supervising psychologist who served as clinical staff of the MCS Mental Health Center within the Division of Exceptional Children and Health Services. This team makeup differs from the original recommendations of the guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006), which

suggest that each school-based team should include an administrator (principal or assistant principal) and a law enforcement representative (such as a school resource officer) in addition to one or more mental health professionals (such as school psychologists, counselors, or social workers).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the viability of a threat assessment approach using the Virginia guidelines and based on a sample of 209 cases. Although the guidelines had previously been field tested in 35 public schools (Cornell et al., 2004), the application of threat assessment in Memphis public schools posed new challenges because of the size and urban nature of the school system. The present study describes the kinds of threat cases referred for assessment and the grade level, special education status, disciplinary history, and school attendance of the students who made the threats. Follow-up examination of the threat assessment process includes the mental health treatment recommendations and subsequent school placement of these students and the available information on whether the threats were carried out.

Method

Participants

The participants were drawn from the pool of 13,659 students in the MCS who received a board suspension (4 days or more) from their principal and as a result were sent for a disciplinary hearing at the PSC during the 2004–2005 school year.¹ The hearing officer made 209 referrals to the TAT because the student had communicated a threat to commit a violent act. The 209 referrals involved 204 students (four boys and one girl were referred twice), ranging in age from 5 to 18 years old and including 159 boys (78%) and 45 girls (22%). One hundred ninety-six (94%) of the referred students were African American, 10 (5%) were White, and 3 (1%) were Hispanic. The students were referred from 103 different schools: 106 (52%) in grades pre-K through 6, 77 (38%) in Grades 7 to 9, and 21 (10%) in Grades 10 to 12.

¹ There were 45 additional cases evaluated by the TAT involving students who had not made a threat of violence but who had a history of repeated aggressive behavior that was cause for concern.

Measures

Threats were classified according to the *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006) as transient or substantive. According to this manual, a member of the TAT interviews the student who made the threat using a series of open-ended, nonleading questions to assess the student's intent. The interview can be modified as appropriate to the circumstances but includes the following basic questions as a guide:

1. Do you know why I wanted to talk with you? Tell me.
2. What happened today when you were [place of incident]?
3. What exactly did you say? And what exactly did you do?
4. What did you mean when you said or did that?
5. How do you think [person who was threatened] feels about what you said or did? (See if the student believes it frightened or intimidated the person who was threatened.)
6. What was the reason you said or did that? (Find out if there is a prior conflict or history to this threat?)
7. What are you going to do now that you have made this threat? (Ask if the student intends to carry out the threat.) (Cornell & Sheras, 2006, p. 111)

Transient threats are defined as behaviors that do not express a sustained intention to harm someone. Transient threats may be figures of speech, attempts at humor, or expressions of anger or frustration. If the student is angry or frustrated, the threat is transient if the student calms down and retracts the threat. The key indication that a threat is transient is that the student is able to explain the reason for his or her statement and retract the threat. Threats can be classified as transient only if the team member is confident that the threat has been resolved and the student has no ongoing intent to hurt someone. If the team member doubts the student's explanation or is uncertain whether the threat is transient, the threat is considered substantive.

Substantive threats are defined as threats that have substance (i.e., an ongoing intent to harm someone). Any threat that clearly conveys a serious intent to harm someone and that cannot be easily resolved as transient is

considered substantive. Substantive threats are distinguished from transient threats because they require protective action to prevent the threat from being carried out. Substantive threats may be identified by one or more presumptive indicators, derived from the FBI report (O'Toole, 2000):

- the threat includes 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;
- there is physical evidence of intent to carry out the threat, such as a weapon, bomb materials, map, written plan, or list of intended victims.

Although the presence of any one of these features may lead the team to presume the threat is substantive, none are absolute indicators, and all require additional investigation. Examples of transient and substantive threats and more detailed evaluation criteria are contained in the manual (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

Procedure

The Memphis threat assessments began when a hearing officer made a referral to the PSC's TAT because a student had engaged in threatening behavior. A TAT member consulted with the hearing officer to clarify what the student was reported to have said or done. Typically, this consultation took place while the students and his or her parents/guardians were meeting with the hearing officer, so that the TAT member could conduct a brief interview with the student and his or her parents/guardians to obtain the student's account of what happened. Next, one of the TAT staff conducted an interview with the school administrator and/or other school personnel with pertinent knowledge of the student and reviewed the student's school records.

After collecting all of the above information, the TAT conducted a case conference to determine whether the threat was transient or substantive. If the threat was deemed to be transient (e.g., the student's threatening state-

ment was made in a moment of anger and had since been resolved), the team concluded the assessment with recommendations for working with the student to avoid future problems. Recommendations could be directed to the school, the student, parents, or other professionals who were working with the student (e.g., mental health staff within MCS or in a community agency). The case then proceeded with the PSC disciplinary hearing for adjudication by the hearing officer.

When the TAT determined that a student's threat was substantive, the disciplinary hearing was postponed while a more complete assessment was conducted. The student and his or her parents were interviewed by a psychologist and a social worker at the PSC. After an initial meeting to obtain parental consent and advise them of the limits of confidentiality, the student and parents were interviewed separately. The interviews covered a standard list of topics derived from the literature on threat assessment and youth violence (Augimeri, Koegl, Webster, & Levene, 2001; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2000; Cornell & Sheras, 2006). In addition, the student and parents were asked detailed questions about the events leading to the disciplinary action.

The psychological evaluation of the student also included a mental status exam and an assessment of the student's social and emotional functioning. Depending on the student's age and clinical presentation, the psychologist administered a series of psychological instruments to the student, and the parents completed a behavioral inventory.

Within a few days, the team met with the student and parents to give them a summary of their findings and recommendations, including a written report. This meeting often occurred in conjunction with the disciplinary hearing, so that the hearing officer could consider the results of the threat assessment in making a decision about the suspension. The team made recommendations concerning the child's social support networks, peer affiliations, and mental health needs. Referrals to the MCS Mental Health Center and/or community agencies were commonly a part of the team's recommendations. The team also made recommendations to the school administrator that included instructions for implementing a safety plan intended to address specific risk factors within the school setting (e.g., addressing a problem with bullying or a peer conflict that precipitated the threat).

TABLE 1
Distribution of Threat Cases Across Grades

Grade Level	Total Students in the District		Threat Cases	
	<i>n</i>	Column %	<i>n</i>	Column %
Pre-k	1,463	<1	1	1
K	9,690	1	2	8
1	9,780	2	5	8
2	9,216	3	6	8
3	9,106	7	14	8
4	9,075	7	14	8
5	9,480	19	40	8
6	9,721	12	26	8
7	9,892	10	20	8
8	9,081	12	25	8
9	10,326	17	35	9
10	8,428	6	13	7
11	6,793	2	5	6
12	6,073	1	3	5
Total	118,124	100	209	100

Results

The 209 student threats of violence included 60 (29%) threats to hit or beat up someone, 48 (23%) threats to cut or stab, 32 (15%) threats to shoot, and 30 (14%) threats to kill. There were 17 (8%) vague threats (e.g., "I'm going to get you"), 14 (7%) sexual threats, and 8 (4%) other threats (such as to blow up or burn down the school). The students who made threats came from each grade level from preschool to 12th grade, although the frequency of threats increased through the elementary grades, peaked at Grade 5, and was maintained at a high rate until after the ninth grade (see *Table 1*).

The first set of analyses described the students who made threats of violence and compared them to the school district population. More than one-third of the referred students (38%) were receiving special education services, compared with 12% of the school system as a whole. The overall rate of students referred for threat assessment was 1.7 per 1,000 students, whereas among students receiving special education services, the rate was 5.6 per 1,000 students. A breakdown of special education service categories (see *Table 2*) indicates that the highest rate was among students receiving services for other health impairments: 12.8 cases per 1,000. The

next highest rate was 10 per 1,000 among students receiving services as functionally delayed. This category is used in Tennessee to identify a group of students who can be distinguished from those in the categories of emotional disturbance, developmental delay, mental retardation, or other standard categories. Functional delay means "a continuing disability in intellectual functioning and achievement which significantly affects the ability to think and/or act in the general school program, but who is functioning socially at or near a level appropriate to his/her chronological age" (Tennessee Department of Education, 2003, p. 45). The eligibility standards required intellectual functioning at a level comparable to the category of mental retardation but with adaptive behavior above the level of mental retardation.

Nearly three-fourths (149; 71%) of the referred students had been academically retained one or more times, as compared with 29% of the district's students. Forty-four percent (92) of the students had repeated one grade, 22% (47) had two retentions, and 5% (10) had been retained three times. For the district, retention rates were one grade (23%), two grades (6%), and three grades (0.3%).

Threat assessment findings. Of the 209 threat cases, 102 (49%) were classified as transient by the TAT and 107 (51%) were

TABLE 2
Special Education Services for Students Who Made Threats of Violence

Special Education Category	School District Population		Threat Cases		
	<i>n</i>	Column %	<i>n</i>	Column %	Rate per 1,000 Students
Autism	199	1	---	---	---
Blind	24	<1	---	---	---
Deaf	4	<1	---	---	---
Deaf-blind	1	<1	---	---	---
Developmentally delayed	493	4	---	---	---
Emotional disturbance	230	2	11	5	4.8
Functionally delayed	679	5	7	3	10
Hearing impaired	206	2	---	---	---
Learning disability	4,733	34	28	14	5.9
Mental retardation	4,138	30	19	9	4.6
Multidisabled	223	2	---	---	---
Other health impairment	705	5	9	4	12.8
Physically impaired	57	<1	---	---	---
Speech and language	2,005	15	3	1	1.5
Traumatic brain injured	16	<1	---	---	---
Visually impaired	81	1	---	---	---
All special education	13,794	12	77	38	5.6
Not special education	104,330	88	127	62	1.2
Total	118,124	100	204	100	1.7

considered substantive. A breakdown of transient and substantive threats (see *Table 3*) showed a preponderance of transient threats in the lower grade levels up until Grade 5, at which point substantive threats began to outnumber transient threats.

The substantive threats were further classified as serious (30 cases, 14%) or very serious (77 cases, 37%) substantive threats. According to the published threat assessment guidelines (Cornell & Sheras, 2006), a mental health assessment of the student is usually conducted only in very serious substantive cases. However, because they wanted to take a more inclusive and cautious approach, the team elected to broaden the criteria for conducting a mental health assessment. They conducted mental health assessments in all substantive cases and in 20 of the transient cases in which the student appeared to have a history of escalating violence or serious emotional adjustment problems.

In each case, the team made recommendations to the schools, students, and parents related to violence prevention and safety. Most of these recommendations included specific

advice on resolving an interpersonal conflict or dispute that was the basis for the threat. In addition, the team frequently recommended mental health services. A total of 37 students were referred for counseling or treatment with the MCS Mental Health Center, 15 students were referred for a psychiatric consult through the University of Tennessee Department of Child/Adolescent Psychiatry or a community mental health center, and 3 cases were reported to the Tennessee Department of Children's Services due to suspected abuse/neglect. There were 41 students who were referred for school-based services through the Student Support Team program, which is a regular education service designed to assist students with academic or behavioral problems that affect their success in school.

In 128 (61%) of the 209 cases, students returned to their previous school, and in the remaining 81 cases, the students had a change in school placement. These changes included placement in an alternative school (37 cases), transfer to a different regular school (14 cases), hospitalization or day treatment (8 cases), homebound instruction (3 cases), home

TABLE 3
Distribution of Threat Types Across Grades

Grade Level	Transient	Serious Substantive	Very Serious Substantive	Total Cases
Pre-k	1	0	0	1
K	2	0	0	2
1	5	0	0	5
2	4	1	1	6
3	9	2	3	14
4	9	2	4	15
5	17	4	17	38
6	13	5	10	28
7	8	5	7	20
8	11	5	9	25
9	15	5	14	34
10	4	1	8	13
11	2	0	3	5
12	2	0	1	3
Total	102	30	77	209

schooling (2 cases), and job corps placement (2 cases). Only 5 students were not recommended for placement during their expulsion period, and just 3 students were incarcerated. Four students withdrew from compulsory attendance, and 3 stopped attending school without withdrawing and could not be contacted.

Attendance and discipline data were available for 198 of the students. For the year, these 198 students averaged 17 days of unexcused absences. Only 41% (80) of the students attended the same school all year, whereas the remaining 59% (118) had attended two or more schools.

The students averaged 9.3 office referrals for disciplinary problems during the school year, not including the referral for the threat incident. This included an average of 6.4 referrals accumulated before the threat incident and 2.9 referrals from the time of the threat assessment until the end of the school year. A paired *t* test indicated a statistically significant decrease in discipline referrals, $t(197) = 6.6, p < .001$. One possible explanation for the higher number of discipline referrals prior to the threat assessment could be that the incidents occurred close to the end of the school year, so that there was less time for students to generate discipline referrals. To rule out this possibility, the date of each threat case was examined and the average referral

date was determined. With a school year spanning 285 calendar days, the average threat incident date was at day 151, just past the midpoint for the school year.

Another possible explanation for the lower rate of postthreat discipline referrals is that it included students who did not return to school or continued in an alternative education setting with different disciplinary referral practices. There were also approximately 35 students who attended more than one school before the threat referral. Therefore, discipline referrals were examined for the subgroup of 80 cases in which the student attended the same school all year. There were an average of 6.3 discipline referrals prior to the threat assessment and 2.8 referrals after the assessment, $t(79) = 3.9, p < .001$.

A critical follow-up question was whether any of the students carried out their threats. The information available to address this question was based on follow-up reports from school principals and school discipline records, as well as information obtained directly from the students and parents who participated in the threat assessments. Across all sources of information, there was no report of any of the threats being carried out during the course of the school year. For the 110 cases involving a threat to kill, shoot, or stab someone, school personnel can be reasonably certain that the threats were not carried out, but in cases of

threats to hit or fight someone, it is conceivable that a threat could have been carried out without detection by school personnel or report from a victim or witness.

Discussion

This study documents the viability of a threat assessment approach in a large urban school system. A centralized threat assessment team serving MCS evaluated 209 cases of student threats of violence. Student threats were recorded at all grade levels and included a wide range of threats, including threats to kill, shoot, stab, or in some other way injure someone. The threat assessment included a review of school records, consultation with school authorities and, in the most serious cases, a mental health assessment of the student and accompanying parent interviews. The threat assessment team followed a decision tree model to determine the seriousness of the threat and to make recommendations for protective action, school placement, counseling, and mental health treatment.

The results of this study can be compared with the original field-test findings for the Virginia threat assessment guidelines reported by Cornell et al. (2004). Both studies reported successful implementation of the threat assessment approach and found that teams were able to distinguish transient from substantive threats using the same decision tree model. In the Virginia study, 70% of the threats were determined to be transient, and 30% were deemed substantive. In contrast, the present study found a nearly even split between transient (49%) and substantive (51%) cases. It is likely that the larger proportion of more serious, substantive cases in Memphis was due to the more selective sample of cases in Memphis. The Memphis cases were deemed serious enough by their school principal that the students were given a suspension of 4 or more days and therefore were sent to the school district's centralized pupil services center, where a hearing officer referred them for evaluation by the threat assessment team. In contrast, the Virginia cases were evaluated by site-based teams headed by the principal or assistant principal at each school, and all cases brought to administrative attention were included in the sample.

Notably, both studies reported that the vast majority of students were able to return to school or continue their education in an alternative setting. In the Virginia study of

188 cases, only three students were subject to long-term suspension (expulsion), and in Memphis, only five students received this outcome. Memphis had a higher number (66) of students placed in an alternative setting than the Virginia study (12 cases), which may reflect both the greater number of resources available in a large urban school system and the more serious nature of the cases seen for assessment in Memphis. Nevertheless, these are positive findings in light of concerns that American schools have widely adopted a zero-tolerance approach that has resulted in a substantial national increase in long-term suspensions or expulsions of students (Advancement Project & Civil Rights Project, 2000; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006). These findings support the view that threat assessment can serve as a less punitive alternative to a zero-tolerance approach.

A disproportionate number of cases involved students who received special education services. Although only 12% of Memphis students received special education services, this population produced 38% of the threat cases. The rate of threats among students in the regular education population was 1.2 cases per 1,000 students, whereas the rate in the special education population was more than 4 times higher, 5.6 per 1,000. However, the rate was not consistent among the students receiving special education services. The highest rate was observed in the small number of students identified as other health impaired (OHI). A review of these cases indicated that they consisted primarily of students diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

A study by Kaplan and Cornell (2005) also examined the special education status of students who made threats of violence. (This study's sample of 256 threat cases included the 188 cases in the Cornell et al. [2004] study as well as additional cases collected from other Virginia schools that subsequently adopted the same threat assessment model.) Kaplan and Cornell (2005) found that 47% of threat cases involved students receiving special education services, slightly higher than the 38% in the current study. The Virginia schools did not use the category of functionally delayed but found that students receiving services for emotional disturbance were the most likely to make threats, followed by students with an attention-deficit disorder diagnosis receiving services under the OHI classification.

The high rate of threatening behavior among students receiving special education may not be news to experienced special educators, but it does indicate the need to address threat behavior in behavior support plans and individualized education plans. Such plans could specify the use of a threat assessment approach to distinguish serious threats that require protective action from threats that can be more easily resolved and do not pose a risk to the safety of others. It would be useful for future research to examine the rates of transient versus substantive threats among students receiving special education services in a more representative sample than was available for this study. Students who make even transient threats jeopardize their educational progress because of the potential for severe disciplinary consequences and long-term suspension, particularly in school systems relying on a zero-tolerance approach.

Threats of violence understandably raise concern about the risk of violent outcomes. The intense publicity given to school shootings has aroused considerable concern among educators and fear among the public that schools are not safe and that there is a growing risk of violence by students (Cornell, 2006). These perceptions stand in contrast to multiple studies that indicate that schools have experienced declining rates of violence over the past decade and are comparatively safe places with a low level of serious violent crime (Cornell, 2006; Dinkes, Forrest Cataldi, Kena, & Baum, 2006). In both Virginia and Memphis schools, the available follow-up information revealed no cases in which a student's threat was carried out. Although it is conceivable that some threats of a less serious nature, such as threats to hit or fight someone, were carried out without the knowledge of school authorities, they are reasonably certain that none of the more serious threats to kill, shoot, stab, or in some other way seriously injure the intended victim were carried out.

Threat assessment may be helpful in preventing a threat from being carried out, but it does not preclude further disciplinary problems. In the present study, students averaged 2.9 disciplinary referrals in the remainder of the year following their threat assessment. One positive sign is that the average number of disciplinary violations after the threat assessment (2.9) was about 55% lower than prior (6.4) to the assessment. This suggests some positive impact of the threat

assessment on the student's behavior, but a controlled study is needed to confirm this possibility.

Overall, the present study produced encouraging results and supports the feasibility of a threat assessment approach, but more research is needed. The present study was limited to a single school district in a large urban area serving a challenging population. Research in a variety of communities and school systems is needed. It would also be useful to collect data on the reliability and consistency of staff in carrying out the threat assessment guidelines and to collect more detailed information on the students' response to the threat assessment process.

It would be informative to carry out a controlled study that compares groups of schools randomly chosen to use or not use a threat assessment approach. However, there are obvious practical limits to the kind of study that can be conducted on a violence prevention method such as threat assessment because in every case of a serious student threat, authorities are compelled to take some form of protective action. The outcomes under study must go beyond the prevention of violence to include additional benefits, including the student's continuation in school, academic achievement, and avoidance of further disciplinary problems.

Limitations in the Memphis adaptation of threat assessment. The Memphis schools adapted the threat assessment model for use by a centralized team serving the entire district. This decision was necessary for practical reasons because the school division already had a centralized program for serious discipline cases and was not prepared to train teams in every school. One advantage of a centralized team is that its members develop substantial experience and expertise in assessing threats. However, there are some limitations to a centralized approach that make school-based teams preferable (Cornell & Williams, 2006). In brief, school-based teams have greater knowledge of the school and of the individual students involved. They are able to respond more quickly to a threat situation and can muster resources to assist them in planning and carrying out a safety plan. School-based teams can more readily include a school resource officer or law enforcement officer who is assigned to the school and knows the students and the surrounding community.

Furthermore, site-based teams can remain involved in the case and make sure that safety plans are implemented and that prevention efforts are effective. Finally, a single centralized team might not be able to respond to all of the threats that occur in a large school district. It seems doubtful that there were only 209 threats in the Memphis school division because the Virginia study, using a site-based approach, identified 188 threats in a sample of just 35 schools. For these reasons, the Memphis staff suggested that the district study the feasibility of implementing site-based teams to handle the majority of cases and allow the central team to serve in a consultative role in the most serious or complex cases.

Conclusions

There is a dearth of information about violent threats made by students. This study examined 209 serious incidents that were resolved using a modified application of the Virginia guidelines. Although a controlled study is needed, these field-test findings indicate that threat assessment appears to be a promising approach to responding to student threats of violence.

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MANUSCRIPT

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APPENDIX

Case Example of a Typical Threat Assessment

Shawn was a 12-year-old sixth-grader suspended for bringing a pellet pistol onto school grounds and threatening other children. He was in juvenile detention for 2 days before being seen for evaluation. A member of the threat assessment team conducted an initial interview with Shawn and his custodial grandmother to obtain their account of what happened. This account was compared with information obtained from school officials and the juvenile authorities. The team then decided that the threat merited a complete assessment.

Shawn reported that some older students had been picking on him and other students since he started middle school a few months ago. They referred to him and his friends as "fresh meat" and called him their "food boy," meaning that he should get extra food for them in the cafeteria. They had pushed and shoved him on several occasions. In retaliation, Shawn brought an unloaded pellet gun to school, pointed it at his antagonists, and threatened to shoot them. Shawn explained that if he had not stood up to the bullies, everyone would call him a "sissy" and that the girls would have no interest in him.

Shawn said that he had no intention of hurting anyone and feels badly because, "I could have caused someone to have a heart attack." He also recognized that he could have provoked someone else to use a real gun. Shawn denied holding a grudge against any of the students

involved but feels that he must try to avoid them in the future. He agreed that the school was justified in suspending him but felt that the other students deserved similar punishment.

Shawn participated in a mental health assessment that included clinical interviews and testing, interviews with his custodial grandparents and school personnel, and a review of all available records. During clinical interviews, Shawn displayed a full range of emotion appropriate to the situation. He seemed bright and articulate and displayed no indication of oppositional or defiant behavior. The assessment indicated a history of attention problems and treatment for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the first grade that had been discontinued after Shawn's mother had died in a car accident and his grandmother assumed custody. Shawn had been in several fights during elementary school and admitted a history of shoplifting. He denied alcohol or drug use. Shawn acknowledged being quick to anger and feeling that other kids are "always messing" with him.

The threat assessment team concluded that Shawn regretted what he had done and was willing to work toward a resolution of the problem without resorting to violence. He was not expelled but received a brief suspension contingent on his good behavior and compliance with the safety plan that was developed to facilitate his return to school. The team had concerns about Shawn returning to his middle school because he had been the victim of bullying and might be the target or retaliation for his threatening behavior. He attended an alternative school for approximately 1 month before returning to middle school. During this time, the prevention coordinator at the middle school worked with the boys who had been involved in bullying. The team also provided Shawn's grandmother with information about ADHD and referred her to a community mental health agency where he could receive further evaluation and treatment. Shawn eventually returned to the middle school and completed the year without any serious problems at school.

This case illustrates the problem-solving approach to student threats that differs substantially from a zero-tolerance approach. In many school divisions, a student who brought a pellet gun to school would automatically be expelled regardless of the circumstances. The assumption underlying this approach is that strict discipline and severe punishment will send a

strong message to the offender and to other students that will deter future misbehavior and maintain a safe school environment. However, a comprehensive review of research on student expulsion found no evidence in support of a

zero-tolerance approach and considerable evidence that long-term suspensions and expulsions can have a damaging effect on student achievement (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006).