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Student Threat Assessment

Good morning Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me here today. I applaud you for your efforts to make college campuses safer by convening this hearing.

I am Dr. Dewey Cornell, a forensic clinical psychologist, a member of the American Psychological Association, and Professor in the School of Education at the University of Virginia. I direct the Virginia Youth Violence Project, which studies school safety and violence prevention (<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>). For 23 years I have conducted research on the psychological characteristics of young people who commit violent acts, and as a clinician, I have examined many juvenile and young adult offenders.

In 1999 I assisted the FBI in its study of school shootings (O’Toole, 2000). Both the FBI study and another study conducted by the Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002) strongly recommended that schools train their staff to use a threat assessment approach to prevent student violence. Threat assessment is a procedure developed by the Secret Service that has become a standard law enforcement approach used in many different settings (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995). Threat assessment involves identifying a threat, evaluating how serious it is, and taking action to prevent it from being carried out. Most educators were completely unfamiliar with “threat assessment” and were unprepared to implement this approach. In response, my colleagues and I at the University of Virginia have developed and field-tested a threat assessment model for primary and secondary schools. I am going to talk first about the safety of our schools and then about our research on threat assessment and how it can be used to improve the safety conditions in our nation’s colleges as well as our K-12 schools.

This year we have experienced tragic shootings at the Amish school in Pennsylvania and at Virginia Tech, among others. In response to such horrific events, there have been calls to increase security at our schools, and even suggestions to arm our teachers. There are recommendations to install sirens and cameras and to create high-tech warning systems to alert students to an attack. While these interventions focus on crisis response, it is critically important that our efforts concentrate on prevention strategies. Prevention cannot wait until the gunman is in your parking lot. School shootings can be prevented and I am here today to emphasize prevention.

In order to prevent violence, we have to study the problem objectively and make sure that our responses are not skewed by extreme cases. After Columbine, many schools overreacted by

expanding zero tolerance programs so that students were expelled for behaviors as trivial as bringing a plastic knife to school in their lunch box. We continue to see students as young as five years old being arrested for misbehavior that would have been handled much differently ten years ago. We have to be careful that our responses are measured and reasonable.

Schools are safe

First, I want to address school safety from a broader and more positive perspective. Despite recent events, the level of violent crime in our schools and colleges is low. National crime statistics demonstrate that it is safer for a student to be at school than to be at home or on the street. Crime victim research also finds that students are less likely to be harmed at school than in the community (DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005). These findings hold up for both K-12 schools and colleges. For example, the violent crime rate is lower on college campuses than off campuses and the victimization rate for college students is lower than for persons the same age who are not in college (Baum & Klaus, 2005).

Furthermore, there is no upward trend of increasing violence in our schools. Over the past ten years, the rate of violence in schools and colleges has actually declined substantially (Baum & Klein, 2005; DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005). The scientific studies to support these conclusions are cited in my written statement.

According to the latest available data from the U.S. Department of Education (2001-2004), there were 95 murders on college campuses in the six years from 1999 to 2004, an average of 16 per year. Since there are approximately 4,200 colleges in the United States, this means the average college can expect to experience a murder on campus about once every 265 years. If you include all 2,808 murders that occurred in the surrounding community—off campus as well as on campus—the rate is much higher: about once every 9 years. This is a reflection of the much higher rate of violence in the general community.

It was tragic to have 33 deaths in one day at Virginia Tech, but according to the CDC, every year more than 30,000 persons die by firearms through suicide or homicide. This is the equivalent of the Virginia Tech death toll occurring 2 to 3 times every day. This is not to minimize the tragedy of school shootings; we want the number to be zero. But if we are going to prevent these events, we have to start with placing them in a broader context.

Schools need prevention programs

Although research demonstrates that schools are safe and that extreme acts of violence are unlikely, we do have less severe forms of violence such as bullying, fighting, and threatening behavior. These are important problems in their own right, and they are also important because they can escalate into shootings.

Fortunately, we have effective violence prevention programs for schools. There have been more than 200 controlled studies of school violence prevention programs, and we know that school-based mental health programs and counseling focused on helping students learn how to solve problems and resolve conflicts are effective (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). A scientific review

of these studies by researchers at Vanderbilt University found that they can reduce violent and disruptive behavior by about 50 percent (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). If these programs were more widely used, we could identify and help troubled students before they reach the point of homicide. The main source of funding for school violence prevention is through the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. Funding for this program should be protected and expanded.

Terms like “school violence” and “campus violence” are misleading because they imply that the location is the defining feature of the problem. We have had mass shootings in restaurants and shopping malls, but no one speaks about “restaurant violence” or “mall violence.” The focus on location leads to unrealistic efforts to make open, public places so secure that they are no longer open or public. We cannot turn our schools into fortresses. We cannot search every backpack on college campuses.

The Virginia Tech shooting appears to be the act of an individual with severe mental illness who was paranoid, delusional, and suicidal. This shooting represents a mental health problem more than a school problem. Our nation suffers from poor insurance coverage for mental health services, and from poor communication and coordination among these services. Even when we know someone needs treatment, there is no effective mechanism to make sure the treatment is delivered and no follow-up to make sure it was effective. College campuses see a substantial number of students with serious mental health problems, yet their staffing levels and resources are focused on short term counseling.

Schools need a threat assessment approach

After Columbine, there was widespread demand for a checklist of characteristics that we could use to identify the next shooter. This is called profiling, and both the FBI and Secret Service have concluded that profiling is not possible for this kind of crime (O’Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The backgrounds of school shooters are too varied, and the characteristics they have in common are too general.

However, both the FBI and Secret Service observed that in almost every case the violent student communicated his or her intentions well in advance of an attack. These individuals usually made threats or engaged in threatening behavior that frightened others. The problem was that there was not an effective, systematic response to these threats. The FBI also observed that many potential school shootings were prevented because threats were investigated and found to be credible. In light of these findings, both the FBI and the Secret Service, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education, recommended that schools adopt a threat assessment approach (O’Toole, 2000; Fein et al., 2002).

Threat assessment is a standardized procedure for investigating a threat, and if the threat is a serious substantive threat, taking preventive action. At the University of Virginia we developed a set of threat assessment guidelines and we trained teams in 35 schools (Cornell, et al., 2004). Each team included a school administrator, a psychologist or counselor, and a law enforcement officer. The teams field-tested the guidelines for a year. Although serious acts of violence are rare in schools, threats are common. The school teams investigated 188 student threats of violence.

All threats are not the same. Some threats are just statements made in anger or in jest, or attempts to gain attention or be provocative. The first step in threat assessment is to determine whether the threat is serious, which we term substantive, or not serious or transient. Fortunately, most threats are transient and can be readily resolved with an explanation, an apology, and some counseling. About 70 percent of the threats were resolved in this manner.

The remaining 30 percent of threats were more serious, usually one student threatening to fight another student, but we had threats to shoot and stab and kill that could not be easily resolved. In these cases, our threat assessment team conducted a safety evaluation that included two components: a psychological assessment of the student and a law enforcement investigation of whether there was evidence that the person was preparing to carry out the threat. The combination of mental health and law enforcement is essential to a threat assessment.

The team takes a problem solving approach—why did this student make a threat and what can we do to reduce the risk of violence? We found students who had serious mental health problems that needed treatment. We found students who were victims of bullying and looking for a way to strike back. We found conflicts over girlfriends and boyfriends. All kinds of threats.

Every threat signals an underlying problem that should be addressed before it escalates into violence. In our follow-up study, we could not find that any of the threats were carried out. Out of 188 cases, we had just six students who were arrested and three who were expelled. This is a much better result than if the schools had used a zero tolerance approach that would have resulted in numerous expulsions. The American Psychological Association's report on zero tolerance (Skiba et al., 2006) found that school expulsions have a damaging effect on student achievement and increase the dropout rate. There is no evidence that zero tolerance makes schools safer.

Memphis City Public Schools has adapted our model and found that they were able to resolve more than 200 threats without any known violent outcomes and again keeping almost all of the students in school (Strong, Wilkins, & Cornell, 2007). Over the past 5 years we have trained thousands of threat assessment teams in a dozen states. But we need more research on threat assessment. There has been no federal program designated to fund threat assessment research. The Secret Service has conducted threat assessment training in conjunction with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, but this has been a limited effort. We need a strong initiative to make threat assessment part of every school's comprehensive school safety plan. I hope this Committee will keep this need in mind when it works to strengthen crucial federal programs such as those authorized under No Child Left Behind.

Threat assessment can be adapted for colleges, too, even though there are some important differences between K-12 schools and colleges. College students are adults and not under parental control. It is much easier to monitor and supervise a high school student than a college student. On the other hand, threat assessment is used in business and industry to prevent workplace violence (Gelles & Turner, 2003), so these challenges can be overcome.

Conclusions

In closing, our educational institutions have an obligation to maintain a safe and supportive environment that is conducive to learning. Overall, our schools and colleges are safe, but in a large nation with thousands of schools, even rare events will occur with troubling frequency and skew our perceptions of safety and risk. We must avoid overreacting to rare events and make better use of prevention methods that address the ordinary forms of violence as well as the more extreme ones.

Threat assessment is a standard violence prevention approach used by law enforcement in many different settings. Our research supports the use of threat assessment in schools, but we need more research and training to make it a standard practice and to extend it to colleges. We urge you to support research and training on threat assessment for our schools and colleges.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present this testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

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Biographical Statement

Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D. is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project and a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy. As a clinician, Dr. Cornell has 24 years experience evaluating juvenile and adult violent offenders and testifying in legal proceedings, including school shootings and other juvenile homicide cases. He consulted with the FBI in its study of school shootings and developed threat assessment guidelines for schools that are being used throughout Virginia and other states. As a researcher, Dr. Cornell has authored more than 100 publications in psychology and education, including studies of juvenile homicide, bullying, psychopathy, and violence. He is currently directing a statewide study of school climate and discipline practices in 312 Virginia high schools.