



# Threat Assessment

## Resources

- Fein, R. Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (May, 2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education.  
[http://www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac\\_ssi.shtml](http://www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac_ssi.shtml).
- International Association of Chiefs of Police. (Undated). *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*. Washington, DC: Author.  
<http://www.theiacp.org>. See Chapter 3 on threat assessment for suggested contents of an incident report, procedures and resources.
- McCann, J. T. (2002). *Threats in Schools: A Practical Guide for Managing Violence*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2002). *Threat assessment: Predicting and preventing school violence*. NASP Fact sheet. National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, 301-657-0270;  
[http://www.naspcenter.org/factsheets/threatassessment\\_fs.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/factsheets/threatassessment_fs.html) Additional related materials are available at [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)
- O'Toole, M. *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, VA: Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation Academy.
- Reddy, M., Borum, R., Bergland, J., Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2001). *Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools: Comparing risk assessment, threat assessment, and other approaches*. *Psychology in the Schools*, 38(2), 157-172.
- **United States Secret Service. National Threat Assessment Center.** A variety of reports, resources and materials are available at the center's website:  
[http://www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac\\_ssi.shtml](http://www.ustreas.gov/uss/ntac_ssi.shtml).
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Incidents of extreme violence in schools have focused attention on how to interpret the various threats made by students or others in schools. Unfortunately, there is no clear way to identify students who might become violent at school, even those who make threats. Although many students in school may act or make verbal statements that could be interpreted as threatening, most of these do not constitute realistic risks of actual violence. While it is important to keep schools secure and to take threats seriously, it is important for school officials to not overreact to these behaviors or verbalizations. There is a difference between those who “make a threat” and those who “pose a threat” (McCann, 2002).

## What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment is a procedure for determining the credibility or seriousness of a threat and may include threats of bombing or fire setting in addition to other violence. It also attempts to determine the likelihood that the threat will be carried out. Once a potential threat has been assessed and is deemed serious, it is crucial to implement interventions that might address that threat. These interventions may range from talking to the student and his or her parents, to removing the student from school.

Focusing exclusively on overt threats may overlook some violent students who do not make overt threats. Overt threats are those in which there is a clear expression of intent to commit some act that is likely to harm another person. An appraisal of these threats is of course necessary. “Concealed” threats, on the other hand, are those in which a person becomes a source of potential harm or danger, but this is not made known to the potential victim or to others. Indirect assessment of these “concealed” threats is also possible and may be necessary, although the risk of incorrectly identifying or profiling students is greater. Assessment of this type of threat should be done very cautiously.

The context of the threat is important to interpreting risks. The prediction of violent behavior is difficult, especially in non-clinical settings (such as schools) where violence is a low base-rate behavior, and the research does not exist to definitively predict violence or to specifically identify how to evaluate the risks of violence. Threat assessment is a process of risk assessment, rather than definitive prediction. It is not based on a “profile” or checklist of characteristics of the person, but instead represents a detailed analysis of those factors across the environment that support or mitigate the likelihood of violence. In other words, the threat is not perceived as simply associated with the person, but is understood in a detailed examination of the context and situation.

## What do We Know About Threat Assessment?

Both the mental health and criminal justice systems have had reason to attempt to predict the violent actions of individuals. These predictions have centered around two lines of thinking. One is the clinical judgment of trained practitioners who are knowledgeable about the individual who is making threats. Another is the actuarial method that employs statistical probabilities of violence based on individual, contextual and other “risk factors”. In general the actuarial method has been found to be as good or better than the clinical judgment in

predicting violence in individuals (Borum et al., 1999), although there is work currently underway which may provide more optimism for clinical approaches.

The threat assessment approach tries to examine “pathways of ideas and behaviors that may lead to violent acts” (Borum et al., 1999 as reported in Burns et al., 2001). This approach uses a variety of data sources to examine life circumstances, unusual interests in violence, evidence of ideas or plans for violence, etc. which might identify a pathway leading to violence. It uses a protocol of questions to structure this data. As a result, it combines both the clinical and the actuarial approaches, but has consistently shown better results than the others, at least for mental health and criminal justice populations (Burns, et al., 2001). There is preliminary data supporting the value of this approach in these environments.

Unfortunately, there is no research data about the use of threat assessment strategies in schools. Even the actuarial identification of risk factors related to school violence has not been conducted, let alone practical evaluation of implementation of this approach in schools. In spite of the lack of data, school administrators have ethical, if not legal responsibilities, to act as a result of perceived threats. The threat assessment approach should be viewed as a promising, but unproven, tool to assist schools in responding to threats.

### What Works in Threat Assessment?

Most threat assessment programs for schools recommend the creation of a threat assessment team which would receive training on the identification, assessment, and management of threatening behavior by students (Mohandie, 2000).

The team might create a central point of contact within a school to report threats or situations that the team should address. This team would then develop a system to evaluate overt threats that occur in that school and also attempt to monitor potential concealed threats. The team would develop and employ a protocol for evaluating threats, their perceived seriousness, as well as an array of responses or interventions that might be employed related to the various types of threats. The team could monitor through time the effects of the interventions on those posing the threats.

In order to evaluate threats made by students in school, a number of questions should be addressed related to the threat (McCann, 2002; Fein et al., 2002):

- What is the content or nature of the threat?
- What is the intent of the threatener?

- What does the threatener wish to convey?
- What is the victim’s perception of the threatener’s intent?
- How credible is the threat?
- What is the threatener’s motive?
- Is a secondary gain associated with the threat?

Other issues may also be important to the likelihood of violence including the student’s access to weapons, history of violent behavior, psychosocial and environmental stressors, group or gang affiliations, and substance abuse (McCann, 2002). This information is used by the team to make judgments and to classify threats into transient or substantive threats (Cornell, 2003).

### Conclusion

Given the number of threats of all kinds that can occur in schools, and given the concern for school safety, schools may wish to consider implementing a threat assessment program. Such a program requires training, experience, and sophistication to be effective in identifying serious threats and intervening to address them in a school environment, without inappropriately heightening fears or over-reacting to student verbiage.

*Reece L. Peterson, June, 2003*

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### About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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