Chapter 17
The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines: An Empirically Supported Violence Prevention Strategy

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School shootings are so traumatic that the fear of an attack can lead to unrealistic appraisals of risk (Cornell 2006). Fear can overwhelm facts. Even though numerous school shootings have occurred in the United States, the probability that any one of the nation's approximately 125,000 schools will experience a homicidal student attack is quite low, estimated as once every 6,000 years (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). School homicides constitute far less than 1% of the annual homicides of youth aged 5–18 in the United States (Modzeleski et al., 2008). School safety is essential, of course, but effective safety practices must be based on a realistic understanding of the problem.

There is potential danger that authorities will overreact to the possibility of school shootings with excessively punitive practices. In the United States, many schools adopted zero tolerance discipline policies, which meant that students were automatically suspended from school for even the slightest violations of school rules regarding weapons, drugs, or threats of violence (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). In many cases students have been suspended for questionable reasons, such as a 6-year-old boy who was ordered to attend a reform school for 45 days because he brought his Cub Scout camping utensil to school (Urbina, 2009). He planned to use the utensil for eating his lunch, but since it happened to include a knife along with a fork, spoon, and bottle opener, it was a violation of the school's zero tolerance policy regarding knives. In the face of public pressure, the school board modified the suspension and allowed the boy to return to school. In many cases, however, students have experienced severe consequences for similar infractions (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). School authorities need an approach that permits them to make reasonable judgments when it is evident that a student's behavior does not constitute a serious threat of violence.

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Another ill-advised strategy is to use profiles or checklists of warning signs to identify dangerous students. A federal government guide to school safety presented 16 warning signs that included items such as "history of discipline problems," "drug use and alcohol use," "feelings of being picked on and persecuted," and "excessive feelings of rejection" (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). Many school authorities could identify multiple students in their schools who appear to meet these signs yet fail to pose a threat for violence. The federal guide recognized the limitations of a warning signs approach and cautioned: "Unfortunately, there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted" (Dwyer et al., p. 7). They urged school authorities to refrain from using the warning signs as a basis for punishing students or excluding them from school.

In their study of school shootings, the profiling experts with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) concluded that schools should not rely on student profiling (O'Toole, 2000). As their report noted, "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" (O'Toole, p. 2). Nevertheless, there is a strong intuitive appeal to the idea that students who commit school shootings fall into a single group with identifiable characteristics.

The United States Secret Service conducted a study of school shootings and observed that over three-quarters of the student perpetrators had communicated to someone, usually a friend or classmate, that they had an interest in mounting an attack at school (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). In more than two-thirds of cases, the perpetrators felt bullied or harassed by others and were motivated to take revenge. These observations indicated that schools should focus their efforts on the identification and investigation of student threats as a violence prevention strategy.

Both the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002) reports recommended that schools adopt a threat assessment approach. Threat assessment begins with the identification and evaluation of persons who threaten to harm others, and is followed by interventions designed to reduce the risk of violence. Because threat assessment involves both assessment and intervention, the term "threat assessment" is not quite appropriate. The developing process called "threat assessment" might be described more accurately as a "threat management" approach to violence prevention (Cornell & Allen, 2011; Heilbrun, 1997; Heilbrun, Dvoskin, & Heilbrun, 2009). A key aspect of threat assessment is its emphasis on considering the context and seriousness of the student's behavior: What were the circumstances surrounding the student's actions and what did the student intend by them? If the investigation indicates that the threat is genuine, the next step would be to take action to prevent it from being carried out.

Threat assessment is used by the Secret Service to investigate persons who might pose a threat to a government official and in the business world when there is concern about workplace violence (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999). One immediate practical problem with using a threat assessment approach in schools is that students frequently make threatening statements or engage in threatening behavior. A survey of 9,487 students in grades 3 through 12 (Singer & Flannery,

2000) found that approximately one-third of primary school boys and more than half of secondary school boys reported threatening someone with physical violence in the past year. Among girls, the rates were approximately one-quarter and 40%, respectively.

Most student threats are not reported to school authorities and do not result in physical violence. A survey of 4,400 high school students (Nekvasil and Cornell 2012) found that approximately 14% reported being threatened by another student in the past 30 days. Most of the threatened students (80% of boys and 65% of girls) said that they did not tell anyone about the threat, primarily because they did not regard the threat as serious. Even among those students who thought a threat was serious, only 49% (38% of the boys and 64% of the girls) reported telling someone about the threat. When asked about the outcome of the threat, most of the threatened students (91%) reported that the threat had not been carried out. These results suggest that threats are a frequent but largely unrecognized occurrence in schools.

Nevertheless, some threats do come to the attention of school authorities. A survey of U.S. public schools conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (Neiman & DeVoe, 2009) found that school authorities recorded 20,260 student threats of physical attack involving a weapon and 461,910 threats of physical attack without a weapon in the 2007–2008 academic year. These threats involved more than two-thirds of all secondary schools and more than one-third of primary schools. Another national survey (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010) found that approximately 7% of teachers reported being threatened with injury by a student and 4% reported being physically attacked by a student in 2007–2008.

Threats of violence can be frightening and disruptive events even if no violence occurs. Students and teachers may be troubled and distracted from schoolwork. Parents may become alarmed and keep their children home from school. In the face of great public concern, school authorities may feel compelled to invest in expensive new security equipment or hire security officers. Even with extensive security measures, schools are vulnerable to hoax threats that are intended only to be disruptive. For example, after the Columbine shooting, numerous anonymous threats were reported at schools across the United States; Pennsylvania schools recorded 354 threats in 50 days (Kostinsky, Bixler, & Kettl, 2001). As a result, threats pose a dilemma for school authorities: they do not want to over-react to threats that are not serious, but they cannot under-react when a serious threat occurs.

17.1 Development of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The reports by the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and Secret Service and Department of Education (Fein et al., 2002) made strong arguments for a threat assessment approach, but there was no established model or set of procedures for schools to follow. In response to this evident need, our group, the Virginia Youth Violence

Project at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, developed and field tested a threat assessment model for schools. The model was designed so that school authorities would have a standard and systematic approach for responding to student threats of violence.

Because student threat assessment was an untried practice with no established procedures, the researchers began by interviewing school principals and school psychologists about their typical responses to student threats. In 2002, we developed a set of procedures in consultation with a group of school administrators, school psychologists, and law enforcement officers. The procedures were then reviewed by a board of national experts in forensic psychology and risk assessment. They were field-tested in 35 Virginia schools for 1 year, further refined, and ultimately published in a 145-page manual, *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). This chapter provides an overview of the resulting Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, followed by a summary of research support.

17.1.1 Threat Assessment Team

We recommend that each school should have its own threat assessment team, consisting of an administrator (principal or assistant principal), a law enforcement representative (such as a school resource officer), and one or more mental health professionals (school psychologist, counselor, social worker, etc.). Of course, schools in different systems may have different staffing patterns, and some schools may not work closely with law enforcement agencies and not have officers employed in the schools. The team approach described here can be adapted for use in different countries or school systems.

A school-based team is recommended because local staff will know the students and be able to respond more quickly than an external team. Furthermore, most student threats can be resolved without an extensive process, so that use of an outside team would be inefficient and could magnify the importance of a minor incident.

The team leader is typically an administrator who has responsibility for student discipline and safety. The leader begins the threat assessment process with a triage evaluation to determine the seriousness of the threat and then either takes the limited action necessary to resolve a transient threat, or if the threat is substantive, engages more team members in a full-scale assessment and intervention. The leader has considerable flexibility to determine when to engage the team.

In more serious cases, a school psychologist or another mental health professional conducts a mental health evaluation of the student. This evaluation has two main objectives: (1) to identify mental health problems that demand immediate attention, such as psychosis or suicidality and (2) to determine why the student made the threat and make recommendations for dealing with problems or conflicts associated with the threat. Students typically make threats when they are frustrated and face a problem or situation that they cannot resolve. School counselors, psychologists, social workers, or other mental health professionals on the team can help

a troubled student resolve underlying conflicts or problems identified in the mental health assessment. It is best if the mental health professionals are staff members in the school because they will already know many of the students and staff members, and they will understand the culture of the school. In some school systems, however, the mental health services are provided by community-based professionals or staff from a central office serving all schools.

Each team should have a law enforcement representative, preferably a school resource officer who has been trained to work in schools (Clark, 2011). The school resource officer advises the team whether a student's behavior has violated the law, provides security, and can undertake criminal investigations in the most serious cases. It should be emphasized that most threat cases do not rise to the level of a criminal act and do not require criminal investigation. Some school authorities worry that law enforcement officers will be too quick to arrest a student for behaviors that ordinarily can be handled with school discipline, a trend that Kupchik (2010) has observed in many U.S. schools. This is a legitimate concern that should be addressed with law enforcement agencies before a team is established, so that there is a common understanding of roles and procedures.

17.1.2 Decision Tree

Threat assessment teams follow a seven-step decision tree that is presented in the manual with guiding principles and numerous case examples (see Fig. 17.1; Cornell & Sheras, 2006). One goal of the Guidelines was to devise a procedure that was flexible and efficient enough to be adjusted to the seriousness and complexity of the case. The first three steps of the assessment are a kind of triage phase during which the team leader determines whether the case can be resolved quickly and easily or whether it will require more extensive evaluation and intervention as a substantive threat. In the easiest and clearest cases, a threat might be resolved within an hour. In more complex cases, there may be a more comprehensive assessment of the student, interviews with witnesses as well as meetings with parents, and then the formulation of a safety plan that is administered over an extended period of time.

At step one, the team leader begins by interviewing the student who made the threat, as well as others who may have knowledge of it. The interviewer uses a standard set of questions that can be adapted to the specific situation. He or she must explore the context as well as the content of the threat. In other words, what were the circumstances in which the student made a threat, what did the student mean, and what does the student intend in making the threat? The student's account is compared to what other witnesses report and how they experienced the threat.

At step two, the threat may be identified as transient, such as an expression of anger, frustration, or even inappropriate humor. The defining feature of a transient threat is that the student does not have a sustained intent to harm someone. In some cases, behavior that appears threatening to an observer might not be a genuine threat, for example, when the student's statement was intended as a joke or a figure

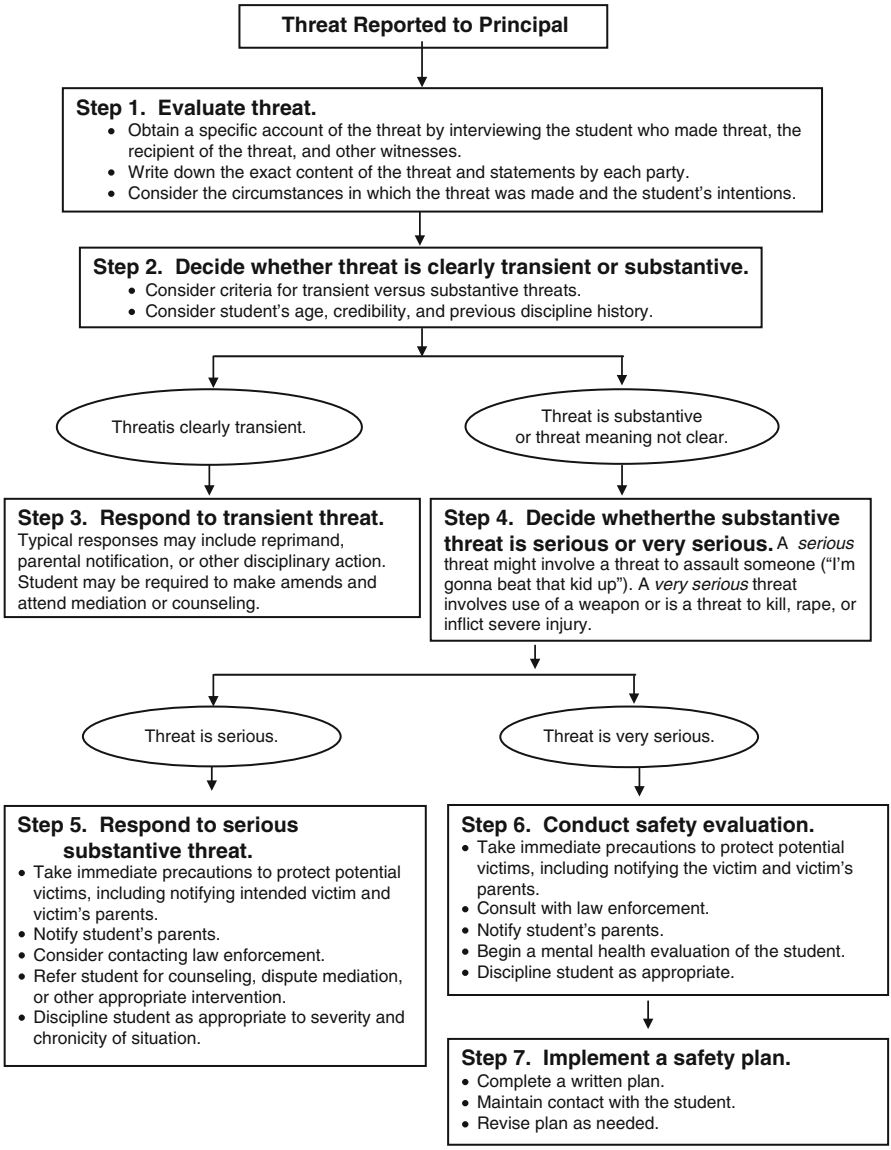

Fig. 17.1 Decision tree for student threat assessment

of speech. In such cases, the student and the school team member would seek ways to clarify the situation for all concerned parties.

At step three, transient threats are resolved if the student is able to offer an apology and explanation that makes amends for his or her behavior. In situations where there is an argument or conflict of some kind, the team may use available counseling

resources. Many schools choose to use mediation or a conflict resolution process. The student may be reprimanded and disciplined in some other way if his or her behavior violated school rules. Most threats are resolved at this step, so the process is not too burdensome and a minor incident is not treated as a major problem.

A threat that cannot be easily resolved as a transient threat is regarded as a substantive threat, which means that there is a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate incident. When it is not clear whether a threat is transient or substantive, the team considers the threat to be substantive. There are some presumptive, but not necessary or sufficient, indicators that a threat is substantive. Threats are more likely to be substantive when they are more specific about who will be attacked, when the attack will occur, and how it will be carried out. Furthermore, threats are more likely to be substantive if the student has engaged in planning or preparation to carry out the threat, and if there is physical evidence of intent such as a weapon or written plan. In each case, the team must consider the totality of circumstances surrounding the threat and make reasoned judgments based on all the available information. The team should consider factors such as the student's age and capabilities, mental state, and prior history of aggression.

At step four, a substantive threat is classified as serious or very serious, based on the intended severity of injury. A serious threat is a threat to assault or fight someone. A very serious threat is a threat to kill, sexually assault, or severely injure. A threat involving the use of a weapon is generally considered a threat to severely injure, but teams must always use their judgment. For example, if a student threatens to shoot someone with a water pistol, it would not make sense to treat such a threat as very serious.

At step five, the team responds to a serious substantive threat by taking action to prevent the threat from being carried out. Immediate protective actions include cautioning the student about the consequences of carrying out the threat, providing supervision so that the threat is not carried out at school, and contacting the student's parents (or adult caretakers) so that they can assume responsibility after school. A team member should also meet with the intended victim(s) of the threat, both in an effort to resolve the underlying dispute or problem and to warn them. If the intended victim is a student, that student's parents should be contacted as well. For serious substantive threats, threat assessment ends here.

In the case of very serious substantive threats, the team takes more extensive action at step six. Typically, a mental health professional such as a school psychologist will undertake a mental health evaluation of the student. The first goal of this evaluation is to assess the student's mental state and need for immediate mental health services. For example, does the student have delusional ideas that could motivate aggressive action? Is the student so depressed or suicidal that he or she might take desperate action without concern for the consequences? A second goal is to recommend strategies addressing the problem or conflict underlying the threat. For example, is the student a victim of bullying or involved in some other peer conflict? Although the use of long-term suspension is discouraged, a short-term suspension (typically a few days) is an appropriate safety precaution until the team can complete its evaluation. The school resource officer must determine whether law enforcement action should be taken.

At step seven, the team integrates findings into a written safety plan. The plan may include a combination of mental health and counseling recommendations, findings from the law enforcement investigation, and disciplinary consequences. The safety plan is designed both to protect potential victims and to address the educational needs of the student who made the threat. These plans vary widely according to the circumstances of each case. A key feature of any plan is that it is oriented toward resolving the problem or conflict that stimulated the threatening behavior. Threats can be regarded as symptoms of a problem that a student is unable to resolve, such as bullying or intense conflicts with peers, or perhaps academic difficulties in school. In many cases the student is struggling with depression and suicidal feelings. Consequently, an effective plan will take a comprehensive, problem-solving approach.

Safety plans will include provisions for monitoring the student over a reasonable period of time and making sure that the plan is working. For example, a team member might be in regular contact with a student for several months to assess how things are going and whether efforts to address a problem with bullying have been successful. If the student has been referred for counseling or mental health services, there should be provision to share information on the student's attendance and progress. For students who are receiving special education services, there may be changes in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP; a U.S. federal requirement for students with disabilities). An IEP might include behavior support plans to help a student deal with anger or interpersonal conflict, or improve social skills.

17.1.3 Staff Training

The possibility of homicidal violence raises such concern that school authorities may believe that a threat assessment team requires extensive training and that only highly specialized experts can conduct threat assessments. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of students who make threats of violence have ordinary problems that are familiar to experienced educators and mental health professionals (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). Common peer problems include bullying, jealousy and rivalry between peers, romantic disputes, racial or ethnic bias, and gang-related conflict. Students may sometimes threaten school staff members over disciplinary actions, academic requirements, and low grades. Although school-based teams should be able to deal effectively with most student threats, there may be exceptional cases that merit outside consultation with mental health professionals or law enforcement authorities. One example would be mental health consultation for cases that involve a student with unusual and severe psychological difficulties. Another example would be law enforcement consultation for a dispute between criminal gangs with a history of violence.

Teams are trained in the Virginia Guidelines in a 1-day workshop that prepares them to use a 145-page manual, *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The workshop is divided into six

sessions. The first session covers the nature and extent of violence in schools and the rationale for using a threat assessment approach as opposed to a zero tolerance approach. The second session is a step-by-step review of the threat assessment procedure and its decision tree. The next session covers psychological factors relevant to a potentially violent student and includes case examples illustrating three primary pathways to violence: (1) violence committed for instrumental or predatory purposes by antisocial or delinquent youth; (2) reactive or hostile acts of aggression committed by youth in response to intense conflict; (3) irrational acts of violence committed by youth experiencing psychotic symptoms such as delusions or hallucinations.

The fourth session addresses legal issues and professional practice standards. There is specific attention to the limits of student confidentiality in threatening situations and the duty to take protective action in response to substantive threats. This session also covers questions about legal liability should a student commit a violent act.

In the fifth session, teams from each school are presented with three case exercises to work through and discuss. The teams develop a plan for each case and then compare plans in a group discussion. This session is especially useful for team members to see that they can work together using the guidelines, and that the teams from different schools arrive at similar conclusions. The final session reviews the steps in implementing the threat assessment model, and how students, parents, and school staff should be informed about the new approach.

Several studies have examined the effects of the workshop on participant knowledge of threat assessment principles and concepts by administering questionnaires before and after training (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008; Cornell, Allen, & Fan 2012; Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). These studies show large training effects with similar impact across participating groups of school administrators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officers.

17.2 Threat Assessment Research

17.2.1 Virginia Field Test

The first study of the threat assessment guidelines was a field test conducted in 35 Virginia schools enrolling approximately 16,200 students (Cornell et al., 2004). In the United States, schools are generally divided into three levels: elementary schools with students from Kindergarten through grade 5, middle schools with grades 6–8, and high schools with grades 9–12. We trained a team in each school to use the threat assessment guidelines whenever a student threat was reported to school authorities. The schools recorded 188 threat cases during the 2001–2002 school year, an average of about five per school.

One goal of this study was to describe the kinds of threats reported to school authorities. The 188 threats included 77 threats to hit or beat up someone and 69

threats to kill, shoot, or stab someone, as well as 42 less specific threats (e.g., "I am going to hurt you"). There were threats from students in all grade levels, but threats appeared to peak in grades 3 and 4 of elementary school and grade 7 of middle school. Threats were reported to school authorities primarily by teachers (82 cases) and students (71), although some threats were reported by parents (14), school administrators (12), and other persons. In the majority of cases (141), the target of the threat was another student, but there were 23 cases involving threats against teachers, and eight directed at other school staff members such as principals. The remaining 17 cases were more ambiguous (e.g., "I am going to blow up the school").

The field test demonstrated that teams could take a differentiated approach to students based on the seriousness of the threat, making the process more efficient and flexible. Most threats (70%) were classified as transient threats and resolved through an explanation or apology. In most transient cases, there were disciplinary consequences and counseling. For example, a student who had an argument with a classmate might attend a mediation session to resolve the dispute. Another student who appeared to have problems with anger and self-control might incur disciplinary consequences, but also be referred for counseling. Schools were free to integrate the threat assessment model with their existing disciplinary and counseling practices.

The remaining cases (30%) were determined to be substantive threats. Because the threats were substantive, school authorities were required to take appropriate protective action to prevent them from being carried out. This might involve increasing supervision of the student, notifying his or her parents, and contacting targeted victims to warn them of the situation. In addition to protective actions, the team would formulate a plan to address the underlying conflict or problem that drove the student to make a threat. Bullying was one of the most common problems that motivated substantive threats. Threats were made by bullies or, in some cases, made by victims of bullying who wanted revenge. In other cases, the threats might involve rivalries between peers or disputes over romantic relationships, such as a break-up between a boyfriend and girlfriend.

The substantive cases were classified as serious (22%) if they involved a threat to hit or beat up someone and very serious (8%) if a threat to kill, rape, or inflict injury with a weapon was involved. Only the very serious substantive cases required a mental health assessment and development of a safety plan.

At the end of the school year, and then again the following fall, researchers conducted follow-up interviews with school principals and other school staff (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The disciplinary consequences for the 188 cases were much less severe than if the schools had used a zero tolerance approach. Only three students were given long-term suspensions. In each of these cases, the students had accumulated more than a dozen disciplinary violations earlier in the year and school authorities concluded that it was not possible to keep them in the school. Nearly all of the students were able to return to their original school. Approximately 43% of students were described as showing improved behavior, 39% were described as about the same, and only 18% were regarded as worse in

their behavior. Remarkably, there was no report of any of the threats being carried out. Although it is possible that some minor threats might have been carried out without knowledge of the school authorities, it is certain that the most severe threats (e.g., to kill, shoot, or stab) were not carried out.

17.2.2 Memphis Field Test

A second field test was conducted in Memphis, Tennessee (Strong & Cornell, 2008). This large system of 194 schools served a predominantly (87%) African-American population in a city with a high rate of crime and poverty. Approximately 75% of Memphis students were eligible for free or reduced lunch and 29% of students had been retained at least one grade. The school system already had an established center that consulted with its schools, so the threat assessment approach was adapted for use within this system. A single team provided evaluations for cases referred from any school in the city. One consequence of this decision is that assessments were conducted only on students whose behavior was judged serious enough by the school principal to merit a suspension of four or more days.

The Memphis evaluation involved 209 cases that represented the most serious disciplinary violations committed by students in 103 schools. There were 60 (29%) threats to hit or beat up someone, 48 (23%) threats to cut or stab, 32 (15%) threats to shoot, 30 (14%) threats to kill, 14 (7%) sexual threats, and 25 (12%) other threats (such as to blow up or burn down the school). In each case, the centralized team developed an individualized plan of mental health and educational services. All but five students were able to return to school or an alternative educational placement and just three students were incarcerated. Across all sources of information, there was no report of any of the threats being carried out. In addition, the study examined student discipline referrals before and after the threat assessment for 198 students with available records. These students averaged 6.4 referrals before the threat incident and 2.9 referrals after the threat assessment, a statistically significant decline.

17.2.3 Retrospective School Climate Study

The two field-test studies found that schools could carry out a threat assessment approach with seemingly positive outcomes, but both lacked comparison groups. A third study addressed this limitation in a statewide survey of Virginia public high schools (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009). According to the state's annual school safety audit, by 2007, 95 (34%) high schools (grades 9–12) had adopted the Virginia threat assessment guidelines, 131 (47%) schools used locally developed threat assessment procedures, and 54 (19%) reported not using a threat assessment approach. The three groups were compared retrospectively using a school climate

survey that had been administered to randomly selected samples of ninth grade students in each high school as part of the Virginia High School Safety Study (Gregory et al., 2010).

The school climate survey contained two standard scales measuring whether students had been bullied or victimized in some other way in the past 30 days, as well as a scale to measure how much bullying and teasing they observed taking place at school. There were two additional scales to measure positive aspects of school climate, including whether they were willing to ask a teacher for help if they were bullied or threatened in some way and whether their teachers cared about them and treated them with respect. The most consistent findings were that students attending schools using the Virginia threat assessment guidelines reported less bullying, expressed more willingness to seek help from teachers, and felt that teachers were more caring and respectful than did students attending other schools.

In addition, state disciplinary records indicated that schools using the Virginia guidelines had fewer long-term suspensions during the 2006–2007 school year than schools using other threat assessment approaches. This study could not demonstrate conclusively that the differences between groups were due to the implementation of the threat assessment model rather than selection effects, but there were statistical controls for a series of potentially confounding variables. These analyses controlled for the size of the school, the percentage of minority students in the school, and the percentage of low-income students in the school. They also controlled for the amount of neighborhood violent crime and the extent of security measures in the schools.

17.2.4 Prospective Quasi-Experimental Study

One limitation of the retrospective school climate study was that there was no assessment of change over time. It is possible that the schools choosing to use the Virginia threat assessment guidelines had already achieved lower levels of bullying and fewer school suspensions than the schools in the comparison group. Therefore, the next study examined a group of schools before and after implementing the Virginia threat assessment guidelines (Cornell et al., 2011). Changes in these schools were compared to changes in a comparison group of schools that did not use the threat assessment model.

The intervention sample consisted of 23 high schools that had received training in threat assessment during the same school year. These schools were part of a single large school division in a densely populated urban/suburban region of northern Virginia. The comparison group consisted of 26 high schools in three nearby school divisions that were considering whether to adopt the threat assessment guidelines, but had not done so. The two groups of schools had comparable characteristics. The 23 intervention schools enrolled an average of 1,891 students per school that included 51% with racial or ethnic minority status and 19% from low-income families eligible for reduced-price meals at school. The 26 comparison schools enrolled an average of 2,065 students per school, with 45% minority and 21% eligible for

reduced-price meals. The differences between the two groups in size and percentages of minority and low-income students were not statistically significant.

The first step in this study was to train the threat assessment teams. The central administration of the school division selected staff members in the 23 intervention schools to attend a 1-day workshop on the threat assessment guidelines. The 142 staff members consisted of 59 principals or assistant principals, 20 school psychologists, 22 social workers, 18 school security officers, and 12 others (such as other administrators). The workshop covered the rationale for threat assessment, the decision tree model, and procedures used to determine the seriousness of a student threat. The workshop emphasized resolving peer conflicts and bullying before these problems escalated into more serious acts of violence. There were case exercises demonstrating how threats could be resolved without long-term suspensions. Participants completed an anonymous pre-test evaluation form at the beginning of the training, and a post-test evaluation at the end of the workshop. Analysis of the evaluation showed large effects on the participants' knowledge of threat assessment. Almost all participants gave positive ratings of the workshop and indicated enthusiasm for implementing it (Cornell et al., 2011).

The next step in the study was to compare disciplinary outcomes in the two groups of schools from the baseline year (prior to training at the intervention schools) to the follow-up year after training. These analyses showed that the intervention schools experienced a decrease of approximately 52% in long-term suspensions, whereas the comparison schools showed no change in long-term suspensions. In addition, the intervention schools reported a decrease of 79% in bullying infractions, whereas the comparison schools reported a slight increase in bullying infractions (Cornell et al., 2011).

17.2.5 Randomized Controlled Trial

Finally, it was possible to arrange a randomized controlled study of threat assessment. In this study, a large school division agreed that 20 of its 40 schools could be randomly assigned to receive threat assessment training and 20 waited in a control group for 1 year before receiving training (Cornell et al. 2012).

The school division enrolled approximately 32,000 students in 26 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and six high schools in an urban/suburban community in eastern Virginia. Approximately 58% of the students were African-American, 31% White, 6% Hispanic, and 5% from other racial/ethnic groups. Nearly half (46%) were classified as economically disadvantaged, based on federal criteria for the free and reduced-price meal program. A baseline survey revealed that, in both intervention and control schools, students who made threats of violence were typically suspended from school (75% and 73%, respectively) and rarely referred for counseling support services (15% and 18%, respectively).

The study examined outcomes for 201 students (100 in intervention schools and 101 in control schools) who made threats of violence during one school year. The student grade levels ranged from Kindergarten to 12th grade with 89 (44%) in elementary school, 59 (29%) in middle school, and 53 (26%) in high school. Most

(73%) of the students were boys. Approximately 24% of the students were identified as white and 76% racial minority (73% African-American and 3% Hispanic).

The prevention of violence is always a fundamental goal of threat assessment, but most threats are not carried out, and severe acts of violence are so rare that it would require an extraordinarily large sample to assess intervention effects. In this study, only seven students were identified as carrying out their threat of violence, so no group comparisons were undertaken. Beyond violence prevention, the Virginia Guidelines were designed to achieve three goals that were evaluated in this study: (1) use of counseling and mental health services to resolve conflicts; (2) involvement of parents in response to the threat; and (3) return of students to school without long-term suspension or alternative school placement.

A series of logistic regression analyses were conducted to compare intervention and control students after controlling for the effects of demographic variables (student gender, school level, and race) and threat severity (transient, serious substantive, or very serious substantive). Compared with control students, students in schools using the Virginia Guidelines were approximately four times more likely to receive counseling services, based on an Odds Ratio (OR) of 3.98. Students in the intervention group were about two-and-a-half times more likely to receive a parent conference (OR = 2.57). Notably, students in the intervention group were about one-third as likely to receive long-term suspension (OR = 0.35) and one-eighth as likely to receive an alternative school placement (OR = 0.13). In sum, students receiving a threat assessment were much more likely to receive counseling services and to remain in their original school.

The researchers gathered information on the fidelity of staff implementation of the threat assessment guidelines within the 20 intervention schools. They constructed a compliance scale based on the extent to which team members at each school attended threat assessment meetings, completed documentation forms, and reported that they used the threat assessment model. Higher compliance scores were associated with greater use of counseling services (OR = 1.24) and fewer long-term suspensions (OR = 0.73). This suggests that schools that more faithfully implemented the threat assessment model were more likely to achieve the goals of greater use of counseling services and less use of long-term suspensions.

Compliance is a critical issue in any effort to change school procedures (Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003). Schools frequently adopt programs but then fail to follow their requirements (Hallfors & Godette, 2007). School authorities in the randomized controlled trial had established their own ways of dealing with student misbehavior and there was some resistance to following new procedures. It is essential that the central administration for a school system provide support and encouragement for school administrators to follow a new model.

Overall, there are some special challenges to implementing a threat assessment model. Threat assessment is not a specific curriculum or prescriptive set of procedures but a set of guidelines to assist a team in its decision-making process. Moreover, threat assessment is not a routine activity but an infrequent event that can occur unexpectedly at any time during the school year. As a result, it may take a year or more for some school team members to develop enough experience to trust the model and be comfortable in using it.

17.3 Strengths of the Threat Assessment Approach

The concluding sections of this chapter discuss several strengths of a threat assessment approach in comparison to other risk assessment strategies. The Virginia Guidelines give schools a flexible approach to student threats that can be adjusted to the seriousness of the student's behavior. There are many forms of aggressive behavior in the school-age population. Verbal aggression can range from playful teasing to arguments and abusive language, whereas physical aggression can include playful jostling or horseplay to many levels of fighting from pushing and shoving to serious attempts to hurt one another. Because student threats are a relatively common event, but rarely result in severe acts of violence, it is important that schools have a procedure to assess the seriousness of a threat rather than over-react with automatic suspension or expulsion. School authorities must always consider the context and meaning of the student's behavior. In many cases the threat is less serious than it may first appear. Research (reviewed above) indicates that schools using the Virginia Guidelines can make judgments about the seriousness of a threat that result in much lower rates of long-term suspension and fewer out-of-school placements than other schools.

Threat assessment teams are trained to encourage students to report threats of violence. In order to overcome the code of silence that affects many students, schools must educate students that there is a difference between snitching and seeking help (Brank et al., 2007). Students may be more willing to report threats when they see that school authorities are not taking a punitive, zero tolerance approach, but are instead concerned with solving problems and preventing conflicts from escalating into violence. Students are more likely to seek help in schools with a more positive and supportive climate (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009).

17.3.1 Targeted Violence and Threats

Threat assessment has broader applicability than its original conception as a procedure limited to "targeted violence," which has been defined as incidents where the targets are identifiable prior to the violent act (Reddy et al. 2001). Threat assessment was largely developed by the U.S. Secret Service to protect specific individuals, such as public officials. However, it is questionable whether threat assessment must be limited to "targeted" violence as opposed to simply "planned" violence. School shootings do not necessarily involve identified targets. Some students had threatened specific victims, but many others had no identified targets and simply intended to engage in a shooting rampage. The definition of "targeted" violence must be broadened considerably to include cases where the identifiable target was simply anyone at school. Furthermore, in cases such as the U.S. shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota (2005), and the German shooting in Winnenden (2009), the student killed individuals outside of school before or after the school attack. It is not clear what is gained by confining threat assessment to "targeted" violence when it appears useful in any case where the person has engaged in threatening behavior.

In the Virginia Guidelines, a threat is defined broadly as any expression of intent to harm someone (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). A threat can be communicated directly to the target or indirectly to third parties. Threats may be spoken or written, and increasingly they may be communicated through digital communication media such as websites or text messages. Threats can be specific ("I am going to kill you") or vague ("I am going to hurt you"). Threats also can be veiled or implied ("You better watch your back" or "You're going to be sorry"). Using abusive language or calling someone names is not considered a threat unless there is a statement expressing intent to harm.

Threats can also be expressed through behavior such as carrying a weapon, and here the presence of a threat requires more judgment. A student who brings a weapon to school is in violation of school prohibitions against weapons but may or may not intend to harm someone. Students may bring a weapon to school for a variety of reasons, such as to protect themselves, to impress others, or to make a sale. The definition of a weapon is also subject to question. In the United States, students have been suspended, arrested, or expelled from schools for bringing toy guns, water pistols, and even a one-inch plastic accessory for a military action figure that was shaped like a gun (Cornell, 2006). Threat assessment allows school authorities to make common sense judgments rather than to rely on rigid rules.

17.3.2 Leakage and Profiling

In recommending a threat assessment approach, the FBI study of school shootings (O'Toole, 2000) referred to the phenomenon of "leakage" as an important warning sign of potential violence. Leakage was defined as statements or behaviors by a student that intentionally or unintentionally reveal feelings or thoughts concerning an impending violent act. Threats would constitute a clear form of leakage, but other behaviors, such as asking friends for help obtaining a weapon, or bragging about what one is planning to do, are also forms of leakage.

The FBI report also suggests more broadly that a preoccupation with themes of violence in the student's conversations, writings, or artwork could be leakage, too. However, a critical problem with these more distal forms of leakage is that they are not as closely linked to actual preparation to carry out a violent act and may not be reliable indicators of impending violence. As the FBI report noted, many adolescents are fascinated with violence and their writings or drawings could be nothing more than a reflection of their imagination. Consequently, the FBI report emphasized that warning signs such as leakage should not be used as "a checklist to predict future violent behavior by a student who has not acted violently or threatened violence. Rather, the list should be considered only *after* a student has made some type of threat and an assessment has been developed" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 14).

One important distinction between threat assessment and profiling is that a threat assessment is triggered by the student's threatening behavior. This narrows the field of students under investigation and is based on behaviors that are initiated by the student and meaningfully linked to a possible violent attack. In contrast, a profile is

applied to a much wider group of students, and uses a collection or checklist of warning signs that may or may not be meaningfully linked to a possible violent attack. Profiles or lists of warning signs typically contain indicators that are too broad to be useful in identifying violent individuals and will generate a high rate of false positive identifications (Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000). In contrast, a threat assessment is less reliant on a standard checklist and more concerned with the context for the student's threat. It involves a search for specific behavior that indicates planning and intention to carry out a violent act, which may vary depending on the nature of the threat.

17.3.3 Scoring Systems and Levels of Risk

Many approaches to risk assessment use a scoring system that awards points to different risk factors and then adds up the points to arrive at an overall level of risk. For example, the Dallas Threat of Violence Risk Assessment (DTVRA) was designed to help school personnel assess student threats (Van Dyke & Schroeder, 2006). The DTVRA consists of 19 risk factors derived from a review of literature on risk factors for violence. Some of the items are conceptually linked to a threat, such as whether the student threat is detailed and whether the student has access to weapons. Other items are more general, such as whether the student has a history of drug or alcohol use or has exhibited cruelty to animals. Each item is rated as low, medium, or high and assigned a score of 1, 2, or 3, respectively. All of the items are given equal weight and are summed into a total risk score in which scores below 9 are considered low risk and scores above 14 are considered high risk. In the Dallas school system, most cases were determined to be low risk and only 3% scored as high risk. Although such a structured system can be appealing, the authors cautioned that the scoring system and cutoff points were "arbitrarily chosen by the committee without empirical validation" (Van Dyke & Schroeder, p. 608).

There are major problems with risk scoring systems for threat assessment purposes. First, many risk factors commonly identified in the literature are associated with general risk for violence at some unspecified time that could be years in the future, rather than immediate risk to carry out a specific threat. Even youth who score high on risk assessment instruments do not necessarily engage in frequent acts of severe violence. There is less research on risk factors for imminent violence, especially in student populations (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Knowing that a student falls into a high risk category does not necessarily mean the student is going to carry out the immediate threat. Risk categories are typically validated on the basis of any aggressive act over a period of years and could include minor incidents that have nothing to do with the threat.

A second problem is that the risk for violence in youth is much more situational and transitory than risk scores imply (Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2002). Risk scores, as well as classifications of risk (e.g., high, medium, low) are static designations that ignore the variability in youth behavior and adolescents' responsiveness to their immediate envi-

ronment. An adolescent who is low risk when supervised and feeling calm may be much more dangerous when angry, intoxicated, or surrounded by peers who encourage impulsive behavior. A student's level of risk rises when he or she moves from a supervised classroom into the hallway between classes, and again when he or she leaves school in the afternoon. Risk is not a fixed quality, but fluctuates over time.

Another problem with risk scores is that there is no clear threshold that indicates the need to take action. When risk is high, certainly intervention to prevent violence is warranted, but at what point is risk so low that it can be disregarded? For example, if a student threatens to kill someone, what level of risk is considered too low to merit protective action? Risk scores do not easily translate into guidance for action.

The underlying distinction is perhaps that threat assessment is concerned with prevention rather than prediction, and risk reduction rather than risk measurement (Borum et al., 2002; Heilbrun, 1997; Skeem & Monahan, 2011). Static risk scores are useful for conducting prediction research over a period of time, but less practical when it comes to immediate efforts to prevent violence. Much of the research literature is concerned with prediction using a fixed set of predictors that can be measured in a sample of subjects, ignoring individual variation and idiosyncratic factors. This simplification is necessary for statistical analyses, but unrealistic for prevention purposes because it means ignoring potentially important information that is specific to the individual case. For this reason, professional judgment is a necessary component of risk management (Borum et al., 2002).

Prevention efforts are intrinsically dynamic because they involve interventions that are designed to reduce the adolescent's risk level. They are adjusted and modified in response to the adolescent's behavior and guided by the resources available to the team and others involved in the prevention effort. This is one reason why studies find that clinical predictions of violence in real world settings are often inaccurate (Monahan et al., 2001). Furthermore, clinicians, who are concerned with prevention rather than prediction, tend to err on the side of safety and over-predict violence. The more concerned the clinicians (or team members) are about a person's potential for violence, the more concerted their effort, and if this effort is successful and violence is prevented, their efforts will not be credited by the researcher but instead regarded as a prediction failure. In this sense, the relationship between prediction and prevention can be paradoxical. A prevention success by the clinician can be regarded as a prediction failure by the researcher.

Another paradox is that low risk scores can lull the team into complacency. If resources are not mobilized because the youth seems to be "low risk," there could be unexpected changes in the youth's situation, such as provocation by peers that results in violence. In principle, a threat assessment approach can minimize this paradox by taking a problem-solving approach to every substantive threat. Intervention efforts are based on the seriousness of the problem or conflict—guided by what is needed to resolve the problem that generated the threat—rather than an unreliable and potentially misleading estimation of the level of risk.

Threat assessment should not be regarded simply as a form of risk assessment (Reddy et al., 2001). On the contrary, threat assessment is a process of investigation

followed by action to reduce risk. A team could make use of structured risk assessment instruments as a source of information in decision-making, but threat assessment remains fundamentally a process of guided professional judgment and intervention. As Reddy et al. noted, threat assessment is guided by three principles. First, there is no specific type of violent student who carries out a school attack. This means that no profile or list of warning signs can be effective. Second, threats are commonplace, but making a threat is not the same as posing a threat, which is more serious. Therefore, all threats must be investigated so that serious threats can be identified. Finally, students who carry out school attacks almost always contemplate and plan their attack before taking action. This preparation can extend for weeks or months. Consequently, threat assessment teams have an opportunity to identify and prevent violence.

17.4 Directions for Future Research

There are multiple directions for further research. There is a need for more fine-grained research on the process and outcomes of threat assessment, especially with regard to the students who make threats. How does the resolution of transient threats differ from substantive threats in process and outcome? What is the rate of violence among students who make these different types of threats in schools that use threat assessment vs. other approaches? Because the rate of violence is so low, it would be necessary to collect data from a very large sample and track numerous cases of student threats to detect group differences.

Other related questions include how students are affected by the threat assessment process and what interventions are most effective for students who make threats under different conditions or in different situations. For example, when a student is being bullied, what interventions are most useful? How does the intervention affect the student's relationship with the threatened individual and how does the intervention affect student behavior in other domains?

There is also a need for research on victims or targets of threats. How do students respond to being threatened, especially when the threat appears to be serious? When do they decide to seek help for a threat? Finally, no studies have examined outcomes for threatened individuals and whether interventions are needed to restore their feelings of safety and engagement in school.

17.5 International Use

The Virginia Guidelines can be adapted for use in countries outside of the United States and are being used in several countries. As Bondü et al. note (in this volume), the Virginia Guidelines have been used as a model for a nationwide effort to prevent school shootings in Germany. Even within the United States, the Virginia Guidelines

have been implemented with varying standards and procedures because American school systems operate largely under local government control. The state of Virginia alone has more than 130 school divisions, each with its own school board and administrative structure, so some degree of variation is inevitable.

The guidelines are intended to be flexible so that the basic principles can be applied in many different threat situations. It is most important that school authorities have the freedom to exercise their judgment in assessing the seriousness of a threat and to develop a plan that resolves the conflict or problem underlying the threat. Schools may modify team membership based on their staff composition. For example, there are many variations in the United States in the use of school psychologists, school counselors, social workers, and other professionals. Each school must determine what resources are available to build the most effective team.

The most substantial challenge may be in defining the role of law enforcement officers on threat assessment teams. This is a challenge in the United States because the development of school resource officers is relatively new and there are differing perspectives on how law enforcement officers can function in school settings (Clark, 2011). Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that in the most serious cases, law enforcement involvement is essential.

17.6 Conclusion

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines provide schools with a flexible, practical, and effective response to student threats of violence. Field tests and controlled studies demonstrate that school-based teams can be trained to conduct threat assessments that distinguish serious, substantive threats from less serious, transient threats. Using a seven-step decision tree, schools are able to respond to student conflicts, take necessary safety precautions, and administer appropriate disciplinary consequences that are calibrated to the seriousness of the situation. Threat assessment provides schools with a much-needed alternative to zero tolerance discipline and leads to substantial reductions in the use of long-term suspensions. Threat assessment also appears to have a beneficial impact on school climate, with associated reductions in bullying and greater willingness among students to seek help from school authorities. In conclusion, the Virginia Guidelines can be a valuable component of a comprehensive approach to school safety.

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