

Threat Assessment – Best Practices for Targeted Violence Prevention

Compiled by Capt. Randy McAlister, MA, CTM™¹

Behavioral Threat Assessment as a Best Practice

FBI: ***Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks***
<https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf>

*“The FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) held a symposium in mid-2015, bringing together academic researchers, mental health experts, and law enforcement practitioners of threat assessment to discuss the active shooter phenomenon. Specifically, symposium participants focused on prevention strategies with regard to this crime problem. **By far the most valuable prevention strategy identified was the threat assessment and management team**”^u – Page 1*

U.S. Department of Education/U.S. Secret Service. Safe Schools Initiative. *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*
https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf

“Threat assessment, as developed by the Secret Service and applied in the context of targeted school violence, is a fact-based investigative and analytical approach that focuses on what a particular student is doing and saying, and not on whether the student “looks like” those who have attacked schools in the past. Threat assessment emphasizes the importance of such behavior and communications for identifying, evaluating and reducing the risk posed by a student who may be thinking about or planning for a school-based attack” – Page 41

U.S. Department of Education/U.S. Secret Service. Safe Schools Initiative. ***Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates***
https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

“School administrators should consider creating a multidisciplinary threat assessment team that is based in the school or the school district” – Page 37

U.S. Secret Service. Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_0711_USSS_NTAC-Enhancing-School-Safety-Guide.pdf

U.S. Department of Justice. *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence*
<https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/tatv95.pdf>

*“The information gleaned from these studies underscores **the importance of establishing a threat assessment process in schools** to enhance proactive targeted violence prevention efforts. The goal of a threat assessment is to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk” – Page 1*

Federal Commission on School Safety final report. 2018

<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>

“Reporting suspicious or concerning behavior on its own, however, will not prevent a violent act from occurring. The reported information must be appropriately evaluated and, if determined to indicate a legitimate potential threat or concern, properly acted upon. This typically means the conducting of a threat assessment” – Page 50

¹ Certified Threat Manager™ (CTM). Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP). 2015.
<https://www.atapworldwide.org/page/certificationexam>

National Association of School Psychologists. Position paper on school violence prevention endorsing threat assessment as a best practice.

(See **School Violence Prevention** link at

<https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/professional-positions/position-statements>

*"NASP does not support assessment procedures known as risk assessment. Such procedures claim to identify or "profile" students as being "at risk" of committing acts of violence; research shows that such methods are associated with high false identification rates. While many students have emotional or behavior difficulties, relatively few commit serious violent acts and using so-called "violence risk profiling" assessments are more stigmatizing than useful. Instead, NASP believes that schools can and must respond to all threats that students (and others) make on school campuses. For this reason, **NASP endorses using a threat assessment approach** to understanding students' potential violent behavior (Cornell & Allen, 2011)"*

FBI: A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013

<https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.atapworldwide.org/resource/resmgr/files/pre-attack-behaviors-of-acti.pdf>

U.S. Dept. of Ed., U.S. Dept. of Justice, U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services. *Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy*

https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.atapworldwide.org/resource/resmgr/files/vt_report_061307.pdf

"Increase information sharing and collaboration among state and local communities, educators, mental health officials, and law enforcement to better provide care and detect, intervene, and respond to potential incidents of violence in schools and other venues" – Page 8

ANSI/ASIS/SHRM. **Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention**. American National Standard

https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/nabenet.site-ym.com/resource/collection/287C1A6D-C2D6-4E8F-8514-27F9B7FC3CAE/wvpi_std.pdf

*"An organization **should**, to the best of its ability, engage in efforts designed to **prevent** the most extreme forms of violence, such as deadly shootings. At the same time, those events remain statistically uncommon. Instead, organizations more often will find themselves needing to **manage** an array of problematic behavior that falls short of homicide or even simple assault" – Page 4*

*"A workplace violence program further **should** include an interdisciplinary team created and trained to respond to violent incidents or reports of troubling behavior made under the workplace violence prevention policy. Depending on preference, organizations commonly will name these teams a "Threat Management Team," "Incident Management Team," or "Case Management Team" – Page 15*

American Psychological Association. *Gun Violence: Prediction, Prevention, and Policy*

<https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-report.pdf>

*"**Behavioral threat assessment is seen as the emerging standard of care for preventing targeted violence in schools, colleges, and workplaces, as well as against government officials and other public figures**" – Page 19*

U.S. Department of Defense. *Predicting Violent Behavior*

<https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.atapworldwide.org/resource/resmgr/files/predictingviolentbehavior.pdf>

"The Secretary of Defense direct a Department-wide requirement for the Military Departments and DoD Agencies to establish a multidisciplinary TMU that identifies, assesses, and responds/manages threats of targeted violence" – Page 32

U.S. Secret Services's Dr. Lina Alathari testimony before U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary after Parkland H.S. shooting

<https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/03-14-18%20Alathari%20Testimony.pdf>

"Threat assessment programs are most effective at reducing the risk of violence when implemented in a comprehensive manner. In fact, they not only have the potential of preventing incidents of targeted violence, but have other positive impacts in the school environment"

MN Homeland Security & Emergency Management. School Safety Center

<https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/mn-school-safety-center/Pages/prevention-threats.aspx>

<https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/hsem/mn-school-safety-center/Documents/Comprehensive%20School%20Safety%20Guide.pdf>

"Through the implementation of a threat assessment process, schools have an opportunity to build capacity for violence-reduction strategies that create healthy cultures of safety, respect, and emotional support for students and staff" – Page 22

National Association of School Psychologists:

[Threat Assessment: An Essential Component of a Comprehensive Safe School Program](https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Resources%20and%20Publications/Handouts/Families%20and%20Educators/nassp_threat.pdf)

https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Resources%20and%20Publications/Handouts/Families%20and%20Educators/nassp_threat.pdf

*"Systematic threat assessment, on the other hand, is **an optimal strategy** for determining the credibility and seriousness of a threat and the likelihood that it will be carried out"* – Page 11

U.S. Department of Education, FEMA, DOJ, FBI, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans

https://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf

"Federal agencies encourage schools to implement a threat assessment program, including the establishment of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team that utilizes the expertise of representatives from mental health service providers, persons familiar with emergency procedures, and law enforcement agencies in the community." – Page 45

Campus Safety is Essential for a Successful Learning Environment. Statement on campus multi-disciplinary threat assessment by U.S. Department of Education Under Secretary Martha Kanter (2012).

<https://blog.ed.gov/2012/07/campus-safety-is-essential-for-a-successful-learning-environment-if-you-see-something-say-something/>

"The best approach, according to those who conducted the recent study, is to establish a multidisciplinary Campus Threat Assessment Team that includes campus experts on law enforcement, mental health, human resources, and student affairs along with legal experts who can ensure that students' rights are properly protected"

Threat assessment (K12) peer reviewed articles on outcomes

Cornell, D., & Maeng, J. (2017). Statewide implementation of threat assessment in Virginia K-12 schools. *Contemporary School Psychology*. Available at:

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40688-017-0146-x>

Cornell, D., et al (2017). Student threat assessment as a standard school safety practice: Results from a statewide implementation study. *School Psychology Quarterly*. Available at:
<https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/spq-spg0000220.pdf>

Cornell, D., & Maeng, J. (2017). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review*. Available at:
<http://naspjournals.org/doi/abs/10.17105/SPR-2017-0030.V47-2?code=naps-site>

Threat assessment reduces school suspension and disproportionate minority discipline:
<https://curry.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/images/YVP/Threat%20assessment%20reduces%20school%20suspension%20and%20racial%20disproportionality%209-26-18.pdf>

Kaplan, S., & Cornell, D. (2005). Threats of violence by students in special education. *Behavioral Disorders*, 31, 107-119.

Threat assessment reduced inconsistency (over-reaction) in suspension as a disciplinary consequence for special education students. Available at:
https://curry.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/files/Youth_Nex_files/VSTAG%20Research%20Articles%203-12-18.pdf

Campus Violence, Threat Assessment, and Liability

California Supreme Court Decision Sharpens Focus on Threat Assessment & Management
<http://sigmatma.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Rosen-CA-Supreme-Court-TAM-Decision-JJN-Summary-B1832516xA047C.pdf>

Campus Threat Assessment and Management Teams: What Risk Managers Need to Know Now
http://www.sigmatma.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/NolanRandazzoDeisinger_CampusThreatAssessmentTeams_FINAL_20110802.pdf

“Dear Colleague” Letter to School Officials at Institutions of Higher Education – 24 Aug. 2016
Addresses HIPAA and FERPA considerations vis-à-vis behavioral threat assessment programs
https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/sites/default/files/resource_document/file/DCL_Medical%20Records_Final%20Signed_dated_9-2.pdf

“Dear Colleague” Letter to School Officials at Institutions of Higher Education – 18 Aug. 2015
http://www.margolishealy.com/files/resources/ED_DCL_FERPA_Final_Aug18_2015.pdf

U.S. Department of Education statement on sharing of information with outside threat assessment team members.
<https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/faq/does-ferpa-permit-sharing-education-records-outside-law-enforcement-officials-mental-health>

[Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting: Lessons Learned on Information sharing, Threat Assessment, and Systems Integrity](https://cspv.colorado.edu/publications/AHS-Report/AHS_Report_Executive_Summary_FINAL.pdf). Report finds inadequate training in threat assessment and failure to follow through on existing threat assessment program
https://cspv.colorado.edu/publications/AHS-Report/AHS_Report_Executive_Summary_FINAL.pdf

Articles on Behavioral Threat Assessment

Mother Jones Magazine. *Inside the Race to Stop the Next Mass Shooter. A Growing Legion of Cops, Psychologists, and Community Leaders are Working Together to Stem the Bloodshed*
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/10/mass-shootings-threat-assessment-shooter-fbi-columbine/>

New York Times. *Focusing on Violence Before it Happens*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/15/us/in-los-angeles-focusing-on-violence-before-it-occurs.html>

International Association of Chiefs of Police. The Police Chief Magazine. *Targeted Violence in Schools: Understanding Mental Health and Managing the Risks*
<http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/targeted-violence-in-schools-understanding-mental-health-and-managing-the-risks/>

FBI: FBI Magazine. Threat Assessment Teams. Workplace and School Violence Prevention
<https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/threat-assessment-teams-workplace-and-school-violence-prevention>

PBS: (Video Documentary): *After Newtown: The Path to Violence*
<https://www.pbs.org/video/after-newtown-path-violence/>

American Psychological Association: *Threat Assessment in Action: Psychologists are Leaders in the Growing Field of Threat Assessment, Working with Law Enforcement and Security Professionals to Prevent Violence Before an Attack Strikes*
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/cover-threat.aspx>

[K-12 Threat Assessment Teams Prove Effective, Without Racial Bias](https://phys.org/news/2016-03-k-threat-teams-effective-racial.html)
<https://phys.org/news/2016-03-k-threat-teams-effective-racial.html>

Threat Assessment & School Safety-Related Legislation

Threat Assessment, Prevention, and Safety (TAPS) Act. H.R. 6664 (U.S. Congress)
<https://babin.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=2135>

This bill directs the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to establish within itself a Joint Threat Assessment and Management Task Force, which shall provide recommendations to Congress and DHS on the development and implementation of a national strategy for preventing targeted violence through threat assessment and management. The task force shall make recommendations relating to the most effective use of existing government infrastructure, workforce, and experience, unit support, training, and school violence prevention.

EAGLES Act of 2018. S. 2759 (U.S. Senate)

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2759/text>

This bill would expand the mission of the National Counter Terrorism Center to conduct research into targeted school violence; provide training in school violence prevention; and to coordinate and consult with other federal agencies and state/local agencies

STOP School Violence Act of 2018. H.R. 4909 (U.S. Congress) [Current Law]

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/4909/text?format=txt>

The STOP School Violence Act reallocated grant monies from the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 away from school physical security enhancements and towards mental health programs, reporting systems, and behavioral threat assessment teams. This is current law.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act. Florida [Current Law]

<https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2018/07026/?Tab=BillText>

Passed in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, this bill mandates numerous school safety related measures including mandated threat assessment teams.

Claire Davis School Safety Act. Colorado [Current Law]

<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cssrc/claire-davis-school-safety-act>

Passed after Claire Davis was murdered at Arapahoe High School when the school failed to properly follow through on conducting a thorough threat assessment on Claire's murderer. This act imposes a limited waiver of sovereign immunity for a school if a school fails to exercise "reasonable care" to protect all students, faculty and staff from "reasonably foreseeable" acts of violence that occurs at school or a school-sponsored event.

Threat Assessment in Virginia. Virginia [Current Law]

<https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/virginia-center-school-and-campus-safety/threat-assessment-virginia>

Virginia law passed in 2013 that requires all K12 public schools in Virginia have threat assessment teams. A previous law (2008) was based requiring all public institutions of higher learning in Virginia to have campus threat assessment teams.

Critical Components of a Best-Practice K12 School Threat Assessment Program

- 1) **Top-down mandate** (Superintendent and school board)
- 2) **School Climate/Culture**
- 3) **Formal Policy/Procedures**
 - a. Designate all threat assessment team members as “school officials with a legitimate educational interest.”
 - b. Team membership
 - c. Training
 - d. Reporting mechanisms
 - e. Follow-up procedures and mechanisms
 - f. Recordkeeping
- 4) **Education on warning behaviors** for staff, students, and parents
- 5) **Reporting system (anonymous)**
- 6) **Training for members**
 - a. Initial formal training
 - b. Periodic update and refresher training
- 7) **Multi-disciplinary**, must include (at minimum):
 - a. School administration
 - b. Counseling or mental health
 - c. Law enforcement
- 8) **Referral/Caretaking Resources**
 - a. Internal school district programs
 - b. External programs