Operational Services

Exhibit - Principles of Threat Assessment [1]

This exhibit is a resource to educate Building-level Threat Assessment Team (TAT) members about the assumptions and principles underlying behavioral threat assessment and management.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are informed by findings of the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Dept. of Education's *Safe School Initiative*, as well as other research about targeted violence occurring in or related to educational settings. Key assumptions include:

1. There is no one demographic profile of a perpetrator of targeted violence, nor is there a profile for the type of school that has been targeted.
2. In addition to students, others also engage in targeted violence in schools, including administrators, teachers, other staff, parents/guardians of students, contractors, people in relationships with staff or students, and even people with no connection with the school.
3. Incidents of targeted violence at school/workplaces are rarely sudden, impulsive acts. Perpetrators engage in a process of considering, planning, and preparing for acts of targeted violence.
4. Perpetrators usually have multiple motives to act violently, the most common involving an unresolved grievance with a peer.
5. Many perpetrators of major acts of violence have experienced psychological, behavioral, or developmental symptoms, but may not have been diagnosed with a mental health condition or benefited from adequate treatment.
6. Many perpetrators of major violence impacting schools are suicidal in addition to their violent acts toward others.
7. Most individuals who perpetrate violence engage in multiple behaviors, prior to the incident, which cause others to have serious concerns about their behavior and/or well-being.
8. Many individuals who perpetrate violence have multiple stressors, including significant difficulties with losses or failures.
9. Many student perpetrators have been victims of, or participated in, prior bullying, which was often observed by others.
10. Most individuals who perpetrate violence do not threaten their targets directly prior to engaging in violence, though many express their grievances and aspects of their thoughts or plans to others, often through social media or online activities.
11. Prior to most incidents of targeted violence, other people know about aspects of the individual's ideas, plans or preparations to cause harm.
12. Many bystanders who have knowledge of concerning behaviors do not report them.
13. While most perpetrators act alone, in many cases, others, e.g., staff, students, peers, family members, etc., are involved in some way, such as failing to report concerns (or take other steps) to prevent violence, encouraging violence, and even helping with plans or preparation for violence.

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[1] Adapted from *Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines*, Fifth Edition (July 2023), Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety, Virginia Dept. of Criminal Justice Services, at: www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/k-12_threat_assessment_management_mppg_mpd.pdf.

The Pathway to Violence

Individuals who committed targeted violence rarely "just snapped," but engaged in a process of thought and behavior that escalated over days, weeks, months, and even years. A graphic representation of this process, the *Pathway to Violence*, is shown in Figure 1. As with any model, the Pathway reflects a general process for understanding intentional actions. For a given person, the process is not necessarily linear, but may ebb and flow in the rate and direction of movement and cycle between phases of the process. As the subject exerts or demonstrates increased "intensity of effort" around the ideation, planning and preparation, e.g., more attention, time, energy, resources, etc., there is greater risk for harm, and likely a greater impact on others. The steps along the Pathway include:

- **Grievance -** A real or perceived sense of loss, mistreatment, or injustice, often fueling a feeling of being wronged. Most people will experience grievances through life and the vast majority do not engage in acts of violence. However, for those who do engage in targeted violence, grievances (or other motivations) are common precursors.
- **Ideation -** Expressing thoughts or fantasies regarding the use of violence to address a real or perceived grievance. Note that many people have occasional or fleeting thoughts of violence in response to perceived grievances, yet most do not act on them or move forward along the Pathway. Knowledge that someone is thinking about violence does not confirm that a danger exists but should raise the possibility that the subject is struggling with a grievance.
- **Planning -** Giving thought and consideration not only to the idea of violence, but also to the who, what, when, where, and how of doing so. Expressions may begin to reference timing, location, targets, means, methods, etc. The subject may seek out and gather information regarding their plan and other incidents of targeted violence to learn from other perpetrators.
- **Preparation -** Beyond just having or acquiring weapons, this stage involves attempts to prepare for the violence and to develop or acquire the capability to cause harm to the intended target(s). Subjects try to obtain the means to fulfill their plans, which may be weapons, tools, and clothing to match their fantasies. Subjects may seek or take advantage of opportunities and circumstances that support their plans. Subjects may conduct surveillance or probe boundaries or security systems to see if they can assess areas where they do not belong or get close to people in ways that are inappropriate or atypical.
- **Implementation -** The subject initiates the operationalized plan once reaching a point where they perceive themselves as capable of doing so. Capability is based on the subject's perceived skill to cause harm and their will to do so.

Figure 1: the *Pathway to Violence*
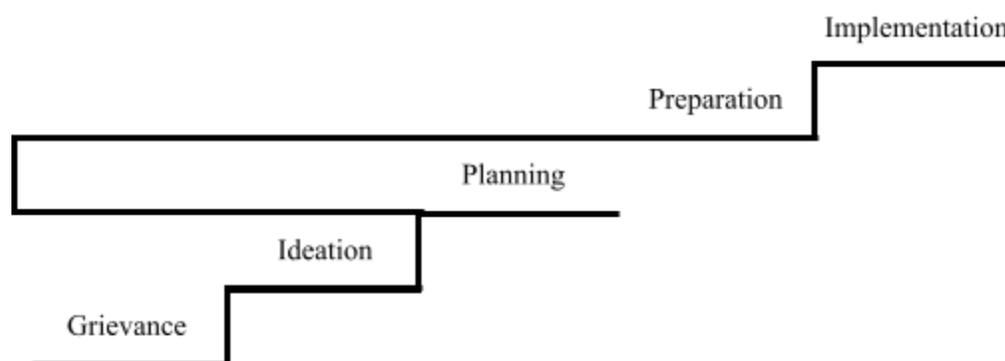
As a subject moves to the right along the pathway, there is often an escalation in the rate of movement (i.e., a flurry of activity or energy burst), or changes in the frequency of behaviors causing concern (e.g., a number of concerns over time), or a sudden change in their patterns of behavior. Where a subject has caused numerous concerns over time and then suddenly there is no more information about concerns regarding the subject (i.e., they "go off the radar"), the TAT should check whether the concerning behavior has stopped, the subject has become more covert in their actions, or community members have stopped reporting concerns.

Research indicates that while targeted violence incidents are rarely spontaneous and impulsive, they can escalate rapidly from ideation through implementation. That is, the time span between the subject's decision to cause harm and the actual incident may be short. This may be expedited by a sense of desperation for resolution, lack of concern for consequences, or the influences of others encouraging escalation (e.g., through social media or direct communications). Consequently, when there are indications that a subject may pose a threat to the school community, threat assessment teams will need to move quickly to inquire about and intervene in that planning or preparation.

The steps along this pathway indicate opportunities to observe, identify and intervene with threatening and/or aberrant behaviors that cause concern for violence by, or the well-being of, the individual. Frequently, information about an individual's ideas, plans and preparations for violence can be observed before violence can occur. However, information is likely to be scattered and fragmented. For example, a teacher may see a certain set of behaviors of an individual in her class, a coach observes other behaviors or expressed thoughts by the individual, a school resource officer has other concerns, and a school administrator is aware of certain conduct violations. The challenge, and the key, is to act quickly upon initial reports of concern, gather other pieces of the puzzle, and assemble them to determine what picture emerges.

Guiding Principles

The fact that most individuals engaged in pre-incident planning and preparation, and frequently shared their intentions, plans, and preparations with others, suggests that the information about targeted violence is likely to be uncovered through a sound threat assessment process.

To determine the risk of a threat, the TAT focuses on actions/behaviors, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to engage in violence and is planning or preparing for that event. The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the known (or reasonably knowable) behavior(s) in a given situation.

TATs train to focus on the following core principles of threat assessment and management:

1. **Effective assessment is based upon facts and observations of behavior, rather than on characteristics, traits, or profiles.** Perpetrator profiles do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments of the threat posed by a particular individual. The threat assessment process examines the behavior of the subject in relation to the context, issues, challenges, and resources involved. This provides for an individualized, holistic, and contextually based assessment of and response to the situation.
2. **Targeted violence is the result of an understandable, and usually discernable, process of thinking and behavior.** This is often referred to as the *Pathway to Violence*, discussed above.
3. **Violence stems from an interaction among the _S_ubject(s), _T_arget(s), _E_nvironment/Systems, and _P_recipitating Incidents (STEP).**[2] Identifying, assessing, and managing potential acts of violence or other harm requires a comprehensive and holistic perspective of the situation involving the following key domains and their interaction:
   a. **S** – Is the **Subject** engaging in behavior(s) that may pose a threat of violence or harm to self or others, or significant disruption, or otherwise indicate a need for assistance or intervention?
   b. **T** – Are **Targets**/others vulnerable to harm, in need of or protective actions, impacted by the situation, or otherwise indicate a need for assistance or intervention?
   c. **E** – Are there **Environmental**/systemic issues contributing to or impacting upon the situation?
   d. **P** – Are there reasonably foreseeable **Precipitating events** that may impact the situation?
   e. **PLUS** – Are there actions the threat assessment team can facilitate (to address any concerns noted), beyond those already being effectively done?

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[2] *Source: Deisinger (1996); Deisinger & Nolan (2020).*

4. **Violence is a dynamic process.** No one is either always dangerous or never dangerous. The level of concern depends on the totality of the situation. An assessment is only as good as the quality of information on which it was based at the time that it was made. Threat assessment and management involves ongoing review, re-assessment, and modification of intervention strategies through the point at which the case is adequately resolved.

5. **Threat assessment is about prevention, not prediction.** TATs do not try to predict whether an individual is a violent person. Instead, TATs try to determine under what circumstances an individual might become violent or engage in other harmful or significantly disruptive behaviors, what the impact of the situation is upon others (even when an individual poses no identifiable threat), what environmental/systemic factors may be contributing to the situation, and whether there are any precipitating events on the foreseeable horizon.

6. **Social media and online activity are critical considerations in many cases.** Individuals of concern, and those concerned about them, often use social media to express such concerns. For those who may pose a threat, their expression of grievances, violent intent, planning, and preparation can often be observed in online activities.

7. **A central question in a threat assessment inquiry is whether an individual *poses* a threat (i.e., is building the capability to cause harm), not just whether the person has *made* a threat (directly expressed intent to harm).** Research on serious targeted violence in schools and workplaces has found that few perpetrators directly communicated a threat to their target before the violence. In most incidents, perpetrators did not directly threaten their targets, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the violence. This indirect expression or third-party communication of intent to cause harm is often referred to as *leakage*. The absence of a direct threat should not, by itself, cause a team to conclude that a subject does not pose a threat or danger to self or others.

8. **The relationship between mental illness and violence is complex.** Most people living with mental illness will not be violent toward others. Most people who are violent are not mentally ill. The presence of serious mental illness increases general risk of violence, but it is not the major factor that it is perceived to be and is almost never the sole or primary explanation for a violent act. Other risk factors, e.g., having a history of violence, childhood exposure to violence, or substance abuse or dependence, have more significant correlations with violence overall. When considering targeted violence, substantially higher rates of severe mental illness have been observed among adult mass murderers, public figure attackers, and lone actor terrorists than in the general population. However, even for many of these, having a mental illness was less of a factor for violence risk than was the cessation or lack of adequate treatment for the illness. For threat assessors dealing with a subject of concern, the symptoms and behaviors associated with the subject's mental illness (versus the diagnosis) can be significant factors impacting a case.

9. **An inquisitive, objective, and diligent mindset is critical to successful threat assessment and management.** Those who carry out threat assessments must strive to be thorough, diligent, accurate, and fair, continuing throughout the assessment process both to gather pieces of information and to fit the pieces into a larger picture to gain understanding of the context and situation. One hallmark of a good inquiry or investigation is corroboration or fact-checking. Where possible, it is important to see where information from one source is confirmed by (or with) information from another source.

10. **A collaborative and coordinated approach between systems within the school and community are critical for an effective threat assessment and management process.** Effective working relationships and collaborations with services and programs both within the school, e.g., school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, school-based mental health clinicians, administrators, disciplinary officers, human resources, etc., and the broader community, e.g., mental health providers, juvenile justice system, child welfare agencies, law enforcement, etc., are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing individuals who are on the *Pathway to Violence*.

11. **Essential elements of an effective threat assessment and management process.** Research and practice have shown that, to establish and sustain an effective behavioral threat assessment and management process, organizations must have a systemic process that:

    a. Utilizes an effective and relevant multi-disciplinary approach that enhances the team's ability to address all threats;

    b. Enables community engagement and centralized awareness of developing concerns through an active outreach program;

    c. Conducts a thorough holistic and contextual assessment of the situation (e.g., using the STEP framework);

    d. Implements proactive and integrated case management strategies (e.g., using the STEP framework);

    e. Monitors and re-assesses cases on a longitudinal basis;

    f. Conducts all practices in accordance with relevant laws, policies, and standards of practice; and

    g. Sustains a focus on continuous improvement of the process and adapts to challenges and changing needs.