Thwarting Threats with Comprehensive Threat Assessment and Intervention
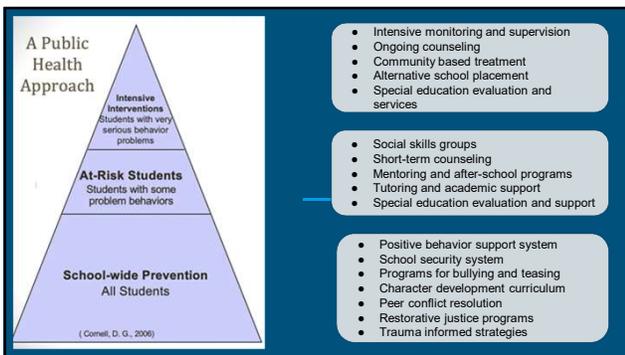
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A Public Health Approach

Intensive Interventions
Students with very serious behavior problems

- Intensive monitoring and supervision
- Ongoing counseling
- Community based treatment
- Alternative school placement
- Special education evaluation and services

At-Risk Students
Students with some problem behaviors

- Social skills groups
- Short-term counseling
- Mentoring and after-school programs
- Tutoring and academic support
- Special education evaluation and support

School-wide Prevention
All Students

- Positive behavior support system
- School security system
- Programs for bullying and teasing
- Character development curriculum
- Peer conflict resolution
- Restorative justice programs
- Trauma informed strategies

(Cornell, D. G., 2006)

Pulse Check

1. Who is on your threat assessment team?
2. Do you have a referral process in place?
3. Do you have established documents, policies, procedures?
4. Do you have a plan for high-risk students?
5. Are you working in collaboration with law enforcement?
6. Do you have community resources established?
7. Have you trained all staff?

Intended Outcomes

- An improved understanding of students who make threats and knowledge of widely spread myths
- An understanding of threat assessment as part of a comprehensive model of student safety that includes many service delivery options
- Improved knowledge of completing threat assessments and improving your school/district's response to threats
- Improved understanding of follow-up to conducting a threat assessment in order to minimize threat and support students

Why this approach?

- Threat assessment and Zero Tolerance Policies
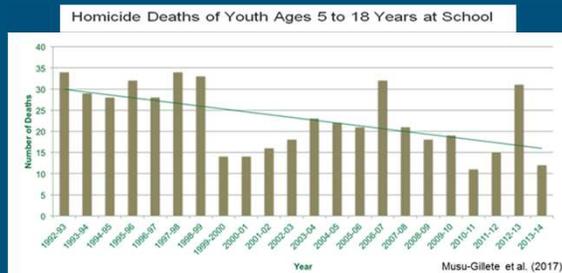- Threat assessment and profiling

(Cornell & Sheras, 2006; Heitzeg, N., 2009)

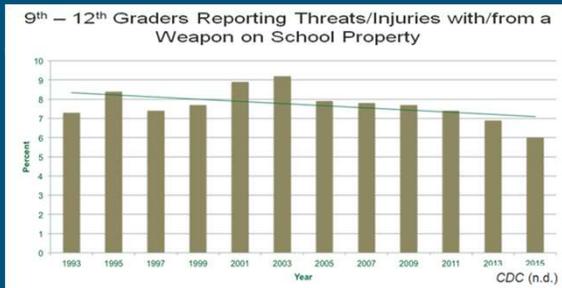## What do we know about school shootings?

Widely Spread Myths

1. School shootings are an epidemic and increasing in frequency.
2. School shooters were bullied outcasts, usually seeking revenge.
3. School shooters all have mental health problems.
4. Increasing physical prevention efforts such as metal detectors, and increasing security will help keep schools safer.
5. Lists of warning signs will predict a school shooter.

But first, some data…

Homicide Deaths of Youth Ages 5 to 18 Years at School

Musu-Gillete et al. (2017)

More data…

9th – 12th Graders Reporting Threats/Injuries with/from a Weapon on School Property

CDC (n.d.)

THE FINAL REPORT AND FINDINGS OF THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PREVENTION OF SCHOOL ATTACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE AND UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON, D.C.
July 2004

U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

A STUDY OF THE
PRE-ATTACK BEHAVIORS
OF ACTIVE SHOOTERS
IN THE UNITED STATES
BETWEEN 2000 AND 2013

Key Findings of the Safe Schools Initiative, 2002

1. Incidents of violence were rarely sudden, impulsive acts
2. Other people knew about the attacker's idea/plan to attack
3. Most did not threaten their target directly before attack
4. There is no accurate profile of students who engage in targeted school violence
5. Most attackers engaged in some behavior that caused others concern or indicated a need for help

Key Findings of the Safe Schools Initiative, 2002

6. Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failure and considered suicide
7. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others
8. Most had access to and had used weapons before the attack
9. In many cases, peers were involved in some capacity
10. Most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement

FBI BAU Phase II: Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters

2. 77% of the shooters spent a week or longer planning their attack and 46% spent a week or longer actually preparing (procuring the means) for the attack.

4. only 25% of active shooters in the study had ever been diagnosed with a mental illness. Of those diagnosed, only three had been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder.

6. On average, each active shooter displayed 4 to 5 concerning behaviors over time that were observable to others around the shooter.

7. For active shooters under age 18, school peers and teachers were more likely to observe concerning behaviors than family members.

FBI BAU Phase II: Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters

8. When concerning behavior was observed by others, the most common response was to communicate directly to the active shooter (83%) or do nothing (54%). In 41% of the cases the concerning behavior was reported to law enforcement. Therefore, just because concerning behavior was recognized does not necessarily mean that it was reported to law enforcement.

9. the most common grievances were related to an adverse interpersonal or employment action against the shooter (49%).

10. In the majority of cases (64%) at least one of the victims was specifically targeted by the active shooter.

Three Psychological Types

1. **Psychopathic shooters** are narcissistic, entitled, lacking in empathy, and sometimes sadistic. Some are abrasive and belligerent; others are charming and deceptive.

2. **Psychotic shooters** have either schizophrenia or schizotypal personality, with a combination of psychotic symptoms (hallucinations, delusions, disorganized thoughts/behavior), eccentric behavior and beliefs, and severely impaired social/emotional functioning.

3. **Traumatized shooters** grew up in chronically dysfunctional families characterized by parental substance abuse, domestic violence, physical abuse, sometimes sexual abuse, frequent relocations, and changing caregivers.

Guidelines

- All threats should be met with an ecological response: consider the individual, the setting, and the target
- Threats may be verbal, written, artistic or gestured, direct or indirect
- Making a threat is not the same as posing a threat-- distinguish between transient and substantive threat
- The goal is to identify whether a student poses a threat and to intervene to prevent targeted violence
- Utilize a two-part model (screening and comprehensive assessment)

What to Do & Where to Start

1. Establish your multi-disciplinary threat assessment team
2. Define the behaviors that will result in referral and referral procedures
3. Establish your threat assessment procedures, documents, policies, and safety & action plan protocol
4. Be prepared for emergency responses and have resources ready
5. Train staff

Establish Your Team

- All schools should establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team.
- Reeves and Brock (2017) suggest this is called a BTAM: Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management team.
- They suggest this team include a minimum of three trained professionals: an administrator, school psychologist, and law enforcement professional
- It is critical that decisions regarding threats of targeted violence are made by the team.

Define Behaviors: What might bring a student to your attention?

- A student who writes an essay about a student killing classmates
- A student tweets the statement "I'm gonna kill everyone in this place."
- A 7th grader who has displayed aggressive behavior and is feared by others who cocks his finger at a classmate on the playground and says: "You're gonna die."
- A student posts pictures to his instagram account that include guns, nooses, and statements such as "good bye" and "thanks for the lack of love, mom."

Transient vs. Substantive Threats

- Transient Threats: "I'm gonna kill you" (said in anger, during a soccer game), "Watch out, or I'll hurt you" (said by an angry student who later calms down), "I'll get you for that."
- Substantive Threats: "I'm going to shoot Jason with my dad's 9mm," "You shouldn't hang out with those kids, I don't want to see you get hurt tomorrow."

11 Key Questions (Secret Service)

1. What are the student's motives or goals?
2. Any communications of intent to attack?
3. Any inappropriate interest in other attacks, weapons, or mass violence?
4. Any attack-related behaviors? Making a plan, acquiring weapons, casing sites, etc.?
5. Does student have capacity to attack?

11 Key Questions (Secret Service)

6. Is there hopelessness or despair?

7. Any trusting relationship with an adult?

8. Is violence regarded as a way to solve a problem? Any peer influences?

9. Are student's words consistent with actions?

10. Are others concerned about student?

11. What circumstances might trigger violence?

Three Psychological Types

Psychopathic	Psychotic	Traumatized
Narcissistic	Avoidant: schizotypal and dependent	Suffered emotional and physical abuse at home
No regard for social norms	Schizophrenia	Sexual abuse
Blame victims and paints self as "good guy"	Severe mental illness and personality disorders combined	Ongoing stress and losses, parental substance abuse, frequent moves, lost parent to separation, jail/death
Dislike for those who represent authority	Depressed and full of rage	*most common type of secondary school shooter
Punishment is seen as injustice- feel wronged		
Charming, witty, charismatic		

How can you assess for these types?

What questions might you ask?

What might you want to know?

Before you sit down with a student:

- Cumulative file (academic records and history)
- Special education records (if applicable)
- Attendance records
- Medical records
- Mental health evaluations
- Law enforcement records

- History of interventions of assessments (academic, behavioral and mental health)
- History of parental involvement
- History of frequent moves
- Discipline history (if applicable)
- Work samples (if relevant)

Student Interview Goals

- What are the student's motives?
  - Also may give students an opportunity to share their side of the story.
- Are there urgent mental health needs?
- What strategies or interventions may reduce risk?

(Cornell, D. & Sheras, P. 2006)

Student Interview

- Discuss the threat (including the victim)
- Screen for mental health symptoms (depression, psychosis, severe anxiety, or suicidality**)
- Ask about Family Support
- Ask about access to and/or interest in firearms
- Investigate previous concerns re: aggressive behavior, bullying, discipline, exposure to violence, etc.
- Assess peer relationships and coping skills

(Adapted from Cornell, D. & Sheras, P., 2006)

Other Interviews:

- Interviews with intended victim(s)
- Interviews with parents
- Interviews with witnesses
- Interviews with school staff knowledgeable about the student
- Others?

(Adapted from Cornell, D. & Sheras, P., 2006)

Key Considerations: Leakage

- These clues can take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums.
- They may be spoken or conveyed in stories diary entries, essays, poems, letters, songs, drawings, doodles, tattoos, or videos.

- 93% of shooters told a close friend, sibling, relative
- Parkland shooter posted videos online, photos suggesting he intended to attack
- Seeking help from friends/classmates to prep (gaining ammo, etc.)

Key Considerations: Pathway to Violence

Pathway to Violence:

- The actions of adolescent and adult mass murderers can typically be classified as predatory/planned.

Two types of violence:

- Predatory planned: premeditated, often emotionless, and serves a purpose/goal.
- Impulsive/reactive: is emotional, impromptu, and frequently a defensive behavior in response to perceived threat.

Reeves & Brock (2017)

Key Considerations: Pathway to Violence

- Research, planning, preparation
- Fixation: Preoccupation with person/cause
- Identification warning behaviors: intense interest in weapons, military, law enforcement, identifies with other shooters, identifies as an agent for a cause
- Novel aggression warning behaviors: tests abilities of violence- warning behavior if committed for first time
- Last resort warning behaviors: increasing desperation or distress, sees actions as last resort, perceives no alternatives, consequences are justified and feels trapped
- Energy burst: increase in frequency/variety
- Leakage
- Directly communicated threat.   Reeves & Brock (2017)

Evaluating Risk

Low Concern

Adapted from Reeves & Brock (2017)

Evaluating Risk

Moderate Concern

Adapted from Reeves & Brock (2017)

Evaluating Risk

Elevated

Adapted from Reeves & Brock (2017)

Evaluating Risk

High Concern

Adapted from Reeves & Brock (2017)

Evaluating Risk

Imminent Concern

Adapted from Reeves & Brock (2017)

Intervention: Action Plan and Safety Plan

- Plan should reduce the risk of violence
- Identify school or community interventions and supports for student
- Document team's plan
- Monitor and review plan
- Consider both discipline and treatment

(Adapted from Cornell, D. & Sheras, P., 2006)

Threat Assessment Documentation

Recommendations:

- Consider system of documentation similar to Suicide Assessment
- Utilize an evidence-based model*
- Ex: Follow the 11 KQ
- Recognize that the "form" doesn't take the place of training staff
- Plan for where the documents will be housed**

Threat Assessment Documentation

Documents to consider using district-wide:
- Threat Screening
- Threat Assessment (To be completed by the BTAM)
- Threat Assessment Action Plan
- Notification of Emergency Conference
- Student Re-Entry Guidelines

Special Considerations: Special Education

Students with disabilities may struggle with:

- Lack of understanding a threat
- Developmental delays with expressions of anger/frustration
- Difficulty understanding social cues
- Low frustration tolerance

Be Prepared

- PREPaRE
- Collaborate with Law Enforcement
- Have your list of community resources ready
- Emergency Responses:
  - START Team (SMART Team)
  - PET/ PMRT/ CAT

Additional Points of Consideration

- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed
- Follow "accepted standard of care" and document all actions taken by the team
- Collaborate--do not do this work in isolation
- Follow up should be ongoing
- Well-established connections to law enforcement are key

"Standard of Care"

- Districts should adopt a pre-established process--this may be part of the school safety plan.
- Staff are trained and understand their roles and how to report concerns
- Protocol includes documentation processes and supervision
- Process is consistent with best practices and US Department of Education (Secret Service) Guidelines

Lessons Learned

Reeves & Brock (2017)

Lessons Learned

Let's Practice

Using the Secret Service 11 Key Questions, let's practice asking some questions to get at the 11KQ.

Remember:

- This is not rigid.
- Ask follow up questions and ask for elaboration.
- Follow their lead.
- Utilize the "stance of not knowing"

Circle Back

1. Establish your multi-disciplinary threat assessment team
2. Define the behaviors that will result in referral and referral procedures
3. Establish your threat assessment procedures, documents, policies, and safety & action plan protocol
4. Be prepared for emergency responses and have resources ready
5. Train staff

Scenario 1: James

Scenario 2: Lorenzo

Scenario 3: Sean

Scenario 4: Tony

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