

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE [5218]

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Abstract

How should schools respond to student threats of violence? Media attention to school shootings generated the misperception that there was an epidemic of violence in U.S. schools and stimulated the widespread adoption of zero tolerance and profiling approaches. Threat assessment represents an emerging standard of practice in school safety that provides a more flexible and legally defensible alternative to zero tolerance and profiling. This article explains how threat assessment guidelines were successfully field-tested in 35 public schools.

Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

During the 1990's, youth violence was a high profile topic in the news. School shootings in small communities like Pearl, Mississippi, Paducah, Kentucky, and Springfield, Oregon received nationwide attention. Culminating in the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School, the news media saturated the public with frightening images of bloody victims, anguished teachers, and distraught parents. Such images were more persuasive than facts or statistics in shaping public opinion; although youth violence declined each year after 1993, the American public was convinced that the nation was amidst an epidemic of school violence and that random shootings could occur at any school.

In response to this perceived national crisis, anxious school administrators increased security measures and implemented strict zero tolerance policies. Schools began to hire a new kind of police officer known as a "school resource officer." Both the FBI and the Secret Service conducted studies of school shootings (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski, 2002). The U.S. Department of Education distributed "warning signs" guidebooks to schools giving advice on identifying potentially violent students (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998), and the U.S. Surgeon General (2001) released a major report on youth violence. Nevertheless, is there good cause to speak of "school violence" as though violence at school were a special form of juvenile crime, or as if schools were especially dangerous places? An analysis of the available evidence suggests that the risk of violent crime at school has been greatly exaggerated.

Youth Violence Facts

The facts about juvenile crime are contrary to the perception generated by high profile cases. Consider FBI arrest statistics for juvenile homicide. (See Figure 1 in the Appendix.) Homicide is a good barometer of violent crime because many other kinds of violent crime are frequently not reported to the police or do not result in an arrest. Homicide arrest statistics are not a perfect measure, but they are a much more reliable indicator of crime trends than news media accounts of a few extraordinary cases. The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (1993-2004) show that more than 3200 juveniles were arrested for murder in 1993, which was an all-time high in the United States and certainly cause for concern, but juvenile homicide then began a steady decline and by 2000, there were only about 800 arrests, which is one-quarter of the peak. In recent years the numbers have remained under 1,000. FBI arrest statistics show declines in other forms of juvenile violence crime, such as robbery, rape, and aggravated assault (although the trends are not as steep).

The dramatic decline in youth violence observed in the 1990's was not just found in arrest statistics. The National Center for Education Statistics publishes annual reports on violent crime in U.S. schools, based on the National Crime Victimization Study (DeFoe et al., 2003). These reports show a trend that is strikingly similar to arrest statistics: In 1994 the annual rate for serious violent crime in schools was 13 crimes per thousand students (based on students ages 12-18). Violent crime in schools declined steadily after 1994,

despite the occurrence of the high profile school shootings. By 2001, the latest year with available data, the crime rate was just six crimes per thousand students, a reduction of more than 50 percent.

There are other sources of information about youth violence, and they also indicate a decline during the latter half of the 1990's. For example, in 1997 there were more than 5,700 students expelled from school for firearms violations under the Gun-Free Schools Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). By 2002, however, there were approximately 2,500 expulsions, again a reduction of more than 50 percent. Contrary to public perception, the facts indicate that juvenile violent crime, including violence at school, was declining even at a time when it seemed to be increasing.

What about homicides at school? The news reports of school shootings convinced the public that there was an epidemic of murders at American schools during the 1990's. However, the massive media attention to a few cases created a false perception that school shootings were pervasive. In a country with 119,000 schools and over 53 million students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), even a rare and unlikely event will occur often enough that it seems to be commonplace.

The National School Safety Center (2005) compiles news reports of all school-related deaths across the country. A tally of all homicides that were committed by students at school shows that these homicides actually peaked in 1994 and began to decline. The downward trend is interrupted by a period when the media focused excessive attention on school shootings and we had a series of copycat crimes, but by 2000 there were fewer than a dozen cases per year.

How do we know there were copycat shootings? The boys who committed these shootings told us that they were inspired by the school shootings they learned about in the news. The two students at Columbine left a video in which they explained what they planned to do and why. They actually aspired to commit the worst school shooting in history and they dreamed of being on the cover of Time magazine. They hoped that one day a famous movie director like Spielberg or Tarantino would make a movie about them.

Fortunately, responsible parties in the news media began to realize that the media hype about school shootings was affecting student behavior. After the Columbine shootings there was a massive increase in students making hit lists and calling in false bomb threats. Some schools closed early for the summer because there were so many threats of violence. It was clear that the increase in threats was stimulated by Columbine news coverage. As a result, the media voluntarily began to tone down their coverage of school shootings; there were fewer front-page headlines and sensational photographs. When the copycat shootings subsided, the downward trend returned.

It is difficult to convince school administrators that a student homicide is highly unlikely to occur at their school. A school shooting is such a tragic event that probably every school principal in America has lain awake at night worrying if something like this could happen at his or her school. The effect of this worry is that when a principal deals with a student who has engaged in some kind of aggressive behavior or made a threat of harming someone, the principal cannot help but worry that this student might be the next Columbine killer. In other words, the fear of school shootings biases the principal's perception of his or her students, and this undoubtedly influences the decisions that the principal makes in disciplining that student. If you think a student is a potential killer, and your school might be the next Columbine, you are going to take a radically different approach than if you see the student as someone who has simply lost his temper or said something foolish that he or she did not really mean.

But how likely is it that a student is a potential killer? It is possible to estimate the odds that a school will experience a student-perpetrated homicide. Consider that there were 93 incidents in which a student killed

someone at school between the 1992-93 school year and the 2001-02 school year.² If 93 incidents occurred over ten years, that is 9.3 incidents per year. The current rate is lower than 9.3, but even using this higher estimate, the annual probability of a school experiencing a student-perpetrated homicide is extremely low. If there are approximately 119,000 schools in the United States and an average of 9.3 incidents per year, the probability is 9.3 divided by 119,000, which is .0000781, or about 1 in 12,804. This means that the average school can expect a student to murder someone at school once every 12,804 years. Contrast this statistical observation with the subjective fear that a student might be dangerous.

Another way to evaluate the risk of a student homicide at school is to compare the rate of deaths due to school homicides with other causes of death. The National Vital Statistics Report shows that in 1997 there were 11,863 persons (ages 5 to 24) killed in motor vehicle accidents, compared to just 27 young persons killed at school. We can be certain that 99.99 percent of school administrators will never have to deal with a student homicide at school, but unfortunately we can be equally certain that most school administrators will have to deal with the death of one of their students in a motor vehicle accident. The fear and concern over the highly publicized and highly sensational school shootings causes us to over-estimate the risk of this happening at our school, and at the same time, we have probably grown complacent about the much more frequent and more likely loss of a student in a motor vehicle accident.

One time at a school safety conference a school administrator raised his hand at this point in my presentation and said, "If what you are saying is true, then why can't we just stop now and go home?" My reply was, "You're right, you can go home, if all you are concerned about is a school shooting. However, we do have other kinds of violence in our schools. We also have the problem of many students threatening violence, and even though most of these students will never carry out their threats, we still have to deal with the problem of what to do about their behavior. The point I am trying to make in this presentation is that we are too concerned with school shootings and this distorts our perception of the other problems in our schools that are much more common." The risk of school homicides has been greatly exaggerated, but less serious forms of juvenile aggression, such as bullying and fighting, are more pervasive in schools and deserve greater attention.

Violence and threats of violence that do not result in homicide are all too common in our schools. According to a national survey of school principals (Miller, 2003), in 1999-2000 an estimated 1.5 million violent incidents occurred in public schools; more than 92 percent of secondary schools, 87 percent of middle schools, and 61 percent of elementary schools reported at least one incident.

Bullying is also a common problem in our schools. Bullying is difficult to define and measure accurately, but a national study found that three of every ten students in the United States claim to be either victims or perpetrators of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying is probably the most pervasive form of violence in our schools, and we should not underestimate its significance because it is so common.

Zero Tolerance

The fear of school shootings triggered the expansion of so-called *zero tolerance* policies. Zero tolerance is an

² The National School Safety Center compiles an inclusive list of "school associated violent deaths" based on news media reports of homicides that are in any way linked to schools. Their report includes suicides and accidental deaths, as well as homicides that took place near school or on school property when school was not in session. The report also includes homicides committed by persons other than students, such as the murder of a teacher by an estranged husband. For the purposes of this calculation, I counted only homicides committed by students and only cases that occurred at school during regular school hours or while students were traveling to or from school. The National School Safety Center report is online at <http://www.nsscl.org>.

example of a good idea taken to the point that it is counterproductive and destructive (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). Originally, zero tolerance referred to a policy of automatic expulsion of students for bringing a gun to school, but over time the policy has expanded to include all weapons and drugs, and in many school divisions, much more. The prohibition of weapons was frequently defined to include toy weapons and objects that appeared to be weapons. For example, a ten-year-old boy was expelled from elementary school because he brought to school a 1-inch (2.5 mm) plastic toy pistol that was an accessory to his G.I. Joe action figure. The boy discovered he had the tiny toy in his pocket by accident when he checked to see if he had his lunch money (*Seattle Times*, January 8, 1997).

The core problem with zero tolerance policies is that all threats of violence are treated as equally dangerous and deserving of the same consequences. In some states, schools are required to have a zero tolerance policy that makes no exceptions (Tebo, 2000). Such policies provide no latitude for school authorities to consider the seriousness of the threat or degree of risk posed by the student's behavior.

Profiling

Another response to the school shootings was to *profile* dangerous students by drawing up a list of the characteristics that could be used to identify them before they could commit an act of violence. Many governmental agencies and professional organizations devised lists of "warning signs" (American Psychological Association, 1999; Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998; National School Safety Center, 1998; Sewell and Mendelsohn, 2000).

Unfortunately, the criteria in these checklists tend to cast an overly broad net in identifying potentially violent youth. For example, the American Psychological Association's (1999) "warning signs" pamphlet sounds an ominous note with the statement, "If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility." The list of "immediate warning signs" includes "increase in risk-taking behavior," "increase in use of drugs or alcohol," "significant vandalism or property damage," and "loss of temper on a daily basis." Most school authorities could identify students in their schools who appear to meet these signs yet fail to pose a threat for violence.

The items on warning signs checklists may well describe the small group of youths who committed school shootings, but this does not make them useful, specific indicators of violence. Because the base rate for severe violence is low, checklists of student characteristics will invariably lead to the false-positive identification of a very large number of students who will not be violent (Sewell and Mendelsohn, 2000).

These lists contain items that are deserving of concern; for example, alcohol and drug use is a well-known correlate of delinquency and violence. Items such as losing one's temper on a daily basis or committing acts of vandalism are behaviors that merit intervention. The authors of the federal warning signs report recognized the potential problems of a warning signs approach. They cautioned, "Unfortunately, *there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted*" (p 7, Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998). These authors urged school authorities to refrain from using the warning signs as a basis for punishing students or excluding them from school. They expressed concern that the warning signs could be used without regard to the student's situational or developmental context. They cautioned against acting on the basis of stereotypes or overreacting to single signs.

In 1999 the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, a group renowned for its use of criminal profiling, convened a conference on school shootings. The FBI report (O'Toole, 2000) firmly rejected the application of profiling to school shootings, recognizing that school shootings were too rare and that the likelihood of falsely identifying students as dangerous was much too high.

Threat Assessment

A key finding from the FBI study of school shootings was that, in almost every case, the student shooter communicated his intentions to peers days or weeks in advance of the crime. Had these intentions been reported to authorities, it would have been possible to investigate the threat and prevent the shootings. The FBI noted other cases in which school shootings were prevented because students did report a classmate's threats to authorities. These observations led the FBI researchers to conclude that schools should be prepared to identify and evaluate student threats in a prompt and systematic manner.

The FBI report cautioned that "all threats are not created equal" (p 5) and that each threat must be carefully investigated to determine what danger the student poses to others. Students who make threats differ in their motivation and capacity, as well as in their intention, to carry out a violent act. For this reason, the FBI recommended that schools train threat assessment teams.

What is threat assessment? Threat assessment is an approach to violence prevention originally developed by the U.S. Secret Service and based on studies of persons who attacked or threatened to attack public officials (Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden, 1995; Fein and Vossekuil, 1999). Threat assessment has evolved into a standard approach to analyze many different dangerous situations, such as threats of workplace violence (Fein and Vossekuil, 1998). In 2002, a joint report of the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education recommended that schools train threat assessment teams in order to respond to student threats of violence (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski, and Reddy, 2002).

A threat assessment is conducted when a person (or persons) threatens to commit a violent act or engages in behavior that appears to threaten violence. This kind of threatened violence is termed targeted violence. Threat assessment is a process of evaluating the threat, and the circumstances surrounding the threat, in order to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out. Threat assessment is ultimately concerned with whether someone *poses* a threat, not whether he or she has *made* a threat. Any person can make a threat, but relatively few will engage in behavior that indicates planning and preparation necessary to carry out the threat. Threat assessment attempts to identify persons who pose a threat, which means that they have the intent and means to carry out the threat. Moreover, threat assessment does not conclude when a person is determined to pose a threat; rather, threat assessment aims to determine how serious the threat is and what should be done about it to prevent it from being carried out.

How can schools conduct threat assessments? Two government reports recommended that schools adopt a threat assessment model, but these recommendations were untried and untested. Could the threat assessment approach used in law enforcement be adapted for schools? How would a school-based threat assessment team operate and what would be the results? Our group, the Virginia Youth Violence Project of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia took on the task of answering these questions (Cornell, Sheras, Kaplan, Levy-Elkon, et al., 2004; Cornell, Sheras, Kaplan, McConville, et al., 2004).

The project began with a work group of educators from two school divisions who met to develop and field-test a practical set of guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence (Cornell and Sheras, 2005). These two school divisions contained a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population of 16,400 students enrolled in 35 schools. The work group studied how school principals typically handled threats and attempted to identify commonsense practices and procedures that would be consistent with FBI and Secret Service recommendations. Over a period of two months, the group reached consensus on a set of guidelines.

Threat assessment teams in each school were headed by the principal or assistant principal, and included a school counselor, school psychologist, and school resource officer. The teams were trained to follow a seven-

step decision tree (Cornell and Sheras, 2005; see Figure 2 in the Appendix). The initial stages of a threat assessment are typically handled by the team leader and often can be easily resolved. In more complex or ambiguous cases, the principal may bring in additional team members.

Although any one of these characteristics may lead the team leader to presume the threat is substantive, none are absolute indicators; with additional investigation, other facts could demonstrate that the threat is transient. For example, a student might seek an accomplice to send a threatening note that is just intended to frighten the classmate. Such an incident would be handled as a serious disciplinary matter, but not as a serious threat.

Threat assessment teams must consider the context of the threat and make reasoned judgments based on all the available information. The team should consider the student's age and capabilities, mental stability, prior history of violent behavior, and other relevant factors. The guidelines assist the team in its investigation, but do not provide a prescription or formula.

Briefly the seven steps are:

Step one. The leader of the threat assessment team interviews the student who made the threat, using a standard set of questions. The principal also interviews the recipient of the threat and other witnesses. The principal is not concerned simply with what the student said or did, but the context in which the threat was made and what the student meant and intended in making the threat.

Step two. The principal must make an important distinction between threats that pose a serious risk or danger to others, and those that are not serious, because they are readily resolved and do not pose a continuing risk. Threats that are not serious and are readily resolved are termed *transient* threats. In contrast, all serious threats are called *substantive* threats. Transient threats are defined as behaviors that can be readily identified as expressions of anger or frustration—or perhaps inappropriate attempts at humor—but which dissipate quickly when the student has time to reflect on the meaning of what he or she has said. The most important feature of a transient threat is that the student does not have a sustained intention to harm someone.

Step three. If the threat is judged to be transient, it is resolved quickly without engaging the full team in a comprehensive threat assessment. The principal may require the student to apologize or explain to those affected by threat, or take other action to make amends for the student's behavior. There also may be a disciplinary consequence if the behavior was disruptive or violated the school's discipline code. If a transient threat was sparked by an argument or conflict, the principal could involve other team members in helping to address or resolve the problem.

Substantive threats represent a sustained intent to harm someone beyond the immediate situation. If there is doubt whether a threat is transient or substantive, it is regarded as substantive. One way to identify a threat as substantive is to look for certain characteristics that serve as presumptive indicators:

- The threat includes plausible details, such as a specific victim, time, place, and method of assault;
- The threat has been repeated over time or communicated to multiple persons;
- The threat is reported as a plan, or planning has taken place;
- The student has accomplices, or has attempted to recruit accomplices;
- The student has invited an audience of peers to watch the threatened event; and
- There is physical evidence of intent to carry out the threat, such as a weapon, bomb materials, map, written plan, or list of intended victims.

Step four. If the threat is substantive, the principal skips step three and proceeds to step four, where the substantive threat is determined to be *serious* or *very serious*. A *serious* threat is a threat to assault, strike, or

beat up someone. A *very serious* threat is a threat to kill, sexually assault, or severely injure someone. A threat involving the use of a weapon is generally considered a threat to severely injure someone.

Step five. In the case of a serious substantive threat, school authorities are obliged to take protective actions. These actions depend on the circumstances of the threat and how soon and where the threat might be carried out. Immediate protective actions include cautioning the student about the consequences of carrying out the threat and providing supervision so that he or she cannot carry out the threat. A team member should contact the student's parents, so that the parents can assume responsibility for supervising the student after school. At this step the team considers what can be done to resolve the underlying problem or conflict that triggered the threat. In many cases a dispute can be resolved through mediation or counseling. It is often helpful if the school resource officer meets with the student in order to gauge the seriousness of the situation and provide the student with a reminder that his or her actions could have legal consequences.

Step six. Very serious threats require that the team skips step five and takes immediate action to assure that the threat is not carried out. The student should be detained in the principal's office until his or her parents have arrived. In addition, the law enforcement officer on the team must determine whether the student has violated the law, and if so, what law enforcement action should be taken. The team should notify the intended victim, and if the victim is a student, the victim's parents. The school psychologist should begin a mental health evaluation of the student as soon as possible, with the initial goal of assessing the student's mental state and need for immediate mental health services. The student should be suspended from school, pending a complete assessment of the threat and determination of the most appropriate school placement.

Step seven. The team completes a safety evaluation that integrates findings from all available sources of information in a written safety plan, which is designed both to protect potential victims and to address the student's educational needs. The plan includes mental health and counseling recommendations, findings from the law enforcement investigation, and disciplinary consequences. At this point, school authorities decide whether and under what conditions the student can return to school.

How did student threat assessment work? Over the course of one school year, the 35 schools dealt with 188 student threats. The majority (70 percent) of threats were transient threats and of the remaining 30 percent that were substantive threats, 22 percent (42 cases) were serious substantive threats, which meant that they involved a threat to fight or assault someone. Just 8 percent (15 cases) were very serious substantive threats that required a more comprehensive evaluation.

Threats were made by students from kindergarten through 12th grade. In elementary schools, the overwhelming majority of the 86 threats were determined to be transient (85 percent), and could be resolved through counseling. Middle schools (grades 6-8) experienced the highest rate of threats, particularly among the seventh and eighth grades. The 60 threats by middle school students were almost equally divided between transient (58 percent) and substantive (42 percent) cases; many cases involved an argument or conflict between students that escalated into a threat to fight or assault someone. In high school there were more threats in the ninth grade than any other grade; this is not surprising because ninth graders generally commit more disciplinary violations than any other grade. Threats probably declined during the high school years in part because students become more mature and because they tend not to disclose threats to school authorities. The 42 high school threats were divided between transient (55 percent) and substantive (45 percent) cases.

What did the students threaten to do? As shown in Figure 3 (in the Appendix), the most common threat was a threat to hit or beat up someone (77 cases, 41 percent). In addition, there were 27 threats to kill, 24 threats to shoot, and 18 threats to cut or stab. There were 32 cases in which the threat was vague or non-specific ("I'm going to get you"), and 10 miscellaneous other threats, such as setting fires or detonating bombs. Threats to kill and threats to shoot actually occurred more frequently in elementary school than in middle and high school combined.

What were the disciplinary consequences for threats? Under a zero tolerance policy, many students would have been expelled from school for making threats to kill or injure someone, but using threat assessment guidelines, only three of the 188 threats resulted in expulsion. In each case, the student had accumulated a dozen or more disciplinary violations prior to the threat.

Half (94 cases) of the students who made threats were given a short-term suspension. Some of these suspensions were in-school suspensions, meaning that the student spent the day in a suspension classroom, while in other cases the student was suspended from coming to school. The modal suspension (32 cases) was one day, with a range of one to ten days. Twelve students were placed in an alternative educational setting; all had established a record of persistent behavior problems.

Only six students were arrested after making a threat. Three arrests were made after a false bomb threat. Two students were arrested because they assaulted a school staff member. The final case involved a ninth-grade girl who threatened to stab a classmate and was found to have a knife in her locker.

What happened after the threat assessment? At the end of the school year, principals provided follow-up information on their cases. The most important question was whether the students carried out their threat. In three cases, the principal was not sure if a student's threat to hit another student was carried out, but in all other cases, the principals reported that the threat was not carried out.

Principals also were asked to judge whether the student's relationship with the threat recipient had improved, remained about the same, or worsened. In 62 cases the principal did not feel sufficiently informed to make a judgment, but in the remaining 126 cases, the principals reported that in about one-third of cases the relationship has improved, in nearly two-thirds (63 percent) the relationships were about the same, in only six cases (5 percent) was it worse.

Finally, principals assessed the student's overall behavior after the threat. They rated 43 percent of the students as demonstrating improved behavior during the remainder of the school year, 39 percent as about the same, and only 18 percent as worse in their behavior.

It seems likely that the process of threat assessment contributed to the positive outcomes found in these schools, but this was a field-test study without a comparison or control group. This project was designed to demonstrate the viability of threat assessment as a new and previously untried procedure, and did not attempt to compare how threats would have been resolved using some other method. An experimental comparison with one or more alternative methods would be an appropriate next step.

How does threat assessment compare to zero tolerance? Threat assessment represents an emerging standard of care in school safety, and from a liability perspective, offers schools a practical, flexible, and legally defensible way to respond to students who make threats of violence. There have been more lawsuits over zero tolerance policies than over school shootings. Zero tolerance policies raise legal problems of free speech and due process, and they deprive students of their right to a public education for minor misbehavior (Rutherford Institute, 2003).

Many school authorities fear that they will be held liable if a student commits a violent act that they did not prevent, but this is a common misperception of liability. When it comes to the risk of violence, courts recognize that no educator or mental health professional can predict the future or control a student's behavior. Courts are concerned with the process that a school authority followed in making a good faith effort to prevent an act of violence. Did the educator meet the standard of care or professional standard for his or her field? The courts have not found that school authorities are responsible for student acts of violence, but they are accountable for how they respond to problems that are made known to them. In the 1999 case of *Davis v. Monroe* (Davis v. Monroe County Bd. of Ed. 526 U.S. 629), the Supreme Court found that a school could be

held accountable for sexual harassment. This decision set a standard that might be applied to other forms of student harassment and to threats of violence. The Supreme Court ruled that a school board is liable under Title IX for student-to-student harassment if three conditions are met:

1. School authorities had knowledge of the harassment.
2. School authorities were deliberately indifferent to the sexual harassment.
3. The sexual harassment was so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it deprived the victim of access to educational opportunities and benefits.

A school using threat assessment is protected from liability because it demonstrates a policy of identifying student threats and making an active effort to respond to them. Threat assessment meets the Tarasoff standard that mental health professionals take action to protect potential victims (Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California case in 1976 (17. Cal. 3d 425 - July 1, 1976. S. F. No. 23042; see also Buckner and Firestone, 2000).

Threat assessment is not intended as a stand-alone approach, but a component of a comprehensive school violence prevention plan. Threat assessment is not a substitute for other violence prevention efforts, but a means of investigation that leads to interventions that deal with student conflicts before they result in violence. Threat assessment can be especially useful in helping schools to use resources in an efficient manner, because it offers them a way to focus on threatening situations and to distinguish situations that require intensive intervention from those that can be easily resolved. Threat assessment presents a clear alternative to widespread practices such as zero tolerance and student profiling.

Where can I get more information on threat assessment? The Virginia Youth Violence Project at the University of Virginia has provided training on student threat assessment to more than two-dozen Virginia school divisions as well as school divisions in California, Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee and other states. The model training program involves a six-hour workshop on threat assessment for school administrators, counselors, psychologists, and resource officers. The training manual, *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell and Sheras, 2005), provides detailed explanations of the threat assessment approach. For more information, see the Youth Violence Project website <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu> or call 434-924-8929.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Juvenile Arrests for Murder

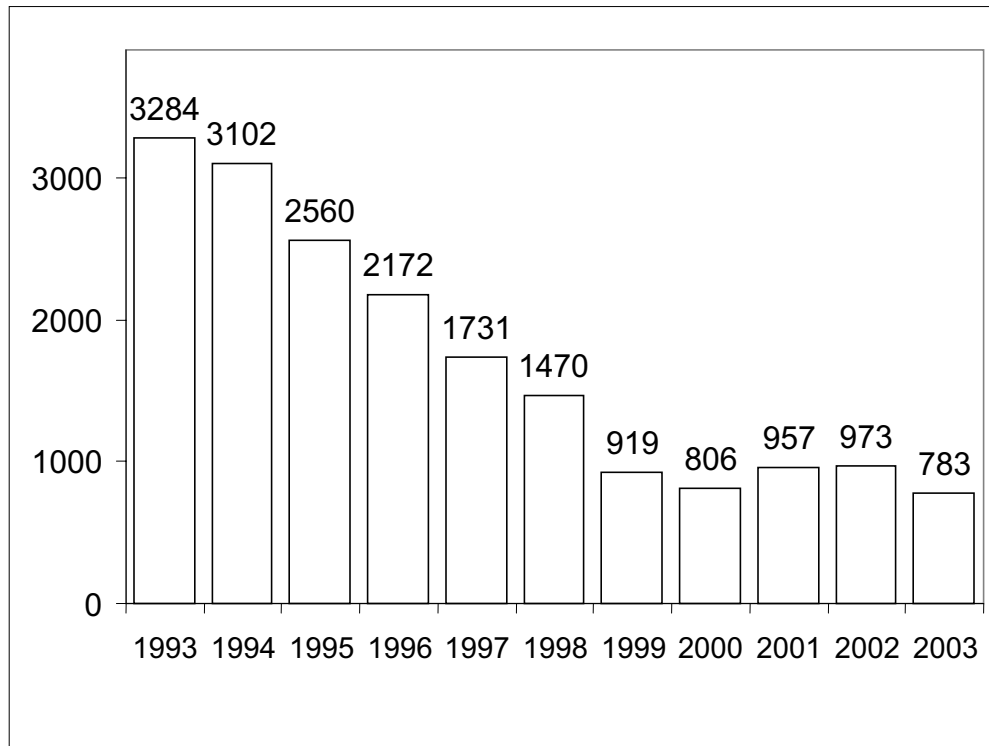


Figure 2. Threat Assessment Decision Tree

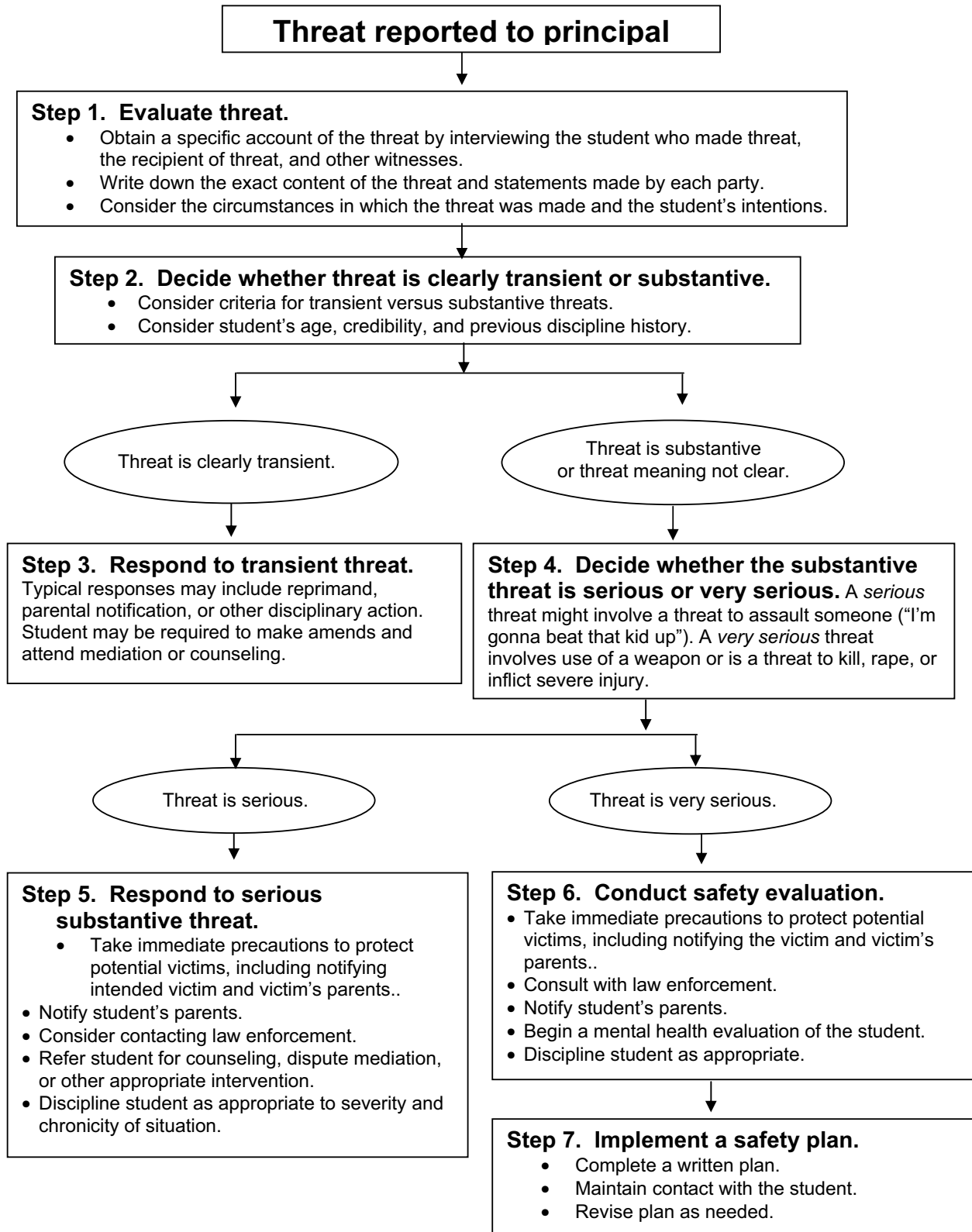
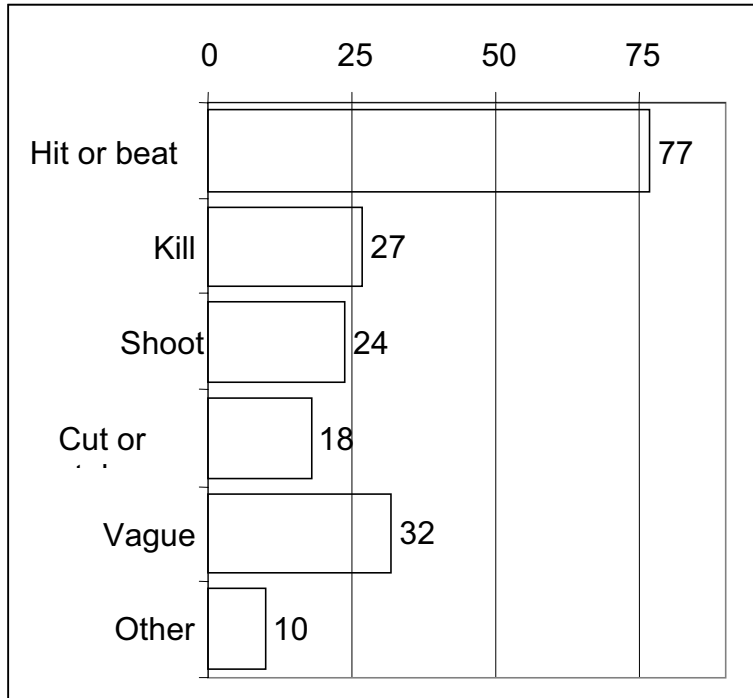


Figure 3. Most Common Student Threats

Types of student threats



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