

Operational Services

Exhibit - Principles of Threat Assessment

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

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. Incidents of targeted violence at school/workplaces are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
2. In addition to students, others also engage in targeted violence in schools, including administrators, teachers, other staff, parent(s)/guardian(s) of students, contractors, people in relationships with staff or students, and even people with no connection with the school.
3. Prior to most incidents of targeted violence, other people knew about the individual's idea and/or plan to attack.
4. Most individuals who perpetrated violence engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, which caused others to have serious concerns about their behavior and/or well-being.
5. Many individuals who perpetrated violence had significant difficulties with losses or failures. Many were suicidal.
6. Many individuals who perpetrated violence felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to engaging in violence.
7. In many cases, others, e.g., staff, students, peers, family members, etc., were involved in some way, such as helping with plans or preparation for violence, encouraging violence, or failing to report (or take other steps) to prevent violence.
8. Most individuals who perpetrated violence did not threaten their targets directly prior to engaging in violence.
9. Violence is a dynamic process. No one is either always dangerous or never dangerous. Rather, the risk for violence is an interaction between the individual, the situation, circumstances, provocations, and inhibitory factors that are present.

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.

Targeted violence is the end result of a process of thinking and behavior that begins with an **idea**, e.g., to use violence to address a real or perceived grievance. The process of thinking and behavior progresses to the development of a **plan** and moves on to **preparation** and acquiring the means, e.g., weapons, training, capacity, access, to carry out the plan. The culmination, regrettably, can be in **violence**. A graphic representation of this process, the *Pathway to Violence*, is shown in Figure 1.

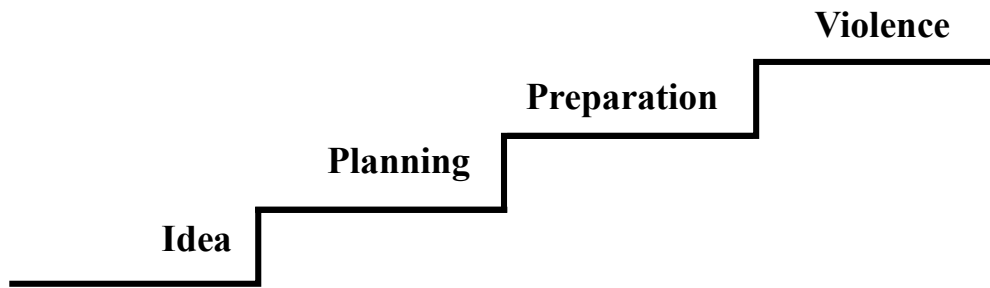


Figure 1: the *Pathway to Violence*

This process indicates opportunities to observe, identify, and intervene with threatening and/or aberrant behaviors that cause concern for violence by, or for the well-being of, the individual. Frequently, information about an individual's ideas, plans, and preparations for violence can be observed before violence occurs. 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.

Principles

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:

- 1. The 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 targeted violence in schools and workplaces has found that fewer than 20 percent of violent perpetrators communicated a direct or conditional threat to their target before the violence. In the majority of 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 to others.
- 2. Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and often discernable, process of thinking and behavior, often referred to as the *Pathway to Violence*, noted above in Figure 1.** Individuals who committed targeted violence did not “just snap,” but engaged in a process of thought and escalation of action over days, weeks, months, and even years.
- 3. Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the Subject(s), Target(s), Environment, and Precipitating Events (STEP).** Identifying, preventing, and intervening with acts of violence requires a focus on these four components and their interaction. A focus on the *Subject* of concern should provide insight into how the individual perceives and deals with conditions, often stressful, in his or her life and the intensity of effort they direct toward planning and preparation for violence. A focus on the *Target* examines choices and coping strategies they are using or responding with that may increase or decrease their risk for harm. A focus on the *Environment* examines the school/workplace climate and systemic issues that contribute to the risk of violence, or do not discourage it. A focus on *Precipitating* events examines critical stressors or events such as bullying,

personal losses, enforcement actions, or even TAT interventions that may increase or decrease the risk for violence.

4. **An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.** Those who carry out threat assessment must strive to be both 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.
5. **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.**
6. **An integrated systems approach, coordinating between local agencies and service systems within the school and community, should guide the threat assessment and management process.** Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school (e.g., school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, school-based mental health clinicians, administrators, disciplinary officers, human resources, etc.) and 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*.

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