

AN ANALYSIS OF THREAT ASSESSMENT MODELS INTENDED TO PREVENT  
TARGETED VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

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An Analysis of Threat Assessment Models Intended to Prevent Targeted Violence in Schools

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## ABSTRACT

### An Analysis of Threat Assessment Models Intended to Prevent Targeted Violence in Schools

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Under the supervision of Dr. Valerie Stackman

The frequency of which active shooters are victimizing schools is a relatively recent phenomenon in history. In an effort to reduce the number of such incidents, several threat assessment models have been developed by various groups. The United States Secret Service developed a threat assessment model based on recognizing preparation behaviors. The FBI created guidelines with an emphasis on evaluating threats. These seemingly divergent models often leave users in the field confused about what to consider during the evaluation of threatening words or actions.

This paper evaluates and compares the models in an effort to provide threat assessors with clear guidelines on risk factors, or discussion points, to be discussed and possibly investigated during the threat assessment process. The end result of the project is a threat assessment tool – a working document – that can be used to guide the assessment process according to current research and best practices.

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## **CHAPTER I: Introduction**

### **Background**

Targeted violence is a term used to refer to the relatively recent trend of attacks, often with high degrees of lethality, on public places. It is defined as “situations in which an identifiable perpetrator poses, or may pose, a threat of violence to a particular individual or group” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 52). The law enforcement, mental health, and education professions, traditionally tasked with reacting to violence after the fact and historically prepared to address violence between individuals instead of against groups, are relatively unprepared and unaccustomed to forecasting and preventing violence ahead of time (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999). The law enforcement profession, of particular interest here, lacks an identified process to recognize, evaluate, mediate, and mitigate a presented threat (Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden, 1995). Low base rates of such acts, however, limit the amount of available information necessary to develop a solid understanding of prevention techniques, thereby potentially hampering the development of successful alternatives (Augustyniak, 2005).

Between 2000 and 2013 there were 27 shooting incidents at elementary, middle, or high schools in the United States, resulting in the deaths of 57 people. The prevalence of shootings in public places to this scale is a relatively new phenomenon in history, which is what led the President to sign the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012 into law. The legislation granted the attorney general the authority to assist in the investigations of targeted violence. Active shooter events, whether in schools, work places, or public places, have steadily increased in frequency since the turn of the century after being exceptionally rare before then (Blair & Schweit, 2014). While media proliferation of event frequency may lead to the impression that such acts occur more often than they do, it is important to remember that an

estimated 54 million students attend class in 125,000 middle and high schools (Karmen, 2010), leaving the relative odds of a school shooting happening lower than the media portrays.

The increase in school violence episodes in recent history and the trauma associated with each incident, however, highlight the need to develop and utilize consistent threat assessment models to mitigate the damage done by these acts in the years to come. Despite the glaring need to use assessment tools in schools to forecast and, hopefully, prevent as many of these as possible, school districts and law enforcement agencies generally do not use standard assessment models. They instead rely on unique processes set up individually (Patrasso, 2005). Several standard models exist, though each is unique to some extent.

### **The USSS Model**

There are two primary threat assessment models currently available to predict and prevent targeted violence in schools. The most prominent model was developed in a joint effort by the United States Secret Service (USSS) and Department of Education (DOE), herein after referred to as the USSS model. The development of the model began with the release of the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP) in 1998, a study by the USSS of all attacks on public figures since 1949. The release of the ECSP created the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), a division of the USSS designed to identify and manage perpetrators who pose threats to people being protected by the agency. The NTAC also provides information to local and state law enforcement agencies. The USSS and DOE combined efforts for the Safe School Initiative (SSI) in 1999, which involved the study of 37 targeted attacks between 1974 and 2000. The

initiative analyzed the incidents backwards from attack to pre-incident behaviors to determine if the acts could have been prevented. The SSI report was released in 2002 (Fein et al., 2002).

Unlike the FBI model, which stresses the quality of stated threats and the social context in which they surface, the USSS framework was founded on the premise that attackers almost always demonstrate a discernible pattern of behavior before violent acts emerge. The recognition of the preparation and variances in behavior before the attacks is the key to the successful identification of potential attacks and subsequent investigative recommendations (Fein et al., 2002). The USSS model operates under the belief that violence is planned and, as such, is influenced by the perpetrator's perception of the target (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). Changes in behavior resulting from the planning of attacks offers opportunities to recognize, evaluate, and prevent the violence.

The SSI study of 37 school shootings that occurred between 1974 and 2000 was able to identify 10 key findings related to targeted violence in schools. The initiative concluded that:

- Violence is generally not sudden or random
- Other people are usually aware of the attacks ahead of time
- Most attacks are not preceded by threats
- There is not one profile of attackers
- Pre-attack behaviors often cause concern in others
- Many attackers have difficulty coping with personal loss or life circumstances
- Most attackers were bullied or alienated by others
- Weapon availability makes the attacks possible
- Most attacks involve more than one person
- Suicide or other resolutions often end the violence prior to the arrival of law enforcement (Fein et al., 2002)

From this framework, the USSS developed assessment protocols based on the recognition of pre-attack behaviors. The USSS model asks users to be cognizant of planning behaviors that become

apparent to observant people during the preparation phase of targeted violence. The belief is that violent episodes are not often spontaneous but rather require extensive planning and that behavior modifications that result from such activity are detectable, allowing intervention before violence erupts (Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

### **The FBI Model**

The FBI model, meanwhile, focuses on the credibility of the threat, if present, and whether the perpetrator has the ability to carry it out (Augustyniak, 2005). This FBI assessment model assigns one of three levels of risk, from low risk, medium risk, or high risk, when evaluating the seriousness of threatening behavior. Low risk behaviors are vague, inconsistent, or indirect. Perpetrators in this category seem unlikely to precipitate targeted violence because of a lack of detail. Medium risk is identified when threats could possibly be carried out but are unrealistic. Persistence or common assertions could elevate threats from low to medium. High risk behaviors entail those that are detailed and specific. Risk is high when potential attackers take steps to carry out plans and the threats appear plausible (O'Toole, 1999). When this happens, intervention is required because the risk to others is high. Developed by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), the FBI model was created in July 1999 at a symposium held to review 18 school shootings. The symposium, attended by 160 educators, school administrators, law enforcement professionals, mental health practitioners, and criminal prosecutors, was initiated because of the Columbine school shooting in April 1999. The NCAVC actually began its work in May 1998 coinciding with a letter from Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard Riley asking all schools to have violence prevention plans in place, but expedited its efforts following the 1999 Columbine tragedy. The experts attending the

symposium following the Columbine shooting combined their expertise with the accumulated knowledge of the NCAVC's 25 years of threat assessment experience to developed guidelines for the future analysis of school threats. They recommended focusing on the personalities, familial influences, school environments, and social dynamics of those making threats or coming to the attention of others when assessing the lethality of concerning behavior. While it is recognized that all threats do not lead to targeted violence and all violent acts are not preceded by threats, the nature of any threats, whether verbal, written, or perceived because of circumstances, and the aforementioned dynamics are viewed as paramount by many threat assessment scholars for determining threat validity (O'Toole, 1999).

### **A Comparison of Models**

Each model attempts to identify the most important characteristics worthy of threat analysis based on the findings of the respective studies. The USSS model prioritizes characteristics on the belief that targeted violence is part of a discernible pattern of behavior that is identifiable and recognizable and which results from the dynamic interactions between perpetrators, victims, and social influences. The determination of lethality is determined by the analysis of pre-attack behaviors and the progression, if any, from planning to execution. This behavior is observable because targeted violent acts are almost always planned events that require preparation and which produce, in most cases, leakage – evidence of intent to harm before actually doing so - that can be detected. The USSS model focuses on behaviors instead of threats or traits (Fein et al., 2002).

The FBI model, meanwhile, prioritizes threats, whether explicit or implicit, and the ability of perpetrators to carry them out. The model attempts to distinguish between veiled and valid threats by considering the behavioral and social contexts surrounding them, believing, similar to the USSS model, that attacks are rarely spontaneous. The planning associated with targeted violence creates leakage that is recognizable. While weighing the motivation behind the concerning behavior, the model concerns itself with the credibility of the threats and the capability the perpetrators have to carry them out. The model focuses on personality, familial, school, and social dynamics when performing the analysis (O'Toole, 1999).

The two independent models, developed and implemented at different times and generated through specific paradigms, offer guidance on the prevention of targeted violence in schools. Each varies, however, in principle and in execution. For example, whereas both models offer means to evaluate the validity and lethality of threatening behaviors or words, the USSS model offers the most specific procedural guidance in the form of detailed information on the development and application of threat assessment teams. A threat assessment team, typically a collection of school, social service, and law enforcement personnel, gathers to discuss, evaluate, and potentially investigate threatening words or actions brought to someone's attention. This USSS model stresses assessing behaviors during the threat assessment process instead of focusing on traits of perpetrators or the threats potentially made by them. The FBI model serves to evaluate the data, however it has minimal follow up response suggestions for users. For example, whereas the USSS model outlines the need and means to evaluate a threat with a multidisciplinary assessment team, the FBI model also offers the means to evaluate the validity of the threat, however it does not offer specific guidance on follow up steps to be taken after a threat is evaluated as valid (Augustyniak, 2005). The result is a somewhat confusing process

plagued by conflicting criteria and a lack of clear direction regarding the identification of potentially threatening behavior.

A useful threat assessment tool should offer clear attributes for analysis, including social, environmental, or pathological variables and characteristics, while aiding in the evaluation of threatening circumstances. The factors to be considered vary according to the literature. The USSS model assesses pre-attack behaviors instead of threats or traits, and the FBI model assesses threats and the ability to carry them out. Table 1.1 below demonstrates the priorities of the respective models while also highlighting identified risk factors deemed relevant by each.

<b>Model</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>
<b>Model's guiding principle</b>	Assesses behaviors, not threats or traits	Assesses threats, ability to carry out, and social context
Reason for assessment	X	X
Recent behavioral change	X	X
Threat to facility	X	X
Form of threat	X	X
Others fear suspect	X	X
Suspect victimized	X	
Strategy to stop victimization	X	
Confrontations	X	X
Conflict management (anger management)	X	X
Positive/negative role models	X	X
Misconduct/criminal behavior	X	
Prohibited items - school	X	X
Attitude toward authority	X	X
Peer interactions (alienation)	X	X
Substance abuse		X

<b>Model</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>
Attention seeking		X
Weapon interest	X	X
Access to weapons	X	X
Interest in violence/media	X	X
Violent beliefs	X	
Inhibitions in life (outside interests)		X
School culture (respectful, etc.)	X	X
Temperament	X	X
Self-worth (narcissism)	X	X
Outlook on future (resiliency)	X	X
Pre-incident suicide	X	
Media/shooting interest (copycat effect)	X	X
Capacity to carry out threat	X	X
Lethal steps	X	X
Trigger occur	X	
Rejection/loss	X	X
Grades	X	X
Attendance	X	X
Involved parents	X	X
Victim/witness of abuse	X	
Home life quality	X	X
Lack of empathy	X	X
Mental health history		X
Inappropriate humor		X
Suicide Threat	X	
Criticism handling	X	X
Tolerance of others	X	X
Planning (Leakage)	X	X

Table 1.1: Priorities of models

Again, the variety and quantity of available threat assessment resources often offer conflicting and contradicting guidelines, leaving users in the field, the people tasked with evaluating the threat, feeling confused and frustrated. The USSS model encourages recognizing

the changes in behavior during planning phases. The FBI model emphasizes assessing the ability of attackers to carry out violence. This present study aims to clarify the spectrum of information and assessment tools currently in place to offer an evidence-based and integrated assessment tool for appraising threats of targeted violence that come to the attention of others. While the two available tools have similarities among them, discrepancies between the tools need to be identified, evaluated, and explained, clarifying the practical application of the information presented by respective sources. Doing so will greatly increase the usability of the tools currently available to assess threatening behavior.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the development of the threat assessment models, many school districts and police departments, if not most, rely on “old fashioned” police intervention, in the form of officers making subjective evaluations, to determine if threats are substantive or transient. The other frequent approach is that agencies develop their own unique methods to attempt to objectify the process (Patrasso, 2005). The USSS and FBI threat assessment models use different approaches to maximize accuracy. This study will analyze the two models to determine if either demonstrates accuracies that surpass the other, according to available research. Findings here will be used to design an assessment tool that utilizes the effective components of each model, supplying users with an instrument that is evidence-based and reflective of current research. The application of the tool will allow users to evaluate criteria that are supported by the literature as being most relevant to lethality assessment.

While targeted violence prevention is based in threat assessment instead of risk assessment, best practice would draw on the merits and lessons learned from risk assessment

platforms. Risk assessment, which is separate from threat assessment, relies partly on the science of psychology to assess risk. It is based on evaluating risk factors and is prediction-oriented, assessing past behaviors in predominantly actuarial methods (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). Threat assessment, meanwhile, is based on managing current behaviors rather than predicting future behaviors. Environmental factors, which are viewed as dynamic, often require subjective analysis and deductive reasoning to gauge when a person might pose a threat. In short, risk assessment attempts to predict the probability of behavior based on past conduct, while threat assessment attempts to recognize impending attacks and alter behavior to prevent attacks from occurring (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). However, some principles of risk assessment also apply to threat assessment. Similar to threat assessment considerations, modern risk assessment often evaluates the contextual, dynamic, and continuous variables surrounding a person of concern. Risk probability is viewed as being dependent on the current context or situation which is changing and in a continuous state of flux. This clinical, or subjective, side of risk assessment is a variation to the traditional actuarial element of risk assessment. Actuarial methods rely on quantitative and statistical conclusions based on current research, whereas clinical methods rely on quantitative and subjective determinations of risk (Borum et al., 1999). This study will focus on the use of threat assessments while recognizing that some risk assessment principles, primarily clinical methods, may apply.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to develop an assessment tool that is drawn from the components of existing threat assessment models that are shown to be the most effective and accurate. By analyzing current considerations being made by the USSS and FBI models, the

most prominent programs to date, similarities and differences will be compared while evaluating current literature on relevant risk factors thought to be associated with pending violence. The creation of an assessment instrument that incorporates the best attributes of these models will make it possible for users in the field to effectively evaluate and assess concerning behaviors or threats. The intervention options available to prevent targeted violence once concerning behavior is identified and evaluated, however, are unique to each jurisdiction and are beyond the focus of this study. The tool, in the form of a series of documents to be used during the application of the assessment procedure, will guide evaluators toward the most accurate appraisal of threatening conduct possible according to current information. Application of the tool will enable users to gauge the severity of risk factors present. The tool could be used by an individual making an initial assessment of concerning behavior or by a threat assessment team, generally a more accurate process because of the collective presence of more information, conducting a thorough analysis of known factors. The result will be the application of accurate threat assessment principles that are often lost in the confusing translation and application of three divergent models.

## **Research Questions**

The literature supporting the aforementioned models seeks to determine how to most accurately identify, prevent, and manage threatening behaviors before targeted violence erupts. Studies consistently conclude that human behavior is difficult, if even possible, to predict and there is not a simple profile of active shooters. Hence, the literature was studied to respond to the following research questions:

- Do the two threat assessment models, despite their stated differences in priorities, exhibit consistent consideration of common risk factors?
- Are there trends in human behavior that can be identified to accurately anticipate targeted violence?
- What factors or discussion points should be discussed when assessing threatening words or actions in the school setting?
- Do either of the two models utilize methodologies that are shown to be more accurate than others?

### **Significance of the Study**

While the scientific understanding of threat assessment is still developing, the practical application of it requires law enforcement and school administrators to shift traditional approaches to threatening behavior. Whereas the respective disciplines used to operate in a reactionary sense when it came to addressing targeted violence on school campuses, the recent increase in both the frequency of attacks and the lethality of the violence makes it imperative to implement an aggressive and proactive procedure that has a high likelihood of accurately identifying, evaluating, and stopping those who pose a threat to others (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). This study seeks to design and implement a field tool that makes the application of evidence-based practices possible. By identifying credible criteria that should be considered during an assessment, and by formulating a condensed instrument that highlights critical steps to be utilized and factors to be considered, the information generated by this study from existing scholarship will be used to create an assessment tool to aid users in the field. Unclear guidelines for evaluating and responding to threats to date have prevented many law enforcement and school administrators from fully implementing expert recommendations. They instead rely on individual investigative intuition, department or district policies, traditional assumptions, and,

among some, a belief that targeted violence on a shocking scale could not happen locally and, therefore, is not worthy of developing a protocol to respond to threats.

The contribution to the field, then, will be an analysis of current threat assessment guidelines and recommendations from national experts, according to available literature, to allow the development of an assessment tool for people performing threat assessments. This study seeks to identify a new set of guidelines regarding threat assessment that, based on analysis of the extant literature, should yield a more accurate determination of the potential for an outside agent to do damage, while maximizing diagnosis accuracy and minimizing the number of false identifications. At the conclusion of the analysis, a practical tool will be developed in order to aid investigators and administrators in their quest to accurately identify potential attackers, thereby reducing the number of false-positive identifications while maximizing diagnosis accuracy and, hence, targeted violence prevention. The developed instrument will be a set of documents offering guidance on practical considerations of warning signs and actual criteria to be considered. The successful development of such a tool, it is hoped, will greatly increase the accuracy of threat assessment by users in the field.

### **Scope of the Study**

Risk assessment and threat assessment are not interchangeable analyses. Whereas risk assessment has traditionally been used in rehabilitation programs associated with sex offenders, violent prisoners, and the mentally ill, the practice primarily served as a prediction tool used to forecast the likelihood of future offending by those exhibiting certain characteristics. Threat assessment, meanwhile, seeks to intervene when a violent incident, believed to be the product of dynamic circumstances which are constantly in flux, point toward impending violence (Harris &

Lurigio, 2012). For the purposes of this study, threat assessment principles will be utilized exclusively, with the realization that some qualities of each discipline may overlap to some degree.

The primary focus of the study is on the development of an assessment tool that will incorporate evidence-based considerations from the USSS and FBI threat assessment models, allowing evaluators responsible for the assessment of threats in the field the ability to accurately gauge the lethality of concerning behaviors and threats. The tool will allow for the concise application of the most accurate principles gathered from each method, eliminating the confusion that often accompanies the usability of three separate and distinct frameworks.

The utilization of information derived from the tool and the application of subsequent interventions aimed at preventing targeted violence, however, are for future study and are not a central focus of this paper. Developing user guidelines for the administration of the developed tool is another topic that is too broad for current study. The scope of the current study is to accurately identify the factors that should be considered when performing a threat assessment process so that a concise instrument can be developed to perform the assessment in a uniform process that considers valid criteria. The actual implementation of the instrument and associated variables that will undoubtedly surface are matters for future study. Similarly, discussion about the interventions available for those identified as threatening, which are unique to local jurisdictions, is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus of the current study is simply on the development of an instrument, initially in the form of a paper packet (and potentially developing into an online tool) to aid in the assessment of concerning behaviors. The tool developed here will provide a baseline opportunity for individuals to make initial assessments of lethality at the onset of threatening circumstances. That assessment can be used to help determine if a threat

assessment team should convene for further discussion and analysis. Threat assessment teams, if gathered, can subsequently use the same tool later in the process to re-evaluate known data. Intervention options, to be decided by the threat assessment team, are beyond the scope of this study. Steps to implement the findings of the tool and options to address those identified as threats to the safety of others will be the subject of future study.

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework**

Social bonding theory, part of Travis Hirschi's 1969 social control theory, holds that deviance is affected in part by one's bonds to society and, comparatively, the connections those bonds have to societal norms. Believing all people are compelled equally to deviate from social norms, Hirschi argued that inhibitors restrain some people from carrying out the deviance. Strong bonds to society and related behavioral expectations, one of the inhibitors, prevents some people from violating the norms. Social bonding theory, then, asserts that deviance can be deterred if such bonds are present (Fukushima & Sharp, 2009). The literature supports the notion that increased social integration is negatively associated with criminality (Doherty, 2006). The applicability of social bonding theory is important because school climates are essential factors to prevent targeted violence in the future. The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) conducted by the USSS and DOE examined previous attacks at schools and concluded, among other things, that many of the shooters felt alienated because of losses experienced in their lives and were frequently bullied (Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008). Climates tolerating bullying, aggression, and biases are more likely to ostracize some students, increasing the chances of targeted violence developing (Pittaro, 2007).

At the National School Safety Conference hosted by the Safe Schools Advocacy Council in Las Vegas, NV from July 22-26, 2013, Dr. Birgit Pfeifer from Windesheim University (Netherlands) spoke about a study she performed on the writings left behind by seven school shooters involved in six shootings. In her analysis, Pfeifer found isolation and identity to be two existential concerns linked to targeted violence. The isolation expressed in the writings is a common form of leakage associated with targeted violence. The isolation exhibited in the writings portrayed a desire to connect with others along with consistent themes of social rejection, and was present in five of the six cases evaluated by Pfeifer. All of the six cases also suggested that the social identity of the shooters was routinely in question, according to the authors' comments, as they struggled to interpret their place in the world. Narcissistic feelings of superiority were found to be natural responses to the rejection (Pfeifer, 2013).

Dr. Scott Poland, a professor and co-director of the Suicide and Prevention Office at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, also spoke at the 2013 conference where he identified three types of school shooters, all of whom exhibit limited bonds to others. The psychotic shooter, according to Poland, has a warped sense of reality as a result of mental illness. The psychopathic shooter, meanwhile, has few connections to others and, similar to Dr. Pfeifer's findings, exhibits feelings of superiority. The third type identified by Poland, the traumatized shooter, feels aloof and alienated from peers because of life events, which often include bullying. Poland also identifies bullying prevention programs as key components to prevent future targeted violence in schools, which is consistent with previous research which found that most school shooters were angry with others who bullied or alienated them. A lack of remorse for shooting victims is believed to be related to the shooters' lack of moral belief in social norms because of such disconnection (Pittaro, 2007).

The USSS and FBI models of threat assessment mention the social ecology of schools as being a vital piece of the prevention puzzle. Peer mediation and conflict resolution are essential components that must be in place to foster climates of inclusion and acceptance, thereby increasing social bonds (Augustyniak, 2005). Bullying prevention, in fact, is one of the 10 key findings of the SSI (Fein et al., 2002). Precipitating stressors to violent events such as alienation, failure, and humiliation, which are thought to be triggers that can combine with underlying personality traits to launch the planning stage of targeted violence, may be prevented through environments rich in social cohesion (O'Toole, 1999).

### **Overview of Methodology**

Methodology used here will involve a meta-analysis conducted on available research regarding existing studies analyzing the accuracy and validity of threat assessment approaches. Likewise there are, as mentioned above, varying paradigms that serve as the foundation for, and the subsequently different approaches of, the models being examined here. The FBI and USSS are responsible for the design, development, and implementation of two models. Existing scholarly sources will be reviewed and analyzed to describe and evaluate best practices of threat assessment. The sources will be evaluated and critiqued to aid in the identification of an effective threat assessment approach that is supported by empirical evidence of effectiveness.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

### Overview of Targeted Violence

Targeted violence, a term added to the global lexicon in somewhat recent history, refers to acts of violence performed at specific times, at specific places, and for specific purposes, hence supporting the origin of the term which is used to note violence that is targeted instead of random. The violence can take many forms and may be brought on with any number of weapons, instruments, or methods (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). An active shooter, a term often used in multiple contexts, specifically refers to targeted violence that is generated by the use of firearms. An active shooter is “[a]n individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area” (Blair & Schweit, 2014, p. 5).

The FBI recognizes eleven categories of locations typically selected by perpetrators when planning and performing targeted violence. Seeking to inflict as many casualties as possible, perpetrators often target commercial areas (malls, areas with pedestrian traffic, and areas without pedestrian traffic), educational settings (K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade schools, and institutions of higher education), open spaces, government locations (military and other), residences, religious locations, and health care facilities (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Targeted violence by school shooters is a particularly shocking crime that further amplifies lethality and public dismay because the perpetrators intentionally select school staff members, children, and young adults as their targets (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Because children are targeted in school settings, it is perhaps the most appalling location for such violence.

## **Frequency and Nature of Targeted Violence**

The proliferation and saturation of media coverage of all targeted violence incidents, and school shooters specifically, may distort the perception of the frequency and likelihood of such incidents occurring. The reality is that violence perpetuated by juveniles has been decreasing since 1993 (O'Toole, 1999). Official statistics on the prevalence or likelihood of being the victim of a threat of or actual targeted violence in a school vary according to sources. There are an estimated 53 million (Randazzo, et al., 2015) to 60 million (Fein et al., 2002) students attending 119,000 schools in the US. The odds of a child dying in a school shooting are estimated at 1 in 2 million (Reddy, et al., 2001), 1 in a million (Pittaro, 2007), or 1 in 2.5 million (Poland, 2013). The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 20,260 threats to attack with a weapon were made nationwide during the 2007-2008 school year, while 461,910 threats to attack without a weapon were made (Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012). Nearly half of all public schools handled non-weaponized threats, while 9.3% of schools reported threats involving weapons that year (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012). According to the Center for Disease Control, increasing numbers of children from 1991 to 2003 reported staying home from school because of feelings of insecurity caused by targeted violence (Randazzo, et al., 2015). It is important to remember, however, that while students frequently report concerns about being victimized at school, these types of incidents are exceptionally rare comparatively (Harris & Lurigio, 2012)

According to a study of 3,756 Virginia high school students by Nekvasil and Cornell (2012), threats are relatively common in high schools, though they are seldom carried out and rarely result in injury to others. Students were asked to complete the School Climate Bullying Survey to assess their experiences with threats. They were asked to share how often they were threatened (frequency and severity) while also reporting whether the threats resulted in any

actions against them (outcome). The assessment was supplemented with open ended questions relating to the reporting or lack thereof of the threats, the inclusion of an Aggressive Attitudes scale, a measure of substance abuse, and a general school climate survey. The results indicate that most students were not threatened recently, only a portion experienced actual acts against them, and most of those threatened did not report the threats. Most of the students (88%) reported not being threatened in the last month. Of those students threatened, less than half (45%) reported the threats being carried out. Most of the students experiencing actual acts against them after being threatened (69%) did not report the threats because they either feared retaliation or thought they could resolve the matters on their own. A small number of all threats (26.4%) were reported. The authors concluded, similar to other expert opinions, that specific threats to injure, largely considered substantive threats in the assessment process, are 10 times more likely to be carried out than vague or indirect (transient) threats, an important distinction to consider when deciding whether to report threats.

Despite the public alarm caused by school violence, the actual odds of being the victim of targeted violence in schools remain low. A 2014 study conducted by the FBI identified 160 active shooting incidents that occurred between 2000 and 2013, of which only 39 (24%) took place in educational settings and only 27 (17%) occurred in elementary, middle, or high schools. Violence in educational settings was second to violence in commercial settings. Commercial shootings occurred 73 times (46%) during the period. The remainder of the shootings took place in government locations (10%), open spaces (9%), residences (4%), religious settings (4%), and health care facilities (3%). The 39 school incidents were associated with 117 deaths and 120 people injured. From the estimated 53-60 million student population in 119,000 schools, pre-school through high school settings accounted for 57 fatalities and 60 people injured. Of those

incidents, 14 were at high schools, 6 were at middle schools, 4 occurred in elementary settings, and 1 was at a pre-school (Blair & Schweit, 2014).

In a similar study of targeted attacks between 1974 and 2000, the USSS discovered that 37 incidents met the definition of targeted violence in schools (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The agency concluded that in 27 of the attacks more than one student was killed. Most of the incidents involved the intentional targeting of at least one school administrator or teacher, whereas students were targeted in less than half of the events (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

The relatively recent concern produced by the actual or perceived threat of targeted violence in schools has contributed largely to the development of law enforcement protocols and procedures that are outside of traditional practices. Responding to the possibility of targeted violence, whether likely or not, requires law enforcement agencies to re-examine existing mindsets and assumptions, as targeted violence presents “challenges that require a departure from traditional law enforcement practices, new paradigms, additional resources, and new skill sets for police personnel” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 51). The result of the recent increase in targeted violence incidents in schools relative to other periods in history, even if still a remote possibility at any given location, is an enhanced emphasis on preventing future school violence episodes. Public safety personnel and community resources are thus tasked with adopting measures to mitigate, if not prevent, targeted violence episodes.

### **The Origins of Threat Assessment**

The threat assessment ideology, developed in response to an increasing trend of targeted violence, was conceptualized and refined by the USSS to manage attacks against public figures.

In a 1992 study of 83 perpetrators who either attacked public figures or were prevented from attacking officials, the USSS released the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), which examined the behavior of attackers since 1949 (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). The report, which sought to aid in the prevention of future attacks by understanding past attackers, concluded that attackers varied in composition and characteristics, the profiling of past and future attackers is risky and often inaccurate, and many attackers displayed discernible patterns of behavior prior to the attacks. In other words, the profile of past attackers was so varied that profiling future attackers was difficult if even possible. However, past attackers displayed identifiable patterns of behavior (preparation) prior to the attacks, leading experts to believe that recognizing such behavior through threat assessment processes may be the key to anticipating future attacks. The USSS eventually expanded the use of threat assessment principles from assassination prevention to school and workplace violence prevention (Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

The adoption of threat assessment principles by law enforcement agencies was a shift from the practice's historical use in dignitary protection. Reddy et al. defined general threat assessment as “[a] set of operational activities that combine the use of an investigative process and information-gathering strategies with targeted violence-relevant questions” (2001, p. 168). Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden, meanwhile, described law enforcement's use of threat assessment as “[t]he set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators” (1995, p. 2). Identifying threat assessment as “[a]n idiographic, fact-based, dynamic and behavioral method of assessing low base rate violence risk toward an identified target,” O’Toole (1999, p. 513) highlighted leakage, or the discernible behavior or words that are evident prior to attacks, as being key components to threat assessment success. That conclusion

was consistent with the conclusion of the ECSP. In perhaps the most succinct definition of threat assessment, Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, and Fan characterized the general process as “[e]valuating a threat and the circumstances surrounding the threat to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out” (2009, p. 120). Specific to schools, threat assessment is viewed as a problem-solving intervention, often involving conflict resolution (Cornell et al., 2012), which can be used when someone poses a threat, whether through words or actions, to the institution (Education, 2010).

In a joint effort between the USSS and DOE, the agencies analyzed the applicability of threat assessment practices and concluded that the primary purpose of the process is on the prevention of targeted violence, not on the disciplining of attackers. The process exists to gather information, evaluate the facts, and determine as accurately as possible if the person poses a threat. An important distinction must be made between those who make threats and those who pose threats. Not all attackers make threats and not all threats lead to attacks (Fein et al., 2002). It is estimated that making a threat, a form of leakage, occurs in 63% of all public figure assassinations, 67% of adult mass murders, and, relating to most school acts of targeted violence, 58% of adolescent mass murders (Meloy & O’Toole, 2011). The ECSP concluded that 66% of would-be assassins of public figures made either implicit or explicit threats before the acts, while nearly 80% engaged in planning activities beforehand (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). Threat assessment processes are thus tasked with identifying threatening people through either leakage or threats and intervening to prevent targeted attacks, realizing at the same time that some threats lead to actual attacks, some who threaten do not actually attack, and some who attack do not threaten (Fein et al., 1995). It is a challenging task.

## **Early Approaches to Assessing Threats**

Traditional attempts at identifying and managing threats of targeted violence in the schools typically take one of three forms. One approach, that of profiling past attackers in an attempt to identify future attackers, was made popular by FBI profiling efforts in cold case crimes. Profiling past attackers requires investigators to work backward from crime scenes to possible suspects, making the technique minimally applicable to targeted violence prevention. This prospective technique, which uses characteristics of previous offenders to forecast future offenders, has shown limited value in threat mitigation because targeted violence perpetrators do not have true profiles. In other words, the literature to date has not identified a narrow set of characteristics that can be used to identify future perpetrators with any degree of accuracy (Reddy, et al., 2001). Attempting to identify profiles of future attackers with the current extent of available research contains a high risk of generating false positives (identifying innocuous people as threatening) and false negatives (failing to identify perpetrators who are threatening). The low base rate of targeted violence incidents and the developing field of research limit the current ability to identify future offenders (Randazzo, et al., 2015).

Automated decision making, the second approach, involves actuarial (statistical) methods of evaluating risk factors to determine the likelihood of attack. Actuarial equations used to forecast behavior based on risk factors are rooted in statistical probabilities that are empirically validated and proven to be accurate. This technique, according to current research, is viewed as being as accurate as human judgment when there is a high enough frequency of occurrence “to permit statistically derived prediction” (Reddy et al., 2001, p. 166). In other words, when a sample of behaviors is large enough to contain identified patterns of behavior that can be analyzed statistically, probabilities of future behaviors can be predicted by examining risk factors

about as accurately as using human judgment. Because base rates, or the frequency of targeted violence acts, are so low, however, actuarial methods of threat assessment have not been established and may not be accurate indicators of actual attack probability. Accordingly, this actuarial method of targeted violence assessment is still developing (Randazzo, et al., 2015) because a consensus on the method's validity pertaining to targeted violence has not been reached yet (Reddy, et al., 2001).

The third method, assessing risk through professional judgment and mental health assessments, is also called clinical assessment. The process, as the name implies, involves the structured assessment and evaluation of potential perpetrators by trained mental health professionals, comparing the people of concern against others in similar populations. While the process has shown some validity compared to unstructured (informal) assessments, there is a concern as to whether the science, traditionally used to assess the risk of general violence, can be accurately applied to assess targeted violence, largely due to the relative newness and low base rates of target violence episodes (Reddy, et al., 2001). Many mental health practitioners, moreover, do not have any formal training in violence risk assessment or prediction (Randazzo, et al., 2015). However, the use of trained psychologists, whether employed by school districts or working in the community, is generally recognized as an important piece of the threat assessment puzzle because clinicians trained in the scientific understanding of human behavior offer a strong opportunity to identify students moving toward targeted violence so that intervention and mitigation steps can then be administered (Patrasso, 2005).

The use of threat assessment processes represents a fourth method to manage targeted violence. Threat assessment processes supplement traditional responses to crime. Historical retributive deterrents such as prison sentences do not mitigate targeted violence episodes because

offenders do not plan to survive the acts and are not dissuaded by punitive consequences, considering their acts to be statements of superiority meant to end in death. As a result, law enforcement agencies often lack clear options for the identification, evaluation, and prevention of targeted violence acts. The threat assessment process offers an avenue to properly assess and respond to such behavior, though it represents a paradigm shift for many agencies. Whereas traditional law enforcement practices involve gathering, documenting, and evaluating information, threat assessment involves identifying, assessing, and managing threatening behaviors (Borum et al., 1999).

Four principles form the basis for the threat assessment process. It is important for users of the process to understand the principles during assessments. First, targeted violence is viewed as the culmination of a process of behaviors more than the performance of an isolated act (Fein et al., 1995). It is generally not a spontaneous or impulsive act (Borum et al., 1999). This consideration is important because recognizing the “process” may provide a window to preventing the violence because recognizing the patterns of behavior associated with the process is critical to targeted violence prevention. Second, the final behavior demonstrated as violence is the result of the combination of conflict and related failure (Fein et al., 1995). The interaction between the person and the environment, to include the target, requires assessors to make a contextual evaluation of the circumstances when appraising the likelihood of violence emerging. Violence is the result of the interaction between the person, circumstantial stimuli, and environmental factors. Suspects with inadequate coping mechanisms who are presented with overwhelming influence from these factors may become physically or mentally ill, self-destructive, or violent (Borum et al., 1999). Third, identifying a suspect’s abnormal actions and behaviors resulting from the earlier principles is a key to the success of the threat assessment

process. By identifying telling actions before attacks erupt, officials can offer intervention and prevention strategies to avoid violence. The fourth principle, holding that interventions will be more effective if implemented by multiple disciplines, follows the precept that multi-disciplinary approaches offer the most hope for successful intervention and problem resolution. For example, school resources or conflict resolutions may allow for support services to be implemented in the educational setting. Mental health services can be offered in clinical or counseling settings to address existing cognitive deficiencies. Law enforcement interventions allow for court-ordered treatment services to be instituted for mental health, chemical, or behavioral concerns. Utilizing multi-faceted interventions are more effective and target a wider variety of conditions than relying on one intervention source exclusively (Fein et al., 1995).

### **Three Phases of Threat Assessment**

The framework of the threat assessment process generally has three phases. In the first phase, identification, assessors are tasked with recognizing those who, based on changes in behaviors, appear to pose a threat to others (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). The intent to attack is often identified by acquaintances who are familiar with the daily habits of perpetrators and who, whether consciously or subconsciously, notice cues that may be indicative of planning or preparation for impending attack. With the establishment of a threat assessment process, the hope is that many of those acquaintances, such as friends, teachers, school resource officers, or family members, will make the behaviors known to members of the assessment team because of the availability of a process to assess them. Once the process becomes commonplace, people may be more likely to share the information as a matter of routine (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Assessment, the second phase, involves the evaluation of whether further investigation is required. The threat's validity and likely lethality is appraised according to available data. A threat demonstrating serious concern should result in a thorough investigation, while a threat appearing transient may be resolved with less inquiry. A person learning of a concerning statement or action, for example, must make an initial evaluation of the information to determine the next step, if any, in the process. Words or actions that are clearly minor, or transient, may be dismissed with minimal or no intervention being offered. Such decisions are made every day in schools. If presented information is somewhat concerning or clearly concerning, called substantive, the threat assessment inquiry should continue. The threat assessment team should assemble to thoroughly discuss the need for further inquiry or investigation of the circumstances. The threat assessment team can decide to end the inquiry and implement suggested interventions at this step or assign the matter to one of the team members, typically law enforcement, to conduct a complete investigation. Intervention options are selected at the conclusion of inquiries or investigations (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Managing the threat, the third and last phase, involves taking steps to prevent the execution of targeted violence and may, depending on specific facts, involve a plethora of intervention options ranging from law enforcement action, continued monitoring, or social service intervention (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). Specific interventions are dependent on local resources. Intervention options centered on reformation and communication, however, are shown to be more effective than zero-tolerance programs based on discipline (Cornell & Allen, 2011). Effective threat assessment applications tend to be restorative more than punitive, especially when coupled with appropriate intervention options. An analysis of two field tests, one study, and one quasi-experimental study of schools using the Virginia Student Threat Assessment

Guidelines, for example, concluded that districts using the aforementioned threat assessment techniques were less likely to use punitive measures as interventions and were more likely to use reformatory approaches. Moreover, the use of reformatory methods resulted in lower rates of bullying and fewer suspensions in the future. Punitive measures, when utilized, resulted in increased feelings of disengagement for perpetrators and higher levels of bullying and suspensions thereafter (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

The threat assessment process may be simple or complex, relatively brief, or extremely prolonged depending on the facts presented at the time. It involves examining situations more than individual suspects and seeks above all else to determine if perpetrators are moving toward or away from attack (Fein et al., 2002). The emphasis with threat assessment is on preventing targeted violence more than attempting to predict it. The process operates on the belief, according to available research, that aggressors cannot be profiled, there has to be a distinction maintained between making a threat and posing a threat, and targeted violence is generally not an impulsive act (Randazzo, et al., 2015). Targeted violence is furthermore viewed as a dynamic event, influenced “by the perpetrator’s views of the target and situational variables” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 54). Those variables involve the complex and dynamic characteristics consistent with any social situation, otherwise referred to as situational contexts.

## **Leakage**

Leakage, a term introduced by Mary Ellen O’Toole in 2000, is a label used to describe information or behaviors conveyed by potential attackers to third parties during the planning and implementation phases of targeted violence. Forms of leakage consist of, among others, emails,

texts, tweets, excited or spontaneous utterances, blog postings, videos, and traditional letters or journals. Any form of communication, to include observable behaviors that may alert others, provides an opportunity for leakage to surface. It can be done intentionally or inadvertently and generally occurs because of a suspect's need for excitement, attention, fear or anxiety, sense of invincibility, or the desire to frighten potential victims. It is not, however, generally done as a cry for help or as a passive signal of the desire to be caught (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Leakage is a type of warning behavior, a broader subset of activities, which can signal that targeted violence may be planned. Warning behaviors are defined as “[a]ny behavior that precedes an act of targeted violence, is related to it and may, in certain cases, predict it” (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011, p. 514). The USSS refers to warning behaviors as any action that signals an attack, while the FBI classifies “forecasting behaviors” as either direct or indirect (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldimann, & James, 2011). They are often dynamic and rapidly-changing, requiring assessors to consider the totality of the circumstances around them when attempting to determine the lethality, validity, and credibility of their presence. The investigation of warning behaviors may lead to the recognition of other warning behaviors, while the failure to recognize them may lead to missing other warning signs (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Meloy and O'Toole (2011) identified eight types of warning behaviors that should be recognized by assessors. Pathway warning behaviors are those activities associated with the planning and implementation of an attack. They are most evident during the preparatory phase of the attack. Any activity that hints at planning or implementing an attack is a pathway behavior and should be evaluated seriously. Fixation warning behaviors are associated, as the name implies, with the preoccupation suspects may have with victims. Obsessive behaviors may be a sign of an abnormal connection being perceived by an attacker and should not be dismissed

lightly. Identification warning behaviors, meanwhile, involve an attacker having a warrior mentality or any other characterization associated with violence, a potential sign that there may be existential concerns relating to identity. If a suspected perpetrator identifies with a violent cause, set of people, or especially previous school shooters, an identification warning behavior is present. The fourth type of warning behavior, novel aggression, involves acts of violence unrelated to planned attacks on potential victims. The violent acts may be tests by the attacker to see if violence on a larger scale can be carried out and may be a sign that other violence is imminent. Energy burst warning behaviors are any activity, violent or not, toward potential victims. These activities point to fascination with the victims and should be evaluated accordingly. Leakage warning behaviors, the sixth type, occur when any intent to harm victims is leaked by attackers. As noted previously, leakage behaviors are often present in targeted violence incidents because the incidents are almost always planned instead of being spontaneous. Leakage behaviors are regarded by the USSS model as one of the strongest signs that an attack is possible. As the name implies, directly communicated warning behaviors occur when direct threats are made toward victims. The FBI model considers threats to be a primary indicator of impending attack. The final type of behavior, last resort warning behaviors, typically involve desperation from attackers as they declare their intent to attack whether through words or actions.

Leakage is generally regarded as one of the strongest signs that an attack is imminent, offering opportunities for recognition, intervention, and prevention. Leakage, which can take any number of forms, is believed to occur in the majority of targeted violence incidents (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) concluded, in fact, that bystanders of historical targeted violence acts to date often had knowledge of the attacks beforehand (Pollack et al., 2008). These behaviors can be evaluated during the assessment process to hopefully identify,

recognize, and prevent pending targeted violence. The use of the warning behaviors, including leakage, has not been evaluated empirically, meaning that predictive validity from their use has not yet been established (Meloy et al., 2011), though their recognition represent a primary tool for the threat assessment process.

### **Threat Considerations and Classifications**

The proper recognition, identification, interpretation, and evaluation of warning behaviors, including threats and related actions, are powerful tools in the quest to mitigate or eliminate the harm caused by targeted violence. The FBI defines a threat as “[a]n expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something. It can be spoken, written, or symbolic” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 6). In that context, the terms “threat” and “warning behavior” can be used interchangeably because they are meant to capture the same threatening behavior commonly associated with the precursors of attack.

Identifying threatening words and behaviors is important because, while it is common for either to be present before an attack, it is not common to have both present. Assessors must realize that not all attacks are precipitated by threats and all threats do not lead to attacks. The USSS, for example, evaluated 43 incidents involving attacks on public figures over the previous 50 years and concluded that none of the attackers made threats prior to the attacks (Borum et al., 1999). The FBI, in fact, lists two principles of threat assessment to that end. The first principle holds that threats and those who threaten are not created equally and should be evaluated as such. The second principle, that most threats are not carried out, further supports the notion that the assessment of all warning behaviors requires the careful evaluation of the totality of

circumstances to properly guide responses. Because threats are made for a variety of reasons, understanding the reasons is critical for proper evaluation (O'Toole, 1999).

Threats can be direct, indirect, veiled, or conditional. Direct threats, as the name implies, involve specific intent to harm a specific victim. Indirect threats are vague, often consisting of ambiguous comments. Veiled threats, meanwhile, have implications of potential violence without directly containing it. Conditional threats, the last type, often include terms, demands, or extortion as part of the message. The associated risk of the respective threats is categorized as low, medium, or high. Low risk threats involve vague, indirect, or inconsistent information. The classification of threats is low when, based on the totality of the content, the threats are highly unlikely to be carried out. Medium risk, however, is present when the plausibility of execution is higher but still unlikely. Plausibility is affected by, among other factors, such things as time and place, direct or indirect information, the amount of apparent thought put into planning, and motive to act. High risk threats, the most concerning type, are those that appear plausible, direct, specific, and imminent (O'Toole, 1999). It is generally agreed upon that specific threats, as opposed to transient threats, are more serious. Similarly, direct threats are regarded as more concerning than indirect, veiled, or conditional (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012).

One of the first steps in the threat assessment process involves classifying threats or warning behaviors as transient or substantive. Transient behaviors, the less concerning of the two, involve those actions that do not exhibit a lasting or sustained level of intent to harm (Cornell et al., 2004) and hence may require less action in response to them (Cornell & Allen, 2011). Substantive threats, meanwhile, often require a more thorough response and investigation because they represent a sustained, concerning effort to harm others. They are frequently characterized by presumptive indicators of lethality, though a complete list of said indicators has

not been established. Substantive threats, though, are generally believed to contain specific details, repeated behaviors, evidence of planning, leakage, and instruments of intent such as weapons (Cornell et al., 2004). Specific threats containing specific information are generally regarded as more lethal (O'Toole, 1999). Evaluating threats during the assessment process requires investigative skill, corroboration of information, and, above all, common sense (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). Because corroborated information is more credible than independent facts, the evaluation of threats or concerning behaviors should be done by analyzing the facts of the circumstances, considering the background of the threat source, evaluating all behaviors related to the threat, evaluating possible motives for attack, and weighing the reason and justification for target selection (Borum et al., 1999). The prevention of targeted violence may depend on the ability to accurately identify, assess, and respond to clues of impending attack, requiring assessors to evaluate the veracity and lethality of threatening words and behaviors before attackers reach the implementation phase of the plan (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999).

### **Factors to Consider in Threat Assessment**

Risk factors in targeted violence threat assessment typically fall into one of four categories: behavioral, social, environmental, or pathological. The evaluation of threatened violence requires assessors to consider the impact of all four categories on perpetrators when appraising the lethality and possibility of violence. Failing to do so may limit the effectiveness of threat assessment teams while increasing the odds that planned violence could be initiated undetected (O'Toole, Mary Ellen, 1999).

Compared to risk evaluations performed in other settings, the population of offenders responsible for committing targeted violence in school settings appears to be unique. Whereas many traditional criminal offenders tend to be minorities from disadvantaged backgrounds with prior criminal records, perpetrators responsible for school attacks are often middle class white students with few prior acts of violence, realizing, as stated earlier, that there is no true profile of active shooters (Pittaro, 2007). That is an interesting trend not seen in other crimes. In criminological circles, it is generally held that previous violence is at least a fair indicator of future violence. The FBI determined, however, that perpetrators of targeted violence in schools do not support that hypothesis. Most attackers to date, in fact, did not have prior violent behavior in their backgrounds (Augustyniak, 2005). Therefore, it may be more important to evaluate the personalities of potential perpetrators more than prior behaviors. Coping skills, internal resiliencies, the ability to handle failure, aspects of self-control, and relative degrees of anger, among others, may be better signs of how potential perpetrators view the world while forming their sense of self, especially in developing adolescents who are in a constant state of emotional, physical, and psychological development (O'Toole, 1999).

Social control theorists believe that dysfunctional behavior emerges when social bonds are weakened (Pittaro, 2007). Bonds to conventional society can be affected by a number of social and environmental experiences such as violence in the home, exposure to media violence, a lack of nurturing or respectful environments, peer abandonment, and emotional abuse, among others (Fein et al., 2002). Abused and neglected children, for example, have a 53% higher chance of being arrested as juveniles and a 38% higher likelihood of being arrested as adults (Augustyniak, 2005). The USSS concluded that a majority of active shooters were bullied, abused, injured, and persecuted prior to committing their acts. The subsequent violence is often

the result of a dynamic interaction between individuals, settings, and social situations, causing some to react violently, especially if they possess poor coping skills or a lack of strong social connections with influential adults (Fein et al., 2002). Precipitating stressors, defined as “incidents, circumstances, reactions, or situations which can trigger a threat” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 8) have varied impacts on perpetrators and are dependent on each person’s underlying temperament, resiliencies, and personality traits. While the pathology of perpetrators is a piece of the threat assessment equation, the social ecology of environments, especially in schools, is regarded as a more influential component of targeted violence prevention (Augustyniak, 2005).

Pathological deficiencies in the form of low IQs, neurological abnormalities, and hormonal imbalances comprise part of the list of risk factors correlated with active shooters (Pittaro, 2007). After the publication of the SSI in 2002, the medical community recognized the need to establish a suitable reserve of psychologists capable of assessing students prone to school violence. The threat assessment process highlights the need to have assessments completed by qualified personnel. When life events challenge the resiliencies of people and coping mechanisms fail or are no longer effective, some people can become psychotic, physically ill, self-destructive, or violent toward others (Borum et al., 1999). There are three instruments currently used by mental health professionals to assess students during the threat assessment process. The FBI contends, however, that school psychologists are not qualified to conduct such assessments and that such analyses must be completed by qualified practitioners in the field (Patrasso, 2005). The Children’s Depression Inventory is designed for 7-17 year olds and uses the Beck Inventory to measure one’s degree of depression. It also measures negative moods, interpersonal problems, feelings of ineffectiveness, anhedonia (inability to feel pleasure), and poor self-esteem. The Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, which assesses thoughts of suicide, is a

valid intervention used in threat assessment. The Adolescent Anger Rating Scale, as the name implies, measures a person's degree of anger in terms of frequency and intensity (Patrasso, 2005). Such tools may be important resources for threat assessment teams because the assessment and evaluation of potential active shooters represents a new challenge for school and law enforcement officials (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). Whereas the perpetrators of targeted violence may be a different kind of criminal than those responsible for traditional crimes, the need for accurate assessments by mental health professionals is necessary because actuarial (statistical) methods are unlikely to be developed in the near future. Furthermore, the extant literature on targeted violence, its causes, and its prevention is in its infancy, offering very little generalizability about accurate mental health evaluations relating to it (Borum et al., 1999).

### **Principles of Risk Assessment**

It is important to specify the difference between threat assessment and risk assessment. Whereas both assessments involve the utilization of professional judgment based on known or suspected criteria, each has its own unique qualities and purposes. Risk assessment, typically conducted by professionals in the mental health field, is defined as “[a] series of tools and practices employed by forensic and criminal justice professionals to gauge the risk of interpersonal violence posed by individuals with particular characteristics” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 55) and is typically used to manage sex offenders, people with mental illness, and chronic violent offenders. Risk assessment has historically been used by mental health practitioners to predict risk toward others, recidivism likelihood, discharge readiness, and future treatment needs to prevent future victimizations. Correctional personnel have likewise used risk assessment methods to determine prisoner worthiness for release, participation in specialty

courts, and other sentencing considerations. Applications to targeted violence incidents are relatively new for law enforcement but are necessary and increasing in frequency because of pressure on agencies to become more proactive to prevent the acts. Law enforcement, mental health professionals, and school administrators looking for innovative ways to curb targeted violence in schools are considering risk assessment options (Borum et al., 1999).

Questions remain, however, whether risk assessment practices are applicable to targeted violence. Risk assessment, using inductive methods based on risk indicators supported by research, is different than threat assessment, which uses primarily deductive methods to assess circumstantial factors. Risk assessment focuses on previous behaviors while evaluating psychological characteristics. Threat assessment, meanwhile, is more concerned with present behaviors and triggers that could incite violence. Risk assessment tends to be more static, actuarial (statistical), and prediction-oriented, while threat assessment leans toward being more dynamic, subjective, and management-oriented. Risk assessment concerns itself more with the characteristics of the person. Threat assessment concerns itself more with environmental circumstances (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). According to Meloy et al., “Risk assessment addresses different domains than threat assessment and typically relies on more historical and dispositional (status) variables” (2011, p. 2).

Risk factors are said to be static if they are unlikely to change. One’s gender is an example. Dynamic factors, meanwhile, are changeable. Drug use and a host of environmental influences are examples of dynamic factors. A recent shift in philosophy in the risk assessment field caused a change from reliance on dispositional (inherent in the individual), static, and dichotomous (present or not) factors to a recognition that factors tend to be contextual (circumstantial), dynamic, and continuous (varying). There is also disagreement over clinical

(judgmental) versus actuarial (statistical) methods in the field. Clinical assessments rely on risk determinations being made somewhat subjectively by trained clinicians. Actuarial assessments use statistical formulas in more of a mechanized approach to gauge risk. A concern about actuarial utilization is that actuarial methods and their applicability to risk assessment may not be fully developed. It is generally acknowledged that such methods can be used only when equations exist for and are applicable to a given assessment, and the equations are validated. The application to targeted violence risk assessment is still developing. Because of the low base rate of targeted acts, statistical formulas are not completely developed. Utilizing purely clinical techniques may be similarly limited because the tools used in such techniques, such as interviews and psychological tests, may provide only partial information. Many clinicians, therefore, use a combination of the techniques when performing risk assessments, using empirically-based practices while also basing decisions on clinical determinations (Borum et al., 1999).

### **Threat Assessment Teams**

The school threat assessment process was borne out of a joint effort between the USSS and DOE and is an extension of earlier threat assessment processes by the USSS designed to prevent the assassinations of public officials. The agencies began the Safe School Initiative (SSI) in 1999, which involved the study of 37 school shooting incidents between 1974 and 2000 and which represents the first empirical study to examine threat assessment in schools (Randazzo, et al., 2015), in an effort to explore applying previous threat assessment principles to schools. The SSI came to fruition through the USSS's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) and the DOE's Safe and Drug-Free Schools program. The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), meanwhile, conducted a 1998 study of 18 school shootings and,

following the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, convened a symposium of 160 participants from education and law enforcement to explore applying threat assessment principles in schools (Harris & Lurigio, 2012) and ultimately recommended using threat assessment teams as a key piece of the targeted violence prevention puzzle (Cornell et al., 2004). Targeted violence prevention is rooted in the belief that the identification, assessment, and management of threatening actions is the key to preventing future attacks. The threat assessment process represents a system to enable such analysis (Fein et al., 2002) and fills a need expressed in a 1998 letter from Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard Riley calling for “a comprehensive violence prevention plan” for every school (O’Toole, 1999, p. 5). There is little empirical analysis of threat assessment’s effectiveness, however, relating to the prevention of targeted violence incidents (Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

During its meeting in 1999, the FBI’s Critical Incident Response Group of the NCAVC, concluded that threat assessment teams, comprised of multidisciplinary members from schools, law enforcement, and mental health, should apply a four-pronged assessment model. Participants were encouraged to evaluate the personality and behavior of perpetrators, family dynamics, the culture of the schools, and the social dynamics of the communities surrounding them. The report, released in 2000, did not offer specific guidance on assessment techniques and cited a need for further evaluation of field test data before the recommendations could be further developed (Cornell et al., 2004). The USSS model, meanwhile, offers specific steps to be taken during the assessment process. The threat assessment team, typically chaired by a school administrator and comprised of participants from multiple disciplines to include law enforcement and mental health, begins the process when someone learns of a concern. The concern, generically called a threat, is evaluated preliminarily, with the perpetrator and witnesses being interviewed. After the

team assemblies, the threat is labeled as transient or substantive. Transient threats may be resolved quickly with such measures as reprimands, parental notifications, or other interventions. Substantive threats are labeled as serious or very serious. These threats require steps to protect victims, provide counseling, administer discipline, or notify parents. Law enforcement may be asked to complete formal investigations depending on the gravity of the circumstances. Implementing a safety plan, the last step, requires maintaining contact with perpetrators and victims while monitoring intervention efforts (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

Threat assessment teams are tasked with identifying, assessing, and managing threatening behaviors, a process also called the protective intelligence process (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). The SSI found that perpetrators of targeted violence in schools often travel similar paths en route to their acts. The pattern of behavior is referred to as a pathway to violence. The pathway consists of the idea to enact violence, the plan to carry it out, obtaining the means to make it happen, and implementing the actual attack. Threat assessment teams are designed to recognize the behavior, assess the gravity of the circumstances, and manage future actions to prevent targeted violence (Randazzo & Plummer, 1999). While each school district may have its own unique threat assessment process, some basic characteristics should encompass all of their procedures. Students of concern should be referred to a threat assessment team for evaluation. The team, comprised of professionals from multiple disciplines, should complete an assessment of the facts while weighing the totality of the circumstances. There should be a meeting with the student, parents, and staff members to relay concerns and discuss interventions. The interventions must then be decided and implemented (Patrasso, 2005). The threat assessment process helps ensure that perpetrators get the interventions they need while making sure students and staff members remain safe (O'Toole, 1999).

It is important to differentiate between a threat assessment inquiry and a threat assessment investigation. A threat assessment inquiry, typically initiated by a school representative who learns about concerning behaviors, is what initiates the assessment process and is a screening mechanism, often resulting in the assembly of the assessment team. The threat assessment inquiry begins when a person learning of a threat or concern performs an initial assessment of the information. If the threat is deemed transient, the inquiry may stop at this point with no further action taken or routine interventions implemented. If the threat's validity cannot be established or if the threat appears to be substantive, the threat assessment team should convene. The inquiry continues during the early stages of the team's meeting as members attempt to determine the validity and lethality of posed threats. A threat assessment investigation, meanwhile, is typically conducted by law enforcement after substantive threats have been labeled serious or very serious by the threat assessment team. Investigations do not occur unless inquiries deem them necessary. The scope of the investigation is typically determined by the findings of the assessment team's inquiry. Areas of concern are investigated using traditional investigative techniques to determine if the risk factors identified by the team as being substantive support initial concerns. Subsequent interventions required to mitigate the likelihood of threats being put into action are dependent upon local resources. The multidisciplinary threat assessment process may vary by jurisdiction, with some placing ownership and team control on school districts, some deciding to follow law enforcement's lead, and some sharing the leadership in more of a collaborative approach. While general recommendations for the threat screening and assessment process were given by the FBI and USSS, there is not one absolute method of operation within the described guidelines, leaving local jurisdictions latitude to assess and address threats according to the availability of local resources. It is vital, however, to have a

central point of contact in each jurisdiction so people, whether staff, students, or community members, know who to contact with concerns (Fein et al., 2002).

Given the relatively recent implementation of threat assessment principles in schools, there are not many empirical studies available on their use (Cornell et al., 2009). A few field tests, as compared to studies, are available, however. One such field test was conducted in central Virginia involving 16,273 students from 35 schools over a 1 year period. Conducted in 4 high schools, 6 middle schools, 22 elementary schools, and 3 alternative schools, threat assessment team members, guided by a pair of FBI agents and several state officials from juvenile justice serving as an advisory group, processed 188 threats during a school year. The threat assessment teams, per the FBI's guidelines, were trained on threat assessment practices and consisted of assistant superintendents, principals, school psychologists, school resource officer supervisors, special education staff members, and prosecutors. They developed a decision method comprised of triaging threats, classifying threats, and intervention implementation. During the triage phase, principals or assistant principals gathered information on threats in order to decide if the teams should meet. They erred on the side of meeting if ever in doubt. Teams then classified threats as transient or substantive based on available information. Interventions, which were stressed more than punitive measures, were implemented based on team discussions. School psychologists, who were instructed not to perform evaluations beyond their training, were provided an outline to use when evaluating perpetrators' mental status, stress, familial environments, and violent tendencies (Cornell et al., 2004).

Of the 188 threats evaluated during the study, 131 of them (70%) were labeled transient, while 57 (30%) were substantive. None of the threats were carried out. Exactly half of the threats resulted in students being suspended for short terms, 3 days or less, which are regarded as being

less punitive and more effective than long-term suspensions comprised of 5 days or more. Another 12 were placed in alternative settings. Only 3 students were expelled. Of the 188 cases, 173 perpetrators were eventually able to return to their original schools. Following the resolution of all cases, principals reported improved behavior in 43% of the involved students. Behavior was classified as worse in 18% of the cases, pointing to potential benefits derived from the use of threat assessment teams when constructive interventions are used as compared to zero-tolerance policies. The results were potentially limited because principals did not receive any training on threat triage prior to the study. School psychologists, likewise, reported receiving no training on doing evaluations and may have exceeded their level of expertise despite warnings not to (Cornell et al., 2012). A secondary test added 68 cases involving special education students and determined that threat assessment principles work in that environment as well (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

Another field test of Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines was conducted in Virginia in a large urban school. The guidelines, which follow FBI and USSS recommendations for assessment team design and implementation and which focus on intervention more than punishment, utilize threat assessment teams in the framework developed to identify, assess, and manage threatening behavior. The field test involved 209 students and included 109 threats to kill. Almost half (49%) of the threats were resolved as transient. Interventions in the form of counseling and similar mechanisms were used in the other 51%. The majority of perpetrators, similar to the earlier field test, were able to return to their original schools (Cornell et al., 2012).

Another field test of the Virginia model, conducted in 2007, analyzed threat assessment results in 95 high schools using the model, 131 schools using a locally developed model, and 54 schools using no threat assessment model, for a total of 280 high schools. Staff members in the

95 schools using the Virginia model received 6 hours of training on the principles of threat assessment and had access to a 145 page manual outlining the priority of paying attention to bullying and conflict while deploying problem solving skills. Zero tolerance practices, which focus on punishment, were discouraged. The Virginia model adopted a 7 step decision tree following USSS and FBI guidelines: threats are labeled as (1) transient, or (2) punitive, (3) protective action is taken if substantive, (4) a safety evaluation is conducted, (5) law enforcement performs an investigation if warranted, (6) a mental health assessment is completed if applicable, and (7) a safety plan is implemented (Cornell et al., 2009). Students in schools using the Virginia model, with an emphasis on intervention instead of punishment, reported less bullying and more acceptance of intervention options than students in the other schools. The Virginia model schools, similar to the previous study, used fewer long term suspensions. Those schools were reported to have more positive climates according to a survey conducted with 7,318 random ninth grade students after the study. Staff members reported using punitive measures less frequently than staff members in schools using local models or no model. This matches the goals of the Virginia model: to use reformative practices involving fewer punitive approaches, encourage problem-solving, and work to improve student behavior (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

A similar quasi-experimental study of 23 high schools using the Virginia model and 26 schools serving as a control group revealed that of the schools using the Virginia model, 52% reported a reduction in the use of long-term suspensions and 79% reported bullying reduction post implementation, exceeding the results of the control group (Cornell et al., 2012). A study performed in Memphis involved 209 cases referred to threat assessment teams because school administrators at the 103 involved schools were considering long term suspensions, traditional responses to threatening behavior, as the discipline for the conduct. The assessment teams

developed individual plans for each case, using mental health and education resources to target deficiencies when identified. Staff members adjusted individual education plans, provided academic and behavioral supports, and sought out mental health services by practitioners in the community. Out of the 209 incidents involving 198 perpetrators, only 3 were confined and only 5 were displaced permanently from the schools. After the processes concluded, average referrals went down from 6.4 to 2.9 referrals per involved student (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

In what is considered the first experimental evaluation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, which again is an adoption of USSS and FBI recommendations, Cornell et al. (2012) analyzed the response to 201 students who made threats in 40 Virginia high schools. Schools were divided into a control group, which had not yet received training in Virginia model guidelines, and an intervention group comprised of schools receiving threat assessment training. Of the 201 threats, 100 of them were handled in intervention schools, while 101 of them were resolved by staff members in schools where training was set to be provided the following year. The schools were divided based on a coin toss. The researchers hypothesized, based on previous field studies, that intervention schools would be more likely to utilize mental health and parental supports and less likely to issue long term suspensions or alternative educational placements. They controlled for race, socioeconomic status, previous discipline records, the respective suspension rates and practices of involved schools, threat severity, and the fidelity of program implementation by staff members. Threats were categorized as transient, serious substantive, and very serious substantive. Participating staff members received a full day of training on the Virginia model, including the aforementioned decision tree. The multivariate pre and post-test measure was statistically significant, meaning staff members demonstrated a working knowledge of the Virginia model following the instruction. In the end the hypothesis was supported. Schools

utilizing the Virginia model were much less likely to impose long term suspensions and alternative placements while being much more likely to offer mental health intervention and parental support.

The research on the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines represents virtually all of the empirical research on threat assessment use in schools (Cornell et al., 2012). More randomized controlled trials are required to accurately measure the effectiveness of threat assessment principles (Cornell & Allen, 2011). While the success of the Virginia model is promising, it is possible that schools having positive cultures may be inherently more likely to implement restorative practices through threat assessment procedures. It is difficult to compare assessment implementations objectively because of nuances and unique qualities inherent with any program. Each threat assessment process is somewhat unique because the guiding principles of threat assessment do not dictate prescriptive procedures but simply serve as general practices to facilitate constructive decision making processes, leaving room for procedural interpretation and varying program designs according to the availability of local resources. Additional research is required to determine which mental health interventions and parental supports, for example, offer the best outcomes (Cornell et al., 2012). Because targeted violence is a relatively new phenomenon, responses to it are likewise in the developmental stage. Nonetheless, the use of threat assessment teams, according to current research, offers a promising option for the identification, evaluation, and management of potentially volatile circumstances. Its success, however, is dependent on the continued communication of information so that concerned participants can implement collaborative and outreach services to prevent targeted violence (Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

## **Development of Threat Assessment Models**

### **United States Secret Service / Department of Education Model**

The USSS, the agency responsible for the development of the threat assessment concept, initiated the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP) in 1992 to analyze the planned and completed attacks on public figures by 83 people since 1949. The project, completed in 1998 and leading to the creation of the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), sought to understand the mindsets and behaviors of those responsible for attacks in an attempt to prevent future attacks. It focused on seven questions according to Fein and Vossekuil (1998, p. 6):

- How did suspects develop the ideas?
- What were the motives?
- How were targets selected?
- How did the suspects plan attacks?
- What communications did the suspects make prior to the attacks?
- What role did mental illness play in the attacks?
- Were the suspects influenced by life events prior to the attacks?

The study used data that was “descriptive, demographic, historical, and related to the events and the days leading up to them” (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999, p. 321) before concluding that perpetrators’ characteristics varied, profiling future attackers is ineffective, and there were recognizable pre-attack patterns of behavior present in most cases. Based on these findings, the USSS developed a threat assessment model “that replaced the inductive and prediction-oriented method of risk assessment with a deductive, behaviorally-focused method of risk assessment” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 54).

The Safe School Initiative (SSI), a joint project between the USSS and DOE initiated immediately after the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 and released in 2002, built on

the work of the ECSP and sought to identify information that is “knowable” prior to attacks. Researchers involved in the SSI gathered investigative information from law enforcement and criminal justice agencies involved in investigating 37 previous attacks and interviewed 10 of the 41 attackers involved in them. Two reports were produced from the initiative. The report entitled *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* focused on prevention options. It recommended that officials should implement measures to detect and evaluate knowable information while employing threat assessment techniques to prevent targeted attacks. It concluded that very few perpetrators made threats prior to attacks. Detectable pre-attack behaviors, however, were present in 80% of cases. Based on these findings, the SSI concluded that threat assessment processes should be fact-based while evaluating behaviors instead of threats or traits. The project declared 10 key findings after extensive analysis of 37 incidents of targeted violence in schools between 1974 and 2000 (Fein et al., 2002). The following, according to Vossekul et al., (2002, p. 11-12), are the findings as published in the report:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
  
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers, 80%, engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

The second report compiled through the SSI, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, established guidelines for threat assessment based on the USSS's earlier ECSP project and existing knowledge of attacks on public figures. From information gathered through the SSI, the USSS modified its threat assessment process to make it applicable to schools. There are basic principles behind the USSS's threat assessment process. It is stressed that while some people who threaten violence actually carry it out, many who threaten it do not act, and many who act do not threaten it. Discernable patterns of behavior, however, preceded the attacks in 80% of the cases studied. The motives involved in attacks are the result of dynamic interactions between perpetrators, victims, and environments. Resiliencies and coping mechanisms available to perpetrators may influence aggression and whether it is carried out. When the defenses are inadequate to stressors, perpetrators are likely to become physically ill, psychotic, self-destructive, or violent. It is important, then, to consider when or if stressful events are likely to occur, how people in the environment respond, and how familiar the perpetrators are with victims' routines (Borum et al., 1999). According to Fein et al., (2002, p. 29) the principles of the USSS threat assessment process include:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
  - Individual: How has the perpetrator dealt with unbearably stressful situations?
  - Situation: Examine the life events that were stressful.
  - Setting: What is the culture of the setting at the time of behavioral concern?
  - Target: Is the target a specific person or group?
- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or "traits."

- An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.
- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student has made a threat.

An immediate threat assessment inquiry should be initiated when a relatively low threshold of concern is met. If the information during an inquiry indicates that the threat assessment team should assemble, the members, usually comprised of school officials, law enforcement, and mental health professionals (typically employed by schools), meet to finish the inquiry. Team members attempt to gather information on five areas. The facts of the case, specifically regarding potential victim(s) and related circumstances, are the obvious starting point for discussion. Information about the perpetrator and his/her connections to others is the second concern. The behaviors demonstrated to date, the third consideration, may, as the research suggests, be indicative of planning activities. Possible motives are the fourth element considered. The fifth point involves leakage and whether the perpetrator revealed possible targets to others. Potential sources of inquiry data, as listed in the literature, include information from school records and staff, collateral school interviews, parent interviews, perpetrator interviews, and target interviews (Fein et al., 2002). The information gathered during the inquiry should attempt to answer 11 questions developed for the threat assessment process (Fein et al., 2002, p. 55-57):

- What are the student's motive(s) and goals?
- Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or intent to attack?
- Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in any of the following?
  - School attacks
  - Weapons
  - Mass violence
- Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors? These behaviors might include developing an attack idea or plan; making efforts to acquire or practice

with weapons; casing, or checking out, possible sites and areas for attack; rehearsing attacks or ambushes.

- Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?
- Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation and/or despair?
- Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
- Does the student see violence as an acceptable—or desirable—or the only—way to solve problems?
- Is the student's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
- Are other people concerned about the student's potential for violence?
- What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

The inquiry conducted by the threat assessment team dictates whether an investigation, typically performed by law enforcement, is necessary in order to gather additional information. An investigation, if needed, may be launched to determine if a perpetrator poses a threat to others.

According to the framework developed by the USSS, managing the threat, the last step in the process, occurs after threat inquiries or investigations reveal relevant information to inform officials about the severity and gravity of the circumstances. Management of the situation seeks to mitigate if not prevent subsequent targeted violence. It involves, in short, controlling the circumstances to prevent an attack, protecting potential victims, and, also important, providing reparation services to potential perpetrators (Fein et al., 2002). The specific forms of intervention, however, are dependent upon local resources and are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **FBI Model**

Similar to the efforts of the USSS, the FBI launched a research initiative in 1998 to analyze the occurrences of targeted violence in schools in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of “the incident itself, and the shooter, his background, the school, and other

social dynamics which may have influenced the crime” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 1). Staff at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), with 25 years of threat assessment experience, reviewed 18 school shootings during the project, though the later report called *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* did not identify which shootings were selected for analysis. Targeted violence at Columbine High School in April, 1999 erupted during the initiative, causing the urgent organization of a symposium of 160 prosecutors, law enforcement officials, school administrators, educators, and mental health practitioners involved in the 18 events. The organizers specifically invited someone from each of the 18 schools who knew the perpetrators personally. Experts in the fields of violence, family dynamics, school dynamics, violence, and suicidology were also present (O’Toole, 1999). The tragedy at Columbine is generally regarded as the event responsible for accelerating the development of response and prevention options to reduce targeted violence in schools. According to Furlong, Bates, Smith, and Kingery (2004, p. vii), “After the events of Columbine, researchers and clinicians began to explore methods and procedures that might guide schools’ and communities’ efforts to become more sensitive to potential signs of violence potential in youth.” From these research efforts, the FBI released the report, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*, highlighting its findings on targeted violence in schools, its causes, potential prevention efforts, and the benefits of threat assessment principles (Cornell et al., 2004). The NTAC released a threat assessment-intervention model based on the research. A second symposium held in 2002 hoped to apply threat assessment principles to workplace violence. Researchers recognized a need for the bridging of a gap between traditional law enforcement efforts and the necessity to prevent targeted violence in the future (Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

Response recommendations compiled by the experts were prefaced with the statement that all threats are not equal and most perpetrators making threats are unlikely to act on them. There were four types of threats identified. Direct threats, the most serious, have specific information linking them to specific acts and targets. Indirect threats, meanwhile, do not have the same detail and are presumably less severe. Veiled threats imply danger without actually saying it. Conditional threats, the last type, have if/then components as the name implies. Emotional content and precipitating stressors should be factored into threat analysis before determining lethality likelihood. Threat risk is categorized as low, medium, and high based on evaluation of the totality of the circumstances, including all aspects of the perpetrator's life (O'Toole, 1999).

There are four prongs of analysis, identified by the experts, that should be conducted when evaluating threats or threatening behaviors: personality of student, family dynamics, school dynamics, and social dynamics. By understanding the personality of the perpetrator, and hence how s/he views the world, the context of threats becomes clearer. Similarly, understanding the family dynamics of the person puts the behavior into full context. School dynamics, the third prong, are important to understand in order to appreciate the person's frame of mind. Social dynamics, like school dynamics, shed light on the perspective of the person making a threat (O'Toole, 1999). The prongs are used after threats are made, not to profile someone likely to make threats (Cornell et al., 2004). The following is the list of factors that should be considered and potentially investigated for the respective prongs during the threat assessment process according to O'Toole (1999, p. 14-24):

#### Prong One: Personality Traits and Behavior

- Leakage
- Low Tolerance for Frustration

- Poor Coping Skills
- Lack of Resiliency
- Failed Love Relationship
- "Injustice Collector"
- Signs of Depression
- Narcissism
- Alienation
- Dehumanizes Others
- Lack of Empathy
- Exaggerated Sense of Entitlement
- Attitude of Superiority
- Exaggerated or Pathological Need for Attention
- Externalizes Blame
- Masks Low Self-esteem
- Anger Management Problems
- Intolerance
- Inappropriate Humor
- Seeks to Manipulate Others
- Lack of Trust
- Closed Social Group
- Change of Behavior
- Rigid and Opinionated
- Unusual Interest in Sensational Violence
- Fascination with Violence-Filled Entertainment
- Negative Role Models
- Behavior Appears Relevant to Carrying Out a Threat

#### Prong Two: Family Dynamics

- Turbulent Parent-Child Relationship
- Acceptance of Pathological Behavior
- Access to Weapons
- Lack of Intimacy
- Student "Rules the Roost"
- No Limits or Monitoring of TV and Internet

#### Prong Three: School Dynamics

- Student's Attachment to School
- Tolerance for Disrespectful Behavior

- Inequitable Discipline
- Inflexible Culture
- Pecking Order Among Students
- Code of Silence
- Unsupervised Computer Access

#### Prong Four: Social Dynamics

- Media, Entertainment, Technology
- Peer Groups
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Outside Interests
- The Copycat Effect

The FBI model, according to the report, “is not a profile of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school. Those things do not exist. Although the risk of an actual shooting incident in any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem in any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 1).

The FBI threat assessment process, unlike the process clearly spelled out by the USSS initiative, was not specifically articulated by the FBI’s guidelines. Rather, there was simply an expressed need for a coordinated and standardized threat assessment system. The FBI model recommended clear school threat assessment policies, a designated threat coordinator, and a multidisciplinary assessment team consisting at a minimum of school personnel, law enforcement, and mental health practitioners. Threats, whether categorized as low, medium, or high risk, generally have a four-step response in the FBI model. The steps consist of the referral of concerning information to a threat assessment team member, an initial assessment of the threat

as low, medium, or high, a four-pronged assessment according to the aforementioned criteria, (personality traits and behavior, family dynamics, school dynamics, and social dynamics) and evaluation and response based on information from the assessments. Intervention strategies, the steps taken to mitigate and prevent violence once the assessment is complete, are important for several reasons. The initiative identified the paramount intervention goals as making sure all people in the schools are safe, making sure they feel safe, and making sure the potential perpetrators receive appropriate supervision and reformation services. It was acknowledged that students should be trained on the importance of the recognition of leakage, while staff members should be trained on threat assessment and adolescent development considerations (O'Toole, 1999).

### **Present Study**

A review of the current models reveals that they are surprisingly consistent in their make-up and approach to threat evaluation despite stated priorities that are somewhat dissimilar. In order for users of the models to have a true sense of considerations to be used when evaluating threats, there is value in comparing and contrasting the risk factors worthy of discussion by threat assessment teams. While it is recognized that checklists are not empirically supported and that such lists cannot definitively determine whether a person of concern is a threat to a school, developing a list of factors as “discussion points” from prevailing experts has inherent value that supersedes any assessment considerations developed at the local level. It enables team members to thoroughly discuss and address factors believed to be associated with the risk of targeted violence without having to develop lists individually. Using the present study to develop such a list of discussion points based on the contributions of experts in multiple fields allows users to

consider and evaluate relevant risk factors while remembering that all factors must be evaluated in the broad social context within which they surfaced. As stated earlier, the qualitative nature of any list of discussion points should be supplemented with the use of multidisciplinary teams utilizing applicable intervention resources, including clinical assessments when appropriate, for persons of concern.

The purpose of the study is to resolve differences between models, if any, to allow users in the field the opportunity to utilize best practices according to current recommendations. Because each model has a distinct principle of focus, it is not always clear to school administrators, law enforcement personnel, and mental health practitioners if each model is also advocating unique and separate approaches to threat assessments. By gathering, analyzing, and comparing the operating mantras and techniques of each model, this study will aid in the development of an assessment tool that encompasses relevant data. The result will be a clear procedure that users can be assured contains accurate and valid assessments according to current research.

## **Chapter III: Theoretical Framework**

### **Overview of Social Bonding and Control Theories**

Social control theories, including Travis Hirschi's 1969 social bonding theory, are different from other criminological theories because the central assumption is that deviance, rather than conformity, is to be expected. Conformity to societal norms, believed to be inherent in other theories, is viewed as the element that requires explanation (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Whereas other theories, such as Merton's anomie theory, ask why people deviate from normative behavior, social control theories ask why anyone conforms (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Fukushima and Sharp describe this approach by adding, "[a]ll actors are assumed to be equally motivated to transgress. People vary in the constraints keeping them from acting on this universal motivation toward self-interest" (2009, p. 437). Social controls, the factor most often responsible for preventing deviance according to many control theorists, are inhibitors that influence and promote what other theories view as normative behavior. In 2004 Hirschi and others, however, recognized that other "inducements" had to be considered when evaluating the causes of antisocial behavior (Akers & Sellers, 2013). For example, personality characteristics and situational variables, including informal social controls, are potential influences that must be considered when explaining deviance or the lack thereof. Control theories are, interestingly, cited in criminal justice literature more than any other theory (Akers & Sellers, 2013) and may be the most widely accepted theory (Pittaro, 2007).

### **Social Bonding Theory**

Hirschi, generally regarded as the primary social bonding and control theorist, introduced social bonding theory in 1969 while witnessing a time of social rebellion in the 1960s (Pittaro,

2007). Social bonding theory analyzed constraints against deviance instead of examining the influences that propel people into deviant behavior (Fukushima & Sharp, 2009). Social bonding theory, as the name implies, suggests that bonds to society tend to inhibit people from following through with tendencies to commit deviant acts. According to the theory, “Social bonds to family, school, community, and conventional value systems act as normative and behavioral constraints preventing individuals from committing criminal acts” (DeLi & MacKenzie, 2003, p. 279). Deviance occurs, then, when “an individual’s bond to society is weak or broken” (Fukushima & Sharp, 2009, p. 437). A person is less likely to act on deviant tendencies, because conformity will be encouraged and promoted, if social bonds to others, such as peers, parents, teachers, and other adults, is strong (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Hirschi felt that such informal social controls offered through strong social bonds were more effective than formal crime prevention controls, making social bonds key to the explanation and prevention of crime (DeLi & MacKenzie, 2003).

Hirschi proposed four elements of social bonding theory: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Akers & Sellers, 2013). A general attachment to others, the first element proposed to affect criminal propensity, is considered to be more important than the characteristics of those to whom people are attached. In essence, it is important to be strongly attached to others, even if the attachments are to those who are deviant. While the preference is to have attachments to people with pro-social tendencies, detachment, or having no social bonds at all, is considered more dangerous than having attachments to those who are deviant. This element is the most important, as sensitivity and empathy toward others, established and cultivated through social bonds, is considered a key to preventing criminality.

Commitment, the second element, refers to one's investment in conformity. Pro-social activities, such as educational and occupational activities, tend to build commitment and attachment to others, while anti-social behavior, such as criminal activity, tends to weaken commitment. Hence, the strength of commitment is related to the strength of attachment because people share norms when they are attached. Commitment to conformity in societal norms is strong when individuals believe in the norms' importance and live to abide by them. The third element, involvement, notes the engagement one has in conventional social activities, where the more involved people are in constructive activities, the less time they have to engage in destructive behaviors. If involvement is strong, attachment and commitment will likewise increase to further dissuade negative behaviors. Belief, the last element proposed by Hirschi, is the degree to which people endorse societal values and norms (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Rules and laws, whether formal or informal, are perhaps the most obvious examples of the principles either supported or ignored by people, and belief in the value of rules and law will obviously increase normative behavior. The four aforementioned elements are interrelated, meaning that the relative strengthening or weakening of any of them will similarly influence the strength of the others (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

There are numerous studies available on the correlation between social bonds and criminality. According to Akers and Sellers (2013), Hirschi initially found that attachment, commitment, and belief had negative associations with delinquency. Involvement, meanwhile, did not demonstrate such an inverse effect. Attachment to peers was negatively associated with delinquency only when the peers exhibited positive influences and prosocial tendencies. Appropriate parental discipline and supportive child rearing practices were also negatively associated with criminality. Religion, which reinforces commitment and belief, is routinely

shown to be negatively associated with anti-social behavior as well. Social bonding theory generally enjoys low to moderate empirical verification.

Deli and MacKenzie (2003) examined the differences social bonding may have on the criminality of both genders. The evidence suggests that men, raised in the midst of masculinity and the inherent push toward independence that is associated with it, are more prone to anti-social behaviors. Femininity, meanwhile, is rooted in attachment to others, which promotes pro-social tendencies. Operating under the hypothesis that social bonds affect males and females differently, Deli and MacKenzie (2003) interviewed 125 probationers in Virginia about their work and school histories, their social ties, and criminal activities. After six months, 107 of the probationers were re-interviewed to evaluate their offending patterns, the variable, against their aforementioned social dynamics. They concluded that social bonds are negatively associated with male offending patterns, while social bonds are positively associated with female offending patterns. The final conclusion about female offending patterns was surprising. Deli and MacKenzie theorized that females, already exhibiting stronger social ties and lower tendencies toward criminality than males, may actually be influenced by the antisocial tendencies of male partners. In other words, females who associate with deviant males appear more likely to demonstrate deviant behavior than females who associate with non-deviant males. The survey, moreover, may have contained females more prone to criminality given the pool sample.

Though Hirschi believed that social bonding theory was applicable across cultures, a study by Fukushima and Sharp (2009) indicated otherwise. The study, intended to measure the effects of social bonding in American and Japanese cultures, surveyed 433 American college students and 369 Japanese college students using a 5 point Likert scale on 13 deviance behaviors during the previous year. They hypothesized that Japanese offending patterns, believed to be

generally lower than American offending patterns, would be negatively associated with bonds to society - thought to be stronger in Japanese culture. Bonds were gauged according to Hirschi's four elements. The study concluded that social bonding theory was not supported because while Japanese students displayed lower offending patterns, they also demonstrated lower levels of social bonds. The researchers acknowledged that a wide range of variables, from societal criminality patterns to policing styles, could be responsible for the surprising findings.

### **Self-Control Theory**

Hirschi joined with Michael Gottfredson in 1990 and gravitated from social bonding theory to create self-control theory. Whereas social bonding theory held that bonds to society prevent people from exhibiting deviant behavior, self-control theory posited that the inability of people to control themselves, which is developed in early childhood, determines the likelihood of deviance. The theories are, interestingly enough, considered rival theories despite Hirschi's involvement in the creation of each. Low self-control, Hirschi and Gottfredson theorized, is the result of poor socialization and is influenced primarily by parental attachment to children, the supervision of children by adults, an early recognition and correction of low self-control, and the enforcement of normative behaviors. The disapproval of unacceptable behavior, specifically by parents, is considered the most important factor in the development of self-control. Self-control remains stable through the life-course after being developed in childhood and is viewed as a developed personality trait (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

## **Social Control Theory**

In 2004 Hirschi offered a new version of self-control theory, called social control theory, focusing on a person's evaluation of the "full range" of costs associated with given behaviors, moving the concept of self-control away from being a trait and toward it being the practice of weighing "the potential costs relevant of a particular act which moves the focus from the long-term implications of the act to its broader and often contemporaneous implications" (Bouffard & Rice, 2011, p. 138). Social control theory brought Hirschi's theory closer to the original version of social bonding theory because the "full range" of considerations is said to be performed according to a person's character. That character is identified, at least initially, according to the four elements of social bonding theory: attachment, commitments, involvement, and beliefs. Many view social bonding theory and the initial self-control theory as rival theories (Akers & Sellers, 2013) while holding that the revised version of self-control theory, with its emphasis on the evaluation of multiple factors, is more likely to incorporate the consideration of negative consequences, including those affected by social bonds to others. In short, according to social control theory, those who are less connected, and thus less bonded, may weigh fewer social costs when deciding on a course of behavior, thereby exhibiting less self-control. Offenders become "relatively free of the intimate attachments, the aspirations, and moral beliefs that bind people to a life within the law" (Bouffard & Rice, 2011, p. 140).

In a study to measure social control theory, Bouffard and Rice (2011) used 311 criminal justice students to examine the decision making process of the students and their likelihood of driving after drinking, attempting to measure their evaluation of the full range of consequences. The students read scenarios and answered questions pertaining to their decisions on whether they would drive after drinking, thereby measuring their self-control. Bouffard and Rice concluded

that those reporting lower social bonds exhibited lower self-control. It appeared that social bonds affected levels of self-control and, hence, offending patterns. In another study to examine social control theory, Tripodi (2010) measured to what extent, if any, marriage and employment has on the recidivism of offenders released into the community. He followed 250 paroled Texas inmates at various intervals after their release from incarceration. Hypothesizing that bonds to society such as employment and marriage reduce future criminal activity, Tripodi measured recidivism rates to gauge correlations with employment and marital statuses. He concluded that marriage and employment are negatively associated with offending patterns, with employment showing slightly stronger associations than marriage.

### **Applicability of Social Control Theory to Threat Assessment**

According to Pittaro (2007), juveniles who engage in targeted violence in schools have common risk factors and exhibit neurological abnormalities, violent temperaments, and fewer problem solving skills. The violent juveniles often have backgrounds which forced them to experience abusive parenting methods and an increased exposure to personal and media violence. Society's tolerance and, sometimes, promotion of violence also influenced them. The United States may have a "toxic culture of a society that has historically supported violence as a means to an end to resolve conflict" (Pittaro, 2007, p. 2). School climates of intolerance, exclusion, and low academic standards may also be risk factors for violence. Hirschi's elements of social bonds, Pittaro felt, are directly related to the risk factors. Attachment, the most important element, represents empathy toward others and is a quality obviously lacking in most school shooters. Commitment to society, another element, is likewise lacking because shooters often expect to die (Pfeifer, 2013) during their violent events, thereby demonstrating a lack of

commitment to society. Being involved in conventional activities, also an element, is absent in the shooters because, as the evidence repeatedly demonstrates, shooters plan their events extensively, leaving little time for conventional behavior. This is the reason that leakage is so common. Fein & Vossekuil, (1999), for example, found during the USSS's Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP) that 80% of all attacks were preceded by planning activities or threats. Shooters clearly do not have a belief in society's rules, the last element, because of the lethality and shocking nature of their crimes. Hirschi's 1969 social bonding theory, Pittaro felt, was widely accepted because "juveniles are less likely to engage in delinquent acts if there is a strong bond to family, school, and community" (2007, p.6). Pittaro felt social bonding theory explained many of the reasons why school shooters harm others.

Dr. Birgit Pfeifer from Windesheim University, presenting at the 2013 National School Safety Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, spoke about the relationship between existential concerns and targeted violence in schools. She analyzed the writings left behind by deceased shooters, revealing their apparent frame of mind and motives for the attacks. The field of philosophy identifies five existential concerns that are driving factors in human behavior (Pfeifer, 2013). The concept of *Death* causes emotional conflict in people because they are mortal but wish to live forever. Mortality is contrary to the wish for immortality. *Isolation* similarly causes disruption because people experience rejection while having a desire to have bonds with others. Internal strife develops, for example, when someone longing for attachment to others is rejected by them. It is similar to Hirschi's attachment concept. *Identity* concerns focus on the sense of self compared to one's role in society. Many adults never truly come to peace with their perception of self and its place in the larger society. *Freedom* causes conflict when people struggle between having free will and being influenced by outside forces. The

responsibility inherent with life choices also conflicts with the qualities of free will. *Meaning*, the last existential concern, causes internal struggles because people want to believe life is meaningful, yet events often seem like they lack order or direction. Pfeifer concluded that hatred and existential loneliness, promoted through weak social bonds, were common themes present in the writings (Pfeifer, 2013).

Pfeifer (2013) examined documents and videos left behind by seven shooters who were responsible for six acts of targeted violence in schools. The existential concerns were evaluated for frequency of occurrence in the material, how each concern was valued (positive, negative, or neutral), and which concerns were combined most often. Death and identity (e.g. I am superior and I hate the human race) were present in every case. Isolation was present in all but one incident, revealing a pattern of rejection that caused frustration in the perpetrators. Death was mentioned in every document (e.g. I kill who deserves to die. My way out is suicide). Isolation, the feeling of rejection from being ostracized and lonely, caused perpetrators to view themselves as outcasts and was mentioned in five of the cases and was, of note, always expressed vehemently.

Pfeifer (2013) concluded that targeted violence was the result of feelings of rejection, often caused from bullying, and frustration over conflicts contained in the existential concerns. The meaning of life was lost on the shooters. Killing represented the last sense of meaning available to them. The violence was most often the result of feelings of isolation combined with beliefs that the school shooters were superior people who were misunderstood by society, according to Pfeifer. The shooters routinely displayed God-like perceptions of self-worth while expressing anxiety, resentment, and anger because of struggles with their existential concerns. Most school shooters felt bullied, displayed warning signs, and were characterized by fascination

with violent media exposure. The shooters described a desire to be free from their feelings, though all expressed a conviction that the only freedom was through their death.

Dr. Scott Poland, a psychologist from Nova Southeastern University and a member of the National Emergency Assistance Team for the National Association of School Psychologists, also spoke at the 2013 National School Safety Conference as an expert on school safety, threat assessment, and suicide prevention. Poland advocates involving students in school security because, being familiar with the social, cultural, and academic dynamics in the schools, students can have the largest and most direct influence on violence in that setting. The key to the prevention of targeted violence in schools, Poland argued, rests in creating environments that are inclusive and accepting, allowing all students to feel validated through due process and communication. Violence occurs when traditional social bonds are disrupted and students feel ostracized, creating feelings of resentment and isolation. Poland suggested that creating accepting cultures in schools, complete with open channels of communication and bullying prevention programs, is a critical step toward violence mitigation, thereby enhancing and encouraging the social bonds vital for maintaining healthy social climates. Poland recommended that all schools should create safety task forces to assess school cultures, survey staff and students regularly to gauge social climates, teach students to de-escalate conflicts, and use student safety and anti-bullying pledges.

Bullying prevention and the establishment of positive, inclusive cultures in schools is the key to preventing targeted violence, Poland argues, and when that fails, social bonds are jeopardized, resulting in the development of feelings of resentment, anger, isolation, and often narcissism that enable students to act out in hostile and lethal ways. Poland, like many researchers, did not find a routine profile of active shooters, though he highlighted trends that

were found often in their makeup. The perpetrators of targeted violence in schools often told others before the act (leakage), had access to guns, were bullied, were suicidal, and engaged in behavior that caused others concern (leakage). He advocated using threat assessment teams to detect the leakage and is a proponent of school violence prevention through the early identification of concerning conditions. He stressed that most school violence can be prevented by establishing and sustaining school climates characterized by open lines of communication. He specifically promotes talking to the students, not at them (Poland, 2013).

Leary, Kowalski, Smith, and Phillips (2003) performed a content analysis to determine if social rejection, long suggested by media outlets to be a precipitator of school violence, is tied to acts of targeted violence. Leary et al. (2003) wanted to determine if available anecdotal information supported the belief that teasing and rejection leads to anger and, hence, acts of school violence, though there is very little empirical evidence on the topic. They analyzed school shootings between January of 1995, the year that school shootings began receiving national attention, and March of 2001. Events qualified for inclusion in the case study if they occurred during a school day and they were enacted by students while targeting other students. Testing a hypothesis that social rejection preceded the shootings, Leary et al. (2003) studied 15 school shootings described in news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, newspapers *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, reputable websites, and other national news sources. Three raters read accounts of the shootings while assessing levels of ostracism present in the reports.

The study analyzing data from 1995-2001 concluded that teasing or malicious bullying, forms of ostracism theorized to be associated with acts of violence, were present in 80% (12) of the cases, findings which are consistent with the earlier findings of the USSS's 1999 Safe School

Initiative (SSI) that approximately two out of three shootings had elements of ostracism as a precipitating factor. Of the cases studied by Leary et al. (2003), many of the incidents (73%) involved victims of the shootings who were the people doing the ostracizing. The researchers concluded that shooters were characterized by at least one of three factors. They were either fascinated with death, fascinated with guns or explosives, or exhibited mental health concerns. In other words, while there were often aggravating factors associated with the shootings, such as bullying or ostracizing, all of the shooters also exhibited one of the three mentioned risk factors as well. Four of the shooters were fascinated with death, six were obsessed with guns, and four had an interest in explosives. They concluded that the hypothesis was supported while recognizing that the low base rate of such acts makes it difficult to systematically study targeted violence in schools. They called for more research on the topic (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

A later study by Weatherby, Strachila, and McMahon (2010) sought to follow up on the work by Leary et al. (2003) by examining data from shootings between 2001 and 2008. They reviewed national news accounts of shootings that occurred which involved middle school or high school students. With those criteria, 12 acts of targeted violence met the criteria for inclusion in the study. The researchers looked for signs of teasing, general ostracism or rejection, acute rejection typically in the form of a relationship termination, fascination with death or violence, fascination with guns or explosives, or signs of mental health concerns.

The findings were somewhat different than those by Leary et al. (2003); whereas the Leary et al. (2003) study found teasing and ostracising in 80% of the cases, the study by Weatherby et al. (2010) found such evidence in 50% of their cases. Acute (relationship) rejection, present in half of the earlier cases, was present in a quarter of the latter cases. In half of

the cases examined by Weatherby et al. (2010) psychological concerns were apparent in shooters, whereas the earlier work found such circumstances in 10 of the 15 cases. Planning was noted in 11 of the 12 attacks that occurred in the Weatherby et al. (2010) study, supporting the conclusions of the USSS's SSI that such preparation is present in 75% of targeted violence incidents. The SSI further determined that revenge is present in 50% of cases, while 66% of the time shooters felt bullied prior to the shootings (Weatherby, Strachila, and McMahon, 2010).

The Weatherby et al. (2010) study of shootings between 2001 and 2008 concluded that while teasing and ostracizing are important factors to explain school shootings, there may be other influential factors present as well. Because the conclusion of the case study by Weatherby et al. (2010) was not as pointed as the work by Leary et al. (2003), the latter researchers sought to measure the applicability of three theories to “help us to understand the mentality of juveniles who commit these acts of school violence” (Weatherby et al., 2010, p. 1). They applied social control theory, anomie theory, and differential association theory to the case study to determine if one of the theories best explains why juveniles engage in acts of targeted violence.

According to Weatherby et al. (2010), social control theory contends that shootings occur when a decrease in social capital is brought about by the weakening of social bonds and a subsequent weakening of communal controls. Delinquency results when “the weakening of effective social and cultural constraints” (Weatherby et al., 2010, p.4) alters the traditional reinforcement of values. The four elements of social control theory – attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief – play a role in deterring deviance, to include targeted violence. Attachment to peers and family creates bonds to critical emotional and physical support structures. Commitment to follow society's rules reinforces the need to act according to accepted standards of conduct. Involvement in community creates opportunities to create and enhance

social bonds. Belief in rules means people are more likely to follow them. According to social control theory, school violence may be caused by any or all of the elements being weakened.

While more research is need on the topic, Weatherby et al. (2010) concluded that, rejection, teasing, and ostracism may be applicable precipitators in school shootings. Regarding the theories applied to the events, they determined that social control theory was the most applicable because a lack of social bonds appeared more often than other variables. The authors said that “[s]ocial control theory emerges as the theory that explains best violent behavior” (Weatherby et al., 2010, p.12). It was the primary explanation in two of the cases. Each of the three theories was applicable to at least one case, however. Anomie theory explained one of the cases and may have been a factor in another. Differential association theory played a role in one case involving deviant behavior learned in a gang setting. The conclusion that social control theory is at least modestly empirically supported is consistent with information from other researchers. Akers and Sellers (2013, p. 182) similarly declared the relevance of social control theories by saying “Strain theory receives less empirical support than either social learning theory or social bonding when all three theories are directly compared.”

### **Other Theories Related to Targeted Violence**

The mention of anomie theory and differential association theory by Weatherby et al. (2010) highlights the point that several theories may help explain why targeted violence in schools is happening more often than at any other time in history. While social control theory demonstrates plausible insight into causes for such behavior, the low base rate of school shootings, as mentioned previously, has limited the empirical knowledge on the topic to date.

## **Anomie Theory**

Anomie theory holds that normlessness is the cause of school shootings. Such a state results when the rules of society dissipate and behavioral expectations are blurred. The devaluing of prosocial behavior occurs when external controls, such as rewards and punishments, no longer have the intended effect on people (Weatherby et al., 2010). Emile Durkheim, regarded as the founder of sociology, believed that deviance is the result of a lack of social regulation. Robert Merton argued that a balance between approved social means and approved goals were the keys to integrated societies. Anomie, or normlessness, causes strain and emerges when “there is a dissociation between valued cultural ends and legitimate societal means to those ends” (Akers & Sellers, 2013, p. 174).

Albert Cohen’s theory of anomie differed from Merton’s. The inability to obtain status and acceptance, Cohen felt, caused strain and subsequent normlessness. Anomie theory suggests that strain develops between aspirations, or the hope to achieve, and expectations, or what is expected to be achieved. The resulting strain leads to deviance. Robert Agnew used a micro-perspective while identifying three types of strain that produces deviance. Failing to achieve valued goals, the first type, occurs when expectations and achievements are conflicted. Removal of valued stimuli, the second type, occurs when a person loses something or someone of value, such as a friend or family member. Confrontation with negative stimuli, the last type, occurs when the negative actions of others causes strain. Bullying and other forms of trauma are examples. Empirical support for anomic hypotheses, however, are not present in the literature and, accordingly, the theory fell out of favor in the 1970s (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

## **Differential Association**

Differential association theory, created by Edwin Sutherland, asserts that deviant behavior is learned. It contends that associating with deviant peers, for example, increases the likelihood that a person will adopt antisocial behaviors and implement them. Whether a person partakes in deviant behavior is dependent in part on the relative strength of bonds with family supports and peer supports. If deviant behavior is learned from others and is either rewarded or not punished, it will likely increase in frequency and severity (Weatherby et al. 2010). Akers and Sellers (2013, p. 79-80) summarized the theory by adding, “The theory explains criminal behavior by the exposure to others’ definitions favorable to criminal behavior, balanced against contact with conforming definitions. Although one expects that law-violating definitions are typically communicated by those who have violated the law, it is possible to learn law-abiding definitions from them, just as one can be exposed to deviant definitions from law-abiding people.”

## **Conclusion**

The three theories offer some consistencies between them that respectively explain some of the behavior present in targeted violence. Social control theory posits that people consider the full range of consequences when deciding on modes of behavior. Their character is developed and influenced by their social bonds or lack thereof relating to their levels of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. Those bonds can be influenced by feelings of ostracism. Anomic theories, likewise, have hints of social disconnects being root causes to deviance. Whether it is Cohen’s description of the strain developed by the divide between aspirations and expectations or Agnew’s described strain generated by his micro-perspective, specifically the

exposure to negative stimuli (confrontation), the theories support the notion that societal disconnects are at least one reason for targeted violence. Clearly other theories can explain components of school violence, but scholars consistently mention social control theory as the best explanation for school shootings. Social control theory, as mentioned above, enjoys more empirical support and, as such, serves as the primary theory that accounts for the explanation of targeted violence in schools.

## Chapter IV: Analysis

### Comparing Models

The comparison of risk factors deemed relevant by the models is somewhat tricky because the USSS model does not designate a specific list of factors. The USSS model, in fact, directs users to identify a certain type of factor relating to pre-attack posturing without spelling out a specific list of variables to consider, though it lists 10 key findings to guide users toward specific criteria to be evaluated. The FBI model, meanwhile, articulates the aforementioned list while declaring that definitive lists do not exist and also encouraging users to consider circumstances related to the broad categories of personality, familial, school, and social contexts surrounding the threats, potentially allowing for the subjective inclusion of factors related to them.

Table 4.1 displays a general comparison of the principles of the models, the categorization of threat severity, and the year each model was created. The principles of the respective models section represents the focus each model uses when analyzing data present in any threatening situation. The threat categorization refers to the ranking or labeling threats receive in each process. As noted earlier, the trend of school shootings through the 1990s, and specifically the shooting at Columbine in 1999, was the impetus for much of the threat assessment development. It is interesting to note that all three of the models emerged in successive years and were obviously the result of the shock generated by shootings at that time.

<b>Principal and Origin of Each Model</b>		
	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>
<b>Model's guiding principle</b>	Assesses behaviors, not threats or traits	Assesses threats, ability to carry out, and social context
<b>Threat categorization</b>	Inquiry or investigation	Low, medium, or high
<b>Year of origin</b>	1999	1998

Table 4.1: Comparison of models' guiding principle and origin

Comparing risk factors, even given the above concerns relating to differences between models, makes it possible to evaluate the consistency of the appearance of risk assessment factors in the respective models. Drawing on the factors listed in table 1.1, it is possible to compare threat assessment priorities as highlighted by the respective models. Table 4.2 displays the risk factors listed in the literature for the models, allowing an analysis for consistency and frequency of use between them. The table illustrates which factors are listed as points of consideration between the models, realizing again that the USSS model does not explicitly list a specific set of factors for consideration. Subjective interpretation of USSS factors is required according to the model's emphasis on assessing behaviors. Table 4.2 also lists the risk factors in four categories according to the type of factor being considered. For ease of analysis, the four categories utilized by the FBI model - personality traits & behavior, family dynamics, school dynamics, and social dynamics – are used during the comparison. Most of the risk factors (24) are personality and behavioral factors. The second most frequent category, social dynamics, has 11 risk factors. Family dynamics (8) contain a relatively small number of risk factors compared

to social and personal factors. The smallest category, school dynamics, lists only school culture, grades and attendance as risk factors.

<b>Risk Factor Frequency by Category</b>			
<b>Personality Traits and Behaviors</b>			
<b>Risk factor</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Reason for assessment	X	X	2
Recent behavioral change	X	X	2
Threat to facility	X	X	2
Form of threat	X	X	2
Others fear suspect	X	X	2
Misconduct/criminal behavior	X		1
Prohibited items - school	X	X	2
Attitude toward authority	X	X	2
Conflict management (anger management)	X	X	2
Attention seeking		X	1
Weapon interest	X	X	2
Violent beliefs	X		1
Temperament	X	X	2
Self-worth (narcissism)	X	X	2
Outlook on future (resiliency)	X	X	2
Pre-incident suicide risk	X		1
Lack of empathy	X	X	2
Mental health history		X	1
Inappropriate humor		X	1
Suicide threat	X		1
Criticism handling	X	X	2
Tolerance of others	X	X	2
Planning (Leakage)	X	X	2
Peer interactions (alienation)	X	X	2

<b>Risk Factor Frequency by Category</b>			
<b>Family Dynamics</b>			
<b>Risk factor</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Positive/negative role models	X	X	2
Involved parents	X	X	2
Victim/witness of abuse	X		1
Home life quality	X	X	2
Access to weapons	X	X	2
Suspect victimized	X		1

<b>Risk Factor Frequency by Category</b>			
<b>School Dynamics</b>			
<b>Risk factor</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
School culture (respectful, etc)	X	X	2
Grades	X	X	2
Attendance	X	X	2

<b>Risk Factor Frequency by Category</b>			
<b>Social Dynamics</b>			
<b>Risk factor</b>	<b>USSS</b>	<b>FBI</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Substance abuse		X	1
Interest in violence/media	X	X	2
Inhibitions in life (outside interests)		X	1
Confrontations (bullying)	X	X	2
Strategy to stop victimization	X		1
Media/shooting interest (copycat effect)	X	X	2
Capacity to carry out threat	X	X	2
Lethal steps	X	X	2
Trigger event	X		1
Rejection/loss	X	X	2

Table 4.2: Factor Frequency

Similarities in respective risk factors recommended by the models can be evaluated by examining whether the models place each factor as a priority. Of the 43 factors selected for

comparison based on the literature, the raw number of appearances in each model demonstrated in table 4.3, shows an interesting consistency despite the differences in guiding principles displayed in table 4.1.

Number of Factors by Model	
USSS	FBI
38	35

Table 4.3: Numbers

The USSS model favored 38 of the listed factors, while the FBI model recommended 35 factors. A comparative analysis of factors between models is achieved by looking at the frequency in which the factors appear in models together in table 4.4.

Consistency of Factor Use		
Models	Frequency	Percentage
Both models	30	70
USSS only	8	19
FBI only	5	12

Table 4.4: Frequency of factor appearance

The factors appeared in both models 30 times (70% of the time). When factors appear in a single model, the FBI model contains 5 of them and the USSS model contains 8 of them. The stand-alone factors listed in the FBI and USSS models are listed in the table 4.5 below. Attention seeking, mental health history, inappropriate humor, substance abuse, and inhibitions in life

appear only in the FBI model. Misconduct/criminal behavior, violent beliefs, pre-incident suicide risk, suicide threats, being the victim or witness to abuse, having a strategy to stop victimization, and the presence of a trigger event are present only in the USSS model.

<b>Factors Appearing in Only One Model</b>	
<b><u>FBI</u></b>	<b><u>USSS</u></b>
Attention seeking	Misconduct/criminal behavior
Mental health history	Violent beliefs
Inappropriate humor	Pre-incident suicide risk
Substance abuse	Suicide threat
Inhibitions in life	Victim/witness of abuse
	Suspect victimized
	Strategy to stop victimization
	Trigger event

Table 4.5: Stand-alone factors

### **Effectiveness Studies**

The science used in threat assessment is still developing and its effectiveness in preventing targeted violence, moreover, is largely unknown. There is not much empirical research on the effectiveness of individual models or on the threat assessment model as a whole. According to Harris and Lurigio, “The threat assessment model has become a critical component in recent national initiatives to prevent group-directed violence in both schools and workplaces. Despite the model’s inherent appeal, experts have cautioned that the empirical groundwork of the field is undeveloped” (2012, p. 62-63). Reddy et al. supported the position that the empirical

analysis of the threat assessment models is largely absent by adding that “[w]hat is most needed for effective prevention of planned school-based attacks is empirical research on incidents of targeted school violence. Many of the shortcomings about current assessment approaches for targeted school violence center around the lack of empirical research on *targeted* violence perpetrated by students at school. We recognize that although the threat assessment approach is based upon empirical research on targeted violence, it too lacks the benefit of comprehensive empirical knowledge on targeted violence in schools” (2001, p. 169). Reddy et al. concluded that “[e]xpert consensus on the evaluation of targeted violence has not been found” (2001, p. 166). Randazzo et al., (2015) cited a lack of available analysis of threat assessment approaches when describing the use of the four current options. Profiling, mental health assessments, automated decision-making (actuarial and expert opinion), and threat assessment teams comprise the available options. However, there is no available information on the frequency of their respective use.

The validity and reliability of the threat assessment procedures proposed by the USSS and FBI models cannot be supported by available empirical research because the field is largely undeveloped. Augustyniak (2005) expressed concern over potential shortcomings of the current models, pointing out that performing risk management with completely subjective, or qualitative, measures is inadequate. The task of predicting future violent behavior is extremely elusive, even with the use of formal psychological assessments. The psychology field, Augustyniak said, has long recognized the complexity of such forecasting. Predicting school violence, furthermore, is a daunting task for three reasons. First, the infrequency and, hence, low base rate of the incidents makes predictive measures very difficult without generating a plethora of false positives. Second, the complex and fluid social dynamics involved in targeted violence make prediction difficult, if

even possible. Third, diagnostic methods in the field of psychology, which show some validity with adults, do not have the same accuracy when applied to juveniles because of the formative, and thus changing, state of their psychological development.

Successful utilization of the USSS and FBI models, according to Augustyniak (2005, p.43) involves recognizing that the following factors are consistent in cases of targeted violence:

- Leakage is almost always present and must be identified.
- Perpetrators often have poor coping skills and internalized disorders.
- Multidisciplinary responses, comprised of school, clinical, and law enforcement resources, must examine the broad social contexts of the incidents.

Threat assessment team members performing the assessment processes spelled out by the USSS and FBI must realize that there are critical risk factors that must be evaluated which go beyond the aforementioned factors listed in either model. These factors, according to Augustyniak (2005) tend to show a “trajectory” toward violence and are beyond the scope of current threat assessment processes. They include:

- Age of onset
- Gender
- Peer and family influence
- Trauma
- Overt/covert expressions of aggression
- Desistance
- Patterns of relapse

In a comparison of the USSS and FBI models, Augustyniak (2005) noted that both models mention concern for the social ecology of schools. Of the cases of targeted violence used to develop the respective models, 81% contained leakage and 88% involved adults who later reported concern over the behavior of the eventual shooters. A key to preventing future attacks, then, appears to be enhancing communication channels in the schools so such information is

brought to light during planning stages, allowing intervention options to be utilized when appropriate. The FBI model, with its four prongs, places more emphasis on social-emotional concerns of students and the social ecology of school climates. The USSS model, meanwhile, focuses more heavily on pre-attack behaviors (instead of verbal threats) when evaluating threats, which Augustyniak felt was supported by empirical research because “[o]nly 17% of attackers threatened targets with direct, indirect, or conditional language prior to the attack” (2005, p.34). The USSS model’s broader definition of “threat,” which includes behaviors and verbal cues but places more emphasis on behaviors, is a strength of the model.

An assessment tool developed for users in the field should contain the factors, or discussion points, presented in the aforementioned literature. The vast majority of factors (70%) appear in both models. Their inclusion into an assessment tool is obvious, given the consistency of their mention and the sometimes subjective classification of factors that warrants their use. The 30% of risk factors not mentioned in both models, highlighted in tables 4.4 and 4.5, must be weighed because of their apparent uniqueness compared to other factors. Augustyniak (2005) added several factors following an analysis of the USSS and FBI models, pointing out considerations that were or were not empirically based. Several she recommended were already included in the list. Peer and family influences, trauma, expressions of aggression, and patterns of relapse (prior interventions) were listed by more than one model previously. Three factors, including age of onset, gender, and desistance, were not mentioned previously and, like other stand-alone factors, merit consideration for inclusion.

An argument for inclusion of all of the factors rests on the premise that the science of predicting future targeted violence is not developed to the point that determinations can be made with any scientific certainty. The factors listed in the accepted list, for example, even vary in

frequency of appearance, with only 70% appearing in both models and 30% appearing in one model. Each model, again, was developed by experts in the field. Also worthy of mention is that any list, as stated repeatedly, must be used while evaluating the broad social context around the circumstances. Consideration must be given, then, whether any of the stand-alone factors fall within the broad social context area of consideration, realizing at the same time that any list is simply an accumulation of discussion points to guide assessors during a threat assessment process.

## CHAPTER V: RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

### **Risk Factor Utilization Moving Forward**

Careful analysis of the threat assessment models reveals a surprising consistency between them. Whereas each proclaims unique primary considerations for the recognition and prevention of targeted violence, both ultimately consider similar variables during the respective assessment processes. As the discussion above illustrates, most of the risk factors, or discussion points, (70%) appear in both models. The remaining discussion points, while potentially demonstrating applicability in individual circumstances, did not qualify for inclusion when separate teams of experts convened to evaluate relevant factors for assessment processes. With that consideration in mind, this study concludes that all of the factors appearing in at both models should be included in an assessment tool as primary discussion points.

The low base rate of targeted violence incidents and the developing state of threat assessment research, as mentioned in the study, limit the certainty with which factors are included or excluded (Augustyniak, 2005). It is important, therefore, that any assessment process utilizes primary considerations according to available research while also maintaining a broad spectrum of considerations as may be dictated by individual circumstances. In short, it is important for all threat assessors to realize that any list of risk factors or discussion points, while based on expert opinion and created according to current research, may not be exhaustive and may be, as the research continues to develop, an evolving list of variables that should be fluid and dynamic. Threat assessment processes should begin by examining the data deemed to be relevant by experts in the field while realizing that other factors, if present, may be applicable given the totality of the circumstances surrounding them.

## **A Preliminary Review of a Private Sector Model: The MOSAIC System**

The MOSAIC system, which stands for Method for Objectively Selecting Areas of Inquiry-Consistently, was developed by Gavin DeBecker of Gavin DeBecker & Associates, a Senior Fellow at the UCLA School of Public Affairs. MOSAIC uses software to assist with threat assessments, using algorithms to potentially connect patterns in data otherwise overlooked during human investigation. The firm offers a variety of threat assessment software products to evaluate threats made in relation to domestic violence, workplace violence, at schools and universities, and against public figures and judicial officials. The software for school threat assessments, MAST, stands for MOSAIC for the Assessment of Student Threats. The software, designed by private industry from input received from experts in security, law enforcement, mental health, and education, asks users to input data in response to a series of questions, allowing the responses to be compared to past situations whose outcomes are already known. The software, says the firm, provides comprehensive assessments by comparing current situations to previous assessments (MOSAIC Threat Assessment Systems, 2015).

Bob Martin of Gavin DeBecker & Associates (B. Martin, personal communication, July 10, 2015) provided a thorough description of the assessment method during a phone interview. MAST, he said, is not a statistical database. It is an accumulation of expert knowledge based on input from 200 experts from education, mental health, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, and security companies who gathered in 2000, a year after the Columbine shooting, to brainstorm on threat assessment in schools. Their input was used to design the software to analyze data on future cases in the hopes that preventing future attacks, an elusive goal for much of history, could be a reality through the use of technology. MAST answers one question: how similar is this situation to others that got worse? It is not an assessment of people; it is an

assessment of situations, comparing the facts to those that ended with and without violence. In a sense, the software does what pin maps did in the past by plotting data in a manner than can be measured and quantified. Because dangerousness is viewed as a changing environment and not a permanent state of being, the product does not attempt to predict human behavior. Rather, it looks for similar situations to those that ended violently, providing notice of similarities so current circumstances can be altered to prevent targeted violence. MAST quantifies police intuition, Martin said, and backs it up with expert opinion.

The software does not make decisions for people. It is not meant as a replacement for human intuition and knowledge. Rather, the designers loaded human knowledge into the program so it could be used to its full potential, allowing users to make informed decisions. The product works well with threat assessment teams because data can be entered multiple times as more information becomes available. Someone can, for example, personally enter preliminary data during an inquiry to help determine if the team should meet. MAST is unique to the USSS and FBI models because it allows individuals to use the assessment tool to decide whether to assemble an assessment team, whereas the other models rely on the subjective evaluation of data at this stage. The team can later use MAST again to re-evaluate the circumstances when more information is available from the collective input of the team. Interventions can be determined based on how bad the threat appears to be. The software, according to Martin, injects objectivity into threat analysis because a standard instrument is used to measure each circumstance, removing human subjectivity and bias. Arrest decisions, however, are still made by people, not the software. With approximately 100,000 users nationwide, the firm is not aware of the product being rejected during any court proceedings. MOSAIC represents “the collective knowledge of experts around the country” while validating intuition. It is not intended to predict the future or

profile future perpetrators. It is designed to compare circumstances and identify situations, according to past events, likely to have perpetrators act out again (B. Martin, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

The proprietary restrictions on MAST prevented its use in this study, representing a limitation in the depth of analysis of current threat assessment models. The described design and purpose of the program, however, indicate that the situational variables used to determine lethality likelihood in the product, with an emphasis on past circumstances known to precede future violence, are undoubtedly similar to those used in the USSS and FBI models. Future studies of threat assessment processes should incorporate MOSAIC methods, if possible, to gain a complete understanding of threat assessment approaches currently in place. The low base rate of attacks, as mentioned previously, limits the development of the literature in the threat assessment field (Augustyniak, 2005).

### **Introduction of the Threat Assessment Discussion Guide**

For occupations tasked with deciding a course of action when confronted with threatening circumstances, such as school personnel, law enforcement officers, mental health practitioners, and social workers, the need for a field threat assessment tool is obvious. Without a document or a set of operating protocols to guide discussions during the evaluation of threats, professionals responsible for keeping school settings safe often resort to approaches and appraisals rooted in beliefs that may be full of misconceptions and inaccurate assumptions. In other words, without a field tool to guide threat assessors through the threat assessment process, they will likely journey down a discussion path that weighs irrelevant factors or, even if some accurate factors are incorporated, they will completely miss many critical discussion points,

thereby reducing the effectiveness of the entire process. They will just “wing it” and discuss factors that seem important. Such an error puts other people at risk of being victims of targeted violence. Utilizing a threat assessment field tool developed from the combined input from experts, however, is tremendously important and greatly increases the likelihood, even in the face of the evolving state of current research, of accurate threat evaluations.

The argument against the use of a field tool rests on the belief, mentioned several times in this study, that the compilation of a list of risk factors for threat assessment is not a magic pill to automatically validate all threat discussions. The FBI model, in fact, states that point explicitly, saying the model “[i]s not a profile of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school. Those things do not exist” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 1). The USSS model similarly declared that “[t]here is no single prescription that will be effective dealing with every situation” (Fein et al., 2002, p. 77). Cornell et al., (2012), meanwhile, criticized the use of a list of risk factors and specifically the scoring of accumulated results from the factors. While they recognized that the use of a structured list is appealing, scoring the factors contained in such a list is dangerous because the factors are often chosen arbitrarily without empirical validation. Such lists, which are often developed by local jurisdictions, and the decisions made from their use are seldom based on research and, therefore, may exhibit low validity.

Given the aforementioned considerations, it is imperative that threat assessment teams find a balance between making determinations without any guidance and basing all decisions on the scoring of lists developed without empirical validation. Assessors in the field, tasked with countless responsibilities separate from evaluating threats that occasionally surface, often do not have the time or the resources to comb through various threat assessment models to develop

usable, accurate guidelines. The Threat Assessment Discussion Guide (TADG), shown in Appendix A, represents a balance between the goals and concerns mentioned herein. The TADG, a working document designed to be used by threat assessment teams during initial inquiries to help them determine if investigations need to be completed, is a gathering of best practices according to current research. It lists applicable risk factors as discussion points to aid in the accurate evaluation of threatening information. The value of any assessment instrument rests in the discussion generated, not in a score obtained through actuarial methods.

### **Applicability of the Threat Assessment Discussion Guide**

Utilization of the TADG is a three stage process. During the pre-assessment stage, users are required to review the actions to be taken when threatening circumstances appear. These initial steps to the threat assessment process are outlined in the TADG so users can make standardized decisions pertaining to the activation of threat assessment teams or the coordination with law enforcement response. Transient and substantive threat determinations are made as part of the seven step process. The final phase of the pre-assessment stage, completed after the seven steps when it is decided to gather a threat assessment team, involves users initialing five agreements associated with the concerns mentioned above. Users agree that any single discussion point can warrant a full investigation, the listed factors are discussion points only and are not conclusive, the scoring of discussion points is discouraged, the assessment tool does not replace human judgment, and all circumstances can change rapidly.

The second stage of the process involves the analysis of the discussion points gathered from available research and grouped according to FBI categories. The discussion points shown in

the TADG are all of the risk factors appearing in either model examined for this study. The TADG categorizes the factors according to the FBI groups identified above to aid in a logical order of discussion. The guide then asks users if any or all discussion points warrant further investigation and if there are any discussion points not mentioned in the document that necessitate consideration or discussion. Users are asked again to agree that the scoring or tallying of factors does not replace human interpretation.

The third and final stage of the TADG requires users to determine recommendations and outcomes. Intervention efforts are noted in a table showing a variety of options divided into school-based supports, community-based supports, and other considerations. At the end of the intervention stage, users indicate who should be notified of the team's findings and conclusions. Parents, staff members, the potential perpetrator, targeted victims, and others are listed as likely people to be notified.

With the aforementioned attributes of the tool in mind, it is important to mention limitations of the guide. While it is tempting and attractive to score or weight risk factors associated with a threatening situation to gauge apparent risk, such practice is problematic and discouraged because the empirical development of these processes has not been developed with the FBI and USSS models. The FBI model, in fact, explicitly dissuades users from using the model with that intent, stating “[there] is no ‘magical’ number of traits or constellation of traits which will determine what students may present a problem. Hopefully, subsequent empirical research in this area will determine which are the significant traits and how they should be weighted. However, a practical and common sense application of this model indicates that the more problems which are identified in each of the four prongs, the greater the level of concern for the assessor” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 15). The TADG, therefore, represents a preliminary method

to evaluate threatening behaviors and words according to prevailing research while realizing that the use of the tool is not designed, given current empirical shortcomings, to completely compute threat lethality. Rather, it is the goal of the TADG to provide discussion points according to current research to aid assessors in making subjective determinations of threat severity and violence likelihood according to the totality of circumstances surrounding the event.

Assessors wishing to use a threat assessment instrument capable of providing some measure of actuarial (statistical) evaluation of threatening situations should use methods showing empirical support. MOSAIC, mentioned above, bases its evaluations on scientific methods that have shown some empirical validity. Though the threat assessment field of research is still developing and many scholars feel low base rates have prevented empirical validation of existing methods, MOSAIC methods have given some indication that the evaluation methods utilized by the product are at least somewhat statistically significant (Roehl, O'Sullivan, & Webster, 2001).

The TADG is a field assessment tool designed to encompass the state of current research in a method that gives users in the schools, the people responsible for preventing targeted violence, an accurate and valid instrument to judge the lethality of concerning circumstances. By collecting relevant discussion points according to the advice of leading experts and tempering the points' blind use based on the concerns of empirical scholars, the TADG accomplishes the most comprehensive analysis of threats while avoiding pitfalls identified in the literature. The TADG does not use a random collection of risk factors to make final determinations; yet the guide offers users a practical tool to generate discussion and, ultimately, evaluation of concerning words or behaviors. Without such an instrument, threat assessment teams have little direction in their discussions and will unquestionably miss vital information. The TADG strikes a balance between letting teams drift aimlessly and forcing them to quantify threatening criteria according

to a rigid list of factors meant to replace human intuition. The intrinsic value in that position may increase the effectiveness of the threat assessment process for users in the field who do not utilize actuarial products with empirical validation.

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Appendix A

Threat Assessment Discussion Guide

The following steps should be completed when a threat or concern is encountered:

- 1) Establish if a threat was made and consider contacting law enforcement
- 2) Evaluate the threat:
  - a) Obtain a specific account of the threat by interviewing the recipient of the threat and other witnesses.
  - b) Write down the exact content of the threat and statements made by each party.
  - c) Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student's intentions.
- 3) Decide whether the threat is clearly transient or substantive (Consider student's age, credibility, and previous discipline history) and initiate an assessment team as needed

Threat is clearly transient:	Threat is substantive:
Reprimand, parental notification, or other steps	Take initial steps to protect the target(s)
The student may be required to make amends	Implement the threat assessment team
Law enforcement may be notified	
Consider implementing the threat assessment team	

- 4) Implement a safety plan
- 5) Complete a written plan/report
- 6) Maintain contact with the student
- 7) Revise plan as needed

Note: Restorative and reformative interventions have been shown to be more effective than zero tolerance or punitive options (Cornell & Allen, 2011).

## Threat Assessment Discussion Guide

Please initial the following conditions relating to the assessment risk factors/discussion points:

Any single discussion point/risk factor can merit initiating a full investigation	Initials: _____
The individual factors are discussion points and are not conclusive indicators of lethality likelihood	Initials: _____
The scoring of factors on this form is discouraged because such practices do not necessarily help determine threat severity	Initials: _____
The assessment tool does not replace human intuition or judgment	Initials: _____
All situations are dynamic and can change quickly	Initials: _____

(Fein et al., 2002 & O'Toole, 1999)

The assessment team should begin by discussing the reason for the assessment.

Stated reason: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Threat Assessment Discussion Guide

### Personality Traits and Behaviors

#### Factors

<b>Evidence of Planning (leakage)</b>	Discuss whether there is any evidence of the person planning an attack.
<b>Recent behavioral changes</b>	Are there indicators of recent dramatic behavioral changes?
<b>Written/oral communication of intent (threat)</b>	Was the intent to attack communicated in any way?
<b>Form of threat</b>	Specific and plausible threats are generally more concerning than indirect or extreme threats.
<b>Others fear suspect</b>	Are others fearful of the person?
<b>Misconduct/criminal behavior</b>	Does s/he have a history of misconduct or criminal behavior?
<b>Prohibited items in school</b>	Has the person brought prohibited items to school in the past?
<b>Student attitude toward authority</b>	Is the student defiant toward authority?
<b>Conflict/hostility management</b>	Discuss the ability of the person to manage anger and conflict.
<b>Preoccupation with weapons</b>	Is there an unusual preoccupation with weapons?
<b>Violent beliefs</b>	Are violent beliefs obvious and concerning?

## Personality Traits and Behaviors (continued)

### Factors

<b>Temperament</b>	Is the person's apathy or anger causing alarm in others?
<b>Perceptions of self-worth/narcissism</b>	Are perceptions of self-worth extremely high or low?
<b>Resiliency</b>	Is the person displaying normal resiliencies?
<b>Indicators of suicide</b>	Discuss subtle signs of suicide consideration in the past.
<b>Suicide threats</b>	Has the person previously threatened or attempted suicide?
<b>Empathy toward others</b>	Is the student reasonably empathetic toward others?
<b>Mental health history</b>	Discuss signs of depression.
<b>Response to criticism</b>	Does the person accept criticism poorly?
<b>Tolerance of others</b>	Are there signs of intolerance of others?
<b>Peer interactions (alienation)</b>	Is the person appropriately bonded to peers?
<b>Inappropriate humor</b>	Does the student display inappropriate humor more than others the same age?
<b>Attention seeking</b>	Are attention-seeking behaviors evident and concerning?

### Family Dynamics

#### Factors

<b>Role models present</b>	Evaluate the presence or absence of positive role models.
<b>Involvement of parents</b>	Assess the involvement of parents in the person's life.
<b>Victim/witness of abuse</b>	Did the student experience trauma as either a victim or witness of abuse?
<b>Quality of home life</b>	What is the quality of the person's home life relative to others the same age?
<b>Access/training with weapons</b>	Does the person have access to or train with weapons?

### School Dynamics

#### Factors

<b>School culture (as perceived by students)</b>	What is the student's perception of the school culture? A positive, communicative culture can be a deterrent to violence.
<b>Grades</b>	Have grades declined or remained constant?
<b>School attendance</b>	Has attendance declined recently?

## Social Dynamics

### Factors

<b>Substance abuse</b>	Is there a history of substance abuse?
<b>Themes of/interest in violence</b>	Does the student demonstrate an interest in violent themes?
<b>Outside interests</b>	Discuss whether the student has interests outside of school.
<b>Discrimination or bullying</b>	Has the student reported being bullied or discriminated against?
<b>Strategy to stop victimization by peers/others</b>	If the student has experienced victimization by others, is there a strategy in place to address it?
<b>Interest in recent shootings (copycat effect)</b>	Is there an excessive interest in other shootings?
<b>Capacity/ability to carry out threat</b>	Does the student have the ability (physically and psychologically) to carry out a violent act?
<b>Evidence of lethal steps taken</b>	Is there evidence that the student has taken steps to carry out a violent act?
<b>Precipitating (trigger) event prior to threat/concern</b>	Is there an event in the person's life that could have triggered the concerning behavior?
<b>Experience rejection/loss</b>	Discuss whether the student experienced any rejection or loss which might have been a source of emotional upheaval.

(Fein et al., 2002 & O'Toole, 1999)

Do any or all of the risk factors/discussion points warrant further investigation?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ (begin investigation)      No \_\_\_\_\_ (end inquiry)

Does the team acknowledge that any risk factor/discussion point tallying does not determine final lethality? Interpretation and evaluation of each factor is required.

Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other risk factors/discussion points not mentioned above which require further discussion?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, list them below and discuss them:

Risk factor: \_\_\_\_\_

Risk factor: \_\_\_\_\_

Risk factor: \_\_\_\_\_

## Threat Assessment Discussion Guide

### **Threat Assessment Team Recommendations and Outcome**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Check recommendations in table below:

		<b>Yes</b>		<b>Yes</b>
<b>Immediate Response:</b>	Immediate Secure Delinquent Setting		Immediate Secure Mental Health Treatment Setting	
<b>School-based Supports:</b>	Modify School Start and End Times		Building-based Evaluation	
	Intensive Supervision in School Setting		IEP Evaluation	
	Alternative Transportation		Meetings with Student Services Staff	
	Reduce or Change Academic Schedule		Deliver Instruction in Another Setting	
	Student, Backpack, Locker Searches		Other:	
<b>Community-based Supports:</b>	Off Campus Programming		Referral to Juvenile Intake	
	Referral to Community-based Services		Other:	
<b>Other Considerations:</b>	Out of School Placement Needed		Recommend Suspension or Expulsion	
	Other:		Other:	

Who should be notified of the Threat Assessment Team's Findings?

\_\_\_\_\_ Parents

\_\_\_\_\_ Target(s) of Threat

\_\_\_\_\_ Student (suspect)

\_\_\_\_\_ Others:

\_\_\_\_\_ Staff Members