

RESEARCH BRIEF

The Case for Threat Assessment *By Bracken Reed*

The traumatic series of school shootings that took place during the late 1990s—particularly the Columbine High School shooting of April 20, 1999—shocked the American public and resulted in a public call for action. Many believed that a national epidemic was at hand, and that schools needed to take drastic measures to prevent school-based violence. Two separate reports, however, directly criticized methods such as profiling and zero tolerance weapons policies, and recommended a more rational, organized approach to violence prevention, called threat assessment. [See page 18 for one example of a threat assessment program.]

In May 1998, the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) and the U.S. Department of Education, collaborated on a study of recent school shootings. This study gained new urgency after Columbine, and in July 1999 the NCAVC convened a national conference on school shooting at its headquarters in Virginia.

A final report, which combined the conference findings with the study of 18 incidents of school-based violence, spoke directly to the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance and profiling methods, saying, "In a knee-jerk reaction, communities may resort to inflexible, one-size-fits-all policies on preventing or reacting to violence" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 3).

In contrast to such policies, the report recommended a threat assessment model, saying, "Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critical" (O'Toole, p. 1).

The Safe Schools Initiative, a collaboration of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center came to similar conclusions.

Starting in June 1999 they studied 37 incidents of "targeted school violence" that had occurred in the United States from December 1974 to May 2000. Their findings (Fein et al., 2002, and Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) make a clear case for the use of threat assessments in a school environment. "Most instances of targeted school violence were thought out and planned in advance. The attackers' behavior suggested that they were planning or preparing for an attack. Prior to most incidents the attackers' peers knew the attack was to occur. And most attackers were not 'invisible,' but already were of concern to people in their lives. In light of these findings, the use of a threat assessment approach may be a promising strategy for preventing a school-based attack" (Vossekuil et al., p. 41).

Both the FBI and Secret Service reports called for more research. "There is a compelling need to field test, evaluate, and further develop these threat assessment recommendations and to develop appropriate interventions designed to respond to the mental health needs of the students involved," wrote O'Toole (p. 31).

So far, the Virginia Youth Violence Project of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education has been the main organization to take up that challenge. Led by prominent clinical psychologist and professor of education Dewey Cornell, the project received a three-year grant and conducted a field study beginning in 2001 (Cornell et al., 2004). Although not a control group experiment, the field study showed positive results and created a blueprint for how threat assessments could be practically applied in actual schools as part of a larger school safety effort.

"Threat assessment is intended to be one part of a comprehensive school safety program. A comprehensive prevention program would include a strong school discipline policy, well-staffed counseling and psychological services, and school-based programs to help students resolve conflicts and overcome bullying" (Cornell & Sheras, 2006, p. 8). ■

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