

The background image is a composite of several elements: a black handgun with a magazine inserted, resting on a stack of three books with worn spines; several brass bullets are scattered on a wooden surface in the foreground; a dark, textured jacket is draped over the top left; and a green wall is visible in the background. The image is overlaid with a large, semi-transparent white triangle on the left side, which contains the text.

Early Recognition and Rapid Response: New Guidance for School Violence Prevention

Steve Crimando | July 2018



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- + In 51%, the attackers had the idea for at least a month
- + In 81% of incidents someone else knew

Violence Is a Process, Not an Event

No one just snaps. Adults don't snap; kids don't snap. The research in the area of threat assessment and violence prevention consistently point to the same key concept: *violence is a process, not an event*. Central to current thinking in violence prevention is the idea that individuals move along a “*pathway*” toward a violent act. Mass shootings, in schools or any other settings, are not impulsive acts, they are decisions. Instances of mass violence are not “*hot blooded*” reactions, but rather they are “*cold blooded*” acts of predatory violence that unfold over a timeline. Individuals on this pathway often give clear indications of their interest and intention through very specific behaviors and communications. It is critical that schools at every educational level have mechanisms in place to recognize and respond to the pre-incident indicators of violence because by the time the first shot is fired in a school, it is already too late.

Understandably, for the past several years, schools and other organizations preparing for the possibility of an active shooter incident have focused almost exclusively on the five minutes of terror from “*shots fired*” to “*shooter down*.” (The FBI study of active shooter incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013 reported that 69% were over in five minutes or less.)¹ While quick response to deadly force is critical for survival, it is better to prevent that first shot from being fired, rather than simply surviving an attack.

The U.S. Secret Service has published a new guide for schools, “*Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*,”² stressing the importance of developing multidisciplinary threat assessment teams and providing training in early identification for all stakeholders. Having a structured, reliable approach for receiving information about individuals of concern, identifying the level of concern, and developing an effective threat management response are three critical steps in prevention, but they are not the only steps. The initial information has to come from somewhere.

Making Bystanders Upstanders

Schoolmates, siblings and others close to an at-risk individual often have information suggesting they are on the pathway to violence. The “*Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*” co-authored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Secret Service in 2004, found that in 93% of cases the act was planned; in 51%, the attackers had the idea for at least a month; and more importantly, that in 81% of incidents someone else knew. In 59% of those cases, more than one person knew, and of those who knew, 93% were schoolmates or siblings. The bottom line is that other kids, and sometimes adults, know when someone is planning mass murder in a school. The challenge then is how to leverage that information to prevent an attack.

Another important study by the Department of Education and Secret Service, “*Prior Knowledge of Potential School-based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent*

¹ A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013. (September 2013). U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigations. Washington, DC.

² Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence. (2017). U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, Washington, DC.



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a Targeted Attack,” stresses that schools should cultivate a climate in which students feel comfortable sharing information regarding a potentially threatening situation with a responsible adult.³ That trusted adult may be a teacher, coach, counselor or law enforcement officer. The most recent guidance from the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, *“Making Prevention a Reality,”* introduced strategies for creating that climate of trust and reinforced the importance of creating an *“upstander”* culture or possibly a program.⁴ This is one of the most important actions schools can take to prevent violence.

The term *“upstander”* was first used to describe those who spoke out against genocide, and later in schools as an anti-bullying strategy. It is an extension of the *“see something, say something”* concept. Students are more likely to be the first to know of trouble, but often are unsure or reluctant to come forward. The barriers to reporting concerns include the:

- + Potential for ridicule
- + Potential for reprisal either from the person of concern or from the organization
- + Appearance of being a “snitch”
- + Potential of not being taken seriously
- + Uncertainty about the seriousness of the information or situation
- + Mistrust of confidentiality or mistrust of the system to handle the situation appropriately
- + Desire to remain uninvolved in the affairs of others

Transforming bystanders into upstanders is a must, and the FBI guidance defined the key elements to leveraging upstander information. They include:

- a) Optimizing opportunities for identification: Whether on social media posts, direct observation, or just overhearing a disturbing comment in the hallway, students and others in an at-risk person’s life, must know what signs and signals to look out for, even if they seem small or unimportant.
- b) Developing a reporting mechanism: If a student, family or community member becomes aware of behavior and/or communication of concern, they must have a clear idea of how to report information and what will happen next.
- c) Creating a culture of shared responsibility: One thing that separates upstanders from bystanders is their positive emotional connection to the school and staff, to their workplace, or to the larger community.

Effective Threat Assessment

Once information about a potential threat of violence is received, it must be evaluated to determine the level of risk in order to formulate an effective, safe and defensible threat management response. The FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit describes threat assessment as, *“... a systematic, fact-based method of investigation and*

³ Pollack, W., Modzeleski, W., Rooney, G. (2008) Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

⁴ Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks. (2017). U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation-Behavioral Analysis Unit. Washington, DC.



Having particular character traits, school performance or even a diagnosis of a mental illness does not predispose someone to violence.

examination that blends the collection and analysis of multiple sources of information with published research and practitioner experience, focusing on an individual's patterns of thinking and behavior to determine whether, and to what extent, a person of concern is moving toward an attack.”⁵

It is important for those assessing the risk of violence to focus on behaviors, not diagnoses or profiles. There is no useful profile of someone who may be on the pathway to violence. Applying profiles yields too many false positives to be useful. Mental illness plays a role in some, but not all school shootings. Approximately 1 in 5 youth aged 13–18 (21.4%) experiences a severe mental disorder at some point during their life.⁶ As a generalization, it is important to understand that individuals with mental illnesses are no more likely than anyone else to commit violence.⁷ Individuals with serious mental illnesses, especially psychotic disorders may have a slightly elevated risk compared with someone who does not have such a condition.⁸ Having particular character traits, school performance or even a diagnosis of a mental illness does not predispose someone to violence. The most important information for assessors is:

- a) Behaviors and communications that are associated with the risk of violence
- b) Negative stressful events experienced by a student of concern
- c) Internal and external resources for coping

Structure Before Skills

In the wake of the tragic Parkland, Florida school shooting there has been an upsurge in interest in school-based threat assessment teams. In a rush to find a remedy and possibly stop the next school shooter, many schools have scrambled to find training in threat assessment methods and skills. It is important for leaders and decision-makers to understand the importance of developing the proper infrastructure within their school or districts to enable a threat assessment team to function effectively. Introducing threat assessment skills before developing this framework can greatly undermine the success of a threat assessment team and may potentially increase risk.

The latest Secret Service-National Threat Assessment Center guidance provides a roadmap for creating the necessary structure to support a functional threat assessment team.⁹ The elements of such a structure include, but are not limited to:

- a) Developing a multidisciplinary team (remember to select and train back-ups or seconds for each critical function to ensure representation of each discipline during actual case assessments).
- b) Defining concerning and prohibited behaviors (understand that there is an important distinction between *making* a threat and *posing* a threat).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Any Disorder among Children. (n.d.) Retrieved July 16, 2018, from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-disorder-among-children.shtml>

⁷ Shern, D., & Lindstrom, W. (2013). After Newtown: Mental illness and violence. *Health Affairs (Project Hope)*, 32 (3), 447-450.

⁸ Douglas KS, Guy LS, Hart SD. Psychosis as a risk factor for violence to others: a meta-analysis. *Psychol Bull.* 2009;135(5):679-706.

⁹ Ibid.

- c) Creating a centralized reporting mechanism.
- d) Determining the threshold for law enforcement involvement.
- e) Establishing threat assessment procedures (this involves protocols for how team members are notified, assembled and work through cases).
- f) Developing a range of threat assessment options (most cases require a blend of several options when crafting a threat management plan. How cases will be monitored is an important consideration since very few are quick open and shut situations. The threat of violence is dynamic and changes over time. The team must have more than just a snap shot of the student of concern).
- g) Conducting training for all stakeholders (notice that this is the final step, not the first!).

Administrators under pressure to ensure school safety and take proactive steps to reduce the risk of violence must take care not to short cut the process and rush to train a threat assessment team too early in the development cycle. Focus first on laying the foundation to support the team over time. Expect attrition, have a plan for team development and maintenance. Threat assessment skills have a short shelf life. Absent of actual cases, periodic reviews and practice assessments are needed to keep skills sharp and to build confidence in the team's skills and processes.

School violence is a complex, multi-dimensional problem that requires an integrated, multi-faceted response. A "whole community" approach is recommended for recognizing and reporting concerns. Using resources from within the school systems and the surrounding communities, it will be necessary to involve school administrators, teachers and staff, guidance counselors and coaches, as well as law enforcement, judicial, mental health, clergy and community leaders in the threat assessment and threat management process.

Balancing Threat Assessment and Incident Response

Threat assessment relies on the awareness of a threat, or concerning behaviors and communications. Many school shootings were not perpetrated by current students. Some have involved former students, disgruntled employees, domestic partners of faculty or staff members, and individuals with other relationships or no relationships to the school. An uncomfortable truth is that regardless of the motive, the shooter always has the initial tactical advantage. In many instances, they have planned, rehearsed and in other ways prepared for an attack. They know the day, the time and the location; those on site can be caught off guard.

Even institutions with skilled and practiced threat assessment teams may not always know of danger lurking beyond their reach. Threat assessment and preventive efforts must be balanced with readiness and response capabilities. It is still critical that everyone in all educational settings understand the basics of active shooter response. Prevention and response must go hand-in-hand to ensure safety and survivability.



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About the Author

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Speed Is Safety

The great American poet and essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said, “*In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.*” That concept is the key to survival in an active shooter incident. In addition to the fact that nearly 70% of active shooter incidents are over in five minutes or less, is the grim statistic that once a shooting incident begins, on average another person is shot every 15 seconds.¹⁰ Teachers, having a duty of care for the safety and survival of their students, cannot lose a second to disbelief, denial or indecision. The faster a teacher on the front line of a shooting incident can initiate a response and notify police and emergency responders of a crisis, the quicker the incident will be resolved. The arrival of police at an active shooter incident is the single most important factor in ending the violence. When the hunter becomes the hunted the dynamic radically changes, and either by suicide, being shot by the police, or by surrender, such incidents tend to stop quickly after the police are on site.

Policies which empower teachers to quickly initiate a response, coupled with technology and training to facilitate quick contact with police and emergency services are essential elements of an effective active shooter prevention and response strategy. If someone on the pathway to violence is not detected and turned back by the threat assessment process, then measures must be in place to mitigate the threat by expediting the police response to the scene. The shooter is well aware that once the first round is fired, the cavalry will be on its way. They have only minutes to execute their plan and take as many lives as possible. Every effort and every available asset must be brought to bear in order to shorten the duration of the active phase of an active shooter incident.

Conclusion

It is highly recommended that leaders and decision-makers in all types of educational settings give equal attention to early detection and prevention, and not focus exclusively on response to an active shooter. Many but not all acts of school violence are preventable. Schools must be skilled in detecting and deterring threats, but also to respond to and recover from actual violence. The development of an upstander culture, reporting mechanism, threat assessment capabilities, and threat management systems to monitor and keep students of concern moving toward help and away from violence are the essential ingredients. To truly prepare schools for the current threat landscape, it is necessary to balance prevention and response.

To learn more about Active Shooter Incidents and mitigation strategies, visit everbridge.com/activeshooter

¹⁰ Ibid.

About Everbridge

Everbridge, Inc. (NASDAQ: EVBG) is a global software company that provides enterprise software applications that automate and accelerate organizations' operational response to critical events in order to keep people safe and businesses running faster. During public safety threats such as active shooter situations, terrorist attacks or severe weather conditions, as well as critical business events such as IT outages, cyber-attacks or other incidents such as product recalls or supply-chain interruptions, over 3,800 global customers rely on the company's SaaS-based platform to quickly and reliably aggregate and assess threat data, locate people at risk and responders able to assist, automate the execution of pre-defined communications processes, and track progress on executing response plans. The company's platform sent over 2 billion messages in 2017, and offers the ability to reach more than 200 countries and territories with secure delivery to over 100 different communication devices. The company's critical communications and enterprise safety applications include Mass Notification, Incident Management, Safety Connection™, IT Alerting, Visual Command Center®, Crisis Commander®, Community Engagement™ and Secure Messaging. Everbridge serves 9 of the 10 largest U.S. cities, 8 of the 10 largest U.S.-based investment banks, 25 of the 25 busiest North American airports, six of the 10 largest global consulting firms, six of the 10 largest global auto makers, all four of the largest global accounting firms, four of the 10 largest U.S.-based health care providers and four of the 10 largest U.S.-based health insurers. Everbridge is based in Boston and Los Angeles with additional offices in San Francisco, Lansing, Orlando, Beijing, London, and Stockholm. For more information, visit www.everbridge.com, read the company [blog](#), and follow on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).



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