



**School Threat Assessment:**  
*An Evidence-based Violence Prevention Strategy*

Society for Personality Assessment  
March 12, 2022

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**Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.**

- Holds the Virgil Ward Chair as Professor of Education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia.
- Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project

Dr. Cornell became interested in the prevention of youth violence based on his experiences as a forensic clinical psychologist evaluating and treating violent offenders in the 1980s. He led the development of threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001. Dr. Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest in the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG.)

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# Overview

1. How does threat assessment differ from risk assessment?
2. How can we conduct a school threat assessment?
3. What does research tell us about school threat assessment?

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# What is threat assessment?


**Behavioral threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.**

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Is threat assessment a kind of risk assessment?

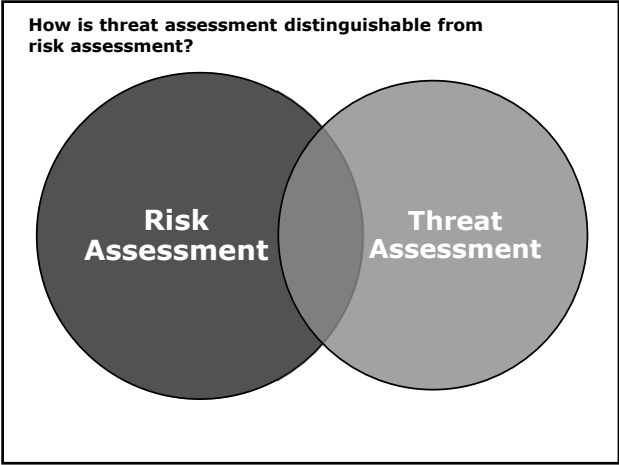
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# Common Elements

1. Assess person’s potential for violence
2. Identify risk and protective factors
3. Recommend interventions

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Differences between Risk and Threat Assessment

	Risk Assessment	Threat Assessment
Purpose	Institutional decision	Response to threat
Intended victim	Often not specified	Usually identified
Timeframe	Often open-ended	Relatively short
Primary Goal	Accurate prediction	Prevention
Intervention Strategy	Primarily detainment	Problem resolution
Social ecology	Often not considered	Goal to improve climate

Most differences are relative rather than categorical.

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Applications of Threat Assessment

Law Enforcement	Schools
Assassins	Bullying and fighting
Stalkers	Sexual harassment
Terrorists	Racial/ethnic bias
Mass Shooters	School shootings

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- Distinguishing Aspects of School Threat Assessment
1. School setting.
  2. Facilitate learning and development.
  3. Create a positive school climate.
  4. Include parent involvement.

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- What are some challenges of school threat assessment?
1. Compared to adults, students
    - frequently make threats;
    - often engage in fights;
  2. Over-reactions are common and have pervasive negative consequences.
  3. Schools have a duty to educate.

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**Prevention means  
“to keep something from  
happening”**



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**Crisis response is not  
prevention.**



**A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.**

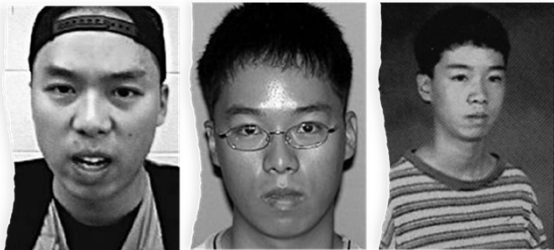
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**Prevention must start before  
the gunman is at your door.**




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**Prevention must start before  
the gunman is at your door.**



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**Shootings seem unpredictable?  
Prevention does not require  
prediction!**



**House Education and Labor Committee  
Hearing on Campus Safety  
May 15, 2007**

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**Prevention does not  
require prediction.**




We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

**Universal, primary, or tier 1 prevention**

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### Prevention can reduce risk factors.




We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

**Selected, secondary, or tier 2 prevention**

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### Prevention can prevent deterioration.

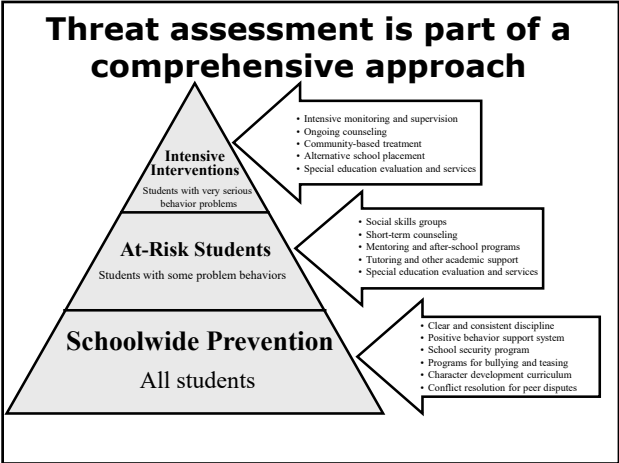
Student accused of threat 'at bottom of an emotional abyss'



We can intervene to resolve problem situations before they deteriorate into violence.

**Intensive, tertiary, or tier 3 prevention**

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### Fear is a barrier to prevention.



School shootings are so traumatic that they skew perceptions of school safety and convince the public and policymakers that there are dramatic needs for security measures.

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In 2021 there were at least **138 incidents of gunfire on school grounds**, resulting in **28 deaths and 80 injuries** nationally.



<https://everytownresearch.org/maps/gunfire-on-school-grounds/>

23

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### How many shootings take place outside of schools?

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In 2021 there were at least **138 incidents of gunfire on school grounds**, resulting in **28 deaths** and **80 injuries** nationally.

**2021**  
**20,820 homicides**  
**40,534 injuries**  
**61,354 shootings**

<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>

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<https://everytownresearch.org/maps/gunfire-on-school-grounds/>

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In 2021 there were at least **138 incidents of gunfire on school grounds**, resulting in **28 deaths** and **80 injuries** nationally.

**For every shooting in a school there are 444 shootings outside a school**

$(61,354 - 138) \div 138 = 444$

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In 2021 there were at least **138 incidents of gunfire on school grounds**, resulting in **28 deaths** and **80 injuries** nationally.

**Schools are far safer than the public perceives.**

<https://everytownresearch.org/maps/gunfire-on-school-grounds/>

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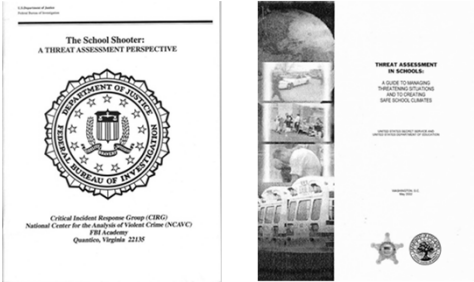
In 2021 there were at least **138 incidents of gunfire on school grounds**, resulting in **28 deaths** and **80 injuries** nationally.

**School violence is part of a much larger societal problem.**

<https://everytownresearch.org/maps/gunfire-on-school-grounds/>

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**The FBI, Secret Service, and Dept of Education recommended a threat assessment approach 20 years ago.**



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**Threat Assessment is a violence prevention strategy.**

**1.Identification:** friends, family members, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress/threatening violence.

**2.Evaluation:** Threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.


**3.Intervention:** The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

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**Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...**

**1. Over-reaction**


School Suspends Second Grader for Eating His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun



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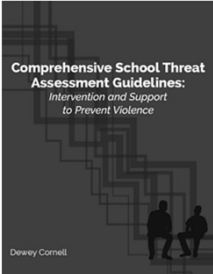
**Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...**

**2. Under-Reaction**



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**Virginia Model of School Threat Assessment**




2018 Manual

- Developed 2001 at University of Virginia
- School-based teams gather information
- Follow decision-tree to determine whether threat is transient or substantive
- Take protective action if substantive
- Attempt to resolve the problem underlying the threat


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Substantive




• Attempts to intimidate or frighten




• Thrill of causing a disruption




• Attention-seeking, boasting



Transient



• Jokes




• Figures of speech

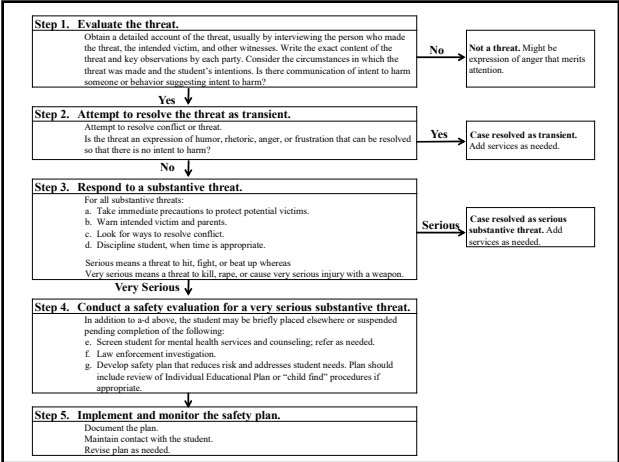
**Continuum of Threats**

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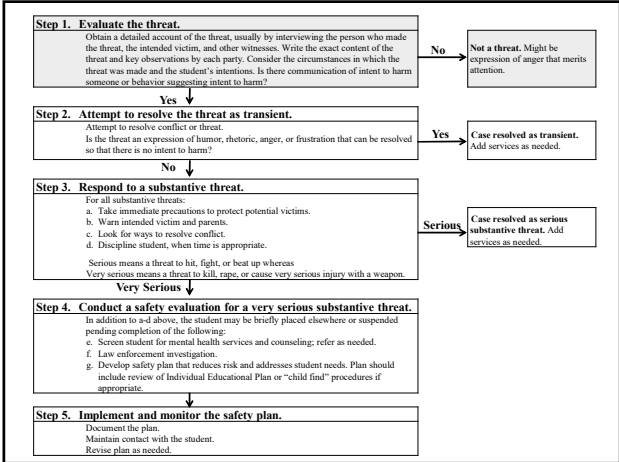
**Forms Freely Available**  
<https://www.schoolta.com/>



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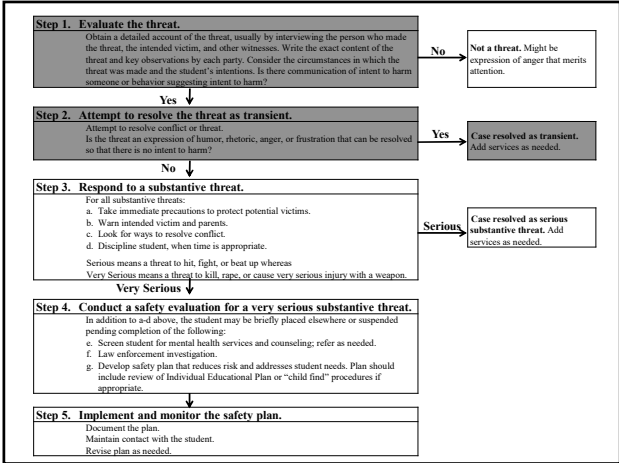


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Initial Interview Questions

- 1. Do you know why I wanted to talk to you?  
What happened today at [place of incident]?
- 2. What exactly did you say and do?
- 3. What did you mean when you said/did that?
- 4. How do you think [person threatened] feels about what you said?
- 5. What was the reason you said that?
- 6. What are you going to do now?

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Transient threats

- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.



Does not pose a serious threat.

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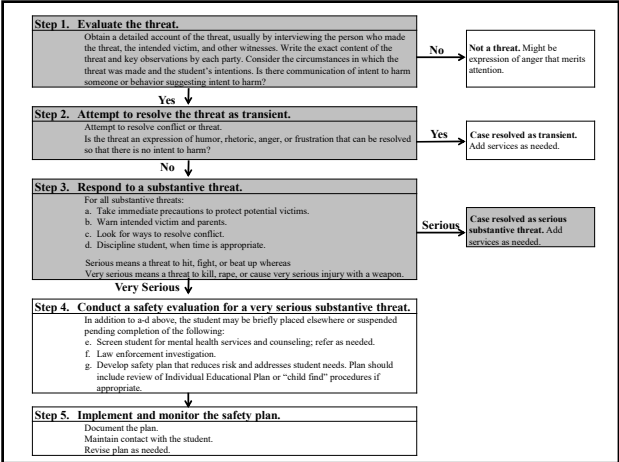
Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

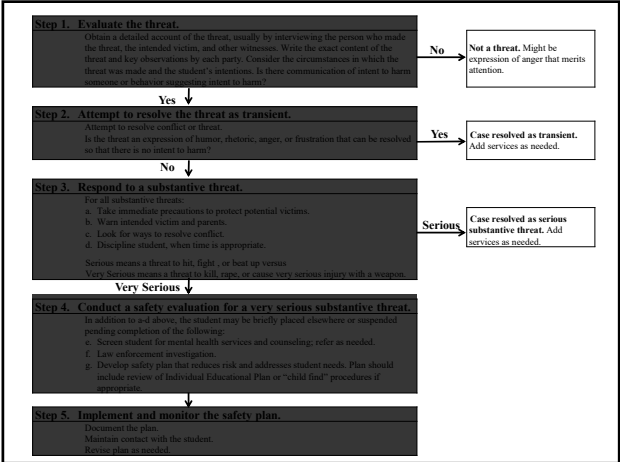


Concern that threat is serious.

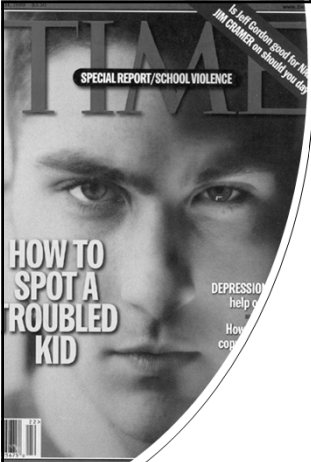
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## Mental Health Assessment

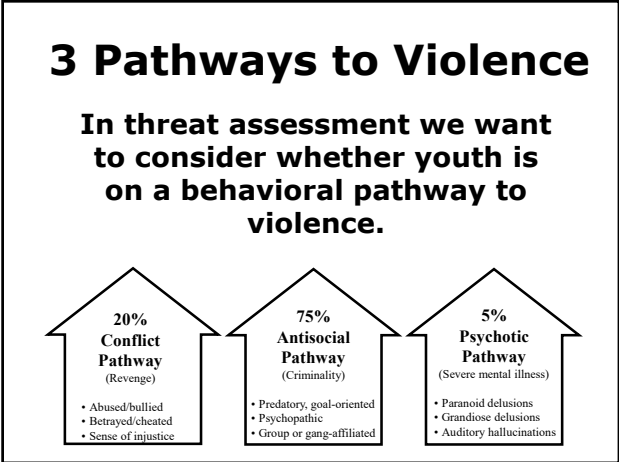
- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.

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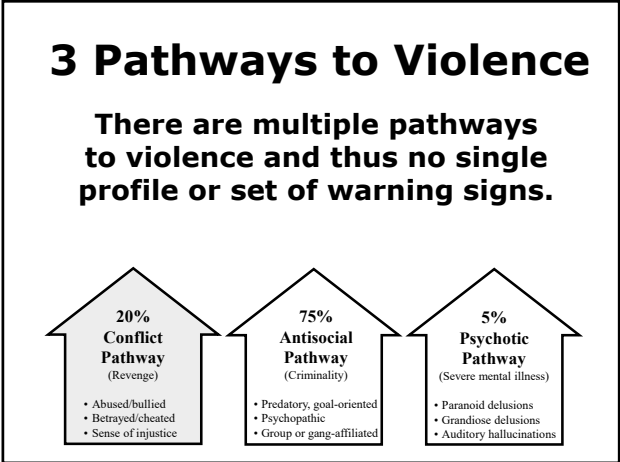


## What are the pathways to violence?

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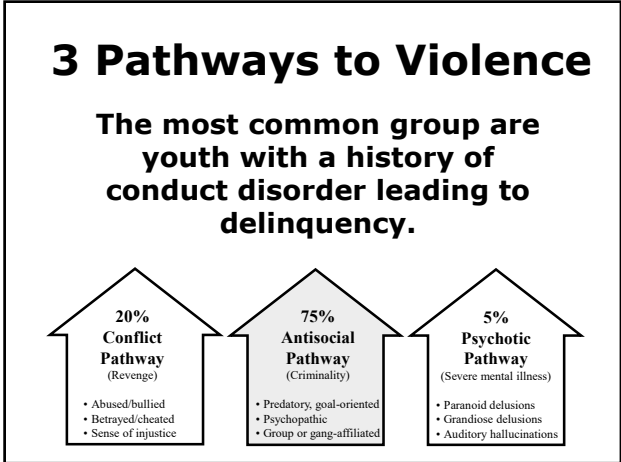


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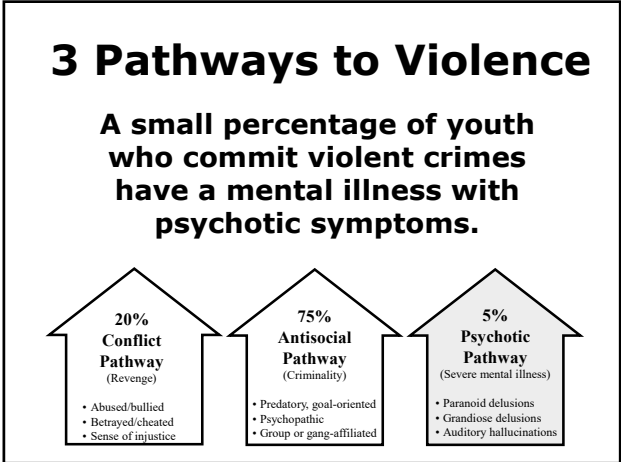


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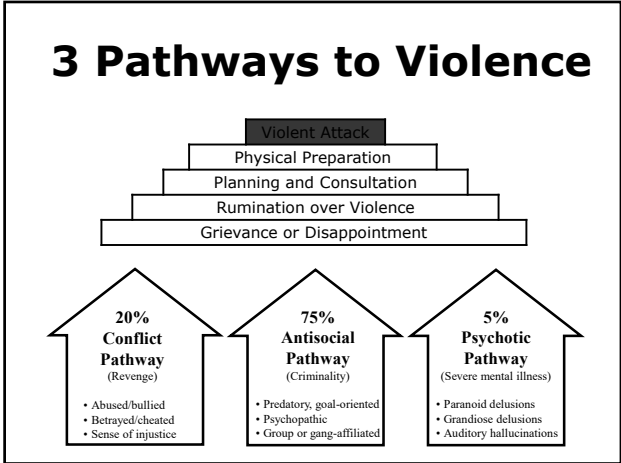




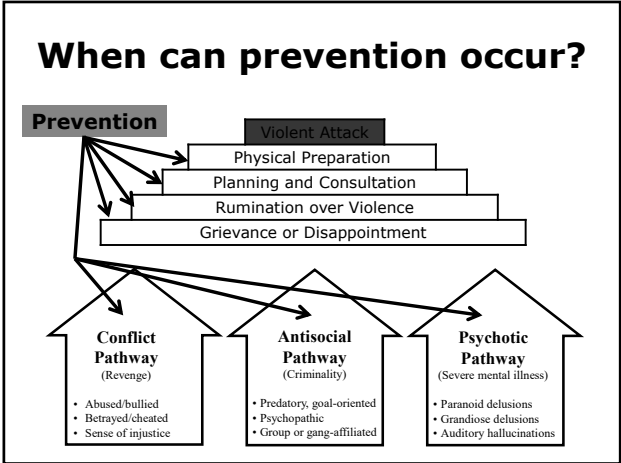
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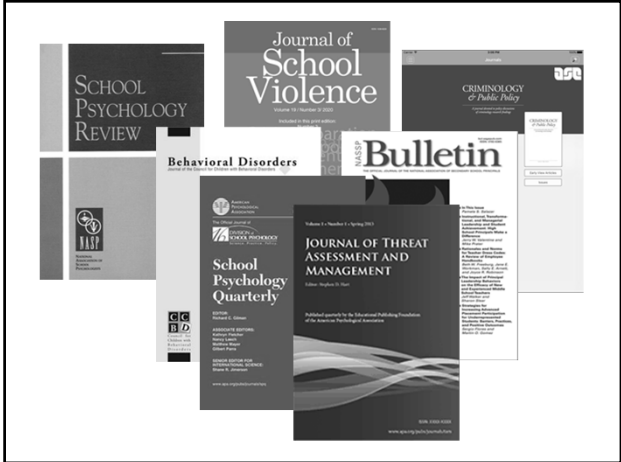
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## Research on Threat Assessment

### 1. Field-test

What happens when you try the model?

### 2. Controlled studies

Cross-sectional, retrospective study:  
How do schools using the model compare to other schools?


Pre-post study:  
How do schools change after adopting the model?

Randomized controlled trial:  
What happens to students in schools randomly chosen to use the model?

### 3. Large-scale implementation

What happens when the whole state adopts the model?

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## Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

School Psychology Review, 2012

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## Randomized Controlled Trial

### Students in threat assessment schools...

- Received more counseling
- More parent involvement
- Fewer long-term suspensions
- Fewer alternative placements

Logistic regression odds ratios:  
3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13

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## Research on Threat Assessment

1. 99% of threats not carried out.
2. Only 1% expelled, 1% arrested.
3. Suspension rates decreased.
4. Racial disparities reduced or absent.
5. Counseling used more often.
6. More positive school climate.

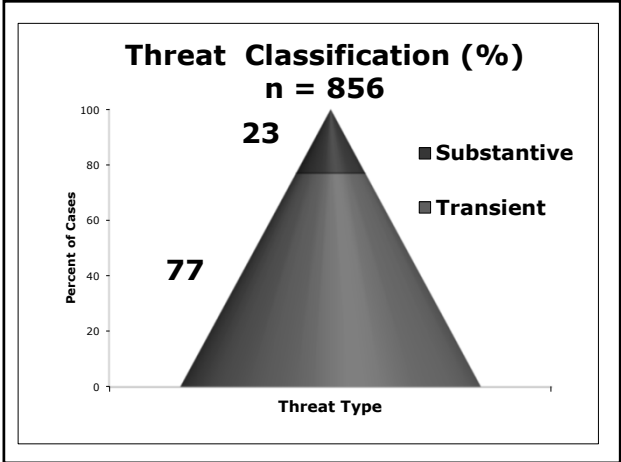
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## What can you expect?

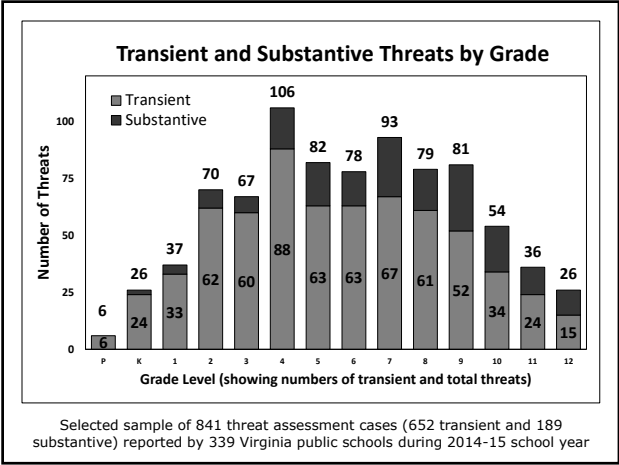
### Results from a routine practice study

- Everyday practice results from 339 Virginia schools
- 884 threat cases
- Threat demographics
- Racial/ethnic differences

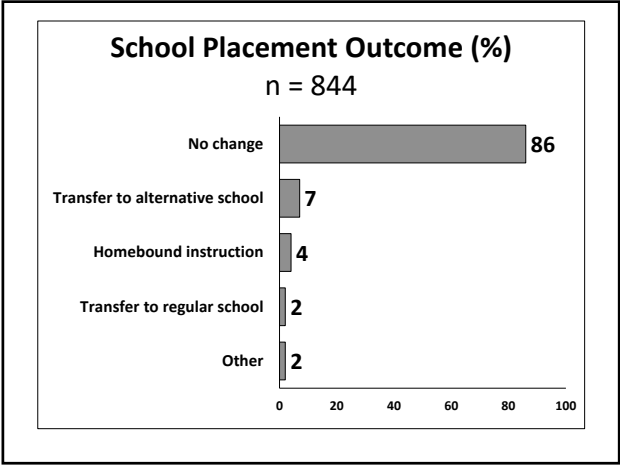
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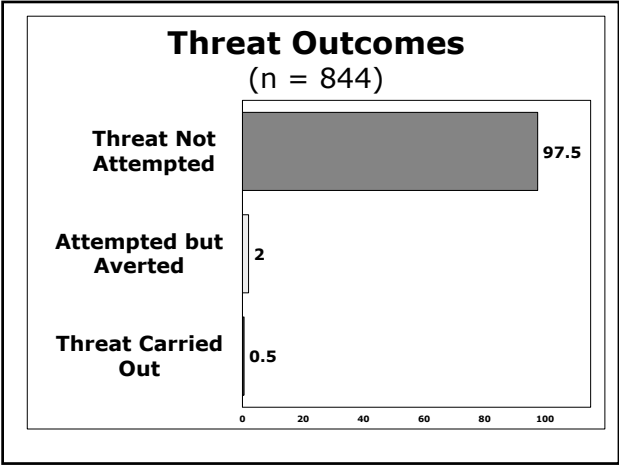
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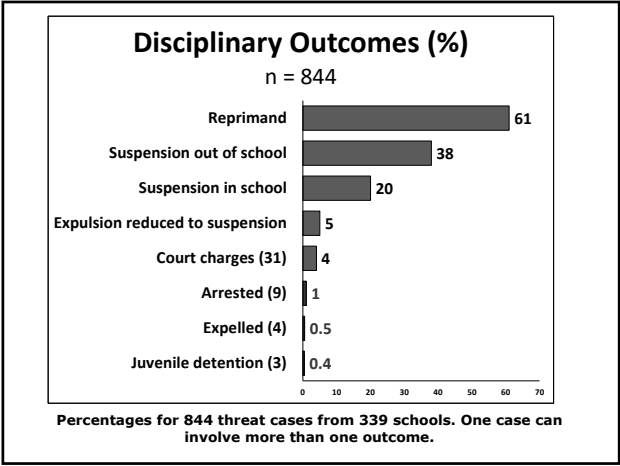
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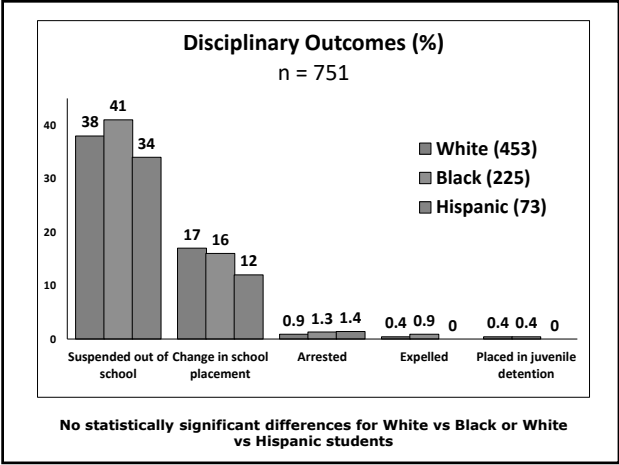
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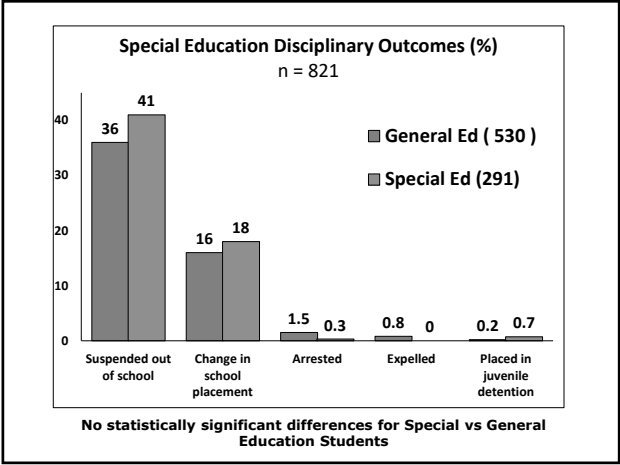
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**University of Virginia  
Research Team**



This work was supported in part by Grant #NIJ 2014-CK-BX-0004 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice or the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. Disclosure: Dewey Cornell is the primary developer of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines and author of the manual, Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines.