

Threat Assessment Reduces School Suspension and Disproportionate Minority Discipline

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Sometimes individuals who are unfamiliar with threat assessment have concern that this practice might increase the school-to-prison pipeline and might disproportionately affect students of color. This is a very important concern that deserves serious consideration. In our program of research on the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, we have systematically and repeatedly examined the impact of threat assessment on the use of exclusionary school discipline and on racial/ethnic disproportionality. *Our research with threat assessment has found that schools using threat assessment see a decrease in use of school suspensions and make very little use of expulsions and arrests of students. We have also found that use of threat assessment does not have disproportionate effects on students of color and in fact reduces disproportionality.* Because this is such an important concern, here is a review of these studies:

1. In 2008 we published a study of 209 students in Memphis City Schools who had made threats of violence.¹ All 209 students were recommended for long-term suspension or expulsion by their school principal. 94% of these students were Black, 1% were Hispanic, and 5% were White. These students were given a threat assessment before a final decision was made by the central administration. Based on the threat assessment, 61% of the students were returned to their previous school, 24% were transferred to a different school, 4% were hospitalized or placed in a day treatment program, and 3% received educational services at home or in job corps. Only 5 of 209 students were expelled and only 3 were incarcerated.
2. Also in 2008 we published a report of how 351 school staff responded to threat assessment training.² We examined staff attitudes toward zero tolerance discipline. After training in threat assessment, support for zero tolerance dropped from 59% to just 12%. This large and statistically significant effect was found for school principals, psychologists and counselors, social workers, and school police officers.
3. In 2009 we published a quasi-experimental controlled study comparing 95 high schools using our model of threat assessment, 131 schools using their own locally developed model, and 54 not using threat assessment.³ We found that schools in both groups using threat assessment had lower short term suspension rates than schools not using threat assessment, and that schools using our model of threat assessment had lower long-term suspensions than either of the other two groups.

¹ Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders, 34*, 42-54.

² Allen, K., Cornell, D., Lorek, E., & Sheras, P. (2008). Response of school personnel to student threat assessment training. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 19*, 319-332.

³ Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24*, 119-129.

4. In 2011, we published a quasi-experimental controlled study that examined suspension rates in 23 schools before and after receiving training in threat assessment.⁴ Schools that received training experienced a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions. In contrast, a control group of 26 schools not using threat assessment had no change in their long-term suspensions.
5. In 2012, we published a randomized controlled trial of threat assessment in 40 schools.⁵ A randomized controlled trial is widely regarded as the gold standard for scientific research in education and the social sciences. In this study, 20 schools – elementary, middle, and high schools – were randomly assigned to receive training in threat assessment and half waited one year to receive training and served as a control group. In that one year there were 201 students identified as making threats of violence at school. Students in schools using threat assessment were 4 times more likely to receive counseling and 2.5 times more likely to have a parent conference than students in the control group schools. Students in the control group schools were 3 times more likely to receive a long-term suspension and 8 times more likely to be transferred to a different school.
6. In 2013, we published a study in collaboration with JustChildren, a program of Virginia’s Legal Aid Justice Center.⁶ The study was specifically concerned with the impact of threat assessment on minority suspension rates in Virginia. It was funded by the Open Society Foundations and the Discipline Disparities Research to Practice Collaborative convened by the Equity Project at Indiana University. This study examined suspension rates in 663 Virginia secondary schools. Schools using our threat assessment model had short term suspensions that were 15% lower and long-term suspensions were 25% lower. These percentages mean that thousands of students were not suspended in the schools using threat assessment. Furthermore, these suspensions were not just for threats, but for all disciplinary infractions in the school. In other words, the schools using threat assessment were limiting their use of suspension for other disciplinary infractions, too. Furthermore, the study showed lower suspension rates for both Black and White students, and the disparity in suspension rates between Black and White male students was significantly reduced. Approximately half of the racial disparity was removed in the schools using threat assessment.
7. In 2015, we were invited to contribute a chapter⁷ to a book entitled *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Research for Policymakers* edited by Daniel Losen, Director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA. Our chapter was entitled “Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions.” In this chapter we reanalyzed data from our

⁴ Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *Bulletin of the Nat Assoc of Secondary School Principals*, 95, 175-194.

⁵ Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review*, 41, 100-115.

⁶ JustChildren and Cornell, D. (2013). *Prevention v. punishment: Threat assessment, school suspensions, and racial disparities*. Retrieved from http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/UVA_and_JustChildren_Report_-_Prevention_v._Punishment.pdf

⁷ Cornell, D. & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Research for Policymakers* (pp. 180-191). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

randomized controlled trial to show that there were no racial disparities in how schools using threat assessment disciplined students who received a threat assessment. We found that both Black and White students were much less likely to be suspended in schools that used a threat assessment. We also analyzed data from a second study of 1,795 Virginia public schools. In this study we showed schools using our threat assessment model had 19% fewer long-term suspensions and 8% fewer short-term suspensions. We also found that the longer the schools had used threat assessment, the greater were their reductions in suspensions.

8. In 2015, we published a quasi-experimental controlled study in 332 middle schools.⁸ Middle schools have especially high suspension rates. Like previous studies, this study again found that schools using our threat assessment model had lower long-term suspension rates. In addition, this study had student and teacher survey data about school climate. Students in schools using our threat assessment model were more likely to report that school discipline was fair and they reported less bullying, teasing, and general student aggression in their schools. Teachers in schools using our threat assessment model reported feeling safer than teachers in other schools.
9. In 2018, we have a new study that is about to be published on racial disparities.⁹ This study does not specifically examine our threat assessment model because in 2013 Virginia mandated threat assessment in all of its schools and many schools adopted a simpler model of threat assessment put forth by the state government. About half of the state schools reported using our model and about half reported using the state model, but in practice there are a lot of similarities and many schools seem to be using a hybrid of models. So in this study we examined all schools regardless of what model they used. We examined 1,836 threat cases in 779 elementary, middle, and high schools. This study found there were no statistically significant differences between Black, Hispanic, and White students in their rates of school suspension or transfer to another school. There were no differences in the rates of legal actions against these students in the form of arrests, incarcerations, or legal charges. We found that only about 1% of students were expelled and only 1% were arrested, even though all of the teams had police officers.

In summary, we have made a concerted effort to examine the effects of threat assessment on disciplinary consequences for students and that we have convincing scientific evidence that threat assessment does not increase the use of school suspension but instead decreases it, and that threat assessment does not contribute to racial disparity in school discipline but instead reduces it.

⁸ Nekvasil, E., Cornell, D. (2015). Student threat assessment associated with positive school climate in middle schools. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, 98-113. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000038>

⁹ Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review*, 47, 183-195. doi: 10.17105/SPR-2017-0030.V47-2