Equity in Law Enforcement Actions Following a School Threat Assessment

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Society for Prevention Research 2024
School-Based Law Enforcement

- Concerns about 1) criminalization of student behavior and 2) disparities between groups of students

- Disparities in community-based arrest data (Claus et al., 2018; Schleiden et al., 2020)
Juvenile Population in Florida

- White Youth: 45%
- Black Youth: 34%
- Hispanic Youth: 21%

Juvenile Arrests in Florida

- White Youth: 32%
- Black Youth: 53%
- Hispanic Youth: 15%
Threat Assessment as Diversion

• Proposed as an evidence-based approach that reduces disparities in suspension and expulsion data (Cornell et al., 2018; Cornell & Maeng, 2024; Maeng et al., 2023)

• Possibly also as diversion from law enforcement action
What is Threat Assessment?

A problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves identification, assessment, and intervention with individuals who have threatened violence toward others.
How Prevalent is Threat Assessment?

- Used in 64% of US public schools (Wang et al., 2022)
- Required in 18 states and encouraged/recommended in 21 more (NASBE, n.d.)
Not just searching for a needle in a haystack
Fairness and Equity Goals

• Avoid unfair excessive punishment or criminalization for minor misbehaviors

• Equitable treatment of students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds
Who is on a Threat Assessment Team?

- Administrator
- Mental health staff (e.g., school psychologist, counselor, social worker)
- School resource officer
- Other staff (e.g., teacher, nurse)
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SROs and Threat Assessment

Concern that SRO involvement leads to greater criminalization of non-criminal behaviors, higher arrest rates and disparities for students of color.
Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG)

- Developed at UVA in 2001
- Distinguish serious (substantive) threats from non-serious (transient) threats
- Focus on support services to prevent violence
CSTAG Decision Tree

Step 1. Evaluate the threat.
Obtain a detailed account of the threat, usually by interviewing the person who made the threat, the intended victim, and other witnesses. Write the exact content of the threat and key observations by each party. Consider the circumstances in which the threat was made and the student’s intentions. Is there communication of intent to harm someone or behavior suggesting intent to harm?

Yes ▶

Step 2. Attempt to resolve the threat as transient.
Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be easily resolved so that there is no intent to harm? Does the person retract the threat or offer an explanation and/or apology that indicates no future intent to harm anyone?

No ▶

Step 3. Respond to a substantive threat.
For all substantive threats:
   a. Take precautions to protect potential victims.
   b. Warn intended victim and parents.
   c. Look for ways to resolve conflict.
   d. Discipline student, when appropriate.

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas very serious means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

Very Serious ▶

Step 4. Conduct a safety evaluation for a very serious substantive threat.
In addition to a-d above, the student may be briefly placed elsewhere or suspended pending completion of the following:
   e. Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed.
   f. Law enforcement investigation for evidence of planning and preparation, criminal activity.
   g. Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs. Plan should include review of Individual Educational Plan if already receiving special education services and further assessment if possible disability.

Step 5. Implement and monitor the safety plan.
Document the plan.
Maintain contact with the student.
Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed.

No ▶

Not a threat. Might be an expression of anger that merits attention.

Yes ▶

Case resolved as transient; add services as needed.

Serious ▶

Case resolved as serious substantive threat; add services as needed.
Threat Classification by Grade

Number of Threats

Substantive
Transient

0
200
400
600
800

K  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12

285  423  461  564  539  606  522  578  555  366  167  111  48

28  56  69  99  129  180  187  216  255  192  111  48  87
SROs and Threat Assessment

• Trained in CSTAG model

• Respond to criminal law breaking

• Interviews, searches, and take protective action when necessary
Project Overview

- In 2018, Florida mandated TA in public schools
- FLDOE adopted CSTAG and initiated statewide training
- UVA project funded by US DOJ to examine CSTAG training and implementation
Research Questions

1. How frequent are law enforcement actions following a threat assessment in schools?

2. How do these actions differ by student race/ethnicity?
Participants

- 21,847 student threat cases
- 2,334 schools in 60 of 67 districts in Florida
Measures

Independent Variables
- Student demographics
  Gender, race, SPED, FRPM, grade
- Classification
  No threat, transient, substantive

Outcome Variables
- Arrest
- Court charge
- Incarceration
How frequent are law enforcement actions following a threat assessment?
Frequency of Law Enforcement Action

- No legal action (n = 21,587)
- Arrest (n = 150)
- Court charge (n = 77)
- Incarceration (n = 33)
How do law enforcement actions differ by student race/ethnicity?
Law Enforcement Action by Race/Ethnicity

- White (n = 8,309)
- Black (n = 8,307)
- Hispanic (n = 5,231)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Arrest</th>
<th>Court Charge</th>
<th>Incarceration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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### Logistic regression model of law enforcement actions

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<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.02</td>
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<td>Black race/ ethnicity</td>
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<td>Hispanic race/ ethnicity</td>
<td>1.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary grade</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
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<td>0.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>High grade</td>
<td>1.84***</td>
<td>2.33***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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\[ R^2 = .30 \quad R^2 = .15 \quad R^2 = .26 \]

*Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. Reference groups: Male gender, White race/ ethnicity, Middle grade, Not a threat classification.*
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Summary

- >98% of cases resolved without law enforcement action
- No significant differences in law enforcement action between White, Black, and Hispanic students receiving a threat assessment
Law Enforcement Action by Race/Ethnicity in Community vs Threat Assessment Contexts

- **Juvenile Population**
  - White Youth: 45%
  - Black Youth: 34%
  - Hispanic Youth: 21%

- **Juvenile Arrests**
  - White Youth: 53%
  - Black Youth: 32%
  - Hispanic Youth: 15%

- **TA Sample**
  - White Youth: 38%
  - Black Youth: 38%
  - Hispanic Youth: 24%

- **TA Arrests**
  - White Youth: 33%
  - Black Youth: 38%
  - Hispanic Youth: 29%
Limitations

• No control group of schools not using threat assessment

• Correlational analyses, cannot make causal inferences
Future Study

• Qualitative research on law enforcement actions

• Examine services, academic, and behavioral outcomes for students 2-3 years after a threat assessment
Implications: Threat Assessment as Diversion

• Evidence-based process that may help correct a previously existing racial disparity in law enforcement actions

• Support for the appropriate use of law enforcement in schools
Thank you!

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http://tiny.cc/YouthViolenceProject

Grant #NIJ 2020-RF-CX-0002 from the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The findings and opinions of this presentation do not represent the positions of the DOJ.

Dr. Dewey Cornell discloses that he has a financial interest as the primary developer of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines.