

How frequently do schools conduct threat assessments?

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Introduction

- Although 85% of US public schools report using threat assessment (TA)¹, there is little research on how many students are referred for a TA and how they compare to the demographics of their schools.
- A TA referral occurs when anyone (typically student or teacher) reports concern about a student's potential for violence.
- The Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) is an evidence-based TA model developed at the University of Virginia in 2001.
- Florida schools were mandated to use CSTAG following the 2018 Parkland shooting.

Research Questions

1. How frequently were TAs conducted in elementary, middle, and high schools?
2. What school-level characteristics were associated with TA rates?
3. How does the composition of students referred for a TA compare to the general student body?

Methods

- This study examined archival data on 15,301 referrals from 1,221 schools for the 2021-22 school year.
- Sample represented 49% of public elementary, middle, and high schools in Florida.
- Outcome variable = number of TA referral cases in each school.
- School- and student-level regressors (grade level, FRPM, disability status, race/ethnicity) were grand-mean-centered prior to analysis.
- Negative binomial regression with maximum likelihood estimation.

1,221 Florida schools conducted TAs on 15,301 students, representing 1.5% of total enrollment

Middle = 1.8%, Elementary = 1.6%, High = 0.9%

RQ 1: TA referrals by student grade level

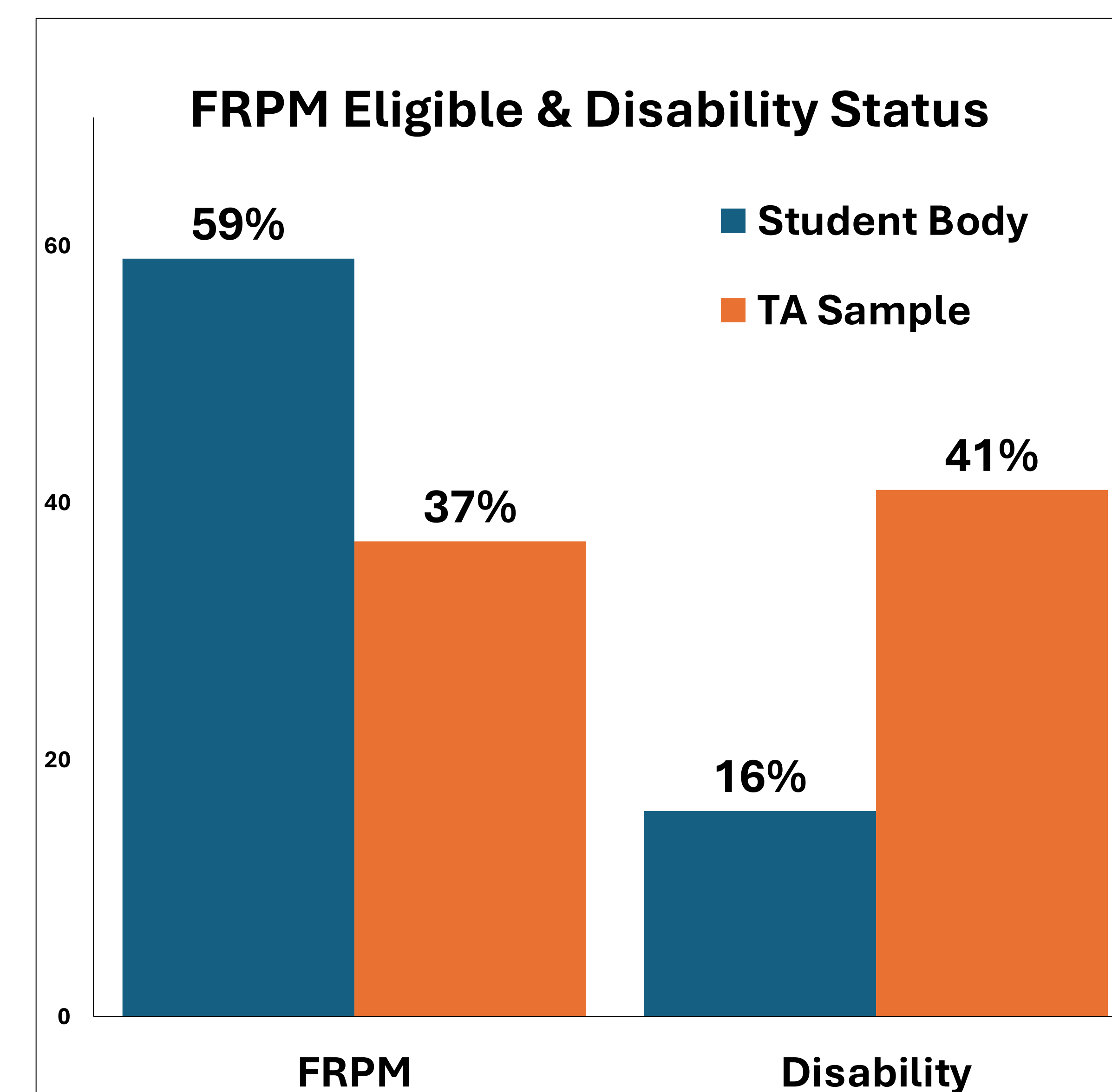
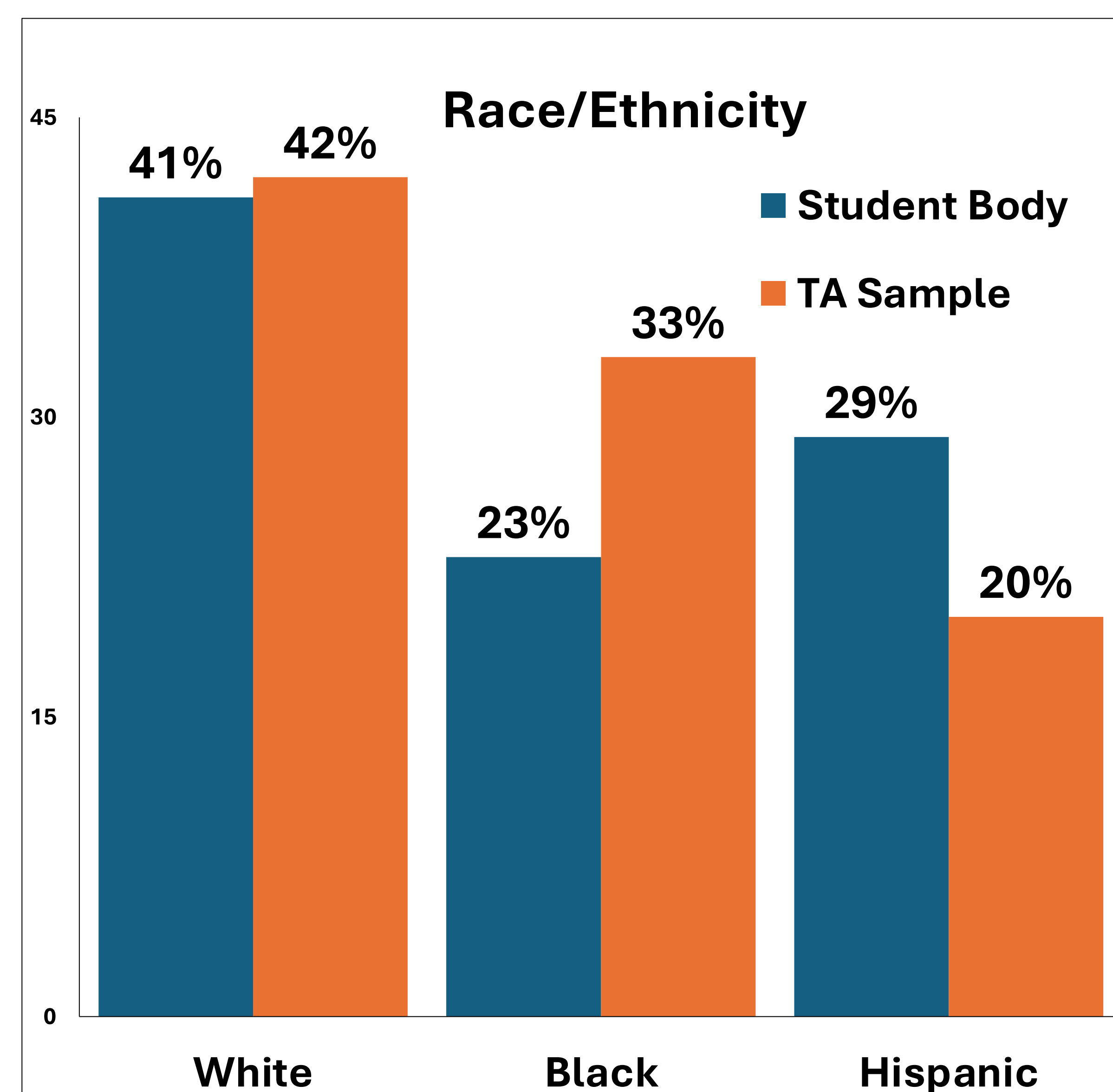
	M	95% CI	Average school size	Expected # TA cases
Elementary (n = 611)	16.9	[15.0, 19.2]	628	10 (1.6%)
Middle (n = 341)	18.4	[16.2, 20.9]	883	16 (1.8%)
High (n = 269)	10.0	[8.5, 11.8]	1,590	14 (0.9%)
Total (n = 1,221)	12.5			

RQ 2: School-level regression model of TA referrals

	B	IRR
Elementary	0.53***	1.70
Middle	0.61***	1.84
% Low-Income	0.01	1.01
% Students with Disabilities	0.06**	1.06
% White	0.03	1.03
% Black	0.03	1.03
% Hispanic	0.02	1.02

p < .01. *p < .001. High school is the reference group. B = Beta. IRR = Incident rate ratio.

RQ 3: Student-level characteristics in TA referral sample vs general student body



Results

- TA referrals more common in elementary and middle schools than high schools.
- School size modestly correlated with number of TA referrals ($r = .17$).
- Relatively high rates of referral for students with disabilities and Black students, but low rates for students receiving FRPM and Hispanic students.

Discussion

- These trends resemble those found in Virginia studies².
- TAs require a substantial resource commitment at all school levels.
- Caution is needed in interpreting these results, since a higher referral rate might be beneficial because students are identified for services and diverted from punitive consequences, like exclusionary discipline or law enforcement action.

Implications

- Students with disabilities may be more likely to experience frustration in learning and interpersonal difficulties that lead to behavior that generates a TA referral.
- Teams must consider the student's disability and safeguard FAPE rights.
- Ongoing research on reasons for referral and student outcomes is needed and available elsewhere³.
- School psychologists play a key role in the threat assessment process and in ensuring school safety.
- School psychologists need appropriate training, time, and resources to participate in threat assessments.

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References: ¹National Center for Education Statistics, 2024. ²Cornell & Maeng (2020). *Student threat assessment as a safe and supportive prevention strategy*. ³Maeng et al. (2024). *School threat assessment in Florida: Technical report of 2021-2022 case data*.