



Behavioral Threat Assessment:

Knowing the Signs & Developing a Process

**MICHAEL KOTH
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL
BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING
JANUARY 27, 2020**

DISCLAIMER: I am not an expert. I am an educator.



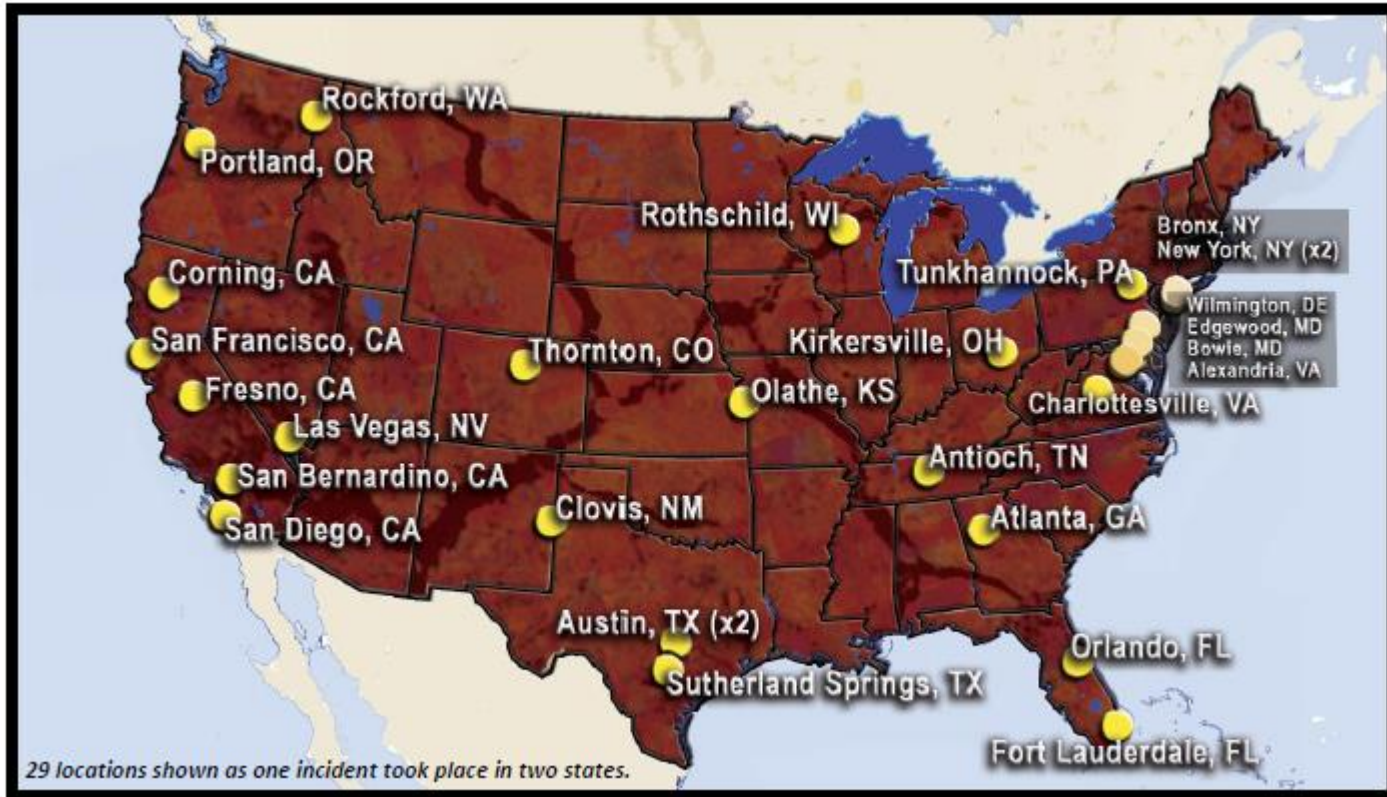
Why Are We Here?



DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE
NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER

MASS ATTACKS IN PUBLIC SPACES - 2017

March 2018



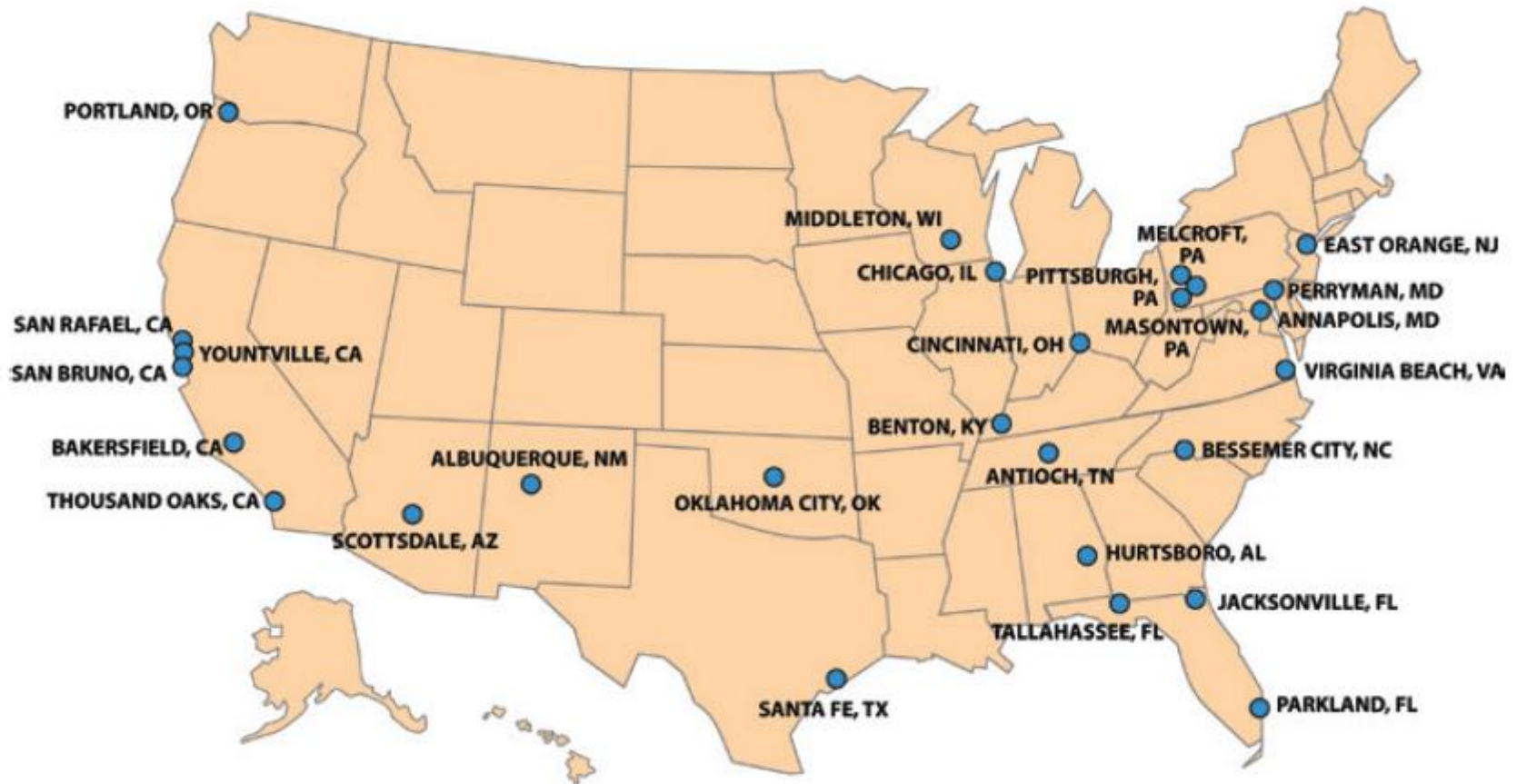
NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Why Are We Here?

United States Secret Service
NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER

MASS ATTACKS IN PUBLIC SPACES - 2018



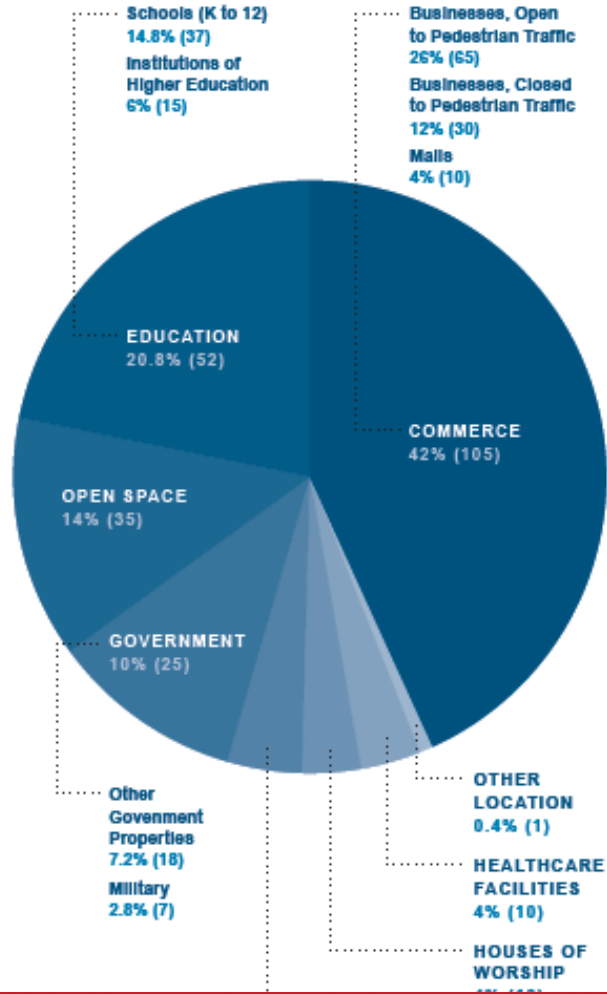
NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Why Are We Here?

Quick Look: 250 Active Shooter Incidents Between 2000-2017

LOCATION CATEGORIES



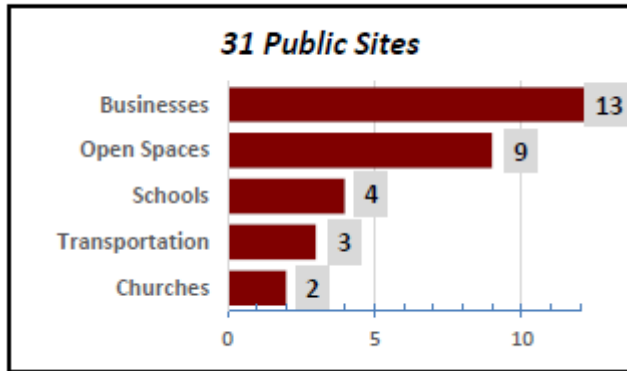
NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Why Are We Here?

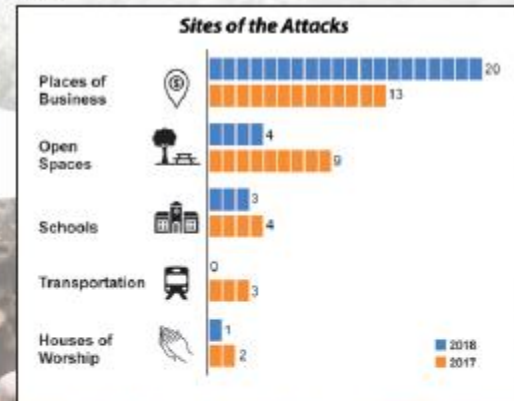
- 2017

Figure 1.



- 2018

Figure 1.



Places of Business Affected

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| Bars / Restaurants | Bank |
| Office Buildings | Municipal Center |
| Warehouses | Yoga Studio |
| Treatment Facility | Hospital |
| Health Center | |



Why Are We Here?

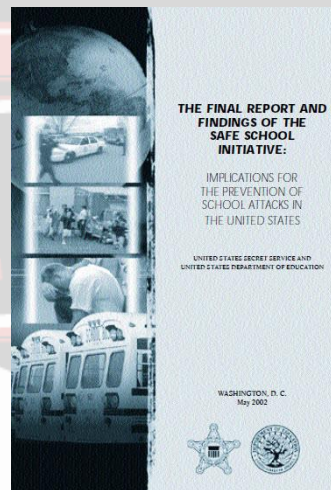
“Although the risk of a school shooting incident in any one school is very low, threats of violence are a problem in any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”

- FBI Recommendations, 2000

Agenda

- Overview of Active Shooter situations and Targeted School Violence
- Knowing the Signs – Understanding Prevention & the Pathway to Violence
- What is School Threat Assessment?
- Building a School Threat Assessment Program
- School Threat Assessment Process
- Being Proactive – School Climate
- Summary / Q&A

Overview of Targeted School Violence and Prevention

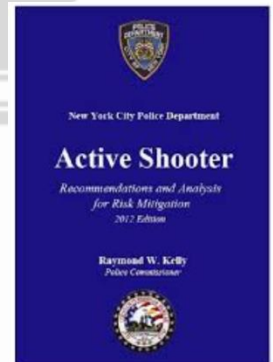
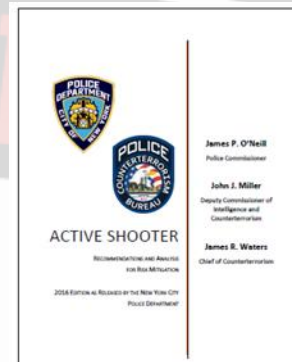
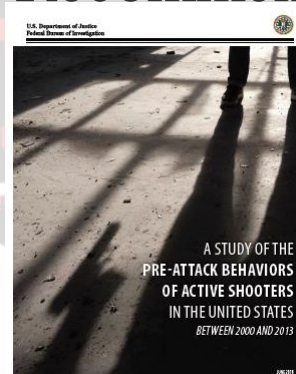


Safe School Initiative, 2002

- Background:
 - Largest federal study of school shootings in the US.
 - Collaboration between US Secret Service and US Department of Education.
 - Focus was on operational information – what could be detectable and useful

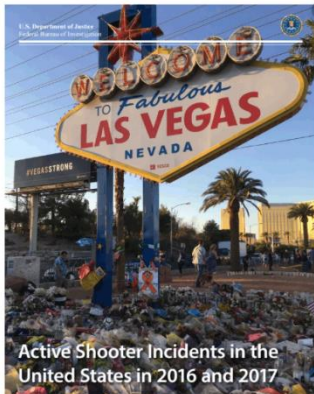
Since 2002...

- FBI: A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2000-2013
- FBI: A Study of Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States, 2000-2013
- NYPD: Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation, 2012
- US Secret Service establishes National Threat Assessment Center
- NYPD: Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation, 2016



Since 2002...

- US Secret Service: Mass Attacks in Public Spaces, 2017
- US Secret Service: Mass Attacks in Public Spaces, 2017
- FBI: Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2016-2017
- FBI: Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2018
- US Secret Service: Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model, 2018



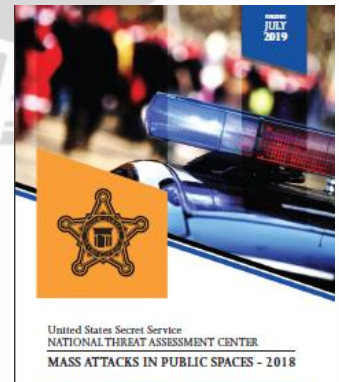
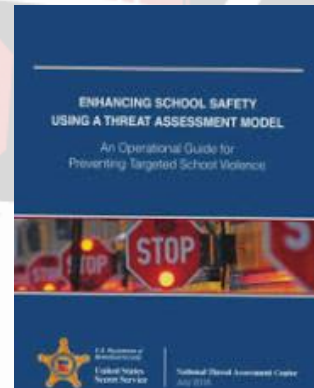
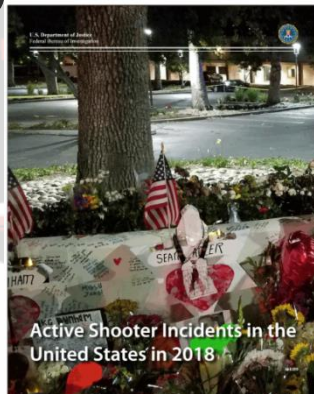
MASS ATTACKS IN PUBLIC SPACES - 2017



Between January and December 2017, 28 incidents of mass attacks, during which three or more persons were harmed, were carried out in public places within the United States (see map for location). These acts impacted the safety of the places we work, learn, shop, travel, and otherwise conduct our day-to-day lives. The resulting loss of 147 lives and injury to nearly 700 others had a devastating impact on our nation as a whole. As the uncertainty that would continue to ripple through these communities, those charged with ensuring public safety were able to identify methods to prevent these types of attacks. To aid in these efforts, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) conducted these incidents, to identify the threats for enhancing threat assessment and investigative practices. Regardless of whether these attacks were acts of workplace violence, domestic violence, school-related violence, or terrorism, similar patterns were observed in the background of the perpetrators including:

- Many had been subjected to a personal grievance related to a workplace, domestic, or other issue.
- Over half had histories of criminal charges, mental health symptoms, and/or child abuse and/or violence.
- All had at least one significant stressor within the last five years, and over half had indicators of financial instability in their households.
- Over three quarters made concerning communications and/or utilized resources from others prior to carrying out their attacks. On average, those who did seek consent caused more harm than those who did not.

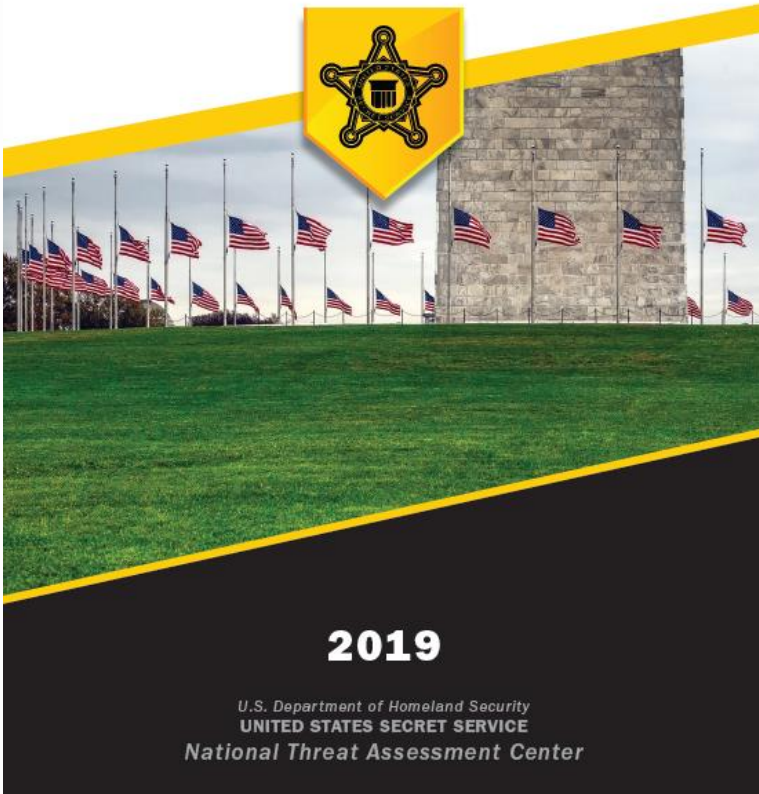
These findings, and others in this report, support existing best practices that the U.S. Secret Service has established in the field of threat assessment. They highlight the importance of gathering information on a person's background, behavior, and situational factors, combining the information from multiple sources, assessing the risk to



Hot off the presses in 2019...

PROTECTING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

**A U.S. SECRET SERVICE ANALYSIS
OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE**



- US Secret Service: Protecting America's Schools, A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence, 2008-2019

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

1. School-based attacks are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.

Components to Motive ¹³	Primary	Secondary	Total
Grievances	25 (61%)	9 (22%)	34 (83%)
Peers	15 (37%)	11 (27%)	26 (63%)
Related to bullying	-	--	19 (46%)
Staff	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	10 (24%)
Romantic	4 (10%)	5 (12%)	9 (22%)
Other personal	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	6 (15%)
Desire to kill	7 (17%)	8 (20%)	15 (37%)
Suicidal	3 (7%)	14 (34%)	17 (41%)
Fame/Notoriety	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	4 (10%)
Psychotic symptoms	2 (5%)	3 (7%)	5 (12%)
Unknown	2 (5%)	n/a	2 (5%)
Total	41 (100%)		

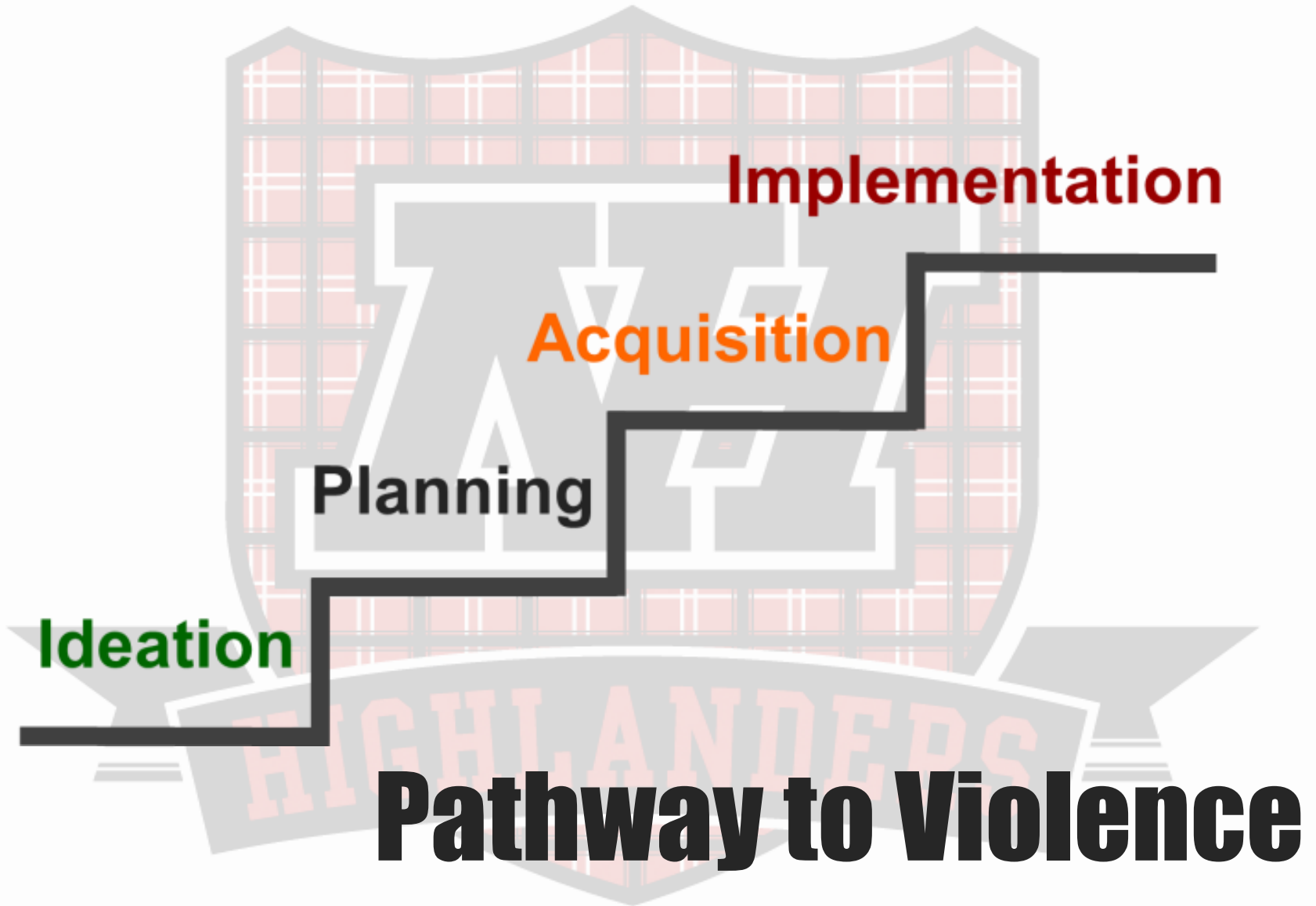


Pathway to Violence

Anticipating Human Behavior:
Lewin's Equation

Behavior is a Function of Person and
Environment

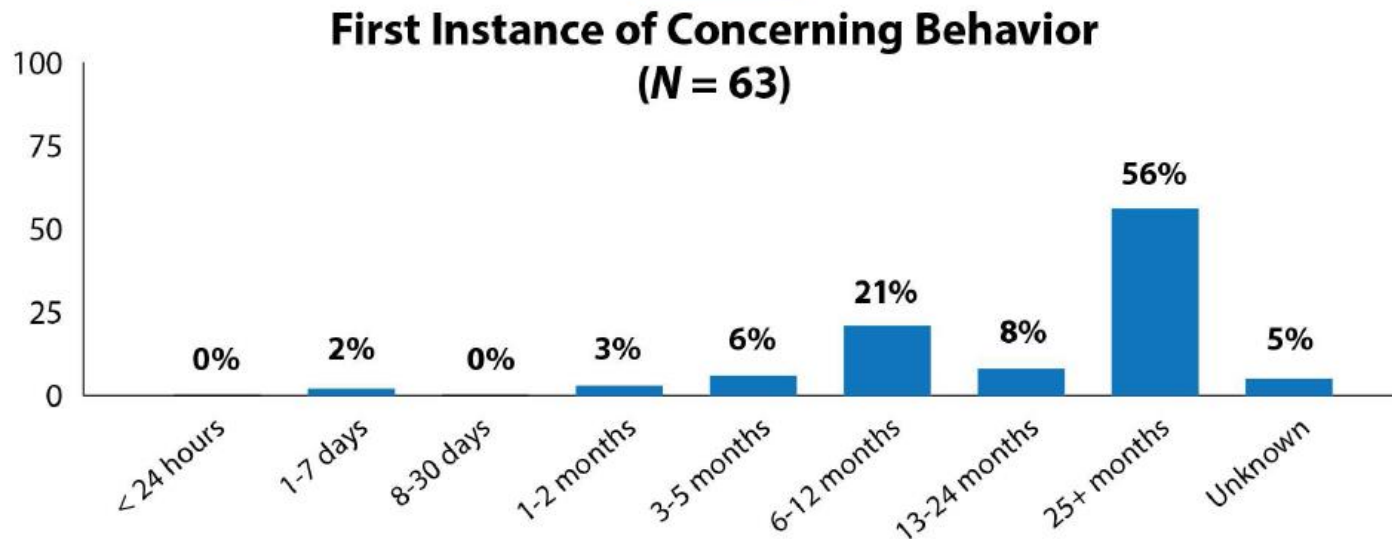
$$B = f(P, E)$$



Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

2. Prior to the attacks, others usually knew of attacker's idea/plan.
3. Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to the attack.

FIGURE 9



*Does not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Common Warning Behaviors

Common Themes of Concerning Behaviors

Threats to the target, others, and/or intent to attack

Intense or escalating anger

Interest in weapons

Sadness, depression, or isolation

Changes in behavior or appearance

Suicide and/or self-harm

Interests in violence

Talk of being bullied

Concerns over grades/attendance

Harassing others



Conveyance of Communication

In-person	31	89%
Electronic message to specific person(s)	20	57%
Online posting	17	49%
School assignments	12	34%
Phone	1	3%

Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

Statistics 1966-2016

4. There is no accurate or useful profile of the “school shooter” or an “active shooter.”

97%
97%
66%
45%
42%
37%

of active shooter incidents are perpetrated by men.

of active shooter incidents are perpetrated by a single attacker.

of active shooter incidents are perpetrated by attackers with professional, academic, or familial ties to their victim or victims.

of active shooter incidents are resolved by law enforcement applying force.

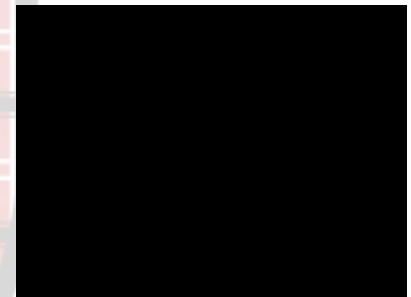
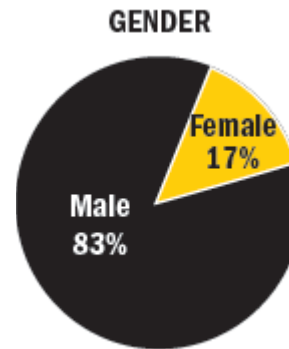
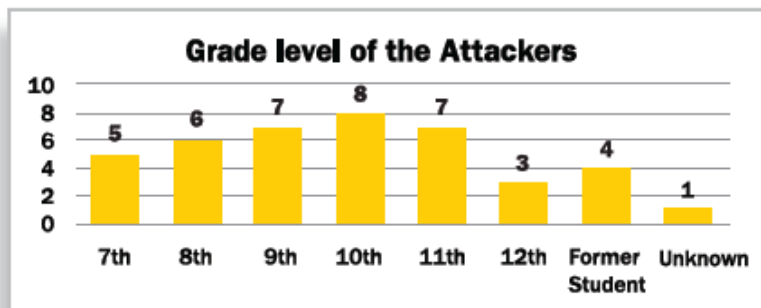
of active shooter incidents targeted business locations including office buildings, open commercial locations, and warehouses.

of active shooter incidents are perpetrated by attackers with more than one weapon.

Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

4. There is no accurate or useful profile of the “school shooter” or an “active shooter.”

Race		
White	26	63%
Black/African American	6	15%
Hispanic	2	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	2%
Two or More Races	4	10%
Undetermined	2	5%



Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

5. Most attackers had seriously concerned others in their lives prior to the attack.

TABLE 3: WHO NOTICED CONCERNING BEHAVIORS

Who Noticed	Number	%
Schoolmate*	11	92
Spouse/domestic partner**	13	87
Teacher/school staff*	9	75
Family member	43	68
Friend	32	51
Co-worker	25	40
Other (e.g. neighbors)	23	37
Law enforcement	16	25
Online individual	6	10
Religious mentor	3	5

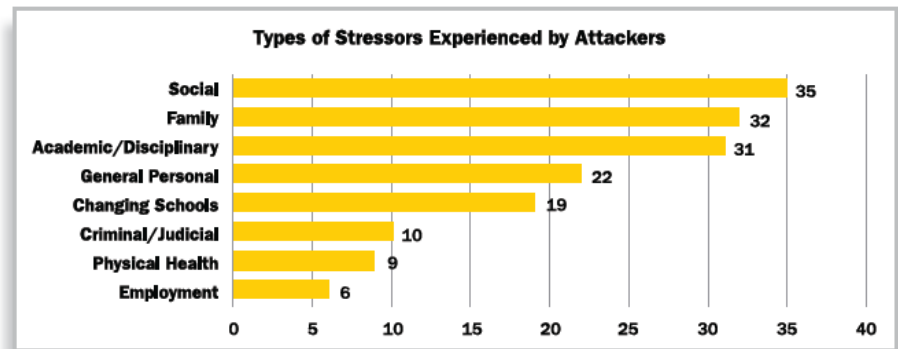
* Percentage calculated only with those active shooters who were students at the time of the offense

Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

6. Most attackers had significant difficulties with losses or failures. Most were suicidal.

TABLE 1: STRESSORS

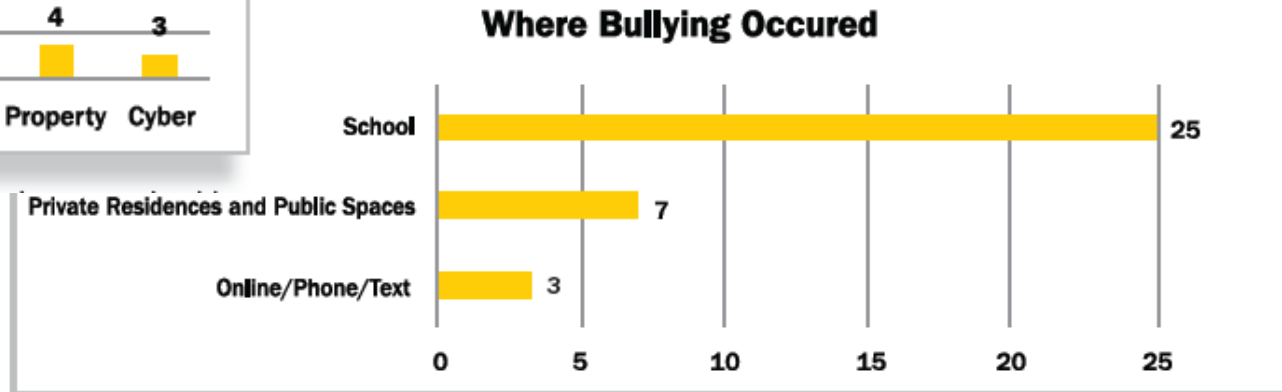
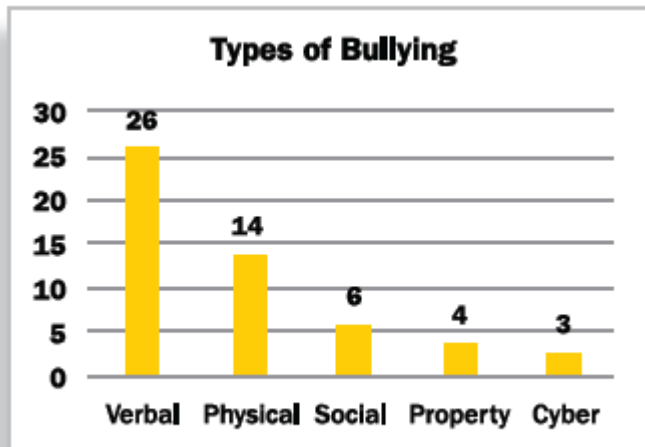
Stressors	Number	%
Mental health	39	62
Financial strain	31	49
Job related	22	35
Conflicts with friends/peers	18	29
Marital problems	17	27
Abuse of illicit drugs/alcohol	14	22
Other (e.g. caregiving responsibilities)	14	22
Conflict at school	14	22
Physical injury	13	21
Conflict with parents	11	18
Conflict with other family members	10	
Sexual stress/frustration	8	
Criminal problems	7	
Civil problems	6	
Death of friend/relative	4	
None	1	



Home Life Factors		
Parent(s) separated/divorced	25	71%
Family financial difficulty	24	69%
Parent(s) or sibling(s) arrested/incarcerated	19	54%
Parent(s) or sibling(s) substance abuse	16	46%
Family discord (including domestic violence/abuse)	14	40%
Family mental health	8	23%
Abuse/neglect suffered by the attacker	8	23%
Non-parental custody/care	4	11%

Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

7. In schools, many felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

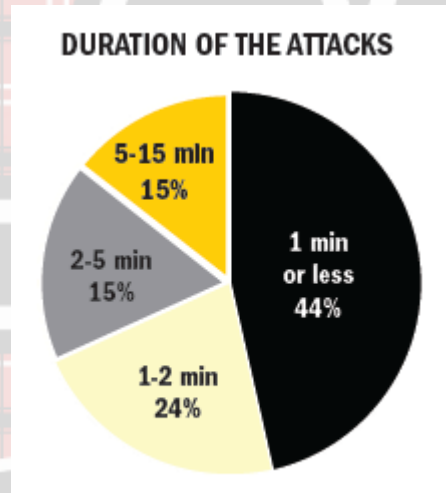


Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

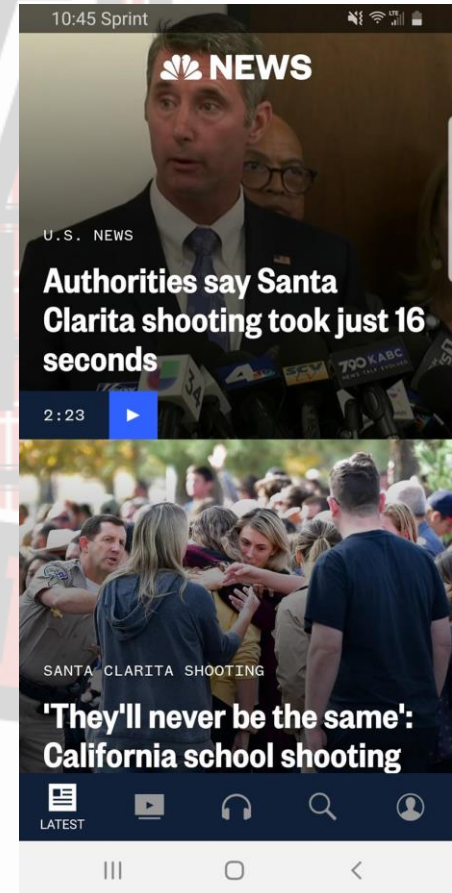
8. Most attackers had access to weapons – and has used weapons -- prior to the attack.
9. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.

Major Facts about Active Shooters (including Schools)

10. Despite prompt law enforcement response, most incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.



Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.



≡ TIME

Dayton Shooting Lasted Just 32 Seconds and Left 9 Dead. Here's the Latest on the Tragedy



Safe School Initiative vs. Protecting America's Schools

2002

1. There is no useful profile of a student who engaged in targeted school violence.
2. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
3. Most attackers showed some suicidal attempts or thoughts, or a history of feeling extreme depression or desperation.
4. Over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence, through movies, video games, books, etc.
5. Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures.
6. Incidents of school violence are rarely sudden and/or impulsive acts.
7. Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan.
8. Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
9. Most attackers had access to weapons prior to the attack.
10. Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

2019

1. There is no profile of a student attacker, nor is there a profile for the type of school that has been targeted.
2. Attackers usually had multiple motives, the most common involving a grievance with classmates.
3. Most attackers used firearms, and firearms were most often acquired from the home.
4. Most attackers had experienced psychological, behavioral, or developmental symptoms.
5. Half of the attackers had interests in violent topics.
6. All attackers experienced social stressors involving their relationships.
7. Nearly every attacker experienced negative home life factors.
8. Most attackers were victims of bullying, which was often observed by others.
9. Most attackers had a history of school disciplinary actions, and many had prior contact with law enforcement.
10. All attackers exhibited concerning behaviors. Most elicited concern from others and most communicated their intent to attack.



Know the Signs

<https://www.pbs.org/video/after-newtown-path-violence/>

- Concerning signs and warning behaviors include:
 - Significant personal loss, humiliation, or set back that is real or perceived.
 - Deliberate or inadvertent disclosure of violent plans; verbal / written expressions of intent to commit highly dramatic acts in the near future.
 - Significantly diminished resiliency or compromised ability to cope with stressors or setbacks.
 - Increased isolation, depression, withdrawal from normally pleasurable activities. Decreased performance at school.



Observational Considerations

Common Themes of Concerning Behaviors

Threats to the target, others, and/or intent to attack

Intense or escalating anger

Interest in weapons

Sadness, depression, or isolation

Changes in behavior or appearance

Suicide and/or self-harm

Interests in violence

Talk of being bullied

Concerns over grades/attendance

Harassing others

Personality Traits

Narcissistic

Sadistic

Deceitful

Disregard for Rules

Lacks Empathy

Callous

Manipulative

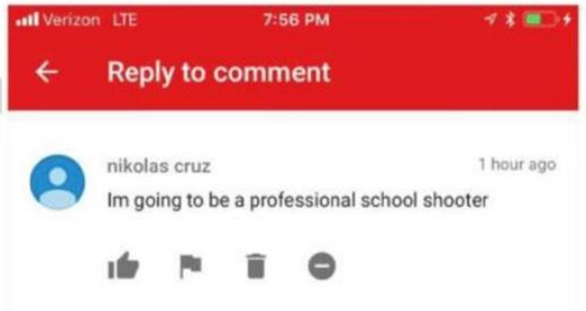
Forms of Leakage

- Threats: overt, veiled, innuendos, etc.
- Diary / journal entries
- Social media / web postings
- Doodling / artwork
- Video / audio recordings

Themes of Leakage

- Violence / suicide
- Hopelessness / despair
- Hatred / vengeance
- Isolation / Loneliness
- “End of the world”

Conveyance of Communication		
In-person	31	89%
Electronic message to specific person(s)	20	57%
Online posting	17	49%
School assignments	12	34%
Phone	1	3%



Know the Signs

- Concerning signs and warning behaviors include:
 - Contextually inappropriate or dramatically escalated interest in:
 - past attacks or attackers.
 - obtaining firearms or explosives.
 - tactical gear, clothing, or paraphernalia.
 - Increasing sense of recklessness



Implications for Prevention

- Incidents of mass violence, and school violence, can be prevented.
- But information available is likely to be scattered and fragmented.
- Key is to act quickly upon an initial report of concern, gather other pieces of the puzzle, then assemble to see what picture emerges.



What is School Threat Assessment?

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



School Threat Assessment is:

A systematic process that is designed to:

1

- Identify persons of concern

2

- Gather information/investigate

3

- Assess person and situation

4

- Manage the person / situation

Threat assessment is fact-based and deductive:

Facts

Conclusions

Strategies

Threat Assessment Process

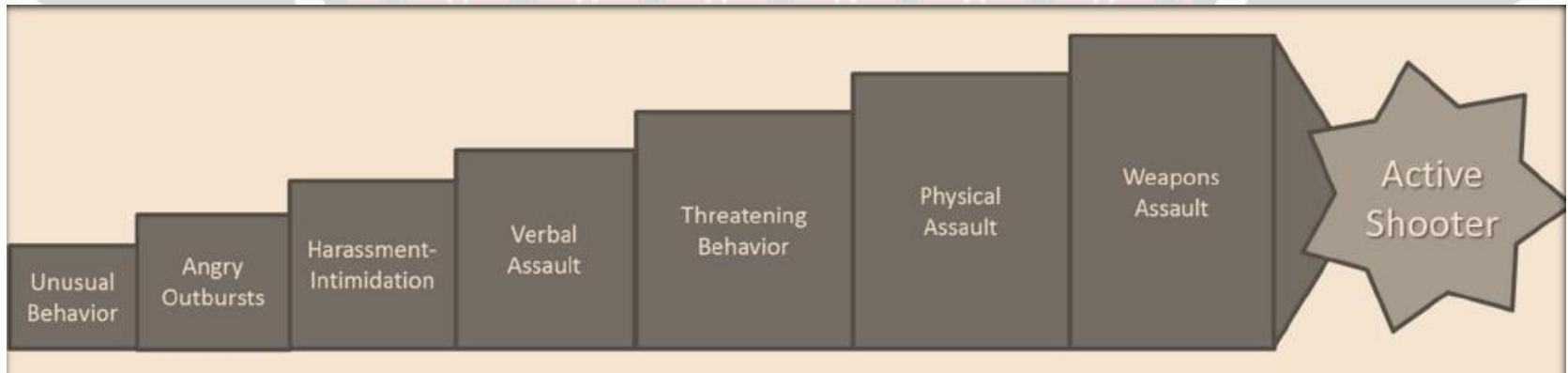
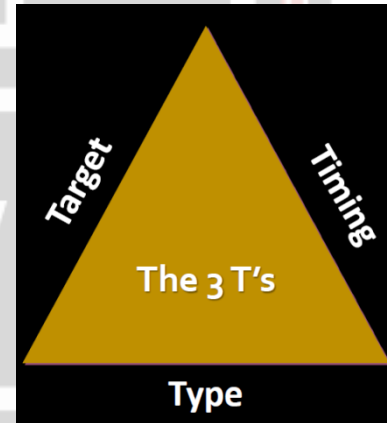
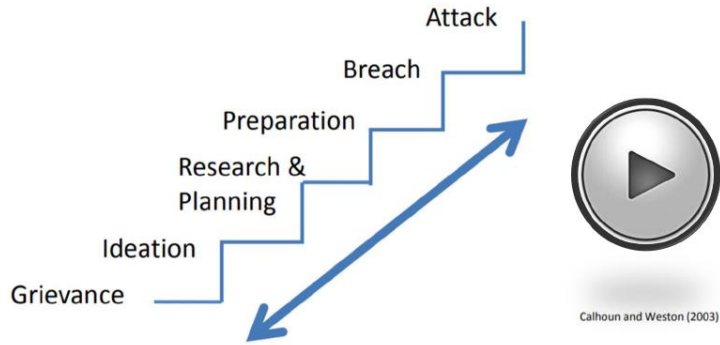
Threat Assessment Team

- Team composition (school level or district level):
 - Multi-disciplinary (within/outside school)
 - Include school security / local law enforcement
 - Include mental health consultant / expertise
 - Ad hoc members when needed
 - Link with other organizations with student contact
- Multi-disciplinary composition enhances team's ability to:
 - Identify
 - Gather
 - Assess
 - Manage

School Threat Assessment Process

1. Learn about a person of possible concern.
Screen case for two issues
1. Gather information about the person and his/her situation.
1. Use information to answer 11 Key Questions.
1. Make evaluation / assessment
1. Develop and implement case management plan

Three General Questions



11 Key Questions

1. What are the subject's motive(s) and goals? What first brought this person to the team's attention?
2. Have there been any communication suggesting ideas or intent to engage in violence?
3. Has the subject shown any inappropriate interest in, fascination, and/or identification with previous acts violence, weapons, desire for fame, etc.?
4. Has the subject engaged in attack related behaviors?
5. Does the subject have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?

11 Key Questions

6. Is the subject experiencing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair?
7. Does the subject have a positive, trusting, sustained relationship with at least one responsible person?
8. Does the subject see violence as an acceptable, desirable – or the only – way to solve a problem?
9. Are the subject's conversation and "story" consistent with his or her actions?
10. Are other people concerned about the subject's potential for violence?
11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood that the subject will engage in violence – either increase it or decrease it?



Making an Evaluation / Assessment

- Focus on facts of specific case.
- Focus on the person's behavior rather than the person's traits.
- Examine progression of behavior over time.
- Corroborate critical information.
- Context is critical.

Context is Critical

- Trigger word or phrases



- Warning
- Kill Bomb



wind
ught



Context is Critical

- Trigger word or phrases

- Tidy
- Pretty
- Flowers
- Beautiful
- Welcome



Tidy up your affairs and buy flowers, because I ordered me to take a beautiful place, I'm anxious to see it.

Making an Evaluation / Assessment

- Look for Nonverbal Cues

Throat
clearing

Hard
swallowing

Jaw
manipulation

Eye
pointing

Feet
pointing

Lack of
emphatic
gestures

Backward
head
movement

Backward
leaning

Suprasternal
notch



of nonverbal communications.
And, I decided to simplify it



Do you have
any other
examples?

Choose Priority Level

- **Priority 1 (Imminent)** – Appears to pose a clear/immediate threat of violence or self-harm. Requires immediate containment, law enforcement notification, target protection, and management plan.
- **Priority 2 (High)** – Appears to pose a threat of violence or self-harm but lacks immediacy or specific plan. Requires threat management plan.
- **Priority 3 (Moderate)** – Does not appear to pose a threat of violence or self-harm at this time, but exhibits behaviors or circumstances that are likely to be disruptive to the community. Requires active monitoring & referrals.
- **Priority 4 (Low / No Threat)** – Does not appear to pose a threat of violence or self-harm at this time, nor is significant disruption to the community expected. Requires passive monitoring and referrals as appropriate. May close case if no interventions are necessary.



Developing a Case Management Plan

Develop an individualized plan based on information gathered in the investigation and other facts known about the person of concern.

- Case management is more art than science.
- Plan must be fact-based and person-specific.
- Engagement is essential, even when dealing with someone who is very angry.
- Distancing makes monitoring and intervention more difficult.
- Personalities involved matter - utilize someone that is trusted



Other Things We Can Do

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Pay attention – trust your intuition

- An increase in rule breaking or disobedience
- Difficulties in school and truancy
- An increase in aggression
- More frequent nightmares and sleep disturbances
- Appearing immune or numb to violence
- Pro-violence attitudes
- An increase in self-protective behavior
- An increase in feelings of anxiety
- Antisocial attitude
- Dishonesty
- Hostility towards police
- Substance abuse
- Loss of ability to empathize with a
- Feelings of hopelessness and dep

Pamphlet created pursuant to an Act concerning a child's exposure to violence, passed by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New York.

Individual Risk Factors:

- Nervousness, withdrawal, worrying and anxiety
- Hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness and risk taking
- Aggressiveness
- Substance abuse
- Favorable attitude toward violence
- Involvement in nonviolent criminal offenses
- Hostility toward police
- Early initiation of violent behavior
- Deviant behavior, and anti-social beliefs and attitudes

School Risk Factors:

- Academic failure
- Low bonding to school
- Chronic absenteeism and dropping out of school
- Frequent school transitions

MEDIA
violence
and Youth:

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Observational Considerations / Identifying Anomalies

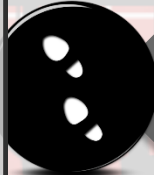
People, activities, or behaviors that are outside of the norm or baseline

Include actions
that:

- should happen but do not, or
- do happen, but should not



Clothing



Mannerisms



Demeanor



Contents

Examples of Nervous Behaviors and Physical Reactions

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62vzwRYrop4>

Repeatedly pats upper body

Protruding or beating neck arteries

Rubbing or wringing of hands

Increased breathing rate

Whistling when noticing security or being screened

Encouraging Reporting

- Bystanders can play a critical role in prevention

“If you see something, say something.”

Source: NYC Metropolitan Transportation Authority



SAY SOMETHING teaches students, educators, parents and community leaders to:

1. **LOOK** *for!* **WARNING SIGNS**
SIGNALS & THREATS
2. **ACT IMMEDIATELY.** *take it SERIOUSLY.*
3. *say something*
to a **TRUSTED ADULT**



NORTHERN HIGHLANDS
REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



Being Proactive - Enhancing School Climate

- Assess and enhance school climate:
 - Surveys for faculty, staff, students, parents, others
 - Data-driven enhancements
 - Student input for solutions and implementation
- Connection with all students:
 - Powerful protective factor
 - Low-cost or no-cost options



Being Proactive - Fill the emotional tank of students



- Say hello & goodbye
 - Use names when doing so
- Express appreciation
- Offer to help
- Check in
- Ask & listen
- Take interests in pursuits outside of class
- Non-verbal actions
 - High five
 - Fist bump
 - Thumbs up
 - Head nod
 - Point
 - Eye contact

Summary

- Prevention is possible.
- Behavioral threat assessment teams can identify and help address a broad array of problematic behavior.
- A multi-disciplinary team, liaison relationships, and a positive climate can facilitate the overall process.
- Periodic training and/or process review are critical to effective threat assessment.
- Don't give anyone an axe to grind!



References / Q & A

- DeBecker, G. The Gift of Fear (1997). Dell Publishing, New York.
- Department of Homeland Security: K-12 School Security: A Guide for Protecting and Preventing Against Gun Violence, 2018.
- FBI: A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2000-2013
- FBI: A Study of Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States, 2000-2013
- FBI: Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2016-2017
- FBI: Active Shooter Incidents in the United States, 2018
- FBI: Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks, 2015.
- FEMA: Site Protection through Observational Techniques, Louisiana State University, 2017.
- Meloy, J.R.(2011). The role of warning behaviors in threat assessment: An exploration and suggested typology. *Behavioral Science and the Law*, 30: 256-279.
- NJ Department of Education: School Safety Specialist Academy, 2018.
- NJ Department of Health, Division of Mental Health & Addiction Services / Disaster & Terrorism Branch: Comprehensive Active Shooter Incident Management for Schools. 2019.
- NYPD: Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation, 2012.
- NYPD: Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation, 2016.
- Sigma Threat Associates: “Behavioral Threat Assessment & Management.” 2019.
- Thompson, J. Elevating Your Game: Becoming a Triple Impact Competitor (2011). Balance Sports Publishing, LLC, Portola Valley, CA.
- US Secret Service: Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model, 2018
- US Secret Service & US Department of Education: The Findings of Safe School Initiative, 2002.
- US Secret Service: Mass Attacks in Public Spaces, 2017
- US Secret Service: Mass Attacks in Public Spaces, 2018
- US Secret Service: Protecting America’s Schools, A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence, 2019

