

Threat Assessment Inquiry: A Summary of Secret Service 11 Essential Questions

1. WHAT ARE THE STUDENT’S MOTIVE(S) AND GOALS?

- What motivated the student to make the statements or take the actions that caused him or her to come to attention?
- Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?
- Does the student have a major grievance or grudge? Against whom?
- What efforts have been made to resolve the problem, and what has been the result? Does the potential attacker feel that any part of the problem is resolved or see any alternative?

2. HAVE THERE BEEN ANY COMMUNICATIONS SUGGESTING IDEAS OR INTENT TO ATTACK?

- What, if anything, has the student communicated to someone else (targets, friends, other students, teachers, family, others) or written in a diary, journal, or website concerning his or her ideas and/or intentions?

3. HAS THE SUBJECT SHOWN INAPPROPRIATE INTEREST IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?

- School attacks or attackers
- Weapons (including recent acquisition of any relevant weapon)
- Incidents of mass violence (terrorism, workplace violence, mass murderers)

4. HAS THE STUDENT ENGAGED IN ATTACK-RELATED BEHAVIORS? THESE BEHAVIORS MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Developing an attack idea or plan
- Making efforts to acquire or practice with weapons
- Casing or checking out possible sites and areas for attack
- Rehearsing attacks or ambushes

5. DOES THE STUDENT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT AN ACT OF TARGETED VIOLENCE?

- How organized is the student’s thinking and behavior?
- Does the student have the means (e.g., access to a weapon) to carry out an attack?

6. IS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCING HOPELESSNESS, DESPERATION AND/OR DESPAIR?

- Is there information to suggest that the student is experiencing desperation and/or despair?
- Has the student experienced a recent failure, loss and/or loss of status?
- Is the student known to be having difficulty coping with a stressful event?
- Is the student now, or has the student ever been, suicidal or “accident-prone”?
- Has the student engaged in behavior that suggests that he or she has considered ending their life?

7. DOES THE STUDENT HAVE A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP WITH AT LEAST ONE RESPONSIBLE ADULT?

- Does this student have at least one relationship with an adult where the student feels that he or she can confide in the adult and believes that the adult will listen without judging or jumping to conclusions? (Students with trusting relationships with adults may be direct away from violence and despair and toward hope.)
- Is the student emotionally connected to – or disconnected from – other students?
- Has the student previously come to someone’s attention or raised concern in a way that suggested he or she needs intervention or supportive services?

8. DOES THE STUDENT SEE VIOLENCE AS AN ACCEPTABLE – OR DESIRABLE – OR THE ONLY WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS?

- a. Does the setting around the student (friends, fellow students, parents, teachers, adults) explicitly or implicitly support or endorse violence as a way of resolving problems or disputes?
- b. Has the student been “dared” by others to engage in an act of violence?

9. IS THE STUDENT’S CONVERSATION AND “STORY” CONSISTENT WITH HIS OR HER ACTIONS?

- a. Does information from collateral interviews and from the student’s own behavior confirm or dispute what the student says is going on?

10. ARE OTHER PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STUDENT’S POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE?

- a. Are those who know the student concerned that he or she might take action based on violent ideas or plans?
- b. Are those who know the student concerned about a specific target?
- c. Have those who know the student witnessed recent changes or escalations in mood and behavior?

11. WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES MIGHT AFFECT THE LIKELIHOOD OF AN ATTACK?

- a. What factors in the student’s life and/or environment might increase or decrease the likelihood that the student will attempt to mount an attack at school?
- b. What is the response of other persons who know about the student’s ideas or plan to mount an attack? (Do those who know about the student’s ideas actively discourage the student from acting violently, encourage the student to attack, deny the possibility of violence, passively collude with attack, etc.?)

Adapted from: Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.

Step 4B: Analyze Information through the use of the NTAC Investigative Themes and Determine any Warning Signs or Risk Factors

NTAC (2002, 2018) identified a set of investigative questions and themes that serve as a framework to organize information. The original study identified 11 themes that are critical to identifying targeted school violence. In 2018, weapons access and emotional and developmental issues were added to the list of themes (however one could argue that weapon access was previously subsumed under capacity and emotional and developmental issues and considerations were considered throughout the entire BTAM process). Ultimately, these themes help the threat assessment team make a determination regarding the level of concern and potential the student will carry out a targeted act of violence. Information on each of the themes should be considered when conducting a school-based threat assessment.

Please see the chart below for investigative themes.