



# Guns in schools: Using threat assessments to prevent school violence

Instead of profiling and stigmatizing troubled students, experts advocate preventive counseling

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by **Natasja Sheriff**

On Jan. 16, only about 20 minutes apart, shootings marred what would have been otherwise normal Friday evening basketball games at high schools in Mobile, Alabama, and Ocala, Florida. A student was shot and injured in each case; both survived. They were the 49th and 50th shootings at K-12 schools in the U.S. — calculated by Al Jazeera as incidents in which a gun discharges on school property and a student or teacher is involved but not police — since the December 2012 massacre of 26 children and staffers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. This is the third in a seven-part series examining the issues surrounding school shootings in the U.S. The other six parts took stock of where the gun control debate stands, how defense measures could traumatize kids, why Georgia has seen the most school shootings since Sandy Hook, why Massachusetts has the fewest guns deaths per capita, Newtown's grass-roots gun reform efforts, and where most gun violence against kids takes place.

Schools across the country are spending billions of dollars on school fortifications and security personnel to protect their students, yet experts say identifying threats early on is key to preventing school violence and the next mass shooting.

“What we really need to think about is helping students who are distressed or troubled, in a conflict or being bullied or any number of different problems that can be addressed early before they escalate into violence,” said professor Dewey Cornell, a forensic clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia who has been at the forefront of research on school violence and its prevention since the late 1990s.

But budget problems are forcing schools across the country to make cutbacks in services, he said. “Unfortunately, what they’re cutting back is the very services they need to prevent violence,” he said.

At least 30 states are providing less funding for their students than they did before the 2008 recession, and 14 states have cut their per student funding level by more than 10 percent, according to Michael Leachman, director of state fiscal research at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

“Since the economic downturn about six years ago, there have been massive budget cuts at all state levels, and school districts have been slashing budgets,” said Brad Erford, a former president of the American Counseling Association and a professor at Loyola University in Maryland. “This has affected school counseling services. It has also affected the number of teachers.”

At the same time, the federal government and many states are providing less funding for school violence initiatives, said Erford, adding that a number of school districts and cities like Philadelphia have gone on record saying that budget cuts have created an uptick in school violence.

Several national organizations, including the American Counseling Association, recommend at least one school counselor for every 250 students. But the latest figures from the U.S. Department of Education show that in 2009, elementary and secondary schools provided an average of one counselor for every 471 students.



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Yet according to psychologists like Cornell, preventing school violence depends on a team of school professionals, including counselors and other mental health experts, who are trained to identify and support troubled students who may be on a path to violence.

These teams follow a standard threat assessment, originally developed to protect the president and other public officials and adapted for schools in the wake of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School. The procedure was pioneered by an unlikely collaboration among government agencies — the U.S. Secret Service, Department of Education and the FBI. Their methodology rejected profiling as a tool to find the next school shooter.

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a profile of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalog or checklist of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous,” wrote the FBI’s Mary Ellen O’Toole in her 2000 report on school shootings.

Nonetheless, one characteristic that many shooters do share is an urge to tell other people about their plans — attacks are rarely carried out on impulse — and that’s key to threat assessment. Student threat assessment is designed to identify dangers, not to label students based on a set of personality traits.

“We strongly discourage schools from taking a list of characteristics and saying, ‘Oh, a child who likes video games or dresses in black or does this or that is somehow dangerous,’” said Cornell. “That’s absolutely what we want to avoid.”

“When a student makes a threat, it’s really a symptom of frustration, that the student has encountered some kind of conflict or problem that he or she can’t resolve. The threat assessment team is really there to help resolve the problem so that there’s really no need for the threat,” he said.

Threat assessment teams are typically drawn from school personnel, often including the school principal, teachers, guidance counselors and security staffers, as well as members of the wider community — social service agencies and law enforcement, for example. Some teams might meet regularly to share information on students or staffers of concern or to respond to a specific threat and investigate the likelihood that it will be carried out.

When a threat is reported to the team, an important first step is to decide how serious the threat is. Is it a transient threat — a joke or an expression of anger in the heat of the moment — or something more serious?

“In most cases the threat is to hit somebody or beat someone up or commit some less serious act of violence,” said Cornell. “Schools deal with that all the time. Student threats are really common in school. Teenagers make threats. Middle school students make threats. Even elementary school students make threats.”

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professor, University of Virginia

His team has pioneered the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, seven steps designed to help the assessment team manage a threat and avert a potential attack. The assessment approach also aims to help troubled kids and keep them in school rather than stigmatize them.

There’s evidence that Cornell’s approach can work to reduce school violence. “We’ve done about 12 years of research in thousands of schools across the country,” he said, “and we’ve been able to demonstrate that schools can use a threat assessment approach. It’s a good alternative to zero tolerance.”

Since the 1990s, zero tolerance policies have proliferated in schools across the country, meting out severe sanctions to students for even minor offenses. The approach has led to large increases in school suspensions and expulsions. The rate of school suspensions in secondary schools increased from 1 in 13 in 1972-73 to 1 in 9 in 2009-10, with no evidence that those harsh punishments directly reduced school violence.

The case of 6-year-old Zachary Christie attracted national attention in 2009 when he was suspended from his Delaware school for taking to school a camping utensil, which included a small knife.

There are no clear statistics to show how many schools have adopted threat assessment strategies or how many continue to favor a zero tolerance approach, but a recent report suggested that about 60 percent of schools are trying to identify and support troubled students who might be prone to violence.

Yet it’s difficult for researchers to find conclusive evidence on which approach is more often responsible for averting school shootings.



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Although even one school shooting is one too many, the likelihood that a school will experience a shooting incident is very low. According to StopTheShootings.org, there have been 387 school shootings since 1992; there are about 99,000 public schools in the United States.

To prove scientifically that a shooting was prevented by threat assessment or any other strategy, a study would have to look at tens of thousands of schools for years, and you would still have a very low rate, said Cornell.

Instead, researchers have looked at the impact of threat assessment approaches on other forms of school violence, which happen much more frequently.

“There are controlled studies that show that school prevention approaches reduce fighting,” said Cornell. “Because fighting is fairly frequent, our controlled studies show that schools have fewer suspensions, less bullying. Students have a more positive perception of school, and teachers feel safer in the schools.”

In 2004, his team carried out the first field test of the Virginia Guidelines in 35 public schools in Virginia. They found that most of the threats they investigated during the study were transient and were resolved with an explanation or an apology and brief counseling. About a third required more protective action, but only three students were suspended from school for more than 10 days. According to school principals, none of the threats were carried out.

A second study, of Memphis, Tennessee, schools involved more than 100 threats to kill, stab or shoot someone. Almost half were resolved as transient threats, and none of the threats were carried out, according to school authorities. Most kids returned to the same school.

Cornell said that while there are concerns about the term “threat assessment” and resulting student vilification, he hasn’t found it to have a substantial impact on the students identified as threats in his studies.

“Keep in mind, what’s the alternative?” he asked. “If a student makes a threat and there is no threat assessment process, that student is still going to be labeled, and it’s more likely the student is going to be arrested and kicked out of school, which makes that label even more detrimental.”

Mark McGowan, director of the Child Study Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, is a psychologist and trainer who has served on threat management teams. He said the tools are better than guessing, but they are far from perfect.

“Not every school is necessarily adopting best practice. Sometimes they only do part of [the assessment]. Some may be they think they’re doing it, but they’re not,” he said. He said that more often than not, members of the team may not be properly trained in how to conduct the assessments.

Training and expertise are the main safeguards against bias, said McGowan, adding that teams can often err on the side of caution, leading them to exclude kids from school. He’s also concerned that kids don’t get enough support and follow-up after a threat assessment.

“Still, I think we’re doing better on the prevention end of things, which is encouraging, and I think that is absolutely the right way to go,” he said.

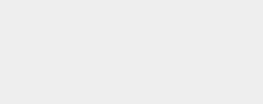
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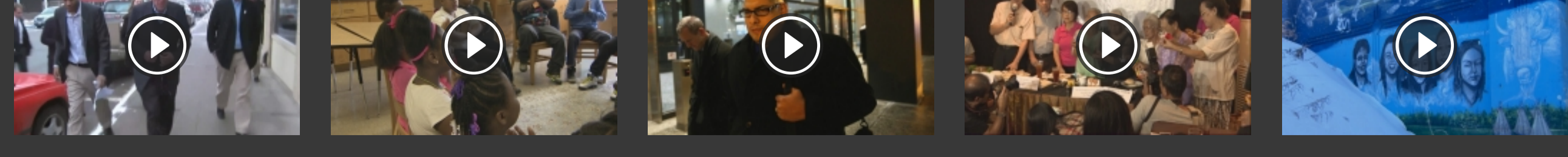
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