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Ten Reasons to Adopt a Threat Assessment Process in Your School

Findings from *The Safe School Initiative*, an in-depth study conducted by the US Department of Education and the US Secret Service, support the need to develop a threat assessment process to identify, assess, and manage threatening situations in schools. The study concluded that most school attackers did not threaten their targets directly, but did engage in pre-attack behaviors that would have indicated an inclination toward or the potential for targeted violence had they been identified. Findings about the pre-attack behaviors of perpetrators of targeted violence include:

1. Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.

Explanation: Students who engaged in school-based attacks typically did not “just snap” and engage in impulsive or random acts of targeted school violence. Instead, the attacks examined under the Safe School Initiative appeared to be the end result of a comprehensible process of thinking and behavior—behavior that typically begins with an idea, progresses to the development of a plan, moves on to securing the means to carry out the plan, and culminates in an attack.

2. Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.

Explanation: In most cases, other young persons—friends, schoolmates, and/or siblings—knew about the attacker’s idea or plan for a possible attack on the school before that attack occurred. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult.

3. Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

Explanation: The Safe School Initiative found that most attackers in fact did not threaten their target directly and some made no threat at all. Instead, other behaviors and communications that may prompt concern, such as hearing that a young person is talking about bringing a gun to school, are indicators of a possible threat and therefore should prompt the initiation of efforts to gather information.

4. There is no accurate or useful “profile” of students who engage in targeted school violence.

Explanation: The demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially. Moreover, knowing that an individual shares characteristics, behaviors, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not help in determining whether a particular student is thinking about or planning for a violent act.

5. Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

Explanation: Several key findings point to the fact that young people send signals—both direct and indirect—to others regarding their problems. The boys and young men who engaged in the targeted school violence examined by the Safe School Initiative were not “invisible” students. In fact, nearly all of these students engaged in behaviors that caused concern to at least one person, usually an adult—and most concerned at least three people.

6. Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide.

Explanation: Many students, not just those who engaged in school-based attacks, experience or perceive major losses in their lives. Most students who face a significant loss, or who have difficulty coping with such a loss, are not going to be at risk for a school-based attack. However, information that indicates a student is facing or having trouble dealing with a significantly difficult situation may indicate a need to refer the student to appropriate services and resources.

7. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

Explanation: Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. Nevertheless, in a number of the incidents of targeted school violence studied, attackers described being bullied in terms that suggested that these experiences approached torment. These attackers told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault.

8. Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

Explanation: Almost two-thirds of attackers used a handgun in their attack. Almost half used a rifle. Most attackers acquired weapons from their home or the home of a relative. Approximately two-thirds of attackers had a history of using guns prior to the attack.

9. In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity.

Explanation: The Safe School Initiative found that in over half of the incidents, others assisted in the planning or execution of the attack by actively encouraging the attacker to shoot others at school, or even helping to select targets and train the shooter in how to use a weapon.

10. Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention and most were brief in duration.

Explanation: Law enforcement authorities responded quickly to almost all calls from schools about attacks. However, most attacks were resolved within minutes, without law enforcement intervention.

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