

We Can Prevent Gun Violence

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Thank you, Congressman Scott, for inviting me to speak about this important national problem. Our state and our country needs your leadership on this issue. Although we are all greatly concerned about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, it is one of a series of mass shootings we have experienced in the past year. This one occurred in a school, which makes it especially tragic, but we should not forget that these shootings occur in many places. Schools remain one of the safest places where children can be. Statistically, we know that children are in much greater danger outside of school than inside school. Nevertheless, this event has galvanized our country to revisit the problem of gun violence and perhaps this time we can take meaningful action.

Prevention starts with safe and healthy children.

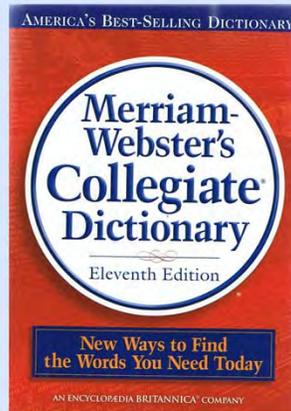


The President's recommendations are a much-needed effort to take a comprehensive approach. Gun violence is a complex problem and will be not addressed with a single, simple solution. However, prevention should start with safe and healthy children. Safe and healthy children will grow up to be responsible, capable adults and will contribute to making our society safer. Efforts to foster safe and health development in our children are fundamental to reducing the problem of gun violence.

**Let's not forget what
prevention means.**

I am concerned that much of the discussion and debate about gun violence has lost sight of what prevention means. We are not placing enough emphasis on prevention and we are confusing prevention with other responses.

**Prevention means
“to keep something from
happening”**



Prevention means simply “to keep something from happening.” Many of the proposals we have seen for responding to gun violence are not prevention efforts.

Crisis response is not prevention.



A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

We certainly need crisis response plans, but we must remember that crisis response is not prevention. A crisis occurs when prevention has failed. We cannot put all of our energy and resources into crisis planning and neglect the need for prevention efforts.

Active shooter training is not prevention.



Active shooter training is not prevention. It is certainly a good idea for first responders to be well-trained and prepared, but this is not a prevention effort.

Arming our teachers is not prevention.

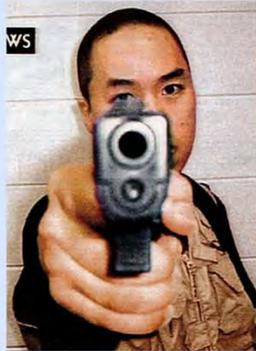
Gun group offers training for Utah teachers



Christine Caldwell, left, receives firearms training with a 9mm Glock from personal defense instructor Jim McCarthy during concealed weapons training for 200 Utah teachers Thursday, Dec. 27, 2012, in West Valley City, Utah. The Utah Shooting Sports Council offered six hours of training in handling concealed weapons in the latest effort to arm teachers to confront school assailants. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

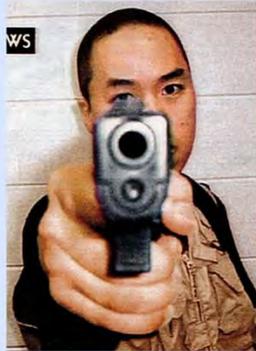
Arming our teachers is not prevention. We should try many other efforts before we have to resort to something as desperate as arming our teachers. It seems incredible to me that with a few hours of training we can prepare a teacher to fire a weapon in a highly dangerous, life-or-death situation. We provide months of training for our military and for our law enforcement officers, and even then cannot be sure how they will respond under fire. We know that even the best trained individuals may not shoot a pistol accurately under duress. How can we expect a teacher to fire a gun accurately during his or her first real emergency?

**Shooting him before he
shoots you is not
prevention.**



Shooting him before he shoots you is not prevention. It seems like a desperate strategy only worth considering as a last resort.

Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.



Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door. Mass shootings are such frightening events that our imagination focuses on the shooter and we think about how we would respond to a shooter and what we could do to stop a shooter. We have to resist the compulsion to focus just on the shooter and think about ways to prevent violence long before a troubled person shows up at your door with a gun. If the gunman is there, prevention has failed. But let's try prevention and not give up on prevention and rely only on desperate measures.

**Critics say,
“We can’t *predict* who
will be violent,
so prevention is not
possible.”**

However,....

Whenever you bring up the topic of prevention, critics will argue that these events are too hard to predict. The argument is that we cannot accurately predict who will commit a shooting, so prevention efforts are futile. However, this argument is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of prevention. We should not assume that prevention requires prediction. Prevention does not require us to identify the specific individual who is going to commit a shooting.

Prevention does not require prediction.



We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

The public health model of prevention has proven that we can prevent many problems without prediction. For example, we cannot predict who will have a traffic accident, but we can prevent accidents and reduce the death toll from accidents. Safety regulations are an effective prevention method. We have dramatically reduced automobile deaths with seatbelts and enforcement of drunk-driver laws. We have designed roads that are safer and cars that are safer. All of this occurs without being able to predict which driver will have an accident.

Prevention does not require prediction.



We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

Another example is our ability to reduce cancer fatalities. Just this week there was a news report about the progress we have made in the prevention of many different forms of cancer. We know that millions of people will die of lung cancer, but we cannot predict who they will be. We can, however, identify risk and protective factors. We know that these girls are at risk for lung cancer, and we know how to reduce their risk, although we cannot predict which one of them will eventually develop lung cancer.

Interdisciplinary Group Position Statement on Preventing School and Community Violence

Endorsed by 186 organizations

American Association of Pastoral Counselors
American College Counseling Association
American Educational Research Association
American Federation of Teachers
American School Counselor Association
Born This Way Foundation
Child Welfare League of America
Council for Exceptional Children
Mental Health America
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
National Association of School Nurses
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of School Resource Officers
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
National Association of Social Workers
National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)
National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)
National Education Association (NEA)

<http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>

After the Sandy Hook shooting, a group of 9 school safety researchers including myself wrote a position statement on preventing school and community violence. We wanted to stress the importance of making better use of prevention methods. Our statement has been endorsed by more than 180 professional organizations, including many of the leading professional organizations in education, such as the American Educational Research Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and national associations for school principals, school psychologists, social workers, school nurses, and school resource officers. I urge you to read the whole statement, which is available on this website and on the website of many of these organizations. I want to note a few important points here.

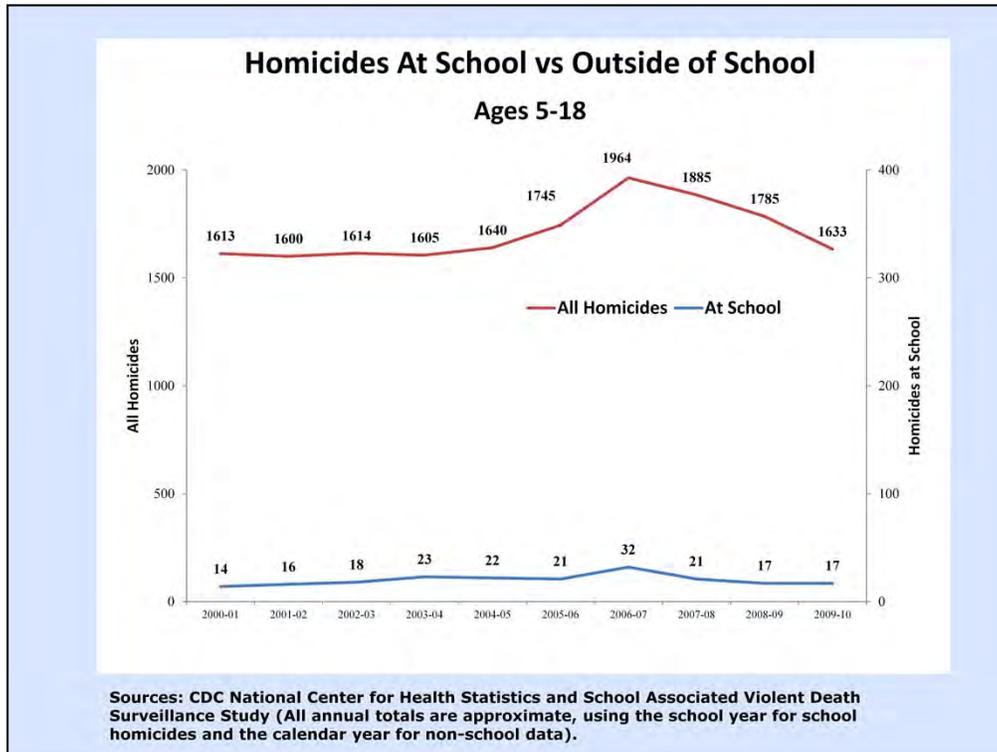
**Interdisciplinary Group Position Statement on
Preventing School and Community Violence**

Key points

- 1. Gun violence is a community problem, not a school problem.**
- 2. Turning our schools into fortresses will not solve the problem.**

<http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>

First of all, gun violence is a community problem and not a school problem. Schools are just one of the many places where gun violence occurs. Turning our schools into fortresses will not solve the problem of gun violence.



CDC statistics demonstrate how few of the homicides of children occur at school. Over the past ten years we have averaged about 1,700 murders of school-aged children every year. Yet very few of those homicides take place at school – an average of 20 per year. Of the 17,084 homicides of children over ten years, about 99% of them occurred outside of schools.

I have to ask why we are talking about increasing the security of schools when 99% of the murders are taking place outside of schools? It would be tragic if we pulled police officers off the streets and put them in schools, with the result being that more children were killed than saved.

From a security perspective, why would you guard the safest place for children and make the other places less safe? We have to be careful not to have an emotional reaction to one school shooting that drives us to make a decision that is not logical or rational.

**Interdisciplinary Group Position Statement on
Preventing School and Community Violence**

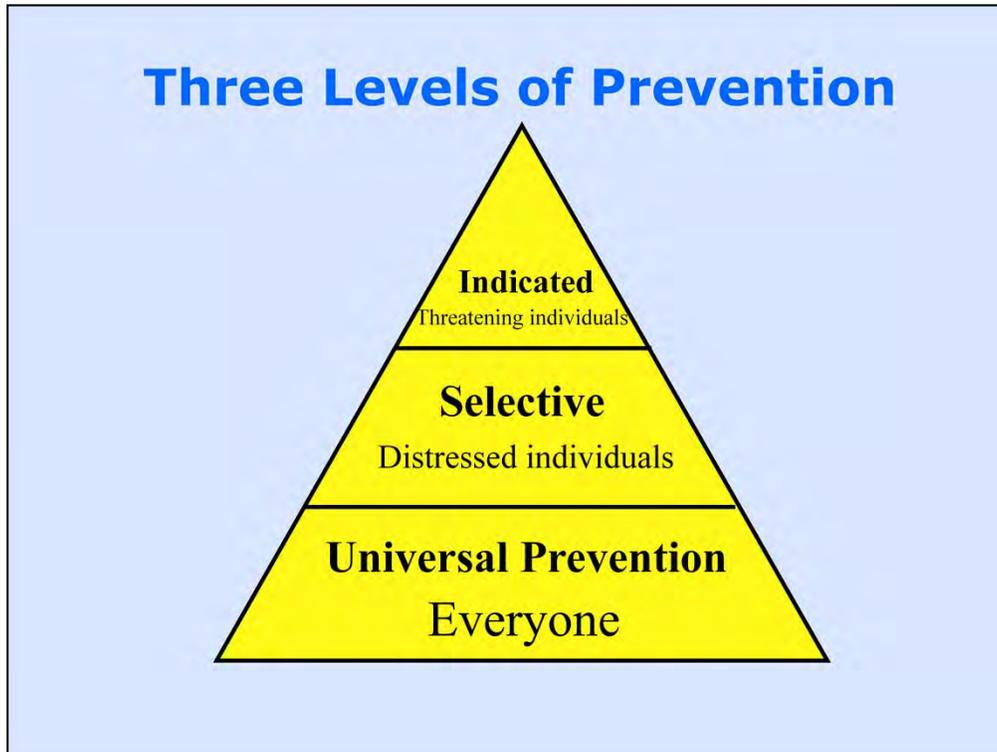
Key points

- 1. Gun violence is a community problem, not a school problem.**
- 2. Turning our schools into fortresses will not solve the problem.**
- 3. We need a comprehensive approach to prevention.**

<http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>

We must think about preventing violence throughout our society and not just in schools. We must think comprehensively about prevention as a multi-layered strategy that works on the causes of violence at multiple stages.

We cannot wait until the final stage when the gunman is at your door and ready to shoot, we have to look earlier in time to how a child grew up to become someone who would do something so horrendous. Prevention must start early.



The public health model and the model widely used in education and mental health fields, involves three levels of prevention. At the universal level are prevention programs for everyone. In schools, we think about prevention efforts such as character education, positive behavior support systems, and anti-bullying programs.

At the selective level we have programs for at-risk students such as mentoring and after-school programs. In communities, we want to have short-term mental health services for persons who are distressed, depressed, troubled, and in need of support. We provide these services not because we predict these individuals will be violent, but because they need help. We can help more of our at-risk students to stay in school, graduate, find employment and stay out of legal trouble. Our whole society benefits from these prevention efforts.

At the highest level, we have indicated interventions for persons with serious problems that need immediate intervention, such as persons who have made serious threats of violence. We also have ongoing services for persons with handicapping conditions, substance abuse problems, or chronic mental illness. There is no single profile of a violent individual and we should not assume that mental illness by itself makes someone dangerous. Most acts of criminal violence are committed by persons who are not mentally ill. But if we provide adequate treatment for all persons who suffer from mental illness, we will include those who are potentially violent.

Interdisciplinary Group Position Statement on Preventing School and Community Violence

Key points

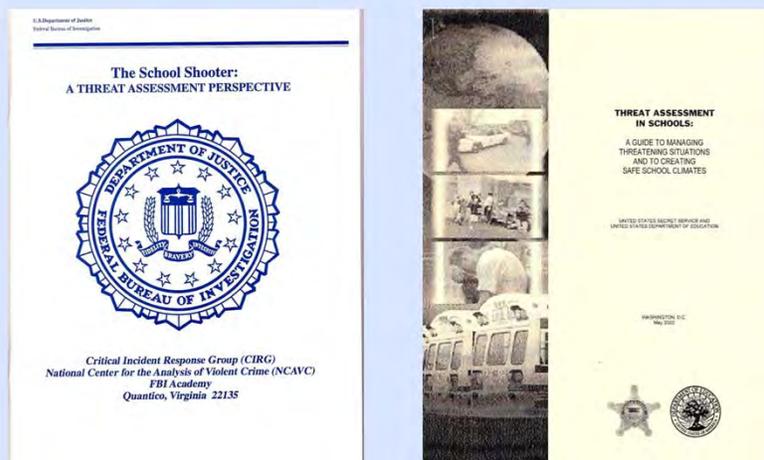
1. Gun violence is a community problem, not a school problem.
2. Turning our schools into fortresses will not solve the problem.
3. We need a comprehensive approach to prevention.
4. **We need mental health resources for family and friends of persons who are distressed or threatening violence.**

<http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>

When you investigate mass shooting cases, you find that no one became violent suddenly. No one just snapped. There is usually a gradual process of a person experiencing increasing distress, alienation, and desperation. In most cases, there are family members, friends, co-workers, or acquaintances who noticed that something was not right. The problem is that concerned individuals often have no place to go, no one to call, no way to seek help.

If a family member or friend calls the police, the police will say they cannot do anything because a crime has not been committed. Private mental health services are expensive and public mental health services are strained to the point that they only deal with the most urgent cases. If a person does not pose an imminent danger to self or others, there may be no services available. We need mental health resources that can provide consultation, advice, and support before a situation has deteriorated into a crisis or emergency.

The FBI, Secret Service, and Dept of Education recommended a threat assessment approach more than a decade ago.



After the Columbine shooting in 1999, the FBI held a conference on school shootings and published a report recommending that schools use a threat assessment approach to prevent violence. The Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education also published reports recommending that schools use a threat assessment approach.

However, schools were unfamiliar with the concept of threat assessment. The government has not followed up on these reports with sufficient support for research and development of threat assessment, or funding for training and dissemination of threat assessment methods in schools.

Threat Assessment is a violence prevention strategy.

1. Family members, friends, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress or who is threatening violence.
2. The threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.
3. The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

What is threat assessment? This term does not really convey the scope of threat assessment or its value as a violence prevention strategy. Threat assessment teams are multidisciplinary teams that are resources for family members, friends, teachers, co-workers, or anyone who is concerned that someone is distressed or who has threatened violence. The team may provide consultation and referral for services.

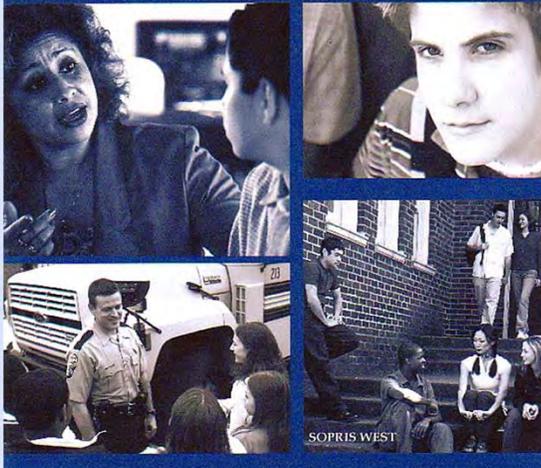
If there is a threat of violence, the team evaluates the seriousness of the threat. Does the person actually pose a threat and is he or she engaged in behavior that indicates planning and preparation to carry out the threat?

The work of a threat assessment team goes beyond assessment to include plans for assistance. A major goal of threat assessment is to determine what kind of problem, conflict, or need underlies the threat. The team may recommend counseling, mediation, or some other intervention that is designed to address a conflict or problem that has driven the person to make a threat.

In the most serious cases, where a person is engaged in planning or preparation to commit a violent act, we can take protective action, including hospitalization and if necessary, arrest.

DEWEY CORNELL & PETER SHERAS

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE



- **School-based teams assess student threats.**
- **Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree**
- **Most threats resolved with counseling**
- **Reductions in school suspensions and transfers.**
- **6 studies of its positive impact.**

Available from
sopriswest.com

At the University of Virginia, we developed threat assessment guidelines for schools. Our guidelines are described in a detailed manual that shows how a team can be assembled and can follow a step-by-step decision tree to investigate threats and resolve problems and conflicts before they escalate into violence.

Threat Assessment involves problem-solving.

- School-based teams of principal, counselor, psychologist, and school resource officer examine each threat case and develop an individualized plan for the student to address the problem or conflict underlying the threat.
- Teams can also operate in businesses, community mental health centers, colleges, etc.

Using our guidelines, school-based teams are composed of a school principal, mental health professionals such as a counselor and a psychologist, and a school resource officer. These teams investigate student threats to determine how serious they are and what can be done to resolve the problem or conflict underlying the threat.

Threat assessment teams are not limited to schools. The Secret Services uses threat assessment to protect government officials. Many large corporations use threat assessment to prevent workplace violence. Virginia public colleges are mandated to have threat assessment teams.

We could have threat assessment teams in every locality as part of community mental health services. In this way, family members and friends would have someone to call when they were concerned about a distressed individual. They would not have to wait until a crime had been committed to call the police. They could obtain advice and consultation, and the team could help identify services the distressed individual might need.

Threat Assessment involves problem-solving.

1. Bullying and teasing
2. Peer conflicts
3. Student-teacher conflicts
4. Stress-related problems
5. Gang rivalry
6. Emerging mental illness

Threat assessment is fundamentally a problem-solving approach. In schools, students make threats because they have encountered a problem they cannot resolve. We see many cases of students involving in bullying and teasing, or other kinds of peer conflicts. Threat assessment teams are not reserved for major problem and impending violence. They want to deal with these sorts of problems early, before they escalate.

There are wide range of problems, such as conflicts between students and teachers, or problems students are experiencing because of stresses outside of school.

One of the more serious problems is gang rivalry where there is a high risk of violence.

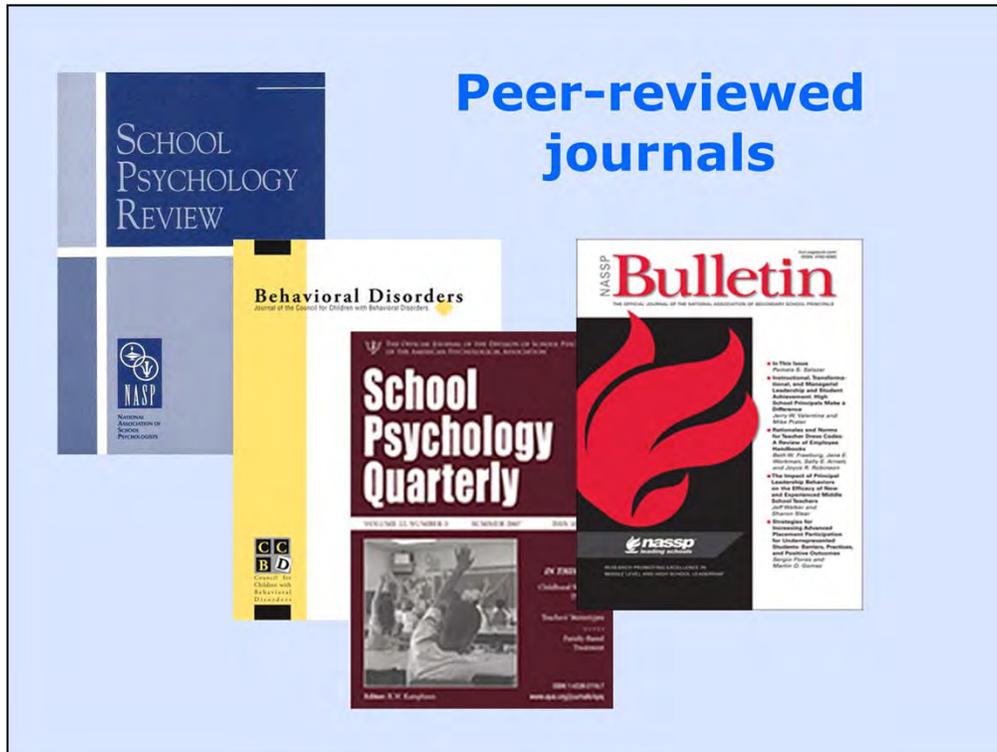
Threat assessment teams also see students who are experiencing the emergence of mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. These illnesses do not necessarily lead to violence, but when there are paranoid or persecutory delusions, there are concerns about violence. Again, the goal of threat assessment teams is not to predict violence, but to provide assistance whenever there are concerns about violence.



Threat Assessment Studies

1. Initial field trial in 35 schools
2. Memphis field trial
3. Virginia high school climate study
4. Quasi-experimental study of suspension rates in 49 high schools
5. Randomized controlled trial in 40 k-12 schools
6. Statewide implementation study

Over the past ten years we have conducted six studies of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines encompassing more than a thousand schools. We have field-tested threat assessment team in large cities and small towns, suburban and rural areas. Next, we conducted three controlled studies, including a randomized controlled trial showing the positive effects of threat assessment teams in schools. Most recently, we have looked at the large-scale implementation of threat assessment in nearly 1,000 Virginia schools.



The first five of these studies have been published in leading peer-reviewed scientific journals in education and psychology. The most recent study is just now being completed. Copies of these studies are available upon request. <dcornell@virginia.edu>

Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., Knight, L., Branson, C., & Cole, J. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 527-546.

Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders*, 34, 42-54.

Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24, 119-129.

Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 95, 175-194.

Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review*, 41, 100-115.

Lovegrove, P., & Cornell, D. (in preparation). Large-scale implementation of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines: A quasi-experimental examination of effects on school suspensions.

Research Findings

- Threat assessment is safe and efficient
- Reductions in school suspensions
- Increased parent involvement and counseling for students
- Lower rates of bullying
- Positive perceptions of school climate by students

To summarize the findings from our studies, first and foremost we have found repeatedly that schools can use threat assessment in a safe and efficient manner. Schools need procedures that are not burdensome or labor-intensive, and we have designed a process that distinguishes threats that can be easily resolved from those that will take more intensive and prolonged effort by school authorities.

Very few threats are carried out and none of the threats to kill, shoot, or stab have occurred. Of course serious acts of violence have a low base rate in schools – they are not likely to occur even without threat assessment, so we have looked closely at the other benefits of threat assessment.

Schools using threat assessment have less bullying and students report a more positive atmosphere and greater willingness to seek help from their teachers when someone talks about committing an act of violence. Schools using threat assessment are more likely to provide counseling for students and to involve parents in the process of resolving student threats than schools not using threat assessment.

In four studies we have found that schools using threat assessment have lower suspension rates than schools not using threat assessment. This is important because school suspension has become recognized as a serious problem contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and the achievement gap between white and minority students. We have shown in a randomized controlled trial that students are much less likely to be suspended, and much less likely to be transferred to an alternative school, than are students in schools not using threat assessment.

Threat Assessment in Virginia

- Over 1,000 Virginia k-12 schools use threat assessment
- All public colleges and universities mandated to have threat assessment teams.

This year more than 1,000 Virginia schools report that they are using a threat assessment approach. We have trained the teams in most of these schools.

In addition, following the Virginia Tech shooting, Virginia mandated that all of its public colleges and universities have threat assessment teams.

16 states have schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Model

California	Ohio
Colorado	Pennsylvania
Delaware	S. Carolina
Florida	Tennessee
Georgia	Vermont
Indiana	Virginia
Kansas	Washington
Maryland	Wisconsin



There are at least 16 states with schools using our threat assessment model. There are Canadian schools using our model and Germany has modeled its national threat assessment program on our approach.

However, there is no national data bank on how many schools are using threat assessment, and there is a clear need for national research on school-based threat assessment.

Research on threat assessment is especially important because of the national movement to stop using zero tolerance policies that result in extraordinarily high suspension rates, especially among minority students. Threat assessment gives schools an alternative to the one-size-fits-all approach of zero tolerance. Using threat assessment guidelines, schools do not have to suspend students who accidentally bring a tiny plastic gun to school, or who use their fingers to playfully shoot at one another. Threat assessment teams are trained to look at the meaning and context of the student's behavior, and to make common sense, reasonable judgments about appropriate discipline. They restore the principle of letting the punishment fit the crime rather than punishing everyone severely no matter how serious or trivial the infraction.

Threat assessment is one component of a comprehensive approach to violence prevention.

We need training and research for schools and communities to establish threat assessment teams.

Threat assessment is one component of a comprehensive approach to violence prevention. Often a threat assessment is the first step in identifying a student who is having difficulty. Threat assessment teams draw upon the counseling and mental health resources of the school, and they go outside the school when circumstances warrant. Threat assessment works best when there are evidence-based programs and treatment methods available. You are going to hear about the value of evidence-based programs from some of the next speakers. Let me close by emphasizing that we need training and research for more schools and communities to establish threat assessment teams.