



**Threat Assessment in
Schools
2018 MISF Conference**



Threat Assessment Management
Building a team to identify, assess and manage threats

Course Objectives

- Understand the Path to Intended Violence
- Basic Threat Assessment Strategies
- Threat Assessment Case Studies
- Threat Risk Levels
- Threat Assessment Team
- Managing a Threatening Situation

Threat Assessment Defined

- “The primary purpose of a *Threat Assessment* is to prevent targeted violence. The threat assessment process is *centered upon analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior* in a given situation.”



Threat Assessment Defined (*cont.*)

- “The appraisal of risk in a threat assessment focuses on *actions, communications, and specific circumstances* that suggest that an individual intends to mount an attack and is engaged in planning or preparing for that event.”
- *Threat Assessment in Schools; A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and Creating Safe School Climates* (Fein, et al., 2002)

Threat Assessment

Not Predictive

But, Preventive



Hopelessness and Helplessness?

- *Easy to believe that nothing can stop a violent intruder determined to commit violence*
- “The offender just snapped!”
- “There’s no way that anyone could have seen this coming!”
- Collective reactions to the “New Normal”

“Can ANYTHING be done?”



Language & Terminology are IMPORTANT!

- Threat Assessment

- “Black Guns”
- Violence
- Confrontation
- Vilification
- Labeling
- Profiling

- Student Safety Assessment

- Interventions
- Student support
- Holistic Approach
- Community Resource Engagement

Student Safety Assessment

- “We see this as an ‘umbrella’ that could cover a wide variety of issues or situations. For example, in addition to the concern about the potential for student violence the assessment could include the various forms of harassment, either as a victim or perpetrator, bullying, mental health issues, potential for self harm, etc.”

Dr. Luther L. Heller; *Superintendent; Montevideo Public Schools*

Cause for hope

- There is something can be done
- Prior to an attack, many offenders engage in behaviors that may signal impending violence
- Some behaviors are concealed
- Others are observable

If **RECOGNIZED** and **REPORTED**, may lead to a disruption prior to an attack

Reporting struggles; Friends & Bystanders

- Struggle to appropriately categorize observed behavior as malevolent
- Resist reporting fearing erroneous labeling
- Law enforcement struggle to decide how best to assess and intervene, particularly if no crime has yet to be committed



Articulate & Observable Concerning Behaviors

- Concrete
- Visible
- Easily identifiable

Intended for use by:

- Teachers & Staff
- Administrators
- Law Enforcement
- Mental Health Providers
- Parents
- Friends
- Employers



School Threats Bottom Line

**WARNING BEHAVIOR
LEAKAGE = COMMUNICATION
TO A THIRD PARTY OF INTENT TO DO HARM**

VIOLENT OFFENDERS DON'T JUST "SNAP"*

81% At least one person
knew of attacker's plans

59% More than one person
knew of attacker's plans

BYSTANDERS

OFTEN RELUCTANT TO REPORT SUSPICIONS†

3 Average bystanders per case
who knew of attacker's plans

43% **Family** | Parents, children,
siblings, spouses, fiancées

41% **Peers** | School mates, close
friends, girl/boyfriends

11% **Community Authorities** |
Teachers, coaches, religious figures

5% **Strangers** | "See Something, Say
Something"

- High Schools predominantly targeted
- Mass casualty tactics used/threatened
 - *Shooting*
 - *Bombing*
- Social media facilitation increasing methods

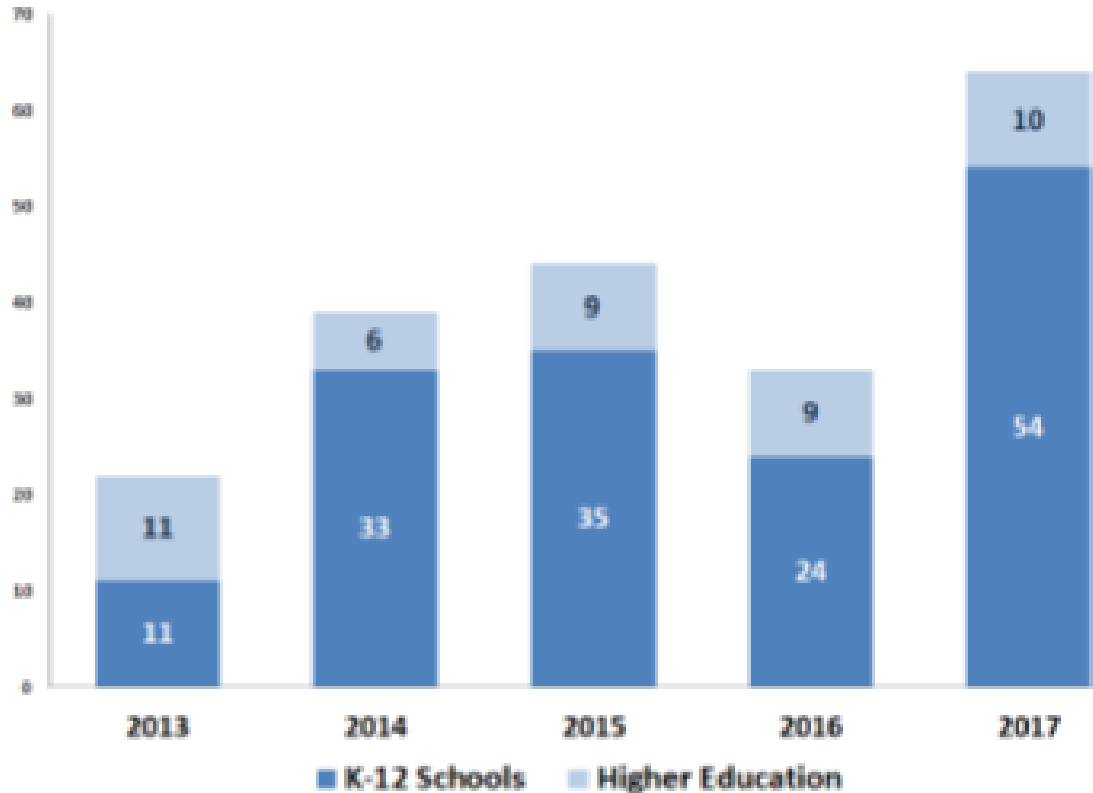
The Joint Intelligence Center, 2018

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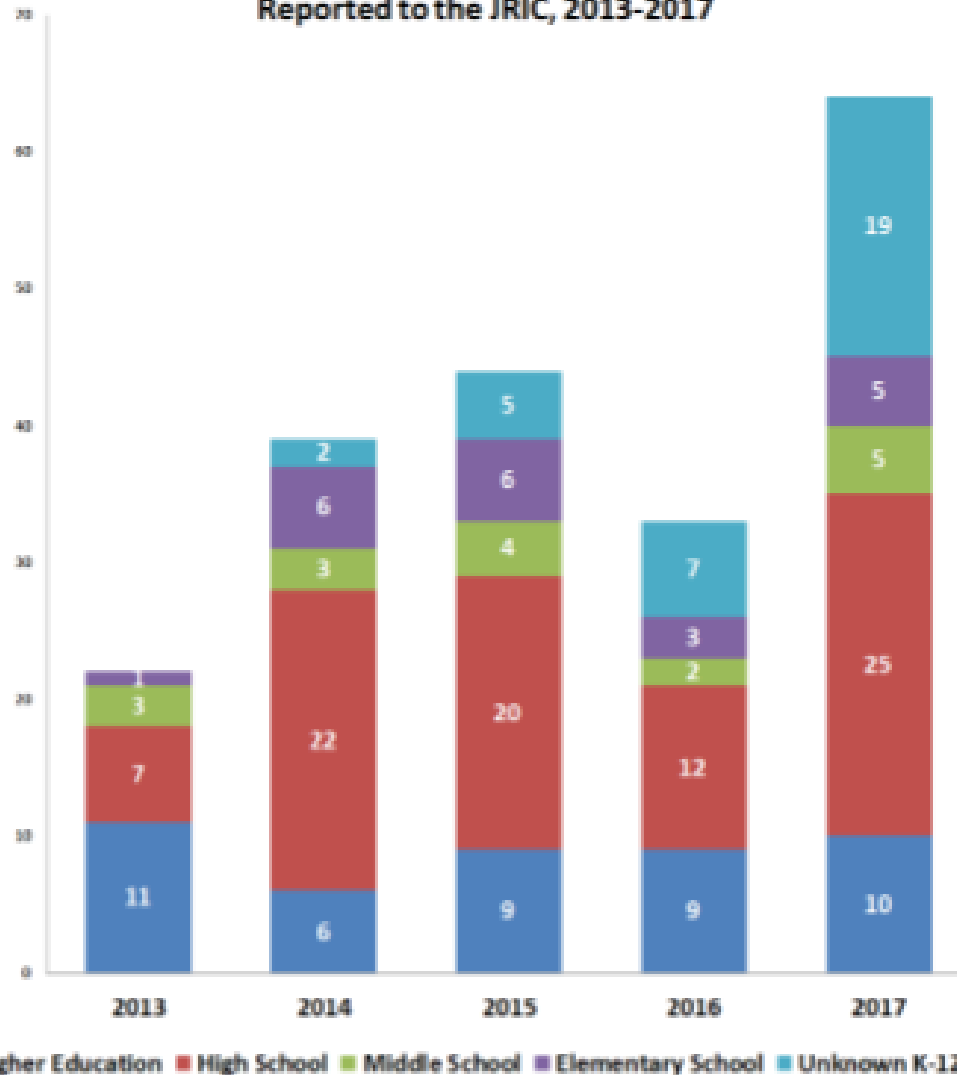
Number to Threats to Schools

Number of Threats to Schools and Higher Education Facilities Reported to the JRIC, 2013-2017



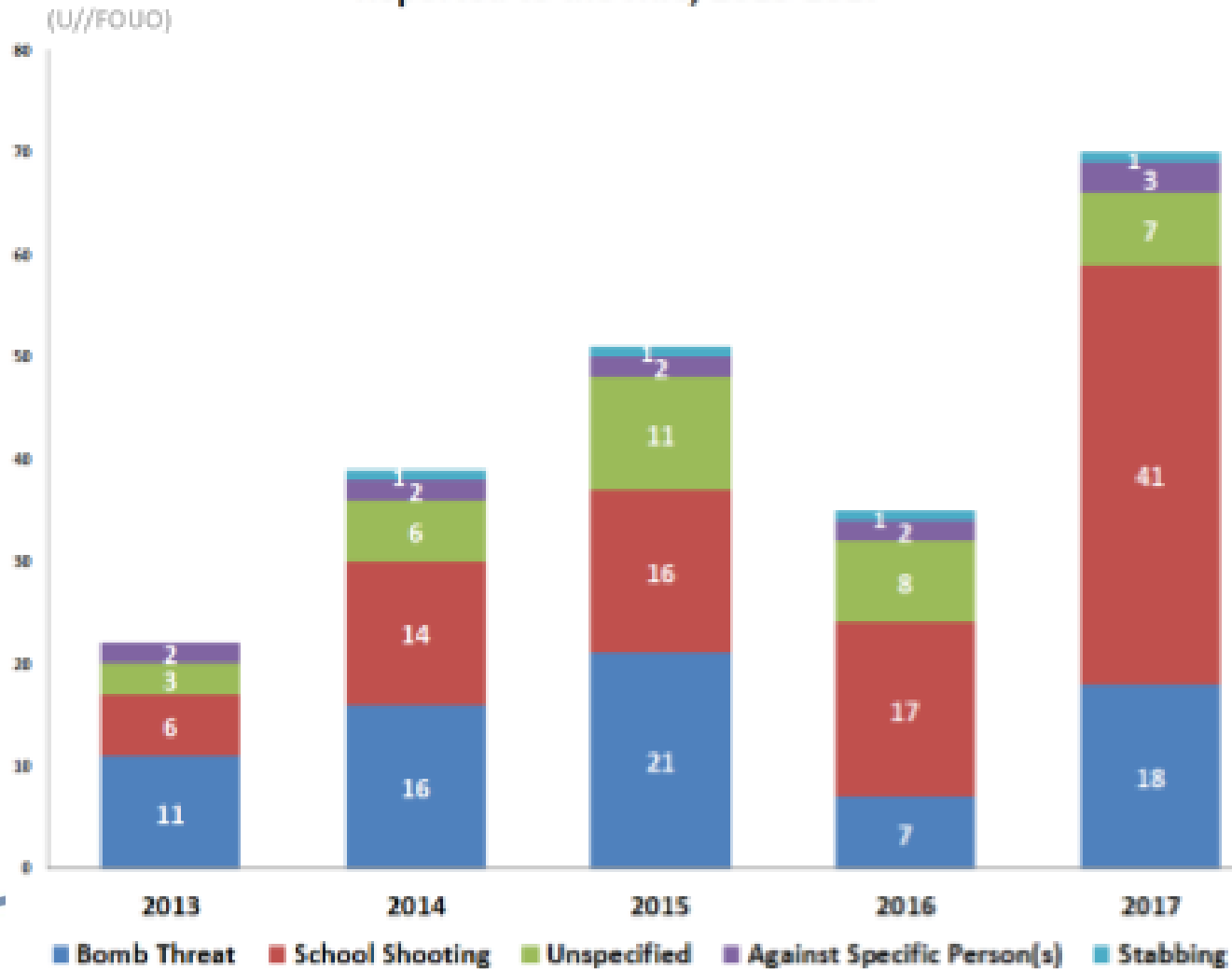
School Threats; Grade School Breakout

Number of Threats to Higher Education Facilities and Schools
(Grade School Breakout)
Reported to the JRIC, 2013-2017

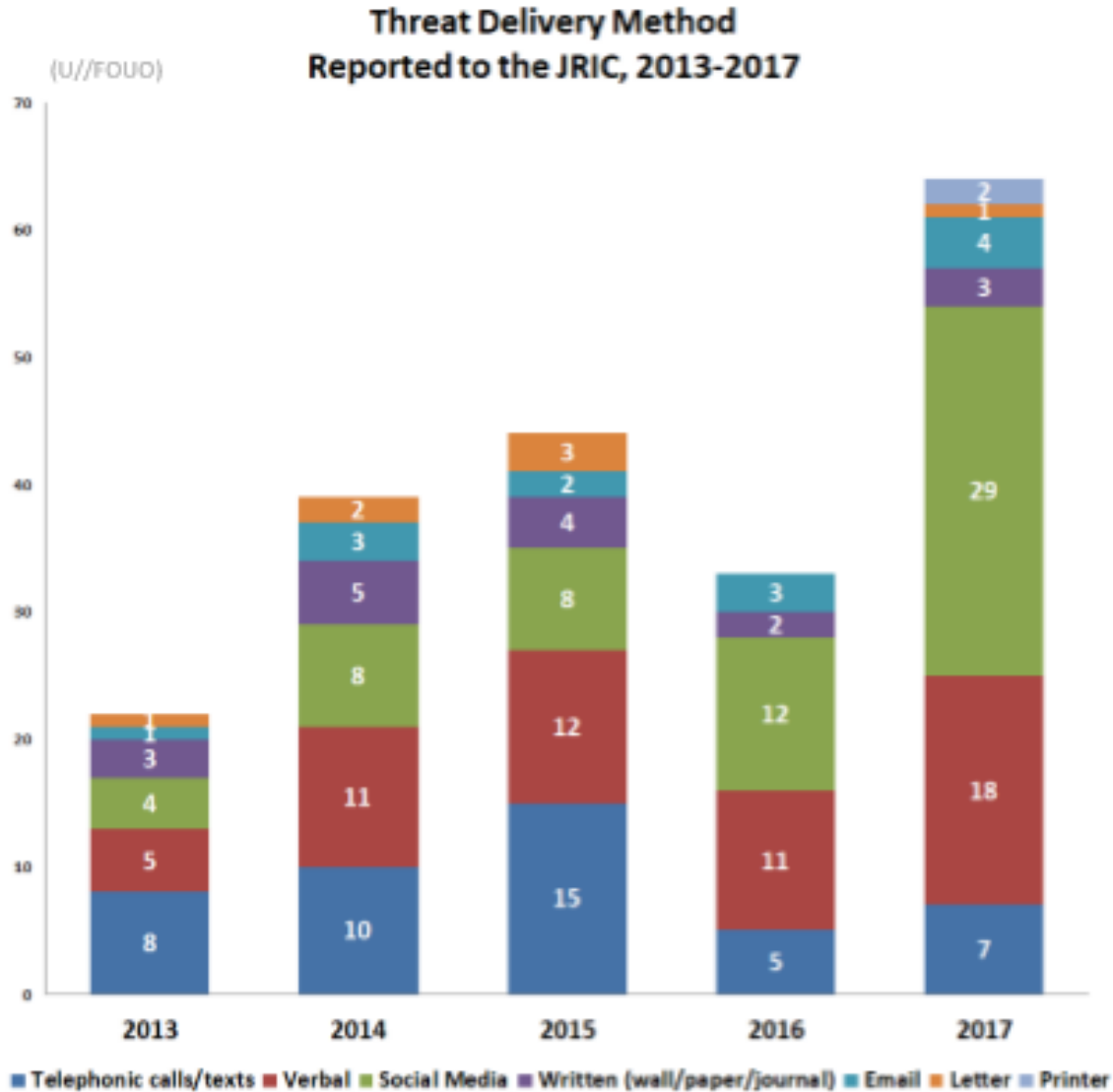


Threat Content

Threat Tactic Content
Reported to the JRIC, 2013-2017

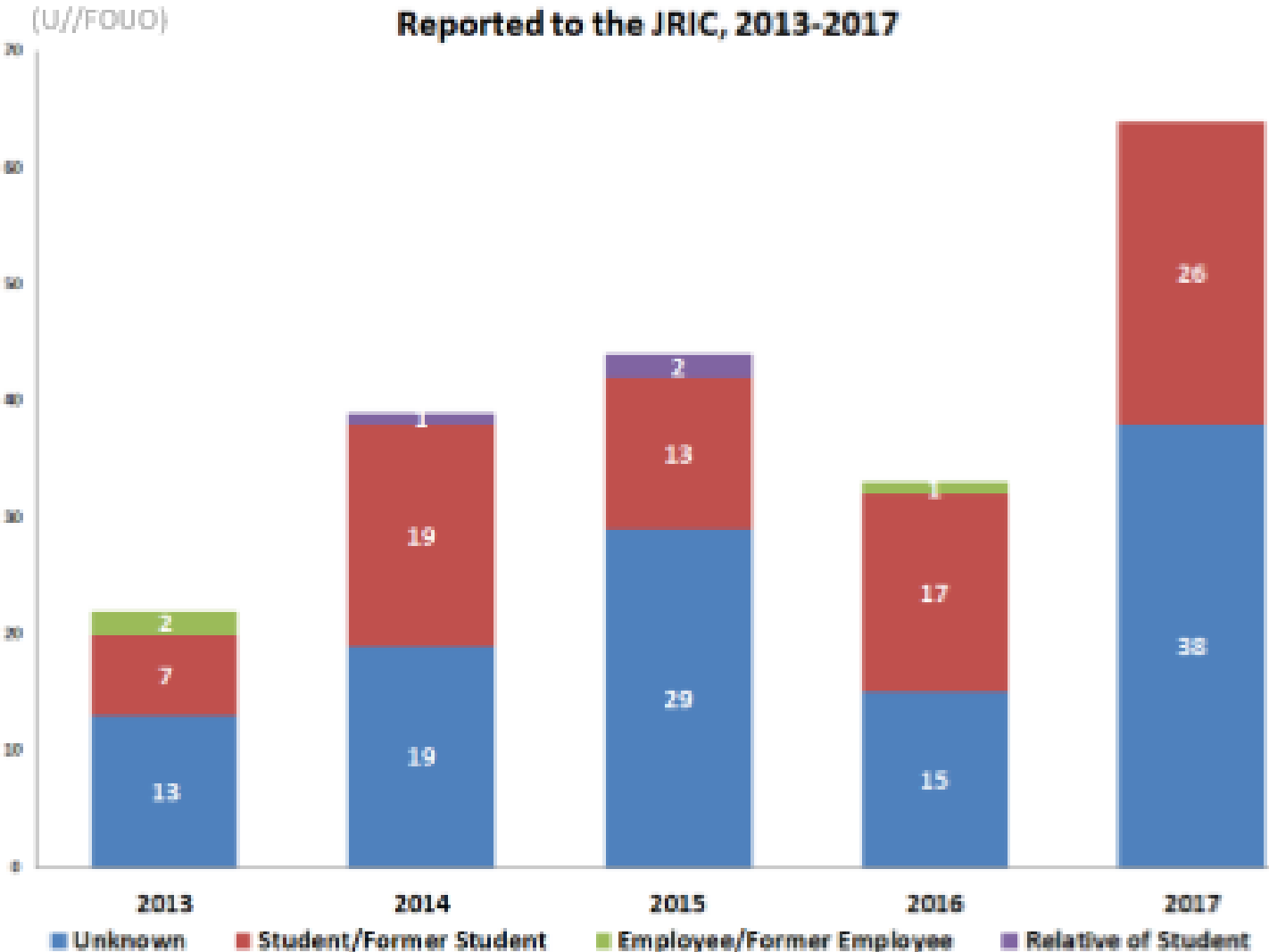


Threat Delivery Method



Perpetrators

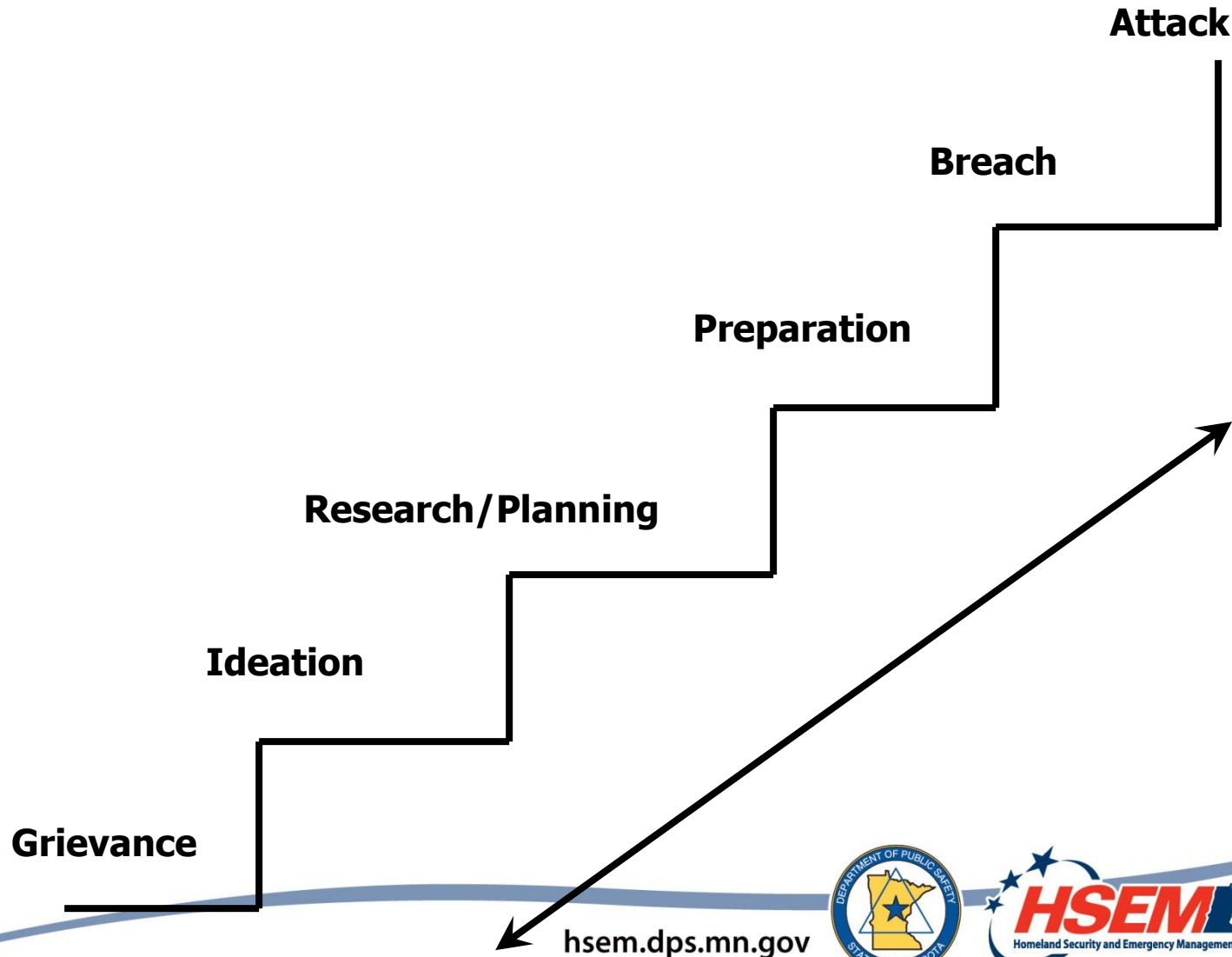
Perpetrator Demographics for School Threats Reported to the JRIC, 2013-2017



Path to intended violence



Path to Intended Violence

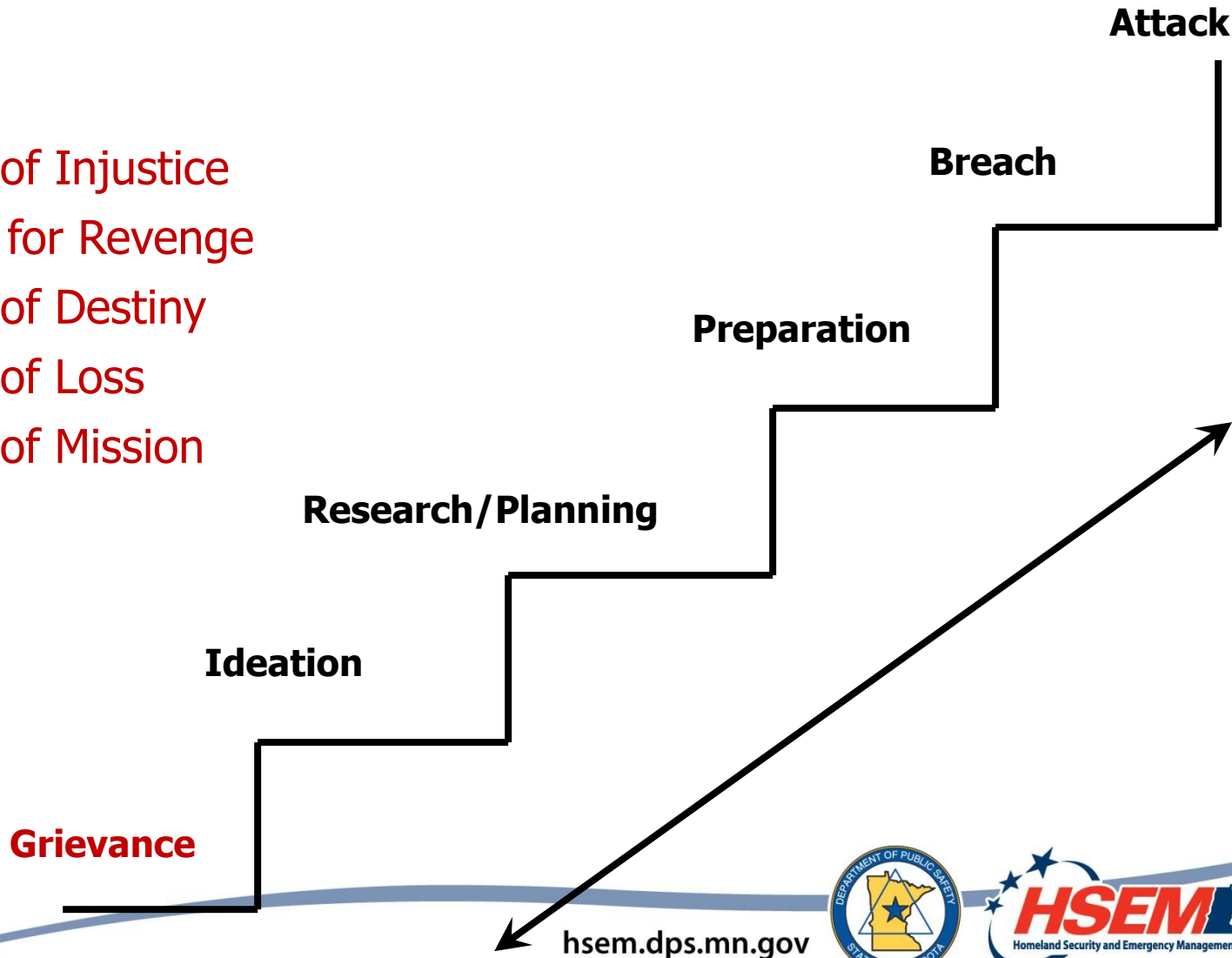


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Path to Intended Violence

- Sense of Injustice
- Desire for Revenge
- Sense of Destiny
- Sense of Loss
- Sense of Mission

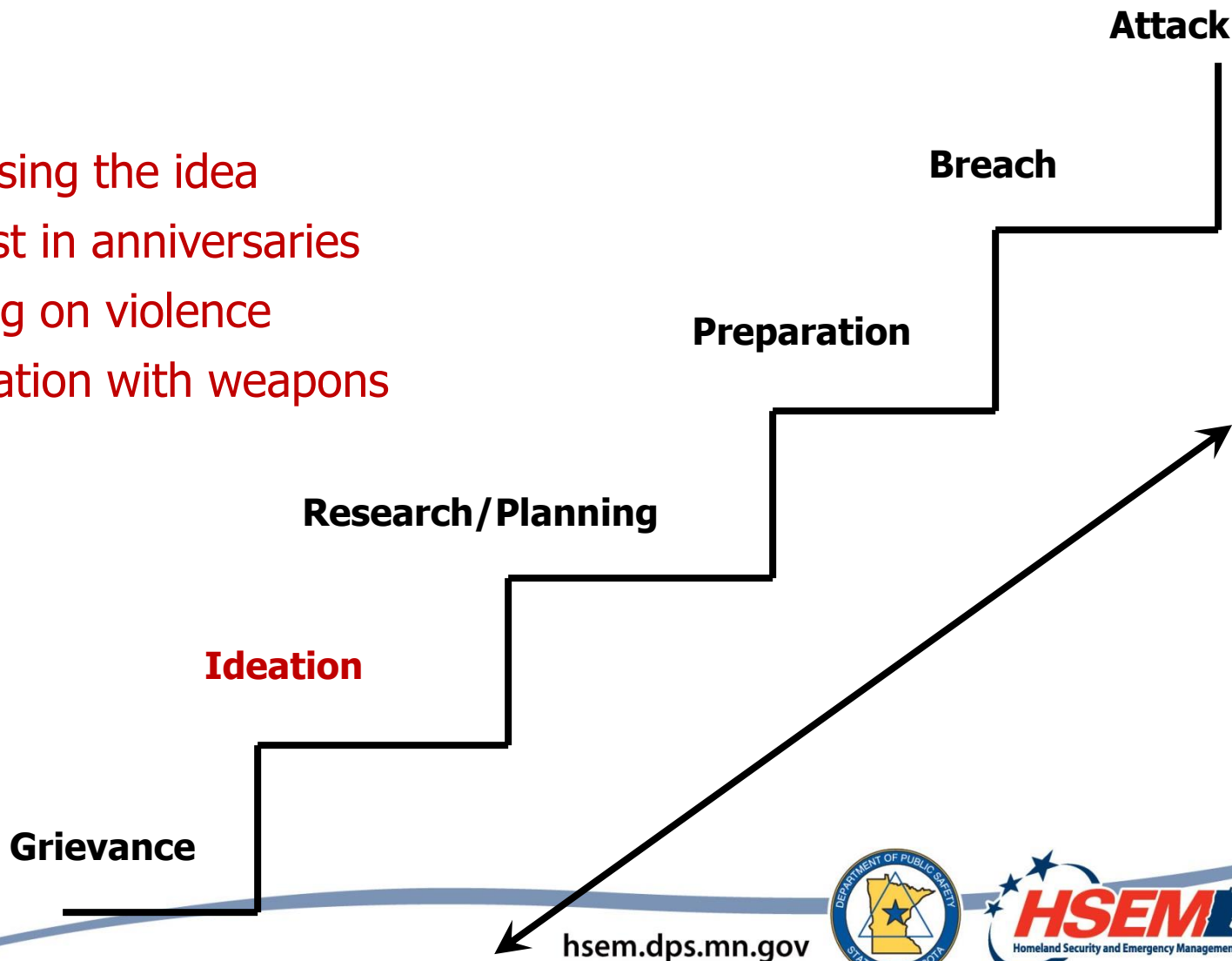


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Path to Intended Violence

- Discussing the idea
- Interest in anniversaries
- Fixating on violence
- Fascination with weapons

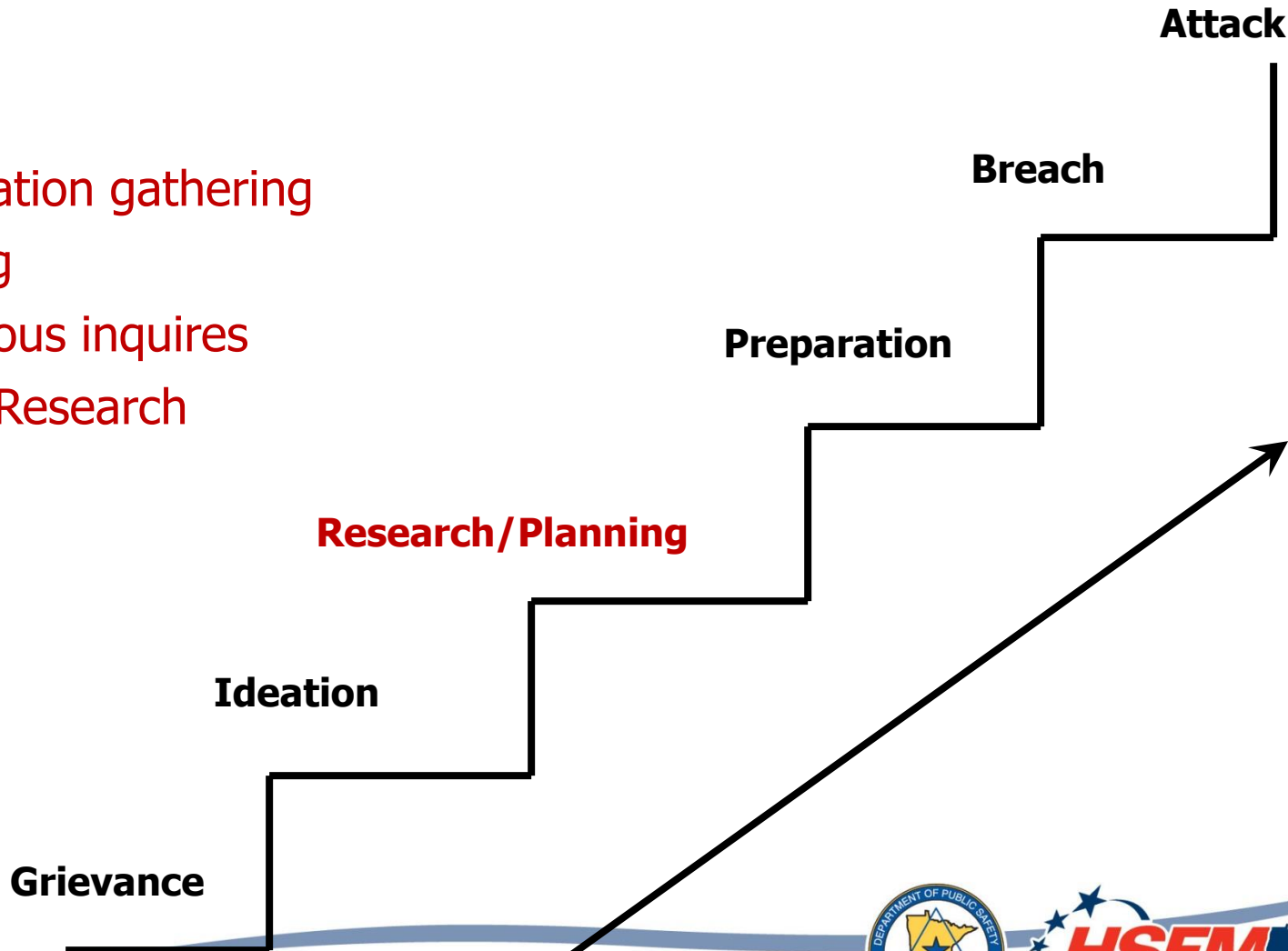


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Path to Intended Violence

- Information gathering
- Stalking
- Suspicious inquires
- Target Research

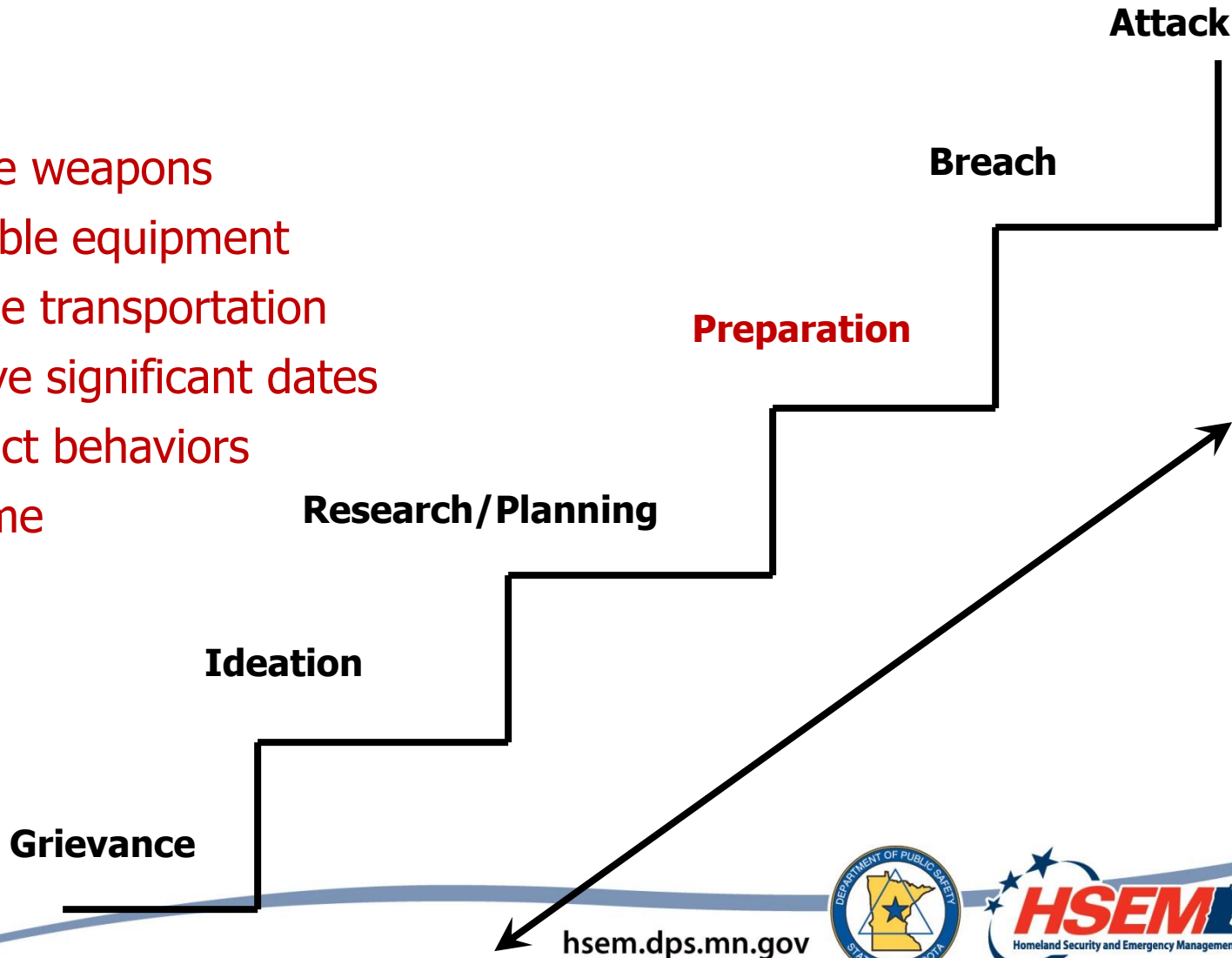


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Path to Intended Violence

- Acquire weapons
- Assemble equipment
- Arrange transportation
- Observe significant dates
- Final-act behaviors
- Costume

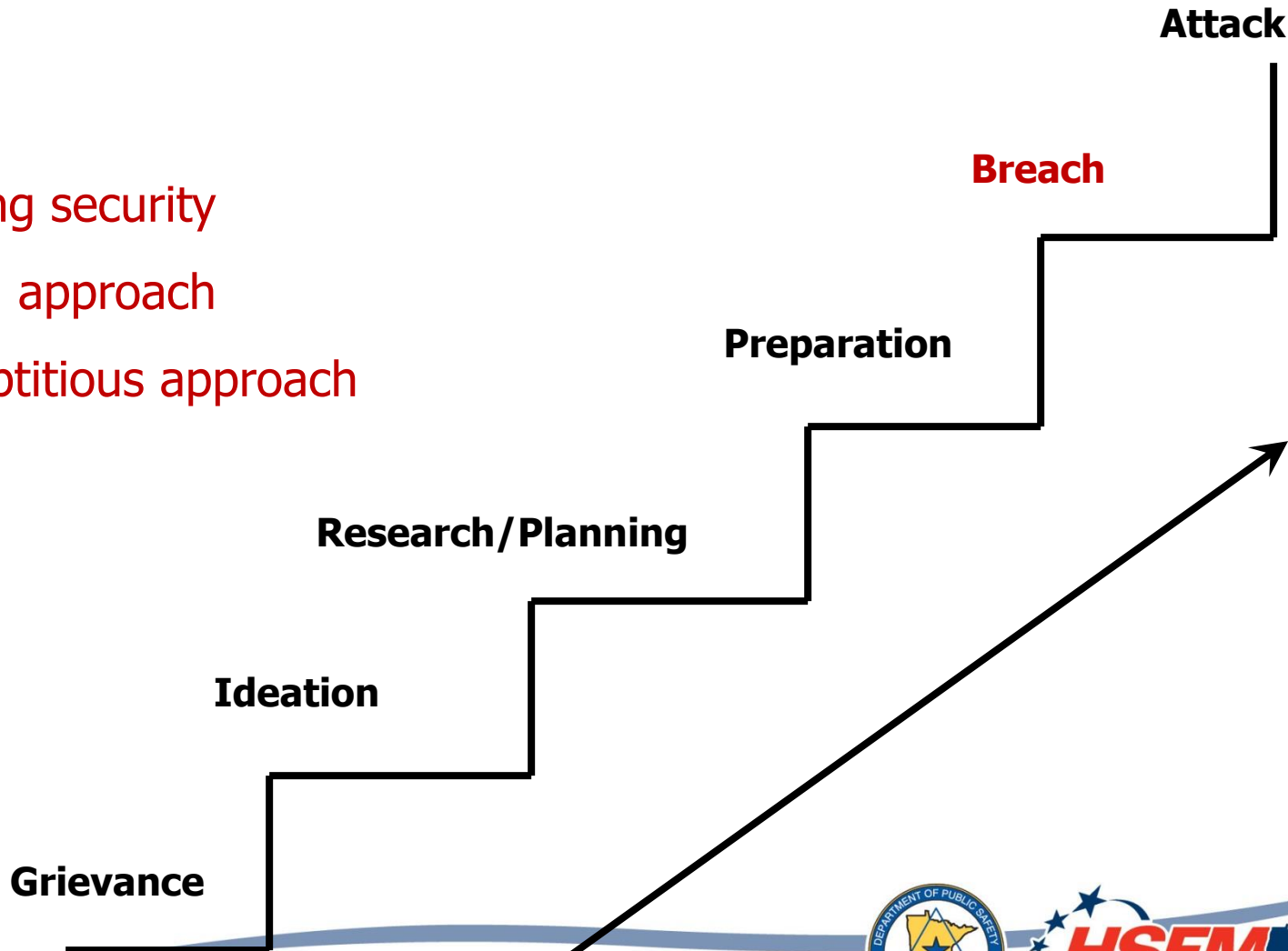


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Path to Intended Violence

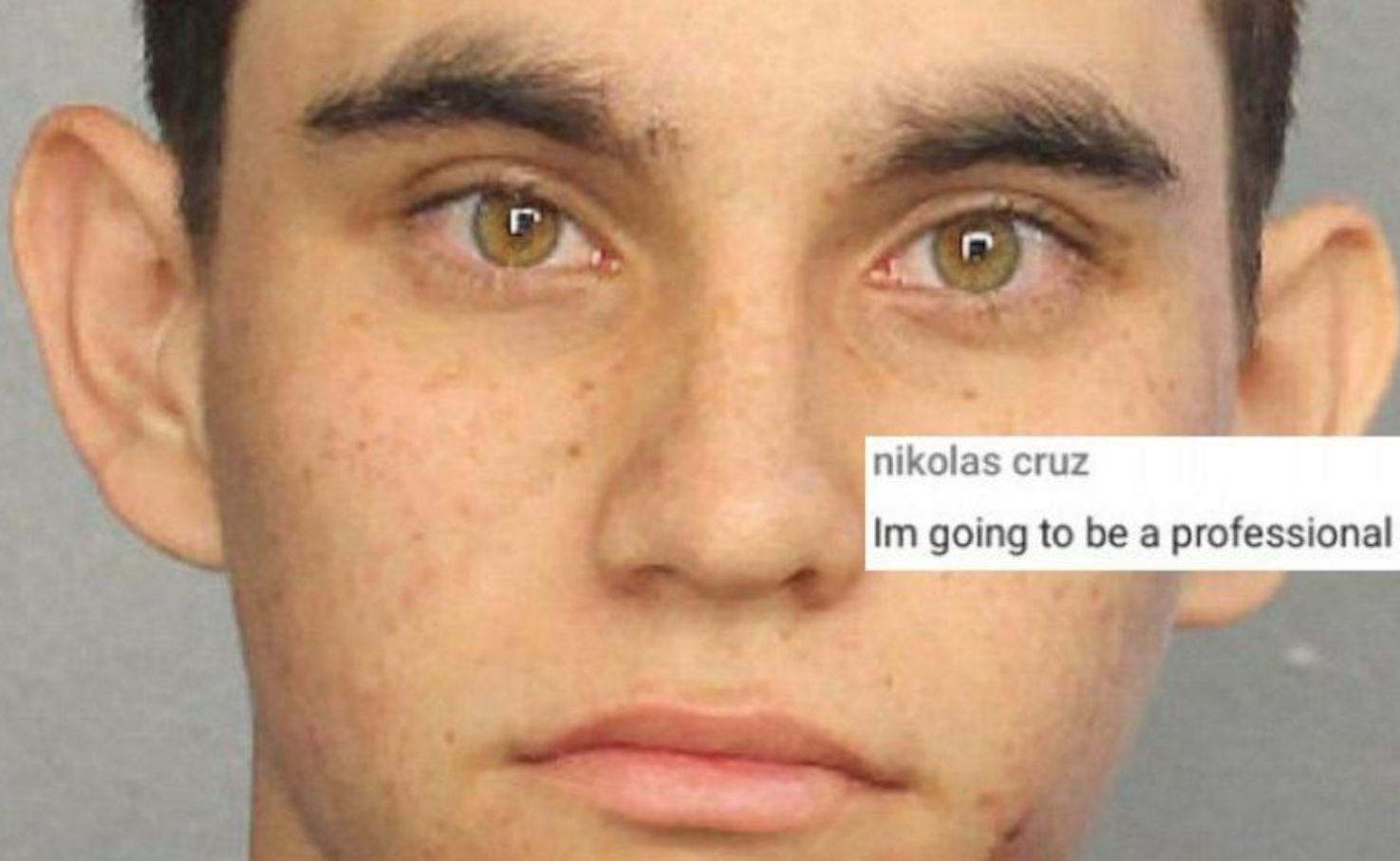
- Probing security
- Lethal approach
- Surreptitious approach



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Path to Intended Violence



nikolas cruz

Im going to be a professional school shooter

Grievance

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Threat Assessment in Schools

- A clear, consistent, rational, and well-structured system for dealing with threats is vitally important

There's something wrong here

- A threat or act of something

- A threat

- for example shooting at



to do harm
e or

symbolic –

s though

Types of threats

- Direct
- Indirect
- Veiled
- Conditional

Threat Assessment

- Strategy for determining the credibility of a threat and the likelihood it will be carried out
- Part of comprehensive school safety program
- Conducted by a team of trained professionals
- Carefully examine the full range of relevant factors and provide appropriate interventions

Factors in Threat Assessment

- Specific, plausible details
- The emotional content
- Precipitating stressors



Basic Steps of Assessing a Threat

- *Recognize* threats of violence
- *Evaluate* the seriousness
- *Intervene* to reduce the risk
- *Follow-up* to monitor and re-evaluate the effectiveness of the safety plan

Threat Assessment Process

- Attempts to *identify information* that was knowable prior to the attack.
- Relies on the *appraisal of behaviors*, rather than stated threats or traits as the basis for determining a cause for concern.

What it looks like...



The Bottom Line

The central question is whether a student poses a threat not whether a student has made a threat.



Case Study #1



- *Michael Chu*

Case Study #1

Michael Chu

- Michael Chu is a 17 year old senior at your high school. His psychology teacher, Mr. Smith, contacted the assistant principal (*not on the threat assessment team*) because recent essays expressed increased hostility toward him. Mr. Smith asked Michael to stay after class to discuss the essay and his declining grades. Mr. Smith said the conversation was largely one-sided with Michael just listening. Late last night, Mr. Smith received a hostile email from Michael saying he “better watch out”. Mr. Smith decided to report this to the AP because he felt troubled about it.

What now?

1. Based on this information, what is the first step the AP should take?
2. Is this an imminent situation or is there a need for the team to call for Law Enforcement intervention?
3. Is there a need for the team to gather information?
4. If so, where should the team look for information?

Source Information

- Assistant Principal
 - Knows Michael Chu fairly well
 - Michael Chu just transferred to your high school and has made an effort to make friends
 - Michael is generally a nice young man
 - She is surprised that he would act in a threatening manner
 - Knows Mr. Smith is a tough teacher and has been accused of being “*unfair*” in the past by students

Other teachers have said ...

- Michael Chu falls asleep in Economics class
- Michael has an average Math grade and has not shown any concerning behaviors
- Michael is distracted in Geography and has been short in some of his responses, but not threatening. Seems disinterested in being in the class

A close friend knows ...

- He has been worried about Michael but doesn't know what to do about it
- He knows Michael plays video games most of the night and doesn't get much sleep
- He has talked about being told to do things by voices in his head and feels like he needs to follow secret instructions
- Michael doesn't like his psychology teacher and said *"he better watch it"*

Anytown Police Department

- No record of Michael Chu in their records system
- No criminal record

**Criminal
Record
Check**



Family

- Parents fear Michael when he doesn't take his medication and often request that he stay with relatives on weekends
- Mom gives Michael his medicine every morning before she leaves for work but cannot verify that he actually takes it
- He had to be hospitalized for 3 months after an *"incident"* at his last school

Knowing this added information...

Does it change your mind about
how you would handle the
situation?



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Signs along the way?

At this time there is no research that has identified traits and characteristics that can reliably distinguish school shooters from other students.



Possible Indicators or “Red Flags”

- Violent fantasy content
 - Writings, drawings (stories, essays, artwork), reading materials (books, magazines, videos, movies, etc.)
- Anger problems
 - Impulsivity, no temper controls, making threats
- Fascination with weapons
 - Machine guns, explosives, ammunition
- ACEs
 - Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Loner
 - Socially withdrawn
- Suicidal or Homicidal Ideation
- Stalking
 - In person or electronically
- Imitation or interest of previous violence
 - Shooting situations, mass violence, grooming, appearance
- Strange behavior or paranoia
- History of violence
- Law Enforcement contact
- Mental health history
- Use of alcohol or drugs

NCAVC Model*

- All threats are NOT created equal
- Two questions for informed judgment:
 - *How credible and serious*
 - *Resources, intent, motivation to carry out*
- Most are unlikely to carry out the threat

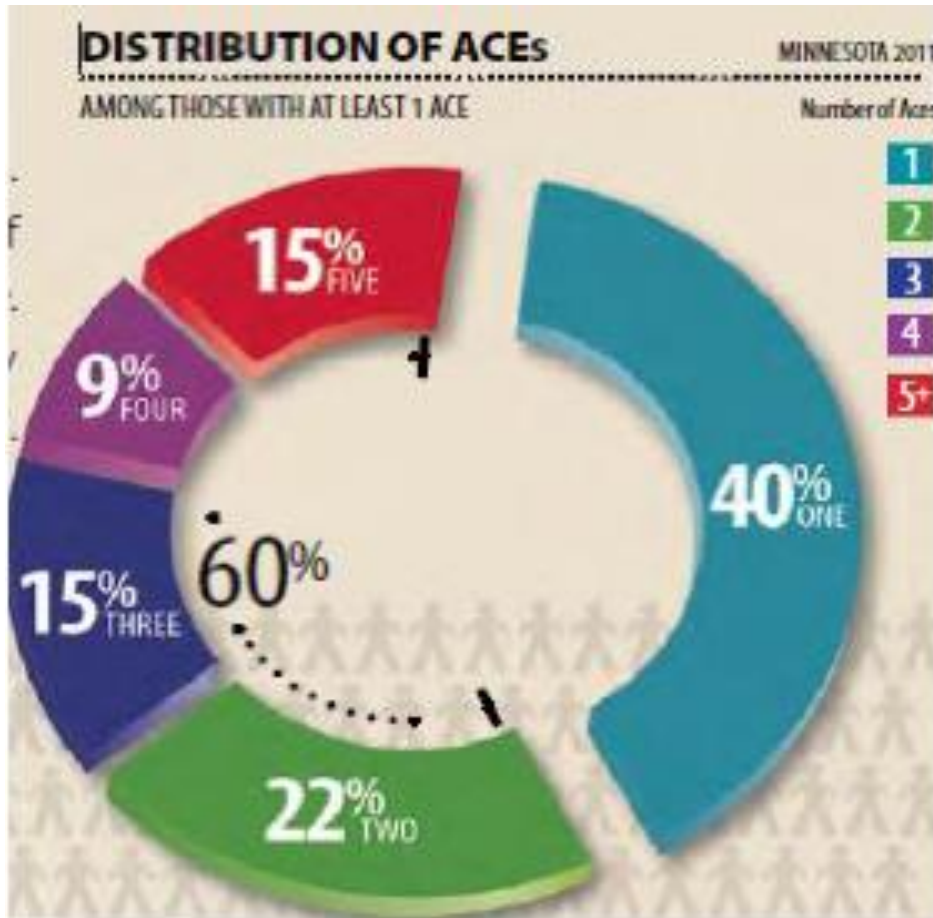
However – all threats must be taken seriously and evaluated in a timely manner.

**National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes*

Motivation for Violence

- taunt
- intimidate
- assert power or control
- punish
- manipulate or coerce
- frighten
- terrorize
- compel someone to do something
- strike back for an injury, injustice or slight
- disrupt someone's/institution's life

ACEs- Adverse Childhood Experiences



- ACEs include:

- Traumatic Experiences
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Household Dysfunction
- Witness Domestic Violence
- Substance Abuse
- Mental Illness
- Crime in Home

ACEs Effect on Brain Development

Teen Brain Development

What does the prefrontal cortex
(the “Executive Center”) control?

- Sound decision making
- Empathy
- Considering consequences
- Regulating emotions
- Self-awareness
- Morality



- Brain develops “back-to-front”
- ACEs cause toxic stress
- Child experiences world as dangerous/uncertain
- Negatively impacts learning and memory
- Increases fear, arousal, and emotional response



Nip it in the bud!

Threat Statements

“At lunchtime today, I’m gonna get Dave,
and cut him up like a jigsaw puzzle”

“My dad’s got guns all around the house; I know
where to get ‘em, and I know how to use ‘em”

Specific and Plausible: *When a threat is both specific and plausible be vigilant about the potential for imminent danger.*

Threshold for Intervention

- Alert law enforcement or other social service/mental health resources
- Interrupt the pathway to violence
- Provides a sense of relief to students, parents, community



Risk Management Options

- Low level
 - Little threat to public safety
- Moderate level
 - May warrant investigation as a potential criminal offense
- High level
 - Always reported/investigated
 - Arrest if possible

Threat Management

- *Inform students, parents and guardians of school policies*



Wrong Assumptions...

- School violence is an epidemic
- All shooters/subjects are alike
- The perpetrator is always a loner
- Violent school incidents are exclusively revenge motivated
- Easy access to weapons is the most significant risk factor

Look for “Leakage” ...

When students communicate their plans to others, after peers, teachers represent the second most likely recipient of that information



Methods & Themes of Leakage

Methods of Leakage

- Threats; overt, veiled, innuendos, etc.
- Diary/Journal entries
- Social Media/web postings
- Doodling/Artwork
- Video/Audio recordings

Themes of Leakage

- Violence/Suicidality
- Hopelessness/Despair
- Hatred/Vengeance
- Isolation/Loneliness
- Nihilism/"End of the World"

Implement a Multidisciplinary Team

- School administrator
- School counselor
- Teacher
- Law enforcement – SRO
- Mental Health
- Social Services

ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY
USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

An Operational Guide for
Preventing Targeted School Violence



U.S. Department of
Homeland Security
United States
Secret Service

National Threat Assessment Center
July 2018

THE ASSESSMENT GUIDE

ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL;
USSS NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER; JULY 2018

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Step 1: Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team

- Manage, Direct, and Document the Threat Assessment process
- Variety of disciplines represented
- Specifically designated leader (School Admin)
- Establish Protocols and Procedures
- Meet on a regular basis- develop cohesive team operations

Step 2: Define prohibited and concerning behaviors

- Establish policies defining prohibited behaviors
- Remember: concerning behaviors occur along a continuum
- Relatively low threshold for intervention
- ID other concerning statements & actions that may indicate a student at risk- develop mitigating strategies to address the risk

Step 3: Create a central reporting mechanism

- Students need a method of reporting
- Establish one or more reporting mechanisms
- *Ex:* dedicated email address, phone number, or smart phone application
- Provide training on reporting to all persons
- Respond immediately to reports
- Options for anonymous information sharing
- Confidentiality; Acted upon; Responsive

Step 4: Determine threshold for law enforcement intervention

- Vast majority of incidents or concerns handled by school personnel & resources
- LE: Weapons, threats of violence, physical violence or personal safety concerns
- Clear threshold for times when LE will be asked to support or take over an assessment

Step 5: Establish assessment procedures

- Maintain documentation; forms & templates ensure standardization across cases
- Use community systems approach; identify the sources that may have information on the student's actions and circumstances
- Examine online social media pages, conduct interviews, review class assignments, and consider locker searches
- Review academic/disciplinary/LE records

Step 5: Establish assessment procedures *(Continued)*

- Build rapport that can facilitate information-gathering efforts (*Goal is to support persons and keep the school environment safe for all*)
- Evaluate the student's concerning behaviors and communications in the context of his/her age and social and emotional development
- Collect information from diverse sources

Evaluation Themes

- Motives
- Communications
- Inappropriate interests
- Weapons access
- Stressors/ACEs
- Emotional and developmental issues
- Desperation or despair
- Violence as an option
- Concerned others
- Capacity to carry out an attack
- Planning
- Consistency and Corroboration
- Protective factors to be implemented

Step 6: Develop risk management options

- Create a situation that is less prone to violence
- Remove or redirect the student's motive through counseling or other resources
- Reduce the effect of stressors through application of student supports in addressing the negative events, setbacks, and challenges

Step 7: Create and promote safe school climates

- Build a culture of safety, respect, trust, and social and emotional support
- Share concerns with adults
- Eliminate the *“Snitch Syndrome”*
- Encourage trusted relationship building between staff and students
- Break down *“Codes of Silence”*
- Help connect students with school and classmates
- Students have a significant role to play!

Step 8: Conduct training for all stakeholders

- School safety is everyone's responsibility
- Staff have a role in school safety
- Students have an active role
- Parents have an active role
- Through training, tailor consistent safety messages to the target audience
 - Teachers and staff*
 - Students and Parents*
 - Public Safety and support providers*

Case Study #2

- *Margie Smith*



Case Study #2

Margie Smith

- Margie Smith is the administrative assistant to your middle school principal. Margie is in the process of leaving her husband, Todd, of 17 years. The SRO informs the Threat Assessment team that Margie recently got a restraining order against her husband. According to the SRO, Margie testified that Todd had beaten her on several occasions, with the most recent being a month ago which resulted in a hospital stay. The police department is under the impression that Margie plans to move out of her home within a week.

What now?

1. Based on this information, what is the first step the Threat Assessment Team should take?
2. Is this an imminent situation or is there a need for the team to call for Law Enforcement intervention?
3. Is there a need for the team to gather information?
4. If so, where should the team look for information?

External Information

- **Margie Smith**
 - Confirmed that she has received a restraining order but only as a “precautionary” measure
 - Said her husband is only bad when he drinks
 - Her husband knows she is moving out and he knows he has to stay away from her
 - Todd is embarrassed by his behavior and promises “never to get that rough with her again”

Todd's Supervisor (*LE gathered*)

- Todd was a night security guard for his company but recently fired him because of the restraining order
- Company policy states that no armed security guard may have a restraining order against them
- Todd was uncomfortably and surprisingly calm at being fired, almost as if he expected it

Margie's supervisor

- Confirmed that Margie has had several 1 and 2 day absences in the past 6-8 weeks
- The last absence corresponds with the date of the most recent beating and hospitalization



What can be Assessed?

- Is there a motive or a goal?
- Is there communication suggesting an attack?
- Does Todd have interests in workplace attacks? Weapons? Mass violence?
- Has he engaged in attack-related behaviors?
- Does he have the capacity to carry out an attack?
- Is Todd experiencing hopelessness, desperation, or despair?

Additional questions...

- Does Todd have someone he can confide in? Is he emotionally connected to people?
- Does Todd see violence as an acceptable means to solve problems?
- Has he been interviewed? Does his story match his actions?
- Are other people concerned?
- Where is Todd along the “*pathway to violence?*”

What is the level of risk in your building?

- No identified Risk
- Low Risk
- Moderate Risk
- High Risk
- Extreme Risk





1 large, very clean stone



4 cups water



3 large carrots



3 potatoes



2 onions



1 can tomatoes



1 can corn



1 can peas



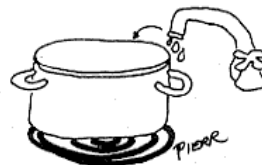
4 teaspoons beef bouillon



dash of salt



Heat water in a large pot.



Managing the Situation

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Managing a Threatening Situation

Most effective and
least damaging course of action

Short term considerations:

- Controlling/containing the situation/student in a way that will prevent the attack
- Protecting & aiding possible targets



Managing a Threatening Situation

Most effective and
least damaging course of action

Long term:

- Deter future threat of violence
- Cause student to abandon plan
- Providing support to help student deal successfully with his/her problems



Intervention and Monitoring

- Plans must be individualized
- Plan should be fact based
- Anticipate what might change in the short – and long-term
- Think creatively about resources
- Suspension and expulsion makes monitoring and evaluating difficult
- Focus on what works

THE THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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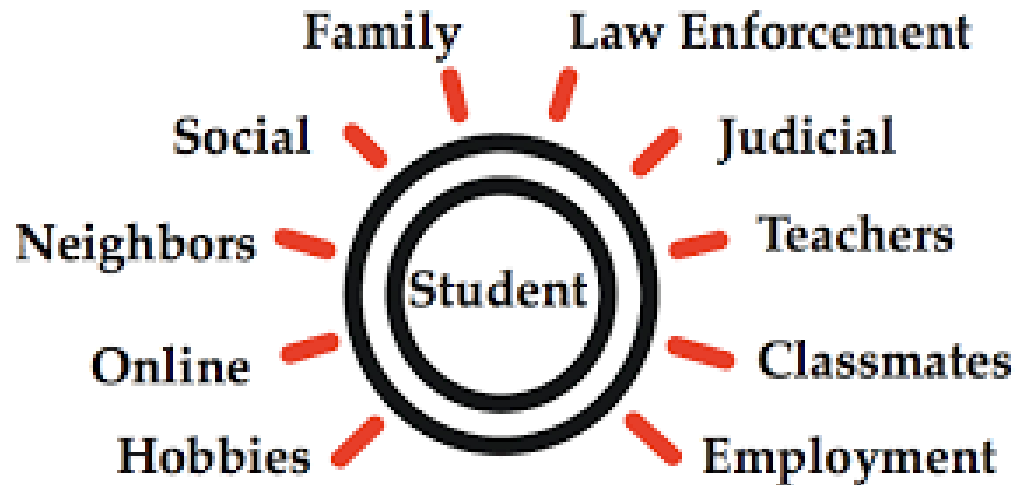


Implementing a Threat Assessment Program

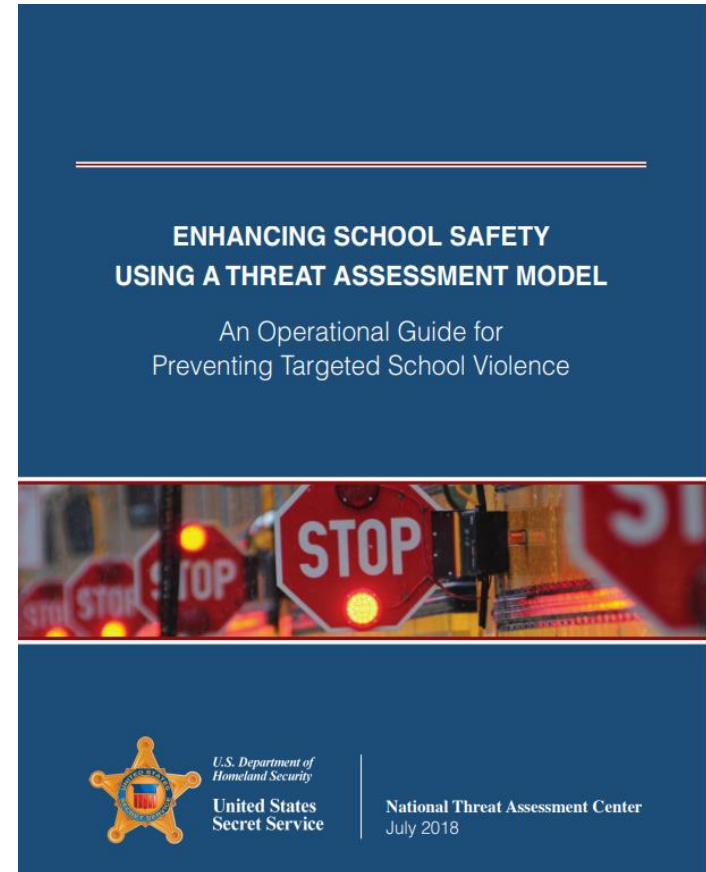
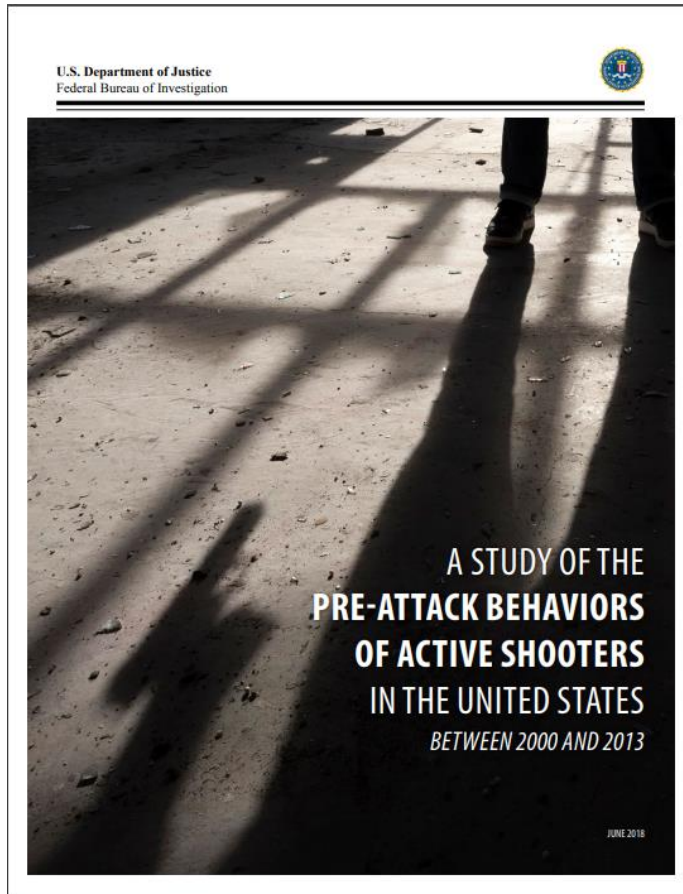
- Communicate to staff/students/families
- Training of staff
- Incorporation of process/policy
- Transparency of the process
- Consult legal for information sharing
- Advertise and support the message that your school will not tolerate any forms of a threat without intervention

Threat Assessment Instruments

- Fairfax County Public Schools Threat Assessment Instrument (*Example*)
- START Threat Assessment Matrix (*Crow Wing County*)

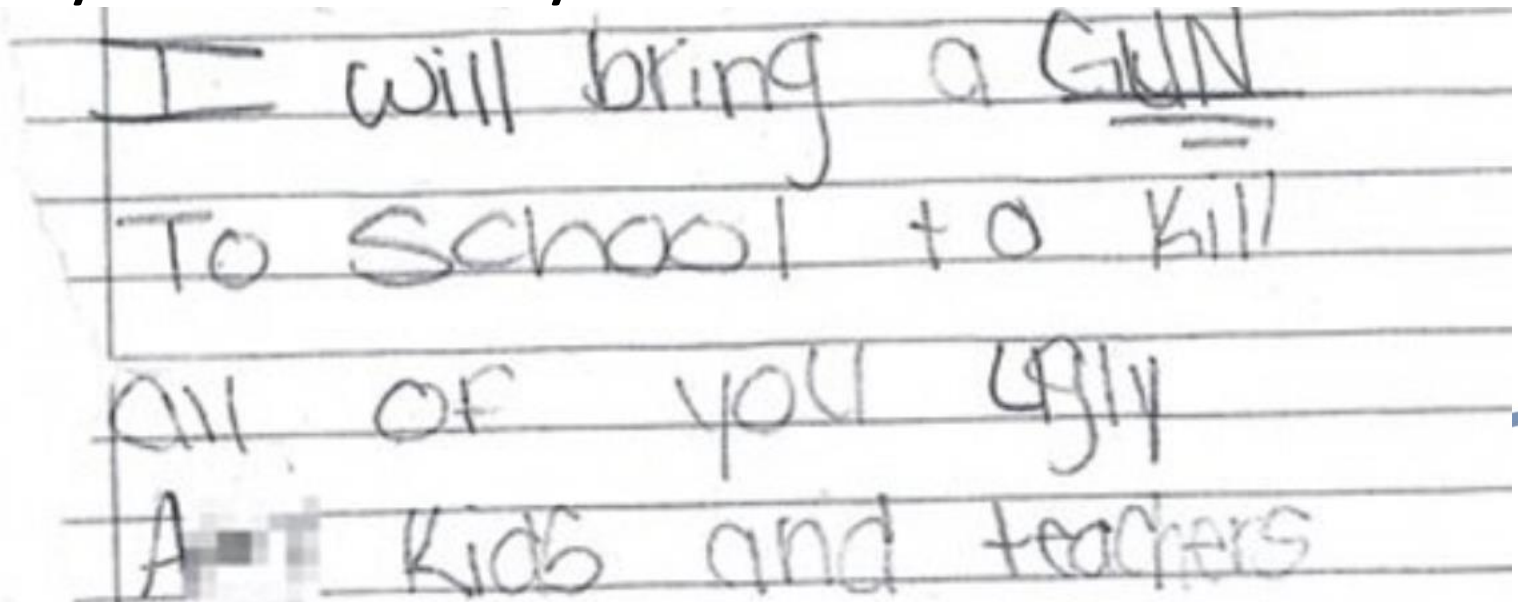


Two New Threat Assessment Sources



Remember...

- All threats are not created equal
- Most who make a threat will never carry it out
- Conversely, others who pose a real threat may never convey their intentions



I will bring a GUN
To School to kill
all of you ugly
A kids and teachers

Threat Assessment

A school cannot ignore any threat of violence. Plausible or not, every threat must be taken seriously, investigated, and responded to.

Questions?



Threat Assessment Resources

- **Virginia Tech:** Threat Assessment and Management
<http://www.threatassessment.vt.edu/index.htm>
- **Safe School Initiative:** The final report and findings
http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf
- **Association of Threat Assessment Professionals**
<http://www.atapworldwide.org/?page=32>
- **“Path to Violence” PBS video**
<http://video.pbs.org/video/2336803730/>
- **Campus Threat Assessment Case Studies**
COPS: Community Oriented Policing Services, US
Department of Justice

Threat Assessment Resources

- **Enhancing School Safety Using A Threat Assessment Model; An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence**

National Threat Assessment Center; July 2018; USSS

- **A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States; Between 2000 and 2013**

Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Dept. of Justice; June 2018

- **Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks**

Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Dept. of Justice; 2017