



# UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY USING A THREAT ASSESSMENT MODEL

## An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence

National Threat Assessment Center

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### U.S. SECRET SERVICE SCHOOL SAFETY RESEARCH

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Over the last 20 years, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) has conducted research, training, and consultation on threat assessment and the prevention of various forms of targeted violence. Following the tragedy at Columbine High School in April 1999, the Secret Service partnered with the Department of Education on two studies related to school safety. Published in 2002, the *Safe School Initiative (SSI)* examined 37 incidents of targeted violence that occurred at elementary and secondary schools to analyze the thinking and behavior of students who commit these attacks. The report, and accompanying guide, served as the impetus for establishing threat assessment programs in schools. In 2008, the agencies released the Bystander Study, a report that explored a key SSI finding that prior to most attacks, other students knew of the attackers' plans, yet most did not report it to an adult. The report highlighted the importance of creating safe school climates in which students are empowered to share their concerns. Since then, NTAC has continued to provide and update training to schools, law enforcement, and others on threat assessment and prevention practices.

### U.S. SECRET SERVICE'S LATEST INITIATIVE REGARDING SCHOOL SAFETY

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The tragic events of the February 14, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and the May 18, 2018 shooting at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, demonstrated the ongoing need to provide leadership in preventing future school attacks. As such, the U.S. Secret Service, along with many of our partners, have redoubled our efforts and are poised to continue enhancing school safety. As part of these efforts, NTAC created an operational guide that provides actionable steps that schools can take to develop comprehensive targeted violence prevention plans for conducting threat assessments in schools. The guide, titled *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*, is available on the U.S. Secret Service website. A condensed overview is outlined on the following page.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS

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- In conjunction with physical security and emergency management, a threat assessment process is an effective component to ensuring the safety and security of our nation's schools.
- Threat assessment procedures recognize that students engage in a continuum of concerning behaviors, the vast majority of which will be non-threatening and non-violent, but may still require intervention.
- The threshold for intervention should be relatively low so that schools can identify students in distress before their behavior escalates to the level of eliciting concerns about safety.
- Everyone has a role to play in preventing school violence and creating safe school climates. Students should feel empowered to come forward without fear of reprisal. Faculty and staff should take all incoming reports seriously, and assess any information regarding concerning behavior or statements.

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**Additional Resources:** The full guide provides information and links to additional resources that can help schools create threat assessment teams, establish reporting mechanisms, train stakeholders, and promote safe school climates.

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## CREATING A TARGETED VIOLENCE PREVENTION PLAN

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The goal of a threat assessment is to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk. This process begins with establishing a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan that requires schools to:

**Step 1: Establish a multidisciplinary threat assessment team** of school personnel including faculty, staff, administrators, coaches, and available school resource officers who will direct, manage, and document the threat assessment process.

**Step 2: Define behaviors**, including those that are prohibited and should trigger immediate intervention (e.g., threats, violent acts, and weapons on campus) and other concerning behaviors that require a threat assessment.

**Step 3: Establish and provide training on a central reporting system** such as an online form on the school website, email address, phone number, smartphone application, or other mechanisms. Ensure that it provides anonymity to those reporting concerns and is monitored by personnel who will follow-up on all reports.

**Step 4: Determine the threshold for law enforcement intervention**, especially if there is a safety risk.

**Step 5: Establish threat assessment procedures** that include practices for maintaining documentation, identifying sources of information, reviewing records, and conducting interviews. Procedures should include the following investigative themes to guide the assessment process:

- **Motive:** What motivated the student to engage in the behavior of concern? What is the student trying to solve?
- **Communications:** Have there been concerning, unusual, threatening, or violent communications? Are there communications about thoughts of suicide, hopelessness, or information relevant to the other investigative themes?
- **Inappropriate Interests:** Does the student have inappropriate interests in weapons, school attacks or attackers, mass attacks, other violence? Is there a fixation on an issue or a person?
- **Weapons Access:** Is there access to weapons? Is there evidence of manufactured explosives or incendiary devices?
- **Stressors:** Have there been any recent setbacks, losses, or challenges? How is the student coping with stressors?
- **Emotional and Developmental Issues:** Is the student dealing with mental health issues or developmental disabilities? Is the student's behavior a product of those issues? What resources does the student need?
- **Desperation or Despair:** Has the student felt hopeless, desperate, or like they are out of options?
- **Violence as an Option:** Does the student think that violence is a way to solve a problem? Have they in the past?
- **Concerned Others:** Has the student's behavior elicited concern? Was the concern related to safety?
- **Capacity:** Is the student organized enough to plan and execute an attack? Does the student have the resources?
- **Planning:** Has the student initiated an attack plan, researched tactics, selected targets, or practiced with a weapon?
- **Consistency:** Are the student's statements consistent with his or her actions or what others observe? If not, why?
- **Protective Factors:** Are there positive and prosocial influences in the student's life? Does the student have a positive and trusting relationship with an adult at school? Does the student feel emotionally connected to other students?

**Step 6: Develop risk management options** to enact once an assessment is complete. Create individualized management plans to mitigate identified risks. Notify law enforcement immediately if the student is thinking about an attack, ensure the safety of potential targets, create a situation less prone to violence, redirect the student's motive, and reduce the effect of stressors.

**Step 7: Create and promote a safe school climate** built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and emotional support. Encourage communication, intervene in conflicts and bullying, and empower students to share their concerns.

**Step 8: Provide training for all stakeholders**, including school personnel, students, parents, and law enforcement.