Default to Designated Receivers:
Increasing the Effectiveness of Threat Assessment Teams Through Standard Guidelines and Proactive Training for First Responders

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Abstract

Incidents of targeted violence within educational environments continue across America. Studies of such incidents have revealed deficiencies in how first responders identify and proactively report threats and concerning communications. Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) programs are becoming increasingly common within these institutions; however, many front-line receivers lack adequate training in the recognition of pathway behaviors and early indicators of violence. This research addresses the gap by evaluating how enhanced training can transform default receivers, those who first encounter threats, to designated receivers who are more equipped to assess and manage them. The research addresses not only the gaps in training but highlights the critical importance of solid communication pathways and a baseline understanding of reporting procedures. The study provides insight on training framework, unified reporting and integrated prevention strategies to improve the ability of a first responder to improve outcomes and prevent tragedy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As college campuses continue to evolve to meet competing demand, higher education remains at the forefront of addressing social issues. Public safety professionals in these institutions are now absorbing the daunting task of managing threats and concerning communications inside and outside the campus community. In addition, they are sometimes confronted with the greater challenge of allowing those within our campus communities and other public spaces to exercise First Amendment rights. The creation of a threat assessment team has become more common place. Many times, there are different labels and terms associated with how universities refer to teams that directly receive and oversee perceived threats.

In my current role as Assistant Vice President of Public Safety in Risk Management it is incumbent to me to learn more about threat assessment as we continue to navigate the threat landscape within higher education. As a participatory researcher, this opportunity affords me the ability to develop frontline law enforcement officers to be proactive in receiving information about potential threats of targeted violence outside the course of the normal routine reporting parameters. As the chairperson of the University's Threat Assessment team, I am well versed in how information must be received, triaged and managed. Training first responders to recognize these signs at the point of first report would be a valuable tool in threat mitigation.

There are many types of teams that work within the Behavioral Threat and Management (BTAM) realm. Examples include names such as the Assessment and Care Team (ACT), Behavior Intervention Team (BIT) and many others, all of which envelop what professionals refer to as the Behavior Threat and Management (BTAM) model within their scope of duties. BTAM is considered a tool used to identify, evaluate, and manage potential threats to public

safety (Nguyen, 2024). These teams strive to prevent targeted violence and use a proactive approach to address any threats or concerning behaviors by members of their communities. This approach helps the team distinguish between incidents in which a student communicates a free speech concern or made a threat that could be carried out. The threats are generally evaluated to ensure legitimacy and whether it was transient or substantive. In recent years, numerous city and county governments, large event managers and universities have increasingly recognized the importance of using proactive measures to ensure public safety. For the campuses, specifically the threat assessment team, seeks to not only identify such threats but to intervene and deploy supportive resources to those accused as well as those that are impacted.

Threat assessment and management is not a new concept. In 1998, the United States Secret Service created the foundation for threat assessment and management (USSS,2018). These teams were not recommended broadly for campuses until the Virginia Tech mass shooting in 2007. It remains relatively new to many university professionals. Most threat assessments naturally rested within the realm of law enforcement, given its origin, as default receivers and the triage and management of the case lay solely on their response and discretion. In many of these cases, police investigators were only notified after a violent incident had occurred and instead of when the initial threat was made (Simons & Meloy, 2016). Universities have since learned to identify and assess not only criminal threats, but also a wide variety of other threats then work holistically to de-escalate behavior.

The recent rise in public interest regarding campus violence has further underscored the need for solutions to identify and mitigate potential threats. As such, many universities have adopted the implementation of BTAM and established specialized threat management teams and

programs to assist and manage troubling behaviors that pose risks to the campus community. Threats of violence are common. However, many are transient and are sourced from venting emotion or poor choice of words (Mitchell, 2016). The intent of this paper is to conduct a program evaluation of threat assessment teams in higher education and to begin to explore the efficacy and effectiveness of such programs advanced training are implemented for those first line responders.

This research study will evaluate the current literature that is relevant to the context of threat assessment training and procedural guidelines within higher education as it relates to first responders and their nexus to threat assessment teams. Key findings with the literature review will focus on those scholarly articles and resources that support the topic. It will also provide context and history of threat assessment teams and important aspects of how they are established and operated. The goal is to review evidence-based research to develop a framework about the impact of training the "first line of defense" to be properly positioned to received and triage concerning communications that involve threats and identify risk factors relevant to a threat assessment team's review and response.

Problem and Issue Identification

Without proper training, law enforcement and other first responders fail to recognize true warning signs and behavioral patterns that could manifest into hostility and greater threats. Bystanders and other receivers of threats will also benefit from training that focuses on warning signs which can promote reporting these significant behaviors relevant to targeted violence. When this training is not implemented, officers treat these calls as routine or may feel either out of place to report, or do not recognize the urgency of such reporting. Studies reflect that any

threat management process that lacks the ability to detect, report and act risks either not receiving the information or missing indicators of violence. (Calhoun and Weston ,2023) Therefore it is incumbent upon threat management practitioners and those involved in BTAM to prepare default receivers in advance for effectiveness in the process.

Threats of violence and risk assessments are nothing new to the law enforcement community.   First responders are trained to respond to hazardous situations and apply a level of crisis response that prepares them to eliminate threats (i.e. active shooters) with a tactical approach to protect the public.   Training, however, has not been as robust in areas of proactive threat assessment and intervention strategies of targeted violence at the first responder level. The issue remains that those at the first point of contact concerning communications and threats are not traditionally trained in signs and clues to those individuals that are on the pathway to violence.   Instead, in my experience, they apply the "street" and tactical approach to resolution without funneling the information to designated receivers that can assess and manage a threat before the aggression and violent act takes place.

Background

Potential examples of how these default receivers within law enforcement either miss cues of pathway behavior or fail to report such incidents abound. One example, in domestic violence and stalking, a call may be initiated by a complainant to the police (the default receiver) for assistance. The complainant may have used the default call to police because of very few other options. Upon going to the call, the complainant states he/she is being "harassed" or "followed". The officer arriving on the scene may simply respond and notify the complainant that they are limited in response since the person of interest or concern is no longer in the area.

The officer fails to ask pertinent questions, related to the threat nor reports to a designated

BTAM team who can conduct a proper intake and preliminary review of circumstances and

advise on a course of action. Instead, the BTAM team is left out of loop, ignorant of the pending

threats which could result in serious bodily injury or homicide.

Another example would be an officer responds to a call in which someone was acting

violent, disorderly, and threatening others. The venue may not be as important as the behavior in

this example because the aggression would be addressed in somewhat a similar manner. The law

enforcement officer on the scene would act to de-escalate the environment then move to

determine if the circumstances warranted arrest.   In this case, proper interviews and threat

assessment related questions in the context of pathway behavior could be applied to determine if

this aggression is symptomatic to other stressors along the pathway to violence.   In this case

more investigation about the motives, the venue, the type of threats conveyed as well as the

target of the threat should be explored.   In basic law enforcement training, officers are not

always exposed to this model and fail to recognize a larger issue. The de-escalation or arrest of

an offender may be appropriate but failure to follow up with the BTAM model could be

detrimental to future threats. The officer is not ignoring the problem but was not classically

trained in the overall context to help thwart an attack.

A final example could involve a college or university atmosphere where bystanders

(instructors, staff or students) and law enforcement first responders are notified of a student's

concerning communications within an assignement or discussions with instructors or others.

Bystanders play a significant role, but even if they report the officer may not recognize the signs

or feel as though they are again limited in response options.   By providing training in the BTAM

model, these default receivers can be positioned to do better informal intake on documents, behaviors and communications which allow a faster conduit to a BTAM team for a more informed approach when referrals are made to these teams.   The overall and ideal paradigm shift would mean evolving these responders from "default" to "designated" receivers of threat complaints and calls.

Overall, the concept of early warning and threat detection by using trained designated receivers can offer a threat assessment team the ability to review and manage a situation before it moves to crisis.   The BTAM model does not negate the use of qualified information within their process and as this study evaluates the problem in context it attempts to address appliable solutions to bridge the gap between default receivers and those who engage the process.

Proposed Solution / Capstone Objective

As in any program evaluation and problem solving one must first identify the problem to apply a treatment. Earlier we defined the problem as lack of training for intake by those tasked in the initial response of threats and concerning communications. The BTAM process is grounded by several principles. A crucial part of the threat assessment doctrine lists a three-step process- identification, assessing and managing those at risk. The identification step precedes the others since without recognition there is nothing to assess (Calhoun & Weston, 2023). The purpose of this project is to solve the problem by applying research on how enhanced training shifts the paradigm from a generic default receiver to designated, more educated, receiver.

As those default receivers obtain relevant threat assessment training, they can identify those on the pathway to violence.   In this case the shift from default receiver to designated

receiver will increase the efficiency of threat assessment techniques and the BTAM process. The entire process hinges on the element of identification of a potential threat or problem (Calhoun and Weston, 2023). The overall goal is to have better trained receivers and bystanders that allow for a more effective assessment when passed along to those that manage them. By implementing training, those in law enforcement, first responders and bystanders can add insightful and qualified information to assessors to not only identify a threat but to properly manage it.

Another area of problem identification is found in the procedural guidelines needed within the organization to create the roadmap to a successful intake and intervention. Threat assessment teams must develop guidelines and procedures to properly assess and manage these types of incidents. The framework would begin at the first responder level, working though the course of intake, risk evaluation, identification, assessment, then include but not limited to areas such as training, investigation, documentation and legal compliance. Procedural guidelines and enhanced training for first responders would add to the effectiveness of the threat assessment team and reduce risk within an organization in these types of events.

The objective of this proposal is to take place in two phases. First, is the development of baseline standard operating guidelines (SOG) that would enhance a threat assessment team's effectiveness and efficacy. There would be a solid framework for, initial reporting, intake, identification, assessment and management of communications and threats. Threat assessment teams need clear policies and procedures for team authority and operations (Nolan, Randazzo, Deisinger, 2011). This is a document that provides a pathway to success. Educational institutions should have clear policies on collection and reaction to concerning communications

and threatening incidents to determine if there is sufficient information to merit further action

and investigation (Fein, et al, 2004).

The second objective is to provide guided recommendations to develop training

based on best practices that will equip first responders to better recognize clues to targeted

violence. The training would encompass teaching relevant points of inquiry at the initial

interactions with complainants. In addition, it would provide insight into points of inquiry in the

preliminary investigation stages and protocols. The training module would also enhance

information that leads to actionable intelligence for the threat assessment team members and

allow for more informed decision making.   This type of enhanced training enables the threat

assessment team to make high-quality assessments and develop effective interventions to work

toward positive outcomes. It is imperative that threat assessment training is useful for

multidisciplinary staff members, which in this project includes law enforcement first responders,

and be implemented effectively (Stohlman, Konold & Cornell, 2020).

These objectives would be accomplished by a qualitative study combining semi-

structured interviews, organizational case studies and desktop/data research. The interview goals

would include interacting with members of current threat assessment teams to elicit information

to achieve the goal.   The ability to identify themes and information gleaned that lead to

recommendations for policies and procedures.   Also to identify any training deficiencies that

may be present in working with first responders and bridging those gaps.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Background and Context of Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM)

The most common working definition of a threat assessment is broadly defined as the set of investigative and operation techniques used by professionals to identify, assess and manage the risks of target violence and its potential perpetrators (Simons & Meloy, 2016). Over the past 18 years, university and higher education-based threat assessments have become more prevalent on college campuses as a response to concerning and threatening behavior (Camacho et al., 2023).

The primary focus for these assessments is identifying behaviors through Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM). Practitioners agree that the most important component is acknowledging that the process is not predictive but preventive (NTAC, 2016). Rather than the reactive or responsive approach to its aftermath, BTAM seeks to apply a structured effort towards preventing future targeted violence. Prevention does not require prediction in these cases (Simons & Meloy, 2016).

The history of BTAM takes its roots from the violence risk assessments conducted by psychologists and other mental health professionals. The methodology has evolved from a strict clinical approach to now a blended approach known as Structured Professional Judgment (SPJ). SPJ is a process that blends both clinical and operational expertise with a professional instrument for assessments (Simons & Meloy, 2016). Threat assessment in universities is also based on models which emphasize identifying, evaluating, and mitigating potential threats before they escalate into violence (Cornell & Maeng, 2021). The model is grounded in the principles of early

intervention and multidisciplinary collaboration (Randazzo & Plummer, 2021). Most institutions implement threat assessment teams (TATs) that include representatives from Student Affairs, law enforcement, mental health services, and academic staff (Sokolow et al., 2020).

Threat Assessment Generally

There have been numerous publications and scholarly articles written about threat assessment (Cornell, 2024). The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of threat assessment, the formation of such teams and programs, and the duty of care. There is a continuing body of evidence on threat assessment in higher education (Nolan, 2012; Fox, Savage & Frosch, 2020; Borum & Cornell, 2021; Randazzo & Plummer, 2021; Van Brunt & Lewis, 2021; Parks, Turner & Adam,2022). The literature continues to point toward the development of programs and teams that prevent targeted violence and advocate intervention methods to thwart harm. The literature points to a common theme of developing a multi-discipline approach to threat assessment and embracing prevention. There is also an emphasis on the application of proper assessment instruments which leads to SPJ within the assessment from subject matter experts rather than relying on an actuarial scale or some ranking system. Legal and ethical aspects are also common within the literature as to ensure proper case law is applied and protection over those engaged and accused are protected.

The process of collecting and assessing information gleaned from a threat management case must be considered as a matter of procedure within a program. There is a consensus that the process must include an examination of the threat, the motivations and intent behind any communication, and any presence or ability to carry it out (Camacho et al., 2023). There is emphasis on gathering strategic and relevant information for a team to utilize while conducting

both an initial triage and the actual assessment itself. A threat assessment is reviewing information in real time and is based on facts and circumstances within a fixed moment, which some have found to be problematic (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021). Most within the profession of public safety and emergency management are accustomed and trained to handle fluid and evolving circumstances and working with urgency to make the best decision they can based on the evidence in front of them.

The literature maintains this theme because not only does the report of violence need to be triaged, but the amount of information provided must also be vetted, massaged and assessed for validity. Information management is part of the process and one of the problems in dealing with the influx of reports is deciphering what is and is not relevant to the assessment (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021). The primary goal or priority of the process is to learn as much as possible about the subject making the threat and develop some type of intervention plan to mitigate the potential risks and deter the individual from carrying it out. Since higher education institutions are not immune from such violence, it is important for a threat assessment team to respond to such communications within the campus community (Camacho et al., 2023).

Training and Development Protocols

The adoption within universities to have a formal protocol or procedure is not a common theme within the literature itself. There is however a greater focus on the "how" and the building blocks of the threat assessment from intake to investigation to intervention (USSS, 2018). These allow for any agency or organization to build their own procedure or protocol which may be integrated into their own team. Although there have been advancements in development in threat assessment programs and procedures, the efficacy of such has not been extensively researched

and specific program evaluations are necessary given the variable nature of campuses, their populations, and their communities (Mitchell & Palk, 2016). Additionally, there is a lack of significant literature on default versus designated receivers on the front line. Building a case for efficacy based on the actionable intelligence obtained by designated receivers is a challenge since once a team is selected and trained the information becomes siloed once received. Nationwide the number of threat managers who are well versed in threat management remain low and are not adequate to address the issue, in fact many are just superficially trained staff members who are void of experience on threats and violence much less the ability to recognize early warning signs demonstrated by perpetrators (Calhoun & Weston, 2023).

Members of threat assessment teams in higher education are generally comprised of designated officials within the institution that are both qualified and hold significant authority to make decisions. The models for most teams call for a standing team and ad-hoc members to stand in as trained back-ups. A consensus that the core teams should consist of a designee from student affairs, a mental health professional, student conduct representative, and campus law enforcement is found in the literature (NABITA, 2024).   Until that team is formulated, the university or organization will rely on "default receivers" such as the police, student conduct or human resources because there are no others available or obligated to do intake. These default receivers are less prepared to handle threats and concerning situations than those designated officials within the institution to do so (Calhoun & Weston, 2023)   Within that model, the lack of trained or experienced responders creates a burden on law enforcement resources and first line responders to recognize and react to the escalation of violence and threats (Calhoun & Weston, 2023).

Care should be taken such that assessors should not be influenced by personal judgements, or moral opinions, which could lead to a biased result. The team members should be professionals and cognizant that what they experience as reality is in fact not an objective judgement but can be subjective, determinate or dangerous (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021). As a team effort, information is passed along and shared with colleagues who have an independent take. This allows for assessment and evaluation of information. These information sharing sessions with independent colleagues help exclude subjective perceptions and reduce the risk of error, especially when a multidisciplinary team is assigned to the same threat management case (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021).

Training standards are an important facet to the team, their functioning, and its sustainability. Private enterprise offers training in many areas such as workplace violence, violent behaviors, and team coordination. That training in the private sector is generally a luxury to those that can afford the opportunities to get the threat assessment training they need (Calhoun, 2023). Smaller organizations may struggle to pay for advanced training such as those offered by the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP) or the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS). The literature reviews support that concept that there is a need for trained first responders and it should continue to be a high priority (Calhoun & Weston, 2023). Although it may seem self-evident, the individuals conducting such assessments should be professionals in the field. In a study by Kloeker-Webster (2019), it was discovered that 96.7% of institutions surveyed had an active threat assessment team, however only 67% of them had received any form of training. This type of training would require a higher level of competency than most and is vital to the success of such programs. The assessor acts as the human instrument

of data collection (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021). That data must be analyzed and interpreted by competently trained individuals to build efficacy.

During the threat assessment the person(s) conducting such inquiries must have some level of instruction or training in what relevant information is needed. The focus on these questions would help determine if there is evidence to suggest movement toward violent action (Reddy, 2001). The literature also supports some level of training and professional development to implement a strategy based on established guidelines. Experts have concluded that there must be rapid engagement of trained professionals at the table. It is important to identify these team members and train them prior to the emergency as well as have a standing agreement in place before one has a need for their expertise (Cawood & Corcoran, 2020).

Literature supports training this team in a collective fashion so each of the members has common understanding of the process. In addition, the National Association of School Psychologists recommend that team members receive training on bias and racism to help assure fair treatment and avoid misconceptions of how a student behaves which could lead to discrimination and poor judgement (Cornell & Maeng, 2024). The training for threat assessment professionals within a team must also be well rounded. More than 75% of surveyed experts rated topics such as basic principles of threat assessment, training on threatening and concerning behavior, when to conduct an assessment and the role of the multidisciplinary team (Cornell & Maeng, 2024).

A deductive, fact-based approach is needed to investigate the risks associated with the threats of targeted violence (Reddy, Borum & Modezeleski, 2001). Internal teams housed within the school or institution are a preferred means of threat assessment, since they can respond more

quickly and have a greater contextual knowledge of situations within the school (Cornell, 2020). Ideally the receiver should be trained to recognize the criticality of circumstances and imminence of threatening behavior (Calhoun & Weston, 2023). Without training and understanding of both the questions and responses from the initial intake and receiver the team would be ill equipped to conduct such assessment and would only be using "guesswork" versus guided or structured professional judgement.

Policies and procedures within the threat assessment team

Threat assessment teams must apply a methodology or scope to any triage or assessment either formally or informally. Merriam-Webster defines policy as "a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). With the implementation of policies and procedures, the team can best document the overall direction, intention and principles of those stakeholders involved. This becomes a framework for setting objectives, measuring achievement and ensures that legal, ethical, privacy and regulatory standards are met. It is a course of action that relates to the goals, defining values and allocation of resources (Ball, 2015). Those that have established teams may opt to have a documented process that tracks when and what is applied and to where. These policies, sometimes referred to as procedures based on institutional rules, guide that process. They are the investigative and operational techniques used by assessment professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of target violence (Meloy, 2021).

Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) and Application of Instruments

Research indicates that most teams apply Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) in threat assessment cases. SPJ is derived from the use of formal assessment tools and instruments created to provide a risk-based approach and evidence-based guidelines to manage risk (Hart, 2017). This a term mostly associated with psychology and clinical assessment and forms a basis for interviewing and evaluating relevant risk factors of violent behavior (Reddy, 2001). SPJ tools can be used by trained team members to measure the level of risk posed by a person of concern. These instruments may allow for some deviation; however, they offer team members within the group to evaluate and offer considerations to reduce risk based on what information is obtained during the process.

In general, the use of SPJ in threat assessment methodologies works to gather information about a person of concern and it's reviewed and evaluated by use of an instrument or checklist to make more informed decisions. The use of SPJ and other structured assessments have produced greater rates of accuracy than those based on unstructured ones (Reddy, 2001). Empirically based instruments and tools should be used for the assessment to be completed in a more comprehensive manner. They also provide direction on identifying topics for further information gathering (Meloy & Hoffman, 2021).

Legal Issues and threat assessment teams

A recurring issue within Threat Assessment Teams is a mandate to consider compliance, legal implications, and duty of care that is placed on higher education institutions in threat mitigation. Some of the literature reviews include context on how to navigate legal issues while performing such assessments. Including legal counsel as a representative on the team can assist with navigating unique legal areas such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

(FERPA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and University policies and procedures. Having such an advisory on the multidisciplinary team supports the mission and assists the team in navigating legal barriers such as privacy and confidentiality (Kloeker-Webster, 2019).

Additional legal issues arise when the Universities address what the literature review mentions as a standard duty of care. Since the laws are variable in many states, legal precedent and statutes are addressed within the assessments in most cases. Colleges and universities are held to a standard and must exercise a duty of care that provides a campus with a reasonably safe environment which includes foreseeable acts of violence (Nolan, 2012). Since there are so many different circumstances and concerning situations that can exist within human behavior, adopting a universal approach is challenging from a legal perspective. Although the laws can be applied, there are no standard legal guidelines for every single case. Instead, threat assessment teams must rely upon their interpretation of legal and ethical obligations (Jones & Gray, 2020). Absent a legal standard, the team must form their own decision based on background and ethical principles to reach a consensus that is within legal guidelines.

As presented, there are bodies of literature upon the topic of threat assessment, bystanders and default vs. designated receivers. Many of which focus on the definition and other aspects that relate to how teams operate, apply methodology and de-escalate threats. The next section focuses upon the research concept and the methods used to create fundamental baseline for solution driven approaches for shifting default receivers to designated receivers.

First responder and by-stander training enhancements

The literature supports robust training for members of threat assessment teams, there is a need for training front line first responders and by-standers to identify and recognize threats and concerning communications. In a previous research study in 2020, an evaluation of threat assessment training was conducted for school personnel by Stohlman, Konold and Cornell studied how training helps school staff, including teachers, administrators, and school police officers, respond to threats. In their research, more than 4,600 participants attended a one-day training workshop.   The results of the research reflected that those who participated and attended the training were able to identify real threats more accurately. The researchers indicated that many felt motivated to apply what they had learned and were able to reach about 75% accuracy when examples of threats were reviewed (Stohlman, Konold, and Cornell, 2020).

In this same research body, they found that school personnel across varied occupations showed a substantial increase in threat assessment knowledge from pre-test to post-test and a higher degree of threat classification. An interesting factor within their study was revealed as it pertains to law enforcement as a default receiver of threats. In that training there was a statistically significant difference across occupational groups and with psychologists scoring the highest scores and law enforcement achieving the lowest knowledge scores (Stohlman, Konold, and Cornell, 2020). While it is difficult to pinpoint why, law enforcement officers are generally are less triggered by violent communications based on the nature of their profession, which could lead to disparity. The results of their study also showed that a brief training program can assist front line staffer's ability to recognize early warning signs of violence and threats.

Other research examined the effects of threat assessment training for law enforcement and other criminal justice practitioners. Story, Gibas, Reeves, and Hart (2011) researched the

topic and found that participants gained knowledge, confidence, and stronger skills in evaluating potential violence. Since law enforcement officers are often the first to respond to potential reports of violence, this type of training is especially important in preparing them to act quickly and effectively (Storey, Gibas, and Reeves 2011).

Two approaches of threat assessment are generally applied when evaluating a person of concern, actuarial and structured professional judgement (SPJ). Actuarial applications require a static approach to which one would expect a scalable ranking of threat risk, i.e. 1-10, 10 being the deadliest. SPJ however is more of a structured process blending research-based factors with discretion and professional interpretation. It was found within their research that the structured professional judgment (SPJ) approach taught in the administered program provided law enforcement officers with tools to make better decisions. The research also reflected that participants within the study of training were better able to significantly identify risk factors on post training evaluations. In addition, training participants were more likely to provide valid risk ratings (as compared to experts in the field) post-training. (Storey, Gibas, and Reeves, 2011). Overall, these studies lend to the body of knowledge that training a first responder and default receiver will increase their ability to recognize risks within the threat landscape.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research paper and program evaluation study employs a mixed methodology of participatory research and summative evaluation design to assess how training first responders to become designated receivers contributes to the broader effectiveness of threat assessment teams and best practices. The research will rely upon qualitative sources. The information and evidence is based upon peer-reviewed literature, secondary data, documented case studies as well

as systematic desktop research of open-source information. Since the research is based on

secondary data, no new data will be collected.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research itself will be collected from a range of scholarly articles, and other validated

material that address training and the preparation of police and first responders.   Sources such as

the included but were not limited to the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP,

2020), reports from the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC, 2021),

and peer-reviewed articles from the Journal of Threat Assessment and Management (e.g.,

Cornell, 2020) and integrated desktop research. In addition, case-based publications identified

through systematic desktop searches added to the scholarly work. Such publications as the

Journal of Threat Assessment and Management published by the American Psychological

Association aggregates data on threats which include references to case studies. These case

studies are included because they demonstrate how successes and failures unfold in real life

organizational settings, while offering practical insights that can expand the landscape and go

beyond just abstract theory.

Case studies can focus on a single organization or event, providing a narrow but highly

detailed review of actionable information. They also provide insight to successes and failures

unfolded when the stress test of threats and concerning communications are triaged and

escalated. When the research methods are aggregated together, these sources allow for research

to integrate both reality base concepts as well as context-specific details.

Since the study is based on secondary resources and materials, the population of interest

is represented in the sources found. NTAC reports often review incidents of targeted violence

across national populations of schools or workplaces; ATAP publications summarize practitioner

experience and lessons learned from threat assessment teams; and peer-reviewed articles and studies frequently examine samples of police officers, threat assessment teams and other default receivers as well as designated receivers.

In addition to desktop research and case evidence, the study reviews threat assessment procedures and guidelines as part of overall qualitative based evidence. Some of the research materials are taken from similar sources such as ATAP, NTAC, NABITA, as well as institutional threat assessment manual that may serve as the standards against which training content and response expectations can be evaluated.   A crosswalk comparison to what is located and recommended within the reported literature review and case studies will point out dominant themes and prevailing procedural guidelines that support professional organizational norms as well as legal requirements and anticipated outcomes.

Procedurally, there will be a focus on how guidelines define roles and reporting processes as well as inter-departmental communications among stakeholders. These stakeholders have decision making responsibilities which have an impact on the quality of assessments as well as strategic interventions. The review puts in context the gaps first responders have with being default receivers to designated ones. Attention to certain aspects such as how the process of training protocols for first responders can prepare them to be more qualified to fill designated receiver roles within an organization. The evaluation provides guidance and will highlight any positive and negatives in training. It will also reveal gaps in training and allow for a pathway for enhanced response by a threat assessment team. An emphasis will be placed upon how default receivers are currently trained and by increasing their self-efficacy in incidents that pertain to threats and concerning communications, and how their functions interact with threat assessment teams.

Ethical Considerations

This research project will adhere to the fundamental principles of responsible research and in compliance with established protocols. All sources of data will be accurately cited and represented to the best of my ability. Any sensitive case data or information will be taken from the public domain that has been previously published under open sources. The current scope of research relies solely on public sources data and does not include surveys, interviews or any form of personally identifiable information of individuals. Certain research protections are not triggered here within the study based on the scope of the assignment.

Ethical and moral considerations have been considered for confidentiality and consent for applicability of oversight. Since the research project provides insight and information from such sources and no human subject research the Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight has been granted an "exempt" status. If or when future research ensues on the topic, IRB review will be submitted based on institutional policy and consent process would be initiated.

Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation of the research data is organized into two criteria of analysis, relevance and effectiveness. For the purpose of this research, relevance will be defined as the degree in which training content and recommended best practices align with organizational realities of first responders. The definition of effectiveness in this paper will be interpreted as documented evidence within the research and case studies. Both factors will provide evaluation criteria that allows for analysis of recognizing concerning behaviors and forwarding them to the proper threat assessment team when appropriate.

Once the research is concluded a qualitative analysis will occur in three stages, The first stage is an exhaustive review of the relevant peer reviewed articles, documented case studies and literature that relates to the subject matter. A review of training protocols, procedures, policies and other relevant guidelines will be proceeded by an extraction of items such as training outlines, learning outcomes for first responders, role expectations of default and designated receivers as well as contextual enablers and barriers that may influence successful outcomes. The information will then be preliminary coded into categories that are relevant to the evaluation criteria. Such criteria include but is not limited to training relevance, intake protocols, documentation, transfer of information and organizational expectations as well as outcomes.

The second phase involves the coding of recognized themes. Relevant themes will be reviewed for such topics as preparation for intake of threats, early identification of concerning behavior, documentation protocols and threat escalation. Effectiveness will span the areas of improved recognition of behaviors earlier identification of concerning communication versus a true threat, initial response duties and reporting guidelines. A comparison will be conducted from the source type (desktop research, case studies and literature) for similarities and disparities within.

The third phase is to aggregate the data and themes into a final narrative. The narrative will be focused upon the contact of training first responders as default receivers of concerning communications and threats to designated receivers. The evaluation will attempt to address to what extent enhanced training for first responders would be deemed relevant and effective given the qualitative analysis. Based on the research the final narrative will identify strengths and weaknesses as well as any gaps in training or other implications for training design and integration. The results and findings will be a summary of key outcomes from the analysis

which provides for a training protocol, remedy gaps within the training and provide for practical implementation.

Chapter 4: Results and Findings

Threat assessment cannot and should not operate within a siloed environment. Since first responders are tasked with the initial intake of concerning communication and threats, it seemed a logical inference that an advance training in threat assessment would build an effective response. First responders must be trained in the practical application of threat assessment in the context of recognition of behaviors, intervention, and open communication to influence positive outcomes.

The analysis for case studies and peer-reviewed literature has revealed some of the common themes that underscored a need for this type of approach. Literature favors the need for a more robust process of implementing threat assessment training across multiple lines and disciplines within an organization. This training should be inherently true for first responders and law enforcement as they are generally the default receivers concerning communications and threats. Findings within the literature also reinforced that first line receivers (specifically first responders) readily occupy a pivotal role in the receipt of these threats but are ill-prepared to deal with them.

Although first responders are generally the first recipients of the concerning information, they are generally not equipped to decipher the behavior traits, and psychological components that trigger key warning signs of targeted violence. A thematic analysis of across the literature revealed three primary codes.

1) A correlation between training and the ability to recognize pre-attack behaviors
2) The importance of identifying these behaviors for proper referrals to threat assessment professionals for disposition

3) That trained personnel exhibited higher levels of identification of threatening behaviors, and which can improve expected outcomes.

In the case studies presented, across multiple lines of incidents patterns emerged that reflects the absence of formal training and the consequences. Those consequences included fragmented communication, missed opportunities to identify warning signs, and delayed interventions. Further research resulted in the emergence of themes which included but limited to training, communication, and interpretation of concerning behavior. The collection of these datapoints within the research provided a greater insight into how first responders encounter these incidents and how well their existing training and protocols influenced their responses.

The findings presented in this section will serve as a baseline for identifying strengths and potential gaps in current training approaches for first responders. This qualitative analysis will also serve an important influence on further training initiatives as it relates to threat assessment for first responders as default receivers.

Research & Evaluation

Threat assessment is a prevention tool and the entire premise is the initial identification of the potential problem of threats (Calhoun & Weston, 2023). The research conducted within this body of work underscores the need for prevention over prediction of targeted violence when pathway behaviors are present. The mounting research highlights that organizations such as universities have developed specialized teams to assess and manage them. The research findings reflect a critical gap between those that are the default receivers and designated receivers as defined earlier herein. Those who first encounter reports of concerning behaviors should be trained to recognize certain elements in order to properly report them. The gap is widened when these default receivers lack structured training for intake which could lead to misinterpretation of warning signs.

It has been demonstrated that school personnel who received training significantly improved their ability to classify the threat accurately. There were measurable gains across different occupational areas, however law enforcement officers, who are most commonly the default receivers, improved their abilities once training was received. (Stohlman, Knold, and Corness 2020). Preliminary analysis revealed a 5.72 gain in correct answers from pretesting to post testing in participants. Within their study teachers and law enforcement officers demonstrated the highest knowledge gains from pretest to posttest, some of which doubled their scores (Stohlman, Knold, and Corness 2020). Training in areas of SPJ improved confidence levels in the law enforcement and criminal justice communities. Based on those findings, properly trained default receivers are necessary for early identification and intervention.

The research also showed that promoting observation of pathway behaviors may be useless if assessors and administrators are not aware of the issues (Cotton et al, 2025) Thus, reporting guidelines must also be part of the overall training for the default receiver. Early reporting by these default receivers is critical. This is especially true when there is a potential for immediate harm and there is benefit to early reporting. Once the reporting is completed then the TAT can then make more educated decisions faster which lead to more effective interventions.

The literature and desktop research emphasizes the criticality of standard threat assessment training and enhanced learning outcomes. The default receiver's ability to identify, detect, interpret and report early warning signs can directly impact an organization's ability to assess and manage a person of concern. Training not only builds competence, it leads to a preventive model that can detour targeted violence and save lives.

Case Study Analysis and Summaries

During the research, an examination of four major threat assessment case studies was performed. Each of these four case studies are being highlighted in this section. Throughout each event within the case studies there are different educational contexts and takeaways. The after-action investigations

converge into one fundamental conclusion for almost each one. First responders and the policies used to integrate our response were often present but not prepared. In addition, the training and policies designated to prevent targeted violence were there but not operationalized.

Case Study: Arapahoe High School 2013

In January 2016 an after-action report was conducted on the Arapahoe high school shooting located in Colorado. Within that document a report on lessons learned and information sharing was presented by the authors. On December 13, 2013, an individual fatally shot the victim, Claire Davis, at the high school before turning the firearm upon himself. In the aftermath of the slaying the Center for the study and prevention of violence (CSPV) and partners conducted a detailed review of the case in an after-action setting.

Drawing upon law enforcement investigations, different records including school district records and deposition testimony, they attempted to identify some of the systemic issues for early intervention of threat assessment. The report highlighted central areas of breakdowns which included deficiencies in the threat assessment process that was utilized. These organizational weaknesses and decisive errors left the school ill equipped to deal with the pending danger.

In the review it was found that administrators and first responders lacked the necessary training needed to identify threats. According to the report there was a failure to train the principal, assistant principals as well as teachers in the school district's threat assessment procedures. Only seven of the staff members had received that training and higher levels were not part of the training landscape (Goodrum & Woodard, 2016).

The incident revealed how minimal training and the misclassification Increased the risk of escalation within the threat landscape. The student responsible for the heinous act had exhibited concerning behaviors that went unrecognized or minimized. Staff could not recognize warning signs and rated him "low concern" which did not trigger any upward trend for better threat assessment and analysis.

The assessors and school administrators who performed the review had not even had the district's proper training which led to the failure.   Those empowered to conduct the assessment had little knowledge of how to respond and react to the warning signs. (Goodrum & Woodard 2016)

Post incident reports emphasized better communication and a standard assessment but the tragedy highlighted how these frameworks failed within those personnel that were not adequately trained. Although the district had policies and procedures from a checklist standpoint they were not implemented or trained upon within the high school. This same report found that the training used by the school district was less than adequate by some standards and only yielded a 20% return rate among those that participated (Goodrum & Woodard, 2016)

A secondary report from Safe Haven's international post incident review of the 2013 shooting identified significant lapses in threat assessment, communication and prevention protocols prior to the attack. Although they noted that the law enforcement response was rapid and likely prevented additional casualties the school's preparedness to receive the threat and train staff for threat assessment was inconsistent. Their commentary was much more flattering towards the district's security approach but still could not align reasoning for the improper or inadequate training provided.

The district failed to align the context of making threats versus posing a threat. According to the report the school districts threat assessment and action plan focused more on establishing evidence that the student of concern made a threat versus if the student was posing a threat. Information gathering and the lack of asking proper questions hindered the threat assessment (Dorn et al, 2016).

The case study revealed that the aggressor had carefully planned his attack and what assessors concluded was for years. He had threatened to "shoot up [his] school" and everyone in his way, and do something he wanted to do for a while-which was mass murder" (Dorn et al , 2016) This second report sings the praises for the efforts of employees and responders during and after the event, but not real detail on what steps could have been taken to prevent the tragedy.

This case study revealed why it is important to train first responders law enforcement and school resource officers in threat assessment protocols. Not only is the training relevant but it is also essential to be adequate to meet the needs of an ever-evolving threat landscape. Since frontline personnel are often the 1st to see and hear about concerning communications and warning signs, they need to know how to elevate a threat and share information in an effective manner. Enhanced training ensures they are not just reacting to an incident but are proactive in its prevention. The tragedy teaches a very hard lesson when schools and 1st responders are not properly trained and adequate response protocols the signs of targeted violence can be missed.

Case Study: Majorie Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting 2018

The 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, exposed critical weaknesses in how schools and law enforcement agencies identify, assess, and respond to potential threats. In response, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement presented an initial case analysis and review in January of 2019. The state expanded reporting and created the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (MSDPSC), which published its first report in November of 2019.

Each provided an overview of events and outlined key substantial deficiencies in both training and operational implementation of threat assessment across the school system. Both of these documents were examined as well as a recent peer reviewed case analysis published in the Journal of Threat Assessment in September 2025 (Alley, Scheithauer, Langman, 2024). Among its findings, the commission emphasized two major areas of concern: inadequate law enforcement training for School Resource Officers (SROs) and the lack of standardized threat assessment procedures within Broward County Public Schools (BCPS).

The case background revolves around a 19-year-old former student that carried out a mass shooting at the high school killing 17 individuals and leaving 17 others wounded in one of the deadliest

school massacres in U.S. history (Alley, Scheithauer, Langman, 2024). The shooter had a well-documented history of behavioral problems, concerning communications and the after-action reports noted numerous warning signs to both school officials and law enforcement prior to the attack (FDLE, 2019). Despite the red flags and warnings, the overall failures of the implementation of the threat assessment process arguably led to the tragic event.

Among the findings within the case studies, it was determined that school personnel lacked standard procedures and often did not recognize the escalating behavior of the shooter. According to the findings, law enforcement and first responders had not received any joint or aggregated training with school personnel on identification and assessment of threats (FDLE, 2019). It was discovered that proximal pathway behaviors were present prior to the event. Other key warnings such as fixation, warrior mindset, leakage as well as last resort behaviors were found to be present and could have been identified and flagged for concern (Alley, Scheithauer, Langman, 2024).

Although the school initiated a threat assessment in September of 2016, prior to the event, the individuals that were charged with performing the assessment were not familiar enough with the process. This left gaps within the process and based on the Commission's own report the Assistant Principal that coordinated the assessment was not competent at performing such a task. In fact, that Assistant Principal has only participated in one threat assessment within his 31-year career (FDLE, 2019). The threat assessment process did elevate the level of threat from a 1 to 2 within their designated process, but those engaged with the assessment could not articulate why this happened. The findings within the commission's report stated that the Assistant Principal mishandled the threat assessment. The principal was disengaged from the process and failed to establish reporting procedures. In addition, the process was flawed due to the lack of training and knowledge of how to conduct effective behavioral threat assessments. (FDLE, 2019)

Overall, the findings within the reports and articles underscored the need for formal training on the threat assessment process for first responders. Although in this case the school personnel were not

operating in the law enforcement capacity, they were still seeing concerning behavior and acted but failed to act appropriately. Stakeholders must be prepared for this type of intervention and build a framework of competent professionals that considered designated receivers of information to respond to such incidents and threats. There must be a baseline for minimum training for those within these roles to ensure consisted evidence-based decision making.

Case Study: Oxford High School 2021

On November 30, 2021, a 15-year-old student committed a shooting at Oxford High School in Township, Michigan, killing four students and wounding seven others. The tragic shooting affected the community and exposed flaws in the school district's operational plans for identifying and managing threats. Their lack of ability to quickly identify and assess pre-incident indicators of violence became part of the overall response narrative. In 2023, Guidepost Solutions developed a post incident report of the circumstances and aftermath of the shooting. This report focuses upon the evaluation of their current systems and makes recommendations to strengthen future responses. The takeaways within provide a framework for successful threat assessment and intervention.

Guidepost Solutions found that while Oxford's current threat assessment protocols were generally aligned with current trends and best practices, they were still facing challenges in many areas. The first issue was the district's low threshold for initiating a threat assessment which created an influx of cases that left an unstainable pathway for resolution. Staff were splintered in many directions, and the core duties distracted them from credible threats. This resulted in critical errors and weaknesses in threat identification. The report also highlighted inconsistencies within the training provided to staff members and other school personnel. The higher echelon, principal, administrators and counselors as well as school resource officers (designated receivers) had specialized training, however lower-level staff members such as teachers and support staff (default receivers) had not been adequately trained (Guidepost Solutions, 2023).

Within a period of a few days the shooter drew concerning images of a handgun, bullets and body with bullet holes in class. These drawings also contained messages such as "the thoughts won't stop" , "help me" and "my life is useless". The report concluded that trained mental health professionals would have recognized the concerning behaviors and might have suggested a likelihood of violence. (Guidepost Solutions, 2023). In this case the report also concluded that a failure occurred because school administrators did not ensure that counselors obtained sufficient threat assessment training. Had that training been conducted, the school staff could have elevated the reports to a TAT or higher-level administrators.

As a result, the report made specific recommendations based on training shortfalls. One recommendation was that every adult at the school receive training on threat assessments. This would now include low level (default) receivers which include but were not limited to teachers, maintenance, custodial and food service staff. The training for all stakeholders was emphasized, and part of the training was what to report, when to report it and proper channels to forward information (Guidepost Solutions, 2023).

The investigation report revealed how the district's low threshold for the initiation of threat assessment coupled with lack of consistent training in warning behaviors led to catastrophic consequences. Since the lower-level default receivers were given an unsustainable workload there were lapses identifying and prioritizing true and credible threats. Although the school had a framework for threat assessment the implementation was inconsistent with best practices. Gaps in the ongoing system-wide training were uncovered and information-sharing across all levels of staff needed improvement. The Oxford case provides a great opportunity to understand how a plan can be developed but not properly implemented. It is also a testament to greater training to all stakeholders to shift them from default receivers to threats to designated ones. This cautionary tale is an example of how even when policies are in place, lack of threat recognition and calibration can have dire consequences when not properly applied.

Case Study: University of Virginia Shooting 2022

On November 13, 2022, a student at the University of Virginia (UVA) opened fire near a parking garage returning from an off-campus event. The shooter killed three students and wounded two others. Two after-action reviews emerged from the event. The first is referred to the Vinson & Elkins report, the second was the Quinn Emanuel Report. These highlighted the major issues within the threat landscape and evaluation of performance of the University. Although there was heavy emphasis on the law enforcement response during and immediately after the shooting, the reports provide awareness into some operational issues in threat assessment. After the review I was able to glean sufficient insight from their recommendations of organizational failures that could have been remedied with training.

The first report, Vinson & Elkins, was heavily redacted due to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This made some of the material in the overall body difficult to dissect, but it was clearly more focused upon the emergency response and law enforcement coordination. It is also important to note that the report was prior to any litigation and criminal cases which also led to some redaction of items. The report focuses on systemic preparedness and coordination gaps that occurred.

In contrast, the Quinn Emanuel report provides more insight into the University's threat assessment protocols and policy related practices. Although the university did allocate sufficient resources to threat assessment to address and prevent targeted violence, the complexities of such assessments presented challenges. This report brought out a new focus of training concerning that of investigative techniques. Members of the threat assessment team (TAT) interviewed during the report mentioned not having received any training in that area (Quinn Emanuel, 2024).

And unfortunately, the threat assessment team members should have been the designated receivers of threats and communications, however their responses within the document clearly reflect that the function and existence of their team was not widely known nor understood by university employees. Most of the interviews within the report did not recall TAT-specific training or information being

presented to their divisions (Quinn Emanuel, 2024). This provides evidence of training gaps between default and designated receivers.   There are those within the university that could assess threat properly, but the first line responders (although not law enforcement) were not trained or familiar with the process.

The case report also surveyed and made comparison of their TAT process as compared to other similar institutions of higher education. It was found that members at UVA were allowed more training opportunities than others. UVA also had required annual training, and those members of the TAT could attend conferences and afforded the ability to get more materials and attend guest speaker events. (Quinn Emanuel, 2024). The training, however, was focused on the designated receivers and not the default receivers that are commonly the first line of defense in concerning or threatening information.

These UVA case studies put issues into context for best practices. There is emphasis on the threat response and investigative process. The common theme among them includes both the structure of TAT teams, but also the gaps in training and authority TAT members and teams encounter. The reports reveal how TAT programs are insufficient and requires proper training not only in identification of threats, but the investigative techniques necessary to decipher them. Together the two reports provide a solid recommendation for integrated and proactive threat assessment processes.

Themes and Coding

The table below highlights the fundamental coded themes within the case studies that allow for a cross convergence. This cross-convergence reflects that all four cases indicate that inconsistent or inadequate training of first responders and default receivers led to failures in identifying concerning behaviors. Those failures reduced the ability to recognize, report and intervene in pre- attack behaviors.   The following table outlines the cases, training gaps, core themes and findings that summarize the case studies. Each provides a brief inject into what went wrong and key data points to improve upon in the after action reports.

Table 1:

Case	Observed Training Gaps	Core Themes / Codes	Findings / Evidence
Arapahoe High School (2013)	Staff lacked consistent training to recognize and report behavioral indicators of violence. No unified understanding of threat levels or reporting hierarchy.	• Lack of training awareness • Fragmented recognition • Reactive response culture	Behavioral concerns were noted some staff members but never acted upon due to the absence of training.
Marjory Stoneman Douglas (2018)	Threat assessment policies existed but were inconsistently applied across staff. Minimal training on structured professional judgment or behavioral risk indicators.	• Policy–practice gap • Inconsistent implementation • Training saturation imbalance	Staff across departments lacked shared vocabulary or understanding of escalation protocols; existing tools were underutilized due to insufficient training.
Oxford High School (2021)	Only administrators and counselors trained; teachers, coaches, and support staff not included in threat assessment training.	Training exclusivity • Limited front-line readiness • Lack of operationalized policy	Staff identified warning drawings and concerning behavior but did not share. SRO not fully integrated in decision-making.
University of Virginia (2022)	TAT lacked threat assessment education, no recurring training in investigative techniques.	• Uneven team competency • Lack of investigative proficiency	Limited cross-training between TAT and campus police reduced effectiveness of interventions.

Three major themes emerged from the review of the case studies as they relate to training and protocols

for threat assessment.

1. Training Disparities – Threat assessment training and enhance understanding of threat recognition were an issue.   Much of the training was reserved for higher level administrators which would become the designated receivers for threats and concerning communications.

2. Lack of training front line first responders - Standard, recurring, training (especially within context to credible threats) led to uneven competence in identifying and escalating behavioral threats between organizational lines.

3. Systemic Disconnects – Weak cross-training between educators, law enforcement, and mental-health professionals created gaps in follow-through and accountability.

Across all reviewed incidents, the thematic evidence revealed inadequate and sometimes inconsistent training led to poor communication which was fragmented across organizational lines.   Collectively, the findings highlight the need for enhanced operational strategies to allow for front line and first responders to recognize credible threats.   The results presented in this section identified a clear problem and provided an opportunity for organizations to improve awareness, increase situational awareness, accelerate reporting and engage behaviors for early intervention.   The case study thematic analysis allows for a more focused approach to recommendations for improvements and enhancements on training and procedures which are outlined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Interpretation of Results

Based upon the results of the research conducted, there is a true need for effective threat assessment.   The results demonstrate that solid assessments are enhanced by training, competency, preparedness and reporting of those individuals engaged in communication, especially in those that serve as default receivers.   In each of the four case studies analyzed (Arapahoe, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Oxford and University of Virigina) a consistent pattern emerged of training gaps, fragmented communication and lack of consistent protocols led to missed opportunities for early intervention.

The literature reinforced such findings and confirmed that training in SPJ models can improve not only efficacy but also confidence in reporting. In addition, the accuracy of reporting leads to better threat identification. Awareness of pathway behaviors of intended violence is not always enough to effectively respond to a reported threat. Unless those default receivers are trained in areas such as recognition, identification, and reporting, awareness alone is insufficient (Cotton et al, 2024)

The thematic coding did reveal that organizations often have formal processes in place to assess threats, but there are systemic failures on implementation. One key theme was the act that training was frequently offered to upper-level management and those referred to as designated receivers, but not as much to default receivers. Since that training was isolated to a higher echelon, key data points were discarded, misinterpreted, or missed. These training disconnects led to disjunction where behavioral cues were not passed on to designated threat assessment teams.

Public Safety Implications

Threat assessment plays a large role in targeted violence prevention. Most law enforcement agencies work diligently to prepare for active shooter events, however, do not seem to immerse themselves in the prevention of such incidents. Instead, they are often late in getting actionable intelligence on critical information which could be acted on to prevent tragedy. A reactive approach must be replaced with a more viable framework for training and professional development among first responders to recognize pathways to intended violence.

Within the status quo, threat assessment is sometimes viewed as a psychological or administrative function and lacks a true focused response. Law enforcement and public safety officials are left scratching their heads when it comes to after-action reports on attacks on the motive and pre-attack indicators which were never communicated to them. The lack of formalized and consistent training, as illustrated in the case studies, reveals a vulnerability in the framework that transcends traditional police training and can be applied among a cross section of organizations and institutions. The first and

arguably the most critical point of contact concerning behaviors are not properly prepared to intake these types of cases.

Proper reporting standards and the ability to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration between default and designated receivers is essential. The absence of focused training for all levels of the organization can create an information vacuum which results in poor intake and assessment.   As relationships among stakeholders are strengthened, training becomes more accessible, and threat assessment is more integrated.   These efforts can significantly improve the early identification and mitigation efforts.

Recommendations and Improvement for Enhanced Training Protocols

Based on research and thematic coding, the following four recommendations should be implemented to increase the success of early intervention of threats and concerning communication.

1- Develop a standard training framework

A framework should be developed that encompasses institutional training standards that incorporate threat assessment models and guidelines that the organization or institution can utilize. This training includes but would not be limited to behavior indicators of violence, models on Structured Professional Judgement, case scenarios, and reporting mechanisms.

2- Increase training for first responders as Default Receivers
The enhanced training would become more focused upon lower level non-traditional first line responders which are best positioned to receive concerning communications among organizational lines. This is reinforced by the Oxford case which reflects that expanding the training base can increase the organization's collective response, raise awareness and decrease the risk of missed warning signs.

3- Implement unified reporting methods

Each organization should establish a centralized case management strategy that provides a platform for intake, reporting, documenting and tracking shared concerns.   This platform should be accessible and could be shared across stakeholder lines.   This will help ensure that early warnings of violent behavior are not only identified but escalated to the appropriate designated receiver and BTAM teams.   Alerts and "red flags" can be placed on POCs by those in default positions using the system they find troubling. This system would also break traditional silos that have hindered the operational reporting that has plagued those within the case studies.

4- Integrate Threat Assessment into Emergency Management Planning

Embed behavioral threat assessment into emergency operations plans (EOPs), continuity plans, and ICS-based response protocols to ensure a seamless transition between prevention, intervention, and response

Limitations of research

While this research study does delve into the dynamics of the training, preparedness and effectiveness of default first responders, it still has its limitations. The first limitation is that it explored educational and campus-based case studies. Within this context the findings would be relevant to that area, however, there should be an expansion into the private sector organizations such as healthcare and corporations. These areas also have significant threats and workplace violence, and a study would be beneficial.

A second limitation is the use of secondary data. Unfortunately, threats cannot be studied in live time, so most literature reviews and existing case studies are the best route to gather data.   It would be optimal to get direct insights from first responders and default receivers in real-world situations, but those options are limited. A review of how a default receiver intakes, relates, and applies threat assessment training would be beneficial but hard to accomplish without a more complex approach.

Finally, the term "first responder" is a broad-brush stroke. It should be well defined in an organization and not just always limited to a law enforcement entity. Since each of the default receivers played varied

roles within the organization, the case studies highlighted different stakeholders. Narrowing down the definition as well as the roles within the framework of an organization would allow for better understanding of expectations from each responder. In other words, many would not have known it was their responsibility to engage in the situation because of their role much less being trained as a designated receiver.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand in several directions. As the date of most publications, most research on pathway violence behaviors is based upon case studies. These case studies are insightful and provide information for what went wrong, but they are not systematic examinations of how pathway behavior is present in a population of those that threaten violence. Each case is very specific to an individual (Cotton et al, 2025). This leads to a level of hindsight more than predictive analysis. I would like to see a more population driven examination on larger scale.

Another research opportunity would be a longitudinal study that measures the sustained impact of a threat assessment training on first responders and their ability to recognize and respond to concerning communications and threats. Although threats are not new, the science of threat assessment is still in the early stages in most cases, which makes it difficult to study over a period. This is especially true since some data sets only reach back ten to fifteen years. The longitudinal data set would provide trainers with insight on how their lesson plans and training methods impact the efficacy of the learner.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Problem and Purpose

The research presented centers on the limited exposure and training of first responders, those that serve default receivers, as it relates to identifying true threats. To properly recognize, and manage communications and threats, the default receivers must be more prepared. Many

organizations, especially in higher education, default receivers are not only law enforcement officers, but administrators, counselors and other front-line contacts for those that signal potential harm.   Although they are trained in their discretionary field, they are often not equipped with the behavioral, physiological, or procedural knowledge to identify and interpret context clues within a standard threat assessment framework. Missed cues lead to lack of proper training and intervention skills generally lead to a more tactical response and enforcement-based approach. This gap in preparation for these early indicators creates a vulnerability that leads to missed opportunities for prevention.

Issues addressed in this study also extend beyond just the recognition of behavior but uncovered concerns for a broader systematic gap between default and designated receivers. The formal threat assessment teams established within the university or organizational context often rely on quality information that can lead to actionable intelligence.   This actionable intelligence is vetted and valid, which allows a well-focused team to make quality decisions to off ramp an individual from targeted violence.   When the initial observations or missed, ignored or not reported, the assessment process is weakened.   The research provided insight into how the previous case studies and literature repeatedly show that lack of understanding, fragmented communication and insufficient training contributed to escalated violence in many situations that may have been thwarted. It was shown that the first point of contact is a vital, and sometimes critical, part of the process and would lead to greater efficacy of threat assessment and management.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings within the literature reviews demonstrate that the effectiveness of threat assessment and management is directly tied to the level of training, competence, and

preparedness of first responders. It defines key components of threat assessment and the process as well as its dependence on information that is relevant, timely and focused. In addition, the research underscored that threat assessment systems perform best when supported by unified communication protocols and cross-disciplinary teamwork. The integration of structured professional judgment (SPJ) models, strong reporting systems, and enhanced training emerged as critical factors in improving threat identification and intervention. The literature also confirmed that first responders who received focused training demonstrated higher confidence levels, improved accuracy of identification in assessing threats, and provided focused information to threat assessment teams.

Across the reviewed case studies and literature, consistent patterns revealing gaps in training, broken or poor communication, and inconsistent protocols lead to organizational failures that led to tragedy.   In each case study, from Arapahoe to Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Oxford, and the University of Virginia, apparent missed behavioral indicators, unclear reporting, and lack of coordinated response were contributing factors that hindered prevention efforts in averting the mass violence perpetrated by the active shooter. The mere awareness of a potential problem is insufficient; there must be proactive models in place to support the threat assessment framework and empower default receivers to have baseline competency to act upon information they are provided. Early and effective engagement of first responders and front-line personnel strengthens the prevention posture and bridges information gaps that often sperate the factors of detection and intervention.

Contribution to Public Safety and Strategic Planning

During my research, meaningful data was uncovered which led to the need to enhance first responder training and not silo valuable information to designated recipients. Threat

assessment is both an art and science from many viewpoints. With its emphasis on prevention versus prediction, it serves an important function to intervene in targeted violence. However, due to the specialized training and focused professionals involved, it has traditionally been reserved for higher echelon staff members within an organization. The wide gap identifies a need to build a bridge of both training and information to and from these higher-level teams.

Embracing that the principle that prevention of targeted violence is not the responsibility of a single discipline but a collective, coordinated effort rooted in preparedness and informed engagement is vital. By identifying specific deficiencies in how first responders are trained to recognize pathway behaviors, this research bridges the operational and behavioral sciences, help public safety organizations better align best practices of threat assessment. This study highlights how first responders and other default receivers play an equally critical role in early detection of concerning behaviors and threats as any other stakeholder.

It also became apparent from the research that public safety professionals must start the process of early identification and intervention. The analysis within the study found a long-standing gap in professional training within the threat assessment context.   The tactical approach and response to active shooters have been addressed, but that is reactive and not proactive. First responders must be properly equipped with more than just tactical or procedure knowledge, they need greater insight into behavioral anomalies and an applied understanding of the principles of threat assessment. The emphasis should be on recognition of those threat models that indicate an individual is on a pathway and work to effectively off-ramp the induvial and deter the act.

Strategic planning must be implemented and introduce a paradigm shift. This shift emphasizes transforming "default receivers" into "designated receivers" and integrates early identification into the core training and expectations.   By embedding these operational changes,

public safety agencies can enhance the response of front-line officers and those responsible for intake. The agency then can have organic growth and cultivate a culture of great vigilance for concerning communications and threats as well as increase reporting protocols for prevention. This moves the needle not only through threat assessment but for crime prevention. This updated strategy (see table 2) strengthens the foundation for a more holistic approach to threat assessment, one that integrates intake, policy, practice and prevention to protect an organization or community.

Table 2:   Summary of Key Findings and Response Treatments

Theme	Problem Identified	Response/Treatment	Outcome
Training	Limited awareness among first responders	Embed behavioral threat training (pathway indicators, intake basics, focused reporting)	Improved recognition of pathway behaviors and more accurate case referrals
Fragmented Communication	Siloed information and unclear reporting	Develop unified communication protocols and cross-disciplinary teams	Faster intervention and fewer missed behavioral signals
Preparedness	Overemphasis on reactive response (e.g., active shooter)	Integrate prevention into policy, lesson plans, and daily operational practice	Shifts organizational culture from reaction to prevention
Culture	Lack of baseline competency at intake; default receivers underutilized	Transform default receivers into designated receivers through focused training and accountability	Builds a culture of vigilance, early reporting, and shared responsibility

A Call to Action

Threat assessment is a valuable tool within the public safety arsenal. It should be viewed as something as significant as any tactical use of a firearm, handcuffs or other device within a

first responder tool belt.   The findings of this research underscores that prevention of targeted violence behind not behind the point of a crisis but the point of first contact. Just as first responders are trained to handle critical incidents, threat assessment and intervention must be implemented into the lesson plans and expected outcomes of training.   This paradigm shift will provide first responders structured training that not only enhances their ability to prevent an attack, but the ability empowers them to bring a public safety agency into a stronger awareness posture.

Law enforcement agencies, corporate security professionals and any stakeholder who finds themselves at the front line of concerning communications and threats must have a sustained commitment to training, communication and information sharing to make this evolution. Default and designated receivers are on the same team and must operate within an ever-changing landscape.   The ability to train first responders in these disciplines provides us with a chance to shift from isolated responders to unified front line protectors that are more than capable of identifying, mitigating and preventing the true threats that endanger our communities.

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