



# National Institute of Justice

## Research in Action

Jeremy Travis, Director

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### Highlights

In the past 5 years, violent crimes involving stalking, workplace violence, and attacks or threatened attacks on public figures and officials have been prominent in the news. Law enforcement and security professionals are turning to prevention as an important component of control strategy. This Research in Action discusses operational and investigative tools and approaches that can be effectively used to recognize, evaluate, and manage the risks of targeted violence before crimes occur.

#### Of special interest:

● Threats of violence arise from feelings or ideas that range from the mean-spirited to the messianic. Sometimes a threat is backed by the will and capacity to do harm; at other times, a voiced threat may amount to nothing but emotional “venting.” However, violent acts can be committed when no prior threat has been uttered. For law enforcement and security officers, recognizing the difference between “making” and “posing” a threat is crucially important.

● Perpetrators of violence often have a traceable history of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures. Violent behavior may be triggered by these individuals’ perception that it provides a means to rectify or avenge an

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## Threat Assessment: An Approach To Prevent Targeted Violence

by Robert A. Fein, Ph.D., Bryan Vossekuil, and Gwen A. Holden

*On April 25, 1993, 25 abortion protesters gathered at the Brookline home of a doctor who performed abortions at the Preterm Health Services clinic on nearby Beacon Street.*

*It was a Sunday afternoon, just a few weeks after antiabortion activist Michael Griffin had gunned down Dr. David Gunn at a Pensacola, Florida abortion clinic. The protesters sensed that Gunn’s murder, the first in the abortion war, had somehow changed the movement—a clear escalation of the violence.*

*As Mary Schumacher, then the executive director of Operation Rescue in Massachusetts, led the group in prayer, she described how Griffin could not be “prolife” if he killed someone. She called Gunn’s death a “tragedy” and asked the protesters to pray for him.*

*Just then one of the protesters—a young man with a face twisted in anger—interrupted the prayer. “You need a talking to,” he said to Schumacher.*

*After the prayer, the man confronted Schumacher and spoke about the failure of the Catholic Church to fight hard enough against abortion. “How can you say that Gunn’s death was a tragedy? He was killing the innocent. Griffin was a*

*hero as far as I’m concerned,” Schumacher remembers the man saying, his voice filled with rage.*

*“I remember it well, especially the part when he said Griffin was a hero,” said Schumacher, referring to her 1993 encounter... “It was not the kind of conversation you forget. Even alerted a police officer that day about it. You could tell the guy was not stable.”*

Boston Globe, 1/8/95 (emphasis added)

The man described in the *Boston Globe* article who was reported to the police that day in 1993 was John C. Salvi III. Less than a year later, on December 30, 1994, Salvi allegedly opened fire on the Preterm and Planned Parenthood clinics in Brookline, Massachusetts, killing two and wounding five persons. Salvi has been charged with committing an act of “targeted violence,” a term that refers to situations in which an identifiable (or potentially identifiable) perpetrator poses (or may pose) a threat of violence to a particular individual or group.

Increasingly, Americans have been confronted with such incidents of targeted violence, both actual or threatened. Behaviors characterized as “stalking,” workplace violence, and attacks on public figures and

## Highlights

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injustice or wrongdoing. Targeted violence can be premeditated or opportunistic when a situation arises that facilitates or permits the violence or does not prevent it from occurring.

- The first component of threat assessment case management involves developing a plan that moves the subject away from regarding violence as a viable option.

- Information about a subject's coping ability during periods of great stress, including any contemplated or attempted violence against others or self, is of special interest in a threat assessment investigation. Other behavioral data—such as obsessive or undue interest in a potential target, or efforts made to secure or practice with weapons—also is helpful.

- Interviews of subjects should be considered as part of the investigation's overall strategy. However, sometimes an interview may stimulate the interest, and may even increase the desperation or anxiety level, of a subject and thus could precipitate violence when it may not have occurred otherwise.

- The target in a threat assessment case needs to be evaluated in terms of vulnerability to attack, job and personal lifestyle, fear of the subject, and degree of sophistication with regard to the need for caution.

- Documentation of data and consultation with experts are key aspects in implementing a case management strategy.

- A case can be considered for closing when the subject is deemed to no longer be a threat. Questions should be asked regarding what changed circumstances could trigger the subject to move toward violent behavior.

officials are frequently reported in the media. Recently, those reports have concerned violent attacks occurring in settings (such as health clinics, schools, the workplace, or a Long Island commuter train) where unsuspecting victims believed themselves to be safe. Often the perpetrators of these attacks are subsequently found to have given advance notice of their violent inclinations.

## Investigative and operational techniques

Traditional law enforcement activities aim at apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of violence *after* the commission of their crimes. In most circumstances, the primary responsibility of law enforcement professionals is to determine whether a crime has been committed, conduct an investigation to identify and apprehend the perpetrator, and gather evidence to assist prosecutors in a criminal trial. However, when police officers are presented with information and concern about a *possible future* violent crime, their responsibilities, authority, and investigative tools and approaches are less clear. “Threat assessment” is the term used to describe the set of investigative and operational techniques that can be used by law enforcement professionals to identify, assess, and manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators.

### “Making” versus “posing” a threat.

Individuals utter threats for many reasons, only some of which involve intention or capacity to commit a violent act. However, a person can present a grave threat without articulating it. The distinction between *making* and *posing* a threat is important:

- Some persons who make threats ultimately pose threats.

- Many persons who make threats do not pose threats.

- Some persons who pose threats never make threats.

**Targeting the victim.** Postponing action until a threat has been made can detract attention from investigation of factors more relevant to the risk of violence, e.g., a potential perpetrator's selection of possible targets. Data from two recent studies suggest that at least some approachers—and attackers—of public officials/figures show an interest in more than one target.<sup>1</sup> U.S. Secret Service experience indicates that a number of would-be Presidential assassins, such as Arthur Bremer and John Hinckley, considered several targets, and changed targets, before finally making an attack. Data on relationship stalking murders and workplace violence murders point to suicide, as well as homicide, as a possible outcome.<sup>2</sup> These examples suggest that, in some cases, the perpetrator may ultimately become his or her own final target.

## Legal sanctions

The threat of sanctions, such as a long prison sentence, may not deter a person who desperately desires revenge or is prepared to die to achieve his objective. Passage of enforceable laws that define and prohibit behaviors that could presage violent attacks is one important step in preventing such attacks. Forty-nine States have passed antistalking laws in the past 4 years, and the National Institute of Justice, together with the National Criminal Justice Association, published a model antistalking law.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, authorities in some jurisdictions are reviewing various threat and harassment laws to determine whether they might apply to threat-of-violence situations. However, laws by themselves are unlikely to prevent stalking, workplace, or public figure-centered violence, unless

law enforcement and security professionals know how to identify, evaluate, and manage persons at risk of committing these violent acts.

## Fundamental principles of threat assessment

Notwithstanding the growing importance of threat assessment for law enforcement and security professionals, systematic thinking and guidance in this area have been lacking. The law enforcement and security communities currently do not have clearly articulated processes or procedures to steer their actions when they are made aware of threat-of-violence subjects and situations. Without guidelines for making threat assessments, otherwise competent law enforcement professionals may be less thoughtful and thorough than they might be in handling such incidents. To fill the void, this report presents four fundamental principles that underlie threat assessment investigation and management. They are followed by a model and process for conducting comprehensive threat assessment investigations.

- Violence is a process, as well as an act. Violent behavior does not occur in a vacuum. Careful analysis of violent incidents shows that violent acts often are the culmination of long-developing, identifiable trails of problems, conflicts, disputes, and failures.

- Violence is the product of an interaction among three factors:

- a) The *individual* who takes violent action.
- b) *Stimulus or triggering conditions* that lead the subject to see violence as an option, “way out,” or solution to problems or life situation.

- c) A *setting that facilitates or permits the violence*, or at least does not stop it from occurring.

- A key to investigation and resolution of threat assessment cases is identification of the subject’s “attack-related” behaviors. Perpetrators of targeted acts of violence engage in discrete behaviors that precede and are linked to their attacks; they consider, plan, and prepare before engaging in violent actions.

- Threatening situations are more likely to be successfully investigated and managed if other agencies and systems—both within and outside law enforcement or security organizations—are recognized and used to help solve problems presented by a given case. Examples of such systems are those employed by prosecutors; courts; probation, corrections, social service, and mental health agencies; employee assistance programs; victim’s assistance programs; and community groups.

## Functions of a threat assessment program

The three major functions of a threat assessment program are: identification of a potential perpetrator, assessment of the risks of violence posed by a given perpetrator at a given time, and management of both the subject and the risks that he or she presents to a given target.

### Identifying the perpetrator

The process of identifying a potential perpetrator involves: (1) defining criteria that could lead to a person becoming a subject of a threat assessment investigation; (2) determining the areas within the law enforcement or

security organization that will be responsible for receiving information about possible subjects and conducting threat assessment investigations; (3) notifying those individuals and organizations that might come in contact with—or know of—potential subjects about the existence of a threat assessment program; and (4) educating notified individuals and organizations about the criteria for bringing a concern about potential violence to the attention of investigators.

## Assessing the risks

The second goal of a threat assessment program is to evaluate the risks persons under suspicion may pose to particular targets. Risk assessment involves two primary functions: investigation and evaluation.

**Investigation.** The primary objective of a risk assessment investigation is to gather information on a subject and on potential targets. Multiple sources of information should be consulted to learn about a subject’s behavior, interests, and state of mind at various points in time:

- Personal interviews with the subject.
- Material created or possessed by the subject, including journals and letters, and materials collected by the subject, such as books and magazines, that may relate to the investigation.
- Persons who know or have known the subject, including family members, friends, coworkers, supervisors, neighbors, landlords, law enforcement officers, social service or mental health staff, and previous victims of unacceptable behavior (including violence) committed by the subject.

- Record or archival information, including police, court, probation, and correctional records; mental health and social service records; and notes made by those aware of the subject's interest in a particular target, such as security personnel, managers, victims, or colleagues.

**Information about the subject.** At the beginning of a threat assessment investigation, it is important to secure detailed descriptions of the subject's behaviors and actions that prompted other persons to notice the subject. The kinds of information useful for threat assessment include data about overwhelmingly or unbearably stressful experiences and the subject's ability to cope at such times. Behavioral data about the subject's motives, intentions, and capacities is critical; of particular importance is information about attack-related behaviors:

- The subject has expressed interest in possible targets, including particular, identifiable targets.
- The subject has communicated with or about potential targets.
- The subject has considered and/or attempted to harm self or others.
- The subject has secured or practiced with weapons.
- The subject has followed or approached potential targets, either with or without weapons, at events or occasions.

**Interviewing the subject.** Whether to interview the subject of a threat assessment investigation can be a key question; the decision depends on several factors:

- The investigator's need for information.

- The facts leading to initiation of investigation.
- The investigator's legal standing in relation to the subject.
- The resources available to the investigator.
- The investigator's training and experience in interviewing.
- The stage of the investigation.
- The investigator's strategy for resolving the case.

A decision to interview a subject should be made on the basis of case facts. Generally, when there has been face-to-face contact between subject and target or the subject has communicated a threat to the target, an interview is a good idea. An interview under such circumstances may have several goals. It may signal that the subject's behavior has been noticed, permit the subject's story to be related to a third party, gather information that is the basis for corroboration, and provide an opportunity for communicating that the subject's behavior is unwelcome, unacceptable, and must cease.

Any interview is a vehicle for gathering information about the subject that can be used to assess the threat that a subject poses and to manage that threat. Therefore, threat assessment interviews are most productive if they are conducted respectfully and professionally. The task of the investigator is twofold: to gather information about the subject's thinking, behavior patterns, and activities regarding the target(s) and to encourage change in the subject's behavior. By showing an interest in the subject's life that is neither unduly friendly nor harsh, an investigator can increase the likelihood of the interview's success.

In some cases, however, an interview may intensify the subject's interest in the target or increase the risk of lethal behavior. For example, a subject who has written a letter to a celebrity professing undying love and formally proposing marriage, *but who has engaged in no other known behavior in relation to the celebrity*, may have his or her interest stimulated by an interview. Without an interview, the subject's interest may dissipate. Similarly, a desperate and suicidal subject, self-perceived as having been abandoned, who has been stalking a former partner, may sense that time is running out and be prompted by an interview to engage in

## Possible Indicators of Potential Trouble

- "My former spouse keeps calling me, cursing, and hanging up."
- "Coworkers report that Jones seems obsessed with getting even with Rogers."
- "Smith is talking about blowing away the Governor. I think he has a gun. He was just turned down on the appeal of his case for worker's compensation."
- "The Judge got her fifth letter this year from Harris telling her that he loves her passionately."
- "The CEO's office just got a call from Doe saying that the Chairman's life is in danger."
- "I know I only met him once, but I know that he loves me; once his wife is out of the way, we can be together always."



more extreme behavior before “they put me away.” In such a circumstance, the investigator may need to expend additional resources, perhaps increasing security for the target, arranging hospitalization or arrest of the subject, or monitoring or surveilling the subject. Subject interviews, therefore, should be considered and conducted within the context of overall investigative strategy.

**Information about the target.** A man who, over days and weeks, has been following a secretary whom he met once, but with whom he has no relationship, appears to have picked out a potential target. An employee, fired by a manager whom he blames for discriminating against him and causing the breakup of his family, has told former coworkers that he will “get even”; once again, a potential target appears to have been selected. To prevent violence, the threat assessment investigator requires information on the targeted individual. Relevant questions about the target might include:

- Are potential targets identifiable, or does it appear that the subject, if considering violence, has not yet selected targets for possible attack?
- Is the potential target well known to the subject? Is the subject acquainted with a targeted individual’s work and personal lifestyle, patterns of living, daily comings and goings?
- Is the potential target vulnerable to an attack? Does the targeted individual have the resources to arrange for physical security? What might change in the target’s lifestyle or living arrangements that could make attack by the subject more difficult or less

likely, e.g., is the targeted individual planning to move, spend more time at home, or take a new job?

- Is the target afraid of the subject? Is the targeted individual’s degree of fear shared by family, friends, and/or colleagues?
- How sophisticated or naive is the targeted individual about the need for caution? How able is the individual to communicate a clear and consistent “I want no contact with you” message to the subject?

### Evaluation

A 2-stage process is suggested to evaluate information gathered about the subject and the potential target(s). In the first stage, information is evaluated for evidence of conditions and behaviors that would be consistent with an attack. The second stage of evaluation seeks to determine whether the subject appears to be moving *toward* or *away* from an attack. After analyzing the available data, the threat assessor is left with these questions:

- Does it appear more or less likely that violent action will be directed by the subject against the target(s)? What specific information and reasoning lead to this conclusion?
- How close is the subject to attempting an attack? What thresholds, if any, have been crossed (e.g., has the subject violated court orders, made a will, given away personal items, expressed willingness to die or to be incarcerated)?
- What might change in the *subject’s* life to increase or decrease the risk of violence? What might change in the target’s situation to increase or decrease the risk of violence?

### Case management

The first component of threat assessment case management involves developing a plan that moves the subject away from regarding violence against the target as a viable option. Such a plan is likely to draw on resources from systems within the threat assessment unit’s parent organization, as well as those outside it. The second component is plan implementation. The best developed and supported case management plan will be of little use in preventing violence if the plan is not implemented and monitored. The plan must remain flexible to accommodate changes in the subject’s life and circumstances. The final management component is formal closing of the case.

**Case plan development.** Once an evaluator determines that a given subject presents a risk of violence to a targeted individual, the next task is to develop a plan to manage the subject and the risk. The evaluator then proceeds to identify those internal and external systems that may be helpful in managing the problems presented by the subject. In certain situations, such as those in which the subject has been stalking an identifiable target in a jurisdiction that has an enforceable and effective anti-stalking law, the best way to prevent violence and minimize harm to the targeted individual may be to prosecute the case vigorously. A good relationship between threat assessment investigators and prosecutors can influence the priority assigned to the case and the extent to which prosecutorial and judicial processes facilitate its resolution. Such relationships also may affect the court’s disposition of the case, including sentencing of a convicted offender.

Even conviction and imprisonment, however, do not guarantee that the target will be safe from the subject. If the subject has been unable or unwilling to let go of the idea of a relationship with the target, or if the subject attributes the pains and misfortunes of his or her life to the targeted individual, it may make sense to consider strategies by which the subject is encouraged to change the direction, or intensity, of his interest. A subject engaged in activities that bring success and satisfaction is less likely to remain preoccupied with a failed relationship. Family, friends, neighbors, or associates may play a role in suggesting and supporting changes in the subject's thinking and behavior. In addition, mental health and social service staff may be of great assistance in aiding the subject to formulate more appropriate goals and develop skills and strengths that are likely to result in life successes.

At least one aspect of a case management plan concerns the target. If the subject is to be prohibited from contact with the target, the target needs to understand what to do (i.e., whom to call and how to contact the official handling the case) if the subject initiates direct or indirect contact.

**Case management implementation.** The most carefully crafted plan will have little effect if it remains in the investigator's files and is not translated into action.

Although no procedures or techniques can guarantee that a subject of comprehensive threat assessment will not attempt violent action toward a target, two activities are known to help reduce the risk of violence, and, in the instance of a bad outcome, assist the threat assessment team in any post-incident review.

First, documentation of data and reasoning at every stage of a threat assessment investigation is essential. Undocumented or poorly documented information-gathering and analysis are suspect in and of themselves, and they provide little foundation for review or for efforts to learn from—and improve on—experience. Without clear documentation, investigators are left with only their recollections, which can be both partial and faulty and are subject to criticism as retrospective reconstruction. A carefully and comprehensively documented record may be criticized for imperfect data-gathering or flawed analysis, but such a record also demonstrates both thoughtfulness and good faith—critical questions in any postincident review.

Second, consultation at every major stage of the threat assessment process can be a significant case management tool. Consultants may be members of the threat assessment unit or external experts. To be effective, a consultant should be knowledgeable in areas relevant to the case and be known and trusted by the investigators. For example, in a case where a subject has a history of diagnosed mental disorders and the primary investigator is unfamiliar with mental health language and concepts used in the records, an expert in psychology or psychiatry can provide invaluable insight and advice.

In addition to providing special expertise, consultants may notice and ask about questions in a case that remain to be explored or answered. Even proficient investigators are occasionally vulnerable to “missing the forest for the trees.” A consultant, such as a fellow threat assessment specialist who has not been involved with the case, may offer a comment that can redirect or sharpen an ongoing investigation. In

the event of a bad outcome, use and documentation of consultant expertise may demonstrate that the threat assessment team sought additional perspectives and ideas and did not get stuck with “tunnel vision.”

**Closing the case.** The final task of threat assessment case management is closing the case. When a threat assessor determines that the subject has moved far enough away from possible violent action toward the target to no longer cause appreciable concern, the case can be considered for closing. At this time, it may be important to ask:

- What has changed in the subject's life that appears to lessen the likelihood that the subject is interested in or will attempt violent action toward the target?
- Which components of the case management plan seemed to affect the subject's thinking or capacity to initiate violent action, and to what extent?
- What life circumstances might occur that would again put the subject at increased risk of contemplating, planning, or attempting violent action toward the original target or other potential targets?
- Are there supports in place (or that can be developed) that will be known and available to the subject at a future time when the subject is again at risk of moving toward violent behavior?

While social commentators and analysts may debate the myriad reasons that lead to growing national concern about targeted violence, law enforcement and security organizations are increasingly being called on to examine individual situations and make judgments and determinations about the risks of violence that one person

might present to an identifiable target. In cases related to stalking behaviors, workplace violence, attacks on public officials and figures, and other situations where targeted violence is a possibility, comprehensive and carefully conducted threat assessment investigations can safeguard potential targets, deter potential attackers, and serve the public.

**Notes**

1. Dietz, P.E. and D.A. Martell, “Mentally Disordered Offenders in Pursuit of Celebrities and Politicians,” National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1989, 83–NI–AX–0005; Dietz, P.E., D.B. Matthews, D.A. Martell, T.M. Stewart, D.R. Hrouda and J. Warren, “Threatening and Otherwise Inappropriate Letters to Members of the United States Congress,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 36 (September 5, 1991):1445–1468; Dietz, P.E., D.B. Matthews, C. Van Dyne, D.A.

Martell, C.D.H. Parry, T.M. Stewart, J. Warren and J.D. Crowder, “Threatening and Otherwise Inappropriate Letters to Hollywood Celebrities,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 36 (January 1, 1991):185–209; and Fein, R.A. and B. Vossekuil, “The Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project: An Examination of Violence Against Public Officials and Public Figures,” National Institute of Justice, study in progress, 92–CX–0013.

2. For example, both Thomas McIlvane, in the Royal Oak, Michigan post office attack, and Alan Winterbourne, in the Oxnard, California unemployment office attack, killed themselves.

3. National Criminal Justice Association, *Project to Develop a Model Anti-Stalking Code for States*, National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1993.

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Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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