Threat Assessment & Response to Mass Violence

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Agenda

- Brief Overview of Threat Assessment Principles
- Recent Trends in Targeted Violence
- Application to Mass Casualty Response

Targeted Violence

- Attacks are not impulsive acts
- Action is Opportunistic
- Acts are part of a campaign waged in asymmetrical conflict

Role of Threat Assessment in Crisis Response

- Event prevention
- Mitigation of secondary issues
- Maintaining confidence in public safety: Risk communication and rumor management

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Prevention: Behavioral Threat Assessment Approach

Myths:
- Shooter/Terrorist profile exists
- threatening activity occurs without warning
- domestic threats are limited
- internal threats to organizations are limited

Why Behavioral Threat Assessment?
- Value of behavior-based as opposed to profile-based strategies to guide assessment and protective activities

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Terrorism-like Tactics

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Terrorist Strategies

- Surveillance activities prior to attack
- Rehearsals or trial runs, disciplined approach
- The element of surprise to the unsuspecting victim or community of victims;
- The use of explosives, secondary devices and diversionary tactics;
- The use of the Internet to communicate threats, strategize among cohorts, document activities, learn tactics and recruit followers;
- Suicide missions involving similar mental states and focus on the part of the attacker/s;
- Warning signs that are often overlooked or ignored;
- Strategies that set the bar for future events in terms of escalating fear, anxiety, destruction and the notoriety of the terrorist

Threat Assessment

Threat Assessment Literature

Threat assessment literature (see especially *Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999)* suggests:

•Threat, approach, and attack behavior are the products of discernible processes of thinking and behavior

•An individual's motives and target selection are directly connected

•Precipitation may involve a personal/significant stressor

Affective vs. Predatory Violence

Threat Assessment

- Movement of Idea to action
- Targeted violence is not random or spontaneous
- Not all threats are created equal
- Related psychological concepts of *Justification & Resignation* to perform targeted violence

Threat Assessment Strategies

Threat Assessment Approach (cont)

After initial consideration of threat posed, the following areas should be considered more closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

Threat Assessment App

After initial consideration of following areas should be closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

> •Recent act of targeted violence?
> •Heightened concern or negative media attention?
> •Recent threatening, tampering or hoax events?

Threat Assessment Ap

After initial consideration following areas should closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

> •Prior arrest record or prior harassment/ threat-related activity?
> •Problematic contacts with other agencies?
> •Recent life stressors?
> •Presence of mental illness symptoms related to grievance or target ?

Threat Assessment Approach (cont)

After initial consideration, the following areas should be considered more closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

Intensity of effort (multiple prior contacts, multiple types of contact behavior) as well as
- Leakage of intentions
- Persistent threatening or concerning behavior
- Reported threat with a specific plan
- Written plans/hit list
- Rehearsal behavior

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Leakage

- Leakage in the context of threat assessment is the communication to a third party of an intent to do harm to a target. (Meloy, 2011)
- Leakage occurs when a subject "intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act."(O'Toole, 2000)

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Threat Assessment Approach (cont)

After initial consideration of threat posed, the following areas should be considered more closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

- *Bottom Line: The More Personal, The Higher the Concern (also called "Intimacy Effect"*

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Intimacy Effect

- The predictive level of threats as pre-incident indicators of violence increased in proportion to the degree of intimacy between the subject and the target.
- Intimacy as perceived by subject

Threatening Language

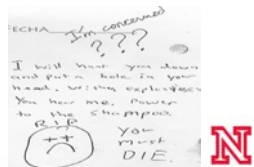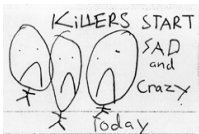Threat cases already receive heightened attention due to the effect upon victims

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Evaluation of Threats

- Communicated verbally or symbolically
- All threats taken seriously
- "Specific and plausible" suggests more serious
- Presence of emotional content
- Recognizable stressors

From: O'Toole, Mary Ellen. The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective.

Threatening Language & Approach

Based upon UNL research, cases involving subjects with:
– obvious/ serious mental illness, and
– prior approach history
pose a significantly higher risk when threats are made

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Threat Assessment Approach (cont)

After initial consideration following areas should be closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Activity
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

Subject view target as responsible for current situation or difficulties?

Target media presence? High Profile?

Target Focus but contacts multiple targets (maintains focus of issue and motives across contacts)

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Threat Assessment Approach (cont)

After initial consideration of threat posed, the following areas should be considered more closely:

- Contextual Factors
- Subject Factors
- Behavioral Factors
- Motivational Factors
- Target Factors
- Protective Factors

•Family or other social support helping to inhibit the threatening activity?
•Physical or other security measures already in-place?

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Challenge: Managing Electronic Communications

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Noteworthy Trends in Electronic Communications
- Threatening language more prevalent
- Increased threatening e-mail and other electronic/internet activity
- More intense politically driven activity and rhetoric
- More extremist language from range of domestic and transnational sources
- Victims set higher threshold for reporting electronic threats

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Electronic Communications:
Recent Research
- When threats present, electronically communicating subjects not as likely to approach, *unless* communication was part of a campaign with other forms of communication (e.g., phone, letters).
- More threatening language
- More likely to contain obscenity

Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, and Garner (2007); Schoeneman, Scalora, Darrow, McLawsen, Chang, & Zimmerman (2011).

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Content Risk Factors

- Personalized motive
- Mental illness symptoms, particularly those indicating threat to self or lack of bodily/personal control
- Intent to approach
- Language regarding justified violence tied to above

James & colleagues (2007, 2008); Mullen & colleagues (2009); Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, and Garner (2007)

Challenge: Assessing Impact of "Instigators"

Extremist Language

- Increased presence
- Recent research has found the presence of such language does not predict approach separate from other risk factors (e.g., personalized motive, intensity of effort)

Challenge: Prevalence of Mental Illness Across Range of Targeted Violence (Including extremism)

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Mental Illness & Extremism

- Significant presence of persons with suspected mental illness in threat assessment caseloads
- Prevalence increases ith electronic communications
- More likely to be encouraged with extremist rhetoric than in past given availability of remote recruitment and indoctrination via internet

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POST-INCIDENT ISSUES

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Post Incident: Mitigation of Secondary Issues

- Mitigation of secondary sources of risk/threat posed
  - Hoax activity
  - Efforts by range of persons to probe security
  - Secondary attacks
  - Confidence in security response
  - Counter-surveillance Issues

Post Incident: Mitigation of Secondary Issues

Rumored activity/Rumor management:

- Be mindful of rumors (*need to monitor social media especially*)
- Public response to rumors
- Surge of false or inaccurate reports
- Impact on risk communication
- Impact of perceived effectiveness of public safety

School Update Issues & Rumors
USF Shooter Alerts (10/2009)

POST-INCIDENT ISSUES:
THREAT SURGES

COPY CAT ACTIVITY

NEED TO MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA

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Bioterrorism Threat

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WMD Issues

- Outreach and education to community
- Substantial hoax activity
- Other threat/communication activity increases when attacks take place

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RISK TO FIRST RESPONDERS

WMD/Mass Casualty Post Incident: Mitigation of Secondary Issues

- Safety Issues:
  – Secondary Devices
  – Need to respect containment procedures
  – Be sensitive to perceptions and concerns of potential continuing risk
  – Respect possibility of future attack

WMD/Mass Casualty Practical Considerations and Lessons Learned

- Both possibility and heightened perception of continuing threat and risk-- even after initial incident
- Respect the potential for lingering psychological after-effects given possible re-exposure or injury
- Some negative effects may be perpetuated by subsequent hoax activity

Heightened Risk for First Responders in WMD/Mass Casualty Events

First Responders

- Heightened risk to first responders
- Containment boundaries critical
- Conflicting duties between containment and investigation
- Heightened concern re: additional sources and secondary risks
- Awareness of first responders' risk to their own families

First Responders

- Heightened risk to first responders
- Often target of secondary attacks/devices
- Conflicting duties between containment and investigation

IMPLICATIONS-RECONSIDER RESPONSE APPROACHES?

Things to Reconsider in Mass Attacks

- Need to promote evacuation when possible versus shelter in place when possible?
- Cover and concealment--Deploy via "overwatch" versus tight formation?
- Who is looking for secondary devices?
- Gear up?

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