

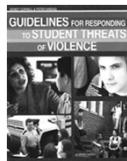
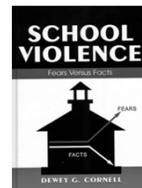
## ***Student Threat Assessment as a School Violence Prevention Strategy***

Dewey Cornell, Ph.D.  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia  
  
434-924-8929  
Email: youthvio@virginia.edu  
Website: youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu



Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D., is a forensic clinical psychologist and Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. Dr. Cornell is Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project, a Program Director for Youth-Nex, the UVA Center for Effective Youth Development, and a faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy.

Dr. Cornell has studied youth violence for nearly 30 years and has assisted numerous schools in the development of violence prevention programs. He has authored more than 200 publications in psychology and education, including two books: *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* and *School Violence: Fears versus Facts*.



## **Overview**

- 1. Our schools are safe.**
- 2. Threat assessment is an alternative to zero tolerance.**
- 3. Research supports threat assessment.**

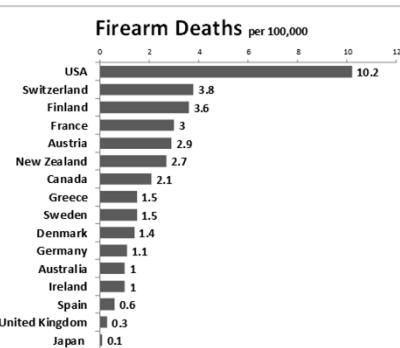
Public concern over a recent series of mass shootings:

- Jan 2011 shopping center in Tucson AZ (6)
- Sep 2011 restaurant in Carson City NV (5)
- Jul 2012 movie theater in Aurora CO (12)
- Aug 2012 Sikh temple in Oak Creek WI (7)
- Sept 2012 business in Minneapolis MN (7)
- Dec 2012 school in Newtown CT (28)
- Sept 2013 Washington Navy Yard (12)

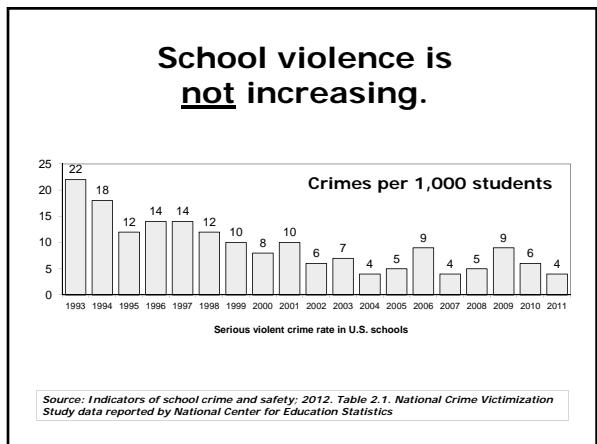
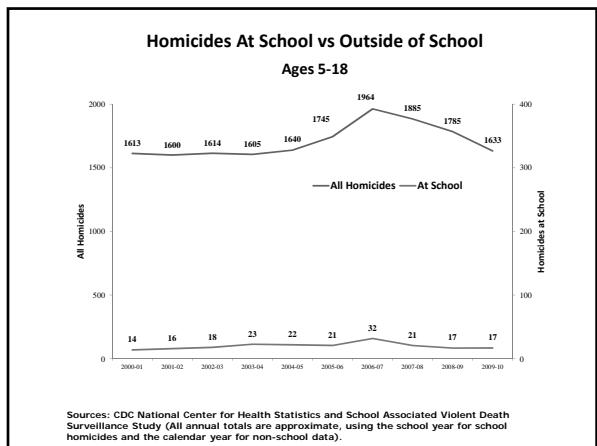
The Sandy Hook shooting was part of a national problem with gun violence, not school violence.

- Approximately 31,000 gun fatalities each year
- Suicide (62%), homicide (35%), & accidental shootings (3%)
- Approximately 85 deaths per day

Source: National Vital Statistics  
[http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction\\_inj.html](http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html)



Selected countries. Note that some countries have a higher death rate than the U.S. – Jamaica, Honduras, El Salvador, Swaziland, Brazil, South Africa, Columbia, Mexico, Panama. Data from United Nations Homicide Statistics.



**School shootings generate increased fear that can lead to over-reactions.**



**Schools Are Training Second-Graders to Attack Mass Shooters**

*Is it worth freaking kids out over the rare possibility of a school shooting?*

—By Deanna Funn | Thu Mar. 28, 2013 3:00 AM PDT

231 | 0 Tweet | 607 | 1 Like | 1.5k



A lockdown drill at an elementary school in Walnut Creek, California. *Bob Larson, Contra Costa Times/ZUMA Press*

Braden Kling, an eight-year-old from Middletown, Ohio, knows what to do. His school has prepared him for the moment of reckoning. "We have this big board and we hide behind that. If he comes in, we start throwing stuff," he explains. "Pencils, chairs, boxes, books, markers. And then we escape."

## Zero Tolerance Suspensions After the Newtown Shootings

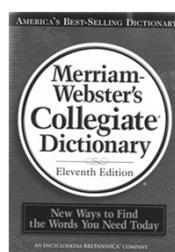


6 year old pointed finger and said "pow!"

<http://www.sott.net/article/255552-6-year-old-suspended-for-pretend-gunshot>

## How Can We Prevent Violence?

**Prevention means "to keep something from happening"**



**Crisis response is not prevention.**



A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

**Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.**



**Critics say,  
“We can’t predict who  
will be violent,  
so prevention is not  
possible.”**

**However,....**

**Prevention does not  
require prediction.**



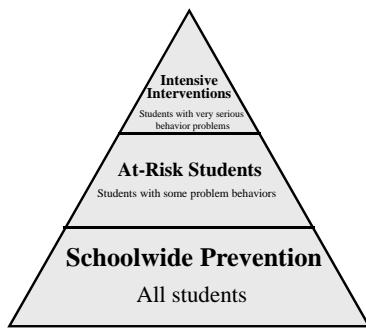
We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

**Prevention does not  
require prediction.**



We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

**3 Tier Model of Prevention**



**Case example: How schools permit and even promote bullying**

- School newspaper
- Rest room monitoring
- Hallway teasing
- Classroom mischief
- Uneven enforcement
- Marching band initiation
- Gym class humiliation
- Group rivalry

**Teach students to distinguish  
snitching from seeking help**

**Snitching:** informing on someone for personal gain

**Seeking help:** attempting to stop someone from being hurt



## FBI Recommendations on School Violence

The School Shooter: A THREAT ASSESSMENT PERSPECTIVE



Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG)  
National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC)  
FBI Academy  
Quantico, Virginia 20188

Download at: [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.” (FBI report p 1)



THREAT ASSESSMENT IN SCHOOLS  
A GUIDE TO MANAGING THREATENING SITUATIONS AND PROMOTING SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
U.S. SECRET SERVICE

Download at: [www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)

**Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:**

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

## Threat Assessment

1. *Identification* of threats made by students.
2. *Evaluation* of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. *Intervention* to reduce risk of violence.
4. *Follow-up* to assess intervention results.

## Threat Assessment

1. Focus on *behavior*, not trait characteristics.
2. Risk is *dynamic*, not static quality.
3. Strategies for *prevention*, not prediction.

## Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal	Leads team, conducts Step 1.
School Resource Officer	Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.
Mental Health Staff (School psychologists, counselors, social workers)	Team member to conduct mental health assessments. Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.
Not required to serve on team Teachers, aides, other staff	Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.

DEWEY CORNELL & PETER SHERAS

## GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE



- Legally defensible procedures for responding to student threats
- Step-by-step guidelines and decision-tree
- Research-based and field-tested
- Covers K-12, regular and special education

Available from [sopriswest.com](http://sopriswest.com)

## What is a threat?

*A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.*

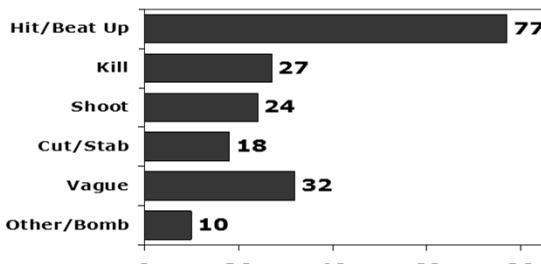
Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims.  
("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise.  
("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

## What did the students threaten to do?

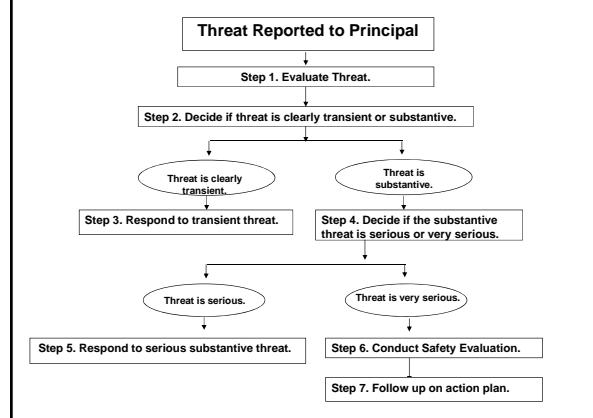


N = 188 cases

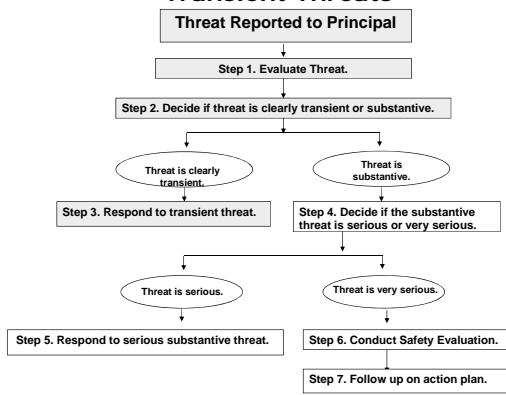
## Continuum of Threats



- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech



### Transient Threats



## Transient threats

- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.

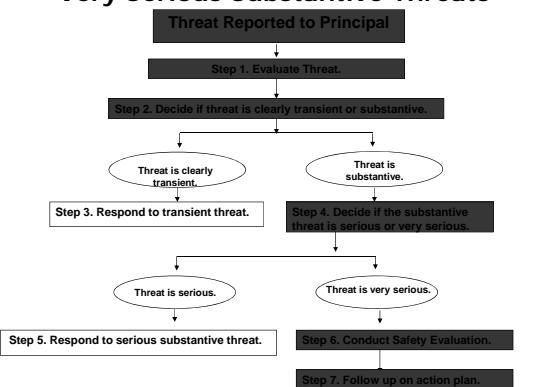
### Step 3. Responses to a transient threat.

- No need to take safety precautions.
- See that threat is resolved through explanation, apology, making amends.
- Provide counseling and education where appropriate.
- Administer discipline if appropriate.

### Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

### Very Serious Substantive Threats



### Immediate responses to a Very Serious Substantive Threat

- Take precautions to protect potential victims.
- Consult with law enforcement promptly.
- Notify intended victim and victim's parents.
- Notify student's parents.
- Begin Mental Health Assessment.
- Determine safety during suspension.

### Step 6. Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat.

Safety Evaluation conducted by a team.

- Principal leads the team.
- School psychologist or other mental health professional conducts Mental Health Assessment.
- School resource officer consults on legal issues.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.

### Law Enforcement Investigation of Very Serious Substantive Threats

- Interview suspects and witnesses.
- Conduct searches for weapons and other evidence of planning.
- Serve as a resource for students with fears or information to share.
- Take appropriate protective action.

## Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.



**Our mental health assessments are not designed to PREDICT violence, but to find ways to PREVENT violence.**



**In a threat assessment, we try to determine why a student made a threat, and therefore how we can prevent the threat from being carried out.**



**Students DO NOT have to be suspended for making a threatening statement.  
Many threats can be resolved without suspension.**



**Boy who held pencil like gun suspended**

School has "zero tolerance" weapons policy  
Updated: Thursday, 09 May 2013, 3:54 PM EDT  
Published: Monday, 06 May 2013, 6:53 PM EDT

Anne McNamara

SUFFOLK, Va. (WAVY) - A Suffolk school suspended a second grader for pointing a pencil at another student and making gun noises.

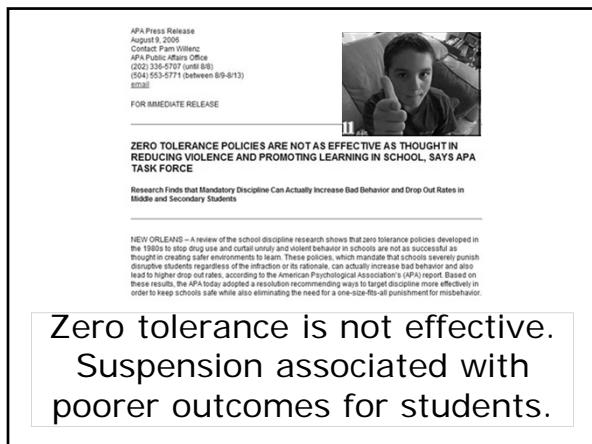
Seven-year-old Christopher Marshall says he was playing with another student in class Friday, when the teacher at Driver Elementary asked them to stop pointing pencils at each other.

"When I asked him about it, he said, 'Well I was being a Marine and the other guy was being a bad guy,'" said Paul Marshall, the boy's father. "It's as simple as that."

## Zero Tolerance

**A policy that mandates a severe punishment that is applied to all violations regardless of the circumstances.**

From APA Zero Tolerance Task Force Report, 2006



AP News Release  
August 11, 2009  
Contact: Pam Willens  
APA Public Affairs Office  
(202) 336-5772 (until 8/8)  
(504) 553-5771 (between 8/9-8/13)  
email:  
  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
  
  
  
ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES ARE NOT AS EFFECTIVE AS THOUGHT IN REDUCING VIOLENCE AND PROMOTING LEARNING IN SCHOOL, SAYS APA TASK FORCE  
  
Research Finds that Mandatory Discipline Can Actually Increase Bad Behavior and Drop Out Rates in Middle and Secondary Students  
  
NEW ORLEANS – A review of the school discipline research shows that zero tolerance policies developed in the 1980s to stop drug use and curb unruly and violent behavior in schools are not as successful as thought in creating safer environments to learn. These policies, which mandate that schools severely punish disruptors, have been adopted by many schools across the country. But they may actually contribute to higher drop out rates, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) report. Based on these results, the APA today adopted a resolution recommending ways to target discipline more effectively in order to keep schools safe while also eliminating the need for a one-size-fits-all punishment for misbehavior.

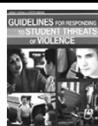
**Zero tolerance is not effective.  
Suspension associated with poorer outcomes for students.**

## Suspension Practices

Suspension is a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:

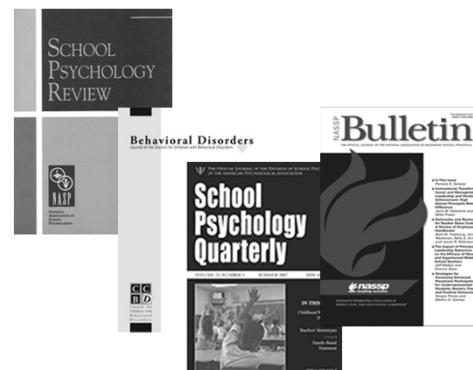
- Fall behind in their classes
- Feel alienated and rejected
- Continue to misbehave and be suspended
- Drop out of school
- Juvenile court involvement

The school-to-prison pipeline

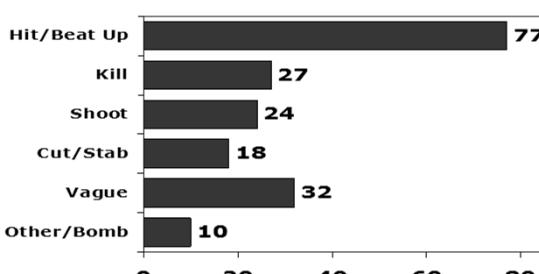


## Research on Threat Assessment

1. Initial field-test study
2. Memphis field test
3. High school climate study
4. High school suspension study
5. Randomized controlled trial



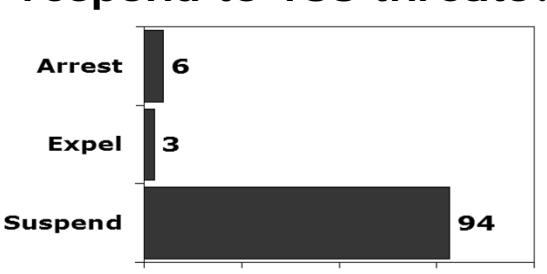
## What did the students threaten to do?



Threat Type	Count
Hit/Beat Up	77
Kill	27
Shoot	24
Cut/Stab	18
Vague	32
Other/Bomb	10

N = 188 cases

## How did schools respond to 188 threats?

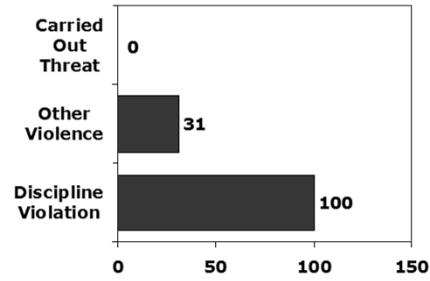


Response	Count
Arrest	6
Expel	3
Suspend	94

### Follow-up interviews on student threats

- Interviews conducted with school principals at end of school year and again the following fall.
- Follow-up time periods averaged 148 days until end of school year.
- Four students did not return to school after the threat, 17 left within 30 days after threat.

### Follow-up on student behavior after the threat



### Memphis Field-Trial

Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.

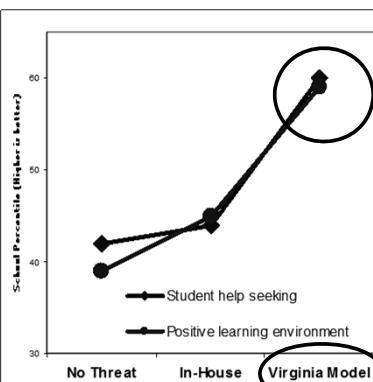
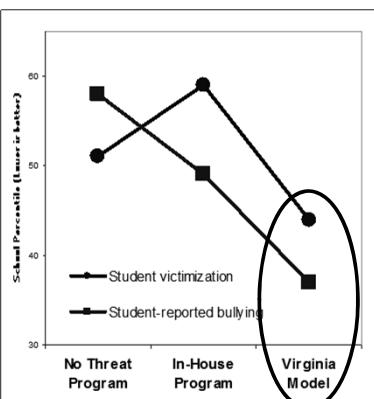
- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out

*Behavioral Disorders, 2008*

### Virginia High School Climate Study

- 
- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
  - 131 using locally developed models
  - 54 not using threat assessment

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*





## Virginia High School Climate Study

### Findings for Virginia Model Schools

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*



## Virginia High School Climate Study

### Findings for Virginia Model Schools

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

*School Psychology Quarterly, 2009*



### Reductions in Long-Term Suspensions Following Adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Dewey G. Cornell<sup>1</sup>, Anne Gregory<sup>2</sup>, and Xitao Fan<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**  
This quasi-experimental study examined the adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in 23 high schools. After training, school administrators and other staff members demonstrated substantial increases in knowledge of threat assessment principles and decreased commitment to zero tolerance approaches. Schools using the guidelines showed a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions from the pretraining year to the posttraining year, in contrast to a control group of 26 schools not using the guidelines.



## High School Discipline Study

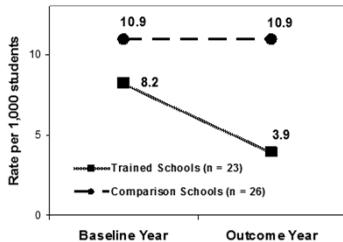
- Compared 23 high schools implementing threat assessment with 26 control high schools (no threat assessment).
- Used school records of suspensions and discipline infractions for baseline year prior to training and follow-up year after training.

*NASSP Bulletin, 2011*



## High School Discipline Study

### Long-Term Suspension Rates



Year	Trained Schools (n = 23)	Comparison Schools (n = 26)
Baseline Year	8.2	10.9
Outcome Year	3.9	10.9



## Randomized Controlled Trial

- 40 schools (K-12)
- Randomly assigned
- 1 year follow-up
- 201 students

*School Psychology Review, 2012*

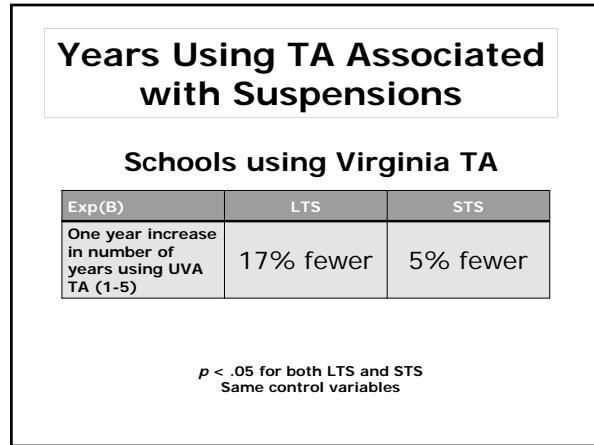
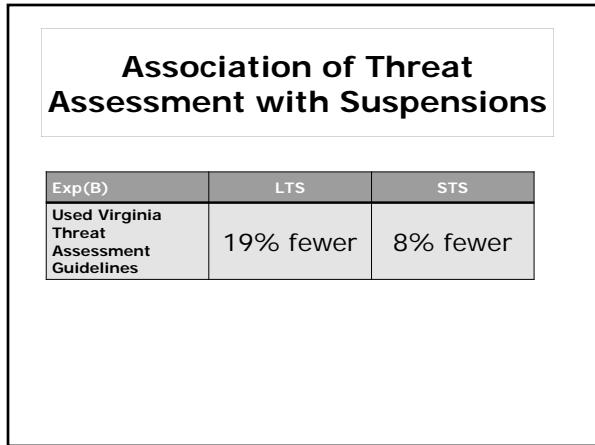
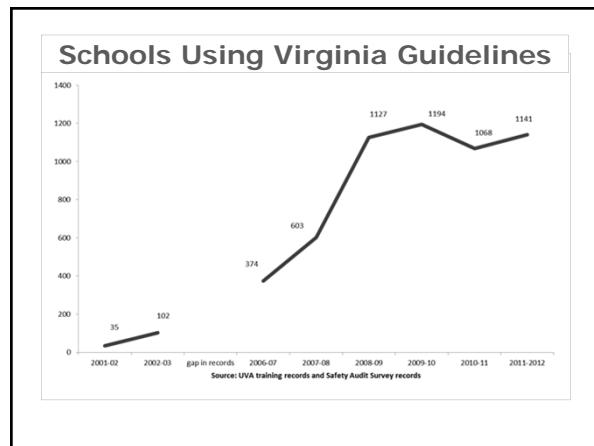
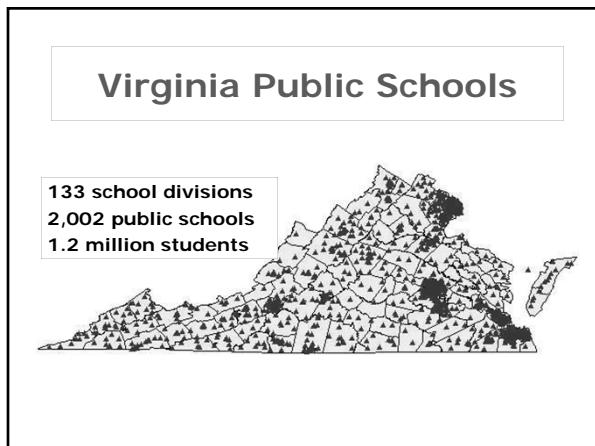
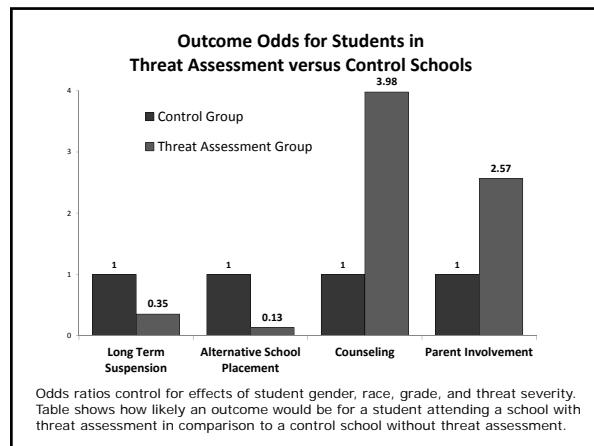


## Randomized Controlled Trial

**Students in threat assessment schools...**

- Received more counseling
- More parent involvement
- Fewer long-term suspensions
- Fewer alternative placements

**Logistic regression odds ratios:**  
3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13



## 2013 NREPP Listing!

NREPP SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices

Home | About NREPP | Find an Intervention | Reviews & Submissions | Learning Center | Contact Us

Intervention Summary Back to Results Start New Search.

### Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (V-STAG) is a school-based manualized process designed to help school staff identify students at risk of threatening behavior. V-STAG is also designed to provide students involved in threat incidents with appropriate mental health counseling services, while ensuring involvement, and reduce the numbers of long-term school suspensions or expulsions and alternative school setting placements. V-STAG also aims to reduce in-school bullying infractions and provide a supportive school climate. The program requires each participating school to establish a threat assessment team, whose members resolve student threat incidents through the use of a context-sensitive, problem-solving approach instead of the more traditional, punitive approach of zero tolerance.

<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=263>



<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

Curry School of Education  
YOUTH VIOLENCE PROJECT

YVP Home Threat Assessment Bullying Violence in Schools

LAB NEWS  
Editorial Conference Credits Best New Research  
Youth No Holes Anti-bullying State Conferences and Research  
Strong Media Coverage of Research Findings  
Prof. Cornell New Study On Threat Assessment Featured  
Conference To Focus on Latest Research in Violence Prevention  
Prof. Cornell Talks to WHVA About That Comes With the Moon

CONTACT  
Virginia Youth Violence Project  
Curry School of Education  
P.O. Box 871400  
404 E. Main Street  
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0001  
P: 434-243-6020  
F: 434-243-6021  
yvp@virginia.edu  
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