

The ILEETA Journal

Volume 14
Edition 2

Spring Edition

June 2024

ILEETA
International Law Enforcement
Educators and Trainers Association

Violence Prevention Model: Policing and Behavioral Threat Assessment & Management

by Rick Parfitt



Historically, policing in America has centered on a prevention model of deterrence in that the presence of uniformed police

officers and marked police vehicles will deter those seeking to break the law or engage in violent behavior.

Many offenders will be dissuaded by these actions, but not all. This long held and trained prevention model may deter the opportunistic offender and possibly have an influence to deter the impulsive offender, but not the predatory offender.

We have come to know the predatory criminal as a stalker, a domestic extremist, lone actor terrorist, many sex offenders and of course the active assailant. Predatory violence also referred to as targeted violence is not so easily deterred by a police presence. Targeted violence, first used in a 1995 National Institute of Justice Research in Action report, *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence* (Fein, Vossekuil & Holden, 1995) 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.

Government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, US Secret Service and FBI along with various researchers have used the terms targeted violence and predatory violence in research and publications since that time. Targeted violence includes terrorist attacks, but unlike terrorism, targeted violence includes attacks many times that lack a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics.

In their *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* strategy, the Department of Homeland Security (2019) detailed that targeted violence has a significant impact on the safety and security of our communities, schools, places of worship, and other public gatherings. They describe how threats of terrorism and targeted violence increasingly intersect with one another, and that lends to some alignment in the tools and methods that can be used to counter them.

Since targeted violence is distinct from violence that is affective, impulsive, random, or spontaneous it can oftentimes be distinguished by pre-attack behaviors that suggest violence as a possible outcome (SchoolSafety.gov).

In 2017, the FBI published, *Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks*. This comprehensive, operational document describes that traditional police techniques historically have focused on the apprehension and prosecution of violent offenders after crimes are committed and points out that when police are given information that someone may potentially commit a crime or become violent in the future, their responsibilities, authorities, and available investigative tools are suddenly less clear. This FBI guide is about threat assessment and management, and how police and others may identify, assess, and manage the risk of future, planned violence (Amman, et. al, 2017).

This information is not new, as the U. S. Secret Service in their 1998 publication, *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* described then that threat assessment is a developing field pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service and involves the investigation and analysis of situations and individuals that may pose threats to persons in public life (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998).

This guide and much of the basis of threat assessment in other research has a foundation in the five-year, U. S. Secret Service study referred to as the *Exceptional Case*

Study Project. This study examined the thinking and behavior of individuals who have attacked or approached to attack prominent public officials or figures in the US between 1949-1996 with the goal to help refine law enforcement operations related to preventing and investigating violence and threats of violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1997)..

The findings of the study revealed general threat assessment information relating to attacks on public officials and figures, showing that planned, targeted attacks are not confined to those involving prominent public officials and celebrities. Additionally, the study suggested that the broader application of threat assessment protocols by Federal, State, and local law enforcement officials could help “*anticipate and prevent other crimes,*” including cases involving stalking, domestic violence, workplace violence, and bias-motivated criminal activity involve planned— often violent—attacks on intentionally selected targets (Fein & Vossekuil, 1997; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998).

Without looking at the research police agencies have been responding to the increased occurrence of mass shootings in our schools by increasing police presence in schools and school policy makers similarly are responding by additional ‘target hardening’ methods, including metal detectors, bulletproof glass and shield devices and many companies are marketing clear bookbags, bulletproof bookbags and panic alarm systems.

Most of these approaches are still reactive, in essence, waiting for persons with guns to show up and it is too late once an armed gunman shows up in the parking lot or lobby of our schools. Several studies have shown that having police at schools has reduced certain violence, mostly impulsive violence, but their presence does not prevent the targeted violence we are dealing with today. The data in *Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019* looked at 133 cases where more than one person was shot in a school, or a person arrived at school with the intent to fire indiscriminately and learned in nearly 24% of the cases an armed guard was on scene and were not associated with

significant reduction in rates of injuries. “The data suggest no association between having an armed officer and deterrence of violence in these cases.... The majority of shooters who target schools are students at that school, calling into question the effectiveness of hardened security and active shooter drills.” They conclude that schools must invest in resources to prevent shootings. (Peterson & Densley, 2021; Sorensen, Acosta, Engberg & Bushway, 2022).

Many times, school shooters have targeted schools with armed police or guards present. 2018 was a particularly deadly year for schools and in four high-profile school shootings, including Kentucky’s Marshall County High School in January; Florida’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February; Maryland’s Great Mills High School in March, and Santa Fe High School in Texas in May. The attackers came onto the campuses despite the presence of armed police or guards and in all four of those cases, armed persons failed to stop the gunman from killing (Yablon, 2019).

There are many positive reasons to have SROs in our schools, including building positive relationships with students. In keeping with Community-Oriented Policing practices, SROs must have the discretionary authority to handle cases, especially non-violent or misdemeanor offenses without always making an arrest.

SROs have developed lasting relationships and have been a positive role model for students. SROs in schools can gather information and intelligence to prevent crimes outside of schools, including child abuse, human trafficking, gang violence and others.

As described, targeted violence is not easily prevented using the policing model and programs we have become accustomed to. Police and schools can prevent targeted or predatory violence if they adopt and practice the principles of behavioral threat assessment and management. This will be a change in methodology and especially protocol. Threat Assessment has police examining a person’s behavior in relation to a pathway to violence. This requires learning and adopting concepts that are not instinctive to police officers.

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Police have traditionally responded to reports of behavior, then determining if a crime was attempted or committed and following with a criminal investigation or if called to persons in crisis situations, determining if there are criteria showing that if the person is suffering from a mental illness that they are a danger to himself or others that allows an officer to take the person into custody. If not, most of those situations are referred to various social service agencies.

Most police agencies have limited resources and especially in recent times of calling for defunding the police so this may require reallocations of resources or personnel. Beyond this, agencies must look at collaboration with other, existing social service agencies. Police agencies are reassessing this traditional policing model and adopting a more holistic way of responding to concerning behavior, but too many times after a horrific incident, like a mass shooting. In many cases we hear that the perpetrator had come to the attention of police officers, and some have had frequent encounters. These are the times that we can greatly affect the outcome of potentially violent incidents by providing interventions. The most effective method for doing this is to establish BTAM principles and procedures.

An important tool added to our ability to keep guns out of the hands of potentially dangerous and threatening persons are Red Flag Laws, Extreme Risk Protection Orders, Gun Violence Restraining Orders, known as ERPOs, RPOs and GVROs.

These civil court Restraining Orders and Red Flag Laws or legislation that establishes a process for issuing a Protection Order to ensure individuals at risk for harm to themselves or others are temporarily prohibited from purchasing or possessing a firearm. Issued by a court on petition from law enforcement, family, or household members of a person at risk for harming themselves. If granted, the order temporarily prohibits the purchase and possession of a firearm by the person of concern. After the order is granted, law enforcement will temporarily remove all firearms from the person's possession or control if the person does not do so voluntarily. As you can see these orders can be used to protect persons with

suicidal as well as homicidal ideation (*American Foundation for Suicide Prevention website*).

As of January 2023, 19 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws authorizing courts to issue extreme risk protection orders. Some limit petitioners to be law enforcement, but many allow family or household members to submit a petition for an ERPO, some allow mental health providers to petition, and New York and Hawaii also allow school administrators to petition (*Giffords Law Center website*).

For BTAM to be effective, police officers must be trained in these principles, and this will be a challenge. An example in a related, complimentary training has been the adoption of Crisis Intervention Team training programs ([NAMI website](#); [University of Memphis CIT Center website](#)).

The program originally started with the Memphis Police Department, known as the Memphis Model in 1988. The National Alliance on Mental Illness, (NAMI), has made this weeklong program for police a priority training. Though the research has not definitively established that officers trained in CIT have experienced less use of force and especially less use of deadly force, there has been research showing that CIT-trained officers felt better equipped to handle these types of calls. Concerning police encounters with people with mental health and substance use disorders, CIT has been shown to have some measurable positive effects, mainly in the area of officer-level outcomes, including officers are less likely to escalate to the use of force and CIT programs have also been promoted to increase diversion to psychiatric services rather than jails and to decrease costs (Rogers, McNiel & Binder, 2019).

My preference is to use 'police' or 'policing' rather than 'law enforcement' when describing our nation's peacekeepers as most of an officer's daily duties are not enforcing the law. This terminology changed at some point in policing history, and I believe causes some consternation among the public. Police respond to many more calls of people in crisis, than they do arresting or enforcing the law and having CIT training can help

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agencies avoid complaints and provide citizens with needed services and having officers trained in BTAM allow them to recognize someone on a “pathway to violence.”

BTAM trained and practiced properly will reduce targeted violence. Police officers will understand the Pathway to Violence and will be able to educate their communities, building relationships that encourage reporting of concerning behaviors. Sharing information is vital, whether between agencies and especially as part of a BTAM team.

Florida Department of Law Enforcement model

After several acts of mass targeted violence in Florida, the governor tasked the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) to establish a statewide strategy of targeted violence prevention. FDLE has trained police officers and others, including school officials, mental health professionals and persons involved in child protection bringing together various agencies to assist in Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2021)

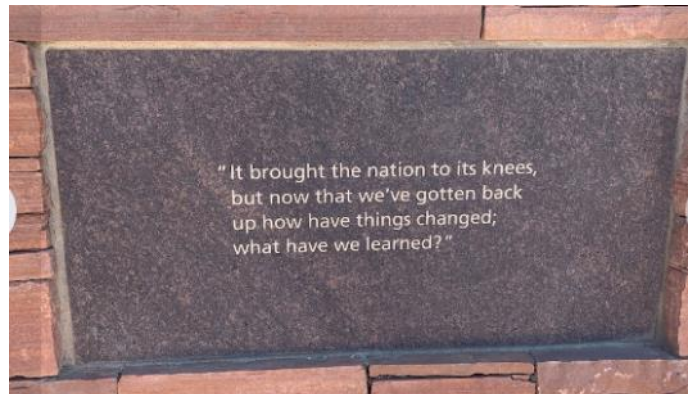
Some police agencies have been using BTAM for many years, including the United States Capitol Police, Los Angeles Police Department Threat Management Unit, and others. BTAM is required in schools in several states, including Virginia, Colorado, Texas, and Florida. Many colleges and universities use BTAM, unfortunately many of these mandates came after tragedies in those states. All government studies and panels that have investigated school shootings starting with Columbine in 1999 to the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSDHS) in Florida and Santa Fe High School in Texas reports have described Behavioral Threat Assessment as the best, proven method for preventing violence.

Most people are troubled long before they are troubling...

A Dark Night in Aurora: Inside James Holmes and the Colorado Mass Shootings Dr. William H. Reid

Threat Assessment in schools and colleges and universities

State government commissions were established after most of the mass shootings at schools and colleges since the Columbine killings in 1999 to investigate and examine these horrific tragedies.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/ColumbineMemorial/photos>

This quote on the Columbine Memorial presents an ominous and important question,

“It brought a nation to its knees, but now that we’ve gotten back up how have things changed: what have we learned?” We have learned that behavioral threat assessment and management is a best practice and becoming the standard of care in violence prevention, but unfortunately change is slow in the adoption of BTAM.

Some of the examples from the various reports include:

The *Columbine Review Commission* recommended that “a state task force should be created to develop model threat-assessment plans, standards and training programs” A threat assessment team should be established at every Colorado middle and high school to evaluate threats of violence (May 2001).

The Final Report of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission recommended each school district in Connecticut should have policies in place that are related to threat assessment and violence management. These teams should receive training in threat assessment that will enable them to review specific threats and help manage

or support any person who issues a threat as well as warning the potential victims (March 6, 2015).

The *Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting* found failures in information sharing, threat assessment and a failure of systems thinking in the time before killing. The report further stated there were 'many missed opportunities to share information about and intervene with (killer) and his "concerning behaviors" before the shooting.

Information Sharing, Threat Assessment, Systems Thinking (January 18, 2016).

The *School and Firearm Safety Action Plan* from Texas recommended to provide schools with behavioral threat assessment programs and the Texas School Safety Center...will deliver training on behavioral threat assessment to school personnel (May 30,2018).

[MSDHS Public Safety Commission, Initial Report](#) stated that Behavioral threat assessments are one of the most important opportunities to provide a safer school environment and head off concerning behavior before it manifests into actual harm...and each school must have a robust Threat Assessment Team_(January 2, 2019).

School mass shootings rightfully generate much attention and considerable research. A recent National Institute of Justice report, *Five Facts About Mass Shootings In K-12 Schools*, revealed that, most people who commit a mass shooting are in crisis leading up to it and are likely to leak their plans to others which presents opportunities for intervention which means that everyone can help prevent school mass shootings and importantly reported that threat assessments are a promising prevention strategy to assess and respond to mass shooting threats, as well as other threats of violence by students (August 2022).

There has been a number of mass shootings at colleges and universities with similar findings.

The Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech Report of the Review Panel recommended VA Tech and other institutions of higher learning should have a threat assessment team that includes representatives from law enforcement,

human resources, student and academic affairs, legal counsel, and mental health (August 2007).

The *Threat Assessment Process Review and Recommendations*, about a Tucson shooting involving a former Pima Community College student noted the "behavioral/threat assessment process must develop and manage an 'all hands' participation to be viable and successful" in recognizing student behavioral issues, addressing potential threats and in facilitating expedient positive outcomes. (Pima Community College, January 8, 2014).

Recently released, a *Review of the University of Arizona's Safety and Security Environment* reported that the University of Arizona's threat management process was ineffective and its security systems inadequate in the period leading up to the fatal shooting of a professor last year (PAX Group, LLC).

There have been similar findings in reports from mass shootings at government offices, military bases, post offices, etc.

Finally, there has been and continues to be extensive research by the U.S. Secret Service, the FBI, and many practitioners in threat assessment. Following the stalking and murder of an up-and-coming actress in Los Angeles in 1989, the investigators of the murder began meeting with other police and mental health professionals and eventually created what became known as the *Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP)*. This organization is currently comprised of approximately 3000 individuals, including law enforcement, prosecutors, mental health professionals, corporate security experts, probation and parole personnel and others involved in threat and violence risk assessment.

ATAP affords its members a professional and educational environment to exchange ideas and strategies to address such issues as stalking, threats, and homeland security. The primary focus of this organization is to provide the necessary knowledge, tools, and support to better prepare members to handle these types of situations. This includes training conferences, seminars and networking with other professionals working in this field. ATAP has

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expanded internationally and there is now a Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, Association of European Threat Assessment Professionals, Asia-Pacific Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, African Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, and most recently, the America Latina Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP website).

The universal goal of all police agencies, be it federal, state or local is to protect citizens and prevent crime, in particular violent crime. With the increase in mass shootings in the United States, agencies must constantly evaluate and re-evaluate methods used to accomplish this all important responsibility and the evidence indicates that BTAM is a proven method to preventing targeted violence.

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About the Author

In 2022, Rick Parfitt joined AT-RISK International to serve as the Director of Threat Management, where he is responsible for overseeing and coordinating the development and implementation of security strategies to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats, helping to ensure the safety and security of clients and their assets.

Prior to joining AT-RISK International, Mr. Parfitt held several high-level municipal and campus policing positions in both Pennsylvania and Florida. In Florida, he created a campus police agency and served as its chief for 11 years. Additionally, Mr. Parfitt served as the Director of Safety and Security for a large Florida school district, where he developed their behavioral threat management program, creating teams in 119 schools and training over 1,200 school administrators, school mental health personnel, and school resource officers. He also served as a police academy instructor and an adjunct college instructor in Pennsylvania and Florida colleges.

Mr. Parfitt is a member of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP), where he served as the first president of ATAP's Florida Chapter and a Certified Threat Manager through the Association. He has been a member of several professional law enforcement organizations, including the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA), the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA), the FBI National Academy Associates, and the Florida and Southwest Florida Police Chief's Associations.

He has authored articles in several publications, including the *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, the *Campus Law Enforcement Journal*, *The Florida Police Chief*, and many others. Mr. Parfitt holds a Master of Arts degree from California University of Pennsylvania and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Pittsburgh. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy, 195th Session.