BTAM: COOPERATION, NOT COERCION

Lauren K. Hagy

In 2014, the US government selected three major cities in which to pilot a local approach to preventing terrorism and targeted violence,[1] predicated on the idea that local community involvement can improve the design of such approaches [2]. Since then, these efforts have become more common as local actors—states, cities, and counties—have passed legislation related to behavioral threat assessment, adopted prevention strategies aimed at terrorism and targeted violence, and implemented programming to address such violence.[2]

We present this series of papers—informed by a year-long evaluation of the violence prevention efforts underway in Wood County, Ohio[3]—to shed light on a local effort and assist other actors in building their own networks.

In July 2018, the US Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) released guidelines to help schools create a targeted violence prevention plan. The report, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*, notes that "the vast majority of incidents or concerns that are likely to be reported can be handled by school personnel using school or community resources" and identifies eight key steps for creating a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan [3]. The fourth step of NTAC's guide is to establish a threshold for law enforcement

involvement, which both implies and assumes that the process is being led by the school and not by the police [3].

Having the process led by schools makes sense because most of the cases for which behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is initiated occur in the pre-criminal space, where the at-risk individual has not yet engaged in an activity or behavior that allows for criminal charges to be filed. BTAM in such cases is focused on early threat identification, support for at-risk youth, and collaboration between community stakeholders and concerned family members. In its best incarnations, BTAM is a fundamentally cooperative endeavor, even if a degree of coercion is required.

THE LIMITS OF COERCION

When coercion is required, it can come from a number of places. Some schools may be empowered to remove the student from school pending a mental health assessment or condition their return to school on engagement in services. However, as one school administrator we spoke to mentioned, it gets "tricky when things aren't at [the] level of expulsion because then you can't necessarily force compliance...there is less leverage for smaller infractions" [4]. Moreover, there are often legal restrictions on the powers schools

---

[1] The US Secret Service defines *targeted violence* as "a premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity" [1, p. 12].

[2]   For example, a range of activities is underway in states including Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Ohio, New York, and Texas.

[3]   Our evaluation focused exclusively on Wood County's efforts serving juveniles.

have to address at-risk student behavior. For example, in some states, schools are not permitted to require students to be evaluated by mental health practitioners as a condition of returning to school [5]. Schools can revert to expulsion, but administrators interviewed acknowledged that this does not resolve the problem; it merely passes the threat on to another school.

Practitioners have even fewer options to coerce the behavior of adults. Certain court-ordered programs, such as outpatient civil commitment (also known as assisted outpatient treatment), exist to help people with a serious mental illness obtain treatment in the community [6]. However, these programs require an individual to be in an active mental health crisis and have strict requirements that limit their use. To qualify, a person must generally meet basic criteria for mental health commitment and have a history of nonadherence to treatment.

Law enforcement and the criminal justice system hold a great deal of leverage. Their processes, tools, and role in society enable them to take actions that quickly affect behavior in cases where the threat is extremely severe or imminent or where criminal behavior has already occurred (Table 1). For example, in one case, the student made a threat so severe they were arrested the same day and their case proceeded immediately to the criminal justice system [4]. This individual was mandated by the court to participate in counseling and treatment with medication.

However, the reality—as noted by NTAC's guidelines— is that most cases identified by BTAM teams will fall short of imminent threat or criminality and not require the involvement of law enforcement. As one Wood County stakeholder noted, "The earlier you're able to intervene, the less options for following up you have" [4]. Practitioners and stakeholders are, in most of these cases, working with a limited number of sources of leverage making coercion a poor tool on which to predicate their approach.

> "The earlier you're able to intervene, the less options for following up you have."

Table 1. Sources of leverage in the BTAM process

	Type of Behavior	Sources of Leverage (Coercion)	Considerations
Youth	Pre-criminal	• School • Child protective services	• Legal restrictions may limit the school's options
	Criminal	• Juvenile court • Diversion program • Probation officer	
Adult[a]	Pre-criminal	• Outpatient civil commitment	• Rarely used because it is too difficult; requires individual to be in active crisis
	Criminal	• Court • Probation officer	

Source: CNA.
[a] Although our analysis focused on youth, the lack of systems to monitor young adults emerged as a serious concern among practitioners. We note sources of leverage for adults to support implementation of our policy recommendations.

THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATION

The alternative to coercion is cooperation, specifically, the cooperation of parents (for youth) or of the individuals themselves (for adults). Parental cooperation is often critical to getting a youth engaged in services or treatment, even when coercive measures can be leveraged. On one hand, a parent's cooperation in the process can ensure that their child receives the best care possible and help a school manage any concerns and challenges. On the other, a parent's refusal to sign a release of information or bring their child to services can be a serious roadblock to getting help for the child. If an adult refuses to sign a release or participate in treatment, little can be done to force them to participate in services if there is no imminent threat to self or others.

Building rapport with the individual of concern (whether a youth or an adult) is critical to ensuring the individual's meaningful engagement in services and communication between relevant entities. Given limited sources of leverage, an individual's belief in the value of the process, the benefits of services, and the support of those involved can help ensure their ongoing participation. Because one of the goals of threat and violence prevention is to identify and support at-risk, pre-criminal youth, escalating a case to law enforcement or relying on a coercive law enforcement approach is insufficient and counterproductive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

1. ARRANGE FOR BTAM EFFORTS TO BE LED BY NON–LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

The 2018 NTAC guidelines assume that BTAM efforts designed to reduce school-based violence will be led by a non–law enforcement organization. The guidance—which, notably, comes from a law enforcement organization: the US Secret Service—suggests that the organization leading the BTAM process should establish a threshold for when "law enforcement will be asked to support or take over an

assessment" [3]. The logic of this approach is rooted in the fact that, as the report notes, "the vast majority of incidents or concerns that are likely to be reported can be handled by school personnel using school or community resources" [3]. It is important to note that this is true for both school-age and adult individuals of concern. Having BTAM efforts led by law enforcement puts at the center of the process an organization that has jurisdiction only once a specific threshold has been crossed. By contrast, placing a non–law enforcement entity at the center—a school or a county mental health board—makes central an organization that has greater flexibility both to offer services to, and foster a long-term cooperative relationship with, the individual and/or family.

2. BUILD A PROCESS FOR YOUTH FIRST (THEN ADULTS)

School-age youths spend much of their time in an enclosed system where they are supervised by both their parents and their school. However, adults engaging in pre-criminal behavior are rarely in similar environments. They present a much more challenging case for behavior management, especially if they refuse to sign releases of information that allow entities involved in their care to coordinate with one another. Therefore, building a targeted violence prevention system that focuses on youth first will likely be more achievable for practitioners. Starting with the youths will give practitioners the opportunity to troubleshoot and recalibrate before moving on to building a process to address adults.

3. TRAIN PRACTITIONERS IN STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING MOTIVATION TO CHANGE

In May 2024, Wood County offered motivational interviewing (MI) training to community-based professionals including law enforcement, probation officers, and treatment providers [7]. MI is described as a client-centered, evidence-based counseling approach designed to help people find the motivation

to make positive behavioral change. It emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and self-efficacy. Given the limited coercive tools practitioners have available, developing an individual's personal interest in change and improvement is essential to ensure their continued participation in services and programming. Jurisdictions seeking to increase their behavioral threat management capabilities should consider offering MI training to community-based professionals engaged in this work.

REFERENCES

[1] National Threat Assessment Center. 2024. *Behavioral Threat Assessment Units: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement to Prevent Targeted Violence*. US Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security. https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2024-10/Behavioral-Threat-Assessment-Units-A-Guide-for-State-and-Local-Law-Enforcement-to-Prevent-Targeted-Violence.pdf.

[2] Savoia, Elena, Megan McBride, Jessica Stern, Max Su, Nigel Harriman, Ajmal Aziz, and Richard Legault. 2020. "Assessing the Impact of the Boston CVE Pilot Program: A Developmental Evaluation Approach." *Homeland Security Affairs* 16, Article 6. https://www.hsaj.org/resources/uploads/2022/04/hsaj_V16_AssessingtheImpactoftheBostonCVEPilotProgram_Aug2020_v2.pdf.

[3] Alathari, Lisa, Ashley Blair, Catherine Camilletti, Steven Driscoll, Diana Drysdale, Jeffrey McGarry, and Amanda Snook. 2018. *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*. National Threat Assessment Center. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_0711_USSS_NTAC-Enhancing-School-Safety-Guide.pdf.

[4] Interview with Wood County stakeholder, Sept. 2024.

[5] Texas School Safety Center. 2024. *School Behavioral Threat Assessment Manual*. https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/sbta-toolkit/manual.

[6] Lukes, Amy, Mark Munetz, Betsy Johnson, and Brian Stettin. *Ohio A.O.T. Implementation Manual: Developing an Effective Assisted Outpatient Treatment Program*. Treatment Advocacy Center. https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/aot-implementation-manual.pdf.

[7] Carle, Julie. 2024. "Motivational Interviewing Training Planned for County Mental Health and Addiction Service Professionals." BG Independent Media. Apr. 18. https://bgindependentmedia.org/motivational-interviewing-training-planned-for-county-mental-health-and-addiction-service-professionals/.

ABOUT CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Institute for Public Research—which serves civilian government agencies—and the Center for Naval Analyses, the Department of the Navy's federally funded research and development center (FFRDC). CNA develops actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts, and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data, working side by side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA's research portfolio includes global security and strategic competition, homeland security, emergency management, criminal justice, public health, data management, systems analysis, naval operations, and fleet and operational readiness.