BTAM: Lessons Learned from Incidents of Violence

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In early 2013, a California high school student entered his first period class and shot a student in the chest. He then attempted to shoot a second student before surrendering. Fortunately, there were no fatalities; however, the incident gained attention when the injured student filed a civil lawsuit against the school.[1] In 2019, a jury found the school negligent in preventing the shooting, a verdict that was upheld in a 2022 appeal.[2]

Notably, about a year before the incident, field trip chaperones overheard the teen perpetrator threatening to shoot other students.[3] They reported the threats to a school administrator, who also served as the head of a three-person Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) team. In response, the school initiated a threat assessment, but the BTAM team determined there was insufficient evidence to classify the student as a violent threat. A score of 5 out of 5 would have qualified him for "immediate arrest or hospitalization," but he scored a 4. The team elected to provide the student with a month of counseling from the school psychologist.[4] In the months between this assessment and the shooting, several adults and students expressed concerns about the teen to the same school administrator. Despite these concerns, no further actions were taken. Those who reported these concerns

Key Takeaways

- No BTAM team can prevent every act of violence, but post incident reviews consistently reveal fixable system level breakdowns rather than isolated individual errors.
- To effectively assess threats, BTAM teams must be able to detect a pattern of concerning behaviors over time; when information is siloed across people, departments, or agencies, no one can see the full picture of risk.
- Risks evolve; even when a formal threat assessment finds "no current violent threat," ongoing monitoring and documented follow up efforts are essential to ensure important changes in behavior and circumstances are not missed.
- Misunderstandings and fear around privacy laws (such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)), combined with decentralized or loosely coupled organizational structures, often discourage information sharing and prevent BTAM teams from acting on concerns.
- Creating cross system, community based BTAM structures and a culture that encourages reporting can reduce information gaps even when individuals move between schools, campuses, workplaces, or jurisdictions.

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were reassured that the previous threat assessment had concluded that the student did not pose a violent threat.[5]

Many school districts, local governments, and state governments have adopted BTAM teams based on growing evidence that they strengthen violence prevention efforts;[6] however, acts of violence still occur. In this short paper, we draw on insights from past incidents to examine the factors that may contribute to the persistence of violent acts despite BTAM team efforts. In addition, we explore the implications of these lessons for future threat prevention. Our intention is not to place blame but rather to share lessons learned from cases in which violence occurred to prevent future violence.

Barriers to BTAM success

BTAM teams are multidisciplinary groups tasked with identifying, assessing, documenting, and responding to potential threats.[7] Their work is complex, so BTAM members must be able to exercise judgment and adaptability in many contexts. When violence occurs despite the existence of a BTAM process or the involvement of a BTAM team, the breakdown can typically be traced to two primary issues: (1) information silos and (2) the organization and climate.

> **"No one knew all the information and no one connected all the dots."** – *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007: Report of the Review Panel, p. 2*

Information silos

Research has found that patterns of behavior rather than single indicators[8] are effective predictors of risk. Such patterns cannot be established if information is siloed. Information silos occur when different individuals or institutions possess separate pieces of critical information but no one has access to the full picture.[9] Many post-incident reviews reveal fragmented information that, in isolation, may not rise to a level of actionable concern; when these fragments are combined, however, they clearly indicate a potential threat. BTAM teams are intended to address this challenge, but despite their presence, information silos can persist for three main reasons:

1. **Lack of a centralized reporting mechanism.** Indicators of potential violence may appear in various settings, such as schools, workplaces, homes, social circles, or law enforcement encounters. Without a centralized structure to collect and analyze concerning behaviors, each piece of information would be evaluated without full context.[10]
2. **Loosely coupled systems.** In layered systems, information silos can occur when there is independence within or between organizations.[11] In schools, teachers often have autonomy over their classrooms and handle minor behavioral issues independently without involving other teachers or the administration. In communities, different organizations operate independently. This autonomy is functional, but it can hinder the observation of behavioral patterns across different classrooms or environments.[12]
3. **Privacy concerns.** Particularly in education settings, FERPA restricts the sharing of student educational records without consent. Fear of noncompliance, and at times misinterpretation of the laws,[13] can discourage educators from sharing student information.

Organization and climate

How a BTAM team's policies are implemented significantly influences its effectiveness. Lessons from past incidents reveal that certain organizational aspects, including the following, have hampered successful threat assessment:

- **Uncodified frameworks.** A lack of clearly documented reporting, tracking, and communication practices can lead to misunderstandings in how to handle concerning behavior.[14] After the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood, Texas, that left 13 people dead and 31 injured, the Army's internal review team specifically noted that they "have programs and policies to

address prevention and intervention for suicide, sexual assault and family violence, but guidance concerning workplace violence and the potential for self-radicalization is insufficient."[15]

- **Inadequate follow-up.** In several incidents, threat assessments were conducted months prior to the attack and found that the individual did not pose a violent threat.[16] These assessments were not repeated despite new concerns arising; therefore, changes in behavior and circumstances over time were missed.
- **Weak reporting environment.** A lack of encouragement to report—including conflicting or absent information on what, whether, and how to report—can result in BTAM teams lacking necessary information. Following a case study in which multiple individuals expressed concerns prior to an act of violence, one researcher observed that the "organizational structure lacked the procedures and cultural norms to support proactive communication about and interventions for [the population]," which hindered reporting.[17] The day before the Taft Union High School shooting, the attacker told a student multiple times not to come to school the next day.[18] However, this student had previously reported concerns to the administration and "been dismissed several times," so they took no action.[19]

"At least 30 people had knowledge of [shooter's] troubling behavior before the shooting that they did not report or [that they] reported but it was not acted on."
– Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission: Initial Report, p. 264

- **Implementation gap.** A threat assessment framework must be correctly implemented to be effective. Reviews of past incidents have identified instances in which processes were simply not followed. Examples include not following guidance on who should be part of a threat assessment and not adhering to threat investigation processes.[20]

Case Examples

To illustrate these issues more concretely, the following section presents two real-world examples. For brevity, only details directly relevant to the present analysis are included.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 2018

Summary:* In February of 2018, a former student of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSDHS) came to the school with a semi-automatic rifle and opened fire, killing 17 people. In 2016, when the attacker was still a student, the school performed a threat assessment after he had reported having suicidal thoughts and had made a suicide attempt. The school also requested he be assessed for an involuntary psychiatric hold.** Two external mental health professionals conducted an evaluation and determined he was not a risk to others at that time.[21] The same year, however, the school resource officer became aware that the student had talked about killing people, and the Broward County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) had been alerted to a social media post in which he said he was going to get a gun and kill people. Multiple additional concerns were reported to the MSDHS administration, including that he had a fascination with firearms, had brought knives to school, and had made comments about hurting people. Students and parents said the administration was dismissive of these concerns. In addition, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) received a tip about a social media post in September 2017, and

* This summary is adapted from the following sources: Jaclyn Schildkraut, Rebecca G. Cowan, and Tessa M. Mosher, "The Parkland Mass Shooting and the Path to Intended Violence: A Case Study of Missed Opportunities and Avenues for Future Prevention," *American Journal of Criminal Justice 47, no. 2 (2022): 335-53,* https://doi.org/10.1177/10887679211062518; Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2019, "Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission," https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/msdhs/home.

** See the *Florida Mental Health Act: Florida Department of Children and Families,* https://www.myflfamilies.com/crisis-services/baker-act.

BCSO received a call about a social media threat in November 2017. When no action was taken in response to the threat, the bystander reached out to the FBI in January 2018, only a month before the shooting.

Discussion: Over a two-year period prior to the shooting, school and community officials were alerted to numerous concerns about the attacker's behavior. However, the Public Safety Commission report[22] found that staff conducting the threat assessment were not properly trained and that law enforcement inadequately responded to threats—two issues that reflect an **implementation gap**. Unfortunately, there was no community BTAM team and no mechanism for sharing information between the school, law enforcement, and the FBI. In addition, once the attacker left MSDHS, the information about his past threats and assessments stayed siloed, as is often the case with school-based systems.[23] The information silo caused by the **lack of a centralized reporting mechanism** prevented any single entity from seeing the whole picture. In addition, no documented action was taken after the threat assessment in 2016, illustrating **inadequate follow-up**.

Virginia Tech, 2007

Summary:† In April 2006, a student at Virginia Tech shot 49 people, killing 32 students and faculty before killing himself. In the months and years prior to the incident, the attacker exhibited concerning behaviors that resulted in multiple contacts with people in authority. These warning signs included intimidating and stalking other students (reported to resident advisors and campus police), dark writings and behaviors that alarmed his teachers (reported to the university BTAM team), and suicidal remarks (reported to campus police and resulting in a threat assessment and involuntary hospitalization). Though deemed mentally ill and a threat to himself or others at intake, prior to his hearing, an independent evaluator found him to be mentally ill and not a threat. At his commitment hearing, the justice determining the continuance of his involuntary commitment ruled he was an "imminent danger to himself as a result of mental illness" but ordered him to outpatient treatment.[24] He attended only one outpatient counseling appointment, which was on the day of his release. The university BTAM team was unaware of the attacker's engagements with campus police (e.g., stalking behaviors, suicidality, involuntary hospitalization) or with the resident advisors (multiple reports of concern from other residents). The BTAM team was contacted by his professors, who had concerns about violent writings; however, the campus counseling center decided that his writings were not threats, and the BTAM team concluded in its review that he was not a threat.

Discussion: The governor's independent review panel for the Virginia Tech shooting identified numerous red flags that were missed by the BTAM team. The review panel specifically noted that the team was hindered by privacy law interpretation (**privacy concerns**) and a decentralized structure (**loosely coupled system**),[25] resulting in information silos. **Insufficient follow-up** is also evident in this case because no one ensured he attended outpatient therapy and because no further contact was made with him after his professors expressed concerns about his violent writings to the BTAM team.

Considerations for Current and Future BTAM Teams

Drawing on the work done by researchers and review committees, current BTAM teams have an opportunity to evaluate current practices and identify opportunities to strengthen their own threat assessment framework. Past cases inform the following recommendations:

1. **Create cross-system centralized reporting structures.** Develop a robust mechanism, such as community-based BTAM teams,[26] to facilitate communication across information silos and ensure critical information is reviewed by all necessary stakeholders. Efforts should focus on breaking down silos across organizations (e.g.,

† This summary is adapted from the following source: Virginia Tech Review Panel, *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007: Report of the Review Panel, Commonwealth of Virginia, 2007,* https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/prevail/docs/VTReviewPanelReport.pdf.

between law enforcement, schools, and mental health agencies) and silos within organizations (e.g., between teachers and administrators within schools; between departments and administrations in post-secondary environments).

2. **Provide clear guidance on privacy and reporting expectations.** To encourage individuals to report concerning behaviors, provide information on what, whether, and how to share information.[27] In systems governed by FERPA, proactively communicate what is and is not prohibited. For example, make clear that FERPA has an emergency exception[28] and does not prohibit a school official from sharing information obtained through personal knowledge or observation. Such information can be disclosed to local law enforcement officials, school officials, and parents.[29]

3. **Establish, document, and follow team processes.** Clearly outline and put in writing assessment procedures, case tracking procedures, and communication expectations.[30] Doing so will ensure consistency, accountability, and informed decision-making.

4. **Implement dynamic assessments.** Recognize that even if an individual is not determined to be a threat at one point in time, they may become violent in the future.[31] Instead of conducting static, one-time threat assessments, use new information as a prompt to initiate a new threat assessment to determine whether the threat situation has evolved.

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