

BTAM: Behavioral Threat Assessment Outcomes in School Settings

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In 2013, a high school student in Denver, Colorado, killed another student and himself. The student had previously been assessed as a “low-level risk” despite a significant history of threatening behavior.¹ The Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) team evaluated the student and created a safety and support plan, but the assessment failed to account for all available information, and the safety plan lacked sufficient follow-up.² Unfortunately, this incident of violence was not an isolated event; even though the vast majority of students assessed by BTAM teams do not attempt violence, some students who undergo a threat assessment and management plan still attempt violence.

What happens after a student is referred to a school BTAM team? BTAM teams are designed to detect and manage threats within their jurisdictions, but little is known about the outcomes of BTAM cases. This article summarizes the current evidence on BTAM outcomes. We examine the rates at which students who receive threat assessment go on to attempt targeted violence. In addition, we look at the data on the use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions and expulsions), law enforcement involvement, and academic outcomes for students assessed by BTAM teams.

Key Takeaways

- Though very few BTAM cases result in injury or harm, attempted violence still occurs in roughly 10 percent of cases.
- Threat classification is the most reliable predictor of attack outcome.
- When implemented according to evidence-based protocols, BTAM may create opportunities to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and to provide support to students that can reduce negative academic outcomes.



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Subsequent Attempts at Violence

The vast majority of students who undergo threat assessment are never transitioned to a management plan because the student is classified as no threat or as a transient threat.³ Of those who undergo both a threat assessment and management plan, most do not attempt violence. Though a small percentage do and an even smaller percentage succeed, each attempt (even those that fail) can have significant consequences for victims, perpetrators, and communities.

Two recent large studies found that in samples of thousands of school threat assessment cases, about 10 percent (235 and 1,533, respectively) resulted in an attack.⁴ Smaller studies have shown slightly more variation: two studies of 844 and 621 cases found attempts at violence in 2.5 percent and 17 percent of cases, respectively.⁵

One of the large studies that assessed the use of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) from 166 schools in five US states found the following out of the 10 percent (234) of cases in which violence was attempted:

- 24.4 percent (57) of the attempts were averted
- 75.6 percent (177) were carried out
- 2.9 percent (7) resulted in serious injury
- 29.1 percent (68) involved minor injuries
- 43.6 percent (102) resulted in no injuries

Threats categorized as substantive under BTAM guidelines are much more likely to be acted on. Threats categorized as transient may also be acted on but with much less frequency. According to these large studies, attacks were attempted at the following rates:

- 29.2 percent and 30.2 percent of very serious threat cases
- 21.5 percent and 32.6 percent of serious threat cases
- 8.0 percent and 7.0 percent of transient threat cases⁶

In one of the small studies, substantive threats were 36 times more likely to be attempted than transient ones.⁷

This finding suggests that BTAM teams using evidence-based methods categorize threats relatively accurately, though some cases categorized as transient threats may have been misjudged (or post-assessment events could have escalated the situation).⁸

Academic and Disciplinary Outcomes

BTAM teams fulfill one of their primary functions when they prevent violence, but that is not their only responsibility.

Before most schools used BTAM, many relied on zero-tolerance policies for students who threatened other students. Such policies often led to use of exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspensions and expulsions), which does not improve student behavior or enhance school safety (and in some cases can worsen it).⁹ It also can result in disproportionately harsh consequences for some students, such as a 10-year-old who was arrested for making joking comments that were misinterpreted as serious threats.¹⁰ BTAM teams serve as an alternative: they tailor responses to the threat and needs of the student and focus on providing appropriate supports to resolve problematic situations before they escalate.¹¹

Although BTAM teams generally do not make disciplinary decisions, their findings can significantly affect students by influencing disciplinary and law enforcement actions.¹² As BTAM teams become commonplace in schools, we must examine whether and how they may contribute to harsh punishment and law enforcement involvement for student misbehavior.

Discipline and law enforcement involvement

Though most threat assessment cases do not result in exclusionary discipline, a significant proportion do. Large studies of Virginia and Florida students who underwent threat assessment found the following: 84 percent and 90 percent (respectively) remained in their home schools, but 43 percent and 26 percent (respectively) received out-of-school suspensions.¹³

Threat classification (i.e., nonthreat, transient, substantive, or very serious) was the strongest predictor

of disciplinary consequences, ranging from suspension to expulsion or change in school placement.¹⁴ This close relationship supports the previous research finding that “[BTAM team] findings can influence the decisions made by the school administration” on disciplinary outcomes, even though BTAM teams do not make disciplinary decisions.¹⁵

If properly implemented, BTAM may help reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. When comparing control groups using zero-tolerance policies to schools with BTAM, researchers found the following:

- Students in schools using BTAM teams were more likely to receive counseling services and parent conferences and less likely to receive long-term suspension or alternative school placement compared to students in a control group.¹⁶
- Schools that implemented CSTAG* had a 52 percent reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79 percent reduction in bullying infractions compared to previous years.¹⁷ Use of CSTAG led to lower exclusionary discipline rates than use of general threat assessment approaches.¹⁸

However, the evidence is mixed. A 2025 California survey of 121 high schools found that increased use of BTAM did not reduce suspension rates.¹⁹

Perhaps surprisingly, the rate of law enforcement action as a result of BTAM is quite low: two large studies found that law enforcement actions occurred following threat assessments in only 1 percent and 1.8 percent of cases, respectively,²⁰ with one study noting that “schools using threat assessment teams with officers did not generate high rates” of law enforcement action.²¹

Academic outcomes

Students who are not disciplined may still experience academic consequences following threat assessment. Like disciplinary actions, “adverse academic outcomes

can have long-term impacts on students, and on society,” so the effects of BTAM on academic achievements should be carefully considered.²²

The evidence on academic outcomes is limited but relatively promising. A small study of students who were described as largely at risk of academic difficulties before BTAM recorded the following graduation rates:

- 94 percent for the general population
- 83 percent for the study population
 - 93 percent for students who had made transient threats
 - 76 percent for students who had made serious threats
- 75 percent for the comparison group (i.e., students who had received out-of-school suspension but not threat assessment)²³

A larger study examined adverse academic outcomes including failed courses, failed state tests, grade retention, and dropout rates for 2,287 student cases, finding that threat-assessed students had similar or lower rates of adverse outcomes than the general population (e.g., 0.8 percent dropout rate compared to 3.2 percent rate for the general population).²⁴

These studies suggest that the evaluation and subsequent engagement of supports such as counseling and parental involvement through the BTAM process may actually serve as a protective factor, “leading to students having more support for remaining in school.”²⁵

Recommendations

As use of BTAM grows, so does the number of students who undergo threat assessment. Assessing the outcomes for these students, including how the assessment process affects students who do not go on to attempt violence, is crucial to the continued development of the practice. Current evidence indicates

* At the time, CSTAG was known as the Virginia School Threat Assessment Guidelines. University of Virginia, “Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines,” Youth Violence Project, accessed June 17, 2026, <https://education.virginia.edu/research-initiatives/research-centers-labs/research-labs/youth-violence-project/school-threat-assessment/comprehensive-school-threat-assessment-guidelines>.

that around 10 percent of threat-assessed students go on to attempt violence; most of these students were correctly identified as posing substantive threats, suggesting high efficacy of BTAM when conducted using an evidence-based framework.

Although the evidence on other outcomes is mixed, it is possible that BTAM use may reduce the use of harsh discipline and decrease negative academic outcomes, particularly for those making transient threats. We must continue to examine these outcomes to ensure that BTAM is both preventing violence and providing support to students who most need it. In the meantime, we recommend the following promising practices:

1. Sticking with evidence-based approaches matters most when the stakes are high. BTAM should be implemented according to tested protocols such as CSTAG, which research has found to improve progress toward BTAM objectives.
2. Threat classification according to established guidelines is a strong predictor of subsequent attempts at violence. BTAM programs should receive thorough training on indicators of substantive versus transient threats.
3. Correctly identified substantive threats have much higher risks of subsequent attempts at violence and should be carefully monitored.
4. Threats identified as transient can still become concerning. BTAM teams should follow up, monitor, and reassess transient threat cases when new information is available.²⁶
5. BTAM should be used as an opportunity to engage supports for all students who are assessed, including those not identified as substantive threats.
6. BTAM teams should be aware of the disciplinary implications of their assessments and work to avoid outcomes that lead to exclusionary discipline when practicable.

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