ABSTRACT

ELLINGTON, BREANNA LEA. Preventing Targeted School Violence Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Exploration of School Counselors’ Prevention and Intervention Practices (Under the direction of Adria S. Dunbar).

After an incident of targeted school violence at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) released an operational guide, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence* (2018), with the intention of providing another tool to enhance school safety. Moving from a reactive response to a more preventive approach is critical to implement the threat assessment process detailed within the U.S. Secret Service model. School counselors take on significant leadership roles in and after school shootings due to their expertise (Fein, Carlisle, & Isaacson, 2008). However, proactive targeted violence prevention efforts also align with the roles and responsibilities of school counselors. The purpose of the present study was to explore professional school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to student threats of violence, including challenges and recommendations for a thorough threat assessment process in schools.

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) was the methodological approach for examining the use of threat assessment in schools. Individual interviews were conducted with eleven professional school counselors from a large southeastern school district. The present study was designed to answer four research questions pertaining to the (1) roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan, and how schools may (2) identify students who might be at risk for violence, (3) assess a student’s risk for violence, and (4) manage a student’s risk for violence. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was the methodological approach employed for collecting and analyzing individual interview
data. Data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12.

Findings suggest schools are attempting to design systems and structures in which to conduct threat assessments on student threats of violence in the attempt to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. Yet, inconsistencies as well as challenges to roles and responsibilities, threat assessment practices, and risk management strategies indicate a need for further exploration and analysis. Thus, future studies that further investigate the school threat assessment process are warranted to inform targeted violence prevention efforts in schools.
Preventing Targeted School Violence Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Exploration of School Counselors’ Prevention and Intervention Practices

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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BIOGRAPHY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................................. ix

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................................... xii

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

Theoretical Frameworks ...................................................................................................................... 4

Significance of the Study ..................................................................................................................... 11

Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................................ 12

Research Questions ............................................................................................................................ 12

Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................................ 13

Organization of the Study .................................................................................................................. 14

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .............................................................................................. 15

Historical Analysis .............................................................................................................................. 15

Origins of Threat Assessment ............................................................................................................. 16

Political and Legal Responses ............................................................................................................ 19

Responses By Schools ......................................................................................................................... 20

Factors to Consider in Threat Assessment ......................................................................................... 33

Principles of Risk Assessment ........................................................................................................... 34

Development of Threat Assessment Models ....................................................................................... 38

  The FBI Model ............................................................................................................................... 39

  The USSS Model ............................................................................................................................ 43

  The VSTAG Model ......................................................................................................................... 45

  Critique of the Models .................................................................................................................... 47

Role of School Counselors in Threat Assessment .............................................................................. 51
Safe School Climate .................................................................52
Student Voice ........................................................................52
Investigating Student Threats of Violence ...............................53
Barriers ..................................................................................54

The USSS Operational Guide to Prevent Acts of Targeted School Violence ........................................54
Creating a Comprehensive Targeted School Violence Prevention Plan ..............................................55
Conclusion .............................................................................58

CHAPTER 3: METHOD ...............................................................59
Research Questions ..................................................................59
Research Design ......................................................................59
Participants .............................................................................61
Researcher Subjectivity Statement .........................................63
Instrumentation ......................................................................63
Procedures .............................................................................66
    Choosing and Structuring a Research Team ..........................66
    Auditor ..............................................................................68
    Data Collection ...................................................................68
    Data Analysis ......................................................................70
Conclusion .............................................................................75

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS ..............................................................76
Roles and Responsibilities ........................................................77
    Collaboration ......................................................................77
    Identify Students and Situations of Concern ........................84
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with Students of Concern</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for the Social and Emotional Needs of Students</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Student Interventions and Environmental Support</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report to School Administrator</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat Assessment Process</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen Cases</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Interviews</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine Level of Risk</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to Manage Student Threats of Violence</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Actions</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill Development</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Referral</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Evaluation</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to Prevent Student Threats of Violence</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible School Counseling Services</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build Connections</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Leadership Roles</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally-Relevant Experiences</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-Wide Prevention Programming</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Systems and Structures</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Transitions</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Communication</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION ........................................................................................................125

School Counselors’ Targeted School Violence Prevention Practices .................................125

Findings by Research Question ..............................................................................................126

What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan? .................................................................126

In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified? ..................132

In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed? ....................137

In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence? .........................................................................................................................139

Theoretical Approaches ........................................................................................................141

Ecological Systems Theory ..................................................................................................141

Strain Theory ..........................................................................................................................144

Conclusions about Theoretical Approaches ......................................................................146

Implications .............................................................................................................................146

School Counselors ..................................................................................................................146

Counselor Educators ..............................................................................................................151

Educational Leaders ..............................................................................................................152

Research Implications ..........................................................................................................154

Limitations ...............................................................................................................................154

The Researcher-Participant Relationship .........................................................................155

Sampling ................................................................................................................................156
Self-Report Methods .............................................................. 156
Future Research ........................................................................ 156
Conclusion ............................................................................... 158
REFERENCES ............................................................................ 159
APPENDICES ............................................................................. 182
  Appendix A: Recruitment Email to School Counselors .............. 183
  Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire ................................ 184
  Appendix C: Informed Consent ............................................... 186
  Appendix D: Identified Domains and Categories ...................... 19
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1       The FBI Four Pronged Assessment Model .........................................................41

Table 2       Participant Demographic Data .................................................................62
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Constructing Domains in Consensual Qualitative Research</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Constructing Core Ideas in Consensual Qualitative Research</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Cross-Analysis in Consensual Qualitative Research</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Ideal Threat Assessment Model</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

School safety has become central to the educational goals and missions of schools on almost every continent (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018). As threats of targeted school violence continue to rise, public policy-makers, school administrators, police officials, and school staff have responded by prioritizing the use of threat assessment in schools. Despite the inclusion of school psychologists and other mental health professions in discussions of targeted school violence prevention and intervention practices, the role of school counselors’ remains largely absent from school safety literature.

Targeted School Violence

According to the United States Secret Service (USSS), both “school shootings” and “other school-based attacks” fall within a broader category called “incidents of targeted school violence” (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum & Modzeleski, 2004). Incidents that may be considered that of targeted violence include “any incident where 1) a current student or recent former student attacked someone at his or her school with lethal means (e.g. gun or knife); and, 2) where the student attacker purposefully chose his or her school as the location of the attack” (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum & Modzeleski, 2004, p.7). Underlying these principles is the belief that perpetrators of TSV will exhibit covert and overt behaviors that signal a need for concern (Goodrum et al., 2017).

Although lethal acts of targeted violence are rare in schools (Augustyniak, 2005), threats and incidents of targeted school violence are relatively common (Trump, n.d.). The Educator’s School Safety Network (2018) reports that during the 2017-2018 school year, more than 3,659 threats and incidents of targeted school violence occurred in American k-12 schools. This was a 62% increase in the number of threats and a 113% increase in incidents of violence from the
previous school year (Educator School Safety Network, 2018). Rare as these events may be, targeted school violence incidents leave a profound and lasting impact on the school, the community, and the nation (James, 2009). School officials are urged to examine the practices and procedures to identify and respond to students of concern for proactive intervention.

**Threat Assessment**

Based on their scholarly research of assassinations and attempts on public officials and public figures (Exceptional Case Study Project, ECSP), Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999) and Fein and colleagues (1995) developed the threat assessment approach to assess a person's risk for engaging in acts of targeted violence (Randazzo et al., 2006). After examining the behavior of attackers from 1949 to 1992, the report concluded that profiling past and future attackers to forecast future offenders is risky and unreliable (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). The use of profiles creates a risk for bias and false positives, as individuals who “fit” the profile may not be at risk for violence (Randazzo et al., 2006). However, the ECSP report highlighted identifiable patterns of behavior (preparation) in past attackers prior to the attacks, leading experts to believe that recognizing such behavior with the threat assessment process is key to anticipating and preventing future violent acts (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

The adoption of threat assessment principles is grounded on empirical evidence that targeted school violence is not spontaneous or because someone just “snapped.” Triggered by discernable behaviors or words (leakage) prior to attacks, the threat assessment approach relies on key questions to determine whether a student poses a threat and prevent any potential acts of violence (O’Toole, 2000). In the context of schools, threat assessment is a fact-based approach for school authorities to prioritize threats (Education, 2010) and make reasonable judgements regarding the risk for violence when leakage reveals a threat to the institution (Meloy &
O’Toole, 2011).

Reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2013), the American Psychological Association (2013), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2015) advocate for the adoption of threat assessment principles in schools. The school threat assessment process is a three-step model in which a team of multi-disciplinary members identifies students of concern, acquires information regarding their behavior and circumstances to assess their risk for violence to themselves or the school community, and develops a management plan to mitigate the risk for violence (DeVos, Nielsen, Azar & Whitaker, 2018).

In an effort to support schools in assessing threats of targeted school violence, several threat assessment models have been proposed (Fein et al. 2002; O’Toole, 2000; Cornell et al., 2012). While each model attempts to identify the most important attributes worthy of threat analysis based upon the findings of retrospective studies, the divergent principles and execution strategies evokes inconsistent implementation that ultimately threatens the safety of students. The accelerated frequency and lethality of targeted school violence in recent history highlights the need for a comprehensive threat assessment model in schools (NTAC, 2018). One of the most credible tools for assessing threats of school violence comes from over 20 years of research by the United States Secret Service (USSS).

**USSS Threat Assessment Model**

Recently, the USSS launched an initiative to provide updated research and guidance on the prevention of school-based violence in February of 2018 (NTAC, 2018). The first phase of the initiative was the release of *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*, an operational guide for schools to develop a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan.
Rather than solely focusing on one aspect of a students’ risk for violence, the guide offers actionable steps with instructions that guide schools on how to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. In the Operational Guide, the USSS presents a threat assessment process that begins with establishing a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan (NTAC, 2018). The following eight steps were recommended to enhance the threat assessment process in schools: 1) form a multidisciplinary threat assessment team, 2) establish a central reporting mechanism, 3) identify behaviors of concern, 4) define the threshold for law enforcement intervention, 5) establish threat assessment procedures, 6) identify risk management strategies, 7) promote a safe school climate, and 8) provide training for stakeholders (NTAC, 2018).

School Counselors’ Roles in School Safety

School counselors are uniquely equipped to prevent acts of targeted violence at schools. With a skillset of listening, reflecting, and emotional intelligence (Sullivan, 2012), counselors may foster a culture of safety and respect that empowers students and staff. The longstanding rapport encourages students to be forthcoming about strains or needs while also placing school counselors in a position to identify and assess students’ behaviors (ASCA, 2012; O’Toole, 2000).

As advocates and leaders for a proactive approach, school counselors are an integral part of the school’s mission (ASCA, 2013). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2013), “a crisis or an act of violence thrusts professional school counselors into positions of responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of all students and staff” (p.43). With roles, positions, and duties that align with the recommendations set forth by the USSS (NTAC, 2018), school counselors are a critical component to targeted violence prevention.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have examined various theoretical frameworks to explain why certain
individuals and groups engage in targeted school violence. Examining theoretical frameworks previously used to better understand incidents of targeted violence may provide a framework for preventive efforts in schools. Two theoretical frameworks that appear most applicable to school counselors will be discussed in the following sections: 1) Ecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1977) and 2) Strain theory (Agnew, 2006). These two theories specifically align with the assessment of a students’ risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities to prevent incidents of targeted school violence.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

The empirical literature on targeted school violence has explored various correlates and antecedents that predispose some children and adolescents to school violence. In particular, biological and psychological risks, including neurological abnormalities, psychiatric disorders, and perceived self-efficacy, and sociodemographic correlates have been examined extensively to enhance our understanding of why youth are more prone to violence or victimization (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Meadows, 2007). However, research demonstrates that targeted school violence represents a complex interplay between personal and environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner (1977) illustrated this ecological paradigm asserting, “the understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior...; it requires examination of multi-person systems of interaction...and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). His transactional approach for understanding the ecological systems and interactions between individuals and environments within the systems- the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem- offers a multilevel framework for understanding development, decision making, and behavior.
Adapting Lewin’s (1935) formula of behavior as a function of the person and environment, Bronfenbrenner (1989) defined development as the cumulative interaction between genetic predisposition and the child’s most proximal physical and social environments (microsystem). To understand an individual’s development requires examination of the ecological systems that surround development. This multilevel investigation will identify a myriad of variables that interact to form their development, behavior, and cognitive processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). By using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of development in the assessment of threat, school officials may identify a number of multilevel factors and outline a myriad of processes by which behaviors of concern arise. Sullivan (2002) asserts that proper understanding of an act, such as targeted school violence, requires information from “an individual in a family in a situation in a school in a community in a national culture” (p. 271). The information gathered will glean insight on the individual’s risk for violence as a result of the developmental process from competence to dysfunction, and identify the manifestations of strain for intervention and prevention practices.

**Microsystem.** The microsystem encompasses the strongest bidirectional influences on development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the people, places, and things within the immediate environment invite, permit, or inhibit progressively more complex interactions needed to establish trusting relationships, a healthy personality, and attachment. Rather than being mere recipients of these experiences, Bronfenbrenner (1994) affirms that individuals simultaneously shape the environment and development of others. Development is not viewed as a phenomenon in and of itself; rather, development is a constant interaction measurable by “its outcome at a particular point in time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 190). Common examples of the
microsystem’s influence on targeted school violence include individual characteristics, the parent-child relationship, and peer victimization.

**Individual characteristics.** In his later writings, Bronfenbrenner (2005) emphasized individual traits that influence development and the person-environment interaction. Categorized as demand, resource, and force, these individual characteristics were thought to influence an individual’s relationships and interactions.

Demand characteristics are external traits that may easily invite or discourage reactions from one’s social environment. Factors such as age, weight, gender, and race are suggested to influence the risk of violence. Findings consistently report that perpetrators of targeted school violence are overwhelmingly male (FBI, 2018; Langman & Straub, 2019). Males are more likely to be perceived as more aggressive (Hong, Cho, & Lee, 2010) and are four times more likely to perceive violence as a legitimate conflict resolution strategy (Hong & Liao, 2010).

Resource characteristics, by way of contrast, are the mental, emotional, and cognitive resources that affect one’s ability to effectively engage in proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 812). The resources act upon the individual at each of the four ecological system levels and influence the individual. Mental and emotional distress, impaired social/emotional functioning, and hypersensitivity have been identified as risk factors to targeted school violence (Langman & Straub, 2019). Findings from a study conducted by the Secret Service suggest that 98% of the high-profile school shooters had experienced loss, grief, or sense of failure (Cullen, 2007). Thus, the assessment of resource characteristics is crucial to the prevention of targeted school violence.

The final and most influential characteristics are those of force. Force characteristics serve as active orientations that initiate or sustain proximal processes. Bronfenbrenner and
Morris (2006) identified one’s temperament (agitated or calm), attractiveness, and energy level (hyperactive and passive) as force characteristics affecting proximal processes. Disruptive characteristics may impede or interrupt proximal processes and include behaviors such as impulsiveness, distractibility, or in a more severe form, aggression and violence (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 810). Research on perpetrators of targeted school violence report a strong correlation to poor attachment with consistent caregivers, a high occurrence of poor peer relationships, antisocial activities, and violent behaviors (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007). These findings highlight the risk factor of child/parent and social relationships because “Developing secure attachments at a young age provides children with the emotional foundation for healthy development” (Hong & Liao, 2010, p. 61).

**Mesosystem.** The mesosystem includes the relationships and interactions among elements of the microsystem that affect the individual and their development. This “system of microsystems” (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 25) includes the developmental characteristics of the microsystem across settings. At the mesosystem level, peer relationships and witnessing violence are highly influential risk factors for targeted school violence.

**Exosystem.** The exosystem includes the social, political, and economic conditions that mutually influence the microsystems. While youth do not directly function at this level, the exosystem indirectly influences developmental outcomes by interacting with a structure of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This may include school and peers, parents’ workplace, or local politics and industry. Exosystem variables are not strong enough to explain targeted school violence and school shootings but are necessary to explain variables that indirectly influence youth. The literature supports socioeconomic status and media violence as risk factors at the
exosystem level to have influence on targeted school violence (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007; Beresin, 2010).

**Macrosystem.** The macrosystem is fundamentally different from the other systems, because it serves as the cultural stage for human development. Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012) describe the macrosystem as “comprising ideology, culture, and major social institutions such as government, religion, and the economy” (16). While the macrosystem is often ignored, Bronfenbrenner (1977) asserts that “once evidence for the existence of a macrosystem is found, it becomes possible to investigate the nature of various aspects of that system as they affect developmental processes at more proximal levels” (p. 230).

**Chronosystem.** According to Berk (2000, p. 30), the chronosystem involves the “temporal changes in children’s environment, which produce new conditions that affect development.” These personal or environmental changes trigger reactions that affect developmental outcomes. For instance, life transitions such as parental divorce or immigration may affect one’s development and trigger reactions, such as aggression or isolation. As such, development is a function of children being both products and producers of their environment (Berk, 2000, p. 30).

Consistent with research that disputes the use of profiles to identify potential school shooters, Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the interaction among variables, rather than their presence or absence. Consistent with epigenetic research that suggests early experiences can alter the epigenome, which determines how genes are turned off, on, and whether specific genes are expressed at all, Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the need for multilevel analysis among students of concern (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). The ecological systems theory parallels the framework of the USSS model of threat assessment. School officials
may conduct in-depth assessments to identify a combination of factors for comparison and evaluation to determine a students’ risk of targeted school violence.

**Strain Theory**

Research suggests that perpetrators of targeted school violence do not simply “snap.” Rather, perpetrators carefully plan their attacks in response to isolated incidents of perceived injustices (Dutton, White & Fogarty, 2013; Declercq & Audenaert, 2011). This research suggests that acts of targeted school violence should not be viewed as an isolated attack. A number of contributory factors with various levels of influence may be considered a form of strain that directly or indirectly affects the perpetrator and their plans for executing the attack.

Agnew’s (2006) theory of general strain dates back to the original work of Robert Merton (1938). Agnew (2006) describes strain as objective or subjective experiences that are disliked by the individual. These experiences lead to a range of difficulties, such as “...anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, fear, and ultimately, crime” (Levin & Madfis, 2009, p. 1230). While most individuals experience refrain from violence after experiencing strain, perpetrators of targeted school violence engage their coping through violence.

According to Agnew (2006), individuals may experience three types of strain, often present in the biographies of prior perpetrators. The first type of strain is the inability to reach a desirable goal. This disjunction between aspirations and actual achievements, and perceptions of inequity, injustice and disrespect. The second type of strain is the loss or threatened loss of a positive stimulus. The strain may include the separation or loss of a significant other, parental separation or divorce, and parental incarceration. The third and final type of strain is the presentation or threatened presentation of a negative stimulus. Strains of this category may include bullying, poor academic functioning, or mental illness.
Encounters with strain must be viewed within a developmental context. The interaction of multiple strains is uniquely experienced by an individual, but increase the likelihood that the individual will experience a negative emotion. Strain theory posits anger to be the “critical emotional reaction” that supplies the emotional arousal for an antisocial or retaliatory response. Kubin, Stucky, and Krhon (2009) explain, “Anger [as a result of strain] is expected to lead to crime because it is based on external attributions of blame, creates desire for redress/retaliation, and empowers the person. Other emotions such as depression are internally focused and tend to de-empower the person” (p. 123).

A number of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors influence the impact of strain (Agnew, 1992). Macrosystemic strains, such as living in poverty, can influence an adolescent’s response to strain. The proliferation of stress and ongoing strain mediates negative emotions, but also self-control, temperament, and the social learning of crime (Jang & Rhodes, 2012, p. 184).

The USSS threat assessment model aligns with the premise of Agnew’s (1992) theory of general strain. School officials are encouraged to assess students’ encounters with strain, which the model refers to as “risk.” The experiences do not accumulate to risk but interact with other factors that mitigating the impact of strain. Factors such as positive school climate, self-efficacy, and supportive parental relationships buffer the impact of strain on negative emotions and acts of violence (Jang & Rhodes, 2012). The USSS model guides school officials to understand the root causes of strain and how they interact to determine the risk of targeted school violence.

**Significance of the Study**

Everyone has a role in the prevention of targeted school violence. At this time, the role of school counselors’ seems misunderstood at best, ignored at worst. This study seeks to fill the gap in the counseling literature by understanding how the school threat assessment process is
implemented in schools as detailed by the procedures in the USSS Operational Guide (NTAC, 2018). Specific attention will be given to the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in the school threat assessment process given their expertise and the alignment of prevention efforts with their professional duties.

**Purpose of the Study**

The primary objectives of this study are to 1) identify school counselors’ roles and responsibilities in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan, 2) focus on the current threat assessment practices in schools, and 3) bring school counselors to the forefront of school violence literature. Given the complexity and uniqueness of targeted school violence, the elimination of future incidents is highly unlikely. School counselors’ unique contributions may enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plans, but before any of these assumptions can be made, an investigation of school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices must take place.

**Research Questions**

The literature supporting the USSS threat assessment model seeks to determine how to most accurately identify, prevent, and manage student threats before acts of violence occur. Empirical research consistently affirms that human behavior is difficult, if even possible, to predict and there is no reliable profile of a student who engages in acts of targeted violence. The following research questions are the focus of this proposed study:

RQ1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan?

RQ2: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified?

RQ3: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed?
RQ4: In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence?

**Definition of Terms**

*Targeted school violence* is defined as an incident wherein a student specifically targets a school or a member of the school community for harm (NTAC, 2018). This type of violence is not spontaneous or impulsive, but rather a culmination of concerning behaviors.

*Concerning behaviors* are defined as a continuum of student behaviors that warrant intervention. Although the range of concerning behaviors should be defined by schools, the umbrella term describes behaviors that warrant assessment of a students’ risk of targeted school violence. Concerning behaviors are the underlying premise to threat assessment and risk management strategies.

*Threat assessment* is defined as the assessment of the risk posed by students’ of concern using information gathered from important stakeholders as well as the potential perpetrator. For the purposes of this research, the term threat assessment is to be used as described in the USSS operational guide, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model* (2018). The USSS Threat Assessment Model (2018) defines threat assessment as a process to identify a student of concern, assess their risk for engaging in targeted violence, and mitigate their posed risk with intervention strategies. The underlying premise of the threat assessment approach is that there is no profile of a perpetrator of targeted school violence. Although the assessment of threats in schools is not the school counselors’ sole responsibility, school counselors have an ethical and professional duty to identify and intervene with concerns of student behavior. While the assessment of targeted school violence risk is a diverse and developing field, the USSS model
considers relevant issues to targeted school violence that align with school counselors' roles and responsibilities.

School counselors will be defined as licensed school counselors who are currently employed as public school counselors.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. The first chapter is an overview of the research on targeted school violence, the USSS threat assessment model, and the need for the proposed study to expand this research into the field of school counseling. The second chapter provides a detailed review of literature related to the topic of targeted school violence and further elaborates the need for the proposed study in the field of school counseling. The third chapter presents the methods to be used to collect data on school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to targeted school violence, as well as information regarding the participants, and limitations of the proposed study. The fourth chapter will describe the results of the proposed study. The final and fifth chapter will describe the implications and steps for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Before beginning a discussion of student threat assessments, it is important to examine the body of literature that already exists on the topics on targeted school violence prevention and intervention practices. It is equally important to explore what is known about the models of student threat assessment. The following sections contain theoretical and empirical research that will serve as a foundation on which to build future research in this area.

Historical Analysis

Targeted school violence is not a new phenomenon to American Schools. Dating back to at least 1764, the fundamental efforts to improve school safety have not changed much since the 1800s (Bernstein, 2009). For example, in 1927, Andrew Kehoe killed forty-four people (38 were students) and left fifty-eight injured after he murdered his wife and bombed a school in Bath, Michigan (Kleck, 2009). Newspapers rushed to make sense of the bombing, claiming Kehoe was insane, demented, and a madman (Boissoneault, 2017). The Bath School attack serves as a warning sign to school safety officials that proactive detection and prevention of targeted attacks on schools is paramount (NTAC, 2018).

Since the mid-1990s, incidents of targeted school violence have been more predominant in the United States than any other country (Agnich & Miyazaki, 2013). One of the most memorable attacks was in 1999 at Columbine High School. Twelve students, one teacher and both shooters died, while nearly 24 students sustained life-threatening wounds (Cullen, 2003). The Columbine shooting garnered significant media worldwide as targeted school violence was pushed to the forefront of public concern (Larkin, 2009; Mushert, 2009).

According to Duplechain and Morris (2014), the frequency of targeted school violence incidents in the last 24 years is more than took place in the previous 230 years combined. The
actual or perceived threat of targeted school violence has contributed largely to the translation of protocols and procedures for the school setting (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). The increase in lethality and frequency in targeted school violence incidents over the last few years is an enhanced emphasis on adopting measures to manage, if not mitigate, threats of targeted violence.

**Origins of Threat Assessment**

In response to the public concern of school safety in the late 1990s, the United States congress encouraged empirical research and detailed studies examining the phenomena of targeted school violence (Moore et al., 2003). Some of the earliest work to result from these research efforts consisted of checklists of warning signs for students of concern and psychological profiles of students believed to be at-risk for engaging in acts of targeted violence at school (American Psychological Association, 2013b; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998). However, in the years following, evidence demonstrated that profiling approaches for identifying students at high-risk of violence may lack validity and reliability (Burns, Dean, & Jacob-Timm, 2001).

The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education (Safe School Initiative; SSI) worked together to examine 37 acts of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers that had occurred in the United States between 1974 and 2000. The SSI analyzed investigative, school, court and mental health records as well as conducted individual interviews of ten surviving perpetrators to “walk through the process of the attack” (Voskuil et al., 2012). Two reports were produced from the initiative.

The first report composed through the SSI, *The final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, focused on the prevention of targeted attacks. Although threats were rarely made prior to attacks,
discernable patterns of behavior preceded the attacks in 80% of the cases studied (Vossekuil et al., 2012). Based on these findings, the SSI recommended that school officials should implement measures to distinguish and assess pre-attack behaviors with threat assessment techniques. According to Vossekuil et al., (2002), the results of the study are consolidated into ten key findings:

1. Acts of targeted school violence are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
2. Other people are usually aware of the attacker’s idea and/or plan prior to the attack.
3. Most perpetrators do not threaten their targets prior to advancing the attack.
4. There is no accurate profile of targeted school violence perpetrators.
5. Most perpetrators displayed concerning behavior prior to the attack.
6. Most perpetrators had difficulty coping with a significant loss or personal failure, and many had considered or attempted suicide.
7. Many perpetrators identified as being a victim of bullying or persecution.
8. Most perpetrators had access to and had previous used weapons.
9. Most acts of targeted school violence involve more than one person.
10. Most acts of targeted school violence are short in duration and end by means other than law enforcement intervention.

The second report composed through the SSI, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, established guidelines for effective threat assessment in schools. The findings assert that acts of targeted school violence are rarely spontaneous but rather require extensive planning. Behavior modifications that result from such planning are often detectable and if school officials are cognizant, potential
threats may be identified and averted. According to Fein e al., (2002, p. 29), six principles were established as the framework for the USSS threat assessment process:

1. Acts of targeted school violence is the end result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior.
2. Acts of targeted school violence stems from an interaction between the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.
3. Effective threat assessment requires an investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset.
4. Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than individual characteristics or traits.
5. Effective threat assessment requires an integrated systems approach.
6. The threat assessment process aims to determine whether a student poses a threat, not whether a student has made a threat.

The USSS model prioritizes patterns of pre-attack behaviors that arise from the dynamic interaction of the perpetrator, victim, and the social ecology (Fein et al., 2002). The progression of pre-attack behaviors, if any, is discernible because planning for acts of targeted violence produces, in most cases, leakage- behavior or words that suggest a risk for violence (O’Toole, 1999, p. 513). Additionally, the SSI concluded that school climates of bullying, aggression, or discrimination were present prior to the majority of shootings. Research on the topic suggests that school violence may be prevented by establishing and sustaining school climates of inclusion and social cohesion (Poland, 2013; Leary et al., 2003).
**Political and Legal Responses**

The first legislative reaction to protect students in schools was The Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA). The act made it a federal crime for, “any individual knowingly to possess a firearm at a place that the individual knows, or has reasonable cause to believe, is a school zone,” Although the act was found unconstitutional for exceeding Congress’ commerce clause power, the act was repaired by the Supreme Court in 1994 and added to The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 2017). The laws required a zero-tolerance policy on weapons to receive federal funding and mandated schools to refer any student who brought a weapon on school grounds to the local criminal or juvenile justice system (Brock, Kriger & Miro, 2017).

Federal agencies have attempted to assist states and school districts in strengthening our schools and providing educators with the necessary resources to keep students safe. In 2018, the Trump administration called for immediate action to secure safe schools, establishing a bipartisan coalition of two bills: HR Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Act of 2018 and Fix NICS Act of 2017 (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). The STOP School Violence Act (2018) authorizes more than $1 billion in grant funding to help school personnel and law enforcement identify and prevent acts of school violence. The grants will support violence-prevention programming and proactive strategies, such as anonymous reporting systems, threat assessments, and improved communication between schools and local law enforcement (H.R. 4909, 2018). The Fix NICS Act (2017) will strengthen the regulation of firearms by requiring federal agencies to submit semi-annual certifications to the Attorney General to identify and review whether a person is prohibited from buying or possessing a fireman.
Legislative measures at the local, state, and federal levels continuously surface for debate among policy officials for strategies to maintain safe schools. School safety proposals include measures for gun control, gun-free zones, school discipline reform, arming school personnel, developing emergency response plans, requiring emergency drills, increasing facility security, expanding mental health services in schools, and school resource officers (SROs) regulation and training (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). Some suggest that in the aftermath of the targeted violence incidents at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook Elementary School, the political and justice responses have merely heightened expectations to address violence within schools (Muschert, et al., 2013; Shedd, 2015).

The Federal Commission on School Safety (2018) released a report that identifies 93 best practices and policy recommendations to support comprehensive school safety planning efforts. For optimal engagement, the Commission believes that state and local policies should develop a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan that includes those best positioned to respond to concerns of targeted school violence (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). Currently, at least 43 states have statutes that require every school or school district to have a comprehensive school safety plan (Education Commission of the States, 2019).

Responses by Schools

Lethal homicides in K-12 school are rare events. However, these events are becoming more lethal with each incident. More than any other historical set of events, incidents of targeted school violence over the past two decades have been the precedent of increased legislation, funding, policy, programs, and intervention strategies (Kupchik, Brent & Mowen, 2015). Empirical inquiries have attempted to identify policies and practices that are comprehensive, preventative, and promote positive student outcomes.
Shortly after the massacre in Parkland, Florida, President Donald Trump established The Federal Commission on School Safety to review safety practices and make actionable recommendations to prevent school violence and improve recovery efforts (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). The Commission conducted field trips, listening sessions, and held a series of meetings with hundreds of Americans across the United States to its proposals for improving the safety and security of American public schools. With the input of key stakeholders - school safety experts, educators, law enforcement, healthcare professionals, students and families - the Commission identified three categories of best practices and resources to address the complex phenomenon of targeted school violence: (a) Prevent, (b) Protect and Mitigate, and (c) Respond and Recover. While there is no universal school safety plan that will enhance safety in schools across the country, the recommendations set forth by the Commission provide state and local legislatures options to address the unique challenges in preventing school violence. The recommendations discussed hereinafter are not exhaustive but present a myriad of theoretical perspectives influencing school safety prevention and intervention practices in K-12 public schools across America.

**Prevent.** A common objection to the prevention of school violence lies under the premise that prevention requires prediction (Cornell, 2018, p. 41). The unpredictability of violence, however, does not indicate that violence is not preventable on a larger scale. Effective and efficient approaches to improve school safety is through school-based promotion and prevention. Levering the developmental needs of students by addressing a range of risk and protective factors, promotion and prevention models offer effective and efficient interventions to improve school safety. The following provides examples of school safety and violence prevention efforts to address multiple aspects of school safety (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018).
Character education and positive school climate. Incidents of targeted school violence are characterized as a culminating event to a range of negative experiences (Henry, 2009). Contributory variables include social isolation or rejection, family dysfunction, and narcissism (Langman, 2009). Bonanno and Levelson (2014) discussed the impact of such factors on the development of chronic strain and eventually culminating in the violent incident. Given these chronic stressors may be found within or outside the school environment, school safety and violence prevention efforts must help youth cope with their difficulties by improving their skills and mindsets, and fostering a culture of connectedness through a positive school climate (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014; Yaeger, 2017).

Character education is considered a key concept in the prevention of school-based violence and promotion of a safe school environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Drawing upon earlier theoretical perspectives of positive youth development, the cultivation of moral and civic values through character education maintains the fundamental goal of promotion efforts (Nucci, 2001). However, behavioral skills may be needed to assert one's values with moral action. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Experience (NICE; 2009) suggest that education facilities adopt a social and emotional learning (SEL) approach to create the positive conditions that ultimately contribute to students’ engagement, prosocial behavior (character development), and academic success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). SEL emphasizes five core skills for successful development: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision making (CASEL, 2005). The practice of SEL is thought to support character development by translating students’ character education knowledge into practice while
enhancing students’ learning and decreasing emotional and behavioral concerns. (Desai, Karahalios, Persuad, & Reker, 2014).

A series of meta-analyses and reviews have concluded that character education programs and SEL interventions are effective across a range of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Moroney & Devaney, 2017). For instance, a meta-analysis that examined the relationship between character education and student achievement and behavioral outcomes revealed character education to be associated with higher educational outcomes, and expressions of love, integrity, compassion, and self-discipline (Jeynes, 2019). Similarly, extensive developmental research note the effectiveness of school-based social-emotional interventions with greater student well-being and higher academic performance in comparison to controls (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998).

The foundation of SEL and character development is the importance of modeling and environment in learning (Elias et al., 2008). Classroom learning environments that promote students’ social and emotional well-being use relational pedagogy to teach and model self-awareness and social awareness for the development of students’ emotional intelligence. Students build their understanding and internalize a concept of themselves through these interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Supportive interactions within the social-emotional environment fulfill students’ psychological needs and enhance students’ sense of connection (CDC, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004). Consistently shown to be a protective factor in the healthy development of youth, school connectedness reduces the likelihood of a student to engage in interpersonal violence (Johnson, 2009). For instance, research on perpetrators of targeted school violence often reveal a sense of detachment and isolation from the school community (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares & Espelage, 2011; Flegenheimer, 2013). Universal SEL programs can prevent such
catastrophic outcomes by improving students’ social and emotional functioning (Durlak et al., 2011), motivation for learning (Eccles et al., 1993), and school connectedness (Viglucci, Rabin, Nehamas & Blaskey, 2018).

Mental health. An estimated 17.1 million U.S. children are diagnosed with a psychiatric mental disorder, making mental disorders the most common pediatric illness in the United States (Children’s National Health System, 2018). Even if concerns do not meet criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis or special education classification, nearly one in five children will experience a mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) disorder- such as depression, conduct disorder, and substance abuse- in their lifetime (O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009). Reportedly, signs of potential MEB disorders begins by age 14 in over half of lifetime cases and nearly three-quarters by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005). Such early onset of MEB disorders is predictive of poor academic performance, incarceration, greater health risks, and disrupted psychosocial development (Mojtabai et al., 2015). The public-health implications of these outcomes emphasize early interventions to prevent the progression of primary disorders and the onset of comorbid disorders.

The findings of the SSI suggest that nearly 25% of perpetrators of mass shootings had been in treatment for mental illness, and more than 75% had symptoms of mental illness prior to the attack (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum & Modzeleski, 2002). Although the presence of mental illness is not indicative of violence, the trends for youth mental, emotional, and behavioral concerns reveal an urgent need for effective prevention and intervention services. Despite advances in early identification and efficacious treatment for child and adolescent MEB difficulties, only half of affected youth receive appropriate care (Merikangas et al., 2011; Olfson, Druss & Marcus, 2015). In an effort to decrease the risk for MEB difficulties, schools have taken
an active role for implementing a continuum of mental health services (prevention, early identification, and treatment), with nearly 12% of you receiving services in a school-based setting (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2009).

The emerging consensus to addressing youth mental health has resulted in school-based mental health programs across the United States (Lever, Chambers, Stephan, Page, & Ghunney, 2010). In fact, many communities identify schools as “the largest de facto provider of mental health services” (Foy & Perrin, 2010, p. S79). The emerging consensus across the fields of prevention science, public health, and developmental sciences is a continuum-of-care model grounded upon the promotion of wellness and healthy development (O’Connell, Boat & Warner, 2009).

The public health approach to school safety and student well-being considers level of prevention defined by the degree of risk in the student population (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Universal interventions are the primary level of prevention targeting all children to prevent risk behaviors. Selective interventions are the secondary level of prevention, wherein subgroups are targeted based on the presence of social, emotional, or academic risk factors. Students receiving selective interventions may still require further intervention to reduce risk behaviors, indicating a need for the tertiary or highest level of preventive intervention (Bottiani, Heilbrun & Bradshaw, 2019, p. 74). Although interventions do not target the risk factors itself, early intervention may reduce the likelihood of maladaptive outcomes, such as the progression of primary disorders and the onset of comorbid disorders (Lynch et al., 2005).

A public health approach to youth violence emphasizes a continuum of support services “...to enhance individuals’ ability to achieve developmentally appropriate tasks (developmental competence) and a positive sense of self-esteem, mastery, well-being, and
social inclusion and to strengthen their ability to cope with adversity” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009, p. 67). A majority of youth who are involved in targeted school violence manifest a history of poor emotional coping and internalizing disorders, signaling needs beyond the range of standard prevention programs (Augustyniak, 2005). In fact, an estimated five to ten percent of all students will need more intensive services than those provided in primary or secondary prevention models (Dwyer, Osher & Wagner, 1998). The public health conceptualization of tiered preventive intervention aims to empower all students to gain control of their mental, emotional, and behavioral health to prevent exacerbation of symptoms (Tones & Green, 2006). Evaluations of existing school-based mental health programs have demonstrated positive outcomes for students with MED disorders, including decreased absenteeism and aggression, and improved academic performance, mental health literacy, and aggression (Jensen, 2009; The Impact of School-Connected Behavioral and Emotional Health Interventions on Student Academic Performance, 2014).

**Threat assessment.** Studies of incidents of targeted school violence recommend that schools incorporate a behavioral threat assessment approach to assess and intervene to prevent school violence (O’Toole, 2000; Vossekui, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The school threat assessment process is a three-step model in which a team of multi-disciplinary members identifies students of concern, acquires information regarding their behavior and circumstances to assess their risk for violence to themselves or the school community, and develops a management plan to mitigate the risk for violence (DeVos, Nielsen, Azar & Whitaker, 2018). Effective assessment and response to threats of violence requires a team of
trained personnel and specific procedures for prompt, discreet, and responsible action (Vossekui et al., 2002).

The Police Foundation (Daniels, 2019), a non-profit organization housed in the U.S. Department of Justice, was tasked with analyzing incidents of averted school violence. The report, entitled *Averted School Violence Project*, discussed that of 51 averted incidents, more than three-quarters (82%) of the cases had students or alert school staff who discovered and reported the school violence plots or concerning behavior (Daniels, 2019). The report along with additional research has shown the use of threat assessment systems in the prevention of targeted school violence (Pollack, Modzeleski & Rooney, 2008; Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009). Empirical research on schools that adopted a threat assessment approach revealed lower rates of bullying and long-term suspensions as well as students being more willing to report bullying behaviors or threats of violence and a more positive school climate (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory & Fan, 2009).

As of 2018, three states- Virginia, Florida, and Maryland- had legally mandated that all public K-12 schools must establish threat assessment teams. A state report of Virginia public schools during the 2014-2015 academic year found that less than 1% of student threats were carried out and no cases resulted in a serious physical injury (Cornell et al., 2016). Schools that have adopted a threat assessment approach have also reported lower rates of bullying and long-term suspensions, a more positive school climate, and an increase in students’ willingness to report violent or concerning behavior (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory & Fan, 2009). Overall, the efficacy of threat assessments in schools has substantial evidence to be a safe and effective violence prevention strategy.
School discipline. Morrell (2002) and Harber (2008) argue that schools can be violent places. This violence is thought to arise from the additive stress and anxiety of culturally condoned ethos of masculinity, inculcation of conformity, discipline, and morality, propagation of inequalities, and increasingly competitive examinations. Punitive disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance practices, grounded on the premise that schools will accept no amount of violence or threats of violence, have been developed and implemented (Borum et al., 2010). Ample research since 1999 have identified the flaws with zero-tolerance policies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Stanner, 2006) and suggest that such extreme policies may elevate the risk of targeted school violence by presenting a critical stressor that acts as a catalyst to move the plan of attack into action (Mongan & Walker, 2012; Okonofua, Walton & Eberhardt, 2016). Researchers unanimously refute zero-tolerance policies and conclude that zero tolerance policies have no significant effect on school safety or the prevention of school violence (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Borum et al., 2010).

Given the range of consequences that derive from punitive disciplinary practices, some schools have opted for a restorative justice framework for handling school discipline. According to Zehr (2002), the restorative justice approach engages various stakeholders (victims, offenders, others) in a collective dialogue to address the needs and concerns of those affected. Rather than focusing on punishing the offending student, the restorative justice model attempts to maintain a safe and orderly environment by restoring relationships and encouraging accountability for misbehavior (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005).

Skiba and Peterson (2000) stressed the importance of preventing school violence by approaching school discipline from a social perspective. Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) offers a form of relational pedagogy to prevent future acts of violence by teaching students
prosocial behavior and creating a school culture of respect and safety (Varnham, 2005).

Evaluations on the effectiveness of restorative and relational pedagogy are promising, showing decreases in student misbehavior and discipline infractions (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

**Protect and Mitigate.** The school environment is broadly conceptualized as the school social environment and the school physical environment. The social environment includes peer relationships, teacher and student relationships, school norms, and classroom and school culture. The physical environment refers to safety actions, school disorder, and the organization of the school environment (i.e. class and school size, school level, location, and school demographics). In an attempt to maintain safe school environments, many schools have adopted various security measures within the social and physical environment.

**Training.** As early as the 1960s, law enforcement officers were placed in schools as a special form of community policing (Lawrence, 2007). In the post-columbine era, school leaders have continued to rely on SROs to maintain school order and discipline (Kupchik & Ward, 2014). According to Newman et al.’s (2004) research, a teacher at Health High School in Kentucky reported, “An ID badge and a fence won’t stop a potential shooter, but a security officer might” (p. 281). By 2016, some 57% of public schools reported the presence of a security guard or other law enforcement personnel at least once a week (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018).

In 2002, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) conducted a survey on the perceptions of school safety and security with 658 of its members in attendance at the Association’s annual conference. The findings indicate: 95% of SROs consider their schools susceptible to acts of targeted violence; 79% believe schools within their district are unprepared to effectively respond to acts of targeted violence; the majority of SROs indicate they are in need of additional training and need additional support from outside agencies; and the majority of
SROs report that school officials have no training on targeted violence due to a lack of school funding (Trump, 2002).

Unfortunately, previous attacks of targeted school violence fail to indicate the presence of an SRO as a safeguard to violence. For instance, in the rampage school shooting in 1999 at Columbine High School or in 2013 at Sparks Middle School, the presence of SROs and hundreds of hours of training failed to protect the entire school population (Bellisle, 2013). Additionally, the use of policing in schools may have negative impacts on the educational environment, such as perceived school safety (Reingle González, Jetelina & Jennings, 2016).

The National Police Foundation (2019) states that “safety is a community concern.” Schools should increase training of all school staff to prevent school shootings and strengthen school emergency response plans. Trainings may include warning behaviors of targeted violence, responding to students’ psychosocial crises, central reporting system, emergency and safety drills (DeVos, Nielsen & Azar, 2018). A review of state-mandated emergency drills and training identified 43 states that required training related to school safety for teachers and school staff (USDOE, 2013). Of the 43 states, 21 provided training on crisis prevention and intervention, and 14 required training on mental health disorders or violence prevention (Musu-Gillette, et al., 2018). These resources help prevent, plan for, and respond to targeted school violence.

**Enhancing campus security.** According to Health, Ryan, Dean, and Bingham (2007), school safety efforts began nearly 150 years ago as a result of fire-related disasters on school grounds (p. 208). However, the evolution and escalation of student behaviors and external threats have required schools to enhance their safety prevention efforts. The American response has largely been increased surveillance, through security cameras and school resource officers...
(SROs), and school security, such as identification badges, metal detectors, and limited facility entrances (Muschert & Madfis, 2013).

During the 2013-2014 school year, approximately 89% of public high schools used security cameras, 43% used one or more SRO officers, security guards or sworn law enforcement officers at least once a week, and 9% complete random metal detector and locker sweeps (Zhang, Musu-Gillette & Oudekerk, 2016). Despite the proliferation of such prevention measures, there are no rigorous evaluations of their efficacy. With estimates on the highest level of security upgrades- bullet-resistant glass, gated parking, video surveillance- to be hundreds of thousands of dollars for setup and upkeep (Sellery & Biggar, 2018), some argue that such measures are not worth the cost (Snell et al., 2002). Others argue that school shooters attack their own schools and are not concerned with secrecy (Langman, 2009). For instance, security cameras filmed the two shooters in action at Columbine (Fox & Burstein, 2010; Langman, 2009).

Students are routinely exposed to what Hirshfield and Celinska (2011, p. 1) claim is a “culture of criminalization and prison-like environmental designs.” A school ethos of conformity and tighter social control reflects the growing tension of pedagogical approaches to managing student behavior (Kim, 2012). While increased security measures conveys the importance of school safety, a fundamental byproduct is an altered relationship between the school and the student (Ahrens, 2012). Failure to mimic adolescents’ need for greater independence may exacerbate the turmoil and stress experienced throughout the psychosocial stages of development (Byrnes, 2003).
**Respond and Recover.**

*Active shooter preparedness.* School lockdowns originated in the 1980s after gangs in South Los Angeles, California used local schoolyards for drive-by shootings on rival gang members. Schools would go into lockdown to protect their students from the external threat (Altheide, 2016). The 1999 shootings at Columbine High School increased the need for schools to better prepare for armed assailant situations. Traditional lock-down practices focused on protecting students from danger outside the school building with tactics such as moving students out of sight, closing and locking the door, and requiring students to remain silent (FEMA, 2013).

Following the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2003) expanded the lock-down only approach (i.e. confining students to a classroom) to an options-based approach. This comprehensive approach to planning and implementation of crisis response allows school staff to make decisions on evolving circumstances (i.e. evacuate).

Although disagreement exists over whether it is appropriate for students to participate in active shooter training, as acts and threats of targeted school violence continues to rise, more schools are opting to utilize active shooter drills to prepare students on how to respond to an active shooter situation (Magliozzi, 2018). The most effective way to train students and staff is through mock active shooter training exercises (Department of Homeland Security, 2017). Research indicates that active shooter situations often span 15 minutes, ending prior to law enforcement arrival (Department of Homeland Security, 2016). Developmentally appropriate response trainings include role-play, scenario-based exercises to simulate an active shooter incident that requires quick decision making (Department of Education Listening Session, 2018; Hierarchy of Education and Training Activities, 2014). In his testimony to the Commission, San Bernardino Chief of Police Jarrod Burguan noted that during the 2017 shooting at North Park
Elementary School, previous active shooter training prepared school staff to successful evacuate and protect 500 students (2018).

Although the primary purpose of active shooter drills is to provide law enforcement and relevant school staff and administration the opportunity to practice the skills and protocols for responding to acts of school violence, schools are urged to consider the consequences of armed assailant drills. For instance, the level of drill intensity (i.e. use of gunfire), extent of warning that a drill will occur, and mandatory participation (National Association of School Psychologists and National Association of School Resource Officers, 2017). Federal agencies are encouraged to support K-12 schools to identify the optimal approach for preparing their student and staff population for active shooter situations.

**Factors to Consider in Threat Assessment**

Targeted school violence threat assessment requires an evaluation of behavioral, social, environmental, or pathological risk factors. The evaluation of threatened school violence requires assessors to consider the collective impact of the dynamic risk factors when determining the propensity for violence. Because different violent behaviors have different precursors, assessing each factor of risk is crucial for the accurate judgement of risk for engaging in targeted school violence (Reddy et al., 2001).

Unlike other criminal offenders, perpetrators of targeted school violence appear to be unique. The potential consequence of a false positive (individual wrongly classified as being at risk for violence when they actually are not) and false negative (individual wrongly classified as being not at risk for violence when they actually are) are sobering, cautioning school officials to make informed and accurate judgements of the risk for targeted school violence (Shipley & Arrigo, 2012, p. 303). However, the low base rate and idiosyncratic characteristics of targeted
school violence is a challenge for identifying correlates and predictors (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). Contemporary understanding of school violence as a contextual, continuous, and dynamic construct (Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2006), suggests an integrated model of empirically validated risk factors to inform professional judgements on an individual’s risk for violence.

Transactional-ecological models assume that disturbances in behavior arise from particular individual characteristics (e.g. gender, temperament, biological factors), contextual influences (e.g. family, peers, school, society), and the processes related to developmental changes (Webber, 1997). These findings are consistent across race and ethnic groups (Loeber, Farrington, & Petechuk, 2003) after controlling for poverty (Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003), familial death (Merikangus & Nakamura, 2011) and parental incarceration (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006). However, not all children exposed to risk have maladaptive outcomes. While risk factors generate vulnerability and exacerbate adolescents’ risk for maladaptive outcomes, protective factors serve as psychosocial buffers for successful adaptation (Masten, 1994; Garmezy, 1985). In essence, risk and protective factors are interactive precursors on a continuum of dysfunction to resiliency (Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Lienenburg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2012).

**Principles of Risk Assessment**

Risk assessment is defined as “a series of tools and practices employed by forensic and criminal justice professionals to gauge the risk of interpersonal violence posed by individuals with particular characteristics” (Harris & Lurigio, 2012, p. 55). Risk assessment has historically been used in the field of mental health to predict an individual's risk toward others, discharge readiness, and identify treatment needs to prevent future violence (RTI International, 2018). The
application to targeted school violence incidents is relatively new but the increase in frequency and lethality has prompted agencies to consider risk assessment options (Borum et al., 1999).

The question still remains on whether risk assessment practices are applicable to targeted school violence. Risk assessment uses inductive methods based on empirically or theoretically derived constructs, demonstrated to be predictive of violence, to guide the assessment of an individual’s predisposition toward violence (Yang, Wong & Coid, 2010). Unlike threat assessment, which focuses on present behaviors and triggers, risk assessment focuses on previous behaviors while assessing psychological characteristics. According to Meloy et al. (2011), “Risk assessment addresses different domains than threat assessment and typically relies on more historical and dispositional (status) variables” (p. 2).

The field of violence risk assessment emphasize an interactional model of causation that reflects a dynamic interplay of individual, social, and contextual variables on an individual’s risk for violence (Douglas & Skeem, 2005, p. 368). The assessment of risk may be approached using clinical (judgements) or actuarial (statistical) methods. Clinical assessments rely on professional judgements of interviews and related information for risk determinations. Actuarial assessments provide a quantitative estimate of risk using statistically significant risk factors (Dumitriu, 2013). The concern for actuarial assessments is that the predictive validity for targeted school violence risk assessment is still developing due to the low base rate of incidents. Similarly, the sole use of clinical techniques may be limited because of human error, including inaccurate beliefs of risk factors, lack of training and limited information (Scurich, 2016). Thus, a combination of techniques are used when performing risk assessment (Borum et al., 1999).

While risk assessment has credibility with mental health professionals, limitation exists on its usefulness in the school setting. Reddy et al. (2001) describes a lack of empirical support
for the potential antecedents and risk factors of targeted school violence. For instance, most students who display multiple risk factors will not become a perpetrator of targeted school violence (Grondahl & Bjorkly, 2016). Thus, the shift in focus has been toward identifying specific warning behaviors in order to identify potential perpetrators of targeted school violence prior to the attack (Agnich, 2015).

Researchers have adopted the term “warning behaviors” to conceptualize behavior patterns of increasing or accelerating risk (Meloy, Hoffman, Guldimann & James, 2011). These behaviors proceed, are related to, and, at times, predict acts of targeted violence (Meloy & O’Toole, 2011). Among a sample of school shooters, O’Toole (2000) found that all subjects demonstrated some type of warning behavior prior to the shooting. Referred to as “forecasting behaviors” by the FBI or behaviors “signaling the attack” by the USSS (Vossekuil et al., 2000), warning behaviors in the form of leakage and communicated threats appear to be common among adolescent mass murderers (Meloy et al., 2004a).

Meloy and O’Toole (2011) identified eight categories of warning behaviors that are indicative of accelerating risk of targeted violence. The proposed typology of eight warning behaviors associated with targeted school violence are as follows:

1. **Pathway** warning behaviors are behaviors associated with the investigation, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack (Calhoun & Weston, 2003).

2. **Fixation** warning behaviors are behaviors demonstrating a pathological preoccupation with a person or cause (Mullen et al., 2009).

3. **Identification** warning behaviors are behaviors suggesting an identity with previous school violence perpetrators, fascination with weapons, military or
law enforcement paraphernalia (Hempel, Meloy & Richards, 1999), and agency with a particular cause or belief system.

4. **Novel aggression** warning behaviors are violent behaviors unrelated to the attack, but serve as a test to the perpetrators ability for violence.

5. **Energy burst** warning behaviors are behaviors, violent or not, related to the target. These behaviors serve as warning to the perpetrators fascination with the victim.

6. **Leakage** warning behaviors are behaviors communicating the perpetrators intent to harm a victim to a third party.

7. **Directly communicated threat** warning behaviors are behaviors that communicate a direct threat to a victim.

8. **Last resort** warning behaviors are behaviors demonstrating an increased desperation as perpetrators declare their intentions with words or actions.

While the pathology of targeted school violence perpetrators is dynamic and complex, models of violence risk assessment have been successful in the reduction of future violence among offender populations (Andrews, 1995) and high-risk youth (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). However, empirical evidence has yet to be established for the predictive validity for averting incidents of targeted school violence (Meloy et al., 2011). Risk factors in threat assessment may, however, signal the need for heightened vigilance for warning signs of violent behavior, including verbalizations, drawings, or behaviors (Reeves & Brock, 2017). Therefore, targeted violence threat assessment must consider the precipitating stressors associated with warning behaviors for appropriate risk management and prevention (O’Toole, 1999, p. 8).
Development of Threat Assessment Models

Scholars have attempted to assemble etiological factors for a multifaceted model of targeted school violence (Levin & Madfis, 2009). However, the targeted school violence phenomenon is complex and characteristically unique. Additionally, the lack of rigorous and contextually sound research in school violence literature significantly challenges school safety conceptualization and translational models. Specific state and local education acts have chosen to respond in a variety of ways, but there are also models for guidance toward best practice in the prevention of targeted school violence.

Based on their scholarly research of assassinations and attempts on public officials and public figures (Exceptional Case Study Project, ECSP), Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999) and Fein and colleagues (1995) developed the threat assessment approach to assess a person's risk for targeted violence (Randazzo et al., 2006). After examining the behavior of attackers from 1949 to 1992, the report concluded that profiling past and future attackers to forecast future offenders is risky and unreliable (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). Also, the use of profiles creates a risk for bias and false positives, as individuals who “fit” the profile may not be at risk for violence (Randazzo et al., 2005). However, the ECSP report highlighted identifiable patterns of behavior (preparation) in past attackers prior to the attacks, leading experts to believe that recognizing such behavior with the threat assessment process is key to anticipating and preventing future violent acts (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Harris & Lurigio, 2012).

The adoption of threat assessment principles is grounded on empirical evidence that targeted school violence is not spontaneous or because someone just “snapped.” Triggered by discernable behaviors or words (leakage) prior to attacks, the threat assessment approach relies on key questions to determine whether a student poses a threat and prevent any potential acts of
violence (O’Toole, 2000). In the context of schools, threat assessment is a fact-based approach for school authorities to prioritize threats (Education, 2010) and make reasonable judgements regarding the risk for violence when leakage reveals a threat to the institution (Meloy & O’Toole, 2011). The complexity of youth violence has been addressed by various disciplines in an attempt to evaluate the validity and lethality of threatening behavior or words in schools with threat assessment ideology. The resulting models have become highly influential in school-based practice and in research.

The FBI Model

The FBI launched a research initiative in 1998 to analyze incidents of targeted violence in schools for potential prevention efforts and threat assessment principles (O’Toole, 1999, p.1). The FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) and shooter profiler Mary O’Toole analyzed 25 years of data and 18 cases of executed and foiled rampage school shootings to provide a practical application of a structured threat assessment in the later report titled *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (Cornell et al., 2004). According to Furlong, Bates, Smith, and Kingery (2004, p. vii), “After the events of Columbine, researchers and clinicians began to explore methods and procedures that might guide schools’ and communities’ efforts to become more sensitive to potential signs of violence in youth.”

Supported by empirical research (Augustnyniak, 2005) that suggests prior violent behavior is not a useful determinant for identifying potential perpetrators of targeted school violence, the FBI released the report *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*, highlighting its findings on targeted violence in schools (Cornell et al., 2004).

During its symposium in 1999, the NCAVC concluded that schools should establish threat assessment teams, comprised of multidisciplinary school officials, law enforcement, and
mental health, and apply a four-pronged assessment model to prevent acts of targeted school violence (Harris & Lurigio, 2012). According to the FBI’s perspective, an evaluation of threatened violence requires an assessment of risk factors surrounding the perpetrator to accurately identify the level of threat (O’Toole, 1999; Langman, 2012). The report states that the FBI model “is not a profile of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school” (Cornell et al., 2004). The four-pronged assessment model provides a conceptual framework for extensive evaluation of the students’ social-emotional functioning (Prong 1) and the social ecology of concerns (Prongs 2-4).

With the notion that all threats are not created equal and most perpetrators making threats are unlikely to act on them (O’Toole, 1999), the FBI model classifies threats in four categories:

(a) A direct threat identifies specific information regarding the violent act and intended target in a clear and explicit manner.

(b) An indirect threat has vague and ambiguous information regarding the plan, intended victim, and motivation for violence. An indirect threat implies a possibility for violence but is phrased tentatively.

(c) A veiled threat strongly implies but does not explicitly threaten violence.

(d) A conditional threat warns that violence will be a consequence if certain demands or terms are not met.

The FBI threat assessment process follows a four-step response. First, a referral is made to a threat assessment team member with information regarding the threat. An initial assessment of the threat is then made with the risk for violence categorically distinguished as low, medium, and high based on the “totality of circumstances” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 14-24). Next, a four-
pronged assessment (personality traits and behavior, family dynamics, school dynamics, and
social dynamics) of the perpetrator is completed. The behaviors and traits indexed within the
four-pronged assessment that may be associated with violence are organized in Table 1
(O’Toole, 1999). While stating, “there is no ‘magical’ number of traits or constellation of traits
which will determine what students may present a problem,” the FBI model emphasizes the
cumulative impact of all four categories for appraising the lethality and possibility of violence
(O’Toole, 1999). The final step, response, is based on information gathered in the assessment but
typically includes intervention strategies to mitigate and prevent the threatened violence
(O’Toole, 1999).

Table 1

The FBI Four Pronged Assessment Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prong One: Personality Traits and Behavior</th>
<th>Prong Two: Family Dynamics</th>
<th>Prong Three: School Dynamics</th>
<th>Prong Four: Social Dynamics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leakage</td>
<td>Turbulent Parent-Child Relationship</td>
<td>Student’s Attachment to School</td>
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<td>Low Tolerance for Frustration</td>
<td>Acceptance of Pathological Behavior</td>
<td>Tolerance for Disrespectful Behavior</td>
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<td>Poor Coping Skills</td>
<td>Access to Weapons</td>
<td>Inequitable Discipline</td>
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<td>Lack of Resiliency</td>
<td>Lack of Intimacy</td>
<td>Inflexible Culture</td>
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<td>Failed Love Relationship</td>
<td>Student “Rules the Roost”</td>
<td>Pecking Order Among Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Injustice Collector”</td>
<td>No Limits or Monitoring of TV and Internet</td>
<td>Code of Silence</td>
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<td>Signs of Depression</td>
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<td>Unsupervised Computer Access</td>
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<td>Narcissism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Media, Entertainment, Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dehumanizes Others</td>
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<td>Peer Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Empathy</td>
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<td>Drugs and Alcohol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exaggerated Sense of Entitlement</td>
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<td>Outside Interests</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>The Copycat Effect</td>
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Table 1 Continued

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<tr>
<th>Prong One: Personality Traits and Behavior</th>
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<tr>
<td>· Attitude of Superiority</td>
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<td>· Exaggerated or Pathological Need for Attention</td>
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<td>· Externalizes Blame</td>
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<td>· Masks Low Self-Esteem</td>
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<td>· Anger Management Problems</td>
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<td>· Intolerance</td>
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<td>· Inappropriate Humor</td>
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<td>· Seeks to Manipulate Others</td>
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<td>· Lack of Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Closed Social Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Change in Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Rigid and Opinionated</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Unusual Interest in Sensational Violence</td>
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<td>· Facination with Violence-Filled Entertainment</td>
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<td>· Negative Role Models</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Behaviors Appear Relevant to Carrying Out a Threat</td>
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Derived from social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the influence of social and ecological systems as precursors to dysfunctional behavior, the FBI’s four-prong model emphasizes the social and emotional concerns of students within their socio-ecological contexts to distinguish between veiled and valid threats (Pittaro, 2007).

**The USSS Model**

The most prominent threat assessment model was developed in a collaborative effort by the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) and the Department of Education (DOE), hereinafter referred to as the USSS model. Findings from the SSI study indicate that acts of targeted violence in schools were planned attacks and other individuals—usually peers—typically knew about the perpetrators’ plans for attack prior to the event (Vossekuil et al., 2002). These results suggested that schools could prevent acts of targeted violence by examining students’ behavior and/or communications for indications of thinking, planning, or progressive lethal capacity to engage in an act of targeted school violence (Deisinger et al., 2008). Using these empirical findings, the USSS adapted the Secret Service threat assessment model and developed the federal model of school threat assessment (USSS model) for use in schools (NTAC, 2018).

The USSS model prioritizes the assessment of identifiable patterns of behavior to deter and prevent acts of targeted school violence. Drawing upon the ten key findings of the SSI study, threat assessment teams are advised to explore the perpetrators’ motivation and goals for violence, communications of intent, interests in sensational violence, capacity to complete the lethal attack, coping skills (or lack thereof), quality of relationships, and related risk factors to answer eleven questions developed for the threat assessment process (Fein et al., 2002, p. 55-57):

(a) What are the student’s motive(s) or goals?

(b) Have there been any communications suggesting ideas or an intent to attack?
(c) Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in any of the following?

   (i) School attacks

   (ii) Weapons

   (iii) Mass Violence

(d) Has the student engaged in attack-related behaviors? (i.e. developing a plan, acquiring or practicing with weapons, rehearsing attacks, casing sites and areas)?

(e) Does the student have the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?

(f) Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair?

(g) Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?

(h) Does the student see violence as an acceptable or desirable or the only way to solve problems?

(i) Is the student’s conversations and “story” consistent with his or her actions?

(j) Are other people concerned about the student’s potential for violence?

(k) What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

The USSS model of student threat assessment was first credited with preventing a planned school shooting in the fall of 2001 (Kohn, 2009) and continues to be the recommended model for U.S. K-12 schools and school districts. Although other models have been developed for threat assessment in schools, the USSS models is recommended by the FBI, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). By using an “investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset” for early warning signs, risk
factors, and protective factors, the inquiry methods of the USSS threat assessment model helps school officials determine if an investigation, typically involving law enforcement, is needed.

**The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines**

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) was developed as part of The Violence Project by the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia (Cornell, 2006). Researchers explored how school principals’ identify and respond to threats in 35 schools. In alignment with the recommendations set forth by the FBI and Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002), a seven step decision making model was developed for schools to use in the evaluation of student threats (Cornell, Maeng, Burnette, & Jia, 2018).

Step 1 of the model is to gather information. The TAT lead interviews the student who made the threat, the recipient of the threat, and any relevant witnesses using a standard set of interview questions. The assessor will attempt to gauge the meaning and intent of the threat from different perspectives as the conduct the interview (Cornell, 2006).

Step 2 of the model is to assess the seriousness of the threat. Accurate distinction of threat severity is critical to determine appropriate management and intervention strategies (Dewey, 2018). In the attempt to help school assessors assessor determine if a threat is transient (no risk) or substantive (risk for violence), O’Toole (2000) and the FBI (Fein et al., 2002) developed a list of threat characteristics that reflect the severity of intent. According to the researchers, substantive threats are characterized by statements or qualities that reflect serious intent, such as planning and preparation, weapon acquisition, or refusing mediation (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). Whereas, transient threats reflect expressions of anger or frustration, but are not serious in nature (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). If a TAT determines a threat is transient, the lead will proceed to Step 3 of the decision making tree, or to Step 4 if the TAT determines a threat is
Step 3 guides TAT through a process to address transient threats. Typically, transient threats are resolved quickly and do not require all team members in a comprehensive threat assessment. The TAT lead may respond to transient threats with disciplinary actions or peer mediation (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

Step 4 guides TAT through a process to address substantive threats. In addition to the protective actions taken at Step 3, the TAT will assess the intended severity of injury that underlies the threat. Threats may be categorized as: 1) serious, for threats with the intent to assault or use physical violence, 2) very serious for threats with the intent to kill, sexually assault, or seriously injure someone, or 3) very serious for threats with the intent for severe injuries, such as those involving weapons. The TAT lead will then proceed to Step 5 of the decision tree if a threat is determined to be serious or Step 6 if a threat is determined to be very serious.

Step 5 guides TAT through a process to address serious substantive threats. First, the team implements precautions to protect potential victims. Protective actions are dependent upon the context of the threat, including the time and location of the threatened violence. Immediate protection actions may include notifying the victim of the threat, contacting the offending students’ parents, informing the offending student of potential consequences, refer the offending student for counseling or mental health evaluation, and if necessary, contact local law enforcement (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

Step 6 guides TAT through a process to address very serious substantive threats. The TAT takes immediate action using the precautions suggested in Step five, including contacting law enforcement and conducting a safety evaluation of the offending student with mental health
and law enforcement components. The interview is typically completed by a mental health professional wherein the assessor attempts to identify needs for mental health services and the conflict that underlies the threat (Cornell & Sheras, 2006). The offending student should be suspended from school pending a complete investigation and assessment and if necessary, determination for appropriate school placement (Cornell).

Step 7 is undertaken if TAT need to develop and implement a written safety plan. The safety plan is designed to protect potential victims and address the offending students’ educational needs. The school principal, or TAT lead, will determine whether the offending student may return to school or if an alternative setting is appropriate. If the student is permitted to return to the school, the team will include required conditions and procedures to support and monitor the students’ reentry in the safety plan (Cornell & Sheras, 2006).

The VSTAG is an empirically supported model with procedures aligning with recommendations proposed from the FBI (O’Toole, 2000) and Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002) studies. The triage approach with progressive assessment and intervention aligning with the severity of threat is an appropriate developmental approach for school-based teams to recognize and respond to student threats. Additionally, given the emphasis on conflict resolution and problem solving without the use of violence, the VSTAG model would be compatible with positive behavioral approaches to school discipline (Horner, Sugai & Anderson, 2010) and restorative justice practices (Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2016).

Critique of the Models

The FBI and USSS models. Reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2013), the American Psychological Association (2013), and the National Association of School Psychologists (National Association of School Psychologists School Safety and Crisis Response
Committee, 2014) advocate for the adoption of the threat assessment approach in schools. In an effort to support schools in assessing threats of targeted school violence, several threat assessment models have been developed. While each model attempts to identify the most important attributes worthy of threat analysis based upon the findings of retrospective studies, the divergent principles and execution strategies evokes inconsistent implementation that ultimately threatens the safety of students. The

The findings of the SSI (Fein et al., 2002) indicate that in most cases, perpetrators share their plans for a school shooting prior to the attack. In fact, in over three-quarters of the incidents studied, at least one person had information regarding the perpetrators’ thoughts or plans for the school attack (81%), and in nearly two-thirds of the incidents, more than one person had information regarding the attack before it occurred (59%). Student’s communicating their intentions (spoken, written, or symbolic) in advance of a violent act is considered “leakage” in the models. The focus on pre-attack behaviors, referred to as “warning behaviors” in the USSS model or “forecasting behaviors” in the FBI model, to identify potential threats is supported by empirical analysis and serves as a strength to the models (Fast, 2008, p. 238). Unlike the FBI model, which stresses the evaluation of direct threats, the USSS model prioritizes the progression, if any, of pre-attack behaviors from planning to execution. The significance of behaviors instead of threats or traits in the USSS model is supported by empirical research which indicates that “only 17% of attackers threatened targets with direct, indirect, or conditional language prior to the attack” (Augustyniak, 2005, p.34).

Each model highlights the importance of the social ecology in schools rather than the pathology of the perpetrator. The FBI attempts to distinguish between veiled and valid threats by considering the behavioral, social, environmental, and pathological risk factors surrounding the
threat, believing, similar to the USSS model, that targeted school violence is rarely a spontaneous act (Fein et al., 2002; O’Toole, 2000). While the USSS model does not provide a list of risk factors for evaluation, as articulated in the FBI model, the 10 key findings direct users to specific circumstances for consideration (O’Toole, 2000).

The underlying principles and action steps in the FBI (Fein et al., 2002) and USSS (O’Toole, 2000) threat assessment models vary greatly. While the seemingly divergent models brings confusion as to what should be considered during threat assessment, a comparative analysis of risk factors revealed a surprising consistency (Potter, 2015). In fact, Potter (2015) found that of the 43 factors discussed in the related literature, the FBI model recommended 35 factors, the USSS model recommended 38 factors, and the majority of factors (70%) appeared in both models. However, the 30% of risk factors not identified in both models warrants question. Reddy et al. (2001) supports the concern stating the “expert consensus on the evaluation of targeted violence has not been found” (p.166).

Augustyniak (2005, p.43) emphasized concerns over the potential shortcomings by the FBI and USSS models, stating that additional factors are needed for a thorough assessment. Factors shown to influence the likelihood violence but are not included in the models include a) age of onset, b) gender, c) peer and family influence, d) trauma, e) overt/covert expressions of aggression, f) desistance, and g) patterns of relapse (Augustyniak, 2005). Although the list of factors should not be used to profile potential perpetrators of targeted school violence, ignoring their influence may hinder threat assessment outcomes.

According to Weisbrot (2008), threat assessment requires thorough psychological and psychiatric assessment, including “suicidality, homicidality, thought processes, reality testing, mood and behavior.” However, the FBI contents that school staff, such as the school
psychologist or school counselors, are not qualified to conduct such assessments (Patrasso, 2005). While the FBI (Fein et al., 2002) recommends the use of clear and consistent practices during school threat assessment, the lack of empirically-based assessment and evaluation tools suggests a limitation to the FBI’s approach. Similarly, aside from the 11 questions that guide the USSS threat assessment process, the prediction of a violent event is typically embedded within complex and intertwined socioecological dynamics. The assessment of threatened violence is thereby confronted with subjective interpretation of the model’s (FBI or USSS) emphasis on direct threats or pre-attack behaviors. In sum, TAT need additional guidance to conduct a reliable threat assessment.

**The VSTAG.** Previous school safety models were reactive in nature as they focused on dispositional, static, and dichotomous factors (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil & Berglund, 1999). In contrast to previous safety models, the VSTAG measures risk factors through continuous analysis of displayed behaviors to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. The models’ triage approach allows educators and mental health professionals to recognize and respond to the developmental needs of children and adolescents without resorting to punitive disciplinary actions (Cornell, 2011).

The Virginia model advocates for a team approach for responding to student threats of violence. To establish interrater reliability and adherence to the prevention model, the VSTAG training materials include case studies as well as pre- and post-test exercises (Cornell et al., 2004). A series of controlled studies have found that schools implementing the VSTAG model had lower rates of bullying and peer victimization (Cornell, Allen & Fan, 2012), fewer short-term and long-term suspensions (JustChildren & Cornell, 2013), students were more willing to seek counseling services (Cornell, Allen & Fan, 2012), and the perception of school climate was
more favorable by students and teachers (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015). With a step-by-step approach for assessing and responding to acts of threatened violence, as well as documentation and protocol samples for quick implementation, the success of the VSTAG seems promising.

While the VSTAG is an actionable and practical template for threat assessment in schools, the decision making tree fails to elaborate on the various forms of action school officials may take. For instance, the materials do not address the influence of specific cultures or genders on students risk for violence (NREEP, 2013). Failure to address disciplinary responses and outcomes across demographics may resort in differential outcomes for students. Additionally, school principals are encouraged to serve as team lead and ultimately distinguish between transient and substantive threats. However, school-based mental health professionals (school counselors and school psychologists) may have information regarding mental illness, risk factors, and/or warning signs unknown to the school principal. If school principals are serving as team lead, the VSTAG should necessitate communication with a mental health professional before any determinations of risk are made.

The effectiveness of the VSTAG in comparison to other threat assessment models is limited as most, if not all, of the empirical research on threat assessment in schools explores the VSTAG (Cornell et al., 2012). Thus, cross-sectional and correlational studies are needed to accurately measure the effectiveness of the VSTAG on school safety outcomes. Similarly, while the decision to incorporate larger school divisions in studies on the VSTAG lessens the likelihood of school-selection bias, additional analyses with schools in other states would be useful to assess differences in school districts and identify best practices.

**Role of School Counselors in Threat Assessment**

According to the Safe School Initiative (2002), there are three points at which school
counselors may support school safety efforts: a) safe school climate, b) student voice, and c) investigation of student threats of violence. School counselors’ training, expertise, and student rapport (knowledge, skills, relationships, etc.) make them a critical resource for successful threat assessment in schools. While threat assessment requires a team approach, school counselors have a unique role in targeted school violence prevention.

**Safe School Climate**

Incidents of targeted school violence are characterized as a culminating event to a range of negative experiences (Henry, 2009); however, threat assessments are only effective in a school climate of safety (Fein et al., 2002). For instance, several school officials who previously encountered incidents of targeted school violence often credit their safe school environment for averted threats (Madfis, 2014).

According to the Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013) school counselors are expected to foster school climates of safety. One approach is through direct or indirect counseling services (Sullivan, 2012). School counselors may support school staff to establish safe reporting mechanisms and teach students the importance of reporting concerns of student behavior. By emphasizing open communication and a culture of listening, school counselors may combat acts of bullying and relational aggression as well as combat leakage of student threats (Sullivan, 2012).

**Student Voice**

School environments and educational services must be inclusive and supportive to all students (ASCA, 2012); however, perpetrators of targeted school violence often report a sense of disconnect with their school and peers (Rocque, 2012). One approach to help students feel connected to the school community is helping students feel a voice in their needs. Their
advocacy role may include making contact with parents, ensuring barriers to mental health access are removed, providing programs such as mentoring and short-term counseling to support students at risk for violence. Additionally, interventions and risk management strategies require the input of students, parents, mental health providers, and law enforcement (NTAC, 2018). Using their skills to form relationships and facilitate collaboration, school counselors actively coordinate services to build partnerships that help students feel empowered and supported (ASCA, 2013).

Investigate Student Threats of Violence

According to the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) National Model (2012), school counselors must be “prepared to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and needs and to address these barriers to student success by offering education, prevention, and crisis and short-term intervention until the student is connected with available community resources” (p. 86). Research demonstrates that in the vast majority of targeted school violence incidents, perpetrators communicated their intent to others and/or displayed concerning behaviors prior to the event (O’Toole, 2000). Cornell (2012) states that school counselors serve a leadership role in the planning, coordination, and implementation of interventions for students who threaten acts of targeted violence.

The majority of recommendations for school counselors involve prevention and intervention efforts, with few statements on identifying early warning signs or conducting assessments of risk (Bernes & Bardick, 2007). According to Daniels (2002), school counselors are in the optimal position to identify students who are at risk for acts of targeted school violence. Given the delicate relationship between counselors and students, counselors are likely to be among the first to recognize a change in students’ behavior or a heightened risk for
violence. Additionally, school counselors trained in suicide assessment and intervention possess the knowledge and job roles for identifying, evaluating, and supporting students at risk for violence (Capuzzi, 2002). Thus, school counselors may inform stakeholders, advocate for and conduct assessments of threat, and monitor student progress to support targeted school violence prevention.

**Barriers**

Notable shifts in school safety policies and procedures intended to make schools safer. However, a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities of school officials has hampered the efficacy of preventive efforts (Borum et al., 2010). The Professional School Counselor and Safe Schools and Crisis Response statement from the ASCA (2013) states that “a crisis or an act of violence thrusts professional school counselors into positions of responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of all students and staff” (p.43). However, school counselors are absent in models of school-based threat assessment and the broader literature. The comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan as outlined in the USSS Operational Guide (2018) includes eight steps wherein school counselors play an important role on teams responsible for the assessment and mitigation of violence risk (ASCA, 2012).

**The USSS Operational Guide to Prevent Acts of Targeted School Violence**

Following the tragic school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida in February of 2018, the USSS aimed to provide updated research and guidance on the prevention of targeted school violence. Based on the findings of the SSI (Fein et al., 2002) and a 2008 collaboration that explored bystander intervention and the significance of creating safe school climates, the USSS *Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence*
provides a pragmatic and detailed process for establishing a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan.

The Operational Guide, entitled *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*, includes school safety and security efforts to help school officials identify students of concern, assess whether they pose a risk of harm to themselves or the school community, and respond with intervention strategies to mitigate that risk (NTAC, 2018). The guide also emphasizes the importance of school climate and the need for positive student-teacher relationships on the prevention of targeted school violence. In contrast to the previous models of school-based threat assessment, the USSS (2012/2018) model provides fundamental direction to meet the demands and growing threats to American schools.

**Creating a Comprehensive Targeted School Violence Prevention Plan**

Preventing acts of targeted school violence requires a great variety of strategies, including measures of school campus security, crisis response, and violence prevention. The USSS (2012/2018) recommends a threat assessment process to integrate school safety and crisis response efforts. The process begins with the creation of a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan (USSS 2012/2018; NTAC, 2018). The Operational Guide (NTAC, 2018) outlines how schools may begin to establish a plan with eight recommendations.

The first recommendation is to establish a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team (TAT) comprised of highly trained professionals from a variety of disciplines (e.g., teachers, administrators, school counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers). The TAT will receive reports of concern for student behavior, gather relevant information, assess the risk for violence, and develop intervention and management strategies to mitigate any risk of violence (NTAC, 2018).
The second recommendation is to establish policies and procedures for prohibited and concerning behaviors with a low threshold for intervention to mitigate the escalation of concerning behaviors. Prohibited behaviors require immediate interventions, such as threats of violence, carrying a weapon on school grounds and bullying or harassment. Behaviors of concern are those not indicative of violence, but may indicate a student is in distress. These include a decline in academic performance, increased absenteeism, withdrawal or isolation, dramatic changes in appearance, drug or alcohol use and changes in emotional or mental health symptoms. Based on empirical evidence that suggests acts of targeted violence are planned and, in most cases, experience leakage, observable behaviors prior to the attack may signal a risk of violence (Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000).

The third recommendation is to establish a central reporting mechanism for behaviors of concern. The reporting system may include an online form on the school website, phone number, smartphone application or other mechanism. To encourage reports without fear of reprisal, the reporting mechanism should offer anonymity to mitigate potential leakage (Pollack, Modzeleski & Rooney, 2008). Similarly, schools must establish policies and procedures that promotes a climate that fosters a sense of safety and breaks down the code of silence. The reporting system should be continually monitored with each report being evaluated to ensure a quick response to any concerns of safety.

The fourth recommendation is to establish a threshold for law enforcement intervention. Although the majority of cases will be effectively managed by school personnel, TATs should establish a threshold for discernable situations that require immediate involvement of law enforcement.

The fifth recommendation is to establish replicable threat assessment procedures for the
TAT. The team should define a protocol for maintaining documentation, gathering information, reviewing records, and conducting interviews for the reliability of risk assessment. The following investigative themes should guide the information-gathering process: Motive, Communication (unusual or concerning, with special attention to social media activity), Infatuation with Violence, Weapons Access, Stressors, Emotional and Development Concerns, Desperation or Despair, Concerned Others, Capacity to Organize an Attack, Pre-Attack Concerning Behaviors, Protective Factors, and Consistency between Students’ Actions and Statements (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018).

The sixth recommendation is to establish risk management options to mitigate any identified risks. Once a threat assessment is complete, an individualized management plan must be created to decrease the risk of violence. Grounding the management plan on the information gleaned in the assessment, other components include law enforcement involvement, protecting potential victims, alternative education settings, and reducing the effects of stressors.

The seventh recommendation is to create and promote a safe climate of safety. Schools are encouraged to facilitate a school culture that emphasizes safety, respect, trust, and emotional support wherein students feel heard and empowered to share their concerns. The guide suggests that social interaction wherein school staff intervene in conflicts and bullying will help create a climate where students can identify a trusted adult.

The eighth and final recommendation to start the path of implementation is to provide training to all stakeholders- teachers, staff, administrators, students, parents, and local law enforcement- on the threat assessment process. Clearly defining the role they play in keeping the school environment safe is vital to the success of the TAT. The training may cover topics such as how to recognize and report concerning behavior, suicide prevention, conflict resolution, and de-
escalation techniques (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018).

**Conclusion**

Within the last twenty years, targeted school violence has emerged as a worldwide phenomenon. Schools are increasingly being challenged to plan for, prevent, and respond to the potential of targeted violence. The USSS (2012/2018) recommends that schools use a threat assessment process to prevent incidents of targeted violence. A crucial component of a targeted violence prevention plan is the role of school counselors. Through the steps of the USSS threat assessment model (2002/2018), the current study seeks to explore the requirements and guidance of threat assessments in schools with specific attention to the role of school counselors.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In response to the Secret Service Initiative report (Fein et al., 2002), there is a need to understand how schools are preventing acts of targeted school violence and utilizing the expertise of school counselors. School-based threat assessment is a recommended, analytical approach for distinguishing serious threats, defined as behaviors and communications posed by a student who may be planning or preparing for a school-based attack, from cases in which the threat is not serious (Cornell et al., 2018). As such, identifying school-based threat assessment practices, as well as the supports and challenges related to threat assessments in K-12 schools, will help inform standard practice in this area. Consensual qualitative research (CQR) examined the use of threat assessment in schools using individual interviews with eleven professional school counselors.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan?

RQ2: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified?

RQ3: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed?

RQ4: In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence?

Research Design

Consensual Qualitative Research. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) is a structured method of qualitative research with an emphasis on consistent data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Hill et al. (1997) introduced CQR as an alternative to existing qualitative approaches in counseling psychology that appeared more subjective or biased in their
methodological approach. While Hill et al. (1997) presents CQR as constructivist in a philosophical stance with a “postpositivist flair” (p. 197), others claim a firm post-positivist stance with a constructivist flair (Balkin & Kleist, 2017, p. 232). Nonetheless, most qualitative researchers agree that CQR adheres to the combined post-positivist-constructivist research paradigm as explicated (Ponterotto et al., 2011; Depner et al., 2018).

CQR incorporates elements of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), phenomenological (Giorgis, 1985), and comprehensive process analysis (Elliot, 1989). Originally developed to study psychotherapy and supervision in counseling psychology, CQR has become a widely used method of inquiry in social science research (Hill, 2012). The majority of research utilizing CQR as a methodological approach have focused on individual interviews. This study utilized CQR for collecting and analyzing individual interviews with professional school counselors.

The essential components of consensual qualitative research are outlined in Hill (2012):
(a) Semi-structured data collection using open-ended questions for consistent probing between participants and a thorough exploration of individual experiences
(b) A research team is utilized to elicit a variety of perspectives throughout data analysis
(c) Consensus process of data analysis by team members for the best construction of meaning
(d) Independent auditors check the consensus judgements to reduce bias in data analysis
(e) Data analysis involves domain coding (i.e. themes), constructing core ideas (i.e. raw data abstracts), and cross-analysis (i.e. sub-themes)

Consensual qualitative research uses traditional qualitative approaches and has descriptive and interpretive validity. With an emphasis on rich, individualized data and reliance
on consensus, a standardized interview protocol, and categorical cross-analysis to limit potential influences, CQR is a rigorous approach to qualitative research.

**Participants**

**Population.** Participants were selected from a large southeastern school district, in which the primary researcher was employed. The criterion sampling method was followed to ensure participants can provide meaningful information (Hill et al., 1997). Criteria for selection was a North Carolina Professional School Counselor License and being employed as a full-time, school counselor in the selected school district. According to Cornell et al. (2017), threats are made by students in the elementary (46.3%), middle (30.7%), and high (23.0%) school grades. Based on these results, school counselors employed at the elementary, middle, and high school levels were invited to participate in the study.

Hill et al. (1997) recommends 8 to 15 participants when conducting CQR. Interview data was collected from 11 school counselors, approximating the recommended range. Recruitment of participants was initiated following the approval for external research from the school district’s Research Review Committee (RRC). As an employee of the school district, the primary researcher had access to all school counselor’s emails. With the permission of the RRC, an email (see Appendix A) was sent to all school counselors in the district with an invitation to participate in an individual interview. After the initial email invitation was sent, two reminders were sent via email. Recruitment concluded one week after the final reminder. Hill et al. (1997) recommends providing interview questions to interviewees; however, because that procedure may alter natural discussion, only the research purpose and methodology was provided before

A Doodle poll was emailed to school counselors who responded to the request for participants. The poll was utilized to identify participants’ availability and a location convenient
and comfortable for them (e.g., coffee shop, bakery) to complete the individual interview. A final email was sent to participants with a confirmation of the interview time, date, and location. An email reminding participants of the interview time and location was also sent one week in advance of the scheduled meeting. Although evidence suggests monetary compensation may interact with participant characteristics (Singer & Ye, 2013), external rewards may incentivize participation in research. All participants received a $25 gift card for Barnes and Noble as compensation for their time.

**Sample.** A total of eleven school counselors participated in the study. Of the eleven participants, three worked in an elementary school setting, four worked in a middle school setting, and four worked in the high school setting in a southeastern school district. Due to time constraints and financial restrictions, recruiting a random sample was not possible. Therefore, a non-random sampling strategy was used in the present study. Participant phic data are reported in Table 2. To protect their identities, the participants were assigned an ID number.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographic Data*

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<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Counseling Certificate Year</th>
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<th>School Setting</th>
<th>Number of School Counselors</th>
<th>Professional License(s) / Certification(s)</th>
<th>Highest Degree of Education</th>
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<th>Type</th>
<th>Degree</th>
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<td>Masters</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2015</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7-12 Teaching License</td>
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</table>

**Researcher Subjectivity Statement**

Attributes of the primary researcher can be viewed in a positive and negative light with regard to reflexivity. First, as an individual who may operate from the lens of a researcher and practitioner, the researcher brings insight to the study. However, to enhance the rigor and ethics of the study, the researchers’ biases will be discussed prior to data collection and referenced throughout the research process. The tasks assigned to the research team members were designed to help monitor these biases. Second, as an employee of the school district in which participants are employed, the primary researcher is less likely to be viewed as an outsider to participants. Considerations of how the relationship may or may not influence the results in a positive or a negative way is imperative.

**Instrumentation**

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ experiences and practices related to student threats of violence, including challenges and recommendations for
thorough threat assessment in schools. After participants have met the inclusion criteria for participation in the current study, they will complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) followed by a face-to-face interview.

The Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework will guide the development and refinement of the interview protocol for reliable and high-quality data. In Phase 1, the primary researcher (who is a licensed school counselor) and a counselor educator (who also is a licensed school counselor) will generate a list of interview questions that parallel their professional experiences, previous qualitative studies surrounding threat assessments in schools, and an extensive literature review. In Phase 2, the primary researcher and counselor educator will review and organize the interview questions for a balance of inquiry with conversational order. The final phase, Phase 3, is the feedback stage wherein the external auditor (who is a counselor educator and licensed professional school counselor) will review the interview questions for clarity and salience. At this point, the interview questions will align with the study’s purpose, are presented in conversational order, and have empirical support. The external auditor will also provide feedback on each question for clarity, simplicity, and answerability (Maxwell, 2013).

Although the IPR framework considers piloting the interview questions as a fourth and final phase, constraints such as time and resources prevents the current study from engaging in pilot testing.

In accordance with Hill et al.’s (2005) recommendations, the interview protocol will begin with a “warm-up” question regarding the participant’s background followed by open-ended questions for rich, experiential data. The proposed interview protocol is as follows:

**Warm-Up Questions**

1. What led you to become a school counselor?
2. How long have you been a school counselor?

_Main Interview Questions_

1. One of the prevention strategies for establishing a comprehensive targeted violence prevention plan is to create and promote a safe school climate built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and emotional support. This includes encouraging communication between students and school personnel, intervening in conflicts and bullying, and empowering students to share their concerns. In what ways are you contributing to:

   (a) Encourage communication between students and school personnel?
   (b) Interventions for student conflicts and bullying?
   (c) Empower students to share their concerns?

2. What have you encountered in your work as a school counselor that would be examples of threat?

3. Talk me through the process of what happens after a student of concern has been identified?

   _Probing Questions_

   a. And then what?
   b. What happens next?
   c. How is that decision made?

4. Once an assessment is complete, how do you identify intervention strategies to manage the risk for violence?
5. What are your roles and responsibilities in the practices for identifying students of concern, assessing risk, and developing a risk management plan?

6. As a school counselor, what contributions do you make to prevent targeted school violence that may be uniquely different from what other school personnel can offer?

7. What else would you like to add about the prevention of targeted school violence that haven’t been brought up?

Procedures

Choosing and structuring a research team. The current study utilized two research teams, one to brainstorm interview questions and another to code and analyze data obtained from the individual interviews; However, the primary researcher was a member of both teams for all aspects of the research project to ensure the focus of each team’s work. Using one research team for the research project may be useful since all members would have an in-depth knowledge of the current study, and some scholars have adopted such a model when using CQR methodology (Hill et al., 205); However, using one research team presents a risk for unintended “tunnel vision” among team members. Hence, using two different teams for research methodology in the present study with minimal (one) overlap of the researchers in groups aims to strengthen the objectivity and reduce the likelihood of “tunnel vision” that would impact the trustworthiness of findings.

Brainstorming team. Three individuals made up the brainstorming team, which includes the primary researcher (who is a counseling doctoral candidate and a practicing school counselor), a counselor educator (who is also a licensed professional school counselor), and a practicing school counselor. The recommended strategies for developing the interview protocol followed the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework (as described above). This
includes brainstorming a list of potential questions, seeking feedback on the initial set of questions, and preparing a final list of questions.

A 1 hour brainstorming session was conducted as a requisite to clear, unbiased, and comprehensive interview questions, followed by a review of the proposed questions by the external auditor. The primary researcher led the brainstorming session and provided background information regarding the purpose of the research study as well as a summary of relevant literature. The team who brainstormed the initial questions includes the primary researcher (who is a counseling doctoral candidate and a practicing school counselor), a counselor educator (who is also a licensed professional school counselor), and a licensed professional school counselor. After drafting a set of interview questions, the external auditor (who is a counselor educator and licensed professional school counselor) was asked to provide feedback about the clarity and objective of each question. As a final step, the brainstorming team reviewed and finalized the interview questions in consideration of the auditor’s feedback.

**Coding team.** Three individuals made up the coding team, which includes the primary researcher (who is both a counseling doctoral candidate and practicing school counselor) and two counseling doctoral candidates (one is a licensed professional school counselor and the second a licensed mental health counselor). The composition of the coding team is an advantage, according to Hill et al. (1997) because team members’ have clinical sophistication and “therapists and therapists-in-training...generally have good interpersonal skills, welcome feedback about how they come across to other people, and are motivated to work on interpersonal relationships,” (p. 528).

The coding team was responsible for coding and analyzing the data. Although members of the primary team have not previously conducted research using CQR methodology, all team
members studied the foundational articles on CQR (Hill et al. 1997, 2005, 2012) and exemplar studies (Knox, Hess, Williams, & Hill, 2003; Diamond et al., 2011). All team members had also earned six to nine graduate level course credits in qualitative research methods by the start of data analysis.

**Auditor.** A counseling faculty member (dissertation co-chair) served as auditor throughout the course of the research study. The role of the auditor is outside the consensual process and serves as a “check for the team” throughout data analysis (Hill, 2012, p.137). The counseling faculty member was not a member of the research team and did not participate in the coding of the data, intended to reduce overall bias among the research teams’ analyses. However, the counseling faculty member did review the interview protocol. Although the counseling faculty member is a former school counselor, their training in counselor education provides a broader perspective of school counseling.

**Data Collection.** Upon arriving for the interview, the primary researcher first obtained informed consent in writing from each participant (see Appendix C). The informed consent includes interview participation, confidentiality, and permission to audiotape interviews. After obtaining informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). Once the informed consent document and demographic questionnaire were complete, the primary researcher began the individual interview.

The interviews were conducted in-person and audio-recorded with an iPhone 8 encrypted by Touch ID. Attempts were made to establish a safe and comfortable environment for each participant, including the research setting being a location of participant choosing (e.g., coffee shop, bakery) and informing participants that should they feel discomfort in the event of changes
in the interview environment (e.g., presence or nearness of colleague), the interview could
discontinue without penalty.

Immediately following the interview, audio recordings were saved as a pseudonym and
the device was placed in lock mode. Audio recordings were transferred from the iPhone to an
encrypted (Filevault) apple computer by the end of the interview day and copies held on the
iPhone were destroyed. As a final step, the interview data was uploaded and stored in the NC
State Google Drive via NC State’s Virtual Private Network (VPN).

**Interviews.** At the beginning of the interview process, the following definitions were
printed and read aloud to all participants:

(a) **Threat**: An expression of intent to harm someone. Threats may be verbal, written,
or suggested in behavior.

(b) **Threat assessment**: The systematic approach that guides school officials in
addressing student threats by determining the degree of motivation and means to commit
a threat of violence (O’Toole, 2012).

Upon clarity of terms, each participant was interviewed using the interview protocol. The
protocol began with general questions to build rapport, followed with more specific open-ended
questions regarding student threats of violence. As recommended by Hill et al. (2005) and
Morgan et al. (1998), scripted questions and probes allows for consistent information across
participants, while spontaneous questions and probes follow the lead of the interviewee for
greater exploration. Although these questions serve as a guide throughout the interview process,
the researcher used intentional probing, clarifying questions, or ask additional questions to
improve the accuracy and depth of information, as well as to maintain the flow of the interview.
Immediately following each interview, the primary researcher recorded reflections memoing the interview in a journal, including notes about the length and flow of the interview session (e.g., hesitations), impressions of the interviewee, and reactions of the interviewer and the interviewee (Hill et al., 1997, p. 542).

**Data Analysis.** Following the protocol for CQR (Hill et al., 2005), all interviews were transcribed verbatim by a reputable transcription company, *Rogers Word Service*. Audio recordings were transferred using a secure file sharing FTP hosting platform on the company’s website. Transcriptions were digitally returned to the primary researcher using a secure web retrieval. Completed transcripts were then emailed to all interview participants using a secure network for review and feedback to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once accuracy was confirmed, any names mentioned within the interview transcript were replaced with a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the participant or third parties. All identifying information, such as personal names or school name, were also removed or replaced with fictitious or alternative names. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo software (Version 12; 2018) for preliminary analysis of the data.

Inductive analysis of the transcripts followed the systematic data analysis procedures of Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill et al., 1997) using NVivo software (Version 12; 2018). Following the CQR guidelines, the primary team completed preliminary analysis with the data independently. All research team members documented their potential findings and insights throughout analysis. Hill et al., (1997) outlined the following sequential stages for data analysis:

1. Within case analysis
2. Cross Analysis
3. Examining patterns in the data
**Within case analysis.** Raw transcript data for two individual interviews was uploaded into NVivo and shared with members of the research team to initiate qualitative content analysis. As recommended by Hill et al. (2005), team members independently examined each transcript and segmented data into preliminary domains (i.e. emergent themes) in NVivo software (Figure 1.). After completing the first coding of domains, three NVivo files for each transcript were merged together to identify and resolve any discrepancies of coding through a consensual process. Any domains found to be redundant, insignificant, or not present were collapsed or deleted. Special attention was made to a domain labeled “Other” and new domains were created. Once inter-rater reliability was established among team members, the primary researcher completed domain coding for the remaining transcripts to reduce repetition in the task, reaching consensus for each coding decision (Hill et al., 2005).

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. Constructing Domains in Consensual Qualitative Research.*

A consensus version of each transcript, an NVivo document, was shared with each member of the research team to identify core ideas for each of the domains (Figure 2.). During
this process, data segments within each domain was reviewed and the participants’ responses were summarized to “capture the essence of what was said” (Hill et al., 1997, p. 547). Similar to the steps of domain coding, the team members worked independently to identify core ideas for two transcripts and the remaining core ideas were determined by the primary researcher. The team members served as internal auditors to the primary researcher by editing and challenging each the core ideas to ensure participants’ perspectives are accurately represented (Hill et al., 2005).

Figure 2. Constructing Core Ideas in Consensual Qualitative Research

**Cross analysis.** The team then moved into a higher level of abstraction in the cross-analysis stage of data analysis (Figure 3.) (Hill et al., 2005). This is an important step of consensual qualitative research (CQR) because common themes were allowed to emerge and characterize participant data. Using the consensus version of all transcripts, the team worked
independently to develop a list of categories that concisely reflects the common core ideas. The team members then collectively refined or collapsed categories for a succinct, collective list.

Once consensus was met in regards to the represented domains and categories of core ideas, the primary researcher sent the agreed upon domains and categories, along with two randomly selected transcripts to the external auditor (dissertation chair who is a counselor educator). The auditor had been absent from the data analysis and therefore provides an unbiased perspective to whether raw data was organized by the correct domain, categories accurately fit the core ideas, and the core ideas succinctly represent the raw data.

Following the external audit, the research team independently coded raw data from domains into categories of core ideas. The team then met to reach consensus on coding decisions following coding for each transcript. Once the raw data was coded into categories, an additional external audit (dissertation chair who is a counselor educator) was conducted to be certain raw data was coded into appropriate categories and domains. The auditors comments were reviewed by the team and accepted or rejected as deemed appropriate in a consensus manner.

**Examining patterns in the data.** The research team reconvened once again to identify the frequency of occurrence of the categories to examine variations within the sample. As suggested by Hill et al. (1997), the categories were divided and assigned the following labels: (a) *general* for categories reported by all cases, or all but one, (b) *typical* for categories reported by at least 5 cases, (c) *variant* for categories reported by at least 3 cases, and (d) *rare* for categories reported by less than 3 cases.
Figure 3. Cross-Analysis in Consensual Qualitative Research
Conclusion

Chapter III outlined the methodology for the current study, including the process of approval for external research in the school district, recruitment strategies, and instrumentation. Data analysis was introduced and the principles and procedures of consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005) using NVivo software (Version 12; 2018) was stated. In order to establish trustworthiness of the research findings, notable techniques were explained: credibility: peer debriefing and member checks; dependability: audit trails and an independent transcriptionist; and transferability: rich, thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010).

In an attempt to identify any themes in the self-reported responses of k-12 schools counselors regarding the threat assessment process in schools, a qualitative approach was implemented to conduct individual interviews with school counselors of various school levels. From these themes, grounded theory was developed regarding the role school counselors in the threat assessment process for the prevention of targeted school violence.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of the present study was to explore professional school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to student threats of violence, including challenges and recommendations for a thorough threat assessment process in schools. Consensual qualitative research (CQR) was the methodological approach for examining the use of threat assessment in schools using individual interviews with eleven professional school counselors. The individual interviews aimed to address the four research questions proposed:

RQ1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan?

RQ2: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified?

RQ3: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed?

RQ4: In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence?

Domains and Categories

Individual interview data was analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12. Two transcripts were withheld from the initial cross-analysis as a stability check for the initial domains and categories. Results of the stability check suggested that the domains and categories that surfaced during the initial cross-analysis were stable. A review of 11 individual cases produced five domains, with three to five categories within each domain (see Appendix D for a complete list of all domains and categories). These five domains describe targeted school violence prevention practices and the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in these practices across school levels: (1) roles and responsibilities, (2) threat assessment process, (3) strategies to manage student threats of violence, (4) strategies to prevent student threats of
violence, (5) organizational systems and structures. What follows is a discussion of each domain and the categories of core ideas that surfaced within each domain.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

The first domain includes the roles and responsibilities of school counselors within the school threat assessment process. All school counselors mentioned collaborating with other school staff as part of the school threat assessment process. This included collaboration with student support services team members, law enforcement, teachers, and other school staff (i.e. other than teachers, school counselors, student support services staff, or administrators). School counselors’ responsibilities were also discussed as part of the school threat assessment process. Participants cite identifying students and situations of concern, interviews with students of concern, advocating for the social and emotional needs of students, and providing student interventions and environmental support as responsibilities of school counselors. Lastly, participants further specified the role of school administrators with respect to the responsibilities of school counselors in the school threat assessment process.

**Collaboration: “Two heads are always better than one.”** School counselors mentioned collaborating with other school staff, as well as with each other, as part of the school threat assessment process. All participants mentioned collaborating with members of the student support services team (e.g., school social worker, school psychologist, school nurse), school administrators, and teachers regarding students and situations of concern. At any point, school administrators or members of the student support services team may be asked to assist school counselors, or vice versa, during interviews with students of concern and help determine the risk for violence.
**Student support services team: “As a team we sit down.”** Five school counselors cite collaboration with the student support services team as a key practice in the threat assessment approach to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. The composition of the student support services team varies from school to school, but school counselors interviewed directly mentioned school social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses. In some instances, school counselors may collaborate with student support services staff to assess their schools and identify school-wide needs. Existing data on student behaviors (i.e. suspension data, attendance data, course grades) may be used to identify common goals and priorities. Within this meeting, which occurs once or twice a school year, school counselors and student support services staff provide input and determine strategies, roles, and responsibilities for prevention programming efforts.

As a team, we sit down, and we look at what we think the needs are at our school based on the data. And I mean data in terms of numbers like failure, suspensions, attendance, but also anecdotal data. Things that teachers are saying about kids, things that parents are saying, and things that kids are reporting themselves. Then we usually try to come up with some sort of a plan or lesson to intervene or to help support.

School counselors may also collaborate with student support services staff on individual student needs to prevent student threats of violence. These collaborative efforts are typically during formal meetings (e.g. confidential space, all team members present) that may or may not be regularly scheduled. To illustrate, one school counselor describes the importance of weekly meetings with other student support staff members in order to address the increasing needs of students and prevent incidents of targeted school violence: “...we have a ton of need in our school...In a school like this we have to be meeting once a week. Maybe we can skip a week here and there, but for the most part we've got to be meeting at least three times a month. Just saying this is what we’re going to do as a team.”
School counselors may also collaborate with members of the student support services team on reports of students or situations of concern. The expectation of student support services staff is to assist school counselors during interviews with students of concern and analyzing student interview data to determine the imminence of threatened violence.

So those who are partnered are either a co-counselor, the school psychologist, the school social worker, or the school nurse. If, needs be, and there’s nobody else, then we use admin. So, we bring the student in and we ask a series of questions...we ask of course, the basics, like do they have access to a weapon?...Is there a plan?

For students of low to moderate risk for violence, student(s) are typically referred to mental health related services. In this school district, school counselors are restricted by policy on community referrals. School counselors may collaborate with school social workers (who are typically not full-time in one school) to connect families with mental health related services.

Typically those that have escalated in the high risk are because the parents called me and said, “Hey, we’ve had a really bad night. I really think something needs to happen.” And I’ll refer, “You know, if you’re feeling this way, and they’ve escalated in behaviors, we need to take the next steps and you need to go to the doctor...So, trying to get them connected with outside resources and help the family through the crisis.

Additionally, while the role of the school psychologists was typically cited in regards to psychoeducational evaluations, two school counselors mentioned collaborating with school psychologists during the school threat assessment process. This collaborative effort aims to address student threats of violence with interventions that appear most likely to mitigate the risk for violence.

She would be the person we would do a run through. She would be at the table, and she would give some input like I think we need to add this or change this. She's definitely a very active team member, but it's just her time is so limited.
Student support services staff are typically assigned to multiple schools within the school district. School counselors discussed this scheduling arrangement as a barrier to their collaboration throughout the school threat assessment process. For instance, school counselors rarely know if or when student support services staff will be in the building, “They're split over multiple schools so she's not even here all the time. So I never feel like that's somebody I can use as a resource.” Furthermore, student support services staff are limited in their prior knowledge of student behaviors and relationships with students.

I just feel like I have a better rapport with the ids. I have a better knowledge of their backgrounds, their home lives, and it gives me a little bit more information to be able to know what I need to do to help them.

Overall, school counselors frequently collaborate with student support services staff (i.e. school psychologist, school social worker, school nurse) on students and situations of concern to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. However, student support services staff are not considered key stakeholders in the identification, assessment, or monitoring of student threats of targeted violence as a result of their inconsistent presence in the school building.

We don’t have a social worker here at the school...Our school psychologist is here one day a week...I’ll be honest with you. I’ve seen her maybe two or three times this year. We never know when she’s actually in the building because she’s on a different floor. We don’t see her. I don’t know her calendar. So, it’s one of those things where if we’re lucky she’s here, but the day she’s here is not always one of those high flyer days of the week.
School resource officers/local law enforcement: “We have law enforcement sitting at the table.” Five school counselors mentioned collaboration with school resource officers/local law enforcement in the school threat assessment process. When asked if this collaboration was thought to arise for specific levels of risk (i.e. low, moderate, high), one participant responded, “From what I have experienced, it has been high.” In such instances, school resource officers/local law enforcement assist school administrators in determining next steps for students who threaten acts of targeted school violence. School counselors mentioned collaborating on information gathered during student threat assessments to guide the decision-making process.

If it's a threat assessment, I give all of my findings to administration, who then gives it to their county person, who's here. You have your police officer, or your head SRO, you have your head of the crisis management and-or safety and security, and they make the determination of what happens to the student next, after I have made my recommendation.

Two participants cite students who threaten acts of targeted school violence may face legal consequences from school resource officers/local law enforcement, stating, “I mean you have law enforcement sitting at the table. So are we pressing charges? What are we doing? Are we taking this kid in?” Additionally, for students who pose a high risk for threatened violence, school counselors may collaborate with school resource officers/local law enforcement to assist with parents who refuse to take their child for an emergency evaluation, as dictated by district policy.

If it's an immediate threat, and the parent doesn't want their kid, which has also happened unfortunately. Doesn't want their kid... like they get here and they're like, "I'm just going to take them home," then I call the police and have them deal with it because they need to see someone immediately.
**Teachers. “Teachers ears are out there.”** All school counselors interviewed mentioned collaborating with teachers as part of the school threat assessment process. Participants cite collaboration with teachers as the most effective strategy to proactively identify students or situations of concern given students’ extended time in the classroom and established rapport.

I think teachers are the most important filter for that. And I think every year the school tries to mention something to teachers that they have to say something. And so they’re the ones that really are in there, day to day. They know the kids much more intimately than we do. Especially at first.

Teachers were mentioned to actively monitor students for warning signs related to acts of targeted school violence. Participants cite students may elicit concern from their teachers by making threatening or concerning statements in writing assignments or to a peer (teacher overhears), with changes in their behavior, or by demonstrating a lack of coping skills (i.e. behavioral outbursts).

I think their ears are out there. They’re looking at writing, they’re listening to conversations between kids...they’re identifying kids that may need some support a little bit quicker than we used to. I think that’s a good thing. I don’t want teachers to be over concerned, but it is good to be aware of what’s going on.

After a student of concern has been identified, school counselors may also collaborate with teachers to identify school-based interventions that mitigate the students’ risk for violence. Typically, school counselors collaborate with teachers during formal meetings following violence risk assessments.

If this is an issue that is an ongoing sort of concern for a student, then I mean we’ve got to do something beyond just dealing with it within our department. What that usually looks like is us then moving on to a meeting of some sort. Typically a meeting with the student’s parents, with an administrator, usually a grade level administrator, whichever colleague worked with the student, sometimes [teachers] depending on whether or not that’s appropriate, but usually these kids have issues that definitely can be observed in a
classroom or in transitions. But we do have a meeting of some sort to come up with a plan that will be followed at school.

During such meetings, school staff (e.g. school counselors, school administrators, teachers, etc.) provide input on the appropriate intervention(s) and discuss the teacher’s role for execution, if warranted. For example, one participant discussed a case in which a responsibility of the teacher was to monitor a student for escalating behaviors, stating, “having the teacher alerted and everyone's keeping an eye on that child to see if they're stable enough to be in the classroom or not.”

At times, students may not pose a threat of violence that necessitates a full threat assessment. School counselors may also collaborate with teachers on low-risk cases to resolve the students’ emotional or behavioral concerns.

I try to build strong relationships with my students, parents, and teachers...I think because of those relationships, I frequently have teachers come ask me, like they want to consult or collaborate, about things students wrote or things they said. So because we have that open like of communication, I feel like that helps create a safer climate for the students, and you know, the teachers are on the front lines when they’re spending time with the kids every day.

Other school staff: “Everybody has their roles.” Two school counselors also mentioned collaborating with other school staff (i.e. other than teachers, school counselors, student support services staff, or administrators) as part of the school threat assessment process. For instance, when prompted with the question, “Who all is on your school threat assessment team?” one school counselor mentioned collaborating with front office personnel in their response, “Our principal, our assistant principal, our school social worker, our school psychologist, our part-time counselor, myself, and we try to have some type of front-office personnel just so they’re in the loop with what is going on.” Similarly, one school counselor mentioned collaborating with the school custodian in order to maintain “structure” in an alternative school setting.
I think in our school we have the right people in the right place. Our principal, he’s tough. Our assistant principal, he’s cool but he’s tough....Everybody has their roles. When you see him out there ... our [head custodian], he don't play. He’s been to CPI training. Everybody's been, we've all been trained, because we're all one family...I’ve never felt unsafe, to be honest with you. Never had a point where a teacher felt like a kid was unsafe. Never, not when I’ve been here, not that I’m aware of. You see what I mean? We always have structure.

Identify students and situations of concern: “We’re usually the first to know.” All but two participants cite the identification of potentially threatening situations or students as the responsibility of school counselors. School counselors emphasized being visible (e.g. hallways, cafeteria, classrooms) as a means to identify students whose attitudes or behaviors signal some level of concern, and may be in need of a threat assessment or additional support.

So, on the social media kinds of things, I had some people, you know, somebody sending some threatening text messages, you know, that they better watch their back, you know, something's going down in the bathroom, at the bus loop, you know. And then, me letting admin be aware that there's something brewing. I think sometimes, it's in the mornings, just walking the halls through the cafeteria, and in the gym, kind of get the feel of the group. And, you can kind of sense if something's rumbling. I try to be proactive when at all possible.

School counselors’ visibility was also discussed as an opportunity to develop and maintain trusting relationships with students and, as a result, empower students to report concerns of safety.

I think first of all the kids really have to... They have to see you. You can't be a counselor who just goes and sits in her office all day because they will not seek you out because they'll feel like they won't know you. Just being up in their hallways during class changes. The mornings that I don't have morning duty I always walk my hallways. First thing in the morning I'm out going up and down the hallways speaking to the kids, talking with their teachers. That's also a great time for kids to just... They'll stop me in the hallway. "I need to come talk to you."
Interviews with students of concern: “There will be multiple people in the room.” In the event of a student or situation of concern, seven school counselors cite a responsibility for interviews with students of concern in the school threat assessment process.

The protocol, the procedure that we follow is the first thing we do is inform admin. When this particular situation happened we let them know this is what's happened. We're going to interview this student. Then we will stay in close communication with them. We had a few incidences this school year where we followed that procedure, and I think the way we approach it makes sense because in all of those situations I don't think that the child would've felt as comfortable talking if it were us and the AP especially after they typically made a poor choice by communicating a threat.

School district policy dictates that in order to conduct a threat assessment (or suicide assessment), two school staff must be present. Best practice would be to include an administrator or another staff member who is covered by confidentiality. Three school counselors, however, mentioned that administrators assist counselors with screening cases and student interviews, or counselors assist administrators. For instance, “The administrator will pull us in for that. And so then from there it's, there will be multiple people in the room sitting there, me and an administrator, or two administrators.”

At times, assessments occur with school counselors and another member of the student support services team (e.g., school social worker, another school counselor, school nurse, etc.).

We always team with somebody within our department and just kind of walk through the questions about actually what happened? Who was the student? Who was the target? Then after we work with the student we spent some time kind of just going through a verbal checklist on our own, which basically a lot of it gets to intent. Did the student actually have an intent to hurt somebody or did they have a plan they were going to carry out?

While school counselors have varying responsibilities with regards to student threats of violence, all school counselors mentioned leading violence risk assessments for student threats of
self-harm (i.e. suicide assessment). One participant commented, “We definitely do a lot more suicide screenings and self-harm kinds of things. The larger threat assessments we don't touch, and I'm sure there are plenty that I don't even know about.” Nonetheless, school counselors cite the importance of a team approach when engaged with violence risk assessments.

Here, we always do things in pairs. For liability, and to make sure we have all of the information. Because I can’t possibly have a conversation with a student and try to get all of the information, and be able to document that information. And then, two heads are always better than one.

**Advocate for the social and emotional needs of students.** “Helping them have a voice.” All school counselors cite a responsibility for student advocacy. Participants discussed their role in the school as one that benefits their ability to advocate for student needs.

I think it's just being the student advocate. Helping them have a voice. I'm not tied to a grade, I'm not tied to discipline, so I can just hear what the student's saying and try to communicate it, whether that's paraphrasing or putting it into different words so that they're understood.

The ways in which school counselors advocate for student needs during conversations varies by school level. For instance, school counselors at the elementary level frequently mentioned “being the voice” for student needs, stating, “I try to be that voice for them to communicate with our staff.” While school counselors at the middle and high school level typically cite encouraging students to share their own needs with stakeholders, for example, “I always try to guide them to be self-advocates.”

Within their role as an advocate for students, school counselors may serve as a liaison between students and related adults (i.e. school staff, parents) across all levels of risk. Four school counselors mentioned being an advocate for student needs with teachers. At times, school counselors report facilitating conversations between students and teachers to ensure their needs are communicated effectively.
I asked the student and parents if they would be okay with me emailing the teachers, not to explain what the threat was or anything like that, but that the student was feeling overwhelmed. If they saw signs of emotional distress, "Would you please allow him to come to Student Services?" The students seem to appreciate that.

One school counselor also modeled strategies for a teacher to use when addressing student needs in the classroom.

So I would say that's the biggest thing I do is be a good role model and show the teachers some ways to deal with students. Especially when the kids are escalated or something, how I talk to the students in a calming way and help them move past things quickly. And I have noticed that some of the teachers will change the way they approached students after that.

Three school counselors acknowledged student confidentiality and advocated for low or moderate risk students to share their needs with parents and/or teachers. School counselors may offer emotional support to the student or facilitate the conversation between students and parents. Typically, these conversations were held during face-to-face meetings or phone conferences.

If it’s moderate, again, talking with the parent, making my recommendations when it comes to outside resources...I build the conversation around the student and how to best support them. So these are some things we noticed, these are some things they said. I'd ask the student to piggyback on any of those conversations. Like, "Is there something you want to share with your parents?" Because sometimes it's just they don't feel heard at home. Things are so busy and everybody's flying back and forth and doing everything that they need to do to get stuff done and they don't necessarily see, be ... they don't feel seen. And just having everybody stop, take a break, and this is what we're talking about right now.

For students of high-risk for violence, school counselors discussed their role as a liaison during formal meetings with parents and/or school staff. During these meetings, individual students are the topic of discussion with a focus on identifying student needs and corresponding interventions to mitigate the risk for violence.
The student was placed there (mental health agency) for a couple of days and then she returned back to us. Before she returned back to us our threat assessment team met together to just assess how she would transition back into the school...My social worker, myself, our administration, got together to identify what the main concern is of the student, and, just, collaborating with their mental health provider- seeing what interventions they put into place and seeing if we can carry those over in place here in the school.

**Provide student interventions and environmental support: “The biggest thing the school counselor does is give kids strategies to deal with the day-to-day things.”** School counselors cite school counselors have a responsibility to provide student interventions and environmental support to mitigate the students’ risk for violence. One participant mentioned school counselors provide short-term counseling to students in need, stating, “We might provide supportive services like trying to get the student an outlet to share their concerns or try to brainstorm ways to make the situation better or to cope with the situation.” At times, school counselors struggle to keep their counseling services within the recommended guidelines for school counselors because students are not receiving appropriate mental health services outside the school setting (ASCA, 2012).

For some of those students we will usually look at doing a check in, check out sort of a system where we meet with them frequently just to kind of have eyes on them and to give them an outlet. We also have to be careful because you're not supposed to be doing anything that looks like long-term counseling per se. Often these students do need more support. I think the importance of continuing to keep eyes on them and work with them and then also document because there might be a chance that that parent might get on board if you continue staying in touch with them.

Oftentimes, school counselors struggle to provide appropriate interventions as a result of school district policies that mandate school administrators to enforce disciplinary actions for cases of student conflict.
I'd have to say that at the high school level it's kind of hard. A lot of it that we deal with is social media and cyberbullying, and most of the time when it comes to bullying it gets looped right up to an administrator. So we're kind of the, "Hey, you need to go talk to this person," and it's not as much coping skills and working through conflict resolution as it could be. And that's just because the bullying standards and making sure that admin's looped in. They tend to handle things before coming back to us for types of intervention.

While no participants mentioned their role as part of a school threat assessment model, more than half of the school counselors interviewed mentioned systems to record completed threat assessments. Six school counselors mentioned using a centralized data management system for student information, OASIS (Office Administration and School Information System), to record completed assessments. School counselors cite the database allows for accessibility of records for students who were previously assessed, enhancing the reliability of threat assessment findings.

Of course we have OASIS, that we have to enter in that information... So again, it's another tracker, but what it does is, it gives me another layer to determine whether or not what I think might be potentially low risk ... If we've been doing this for a little bit, we're continuing to talk about it, it may be a higher risk.

Two school counselors also cite efforts to maintain personal documentation of completed threat assessments. The records in personal storage were described as unidentifiable records that were easy for school counselors to assess when collaborating with parents.

I'm big on documentation. So I take good notes and just keep them in my own personal files, obviously not anything that's kept in a cumulative folder, but just information for me to refer to if I feel like I need to talk to this parent about what the concerns are.

Report to School Administration: “That’s more of an administrator role.” Once the school threat assessment process has been initiated, school administrators are immediately involved. In fact, all school counselors cite informing school administrators when they become
aware of students of concern, for instance, “the first thing we do is we inform admin.” While most school counselors cite a responsibility for interviews with students of concern, two school counselors mentioned students who pose a high risk of violence are interviewed by school administrators.

Yeah, I think there have been times where the threat is very serious and they wanted to keep it out of as many people's lane as possible. And, at that time, maybe only one of us will be pulled in or they'll do it between the two of them.

In some instances, school administrators were mentioned to conduct interviews with students of concern without involving the school counselor. One school counselor reports, “Aside from threats to themselves, that's more of an administrator or AP role.” School counselors perceived their lack of involvement as an intentional strategy to prevent school counselors’ from getting involved with incidents that may warrant disciplinary action.

I explained to students, "I don't assign consequences" and especially something that might involve some sort of physical threat or, we've seen an increase in social media threats. I explained [that] becomes more of a disciplinary issue, and so those cases I have to hand off to my partner. Luckily we have teams here, so we're partnered with an AP (assistant principal).

School counselors cite school administrators as being a part of a larger school team that is responsible for identifying strategies to manage student threats of violence. School administrators may invite student resource officers/local law enforcement and crisis prevention staff from the district to collaborate with the larger school team on strategies to manage student threats of violence. Six school counselors report that discipline is a typical management strategy chosen and enforced by school administrators.

Basically what happens is we try in-school suspensions, call the parents, and if it’s not working out, then we try half of a day. During that half a day process, if you’re still
getting involved and disrespecting teachers, wanting to fight students- we had one young lady, she was just very disrespectful...She would call a teacher a, you know, and just snap...She wanted to fight another girl- Like I said, the online is our last resort. Everything else has been in place- calling parents, we put you in an isolated room all day, let’s try half a day, we can just get your core subjects and go home. We wanted you to get those social emotional skills. Come and talk with me, I talked to her many times. She’s fine when she talks to me, but I understand that. I see a totally different perspective on the kids when they’re in counseling versus in the classroom. The process is, that’s the last resort, I’ll be honest with you.

Communications from school administrators to the larger school team regarding student disciplinary actions was cited as a limitation to the school threat assessment process because school counselors were unaware of students in need of monitoring or interventions and support.

Like, last semester a student didn't show up for his final exam. So I saw his name on the list and I was like, "Oh, he missed his final exam." So I called home because that exam counts 20% of his grade, and I explained to Mom, "So-and-So missed their exam. Can you please get them up here?", and she's like, "Oh, he's suspended. Did you not know?" So to me, that showed clearly a communication breakdown, and that's not the only time that's happened.

**Threat Assessment Process: “Filter things out.”**

The second domain is the threat assessment process in which school staff follow to assess student threats of violence. All school counselors interviewed mentioned three practices that guide the school threat assessment process: (a) screening cases, (b) student interviews, and (c) determine severity of the threat. Eight school counselors mentioned screening cases as a preliminary practice to school threat assessments. Eight school counselors also mentioned student interviews as the data collection practice in the school threat assessment process. All but two school counselors discussed the process in which school staff determine the imminence and intent for student threats of targeted violence. Seven school counselors mentioned documentation practices in the school threat assessment process.
Screen Cases: “You have to assess the situation and see if they meant what was perceived.” Eight school counselors cite a preliminary practice in the school threat assessment process in which student threats of violence are screened for imminence of threat. Meaning, was the threat a genuine expression for harm or was the threat an idle prank? Defined institutional guidelines regarding how to assess the seriousness of school violence threats were not mentioned. However, screening cases typically involved a series of questions aimed to assess the intent of the threat reported.

You have to assess the situation and see if they meant what was perceived, or was it something else. Most of the time it is meant, but you know, sometimes it is just a joke. That can happen.

School counselors cite personal knowledge of the student can help provide information to determine the seriousness of threatened violence.

Luckily I know the kids pretty well here, so unfortunately there have been some kids that, over the years, have made threats over and over again and I know where they’re coming from or you know what their triggers are. So that helps me a little bit.

School counselors may collaborate with other school counselors who have personal knowledge of the student who threatened violence to accurately screen cases for imminence of threat.

First you have to figure out who the best person to talk to the individual is. Let’s say...I know that something else has a better relationship or knows more about the situation, I’m going to ask that person to do it.

School counselors may also assess relevant student records (e.g. discipline history, grades, previous threats of violence) to determine if the threat is a continuing threat of harm, which may necessitate a full threat assessment.
I don't know what's happening but I can see that maybe they said things like this in the past. And, so, that makes it easier for me to decide, is it time to look for outside resources for this child? Or is this just an issue that started and hopefully that we can resolve it here at school?

**Student Interviews: “There’s a root cause.”** All school counselors discussed student interviews as a typical practice in the school threat assessment process. School staff (i.e. school counselors or school administrators) gather information on student thoughts, behaviors, and conditions to determine if a student poses a threat.

We ask, of course, the basics, like do they have access to a weapon, have they ever held that weapon, have they ever used it, do their parents know that they have access to it, how frequent these thoughts are? Who else have they told about these thoughts? Is there a plan? We start talking about other things. For example, there have been times where students have just started giving away things, and that’s an indicator. That’s a huge red flag. And so we’ll ask those questions. We ask future goal questions, because if a student has the aspiration to do something later on in their life, then the threat can be determined a little bit lower, because they do want to see themselves somewhere in the future.

Participants cite school counselors have a unique ability to foster an environment that is conducive to interviewing students of concern, stating, “I think what I [the counselor] brings to the table is that I can make it into more of a personable experience for the student so they're more comfortable and more willing to share their actual feelings and thoughts.” Furthermore, students will likely feel more comfortable responding to questions in the student interview to school counselors because administrators are authoritative in nature.

It’s different from how an AP (assistant principal) would approach it. Even though you are asking them a series of questions, tell me more about what you were thinking, you don’t want them to feel like they’re being treated like a criminal.
Interviews with students of concern aim to gather relevant information to determine the students’ motive, acts of planning and/or preparation for the threatened violence, and means to carry out the threatened violence.

What was going on at the time he posted those comments, what were his intentions, you know? And then does he have intent to harm himself or someone else? Is he being harmed? Does he have a plan? Does he have access to means?

School counselors may also attempt to gather data on risk and protective factors for the student of concern. For instance, four school counselors cite coping skills as an important factor to explore during student interviews.

How are you coping? How are you dealing with emotions? Because that's where school violence comes from. Somebody's having some very strong emotions, and they're struggling to cope.

Interviews with students at the middle or high school level were also mentioned to be more challenging than those at the elementary level because students become “more reserved”

But, middle school's a little different, because they've got to, you know, to be comfortable about talking. And I think, sometimes, elementary, they're just like little flood gates, you know. But, in middle school, sometimes, they become a little more reserved.

Data collection was described as a challenging practice in which school counselors use “tactful” questioning to guide the threat assessment process.

I know that I have one child in particular this year who we had to do a threat assessment on him because he threatened to stab another student in the hand...In a situation like that, you definitely don't want a student to feel like...You don't want them to feel like they're being treated like a criminal. You have to be tactful and approach it in a certain way.

The most common approach cited by which school counselors conduct student interviews was with a district-provided instrument. The instrument aimed to guide best practice by analyzing student interview data with key investigative questions.
The only thing that I don't necessarily like about it is the descriptiveness of it and having to ask specific targeting questions because sometimes a kid will say something because they know how to answer it, and they've gone through it before, so how do you actually get to that level of what's actually going on?

Additionally, many school counselors cite investigative questioning techniques are problematic for decision-making in the school threat assessment process because additional information is needed to effectively address the underlying concerns.

I feel like our threat assessment is kind of solution based, very short-term, getting to the root of the problem, and more so getting to the root of the problem and how can we fix it. Not really looking at the whole student and determining what led them to that point.

Furthermore, one school counselor cites the investigative questioning technique as being potentially harmful to individuals believed to be at high risk of violence, “I do not think that it is productive to do a Q&A with a student that's in such a fragile state.” As a result of school counselors’ concerns regarding the usefulness of the threat assessment tool, implementation varied from the tool being as a mental guide to a physical resource during interviews with students of concern.

We’ve learned what kinds of questions to ask. I’ve been to quite a few trainings on that. I don’t have a rubric that I pull out. It’s all in my head. And I just go, I kind of check mark body language, you know, all the things. The way they say things...I guess you could make a check-mark of it, or a list of the things, but I think that would feel too artificial and the kid, whoever the person is, might not react well to it. It’s a human to human thing.

Nonetheless, all school counselors cite the importance of using the district’s instrument to capture data in all areas of potential risk.

In pulling him in, we had to go through the whole assessment, which is important to do...But we kind of walked through like what he was thinking, and ultimately what he said was, "I had no intentions of stabbing him, but I just wanted him to leave me alone." Just drilling really deeply we did figure out that there was bullying that had been going on for a while, but that's why it's important to do that assessment because we know that
he's a great kid, he's not a kid who's typically violent. But if we hadn't done the assessment, then we wouldn't have been able to figure out what was at the root of what happened and why he was so angry.

**Determine level of risk: “The level of threat depends upon what happens next.”**

Seven participants discussed practices in which school staff determine the level of risk for violence a student poses. There are two commonly mentioned groups of school staff in which the determination of risk for threatened violence is made. The first group includes school counselors and school administrators who partner to collect student interview data and determine the appropriate level of risk for student threats of targeted school violence. This multidisciplinary team, cited by four participants, was thought to maximize the skills and resources for analyzing student interview data.

I was brought in by an administrator who wanted a counselor there to help walk through the assessment to see what level of threat did I perceive versus an administrator's eyes. So, helping develop that communication between the two of us, so it's not just admin but also the mental health and social emotional and what's going on with the student. So I guess putting my perspective of what's going on and identifying the level of threat.

The second includes school administrators and members of local law enforcement. This group was cited to meet and collaborate on student threat assessment data that appears to be high and imminent risk situations.

It kind of depends on the situation, but if it's something where I feel like I can get them mentally to a good place where they feel comfortable going back to class, I would consider that mild or low. Sometimes they just get overwhelmed in class. They need to just talk, process, and then they're fine, but if I'm feeling some hesitance, like I just kind of read what they're saying. If they don't seem to feel comfortable to go back or their mind is still stuck in whatever they're worried about, for example, if they're still feeling unsafe that a fight is going to happen, then things like that I escalate to an administrator.

School counselors also cite this group to meet and collaborate on any student threats of violence that appear “disciplinary” in nature.
For example, if there's a pending threat, oftentimes the assistant principals will call in the parties involved and explain up front, "If this happens, then this will be the consequence," whereas if I was having that conversation, I can't assign the consequences. It's kind of like an idle threat. So we work in concert with each other, but things that are more disciplinary have to go through them...sometimes depending on the threat, our student resource officer might be involved, which is our on-campus police officer.

School teams review all data (i.e. student interview data, discipline history, grades, previous threats of violence) to determine the level of risk for student threats of violence. A specific, detailed plan was frequently acknowledged as a critical indicator for the intent for future violence and a high risk for violence.

I think the biggest thing is, do they have access and do they have a solidified plan. If they've worked out all of those things. And those that, I think you can tell when you're talking to a kid, those that have actually thought through, their next steps, because they'll have a backup, if something doesn't work in their first plan, they've got something else going on. So those are typically my high risk kids because if something doesn't work the first time they've got something else lined up.

Additionally, school counselors also mentioned the importance of analyzing risk factors to determine if a student poses a threat. Although several risk factors (e.g. student transitions, peer relationships) were mentioned, most frequently cited is a lack of coping skills. At times, a lack of coping skills did not appear to increase the risk for violence. The threatened violence was conceptualized as the result of heightened frustration.

I would say most of the threats that I deal with are kids that are frustrated and they’re just yelling things out, saying, “I’m going to kill you” or “I’m going to blow up the school.” I’ve had some kids say that before. So that’s usually what I see when they get to that frustration level, they just blurt things out.

In other instances, a lack of coping skills may suggest a heightened risk for violence. Given the school counselors’ (i.e. assessor) personal experience with students who engaged in
acts of violence in response to a lack of coping skills, a lack of coping skills was seen as a critical risk factor.

We recognize that kids are struggling with coping skills. We have lost students who we knew and loved to suicide because they were struggling to cope...I think this is something that is huge and that we can continue having a conversation with kids. How are you coping? How are you dealing with emotions? Because that’s where school violence comes from. Somebody’s having some very strong emotions, and they’re struggling to cope.

The school threat assessment process relies heavily on student interview data. One school counselor cites the lack of accessible information as problematic because students may alter their interview responses, making it very challenging for school counselors to accurately gauge the risk for violence, stating, “Sometimes a kid will say something because they know how to answer it, and they've gone through it before, but how do you actually get to that level of what's actually going on?” Furthermore, school counselors did not identify a school threat assessment model to which they align their practices. Instead, the determination of risk appears dependent on the assessors’ perception. To illustrate, one participant cites using their “professional capacities” to determine the students’ risk for violence, stating, “I try to, again, just with my professional capacities, determine if they're safe to go back to class.” Another participant cites the nature of instinct to guide their actions when determining the level of concern, “I trust myself and I feel like I have good instincts, but you never know, right?

Strategies to Manage Risk: “Interventions to alleviate or go to a lower threat level.”

Within the third domain, school counselors mentioned five strategies to manage student threats of violence. Six school counselors cited discipline as a strategy to manage student threats of violence. Eight school counselors cited attempts to monitor students who threaten violence. Seven school counselors cited strategies to enhance skill development for students who threaten
violence. Six school counselors interviewed mentioned a team referral to manage student threats of violence. Eight school counselors interviewed cited referrals for mental health evaluations as a strategy to manage student threats of violence.

**Discipline Actions: “There’s no playing with certain subjects.”** Six school counselors mentioned discipline as a strategy to manage students of concern. Schools may consider discipline measures such as “short-term suspension,” “long-term suspension,” “expulsion,” or consider “pressing charges” against students who make threats of targeted school violence.

They're determining whether or not to follow through with a long-term suspension, recommendation for expulsion, if they are recommending ... I mean you have law enforcement sitting at the table. So are we pressing charges? What are we doing? Are we taking this kid in?

Decisions to enforce discipline measures are reportedly made by school administrators and a team of individuals, including school resource officers, law enforcement, and crisis prevention leaders from the district. One school counselor mentioned sharing threat assessment results with the team to guide their determination.

I give all of my [threat assessment] findings to administration, who then gives it to their county person, who's here. You have your police officer, or your head SRO, you have your head of the crisis management and—or safety and security, and they make the determination of what happens to the student next, after I have made my recommendation.

School counselors cite the decisions for disciplinary actions are made in accordance with the determined risk level for the threatened violence. To illustrate, short-term suspension may be a chosen intervention for low level risk threats.

There have been times where a student is just talking, and especially, for whatever reason, I do not know, middle schoolers, they can't make that connection of, what I say, it's detrimental. There's no playing with certain subjects. And so whatever, there might be a consequence, but it is not long-term, it's short term.
Whereas, expulsion or long-term suspension may be determined for high-risk threats. A high risk threat includes threats in which assessment findings confirm a student’s plan for targeted school violence, for instance, “If the threat is high, for example, the threat of the gun. In that particular situation the student did not come back, because there were accurate findings.” A threat may also be considered high risk if the threatened actions create a sense of fear among the student body.

Last year we had a student who posted a video of a toy gun. It looked like a real gun, but he filmed it on Instagram, and he showed he was putting a gun into his book bag and he was like, "See you all at school tomorrow." Poor choice. He ended up actually being sent to the alternative school because it created such a disruption.

Students recommended for expulsion or long-term suspension may be considered for enrollment in an alternative school within the district. School counselors are not typically involved in these decisions. One school counselor perceived their lack of involvement as a result of “legal implications.”

I will have my initial seat at the table and they will ask my opinion, and then I am asked to leave. And I don't know if it's because then it becomes a legal thing, where there's a lot of legal implications...But then they do circle back around and they let us know whether or not they've been long-term expelled. If so, if they're going to get an opportunity to go to the alternative school, or not, and if they're coming back.

A school counselor from an alternative school in the district discussed the antecedents to which students were placed at the alternative school setting. Many students were reportedly removed from their base schools because they were “selling drugs” or “brought a weapon to school.” The school counselor also cites a majority of females enrolled at the alternative school were recommended because “they fight.”
Just looking at my facts, extreme reasons why they're here. I.e. selling drugs, i.e. brought a weapon to school. Majority is. But not as, the majority of the girls here, they fight. End of story. Every one of the girls who are here, they fight, and they will fight.

Students attending the alternative school were also mentioned to “bounce” from school to school due to behavioral issues. One school counselor reports, “These kids bounce in White County. Have a problem with this school, I'll pull them here. Have a problem with this school, I'll move them here.” However, one school counselor cites that students are rarely removed from their base school after attending the alternative school, stating, “We don't have a lot of repeats...I don't know what that is, maybe they hate us so much... I think that's what it is, too, for some of them, because we're very strict. Some kids can't handle that.”

**Monitoring: “Everyone’s keeping an eye on that child.”** The most common strategy cited to manage student threats of violence was to monitor students who pose a risk for violence. The most commonly mentioned strategy in which school counselors monitor students of concern was through student check-ins. School counselors utilize check-ins to monitor precipitating events and escalating behaviors, for instance, “so because of those check-ins you can see how those patterns and feelings have developed over time or what their triggers are.” Although school counselors typically facilitate student check-ins, other school staff (e.g., teachers, student support services staff, school administrators), which varies case by case, may also be partnered with a student of concern to monitor their behavior and provide behavioral feedback.

Then this year we focused primarily on behavior but then paired each of the kids who had a significant number of disciplinary referrals the year before with one of the members on either our admin team or our student services team to meet with those kids.

The duration between student check-ins is dependent upon the student’s risk for violence. For instance, one school counselors cites check-ins with students of low risk for violence are
typically bi-weekly, stating, “If they're low-risk, probably bi-weekly.” Another school counselor cites check-ins with students of low risk for violence are as-needed, stating, “For our low risk cases, those students I see those students when they need to be seen or if they feel like they need to come talk.”

Whereas, in cases of moderate to high risk, school counselors typically meet with students on a daily basis to monitor their risk for violence.

I think our check in, check out kids, those are the ones that I think are more of our moderate to high kids just because if you're checking in and checking out with somebody we're meeting with them pretty much every day.

A reported consequence for the criteria of student check-ins was students of low risk for violence are not monitored consistently.

I also think that there are gaps, because even though I might not be a high threat today, I still need something a little more than the counselor checking up on me every now and again...Because what happens to me in high school, what happens to me if it's just a bad day, and we all, and I'm not just going to say teenagers and kids, but we all are very fragile. Where one day we are full of joy, and there might be something that was so traumatic, that can completely change our trajectory on our course of reason... So I do feel like our follow-up needs to be tighter, and we need to continue those conversations, and continue that help.

School counselors also mentioned ongoing communication with community mental health providers as an attempt to monitor students of concern. These professionals work with students of concern to provide counseling or other psychological services. By collaborating with community mental health providers, school counselors are better equipped to monitor the effectiveness of school-based interventions and the student’s mental well-being.

Normally what we do is, we will document how often we meet with that student, umm, or how often they are given that intervention, and we may meet as a team monthly to discuss how they're doing and just collaborate with their mental health provider to see how they're doing with that aspect and seeing if there's anything that we can improve on
or they can improve on. Umm, just going through that intervention and meeting monthly to talk about how that student is progressing.

District policy dictates that prior to disclosing confidential information (e.g. mental well-being, services provided), community mental health providers must receive parental consents in writing. While school counselors report every attempt to obtain the written consent for the release of information, parents may refuse. School counselors cite this barrier in communication to be “scary” in regards to school safety.

This is the part that, it's beyond the school, but we have not, I have not seen one model that was good. We don't know what happens. We don't know what the consequences are. We don't know, obviously if the kid dies we know that, but outside of that we don't know. The parent almost never reports anything, even if you prod them. Then you have to talk to the kid, but the kid, depending on age and what they understand what's going on, they don't know what's going on. We have no good way of figuring out what the assessed level is of the kid coming back. We don't. There's zero way of holding anybody accountable for that. Part of it, I'm assuming, has to do with confidentiality and things like that. I guess we could... the only way I could see it being changed is if when you send a kid over to do an assessment, we also sign the release of information form, and that's mandatory. And they have to also sign it, and we sign it, and then they have to report to us, by law. There's no other way you can make them, and... because I don't know and it's scary as hell. Because you don't know when the kid is coming back. I don't know what they're going to do. We've done our job to filter things out and do what we have to do, but outside of that, it's beyond our control. Outside of just checking in with the kid. But I don't know anything else.

In all other cases, parents written consent was received by school counselors and shared with the appropriate mental health providers; However, providers failed to communicate with schools in a timely manner. Such instances were mentioned to result in high risk students returning to school without school staff being aware or without proper interventions in place. One school counselor shared her concerns regarding limited communication with community mental health agencies and high-risk students.
That's always the struggle, I would say, depending on what facility they're leaving from. A lot of times, some facilities are very good about letting you know and working with you, like what has been done there? What can we continue working here? And other facilities are not like that. They just show up one day and they're like, oh, okay, they're back.

**Skill Development: “We talked about strategies.”** School counselors also mentioned skill development as a strategy to manage students who pose a threat of violence. For low risk threats of violence, participants report student mediations to be a typical area of skill development to mitigate a students’ risk for violence. Mediations are typically facilitated by school counselors, but school administrators or other counseling staff at the middle or high school level may also attempt to resolve threatening situations by providing students mediations.

I can say, and I will give admin a pat on the bat, I'll give myself a pat on the back, and just this counseling department. By the time they're in 8th grade, the students who have had conflict previously, and have went through those processes, when there is something that's about to arrive, they seek you out and they're like, "I need a mediation." Sometimes they need a mediation every day, but the fact that they're using that is awesome.

An ideal mediation that effectively mitigates the risk for violence includes all students experiencing conflict, as long as each student is “comfortable and open to talk.”

And also, offering mediation with students. If they're comfortable and open with that, to talk to the perpetrator. Because, my feeling is that, they need to have the power to do something about it, versus somebody else coming in and taking control.

The extent to which conflict mediations are provided by school counselors varied across school levels. School counselors at the elementary and middle school level typically facilitate a “lot” of mediations.

So for conflict we do a lot of mediation and so I'll often pull in the people that are having conflict or just one if it's a deescalation time and we'll talk through the event and kind of talk about how we can take responsibility for our side and how we can use our words to convey what we want to say to the other student.
School counselors at the high school level cite “occasional” meditations. Often school counselors at the high school level cite time as a barrier to student mediations.

Occasionally the student will ask to meet with the other students, so we try to do kind of like a mediation, always make it clear that the other student has to be willing and interested in doing it. So sometimes, I will bring in students together, but again, that's during class. Less than ideal, but sometimes the situation necessitates it.

School district policies dictate requirements for how schools should respond to incidents of student conflict and related matters (e.g. bullying, cyberbullying, discrimination). As a result of these standards, school counselors at the high school level report that student mediations are typically facilitated by school administrators given administrative responsibilities for addressing complaints or incidents of student conflict.

I'd have to say that at the high school level it's kind of hard. A lot of it that we deal with is social media and cyberbullying, and most of the time when it comes to bullying it gets looped right up to an administrator. So we're kind of the, "Hey, you need to go talk to this person," and it's not as much coping skills and working through conflict resolution as it could be. And that's just because the bullying standards and making sure that admin's looped in. They tend to handle things before coming back to us for types of intervention.

Programs that facilitate the development of skills to positively cope and manage distress was also cited to be implemented by school counselors to reduce students’ risk for violence.

We talked with the kids about, “what does a healthy coping skill look like?” It's one that restores emotional balance. You feel better. What does an unhealthy coping skill look like? It does not bring your emotions back into balance. At the end you might've done something that makes you feel even worse. If you look down and you've ripped something up, then that's not a healthy coping skill because then you've got to clean it up or replace it. You've damaged or destroyed something. So having that conversation with the kids and they were able to learn from each other.

School counselors mentioned various risk factors (e.g. social media, mental illness, home environment) that impacts the ability of students to positively cope with distress and frustration.
To illustrate, one school counselor cites the coping skills of parents as a potential risk factor associated with the ability to identify and utilize positive coping skills.

A lot of parents, [they] send the best of what they have to us. And sometimes, we have to model and teach skills that they're not learning within their environment. So, you know, they may be taught; If you hit me, I'm hitting you back. Or, you come for me, I'm coming after you... they just know, be reactive. But, if you teach some of the coping skills, and they can identify what they're feeling, hopefully, they can re-channel that energy in a positive way. But, it's a process.

Team Referral: “Then it would have to be a team approach.” All but one school counselor interviewed mentioned team referrals as a strategy to manage students who pose a risk of violence. A result of this referral is often a multidisciplinary team meeting in which parents and school staff, which varies from school to school (e.g., teacher[s], school counselor, school social worker, school psychologist, administrators), meet to discuss needs identified from student threat assessments and collaborate as a team to identify interventions that mitigate the risk for violence.

What that usually looks like is us then moving on to a meeting of some sort, typically a meeting with student's parents, with an administrator, usually a grade level administrator like myself, whichever colleague worked with the student, sometimes teachers depending on whether or not that's appropriate, but usually these kids have issues that definitely can be observed in a classroom or in transitions.

Outcomes of team meetings are individualized management plans with agreed upon student interventions as well as staff roles and responsibilities for seamless implementation. Plans are customized to each student, case, or circumstance, and serve as documentation for implementation and progress monitoring.

We met with teachers, mom, grade level administrator, school psychologist. We just sat down and talked about what we were observing from him, which was a lot of profanity, a lot of verbal threats like saying to kids... We talked about when we felt like we observed these behaviors happening, what were some triggers? Then as a team we talked about what we could do to support him. We came up with a plan that he would check in, check
out with me. We identified some peers, not with mom at the table, but peers who we needed to separate him from. We also talked about ways to increase his engagement in the classroom. We talked about preferential seating or trying to get him on board with a plan where for him a trigger was drawing. He would be drawing, and he would be frustrated by somebody either interrupting him. Those sorts of things. We talked about strategies. Then we met six weeks later and also followed up with his outside practitioner.

School counselors cite team meetings are necessary to not only address student needs but for protection against any civil liability.

I think if you have a kid who is a high risk sort of a student, then you're obligated to.. You have to have some sort of a meeting where you sit down and get people at the table to talk about how to support them. It can't just be you and somebody in your department. That's important also for self protection as well. Because if something were to happen, then you at least have the documentation that we met as a team and as a committee, and this is the plan that we drafted and created in partnership with all stakeholders on behalf of this child.

School counselors cite value in hearing from students themselves when discussing individualized management plans to effectively address students’ needs. With that, school counselors at the high school level cite students are invited to team meetings wherein intervention management plans are being developed, when appropriate.

I'll give you an example from my student who said he was going to stab the kid in the hand. We basically met as a team because he only had a 504 plan. Really his 504 plan was only for ADHD. We knew. We were like, "We've got to get together because he needs more support than just a 504 plan. He said that he did not want to participate in the meeting. We invited him to do so. That was fine.

School counselors at the elementary and middle school level mentioned being the voice for students’ needs because students at these school levels often struggle to communicate their needs.
I feel like I advocate for our students here; helping them have a voice. Umm, some of them have trouble communicating what their needs are, if they’re frustrated, things of that nature. I try to be that voice for them to communicate with our staff.

Three school counselors discussed follow-up meetings for individualized management plans to review students’ progress. School counselors mentioned attempts to collect progress monitoring data, such as reports from teachers, parents, and outside mental health professionals, to review the effectiveness of interventions and the students’ overall progress. The duration between initial team meetings and follow-up meetings varied (e.g. four weeks, six weeks, quarterly) among school counselors. For instance, one school counselor reports individualized management plans are reviewed monthly.

Normally what we do is, we will document how often we meet with that student, how often they are given that intervention, and we may meet as a team monthly to discuss how they’re doing and just collaborate with their mental health provider to see how they’re doing with that aspect and seeing if there's anything that we can improve on or they can improve on.

Four school counselors did not mention individualized management plans. Of those participants, two school counselors cite team referrals and/or individualized management plans are not currently being used as a strategy for managing students of concern in their school. For instance, when asked, “Would you say there are plans in place for when students make the transition back, aside from the counselor reaching out and checking in with them the day they return?” one participant responded, “If there's something in place I'm not aware of it.”
Mental Health Evaluations: “You need to go to the doctor.” Eight school counselors mentioned instances in which they advise parents to pursue mental health evaluations for students who pose a risk for violence. Parents of a student at high risk for violence where mental health issues are reasonably believed to be causing or contributing to the risk of violence are expected to seek an independent mental health evaluation per district policy.

I contact the parent or guardian, and I'm very transparent with the student... Now, if it's a situation where the student has a plan and has access to said items or situation, then I stay with the student the whole time until somebody comes. So I clear everything away, and even if it takes hours, I will be with the student the whole time. So that's the ultimate threat...They have to take them for an evaluation.

School counselors cite parents may become angry and refuse to seek the recommended mental health evaluation. In these high risk instances, school counselors report their concerns to the Department of Social Services or local law enforcement prior to releasing the student to their parent or guardian.

If it's an immediate threat, and the parent doesn't want their kid, which has also happened unfortunately. Doesn't want their kid... like they get here and they're like, "I'm just going to take them home," then I call the police and have them deal with it because they need to see someone immediately.

Mental health counseling services may also be a recommended treatment following mental health evaluations. School counselors cite parents will often refuse these recommendations and the Department of Social Services may not find the services warranted.

When you talk to CPS it's interesting. I've had a case where they did follow up with the parent because she was refusing to take her child to get counseling, and he told us that he thought about hurting himself two to three times a week. When I called CPS and told them that they were living in a hotel and were very transient, they took the case. We contacted CPS other times and they're like, "A parent does not have to get counseling for their child if they choose not to do so.
As school counselors engage with the Department of Social Services regarding concerns for students mental wellbeing, many participants find it challenging to maintain positive relationships with parents.

I think the thing that is the most difficult is you still have to work with that child along with that family. So, you're trying to salvage the relationship so that you can continue working successfully with the child, but I have definitely encountered a lot of that where parents do not feel that their children need help, and they're very resistant to getting help.

**Strategies to Prevent Student Threats of Violence: “We can be proactive.”**

The fourth domain includes strategies to prevent student threats of violence as mentioned by participants. All school counselors emphasized accessible school counseling services as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. All but two school counselors interviewed also cite building connections with- and between- students as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. Two school counselors mentioned opportunities for student leadership roles as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. Additionally, two school counselors also mentioned culturally-relevant experiences to prevent student threats of violence. Lastly, all but one school counselors mentioned school-wide prevention programming as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence.

**Accessible school counseling services: “I need to come talk to you.”** Although counseling is a part of every school counselors’ work in schools, all school counselors’ directly mentioned accessible school counseling as a strategy to prevent student threats of violence. One school counselor cites the importance of providing counseling services to students in need to intervene social and emotional concerns in a timely manner, stating, “If there is a student that needs to see us, we need to see them.” With that, school counselors described efforts to ensure individual school counseling services are available for all students. There are two commonly
mentioned models in which individual school counseling services are made available to students in need. The first, and most frequently cited, is an appointment model in which students may request to visit the school counselor. Participants cite students’ request appointments for individual counseling by leaving a note for the school counselor, by speaking with the student services technician, by requesting a teacher referral, or by contacting the school counselor through email.

So they can send me a Remind message. They can send me a message on Twitter, they can come in to the student services office and request an appointment. Our technician has access to my calendar and so she has... Unless I have blocked it out, I've told her she can schedule students in at any time to come see me, so you know? I have an open door policy, unless I am busy. They can email me. They can stop by after school.

The second, is an “open door policy” in which students may visit the school counselor’s office for their support without having an appointment.

I feel like we have very good communication. We have a very open door policy. I know some schools, students have to make appointments to see their counselors. Here, if we're available, we try to see students immediately, which, I feel like helps create a climate where if they feel like they need to report something or they are having a bad day, we try to address it very quickly versus kicking the can to tomorrow or whatever.

One school counselor mentioned a “no questions asked” policy for teachers when a student requests to be seen by the school counselor as a means to proactively intervene.

But we have these little blue passes that every adult in the school has, and when a student needs to see someone in the building, you write them a pass. So our procedure is no questions asked. We explain at the beginning, if there is a student that needs to see us, we need to see them. I understand there might be a test going on. Let us make the determination of whether or not it can be something that can be put off. If it is then we'll write them another pass for an elective class, or during lunch, or before or after school, whatever.
Build connections: I think it's all about relationships.” All but two school counselors interviewed report building connections with- and between- students as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. Connected in this sense means relationships. School counselors acknowledged the value of connecting with all students, and emphasized the importance of students’ feeling connected to the school counselor in order for them to seek-out counseling services, if the need arises.

I think the difference between myself and people within the building, outside of student services, is truly getting to know the kid before something happens, because you have that level of trust with them. To where even if it is something that they know that is going to cause an uproar, or could potentially get them in trouble, they're more willing to look at you as the support, as that person that's going to help.

The most commonly cited strategy to help students feel connected to the school counselor is visibility. Being visible in hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria, the gym, school announcements, or on social media (school Twitter account) was emphasized for students to connect with the school counselor, relationally and communicatively. For example, one school counselor cites school counselors must be highly visible throughout the school to build rapport with students.

The kids really have to... They have to see you. You can't be a counselor who just goes and sits in her office all day because they will not seek you out because they'll feel like they won't know you.

The second, is during Minute Meetings in which school counselors meet with each student on their caseload for one minute to build student rapport and identify concerning and prohibited student behaviors. Four school counselors (one middle, three high) report minute meetings as a useful strategy to proactively address student needs. During these meetings, school counselors mentioned using surveys or asking targeted questions with a focus on identifying
students’ academic or behavioral needs that may not have been known otherwise. One school counselor stated, “This past year I had 332 students, and I will say I found out so much.” Some of the concerns that were mentioned to be identified through Minute Meetings include depression, parental divorce, financial strains, and school adjustment issues.

I only had a minute, 60 seconds. So I created a little general survey: who you were, what high school you were going to, and just, is there anything that you're looking for from me this year to support you? And what's one thing that I don't know about you that you're willing to share with me? And I will say I found out so much, where there were screenings after the fact. Like suicide screenings, check-ins just to make sure, because students mentioned depression, like "I'm feeling an overwhelming sense of sadness," or, "My parents divorced and no one knows." So there was a lot of information that came out of that.

School counselors interviewed also mentioned ways in which they attempt to build connections between students to foster protective factors in the school environment. Two school counselors mentioned school clubs as an opportunity for students to meet and connect with students who have similar interests, for instance, “So I feel like a lot of our students feel supported by one of these clubs, and it's a good way for them to network with other students and get to know students who share similar interests.” Similarly, participants cite student connections as a strategy to combat issues of leakage, as students are more likely to report information of potential threats.

At least 30% of our referrals come from other students that are concerned about a friend. So I feel like our kids really do care a lot about each other and feel safe coming to us.

Overall, participants acknowledged school counselors’ role in helping students find a sense of connection within the school environment to prevent incidents of violence.
I guess I'm thinking what can I do to help students feel seen, feel like they belong, feel like there's an adult in the building who cares about them, and I guess by doing that maybe they are less likely to self-harm or harm others.

**Student leadership roles: “They don't feel seen.”** Two school counselors mentioned opportunities for students to engage in roles of leadership as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. Participants cite leadership opportunities that allow students to be seen and praised for their efforts, fosters a sense of belonging for all students by emphasizing their importance in the school environment.

Because we hear so many times that the student that came to the school with a weapon, they were flying under the radar. And there were signs, but they weren't troublemakers, so who cares. Then you think back of all of the things that could've been done: Could you have done a lunch group? Could you have pulled this kid in for a leadership opportunity, to just make them feel a part of the school? That changes their perception of how people think of them, or what their role is in the school. Because a lot of times you hear, "Nobody's going to miss me. I want you to miss me. I want to be that impactful." Giving them something in the beginning to feel that they're contributing to the larger part, I think that's the biggest thing.

**Culturally-relevant experiences: “His story, they can relate to.”** Two school counselors also mentioned culturally-relevant experiences as a strategy to prevent threats of targeted school violence. Participants cite culturally-relevant experiences to be particularly valuable for students struggling with chronic behavioral issues.

The students that have high behavioral issues, no, they just give up, and it's sad. That's the options that we give them, because they cannot handle it...you have got to learn to talk to them where they're at...We have a gentleman named Mr. Scott, he comes religiously on Mondays and Thursdays. I give him a group of students, I want you to talk to this person...Then we have a young lady who came from a church up the street. She's got one female student that she talked to, and that went very well. We also have girls groups. The point is, we give them an out, and they loved it....Just to listen to their story, just to see where they're at. They all want to build relationships and want to be heard...We can't give up.
There are two commonly cited culturally-responsive strategies to minimize challenging behavior and prevent threats of targeted school violence. The first, is service learning activities which integrate community service with culturally relevant experiences. One school counselor cites service learning projects as an effective instructional practice to encourage active student engagement and greater motivation for learning.

Once a week on a Friday we go to the food shelter, and we bag up the groceries and we take them to the senior center. We only take seven of the best, and they do a wonderful job.

The second, is school-based mentoring programs between students and culturally competent adult mentors who share similar backgrounds with the students. The mentoring relationship influences students to feel a sense of belonging and motivation for change. School-based mentoring was cited to “reach” struggling students at an alternative middle school, by helping them identify goals for a successful transition to their zoned schools, for instance, “He's been through a lot in his life. His story, they can relate to, how he turned his life around… a group of students that [for some reason] I can’t reach, I’m not communicating… He sets goals with them.”

**School-wide prevention programming: “We need more preventative care.”** All school counselors interviewed discussed the ways in which school-wide prevention programming occurs at their schools in an attempt to proactively address common issues that may escalate to threats of targeted school violence. They discussed programming mandated by the district (human trafficking, bullying prevention, signs of suicide, coping skills) as well as programming efforts to address school-wide needs with a preventive approach.

We do a classroom guidance lesson within the first four weeks of school just to reintroduce ourselves to the kids and review protocols for how do you find me? How do
you access me? I give them our email addresses. Make sure they know how to get to student services. We show them copies of a little appointment request list and also talk to them about reasons why they might want to come talk to the counselor...We talk about bullying, but it's difficult I found this past year and last year to kind of have like a huge campaign because there are so many different things that we're expected to cover with them in middle school. We're expected to cover signs of suicide prevention in seventh grade. We do human trafficking in seventh and in eighth grade. I know at our school we created a coping skills program.

Six school counselors mentioned using school-wide data to identify the needs of their school for preventive efforts. Student data includes attendance data, failure data, suspensions and disciplinary referrals, and anecdotal data (student, teacher or parent reports). School counselors discussed times before the school year had yet to begin in which they met with other student support services staff, which varies from school to school (e.g., school counselor[s], school nurse, school social worker, school psychologist, administrator), to discuss student data from the previous school year and then collaborate as a team to create lessons to address student needs.

I think some of the things that we do that I personally love about my school, my team... When we had a new team this year more than half of our team turned over, so we got a new school psychologist, new social worker, new school counselor. Then we were able to hire a fourth counselor because we were so large. As a team, and my former team was like this, we sit down, and we look at what we think the needs are at our school based on the data. And I mean data in terms of numbers like failure, suspensions, attendance, but also anecdotal data. Things that teachers are saying about kids, things that parents are saying, and things that kids are reporting themselves. Then we usually try to come up with some sort of a plan or lesson to intervene or to help support.

One school counselor further emphasized the importance of taking a proactive approach to address the social and emotional needs and concerns of students as a preventive approach for overall school safety efforts.

The county mandates are things around suicide prevention, human trafficking. All those things are important, but those are not things that allow for you to have an ongoing conversation with the kids. I think by us saying, hey, we recognize that kids are struggling with coping skills, we have lost students who we knew and loved to suicide
because they were struggling to cope, and it's impacted our broader community. I know in elementary school you guys have to talk more about coping skills. But that's a conversation that needs to be continued...How are you coping? How are you dealing with emotions? Because that's where school violence comes from. Somebody's having some very strong emotions, and they're struggling to cope.

Overall, school counselors report a growing concern for the lack of coping skills among students and emphasized the need for a preventive, school-wide approach.

I'd love to see more prevention take place so that we can be proactive when it comes to identifying some threats or triggers for students. Less reactive, because I think at that point when you're reacting to the issue, you're behind the ball. You can't get in front of it.

Organizational Systems and Structures: “It's a conflicting message”

Within the fifth domain, all but two school counselors cite organizational systems and structures that influence the school threat assessment process. Five school counselors cite student transitions as a system of influence to the school threat assessment process. Seven school counselors cite communication between staff as an influence to the school threat assessment process. Six school counselors mentioned staff training as an influence to the school threat assessment process. Two school counselors cite technology as an influence to the school threat assessment process.

Student transitions: “Trying to reintegrate back.” School counselors mentioned various student transitions that influence the school threat assessment process. The most cited challenge for successful student transitions was a lack of planning prior to the transition in which students re-enter their base school. School threat assessment procedures outlined by the district cite student transition plans as an appropriate action to support students who may pose a continued threat, but many students return to school without transition plans in place. To
illustrate, one school counselor reflects on their schooling experience in another school district in which transition plans were in place:

In a previous district I worked in, when we had a student that left to be hospitalized or there was a threat, when they came back we had a formal form plan that was distributed to the teachers, basically warning signs to look for, certain possible triggers to avoid, different things depending on the situation, but I don't feel like we have anything similar here. So again, it's very, in my opinion, not consistent.

There were two commonly cited instances in which schools plan for student transitions. First, is the transition from mental health treatment facilities to schools. Two school counselors mentioned student transition plans are often created by mental health professionals outside the school setting. The plans are scripted for school-based interventions and data collection for students who, based on the violence risk assessment, were identified as moderate to high risk for violence.

A lot of our moderates will come back with some sort of transition plan if they're seeing a specific counselor or therapist. If they're high risk they tend to have their crisis plan in place saying this is what I need to do to reintegrate at school. And it's kind of spelled out based on their therapist and their outside provider and whatever we can accommodate here in the school, that's what we end up doing.

Three school counselors cite transition plans are not created prior to the transition and oftentimes, school staff may be unaware of the re-entry timeline.

That's always the struggle, I would say, depending on what facility they're leaving from. A lot of times, some facilities are very good about letting you know and working with you, like what has been done there? What can we continue working here? And other facilities are not like that. They just show up one day and they're like, oh, okay, they're back. It's beyond the school....I have not seen one model that was good... The parent almost never reports anything, even if you prod them. Then you have to talk to the kid, but the kid, depending on age and what they understand what's going on, they don't know what's going on. We have no good way of figuring out what the assessed level is of the kid coming back. We don't. There's zero way of holding anybody accountable for that.
The second, is the transition to school after receiving discipline actions. Seven school counselors were not aware of transition plans (e.g., weekly check-in’s, academic or behavioral interventions, etc.) for students transitioning to school after receiving disciplinary actions. One school counselor reports, “I don't even know sometimes if a kid gets suspended or not.”

Students who attend an alternative school setting were cited to return to their base school at the beginning of the following school year. One school counselor employed at an alternative school also cites a lack of planning for the transition of students back to their base school, and mentioned that no transition program is currently in place.

I'm more than happy to help these base schools, but that's up to them. I told them I'm available. Let's set up an appointment. Yeah, me, maybe one administrator, and the counselor and the teacher. Let's sit down and tell them, hey, they had a good year, this is what they did here. Now let's transition them back. But mm-mm (negative), not right now we don't. I've been trying to do it, but it's not up to me.

Staff communication: “We need to get everybody on the same page.” Seven school counselors described limited communication between staff as an organizational barrier to the school threat assessment process. Communications about students of concern to school counselors seems to be an important aspect of school counselors’ attempt to identify, assess, and mitigate a students’ risk for violence with preventive interventions. One school counselor states, “We need to get everybody on the same page.”

Staff communications that are effective for actions and interventions to help mitigate the risk for violence were described as face-to-face meetings that were formalized to discuss specific student needs and then collaborate as a team to provide effective services.

What we do is each quarter we have a failure meeting, which is not just about academics, but we talk about each child who's failing, and then the teachers will also give some background information about why they think that is. We talk about behavior...you have
to be very intentional as a counselor about how you're going to partner closely with your students when you have so many on your caseload.

Although several barriers (e.g. transient support services staff, large student caseloads, additional duties, confidentiality/student privacy) to communication between school staff were mentioned, most frequently cited was school size. Four school counselors directly mentioned school size as a barrier to proactive and direct communication between school staff. To illustrate, one participant cites the spacing between the school counselor’s offices and school administrator’s office as a barrier to direct communication.

That's one of the things that, personally at this school, we have way, way bigger room to improve upon, is the ability to communicate directly. Part of it has to do with geography because our offices are here, and the administration is all throughout the buildings...The physical environment of the school, being separated with eight different buildings, it feels like a college campus...I never really thought about it before coming here, but it plays a huge role in working together.

Four school counselors discussed limited communication regarding student threats of violence as a result of discipline actions to be a great concern for school safety. All school counselors report no involvement with decisions related to student suspensions or expulsions, and three school counselors described being unaware of incidents in which students receive disciplinary actions. For instance, one school counselor reports a change in communication from administration regarding student suspensions, which affects her ability to proactively address student needs.

Like in the past for example, if the student was suspended for fighting or drugs or whatever, we received an email. It didn't specify exactly what, but at least we knew the student was suspended for how many days. That doesn't seem to happen anymore. When I questioned that, they said it was really because of privacy, but I feel like sometimes that's hard because maybe one of my students will be suspended. I didn't even know it.
At the middle and high school level, the association of student threats of violence and discipline actions typically resulted in school counselors being uninvolved in the school threat assessment process.

Sometimes it feels like, you know, it's like our group and then the administrative group, and once it becomes a disciplinary thing, there doesn't always seem to be good followup with us, or even sometimes depending on the threat, our student resource officer might be involved, which is our on-campus police officer and a lot of times that information doesn't get back to us. So that is something that I've expressed. I feel like it would be helpful if somehow we could do better communication, which I think a lot of this stems from just everybody being worried about privacy.

Training for school staff: “I just need further training.” Six school counselors cite training for school staff as an organizational system that is influential to the school threat assessment process. Although various trainings were mentioned (e.g. counselor education, crisis prevention institute, suicide prevention, social and emotional learning), the most frequently cited was the threat assessment training offered by the school district: “I have been to the district-provided threat assessment training.” However, school counselors frequently mentioned the need for additional training on the school threat assessment process for all school staff. Four participants cite the need for school counselors’ to receive additional training on how to determine the level of risk for violence (e.g. probability in which a student may become violent) as well as evidence-based interventions to mitigate the risk for violence. For instance, when prompted with the question, “how do you identify intervention strategies to manage a risk for violence,” one school counselor describes a lack of knowledge on school-based interventions and describes an inconsistency in the implementation of school-wide interventions for students.

I would say we don't have a good system for that at all other than, again, checking in with the student, depending on what the issue is, making sure the teachers are
aware...Certainly not consistent across campus. Like I might be doing one thing, another counselor might handle it another way... I think I just need further training actually just on, "What are some good research-based interventions for students that are making threats that are still going to be here on campus with us?"

School counselors also discussed how administrators have received little to no training in the school threat assessment process, which typically leads to role confusion.

It's been strange in partnering with our administrative team because last year our administration said when we talked as a large team, we went through our crisis plan, they were like, "We know nothing about this threat assessment tool," who was supposed to do it. It was just kind of ambiguous because we were under the impression that we were supposed to partner with administration if the student communicates a threat. They were like, "We've not been trained."

Four school counselors also cite a need for teacher training on how to proactively identify students of concern. Teachers were often described as being on “the front line” for proactive identification of students in need.

There's no way that counselors alone can address the needs of our students that seem to keep growing. So if we could train the staff, at least preliminary cursory training, I feel like that would help, and I feel like they'd feel more comfortable.

**Technology: “Social media is a problem.”** School counselors mentioned technology in schools as an organizational structure that influences the school threat assessment process. Six school counselors directly mentioned an increase in student threats of violence on social media platforms. For example, one school counselor cites, “We've seen an increase in social media threats.” Another school counselor discussed how challenges within social media are translated into the school environment and bring about concerns for school safety.

You know what, social media is a problem with middle schoolers, not the threat to the school, but threat to each other. You're right, that would probably be the only thing. They take that social media at home, they bring it to the school...A lot of the fights are because of social media. That's probably the key right there, yeah. The threat that we have is
social media at home, because then they start talking about who's sleeping with who, and blah blah.

School counselors also mentioned the influence of technology (i.e. social media platforms) on students’ ability to cope with distress. To illustrate, one school counselor reports an increase in student concerns on Mondays or following holiday breaks because students’ are using more technology during those times.

With social media there is no break...Before, when there was a problem, you had the weekend for things to cool off...things never cool off now. In fact, they seem to ramp up at night and on weekends...Sometimes we seem to have more problems on Mondays or after holidays.

Participants also mentioned an increase in the prevalence of loneliness among students as a result of an increase in time spent on social media. For instance, one school counselor cites students lack of awareness regarding social isolation despite feelings of loneliness, stating, “So I feel like with kids using phones so much more and they are feeling lonelier, and then in turn are seeking attention. I don't even know that they're making that connection.” Furthermore, students’ use of technology during the school day was also cited as an influence to students’ feelings of loneliness. For instance, students frequently walk through the school building with earbuds in their ears, which signals a desire for alone time. As a result, students are not engaged in conversation with other students and often begin to experience feelings of loneliness. In response, students may engage in threats of violence on social media as an expression of their emotions or engage in attention seeking behaviors.

I said, “So if you've got your earbuds in and your phone's up to your face and your head is down with your hoodie up, what signal are you sending out to everybody else?” "Well, that I don't want to talk." I'm like, "Exactly. So you're feeling lonely when really it sounds like they're trying to respect your space." So I feel like with kids using phones so much
more and they are feeling lonelier, and then in turn are seeking attention. I don't even know that they're making that connection.

**Perceptions of Risk Factors: “That’s just a boy thing.”** Five school counselors mentioned risk factors in which they perceived, or felt other school staff perceived, to influence the probability of a student becoming violent as an organizational structure that influences the school threat assessment process. Many participants characterized potential perpetrators of targeted school violence as awkward, loners, or having a history of mental health issues.

We have had a situation where a student overheard someone talking about guns and has the personality type where he's a loner and he needs to have a ... not soft hand, but it makes you wonder with some of the stuff that's going on at home and history of mental health issues.

One school counselor also described how other school staff have gender thresholds, specifically associated with boys and girls, in which they categorize the concern of violence. The participant did, however, describe such gendered perceptions to be changing and perceived this to be a former barrier to the school threat assessment process, stating, “I think teachers are feeling more comfortable listening to kids and not just saying, oh, that's just, that's a boy thing.”
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore professional school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to student threats of violence, including challenges and recommendations for thorough threat assessments in schools. The following research questions were used to guide this exploratory qualitative study:

RQ1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan?

RQ2: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified?

RQ3: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed?

RQ4: In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence?

In addition, theories were introduced in Chapter II that align with the assessment of an individual’s risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities. Findings will be reported as they appear to align with the theories, as well as findings that appear skewed from those theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, implications for professionals in the school counseling field, counselor education, and educational leadership will also be discussed in relation to the findings.

School Counselors’ Targeted School Violence Prevention Practices

This study provides a foundation for further exploration of school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices as part of a school threat assessment process. Targeted school violence prevention, thus far, has been examined in professional literature with other school professionals as the focus (e.g. school psychologists, school administrators); however, the school counseling literature has less to offer in this area, with very few research articles published that are focused
on school counselors’ roles and responsibilities, expertise, collaborative contributions, preventative and reactive intervention strategies, evidence-based practices, or theoretical approaches describing school counselors’ involvement in school threat assessment processes. Thus, the current research study was an important action step to better understand how school counselors help to identify students who pose a threat of violence, assess the severity of student threats, and respond to manage student threats of targeted school violence.

**Findings by Research Question**

Four research questions were addressed through eleven individual interviews with school counselors. Results of this study are discussed in the context of each research question below.

**RQ1: What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in a comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan?**

School counselors are key players in comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plans. While school counselors’ roles and responsibilities vary greatly across school levels, school counselors have knowledge and skills in the areas of prevention, assessment, interventions, research, and advocacy (Branthoover, Desmond & Bruno, 2010). Although school counselors did not address their roles and responsibilities within the framework of a threat assessment model, school counselors’ are involved in prevention, intervention and crisis response efforts.

**School Counselors as Prevention Resources.** When asked the best manner in which school counselors can help prevent incidents of targeted school violence, all school counselors expressed a firm belief in establishing a cohesive, supportive, and trusting school environment. Similarly, almost without exception, participants noted the importance of fostering a school culture wherein “students feel they have a voice” and “students feel supported” and “safe”
because of “reliable” “positive relationships with at least one adult in the school building.” School counselors felt confident that a supportive school environment where students feel safe and valued by the adults in the school building would ultimately diminish incidents of targeted school violence because students would report students’ and situations of concern (i.e. leakage).

Daniels and colleagues (2007) found that school climate does, in fact, affect the willingness of students to report students and situations of concern. The scholars recommend that schools prioritize relationships between students and staff to “break the code of silence” that exists between students and school staff to uncover leakage for attacks (p. 91). School counselors who aim to create a positive school climate should consider research conducted by Pollack et al. (2008), which suggests, “Simple and genuine measures, such as regularly greeting students, talking to students, and addressing students by name, help to make students feel connected and part of the school” (p. 8). School counselors should also model positive behavior and address situations where students feel marginalized in order to establish an environment with consistent and dependable procedures. Research on perpetrators of targeted school violence suggests that 66% of attackers perceived a sense of failure or loss of social status (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Hence, situations that give preference for certain students or groups of students must be addressed immediately.

Recent school safety initiatives, including security cameras and metal detectors, have not been successful in fostering a positive school climate or preventing incidents of targeted school violence. These methods are not only costly but foster school climates of fear and distrust (Trump, 2011). Additionally, the use of zero-tolerance policies, which exclude students from the school setting using punishments such as expulsions or suspensions, fail to resolve underlying conflicts and may even increase the risk of subsequent violence (Cornell & Allen, 2011). School
counselors should attempt to identify and resolve the underlying conflicts to prevent incidents of targeted school violence and the likelihood of subsequent suspensions or expulsions.

The role of individual, small group, and large group counseling in targeted school violence prevention was also discussed as a responsibility of school counselors. School counselors contribute to safe schools by providing counseling services that address students’ academic, career, personal, and social needs. School counselors also facilitate school-wide programs that address academic or peer concerns in an attempt to resolve problems or conflicts among the student body. With this approach, school counselors serve as a resource to address the broader antecedents that characterize targeted school violence incidents.

**School Counselors as Intervention Resources.** The role of school counselors as intervention resources varied substantially among grade levels. School counselors at the elementary and middle school levels had clear roles and responsibilities in school violence intervention, unlike school counselors at the high school level. The principal-counselor relationship appears to influence the extent to which school counselors understand their roles and responsibilities in comprehensive targeted school violence prevention. Elementary and middle school counselors report positive, collaborative relations with administrators whereas high school counselors described limited collaboration confounded by relations that mimic the hierarchical organizational structure of schools. Additionally, school counselors at the high school level, specifically, discussed barriers that prevent school counselors from adequately addressing the needs of their students. Large caseloads with multiple responsibilities for individual student planning (e.g. post-secondary admissions counseling, scheduling courses, other clerical tasks) and an increasing number of students with mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety) were frequently mentioned. School counselors should provide crisis and
short-term counseling services, engage in the assessment and intervention of students at risk for violence, and facilitate recommendations and referrals for appropriate services. However, given school counselors have student caseloads that greatly exceed the recommended 1:250 ratio, to assume school counselors can meet the mental health needs of all students is unrealistic (ASCA, 2012).

School counselors at the elementary and middle school levels gave a systematic discussion on the functioning structure in which school counselors engage in comprehensive targeted school violence intervention. Most identified a responsibility to identify students who may pose a risk for violence, to assist or lead in the process by which student threats are assessed, and assist in the development of individualized management plans for students of concern. However, the roles and responsibilities for the school counselors and administrators frequently overlapped. School counselors described a collaborative decision making process in which counselor-administrator teams share knowledge from their professional lens and maximize the team’s effectiveness in responding to student threats of violence. Leadership within this collaborative structure, however, appears influenced by school counselors year of experience or perceived efficacy. For example, school counselors who had limited knowledge or experience with risk assessments typically collaborate with school administrators throughout each phase of the school threat assessment process. School counselors with substantial knowledge and experience, however, led the school threat assessment process and collaborated with school administrators at specific points for decision making. The roles school counselors’ ideally fulfill in the schools in which they work may therefore be influenced by expert rather than positional power. Nonetheless, elementary and middle school counselors appeared to embrace the overlap
of roles and responsibilities with little tension, reflecting the foundation of an effective school counselor-administrator team.

At the high school level, school counselors typically assist with the implementation of intervention strategies which range from student conferences to referrals for mental health evaluations provided by outside mental health professionals. Yet, early interventions with reference to early warning signs and evaluations of risk were not typically seen as the school counselors’ responsibility. This approach was discussed as a concern for student safety, particularly with considerations of school counselors’ expertise in assessing and managing student threats of self-harm (i.e. suicide assessments). At times, school counselors discussed suicide assessment and threat assessment interchangeably, even though they reported being more involved in the former than the latter. While many school officials fail to see the connection between threats of self-harm and threats of targeted school violence, research suggests that 78% of targeted school violence perpetrators had recent attempts or thoughts of suicide (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The best approach to targeted school violence intervention lends itself to school counselors as they have knowledge of students who threaten self-harm (i.e. risk factor) and have the training needed to assess, manage, and intervene when warranted.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP; 2016) standards require counseling graduates to demonstrate knowledge and skills across the curriculum, including preparation in “crisis intervention, trauma informed, and community-based strategies, such as Psychological First Aid.” (CACREP, 2016) Furthermore, school counselors have an ethical duty to protect students from harm to self and others, and evaluate and manage students’ risk for violence using risk assessments (Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Without adequate training in risk assessment and intervention, other school
professionals may unintentionally create situations that are potentially harmful for students (Schmitz et al., 2012).

School counselors discussed the importance of targeted school violence prevention and the role of early intervention in their professional work. With such responsibilities, many school counselors mentioned concerns of liability as counselors’ are ethically and legally responsible to exercise reasonable care in order to prevent incidents of targeted school violence (ASCA, 2012). Yet, many strategies within the comprehensive targeted school violence prevention plan relies upon the support of students and parents. For instance, assessments that require school counselors to gauge the possibility for violence require discretion to quantify the risk (i.e. high, medium, low) are based largely on self-reported responses. Students’ willingness to fully disclose relevant information during the school threat assessment process brings about a sense of uncertainty in school counselors’ ability to address early warning signs. Moreover, school counselors may urge parents to seek further evaluation of mental wellbeing, stress proper monitoring of the student in the home environment, or provide referrals for community mental health treatment, but parents may not take the recommended actions. In these instances, school counselors are required to manage the students’ threat for violence with school-based approaches that do not adequately address the needs of the student. Although school counselors continue to act in the best interest of students, counselors’ alert appropriate authorities if a student poses a significant risk for violence to themselves or others and document all efforts to protect themselves against liability.

School Counselors as Crisis Resources. Incidents of crisis were not common experiences among school counselors, but were thought to be a responsibility when necessary. School counselors may coordinate community counseling services, communicate with
stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers), contact feeder schools, and provide information to parents in times of crisis. Administrators must ensure that school counselors are accessible in times of crisis and school districts must work to reduce the school counselor to student ratio to meet the needs of students.

RQ2: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being identified?

**Warning Signs.** Incidents of targeted school violence are suggested to be a part of a “cumulative strain” in which small incidents of strain build into violent attack (Levin & Madfis, 2009). This research suggests that school counselors have opportunities to identify warning signs to intervene and manage the risk for violence prior to threats of violence. Direct communication between students and staff is essential to ensure that students or situations of concern are both reported and investigated (Cornell, 2006).

The foundation for a school culture conducive to reports of warning signs for the risk of targeted violence requires relationships between students and staff. Recent measures focusing on enhanced security as a way to improve school safety significantly hinders student reports of leakage (Ahrens, 2012). In fact, Kohn (2004) suggests that such punitive policy “isn’t merely ineffective- it’s actively counterproductive” (p. 26). Meaning, doing nothing in response to incidents of targeted school violence would be more successful in averting future attacks than such authoritarian practices. Despite institutional objectives of inclusivity and support, the increased use of law enforcement personnel and technologies in schools bring consequences upon the overall school climate and erodes the trust between students and staff (Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011). In order to improve school safety and prevent future attacks, schools must prioritize school climates of empathy and support to encourage student bystanders to break the code of silence (Sułkowski, 2011).
Technology platforms (e.g. Remind, Twitter, email) are useful for students and parents to report their concerns in a timely manner. These electronic communication systems allow for students and situations of concern to be quickly identified and, at times, resolved. Likewise, these technologies expand school counselors’ reach and create opportunities to connect and encourage dialogue between school staff, students, families, and the community. However, school counselors must consider the issues of ethics in regards to their use of technology. Interestingly, leakage in the form of premeditation has been found in social media postings of previous perpetrators of targeted school violence (Cohen-Almagor, 2014). It is unknown if school counselors are aware of protocols and procedures regarding inappropriate or concerning statements made while using these technologies, or district monitoring protocols (e.g. weekends, school breaks).

Overall, identifying students who may pose a risk for violence is the most challenging step in the school threat assessment process. Failure to communicate concerns for students who are struggling to cope, feeling isolated, or exhibit warning signs occurs often within the school setting. Successful interventions do occur to prevent incidents of targeted school violence but require effective communication in a timely manner. What follows is a discussion on the warning signs that may indicate a student is at risk for violence.

**Leakage.** Perpetrators of targeted school violence often discuss their plans for violence prior to the attack (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The FBI refers to students communicating their violent intentions to others in advance of a targeted attack as “leakage” (Fast, 2008, p. 238). According to the National Threat Assessment Center, school staff should monitor leakage to prevent incidents of targeted school violence (NTAC, 2018).
Leakage of potential threats of targeted school violence may occur in a variety of ways. Perpetrators of targeted school violence may foreshadow their violent intentions in the form of writings or drawings. Such forms of leakage were demonstrated in Newman et al.'s (2004) study, which reported that forty percent of the perpetrators had written about violence in school assignments prior to the attack. Teachers may identify students at risk for violence by monitoring student assignments for expressions of intent to cause harm. School staff should monitor student assignments for concerning or violent threats and pictures with expressions of intent to cause harm to identify students at risk for violence. It is, however, unknown as to whether or not teachers have received training on what constitutes as “concerning” statements or drawings that appear threatening. Additionally, students’ knowledge of specific language and behavior that suggests an intent for violence may be limited. To combat false positive identification, students and staff need additional training on appropriate language and behaviors in the school setting, and the potential outcomes for inappropriate language and behavior (e.g. suspension, expulsion), to help all members of the school community combat issues of school safety.

Leakage may also be communicated to other students. While it is common for students to discuss personal struggles to school counselors during elementary school, students experiencing problems during middle or high school are more likely to confide in their peers (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009). Given adolescents’ help-seeking behaviors and research that suggests over 80% of targeted school violence perpetrators shared their plans with at least one individual prior to the attack, students at risk for violence may be identified through student reports of threatening or concerning statements made by peers (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Student reports of leakage are not uniformly close friends or confidants of student plotters. Research conducted by Pollack and his colleagues (2008) found that one of their
students’ came forward with information in part because of the fact that “he was not close friends with the potential attackers” (p. 13). This suggests that breaking the code of silence among close friends remains a significant challenge. School counselors serve a vital role in implementing and coordinating efforts to bring awareness on how to navigate friendships when concerns for violence arise. Additionally, reports of concern require students to experience, observe, or overhear some evidence of threatening behavior. As students increasingly use technology during the school day (e.g. earbuds, social media) students are less likely to observe behaviors or overhear conversations that suggest a student may become violent. School districts are recommended to consider the impact of personal devices at school on school-wide and individual violence prevention.

**Behavioral signs.** Students who may pose a risk for violence may also be identified through staff observations. Changes in students’ mood or behavior as well as incidents of peer conflict may be observed and understood as potential warning signs. These situations of concern may be observed by school counselors in school building areas with high traffic (e.g. cafeteria, hallways, gym), but are most likely to be observed in the classroom where students spend the majority of the school day.

To interpret behavioral observations as an indication that a student is at risk for violence requires familiarity with students’ baseline mood and behavior as well as knowledge on behavioral warning signs for effective identification. Oftentimes, warning signs of an impending attack are difficult to identify in foresight because innocuous explanations exist and in isolation, none of these warning signs appear serious enough to warrant immediate intervention (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Langman, 2009b). In fact, most perpetrators of targeted school violence showed no change in academic performance (56%), friendship patterns (73%), interest in school (59%)
or school disciplinary problems (69%) prior to the attack (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Misconceptions of warning signs may result in ineffective attempts to profile perpetrators of targeted school violence. School counselors must therefore collaborate with other school staff to observe multiple interactions to accurately assess a student’s behavior for patterns of concern without marginalization.

**Suicidality.** Suicidality and risk of suicide were not mentioned but should be a significant warning sign for students at risk for targeted school violence. Feelings such as hopelessness, humiliation or anger are associated with suicidal ideation and overlap almost entirely to the warning signs for a person at risk for targeted school violence (Lee, 2013; NTAC, 2018). Additionally, 78% of perpetrators had attempted suicide or considered suicide prior to the attack and 42% of targeted school violence attacks end in suicide of the gunman (Vossekuil et al., 2002; Langman, 2018). Thus, incidents of targeted school violence typically have a homicidal-suicidal plan, which greatly differs from most homicides (Bushman et al., 2016).

A risk factor for suicidal behavior, including incidents of targeted school violence, is experiences of loss. In 37 school shooting cases, Vossekuil et al. (2002) found 98% of the attackers had “experienced or perceived some major loss prior to the attack” and in most cases (83%), the students’ recent behaviors suggested they were not coping well. School counselors are trained to recognize the warning signs of a student who is suicidal and should be trained to approach the concerns as a critical component of threat assessment.

**Home environment.** Students’ home environment is a challenging area for school officials to identify students at risk for violence. Oftentimes, parents serve as gatekeepers of important information (e.g. familial death, financial concerns, parental separation or divorce) that may ultimately prevent acts of targeted school violence. This may be due to a lack of intimacy
between immediate family members or parents not recognizing the pattern of negative behavior that is emerging. Parents are urged to survey and monitor their child’s media usage as well as report behaviors of concern to proactively identify students at risk for violence.

**RQ3: In what ways are students who may be at risk for violence being assessed?**

When asked for specific examples of how students who pose a risk for violence are assessed for imminence and intent, participants gave examples of open-ended questions that guide data collection. Practical distinctions were also considered such as between threats that are communicated as jokes and angry rhetoric. Threat assessment guidelines identify this distinction as between substantive and transient threats, though participants did not seem aware of this terminology.

According to O’Toole (2000), threats should be evaluated based on the specificity and plausibility of the threat content, history of threatened violence, evidence of planning for the threatened violence, invited accomplices or audience to observe the attack, and accessibility or acquisition of weapons (e.g. firearms, bomb materials, ammunition). Participants did appear to evaluate threat content for these indicators, but relied solely on self-report data and intuition for decisions regarding threat classification (e.g. low, moderate, high). While most threatening statements can be addressed as transient threats, school staff must understand the qualitative distinction between transient and substantive threats to accurately quantify the risk of violence (Burnette, Datta & Cornell, 2018).

A school-based threat assessment tool was typically used when responding to student threats of violence. Data on the validity and reliability of the instrument is unknown, however, participants did not seem to question the district’s guidelines. Given the rarity of transient threats, this may be a reflection of participants’ limited engagement with comprehensive threat
assessments and limited knowledge of the field of threat assessment. When probed for the usefulness of the instrument, however, participants gave varying responses. Many described the assessment as easy to follow, objective, and helpful for determining the severity of threat given the breadth of information captured. Others felt the instrument was problematic, describing the assessment as short-term focused, subjective to self-report data, and difficult to utilize in practice given the question-answer format. Ultimately, the threat assessment approach appears to be accepted and practiced by school counselors. Hesitations regarding the threat assessment criteria and implementation methods suggest the need for critical evaluation of these practices.

Discussions on the scholarly work that established the foundation of the threat assessment may prove useful to ease school counselors’ concerns regarding the tool’s validity and reliability. Additionally, school counselors may be using the tool as a checklist of risk factors. Previous research on targeted school violence suggests checklists of warning signs to be ineffective and recommends school officials the use of threat assessments for analyzing the credibility of threatened violence to determine if the student poses a threat (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012). Training of school staff on best implementation practices is needed to ensure threat assessments are being used with fidelity.

Given the importance of intentional questioning for reliable threat assessments, concerns regarding the ability of authority figures (i.e. school administrators), who know little about developmentally appropriate interviewing techniques, to engage in such practices seem reasonable. School counselors’ rapport, knowledge (e.g. mental health, school climate), and skills (e.g. empathy, active listening) encourage students to share vital information in regards to their thoughts and feelings (e.g. suicidality, access to weapons, planning of attacks), unlike anyone in the position of authority. Thus, in order to gather the information needed for an
effective threat assessment, a multi-disciplinary approach wherein school counselors and school administrators collaborate to conduct school-based threat assessments will prove beneficial. Furthermore, a successful threat assessment relies upon effective communication and collaboration prior to an impending attack. School counselors and school administrators should attend training sessions together to establish consistency and preparedness for implementing the school threat assessment process.

**RQ4: In what ways are schools identifying intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence?**

Schools appear to utilize one of five intervention strategies to manage a student’s risk for violence: 1) discipline, 2) monitoring, 3) skill development, 4) team referral, and 5) mental health evaluation. Consistent with school threat assessment models, school teams do appear to respond differently to transient versus substantive threats (Burnette, Datta & Cornell, 2018). However, teams differ in how they respond to student threats of violence across school levels. It is likely that many competing considerations (e.g. student age, school resources, staff perceptions) affect such case management decisions.

By far, zero tolerance policies were often enforced with punitive disciplinary actions. According to Langman (2009), zero tolerance policies typically result in “inappropriate responses to innocuous situations” because of a “failure to distinguish actual threats from non-threats” (p. 186). Expelling or suspending students from school appeared to be an established protocol for any student who threatens targeted school violence. Controversially, such punitive measures appeared ineffective with respect to prevention. Students were not only excluded from the school setting, but supports offered upon students’ re-entry (i.e. check-in) were not sufficient to resolve any underlying conflicts. Furthermore, school staff found it difficult to discern the
students’ risk for violence due to a lack of monitoring systems outside the school setting. School safety discourse appears disconnected from targeted school violence prevention policies with an empirical basis. Nonetheless, school counselors should make every attempt to discuss the students’ needs with all relevant parties (e.g. teachers, parents, community mental health providers) prior to the student returning to school to avert escalation or incidents of targeted school violence. Strong communication and collaboration skills are essential to sufficiently address the student’s needs and mitigate any potential risk for violence.

If a threat did not rise to a level of concern that warranted a comprehensive threat assessment (e.g. intended as a joke, emotional statement), students may be monitored for escalating behaviors. Monitoring in this sense typically involves the school counselor having check-ins with the threatening student or the student’s teacher. The intent of interventions, however, is to address the conflict that underlies the students’ behavior. Yet, opportunities for school counselors to adequately address students’ needs is limited. For instance, lunch time is the only time in which students will not miss instruction; however, school counselors struggle to provide interventions during lunch times due to additional roles or duties and large caseloads. While school counselors do not offer long term counseling in the school setting, students are not receiving the emotional support they need (ASCA, 2012). Schools should focus on implementing risk management plans that employ support from the school counselor to mitigate the students’ risk of violence. Likewise, school counselors should be trained on available, researched-based interventions to effectively address relevant educational and mental health needs of students. Lastly, community-based counselors may be hesitant to disclose otherwise confidential information about students. School counselors should continue to pursue and share information
with community-based counselors for consistency in student interventions and monitoring of students’ mental wellbeing.

Overall, school counselors appear limited in regards to interventions for students of concern. Aside from discipline actions or mental health evaluations, schools are relying on school counselors to monitor students of concern for escalating behaviors. This approach not only fails to effectively address the conflict underlying student threats, but given the amount of duties already placed on school counselors and school counselors’ large caseloads, these security measures are ultimately concerning. Without a strong emphasis on appropriate interventions (i.e. mental health counseling services) to address students’ needs, schools are practically awaiting student conflicts to escalate into violent acts. Thus, if violence prevention is truly a priority, school districts must consider these practical implications when formulating school safety plans.

**Theoretical Approaches**

Two theories related to incidents of targeted violence were used as a basis for this study: ecological systems theory (Broffenbrennder, 1977) and strain theory (Agnew, 2006). Ecological systems theory describes the need for multilevel analysis among students of concern to identify a combination of factors for comparison and evaluation to determine a students’ risk of targeted school violence. Strain theory describes the need for identifying students’ encounters with strain to determine the risk for targeted school violence.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

**Microsystem.** The microsystem consists of the immediate surroundings in which an individual lives and the interpersonal relationships experienced by the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The influence of factors within the microsystem level on students’ risk for targeted school violence, include peer influence and inappropriate use of the internet.
Negative peer interactions (e.g. anti-social behavior, peer victimization) may result in deviant peer affiliation or social isolation, and potentially escalate into acts of targeted school violence. Students may attempt to interact with others on the Internet via social networking sites, online gaming platforms, and texting via devices (e.g. computers, cell phones, and gaming systems). While this can help students develop healthy peer relationships, students may also experience cyberbullying or further social isolation as they display outward signs for desired isolation and become dependent on the virtual community (e.g. avoiding eye contact, constant use of headphones, raised hood over their heads).

**Individual characteristics.** School counselors are most likely to evaluate individual traits when identifying students of concern and assessing their risk for engaging in targeted school violence. These traits are characterized as demand, resource, and force characteristics that may influence an individual’s relationships and interactions. These trait characteristics may prove particularly useful for assessing the risk for violence. For instance, considerations of age on the intent behind student threats of violence (demand), mental and emotional distress on their perception of violence (resource), and patterns of violent behavior on the likelihood for committing an act of targeted school violence (force) may prove useful for valid estimations of the risk for violence.

**Mesosystem.** At the mesosystem level, relationships between school counselors and students and among students are an important factor in preventing targeted school violence. Student encounters with concerning peer behaviors and communications and the school counselors’ responses to these situations of concern will likely influence perceptions of reporting and overall school safety efforts. Given student reports of concern are the most useful sources of leaker, fostering positive relationships between students and school counselors, and ensuring all
students are socially engaged at school seems to be critical for preventing or mitigating the risk of targeted school violence.

**Exosystem.** Risk factors for engaging in targeted school violence in the exosystem level include mass media and the overall education system. The portrayal of violence in mass media and district requirements for responding to student behaviors have a direct impact on students through their immediate environments. For instance, youth are increasingly exposed to images and language that glamorize aggression and violence. School districts, however, have governing policies that support long-term suspension for students who engage in fighting or display aggressive behavior. Such policies govern the ability of school counselors to identify and address the underlying concerns for incidents of student conflict, which may serve as a precipitating event for students to engage in acts of targeted school violence.

**Macrosystem.** Social stigma is an underlying problem at the macrosystem level that influences the school threat assessment process. In this sense, social stigma was refers to the underlying perception of parents that stigmatizes students from receiving mental health services. One may also speculate that the underlying perception of society may ultimately affect students thoughts about themselves and their help-seeking behaviors. Furthermore, other ecological factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, parenting behaviors, financial concerns, etc.) are likely to mediate the influence of social stigma and the willingness to seek mental health services for youth.

**Chronosystem.** In the chronosystem level, transition experiences and social expectations of technology competence influence the school threat assessment process. Students may experience normative (i.e. starting secondary school) and non-normative (i.e. hospitalization) transitions which bring about periods of heightened risk. Without proper school systems and
structures to respond to student needs during this period, students may escalate into acts of violence.

In addition to experiences of transition, social networking is a largely prevalent within many adolescents' lives and perceived to be an influence in many areas of their competence (e.g. social competence). Students may find it difficult to socialize during face-to-face situations at school given the increased reliance on social media platforms, and may continue to inhibit their development of social competence by using social networking to avoid peer interactions.

**Strain Theory**

Strain theory is based on the premise that people are faced with undesirable experiences (i.e. strain) that influence their ability to cope. Three types of strain may be encountered: 1) inability to reach a desirable goal, 2) loss or threatened loss of positive stimulus, and 3) presentation or threatened presentation of negative stimulus (Agnew, 2006). These stressful experiences and interactions increase the likelihood of delinquency or violence through negative affect states (most notably, anger) that often result from undesirable experiences.

Acts of targeted school violence are neither random nor illogical. According to strain theory (2006), targeted school violence is a violent expression of the cumulative effects of strain an individual experienced. At times, strain may be exacerbated by personality traits or behaviors. A lack of individual coping resources is a critical risk moderator between experiences of strain and student threats of violence. In instances involving poor coping skills, the cumulative strain may lend to inappropriate expression of behavior, such as physical aggression or threats of violence.

In addition to a lack of coping schools, parenting approaches may also prove to moderate student outcomes. Elements such as the lack of parental discipline or supervision and
parents’ refusal to address underlying concerns in students’ behavior are risk factors for students’ ability to cope and manage the risk for violence. Such antipathetic environments contribute to the development of the personality traits and behaviors as previously described, and enable the development of a plan for targeted school violence. What follows are reported examples of strainful elements that consequently triggered student threats of violence. While these types are theoretically distinct from one another, school counselors report an overlap in practice.

**Inability to reach a desirable goal.** Strain of this category was frequently referenced as students’ inability to develop and sustain positive peer relationships. Mental illness or school expulsion introduce strain through the perceived failure to achieve the positively valued goal of friendships. For instance, untreated mental illness may lead to social isolation or rejection due to manifestations of the active symptoms. Students may also experience social isolation during school reintegration following hospitalization for psychiatric treatment or expulsion (alternative school setting).

**Loss or threatened loss of positive stimulus.** The loss or threatened loss of supportive relationships is a significant source of strain of this category for students who previously threatened violence. Students may experience conflict with peers, weak relationships with teachers, or suspension from school.

**Presentation or threatened presentation of negative stimulus.** Strains of this category include social isolation, poor grades, and peer pressure. Other sources of negative strain within the familial level, such as parental divorce, estranged parents, or financial struggles may also influence the risk for violence. Across all school levels, cyberbullying is a negative stimulus that is frequently experienced by many youth.
Conclusions about Theoretical Approaches

Theories were not tested as part of this research study. Thus, conclusions cannot be drawn as to whether ecological systems theory or strain theory explain incidents of targeted school violence for the purposes of school threat assessment. Components of each theory does, however, appear to provide valuable insight for understanding the circumstances and factors which potentially influence students to engage in acts of targeted school violence. These theories in conjunction with current school-based threat assessment practices may prove useful for further exploring comprehensive targeted school violence prevention efforts.

Implications

The implications of these research findings can be applied to school counselors, the larger counselor education community, and educational leaders. In the following section, implications as they appear relevant to each of these groups will be discussed.

School Counselors

It is evident from the results of this study that school counselors' involvement in the school threat assessment process is inconsistent and limited, yet they are positioned to be key players in addressing school violence in all of its manifestations. School counselors’ training and the roles they typically fulfill in schools highlights counselors’ contributions to the school threat assessment process.

Efforts to address concerns of school violence have emphasized the importance of comprehensive approaches to prevent targeted attacks. This whole-school perspective involves school counselors by nature, given their role is to “address the needs of all students comprehensively through the implementation of a developmental counseling program” (American School Counselor Association, 1999, p. 1). School counselors’ knowledge and skills
serve as a resource to help establish learning environments that are safe, supportive, and nurturing for all students.

While the role of school counselors varies among grade levels, school counselors are in the optimal position to identify students who may pose a risk for violence given their unique training and relationships with students and teachers (Astramovich et al., 2013; Daniels, 2002). Early intervention in school violence is critical and current threat assessment models rely upon early warning signs. These actions or behaviors signal a concern for students who manifest them. School counselors have the training needed to identify early warning signs and should be seen as a resource for educating students, parents, and other school staff. Additionally, school counselors should oversee reports of early warning signs to monitor students of concern and gauge the risk for violence with reference to previous incidents of suicidality and experiences of loss. These risk factors are typically addressed by school counselors and have been shown to be highly influential on students’ risk for engaging in acts of targeted school violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

There appears to be a perception of student threats of violence being a situation that necessitates discipline actions (e.g. suspension, expulsion). In an attempt to separate school counselors from such consequences and salvage student rapport, school counselors may not be involved during assessments of risk to protect the rapport with students. As a result, school staff who are not trained in therapeutic approaches and appear authoritative in nature (e.g. school administrators) address the signs that have been manifested. To prevent incidents of targeted school violence, schools rely upon valid and reliable threat assessments. School counselors not only obtain the professional competencies for effective assessment procedures but have experience in the field of threat assessment with regards to threats of self-harm. School
counselors must oversee the threat assessment process in schools to accurately gauge the risk for violence and prevent incidents of targeted school violence. School administrators and educational leaders are urged to consider and promote the involvement of school counselors in the school threat assessment process to address the nationwide concerns of school safety.

A large caseload was one of the most frequently cited barriers to the school threat assessment process. School counselors struggle to provide school violence prevention and intervention strategies as a result of increasing student needs (e.g. mental health) and the paperwork that accompanies each student. Suggestions for advocacy in this area include documentations of how school counselors spend their time to identify roles and responsibilities that may better serve students and the school threat assessment process. Furthermore, school counselors may collect data and document their time spent on school violence prevention and intervention strategies as well as the outcomes for students, families, or school staff to demonstrate the benefits of their services. Such documentation would be useful to advocate and educate school leaders and district officials on the importance of school counselors and school violence prevention and intervention strategies.

Research on perpetrators of targeted school violence suggests 78% of perpetrators attempted suicide or considered suicide prior to the attack and 61% had a documented history of depression or feelings of isolation (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Yet, current school procedures conceptualize the assessment of risk for threats of self-harm (i.e. suicide assessment) and threats of targeted school violence as separate prevention practices. Current school safety literature identifies suicidality as a potential risk factor for engaging in acts of violence, but school safety models continue to address concerns for school violence without reference to threats of self-harm. Results of the current study and empirical literature on school threat assessment models
suggest the need for a revised model for the school threat assessment process. In contrast to current school threat assessment models, all student threats (i.e. self harm, violence) will be assessed to determine if the student poses a threat using one threat assessment process (Figure 4). While threats arise in distinct contexts and circumstances, and require different management strategies, the preventive steps within suicide and violence threat assessments are one in the same. The proposed model aims to provide a functional guide that emphasizes a threat assessment approach for detecting and responding to all student threats. All students of concern are proposed to first be assessed for risk of harm to self and then for risk of violence. Additionally, key strengths of the threat assessment approach respectfully suggests that all assessments of threat are conducted by school counselors, given their student rapport and knowledge of assessment practices. The proposed threat assessment model is structured and systematic, guided by a foundation of empirical support, and utilized by school professionals that are highly qualified and knowledgeable for the role. School administrators and education leaders are urged to consider the ways in which evolving school violence prevention practices encourage criminalization and lack fundamental structure. This proposed aims to approach school violence prevention with a humanistic approach that appears appropriate and effective for consistent school safety practices.
Figure 4. Ideal School Threat Assessment Model
Counselor Educators

A topic frequently discussed in counseling research journals is the gap that exists between counseling research and practice. One explanation for this gap may be the sharing of knowledge from counseling researchers to counseling practitioners. For instance, school counselors typically receive counseling-related knowledge through district training. Counselor educators, however, typically share knowledge of counseling research via peer-reviewed journal articles, conference presentations, or counselor education preparation programs. Perhaps researchers in the field of school counseling can partner with school districts to share knowledge of the school threat assessment process in addition to online journal articles and conference presentations. Understanding how school counselors play a role in school violence prevention and intervention through the school threat assessment process lends itself to the development of district training wherein counselor educators present relevant research to inform and encourage school counselors’ contributions.

Furthermore, counselor educators must examine the influence of school counselors on the school threat assessment process. While one may presume that school counselors’ knowledge, skills, and student rapport would be beneficial for the school threat assessment process and overall school safety efforts, additional research is needed for empirical support. Also, there appears to be factors that influence school counselors’ effectiveness in the school threat assessment process, including consistent communication with parents and teachers. Counselor educators should help school counselors identify factors that hinder such communications and identify ways to facilitate communication between stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, administrators). Lastly, school counseling graduates must be knowledgeable of researched-based interventions for students of concern. Although counselor education curriculum includes crisis
preparation, counselor educators are urged to specifically address best practices for interviewing students of concern to support overall school safety efforts and the model proposed herein. School counselors must be prepared to interview students of concerns in such a way that supports students’ mental wellbeing and developmental state, while gathering critical information to gauge the risk for violence.

**Educational Leaders**

Education administrators must reflect on the school threat assessment process in their school district and consider the benefits and outcomes of involving school counselors. School counselors have relevant knowledge and skills, as well as risk assessment experience (e.g. suicide assessments) to enhance the effectiveness of the school threat assessment process. In fact, many school counselors were confused as to why they are not key players in the school threat assessment process and expressed frustrations in regards to role confusion. Thus, school administrators must clarify the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, as well as other school staff, in the school threat assessment process. Opportunities for school counselors to share potential consequences or barriers that currently hinder the school threat assessment process may also prove beneficial for designing effective policies to assess and respond to threats of targeted school violence.

In addition to discussing and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and other school staff in the school threat assessment process, education administrators should offer all school staff opportunities for training to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of school safety procedures. The results of the study suggest many school staff are either not trained in effective threat assessment protocols and practices or have received inconsistent guidance on district policies and procedures. Training that invites stakeholders to attend as a school team may
prove useful for clarity and consistent implementation. Furthermore, the presence of leakage, wherein an individual either directly or indirectly communicates threats of violence, alerts school staff to initiate the school threat assessment process. Education administrators should consider awareness training for staff, students, and parents on what, when, and how to report behavioral or emotional warning signs to limit potential barriers to communications of leakage in schools.

Appropriate policies and procedures should guide a core school team on how to assess the seriousness of behavioral or emotional warning signs. Results of this study suggest that school administrators are oftentimes involved in assessments of student threats of violence and may even conduct threat assessments without involving mental health professionals, such as school counselors. Education administrators must consider their influence on screenings and student interviews. To illustrate, students may hesitate or withhold information related to their emotional or behavioral functioning due to their fear of punishment or lack of rapport with administrators. School policies and procedures must address all risk assessment practices as the responsibility of school counselors to effectively assess the seriousness of behavioral or emotional warning signs and respond appropriately. With that, results of the current study suggests that students are experiencing increasing difficulty with coping and managing their emotions. However, school staff struggle to identify early warning signs of emotional needs due to the substantial amount of time students spend on technology devices at school. Without technology-free opportunities to observe students’ actions and behaviors, schools may struggle to identify students in need before they escalate into disruption or violence.

Finally, results of this study suggest that due to disciplinary code violations and bullying standards, many students are receiving discipline actions (e.g. suspension, expulsion) as a result of their behaviors. At present, there is no evidence that punishment and exclusion can change
students’ behavior and improve school safety (Cornell & Allen, 2011). In order to break the cycle of violence against schools, education administrators may develop an array of options that deal with disruptive or violent behavior, while at the same time addressing the underlying conflict and keeping students engaged in school. A number of alternative responses may be considered, such as interagency approaches, restitution, mental health counseling or opportunities for skill development. With that, direct and timely communication of student behaviors and response strategies to school counselors may also prove beneficial for monitoring purposes and to ensure students’ are positively reconnected with peers.

**Research Implications**

In addition to implication for professionals, this study also has implications for future research that explores the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in the school threat assessment process and the application of Consensual Qualitative Research. The combination of this qualitative methodological approach and the utilization of school counselors as active participants has not been incorporated by previous research studies. Utilizing each of these approaches enabled the researcher to present school counselors’ shared and unique experiences, whereas other methodologies use higher-order axial coding that can diminish participants’ unique experiences. The raw aspects of this study encourage the use of similar methods in future research.

**Limitations**

As with any exploratory study, there are limitations with this research that should be considered when reviewing the findings. Each of these limitations were given considerable attention and intentional decisions were made on how to proceed with the current study. Current literature and faculty advisors were consulted to ensure the impact of these limitations did not
reduce the credibility or usefulness of the research findings. Considerable limitations include the relationship between the researcher and participants, sampling, and self-report methods.

**The Researcher-Participant Relationship**

Given the researcher has only worked at the elementary school level and this is their first year in the school district, it is unlikely that a researcher-participant relationship existed prior to the current study. In an attempt to manage any pre-existing relationships, however, the primary researcher recruited a diverse group of participants from all school levels (elementary, middle, high) throughout the school district.

The developmental nature of the research process also lends itself to consideration of power relations. The analytical power of interviews in the current study was limited as a result of various attempts to minimize the distance between the researcher and participants. For instance, the primary researcher maintained a professional approach, such as using a formal discourse and avoiding collegial discussions to create professional distance while in the interview situation. Also, the researcher consistently engaged in self-reflexivity to enrich the experience of the research practice. Strategies to maintain reflexivity include member checking, a coding and data analysis team for unconscious editing, keeping a research journal for self-supervision, and using an external auditor to check the researchers’ reasoning, judgment, and emotional reactions.

Furthermore, to avoid an authoritative stance, the researcher embraced the standpoint of the uninformed and actively sought guidance and feedback from the participants by using probes such as, “tell me what I may be missing.” During instance that participants gave a non-candid response, the primary researcher reminded participants of their confidentiality and anonymity, and used the semi-structured format to probe for additional information. Additionally, participants maintained power in their choice to participate and terminate from the interview, the
environ
ment in which the interview was carried out, the level of cooperation in discussions, and
member checking of their transcripts.

Sampling

All school counselors were recruited from a large southeastern school district. Although
the sample size is in accordance with recommendations set forth by Hill and colleagues (2005)
for CQR studies, school counselors described their experiences from a single school district.
Variability is likely to exist in the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in schools at the
county and state level, as well as within the school district. The researcher also attempted to
maximize the transferability of the research findings by recruiting multiple participants from
various areas in the district as well as from each school level.

Self-Report Methods

Results of this study relied on self-reported responses of k-12 schools counselors’
regarding the school threat assessment process and their roles and responsibilities, which may
introduce errors due to self-report. Furthermore, no information was available on the extent to
which school counselors carry out the school threat assessment process or related activities with
fidelity. Testimonial validity of participants’ responses was, however, confirmed through
member checking techniques, and representativeness of the findings were stable across cases.

Future Research

Given the significance of the threat assessment approach in schools as indicated by this
study and relevant research, as well as its infancy with regard to empirical scholarship in the
field of school safety, there are important considerations for future research. First, researchers
must analyze threat assessment models and relevant research on school violence to better inform
the school threat assessment process. Results of the current study and empirical literature on
school threat assessment models suggest the need for a revised model for the school threat assessment process. In contrast to current school threat assessment models, all student threats (i.e. self harm, violence) will be assessed to determine if the student poses a threat using one threat assessment process (Figure 4). While threats arise in distinct contexts and circumstances, and require different management strategies, the preventive steps within suicide and violence threat assessments are one in the same. The proposed model aims to provide a functional guide that emphasizes a threat assessment approach for detecting and responding to all student threats. All students of concern are proposed to first be assessed for risk of harm to self and then for risk of violence. It is imperative that researchers explore the effectiveness of the proposed model for school threat assessments with regards to violence prevention efforts.

Researchers are also encouraged to examine threat assessment practices across schools. An in-depth consideration of critical student factors (e.g. gender, familial factors, thought patterns, overt/covert expressions of aggression) should be addressed to support best practice in the collection and analysis of threat assessment data. Additionally, future research might consider whether there are significant differences among threat assessment practices between averted and completed threats of targeted school violence. Specific attention to how these schools’ engage in long-term student monitoring and in what ways student transitions (e.g. school level, discipline actions, mental health treatment) are managed would be enlightening. Lastly, exploring school response strategies would prove useful for school disciplinary policies and school safety efforts.

Beyond the school threat assessment process, findings of the current study suggest a need for exploring the relationship between school-specific factors and student threats of targeted school violence. For instance, school counselors consistently mentioned large student caseloads
as a primary concern with regards to the growing threats on school safety. With that, there may be great benefits in exploring the relationship between school size and rates of student threats of targeted school violence. Additionally, findings of the current study revealed a significant role of technology on rates of student threats and skills in the area of social competence. Researchers should explore similarities and differences in rates of student threats and students’ social functioning between school districts with 1:1 device programs or Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiatives, and school districts without these models.

**Conclusion**

In closing, the present study was an investigation of professional school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to student threats of violence, including challenges and recommendations for a thorough threat assessment process in schools. Findings revealed schools are attempting to design systems and structures in which to conduct threat assessments on student threats of violence in the attempt to prevent incidents of targeted school violence. Yet, inconsistencies as well as challenges to roles and responsibilities, threat assessment practices, and risk management strategies indicate a need for further exploration and analysis. Thus, future studies that further investigate the school threat assessment process are warranted.
References


doi:10.1177/1057567713515273


American School Counselor Association (1999). The role of the professional school counselor. Alexandria, VA.


doi:10.1002/ab.10061


United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education.


Dear __________ (school counselor),

I am currently working on dissertation research at North Carolina State University that is intended to explore the ways in which school counselors’ evaluate reports of student threats. You have been invited to participate as a school counselor for White County Public School District. If you choose to participate, you will be asked for 30-45 minutes of your time to participate in an individual interview. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how schools identify, assess, and manage students of concern, and the role of school counselors throughout this process.

The individual interview will take place after school or on a weekend day, whichever is more convenient for you. A $25 Barnes & Noble gift card will be given to all school counselors who choose to participate in the research study.

If you would like to participate, please email me (bellington@white.net) and we can set up a time and location to meet. I am also happy to answer any questions you have regarding the research study.

Thank you for considering participating in this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Breanna Ellington
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your gender? ____________

2. Which of the following best describes your ethnicity?
   - Asian American / Pacific Insider
   - American Indian
   - African American / Black
   - Caucasian / White
   - Hispanic / Latino/a
   - Multiracial
   - Other (please specify) _____________

3. In what year did you receive your counseling certification? __________

4. How many years of experience do you have in the field of school counseling? _____

5. Which of the following best describes the setting in which you work:
   - Elementary School
   - Middle School
   - High School
   - Other

6. How many school counselors (including yourself) work in your school? ______

7. What professional license(s) and/or certifications do you hold?

_________________________________________________________________

8. What is your highest degree of education in a mental health field?
   - Bachelor’s Degree
   - Master’s Degree
   - Education Specialist Degree
   - Doctoral Degree
9. Have you received training on school threat assessment and/or behavioral supports? If so, please describe the training(s) you received.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

10. Is there a threat assessment team at your school?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Unsure
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

North Carolina State University

Title of Study: An Exploration of School Counselors' Prevention and Intervention Practices Related to the USSS Threat Assessment Model
Principal Investigator: Breanna Ellington
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Adria Dunbar

What are some general things I should know about this research study?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of how schools identify, assess, and manage students of concern, and the role of school counselors throughout this process.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form. You may want to participate in this research because you will inform policies, procedures, and training on reducing and responding to threats of violence in school. You may not want to participate in this research because you could feel discomfort when sharing your experiences.

In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be given to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office (contact information is noted below).

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to discover and describe how schools identify, assess, and manage students of concern, and the role of school counselors throughout this process. Specifically, this study will explore school counselors’ prevention and intervention practices related to the USSS threat assessment model.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?
There will be approximately 8-12 participants in this study.
In order to be a participant in this study you must be a licensed as a North Carolina Professional School Counselor and employed as a full-time, professional school counselor in the White County Public Schools District.
You cannot participate in this study if you do not have a valid North Carolina Professional School Counselor license or are not employed as a full-time employee in the White County Public Schools District.

**What will happen if I take part in the study?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is 30-45 minutes. This is a one-time commitment and will occur outside your normal working hours at a time and location convenient for you.

The explorative procedures will be to participate in an individual interview discussing the prevention and intervention practices implemented at your school to identify, assess, and manage students of concern.

**Photos and video**
If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to be audio recorded. If you do not agree to be audio recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

As part of this research, we would like your consent to audio record your interview.

_____ I consent to be audio recorded.

_____ I do not consent to be audio recorded.

**Risks and benefits**
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research, but discomfort could always occur during or after an interview. To avoid any risk or discomfort from talking about personal or sensitive information, the researcher will take specific measures to protect information shared by participants. Specific measures that will be in place to protect confidentiality are explained below. The researcher is also a trained professional capable of handling emotional discomfort.

There are benefits to your participation in this study. A benefit to your participation is the opportunity to reflect on your experiences with students of concern. Reflecting on your knowledge and experiences may influence your effectiveness with students, families, faculty, staff, and the White County Public Schools District. Also, the knowledge gained in this study may inform the policies, procedures, and training on reducing and responding to student threats
of violence in schools, benefiting the larger school counseling profession and student safety efforts.

**Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time. In order to stop your participation, please contact the researcher, Breanna Ellington at bellington@white.net. If you choose to withdraw your consent and stop participating you can expect that any of your collected data be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on an NC State managed computer. The audio recordings will be transferred, using a secure method that is supported by the university, and saved on the researcher's network secure, password-protected laptop. The laptop will remain in a locked private office. The audio recordings will be destroyed on the audio recording device by deleting the file. A reputable transcription company will be used to transcribe interview data. This company has strict confidentiality procedures in place to ensure your privacy. You can visit their website at rogersword.com. Unless you give explicit permission to the contrary, no reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. Individual data with identifiable details removed may be made available to the public as required by a professional association, journal, or funding agency. Any identifiable information collected as part of this research, including demographic questionnaires, will not be used or distributed for future research purposes without your consent. All consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked private office and destroyed in a paper shredder three years after the closure of this research study.

**Compensation**

For participating in this study you will receive a $25 gift card to Barnes and Noble. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not receive the $25 gift card to Barnes and Noble.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Breanna Ellington, at bellington@white.net.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the
NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office via email at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1.919.515.8754. You can also find out more information about research, why you would or would not want to be a research participant, questions to ask a research participant, and more information about your rights by going to this website: http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant’s printed name ________________________________

Participant’s Signature ____________________________ Date ________________

Investigator's signature____________________________ Date ________________
## APPENDIX D: IDENTIFIED DOMAINS AND CATEGORIES

<p>| Roles and Responsibilities                  | E  | S  | E  | S  | M  | S  | M  | S  | H  | S  | H  | S  | H  | S  | Label       |
|---------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------------|
| Collaboration                               | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    | General     |
| Student Support Services Team               | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Typical     |
| Prevention Programming                      | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Student Needs                               | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Student Interviews                          | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Mental Health Referrals                     | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Student Resource Officers/Local Law Enforcement | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    | General     |
| Management Strategies                       | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    | Typical     |
| Legal Consequences                          | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Parent Refusal                              | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Typical     |
| Teachers                                    | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    | General     |
| Monitor for Warning Signs                   | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    | Typical     |
| Management Strategies                       | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Variant     |
| Resolve Low-Risk Concerns                   | X  | X  | X  | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Typical     |
| Other School Staff                          | X  | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Rare        |
| Front Office Staff                          | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Rare        |
| School Custodian                            | X  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Rare        |</p>
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