

BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT & MANAGEMENT

Understanding Active-Shooter Pathways to Violence

A Research and Analysis Framework for Schools, Security Professionals, Law Enforcement, and Community Stakeholders

THE PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE

Grievance → Ideation → Research & Planning → Preparation → Breach → Attack

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Contents

Executive Summary 3

Section I — From Profiling to Pathways 3

Section II — The Ten Common Factors in Active-Shooter Incidents 5

 1–5 Grievance · Leakage · Identification · Mental Health · Social Difficulty 5

 6–10 Stressors · Means · Suicidal Ideation · Planning · System Failure 8

Section III — Building a BTAM Program..... 12

Section IV — BTAM Risk Domains 13

Section V — The BTAM Intervention Matrix..... 14

Section VI — Documentation Protocol..... 15

Section VII — Legal, Ethical, and Privacy Considerations 15

Section VIII — The Role of the Security Professional 16

Conclusion 17

References 17



Executive Summary

For more than two decades, researchers, law enforcement agencies, and educators have searched for a way to anticipate acts of targeted violence before they occur. The most important conclusion to emerge from that body of work is also the most counterintuitive: there is no reliable demographic profile of an active shooter. Individuals who carry out targeted attacks come from every age group, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, religion, and family structure. What the research has produced instead is not a profile but a process — a discernible pathway of thinking and behavior that an individual travels before committing violence.

This distinction is decisive. Profiling asks, “What kind of person does this?” and inevitably produces false positives that stigmatize the harmless while missing the genuinely dangerous. Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) asks a fundamentally different and more useful question: “Is this individual moving toward violence?” That reframing shifts attention from immutable characteristics to observable, changeable behaviors, grievances, communications, planning activities, and access to means, each of which presents an opportunity to intervene.

This report synthesizes the leading research in the field, including the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center’s (NTAC) studies of targeted school violence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s analysis of the pre-attack behaviors of active shooters, and the foundational “pathway to violence” model developed by Calhoun and Weston. From this literature it distills ten recurring factors that appear across active-shooter cases and organizes them into a practical BTAM framework that stakeholders can use to identify concerning behavior, assess the level of risk, coordinate a multidisciplinary response, document their actions, and intervene before a pathway becomes an attack.

CENTRAL PREMISE

The most effective violence-prevention programs do not seek to identify “dangerous people.” They seek to identify **dangerous behaviors**, escalating circumstances, and opportunities for intervention, and they act on what they find.

The purpose of this framework is prevention through early identification, intervention, and support. It is written for a multidisciplinary audience, school administrators and educators, private security professionals, law enforcement officers, mental-health practitioners, families, and community members, because the research is unambiguous on one further point: attacks are almost never prevented by a single person acting alone. They are prevented when people who each hold a fragment of information share it, and when an organized team turns those fragments into a coherent picture and a plan of action.

Section I - From Profiling to Pathways

1.1 The Myth of the Profile

Early efforts to prevent targeted violence rested on the intuitive but mistaken assumption that attackers share a common psychological or demographic signature — a “type” that could be spotted in a crowd. Decades of case analysis have dismantled this assumption. The Secret Service’s landmark Safe School

Initiative, which examined 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers, found no accurate or useful profile of a school shooter; attackers varied widely in age, academic performance, social standing, and family circumstance (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The FBI reached the same conclusion in its study of active shooters, reporting that aside from gender, there were very few demographic patterns or trends to be found (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018).

Profiling fails for two reasons. First, the base rate of targeted violence is extremely low while the traits commonly attributed to attackers, social isolation, anger, an interest in firearms, a fascination with past violence, are widely distributed in the general population. A profile built from these traits flags enormous numbers of people who will never be violent, overwhelming any system that relies on it and unjustly burdening the innocent. Second, and more dangerously, profiling produces a false sense of security: the individual who does not fit the expected mold is overlooked precisely because attention has been fixed on the wrong target.

1.2 The Pathway to Violence

If there is no profile, what is there? Research converges on the finding that targeted violence is rarely impulsive. It is, in the words of the Secret Service, “typically the end result of an understandable and often discernible process of thinking and behavior” (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Frederick Calhoun and Stephen Weston gave this process its most influential formulation, the pathway to violence, describing a sequence of observable stages through which an individual intent on violence tends to move:

THE CALHOUN & WESTON PATHWAY (2003)

Grievance → **Ideation** → **Research & Planning** → **Preparation** → **Breach** → **Attack**

The pathway begins with a grievance, a real or perceived injustice that becomes central to the individual’s identity. It progresses to ideation, the developing belief that violence is the only acceptable response to that grievance. From there the individual moves to research and planning (selecting a target, studying tactics, conducting surveillance), then to preparation (acquiring weapons, equipment, and the resolve to act), then to a breach of the target’s security or boundaries, and finally to the attack itself.

Two features of this model make it powerful for prevention. First, the stages are behavioral and therefore observable, each one can leave traces that others may notice. A recent quantitative analysis found that in 58 percent of cases studied, all of the pathway behaviors remained intact and detectable (Jones et al., 2024). Second, movement along the pathway is not inevitable. Individuals do not always progress linearly, and intervention at any stage can interrupt the progression. The pathway is therefore not a prediction of doom but a map of opportunities to intervene.

Hunters and howlers. Calhoun and Weston also drew a critical distinction between *hunters*, individuals genuinely committed to carrying out an attack who tend to conceal their intentions while moving methodically along the pathway, and *howlers*, who issue threats and dramatic communications but seldom act on them. The two require different responses: howlers are managed primarily to de-escalate and redirect, while hunters demand disruption. Crucially, a person can shift between these categories, and the absence of an overt threat is never, by itself, reassuring. Many genuine attackers make no direct threat to their targets at all.

1.3 The Research Foundation

The BTAM framework presented in this report is not speculative. It rests on a convergent body of empirical research conducted over more than twenty years by federal agencies and academic threat-assessment professionals. Three sources are especially important:

- **The Safe School Initiative (2002).** A joint Secret Service and Department of Education study of 37 school attacks. It found that most attackers told someone about their intentions beforehand, most had access to and experience with firearms, many had felt bullied, and most engaged in behavior before the incident that caused concern or signaled a need for help.
- **The FBI Pre-Attack Behaviors Study (2018).** An analysis of a sample of 63 active shooters from incidents between 2000 and 2013. It found that shooters typically displayed four to five observable concerning behaviors over time, were experiencing an average of 3.6 significant stressors in the year before the attack, and that only 25 percent had ever been diagnosed with a mental illness (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018).
- **NTAC's school-violence reports (2019, 2021).** Protecting America's Schools analyzed 41 targeted attacks (2008–2017), and Averting Targeted School Violence examined 67 disrupted plots (2006–2018). Together they confirm that attackers display observable warning behaviors and, critically, that averted plots were almost always stopped because a bystander noticed something concerning and reported it to someone who could act.

The remainder of this report translates these findings into a usable framework. Section II examines the ten factors most commonly identified in active-shooter cases. Sections III through VI describe how to build a BTAM program, structure an assessment around defined risk domains, calibrate the response to the level of concern, and document the process defensibly. Sections VII and VIII address the legal and ethical guardrails that keep such a program lawful and fair, and the particular role of the private security profession in carrying it out.

Section II - The Ten Common Factors in Active-Shooter Incidents

The factors below recur across active-shooter investigations. They are not a checklist for prediction and no single factor nor any particular combination confirms that an individual will become violent. Rather, they are the behavioral and circumstantial signals that, taken together and assessed in context, indicate whether a person may be moving along the pathway to violence. The value of the list is that it tells observers what to pay attention to and gives an assessment team a common vocabulary for organizing what they learn.

1. Grievances and Perceived Injustices

DEFINITION

A grievance is a real or perceived injustice that the individual comes to experience as a defining wound, an offense so central to their identity that resolving it begins to feel like a matter of survival.

Grievance is the headwater of the pathway to violence; in the Calhoun and Weston model it is the stage from which all subsequent escalation flows. What matters for assessment is not whether the grievance is objectively justified, many are partly or wholly imagined, but how the individual relates to it. A healthy person experiences setbacks, feels anger, and eventually moves on. The individual on a pathway to violence does the opposite: the grievance hardens, expands, and becomes the lens through which they interpret the world. Common sources include bullying, romantic rejection, employment disputes, disciplinary actions, family conflict, and experiences of humiliation. The Secret Service found that a majority of school attackers had grievances with classmates, and that having been bullied played a key role in a substantial share of cases.

Behavioral Indicators

- Persistent, intensifying fixation on having been wronged
- Escalating anger that does not subside with time
- Inability to move beyond the issue despite resolution attempts
- Revenge-oriented thinking and language; blaming a specific person, group, or institution
- Collecting evidence of the injustice or rehearsing it repeatedly to others

Assessment Considerations

Assess the intensity of the grievance, whether it is escalating or de-escalating over time, and whether it is becoming generalized (“everyone is against me”) or fixed on a specific target. A grievance that is broadening in scope and rising in intensity is more concerning than an acute, narrowly focused complaint that is cooling.

Intervention Opportunities

Because grievance sits at the start of the pathway, it offers the earliest and often most effective point of intervention. Mediation, counseling, structured conflict resolution, and the restoration of a damaged relationship or status can drain a grievance of its power before it metastasizes. The goal is to address the underlying sense of injustice, or to help the individual build a tolerable narrative around it, rather than simply telling them to “move on.”

2. Leakage

DEFINITION

Leakage is the communication, to a third party, intentional or not, of an intent, fantasy, or plan to do harm, before an attack occurs.

Leakage is among the most important warning behaviors in all of threat assessment because it is so common and so often missed. The Safe School Initiative found that, prior to most attacks, the attacker had told someone about their idea or plan. Leakage may be explicit (“I’m going to make them pay on Friday”) or oblique (a story, drawing, or social-media post that dwells on violence). It may be a deliberate boast, a cry for help, or an unintended slip. It frequently reaches peers rather than authority figures, and younger individuals are more likely to leak to classmates and teachers while adults more often leak to

spouses or partners (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). The recipients often fail to report it because they assume the person was joking, did not want to overreact, or did not know whom to tell.

Behavioral Indicators

- Statements referencing revenge, specific targets, dates, or timelines
- Social-media posts, messages, writings, artwork, or assignments preoccupied with violence
- Veiled warnings to friends to “stay home” or “stay away” on a certain day
- Detailed knowledge or admiring discussion of how an attack might unfold
- Photographs or videos displaying weapons in a menacing or celebratory context

Assessment Considerations

The cardinal rule is that leakage must never be dismissed as joking without assessment. The relevant questions are: How specific is the communication? Does it identify a target, method, or time? Is it escalating in frequency or detail? Who received it, and did the individual seem to want it noticed? Specificity, target identification, and a concrete timeline sharply increase the level of concern.

Intervention Opportunities

Every credible report of leakage should trigger an assessment, not an assumption. Establishing low-barrier, well-publicized reporting channels, anonymous tip lines, trusted adults, see-something-say-something programs, is one of the highest-leverage prevention measures available, because leakage is only useful if it reaches someone able to act on it.

3. Identification with and Fixation on Prior Attacks

DEFINITION

A preoccupation with previous attackers or with violence itself as a solution, ranging from general interest to active identification with, and emulation of, those who have committed violence.

Roughly half of school attackers studied by NTAC displayed an interest in violent topics, and a recurring theme in active-shooter cases is the individual’s identification with prior attackers, studying their methods, collecting their writings, and in some cases consciously modeling themselves after them. The assessment challenge is to distinguish ordinary curiosity (true crime, history, news consumption) from something more troubling: a sense of kinship with the perpetrator, admiration framed as aspiration, and a desire to match or exceed a previous attack’s notoriety or body count.

Behavioral Indicators

- Admiration or hero-worship of past attackers rather than mere interest
- Extensive study of specific attacks, tactics, or the perpetrators’ manifestos
- Collecting or sharing attacker materials and identifying with their grievances
- Emulation behaviors, adopting dress, language, anniversary dates, or methods
- Expressed desire for fame, infamy, or recognition through a violent act

Assessment Considerations

The key diagnostic question is whether the individual is merely interested in the subject or identifies with the attacker. Interest examines violence from the outside; identification adopts the attacker's perspective as one's own. Watch in particular for fusion of identification with a personal grievance when an individual begins to see a past attacker as someone who solved a problem like theirs.

Intervention Opportunities

Intervention combines redirection and connection: providing positive role models and identity anchors, engaging the individual's interests toward constructive ends, and, where identification is strong and coupled with grievance and capability escalating to formal assessment and, if warranted, law-enforcement involvement.

4. Mental-Health Concerns and Emotional Distress

DEFINITION

Significant emotional deterioration, hopelessness, despair, and loss of functioning that may accompany movement toward violence, distinct from the presence or absence of a formal psychiatric diagnosis.

This factor is the most widely misunderstood, and getting it right is essential to both effectiveness and fairness. Mental illness alone does not predict violence, and the overwhelming majority of people living with mental illness are never violent. The FBI found that only one quarter of the active shooters it studied had ever been diagnosed with a mental illness, and only a handful with a psychotic disorder (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). At the same time, NTAC found that most attackers were experiencing observable psychological, behavioral, or developmental symptoms and acute emotional distress in the lead-up to their attacks. The reconciliation of these findings is the governing principle of BTAM: assess behavior and trajectory, not diagnosis.

Behavioral Indicators

- Deepening hopelessness, despair, or expressions of futility
- Marked emotional deterioration or loss of day-to-day functioning
- Increasing withdrawal from relationships and activities
- Extreme, disproportionate emotional reactions to ordinary events
- Loss of future orientation, no plans, goals, or sense of tomorrow

Assessment Considerations

Focus on change over time. A decline in functioning, a collapse of future orientation, and the convergence of despair with grievance and access to means are far more meaningful than any label. Resist the twin errors of treating a diagnosis as proof of dangerousness and treating its absence as proof of safety.

Intervention Opportunities

Connection to mental-health care is frequently appropriate and humane, but it is a support measure, not a containment measure, a referral does not by itself reduce an acute risk and should never substitute for

threat management when planning or capability are present. The aim is to restore functioning, relieve distress, and rebuild a sense of future.

5. Social Difficulties and Isolation

DEFINITION

The deterioration of healthy social connection, the loss or absence of the relationships that ordinarily buffer an individual against despair and grievance.

Every attacker in NTAC's study had experienced social stressors involving peers or romantic relationships. Social difficulty matters not because loners are dangerous, the great majority are not but because the erosion of supportive relationships removes the very connections that might otherwise interrupt the pathway. Isolation deepens grievance, amplifies hopelessness, and shrinks the circle of people positioned to notice leakage or distress. Rejection sensitivity, an outsized reaction to perceived exclusion or humiliation, is a particularly important amplifier.

Behavioral Indicators

- Progressive social isolation and withdrawal from former relationships
- Acute sensitivity to rejection, exclusion, or perceived disrespect
- Loss of a key support system (a breakup, a falling-out, a move)
- Growing resentment toward peers or groups perceived as belonging
- Replacement of real-world ties with online communities that reinforce grievance

Assessment Considerations

Consider both the degree of isolation and its direction of travel. Someone becoming progressively more cut off, especially after a precipitating loss, and especially when the isolation feeds resentment, warrants more concern than a stably solitary person who is content and functioning.

Intervention Opportunities

Protective intervention here is among the most powerful available: deliberately rebuilding connection through mentorship, peer engagement, family involvement, and inclusion can restore the relationships that act as natural circuit-breakers on the pathway. Strengthening protective factors is often as important as managing risk factors.

6. Significant Life Stressors

DEFINITION

Major destabilizing events, losses, failures, and ruptures, that strain an individual's capacity to cope and may accelerate movement along the pathway.

Stressors are the accelerants of targeted violence. The FBI found that active shooters were typically contending with multiple stressors at once, an average of 3.6 distinct stressors in the year before their attacks (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). Common examples include divorce or relationship breakdown,

job loss, academic failure or suspension, financial hardship, legal trouble, and the death of a loved one. Stressors are universal; almost everyone faces several in any given year. Their significance for assessment lies entirely in how the individual is coping with them, whether they are metabolizing the strain or being overwhelmed by it.

Behavioral Indicators

- Recent or accumulating losses: relationships, employment, status, housing
- Academic or disciplinary failures, suspensions, or expulsions
- Financial or legal crises perceived as catastrophic or irreversible
- A precipitating event that appears to act as a “last straw”
- Coping responses that turn outward into blame rather than inward into adjustment

Assessment Considerations

The assessment question is not whether stressors are present, they almost always are, but how the individual is coping with them. Watch for escalation signatures: as stress mounts, does anger increase, does leakage increase, does fixation increase? Rising stress that converts into a hardening grievance and intensifying ideation is the pattern of concern.

Intervention Opportunities

Practical support that relieves the precipitating stressor, academic accommodation, employment assistance, financial counseling, family mediation, grief support can lower the pressure driving escalation. Pairing material support with emotional support addresses both the stressor and the despair it produces.

7. Access to Firearms and Means

DEFINITION

The individual’s capability to carry out an attack, current access to weapons, recent acquisition, or active efforts to obtain the means of violence.

Capability is what transforms violent ideation into a feasible act. The Secret Service found that most school attackers used firearms and that, among those who did, the great majority acquired the weapon from the home of a parent or relative. Capability is therefore frequently a question of access rather than ownership, and changes in access, a recent purchase, a sudden interest in acquiring weapons, attempts to obtain them through others are especially significant because they often mark movement from the planning into the preparation stage of the pathway.

Behavioral Indicators

- Current access to firearms or other weapons, including through family
- Recent acquisition, or sudden, uncharacteristic efforts to acquire
- Attempts to obtain weapons illegally or through intermediaries
- Accumulation of ammunition, tactical gear, or related equipment
- Unsupervised access to weapons stored in the home or accessible to the individual

Assessment Considerations

Assess access without assuming that ownership alone creates risk, lawful gun ownership is common and is not, in itself, a warning sign. The concern arises when capability converges with grievance, ideation, and planning, and especially when there is a recent change in access that coincides with escalation in other domains.

Intervention Opportunities

Where risk is elevated, reducing access to means is one of the most direct and evidence-supported interventions available, achieved through family engagement, safe-storage measures, voluntary surrender, or, where the law provides, civil tools such as extreme-risk protection orders. Means reduction buys time and time allows other interventions to work.

8. Suicidal Ideation and Despair

DEFINITION

Thinking oriented toward self-destruction, hopelessness, finality, and the sense of having nothing left to lose which in targeted violence is frequently interwoven with intent to harm others.

Many active shooters display suicidal thinking before their attacks, and the connection is not incidental. Targeted violence is often, in the mind of the attacker, a final act, an event from which they do not expect or intend to return. The individual who concludes that their own life is over may experience a collapse of the deterrents that normally restrain violence: fear of consequences, of capture, of death. Suicidal despair and homicidal intent can become fused, with the planned attack serving simultaneously as the end of others and of the self.

Behavioral Indicators

- Expressions of hopelessness or that life is no longer worth living
- Statements of finality, farewell behaviors, or putting affairs in order
- A “nothing left to lose” outlook that dissolves ordinary deterrents
- Giving away possessions or signaling that the future does not apply to them
- Co-occurrence of self-directed despair with grievance and target fixation

Assessment Considerations

Treat the convergence of suicidal ideation with grievance, planning, and capability as a significant elevation of concern. Violence toward the self and toward others may be interconnected, and the presence of a “final act” mindset removes restraints that would otherwise slow the pathway.

Intervention Opportunities

This factor requires care: discussing means of self-harm is itself sensitive, and intervention should connect the individual to qualified crisis and mental-health resources while simultaneously managing the threat to others. The two responses are complementary, not alternatives. If you or someone you know is in crisis, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) provides immediate, confidential support.

9. Extensive Planning and Preparation

DEFINITION

Concrete, goal-directed activity in service of an attack research, surveillance, target selection, and acquisition of equipment marking the later, more dangerous stages of the pathway.

Targeted violence is, by definition, planned; it is predatory rather than impulsive. The FBI found that, where it could be determined, 77 percent of active shooters spent a week or longer planning their attacks and 46 percent spent a week or longer in active preparation (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). This is sobering and hopeful in equal measure: sobering because it confirms the deliberateness of these acts, hopeful because planning and preparation unfold over time and generate observable behaviors — each of which is a window for detection and disruption.

Behavioral Indicators

- Research into targets, tactics, security measures, or previous attacks
- Surveillance or reconnaissance of a potential location
- Target selection and the narrowing of a grievance onto specific victims
- Acquisition of weapons, ammunition, tactical clothing, or equipment
- Rehearsal behaviors, timelines, or “final preparations” such as a manifesto

Assessment Considerations

Locate the individual on the escalation pathway: Ideation → Fixation → Research → Preparation → Rehearsal → Attack. Evidence of research, preparation, or rehearsal indicates advanced movement and demands an urgent, coordinated response. The later the stage, the shorter the window for intervention.

Intervention Opportunities

At the planning and preparation stage, intervention shifts decisively from support toward disruption: immediate law-enforcement involvement, separation of the individual from means and targets, and emergency assessment. Early-stage support measures remain relevant for the underlying grievance, but they no longer suffice on their own.

10. The Failure of Multiple Systems to Intervene**DEFINITION**

The recurring post-incident finding that warning information existed but remained fragmented, distributed across people and institutions that never combined what they knew.

Perhaps the most consistent and most actionable finding in the entire literature is that the information needed to prevent an attack usually existed beforehand but was scattered. A family member knew about the despair; a classmate saw the leakage; a teacher noticed the fixation; an employer recorded the grievance; no one held the whole picture. NTAC’s study of averted plots is the mirror image and the proof of concept: disrupted attacks were almost always stopped because a bystander noticed concerning behavior and reported it to someone who could act. Prevention, in other words, is fundamentally a problem of information sharing.

Behavioral Indicators

- Warning signs observed by different people who never compared notes
- Reports made to one party (a teacher, a manager) but never escalated
- Information siloed across schools, employers, security, and law enforcement
- Bystanders who noticed but stayed silent out of doubt, loyalty, or fear
- Absence of any central place to receive, combine, and act on concerns

Assessment Considerations

The lesson is structural, not personal. The failure is rarely that no one knew, it is that no system existed to assemble what individuals knew into a coherent assessment. This is precisely the gap a BTAM program is designed to close: a known channel for reporting, a team to integrate information, and a process to act on it.

Intervention Opportunities

Build the connective tissue: a single, well-known reporting mechanism; a standing multidisciplinary team with the authority to gather information across silos; lawful information-sharing agreements; and a culture in which raising a concern is treated as responsible rather than disloyal. Information sharing is not a nicety of prevention, it is the mechanism of it.

Section III - Building a BTAM Program

Recognizing the ten factors is necessary but not sufficient. The factors only prevent violence when an organization has the standing capacity to receive concerns, assess them rigorously, coordinate a response, and follow through. That capacity is what a Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management program provides. NTAC, having studied dozens of disrupted plots, recommends that schools and organizations adopt multidisciplinary threat-assessment programs built not around a profile or type of person, but around a process for gathering and acting on information about behavior.

3.1 Core Objectives

A functioning BTAM program pursues five linked objectives:

1. Identify concerning behavior through a known, low-barrier reporting channel that surfaces grievances, leakage, and distress early.
2. Assess risk by gathering corroborating information and evaluating the individual's movement along the pathway, not by matching them to a profile.
3. Coordinate interventions marshaling the right mix of support, supervision, and where necessary disruption across disciplines.
4. Monitor progress tracking whether concern is rising or falling over time and adjusting the response accordingly.
5. Prevent escalation interrupting the pathway as early as possible while addressing the underlying needs that drive it.

3.2 The Multidisciplinary Team

The single most important structural feature of a BTAM program is the multidisciplinary team. Because the warning information in any given case is almost always fragmented across people and roles, no one discipline can assess a case alone. An effective team typically brings together administrative leadership, security professionals, mental-health expertise, human-resources or student-services representation, and a law-enforcement liaison. Each member contributes a different vantage point and a different set of lawful tools, and together they can assemble the complete picture that no individual possesses.

The team's essential functions are to operate a central point where concerns are received and recorded, to gather information from across organizational silos, to assess each case against defined risk domains, to decide on and assign interventions, to document its reasoning and actions, and to monitor each case until it is resolved. Equally important is what the team is not: it is not a disciplinary body, and it is not a mechanism for surveillance of disfavored individuals. Its mission is to keep people safe including, very often, the person of concern by intervening early and supportively wherever possible.

FOUNDATIONS OF AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

Central reporting. A single, well-publicized, low-barrier channel, including an anonymous option so that leakage and concern reliably reach the team.

Standing authority. A defined mandate to gather information across departments and to direct interventions.

Trained members. Regular, scenario-based training so the team applies the framework consistently and lawfully.

Defined thresholds. Clear criteria for when to escalate to emergency response and law enforcement.

A culture of reporting. An organizational climate in which raising a concern is understood as responsible, not disloyal.

Section IV - BTAM Risk Domains

A structured assessment does not score the individual against a profile; it inquires systematically across a set of behavioral domains, each capturing one dimension of movement along the pathway. The eight domains below organize the ten factors into a working assessment instrument. The questions are diagnostic prompts, not a tally, the team weighs them together, in context, to judge whether the individual is moving toward or away from violence.

Domain	Guiding Assessment Questions
1. Grievance	What grievance exists? How intense is it? Is it escalating, generalizing, or cooling over time?
2. Emotional State	Is the individual deteriorating? Is hopelessness or despair present? Is functioning collapsing?

Domain	Guiding Assessment Questions
3. Leakage	Has intent been communicated? To whom, how specifically, and how often? Is it escalating?
4. Fixation	Is the individual obsessively focused on a person, group, event, or injustice?
5. Identification	Does the individual identify with prior attackers or see violence as a solution that fits them?
6. Capability	Does the individual have, or is acquiring, access to weapons or other means? Has access recently changed?
7. Planning	Is there evidence of research, target selection, surveillance, preparation, or rehearsal?
8. Protective Factors	What stabilizers exist — family support, counseling, positive relationships, future goals, reasons for restraint?

On protective factors. The eighth domain is not an afterthought. The presence of strong protective factors, a supportive family, a trusted mentor, meaningful goals, a stake in the future, can meaningfully reduce risk even when concerning behaviors are present, and the deliberate strengthening of these factors is itself an intervention. An assessment that catalogs only risk while ignoring protection will systematically overstate danger and miss the most constructive avenues for management.

Section V - The BTAM Intervention Matrix

Assessment is meaningful only when it is tied to a calibrated response. The intervention matrix translates the team’s judgment about the level of concern into a corresponding tier of action, ranging from documentation and support at the low end to emergency response at the high end. The tiers are not rigid boxes; a case can move up or down as circumstances change, and the team should reassess continuously. The governing principle is proportionality, enough response to manage the risk, no more than the situation warrants, and always coupled with attention to the underlying need.

Level of Concern	Typical Indicators	Corresponding Actions
LOW	Transient anger; no planning; strong support systems; grievance present but not escalating	Document the concern; provide support services; schedule follow-up; monitor for change
MODERATE	Escalating grievance; some leakage; growing isolation; emotional deterioration	Formal BTAM review; mental-health referral; increased monitoring; engage supports and protective factors
HIGH	Direct or veiled threats; access to weapons; early planning behaviors	Immediate intervention; law-enforcement notification; emergency assessment; consider means reduction
IMMINENT	Active planning; rehearsal; target identification; operational preparation	Emergency response; crisis intervention; protective measures to ensure safety of potential targets

CALIBRATION PRINCIPLE

Lower tiers emphasize **support and connection**; higher tiers add **supervision, means reduction, and disruption**. Support never disappears as concern rises but at the high and imminent levels it can no longer stand alone. Conversely, a low-concern case handled only with paperwork, and no genuine support, is a missed opportunity to interrupt the pathway at its most treatable stage.

Section VI - Documentation Protocol

Disciplined documentation serves three purposes at once. It supports good assessment by forcing the team to record objective facts rather than impressions; it creates continuity so that a case can be monitored over time and handed off without losing information; and it provides a defensible record demonstrating that the organization acted reasonably and lawfully. Documentation should be factual, contemporaneous, and confined to what is relevant to the assessment, it is not a place for speculation, diagnosis, or editorializing.

Every BTAM review should capture, at a minimum, the following elements:

Record Element	What to Document
Subject Information	Name, date of review, organization or affiliation, role/status
Report Source	Who reported the concern, when, and through what channel
Behaviors Observed	Objective facts only what was seen, said, or written, in concrete terms
Risk Factors Present	Grievance, leakage, fixation, identification, capability, planning, stressors
Protective Factors	Supports, relationships, goals, and stabilizers identified
Assessed Level	The team's determination (low / moderate / high / imminent) and its reasoning
Actions Taken	Interventions assigned, by whom, and any notifications made
Follow-Up Schedule	Next review date, monitoring responsibilities, and resolution criteria

A note on objectivity. The “behaviors observed” field is the heart of a defensible record and should contain facts a neutral observer could verify “posted an image of a firearm with the caption naming a classmate” rather than “seemed dangerous.” Conclusions belong in the assessment, supported by the facts, never substituted for them.

Section VII - Legal, Ethical, and Privacy Considerations

A threat-assessment program operates at the intersection of safety and individual rights, and it earns legitimacy only by respecting both. A program that violates privacy, brands individuals on the basis of group identity, or substitutes suspicion for evidence not only harms the people it touches, it discredits the entire enterprise and discourages the reporting on which prevention depends. The following principles keep a BTAM program lawful, fair, and effective.

- **Behavior, not identity.** Assessment must rest on observable conduct and circumstances, never on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, or any protected characteristic. Profiling by group is both ineffective and unlawful, and the research is unambiguous that no such profile exists.
- **Privacy and information sharing.** Information should be gathered and shared only as needed to assess and manage a genuine concern, in accordance with applicable law including FERPA in educational settings, HIPAA where health information is involved, and employment-privacy law in workplaces. Most such frameworks contain provisions permitting disclosure to address a genuine safety emergency; the team should understand these in advance, not improvise in a crisis.
- **Avoiding criminalization.** The goal of BTAM is to help a person off the pathway, not to punish them for being troubled. Over-reliance on exclusion, arrest, or discipline can deepen grievance and isolation, the very factors that drive escalation and can fall unequally on already-marginalized groups. Support should be the default wherever safety permits.
- **Due process and proportionality.** Interventions should be proportionate to the assessed level of concern, periodically reviewed, and accompanied by appropriate procedural fairness. A person who is assessed and supported should not carry a permanent mark for having been the subject of a concern that was resolved.
- **Mental-health stigma.** Because mental illness alone does not predict violence, a program must take care not to equate distress or diagnosis with dangerousness. Doing so is both inaccurate and harmful, and it deters the help-seeking that prevention relies upon.

Handled well, these principles are not obstacles to safety but conditions of it. A program that is visibly fair is a program that people trust enough to bring their concerns to, and reporting, as the research shows, is where prevention begins.

Section VIII - The Role of the Security Professional

Private security personnel occupy a distinctive and often underused position in the prevention architecture. They are frequently the most consistent professional presence at a site, present daily, familiar with the normal rhythm of a location and its people, and well placed to notice the deviations from baseline that signal concern. In schools, commercial properties, places of worship, and critical facilities, the officer on post is often the first person to observe leakage, fixation, or a change in someone's behavior, and the first point of contact when a community member wants to report something troubling.

Realizing this potential requires deliberate integration. Officers should be trained not merely to respond to incidents but to recognize the warning behaviors described in this report, to understand that their observations are valuable intelligence, and to know exactly how to route a concern into the assessment process. The security function should be represented on, or formally connected to, the multidisciplinary team, with clear protocols for documentation, escalation thresholds, and the handoff to law enforcement. Officers also play a central role in protective intervention, controlling access, hardening targets, supporting means reduction, and providing the physical-security measures that protect potential victims while support-side interventions take effect.

INTEGRATING SECURITY INTO BTAM

Observe and report: train officers to recognize warning behaviors and to treat their observations as actionable information, not background noise.

Connect to the team: give the security function a defined seat in, or channel to, the assessment process.

Standardize documentation: equip officers with simple, objective reporting tools that feed directly into the BTAM record.

Define escalation: make explicit when an officer notifies the team versus when they call law enforcement immediately.

Support protection: position security to deliver access control, target hardening, and protective measures at the high and imminent tiers.

Conclusion

The most important finding of a generation of research into targeted violence is also the most hopeful: these attacks are not bolts from the blue. They are the end point of a process that unfolds over time, that generates observable warning behaviors, and that can be interrupted. There is no profile of a person who does this but there is a pathway, and pathways can be blocked.

Effective violence prevention does not seek to identify dangerous people. It seeks to identify dangerous behaviors, escalating circumstances, and opportunities for intervention, and then it acts on them. It succeeds when schools, security agencies, law enforcement, mental-health professionals, families, and community members recognize warning signs early, share what they know responsibly, assess it rigorously, and intervene before a pathway to violence becomes an act of violence.

The ten factors, the eight risk domains, the intervention matrix, and the documentation protocol set out in this report are tools toward that end. But tools require hands. The decisive variable in every averted attack studied to date has been a person, a classmate, a parent, a teacher, an officer who noticed something, said something, and reached someone able to act. Building the systems that make those moments count is the work of behavioral threat assessment and management, and it is work that saves lives.

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This report is intended as an educational and prevention-oriented framework for stakeholders responsible for safety. It does not constitute legal advice, a clinical instrument, or a predictive tool. Threat assessments should be conducted by trained multidisciplinary teams in consultation with appropriate legal, mental-health, and law-enforcement professionals.