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A Qualitative Examination of Student Threat Assessment in Nassau County, New York

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A Qualitative Examination of Student Threat Assessment in Nassau County, New York

by
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Approval Page

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Abstract

A Qualitative Examination of Student Threat Assessment in Nassau County, New York. Christopher Cleary, 2021: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: School shooting, Student threat assessment, targeted violence.

Law enforcement agencies and school systems face the critically important task of preventing attacks of targeted school violence and providing safe environments for students, faculty, and staff. The tragic results of past school shooting incidents have caused law enforcement agencies to work collaboratively with educators to develop strategies to reduce violent attacks.

Numerous examples from previous school shooting incidents show that shooters exhibited certain warning signs before the attack, and those signs went unaddressed. The student threat assessment process was developed to help educators and law enforcement members recognize the warning signs and take preemptive action before violence occurs. Threat assessment is a deductive process that involves identifying individual students who exhibit warning signs, gathering as much information about their behavior as possible, and using that information to determine if the student requires psychological or emotional intervention.

To guide educators and law enforcement members who may be tasked with preventing school shootings, this dissertation clarifies the process of school-based threat assessment and highlights the factors that affect decision-making. A qualitative method was used to gather data from school administrators and law enforcement personnel who have experience in the student threat assessment process.

The resulting data explains the behaviors that generate concern, the interaction between the schools and the police department when investigating those concerns, and the methods used to help the students and prevent violence. The composite data also provides insight into the external factors or conditions which might benefit or hinder the threat assessment process. This knowledge will aid other educators and law enforcement members who may be tasked with conducting a student threat assessment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Schools should have an environment that is conducive to the learning process and free of violence and fear. Creating a safe environment for students, educators, and staff members in our nation's schools is a critically important task for law enforcement agencies that have been called upon to prepare for and effectively respond to school shooting incidents (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). The tragic results of past school shooting incidents have demonstrated the vital need to develop effective intervention and prevention strategies focused on reducing violent attacks (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019).

Indiscriminate mass shootings in schools have generated intense media coverage, which has resulted in public demands for increased safety and security policies. Since 1999, the year of the mass shooting at Columbine High School, there has been a significant increase in school security because of the fear of rampage attacks involving guns and explosives. Noting that the attack at Columbine was the most followed media story in 1999 (Pew Research Center 1999), Madfis (2016) suggests that the Columbine attack caused a change in how the public perceives school safety. The fear generated by attacks like Columbine is not localized in the affected school community. Citizens across the country share the impact of these incidents. Graphic media reports of innocent lives lost may create a perception of the likelihood that these attacks will occur in other schools.

School-based mass shootings have also become a major cause of discord in the United States. The public debate resulting from these events covers topics such as state

and national gun control laws, moral and religious beliefs, entertainment choices, and educational practices (Barbieri and Connell, 2015).

Research on past incidents suggests that school rampage shootings are motivated by a complex interaction of influences. The pervasive changes in security policies and procedures that have occurred in many of the nation's school systems have not been wholly effective and have often been overly intrusive to the learning process (Crawford and Burns, 2016). Adapting to tighter school security procedures for active shooters has also been challenging to implement for law enforcement agencies and has created serious concerns for police responders (Police Executive Research Forum, 2014).

There are no easy methods to know who will or will not become violent. Still, violent behaviors develop progressively. There are often warning signs that can be used to evaluate whether the individual has the intent and the ability to carry out a violent attack (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Identifying potential threats posed by students and preventing acts of extreme violence has been very difficult for police agencies, even after explicit threats have been made (Capellan & Lewandowski, 2019). Reducing the danger of potentially violent students will take a collaborative effort by law enforcement agencies working with school systems, families, students, and other community resources to identify and investigate warning signs of potential violence. A vital component of a viable threat assessment plan is based in part on the ability to identify behaviors or warning signs that are unacceptable and warrant law enforcement intervention (U.S. Secret Service, 2018). This study will examine the threat assessment process used in Nassau County, New York.

Background and Significance

Violence occurring in school settings happens frequently. A study by Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Robin (2018) determined that children between ages 12 to 18 experienced more nonfatal victimizations at school than away from school. An opinion poll by the Pew Research Center determined that 57% of U.S. teens worry that their school could experience a shooting (Graf, 2018).

A report sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education determined that 6% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 stayed away from school activities, classes, or locations in their school because they believed someone might attack them (Musu et al., 2018). This fear is not entirely unfounded because the number of shootings and the number of deaths at kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools in the United States was higher in 2018 than in any prior year (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018). National data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that homicide is the second leading cause of death for children between the ages of 5 and 18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Despite the magnitude of the issue, the data on school shootings has been surprisingly difficult to examine with any accuracy. There have been significant differences in researchers' criteria to determine what parameters define a school-based shooting incident (Elsass et al., 2016). As evidence of this variation in data, the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) reported 240 school shootings during the 2015-2016 academic year. Yet, the Everytown for Gun Safety database recorded only 29 schools as having had a shooting incident (Wallace, 2018). Noticing this discrepancy, reporters from National Public Radio contacted all the schools on the DoE list. They found that two-

thirds of the incidents had never happened, and only 11 incidents out of 240 fit the government's parameters for a reportable shooting (Kamenetz et al., 2018).

Endeavoring to develop a suitable profile of potential offenders is believed to be unproductive. Prior perpetrators of school shootings have been both male and female, high achieving and low achieving students, those who are outcasts, and those who are well-liked (U.S. Secret Service, 2018).

Shortly after the 1999 targeted school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, the FBI published a report outlining the results of a conference of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (O'Toole, 2000). This seminal report provides the framework for threat assessment, recommended for educators, health professionals, and law enforcement officers who need to evaluate a suspected individual's words or writings. After an in-depth study of eighteen school shootings, the authors found that the threatening aspect of a shooter's statements could become apparent in their constant preoccupation with violence, despair, loneliness, isolation, or nihilism. These indicators are referred to as "leakage," which may appear in the student's writing or artwork, showing a preoccupation with hatred, prejudice, death, weapons, homicide, or suicide. This framework is designed to be used after an identified individual has made threats, not as an alarm system that identifies potential shooters from the student population. The report acknowledges that all threats cannot be treated the same. Sometimes threats are made by students who intend to harm others, and some threats are made by students with no actual desire to harm, but neither threat should be ignored (O'Toole, 2000).

The framework helps officials to recognize which threats may be actual indicators of imminent violence and which are just words that may not represent any actual future aggression.

The targeted school shooting that occurred at Marysville Pilchuck High School in Marysville, Washington, was committed by 15-year-old student Jaylen Fryberg. Fryberg had texted four of his friends an invitation to meet him for lunch. Fryberg walked up to the cafeteria table where they were sitting and shot them, killing four and wounding one. Fryberg shot and killed himself as a teacher tried to intervene. The investigation into Fryberg's background revealed disturbing social media posts, including "Fuck It!!" "Might As Well Die Now" "Your gonna piss me off...And then some shits gonna go down and I don't think you'll like it..." (Kutner, 2015).

The mass murder at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, occurred on December 14, 2012. Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old former student, shot and killed 26 people, including six adults and 20 children between six and seven years old. An investigation determined that he had murdered his mother in their home before the school attack. FBI investigative reports on the killings include a witness statement from a person who had previously communicated with Lanza online. Although the witness's name is redacted in the report, they describe Lanza as "the weirdest person online" and that his messages were solely focused on different aspects of mass murder (Johnson et al., 2017).

On February 14, 2018, 19-year-old former student Nikolas Cruz engaged in an indiscriminate mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The attack killed 14 students and three staff members and injured 17 others.

After the incident, Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel told reporters that Cruz's social media posts contained “troubling content that included a variety of gun and violence-related posts” (McLaughlin & Park, 2018). The Anti-Defamation League reports that Cruz was active on a private Instagram group where he posted hundreds of racist comments, memes, and videos (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission report shows that Cruz had social media messages on Instagram saying, “I do and don't care I have my life and I wanna fucking kill people’, “I whana shoot people with my AR-15” and “Im going watch them sheep fall fuck antifa I wish to kill as many as I can.” The commission regards Cruz’s social media activity as “missed indicators of targeted violence” (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, 2019).

On May 18, 2018, Dimitrios Pagourtzis, a 17-year-old student, entered Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, and engaged in an indiscriminate mass shooting. Pagourtzis murdered eight students and two teachers during his pre-planned attack and wounded 13 others, including two police officers. In the weeks prior to the attack, Pagourtzis had posted photos on his social media accounts of a T-shirt with the slogan "Born to Kill" and of his trench coat adorned with pins, including the Iron Cross, a German military medal sometimes associated with Nazi sentiment, and a goat head which may represent the Church of Satan. (Collins et al., 2018).

Studying the warning or pre-attack signals that the perpetrators of recent targeted shootings have given will provide insight for law enforcement professionals who must investigate individuals who have exhibited concerning behaviors. The warning signals may represent psychological patterns, which may indicate the student poses an increasing

risk (Meloy et al., 2014). While posting violent, nihilistic, or threatening messages on social media platforms is not a direct indicator of future violence, understanding the nature of past school shooters' social media interactions may help determine the level of threat posed by the student and develop an intervention strategy.

Dissertation Goal and Audience

Threat assessment is the best method for preventing targeted violence in schools (U.S. Secret Service, 2021). The process of student threat assessment is a deductive process that involves identifying an individual student who may pose a threat, gathering as much information about their behavior as possible, then making a determination regarding the amount of threat of violence that the student poses to others (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). The goal of this dissertation was to develop an understanding of the decision-making process used in student threat assessment by members of the Nassau County Police Department (NCPD) and their counterparts who are administrators in Nassau County school districts. The data revealed by this study will be helpful to law enforcement members who may be assigned the responsibility of future threat assessments.

Barriers and Issues

Despite the notoriety that school shooting incidents attract, the actual number of school shooting incidents is relatively low compared to other types of violent crime (Barbieri & Connell, 2015). Conducting an examination of the threat assessment process will be based on the expertise of participants who may have a limited amount of experience with cases of students suspected of future violence. Because the number of cases is smaller than other forms of violence that occur in the U.S. and the dearth of cases

may obscure some existing correlations. Due to this lack of data, relying on qualitative or descriptive analysis should provide the most benefit.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

The process of threat assessment in schools is inconsistent and often misunderstood. Only one U.S. state (Virginia) mandates that all K-12 schools utilize a threat assessment process. Only four others have done significant training for those involved in the process (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). After conducting a study on statewide threat assessment practices in Virginia and finding that there is inconsistency in how the process is conducted in various locations, Cornell, Maeng, Burnette, Jia, and Huang (2018) advocate for future research to determine best practices on how assessment teams collect, conceptualize, and evaluate data, and how they develop intervention strategies. Similarly, Goodrum, Thompson, Ward, and Woodward (2018) recommended the need for additional research when their study found that more consistency is needed in student threat assessment training, forms, and procedures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to examine the process of school-based threat assessment. The study has used participant interviews to build a composite perspective of subjects with law enforcement and K-12 education experience who have participated in the student threat assessment process. The resulting data provides an understanding of the factors that affect their decisions in regard to deciding the need for student intervention. The composite data also provides insight into the external factors or conditions which might benefit or hinder the threat assessment process. This knowledge

will aid other educators and law enforcement members seeking to develop an understanding of the student threat assessment process.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided for key terms that are used in this dissertation:

Active shooter- an individual engaged in attempting to kill people in a confined space or populated area.

Indiscriminate shooting- shooting at random victims with the intent to kill or injure as many as possible.

Mass shooting incident- the use of a firearm to murder at least four people, not including the shooter.

School shooting or school shooter- the data that will be examined in this dissertation is solely limited to shootings that occurred in kindergarten through grade-12 schools. Shootings that occurred in post-secondary schools will not be included in the study.

Targeted school shooting and pre-planned school shooting- will have the same definition in this dissertation: the shooter pre-planned the attack with the intent to kill and injure as many victims as possible. The "intent to kill" included in this definition will limit the study to incidents in which a handgun or long gun was used. Incidents involving less-lethal guns, such as bb guns, will not be included in the study.

Threat Assessment- is a deductive process to gather information about a suspected person from multiple sources and evaluate whether that suspected person poses a threat of violence to others.

Threat Management- Developing and implementing a plan to reduce any threat identified during the threat assessment process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Very few issues garner as much national attention as rampage shootings in schools, and the United States has, by a large margin, more mass shootings and attempted mass shootings than any other country (Agnich, 2014). Law enforcement agencies working in conjunction with school administrators, parents, and other community resources are trying to identify students who may potentially engage in future violent attacks. The purpose of this research is to examine the threat assessment process used to reduce the threat of school shooting incidents. This literature review will seek to develop a better understanding of the body of research that has been conducted on the phenomenon of K-12 school shootings in the United States and assess the viability of the threat assessment methods being employed by law enforcement agencies.

Background

While violent crime statistics had been dropping, the number of shootings and the number of deaths at kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools in the United States was higher in 2018 than in any previous year (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018). (See Figure 2.1, 2.2). The fear generated by school violence can cause students to avoid danger by not participating in certain school gatherings. Results from a Department of Education survey reports that 6% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 stayed away from school activities, classes, or areas of their school because they believed someone might attack them (Musu et al., 2018). Providing a safe environment in schools for the students, educators, and staff members is a vitally important task that will require a holistic approach by policymakers, educators, health professionals, and law enforcement (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Table 1. Shooting Incidents by year

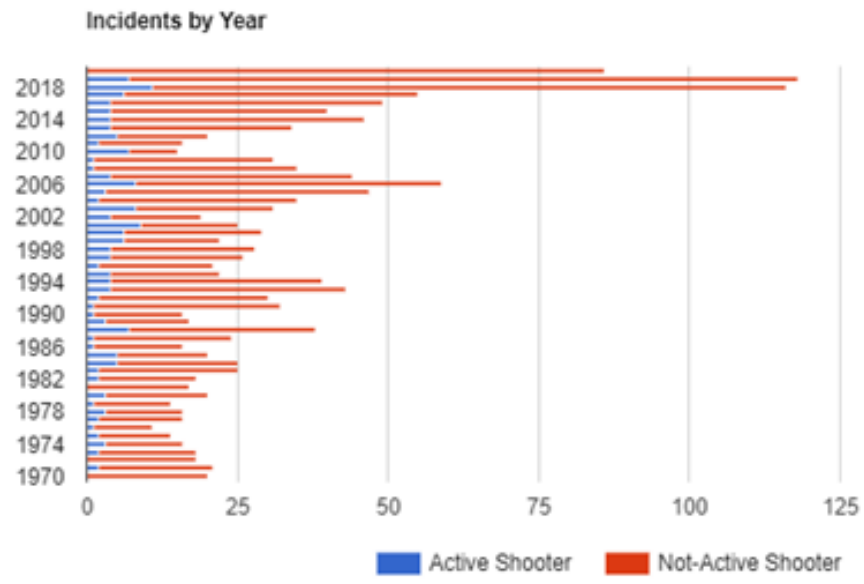

Figure 2.1 Shooting Incidents at K-12 Schools 1970-Present. (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018).

Table 2. Shooting victims by year

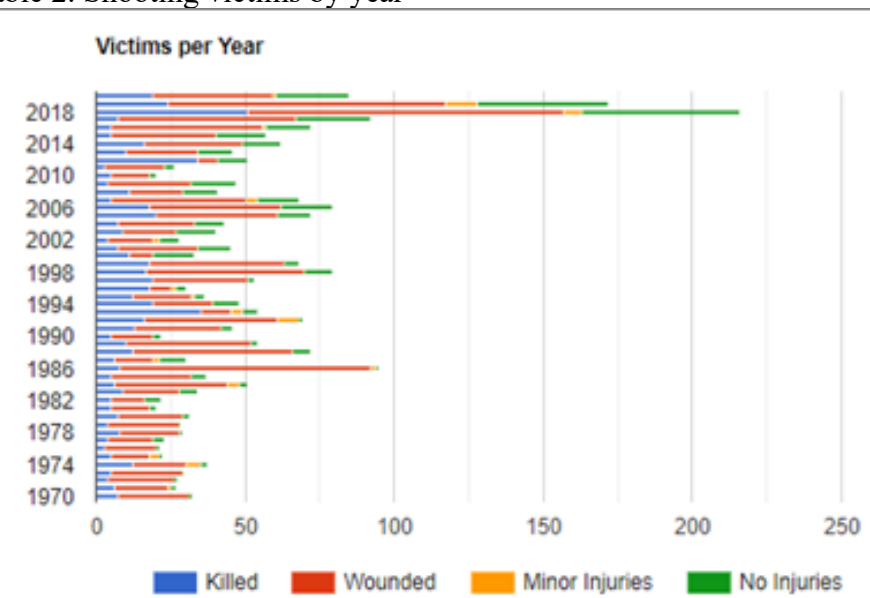

Figure 2.1 Shooting Victims at K-12 Schools 1970-Present. (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018).

To provide a breakdown of the factors associated with school shootings, Kalesan, Lagast, Villarreal, Pino, Fagan, and Galea (2017) presented a profile of shooting events that occurred during the years 2013 to 2015. Their study examined four factors that are possible contributors to the issue: (1) the inconsistency of gun laws, (2) the issue of mental health screening, (3) the impact of reduced funding on education, and the inconsistent application of school funding based on the location of the school, (4) whether school shootings may be more or less prevalent in urban rather than rural areas. Upon examining the data, they found a significant association between the amount of gun ownership in a state and the likelihood of a mass shooting. The data also provides evidence that school shootings are less likely in states requiring background checks prior to gun purchases, have a higher expenditure on mental health examinations, have higher spending on K-12 education, and states with a higher percentage of urban population compared to the rural population.

A descriptive analysis of the characteristics of recent school shootings was conducted by Livingston, Rossheim, and Stidham Hall (2018). Their review examined factors related to individuals, schools, guns used, and incident severity in the United States from April 1999 through May 2018. Using the data compiled by the Washington Post, they found that handguns were used in 81% of school shootings. Rifles were used in 14% of the shootings but had a higher casualty rate and fatality rate than other weapons. Fatalities were more likely to occur at rural schools and at schools where the majority were Caucasian. The review found a higher casualty rate and fatality rate when the shooter was more than 20 years old. They found no difference in severity at schools where a School Resource Officer (SRO) was present.

Reducing the threat of school shootings and mitigating the effects will take an intensive and coordinated effort by law enforcement agencies working in coordination with school systems, families, and students. Many of the security measures that had been instituted as a result of these shootings do not have strong empirical support, and several have been criticized as unsound (Borum et al., 2010).

A report by Crawford and Burns (2016) supported the assertion by Borum et al. that school security measures designed to reduce violence may not be effective. Using the data measuring reported violence from the 2006 School Survey on Crime and Safety, the authors provide evidence that schools with a large minority population had a heavier law enforcement presence, which may have been counterproductive to reducing the number of violent incidents in those schools.

Non-lethal violence occurring in school settings is not a new phenomenon, and it happens frequently. Children aged 12 to 18 experienced more nonfatal victimizations at school than away from school (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). While they occur much less frequently than other physical confrontations, the threat of school shootings is a major cause of concern for many Americans (U.S. Secret Service, 2018). Since school shootings resulting in deaths are an extreme and heinous form of violence, they must be studied separately from other forms of physical violence that occur in schools (Thompson & Kyle, 2005). This contention is not supported by Rocque, who questions the need to study school shootings separately from other crimes.

Rocque (2012) proposes that theory development is still in early phases, with most explanations of school shootings relying on psychological reasons. There is a long history of violence in schools, but the issue of rampage or mass killings is relatively

new. Rampage shootings are defined by the involvement of current or former students and having multiple victims who appear to be randomly chosen. Most recent efforts to prevent rampage shootings have focused on crime prevention and situational "target hardening" measures rather than theories about why violence occurs in school. The data suggest that school rampage shootings are motivated by a complex interaction of individual and community influences. More research is necessary because most efforts have not been based on theoretically sound reasoning. Rocque proposes that these crimes are similar to other violent crimes and could be studied with the application of theory from other fields (e.g., sociology, criminology).

On the comparatively rare occasions when gun violence occurs in schools, the resulting media attention creates a sense of fear and a belief that all schools are unsafe. The fear generated by these attacks is not limited to the targeted school community. The impact of these violent incidents is felt by students, faculty, and parents across the country. The concern regarding the possibility of additional shootings interrupts the educational process at all schools (Agnich, 2015).

A 2018 opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that 57% of high school students in the United States feared that a shooting could happen at their own school (Graf, 2018). Despite the intense media coverage and the national concern that results from school shooting incidents, the actual number of incidents is quite low compared to other types of violent crime (Borum et al., 2010; Barbieri & Connell, 2015). Based on the number of homicides that have occurred in schools between 1996 and 2006 divided by the number of schools in the U.S., any individual school would experience a

homicide once every 6000 years (Borum et al., 2010). The relatively few numbers of cases suggest that schools are safe for children (Haan, and Mays, 2013).

In his study of the change resulting from publicized school shootings, Madfis agrees with Borum et al. in stating that these incidents have caused people to overestimate the actual level of the threat and demand a disproportionate response. The horrific cost in terms of innocent lives lost, combined with an exaggerated perception of the likelihood that these attacks will occur, has created a willingness to try to prevent their occurrence by almost any means possible (Madfis, 2015).

A 2015 report by Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford concurs with Borum et al., (2010); Barbieri and Connell, (2015); and Madfis, (2015), in stating that school shootings are a comparatively rare occurrence, but the disproportionate amount of media focus has made them appear to be almost epidemic.

A comprehensive study of shootings in K-12 was conducted by Riedman and O'Neill. Noting inconsistent figures in other studies, the authors attempted to identify every incident, then verify the facts with original police reports, court documents, or school records. Their study found that the number of actual school shooting incidents between 1970 and 2019 is slightly over 1300 (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018). This number is smaller than other forms of violence that occur in the U.S., and the paucity of cases may have hampered past research studies by obscuring some correlations, which may become apparent as more data is developed.

Prior Attempts to Study School Shootings

Because these incidents happen so infrequently, they are rarely studied quantitatively (Agnich, 2015). The number of studies on the subject is relatively low, and

due to lack of data, most previous research has relied on qualitative, descriptive analysis, and case studies (Borum et al., 2010; Agnich, 2015). Prior research on school shootings has most often relied on case studies to identify incident-related behaviors and categorize shooters based on their motivations, their associations with victims, and the number of victims killed. Quantitative studies have been used to examine school context, seeking correlations as to the size of the student body or whether the school was in a rural, suburban, or urban location (Agnich, 2015).

In examining previous attempts to study school shooters, Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson, (2015) found that there have been attempts to understand the motivations of the offenders and tries to study the characteristics of the offense. They did not find previous studies that attempted to build a model of offender characteristics or risk factors that could be used to develop prevention and intervention strategies. They also noted the disparity in the definitions used to classify a school shooting.

Elsass, Schildkraut, and Stafford (2016) also used meta-analysis to examine some of the approaches that have been employed to understand school shootings. They found that prior researchers often used criminological theories such as biological, psychological, and strain theory to develop some understanding of why individuals commit criminal acts. Their findings determined that trying to explain school shootings through criminological theory has challenges. School shooters often commit suicide during their attack preventing an in-depth interrogation, which further reduces the already small sample size to use in case studies. The sample size is small for identifying common attributes and even smaller when testing the proposed hypotheses.

Legislation Inspired by School Shootings

In their review of the legislative response that follows the rampage shootings in schools, Schildkraut and Hernandez (2014) examined the laws that were enacted following the tragedies at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, AR, Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, and Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. Noting that these incidents are always followed by public calls for increased restrictions on firearms, the authors examined whether the laws passed were effective or just "feel-good" legislation designed to give the appearance that something was being accomplished. The article provides a short history of U.S. laws affecting gun ownership and how gun tragedies generate anti-gun sentiment. The authors present evidence that many of the shooters in recent mass-school shootings were in violation of existing gun laws, so further legislative restrictions may not have prevented the events.

Noting that the attack at Columbine High School was the most followed media story in 1999 (Pew Research Center 1999), Madfis suggests that the Columbine attack caused a change in public perception and policy debate regarding school safety. Since 1999, the year of the attack, there has been a significant increase in school discipline and security in response to the fear of rampage attacks using guns and explosives. He presents evidence that the Columbine attack was the major impetus for the transformation of school discipline and security. The *post-Columbine* era has brought expanded zero-tolerance policies, increased suspensions, expulsions, and arrests of students, along with increased use of surveillance cameras and an increase in the number of police officers assigned to schools (Madfis, 2015).

Impact of the Columbine Shooting

Calling the Columbine shooting a "watershed event", Malkki (2014) agreed with Madfis on the significant effect of the 1999 school rampage shootings. She claims that the Columbine attack changed the public perception of these types of attacks but also changed the nature of the rampage attacks that followed. Her examination of rampage attacks found strong evidence that the Columbine shooting influenced many subsequent school attackers.

Modzeleski and Randazzo (2018) also determined the school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 marked a critical turning point for providing safety in schools. The attack prompted entities at the federal, state, and local levels to explore new ways to prevent future school violence.

Defining School Shooting Incidents

Despite the gravity of school shootings and the amount of attention focused on each incident, the collective data has been surprisingly difficult to examine with much accuracy. This section examines the parameters that have been used in recent research studies to define what is and what is not a school shooting. There are at least four defining factors that have varied in previous studies; what constitutes school property, whether school or school activities must be in session, whether the shooters or victims must be associated with the school, and whether the study requires a specific number of victims.

Since agencies and researchers have used varying standards to decide which incidents to recognize as a school shooting, Elsass, Schildkraut, and Stafford (2016)

propose that defining the issues involved may be the biggest hurdle facing researchers who are trying to determine the exact magnitude of the problem.

In their study of the role that databases play in the study of mass shootings, Booty, O'Dwyer, Webster, McCourt, and Crifasi (2019) reviewed data on shootings in 2017 from four prominent sources used in previous studies: The Gun Violence Archive identified 346 incidents, Mother Jones Investigation identified 11, Everytown for Gun Safety which identified 18, and FBI's Supplemental Homicide Report which identified 22 mass shootings. The results indicated that there is a significant discrepancy in the parameters that each database uses to define a "mass shooting." This review showed only two incidents that were counted in all four databases as being a mass shooting; the October sniper incident at the Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada, in which 58 individuals were fatally shot, and the November shooting spree in Rancho Tehama, California, in which five people were killed.

Defining "School"

This problem of definition is also recognized by Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, and Jimerson (2010). They state that since previous studies of school shootings have used different definitions of what constitutes a school shooting, there has been inconsistency in the findings. It may seem apparent that a school shooting incident must occur in a school building; however, that is not always the case. Some studies do limit the incidents to include any discharge of a firearm occurring inside a school building, while others include shootings on school property outside the school building. Other studies extend the definition of school property to include school buses as they transit students, regardless of their distance from school (Borum et al., 2010).

Importance of the Shooter's Association with the School

Regarding the assailant's or victim's association with the school, Elsass, Schildkraut, and Stafford (2016), reported that a 2002 joint report between the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service defined school shootings as incidents in which a current or former student used lethal means to attack someone at their school. Diverging from that definition, statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) include incidents of violent deaths (homicide or suicide) occurring on school grounds (Elsass et al., 2016). The CDC statistics give no indication that the shooter or victim must be a current or former student at the school.

Definition to Include School Activities, or Simply School Property

Should a gang-related shooting that occurs at night in a school parking lot in which neither the shooter nor victim are associated with the school be considered a school shooting? Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Robin (2018) would not include that type of incident in their data, but Riedman and O'Neill (2018) do. To focus their study on intentional mass school shootings in the U.S., Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Robin (2018) limited their data to incidents that happened on school grounds during the school day or during a school-sponsored event on school grounds. This would seemingly exclude incidents occurring on school property when school is closed or incidents occurring on a school bus away from school property.

In their study seeking to identify pre-incident indicators, Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson (2015) also excluded cases in which the shooter was not a student and those shootings that did not occur on school grounds during the school day.

Defining "shooting"

Even the term school shooting may be restrictive to further understanding. While the majority of mass killings are committed using guns, Agnich (2014) explains that there have been rampage-style attacks that may be similar in nature but do not involve the use of guns. In a Texas incident, a perpetrator stabbed and injured 12 classmates using a razor-type knife. In another case near Portland, Oregon, a student was planning a Columbine-style attack on his school and was found in possession of explosives and his plans to commit mass murder. Due to the potential similarities in motivation among the attackers, Agnich examined rampage attacks that used guns and also included rampage attacks that did not involve guns.

Studies Requiring a Minimum Number of Victims

With regard to setting an established number of victims for an incident to be included in a school shooting study, again, there are different interpretations depending on the intent of the study. The Congressional Research Service report to Congress (Bjelopera et al., 2013) used the FBI's interpretation of mass-killings and therefore limited their study to incidents involving four or more deaths, not including the attacker. Katsiyannis, Whitford, and Robin (2018) also used a standard based on the FBI mass-killing definition for their study and examined only those cases in which "one or more people intentionally plan and execute the killing or injury of four or more people, not including themselves" (Katsiyannis et al., 2018 p.2564).

Broad Definition

Other researchers have used more general definitions. In designing their comprehensive study of K-12 School Shootings, Riedman and O'Neill (2018) expanded

the definition to include any shooting incident occurring on school property regardless of the time of day. They use a broad definition of school property, including shootings on or at school buses in transit.

School Shootings and Terrorism

While mass shootings have occurred in many different settings, shootings in schools have been of particular interest to lawmakers. Regarding the question of whether school shootings could be regarded as terrorism, there is a distinction between the motivation of terrorists and past school shooters. Terrorists have committed mass killings, both in the U.S. and internationally, in furtherance of radical interpretations of established ideologies. The Congressional Research Service examines public mass shootings in their report to Members of Congress and concluded that prior mass-shootings incidents in the U.S. had not been motivated by criminal profit nor by terrorist ideology. They also recognize that there is a difference between school shooters and serial killers who commit their killings over an extended time. (Bjelopera et.al, 2013).

In her study of school shootings, Malkki (2014) used empirical evidence to propose that many are not substantially different from other forms of political violence or lone-wolf terrorism. The study determined that the focus on mental health and peer relationship issues has overshadowed the political aspects of recent attacks. School shootings have been interpreted by many researchers as non-political acts, but she claims that rampage types of school shootings are usually not focused on specific individuals. These attacks are essentially a type of symbolic violence, in which the act is a way of sending a message to a broader audience than the immediate victims. While most shootings at schools do not involve any terrorist ideology, some notable school attacks do

fit the parameters of terrorism. Malkki cites cases of the 1989 attack at E´cole Polytechnique in Montreal, the 2007 attack in Tuusula, Finland, and the 1999 attack at Columbine High School, which she believes to be politically motivated.

During the 1989 attack at E´cole Polytechnique in Montreal, Marc Le´pine killed 18 and injured ten people before shooting himself. Prior to the shooting, he left notes saying the attack was committed because of his hatred of feminists. In the incident in Tuusula, Finland, in which Pekka-Eric Auvinen killed eight before killing himself, he posted notes, photos, and videos to the internet and proclaimed that his attack should not be regarded as a school shooting because it was a form of political terrorism. Before the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold posted video recordings saying that they wanted to kick-start a revolution (Malkki, 2014). It should be noted that Malkki chose not to determine the real motivation behind the rampage shootings examined in her study. As with other cases of lone-wolf terrorism, the shooter's actual motives may never be fully known. She based her findings solely on the rampage shooter's own proclamations and explanations of why they committed the attack.

Media and Public Perception

This section will examine the research studies focused on how intense media coverage of school shootings affect the viewing public's perception of these attacks and the impact that the coverage may have on students.

It is hard for the viewing public to make sense of school shooting incidents. Barbieri and Connell's study (2015) shows how the news media can inform the viewing public but may also play a role in creating public alarm. Their report indicates

that because these incidents of the mass murder of children occur in seemingly safe places, it is very difficult for rational viewers to process and understand any possible reason behind the event. Continuous media coverage can cause a sense of unease or panic, which then generates more interest in the media coverage as viewers look for school and public officials to provide a sense that safety will be restored.

Instances of mass murders and especially those that occur to school children, attract a large volume of audience attention. Schildkraut and Muschert (2014) propose that the public has a desire to learn more facts to develop some understanding of the social implications or deeper meanings of the tragedy.

Public fear caused by media coverage

There have been several studies that have examined the public's fear of victimization by ordinary criminal activity and how that fear affects their perception of safety, but most of those studies do not specifically address the fear caused by school shootings. Elsass, Schildkraut, and Stafford (2016) state that the studies which have focused on the specific effects of school shootings on the public's perception of safety in schools face problems regarding the collection of data due to spatial and temporal conditions. Unlike ordinary crime, which occurs fairly consistently, the effects of fear generated by school shootings will likely be magnified in the areas closest to the school compared with areas far away and in the days immediately after the shooting but may reduce as time passes (Elsass et al., 2016). The magnitude of those effects may be partially related to the quality and quantity of the media coverage of the shooting.

The fear caused by these events is disproportionate compared to other types of violence. The horrific images of the school shooting incidents shown on live news reports

tend to exacerbate the level of emotions that are generated by the viewers (Haan and Mays, 2013). Contrary to the fact that school shootings happen infrequently compared to other forms of violent crimes, the public believes that they happen more frequently than they do (Borum et al., 2010; Agnich, 2015).

Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, and Jimerson propose that most school-associated homicides are drug or gang-related, or they are the product of some other criminal activity. The number of random targeted school attacks, such as the Columbine attack, is a "rare subset" of the total number of school children killed. The understanding that comes from the public's attention to these attacks can only be as accurate as the media source delivering the information. An empirical study of primary source documents (investigative and court records) of targeted school attacks shows evidence that the media reports are often incomplete or inaccurate (Borum et al., 2010). Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson (2015) found that the media's accounts of the incidents have led to misleading assumptions and stereotypes about the attackers and their motivations.

The Divisiveness of School Shootings

The issue of mass murders occurring at schools has been a major cause of disagreement in the U.S. Unlike any other type of gun violence, school shootings, and their resulting media coverage has caused fierce arguments about our country's gun control efforts, moral and religious beliefs, entertainment choices, and educational and security practices (Warnick et al., 2010; Barbieri and Connell, 2015).

Media coverage and discussion often focus on possible contributing factors that motivated the shooter to commit the act. Among the most discussed possible causes are gun control, bullying, emotional and social issues, parental responsibility, and lack of

school intervention. Agnich's study found that media reports were most likely to identify bullying as the motivation for school shooting attacks. Her post-hoc analysis indicated that the media reported bullying as the motivation behind 19% of mass-shooting events and 15% of attempted mass-shooting events (Agnich, 2014).

Sensationalizing Violence

In his article, which was written after the school attack at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, Faria (2013) discusses some contributing factors associated with the problem of rampage shootings. Faria's article examines the contributing effects of misguided mental health strategies, but he contends that sensationalizing violence in the media and reporting is a more sinister contributing factor in the increase of rampage shootings.

Haan and Mays (2013) contend that the media is also the target of frequent blame with accusations that they sensationalize the tragic events. The coverage of mass murders, especially live shots from the school, generates significant ratings and revenue for the media outlets. Since adolescents are impressionable, intensive media coverage of the shooter will inspire other potential shooters to act. (Haan and Mays, 2013).

Media Coverage Inspires Additional Violence

Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, and Castillo-Chavez (2015) are in agreement with Haan and Mays on the potential negative effects of sensationalized media reporting. Their study also determined that it is likely that media coverage of a mass school shooting will inspire additional school violence. Researchers have found significant evidence that school shooting incidents cause a temporal increase in the likelihood of a similar school shooting event (Towers et al., 2015).

Examining the temporal increase that occurs after school shootings, Meindl and Ivy's study (2017) supports evidence that the generalized imitation model is the most appropriate method to explain this phenomenon. Generalized imitation is a model used in psychological studies to help explain why there is an increased likelihood that individuals will engage in behaviors with similar characteristics to behaviors they have observed or are aware of. The authors examine the media's role in stimulating imitative behavior. They provide evidence that the extensive coverage and dramatic digital re-creations of mass shooting events can increase the likelihood of imitation.

There are studies that examine the impact that media violence has on children. Ioan, Iov, Dumbrava, Ionescu, and Damian (2013) present evidence that exposure to the depiction of violence in the media has been shown to increase aggression in adolescents. Concurring with Ioan et al. (2013), Fitzpatrick, Oghia, Melki, and Pagani (2016) conducted a meta-analysis and determined that exposure to violent media during the preschool years poses a reliable risk for increased aggression in childhood and adulthood.

Moral Panic

The result of this attention and the perceived threat to public safety has been labeled by researchers as moral panic. The 2015 study by Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford used a survey with 19 Likert-scale questions to examine college students' fear of school shootings by applying the theory of moral panic. The moral panic theory has been used to measure the effects of fear of criminal activity, and it has five key attributes: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. Noting that previous applications of moral panic have relied on qualitative studies, the authors examine the

issue using a quantitative assessment. They applied the following definition of moral panic as originally proposed by Cohen:

> *A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media (Cohen, 1972).*

The first attribute of the moral panic theory is *concern*, which represents a high level of anxiety or concern about a perceived social threat. The second attribute, *hostility*, is often demonstrated through an "us-versus-them" sentiment. The third attribute, c*onsensus*, occurs when people agree that a threat is serious and caused by the offenses of a group of people. The fourth attribute, *disproportionality*, happens when the intensity of public concern exceeds the actual threat posed by the social problem. The fifth attribute, *volatility*, occurs because of the sudden outburst and then the decline of a moral panic. Their survey of 442 college students found strong evidence supporting the theory of moral panic. (Schildkraut et al., 2015).

The Argument Against Profiling

Law enforcement agencies and school administrators are frequently called upon to conduct a threat assessment of individuals who have exhibited behaviors that are alarming to others. This section examines recent research into the methods and rationale that are used to evaluate and reduce the level of threat posed by those students.

There is significant agreement that there is no viable benefit in developing a profile or pre-indicators of a potential school shooter. Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, and Jimerson (2010) report that influential studies by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United States Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Education rejected the concept

of developing a list of pre-event behavioral indicators to identify the type of person likely to commit a school shooting. The belief is that there is no single set of indicators that could be specific enough to be usable. More importantly, publishing a list of traits would likely result in the unfair labeling of innocent individuals as potentially violent.

Even the FBI's criminal profiling experts concluded that profiling was not an appropriate tactic to stop school shootings. The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, in which 13 students were killed and 20 students were injured, changed the national perception of the safety of children. Shortly after the Columbine attacks, the FBI published a report outlining the results of a conference of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (O'Toole, 2000). This seminal report on school shooters provides a threat assessment framework recommended for educators, health professionals, and law enforcement to help evaluate an individual's words or writings. This framework is designed to be used only after a specific individual has made threats, not as an alarm system to identify potential shooters from the student population. The framework helps officials to recognize which threats may be true indicators of future violence and which are just words that do not represent any actual imminent harm.

While this framework can be used as a guide, the authors stress that it is not a profile of a school shooter, nor is it a checklist of behavioral indicators that could be used to identify a potential school shooter. Recognizing that the desire to develop a profile exists, the experts believe that the same behavioral characteristics exhibited by previous school shooters are also common behaviors exhibited by adolescents who will never commit any violence, and therefore creating a profile will cause harm to innocent people who get labeled as potentially dangerous (O'Toole, 2000).

Student Threat Assessment

The FBI threat assessment of school shooters (O'Toole, 2000) provides one indicator of behavior that has occurred frequently in prior incidents. She uses the term "leakage" to label the likelihood that the shooter will intentionally or unintentionally reveal clues to his feelings, fantasies, or intentions. These clues can be written or spoken and can be communicated as subtle or direct threats, predictions, or ultimatums. Leakage could be apparent in a student's constant preoccupation with violence, despair, loneliness, isolation, or nihilism. Leakage may also appear when a student's writing or artwork demonstrates a focus on hatred, prejudice, death, weapons, homicide, or suicide (O'Toole, 2000).

Pre-attack behaviors. A Study of the pre-attack behaviors of individuals who committed active shootings between 2000 and 2013 was sponsored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The authors Silver, Simons, and Craun (2018) found evidence that 77% of the subjects spent a week or more planning their attack, and 46% spent a week or longer preparing for their attack. On average, these subjects exhibited 4 to 5 behaviors that were considered concerning to others around them.

Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson (2015) examined the possibility of developing a model to differentiate school shooters based on their pre-attack characteristics. They identified the co-occurrence of all known offender characteristics (or risk factors) and used them to test the hypothesis that they could be categorized into themes. They found that the offender was male in 95 percent of the cases, and 57.5 percent of the shooters had reported being bullied. In 42.5 percent of the cases, the shooter had a previous mental illness, weapon fascination, or was describes as a loner. In 37.5 percent of the cases, the

offender had expressed suicidal thoughts in the past, and 22.5 percent of the shooters were on medication because of their mental health issues. Evidence of the shooter's violent writings was present in 37.5 percent of the cases. In 35 percent of cases, the shooter had been playing violent video games and/or watching violent films before the shooting occurred.

Typology of shooters. Using the results of this identification of co-occurrences, Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson (2015) were able to separate the offenders into one of three categories: the Disturbed Shooter, the Rejected Shooter, and the Criminal Shooter. The Disturbed Shooter was the label given to shooters with evidence of mental illness, medication, violent writings, suicidal thoughts, being a loner, and having been bullied. The Rejected Shooter were cases in which the offender had a recent relationship breakup, was abused at home, had been suspended or expelled from school, or a past suicide attempt. The Criminal Shooter were cases involving past violent behavior or convictions, violence against their families, weapons fascination, and cases involving multiple offenders. Of the 40 cases studied, Ioannou, Hammond, and Simpson were able to classify 60 percent as Disturbed, 22.5 percent as Rejected, 7.5 percent as Criminal and 10 percent were unclassifiable (Ioannou et al., 2015).

Examining bullying as a motivator. Bullying is a significant problem that affects millions of school-aged children each year. The act of bullying is characterized as hurting others through physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. This abuse often occurs through repeated actions performed by a single individual or a group of persons. According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2020), over 20% of students between 12 and 18 reported having been bullied at school during the school

year. The survey defined “school” as school buildings or property, school buses, or traveling to or from school. The types of abuse included being the subject of rumors, being called names or insulted, being shoved, tripped, or spit on, being threatened with harm, being intentionally excluded from activities, and having personal property destroyed.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes bullying as a significant public health issue classifying it as an adverse childhood experience that can negatively affect a child’s sense of safety, stability, and bonding. The CDC defines bullying as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.” While the CDC reports that one in five students between 12 and 18 stated they had been the victim of bullying in 2017, the percentage is higher, approximately 40%, for students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The ratio is also higher for females (30%) compared to males (19%). Reported bullying was higher among white students (29%) than Hispanic (19%) and Black students (18%). The consequences of bullying could be physical injury, social or emotional distress, cause a victim to commit self-harm, and even death in some cases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Because the harmful effects of bullying are felt not only by the victims but also affect families, schools, and society, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) also published a tool to provide definitions for educators and researchers. Bullying Surveillance Among Youths helps to build consistency and comparability of data. The descriptions and conclusions in this publication refer strictly to bullying between youths

and do not include other forms of bullying that might occur in a familial or dating context. School bullying is a form of aggression that threatens a youth's safety may result in victims feeling powerless and publicly embarrassed by the hostile acts of their abuser(s).

To examine the health problems associated with the issue, Le Menestrel (2020) summarized the 2016 consensus report from the National Academies of Sciences on Preventing bullying: Consequences, prevention, and intervention. The report recognizes four types of bullying: (a) Physical bullying involving the use or threat of physical force against the victim, (b) Verbal bullying involving words or writings intended to harm the victim, (c) Relational bullying intended to damage the victim's relationships or reputation through posting photos or mean comments, social isolation, or spreading rumors, and (d) Property theft or damage intended to harm the victim. The report acknowledges that bullying causes emotional, behavioral, and mental health problems in the victims and the child who bullies and bystanders who witness the abuse.

The American Psychological Association has provided a learning module for teachers to recognize, understand, and minimize the effects of bullying (Graham, n.d.). The module underscores the relationship between a child's social life and academic achievement and explores the critical features that differentiate simple conflict between students and bullying. Agreeing with the definitions provided by the CDC (2020) and Le Menestrel (2020), Graham's definition of bullying involves repeated incidences of harm and an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. The required imbalance of power could result from physically strong individuals abusing weaker individuals, older students abusing younger students, or students from a numerical majority group abusing

students from a numerical minority group. Although Graham's definition identifies repeated instances of harm, she acknowledges that even a single traumatic abuse incident can cause injury and raise fears about further abuse.

Recognizing the significant physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral health and academic problems caused by bullying, Le Menestrel (2020) outlined some steps taken at both the program and policy level to reduce bullying. There is no specific federal law prohibiting bullying; however, civil rights and anti-discrimination laws provide some protection for victims who are members of a protected class. State laws may offer some protection, but the level of protection varies from state to state. The author's review of literature and metanalyses conducted over the past ten years indicates that the most effective anti-bullying strategies are whole school programs that involve universal and targeted strategies. The universal approaches include educating the student body, faculty, and staff on recognizing, responding to, and reporting instances of bullying behavior. Targeted strategies are those aimed at students showing signs of engaging in or being victimized by bullying.

Examining mental illness as a motivator. Predicting a person's inclination toward violence is a difficult task. The American Psychological Association (2013) report on gun violence determines that people with mental illness have committed many notorious shootings, but only a small percentage of shootings are committed by persons with mental illness. Other factors, such as conduct disorders, anti-social disorders, and substance abuse, may increase a person's likelihood of violence toward others. Even with this knowledge, mental health experts have had only moderate success in predicting which individuals are likely to commit serious violent attacks. The authors advocate

using a behavioral threat assessment strategy designed to identify individuals who have made threats of violence or committed actions, which clearly indicate that they are planning or preparing to commit violence.

In a review of threat assessment models used for school shootings, Modzeleski and Randazzo (2018) describe the methods explored to identify and prevent future incidents. Based on findings of the Safe Schools Initiative (the 2002 collaboration between the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education), many prior school shootings were planned in advance, and other people knew of the shooter's plans prior to the event. Since fellow students might be the most likely to know of the plans, they became an integral focus of the prevention effort. The Safe Schools Initiative also found that there were no composite background or demographic characteristics that would lead to identifying a potential shooter. Investigating threatening or troubling behaviors by students or former students might help to uncover someone on a "pathway to violence". The initiative found that school shootings were often committed by someone who might be suicidal or in a personal crisis. Finding the reasons behind the crisis might get the potential shooter off the pathway to violence.

Threat Assessment Contrasted with Risk Assessment

The threat assessment model is different from risk assessment and profiling. Violence Risk Assessment is the process used by trained mental health professionals to evaluate the likelihood that an individual person may engage in violent behavior. Profiling is often used in law enforcement investigations to match a person's background characteristics to the known background characteristics of previous offenders. Profiling is

not believed to be effective in identifying future school shooters (Modzeleski and Randazzo, 2018)

Threat assessment is a behavior-based process with four steps; identifying a potential shooter, gathering information on their behavior and communications, evaluating the threat they may pose, and developing a plan to reduce the threat. Threat assessment is believed to have the best potential to prevent future school shootings (Modzeleski and Randazzo, 2018).

Threat assessment requires that the evaluators make every reasonable effort to investigate the details of the leakage and the warning behaviors to assess their credibility in cases with specific targets and in which the violence is threatened (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Threat Assessment and Intelligence-led Policing

Capellan and Lewandowski (2019) conducted a study examining the viability of using threat assessment as an intelligence-led policing tool to identify potential shooters and prevent mass shootings. Using a retrospective analysis of 278 mass public shootings from 1966 to 2016, the authors found the current model of threat assessment to be the most promising method to determine the risk that a student may be on a pathway to violence. However, their study determined that threats are often underreported, and using the content of known threats combined with the suspect's characteristics to correctly ascertain the risk posed by an individual is problematic. They recommend that the current threat assessment framework needs refinement.

State Requirements for Student Threat Assessment

Woitaszewski, Crepeau-Hobson, Conolly, and Cruz (2018). Conducted a comprehensive study to examine threat assessment rules and mandates currently in use in the U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Their study revealed that only one U.S. state specifically mandates the use of threat assessment teams and school-based threat assessment procedures. Although thirty-nine states provide web-based threat assessment resource for schools, only five states have statutes or procedures which suggest the need for threat assessment.

School Resource Officers

Crawford and Burns (2015) presented the results of a study that examines the effects of school violence prevention efforts. The range of security measures examined in the study includes the use of School Resource Officers, uniform guards, armed security guards, security personnel armed with oleoresin capsicum spray, and security personnel armed with a Taser. The study uses response data collected from school administrators during the School Survey on Crime and Safety in 2006 for the U.S. Department of Education. Although the results do not imply causation, they do show a significant association between High Schools that used SRO's and armed security guards and a higher level of reported crimes. However, they found that High Schools with security guards who carry Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) spray reported lower levels of threatened attacks with weapons. They did not find any significant effect in lower grades. Similarly, there was a higher association with reports of serious violence in schools that had access-controlled doors, metal detectors, and a plan for shooting incidents. The study also determined that the number of SROs and security guards employed by the school were

related to a higher incidence of threatened attack with weapons in high schools. However, threatened attacks with weapons were lower in high schools where security guards were armed with oleoresin capsicum spray. Acknowledging that the issue will require further study and that the presence of guards and SRO's should not be the centerpiece of a solution, they determine that the program should remain as part of a more extensive solution.

In a comprehensive assessment of school safety measures, Reingle, Gonzalez, Jetelina, and Jennings (2016) reviewed findings from research published between 1998 and 2016. The list of safety measures included metal detectors, cameras, closed-circuit video systems, access control, and the presence of School Resource Officers. The studies included primary and secondary schools. The authors' exhaustive search found 32 studies that fit their criteria of having used randomized controlled trials and pre-test/post-test designs. Most studies found that the use of multiple security measures was inversely associated with a student's perceived feeling of safety. As more security measures are visible to the students, they feel less safe in school. In spite of the perception, most studies found that the presence of physical safety measures and security personnel did enhance school safety.

A national survey shows that schools with SRO's had higher levels of law enforcement involvement compared to schools that did not (Zhang, 2019).

A report by Pigott, Stearns, and Khey (2018) also examined the effect caused by the presence of armed police officers in schools. The authors tested previous claims that strict zero-tolerance policies have resulted in an issue termed the media as the "School to Prison Pipeline" They tested the hypothesis that the presence of School Resource Officers

in schools will have a positive relationship with the number of expulsions at school. They noted that the zero-tolerance policies in schools began with the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994, which required schools receiving federal funds to mandate a one-year expulsion to any student who brought a firearm to school. The zero-tolerance policies were expanded by many schools to include drug possession or threatening other students. Some schools included minor infractions such as insubordination or violation of school rules in their zero-tolerance policies.

The study used data from the 2009–2010 School Survey on Crime and Safety and found that there was a decrease in student removals in schools that used SROs or sworn police officers who were not certified SROs. There was only a slight increase in student removals. They did find an increase in student removals at schools that had both SRO's and security guards. This study found that the presence of SRO and security guards at high schools reduce the amount of violence on campuses. It is hard to determine the total number of SRO in the United States because there is no mandatory reporting for schools or police departments. To further complicate the issue, some schools employ more than one SRO, and some SROs cover more than one school (Pigott et al., 2018).

Schlosser (2104) examines the implementation of the SRO program in a mid-western school. He shadowed an SRO during his tour of duty and observed the interactions. Schlosser concluded that SROs might be expected to act in several capacities during their tour, and some of those roles may conflict with each other. In their law enforcement role, SROs are expected to respond to disturbances, investigate crimes such as theft or violence, and make arrests when necessary. In their role as counselors, they provide advice or guidance to students. In their teaching role, they may be tasked

with teaching students about issues like gangs, drug abuse, or driving while intoxicated. The conflict can arise when the SRO is acting in the counselor or teacher role but must revert to the law enforcement role if it becomes necessary.

Similar to the definition proposed by Schlosser, Zhang's study (2019) identifies three primary roles of SROs as safety expert and law enforcer, problem solver and liaison to community resources, and educator. He recognizes that although most SRO roles fall into these categories, their specific duties vary from school to school, and their roles are not fully defined.

A review of national statistics by Counts, Gainey, Ryan, and Katsiyannis (2018) found that the number of arrests for school behavior/conduct violations other than criminal activity has been growing. The authors provide evidence that the misuse of the SRO program may be causing a disproportional risk of adjudication on minority students and students with disabilities. The role of an SRO has evolved from one of providing safety into the role of enforcing discipline. Noting that only 12% of the student population have disabilities, those students represent 28% of the arrests or referrals. Youths with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances have an increased risk of placement in a juvenile correctional facility. The study determined that the definition of an SRO varies by school and jurisdiction, and there are no universal standards regarding their function in schools. The authors advocate the need for legislation to standardize and define the roles and certification of SRO's (Counts et al, 2018).

There is further evidence that supports Counts et al. (2018) contention that there is a lack of definition in the roles and responsibilities of SRO's. Lynch, Gainey, and Chappell (2016) provides data to suggest that SRO's assigned to schools that are socially

and educationally disadvantaged are likely to perform more law enforcement-related duties than educational, while SRO's assigned to schools that are not socially and educationally disadvantaged perform more education-related duties than law enforcement. This not only contributes to a higher number of disadvantaged students in the juvenile justice system but also limits the SRO's teaching role in schools that are already disadvantaged.

Regarding the effectiveness of the police in schools, Zhang (2019) examined whether the presence of Prevention Resource Officer (PRO) in middle and high schools in West Virginia affects the incidence of school crime, disciplinary problems, and disciplinary actions. The data, representing three years of school-reported activity, provided evidence that the schools with a PRO had a higher number of drug-related offenses, suggesting that the PRO makes detecting drug crimes more likely. The data also indicated that schools with a PRO over this three-year span schools had lower rates of violent crime and disorder than schools that did not have a PRO. This suggests that the presence of the PRO has a deterrent effect on the disorder in the school. However, the schools that only had the PRO for one or two years did not show reduced levels of crime, suggesting that the program must be in place for three years before it deters criminal activity.

Conclusion

The issue of gun violence in schools, and especially rampage shootings, is a cause of great concern in the United States. Law enforcement agencies must plan and prepare not just to respond and effectively stop an active shooter event but to be proactive in working with school officials, policymakers, and health professionals to build a holistic

framework for preventing future attacks. There have been studies on the topic, but there has been some inconsistency in the results due to the inability to find a single definition of what constitutes a "school shooting." Research shows that media coverage of school shooting incidents informs the public on the issue but may also inflame public concern and, in some cases, inspire copycat violence in other schools. Researchers have not been able to develop a viable list of behavioral characteristics that can be used to identify future school shooters because the behaviors that have been exhibited by previous shooters are also commonly exhibited by non-violent adolescents.

The review of literature has shown that schools, legislative bodies, health providers, Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies have all taken steps to increase safety and identify and reduce the threat of school shooters, but the results have not yet been effective, and more research is needed.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this dissertation are:

RQ (1). How do members of the Nassau County threat assessment team describe their decision-making process to recommend a student for intervention?

RQ (2). What factors influence their decisions to recommend or mandate a student for intervention?

RQ (3). Is the Nassau County threat assessment process effective?

RQ (4). Are there any improvements that could make the Nassau County threat assessment process more effective?

These research questions were reassessed upon completion of the interview process and found to be adequate for the stated purpose of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Method

This research was conducted using a generic qualitative methodology (Yin, 2016) that examined the process used by law enforcement members and school administrators who are tasked with quantifying the level of threat posed by students suspected of future violence. The County of Nassau in New York was chosen as the focus of this study based on the author's prior service as a member of the Nassau County Police Department. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the population of Nassau County, NY, to be 1,356,924 as of July 2019 (US Census Bureau, 2020a). This densely inhabited county has a population that is slightly higher than the State of Maine and is significantly higher than eight other U.S. States (US Census Bureau, 2020b). The Nassau County Police Department (NCPD) is a full-service police agency serving the residents of Nassau. Reported crime is at historically low levels, and crime reports of the past five years show Nassau to be the safest large county in New York State (McAtee, P. 2018).

For two decades, schools have been encouraged to develop a behavioral threat assessment team that includes school administrators and local law enforcement (Cornell & Williams, 2006). There are 56 school districts with over 199,000 students enrolled in k-12 schools in Nassau County,, according to the NY State Education Department (2020). The Nassau County Police Department

A generic method was chosen for the study because it is often effectively used in qualitative research (Yin, 2016), and it provides an efficient way to analyze and interpret the attitudes, subjective opinions, and beliefs of the participants (Percy et al., 2015).

The interpretation of the participants' responses provides insight into real-world experiences for other law enforcement members and school administrators who will be faced with conducting threat evaluations of students who are suspected of planning violent acts.

Interviews of participants who have experience in student threat assessment have been used to develop a composite description of common perceptions and experiences and to build a better understanding of the meanings that the participants ascribed to the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Exploratory research questions were used to elicit the values and meanings that the participants attached to their threat assessment experiences. The questions were relatively unstructured. Bachman and Schutt (2017) recommend that technique so that responses can be used to discover what the participants think about the issue. This questioning method allowed for finding unanticipated and unstudied attitudes or meanings, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

Participants

Baxter and Jack (2008) state that the examination of the subunits, which are situated in a single larger case study, can be a powerful approach because the subunits can be compared both within the subunit and between the subunits. The Nassau County Police Department (NCPD) participants are a subunit of the threat assessment process who have a perspective based on their law enforcement background. In contrast, the participants representing the school districts are a subunit with perspectives based on their experience as educators. Using a group of experienced threat assessors as a sample in this generic qualitative study will help to build a rich body of information about the topic (Percy et al., 2015). Baxter and Jack (2008) concur that using a sampling method

that examines a variety of viewpoints is an effective method to reveal and understand multi-faceted activities.

Participant Selection

The decision on which participants to include in qualitative studies was made in a deliberate manner to obtain the broadest perspectives on the topic of study and purposive sampling was an appropriate method to increase the likelihood that the findings will produce the most relevant data (Yin, 2016). Purposive sampling is a procedure commonly used for qualitative research (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The method involved the intentional selection of participants based on their ability to explain or provide meaning about a subject or topic (Robinson, 2014). A purposive sampling strategy was used in this research,, and participants were selected based on their willingness to elucidate their experiences in student threat assessment.

The participants in this study were law enforcement professionals and school officials who have experience in conducting student threat assessments. The goal of this selection process was to get voluntary participation from three to four NCPD members and four to six school administrators who have experience in the student threat assessment process. The NCPD commands were chosen because of their involvement with the threat assessment process. The number of NCPD members in the study was only one more than the number of participants from school districts to balance subjects with law enforcement backgrounds and educational backgrounds.

Four school districts were chosen to represent the population of Nassau County. Districts were selected to represent a large district, a small district, a district with a higher socioeconomic population, and a district with a lower socioeconomic population.

The intention of this selection process was to get between 7 and 10 volunteers to participate in the study.

Contact was made through a letter sent to administrators of each school district chosen for the study. The letter introduced the author, explained the purpose of the study, and requested voluntary participation from those school principals or administrators who have experience in student threat assessment and were willing to provide their perspective on the process.

Contact to the police was made via a letter sent to the Nassau County Police Commissioner. The letter explained the purpose of the study requested that the members involved in student threat assessment be contacted and asked for their voluntary participation.

Confidentiality

This study involves human subjects and required approval by the Institutional Review Board. Approval was granted by the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board before the author made any contact with participants.

Prior to the interviews, the author provided all subjects with a consent document that was clearly written and understandable. Each potential subject was informed of the goals and key facts of the dissertation study. All subjects were told that their participation was strictly voluntary and that there was no penalty if they choose not to speak or answer questions. Participants were informed that there would be no benefit associated with their decision to answer questions. They were informed of their right to confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. In addition, the author read the consent document aloud to the subject and ensured that they understood

the conditions. Any concerns or questions from the participants were addressed before obtaining written consent. All subjects in this study were over 18 years old and therefore able to give permission to participate.

The identity of all participants, including their rank or title and the name of their command or school or school district, has been kept confidential. Administrators of the school districts involved and of the NCPD know the identity of subjects who participated, but the author has ensured that any statements used in the dissertation cannot be attributed to any individual participant. Any notes or recordings of the interviews will be kept in the sole custody of the author in compliance with the rules of the Institutional Review Board.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a written list of semi-structured but open-ended questions that were used during one-on-one interviews. Each participant was asked the following six questions:

1) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe how a student may become the subject of a threat assessment.
2) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe the process of how a threat assessment is conducted.
3) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe your individual role and responsibilities in student threat assessment.
4) Please describe any specific certification, training, or experience that you have in student threat assessment and if it has helped you.

5) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe the process of how you determine the level of threat posed by a student.
6) Please describe your personal view of the threat assessment process. What are the process's strengths and weaknesses, and can you suggest any ways to improve the process?

If a participant's response to any of these questions seemed incomplete or lacked the detail necessary for interpreting meaning, the author asked the participant to elaborate on their answer.

Procedures

For this generic qualitative study, the author conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant. This method allowed the author's pre-knowledge of the topic to construct general questions but allowed participants to add relevant but unexpected response data, as recommended by Percy et al. (2015).

Face-to-face interviews were the preferred method and were conducted at a time and location convenient for each individual subject. The face-to-face interviews allowed for the author to collect written and electronic recording of spoken responses and the observation of non-verbal portions of the conversation, including tone of voice, pauses, or body language. Observing body language may sometimes add context to participants' answers (Yin. 2016). Any nonverbal communications that add to the meaning of the participant's answers will be recorded in the author's notes.

Recording interviews stimulate recollections that might not be included in written notes (Yin, 2016). With the permission of the participants, their responses were collected using audio recordings to increase the accuracy of interpreting the intended meaning.

Since recording interviews may create complications for participants, the interviews would not have been recorded for any participant who declined or indicated that they were uncomfortable with the process. None of the participants declined to be recorded.

Because this study was conducted during the Coronavirus pandemic, three of the nine volunteers were unwilling or unable to participate in face-to-face interviews. In those cases, the author requested each participant's permission to conduct one-on-one interviews via web-based video conferencing platforms. One interview was conducted using WebEx, one used Zoom. At the start of each video conference interview, the author requested permission from the subject to record the interview in the same audio format used during face-to-face interviews. The author did not record the video portion of those conferences. Written notes were taken to record the subject's body language when it became relevant to help interpret their verbal responses and non-verbal communications.

One subject requested a telephone conversation in lieu of an in-person or video conference. This method did provide a viable method to access the subject's responses; however, some informal communication may have been missed because of the absence of visual cues.

A digital voice recording was made of each of the nine interviews. The author promptly transcribed all recordings of participant interviews. The transcripts are kept in the sole custody of the author in compliance with the rules of the Institutional Review Board.

Each interview was expected to take between 30 and 45 minutes to explain the process and obtain consent for the interview, develop rapport between the investigator and the participant, and obtain necessary response data. An interview protocol form was

used during each interview, consisting of the core questions with space to record responses and interview notes. Subjects were asked to explain their responses in as much detail as possible. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that researchers should expect qualitative interviews to evolve and change,, which may necessitate that questions be reformulated. Questioning in this study was guided from the written list but changed to explore new and unexpected topics as they arise.

Data Analysis

Inductive analysis, as described by Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015), was used in this study as a generic approach to analyzing participants' responses so they could be used as the basis for building understanding. The audio recordings of the interviews, along with the author's interview notes,, were transcribed. All records of non-verbal communications will be coded. The transcripts were examined individually, and significant statements that provided an understanding of how the participants view the threat assessment process were identified. The statements, ideas, and non-verbal communications were repeated by participants were highlighted to identify common themes. The highlighted information that relates to the research questions were placed into clusters. Each cluster of meaning was identified with an explanatory phrase. Related clusters were combined into themes. Any differences in responses based on participant factors such as employment or demographics was noted. A detailed analysis was then written to describe the essence of each theme. All themes were then be integrated to form a composite of the participants' responses to the research questions and a textural description of their collective view of the student threat assessment process.

Summary

Identifying students who may be in the planning stages for the commission of a school shooting is a vitally important task that requires a combined and coordinated effort between schools and law enforcement. While the effort is ongoing, qualitative research on the process is lacking. The generic qualitative research design used in this study is intended to explore how practitioners involved in student threat assessment view the process and their decision-making.

This study aims to get the perspective of subjects with law enforcement and K-12 education experience who have participated in the student threat assessment process. The resulting data will provide an understanding of what affects their decisions concerning student intervention. The data will also provide insight into external factors or conditions that may be a benefit or hindrance to the threat assessment process. This knowledge will aid other educators and law enforcement members who seek to understand the student threat assessment process.

Chapter 4: Findings

General overview

Incidents of targeted violence in our nation's schools and the resulting loss of lives have forced our law enforcement agencies and school systems to work together to eliminate the threat. This study examines the threat assessment process used in Nassau County, New York.

This chapter describes the analysis of the data collected from Nassau County Police Department members and Administrators from four Nassau County districts who have experience in recognizing and responding to students who may be on a path toward violence. This chapter also articulates the steps taken to collect and code data and identify emergent themes. Finally, the findings are presented and supported by the participants' comments.

Research questions helped create the study's conceptual framework and defined its intended role in the broader subject literature (Yin, 2016). The following research questions guided the study:

RQ. (1). How do members of the Nassau County threat assessment team describe their decision-making process to recommend a student for intervention?

RQ. (2). What factors influence their decisions to recommend or mandate a student for intervention?

RQ. (3). Is the Nassau County threat assessment process effective?

RQ. (4). Are there any improvements that could make the Nassau County threat assessment process more effective?

Yin (2016) suggests that research questions may need to be reassessed and revised upon completing the interview process. However, the author reviewed the research questions after examining data, and no revisions were necessary.

Participant Profiles

The nine individuals who participated in this study are a representative sample of NCPD members and school district administrators in Nassau County, NY.

Five of the nine participants currently hold positions in the NCPD that are focused on school safety and the prevention of targeted school violence. Participants # 1, 2, and 3 are assigned to the Homeland Security Unit and act as department liaisons to various school districts. Participants # 4 is an intelligence analyst, and Participant #5 is an intelligence detective. Both are assigned to the Intelligence Unit and focus on issues of school safety.

The remaining four participants are administrators in Nassau County school systems.

Participant # 6 is an administrator used in this study to represent a district with a higher socioeconomic status. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the community has a median household income above $145,000.

Participant #7 is an administrator used in this study to represent a district with a large student population. According to N.Y. State Education Department (2020), the district has more than 7000 students enrolled.

Participant #8 is an administrator used in this study to represent a district with a lower socioeconomic status. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the community has a median household income below $125,000.

Participant #9 is an administrator used in this study to represent a district with a small student population. According to N.Y. State Education Department (2020), the district has less than 2000 students enrolled.

Data Collection

After receiving permission to conduct participant interviews from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board, the author contacted the Nassau County Police Department and four Nassau County School Districts to recruit volunteers. Each interview was conducted individually either at a location chosen by the participant, by telephone or virtually using WebEx or Zoom. The author explained the goals and key facts of the dissertation study and obtained written consent from each participant. Every participant agreed to have their interview recorded using a password-protected digital voice recorder. Each interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. After the initial session, there was no need to recontact the subjects for a second interview.

Data Analysis

Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) described the inductive analysis process used in this study to develop relevant themes from the participant interviews. The first step of the analytic process was to become familiar with the collected evidence. Familiarization was accomplished as the author transcribed the interview recordings into separate password-protected Word documents.

The transcripts were examined and checked for accuracy. Statements significant to the research questions were highlighted and placed into an Excel database. An open coding process was used to categorize the data into a higher conceptual level systematically. The purpose of this step was to organize the qualitative data in a logical

manner before attempting a formal analysis. When the coding process was completed, each record was then verified by reviewing its logic and consistency.

During the coding process, patterns began to emerge from the data. Comparably coded ideas were placed into clusters based on their theme or theoretical concept. Each cluster of meaning, or sub-theme, was identified and described. After re-evaluating the data accuracy in each group, the author compared the clusters to look for overarching themes. Each overarching theme became the second level of abstraction.

Related themes were then placed into a matrix to illustrate the emergent patterns. A detailed analysis was then written to describe the essence of each theme. All themes were then integrated to form a composite of the participant's responses to the research questions and a textural description of their collective view of the student threat assessment process.

Presentation of the Findings

After the completion of the open coding process, a total of 16 clusters of meaning emerged from the participants' comments. The clusters of meaning, or sub-themes, were categorized into five themes: Assessment Process, Training, Student Behaviors, Effectiveness, and Improvements. See Table 3.

Table 3.
Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Assessment Process	Alliance	AP-A
	Proactive	AP-P
	Communication	AP-Comm
	Psychological or Emotional Care	AP-PEC
	Monitoring	AP-M
Training	Formal Training	T-FT
	Life or Work Experience	T-LWE
Student Behaviors	Weapons	SB-W
	Bullying	SB-B
	Social Media	SB-SM
	Emotional Problems	SB-EP
	Behavioral Change	SB- BC
Effectiveness	Policies	E-P
	Compliance	E-C
Improvements	Policies	I-P
	Compliance	I-C

Research Question #1- Theme: Assessment Process

Research question #1 examined how the Nassau County threat assessment team members describe their student assessment process. The participants' responses were reviewed, and five sub-themes emerged: Alliance, Proactive, Communication, Mental or Emotional Care, and Monitoring. Each sub-theme is described in detail.

Alliance. There was a noticeable trend for seven of the nine participants to discuss the process of threat assessment as an alliance or partnership between the police department and the schools. These comments suggest that they view the student threat assessment process as a collaborative effort aimed at reducing or preventing school violence. The statements that exhibit this alliance include discussions of the combined school safety training and drills, the police interaction at school during their daily visits,

the sharing of information between the police and the schools, and the descriptions of the collaboration while investigating incidents of worrying student behaviors.

Participant #1 discussed the shared responsibility and cooperation between the police department and school, saying, *"The strength of the process is the relationships between us and the districts. We have strong relationships with the districts. The last incident I had was at 11 o'clock at night. I got a call on my cell phone. The districts will call us and inform us, even on weekends."*

Participant #2 agreed that a substantial amount of cooperation exists, saying, *"Most of the districts, as soon as there's a threat, they'll work you." "When there is a threat… it really is a collaborative effort with the school to sit down and look at the situation. We ask, who are we dealing with, and what evidence is there?"*

Participant #3 also commented on the strength of the alliance, saying, *"We have a very close relationship with the schools to where we become the liaison between the police department and the schools."*

Participant #6 spoke about their district's policy to work together when a student exhibits disturbing behavior, saying, *"If there is any indication of danger, we notify the police. The notification to the police could happen even before the student's parents are notified.".* P6 also discussed collaborative training, saying, *"The police have provided us with situational awareness training" "Our police officers are in our buildings during lock-down drills to help us. We ask questions, and we rely on their expertise."*

Participant #7 discussed the interaction between their district and the police and provided an endorsement of the interaction, saying, *"This program is the model. It's the model from the intervention piece, all the way up to the response piece. What's*

happening in Nassau County needs to be replicated. It's working, and I think the information has filtering down to the patrol cops, but certainly, at the Supervisory level, those kids are winding up in a hospital (for help). On the response end, I don't think there is much like it. I feel very confident in what's happening here, and I think the police really believe in it."

Participant #8 commented on their district policy to let the police investigate incidents involving students saying, *"Once the officer is involved, they pretty much take it from there. They'll go to the house. They'll look to see if there are guns. And then they'll inform us of what they find."* P8 also discussed utilizing the NCPD for the threat assessment training, saying, *"We also do drills with homeland security. I, and members of my team, along with (another school district), attended a week-long training. The training was done by NCPD Homeland Security. They gave us this giant book, and we went through the whole thing. It was really enlightening."*

Participant #9 commented on the cooperative nature of the investigative process, saying, *"If we, our support team or our social workers, feel that there is a real threat, then we get law enforcement involved immediately. We work hand-in-hand with the authorities who have more jurisdiction in terms of the student's home computer, searching the home, and that kind of thing."* P9 also discussed the police training on school safety, saying, "*We go to the Nassau County police training. They go over certain scenarios, so we have training in that regard."*

There was consistency between the educators and police personnel in statements of collaboration and cooperation. The only two participants who did not make specific

comments on the alliance theme are the NCPD members assigned to the Intelligence Unit, and they do not have regular contact with schools.

Proactive. The comments of all nine participants provide a picture of a process designed to prevent targeted violence in schools by identifying students who may be on the path toward violence and providing them the help that they need. While the idea of police interaction designed to stop criminal acts may lead an observer to assume that the goal is to arrest offenders, the student threat assessment process in Nassau County is designed to provide preventive intervention to the potential offender to prevent any criminal activity or targeted violence.

Participant #1 discussed the proactive intervention saying, *"Most of the time, the kids end up going to (local psychiatric hospital) for an interview. Some districts… have a relationship with (local psychiatric hospital). They will transport the kid to the hospital to speak with a doctor".*

Participant #2 also described a process designed to help potentially violent students, saying, *"In recent years, with the standing up of this school resource program, and the school coordinators, and building the relationships, they realized that we're not just gonna kneejerk and come in and drag the kid out in handcuffs." "On the other end, we follow up because (the student) is on the radar now, and you just want to make sure, 1) the kid is getting better, and 2) he's not a threat to the school."*

Participant #3 specifically stated that the intention of the process is to provide help before a tragedy occurs, saying, "*Sometimes these interventions can prevent suicides." "The key to what we do is intervention. Getting help for these students before a tragedy happens."*

Participant #4 discussed how this program is based on lessons learned from past school shootings in which the police agency had prior knowledge of the shooter but did not mitigate the threat, saying, *"We looked at it from the perspective of how can we as a law enforcement agency protect and serve in a more complete way? So what we're doing isn't a traditional law enforcement, but in some ways, it is in that we are doing some preventative work. We are taking the initiative so that the problem we initially came for doesn't reoccur."*

Participant #5 spoke about the intervention that might prevent students from making threats on social media, saying, "*The intervention is important. Just having the communication between the officer and school, the parent and the student. Having the students know that they can't post threats on social media. This is really serious."*

Participant #6 discussed how their district's commitment to providing help to the potentially violent student before a tragedy happens, saying, "*We Support the child with intervention, medical or counseling help." "It's our job to reacclimate the child back into the school and support them going forward. School psychologists and guidance counselors will build that support, so the child learns from their mistakes. That is our goal."*

Participant #7 spoke directly about the need for schools to use the threat assessment process to intervene before a student takes violent action, saying, "*It's all about the intervention piece."* "P*roactive districts using this model, it works perfectly. The districts who still don't want to share information about the child or disclose things like orders of protection are the districts where it falls through the cracks. Then it's a 911 call, and they've missed out on the chance for intervention."*

Participant #8 affirmed the goal of providing intervention before the violence, saying, "*The object is to get help for the kid. They did something that's a little bit scary, and it's usually considered to be a cry for help. What all of these school violence things tell us is that the kids are asking for help way before the violence occurs. So, our goal is to try to address that at the time."*

Participant #9 discussed their school's goal to recognize troubled students before they have exhibited concerning behavior, saying, *" If we can intervene before it gets to that point, and you never get to the point of a threat assessment, that's when you know you're doing your job."* P9 then discussed their process after a student engages in threatening behavior, saying, "*There will be a disciplinary phase and a phase to try to help the child in terms of providing counseling, or any resources that the family might need."*

There was consistency among all nine participants on the central goal of recognizing warning signs and providing intervention before violence occurs.

Communication. Another sub-theme common to the participants was their frequent discussion of observing, collecting, and communicating information about students who might require intervention. The comments from NCPD members included the importance of their weekly Student Threat Assessment meetings, their daily interactions with the schools, and their review of student's public social media activity. The educators commented on the importance of internal communication and communicating with their police.

Participant #1 provided many statements attesting to the sharing of information between school personnel and NCPD personnel. One of those statements was concerning

the Homeland Security Unit's practice of ensuring all necessary school personnel is aware of students who are not allowed on school property, saying, "*We'll make sure school security is aware of the student and who it is. But we do that in conjunction with the school. Together, we give information to have security keep an eye out for the ones who should not be getting in."* P1 also discussed the importance of the weekly meeting to share information on school threat assessment, saying, "*We're pretty much the liaison between the school district and whichever squad is investigating. When the case ends up going to Intel (Intelligence Unit), we will be in the middle with them and every Tuesday. We get together and have a meeting to discuss every school incident from the prior week."*

Participant #2 also noted the importance of the weekly student threat assessment as a valuable method to communicate, saying, "*The weekly meetings weekly are great because we go over what happened.' And "The weekly meetings include Homeland Security Unit, Intel (Intelligence Unit), SIS, (Special Investigations Squad), the state police also sit in sometimes."*

Participant #3 noted the benefit of staying in communications with their assigned schools, saying, *"I'm on a first-name basis with my schools- cell phones back and forth with all the principals and the numerous superintendents in all my schools and districts. Some districts have ten superintendents, and all have my number…they feel comfortable calling us to be part of their threat assessment. Sometimes principals will run things by us before taking action."* P3 also discussed the exchange of information that occurs at the weekly police meeting, *"At our Tuesday meeting, we will go over the student's social media activity. Sometimes we'll see a student in a photo with illegal weapons."*

Participant #4 provided additional insight into the effort to get critical information and communicate it to all the police personnel involved in student threat assessment, saying, "*precinct intelligence analysts will use a standardized code for each school incident. A school incident doesn't need to be a threat. It encompasses anything that touches a school. Every week on Tuesday, our analyst pulls all the case reports for our school threat meeting. …we have a face-to-face meeting with the guys from Homeland Security Unit. When we discuss those cases, the guys from HLS will add their own perspective because they were there, and they give us the information that the case report doesn't give. They provide the back story of what was going on with this kid before and the background from the school. All the stuff you want to know that's not contained in the case report."*

Participant #5 is the Intelligence Analyst assigned to the school threat assessment program. P5 provided more detail on the communication process, saying, *"Every Tuesday we meet with Homeland Security and we go through every single case that occurred between Tuesday to Tuesday. I read the cases out (to the group) and give a little added information including investigating detective's narrative, calls for service (involving the student), and things that aren't necessarily in the case report." If the case is deemed a school threat, I highlight it. I go back and send all the additional information that I presented in the meeting to Homeland Security Unit, to my boss, and to the investigating intelligence detectives."*

Participant #6 discussed their district's willingness to stay in communication with the police regarding student behavior, saying, *"If there is any indication of danger, we notify the PD. This notification could happen before the student's parents are notified.*

Participant #7 also discussed the importance of their district's internal communication process, saying, "*Once a child has been identified to that team, we go around the table and ask, what are we seeing in that child, in their home life, their grades, their social activity? Have they become dark? I'll interview the art teachers and English teachers. Those teachers can be a wealth of information."*

Participant #8 discussed their district's practice of allowing school administrators to bypass the district administrator and communicate directly with the police, saying, "*The principals have the authority to call the police. They don't ask me for that permission, and I don't want them to ask. If they think there is a threat, they should do that on their own. They can come back to me later."* P8 also discussed the fact that some of their school administrators will confer with the police officers before making a decision, saying, "*Sometimes they will call the POP officer, and they will have a conversation about it, and the POP officer will help them make that decision."* In this statement, P8 referred to POP officers who are precinct-based Problem-Oriented Policing Officers. These POP officers are also responsible for maintaining contact with schools.

Participant #9 discussed their school's communication with the police, saying, *"We then make a quick determination of whether the police need to be notified, especially if it is a direct threat. Then at that point, we work hand-in-hand with the authorities. Our relationship with the police is very good. We work with the POP unit, who are very good in terms of being accessible."*

The comments on the importance of communication were consistent among all the participants. In this section, P8 and P9 referred to POP officers who are precinct-based Problem-Oriented Policing Officers.

Psychological or Emotional Care. The concept of psychological or emotional issues emerged in two separate contexts. In this theme of the assessment process, the context is the importance of providing a student with the proper care necessary to take them off their path toward violence. The comments regarding psychological and emotional issues will also be discussed related to the subsequent theme of student behavior.

Participant #1 commented that the threat assessment process rarely results in an arrest but frequently results in the student receiving care, saying, "*Most of the times the kids end up going to (local psychiatric hospital) for an interview. Some districts notify us afterward. They have a relationship with (local psychiatric hospital). They will privately transport the kid to the hospital to speak with a doctor.*

Participant #2 echoed the idea that psychological or emotional care is the most likely outcome when a student exhibits concerning behaviors, saying, "*a lot of times the child will be shipped to (local psychiatric hospital) for a psych evaluation if there are direct threats made. if there were any threats made to either themselves or another student, it is almost an immediate need for a psych evaluation, and you explain to parents that this would be in the best interest of the child because he's making or she's making this kind of threat."*

Participant #3 did not use the words "emotional" or "psychological," but the conditions that P3 described are related to those words. P3 described their practice of looking for signs and providing help to the student, saying, *"Was there a negative change in appearance, behavior, or socialization? When you have a student exhibiting these signs, it's a call for help in most cases. Sometimes these interventions can prevent*

suicides. The key to what we do is intervention. Getting help for these students before a tragedy happens."

Participant #4 also discussed their practice of considering the need for psychological or emotional care to mitigate the threat posed by a student, saying, *"Is this person of interest making this threat because of a one-time incident? Is he reacting to being bullied or something like that, or is it because he has serious mental problems that are not being addressed?*

Participant #5 referenced students who might be engaging in concerning behaviors as the result of psychological or emotional issues, saying, *"if a case report shows a student who is hearing voices in their head, I look him up in our databases, and I see that he has four other cases where he's been doing similar things within the last few months, and last year he also made a school threat. That's important to note when we go to a school threat meeting because you want to know if this is just a mental issue."*

Participant #6 discussed their district's policy of providing a suspected student with appropriate care, saying, *"We Support the child with intervention- medical or counseling help. It's our job to reacclimate the child back into the school and support them going forward. The school psychologist and guidance counselors will build that support. That is our goal. If they need intense help from a hospital, we make sure the parents are following up and are not neglecting their role in this."*

Participant #7 commented on the types of students that of concern and the need to provide care, saying, "*One of the primary factors we look at is suicidal tendencies. I find the credibility to be higher in the "dark mode" kids than in the kids who are making direct threats. If a child needs to be arrested, I support that, but it's a great balance to*

tell a child that may be planning something that we are taking you to a hospital to get you help."

Participant #8 agreed that students who exhibit threatening behaviors might require care, saying, "*There could be a psych exam. That's very possible because if they're making a post like that, there's usually some sort of a cry for help. And then, we go with the psychological evaluation because the core is always to help the kid. The psychologist will make the determination on that.".*

Participant #9 briefly mentioned their school's policy of providing psychological or emotional care to a student in need, saying, *"There will be a disciplinary phase and a phase to try to help the child in terms of providing counselling, or any resources that the family might need."*

The comments recognizing the importance of providing these students with psychological or emotional care were consistent among all the participants.

Monitoring. The concept of monitoring relates to the continuous follow-up that occurs after a student has been identified as a potential threat. Six of the nine participants emphasized the importance of continual supervision of and contact with the subject.

Participant #1 explained that the home visits conducted by detectives from the Intelligence Unit are an integral aspect of the department's process, saying, "*intel does follow-up with the student, their family, and the schools. Is he drawing pictures of guns? Has he gotten help? Is he getting better?*"

Participant #2 provided statements that indicate the importance of staying in contact with students who have exhibited alarming behavior, saying, "*Intel will touch base just to see how things are going out there with the family. It's almost like we are just*

keeping our finger on the pulse, which I think is important. In the past, usually, you'd just close it move on. I think we've seen…looking at some of the national cases and international cases. That's when police ran into trouble if they didn't keep a finger on the pulse. If they're not paying attention to what's going on and the kid falls off their radar, but the pattern of behavior really didn't stop, then it blows up, it's going to come back, and no one wants to be in that situation."

Participant #4 explained their responsibility of staying in contact with students who have made threats of violence, saying, "*Once we tag the person as someone we are interested in, then they are ours, in that we are responsible for making sure that threat is either mitigated or justified as not being a threat anymore. We are charged with follow-up. We go to the child's home to build a relationship and mitigate that threat. Sometimes our interest doesn't end until the subject is out of school. Sometimes the visits continue. Some continue weekly for a short time, but most get visited monthly, or as needed, determined by the threat."*

Participant #5 explained their role in monitoring the student's online and social media activity, saying, "*We keep track of them in a spreadsheet. I'll keep track of their activity, and I'll be able to see if they make another suspicious post or make another threat. Then, once or twice a week, I will go to their page and look them up and see if they posted anything new. If they have, I'll send that update to the intel detectives and HLS. HLS will sometimes reach out to the school and ask, "what up with this kid? How is he doing?"*

Participant #6 discussed their district's practice of monitoring students who have been identified as a potential threat, saying, "*Someone from the school will follow up with*

families to ensure the child is getting continued help. We make sure the parents are following up and are not neglecting their role in this. Any suspension has a mandatory re-entry meeting to create dialogue and let them know about ongoing support. Let the student know where and how to get the help."

Participant #9 discussed their school's practice of monitoring students, saying, *"There will be a disciplinary phase and a phase to try to help the child in terms of providing counseling, or any resources that the family might need. We watch them closely and set up counseling. For lack of a better term, this is the rehabilitation phase to get the student back on track."*

The importance of monitoring students who have become the subject of a threat assessment was mentioned by four of the five NCPD members and two of the four educators.

Research Question #1- Theme: Training

Research Question #1 seeks to understand how the Nassau County threat assessment team members describe their decision-making process. To ascertain factors that may help them in the process, the participants were asked to describe any training, certification, or experience that has been beneficial. The responses generated two sub-themes, formal training and life experience.

Formal training. The participants' descriptions of formal training programs included programs conducted by the NCPD, by the Nassau County Board of Educational Services (BOCES), the U.S. Secret Service, and one participant commented on the benefit of a higher education degree.

Participant #1 replied to the inquiry about *training, saying, "my first week in the unit, we went to training on school threats with the Secret Service.*

Participant #2 discussed both law enforcement training and training received from educational programs, saying, *"We've had various training courses through the years. We were trained to de-escalate situations. We had training in dealing with mental health or psychological problems, for lack of better term. We've had training through BOCES* on police in schools and the relationship with the schools. And there was that Unaccompanied and Undocumented Minor training we had at a school safety conference."*

Participant #3 discussed law enforcement training modules, saying, "*I did a training with an FBI Behavioral Analyst. He told us about behavioral changes or behaviors like animal cruelty. I attended a seminar on handling students with autism. That training is very important. It makes you think about other possibilities if you encounter a youth who is acting out. Is that child really a threat, or is there another reason why they are acting differently?*

Participant #5 listed several beneficial educational and training programs, saying, "*I've done a lot of training through HIDTA (High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program). One was called Search.org. It was great. I also did the counter-terrorism training with NYPD. I have a New York State Crime Analyst certification and a bachelor's degree in Intelligence."*

Participant #6 listed the training received from the NCPD, saying, *Training and assistance from NCPD POP and HLS helped to evaluate security in all buildings. The PD provided training, including situational awareness training. Our police officers are*

also in our buildings during lock-down drills to help us. We ask questions and rely on their expertise. Now we're at the stage where they just watch and only help if we ask. They built us to the point where we are proficient."

Participant #7 discussed the importance of training provided by the U.S. Secret Service, saying, "*The best training was a seminar run by the Secret Service as Stony Brook University. I was amazed, and I started digging deeper. When my first incident happened, I dug out all that material. For a very long time, I have followed the US Secret Service model."*

Participant #8 commented on the benefit that the NCPD provided to districts, saying, "*I and members of my team, along with another school district, attended a week-long training. The training was done by NCPD Homeland Security about student threat assessment. They gave us this giant book, and we went through the whole thing. It was really enlightening. That was the biggest training. We also do drills with homeland security."*

Participant #9 Also noted the training provided to their school by NCPD, saying, "*We go to the Nassau County PD training. All the big wigs in NCPD spoke. They went over certain scenarios, so we have training in that regard."*

The comments from the educators in this sub-theme suggest that the training provided by the police department may be the only formal training on student threat assessment that they receive.

Life or Work Experience. There was significant discussion of the benefit of skills learned from other than formal training, such as experience gained through participants' years of experience in their career as NCPD members or educators. Some

participants cited different experiential learning situations, such as parenthood, frequent social media use, or communication skill developed in previous occupations.

Participant #1 did list formal training but emphasized the benefits of personal research and the interpersonal skills and knowledge of school safety developed during their police career, saying, *"We keep up with any articles and do some personal research on prior school shootings. My ten years on patrol and just talking to people have helped. Most of what I know is pretty much on-the-job training from this unit."*

Participant #3 also listed formal training programs but explained the benefits of the communication skills learned in a previous job, saying, *"Being a supervisor at a fast-food restaurant when I was a teenager has helped me deal with people. That trained me how to talk to people. It helped me understand how to empower them to choose between two good options. I use that all the time."*

Participant #4 did not discuss formal training but emphasized the benefit of learning communications skills and empathy and the skills learned as an intelligence detective, saying, "*Probably the best preparation that I had was just being a uniformed cop. I can't emphasize enough the value of being a uniformed cop and going to every kind of assignment, and dealing with people from across the economic and educational spectrum, and dealing with them in the same situations. In some ways, you're dealing with them in the same way, and in some ways, you deal with them very differently depending on how you're going to help them resolve whatever their problem is. My experience as a detective in the Intelligence Unit has helped. As much as we want to help all these kids, and that's the first goal ultimately, it is an intelligence operation. It is an intelligence operation to get the full story of what happened in these cases."*

Participant #5 noted several formal training programs but emphasized the importance of familiarity with technology and social media, saying, *"Just being 28 in the age of social media. Having the experience of using the technology day-in and day-out in my free time has been a huge tool in helping people. Just knowing makes it easier to do a productive instigation. Snap-chat, for example, 24 hours on the feed, then the threat is gone. If a Detective wants me to recover something that was posted three days ago, I already know it's gone and can't be recovered. Just knowing these things makes it easier."*

Participant #7 listed a formal training program as beneficial but also noted the importance of skills learned during his job tenure, saying, "*Talking to hundreds of kids has made me better at this. This is all about helping kids. When you dig into their background, and the litany of things they've been through, or the mental illness, there's a lot there."*

Participant #9 discussed the training provided by NCPD and noted that their school staff is also a source of information, saying, *"I also have conversations with our school psychologist and social worker. They are more up-to-date with threat assessment. They are doing the interviews and telling me what they think. I rely on them."*

The responses from four of the five NCPD members and two of the four educators demonstrated the importance of learning communication and interpersonal skills in dealing with students.

Research Question #2- Theme: Student Behavior

This research question explores the factors that influence the participant's decisions to recommend or mandate a student intervention. All participants in the study

indicated that every student threat assessment began when the student threatened to harm themselves or others. Based on the participant's comments, the threats could be conveyed verbally, via social media, or as part of a writing or art assignment. They added their perceptions that the behavior of these students was sometimes caused by identifiable factors such as psychological or emotional problems, being bullied, or other social issues. Many of these students were noticed when they engaged in identifiable behaviors or warning signs such as withdrawing, expressing their intentions via writing or art assignments, and making direct or veiled threats. Social media was a prominent theme among the participants. Social media platforms were discussed for their role in cyberbullying the student of interest or as a method for that student of interest to post threats.

Seven clusters of meaning, or sub-themes, emerged from the participant's dialogue: weapons, bullying, social media, socialization, self-harm, behavioral changes, and emotional problems. Finally, the clusters of meaning were combined to create the theme of student behavior.

Weapons. While describing the types of student behavior that caused the initiation of a student threat assessment process, all nine participants mentioned weapons as an exacerbating factor. Since any act of violence inside a school that includes a weapon will likely be of national interest, both the law enforcement members and the educators discussed the need to take action when threats discuss or show visual representations of weapons.

Participant #1 responded to a question about how a student would become the subject of a threat assessment by directly mentioned weapons, saying, "A student posting

pictures of himself with weapons, social media posting about weapons, statements of possession or access to weapons, or vague threats involving guns. Possibly some specific threats against other students to shoot, stab, kill."

Participant #2 also commented that weapons are a factor in starting the threat assessment process, saying, *"Normally, students get noticed because of social media posts, threatening posts, or posts with weapons, but it could be any threat involving a weapon." "It could be verbal comments that other students told us about, either he said he was going to shoot up the school, or his home, or parents."*

Participant #3 provided a hypothetical example of a student who responded to bullying by saying, "*Tomorrow I'm coming with my dad's hunting gun. You are done!"*

Participant # 4 described how their unit evaluates a students' actions, saying, "*Obviously, the first metric we have is whether or not a crime has been committed. If you've got a kid who brings a gun to school or has access to an unsecured firearm that he is showing off on a zoom meeting or something."*

Participant #5 described the actions that could necessitate a threat assessment by saying, *you have students who post on Snapchat that they want to shoot up the school" or "don't come to school on 4/10" "don't come to school on this day." "somebody who is hearing voices inside their head, they want to shoot up the school."*

Participant #6 also indicated that weapons elevate the concern in their district, saying, "*If it's a non-verbal threat, it would be a photo of weapon, or if they make comments about killing or hurting themselves or others. If Someone is having a conversation and a picture of a gun gets posted."*

Participant #7 asserted that a student's threat is taken more seriously if it involves a weapon, saying, "In all the cases we have investigated, access to weapons is a critical aspect.

Does the child have interest or access to weapons?"

Participant #8 commented on their district's standards for starting the assessment process, saying, "*A student could write something alarming; it could be in an essay, it could be on a desk. Certainly, social media would be the biggest way we could find out. He or she tells somebody else about their intentions to be violent or a threat in the image or guns in the image."*

Participant #9 agreed with the idea that weapons increase the level of concern, saying, *"We have to be thorough on this. If the kid is drawing pictures of guns, we can't just brush it off. We have to do a full investigation."*

The prospect of a student using weapons, primarily guns, in a school-based act of violence was a worry for all the participants in the study. There was no deviation between NCPD members' level of concern compared to that of the educators.

Bullying. A significant sub-theme that emerged from the participant's transcripts was the sentiment that students may exhibit violent or threatening behavior due to being bullied. Bullying is a major problem known to affect millions of school-aged children each year. Eight of the nine participants discussed the impact that bullying has on the issue of school violence.

Participant # 1 discussed the idea that the student who becomes the target of a threat assessment may be reacting to being bullied, saying, *"Sometimes there is an*

indication that the student has been bullied, but not all the time, I don't know if I could put a number on how many.

Participant #2 commented on the inquiries that his unit makes when they respond to a school for a reported student threat, saying, *"He's making threats? Why is he making the threats? Is it bullying or psychological problem that may need to be addressed?"*

Participant #3 provided a more detailed description of how bullying affects students, saying, "*Maybe this is a student who has been bullied in the past and now is making threats. A student may stand up in class because they just got something instant messaged to them; they stand up and say, "tomorrow I'm coming with my dad's hunting gun. You are done." "In the old days, a student could face a bully in school but get away from the bully at home or with their friends. When you're home, that's your safe haven. Now with social media, you have cyberbullying that never turns off. Cyberbullying is not one-on-one. The bullying goes out to all the student's friends, co-workers, relatives, and neighbors. This could give the student a sense of doom."*

Participant #4 also described the problem of bullying and how it might cause the victim to threaten violence, saying, *"I can think of cases where we have a kid who's made a threat and when we found out more about it... we did the interviews and did the extra work to prepare for our evaluation, we realized that the kid that made the threat wasn't the threat. That the kid that made the threat was usually being bullied by threat, and he lashed out in some way to fight back. He was tagged as having made the threat because he was acting in a moment of panic and or anger. He didn't know how to handle it and lashed out in the wrong way.*"

Participant #5 discussed bullying while providing the hypothetical types of threats that students make, saying, "*some students make specific threats, like "this is the day that I'm going to do it, this is who I want to help, this is the list of people who have been bullying me who I am going to harm."*

Participant #7 discussed factors the cause concern, saying, "*The bullying aspect. People can debate that back and forth, but I have found it to be a common denominator in most of the cases we have investigated. I am more concerned with the child who is having lunch by himself, and there are six kids at another table throwing grapes at that child."*

Participant #8 described their district's level of concern after a student threat on a scale of 1 through 10, saying, "*If this is a kid who has never been in trouble and never done anything wrong, that's going to be a 1. If this is a kid who has shown issues in the past, if there have been bullying problems, then that's going to start with a 10. We would probably have to react to this very quickly. Kids that have been bullied are looking for ways to get revenge on the kids who have bullied them."*

Participant #9 also mentioned bullying as a factor that may raise their school's level of concern, saying, "We are concerned when students withdraw or become disenfranchised with the student body, Someone who has a history of reporting being picked on or bullied. There are two types; there's that type or the silent type. The silent types are the ones you don't know about who unfortunately slip through the cracks, and you're not aware. And it might not be happening in school, or it might be happening outside a teacher's view."

Social Media. Social media and its effect on student threat assessment were mentioned in at least three different contexts. First, it was cited as a method used to cyberbully the student who may ultimately react with threatened violence. Second, it was discussed as the method used for troubled students to reveal their intentions or deliver their threats. And it was also mentioned in the context of the prior theme as a way to monitor students during the threat assessment process.

Participant #1 referred to social media as one of the methods used in delivering threats of violence, saying, "*A student might become the subject of a threat assessment by posting pictures of himself with weapons, social media posting about weapons, Social media posting regarding police capabilities to respond to a school attack, or possession or access to weapons."*

Participant #2 discussed the importance of social media as a method that students expose their violent plans and are thereby reported to the school or police, saying, "*Normally, students get noticed because of social media posts, threatening posts, or posts with weapons or posts glorify violent behavior. A student can be noticed due to someone seeing violent thought processes on social media. Social media threats must be taken seriously to avoid a disaster... it has made the problem bigger."*

Participant #3 as part of the discussion on comments on cyberbullying, discussed the role that social media plays in pushing a student on a path toward violence, saying, *"In the old days, a student could face a bully in school but get away from the bully at home or with their friends. When you're home, that's your safe haven. Now with social media, you have cyberbullying that never turns off. Cyberbullying is not one-on-one. The*

bullying goes out to all the student's friends, co-workers, relatives, and neighbors. This could give the student a sense of doom."

Participant #5 discussed social media as a method for the student of interest to deliver threats, as a method to monitor the student, and the difficulty in obtaining the evidence before it can be permanently deleted, saying, "*you have students who post on Snapchat that they want to shoot up the school. It could be online through a chat, through texting, but for the most part, it's social media-based that exposes potential threats. Social media is the number one way we get things. If there are threats on social media, I try to preserve the social media that it was posted on. So, for example, somebody posts a threat on Instagram, saying, "I want to shoot up the school," I'll try to take a screenshot and save it, so we have it on file. A lot of the time, when police respond to that school, the post will get deleted because they* (the students) *don't want to get in trouble. To recover that post from Instagram, you have to submit a preservation request, but the request has to be before the information is deleted, so it's very rare that that could be done in time."*

Participant #6 agreed that social media plays a significant role in exposing the student who may be considering targeted violence, saying, "*A student can become a focus based on a statement to peer or teacher- it could be verbal to a person, it could be online through a chat, through texting, but for the most part, it's social media-based that exposes potential threats- Social media is the number one way we get things.*" *"If someone is having a conversation, we take a snapshot of a picture of a gun that's posted. That gets forwarded to an administrator … and then the investigation begins."*

Participant #7 commented about their district's interest in students' social media posts, saying, "*We look at what the child is doing on the network at school, what's in*

their social media, or Tiktok, Instagram, or Snapchat, does the child have interest or access to weapons?"

Participant #8 discussed their experience of how students have become subjects of interest through their social media activity, saying, *"Certainly social media, that would be the biggest way we could find out. He or she tells somebody else about their intentions to be violent, or there is a threat in the image or guns in the image. Typically, we would get the social media post from another student or from a parent. They bring it to the principal, who takes a look at it. That's always our first line of defense." Usually, our POP officers will come and take a look at it. Then, they'll go to the house. They'll look to see if there are guns. And then they'll inform us of what they find. It all happens quickly. Especially if we see a threat in the image or guns in the image."*

Participant #9 explained their school's experience in dealing with past threats on social media, saying, "*Social media is a big problem in school. I would say that that's the number one way that we find out information. For example, a kid who says, "I'm going to do something to the school or I'm going to harm somebody," another kid will come in with the Instagram or Snapchat and report it, and that's how we start. We do a full assessment with our support team, school psychologist, or social workers, and guidance counselors. It starts with them, and then they bring the information to the administration. We then make a quick determination of whether the police need to be notified, especially if it is a direct threat. Then at that point, we work hand-in-hand with the authorities who have more jurisdiction in terms of the student's home computer, searching the home.."*

The topic of social media was mentioned by eight of the nine participants. Those that discussed the issue believed that it plays a significant role in bringing a potentially violent student to the attention of the school and the police.

Emotional Problems. Statements regarding psychological or emotional problems have been discussed in this chapter under the theme of the assessment process. Those statements were presented to support the participants' stated or implied goal of providing professional psychological or emotional care to troubled students before they engage in violent acts. Most students who experience emotional issues will never engage in violence. Still, it is important to note that many of those statements cited student behavior associated with emotional problems as possibly being a warning sign that might necessitate threat assessment. For example, five of the nine participants mentioned students who indicate they may be considering self-harm or suicide as a behavior that would trigger a threat assessment.

Behavioral Change. Study participants commented on the importance of school personnel's ability to recognize and report changes in a student's behavior. The behaviors mentioned in the comments involve changes in social relationships, appearance, demeanor, attendance, and academic performance. Another behavioral change of concern was a student developing violent or harmful interests which might become apparent in their writing or art assignments.

Participant #1 discussed their unit's practice of responding to schools when a threat is reported and immediately inquiring about behavioral changes, saying, *"We will go to the administrators and ask questions about if the student has done anything in the past. How is their attendance record? How's their discipline record? Ask any of their*

teachers or guidance counselors, the principal, and any other administrators. We'll see if there are any other red flags that come up. Is this just the kid making a statement, or if it looks like he's been changing his ways and acting differently."

Participant #2 made similar comments about the need to "*We will go down to the school and talk with the administration to get the background. Generally, is there any history with this child? You really have to look at the whole picture as far as what contributing factors that we have. Sometimes the threat is a one-time thing, but sometimes there are several years of history where they start having a fascination with guns and things like that. There's not a list that we put together, but it's almost like that once we exhibit a pattern of behavior, they will be on our radar.*

Participant #3 indicated that their unit inquires about changes in a variety of areas, saying, "*We ask the principal and teachers about the student's grades and if they have changed recently. Was there a change in grades, absenteeism, or lateness? Was there a negative change in appearance, behavior, or socialization? When you have a student exhibiting these signs, it's a call for help in most cases."*

Participant #4 discussed the typical discussion of cases reviewed at the weekly police meetings, saying, "*Every week on Tuesday, an analyst pulls all the case reports for our school threat meeting. When we discuss those cases, the guys from HLS will add their own perspective because they were there and give us the information that the case report doesn't give. They provide the back story, what's going on with this kid before, and the behaviors and background from the school. All the stuff you want to know that's not contained in the case report.We decide if this constitutes a school threat or not."*

Participant #7 indicated that the threat assessment team at their district tries to be aware of changes in students' behavior and demeanor, saying, "*There are a few things we look at like a recent change in their behavior. Has the child become dark? Have there been indicators noticed by teachers from a student's art or writings? Has there been a change in how they express themselves? I have seen a pattern of students withdrawing. For years we were worried about having a fight in the cafeteria. Now, we are more concerned with the child who is having lunch by himself. We look for kids sitting in the hall by themselves. That's not an indicator for all, but it's something we try to watch. I find that those kids in the dark mode don't make direct threats. I find the credibility to be higher than in the kids who are making threats.*"

Participant #9 commented that their school also watches for behavioral changes in students, saying, "*We are concerned when students withdraw or become disenfranchised with the student body.*"

Four of the five NCPD members and two of the four educators commented on the significance of watching for behavioral changes.

Research Question #3- Theme: Effectiveness

Research question #3 focused on the participants' view of the Nassau County threat assessment process. They were asked to judge its effectiveness, but since effectiveness is a subjective term, it was left to the interpretation of each participant to decide on what parameters would make the program successful or unsuccessful. The participants' views on the program's effectiveness showed that they believed the program to be a successful method of reducing targeted school violence. There were no remarks that indicated a lack of support for the current methods.

Participant #1 noted that the current process is successful because of the inter-personal connections, saying "*I think that it's the relationships that we have. We just have great relationships with the districts. We have strong relationships with the districts."*

Participant #2 enthusiastically stated that the process in Nassau is effective, saying " This needs to be done the right way and we do. It needs to be done because of where society has come with this thing (targeted school violence) and social media is so far reaching. You have the support of the administration, and the school districts… know he (the Police Commissioner) takes it seriously."

Participant #3 also expressed enthusiasm for the current process, saying "*The strength is the relationships and the fast notifications from schools. We do this job because we want to do this. We are able to impact in a positive way such a huge audience, it's great."*

Participant #4 discussed the importance of the proactive model being used in Nassau, saying "*I think that we are unique in what we are doing.. The reason why we did this was we saw, in most of the country, when these incidents did happen where you had an active shooter incident, or other types of threats, the next article in the paper was always "and the police knew all about this person three years ago and did nothing". This program is a response to that. We looked at it from the perspective of how can we as law enforcement agency protect and serve in a more complete way?"*

Participant #5 expressed "*I'm passionate about this. The Homeland Security guys do a great job, they all have a school district their assigned together. Having the same cops at the schools has caused the relationship to get better."*

Participant #6 explained their positive view of the process, process, sa*ying* "*This works because of the commitment by the district with funds and resources to respond to any threat to safety. This is a proactive systems to catch potential behaviors before something bad happens. The relationship better because of (Police Commissioner). I want them (the police) here more!"*

Participant #7 stated his support for the program, saying, "*the Nassau County program is the model. It's the model from the intervention piece, all the way up to the response piece. What's happening in Nassau County needs to be replicated. It's working, and I think the information is filtering down to the patrol cops, but certainly at the Supervisory level, those kids are winding up in a hospital (for help). On the response end, I don't think there is much like if. I feel very confident in what's happening here, and I think they (the PD) really believe in it."*

Participant #8 agreed that the process is effective, saying *"I cannot suggest an improvement. They do a wonderful job for us. The relationship with NCPD has always been excellent. Nobody that has any knowledge of what our police officers do here has any issue with them."*

Participant #9 expressed satisfaction on how the process is handled in their district, saying "*Our students and teachers are aware of the process. That's the biggest strength. If they didn't know what to do with it, then we wouldn't know about it., The school has fostered a spirit of communication on this issue."*

All nine participants expressed their approval of the collaborative student threat assessment process.

Research Question #4- Theme: Improvements

When asked about suggestions for improvement, two sub-themes emerged from the answers; comments related to the importance of policies and statements associated with the value of compliance with the assessment process.

Policies. The belief in the importance of or the need for additional written policies and procedures was evident from NCPD members, who recognized an area of the process with a potential flaw. There was a recurring concern that the detectives who are assigned to investigate the initial report from the school may or may not conduct a pistol license check of anyone living with the student of interest or ask permission to search for weapons.

Participant #1 indicated support for the program but noted the need for policy directing investigating detectives to conduct pistol license checks of the student of interest's home and family, saying, *The only thing, there is no set procedure for each and every one of these types of calls. You don't always know if the detectives did a pistol license check or went to the home to see if there were weapons or not. A lot of time, that little bit of information is a great comfort to the district or the other students involved."*

Participant #2 similarly noted the lack of policy, stating, "*I think the hole in the doughnut right now is getting the detective squads on board and getting the new cops on board. We need a more consistent squad response. A written plan, that's one of the things that we've pushed for. A worksheet is needed because there are some people that… still don't do a pistol license check, and they don't go to check the house."*

Participant #3 did not specifically mention the weapons check but noted a general need for policy, stating, *"We could use more in-depth policies and procedures, so*

everyone from the department knows their role. Because different patrol supervisors and detectives respond, it would be best if they all knew what needs to be done. We would like to have a universal response for all incidents, similar to our domestic policy."

Participant #5 also cited the problem of needing an additional policy, stating, *We've had multiple cases where the squad did not ask if weapons were present in the home. "That follow-up is important. We could also do better with police officers and detectives asking for information on social media accounts. Ask, what's your Snapchat user name? Is it attached to your cell phone number? What's your cell phone number? Do you have Instagram? Do you have Facebook? Twitter? so if I do a follow-up investigation, I have all that information."*

Participant #9 mentioned the importance of the policies that are in place in their school and also agreed with the need for policy to create consistency of the initial police response, saying, "*We have students and teachers who know protocols. If they see something, they know to bring it to us. When you have protocols, things get easier. You follow the path that you have used before and see where that leads you. Our students and teachers are aware of the process. That's the biggest strength. If they didn't know what to do with it, then we wouldn't know about it., The school has fostered a spirit of communication on this issue. On the police end, sometimes, they get here, one guy comes, then another comes, they have to get a supervisor. So that's a little cumbersome. Sometimes if our regular guys aren't working, some officers who I don't know may come, and that might cause a little bit of a problem."*

Four of the five NCPD members and one educator referenced a need for a policy to make the initial investigatory response more consistent. One of the four educators

mentioned the importance of having policies that are known to all members of the school community.

Compliance. Preventing violence in schools takes the combined efforts of many people in many differing occupations. The comments made by participants in this study show an apparent belief that they cannot accomplish that objective unless everyone in the process embraces the importance of the problem and complies with the necessary protocols and procedures. This sentiment applies to not only the people but the NCPD, schools, and districts involved.

Participant #2 discussed the need to educate the department members on the importance and creating compliance with procedures, saying, "*I think training is always a positive. We need more…training with the younger cops and getting them involved in the schools. Get them to realize that this is serious. If we all do what we're supposed to do and we handle it the right way, the number of occurrences of school violence will be minimal. If we don't, and we don't see the clues, or we choose to ignore them or not take them seriously, it's going to blow up in everybody's face. Kids are going to get hurt. You're going to have a tragedy, and you're going to have a black eye for the department. The patch means a lot to me, and I get frustrated when guys don't take this seriously.*"

Participant #4 spoke about the need for a more significant commitment of resources from the NCPD, saying, "*We probably have, between Homeland Security and us, about 15 to 20 people working on the problem at any given time. We should probably triple that. It would make it easier to not only respond to these incidents but to do a better job in following up. But that then works into budgets everything else we deal with. It's tough because you are walking a tightrope.*

Participant #5 commented on a perceived lack of understanding by certain mental health professionals, saying, *"it would be beneficial to work with mental health professionals. We have had 70 legitimate school threat cases already this year, and it's only March, and the kids haven't been in school. Much of this is not a police problem; it's a mental health problem. We've had a lot of cases where the student goes to (psychiatric hospital), but they're released in two hours. Did they even interview them? Do the doctors even know how serious this is or how serious it could be? It's like going through the motions. Reform in the mental health world is so important and difficult."*

Participant #6 discussed the importance of an across-the-board commitment, saying, "*This works because of the commitment by the district with funds and resources to respond to any threat to safety. The days when faculty or staff didn't take this issue seriously are gone. There is no room for inaction. In years past, we kept problems internal. Now, that's not an option. But, with the human element, sometimes there are gaps in communication or commitment. We cannot get lax or lazy."*

Participant #7 discussed the compliance of police members and the lack of commitment of some school districts, saying, "*There are still some districts who don't use the threat assessment process. They're missing the point. Proactive districts use this model, and it works perfectly. The districts that still don't want to share information about the child or disclose things like orders of protection, those are the districts where it falls through the cracks. Then it's a 911 call, and they've missed out on the chance for intervention. The Nassau County program is the model. It's the model from the intervention piece, all the way up to the response piece. What's happening in Nassau County needs to be replicated. It's working. I think the information is filtering down to*

the patrol cops, but it's certainly there at the Supervisory level. We can do better in the schools. There is a disparity in the belief factor. We need to get the message out to the people who interact with the students. Sometimes districts are willing to spend a huge amount of money on a camera system but won't spend $5000 to bring their staff in for training on this process. It's not just the psychologist or social worker that needs to understand. The custodians, the lunch aides, they are in the lunchroom every day and are the ones who see the bullying every day, but we don't bring them in to tell them what to look for and what to report. The boots on the ground are not getting the training."

Participant #9 discussed a belief that their school has good compliance but acknowledged that there could be gaps, saying, "*We have students and teachers who know the protocols. If they see something, they know to bring it to us. We have our protocols. When you have protocols, things get easier. Our student body will report a kid. Our students and teachers are aware of the process. That's the biggest strength. If they didn't know what to do with it, then we wouldn't know about the incident. The school has fostered a spirit of communication on this issue. I guess the biggest problem would be that there might be some people who are not communicating. There was an incident where a teacher reported that a student threatened to blow up the school. The danger is that an incident like that does not get reported to you. That's a big problem.*

Three of the five NCPD members and three of four educators spoke about the need to develop a widespread awareness of how serious the problem is and get compliance from every person who could interact with students.

Evidence of Credibility

Yin (2016) states that qualitative studies can strengthen the credibility of a study by ensuring that data was collected and interpreted correctly. The goal is to employ trustworthy methods to produce the data rather than establish the data's truthfulness. The study should also demonstrate authenticity by showing that the data accurately represents the feelings of the participants. Comparing evidence from different groups is an additional method to bolster credibility.

Trustworthiness. In this study, trustworthiness was accomplished by following the methods outlined in Chapter 3, specifically in recruiting and selecting volunteers.

Authenticity. Authenticity was achieved in the methods used to conduct private interviews and allowing the volunteers to speak freely and anonymously about their perceptions and feelings. Nine volunteers provided their answers to the questions posed during their interviews. Saturation became apparent by the seventh participant, but two additional interviews were conducted to balance the number of law enforcement participants with the number of educators.

Comparison. This study compared the responses from two distinct groups: law enforcement members and educators. The groups have vastly different forms of employment, training, and work experience. The issue of school safety is one of the few times that the group's work assignments converge. Comparing viewpoints from two subunits in a process is an effective method to reveal and understand a multi-faceted process (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of police and school administrators regarding the student threat assessment process so that the key themes and ideas can be of use to others who may be faced with protecting schools from violent attacks.

As described in Chapter 1 of this study, law enforcement agencies and the school system face a critically important task in preventing targeted school violence. The shooting incidents outlined in that chapter are just a small sample of the numerous homicidal attacks that have occurred in our nation's schools. However, those incidents show that there were warning signs exhibited by the shooter that went unaddressed. Failing to recognize warning signs and take action when they occur might have catastrophic consequences.

In addition to the number of people affected by the actual violence, the emotional effects of past shooting incidents have caused universal fear of continued attacks and outrage at the inability to prevent the violence.

The U.S. Secret Service (2021) suggests that a collaborative threat assessment model would provide the best method for preventing future school shootings. Threat assessment is a deductive process that involves identifying individual students who may pose a threat, gathering as much information about their behavior as possible, then determining the amount of danger the student poses to others (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

Discussion of Findings

The data collected during the interview portion of this study was applied to the research questions. The consistent ideas that the study participants discussed provide an important insight into a practical student threat assessment framework.

Research Question #1

R. Q. 1-How do members of the Nassau County threat assessment team describe their decision-making process to recommend a student for intervention?

The participants were asked to describe their view of the student assessment process and any training, certification, or experience that may have benefitted them in conducting a threat assessment. Their responses were categorized into two themes and seven sub-themes. The "Assessment Process" theme is comprised of Alliance, Proactive, Communication, Mental or Emotional Care, and Monitoring. The "Training" theme has two sub-themes, Formal Training and Life or Work Experience.

Research Question #1- Theme: Assessment Process. The assessment process comments were in response to two separate questions. One asked participants to describe their concept of the student threat assessment process. The next question asked them to explain their individual role in the process.

Alliance. Seven of the nine study participants described the threat assessment process as a cooperative effort between the police department and the schools. The two participants who did not address their interaction with the schools did describe their role in building relationships with the subject of the threat assessment and their family to maintain contact and monitor that the subject was not engaging in any further pre-attack activity. When viewed in this context, these statements suggest that participants see the

threat assessment process as a collective effort that succeeds when all segments of the school community work together.

The statements that are noticeable in the alliance sub-theme include discussions of the joint training and drills, the daily police visits to schools, and threat information sharing between the police and the schools. The issues described by the participants closely match the recommendations of Modzeleski & Randazzo (2018), who recognized that student threat assessment should be a holistic effort of school administrators working together with law enforcement, with participation from the whole school community. Another aspect of this alliance ties into the next sub-theme, the joint goal of being proactive in recognizing the signs of potential violence and providing the student with some non-punitive intervention.

Proactive. One of the author's preconceptions at the start of this study was that the NCPD members would be using traditional law enforcement methods to identify and arrest students who might be planning a school shooting. The statements provided by the study participants show that both NCPD members and educators view the student threat assessment process as a way of recognizing troubled students before any criminal activity or targeted violence occurs. The findings of the preventive intervention techniques used in Nassau County are consistent with those of a study testing previous claims that police interaction in schools results in an increased likelihood of student arrests or a "school to prison pipeline." Pigott, Stearns, and Khey (2018) used data from the 2009–2010 School Survey on Crime and Safety. They determined that schools with police officers present were more likely to provide services to the student and did not translate into higher rates of police reports.

Communication. There was frequent discussion by the participants about observing, collecting, and most importantly, communicating information about students who might require intervention with others involved in threat assessment. The ability to recognize and help troubled students before they take violent action requires cooperation, planning, training, and the seamless application of policy. These individual components of the process cannot be accomplished without the continual communication described in the interviews.

Mental or Emotional Care. Predicting a person's inclination toward violence is a difficult task. The American Psychological Association (2013) report on gun violence states that conduct disorders, anti-social disorders, and substance abuse may increase a person's likelihood of violence toward others. Unfortunately, this understanding has not translated into an ability for mental health experts to accurately predict which individuals are likely to commit violent attacks. Instead of predicting violence, the report advocates using behavioral threat assessment techniques to identify individuals who have committed acts that indicate the presence of these disorders.

The goal of the threat assessment process is not to predict whether a student might be harmful to themselves or others. Instead, the goal is to recognize behavioral factors that indicate that violence may be possible. When those behavioral factors are identified, the student should be provided the necessary psychological or emotional care.

Monitoring. Once a student has been identified as potentially harmful to themselves or others, they should be subject to continual follow-up through visits or telephone contacts. Additionally, their teachers, families, guardians, or anyone in a position to observe the student's behavior should be contacted to ensure that the child is

receiving the help they might need and is not engaging in actions that might cause concern.

There is a likelihood that any significant threats involving weapons will result in a student's suspension from school. If this occurs, the school administrators and law enforcement agencies must continue to monitor the child's progress. Several past targeted attacks involved students who had been removed from and were not permitted in the school (U.S. Secret Service, 2018).

If the threatening behavior results in the student's arrest, then it is likely that a Family Court Judge would mandate some form of monitoring.

Research Question #1- Theme: Training. Just as communication between the entities is necessary for the threat assessment process to succeed, joint training is also needed. This study shows that school administrators rely heavily on situational awareness training and active shooter; lock-down- lock-out drills provided by the police department. Joint training, drills, and exercises allow each entity to practice for their response to a critical incident, understand their responsibilities, capabilities, and limitations, and understand their counterparts' capabilities and limitations. These joint sessions should include all persons and agencies who would be present in an actual emergency, including students.

It is essential to learn from problems that arise during drills or exercise. An after-action report can play a vital role in illustrating which aspects of the response plan work well and which parts may need revision. Mistakes or unforeseen actions by any necessary response component during an active shooter event could have catastrophic consequences (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2018).

Research Question #2

R.Q. (2). What factors influence their decisions to recommend or mandate a student for intervention?

Participants were asked to describe the types of actions or behaviors that would cause a student to become the subject of a threat assessment process and how the team determines the level of threat the student poses. The responses were categorized into one theme, Student Behavior, comprised of six sub-themes: Weapons, Bullying, Social media, Self-harm, Emotional problems, and Behavioral changes.

Research Question #2-Theme: Student Behavior. The data collected in this research outlines the behaviors that influence the decisions to recommend or mandate a student intervention. In most cases, a student becomes the subject of a threat assessment only after threatening to harm themself, or others. The threat assessment process includes a review of the student's behavior before the time of the threat. Troubling behaviors or warning signs such as withdrawing, expressing their intentions via writing or art assignments and making direct or veiled threats would cause the threat assessment team to recommend psychological or emotional care and monitoring. Severe behavior might necessitate removal from school or possibly criminal charges if laws are violated.

A student who exhibits warning behaviors may be signaling behavioral, cognitive, and emotional processes, leading to an increased likelihood of violent actions. Assessment teams should not expect that the student of interest will exhibit every warning behavior. However, typical patterns of warning behaviors often precede acts of targeted violence (Meloy, et al., 2014)

Weapons. Incidents of gun violence occurring in schools capture the nation's attention. Due to the intense media coverage, the resulting fear caused by these incidents is proportionally higher than the fear caused by other types of violence that occur on a more frequent basis (Haan and Mays, 2013). According to school shooting statistics, handguns were used in 81% of school shootings and shotguns in 12%. Rifles were used in 14% of the shootings, but they caused a higher casualty and fatality rate than handguns and shotguns. (Livingston, Rossheim, and Stidham Hall, 2018).[1]

While most mass killings are committed using guns, rampage-style attacks have occurred with weapons other than guns (Agnich, 2014). The investigation of the student's weapons should include bladed instruments, explosives, or chemicals that can be combined to make homemade explosives.

Schools must be vigilant to watch for students who have an unusual fascination with guns or images of gun violence. Once a student becomes the subject of an assessment, it is imperative for law enforcement agencies to make every effort to ensure that they do not have access to weapons. This effort will likely require persuasion since guns may be legally owned. Building a relationship of trust with the student and their parents or guardians should be undertaken by law enforcement members. If firearms are present in the home, the student and their parents must be encouraged that it is best to relinquish any firearms to prevent their use in a moment of emotional distress. Simple license checks may not be enough to verify if the student has access. Many of the guns used in recent mass school shootings were not legally owned (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014). Parents may be unaware that their child has a weapon, so they should be

[1] The total of these statistics exceeds 100% because some school shootings involved more than one assailant, or more than one weapon.

encouraged to consent to the police searching the child's room and other areas where a gun might be secreted.

Bullying. Bullying is a significant public health issue that can negatively affect a child's sense of safety, stability, and bonding. Bullying involves repeated acts of hostile behavior by another youth or group of youths. One in five students between 12 and 18 stated they had been the victim of bullying in 2017. The percentage is higher, approximately 40%, for students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. A higher rate of females (30%) than males (19%) reported being bullied, and the rate was also higher for white students (29%) than Hispanic (19%) and Black students (18%). The effects of bullying include physical injury and social or emotional distress. Bullying has caused some victims to commit self-harm or suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Social media. Social media platforms play a significant role in the behavior of school shooters. It has been used as a modality to cyberbully students, causing some victims to choose extreme response methods. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat have been used as a platform for troubled students to express their intentions to hurt or kill themselves or others. Nikolas Cruz, the perpetrator of the 2018 school shooting attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, used Instagram to post threatening messages, including "I do and don't care I have my life and I wanna fucking kill people', "I whana shoot people with my AR-15" and "Im going watch them sheep fall fuck antifa I wish to kill as many as I can." The commission formed to review the tragic incident called Cruz's social media posting as "missed indicators of targeted violence" (Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, 2019).

Self-harm. The participant comments regarding a student's indication that they were planning to harm or kill themselves were considered a separate but related sub-theme to psychological or emotional problems. It is vital for law enforcement members and school personnel to understand that the same processes used to recognize students planning violent attacks may also reveal students contemplating suicide. In either case, detecting the planned action provides an early opportunity for those students to receive support or treatment from health professionals.

Threats of suicide have preceded some past school shootings and must be taken seriously. In 2014, 15-year-old student Jaylen Fryberg had texted threats of suicide several times in the days before he attacked his fellow students at Marysville Pilchuck High School in Washington. Fryberg killed four students and wounded three before he killed himself as a teacher tried to intervene. The investigation into Fryberg's background revealed that he had texted several threats to his acquaintances, including "Fuck It!!" "Might As Well Die Now," " I set the date. Hopefully you regret not talking to me", and " Bang bang I'm dead." (Kutner, 2015).

Assessment teams should take note of any previous threats of suicide made by the student of interest. Suicidal thoughts can signify that the person has lost hope, and those thoughts may be accompanied by behaving violently toward others. Targeted violence offenders often contemplate suicide but choose to use violence as a form ao revenge against the people they blame for their feelings of hopelessness (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Psychological or emotional problems. Although it is not the role of the threat assessment team to diagnose mental illness, behaviors that might indicate mental illness

should be observed and be considered when assessing the potential for violence. Mass murderers have been found to have a significantly higher percentage of severe mental illness than the general population. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Although most people who have a severe mental illness are not violent, they have a slightly higher risk of committing violent acts than people who do not suffer from mental illness. A review of school shootings between 1940 and 2018 showed that 36% of the shooters had an identified mental illness at the time of the shooting (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

Behavioral changes. Preventing acts of violence in schools requires identifying and interpreting a student's behavior. Using a student's behavior to determine risk requires an in-depth examination to understand their typical characteristics and traits. The people who have frequent contact with the student, such as teachers and counselors, will be beneficial in developing a holistic view of the student. The quality of the information provided by these sources will affect the accuracy of the assessment.

In addition to the threats made in the form of leakage, assessment teams should take note of new behavioral patterns in the student, such as preoccupation with weapons, military or law enforcement tactics, or previous attacks or attackers. The student may also have committed an uncharacteristic act of violence as a way to test their resolve for a more lethal attack. Past attackers have frequently indicated increased desperation or distress in their communications (Meloy, et al., 2014).

Other behaviors that should be of concern include failing to take prescribed medications, increased absences from school, withdrawal from social relationships, or increased isolation (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Research Question #3

R.Q. (3). Is the Nassau County threat assessment process effective?

Participants were asked to describe their personal view of the threat assessment process, its strengths, and weaknesses, and suggest any ways it can be approved.

Research Question #3- Theme: Effectiveness. Using the perceptions of participants from NCPD and Nassau school districts to instruct future student threat assessments implies that the Nassau model is effective and is worthy of being replicated. All nine participants were enthusiastic in their views of the current process. The interviews in total show that the process is successful in identifying students who may be on a path toward violent or destructive behaviors and provides them with the care and supervision that could help to alleviate the underlying problems.

Research Question #4

R.Q. (4). Are there any improvements that could make the Nassau County threat assessment process more effective?

Participants were asked to suggest any ways the process can be approved. It was apparent that all nine participants were enthusiastic about the current state of the collaborative effort to reduce the threat of targeted violence in Nassau schools. However, their comments indicated two areas in need of improvement.

Research Question #4- Theme: Improvements. Participants' recommendations indicated the need for additional written policy to direct actions and to gain compliance from those individuals, schools, or districts that have resisted using the threat assessment model.

Policies. Comprehensive written policies to direct the actions of threat assessment team members and all faculty, school staff, and police personnel must be developed. School policies should include a zero-tolerance for unacceptable behavior, direct that those behaviors are reported to the police, and direct compliance with the resulting police investigation (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Police agencies should develop policies that explain the school-police partnerships' goals and direct the law enforcement response, protocols, and interactions during school threat incidents. They should collaborate with schools and school districts to develop a plan that defines the roles and responsibilities for school threat assessment teams, behavioral threat assessment, information sharing, and the mechanisms for schools to report concerning behavior (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2020). Creating and maintaining a joint plan will create unity of purpose and bring the two groups closer (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2018).

Compliance. School security is everyone's responsibility. Building widespread agreement on the importance of student threat assessment among all police department members and school personnel is vitally important and should never be considered to be completed. There will always be new personnel to train and entrenched personnel who may not fully embrace its importance. Police agencies should develop school safety training programs for school employees and students. Training students to recognize and report disturbing behavior is crucial because they are often the first to become aware of these actions.

Leadership is also essential in developing compliance among all personnel involved in school safety. This effort requires a top-down approach in which the

executives in the schools, districts, and police agencies visibly and actively support the process (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Limitations and delimitations

Due to the limited number of potential participants, this study has a small sample size. Due to the limited number of participants, the implications may not be transferable to all jurisdictions. The NCPD is comprised of dozens of individual commands situated within the Patrol Division, Detective Division, and Support Division. Only two NCPD commands, the Homeland Security Unit and the Asset Forfeiture Intelligence Unit, are actively involved in the student threat assessment process. Both of those police commands were asked to provide two or three members willing to participate in the study. Each of the school districts chosen for the study was asked to provide one or two members willing to participate in the study. Obtaining data from eight to twelve participants improves the level of data saturation and increases the analytic generalizability of the data. Analytic generalization, as defined by Yin (2016) is a two-step process in which investigators demonstrate how their findings clarify concepts or constructs, then explain how those concepts or constructs are applicable to other similar situations.

A concern in this study was that the participants might be unwilling to share information that might reflect badly on themselves, their qualifications or training, their agency or district, or the students who have been the subject of assessment. That problem may be impossible to fully eliminate, but the author provided assurance that all responses will be kept confidential, and only those statements regarding decision-making and assessment procedures will be published. To build trust and rapport with the participants,

the author identified his background in law enforcement and explained that the intent of the study is not to highlight any past mistakes but only to provide beneficial information to law enforcement members or educators who may be tasked with student threat assessment in the future.

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of police and school administrators regarding the student threat assessment process so that their knowledge and expertise might be beneficial to others. The participants who agreed to participate in this study were all in enthusiastic agreement that the coalition between the NCPD and the schools and districts represented in the study effectively identifies troubled students and finds appropriate help in the form of psychological support and counseling. Finding the students who may be on a pathway to violence and referring them for help is only part of a viable solution to targeted violence. The question that remains unanswered is whether that psychological support effectively diverts the student from contemplating future violence.

Potential Research Bias

To establish thoroughness in a generic qualitative study, researchers should address personal biases or assumptions (Kennedy, 2016). The interview process included in this study involved eliciting narrative accounts of incidents and conditions experiences by law enforcement members. Since the author has spent three decades as a law enforcement member, there is a likelihood that he may make assumptions based on incomplete information provided by the participants. Protecting the accuracy of the data and the study results required the author to obtain very detailed explanations of questions and refrain from making assumptions.

Recommendation for Future Research

Based on the study limitation mentioned above, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of the threat assessment process using multiple police jurisdictions and school systems. Examining the threat assessment process in several jurisdictions might provide a contrast between the jurisdictions that fully embrace the program versus those who do not. That study may also uncover innovative policies or techniques that could be useful to future practitioners.

Implications

Targeted violence in schools remains a significant problem in the United States. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) reports show that homicide is the second leading cause of death for children between the ages of 5 and 18. In 2018, the number of shooting incidents at K-12 schools and the number of deaths resulting from those incidents was higher than in any prior year (Riedman & O'Neill, 2018).

Numerous examples from previous school shooting incidents show that shooters exhibited certain warning signs before the attack, and those signs went unaddressed by school officials and law enforcement agencies. The student threat assessment process was developed to help guide educators and law enforcement members to recognize the warning signs so that action can be taken to before a violent incident occurs. Threat assessment is a deductive process that involves identifying individual students who exhibit warning signs that they are on a pathway toward violence, gathering as much information about their behavior as possible, and using that information to determine if they require intervention. Interventions might include suspension or removal from school, psychological or emotional care, monitoring, and possibly arrest.

While it may not be possible to eradicate school violence, the results of this dissertation support past studies to show evidence that police agencies, working in concert with schools, can take positive steps to address targeted violence.

This dissertation was constructed to guide educators and law enforcement members who may be tasked with preventing school shootings and the results will be presented to the Commissioner of the Nassau County Police.

A qualitative method was used to gather data from school administrators and law enforcement personnel who have experience in the student threat assessment process.

The findings of this research have broad-based implications for law enforcement members and school administrators. The study data expands the literature on the methods used to prevent school violence by recognizing the types of student behaviors that might indicate they are on a pathway toward violence. The evidence also demonstrates the importance of being proactive in providing appropriate psychological or emotional care before they engage in violence. This study illuminates the importance of personal relationships, communication, and the spirit of cooperation that are needed to strengthen the mutual efforts of the schools and police.

The study also highlights the importance of the police and the school system sharing similar goals for troubled students. Police agencies should avoid any policies that result in unnecessary arrests. Officers must forgo the traditional path of seeking to incarcerate troubled youths and embrace the idea that intervention through appropriate psychological help may serve the student and the school community and the long-term interests of the police department.

Unabated monitoring of students who may have been on a path toward violence is a key aspect of a successful student threat assessment program. Checking the student's behaviors, academic progress, social interactions, and emotional health can help to prevent future tragedies. Police and educators must conduct continual follow-up visits or telephone contacts with the student, their teachers, families, guardians, or anyone in a position to observe the student's behavior to ensure that the child is receiving the help they might need and is not engaging in actions that might cause concern.

Maintaining an effective student threat assessment program takes active participation and attention from police and school executives. It is unlikely that the police department and school employees will fully embrace the importance of the problem unless there is top-down leadership. Executives must provide written policies outlining the program's goals and the expected level of participation of all members of the agency or school. Once the guidelines have been established, all employees must be trained to understand their expected role fully.

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Appendix A: Letter to School Administrator

Date:
Superintendent of Schools
School District Name
Address

Re: Dissertation Research, Nova Southeastern University

Dear Superintendent,

I am seeking your cooperation in completing a dissertation research study designed to understand how school systems and police agencies identify and provide intervention for students who may be on a path toward violence.

The purpose of this research is to examine the process of school-based threat assessment by using the perspective of educators and police officers and who have participated in the student threat assessment process. The resulting data will explore the factors that affect their decisions and identify the external factors that might benefit or hinder the process. The study will not discuss or identify any past interactions and is intended solely to provide beneficial information to educators or law enforcement members who will conduct student threat assessments in the future.

I am requesting your permission to seek one or two volunteers from your district administrators or faculty who have participated in the student threat assessment process. Those who choose to volunteer will be interviewed, either in person or using Zoom, if social distancing issues arise. I will conduct these interviews one-on-one, and each should take approximately 30 minutes. Volunteer's identities will not be published, and their participation will be kept confidential. No individual students, schools, or specific incidents will be discussed during the interviews or mentioned in the study's published results. The name of the School or District where the volunteer works will not be published. The participating Districts will be described only in terms of being located within Nassau County and their relative size compared to other county school districts.

Any individual from your District who agrees to participate in an interview will receive a $50 Gift Card as compensation for their involvement.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for a follow-up or if additional information is required.

Sincerely,

Christopher J. Cleary

Appendix B: Letter to Police Commissioner

Date:

Commissioner of Police
Nassau County Police Department
1490 Franklin Ave. Mineola, New York

Re: Dissertation Research, Nova Southeastern University

Dear Commissioner,

As affirmed in your department's commitment to reducing the threat of school violence, we must do all we can to prevent shootings at our nation's schools. In that spirit, I am seeking your cooperation in completing a dissertation research study designed to understand how police agencies and schools identify students and determine intervention needs for students who may be on a path toward violence.

The purpose of this research is to examine the process of school-based threat assessment by using the perspective of police officers and educators who have participated in the student threat assessment process. The resulting data will explain the factors that affect their decisions and identify the factors that might benefit or hinder the process. The study will not discuss or identify any past NCPD interactions and is intended solely to provide beneficial information to law enforcement members or educators who may be tasked with student threat assessment in the future.

I am requesting your permission to seek five volunteers from your department members who participate in the student threat assessment process. The five members who choose to volunteer will be interviewed, either in-person, or using Zoom if social distancing issues arise. I will conduct these interviews one-on-one, and each will take approximately 30 minutes. The member's identities will not be published, and their participation will be kept confidential. No individual cases, incidents, or students will be identified in the published results of the study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if additional information is required.

Sincerely,

Christopher J. Cleary

Appendix C: Interview Questions Framework

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF STUDENT THREAT ASSESSMENT IN NASSAU COUNTY, NEW YORK

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the process of school-based threat assessment by using the perspective of police officers and educators who have experience in the student threat assessment process. The resulting data will explain the factors that affect their decisions and identify the external factors that might benefit or hinder the process.

Questions:

1) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe in as much detail as possible how a student may become the subject of a threat assessment.
2) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe in as much detail as possible the process of how a threat assessment is conducted.
3) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe in as much detail as possible your individual role and responsibilities in student threat assessment.
4) Please describe any specific certification, training, or experience that you have in student threat assessment and if it has helped you.
5) Without naming or identifying any specific student or case, please describe in as much detail as possible the process of how you determine the level of threat posed by a student.
6) Please describe your personal view of the threat assessment process. What are the process's strengths and weaknesses, and can you suggest any ways to improve the process?

If a participant's response to any of these questions seems incomplete or lacks the detail necessary for interpreting meaning, the author will use probes or follow-up questions to elicit further discussion.