



# School-Based Threat Assessment: Assessing the Danger a Student Might Present to Self and Others

Stephen E. Brock<sup>1</sup> · Melissa A. Louvar Reeves<sup>2</sup>

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As we sat down to write an introduction to this special issue of *Contemporary School Psychology* on the topic of school-based threat assessment, we did so with a heavy heart. For underscoring the issue's importance, recent tragedies in western Kentucky and southern Florida had just taken the lives of 19 students and wounded 32 others (Chuck et al. 2018; Yan et al. 2018). Rightfully so, these horrific school shootings are currently occupying much of the national consciousness. However, this should not result in us overlooking the fact that each day in our country over 22 school-aged youth (age 5 to 18 years) die by suicide, and over 312 others in this age group engage in nonfatal self-injury [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2018a, b]. These frightening statistics further emphasize the importance of this special issue, which includes six articles related to behavioral threat assessment and management, and three articles relevant to the topic of school suicide risk assessment. In our introduction to this special issue, we strive to place the topics of behavioral threat assessment and suicide risk assessment within an appropriate perspective, as well as providing an overview of the articles contained within this issue.

## Behavioral Threat Assessment

Likely, at least in part, in response to the recent school shootings in Kentucky and Florida, we have seen increased calls for improved school safety. For example, the National Institute of Justice's *Comprehensive School Safety Initiative* (2018) has called for research designed to develop "... knowledge about

the root causes of school violence, developing strategies for increasing school safety, and rigorously evaluating innovative school safety strategies through pilot programs" (§ 2). Consistent with this public expression of need, the "threat assessment" literature has been growing in recent years. Figure 1 provides a graph illustrating this growth. Making use of the term "threat assessment," we searched the PsycINFO database by year for each of the past 20 years. A clear increase in publications referencing "threat assessment" is observed. More specifically, in the last 4 years, over 56% of all such papers were published, a fact that we suspect might be related to the tragic shootings that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2013.

In addition to threat assessment scholarship, we have also observed a substantial increase in attention to this issue (and school violence in general) in the popular press. In fact, there has been so much attention to this issue we suspect that many in our country have come to believe our schools to be flawed and horribly violent institutions. Consistent with the almost daily news reports implying that schools are unsafe, Musu-Gillete et al. (2017) report that 7% of fourth grade teachers and 13% of eighth grade teachers in the USA view their schools as less than safe and orderly. This percentage was higher than percentages reported in 22 other countries for fourth grade teachers (only Bahrain, Jordan, Japan, Morocco, and Chile reported higher percentages), and higher than that reported in 30 other countries for eighth grade teachers (only Japan, Chile, Turkey, and Morocco reported higher percentages).

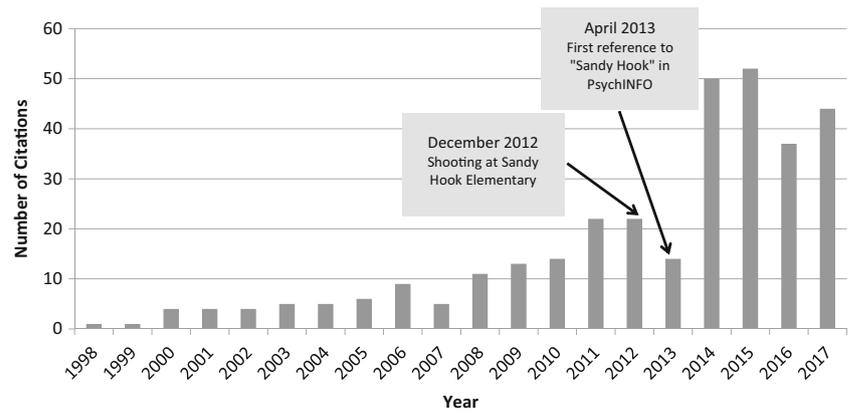
However, when we look at data regarding the actual occurrence of acts of school violence, while the numbers remain unacceptably high, there is reason to believe schools are safer today than they were in years past. For example, Fig. 2 reports results from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC n.d.). This is a biannual study conducted of high school grade students' health-risk behaviors that contribute to leading causes of death and disability. As illustrated in Fig. 2, in the most recent survey, the percentage of youth who reported having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property was at its

✉ Stephen E. Brock  
brock@csus.edu

<sup>1</sup> California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC, USA

**Fig. 1** Citations using the term “threat assessment” found in the PsycINFO database by year (1998 to 2017)



lowest point since these data began to be collected in 1993, with the linear trendline headed downward.

A similar pattern is observed for school-associated violent deaths (Musu-Gillette et al. 2017). Figure 3 reports the number of homicides of youth age 5 to 18 years at school. As can be seen by inspection of the linear trendline, and despite dramatic exceptions to this pattern (e.g., the 2012/13 year during which 20 of the 31 deaths were accounted for by a single incident at Sandy Hook Elementary), the overall pattern is a reduction of school-associated student homicides. However, as we acknowledge in our contribution to this issue (Louvar Reeves and Brock 2018), one homicide is one to many. Consequently, we must continue to strive to continue to make schools safer and safer places.

While with this issue, we are clearly suggesting that one approach to making schools safer is improving our schools' ability to provide behavioral threat assessment and management; we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that gun violence is a national scourge. Consequently, as has been advocated for by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP 2018), we must acknowledge the need to support public policies aimed at reducing gun violence. Potentially supporting these efforts at promoting gun safety

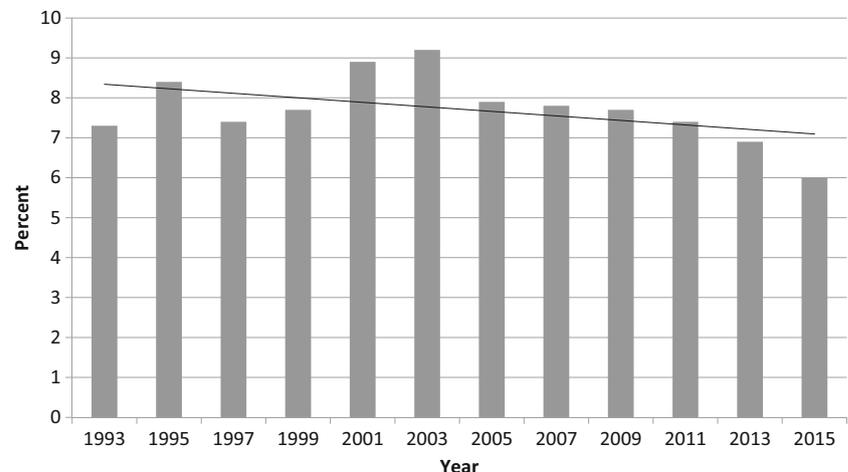
measures is careful analysis of Fig. 3, which finds the lowest 5-year period of school-associated homicides occurred between the 1999–2000 and the 2003–04 school years, which happen to be the final 5 years of the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act (1993–1994), which is also known as the “Assault Weapons Ban.”

## Suicide Risk Assessment

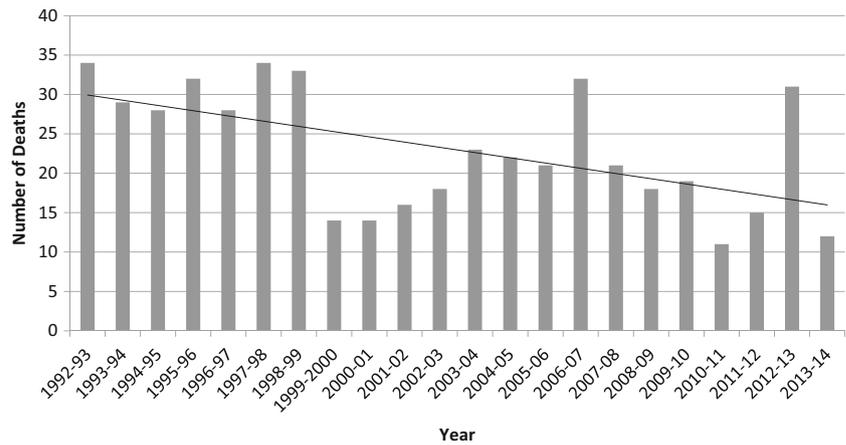
The issue's articles on school-based suicide risk assessment are especially relevant to California school psychologists given relatively recent requirements for all school districts serving students in grades seven through 12 to have governing board policies that include risk assessment protocols. Specifically, as of July 1, 2017, Pupil Suicide Prevention Policies (2016), requires public school districts to adopt policies that “... at a minimum, address procedures relating to suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention” (§ 2). Analysis of available suicide data suggests this addition to California's Education Code (§ 215) to be especially timely.

While there is reason to believe that we are making progress toward the goal of increasing school safety and reducing

**Fig. 2** The percent of US ninth through twelfth grade students who report having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (in the 12 months prior to completing the survey; 1993 to 2015). Adapted from the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (n.d.) data sets



**Fig. 3** Number of homicide deaths of youth ages 5 to 18 years at school. Adapted from Musu-Gillete et al. (2017, p. 33)



school violence, the same cannot be said regarding the problem of youth suicide. Thus, even for educators not having to attend to a new education code, there is an immediate need to be better prepared to respond to the problem of youth suicidal thinking and behavior. For as documented in our contribution to this issue (Brock and Reeves 2018), we have recently seen a disturbing increase in suicide deaths among school-aged youth. In addition, as illustrated in Fig. 4, an increase in non-fatal suicidal behaviors has also been observed. Again according to the CDC (n.d.), while there was a consistent decline in the percentages of high school grade youth’s self-reports of nonfatal suicidal behaviors from the initial YRBS in 1991 up until the 2007 report, since the 2009 report (and highlighted in Fig. 4), there has been a consistent increase in these behaviors.

### This Special Issue

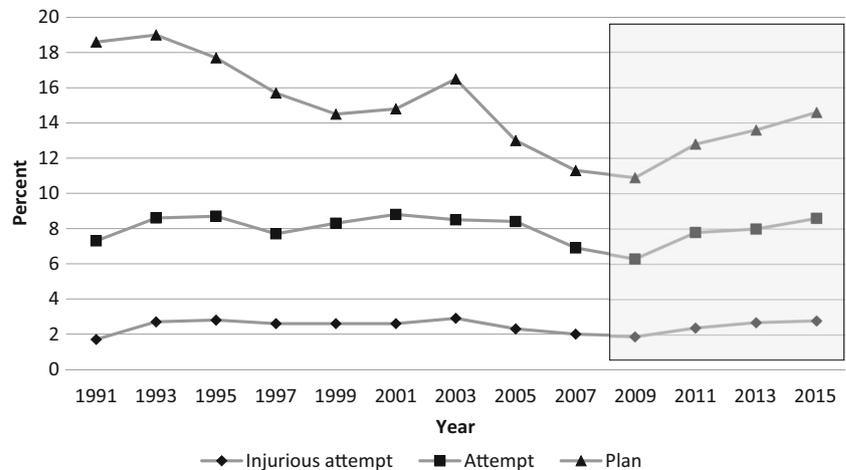
It is our most sincere hope that the articles in this issue will support needed research and contribute to the development of knowledge in the areas of behavioral threat assessment and

management, and suicide risk assessment. This issue begins with six articles focused on the topic of threat assessment. These include three practically oriented articles classified as “tools for practice,” a systemic review, and two original research articles.

Authors of this part of the special issue include Marissa Reddy Randazzo, an internationally recognized expert on threat assessment, targeted violence, and violence prevention. She co-directed the *Safe School Initiative*, the landmark federal study of school shootings conducted jointly by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. This work led to the development of the Secret Service Model of behavioral threat assessment. Along with William Modzeleski (former Associate Assistant Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools), a “tools for practice” article is offered that provides a brief history of the development of this model of school-based threat assessment. We believe readers will find their “lessons learned” about the model’s use in assessing threats; and in training students, parents, and educators to recognize dangerous situations, very helpful.

This special issue also includes an article by a Dewey Cornell, who is a pioneering researcher in the area of school-

**Fig. 4** The percent of US ninth through twelfth grade students who report having as suicide attempt that required treatment from a doctor or nurse, a suicide attempt, and a suicide plan (in the 12 months prior to completing the survey; 1991 to 2015). The area shaded in gray highlights bifurcation of the trends over time. Adapted from the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (n.d.) data sets



based behavioral threat assessment. Along with his colleague Jennifer Maeng, Dr. Cornell provides a systematic review of the development and adaptation of the *Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines*. We anticipate that readers will find this article's discussion of online programs designed to inform students, parents, and educators about threat assessment informative. We also believe that readers will find their "lessons learned" about implementing a statewide threat assessment program to provide important guidance.

This section's two original research articles include a paper by Scott Waitaszewski, Franci Crepeau-Hopbson, Christina Conolly, and Melinda Cruz (all members of the NASP's School Safety and Crisis Response Committee). This article provides a comprehensive review of state-level requirements for threat assessment (and is part of the research being conducted for the third edition of NASP's PREPaRE Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum). This review reveals that currently, only one state clearly mandates school threat assessment, and only five others have statutes, standards, or procedures that imply the need for such. Shelley Hart and colleagues submitted the other original research article. This thought-provoking study explored the role of special education placement in affecting the developmental trajectory of aggression. This study suggested the possibility that such placements may have a protective function.

Additional "tools for practice" articles include a paper we (Melissa Louvar Reeves and Stephen Brock) wrote, designed to provide a broad overview of what we consider to be best practices in behavioral threat assessment and management. In addition, the 2017 NASP School Psychologist of the Year, Shawna Rader Kelly, provides a practicing school psychologist's, real world, perspective on school-based threat assessment teams.

The issue concludes with three articles on the topic of suicide risk assessment. This section includes a "tools for practice" article we (Stephen Brock and Melissa Louvar Reeves) wrote, designed to provide detailed and practical guidance on how to conduct a school-based suicide risk assessment. This section includes a second "tools for practice" paper. Written by Terri Erbacher and Jonathan Singer, this article offers discussion of a specific tool for monitoring suicide risk in the school setting. Finally, an original research submission by Jacqueline Brown, Anisa Goforth, and Greg Machek offers the results of a survey examining a rural state's school psychologists' involvement and training in suicide risk assessment.

We hope readers will find valuable the practical guidance contained within the pages of this special issue of *Contemporary School Psychology*. In particular, we hope that these contributions to the literature will play a role in the prevention of both self- and other-directed violence. For as we all know, one fatal injury of a school-aged youth is one to many.

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**Stephen E. Brock, Dr.**, is a Professor and the School Psychology Program Coordinator at California State University, Sacramento. Previously, he worked as a school psychologist and the Lead Psychologist for the Lodi Unified School District (Lodi, CA). His scholarship has emphasized study of school crisis prevention and response (including behavioral threat assessment and management, and suicide prevention). He is a past president of both the California and National associations of school psychologists (CASP and NASP).

**Melissa A. Louvar Reeves, Dr.**, is an Associate Professor in the Psychology Department at Winthrop University (Rock Hill, SC). Previously, she worked as a school psychologist for the Cherry Creek School District (Greenwood Village, CO). Her scholarship has emphasized study of school crisis prevention and response (including behavioral threat assessment and management). She is a past president of the National Association of School Psychologists.