Death Threats and Violence
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Until recent decades, there was little emphasis on studying death threats as a social or psychological phenomenon. However, since the 1960s, attacks on public officials and celebrities and the ubiquitous nature of homicidal threats in face-to-face relations have spawned research and new organizational responses to death threats and related behaviors, such as stalking. Publicized workplace-related death threats and shootings, such as the 21 separate incidents since 1986 in which U.S. Postal Service employees were shot, and the death threats and attacks directed at schools and universities have helped to transform death threats from a private phenomenon into a social problem. Political leaders have developed new policies, organizational structures, and laws in an attempt to prevent death threats and related violence. Moreover, in the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. government and other governments around the world have formulated new policies and organizational structures to deal with the threat of terrorist attacks.

At the level of interpersonal relations, the weakening of social control processes allows individuals to make homicidal threats against people and organizations in different settings. This book will address such questions as, Under what conditions are individuals able to evade social control by making death threats? What factors trigger the response of social control mechanisms to death threat makers? How effective are the institutional responses to death threats? At the macrolevel, this book assesses how governments and paramilitary and terrorist groups also employ death threats to achieve their desired social and political objectives.

Data from the Stalking and Violence Project (SVP) and other sources are used to explore the nature of death threats and the process of regulating offenders in different relationships (see Appendix A, “Research Methods,” and Appendix B, “Study Results,” Tables B.1 to B.14). The SVP data are derived from a random sample of 519 victims of self-reported domestic violence who filed restraining orders in two large metropolitan areas.

Chapter 1 explores the different forms in which death threats are communicated and their impact on the social control process. This chapter emphasizes the different meanings and consequences of death threats in different settings.

Chapter 2 describes the characteristics of death threat makers and focuses on the risk factors that weaken the mechanisms of social control and increase the
likelihood that individuals will make death threats. In addition, the duty of health care professionals to report death threats is examined.

Chapter 3 determines the attributes of individuals that increase the likelihood that they will be the victims of homicidal threats. This chapter also analyzes the psychosocial impact of death threats on partners and their families and emphasizes the different forms of emotional trauma that face death threat victims and their families. The uses of medical, counseling, and shelter services by death threat victims are compared with the uses by non–death threat victims.

Chapter 4 examines the possible link between stalking and death threats that result in homicide and other acts of violence. The psychosocial impact of stalking and death threats is presented.

In Chapter 5, the ways in which access to and use of weapons weaken the mechanisms of social control and increase the chances that persons will make death threats are discussed.

Chapter 6 examines the role of substance use and abuse in weakening the social control process and increasing the probability of death threats and related violence.

In Chapter 7, the nature of death threats made against schools and colleges is explored.

The prevalence and risk factors for workplace-related death threats are analyzed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 discusses the weakening of social controls due to wars, cultural and personal pressures, and ethnic/political conflicts.

In Chapter 10, the role of homicidal threats in the commission of hate crimes is assessed.

Chapter 11 explores how the weakening of social control allows terrorists to make death threats to achieve their social, cultural, religious, and political objectives.

Chapter 12 discusses the legality of death threats and the responses of the legal system to such threats. The ways in which the police and the courts respond to complaints of death threats are evaluated. It describes the situations that create probable cause for the police to arrest a person for making death threats. The chapter also examines the degree to which police contacts and arrest patterns differ between partner violence offenders who make death threats and those who do not.

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