

# ***Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines***

Using the  
Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

Developed by Dewey Cornell, Ph.D. and Colleagues  
Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

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## **Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.**

- **Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia.**
- **Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project**
- **Forensic clinical psychologist specializing in violent offenders**
- **Studied youth violence for 30+ years, 200+ publications in psychology and education**
- **Developed threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001.**

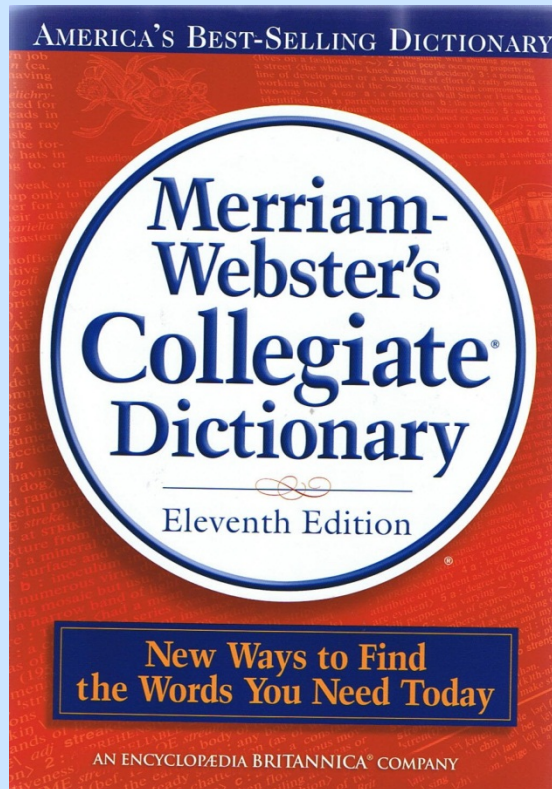
# Kentucky Train the Trainer



# What is Threat Assessment?

**Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence **prevention** that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.**

**Prevention means  
“to keep something from  
happening”**



# Crisis response is not prevention.



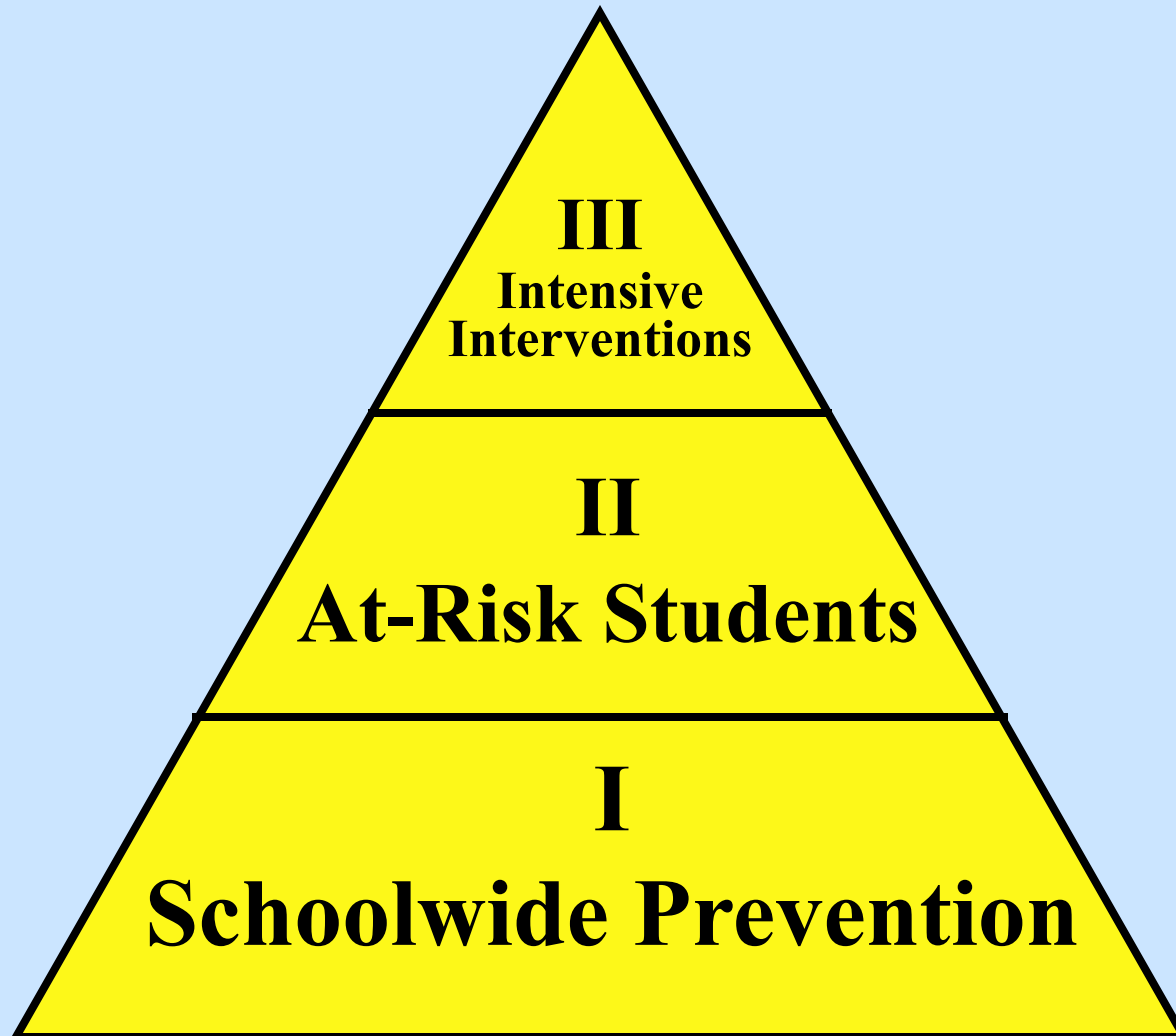
**A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.**

**Shootings seem unpredictable,  
but,  
Prevention does not require  
prediction!**



**House Education and Labor Committee  
Hearing on Campus Safety  
May 15, 2007**

# Three Tiers of Prevention in Schools





# Prevention does not require prediction.



We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

**Universal, primary, or tier 1 prevention**

# Prevention can reduce risk factors.



We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

**Selected, secondary, or tier 2 prevention**

# Prevention can prevent deterioration.

**Police Beat**

HOME > NEWS > LOCAL > CRIME    Share This    Print    Text Size

## Student accused of threat 'at bottom of an emotional abyss'

By [TASHA KATES](#)  
Published: January 25, 2010  
Updated: January 26, 2010

[» 0 Comments](#) | [Post a Comment](#)

vote now **buzz up**

A Western Albemarle High School student accused of threatening to kill four schoolmates was "at the bottom of an emotional abyss" at the time and poses no threat to others, a psychiatrist testified Monday.

Despite the testimony, Judge William G. Barkley denied bond for Patrick Dittmar Crider, 18, after a bond hearing Monday in Albemarle County General District Court. Crider will remain in Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail.

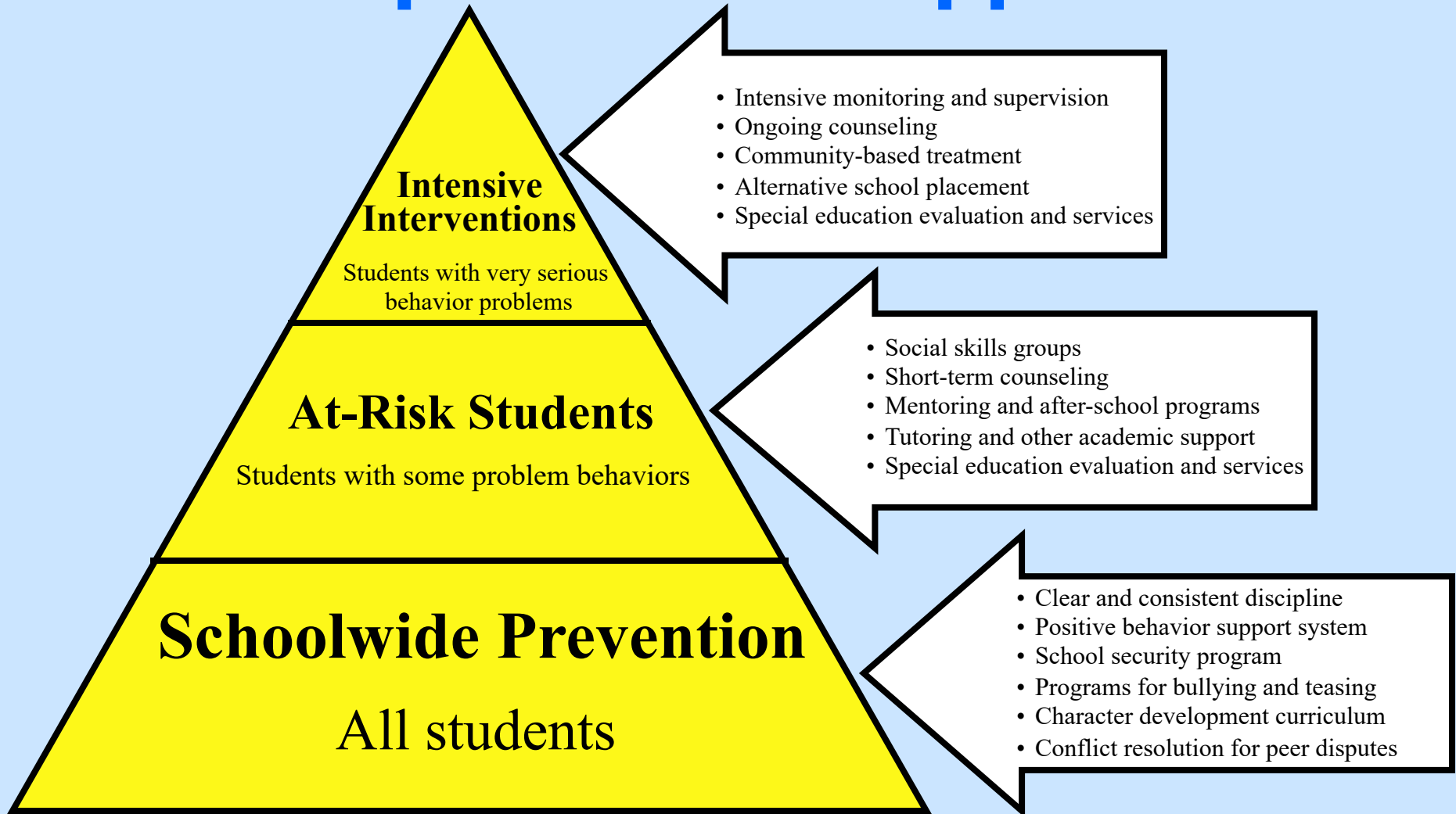
Authorities have accused Crider of having a conversation on Facebook on Jan. 13 during which threats were made to kill four students the following day. After the killings, the shooter would declare his



We can intervene to resolve crisis situations before they deteriorate into violence.

**Intensive, tertiary, or tier 3 prevention**

# Threat assessment is part of a comprehensive approach



# Fear is a barrier to prevention.



**School shootings are so traumatic that they skew perceptions of school safety and convince the public and policymakers that there are dramatic needs for security measures.**

# Gunfire on school grounds in the United States

Since 2013, there have been at least 386 incidents of gunfire on school grounds in America

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

2014

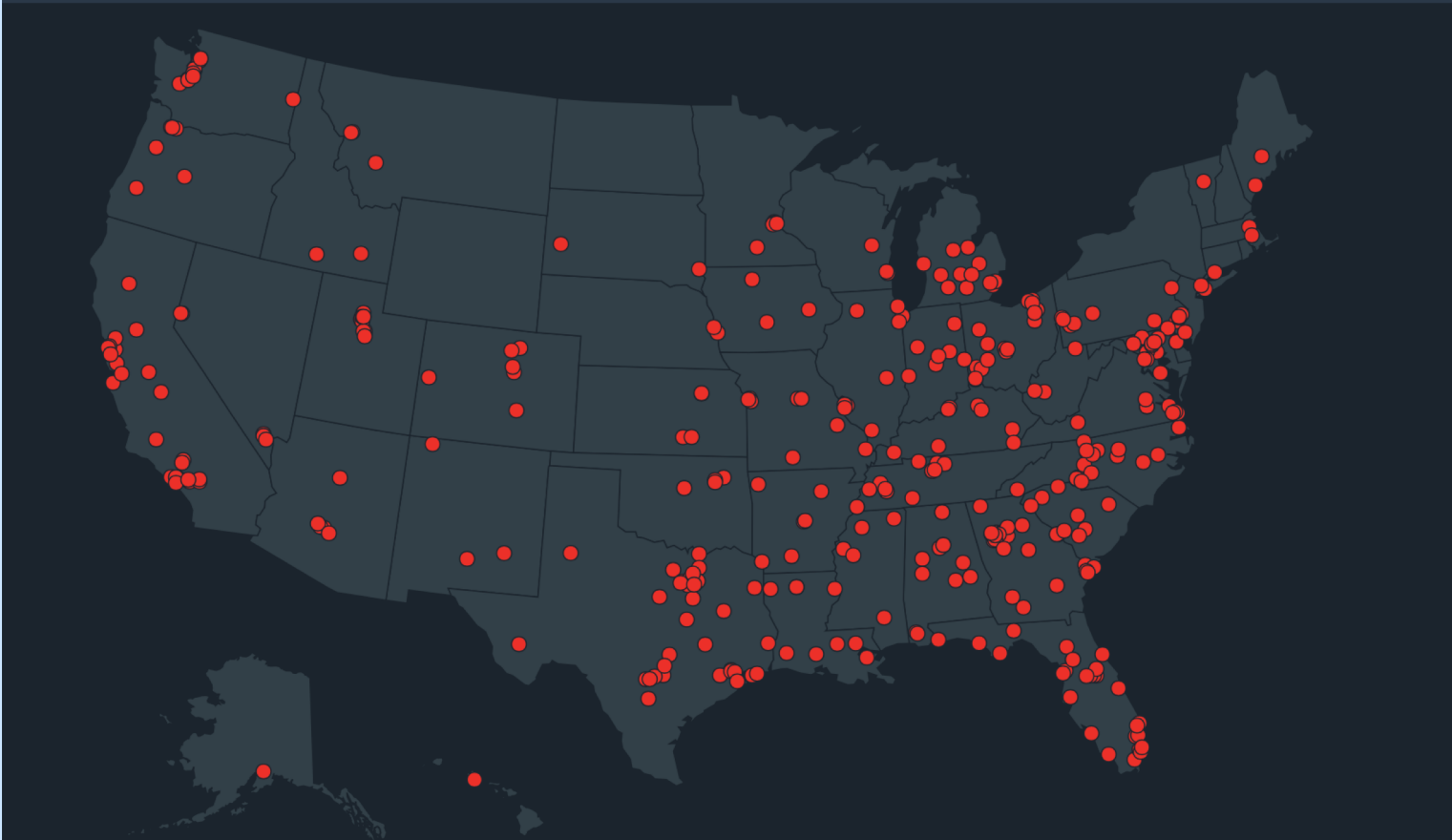
2015

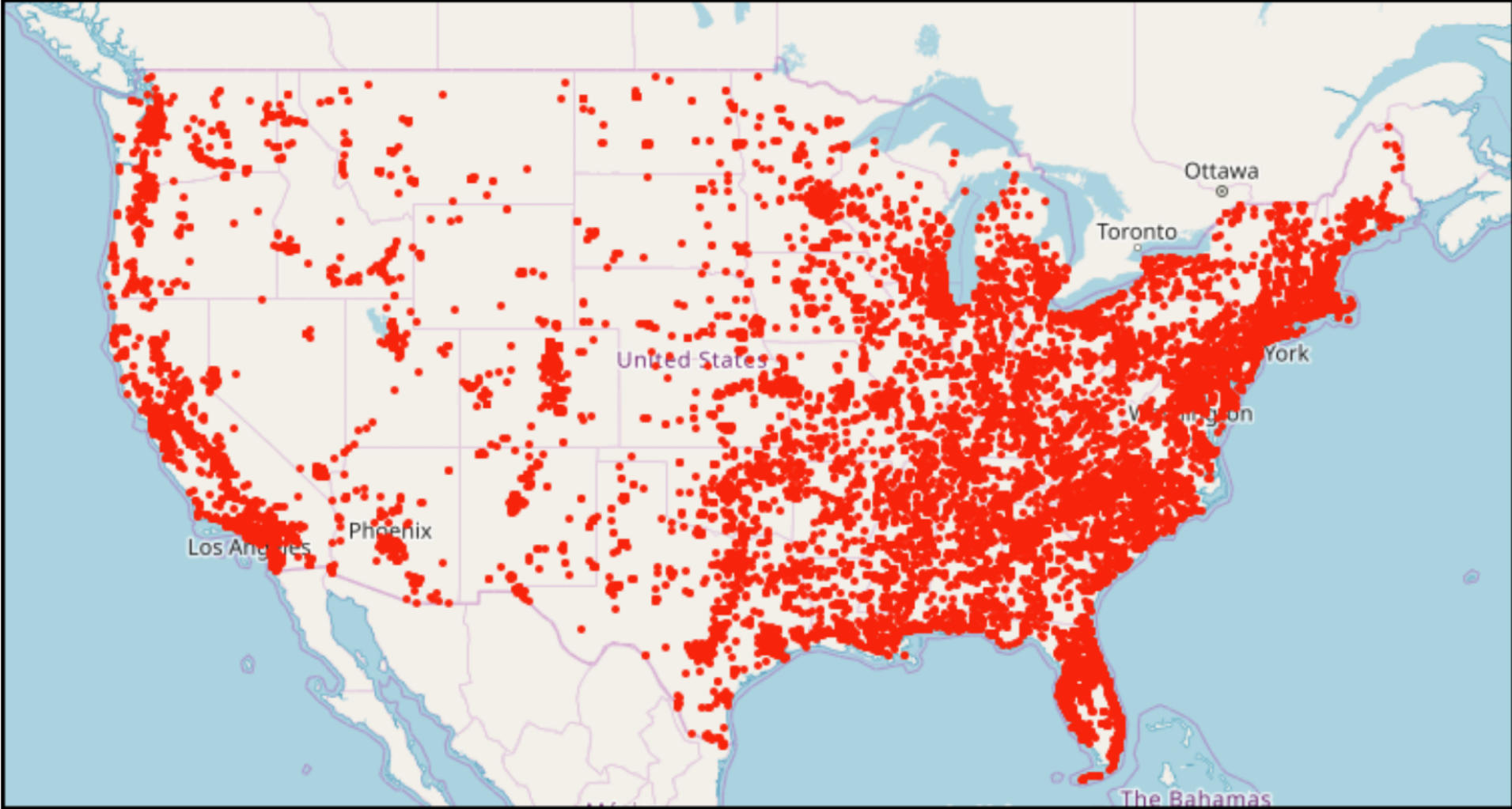
2016

2017

2018

2019





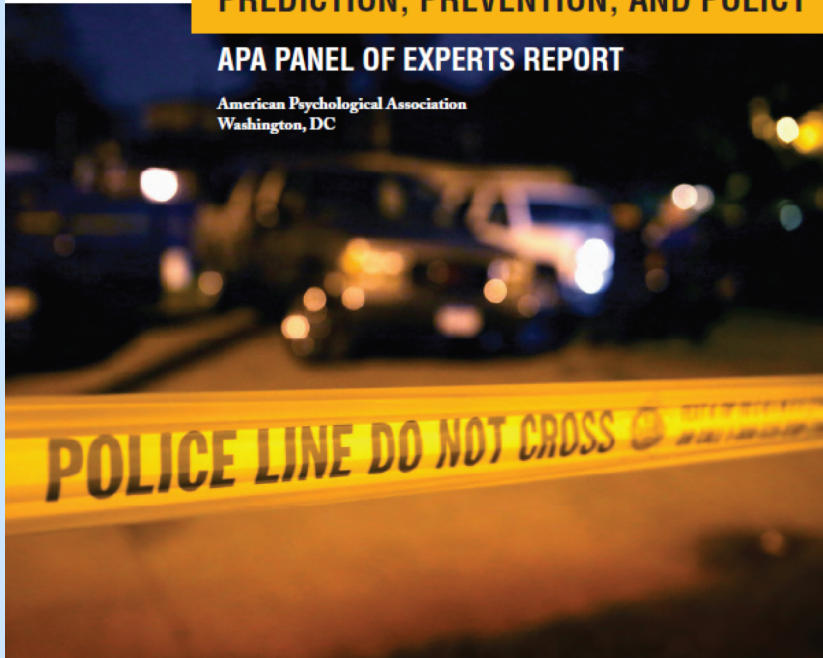
**January 1 - October 27, 2018**

[gunviolencearchive.org](http://gunviolencearchive.org)

**GUN VIOLENCE:  
PREDICTION, PREVENTION, AND POLICY**

**APA PANEL OF EXPERTS REPORT**

American Psychological Association  
Washington, DC



**Annual Gun Toll**  
**33,000 deaths**  
**+ 67,000 injuries**  
**100,000 total**

**275**  
**Shootings per day**

APA report is available at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-prevention.aspx>

Shooting deaths from: National Vital Statistics

[http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction\\_inj.html](http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html)

Shooting injuries from: <http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/nfirates2001.html>



# 301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

2014

2015

2016

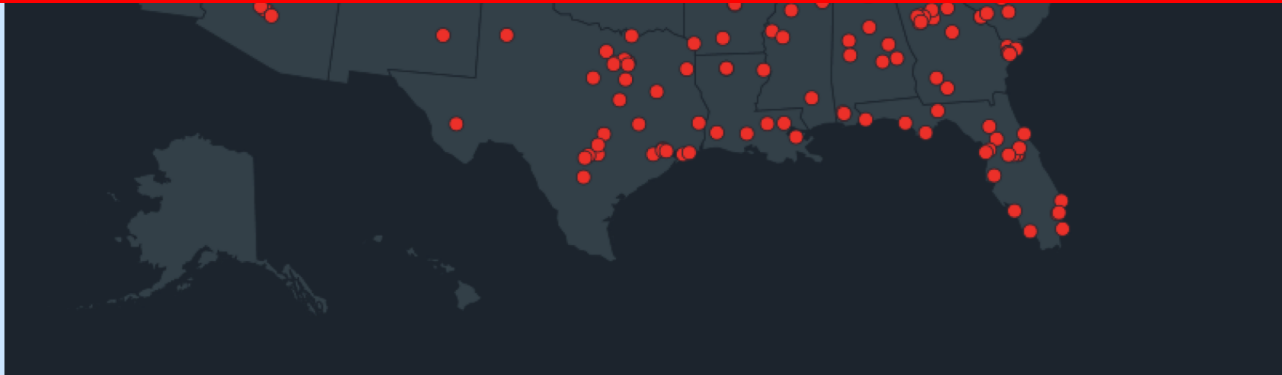
2017

2018

5 yrs x 100,000 =

**500,000**

**outside of schools**



# 301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

2014

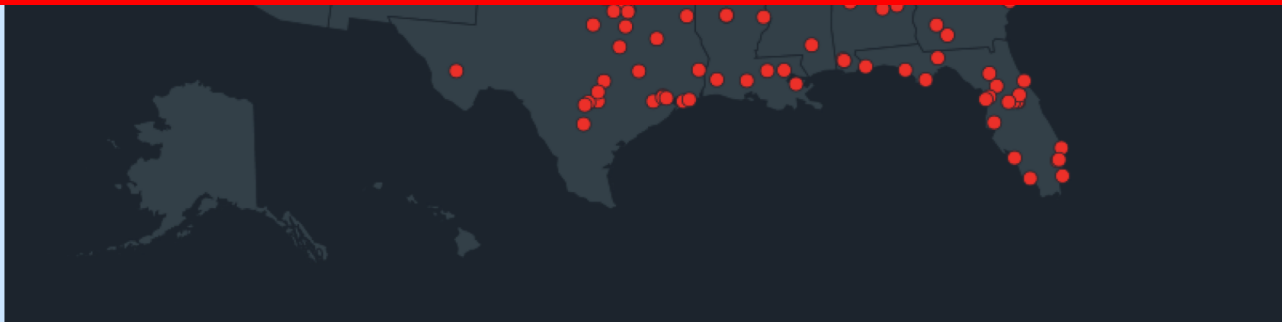
2015

2016

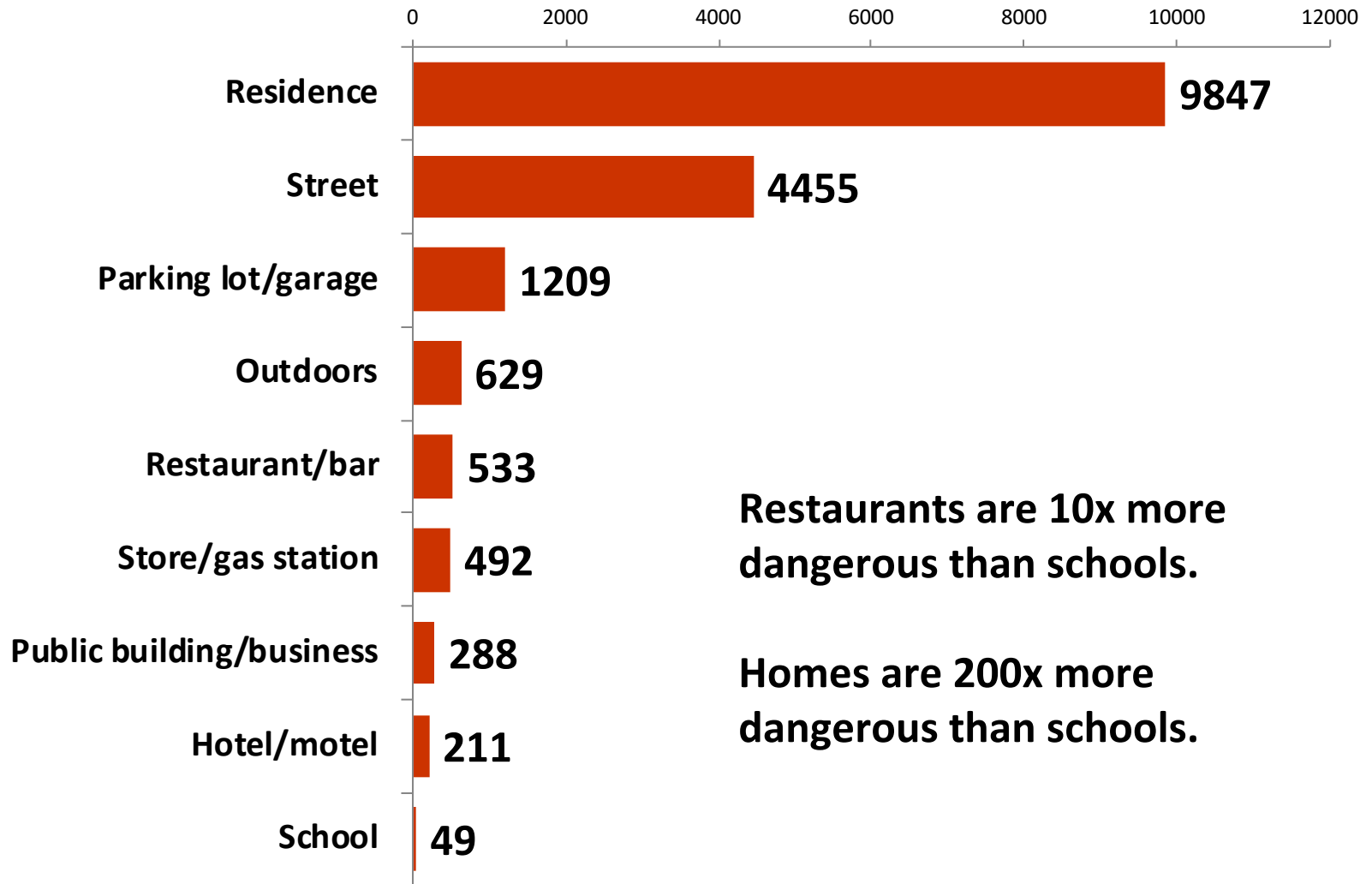
2017

2018

**The real problem is  
*gun* violence,  
not *school* violence.**



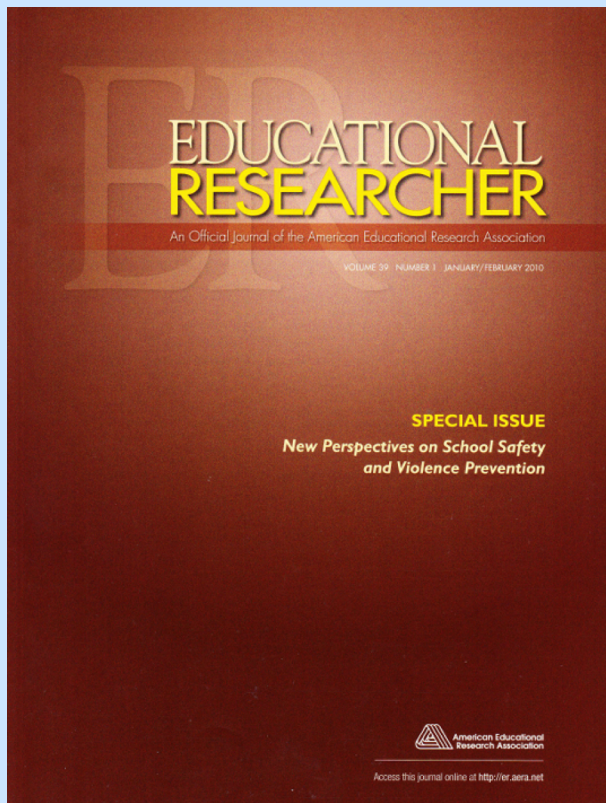
## 2005-2010 Homicides in 37 States



Source: FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) database. Selected locations. School includes colleges. See Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang (2015) *Psychology of Violence*, 5, 236-245.

# What Can Be Done About School Shootings? A Review of the Evidence

Randy Borum, Dewey G. Cornell, William Modzeleski, and Shane R. Jimerson



**“Any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years.”**

**125,000 schools ÷ 21 deaths/year**

Every 6,000 Years

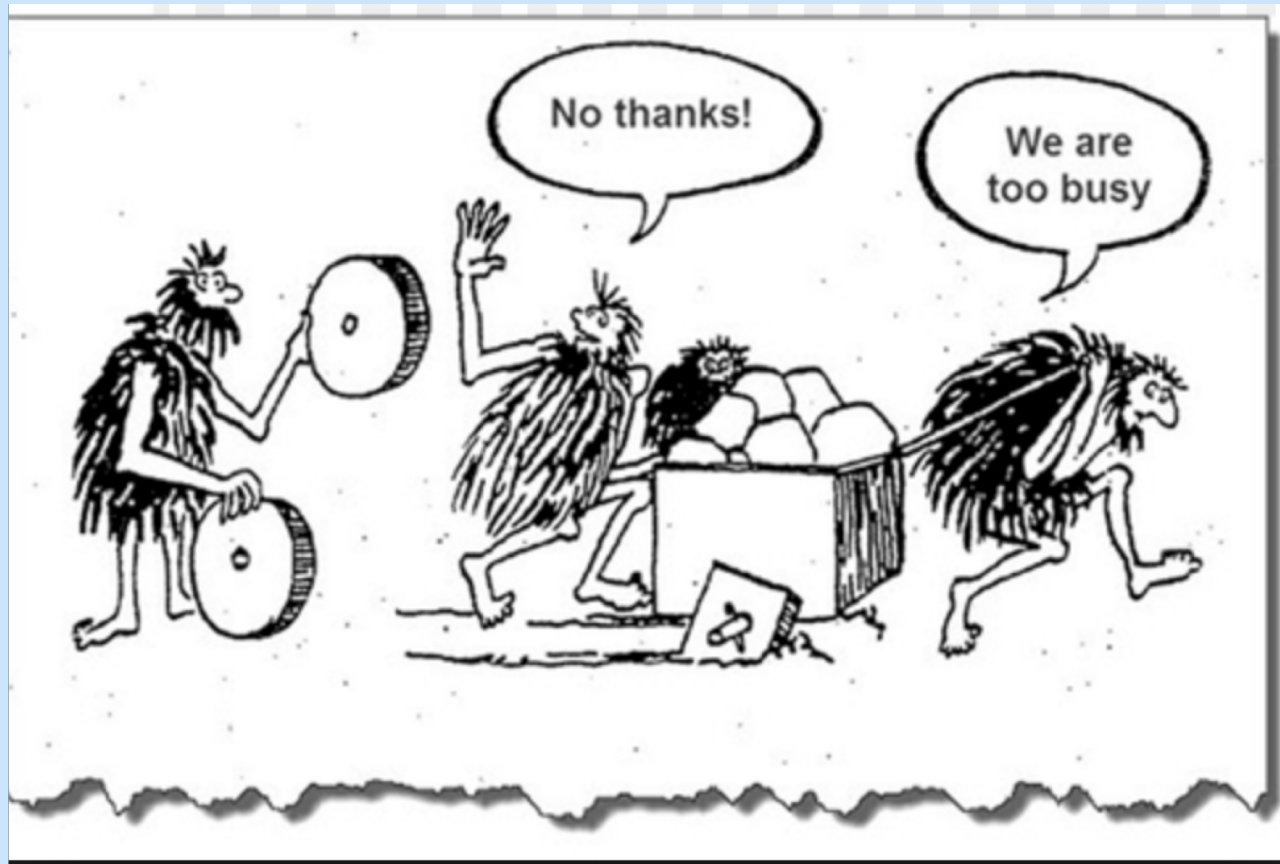


It's eye before flea,  
except after sea.

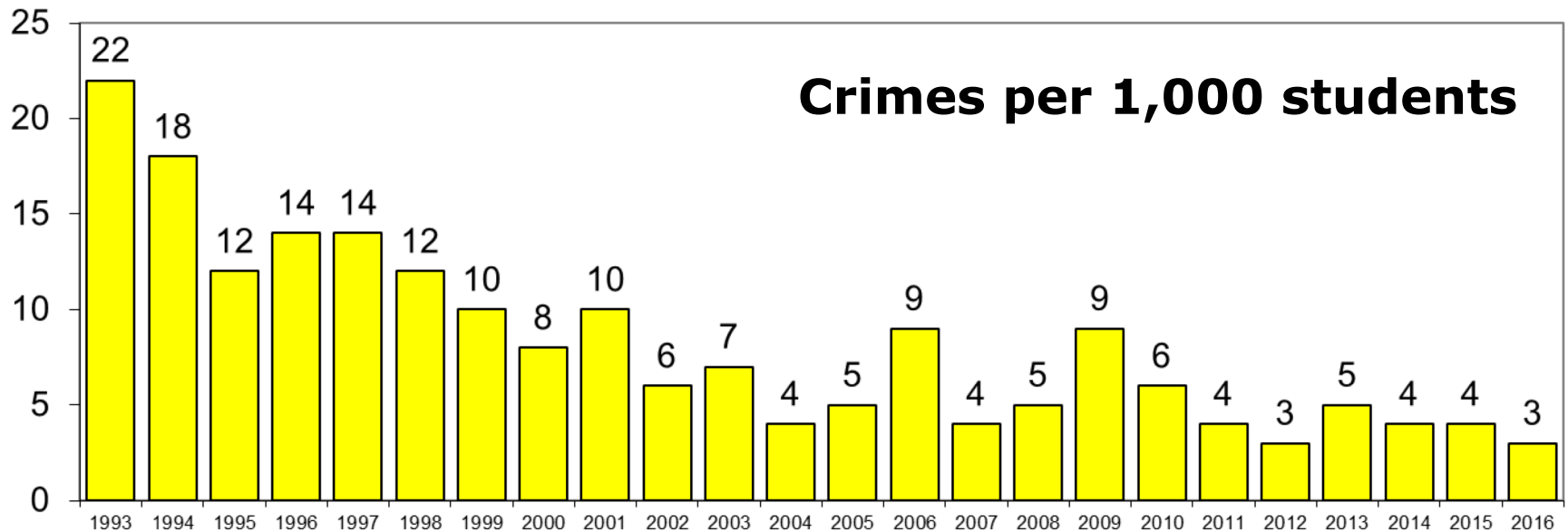


5  
P. ODIN  
Pikoro.  
1-9-14

# This Date in History..



# School violence has declined.



## Serious violent crime rate in U.S. schools

*Indicators of school crime and safety; 2017. Table 2.1. National Crime Victimization Study data reported by National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018).*



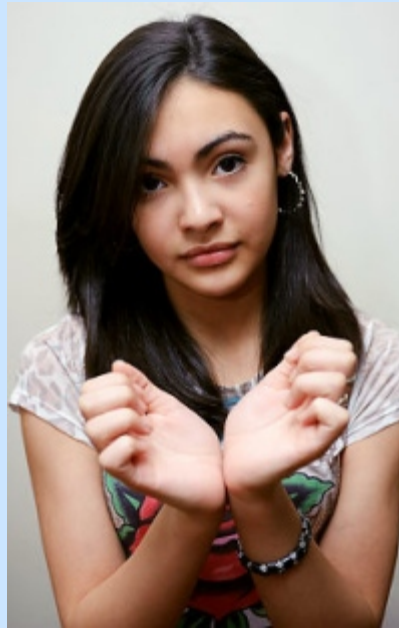
# **Why the Fear of School Violence Matters**

- 1. School Suspensions**
- 2. School Fortification**

# Zero Tolerance Suspensions



**9 year old with  
toy gun**



**12 year old  
doodler**

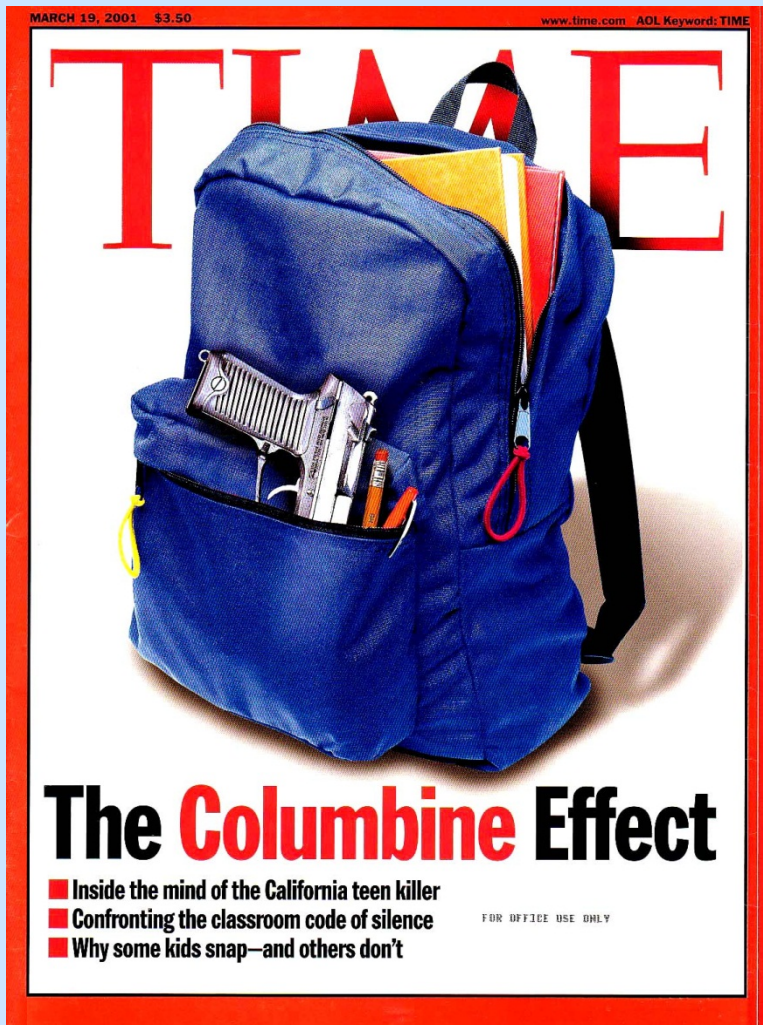


**Poem about Sandy  
Hook, "I understand  
the killings..."**

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/desk-doodling-toy-gun-incidents-clear-educators-lack-common-sense-article-1.194105>

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/california-teen-suspended-newtown-poem-article-1.1230655>

# The *Expansion* of Zero Tolerance

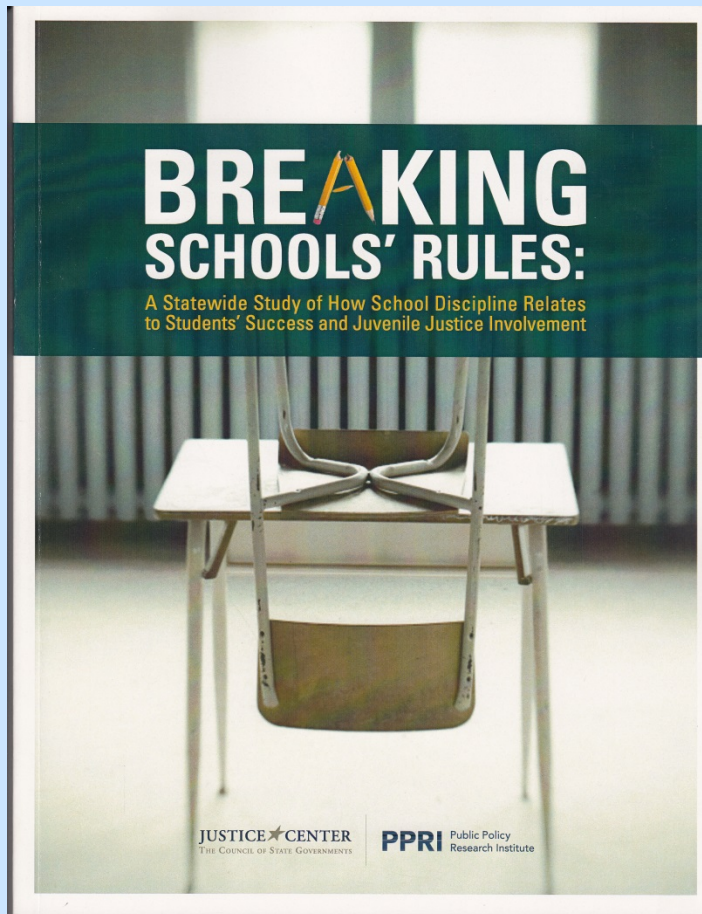


From No Guns to

- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting

*No Accidental violations*

# Texas Study of School Discipline



**Tracked school and court records**

**1 million 7<sup>th</sup> grade students for six years**

**60% suspended or expelled**

<http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/breaking-schools-rules-report/>

# *Suspension Practices*

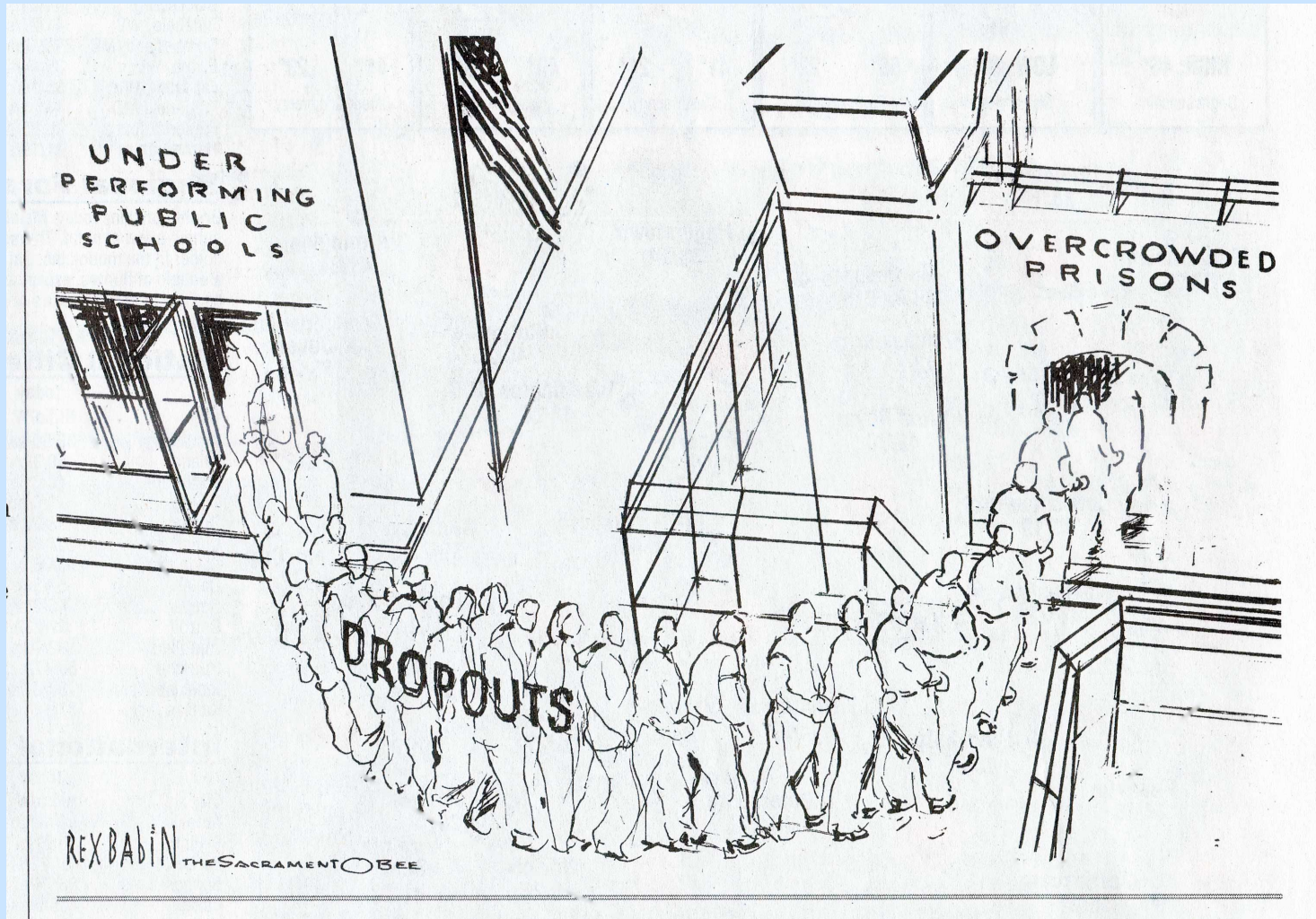
**Suspension is a practice that has more negative than positive effects on students:**

- **Fall behind in their classes**
- **Feel alienated and rejected**
- **Continue to misbehave and be suspended**
- **Drop out of school**
- **Juvenile court involvement**

**The school-to-prison pipeline**

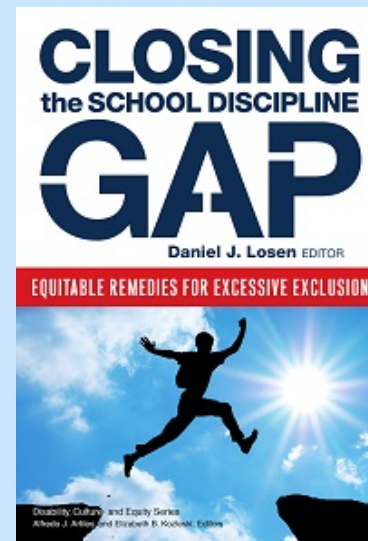


# 3.3 Million Suspensions Per Year Fuel the School to Prison Pipeline

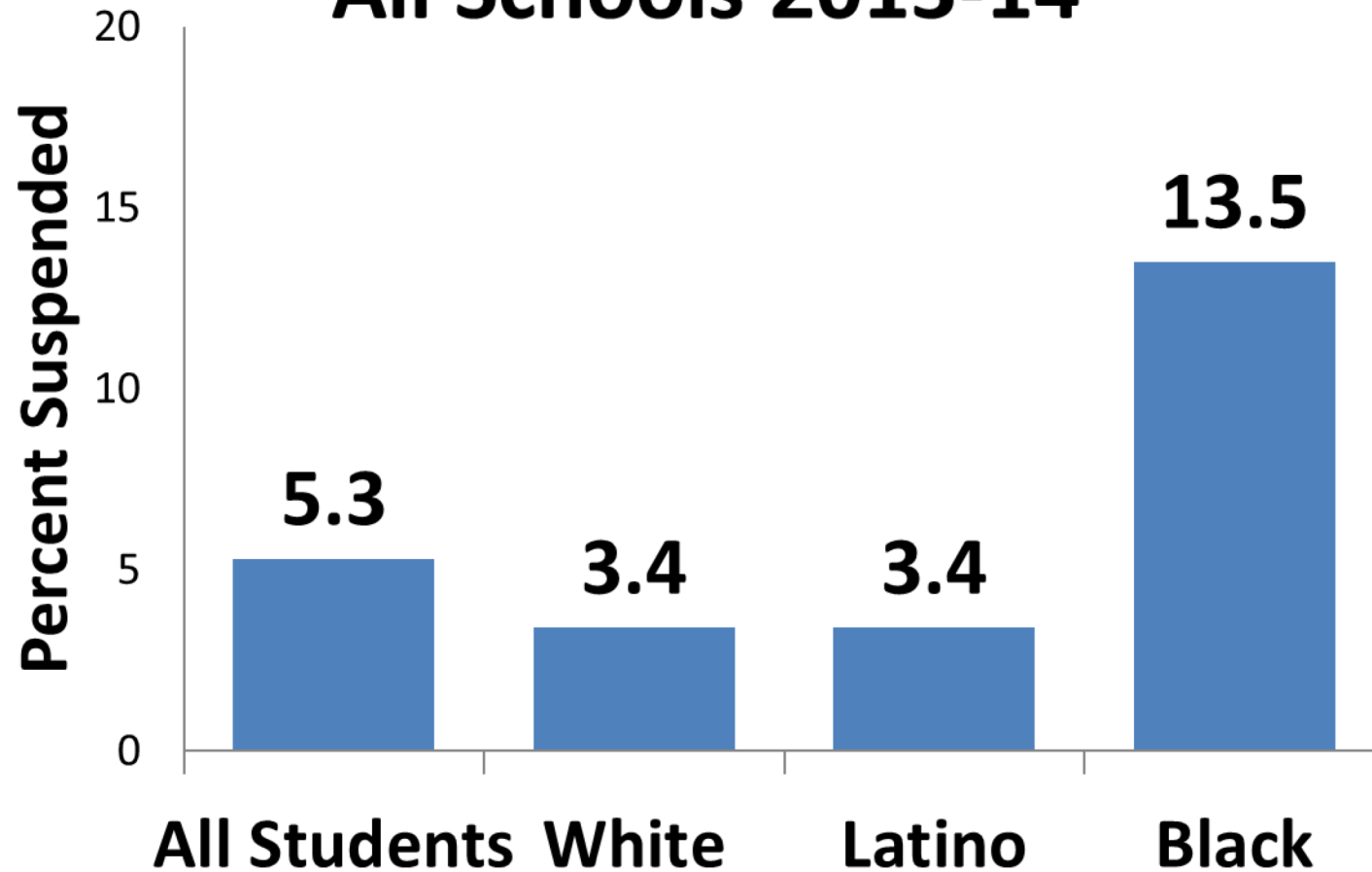


# Racial Discipline Gap

- Disproportionate suspension rates for some minority groups
- Potential discrimination
- USDOE Office for Civil Rights



# U.S. Suspension Rates All Schools 2013-14



Latest available data April 2018

[https://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations\\_2013\\_14](https://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/Estimations_2013_14)





# Students involved in shooter drills.



Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost \$4 million

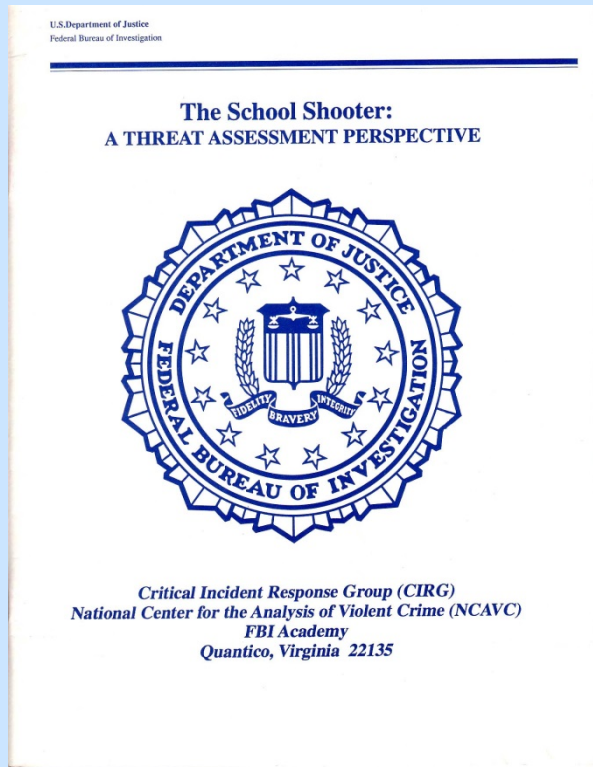
**School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.**

Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost \$138 million

NRA proposal would cost state schools about \$138 million.

*Every Per Pupil dollar spent for **Security** is a Per Pupil dollar NOT spent for **Instruction**.*

# FBI Recommendations on School Violence

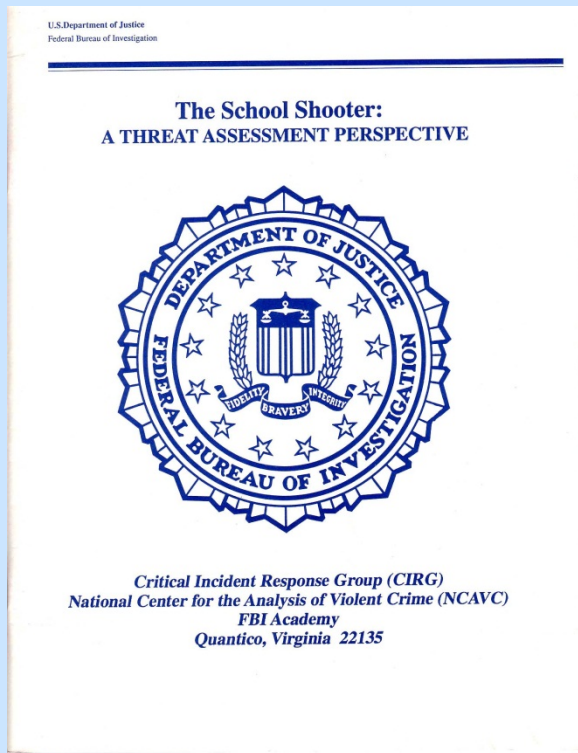


**Download at  
[www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)**

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous.

Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

# FBI Recommendations on School Violence



**Download at  
[www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)**

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”  
(FBI report p 1)



## ***Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:***

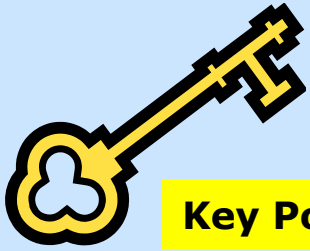
- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

**Download at:  
[www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)**

# 6 Principles of the Threat Assessment Process

(abridged from Secret Service/DOE Guide)

1. Targeted violence results from understandable process, not a random or spontaneous act.
2. Consider person, situation, setting, & target.
3. Maintain an investigative, skeptical mindset.
4. Focus on facts and behaviors, not traits.
5. Use information from all possible sources.
6. *Making* a threat is not the same as *posing* a threat. Ask "Is this student on a path toward an attack?"



Key Point

***Threat assessment is not designed to determine whether a student has **MADE** a threat, but whether a student **POSES** a threat.***





# Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

## 1. Over-reaction

School Suspends Second Grader for Eating  
His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun



# Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

## 2. Under-Reaction





**Comprehensive School Threat  
Assessment Guidelines:**

*Intervention and Support  
to Prevent Violence*

Dewey Cornell

- **New manual includes all procedures from original manual.**
- **Improvements based on more than a decade of experience and feedback from schools**
- **Evidence from a dozen published studies**
- **Procedures for adult threats**

New manual released Nov 2018.  
Available from Amazon.com

# Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal	Leads team, conducts Step 1.
School Resource Officer	Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.
Mental Health Staff (School counselors, psychologists, social workers)	Team member to conduct mental health assessments.
	Team member to take lead role in follow-up interventions.
<b>Option team members</b> Teachers, aides, other staff	Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.

# No Magic Formula or Crystal Ball

There is no formula, prescription, or checklist that will predict or prevent all violent acts. School authorities must make reasoned judgments based on the facts of each individual situation, and monitor situations over time.





## THREAT ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE PROTOCOL<sup>®</sup>

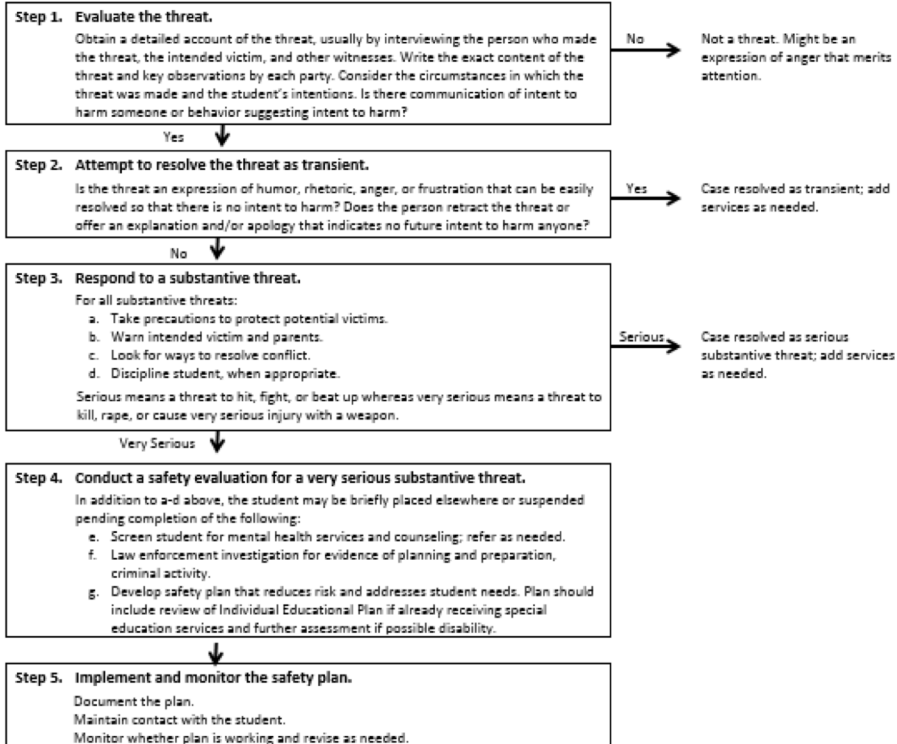
Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines

### OVERVIEW

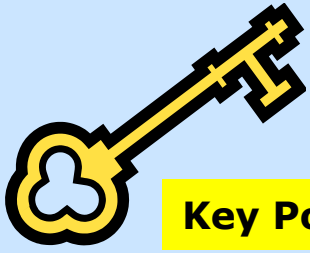
A threat is a communication of intent to harm someone that may be spoken, written, gestured, or expressed in some other form, such as via text messaging, email, or other digital means. An expression of intent to harm someone is considered a threat regardless of whether it is communicated to the intended target(s) and regardless of whether the intended target is aware of the threat. Threats may be implied by behavior that an observer would reasonably regard as threatening, planning, or preparing to commit a violent act. When in doubt, treat the communication or behavior as a threat and conduct a threat assessment. Threats that are not easily recognized as harmless (e.g., an obvious joke that worries no one) should be reported to the school administrator or other team members. The administrator or another team member makes a preliminary determination of the seriousness of the threat. The student, targets of the threat, and other witnesses should be interviewed to obtain information using this protocol. A *transient* threat means there is no sustained intent to harm and a *substantive* threat means the intent is present (or not clear) and therefore requires protective action. This form is a guide for conducting a threat assessment, but each case may have unique features that require some modification.

A threat assessment is not a crisis response. If there is indication that violence is imminent (e.g., a person has a firearm at school or is on the way to school to attack someone), a crisis response is appropriate. Take immediate action such as calling 911 and follow the school crisis response plan.

### School Threat Assessment Decision Tree<sup>\*</sup>



<sup>\*</sup>This 5-step decision tree is a revision of the original 7-step decision tree for the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines that retains the same information and procedures in a more condensed format.



Key Point

***In a threat assessment, we try to determine **why** a student made a threat, and therefore how we can **prevent** the threat from being carried out.***



# SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

## Behavioral Disorders

Journal of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders



Council for  
Children with  
Behavioral  
Disorders

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE DIVISION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY  
OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

# School Psychology Quarterly

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 3 WINTER 2007 ISSN 0013-7902



Editor: S.W. Campbell

IN ENGLISH  
Childhood &  
Adolescence

Teacher "Workdays"  
Family-Based  
Treatment

ISSN 0013-7902  
www.apa.org/journals/spq

Volume 1 • Number 1 • Spring 2001

# JOURNAL OF THREAT ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Editor: Virginia D. Hart

# NASSP Bulletin

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ISSN 0192-6349



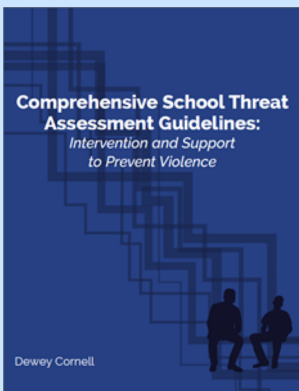
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- **Instructional, Transformational, and Managerial Leadership and Student Achievement: High School Principals Make a Difference**  
*Jimmy W. Valentine and Mike Prater*
- **Rationalities and Norms for Teacher Dress Codes: A Review of Employee Handbooks**  
*Beth W. Freedburg, Jane E. Workman, Sally E. Arnett, and Joyce R. Robinson*
- **The Impact of Principal Leadership Behaviors on the Efficacy of New and Experienced Middle School Teachers**  
*Jeff Walker and Sharon Stear*
- **Strategies for Increasing Advanced Placement Participation for Underrepresented Students: Barriers, Practices, and Positive Outcomes**  
*Sergio Flores and Martin O. Gomez*



RESEARCH PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN  
MIDDLE LEVEL AND HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

# Research on Threat Assessment

1. Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., McKnight, L., Branson, C., & Cole, J. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review*, 33, 527-546.
2. Kaplan, S., & Cornell, D. (2005). Threats of violence by students in special education. *Behavioral Disorders*, 31, 107-119.
3. Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders*, 34, 42-54.
4. Allen, K., Cornell, D., Lorek, E., & Sheras, P. (2008). Response of school personnel to student threat assessment training. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 19, 319-332.
5. Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24, 119-129.
6. Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 95, 175-194.
7. Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review*, 41, 100-115.
8. Cornell, D. & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions. In D. Losen (Ed.). *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Research for Policymakers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
9. Nekvasil, E., Cornell, D. (2015). Student threat assessment associated with positive school climate in middle schools. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, 98-113. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000038>
10. Burnette, A. G., Datta, P. & Cornell, D. G. (2017). The distinction between transient and substantive student threats. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-56103-001>
11. Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Burnette, A.G., Jia, Y., Huang, F., Konold, T., Datta, P., Malone, M., Meyer, P. (2017). Student threat assessment as a standard school safety practice: Results from a statewide implementation study. *School Psychology Quarterly*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000220>
12. Cornell, D., Maeng, J., Huang, F., Shukla, K., & Konold, T. (2018). Racial/ethnic parity in disciplinary consequences using student threat assessment. *School Psychology Review* 47, 183-195.



# Research on Threat Assessment

## 1. Field-test

What happens when you try the model?

## 2. Controlled studies

Cross-sectional, retrospective study:

How do schools using the model compare to other schools?

Pre-post study:

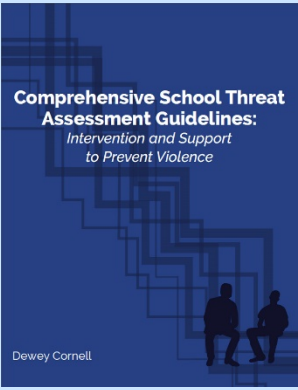
How do schools change after adopting the model?

Randomized controlled trial:

What happens to students in schools randomly chosen to use the model?

## 3. Large-scale implementation

What happens when the whole state adopts the model?



Comprehensive School Threat  
Assessment Guidelines:  
*Intervention and Support  
to Prevent Violence*

Dewey Cornell

# Research on Threat Assessment

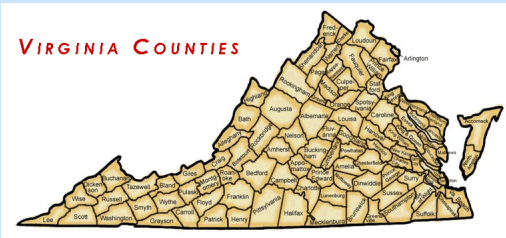
1. 99% of threats not carried out.
2. Only 1% expelled, 1% arrested.
3. Suspension rates decreased.
4. Racial disparities reduced or absent.
5. Counseling used more often.
6. More positive school climate.



# Memphis Field-Trial

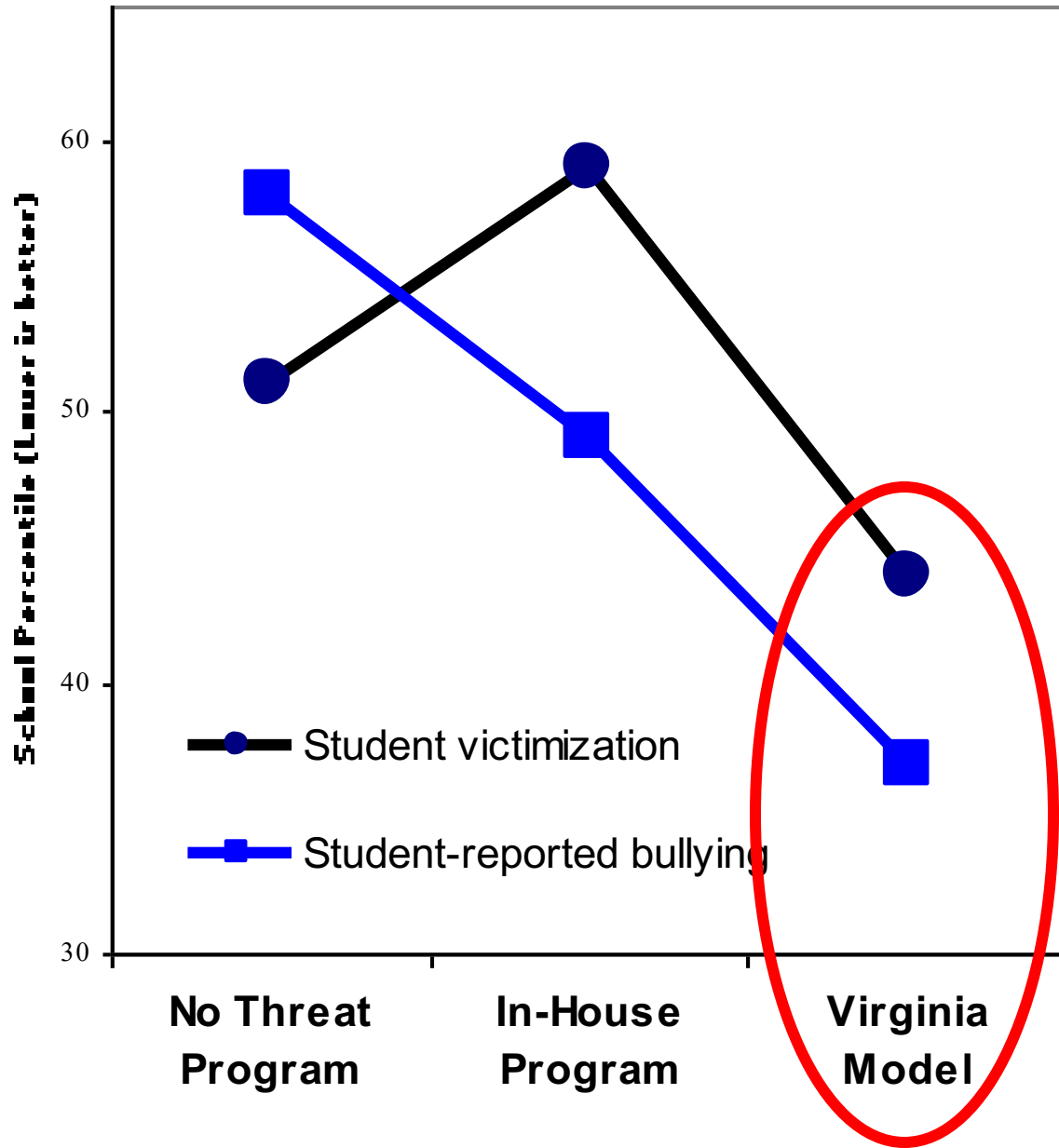
Memphis Public Schools resolved 209 threats in 194 schools, including 110 threats to kill, shoot, or stab.

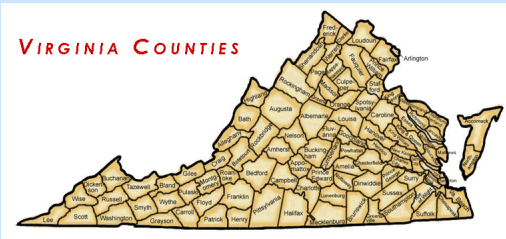
- 5 permanent expulsions, 3 incarcerations
- Office referrals declined >50%
- No reports of any threats carried out



# Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

- 95 high schools using the UVA threat assessment model
- 131 using locally developed models
- 54 not using threat assessment





# Virginia High School Threat Assessment Study

## Findings for Virginia Model Schools

- Less bullying and other victimization
- Greater student willingness to seek help
- Perceive adults as more caring and fair
- Fewer long-term suspensions

Controlled for school size, poverty, minority %, school security measures, and neighborhood violent crime.

***School Psychology Quarterly, 2009***



# Reductions in Long-Term Suspensions Following Adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines



Dewey G. Cornell<sup>1</sup>, Anne Gregory<sup>2</sup>, and Xitao Fan<sup>1</sup>

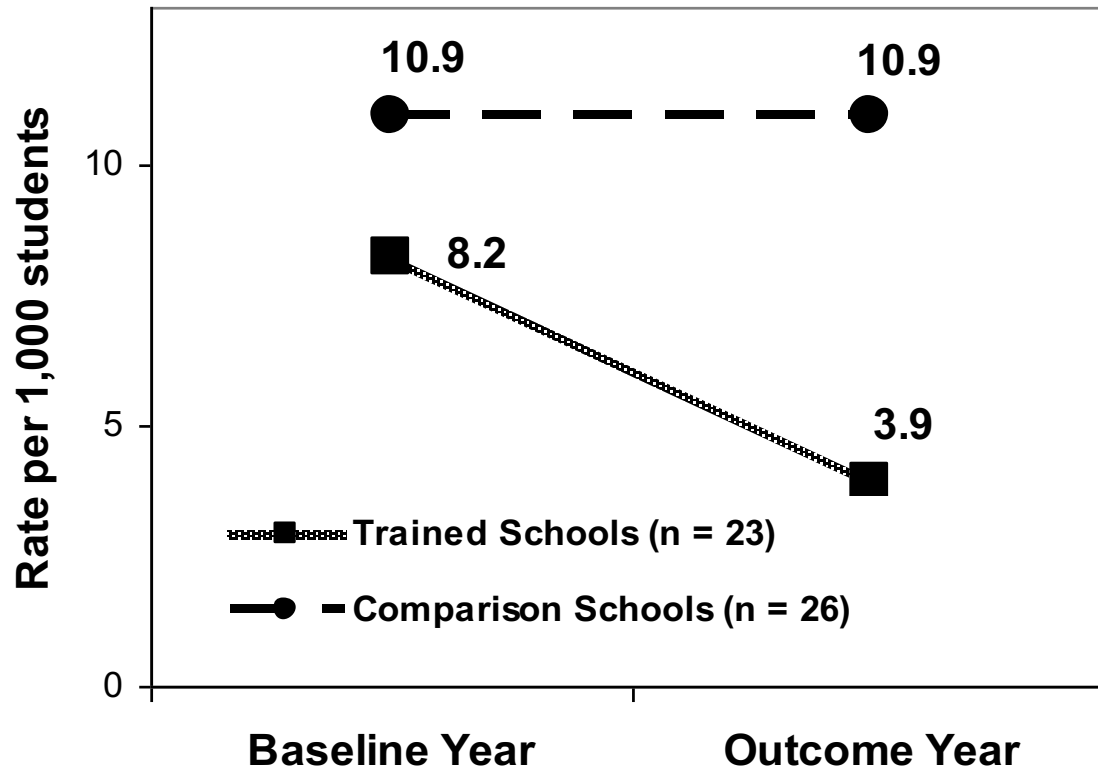
## Abstract

This quasi-experimental study examined the adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in 23 high schools. After training, school administrators and other staff members demonstrated substantial increases in knowledge of threat assessment principles and decreased commitment to zero tolerance approaches. Schools using the guidelines showed a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying infractions from the pretraining year to the posttraining year, in contrast to a control group of 26 schools not using the guidelines.



# High School Discipline Study

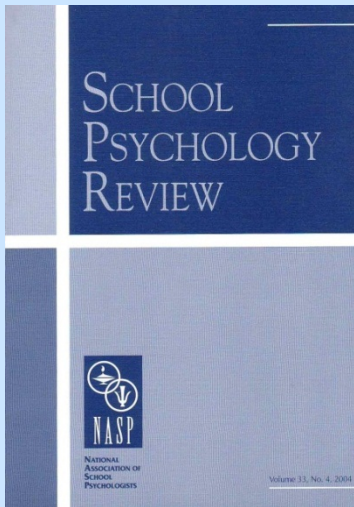
## Long-Term Suspension Rates





# Randomized Controlled Trial

- **40 schools (K-12)**
- **Randomly assigned**
- **1 year follow-up**
- **201 students**



# Randomized Controlled Trial

## Students in threat assessment schools...

- **Received more counseling**
- **More parent involvement**
- **Fewer long-term suspensions**
- **Fewer alternative placements**

**Logistic regression odds ratios:  
3.98, 2.57, .35, and .13**

# 2013 NREPP Listing



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## Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (V-STAG) is a school-based manualized process designed to help school administrators, mental health staff, and law enforcement officers assess and respond to threat incidents involving students in kindergarten through 12th grade and prevent student violence. V-STAG is also designed to provide students involved in threat incidents with appropriate mental health counseling services, with parental involvement, and reduce the numbers of long-term school suspensions or expulsions and alternative school setting placements. V-STAG also aims to reduce in-school bullying infractions and provide a supportive school climate. The program requires each participating school to establish a threat assessment team, whose members resolve student threat incidents through the use of a context-sensitive, problem-solving approach instead of the more traditional, punitive approach of zero tolerance.

<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=263>

# Governor's School and Campus Safety Task Force



**40 members,  
Led by Secretaries of Public Safety, Education, and  
Health and Human Resources**

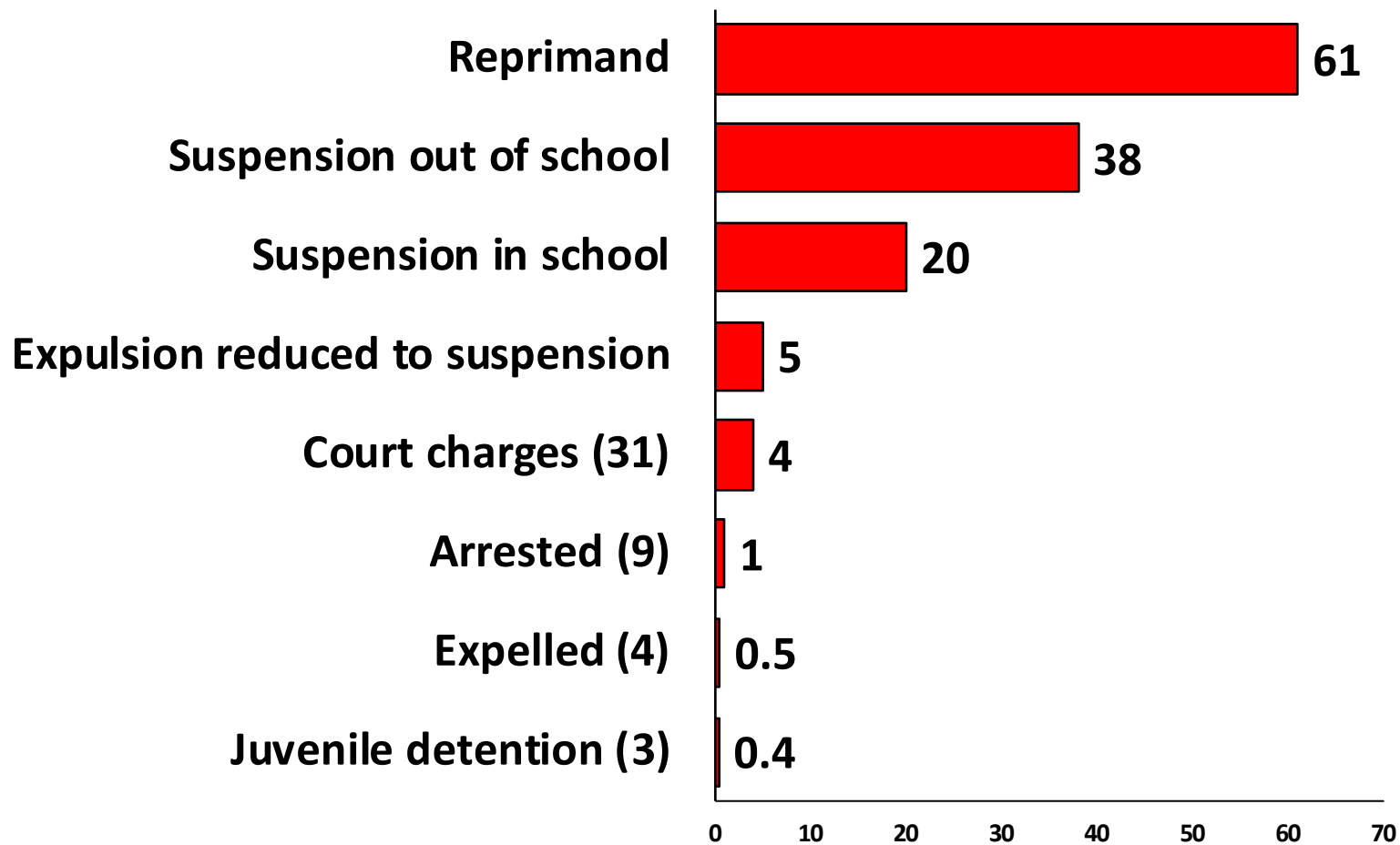
<http://dcjs.virginia.gov/vcss/SchoolCampusSafetyTaskForce/>

# Routine Practice Study

- Everyday practice results from 339 Virginia schools
- 884 threat cases
- Threat demographics
- Racial/ethnic differences
- SPED differences

# Disciplinary Outcomes (%)

n = 844

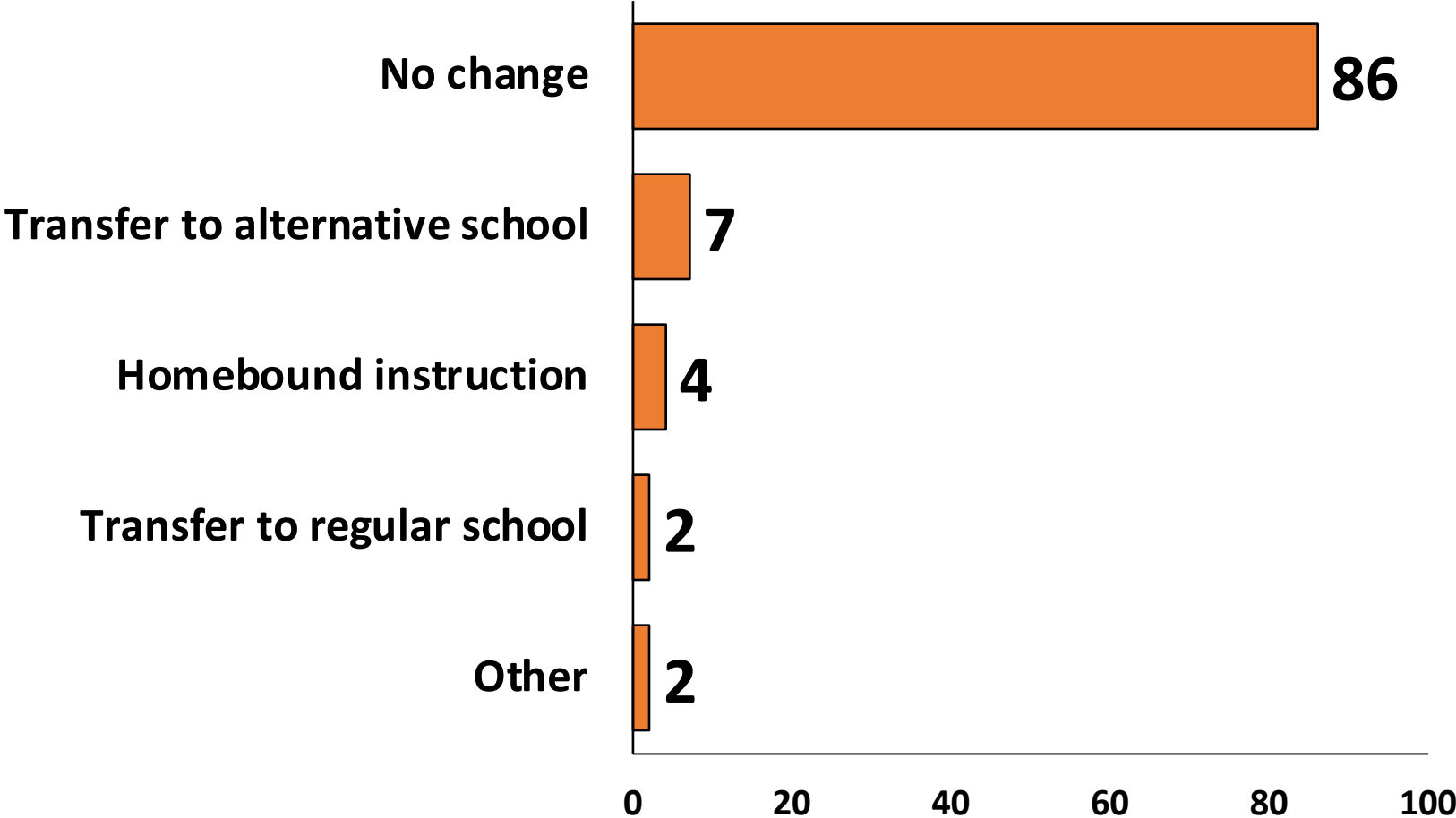


**Percentages for 844 threat cases from 339 schools. One case can involve more than one outcome.**



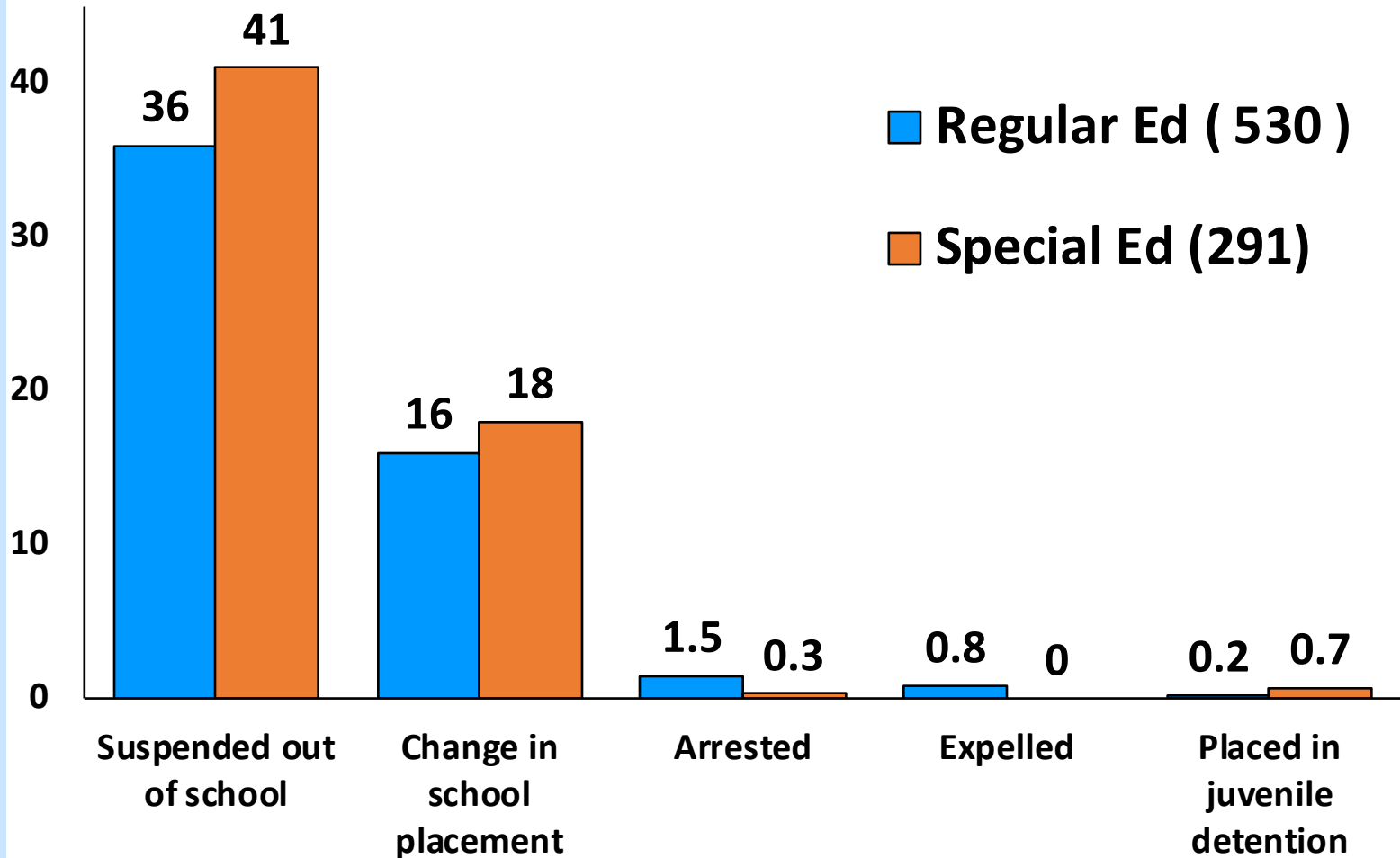
# School Placement Outcome (%)

n = 844



# Special Education Disciplinary Outcomes (%)

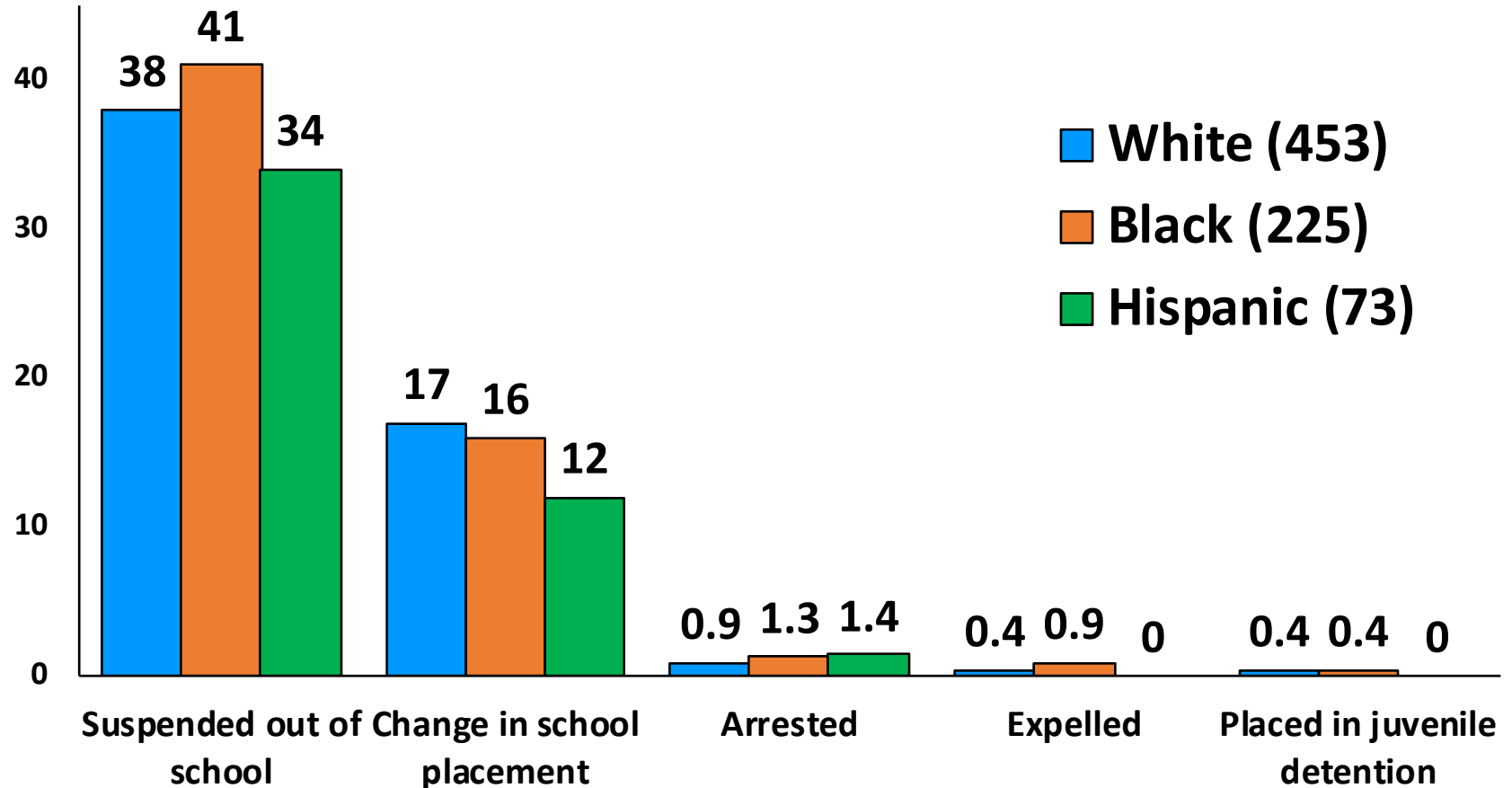
n = 821



**No statistically significant differences for Special vs Regular Education Students**

# Disciplinary Outcomes (%)

n = 751



**No statistically significant differences for White vs Black or White vs Hispanic students**

# Widely Used Model

**Arkansas**                      **Michigan**  
**California**                    **Minnesota**  
**Colorado**                      **New York**  
**Connecticut**                 **North Carolina**  
**Delaware**                      **North Dakota**  
**Florida**                         **Ohio**  
**Georgia**                        **Pennsylvania**  
**Illinois**                        **South Carolina**  
**Indiana**                        **Tennessee**  
**Kansas**                         **Vermont**  
**Kentucky**                      **Virginia**  
**Louisiana**                    **Washington**  
**Maryland**                      **Wisconsin**  
**Massachusetts**



# Implementing a Threat Assessment Approach

- 1. Educate your staff.**
- 2. Select and train your team.**
- 3. Update student code of conduct.**
- 4. Inform students and parents.**

**Comprehensive School Threat  
Assessment Guidelines:**  
*Intervention and Support  
to Prevent Violence*

Dewey Cornell



# School Safety Online Educational Program

- **Students** (15 min)
- **Parents** (25 min)
- **Teachers/staff** (25 min)
- **Team members** (25, 20, 30 min)

<http://www.schoolthreatassessment.com/>

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