

Threat Assessment Glossary

The world of threat assessment and behavioral intervention has unique language and terminology that is important to understand when communicating between departments. If a large part of the threat assessment process is building connections among departments and various stakeholders, using a common language is essential. Items in **red** are risk factors for violence.

Actionability	The likelihood that an individual has access to the means and materials to carry out an attack.
Action/Time Imperative	The time, location, and movement toward an attack location
Affective Violence	Violence driven by emotions in an impulsive and emotional response to an environmental stressor or perceived threat.
Aggrieved	The individual blames others for most of their problems and difficulties in life. They carry resentments and escalate to make those they see as responsible pay for their actions. These actions can be perceived or actual; most commonly, they are based on some general truth.
Alone	Refers to isolation and the inability to form social connections despite the desire and attempts. This escalates to feelings of hopelessness, irritability, and anger at being separated from what seems to come so easily for others. The outsider status and extreme isolation coincide with teasing and thoughts of suicide or extreme action.
Americans with Disability Act	The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 established comprehensive civil rights protections for people with disabilities. It is published in the United States Code and is often referred to by the titles and chapters of the code that contain the law. More information about the ADA is available at http://www.ada.gov .
Anchors	Supportive measures that help prevent the escalation in violence. Also called protector or stabilizing factors.
Anchor Bias	When we become anchored or locked on a particular piece of data or first impression on a case, and are unwilling to consider rival, alternative hypotheses.
Approach	The movement toward a target, beginning with fantasizing about harming them and obtaining small items needed for an attack (extended magazines, research material, chains/locks). As they progress, they overcome their hesitancy and talk with others about their plan. Risk-taking behavior increases as they continue to escalate without considering their well-being. In the late stages of approach, they conduct test runs, engage in physical violence/threats, and solidify details for their full attack.

Approach Behavior	The type, frequency, and intensity with which an attacker engages in to become physically close to the target.
Availability Bias	The tendency to use readily available data to make decisions.
Behavioral Indicator	An observable action that may demonstrate that the individual is on the pathway to violence.
Behavioral Threat Assessment	Addresses the level of danger posed by a threat made verbally, on social media, in writing, or through artistic expression.
Bias	Our tendency to see the world through our particular lens of experience. Bias can lead us to ignore evidence, make unsupported assumptions, or impact what we remember. It can create blinders, affecting our ability to build rapport and create safe/neutral spaces. We can never remove bias, but we can train ourselves to be more aware of how it can affect decision-making.
Blaze	The desire on the part of an attacker to end their life in a public, extreme manner that will, in their mind, justify the pain they have experienced or in the service of some perceived larger cause (a “blaze of glory”). There is increasing talk or posting on social media about their growing frustrations or dedication to a cause. As this reaches extremes, they are overwhelmed and trapped by pain or express a fanatical devotion to a cause. There is a detailed plan and commitment to a final action to send a message to others.
Breach	A security gap that is often exploited or circumvented in an attack.
Blind Spot Bias	Having knowledge gaps in your process. This is the tendency to miss crucial elements of a case due to an inability to view the data from a balanced, reasonable perspective.
BIT	Behavioral intervention team.
CARE	Campus assessment, resources, and evaluation.
Catalyst	These negative events act as catalysts in a chemical reaction, speeding up the escalation towards violence. For example, the loss of status, opportunity, relationship, or finances can further an attack plan. Unlike free fall, catalyst events occur more suddenly.
Checklist	The physical manifestation of fantasy rehearsal and brainstorming what would be needed to punish or harm a person, place, or system. Checklists become increasingly informed by research and specificity around the timing and location of an attack and the materials needed. There may also be a shutting down of bank accounts, phones, or social media accounts, or other recurring memberships or involvement, with the anticipation of an upcoming event.

Confirmation Bias	Deciding first and then finding facts to support it.
Consumed	A set way of thinking and escalating toward action. The individual has difficulty accepting alternative explanations for events, engages in harmful debate with others, and increasingly looks for ways to widen their impact and solidify their viewpoint. This escalates to include a quality of obsession and a spiraling negative impact on other aspects of their work, school, social relationships, and family. They seek opportunities to troll and stage demonstrations to push this view on others. They not only have a hardened point of view, but this becomes a defining characteristic of their entire person. When limits are set by the workplace, school, or police, they move quickly past these, feeling justified in their actions because of their locked perspective.
Costuming	The process of creating a persona or mask that defines or hides the true identity of those planning violence. As an attacker prepares, they often find clothing, tactical gear, and accessories they will need during the attack. This may start with an affiliation to a group like the Proud Boys or Atomwaffen and eventually involves purchasing ballistic plates, knee and elbow pads, harnesses, and/or ammunition containers. In some attacks, they have taken on the appearance of figures such as the Dark Knight, Joker, and characters from <i>The Matrix</i> .
Credible threat	A threat that is deemed actionable and substantive. A threat that is likely to occur without intervention.
Cultural Competency	The ability to understand, appreciate, and interact with people from different cultures and with beliefs different than your own.
Defiant	At first, defiance may be a general tendency to take an alternative path when compared with how others approach those in authority. This escalates into more frequent incidents with authorities and society in general. Incidents then involve more substantive threats, violent actions, and conditional ultimatums.
DEI-B	Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.
Direct Threat	A threat made verbally or in a written format, like a letter or on social media. The individual may start with vague references or memes and escalate to mention specific places, times, and actions. As they escalate, the threat is made with a sense of urgency and repeated in multiple formats.
DOS	Dean of Students.
Dunning-Kruger Effect	The tendency to overestimate or underestimate our abilities in certain areas based on our experience.

Duty to Warn

Tarasoff guides licensed psychotherapists and counseling/ medical staff around sharing confidential information in a client/patient relationship regarding an imminent, lethal threat. This policy does not apply to the police or most school officials. In a Tarasoff duty-to-warn/protect case, there is negligence if a therapist fails to take steps to protect a potential victim from a patient who has made a specific threat against them. This may include warning the victim, but may also involve increasing the frequency of therapeutic visits or hospitalizing the patient. Importantly, this protective duty overrides concerns about maintaining patient confidentiality

Energy Burst

An increase in the intensity of behaviors prior to an attack.

Encouragers

These are often third parties met on the internet, chatrooms, social media, or in-person meetings, such as local white supremacists, KKK, or other violent hate groups. The encouragement progresses from the pursuit of ideas and philosophies to support acquiring weapons, developing an attack plan, and punishing those who they see as responsible for societal problems.

FERPA

Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. This federal law (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) governs the gathering, maintenance, and accessibility of educational records. Schools need written permission from the student to release educational records to anyone other than the student. Schools may disclose records, without consent, to certain parties under specific conditions, including complying with a judicial order or lawfully issued subpoena, to appropriate officials in cases of health and safety emergencies, and to state and local authorities, within a juvenile justice system, pursuant to specific state law.

Fixation/Focus

Threat assessment terms that refer to narrowing down on a particular target (e.g., fixation on women, focus on women in a sorority house).

Free Fall

Unlike catalyst events, which are more sudden, free fall describes a more general set of problems like failing supports, mental illness flare-ups, and a general sense of hopelessness. The free fall becomes more concerning as multiple, chronic problems intersect, eventually creating an inability to function and a lack of hope that things will improve.

HIPAA

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. The HIPAA Privacy Rule requires covered entities to protect individuals' health records and other identifiable health information. Of primary importance to threat assessment professionals are the security, accountability, and confidentiality of medical records covered by this act. The rule permits use and disclosure of protected health information, without an individual's authorization or permission, for

national priority purposes to law enforcement officials under specific circumstances (See 45 C.F.R. § 164.512). Disclosure must also be made to someone believed to be able to prevent or lessen a threat or to law enforcement if the information is needed to identify or apprehend an escapee or violent criminal.

Hopeless

This describes a sense of worry and uncertainty about the future, along with difficulty focusing and pervasive feelings of sadness. As hopelessness increases, they feel trapped and eventually are unable to function and/or experience growing suicidal thoughts.

Howlers

Individuals who may display inappropriate or threatening behavior but do not intend to follow the path toward violence.

Hunters

Individuals following the path toward violence who behave in ways that further their goal.

In Group/Out Group

Gathering data and making decisions that are favorable toward someone who is like you.

Impulsive

In moving from an idea to an action, the individual progresses quickly without weighing the impact of their actions. They increasingly ignore those in positions of authority or limits that have been set. In the more extreme escalation, the student acts despite a risk to their life.

Incel

This term stands for “involuntary celibate.” It represents a range of thinking and behaviors from social awkwardness and difficulty forming connections with women to hardline misogyny and active threats to punish them for rejecting the person’s attempts at dating.

Inhibitors

Anything that reduces the likelihood that the person will escalate to violence. Also called buffers, anchors, or protective factors.

Irrational

Thinking becomes increasingly impaired due to paranoia, odd or obsessive thoughts, delusions, and/or a general separation from reality. This may include language about aliens, government organizations surveilling them, incongruent or poorly organized speech, and the experience of hallucinations (voices, visions, smells, etc.) that may command and/or demand they take violent action.

JACA

Justification, Alternatives, Consequences, and Ability. This acronym, created by Decker, helps determine the level of threat. J: Does the person feel justified in using violent means? A: Does the subject perceive that he or she has alternatives to rectify the grievance? C: How salient are the consequences of this activity to the subject? A: Does the subject believe they can carry out the intended violence?

**Last Resort
Warning Behavior**

A decision to end one’s life and make final arrangements before a targeted violence attack.

Leakage

Intentional or accidental communication to a third party of intent to do harm, including clues and details about their existing attack plan. At first, these are vague hints at frustration, growing unhappiness, and unfairness, with no mention of a specific time, place, or target of an attack. Leakage increases as they vent frustrations verbally/online and demand justice. Threats then become specific and lethal with a time and location mentioned.

Legacy Token

Content prepared by a perpetrator before an attack that is typically designed to be found following the attack as a way to share a message. The legacy token is a manifesto, written text, blog post, video project, piece of art, diary, or journal created before an attack and left for someone to find after the attack. It clarifies the attacker's motives or better defines the attacker's message of infamy.

Lethality

The level of access to deadly weapons and materials determines the danger posed by the attack plan. At the early stage, access to deadly weapons may require obtaining them from friends or other locations. As lethality escalates, weapons are acquired along with ammunition and secondary materials needed for an attack, like high-capacity magazines, security schedules, or counter-surveillance measures.

LOA

Leave of absence.

Location

This signifies the place where an attack will occur. This may be vague and general at first, perhaps even at a place where the attacker does not have access. With escalation, the location becomes increasingly specific, and the threatener has conducted research and planning on access. They may conduct walkthroughs of the location and assess how to overcome any obstacles.

Microaggression

These are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.

Microassaults: Conscious and intentional actions or slurs, such as using racial epithets, displaying swastikas, or deliberately serving a white person before a person of color in a restaurant.

Microinsults: Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a colleague of color how she got her job, implying she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.

Microinvalidations: Communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, white people often ask Asian Americans where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

Novel Aggression	An act of violence that appears unrelated to any targeted violence pathway warning behavior and committed for the first time. Such behaviors may be utilized to test the ability of the subject to commit a violent act and may be a measure of response tendency, the motivation to act on the environment, or a behavioral tryout.
Objectification	There is a depersonalization regarding how others are seen, with an increasing tendency to see them as "less than" or unworthy of basic consideration. This manifests in name-calling and the use of racist, misogynistic, or bigoted language. As objectification escalates, there are increased conflicts at work, school, and home, along with threats and negative actions. They eventually see their target as undeserving of any consideration and simply as an obstacle to their goal.
Organization	This denotes threats that move from vague and undefined to narrow and specific. Poorly organized threats are more reactive and often involve many targets and people. Escalations in organization define the attack to a singular target and are consistent and repeated.
Pathway to Violence	A series of sequential steps – from its beginning with a felt grievance, to violent ideation, research and planning, specific preparations for violence, critical breaches of security or other boundaries, to a concluding attack – indicating that an individual is progressing towards an act of targeted violence.
Penetration	The individual begins to study the vulnerabilities of their target or targets to determine how to increase the lethality and success of their plan. As this escalates, they study security measures and develop ways to overcome them. They select a time for the attack and often create a manifesto or legacy token memorializing their study.
PI	Principal investigator or advisor.
Planning	Involves writing down or thinking about what the student may do to correct an injustice or seek revenge. Planning intensifies as the threatener focuses on details, gathering intel, and acquiring the items they need for an attack. As planning escalates, the student clarifies and improves tactics to increase damage and overcome potential obstacles. Secondary sites, counter-surveillance measures, and contingency plans are developed.
POC	Person of concern (typically used in law enforcement, though POC may also refer to a person of color outside of law enforcement).
Predatory Violence	Also known as targeted, instrumental, mission-oriented, tactical, or strategic violence. Describes those who do not act based on the immediacy of their emotions but rather plan over weeks, months, and years, acquiring the data needed to carry out their assault.

Psychological Assessment	Focus on evaluating mental illness or functional behaviors. These are used when a diagnosis of a mental illness is sought, medication needs are evaluated, testing or assessment is required for accommodation, or a level of care assessment is urgently needed for danger to self or others.
Reporting Party	Often used in sexual assault or harassment cases to refer to the person making the report. Also commonly referred to as the victim.
Research	This involves general interest in and the reading or viewing of materials about past attacks. As the individual escalates, research becomes increasingly focused on weapons, tactical gear, scouting the location, and penetration testing (examining vulnerabilities in security, patrols, and cameras).
Responding Party	Often used in sexual assault or harassment cases to refer to the person against whom the report is made. Also commonly referred to as the accused or the perpetrator.
Rhetoric	Refers to the historical context of writing fiction, satire, or opinion pieces that may look concerning at first, but are, in fact, a common way the student processes and vents. While they may write vague threats and use jarring language, the overall piece is intended to express pain and/or is satirical. As rhetoric escalates, the tone and details convey a disregard for the target, and they are written to inflict pain and insult rather than to make a larger narrative point. At the extreme, the fiction/satire is seen as a poor disguise, and the real desire is clearly to weaken the target's image and destroy the target.
Sadist	They take pleasure in inflicting harm on people and/or animals. In the early stages, this may manifest as a lack of empathy or non-physical attacks on others. In later stages, there is a growing need to harm others physically, along with making plans and narrowing on a target.
Silos	Refers to situations in which information is not shared across departments. In this flawed process, information or knowledge is kept separate, tightly controlled, and not shared. This can inhibit attempts to assess or manage a threat or potentially threatening situation.
SOC	Student of concern.
Substantive Threats	Threats that are supported by access to weapons or lethal means and driven more by a desire to harm or destroy a target.
Target Hardening	The process of making a target more difficult to attack using things like a single point of entrance, closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV), reinforced doors, automatic locks, and sign-in/sign-out policies.

Teased

In the early stages, teasing and bullying are occasional experiences that affect a student's self-worth and social connections. As teasing increases, their world becomes increasingly unsafe and negative, leading to feelings of hopelessness, despair, being trapped, and eventually feelings of suicide or a desire to send a message to the oppressors through violent action.

Time

This refers to when the attack will take place. In the early stages, the time may be given in months or years, with the feeling of "if things don't change at some point, this will happen." As timing escalates, the student thinks in terms of weeks, and the attack becomes increasingly likely if the target does not change their behavior. When the attack is imminent, planned for the next hours or days, the timing may be communicated through a verbal or online threat.

Tone

Whether written or verbal, the tone is intimidating, angry, and frustrated, often tinged with sadness and pain. As the tone escalates, the attacker uses negative adverbs and adjectives to blame, harass, and intimidate the target. Increased objectification of the target occurs, removing any sense of agency or humanity. In extreme stages of tone, rage, and a desire for punishment are explicit and unrelenting.

Transient Threats

Threats made as an emotional reaction to a stressful situation in which the person making the threat feels trapped, misunderstood, angry, or unheard.

Types of Workplace Violence

As defined in CA SB 553, there are four types of workplace violence:

Violence committed by someone with no legitimate business at the site

Violence directed at employees by customers, clients, patients, students, inmates, or visitors

Violence directed at an employee by a present or former employee, supervisor, or manager

Violence committed by a person who does not work there but has a relationship with an employee

Vengeance

Seen in parallel with aggrieved, injustice, and grievance collecting, this is the action and desire to punish those they feel have caused their pain or are unfairly enjoying life in a way the attacker resents. Talking and venting eventually includes fantasies of acting out their plan and considering the time, place, and location of their attack.

Violence Risk Assessment

A broad term that may include a threat assessment, psychological assessment, suicide assessment, and/or a general evaluation of overall risk.

**Weapons
Acquisition**

Moving beyond simple interest, they begin purchasing weapons or gaining experience shooting at a range. The weapons are increasingly chosen for a specific purpose, and the knowledge about the weapons becomes more directly tied to a specific attack plan. Secondary and tertiary weapons, ammunition, and gear are obtained.

Weapons Interest

They explore different types of firearms, knives, explosive devices, and corresponding tactical equipment such as harnesses, night-vision goggles, expanded magazines, optics, and bulletproof vests. As their interest grows, they become increasingly obsessed with the topic and talk about it freely with others, despite negative consequences for their friendships, work, or academics. They may belong to several Internet discussion groups and in-person organizations, and subscribe to magazines or other books or literature. As this interest escalates, there becomes an increasing focus on narrowing weapons and tactical material knowledge for a specific plan, such as a shooting at a public event, school, or workplace.

**Zero-Tolerance
Policies**

These often require a straightforward separation based on a single incident; however, simply separating a subject from school or work under a zero-tolerance policy can escalate an upset, frustrated individual into a rage-filled, potentially vengeful attacker. Instead, according to the FBI, zero-tolerance policies should not require a rigid, one-size-fits-all response, but mean that no threatening or violent behavior is acceptable, and no violent incident will be ignored.