Threat Assessment: Evaluating Risk of Targeted Violence

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What is Threat Assessment?

Threat assessment and management is the process of identifying and evaluating the risk of harm to a particular target (group of individuals or individual) and involves intervention strategies to reduce the risk or threat (Meloy, Hart, & Hoffman, 2014; Mohandie, 2000).
Definition of Workplace Violence

- “An intentional act committed by an individual or group for the purpose of (or resulting in) psychologically and/or physically affecting an organization or person associated with an organization” (Stock, 2007).

- Targeted violence is often considered synonymous with predatory violence, but this common language leaves a substantial gap in the understanding, assessment, and management of certain other forms of workplace violence.
Threats in the Workplace

Risks in the workplace tend to arise in one of four contexts:

TYPE I- Criminal Intent (Robbery)
TYPE II- Customer/Client
TYPE III- Worker (or Worker on Worker)
TYPE IV- Personal Relationship (Domestic)

CalOSHA, 1995; Howard, 1996; IPRC, 2001
Situational and Organizational Factors

- The organization has as much of a personality as the subject of the assessment. How does the organization contribute to risk?

- Those around the subject may be influential by ignoring, permitting, encouraging, or provoking a subject’s violence (Denenberg & Braveman, 1999; Innes, Barling, & Turner, 2005; Monahan, 1986; White & Meloy, 2007).

- Impact the process has on all parties: employer (cost, productivity, image), victim, subject, coworkers, and associates to the different parties.

- Cooperation of the parties.
Principles of Threat Assessment

- Basic principles of threat assessment (Borum et al., 1999):
  - Targeted violence is the result of an understandable and often discernable process of thinking and behavior.
  - Violence stems from an interaction among the potential attacker, past stressful events, a current situation, and the target.
  - The key to investigation and resolution of threat assessment cases is identification of the subject’s “attack related” behaviors.
  - The successful management of targeted violence risk is enhanced through collaboration.
The prevailing theoretical model with regard to the assessment and management of targeted violence begins with the concept of a “pathway” to violence.

First mentioned by Dietz and Martell (1989) and systematically studied by Fein and Vossekuil (1998; 1999), behavioral pathway refers to the path along which an individual might progress in moving from communication with the target to approach.

The U.S. Secret Service developed a pathway model based on their empirical research describing a route moving from ideation, to planning, to preparation and finally to implementation.
White and Meloy (2010): Five critical items suggesting a high risk of workplace violence:

1. Motives for violence
2. Homicidal ideas, fantasies, or preoccupation
3. Violent intentions and expressed threats
4. Weapons skill and access
5. Preattack planning and preparation
Warning Behaviors

- Warning behaviors are dynamic and acute behaviors that precede an act of violence, are related to it, and therefore a risk factor for it.

- They show an intense and accelerated effort to further a particular cause.
A rationally derived typology of dynamic signals (warning behaviors) was developed for purposes of conceptualizing more short-term high-risk superordinate behavior patterns (Meloy, Hoffman, Guldinam, & James, 2012; Meloy, Hoffman, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, & Guldimann, 2014):

- Pathway
- Fixation
- Identification
- Novel aggression
- Energy burst
- Leakage
- Last resort
- Direct threat
History

- Mental health assessment of violence risk was typically conducted in a judicial context and related to predicting violent recidivism.

- A number of tools have been developed and validated for predicting violence risk in this context (e.g., VRAG, PCL-R, HCR-20).

- Statistical prediction has proven to be the most accurate approach to predicting violence risk. **However, this approach depends on large data sets to accurately classify cases.**
Contemporary Threat Assessment

- There are no purely actuarial risk assessment instruments available for assessing workplace violence.

- This is due in part to the low base rate of targeted violence in the non-adjudicated community.

- Despite the limits of science, the problem still needs to be addressed.

- The current approach is empirically based, but relies heavily on professional judgment.
“In practice the evaluator examines the evidence for each of the risk factors in relation to the evidence for the other factors, relying on his or her clinical judgment to reach an opinion as to the nature, severity, and time line of violence risk” (Meloy & Hoffman, 2014).

According to Van Deer Meer and Diekhuis (2014), “everything should be done to reduce the risk of error in judgment.”

Systematic methods for data collection and formal procedures (decision rules) for weighing and combining relevant factors narrow the focus and reduces noise maximizing decisional accuracy (Faust, 2012).

Any structure is better than none at all (Hart, 2014).
The Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk (WAVR-21) is a structured professional judgment instrument assessing the risk of workplace violence” and was “designed to consider target and contextual factors and also change over time in the risk behavior of a person of concern (White, 2014, p. 12).

Hart (2014) concludes that SPJ has a large evidence base supporting its efficacy, effectiveness, and utility.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>WAVR-21</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Homicidal Ideation, Violent Fantasies or Preoccupations</td>
<td>13. Depression and Suicidality</td>
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<td>3. Violent intentions and Expression</td>
<td>14. Paranoia and Other Psychotic Symptoms</td>
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<td>4. Weapons Skill and Access</td>
<td>15. Substance Abuse</td>
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<td>5. Pre-Attack Planning and Preparation</td>
<td>16. Isolation</td>
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<td>6. Stalking or Menacing Behavior</td>
<td>17. History of Violence, Criminality, and Conflict</td>
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<td>8. Extreme Job Attachment</td>
<td>19. Situational and Organizational Contributors to Violence</td>
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<td>10. Entitlement and Other Negative Traits</td>
<td>21. Organizational Impact of Real or Perceived Threats</td>
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<td>11. Lack of Conscience and Organizational Impact of Real or Perceived Threats</td>
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Contemporary Threat Assessment

The U.S. Secret Service developed a threat assessment approach that is fact-based and looks not at profiles but rather, methodically analyzes warning signs (thoughts and behaviors) on a pathway to violent action.

Functions of a Threat Assessment Program
- Identifying perpetrator
- Assessing risk
- Manage case

(Fein, Fossekuil, & Holden, 1995)
Conducting the Assessment

- Multiple sources of information.
- According to Fein and Vossekuil (1998), information should be sought in at least five areas:
  1. Facts bringing the subject to attention
  2. The subject
  3. Attack-related behaviors
  4. Motive(s)
  5. Target selection
- Confidence through convergence.
Risk investigation utilizes available information about warning signs, risk factors, stabilizing factors, and precipitating events, to arrive at a categorical description of risk for a particular point in time.

Risk investigation is only as good as the data collection to support it. Use of collateral data sources is essential.
IAS/NAS FIVE CATEGORY SYSTEM

Category I: High Violence Potential, Qualifies for Immediate Arrest or Hospitalization

Category II: High Violence Potential, Does Not Qualify for Arrest or Hospitalization


Category IV: Insufficient Evidence for Violence Potential, Sufficient Evidence for the Unintentional Infliction of Emotional Distress Upon Others

Category V: Insufficient Evidence for Violence Potential, Insufficient Evidence for Emotional Distress Upon Others
Intelligent Intervention

- The details of the case should inform the selection of interventions.

- An intervention can have three effects: decrease risk, increase risk, or have no effect.
Five Categories of Control

- Organizational Control
- Social Control
- Psychological Control
- Physical Control
- Legal Control

(Palarea & Van Horn, 2010)
Threat Management Hierarchy

- Incarceration (jail)
- Arrest
- Hospitalization
- Restraining/Protection order
- Refer subject to outpatient counseling
- Take administrative actions
- Implement physical security measures
- Leverage subject’s social network
- Inform subject of boundaries/consequences
- Inform victim on safety measures

(Palarea & Van Horn, 2010)
Know relevant federal and state laws.

According to the General Duty Clause of the federal Occupational Safety and Health and Act of 1970 (OSHA), employers must maintain a workplace “free from recognizable hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious harm to employees (Occupational Safety and Health Act, 1970).

State laws impose similar requirements:

Most threat assessment professionals report applying related laws (Mohandie & Hoffman, 2014).

Data Privacy Laws.
Culture and Workplace Violence

Some cultural consideration (White & Christiansen, 2012):

- Obtain cultural background information that may explain the behavior.
- Address language barriers.
- Assess acculturation
- In assessing imminent or high-risk scenarios, refer to know universal risk factors: motives to harm, intent, fixation, entitlement, psychosis/violent delusions, mood disturbance (especially anger), firearms/weapons access and capacity, and perturbation (pain, dread, hopelessness).
- Seek consultation
Increase likelihood of Positive Resolution

- **Specialization**
- **Process** (structure [WAV-R] and procedural accountability [checklist])
- **Multidisciplinary team**
- **Consultation**
- **Documentation**