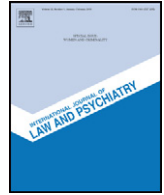




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## A comprehensive approach to managing threats of violence on a university or college campus



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### ABSTRACT

Horrifying, high profile acts of violence on campuses remain relatively rare, nevertheless, academic administrators are required to manage threats of violence on campus on an increasingly regular basis. These threats take two primary forms, those in which the perpetrator and the intended victim(s) are clearly identified, often involving repeated threats and threatening behaviour towards an individual; and those involving anonymous threats to commit acts of larger scale violence. Complicating factors in managing these threats include: fear contagion; mass media and social media attention; responsibilities to all members of the university community sometimes including individuals issuing the threat and the intended victims; demands for safety and security measures that are often at odds with professional advice; and permeable campus boundaries that cause security challenges. This paper considers the changing landscape of threat assessment and risk assessment on university and college campuses and suggests opportunities for partnerships between forensic mental health professionals and academic administrators.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years the public has been riveted by media images of shootings on university and college campuses and subsequent interviews of those affected. The death of 32 and wounding of 17 people at Virginia Tech in 2007; the death of six people and wounding of 21 at

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University of Iowa in 2008; and in Canada, the death of one and wounding of 19 at Montreal's Dawson College in 2006; all evoke collective horror. They also spark political action. Following the Virginia Tech shooting, President George W. Bush began a process of consultations resulting in a report to the President and a partnership between the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Secret Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Drysdale, 2010). President Obama in 2013, developed "Now is the Time" a plan to provide resources to make schools safer and address gun violence in education settings.

While statistical analyses suggest that incidents of mass violence on campus may be low (Cornell, 2010; Drysdale, 2010; Fox & Savage, 2009; Moore, Petrie, Braga, & McLaughlin, 2003), in light of the far reaching and long term impacts, universities in North America and beyond have prudently moved to develop plans to mitigate the risk of recurrence. As Reddy and colleagues note, despite the extremely low occurrence, these events are so horrifying and traumatic that "the fear they engender can often drive radical policy change, in some cases leading to the implementation of bad policy" (Reddy et al., 2001) (p159). Some approaches have focused on heightened physical security such as metal detectors, fences, and increased policing, (Moore et al., 2003) leading to student complaints that schools can feel more like prisons than environments for learning (Sullivan & Guerette, 2003). Other approaches have included safety and security audits; reviews and revision of policies and practices related to operations and security monitoring; development of specialized teams addressing violence; and implementation of notification systems (Rasmussen & Johnson, 2008). Indeed, recent surveys of colleges and universities in the United States suggest that approximately 80% now have some sort of threat assessment team (Hollister & Scalora, 2015), more than 90% have emergency response plans in place, and many have lockdown plans (Fox & Savage, 2009).

Threat assessment, which emerged from policing, relies upon behavioural and observational analysis techniques for determining the potential for targeted violence (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldman, & James, 2012). This approach focuses on individuals, many of whom may not have a history of violence, who have either communicated a threat or have raised concerns because of recent threatening behaviour (Cornell, 2010), and seeks to determine and manage risk in a dynamic situation. Many universities now have a threat assessment team consisting of a combination of mental health, administrative, and campus policing or security staff. Clearly when violence is actively occurring, such as in the case of a shooter, policing services will have primary jurisdiction. However, when the threat is imminent surprisingly underutilized resources are forensic mental health professionals with expertise in determining potential for violence and harm, and expertise in strategies to mitigate the risk of mass violence.

A second and more common form of threat situation on campus takes the form of interpersonal violence in which a student, staff member or faculty member makes a threat towards another member of the campus community. Media attention has recently focused on violence committed against faculty members by students (Garofalo, 2016). For instance, on June 1, 2016, former doctoral student Mainak Sakar shot and killed UCLA Professor William Klug before turning the gun on himself (Hamilton, Watanabe, & Winton, 2016). According to newspaper reports he "struggled with severe mental problems, including depression and an inability to study, which compromised his work at UCLA". Sakar reportedly made several online posts focused on Klug suggesting the professor "made me really sick. Your enemy is your enemy. But your friend can do a lot more harm. Be careful about whom you trust." In March 2016, Boston's Salem University student Stephen Chastain strangled and stabbed English professor Pierre Walker 20–30 times in a campus washroom. Chastain was reported to have a history of mental illness and to suffer from auditory hallucinations, perceptual distortions, and self-injury (McCabe, 2016).

Interpersonal threats on campus may take the form of stalking, defined as a pattern of conduct in which one person inflicts on another repeated, unwanted intrusions and communications to the extent that the

victim fears for her own safety (Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Twenty-five percent of a sample of a nation-wide survey of 4811 faculty members in the United States reported stalking behaviour by students at one point in their careers including: receiving unwanted phone calls, emails or faxes; waiting at their offices; spying and watching; invasion of personal space; and boasting about personal information obtained (Morgan & Kavanaugh, 2011). Most distressing behaviours for victims included: arriving at the faculty member's home; acts of physical harm, threat or restraint; and verbal abuse – each of which occurred in almost 25% of the reported cases. In addition, student stalkers frequently threatened to discredit faculty with other faculty or superiors if they did not comply with demands. Recent studies of undergrads in the United States have similarly indicated that 20–25% of female students and 8–22% of male students reported being stalked since arriving at university (Buhi, Clayton, & Surrency, 2009; McNamara & Marsil, 2013; Myers, Nelson, & Forke, 2016), most commonly by acquaintances (48.7%), classmates (37.2%), or romantic partners or ex-partners (34.6%) (Buhi et al., 2009). Of students who reported being stalked 59.1% reported no other forms of interpersonal violence (Myers et al., 2016). Stalking behaviours often escalate over time and can result in not only psychological harm, but also physical harm towards the victim.

Violence risk assessment is the domain of forensic mental health professionals and typically considers future risk of violence in an individual who has perpetrated violence in the past. It is usually conducted in a controlled environment, such as a clinic, hospital or prison and is often used in making determinations regarding sentencing, level of security, or release (Meloy et al., 2012). Risk assessment generally relies on clinical interviews and risk assessment tools (including structured professional judgment and actuarial instruments). Bringing these skills and methods to the university setting however, requires an expanded approach that fully appreciates the unique character of university campuses, the different forms of threat, and the challenges administrators and other staff face when confronted with managing threats of violence.

Threats on campus take two primary forms, those in which the threatener and the intended victim(s) are clearly identified (often involving repeated threats and stalking behaviour); and those involving threats (often anonymous and online) to commit acts of larger scale violence. The case in which the threatener is unknown or unavailable, calls for the use of the threat assessment model. When the threatener is known, a violence risk assessment approach (in conjunction with the threat assessment approach) is often more appropriate. This differentiation is depicted in Fig. 1 later in this paper.

In this paper we describe threat assessment and violence risk assessment models as they apply to the university environment. We also identify the challenges faced by university administrators; offer suggestions for forensic mental health professionals interested in working on interdisciplinary teams in this critical area of practice; and provide a model for partnership. We begin our discussion with a review of the significant consequences of violence on campus.

## 2. Consequences of violence on campus

Violence in educational institutions has far reaching implications, affecting those on campus, loved ones and the surrounding community. A case study analysis of six communities affected by school shootings saliently summarized the longstanding effects as follows:

"The tragedy and shock of the large numbers killed and injured all at once in the suburban and rural cases still reverberates in those communities. Those closest to the centre of these incidents continue to be traumatized; victim's civil suits against shooters families are still pending...business continues to suffer because of harm to the communities' reputations." (Moore et al., 2003) (p3).

The most expected reaction to mass violence on campus is the occurrence of post-traumatic stress symptoms among those who were

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