

Three and a Half Years Later: Threat Assessment in the Aftermath of Littleton and Taber

*Originally Published:
The Canadian Association of School Social Workers
and Attendance Counsellors Newsletter
Volume 11, Issue 4, Fall, 2002*

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In the wake of the 1999 school shooting in Taber, Alberta, the Alberta Government organized the Taber Response Project (TRP)* to deal with the “aftermath” of Canada’s first high-profile school shooting. The concept of traumatic aftermath from school shootings was generally limited by some professionals to what happens in the immediate minutes to hours following a shooting and what happens directly at the scene of the crime. Other professionals extended the scope of aftermath to include the “days” following a traumatic event. Through TRP consultations with sites outside of Canada impacted by school shootings, and with our own experiences in Alberta, the first comprehensive model of aftermath called the Traumatic Events Systems (TES) model was developed. The TES model addresses both immediate and longer-term effects of traumatic aftermath in terms of the school and community systems where the shooting occurs (“ground zero”) and the school and community systems beyond, that are likewise touched by the tragedy (the “impact zone”). In the Canadian context most schools and communities have been influenced to some degree by the Littleton and Taber shootings, but this impact is often not evident until a threat is subsequently made by one of their own students. What we now understand is that there is a *relationship* between actual incidents and the threat-making behaviours that follow, even those that only emerge months or years later, or hundreds of miles away. The TES model offers the first insight into these phenomena and helps us to decide how seriously to take the threats.

The TES model views student threat-related behaviour as typical of aftermath, and has identified predictable time frames, or "critical periods", for increased threat-related behaviour. The model also anticipates these elements of aftermath from high-profile violence to endure a minimum of five years post-incident. Further, every time another high-profile school shooting occurs, the aftermath duration from earlier shootings seems to be extended. One certainty is that threat-related behaviour by high-risk students in Canadian schools continues to occur three and a half years later.

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In the eight days prior to the shooting in Taber, many Canadian schools were dealing with the first critical period in the impact zone (identified as the two weeks following a school shooting) from Columbine's shooting as students across the country were engaging in threat making behaviour including direct threats to replicate the crimes committed in Littleton, Colorado. On the day of the April 28, 1999 shooting in Taber, the school division counselling team had just concluded a meeting where a new phenomenon was reported and discussed: multiple students in "our schools" were threatening to "do a Columbine". Ironically, within an hour of that meeting we were called to W.R. Myers High School to respond to Canada's first high-profile random-type school shooting.

Although student threats were already on the increase in Canada as a consequence of the Colorado incident, the situation intensified as a second impact zone from Taber (an "overlapping impact zone") exerted its influence. The first critical period from Taber amplified the existing critical period from Littleton and thrust Canadian jurisdictions into the field of student threat assessment. A second critical period was then recognized: the month and a half prior to Christmas vacations. The third critical period is the month and a half prior to the anniversaries of the Littleton and Taber shootings. Other periods were identified that are beyond the scope of this article. School personnel do not need to be caught off guard by what seems like an unexplained increase in threats across their divisions. It should be noted that threats occur at other times as well, but during critical periods they occur at a much higher rate. These periods are a natural part of traumatic aftermath. However, the particular response to these threats by school officials (principals, psychologist, social workers, counsellors, school resource officers etc.) can in fact contribute to either an *increase* or a *decrease* in the degree of risk for both the threat maker and the threat recipient(s). Currently, the most common responses to student threats in the aftermath are either overreactions or underreactions. Both are a problem.

To avoid overreaction or underreaction there are some key concepts to be remembered:

- a) There is no profile of a school shooter. Students who commit serious acts of violence may be anywhere on a continuum from "traditional high-risk students" (ones we expect could kill) to "non-traditional high-risk students" (ones we never expect could kill). Understanding this allows trained threat assessment teams to avoid being deceived by assumptions and to focus on real data/evidence that indicates a student is moving on a course to committing a serious act of violence.
- b) The majority of threat makers in the aftermath do not pose a risk to others. Many, however have been found to be a risk to self.
- c) Historically, when violence has occurred and the selection of "targets" by shooters appears to have been partly or completely random, it was later confirmed that all had communicated their intentions to others. In other words, all were threat makers in the days, weeks, or months prior to opening fire.

The majority of threat makers are attempting to communicate something to those around them through their threat-making behaviour. Most often they are students in emotional pain moving on a path toward self harm, while a few (the majority of our school shooters) are both suicidal and homicidal. In threat assessment we look closely at the level of “fluidity” between the suicidal and homicidal domains and take all threats seriously, as either outcome would be devastating.

When schools underreact to threat-making behaviour (i.e. at the extreme, failing to even question the threat maker) the threat maker who has engaged in the behaviour as a way of communicating that he or she is feeling unsafe or out of control will often view the underreaction as evidence that he/she truly is insignificant. This lack of response to one's threat may elevate a student's risk as he/she attempts to become significant (noticed) by “proving it”, by perhaps bringing a weapon to school or actually carrying out an act of violence. When some students, staff, and parents hear that someone “threatened to shoot up the school” and that “nothing was done about it” there is often increased anxiety in the school and community revealed, may traumatize some individuals and could result in a concerted effort, by those most traumatized, to scapegoat the threat maker. As common sense would dictate, this in turn would increase the likelihood of a threat maker feeling pressured or justified to act.

Conversely, schools that overreact by calling the police and suspending students who haven't clearly delivered a threat (e.g. a student draws a picture with violent content but with no threat to a specific target) can trigger a significant trauma response in many as well. As in underreaction, overreaction may result in scapegoating and result in risk developing in a student where it did not previously exist, or was simply low or transient. Also, there may be a tendency to soften or escape the negative image of “overreacting” by *underreacting* the next time. When this dynamic exists, indicators of violence that could prevent an incident are often ignored or denied as relevant, until after the fact.

The TES model identifies the need for all school divisions to have trained multidisciplinary threat assessment teams and protocols that include participation by school administrators, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, police, child protection workers, mental health professionals, etc., functioning in their various capacities. When all students, staff, and parents are made aware that all threats and threat-makers will be taken seriously (meaning they will be assessed by a trained team) then “fair notice” has been given that a new way of responding (protocol) is in place and then overreaction and underreaction are rarely variables in the assessment.

We have learned in Canada and the United States that the simple act of skilfully and compassionately interviewing a threat maker, even one who is moving rapidly towards committing a serious violent act, can result in the student abandoning their plan to kill. It is not easy to kill and most of the school shooters struggled with their decision down to the last moment. When students communicate to us through their threat-making behaviour, let's listen. Dealing with the aftermath of school homicide or suicide is painful and recovery is often tentative and long-term. It is far better to assess threat makers than to assess victims in the aftermath.