

Briefing Document: Review of Recent Trends in Behavioral Threat Assessment

Overview:

The threat landscape is dynamic and influenced by complex, layered grievances, often amplified and shaped by online content. Effective behavioral threat assessment requires a rigorous, evidence-informed process that considers multiple factors, including intensity of effort, personalized motive, target focus, and the influence of online activity and extremist rhetoric. Collaboration among agencies and a willingness to explore the various layers of an individual's grievance are essential for successful intervention and violence prevention.

Evolving Threat Landscape:

The threat landscape is continuously changing and becoming more complex.

- **Targeted violence cases** are often initially described as being related to a single issue (e.g., domestic violence, stalking) with other layers of risk emerging later.
- **Clinical risk issues** can have layers, in terms of community risk, implying broader obligations for practitioners to understand potential risks outside of the therapy setting.

Importance of Process, Accountability, and Ethical Considerations:

Effective threat assessment relies on a robust, evidence-informed process and adherence to ethical principles.

- We can rarely promise an outcome, but we can be true to a process. This process must be evidence-informed, evidence-based, and

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consistent with ethical values such as doing no harm and treating everyone with dignity and respect.

- Institutions and organizations have a duty to have a process and follow it. Failures in communication and implementation of established plans can lead to significant legal repercussions.
- Effective behavioral threat assessment requires communication and collaboration within teams.

Key Factors in Behavioral Threat Assessment:

Research continues to support core factors in assessing risk.

- **Intensity of effort:** The energy an individual is putting into their grievance and potentially toward planning. This involves looking beyond a single communication and analyzing it in context with other behavior, methodologies, and potential escalation.
- **Personalized motive:** The individual's specific grievance and why it bothers them, recognizing its idiosyncratic intensity.

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- **Target focus:** How the person of concern views specific individuals or entities as responsible for their grievance and their level of focus on those targets.

Nature of Violence and Grievances:

Violent acts are rarely spontaneous and are often planned and purposeful. Grievances are becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted, influenced by online information.

- The online world and algorithms expose individuals to more like-minded information, leading to the development of additional layers of grievances.
- Violent extremism differs from extreme or atypical political or religious beliefs because the person focuses on violence as a problem-solving method.
- There is increasing evidence of the co-occurrence of suicide and aggressive behavior. It is important to ask a broad set of questions without stigmatizing individuals who seek help for suicidal ideation.

The Role of the Electronic Footprint and Online Influence:

The online world significantly influences the threat landscape, providing inspiration, justification, and practical guidance for violence.

- Examining the person of concern's open-source electronic footprint is crucial, though how this is done depends on one's role.
- Individuals increasingly put out their ideation and intent online, mirroring the behavior of extreme groups that back terror as a tactic.
- Extremist groups aren't demanding someone join them to learn their ideology and tactics. Instead, they target psychologically vulnerable

individuals by addressing feelings of being mistreated and slowly introducing hateful rhetoric and guidance on planning attacks.

- In averted shootings, individuals have admitted to researching their planned attacks on extremist and terrorist group websites even while denying favorable attitudes toward the ideology.
- Online sites push more inspiration for violence without affiliation. This contributes to the notion of "cut and paste ideology," where individuals blend different justifications and beliefs.

Layering of Grievances and Parfait Analogy:

Grievances are often not monolithic but composed of multiple interconnected issues, likened to the layers of a parfait.

- Individuals can blend justifications for violence from multiple ideologies.
- The "parfait" analogy illustrates how individuals pick and choose different layers and justifications for their grievance.
- These grievances may be linked or activated by personal issues.

Interplay of Mental Illness and Online Influence:

For a small minority of individuals with serious mental illness and paranoid beliefs, online sources can reinforce delusions and contribute to violent ideation.

- While most people with serious mental illness are not violent, a minority may find their delusions and grievance reinforced by online rhetoric.

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- Individuals threatening violence with serious mental illness may have done research online, visiting websites that reinforce their paranoid beliefs, even if the source is viewed critically.

Understanding Pathways to Violence Beyond Traditional Radicalization:

Individuals don't necessarily need to fully radicalize or join a group to be influenced and mobilize for violence.

- Traditional models focused on radicalization and joining groups. A newer perspective suggests individuals may start with curiosity, then get exposed to online material that becomes enmeshed with their grievance.
- Most people don't have to go to radicalization to get violent, instead we think of the online world as inspiring and mobilizing them.

Research Findings on Violent Extremist Rhetoric in Local Cases:

Recent research indicates that while overt violent extremist views are rare in local threat assessment cases, elements of their rhetoric can be present, often layered with other grievances.

- Research with local agencies in Southeast Nebraska looked at cases in law enforcement and mental health that referenced ideologies, violence, or extreme behavior directed toward violence. Such indicators were present in a small number of cases (less than 5% of contacts).
- When these indicators were present, most had one indicator, but several had multiple indicators.

- Four grievance content areas were identified as most common in local cases: upset with the government, rights were violated, religion, or race. Such individuals talked about the illegitimacy of government, hate towards certain groups, and claimed ideological justification for violence, over and above the initial activating event.
- Many of these cases also included threats of suicide.
- These individuals often threatened multiple entities (e.g., families, workplaces, government, schools).
- Some had obvious symptoms or were already engaged in mental health services.

Lessons Learned From Research & Practice:

Key takeaways for practitioners.

- People may “cut and paste” from different sources to justify their violence.
- The primary issue of concern drawing community attention wasn't always a threat but could be other problem behavior, with grievances leaking out.
- Multiple agencies may be involved, highlighting the need to partner with other community agencies.

It is crucial to assess suicide and violence risk concurrently, as they can overlap.