BTAM: PROS AND CONS OF DIFFERENT CADENCES

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In 2014, the US government selected three major cities in which to pilot a local approach to preventing terrorism and targeted violence,[1] predicated on the idea that local community involvement can improve the design of such approaches [2]. Since then, these efforts have become more common as local actors—states, cities, and counties—have passed legislation related to behavioral threat assessment, adopted prevention strategies aimed at terrorism and targeted violence, and implemented programming to address such violence.[2]

We present this series of papers—informed by a year-long evaluation of the violence prevention efforts underway in Wood County, Ohio[3]—to shed light on a local effort and assist other actors in building their own networks.

Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) is a systematic, fact-based process designed to help practitioners bridge the gap between identifying and mitigating potential threats and, by extension, to prevent acts of terrorism and targeted violence [3]. Federal guidance notes that BTAM teams should be multidisciplinary, have established protocols and procedures, meet on a regular basis, and have a relatively low threshold for intervention [4]. The guidance does not specify optimal meeting cadences and thresholds for intervention, however, and states, counties, and cities with BTAM requirements have articulated different expectations around both issues [5,6].

Ohio state law requires that all school buildings serving grades 6 through 12 have a threat assessment team, but it leaves issues of cadence and threshold to the individual schools [8]. Thus, in Wood County, different schools have adopted different approaches to BTAM. At one end of the spectrum, teams at some schools take a more inclusive approach to the process (i.e., including more cases), meeting frequently and operating at a lower threshold for activation. For example, at one school, team members reported conducting approximately 50 threat assessments per year (1 for every 29 students) and holding weekly meetings to discuss cases [7]. At the other end of the spectrum, teams at some schools may choose to be more exclusive about initiating a BTAM process, meeting less frequently and with a higher threshold for activation. At another school, the BTAM team has conducted only two formal threat assessments (1 for every 284 students) but uses threat assessment guidance informally to assess other situations of concern (Figure 1) [7].

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[1] The US Secret Service defines *targeted violence* as "a premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity" [1, p. 12].
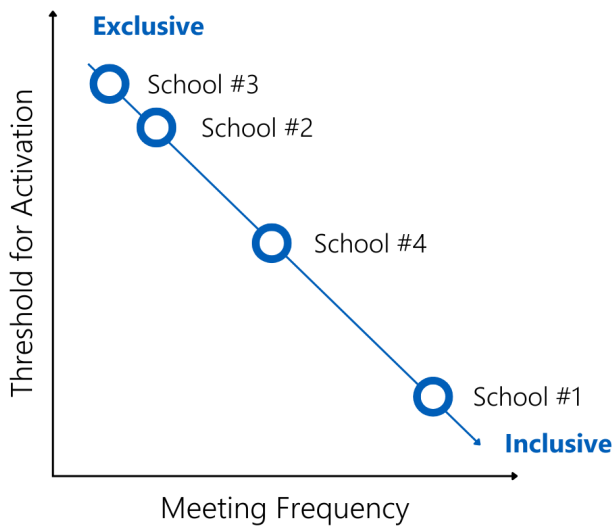
[2] For example, a range of activities is underway in states including Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Ohio, New York, and Texas.

[3] Our evaluation focused exclusively on Wood County's efforts serving juveniles.

Figure 1. Approaches to BTAM observed in four Wood County, Ohio, schools

Source: CNA.

Both approaches have pros and cons, and policy-makers and practitioners will have to weigh these when choosing their approach.

INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO BTAM

An inclusive approach to BTAM involves more frequent meetings and a lower threshold for activation that enables highly proactive identification of individuals of concern.

Pros: Conducting threat assessments more frequently enables team members to build confidence in the process, deepens relationships between the professionals serving on the team, allows more integration with a wider range of participants, and increases the likelihood that the school will be able to identify and provide services to a youth in crisis. In one case, stakeholders from a school taking an inclusive approach explained that they preferred this option because it allowed them to identify a wider array of interventions for behavior management and to avoid extreme options such as expulsion [7]. The

lower threshold for activation also enabled the team to intervene earlier, catching students exhibiting concerning behaviors before they became imminent threats. The stakeholders specifically noted that their BTAM process had helped them to identify students with learning differences or mental health struggles and connect them with appropriate supports and services.

Cons: Initiating a BTAM process inclusively might (problematically) label students who are not violence risks, stigmatizing those who exhibit only signs of anxiety or depression, or implying that their mental health struggles make them threats. In addition, enhanced scrutiny inherently gathers more student data, risking possible privacy violations. Finally, conducting a threat assessment with greater fidelity can be a highly resource-intensive process, so conducting a larger quantity of assessments per year might require a significant investment of team members' time and energy (although conducting threat assessments more frequently will lead to greater familiarity with the process, which might ultimately save time and resources).

EXCLUSIVE APPROACH TO BTAM

Teams taking an exclusive approach mobilize only in response to a severe threat.

Pros: The higher threshold for activation associated with this approach attenuates the risk of over-stigmatizing kids (who may be low risk) as violence risks or threats. In addition, this approach avoids the labor- and time-intensive process of conducting a formal threat assessment. Our evaluation found that the BTAM process relies heavily on critical personnel such as school resource officers, administrators, counselors, and social workers. Thus, conducting threat assessments infrequently lessens the workload of teachers, counselors, and other support staff who are likely already overburdened.

Cons: The downsides of this approach are an increase in the risk that a case could be ignored or missed and a decrease in opportunities to refine the team's processes. Teams with fewer activations have fewer opportunities to put their training into practice, gain confidence in the process, and gather experience working together.

IMPLICATION FOR LOCAL POLICY-MAKERS
MAKE AN INTENTIONAL CHOICE ABOUT HOW TO APPROACH BTAM

There is no single correct approach to BTAM—both approaches identified above have advantages and disadvantages. BTAM teams need to find the right balance for their operating environment that considers available resources and the needs of the specific school population. Doing so requires continually reevaluating the team's meeting cadence and threshold for activation. It might also involve conducting a needs assessment to help balance the school population's needs with available personnel and resources. In addition, the team should solicit feedback from internal and external partners to assess how well the process is working for the parties involved. It is critical that an intentional decision be made in full recognition of the pros and cons of each option.

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