Public Awareness Bulletin
Mitigating the Threat of School Violence as the U.S. "Returns to Normal" from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A)

The Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) manages the department-wide processes for coordinating and executing the intelligence cycle at both the federal and local levels. By integrating its capabilities with those of other DHS Components, I&A enhances threat identification, mitigation and response across the Department's mission areas. Additionally, I&A formulates and implements key strategies and initiatives that address critical barriers to information sharing.

DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships

The Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) supports communities across the United States (U.S.) to prevent individuals from radicalizing to violence and intervene when individuals have already radicalized to violence.

Objective

On January 21, 2021, President Biden signed an executive order urging the reopening of schools. As schools reopen, and the U.S. "returns to normal," the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) CP3 and I&A jointly produced this awareness bulletin for local communities to;

1. Raise awareness of potential risk factors and indicators for targeted violence in schools;
2. Raise awareness of the likelihood that students may have been exposed to multiple risk factors during the COVID-19 pandemic, and;
3. Provide resources to become an **engaged bystander** as part of a comprehensive local prevention framework.

DHS I&A and CP3 believe that the threat of targeted violence in schools will remain elevated as more children return to school full-time. Even after this elevated threat subsides, prevention of targeted violence should remain a key goal of schools and the communities in which they are located.

A **bystander** is an individual who is aware of concerning behaviors.

An **engaged bystander** is an individual who is *aware* of concerning behaviors and knows *how* to act on those concerns.

Part I: Potential Risk Factors and Indicators for Targeted Violence in Schools

CP3 works with local communities to create local prevention frameworks that prevent individuals from *radicalizing to violence* and intervene with individuals who already have – or are in the process of – radicalizing to violence. In most incidents, an individual who has carried out an act of terrorism or targeted violence had identifiable potential *risk factors* prior to radicalization to violence and observable *indicators* once they radicalized to violence.

> **Radicalizing to violence** is the process wherein an individual comes to believe that the threat or use of unlawful violence is necessary – or even justified – to accomplish a goal. That goal could be ideological or personal.

> A **risk factor** is a characteristic that may increase an individual's susceptibility to radicalization to violence. Having one (or more) risk factors does not mean an individual will radicalize to violence. Risk factors are not predictive.
>
> An **indicator** is a behavior that suggests an individual has already radicalized to violence.

For targeted violence in schools, the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) has conducted multiple studies on individuals who successfully carried out an attack on schools. That work has found:

- **91%** of school attackers had observable psychological (depression, suicidal ideation, anger, psychotic symptoms, etc.), behavioral (defiance, poor impulse control, violation of social norms, etc.), or neurological (developmental delays, cognitive deficits, etc.) symptoms.
    - 41% of school attackers were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to commit suicide.
- **94%** of school attackers had at least one identifiable "home life factor" which include:
    - parental divorce/separation (**71%**),
    - family financial difficulty (**69%**),
    - parent/sibling arrested/incarcerated (**54%**),
    - parent/sibling substance abuse (**46%**),
    - family discord (including domestic violence/abuse) (**40%**),
    - family mental health issues (**23%**),
    - abuse/neglect of attacker (**23%**), or
    - non-parental custodial care (**11%**).
- **83%** of school attackers threatened others, including the target, and/or communicated their intent to conduct an attack.
- **83%** of school attackers were retaliating for a grievance.
- **80%** of school attackers were bullied by their classmates. Some of the attackers actively sought help to address bullying but received an ineffective response or no response at all.
- **74%** of school attackers showed signs of frequent, intense anger and/or communicated that they were becoming increasingly prone to anger.
- **63%** of school attackers showed signs of severe depression, sadness, or isolation or openly talked about experiencing these emotions.
- **51%** of school attackers had engaged in observable planning behaviors prior to the attack. [1]

The USSS NTAC also reported that 94% of school attackers had experienced a risk factor within six months of their attack. Of those who experienced a risk factor, NTAC found that:

- **100%** experienced at least one social risk factor (e.g., bullying or problems with a romantic partner),
- **91%** experienced family-related risk factors (e.g., abuse, neglect, or financial problems), and
- **89%** experienced either academic failure or disciplinary actions (e.g., failing grades or suspension from school).[2]

The above characteristics and behaviors found by USSS NTAC have been organized by DHS I&A and CP3 into potential risk factors and indicators:

Potential Risk Factors:
The potential risk factors are not predictive; however, a community that is aware of the risk factors is an empowered community and is able to proactively engage in prevention programs.

- Suicidal ideation
- Depression
- Intense anger
- Mental illness
- Social isolation
- Family financial difficulties
- Family-based substance abuse
- Family-based arrest/incarceration

- Family-based discord
- Family-based mental health problems
- Abuse/Neglect
- Parental absence
- Academic poor performance
- Previous disciplinary actions
- Holding a grievance

Indicators:
If a student has demonstrated any of these indicators, a community's threat assessment and management team or law enforcement should be contacted immediately.

- Threatening a target
- Expressed intent (verbalization) to carry out an attack including threats on social media
- Planning an attack

PART II: COVID-19 and Increased Exposure to Potential Risk Factors

To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, many schools across the U.S. adjusted to operate in either partially online ("hybrid") or entirely online environments. This led to an immediate impact of COVID-19 – social isolation.[3] Subsequently, a nationally representative survey of 3,300 youth (aged 13-19) found that students have been experiencing multiple negative impacts including:

- **78%** of respondents are spending four hours or less each day in class or working on assignments.
- **30%** of respondents reported feeling unhappy or depressed with nearly as many reporting they worry about having basic needs (food, medicine, and safety) met.
- **29%** of respondents do not feel connected to school adults with nearly as many reporting they do not feel connected to their classmates or their community.
- In addition, respondents reported losing sleep, feeling under constant strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence.
- Some respondents also reported poorer overall health. [4]

In addition, many families of students experienced (or are continuing to experience) financial hardships during the pandemic including job or wage loss. In fact, in a recent survey, 51% of non-retired adults reported that the COVID-19 pandemic will make achieving their financial goals harder.[5]

There has also been anecdotal evidence that suggests students have experienced an increase in cyberbullying. Students who had experienced bullying before the pandemic are also more likely to experience pandemic stress.[6]

!   **Having one or more potential risk factors does not mean a student will engage in targeted violence or terrorism. Potential risk factors are not predictive.**

Prior to schools closing, millions of students relied on the mental health resources provided by schools, including access to mental health professionals. These resources were either severely restricted or terminated altogether as schools moved to online-only instruction. The reduced access to services coupled with the exposure to additional risk factors suggests schools – and the communities in which they are located – will need to increase support services to help students adjust to in-person learning as they cope with the potential trauma associated with the pandemic response.

Part III: Resources

The USSS NTAC reported that 100% of all school attackers exhibited concerning behaviors prior to their attack with 94% of these behaviors exhibited at school. In 66% of these cases, one or more concerning behaviors was not reported (to a parent, a school official, or to law enforcement).[7]

The school community (students, staff, parents, and other members of the broader community) are all potential bystanders. In order to be engaged, members of the school community need to know how to find help for an individual who may be radicalizing to violence. An engaged bystander is an individual who is *aware* of concerning behaviors and knows *how* to act on those concerns.

Topic	Resources
Threat Assessment and Management Teams	**U.S. Secret Service** The USSS has identified the creation and deployment of threat assessment and management teams as a best practice in school violence prevention. The USSS notes that: *…the goal of threat assessment is to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and deliver intervention strategies to manage that risk…. Many of these behaviors [of concern] may not involve physical violence or criminal acts, but still require an assessment and appropriate intervention.* ***The threshold for intervention should be low so that schools can identify students in distress before their behavior escalates to the level of eliciting concerns about safety*** [emphasis in the original].[8] If your school has a threat assessment and management team (or access to one), ensure that that is widely known and that ways to refer an individual are widely advertised. - If your school does not have, or have access to, a threat assessment and management team), consider approaching your local town/city governance and law enforcement partners to create one. See "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence." Accessible via https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac - For a brief overview of these types of teams and further resources, see "Threat Assessment and Management Teams" https://www.dhs.gov/publication/threat-assessment-and-management-teams?topic=preventing-terrorism **National Threat Evaluation and Reporting (NTER)** NTER offers a Behavioral Threat Assessment Train-the-Trainer Program. This Master Trainer Program (MTP) certifies federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial homeland security partners in behavioral threat assessment. THE MTP teaches candidates to identify and assess risk and warning signs, and manage potential threats of future, targeted violence, regardless of motive. For more information email NTER.MTP@hq.dhs.gov
School Safety	SchoolSafety.gov was created by the federal government to provide schools and districts with actionable recommendations to create a safe and supportive learning environment where students can thrive and grow. This resource can be accessed through https://www.schoolsafety.gov/. This site has multiple resources for schools on a range of topics including: - Bullying and cyberbullying - Threat assessment and reporting

- Mental health
- COVID-19

Suicide Prevention	Youth.gov – an entity created by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Program (IWGYP) – is composed of representatives from 21 federal agencies that support programs and services focusing on youth. The IWGYP promotes the goal of positive, healthy outcomes for youth. Youth.gov hosts a variety of resources for preventing suicide among youth and serves as a single stop for school communities. These resources can be accessed through https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-suicide-prevention/preventing-youth-suicide. Examples of resources include:
	
	• The National Suicide Prevention Hotline, a 24-hour, toll free hotline
	    ▪ 1-800-273-TALK (English) or 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
	    ▪ The hotline also provides informational material and is available in approximately 150 languages
	• A U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) toolkit for high school students
	• Resources for parents

Anti-Bullying	The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) created an anti-bullying website (StopBullying.gov) that hosts a variety of tools and resources. These resources can be accessed through https://www.stopbullying.gov/. Examples of resources include: • What bullying is and what the warning signs are • The differences between "bullying" and "cyberbullying" • How to get help if someone is being bullied (https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/get-help-now) • Bullying Prevention and Remote Learning (https://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2020/09/24/bullying-prevention-and-remote-learning)
Responding to Child Trauma	A traumatic event is an event that is frightening, dangerous, or violent. COVID-19 is a traumatic event. Traumatic events can elicit strong emotional and physical responses that linger long after the event has ended. Many students have experienced trauma during COVID-19, including the loss of loved ones. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (https://www.nctsn.org/) was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children's Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who have witnessed or experienced trauma. The NCTSN has specific resources for coping with COVID-19: https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/pandemic-resources

Mental Health	**The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA)** SAMHSA provides multiple resources to help communities find appropriate services for individuals who are abusing substances or having a mental health crisis. These resources include: • Guidance to states and school systems on addressing mental health and substance abuse https://store.samhsa.gov/product/guidance-states-and-school-systems-addressing-mental-health-and-substance-use-issues • School and campus health https://www.samhsa.gov/school-campus-health • How to find a mental health provider https://www.samhsa.gov/find-treatment **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** The CDC has a comprehensive page focused on COVID-19 and youth. This resource provides parents with activity books, conversation starters, and printable materials to help increase engagement and connectivity during the pandemic. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/parental-resource-kit/index.html **MentalHealth.gov** The U.S. government runs MentalHealth.gov – a website that compiles information on a variety of mental health topics from the CDC, the National Institutes for Health (NIH), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and SAMHSA, et. al. This site has a specific page for educators that can be accessed via https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/educators. Topics for educators include: • Warning signs of mental health problems • What behavioral signs should signal an intervention • How to access crisis support and other mental health services • How educators can help prevent a mental health crisis
Suspicious Activity Reporting	**The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI)** The NSI, a joint collaborative effort by the DHS, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement partners, is a standardized process for identifying and reporting suspicious activity in jurisdictions across the US and additionally serves as the unified focal point for sharing SAR information. Visit the NSI website at https://www.dhs.gov/nsi for additional resources, as well as online SAR training available for law enforcement and hometown security partners to help prevent terrorism and other criminal activity.

[1] U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. (November 2019). "Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted Violence." Accessible via https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac

[2] Ibid.

[3] See "Mitigating Social Isolation in Youth" for a discussion on this risk factor in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. https://www.dhs.gov/publication/mitigating-social-isolation-youth?topic=preventing-terrorism

[4] Margolius, M., Doyle Lynch, A., Pufall Jones, E. & Hynes, M. (2020). *The State of Young People during COVID-19: Findings from a nationally representative survey of high school youth.* Americas Promise Alliance. https://youth.gov/announcements/report-covid-19's-impact-young-people

[5] Pew Research Center. (March 5, 2021). "A Year into the Pandemic, Long-Term Financial Impact Weighs Heavily on Many Americans." https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/03/05/a-year-into-the-pandemic-long-term-financial-impact-weighs-heavily-on-many-americans/

[6] Shanahan Lilly, et. al. (2020). "Emotional Distress in Young Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence of Risk and Resilience from a Longitudinal Cohort Study." *Psychological Medicine* 1(10). https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329172000241X

[7] U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center. (November 2019). "Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted Violence." Accessible via https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac

[8] Ibid. pg. 49.