

# Chapter 35

## Impacted Whether They Know It or Not: A Systems Approach to Preventing School Shootings

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the past 20 years, schools have been increasingly exposed to school shootings in which many of the victims are targeted at random. Despite recent progress in coping with school crises such as suicide, accidental death, and targeted violence, the advent of random-type school shootings has left mental health, education, law enforcement, and other professionals struggling to deal with this type of traumatic event in terms of its aftermath and its prevention. In this chapter, a systems-oriented approach—rather than an individually-focused approach to traumatic events—the Traumatic Event Systems (TES) model, is proposed to increase the understanding and the effectiveness of professionals in responding to the aftermath of school shootings. The companion model, the Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA), is proposed with a trauma-informed threat assessment practice that creates a nexus between prior trauma and future violence potential through an understanding of the “trauma-violence continuum.”*

### **INTRODUCTION**

On April 20th, 1999, a mass school shooting in suburban Denver shocked the world. It was unfathomable that the tragedy of Columbine High School could ever be repeated. Now, twenty years later, there has been a steady stream of mass shootings, both inside and outside the walls of schools, with seemingly no clear answer or real tools to prevent them. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center Survey, 57% of teens worry about a shooting happening at their school, with one-in-four saying they are very worried, while 63% of parents of teenagers fear a shooting at their child’s school (Graf, 2019). What if society were able to arm teachers, educational leaders, counselors, parents, and law enforcement with critical

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information to prevent school shootings instead of arming them with a weapon, a bulletproof backpack, or a lockdown drill to react only after a violent tragedy has been committed?

After twenty years of successful school leadership, it has been demonstrated that multidisciplinary collaboration through the Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA™) model and protocol improves both assessment and intervention in a variety of applications (Randazzo & Cameron, 2012). Most importantly, if there is not a clear protocol for how collaboration will look, what roles each discipline (or agency) will play, and what criteria will be used to determine the level of risk and plan interventions, the common outcome is limited in success. VTRA's™ Community Protocol was developed for small towns and cities; large urban areas and regions have formal written agreements that bind leading agencies and service providers together for a common and consistent practice regarding assessment, prevention, and intervention for violence risk in its' many forms (Cameron et al., 2019).

One factor that also determined whether schools and their professional partners would excel in the practice was their history of collaboration. School system dynamics that were open, healthy, and functional were more likely to embrace high-level collaborative practices. This is because naturally open leaders understood that the base rate for a school shooting was low but the level of fear of those in the system increased when high profile school shootings occurred elsewhere. Second, they also understood the broader applications of VTRA™ as a process to support high-risk students who may not pose a risk to commit a school shooting but were on a path to other forms of violence or suicide. Third, leaders were open to the possibility that a shooting could happen anywhere, including their school, and preferred a multidisciplinary team to accurately assess the situation. Schools that were closed, emotionally toxic, and fragmented either refused to be trained in violence prevention or participated in the training but refused to apply it. The common denominator for many of those closed systems was that they had experienced prior traumas (including other forms of violence in the past) and determined that if they denied the impact, it meant the trauma no longer affected them. Whether they knew it or not, they became traumatically closed systems.

## **Foundation of the VTRA™ Model and Protocol**

The early underpinnings of the VTRA™ model and protocol include the foundational work of the United States Secret Service Safe Schools Initiative as well as theoretical and practical applications from psychology, psychiatry, traumatology, family systems theory, criminology, organizational behavior, criminal justice, and others (Fein, et al., 2002; Pollack, et al., 2008). In essence, the springboard for the early development of the model was the realization that many high-profile shootings were perpetrated by a Person of Concern (POC) who often gave pre-incident signs and indicators (sometimes blatantly) that many professionals underreacted to. This realization led to the conclusion that, in some cases, the professionals were unwittingly contributing to the POC's risk for violence without realizing it by failing to heed the many conscious and unconscious "cries for help" that were given (Cameron, 2001).

The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR™) Model and Protocol is referred to as Violence Threat Risk Assessment™ (VTRA™). It is the only practice that combines the introduction of early United States Secret Service Research around targeted violence toward political figures, known as Threat Assessment (TA) and the General Violence Risk Assessment (RA) work that clinicians and therapists have been conducting for years.

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