POSSIBLE ATTACKERS?
A COMPARISON OF ACTIVE SHOOTERS AND PERSONS OF CONCERN

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE – FBI BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT (BAU)

BRIEF

Threat assessment teams are tasked with the challenge of assessing the level of concern that a person will go on to commit an act of targeted violence and managing/mitigating that threat. Findings illustrate several key variables help differentiate between active shooters and persons of concern who do **not** commit violence. Sixty-three active shooters were compared to sixty-three persons of concern (POCs) who were reported to the FBI's Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (BTAC), Behavioral Analysis Unit 1 (BAU-1), between 2012 and 2016 and did **not** go on to commit a mass attack as of November 2019.[1] POCs were considered "high risk" because the cases had exceeded threat assessment capabilities at the local level. They were referred to and accepted by BTAC as requiring their attention. While results reported below can provide guidance to threat investigations, statistics should not be interpreted as probabilities of an attack, but rather helpful factors to consider during threat assessment/threat management. Statistics indicative of POCs having less risk do not suggest that a concerning behavior should be minimized or a case should not be referred to BTAC or handled by a multi-disciplinary threat assessment threat management team (TATM).

SUMMARY

The two groups appear so similar in their stressors and concerning behaviors that perhaps it was the intervention of the threat assessment team and report to law enforcement ultimately that mitigated the threat. Of the 50 variables measuring stressors, subject behaviors and concerning behaviors to others, only a small portion of them were significantly different between the two groups. However, it is important to remember all variables are important to the threat assessment process.

STRESSORS

Active shooters are more likely to have experienced feelings of **humiliation** than high-risk POCs. When possible to determine when the humiliating event occurred, it was most often experienced within two years of the attack.

	Active Shooters	Persons of Concern
Experienced feelings of humiliation	52.4%	23.8%
Experienced humiliating event	69.0%	N/A

OTHER PRIOR BEHAVIORS

Active shooters were less likely to have a history of stalking behaviors, or a history of mental health diagnoses than high-risk POCs.

	Active Shooters	Persons of Concern
History of stalking	11.1%	38.1%
Mental health diagnosis	25.4%	47.6%

CONCERNING BEHAVIORS

Active shooters are more likely to have someone recognize their violent media use than high-risk POCs. However, high-risk POCs are more likely to have **someone recognize** their anger problems and leakage than active shooters. This may be a result of isolation differences between the two groups or because violent media usage was not considered as concerning as anger problems or leakage and therefore did not result in affirmative threat mitigation.

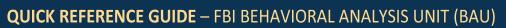|	Active Shooters	POCs
Violent media use	19.1%	6.4%
Anger problems	33.3%	60.3%
Leakage	55.6%	74.3%

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study demonstrates what practitioners have known all along: threat assessment is complicated, nuanced, dynamic, and individualized. The results support the idea that to be disrupted, someone has to recognize and report the behavior. In cases where disruption occurred, we saw a greater level of recognition of the concerning behaviors.

[1]Gibson, K. A., Craun, S. W., Ford, A. G., Solik, K., & Silver, J. M. (2020). Possible attackers? A comparison between the behaviors and stressors of persons of concern and active shooters. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 7, 1-12. Doi:10.1037/tam0000147

ACTIVE SHOOTERS

Feelings of Humiliation	During threat assessment it is important to look for a humiliating event. Humiliation is a sense of being publicly victimized and exposed to be somehow deficient, which can then lead to feelings of shame and anger. When a timeframe of the event could be determined, 69% experienced humiliation within the two years prior to the attack. When assessing threats, it is important to remember that what is "humiliating" to one person, may not be humiliating to another. The subject's feelings or reactions may seem disproportionate to their situation, but it is their perspective that matters in understanding the threat they pose. Be mindful as a stakeholder not to create a humiliating event through the threat assessment/threat management process.
Concern Due to Violent Media Content	Active shooters were more likely to have another person feel unease due to their interest in violent media (unusual interest in visual or aural depictions of violence). Bystanders may not recognize the significance of this variable without observance of other concerning behaviors (i.e., anger and leakage).

PERSONS OF CONCERN

Concern Due to Leakage	Leakage is the intentional or unintentional sharing of one's violent plans (e.g., death, homicidal, suicidal themes). Although it is more common seen in POCs, it was still seen in over half of active shooters and should always be taken seriously.
Concern Due to Anger Problems	The fact that active shooters are less likely to have others concerned about their anger may be because active shooters are more predatory and covert in their actions, increasing capability for an attack. Unlike POCs whose overt anger causes concern in others, active shooters may have turned their anger into goal-directed behavior.
History of Stalking	While stalking was more often seen in the group that did not go on to complete an act of mass violence, this should not be construed as an indication that stalking should be taken lightly, but rather likely led to problematic behaviors being referred to law enforcement. If bystanders are concerned enough to refer a case to law enforcement, threat assessment teams should use due diligence in mitigating the threat and recognizing the challenges evident with this type of fixated offender. It is important to note that stalkers and active shooters share similar predatory aspects as they consider, plan, and prepare.
Mental Health Diagnosis	While an official diagnosis provides some indication of a subject's psychological state of mind, threat assessors should focus specifically on subjects' behaviors, mental wellness, and overall stressors. Awareness of a subject's state of mind, coping mechanisms, and how they handle confrontation allows for more strategic planning if the need arises to intervene or address concerns with the subject.

SUICIDALITY/HOMICIDALITY

There is no significant difference in suicidality between the two groups, however, both show more suicidality than the general population as almost half of the active shooters had suicidal ideation/behavior sometime prior to the attack and 100% were subsequently homicidal. These results show that both groups struggle with suicidality - broadcasting the need of intervention and support from others. With targeted violence there is a thin line between suicidality and homicidality. When only examining POCs, those who were suicidal were almost twice as likely to be homicidal as compared to the POCs who were not suicidal. Emphasis on suicidality provides a gateway for intervention, which then assists in the prevention of homicidality.

BYSTANDERS[2]

The research on threat management is starting to illuminate different individual layers, which allows for the picture to become more clear on who may perpetrate an act of violence. Bystanders are a part of the threat assessment/threat management process and inform the threat picture. While active shooters may be more covert in their actions, research shows that they still present opportunities for intervention. The two groups appear so similar in their stressors, concerning behaviors, and other previous behaviors, this highlights the importance of bystander observations and the threat assessment/threat management process as key in preventing acts of targeted violence.

The BTAC is the only multi-agency behavioral threat team in the U.S. Government. For assistance concerning an ongoing investigation, including operational support and consultation from the BTAC, please contact your local FBI office Threat Management Coordinator (TMC).

[2] Craun, S. W., Gibson, K. A., Ford, A. G., Solik, K., & Silver, J. M. (2020). (In)action: Variation in bystander responses between persons of concern and active shooters. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 7, 113-121. Doi: 10.1037/tam0000146