



(IN)ACTION: VARIATION IN BYSTANDER RESPONSES BETWEEN 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 isolation and opportunity for bystanders that perhaps it was the intervention of the threat assessment team and report to law enforcement ultimately that mitigated the threat

ISOLATION

Active shooters were **less likely to be virtually connected than high-risk POCs**. Both groups were similar in their level of physical connections

	Active Shooters	Persons of Concern
Physically connected	85.7%	84.1%
Virtually connected	27.0%	63.5%

BYSTANDERS ACTIONS

Bystanders of active shooters were more likely to discuss the observed concerning behaviors with friends or do nothing and **bystanders of high-risk POCs were more likely to report to non-law enforcement or to do something else (other)**. Both groups were equally as likely to discuss the concerning behaviors with the subject. This research supports the idea that the prevalence of bystander inaction (i.e., doing nothing) in the active shooter population is a stark reminder of the need to increase opportunities for bystanders to report the concerning behavior they observe.

	Active Shooters	Persons of Concern
Discussed directly with subject	82.5%	82.5%
Reported to non-law enforcement	50.8%	61.9%
Discussed with friends	49.2%	41.3%
Other	1.6%	11.1%
Did nothing	54.0%	14.6%

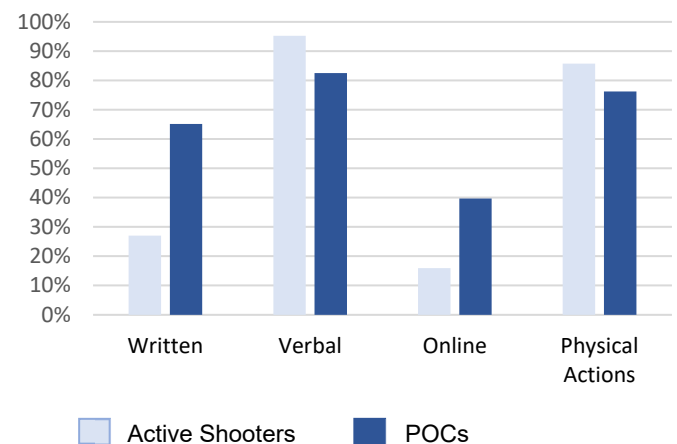
CONCERNING BEHAVIORS

(Table 1)

While active shooters were more likely to present concerning behaviors verbally and physically, high-risk POCs were more likely to present **concerning behaviors in written and online forms**.

	Active Shooters	Persons of Concern
Written	27.0%	65.1%
Verbal	95.2%	82.3%
Online	15.9%	39.7%
Physical Actions	85.7%	76.2%

Table 1



¹ 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



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OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bystander intervention is critical as high-risk POCs rarely refer themselves to threat assessment teams. Understanding the mechanisms that impede or facilitate reporting of concerning behavior is of extreme importance for threat assessment teams to understand. It is through the actions of these bystanders and the work of threat assessment teams that persons of concern can obtain the interventions they need, and violence can be averted.

WHO NOTICES

The majority of both active shooters and high-risk POCs were not physically isolated in the year preceding the attack or threat assessment. Additionally, both the fully isolated offenders and those with connections had concerning behaviors that were noticed by others. This finding mirrors the findings of Silver et al. (2018)², that there were no differences in leakage between offenders who were socially isolated and those that were not. The odds were lower of being an active shooter if the subject was virtually connected.

WHAT THEY NOTICE

In this study, BTAC also assessed which stressors and concerning behaviors presented themselves between active shooters and high-risk POCs.⁴ It was identified that high-risk POCs were more likely to demonstrate leakage and anger.

That in combination with everything seen in this study (less virtually connected, less written, bystander that does nothing) it is understandable how active shooters slip through the cracks with inaction.

It was noted that there are many differences in stressors and concerning behaviors prior to attack or threat assessment. Therefore, a combination of bystander action and threat assessment team mitigation strategies can help divert potentially dangerous high-risk POCs.

HOW THEY NOTICE

The likelihood of being an active shooter was lower if a bystander noticed a concerning behavior via written medium.

Gives bystanders tangible evidence of concerns and the need to take it seriously, but not usually indicative of an attack.

Most who leak do not do so through written medium (also noticed in Silver et al. (2018)³ where it was identified that public mass shooters were more likely to have verbal leakage. In this study, while verbal leakage was recognized commonly there was no difference between active shooters and high-risk POCs).

The likelihood of being an active shooter was lower if a bystander noticed a concerning behavior via written medium.

BYSTANDER ACTIONS

Odds of being an active shooter are higher if the subject had at least one bystander who did nothing when they noticed concerning behaviors. The key to threat management is others noticing concerning behaviors and giving assistance. This study highlights the potential for bystander inaction to be perceived as permission to act violently by the person of concern. Bystanders need to take verbal leakage as seriously as written.

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 Silver, J., Simons, A., & Craun, S. (2018). *A study of the pre-attack behaviors of active shooters in the United States between 2000 and 2013*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation

³ Ibid

⁴ 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