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A Tale of Two Pandemics: Equitable and Trauma-Informed Threat Assessment Processes

In the aftermath of school shootings such as Sandy Hook, Parkland, and countless others, many school staff and families are left wondering how to keep schools safe. First, it is important to realize that schools are among the safest places to be, as approximately 98–99% of violent deaths of children occur outside of school in homes and communities (Fox & Delateur, 2014). While school shootings are unlikely, educators, families and students may still fear the next school occurrence, which can impact feelings of safety and security. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased feelings of vulnerability, fear, grief, emotional stress, and financial strain. As a result, tensions are high, students and staff fear exposure to the virus, and personal safety is in question for many. These additional stressors, along with pandemic-related quarantines, have isolated many young persons in spaces that do not feel safe or supportive. Finally, the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, and many more have exacerbated safety concerns for youth of color and their families. At a time when Black people are 3 times more likely to be killed by police than White people (police killings per 1 million population) and 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed compared to White people (% killed by police unarmed, 2013–2020), the cumulative stressors of racial trauma and a global health pandemic are nothing less than staggering (Mapping Police Violence, 2020).

Today we are living in an era of two pandemics— the COVID-19 global health pandemic and the racial inequity pandemic—and at the same time, anxiety over school shootings is increasing. When assessing school-based threats of violence, equitable procedures and protocols are needed to guide decision-making and ensure that high-level interventions are selected and implemented. However, context also matters. For some youth, school feels safe, while for others, school represents a constant challenge of inequity, bias, bullying, and isolation. Many are wondering how do we keep kids safe in schools? How do we prevent school violence? And, how do we approach threat assessment processes through an equitable and trauma-informed lens? These are hotly debated issues in education, and we advocate for an approach that seeks to keep young people physically safe while ensuring their psychological safety as well.

Systemic Racism Amid a Global Health Crisis

"Trauma is not singular, those who experience it are not identical, and the contexts and cultures within which each of us lives are as varied as the blades of grass in a field," (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018, p vii). While many are experiencing their first community trauma as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, others have

experienced ongoing community trauma, as well as historical and generational trauma, for centuries. *Community trauma* affects social groups or neighborhoods long subjected to interpersonal violence, structural violence, and historical harms. Research suggests that its causes lie in the historic and ongoing root of social inequities, including poverty, racism, sexism, oppression and power dynamics, and in the erasure of culture and communities (Pinderhughes, Davis, & Williams, 2015, as cited in Falkenburger et al., 2018). Furthermore, racial trauma is unique in that it involves ongoing individual and collective injuries due to exposure and reexposure to race-based stress (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019).

Social inequities are evident at this time in history as the illness, hospitalization, and death related to COVID-19 disproportionately impacts Black Americans (CDC, 2020; Price-Haywood et al., 2020). When considering health inequities, "racism—not race—is a critical factor," according to Monica R. McLemore, associate professor in the family health care nursing department and clinician–scientist at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health at the University of California (McLemore, 2019). In addition, deep-rooted racism has led to people of color being more exposed to the disease due to residential and educational segregation in the United States, suggesting that people of color are less protected because their "lives are less valued," according to Camara Phyllis Jones, epidemiologist, family physician, and 2019–2020 Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University (Wallis, 2020). In short, "we are living in a racism pandemic," says Sandra L. Shullman, PhD, president of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2020) agrees, stating that health inequities that put people of color at increased risk of being exposed, being hospitalized, and dying from COVID-19 include discrimination, lack of access or ability use healthcare, occupations that increase risk, crowded housing quarters, and educational, income, and wealth gaps. In this way, one of the biggest environmental threats in our world is not just the spread of the novel coronavirus, but racism.

Equitable and Trauma-Informed Practices

Considering that our communities are experiencing two simultaneous pandemics, one that is novel and the other generational, how can schools and school-based clinicians intervene? The "trauma-informed" terminology is often used, especially during more recent times, but what are trauma-informed practices? Trauma-informed practices are approaches to healthcare, education, mental health, and social services that consider the role and impact of trauma and adversity. If racial trauma and inequities are not taken into consideration and intervened upon, then these practices are not trauma-informed. The term *trauma-informed care* emerges from mental health and public health researchers and front line providers with a focus on understanding how trauma impacts people and communities and what we do to respond to that trauma in supportive ways. The four R's of a trauma-informed organization can guide our thinking around trauma-informed practices: (a) Realize the widespread impact that trauma can have on people and communities and integrate that knowledge into policies, practices, and procedures; (b) Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, families, staff, and all others who touch the system; (c) Respond to those traumas and hurts in a responsive, caring way; and (d) Resist retraumatization for all involved. When considering what this means on the frontlines of service provision, we can conceptualize the three pillars of trauma-informed care: Safety, Connection, and Emotional Regulation (Bath, 2008). In his seminal article "The Three Pillars of Trauma-Informed Care," Howard Bath notes that Connection is the central pillar, without which, trauma-informed care cannot occur.

Trauma-informed denotes an ever-emerging body of literature and practice representing the convergence of various disciplines, such as research in the fields of traumatology and neurobiology, as well as concepts gleaned from various developmental theories such as attachment and cognitive development, combined with

emerging data regarding intervention methods most effective at helping persons heal and resume their development. (Berardi & Morton, 2017)

It is here where we consider the intersection of trauma-informed practices in schools, including trauma-informed threat assessment. In order for a threat assessment practice to be aligned with the trauma-informed ethos, it must be implemented in a way that centers safety, connection, and emotional regulation, and it must ensure equity. When enacted without these core pillars in mind, threat assessment has the potential to retraumatize and further harm those involved.

Equitable Threat Assessment Processes: Context Matters

As schools work toward providing equitable and trauma-informed threat assessment processes, it is important to realize that students of color are disproportionately disciplined, restrained, and secluded in school, and that Black youth are suspended and expelled 3 times more often than their White counterparts, beginning even in the preschool years, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2019). While Black students in this study represented 15% of the total student enrollment, they constituted 31% of students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested, 39% receiving out-of-school suspension, and 33% expelled (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2019). These unfair practices further exacerbate inherent systemic and historical trauma.

In an analysis of school shootings, the United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC, 2019) found that approximately two thirds of the attackers (63%) were White, while 15% were Black, and 5% were Hispanic. Inequity and bias affects other students in the classroom as well. As an example, students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined, including receiving out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2019). In this study, students with disabilities comprised 12% of enrolled students, yet represented 71% of all students restrained, 66% of all students secluded, and 28% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested. One mother is working to fight unfair policies after her 6-year-old daughter with Down syndrome was reported to law enforcement for pointing a finger gun and stating "I shoot you" to a teacher (Farzan, 2020).

To reduce the impact of bias and inequity, it is important to assess not if a student *made* a threat, but if they *pose* a threat. As advocated by the United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education (2004), threat assessment inquiries should include an understanding of the student's motives and whether the student has the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence and other attack-related behaviors. Following specific procedures may also help ensure threat assessment teams focus on the facts and data to reduce (or eliminate) bias during threat inquiries. As an example, research has been conducted on the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guideline (CSTAG) developed by Dr. Dewey Cornell, with one study concluding that no racial disparities were evident with regard to disciplinary consequences for Virginia students receiving a threat assessment in schools using this model (Cornell et al., 2018). School staff should seek to understand the context in which statements were made, query the trauma experienced by the student, note the impact of COVID-19 as well as racial and historical trauma experienced, and understand the implications of these for each unique, individual student.

Some states, such as Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia now mandate school-based threat assessment teams. These states have each created their own guidelines. If schools prefer guidelines that are ready-made, several evidence-based threat assessment models are available such as CSTAG, SIGMA Threat Management, Salem-Keizer Student Threat Assessment System (STAS), School Threat Assessment Training (STAT), and NTAC's Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence.

A key component to these models is the focus on early intervention and restorative justice, which are congruent with the trauma-informed approaches noted above. Furthermore, because trauma is associated with increased suicide risk (Felitti & Anda, 2010) and the United States Secret Service (2004) has reported that most perpetrators of school violence had considered or attempted suicide, another key component is screening for suicidal thoughts and plans. Finally, as suicide risk has been increasing for youth of color (CDC, 2019), this may be particularly concerning because the pandemic and resulting social isolation have the potential to seriously exacerbate suicidal thoughts and behaviors among youth (Erbacher & Knapp, 2020). Regardless of which guidelines or model is used, all schools can ensure threat assessment processes are implemented with fidelity through an equitable and trauma-informed lens by attending to the warning signs of violence and implementing the suggestions that follow.

Warning Signs

While there is no profile of a school shooter, school staff can be aware of the research on those who have committed violent acts. This can be particularly helpful in light of current national tension regarding both race relations and COVID-19. First, the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC, 2019) found that school shooting incidents occurred most frequently at the start of the school year (September) or after students returned from winter break (January) and 41% took place within the first week back to school following a break in attendance. Thus, threat assessment teams should be prepared as youth begin to reenter brick and mortar schools after stay-at-home orders related to COVID-19.

Furthermore, understanding information about attackers can be helpful. For example, for 83% of the attackers, retaliating for a grievance played a role in their motive. In 73% of cases, the attacker targeted a specific person or persons, and in 54% of attacks, that target was injured or killed. Over half of the attackers (51%) engaged in observable planning behaviors prior to carrying out their attack, with one third (32%) researching weapons. Thus, school staff should be instructed to take all indications of planning and researching weapons or a target seriously.

Every attacker included in this analysis (100%) exhibited concerning behaviors prior to their attack. Specifically, 94% displayed concerning behaviors at school, 77% at home, and 74% online. In 80% of the cases, the attacker's behavior "elicited concern from bystanders regarding the safety of the attacker or those around them," driving home the point that teachers and youth should be aware of online and offline warning signs as well as confidential reporting procedures. Furthermore, 57% displayed behavioral symptoms, such as defiance toward authority or poor impulse control. Almost three quarters of the attackers (71%) received some form of school disciplinary action prior to the attack, with 40% disciplined for fighting at school and 51% receiving at least one suspension. As 31% had previously been arrested or faced criminal charges, communication between schools and juvenile justice systems is integral.

Home life factors were also a significant consideration, with 94% of attackers having experienced at least one stressful home situation. The most frequent factors included parents being separated or divorced (71%), family financial stress (69%), or a family member being arrested or incarcerated (54%). Of note during COVID-19 is the Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking poll findings that 59% of Americans are worried about financial security, 52% fear losing their job, and 45% had already lost income early on in the pandemic (Kirzinger et al., 2020), thus suggesting the potential for exacerbated family stress during this time.

Table 1 indicates stressors experienced by attackers, with 100% experiencing social stress, including stress related to the attackers' relationships with peers (e.g., bullying or other peer conflicts) and romantic partners. Other major stressors included family stress as well as academic or disciplinary stress, underscoring the importance of reaching out to youth virtually who may be struggling.

Table 1: Stressors of School Shooters

Stressors Experienced by Attackers	(*N* =35)	Percentage
Social	35	100%
Family	32	91%
Academic/Disciplinary	31	89%
General Personal	22	63%
Changing Schools	19	54%
Criminal/Judicial	10	29%
Physical Health Problems	9	26%
Employment	6	17%

There were also common behaviors students exhibited that were observable to others. First, the majority of attackers shared concerning communications verbally through in-person statements (89%), while over half shared concerning electronic messages sent to a specific person or persons (57%) or posted online to groups or the general public (49%). One third of the attackers (34%) conveyed concerning thoughts through school assignments (e.g., writing essays on violent topics, drawing weapons), thus providing insight into what teachers can look for.

More than half of the attackers (57%) exhibited observable changes in demeanor, appearance, or routine prior to the attack. Examples included increased apathy about life, decreased effort on schoolwork, withdrawing from activities, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, and changes in online behaviors. Furthermore, for 54% of the attackers, a social event, such as a breakup or an incident of bullying, was the most recent stressor experienced before carrying out the attack. For 57% of the attackers, the bullying appeared to be of a persistent pattern lasting for weeks, months, or years. Three quarters of the attackers (74%) displayed behaviors or shared communications indicating significant or increasing anger, including aggressive acts at home. These examples exemplify the importance of school–family collaboration during times of virtual learning as families may observe these warning signs before school personnel.

In school attacks, a documented mental health diagnosis was received by 40% of the attackers *prior* to their attacks, with 63% of attackers displaying depression, 60% experiencing suicidal thoughts, and 54% receiving some type of mental health treatment. Over half of the attackers (54%) had communicated about or engaged in observable behaviors related to suicide or self-harm. COVID-19 is taking an additional toll on mental health as indicated in a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control. In a national survey, Czeisler and colleagues (2020) found that over 40% of respondents reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition, including symptoms of anxiety disorder or depressive disorder (30.9%), symptoms of a trauma- and stressor-related disorder related to the pandemic (26.3%), and having started or increased substance use to cope with COVID-19 (13.3%). Furthermore, 1 in 10 respondents report considering suicide

in the previous month, with rates being even higher for Black and Hispanic individuals. Astonishingly, one in four young adults between the ages of 18–24 years contemplated suicide in the previous month, further demonstrating the need for increased mental health supports, interventions, and supportive relationships, particularly during virtual learning as well upon the return to brick and mortar schools.

Equitable and Trauma-Informed Recommendations

Prevention and training. First and foremost, the greatest method of violence prevention is creating a positive school climate and culture where students (and staff) feel physically and psychologically safe. A healthy school environment is one where students can openly communicate their feelings during this challenging time, which may increase the likelihood of reporting potential threats of violence. Social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, including bullying prevention programs, sexual harassment prevention, and trauma informed practices, may help mitigate the concerns of those that may want to harm others (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020a). Because positive school climates and cultures can help ensure that all students and staff remain connected to the school and community, schools can consider implementing a needs analysis or climate survey to assess their unique setting. Prevention may also include ensuring that sufficient mental and behavioral supports are available to address potential trauma, stress, and concerns of both students and staff.

If not already in place, schools should formulate threat assessment teams, as immediate assessment and intervention may thwart an attack. Teams may use existing MTSS/PBIS or school safety/crisis teams as a basis for their threat assessment team and teams should be multidisciplinary. It is important to note that there is an emerging trend in many states by which legislation is being drafted and implemented that actually requires this of schools. If your state is not one that already mandates this, it may be in the near future. School psychologists are integral members of the team due to their expertise in "understanding both covert and overt behaviors, and effectively conducting interviews" (Reeves & Brock, 2017). Team membership should remain flexible during this time of COVID-19, with team members able to fill various roles should a team member not be available due to long-term absence for illness or caregiving responsibilities. Many teams require two staff members to conduct all inquiries, which allows for accuracy as well as liability protection. This may be even more important in a virtual setting, wherein one staff member takes notes while the other leads the interview and can maintain eye contact with the student online. While a team approach is always important, it is essential during this unprecedented pandemic in order to support one another and ensure best practice procedures continue to be implemented.

Once established, teams should be trained in uniform methods and policies. Procedures, interview forms, intervention and safety planning strategies, as well as communication flow, should all be in place. Teams should continue to meet on a regular basis to discuss concerns and engage in follow-up trainings, such as tabletop activities, to practice scenarios and ensure that staff retain the knowledge gained and implement practices appropriately. Though it can be a challenge to find time during this pandemic, these activities can be done virtually and need not be laborious.

School staff should be trained to observe signs of trauma and racism and to implement strategies that mitigate the effects of traumatic experiences. For example, as toxic stress is the "strong, unrelieved activation of the body's stress management system in the absence of protective adult support" (Harvard Center for the Developing Child, 2020), mitigation may include providing safe and supportive adults within the school setting and reminding teachers of the importance of building relationships to foster resilience. This is consistent with Bath's (2008) central pillar that connection is a primary protective factor for youth experiencing trauma.

School staff should also have trainings on the warning signs of impending violence and behaviors that reach the threshold of concern. Staff should know reporting procedures of concerns, any differences of procedures for behaviors presented by students learning virtually, and to err on the side of caution when in doubt. School teams should also be aware of any cultural implications that may impact reporting such as community beliefs that "snitching" is unacceptable (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020b). Ensure that parents, students, and stakeholders are also aware of threat assessment procedures to facilitate reporting of concerns and to ensure that parents are not surprised or put on the defensive if their own child is interviewed as part of a threat assessment process. Schools may consider putting threat assessment policies and procedures on their website for clarity and transparency.

Assessment of school threats. During this time of COVID-19, as students learn virtually and in hybrid models, school threat assessment teams continue to have a responsibility to follow up on any potential threats of violence (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020b). With more time spent online and at home, students may post direct or indirect threats of violence via social networking sites, text messages, or even through online chats on school virtual learning platforms. If communications appear imminent or include pictures of weapons, such as guns, school staff may contact local law enforcement to investigate the situation within the home. This is especially important as NTAC (2019) research found that 71% of school attackers stockpiled weapons or communicated about weapons in a way that indicated an unusual or concerning level of interest. Furthermore, gun access may be more readily available during this time of COVID-19 as March 2020 was the second busiest month for gun sales ever (Collins & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020).

However, police intervention should not be the first line of defense if not needed because many threats are not serious with students having no actual intention of harm. Unnecessary police intervention can cause undue trauma for that student as well as stigmatize and marginalize the student. While police wellness checks may become more prominent during virtual learning, this should never replace a comprehensive assessment completed by a school team (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020b). The same holds true for other outside providers, such as crisis centers, hospitals, or behavioral health clinicians, who may assess concerns of youth violence. While collaboration is always recommended, the school threat assessment team may have more comprehensive access to academic, discipline, and attendance information; social media and internet activity; and information from juvenile justice or social services; as well as results of a student car/locker search on school property as justified (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020a). Student data, such as educational and behavioral records, can be accessed digitally in most cases if needed. School teams can also interview peers, friends, witnesses, potential victims, parents, teachers, and other school staff to gain insight into relationships, possible motives, and situational dynamics unavailable to outside experts.

One of the single most important things that school practitioners can do is examine all potential threats through a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive lens. It is integral to incorporate current context into threat assessment inquiries. School psychologists can take the lead in advocating for threat assessment teams to consider the following when interviewing a student who made a threat of violence (adapted from Erbacher, 2020):

- Ask about the impact of the pandemic.

- Ask how social distancing has impacted them.

- Ask what activities they engage in while home.

- Ask about racial bias, tension, and inequity experienced.

- Ask about systemic racism and implicit racism experienced.

- Ask about racial tension and inequity witnessed.

- Ask how they are coping.

- Ask about feelings of hopelessness.

- Ask about suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

- Ask how they feel they are doing academically.

- Ask what supports they have at home or virtually.

- Ask what is working well for them, or what they want to have continue to happen.

Furthermore, school mental health professionals should help to ensure that suicide screening questions are part of any threat assessment inquiry and should be trained in conducting both virtual and in-person suicide risk assessments (Erbacher & Knapp, 2020). For schools on hybrid models or in cases where some staff are in the school buildings, threat assessment teams may request a student to come on campus for an in-person interview.

Consider legal and ethical requirements throughout all phases of assessment and intervention, including ensuring the school threat assessment team is utilizing FERPA and HIPPA protected virtual platforms to conduct interviews, provide intervention support, and hold team meetings. When beginning virtual meetings, always get the location/address of a student as well as a good telephone number for the student and parents/guardians. Backup plans such as phone conferencing should technology fail or disconnect should be considered. Many apps allow users to make calls while blocking or disguising their phone number, such as Hush, Burner, or Google Voice. If backup plans are ineffective and technology fails while interviewing a student at risk of violence, consider involving law enforcement to ensure safety.

Intervention and support. Previous research found that nearly one quarter of attacks (24%) took place on the first day that the attacker returned to school after an absence (NTAC, 2019). In two of these incidents, the attacker was actively suspended from the school at the time of the attack. These findings suggest that schools should make concerted efforts to facilitate positive student engagement following disciplinary infractions such as suspensions and expulsions. Punitive practices are not recommended and zero tolerance approaches have not proven successful or equitable (NTAC, 2019). Zero tolerance can also take attention away from those who may pose a legitimate risk, and suspending or expelling students may have the adverse effect of giving them more time to ruminate and plan an attack. Punitive measures may also make students less willing to report concerns (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020a). Rather, teams should focus on designing equitable interventions and supports, such as restorative justice approaches and providing mental health services, embedded within multitiered systems of support for students assessed as posing any level of risk to themselves or others, to prevent any attack from occurring (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020a; NTAC, 2019). These supports and interventions are not just to mitigate the potential for violence, but to help *all* students, including those who may be struggling with bias, injustice, and racial trauma.

Recommendations also include increased availability and access to mental health treatment along with education around and destigmatization of mental health services (Langman, 2020). However, "despite evidence that the presence of school-based mental health personnel improves school climate and reduces violence," most school mental health practitioners across the nation have caseloads significantly above ratios

recommended by experts and professional organizations (ACLU, 2019). While advocating for better student ratios for mental health staff, threat assessment teams may also consider resource mapping to most effectively utilize available services at school and in the community.

Interventions can feel tricky in times of virtual learning, making school–family partnerships even more important. Parents and guardians may be more active in providing supports, monitoring behaviors, and reducing access to weapons. Furthermore, school threat assessment teams may add community members to the team who can assist in follow-up and may revise memorandums of understanding to include community-based supports (NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, 2020b). Technological supports may also be used more often, such as apps for meditation, deep breathing, anxiety management, or self-harm. Sample apps may include CALM, Delightful Gratitude Journal, Virtual Hope Box, Headspace, 10 Percent Happier, Mood Kit, Mind Shift, Self-Help for Anxiety Management, CBT Thought Record Diary, Breathe2Relax, Happify, MoodTools, and CALMHARM. For students also presenting with suicide risk, safety plan apps may be used, such as MY3, notOK, or SafetyPlan. Families should be involved in these online planning tools for youth to help facilitate appropriate and ongoing use as needed. Finally, it is important to monitor and review effectiveness of safety and intervention plans to ensure student success. For youth already receiving interventions and supports, these should be revisited upon returning to brick and mortar schools and a reentry plan considered.

In summary, it is critical that schools integrate trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practices into whatever threat assessment model or process is used. The risk is otherwise too great to inadvertently traumatize or retraumatize youth, further isolate or marginalize them, or disproportionately discipline them. This time of two pandemics is challenging for all schools and one that could never have been imagined. We hope for a better future by caring for our nation's youth, providing safe and supportive adults, and mitigating traumatic potential.

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