Borum, R., Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., & Berglund, J. (1999). Threat assessment: Defining an

approach for evaluating risk of targeted violence. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 17*,

323-337.

Professionals in the mental health community, in addition to court and correctional

systems, have been concerned with identifying individuals who are at risk for violence and

recommending ways to prevent violent behavior (Borum, 1996; Borum, Swartz, & Swanson,

1996; Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1997; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998;

Rice, 1997). Law enforcement officers previously reacted to violent crime instead of preventing

the violent actions, including investigating and bringing individuals to justice (Borum, Fein,

Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999). Currently though, mental health and law enforcement

professionals are now being asked to assess risk for specific types of violence, not just general

violent reoffending with even more individuals also needing to address risk like corporate

security managers and school principals (Borum et al., 1999). Borum et al. (1999) seek to

promote a United States Secret Service threat assessment model and apply it to the existing risk

assessment literature.

Mental health professionals have evolved assessments of risk to include contextual,

dynamic, and continuous aspects to form a construct that portrays an individual's dangerousness

level rather than just one aspect or another (Borum et al., 1999). By combining all of these

factors, it has changed the way professionals think about and conduct risk assessments which has

brought about the clinical judgment versus the statistical actuarial tools (Dawes, Faust, & Meehl,

1989; Melton et al., 1997; Miller & Morris, 1988; Quinsey et al.. 1998). While there have been

numerous studies trying to differentiate which is better, it seems the actuarial tools may be best

due to the standardized structure and empirical basis with the ultimate decision left to clinical judgment (Melton et al., 1997). These studies though have focused on general criminal and/or violent recidivism and may not generalize to other types of violence, for example stalking or school violence. Although the research is limited on target violence, different roles in the community must take action and attempt to resolve any problematic situation. Even though base rates are quite low for specific violent acts, it does not reduce the responsibility of professionals and an alternative approach to clinical techniques needs to be adapted (Borum et al., 1999).

The United States Secret Service has been the main law enforcement agency to prevent targeted violence crimes, especially assassination of national leaders. The Secret Service conducts "threat assessments" of individuals whose behavior causes concern for those they are protecting (Borum et al., 1999). This responsibility is being relayed onto all law enforcement agencies with new laws which aim to prevent violence, like those of stalking. This responsibility is being placed on officers without any skills or background in threat assessments (Fein et al., 1995). Threat assessment involves investigations and operations in order to identify, assess, and manage persons who may pose a threat of violence. Law enforcement is trained to gather, document, and evaluate facts in a criminal investigation instead of assessing threats (Fein et al., 1995; Swanson, Chemalin, & Territo, 1984). This new way of evaluating a situation requires different skills than most law enforcement officers are used to (Borum et al., 1999).

The Secret Service's approach has been developed and refined based on data about persons who attacked or attempted to attack public officials but is general enough that is can be modified to evaluate risk for other forms of targeted violence (Borum et al., 1999). This model moves away from profiling and looks at pathways of ideas and behaviors that may lead to violent acts. Profiling may be effective after a crime has occurred; it is not useful for prospectively

identifying those at a great risk for targeted violence which is contrary to popular belief. Also, this approach does not rely on direct communication of threat as a requirement: investigators distinguish between people who make threats and those who pose a threat (Borum et al., 1999). Individuals who pose a threat are more often more dangerous than those who express a threat (Dietz & Martell, 1989).

Three fundamental principles are the basis of the threat assessment approach (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). First, targeted violence is the result of an understandable process of thinking and behavior and not spontaneity or impulsivity. Thus, ideas about monitoring an attack usually develop over time. The second principle is that violence stems from an interaction among the potential attacker, past stressful events, a current situation, and the target. The aspects of risk may be determined by examining the types of events that have led the individual to experience extreme stress, the individual's response to those events, and the likelihood that it may reoccur. Individual factors are coupled together with an appraisal of the current situation and the target to form a risk assessment. Lastly, the evaluator must assess relevant factors about the intended target which includes the individual's familiarity with the target, the target's vulnerability, and the target's sophistication about the need for caution (Borum et al., 1999).

When conducting the threat assessment, data should be gathered and corroborated from multiple sources so confidence can be placed in the information. Five areas in which the data should come from are: facts bringing the subject to attention, the subject, attack-related behaviors (selection of target, getting a weapon, etc.), motives directly related to target selection, and target selection (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998; Fein et al., 1995). When looking specifically at the subject, identifying information, background information, and information about the subject's current situation and circumstances are normally collected. The behaviors of concern when

examining the attack-related behaviors are an unusual interest in targeted violence, evidence of ideas/plans to attack a specific target, communication of inappropriate interest/plans to attack a target, following a target or visiting an attack location, and approaching a target. By identifying the motive, it could give information into which targets may be at risk since they are most often interrelated (Borum et al., 1999).

The last section of the article lists ten key questions the Secret Service has identified in connection with threat assessment investigations based on experience and assassination research. First, in regards to the subject's motivation to make statements for attention, the investigator should explore a variety of possibilities instead of relying on the subject's insights. Examples would be to cause problems for someone or to avenge a perceived wrong. Second, the subject's communication of intention does not mean that the individual poses an actual threat- many do not direct threats to targets (Borum et al., 1999). Also, it is important to know that some perpetrators of targeted violence show an unusual interest in acts similar to what they are planning. These individuals may talk excessively or make inquiries regarding targeted violence, weapons, extremist groups, or murder (Pynchon & Borum, 1999). Fourth, very few individuals who attacked U.S. public officials had histories of arrests for violent crimes or crimes with a weapon, but many had histories of harassing other persons (Borum et al., 1999). In addition, mental illness only rarely played a key role in assassination behaviors, but its relation to other forms of targeted violence is currently unknown (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). Any association between mental illness and violence appears to be related to substance abuse and/or psychotic symptoms (Borum et al., 1999). Sixth, a functional approach should be used to assess an individual's capacity to execute a plan of attack. The steps to evaluate should be identified and then matched to whether the subject is capable which includes acquiring weapons, gaining access

to the target, and foiling security. Also, in identifying if the subject has suffered a recent loss which lead to their despair, inquiry into past stressful events may help the evaluator to determine the type of negative event that may occur in the future to gauge the subject's response to them. Eighth, in any threat assessment investigation, an attempt should be made to corroborate as much information they can gather which can assess the subject's credibility. Also, it is valuable to investigate others who are afraid of the subject or concerned he/she may act out in violence. Lastly, it is important to look at factors that might increase or decrease the likelihood of the subject to attack a target. Destabilizers may be markers for a time where scrutiny is necessary while a support system may serve as a protective factor in the subject's life (Borum et al., 1999).

Overall, the threat assessment approach developed by the U.S. Secret Service provides a useful framework for thinking about assessments of potential for targeted violence. It focuses on an individual's pattern of thinking and behavior, not on profiles, to determine if they are moving toward an attack (Borum et al., 1999).