The Importance of Bystanders in Threat Assessment and Management

in JR Meloy and J Hoffmann Eds. (2021).Int handbook of threat assessment 2nd edition. New York: Oxford Univ Press.

Randy Borum

School of Information

University of South Florida

Mary Rowe

Sloan School of Management

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

Bystanders—those who observe or come to know about potential wrongdoing—are often the best source of pre-attack intelligence, including indicators of intent and "warning" behaviors. They are the reason that some planned attacks are foiled before they occur. Numerous studies of targeted violence (e.g., mass shootings and school shootings), have demonstrated that peers and bystanders often have knowledge of an attacker's intentions, concerning communication, and troubling behavior before the attack occurs. This chapter describes—with empirical support—why threat assessment professionals should consider bystanders; outlines a model for understanding bystander decision making; reviews common barriers to bystander reporting; and suggests ways to mitigate those barriers, to engage bystanders at an individual level, and to improve reporting.The principal aim of threat assessment is to prevent (primarily) intentional acts of harm. When tragic incidents of planned violence occur, however, it is almost always uncovered "that someone knew something" about the attack before it happened. This happens because, as attack plans unfold, people in several different roles may know, or come to know, something about what is happening before harm occurs. The perpetrators know, and so may others, including targets, family members, friends, co-workers, or even casual observers.

The principal aim of threat assessment is to primarily prevent intentional acts of harm. When tragic incidents of planned violence occur, however, it is almost always uncovered "that someone knew something" about the attack before it happened. This happens because, as attack plans unfold, people in several different roles may know, or come to know, something about what is happening before harm occurs. The perpetrators know, and so may others, including targets, family members, friends, co-workers, or even casual observers.

We regard these people as potential "bystanders." Their role in preventing acts of planned violence and intentional harm is critical. Responsible bystanders may possess and report concerning behavior that may portend an attack, but they may also help to re-channel, interrupt, mitigate, stop, or remediate the threatening behavior or intent.

In late December, 2018 at a middle school in Middlebury, Vermont, a student overheard two other students planning to attack a specific individual on campus. He reported what he heard to the school's principal, who notified the authorities. An investigation revealed that a 14-year old student had a specific target, plan, time, location and means (with a weapon provided by a co-conspiring student) to execute the attack. Days before the planned shooting was to occur, police were able to transport the teen to a local medical center for psychiatric evaluation and treatment (McLaughlin & Chavez, 2018).

In May, 2019, a student wearing a black trench coat and brandishing a loaded shotgun entered a classroom in a Portland, Oregon high school. An unarmed football coach tackled the student and detained him until authorities arrived.

In July 2019, just weeks before a mass shooting spree in El Paso, Texas, another attack in the same state was potentially thwarted by a concerned grandmother. According to a federal

affidavit, a 19-year- old Texas man called from a hotel room, telling his grandmother that he had purchased “an AK-47 style rifle and was wanting to ‘shoot up’ his hotel and then commit suicide by cop when the police arrived.” The grandmother could even hear him handling the rifle over the phone. She convinced the man to allow her to pick him up and take him to the hospital. When police searched his hotel room, they found an AK-47 rifle with multiple loaded magazines, several knives, and tactical clothing the man had laid out on the bed to be seized by authorities (Yancey-Bragg, 2019). Stories like these—whether or not reported in the news—may occur as often, or more often than successful shooting attacks. People can and do recognize “red flags” before a tragedy occurs, and some act directly or indirectly to prevent it.

Many bystanders, however, still hesitate much of the time, in the face of concerning behavior. Except in sudden, dangerous emergencies, when some people may act instinctively, people often hesitate, before acting on the spot or reporting behavior that causes them to be concerned. There are many reasons why people hesitate. Many people dislike and distrust investigations or the authorities that conduct them. Some fear that acting or reporting will damage an important relationship. Others may doubt the significance of what they know, or even convince themselves that there must be some benign explanation for what they know or have seen. What is most important to understand is that hesitation occurs for a range of reasons—often for multiple reasons—and is not simply the result of a “diffusion of responsibility” cited in the media.

The popular idea that bystanders are generally passive observers seemed to accelerate after the highly publicized 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens, New York. Ms. Genovese was publicly attacked by a knife-wielding assailant who stabbed her twice in the back. She was

just a few feet away from her apartment building entrance. She reportedly screamed for help. One neighbor is known to have yelled at the attacker, which prompted him to flee the scene (though the attacker re-confronted Genovese and further assaulted her once she was out of view).

Initial news stories reported that more than 30 of her neighbors watched the attack without doing anything to help. That became the indelible image burned into the minds of the public. Those initial estimates were subsequently shown to have been inaccurate and markedly exaggerated, but the public perception of bystanders as apathetic onlookers persisted. Sparked, in part, by this event, several decades of experimental research focused on the so-called "bystander effect." The bystander effect postulates that having more observers present at a given incident decreases the likelihood that a bystander will intervene.

Although subsequent experimental research has often replicated the finding, numerous studies suggest that the "effect" is not a general truth. Research has illuminated situational conditions that substantially mitigate the effect, and other studies have found the presence of other bystanders can actually *increase* the likelihood of intervention under certain conditions, particularly when the situation is dangerous or potentially if the victim is seen as a member of one's "in-group."

New research in non-experimental, real-world settings also challenges conventional wisdom about the "bystander effect." Philpot and colleagues (2019) examined CCTV footage in three countries (UK, the Netherlands, and South Africa), identifying 219 incidents of public space aggression involving conflict between at least two people. In 90.9% of these conflict situations, at least one bystander intervened. On average, each situation mobilized nearly four

people to act. Results were fairly consistent across the three countries. In contrast to expectations based on the "bystander effect," the number of bystanders present in the conflict situation actually *increased* the likelihood of intervention, with an incremental bump in that likelihood for each additional bystander on the scene (Philpot, Liebst, Levine, Bernasco, & Lindegaard, 2019).

It is inaccurate to conclude from research that bystanders, in general, are cowardly do-nothings. Significant research demonstrates that sometimes bystanders intervene or otherwise take action when they witness troubling behavior. In some situations, it may be almost certain that someone will intervene. Numerous studies in social psychology, and real-life observations of public events, show that people are often quite willing to intervene, even at a personal cost, to stop another's wrongdoing (e.g., assault, rape, theft, littering). The potential for helpful bystander action offers an incredible opportunity for threat assessment professionals, whose goal is to prevent hazardous or conflictual situations from escalating into violence.

In this chapter, we will summarize some of the existing (though often limited) literature on bystander behavior and decision-making— including their motivations and barriers to reporting. We then offer some practical guidance to help threat assessment practitioners to develop more effective reporting systems/mechanisms, and to identify and engage those who may have information relevant to a potential threat.

For the purposes of this chapter, we use the term "bystander" for people who observe or come to know about concerning behavior or wrongdoing by others, but who are not knowingly engaged in planning or executing that behavior. We are also interested in those who come to know of preparations by a perpetrator that may lead to, or have led to harm. These

observers may be “bystanders” for our purpose, regardless of whether they know, or knew of plans for doing harm.

Why should TA professionals consider bystanders?

Given the relative lack of attention to bystanders in traditional threat assessment, practitioners might wonder why they should consider bystanders in assessment inquiries and management plans. The noteworthy answer is twofold: (a) bystanders are often the best source of pre-attack intelligence, including indicators of intent and “warning” behaviors, and (b) bystanders are the reason that some planned attacks are foiled before they occur.

In cases of targeted violence, peers and bystanders often have knowledge of an attacker’s intentions, concerning communication, and troubling behavior before the attack occurs. This finding has consistently been borne out in studies of mass shootings, school-based attacks, lone actor terrorism, assassination, active shooter attacks. and other forms of targeted violence.

Gill, Horgan, & Deckert (2014) studied 119 individuals from the U.S. and Europe who engaged in or planned to engage in lone-actor terrorism. They found it very common for others to be aware of the attacker’s commitment to a specific extremist ideology (87.8%) and of the grievance that spurred the planed attack (83.7%). Strikingly, “For 63.3 percent of the sample, there was an identifiable bystander to the individual’s planning/ preparation behaviors. These

(bystanders) were typically individuals who witnessed concerning behaviors (e.g. seeing the offender looking at bomb-making manuals at work) but were not privy to the individual's specific plans" (p.108). In about two thirds of all the cases examined, one or more friends or family members were aware of the attacker's intent because the attacker verbally told them (p. 429).

In another sample of 115 mass murderers, more than half (58.3%) communicated their intentions to harm a specific target to at least one third party, sometimes even disclosing their specific plans (Silver, Horgan, & Gill, 2018). Almost two decades earlier, Hempel, Meloy and Richards (1999) reported a similar finding in their sample of 30 mass murderers. While two thirds (67%) communicated some type of general or specific threat to a third party before the attack, half of those communicated specific threatening information "verbally or in writing, which described the location, victims, or time of the killings" (p.220). Moreover, in a study of *ˆthwarted* mass homicide attacks, Sarteschi (2016) found that the plots were identified or uncovered most commonly by information from the suspect's family, friends or acquaintances, but also by information from members of the general public.

Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva & Gray (2001) studied cases involving adolescent mass murderers. They found that—prior to the attack--more than half the adolescent attackers made direct statements about the attack (usually to third parties). Likewise, in 81% of the school

shootings studied by the U.S. Secret Service/Department of Education (Vossekuil et al., 2002), at least one person before the attack, knew of the attacker's intentions and plans, and, in over half, more than one person knew. In nearly all cases (93%), the school shooters were known in advance to engage more broadly in behavior that caused other people to be concerned.

An FBI Study (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018), examining 160 "active shooter" incidents in the U.S. between 2000 and 2013, found more than half (56%) the shooters communicated beforehand their intent to harm someone to a third party (a process the authors refer to as "leakage"). Each attacker, on average, engaged in 4.7 "concerning behaviors" before the attack occurred. In cases where the attacker was a student, those behaviors were typically noticed by a schoolmate (92%) or by a teacher/school staff (75%). For adults, the attacker's spouse/partner (87%), family members (68%) and friends (68%) were the common observers of concerning behaviors.

Bystanders' knowledge of pre-attack plans, communications and behaviors may provide the initial signal of a pending attack, or their information may contribute to a broader threat assessment inquiry or investigation. Organizations may know that troubling behavior is occurring, but may require further investigation to identify the nature or source of that concerning activity. Threat assessment practitioners may be called upon to support those

protective intelligence investigations, or they may even be brought in by lawyers or others after an event has occurred to locate and interview potential witnesses.

The second major reason why threat assessment professionals should consider peers and bystanders is less well documented in the professional literature, but at least as important. Peers and bystanders often act, formally and (more commonly) *informally*, to divert potential perpetrators of unacceptable behavior from their plans to engage in wrongdoing (Hodges, Low, Vinas-Racionero, Hollister, & Scalora, 2016). Although peers and bystanders with foreknowledge may not routinely go directly to law enforcement authorities, they do quite often act on their concern, either with the potential attacker directly or by sharing the information more unofficially with a supervisor or manager.

Regarding targeted violence, specifically, it is not a general truth that bystanders "do nothing" to prevent it. In fact, in the FBI's study of active shooter incidents, 13% of the attacks ended after unarmed citizens safely and successfully restrained the shooter (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). The same was true for active shooters in 2014-15 (15%) (Schweit, 2016), and 2016-17 (16%) (FBI Office of Partner Engagement, 2018). In 2018, 18.5% of active shooter attacks were ended by unarmed or lawfully armed citizens (FBI Office of Partner Engagement, 2019).

Some bystanders *are* willing to act, especially in emergency situations. And numerous anecdotal reports have recounted how a planned, targeted attack was foiled by a peer, family member or bystander bringing their concerns to the attention of authorities. This is especially and increasingly true for thwarted school shootings. Millspaugh and colleagues (2015) surveyed more than 39,000 7th and 8th grade students. Eighty six percent (86%) of the students agreed that if another student brought a gun to school, she/he would tell one of the teachers or staff at school. Eighty two percent (82%) agreed that if another student talked about killing someone, she/he would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.

Stallings and Hall (2019) reported in their study of averted school shootings that 60.7% of the incidents they studied were averted due to a student reporting the threat. Another 18% were averted because the suspect was stopped immediately prior to the targeted school killing—for example, when students were detained by law enforcement for a minor infraction, but the planned attack was detected. Daniels and colleagues (2007) also found that other students were the primary source of information for averted school attacks. In half of the cases they studied, the source was a friend of the suspect. In another 25%, the information was overheard by other students who came forward (Daniels, Buck, Croxall, Gruber, Kime, & Grovert, 2007).

Threat assessment professionals should be working with communities, law enforcement, and organizations to encourage more people with relevant, concerning information to come forward—and, a vital point, to teach those who receive information how to be *perceived* as receptive and effective. Professionals need to help in designing systems and facilitating climates in which peers and bystanders are more confident and comfortable coming forward (Banyard, Weber, Grych, & Hamby, 2016; Bennett & Banyard, 2014; Edwards, Banyard, Sessarego, Waterman, Mitchell, & Chang, 2019; Cowie & Hutson, 2005; McMahon, 2015; Rowe 2018).

Effective prevention will require more than purveying a "See something, Say something" message. Working at the system level—fostering positive climates and conditions for reporting—may save more lives by preventing a planned attack from ever coming to fruition (Lankford, 2018; Stallings & Hall, 2019).

What do Threat Assessment Professionals need to know about bystanders?

Sometimes threat assessment practitioners need to identify an unknown perpetrator—or to assess a possible perpetrator. In this situation they might seek bystanders—and look especially for those who may have already taken some kind of relevant action in a given context—as potentially important sources of information (see Table 2). Threat assessors also

need to know how to interview bystanders to assess the information they have or have provided. In sum, threat assessment professionals must recognize (a) that bystanders may have critical information and be able to help, directly or indirectly (as detailed above) and (b) that success in locating and working with bystanders is more likely if assessors know how and why bystanders decide whether or not to help.

How and why do bystanders decide whether to help or take action?

Threat assessment professionals seeking to identify and engage bystanders need a basic understanding of how/when/why/where certain people act directly or surface their concerns about the possibility of intentional harm, while others do not. We propose a four-stage model for understanding responses to others' concerning behavior.

- In Stage 1, the bystander perceives or receives information about the target behavior (or intended behavior).
- In Stage 2, the bystander decides (in a deliberate way) or registers (automatically) that the behavior is dangerous, or otherwise unacceptable. If not, then the behavior may be ignored, or covered up or dismissed.

- In Stage 3, if the bystander decides that some dangerous or unacceptable behavior has occurred, then she or he must decide whether some type of response or action is necessary.
- Stage 4, if action is deemed necessary, then the bystander must determine what his or her personal response will be—whether, when and how to pursue a response.

These four stages are not necessarily independent of each other, and they are not always sequential. A person may move back and forth from one stage to another.

The fourth stage focuses on the ultimate question: "Will I act or report the wrongdoing?" Bystanders weigh at least four sets of considerations in their decisions about whether to act:

(1) The bystander's motivations and goals, especially if significant others are involved.

(2) How others are likely to judge the bystander's action—the list of important others may be long.

(3) The perpetrator's status and relationship with the bystander if the bystander knows the perpetrator's identity.

(4) The bystander's self-perceived skill or capacity to act, the perceived effectiveness of taking action, and the perceived consequences.

These four factors affect how the bystander "frames" the decision for him or herself—that is, whether an intervention and/or report is an act of heroism, duty, betrayal, revenge, a "last resort," or something else.

Motives: The bystander's motives and goals will influence the decision about whether to act or report/disclose concerning information. Those motives and goals can be multiple, well or poorly understood, complex, and quite diverse (Rowe, Wilcox and Gadlin, 2009, see Table 1). People can do good things for bad reasons (motives)—or end up doing bad things for good reasons.

Table 1

Why *Do* Some People Stop or Report Unacceptable Behavior?
(Adapted from Rowe, Wilcox, & Gadlin, 2009, p. 19)

- This is my job
- There is a moral imperative to act
- Tangible and intangible rewards for speaking up
- Tangible and intangible sanctions for people who do not speak up
- I am forced to speak up
- There is strong evidence (conclusive proof) that will support speaking up
- I know the rules and can find out how to come forward
- I can do it without being identified
- I can talk with (the offender) directly
- Important people will help me
- It is reassuring "not to have to act alone"
- If it all goes bad I have a good fallback position
- I have nothing left to lose
- I will never give up; I am committed; nothing else matters
- This is my chance to "pay back or "get even"

Revenge/payback/competition is not an uncommon set of motives for reporting others' behavior. If the bystander has felt disrespected, bullied or otherwise mistreated, he may regard his own reporting as "payback," or as a way for the one exposed to "get what they deserve." A bystander also may be willing to publicly expose or cause pain to another person, not because they have wronged her personally, but because the perpetrator may remind the bystander of a different person who caused harm. Or the perpetrator may be seen to impede the bystander's own goals.

Finally, a bystander might be willing to report the apparently unacceptable behavior, and risk, accept, or even seek the personal consequences, because she feels that she has nothing left to lose. This dynamic is sometimes seen in people who feel desperate, hopeless, or suicidal.

In the prosocial realm of motivations, a bystander's sense of duty, justice sensitivity, or altruism can also nudge her toward surfacing her concerns. A sense of duty may arise from moral or role-based obligations, or from fear of being found later not to have shared what she knew. Acting from moral duty—in the ethical sense—is to fulfill obligations without regard to consequences or personal interests. The ethical doctrine of altruism, however, is explicitly rooted in consequentialism. The central idea is that acting for the good/benefit of others, even

over self, should be each person's moral obligation. An act is, therefore, deemed right or good to the extent that it benefits others.

The Appraisals of Significant Others: Most people attend to how they are perceived or judged by others whose opinions are important to them, and those perceptions frequently influence their behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) posits that a key factor in determining a person's intention to act is the reaction he/she expects from others. People tend to shape their own identities, at least in part, by the groups to which they belong. These group identifications create "social identities" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Vadera, Aguilera, & Caza, 2009). A person may identify with a few or several groups. The culture or ethos of that group may favor the reporting of concerns, or it may cast those who report others as disloyal or troublemakers. Perceptions of what others are likely to think will be important elements in the bystander's decision about whether, and potentially how to act (Berry, 2004; Kaptein, 2011).

Observed Actor's Status: The status of the person whose behavior was observed and the bystander's relationship with him/her may also affect the bystander's decision about whether to act. Consideration of "status" may include social status and reputation, as well as the observed person's position within a hierarchy (e.g., supervisor, subordinate, etc). It might also include the person's history of past behavior, especially whether the perpetrator was seen

to be a rule-breaker or respectful of rules, threatening or supportive, a good or poor citizen, or a good or poor performer.

The relationship between the bystander and the observed may be considered in light of how long they have known each other, their past conflicts, cooperation, and emotional and material exchanges. The decisions of college students, for example, to take only *informal* action in response to potentially threatening behavior were influenced by their prior relationships with the potentially dangerous individual (Hodges et al., 2016). Decisions might also be affected by whether the person observed was regarded as part of the bystander's "in-group" or "out-group," classifications often formed on the basis of social identities (Tajfel, 1982).

In Rowe, Wilcox and Gadlin's (2009) study, *relationships* were found to be the most important factor in determining whether bystanders would act or report. The closeness of the bystander's relationship with the apparent wrongdoer may affect the likelihood of reporting (Miller & Thomas, 2005). Friendship, loyalty, and in-group cohesion between bystander and wrongdoer are all factors that may diminish the likelihood of reporting. In King's (1997) study of registered nurses, for example, he found participants much less willing to report wrongdoing by a friend than by a colleague who was not considered a friend.

Little is known about decision-making where the bystander does not know the identity of a potential perpetrator. This question, however, is likely to be important in a specific case.

Efficacy of Reporting: Perceived efficacy, both of the reporter herself and the entity to which she is reporting, will weigh into a bystander's decision. An affirmative belief in one's competence to execute a task, also known as "self-efficacy," buffers fear and enables action (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Once a self-confident bystander determines that action is necessary, he might consider acting on the spot or reporting to an authority, depending on the nature of the unacceptable behavior, the context in which it occurs, the options the bystander thinks he has, how the bystander believes he might most safely and effectively respond, and his perception as to whether any action taken will be appropriate and effective.

In sum, capacity to act or report the target behavior is a combined function of the bystander's own sense of competence to respond, the safety, credibility and accessibility of reporting mechanisms, assessment of risk and propensity to avoid risk, and the bystander's knowledge of, and perceptions about the competence and intentions of the authority who will be expected to respond. Any of those touch points may affect the bystander's intention to act.

What barriers exist to reporting/disclosing concerns?

Threat assessment professionals need to know about barriers to reporting in order to manage resistance or difficulty with disclosure. We present a brief description of barriers that might occur at each stage of bystander decision-making. As described above, those four stages

involve perceiving a wrong action, deciding the action is wrong, deciding whether a response is necessary, and deciding how personally to respond.

Stage 1

Barriers to seeing or otherwise learning of problematic behavior

- Insufficient Knowledge: The bystander does not actually know enough to notice or "register" the behavior as problematic.
- Inattention: The bystander is too absorbed or distracted to notice.
- Motivated Blindness: "Motivated blindness" blocks the bystander from noticing; it is not safe to "see" this behavior; therefore it is not observed or remembered.
- Avoids Seeing: The bystander chooses, either consciously—or unconsciously—not to be in a position to see unacceptable behavior.

Stage 2

Barriers to perceiving behavior as unacceptable

- Insufficient Knowledge: The bystander does not know relevant rules or laws, or how to judge the problematic behavior, especially if the behavior is simply a small part of a preparation by a wrongdoer who intends harm.
- Insufficient Threshold: The bystander thinks there "probably is not much of a problem here." Because the behavior is brief or sporadic, with few or no

"footprints," the bystander has no clear definition in mind about what has happened. For example, when college students who had observed threatening behavior on campus were asked whether they had reported their concerns, those who had not were more likely to believe that the behavior did not portend a likely or imminent dangerous incident (Hodges et al., 2016).

- Authority Barrier: The apparent wrongdoer is highly placed, an expert, a person who has the right to act unconventionally; the bystander thinks, "My judgment must be wrong."
- Affinity Barrier: The apparent perpetrator is a friend or family or in-group member; the bystander thinks, "this must be OK; anyway it *has* to be OK."
- Social Appraisal Barrier: The bystander may be asked or expected to help or go along with the behavior, as if, of course, it is acceptable; the bystander may then be talked out of his or her reservations.
- Benefit Barrier: There may be immediate gains from the problematic behavior for the bystander; these gains may seem to cancel out the problematic aspects.

Stage 3

Barriers to deciding that "someone" should take action

- Insufficient Knowledge/Understanding: The bystander does not have the experience to know if action should be taken—and does not know any relevant reporting procedures.
- Insufficient Evidence Barrier: The bystander thinks nothing will done by authorities if there is "no conclusive proof and no (other) witness."
- Competence/Trust Barrier: The bystander thinks "there is no one who is competent—or trustworthy—to understand and fix this. It is no use for me to take action."
- Ineffective Response Barrier: The bystander thinks any action would result in too much being done—or nothing being done—and that even "just an investigation" would have bad consequences.

Stage 4

Barriers to personal action

- Unsure How to Respond Barrier: The bystander cannot imagine how to formulate a plan even if he or she thinks the behavior should be stopped.
- Prior Damaging Response Barrier: The bystander knows someone who tried to stop unacceptable behavior, with very bad consequences.

- Lack of Knowledge/Trust Barrier: "I know no one who understands or trusts the system." (See Hollister, Scalora, Hoff & Marquez, 2014, finding that college students who did not trust campus police were also *less* willing to report concerning behaviors that might signal an on-campus attack).
- Insufficient Evidence Barrier: The bystander thinks, "for sure my evidence is not enough," assumes any action is "his word against mine," and fears that his or her own competence may be questioned.
- Role Barrier: The particular bystander thinks taking action is not part of her or his status, role, or job.
- Reporting Procedure Barrier: The bystander wishes for a specific reporting option, e.g. complete anonymity, that is not available.
- Some Specific Negative Consequences Barriers:
    - Specific Fear of Retaliation: The bystander worries that specific people will find out or guess who reported.
    - Fear of Social Disapproval: The specific bystander knows that loyalty is everything.

- Fear of Being Misunderstood: The bystander is wary of offense in a particular workplace: "I cannot risk raising a concern about someone from another culture."
- Fear of Acting Alone: This bystander cannot imagine taking action alone.

How can Threat Assessment Professionals engage bystanders at a systems level?

In addition to directly preventing, interrupting, re-channeling, mitigating, stopping, or remediating concerning behaviors, bystanders may also *report* such behavior to various authorities with formal power. Sometimes this is done through a designated "incident reporting" mechanism or office. That action in turn may also lead to preventing, interrupting, re-channeling, mitigating, stopping and remediating concerning behavior—in this case by the authorities themselves.

When presented with evidence, such as that reviewed in the first part of this chapter which shows that other people usually know about an attacker's intention or plan before an attack occurs, a common response is to declare a need "to educate the public" about common warning signs, so that they will be more likely to report them. While educating peers and bystanders may be helpful, reflexively calling for this type of public education as a primary solution misses an important point. Often those with foreknowledge of an attackers plan

already know enough to be concerned. They may hesitate to share that information with authorities, however, either because the best way to report is not clear (or accessible) to them or because they believe the authorities may not respond appropriately. Ultimately, we may need to educate bystanders, but first we should consider educating those who will receive information (access points) of concern, as well as those who will act on the information, such as investigators and decision-makers.

Bystanders regularly speak and act as if they find formal reporting channels unappealing, and "investigations" to be useless. Many bystanders perceive reporting authorities to be unreceptive and ineffective. Cultural issues are another set of factors important to understanding bystander reporting. Numerous empirical studies have shown how perceptions of wrongful or unacceptable behavior may differ as a function of variants in cultural norms or values.

If preventing harmful behavior is the goal, creating climates in which bystanders are likely to report their concerns may be the most important intervention that we have not yet tried. A common challenge to coming forward is that bystanders in all cultures experience barriers when their actions risk their relationships. For preventing targeted violence, it is not accurate to view bystanders as the major problem. Bystanders *are* willing to act in all kinds of emergency situations, even those that may put themselves at risk of harm. The real challenge is

asking bystanders to risk their relationships to prevent an outcome that may or may not even happen.

That suggests that a focal point of prevention efforts should be creating a “zero barrier” system for reporting concerns. In general, those who seek advice and make reports typically want their “access points” and reporting channels to be *safe, accessible and credible*. Most effective incident reporting systems share these characteristics. Many authors also have focused on the importance of building a "safety culture" to enhance the likelihood that errors and mistakes will get caught in a timely way. One prominent and consistent finding from research on incident reporting is that supervisors/authorities have a powerful role in whether and how concerns and misconduct are reported.

The presence and nature of multiple reporting options or access channels appears to make a major difference in whether people are willing to seek advice, and to “speak up.” Multiple modes and points of access allow a range of user preferences to fit with different user motivations and different circumstances—especially if one is a “zero barrier” option, such as completely anonymous reporting or a confidential office like an organizational ombudsman.

How can Threat Assessment Professionals engage bystanders at an individual level?

Bystanders typically emerge from one of four groupings: Family, Peers (to include friends and acquaintances), Authority Figures (such as a principal, supervisor, law enforcement or mental health professional), and Strangers (such as members of the general public). Intended victims are another potential source of pre-incident information, but might not be regarded as "bystanders" *per se*. Each group may have access to different kinds of information; each may have different motivations and decision patterns in different kinds of situations. Each may have different levels of resistance to sharing that information with a professional trying to assess and manage a potentially threatening situation. Confrontations and interrogation-like approaches are rarely effective in eliciting cooperation from bystanders; the interviewer must be prepared for resistance and be able to elicit accurately the kinds of details that will support the assessment.

The general approach to effective engagement is to develop a collaborative, rapport-based exchange that facilitates trust and inspires the interviewee's confidence. Most threat assessment professionals will have sufficient investigative experience to know how to develop rapport and to know when it has been established. With bystander-related interviews, the interviewer will want to assume a more collaborative, and less directive posture, allowing the interviewee space and latitude to express ideas and convey information. In most cases, the basic tenets of active listening work well, represented here by the acronym: OARS

- **O**pen-ended questions: Queries might funnel from the general to the more specific, starting with questions that do not have a yes/no answer. Asking for more descriptive responses (Tell me about…. or Tell me how …) facilitates a deeper exchange and allows the interviewee to elaborate without interference from the interviewer.
- **A**ffirmations: Because the interviewer will probably have to work with an interviewee's ambivalence, it is important to identify, acknowledge and validate the emotions and concerns that may affect disclosure or reporting of information (such as those discussed above).
- **R**eflections: Reflections are a basic group of active listening techniques that allow the interviewer to provide "feedback" demonstrating that she has heard and understands what the interviewee has said, and has accurately perceived the underlying emotions or sentiment (reflection of feeling). Reflection tactics include repeating, re-stating, or paraphrasing what the interviewee has said.
- **S**ummaries: Summaries are a type of reflection in which the interviewer sums up a central message, and often checks with the interviewee on the accuracy of what was summarized. They can also be used to highlight areas of interviewee ambivalence.

Managing resistance often is challenging. It is generally true that closer bonds or relationships between the bystander and the subject of the assessment will be associated with

higher levels of resistance—even if the bystander, in principle, is committed to preventing violence or avoiding harm. Some investigators are accustomed to overcoming a subject's resistance by argumentation or forceful persuasion. That approach is unlikely to yield a positive outcome in bystander interviews. Instead, the interviewer is generally advised to "roll with resistance," and to use that resistance to explore the interviewee's concerns.

Mobilizing Bystanders: In addition to "reporting" threat-related information, it is clear that bystanders can also be primed, empowered, and sometimes mobilized to prevent or mitigate a potentially dangerous situation. In organizations, a "primary prevention" approach might include (1) action-oriented member training, (2) shaping the organizational culture by training senior leadership and peer levels how to "listen" to bystanders with assurance/demonstration/regular communication of effective organizational response, and (3) developing systems (for reporting and sharing concerns) that ensure confidentiality/anonymity, have multiple modes of access, and minimize barriers.

At the individual level, key bystanders may be engaged to monitor and sometimes even act to address a subject's concerning behavior—even if they initially seem resistant or unwilling to report the behavior or to put the subject in jeopardy. Bystanders may take determined, unobtrusive, informal actions to prevent or stop criminal behavior by a family member or close friend, while keeping the authorities from finding out about it. These examples highlight the

importance of private bystander actions—beyond just reporting—that may re-channel behavior or resources.

Table 2 presents a non-exhaustive list of responses drawn from many hundreds of self-reports from real bystanders who have taken action with respect to concerning behavior. In considering a specific case, of course, the professional might ask, "What might encourage particular bystanders to help in this situation?"

Table 2. Some Naturally Occurring Helpful Bystander Actions[3]

Peers and bystanders can:

- Ask civil, effective questions, of an apparent perpetrator, or of people around the perpetrator
- Become active mentors, modeling accessible, trustworthy behavior, in a way that interferes with the unacceptable behavior
- Consult with personal or professional resources, in a direct or indirect fashion, with or without information identifying a (potential) perpetrator
- Discuss, discourage and disparage behavior that is unacceptable, on the spot, as in "speaking up" in public, or physically defending a target
- Deflect or derail the behavior unobtrusively as with humor, cartoons, or posters
- Engage friends, family or associates to help deal with the behavior; engage other bystanders and "bystanders of bystanders"
- Instigate or trigger a "generic approach" such as asking for a relevant community or organizational program on the subject, without identifying any individual
- Interrupt the behavior unobtrusively or overtly
  Mitigate the effects of unacceptable behavior by personal action
- "Name" or talk widely about associated unacceptable behaviors in the community, so they cannot happen unnoticed

- Observe the behavior, gathering more information before choosing an option, collecting evidence, keeping a diary
- Offer to accompany, call for help—or otherwise support—targets of unacceptable behavior, so that vulnerable persons are not left alone to deal with the behavior or possible retaliation
- "Pivot" the situation, by encouraging or instigating positive alternatives for potential perpetrators
- Prevent the behavior from recurring (e.g. by making certain behavior punishable, or eliminating resources)
- Punish the behavior (at the time or later) or act to see it punished
- Re-channel plans or persons or resources engaged in unacceptable behavior, (e.g. engaging the relevant person elsewhere, removing their access)
- Remediate the behavior, (e.g. noticeably or behind the scenes – overtly or "casually")
- Report the behavior in one of many different ways, (alone or with others, once or repeatedly, in writing or orally, identifiably or anonymously, formally or informally, immediately or later, directly or indirectly, with few salient details or with exhaustive information)
- Repudiate the specific unacceptable behavior, after the fact, in an explicit public fashion
- Stop the behavior in the moment, alone or with others
- Stop the behavior and follow up, directly or indirectly, to assure no recurrence
- Take covert action in such a way that the behavior of the perpetrator can come to the attention of some inside or outside authority
- Teach others how to identify unacceptable behavior and to assess: "who, what, when, where, why, how, and with whom?" in thinking about options
- Teach others how to lead and exemplify positive alternatives with systematically affirming behavior

Conclusion

As Hodges and colleagues note: "The first step of violence prevention, including threat assessment, is to identify threatening individuals through becoming aware of pre-incident behaviors." After a horrific, violent incident occurs, it is common to find that "that someone knew something" about the attack before it happened. Attackers are known to communicate

with family members, friends, co-workers, or even casual observers—who we might regard as "bystanders"—about their grievances, and sometimes their attack plans. Those same individuals may directly observe the potential attacker's behavior and be concerned. Threat assessment professionals need to know not only that those individuals may be important sources of pre-attack information, but also how they might best access that information, either through official reporting systems and channels or through collateral interviews in a threat assessment inquiry.

Despite the fact that researchers have pursued a longstanding focus on the "bystander effect," which suggests that it is less likely a bystander will intervene if other people are present at the scene, that "effect" is far from a general truth. Systematic observations of actual public and private conflicts show that many times bystanders will step in to help, even (and perhaps, especially) when other observers are present. Moreover, studies of "thwarted attacks," from school shootings to mass homicides consistently reveal that the plots were discovered because of information brought forward by bystanders. Bystanders often report and act on their concerns about unacceptable or threatening behavior, but surfacing those concerns is much more likely when reporting systems (and responders) are safe, accessible, and credible. Threat assessment practitioners should work to support systems and climates that will encourage bystanders to come forward. They should also understand the dynamics of bystander decision-making and the common barriers to reporting, so they can better enlist bystanders' cooperation with their inquiries.

It is time for the threat assessment practice community to focus more on bystanders' critical role in violence prevention. Available research and decades of experience suggest that

bystanders are often the best source of pre-attack intelligence, including indicators of intent and “warning” behaviors, and that some planned attacks are, and have been, averted because bystanders have surfaced their concerns. Though bystander intervention is a complicated issue, there are good reasons to be optimistic. Organizations can create a climate in which bystanders are very likely to act, and save lives.

Key Points

- Bystanders may help to identify, assess and even manage those who plan or undertake violence.
- Bystanders are often the best source of pre-attack intelligence, including indicators of intent and “warning” behavior.
- Studies of “thwarted attacks,” from school shootings to mass homicides consistently reveal that the plots were discovered because of information brought forward by bystanders.
- Bystanders may divert, prevent, stop, interrupt, mitigate or remediate wrongdoing directly or by alerting authorities.
- Bystanders may help to identify an unknown perpetrator—or provide information after an event.
- Bystanders typically face major barriers to reporting; understanding these barriers will help in locating bystanders, in conducting threat assessment interviews, and in assessing bystander information.
- Understanding barriers faced by bystanders will help authorities: in providing safe, accessible and credible ways for bystanders to provide information, in training those who receive bystander information, and in training bystanders.

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