

# ***Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence***

Virginia Youth Violence Project  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia

434-924-8929

Email: [youthvio@virginia.edu](mailto:youthvio@virginia.edu)

Website: [youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu](http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu)



# Our Purpose...

*...is to develop, implement, and evaluate guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence.*

# **The *Expansion* of Zero Tolerance**

**No Drugs**

No Toy Guns

**No Guns**

No Nail clippers

**No Knives**

No Plastic utensils

**No Threats**

No Finger-pointing

No Jokes

No Drawings

No Rubber band shooting

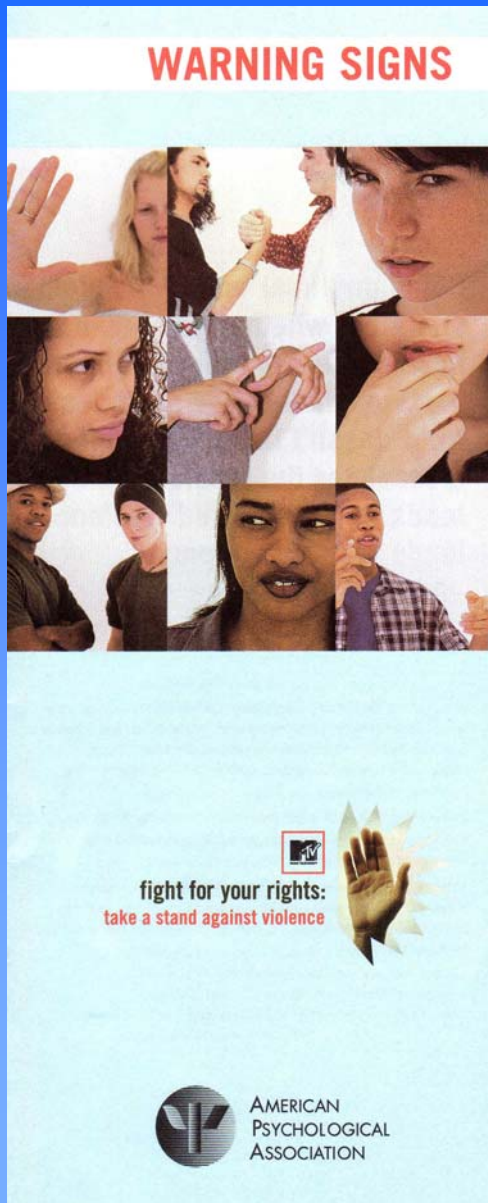
*No Accidental violations*

# Nervous Officials No Longer Ignoring Threats by Students

Around the Country, Children Are Being Arrested

- 4 Kindergarten students suspended for playing cops and robbers during recess.
- New Jersey district zero tolerance policy resulted in 50 suspensions in 6 weeks, mostly in kindergarten and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for verbal threats.
- 7 yr old transferred to a different school after talking about his grandma's gun
- 3<sup>rd</sup> grader suspended for drawing a soldier with grenades and knives.
- 8 yr old suspended for pointing a chicken finger at a teacher, saying pow-pow
- 10 yr old expelled for a 1" GI Joe toy gun
- 14 yr old convicted of felony for e-mail threat
- 17 yr old arrested & expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band

# Warning Signs Brochure

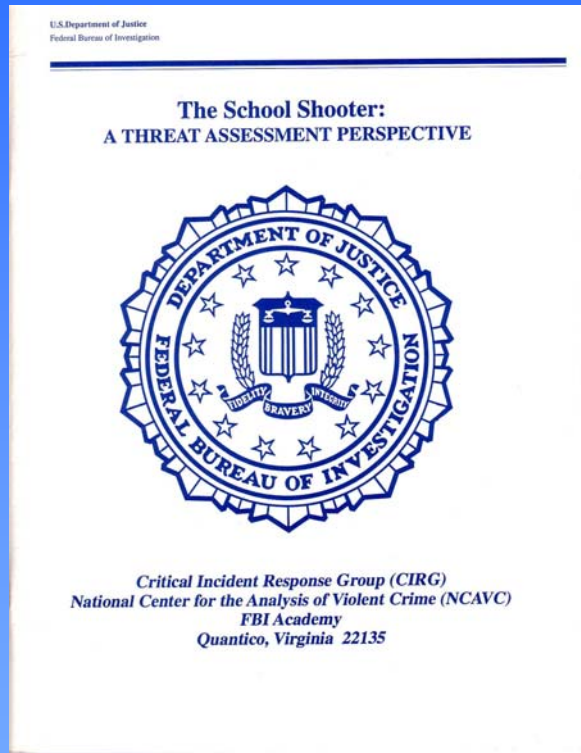


“If you see these immediate warning signs, violence is a serious possibility:”

1. Loss of temper on a daily basis
2. Significant vandalism or property damage
3. Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
4. Increase in risk-taking behavior
5. Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
6. Announcing threats or plans for hurting others
7. Enjoying hurting animals
8. Carrying a weapon



# FBI Recommendations on School Violence



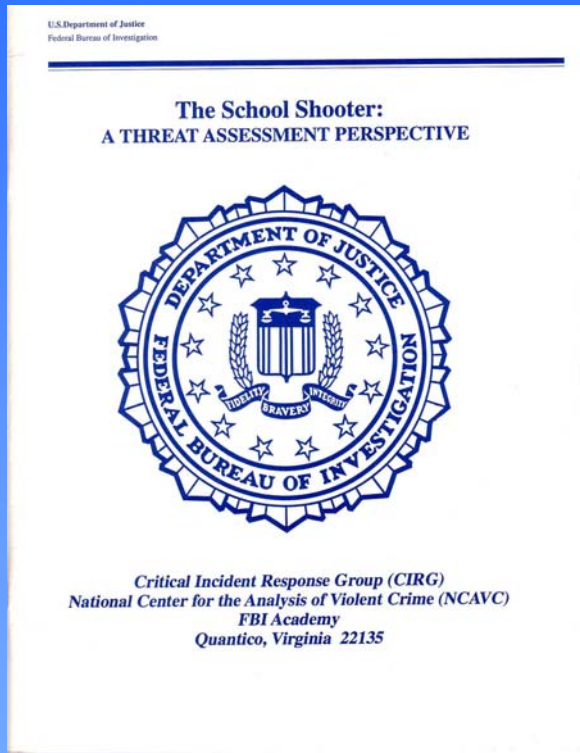
**Download at  
[www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)**

“One response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical school shooter. This may sound like a reasonable preventive measure, but in practice, trying to draw up a catalogue or “checklist” of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal. In fact, a great many adolescents who will never commit violent acts will show some of the behaviors or personality traits included on the list.” (FBI report pp 2-3)

# Profiling does not work.

- School shootings are too rare.
- Profiles make false predictions.
- Profiles generate stereotypes.
- Profiles don't solve problems.

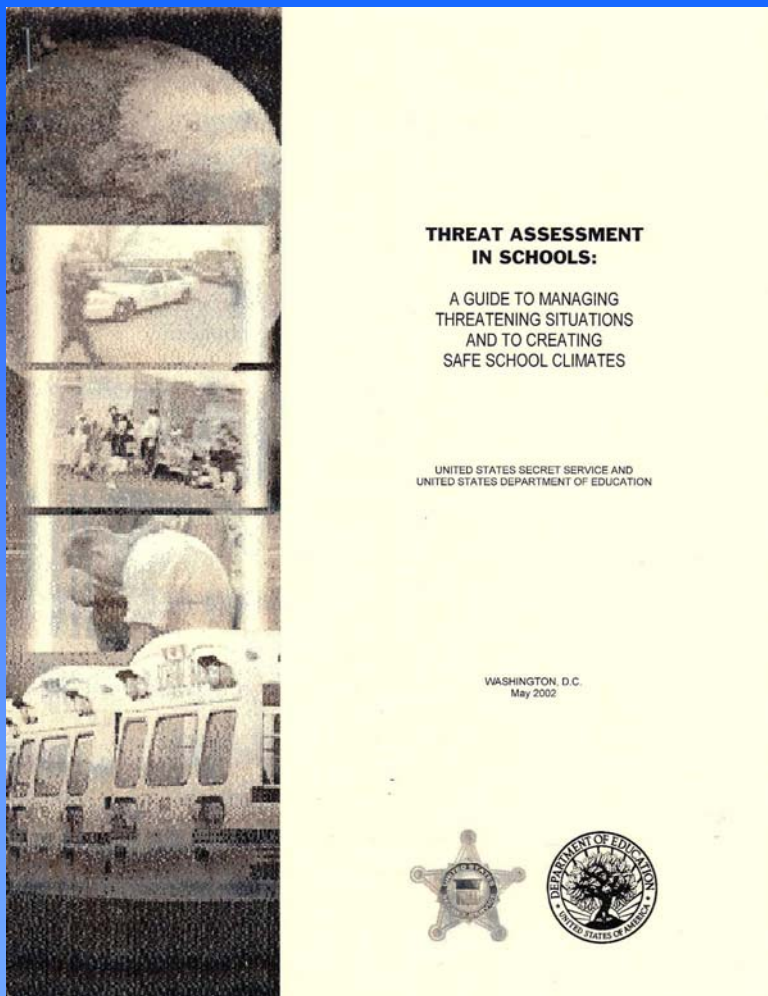
# FBI Recommendations on School Violence



**Download at  
[www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)**

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.”  
(FBI report p 1)





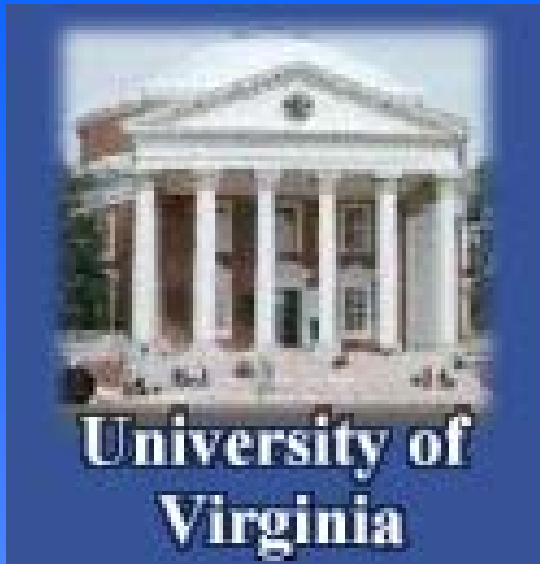
**Download at:  
[www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)**

## ***Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:***

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

# Threat Assessment

1. *Identification* of threats made by students.
2. *Evaluation* of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. *Intervention* to reduce risk of violence.
4. *Follow-up* to assess intervention results.



# **Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence**

A collaborative project of:

University of Virginia Curry School of Education

Albemarle County Public Schools

Charlottesville City Public Schools

Funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund



## Guidelines for Student Threat Assessment: Field-Test Findings

Dewey G. Cornell, Peter L. Sheras, Sebastian Kaplan, David McConville,  
Julea Douglass, Andrea Elkon, Lela McKnight,  
Chris Branson, and Joanna Cole

*Programs in Clinical and School Psychology, Curry School of Education,  
University of Virginia*

*Abstract.* A demonstration project was conducted to field-test guidelines for schools to use in responding to student threats of violence. Results from 188 student threats occurring in 35 schools over the course of one school year are described. School-based teams used a decision-tree model to evaluate the seriousness of a threat and take appropriate action to reduce the threat of violence. Using threat assessment guidelines, the majority of cases (70%) were resolved quickly as transient threats. More serious cases, termed substantive threats (30%), required a more extensive evaluation and intervention plan. Follow-up interviews with school principals revealed that almost all students were able to continue in school or return to school after a brief suspension. Only 3 students were expelled, and none of the threatened acts of violence were carried out. These findings indicate that student threat assessment is a feasible, practical approach for schools that merits more extensive study.

# School Work Group

<b>Team composition</b>	<b>Albemarle</b>	<b>Charlottesville</b>
Assistant Superintendent	Frank Morgan	Ron Hutchinson
Principal	Carole Hastings	Robert Thompson
School Psychologist	Chris Love	Nancy Cornell
Supervisor for School Resource Officers	Sgt James Bond	Sgt Allen Kirby

**Youth Violence Project staff** – Dewey Cornell, Peter Sheras, and graduate students Sebastian Kaplan, Andrea Levy, David McConville, and Lela McKnight.

# Advisory Group

<b>Donna Bowman</b>	<b>Director, Virginia School Safety Center, Dept of Criminal Justice Services</b>
<b>Arlene Cundiff</b>	<b>Director, Office of Safe &amp; Drug-Free Schools, Virginia DOE</b>
<b>Capt. Chip Harding</b>	<b>Charlottesville Police Dept. &amp; State Board of Juvenile Justice</b>
<b>Kirk Heilbrun</b>	<b>Professor of Clinical Psychology, Hahnemann University</b>
<b>John Monahan</b>	<b>Professor of Law, Clinical Psychologist, University of Virginia</b>
<b>Mary Ellen O'Toole</b>	<b>FBI Supervisory Special Agent, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime</b>
<b>Terri Royster</b>	<b>FBI Supervisory Special Agent, National Academy</b>



# Development of Guidelines

## Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence

### Purpose and Goals of these Guidelines

*The purpose of these guidelines is to help school personnel deal with student threats of violence in a consistent, fair, and responsible manner. Our goals are to maintain a safe school environment and to respond to student needs that are indicated by threats.*

### Perceived risk of violence

Media attention to a series of school shootings has stimulated fears that schools are not safe, and generated inaccurate perceptions that all students who make threats are likely to engage in lethal violence. In fact, the risk of violence at school is very low relative to the risk outside of school.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Contrary to public perceptions, violent crime by youth, including school homicide, has declined substantially since 1993. The overall risk of violence and injury at school has changed very little over the past 20 years, and weapon carrying at school has declined for almost ten years.<sup>3</sup>

Schools have an obligation to take a factual, rational approach to student threats of violence -- to protect students and staff, and to maintain a safe and orderly school environment, but at the same time to avoid over-reacting to threats in a manner that is disruptive to learning or results in excessive consequences for students who engage in inappropriate behavior.

### Predictions of violence

Reports by the FBI,<sup>1</sup> the Secret Service,<sup>2</sup> the U.S. Surgeon General,<sup>3</sup> and the U.S. Department of Education<sup>2,4,5</sup> emphasize that there is no profile or formula that will accurately determine whether or not a student will engage in lethal acts of violence. Severe violence is too rare, and can result from too many different factors, to be accurately predicted. However, there is useful scientific information about the behavioral and psychological antecedents of violence, and it is possible to reduce the risk of violence by appropriate interventions.<sup>3,5</sup> Therefore, our approach is to evaluate student threats of violence, and to make measured and systematic responses aimed at reducing the risk of violence by addressing the problem or circumstances that precipitated the threat.<sup>1,2</sup> These guidelines will be most useful in helping school personnel gather relevant information necessary to make an individualized assessment of student threats, and to make decisions based on their professional judgment, considering the unique circumstances and needs of their students.

### WHAT IS A THREAT?

A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone. Threats may be spoken, written, or expressed in some other way, such as through gestures. Threats may be direct ("I am going to beat you up") or indirect ("You better watch out" or "If I wanted to, I could blow this place up"). Illegal possession of weapons should be presumed to indicate a threat unless careful investigation reveals otherwise (e.g., a student accidentally brought a knife to school). When in doubt about whether a student's behavior is a threat, evaluate it as a threat.

### For more information:

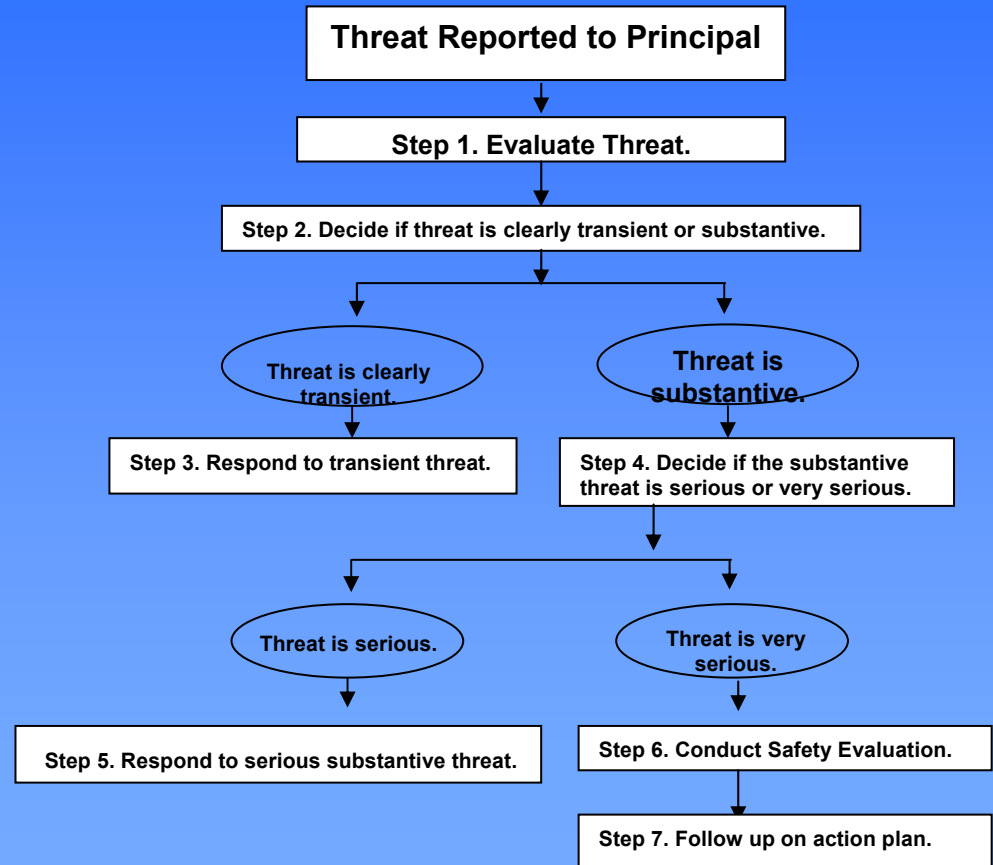
<sup>1</sup> O'Toole, M.E. (2000). *The school shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Quantico, Virginia: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov).

<sup>2</sup> Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. And Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and in creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education. Available at [www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov).

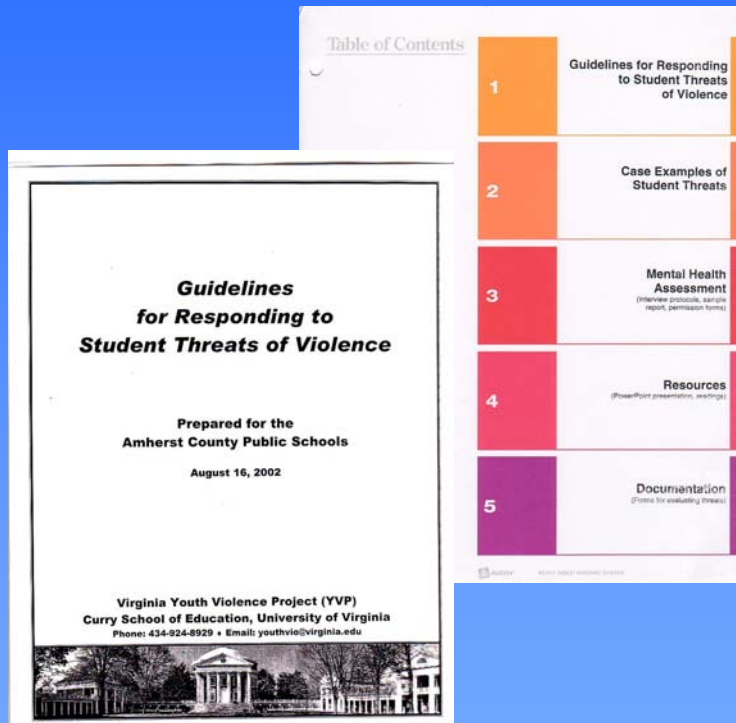
<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Youth violence: A report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: Author.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, P., Chen, X., Chry, S.P., Ruidy, S.A. et al. (2000). *Indicators of school crime and safety*. (NCES 2001-017/NCJ-184176). Washington, DC: U.S. Dept of Education.

<sup>5</sup> Dwyer, K., Osher, D., & Warger, C. (1998). *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safer schools*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept of Education.



# Manual Contents



1. Guidelines
2. Case Examples
3. Mental Health Assessment
4. Resources
5. Documentation

**The complete manual will be published by Sopris West in the summer of 2005.**

# Field-Test Schools

22 Elementary schools

6 Middle schools

4 High schools

3 Alternative schools

35 Total





# Training Recipients

59 Principals and assistant principals

33 School psychologists

07 School resource officers

46 Counselors, other administrators

500 Staff at introductory sessions

# Team roles

Principal or Assistant Principal	Leads team, conducts Step 1.
School Resource Officer	Advises team, responds to illegal actions and emergencies.
School Psychologist	Team member, conducts mental health assessments.
School Counselor	Team member, lead role in follow-up interventions.
Teachers, aides, other staff	Report threats, provide input to team. No additional workload.

School divisions may further specify team roles and include other staff to meet local needs.



# No Magic Formula or Crystal Ball

There is no formula, prescription, or checklist that will predict or prevent all violent acts. School authorities must make reasoned judgments based on the facts of each individual situation, and monitor situations over time.





# What is a threat?

***A threat is an expression of intent to harm someone.***

Threats may be spoken, written, or gestured.

Threats may be direct or indirect, and need not be communicated to the intended victim or victims.

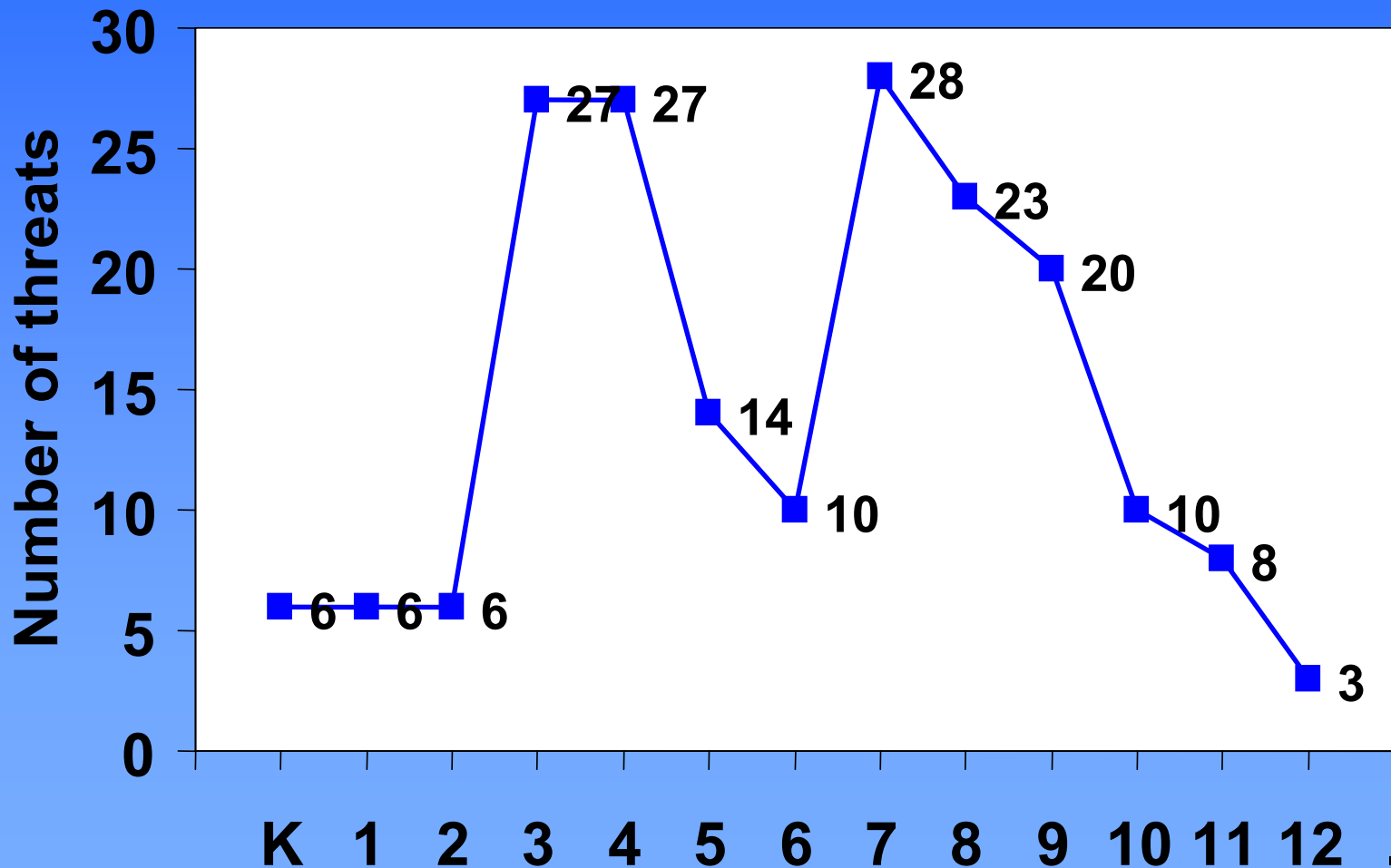
("I'm going to get him.")

Weapon possession is presumed to be a threat unless circumstances clearly indicate otherwise.

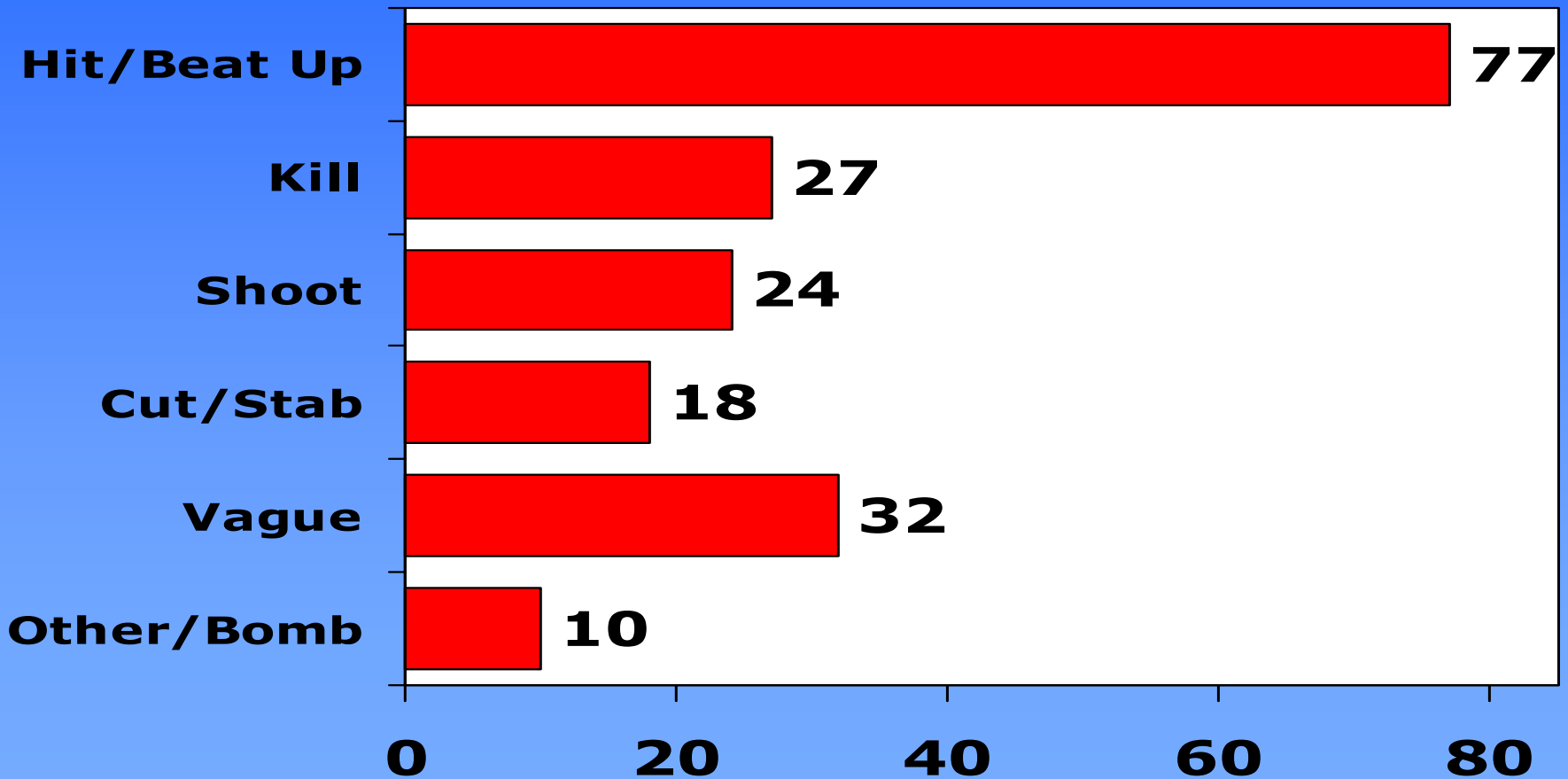
("I forgot my knife was in my backpack.")

When in doubt, assume it is a threat.

# Grade Levels for 188 Student Threats of Violence

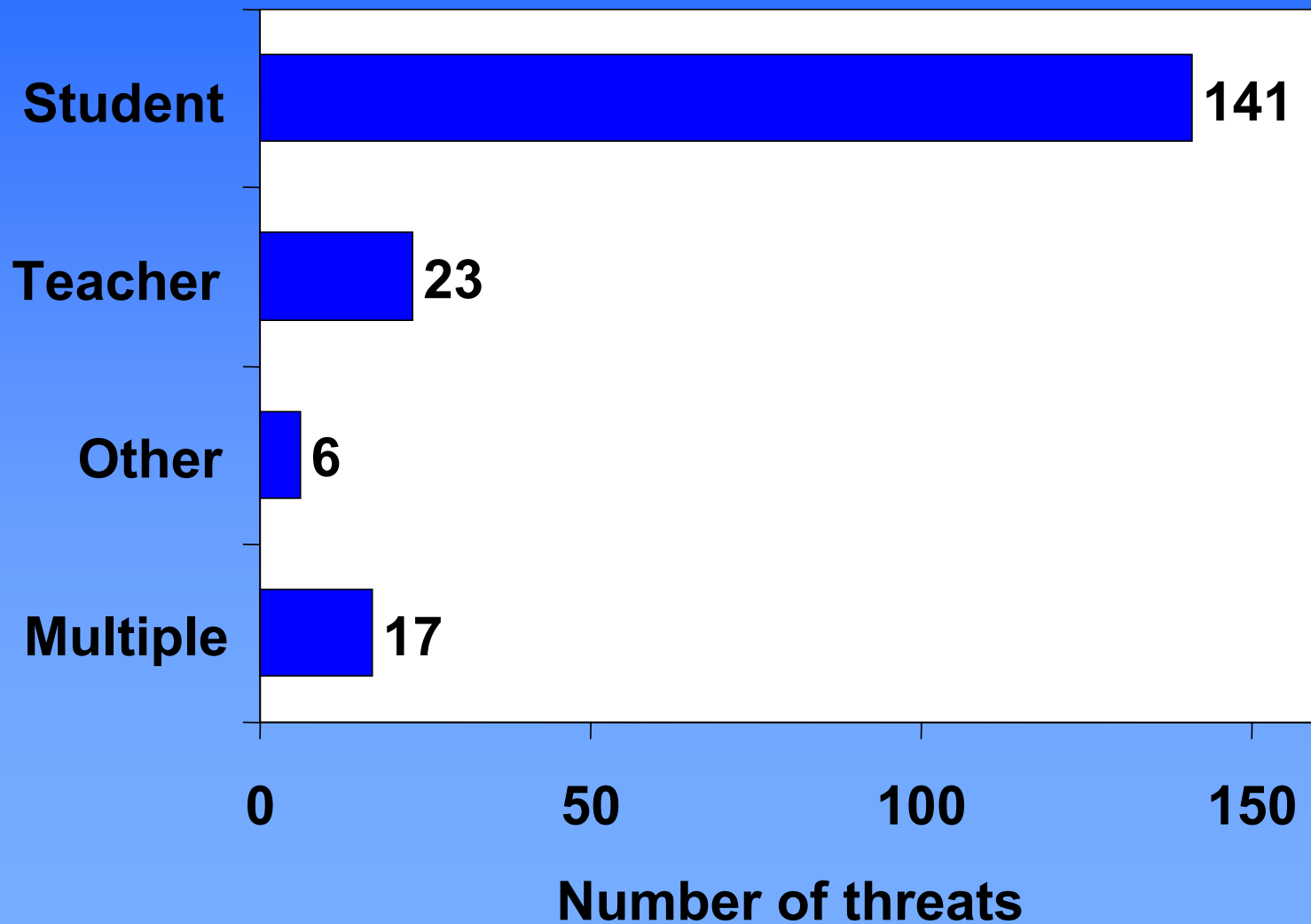


# What did the students threaten to do?



N = 188 cases

# Who was the victim of threats?



# Student and Victim Special Ed Status

	Not Spec Ed Victim	Spec Ed Victim	
Regular Ed Threat	52%	3%	55%
Spec Ed Threat	32%	13%	45%

N = 155.

# Threat Reported to Principal

Step 1. Evaluate Threat.

Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.

Threat is clearly transient.

Step 3. Respond to transient threat.

Threat is substantive.

Step 4. Decide if the substantive threat is serious or very serious.

Threat is serious.

Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.

Threat is very serious.

Step 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.

Step 7. Follow up on action plan.



# Step 1.

## Evaluate the threat.

- Obtain an account of the threat and the context from the student and witnesses.
- Write down the exact threat.
- Obtain student's explanation of the threat's meaning and his/her intentions.
- Obtain witness perceptions of the threat's meaning.

Document your  
evaluation.

# All threats are not the same.

“I could just kill you for that!” (laughing)

“I’m gonna kick your butt.”

“There’s a bomb in the school.”

“Wait until I get my gun!”

“Let’s really make them  
pay for what they did.”

Context matters...



# Step 2.

## Transient or Substantive?

- Determine whether the threat is transient or substantive.
- The critical issue is not what the student threatened to do, but whether the student intends to carry out the threat.
- When in doubt, treat a threat as substantive.

# Transient threats



- Often are rhetorical remarks, not genuine expressions of intent to harm.
- At worst, express temporary feelings of anger or frustration.
- Usually can be resolved on the scene or in the office.
- After resolution, the threat no longer exists.
- Usually end with an apology or clarification.

# Transient Threats

**Threat Reported to Principal**

**Step 1. Evaluate Threat.**

**Step 2. Decide if threat is clearly transient or substantive.**

Threat is clearly  
transient.

**Step 3. Respond to transient threat.**

Threat is  
substantive.

**Step 4. Decide if the substantive  
threat is serious or very serious.**

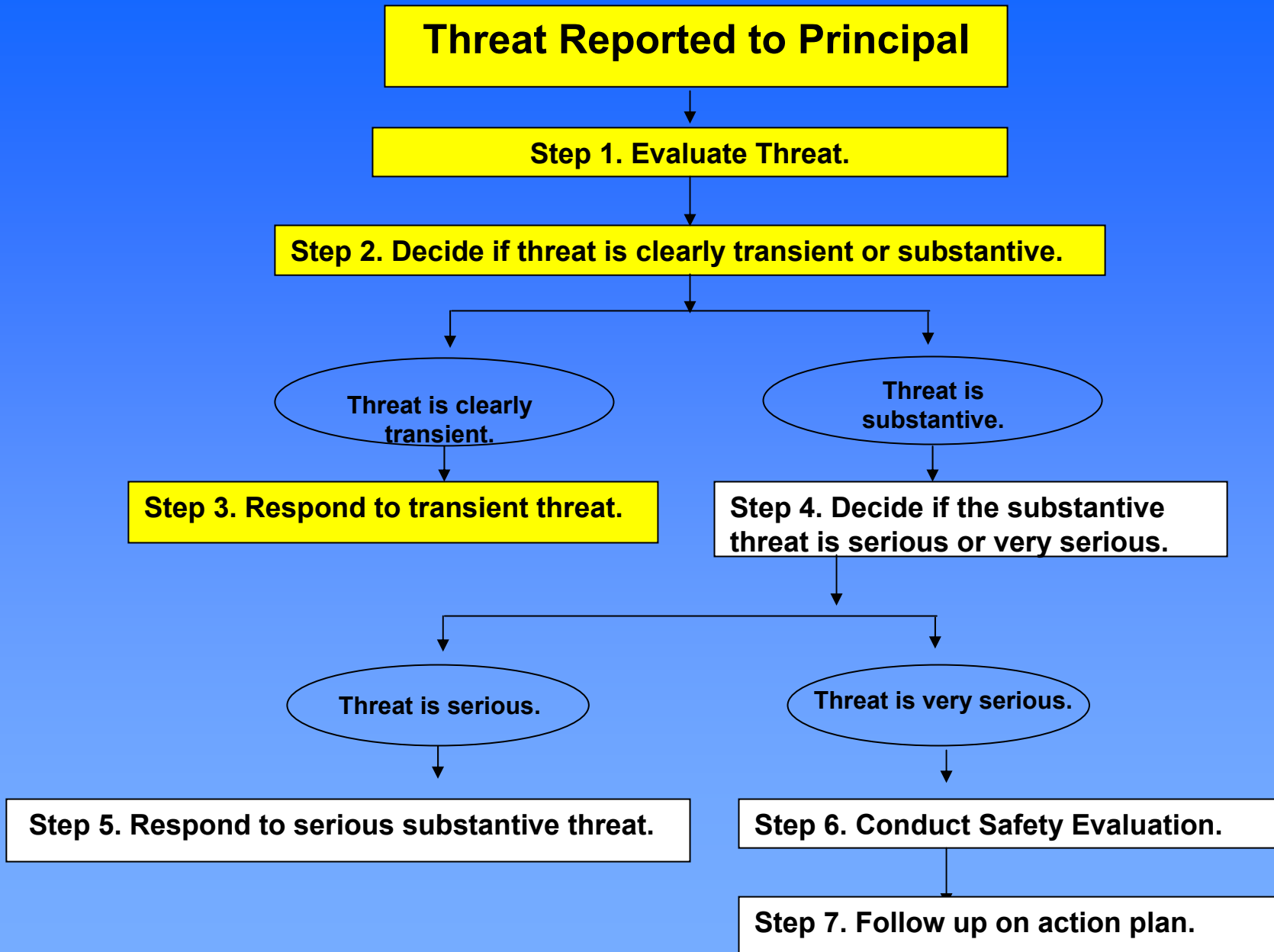
Threat is serious.

**Step 5. Respond to serious substantive threat.**

Threat is very serious.

**Step 6. Conduct Safety Evaluation.**

**Step 7. Follow up on action plan.**



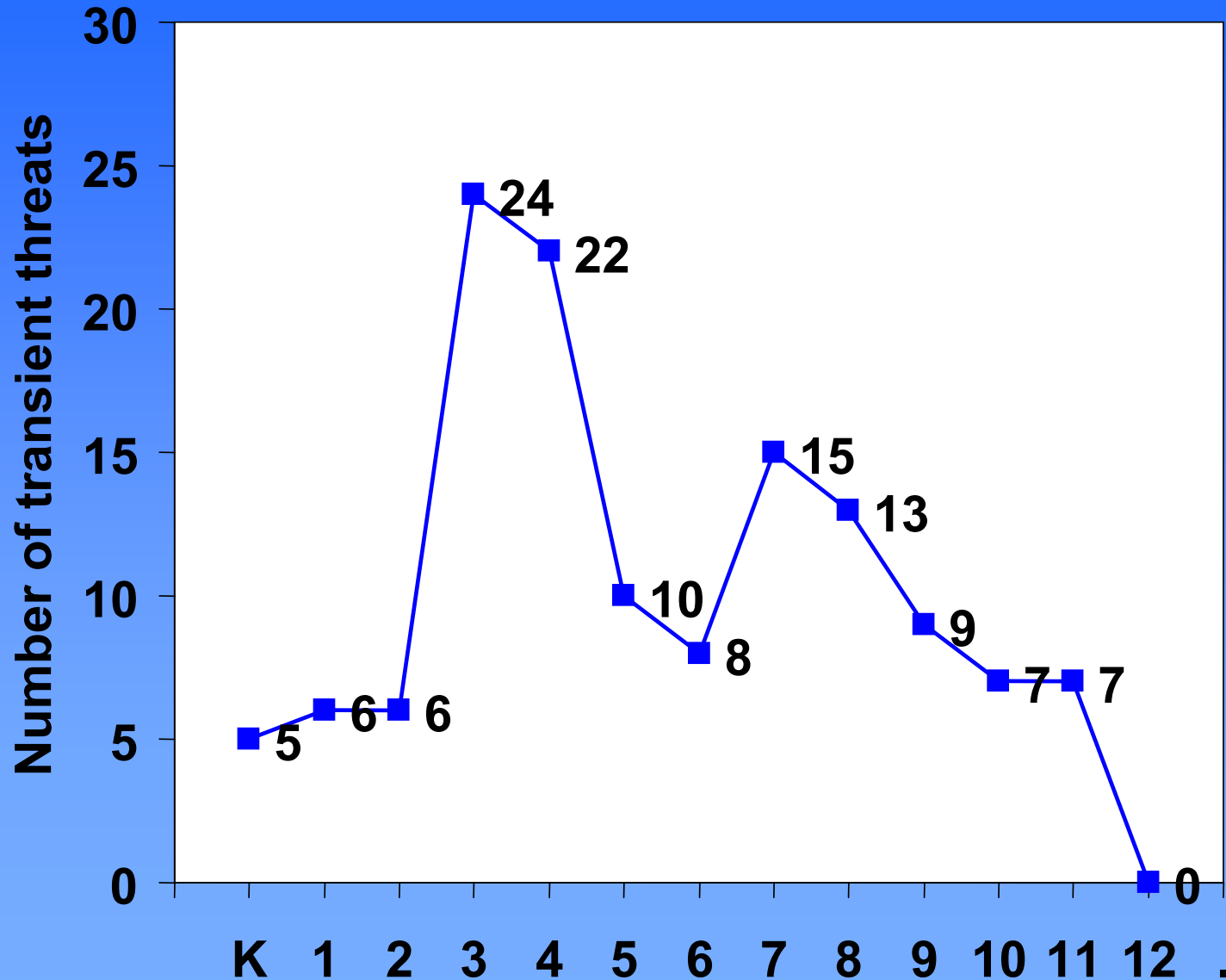
# **Step 3.**

## **Responses to a transient threat.**

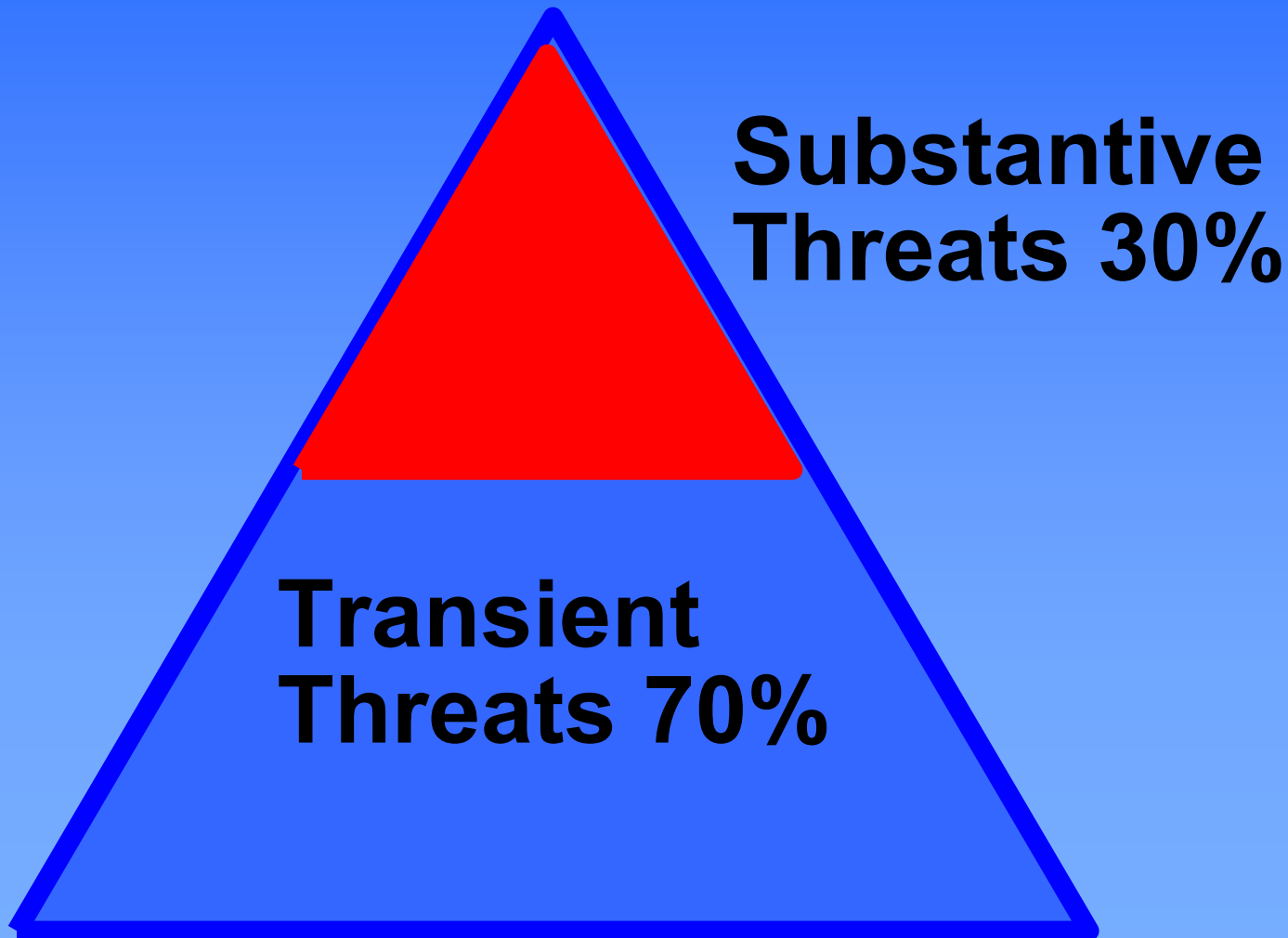
- No need to take safety precautions.
- See that threat is resolved through explanation, apology, making amends.
- Provide counseling and education where appropriate.
- Administer discipline if appropriate.



# Who made transient threats?



# Transient versus substantive threats



# Substantive threats

- Express intent to physically injure someone beyond the immediate situation.
- There is at least some risk the student will carry out the threat.
- Require that you take protective action, including warning intended victims and parents.
- May be legal violations and require police consultation.
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

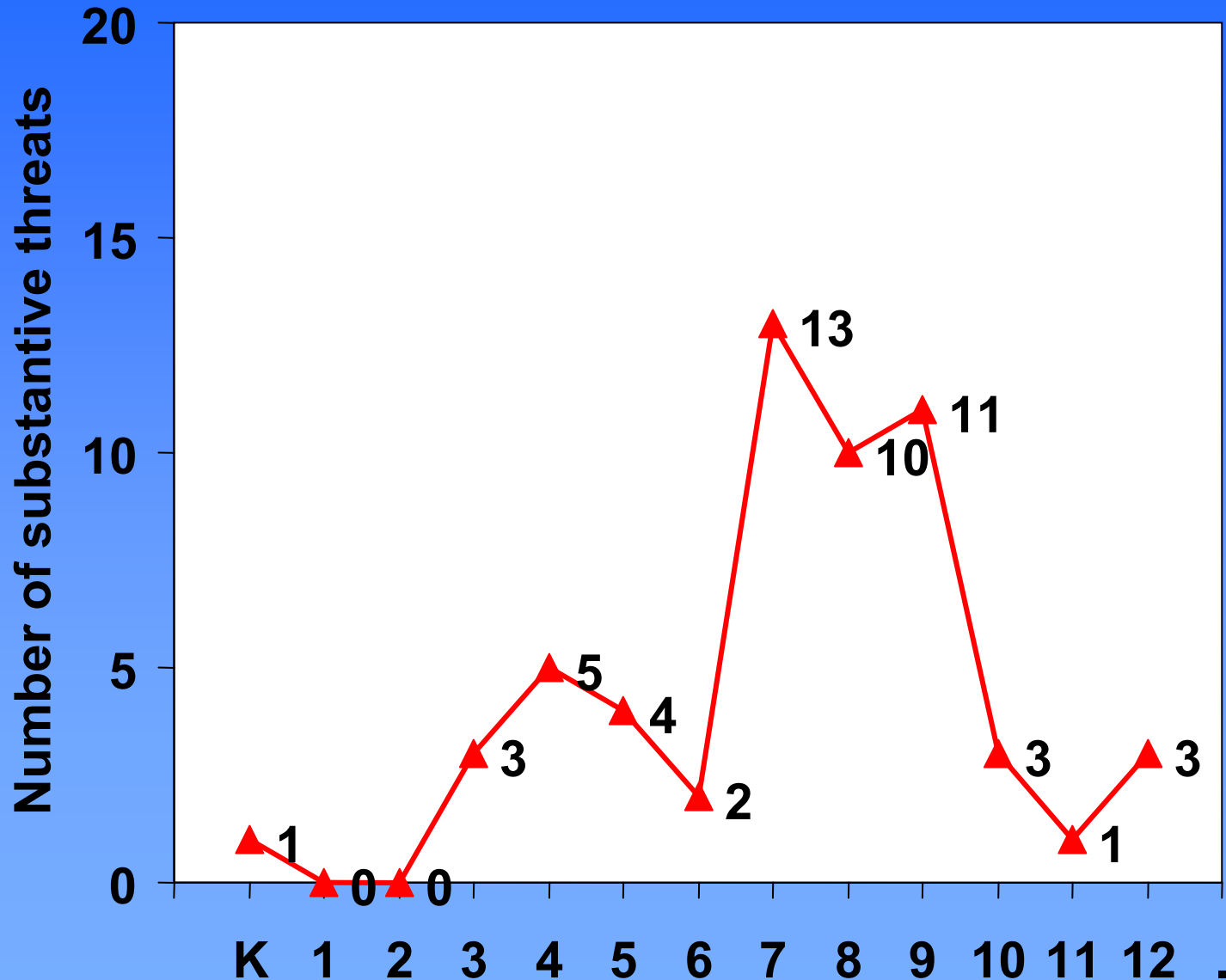
# Substantive threats: Factors to consider

- Age of student
- Capability of student to carry out the threat
- Student's discipline history
- Credibility of student and willingness to acknowledge his or her behavior
- Credibility of witness accounts
- When in doubt, treat threats as substantive.

# Presumptive indicators of substantive threats

- Specific, plausible details. (“I am going to blast Mr. Johnson with my pistol.”)
- Threat has been repeated over time. (“He’s been telling everyone he is going to get you.”)
- Threat reported as a plan (“Wait until you see what happens next Tuesday in the library.”)
- Accomplices or recruitment of accomplices.
- Physical evidence of intent (written plans, lists of victims, bomb materials, etc.)

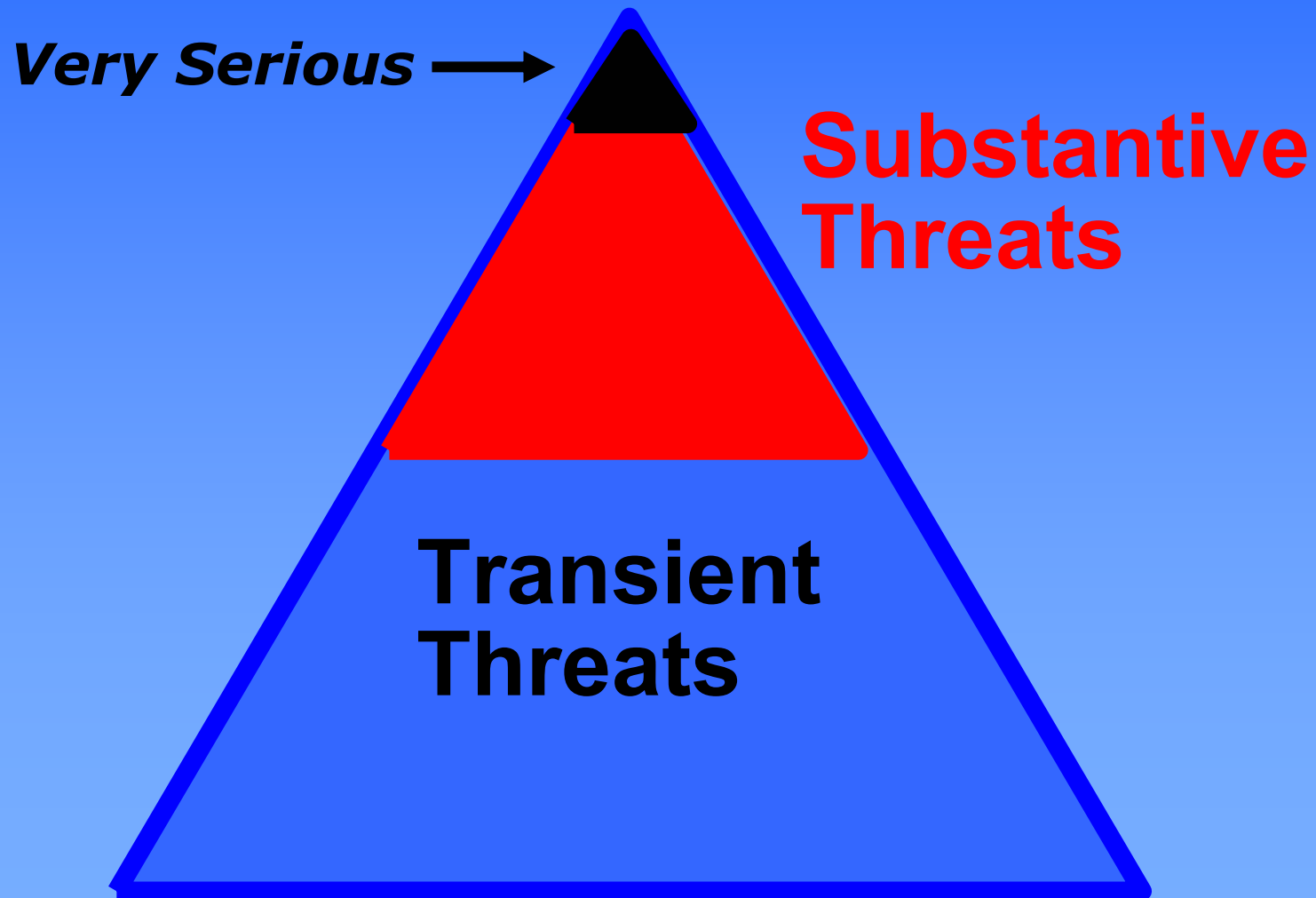
# Who made substantive threats?



# Step 4. Serious or very serious substantive threat?

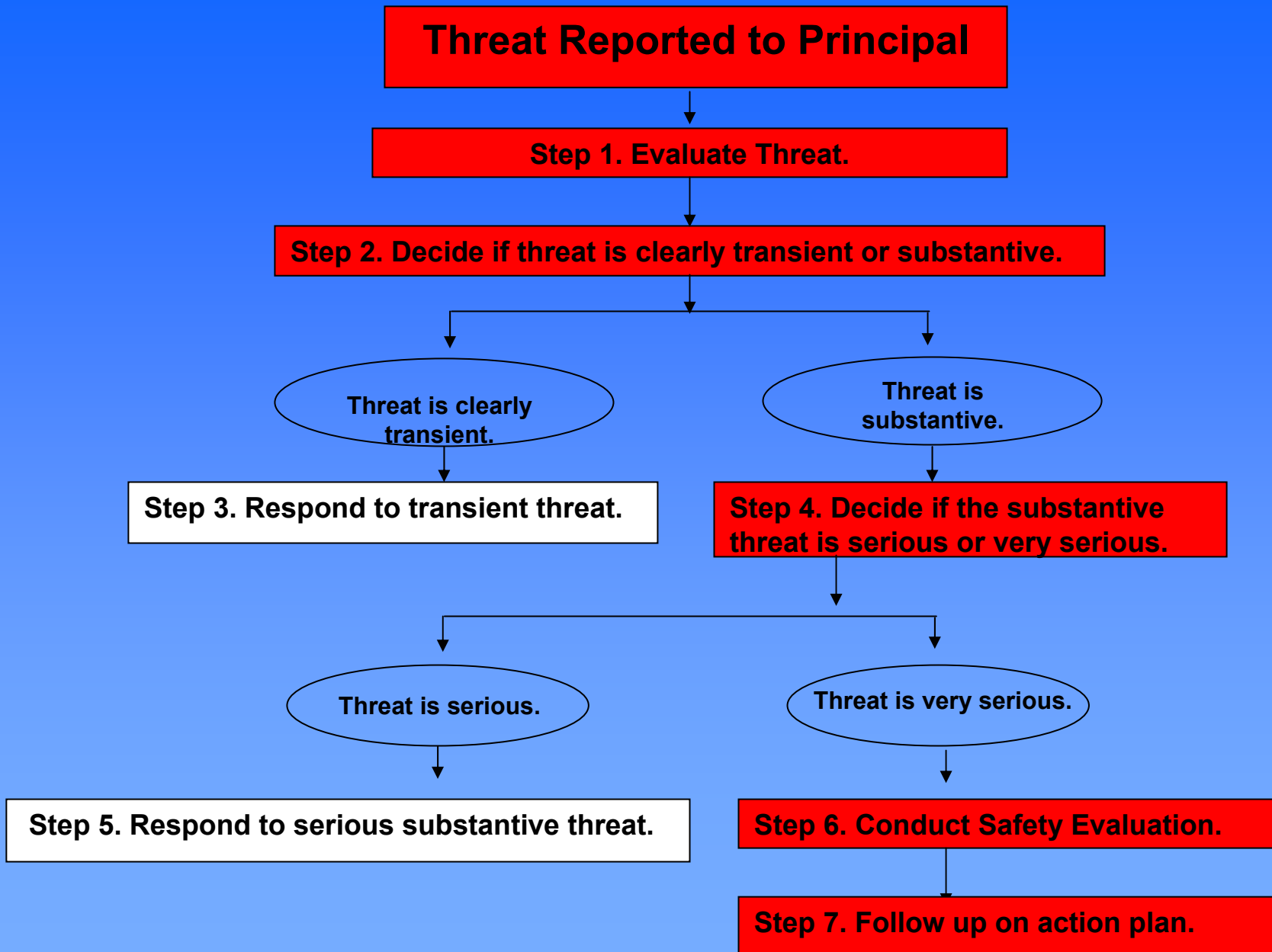
- Substantive assault threats are classified **serious**. (“I’m gonna beat him up.”)
- Substantive threats to kill, rape, or inflict very serious injury are classified **very serious**. (“I’m gonna break his arm.”)
- Substantive threats involving a weapon are classified **very serious**.

# Very serious cases are relatively rare





# Very Serious Substantive Threats



# **Step 6.**

## **Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat.**

Safety Evaluation conducted by a team.

- Principal leads the team.
- School psychologist or other mental health professional conducts Mental Health Assessment.
- School resource officer consults on legal issues.
- School counselor leads intervention planning.

# **Immediate responses to a Very Serious Substantive Threat**

- Take precautions to protect potential victims.
- Consult with law enforcement promptly.
- Notify intended victim and victim's parents.
- Notify student's parents.
- Begin Mental Health Assessment.
- Determine safety during suspension.

# Mental Health Assessment

- Not a prediction model.
- Identify any mental health needs.
- Identify reasons why threat was made.
- Propose strategies for reducing risk.

# Student Interview

- Review of threat and relationship with victim
- Stress and situational factors, family support
- Mental health symptoms (depression, psychosis, severe anxiety, or suicidality)
- Access to firearms
- Previous aggressive and delinquent behavior, exposure to violence
- Peer relations and social adjustment
- Coping and strengths
- Bullying and victimization experiences

# Beginning the student interview



- “Do you know why I wanted to meet with you today?”
- Explain purpose of interview to understand what happened, why it happened, and what should be done to resolve the problem.
- Information will be shared with school staff who will be deciding what to do about the problem.  
**No promise of confidentiality.**
- This is the student’s opportunity to tell his/her side of the story and have a voice in what is decided.

# Parent interview

- Parent knowledge of threat
- Current stressors, family relations, childhood history
- Recent behavior and mental health
- School adjustment
- Peer relations and bullying
- History of aggressive and delinquent behavior, exposure to violence, access to weapons
- Willingness to assist in a safety plan

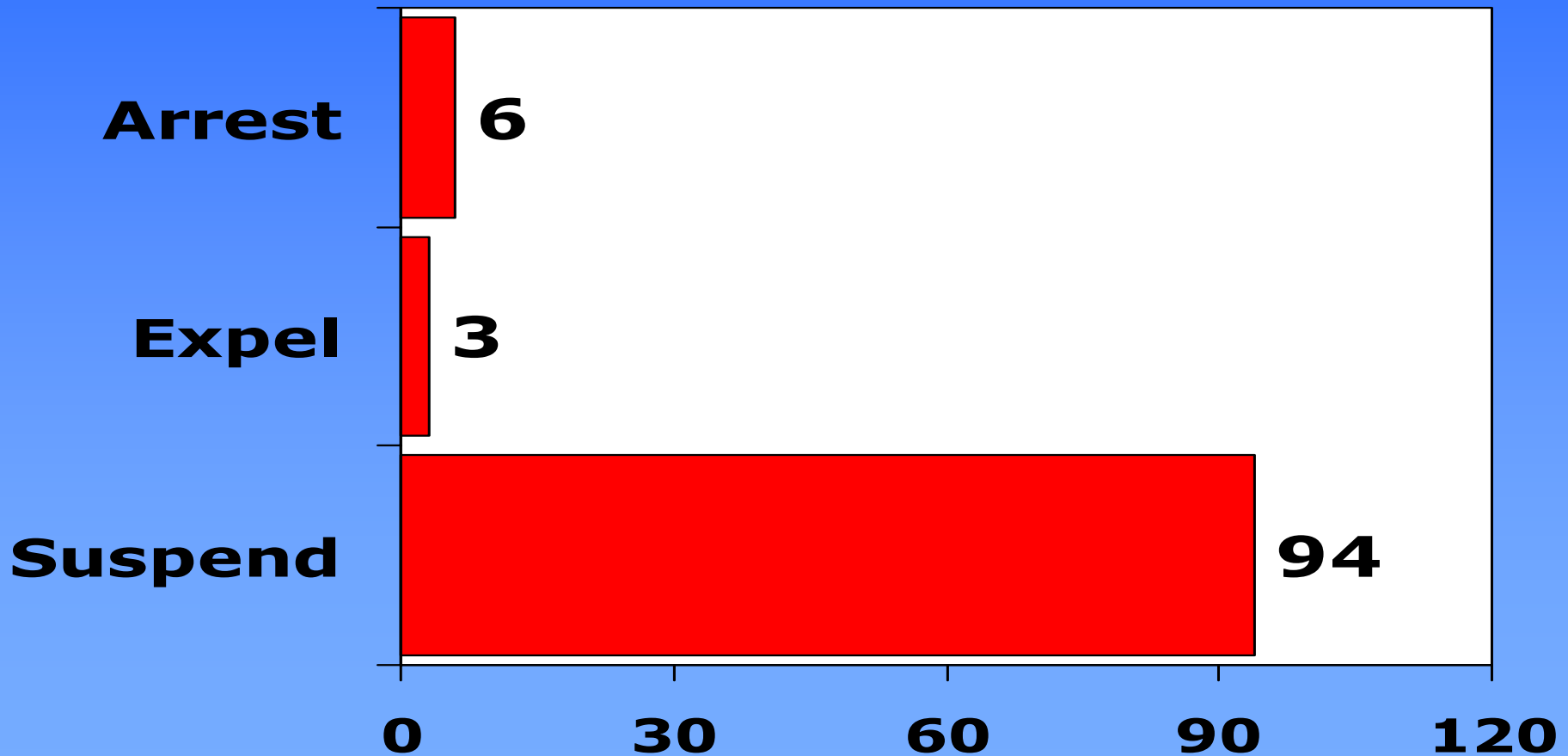
# Step 7.

## Follow up with action plan.

- Determine action plan to reduce risk of violence.
- Identify appropriate interventions for student.
- Schedule follow-up contact with student to assess current risk and update plan.
- Document plan in Safety Evaluation Report.



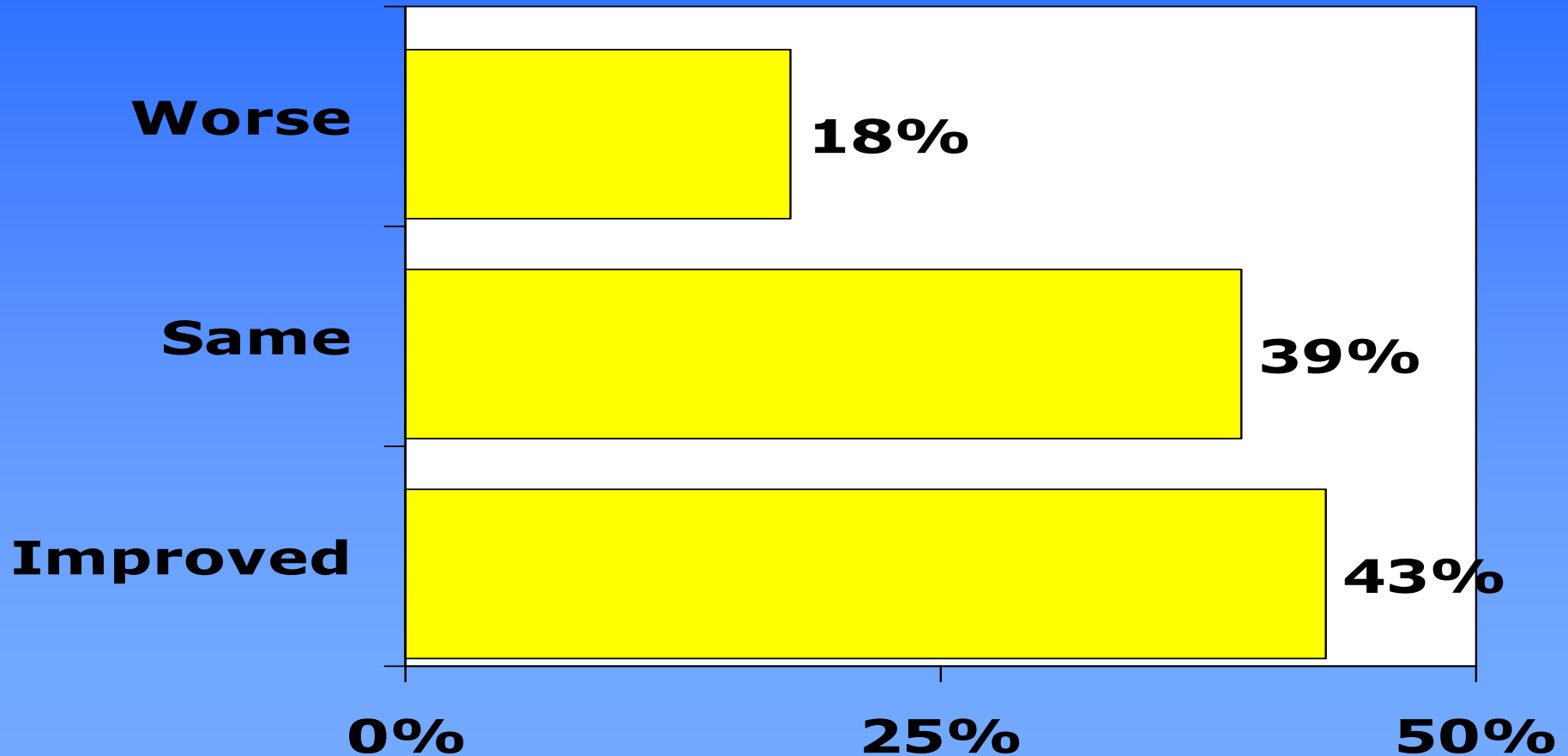
# How did schools respond to 188 threats?



# **Follow-up interviews on student threats**

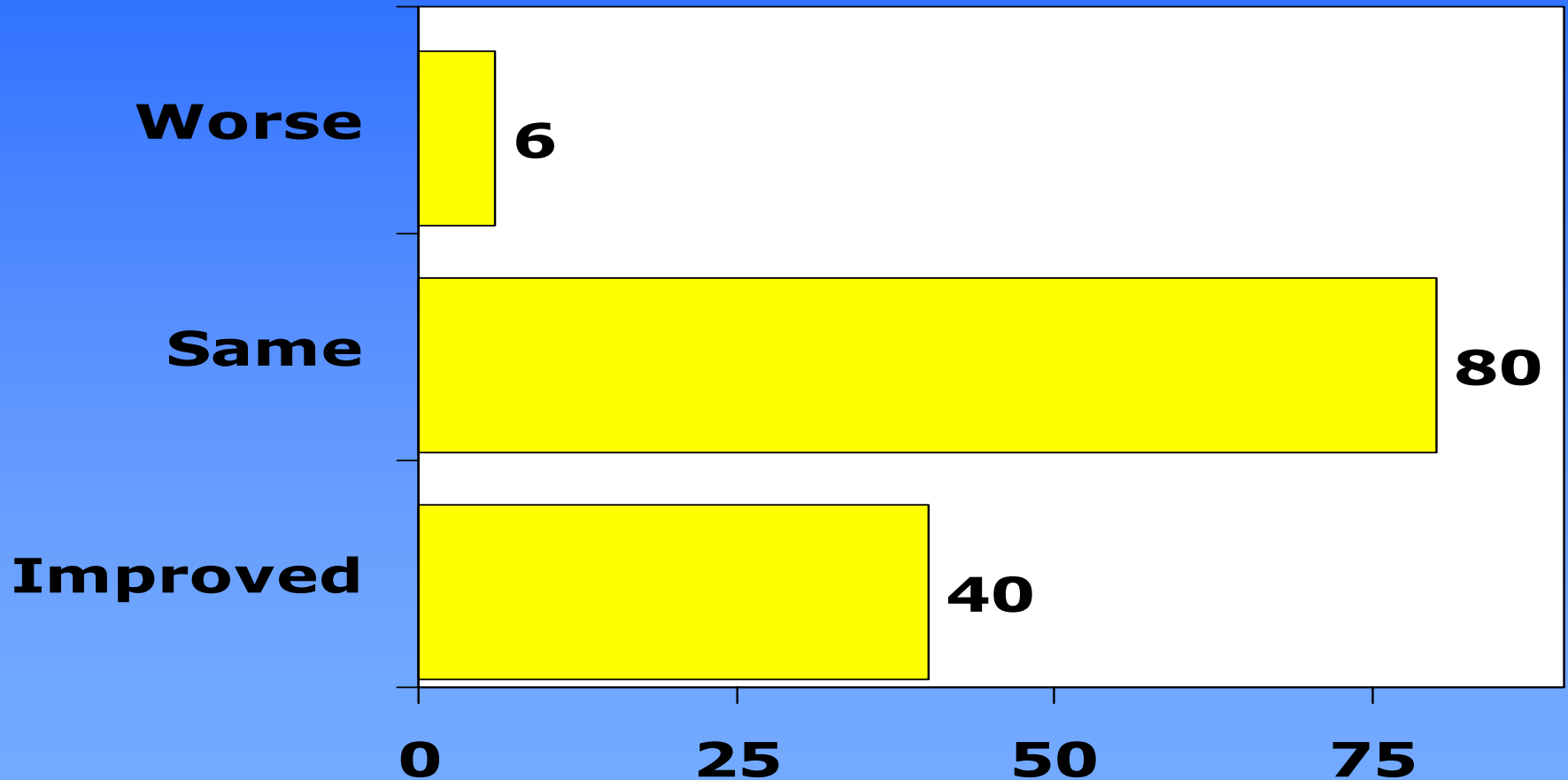
- Interviews conducted with school principals at end of school year and again the following fall.
- Follow-up time periods averaged 148 days until end of school year.
- Four students did not return to school after the threat, 17 left within 30 days after threat.

# Change in student's behavior after the threat



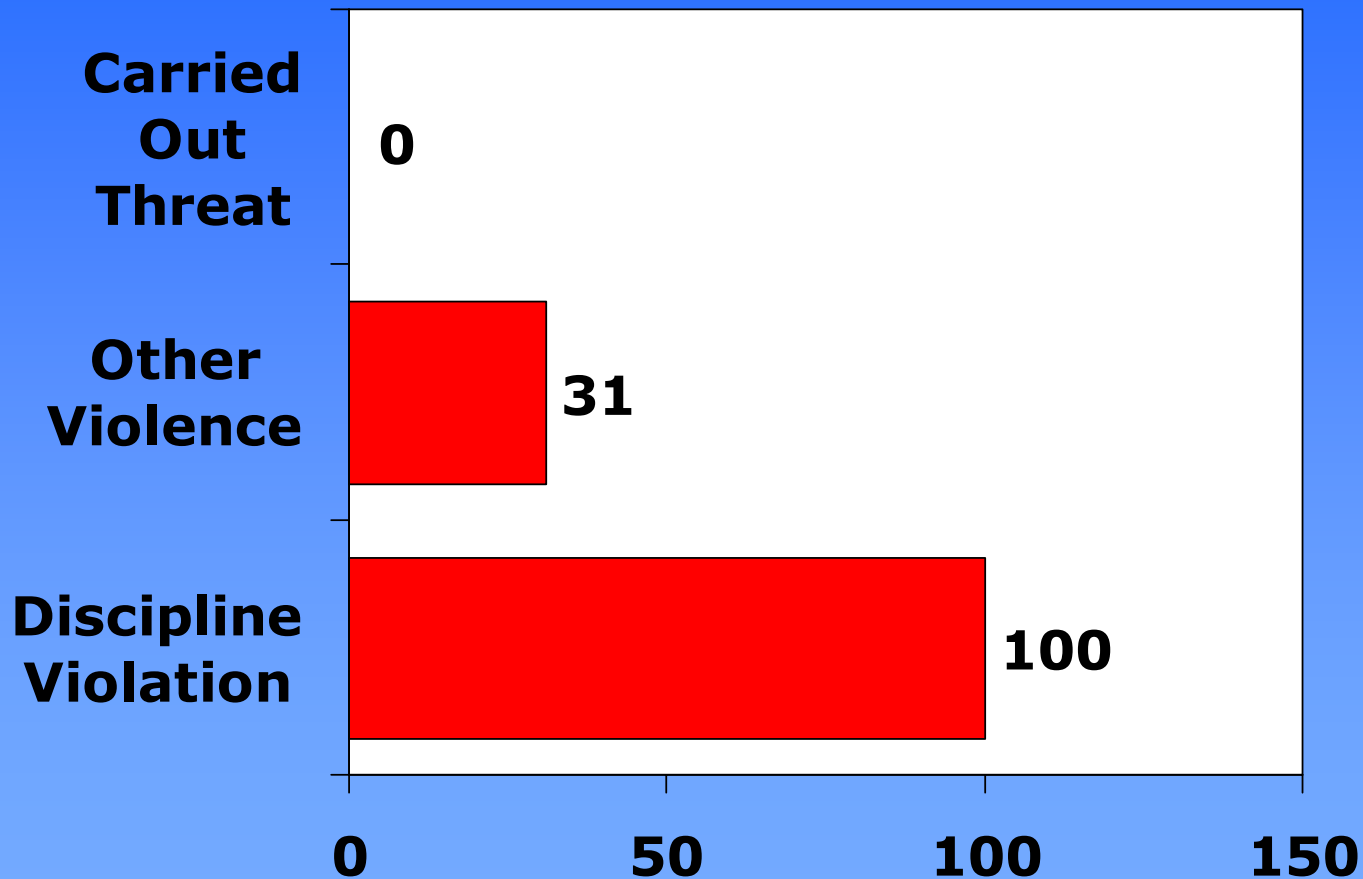
*As rated by school principals, followed up after the school year. N = 176.*

# Change in student's relationship with victim after the threat



*As rated by school principals, followed up after the school year. N = 126.*

# Follow-up on student behavior after the threat



*According to school principals interviewed after approximately one year.*



# Research Needs

- Controlled studies comparing schools with and without threat assessment.
- Research on threat context and student characteristics.
- More follow-up studies of threat outcomes.
- Identification of effective threat prevention efforts (e.g., bullying reduction).