

# Threat Assessment Best Practices: *Identifying the Pathway to Violence and Interpreting Warning Behaviors*

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# Agenda

- Define targeted violence and behavioral threat assessment and management
- Identify the elements and purpose of the pathway to violence model
- Acquire understanding in recognizing and interpreting violence threat enhancers and mitigators

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Among other sources, this presentation relies on the Department of Homeland Security's National Threat Assessment and Reporting Program Office's Terrorism and Mass Violence Prevention Training materials, the FBI's "Making Prevention a Reality," and United States Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center's publications

# Violence and Aggression

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## *Violence and Aggression*

Hardwired for aggression

Neurological underpinnings

Survival risks and benefits

# What is Targeted Violence?

## **IMPULSIVE/REACTIVE/AFFECTIVE:**

- Emotional and impromptu
- Frequently a defensive or reactionary behavior in response to a perceived imminent threat
- Unpredictable or unplanned and spontaneous

## **PREDATORY/PLANNED:**

- Premeditated, involves intentional planning and preparation
- All instances of targeted violence and almost all mass murders are premeditated
- The planned nature provides an opportunity for the BTAM process to prevent an attack

# Violence Risk Assessment vs Threat Assessment

- General violence
- Typically prompted by a court proceeding or institutional policy or procedure
- Follows guidance from forensic psychology, psychiatry or trained mental health professional
- These emphasize empirical-derived group data and risk factors
- Targeted violence
- Typically prompted by specific threat (explicit or implicit) or concern
- Follows guidance from ATAP, USSS model or school-based models
- These prioritize an individualized “fact-based approach” focusing more on behaviors

# Violence and Mental Illness

The *minority* of people with serious mental illness (SMI) will engage in violence

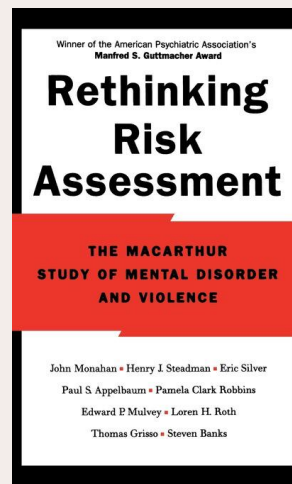
SMI elevates the odds of violence by roughly **5x** compared to members of the general population

The strength of the association **reduces** when SMI is compared to externalizing disorders, substance-related disorders, and certain personality disorders

The strength of the association **reduces** when controlling for substance-related disorders; the strength *increases* when SMI is combined with substance-related disorders

# Epidemiological Takeaways

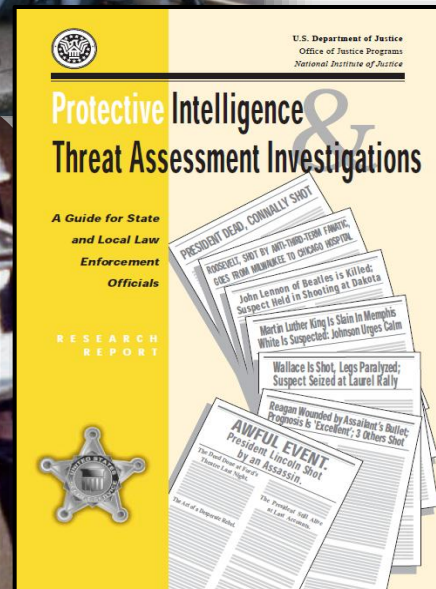
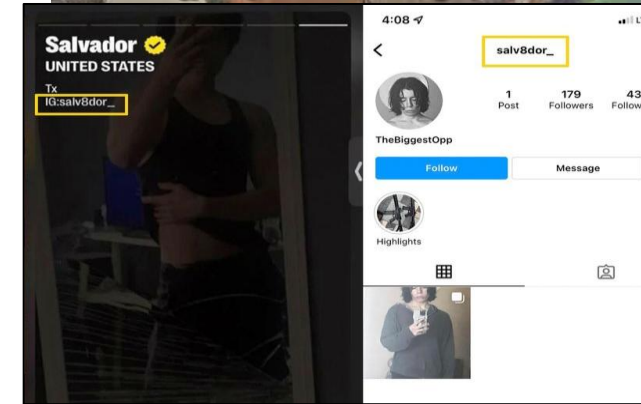
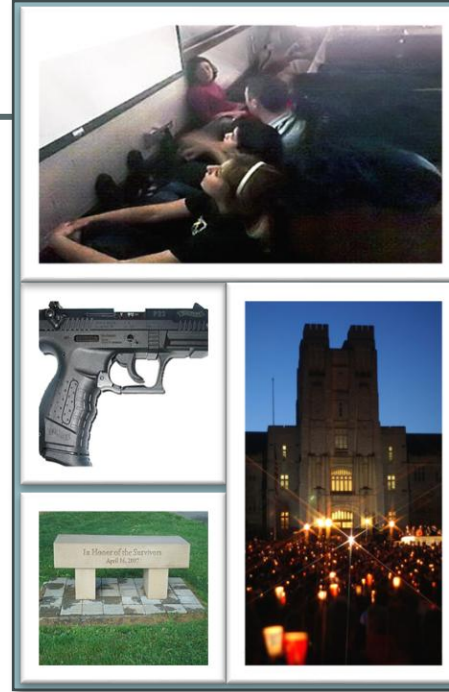
- Most people with SMI are *not* violent, and most violence is committed by people *without* SMI.
- Substance abuse, more common among those with SMI, is responsible for much of the increased violence risk attributable to SMI.



# Targeted Violence Definition

*Generally, any premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation, that violates the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or subdivision of the United States.*

# Violence and Threat Assessment Foundations



# Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) Defined

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- A **systematic, fact-based** method of inquiry and examination that blends the collection and analysis of multiple sources of information with published research and practitioner experience
- Focuses on an individual's **patterns of thinking and behavior** to determine whether, and to what extent, an individual is moving toward an act of violence
  - More of a situational, dynamic process, concentrated on identifying and mitigating specific imminent threats and focused on preventing immediate harm
- A **course of action** that responds to and mitigates a threat of potential violence, utilizing a **multi-disciplinary** team
  - Involves analyzing behaviors, communications, and contextual factors to prevent targeted violence
- Considers target protection

# BTAM Process

## Threat Assessment Inquiries

- Fact finding
- May or may not involve law enforcement
- Is there information to suggest this person is on the pathway?
- May lead to different types of referrals

## Violence Risk Assessments

- Mental health focused
- Conducted by clinician w/ specialized training
- Is the person likely to act violently if not hospitalized?
- Uses risk assessment tool to determine risk of harm to self or others

## Law Enforcement Investigations

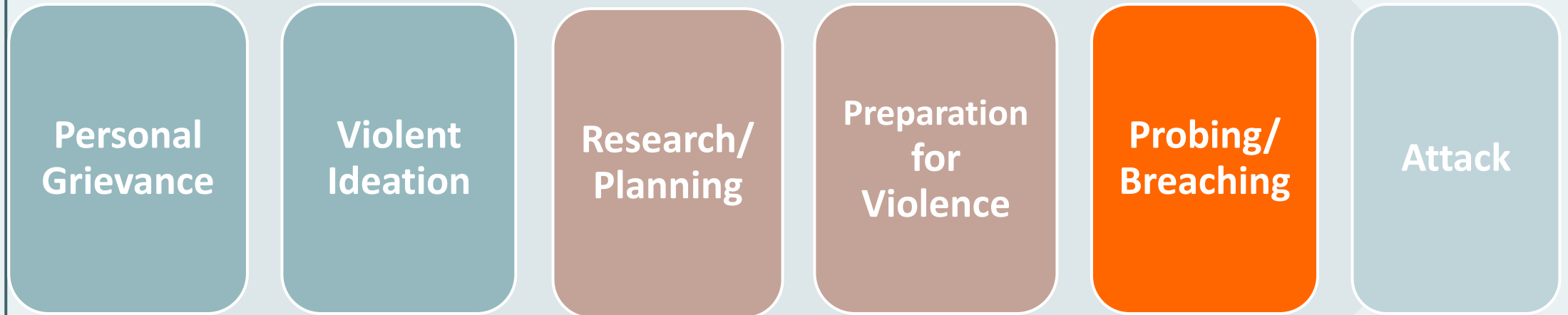
- Gathers criminal evidence for prosecution
- May also result in protective or security measures
- Can include a threat assessment related inquiry or violence risk assessment

*Prevention is the goal....*



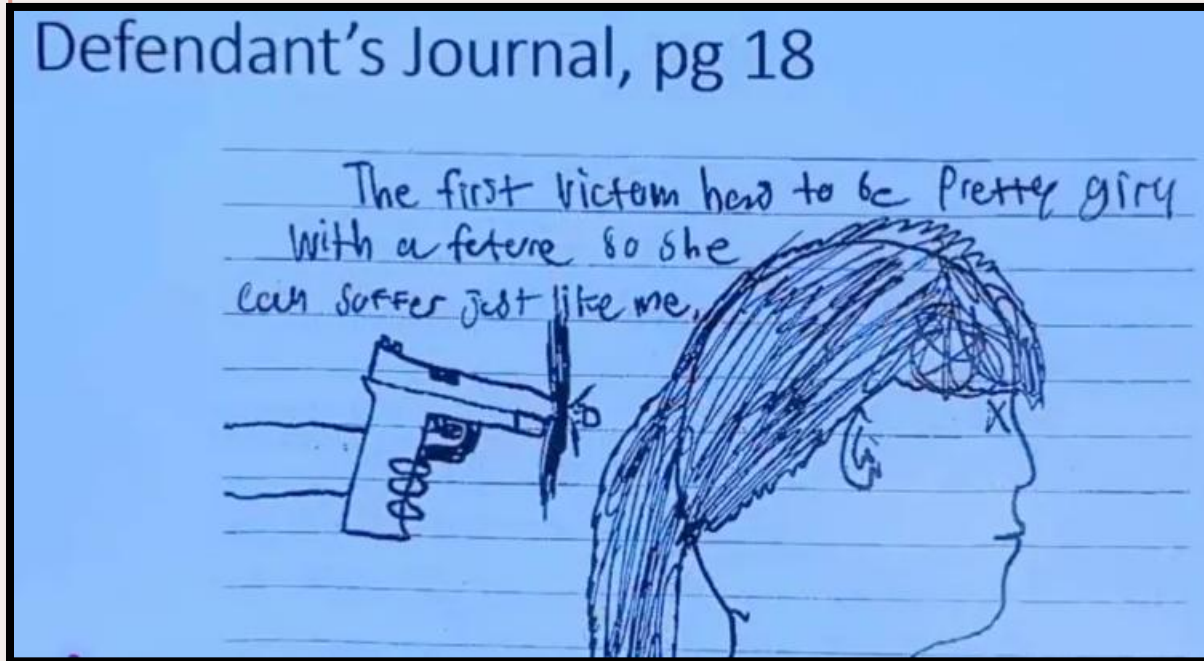
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvRQ1StsYGw>

<https://youtu.be/ZvRQ1StsYGw>



**Best Practice: The Pathway to Violence Model**

# Pathway to Violence: Grievance



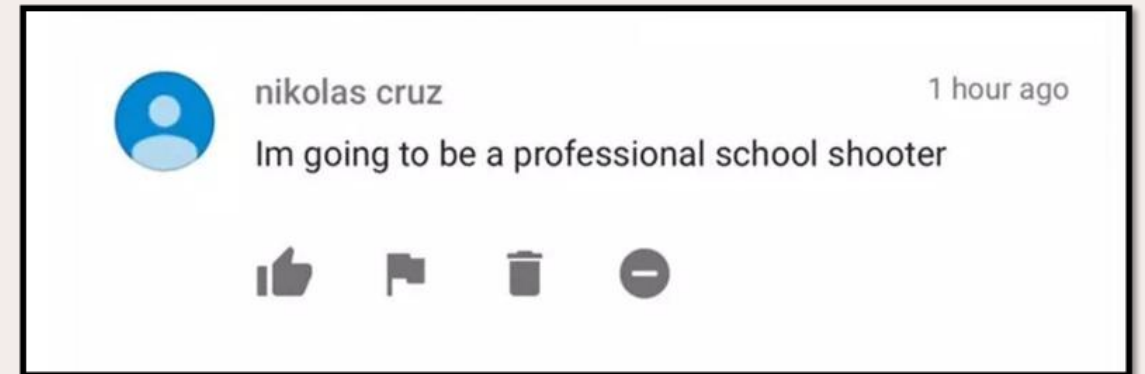
**Grievance:** the formation of a deeply held personal complaint, resentment, or humiliation based upon real or perceived injustices inflicted upon the grievant. It is highly personal and can cause great distress. This feeling of being wronged often generates behaviors related to a sense of mission, destiny, loss, or a desire for revenge.

This is from the Oxford High School offender's journal. "The first victim has to be pretty girl with future so she can suffer just like me."

# Pathway to Violence: Violent Ideation



**Violent Ideation:** When an individual is unable to resolve their real or perceived grievance, they could progress to violent ideation; meaning, the idea that violence is an acceptable, or even the only, means of achieving redress.



# Pathway to Violence: Research and Planning



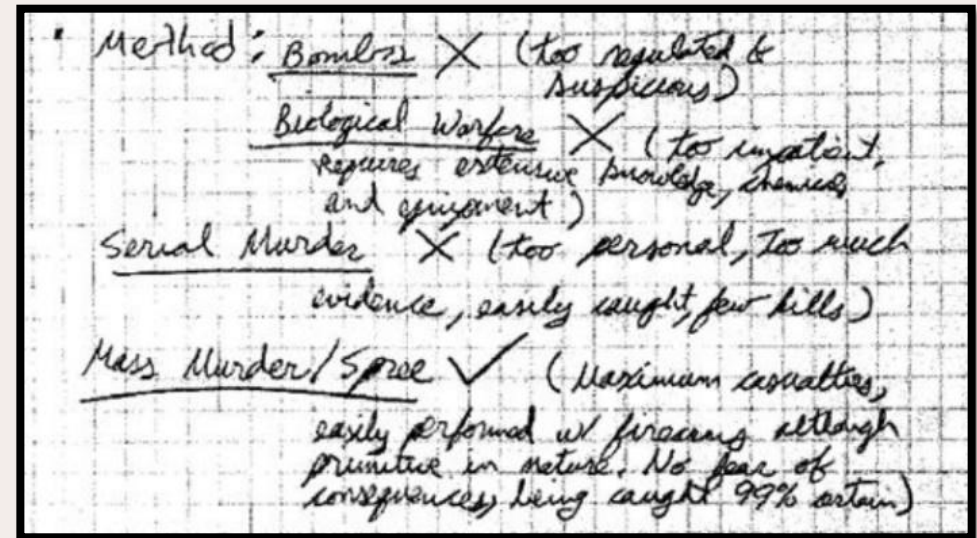
## Unique concern about this online diary

The digital diary asserts that the author was first exposed to the racist conspiracy theory known as the [Great Replacement](#), and then was inspired to commit a mass shooting, by materials he accessed online of the Christchurch, shooter. He also cites screeds posted by a number of other violent extremists, including a domestic terrorist who killed 77 people in attacks in Norway in 2011. Extremism researchers are worried that writings and video believed to be linked to the Buffalo gunman will add to the radicalizing materials that copycats look at online, and that they may even prove more harmful than what was available before the attack.

**Research/Planning:** Once an individual decides that violence should or must be used to seek justice for real or perceived wrongs, under most circumstances they must then begin to think and plan. **The individual considers when, how, and where to conduct violence.**

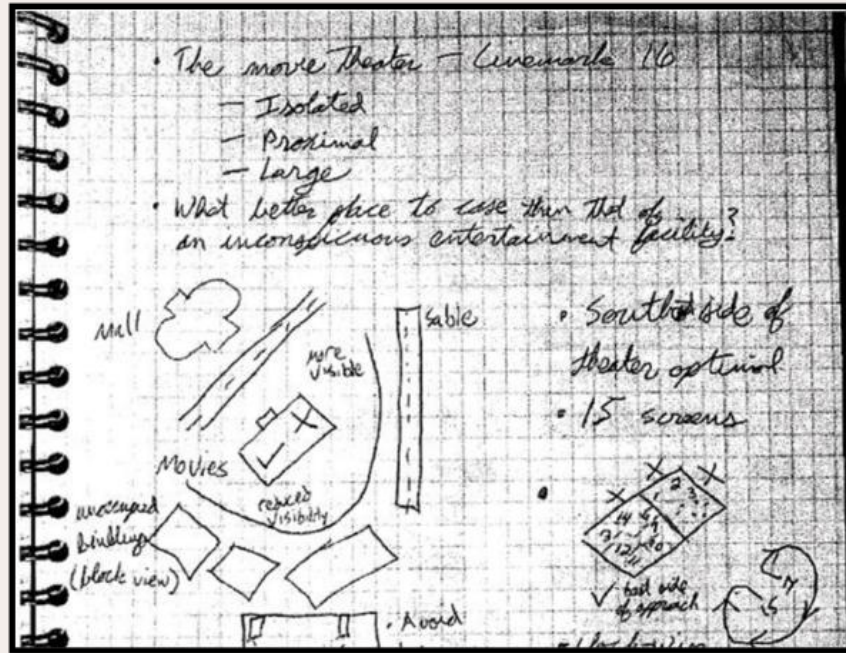
# Pathway to Violence: Preparation for Violence

**Preparation for Violence:** After deciding on a course of action and conducting the necessary background work, an individual may begin to prepare physically and psychologically to conduct an actual attack.



The Aurora movie theater offender noted in his journal about the methods he could use – “bombs (too suspicious), Biological warfare (requires chemicals and equipment), Serial Murder (too personal-few kills), Mass Murder/Spree (Maximum Casualties, Easily Performed).”

# Pathway to Violence: Probing/Breaching



**Probing/Breaching:** involves an individual circumventing both physical and online security measures at the target location and can include activities such as: conducting dry runs, engaging in approach behaviors including stalking, and testing physical security at the target location.

The Aurora movie theater offender journaled – “What a better place to case than that of an inconspicuous entertainment facility.”

# Pathway to Violence: Attack

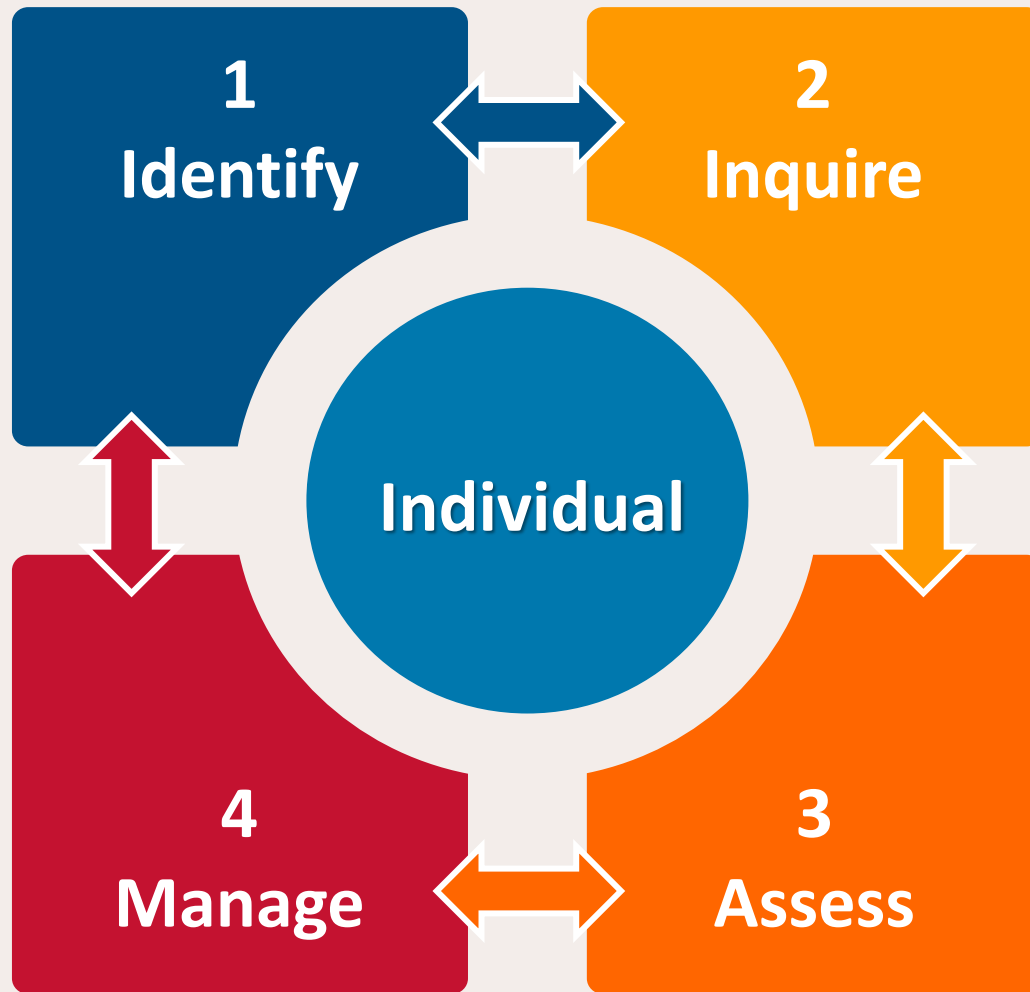




**Can you identify warning signs?**

<https://youtu.be/A8syQeFtBKc>

# DHS NTER's BTAM Process



*1. Identify – determine  
imminence*

*2. Inquire – gather  
information*

*3. Assess - analyze*

*4. Manage – determine  
a plan*

# BTAM Process

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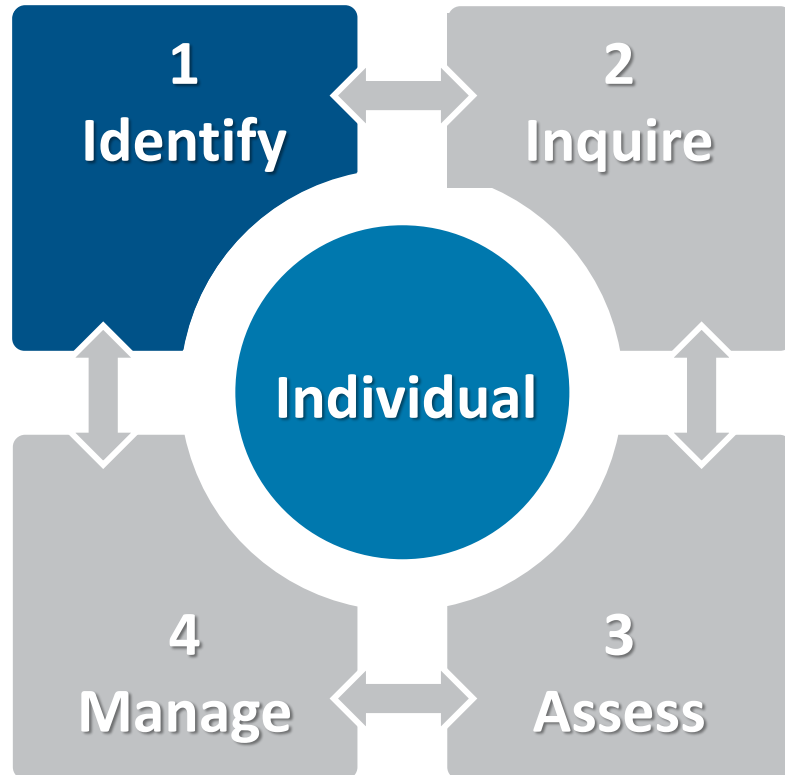
- Gathers criminal evidence for prosecution
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# Best Practice: Multi-Disciplinary Team



# BTAM Process: Identify

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In the identify stage, practitioners use tips and leads that are being reported to identify threats or observable behaviors that may concern others and, if possible, an individual of concern.



*Threat Assessment and  
Management of  
Violence: How to  
Approach those of  
Concern*

Who are they?

Why are they...here?

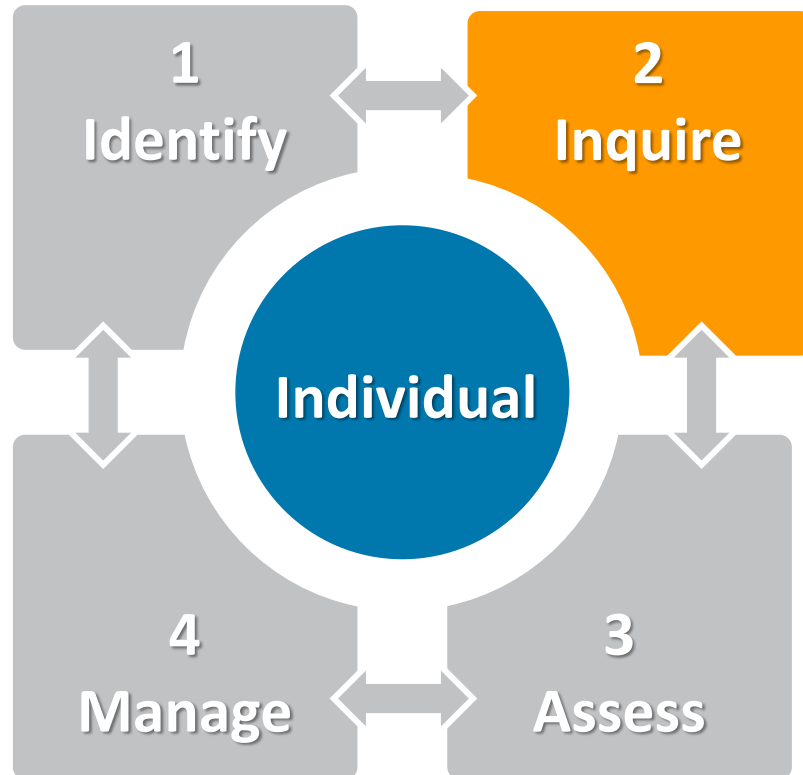
What do they want?

What are the observable behaviors?  
The threat posed?

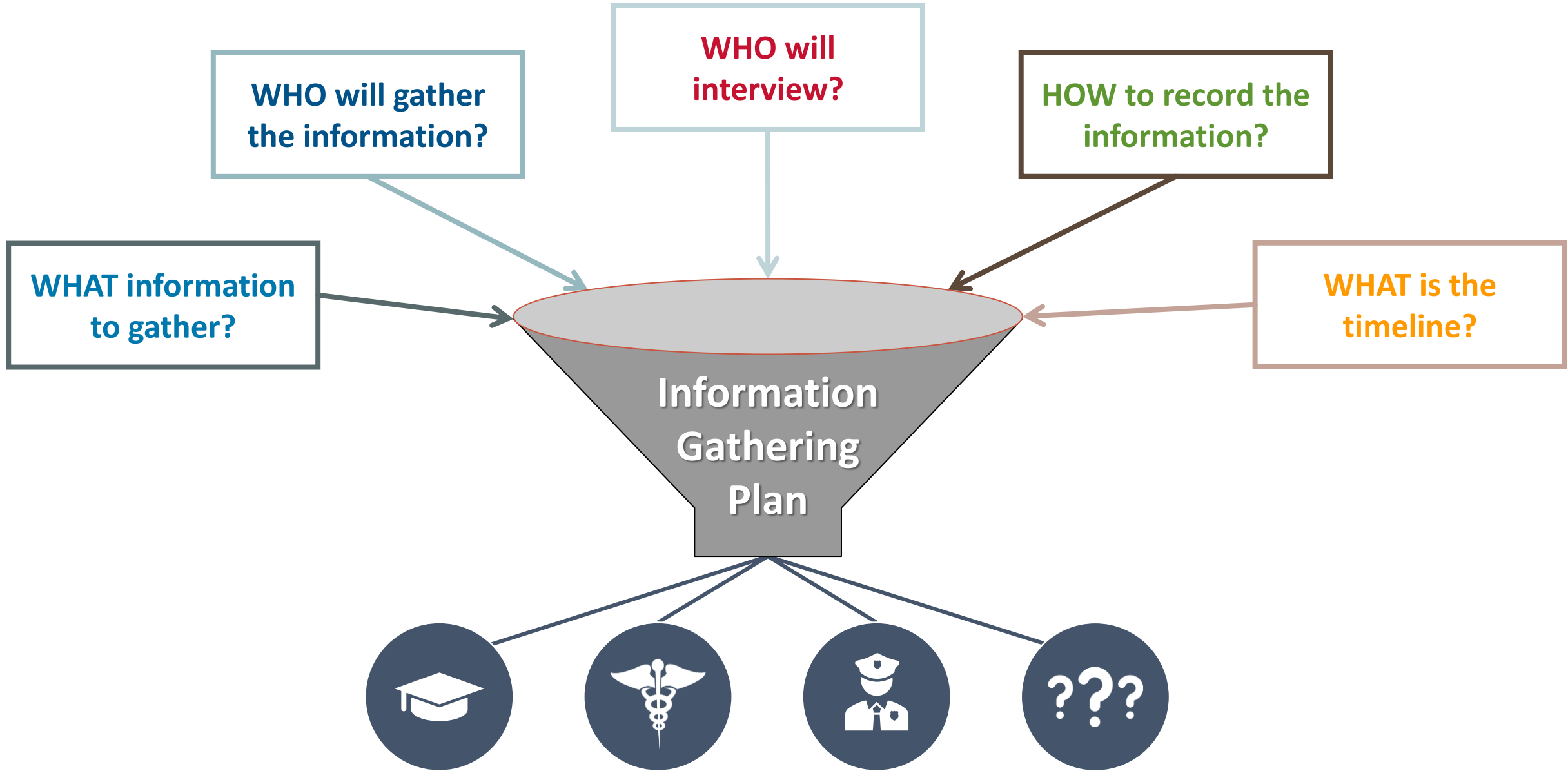
Intervention – What to do?

# BTAM Process: Inquire

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The purpose of the inquire stage is to “fact find” and gather the information necessary for a thorough threat assessment and for guiding individualized management plans.



WHO will gather the information?

WHO will interview?

HOW to record the information?

WHAT information to gather?

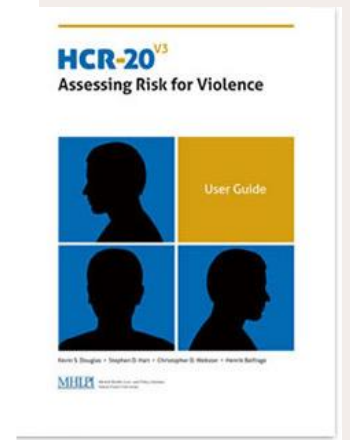
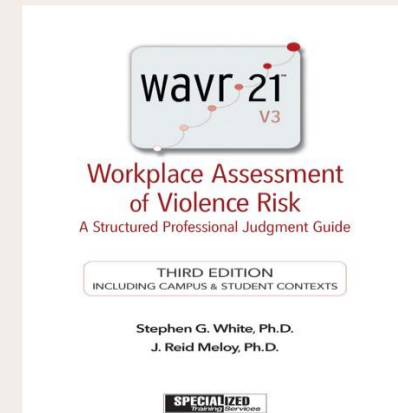
WHAT is the timeline?

Information Gathering Plan




# Best Practice: Multiple Sources of Information

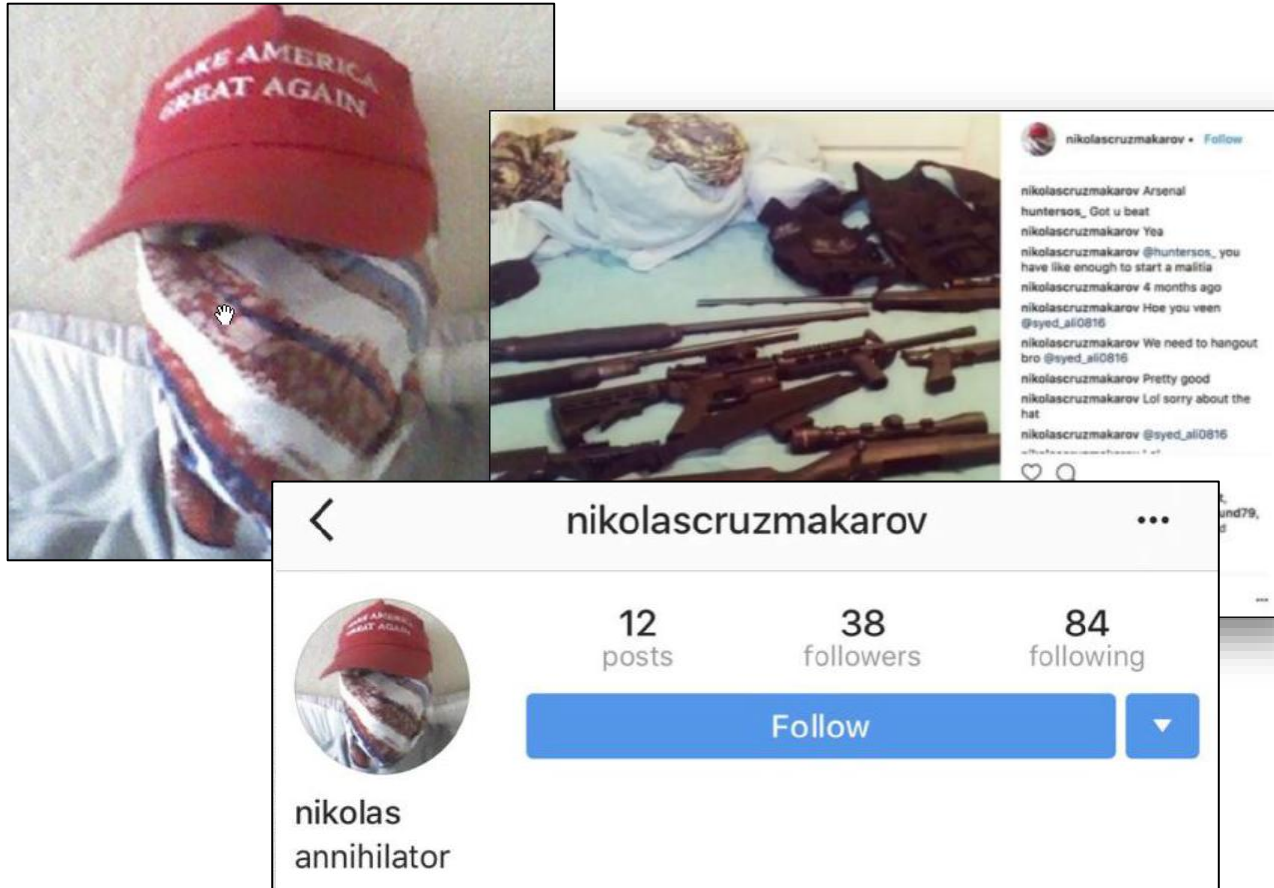
- Records (public vs. private)
- OSINT
- HUMINT
- Structured Professional Judgement Tools



# Social Media Platforms

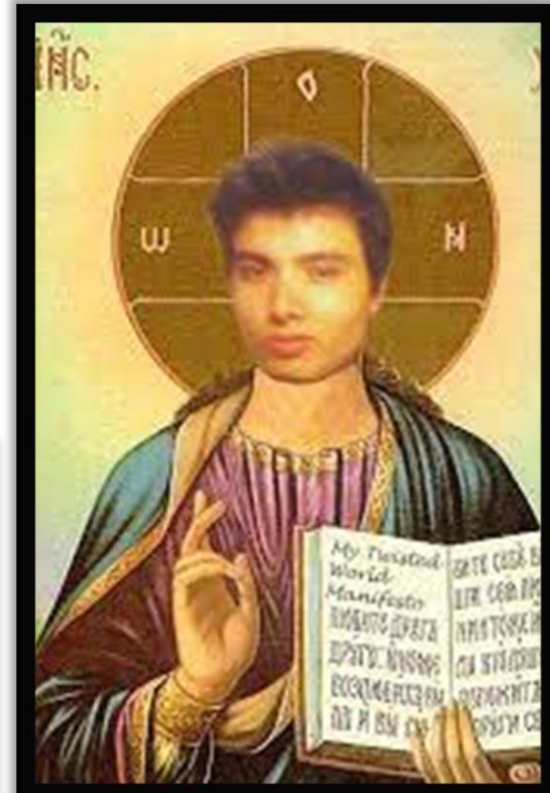
Mainstream	Facebook 	Instagram 	Snapchat 	TikTok 	Discord 	Twitch 	YouTube 
Permissive	Reddit 	Twitter/X 	Telegram 	Parler 	Gab 	4chan 	
Extremist-Oriented					8chan/8kun 		

# Concerning Social Media Postings



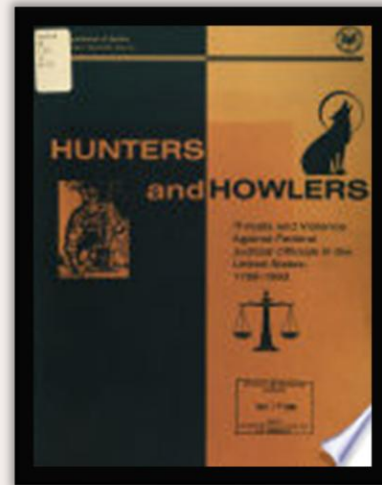
- Nikolas Cruz (Parkland, FL)
- Offender's posts demonstrated concerning statements
- Offender repeatedly expressed interest in killing people

# Contagion Effects



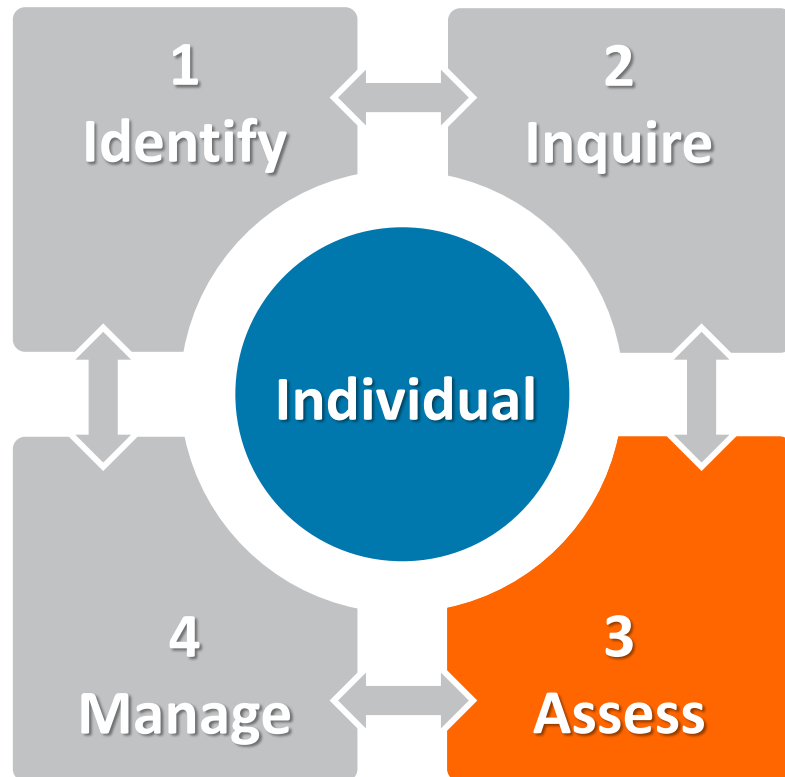
# Best Practices: Interviewing

- Be prepared
- Mechanics of the interview
- Have a process
- Know your style
- Beware of stereotype threats, bias, shiny objects
- Build rapport
- Practice difficult questions
- Interview length
- Bear in mind that those set on doing a deed are less likely to be honest (more likely to respond in an incomplete manner).



# BTAM Process: Assess

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In this stage, objective decisions are made regarding whether an individual is on the pathway to violence and how, and how quickly, to best manage an individual away from violence.

# Best Practice: Assessment

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# Risk and Protective Factors



A risk factor **risk factor** is a characteristic that may increase the likelihood of a person perpetrating targeted violence, but there is no cause/effect relationship. A risk factor does not predict or cause targeted violence.

*No single factor leads to a pathway to violence.*



A protective factor **protective factor** is a characteristic that may decrease the likelihood of a person perpetrating targeted violence. A protective factor provides a buffer against risk, without a cause/effect relationship.

*An individual may possess some or all these factors and never commit violence.*



**VIOLENCE HISTORY**

**OTHERS ARE CONCERNED**

**HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH**

**SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL**

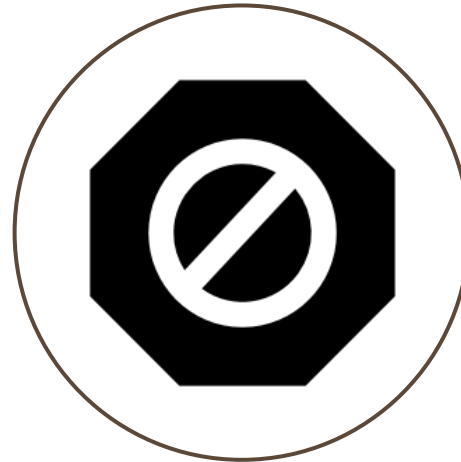
**PERSONALITY  
DISTURBANCES/DISORDER**

**PROBLEMATIC  
BEHAVIORAL HISTORY**

**SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS**

**WEAPONS**

**HISTORY OF SUICIDALITY**





# Warning Behaviors

**FIXATION**

**DIRECTLY COMMUNICATED THREAT**

**IDENTIFICATION**

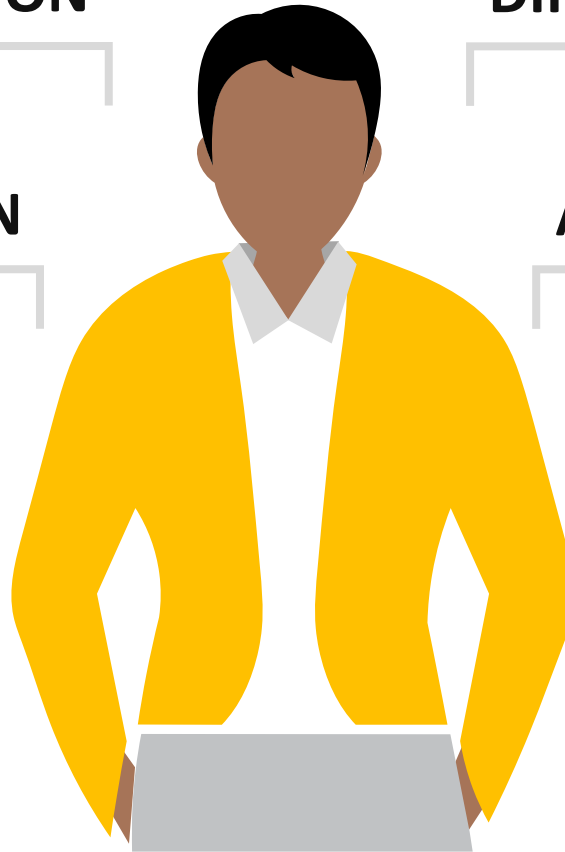
**APPROACH BEHAVIOR**

**NOVEL AGGRESSION**

**PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE  
WARNING BEHAVIORS**

**LEAKAGE**

**BEHAVIORS THAT COULD  
SIGNAL IMMINENCE**



# Examples of Potential Risk Factors and Protective Factors

There are **many** potential risk factors for targeted violence, including:

- Having a criminal history
- Fixation on violence
- Thrill/risk seeking
- Use of illicit substances
- Real or perceived threat
- Justification for violence

There are also **many** potential protective factors for targeted violence, including:

- Law abidance
- Societal inclusion and integration
- Institutional trust
- Political and life satisfaction
- Parental involvement
- Exposure to nonviolent belief systems and narratives
- Nonviolent outlets for addressing grievances Resources to address trauma and mental health issues

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# RISK ENHANCERS

- Family**
- Parental Mental Health
  - Parent-Child Conflict
  - Abuse/Neglect
  - Family Discord
  - Parent Substance Use
  - Poor Attachments with Parents
  - Poor Supervision

- Individual**
- Social Skill Deficit
  - Unhealthy Esteem
  - Mood Dysregulation
  - Personality Traits
  - Poor Coping Skills
  - Substance Use
  - Fixation/Identification
  - Lack of Belonging/Connection
  - Shame

- Community**
- Peer Rejection/Bullying
  - Financial Hardship
  - Housing Instability
  - School Violence
  - Community Violence
  - Culture of Deviance
  - Loss of Connections
  - Access to Resources

- Family**
- Family Structure
  - Healthy Discipline
  - Expressive Love
  - Predictability
  - Healthy Attachments

- Individual**
- Intrinsic Motivation
  - Healthy Esteem
  - Effective Coping
  - Positive Connections
  - Longitudinal Vision
  - Locus of Control
  - Good Insight
  - Impulse Control
  - Academic/Work Success

- Community**
- Positive Mentors
  - Physical and Psychological Safety
  - Resources Available
  - Positive Norms
  - Accountability



# Warning Behaviors that Could Signal Imminence



Energy burst behavior

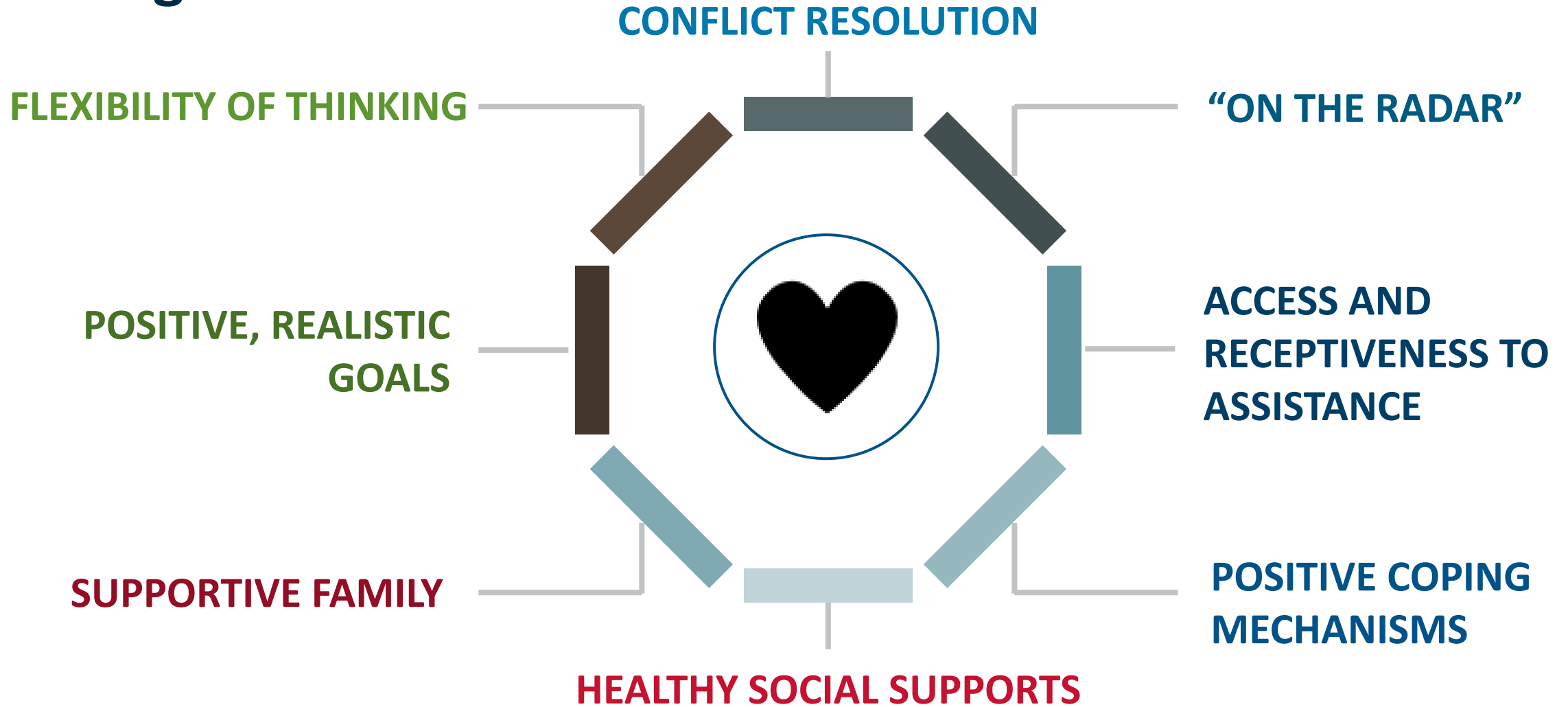
End of life planning

Last resort

Sudden withdrawal from life pattern

Sudden cessation of medications or other substance use

# Mitigators



# Group Practice: Case Examples (Handouts)

# Best Practice: Preparing Findings

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MEMORANDUM

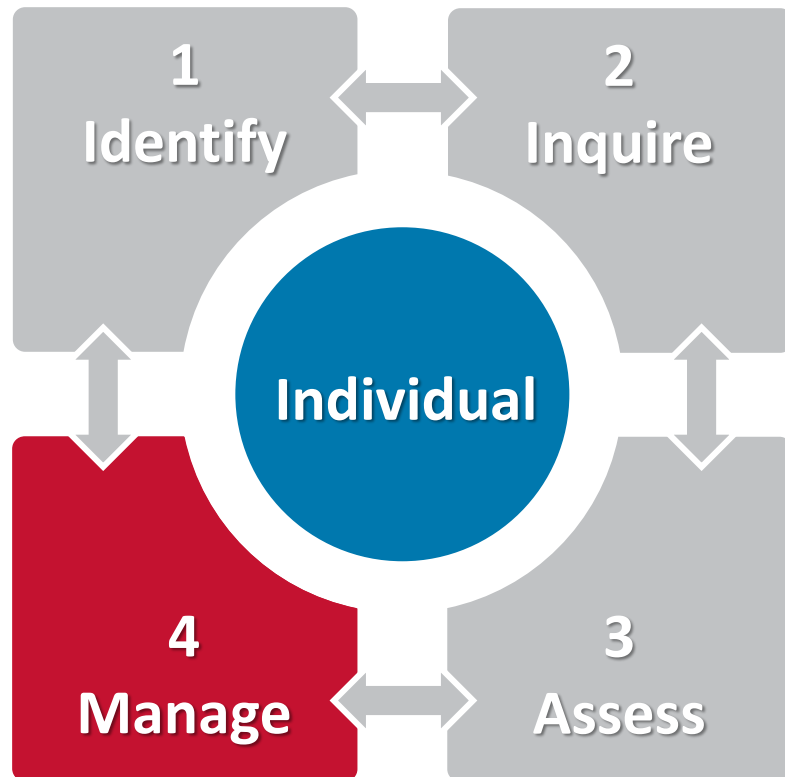
TO: FILE  
FROM: THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAM  
DATE: TODAY  
SUBJECT: SUBJECT OF CONCERN

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**“X person, based on the available evidence, does (not) appear at this time to pose a threat of violence to X person or X target for X reasons.”**

# BTAM Process: Manage

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The process of developing and implementing individualized plans to mitigate the threat of violence based on information gathered during the inquiry and other known facts about the person of concern.

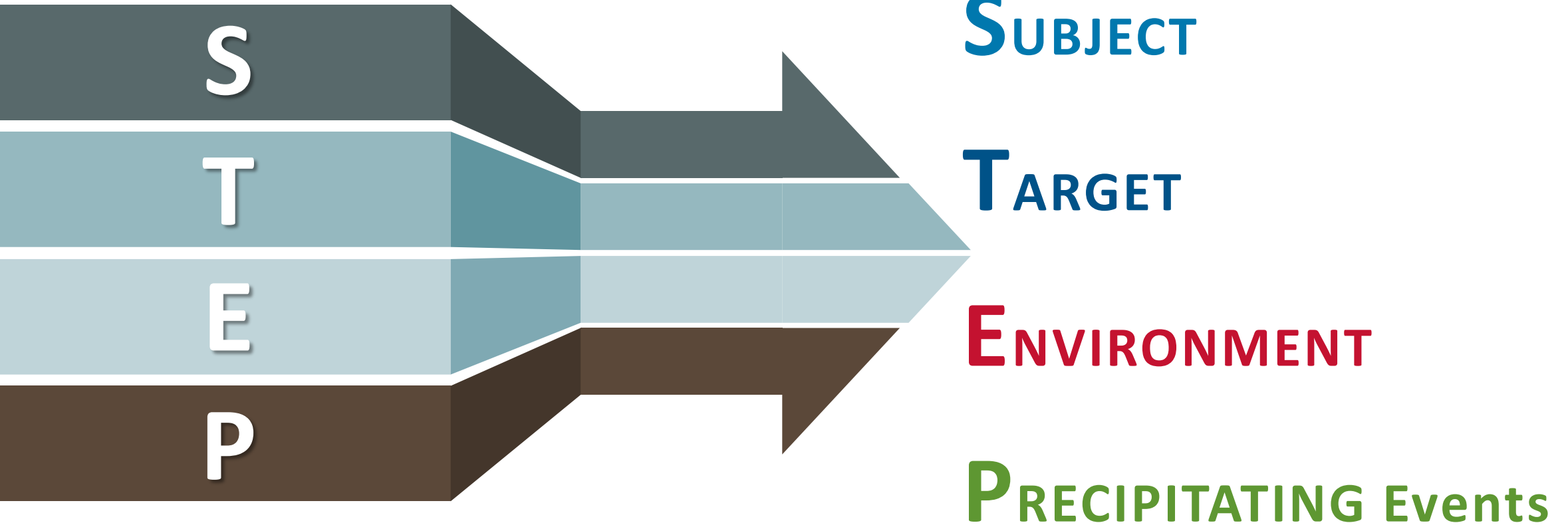
# Threat Management Considerations

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# DHS NTER Model:

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# Guiding Principles for Threat Management

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Keep context and circumstances in mind

Determine impact of the intimacy effect

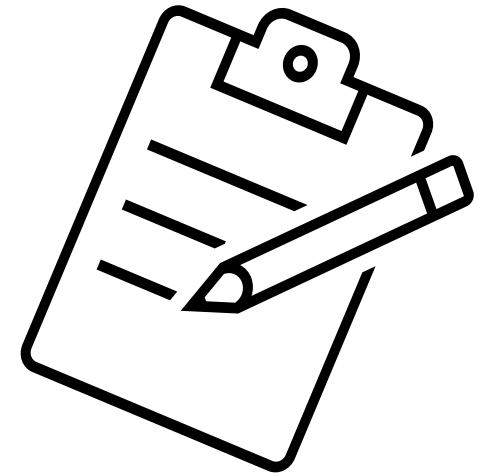
Be prepared to reassess

Avoid causing or allowing a last straw event

Keep your word

Treat persons of concern with respect

Stick to the facts



## In summary...

- Prevention is possible
- Everyone has a role to play
- Recognize warning signs
- Stay connected: know your resources, form partnerships

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Thank you