



STATEMENT OF MR. ROBERT SICA

**Special Agent In Charge
National Threat Assessment Center
United States Secret Service**

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing entitled "Protecting our Schools: Federal Efforts to Strengthen Community
Preparedness and Response"**

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Good morning, Chairman Thompson. I would like to thank you, as well as the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. King, and the other members of the Committee for providing an opportunity to discuss the Safe School Initiative, a collaboration between the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education.

As part of our protective responsibilities, the U.S. Secret Service has long held the view that the best protective strategy is one of prevention. The goal of Secret Service threat assessment efforts is to identify, assess, and manage persons who have the interest and ability to mount attacks against Secret Service protectees.

National Threat Assessment Center

In 1998, the Secret Service created the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC). The mission of NTAC is to provide guidance on threat assessment both within the Secret Service and to the criminal justice and public safety communities. Through the Presidential Protection Act of 2000, Congress formally authorized NTAC to provide assistance to federal, state, and local law enforcement as well as others with protective responsibilities in the following functional areas:

- Conducting research on threat assessment and various types of targeted violence;
- Providing training on threat assessment and targeted violence to law enforcement officials and others with protective and public safety responsibilities;
- Facilitating information-sharing among agencies with protective and/or public safety responsibilities;
- Provide case consultation on individual threat assessment investigations and for agencies building threat assessment units; and,
- Developing programs to promote the standardization of federal, state, and local threat assessment and investigations involving threats.

As a result of our research in the areas of attacks on public officials, public figures, and in schools, NTAC has provided relevant information and advice to law enforcement and other professionals who are charged with investigating and/or preventing targeted violence. NTAC has also collaborated with experts in the fields of stalking, domestic violence, and targeted workplace violence. The Secret Service provides this information nationwide through NTAC's threat assessment seminars and formal presentations, as well as several publications. In addition, NTAC offers assistance to organizations interested in developing threat assessment programs.

Background

In response to concerns about the safety of America's schools following several high-profile shootings, in June of 1999, the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education collaborated on the Safe School Initiative (SSI), an operational analysis of school-based attacks in the United States. The SSI focused on a rare but significant component of the problem of school violence – incidents of targeted violence in schools. The term “targeted violence” evolved from the Secret Service’s Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), an operational analysis of the thinking and behavior of those who have assassinated, attacked, or tried to attack public officials or public figures in the United States since 1949. The ECSP defined targeted violence as any incident of violence where a known (or knowable) attacker selects a particular target prior to their violent attack. The purpose of the ECSP was to generate a better understanding of attacks against public officials which, in turn, would assist the Secret Service with investigations of threats against the President and other protectees, and support the development of strategies to prevent harm to these public officials.

Research and Findings

The SSI, in both focus and design, was modeled after the ECSP. Targeted school violence was defined as an incident where a current or recent former student attacked someone at his or her school with lethal means and purposefully chose the school as the location of the attack. Through the use of this modified definition, the SSI identified and studied 37 school shootings, involving 41 attackers that occurred from 1974 through 2000. The emphasis of the SSI, as with the ECSP, was on obtaining information about the pre-incident thinking and behaviors of the attackers – students who have planned and carried out instances of targeted violence in American schools. This information was gathered through a systematic analysis of investigative, judicial, educational, and other pertinent case records, and interviews with ten (10) of the young boys involved in school shootings. Ultimately, this collaboration was designed to address two central questions concerning school attacks: “Could we have known these attacks were planned?” and, “What could be done to prevent these attacks from occurring?”

The SSI resulted in the publication of two documents, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States (May 2002)*, and *Threat Assessment in Schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates (May 2002)*, copies of which have been provided to this Committee. The report and guide are available on the Secret Service web site at: www.secretservice.gov.

The ten key findings of the SSI, as detailed in the *Report*, include:

1. Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely are sudden, impulsive acts.
2. Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
3. Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
4. There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

5. Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
6. Most attackers had difficulties coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
7. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
8. Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
9. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
10. Despite prompt law enforcement response, most incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention. Most school-based attacks were stopped through intervention by school administrators, educators, and students or by the attacker stopping on his own.

While each of these findings is important and may be useful for improving school safety, one finding in particular struck both the Secret Service and Department of Education as being of unique importance to prevention efforts: “Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.” We are currently conducting additional research into this ‘Bystander’ phenomenon to learn more about information that may be conveyed prior to an attack. Some of the questions we are attempting to address include: What information is conveyed prior to the attack? To whom? Why isn’t the information brought forward to a responsible adult? How can we increase the likelihood that information will be shared? The goal of this effort is to provide information to school administrators and educators regarding possible barriers that may prevent children who have information about a potential incident from reporting that information to a responsible adult.

Threat Assessment Approach

Threat assessment, as developed and utilized by the Secret Service, is a fact-based investigative and analytical process that focuses on the identification, assessment, and management of those who may pose a threat of targeted violence. In light of findings of the SSI, a threat assessment approach may be a promising strategy for preventing a school-based attack. The Secret Service believes there are six fundamental principles to the threat assessment process:

1. Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and often discernable, process of thinking and behavior.
2. Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the person, the situation, the setting, and the target.
3. An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.
4. Effective threat assessment is based on facts, rather than characteristics or traits.
5. An integrated systems approach, which incorporates gathering and sharing information between entities that had involvement with the student, such as educational, community, or faith-based organizations, should guide threat assessment investigations.
6. The central question of a threat assessment is whether a student *poses* a threat, not whether a student *made* a threat.

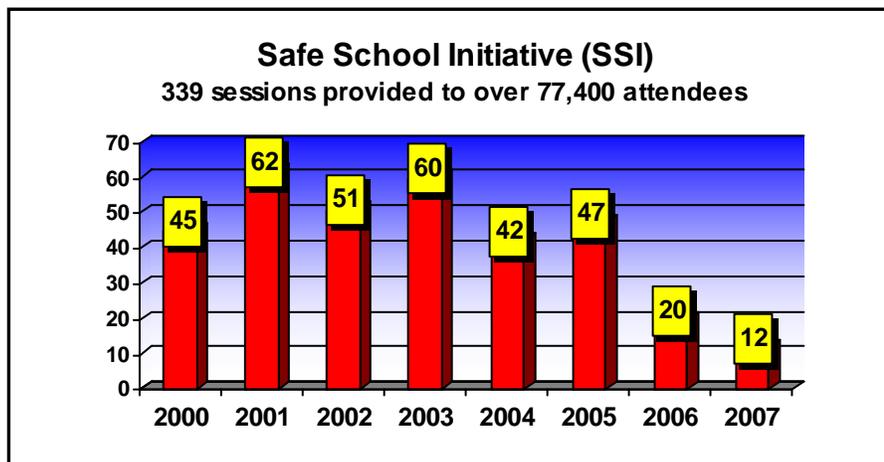
As illustrated by these principles, targeted violence is the end result of a process that can often be detectable by accurately gathering and assessing the facts of a particular case. Schools and law enforcement may be able to prevent some incidents of targeted school violence if they know

what information to look for and what to do with such information when it is found. To best gather and evaluate information from multiple sources, schools should consider establishing multidisciplinary threat assessment teams comprised of people from the school, the community, and law enforcement. By utilizing this multi-systems approach, these threat assessment teams may be able to detect and evaluate information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and, ultimately develop strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

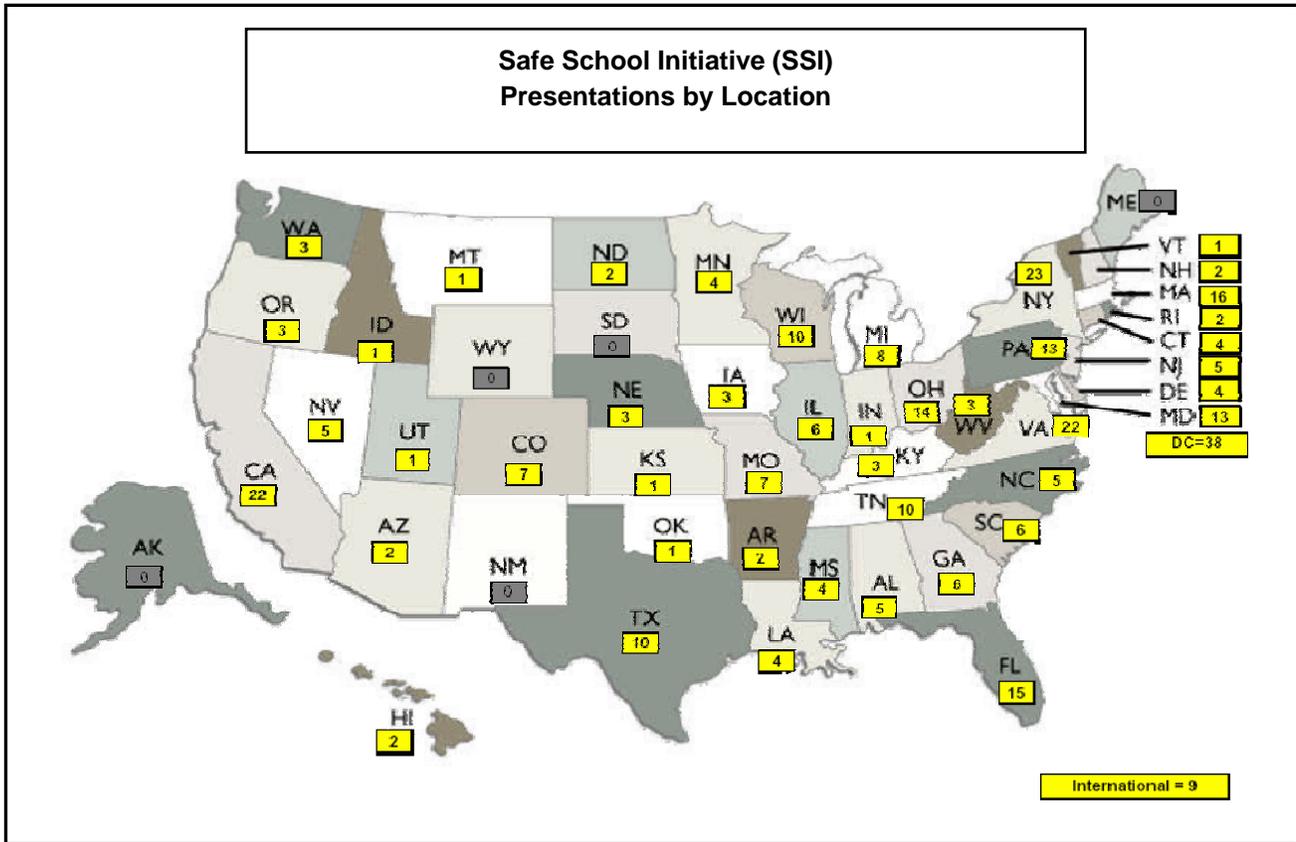
Trainings and Dissemination

The U.S. Secret Service routinely shares the results of the SSI with school and law enforcement professionals responsible for the prevention of targeted school violence.

As illustrated in the graph below, through April 2007, NTAC has provided briefings and training on the SSI at 339 different sessions to over 77,000 people. The attendees have included educators, school administrators, school resource officers, other law enforcement, and community representatives.



These information-sharing seminars have occurred throughout the United States and internationally as well. The illustration below depicts the locations of the SSI sessions.



To aid in the dissemination of this salient research, the Secret Service and Department of Education have released an interactive CD-ROM, *A Safe School and Threat Assessment Experience: Scenarios Exploring the Findings of the Safe School Initiative*, a copy of which has been provided to this Committee. Following last October’s White House Conference on School Safety, this CD-ROM—along with a copy of the threat assessment guide and final report of the SSI described earlier—was distributed to school superintendents and others involved in school safety in January 2007. Through the use of hypothetical school-based scenarios, school threat assessment team members may further develop their skills in conducting a threat assessment inquiry. The unique interactive format is designed to serve as a tabletop exercise for team members to gain familiarity with the threat assessment process, as well as the role each team member will play in it.

Conclusion

The research completed by the Secret Service and Department of Education through the Safe School Initiative has greatly contributed to our understanding of targeted school violence and helped to identify steps that may be implemented to prevent future occurrences. Establishing and maintaining multidisciplinary threat assessment teams that enlist school and community resources may better equip schools to handle those who pose a risk of targeted violence through prompt identification, accurate assessment, and effective management.

Chairman Thompson, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before this Committee.