

PTV | **PREVENTING TARGETED VIOLENCE**

Nebraska Community Behavioral Threat Assessment Guidance

2025

Prepared by

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Nebraska Community Behavioral Threat Assessment Guidance 2025

Purpose:

Individuals and communities face a range of targeted violence threats, from acts of terrorism and mass violence to more localized concerns like domestic violence, harassment, stalking, and workplace violence. This range of concerning situations and potential threats (see Figure 1) underscores the need for proactive and coordinated community behavioral threat assessment capacity. Community behavioral threat assessment is an evidence-based process for identifying, evaluating, and intervening with individuals who may pose a risk of targeted violence within a community. The purpose of this community behavioral threat assessment guidance is to detail key aspects of the process, identify relevant information to consider when assessing and formulating risk, and guide development of interventions and management strategies to mitigate those risks.

A Note on Overlapping Risk Factors for Targeted Violence and Suicide:

Most individuals who are suicidal or who are experiencing other mental health concerns will likely not carry out a targeted attack. However, some risk factors for targeted violence and suicide may overlap. Thoughts of suicide and mental health concerns remain considerations for risk assessment and formulation in context with other situational, behavioral, and developmental factors specific to persons of concern.

Acknowledgments

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center would like to acknowledge the contributions of Owen Yardley, Joseph Wright, and Jonathan Sundermeier, who provided expert review and comments on this guidance.

Usage Considerations:

This guidance complements existing community structures and resources (human and institutional) but does not replace them. **This guidance does not intend to replace formal behavioral threat assessment training nor preclude other behavioral threat assessment and management measures.** This guidance should only be utilized by those with proper behavioral threat assessment training or consultation. When applying this guidance, environments like schools or workplaces may require additional consideration of specific situations, concerning behavior, and risk factors unique to their context.

Range of Concerning Situations



Figure 1

Note: This diagram provides examples of potential concerns and threats, but is not a comprehensive or exhaustive list.

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Key Principles of Behavioral Threat Assessment:

Behavioral threat assessment is a method of investigating and assessing behaviors of concern with the goal of preventing or managing targeted violence.¹ Targeted violence, as opposed to reactive or affective violence, includes violence involving a person who intends to cause harm to an identifiable target, such as an organization, place, group, or other person. Research on targeted violence suggests that:

- Threat, approach, and attack behavior are the products of discernible processes of thinking and behavior prior to the violent act.
- An individual's motives and target selection are directly connected.
- The person of concern may have experienced a personal or significant stressor or had a desire to be violent before acting.

1. Refer to the Threat Assessment Glossary from Bulling and Scalora (2013) for definitions of key concepts and principles related to behavioral threat assessment and management.

Behavioral threat assessment focuses on patterns of behavior and seeks to interrupt individuals on the pathway to violence. Behavioral threat assessment:

- Focuses on troubling behavior rather than troubled individuals, thereby avoiding profiling.
- Is preventative versus reactive to violent behavior.
- Allows for assessment and monitoring of patterns of contact.
- When feasible, uses multidisciplinary teams to allow for a coordinated response with different partners to prevent violence.
- Uses interventions that promote and emphasize dignity and respect to de-escalate tension and prevent violence.

Behavioral threat assessment is a dynamic process that may resemble the image below.

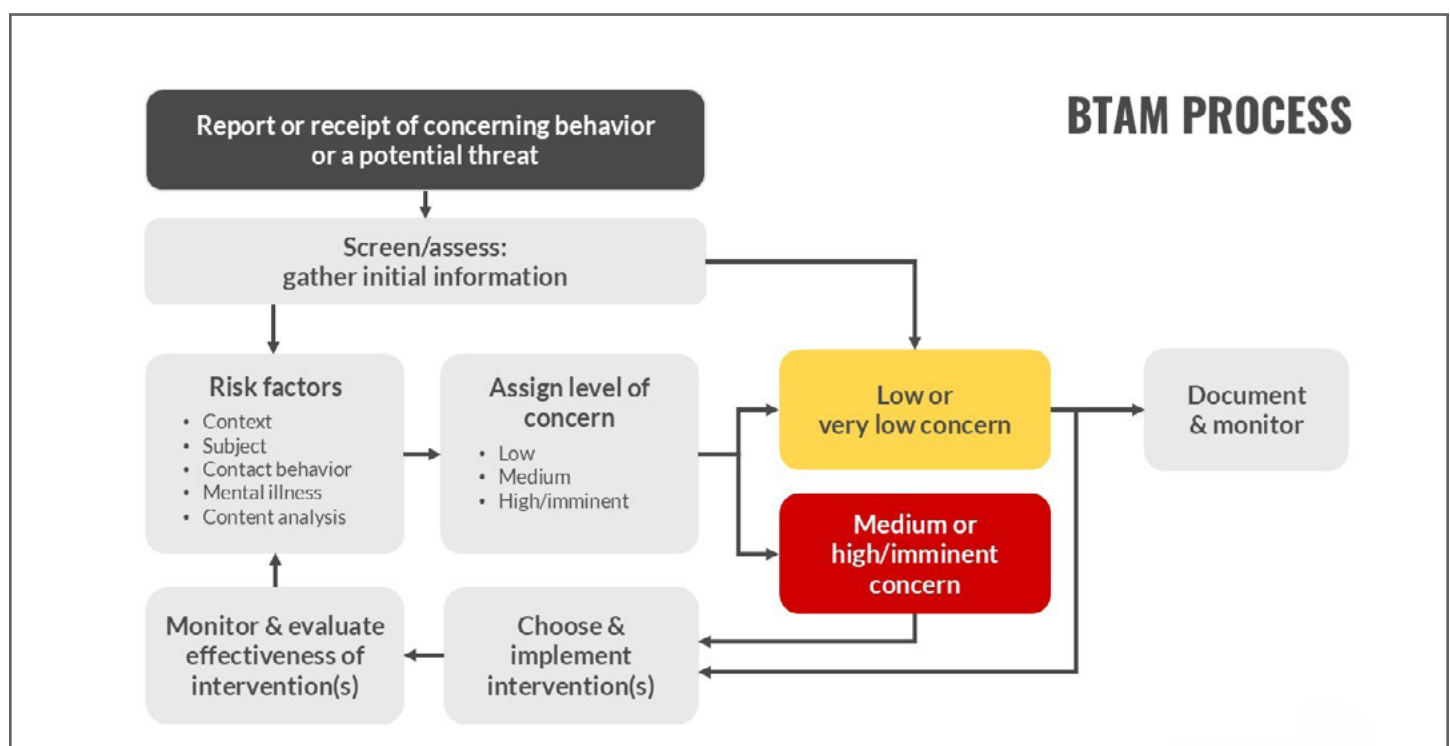


Figure 2

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Receiving Reports:

The behavioral threat assessment process begins with formally or informally receiving a report containing information about concerning behaviors. Reports may come through sources like written or verbal messages, social media, observed behaviors, or community reporting systems such as anonymous tiplines. An initial response to the report may include the following:

- Review the report and note what actions, if any, may have already occurred (e.g., disciplinary action, law enforcement involvement).
- Decide which members of your multidisciplinary team will lead the behavioral threat assessment process (including calling the team together) and document actions.
- Identify key team members needed to assist with screening and gathering initial information about the threat (e.g., reviewing electronic activity and social media, law enforcement consultation).

Preliminary Screening and Assessment:

After receiving a report, begin your preliminary screening and assessment of the case.

- Identify facts about the situation and person(s) implicated in the report.
- Consider assigning specific fact-finding duties to behavioral threat assessment team members.
- Determine what actions have already been taken by reporting systems or law enforcement.

Determine if (and when) to enlist help from others for the investigation and/or to help work through the case.

- Consider how/when to involve specialists and trusted individuals with relevant skills or information (e.g., public information, technology, and risk/behavioral threat assessment).

- Assign specific roles and responsibilities to specialists with deadlines for reporting back to your team.
- Consider how/when to involve parents/guardians if a juvenile is implicated in the report as a person of concern or potential target/focus of the threat.

Information Gathering Considerations:

Be strategic when assembling the facts about a situation, person of concern, and potential behavioral risk factors to provide context to the threatening situation. Uphold discretion and confidentiality when considering the following:

- What else do you need or want to know?
- Why is this happening now?
- What source should be approached?
- How and where can information be gathered from?
- Who gathers the information and when?

Preliminary Considerations to Determine if Immediate Action is Necessary:

Determine if the following suggests the need for immediate protective actions as assessment continues, especially if:

- A detailed, direct, and viable threat is present that suggests immediate harm will happen.
- The person of concern is in proximity to, or has access to, the targeted person/object of focus.

Consider what type of interagency cooperation may be required to manage the situation and assist with immediate security.

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Screening Considerations:

The following factors may allow for a case/situation to be screened out after a preliminary investigation:

- Behavior of concern is isolated and not part of a pattern of behavior.
- Behavior of concern is nuisance activity in nature with no threatening or intimidating activity.
- Threatened behavior or behavior of concern is vague and indirect.
- Information contained within the communicated threat is inconsistent, implausible, or lacks detail.
- Content related to the behavior of concern suggests the person is unlikely or unable to carry it out.

If concern remains after the initial screening, further assessment and investigation should address whether the following observable behavioral risk factors are present. Note all that apply prior to determining a level of concern.

Observable/Behavioral Threat Assessment Risk Factors:

There is no profile of someone who may engage in targeted violence. However, specific behavioral patterns and risk factors may indicate to members of a multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment team that a person of concern is at risk of targeted violence. Issues related to the person of concern's behavioral patterns and activity, motivations, target of focus, personal factors, and contextual factors should be included or documented as part of a behavioral threat assessment (see Figure 3). *Note that this approach presents a framework with examples and is not an exhaustive list of risk factors.*

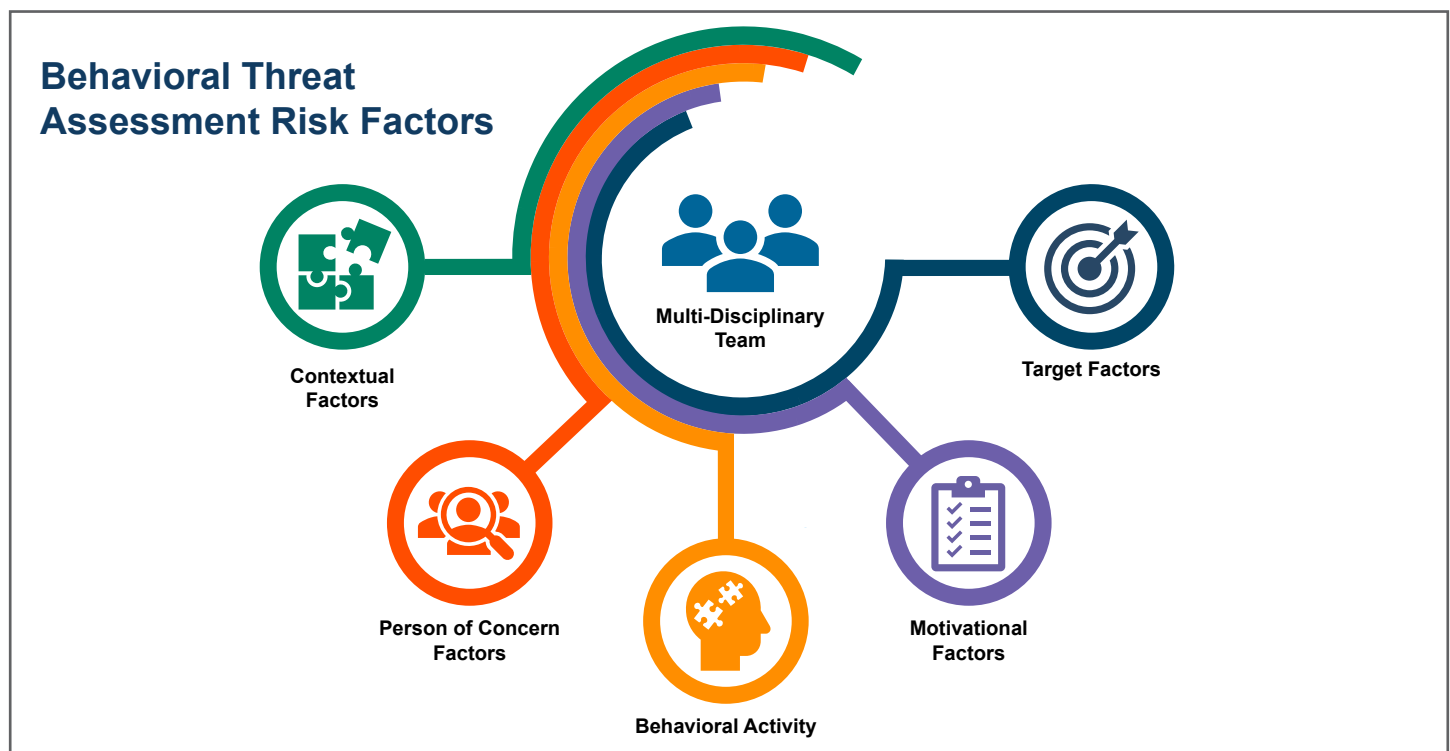


Figure 3

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Behavioral Activity:

Behavioral threat assessment prioritizes observable behavioral patterns and activities over individual profiles. These actions

and threat characteristics can indicate an escalating risk of targeted violence.

Pattern of Contacts:

- Indicators of intensity of effort, including:
 - Multiple prior contacts.
 - Multiple methods of contact/activities.
- Persistent/escalating threatening or concerning behavior.

Expression of Violent Intention:

- “Leaking” — telling friends, family, etc., about plans to attack or communication about ideas and intentions to third parties.
- Threats expressed or simulated in written, electronic, audio, or video form announcing threats or plans for hurting others.
- Rehearsal or fantasy activity (e.g., postings, journals, video, and drawings).
- List or similar details provided about those targeted.
- Planning/detailing how violence will be carried out.
- Enlisting the aid of others or divulging plans to others.
- Evidence of attack-related behaviors and planning online or in other communications.
- Evidence the person of concern has the capacity to carry out a violent attack on the identified target.
- Expressing desire or a plan to approach the target.

Mention/Presence of Weapons:

- Carrying a weapon (actual or fake) to school, work, or at leisure.
- Fascination with weapons, especially guns.
- Weapons (gun, knife, etc.) are mentioned in the threat.
- Weapons are present or available to the person of concern.

References to Prior Violence:

- Refers to other acts of targeted violence (e.g., school shootings, recent mass violence).
 - Nature of reference:
 - » Simple mention.
 - » Desire to repeat/perform their own act.
- Unusual interest in targeted violence or fascination with violence in general.
- Research on prior targeted violence.

Key Communication Content:

- Describes/presents feelings of hopelessness or despair (including suicidal ideation or attempts).
- Losses (real or perceived).
- Asserts that violence is a solution to their problems.
- Reflects anger, frustration, contempt, and the dark side of life in writings.

Threatening Language:

- Nature of threat:
 - Direct (I will hurt you).
 - Indirect/Vague (Someone should hurt you).
 - Conditional (Threatens to be violent if conditions are not met).

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Threats are Most Concerning If:

- The person of concern has a serious mental illness.
- Threats emerge as part of a series of contacts/activities.
- The person has prior problematic approach history with the person/object of focus.



Motivational Factors:

- Understanding why a person of concern might consider targeted violence is critical for preventing and managing threats. A person of concern's motivation can be indicated by their behaviors and communications.
- Nature of person of concern's motivation.
 - Bottom line: the more personal the motive/grievance, the higher the concern.
 - Person/object of focus is identified.
 - Motives are influenced by mental illness symptoms.
 - Seeking revenge/retaliation for perceived injustice or harm.
 - Desire for revenge is communicated.



Target Factors:

- The person or object of focus often holds a significant meaning for a person of concern. These target factors can reveal insights into the nature and intensity of the focus of the individual's grievances or ideations.
- Person of concern views person/object of focus(s) as responsible for current situation or difficulties.
 - Person of concern and person/object of focus had prior conflict or relationship.
 - Consistent fixation on person/object of focus.

- Sharing grievance(s) about person/object of focus to others.
- Shifts in the person/object of focus.



Person of Concern Factors:

A range of factors relating to a person of concern's history, traits, and life circumstances can contribute to their risk for targeted violence. These factors are unique to the person of concern.

- History of a grievance or personal issue with the person/object of focus.
- Prior arrest record or prior harassment/threat-related activity.
- Problematic contacts with entities or people.
- Recent life stressors (e.g., job loss, relationship dissolution).
- Presence of serious mental health concerns.
- History of current substance abuse/misuse.



Contextual Factors:

Contextual factors provide the backdrop for understanding the significance of observed behaviors and determining the overall risk level. These factors add insight to why the person of concern is exhibiting concerning behaviors at a certain time.

- Suspicious people or items and changes in typical patterns of activities.
- Recent violent events elsewhere suggesting a "contagion effect."
- Anniversaries of personal or notable events.
- Recent or upcoming crisis or loss for person of concern.
- Upcoming events of concern (e.g., impending legal/disciplinary action).

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Levels of Concern:

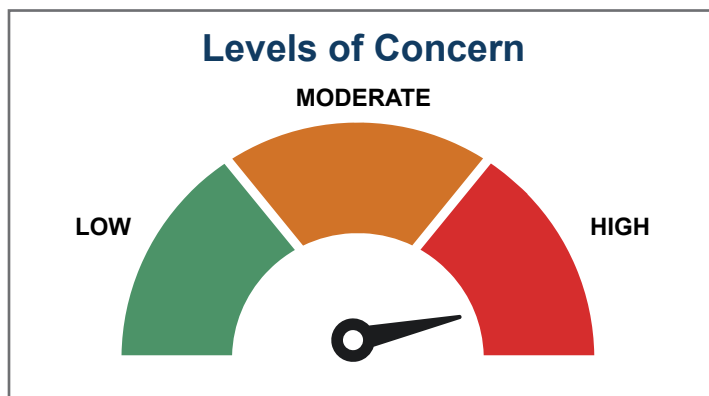
Based on the observable/behavioral risk factors currently available, formulate a level of concern.

Consider the following factors that comprise the level of concern:

- The level or type of attention needed.
- The perceived risk of violence.
- The need for management efforts to mitigate the risk of escalation or violence.

Document what the level of concern is based on. This includes listing observable risk factors and information known about the person of concern and context. When risk levels overlap, note the highest level appropriate.

Refer to the "Determining Level of Concern" and "Actions for Levels of Concern" guides on pages 8–9 of this document.



Behavioral Threat Assessment Intervention:

Choose and implement intervention(s) to mitigate the risk of targeted violence.

- Document actions taken.
 - Actions include anything done in the previous stages of the behavioral threat assessment process, including fact finding, convening your team, adding specialists, involving parents/trusted persons, restrictions, discipline, meetings, check-ins, etc.
 - Refer to the "Actions for Levels of Concern" guide on page 9.
- Begin planning for follow-up and management of the situation. Start by identifying:
 - What will follow-up look like? Consider human and institutional resources needed.
 - Who will take the lead in follow-up?
 - When does the team need to meet again?
 - What will happen when additional information is received?
 - Who will take responsibility for bringing your team together to reassess the situation as it changes?

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DETERMINING LEVEL OF CONCERN



LOW LEVEL OF CONCERN

Further assessment is not yet warranted

Behavior that poses a minimal risk to the potential target and community safety. Information/investigation suggests low potential for harm to a targeted individual, group, or institution. No inappropriate approach behaviors exhibited. Person of concern's interest can generally be considered at a nuisance, non-threatening, and non-dangerous level.

- A non-threatening or nuisance statement found to pose minimal risk to the potential target and public safety.
- Threatened behavior or behavior of concern is vague and indirect.
- Information contained within the communicated threat is inconsistent, implausible, or lacks detail.
- Threatened behavior not realistic or plausible.
- Content related to the behavior of concern suggests person is unlikely to carry it out.
- Available information suggests follow through is unlikely.

MODERATE LEVEL OF CONCERN

Monitor for escalation of concern

Moderate potential for disruptive or threatened behavior of concern. Information/investigation suggests a moderate potential for harm or disruption to a targeted individual, group, or institution. The person of concern can be considered to have threatening, inappropriate, or otherwise unusual interest toward a targeted person and has exhibited the ability or interest to do harm. Further investigation may be required. Though immediate risk of harm or serious disruption is not likely after initial investigation or management strategies are in place, the situation needs further monitoring.

- Person of concern has a persistent grievance.
- Person of concern has a mental illness but symptoms are being managed.
- Threatened behavior is more direct and more concrete than a low level threat.
- Communications suggest that the person of concern has given some thought to how the act will be carried out.
- There is no strong indication that the person of concern has taken preparatory steps.
- Other behaviors of concern exist to suggest that the threatening statements or behaviors of concern are not in isolation.

HIGH LEVEL OF CONCERN

Action required to contain likelihood of harm

Information/investigation indicates a likelihood of harm or serious disruption toward a targeted individual, group, or institution. Imminent harm is possible. Immediate investigation is initiated with focus on obtaining collaborative data concerning the person of concern's location, behavior, and lethality. Additional steps necessary to initiate safety measures.

- Threat is direct, specific, and plausible.
- Threat suggests concrete steps have been taken toward carrying it out (e.g., information indicating that the person of concern has acquired a weapon or had the target/entity under surveillance).
- Person of concern has a serious mental illness with active symptoms.
- Person of concern has made a direct threat.
- Patterns of behaviors/communications escalated in intensity/tone.

In general, the more direct and detailed a threat is, the more serious the risk of it being acted on. A threat assessed as a HIGH concern will generally require immediate law enforcement intervention.

In some cases, the distinction between levels of threat may not be as obvious and there will be overlap/fluctuation between the categories. Sometimes it may be prudent to assume a higher level of risk/concern until it is ruled out.

EXAMPLE ACTIONS FOR LEVELS OF CONCERN



LOW LEVEL OF CONCERN

- Document the behavior.
- Connect person of concern with a trusted individual/group.
- Redefine/reassert behavior expectations.
- Give corrective/preventive feedback to person of concern.
- Mediate unresolved conflict.
- Problem-solve together.
- Assess validity of grievance/complaint.
- Apology and/or restitution.
- Contact probation/parole officer or caseworker.
- Follow-up: progress updates.



MODERATE LEVEL OF CONCERN

- Document the behavior.
- Psychological assessment, if necessary, for mental health issues.
- Consider notifying target if known.
- Safe separation (minimize contact with the target).
- Daily to weekly attitude and behavior checks.
- Ask trusted individual to regularly engage with person of concern.
- Problem-solve together.
- Contact probation/parole officer or caseworker.
- Follow school or workplace discipline procedures.
- Assign a team member to monitor person of concern and status of intervention, as appropriate.
- Follow-up: progress updates.
- Cease and desist letter (adult).
- Protection order (adult).



HIGH LEVEL OF CONCERN

- Work with law enforcement to contain threat.
- Law enforcement involvement (welfare check/arrest if warranted).
- Consider notifying target if known.
- Committal if warranted (adult).
- Hospitalization if warranted (juvenile).
- Consider safe separation (minimize contact with the target).
- Notify person of concern/parents of requirements for readmission to school or work.
- Contact probation/parole officer or caseworker.
- Collaborate with probation/parole officer or caseworker.
- Do not allow person of concern to be unsupervised before/after school if they are a juvenile.
- Follow-up: progress updates.
- Assign team member to monitor person of concern and intervention/safety plan.
- Cease and desist letter (adult).
- Protection order (adult).

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