PTV | PREVENTING TARGETED VIOLENCE

TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNITIES

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NEBRASKA
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

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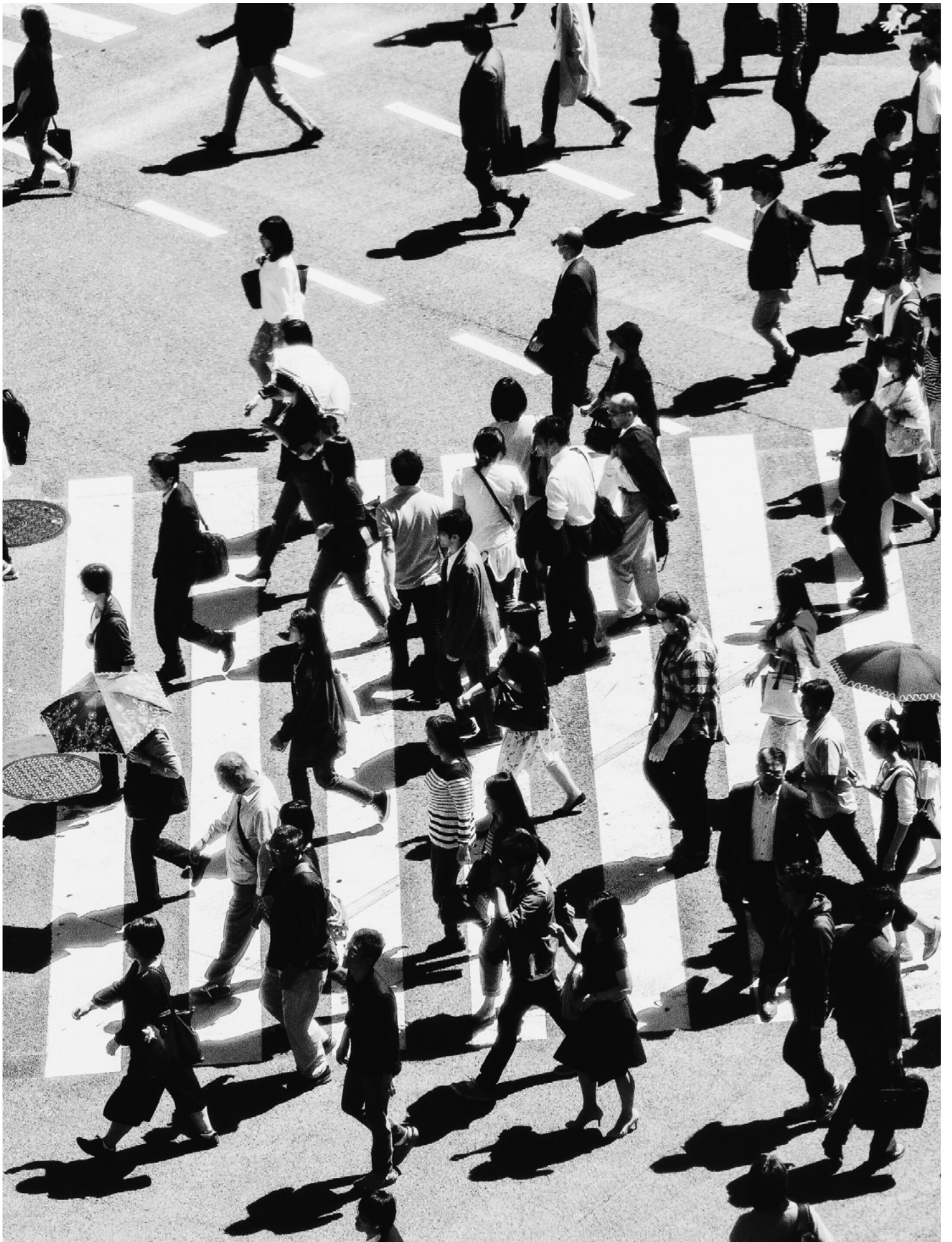
Introduction

This toolkit is intended for local entities (e.g., law enforcement, behavioral or public health professionals, public officials) interested in preventing violence in their communities. The background section provides the reader with information about different types of violence. The toolkit introduces the behavioral threat assessment and management approach and provides suggestions to help community leaders develop capabilities to implement this approach. Supplementary resources, including short videos, websites, documents, and templates, are embedded throughout the toolkit.

We encourage community leaders to obtain training and consultation (in addition to using this toolkit) to help them adapt violence prevention approaches in recognition of their local needs, access to resources, and cultures.
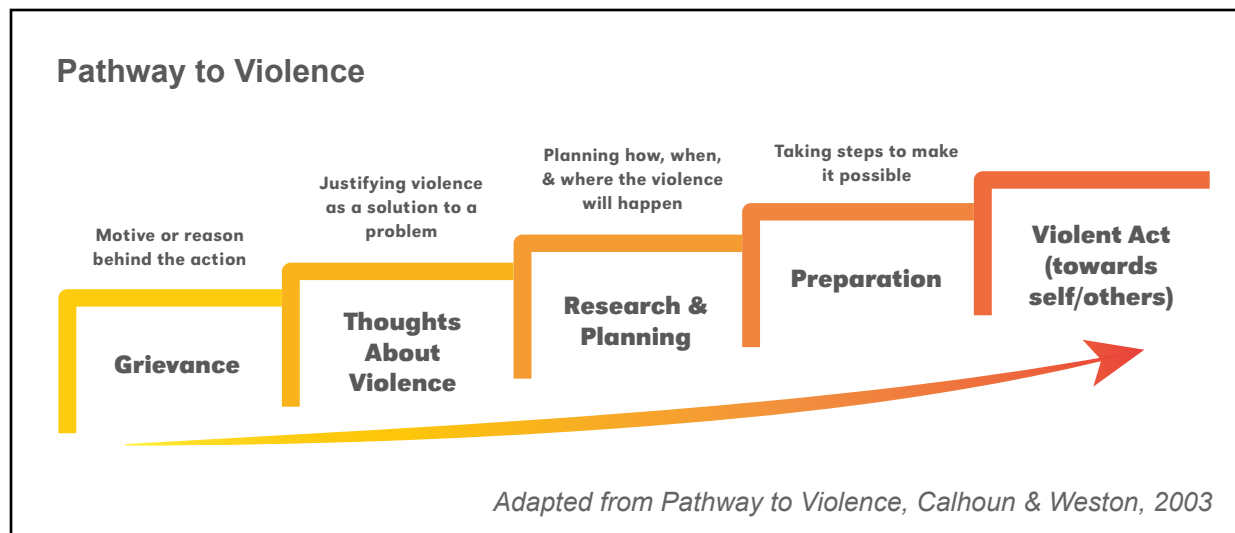
Background

Research on violence indicates that people don't just "snap" and carry out violent acts out of the blue. Instead, the precursors of violent behavior typically build up over time. Targeted violence stems from the idea that violence is a viable option for solving a problem or righting a perceived wrong.

Warning signs or behavior may be detected by family, friends, peers, and coworkers before a violent act occurs. Even though these behaviors are concerning, they may go unreported. For example, after mass shooting events, news reports will quote acquaintances saying, "I thought he was acting strange" or "I was worried about him," but no one reported their concerns. Sometimes, people hesitate to report "strange behavior" because they do not know who to report it to, do not trust authority figures, or do not want to inconvenience themselves or cause trouble. Community-based prevention of violence starts with sharing what to look for and be concerned about.

Violence is generally categorized into one of two types: reactive violence (sometimes called affective violence) and targeted violence. Reactive violence is often unplanned, impulsive, and may be defensive (i.e., when someone fights back after being attacked). This toolkit focuses on preventing acts of **targeted violence** (when a person intends to cause harm to an identifiable target). Targeted violence involves planning, research, and other observable behaviors directed toward a specific person, facility, or community. Examples of targeted violence include domestic violence, workplace violence, stalking, targeted shootings, and other focused acts of violence.

Range of Concerning Situations

Mentally Ill Concerning Behaviors

Domestic Violence

Stalking

Threats/ Threatening Behavior

Threat Assessment

Personal Safety/ Welfare Concerns

Employee Discipline & Termination

Sabotage to Operations

Harassment

Pathway to Violence

Motive or reason behind the action

Grievance

Justifying violence as a solution to a problem

Thoughts About Violence

Planning how, when, & where the violence will happen

Research & Planning

Taking steps to make it possible

Preparation

Violent Act (towards self/others)

Adapted from Pathway to Violence, Calhoun & Weston, 2003

A "Pathway to Violence" framework places concerning behaviors on a continuum to help conceptualize how close a person may be to carrying out an act of targeted violence. Viewing behaviors on this pathway can reveal potential opportunities to intervene before a violent act occurs. This focus on behavior is central to the practice of behavioral threat assessment and management, a violence prevention strategy implemented in many different settings.

Often someone on the pathway to violence will justify violence as a potential solution to any grievance they may have. Their justifications can leak out in conversations, electronic communications or posts, and other forms of communication. For example, someone may tell a friend that they will "get them" or post "don't come to work tomorrow" on social media. This "leakage" may be picked up by friends, colleagues, family members, teachers, or someone online. This is why communities trying to prevent targeted violence will invest time in educating the public about what to look for and what to do if they are concerned. People are often more comfortable telling someone they trust about their concerns than reporting to a stranger. However, there are situations when reporting may be easier if the person can be anonymous. Communities and organizations should have multiple ways people can share their concerns. For example, Nebraska schools have access to an anonymous reporting system via Safe2Help Nebraska. Schools may also have internal reporting structures and staff educated about what to do if a student or family reports something concerning. **Skip to the section on Empowering Community Members to report concerns to learn more**.

Behavioral Threat Assessment & Management (BTAM)

A primary component of disrupting the pathway to violence is having a viable, structured mechanism to receive and process concerns reported by community members. Mechanisms to receive reports include apps, hotlines, text lines, web-based and email reporting, and in-person or written reporting. The best practice for processing reports is for the receiving entity to screen them and, if appropriate, bring them to a trained multi-disciplinary team for review and action. Many institutions have these teams in place, such as school systems, hospitals or healthcare settings, workplaces, and other contexts in the public and private sector. These teams are typically called *threat assessment teams* or *behavioral threat assessment and management teams*, often referred to as "BTAM" for short.

The primary role of the BTAM team is to identify a potential threat of violence, evaluate how serious the threat is, and address the threat by developing an appropriate intervention. Behavioral threat assessment may be highly fluid, complex, and demand timely responses. Teams should have collaborative and multi-disciplinary members with sufficient expertise to rapidly evaluate and assess behaviors of concern. Depending on the situation and person(s) of concern, an assessment of a possible threat may be a one-time event or require sustained monitoring and assessment of a person's behavior over time to detect patterns of escalation.

Learn more about Recent Trends in Behavioral Threat Assessment.

It is common for newly formed teams to assume that one brief training session will equip them to do this work. Training and working together as a team will help build expertise in behavioral threat assessment and management, but it takes time to acquire confidence and competence. Finding a competent, experienced behavioral threat assessment and management professional/consultant to assist the team is helpful during this initial period. One resource for finding such a person is via the **Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP)**. ATAP has a certification program that provides credentials to experienced threat professionals. Certified Threat Managers have met experience criteria and passed a certification exam, ensuring they possess the requisite knowledge of threat assessment and management. Due to the multi-disciplinary nature of the field, many Certified Threat Managers have backgrounds in law enforcement, security, or mental health, or a combination of backgrounds.

Want to learn more about behavioral threat assessment and management? Visit: https://ppcta.unl.edu.

Developing Community BTAM Capabilities

Developing community behavioral threat assessment and management capabilities begins by taking an inventory of what BTAM activity is already going on in your community.

- What entities already have BTAM teams? (e.g., K-12 schools, community colleges or local universities, industries or large retail entities, houses of worship)
  - Who is the contact person for existing BTAM teams?
  - What teams are local law enforcement already part of?
- Are there ATAP members in my community or county?
  - Reach out to officers of the Great Plains Chapter of ATAP to learn more about ATAP professionals in your area **https://www.atapworldwide.org/page/allchapters**
- How interested or involved is local law enforcement in violence prevention? (e.g., departmental policies or strategies related to violence prevention, violence prevention training opportunities for law enforcement personnel, law enforcement involvement in BTAM teams)
- What local structures are already in place to provide support for BTAM? (e.g., community coalitions, public health or behavioral health prevention efforts, existing community safety or well-being groups)

Many rural communities have existing collaborative networks with diverse stakeholders and strong leadership, particularly in the areas of community health and well-being. Examples may include suicide prevention coalitions and healthcare collaboratives. Prevention of targeted violence efforts can build on these networks and offer opportunities for new collaborations and creative thinking around important issues like violence prevention.

The behavioral threat assessment and management inventory will reveal existing community resources to build upon. It will also uncover local gaps in capacity, resources, and expertise. Some communities opt to proceed and build BTAM capabilities to fill the gaps, while others gather more information about what else is needed before developing a team.

Want to learn more about how to gather information from your community, then process and report what you found? Check out these resources:

- **Guide to Gathering Community Information**
- **Guide to Analyzing and Reporting Results**
- **Create a Final Report or Presentation**

Watch this video to learn more about **The Value of BTAM in Communities**.

Once you determine that you have sufficient information about your resources, gaps, and needs, you can present your findings to community decision-makers or partners. Having buy-in from people who can either provide resources (people, expertise, space, etc.) or block your efforts is key to the success of your violence prevention efforts.

Building a community effort that includes behavioral threat assessment and management may look very different from one location to another. However, the backbone of many programs is a multi-disciplinary group that takes on the responsibility of coordinating their efforts to prevent targeted violence. In some communities, it may be a "***team of teams***" with representatives of different organizations that already have BTAM capabilities. Other communities, particularly in rural areas, may opt to bring people together across a wider geographic area in a regional effort. In some cases, expertise may be embedded with a few individuals focused upon a specific area (e.g., schools, workplaces, law enforcement) that can be pooled together when needed. Either way, the new group should begin by establishing "rules" about how they intend to work together. This is often formalized in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) among all organizations represented in the group. These rules or agreements include how privacy and confidentiality are managed, the process and criteria for bringing a case to the group, and how the group will operate. Additional procedures (e.g., frequency of meetings, documentation of actions, activating resources) can be developed after the group is trained and begins working together.

> **The BTAM program can never promise an outcome but can promise fidelity to a process or approach to assessing and managing threats.**

Check out this example MOU of a community threat advisory team: Example MOU.

Learn more about what it takes to build and sustain a BTAM program: **Operational Components Related to the Development, Implementation, and Sustainability of Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Programs**.

Preliminary Questions

Two preliminary questions guide the development of your group or program:

- Who is in your group?
- How can you describe your group to key stakeholders and community members to prevent misunderstandings?

Who is in your group?

Determining who to be involved as community behavioral threat assessment and management team members will depend on your community and available resources. Consider the full spectrum of targeted violence issues that are relevant to your community's concerns and identify who could provide expertise and perspectives to assess and evaluate concerning behavior. Law enforcement is usually a key member of the group because they have investigative experience and access to information not available to the public. Mental health professionals also bring unique experience and knowledge to the group, particularly on mental health symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment options. Other group members may include those with responsibilities or experience working with domestic violence, education, social services, public health, medical facilities, major workplaces, or specific cultural expertise relevant to the community.

Learn more about how state and local law enforcement agencies can use BTAM teams to prevent targeted violence: Behavioral Threat Assessment Units: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement to Prevent Targeted Violence.

Watch this video to learn more about **BTAM as a Multidisciplinary Approach**.

How do you describe your group to key stakeholders and community members to prevent misunderstandings?

Describe the BTAM effort to key partners and community members to avoid misunderstandings. Violence prevention strategies that protect the dignity of all involved are more likely to be accepted by community members than those perceived as mechanisms for getting individuals into trouble. Group members need to be seen as trustworthy, credible, and knowledgeable about targeted violence. Most importantly, they must be seen as devoted to community well-being and helping others. Poor messaging or impressions can undermine your efforts and create suspicions or mistrust. A lack of community buy-in can easily undercut your targeted violence prevention initiatives, particularly if they are viewed as a hidden means to monitor behavior, gather intelligence, and single out specific groups.

Effective branding of your efforts is an early step in fostering community acceptance and credibility, because it communicates a sense of focus and mission. Branding efforts should include developing an outreach strategy to inform the broader community about your initiative and the role of the community behavioral threat assessment group.

Watch this video to learn more about **Raising Awareness of BTAM**.

BTAM Training

Behavioral threat assessment group members should train together whenever possible. This helps ensure they all have the same baseline knowledge of behavioral threat assessment and management. It also helps to cement working relationships that lead to decisions about team functioning. Besides getting trained in basic behavioral threat assessment and management principles and strategies, the team must understand how and when to access outside help, how they will document their work, who maintains responsibility for the case, and how they will monitor cases over time.

Training should incorporate practical exercises drawn from plausible scenarios. This will help the team identify who else should be at the table and what additional resources or knowledge they need. Team training should be facilitated by a qualified threat assessment professional who is available locally for consultation. Alternatively, team members could attend conferences and team training sessions offered outside their home area.

Want to learn more about the basics of BTAM? Check out this online introductory course on The Principles of BTAM.

Note: you will be required to create a free Moodle account in order to view the course.

Empower Community Members to Report Concerns

Once a community has identified how reports will be received, who receives them, and how they are processed, it is time to empower community members to report their concerns. This requires a broad communication strategy focused on addressing barriers to reporting. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews are useful tools to identify reporting barriers in your community. You may discover that one of the barriers to reporting is that residents simply don't know what to report.

Communicating what behaviors community members should report can include traditional and non-traditional media or the development of written materials. Consider how you can enlist trusted leaders to talk with their constituents about behaviors on the pathway to violence and what/how to make a report. Websites from community partners can serve as an additional resource by providing handouts and information for residents and stakeholders who want to know more about targeted violence, issue-driven violence, and behavioral threat assessment.

Want to learn more about educating community members about targeted violence and what to look for? Check out the customizable education resources located here: **ptv.unl.edu/home/resources**.

Watch this video to learn more about **Empowering People to Report in BTAM**.

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