

Threat Assessment: Scholars, Operators, Our Past, Our Future

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A stylized silhouette of a mountain range in shades of brown and tan, positioned at the bottom of the slide against a blue gradient background.

Sherlock Holmes

- “I think you know me well enough, Watson, to understand that I am by no means a nervous man. At the same time it is stupidity rather than courage to refuse to recognize danger when it is close upon you.”
 - The Final Problem, December, 1893





Richard von Krafft-Ebing



Hugo Munsterberg



What have we learned in the field of threat assessment?

- **What** are the **BIG IDEAS**
(some researched, some not) in **threat assessment?**



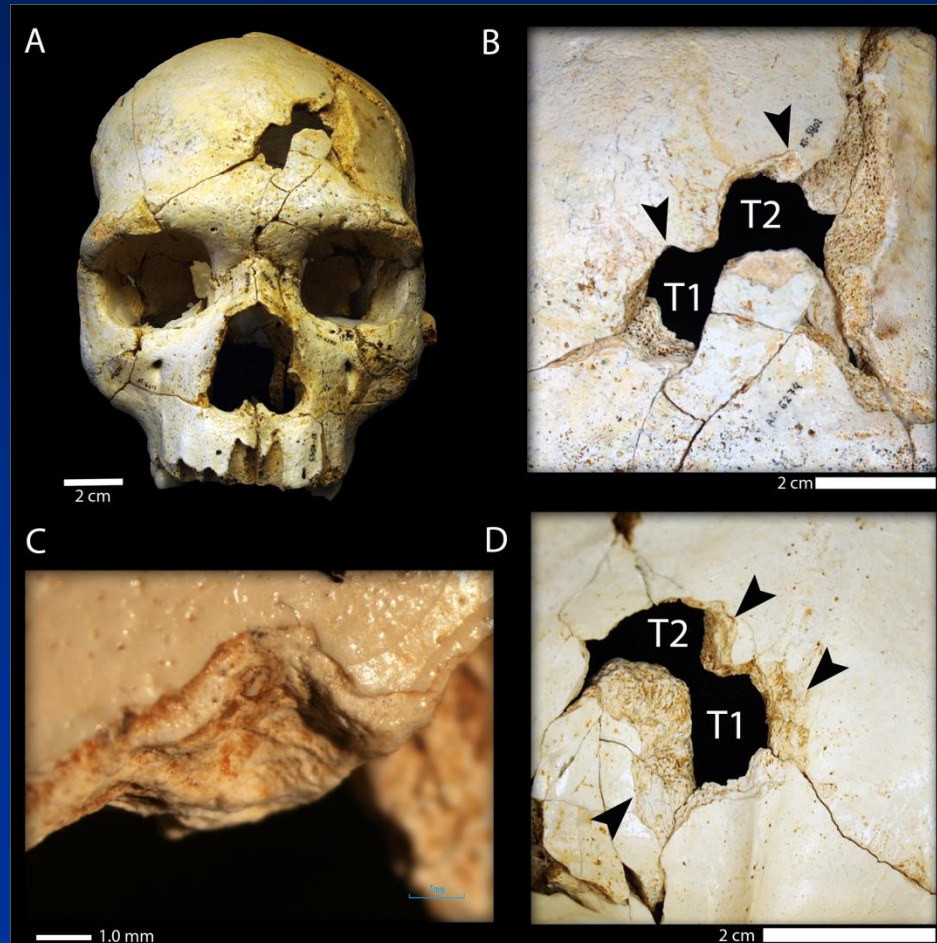
- Violence is not homogeneous
 - Affective (emotional, reactive, defensive)
 - Predatory (instrumental, targeted, offensive)







Sala et al., PLOS One, May 27, 2015: Lethal Violence 430,000 years ago in north Spain



Threat Assessment

- We primarily focus upon predatory (instrumental, targeted, offensive) violence
- But also concern ourselves with less violent acts of intentional aggression, such as harassment, bullying, intimidation, boundary violations, etc.



- There is often a **pathway to violence**, but it varies in:
 - Speed
 - Duration
 - Vector or direction
 - Location at any point in time



- Threat assessment is different from, and similar to, violence risk assessment
 - It is dynamic
 - It is operational
 - It is often urgent
 - Both focus upon management of the threat



- Threat assessment and threat management are dynamically related; when you do one, you do the other.



- Static factors may help predict long term risk of violence, but dynamic factors work best in the short term management of threats



- Structured professional judgment is superior to unstructured professional judgment to assess risk
 - Ipsi Dixit—“he himself said it”
 - “I am the doctor...”



I WAS JUST CHECKING YOUR
RECORDS, KLEINZWECK, AND YOU HAVE
A PH.D.. IN **PSEUDOSCIENCE!**



- We select our SPJ instrument based upon:
 - Outcome we want to measure
 - Goodness of fit between our subject and the validation sample(s)
 - Our training in the instrument
 - The scientific foundation of the instrument



The map is not the territory



Words of Wisdom

- Precision can be the enemy of accuracy
 - Because we can be more precise, we desire to do so; but it forces others to also be more precise, and therefore often inaccurate





Good accuracy
Good precision



Poor accuracy
Good precision



Poor accuracy
Poor precision

For the consultants.....

- Follow the rules, but think outside the box.
– Kris Mohandie



- Your work is their reputation
 - Steve White



- Good work speaks for itself



- Monitor your own narcissism



“I am very, very rich!!!!”



“One day, I do want to run for
Prime Minister...”



Eleanor Roosevelt:

- “You wouldn’t worry so much about what others think of you if you realized how seldom they do.”



- There are two rules for success:
 1. Never reveal everything you know



- Our recognition of patterns is an evolved skill that helps us survive threats
 - Is it friend or foe? The amygdala reacts faster, the pre-frontal cortex is more accurate, but slower; the high road vs. the low road.



Gestalt Psychology

- Hw cn I rd ths wrds wtht ny vwls?



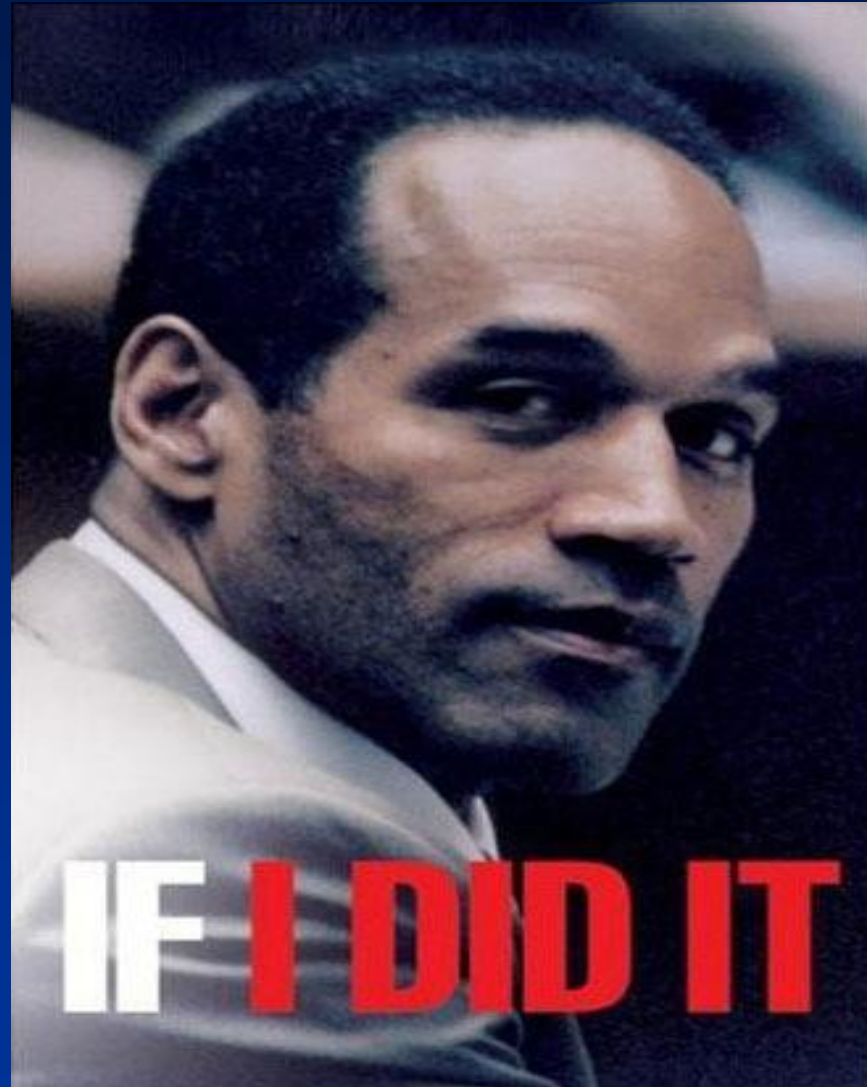
Stalking

- Understanding stalking, and work in this area of criminality, has contributed much to threat assessment
- Stalking is an old behavior, but a new crime



- The most dangerous stalkers are prior sexual intimates of the victim





- Most public figure stalkers are psychotic.
- >80%





Criminal Violence

- Criminal violence is decreasing throughout the United States, but mass murder is on the rise

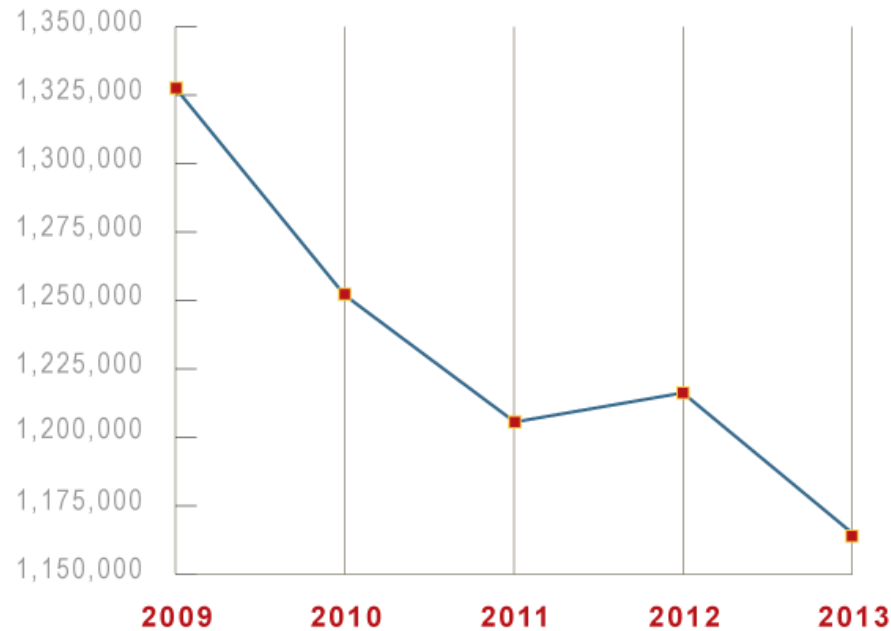


FBI Uniform Crime Report 2013

Violent Crime Offense Figure

Five-Year Trend, 2009-2013

Estimated
number of offenses



FBI Active Shooter Study 2014

- “An individual(s) killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.”
- 11.4 incidents annually (N=160)
- 6.4 2000-2006
- 16.4 2007-2013
- 150% increase
- Consistent with Harvard public health study



Terrorism

- We face threats from the extremes
 - Secular
 - Religious
 - Single Issue
 - Bizarre (usually psychotic)



The Violent True Believer as Lone Wolf?



Rick McIntyre, wolf researcher

- “The main characteristic of an alpha male wolf is a quiet confidence, quiet self-assurance. You know what you need to do; you know what’s best for your pack. You lead by example. You’re very comfortable with that. You have a calming effect.”

- New York Times, June 6, 2015, p. A19



- Let's consider not using the terms “lone wolf” or “school shooter”
- Do you want to help the likes of James Holmes and Dzhokahr Tsarnaev strike a cool pose?



MARK WAHLBERG

SHOOTER

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF 'TRAINING DAY'

"Edge-of-your-seat action."

- CHUCK THOMAS, CBS TV

- Let's call it what it is:
 - An act of lone terrorism
 - An act of mass murder



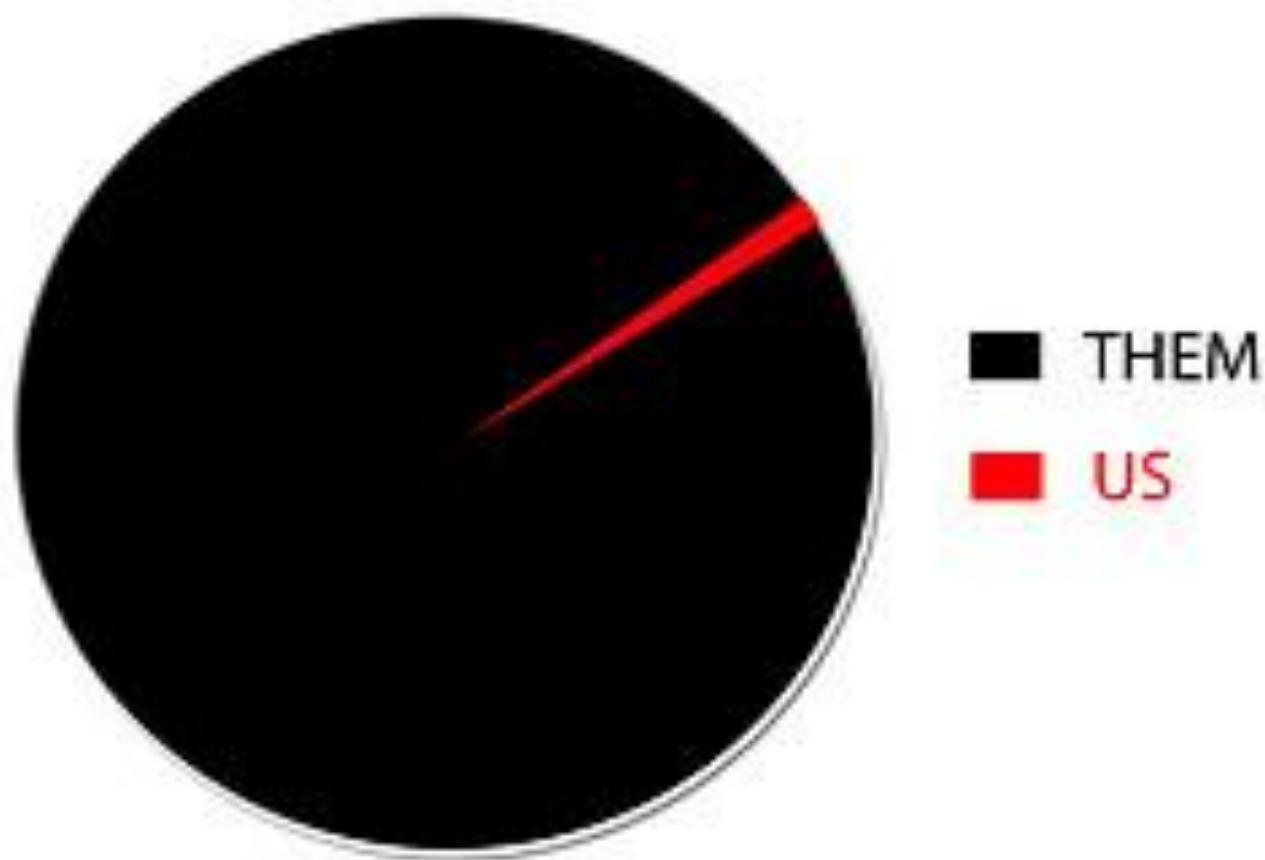
Much to their surprise, the Jihadists
found the virgins awaiting them in heaven
were not what they had expected.



- Mental illness is one ingredient in many factors that increase risk for targeted violence, but a very small piece of the pie.



Who is responsible?



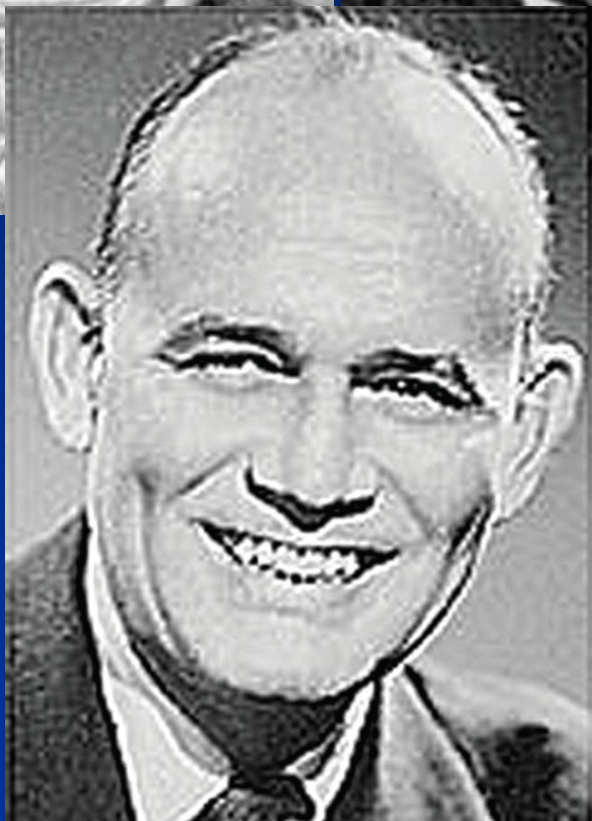
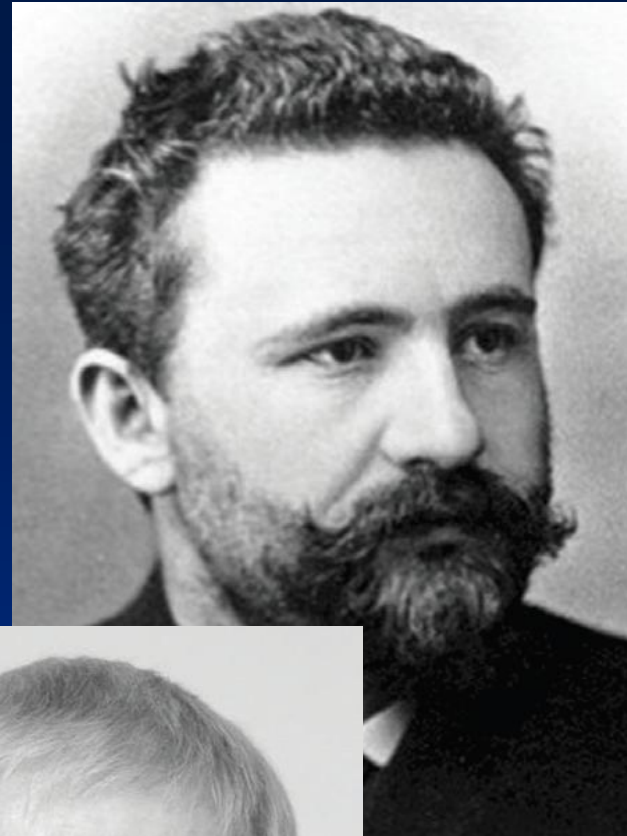
- Psychopaths walk the earth.
 - “Intraspecies predators”
 - Evolutionarily adapted for predation
 - Account for the largest proportion of explainable variable in violence risk
 - Usually are the most disturbing subjects of concern in threat assessment





- “There are no saints in the animal kingdom, only breakfast and dinner.”
 - Billy Bob Thornton, “Fargo,” May, 2014





↑ OPEN ↑

ARE
YOU A
PSYCHOPATH?

YOU BETTER CHECK

Please

TAKE ONE

Manufactured by S&S

- Targeted violence is a rare event, and cannot be predicted
 - Yet, unless the probability of an event is zero, it will eventually occur



- Population-based epidemiological studies are of little use in predicting rare events.
 - 1 out of 10,000 people commit homicide.
 - We apply a risk prediction instrument that is 90% accurate
 - Even though most offenders will be correctly predicted, we will be wrong 9,473 times for every time we are correct
 - This is the Number Needed to Detain (Singh, 2013)



Black Swan Events Do Occur

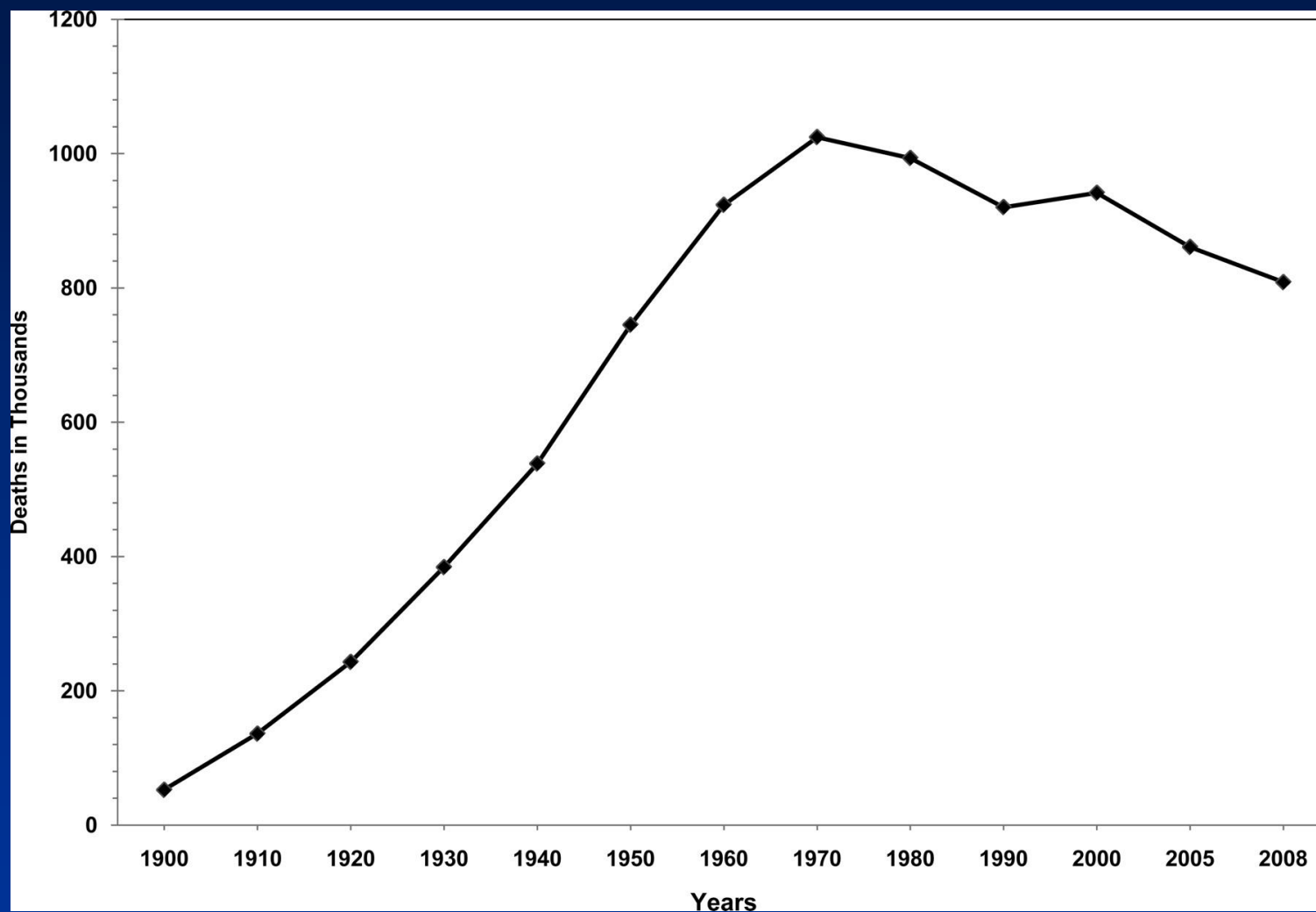


- Unpredictable
- Catastrophic

- **Prevention does not require prediction**
 - Can your cardiologist predict who will have a heart attack?
 - Can your cardiologist manage risk factors associated with a heart attack?



Deaths attributable to cardiovascular disease (United States: 1900–2008).



Writing Group Members et al. *Circulation* 2012;125:e2-e220



- Watch your cognitive biases
 - Confirmatory
 - Availability
 - Predictable world (hindsight and foresight bias)



- Beware of inductive reasoning
 - Moving from the particular to the general:
“I have done two stalking cases and they were both psychopaths, therefore all stalkers are psychopaths.”



- Social Media Investigation (SMI) is critical to threat assessment and management

- Emails
- Blogging
- Listservs
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Tumblr
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Etc.



SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLAINED

TWITTER I'M EATING A #DONUT

FACEBOOK I LIKE DONUTS

FOURSQUARE THIS IS WHERE
I EAT DONUTS

INSTAGRAM HERE'S A VINTAGE
PHOTO OF MY DONUT

YOUTUBE HERE I AM EATING A DONUT

LINKED IN MY SKILLS INCLUDE DONUT EATING

PINTEREST HERE'S A DONUT RECIPE

LAST FM NOW LISTENING TO "DONUTS"

G+ I'M A GOOGLE EMPLOYEE
WHO EATS DONUTS.

Do you mind if I strap your phone
to my forehead so I can pretend
you're looking at me when I talk?



- We need Occam's Razor
 - Among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions is better.
 - 9/11 was a Jewish conspiracy orchestrated by the Zionist Operated Government (ZOG) to start a war against Islam, and also involved plotting by the CIA
 - 9/11 was a terrorist attack by Al Qaeda



- We remember the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and try to be comfortable with it
 - There is a fundamental limit as to the precision with which we can know something
 - Walter White is Heisenberg





- We are wary of the observer (Hawthorne) effect
 - People change their behavior when they know they are being observed.
 - When do we interview or not?
 - How aggressive should our risk management be?



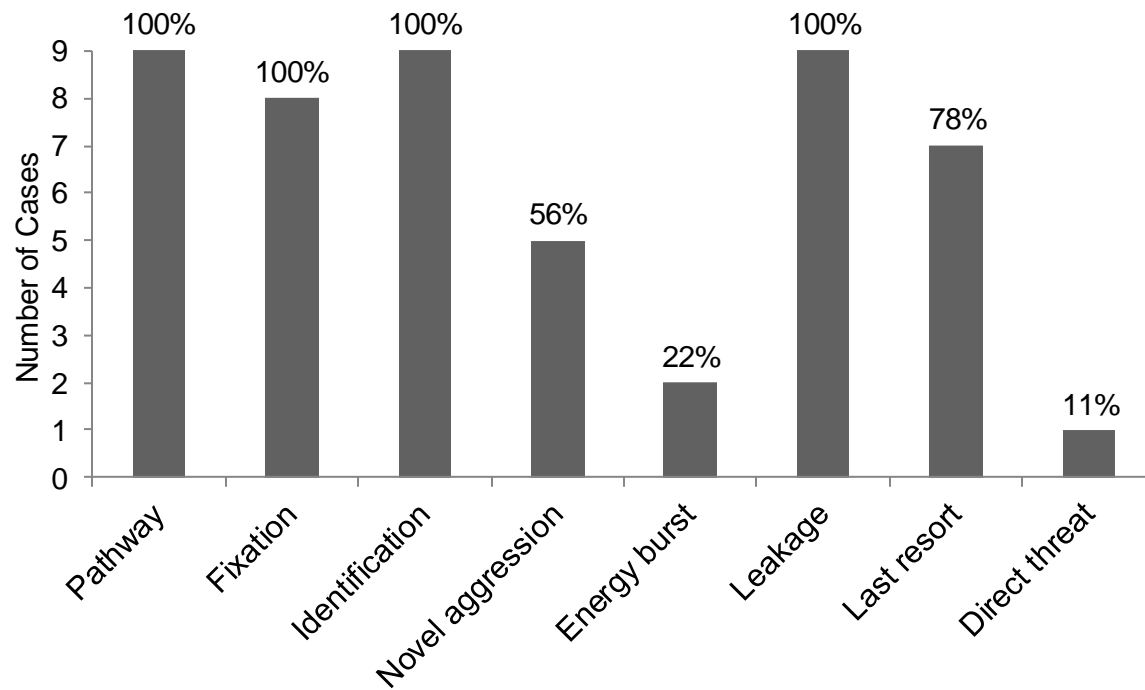
- Directly communicated threats are on the stage of threat assessment, but usually do not have the leading role



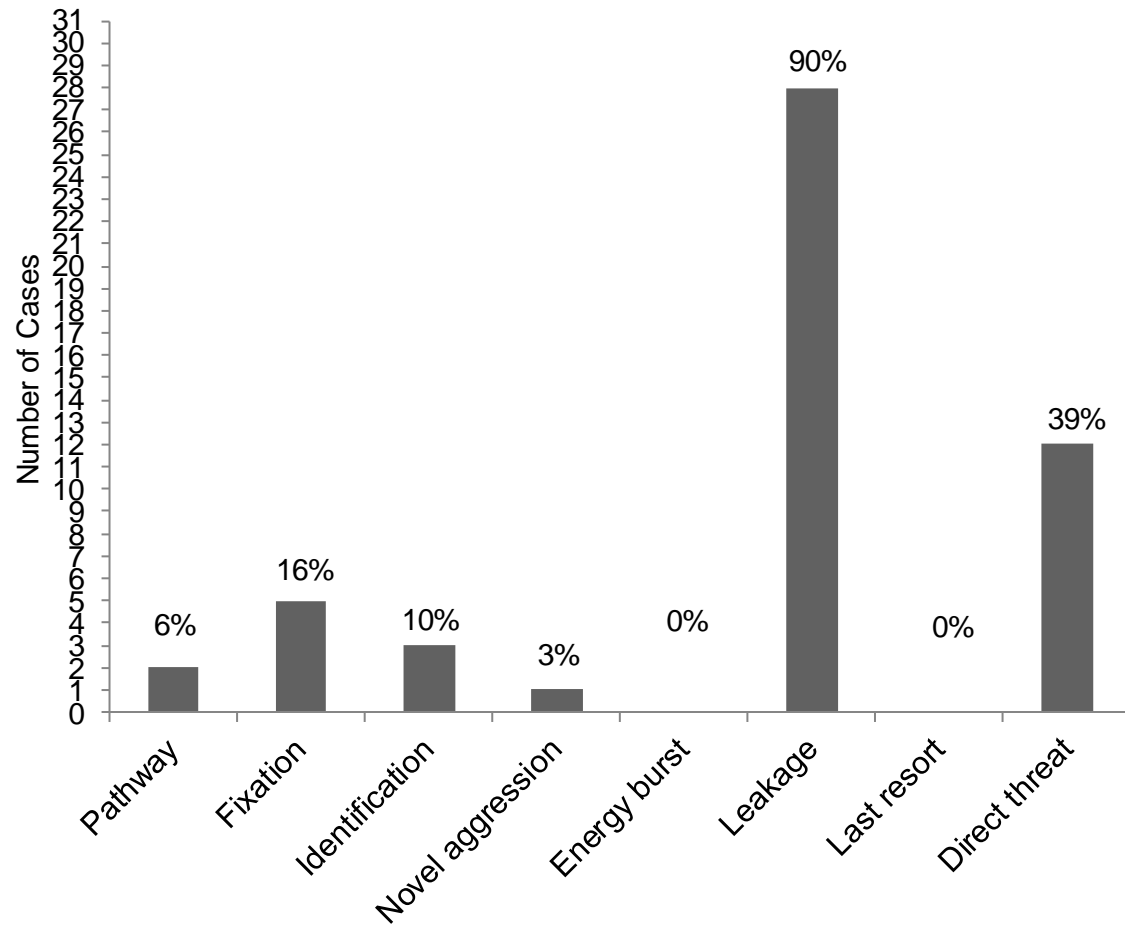
- Leakage occurs during the pathway toward violence in the majority of cases
- However, most leaks will be false positive



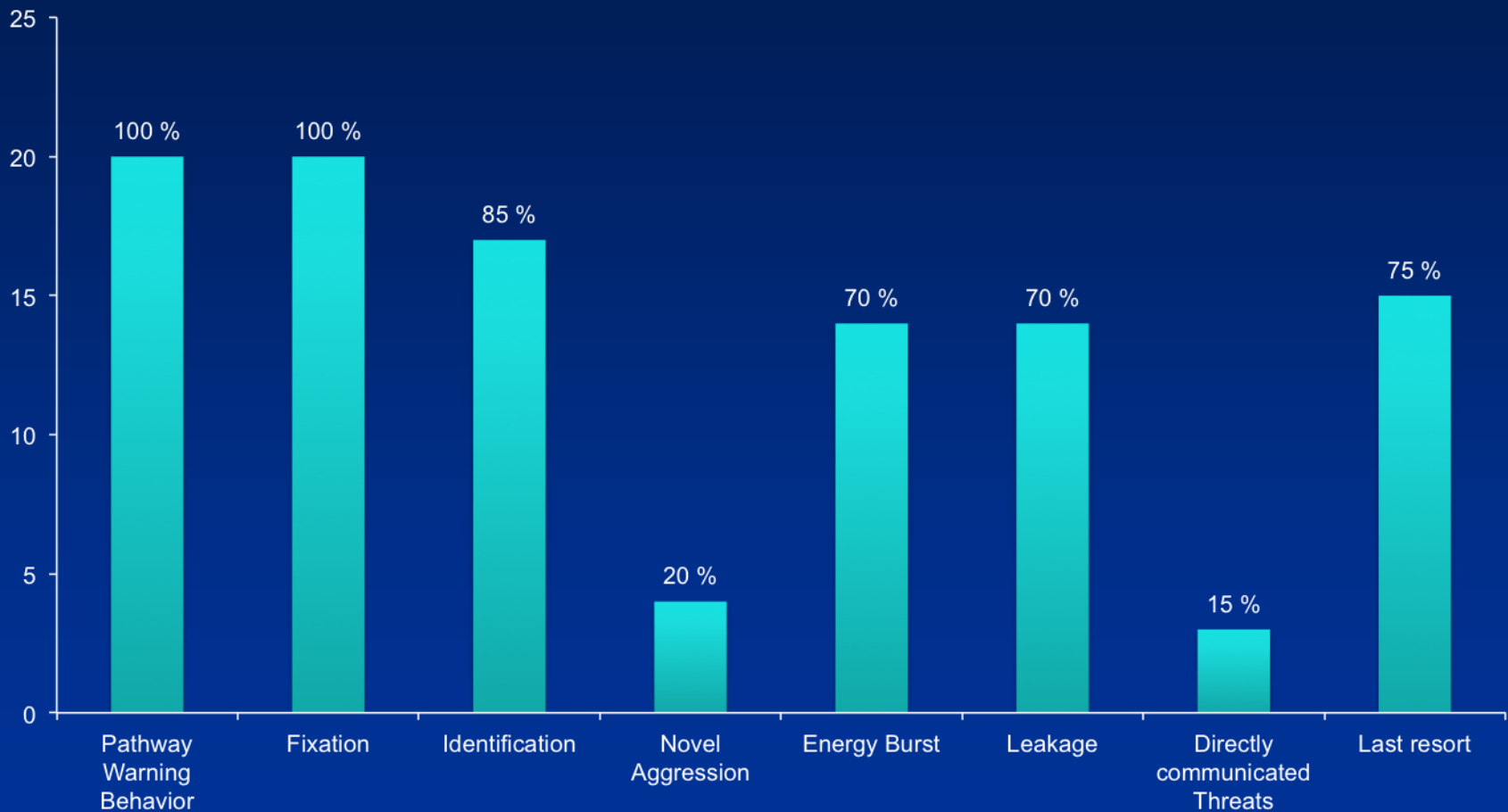
School Shooters (N=9)



Other Students of Concern (N=31)



European Lone Terrorists n=22 (Meloy et al., submitted, JTAM)



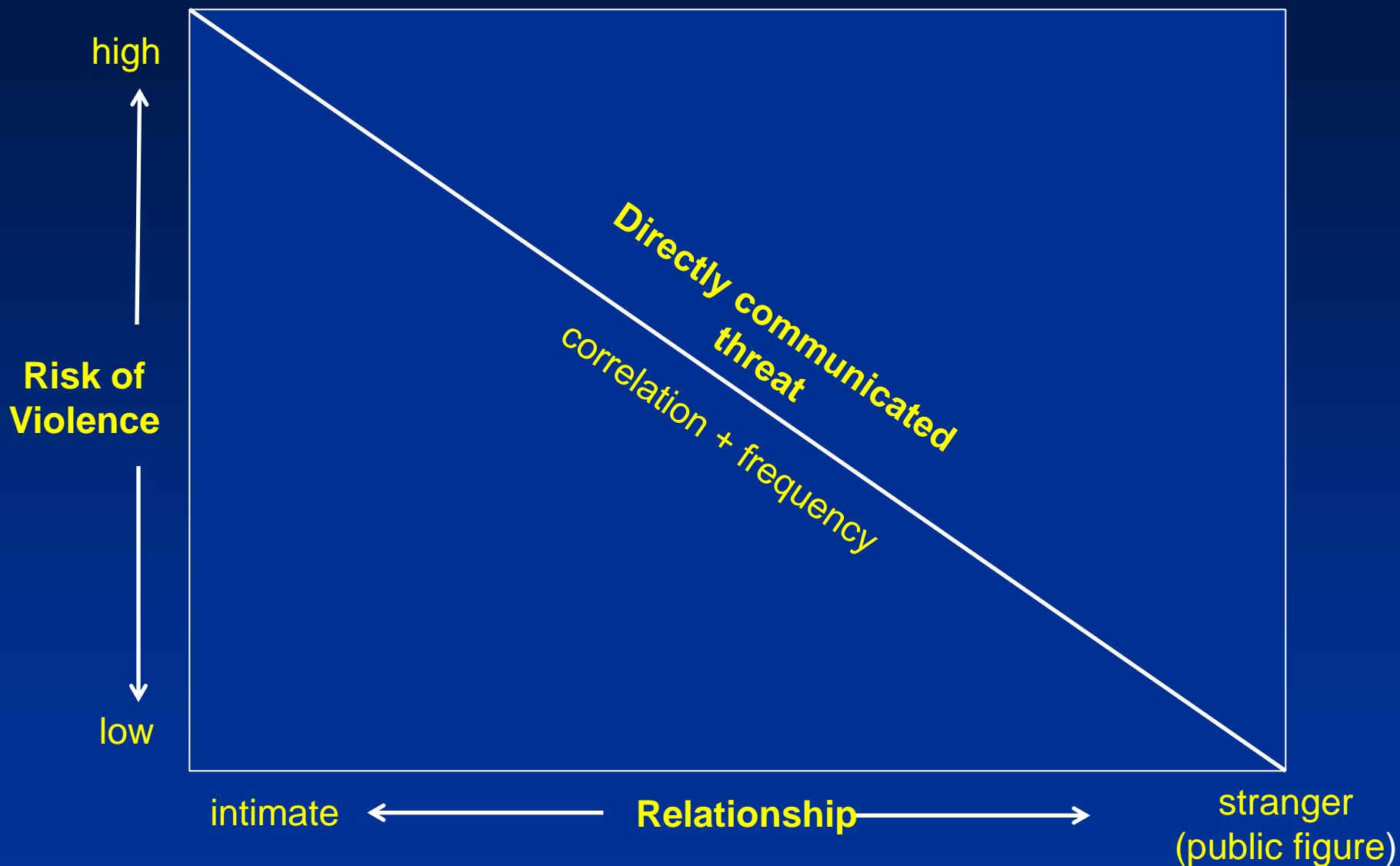
- Posing a threat is more important than making a threat (Fein & Vossekuil)
 - Thinking
 - Feeling
 - Behavior



However,

- The “intimacy effect” has some scientific validation
 - The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the more a direct threat is predictive of violence

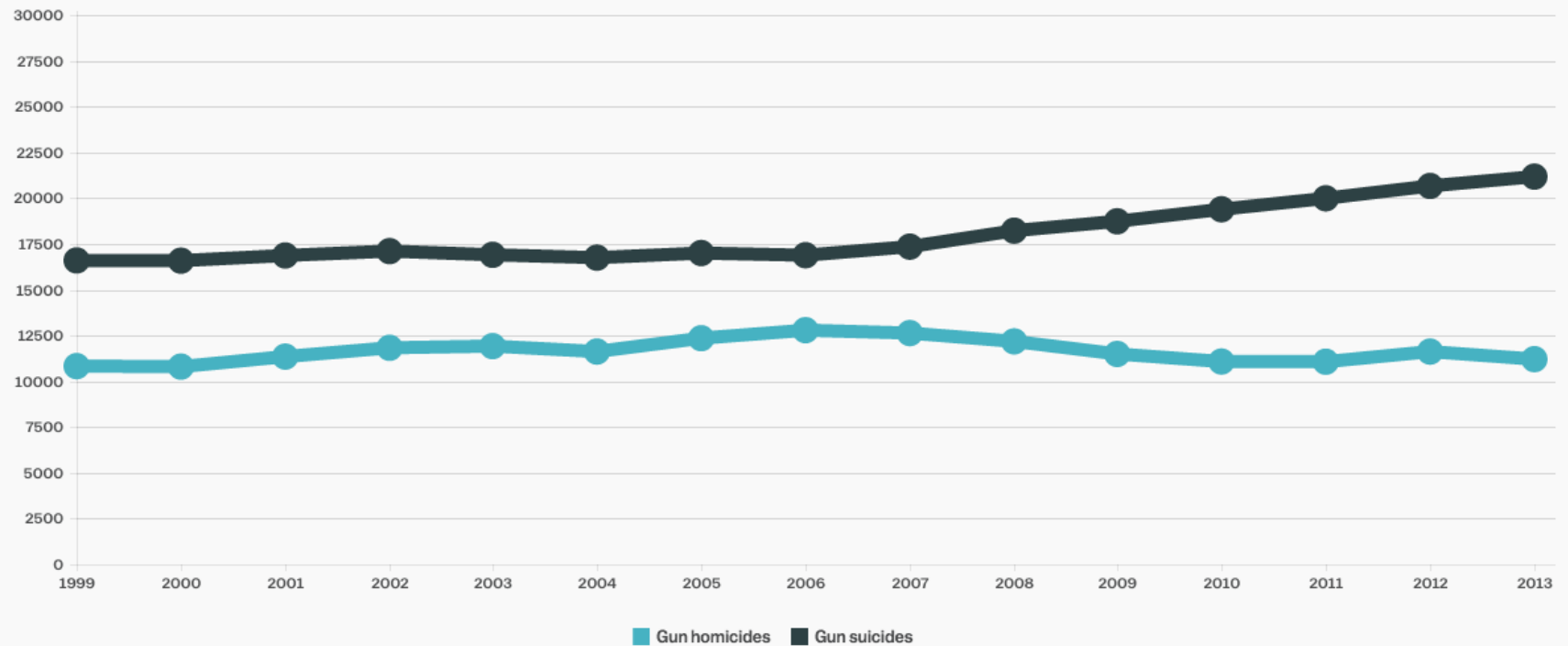




- Suicide risk positively correlates with homicide risk



Gun homicide and suicides in the US, 1999 to 2013



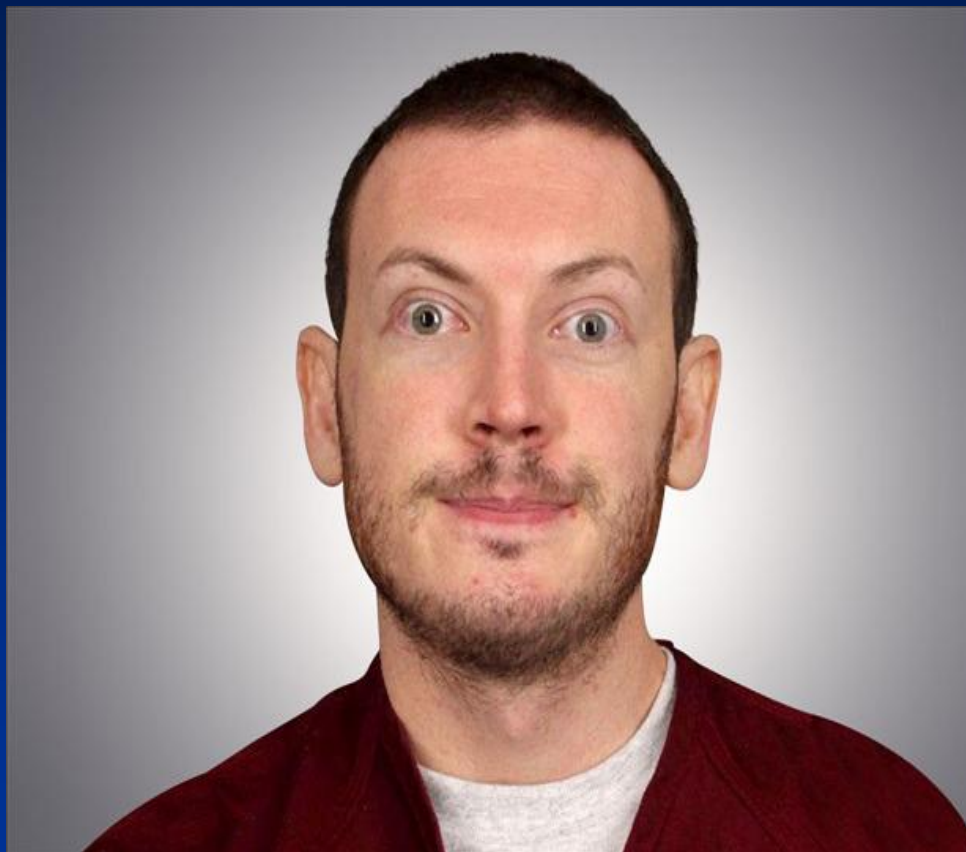
SOURCE: CDC / WISQARS

Vox

- Psychosis does not necessarily disorganize behavior



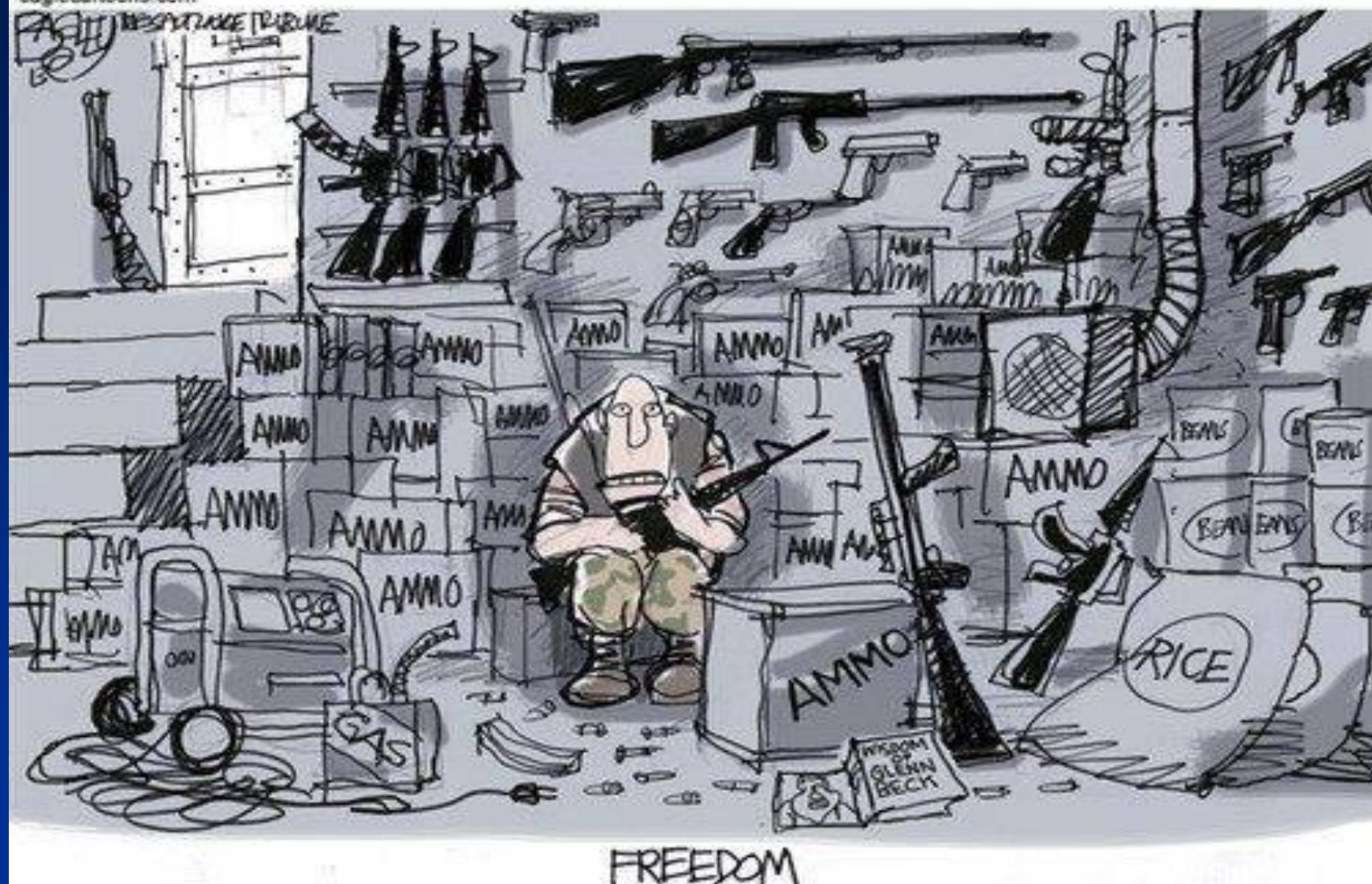
18 dead, 83 injured



Firearms: What do we know?

- Weak predictor of violence in general
- Strong predictor of lethality risk if possessed by a person of concern





Supporting the Second Amendment

- **Register** all firearms and their sale
- **Regulate** to keep firearms away from felons, the mentally ill, and others who are at greater risk to misuse them
- **Require** competency in their use and safe keeping



- Cultural scripts are important





Columbine was a cultural script
leading to an international copycat
effect beginning in 1999



- The science of threat assessment, and particularly threat management, is just beginning.



Our Strengths

- Our emphasis on multi-disciplinary teams
- Our growth through networking, organizations, a science journal, newsletters, conferences, and meetings
- Our attention to certification, best practices, standards of practice, and scientific foundation
- Our ATAP Code of Ethical Conduct



Our Vulnerabilities

- Our science (we strive for evidence-based practice)
- The lack of understanding of TATM among professionals outside our specialty, including most mental health professionals, law enforcement professionals, and courts



Our Vulnerabilities

- Our lack of formal study of **threat management** and what actually works
- Our definitions of terms
- Our credentialing for skills, knowledge, and experience to do TATM: is our testing reliable and valid?
- Our lack of clarity and measurement of outcomes



Our Future

- Build the science of threat assessment and threat management
- Disseminate to practitioners within all disciplines in clear and direct language
- Teach TATM whenever there is a teaching moment
- Define our outcomes
- Recognize this historical moment for TATM





I hope I die
during an
inservice
because the
transition
between
life and
death would be so subtle.

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www.sandyhookpromise.org

Thank you very much!

- www.DrReidMeloy.com

