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An Epidemiological Assessment of Problematic Contacts to Members of Congress

ABSTRACT: In order to assess the nature of threat assessment activity pertaining to members of Congress, 4387 cases involving threatening and other problematic contact were analyzed. The cases were studied regarding subject characteristics, articulated motives, as well as several aspects of contact behavior in relation to approach behavior. Approachers were significantly less likely to have articulated threat language prior to or during their contacts and were also less likely to have stated a policy grievance (foreign or domestic) as the source of their concern. Further, approachers were substantially more likely to have expressed help seeking requests as part of their prior and approach-related contacts and were less likely to have had racial or sexualized content within their contacts. Approachers were also significantly more likely to have had a criminal record as well as displayed symptoms suggestive of major mental illness. Subjects engaging in approach behavior were also less likely to have used an alias, were less likely to be a direct constituent of the target and were more likely to have contacted multiple congressional targets. The implications for threat assessment activity are discussed.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, threat assessment, domestic terrorism, mental illness

Despite longstanding efforts to assess threats of targeted violence, researchers have only recently begun to systematically examine the nature of targeted violence incidents to assist with devising strategies for appraising the risk of future targeted violence. In fact, it has been only within the last few years that distinct methodologies have been outlined for the assessment and management of threat cases, primarily coming from sources responsible for protecting high-profile individuals. The most well-defined and comprehensive approach to threat assessment has been articulated by Borum and colleagues (1). This approach differs from other risk assessment techniques because it attempts to identify, assess, and manage persons who may pose a threat of violence to certain identifiable targets rather than simply any target or category of targets. Unlike many other forms of risk assessment, this process requires an examination and determination of the level of violence risk an individual poses at a particular time (2,3).

As with other investigative and assessment techniques, threat assessment methodology requires that one consider a comprehensive range of variables relating to the individual subject as well as behavior characteristics and features of the contact (1). Describing the need for integrating research into the practice of threat assessment, Coggins, Pynchon, and Dvoskin (4) stated that professionals must have access to data involving a wide range of problematic contact cases to help understand the utility of various case characteristics for predicting problematic and potentially violent behavior. Unfortunately, little published research details the nature of such contact behavior within the wide range of cases that investi-

gators typically confront. Indeed, the earliest research on threat cases involving political targets involved unique samples of institutionalized mentally ill individuals (e.g., 5–7). In one of the last studies of these individuals, Shore and colleagues (8) confirmed the high incidence of psychosis and delusional symptomatology. However, they were also the first to make statistical comparisons among these patients by breaking down cases into those who issued threats of violence and those who did not, finding more intimate relationship instability (divorce or separation) among those who threatened. Subsequent analyses (9,10) discovered that issuing threats to the political target was associated with post-release violence charges among patients without prior violence arrest records, but not among patients with prior violence arrests. Meanwhile, a history of weapons possession was associated with post-release violence among the latter group.

More recent research has attempted to provide detailed information about political threat case characteristics and targeted violence. Fein and Vossekuil (3) intensively and systematically studied demographic, psychological, and behavioral features of subjects who attacked, or approached with intent to attack, prominent public figures to analyze the connections between these factors and violent/potentially lethal approach behavior. Several characteristics, including the primary motivation behind the attack behavior (e.g., desire to achieve notoriety/fame, to bring public attention to a perceived problem, to achieve a special relationship with the target, and to bring about political change), emerged as related to attack behavior.

Another broad-based study assessed risk factors potentially most useful for consideration in the early stages of assessment of threats and violence directed toward federal judicial officials (11). Calhoun categorized contacts based upon the nature of the threatening language within individual communications and the relationship

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between the threatening language and the level of behavior performed to carry out those threats. Certain characteristics (such as a hidden identity, identification with a group or ideological cause) and suspect motives derived from specific grievances against the target were related to an increased risk of assault behavior. Lastly, a recent examination of state government threat cases reported a number of basic characteristics related to levels of contact behavior (12). Analyses indicated that cases involving an approach toward the target (considered a threshold of high-risk behavior) differed from nonapproach cases in the temporal intensity of contact, the primary motivation articulated for contacting the target, as well as in the presence of mental illness.

Despite the extensive sampling of judicial cases in the Calhoun (11) study, much of the literature in the federal area (in particular) has focused upon the executive branch, often involving small samples. Additional research is needed concerning the broader epidemiological characteristics of problematic contact cases related to the legislative branch. It is unclear the degree to which assumptions related to threat assessment overlap across the branches of government. Legislators, for example, often provide an ombudsman-like function for constituents as well as tending to make themselves more available to constituents. While the targeted threat literature has expanded, law enforcement and threat assessment professionals who guard public officials may also benefit from epidemiological and risk factor information about a broader range of cases typically encountered within the generally accessible and service-oriented legislative branch (12). The need for epidemiological and descriptive data related to inappropriate contacts toward the legislative branch is further heightened by operational challenges faced by threat assessment professionals, given the increased size of the legislative bodies as well as the presence of centralized and district-level offices. To date, only one published study has focused upon U.S. congressional targets, examining characteristics of letters to reveal aspects relating to approach behavior (13). However, this study exclusively utilized a selected sample of letter contacts, highlighting the need for broader epidemiological data concerning the legislative branch.

Researchers have noted a substantial need for applied research connecting relevant risk assessment information to the context of targeted violence, especially information concerning a range of pertinent factors (1,4). It is beneficial for investigators and researchers to have a significant understanding about the nature of threatening or alarming incidents involving the target(s) under protection. What do these cases generally look like? Are there discernable differences between cases in which the subject attempts to approach a target in a potentially threatening way and cases involving no attempted approach? For the most part, characteristics of these cases have not been inspected in much depth, aside from those studies focusing on incidents of attempted assassination and extreme attack behavior (e.g., 2,14). However, these violent incidents are the very rare exception, and it seems important to be cognizant of the features from not only these incidents but also the full breadth of incidents encountered by protective agents.

The intent of this study is to summarize characteristics about the cases investigated by a law enforcement agency as well as related risk factors for problematic approach behavior suggested by such information. The authors hope that the results will help to enhance the reader's knowledge of a variety of case characteristics involving threats to a range of public officials, and provide useful information about the relationship of certain basic case features to the occurrence of problematic approach behavior.

Procedures

Case information was derived from the computerized records of the United States Capitol Police's (USCP) Threat Assessment Section (TAS). The USCP, established in 1828, is the agency primarily responsible for the security of members of congress, congressional staff, and visitors to the US Capitol, as well as congressional offices throughout the nation. Incidents of either a threatening or suspicious nature are reported to and managed by the TAS, the specialized unit responsible for performing the relevant investigative and risk assessment activity.

Data collection involved an in-depth analysis of 4387 electronically stored cases investigated between 1993 and mid-1999. Such records included an abstract of the incident report as well as data fields containing descriptive information about the case the investigator is required to answer. As a matter of policy, the abstract provided a detailed synopsis of the contact behavior, indications of unusual features or elements of the contact, as well as details concerning the particular statements made by the subject.

For the purpose of the present analysis, the data coded included a variety of subject and contact-level features. A subject was considered to have approached if either the investigator or the target contacted described any physical approach involving an articulated threat, threatening gesture, or attempt to unlawfully disrupt a congressional function. Such behaviors could include an attempted (intercepted by law enforcement) or actual face-to-face contact with or without a weapon, or attempted or actual assault) toward a member of the congressional community (e.g., member of congress, staff, USCP personnel, or visitor).

Use of an alias was defined as an obvious attempt to disguise one's identity via use of a group or code name or simply providing a false identity. The number of targets contacted (coded as singular/multiple) was determined by noting the exclusivity of the member/staff contacted. If either multiple offices were contacted or the subjected addressed contacts to the congress (or government) in general, the multiple target coding was utilized. A subject was considered to have been a direct constituent of the target official if the subject resided in the congressional target's home district.

Prior arrest record was determined utilizing the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database for interstate records of offenses as well as local law enforcement contact information. Such cross validation is necessary for documenting criminal history as some local law enforcement contacts and pending legal activity are often not found within the NCIC database.

A subject was determined to have been suspected of serious mental illness if certain behaviors were noted by either victim reports or investigator observations detailed within the written case abstract, including self-reported hallucinations, observed incoherence, or disorganization of thought, or obvious delusional presentation (e.g., paranoia, complaints of thought insertion or withdrawal). Though such documentation was not always available, a subject was also considered to be mentally ill if corroborating documentation existed affirming that the subject had suffered from some mental illness or had some law enforcement contact related to protective custody.

Subjects were considered to have utilized threatening language if they described a desire to physically harm or have physical harm occur to the target in either a direct or veiled fashion.

As part of normal investigative procedure, relevant state and federal law enforcement agencies are contacted to determine whether the subject had engaged in similar or related behavior within the agency's jurisdiction. Subjects were determined to have been involved with multiple law enforcement agencies related to threat

management if at least one local, state, or federal law enforcement agency noted such contacts.

Concerning thematic content, coding of the non-exclusive categories of content and themes was based upon verbal or written statements noted during the contact behavior. *Domestic policy-related* content was considered if statements were provided regarding non-personal concerns related either to government operations, policies, other political, or legal topics. Examples of such policy-related content included the budget, as well as sensitive topics such as abortion and AIDS. On a related note, *foreign policy-related* content was similarly noted for non-personal concerns related either to government operations, policies, or other political issues pertaining to foreign entities (e.g., military action overseas, relationship with another country, international trade). Content was categorized as *help seeking* when subjects articulated requests for assistance from the target or indicated a desire that action be taken to remedy a perceived problem. Regardless of whether assistance was requested, content was coded as related to *government entitlement* whenever specific entitlements were noted (e.g., Social Security, Medicaid, veterans benefits). Degrading language or imagery involving racial or ethnic groups was classified as *racial*. Degrading language or imagery involving gender groups or sexual references was classified as *obscene/sexual*.

Consistent with standards outlined in Cicchetti and Sparrow (15) for coding archival data, inter-rater reliabilities of all coded information were determined by calculating Pearson product-moment correlations for continuous variables and the kappa statistic for categorical variables. Reliability estimates ranged from .86 (for thematic content) to .95 (demographic factors and criminal history).

Results

Approximately 90% of the cases studied involved a single contact ($M = 1.15$, $SD = .91$). Univariate analyses indicated that subjects who engaged in multiple contacts toward the target were more likely to have engaged in approach behavior ($\chi^2(1) = 22.35$, $p < .0001$). Particularly noteworthy was that in only 6.9% of cases did subjects follow-up with a problematic contact subsequent to a USCP intervention (e.g., interview, mental health intervention).

Based upon those cases with known gender, males comprised a substantial majority of the overall contact sample (83.2%), as well as similar proportions of both the approach and non-approach groups. The total contact sample was ethnically diverse though predominantly Caucasian (81.7%) with the remaining group distributed across other groups (14.7% African-American, 2.0% Hispanic, and 1.6% other). The age span of the contact subjects was rather wide ranging (between 11 and 87 years) with the average age among subjects with known demographic information equaling 44.12 years ($SD = 12.80$). As noted in Table 1, younger subjects were significantly more likely to engage in approach behavior [$F(1, 2345) = 58.45$, $p < .0001$]. Nearly one-quarter (23.4%) of the subjects had a prior arrest record, ranging across various misdemeanors and felonies. Univariate analysis indicated that those engaging in approach behavior were more likely to have prior criminal records [$\chi^2(1) = 142.13$, $p < .0001$].

Almost one third of the subjects overall displayed some overt behavioral sign suggestive of serious mental illness according to the investigative data drawn from either behavioral descriptions by the investigators or reporting parties. Based upon univariate analysis, those who engaged in approach behavior were significantly more likely to evince symptoms of serious mental illness [$\chi^2(1) = 20.24$, $p < .0001$].

TABLE 1—Univariate analyses of approach and non-approach samples.

Characteristic	Group	
	Approach ($n = 986$)	Non-approach ($n = 3,401$)
Mean age (SD)	42.10 (11.45)	46.32 (13.21)‡
Prior arrest record	357 (36.2%)	940 (27.7%)‡
Mental illness indicated	346 (35.1%)	940 (27.7%)‡
Use of alias	164 (16.6%)	670 (19.7%)*
Direct constituent of target	289 (29.3%)	1155 (34.0%)†
Multiple law enforcement agency contact	222 (22.5%)	603 (17.7%)‡
Multiple targets contacted	391 (39.7%)	1123 (33.2%)‡
Language content		
Threatening language	207 (21.4%)	1159 (35.1%)‡
Help seeking	270 (27.4%)	559 (16.5%)‡
Government entitlement	69 (7.0%)	232 (6.8%)
Domestic policy	375 (38.0%)	1699 (50.0%)‡
Foreign policy	55 (5.6%)	295 (8.7%)†
Obscene/sexual	66 (6.7%)	411 (12.1%)‡
Racial	37 (3.8%)	312 (9.2%)‡

* $p < .05$, † $p < .01$, ‡ $p < .001$.

Contact characteristics

Physical approaches were performed by 22.5% of the subjects studied. Attempted or actual violent approaches (i.e., approach with weapon or attempted or actual physical assault) occurred in only 2.2% of the cases studied. The most prevalent threatening or harassing contact occurred via letters or faxes (39.4%) followed by phone contacts (27.1%). Threatening or harassing computer contact (e.g., e-mail) comprised of 2.0% of the cases studied.

Only 19.1% of the contact sample utilized an alias or withheld their name during the contact. Generally, approachers were significantly more likely not to attempt to mislead regarding their identity either prior to or during their problematic contact [$\chi^2(1) = 4.67$, $p < .031$].

Overall, 31.7% of the cases involved either a direct or veiled threat toward the member of the congressional community contacted with the remaining contacts being merely harassing in nature. Approachers were significantly less likely to have made a direct or veiled threat prior to the problematic contact [$\chi^2(1) = 69.50$, $p < .0001$]. While consistent with prior literature, the data also suggested that threats cannot be ignored, as 21% of the approaches were preceded by threatening statements and 42% of the violent approaches (i.e., involving threat or use of weapon, attempted or actual assault) involved prior threatening statements.

Given today's mobile society with widespread access to communication technology, it is not surprising that only slightly more than 25% of problem contacts involved a direct constituent of the congressional office contacted. Univariate testing indicated that approachers were significantly more likely to not have been direct constituents of the congressional office [$\chi^2(1) = 7.63$, $p < .006$].

Overall, over one-third (34.3%) of the subjects contacted multiple targets. Proportionally, more of the approachers engaged in such behavior [$\chi^2(1) = 14.23$, $p < .0001$], as well as being substantially more likely to have been involved with other state or law enforcement agencies as a result of problematic contact behavior [$\chi^2(1) = 11.46$, $p < .001$].

The thematic content of the various contacts was wide ranging. Concerning policy issues mentioned by the subjects, a majority (51.1%) noted a range of domestic issues (e.g., abortion, gun con-

trol). Foreign policy issues were mentioned in only 16.7% of the cases. Approachers were less likely to primarily raise policy related concerns of either a domestic [$\chi^2(1) = 43.91, p < .0001$] or foreign nature [$\chi^2(1) = 9.99, p < .002$]. Analysis of specific themes and content indicated that insults were noted in 51.1% of contacts. Help seeking behavior was noted in 26.2% of contacts with approachers being substantially more likely to endorse such a theme [$\chi^2(1) = 59.57, p < .0001$]. On a related note, concern regarding personal entitlements was described in 15.8% of contacts. Obscene or sexualized content was observed in 16.1% of problematic contacts, while racial themes were noted in 16.6%. Such content was generally inversely related to approach behavior [$\chi^2(1) = 22.92, p < .0001$].

To determine a model differentiating between problematic approach and non-approach cases, a logistic regression analysis was utilized with 4234 cases not missing any of the predictor variables described with the above mentioned univariate analyses. The resulting equation successfully differentiated between the approach and non-approach groups [$\chi^2(13) = 1546.25, p < .0001$] while accounting for 30% of the variance (Cox and Schnell $R^2 = .306$). The resulting model correctly classified 76.4% of the overall sample (46.9% of approachers and 80.5% of non-approachers). Table 2 displays the relevant significance testing and beta weights for the resulting regression equation. Not surprising, many of the variables that individually differentiated between the approach and non approach groups in the univariate equations also significantly contributed to the regression model. Approachers were significantly less likely to have articulated threat language prior to or during their contacts and were also less likely to have stated a policy grievance (foreign or domestic) as the source of their concern. Subjects engaging in approach behavior were also less likely to have used an alias, were less likely to be a direct constituent of the target and were more likely to have contacted multiple congressional targets. Further, approachers were substantially more likely to have expressed help seeking themes as part of their prior and approach-related contacts and were less likely to have had racial or sexualized content within their contacts. Approachers were also significantly more likely to have a criminal record as well as to display symptoms suggestive of major mental illness.

TABLE 2—Summary of binary logistic regression analysis related to approach and non-approach behavior.

Predictor	β	SE	Odds Ratio	Wald Statistic
Prior arrest record	.782	.090	2.185	75.496‡
Mental illness indicated	.328	.082	.721	16.121‡
Use of alias	-.621	.102	.537	36.844‡
Direct constituent of target	-.750	.082	.472	83.737‡
Multiple law enforcement agency contact	.116	.099	.891	1.354
Multiple targets contacted	.152	.077	.859	3.898*
Content/language				
Threatening language	-1.159	.084	.314	188.532‡
Help seeking	.682	.102	1.979	44.833‡
Government entitlement	.212	.197	1.237	1.158
Domestic policy	-.981	.073	.375	183.115‡
Foreign policy	-.528	.189	.590	7.793‡
Obscene/sexual	-.809	.161	.445	25.168‡
Racial	-1.092	.238	.336	21.068‡

* $p < .05$, † $p < .01$, ‡ $p < .001$.

Discussion

This large epidemiological sample highlighted support for a comprehensive risk assessment approach involving the analysis of relevant subject, contact behavior, and environmental risk factors related to problematic approach behavior. The range of risk factors, as well as the diversity of subjects studied, provides support for notion that no single profile exists for subjects prone to display inappropriate or dangerous targeted behavior (3).

The subject characteristics that emerged as predictive of approach behavior have been consistent with prior literature. For example, persons who engaged in problematic approach behavior were significantly more likely to have had a prior criminal record (16) as well as display behaviors/signs suggestive of serious mental illness (e.g., 12,13).

The significant presence of mentally ill subjects suggests several implications for threat management activity, including the need for continued outreach to mental health community, vigilant case management strategies, and continued training implications (17,18,4). The case management and risk assessment implications are particularly noteworthy given the fluid nature of risk posed by persons with serious mental illness. As recent research (e.g., 19,20) has indicated, the presence of mental illness, per se, is not indicative of violence risk, but more fluid variables such as type of symptomatology presented, as well as treatment compliance, are substantially more predictive.

Approachers also displayed a heightened intensity of contact behaviors, including being more likely to contact multiple targets. The finding that approachers were significantly more likely to have been involved with other federal law enforcement agencies concerning threat assessment activity also indicated such a heightened intensity. Given the potential severity of approach contact, as well as the heightened potential for multi-agency involvement with higher risk cases, agencies performing threat assessment activity need to maintain continued outreach with other law enforcement agencies at the state and federal level (see 2).

Regarding contact behavior, the findings of this large sample support the current USCP practice (as well as the opinion of many commentators) of taking non-threat and threat cases seriously. While the results are consistent with prior research (e.g., 13,3), indicating that most approach behavior prompting security intervention are not preceded by prior threats, a significant number of threatening contacts (as many as 21%) still did result in a subsequent approach. Threat assessment professionals cannot ignore the potential risk imposed by threatening behavior. One also cannot ignore the fact that the role of prior threat to approach could be understated, since threats are more likely to be reported and obtain law enforcement attention in general given the presence of statutes against such behavior.

Particularly interesting was the broad range of motives presented by the subjects and the relationship of such motives to problematic approach behavior. Many of the problematic approaches involved help seeking requests for personal issues, with few relating to ideological or policy-related issues. The salience of such a finding cannot be understated when considering threat management activity for the legislative branch, particularly given the protectees' desire to provide accessible and responsive constituent service. The predictive value of the personal motives is also noteworthy in light of the finding that approachers were more likely to contact multiple targets, suggesting that the level of focus upon the presenting concern, as opposed to the focus upon the target, may be more worthy of attention. The predictive nature of the personal and help seeking motives also differs from some of those articulated in Fein

and Vossekuil's (3) study of attempted assassins, noting that stated motives to achieve notoriety/fame, to bring public attention to a perceived problem, to achieve a special relationship with the target, and to bring about political change.

In addition to the differential presentation of motivational factors, threat assessment professionals face other challenges unique to legislative branch protection. Such enhanced operational challenges are the result of the larger size of the legislative bodies as well as the presence of centralized and district-level offices—unlike the executive and judicial branches. The provision of constituent services, a mainstay of legislative activity, also provides numerous opportunities to encounter disgruntled individuals, similar to many other public service entities.

The number of threat assessment cases faced by the USCP is noteworthy, particularly in light of limited threat assessment literature related to the legislative branch. A variety of factors appear to contribute to the heightened activity. First, increased media attention is paid upon the Congress due to C-SPAN (public affairs cable networks providing live coverage of Congressional proceedings as well as related educational programming), more attention from other 24-h news outlets, as well as more public and media attention of Congressional oversight of executive branch activity. The significant level of threat assessment activity is also likely due to increased awareness of the USCP's TAS within the Congressional community. Increased constituent involvement with entitlements may also play a key role in the increased need for threat assessment activity related to the federal legislative branch.

Some weaknesses of the present study warrant discussion. While this analysis involved a large sample of contacts tracked over several years, limited data were available in the present analysis regarding more detailed aspects of the targets contacted as well as details concerning the contact behavior (e.g., intensity of threatening behavior, distance traveled, etc.). In addition, information regarding the contact behavior (e.g., nature of threat, suspected mental illness) was drawn from documented observations by government staff or law enforcement personnel. No data are available regarding the reliability or thoroughness of observations or assertions made by the incident reporters and law enforcement. Further, detailed information concerning the severity or nature of the mental illness symptoms (e.g., presence of thought/control override symptoms) were not collected.

Despite preliminary data suggesting the effectiveness of threat assessment activity within this sample given the limited number of repeat contacts, additional research is necessary to assess the impact of various interventions utilized throughout the course of threat assessment and management activity. In addition, more in-depth analyses concerning the relationship of factors such as specific symptoms of mental illness and nature of contact behaviors to approach is warranted. Further empirical research regarding multiple agency contactors as well as subjects who are resistant to threat management strategies, would also enhance the existing body of knowledge.

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