



# Threats of Violence by Students in Special Education

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## Abstract

We compared threats of violence made by K-12 students in special education (93 cases) or regular education (95 cases). Threat information was gathered in two school districts field-testing guidelines for responding to student threats of violence. Special education students committed threats at a significantly higher annual rate (33/1,000 students) than regular education students (6.9/1,000) and made more substantive threats (39.8%) than students in regular education (20%). The highest threat rates and most serious threats were made by students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED). Students in special education who made threats also committed significantly more disciplinary infractions during the school year, including more infractions involving violent acts and disorderly conduct, than regular education students who made threats. There was no significant difference in days of school suspension that special and regular education students received in association with a threat incident. Post-threat behavioral improvement was more likely in regular education students.

## Rationale

Reports from the FBI (O'Toole, 2000) and Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education (Fein, et al., 2002) recommended that school systems institute a threat assessment model for responding to student threats of violence. Little is known about student threats of violence, although students in special education tend to commit disciplinary violations at a higher rate than regular education students (Leone, et al., 2000; Skiba, et al., 1997). Threats of violence pose a dilemma for educators, who must balance federal requirements protecting the rights of special education students against needs for school safety. The present study examined threats of violence by students in special education by addressing the following questions:

## Study Questions

1. Are there differences between students in special and regular education in threat rate and severity?
2. Are there differences in threat rate and severity associated with special education classification (e.g. ED, LD, and OHI)?
- 3-5. Are there differences between students in special and regular education who made threats in:
  - Disciplinary infractions committed during the school year?
  - Disciplinary consequences for the threat incident?
  - Post-threat adjustment?

## Methods

We trained two school divisions using our *Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence* (Cornell, 2001). We collected information about 188 threats that were reported to school principals during one school year. Male students made 77.7% of the threats while female students made 22.3% of the threats. The racial/ethnic composition was 54.8% Caucasian, 43.1% African-American, 1.1% Hispanic, and 1.1% other groups. In following the guidelines, school principals classified threats as *transient* (relatively less serious threat such as an angry remark that is resolved with an apology or explanation) or *substantive* (more serious threat which the principal judged that the student might carry out). For information on our threat assessment guidelines, see our website: <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

## Results

**1. Threat Rates and Severity:** Special education students committed threats at a significantly higher rate than regular education students ( $\chi^2 = 142.1, p < .001$ ) (See Figure 1). While special education and regular education students made comparable numbers of threats in elementary school and high school, special education students made more threats in middle school ( $\chi^2 = 7.86, p < .05$ ) (Figure 2). Special education students were more likely to make serious substantive threats than regular education students ( $\chi^2 = 10.57, p < .01$ ) (Figure 3).

**2. Special Education Classification:** ED students had higher threat rates than LD and OHI students ( $\chi^2 = 126.08, p < .001$ ) (See Figure 1). Furthermore, ED students committed a disproportionate number of substantive threats ( $\chi^2 = 10.2, p < .05$ ) (See Figure 4).

**3. Other Discipline Infractions:** Students in special education committed significantly more disciplinary infractions, including more violent incidents ( $F = 9.9, p < .01, R^2 = 0.47$ ) and more disorderly conduct ( $F = 13.9, p < .001, R^2 = 0.67$ ), than students in regular education (Wilks' Lambda = 0.37) (Figure 5).

**4. Suspension Differences:** Although special education students made more serious threats and committed more discipline infractions than peers in regular education, differences did not exist for use of school suspension ( $\chi^2 = .27, p > .05$ ) or length of suspension, in response to the threat incident ( $t = 1.13, p > .05$ ) (Figure 6).

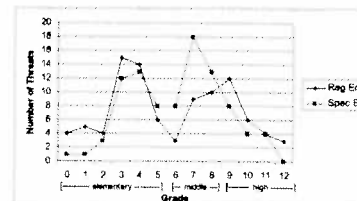
**5. Post-Threat Behavior Differences:** As rated by school principals, regular education students were more likely to exhibit improved behavior following the threat incident, while special education students were more likely to display declining behavior, in the months following the threat incident ( $\chi^2 = 13.6, p < .01$ ) (Figure 7).

Figure 1. Threat Rates

	Total School Enrollment*	Number of Threats	Rate Per 1,000 students
Regular Ed	13,612	95	6.9
Special Ed-All	2,788	93	33
ED	271	57	210
LD	1,028	29	28
OHI	399	18	45

\*School enrollment based on the total number of students in the two school divisions (35 schools) that participated in the field-test project.

Figure 2. Grade Levels



N = 188, including 86 Elementary, 81 Middle, and 41 High school cases

Figure 3. Transient and Substantive Threats

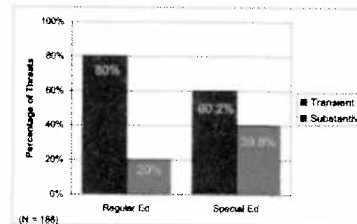
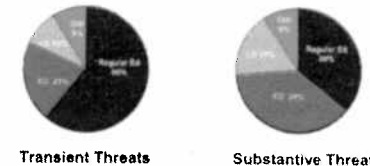


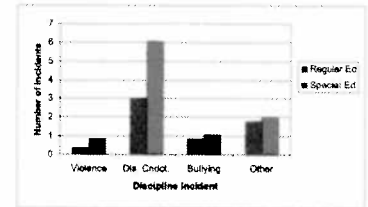
Figure 4. Special Education Classifications and Threat Type

Threats Committed by Regular, ED, LD, and OHI Students:



N = 178. Special ed students not classified as ED, LD, or OHI were not included in this analysis.

Figure 5. School-Year Discipline Infractions



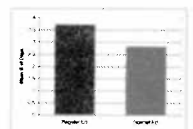
N = 185. Statistically significant group differences for Violent and Disorderly Conduct infractions.

Figure 6. Suspension Differences

Was the student suspended for the threat?

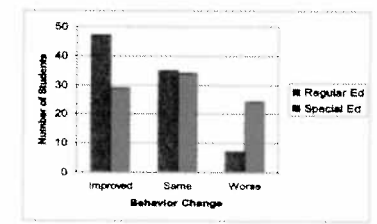
	No	Yes
Regular Ed	52.3%	47.7%
Special Ed	46.8%	53.2%

What was the average number of suspension days?



N = 91. Number of days suspended was only available for one school division.

Figure 7. Post-Threat Behavior Differences



N = 178.

## Conclusions

Threats of violence appear to be more prevalent among students in special education than regular education. Nearly half of all threats reported to school principals were made by special education students, even though special education students represented only 17% of enrollment. This study was conducted in schools that were field-testing threat assessment guidelines, and only included threats reported to school administrators, so should be replicated in other school divisions. Special education teams should be prepared to respond to student threats of violence in the classroom and to consider the link between the student's handicapping condition and threatening behavior in manifestation determinations and functional behavior assessments.