
The Relationship of Mental Illness to Targeted Contact Behavior Toward State Government Agencies and Officials

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Research in the burgeoning field of threat assessment has illuminated the importance of mental illness factors when considering risk of targeted violence—particularly related to government agencies and officials. The authors analyzed 127 cases investigated by a state law enforcement agency regarding threatening or other contacts toward public officials or state agency employees prompting security intervention. Univariate and discriminant analysis indicated that mentally ill subjects were significantly more likely to engage in more contacts as well as to make specific demands during such contacts. Mentally ill subjects were also more likely to articulate help-seeking concerns and employ religious themes, as opposed to using insulting, degrading, or ominous language toward the target or issuing complaints regarding policy issues. Contrary to other research, the mentally ill subjects within this sample were not significantly more likely to engage in approach behavior, a threshold for higher risk of violence. Implications for threat assessment activity are discussed. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Research and commentary in the burgeoning field of threat assessment has elucidated the importance of mental illness factors when considering risk of targeted violence. As is the case with the study of many domains of behavioral sciences, an appreciation of mental health issues and distorted, abnormal mental processes is considered to be an essential component for understanding the nature and development of violent thoughts and behavior toward a targeted individual (Coggins, Steadman, & Veysey, 1996). It seems likely that the impact of distorted mental

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processes would be evinced in the manifested characteristics of an individual's actions toward the targeted individual.

In terms of potentially dangerous contact involving political targets, the literature has suggested that mental illness may be an important factor in the motivation for, and level of, contact behavior, most often focusing on psychotic or delusional symptomatology (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999). While some research has found no relationship between active mental illness symptoms and targeted violence (see, e.g., Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), others have associated the presence of mental illness symptomatology with higher-risk behavior, such as approaching or attempting to approach the target (see, e.g., Baumgartner, Scalora, & Plank, 2001; Dietz *et al.*, 1991a). Coggins *et al.* (1996) noted, for example, that in a review of United States Secret Service cases involving threats against the President, approximately 50% of all subjects had received mental health care. Furthermore, among those considered by the Secret Service likely to pose a risk to protectees, approximately 90% had a history of mental health treatment.

Several early studies examined the contacts and characteristics of psychotic visitors to the White House (Sebastiani & Foy, 1965) and federal government offices (Hoffman, 1943), describing some features of their contact behavior and how the delusions they experienced influenced their decision-making, including their decision to attempt a physical approach toward the target. Later research documented the high incidence of prior mental health problems and psychiatric treatment among presidential threateners, roughly half of whom were considered to be psychotic at the time of contact (Logan, Reuterfors, Bohn, & Clark, 1984), though attempting to physically approach the president was not required for inclusion in the study. However, in letters considered threatening to members of Congress, Dietz *et al.* (1991a) noted that subjects who attempted to approach their target often perceived an inaccurately close or otherwise inappropriate relationship with the target, possibly the result of mental illness. In the stalking literature, subjects have been noted to harbor delusional perceptions about their relationship to the target that can influence the motivations for, as well as the manner of, contact (Wright, Burgess, Lazlo, McCrary, & Douglas, 1996), ranging from seeking help for a grievance or personal issue to exaggerated or irrational motivators/themes that prompt a subject to approach a target (see, e.g., Kienlen, Birmingham, Solberg, O'Regan, & Meloy, 1997).

Relationships are not the only area in which delusions and other mental illness symptomatology can impact contact behavior. In recent work examining targeted violence, Fein and Vossekuil (1999) found that while most attackers and near-lethal approachers toward public figures (including political officials) had a history of mental health difficulties, delusional states were not commonly observed through overt behavior just prior to attack. However, these authors also noted that mental illness, including psychotic and depressed symptomatology, appeared influential both for the motivations compelling the subject to attempt violence and for the staging activity leading up to the attempted or completed attack.

Substantial recent empirical activity has addressed the relationship between mental illness and violence within general, non-targeted, contexts. While some of these studies have discovered that delusions do not increase risk of behaving violently (see, e.g., Appelbaum, Clark Robbins, & Monahan, 2000; Junginger, Parks-Levy, & McGuire, 1998; Swanson, Borum, Swartz, & Hiday, 1999), the

prevailing wisdom in the literature is that at least some aspects of mental illness may be associated with a greater risk for violence (see, e.g., Link, Monahan, Stueve, & Cullen, 1999; Monahan & Steadman, 1994; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). What particular aspects of mental illness are most associated with a greater propensity for violence remains unclear, though constructs such as impulsivity (Webster, Douglas, Eaves, & Hart, 1997) and psychopathy (Hare, 1999) seem promising. Additionally, studies have obtained conflicting results regarding the role of threat/control override symptomatology and subsequent violent behavior (see, e.g., Appelbaum et al., 2000; Link, Stueve, & Phelan, 1998). Given the range of findings concerning the relationship of mental illness variables to generalized violence, continued scrutiny is necessary regarding such relationships within the context of targeted violence toward political figures.

Both the literatures on targeted and general violence described above suggest that mentally ill subjects who engage in threatening or harassing behavior toward public officials may display significant differences, with regard to motivational and contact-related factors, when compared with their non-mentally ill counterparts. However, the nature of such differences has not been directly explored. For example, mental illness symptomatology, including delusional thoughts and beliefs, disorganization, and depression, may not only be evinced in the content of a subject's contacts with a target, but also in the level of that contact (e.g. approaching target versus not, intensity/number of contacts).

A variety of other contact characteristics may also be influenced by the presence of mental illness. For example, some studies have shown that those who pursue, harass, or attack public figures are often diffuse in their target selection and harass other public targets (Borum et al., 1999; Dietz et al., 1991a, 1991b). However, some of those who attempt to assassinate, injure (see, e.g., Meloy, 1992) or even harass (see, e.g., Dietz et al., 1991b) a public figure are also described as particularly fixated on that individual. Furthermore, it is possible that target diffusion (the selection of multiple targets) could include the selection of entire agencies rather than any one particular individual, with mental illness differentially associated with these choices. Considering the use of demands within contacts, it is unclear whether mental illness plays much of a role, as symptoms may interfere with the levels of organization and purpose needed to carry out plans (Borum et al., 1999). However, those with mental illness could merely issue demands that are outlandish and unrealistic, or make no demands at all. Finally, no consistent relationship has been shown between the use of threat and mental illness. Research on attackers, many of whom have suffered from mental illness, has shown that some use threats and some do not (e.g., Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). However, some research on general violence and mental disorder has discovered high rates of threatening language among violent individuals (see, e.g., Citrome & Volavka, 1999; Monahan & Steadman, 1994), raising the question of an interrelationship among violence, threat, and mental illness symptomatology.

Experts in the field of threat assessment have identified a particular need for applied research connecting relevant risk assessment information to the context of targeted violence, including pertinent aspects of mental illness (Borum et al., 1999; Coggins, Pynchon, & Dvoskin, 1998). The available risk assessment studies are currently mixed in their conclusions regarding the relationship of mental illness to the nature and outcome of problematic contact behavior toward government

officials prompting security intervention. Further, limited data exist involving such analysis related to state government targets. The only available study exclusively involving state targets (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2001) utilized a selected sample of cases requiring intensive state law enforcement investigative activity, hindering assessment of the role of mental illness across the entire range of security-related incidents typically confronted by law enforcement officials charged with the protection of state government employees and institutions. The purpose of this project was to examine several contact-related factors in problematic incidents involving a broad range of state government targets, to identify differences between those displaying signs of mental illness and those not displaying signs of mental illness. The findings could inform threat assessment and mental health professionals on important distinctions in contact behavior as well as having case management and threat assessment implications.

METHODS

Analyses were based upon data gathered from the official investigative files of two state agencies, namely a law enforcement agency providing protection to state government sites and constitutional officials as well as an administrative agency responsible for building security. Data came from cases involving threatening or inappropriate contact with state government officials or agencies. Characteristics of the communications were drawn from the actual documents and investigative reports. Analyses were conducted on an inclusive sample of 127 reported cases from a 13-year time period (1987–2000). While the cases were drawn from an extended time frame, the number of reported cases grew steadily over time. Regardless of the enhanced reporting of incidents over time, the researchers selected only those case characteristics that were most consistently corroborated. Cases were studied in order to examine whether any pattern of differences could be discerned between the contact behavior of those evidencing mental illness characteristics (MI) and those not evidencing mental illness characteristics (NMI), as ascertained through an examination of the contact behavior.

A subject was considered to evidence mental illness if one of two threshold conditions were met. First, if the subject self-reported mental illness symptoms such as hallucinations or delusional thoughts (e.g. paranoia, complaints of thought insertion or withdrawal). Lacking such self-reported information, law enforcement investigator impressions that a subject might be suffering from a mental illness were not sufficient to designate the subject as mentally ill for the purpose of this study. In such cases, subjects were designated as mentally ill if available corroborating documentation existed affirming that the subject had suffered from some mental illness or had some law enforcement contact related to protective custody.

In an effort to provide the most useful analysis for threat assessment and law enforcement professionals, this project examined characteristics of cases at the same level as available to such professionals in the early stages of a threat assessment. Therefore, the level of information available to the researchers was not intended to be greater than that of the investigating officers. Information such as detailed mental health documentation, which would frequently not be available to law enforcement agencies during the early phases of a threat assessment, was not utilized. While more

documentation regarding prior mental health assessment and treatment would be ideal, the data are comparable to the sort of information that would be typically available to law enforcement professionals. Therefore, assessments of mental illness for this study were based upon evaluations of the same information as investigators used to make their judgments.

Several basic contact characteristics were selected for inspection. Target dispersion was determined by the number of targets contacted (coded singular/multiple) as well as by noting the exclusivity of the target(s) contacted. If either multiple offices were contacted or the subject addressed contacts to the government in general, target dispersion was considered to have occurred.

The number of contacts was computed from the number of phone, letter, and physical approach contacts (actual or attempted) noted within the available investigative documentation. Also included in this computation were contacts that may have been described by the reporting parties as having occurred prior to the report-triggering event.

A subject was considered to have approached (coded yes/no) if either the investigator or the target contacted described any physical approach involving an articulated threat, threatening gesture, or attempt to unlawfully disrupt a government function. Such behaviors could include an attempted (i.e. intercepted by law enforcement) or actual face-to-face contact, approach with weapon, or an attempted or actual assault toward a member of the governmental community such as a member of executive or legislative branch or their staff, law enforcement personnel, or visitor.

Regarding threatening language, subjects were considered to have utilized threatening language (coded yes/no) if they either threatened death or physical harm toward the target. Threats of harm of a political or legal nature were not coded as threatening language in this category.

The presence of demand language (coded yes/no) was noted if the subject made either vague or specific demands of the target to do something, regardless of the request's level of rationality.

Concerning thematic content of the contacts toward the target, nine non-exclusive categories of content and themes were coded based upon verbal or written statements noted during the contact behavior. *Policy-related* content was considered if statements were provided regarding non-personal concerns related either to government operations, policies, or other political or legal topics. Examples of some policy-related content include the military, as well as sensitive topics such as abortion and AIDS. 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 its nature. *Insulting/degrading* content was noted when insulting or other negative statements were made toward the target, including attacks on character and non-obscene name-calling. Content and themes were categorized as *threat dominant* when threats of death or physical harm toward the target were the sole content of the communication. *Antigovernment* content was coded when references were made to antigovernment or separatist movements, organizations, or views. Degrading language or imagery involving racial or ethnic groups was classified as *racial*. Degrading language or imagery involving gender groups was classified as *sexual*. Content and themes were categorized as *religious* when they involved references to religious, theological, or spiritual terminology, figures, or icons. Finally, use of *obscurities* was considered a distinct content or thematic feature.

Data collection was completed by a team consisting of the study authors, research assistants, and law enforcement officers who were trained over several weeks to properly identify the research variables and code information from the records. Coding questions were documented, brought to the attention of the authors, and addressed during group coding sessions. Any disagreements about coding decisions were discussed and resolved among the investigators. Decisions were documented to ensure future coding consistency. Using procedures suggested by Cicchetti and Sparrow (1981), inter-rater reliabilities were determined by calculating Pearson product-moment correlations for continuous variables and the kappa statistic for categorical variables. Reliability estimates related to the number of contacts and level of criminal history yielded Pearson product-moment correlations of 0.92. Kappa coefficients included 0.82 (thematic content categories), 0.89 (contact behavior categories including target dispersion), and 0.92 (demographic information, presence of mental illness, presence of demands, and threatening language). The final sample consisted of 56 MI and 71 NMI cases, with the only basic demographic difference being that significantly more females were present in the MI group ($\chi^2(1, N = 118) = 6.16, p = 0.01$).

RESULTS

The selected contact characteristics were independently examined between the MI and NMI cases. As displayed in Table 1, MI and NMI cases were significantly different on several factors. More specifically, on average, MI cases involved a greater number of total reported contacts ($F(1, N = 125) = 5.02, p = 0.027$) and more

Table 1. Contact features of MI and NMI Cases ($N = 127$)

Contact feature	Type of contact	
	MI ($n = 56$)	NMI ($n = 71$)
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)
Total number of reported contacts*	5.9 (8.4)	2.9 (6.3)
	% (n)	% (n)
Approach or attempted approach toward target	39.3 (22)	36.6 (26)
Demand(s) issued**	83.9 (47)	62.0 (44)
Target dispersion	51.8 (29)	42.3 (30)
Use of threat(s)	58.9 (33)	73.2 (52)
Content of contact		
Policy	46.4 (26)	39.4 (28)
Help seeking*	58.9 (33)	40.8 (29)
Insult/degrade**	10.7 (6)	32.4 (23)
Threat dominant	23.2 (13)	31.0 (22)
Antigovernment	30.4 (17)	25.4 (18)
Racial	7.1 (4)	5.6 (4)
Sexual	9.0 (5)	4.2 (3)
Religious***	35.7 (20)	8.5 (6)
Obscenities	12.5 (7)	18.3 (13)

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Table 2. Standardized canonical coefficients and structure weights for the model differentiating MI and NMI cases

Contact feature	Structure weights	Standardized coefficients
Religious content	0.610	0.765
Insult/degrade content	-0.455	-0.509
Demand(s) issued	0.427	0.340
Total number of reported contacts	0.344	0.241
Help seeking content	0.313	0.191
Use of threat(s)	-0.262	-0.239
Sexual content	0.165	0.041
Target dispersion	0.163	-0.064
Threat dominant	-0.149	0.028
Obscenities	-0.136	-0.004
Policy content	0.121	-0.087
Antigovernment content	0.095	-0.296
Racial content	0.053	0.021
Approach or attempted approach toward target	0.047	-0.067

frequently included demands ($\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 7.43, p = 0.006$) than NMI cases. Furthermore, contacts of MI cases were significantly more likely to be composed of help seeking ($\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 4.10, p = 0.043$) and religious ($\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 4.29, p < 0.001$) content, and significantly less likely to be composed of insulting/degrading content ($\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 8.35, p = 0.004$). MI and NMI cases were fairly equivalent with respect to the occurrence of approach or attempted approach behavior, target dispersion, use of threat, and the remaining types of content.

In order to ascertain a multivariate model of which characteristics provided the richest and most complete depiction and differentiation of MI and NMI cases, a discriminant analysis was conducted. Findings revealed a function that adequately differentiated the two types of contact ($\lambda = 0.75, \chi^2(14, N = 127) = 34.59, p = 0.002, R^2\text{-canonical} = 0.25$). Examination of the structure weights and standardized canonical coefficients in Table 2 suggested that religious content, help seeking content, insult/degrading content, issuance of demands, and the total number of reported contacts contributed to the discrimination of MI and NMI cases. This multivariate picture mirrored findings from the independent comparisons between the two types of case. In the discriminant model, MI cases could be described as more likely to contain religious and help seeking content, incorporate the use of demands, and involve a greater total number of contacts, and less likely to have insulting/degrading content, compared with NMI cases. Classification results, presented in Table 3, showed that the function was able to correctly reclassify the majority (69.3%) of contacts, with MI cases being reclassified the best (71.4%). A graphical depiction of the function, with group centroids, is presented in Figure 1.

Table 3. Reclassification results for the discriminant model ($N = 127$)

Actual group membership	Predicted group membership	
	NMI % (<i>n</i>)	MI % (<i>n</i>)
NMI	67.6 (48)	32.4 (23)
MI	28.6 (16)	71.4 (40)

69.3% of original grouped cases correctly reclassified.

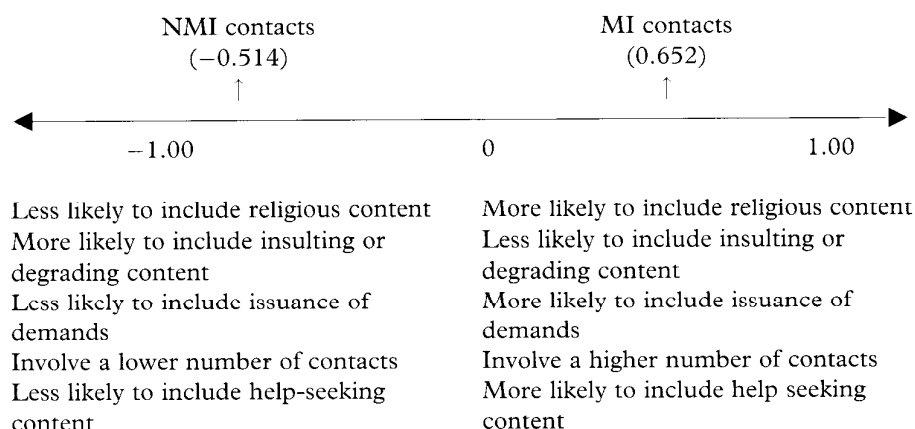


Figure 1. Graphical depiction of the discriminant function results.

DISCUSSION

The characteristics of contacts toward state government targets from subjects displaying mental illness symptoms differed in several areas from those of contacts that do not evidence mental illness. Motivations for contact, as suggested by the content of the contact behavior, differed significantly between the two groups, despite similar rates for problematic approach behavior. Mentally ill subjects were more likely to make contacts of a help seeking nature. They were also more likely to articulate concerns specifically focused toward the target's area of professional responsibility, as opposed to airing broad complaints about governmental institutions in general or insulting the target's personal characteristics or behavior. Religious content was also significantly more prevalent within the mentally ill sample. A more detailed examination of the MI subjects may show that motivations or concerns related to help seeking and religious content may be heavily influenced by delusional beliefs about the role of the target in the subject's problems or the target's perceived control over certain governmental responsibilities. In addition to supporting the view that motivational factors are critical to risk assessment (Borum *et al.*, 1999), these findings may be pertinent to other research relating the influence of personally motivated and focused concerns to problematic behavior (Dietz *et al.*, 1991a). It should be noted that the findings of the multivariate analyses paralleled the significant findings of the univariate analyses, indicating that the predictive variables were not strongly influenced by statistical co-variation or inter-relationships.

Consistent with recent literature on targeted violence toward public figures (see, *e.g.*, Dietz *et al.*, 1991a; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), mentally ill contactors were no more likely to articulate aggression through verbal threats than contactors not displaying mental illness symptoms. The findings are also consistent with recent threat assessment literature suggesting that articulation of threat, *per se*, is not indicative of increased risk for violence through approaching the target (see, *e.g.*, Baumgartner *et al.*, 2001; Calhoun, 1998; Dietz *et al.*, 1991a; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). Several reasons may exist for the inverse relationship between threatening language and problematic approach behavior. First, the presence of threatening

language within a contact may, in itself, prompt the attention of law enforcement in a manner that deters future contact. Besides law enforcement intervention, mentally ill subjects may be acutely aware of the risk of civil commitment if threats are articulated. Further, the act of threatening someone via phone or letter may serve as a means of venting concerns to the degree that it averts further escalation. However, it should be noted that non-mentally ill subjects were significantly more likely to utilize insulting/degrading language through their contacts. Such contacts, however, were generally less focused upon personal help-seeking concerns, but instead were more likely related to policy or target-related issues.

Contrary to prior research indicating that mentally ill subjects are more likely to engage in approach behavior (see, e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2001; Logan et al., 1984), the present sample noted similar rates of approach behavior regardless of the suspected presence of mental illness. One might speculate that such a finding may be reflective of a more proactive response and outreach to government staff and officials by the law enforcement agency in response to cases that crossed a threshold of perceived risk. This stance may result in a wider net for capturing and documenting a variety of contact behaviors that previously might not have been noted until more intense or threatening contact behavior was evidenced. This processing effect is highlighted by the fact that more recent cohort of cases involved less physically threatening language upon initial report ($\chi^2(1)$, $N=127$, 36.74, $p < 0.001$) and a greater overall number of reported contact incidents ($F(1, 125) = 4.09$, $p = 0.045$) than older cases. Cases did not differ significantly in other contact-related features.

While prior research has indicated that a significant amount of threats toward public officials involve a substantial number of individuals suspected to suffer from significant mental illness, the results of this study suggest several management and risk assessment issues inherent with such cases. The present study indicated that the mentally ill subjects, despite having similar rates of approach behavior, differed significantly in the intensity and nature of contact behavior. The mentally ill subjects engaged in more frequent contact behavior. Threat assessment professionals must track the nature of such contacts over time as well as inquire as to both the number and nature of contacts to the reporting party having occurred prior to the triggering incident. In addition, law enforcement and other threat assessment professionals must focus upon the motivations inherent within the contact. The mentally ill subjects studied were more focused upon specific personal concerns as opposed to generalized policy issues. While mentally ill subjects were as likely to be adamant regarding their concerns, they tended to avoid insulting and inflammatory language directed toward the target that might immediately garner attention or concern from reporting parties and threat assessment personnel. Detailed documentation of the nature of delusional material (e.g. some help seeking and religious content) is also a necessary component of a reasonable risk assessment. In addition, since fewer mentally ill subjects articulated threats, the need exists to take such cases seriously since they are just as likely to physically approach as non-mentally ill subjects. Furthermore, the risk posed by mentally ill subjects could fluctuate over time based upon the stability of the subject's mental status and treatment compliance. Noteworthy, however, is that law enforcement officials' ability to fully monitor the risk posed as a result of changes in a particular subjects' mental status is challenged by confidentiality statutes limiting access of personal medical information to third parties.

The limitations of this study warrant discussion. The select nature of the cases presented from a unique source might raise questions regarding the generalizability of the findings. Yet, the obtained results correspond to a large degree with prior research. Also, information regarding suspected mental illness was not drawn from standardized measures or clinician judgment, but by documented observations by government staff or law enforcement personnel. It is difficult to assess the reliability of observations or assertions made by the incident reporters and law enforcement. Further, information concerning the severity or nature of the mental illness symptoms was rather limited. However, such limitations mirror the level of information typically available to law enforcement in a threat assessment situation.

Given the substantial representation of subjects displaying significant mental illness in this and other studies related to threatening and harassing activity toward public officials, the need for increased attention to the inter-relationship between the mental health and law enforcement communities is critical. Coggins *et al.* (1996), for example, asserted that mental health practitioners are often unaware of the protective responsibilities of even high profile agencies such as the Secret Service. Additionally, they noted significant variation across practitioners regarding the threshold conditions that would trigger the necessary contact to law enforcement. Supporting the advantage of increased communication between the two fields, researchers have noted substantial benefit to developing formal and systematic use of mental health consultation by law enforcement agencies with threat assessment responsibility (Coggins, & Pynchon, 1998; Coggins, Pynchon, & Dvoskin, 1998). Such consultation, for example, has been found mutually beneficial to improving linkages and liaison between both professional communities.

Finally, in light of these differences between mentally ill and non-mentally ill subjects, additional research is necessary to clarify the role of mental illness for targeted threat assessment. A need exists for future research involving more detailed and functional analyses of symptomatology and their relationship to problematic approach behavior. Further attention is also needed regarding the role of contextual factors such as treatment compliance, family support as well as response to law enforcement intervention as potential mediating factors to risk of targeted violence.

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