Threatening and otherwise inappropriate letters to members of the United States Congress

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<th>Format</th>
<th>Pages</th>
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</table>

Cite this document


Abstract

The authors examine the characteristics of threatening and otherwise inappropriate communications sent to members of the U.S. Congress by a sample of 86 subjects, 20 of whom threatened assassination. We quote excerpts from these letters and provide quantitative data on such variables as the volume, duration, form, and appearance of such communications; the enclosures; the subjects' perceived relationships to the recipients; the thematic content of the communications; and the messages and threats communicated.

Comparisons between 43 subjects who pursued encounters with members of Congress and 43 who did not revealed 17 factors associated with such pursuit. In this population, threateners were significantly less likely to pursue an encounter than inappropriate letter writers who did not threaten, regardless of the type of threat or the harm threatened. Inappropriate letters to members of Congress are compared with those directed to Hollywood celebrities. Mentally disordered persons writing to public figures often mention and sometimes threaten public figures other than those to whom the letters are addressed, which raises important issues regarding notification of endangered third parties and the sharing of information among protective agencies.

Author Information:

Martell, DA
Research scientist, Nathan Kline Institute, clinical instructor, Department of Psychiatry, New York University School of Medicine, and director, Forensic Neuropsychology Laboratory, Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center, New York, NY

Matthews, DB
Professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, and director of psychiatric residency training, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock, AR

Hrouda, DR
Research assistant, Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

Warren, J
Assistant professor of psychiatry, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA

Dietz, PE
Clinical professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, School of Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Stewart, TM
Psychologist, Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, Philadelphia, PA

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