Active Shooters –
The Quiet Threat That Dwells in Your Backyard

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, shocked the nation and the world due to their unprecedented scope and impact. These outrages made it clear to Americans that they were vulnerable to international terrorism in the US homeland, which led to wide-ranging changes in the machinery of government, and also in the strategy and policy, to cope with this threat. The United States also faces a domestic terrorism threat from Americans who have been radicalized by extremist ideologies ranging from right-wing fanatics like Timothy McVeigh (who bombed the Oklahoma City federal building in April 1995) to plots by Jihadists such as Faizal Shazad, and Najibullah Zazi. Despite the justifiable concern over the potential for continued terrorist attacks in the United States, the most consistent threat the country is facing in terms of seemingly random firearms (or, in some cases, bombing) attacks is that of the active shooter.

An active shooter is someone who *attempts* to engage in an act of "mass murder," which is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as four or more murders during the same incident. Unlike terrorism (which tends to be a much more calculated act of violence and is motivated by a political agenda of some kind), or criminally motivated shootings (some of which are calculated hits but most of which are semi-random types of violence), active shooter violence tends to be highly random and sporadic and is usually motivated either by a personal grievance (as in workplace violence, for example) or the result of serious mental disturbance. The year 2012 was the worst year in decades, and possibly longer (the most comprehensive database of such attacks begins in 1982), in terms of the overall number of fatalities and injuries as the result of active shooters, with over 140 victims, including 72 fatalities.[1] However, the number of incidents and victims varies wildly from year to year precisely because these are largely random and sporadic acts.

Active shooters represent a fraction of annual firearm-related attacks in the United States. In 2012, despite the fact that this was the worst year in recent memory for such attacks, active shooter attacks only made up 0.8 percent of homicides carried out using firearms in the United States.[2] Nevertheless, just as terrorism is considered to be a greater threat than the actual violence and destruction that it produces (because of the degree of disruption it produces or can potentially produce due to the fear it engenders), similarly, active shooter incidents and threats are more impactful than the absolute numbers of victims suggest because of the degree of disruption and the psychological impact they have on communities. From a psychological and

resilience point of view, people realize that they are at risk from criminally motivated violence but they usually know that if they observe certain behaviors (dodging certain parts of town, dark alleyways, contact with criminal elements, etc.), they stand a good chance of avoiding falling victim to this type of violence. The unnerving thing about both terrorism and active shooter attacks is that there are very few mitigating behaviors (aside from not getting out of bed in the morning) that a person can follow in order to stand a reasonable chance of avoiding becoming a victim to such attacks. The victims of active shooter (or, some might argue, terrorist) Army Major Nidal Hassan, who is charged with murdering 13 people and injuring 32 others at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009, could have been forgiven for thinking they were safe (after all, an army base is hardly the same as a movie theater or elementary school), and yet they too fell victim to this type of attack.

This backgrounder will look at the serious problem of active shooters and attempt to provide some context and understanding of the phenomenon. We will first look at the common characteristics of active shooter attacks, then at the psychological and social behaviors and issues characteristic of active shooters. We will then move on to discussing the law enforcement response to active shooter attacks. Finally, we will conclude with some tips to help businesses prepare for and cope with active shooter threats.

Common Characteristics of Active Shooter Attacks

As noted above, active shooter attacks can either be motivated by a personal grudge or be completely random (and often inexplicable because they are carried out by mentally disturbed, though "normal" and socially functional, individuals). Grudge-based active shooter incidents often occur in the shooter's place of work and fall within the category of workplace violence. Workplace violence, as a whole, is a very widespread phenomenon in the United States, and a surprising 20 percent of all violent crime in America occurs in the workplace.[3]Nevertheless, grudge-based attacks usually have the same characteristics as the random active shooter attacks by severely imbalanced individuals. Regardless of whether the attack is based on a grudge or is more random and linked to psychological instability, active shooter attacks tend to be local, with the shooters targeting people or facilities that they know well. Research on lone wolf terrorist attacks (which share many of the same characteristics) suggests that the vast majority of attacks occur within 100 miles of the attacker's location, and most of these occur within a few miles of where the attacker lives and works.[4] According to a study by the New York Police Department (NYPD), most active shooter attacks result in few or no deaths (the majority of attacks result in 0 to 5 deaths and an average of 3.1 wounded victims).[5]This is likely because firearms attacks, unlike bombings, are less devastating because it is hard to hit targets at a distance or targets that are moving – whereas a bomb blast projects organ-damaging air pressure and heat in a, more or less, uniform manner, thus impacting virtually everyone in the blast radius. In looking at a data set of 230 active shooter cases, the NYPD concluded that the

overwhelming majority of attacks occurred in three types of locations with 38 percent of attacks occurring in the shooter's existing or former workplace environment, 26 percent occurring in random locations to which the shooter had no special relationship, and 22 percent occurring in university or school settings to which the shooter had a direct relationship.[6] Just over a third of active shooter attacks involved the use of more than one weapon (sometimes a knife was also used) and, in several cases, firearms used in such attacks were stolen from relatives or friends, particularly in the case of school-related shootings in which the perpetrators stole weapons from their respective parents.[7]

Common Characteristics of Active Shooters

While there are many exceptions to the "template" of the active shooter, in many cases, active shooters have been younger males that are generally loners but subject to defiant outbursts and emotional instability.[8]According to the aforementioned NYPD study, only three percent of active shooters were female and the median age of such attackers was 35 (with one cluster of shooters in the 15-19 year old range and the other cluster in the 35-44 year old range).[9] Active shooters also tend to have a history of violence, exhibit high frustration levels, behave erratically, harbor extremist views, incessantly complain and blame others, and exhibit threatening behavior. In some cases, a person who becomes an active shooter will exhibit certain behaviors leading up to the actual attack including: changes in hygiene, paranoia, dramatic mood swings, obsessively thinking about weapons, or psychotic episodes.[10]In many cases, active shooters have relationship problems and a history of social marginalization (sometimes being victims of bullying). They also typically experience considerable frustration and failure.[11]

Active shooters often engage in fantasizing about, planning and rehearsing attacks for weeks, months or longer, prior to an attack, and these types of attacks rarely occur just because someone snaps. Moreover, active shooters plan and then engage in an attack knowing that they are going to die or be apprehended by the police and do not plan for a getaway.[12]This likely means that they are going to try to maximize the death toll because they realize they will only have one chance to kill and they can spend more time and be more focused on killing because they are not preoccupied with making good their escape.

Ultimately then, active shooters are usually frustrated and unhappy young males that may or may not exhibit some clinical psychological problems. They tend to lash out randomly or in familiar environments and embark on an attack with the sole purpose of killing as many people as possible, and without hoping to escape to continue on with their lives. Needless to say, this type of individual is a very serious threat, and it could be argued that such a person is just as dangerous as a suicide bomber (though with the qualifier, as noted earlier that firearm attacks are generally less devastating than bombings).

Aside from the sheer human tragedy and trauma of active shooter attacks, such events also bring into question complicated legal issues and questions of roles and responsibilities for people caught up in these attacks, as well as first responders arriving on scene.

The Police Response

In the wake of the shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999, many police departments around the country changed their tactics in order to better cope with active shooters. While policies sometimes differed from department to department, in general terms, prior to Columbine, the role of the average police patrolman/woman was to secure the perimeter and assist with civilian evacuations while waiting for Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units, who were specially trained to deal with active shooters, hostage situations, etc., to arrive and engage the shooter. What this meant in practice, of course, was that the shooter (or shooters, as in the case of Columbine) was left free to continue the carnage until SWAT or similar units arrived at the scene. In the wake of Columbine, most departments adopted tactics that were based on what is sometimes referred to as "Immediate Action-Rapid Deployment." This concept basically means the swift deployment of what in the military are sometimes referred to as "fire and maneuver teams." Essentially, this means that the first officers on the scene establish incident command, request the appropriate resources, and determine if immediate action-rapid deployment is necessary.[13] If it is, the officers will join together in "contact teams" of three or more, arm themselves, if possible, with assault rifles (many police cruisers these days are equipped with assault rifles), and then enter the scene of the shooting in order to engage the shooter and either kill him/her or otherwise incapacitate the shooter so that an arrest can be made. Police may form other teams to bring victims out of the immediate venue of the shootings as well as to create a security perimeter in the event, even if it is unlikely that the shooter will try to flee the area.[14]

The police response, with its emphasis on rapidly engaging the shooter, means that unfortunates caught up in an active shooter incident will not only need to be wary of being shot by the active shooter, but also by the heavily armed police contact teams that arrive at the scene during the event. The police will be geared up to neutralize the threat by immediately engaging the active shooter. Of course, this is necessary both in terms of stopping the killing of innocent civilians trapped at the scene as well as protecting the lives of the officers responding to the incident. At the same time, it means that the officers will view anyone at the scene as a potential threat and they will also focus on assisting the victims only after they have neutralized the threat. Police units responding to the scene of an active shooter attack will seldom have a clear description of the shooter. Even if people caught up in the event are able to provide a description to 911 dispatchers, there are likely to be multiple descriptions and many are likely to be inaccurate. In such life and death situations, stress warps perceptions of time and distance as well as imagery, and the police cannot rely on the

accuracy of such descriptions or be in a position to judge which, among multiple differing descriptions of the shooter, is correct. Moreover, the police "contact teams" will be under great stress, similar to combat situations, and they may not be able to make clear and split-second assessments to differentiate between the shooter and his/her victims. Consequently, civilians at the scene of an attack must assume that police will deem them a threat until they can be shown not to be a hazard. This means that they must avoid any type of behavior that could be interpreted as threatening to police (running toward police officers, grabbing hold of police officers for protection, etc., is not a good idea). The best course of action for civilians who are unlucky enough to be present at an active shooter event is to hide, raise their hands and spread their fingers or lie down until given instructions by police. Civilians should also know that if the police have not been able to clearly identify the active shooter, they would all be detained until the police can ascertain who the active shooter was and/or if the shooter had any accomplices.

What Should Businesses Do to Prepare?

Businesses and other public venues (such as schools, universities, medical facilities, etc.) cannot predict if they will be faced with an active shooter attack, but there are three ways in which they can prepare themselves to either prevent an attack or minimize its impact. These activities can broadly be classified into three categories: intelligence, training and site security.

Intelligence, in the context of business preparedness for active shooter events, means spotting behavior that may be a precursor to an actual attack. As noted earlier, some active shooters attack people at their place of work and others attack businesses because they are public venues that contain many potential targets. Since active shooters usually plan their attacks weeks or months ahead and often exhibit some of the warning signs discussed previously, an informed workforce and management should provide information about such behaviors to the appropriate security officers at that particular business. In the case of disgruntled employees, business security personnel may want to interview the employee to ascertain whether he/she might pose a potential threat, or they may want to covertly observe that individual to ensure that he/she does not become a threat. In the case of threats from customers or other non-employees of the business, business security officers may want to actively observe people accessing the premises or loitering outside the premises, in order to look for behaviors or actions that might indicate either the planning or the preliminary execution of an active shooter attack. This means that security personnel should operate from a perimeter well outside the business and mingle with passersby in order to spot potential threats. Of course, not every business can afford to assign personnel to carry out such intelligence activities on a regular basis, but adopting some of these activities may provide some degree of security. Moreover, businesses can train their regular employees to spot telltale signs of such threats and report them immediately to the proper personnel so that law enforcement can be notified and the businesses emergency plan can be activated.

Training, as alluded to above, can involve educating personnel about threatening individuals and behaviors, but it is primarily geared toward minimizing the impact of an attack. In principle, people facing an active shooter have three options: 1) fleeing, 2) hiding or 3) fighting.[15]Evacuating oneself and others from the scene of an attack is by far the best option. People able to flee the scene will ensure that they are not injured or killed in the attack and will be able to call the police and possibly provide a description of the shooter and the kinds of weapons he/she has. Moreover, by leaving the scene, they will make it easier for police officers responding to the attack to zero in on the shooter and not have to cope with large numbers of civilians, all of whom, as noted above, will have to be assessed in terms of whether they pose a threat or not (as one of them could be the shooter). When there is no clear route of escape, the second best option for people is to hide from the shooter and, if possible, lock doors or move furniture in such a way that it constitutes a barrier to the shooter. Those who hide can still alert the police and provide a description of the shooter via a landline or cellular phone, provided they can do so without alerting the shooter to their location. Finally, personnel who are confronted directly by the shooter and find themselves in a life-or-death situation are left with only the fight option: attacking the shooter, throwing items at him/her, or otherwise disorienting the shooter in order to overpower him/her or flee the scene. Personnel should be trained in various active shooter scenarios and exercise fleeing, hiding and fighting.

In the area of site security, businesses and other public venues can institute various measures to restrict access to facilities in ways that would make it more difficult to launch active shooter attacks. Such measures can be as simple as ensuring that doors automatically lock from the outside and cannot be propped open (James Holmes, who killed 12 people in a movie theater in Colorado in July 2012, brought his firearms into the movie theater via propping open one of the exit doors and bringing in his weapons from outside[16]). Other measures include barriers to funnel the flow of people into a building, proper fencing, lighting and closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras. Additionally, protected spaces with thick doors, locks, few or no windows, first-aid kits and communication devices can be built within structures in order to provide a place for people to hide in the event of an attack. Structures can be designed or refitted with multiple evacuation routes to increase the number of people that are able to flee an attack.[17]

Conclusions

While active shooter attacks cannot be predicted, they can be better understood, planned for and sometimes prevented. A better understanding of the psychological dynamic that leads people to become mass murders via shooting rampages may enhance the ability to spot behaviors and enact the appropriate interventions in order to prevent a person who is vulnerable to becoming an active shooter or actively planning such an attack to actually becoming a perpetrator. Understanding how law enforcement authorities are trained to respond to such attacks will help people and businesses assist police and avoid being inadvertently viewed as a threat themselves and coming to harm. Finally, understanding what businesses and public facilities such as schools and hospitals can do to spot dangerous behaviors, prepare their personnel to cope with an attack and harden their facilities against such attacks will help businesses and other entities prevent or cope with such attacks. Falling victim to an active shooter attack is, from a statistical standpoint, highly unlikely. Nevertheless, when one does occur, it becomes a life-or-death situation for all involved. While this is a low risk event, it is of extremely high consequence for those caught up in it, and understanding and preparing for such attacks will unquestionably save lives.

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Homeland Security and CTU

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