Regional Organized Crime Information Center
SPECIAL RESEARCH REPORT

ACTIVE SHOOTER

Protecting the Lives of Innocents in Shooting Situations

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Some of the most tragic events in our country's recent history have been episodes where a deviant has carried out shootings in public places. These killings take place for no other reason than to harm as many innocent people as possible. They are often unpredictable and strike in places dear to us, such as our schools, churches, and places of work. They also can occur in random public settings.

The definition of an active shooter incident is when one or more subjects participate in a shooting spree, random or systematic, with intent to continuously harm others. Active shooter scenarios are incredibly dangerous and difficult because there is no criminal objective (robbery, hostage-taking) involved other than mass murder. Often, the shooter has no regard for his own life, and may be planning to die. These elements leave officers no other tactic than to find and neutralize the shooter as quickly as possible.

For officers, the key to protecting the public from an active shooter is to respond appropriately to the unique situation with intensity and speed. They need to have a working knowledge of the scenario, and a working plan to confront it.

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

The most poignant example of active shooter horrors are found in the school shootings of recent years. Although there were isolated events before, a string of school shootings that began in 1995 (Giles Co., Tenn.) still persists to this day, with an attack as recently as Nov. 2005, in which a 15-year-old student shot and killed an assistant principal in Jacksboro, Tenn. Approximately 43 school shootings have occurred in the U.S. since 1995.

The deadliest of school shootings came on April 20, 1999 (the 110th anniversary of Adolf Hitler's birth) at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. Students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold conducted a shooting rampage that killed 13, one teacher and 12 students, before shooting themselves. There were 25 injured. Harris and Klebold had planned to kill 500, and had placed two propane bombs in duffel bags in the school's cafeteria to explode prior to the shooting. The bombs had

enough explosive force to collapse the room, but fortunately failed to detonate.

Harris and Klebold during shooting spree

School shooters tend to have many personality and background aspects in common. They are typically outcasts, or have a small exclusive group of friends (Harris's and Klebold's clique was known as the "Trench Coat Mafia" because they wore long, dark, trench coats) not well accepted by their peers. Most have experienced ridicule and bullying from others, and may be hypersensitive to comments made by more popular individuals. They are enamored with, study, and collect weapons, especially firearms, and will likely experiment on some scale with explosive improvisation.

They enjoy violent media, such as video games, movies, and often prefer "industrial," "goth," and "metal" music styles because of the angst typical of those genres. First-person-shooter-style (FPS) games, such as *Quake* and *Doom*, are extremely popular among school shooters.

WORKPLACE SHOOTINGS

Shootings conducted by employees, or former employees, at their place of business have also increased in recent years. In 2003, 45 workplace shootings occurred, with 69 victims killed. In 2002, there were 25 workplace shootings and 33 victims killed. Between 1994 and 2003, there have been at least 164 workplace shootings in the U.S.,

A screenshot from the FPS-style game "Postal 2" (arguably both inspired-by and inspiring-to rampage shooters) and the game's opening disclaimer

CHARACTERISTICS AND WARNING SIGNS OF SCHOOL SHOOTERS

- Social outcasts who pride themselves on exclusion from popular circles
- Often bullied, teased, and/or rejected
- May come across as shy or quiet, occasionally acting out aggressively
- Rejection sensitivity- perceiving more hostility in ambiguous comments than is actually present
- Experiences depression
- Declining social functioning
- Attitude of superiority
- Exaggerated sense of entitlement
- Failed love relationship
- Capacity to dehumanize others, or picture others as "stumbling blocks"
- Poor or tense relationship with parents
- Low parental supervision/involvement
- Low verbal aptitude
- Captivated by weapons, bombs, paramilitary techniques
- Possible links to, or interest in, Satanist cults, Nazism
- Often keep personal journals of thoughts and feelings of rejection, violence
- Fantasies involve violent retribution against oppressors
- Fans of violent media, especially first-person-shooter games
- Often threaten or brag about shooting spree before it occurs
- Prone to act with one accomplice, or a small group of accomplices
- Violent and dark themes present in school work, personal writing, humor, drawings, or doodles
- Cruelty to animals
- Has experienced discipline from the school, suspension or expulsion
- May have attempted or threatened suicide

killing a total of 290 people and wounding 161. While it is possible to choose safer environments for work, i.e., white collar vs. third-shift retail, workplace shootings are very unpredictable. They are not confined to any particular industry, occupation, or income level.

A workplace shooting tragedy took place on Jan. 30, 2006 in a U.S. mail processing center in Goleta, Calif. The offender was a 44-year-old female who had not worked at the center since 2003, when she was placed on medical leave for psychological reasons. She killed eight people, including herself and her former neighbor, whom she shot to death prior to the postal rampage.

The incident was the deadliest workplace shooting ever committed by a woman, and the first postal shooting in almost eight years. The attack was the largest postal service killing since a 1986 massacre in Edmund, Okla. that left 15 dead and six wounded (including the shooter who killed himself). Such shootings have led to the misconception that U.S. Postal Service employees are especially prone to violence. In reality, they are statistically no more likely to go on a shooting spree than employees of any other company or industry.

In July, 2003, Doug Williams, a 48-year-old Lockheed Martin factory worker in Meridian, MS, used a shotgun and semi-automatic rifle to kill five fellow employees and injure nine before taking his own life.

In July of 1999, Mark Barton, a 44-year-old day trader, bludgeoned his wife, 11-year-old son, and eight-year-old daughter to death before killing a total of nine people and injuring many others in two Atlanta, GA investment offices. He took his own life when stopped by police.

The typical profile of a violent worker is a 25 to 50-year-old white male loner, who exhibits personality disorders, a history of violence, and a fixation on weapons. Often, stress on the job is a factor in the incident.

CHURCH SHOOTINGS

Churches have also been sites of increasing violence in recent years. Church shootings are also unpredictable, and often less expected than shootings in other locations.

In March of 2005, Terry Ratzmann, 44, walked into a church meeting at a Sheraton Hotel in a Milwaukee, WI suburb and immediately began shooting. He killed eight people, including himself, with 22 shots from a nine-millimeter handgun.

PROFILE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKPLACE SHOOTERS

- 25 to 50-year-old white males

- Violent history

- Loner

- Fascination with weapons

- Exhibits depression, paranoia, self-destructive behaviors, or other personality-disorder-related behavior

- Jealously, insecurity, or revenge motives

- Stress caused by:

  - Excessive workload/lack of sufficient time to complete tasks

  - Poor supervision/management

  - Unstable corporate climate

  - Unclear responsibilities

  - Philosophical differences between organization and employee

  - Unresolved frustrations

  - Unexpected/significant change at work or home

Ratzmann was known as a quiet, but neighborly man who largely kept to himself. He struggled with depression and alcohol, apparently, but had no violent or criminal history. He had left a church meeting two weeks before the shooting visibly upset at a sermon.

Another poignant church shooting incident occurred in Fort Worth, TX, in Sept. 1999. Larry Ashbrook entered the church, shooting a total of 14 people, including himself, killing eight in all. He also threw a pipe bomb, but it injured no one. Ashbrook had a history of paranoia and mental instability. It is difficult if not impossible to determine the motive of the shooters behind the slayings.

Terror-driven shootings have also occurred at synagogues and mosques in the United States. Victims of these shootings are typically killed outside of the establishment, when leaving or entering.
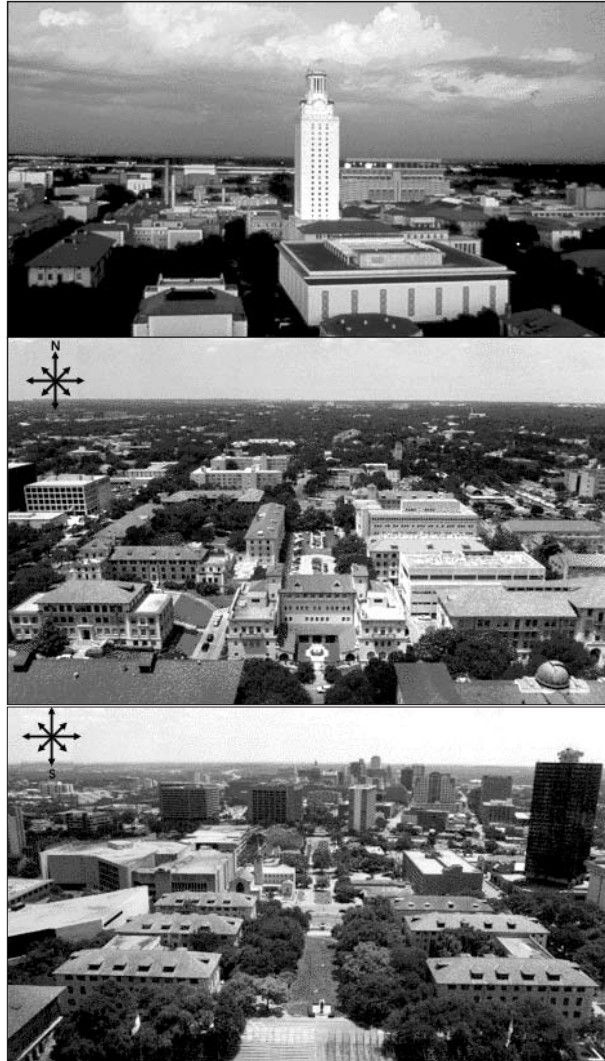
SNIPER ATTACKS

Sniper attacks, while less frequent than other shootings, were made nationally relevant by the Oct. 2002 "Beltway Sniper" killings that lasted for more than three weeks. John A. Muhammad and Lee B. Malvo, his young accomplice, killed ten and critically injured three others around the Washington, D.C. area. Their vehicle was modified so shots could be made from inside the closed trunk.

A sniper, as defined by the dictionary, is someone who "shoot[s] at exposed individuals from a usually concealed point of vantage." In other words, a sniper is a shooter who is hidden from sight. But the term has come to be used more loosely. There is no uniform definition of a sniper attack for law enforcement, according to the FBI.

In August of 1966, Charles Whitman, a former U.S. Marine, climbed the 307-foot-tall University of Texas Tower and fired for 96 minutes. He killed 14 people and wounded many more before being shot by Austin police officers. He had killed his wife and mother prior to the rampage.

Sniper incidents have fewer similarities between them than school or workplace shootings, and it is therefore difficult to determine a typical profile, although military service is common. Citing these cases, Muhammad had been a member of the National Guard and later the Army, where he earned medals for expert marksmanship under his given name of John Allen Williams. He changed his name when he joined the Nation of Islam. Whitman had a difficult childhood, with an abusive father, and suffered low self-confidence as an adult. He received training in the Marine Corps but was disciplined on several occasions and discharged early. Whitman kept extensive journals detailing means of self-improvement. Both men had also killed immediately prior to their sniper shootings.

The University of Texas Tower, and opposing views from the top

In the 20-year period from 1982 to 2001, the FBI classified 327 murder incidents as sniper attacks, with 379 victims from these attacks. Handguns were used in 63.6 percent of these attacks, rifles in 22.9 percent, shotguns in 7 percent; and other firearms or unknown firearms in 6.7 percent.

TERROR-RELATED SHOOTINGS

Terrorist shootings have thus far been a rarity in the U.S., but there have been incidents and they will likely only increase in the future. John Muhammad's sniper attacks apparently were politically motivated, with Muhammad having ties to the Nation of Islam and Jamaat al-Fuqra, a militant, largely African-American, Islamic group. Muham-

mad also admired Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, and was likely an anti-Semite.

In 2002, an Egyptian immigrant opened fire in a Los Angeles airport for terrorist purposes. He killed two people before being stopped.

In July of 1999, Benjamin N. Smith, a member of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacy group, went on a terror-driven shooting spree. In several Illinois cities, Smith targeted racial and religious minorities, shooting at 32 people over three days, killing two and wounding eight. He shot himself when police closed in on him.

OFFICER PROCEDURES

Rationales behind multiple-shooting events vary greatly, and should be watched for diligently by officers in the hopes of preventing a shooting. But when a situation does arise, law enforcement must move immediately, swiftly, and purposefully to prevent as much harm to innocent people as possible. Saving lives is the primary objective.

The first responding officer on the scene of an active shooter episode must critically evaluate the situation and confirm it for what it is. The officer has to decide whether to act or direct based on the information at hand, by answering questions such as:

- Is there an on-going systematic killing or critical injuring of others at the scene?
- Are additional potential victims within the building?
- Can those suspects be reached quickly and effectively?

If the threat can't be stopped, try to isolate and contain it, and await backup. Support should come in the form of a contact team, whose job it is to confront the suspect and stop the deadly behavior. An active shooter does not hide, allowing law enforcement to locate a subject(s) quickly. Once the shooting has been stopped, a contact team should also:

- Limit the suspect's movement
- Prevent his escape

Response teams should be composed of no more than five officers, but not less than two

- Communicate progress to responders
- Provide preliminary assessment (dynamic intelligence)
- Give victim locations and medical needs if time permits
- Report explosives types and locations
- Offer descriptions and locations of suspects
- Describe weapons of shooter(s)

A rescue team then operates to recover casualties by entering or approaching to locate victims, extracts victims to a safe area and notifies the incident commander and medical personnel. In the case of multiple victims, the rescue team may need to be expanded. Custody and control of the situation must be emphasized by the rescue team, and a system of identifying and accounting for victims must be put in place.

Upon entry, teams can expect to contend with:

- Confusion
- Frightened victims hiding
- Victims unresponsive to law enforcement
- Carnage
- Sprinkler and fire system operations
- Noise from alarms, screaming, etc.

If explosives are encountered, they need to be visually inspected for potential detonation (trip wires, timing devices, lit fuses, etc.) and identified. The location of the device should be reported and an officer should be posted as soon as possible to control the area. Do not touch the device. Restrict radio use because explosives are sensitive to radio

waves. Contact and rescue teams should move past any devices.

When deploying, a team should be composed of two to five officers. As officers arrive on the scene, as many teams as are necessary to control the situation can be formed. Teams should deploy in a manner that gets them to the shooter quickly, and offers a tactical advantage.

There are many officer training classes on active shooter scenarios sponsored by various agencies. Additional and hands-on training can be garnered at these events. Several institutions also distribute active shooter-related videos or CD-ROMs to law enforcement agencies.

Clearly, each scenario involving an active shooter poses a unique set of dangers. Officers must make quick, but careful decisions that keep safety, both for potential victims and for law enforcement, at top priority. It is a good idea to train for team deployments in active shooter scenarios, especially plausible ones within specific jurisdictions. Also, it is wise to have building schematics available quickly in the event of a mass shooting. All officers must prepare themselves, mentally and physically, in order to effectively limit these tragedies.

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