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Summary

Change takes time. In this endeavor, every element is important. By being ever diligent, we can stop many incidents from ever happening. We can save the lives of suicide victims and potentially the people they might hurt. By hardening our schools, we prepare for those few who might slip through. Making a plan and practicing will prepare us for the worst and help us to feel more comfortable and normal. Eliminating the notoriety will serve to remove the idea of becoming an Active Shooter from the minds of suicide victims. It is all a package — a process that requires us all to stand together and make our world a safer place.



Active Shooter Preparedness in schools is comprised of a concurrent four phase process. They are:

Phase One - An educational process to encourage parents, teachers, and all of society to be ever vigil. To identify the symptoms of potential suicides, which may also become Active Shooters.

Phase Two - Harden our facilities and establish a process and procedure for utilizing our defensive tools for the best possible result.

Phase Three - The Plan itself, which considers every possible threat scenario. It begins with identifying the entrances and exits and how they are to be managed. It includes a specific procedural guide and instructions for exactly what is to be done under every possible circumstance.

Phase Four - Include the media and society as a whole. When we encounter and defeat an Active Shooter, we must eliminate any possibility of notoriety for the perpetrator. We should never say the name or make any reference that will cause them to appear "special."

School Safety in the Age of Active Shooters

A White Paper

By
Paul D. Alexander

Overview

Active Shooters are perhaps the least understood and the most mishandled threat to our children, our schools, and our society. We have hurricane, tornado, and fire drills to be prepared "just in case." While we conduct those practice maneuvers, meteorologists continually study weather patterns to ensure we are forewarned and firemen review our facilities, infrastructures, emergency systems, and stand constantly at the ready. We rigorously discuss the threat of weather and fire. Logically, we must be equally prepared to prevent, manage, and counter the threat of a misguided individual with a weapon.

Active Shooter Preparedness and Planning is an ongoing process. It begins by understanding the mindset of the Active Shooter. A common misconception is that Active Shooters are Copycats. Active Shooters are typically part of a suicidal notoriety seeking the ultimate acknowledgement and justification for their planned actions. They witness how other Active Shooters become headline news stretching far beyond a 24-hour news cycle. This perceived fame is the basis for the Contagion that draws future Active Shooters to join their ranks. Our goal should be to identify the Active Shooter before a single gun is loaded and prevent the event from ever occurring.

Phase One - Prevention – Understanding and Identifying the Mindset

Active Shooters, especially adolescents (up to cognitive maturity at age 26), are part of a mass shooting Contagion. This is a behavioral or social Contagion with the same mentality basis as a suicide victim. Their desperation is fueled by feelings of despair, disconnectedness, a sense of lack of recognition, and feelings of invisibility. They often believe they have no friends, perhaps no family, or at least none that truly care. There are people who rationalize the safety of their institution by saying “lightning does not strike twice,” meaning that if there was a school shooting in the vicinity, it will not happen again. Lightning can and does strike twice and there is absolutely no correlation with school shootings. Every school that has the potential for a suicide victim among the student body, or those who recently left school, who is able to find or force access to a gun, has the potential for an Active Shooter attack. Active Shooters are not Copycats. People who commit Copycat crimes are patient. They wait for a milestone, at least significant to them, such as an anniversary of some event, or a special occasion. For Copycats the crime is a ritual, something to be revered and cherished. In the minds of potential Active Shooters, the actions of previous Active Shooters seem romantic. They desire to become a part of this Contagion because they believe that by mimicking the behavior, they can achieve their goal of suicide with the greatest possible impact and notoriety as it relates to everyone in their life. They do not intend to live through the attack. They do expect to be famous, immortalized, and remembered (they believe the more dramatic the attack the more lasting their memory). Potential suicide victims learn of the actions of Active Shooters and begin to relate those actions to their own lives. They struggle with thoughts of an attack and gradually become more inclined to commit suicide as an Active Shooter. When a mass shooting occurs and is well publicized, it removes a crucial psychological barrier and inspires them to act on their latent plan. To prevent this from happening, we all: parents, teachers, administrators, family members, friends, and neighbors must be aware of the telltale signs of potential suicide and when we see something, say something. We can look for the previously described symptoms of desperation and isolation. At times they will talk about their feelings or post them online. They can be expressions of despair, resentment, anger, and sometimes can be exacerbated by in-person and/or online bullying. We must destigmatize mental health and the behaviors that lead to mass shootings and suicides. We should treat these children as emotionally disenfranchised and in need of help, our help!

Phase Two – Physical Preparation – Hardening our Schools

While focusing upon the psychology of Active Shooter Contagion is paramount in our efforts to stop the threat, it is essential we plan ahead for those rare instances when someone actually progresses to the point of planning and carrying out an attack. We begin by hardening our facilities. There are two types of hardening: Static and Tactical. Static hardening includes any protective elements that are built-in and become a part of the building, including, but not limited to, Anti-Ballistic doorways, safe rooms, safe havens, Anti-Ballistic windows, and door locking devices that can be controlled remotely. Tactical hardening is anything sufficiently mobile to be used as a shield when under attack by an Active Shooter including but not limited to: handheld Anti-Ballistic shields, Anti-Ballistic mobile panels, and Anti-Ballistic mobile workstations. These tools are designed to give the defender a physical advantage over the Active Shooter. Most can be used both offensively and defensively and if properly constructed, can be completely safe and totally innocuous. Active Shooters are emotionally limited, mentally ill or distraught, linear thinkers. They have only one thought, the destruction of other people culminating in ending their own life in a highly publicized, dramatic way. When an Active Shooter comes through the door, they are looking for soft targets, people to kill. They likely did not sleep the night before. They often carry too much gear, probably a burdensome backpack with excessive ammunition and other unnecessary weapons and related items.

When the Active Shooter sees another person, regardless of who it is, the immediate intent is to kill. If the target were to step behind a Tactical Anti-Ballistic solution, that does not look like protective gear, the Shooter will open fire thinking they can shoot through the product and hit the intended soft target. Doing so will empty the weapon’s magazine. In this moment they are no longer an Active Shooter, rather a deranged individual with an empty gun who can be safely stopped.

Phase Three – Preparedness – Planning and Practice

As we begin the process of identifying the quantity and types of hardening, we must also envision how the products will be located in the building and how they are to be used in case of an emergency. There are a wide variety of options and the plan itself is dependent upon the type of structure, the number of entrances, the number of exits, and the philosophy of the administration. When under attack, there are three options: Hide, Fight, or Flight. A plan may include all three possibilities depending upon available exits, existential vulnerabilities and the location of the Active Shooter relative to any particular group of people. Of the three options; only Fight will eliminate the threat. Someone must take offensive action. The plan will certainly include managed entrances and exits, building security, and placement of all Anti-Ballistic static and tactical tools. Once the tools are chosen and placed and the overall procedural guide is established, it must be practiced on a regular basis. This does not necessarily mean practice with the children. It is best if Active Shooter drills are practiced with administrators, staff, and teachers only. After the procedure is well learned and muscle memory is established, the teachers can conduct movement, hiding, and evacuation drills with the children. There is no reason to call these “Active Shooter Drills.” They can be: “In case of emergency drills.” Make the conversation about natural disaster preparedness; tornadoes, hurricanes, and fire, not human failings. The children learn that when the teacher says and does a certain thing they react in an appropriate, relative way. By so doing, we can teach our children what to do without putting the idea, and fear, of an Active Shooter at the top of their minds.

Phase Four – Eliminate the Notoriety

As previously noted, most adolescent Active Shooters are suicide victims who choose to make their feelings well known by taking the lives of others and having theirs taken by law enforcement. They wish to be remembered, to be recognized, by all the people who they believe have treated them unfairly. They want those people to experience regret and remorse. Suicides who do not become Active Shooters typically leave a note, manuscript, or video to ensure they achieve some level of awareness in the hearts and minds of others. Active Shooters take this a step further because they are drawn to the media coverage of other Active Shooters. They perceive the shooters to be acclaimed for their actions. This is exactly the notoriety they seek.

This notoriety fuels the Contagion. The media coverage encourages suicide victims to become Active Shooters. Whether they end up in the morgue or prison, in their minds they will be famous. For them the coverage makes the tragic event romantic. They are no longer overlooked; they perceive themselves as glamourized.

In this final phase, it is up to us as responsible, thinking adults to ensure that we do not fuel the Contagion. When a tragedy occurs and the threat is eliminated, we must talk about the victims, never the perpetrators, regardless of the outcome. We should never report their name and only call them some variation of what they are, a bad person with a gun.