

### **Active Shooter Events; The Next Critical Issue in Policing**

One of the most critical incidents to which any law enforcement agency may respond is that of an active shooter. Over the past ten years, there has been an upward increase in these events and in 2017, a seventeen-year high was reached, with 30 active shooter events occurring.<sup>1</sup> The FBI classifies an *Active Shooter Event* as a situation in which an individual engages in killing, or attempting to kill, people in a populated area with a firearm.<sup>2</sup> Shootings which are gang related, drug related, or which are committed within a family setting are not categorized as such.<sup>3</sup> An examination of key factors linked to active shooter events, along with an analysis of the FBI's synopsis of these occurrences, is required to appropriately understand this topic.

In 1999, law enforcement responded to an active shooter event at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in which two high school students, armed with various firearms and explosives, killed 13 people.<sup>4</sup> In general, law enforcement at that time had neither comprehensive strategies nor sound protocols to effectively respond to these situations. In the ensuing decades however, improved strategies were developed and refined to meet the rising frequency of these events. According to FBI statistics, from 2000 to 2017, there were 250 active shooter events in which 799 individuals were killed and 1,418 were wounded.<sup>5</sup> In studying data regarding the places in which these events occurred, findings reveal that commerce locations accounted for 42% of the sites, followed by educational institutions at 20.8%, open spaces at 14%, government properties at 10%, residences at 4.8%, houses of worship at 4%, healthcare facilities at 4%, and other locations comprising the remaining .4%<sup>6</sup>

For perspective, below are some of the more well-known active shooter events from the past decade: In November of 2009, a soldier, age 39, entered the processing center of the Fort Hood Military Base in Fort Hood, Texas armed with two handguns, subsequently killing 13 and wounding 32; In July of 2012, a man, age 24, entered the Cinemark Theaters in Aurora, Colorado armed with a rifle, shotgun, handguns, and tear gas, subsequently killing 12 and wounding 58; In December of 2012, a man, age 20, entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut where he killed 20 children and 6 adults, and wounded 2 others; In June of 2015, a man, age 21, entered a church in Charleston, South Carolina armed with a rifle, where he killed 9 people; In June of 2016, a man, age 29, armed with a rifle and handgun entered a nightclub in Orlando, Florida where he killed 49 and wounded 53; In October of 2017 a man, age 64, armed with multiple rifles, killed 58 and wounded 489 at an outdoor concert in Nevada.<sup>7</sup>

As seen by this limited sampling, schools, churches, government sites, nightclubs, movie theaters, and open space venues were all vulnerable. In reviewing details from the 250 events, findings show that in 239, the perpetrator was male (two of which had a female accomplice), in eight events, the perpetrator was female, and in three events, the perpetrator was not identified. Of the 250 events, 98 ended with the shooter in custody, 53 ended with the shooter killed (49 by responding officers, three by an armed off-duty officer, and one by an armed citizen), 96 ended with the offender committing suicide, and in three events, the offender remains at large.<sup>8</sup>

The male perpetrator's age averaged 35.25 years, with an age range of 12 to 88. For females, the age averaged 36.2 years, with an age range of 22 to 44. Two of the younger females (ages 22 and 29) were counterparts in events with male accomplices. When the ages of the youngest females (age 22 and 23) were excluded, the average age for the female shooter was 39.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of weapons revealed that most female actors used only a handgun, except for the two events in which the females were accomplices to a male counterpart; in those cases, a rifle and/or shotgun was also used. In 136 of the events, the weapon used was a handgun(s), in 52, a long gun (rifle/shotgun), and in 59, multiple weapons were used (handguns, long guns, knives, explosives). In three instances, the firearm used remains unknown.<sup>10</sup>

Even from the vast study of this topic, there is still no “*profile*” of the active shooter. However, FBI data drawn from 63 active shooter events between 2000-2013, reveals pre-attack qualities associated with the perpetrators. Findings indicate that 62% of the shooters had a history of abusing others; 73% had a connection to the targeted site; 88% who were 17 or younger, targeted their school; 62% had mental health stresses; 49% had financial strains; 35% had a criminal history; 24% had military experience; 57% were single; 25% had a diagnosed mental illness; and 89% displayed concerning behavior prior to the attack.<sup>11</sup>

The behavior-types which occurred most often prior to an attack were “problematic interpersonal interactions, leaking of planned violence, and visible mental health issues.”<sup>12</sup> During the FBI’s research, evidence revealed that 63% of the perpetrators were Caucasian. The demographic with the highest percentage of shooters was males (94%), and the 40-49 age group comprised 29% of the shooters.<sup>13</sup>

With so many variables and no conclusive definition as to who the active shooter is, law enforcement is still overwhelmingly reactive to these events, and reliant on the public to “say something if they see something.”<sup>14</sup> As indicated, 89% of active shooters exhibited concerning behavior prior to the attack, therefore it is essential for the public to remain vigilant.<sup>15</sup> When abnormal behavior is observed, the public must deliver that information to law enforcement so it can be vetted and investigated. As the FBI confirms, since no universal warning sign exists to

effectively pre-identify an active shooter, the combination of attentiveness towards unusual behavior and reporting the same, is needed to provide the crucial lead time needed to intervene.<sup>16</sup>

With that, the law enforcement profession must continue to promulgate the “see something, say something” campaign, and when reports of suspicious activity are brought forward, they must be thoroughly investigated. Law enforcement should also engage in “*Red Team Exercises*” to test their respective communities’ ability to recognize elements of suspicious activity and report those findings to law enforcement.<sup>17</sup> Schools and businesses must not only detect their own areas of vulnerability and fortify them, they must also educate their students and employees in the “*Run, Hide, Fight*” model of defense to create a means of survivability.<sup>18</sup> Police must also continue to train diligently, and acquire the equipment needed to rapidly deploy, engage, and neutralize an active shooter.

Lastly, information must be shared between all governmental agencies, including those within the field of mental health, so that early intervention can ensue. It is no longer a matter of whether an active shooter event will occur, but rather it is a matter of *where and when*. Thus, the more alert society and law enforcement becomes, the better the chances will be for preventing future attacks.

| <b>Analysis of 250 Active Shooter Events From 2000-2017</b> |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Male Perpetrators                                           | 239   |
| Females Perpetrators                                        | 8     |
| Not Identified                                              | 3     |
| Male Age (averaged)                                         | 35.25 |
| Female Age (averaged)                                       | 36.2  |
| Oldest Male Perpetrator                                     | 88    |
| Youngest Male Perpetrator                                   | 12    |
| Oldest Female Perpetrator                                   | 44    |
| Youngest Female Perpetrator                                 | 22    |
| Perpetrators Apprehended                                    | 98    |
| Perpetrators Killed By Responding LE                        | 49    |
| Perpetrators Killed by Off-Duty LE                          | 3     |
| Perpetrators Killed by Armed Civilian                       | 1     |
| Perpetrators that Committed Suicide                         | 96    |
| Perpetrators At Large                                       | 3     |
| Used Handgun (s) only                                       | 136   |
| Used Long Guns only                                         | 52    |
| Used Multiple Weapon Systems                                | 59    |
| Unknown weapon used                                         | 3     |
| Acted with Accomplice                                       | 2     |

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013; Federal Bureau of Investigation; June 2018; P. 6; <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>
- <sup>2</sup> Officer for Victims of Crime; DOJ  
[https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/ncvrw2018/info\\_flyers/fact\\_sheets/2018NCVRW\\_MassCasualty\\_508\\_QC.pdf](https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/ncvrw2018/info_flyers/fact_sheets/2018NCVRW_MassCasualty_508_QC.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid
- <sup>4</sup> Active Shooter Events from 2000 to 2012 J. Pete Blair, Ph.D., M. Hunter Martaindale, M.S., and Terry Nichols, M.S. Jan 7, 2014
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-incidents-graphics>
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid
- <sup>7</sup> 2000-2017 Active Shooter Incidents; US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-incidents-2000-2017.pdf/view>; As per the publication, “The methodology used in compiling the list is articulated in A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013 (Blair, J. Pete, and Schweit, Katherine W. (2014). Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. 2014).”
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid (All 250 cases from referenced source individually examined by Nayor, Dennis R. to extract data to calculate gender composition, average ages, age ranges, weapon-types used, event resolution mechanism, and other relevant information. See Appendix A)
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013. Quick Reference Guide- FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-2000-2013-quick-reference-guide.pdf/view>
- <sup>12</sup> A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013; Federal Bureau of Investigation; June 2018; P.7; <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid P. 9, 10
- <sup>14</sup> A campaign created and promoted by the Department of Homeland Security in the wake of the September 11th attacks. The goal was, and is, to engage the public to be aware of things that do not seem normal and to encourage the reporting of suspicious activity to law enforcement, with the slogan “see something, say something”; <https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/about-campaign>
- <sup>15</sup> A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013; Federal Bureau of Investigation; June 2018; P.20; <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid P. 21
- <sup>17</sup> Red Teaming is a method to determine weaknesses and exposes vulnerabilities. The exercises provide an indication as to whether a business or individual may report suspicious activity to law enforcement when evidence of such activity is presented in a pre-scripted manner by trained law enforcement personnel. See related article; Red Teaming for Law Enforcement; Police Chief Magazine; Meehan, Michael K; <http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/red-teaming-for-law-enforcement/>
- <sup>18</sup> Run, Hide, Fight is a training methodology supported by the Department of Homeland Security during active shooter events; related information found at <https://www.ready.gov/active-shooter>