

Active Shooter Response Options and Implementation Recommendations for School  
Districts

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## **Abstract**

School violence with the use of firearms, is an increasing concern for all school districts. 160 active shooter events occurred in the United States between 2000 and 2013, an average of 11.4 per year. 1043 casualties occurred during those events. Of those, 486 lost their lives (ALICE Training Institute, 2018). Current security plans that have been put in place by schools have not adequately addressed the safety of students and staff. Currently, there are multiple programs that school districts follow to address active shooter situations. Programs such as ALICE and RUN-HIDE-FIGHT are the most common programs that are utilized. While the goals of these programs remain similar throughout, the action plans differ with each one. The Ozaukee County, WI active shooter instructors train in a manner that seems to pull ideas from each program. While the programs offer ways to combat active shooters, flaws still exist. The problem is that the “Run, Hide, Fight” campaign doesn’t adequately address the reality of an active shooter attack (Wood, 2016). These methods need to blend, so first responders and school staff can decrease the number of injuries and fatalities and be better prepared when these incidents do occur. Additionally, schools must better secure their buildings by putting security measures in place to prevent or drastically slow down an active shooter.

## **Method of Approach**

The method of approach for this seminar paper will include secondary academic research into literature concerning violence that has occurred in the educational

environment. A thorough review of current literature, policies and procedures, and varying response options will be evaluated. It is the goal of the researcher to develop options that are available for school districts to deploy in their schools. Additionally, the researcher attempts to explain active shooter occurrences by tying in Social Control Theory, General Strain Theory, and Routine Activities Theory.

### **Results of the Study**

The findings from this study suggest that there are several steps that can be taken by school districts and police departments to attempt to minimize casualties from active shooter events and to attempt to thwart an active shooter event before it happens. Risk assessment, response model options, and implementation are the immediate needs to prepare and anticipate a catastrophic event. The researcher also believes that education and training is crucial to the successful deployment and ongoing functionality of active shooter response models.

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## **I. Introduction**

Over the past 50 years there have been nearly 250 school-related shootings across the United States, a Tribune-Review analysis found. That includes more than 130 since the 1999 incident at Colorado's Columbine High School — a massacre that left three dozen people dead or injured which often is used as a baseline in reporting school shootings (The Associated Press, 2018). Over the past two decades a handful of massacres that have come to define school shootings in this country are almost always remembered for the students and educators slain. Death tolls are repeated so often that the numbers and places become permanently linked. What those figures fail to capture though, is the collateral damage of this unique American crisis. Beginning with Columbine in 1999, more than 187,000 students attending at least 193 primary or secondary schools have experienced a shooting on campus during school hours, according to a year-long Washington Post analysis. This means that the number of children who have been shaken by gunfire in the places they go to learn exceeds the population of Eugene, Ore., or Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Cox & Rich, 2018).

Columbine was a flash-point that ignited our paranoia about school shootings. Wikipedia lists school shooting incidents going back to 1840. Violence in urban schools seldom made the front page. Gunplay in rural areas was noted, but too far removed from the nation's experience to be widely feared. But Columbine was in sight of the peaceful Colorado Rocky Mountains – comfortable, prosperous, mostly white, suburbia.

The savagery of the attack, the evil of its gestation, the innocence of its victims, the normalness of the boys who plotted a much greater devastation than they were able to

consummate, and the sheer number of bodies all playing out over agonizing hours of news coverage with vivid video from news helicopters launched from just a few miles away – it was a perfect storm for grabbing the hearts and minds of a nation (Police One, 2019).

We thought that making a change from securing the perimeter and waiting for SWAT could make a difference. So, we all trained on diamond formations. Even that was too slow, so we began advocating for solo officer response, forgetting that there was an armed school resource officer at Columbine that day (Police One, 2019).

We've strained resources looking for the predictor killer profile. We've hardened targets, made everyone an ID card, locked our doors, spent millions on consultants, expanded mental health services, established hotlines and practiced active shooter drills. We have no idea if any of these things have stopped killers or saved lives – prevention can never be truly measured. By now every prospective killer knows what students and staff will be doing if the alarm sounds, because they went through the drills themselves (Police One, 2019).

As a school resource officer, this topic is something I think about daily and am continually looking for ways to make schools safer. In my role, I am part of the school districts safety committee, threat assessment team, and I assist in the active shooter training that is hosted by my department and the school district.

## **A. Active shooter**

The agreed-upon definition of an “active shooter” by US government agencies (including the White House, US Department of Justice, FBI, US Department of Education, US Department of Homeland Security, and Federal Emergency Management Agency) is “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.” In most cases, active shooters use firearms and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims (ALICE Training Institute, 2018). Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes and before law enforcement arrives on the scene, individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation. In most cases, active shooters use firearms(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims (ALICE Training Institute, 2018).

The FBI released the results of their findings in two studies about active shooters. Phase I attempted to identify trends, frequency, location, and number of shooters. Phase II, which covered active shooter events between 2000 and 2013, sought out to find behavioral factors in active shooters before the mass killings took place. The idea being that we may be able to see the warning signs in these individuals before they strike. Both studies examined active shooter events that occurred in the United States at businesses, churches, schools, and other public gatherings. Attempts to explain school shootings have been done in public investigation reports, case studies and reviews. The outcome of

these studies has produced a mixed and even conflicting picture of the phenomenon. Several authors have noted that there is little evidence of common denominators for school shootings and the perpetrators of such acts (Grøndahl & Bjørkly, 2016).

## **B. Demographics**

The FBI's study was not school specific. As a result, the average age of the active shooters in school environments would be much different. According to the study, the youngest shooter was 12 years old while the oldest was 88 years of age. The average shooters age was 37.8 years old. 94 percent of the shooters were male while 6 percent were female. 63 percent of the shooters were white, 16 percent black, 10 percent Asian, 6 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Middle Eastern, and 2 percent Native American.

Shooters acquired guns specifically for their planned attack by legally purchasing them in 40 percent of the cases. Only five shooters got their firearm illegally, one of which was an unlawful purchase, the other four from stealing. The remaining 35 percent had already owned a firearm long before their apparent decision to use it in an attack (Shults, 2018).

The assumption that most shooters have a diagnosable mental illness is not established in the FBI report, but factors such as stressors and known mental health issues are addressed. In only 25 percent of the cases was there a verifiable mental illness

diagnosis among shooters. The challenge of making this a predictive factor is that violence associated with mental illness is relatively rare, and that nearly half of the U.S. population will experience symptoms of a mental disorder something during their lifetime (Shults, 2018).

A tally of stressors known in the shooters' histories that may be connected to their violent behavior include financial, injury and conflicts with the law. The largest area of stress is relational conflicts with partners, family, peers, and at work or school. Fewer than 25 percent had known substance abuse problems. Many attacks are personalized as revenge or punishment for the shooter's treatment. The locations are typically where they have engaged with the person or persons in conflict (Shults, 2018).

Nearly 80 percent of shooters had an identifiable grievance that appeared to motivate their violence. The perception – based on reality or not – that one has been treated unjustly, results in a disproportionate drive to get even or right the wrong. The top three categories are interpersonal, employment related and a general hatred of others. A significant percentage of offenders experienced a precipitating event related to their grievance shortly before the shooting, such as a firing, romantic break up, or unfavorable legal outcome (Shults, 2018).

The report points out that, despite common perception, most shooters aren't socially isolated "loners." Therefore, there are persons in relationship with the suspects that can observe and report concerning behaviors. Suicidal ideation or actual attempts at

suicide are known in half of the attackers, with 90 percent ideation noted in the history of shooters whose attacks included suicide plans. Threatening behavior or confrontations, including written and verbal threats, are very common attributes of shooters toward their targets prior to the shooting event. Over half of shooters, particularly adolescents using journals and social media, “leaked” their intent or feelings to a third party. Thirty percent of cases in this study population left “legacy tokens” that include videos, manifestos, or other items staged for discovery after the capture or death of the shooter. Discovery of these items may be the most valuable indicator in the study (Shults, 2018).

Based on the research that has been conducted into active shooters in the educational environment, it is clear that there is no distinguishable trait that allows us to predict the next mass attacker. There have been male and female attackers, high-achieving students with good grades as well as poor performers. These acts of violence were committed by students who were loners and socially isolated, and those who were well-liked and popular (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). Several studies of the characteristics of school shooters have emphasized that the perpetrators are lonely, alienated by their peers and are victims of bullying. Yet, it is noted that such characteristics can be found in many students who never do show any signs of violence. Other researchers claim that school shooters leak their plans in advance of an attack and suggest that this is an important warning signal (Grøndahl & Bjørkly, 2016).

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. ALICE**

Every school year, school districts around the country practice drills to better their response to active shooter violence. The drills instruct children, as young as kindergartners, to respond to a scenario where a “bad guy” tries to get into their classroom. They are instructed to hide, block doors with furniture, be silent, or distract if the “bad guy” gets in. This training is a scary notion for many; however, most agree that the training goes along with the current state of affairs in our country. The traditional lockdown taught in schools and then brought into the workplace as a trained response was developed in the 1970s for drive by shootings—threats lasting a few seconds from the street. It was never intended for active threats or terrorists in contact with or inside a building with their potential victims. Lockdowns were promulgated across the country in the early 1990s when school shootings began to occur with some regularity, though the tactic has failed during numerous shootings in educational facilities, public locations and businesses (Hendry, 2016).

School districts and police departments have more recently been following two specific active shooter models that train response tactics. For example, Akron school district follows ALICE, which stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate. ALICE was developed by former police officer Greg Crane and his wife Lisa Crane, a

school principal, after the Columbine High School shootings. It's grown more popular following the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. About 4,000 school districts and 3,500 police departments have ALICE-trained personnel (Blad, 2018). Traditionally, schools primary started training in the "lockdown method". This type of training instructed teachers to lock their doors, turn off the lights, and huddle their students in the corner of the room, outside of the line of sight from the classroom entrance. The "lockdown" training has progressed since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012. Schools are now instituting other methods, such as ALICE, that empower and provide options for school personnel and students to actively protect themselves against armed assailants.

In the Columbine High School shooting, students and staff were trained to hide. Students that hid in the library weren't attacked for approximately 4 ½ minutes. Additionally, there was a fire exit door nearby so they essentially had a head start and an exit from the shooters, but prior training had taken away their options. In Crane's opinion, while lockdown procedures can be effective in many cases, they are not the best option in every situation. While the teacher did exactly what she was trained to do, sheltering in place was the wrong approach at Columbine (Widmer, 2018). For Crane, giving teachers and administrators other options could be the key to survival. "If I only provide you one option today, that means I have to hope that if you ever find yourself in one of these events, I have some kind of crystal ball and I see that what I told you today is exactly what you need to do then," he said. "These scenarios, these shooting events,

they're all unique, they're all dynamic, they're all chaotic. There's not a one-size-fits-all plan" (Widmer, 2018).

The following explains the ALICE response option model:

### ALICE

- **Alert is your first notification of danger.** ALERT is when you first become aware of a threat. The sooner you understand that you're in danger, the sooner you can save yourself. A speedy response is critical. Seconds count. Alert is overcoming denial, recognizing the signs of danger and receiving notifications about the danger from others. Alerts should be accepted, taken seriously, and should help you make survival decisions based on your circumstances.

### ALICE

- Barricade the room. Prepare to EVACUATE or COUNTER if needed. If EVACUATION is not a safe option, barricade entry points into your room in an effort to create a semi-secure starting point. Our training explains scenarios where Lockdown may be the preferable option and dispels myths about passive, traditional 'lockdown only' procedures that create readily identifiable targets and makes a shooter's mission easier. ALICE trainers instruct on practical techniques for how to better barricade a room, what to do with mobile and electronic devices, how and when to communicate with police, and how to use your time in lockdown to prepare to use other strategies (i.e. Counter or Evacuate) that might come into play should the active shooter gain entry.

## ALICE

- Communicate the violent intruder's location and direction in real time. The purpose of INFORM is to continue to communicate information in as real time as possible, if it is safe to do so. Armed intruder situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly, which means that ongoing, real time information is key to making effective survival decisions. Information should always be clear, direct and in plain language, not using codes. If the shooter is known to be in an isolated section of a building, occupants in other wards can safely evacuate while those in direct danger can perform enhanced lockdown and prepare to counter. Video surveillance, 911 calls and PA announcements are just a few of the channels that may be used by employees, safety officers, and other personnel to inform others. An emergency response plan should have clear methods outlined for informing school employees, hospital workers, or any other employees of the location of a violent intruder.

## ALICE

- Create Noise, Movement, Distance and Distraction with the intent of reducing the shooter's ability to shoot accurately. Counter is NOT fighting. ALICE Training does not believe that actively confronting a violent intruder is the best method for ensuring the safety of those involved. Counter is a strategy of last resort. Counter focuses on actions that create noise, movement, distance and distraction with the intent of reducing the shooter's ability to shoot accurately. Creating a dynamic environment decreases the shooter's chance of hitting a target and can provide the precious seconds needed in order to evacuate.

## ALICE

- When safe to do so, remove yourself from the danger zone. ALICE provides techniques for safer and more strategic evacuations. Evacuating to a safe area takes people out of harm's way and hopefully prevents civilians from having to come into any contact with the shooter. Did you know that you should break a window from the top corner as opposed to the center? Many useful techniques that civilians do not know exist and can save your life. ALICE trainers teach strategies for evacuating through windows, from higher floors and under extreme duress (ALICE Training Institute, 2019).

## **B. RUN.HIDE.FIGHT**

The “Run, Hide, Fight” campaign is a multi-agency effort, promoted most prominently through a widely-distributed training film produced by the City of Houston, with federal funding (Wood, 2016). In this model, citizens are presented with information that leads them to think that running and hiding are better options than meeting the attacker with resistance. Responding to the attacker with violence is held as a last resort only. The model, or guidelines, that were developed by the Department of Homeland Security, has numerous steps. It first advises to be informed. Citizens should sign up for active shooter classes, apply the “see something, say something” mantra, and be aware of your environment and any possible dangers. From there, making a plan in the event of an active shooter situation is the next step. Family, co-workers, students and

others should know how to get out and where to hide. During an attack, the RUN.HIDE.FIGHT model is put into effect.

**RUN** and escape, if possible:

- Getting away from the shooter or shooters is the top priority.
- Leave your belongings behind and get away.
- Help others escape, if possible, but evacuate regardless of whether others agree to follow.
- Warn and prevent others from entering an area where the active shooter may be.
- Call 911 when you are safe, and describe the shooter, location, and weapons.

**HIDE**, if escape is not possible:

- Get out of the shooter's view and stay very quiet.
- Silence all electronic devices and make sure they won't vibrate.
- Lock and block doors, close blinds, and turn off lights.
- Don't hide in groups-spread out along walls or hide separately to make it more difficult for the shooter.
- Try to communicate with police silently. Use text message or social media to tag your location, or put a sign in the window.
- Stay in place until law enforcement gives you the all clear.
- Your hiding place should be out of the shooter's view and provide protection if shots are fired in your direction.

**FIGHT** as an absolute last resort:

- Commit to your actions and act as aggressively as possible against the shooter.
- Recruit others to ambush the shooter with makeshift weapons like chairs, fire extinguishers, scissors, books, etc.
- Be prepared to cause severe or lethal injury to the shooter.
- Throw item and improvised weapons to distract and disarm the shooter

**AFTER**

- Keep hands visible and empty.
- Know that law enforcement's first task is to end the incident, and they may have to pass injured along the way.
- Officers may be armed with rifles, shotguns, and/or handguns and may use pepper spray or tear gas to control the situation.
- Officers will shout commands and may push individuals to the ground for their safety.
- Follow law enforcement instructions and evacuate in the direction they come from, unless otherwise instructed.
- Take care of yourself first, and then you may be able to help the wounded before first responders arrive.
- If the injured are in immediate danger, help get them to safety.
- While you wait for first responders to arrive, provide first aid. Apply direct pressure to wounded areas and use tourniquets if you have been trained to do so.

- Turn wounded people onto their sides if they are unconscious and keep them warm.
- Consider seeking professional help for you and your family to cope with the long-term effects of the trauma (Office of Homeland Security, 2018).

### **C. Challenges with Active Shooter Models**

The models encourage a mindset and a pattern of behavior that may not adequately prepare potential victims to save themselves and others during an attack (Wood, 2016). According to Wood, there are three flaws to this model. The first flaw is what he calls the ‘freeze’. Wood argues that while the model gives individuals various ways to react to an active shooter situation, it doesn’t address the notion that most people will freeze when faced with violence and not react at all. This inaction could be crucial in a life or death situation. To address this flaw, Wood suggests that the model should also offer a way to “break” the freeze and react quicker. He recommends that this be done through education and mental preparation.

The next area of concern that Wood addresses is that the model instructs in a very linear fashion. In other words, individuals are taught that fighting comes only after running and hiding has been exhausted. This is a critical flaw in the model, because there are situations where a potential victim would be safer to immediately counterattack than they would be to turn their back and run. Sometimes fighting is not the last option, but the first and only option. A proper model would make it clear that either running or

hiding or fighting could be an appropriate initial response, depending on the circumstances. Teaching the public that violence can never be the first option fails to mentally prepare them for the times when it should be (Wood, 2016).

Thirdly, Wood states that the model fosters a mindset that is non-aggressive. He writes that running and hiding as the first and second option, leave an individual unprepared to fight back. He writes that this mindset needs to change from the standpoint that individuals should not solely rely on law enforcement to take on violence when others can lead the way as well.

The Run, Hide, Fight model has also been looked at in a sense of how humans naturally react to an emergency situation. Some are unable to think clearly, some freeze, and some may be bold in their actions. The response to an emergency will be different from each and every one of us. Because of this, author Steven Adelman, suggests the following: “based on the anecdotal and scientific evidence that most people cannot not engage in that sort of supple gymnastics during a crisis, I am suggesting that, particularly for live event and venue professionals, active shooter response training focus on the people who, due to their life experience or brain chemistry, are better than the rest of us at recognizing and responding to emergency situations. Put another way, rather than giving everyone training that few are able to use, train the few who can lead how to move the followers to safety.” (Adelman, 2016) With the Run, Hide, Fight model, it is assumed that people will do one of those three things automatically, when the shooting begins. However, Adelman suggests, and backs up with data taken from public event

shootings that have occurred, that “only an unhappy few know what gunfire sounds like where they work, much less where they attend entertainment events.” (Adelman, 2016) This poses a problem for individuals that are to attempt to run, hide or fight. According to Dr. John Leach, known as one of “survival psychologies” leading thinkers, he explains that our brains process information in our working memory, which has “two important limitations: It can hold only so much information at any given time and it can process information at a given maximum rate and no faster.” (Adelman, 2016)

Run, Hide, Fight is only three words; according to Leach, our brains actually go through five distinct steps when faced with new information. The steps include perception, comprehension, decision, implementation, and movement. Because of the complexity of the brain and the variance in reaction between individuals, an individual familiar to crisis can react more positively than an individual who hasn’t been exposed to a crisis. The people who work through these five cognitive processes fastest have had enough experience to perceive a familiar situation, then select from among a menu of pre-learned responses. In other words, quick and decisive responders convert a series of complex operations into one simple one, which overcomes the storage capacity limitations in our brain’s working memory (Adelman, 2016).

### **III. Theoretical Framework**

#### **A. General Strain Theory**

Why crime is committed has been studied using criminological theory. While there isn't an exact theory as to why someone would engage in mass murder at a school, I believe that the General Strain Theory fits the best. General strain theory (GST) argues that strains or stressors increase the likelihood of negative emotions like anger and frustration. These emotions create pressure for corrective action, and crime is a possible response (Agnew, 2010). Agnew's (1992) general strain theory broadened the concept of strain to include a range of negative experiences or disappointing events in social relationships at home, school, or work or in the neighborhood. In Agnew's theory, strain is regarded as a range of difficulties that lead to anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, fear, and ultimately, crime (Levin & Madfis, 2009). For example, if an individual loses his/her job and cannot pay the bills, the stress may result in criminal behavior in order to correct the problem at hand. Robert Agnew stated that strain refers to "relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated."

Strain is further defined by objective and subjective strain. Objective strain means that a certain group dislikes certain events or conditions. This means that if a person is experiencing strain, the event causing the strain is disliked by the group.

Subjective strain means that the events causing the strain are disliked by those going through it or have gone through it already. An important factor is that Agnew does not argue that strain causes crime. He argues that individuals are more susceptible to commit crime when they lack the skills to cope with their strain. Strain is most likely to lead to crime when individuals lack the skills and resources to cope with their strain in a legitimate manner, are low in conventional social support, are low in social control, blame their strain on others, and are disposed to crime (Agnew, 2010).

## **B. Social Control Theory**

Another crime theory that could help in explaining why an individual would become a mass shooter at a school would be the social bonding theory. The social bonding theory, presented by Travis Hirschi in 1969, suggests that the stronger an individual is bonded to their social environment, the less likely they are to commit crime. Hirschi's social bond is made up of four elements. They are (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement, and (4) moral belief (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010). The theory is that the more connected an individual is to all four elements, the less likely that individual is to engage in criminal activity. Dating back to the Columbine school shooting, it's safe to generalize that school shooters have typically been young Caucasian males. They have typically been known as a loner or an outcast and have been described by their teachers and their peers as socially awkward. Further, many reports indicate that the school shooter was often a victim of bullying. Because of this, retaliation and revenge may have been the motivating factors to carry out a school shooting.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the paradigm and applicability of Hirschi's theory, it is important to recognize the historical context from which he wrote *Causes of Delinquency* (1969). In the 1960s, Hirschi observed a loss of social control over individuals and an accompanying rise in crime, particularly among adolescents. Social institutions such as organized religion, the family, educational institutions, and political institutions were not as prominent in the life of adolescents. As a result, these individuals started to challenge conventional social norms and expectations. Hirschi blamed this on the breakdown of the aforementioned social institutions, particularly the breakdown of the family due to increasing rates of divorce and single-parent households. Fast forward to present day and this shift in family structure has continued. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 34 percent of children today are living with an unmarried parent—up from just 9 percent in 1960, and 19 percent in 1980. In most cases, these unmarried parents are single. I strongly believe that individuals who carry out school shootings can lack both resiliency and coping skills due to the breakdown of family structures, as well as reduced value placed on religious and educational institutions. These social institutions are important for molding and shaping individuals and instilling compassion, empathy, and respect for the law and those in authoritative positions (Pittaro, 2018).

### **C. Routine Activities Theory**

Routine activities theory is a subsidiary of rational choice theory. Developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), routine activities theory requires three elements be present for a crime to occur: a motivated offender with criminal intentions and the ability to act on these inclinations, a suitable victim or target, and the absence of a capable guardian who can prevent the crime from happening. These three elements must converge in time and space for a crime to occur (Myers, 2016).

(Levin & Madfis, 2009) explain how mass murder by students at schools could possibly be explained by incorporating routine activities theory, strain theory, and control theory. Their model contains five things that must happen in order to support the theories. The sequences are chronic strain, uncontrolled strain, acute strain, the planning stage, and the massacre. Chronic strains are described as the long-term frustrations that an individual may experience. When strain intensifies and persists across a lengthy period of time, it becomes chronic (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

Levin and Madfis explain chronic strains more specifically in cases where someone murders their family. In these cases, often the male will carry out “familicide” because of chronic family strain. This strain could be financial, family conflict or another family issue. The aggressor will kill his spouse and children for two reasons. The first is for revenge, as if the spouse has made decisions that have put the family into strain and

the spouse is killed and the children loved by that spouse as well. The other reason is that the aggressor sees a future for his family that is much worse than the murder itself, and he justifies it by thinking he is saving his family from an impending type of doom. School shooters are no different. Their version of chronic strain may have developed at home and continued to build at school.

Next, these long-term frustrations are never met with a positive social support system, which leads to the uncontrolled strain. This leads to a negative event that is devastating to the individual. In most cases of everyday strain, an individual receives some type of positive support that offsets the negative strain. If there is strain at home, the individual finds support at school and vice versa. Some students, however, either never develop any meaningful social relationships at all (such as Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho) or turn to marginalized students who are willing, even eager, to support and encourage their violent antisocial feelings and beliefs (such as the killer duos responsible for the massacres at Columbine, Colorado, and Jonesboro, Arkansas) (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

In the vast majority of cases of all forms of mass murder, there is evidence of acute strain, some loss perceived to be catastrophic in the mind of the killer, which serves as a catalyst or precipitant (Levin & Madfis, 2009). In situations of mass murder, acute strain can be any event that the perpetrator perceives as catastrophic. Examples include eviction, loss of a job, sudden financial loss, divorce, and so on. When we look at school shootings, there are examples of acute stress in most cases. Kip Kinkel, the active

shooter in the Thurston High School shooting in 1998, first killed his parents and then went on to murder two students and injure 25 more. His acute strain was that he was expelled and was about to attend a program for troubled youths. Luke Woodham was responsible for the shooting at Pearl High School in Mississippi in 1997 where he killed his mother and then went on to murder two students and injure seven others. It was later learned that he had written in his journal about his heart being broken by a girlfriend. Another example of acute strain in a school shooter is Gang Lu. In 1991, Lu was competing for and lost a prestigious dissertation award at the University of Iowa. After losing the award, he went on to murder most of his dissertation panel and himself.

No longer feeling able to cope and feeling as if there is nothing in life left to lose, the potential shooter is inspired to get even and show the world, even if in only a few minutes of horrifying bloodshed, that he cannot always be ignored and diminished. This is known as the planning stage (Levin & Madfis, 2009). The research done into school shootings have found that the perpetrators planned their attack from two days before the incident or, in the Columbine High School shooting, one year before the incident. The purpose of the massacre, from the shooters perspective, is to leave his mark on society and to make sure that the attack is not a failed attempt. This logic leads to a troubling but inevitable conclusion. If mass murderers are rational actors and not hallucinating maniacs, then a violent massacre must in some way provide a rational, if terribly immoral, solution. In fact, for school shooters (and likely other mass killers as well), the massacre serves to solve their most pressing problems of damaged personal identity and tarnished self-worth (Levin & Madfis, 2009).

The last stage in this sequential model is the massacre or catastrophic event. Levin and Madfis point out that in school shootings, there are always three elements present. The shooter has training and access to weapons. The shooter has targets that are assembled close together. And finally, there is insufficient or no individuals present who are able to defend others from the shooting. They also point out that there have been examples of shootings that haven't panned out for the shooter because of their lack of planning, no immediate access or training with firearms, and elevated stress levels that inhibited them from carrying out the event.

#### **IV. Threat Assessment**

Active shooter incidents in our schools are one of the top safety concerns for school districts. With this type of incident at play, school districts, such as the Cedarburg School District in Wisconsin, have taken steps to attempt to minimize the damage of an active shooter and minimize the opportunity for an active shooter incident. During the Parkland shooting in 2018, the gunman pulled the fire alarm and had students fill the hallways and become his targets. Based on this event, the Cedarburg School District and the Cedarburg Police Department have partnered to provide a preventative and comforting practice for fire alarm drills. Fire alarm drills are announced to the police department prior to it occurring. This allows for squad cars to position themselves outside and monitor the drill while providing a peace of mind for students, staff and parents. After the Parkland incident, many parents would not allow their children to exit

the classroom while a fire alarm sounded, fearing a copycat situation. With the new practice, staff and students now know that the drill is occurring minutes before, and can expect that the alarm will provide for a safe environment. In the event of an alarm without a warning, staff is instructed take caution, quickly scan the hallways, and exit if safe to do so.

Another step, which has been spearheaded by the Cedarburg Police Department, is the attempt to change legislation to allow for the use of barricading devices. According to Wisconsin Law, a barricading device is not legal for use in a public building because they violate the fire code and the Americans with Disability Act. Because of this, Wisconsin legislators are drafting an amendment to 60.555, 118.07(4)(bm) 2, and 118.07(4)(c), to allow for an exception for schools to use temporary barricading devices if they want to. Currently, the amendment would allow for them if they have a method to be “unlocked” by first responders using a key or a special tool, and, the school district receives approval from the local police department and fire department to deploy them.

School districts throughout the State of Wisconsin had an opportunity to receive funding to improve school safety. This grant was available in 2018 and schools are still in the process of meeting the ongoing state requirements to receive funding. One of the requirements is the creation of a threat assessment team. The Wisconsin Department of Justice; Office of School Safety, provides free training and guides for school personnel and law enforcement officers. According to the documentation that is provided by the Office of School Safety in Wisconsin, they inform law enforcement and school officials

that several personality traits, family traits, and school traits have been identified as causing an elevated risk for committing acts of violence. While this information does not provide a clear profile of a school shooter, this information should be a guide in evaluating a level of risk that is associated with a specific threat. The development of a threat assessment team and the goal of the team after sufficient training is to be able to identify these specific traits that increase risk in individuals that may pose a threat (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018).

The Safe Schools Initiative was a joint project, beginning in 1999, which included the United States Department of Education and the United States Secret Service. They collected data from 37 school shootings from 1974 to 2000. The findings of this data are what threat assessment teams are based upon. The Safe Schools Initiative listed ten key findings after the analysis of 37 school attacks:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely are sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered suicide.

- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018).

Threat assessment teams take a threat and decide whether it's a low, medium, or high level of risk. When the threat has been categorized as a medium or high level of risk, a four-pronged assessment is taken. The four prongs of the assessment include the personality of the student, the family dynamics of the student, the school dynamics of the student's perceived role in them, and the social dynamics of the student (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018).

### **The First Prong-Personality**

The first prong, the personality of the student, focuses on the individuals "leakage." The FBI defines leakage as, "when a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes or intentions than may signal an impending attack." Leakage is important because 75 percent of all violent attackers told at least one other person of the impending attack, and 25 percent directly told the intended targets (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018). Leakage can be found anywhere. A potential threat may have leaked some of his or her intentions in person to a peer,

teacher, social worker, parent or anyone else he or she has access to. Leakage can also come from social media posts, journaling, class assignments, and so on. Privacy advocates may not like it, but law enforcement and social media providers need to pay attention to pre-event rants, threats and unusual behaviors. Tips from the public need to be thoughtfully investigated, not dismissed (Police One, 2019).

### **The Second Prong-Family Dynamics**

The second prong of the threat assessment is a look into the individual's dynamics in his or her family. Certain indicators such as family abuse and family relocation or neglect could be indicative of elevated risks. Other indications of elevated risk could include how the child is being parented. Does the child "run the house?" Does the child intimidate the parents to the point where the child gets whatever they want? Is there unlimited, unsupervised and uninterrupted access to the Internet, television, or even weapons located in the house?

### **The Third Prong-School Dynamics**

The third prong examines how the student feels they fit into the schools' dynamics. A student that is considered at risk for violent behavior may feel like an outcast in the school environment. They may exhibit "loner" qualities by being disengaged from students, learning, and school activities. Two children were interviewed

after they had carried out a mass casualty event and survived to talk about it. Luke Woodham, who killed his mother, two students, and injured many more in 1997 stated, “Every time I was bullied it was always a reminder that they didn’t want me, that I’d never fit in, that I’d never be one of them. You go through life feeling like you’re on the outside looking in.” (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018) Another child that was interviewed after an attack was Kip Kinkel. Kinkel was responsible for killing his parents, two classmates, and wounding 25 others in an incident in Oregon. Prior to his attack he wrote, “I feel like everyone is against me, but no one ever makes fun of me, mainly because they think I’m a psycho. There is one kid though. I’d like nothing more than to put a bullet in his head.” (DOJ, Office of School Safety, 2018)

### **The Fourth Prong-Social Dynamics**

The last prong focuses on how the student fits into the social dynamics of the community. How the student interacts outside of school is helpful in determining the level of risk. This can be dynamics with social groups, community members, law enforcement, child protective services, and the department of human services. The interactions the child has with any or all of these groups can help risk assessment teams see trends in behavior and identify what is or is not working.

## **V. Recommendations**

While there are different ways to respond to an active shooter situation, such as following models like ALICE and RUN.HIDE.FIGHT, it appears that it would be more beneficial to spend time in identifying kids that show a high level of risk in violent behaviors. The knowledge that is lacking in school shooter events is two fold.

First, what steps could have been taken with a school shooter prior to them going on a rampage and did someone have an opportunity to do something before the massacre or was the massacre inevitable. By examining the individuals' family dynamics, school dynamics, and social dynamics, we may be able to see similarities with violent children and use a different approach to thwart the impending violent behavior.

The second deficit in research into this topic is a look into the active shooter models. Determining what the best practice is in an event is difficult to choose. It is difficult to choose because the active shooter event is never the same. If you can only react to this situation in the hypothetical, it is necessary that everyone train in relation to his or her unique set of circumstances. What the best practice may be for the gym teacher may be the opposite for the English teacher. Relative training is necessary to increase the odds of surviving an unknown and dynamic event.

The researcher acknowledges that there is a need to study how active shooter response plans operated during a school shooting. What is unclear when looking at active shooter plans is what the victims of school shootings trained for prior to the

shooting, how they performed during the shooting, and if the plan was successful in saving lives.

The researcher also acknowledges that rolling out a specific plan for an active shooter event can be difficult, and it would be beneficial if school districts had a blueprint they could follow to institute a plan.

### **A. Developing the Plan**

The researcher, in cooperation with the Cedarburg, WI school district, is currently undergoing an implementation process to bring the principles of ALICE to the districts' schools. The following is the timeline to implement intruder response options.

1. Introduce the ALICE concept to the districts' safety committee. The committee is made up of administrators, police personnel, fire personnel, and buildings and grounds members.
2. ALICE Training: Train the trainer takes place by the ALICE organization. Key members of the safety committee are trained so that they can then train others.
3. Introduce ALICE and response options to all staff during the first annual safety summit.
4. Pilot training at the high school where the staff is introduced to response options for the first time. Police department personnel simulate active shooter scenarios and staff reacts accordingly.
5. Safety committee review, planning and preparation for phase 1, 2, and 3.

6. ALICE Phase 1:

- Initial staff training with e learning and hands-on.
- Distribution of parent and student information.
- Train additional staff to be trainers for each school building.

7. ALICE Phase 2:

- Staff recertification and new staff training.
- Student introduction to ALICE and training.
- Full lockdown drill with response options in place.
- Parent notification.

8. ALICE Phase 3:

- Response options are fully implemented.
- Policy and Procedures are in place.
- Yearly, train new staff and perform a lockdown with students included.

Further recommendations refer to each organizations role in developing an active shooter plan. First of all, cooperation and a good working relationship between law enforcement and school districts are critical. Secondly, school districts must include their building administrators in the roll out of the plan and in the securing techniques of the buildings themselves. Lastly, these techniques and procedures should be rehearsed and evaluated continuously.

## **B. Security Measures**

Buildings need to be as secure as possible during the school day. Entrances should be as limited as possible. Students and staff should know where the entrances are and only use those entrances while school is in session. Additionally, students and staff should only use the designated entrances as exits during the school day. School officials that are familiar with the students, staff, and regular visitors should preferably man the entrances. This adds another crucial layer to the security of the building. In cases where an adult cannot be stationed at the entrances, schools should consider a system that includes video monitoring, push button access, and two-way communication at the entrances. An area of concern at larger schools is the number of exits. This is useful while exiting during an emergency but it is also another entry point for someone looking to cause harm. A recommendation to limit unofficial entrances is to enforce a school rule on those that exit there or assist in letting someone enter. School consequences for someone that violates a safety procedure may alleviate this concern.

When school is in session, teachers should lock their classroom doors for the entire day. This may cause a distraction for those that arrive to class late, but it is the quickest and safest way to make sure the classroom is always secured. Fire code and life safety codes have been written based on the fact that people's fine motor skills largely disappear in crisis (Hendry, 2016). This is important to understand because during an active shooter situation, a teacher's ability to simply lock their classroom door may not be possible because of high stress. Locking the door as a common practice, removes this factor as a possible downfall. School districts can also communicate with their local

police and fire departments to see if using barricading devices are recommended and allowed for use. Other security measures that school districts should consider are the use of cameras, the use of active shooter or other crisis applications for use on mobile phones, and check-in hardware and software at school entrances.

We've made progress in many areas since Columbine, but many significant challenges remain, with two rising to the top. First, we need to do a better job of integrating fire, EMS and police resources, particularly at the senior leadership levels, to ensure a coordinated response to mass violence. Comprehensive deployment doctrine must be drafted, agreed to and trained. Senior leaders need better training to fulfill their roles as on-scene commanders. Responders from all public safety disciplines need more opportunities to train together and develop an appreciation for how they fit into a collaborative response. Additionally, public safety leaders need to be more engaged with training, educating and equipping the public to fend for themselves while awaiting outside help. The greatest amount of violence is committed prior to the inevitably delayed police and fire/EMS response, so we must give the public better tools and training to protect and preserve innocent life before professional help arrives. An investment in public readiness will be a force multiplier that will save many lives in mass casualty attacks (Police One, 2019).

## **VI. Summary and Conclusions**

After reviewing the literature and connecting active shooter events to criminological theories, the researcher was able to notice specific needs in active shooter response. First, it is necessary to understand what may motivate an individual to become an active shooter. By conducting threat assessments, we may be able to predict violent behavior based on the type of behavior an individual has already displayed. While this may never completely stop someone from carrying out a mass murder event in a school, it can prove to be useful in evaluating certain risks.

Secondly, school districts and police departments must work together in selecting the appropriate response options for their respective buildings. It is also important that the response options are taught to staff and students and the model is then implemented in an ongoing and comprehensive fashion. Policy and procedures need to be put in place and parents kept informed. Response option training should be specific and targeted. What was learned in the literature review was that everybody has a different reaction in a crisis situation. With that in mind, people should be trained to understand the different ways people react, recognize the reaction when it occurs, and then act appropriately based on the situation and their training.

Finally, additional research into the success of active shooter response options is necessary to support the recommendations within the models. A further look into mass shooting events at schools and the steps that were taken by the survivors would be a tremendous look into the effectiveness of the response options and the training they were provided beforehand.

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