

## ACTIVE SHOOTER IN THE LIBRARY

### How to Plan for, Prevent, and Survive the Worst

Amy Kautzman

You are in your office puzzling over an especially sticky grant proposal when you hear quiet pops in the distance. Thinking that teenagers are setting off firecrackers, you turn back to your personnel listing and salary descriptions – only to become aware that people are shouting and screaming outside of your office. What do you do?

April 2010 was the eleventh anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre, an unthinkable event that appeared to come out of nowhere. In September 2010, the University of Texas had an active shooter incident in the Perry-Castañeda Library. We don't like to imagine such incidents happening with any regularity, and yet they continue; Virginia Tech, Hampton, and Northern Illinois University, to list a few of the epidemic attacks. Fortunately, most of the shootings have not directly involved campus or public libraries, but library leaders should still be aware of and prepare for such an eventuality. According to the Criminal Justice Information Services Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 67.1% of all homicides the weapon of choice was a firearm.<sup>1</sup> This means that out of the 13,635 Americans murdered with a weapon in 2009, 9,146 were shot with a firearm of some type<sup>2</sup>. This article is a primer on how best to protect your library, yourself, and the people around you if you find yourself caught up in an active shooter event.

#### What is an Active Shooter?

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "An Active Shooter is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use firearm(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims. Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. Typically, the immediate deployment of law enforcement is required to stop the shooting and mitigate harm to victims. Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes, before law enforcement arrives on the scene, individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation<sup>3</sup>." An active shooter is a person who is often motivated by revenge and is determined to cause disruptive fear, mass casualties, and death. In such a scenario there is no reasoning or bargaining with the perpetrator.

The individual can have specific victims in mind but will hurt most people who happen to be in his or her path. Generally there is no stopping such an individual. They are not looking to negotiate or escape as they have often already given up on life and expect to die. The event usually ends in suicide or "death by police." Many times this person is a former employee, a partner in a domestic abuse situation, or someone who has marked the library as a target rich environment. In such a scenario, the focus of law enforcement is dedicated to Rapid Response or Immediate Action Rapid Deployment (IARD), where the closest officers are the ones who

take immediate and direct action against the shooter. The bottom line is that if you wish to survive an active shooter incident you must develop your own prevention and preparation survival skills. These skills can be learned and they may make the difference as to whether you live or die.

## No Surprises

Every active shooter event follows a similar arc: fear, disbelief, and the inevitable public examination of the shooter's motives (where it often becomes patently clear that very few people were surprised that this person turned his or her anger and despair towards innocent bystanders). It is very seldom that an attacker "just snaps." There are often warning signs, a goodly number of family members, teachers, and peers who, in hindsight, noticed signs of danger but did not voice their concerns. Or worse yet, they had shared their concerns but their worries were not fully addressed. According to an FBI publication, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*, "In general, people do not switch instantly from nonviolence to violence. Nonviolent people do not "snap" or decide on the spur of the moment to meet a problem by using violence. Instead, the path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way. A threat is one observable behavior; others may be brooding about frustration or disappointment, fantasies of destruction or revenge, in conversations, writings, drawings, and other actions<sup>4</sup>." Gavin De Becker, author of the *Gift of Fear*<sup>5</sup> and an expert in predicting violence, believes that our own intuition is enough to help prevent many of these tragedies. This was certainly appeared to be the case with Cho Seung-Hui, the Virginia Tech shooter who was on the radar screen of many faculty members and the counseling and administrative offices at the Institute. Female students reported his stalking behavior and professors informed department heads that they felt his writings were violent and threatening<sup>6</sup>. One faculty member went so far as to have a safe word, which her staff would recognize as a call for help, when she was working with him. There were many lessons learned as a result of this tragic event, perhaps the most relevant is the importance of "reports on the ground." Cho's family, faculty and student peers all reported his inappropriate and unusual behaviors to the campus police and administration. Unfortunately, the campus, like many work environments, did not have a plan for banning unsafe people from campus. This lack of a comprehensive response to a string of threatening actions allowed Cho's behaviors to continue unabated until he reached his breaking point and commenced his rampage. The tragedy that struck Virginia Tech should empower institutions to develop the wherewithal to set up the infrastructure to prevent such devastation and the backbone to act more firmly when warning signs appear.

## Follow Your Gut

The most important lessons are to follow your "gut feeling," or your intuition, and to share information. Like pure logic, these feelings involve quickly processing the information available to you and using the available data to make a decision or perform an action. We know from societal norms and past history what is acceptable and what is crossing the line of normative behavior. If someone is making you nervous it is imperative to pay attention to your concerns. Many people do not act for fear of insulting the person they are interacting with. Or, upon hearing gunshots in a public place, may be embarrassed to begin running for safety. You have cognitive tools at your ready – use them. If you feel unsafe you may want to check in with a trusted colleague to see if your concerns are shared. However, do not let a peer's point of view keep you from acting if you sense something is amiss. We all have different tolerances for risk

and discomfort. If you feel truly unsafe, it may be necessary to take your concerns to the next level, perhaps a higher placed manager or office.

If you feel deeply uncomfortable or if you witness anti-social behavior, it is important to share what you experienced with the appropriate offices. Many active shooters give off copious warning signs to those who interact with them on a regular basis. Therefore, it is important to build a workplace environment where staff are allowed to discuss suspicious behaviors and activities with Human Resources without fear of reprisal or ruining someone's reputation. *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* lists examples of threat levels and the type of threats that exist at each level. This is a useful, freely available online resource, which allows the layperson to place threatening language within a risk continuum. Of course, most of us are not mental health or safety specialists so it is important to avail oneself of the professionals, in your work place or town, who are best able to assess extreme actions, changes in behavior, or threats. In your Library Safety Manual it is important to list the contact information of experts who should be contacted with these sorts of concerns. Most active shooters leave a trail of clues; it is up to us to build a supportive infrastructure that will allow us to pay attention and respond properly when threats appear.

### **Write Behavioral Policies**

One of the most important takeaways from the Virginia Tech tragedy is the need to be aware of our environment and to be able to act on strange behaviors. To control and protect our environment we need to work within our institutions to develop a plan for naming, acting on and banning unacceptable behavior. We are justifiably proud of the fact that libraries are safe spaces that are generally open to the public or an entirety of a large user community. Libraries attract a wide spectrum of patrons and are known for offering services to all types of patrons. But being perceived as too accepting can leave many with the impression that some anti-social behavior is allowed or worse, leave staff feeling disempowered in regards to enforcing rules of conduct. Working together, front line staff, along with administration and counsel can draft a Patron Behavior Policy that lists unacceptable patron behavior, the steps for documenting such behavior and the criteria for acting on it. Every library must strive to protect patron rights and to stay away from a lawsuit like *Kreimer v. Morristown*<sup>7</sup> where rules were made up to specifically address one patron's actions. Patron Behavior Policies can help to control small nuances and also empower library staff to stave off disruptive behavior or imminent threats. Of course, having a well crafted Patron Behavior Policy<sup>8</sup> will not wrap a magic impenetrable ring around your library nor will it protect you from threatening employees or somebody who walks in off of the street. Whether your attacker is a known entity or a stranger, it is essential that you plan for and are aware of your escape options.

### **Best Practices/Survivor's Mindset**

An analogy that is used time and again in safety preparedness is that of airline safety precautions. Every time we board an aircraft we are reminded to look for the closest exit, told where the flotation devices are located and what to do should oxygen be needed. Each one of us should apply these same preventative practices to our day-to-day activities. Within our work environment we practice our response to fire alarms in such a routinized fashion that it is difficult to imagine there ever being a real fire and the accompanying mad scramble through smoke and heat. But should a fire strike, we are ready for it. Likewise we should have a plan at work that

helps us practice “shelter in place.” In case of an emergency, it should be second nature to immediately turn off the ring tones and IM beeps of the errant cell phone. (In fact, this may be the time to make a decision to silence all sounds except for the ring announcing your incoming calls. That ring can then be quickly shut off in case of an emergency or a work meeting.) One should consider how to best secure oneself within a work space. What furniture could be used as a barrier? Where are the exit doors? How do you break through a window in order to escape? Where are locations you could escape to? And what steps would you need to take to ensure you walk out alive?

Again, you are your own best resource. If you sense something threatening is happening -- act with determination: lock your door and call 911! Don't wait for confirmation from other people. This level of preparedness builds a “survivor's mindset” which is a key component in coming out of any violent confrontation; a prepared mind allows for action instead of confusion. Having a library training plan and a survival plan greatly increases your chance of survival and the possibility of your assisting in saving other lives.

### Prevention/Change the Ending of the Story

Not one of us wishes to be involved in such a heinous attack as an active shooter situation. Bringing up the possibility of such an event and holding training sessions may be deeply upsetting to many of our staff. One way to assure our employees that their workplace is a stable and safe environment is to focus on making it one. Like fire alarm drills, it is important for everybody who works in libraries to understand that individuals bear responsibility for surviving in the case of an emergency. Amanda Ripley, author of the book *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes – and Why*, is a strong proponent of preparation and practice. She says, “It makes intuitive sense that the more you expose yourself to safe stress, the less sensitive you would be to its effects<sup>9</sup>.” So yes, while talking and preparing for such a violent event will be deeply disturbing for some, the very action of talking and preparing can work to desensitize and train employees to act in an appropriate way in the course of an emergency. It does not hurt to repeat this motivating probability: by the time law enforcement arrives, a shooting event may already be over. It is imperative for each of us to consider how we would survive such a violent scenario and to incorporate our survivor's mindset into our plans and subsequent actions. There are no guarantees in life, including surviving an active shooter event. However, there are preparations one can take in order to increase the odds of survival. The first step is to accept that a shooter could show up at your workplace. Once you accept that possibility you can plan for a reaction that may save your life.

### Training Plan/Response Plan

The premise of having a “survivor's mindset” is one of preparation. Developing an Active Shooter section within the Emergency Manual should be a priority for your library and yourself. A plan may include the use of communication tools (a public announcement system, phones, Short Message Service (or SMS), or an internal distress code system within the library, etc.). Many of these communication plans can be specific to a building or campus-wide, in the case of academic settings. A successful plan is based on staff training and has been reviewed with all employees. It should include evacuation plans, noted gathering places and local lock-down scenarios. Security considerations should be a regular part of safety operations. For example, has a safety census been done at your work site? If not, find out who in your institution can help

you develop one. Do your local safety officers have building blueprints on file? If not, speak to the police to see if they are interested in storing digital blueprints on their server. Have door handle mechanisms been checked for operational integrity and the ability to be locked quickly in case of an emergency? If not, explore the possibility of placing locks in key locations. Assigning staff to assess their own environment forces them to imagine survival and to suggest improvements. Very few of us have considered these issues, but with the proper support we can learn to consider our safety in a new, proactive, way.

If your library does not have a training and response plan you can and should work with safety officers and town, city, or university emergency planners. It is a goodly amount of work, and most of our buildings, designed with access and openness in mind, are not easily secured. There is no guarantee that any building can be fully locked down and secured. In some cases, a decision may be made to focus on locking down particular areas rather than trying to secure the building and run the risk of locking a shooter inside and emergency responders outside. However, having a plan gives your staff options and a chance at staying alive. Teaching and empowering our staff to report unsafe interactions can help to stop their escalation. Meeting with local police and other emergency responders to formulate possible plans will help us be aware of our building's strengths and weaknesses. There are online guides which can assist in the development of programs and training materials. OSHA has an older, but still useful guide titled "How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations"<sup>10</sup>. Once there is a building specific plan, planning the training is much easier and more apt to address building specific concerns.

Each library should hold ongoing training sessions and provide online resources that can be easily accessed and read time and again. Luckily, there are many tools out there which can help you build a strong training program. There are a growing number of online videos and web pages than can be used as tools and templates. But it is critical to be aware that it can be frightening for many employees to participate in "unthinkable events," therefore it may be necessary to have mental health workers on hand to support people in early conversations or in the aftermath of a training exercise.

Many cities and universities have developed Active Shooter Training with supporting online resources. An excellent example of a local production is the *Ithaca College Emergency Response Guide*<sup>11</sup>. There are also a few high caliber videos with professional production values which will frighten and motivate in equal parts. Listings for these can be found in the appendix. James Alan Fox, the Lipman Family Professor of Criminology, Law and Public Policy at Northeastern University, is one of the authors of "Campus Violence Prevention and Response: Best Practices for Massachusetts Higher Education"<sup>12</sup>. This report, while directed towards educational institutions, can be used across many types of organizations in helping to form best practices for workplace safety and violence prevention. Particularly useful are the best practices that were noted time and again in studies from around the country. A select listing includes:

- Create an all-hazards Emergency Response Plan (ERP).
- Adopt an emergency mass notification and communications system.
- Establish a multi-disciplinary team to respond to threats and other dangerous behaviors.
- Practice emergency plans and conduct training.
- Educate and train students, faculty, and staff about mass notification systems and their roles and responsibilities in an emergency.
- Educate faculty, staff, and students about recognizing and responding to signs of mental illness and potential threats.
- Conduct risk and safety assessments.

Also noted are recommendations for how campuses can better teach early detection and prevention in regards to safety and violence. In addition, physical and electronic security measures are listed out as are police partnership issues, mass notification, emergency response needs and policies and procedures.

## **Collaboration/Partnerships**

Building partnerships or collaborating with other city offices, campus infrastructures, or your local police force, has many positive ramifications. Partnering with other groups allows efficiencies; especially in the design and implementation of safety training. When developing best practices and an active training program it is useful to appoint a safety committee. The committee members can build a program that will allow employees to respond to a wide array of emergencies such as fire or flooding, medical incidents, or an active shooter. Any committee should be working hand in glove with the local police force. Having a strong and ongoing police/library partnership will result in a safer work environment. When officers regularly enter the library their presence is less threatening and more along the lines of business as usual. Staff and patrons will know the names and faces of the police department and welcome the officers into their library. Their presence will dissuade troublemakers and allow for a healthier neighborhood environment where the police are seen as friends and safety officers, not harbingers of doom. If possible, locate a law enforcement way-station in the library so the police have a reason for stopping by. Their interaction with the locale will build a familiarity with the building, staff, and clientele. For example, at UC Davis there is a satellite office for the campus police within the Shields Library called Shields in Shields. The outpost allows police to set up appointments in an office that is more central than the Police Department. Most days there are visual cues that the police are in the building; like a police car parked near the library or a police bicycle locked to our staircase railing. Additionally, the partnership has led to conversations on better training for library security guards and professionalized the way that we report criminal activities within the Shields Library. Public libraries have even more opportunities to build on their relationship with the local police. Because of their place in the local community's life, public libraries can plan for a wide array of events. They can co-sponsor safety events, have police officers act as celebrity readers during children's events, partner in cultural and other local programs and teach safety courses. Working with the local police department on Active Shooter Training focuses both the police and library personnel and pushes them to be better prepared. It is easy enough to form a committee, partner with other groups and to become closer to one's police department. The next level is where we begin to explore what it means to be a survivor.

## **Surviving an Active Shooter Event**

We all think that we know what gunfire sounds like. After all, our entertainment media is dense with shooting cops, out of control criminals, and international crime syndicates empowered with automatic weapons. Some of us even have hands on experience from the military, or our families go hunting or take part in target practice. But hearing the "pop, pop, pop" of a gun in our workplace, possibly at the other end of the hallway and without the sonic boom of a multiplex magnified reverb, is an unusual and easy to ignore noise. It is necessary, if you hear such a noise, to stop, assess, and gather information. If you can't immediately ascertain where the sound originated from, secure yourself for a moment as you verify all is safe. If all is not safe, follow the instructions below.

If you hear shots:

- Most people look to others to confirm their assumptions. Do not waste time doing this! If you think you hear gunshots, immediately secure yourself in a safe location.
- If you are not sheltered in a secure space (a closed room that you can lock and make dark) run in the opposite direction of the gunshots.

Exit the building if possible:

- Inform others as you exit the building.
- Trust your instincts.
- Leave your belongings behind.
- Call 911 (if on a campus, also call campus police department).
  - Give your name
  - Location of the shooting
  - Number of shooters and any other information you may have
    - Description of shooter(s) (clothing, race, gender)
    - Injuries, numbers and types of injuries
    - What types of weapons you saw or heard
    - If the assailant has a backpack
  - Your current location

If you cannot exit the building:

- Go to the nearest safe space (a room you can secure)
  - Close, lock, and barricade door (using file cabinets, desks, other furniture)
  - Close shades, turn off lights
  - Mute your cell phone, turn off radios and computer monitors
  - Keep quiet
  - Do not answer the door
  - If there is more than one of you, spread out (no easy targets and more opportunity for escape or for overpowering shooter)
  - Get on the floor and behind heavy furniture
- Remember, the shooter generally will not stop until s/he is stopped. Do not exit your safe space until you are positive the police are in control of the situation

When the police come:

- Remain calm, keep hands visible with your palms open and facing up
- Do not move until “all clear” command is given
- Help with first aid
  - Have basic first aid supplies on hand
- You are now in a crime scene, follow all instructions given to you by the officers

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to address every active shooter scenario and answer all questions – that is all but impossible. Rather, the goal is to raise awareness of the possibility of such an event and to help empower libraries to, if not prevent an attack, to come out of it alive. Understanding and appreciating that every staff member is involved in the prediction and prevention of workplace violence is the first step to allowing that conversation to happen. Having strong patron and staff behavior policies with some backbone is the first step of risk management. Of course, the necessity of safety training, a response plan, and an ongoing relationship with your community's safety officers is of utmost importance. Only then will library staff have the opportunity to develop the survivor's mindset essential for staying calm when the unthinkable happens.

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<sup>1</sup> Murder, Types of Weapons Used, Percent Distribution by Region, 2009. *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. Washington: Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2009. [http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2009/offenses/expanded\\_information/data/shrtable\\_07.html](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2009/offenses/expanded_information/data/shrtable_07.html)

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<sup>3</sup> *Active Shooter: How to Respond*. Washington (D.C.): U. S. Dept. of Homeland Security, 2008. Pg 2. [http://www.dps.mo.gov/homelandsecurity/documents/Active%20Shooter/DHS%20ActiveShooter\\_Response%20Booklet.pdf](http://www.dps.mo.gov/homelandsecurity/documents/Active%20Shooter/DHS%20ActiveShooter_Response%20Booklet.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> O'Toole, Mary E. *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*. Quantico, Va: Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG), National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), FBI Academy, 2000. Pg 7. <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> De, Becker Gavin. *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*. New York: Dell, 1999.

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<sup>8</sup> Geiszler, Robert. "Patron Behavior in the Public Library: Kreimer v. Morristown Revisited." *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 71, Spring, 1998. Pg 54-67.

<sup>9</sup> Ripley, Amanda. *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes and Why*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> *How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations*. Ft. Belvoir: Defense Technical Information Center, 2001. <http://www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3088.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> *Ithaca College Emergency Response Guide*. Ithaca, New York: Ithaca College, 2008. [http://www.ithaca.edu/emergency/pdfs/Emergency\\_Response\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.ithaca.edu/emergency/pdfs/Emergency_Response_Guide.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> O'Neill, Daniel M. *Campus Violence Prevention and Response: Best Practices for Massachusetts Higher Education: Report to Massachusetts Department of Higher Education*.

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## Active Shooter in the Library

### Security & Safety – Selected Materials

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## Web Pages

The following links are examples of how to share information with your community as well as information on what to do. We have put together a list of representative universities from across the country:

Pennsylvania State University - <http://www.yk.psu.edu/Information/Safety/29011.htm>

Southern New Hampshire University - <http://www.snhu.edu/3083.asp>

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University - [http://prescott.erau.edu/campus-services/safety-security/ActiveShooter\\_Prescott\\_Proof4.pdf](http://prescott.erau.edu/campus-services/safety-security/ActiveShooter_Prescott_Proof4.pdf)

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