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An Analysis of Active Shooter Training in Law Enforcement

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ABSTRACT

Traditional police response to in-progress critical incidents normally call for officers to surround, isolate, contain, and prevent the problem from growing. Then, special resources with technical skills are normally called in for resolutions. The fact that victims are being killed in a circumstance where law enforcement is present requires officers at the scene to confront the suspect(s) and if necessary, use deadly force to stop them.

The topic of Active Shooter Training to determine if the training is beneficial to law enforcement will be addressed. Safety issues during Active Shooter Training will be scrutinized. The tragic accidental shooting of an Arlington, Texas police officer will be analyzed.

To assess the need for Active Shooter Training, literature to include magazine and newspaper articles were reviewed. A survey of police officers who had attended this type of training were surveyed to determine if they believed the training was beneficial. The results reflected that training is critical for the success of an agency to reach its required level of readiness. Officer safety should take precedence over the training, to include having a written checklist that everyone goes through and everyone does this each time the training resumes.

To preserve life is the primary duty of every law enforcement officer in this country. There have been many incidents involving active shooters in the workplace, restaurants and in schools. All law enforcement personnel must be prepared to deal with this new phenomenon.

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Introduction

In recent years there have been numerous incidents involving the active shooter. The active shooter is defined as: Someone who participates in a shooting spree which involves ongoing injury or loss of life. There have been active shooter incidents all over the country. They can occur anywhere; in the workplace, schools, playgrounds and restaurants. Examples include, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They killed 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO before killing themselves. One hundred and sixty students were triaged at the scene, twenty-four were transported to six area hospitals. It took police three hours to reach teacher Dave Sanders at Columbine. During that time, he bled to death. In 1998 two boys, ages 11 and 13 killed four students and a teacher after setting off a false fire alarm at a Jonesboro, Arkansas elementary school. They were apprehended. In 1996 fourteen year old Barry Loukaitis killed three classmates and wounded one before being apprehended at a Moses Lake, WA middle school. In 1991 George Henard rammed his truck into a Killeen, Texas restaurant, he killed 23 patrons, wounded 24, then killed himself.

Recently there has been a progressive shift among police agencies to develop and train in active shooting scenarios. Active shooter training is classified by many names. Some agencies refer to the training as Immediate Action Rapid Deployment and other agencies call the training Homicide In Progress. Today it is possible to elevate an individuals shooting, fighting and situational control skills to levels not possible in the past. However, officers are still getting injured and killed much to frequently (Doss,

2001). Not to mention accidental weapon discharges and minor injuries that are not made public.

This project will analyze the active shooter training to determine if the training is beneficial to law enforcement agencies. The high-risk training will be examined to check for elements of deficiency and/or an aspect of the training that has been neglected. It is hypothesized that active shooter training is an effective tool in law enforcement training.

Literature on active shooter training will be reviewed and analyzed. Since the subject is relatively new to law enforcement; it may be hard to find classic information. It is anticipated that current information including magazines and newspapers will be utilized. Information will be gathered from law enforcement agencies to include types of weapons used in training and types of simunition used. Information from Arlington Police Department will be discussed reference loaded guns in the training scenarios due to the tragic incident that occurred on June 7, 2001, when an officer was accidentally shot and killed during an Active Shooter Training Session. Observations will be made by attending actual Active Shooter Training.

The purpose of this research will be to examine ways in which safety guidelines could be implemented to deal with safety issues. Safety issues could vary from no live ammunition in the training area to adequate supervision of the training. The goal is to discover ways in which productive training could be implemented and future accidents may be avoided.

The implications of the research to law enforcement would be to develop safety guidelines that would assist in successful training. Active shooter training is a different aspect to law enforcement agencies. The old way of doing things is to wait for the

Special Weapons And Tactical (SWAT) team, which takes time to deploy. Active shooter training involves the first responding officers dealing with the shooter(s) immediately. The goal is to save lives. Speed is the most important ingredient in the rapid response to a shooting in progress incident in which innocent people are being killed.

Review of Literature

The primary mission of all law enforcement agencies is to protect the lives of citizens. This role may vary to some degree depending on their location, size, jurisdiction and resources. However, what does not vary is that this duty must be performed at all times and under all conditions. Real life situational training is a dominant aspect of protecting and serving.

The typical response among agencies seeking to reduce the failure rate among officers is to increase the duration or frequency of training, without consideration to the content and quality of that training. If the training is not structured and relevant to their needs, the usual end result is nothing more than a reinforcement of irrelevant skills and bad habits (Doss, 2001).

Law enforcement and the Armed Forces are both authorized to use deadly force if necessary. Law enforcement is held to a higher standard and are responsible for every bullet fired. The military cares nothing about what happens to a bullet once the enemy has been downed. Police requirements are almost the opposite. What a bullet does after it puts down a felon is of tremendous importance to all professional officers (Williams, 1977). Law enforcement active shooter training needs to reflect the importance of bullet placement and innocent citizens safety and not the mind set of the military.

Although the association between law enforcement personnel and the handgun has become an accepted fact in American society, training and knowledge does not always go hand in hand. Some officers are only required to qualify with their duty weapon annually and fail to practice gun safety or marksmanship on their own. Also, the increasing number of lawsuits directed at individual officers, law enforcement administrators, law enforcement agencies, and jurisdictional governments alleging inadequate training in the proper use of firearms attest to the need for both comprehensive training programs and rigorous follow-up training policies (Teske, 1979).

It is not unusual for a tactical team to arrive at the scene of a barricaded incident and find that patrol personnel have contained the suspect within a secure perimeter. There is generally time for the tactical team to deploy their personnel without serious concern or suspect escape. Once the incident has been isolated, time enables patrol and/or tactical personnel to formulate a structured and deliberate plan. However, some scenarios may require immediate action; rapid deployment tactics of patrol personnel before the arrival of the tactical team. In these cases, delayed deployment could have catastrophic consequences. These scenarios often involve ongoing shots fired or downed officer/citizen rescue. The immediate and rapid deployment of law enforcement personnel to contain and prevent the escape of an armed and dangerous person should also be considered.

In small towns across America, the quiet, the meek, the mild-mannered are striking out with deadly, premeditated violence. A twisted view of reality tells them that killing is the best way to speak up. High schools are not the only educational institutions

in which violence can occur. Recent events at Littleton, CO., and elsewhere may provide a preview of what looms on the horizon for higher education (Bonilla, 2001).

Many police departments began using the active shooting training after the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado two years ago. It teaches officers to immediately approach and overcome a shooter rather than clear the building or assist victims first. The training itself is very, very valuable in that it is designed to save the lives of many children (Eiserer, 2001, June 18).

An important factor that should not be overlooked is officer safety within the firearms training scenarios. From 1936 to present there have been twenty-one law enforcement personnel fatally shot during training exercises. Police training experts say such accidents are preventable, and they say law enforcement agencies should review their training procedures to ensure safety protocols are sufficient. It does not matter how good the training is. If safety is sacrificed, then the training is counterproductive (Eiserer, 2001, June 16).

In June of 2001, the hard truth that fatal training accidents can occur struck home to Texas law enforcement officers. Arlington police dealt with double grief on the accidental shooting of one of their officers by another one of their officers while in a training scenario. While any loss is painful, this death was made more difficult to cope with due to the fact that it probably could have been prevented. Officer Blane Shaw was attempting to demonstrate how a plastic helmet would deflect a fake bullet when he fatally shot his friend Corporal Joey Cushman in the head. The accidental shooting was captured on videotape by a security camera in the school's foyer (Gonzales, 2001.).

Cushman and Shaw were demonstrating a technique to several officers before an active shooter drill began.

Officers continue to struggle with their own questions about how such a tragedy could occur. According to Jarvis (2001,) a Fort Worth Star Telegram Officer Elliott stated, "I think at this point everyone is saying "How could this happen when we train and train?" "Then we have something of this nature, so far out, happen." Police are caught in a battle of emotions vs. intellect. "The heart side of us says this could not have happened, but the intellectual side says that it did" (Officer Elliott).

Several accidental shootings during police training drills have occurred in the United States. In 1999, a Nebraska State Patrol trooper fatally shot another trooper. In the wake of the Columbine High School shooting, many police departments have started training officers to handle a shooter. According to Eiserer's (2001, June 9) article you want to make training as real as possible, but you need to always keep safety in mind. Safety is number one. It overrides realism. If it's not safe, then you have tragedies like this.

Officer Blane Shaw instinctively pulled his loaded 9mm service revolver from his holster instead of picking up a handgun with fake bullets that he had placed on a nearby table, said Sgt. James Hawthorne, a police spokesman. Instructors had been allowed by their supervisor to bring loaded weapons to "active shooter" training exercises (Eiserer, 2001, June 13).

Cpl. Cushman donned a training helmet, face shield and neck protector to show trainees that the simulated ammunition being used would not injure them. Officer Spruiel fires a Simunition –or fake- round from a shotgun converted for training, but missed.

Had Spruiel not missed with the 12-gauge round, Shaw would not have proceeded with the handgun demonstration. Because the demonstration failed, Shaw decided to complete the demonstration by firing a handgun Simunition round at Officer Cushman (Trahan, 2001,).

Police officials state that safeguards are needed to ensure that no real ammunition is present during the active shooter training. Arlington police department will no longer use kits to convert service weapons for use during training exercises. Instructors will use blue-colored weapons that fire only simunition rounds, which are fragile plastic shells filled with powdered laundry detergent (Mooring, 2001,).

The impact of gun violence is even more pronounced on juveniles and young adults. For persons between the ages of 15 and 24, the homicide rate of 15.2 per 100,000 U.S. residents is higher than the combined total homicide rate of 11 industrialized nations. Between 1984 and 1993, the firearm homicide rate for this age group increased 158 percent. Firearm injuries, suicides, and unintentional gunshot injuries claim the lives of some 38,000 Americans each year. Firearm injuries are the eighth leading cause of death and the fourth leading cause of years of potential life lost before age 65. A teenager today is more likely to die of a gunshot wound than of all natural causes of disease (Sheppard, 1999).

Scanlon (2001) writes that we, as police officers, need to give our citizens some of their quality-of-life back. If a suspect is seriously injuring or killing people, once officers are at scene, those officers are required to make entry and stop the suspect. He believes it is an officer's professional, legal and moral obligation to do so. While recognizing the fact that some officers may refuse to enter into such a dangerous

situation, it is believed they are in the minority. Officers need to assure citizens that if their community is ever faced with this dreaded situation, a plan is in place.

Active shooter incidents involve one or more suspects who participate in a random or systematic shooting spree, and are normally mobile inside a structure. During active shooter incidents, there is no time for negotiations, and there is a historical precedence that the suspects have no interest in establishing communications. There is an accepted common response strategy for an active shooting incident. The safety of subjects in danger takes first priority, followed by the safety of the public (Swon, 2001).

A comprehensive and coordinated training program can only benefit a police agency. A unified philosophy regarding tactics and the use-of-force is vital. This can only be achieved by providing a committee of agency trainers with the means and responsibility to affect the coordination of training guidelines. While a single individual can meet the challenge, it can backfire. By moving toward a training czar in committee form, the forward-thinking police agency provides better physical and civil protection for officers (Williams, 2001).

Methodology

For assistance in determining if Active Shooter Training is beneficial to law enforcement agencies a survey was prepared as a method of inquiry. The survey was handed out to the LEMIT Module I, August of 2001 class. The following is a sample of the survey:

If you and/or your agency have participated in any type of active shooter training please answer the following questions:

1. What year was the training held?

2. Type of weapon used in training?
3. Type of ammunition used in training?
4. In your opinion was the training safe? Please explain.
5. In your opinion was the training beneficial. Please be specific.

Out of twenty-six persons surveyed, only eight forms were returned.

The goal of this research is to discover ways in which productive training could be implemented and future accidents avoided. Safety guidelines and safety issues will be examined. It is hypothesized that Active Shooter Training is an effective tool to law enforcement training and to the public.

Findings

A decision to survey the LEMIT class was made based on the diversity of the officers and departments that they represent. The following results were gathered:

From 1999 to 2001 of the eight officers responding all had received some type of Active Shooter Training either through their own agencies or at larger departments. One officer had received training in this area twice. The types of weapon used in the training varied to include: Glock simunition pistols, service weapons, simunition handguns and shotguns, AR-15, MP-5 automatic, and paint ball guns. Simunition was the ammunition used the most often but some training was held by using no ammunition at all.

All but one officer (Arlington PD) stated that the training was safe. Some of the safety features implemented within the training included the fact that no officers weapons were allowed in training to include triple safety checks performed on officers in training to insure that no ammunition or extra weapons were found. A triple safety check performed again after all breaks and lunch. Triple safety checks uses three different

safety officers and all safety officers remained on site to discern and correct any safety issues. All participants were checked and could not carry ammunition magazines, intermediate weapons or mace. A very controlled environment was maintained. Desoto PD used safety judges to inspect and secure weapons. Live ammunition was secured in one box that was protected by a judge. No one could enter the staging area without inspection of their firearm. Officers also were paired with a partner to check each other again. After the exercise (off-site) officers are advised to re-load weapons. Officers are then debriefed.

Everyone agreed that the training was beneficial. Examples listed were that officers are now on the same page and have a sample plan of action that they have practiced multiple times. They feel more confident in handling Active Shooter/High Risk Incidents. Jacksboro PD stated that the entire department trained and are now able to practice scenarios at school. Another benefit was working with school staff on a response plan. Other responses included emphasis on the direct to threat aspect while working within a group. Drove home the fact that the group must be small to be mobile and that for the group to be successful each member must be successful in the performance of their duty. Training helped work out the unexpected conflicts of this type call. It prepared officers with a predetermined response and clarified the stance of the agency on this type of event. The training especially benefited the new officers in practice with this unknown area. The logistics of coordinating and implementing a plan with various personnel in a school setting is problematic and a lot was learned. Arlington PD stated that their training will resume in the near future and that training officers to

respond to an active shooter is critical. Especially since it is a change in how we handle tactical incidents.

Discussion/Conclusions

This study was aimed to determine if Active Shooter Training is beneficial to law enforcement agencies. It was hypothesized that Active Shooter Training is an effective tool to law enforcement training. Aspects of the training that may have been neglected and elements of deficiency have been scrutinized.

The need for rapid response training has become necessary for the law enforcement communities, most agencies are unprepared for a crisis of this nature. It should be understood that the training techniques would only be used with an active shooter whose intent appears to be committing mass murder, rather than some other criminal conduct such as robbery or hostage taking. These acts are usually committed in public places such as schools, restaurants or offices occupied by many unsuspecting victims. The training allows first responding officers at the scene of a mass homicide to take immediate action to control the situation rather than contain it and wait for a SWAT team to arrive while lives are being lost.

Safety considerations of Active Shooter Training are paramount. Training sites must be secured from all live ammunition, and perimeters must be set and maintained at all times. No one (not observers, supervisors, chiefs, sheriffs or trainers) should be allowed to violate this policy. Another way to help ensure firearm safety is to have a control or safety officer whose only job is to search everyone that comes into the training area and remove all ammunition from all the officers. Triple safety checks should be conducted.

The relevance of this study to law enforcement is that training of physical and tactical skills is very important to the individual police officer. Incidents of violence in the school or workplace necessitate a response plan. The plan must focus on innocent victims, bystanders, law enforcement officers, and suspects in that order. The general public needs to be assured that police agencies have a plan. That individuals will not be allowed to seriously injure or kill innocent people while police officers are at the scene. Officers are willing to risk their lives to stop these actions and they deserve to be safely trained to effectively deal with these situations.

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