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**School Active Shooter:  
A Shift from Awareness to Preparedness**



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**By  
Chris Thompson**

**Sugar Land Police Department  
Sugar Land, Texas  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The average school in the United States is not fully prepared to address an active shooter on campus, and more education, training, and working partnerships need to be incorporated to save lives. Schools are still depending on law enforcement responses to stop active shooters on campus and have put into place policies and procedures to lock schools down until police arrive. This is no longer relevant as police responses to an active shooter on average is greater than the time it takes an active shooter to complete the act. School districts and universities should incorporate and provide mandatory training in response procedures as part of an active shooter recognition and prevention program. Schools need to use a multi-tier system of education, training, and working with law enforcement officials to create a system of actions and protections to minimize casualties in the event of an active shooter. Data analysis from many campus shootings over a long period of time has been evaluated, and it revealed that schools are still not prepared to confront an active shooter and minimize casualties. Accordingly, the recommendations that are included suggest a practical implementation of education and training capable of mitigating the deadly effects from a homicide in progress on school campuses.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of this paper is to provide a comprehensive and logical argument that will show schools need to incorporate mandatory faculty and student training regarding active shooters on campus. Law enforcement arrival to the call of an active shooter in or at a school exceeds incident duration (Ergenbright & Hubbard, 2012). Mandatory multi-tier training and critical incident drills must be implemented for all faculty, staff, students, and parents in schools so that everyone understands how to respond to an active shooter. Faculty and students must also be trained on what to do when law enforcement arrives on scene. School employees and students will respond only with gross motor skills with a fight or flight instinct unless trained otherwise.

Active shooters fit several profiles; including one that describes an active shooter as a person in the process of killing or attempting to kill people in an enclosed structure. Active shooters use guns and tend to pick out individuals at random while committing their crimes. It is very difficult for law enforcement to determine when and where an active shooting will take place, as they happen very quickly and with little or no notice. In order to limit or stop the shooting to save lives, law enforcement must act very quickly in their response to the scene. Ten to fifteen minutes is all it takes for an active shooter to start and finish their crime. On most occasions, the active shooting is over before law enforcement can arrive to help. If law enforcement is not able to arrive in a timely fashion to assist, then individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to confront an active shooter and save their own and others' lives. (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2008).

On August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman climbed into a tower on the University of Texas Austin campus and used a rifle to kill 15 people. This incident is considered the catalyst for developing active shooter and SWAT training in general ("Active shooter," 2010). Law enforcement, faculty, and students did not have a plan and did not know what to do during the shooting. On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebod walked into Columbine High School in Colorado and went on a shooting spree that killed 13 people. They were in the school for almost one hour before they took their own lives (Chronis, 2000). There was no law enforcement intervention inside the school during the incident that would have stopped the killing. Faculty and students did not know what to do as they sat in the library waiting for police to arrive. This event is credited as being the catalyst for law enforcement on how to better respond to active shooters in schools (Borelli, 2005).

Law enforcement agencies now have detailed training programs for police officers and how they will respond and confront an active shooter in their community. The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) program is a very structured program for training and educating police officers on how to aggressively respond to an active shooter situation (Texas State University, 2007). There are government programs that offer to educate and train civilians, who are always the first on scene, of how to intervene during an active shooting. Law enforcement has done a great job after the Columbine High School shooting with regards to responding and securing active shooting scenes; however, they rarely arrive until after the trigger has been pulled and people have been killed and wounded. This leads to a healthy

discussion on what training should be implemented in schools and how faculty and students will respond before law enforcement arrives and after.

The most recent school active shooting scene in Newtown, Connecticut revealed how faculty, staff, students, and law enforcement have been trained to respond during an active shooter incident there. In 2012, the victim count at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown was 26 killed, twice the number as Columbine High School, which occurred in 1999 (Bratu, 2012). This can be attributed to a lack of training and preparation of faculty and students regarding active shooter due to a gross misunderstanding that police can arrive fast enough to solve the problem.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) research has shown that most active shootings are stopped by something other than law enforcement intervention, and schools need to incorporate training to reflect such (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). It is important that schools start to embrace the fact that the law enforcement community knows it cannot be there every time an active shooting starts, but they are interested in doing all they can to minimize casualties.

The law enforcement community should be placing more emphasis on developing and implementing real, quality training to faculty, students, and civilians in school and university settings so that they have a chance of survival in the minutes prior to law enforcement arriving on scene. Schools also need to train faculty and students on what to do when law enforcement does arrive and how they can best assist with the situation. School districts and universities should incorporate and provide mandatory training in response procedures as part of an active shooter recognition and prevention program.

## POSITION

The civilian population and law enforcement must understand that current training, policies, and procedures in place for active shooters in schools and universities are for awareness purposes and not for preparedness. The Arkansas State University Police website tells a student what to do in an active shooter situation but does not show the student what to do (Arkansas State University Police, n.d.). A reason why people need to be prepared to intervene is because law enforcement cannot arrive fast enough to stop the active shooter. Research showed that on many college campuses, active shooters take almost 12 minutes and 30 seconds to commit their crimes, while it takes law enforcement almost 18 minutes to arrive after being dispatched. (Ergenbrigt & Hubbard, 2012). This is evident most recently by the active shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, which showed that the “School Lockdown” method of response to an active shooter is only the first part of a multi-tiered plan. The faculty was aware of active shooter procedures but not prepared.

There are several more steps that need to be implemented and trained for in schools in addition to the lockdown. Twenty-six people, mostly children, were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, while staff and faculty attempted to lockdown the school and hide children from the shooter (Barron, 2012). The training received by employees and students at Sandy Hook may have had limited success; however, more detailed training with different options may have had a more positive result. Law enforcement did not stop this shooting, and it only ended when the shooter, Adam Lanza, took his own life. The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University active shooting incident on April 16, 2007 produced 7.9 murder attempts per minute with 32

people killed. Law enforcement did not stop the killing, and the shooting only stopped after Seung Cho took his own life (Ergenbrigt & Hubbard, 2012). In 2011, Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 young people at a labor party youth camp, on a Norway island. While this is not technically a school, it was considered a school shooting in Norway. He used a 9mm handgun during his killing spree in the worst mass murder event in Norway's history. Law enforcement arrested him upon arrival to the island after he became tired of killing people in the youth camp. (Ergenbrigt & Hubbard, 2012).

School employees, students, and parents have little mandatory training to prepare them to face an active shooter and increase their chances for survival (Gray, 2013). The time gap between Columbine High School shootings and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings is 14 years, and very little has been done to incorporate mandatory, continuing training in schools. This training must be mandatory and aggressive in order to save lives. School districts have very strict plans of action and frequent training for responding to a fire or fire alarm. This same type of mentality and aggressive training now must be incorporated with active shooter. The government has a responsibility to do everything possible to protect against potential threats or known threats. In researching student fatalities in school fires, there were no discovered deaths since 1958 (United States Fire Administration, 2007). Schools have continuing education and training regarding fire and fire drills even though there have been no discoverable school fire deaths since 1958. Active shooters and building fires are both potential threats, so giving training time to faculty and students in both areas is essential.



There are several widely used training programs to instruct civilians on how to respond to an active shooter situation. One is the ADD (Avoid, Deny, and Defend) model from Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center (Texas State University, 2007). This model instructs a person to first avoid the active shooter if possible. The second course of action is to deny access to a location by barricade or locking potential victims in a room. The third and last resort is to defend people if necessary in order to save lives. The Houston Police Department has incorporated a “Run, Hide, Fight” approach to active shooter and has just recently started to find ways to re-educate and train civilians on how to defend themselves (“Controversial City of Houston,” 2012). This program, like ADD, first uses flight as a first defense. The training then encourages one to hide and, lastly, fight, if there is no alternative to save lives. The Department of Homeland Security (2008) provides a course entitled: Active Shooter: What can you do. These models are different, voluntary, and provide some very good threat assessment regarding how to train people to respond to an active shooter. The issue at hand is that while there are some very good programs that teach several options to defend against an active shooter, if they are not incorporated as mandatory, then the training may not be taken seriously, if at all.

Law enforcement responds to active shooter scenes in all parts of the country very aggressively. Citizens need to know what to do when a police officer arrives on scene as it could help with saving lives. Training in this area will involve confirming the active shooter has stopped and cannot continue hurting others. Citizens need to assist with directing officers to suspects or victims who then will begin to allow access of the scene to medical personnel. This type of training is very important and will get the right

help to the people who need it most the fastest. Training on how civilians can help police officers when they respond to the call is essential in order to save lives (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). In Columbine, mass confusion on the part of faculty, staff, students, law enforcement, fire, EMS, parents, and others was a result of all groups not being trained on what to do and how to respond to an active shooter. The responding agencies knew their jobs but could not formulate a successful plan of action due to a lack of preparation and training (Chronis, 2000). Civilian training on active shooter should follow a nationwide model so that everyone is on the same page when it comes to confronting active shooters

The issue remains that law enforcement must prepare and train school faculty and students on how to respond aggressively to an active shooter and how to stop them. Law enforcement must realize that they are responding too late to an active shooter call to give others on scene the best chance for survival. Schools and business going into lockdown and waiting to be killed does not solve the problem. Training curriculum developed for civilians has encompassed a peaceful response to active shooter by instructing them to lockdown buildings, hide, and be quiet. The University of Arkansas, along with several other large Universities, has a list of what students should do in the event of an active shooter. The information on their university police site instructs anyone who may be a target to stay quiet and hide (Arkansas State University Police, n.d.). This does not work when an active shooter is looking at a person. Training to counter the attack must be a part of the multi-step response procedure when dealing with an active shooter (Dorn & Satterly, 2012). The large part of preparing and training for active shooter needs to focus on how to defend oneself and others from

someone trying to kill. Government agencies should include detailed instruction and training on an active response to armed aggressors. Knowing this is the key to developing training for civilians because like fire threats, there will always be active shooter threats. When law enforcement trains people to “lockdown and hide,” then no one is stopping the active shooter.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Resistance to the concept of providing mandatory training for active shooter can be divided into three areas of contention: Budget costs, agreed upon training curriculum, and resistance of active shooter drills into schools. The leading area of contention is school districts and their tight budgets. The economy is still deflated, and taxing entities are operating on lean budgets with revenues down. Incorporating mandatory active shooting training for all faculty and students will require time and money (Bonvillian, 2013). Faculty and students will have to be given the necessary time to train and prepare for active shooter events. If school districts outsourced this training, then more costs would be incurred for instructors, materials, and maintenance training. The purpose of active shooter training is to provide faculty and students with a roadmap to survival in the event of an incident. This training can be expanded to include other types of physical threats. The Department of Homeland Security (2008) offers a free training curriculum in active shooter. There are survival plan resources released through the DHS Active Shooter Program that are available at no cost to the public. The resources, including online seminars and classes, posters, booklets and pocket cards, have trained 125,000 people over the past four years (United States

Department of Homeland Security, 2008). School districts can take this and apply the concepts to their faculty and students for free.

The training curriculum and what should be included in a training program is widely debated. Many leading experts in school safety as well as school officials have reservations regarding confronting an active shooter as part of a training program. Their concern is that students, especially the very young or disabled will not remember what to do in a stressful situation or have the means to put up any type of fight. The misapplication of techniques could cause more deaths instead of preventing it (Dorn & Satterly, 2012). Everybody should have an opportunity to protect themselves from harm and to think that people only hold law enforcement accountable for that action is naive. Training students regularly, like with fire drills, will instill a roadmap to remembering the information when needed. Training for fire response is applied to the young and disabled and has been just as successful as with other students. Only as a last resort, should faculty and students be trained to attack an active shooter.

The incorporation of active shooter drills into the school environment is disruptive to the learning process and not the duty of government. Many parents believe that the job of training their kids to respond to school shooting is their own. There is belief that young children will be traumatized with active shooting training and they will fear going to school. Children are taught to “stop, drop, and roll” if they catch on fire. During the 1960s and 1970s, school children were taught how to respond to a nuclear attack with the “duck and cover” method. The schools are responsible for the safety of children while they are at school. Having an organized and practiced plan to address incidents on campus is being responsible. The issue of active shooters in schools is an open

discussion of what is going on in the world. Ignoring the problem and pretending it will never happen is not the answer.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The development and implementation of training at school campuses so that faculty and students know what to do in the event of an active shooter should be mandatory. Law enforcement cannot arrive in time to stop an active shooter on a school campus in most instances (United States Secret Service, 2002). School faculty and students need to be trained on how to respond when confronted with an active shooter, and they need to know what is expected of them when police arrive. Active shooter training and maintenance can be time-consuming and expensive for school districts. Several government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security (2008), have developed educational materials that are free of charge and can be used for active shooter training. There is some debate on what training should be taught to faculty and students and whether an unarmed person should ever confront an armed active shooter (Dorn & Satterly, 2012). Local law enforcement is available to help school districts with training, action planning, and developing a procedure that is right for that school. Law enforcement would be able to train schools on how they would respond to an active shooter and how schools can assist. Parents are concerned that training young children and exposing them to active shooter drills is not the right course of action (Gray, 2013). It is important, however, to give everyone a realistic chance at survival, and like fire drills, should be a necessary component in today's society.

Mandatory school training would require legislation to be passed that requires all schools to implement a training plan for faculty and students on response procedures to

active shooter. This training can be implemented on the state level, with a startup period of one year to bring faculty and students up to required standards. The standard should match the recommendation of the Department of Homeland Security's response to active shooter program. Once the training has been put into place, then schools will be required to maintain the training monthly, and conduct drills so that everyone is learning how to respond. The training must be multi-tiered and continuing training drills, like fire drills, must be incorporated. Proper training can make the difference of life or death to the victim or potential victim confronted by an active shooter. Faculty and students need options when confronted with an active shooter, and law enforcement and the community must realize that only training on awareness and not preparedness will fail in a true active shooter scenario. When children are targeted, adults must intervene, with force if necessary, to distract and stop the active shooting (Dorn & Satterly, 2012). In addition to training law enforcement and first responder's responses to an active shooter, school faculty, staff, students, and parents must also receive training as well.

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