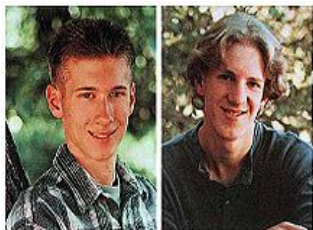


Responding to a High-Rise

ACTIVE SHOOTER

By Elvis Polanco, MS, CPP

What should I do? That is the question that all employees who work in high-rises should be asking themselves and answering to effectively and efficiently deal with the resulting trauma of an active shooter incident. Over the years, stories have been published relative to the impact that active shooter experiences have on people who are intimate with the incident. The Columbine High School incident in Jefferson County, Colorado and its aftermath is indicative of people's general reactions when the incident



of Eric Harris (above, left) and Dylan Klebold (above, right) as they massacred 12 students and one faculty member will live with us for many years. More recently in 2007, the



occurs in one- and two-story buildings. These low-rise buildings allow potential victims to escape from harm fairly easily by merely distancing themselves from the shooter. In 1999, the images shown the world over Virginia Tech massacre involved the callous murder of 32 people by Seung-Hui Cho (left) in Blacksburg, Virginia. This massacre was the deadliest perpetrated by one individual shooter in US history.

According to the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the active shooter is "an individual actively engaged in attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area, typically through the use of firearms."

This definition captures the essence of what an active shooter feels is the ultimate mission goal: death. The shooter is not concerned with the consequences of their actions since ultimately the shooting incidents end with the self-inflicted or police-inflicted death of the shooter. Harris, Klebold and Cho's deaths were self-inflicted. The families affected by their actions will never understand what could have triggered in the minds of these individuals that would lead them to perpetrate these catastrophic murderous rampages. The pain and suffering the families of the victims experience is immeasurable.

The dilemma that tenants of high-rise commercial buildings face is how to escape from properties that have limited paths of egress. Unlike Columbine and Virginia

Tech, two educational institutions located in the middle of vast campuses, commercial high-rises in New York City are for the most part built around highly concentrated and densely populated areas, particularly in the borough of Manhattan.

More importantly is the fact that high-rises pose the biggest challenges due to limited availability of emergency exits and elevators, lack of proper emergency response training and high occupancy rates. Although there are no concrete answers as to what actions can be effectively and efficiently utilized in an active shooter situation, there are guidelines that should be explored in depth to limit the number of injuries and deaths. Building managers and owners should explore these questions further as they should be building-specific and therefore are likely to vary between different properties.

Questions to Contemplate

1. Should security make public address announcements to the active shooter floor only, the uninvolved floors only, or the entire property?
2. What message should be delivered to the active shooter floor and/or to the entire property? Should the people on the active shooter floor be informed to evacuate if safe to do so? Or should they be informed to seek shelter? Should the uninvolved floors be informed to evacuate or shelter in place?
3. Should elevators be shut down? If so, should the elevator bank servicing the active shooter floor be shut down, or should all the elevators in the building be shut down via elevator recall phase I operations? Would shutting down elevators force the shooter to go to the stairwells where people might be self-evacuating?
4. Should emergency stairwells be utilized? If so, should all of the stairwells be utilized or only those farthest from the shooter? If utilized, could that action inadvertently bring the occupants closer to the shooter?
5. Should the fire alarm be activated on the active shooter floor to alert everyone on the floor of the emergency and to activate first responders? Or will this action cause more panic and confusion and should be discouraged?
6. Should people who find themselves in active shooter incidents attempt to escape the floor, seek shelter, "play

dead” or confront the shooter? Is there a fifth response that should be explored?

7. Should the shooter be allowed to exit the building without confrontation? If so, will allowing the shooter to escape expose more building occupants to the shooter and possibly cause more mayhem?

These and other questions have a significant impact on how effectively property management will address active shooter emergencies. Property management teams, through training and educating their tenants, can play a significant role on how these incidents materialize. The goal of training building occupants is to ensure that the active shooter’s mission of murder is thwarted. Obviously, it is not always possible to know the original intent of the shooter and therefore it is not known in advance whether the shooter has a specific target or will seek victims at random. In some instances, the shooter’s intention is to harm a specific individual who may be a professional colleague or someone with whom the shooter was involved in a business transaction or in a romantic relationship gone sour.

According to DHS, the shooter selects victims at random. Although this may be true in certain situations, the shooters have defined targets, who they accuse of psychological or physical harm, whether real or perceived. The active shooter incidents are both predictable and unpredictable depending on the observational skills of the staff, a known history of threats by the future shooter or a known psychological disability such as Schizophrenia. Since the shooter is for obvious reasons not behaving like the average person, their behavior cannot be classified into one category and expect the incidents to unfold in a manner that is 100% predictable. Because law enforcement personnel respond in a matter of minutes to these incidents, the incidents normally only last a few moments, unless the

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shooter goes into hiding and resurfaces, as Cho’s actions demonstrated at Virginia Tech. Shooters who do not take their own lives are for the most part killed by responding officers. Officers are trained to shoot to kill the shooter.

Information

Acquiring as much information about an active shooter incident is critical in preparing law enforcement officers who arrive at the scene. The more accurate information is gathered about the incident prior to police presence, the more effective the police response will be to end the incident. Both the 911 operator and responding officers should be provided with basic information such as the location of the shooter. The shooter is a mobile hazard which makes it

difficult to identify the exact location of the shooter. In incidents where the shooter seeks revenge for a perceived wrongdoing involving multiple individuals who are regularly assigned to different areas/floors, then the shooter is prone to visit multiple areas of the facility, thereby possibly delaying the end of the incident while increasing the probability of additional victims.

Clearly, law enforcement officials would want to know how many shooters are involved. The law enforcement plan and response will differ depending on the number of shooters involved in the incident. Although multiple-shooter incidents do not necessarily equate with more deaths, as was the case at Virginia Tech (one shooter, 32 deaths) versus Columbine (two shooters, 13 deaths), the officers’ response will be more involved as they will be seeking multiple suspects instead of one lone gunman.

In the ensuing chaos in an active shooter incident, the last thing people might remember is the physical description of the shooter. Witnesses who find themselves at a safe distance from the shooter and are able to describe the physical characteristics of the shooter, including color and type of clothing, will have a significant impact on ending the incident soon after it begins. If law enforcement officers know the appearance of the shooter prior to entering the “Hot Zone,” they then know who to look for, thereby leading to early identification followed by the immediate termination of the shooter.

How to Respond

High-rises are populated by thousands of people, potentially increasing the victim count. The more people are involved in an incident, the more complex the incident becomes because there will be more critical decisions to make on the part of building management. An increased risk of injury and death surfaces in all incidents involving highly populated properties.

Discussions have brought about many lessons learned from past active shooter incidents. As mentioned earlier one- and two-floor occupancies afford people the opportunity to escape active shooter incidents by simply opening the windows, jumping out and distancing themselves from the shooter. A high-rise building active shooter incident does not afford the occupants the opportunity to distance themselves as easily as do occupants of low-rise buildings.

Because it is nearly impossible to know how an active shooter incident will unfold, it is critical for occupants of high-rises to know and understand the survival options that are available to them in active shooter emergencies.

Evacuate the Floor/Building

High-rise occupants must be familiar with their office environment and know where the emergency exits are located in relation to their offices/desks. Employees should also be familiar with the travel distance (literal distance between their offices and emergency exits) and the time distance (time it takes to reach the emergency exits). Knowing this information is invaluable in active shooter

incidents when the occupants know that evacuating the floor would be the best option under the circumstances. Actively drilling the distance between the two points is essential to effective evacuations.

The pressure and stress associated with this type of incident can be overwhelming and people are destined to act differently when confronted with high-anxiety situations. It is critical that everyone concentrates on their safety and not the protection of their personal belongings. Accounting for personal belongings will hinder the evacuation of individuals by creating a personal barrier to an emergency evacuation. Time is of the essence in these situations and stopping to

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retrieve personal belongings is not an essential task during active shooter incidents.

Since law enforcement officers are expected to arrive within a few minutes after 911 is activated, they will encounter innocent people as they make their way to the active shooter floor. It is of critical importance for evacuees to always keep their hands visible. Officers will be looking at the occupants' hands to see if they are carrying weapons. Sudden moves and gestures towards law enforcement officers should also be avoided. It is advisable for occupants to raise their arms so that officers can determine from a distance that they (evacuees) are not armed.

Protection by Barrier and Concealment

When evacuation is not feasible because occupants cannot reach the emergency exits and elevators, the shooter is in the path of egress or the occupants are injured, then seeking shelter and protection from the shooter becomes the primary survival strategy. Once the sound of a weapon being fired is heard on the floor, which sounds completely different from the "shots" heard in movies, the occupants who are unable to escape are to seek shelter away from the shooter's view. To further protect themselves, occupants are to secure the door and place any objects behind the door to prevent the door from being opened by the shooter. Furthermore, once in hiding, cell phones must be switched to "vibrate" mode to not attract the attention of the shooter. Always keep the cell phones "on" to quietly relay information about what you know about the shooter/incident to the authorities, if feasible and safe to do so. Hiding behind any form of office-environment barrier might offer some protection; however seeking physical protection behind metal cabinets located inside offices is recommended as the metal cabinets are likely to protect people from bullets discharged from handguns.

Play "Dead"

If the shooter is causing injury and death and the option to evacuate or protect by barrier are not plausible, then "playing dead" is an option that may lead to survival. The shooter might believe that those individuals "playing dead" are actually dead. This action might lead the shooter to move away from that area and spare those people. This is a very risky option as the "victims" must be believable in their attempt to appear to be dead.

Take Action against the Shooter

When the options to evacuate the property, protect by barrier and playing dead are not available, then the fourth generally accepted response is to attack the shooter. When the life of an occupant is in imminent danger, and there is no other recourse for survival, extreme physical and aggressive action must be taken against the shooter in an attempt to incapacitate the shooter. The decision to not take action against the shooter will ultimately lead to the death of the person who refuses to take action.

Any form of aggressive behavior to incapacitate the shooter is acceptable. From physically tackling the shooter in an attempt to dislodge the weapon from their grip, to grabbing an object which when used would cause physical injury or death to the shooter. The chances of survival will depend on the aggressiveness of the "victim's" response.

Law Enforcement

Upon arrival, law enforcement officers will take whatever action is needed to end the incident. This action focuses on killing the shooter. For this reason, it is necessary for occupants to know how to behave when law enforcement officials reach the incident scene. Following are directives for occupants to adhere to in active shooter incidents:

1. Remain calm and follow instructions
2. Put down any items in your hands (e.g., bags, coats, etc.)
3. Raise hands and spread fingers
4. Keep hands visible at all times
5. Avoid quick movements toward officers such as holding on to them for safety
6. Avoid pointing, screaming or yelling
7. Do not stop to ask officers for help or direction when evacuating

The following statistics were generated from an analysis by the NYPD of 281 active shooter incidents between 1966 and 2010, however only 202 cases were included in the data set. Further details about the NYPD study may be found in the professional manual titled *Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation* (2011).

An overwhelming amount of the cases studied by the NYPD indicate that the shooters are male; the average age of the shooter is 35; 98% of the shooters were lone attackers; some shooters preplanned their attacks while others acted impulsively; the relationships between the shooters and victims were classified as professional: 41%; academic: 23%; familial: 5%; other: 9%; and none: 22%. The median number of deaths was found to be 2, while the average was 3. The location of the incidents was categorized into five sections: schools: 29%; office buildings: 13%; open commercial: 23%; factory/warehouse: 13%; and other: 22%. 36% of the incidents involved the discharging of multiple firearms. Furthermore, the NYPD analysis found that the resolution to these incidents involved applied force: 46%; no applied force: 14%; suicide/attempted suicide: 40%; attacker fled: <1%.

High-rise occupants should always be vigilant and know what would be the best course of action to survive an active shooter incident. Although these types of incidents are rare compared to other crimes, it is never too early to understand the fundamental complexities and proper responses associated with active shooter incidents especially in high-rise buildings.

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