

Chapter 4

Can We Identify the Next Shooter? Preventing Mass Shootings and Active Shooters by Identifying Concerning Behaviors of the Shooter Prior to the Attack

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Abstract

There are numerous assumptions that arise from mass shootings and active shooters. Unfortunately, a large portion of the public may be unaware of certain concerning behaviors that can identify potential shooters. A common assumption is that the attack could not have been prevented in any way. This paper will discuss specific observable behavioral characteristics exhibited by shooters, which could be useful to identify them, prior to the incident. Educating the public about common pre-attack behaviors displayed by past offenders can increase the chances of a bystander detecting and disrupting the attack. It is imperative that the collective and collaborative engagement of all members of a community participate in preventing a mass shooting incident. This research paper will provide definitions of the terms “mass shooting”, “active shooters”, “stressors”, and “mental health” as they pertain to the research conducted. The common assumption that mass shooters and active shooters are mentally ill, and the research that contradicts this belief will be discussed.

Introduction

The majority of planned mass shootings and active shootings follow a period where the actions undertaken by the shooter could be identified as concerning. When the public is aware and alert for observable behaviors, potential shootings can be disrupted and prevented, and hundreds of lives can be saved. Although there is no single list of behaviors or certain prevention strategies that has been proven to work in all shooting incidents, there are multiple approaches that are worth the effort they require. The number of casualties each year caused by these tragic events is appalling. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2018) designated 50 shootings in 2016 and 2017 as active shooter incidents. Of these 50 shootings, 943 casualties were declared, consisting of 221 killed and 722 wounded (p. 2). These statistics are excluding the shooters. There is no single definition for the terms “mass shooting” and “active shooter”, and because of this statistics on the subject are diverse. For the purpose of this paper, when using the term “mass shooting” it will refer to the definition stated by Bjelopera et al. (2013):

‘Incidents occurring in relatively public places, involving four or more deaths – not including the shooter(s) – and gunmen who select victims somewhat indiscriminately. The violence in these cases is not a means to an end such as robbery or terrorism’ (p. 4).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines an active shooter as one or more individuals actively engaging in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area (Silver et al., 2018, p. 1). When using the term active shooter, it is in reference to this definition stated by the FBI. The term “stressors” will also be discussed, which according to the FBI in this context are physical psychological, or social forces that place real or perceived demands or pressure on an individual and which may cause psychological and or physical distress (Silver et al., 2018, p. 15). A very important stressor in this context is “mental health” which indicates that the active shooter appeared to be struggling with (most commonly) depression, anxiety, paranoia, etc. in their daily life in the year before the attack. (Silver et al., 2018, p. 17) I will often use the term “shooter” when referring to both mass shooters and active shooters. With consideration to their differences, the qualities that are being discussed are applicable to both terms. Unfortunately, it is impossible to create a demographic profile of shooters, as there are very few demographic patterns or trends other than gender that can be identified. For this reason, it is more appropriate to identify a shooter based on behavioral characteristics rather than relying on demographic characteristics.

This paper will discuss the possibility of preventing mass shootings and active shooters by identifying the shooter prior to the attack by being alert for observable, concerning behaviors. With this background knowledge on the topic, the paper will go on to explain the many aspects and controversial theories on this subject. It will start by describing the planning and preparation processes of the attack by the shooter. The discussion of various stressors that are considered when analyzing shooters will be explored, including mental health as a stressor. Next, concerning behaviors exhibited by the shooter and then transition into the subject area of analyzing the primary grievance, and or cause of the shooter's distress or resentment will be analyzed. Finally, the prevalence of suicide ideation and attempts among shooters will be discussed. With this information considered, this paper will conclude with detailed findings of various behavioral, statistical, and scientific research by restating my opinion that mass shootings and active shooters can be prevented by educating the public about common pre-attack behaviors displayed by past offenders.

Planning and Preparation of the Attack by the Shooter

Many factors are involved in the process prior to the shooting incident. The two aspects often examined when studying a shooter's pre-attack life are the time spent planning the attack and the time spent preparing for the attack. These time periods are related and they include the various decisions and actions undertaken by the shooter. In one study conducted by the FBI, 63 active shooting incidents that occurred between 2000 and 2013 were analyzed and compared to one another⁵. In the context of this study, Silver et al., (2018) states that:

'Planning includes the decision to engage in violence, selecting specific or random targets, conducting surveillance, and addressing all ancillary practical issues such as victim schedules, transportation, and site access' (p. 13).

This specific time frame that the planning process began is often very difficult to establish. This is due in part to the fact that planning is often started with an internal thought process known only to the shooter. In every case

⁵ This study is the second phase of a report published in 2014 by the FBI titled *A study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*. To read more information about the two phases of the study please refer to: <https://www.eagltechnology.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/A-study-of-the-pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters.pdf>

studied by the FBI there was at least some evidence to indicate that the shooter planned the attack, and that the attack was not a spontaneous response to a single immediate stressor. To determine the amount of time that is spent planning the attack by the shooter, evidence such as conducting pre-attack surveillance of the target and or engaging in conversations with others regarding stressors, tactics, the venue or potential victims is examined. Other materials are also considered, such as journals and computer hard drives that belong to the shooter. These items are more difficult to discover prior to the attack and are more commonly found following the incident. Actions undertaken by the shooter prior to the incident like conducting surveillance are often easier to identify and can be reported as concerning to authorities. The same study conducted by the FBI was able to determine the amount of time spent planning the attack in 34 active shooter cases. Most perpetrators spent less than two months thinking about their specific attack strategy, while over 9% of the cases showed 13 to 24 months of time spent planning (Silver et al., 2018, p. 13). Over these months, there are possible opportunities to identify actions undertaken by the shooter in the planning process of their attack.

The time spent preparing for the attack in this context involves actions rather than internal thought processes. Silver et al., (2018) states:

‘Preparing was narrowly defined for this study as actions taken to procure the means for the attack, typically items such as a handgun or rifle, ammunition, special clothing and/or body armor’ (p. 14).

Activities in this area were more easily noticed by others, such as ammunition being delivered or visiting a gun store. More evidence relating to preparing for the attack was found by the FBI than evidence for planning the incident. In more than half of the cases studied by the FBI where the time spent preparing was known, shooters spent one week or less preparing for the attack (Silver et al., 2018, p. 14). This creates a smaller window of time to notice concerning behaviors and interrupt the execution of the attack. With this information considered, in four cases where shooters took less than 24 hours to plan and prepare for their attacks, all had at least one concerning behavior and three had an identifiable grievance (Silver et al., 2018, p. 15). Although statistics show that many of the shooters did not spend a significant time preparing for the attack, there were many actions displayed by the offender that could be identified prior to the incident.

Stressors

Almost all people confront stressors in some way in their daily lives and find resources and coping skills to overcome such challenges without resorting to violence. Unfortunately, mass shooters and active shooters cannot properly handle this distress and react with violent behavior. The FBI states that “stressors are physical, psychological, or social forces that place real or perceived demands/pressures on an individual and which may cause psychological and/or physical distress” (Silver et al., 2018, p. 15). Stressors that are often assessed in studies of mass shooters and active shooters include financial pressures, physical health concerns, interpersonal conflicts with family, friends, and colleagues, mental health issues, criminal and law issues, and substance abuse. Data shows that shooters were typically experiencing multiple stressors, (an average of 3.6 separate stressors) in the year before they attacked⁶ (Silver et al., 2018, p. 16). The largest area of stress is relational conflicts with partners, family, peers and at work or school (Schults, 2018). Again, the majority of society faces conflicts with others on a daily basis, but what is examined among shooters is their ability to navigate this conflict.

Mental health as a stressor applies to a significant proportion of mass shooters and active shooters. The stressor “mental health” is not meant to imply that the individual is diagnosed with a mental illness. This stressor in this context indicates that the perpetrator appeared to be struggling with depression, anxiety, paranoia, etc. in their daily life in the year before the attack. A study at the University of Glasgow found that 28% of multiple killers were believed to suffer from autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and 21% had suffered a definite or suspected head injury in the past (Dearden 2014). Although this appears to be a significant proportion of shooters that are believed to suffer from mental illness, it is not 100% of shooters, as many people may believe. Vintiadis states that “there is substantial research that shows that the correlation between mental illness and violence is much lower than is commonly assumed and that mass shooters are not in their majority mentally ill” (Vintiadis, 2018). Associating mental illness with violence is, in a certain aspect, a way to try to understand mass shootings. Evidence contained in the clear majority of research states that only a small percentage of shooters are mentally ill. It is unfair and misleading to generalize the whole population of shooters as mentally ill.

⁶ “The variables were treated as binary, that is, either the stressor was present or not, without regard for the number of separate circumstances given rise to the stressor. So, an active shooter who had conflict with one family member and a shooter who had conflicts with several family members were both coded as “yes” for “conflict with other family members” (Silver et al., 2018, p. 16).

Concerning Behaviors

Violent situations like mass shootings and active shootings rarely develop “out of the blue.” If the public is aware of warning signs, there are typically enough hints to alert those who are paying attention (Goodman, 2018). There appears to be a complex combination of behaviors and interactions with bystanders that may often occur in the days, weeks, and months leading up to an attack. Some of these behaviors include interpersonal interactions, physical aggression, potential symptoms of mental health issues, quality of the shooter’s thinking or communication, recklessness, firearm behavior, violent media usage, impulsivity, and changes in hygiene and weight⁷. A common behavior of potential shooters is also to blame others for their problems and go as far as to express a desire for revenge. The public should also be concerned if they observe an individual react inappropriately to other shootings or violence in the news, or not reacting to a tragedy in a serious manner. Continuously talking about previous incidents of violence involving themselves or others should also be considered a red flag for potential violence, or empathy with individuals committing violence. An increase in unsolicited comments about firearms and other dangerous weapons is another behavior that should be noted as unusual and potentially violent. In the workplace, there are additional behaviors that all workers should be aware of to indicate someone potentially acting out in a violent manner. These behaviors can include repeated violations of company policies, resistance and overreaction to changes in policy and procedures, increasingly talks of problems at home, escalation of domestic problems into the workplace, and talk of severe financial problems (Department of Homeland Security, 2008, p. 10). This puts workers in a unique position with insights to inform a threat assessment, given the high prevalence of financial and job-related stressors as well as conflict with peers and partners in the workplace.

The widespread perception that shooters tend to be cut off from those around them has been proven to be false. In the previously stated study conducted by the FBI, the majority (64%) of the shooters age 18 and older did live with someone else, and all of the shooters either lived with someone or had significant in-person or online social interactions (Silver et al., 2018, p. 18). The observable behaviors displayed by the shooters were most commonly noticed by the individuals who

⁷ “The FBI looked for documented confirmation that someone noticed a facet of the shooter’s behavior causing the person to feel a “more than minimal” degree of unease about the well-being and safety of those around the active shooter” (Silver et al., 2018, p. 18).

knew the shooter best, such as family, friends, classmates and co-workers. The people that are most likely to notice concerning behaviors of offenders are also the people that are less likely to act on these concerns. The family members and friends of the perpetrator may feel uneasy reporting the individual to authorities because of loyalty, disbelief and/or fear of the consequences (Silver et al., 2018, p. 20). Oftentimes, because of this, the concern is either brought up and stays between the person who noticed the behavior and the shooter, or nothing is done. Most often the unusual behaviors are noticed through verbal communication by the shooter or observing physical actions of the shooter. Other ways of noticing these types of behaviors include written communication and observing behavior that is displayed online. The majority of shooters demonstrate concerning behaviors that can be noticed in multiple ways. The study conducted by the FBI concluded that each active shooter displayed four to five concerning behaviors over time. While it may only be the interaction and cumulative effect of these behaviors that would cause alarm, early recognition and detection of growing or interrelated problems may help to mitigate the potential for violence (Silver et al., 2018, p. 19). Keeping in mind that there is no single warning sign, checklist, or algorithm for assessing behaviors that identifies a prospective shooter, individuals must always be aware of their surroundings and alert for certain behaviors. The challenge is having the situational awareness to observe a potential threat and then direct the appropriate resources towards the person in question before it is too late (Spicer, 2015). Although identifying the potentially dangerous behavior may seem like the difficult task, the task of reporting information to authorities to ensure that the individual does not cause harm to anyone or themselves is just as difficult and important.

Primary Grievance/Motivation and Suicide Ideation and Attempts

By studying past offenders, researchers have found that there is a wide variety of motivations that could lead someone to complete such a violent act of shooting. There is often a desire to “right the wrong” and achieve a measure of revenge. The previously stated study conducted by the FBI states that:

‘A grievance is defined for this study as the cause of the active shooter’s distress or resentment; a perception – not necessarily based in reality – of having been wronged or treated unfairly or inappropriately’ (Silver et al., 2018, p. 21).

It is possible that a shooter might have multiple grievances, but there is often a primary grievance that builds the majority of the anger in the perpetrator. There are also some cases that the primary grievance of the offender could not be determined due to insufficient evidence or there appeared to not be one. According to the FBI, those that did not leave any evidence of a primary grievance for the attack still displayed concerning behaviors, were under identifiable stressors, and engaged in planning and preparation activities (Silver et al., 2018, p. 21). There is also a significant percentage of offenders that experience a precipitating event related to their grievance shortly before the shooting, such as firing, romantic break up, or unfavorable legal outcome. While these events are very common among people in their everyday life, if someone reacts very poorly to an event like this it should be considered a red flag. It is not fair to generalize everyone who goes through a hard event and reacts poorly, but if someone becomes violent or displays any concerning behaviors it should be taken seriously.

It is not uncommon for potential mass shooters and active shooters to have suicide ideation or engage in a suicide attempt(s) prior to the shooting. Nearly half of the shooters studied by the FBI in the certain study had suicidal ideation or actual attempts at some time prior to the attack. Of these shooters, several made actual suicide attempts, and nearly three quarters of these behaviors occurred within one year of the shooting (Silver et al., 2018, p. 24). These behaviors are noteworthy as they represent an opportunity for intervention, and possible prevention of the attack. As stated by Silver et al., (2018):

‘Without stigmatizing those who struggle with thoughts of self-harm, researchers and practitioners must continue to explore those active shooters who combined suicide with externalized aggression (including homicidal violence) and identify the concurrent behaviors that reflect this shift’ (p. 24).

It is very important to not generalize all shooters or all of those who struggle with suicidal ideation. Many mass shooters and active shooters carry out their attack with no prior suicide thoughts or attempts, but it is a key behavior to be alert for in anybody.

Concluding Thoughts

In order to successfully prevent a mass shooting or active shooter, a combination of both people being aware of their surroundings and alert for concerning behaviors and reporting these observations to authorities needs to be present. Unfortunately,

there is no exact checklist to look for to identify an individual that could carry out such a tragic event. Simply being aware of the common behaviors displayed by past shooting offenders can potentially save lives. The most difficult part of disrupting a potential attack may be gaining the courage to report the individual to authorities, mainly because the person who is often noticing the concerning behaviors has a close relationship with the offender. Without being aware of the behaviors that may be concerning, there is no chance of them getting reported as potentially dangerous.

It is very clear that it is not a simple task to interrupt the planning and preparation of a mass casualty event like a shooting. There are many considerations regarding this topic, most importantly that it is not realistic that the shooter always shows any warning signs or leaves any traces of evidence prior to the attack. This is a very rare occasion, but unfortunately there would be no way to stop these attacks. Another limitation in this subject is that what caused shooters to act the way they do cannot be explained simply by the presence of a grievance (Silver et al., 2018, p. 22). It is often difficult to trace the interaction of various psychological stressors and operational considerations that lead them to carry out the attack until after the fact. It is important to note that simply because some shooters do spend less than 24 hours planning and preparing for their attack, it does not mean that there are no potential warning signs or evidence of escalating grievance that exist and may be detected earlier. It is not to suggest that every concerning behavior calls for assertive intervention, as many of the concerning behaviors mentioned do not necessarily suggest deadly violence to a reasonable person. Unfortunately, the public may not start to believe that it is possible to prevent shooting attacks until more attacks happen, and possibly not until an attack involves someone that they know.

The purpose of this paper is to heighten the need for family, friends, co-workers and professionals to report the concerning behavior of individuals. If more people are aware of the warning signs to look for and even just one potential attack is disrupted, hundreds of lives could be saved. Although predicting a shooting can seem daunting, these events hardly ever happen “out of the blue”. It is important to understand that there are often opportunities before a shooting to recognize concerning behaviors that may suggest progression toward violence. By educating the public about these signs and behaviors exhibited by a shooter, the chances that a bystander will detect and interrupt a shooting prior to the attack increases. Although there are no prevention strategies for shooting attacks that have been proven to work in every situation, there are prevention approaches that are worth the effort they require. Information on this subject will only get stronger and more in depth with further research and will potentially save many lives.