This playbook is intended to give you insights on active shooter trends and warning signs, practical advice for preventing and surviving an active shooter incident and tips for business leaders to assess risks and post incident plans.
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Introduction

At a holiday gathering in San Bernardino, California, employees were enjoying a nice lunch when a co-worker and his spouse opened fire, killing 14 people and injuring 22 others, most of them employees. No one saw it coming and it was over in a matter of minutes; both shooters were killed at the scene. This real-life “active shooter” incident is just one example of the increasing threat of violence in today’s workplaces.

Could this happen to you or someone you know in places you frequent every day? It does—in small businesses, big businesses, education, government, healthcare facilities, houses of worship, open spaces, and private residences. According to a recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report of active shooter events in the last decade, these incidents are occurring more frequently, and most targets are chosen randomly with no apparent pattern or method to the selection of victims.

So what is the definition of an active shooter? The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines an active shooter as “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.” DHS notes that most active shooters use firearms without any pattern or method to the selection of their victims.

Thinking that an active shooter incident couldn’t happen to you or in your company is just not good business. Use the same rationale you have for taking other preventive measures, such as wearing your seat belt, getting regular medical checkups, and buying insurance to protect from unknown risks. You should do absolutely everything you can to prevent or stop bad things from happening to you, your company, your customers, and employees. Bring this mindset and focus to the table when learning about how to prevent, react, and survive an active shooter incident. Think of the tools available to you. Establish and follow emergency prevention plans that consider all of your risks and develop strategies to ward off those risks, similar to working with a health care professional to set long-term good health goals. Conduct and participate in drills to increase awareness and planning, just like when you exercise regularly so it becomes part of the normal routine. Keep a simple phrase in the back of your mind: “Plan for the worst, and hope for the best.”

In the businesses that have been impacted by active shooter events, the costs to the company and employees can be high. Estimates of the financial impact of these events and other types of workplace violence in American businesses vary, but the numbers are high, ranging between $5 billion and $36 billion annually. Plus, employees will be impacted emotionally, and possibly psychologically, by the shootings, which could affect their ability to work. Any employee injuries or deaths can result in workers’ compensation or other liability/casualty insurance claims, including lawsuits. The business may have suffered property damage as a result of the event, causing disruptions in the ability to operate the business. The business may also suffer reputation risks if employees or customers feel unsafe.

Safeguarding co-workers, customers, and visitors to your business, protecting company property, ensuring few business disruptions, and guarding against reputational losses all highlight the importance of effective emergency preparedness planning, and employee training, so everyone can be ready in case the unthinkable happens.
Active Shooter Incident Trends

President Obama signed the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012, which provides more resources to law enforcement for such crimes, into law in 2013. The law enabled the FBI to conduct the first-of-its-kind study of active shooter incidents from 2000 to 2013 to provide the public and law enforcement at all levels with data to better understand how to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from these incidents. The goal is to continue to understand how and why these events occurred so that the public at large, employers, and law enforcement personnel are better prepared to affect the outcome of an active shooter event.

The results of the FBI study are both enlightening and frightening. There were cumulatively 160 known incidents resulting in 1,043 casualties. [See Figure 1].

The average of 11.4 incidents per year is alarming, but even more so when considering that in the last seven years, the statistic has jumped to 16.4 incidents on average per year.

The FBI report’s findings also highlighted the damage that can occur in a matter of minutes. In the 63 incidents where the duration of the active shooter incident could be determined, 44 (70 percent) ended in five minutes or less and 23 ended in two minutes or less. This data underscores the need for businesses and employees to be prepared and trained to know what to do when confronted with an active shooter.

Other important findings from the study include:

- All but two incidents involved a single shooter.
- In at least six incidents, the shooters were female; in all the rest, the shooters were male.
- 70 percent of the incidents occurred primarily in commerce and educational environments. [See Figure 2].

A Study of 160 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000-2013: Location Categories

Figure 2: FBI study of the location of active shooter incidents.

*“A handful of those identified as “wounded” were not injured by gunfire but rather suffered injuries incidental to the event, such as being hit by flying objects/shattered glass or falling while running. This does not account for all those wounded in this fashion or any mental or emotional trauma that resulted in potential medical treatment.*

Figure 1: FBI snapshot of active shooter incidents, 2000-2013
Noteworthy information from this data showed that in businesses open to pedestrian traffic:

- While the majority of the shooters were not employed at the location, seven of the shooters did have a relationship with at least one current employee.
- 12 shooters were employed or previously employed by the businesses, including four former employees and eight current employees.

Noteworthy information from this data showed that in businesses closed to pedestrian traffic:

- The incidents almost exclusively involved employees (22 incidents), and in the one that did not involve a current or former employee, the shooter had a relationship with a current employee.
- 14 active shooters were current employees, four had been terminated the day of the shooting, three were former employees, and one was a suspended employee.
- In 12 incidents, supervisors/managers, and company owners were killed or wounded.

The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University, a partnership between the university and several law enforcement agencies, has studied active shooters and found similar findings to the FBI study. According to ALERRT, the frequency of active shooter incidents has continued to increase, nearly tripling from 2009 to 2012 as compared with the prior eight years, to 15.8 active shooter incidents per year. The ALERRT team developed the active shooter curriculum used by most law enforcement groups today and works with law enforcement agencies throughout the country to ensure that they are more highly trained, better equipped, and can react faster to active shooters.

**Employee Survival**

The first step in preparing to respond in the event of an active shooter incident is to understand the underlying reasons for the behavior.

**Motivation of active shooters and pre-incident indicators**

Active shooter incidents happen for a range of reasons. There are, however, trends and pre-incident indicators that can help individuals recognize and stop active shooters from accomplishing their objectives. These indicators can result from extremism, harassment/bullying, anger, or trauma. They can also come as verbal, emotional, or physical changes in the individual that can be abrupt or over time, signaling a shift in the individual’s psychological or emotional state or belief system. These changes are most easily identifiable in people who are psychologically predisposed to or experience environmental pressures that may, together with a catalyst, trigger an act of violence or aggression.

Characteristics may include:

- **Terrorism-related ideology**: These individuals attempt to instill fear for the purpose of political or ideological gain. This can be a direct result of a terrorist group or individual working on behalf of an organization, a sympathizer who wants to be noticed or support the group, or a home-grown violent extremist with terrorist tendencies not directly supported by or related to an organization. Individuals working in your business and plotting terrorism on their time off may be difficult to spot. It is important to have a confidential internal process for employees to report suspicious behavior. The company should report concerns to local law enforcement or the FBI for follow-up investigation.

- **Victims**: Whether they were bullied in any kind of environment (including in the workplace), involved in a domestic dispute, or someone they know was a victim, this type of individual may create an event when he or she has had enough and wants to end the pain and/or suffering. Company anti-harassment and bullying training can help employees spot situations and correctly follow reporting procedures. Establish policies that encourage employees to come forward and report incidents.
- **Mental Illness**: Typically, this in itself isn’t a pre-incident indicator that would result in someone becoming an active shooter; however, mental illness combined with other environmental pressures may lower the cognitive barrier and justify the act.

- **Warning signs** may include:
  - Increased and unexplained absenteeism.
  - Noticeable decline in appearance and/or hygiene.
  - More withdrawn from work activities and co-workers.
  - Overreaction and/or resistance to changes at work.
  - Noticeable mood swings and emotionally unstable responses to others.
  - Explosive outbursts of anger or rage.
  - Unfocused behavior that appears to be due to alcohol or drug use.
  - Discussions of personal or financial problems, suicide, paranoia, violent crimes, and/or firearms.

Employees typically do not just “snap,” but rather display indicators of potentially violent behavior over time. These behaviors are particularly prevalent in people who are predisposed to experience psychological or environmental pressures. This behavior isn’t typically isolated. It occurs repeatedly and in clusters. If these behaviors are recognized early, the company may be able to provide the needed support and resources to help the employee cope with his or her issues and get the right treatment.

If you manage an employee exhibiting these behaviors, discuss the situation with your human resources (HR) department. If appropriate, talk with the employee about your observations and offer help. Refer the employee to get help through your employee assistance program, treatment programs for addiction, or other benefits you may have available. Be open to requests for time off to allow the employee to get the situation under control.

In addition, you can help avoid potential active shooter events by:
  - Fostering a respectful, inclusive workplace culture free of harassment and bullying.
  - Ensuring that all employees know the company’s stance against discrimination of any kind.
  - Providing open communications processes to provide everyone with safe channels for discussing suspicious behavior, concerns, and problems.

Open communications are critical to provide a safe outlet to voice concerns and issues. Intuitive coworkers may notice characteristics of potentially violent behavior in an employee. Don’t ignore the signs—alert your HR department or senior management if you believe an employee or co-worker is exhibiting potentially violent behavior so that the company can help the employee before it is too late.
**Workplace Violence Categories**
There are four categories of workplace violence that may lead to an active shooter event:

1. Violence in connection with criminal acts (robbery, gangs, etc.).
2. Violence related to a customer, patient, or client.
4. Domestic violence spillover into the workplace.

The best way to prepare for and to prevent active shooter events is to foster a positive employee relations environment, educate employees, train and drill, and draft policies and procedures to help manage or prevent behaviors in the workplace. Creating and maintaining a culture where employees feel empowered to report suspicious activity is good business. Enabled, cross-trained, and knowledgeable team members able to identify warning signs can help prevent the unthinkable from happening.

**The importance of situational awareness in assessing threats**
Situational awareness is an individual’s understanding of his or her surroundings and environment. Recognizing discrepancies, deficiencies, and changes within the normal sphere of influence is the cornerstone of this concept. Most active shooter training experts stress the importance of scanning the environment and evaluating the “threat versus no threat” based on that scan. These assessment should include:

- Considering the temperament and behaviors of the individuals around you.
- Looking at how these individuals are dressed and what types of accessories they may be carrying.
- Checking for anything that seems “off” or potentially risky based on the environment.

For example, a single man wearing a bulky heavy coat and sunglasses inside a building on a warm day may be a good signal that something is amiss. Another sign may be related to that individual’s behavior. Training employees to practice situational assessment techniques and encouraging them to report anything that makes them feel uneasy or suspicious may prevent an active shooter incident.

**Surviving an active shooter event**
Most active shooter incidents last five to seven minutes, so your goal is to create time, barriers, and distance between you and the shooter. To best prepare for an active shooter situation, make sure your company’s emergency preparedness plans include escape planning and facility safe areas. Employees should have maps of the exit routes and safe areas where they should regroup. Everyone should remain in the safe regrouping area until a member of the management team gives the “all clear” sign. This procedure is important so that everyone can be accounted for and available to law enforcement as needed.

In the event of an active shooter in your workplace, there are three basic survival strategies: RUN. HIDE. FIGHT. Remember the goal is to keep yourself and others, if you can, safe until the police arrive.

In the event of an active shooter in your workplace, there are three basic survival strategies: RUN. HIDE. FIGHT. Remember the goal is to keep yourself and others, if you can, safe until the police arrive.
**The best strategy is to RUN.** Running and assisting others to safety is always the best course of action when an escape route is available. The goal is to create as much time and distance and as many barriers and obstacles as possible between you and the active shooter. The biggest challenges to running away include identifying where the attack is coming from and ensuring that you will be able to get out with a reasonable expectation of success.

If you can overcome those challenges, run!

Leave your personal belongings behind—you are more important than your stuff. Help others escape, if possible, and prevent individuals from entering an area where the active shooter may be. Do not attempt to move wounded people and call 911 when you are safe to notify them of the threat and the locations of the wounded. Use a notification system to alert your colleagues of the threat when able to do so. If law enforcement officials are on the scene, follow their instructions.

Once you are out of the building safely, go to your evacuation meeting area. Do not leave, and remain available for the police, as your information can assist them.

**If you cannot get out safely, HIDE.** In some work locations, the shooter may have the escape route blocked, so your next best course of action may be to find a place to hide, such as in an office where you can completely secure the door and get out of the shooter’s view. Make sure that the area does not trap you or restrict your options for movement inside the space. Barricade the area to provide ballistic protection if bullets are fired in your direction. If you cannot lock the door from inside, utilize furniture, cords, belts, cables, and door stops to restrict the door’s movement. Make sure to also silence the ringer and vibration mode on your cell phone and turn off the lights.

Once you feel you are in a safe place, call 911 and report everything you know about the threat. This includes the location of the shooters, number of shooters, physical description of the shooters, types of weapons, injured victims and their locations, and any other information you may have.

Do not, under any circumstances, open the door until you are certain the person on the other side is a police officer. There have been incidents in the past where active shooters have worn police-style uniforms.

**If you cannot run or hide and your life is in imminent danger, FIGHT.** This should be done only as a last resort. Your goal is to disrupt, incapacitate, or subdue the active shooter until the authorities arrive. Whether you’re alone or working together as a group, act with aggression, improvise weapons, and do your best to disarm and neutralize the shooter. Improvised weapons increase the effectiveness of your attack.

Common weapons could include:

- Blunt force weapons such as sticks, pipes, lamps, chairs, and books.
- Edged weapons such as knives, scissors, and broken glass.
- Distance weapons including fire extinguishers, fire hoses, projectiles, and throwable objects.

Fighting back takes a little planning, so work as a group if possible. Find whatever tools you can—a heavy book unexpectedly thrown at the shooter while a colleague pushes a chair at him might be enough to knock the weapon away and subdue him.
When law enforcement arrives—what to expect and do

Police tactics have evolved in response to the increased aggressiveness of the active shooter threat. Instead of forming a perimeter around the building and waiting for SWAT and negotiators to arrive, police now arrive equipped with rifles, shotguns, and handguns, wear protective body equipment, form small teams, and immediately work together with one goal—to stop the shooter as quickly as possible. Expect them to be shouting commands and ignoring the injured.

A member of management can step in and help employees understand what law enforcement is doing and reassure them that help is on the way for the injured.

You should follow law enforcement officers’ instructions, make sure nothing is in your hands, and keep your hands visible. Officers will be in a heightened state of awareness. Do not force an officer to make a split-second determination if the object in your hand is a cell phone or a gun.

Move in the direction the officers just came from and assist in directing additional officers by pointing in the direction you last saw the shooter.

Once you are in a safe location or assembly point, you will be asked to remain there to provide authorities with any additional information based upon what you witnessed during the incident. Don’t leave the area or allow your co-workers to leave until the authorities have instructed you to do so. Do your part to help keep everyone calm.

Management personnel need to account for all employees to determine who might be missing or injured. Assess those in the most need of counseling or medical attention and direct emergency personnel to those individuals. They might also be tasked with notifying families of individuals affected by the active shooter.
Business Survival

While employee survival is always paramount, as a manager or business leader, business survival is also important. The following steps should be taken to develop plans to mitigate your risks in the event of an active shooter incident.

Assess your business risks and develop your plan.

**SWOT analysis:** The first step toward mitigating active shooter risk and vulnerability is to conduct a self-assessment of your organization for security concerns. Repurposing the organizational concept of a SWOT analysis, identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as they relate to the types of threats or hazards your organization might face. This analysis should include physical security, company policies and practices, and employee issues or concerns.

**Identify key personnel:** Take a multi-disciplinary approach and identify key personnel to develop and implement the emergency action plan based on the threats that might occur. This group should include senior management, risk management, security, legal, HR, operations, finance and insurance professionals. Consult with local law enforcement and emergency response teams.

**Make your emergency preparedness plan:** This plan could include internal and external emergency communications, evacuation/lockdown plans, employee training, emergency coordinator identification, security enhancements, alternate work arrangements in the event of business disruptions, insurance or legal enhancements, media/PR coordination, and facility upgrades to increase security.

**Test your plan:** In the event of an active shooter situation, every second counts. Lives are at stake. Ensure that communications, evacuation planning, and employee training is tested and everyone knows what to do to survive the situation.

**Conduct training drills on a regular basis:** Some companies also conduct mock active shooter training exercises that could include local law enforcement and cover topics such as recognizing the sound of gunshots, reacting quickly, practicing the techniques of running, hiding, and fighting (as a last resort), best practices in calling 911, and working with law enforcement in these situations.

**Amend your plan as necessary:** Ensure that all emergency plan changes are communicated and provide training that includes the changes to all team members.
Post-incident planning and communications

In any crisis, handling the aftermath can be as critical as your actions during the emergency. Your organization’s response to the event may impact the confidence your employees, customers, and community have in your company. Although these events are rare, you must be prepared.

If personnel were injured or killed or your facility or systems were damaged in the attack, you may need to identify and fill personnel, facilities, and operational gaps as a result. Consider the impact of the event on your employees and those who lost loved ones in the attack. Talk with each member of your team to determine what they might need in terms of company support, including counseling services, time off, or working from home or from another company location. Consider your own feelings and needs and share them with your manager or HR. Work with your HR department to manage these requests and any types of expressions of condolence to families who lost loved ones in the incident. Everyone handles grief and stress differently, so you must allow for different reactions.

Depending upon the extent of the incident and its resulting loss of life or damage to the facility, reassure your employees and customers by implementing your backup operational plans and communicating as much as you can about the actions the company is taking to get back to full operational strength and to support employees and customers.

Ensure that you have a media relations plan. Employees managing the media need to be trained and coordinate messages with law enforcement and legal counsel while investigations are still in progress.

While this may be difficult for all involved, in order to facilitate effective planning for future emergencies, your emergency management team should get together to analyze the recent active shooter situation as soon as possible. This review will serve as documentation for future response activities and allow you to update your plan.

Summary

If the unthinkable happens, be ready. Watch for the warning signs. An event like this is unpredictable and may evolve quickly. Although you cannot eliminate the threat, your actions can make a difference to your and others’ safety and survival, so remember RUN. HIDE. FIGHT. Effective planning and preparation can also return your company to regular operations as quickly as possible.

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About Jeff Zisner and AEGIS Security & Investigations

Jeff Zisner is CEO of AEGIS Security & Investigations. He is ASIS board certified as a Certified Protection Professional, Bureau of Security & Investigative Services Security Instructor, and the FBI’s Infragard Commercial Facilities Sector Coordinator. He regularly conducts active shooter training workshops with businesses, the general public, and law enforcement professionals. His company, AEGIS Security & Investigations, specializes in high-end security, investigation, training, and consulting solutions. The company uses a simple methodology of working with clients to prevent security and safety risks with customized programs that include active shooter/workplace violence training and risk management solutions.

For more information, visit aegis.com

About ThinkHR

ThinkHR provides expert HR knowledge solutions designed to help people and companies thrive. Combining the best of human expertise and innovative technology, ThinkHR’s solutions include the industry’s first and most used HR hotline, an award-winning online HR knowledge base, document creation tools, and a comprehensive eLearning platform.

ThinkHR’s mission is to give its partners a powerful competitive advantage to help them strengthen their client relationships, manage risk, and win more business. Equally important, the company is passionate about empowering HR professionals and other executives to become more efficient, productive, and successful.

For more information, visit thinkhr.com

ThinkHR
855.271.1050
contact@thinkhr.com