

# ***“School Shootings”***

## **A Reality Check on Campus Security**



## **SCHOOL SHOOTINGS: A Reality Check on Campus Security**

By Michael Minieri, CPP

Shootings and physical violence in our nation's schools, universities and other educational institutions always elicits highly emotional reactions in the community, particularly among parents and administrators. After the initial shock comes the cries of "how could you let this happen!" and "do something so this doesn't happen again no matter what it costs!". The average person tends to view security against school shootings as something that can be accomplished easily, quickly and affordably. In this article, an international security expert provides some key insights from a dispassionate professional's point-of-view.

On-campus shooting incidents are in the national media spotlight once again and most follow the same basic attack scenario: A disgruntled, deranged or mentally ill person – student, former student or anyone else – walks into a school building and opens fire. There may or may not be one or more predetermined and specific targets, such as a teacher or bully. Even when there are intended targets, others tend to be shot as well either intentionally or unintentionally in the course of the event. The gun may be smuggled in covertly or may be brazenly displayed in-hand from the onset.

For a quick historical perspective, multiple-fatality shootings on school campuses are far from "new" in the United States. The earliest known shooting to happen on school property was the Pontiac's Rebellion school massacre on July 26, 1764, before the birth of America. There four Lenape American Indians entered the schoolhouse near present-day Greencastle, Pennsylvania, shot and killed schoolmaster Enoch Brown, and killed nine or ten children (reports vary). Only three children survived. Reportedly, though a comparatively rare occurrence prior to 1989, there were more than 40 such incidents between 1989 and 2012, due in part to "copy cats" and exposure through our modern mass media.

From the perspective of a security expert considering the current general state of security at our educational institutions, the vast majority of our schools are almost completely vulnerable to this attack scenario. The factors most likely to be the cause of this vulnerability are COST and low PROBABILITY. "Vulnerability" and "Probability" are two of the key elements that a security professional considers in assessing and planning the protection of any facility. *Vulnerability* can be viewed as the likelihood and extent of success or failure of the attack in light of the existing security measures employed. *Probability* is the anticipated likelihood that such an attack will even occur or might be attempted at all. In the practice of Risk Management (of which *Security Risk Management* is a subset), it would be unreasonable to invest considerable expenditures to protect against an event that *could* happen, but statistically has very low odds of ever happening. One does not see much preparation for an alien invasion for example.

When it comes to the value of human life, only lawyers and insurance companies have gone so far as to assign actual dollar amounts. The average American would likely say that human life is "priceless" when asked. In the immediate aftermath of a fatal school shooting, there are always those who call for a solution at any cost and there is an extreme sense of urgency. As with many highly emotional issues, the urgency usually diminishes somewhat over time. The first question one might ask could be "is it even possible to secure a school effectively enough to prevent such incidents from ever happening?". The security profession's answer is "maybe". That's because it is a commonly accepted principle that no amount of security can be considered 100% effective. That said, it IS POSSIBLE to establish security measures that will reduce the risk of a defined threat to almost nothing. The COST will almost certainly be extremely high to the point of being realistically cost-prohibitive.

Like terrorists and criminals, school shooters don't wear signs on their foreheads stating their intentions or that read "*I have an assault rifle in my backpack*". With this fact in mind, consider just five (5) of the realities of today's school security against an *active shooter*, along with some expert commentary;

### 1. *ARMED POLICE or GUARDS ON SITE*

Having one or more local law enforcement personnel assigned full-time during school hours is growing in popularity, as is the posting of proprietary or contract security guards. Job titles such as "school resource officer" or "courtesy officer" are usually reserved for un-armed personnel, but job titles don't stop bullets in any case. Like the armed guard you might see standing in the lobby of your local bank, this can be a form of deterrent to some would-be adversaries. More often than not, this serves only to give customers some peace-of-mind. A determined adversary will likely just target this person FIRST.

### 2. *UN-ARMED GUARD*

Guards-without-guns are perhaps the more common practice in schools, often for potential liability reasons. At best, this person may be able to call the police when the shooting starts. At worst, there is one additional shooting victim.

### 3. *ENTRANCE SEARCH / SCREENING*

It is correct to focus security measures on the WEAPONS themselves. No person can distinguish between innocent students and the one intending to start shooting, simply by looking at them. Efforts to use psychological and similar methods to address the "root cause" and motivations behind the *potential* shooters actions – in advance - are not within the scope of mere mortal security professionals. When you find the weapon, the adversary is probably the person carrying it. Consider that as formidable as the security at jails and prisons can be, weapons are still manufactured or smuggled-in every day (in this case "stabbing weapons" in place of guns).

So how can one prevent weapons from getting into the school? Your first thought should be "airports" as this poses the same basic security challenge only in a different environment. "Metal Detectors" are becoming more common in schools, act as an additional deterrent to some potential adversaries and can provide some positive – but limited – degree of effectiveness when employed correctly. They can be a "cost effective" capital outlay, but the ongoing cost of adequate personnel to operate them must also be budgeted. Students and others that enter school buildings will possess metal that is NOT a weapon so "walk-through" detectors must be paired with "hand-held" models for secondary screening to find and identify the source of every "alarm". Failures of metal detection (i.e. undetected weapons) are significantly more common than one might expect, but such are not often any fault of the equipment itself.

Backpacks, book-bags, hollowed out books, and any other object large enough to conceal a very small pistol must also be screened and "metal detection" or manual/visual searches are not the most effective way to accomplish this. Again, think "airports" and think X-ray machines. These are significantly more expensive than metal detectors and they require staffing in addition to the staffing for the metal detectors. There are now a number of more sophisticated, potentially more effective and substantially more expensive technological security screening systems available to those that can afford them.

With regard to all of this additional staff at your entrance, refer back to #1 and #2 above. Nothing prevents an adversary from starting the shooting spree BEFORE he hits the search/screening point. Airport passenger screening is more focused on preventing the introduction of weapons and explosive onto *aircraft* rather than

protecting the people in the *terminal*. Persons in pre-screening areas of the terminal building – such as at curbside, ticketing, baggage claim and the like – remain vulnerable to this day. Those students and staff entering or exiting the school grounds, along with those involved in outdoor activities, will not reap the benefits of security measures at the building.

#### 4. LOCKING PERIMETER DOORS

In order to make the search/screening described in #3 *effective*, the process must be established at ALL operational entrances to the building. More commonly, all pedestrian traffic must be funneled to that single entrance where the search/screening will take place. Easy to understand, but easier said than done.

First, it is not too difficult to secure doors from being used for entry from outside the building. During hours when the building is occupied doors considered to be “emergency exits” may NEVER be locked so as to prevent anyone from exiting the building. This is an issue of “access control” and is a core element for every security professional’s work. One of the vulnerabilities to many practices employed for one-direction (outward) control is something you frequently see in the movies: A person exits through such a door and the adversary – waiting outside nearby - catches the door before it closes and locks, and thus gains unauthorized (and usually undetected) entry. Building exiting and re-entry for outdoor activities such as physical education sessions must also be considered in this context. There are several potential counter-measures for this but they are not necessarily low cost, and some devices would be needed at ALL such exits.

The access control issue that is most often underestimated in security planning is “TIME”. This is particularly true at the security search/screening entrance during peak traffic periods such as the start of every school day. If you use air travel much, you have already experienced that even a 3 hour advanced arrival at the airport might not be enough on occasion. Understand that the ONLY sure method of reducing the delay is to have MORE “search lanes” (metal detectors, x-ray machines and staff) in operation simultaneously. More lanes means more cost. Lines will likely be very long every day, there will be extended waiting periods and patience can frequently wear thin. It is highly likely that some enterprising students will find alternative ways to get inside in any case. This highlights the fact that such security can be extremely “*inconvenient*” to facility users and this is one non-monetary price that must be paid. The stakeholders and decision makers must determine if such inconvenience is tolerable and acceptable.

#### 5. CCTV CAMERAS

While surveillance cameras can be another form of deterrent to some adversaries, they should never be relied upon as an effective way to prevent any type of crime from taking place. Think about all the hours and hours of CCTV video footage of actual crimes taking place – including murders – which you now see routinely on television. Everything from the London subway bombers and other acts of terrorism to the daily footage of the most recent armed robbery at that convenient “stop-and-rob” store on the corner is captured on CCTV systems. Yes...some school shootings too! CCTV does have security value, particularly as an aid to law enforcement in the *apprehension* of the perpetrator and in subsequent prosecution. This is of little comfort to the friends and families of the victims and it clearly highlights the difference between the core mission and key performance metrics of law enforcement (crimes solved by arrest) and those of security practitioners (preventing losses). There is a set of security principles that must be addressed by security planners and that require resolution in order to establish effective security. CCTV systems can be the preferred method of implementing one or two of these essential elements.

At this point, you may have already concluded that *your school IS vulnerable* to a campus shooting attack and you will probably be correct. What *should* be done? Here is one security expert's advice;

#### A. COMMISSION A PROFESSIONAL SECURITY ASSESSMENT

Currently, many school districts and universities are undergoing a comprehensive assessment of their existing security by competent independent professionals. Risks cannot be transferred, mitigated or accepted unless they are first identified and become known to the decision makers. No disrespect by the author intended, but this is no time to opt for the free advice available from the local police crime prevention officer. An assessment by a highly skilled expert can provide the best available snapshot of existing security. The expert should consider all of the conditions and factors that are specific to a particular geographic area, campus or building. A quality assessment will identify key potential adversary types, anticipated attack scenarios, existing security vulnerabilities, critical security threat/risks and much more. The report should also prioritize the items most in need of mitigation for the efficient use of time and money. All good security starts with a good assessment featuring a preliminary Strategic Security Plan (SSP). Spending money on security without an assessment and a strategy is more often than not, a waste of already scarce dollars. Security assessments are relatively inexpensive "management tool" and a good one is both cost-effective and very enlightening for all stakeholders.

#### B. HAVE A SECURITY MASTER PLAN (SMP) DEVELOPED

This task should only be undertaken following a recent security assessment since the plan should be "*threat based*". Otherwise, one is just *guessing*. An SMP uses the results of the security assessment, and the SSP to create a sort of *guiding document* for both short- and long-range corrective action. For a large multi-location (i.e. school district) or multi-building campus (i.e. university) institution, the SMP can outline appropriate security measures to be deployed based upon the occupancy, purpose, functions and activities that regularly occur in each building and sometimes within rooms. Operationally, the SMP can serve as a form of "*standard*" for use with all current and future facilities in the area that are part of that school system. An important benefit is the assurance of technical compatibility for integrated security technologies and the highly important inter-reliance of Operational security, Architectural security and Technological security. The prioritization features of an SMP will make an invaluable tool in preparing the multi-year budget allocations that are likely to be necessary for most schools.

Should we all panic now? A U.S. Department of Education statistic suggests that there are more than 150,000 educational institutions in the country. One oversimplified perspective might be that the 40 incidents from 1989 to 2012 represent just 0.026% of schools. All other factors being relatively equal, is it probable that there will be a shooting incident at *your* school? So far, the odds are very much against that ever happening at any particular school. Still, there is good supporting evidence to predict that there will be shooting incidents at *some* schools in the future.

#### *About the Author*

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