

Pre-attack indicators: Do we finally have a profile on active shooters?

FBI study looks at what happened in the lives of shooters before the violence to find behavioral predictors of likely mass killers. Jun 27,2018

Following on the heels of its April 2018 report on active shooters (see P1's analysis of that report here), the FBI has just released what they refer to as Phase II of a study of selected active shooter events from 2000 to 2013 (complete report available below).

The initial report on this time span was published in September 2013 and included the horrendous Aurora, Colorado, Ft. Hood Texas, Sandy Hook Elementary School and Virginia Tech shootings, along with 156 other selected events.

The original study, labeled Phase I, made no attempt to determine motives, aiming to identify some trends of frequency, location and number of shooters. It echoed the noteworthy Secret Service study of school shootings that no typical profile by any demographic characteristics is useful for predicting where or by whom an active shooter event will happen.

Phase II goes beyond the study of the characteristics of the shooter at the time of the events. This study looks at what happened in the lives of shooters before the violence to find behavioral predictors of likely mass killers.

THE SEARCH FOR COMMON PRE-ATTACK BEHAVIORS

"By articulating the concrete, observable pre-attack behaviors of many active shooters, the FBI hopes to make these warning signs more visible and easily identifiable" says the report's introduction. Does the study deliver?

Researchers dissected law enforcement case files that were especially thorough in examining the backgrounds of offenders. These tended to be cases with higher casualties, but were otherwise representative of the cases in Phase I. A variety of characteristics were coded for comparison. Nine behavior categories embraced planning, motives and observable concerning behavior.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The study examined *planning* as including the decision to engage in violence, selecting targets and conducting surveillance. Because planning is often a largely internal thought process, nearly half of the cases offered no definitive clue as to the total time the shooter engaged in planning. Where the information was not known, the cases were not included. Most perpetrators spent less than two months thinking about their specific attack strategy.

Preparing is defined in this study as specific and observable actions to procure the means of the attack such as firearms or body armor. Over half of the shooters whose preparation was observable had spent less than a week in those specific tasks, the balance spending up to a year. Targets are overwhelmingly not random to the shooter but hold significance and previous association to them. Most casualties are random victims of chance near the intended target.

GETTING GUNS

Shooters got guns specifically for their planned attack by legally purchasing them in 40 percent of the cases. Only five shooters got their firearm illegally, one of which was an unlawful purchase, the other four from stealing. The remaining 35 percent had already owned a firearm long before their apparent decision to use it in an attack. It appears from this analysis that the implications for proposed solutions to prevent these types of shootings by controlling firearms access are not favorable.

MOTIVATION

The assumption that most shooters have a diagnosable mental illness is not established in this report, but factors such as stressors and known mental health issues are addressed. In only 25 percent of the cases was there a verifiable mental illness diagnosis among shooters. The challenge of making this a predictive factor is that violence associated with mental illness is relatively rare, and that nearly half of the U.S. population will experience symptoms of a mental disorder something during their lifetime.

A tally of stressors known in the shooters' histories that may be connected to their violent behavior include financial, injury and conflicts with the law. The largest area of stress is relational conflicts with partners, family, peers and at work or school. Fewer than 25 percent had known substance abuse problems. Many attacks are personalized as revenge or punishment for the shooter's treatment. The locations are typically where they have engaged with

Nearly 80 percent of shooters had an identifiable grievance that appeared to motivate their violence. The perception – based on reality or not – that one has been treated unjustly, results in a disproportionate drive to get even or right the wrong. The top three categories are interpersonal, employment related and a general hatred of others. A significant percentage of offenders experienced a precipitating event related to their grievance shortly before the shooting, such as a firing, romantic break up, or unfavorable legal outcome.

SHOOTERS BEHAVIOR NOTED BY WITNESSES

The report points out that, despite common perception, most shooters aren't socially isolated "loners." Therefore, there are persons in relationship with the suspects that can observe and report concerning behaviors.

Suicidal ideation or actual attempts at suicide are known in half of the attackers, with 90 percent ideation noted in the history of shooters whose attacks included suicide plans.

Threatening behavior or confrontations, including written and verbal threats, are very common attributes of shooters toward their targets prior to the shooting event. Over half of shooters – particularly adolescents using journals and social media, "leaked" their intent or feelings to a third party. Thirty percent of cases in this study population left "legacy tokens" that include videos, manifestos, or other items staged for discovery after the capture or death of the shooter. Discovery of these items may be the most valuable indicator in the study.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this study is descriptive and not prescriptive. It heightens the need for friends, co-workers and professionals to report concerning behavior, but fails to establish the magic checklist that would help law enforcement know who is about to perpetrate the next tragic mass casualty event.

Like constellations, the cluster of behaviors and circumstances surrounding the shooters' decisions to play out their fantasy revenge plans are not easily traceable. The value of the ongoing analysis of shootings is to threat assessment teams who have access to many points of information along the way to identify those most desperately in need of intervention before their final step toward infamy.

About the author

Joel Shults operates Street Smart Training and is the founder of the National Center for Police Advocacy. He retired as Chief of Police in Colorado. Over his 30-year career in uniformed law enforcement and criminal justice education, Joel served in a variety of roles: academy instructor, police chaplain, deputy coroner, investigator, community relations officer, college professor and police chief, among others. Shults earned his doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri, with a graduate degree in Public Services Administration and a Bachelors in Criminal Justice Administration from the University of Central Missouri. In addition to service with the U.S. Army military police and CID, Shults has done observational studies with over 50 police agencies across the country. He has served on a number of advisory and advocacy boards, including the Colorado POST curriculum committee, as a subject matter expert.

His latest book *The Badge and the Brain* is available at www.joelshults.com.

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