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WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTERS?

PART TWO: CAN VICTIM RESPONSE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE, I began this three-part series on what we've learned about school shooters. In Part One, I addressed the issue of "magazine capacity" head-on to determine whether a reduction in magazine capacity would have affected the outcome at any mass shooting (the answer is no) and I also looked at whether "gun-free zones" figure into the planning of these mass shooters (the answer is yes). In Part Two, I'm going to look at whether victim response can affect the outcome, and in the next issue, I'll summarize this series with a four-point plan designed to eliminate the scourge of school shooters once and for all.

SCHOOL LOCK-DOWNS, OR, "HOW TO MAKE AN EASY TARGET"

While preparing this article, I called my 11-year-old son Jack into my home office and asked him to explain to me how "lock-downs" worked in his school. Jack said that the lock-down would be announced over the loudspeakers, and that his teacher would lock the door, cover the window, and then, "We all gather on one side of the room."

"Like a big target?" I asked.

Jack answered with a sad smile, "Yeah, sort of like a big target."

I continued, "What would you do next if you knew there was a shooter in the school?"

Jack was momentarily stumped, but he replied, "Nothing, we just wait in our classroom and hope that the shooter goes to someone else's classroom instead of ours."

Jack made that last comment without ill-intent or meanness, but it struck me as incredibly sad that the best hope my son would have if a shooter entered his school would be that some of his schoolmates would die instead of him while waiting for the po-

lice response. The idea of having students actively participate in defending the classroom had never entered the mind of the school administrators, and instead they seemed to be relying on the "hope" that local law enforcement would end the attack before any students were harmed. In Part One of this series, I pointed out how futile that hope actually is. So that begs the question, have the intended victims at any mass shooting affected the outcome by their own actions, including whether they chose to fight back or flee? And, what is the profile of the typical mass shooter during the incident itself? Are these firearms experts? Are they novices? Are they making intelligent tactical choices, or are they making major blunders that can be exploited?

Let's start with the second question first. While much has been said about the profiles of these shooters *before* the shootings (and to be honest, I don't give a rat's ass whether these shooters are loners or spent their spare time playing "Grand Theft Auto," all I care about is that they're killing our kids), not much has been reported about their profiles *during* the shootings. Here's what we know:

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• These shooters typically have some familiarity with firearms, but are not experts. Most recently bought or stole the firearm and have little or no practice. When their firearm malfunctions, they typically switch firearms rather than clear the problem. Reloads are slow, or magazines are dropped during the reload attempt.

• The shooters fire at what could be termed a sluggish rate of fire—in most cases, no faster than is attainable with a bolt-action or lever-action rifle.

• Not since Charles Whitman shot and killed 16 people from the clock tower at the University of Texas in 1966 have school shooters used precise aimed fire. Instead, they target victims at “point shooting” distances.

• The shooters typically have a complete lack of situational awareness and make no use of their environment. They are either focused on chasing down a specific victim or methodically moving down a line of victims rather than identifying and using cover or watching angles of approach. (They’re not “watching their six.”)

• They will typically abandon one set of targets for an easier set of targets.

• They do not have an escape plan.

• They will commit suicide when one of two things happens: they run out of victims, or they believe they are about to be shot by armed responders.

The facts above can be exploited to save lives, including the fact that these shooters will give up one set of targets for an easier set of targets. To demonstrate that and to show how victim response has affected the outcome, let’s take a look at one of the most infamous school shootings, which occurred at Virginia Tech in April of 2007.

VIRGINIA TECH: A CASE STUDY

As I explained in Part One, Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho was able to murder 30 students and teachers by taking advantage of 11 uninterrupted minutes in the “gun-free zone” of Norris Hall. During his 11-minute siege, Cho entered or attempted to enter five separate classrooms, as shown in the diagram at right. You’ll note that the classrooms are grouped by how the students responded to Cho’s attack. Group One shows classrooms where the students and professor proactively defended their classroom from the outset by barricading the door; Group Two shows classrooms that did not proactively mount a defense during any moment of the at-

tack; and Group Three shows classrooms where students failed to initially form a defense but who regrouped and then actively worked to barricade their classroom door. That diagram clearly shows that the outcome was not consistent among the five classrooms, and that when students and their professors actively mounted a defense, their chances of survival dramatically improved—and not by just a small margin. This is a classic example of how mass shooters will switch from one set of targets to another set of targets. The students in classroom 205 didn’t need to disable or kill Cho; all they needed to do was to delay his entry long enough for him to become frustrated and move on to a new set of targets. Cho knew the clock was ticking, and he wasn’t about to waste more than a few seconds trying to gain access to any one classroom. The result was that everyone in classroom 205 lived.

DEFENSIVE VERSUS OFFENSIVE RESPONSE

Although the students and professors in classrooms 204, 205, and 207 took (or eventually took) defensive action by barricading their classroom doors, no evidence exists showing that any student in any classroom took any offensive measures, such as throwing objects at Cho, striking him with objects, or attempting to tackle him. One student from room 211 was even quoted as saying that he was “waiting for it to be his turn” to be shot. Although that student heard Cho reload three times, he failed to use that opportunity to flee the classroom or to make a counter-attack on Cho, and instead decided to continue to wait for it to be “his turn” to die. Please understand that I am not blaming the victims by this analysis; rather, I’m simply attempting to understand what we might take away from the volumes of data that were recorded about this incident. If anything, the evidence points out that our schools’ “zero tolerance” policies have so systematically conditioned our nation’s students to never fight back that the outcome of these shootings is a forgone conclusion. That has to change.

Virginia Tech isn’t the only mass shooting where potential victims failed to fight back offensively. During the Aurora, Colorado Theater shooting, many survivors were quoted as saying that they sent out tweets or texts, rather than calling 911. Although

shooter James Holmes’ firearm jammed and he was unable to clear it, no one did so much as throw a bucket of popcorn at him as he switched to a secondary gun.

So how about mass shootings where the victims did fight back offensively? In case after case, it can be shown that an active response by bystanders can end these mass shootings early, effectively saving countless lives. Examples include:

• May 21, 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield Oregon. Recently suspended student Kip Kinkel enters the school with two pistols and a .22 caliber rifle. Kinkel fires a total of 50 rounds from his rifle, striking 37 people and killing two. When Kinkel attempts to reload, student Jacob Ryker (who has already been wounded) tackles Kinkel, and six other students join in to assist. The seven students restrain Kinkel until police arrive on the scene. Although Kinkel was carrying a total of 1,127 rounds of ammunition, the proactive and aggressive counter-attack by students ended the attack after Kinkel had fired less than five percent of his total ammunition supply.

• January 16, 2002, Appalachian School of Law. Shooter Peter Odighizuwa shoots and kills a student and two faculty members, but is then stopped by students Tracy Bridges and Mikael Gross, who retrieve their personal firearms from their vehicles.

• December 9, 2007, New Life Church, Colorado Springs. Shooter Matthew Murray opens fire in the church parking lot, injuring three people and killing two. After entering the church, Murray is shot multiple times by Jeanne Assam, a concealed carry permit holder and security volunteer. Police reports indicate that after being seriously wounded by Assam, Murray killed himself with a shotgun. Police reports also indicate that Murray had in his possession over 1,000 rounds of ammunition and that approximately 7,000 people were on the church campus at the time of the shooting. The actions of Jeanne Assam undoubtedly saved countless lives.

• January 8, 2011, Tucson Arizona. Shooter Jared Loughner fires 31 rounds into a crowd attending a constituent meeting hosted by Representative Gabrielle Giffords at the La Toscana Village mall just outside of Tucson, Arizona. When attempting to reload, Loughner drops the magazine. While one bystander fights Loughner for the dropped magazine, three other bystanders tackle Loughner to the ground,

GROUP ONE

>> PROACTIVELY FOUGHT BACK

Room 204: The professor and one student are killed.

Room 205: No one is killed.

3 dead

GROUP TWO

>> DID NOT PROACTIVELY FIGHT BACK

Room 206: The professor and nine students are killed. Two more students are wounded. Only two students are uninjured.

Room 211: The professor and 11 students are killed.

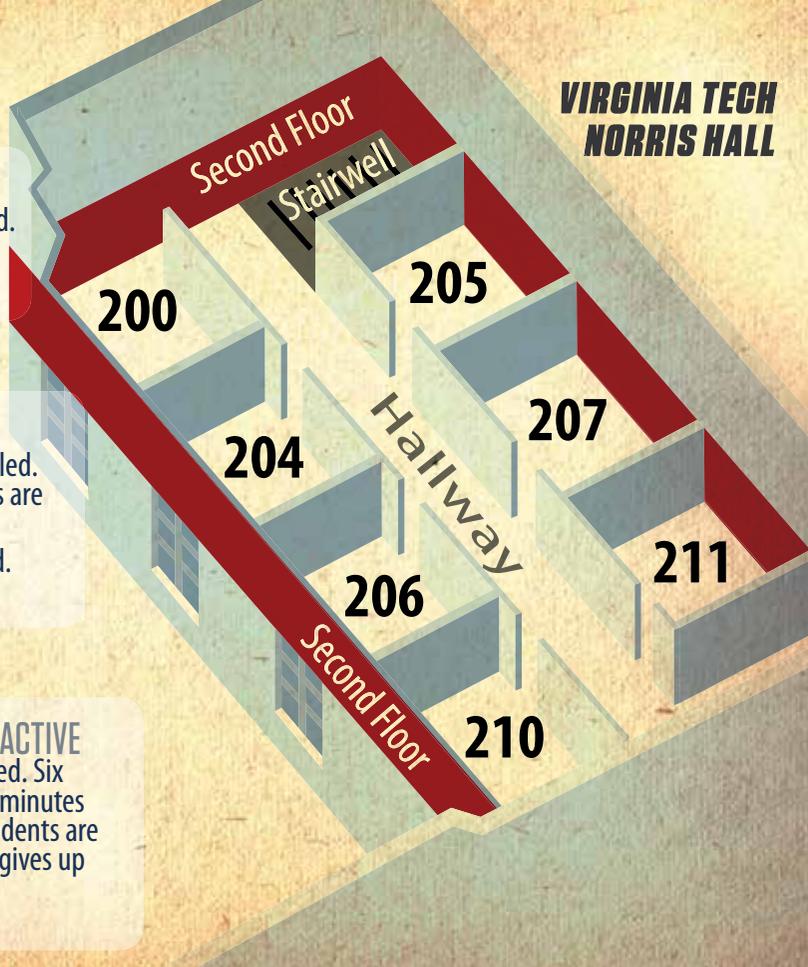
22 dead

GROUP THREE

>> INITIALLY NOT PROACTIVE, THEN BECAME PROACTIVE

Room 207: The professor and four students are killed. Six students are wounded. Cho leaves, and returns two minutes later. Cho attempts to reenter the room, but two students are barricading the door with their hands and feet. Cho gives up and leaves.

5 dead



including 74-year-old retired Army Colonel Bill Badger (who is wounded), Joseph Zamudio, and Roger Sulzgeber. Although six innocent people lost their lives during this shooting, far more would have been injured or killed if it weren't for the proactive and aggressive actions of Loughner's potential victims.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

An active response by potential victims affects the outcome. That active response might be barricading a door, fighting back, or running away, but in all cases, survival jumps exponentially. Fighting back as a team significantly affects the shooter's ability to continue his attack. Those facts are reflected in the Department of Homeland Security's new program on "Surviving an Active Shooter." Never heard of the program? That's not a surprise, because the program openly advocates fighting back, which isn't something that the national media is likely to help promote. The program teaches that there are three things you can do that will make a difference during an attack: Hide, Flee, or Fight. The Hide, Flee, Fight program teaches that if evacuation or hiding out are not possible, then action should be taken against the shooter. The program states:

As a last resort, and only when your life is in imminent danger, attempt to disrupt and/or incapacitate the shooter by:

- Acting as aggressively as possible against him/her.
- Throwing items and improvising weapons.
- Yelling.
- Committing to your actions.

While the program doesn't specifically take a stance one way or another on whether firearms in the hands of potential victims would change the outcome, it is significant that the Department recommends fighting back at all. Had this approach been taught to the students at Virginia Tech, it's likely that even if Cho hadn't been incapacitated by his potential victims, any aggressive action on the part of the students would have disrupted Cho's plans long enough for law enforcement to make entry. Remember that the typical length of time that mass-shooting events last is only five to nine minutes, or in Cho's case, 11 minutes (since he had chained and padlocked several doors). The students in classrooms 204, 206, 207, and 211 didn't necessarily need to incapacitate Cho—all they needed to do was to buy themselves several minutes of time to allow law enforcement to make their entry (as did the students in classroom 205).

What could they have done? As soon as it was apparent that a shooter was in the building, the students could have immediately piled tables, chairs, bookshelves, or any other barrier objects in front of the door. Each student could have then picked up a chair, a book, a coffee mug, their shoes, or any of the hundreds of other objects that would have been in the classroom. If Cho was able to breach the barriers and enter their classroom, the students could have thrown these objects at his head and torso, screaming at the top of their lungs, committing to their actions until the threat was over. If Cho went down still in possession of his firearms, the students could have beaten him into unconsciousness with chairs or their fists. Sound pretty brutal? The alternative wasn't just brutal; it was the deaths of 30 innocent people.

Next issue: *What should change? A four-point plan to eliminate the scourge of school shootings once and for all.*

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