Virginia Tech Shooting

From the Department of Homeland Security “Design Safe School Projects in Case of Terrorist Attacks and School Shootings”

Source:
3.4.1 Active Shooter

Law enforcement agencies define active shooters as armed persons who use deadly physical force against multiple victims in situations of unrestricted access. The many unrelated motivations for this type of attack make it difficult to categorize them. The motivations can range from revenge for real or imagined grievances to “fun,” role-playing while acting out a staged scenario. Active shooters may be heavily armed with multiple weapons and large quantities of ammunition. The method of attack can be focused on specific individuals confined to one room or completely random attacks in multiple areas. Shooters may act singly or as a team. Active shooters typically conduct significant preparation and planning, which in the case of teamed shooters may include plans for coordinated attacks that target multiple areas at the same time. Active shooter attacks are by far the most common threat for targeted shootings. They are unpredictable and evolve very quickly. Many attacks of this type are over within 10 to 15 minutes, well before law enforcement and emergency response teams arrive on the scene, which requires that school staff be well prepared, both physically and mentally, to deal with such a situation.

3.4.1.1 Single Shooter Roaming the Campus: The Virginia Tech Incident

On April 16, 2007, an angry and disturbed student shot to death 32 students and faculty at the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, VA. He wounded 17 more and then committed suicide after the first police officers entered the building where he had barricaded himself. The shootings involved two separate incidents, at first thought to be unrelated. This perception allowed the shooter to enter other campus buildings unrestricted where he continued his rampage. He carried two handguns, almost 400 rounds of ammunition (most of which were in rapid loading magazines), a knife, heavy chains, and a hammer. No one reported his behavior as suspicious before the shooting started.

He barricaded himself in Norris Hall by putting chains on each of the three main entrances with a note on the inside of one set of chained doors warning that a bomb would go off if anyone tried to remove the chains. Several students noticed the doors chained before the shooting started, but no one called the police or reported it to the university. The chaining successfully delayed response teams from interrupting his plan and also kept his victims from escaping.
Prior to starting the shootings, the shooter walked around in the hallway on the second floor poking his head into a few classrooms, more than once, according to interviews by the police and the Virginia Tech Review Panel. This struck some as odd because it was late in the semester for a student to be lost, but no one raised an alarm.

The occupants of the first classroom attacked had little chance to call for help or take cover. After peering into several classrooms, the shooter walked into Room 206, shot and killed the instructor, and continued shooting at random. Of 13 students present in the classroom, 9 were killed and 2 were injured by the shooting, and only 2 survived unharmed.

The shooter then went across the hall to Room 207 and shot the instructor and several students near the door, then started down the aisle shooting others. Four students and the instructor ultimately died in this room, and another six were wounded. Students in Room 211 tried to use the instructor’s table to barricade the door, but the shooter pushed his way in, shot the professor, and walked down the aisle shooting indiscriminately. A female student was lightly wounded but kept her cell phone line open, spoke quietly as long as she could to the dispatcher. By keeping the line open she helped keep police apprised of the situation. She kept the phone hidden by her head and hair so she could appear dead but not disconnect.

The shooter returned to Rooms 207 and 211 for a second time trying to shoot students cowering behind overturned desks. When he tried to enter Room 204, the instructor braced his body against the door and yelled for students to head for the window. Ten of the 16 students present escaped by pushing out the screens and jumping out before the shooter gained access by killing the professor through the door. Two students who were scrambling to leave through the window were also shot.

The shooter returned to most of the classrooms more than once and continued shooting. He methodically fired from inside the doorways of the classrooms, and sometimes walked around the classroom. Students had little place to hide other than behind the desks. By taking a few paces inside he could shoot almost anyone in the classroom who was not behind a piece of overturned furniture. Finally, when he realized that the police were closing in on him, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. With over 200 rounds left, more than half his ammunition, he almost surely would have continued to kill more of the wounded, and possibly others in the building, had not the police intervened.
Response

Occupants’ first reaction, according to survivors, was disbelief, followed rapidly by many sensible and often heroic actions. Attempts were made by a few students to escape from classrooms and down the hall in the earliest stage of the incident. But after some of them were shot in the hall, no one else tried that route. Others attempted to barricade the doors, but in the majority of cases, the shooter managed to push his way in or shot through the doors. An instructor in a third-floor classroom led his students to safety in a small room, locked them inside, and went to investigate the gunfire on the second floor. He was shot and killed, but those who found refuge in locked rooms, though badly frightened, all survived. Several students, some of whom were injured, successfully played dead amid the carnage around them, and survived. Typically, they fell to the ground as shots were fired, and tried not to move, hoping the shooter would not notice them. The shooter systematically shot several of his victims a second time when he saw them still alive, but those who managed to hold still and keep quiet survived.

The shooter started shooting at about 9:40 am. Students and faculty in Room 211, a French class, took approximately 1 minute to realize that the sounds they heard in the nearby room were gunshots. The instructor asked a student to call 911, and the call was routed to the Blacksburg police.

The Blacksburg Police Department received the call at 9:41 am. The police were not familiar with campus building names and took approximately 1 minute to realize that the call was coming from Virginia Tech. The police then transferred the call to the Virginia Tech Police Department (VTPD). At 9:42 am, that first call reached the VTPD notifying them of a shooting in Norris Hall.

Police arrived within 3 minutes of the 911 call. By professional standards, this was an extraordinarily fast police response. Because the shooter used two different caliber weapons that sounded different, officials initially assumed more than one shooter was inside the building. After failing to break in through the chained doors, the police broke in through the maintenance shop. By the time they reached the second floor, where most of the shooting occurred, the shooting had ended. The rescue operation began even before police had established that the danger had passed. Checking all the classrooms and making sure no other shooters lurked nearby took some time. An incident commander was not named and an emergency operations center was not set up until after the shooting was over, mainly because events unfolded very rapidly. A more formal process was used for the followup investigation.