

Episode 4 – “Federal Law Enforcement Leadership in Response to the 2015 Charleston Church Shooting”

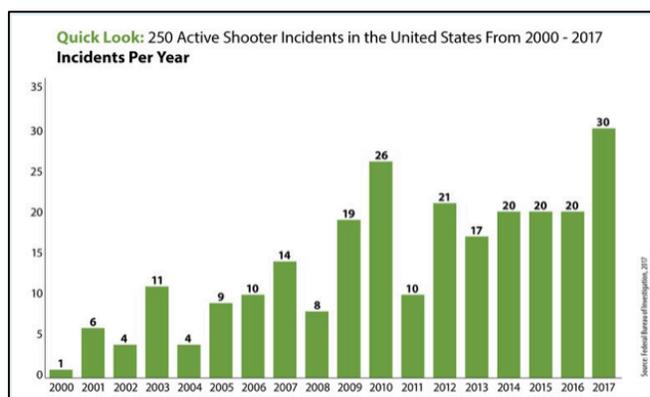
Background on Episode 4

At the intersection of disaster management and leadership studies, the Leadership During Crisis Podcast explores stories from leaders who have led through a complex crisis. Episode 4 explores federal law enforcement’s response to the 2015 Charleston Church shooting and features interviews with two officials from the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), who responded to the 2015 shooting. Gerod King, Public Information Officer, and Wayne Dixie, Special Agent in Charge at the ATF’s Charlotte Field Division, discuss the challenges of preparing for and responding to low-probability and high consequence events such as active shooters. They also share insights on relationship building across jurisdictions and agencies in advance of a crisis, and effective communications and planning during one.

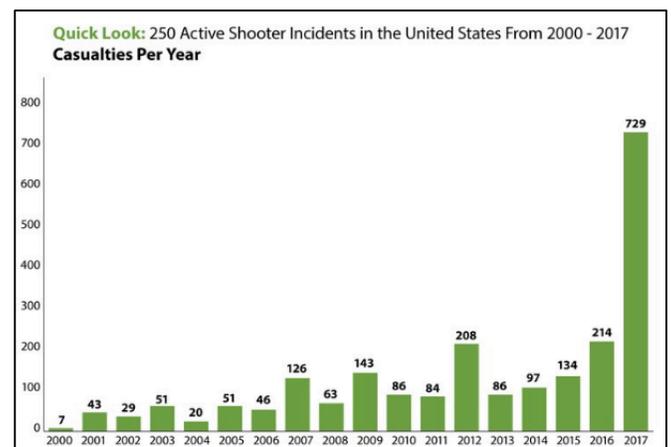
Facilitator Context: High Impact, Low Probability Events

Chatham House, a nonpartisan research organization, considers high-impact, low-probability events to be either those that are entirely unpredictable (i.e. Black Swans), or those that are known, but rare events with catastrophic consequences.ⁱ Such events require communities and their leaders to make difficult tradeoff decisions in terms of preparedness. As Chatham House reports, “What is required is a method for rational analysis of the worst-case scenario, and then the ability to manage the situation with the resources that will be available [...]”ⁱⁱ

An active shooter scenario—defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as “individual(s) actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area”—represents a low-probability, potentially high-consequence event for diverse types of communities.ⁱⁱⁱ Between 2000 and 2017, 250 active shooter incidents occurred in the United States, causing 799 deaths and 1,418 injuries.^{iv} While active shooter events remain unlikely, the FBI reports an increase in their frequency and lethality (see trend graphics below).



Source: FBI, Quick Look: 250 Active Shooter Incidents in the U.S. from 2000-2017



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An active shooter presents significant risks to a community given the casualties he or she may rapidly cause; for example, the FBI reports that the majority of incidents end within five minutes or less. An active shooter also presents significant uncertainty in that neither communities nor law enforcement can entirely predict who may pose a threat, how that individual will behave, or how survivors will interact with a shooter. (This is not to deny that many shooters do exhibit behaviors in advance that may suggest an intent to commit violence).^v

Influencing Outcomes: Law Enforcement's Evolving Approach to Active Shooters

Prior to the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, the standard law enforcement response to an active shooter situation was for initial responding officers to secure perimeters and wait for tactical backup, such as a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to arrive.^{vi} Officers responding to the Columbine massacre did not enter the school for over 30 minutes based on training they received to “contain” the incident, or prevent it from spreading, while awaiting more specially trained and equipped personnel to confront a shooter directly.^{vii}

Given lessons learned from Columbine and other incidents, including the recognition that any delay may result in additional death or injury, law enforcement agencies across the country now expect first responding officers to directly engage and attempt to stop an **active** shooter. (This is based on the assumption that an active shooter is fundamentally different from a hostage situation, wherein active killing/attempted killing is not occurring). This strategy, however, presents increased risk to responding officers—the FBI reports that 26 officers were killed and 58 wounded between 2000 and 2017 in attempting to stop an active shooter.

The FBI also reports that citizens successfully stopped the shooter in 37 of 250 incidents between 2000 and 2017; and in 29 of these instances, the citizens were unarmed.^{viii} Law enforcement's guidance to civilians regarding how to respond in an active shooter scenario has thus also evolved in recent years. As Professor Pete Blair, an expert in active shooter threats, states, “Our research found that many times, active-shooter attacks stopped because potential victims took action to stop the shooter directly, or they made it more difficult for the shooter to find targets.”^{ix} Professor Blair describes the civilian training method of “Avoid, Deny, Defend,” meaning avoiding the shooter by getting far away, denying the shooter access to your location if you can't get away, or—finally—defending yourself and others with whatever resources you have if the shooter does gain access to you. A similar training method is “Run, Hide, Fight.”

The Role of Federal Law Enforcement in Active Shooter Incidents

Local and state law enforcement agencies generally maintain leadership and jurisdiction for the tactical response to active shooter incidents, although federal and other support resources are integrated through incident command structures. The FBI is a national security organization with substantial authority and responsibility for the enforcement of federal laws, and provides support to local and state officials before, during, and following active shooter incidents. The

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FBI works with other law enforcement partners at all levels of government on research-based strategies to prevent active shooters, and on training and exercises to prepare law enforcement and civilians for potential attacks. The FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and others may provide operational support to local officials during an active shooter incident, and may lead or provide support to the criminal investigations following.

Discussion Questions:

1. Through Wayne and Gerod's remarks, how do you observe various law enforcement agencies working together during this response? Who "was calling the shots" and who was in support?
2. Wayne and Alyssa discuss the need to respect official policy and responsibilities while also being adaptable during an evolving situation. If every active shooter situation is different, as Wayne argues, how can responding agencies best prepare for what they might face? What strategies does Wayne describe in order to cope with a situation once it occurs?
3. Gerod served as the ATF's Public Information Officer in response to the 2015 Charleston Church shooting. What communication challenges did he face during this no-notice, evolving situation? How did he manage his communication responsibilities, and what lessons did he learn?
4. Gerod argues, in respect to active shooter threats, that "states, cities, counties, and our schools are going to have to fortify. [...] Become a harder target." Do you agree with this statement? How do communities balance values like inclusion and openness with the need to prevent and prepare for low probability, high consequence threats like an active shooter?
5. Gerod states, "[...] when you have something that is this prevalent, that happens this often... well, the definition of insanity [is] if you do what you've always done, you're going to get what you always get. There will need to be changes." Is the prevention of and preparation for active shooter incidents a shared responsibility? Why or why not? If it is, what collective changes need to occur? In what ways is the ATF working to better prevent and prepare for such incidents in the future?

Resources

ⁱ Lee, Bernice, Felix Preston, and Gemma Green. "Preparing for High-impact, Low-probability Events: Lessons from Eyjafallajokull." Chatham House. January 2012.
https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/r0112_highimpact.pdf.

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ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blair, J. Pete, and Katherine W. Schweit. "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents, 2000 - 2013." Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2014.

^{iv} "Quick Look: 250 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000 to 2017." FBI. <https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-incidents-graphics>.

^v "A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States between 2000 and 2013." FBI. June 2018. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf/view>.

^{vi} See James Johnson, former Baltimore County Police Chief, interview with Scott Simon during podcast on "How Columbine Shaped Police Response to Shootings." Weekend Edition Saturday. National Public Radio. July 21, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/2012/07/21/157154275/how-columbine-shaped-police-response-to-shootings>.

^{vii} "The Police Response to Active Shooter Incidents." Critical Issues in Policing Series. Police Executive Research Forum. 2014. http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/the%20police%20response%20to%20active%20shooter%20incidents%202014.pdf.

^{viii} Based on data from Blair and Quick Look.

^{ix} Police Response to Active Shooter Incidents. 2014.