



Active Shooter Incidents

Key Points

- Overall violent crime has decreased in the past decade.
- Active shooter incidents are a newly defined category of hazard, but similar incidents have occurred for many years.
- Media reporting on active shooter incidents has increased, resulting in the perception that active shooter events have increased.
- Active shooter incidents are distinguished from multiple homicide incidents by the need for an immediate response by law enforcement supported many other sectors such as emergency medical services, transportation and utilities.
- Three significant active shooter incidents have occurred in the Puget Sound region in the past ten years.
- Active shooter incidents have occurred in every part of the country.

Context

The Columbine High School Shooting in 1999 was a watershed event that defined “Active Shooter” incidents as a hazard in the public’s imagination, but even before this event, incidents that would now be called active shooter incidents have not been uncommon in the United States. Similar incidents date back at least to 1966 when a gunman at the University of Texas killed 14 people and probably go much further back.

The term “Active Shooter” describes:

- In-progress, deadly-force attacks in which,
- The attacker has unrestricted access to multiple victims, and
- Direct, immediate law enforcement action is necessary and likely to save lives.

Key to this definition is the understanding that the situation is exigent, dynamic and rapidly evolving. Attacks in which multiple victims have been killed or seriously injured but where the suspect has been apprehended or killed are not “active shooter” events.

While most attacks are committed with firearms, a deadly-force assault with any weapon meets the first element. In Europe, where firearms are less readily obtainable than in the United States, several active “shooters” have used edged weapons and even a flame-thrower. Unless an assailant is armed with multiple devices, persons armed with explosives are not considered active shooters.

Some definitions of an active shooter incident describe the suspect’s access to “mass potential casualties” and further define “mass casualties” as a number of casualties for which the potential need exceeds the medical response capability. Many law enforcement agencies now use the phrase “multiple victims,” which allows for situational discretion. For example, a botched bank robbery in which two suspects have fired multiple shots at four victims, all of whom appear to be dead, would probably not meet the second element and should be treated as a murder scene with a barricaded suspect. On the other hand, a work-place shooting with one victim shot on the first floor and a second person calling 9-1-1 from a second floor office would probably meet the second element of the definition and necessitate a rapid intervention response to an active shooter.



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Exigency guides first responders' actions. Where immediate and direct intervention, as in moving toward and using deadly force to stop the suspect, is not necessary or likely to save lives, responders are trained to treat the incident as a barricaded person or hostage incident.

Further complicating predictive analyses are the varying motives for the attack. Media accounts may drive people to think first of psychopathology as the motive defining an active shooter, as in the student, fired employee or jilted lover who "snaps." Clearly, psychopathology can be described as an element of any murder, but a cautious definition is needed, lest motives be too narrowly defined. Active shooters have demonstrated extensive planning, deliberation and cognitive functioning in the commission of the attacks. Not all active shooters suddenly, impulsively and randomly open fire in a public place. Like context and environment, an active shooter incident is defined when the three criteria are met, not by the attacker's motive.

History

Although there have been multiple homicides in Seattle's history, with the Wah Mee Massacre of 14 people in 1983 being the most prominent, the number of active shooter events have been smaller. Significant recent regional active shooter incidents:

November 21, 2005. Tacoma Mall, Tacoma. Man opens fire in mall, wounds seven.

March 25, 2006. Capitol Hill, Seattle. Kyle Huff kills seven at house party.

July 28, 2006. Seattle Jewish Federation, Seattle. Navid Haq kills one, injures five.

May 30, 2012. Café Racer shootings. A man shoots and kills four people at Café Racer and kills a fifth person near downtown Seattle while attempting to escape.

A survey of school shooting incidents from 2008-2009 indicates (Washington Ceasefire):

- There were **34** shooting incidents in schools of all levels.
- Of these, **4 resulted in multiple deaths and 7 resulted in multiple injured victims.**
- A total of **25 persons were killed and 49 persons were injured** in all incidents.
- School level: **10 colleges and universities; 20 high schools, 2 middle schools and 1 elementary school.**
- Primary motives were: **11 escalated disputes, 3 domestic violence, 3 hate crimes, 9 psychopathologic and 7 unknown.**

Likelihood of Future Occurrences

Active shooter incidents are often prominently reported in the national media, especially following the landmark Columbine High School Shooting on April 20, 1999 in Jefferson County, Colorado. Data supporting trend and frequency analyses are obscure and unreliable. Credible studies exist for school violence but include many incidents that fail to meet the criteria for *active shooter* events, and filtering is difficult. Active shooter events have occurred in elementary, middle and secondary schools; in colleges and universities; at offices, plants and other workplace environments; at shopping malls, public sporting events, parties, bars and family gatherings. Irrespective of the environment or context, where the three criteria are met, the incident is defined as an *active shooter* event.

Vulnerability

It is very difficult to construct a vulnerability profile for active shooter incidents because they can happen in any community and in many different locations. Recent incidents have occurred in schools, workplaces, restaurants, centers of worship, parties and community centers. The only similarity between these locations is that they are enclosed



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facilities where the shooter has an easy choice of victims. People are crowded together and escape is difficult. Unlike typical criminals who tend to murder victims in private spaces, active shooters most often choose public spaces.

Because of highly publicized incidents, some organizations have developed stricter security policies. School districts, including the Seattle School District, have been especially active. Still, it is impossible to completely secure a facility with a large population.

Because some perpetrators were known to authorities as potentially dangerous, there is a hope that such people can be identified before they commit crimes. While individual shooters may perhaps be identified ahead of time, it is impossible to screen all potential perpetrators.

Some active shooter incidents are acts of terrorism. The individuals undertaking these acts have very different motives than other active shooters. The vulnerability profile for these incidents fits with terrorism.

Consequences

Active Shooter incidents are especially traumatic for communities. The intentional murder of innocent members of the community by another community member is disturbing. As mentioned above, what distinguishes active shooter incidents from other crimes is that the threat is ongoing, making a response more complex and involving multiple government functions besides law enforcement. Most incidents are single site, but as the 2008 Mumbai, India attack proved, multi-site incidents are possible, especially if the incident is terrorist.

Most Likely Scenario

The United States has had number attacks by individuals or pairs. It is very possible that Seattle could witness an attack of this type with even more casualties than past incidents.

Two individuals attack a gathering at a downtown lecture. The attack is still in-progress when police arrive. The attackers do not have formal military training but have done some planning. They set off a bomb in another part of the City as a diversion. Attack ends with hostage taking.		
Frequency	4	Mass shootings have unfortunately become common in the US. Several have occurred in Seattle within the past decade. As tragic as they are, most do not require activation of the City's emergency plan. This scenario envisions a more complex event that requires more multi-agency coordination.
Geographic Scope	2	The attack occurs in a lecture hall. It is a large, but contained area. The diversionary bomb goes off in Sodo near CenturyLink stadium.
Duration	2	The attackers take hostages. It takes law enforcement 2 days to end the standoff.
Health Effects, Deaths and Injuries	2	9 people are killed in the shooting attack and 1 person is killed in the bombing. 34 people require hospitalization and 107 are treated by medical personal and released.
Displaced Households and Suffering	1	The attacks occur in commercial areas so no residents are displaced, but the surrounding office buildings need to be cleared. The incident does not affect the public's access to essential commodities.
Economy	1	The attack has an immediate impact on downtown businesses that are forced to close for two days, but the effects are short-lived.
Environment	1	The attack does not damage the environment.



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Structures	1	The bomb and bullets damage buildings but no buildings are destroyed.
Transportation	1	Law enforcement creates a one block cordon around Westlake Mall. This action ties up traffic through downtown, but the closure of many businesses reduces the traffic impacts.
Critical Services and Utilities	1	The response requires large amounts of law enforcement officers. Seattle must use mutual aid to backfill and adopt 12 hour shifts, but it avoids decreasing service levels. No utilities are compromised and no responders are killed. 2 responders are injured.
Confidence in Government	1	The public sees local government's response as swift and decisive.
Cascading Effects	1	The attacks cause no significant secondary incidents.

Maximum Credible Scenario

While single/paired shooter scenarios are bad, the prospect of a multiple group/multiple site event is even worse and cannot be ruled out, especially after the attack in Mumbai, India in 2008. In that attack, heavily armed terrorists launched ten coordinated attacks. The attacks lasted almost 72 hours, resulted in 173 deaths and locked down much of downtown Mumbai. While the attacks were made easier by the close proximity of the terrorists' base in Pakistan, it would not be impossible to launch similar attacks in the U.S.

<p>A well-armed, well organized and motivated group launches a planned attack using a mix of automatic weapons and improvised explosive devices during the Westlake Mall tree lighting ceremony. The initial attack focuses on blocking natural exit routes in an attempt to move the panicked crowd of several thousand in the direction of several command detonated improvised explosive devices (IED). The IEDs, which include metal shrapnel to maximize casualties, cause many critical injuries and fatalities which overload EMS and hospitals. After the initial assault a splinter group leave the mall before it is surrounded. The well-armed gunmen engage in a series of running gun battles with law enforcement with the intention of causing confusion, hampering the response, and increasing the number of casualties. This group is cornered in the Sodo area and killed. The gunmen in the mall take hostages and set fires.</p>		
Frequency	2	This active shooter scenario is also an act of terrorism similar to attacks in Mumbai, India and Nairobi, Kenya. Such an attack has not occurred in the United States. Significantly, in both the Mumbai and Nairobi attacks, the attackers were able to move over borders relatively easily. The difficulty of staging this type of attack balanced by two actual occurrences yields an assessment of a 1 in 1000 chance of occurring per year.
Geographic Scope	4	The attack affects a nine block area of downtown, the mall and the eight blocks surrounding it.
Duration	2	Due to the danger to law enforcement, it takes 3 days to subdue the attackers.
Health Effects, Deaths and Injuries	3	34 people are killed in the attack. 42 people require hospitalization and 212 are treated and released.



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Displaced Households and Suffering	3	The attack occurs in a commercial area so no residences are affected, but people working and visiting downtown need to be moved out of the area. The splinter group that escapes causes the Mayor to order a shelter-in-place for the whole City. Many vulnerable residents are not able to get essential commodities and access medical care.
Economy	2	The attack closes a big section of downtown for three days. Westlake Mall suffers extensive damage. It takes the Mall a month to re-open. Retail businesses located in it miss a whole holiday shopping season.
Environment	1	The attack causes no significant damage to the environment.
Structures	2	No buildings are destroyed, but the IEDs and firefight inside the Mall heavily damage it.
Transportation	4	The Metro tunnel and surface streets surrounding the Mall are closed causing significant delays getting into and through downtown. The shelter-in-place order does not affect infrastructure, but renders many critical services inaccessible.
Critical Services and Utilities	4	The attack severely overtaxes Seattle Police. Shifts are extended and mutual aid is called upon, but service levels must be reduced to cope with the emergency. 2 responders are killed and 3 wounded. The shelter-in-place order renders many services inaccessible.
Confidence in Government	3	The public is shocked by the attack. Initially the response is given high marks, but later public opinion shifts as many people begin to question security at the tree lighting ceremony.
Cascading Effects	1	The attack is extremely deadly and disruptive, but it does not cause any significant secondary incidents.

Conclusions

Active shooter events are an old threat in the United States. Newspaper accounts can be found for public attacks dating back at least to the late 1800s. Recently, several highly public and shocking attacks on children focused public attention on this problem. Most attacks are carried out by a single attacker in a single location. Terrorist group have used assaults with firearms, most recently in Mumbai, India. They represent the extreme end of firearms-based attacks.