



QUARTERLY SPECIAL REPORT

# ACTIVE SHOOTER/ ACTIVE THREAT:

*ARE YOU PREPARED?*



SAFETY  
& HEALTH

Employers have a legal obligation to provide their employees with a work environment free from harm, including physical violence. Given the increase in workplace shootings in recent years, some employers are going a step further and teaching their employees how to react if such dangers occur in their places of business.

Knowing how to respond if confronted with an active threat is just as important as knowing what to do in the event of a fire or tornado. Even though the likelihood of a violent situation may be low, you should still be prepared, especially when the results can be so devastating.



## WHAT EXACTLY IS AN “ACTIVE SHOOTER?”

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The FBI defines an active shooter as one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area. The FBI has attempted to identify what motivates a shooter and whether signs of planning could be identified. The study found that although motives differ, they fall into a few identifiable categories. Attackers do not always document plans, but the FBI identified some potential warning signs. Knowing the phases that most attackers go through could also help identify and stop a potential attack before it begins.

# ACTIVE SHOOTER PROFILE

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The unfortunate truth is there are few similarities among active shooters, the locations they target, or their choice of victims.

Aside from gender (mostly male), there are no similarities in age, education, employment, or criminal background of the shooters studied. Creating an active shooter profile simply isn't possible.

These incidents have taken place in rural areas, suburban communities, and large cities. Most incidents take place in areas of commerce, but shooters also target schools, open areas, government buildings, residences, churches, and healthcare facilities.



Still, the FBI determined that most active shooters (80%) had a grievance, whether real or perceived, and were motivated by something they saw as an injustice. Often, the shooter wanted revenge for alleged mistreatment or unfairness. In many cases, the shooter's primary target was someone known to the attacker, not someone randomly selected. Unfortunately, most victims were bystanders who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**The three most common motivations were:**



Employers should watch for employees who complain about such issues, especially if they blame others for their problems, get into confrontations with coworkers, and/or seem to be contemplating suicide (which suggests extreme despair).

Active shooting incidents start abruptly and typically last just minutes, with the majority ending before police arrive on the scene. Because these events unfold so quickly, employees should learn how to take their safety into their own hands.



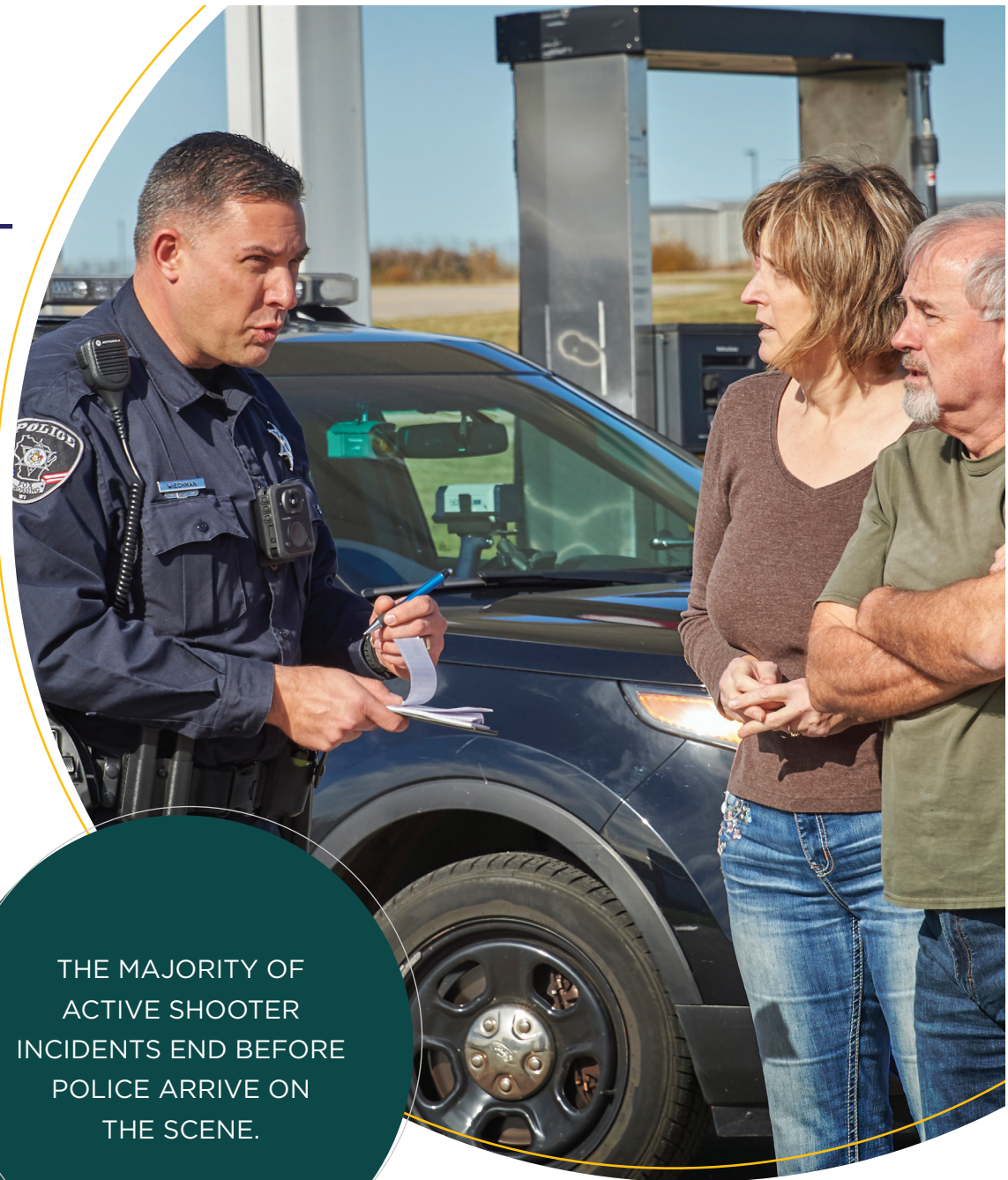
# TAKE THE PROACTIVE APPROACH

The key to stopping workplace violence is to identify and address potential problems before they escalate into violent outbursts.

Approximately half of the active shooter cases studied involved potentially visible signs of planning such as social media posts or personal journals. While all shooters are believed to plan their attacks, half of the cases studied did not involve documentation, and planning existed solely in the attacker's mind.

Where planning was evident, shooters almost never planned to escape; most expected to commit suicide, be killed by police, or be caught and arrested.

In cases where documentation was found, the time spent planning varied from less than one week to more than one year. The shorter time frame suggests that a shooter can move from "decision" to "attack" in just a few days. Although the FBI study did not correlate each motive with the time spent planning, many shooters experienced the motivating event (such as termination of employment) shortly before the attack.



THE MAJORITY OF ACTIVE SHOOTER INCIDENTS END BEFORE POLICE ARRIVE ON THE SCENE.



The fact that half of cases had no visible signs of planning highlights the need to recognize and address warning signs. Active shooter events can be apparently random with no identifiable motivation, particularly when the attacker has no relationship to the target (such as a school, shopping mall, or public area). However, individuals who attack their current or former place of employment likely have an injustice motive coupled with a specific target.

Train employees to recognize warning signs in coworkers and encourage them to report their findings to a supervisor, talk to a member of Human Resources (HR), or use an anonymous reporting avenue.

Common warning signs of a potential active shooter incident include:

- ▶ A notable increase in frustration or picking fights,
- ▶ An obsession with weapons,
- ▶ A decline in personal health or hygiene habit,
- ▶ An increase in alcohol or drug use, and
- ▶ Symptoms of depression or thoughts of suicide.

It's important to reassure employees they will be protected from any form of retaliation if they do make a report and ensure them that their reports will be handled as confidentially as possible.

# PHASES OF PLANNING

Understanding the planning phases may help employees better identify warning signs and realize the importance of early reporting. Active shooters tended to go through five phases:

1

**Fantasizing** about the attack, whether daydreaming, writing journals, posting on social media, or talking to friends. Identifying and reporting these warnings can allow for intervention.

2

**Planning** who to kill and what methods to use. Most attackers spent less than two months planning.

3

**Preparing** by gathering equipment and weapons, as well as surveilling the location. More than half the shooters studied spent less than one week in the preparation phase.

4

**Approaching** the target, which may take only moments, though some attacks were stopped as the attacker approached the target.

5

**Initiating** the attack.



Understanding these stages and timelines can help highlight the importance of early reporting. The fantasy and planning stages can last months and could include expressions of rage about being wronged, making threats, writing manifestos, or making lists of equipment. Reporting concerns at this stage allows more time for intervention.

At the third preparation stage, warning signs include obtaining weapons and tactical gear, training with weapons, acquiring chemicals or bomb-making material, surveilling targets, or warning friends to avoid a location on a particular day. In this phase, the shooter could be mere days from starting the attack.

Understanding the five phases may help coworkers or family members recognize red flags. Further, knowing that the timeline to an attack tends to shorten with each phase should encourage immediate reporting. By the time an active shooter reaches the third preparation phase, an attack could be imminent and delaying a report of concerns for even one day could cost lives.



# TRAIN EMPLOYEES TO BE PROACTIVE

Although active shooter events are statistically unlikely to happen at a specific workplace, the potential exists. Properly training employees to survive an active shooting incident can save lives. Expert research and agency guidance recommends taking the three following approaches:

## **AVOID:**

At the first sounds of gunfire, employees need to realize it is not fireworks or some other prank. If they can, they should move toward a safe exit immediately and get out of the facility as quickly as possible.

## **DENY:**

If the shooter is blocking their exit or they are physically unable to escape, employees should deny the shooter access to them. Find a safe room, preferably with a locking door, shut off the lights, silence cell phones, and make no noise. Barricade the door with heavy objects if it can't be locked.

## **DEFEND:**

If avoiding and denying aren't possible, employees should take every effort to defend themselves as a last resort. Use whatever objects are within reach and attack the shooter without hesitating. Don't fight fair, and don't stop until the shooter is incapacitated and disarmed.



# CONDUCT A THREAT ASSESSMENT

Since threats can also come from outside your place of employment, it's important to conduct a risk assessment that examines your building and the access to it. The goal of this detailed evaluation is to identify areas of vulnerability.

When conducting a risk assessment, seek the assistance of local law enforcement. These experts are aware of any local threats and have the knowledge and understanding from previous experience.



# CREATE AN EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

Unfortunately, even the best prevention measures cannot stop all acts of violence; however, creating an emergency action plan specifically for an active shooting will ensure all employees know how to respond.

Some items you'll want to include in the plan are how to:

- ▶ Report an active shooter,
- ▶ Alert other employees,
- ▶ Respond after the active shooter incident, and
- ▶ Account for all employees afterward.

When developing your company's emergency action plan, seek input from members of HR, your training team, the owner or property manager of your facility, local law enforcement, and emergency responders in the area.



# CONDUCT A TABLETOP EXERCISE

After your emergency action plan has been written, members of management, HR, and your company's emergency response team should gather and conduct a tabletop exercise.

This exercise will take attendees step by step through the entire emergency process, generating discussion that could lead to the plan's improvement.

An active shooting tabletop exercise poses questions to consider during each phase: prevention, response, and recovery. Essentially, during a tabletop exercise, you are role playing the steps you would take during an actual incident.



# CONSULT WITH LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Just as with a risk assessment, you can also ask members of your local law enforcement for input on your emergency action plan. And, you can take a cue from real-life events you see on the news. Such incidents serve as reminders to review your plan and look for areas of improvement. Meet regularly with your leadership team and discuss recent incidents.

When you meet with your leadership team, ask questions such as:

- ▶ How would we have handled that?
- ▶ What do we think the company did well?
- ▶ What could they have done differently?
- ▶ What are the lessons learned?

Because active shootings last just minutes, some companies go a step further and provide local police with advance access to:

- ▶ Keys or key cards into the building,
- ▶ Floor plans, and
- ▶ Surveillance cameras.

The level of police involvement in preparation is up to your company. Talk to law enforcement about your options and provide only what you are comfortable with.



THE LEVEL OF POLICE INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR COMPANY'S PREPARATION IS UP TO YOU.



# INCORPORATE PRACTICE DRILLS

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The decision of whether or not to incorporate practice drills within your active shooter/active threat training is not to be taken lightly. Active shooter drills can be traumatizing, even when conducted carefully.

The goal with any drill is not to frighten, but to teach an individual's body how to react in an emergency by creating muscle memory, or the ability to act without conscious thought. Rather than just hearing what to do, going through the physical motions will help employees respond, rather than freeze, during an actual incident.

If you choose to conduct practice drills at your company, you may want to consider making them voluntary rather than mandatory. The realistic nature of such practices may be too intense for some to handle. And, you'll want to seek assistance from local law enforcement officers. They are the experts when it comes to designing and conducting practice drills.

# RECOVERING FROM AN INCIDENT

Recovery begins the moment the active shooter is incapacitated, and law enforcement renders the building safe. Beginning to account for individuals inside the building and reconnecting employees with family members should all be a part of your company's emergency action plan and discussed during your tabletop exercise.

Employees may have fled, leaving personal items like jackets, purses, cell phones, and car or house keys behind. After things settle down a bit, there will be attempts to retrieve personal belongings. Because the building is a crime scene, someone from law enforcement may need to gather the items, not a member of HR or management.

Depending on the size of your company, this may be quite an undertaking. In addition to recovering items left behind, police may not allow employees to drive personal vehicles home until after they have been searched and deemed safe. Consider discussing each of these prospects as you work with law enforcement during your active shooter preparations.



# ARE YOU PREPARED?

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An active shooter is something no one wants to think about, much less plan for. But, as someone responsible for helping to maintain a safe workplace, you have an obligation to do just that.

Knowing how to respond to an active threat isn't enough. Employees should know the warning signs to better recognize threats and hopefully prevent an attack from occurring. To plan for (and recover from) such an unthinkable event, businesses must thoroughly prepare long before a threat even exists. Are you prepared?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Edwin Zalewski has been a valued member of J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. since 1999. Serving as a Senior Editor on the EHS Editorial Team, he diligently researches laws and regulations to keep customers up to date. In turn, he crafts engaging content covering a wide spectrum of safety-focused subjects.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# ABOUT J. J. KELLER & ASSOCIATES, INC.

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