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WHEN A GUNMAN shot and killed 20 sixth graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, it shook up the entire nation. But since then, the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that tracks school shootings, reports there have been at least 239 school shootings nationwide. In these events, 438 people were shot, 138 of whom lost their lives.

However, statistics like these and the media reports about them are often somewhat skewed, states Michael Dorn, executive director of Safe Havens International, a non-profit campus safety organization committed to helping schools and school systems improve crisis preparedness and campus safety.

He explains that when most people hear the words “school shooting,” they picture the rarest type of school shootings, the ones that “get the most media attention; the Sandy Hooks, Parkland and Columbine types of events.

“But the reality is that 92% of people murdered on K-12 campuses are not killed in active shooter events but rather in the far more typical single victim event,” he says. “This is a very important distinction because anytime a shooting happens there is a tendency to treat it as an active shooter event, which makes sense. But once police arrive on-scene, and find it’s not that type of situation, it can change their response, especially in terms of clearing the building.”

That being said, Dorn reports key areas to address through preplanning, just in case an event is indeed a mass shooting.

FIND YOUR WAY

One of the items topping Dorn’s list is wayfinding. A lot of schools are very vast in size. For instance, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, is an approximately 43-acre campus with around 13 buildings.

“Some high schools have up to 5,000 students,” Dorn says. “With that many students, the sheer size of the building can make wayfinding challenging, especially if officers are unfamiliar with the layout.”



PHOTO: POLICE FILE

EFFECTIVELY RESPONDING TO INCIDENTS ON K-12 CAMPUSES REQUIRES FAMILIARIZATION WITH SCHOOL ACCESS, SURVEILLANCE, AND PARENT REUNIFICATION PLANS.

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Dorn emphasizes. “More and more schools are using forced entry protection on glass, so it’s become harder to get in without keys or keycards. In the past you could blow the door glass with an AR-15 or force entry by smashing a window. Now that’s become a little more difficult.”

Preplanning should give police access to either master keys or proximity cards, he says.

There are a variety of ways to do this. Many times, schools place Knox Boxes, or wall-mounted safes for emergency access keys, outside the front entrance. However, state laws often ban police access to these boxes. When this is the case, schools can mount a second Knox Box on the perimeter for police use.

“Police officers may not want to go right up to a front entryway with a lot of glass anyway, and that’s why a second box, painted blue and mounted on the perimeter, makes sense,” he says. “With that approach, officers can use a code, which is often sealed and given out by dispatch when a call goes out. Or, there are a number of products available where police carry a device that can unlock the box in their squad cars.”

Other rural schools issue police master keys.

Some schools operate remote electronic unlocking systems that allow them to buzz in people during the day. Dorn recommends establishing additional points from which employees can do that. “We teach our clients to have what we call a safe room so that if office staff feels threatened, they can retreat to that space, lock the door, and put a barrier up between them and an aggressor.”

Dorn recommends marking exterior entry doors. Some agencies, he says, also mark classroom windows, which he advises against. “When you look at statistics, it’s far more common to have a relational homicide, where an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend shows up to kill a student or employee. Marking the classroom windows can let the attacker know where the person they intend to shoot is within the building.”

ABOUT GAINING ACCESS

“Today, it is essential to determine how police will gain access before an incident occurs,”

sor. We like to have intercom access in that room so they can call a lockdown and 911, but also remotely unlock the doors once officers arrive.”

SEEING WITH SECURITY CAMERAS

Dorn reports some schools grant police access to their security cameras, which enables officers to view what’s happening inside in real time. But he warns, “There are some limitations and concerns with doing that.”

First, officers must be trained to operate the cameras and this should be done before an incident occurs. Because this can be time consuming to do, Dorn recommends having people from the school district operate cameras from a safe room instead and provide camera views to police.

“A lot of folks assume that if you give real-time access, police can come in and find the attacker. But in our experience, this doesn’t work well, especially in districts with 100 schools,” he says. “It could take quite a bit of time for police to familiarize themselves with operating the camera system.”

In addition, cybersecurity of video surveillance systems within schools is a concern. If an agency has remote viewing access of school security cameras, they need to make sure that remote access is secure. “It is not that difficult, sometimes, for a moderately studied hacker to hack into the cameras via either the school system or the police agency’s,” he says. “The device you use to tap into the cameras has to be protected.”

He adds, “We work globally and this is not a hypothetical scenario. I worked an attack where the perpetrators took over the cameras during the event and denied police and security personnel access to their own camera system. And they used the cameras to help them kill responding personnel.”

The same security considerations, he says, affect proximity cards. If they are not encrypted, they are easy to hack into; perpetrators then can gain access to the school and shut out others during an attack.

OFF-SITE FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Once a building is swept and cleared, the next area that proves difficult is typically offsite family reunification, reports Dorn.

“When schools used to do this in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was difficult but it’s far more difficult now,” he says. “Today, the public is predisposed to panic. When we had a school shooting years ago, there were times when they didn’t even close the school, especially if no one was killed. But today, if there is a school shooting announcement, you’re going to have two to three adults rushing to the school for each child and they immediately think the worst. On top of that, they are finding out faster than they used to. Students are texting, emailing, and calling, and they are often describing the incident as worse than it actually is.”

In the past, schools could transport a busload of students to an off-site reunification site and parents didn’t know its location until the school notified them. Today, they know exactly

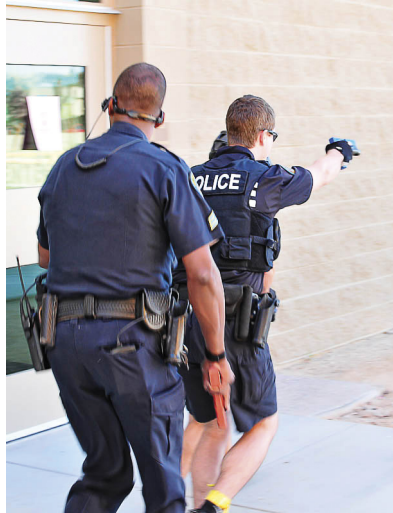


PHOTO: POLICE FILE

Officers must be able to access school grounds in an emergency and train for how to navigate the property.

where the bus is in transit.

“With the level of fear we have now, a parent might pull in front of the bus to get their child off of it,” he says. “It’s very common to see a lot of injuries with accidents involving parents rushing to the school. In the Pearl, MS, High School shooting, there were seven accidents with injuries within the first 10

minutes, and they all involved parents rushing to the school.”

Safe Havens International recommends that schools and their public safety partners plan intensively for student-parent reunification and then test the processes before they need them.

“Reunification is needed for things besides school shootings,” he says. “You may need it for a hostage situation or an explosion or something like that.

In those situations, you will need to move students and staff to an off-site location, so you will need to focus on that and drill on it. We suggest schools educate, to an appropriate extent, staff, students, and parents on the reunification process.”

This means that while staff, students, and parents should not be told where the reunification sites will be or other specifics, they should know what their role will be, and what the process will look like. Schools can provide written notifications of the process, then push the information out in parent-teacher organization meetings, and through the mass media.

“In the state of Georgia, we developed scripts that are sent to the media when

an event occurs,” he says. “The media is given instructions to read as they report on the event. This script is updated after the event, and includes information such as the type of event, where students are being taken, and what parents need to know, such as don’t come to the site until this time, make sure you bring a

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photo ID, don't call the 911 center, don't call the school system, and don't go to the school, because doing these things can delay or affect police response."

PUSHING PARENT NOTIFICATIONS

Most school districts have invested in emergency notification systems that allow them to quickly disseminate a message during an incident via phone, text, and email. The systems are very affordable and they work very well, says Dorn.

However, he advises school districts to practice crafting different types of messages and sending them out so that during an actual emergency they can get messages out in minutes.

He also recommends paying attention to cybersecurity. He notes there have been incidents where these web-based platforms have been hacked. In the Midwest, hackers infiltrated an emergency notification system and sent a message to parents stating their elementary-age children had been killed in an active shooter incident.

"When we do security assessments for districts, we really push clients to include cybersecurity measures in their budgets," Dorn says.

There are also software-based visitor management systems available for schools so that as people arrive an attendant can scan a driver's license to perform a quick check on who this per-

son is and what if any warrants or arrests exist for this person. Dorn recommends making sure these systems can be operated from a tablet computer so they can be used during the reunification process. "This way schools can keep a record of who is picking up a child from the reunification site," he says. "It eliminates issues of a non-custodial parent, for instance, taking advantage of the situation to take off with his or her child."

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

All the preplanning in the world is for naught if the processes and procedures in place do not work as intended. For this reason, Dorn recommends conducting regular drills, especially for the family reunification process.

He explains, "A lot of emphasis is put on active shooter exercises, and these are important, but you really need to drill and exercise on the family reunification process. That's the hardest part of responding to a crisis event, where parents perceive students and family members are at risk. It can dramatically impact a clearing operation when there are a lot of folks forcing their way on campus. So drilling, testing, and practicing reunification procedures is incredibly important." ■

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