

*Emergent Threat: Stabbing Attacks in Schools*

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Gun attacks are obviously the most feared assault, since mass casualties are inflicted in a short period of time. However, as our focus naturally centers on keeping guns out of schools with recent mass shooting incidents, we can't forget that knives are easier to conceal and transport, and can also inflict significant bodily harm in a short period of time.

We confiscate more knives in schools across the country than guns, and knifing incidents are on the rise across the nation. Between April 2012 and November 2015, there were 24 serious or fatal stabbings at schools in the U.S. and many more worldwide in surprising locations such as Ireland and Sweden. In the 2010-11 school year, according to the Department of Education, public schools reported 5,000 cases of student possession of a firearm or explosive device, and an alarming 72,300 cases of possession of a knife or other sharp object. Since school behavior is reflective of societal trends, it is also important to note that knifing deaths in the U.S. are prevalent and on the rise; there are over 1,600 stabbing murders annually, constituting 16% of all homicides.

One factor driving a perpetrator to use a knife instead of a firearm is that knives are much easier to obtain. In many recent attacks, perpetrators simply used kitchen or hunting knives. Also, for those hoping to escape anonymously following an attack, knives are usually untraceable. After pregnant Brenda Paz, 17, was stabbed 20 times by an MS-13 gang member and left to die in a creek near my home in Virginia, I researched the gang's penchant for using knives and machetes in attacks versus firearms. Often, the stabbing or slicing weapons used by MS-13 were purchased at hardware stores or mall kiosks, and paid for with cash. Police were often frustrated that even if they had the weapon in an MS-13 attack, it was virtually untraceable.

Unless a knife has a decorative handle, is an antique or unique in another way, it is very difficult to trace to the sale point and buyer. Also, MS-13 prefers knifings since they are more up close and personal, appealing to a certain type of killer who wants to inflict prolonged suffering or a leave a lingering reminder of the attack. This type of information is helpful as we psychologically profile potential attackers.

Knife attacks are also fast, unexpected and can be devastating in terms of injuries. On December 14, 2012, just hours before the Sandy Hook shooting, a 36-year-old villager in the village of Chenpeng, Henan Province, stabbed 23 children and an elderly woman at the village's primary school during morning arrival. The attack took only a few minutes and the perpetrator was eventually restrained by teachers and arrested. All of the victims survived, however many lost fingers or ears, and some sustained serious internal damage to organs, requiring long-term care. Attacks on elementary schools are of great concern since young children are basically defenseless and unable to protect themselves. High school attacks can also be devastating; on April 9, 2014, 16-year-old Alex Hribal used two kitchen knives to stab 22 victims in their stomachs and lower backs at Franklin Regional High School outside of Pittsburgh. The attack took less than 5 minutes and Hribal was eventually subdued by brave students and a gym teacher. Stabbings at colleges are also on the rise; in November, 2015, ISIS sympathizer Faisal Merced used a hunting knife with a 10-inch blade to quickly and gleefully stab 4 students at the University of California. He was shot and killed by responding police when refusing to drop the weapon. Therefore, all types of schools have proven vulnerable to stabbing attacks, which can be very fast and lethal.

Another challenge is the presence of a knife in school may not be alarming. A good example comes from a recent stabbing attack at a primary school in Sweden in October, 2015. One witness, a student, told broadcaster SVT the attack was initially believed to be a joke and attracted students, pulling them in close to the killer: "He wore a mask and black clothes. There were students asking to take pictures with him and touch the sword." Obviously a student wielding a gun would be treated quite differently.

The physical response to stabbings presents yet another challenge. In stabbing events, victims often do not realize what is happening until they start bleeding, delaying their "fight or flight" response and allowing the attacker more time to engage. During a knife attack that involves puncture wounds, with the attacker plunging in and out of the body, victims often don't feel pain. There will be a cold, icy feeling at the stabbing site as the body goes into shock, and a person may only realize they are injured with the actual presence of blood. Panic, disbelief and confusion will set in at the large volume of blood lost from the penetration site, rendering the victim even more unable to save themselves from an ongoing violent situation. Interestingly, there aren't many pain sensors inside our bodies; in fact, a large blade penetrating a critical organ results in death so quickly that most people pass out and die without much pain. Slashing attacks are quite different and painful, since the skin has many nerve endings. However, most premeditated stabbing attacks have the perpetrator plunging the knife or knives (one in each hand is a popular tactic) deeply into victims. The superficial slashing only begins when the attacker is confronted and shifts to the defensive, vice offensive mode.

In reviewing stabbing case studies, it appears people are more willing to engage and try to subdue an attacker with a knife, while choosing to run or hide from a gunman. However,

physically confronting an enraged assailant wielding large knives is very difficult, and those who approach are likely to be severely injured or killed. In stabbing attacks, the use of committed, overpowering force by more than one person is necessary, or neutralizing the attacker with a disabling (or more) potent weapon like a firearm. This is where “bringing a gun to a knife fight” might actually be a good tactic.

In terms of mitigation, knives are easily detected at school entrances with metal detectors or, in their absence, by random wandering in hallways. Unannounced locker inspections are also a good way to stay on top of non-firearm weaponry such as knives, numchucks, brass knuckles and batons. Regularly look in closets and restrooms for hidden knives, perhaps in ceiling tiles, taped in toilet tanks and behind moveable objects. Also discuss the rising possibility of knife attacks when discussing active shooter scenarios or conducting desktop or live exercises in your schools. Think about response and ways to engage and disable the attacker, as well as render first aid to stabbing victims when precious minutes can mean the difference between life and death. Finally, remember teachers, students and staff are the new first responders, as most attacks are over and damage inflicted before the arrival of law enforcement and medical personnel.

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