

## **How the Campus Carry Bill MAY Impact School Shootings**

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On Valentine's Day, 2008, a former Northern Illinois University (NIU) sociology student entered the Cole Hall lecture room at NIU and opened fire, killing five people and injuring at least 21 other students.

I responded with a team to assist in the critical incident stress management and aftereffects of the horrific incident. With no emotion and a hollowness in their eyes, the responders relayed details that I'll never forget: phones clutched in victims' hands as they dialed 911, blood splattered across the lecture room floor, students cowering under desks with their textbooks

After decades of responding, planning for and studying crisis management and active shooters, this case struck home for me, as I teach at NIU.

Seven years later, the United States continues to experience deadly school tragedies. One of the most recent incidents took place at the Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, leaving our country desperate for answers to tough questions: How do we stop school shootings? Should we ban guns in the United States? Can arming our students and educators better protect our schools? Unfortunately, none of these questions have been answered.

However, some states are trying to address these issues with controversial bills. For instance, in June of 2015, Texas lawmakers passed a bill that would allow concealed weapons to be carried on campus. The University of Texas at Austin has become the center of the controversy as protests broke out on campus. While the bill may have good intentions, it's important that lawmakers and educational leaders carefully and thoughtfully evaluate their proposed actions. In the face of such tragic circumstances, we should fully consider the nuances of school shootings in the United States before implementing drastic changes.

### **Examining the Precursor**

For the record, I have sworn to uphold the constitution throughout my public safety and government career. Properly educated and trained individuals are a cornerstone of any self-defense activity, but guns as a single solution to campus shootings emphasize only a small part of the entire process. Appropriately educated, trained and certified citizens properly carrying guns on campuses might provide a solution after the shooter enters a campus with the intent to kill, but this solution alone cannot stop the problem before it happens.

Sadly, as this goes to press, we have heard of several more attacks, some with guns, some with knives and it seems that we could even draft the news story today, just fill in the date and location. I have chosen not to publish the names of the attackers, in an attempt to not allow them the opportunity for any level of publicity or notoriety.

Also, society, in general has seen many more anti-social behaviors not only in schools and businesses, but in society in general.

What we are seeing is a disconnected society, and that is not due to the latest electronics that everyone seems to have two or three of.

It is the fact that society seems to have been turned upside down by the lack of communication on an inter or intra personal level. That is the marked absence of people TALKING to one another. Not texting or other social networking. (or as I coin it “Anti-social “networking.”

It is the lack of understanding of the depth of the social milieu that drives people to commit these violent anti-social acts on their fellow humans. It is not just the device they use to commit the crime, it is the person behind the device, be it a firearm, a knife or a keyboard.

Schools of all types, Public, Private, K-12 or Higher Education, as well as business settings are a microcosm of society. We have witnessed horrific events with trucks, aircraft, firearms, knives and vehicles by people upset with their lot in life or society in general. After almost every event, people may be heard to say: He (she) was a quiet neighbor, always kept to themselves; was never in a committed relationship; was bullied in sports or at school, or with some other perceived complaint that has not been identified.

It is a PEOPLE issue here, and that is where we must start to reduce the ill effects of a society that has lost its ability to communicate effectively.

Folks wonder when the next event will be, and by whom, it's not IF, it's when again.

Even before the conversation shifts to firearm practices, it's important to look at the precursors to school shootings. (This applies to all acts of violence in the workplace, not just schools.)

Active shooter events are usually over in less than 480 seconds. Think about that for a moment. That's six minutes from first shot to neutralization or suicide. Even though it's a short amount of time, in those few moments, lives are changed forever. While a school shooting or other attack type certainly has a beginning and middle, *it never* has an end. For those who experience the trauma, the tragedy has lasting residual effects. The goal is to prevent these events from ever happening.

A noble goal is to protect and defend, and it's our moral obligation as citizens as well. However, without adequate training and planning, it may be extremely difficult to achieve that goal without confusing the issue. The scene will be chaotic in those 480 seconds, and it's very difficult for law enforcement responders to ascertain who may have a hostile intent at the scene as well.

I am an advocate for early intervention programs and threat assessment teams at higher education institutions. Unfortunately, many schools and organizations are cutting budgets in this area, but a recommitment to these types of mental health programs can mitigate the effects of a hostile individual and may prevent the situation from taking place on campus or in the workplace.

Intervention programs and threat assessment teams can begin to comb through social media and flag students who exhibit indicators of high-risk behavior. This strategy will require more active monitoring of social media for online behavior that is consistent with the psychological profiles of these potential assailants.

Another reason a campus may struggle with threat assessment is that students and teachers are increasingly isolated. Our campuses are riddled with people who are disconnected, walking around on their phones and failing to interact in meaningful ways to create a community. Adjunct professors who teach several classes lack the necessary time to interact with their students to determine those who may need appropriate intervention services. But students, staff and family also have a role in stopping school (and other facility) shootings before they happen. They can engage others and help create a community for people who might feel disenfranchised.

### **Concealed Guns on Campus**

The best time to stop school attacks and shootings is before they happen, but if mental health, safety professionals and law enforcement agencies lack the ability to stop them in the beginning stages, will allowing guns on campus stop school shooters?

The answer to the question is incredibly complex, and while the new Texas law will give students and educators a chance to protect themselves, it's important to also consider this policy change from a different perspective.

What many students need to consider is how law enforcement professionals will read an active shooter situation when there are multiple guns in a hostile environment, especially within a university. The officer's job becomes more complicated because the officer may not be able to tell the difference between a non combatant civilian and THE active shooter when there are multiple guns. If an officer encounters someone with a gun, a knife or device, the officer will have no choice but to react appropriately and quickly in the rapidly unfolding situation.

This is not a TV thriller—officers literally have only seconds to make a decision, the right choice. My fear is that law-abiding individuals who carry guns may put themselves in a situation where law enforcement is unable to decipher between friend and foe in a split second.

Officers want to see the following things in an active shooting scenario:

- All people should raise their hands and spread their fingers.
- No one should reach for anything.

This is exactly how I teach people to react when they encounter law enforcement agents in active shooting scenarios. The other options are run, hide and finally, fight. The last option is to fight, but if a citizen has a gun, will fighting become the first option? Would that individual potentially save other lives?

I recognize the value of having guns on campus for properly trained, licensed and educated people to protect themselves, but there isn't enough information for us to decide whether guns on campus is the ONLY solution.

In the end, the thought that keeps me up every night is how can I help save lives. That is how I see my role as a safety professional and a 35-year law enforcement responder and instructor. We have to continue to ask tough questions, and saving lives must be our ultimate goal.

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