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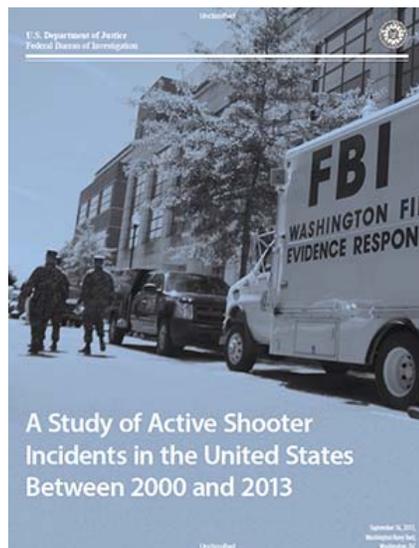
# FBI Study Finds Active Shooter Incidents Increasing

By: Amanda Vicinanzo, Senior Editor

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In partnership with Texas State University's Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training Center, the FBI in 2014 initiated a study of active shooter incidents to provide law enforcement and first responders with data to help them better prevent, prepare for, respond and recover from future incidents.

The report, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, evaluated 160 active shooter incidents, including those at Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook Elementary School, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Fort Hood, the Aurora (Colorado) Cinemark Century 16 movie theater, the Sikh Temple in Wisconsin, the Washington Navy Yard and numerous other tragic shootings.

Special Agent Katherine Schweit, who heads the FBI's Active Shooter Initiative, says she hopes the study "demonstrates the need not only for enhanced preparation on the part of law enforcement and other first responders, but also for civilians to be engaged in discussions and training on decisions they'd have to make in an active shooter situation."

The FBI emphasized that the report evaluates active shootings, a term more specific than "mass shootings," which does not encompass all mass killings or shootings in public places. The FBI defines active shooters as "individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in populated areas (excluding shootings related to gang or drug violence)." The "active" aspect of the term refers to the ability of law enforcement to affect the outcome of the event based upon their responses.

The report discovered that incidents involving active shooters are becoming more frequent. The first seven years of the study show an average of 6.4 incidents annually, while the last seven years show 16.4 incidents annually. These incidents resulted in a total of 1,043 casualties (486 killed, 557 wounded—excluding the shooters).

"This trend reinforces the need to remain vigilant regarding prevention efforts and for law enforcement to aggressively train to better respond to—and help communities recover from—active shooter incidents," the report stated.

The report also revealed the damage an active shooter can cause in just a matter of minutes. The duration of the incident could be ascertained in 64 of the 160 incidents. The report found that 44—or 69 percent—of the incidents ended in 5 minutes or less. 23 of the incidents ended in 2 minutes or less.

Although law enforcement often have the capability to respond in moments, the report notes that the short duration of these incidents often puts life and death decisions in the hands of civilians, making it crucial to provide training on the decisions they may face. In at least 65 of the 160 incidents, citizen engagement or the shooter committing suicide ended the shooting at the scene before law enforcement arrived.

"Recognizing the increased active shooter threat and the swiftness with which active shooter incidents unfold, these study results support the importance of training and exercises—not only for law

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enforcement but also for citizens. It is important, too, that training and exercises include not only an understanding of the threats faced but also the risks and options available in active shooter incidents," the report said.

While the largest percentage of incidents—45.6 percent—took place in a commercial environment (73 incidents), 24.3 percent that took place in an educational environment (39 incidents). School shootings include some of the highest casualty numbers. The 39 incidents that occurred in educational environments resulted in 117 individuals killed and 120 wounded.

"Incidents in educational facilities account for some of the higher casualty counts. For example, the highest death tolls among the 160 incidents occurred at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia (32 killed, 17 wounded) and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (26 killed, 2 wounded [1 additional death at a residence])," the report said.

The study did not explore the motivation of the shooters, but it did identify typical shooter characteristics. For instance, shooters involved in high school shootings were typically students at the schools. Moreover, the report found that the shooter chose to act alone in all but 2 of the incidents and that in all but 6 of the incidents the shooter was male.

Active shooting incidents tend to end on the shooter's initiative. More than half of the incidents—90 shootings—ended on the shooter's initiative with 64 percent of the incidents ending in suicide. 21 incidents ended only after unarmed citizens successfully restrained the shooter.

In exploring the risk to law enforcement in an active shooter incident, the report discovered that in instances where law enforcement officers engage the shooter, they often suffer casualties. In 21 of the 45 incidents where law enforcement had to engage the shooter to end the threat, nine officers were killed and 28 were wounded.

Although US government agencies typically define active shooter incidents as occurring in confined spaces, the FBI chose to drop the term "confined" from their definition as a result of the study results. The report found that 10 of the officers involved were wounded in gunfights categorized as occurring in open spaces were shooters could move through streets and between buildings.

Using the results of this study, the FBI indicates that behavioral analysis experts will now delve deeper into why these shooters did what they did in an effort to help strengthen prevention efforts around the country.

"The FBI recognizes that seeking to avoid these tragedies is clearly the best result," concludes the report. "The FBI remains dedicated to supporting prevention efforts within all communities affected by these tragedies. As the FBI continues to study the active shooter phenomenon, the Bureau remains committed to assist state, local, tribal, and campus law enforcement in developing better prevention, response, and recovery practices involving active shooter incidents."

**Editor's note**: For more on why rapid on-site management is essential during an active-shooter event, read the March *Homeland Security Today* report, *Lockdown*.

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