

# On-Scene Behavior of School Shooters: The Resolution of Rampage Attacks

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## INTRODUCTION

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I have heard it said that active shooter incidents, including school shootings, are over so quickly that there is usually no time for law enforcement officers to arrive and intervene. This is not true as often as is sometimes claimed. Many shootings do end quickly, but many others do not.

This document contains data on the actual outcomes of school shootings, not the perpetrators' intended outcomes. For example, some shooters planned to kill themselves but didn't, either because they changed their minds or were apprehended before they had the chance. Conversely, some shooters apparently expected to escape, but when this became impossible, they ended their lives. Other shooters intended to be killed by police ("suicide by cop"), but instead were wounded and apprehended, or simply apprehended without being shot. Though the perpetrators' intentions may be of interest, this article summarizes the actions of the shooters, regardless of their intentions prior to their attacks.

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## TERMINOLOGY

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I differentiate between "surrendered" and "apprehended," with surrendering meaning the perpetrator voluntarily stopped the attack and let himself (or herself) be taken into custody by police or held by civilians until the arrival of the police. Apprehended is used for instances in which the perpetrator had not stopped the attack, and the shooter was tackled, wrestled to the ground, or otherwise stopped through the use of force, either by civilians or the police.

I also differentiate between "hostage" situations and "kidnapping." Hostage situations involved keeping people in a room with the perpetrator in a standoff situation with law enforcement. Kidnapping refers to an incident in which the perpetrator left the scene and hijacked a car at gunpoint, forcing the driver to take him where he wanted to go. In addition, "human shield" refers to the perpetrator grabbing someone to use as a shield to keep law enforcement from shooting at him. Though someone who is kidnapped or used as a human shield may in a sense be a hostage, the dynamics of the situations vary. Hostages were used as a bargaining tool, the kidnap victim was used as a means of escape, and the human shield was used as protection.

The shootings are divided into those that were resolved "on-site" and those that ended "off-site." Distinguishing these two is not always straightforward, depending on how the concept of the site of attack is understood. In some cases, attacks were classified as ending "off-site" even if this was still on school property. For my purposes, site refers to the scene(s) where the shootings occurred. Some perpetrators were able to leave the immediate scene of attack, but were apprehended elsewhere on school property. In the case of college attacks, the campuses may be huge, and therefore the perpetrator could be far from the attack but still within the campus somewhere. Despite still being on school property, however, such perpetrators succeeded in escaping from the immediate scene of their shootings. Their ability to do so posed a safety risk for the larger community.

Finally, I distinguish "police" or "law enforcement officers" from civilians. Law enforcement officers includes community police, campus police, school resource officers, and security guards (both at schools and in the community).

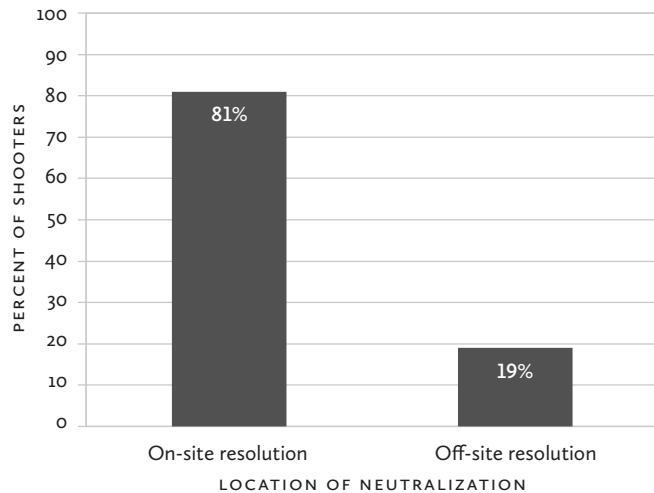
The data presented here is from the sample of 48 perpetrators presented in my book *School Shooters: Understanding*

*High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators.* The perpetrators were ages 11 to 62, and the attacks ranged from 1966 to 2012. There were 44 males and 4 females within the sample. Most of the shootings occurred in the United States, but ten were from other countries.

## RESOLUTION OF ATTACKS

Most attackers were “neutralized” on-site. This means that they surrendered, were apprehended, or died at the scene of their attack (39 shooters, 81%). Of the nine perpetrators (19%) who escaped from the immediate scene, only two were on the run for an extended period. Both Laurie Dann (1988) and Tim Kretschmer (2009) avoided capture for several hours and caused further casualties while eluding police. Two other shooters, Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson (partners in an attack) attempted to escape by means of a van they had taken from one of their homes, but were intercepted by police.

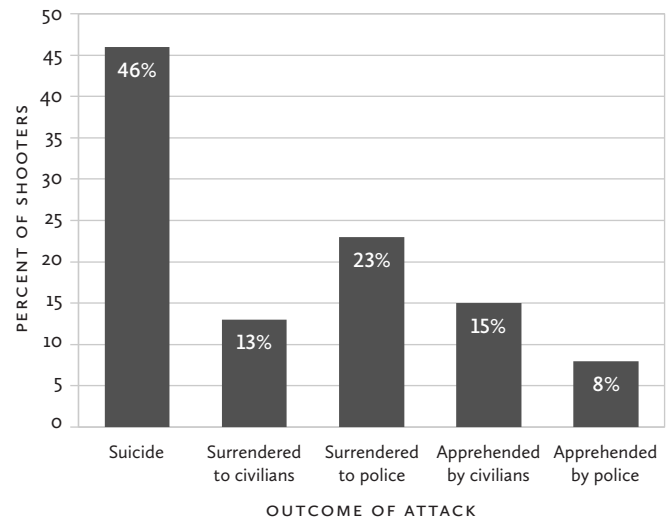
Figure 1: Localization of Attackers’ Neutralization



Suicide was the most frequent resolution of the attack, with 21 shooters (44%) ending their own lives, and one (Charles Whitman) being killed by police. Whitman’s writings made clear that he intended to die in the attack, and his death may be considered a case of “suicide by cop.” If he is counted as a suicide, then 46% of shooters died by suicide.

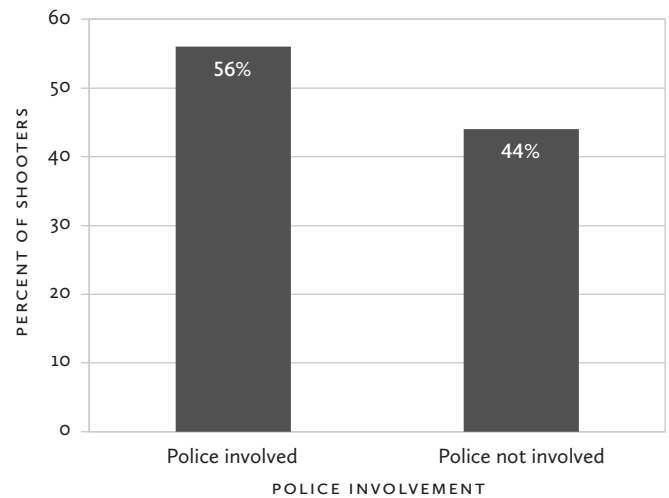
The other resolutions involved the perpetrator surrendering to civilians (13%), surrendering to police (23%), being apprehended by civilians (15%), or being apprehended by police (8%). These results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Outcomes of Attacks



Though the results appear to indicate that the rate of civilian-resolved vs. police-resolved incidents were just about equal (28% to 31%), this is not the full story. A key factor is that many of the suicides occurred after police had arrived on the scene, sometimes engaging the perpetrator in gunfire, and in some cases wounding the perpetrators. Only at this point, did some shooters decide to end their lives. Thus, more resolutions were a result of law enforcement intervention than is revealed in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows that more perpetrators were neutralized by law enforcement response than by other means.

Figure 3: Police Involvement in Resolution of Attacks



The number of police-resolved incidents was not simply a matter of prompt response, but in some cases of on-scene presence, both at schools and in the community. For example, Jason Hoffman was wounded by a school resource officer at the school. Valery Fabrikant took two hostages, one of whom was a security guard who eventually overpowered him. One Goh escaped from the scene and fled to a supermarket where he either told store

staff or was heard telling his father on the telephone that he had killed people. The store security guard held Goh until the local police arrived. In this case, the attack was over, but Goh was not in custody. Similarly, police intervention did not stop Wayne Lo's attack; Lo's gun kept jamming and he eventually gave up trying to shoot, called the police, and waited for them to arrive. It could be argued, however, that Goh and Lo might have resumed their attacks while waiting, and therefore the incidents were not over until they were in police custody.

In many cases, however, the police played a decisive role in neutralizing the attacker, often at great risk to themselves. Eleven shooters (23%) shot at police, and four shooters wounded or killed one or more officers. Additionally, in at least nine attacks (19%), the police fired at the perpetrators, wounding six of the shooters and killing one. Four of those wounded ended up killing themselves (Jeffrey Weise, Kimveer Gill, Tim Kretschmer, and Wellington de Oliveira). Of the other wounded shooters, Jason Hoffman was apprehended and put in jail where he killed himself (he had said after the attack that he had intended to be killed by the police), and Biswanath Halder surrendered after being wounded twice. As noted earlier, Charles Whitman was killed by law enforcement officers.

The range of incidents demonstrates how difficult it is to summarize the outcomes and how they were brought about, whether by the perpetrators' decisions to stop, by civilian intervention, or law enforcement intervention.

## OFF-SITE ATTACKS PRIOR TO SCHOOL RAMPAGES

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In most cases, the crime scene was limited to a particular room or several rooms in one building. In some cases, however, people were shot in different locations. For example, Gang Lu shot several professors in one building and then walked to an administration building where he shot two more people. Seung Hui Cho shot two people in a dormitory, left campus, and then returned for his large-scale attack.

In a different variation, seven perpetrators killed people in non-school settings prior to going on their rampages. Most of these killed family members in their homes (Luke Woodham, Kip Kinkel, Alvaro Castillo, and Adam Lanza). Jeffrey Weise killed his grandfather and the grandfather's girlfriend in their home. Charles Whitman killed his mother in her apartment and then his wife in his own home, only then going to his college campus. Robert Poulin did not kill a family member, but a girl he had raped in his home. In perhaps the most bizarre rampage of all, Laurie Dann attempted to poison several dozen people and to kill a family by setting its house on fire, all before committing a school shooting.

The lesson from all this is that even after the school shoot-

ing is over, there may be other crime scenes to investigate and perhaps lives to save in other settings.

## BE PREPARED TO NEGOTIATE, BREACH BARRIERS, DEAL WITH FIRES

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The circumstances facing first responders arriving at the scene of a school shooting can present numerous challenges. One shooter, Thomas Hamilton, cut the telephone lines in the area prior to entering the school in order to hamper communication. Other shooters set up a variety of barriers either to impede those attempting to flee the scene and/or those attempting to respond to the attack. Charles Whitman barricaded access to the tower where he set up his sniper position. Seung Hui Cho chained the doors shut to the building where he carried out his primary attack. Jiverly Wong used a vehicle to block the back door of the building where he was about to go on a rampage.

Five shooters (10%) held hostages behind close doors (Eric Houston, Valery Fabrikant, Gary Scott Pennington, Barry Loukaitis, and Robert Flores). Most of these situations did not last long, but Houston's dragged on for hours. In a different twist, dozens of people were trapped in the building where Biswanath Halder and numerous law enforcement officers were engaged in a shoot-out. This, too, lasted several hours.

Of the five hostage situations, two were resolved by people in the room overpowering the shooter (Barry Loukaitis and Valery Fabrikant), and three perpetrators released the hostages with no further casualties (Eric Houston, Gary Scott Pennington, and Robert Flores). Houston and Pennington surrendered to police; Flores killed himself.

Law enforcement officers need to be prepared to engage in negotiations regarding hostages, as well as have equipment to breach doors and barriers if necessary. They may also have to arrange for water, food, and medical supplies to be provided to people stuck in buildings, whether as hostages or simply because it is too dangerous to risk leaving.

In addition, five shooters (10%) set fires or smoke bombs, and several others had explosives that were used in their attacks (Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold), left in their cars (Harris, Klebold, and Patrick Purdy), or placed in their home (Kip Kinkel). Thus, first responders may be faced with searching for a killer and rescuing victims in burning, smoke-filled buildings with sprinklers activated and fire alarms sounding. These factors can impede their progress and interfere with communication. In addition, there may be unexploded bombs to be dealt with on the perpetrators' bodies, or in their backpacks, their vehicles, or their homes.

One shooter (Kimveer Gill) grabbed a bystander and tried to use him as a human shield. First responders need to be prepared to deal with this situation.

## CONCLUSION

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The behavior of school shooters is so varied that it is difficult to summarize. This article presented data from four dozen perpetrators regarding multiple aspects of their attacks and the resolution of their rampages. Despite the conventional wisdom that active shooter incidents are usually over before law enforce-

ment can arrive, the data included here demonstrate that police response has played a critical role in neutralizing many school shooters. The article has also sought to highlight factors for first responders to consider so that they are prepared for the wide range of situations they might encounter when arriving at the scene of a school shooting.