A STUDY OF THE PRE-ATTACK BEHAVIORS OF ACTIVE SHOOTERS IN THE UNITED STATES BETWEEN 2000 AND 2013

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE – FBI BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT (BAU)

REMINDERS

- There is no one “profile” of an active shooter.
- There is no single warning sign, checklist, or algorithm for assessing behaviors that identifies a prospective active shooter.
- While impossible to predict violent behavior, it is possible to prevent some attacks via effective threat assessment and management strategies.

ACTIVE SHOOTER DEMOGRAPHICS

The 63 active shooters in the sample did not appear to be readily identifiable prior to the attack based on demographics alone.

The youngest active shooter was 12 yoa and the oldest was 88 yoa with an average age of 37.8 years.

94% were male and only 6% were female.

Among active shooters age 18 and older, 44% were employed and 38% were unemployed.

24% had at least some military experience.

57% were single at the time of the offense.

13% were married; 13% were divorced; 11% were partnered but not married; 6% were separated.

35% had adult criminal convictions prior to the event.

62% had a history of acting in an abusive, harassing or oppressive way (e.g., bullying).

16% had engaged in intimate partner violence.

11% had engaged in stalking-related conduct.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

73% of active shooters had a known connection with the attack site.

35% of active shooters age 18 and older targeted their workplace or former workplace.

88% of active shooters age 17 and younger targeted their school or former school.

Active shooters with no known connection to the site were more likely to conduct pre-attack site surveillance as compared to those with a connection to the targeted site.

21% of active shooters researched or studied past attacks by others.

In cases where the amount of time spent planning could be determined (n=34), 77% (n=26) of the active shooters spent a week or longer planning their attack.

In cases where the amount of time spent preparing could be determined (n=46), 46% (n=21) of the active shooters spent a week or longer preparing (procuring the means) for the attack.

In the four cases where active shooters took less than 24 hours to plan and prepare, all had at least one concerning behavior and three had an identifiable grievance.

FIREARMS ACQUISITION

40% of active shooters purchased a firearm legally and specifically for the purpose of the attack.

35% of active shooters already possessed a firearm and did not obtain it for the express purpose of the attack.

11% of active shooters borrowed or took a firearm from a person known to them.

6% of active shooters stole a firearm.

2% of active shooters purchased a firearm illegally.

STRESSORS

Active shooters experienced multiple stressors (with an average of 3.6 separate stressors) in the year prior to the attack. The stressors reported included:

- 62% Mental health
- 49% Financial strain
- 35% Job-related stressors
- 29% Conflict with friends/peers
- 27% Marital problems
- 22% Abuse of illicit drugs/alcohol
- 22% Other (e.g., caregiving responsibilities)
- 22% Conflict at school
- 21% Physical injury
- 18% Conflict with parents
- 16% Conflict with other family members
- 13% Sexual stress/frustration
- 11% Criminal problems
- 10% Civil problems
- 6% Death of friend/relative
- 2% No stressors

MENTAL HEALTH

25% of active shooters had a diagnosed mental illness prior to the offense.

Of the 25% (n=16), 12 had a mood disorder, 4 had an anxiety disorder, 3 had a psychotic disorder, and 2 had a personality disorder. One active shooter was diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder, one with a developmental disorder, and one described as “other.”

It could not be determined if a diagnosis had been given in 37% (n=23) of the cases in this study.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

All active shooters either: a) lived with someone or b) had significant in-person or online social interactions.

- 68% of all active shooters lived with someone else.
- 64% of active shooters 18 yoa or older lived with someone else.
- 86% of active shooters had significant in-person social interactions with at least one person in the year prior to the attack.
- 27% of active shooters had significant online interactions with another person within a year of the attack.

For this study, the FBI used data that has been verified to the greatest possible extent, relying almost exclusively on information contained in official law enforcement investigative files. Active shooting events which appeared to be spontaneous reactions to situational factors were excluded. The final sample of 63 active shooting incidents was included in this study.
Concerning behaviors are observable behaviors, with an average of 4.7 concerning behaviors displayed by the active shooters in this sample. The concerning behaviors observed by others included:

- Mental health: 62%
- Interpersonal interactions: 57%
- Leakage: 54%
- Work performance: 46%
- School performance: 42%
- Threats/confrontations: 35%
- Anger: 33%
- Physical aggression: 21%
- Risk-taking: 21%
- Firearms behavior: 19%
- Violent media usage: 13%
- Drug abuse: 13%
- Weight/eating: 13%
- Alcohol abuse: 10%
- Physical health: 10%
- Hygiene/appearance: 8%
- Other (e.g., idolizing criminals): 6%
- Sexual behavior: 5%
- Quality of sleep: 3%
- Quality of thinking or communication: 5%
- Work performance: 42%
- School performance: 35%
- Threats/confrontations: 35%
- Anger: 33%
- Physical aggression: 21%
- Risk-taking: 21%
- Firearms behavior: 19%
- Violent media usage: 13%
- Drug abuse: 13%
- Weight/eating: 13%
- Alcohol abuse: 10%
- Physical health: 10%
- Hygiene/appearance: 8%
- Other (e.g., idolizing criminals): 6%
- Sexual behavior: 5%
- Quality of sleep: 3%
- Quality of thinking or communication: 5%
- Work performance: 42%
- School performance: 35%
- Threats/confrontations: 35%
- Anger: 33%
- Physical aggression: 21%
- Risk-taking: 21%
- Firearms behavior: 19%
- Violent media usage: 13%
- Drug abuse: 13%
- Weight/eating: 13%
- Alcohol abuse: 10%
- Physical health: 10%
- Hygiene/appearance: 8%
- Other (e.g., idolizing criminals): 6%
- Sexual behavior: 5%
- Quality of sleep: 3%
- Quality of thinking or communication: 5%
- Work performance: 42%
- School performance: 35%
- Threats/confrontations: 35%
- Anger: 33%
- Physical aggression: 21%
- Risk-taking: 21%
- Firearms behavior: 19%
- Violent media usage: 13%
- Drug abuse: 13%
- Weight/eating: 13%
- Alcohol abuse: 10%
- Physical health: 10%
- Hygiene/appearance: 8%
- Other (e.g., idolizing criminals): 6%
- Sexual behavior: 5%
- Quality of sleep: 3%
- Quality of thinking or communication: 5%
- Work performance: 42%
- School performance: 35%
- Threats/confrontations: 35%
- Anger: 33%
- Physical aggression: 21%
- Risk-taking: 21%
- Firearms behavior: 19%
- Violent media usage: 13%
- Drug abuse: 13%
- Weight/eating: 13%
- Alcohol abuse: 10%
- Physical health: 10%
- Hygiene/appearance: 8%
- Other (e.g., idolizing criminals): 6%
- Sexual behavior: 5%
- Quality of sleep: 3%
- Quality of thinking or communication: 5%