

Workplace Violence: Are You Prepared?

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Columbine, Virginia Tech, Nickel Mines, Westroads Mall, Northern Illinois University. What do these places have in common? They were all the scene of tragic events involving an active shooter. The list of schools and work places affected by this phenomenon goes on and on. No, it is not pleasant to talk about, but it has become increasingly necessary as we strive to maintain safe environments in which to work and learn.

Not long ago, we were content to think that these events could only occur in other far away places, not here. The tragic events at Von Maur last December and more recently, the senseless shooting of a young woman in the drive-through lane of a fast food store on North 30th Street were a rude wake-up call that we are no longer immune. We can no longer take for granted that similar events will not occur again in our community. The question is no longer **IF** it happens, but **WHEN** and **WHERE** will it happen?

Schools and businesses are beginning to take a look at their security plans to include procedures for responding to an active shooter. In many cases, not enough is being done, however. Would you know what to do today if you were confronted by an active shooter in your school or work place? Have you taken the time to mentally prepare and develop a mindset of awareness and survival?

Most of us have taken the time to prepare for and respond to a fire in our homes and businesses. We have installed smoke detectors, sprinkler systems, fire alarms, fire exits, and fire extinguishers in every public building in our community. We have spent large sums of money on fire prevention and protection in our schools and businesses. We have also mentally prepared for and physically rehearsed fire drills in our homes and schools.

However, not one single person has been killed by fire in a school in the last 20 years. In fact, the United States Department of Labor has reported an average of fewer than 200 occupational fatalities per year due to fire over the past five years. Not one of these fatalities occurred in a school. An average of 1000 people were killed by violence each year during the same period. 48 people were murdered in American schools during the 2004-2005 school year. Homicide is now the second leading cause of death in the workplace.¹

Statistically, you are much more likely to be killed or injured by an act of violence in your school or work place than you are by fire. Have you taken appropriate steps to prevent or protect yourself from what is more likely to harm or kill you? The next time someone asks, "Do you really think there will be a shooting here?", just point to the nearest fire extinguisher or alarm and ask them, "Do you really think there will be a fire here?". We do not expect that there will be a fire, but we would be morally and criminally negligent not to prepare for the possibility.² The same is true for an act of violence in a school or work place.

What has been learned from studying hundreds of school and work place attacks during the past 20 years is that they are usually over in less than 30 minutes. Despite prompt law enforcement response, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.³

Although violence in schools and in the workplace is not an epidemic, we must accept the reality that it is a distinct possibility. Everyone must take direct responsibility for their own safety at home, at work, and at school.

The Center for Personal Protection and Safety has identified the following actions you can take to reduce the effectiveness of an active shooter and improve your chances for survival.⁴ The first step is to develop a sense of awareness and survival mind set. Maintain awareness of your surroundings where ever you are. Where are the nearest exits? Are there objects nearby that would protect me from bullets? Ask yourself ‘*What If*’ questions and mentally rehearse what you would do in an emergency. Convince yourself that you will do whatever it takes to survive. These techniques are designed to make you mindful, not fearful.

If you do find yourself in the middle of an emergency situation, you need to quickly figure out what is going on and what you are going to do. What is happening? Where is it happening? Can you get out or should you hide out? The answers to these questions will come much easier if you have taken the time, in advance, to remain aware and mentally rehearse.

If you can get out without exposing yourself to additional danger, do so as quickly as possible. Leave your personal belongings behind and alert others to danger as you exit. It is important that you DO NOT sound the Fire Alarm as this may place others in danger as they evacuate from a safe area to an area that is in the path of the attacker.

It may be safer for you to stay where you are if you are in a secure area and not under immediate attack. Your only avenue of escape may be blocked or expose you to danger. In this case, the best option is to remain where you are and hide from the attacker. Lock yourself in a room if possible and stay out of sight. Block the door with large heavy objects to make entry as difficult as possible and turn out the lights. Stay calm and quiet. Turn off radios, computers, and cellular phone ringers. Close any blinds and block windows. Do not huddle together with others if you decide to hide. It is much easier for an attacker to shoot at a group of people than individuals.

Whether you can get out or must hide out, call out to 911 as soon as it is safe to do so. Others may be doing the same and tying up the phone lines, so stay patient. Report as much specific information as possible about your location, number of other people, any injuries, and the suspect’s physical and clothing description. Report who the attacker is, if known, and the number and types of weapons displayed such as handgun or long gun.

As a last resort, you may have to fight back in order to survive. Remember, the attacker will continue to kill unless he is stopped. You must assume that his intentions are deadly and you may have no other option. If you are faced with this situation, you must be as aggressive as you possibly can. You must do whatever it takes to survive. If others are with you, work together as a group to distract and overcome the attacker. Yell, throw objects, use improvised weapons, do anything except sit there and wait to be killed.

Finally, it is also important to know what to expect when Police or Public Safety Officers enter the building. Remember, their primary objective is to immediately locate and stop the attacker. Victims and the injured will be evacuated only when the threat is eliminated. Officers may bypass the wounded in search of the attacker.

Be aware that Officers will not know who is a threat and who is not. Be prepared that Officers may point their weapons directly at you as they must assume everyone is a potential threat. You may also be searched and handcuffed. Do not make any sudden movements when approached by Officers. Do not run towards, or grab onto Officers. Follow their verbal commands exactly and do not point at them or others. Officers will focus their attention on your hands. It is important that you raise your arms and show that your hands are empty.

Once the situation has stabilized, Police or Public Safety Officers will escort you out of the building. They may direct you to raise your hands above your head as you move. You will not be allowed to take personal items with you. You will not be allowed to go back into the building for quite some time as it will be designated as a crime scene. You will be directed to a holding area where you will be interviewed. This may take a considerable amount of time, so please be patient.

This article gives you much to think about and it is not pleasant dinner conversation. You need not be fearful but you should be mindful that you are directly responsible for your personal safety. Hopefully, this article has forced you to give more thought to your own safety in school and in the workplace and that is the first step towards developing awareness and a survival mindset.

¹ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-1, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries by Industry and Event or Exposure, United States, 1992-2006. <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshcfoi1.htm>

² Fairburn, Richard and Grossman, David. Preparing for School Attacks. Killology Research Group, Jonesboro, AR. <http://www.killology.com/schoolattack.htm>

³ The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative. United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, Washington, D.C. (May 2002)

⁴ Center for Personal Protection and Safety. Surviving an Active Shooter in the Workplace. Safe Travel Institute, Spokane, WA. (January 2008)