

Ohio trainer makes the case for single-officer entry against active killers

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If you're a patrol officer who's first on the scene of an active-shooter call, should you make immediate entry in hunt for the suspect...or wait for other early responders and improvise a rapid deployment team?

Since the Columbine massacre 9 years ago, few if any trainers any longer advocate delaying for a formal SWAT call-out, which can take 30 minutes or more in some areas. But commonly a hasty assembly of 3 or more officers for a search-and-confrontation team is recommended, with coordinated movement tactics taught accordingly.

To trainer Ron Borsch, a 30-year law enforcement veteran who manages the small SEALE (South East Area Law Enforcement) Regional Training Academy in Bedford, Ohio, that's a deadly waste of time when seconds can mean lives.

Based on his on-going research of active-shooter realities, he's convinced that single-officer entries can potentially lessen the toll of casualties while exposing the responders involved to little additional risk. Although popular law enforcement literature has just lately begun to explore the single-officer concept, Borsch has promoted the idea to in-service trainees for more than 2 years and has taught solo- and 2-officer entry-action models in academy courses for the past year. And he finds that administrators whose officers are exposed to this approach generally accept it enthusiastically.

"We offer this report not necessarily as a tactical advisory but as an example of one trainer's effort to give tactical instruction a research base," explains Dr. Bill Lewinski, executive director of the Force Science Research Center at Minnesota State University-Mankato. "We offer it for your thoughtful consideration and we'd be interested in hearing comments from our readers on Ron Borsch's conclusions." If you have comments, please e-mail the editor. "Time is our worst adversary in dealing with active killers," Borsch told Force Science News. "We're racing what I call 'the Stopwatch of Death.' Victims are often added to the toll every several seconds."

Where times have been reliably documented, **the average post-Columbine "rapid mass murder episode" lasts just 8 minutes**, according to Borsch's calculations. "The murderer's timeline begins when he says it begins. **Any prevention, deterrence or delay efforts have failed at that point, and the police are handicapped with catching up whenever they are notified.**"

To have any hope of successfully intervening in a slaughter spree under the usual tight time strictures, law enforcement "needs to get less manpower on site sooner." Training LEOs to wait even moments to form an impromptu entry team shows that "our country's tactical community at large has failed to do its homework and to evolve strategies that accurately reflect the known methods of operation and patterns of active killers," Borsch asserts. "Law enforcement has already proved many times over that we can arrive 'too late with too many' and spend too much time gathering pre-entry intelligence. Now we need to fix what is obviously a broken strategy."

Borsch, who logged 17 years as a part-time SWAT team member before retiring from street work, has analyzed more than 90 active-shooter incidents on the basis of data largely ferreted out from Internet

reports. Most involved schools and colleges, but workplaces, shopping malls, churches and other public places are also represented. Among his findings that have helped shape his tactical thinking:

- 98% of active killers act alone.
- 80% have long guns, 75% have multiple weapons (about 3 per incident), and they sometimes bring hundreds of extra rounds of ammunition to the shooting site.
- Despite such heavy armaments and an obsession with murder at close range, they have an average hit rate of less than 50%.
- They strike “stunned, defenseless innocents via surprise ambush. On a level playing field, the typical active killer would be a no-contest against anyone reasonably capable of defending themselves.”
- “They absolutely control life and death until they stop at their leisure or are stopped.” They do not take hostages, do not negotiate.
- **They generally try to avoid police, do not hide or lie in wait for officers and “typically fold quickly upon armed confrontation.”**
- 90% commit suicide on-site. “Surrender or escape attempts are unlikely.”

Because active shooters seem so intent on killing, it’s often difficult to convince first responders that “this bad guy is one of the easiest man-with-gun encounters they will ever have,” Borsch observes. “Most officers have already faced worse opponents from a personal safety standpoint than these creeps.”

He believes the profile he has drawn should “empower officers with probable cause to believe that they can successfully prevail against the predictable patterns of these mass murderers” if they arrive in time to abort an actual attack.

From their experience in dealing with “a myriad of urgent circumstances” in their normal work, street officers are “already quite used to a multi-tiered response that begins with one officer, with backup en route.” A solo officer entering an active-killer scene “has a virtual guarantee that an avalanche of manpower is coming fast behind him,” so he won’t be alone for long.

Once into the scene, to further gain confidence in advancing aggressively toward the suspect, officers need to understand the nature of these killers. Unlike conventional criminal predators, who often have no reluctance about attacking police, active shooters tend to be “cowardly,” Borsch says.

“They choose unarmed, defenseless innocents for a reason: They have no wish to encounter someone who can hurt them. They are personally risk- and pain-avoidant. The tracking history of these murderers has proved them to be unlikely to be aggressive with police. If pressed, they are more likely to kill themselves.” In his research, he has found no evidence of any LEO in the U.S. yet being wounded or killed in an active-shooting incident where mass murder was intended or accomplished. “Officers need to understand valid military principles that apply to these calls, such as speed, surprise and violence of action,” Borsch insists. “They need to learn how to close in and finish the fight with aggression, having and keeping the ‘momentum of battle’ on their side. The idea is to keep the

adversary off-balance by forcing him always to react to your actions, rather than, after contact, reacting to him.”

For example, once an active killer is spotted, Borsch favors the swift application of deadly force over seeking defensive cover in most instances. “An unintentional consequence of going to cover may be to lose sight of the offender, allowing him to gain the momentum of battle and shoot more defenseless innocents until he says it’s over.”

SEALE’s active-killer countermeasures, taught through a course called Tactical First Responder, bypass traditional instruction in team formations and movement. These can be important in a mass murder response, Borsch says—but only later, during a search-and-rescue phase. What’s realistically needed by the first one or two patrol officers to arrive at a scene—“the first of the first responders”—are instruction and practice in how to enter, move and confront the threat alone.

Thus after a briefing on the predictable patterns of offender behavior that his research has revealed, the trainees concentrate on perfecting a swift zig-zag movement down hallways, on mastering an accelerated slicing-the-pie technique for taking corners, on maneuvering up and down stairways with a patrol rifle (the response weapon of choice, given the killer’s likely armaments), and on using sight, sound, smell and intuition to gather intel that will help them close quickly on the threat. “We practice until there’s no speed less than rapid.”

If an officer enters a school in response to an active-killer call “he may see or hear nothing out of order initially,” Borsch says. “The place may be in lock-down and there may be hundreds of rooms, some of them quite distant and out of earshot, where the killer could be wreaking havoc.

“The officer may have to set out in a direction with little guidance and cover a lot of ground until he comes across something. In these situations, intelligence often belongs only to those who go get it. But what’s the alternative—just stop and wait? The killing may be continuing while you hear nothing.”

Single-officer entry has been a controversial concept, Borsch says, but he senses that the tide is starting to turn. In a recent issue of Law and Order Magazine, hardly an advocate of radical innovation, the executive director of the National Assn. of School Resource Officers wrote in an article aimed at police chiefs, “Training CANNOT be limited to the active shoot training where three, four or more officers respond and form a team.” At SEALE, Borsch has found that chiefs whose officers have completed the First Responder course often want their personnel to repeat the training to reinforce the single-entry precepts. Some departments have also hired him as a consultant to evaluate and revise their active-killer protocols.

“A slow-and-methodical approach—what I call ‘tactical loitering’—is still appropriate for most types of police encounters,” Borsch says. “Dynamic active killers are a unique problem. With time as a relentless enemy, an officer has a choice to make: does he or she take the risk of going in alone...or are potential victims left to the mercy of a rogue human while the officer stays safe?”

Even with an immediate solo entry, Borsch concedes, police may not find the killer until his bloodletting is over. But saving time by “getting called early enough and taking action early enough,” he argues, still offers the best chance for mitigating casualties.

Aided by his research, “we prepare the officers’ mind first, then work on the motor skills in hallways, stairwells and rooms,” Borsch says. To motivate courage, he hangs the walls of his training classroom with photographs of victims and their active shooters. “The victims’ pictures are big,” he explains. “Those of the killers are small. They’re worthless cowards. The innocent people who may be their victims if we don’t stop them are what matter.”

A note from FSRC

We're excited to announce that Force Science News will now be translated into French in response to request to make the articles available to about 14,000 French-speaking officers in Quebec. The request came from the Canadian Police Research Council and the Quebec National Police School, who wrote, “Force Science News is recognized in the Canadian police community as a reliable source of information on the evolution of knowledge about the use of force in law enforcement. However, as you may be aware, most of the police forces in the province of Quebec – some 14,000 officers – as well as a number of other police forces and individual officers throughout Canada have French as their mother tongue.”

As part of the agreement, FSRC will be given copies of each translated article for posting to the Force Science News Web site, which will allow other French-speaking officers around the world to benefit as well.

“This relationship is a clear indication of the global need for and interest in the work we are doing at the Center,” said Lewinski. “We are thrilled to open the doors of Force Science to French-speaking officers through translated Force Science News articles and we hope to have the opportunity to offer translations in other languages as well in the future. The more officers we can help, the better.”

If you see a need for translation in your area and have a method by which that may occur, please e-mail the Center.

The FSRC was launched in 2004 by Executive Director Bill Lewinski, PhD. - a specialist in police psychology -- to conduct unique lethal-force experiments. The non-profit FSRC, based at Minnesota State University-Mankato, uses sophisticated time-and-motion measurements to document-for the first time-critical hidden truths about the physical and mental dynamics of life-threatening events, particularly officer-involved shootings. Its startling findings profoundly impact on officer training and safety and on the public's naive perceptions.

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