

Title: Run, Hide, Fight – Who’s in Control and Why Does it Matter?

By Catherine W. Jones

Session Objective: By the end of the session participants will be able to apply the concepts of continuous improvement to how we think about active shooter/armed intruder response situations, particularly from a schools standpoint. Participants will be challenged to think critically about the first moments after law enforcement arrives and takes charge of the scene, and then throughout the hours afterwards as it best applies to their own context. Participants will take back to their respective agencies key points regarding concerns and considerations that can improve active shooter response.

Session Summary: This panel discussion as to who is in charge during an active shooter/armed intruder situation will explore the unique dynamic of shifting authority and responsibility, particularly within the Run Hide Fight model. The discussion is intended to push beyond the obvious objective of stopping the shooter. Jurisdictions have varying emergency operation protocols. When is control relinquished and to whom? The session is intended to help participants collaborate better with responding agencies and improve response actions. The principles of National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS) will also be explored as a guide to improving response.

Introduction

As it relates to an active shooter incident why is it important to talk about who is in control? Isn't the obvious answer law enforcement? What if we consider there is more than one context involved and it involves the lives of the survivors? Particularly as it relates to the trauma of the incident. Our thinking should not be focused solely on wresting away the attacker's control. We must look ahead – to the survivors. For them, the end of the shooting incident is not the end of the trauma. It may be the beginning, and everything is not OK with them. A bullet can end a life, trauma can ruin one.

In her survey of school leadership, Bree Alexander finds, “Negative consequences related to school shootings include trauma symptoms such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), posttraumatic stress symptoms, major depression, anxiety, and mood disorders which can be manifested in many ways including mental intrusions, flashbacks, sleep problems and/or nightmares, and hypervigilance.”

A Washington Post analysis finds some 311,000 children have attended a school during a shooting since the Columbine High School incident. When you add in the number of school faculty, staff, and associated family members that were also affected, the number of impacted individuals grows. Reducing trauma to survivors as an important outcome. It is not suggested that trauma intervention is non-existent; however, the focus here is to explore ways trauma can be reduced *while still in the event*, thereby reducing its impact.

Continuous Improvement Model

The goal here is to introduce the mindset that improvement does not have to be wholesale change in order to be worthwhile. The continuous improvement model leans into embracing incremental changes that over time provide constant improvement and effectiveness.

Thinking differently about how we respond to active shooter incidents to improve the mental health of the survivors is a worthwhile goal. As these incidents unfortunately continue to occur, we see that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, maybe there are small overarching principles we can embed in our thinking that will inform our responses.



Active shooter responses have already benefited from continuous improvement thinking. Many students in the Columbine shooting lost their lives because they were told to “stay still,” even though an exit to outside and safety was close by. That was before the Run, Hide, Fight days. That was also before law enforcement learned they cannot wait for a tactical team or SWAT to arrive. They need to go in immediately! The Uvalde school incident shows us we are still learning this hard lesson.

In no way is any of this meant to be a criticism of law enforcement. They are often the necessary element to end the horror. The goal here is to expand our thinking beyond the law enforcement response, in collaboration with the law enforcement response, and while we wait for a law enforcement response. In other words, what can victim do for themselves independent of law enforcement and in cooperation with law enforcement.

Trauma

Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. defines trauma as “not the story of something that happened back then, but the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside the individual. These events leave us stuck in a state of helplessness and terror, and results in a change in how we perceive danger.” He notes this is often the foundation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The difference between the memory of living through a bad event vs the brain living permanently in the bad event.

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk says, “Being able to move and *do* something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars.” In an interview he goes further, “Trauma produces feelings of dread and helplessness, disgust, and horror in the body. And in response to that people try to numb out the body. The most common way of doing that is with drugs and alcohol. Comorbidity between trauma and drugs and alcohol is gigantic. It is important to understand these ways (drugs and alcohol) as ways people desperately use to manage unbearable situations.”

Van der Kolk tells the story of five-year-old Noam Saul who witnessed the first plane hit the World Trade Center in 2001. His classroom was less than 1,500 feet away. He ran with his classmates and teacher, was reunited with his older brother and father (who had just dropped him

off at school), and then the three ran for their lives through the “rubble, ash, and smoke of lower Manhattan.” Traumatic incident? Certainly. No one would be surprised to learn that Noam would grow up to be a disturbed, anxiety-filled young man. But are we surprised to learn that young Noam was able to see the incident as concluded (albeit terrible) and was able to go on with his life without serious psychological scars?

Van der Kolk explains that Noam’s experience allows us to see critical aspects of the adaptive response to threat. One is being able to take an active role (by running away) thus becoming an agent in his own rescue. Second, was the importance of reaching the safety of home. The immediacy of the incident subsided and his brain and body were able to quiet, enabling his mind to make some sense of what happened. In this case, Noam made a drawing of what he had witnessed (plane crashing into a building, fire, people jumping out, etc.) with a slight alteration. His drawing depicting personal observations during the incident included a trampoline adjacent to the building “So that next time when people have to jump they will be safe.”

When we experience a stressful event our stress hormones heed the call to action and then quickly reset when the threat is over, returning us to equilibrium. Noam’s ability to exert control over his situation (by running away) and reaching the safety of home allowed his body to send the “all clear” message, returning him to physical equilibrium.

Imagine a horrible scenario, like an active shooter incident, where you have no power to control your situation, no ability to make decisions for yourself, no situational awareness for extended periods of time, and no “all clear” messages being sent. This is the genesis for trauma. By the way, a follow up with Noam reveals he is a well-adjusted young man with an impressive education who is pursuing his passions in his career. He has not been derailed by trauma even though he experienced something horrific and unimaginable. Noam says, “While reaching the safety of my home did not necessarily mean I’d left the trauma behind, it was a critical step that enabled me to step back, draw my perspective of the attacks, and begin to reconcile what happened.” For months, five-year-old Noam believed Osama bin Laden was in his home, but he was able to “accept the role of that trauma without letting it disturb me to the same extent in the years that followed.”

Being traumatized means continuing to organize life as if the trauma were still going on – unchanged and immutable – as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past. Those struggling with PTSD continue to emotionally defend against a threat that belongs to the past. Too many of us are not as fortunate as Noam, to instinctively imagine a new future that lets go of the past.

Instinctive Response

Run. Hide. Fight, (RHF) is not just a catchphrase. They are the hardwired responses in our brain’s alarm system that are trying to help us survive. Van der Kolk explains that “If for some reason the normal response is blocked – for example, when people are held down, trapped, or otherwise prevented from taking effective action, be in a war zone, a car accident, domestic violence, or a rape – the brain keeps secreting stress chemicals, and the brain’s electrical circuits continue to fire in vain. Long after the actual incident has passed, the brain may keep sending signals to the body to escape a threat that no longer exists.” Further, he says, “Being able to

move and *do* something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars.”

We often forget that there are four instinctive responses. Run, hide, fight, and/or freeze. If we become so overwhelmed with stress hormones that our frontal lobe shuts down, we lose executive functions. In this situation we are unable to make decisions, unable to act, unable to even speak coherently. Is the freeze response opening the door to trauma, and does that happen more often when an individual is overwhelmed with the incident combined with having no sense of control thereby increasing the feelings of helplessness?

When RHF was first introduced as an appropriate response to an active shooter incident, it gave victims an opportunity to take control over the decisions they made if they ever found themselves in such a horrific circumstance. One could argue that just the pre-incident contemplation of one’s response provides a subconscious element of control and security. Have we stopped the conversation too soon, especially with schools? RHF is acknowledged as an acceptable premise - until law enforcement shows up. Too many school administrators take the position that once law enforcement shows up, their role in the incident is over. But what happens when law enforcement is an hour away? We need other options, especially when children are involved, and school district administrators need to step up their preparedness and response options.

With HUNDREDS of shootings each year, what happens to the survivors should not be forgotten. Are we responding to these incidents in a way that will reduce the potential for trauma to set in? Are we even thinking of that, or are we so focused on the singular goal of stopping the shooter that all other consequences of the response are forgotten or marginalized? Can both goals be prioritized simultaneously? Perhaps that expanded thinking helps open the door to a more collaborative approach to active shooter response – one that thinks about the survivors and not just the shooter. If the Washington Post numbers are correct, there is easily 500,000 students, staff, and family that are potential trauma victims possibly suffering to move their lives forward.

The victims/survivors of active shooter incidents have an inherent need for control over the horrible circumstances they find themselves in. We know being able to exert some sense of control is important to prevent a horrible circumstance from becoming long lasting trauma. Therefore, we must think of ways we can embed elements of control that people can implement for themselves.

Introducing Control

How do we reduce helplessness in an active shooter incidents in schools? Provide elements of control. Even if ultimately prove futile, will some control over one’s behavior and ability to make decisions for themselves reduce the level of lasting trauma? Maybe. Research tells us it should.

Introducing control for an active shooter incident for schools may include the following:

- Embrace that RHF is more than a catchphrase, it is permission to live. It allows one to make decisions for oneself that seem the best in the moment and it doesn’t stop when law enforcement arrive. Teach people what these options *feel* like by conducting drills and

exercises. Even in a drill, there is a horrendous feeling of helplessness crouching under a desk waiting to get shot (even when only simulated). Being able to get up and run is empowering and an important element of control. Age appropriate training can be offered to students, ideally training that does NOT include moulage. It has been established that exercises and drills are stressful enough, adding make-up to simulate injuries is unnecessarily stressful (and possibly traumatic).

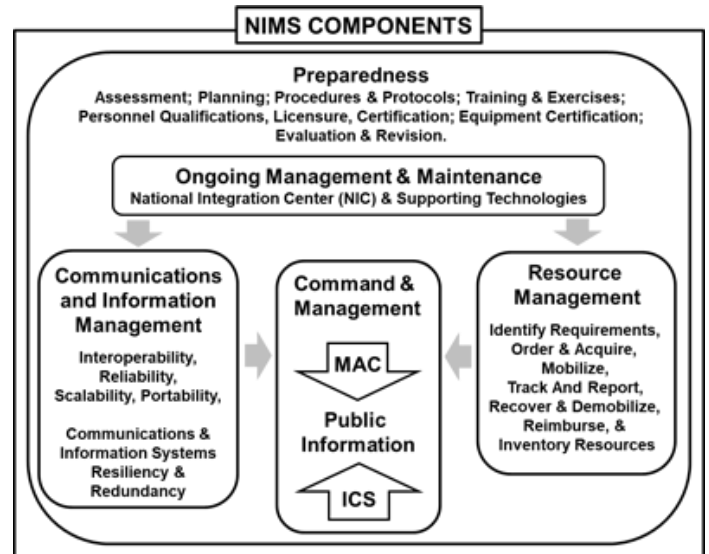
- Provide a means of communication so occupants have the situational awareness to make decisions for themselves (using apps, radios, phones, intercoms, etc.)
- Enable teachers to lock their doors from the inside. This is a must. The college where I work spent thousands of dollars installing electronic locks that can be activated from the Public Safety department. However, the hardware does not allow for the door to lock on the inside. In the Uvlade incident, we learned of one teacher who mustered up the courage to step out into the hall to lock her door using her key. This is unacceptable.
- Teach occupants how to barricade, block a door with their feet, immobilize a door opener with a belt or tie. Learning to immobilize the door-opener is a critical element for schools because the doors swing outward; therefore, barricading will have limited, if any, effectiveness.
- Strive to get students off the campus and home immediately, do NOT sequester them in an auditorium for eight hours. During the Taft High School Shooting, the shooter was apprehended and removed within 15 minutes. However, the students were kept in the auditorium for over eight hours. I suggest that this robs them of their opportunity to be Noam. Their control over themselves and their situational awareness was taken away, which artificially increases the significance of the incident. No more RHF for them.
- Don't treat students like bank robbers. Most of us have likely seen the pictures from school shootings where students are being marched out (sometimes by gunpoint) with their hands on their heads. Is this really necessary? None of the others standing around have their hands on their heads. Before law enforcement arrived students had the control to decide whether or not to leave (run), now that law enforcement has arrived not only are they no longer allowed that decision, but now they are being marched out with their hands on their heads.
- Don't clear classrooms with guns raised and pointed at faculty and students. Once the shooter has been stopped, the step of "clearing" the classrooms is often conducted. However, in the Taft Hight instance, faculty reported that having a gun pointed in their face was disturbing. Imagine what the students felt. There were less than 30 students in the classroom the shooter entered, but the whole student body felt the impact of the incident by experiencing guns in their faces and being sequestered for hours. The response created the stress rather than the incident itself for most people who experienced that incident.
- Provide trauma kits in classrooms and train faculty how to use them. Providing basic first aid even if it results in futility is arguable better than helplessly watching a child bleed out. Train students as well using age appropriate material. Stop the Bleed is an excellent program that is now associated with California's Assembly Bill 2260 "Emergency Response: Trauma Kits." The legislation requires the installation of trauma bleeding control kits in newly constructed public and private buildings.



If the difference between being a victim of trauma and being a survivor of a bad situation is a matter of control, shouldn't this be something that informs our response?

Emergency Management

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is a common framework for emergency management and incident response that is applicable to all stakeholders with incident related responsibilities. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) says NIMS is a systemic approach to incident management, including the command and coordination of incidents, resource management and information management. It provides a unity of effort to achieve common objectives allowing participating agencies to maintain their own authority and accountability.



The elements of the Incident Command System (ICS) feed into NIMS in the Command and Management component. Looking at a typical ICS chart provides some insight into the various elements and objectives that need to be considered in a school emergency. Although the objective of stopping the shooter most often falls to law enforcement, the other objectives that need to be considered include:

- Information sharing and situational awareness. The school should have a liaison in the incident command structure as soon as it is established.
- First aid
- Shelter of students and reunification (e.g. establish a Friends and Relatives Center and a Family Assistance Center.)
- Possible transport of students
- Student and staff accounting

Post-incident objectives include counseling and school status (re-occupy). With active shooter incidents, we often think of only the response phase and not the post-incident recovery phase.

Using the emergency management model, particularly embracing a unified command approach, could we look at active shooter incidents, especially in schools, as “emergencies/disasters,” where there are multiple objectives, rather than as bank robberies/crime scenes where law enforcement is singularly in charge? Could we reduce trauma to the survivors if we do?

Bank Robbery Model:

- LE may not know who the bad guys are
- Take control of the bank
- Bring in SWAT if necessary
- Secure the scene and sequester occupants, no one leaves the scene
- Identify witnesses take statements

Emergency Response Model:

- Try to stop or control the incident
- Get people to safety
- Encourage occupants to take control
- Collaboration of resources (multiagency, unified command)
- Reduce effect of incident

Emergency response involves simultaneously thinking about responding to the event, minimizing damage, and restoring function.

How is helplessness reduced in emergency management? Planning, training, and realistic exercises. These are important elements to prepare people to take charge of their own survival, priming them to respond, take some action (any action) that they can initiate and follow through with. Are we missing this element with the RHF model if all control is ceded to law enforcement when they arrive? If occupants are sharing intelligence internally via a phone app, radio, or other means about the location of the shooter so that decisions can be made that seem appropriate, does all that stop when law enforcement arrives? Is the option to RHF suddenly over? How does the intelligence being shared by occupants get shared with responding law enforcement? Using the crime scene model, information does not get shared, it stays within the law enforcement community. However, embracing the concepts of NIMS/ICS tell us this is a coordinated and shared responsibility. This further establishes why a school liaison is a must at the incident command post. Would the outcome at Uvalde been different if information sharing between the school occupants and responders occurred? Probably.

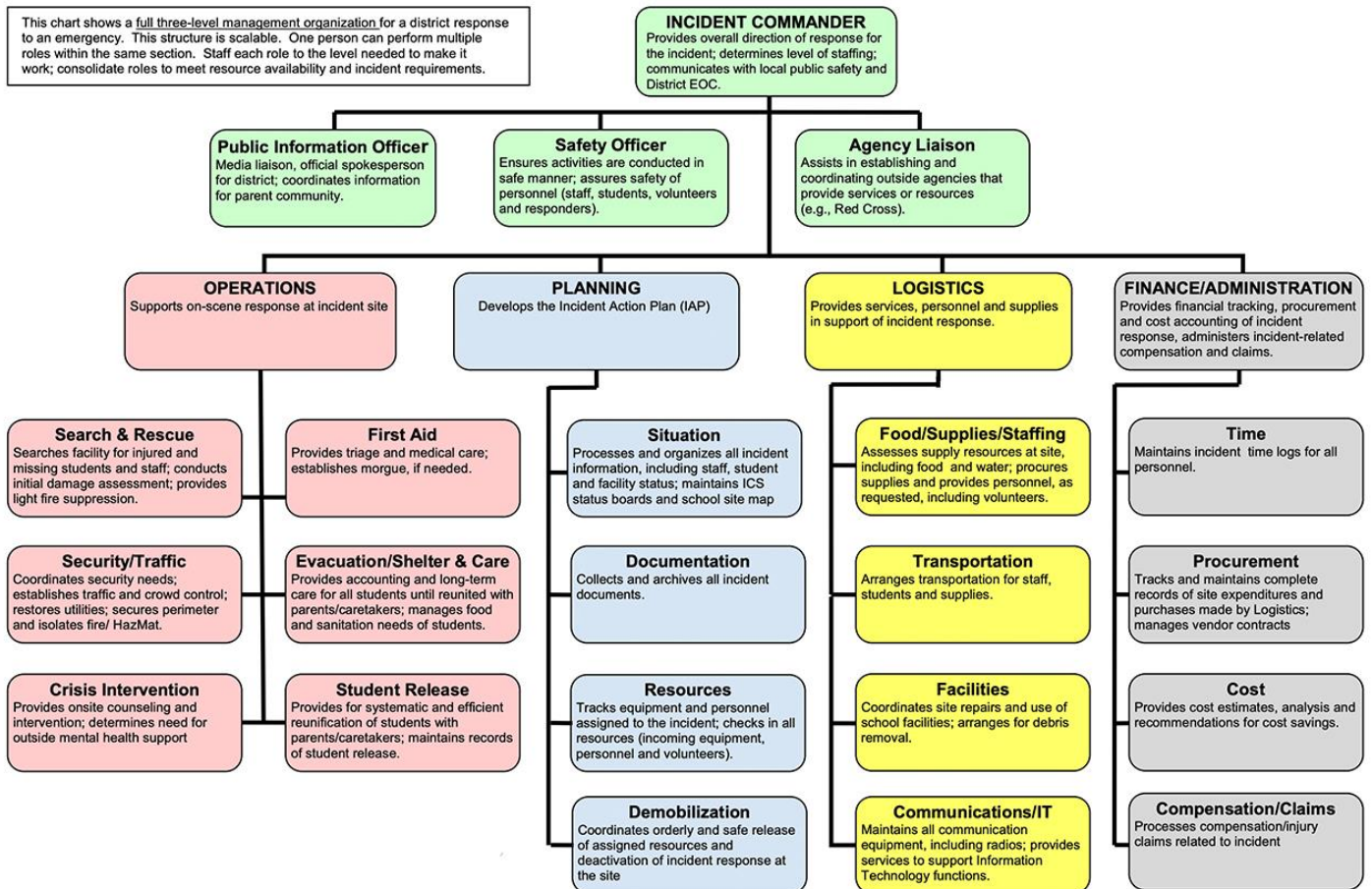
Using the ICS diagram below, we can consider how a unified command might function. Initially, school personnel are in full command of responding to or managing an active shooter incident. That might include sharing information about the shooter, locking down, encouraging students to flee, having their armed staff respond (if there are any), and collecting as much information about what is going on as possible. Once law enforcement arrives, a unified command should be established immediately so that sharing information and situational awareness can occur. A Friends and Relatives Center (FRC) and a Family Assistance Center (FAC) should be established. The FAC should be separate from the FRC to prevent further trauma to family and friends experiencing the loss of a loved one during, or as a result of, the incident. These actions demonstrate that the survivors are as important as ending the shooting.

The key law enforcement responsibility is to contain the shooter and stop the incident. That falls squarely in Operations. However, establishing and managing a FRC and/or a FAC is also an Operations functions but should not fall under law enforcement responsibility. One key to reducing trauma is to help survivors reach safety and reunite with their family or loved ones. Getting students off the site and reunited with their families is a function best performed by school personnel, and conducted as soon as possible – not eight hours later.

Other functions in the ICS model include Logistics and Planning. These areas support the response, and in a school active shooter incident would include things like access to camera feeds, keys to doors, facility access, provision of staging areas, etc. All these come from school personnel, further establishing why school administrators must be included within a unified command mindset.

Lastly, in an active shooter incident we must consider the delivery of first aid (also an Operations function). We often look to fire department personnel as the rescue team, and rightly so. However, until the shooter has been stopped, and rescue personnel can enter safely, the delivery of first aid on scene is a lifesaving necessity. School personnel should have trauma kits in classrooms, with training. Even if not possible to save lives, teachers would endure much more trauma knowing there was nothing they could do to help a student because no training or materials (trauma kit) were provided and they had to sit helplessly watching students bleed out vs being able to take some action and being equipped to do so.

SAMPLE DISTRICT INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM (ICS)



Conclusion

The intent here is not to disparage law enforcement, the intent is to expand our thinking about what an active shooter incident response is, and how, if we put all hands on deck in a unified command system we might be able to reduce the trauma experienced by the survivors. A school is not a shopping mall, bar, or outdoor concert. School personnel have a responsibility for the students under their care. That doesn't end because of an emergency. In her survey, Bree Alexander found that only 16.9% of respondents indicated their school has trauma or crisis plans that address issues related to school shootings. It's time to expand our thinking.