

Article

Managing Active Shooter Events in Schools: An Introduction to Emergency Management

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Abstract: Active shooter events involving an armed perpetrator(s) on campus are one of the main risks facing K-12 schools. Defined as planning for and responding to emergency situations, emergency or crisis management allows for an ‘acceptable’ level of risk to be achieved. This paper will go through the four principles of emergency management, detailing what each stage involves and how it can reduce risk. The first of these is mitigation, which prevents crises occurring in the first place. Effective risk and threat assessment are pertinent to this stage. Secondly, there is preparedness, which enhances the capacity of an organization to respond to various incidents. This involves drafting emergency management plans and practicing these to ensure readiness to respond. The next principle is responding to a crisis, denoting the actions taken during and immediately after a crisis, should one transpire. The final facet of emergency management planning is recovery, referring to the short-to-long-term phase of restoring a community following an incident. This paper will share insights obtained from a recent event, *The Briefings*, held by the *I Love U Guys* foundation, one of the leading school safety organizations in the United States. Specifically, the paper will focus on a possible training approach to active shooter events and other emergencies, the organization’s emergency management framework called the ‘Standard Response Protocol’. Additionally, this paper will incorporate relevant scholarly readings in order to provide an introduction to the topic of emergency management.

Keywords: emergency management; active shooter; crisis communication; risk



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1. Introduction

There are numerous competing definitions of what defines a mass shooting: for instance, whether this includes four or more people killed (see, for example, [Lankford 2016](#)) or a minimum number of people injured (see, for example, [Silva and Capellan 2018](#)). Interested readers are directed towards [Kerr \(2021\)](#) for a more extensive discussion of the varying definitions. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on active shooter incidents, using the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(2023, p. 1\)](#) definition: “One or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area”. In this sense, the numbers of people killed or injured are not the defining factors; rather, what is important is the *intention* to cause harm.

The differences between how active shooter events and mass shootings are defined affects the number of incidents recorded. As an example, the School Shooting Safety Compendium (SSSC) defines school shootings as incidents in which “a gun is brandished, is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims, time of day, or day of week”. The broadness of this definition means greater numbers are recorded. In the most recent data from 2021 to 2022, there were 327 documented school shootings at private and public elementary and secondary schools. Of these, 188 involved casualties (57 of which included deaths), whilst the remaining 139 did not cause any casualties. In contrast, the number of active shooter incidents at elementary and secondary schools recorded by the FBI across the twenty-one year time period of 2000–2021 was

46. These active shooter incidents resulted in 276 casualties: 108 deaths and 168 injured (National Center for Education Statistics 2023).

Although the numbers of active shooter incidents in schools are comparatively low in the context of other types of gun violence, this should not underestimate the dangerousness of these events. As Doss and Shepherd (2015, p. 41) explain, this type of incident is one of the most challenging to predict and, thus, prevent from occurring. Moreover, since this type of shooting is active, law enforcement and affected citizens have the potential to affect the outcome (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). This underscores the importance of preparing for such an event occurring to ensure that the response is as effective as possible to prevent casualties and reduce property damage.

Crisis or emergency management is critical to ensuring the response to a shooting in progress is as effective as possible. This is defined as planning for and responding to emergency situations like active shooter incidents (Lindsay 2012, p. 1). Preparing for any kind of emergency should follow the directives prescribed by the 'Presidential Policy Directive': prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. These principles span across the three timelines of pre-incident, during incident, and post-incident (REMS TA Center 2023). The planning process must be as comprehensive as possible, going further than a simple emergency action plan (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 41–42).

This paper will go through each of the four Presidential Policy Directive principles, detailing what is involved in each stage. Firstly, the activities involved in the mitigation or prevention of the crisis will be discussed. Then, the paper will move onto preparedness, which involves planning for crises. Third, the response stage will be detailed, looking at how this can minimize the damage caused when events do transpire. Lastly, the paper will cover recovery in terms of repairing the short- and long-term damage caused by the incident. An overview of relevant literature, training in an emergency management framework, and empirical research from a School Safety Symposium will buttress the arguments being advanced.

Aim

The purpose of this paper is to document the process of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from active shooter events in schools. Remote attendance at a School Safety Symposium called 'The Briefings' and training event, both run by the *I Love U Guys* foundation, were undertaken for this paper. The *I Love U Guys* foundation was set up after a hostage situation taking place at a school in Colorado in 2006. The founders of the foundation lost their daughter, Emily, in the school hostage attack and the name *I Love U Guys* is derived from text messages she sent to her parents during this situation. The mission of *I Love U Guys* (n.d.a) is to "restore and protect the joy of youth through educational programs and positive actions in collaboration with families, schools, communities, organizations and government entities". The foundation's interests lie in safety, preparedness, and reunification in schools; although they are not limited to this. During the pandemic, for example, *I Love U Guys* devised a policy framework to allow food, medication, and learning materials to be distributed during school closures.

The Briefings are held by *I Love U Guys* twice a year and presentations are given by people with direct experience of crisis situations, such as law enforcement, emergency managers, survivors, and those with other relevant experience, e.g., threat assessment. The training session was for the organization's emergency management framework called the 'Standard Response Protocol', including specific actions to take depending on the situation faced. The foundation trains schools and businesses and also offers training at the municipal level. In addition to attending these events, relevant literature was sourced and critically assessed. The overall aim of the paper is to provide an introduction to emergency management in active shooter scenarios, by going through the principles of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Additionally, it will use what was learned from attendance at *The Briefings* and training event to offer an in-depth overview of a possible training approach.

2. Introduction Emergency Management

2.1. Defining Emergency Management

Emergency management may be defined as the activities related to avoiding and responding to hazards (Lindsay 2012, p. 1). These are pivotal to achieving an ‘acceptable’ level of risk, considering risk can never be completely eliminated (Sokolow et al. 2008, p. 347). In the United States, emergency management is managed according to the National Incident Management System, a preparedness and response management model based on the Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS is a response method used across the United States in emergency situations. The purpose of it is to define a shared vocabulary and determine the role of people responding to a crisis (Lindsay 2012, p. 2).

The four principles underpinning emergency management are as follows:

- Mitigation or prevention—activities to prevent crises occurring in the first place;
- Preparedness—getting ready to deal with crises, should they transpire, with a particular emphasis on minimizing loss and lessening the impact of such an event;
- Response—responding quickly in order to minimize the damage caused when crises occur;
- Recovery—repairing long-term damage caused.

Importantly, these phases are not mutually exclusive nor should equal weighting be given to each; rather, there may be some element of overlap between each. Recovering from a crisis, for example, is likely to inform future planning efforts (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 143–44; Lindsay 2012, p. 2).

An active shooter event is a different kind of threat than a natural disaster or other emergency. Notably, it is one of the most dangerous an organization can face, because the intention of the perpetrator(s) is to kill people (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 75). In 2022, fifty shootings fell into the definition of an active shooter incident, four of these took place in educational settings. The severity of these incidents is evident in the death and injury toll, with the four shootings resulting in twenty-three people killed and twenty-nine wounded. The majority of these casualties came from the Robb Elementary School, Texas shooting which resulted in twenty-one deaths and seventeen wounded (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023, pp. 1, 9, 13).

School environments have much in common with hospitals, which vary in location, size, and resources (see Khirekar et al. 2023). Additionally, the affected populations in schools and hospitals are more vulnerable. Given the prevalence of shootings in schools by students, there is also the unsettling possibility of the active shooter incident being perpetrated by an internal attacker. This creates further complications since they would know the layout of the building, the procedures undertaken in an emergency, and so forth (see Doss and Shepherd 2015, p. 53). Further to this, active shooter incidents have the potential to become other kinds of dangerous situations (see, for example, U.S. Department of Education 2007). This underscores the importance of trying to avert these incidents, preparing for them, and considering the recovery implications if they do transpire.

2.2. Mitigation

The first principle is mitigation or prevention of crises, by avoiding, deterring, or stopping them occurring in the first place (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 3). Arguably, this is one of the most fundamental elements of emergency management, with it being more effective to detect rather than prevent a crisis occurring (Schneier 2006, p. 143). This would start by identifying potential threats and hazards. A technique that could be used is to put together a table looking at the probability or frequency of it happening; the magnitude if it did occur; the likely duration of the incident; the time required to warn the affected population, including visitors to the organization; and the follow-on and cascading effects. Conducting a range of assessments, including culture, capacity, climate, site, and hazards, will help with determining the overall risk level, as well as identifying the vulnerabilities of an organization that might make it more susceptible to the threat (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 17–19).

In the case of a threat like an active shooter incident, threat assessment should also be utilized as a prevention method. This attempts to identify, assess, and manage the threat in order to prevent a situation escalating (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 81). Since it involves both assessing threats and ensuring they do not re-emerge, a more appropriate term for it may be 'threat assessment and management.'

At *The Briefings*, a threat assessment expert detailed the process of threat assessment and management:

- Obtaining intel, defined as solidified information that decisions are based on, as opposed to anecdotal evidence/hearsay.
- Information should be gathered from multiple sources to improve the quality of evidence.
- Ideally, this information should be assessed using an appropriate threat assessment tool or framework to reach a decision about the threat. The decision should never be based on a single data point.
- The threat should be monitored and managed to prevent escalation.

In the initial stages of gathering intel, information should be gathered, as deemed appropriate, about behaviors, concerns, threats, family issues, and relationship problems; as well as information that has not yet been sustained. Potential victims may also be identified. In the National Threat Assessment Center's (2018) guidance, there are also the following issues: inappropriate interests, suicidal ideation and depression, motives, and communications that are threatening and/or violent; the capacity to carry out an attack; and any specific plans that have been made. Conversely, any protective factors that may negate the potential for an attack should also be considered. Pertinent to this stage is that those involved in the threat assessment understand the parameters of the *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA). The purpose of this act is to protect the privacy of the student education record, with the right applying to parents until the student turns eighteen years and then it is transferred over to them. Personally identifiable information (PII) may be disclosed from education records without consent in cases where there is a significant threat. Failure to fully understand this law and its parameters could cause unnecessary delays to the threat assessment process (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 53, 56, 59). It is also of key importance that the threat assessment process does not discriminate, directly or indirectly. This means no part of it should be based on assumptions or stereotypes relating to factors like disabilities, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or religion (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 61, 78).

Ideally, once all the information is in place, a threat assessment instrument or framework should be utilized to make sense of all the information (Spearman 2019, p. 14). A school threat assessment model, *Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines* (CSTAG), was developed by Professor Dewey Cornell and colleagues, which is freely available on the training services website (see School Threat Assessment (schoolta.com, accessed on 27 June 2024)). This model makes use of a decision tree spanning five main steps to follow to resolve and respond to student threats (see Cornell 2020).

Once that stage is complete and decisions have been reached about the threat and level of risk posed, interventions should be implemented to reduce the risk level (Cornell 2013, p. 380). It follows that "the higher the level of concern, the more directive and intensive supports must be" (Spearman 2019, p. 14). Interventions should be followed up and evaluated to ensure effectiveness (Cornell 2020). Another important consideration is suicide risk of the individual, with the threat assessment team taking steps to deal with any suicidal ideation detected (Cacialli 2019, p. 39). In addition to dealing with the psychological and physical safety needs of the individual(s) being assessed, intervention plans should also consider those of the wider school community. Although it can be more challenging to do so, it is critical that management of an individual continues even if they are expelled from school. (Louvar Reeves and Brock 2017, p. 12). The final stage of follow-up and support is crucial to effective threat management to ensure the situation does not escalate later on.

If the process of threat assessment and management is carried out correctly, it is one of the most effective ways to try to prevent an incident from occurring (Louvar Reeves and Brock 2017, p. 12). Capellan and Lewandowski (2018) analyzed 278 mass shootings in the United States and found that threat assessment had the potential to be an effective tool in preventing such incidents. They did note, however, that there are some barriers to this process, including the under-reporting of threats in the first place.

In order to overcome this barrier and strengthen reporting, there are a number of strategies that could be adopted—perhaps most obviously, creating a positive climate in which reporting is encouraged, valued, and respected. Being transparent about actions taken in response to concerns and sharing information about the impact of the reporting program should help with this. Reporting also needs to be a straightforward, accessible process with multiple reporting methods, including directly to a trusted adult and tips via phone lines, emails, texts, apps, or an online form. There is some debate about whether reporting threats should be confidential, as this creates the potential for false and prank tips; however, reporting should be safe for those doing it. An alternative could be to offer individuals the option to report threats anonymously (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and U.S. Secret Service 2023, pp. 4, 12, 16).

2.3. Preparedness

The second principle of emergency management is ‘preparedness’, which assumes crises will transpire and that organizations should prepare accordingly. This should enhance the capacity of an organization to respond to a variety of incidents, including active shooter events (Lindsay 2012; McEntire 2020). The National Incident Management System (NIMS) should be used. One component of this is the Incident Command System, providing a standardized approach for managing incidents of varying sizes, complexities, and locations (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 3). A planning team should be assembled including representatives from all relevant factions: mental health and public health professionals; the core population that would be affected; first responders including law enforcement, medical, and fire; emergency management professionals; and other relevant individuals such as people with disabilities (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 42–43).

A good starting point for this is devising an emergency action plan, which should identify potential crises and specific actions to take in each scenario to minimize the loss of life and damage to property (Doss and Shepherd 2015, p. 42). The plan should consider a variety of scenarios from extreme weather and fires through to active shooter incidents (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010, p. 1). Also considered must be all possible settings, including satellite and off-site ones, and times for incidents occurring. An emergency occurring in the middle of the day will have very different requirements to one that happens late at night. The plan must comply with legislation, particularly the *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act*, *Americans with Disabilities Act* and *Civil Rights Act*, etc. To this end, individuals with disabilities must not be separated from assistive animals or devices and language barriers should be addressed. Considering this, the document should be continually reviewed and updated to account for new legislation; in addition to capturing any new or changing threats (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 5, 24, 63; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014, p. 10). The plan should also detail how the institution would recover from crisis scenarios (Cavaliere 2019). In relation to emergency preparedness in hospitals, Khirekar et al. (2023) advise looking at the impacts on stakeholders, including people, society, and the environment. The same principles can be applied to the school environment, which is an integral part of any community and likely to have wider, cross-cutting impacts.

In terms of an active shooter incident in an educational institution, it is pertinent that the action plan details when to notify the affected population about the threat and methods for doing so. Also to be considered are ways to let the affected population know when it is safe to return to normal. Evacuation, shelter, and lockdown procedures should be outlined, with consideration of potential difficulties such as routes being blocked. Of key importance

is consideration of how to accommodate individuals who may face difficulties evacuating (e.g., disabilities, non-English speakers, and pregnancy). The definition of disabilities in this context should include physical conditions that could inhibit mobility; sensory ones that might impede responding to instructions such as autism; and cognitive impairments that could affect how one understands a situation or instruction. All of this should be reflected in the planning process, whereby the core team has representation from those with access needs and/or disabilities and minority groups. It is also pivotal to include building schematics with the plan to give an outline of window and door locations and access controls (NASP et al. 2021, p. 17; U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 57–58; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014, pp. 4–5, 10–11, 13). The plan should clearly identify the personnel who will respond to the active shooter event and their roles and responsibilities and built-in redundancy to cope with potential staff absences (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 42–43).

In addition to response, an educational institution should include ‘prevention’ in the form of proactive steps to identify individuals who may pose a threat and how to negate the situation to avoid a shooting occurring (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014, p. 11). An action plan should also detail ‘recovery’, specifying how the organization would recover from something like an active shooter incident. It is important to consider the wider community beyond the affected population (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 43–44). Recovery can also detail lessons learned from previous incidents to inform planning (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 1). This highlights that the four principles of emergency management are not necessarily sequential (Lindsay 2012, p. 2).

Due to the amount of critical and, indeed, sensitive information in a plan, institutions should be circumspect about who is able to access it. Part of the consideration when drafting the plan should be ascertaining who is able to access it and how the document will be secured. A record should be kept of those organizations and individuals within them who are authorized to receive the plan (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 28).

Once the plan is in place, it is critical to ensure it is clearly understood (Greenberg 2007, p. S58). Everyone who may be involved in responding should be aware of their roles and responsibilities at all stages of a crisis (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 28). If it is something like an emergency management plan for an organization to prepare for extreme weather situations or an active shooter, then this needs to be exercised beforehand. Exercises allow for emergency management plans to be tested and reinforced; this should also highlight any weaknesses to be addressed. Conducting ‘after-action’ reports could, for example, allow for clarifying procedures for creating a family reunification plan (U.S. Department of Education 2008, pp. 1, 5). The planning team should determine how often exercises should be conducted. Although higher education institutions that are subject to the Clery Act are mandated to publicize their ‘emergency response and evacuation procedures’ as well as test them on an annual basis (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 30, 50).

The most straightforward exercises are orientations and storyboards. Table-top activities and walk-throughs are a bit more nuanced. Then, more intense and complicated ways to practice are drills (pre-announced and unannounced), full scale drills, simulations, and advanced simulations. These types of exercises should involve first responders who would respond to a situation like this, including fire, medical, and law enforcement. There has been some debate around the most intense kind of drills. Although they have the potential to empower, if they are not conducted correctly they could also cause harm. For instance, given their highly sensorial nature, something like an advanced simulation drill for an active shooter event is not recommended for younger children (preschool and elementary level) (NASP et al. 2021, pp. 2, 6, 8). Schildkraut and Nickerson (2022a) highlighted that lockdown drills are part of a larger school safety consideration and present arguments both for and against them.

Empirical research in this area has given mixed results. Jonson et al. (2020) assessed the psychological implications of ALICE Training with a sample of students from fourth

to twelfth grade. ALICE denotes 'Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate' (see <https://www.alicetraining.com/>, accessed on 27 June 2024)). This course is taught online to trainers and via a discussion-based format to students. ALICE emphasizes an options-based approach dictated by the situation and, thus, is subject to change (Martaindale and Blair 2019, p. 352). The results of the study by Jonson et al. (2020) showed that students are generally not any more fearful of ALICE than other emergency preparedness practices. Those students who were more fearful of other emergency preparedness practices experienced more negative and less positive psychological outcomes when learning about ALICE. In 2020, a study by Huskey and Connell (2020) surveyed university students to discover whether active shooter drills experienced in high school had a negative effect. Findings indicated that those who experienced active shooter drills in high school had a significant increase in student fear, inflated perceptions of risk, and decreased perceptions of school safety. In another study, Schildkraut and Nickerson (2022b) collected survey data over three timepoints with high school students, including before and after a series of 'Standard Response Protocol' (SRP) drills. The findings indicated that students were less fearful after drills; however, their avoidance behaviors increased. In contrast, an earlier study by Schildkraut (2019) found that students' survey results showed they felt less safe after a SRP drill.

In order to ensure that the type of drill used is safe and appropriate to the children's development level, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP et al. 2021, p. 1011) recommend that the following steps are be undertaken:

- A school safety team with at least one MH professional should be assembled.
- Implement a cost-benefit analysis of conducting a drill and consider all available types of drills.
- An assessment should be conducted of the school community and drills should be tailored to the environment.
- The logistics of the drill should be considered.
- A plan to communicate with the school community should be developed.
- Follow-up should be considered, including ways to evaluate the process.

Due to their potential to cause trauma, especially in a school context, these activities should be handled carefully. School-employed mental health professionals should be involved in all stages of the drill. Beforehand, staff members should consider trauma reactions and take into consideration any prior traumatic experiences of students. During the drill, participants should be carefully monitored and removed if they seem traumatized. Mental health support should then be made available to all who need it after the drill (NASP et al. 2021, p. 3).

2.4. Responding to a Crisis

The next principle of emergency management focuses on what happens when a crisis is unable to be prevented. Response denotes the actions taken during and immediately after a crisis, when one does transpire. If this is something like a terrorist event or a natural disaster, first responders—law enforcement, fire, paramedics, emergency medical staff, and public health representatives—should effectively coordinate. As highlighted in the previous section on preparedness, they should have been involved in training so they are well-versed and thoroughly prepared to enact their part of the emergency management plan. The affected population also needs to be trained to be able to respond, as the common reaction to a threat tends to be denial of what is transpiring (U.S. Department of Education 2013, p. 82).

For something like active shooter incidents, these tend to be over very quickly so rapid response is paramount to reduce death and injury. In 2022, the four active shooter incidents that took place in educational institutions resulted in 23 deaths and 29 people being wounded. This type of incident is particularly dangerous for first responders. In the four case studies noted, three law enforcement officers were injured during the attacks (Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice and the Advanced Law Enforcement

Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University 2023, pp. 10, 13). Previous active shooter incidents have resulted in criticism of law enforcement: for example, the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School and the more recent attack at Robb Elementary School. In the Columbine shooting, the law enforcement response was delayed and officers went through the lengthy process of ‘securing the perimeter’ to stop perpetrators escaping, which led to a delay in medical treatment and a teacher bleeding to death ([Columbine Review Commission 2001](#)). The law enforcement response at Robb Elementary School did not consistently treat the incident as an active shooter situation, failing to use the sufficient equipment and resources to eliminate the threat. As it stands, there was a gap of seventy-seven minutes between officers arriving on the scene and the shooter being confronted and killed ([U.S. Department of Justice 2024](#)).

Active shooter events commonly result in the death of the shooter(s) at the scene, either via suicide or ‘suicide by cop.’ In the four educational shootings that took place in 2022, one shooter committed suicide at the scene after law enforcement arrived, two shooters were killed by law enforcement at the scene, and one perpetrator was apprehended by law enforcement at another location ([Federal Bureau of Investigation 2023](#), p. 13). That is not to say that active shooter incidents must end violently. At *The Briefings* (2022), techniques were outlined for helping deescalate situations. For example, ‘tactical empathy’ ([Voss and Raz 2016](#)) allows for the perspective of another to be recognized. This can be vocalized by identifying yourself, mannering non-verbal cues, and paraphrasing what the attacker says. The purpose is to show that the perspective of the attacker has been recognized; something which could deescalate the situation.

In some cases, the event may even be over before law enforcement arrives. [Blair and Schwieit \(2014\)](#) found that active shooter events are generally over in less than five minutes and, thus, about half of active shooter incidents end before law enforcement even arrive on the scene. This means the affected population may need to be prepared to deal with the shooter(s). One of the techniques promoted to deal with this is ‘run, hide, fight’ where these options exist on a continuum, with fighting being the last resort ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014](#), p. 18). Training materials on this technique and other active shooter materials are available on the FBI’s website ([fbi.gov/survive](#), accessed on 27 June 2024). Another technique is ‘avoid, deny, defend’ taught as part of the ALERRT Center’s Civilian Response training, centered on the idea that civilians have options to improve survivability. The principles of this are to avoid the shooter where possible, deny access to their location (e.g., locking doors), and, if neither of those work, there is the option to defend ([Martaindale and Blair 2019](#), pp. 351–52).

Although there are a number of different techniques, the one that will be discussed in this paper is the ‘Standard Response Protocol’, (SRP-2021). This technique can be used across multiple crises other than active shooter events. The SRP-2021 was developed by the *I Love U Guys* foundation for the purpose of standardizing the language and actions used by stakeholders in an emergency. The latest version of the *Standard Response Protocol* published in 2023 includes additional guidance and details for conducting drills, messaging parents and guardians, and sequencing actions and environmental factors that could impact decisions. When using the framework, people should be cognizant of the fact that it is a guide and that first responders may have local policies. The organization also offers the *Standard Reunification Method*, a framework that can be used to reunify parents and guardians with children in crisis situations (*I Love U Guys n.d.a*).

The specific actions are as follows: Hold, staying in the same place; Secure, getting inside the building and lock doors; Lockdown, usually involving locking doors, turning off lights, and getting out of sight; Evacuate, telling people where the safety gathering point is; and Shelter, stating the type of hazard and the instruction (e.g., tornado, use storm shelter). The relevance of actions depends on the situation. For example, Secure may be used in cases where there is a threat outside the building like dangerous dogs; whilst Hold could potentially be used to control the flow of people in the hallways, e.g., if there was a fight in the hallway. For an active shooter event, the main protocol in the *Standard Response Protocol*

is Lockdown, with locked classroom doors acting as a time barrier. The previous practice used by some schools of sliding red and green cards under doors to alert first responders to the situation in the room is not recommended, as this can alert potential threats to where a group of people are. Importantly, 'Lockdown' differs from 'Hold'—in 'Hold', the classroom doors can be opened to anyone who needs it. In an active shooter situation, the actions of Hold, Shelter, and Secure would generally not be used if the threat was in the building.

Drilling using the *Standard Response Protocol* should help build awareness of the specific actions to take during a crisis. One of the recommendations given during the *Standard Response Protocol* training session is that for every action attendance should be taken and the time should be noted. The purpose of this is to make it part of the routine, because that is what people will revert to under situations of extreme stress. This is particularly important during a 'lockdown' situation to check if any students are missing and also to see if any extra/unexpected people are present in the room.

Even if trained in a particular method like the SRP, however, institutions must always be reactive to the situation and take the physical infrastructure and security of the building into account. For example, in the [U.S. Department of Justice \(2024\)](#) report scrutinizing the response to the Robb Elementary School shooting, an observation was made that lockdown procedures were predicated on the assumption that the doors and walls were impenetrable, as well as the existence of other physical security features that did not exist at that school. As it transpired, a teacher was shot through several walls during the attack. The recommendation from the report was, therefore, that in a dynamic, evolving situation, reconsideration should be given to the pre-eminence of lockdown procedures. The risk of remaining in lockdown should be balanced against the risk of trying to escape the area ([U.S. Department of Justice 2024](#), p. 53).

Another facet of response is crisis communication during and after an incident. Becoming aware of an ongoing threat should provoke the crisis communication protocol ([U.S. Department of Education 2013](#), p. 51), which should be three-fold in nature. Firstly, there is the manner in which you let people know what is going on. This includes the directly affected population and external people also affected by it, e.g., parents whose children are at school when there is a shooting. Second of all is determining what is said to ensure the information is clear and correctly conveys the level of urgency. The final component is specifying who is responsible for letting people know what is going on and identifying back-ups in case that person is unavailable on the day of the attack ([Cassidy 2021](#)). The type of notification methods should also be considered: internal ones (e.g., loudspeakers) to notify the affected population and external methods (e.g., social media) for those who are not within the school but are still impacted, such as parents whose children are at school ([Goodrum and Woodward 2019](#), p. 63). The emergency management plan should cover all three of these elements, providing contact information for key personnel. Furthermore, the plan should be regularly reviewed to ensure contact information is still valid ([Cassidy 2021](#)).

2.5. Recovery

The final component of emergency management is 'recovery,' referred to as the short-to long-term phase of restoring a community following an emergency ([Edwards 2009](#), p. 20). In an active shooter situation, because of the potential for loss of life, injury, and damage to property and services, the recovery process can be quite complex. Recovery does not occur at a specific time; rather, it occurs over stages, as required. The recovery aspect should be considered during emergency management preparation and, thereafter, detailed into plans ([Cavaliere 2019](#)).

Firstly, there is the restoration of physical facilities and services that may have been damaged in the incident. Training offered by the *Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)* (2003, pp. 2–4) states that the intention in the short-term is to return the community to minimum operation standards. Public relations will feature heavily during this period in order to frame public perceptions of the event and its aftermath. This should "prevent or

lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis”, offering a degree of protection to the organization and its stakeholders from damage (Coombs 1999, p. 4). There needs to be some type of contingency plan in place to still operate, considering issues such as where employees will work, retrieval of documents, and so forth (Cassidy 2021). Restoring facilities and services in the longer term will likely take a lengthy period of time, ranging from months or even years. The intention at this stage is to return facilities to their previous conditions, to the extent possible (FEMA 2003, pp. 2–4).

There is also the debate of whether to restore building facilities or demolish and rebuild them, especially after something like a high-profile active shooter event. After the Sandy Hook Elementary School attack in 2012, for example, the school was demolished and rebuilt. There have been debates about whether to do the same to the Columbine High School building, which, apart from some remodeling, has remained the same and has become somewhat of a macabre attraction for visitors. Some, including the former principal of the school at the time of the attack, are supportive of a new building. One of the ideas proposed was rebuilding the school further away from the road and keeping a number of its current features, including the Hope Library dedicated to the victims, the school name, colors, and mascot. Others feel that this would not solve the problem—particularly if the name, Columbine, was still retained—or that the building represents a symbol of strength in the community (Glass 2019; Turkewitz and Healy 2019). Since debates like this are almost sure to arise after high-profile active shooter events, future plans for the building are something that should be considered as part of recovery plans.

Secondly, there is the more important need to try to heal the psychological damage caused to the affected population. This component of recovery is immensely more challenging. For an active shooter event in a school, the damage may extend past the affected population and first responders to the wider community, including other schools, as well as regional or even national resources (Doss and Shepherd 2015, pp. 43–44; Goodrum and Woodward 2019, p. 66; Lindsay 2012, p. 3). Mental health needs in the immediate and long-term aftermath should be considered and incorporated into emergency management planning (U.S. Department of Education 2007, pp. 7, 13–14).

In the immediate aftermath of the event, including when it may still be ongoing, it is critical to take steps to protect the mental health of those directly affected. FEMA training (2003, pp. 2–12) highlighted that, in order to minimize negative effects later on, stress must be handled appropriately in the early stages of a crisis. An anecdote shared at *The Briefings* (2022) event was about the parents at Columbine High School who had not been reunified with their children and did not know what had happened to them. Even over twenty years later, the parents still remember the mental health professional who approached them at the scene asking ‘How you doing?’ It later transpired that those parents had lost their children in the shooting, hence why this was deemed to be particularly insensitive. Importantly, open remarks are very important and it should have been clear that the parents were not doing well since their children were missing or deceased. In cases where immediate reunification is not possible, it is pertinent to provide family members with timely, accurate, and relevant information in a compassionate manner. The emergency management plan should detail how it will support families and children who do not want to engage with the media (U.S. Department of Education 2013, pp. 40, 84).

Also needing to be considered as part of intermediate and long-term mental health needs of the affected population are triggers that could reintroduce trauma. For example, planning of memorials and tributes for victims needs to be handled very carefully to ensure this is not triggering. Counselors could perhaps attend such events to ensure they are there to provide support if needed (U.S. Department of Education 2007, p. 15). Another potential trigger could be when further active shooter events occur. Ways to deal with this should be built into the longer term recovery process (Cowan et al. 2020, pp. 173–74). Triggers could also be events that are completely unrelated but also have the potential to cause emotional upset. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic was a traumatic situation that put a strain on people’s mental health.

Another important part of recovery is analyzing the response ([Doss and Shepherd 2015](#), p. 57). Strategies should be considered that would lessen the effects of a similar event, should one occur again in future ([FEMA 2003](#), pp. 2–5). The National Incident Management System (NIMS) model prescribes that lessons learned should be passed on in order to improve response efforts and, by extension, reduce mortality and morbidity levels ([Salzman and Fuentes 2020](#)). An example of this is the Aftermath Project, which uses case studies, interviews, actions, and outcomes to assess the aftermath of school violence incidents. This kind of review should indicate what worked well and where mistakes were made ([I Love U Guys n.d.b](#)).

An example of this is the attack at Columbine High School (1999). As highlighted at *The Briefings* (2022) event, a number of recommendations were made that are still used today:

- Every school should have an emergency crisis plan;
- SROs should be trained as first responders;
- Schools should have an emergency kit;
- Bullying prevention;
- Information sharing.

There were numerous criticisms, for instance, leveled at law enforcement for their response to Columbine, including not allowing medical response to enter the building where a teacher ultimately bled to death without treatment. The SWAT officers responding had to form an ‘ad hoc’ team of police from different agencies with no previous contact. After the mass shooting at Columbine High School, one of the recommendations made was that staff members in schools should be trained with community partners and first responders to ensure all are aware of their roles and responsibilities ([Columbine Review Commission 2001](#)). Specific changes were also made to law enforcement tactics. For example, the focus for law enforcement was no longer to set a perimeter; rather, it was to get to the scene of the attack and confront the shooter ([Martaindale and Blair 2019](#), pp. 345–46).

This is something that did not happen during the 2022 Robb Elementary School attack. Whilst there were plans and agreements in place for a coordinated response, these failed to operationalize on the day of the incident (see [U.S. Department of Justice 2024](#)). The critical incident review into this shooting has made a number of recommendations, particularly for law enforcement. One of those specific recommendations was that officers responding to an active shooter incident ‘must first and foremost drive toward the threat to eliminate it.’ Furthermore, in this school shooting, the evacuation effort was protracted, thus causing a significant delay to entering rooms. The aligning recommendation is that any evacuations that are conducted should be limited to those immediately in harm’s way and should not be at the expense of the priority to eliminate the threat ([U.S. Department of Justice 2024](#), p. 111).

A review should not just look at where improvements need to be made; it should also highlight what worked well. The review of the shooting at Northern Illinois University noted the strengths in the response to this attack, e.g., collaborative planning amongst the various response organizations was said to have assisted with the rapid treatment of victims. Moreover, the emergency communication conveyed was clear and descriptive, informing people what to do ([Northern Illinois University Police and Public Safety Department 2008](#)). By highlighting this, it indicates that this kind of action should be taken again in future to ensure response is once again rapid.

3. Conclusions

Emergency management is the coordination and integration of activities in order to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from hazards such as active shooter events. Without such an approach, it is likely an institution will be unprepared to deal with a crisis, thus increasing the likelihood of casualties, property damage, and reputational damage. This can be seen in the response to a number of high-profile active shooter events. This

paper utilized findings from expert presentations at *The Briefings* and *Standard Response Protocol* training, coupled with a review of the relevant literature, to explore the principles of emergency management. Each of these elements has a pivotal role in averting incidents and negating potential harm.

The first is prevention, which involves risk and threat assessment of potential perpetrators. This is pertinent because the process of identifying, assessing, and managing the threat can prevent an active shooting incident from transpiring in the first place (see [Louvar Reeves and Brock 2017](#); [Spearman 2019](#); [U.S. Department of Education 2013](#)). At *The Briefings*, an expert explained the process of conducting threat assessment and management. Notably, the management component is just as important as the initial assessment to ensure the threat is successfully managed and does not escalate later on.

Preparedness refers to the preparations undertaken to minimize the damage, should an event like an active shooter incident occur. In the United States, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) should be used. A planning team with representation from different first responders and other relevant personnel should be assembled and an emergency action plan for a variety of potential scenarios should be devised. Considerations during planning should be actions to deal with threats, how to notify people of threats, and also how to cope with unexpected barriers such as escape routes being blocked. Another important consideration is how to accommodate those with additional needs, as well as people whose first language is not English (see [Doss and Shepherd 2015](#); [NASP et al. 2021](#); [U.S. Department of Education 2013](#); [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014](#)). Once the planning process has taken place, it is crucial to practice the elements of the plan. This can be carried out via table-top exercises, drills, and simulations. Caution has to be exercised when using more realistic exercises like drills and simulations with children, as this has the potential to traumatize them ([NASP et al. 2021](#)).

Responding to an active shooter event effectively can minimize damage caused. It is, therefore, pivotal for first responders to be well-versed in the emergency management plan and to have practiced the related protocols. This is particularly important considering that active shooter incidents are one of the most dangerous first responders may face (Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice and the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University 2023). The 'Standard Response Protocol' (SRP-2021), devised by the *I Love U Guys* foundation, contains five actions that can be used for a variety of scenarios. Similar to the plan, the *Standard Response Protocol* should be practiced. Another consideration is how to communicate during and after an incident ([Cassidy 2021](#)).

'Recovery' is the final element of emergency management; although, short- and long-term restoration and healing should already have been considered as part of emergency management planning ([Cavaliere 2019](#)). This should detail how to return the community to minimum operating standards in the short term; as well as how to support mental health needs in the immediate aftermath and longer-term, including how to sensitively deal with mental health needs around potential trigger events like further shootings. Importantly, recovery planning should also analyze the response to an incident in order to elucidate any lessons to be learned and to inform future planning (see [Doss and Shepherd 2015](#); [Goodrum and Woodward 2019](#); [Lindsay 2012](#); [U.S. Department of Education 2007](#)).

Considering all four elements of emergency management planning helps to reduce risk, avert and negate harm, and assist in returning to 'normal' after a traumatic event like an active shooter incident. Of key importance to this process is learning from past incidents to make the necessary changes to future planning efforts. Similarly, noting what worked well is also useful to ensure this is maintained at its current high standard. The training undertaken and school safety event attended provided insights and recommendations that may be useful in considering how to approach emergency management planning; although, it should be noted that it is only one possible crisis approach. Future research in this area should focus on related issues, such as how to encourage people to report threats. Looking at case studies of active shooter situations in which emergency management planning was

effective, as well as incidents where it was poor and there was an impaired response, would also be a beneficial addition to this research area.

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