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Article

Armed assailants and education institutions: the problem posed by external events

Lucy Straker • December 12, 2022

Reports of students using firearms on fellow students or teachers are now so commonplace in the US that the news quickly moves on, often while the victims of such attacks are still processing what has happened.

In response to the growing frequency of this type of shooting, educational institutions in the US have taken steps to bolster their preparedness for an active shooter incident; with bulletproof glass, bag scanners, security guards and enhanced CCTV now a feature in almost every educational building across the country, and children as young as 7 taking part in active shooter drills to prepare them for an active shooter situation.

External events: an emerging risk

But what happens when there is an active shooter situation that happens outside of school hours or premises, such as off-campus sporting events or a graduation ceremony? These events present a very different risk profile to conventional educational situations – not least because a large number of participants will not be regular attendees of the school.

Since September of this year, there have been three such incidents which took place at sporting events organised by schools – at Armstrong High School (Virginia), Riverdale-Oakland High School (Tennessee) and Brandywine High School (Delaware) respectively – and, as with all sporting events, supporters of the opposing team were also in attendance, as well as family and friends of the home team, making the situation far more complex to manage.

Many of the security and screening measures that a school has in place for the day-to-day management of risks within the school environment

may be difficult or even impossible to replicate in situations such as these, which are essentially an exercise in event management. The audience at such events will often be dynamic, and the identification and management of any risk threats will be a different and heightened challenge for educational institutions who find themselves in this situation.

Much like sporting events, graduations are generally large-scale events that are held at a different location to a school or university – and they are supposed to be happy events for students to enjoy with their friends, family and supporters. There have been two high profile active shooter events at graduations so far this year – at U.S Steele Yard Stadium (Indiana) and Xavier University's Convocation Center (Louisiana) respectively.

What can educational institutions do?

Outside events such as sporting competitions and graduations are an important part of school and university life, but incidents like these could create a situation where educational institutions no longer feel able to host them. Instead of opting to step away altogether, there are a number of practical steps that educational institutions can take to minimize the risk to their pupils and their families:

- Only having high school football games taking place in daylight hours and limiting the numbers and categories of people who can attend is one such solution that a growing number are choosing to try out.
- Having additional school resource officers and police personnel in attendance at such events, to keep tabs on attendees and limit numbers, provides another layer of protection.
- Creating an incident team, who are trained in how to deal with crises and have clear lines of communication with the appropriate bodies and attend each event is another way of making these events safer.
- Partner with an insurance carrier that offers prevention services as standard to advise on best practice in order to protect events, as well as post-event support.

A specialist insurance product which provides risk management and preventative measures can prove invaluable to educational institutions. In fact, many now consider it a necessary investment to provide their students with a rich and fulfilling educational experience while keeping them as safe as possible.

When it comes to choosing your carrier, it makes sense to look to those who have experience in this area, have paid claims to organizations similar to yours, and who understand how to deal with an active shooter event in its immediate aftermath and beyond.

The importance of being prepared and swiftly moving to the aid of those affected by an armed assailant in an educational setting was demonstrated following an attack at Palm Beach Central High School in Florida.

The incident occurred in the campus parking lot adjacent to the school's football stadium while a game was in progress. Although those

directly involved with the shooting were not understood to be connected with the school, the impact on the school and local community was profound.

Since the School District of Palm Beach County had taken out a Deadly Weapons Protection policy from Beazley before this occurred, we helped arrange a face to face and telephone based counselling service to be accessed by the schools that may have had students impacted within hours of the attack. We also arranged social media monitoring that helped the District assess the community sentiments about what had happened.

With both practical and emotional support made available immediately, and a team of experts on hand to help navigate the difficult minutes and hours that follow, for many, the impact of not having such protection in place would be too great for them to withstand in terms of reputation, legal stance and – most importantly – student wellbeing.

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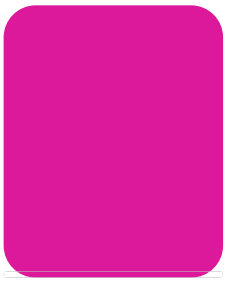

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