



# **RUN, HIDE, FIGHT:** How To Survive An Active Shooter Event





# Run, Hide, Fight: How To Survive An Active Shooter Event

By Michael Martin

**A**FTER THE MASS SHOOTING IN COLUMBINE, COLORADO, law enforcement agencies from the FBI down to local counties, cities, towns and villages got to work on redeveloping agency and interagency operating plans and tactics to address the mass shooter threat from a law enforcement perspective. If we can rewrite the way that law enforcement responds to the threat, we can also rewrite the way that potential victims respond to the threat.

The changes in operating procedures for law enforcement agencies evolved from the understanding that the mass shooter threat was a very different threat from an armed gunman taking hostages and sharing a list of demands with a negotiator, and that a different strategy was required to counter the new threat.

One lesson learned from Columbine was that waiting on a SWAT team to arrive before making entry would only ensure that more victims would be killed in the intervening minutes. So new tactics evolved which included having the first arriving officer or officers make entry the moment they arrived on the scene of the shooting, even if that meant making entry with just one

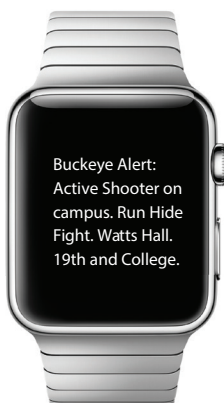
or two officers. The change in tactic seemed to be a good one — while the Columbine shooting lasted 47 minutes, subsequent mass shootings have averaged a duration of about nine minutes. So tactics for law enforcement evolved, but it wasn't until the federal government's Department of Homeland Security quietly released a program titled, Active Shooter: How to Respond, that anyone began to address how victim tactics should change. The DHS program, which is better known by its other name, Run, Hide, Fight, teaches potential victims of mass shootings that they aren't required to simply wait out mass shootings without a plan; instead, they must take an active part in their own self-preservation by either



running, hiding, or fighting back. While the program doesn't specifically call out this fact, it's important to understand that the Run, Hide, Fight methodology doesn't look at those three options linearly, or as a series of steps that you must progress through. In other words, if you are in public, at a school, at your house of worship, or at your place of business and a mass shooter enters the area, you're not required to first try to run, and then try to hide, before you elect to fight back; instead, if the situation calls for it, you can choose to immediately fight back, and fight back aggressively. In this section, we'll review the Run, Hide, Fight methodology in detail where once again, I'll supplement the information provided by the Department of Homeland Security with my own recommendations.

## DENIAL ISN'T A REQUIRED STEP

Even before we look at specific actions you'll need to take if you elect to run, hide or fight, let's first talk about what your immediate reaction must be to the sound of gunfire or other signs that a mass shooter has entered the area. As with many things in life that are out of the ordinary, our first response to a mass shooter threat may be denial, with thoughts of, "This can't be what I think it is." Even momentary denial can lead to the loss of valuable seconds which could have been used to escape or to prepare an active counterattack. Whether the first sign of an active shooter is gunfire, the alarm being sounded by another individual, the sound of a lockdown being called, or a text or tweet, you must skip the denial step and instead, immediately accept the fact that it is real. You should then try to determine the direction and the proximity of the threat and if the alert has not yet been sounded, you must alert others around you by shouting, "Gun, gun, leave the area!" At that point, you'll make a decision as to whether you will run, hide or fight.



»» At 9:56am on November 28, 2016, an alert was sent out to all Ohio State students and staff by text and social media, warning them of a possible active shooter on campus, and warning them to run, hide, fight. The problem was, no one knew what "run, hide, fight" meant, since no training had been provided to students or staff.

# RUN »»

If you have the ability and the opportunity, your first choice of action should be to run out of the kill zone as fast as humanly possible, and keep running until you've reached what you believe is a safe location. Regardless of whether you're in a wide open room or a narrow hallway, your number one goal should be to put as much distance between yourself and the shooter as possible. As you exit the area, you must remember that your top priority is for your own personal safety — that means leaving all personal belongings behind and even leaving others behind if they are too afraid, or unable or unwilling to leave. Head in a direction opposite the sound of gunfire and make a direct route for the closest exit.

Even if the shooter has entered your immediate area (such as a conference room or classroom), escaping may still be an option, but you must immediately kick your escape plan into action (in other words, you'll need to skip the denial stage) by running in the opposite direction, moving laterally or diagonally from the shooter which moves you off of his line of attack. Anyone who has taken a trip to the range and then tried to translate that to hunting wild (and moving) game can attest to the fact that accurately shooting at a stationary target can be difficult enough, but shooting at a target that is moving laterally or diagonally away from you, increases the difficulty exponentially. I actually make that last statement based on mathematical fact, not just as a figure of speech. Back in high school or college math, you might have heard of the "inverse-square law" which states that the intensity of an effect (such as illumination) changes in inverse proportion to the square of the distance from the source. While that description might sound a bit complicated, what it means is that if you double the distance between an object and a source of light, the intensity of the light on that object isn't one-half of the original intensity, it's one-fourth of the original intensity.

The exact same formula applies to how easy or how difficult it is to hit a target with a firearm. For example, if you are ten feet from a shooter, simply doubling the distance between you and the shooter makes you four times more difficult to hit. If you triple the distance, you will be nine times more difficult to hit. Increase the distance to 100 feet (which the average person can cover in about 10 seconds), and you've just become 100 times harder to hit (10 times the original distance squared, or  $10^2 = 100$ ). We know that mass shooters will not waste their time chasing after victims, especially if those victims are about to leave the immediate area, and especially if other potential victims chose not to run and remain in the area.

## HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN

As simple as running away sounds, having an escape plan first requires you to have a plan, which is as simple as always knowing where the exits are in any room that you enter, and knowing where the building exits are. As part of your institution's *Emergency Operations Plan* (or as part of your individual or family plan if no EOP exists), it's important to identify appropriate escape routes in the event of a mass shooting. Similar to knowing escape routes in the event of a fire, there should be at least two identified escape routes from each room. The selection of *which* escape route will be used will be based upon the location and disposition of the shooter. In some cases, exterior doors may be used, while in other cases, exterior windows must be opened or broken to enable a rapid escape. Once clear from the building, you should run as quickly as possible until you've reached law enforcement. Keep your hands in the air, and follow the direction of law enforcement personnel to the *letter*.

## Be a Good Witness

If your institution is like most, law enforcement will not have an internal video feed to determine the disposition of the attacker, so they must either operate in the blind, or they can depend upon eye witness accounts from those who were able to escape from the area. Even if you had just seconds to look at the attacker, try to remember these key items, which will be critical in helping law enforcement end the attack quickly:

- A general description of the attacker including what he or she is wearing, size, general race characteristics, hair color, approximate age, etc.
- A general description of the firearm or firearms that the shooter is carrying, for example, is it a handgun, or a long gun like a rifle or shotgun?
- Whether the shooter is carrying extra magazines, and if so, approximately how many.
- Whether the shooter is carrying a bag or backpack.
- Whether the shooter is wearing body armor, which might be indicated by a bulky vest or bulky clothing.
- The direction of travel of the shooter.
- Anything that the shooter said, such as whether he has a specific target or any specific demands.

**HIDE** >>> If the shooter has not yet seen you but there is no practical escape from the building, you may choose to hide in as safe a place as possible, if one is available and it meets the definition of good concealment and cover. Concealment is anything that hides you from the threat (a closed door, a wall, or anything you can duck behind) while cover (things like concrete pillars, a concrete wall, or the front of vehicles where the engine block is) also protects you from incoming bullets. Concealment may keep you safe, but if the shooter approaches your area, you may be very easy to detect, especially if you are breathing heavily or are with others who are making noise. Cover is a far superior choice since it can not only protect you from incoming bullets, it can also help to keep the noise of you and others down, so that you go undetected by the shooter.

If you have chosen to hide, here are key points to remember:

- As part of the Emergency Operations Plan your institution developed, you should be aware of which rooms have locks and which rooms do not. Even if you need to travel a greater distance to reach a room with a lock, this will be a far superior choice.
- If you have the choice of hiding in a room on the interior of the building or the exterior of the building, choose the room on the exterior. You may have an opportunity to break a window and escape from the building, or rescuers arriving on the scene may do it for you.
- Once you and others have entered the room, immediately lock the door and move out of the line of sight of any windows in or alongside the door. As part of your institution's EOP, the room may have a marked line on the floor indicating the areas inside and outside the line of sight.
- If the room you entered does not have a lock, quickly barricade the door with heavy furniture. Don't be shy about this — if there are tables, chairs and desks in the room, quickly move as much as possible to block the door.
- Turn off the lights and silence all electronic devices.
- Remain silent. Remember that on average, you will only have five to nine minutes to wait until the shooting has ended.




- If possible, use strategies to silently communicate with first responders. For example, in rooms with exterior windows, make signs to silently signal law enforcement and emergency responders to indicate the status of the room's occupants.
- Hide along the wall closest to the exit but out of the view from the hallway (allowing for an ambush of the shooter and for possible escape if the shooter enters the room).
- Find an improvised weapon, and have it at the ready in case the shooter forces his way into the room. Silently indicate to others in the room that they should do so as well.
- Remain in place until given an all clear by identifiable law enforcement.
- An additional ability to block the door, such as a Door Jammer™ or other commercial device.
- Any required tool to open or break exterior windows if they are an avenue of escape.
- Any required item to block or cover the viewport in the door (if one exists).
- An emergency first-aid kit.
- An ability to communicate with law enforcement. The most sophisticated way to do this would be electronically. A simpler method would be for each safe room to have three pre-printed posters which can be stuck to the exterior windows indicating whether the occupants of the room are "All Safe," "Under Attack," or "Need Medical Assistance."
- A weapon which can be used against the attacker if he makes entry. This can be as well thought out as an expandable baton, as simple as a baseball bat, or as specific as a taser or firearm in a lockbox.

As part of your institution's Emergency Operation Plan (or as part of your individual or family plan if no EOP exists), it's important to understand which rooms in your school, house of worship or place of business can effectively act as "safe rooms" in the event of an attack, and to identify those on building schematics placed in each room, no differently than how a fire escape plan is documented. Key criteria for a safe room includes: (1) a lockable, solid core door that does not require a key to lock; (2) no windows to the interior of the building (other than a viewport on the door); (3) an ability to move all occupants of the room out of the line of sight from the viewport; (4) objects within the room that can serve as barricades and improvised weapons.

Exterior rooms are superior to interior rooms but as long as the interior room meets all other criteria, it is highly likely that occupants can survive the eight to nine minutes it will take for the average mass shooting to end. As part of an effective EOP, each safe room should also be pre-staged with an emergency first-aid kit and an intercom or other means of communicating with responders to update them with the status of the room's occupants (all safe, under attack, or emergency medical care needed).

## Staging Your Safe Room

As part of your institutional EOP, not only should rooms be identified as "safe" or "not safe," you should also include in the plan the specific items that will be staged in your safe rooms. These items can include:

**FIGHT**  If it's too late to run, or if the shooter finds your hiding spot and escape is not possible, you have just a single choice remaining — you *must* commit to aggressive action to stop the shooter, using whatever means necessary. That may mean using improvised weapons that you find on the scene, or, it may mean using a firearm if you had the foresight to include one in your personal or institutional plan.

While the *Run, Hide, Fight* program doesn't specifically take a stance one way or another on whether a firearm in the hands of potential victims would change the outcome, it is significant that the Department of Homeland Security recommends fighting back at all. I'll add that the European version of this program is *Run, Hide, Report*. Leave it to the Europeans to avoid fighting back at all costs.

Had the *Run, Hide, Fight* methodology been taught to the students at Virginia Tech, it's likely that even if shooter Seung-Hui Cho hadn't been incapacitated by his potential victims, any aggressive action on the part of the students would have disrupted Cho's momentum and his confidence, forcing him to move from offensive mode, to defensive mode. Remember that mass shoot-

ers count on being entirely in control of the situation, and a coordinated response by the students to fight back would have threatened that control. Students who barricaded themselves in classrooms didn't necessarily need to incapacitate or kill Cho. All they needed to do was to buy themselves several minutes of time to allow law enforcement to make their entry (as did the students in classroom 205). Remember that the average length of time that mass shooting events last is only nine minutes, or in Cho's case, 11 minutes since he had chained and padlocked several doors. What could the students have done to hold out for 11 minutes? As soon as it was apparent that a shooter was in the building, the students could have immediately piled tables, chairs, bookshelves, or any other barrier objects in front of the door. Each student could have then picked up a chair, a book, a coffee mug, their shoes, or any of the hundreds of other objects that would have been in the classroom. If Cho was able to breach the barriers and enter their classroom, the students could have thrown those objects at his head and torso, screaming at the top of their lungs, committing to their actions. If Cho went down still in possession of his firearms, the students could then have beaten him into unconsciousness with chairs or their fists or their feet. If that sounds pretty brutal, the alternative wasn't just brutal, it was the death of 30 innocent people in Norris hall.

## IMPROVISED WEAPONS

We'll talk about how firearms may fit into your personal or institutional plan in a moment, but let's first talk about improvised weapons. As would have been the case in the classrooms in Norris Hall at Virginia Tech, we're typically surrounded by dozens of objects, large and small, which could be used as improvised weapons to disable or deflect an attacker. While any object thrown at an attacker's head will cause him to temporarily break off his attack as he turns to dodge the object, your first choice should be any hardened object that can be used as an impact weapon, such as a chair, the leg from a table, a lamppost or a laptop; or any object which can serve as an improvised edged weapon, such as a scissors or a box cutter. Other objects including shoes, coffee mugs, books, or even papers thrown at the attacker's head will cause at least an involuntary reaction to turn away from the improvised missiles, which can allow other defenders to reach the attacker and overwhelm him.

To improve the likelihood of success, I'll echo what the Department of Homeland Security has to say about fighting back, and that's that you must commit to your actions until the shooter is overwhelmed and either disabled, or dead. If you're unsure of how easy it will be to find an improvised weapon, the next time you're at



»» The Houston Police Department has produced an absolutely outstanding video explaining the Run, Hide, Fight methodology using a real-world scenario. This video should be played in every house of worship, business, and school in the nation, and should serve as the basis for discussion and training to implement the methodology. The video is available on YouTube in multiple languages.

your child's school, at your house of worship, at your place of business, or even out in public shopping, take a critical look around at the objects in whatever room you find yourself in. You can even make a game of it, which should drive some creative thinking on how you can take an everyday object, and turn it into a weapon.

## Counterattacking as a Team

While the chances of a single defender overwhelming an attacker with an improvised weapon might seem low, if multiple defenders counterattack as a team (attacking the shooter simultaneously from multiple directions), the likelihood of success will be dramatically increased. Logic might state that the best time for a counterattack is when the shooter is reloading (remember that the Virginia Tech shooter reloaded a total of 15 times), but the truth is, waiting for a reload may simply mean delaying the counterattack while more victims are shot. Since action always beats reaction, defenders rushing in from multiple directions will have on average, about 1.5 seconds before the shooter can react to their actions. During that 1.5 seconds, the defenders can close the gap by about 20 — 25 feet. Considering that no mass shooter has ever exceeded firing two rounds per second, the mathematics work in favor of the defenders, not the mass shooter.

I'll end this topic by adding that these types of improvised weapons are clearly weapons of last resort. If your opportunity to escape or to hide has disappeared, and your options are to either plead with the shooter to spare your life, or to fight back to your last breath, you must fight back with whatever means necessary. You must be willing to get as brutal and as bloody as is required to stop the shooter, even if that means clubbing him to death with the metal leg of an office table. Remember that in 23 of the 165 active shooting events tracked by the FBI, bystanders were successfully able to subdue the shooter and end the attack, with nothing more than their fists or with improvised weapons that they found on scene. These shooters can be beat. But if you'd like to dramatically improve your odds of success, you'll need to include an armed response in your personal or institutional plan.

## AN ARMED RESPONSE

For 12 million Americans, carrying a firearm on a daily basis under a state issued concealed carry permit is as everyday as carrying their wallet or purse. But for most school boards, most church committees, and most corporate lawyers, the thought of including firearms in an *Emergency Operations Plan* may be a difficult idea to swallow. If you fall into that camp, my suggestion is that you play this scenario through in your mind: 30 seconds from now, a mass shooter will walk into the front door of your school, house of worship or business, and he will shoot and kill the first three people he sees, just feet away from you. You and a dozen others have no chance to run or hide. In this scenario, you get to pick three extra people to join you. Those people can be friends who will call the police (of course, you know that the shooting will last about nine more minutes before the shooter kills himself or the police apprehend him); you can choose three psychologists or spiritual leaders who will plead with the shooter not to kill anyone else and to give himself up (but you know that only four percent of active shooters surrender); you can choose three friends who have taken karate classes; or, you can choose to have three friends join you who are legally armed. While you may consider this scenario overly dramatic, I use it to illustrate the fact that just because these killers are using firearms as an offensive tool, does not mean that you should be dissuaded from considering a firearm as a defensive tool. The truth of the matter is, nothing else in the world can level the playing field between a demented individual who will kill everyone and anyone in his path, with a senior citizen, or an expectant mother, or a disabled veteran. Nothing. If you ever do find yourself face to face with a mass shooter, having a gun in your possession won't guarantee that you'll survive, but not

having one increases the odds that you'll be dead, and that everyone standing behind you will be dead too.

## Does an Armed Response Belong in your EOP?

If the idea of creating an *armed educator*, or an *armed employee*, or an *armed volunteer* program made up of non-law enforcement officers sounds revolutionary, it isn't. Since Sandy Hook, hundreds of houses of worship and school districts, and thousands of businesses both public and private, have done exactly that. While these institutions can choose to require nothing more than a state issued concealed carry permit for participants in their programs (collectively, I'll refer to them as *armed staff* programs), many are requiring additional training and/or qualifications as part of their formal Emergency Operations Plans. Those additional requirements often include:

- In addition to requiring a state issued concealed carry permit, many institutions are also requiring participants in their program to attend weapons retention and advanced handgun training. This training is often modeled after the armed pilot program started after 9/11, but typically does not require more than two weeks of training. This training usually includes advanced weapons handling; weapons retention; legal topics such as the use of deadly force; and multiple shoot / no-shoot scenarios in a variety of settings using both live fire and Simunition firearms and ammunition.
- Many institutions also require participants to pass a physical agility test and/or a psychological test to enter their program, similar to the type of tests required during the application process for a police, EMS or firefighter position.
- Many institutions are also requiring that firearms be secured in what are referred to as *Level III retention holsters*. Level III holsters have three active retention methods which keep the firearm locked into the holster, until the retention methods are properly released, all in the correct order. When the firearm operator has also been trained in weapons retention, an unauthorized person has virtually no chance of gaining access to the firearm.





## How Many Improvised Weapons Can You Spot In This Image?

### >>> Roller Chair

The roller chair can be picked up and swung at or thrown at an attacker, or the bottom can be unscrewed and used as an impact weapon.

### >>> Computer Monitor or Laptop

The computer monitor (or the typical laptop found in most offices) can also be used as an impact weapon.

### >>> Desktop Speaker

The desktop speaker can be thrown, or swung at the end of its cord as an improvised mace.

### >>> Scissors

The scissors can be used as an improvised edged weapon. Since scissors will have more difficulty penetrating the chest or abdominal wall when compared to a knife, a counterattack should focus on stabbing the attacker in and around the face and neck.

### >>> Pens and Pencils

While not as effective as other improvised edged weapons, stabbing an attacker in and around the face and neck with a pen or pencil can allow other defenders to subdue him.

### >>> Table Legs

Perhaps the best improvised weapons in the room are the legs of the table, which can be quickly broken off if enough force is applied. If multiple defenders simultaneously attacked a shooter from multiple directions with these improvised striking weapons, the shooter could be quickly disabled or killed.

### >>> Computer Cords

While one or more defenders counterattacked a shooter with other improvised weapons, another defender could use a computer cord as a make-shift garrote to kill him, or at least cause him to lose consciousness.

### >>> Folding Chairs

Five folding chairs in this room equal five improvised weapons for defenders. If just one defender attacked a shooter with a folding chair, he or she would most likely be shot. But if five defenders attacked a shooter simultaneously from multiple directions, the shooter would most likely be stopped in place.

### >>> Distracting Weapons

In addition to the improvised disabling weapons in this room, the room is literally filled with other objects that can be thrown at an attacker's head to distract him or cause a momentary flinch, allowing other defenders to close on him. Papers, books and boxes on the shelves, the paperweight on the desk, even the potted plants on the upper right shelf could serve as ad-hoc missiles. Don't forget about shoes, coffee mugs, belts, and your fists, elbows and feet.





# **GAIN CONFIDENCE, PREPAREDNESS & PEACE OF MIND**

*WITH YOUR MEMBERSHIP TO THE  
U.S. CONCEALED CARRY ASSOCIATION*

---

[www.USCCA.com](http://www.USCCA.com)  
1-877-677-1919

