

Surviving a School Shooting

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Security Expert: Survival Options for Future School Violence

Imagine what students at Virginia Tech were thinking when they heard multiple gunshots ring out. Did they fear for their lives? Did they know what to do to survive? Imagine how you would react and what you would do if you were in their place. Could you quickly come up with a plan?

Some of the students barricaded themselves in a classroom only to discover that shots were fired through the door.

Bad idea? Good idea?

Security consultant John Nicoletti said he knew the answer. "Barricading yourself in a room is the second option you have when someone might be trying to kill you," he told ABCNEWS.com. "The first option is to get out and get away."

Nicoletti, who wrote two books on students surviving violence on campus -- "Violence Goes to School" and "Violence Goes to College" -- was on the scene at the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colo., 20 minutes after the violence began. When it was over, seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had killed 12 students and one teacher, and left 23 others wounded in the 1999 attack, before committing suicide. Nicoletti consulted with authorities and interviewed scores of students. He then chronicled his findings and those from every school shooting in modern history and discovered that students survived when they followed several different defensive options.

"There are five options, and we have listed them in the order of success," he said. "First and foremost, you should try to get away. Those who have tried this have had the best survival rate."

It's a seemingly simple solution but not always possible. It can also lead to injuries when students jump from windows as they did at Virginia Tech and Columbine.

"The second option is to lock the door and barricade it," Nicoletti said. "Obviously, this must be a door that opens in and not out or else you've only created an obstacle. After locking or barricading the door, move away from it to avoid gunfire should the shooter fire through the door, as he apparently did at Virginia Tech. Most gunmen won't waste their time trying to get through it -- they'll simply move on to another easier target."

At Columbine, which marks its eighth anniversary of the deadly shootout this Friday, several students survived by locking themselves in the band room. "Harris and Klebold tried to get in but when they failed, they went on to easier, more available targets," said Nicoletti.

"My firm [Nicoletti-Flater Associates] encourages schools to set up safe rooms that have locks," he said.

"If there is time to get into that room, it could mean the difference between life and death."

What if you can't run or secure yourself in a locked room?

"There are three more options," Nicoletti said. "Option three is concealment. If you can, hide and get as horizontal as you can. If a gunman decides to 'spray' a room with automatic fire, you are less of a target."

Option four is more difficult. "If the previous options fail, play dead," said Nicoletti. "Obviously, this is difficult for two reasons. First, there had to have been shots fired already. Second, you really have to look dead, which isn't easy when hysteria is the natural tendency."

And finally, option five. "We used to teach passive compliance -- give in to whatever demands are made," said Nicoletti. "But the events on 9/11 changed that. Now, there is the tendency to train people in active resistance. In other words, when all options are lost -- fight back if you're sure you'll be shot."

Option five is highly controversial. No school administrator contacted for this report would endorse it. "They're worried about liability issues," said Nicoletti. "Let me be clear, this is not -- repeat -- not a first option. It also assumes that students know how to actively resist to save themselves, and most do not."

Still, it was that practice that ended the Springfield, Ore., school shootings in 1998. "Kip Kinkell ended his siege only when he was stopped. That was active resistance," said Nicoletti, while once again cautioning against it even as a last resort.

Finally, Nicoletti emphasized prevention. "Before blood is even drawn, students have a responsibility to report suspicious activity by fellow students."

He said most individuals will "broadcast" what they're going to do well in advance of actually taking aim and firing.

"Unfortunately, most students don't report these students because they are worried they will be accused of overreacting," said Nicoletti. "But when you see something or someone acting suspiciously or violently, share it, even though you don't want to be considered a snitch."

According to Nicoletti, one of the telltale signs of danger is multiple "troubling signs" exhibited by some students.

"Violence doesn't stand alone. By that, I mean potential shooters telegraph their violent tendencies more than once. Look at the plays Cho wrote. They were disturbing and filled with violent revenge," said Nicoletti. "That should have been a clue."