Chapter 24

Emergency Management and Communication Improvements: Changing the Landscape of School Safety

Selina E. M. Kerr
Independent Researcher, UK

ABSTRACT

"Active shooter” events are amongst the most dangerous an educational institution can face. Planning for emergencies like this can, to some extent, mitigate the level of harm faced. Using the two cases of shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech University, this chapter exemplifies how these incidents highlighted flaws in emergency management planning, training, and communication. Also discussed are the advances in law enforcement tactics following the Columbine shooting. The policy responses to improve emergency management planning, training, and communication are discussed. The work of school safety foundation, I Love U Guys, and smartphone application, LiveSafe, is detailed in relation to ongoing developments in planning for emergencies and communicating threats to the affected populations.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines advances in emergency management and communication and discusses the extent to which these have the potential to help avert and manage “active shooter” incidents in K-12 schooling. The definition of an “active shooter” incident used by the main Bureaus and Agencies in the United States is “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area” (cited in Blair & Schweit, 2014, p. 50). In this chapter, the focus will be on the pre-incident plans to deal with “active shooter” situations in schools and the response to these incidents. Examples of such incidents are the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 and the massacre at Virginia Tech University in 2007. Although there have been changes in security procedures and school policies (for instance, around bullying) following other school shootings, these two incidents were particularly significant with regards to the changes they provoked to preparations for and management of active
shooter events. To research this issue further, official reports relating to both incidents were sampled from various levels: federal (national), state (regional) and institutional (local). Policy documents are a rich data source for tracking the evolution of strategic developments over time. The “frames” within the policy sample relating to both incidents are critically assessed here. Framing within policy documents allows for a more focused approach to solving an issue, by highlighting certain aspects of it and then formulating solutions to them (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p. 1406).

Moreover, the recent developments in emergency management and communication are discussed throughout this chapter, using interview results with experts in this area: the Executive and Operational Directors (who are also the founders) of the school safety organization, I Love U Guys; the Executive Director of emergency management at Jefferson County School District, which includes Columbine High School; a representative from a smartphone application, LiveSafe, designed to improve communication procedures in crises. Ethnographic research was also conducted by the author attending a “School Safety Symposium” entitled The Briefings on two occasions. Discussed here are presentations from two law enforcement officials involved in high-profile active shootings: Sergeant Michael Touchton and Sergeant A. J. DeAndrea, both from Arvada Police Department. Findings from these conferences provide an insight into the role law enforcement plays in responding to high-risk school violence incidents. All of these results are discussed in relation to the landscape of emergency management planning and response.

Firstly, this chapter will detail what effective emergency management planning should involve. It will then highlight the weaknesses in the emergency management plan at Columbine High School prior the shooting and document the recommendations made in official reports critiquing the response to the incident. Discussion thereafter centers on the post-incident legislative and practical revisions made to emergency management plans and training. Also documented are the changes made to law enforcement tactics and provisions in schools following the Columbine incident. The recent developments in emergency management planning offered by the non-profit foundation, I Love U Guys, are then discussed. The chapter moves on to discuss the flaws in emergency communications evident in the Virginia Tech University incident and how these were subsequently dealt with in terms of policy and legislative changes. Developments in emergency communication are discussed using the results of an interview with a representative from LiveSafe, a mobile phone safety application founded by a survivor of the shooting at Virginia Tech University. The company developed a smartphone application which is now used in a number of high schools and higher and further education institutions, allowing users to report, as well as track the location and severity of emergency incidents. The chapter will finish with an overview of everything that has been discussed, as well as possible future developments in this area.

BACKGROUND

“Active shooter” incidents are one of the most perilous types of violence that can occur (Doss & Shepherd, 2015, p. 44). Of the hundred and sixty “active shooter” incidents that took place between 2000 through to 2013, thirty-nine of these were in educational institutions. These episodes resulted in a death toll of one hundred and seventeen, as well as a hundred and twenty people being injured (Blair & Schweit, 2014, pp. 6, 13-15). The potential for mass causalities, unpredictability and costly recovery are the reasons why “active shooter” scenarios require a more proactive and detailed approach to emergency management planning (Doss & Shepherd, 2015, pp. 41-42). It has been said that post-hoc analysis following a crisis situation can inform future emergency management planning (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009, p. 125).