



Assessing the TTPs Used in the Shooting Rampage at the High School in Parkland, Florida

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The February 14, 2018 mass shooting rampage carried out by Nikolas Cruz at Stoneman Douglas High School (SDHS) illustrated many of the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used by active shooters. It also featured several divergencies from the TTPs used by other shooters. With active shooters (and terrorists) continuously attempting to exploit new vulnerabilities in their adversaries, the SDHS attack represents a significant example of new lessons learned that can be generated to assist public safety practitioners to be aware of new developments that need to be anticipated for effective countermeasures. To accomplish these objectives, this article discusses the incident, the weapons used, and the TTPs used by the shooter and how they relate to previous cases.

The Incident

On February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz, 19, took an Uber ride to Stoneman Douglas High School, where he arrived carrying a backpack and a long bag. He then proceeded to the school's "freshman building," a three-story structure. Inside his bags were a rifle, ammunition, and other explosives. His arrival coincided with the time of the students' dismissal from school. Upon entering the building's third floor, Cruz, who was familiar with its layout, put on a gas mask and used smoke grenades to trip several fire alarms, while also pulling other alarms manually to draw students out of their classrooms and into the hallways. Around 2:21 pm, he started firing his semiautomatic AR-15 rifle at the fleeing students, expending more than 100 rounds of ammunition. The shooting lasted six minutes, resulting in the killing of seventeen 14 students and three teachers, with 15 others wounded.

As soon as the gunshots began, the school activated a "code red" lockdown.

Following his shooting rampage, and prior to the arrival of police SWAT personnel, Cruz had already left his bags, firearm, ammunition and other devices on the third floor, and escaped by blending in among the students running from the scene of the incident into the streets. Once outside, he then walked to a nearby Walmart, where he bought a drink at the Subway outlet inside. Then he left and went to a local McDonald's restaurant, where he sat until around 3:01 pm, before departing. Finally, about 40 minutes after the shooting attack began, he was detained about two miles from the school by a police officer with the Coconut Creek Police Department.

The Weapons

Cruz had purchased his firearm and multiple magazines legally at the Sunrise Tactical Supply store in February 2017. His step-family had allowed him to keep the AR-15 as long as it was locked in a gun safe, although he retained one of the keys. The AR-15, whose name stands

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for ArmaLite rifle, is based on the military's M-16. It can be customized and comes in numerous versions, with the owners able to mix and match different elements, such as stocks, grips, and barrels.

TTPs

As demonstrated by this attack, active shooters' tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) continuously adapt and evolve to exploit their adversaries' vulnerabilities in ways that make them increasingly difficult to predict. At the same time, however, like other attacks, in this incident the shooter devoted enormous preparation, resources and time to his attack cycle, which was designed and executed to inflict as many casualties as possible. In general, such TTPs consist of:

1. Attack preparation steps (e.g., deciding to launch an attack, acquiring the funds to mount an operation, and selecting the weapons to be used in an attack,). In this case, the shooter prepared to acquire the AR-15 firearm, multiple magazines of ammunition, the gas mask and smoke grenades, as well as being trained in their use.
2. The planning stage (e.g., collecting the resources for the attack). In this case, the shooter acquired and readied the weapons and other devices to be used in the attack, including training in their use.
3. The execution timeline (e.g., identifying the timeline for an attack). In this case, the shooter selected Valentine's Day for the date of the operation, although it is not known why this day was chosen in particular. The timeframe was apparently chosen because this was when the students would be getting ready to leave the school.
4. Targeting (e.g., selecting a target to achieve the attack's objectives, carrying out reconnaissance of the target, including identifying its potential vulnerabilities). In this case, the shooter selected his former high school, which had expelled him in 2017. He was aware of the school building's layout through his previous attendance at the school.
5. The final execution stage (e.g., conducting the actual attack). In this case, the shooter decided to take an Uber to the school, which enabled him to evade detection had he driven his own car and been spotted as someone who was deemed dangerous to be present on school grounds. He also deliberately selected the timeframe for the attack to take place towards the end of a school day when students would be congregating en masse in the building's hallways.

Unlike other previous shootings, however, in this incident the shooter employed the additional weapons in the form of smoke grenades, which sowed confusion and panic at the beginning of his attack. In another TTP difference, this was one of the very few cases where the shooter attempted to flee from the incident, with many other cases ending when the shooter either had committed suicide or attempted to kill as many victims as possible until police arrived to neutralize him.

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In TTP similarities with other shooting incidents, the AR-15 rifle (or comparable semiautomatic rifles) has been used in numerous mass shootings. These include the following:

- James Holmes's use of the AR-15-style .223-caliber Smith and Wesson rifle with a 100-round magazine in his shooting rampage in Aurora, Colorado (June 20, 2012)
- Adam Lanza's use of the .223-caliber Bushmaster Model XM15, an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, in his shooting rampage in Newtown, CT (December 14, 2012)
- The husband-and-wife use of two AR-15-style, .223-caliber Remington semiautomatic rifles, in their shooting rampage in San Bernardino, California (December 2, 2015)
- Omar Mateen used an AR-15-style Sig Sauer MCX semiautomatic rifle (among other weapons) in his shooting rampage at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando FL (June 12, 2016)
- Stephen Paddock used an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle (among the arsenal of guns) in his shooting rampage in Las Vegas, NV (October 1, 2017)
- Devin Kelley used an AR-15 style Ruger semiautomatic rifle in his shooting spree at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas (November 5, 2017)

The simultaneous use in a mass shooting of a semiautomatic firearm and tear gas grenades, however, has only been used once, by James Holmes, who also wore a gas mask in his attack at the Century 16 movie theater in June 2012.

Finally, Cruz's shooting attack was one of the very few instances when a perpetrator had attempted to escape from the scene of his attack. In one instance, the husband-and-wife shooters in San Bernardino, California, had escaped in their vehicle from the Inland Community Center prior to the arrival of the responding police officers, but they were killed in a shootout with the pursuing officers more than four hours after their attack. In another instance, Devin Kelley used his car to escape from the scene of his shootings, but, following a high-speed car chase with his pursuers, shot himself to death.

In conclusion, while Nikolas Cruz had used many of the TTPs commonly used by other mass shooters, his method of attack introduced several new elements in attacking a school. These include using a mix of smoke grenades and a semiautomatic rifle, as well as manually setting off fire alarms as a way to cause mass panic and then escaping from the scene of his shooting by blending in with the rushing students. These are important TTP factors for the public safety community to consider as attackers continuously attempt to exploit new vulnerabilities in their adversaries in conducting their attacks.

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