

WHEN *FIGHT* WORKS

When Fight Works: Unarmed Resistance in Active Shooter Incidents, 2000-2017

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SUMMARY: Analysis of AS events from 2000-2017 reveals unarmed victims have successfully mitigated at least 30 incidents in the time from an attack occurring prior to the arrival of law enforcement. As the physical intervention by victims facing an armed intruder is often a key component – and last resort - in AS training taught to all sectors, the conclusion that “Fight,” within the context of the DHS response formula of “Run, Hide, Fight,”[®] offers a viable and proven option in overtaking an armed attacker is a significant finding.



One of the most difficult aspects of responses to an Active Shooter (AS) event is the idea of unarmed potential or actual victims fighting back against their armed attacker. Certainly, there have been instances in which armed civilians have successfully interdicted an AS incident in progress. However, when fleeing the scene is impossible (i.e., the “Run” option) and efforts at concealment (i.e., the “Hide” option) are not feasible, the final option may be to take offensive action against the attacker. Yet, while facing an armed intruder may indeed be an action of last

resort, there is ample evidence that acting against the shooter may indeed be not only viable but life-saving.

Schools and other organizations that have prepared and trained for active shooter incidents may respond faster to mitigate the threat. As most active shooter incidents only last a few minutes, every second is vitally important. If an organization plans and trains for incidents, it empowers employees and allows for heightened situational awareness before and during incidents. Resilience is fostered through education and training.

KGH seeks to foster *Preparedness Without Paranoia*[™] to foster resilience for organizations that may face active shooter/active assailant type incidents. With education, training, and practice, organizations may prepare for potential incidents with confidence, replacing fear when an ordinary day turns extraordinary. The *Preparedness Without Paranoia*[™] program empowers individuals to respond and recover from active shooter incidents.

In September 2017, longtime P.E. and math teacher Angela McQueen prevented tragedy by grabbing the shooter’s arm after he opened fire in the Mattoon High School cafeteria. At the time of the shooting, Illinois school had recently trained for active shooters. One student was wounded in the shooting and the suspect was taken into custody. As McQueen later recalled,

“In that moment, you don’t really think. You just react. To me it’s almost like the mama bear instinct.”

Current AS training, as the widely used “Run, Hide, Fight”® model suggests, as a final option against armed assailants, that people use whatever means and measures necessary to physically confront the shooter in order to defeat the threat. These actions can include throwing heavier objects such as laptops, chairs, and even small tables. They may also include lighter items, such as coffee mugs, staplers, and anything that might serve as an effective projectile to distract and potentially open a window of opportunity to attack the shooter. These means, however, while likely sound in principle, have rarely been put into practice in real world incidents. In November 2017, in a unique case of bystander intervention, after Travis Green, 29, opened fire on a Dollar General store in Cheektowaga, bystanders intervened. Police officers tackled and arrested Green after a brief chase, during which Green was struck by a bystander’s vehicle. Green had opened fire from the store's parking lot.

The primary means of unarmed intervention in AS events has been physical attack: punching, wrestling, and simply swarming the shooter with as many persons as possible. In these instances, the “Fight” aspect has proven itself numerous times. These actions have occurred, typically, during a shooting event, when the attacker is reloading or otherwise distracted, such as was the case with the attack against US Representative Gabby Giffords in the January 2011 attack at a Safeway supermarket in Tucson, Arizona. In this event, persons present at the event tackled the shooter and subdued him until police arrived, though only after he had killed six and wounded 13. Nonetheless, had these individuals not intervened, the casualty list could well have been more tragic.

Interestingly, though, not all unarmed interventions include the use of physical force. Particularly in the case of school shootings, verbal engagement and negotiation with the shooter has also resulted in the cessation of actual and probably AS incidents. In these instances, school counselors, teachers, and administrative staff have successfully “talked down” armed students, often without a single shot fired.

In October 2015, chess teacher and Vietnam War veteran James Vernon, 75, used a combination of persuasion and force to disarm Dustin Brown, 19. Vernon was teaching chess at a public library in Morton, Illinois to a group of children, when Brown, armed with two knives enter the room and threatened to kill them. Vernon persuaded Brown to let the children go, and once the children were out of the room, Vernon tackled Brown, sustaining wounds to his hand. Vernon credited the training he received in the Army in helping him win the fight with Brown. Both Brown and Vernon were taken to the hospital following the incident and Brown was charged with various counts, including attempted murder.

In January 2013, at 8:59 a.m., Bryan Oliver, 16, armed with a shotgun, allegedly began shooting in a science class at Taft Union High School in Taft, California. No one was killed; two people were wounded. An administrator persuaded the shooter to put the gun down before police arrived and took him into custody.

In conclusion, analysis of more than 430 AS events between 2000 and 2017 reveals that, in at least 30 instances (or 7%), the actions of unarmed victims during those events successfully halted an imminent or ongoing attack. In an additional eight incidents, unarmed individuals were able to either thwart an attempted attack or respond to non-firearm attacks. Moreover, it is clear that both physical and verbal interdictions have successfully resolved such events, though the latter needs to be more widely highlighted in AS response models, such as the standard "Run, Hide, Fight." These facts not only demonstrate that "Fight" does indeed work, but also that perhaps more attention, resources, and training should be devoted to verbal interaction, particularly within the educational training sector. As numerous studies have shown, police are unlikely to arrive in time to confront and defeat an Active Shooter during such an attack. For this critical reason, it is essential that the public is educated on that fact that attempting to interdict an assailant should not be relegated as a tactic of last resort, but that it is an even more critical option to consider when confronted with surviving an AS event.