

SAFE TO STUDY

Robert Platt explores what can be done to lock violence out of educational institutes

When it comes to student safety, walking the tightrope between creating a welcoming environment on the one hand and visible surveillance that may be unsettling or restricts personal privacy is a delicate balance. With budgets ever more constrained by economic considerations and fierce competition for funding, cost is also a key issue, meaning that a multidisciplinary strategy combining technology with physical security measures and clear safety guidelines is the most effective and economical approach.

While the ongoing Covid pandemic and infection control issues have driven educator concerns over the past year, the prospect of an eventual return to full numbers is set to turn the spotlight back onto another epidemic: the growing incidence of knife and gun violence in schools and colleges.

Violence is something that has affected all types of educational facilities, from pre-school nurseries and kindergartens to primary and secondary schools, community colleges and universities. Those in the private sector too. The attacks on education can be devastating, not only resulting in student deaths and injuries, but impacting surrounding communities over the longer term.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES ARE REQUIRED BY LAW TO HAVE A PLAN IN PLACE IN THE EVENT OF AN ATTACK

Perhaps the most notorious incidents are the attack on a primary school in Dunblane Scotland where 17 people were killed and 15 injured, and the Sandy Oaks Elementary school shooting in the USA in 2012 where the death toll included 20 children and six adults.

As a phenomenon, the figures suggest it is not a problem that is going to go away. According to *The Washington Post*, more than 222,000 students, teachers and academics were killed or harmed in attacks on education in the last five years. While active shooters are not so prevalent in the UK, knife attacks are a frequent occurrence. Disturbingly, UN statistics have also revealed a worldwide increase in violence, with 93 countries affected between 2015 and 2019.

All educational facilities have a responsibility for putting in place reasonable precautions to ensure student safety in the event of a breach. In the USA, the response following the Sandy Hook shooting and a later incident at the Columbine School in 1999, where 13 students were

killed, has been to introduce shooter and/or lockdown drills in 95 percent of US schools, with some states passing laws to make them mandatory. With some drills involving masked men carrying assault rifles, reports *The Guardian*, two of the USA's biggest teacher unions have protested about the graphic nature of such exercises, citing the traumatic effect on staff and pupils and the lack in some cases of age-appropriateness, with children as young as five subjected to the experience. Witnessing a shooting, it is claimed, can cause depression, anxiety and PTSD with effects lasting into adulthood.

Many schools, particularly in the USA, have responded to the uplift in crime by establishing a physical security presence, with up to a fifth of educational establishments having recruited security guards for this very purpose. Such visual reminders can reassure on the one hand, but may also increase the perceived risk of crime, which can create fear over and above the actual incidence of crime in a community.

As violence becomes a regular feature of school and campus life, managers are increasingly turning to modern surveillance technologies to protect their students and prevent shooting or knife incidents from happening. Also to safeguard properties against vandalism and arson, both increasingly prevalent in the USA and the UK.

Video cameras have been used over many years as a passive surveillance tool, which can be used to detect and record unlawful entry after hours, can be effective when combined with a physical security presence in detecting potential incidents during school hours. With the escalation of random violence including active shooter incidents, many facilities have now upped their game by installing sophisticated surveillance systems, with the education sector's considerable expenditure on security equipment and services likely to continue to increase over the coming years according to a report from IHS Markit.

Some schools have taken security systems one step further, incorporating facial recognition technology into surveillance networks to track students based on their appearance or what they are wearing and unexpected patterns of movement outside their normal areas. Such networks can very quickly create a timeline to enable tracking and detection of potential threats through the school.

Some schools have adopted AI software, which is the next step up from simply scanning campus activity and building entry. From facial recognition to the capability to check students by their appearance, modern technology allows security officers to access all areas from a central control facility. Safety Management programmes may



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also be used to scan online documents and keep track of everything students write, triggering flags based on student behaviours or language. Unobtrusive perhaps and certainly developers can demonstrate considerable success in tracking incidents of cyberbullying and drugs activity, but this level of intensive surveillance has led to concerns being raised about student privacy and freedom of speech, as well as in the way data may be used and stored.

Another layer of protection built into schools and campus surveillance systems revolves around access control. Increasingly facilities are being designed with

access prevention in mind and to eliminate potential problem areas through an improved layout. Not a new phenomenon, electronic access control systems, often disparate and difficult to control centrally are undergoing modernisation and integration by phasing out cards, that can be lost, stolen, lent to others or replicated, with personalised easy to use smartphone access.

While the latest developments may be crucial to campus safety, the environment created in educational facilities for all ages from preschool to universities is equally important in providing a positive learning

experience. A welcoming environment that is stress-free assists with the learning process and in creating personal balance.

There is no one universal approach that is right for campus security. Individual schools may have specific requirements, which require a holistic approach rather than installing the latest system which may be unnecessarily complex and expensive.

When it comes to protecting facilities against random attacks, there are two key considerations, which need to be factored in when developing a tailored strategy. The first is the nature of the individuals perpetrating the crime. A rampage killer is typically a single person (although it can also be two or more people) who is physically present and uses potentially deadly weapons in a single event. Mental health problems account for less than 30 percent of such attacks. Many kill because of narcissistic or personality disorders, which seek publicity or to reduce distress triggered by a specific event. Others have extreme beliefs or hatred of specific groups. By their very nature, such killers, especially sociopaths, are capable of concealing their feelings and behaviour and may undertake detailed planning in advance. Perpetrators typically end by taking their own lives, so negotiation is not an option.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRECAUTIONS TO ENSURE STUDENT SAFETY

Secondly, rampage killings are distinguished by the short timeframe in which they can occur. In the case of the Sandy Hook tragedy, the shooting took place in just a few minutes before responders arrived, leaving little time for staff to react and to protect students.

Geography is also a determining factor when choosing equipment. Unlike civic and commercial buildings where there are only a few points of entry, campus security, particularly in the case of colleges and universities, may involve monitoring multiple buildings and extensive grounds, including educational buildings and associated research facilities.

There is little concrete evidence on the effects of individual systems and methodologies in terms of their effect on school safety, while it is clear that during a violent attack there is no time to think. Whatever the controversy about drills, the need to react swiftly and instinctively means that a basic understanding of what to do when the panic button is deployed is essential.

Educational facilities are required by law to have a policy or plan in place to cover such eventualities, with firm protocols and designated individuals, assigned with specific safety duties. At the heart of this is a shared understanding of how to respond to immediate identified threats. Being prepared to deploy immediate protection and shielding pending the attendance of the emergency services is vital.

Such policies make a clear distinction between evacuation and lockdown, with the emphasis on relocating to the nearest safe space and securing rooms by barricading doors and windows. This where physical door locking and bracing devices can make a difference between life and death. Penn Elcom's DoorJammer

Lockdown, for example, is designed for instant deployment and, equally importantly, fast removal when emergency responders arrive or the threat has been neutralised.

DoorJammer can be used on all types of inward swinging door, with or without a lock or handle, simply by placing the flat part under the door and twisting the hand screw until the foot is firm against the floor. Its police-accredited, patented design redirects force from the outside of the door downwards and upwards, wedging DoorJammer firmly into the doorframe, the ground and the surrounding wall. The greater the force applied, the stronger the door becomes, creating an instant safe area.

The advantage of physical door braces like these is that their size makes them highly portable. DoorJammer Lockdown, for example, weighs just 1.78lbs and measures under 8in in height. Its storability means that multiple units can be purchased and kept in a desk draw, or similar, in each room, offering a local solution to supplement campus wide security systems in the same way fire extinguishers are widely distributed for fire protection purposes.

While the choice of systems and methodologies should be dictated by the needs of individual establishments and campuses, a combined approach which marries ongoing surveillance technology with point of entry physical security, underpinned by a written and communicated plan is likely to deliver the best and most cost-effective protection. Discretion in deployment backed by staff training ensures a safe and unthreatening environment, while building in essential measures to ensure safer outcomes should the worst happen ●

Robert Platt, Sales Director, began working for Penn Elcom in 2004 marketing and distributing physical security products for Laptops and PCs, assuming specific responsibility since 2013 for overseeing the marketing and sales of DoorJammer and associated products.

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