

Keeping our Campuses and Communities Safe

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Keeping our Campuses and Communities Safe

Abstract

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. population has a heightened awareness that tragedies can and do strike ordinary people without warning. The same can be said for the unfortunate abundance of campus shootings, where the next "9/11" occurred in 2007 on the campus of Virginia Tech. And yet, subsequent investigations into these horrific events often reveal that clues existed that might have pointed to the eventual violent outcome. It is unquestionable that to dramatically improve the safety and security of our cities we must rely upon the millions of eyes of our fellow citizens to unearth these clues as they pursue their daily activities. But ordinary citizens on the street are often reluctant to get involved and lack the tools to overcome their reticence to report suspicious activity. In this article, we examine several indicators of campus and community violence, as well as a novel technology to facilitate communication of potential threats to safety before they become a reality.

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Introduction

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. population has a heightened awareness that tragedies can and do strike ordinary people without warning. The same can be said for the unfortunate abundance of campus shootings, where the next "9/11" occurred in 2007 on the campus of Virginia Tech. And yet, subsequent investigations into these horrific events often reveal that clues existed that might have pointed to the eventual violent outcome. It is unquestionable that to dramatically improve the safety and security of our cities we must rely upon the millions of eyes of our fellow citizens to unearth these clues as they pursue their daily activities. But ordinary citizens on the street are often reluctant to get involved and lack the tools to overcome their reticence to report suspicious activity. In this article, we examine several indicators of campus and community violence, as well as a novel technology to facilitate communication of potential threats to safety before they become a reality.

Indicators of Campus Violence

Violence on our nation's campuses is a serious problem. For example:

- From July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006, there were 35 school-associated violent deaths in elementary and secondary schools in the United States.
- In 2005–06, 78% of schools experienced one or more violent incidents of crime, 17% experienced one or more serious violent incidents, 46% experienced one or more thefts, and 68% experienced another type of crime.
- In 2005, approximately 6% of students aged 12–18 reported that they avoided school activities or one or more places in school because they thought someone might attack or harm them.¹

What seems to be painfully common about the perpetrators in many of these school shootings are expressed feelings of estrangement and rage—to call some of these youthful offenders "disturbed" is to understate the

devastating psychosis of the assailants considerably. For example, Luke Woodham, who killed his mother and shot nine students at his school in Pearl, Mississippi in 1997, claims that "demons" visited him and made him commit the crimes. Paranoia, deep depression, self-perceived isolation, and hearing voices are all common symptoms reported by the various guilty parties. In almost every case there were elements of child abuse (whether physical, sexual, or emotional), as well as distinct dissociation from their parents and fellow students (where applicable)—typically blamed on some fear or anxiety later discovered or confessed by the perpetrators, eye witnesses, or victims who survived the incidents.²

Another prime example is the case of Steven Kazmierczak, the former Northern Illinois University student who, in 2008, killed five people and left an additional 18 students wounded. We know now that he had been dismissed from the Army after it was revealed he had hidden his psychiatric history. Kazmierczak had studied the Virginia Tech and Columbine massacres. Investigators also discovered his preoccupation with cinematic monsters, particularly the sadistic killer in the "Saw" horror films.³ He had a history of suicide attempts and psychiatric difficulties. Yet, while considered strange by many, no one reported their concerns. When asked if anyone thought Kazmierczak exhibited odd behavior at NIU, Police Chief Donald Grady said nothing had ever been reported to the police department.⁴

Of course, sometimes, obvious predictors are missing, or at least not egregiously evident. But if a number of people individually notice questionable or odd behavior, and these same individuals report their observation to a central depository, independently of one another, a profile will emerge. What if such a profile had emerged before the tragic murder of a female student at Virginia Tech? Considering the previous shooting spree, there is probably not another campus in the nation that is as sensitive and attuned to suspicious student actions.

While there are many risk factors that contribute to the likelihood that any one person presents a threat, Roger Depue, Ph.D., notes:

When a cluster of indicators is present then the risk becomes more serious. Thus, a person who possesses firearms, is a loner, shows an interest in past shooting situations, writes stories about homicide and suicide, exhibits aberrant behavior, has talked about retribution against others, and has a history of mental illness and refuses counseling would obviously be considered a significant risk of becoming dangerous to himself or others.⁵

Is it possible that some students and faculty did notice that Haiyang Zhu, a doctoral student at Virginia Tech, who decapitated a female acquaintance in a campus café, had previously exhibited antisocial behavior that was noted but ignored? What if sufficient numbers of students and faculty, individually, had notified a central authority like the campus safety office? Might the tragedy have been averted? We will never know, but it is imperative that all universities, cities and corporate entities utilize all available technology-enabled tools and systems to try to prevent future events.

Too many studies have shown a reluctance to report crimes or other suspicious activities for fear of authorities or criminal retribution. Too many Americans are inculcated with the belief that "the authorities will attend to it" without considering that the appropriate law enforcement agency is probably unaware of the danger. While many domestic terrorist events and campus shootings are committed by those whose precedent actions, either by word or deed, were seen by those around them as odd, perverse or potentially damning, too often these observations go unreported for fear of involvement. Major news stories from our cities and universities attest to antisocial behaviors exhibited by the perpetrators that go unreported. Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, the Oakland city shootings and San Gabriel, California, all come to mind.

The latter two are suspected gang related. In February 2009, two shooters entered a coffee shop in San Gabriel with a specific target in mind. With one dead and six seriously wounded they obviously were not concerned about collateral damage. "The preliminary investigation would lead homicide detectives to believe this is gang-related," sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore said.

Even though the shop was crowded with at least 40 people when the attack took place, deputies had difficulty finding witnesses. Whitmore said witnesses refused to cooperate, out of fear, with the police. "We know people saw something," Whitmore said, "and we need them to come forward and help us solve this crime."⁶

Crime Prevention in our Communities

We know evil deeds will evolve from evil or demented people; the question is how to identify and prevent them. In a recent interview, an anti-terrorism official (name withheld at his request) recently expressed his view on prevention: "The ability to gather information, sift through it to find what is useful intelligence, and then rapidly get that information to

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the right people, can and has made the difference between tragedy and that tragedy being averted."

Given the current culture, a number of police agencies agree that anonymity is essential for encouraging citizen involvement. New technology also allows for picture/video attachments to be included. With the ubiquity of camera phones, photo identification becomes an important adjunct. Some programs are adding executive dashboard (a computer interface that displays the information) and analytical tools to help track the tips. Many of these new programs are Web-based, a boon for money strapped agencies since no software or hardware installation or maintenance is required by the adopting agency.

Companies are now focusing on creating back-office solutions that adapt to and enhance consumer products already in wide distribution. By creating software programs that interface with everyday consumer tools (e.g., cell phones and laptop computers), companies are closing the loop on encouraging and supporting citizen involvement in making universities, cities and the country as a whole, safer.

Spotlight on TipNow™—a New Mass Communication Tool to Report Suspicious Activity

Obviously, the tools to fight violence in our communities must be many and varied. A new weapon in this war was recently introduced by Resilience, a Silicon Valley, California, innovator in technology applications, to involve the citizenry in crime mitigation and prevention. Their product, *TipNow*™, is an anonymous text-based reporting system. It is presently being evaluated by a number of cities and universities and has already been deployed on two college campuses.

The product uses SMS to anonymously report suspicious activities to the appropriate, pre-designated officials. From any cell phone a text message describing questionable or obviously illegal activities is sent to a campus or city-wide email address. With *TipNow*™, the company's servers assign an alphanumeric alias that allows for follow-up while maintaining the promised anonymity of the reporting party. The message is automatically encrypted by Resilience servers and forwarded to the appropriate law enforcement agency; all in minutes and all completely anonymous.

The company hopes that by allowing citizen involvement without compromising their identity more people will be encouraged to participate in the process of making us all safer. Other reporting modalities will be coming on line with new ways of identifying potential dangers before they can be realized.

About the Author

Ronald Goodman is Vice President of Marketing of Resilience Inc., a Silicon Valley-based provider of reporting solutions for campus, city, and corporate environments. Serving Fortune 500 companies for over twenty years, Ron has an extensive background in multiple disciplines. His experience spans diverse categories including wine marketing, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and semiconductors. Over the years he has led marketing and creative teams for industrial, hi-tech and healthcare companies. Ron has served as a board member and speaker for a number of professional organizations including Peninsula Marketing Association, Medical Marketing Association and Business Marketing Association. He is currently on the Board of the Direct Marketing Association, and is a

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