

A security officer in a light blue shirt and dark blue pants with a duty belt. The officer is wearing a dark blue tie and has a duty belt with a radio and other equipment. The background is blurred.

SECURITY

ACTIVE ASSAILANT,
UNARMED SECURITY OFFICER

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The notion that small acts can have large ramifications is called the *Butterfly Effect*. The phrase, based on a thesis by American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz, refers to the idea that a butterfly's wings could create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately delay, accelerate, or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in another location.

The level of awareness exhibited by security personnel can have a *Butterfly Effect* on an active assailant's perception of risk. Active shooter attacks often end when the perpetrator is apprehended or killed by law enforcement, or when the attacker commits suicide – rarely do assailants run or escape. Having security officers onsite may alleviate the opportunities of an attack, but this class of embedded response is no guarantee that the attacker will be deterred or stopped.

Preventative measures can be taken to focus on the events that occur **before** an attack. Those who intend to commit violence often give themselves away by their physical appearance or odd behavior. By engaging individuals with simple hospitality principles, a security officer is more likely to observe some warning signs.

Even when the worst-case scenario occurs, a security officer's situational awareness is critical. Early detection enables officers to respond more quickly and help others by providing instructions that can mitigate the attack. By observing physical and behavioral cues, acting upon concerns, and implementing effective response methods, unarmed guards can help prevent or mitigate active assailant attacks.

PREATTACK INDICATORS

Because most attacks represent the killer's first and last act of violence, the assailant often exhibits telltale signs of the incident to come. With little to no prior criminal record or experience in extreme violence, they may show behavioral and physical indicators that give their bad intentions away. Looking out for these early warning signs, or preattack indicators (PAINs), can alert the security practitioner to potential trouble and possibly thwart attacks.

PAINs are physical actions that include movement patterns, carried objects, appearance, or dress. They are also behavioral elements, such as facial expressions or demeanor. PAINs do not automatically indicate danger, because they can be consistent with perfectly innocent explanations. By carefully and prudently observing people who are determined not to be a danger, the officer can learn how to better distinguish future threats.

In the rare instances when PAINs are associated with imminent danger and immediate action is required, awareness will greatly improve response, because the element of surprise that may elicit the fight-or-flight response is removed.

Normalcy bias. Trying to look for someone in a crowd who could be an attacker is like looking for a needle in a stack of needles. Since active assailant attacks are rare, there is a tendency to discredit PAINs in favor of the norm. Effective security requires a certain level of paranoia that avoids the "it can't happen here" mentality.

Establishing a thorough understanding of what is normal allows the guard to have a baseline. Then the security officer remains alert and vigilant during normal activities, and can easily transition to a heightened state of alert when a change occurs to the baseline.

Customer service. Proactivity on the part of the guard is not to be confused with aggression, because customer service is still a priority. Security should view each person as a customer, not a suspect, until a significant change to the baseline occurs. Professional and nonthreatening behavior from security is more likely to elicit cooperation.

In customer service, the 10-5 Rule is a gold standard. The rule states that when the staff member is within 10 feet of guests, staff should make eye contact and smile to acknowledge them. Within five feet of a guest, a sincere greeting or friendly gesture should accompany the eye contact and smile.

The 10-5 Rule reminds others of the presence of a professional security force while keeping the security officer engaged with visitors.

Making eye contact with a person is an effective first step to determine if a basic level of mutual trust exists. At around 10 feet, make brief eye contact with a pleasant demeanor, then scan for PAINs such as tunnel vision, trouble communicating, favoring one side, excessive attention to carried objects, adjusted waistband or clothing, or repeated entries and exits to a single area.

If PAINs are observed, engage the person in a focused conversation. In this context, professionalism is key. A focused conversation should not resemble interrogation.

Active engagement. The purpose of a focused conversation is to determine if the person poses a risk. A polite "where are you heading?" to learn that person's trip story can be an effective conversation starter.

There are two types of trip stories—past and future. A past trip means the person has completed the purpose of the trip, and a future trip means the person is on their way to a specific place. This basic framework helps the officer determine whether the trip story is verifiable by providing specific details of sights seen and actions taken. A vague, unverifiable trip story does not indicate imminent violence, but it does indicate deception.

Officers should expect occasional negative reactions and be prepared to encounter individuals who refuse to cooperate. Appropriate measures should be taken to deal with such persons, including asking for another officer to help and continuing to question the individual.

Low-risk groups. Just as there are universal indicators of imminent danger, there are groups of people that, absent an overt hostile act, can be statistically discounted as a threat. These low-risk groups can be removed from the 10-5 Rule, including families, children, people older than 70 years, known guests of the facility, and people known and trusted by the officer.

High-risk people. After the focused conversation, those not eliminated as a possible threat must be monitored. Ideally, the person can be denied access and escorted out of the area. If not, supervisors need to be alerted and the person should be followed by an officer. Using video surveillance is also a possibility. The officer should be prepared to document their concerns and articulate—based on PAINs and the focused conversation—why the person was considered a threat.

If it becomes apparent that the person is dangerous, immediate action should be taken. The first step is to alert others and request assistance. The following actions will be based upon the perceived threat and the location. Options may range from initiating heightened security procedures and observing the subject to an immediate evacuation of the area.

ATTACK RESPONSE

Regardless of the specific factors leading up to the situation, it is imperative that security officers understand how to respond to a violent attack.

Some responses require compartmentalizing occupants away from the assailant, which is associated with the lockdown concept. However, not all situations call for these measures. Lockdown or compartmentalization is a valid tactic, but it lacks the flexibility needed to adequately mitigate all active assailant attacks. A lockdown does not help people in areas that cannot be secured or those having direct contact with the perpetrator. In an active assailant attack, these are the people at the greatest risk.

Not every human-based threat or intrusion requires Run. Hide. Fight. decisions. Under these far more common nonactive shooter events, using the word "lockdown" can cause a high percentage of occupants to falsely assume there is an active shooter, creating unnecessary panic and anxiety. Instead, these scenarios require heightened security procedures.

Heightened procedures. Situations requiring heightened security can range from a threat of school or workplace violence to civil unrest. What measures are taken to increase security depend on several factors, including the nature of the threat, the mission of the facility, the architecture and layout of the facility, and law enforcement presence or response time.

Based on these factors, leaders must determine which measures are most prudent given the circumstances, and security officers should be prepared to guide facility occupants.

When necessary, guards should communicate the fact that security has been heightened in simple language, such as "Attention, guests: we have a situation that requires heightened security. Please move inside a secure location." These messages get people's attention without causing unnecessary panic. Additional information can be shared as needed.

Attacks. All leading U.S. federal preparedness and response organizations, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice, recommend the option-based *Run. Hide. Fight.* approach. This recommendation is not limited to U.S. government agencies—*Run. Hide. Fight.* can be applied to many organizations and settings.

When deciding which option is best, determining whether the guard has direct or indirect contact with the shooter is essential. Direct contact means there are no barriers between the guard's location and the attacker, and the assailant is close enough to pose immediate danger.

With indirect contact, the attacker is inside or near the facility or general area, but distance or barriers delay the attacker's ability to cause harm.

After determining the level of contact, the survival options of the protocol are applied. The guard should also be prepared to advise those around him or her on which option to choose and to assist others.

Given their large presence at events, facilities, schools, and other venues, both armed and unarmed security officers play a critical role in preventing and mitigating active assailant attacks.

Because the killer is likely to have a target location for the attack in mind—whether it be a school cafeteria, concert, or church service—the presence of trained, engaged, and aware security can disrupt the attack.

Unarmed guards have a variety of tools at their disposal to protect the public and mitigate potentially dangerous situations. With a combination of active observance, engaged conversation, and—when necessary—heightened security procedures, security personnel can serve as a major deterrent against those who intend to commit harm.