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Thousand Oaks Shooting: A Case Study

Introduction

In 2018, twelve people died at the hands of a mass shooter at Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California.¹⁻³ The event facilitated discussions about whether the state's already strict gun laws were enough to prevent such tragedies.⁸

Facts of the Shooting

On November 7, 2018, Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California was hosting a regularly scheduled College Country Night event many college students from surrounding universities frequented.¹⁻³ At 11:18 p.m., Ian David Long, a 28-year-old Marine Corps veteran, entered the establishment through the front door and opened fire on 259 patrons and employees.³ He was using a legally purchased .45-caliber handgun that was outfitted with illegal high-capacity magazines.³ There was no method to the shooting except to target as many college students as possible. Long's initial attack killed five people near the entrance of the building; the other casualties occurred in the main room of Borderline.³ In total, 61 rounds were fired, and several smoke bombs employed.³ Patrons attempted to escape the gunshots by using chairs and tables to break windows or hiding in the employee bathroom.³ Two California Highway Patrol officers along with the Ventura County Sheriff, Ron Helus, responded to the shooting within minutes of it starting.³ Long opened fire on the officers, shooting Helus. Ultimately, the Sheriff was fatally shot by a fellow officer because the building was darkened and smoke-filled by the shooter.³ Twenty minutes after opening fire, following the interaction with law enforcement, Long stopped shooting and committed suicide.¹⁻³ Additional law enforcement officers located 11 deceased patrons and rescued 19 survivors from inside the bar.³

Epidemiological Aspects of the Event

Not many research studies have been conducted evaluating the epidemiology aspects of the Thousand Oaks shooting. However, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office released a report in 2021 detailing Long's actions and history, number of victims, police response, officer-involved shooting, and follow-up efforts.³ In total, twelve people, not including the shooter, were killed: seven college students, one recent graduate, the sheriff who responded to the shooting, one bouncer, one Marine Corps veteran, and a navy veteran who had survived the 2017 Las Vegas shooting.^{3,4} The report illustrated a potential risk factor in Long's mental health disorders in relation to the shooting. He suffered from adjustment disorder with symptoms of depression and anxiety since adolescences, and potentially had PTSD because of his time with the Marine Corps.³ Long was visited by police and mental health crisis team a year before the shooting but was not deemed a threat and thus was not placed in a psychiatric facility. Although the report found no evidence of a foundational motive for Long's actions, information collected suggested the perpetrator had "a strong disdain for civilians, or individuals not associated with any branch of the US military" and more specifically college students.³

Most of the information in the report was collected from surveillance footage at the bar and surrounding businesses, however, interviewees with eyewitness accounts, officers and deputies, and family and friends of Long were used as well. The eye-witness interviews could potentially have introduced memory biases. Witnesses are vulnerable to errors and biases in remembering specific details and can even remember events that did not happen. In addition, the report itself could have implicit bias. The Sheriff killed in the shooting was a member of the law enforcement that conducted the investigation for this report. Information may have been stated, or not stated, to paint the sheriff and department's narrative in a more favorable light.

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Management of the Shooting

Initially there was unstructured evacuation from the shooting location as patrons fled in various directions. As law enforcement deputies arrived, they provide more specific instructions. First responders, including paramedics and Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD), were dispatched three minutes after the shooting began.³ A VCFD Chief established a casualty command post (CCP) upon arrival and requested four additional ambulances as well as fire department resources to assist with treatment of victims.³ Because the CCP was set up at a road intersection with a highway, VCFD moved the post to a gas station.³ A second CCP locations was established after the patrons being treated at the original post became too numerous. In addition, Ventura County Sheriff's Office established an offsite reunification and information center three miles from the Borderline because relatives and friends of Borderline patrons began arriving at the scene seeking information about their loved ones.³ The center was supplied with resources from the Ventura County District Attorney's Office Victim Assistance Unit, FBI Victim Advocates, a representative from Ventura County Behavioral Health, and ordained clergy.³ The District Attorney's Office Victim Assistance Unit and the FBI Victim Advocates had training and experience in helping mass shooting victims and their families.³

Management of the shooting was handled appropriately given the frequency, randomness, and unpredictability of mass shootings in the United State. Improvements could have been made by establishing the CCP in the early stages of the event. The first deputies to arrive on the scene should have established the CCP and broadcast it to emergency personnel to provide more organized and effective treatment. Additionally, this would have enabled early assessment of the scene and resources need for treatment of the injured.

Communication

During the Thousand Oaks shooting, Long went on social media during the attack and made several Instagram posts about his motives and mental state.⁵ Details of the event, however, were relayed to the public via reports from local and national news outlets.^{1,2,4,5} In less that 12 hours of the shooting, the nation was briefed about the shooting and provided live updates as investigations uncovered more information. New developments continued to be provided as they occurred during the ensuing week. Media coverage of the event was appropriate as information was shared in a manner that did not cause hysteria or illustrate the shooter as the victim. However, there was a lack of communication between the Ventura County Sheriff's Office and the public. As a result, several news outlets sued the police department and in 2022 all recordings of police radio communication, ninety-four emergency calls, security footage from inside the bar, and fourteen dashboard and body-camera videos from responding officers were released.⁶

Summary

Despite California having one of the nation's strictest gun laws, the Thousand Oaks Shooting was not prevented. Law enforcement responded to the attack to the best of their training; however, management of the event should have initiated at the legislative level before the shooting occurred. The shooting demonstrated a need for increased recognition and reform of existing gun laws in California. Many officers and civilians were unaware of the Gun Violence Restraining Order Law (i.e., Red Flag Law) that enables law enforcement and family members to "petition courts to take weapons from persons deemed a threat".⁷ Perhaps if Long's family or the officers that responded to domestic calls against Long had been aware of the law, they could have triggered it. Additionally, had California legislation successful expanded the Red Flag Law to include a measure that would enable someone other than a family member to petition for a gun removal order sooner than 2022, one of the many neighbors that had called law enforcement on Long could have invoked the law.^{7,8} If more people were given the authority to use the law, awareness of it would grow and people with violet or disturbing behavior would get the help they need but moreover, mass tragedies would be prevented.

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