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2023 Michigan State University Shooting: A Case Study

Introduction

On February 13, 2023, 43-year-old Anthony McRae, equipped with two 9mm handguns, walked into Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, and fatally shot three students, and wounded five others. McRae died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound after a three-hour manhunt, leaving behind a note that expressed fatigue at “being rejected” and complained about not having sex in 10 years.

Facts of the case

At approximately 8:15 pm, gunshots were heard outside a classroom in Berkey Hall at Michigan State University (MSU). Shortly afterward, the 43-year-old gunman stormed into the classroom and fired additional shots, killing two students and wounding five others. At 8:18 pm calls were made to 911 reporting gunshots heard in Berkey Hall. More calls began to filter in, all reporting gunshots at the MSU union building, where another student was fatally wounded. By 8:31 pm, MSU campus police officially issued a secure-in-place, “run, hide, fight,” alert. All campus activities were suspended for 48 hours, with students and faculty warned to stay away. Campus police lifted shelter-in-place notice after the suspect, Anthony McRae, was found off campus, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. By the end of the ordeal, 3 students, Arielle Anderson, Alexandria Verner, and Brian Faser, were fatally shot, and 5 others were wounded.

Anthony McRae had no previous affiliation with MSU. He was equipped with two 9mm handguns which he purchased legally in the fall of 2021 but did not register. McRae had previously served probation after pleading guilty to a misdemeanor weapons charge in 2020. Following the event, MSU vowed to cover hospital expenses for the five students who were critically wounded. The university’s Spartan Strong fundraised over \$250,000 in just a few days. As of December 2023, MSU reached a \$15 million settlement with the families of the students who were killed during the shootings. In 2022, researchers at Harvard Medical School found that gun violence costs the United States approximately \$557 billion, or 2.6%, of the country’s gross domestic product annually.

Epidemiological aspects of the event

Mass shootings on college campuses are not uncommon. In 2007, a mass shooting at Virginia Tech took place, killing 32 and wounding 26. Since then, there have been 5 more mass shootings on college campuses, not including the MSU 2023 shooting. In 2023, at least 627 mass shootings were reported throughout the year, with gun-related fatalities totaling 40,167 people by early December. According to the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), as of February 2024, there have been 37 mass shootings reported in the United States, with fatalities totaling 64 people. GVA acquires its data by utilizing automated queries, 7,500 sources from local and state police, media, data aggregates, government for manual research, and other sources to provide near-real-time data relating to gun violence.

Management of the event

After gunshots were reported, MSU police officers immediately entered Berkey Hall and the MSU student union. They were later joined by the Ingham County Sheriff's Deputies, and East Lansing Police. The Ingham County Dispatch Center (ICDC) began to coordinate calls-for-service and dispatched additional resources and services; the ICDC was able to appropriately respond to this emergency and accommodate the massive influx of calls thanks to prior training. It took the university approximately 12 minutes to send its first shelter-in-place order; these alerts were sent out primarily through email. The university's alert system was shortly after updated to include a siren, however, by this point, the gunman had already left the scene. The response at MSU police was assisted by first responders from 72 law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical service agencies.

While the response to this emergency was well-handled, there remain some areas of improvement for MSU, namely restricting campus building access to students and staff and adding locks to classrooms. Furthermore, emergency notifications should come at a quicker speed and should be distributed on all platforms, rather than primarily email. Luckily, MSU has committed to implementing the two former suggestions.

Communications

12 minutes after the shooting, a shelter-in-place alert was issued, primarily through email. Another 'active shooter' notification was sent out moments later with a brief description of the shooter. Around 3 hours later, two photos of the suspect were released and circulated on the internet, calling for help with recognizing or identifying the individual. As aforementioned, communication of the shooting could have been improved by sending out alerts faster and sending out multiple active shooter notifications via multiple platforms.

Summarize

The 2023 Michigan State Shooting was a heartbreaking, but all-too-common event in the United States. While there is a lot MSU did right in its response to the shooting, there is still a lot that can be improved upon. Further measures must be taken to ensure students are safe on campus at all hours of the day.

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