

Samantha Whitegeese
May 28, 2024

2012 Aurora Theater Shooting: A Case Study

Introduction: On July 20, 2012, 12 people were killed and over 70 were injured during a shooting at the Century 16 movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, caused by gunman James Holmes.¹⁻⁶ This event led to changes in state gun regulations⁵ and highlighted unexpected issues in active shooter response scenarios.⁴

Facts of the Case: Within two months before the incident, James Holmes legally purchased four guns and 6,000 rounds of ammunition.² On July 7, Holmes purchased a ticket to the July 19 midnight showing of *The Dark Knight Rises*.⁶ During the sold-out showing, Holmes entered theater #9 and left through the emergency exit to the right of the screen,⁶ keeping the door propped open.² When he returned around 18 minutes into the movie,⁶ he had on full riot gear, including a ballistic helmet, gas mask, bulletproof leggings, bulletproof vest, and gloves.^{2,6} Holmes threw 2 oleoresin capsicum (OC) canisters across the theater,^{2,6} creating plumes of smoke, and opened fire into the packed audience with a fully loaded AR-15 rifle, Remington 12-gauge shotgun, and .40 Glock handgun.² Ten people were killed at the movie theater, and two more died at the hospital.^{1-3,6} Over 70 audience members sustained injuries.^{1-3,6} Bullets were found in the adjacent theaters, where an additional person was injured.³ Around 12:39am, James Holmes surrendered to police outside the movie theater.² Holmes warned police that he booby-trapped his apartment with explosives.^{2,6} All bombs and incendiaries in his apartment were disarmed the next day.^{2,6} On July 16, 2015, nearly three years after the massacre, James Holmes was found guilty of all of the 165 counts against him and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.^{2,6}

Epidemiological Aspect of the Event: A collection of books and studies have been published that discuss a range of topics surrounding the Aurora shooting and the mental health of James Holmes, in addition to comparing the Aurora shooting with the Sandy Hook Elementary School, which occurred in the same year.^{3-4,6-7} A case published by Harvard Kennedy School of Government highlights the recovery process within Aurora Public Schools and the steps taken by Superintendent John L. Berry.⁷ One article examines assumptions surrounding the connections between gun control laws, mental illness, and mass shootings.⁸ Additionally, this case has interested the public because Holmes unexpectedly remained alive, letting the police apprehend him.²⁻³ While two psychiatrists examined his mental health, only one of them recorded their sessions, which were later used in books, articles, and studies on the mental health of a mass shooter.^{3,6-7}

Management of the Event: SWAT Commanders Mike Daily and Jad Lanigan led the response to the event alongside Aurora police officers, emergency medical services, and firefighters.⁴ There was an assumption that a leadership transfer would occur as Commander Lanigan led the response at the beginning until Commander Daily arrived on the scene. However, a decision was made to keep Commander Lanigan in charge, so there was an unwavering focus on the task at hand.⁴ Police apprehended James Holmes as he sat outside the movie theater in his car.^{2,6} Both commanders spoke at the Patrol Tactics Conference, discussing the unexpected obstacles in the active shooter response.⁴ One factor that made this a difficult issue to respond to and navigate was the sound.⁴ The movie kept playing in the background because movie theater workers fled the scene.^{2,4,6} Second, the gas canisters Holmes used made visibility difficult in an already low-lit auditorium.²⁻⁴

Communications of the Event:

During the Patrol Tactics Conference, Commander Lanigan and Commander Daily discussed response issues that were highlighted in the incident.⁴ Several gunshots could be heard during calls to 9-1-1. However, the dispatchers could not recognize the noises as gunshots and, therefore, did not immediately know this was a mass shooting.⁴ Commanders suggested dispatchers visit a gun range to understand what a fired gun sounds like.⁴ Additionally, the language used and the phrasing of questions to the caller created unintentional leading questions.⁴ The pronoun used by dispatch was 'they' when asking where the shooter was.⁴ The response by the caller included 'they', leading dispatch to think there were multiple shooters.⁴

Summary: In the aftermath of the 2012 Aurora theater shooting, key lessons were learned about mass shooting response, mental health in connection to gun control laws, and recovering from this tragic event that impacted the whole community of Aurora.

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