




# INSIDER THREAT JOB AID

**Potential Risk Indicators:**  
Active Shooters and the Pathway to Violence



Center for Development  
of Security Excellence

**CDSE**



The following draws on extensive research by the FBI of active shooter incidents in the US from 2000 to 2020. Those studies and additional resources related to active shooter awareness and prevention are available on the FBI's website:

[https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/  
active-shooter-resources](https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-resources)



The FBI defines an active shooter as an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area. Implicit in this definition is an individual's use of firearms in such attacks. **According to FBI data, a record high 40 active shooter incidents occurred in 2020, a 33% increase from the prior year and a 100% increase compared to 2016. While active shooter incidents were the highest on record in 2020, casualty counts declined by 36% from the prior year (258 vs. 164 casualties).** The FBI notes the decline may be the result of several possible factors, one being the reduction of public gatherings due to COVID-19 lockdowns. As people fully return to workplaces, schools, and public venues, active shooter casualty opportunities may likewise increase.

With the rise of cases in recent years, some may wonder if little can be done to stop an attacker determined to commit violence. However, FBI research suggests many active shooters, in the weeks and months before an attack, engage in behaviors that may signal impending violence. While some behaviors are intentionally concealed, others are observable and — if recognized and reported — may lead to successful intervention before an attack is carried out.



## Pathway to Violence

Researchers believe individuals who commit targeted violence often move along an identifiable pathway to violence. While the progression along this pathway varies from person to person, the first step usually involves a deeply held personal grievance for a real or perceived injustice. In an attempt to resolve the negative emotional responses to such a grievance, a person may progress to violent ideation and conclude that violence is the only solution.

### Traditional pathway models may include the following steps:

- **Grievance** – motivations may include revenge for a perceived injury or grievance, a quest for justice, as well as a desire for notoriety or recognition
- **Violent Ideation** – forming a conclusion that violence is a justified and necessary solution to a problem
- **Research and Planning** – determining how, when, and where the violence will be committed
- **Preparation** – acquiring the weapons, equipment, and/or skills to carry out the attack; end of life planning, farewell writings, or other means of claiming credit or explaining motivations for the attack
- **Probing and Breaching** – testing and circumvention of security measures at the site of the attack
- **Attack** – may involve violence against both preplanned and opportunistically chosen targets







## The FBI Top 21 Concerning Behaviors

In 2014, the FBI published a report titled *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*. Phase II of this study assessed the pre-attack behaviors of the shooters themselves and identified 21 concerning behaviors that remain relevant as potential risk indicators.

1. **Mental health** – indications of depression, anxiety, paranoia, or other mental health concerns

In 2013, a Navy contractor shot and killed 12 people at the Washington Navy Yard in Washington, D.C., before being killed at the scene by police. Alexis, like many other active shooters, displayed mental health concerns.

**Read more here:**

**Aaron Alexis:** <https://www.cdse.edu/Training/Security-Training-Videos/Insider-Threat/Behavioral-Indicators-of-an-Active-Shooter/>

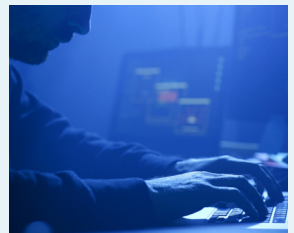


2. **Interpersonal interactions** – more than the usual amount of discord in ongoing relationships with family
3. **Leakage** – communication to a third-party of the intent to harm another person

In 2019, an active-duty Army infantryman spoke to others via social media about his desires to travel to the country of Ukraine to fight with a violent, far-right paramilitary group and kill members of an ideological group.

**Read more here:**

**Jarrett Smith:** <https://securityawareness.usalearning.gov/cdse/case-studies/case.html?Smith>



4. **Quality of thinking or communication** – indications of confused or irrational thought processes
5. **Work performance** – appreciable decrease in job performance; unexplained or unusual absences

In 2019, a 22 year-old active-duty sailor shot and killed two civilian employees, wounding a third at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard. Leading up to the shooting, the sailor was subject to repeated disciplinary actions related to poor work performance.

**Read more here:**

**Gabriel Romero:** <https://securityawareness.usalearning.gov/cdse/case-studies/case.html?Romero>



6. **School performance** – appreciable decrease in academic performance; unexplained or unusual absences
7. **Threats/confrontations** – direct communications to a target with the intent to harm, delivered in person or by other means (e.g., text, email, telephone)



8. **Anger** – inappropriate displays of aggressive attitude/temper
9. **Physical aggression** – inappropriate use of force; use of force beyond what was usual in the circumstances
10. **Risk-taking** – actions that show more than a usual disregard for significant negative consequences
11. **Firearm behavior** – interest in or use of firearms that appears unusual given the active shooter’s background and experience with firearms
12. **Violent media usage** – more than a usual age-appropriate interest in visual or aural depictions of violence

In 2019, a former Army infantryman made multiple posts online expressing support for a violent jihad. In 2021, he was sentenced to 25 years in federal prison for plotting the bombing of a 2019 political rally in Long Beach, California.

**Read more here:**

**Mark Domingo:** <https://securityawareness.usalearning.gov/cdse/case-studies/case.html?Domingo>



13. **Weight/eating habits** – significant weight loss or gain related to eating habits
14. **Drug abuse** – sudden and/or recent use or change in use of drugs; use beyond social norms that interferes with the activities of daily life

In 2020, a Coast Guard officer was sentenced to 13 years in prison for illegal possession of drugs and firearms. Before his arrest in 2019, the self-identified “white nationalist” had a history of illegal drug use and allegedly compiled a list of prominent public figures whom he planned to shoot.

**Read more here:**

**Christopher Hasson:** <https://securityawareness.usalearning.gov/cdse/case-studies/case.html?Hasson>



15. **Impulsivity** – actions that in context appear to have been taken without usual care or forethought
16. **Alcohol abuse** – sudden and/or recent use or changes in use of alcohol; use beyond social norms that interferes with the activities of daily life
17. **Physical health** – significant changes to physical well-being beyond minor injuries and ailments
18. **Sexual behavior** – pronounced increases or decreases in sexual interest or practices
19. **Amount or quality of sleep** – unusual sleep patterns or noticeable changes in sleep patterns
20. **Hygiene or appearance** – noticeable and/or surprising changes in appearance or hygiene practices
21. **Other** – any behavior not otherwise captured in above categories that causes more than a minimal amount of worry in the observer (e.g., idolizing criminals)





On average, each active shooter displayed 4 to 5 concerning behaviors over time that were observable to others around the shooter. Concerning behaviors are observable behaviors exhibited by the active shooter.



The most frequently occurring concerning behaviors were related to the active shooter's mental health, problematic interpersonal interactions, and talk of violent intent.



For active shooters under age 18, school peers and teachers were more likely to observe concerning behaviors than family members. For active shooters 18 years old and over, spouses/domestic partners were the most likely to observe concerning behaviors.



When concerning behavior was observed by others, the most common response was to communicate directly to the active shooter (83%) or do nothing (54%). In 41% of the cases, the concerning behavior was reported to law enforcement. In those cases where the active shooter's primary grievance could be identified, the most common grievances were related to an adverse interpersonal or employment action against the shooter (49%). However, just because concerning behavior was recognized does not necessarily mean it was reported to law enforcement. Since the observation of concerning behaviors offers the opportunity for intervention prior to the attack, it's essential that you can recognize "Concerning Behaviors" and report them to the proper authorities. The goal is to get the person help before the situation gets out of control.

## Remember!



Active shooters showed, on average, **4.7** concerning behaviors



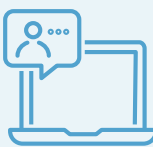
At least **1** person noticed a concerning behavior in every active shooter's life



Concerning behaviors were noticed via verbal communication by the active shooter (**95%** of the time)



On average, people from **3** different groups noticed concerning behaviors



Concerning behavior displayed online was observed (**16%** of the time)



Most active shooters (**89%**) demonstrated concerning behaviors in multiple ways



Concerning behaviors were from observing the physical actions of the potential active shooter (**86%** of the time)



# SUPPORTING THROUGH REPORTING

Reporting concerning behaviors and risk indicators allows insider threat programs to take proactive measures that can lead to positive outcomes for individuals and mitigate risk for organizations.

**Learn more by visiting the CDSE Insider Threat Toolkit:**

<https://www.cdse.edu/Training/Toolkits/Insider-Threat-Toolkit/>

