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Timothy O'Connell for The Atlantic

IDEAS

TO STOP A SHOOTER

Why would an armed officer stand by as a school shooting unfolds?

By Jamie Thompson

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It was the early afternoon of Valentine's Day 2018, and the campus of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School was full of kids exchanging stuffed animals and heart-shaped chocolates. Scot Peterson, a Broward County sheriff's deputy, was in his office at the school, waiting to talk with a parent about a student's fake ID. At 2:21 p.m., a report came over the school radio about a strange sound—firecrackers, possibly—coming from Building 12. Peterson stepped outside, moving briskly, talking into the radio on his shoulder. Then the fire alarm rang. Peterson, wearing a sheriff's uniform with a Glock on his belt, started running.

He climbed into a golf cart with two school employees and headed across campus. At 2:23 p.m., he arrived at Building 12. He was about 10 feet from the door when he heard two or three gunshots. Peterson spoke into his sheriff's-department radio: "Possible shots fired. 1200 Building." Deputies in the area started speeding toward the school. Peterson says he then switched to his school radio and yelled: "Code red, code red!"

Inside Building 12, Nikolas Cruz, a former student, had already shot 24 people on the first floor, 11 of them fatally. Cruz climbed the stairs to the third floor, where he came upon a group of students, including several whose teacher had accidentally locked them out of the classroom after the fire alarm. As the students tried to run, Cruz fired his weapon, an AR-15-style rifle. Jaime Guttenberg, a freshman, was a few feet away from a stairwell when a bullet entered her back, severing her spinal cord and killing her. Another student, Anthony Borges, lay in a pool of his own blood, shot through the lungs, legs, and torso. Borges says that as he lay there, he wondered, *Where are the cops?*

Scot Peterson was outside, standing beside a concrete wall, pistol drawn. Instead of entering Building 12, he had taken cover near Building 7, about 75 feet away. He made no attempt to enter the building where children were being murdered. Inside, 17 people were dead or dying, six of them killed after Peterson took cover. A lieutenant from a nearby police department later told state investigators that he saw Peterson pacing back and forth, breathing heavily. The lieutenant asked what was going on. "I don't know. I don't know," Peterson responded. "Oh my God, I can't believe this." For 48 minutes, even as other law-enforcement officers arrived and went inside Building 12 to try to confront the gunman, Peterson continued to take cover next to the wall.

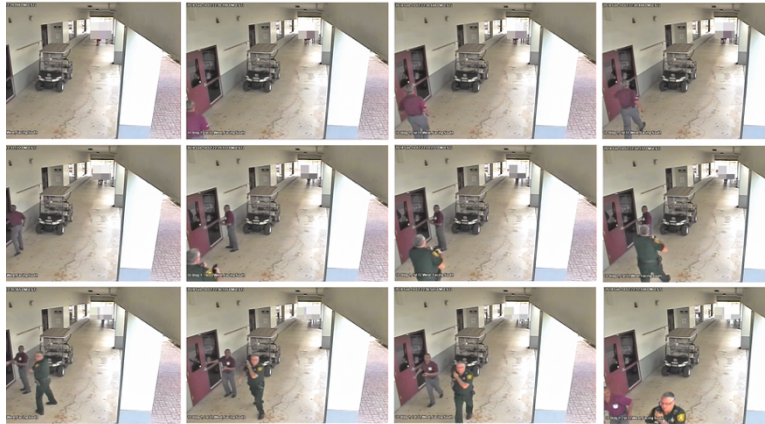
One morning last may, Peterson walked into a courtroom in downtown Fort Lauderdale. He made no eye contact with the half a dozen sheriff's deputies standing guard in dark-green uniforms—the same uniform he'd worn for 32 years.

Peterson, now 60 years old, is 6 foot 5 and has light-blue eyes and silver hair. He was on trial for seven counts of felony child neglect, three misdemeanor counts of culpable negligence, and one count of perjury, charges that carried a maximum prison sentence of 96.5 years. These were the technical charges. But in the eyes of the public, what he was actually on trial for was cowardice.

Read: The next Parkland could happen anywhere

Michael DiMaggio, a lieutenant colonel with the Broward County Sheriff's Office at the time of the shooting, believes he was the first in the department to view the security-camera footage of Peterson standing beside the wall.

“I couldn’t believe it,” DiMaggio stated in a deposition. “He could have interceded and at least saved some of those victims.”



Security-camera footage of Scot Peterson emerging from his office just after receiving a report of a strange sound, possibly firecrackers, on campus (Courtesy of Broward County Sheriff’s Office)

Rick Swearingen, who was then the commissioner of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, said after a 15-month investigation, “There can be no excuse for [Peterson’s] complete inaction and no question that his inaction cost lives.” A Florida state senator called Peterson “a cowardly accomplice to murder.” The editorial board of the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* called him “despicable.” One grieving parent called him a “piece of garbage”; another tweeted that he should “rot in hell.” This “wasn’t a training issue or a policy issue,” Scott Israel, who at the time of the shooting was the Broward County sheriff, and Peterson’s boss, would say. “It was an issue of courage.” Eight days after the shooting, Israel held a press conference announcing that he’d decided to suspend Peterson without pay, but Peterson had retired instead. Peterson had failed to go into the school, Israel said, standing outside doing “nothing” while the gunman was still actively shooting students and teachers. When a reporter asked how the sheriff felt about that, he said, “Devastated. Sick to my stomach.”

Peterson—by now known not only in Florida but around the world as the “Coward of Broward”—hid in his house for three months, draping a white sheet over his front door in an effort to thwart the television trucks parked in a cul-de-sac of his 55-and-older community. He would soon move out of state, to a cabin off a dirt road in the North Carolina mountains, where he relived the shooting every day. At times his partner, Lydia Rodriguez, was scared to leave him alone.

A year after leaving the state, Peterson returned to Broward County for a hearing related to his separation from the force. It was then, to his surprise, that he was arrested. He says he was stripped to his underwear and put in an anti-suicide smock, and spent two nights in jail.

In their arrest-warrant affidavit, investigators alleged that Peterson had “knowingly and willingly” failed to act, refusing to “seek out, confront, or engage the shooter.” This put him among a rare class of defendants tried for an act not of commission but of omission. Because cowardice is not an actual crime—courts have consistently ruled that police officers have no specific constitutional duty to protect citizens, except for those in their custody—Florida prosecutors argued that Peterson, in his job as a school resource officer, was a “caregiver” for the children at Stoneman Douglas. His trial would thus be an experiment in a new arena of police accountability: Can cops be criminally punished for failing to move toward gunfire?

On the first day of jury selection, Lori Alhadeff, whose 14-year-old daughter, Alyssa, was killed in the shooting, took a seat in the second row of the courtroom.

Alhadeff had never seen Peterson in person before the trial. She told me she found it difficult to be in the same room with him, this big guy who’d had a gun and not gone in after the shooter; he had the blood of children on his hands. “It was just painful knowing that he was the one who was supposed to save my baby girl,” she told me. Alhadeff said she attended the first day of the trial because she wanted Peterson and his lawyer to feel her presence. “We all have jobs in life,” she said. “We have to be able to do our job and execute when the moment comes.” To her, Peterson was like a lifeguard who’d refused to rescue a drowning child.

“My daughter was shot eight times in her English classroom, murdered while he hid,” Alhadeff said.

Manuel Oliver’s son, Joaquin, who was 17, had been outside his creative-writing class on the third floor when the gunman started shooting. Joaquin tried to duck into the women’s restroom, but the door was locked. (School officials had been trying to stop students from vaping in there.) Joaquin ran to the nearby men’s bathroom, but that door, too, was locked. The gunman

arrived at the restroom and shot Joaquin. According to a medical examiner's testimony, one bullet left two holes in Joaquin's arm; another struck him in the leg, making it difficult for him to flee. The fatal shot likely came as Joaquin instinctively raised his right hand, palm facing outward, to protect his head. The bullet entered Joaquin's palm and exited through the web between his index finger and thumb. The bullet, along with parts of Joaquin's hand bone, slammed into his temple, shattering his skull in what the medical examiner described as a "lead storm." It was, he testified, as if someone had set off a cherry bomb inside Joaquin's head. "Mr. Oliver's head was only kept together by his scalp and forehead. Everything under the skin was obliterated, and the brain itself was morcellated, and was unrecognizable once I removed it."

Read: What I saw treating the victims from Parkland should change the debate on guns

For years after the shooting, Oliver had clung to the idea that his son died quickly, without suffering. But the medical examiner's testimony, part of Nikolas Cruz's sentencing trial in 2022, made it seem likely that Joaquin had died in pain. The idea that his son had been alone and afraid in his final moments was devastating. And the fact that a law-enforcement officer had been standing about 75 feet away with a loaded gun, cowering behind cover, was almost too much to bear.

Too often, a lone officer is all that stands between a contained incident and rampant carnage.

Oliver told me that he holds Peterson partly to blame for his son's death. When pressed to quantify, Oliver said he'd apportion the deputy's share of fault at 10 percent, with the remaining 90 percent for the shooter.

"But that 10 percent could have changed everything," he said.

Oliver believes Peterson deserves a prison sentence. The deputy had taken an oath, been trained, collected a paycheck, accrued a pension, all in exchange for protecting and serving fellow citizens—something that, when the time came, he'd been unwilling to do. To Oliver, a man failing to keep his word because he was afraid was the essence of cowardice and a dereliction of duty.

Peterson's own lawyer, Mark Eiglarsh, told me he'd initially been reluctant even to meet with him. Eiglarsh's family knew kids who'd attended Stoneman Douglas. Could he represent someone who'd failed to help kids the same age as his own children? A decision to take up Peterson's defense would be unpopular, frowned upon by neighbors and friends—maybe even more so than the capital-murder case he was working on, in which a husband had admitted to shooting his pregnant wife, then trying to dismember her.

But Eiglarsh met with Peterson anyway, and after listening to his story over a number of hours, said to him, "If even 10 percent of what you're telling me can be proven, then you have been politically sacrificed."



Peterson, photographed at his home in North Carolina, December 2023 (Timothy O'Connell for *The Atlantic*)

As Peterson's trial unfolded, it became clear that a question bigger than his guilt or innocence loomed over the proceedings: In an era when schools and malls and supermarkets and synagogues and churches and bowling alleys all over the country are apt to become war zones at any given moment, how do we refashion our police forces to deal with mass shooters? Because too often, a lone officer like Peterson is all that stands between a contained incident and rampant carnage.

Although active-shooter calls have come to feel ubiquitous in America, they're still rare for any given officer to receive. And when they do get that call, many cops say, they've likely spent more time learning about their

department's sexual-harassment policy than about gunfighting. Which is partly why, on the day when a psychopath emerges in their town and they're presented with a moment that reveals their character, many cops discover that any dreams of heroism that might have drawn them to the job are not enough to propel them into action.

Read: Listening to America's kids after Uvalde

Peterson had spent most of his 28-year career as a school resource officer at a magnet and vocational school where he'd rarely had to make an arrest. (A school resource officer is a law-enforcement officer who has arrest powers, carries a gun, and is assigned to work at a school to help keep students safe.) When that position was eliminated because of budget cuts in 2010, he was assigned to Stoneman Douglas, in Parkland, a school of about 3,300 with something of a country-club feel, its 15 buildings spread across 45 acres.

Among some cops, Parkland was known as a "retirement district," a place where older officers liked to work because of its low crime rate. As you approach the Parkland city limits, about 25 miles northwest of Fort Lauderdale, the atmosphere shifts: Commercial sprawl gives way to lush greenery, stately palms, southern live oaks, and philodendrons. With about 37,000 residents, the city has nine parks, elaborate jungle gyms, and endless baseball diamonds. Many subdivisions are gated and feature stone entrances, gurgling fountains, and private security guards.

For Peterson, though, the transition to Stoneman Douglas represented a dramatic change. The teenagers had money and did stupid things. "Oh my God, I've got to go back and start doing police work again," Peterson thought as he acclimated to the new job. He made roughly two arrests a month. He investigated kids for selling vapes, smoking vapes, possessing liquid THC for vapes (a felony), stealing, cyberbullying, sexting, masturbating in the classroom (that was just one kid), and getting into fistfights.

During a Florida Senate hearing in 2019, Sheriff Israel said that Peterson was considered a "very good" officer and was well liked by students and staff. He'd been named Parkland's School Resource Officer of the Year in 2014. One of the only school employees who would speak ill of Peterson—Andrew Medina, a

campus monitor—told state investigators that Peterson spent hours on the job watching home-improvement videos on YouTube, and joked that if he ever had to pull his gun, french fries might fall out of the holster. (Peterson denies the claims; investigators have cast doubt on Medina’s credibility.)

Every year, a couple of students on campus seemed capable of legitimately dangerous things. One of them was Nikolas Cruz. During his time at the school, he’d frightened his classmates by, among other things, bringing a dead animal to school in a lunch box, showing them a picture of a decapitated cat, and bragging about killing a duck with a tire iron. “Nikolas Cruz was batshit crazy,” Peterson told me. “And everybody knew Nikolas Cruz was batshit crazy.” Peterson said that a year before the massacre, when an assistant principal met with Cruz to persuade him to transfer to online school, the administrator asked Peterson to sit in on the meeting for his own safety. Cruz then left the school. “Problem solved,” Peterson says administrators thought. A year later, Peterson got his active-shooter call.

A truism in law enforcement is that officers do not rise to the moment but fall to the level of their training. And as the trial unfolded, Peterson’s training was a linchpin of the state’s case: He’d been taught what to do and failed to do it. One of the prosecutors, Christopher Killoran, called Peterson’s training “vast,” and held up a yellow folder, State’s Exhibit 13, which contained Peterson’s training logs dating back to 1999. Killoran pulled out two sheets of paper and held them up for the members of the jury, showing them a list of 126 courses. A mass shooter is “what he was trained to handle,” Killoran told jurors. “And when the shots started, what did he do? He ran away.”

The pages Killoran held up seemed to display an impressive list of coursework, but a closer look showed that Peterson had received only three specific active-shooter trainings, in 2007, 2012, and 2016. Although other courses had taught relevant or adjacent skills—“tactical pistol,” “combat life saver”—or had been lectures that focused on things like the history of mass shootings, Peterson had spent very little time learning how to do one of the most dangerous and complex tasks required of law enforcement: confront a shooter who has a semiautomatic rifle.

Read: American police are inadequately trained

The Broward County Sheriff's Office added "active shooter" to its annual in-service training in 2007. The first session emphasized a rapid response, but recommended that deputies wait until a four- or six-person team could deploy in a quad or diamond formation, according to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, a group of law-enforcement officials, politicians, and parents who interviewed hundreds of witnesses to produce a 439-page report for Florida lawmakers in 2019. The 2012 training was eight hours, with an hour and a half dedicated to solo responses in live-fire scenarios. The most recent round of training was divided into two four-hour blocks, one devoted to active-shooter response tactics, the other to rescuing victims. With 18 to 24 deputies per class and only 90 minutes of "scenario training"—which requires officers to physically act out imagined plots, making split-second decisions and using multiple skills at once, rather than passively listening to lectures—the "repetitions per deputy were inherently limited," according to the commission's report.

The prosecutor's yellow folder contained the lesson plan for the last cycle of training, which Peterson took two years before the massacre. In one solo-response exercise, the script prompted instructors to say: "There is no reason to give up a good position of cover ... Remember, the cavalry is on their way, so it's better to hold, than to expose yourself to unknown threats."

Deputies were also instructed in the department's active-shooter policy, which read, "If real time intelligence exists the sole deputy or a team of deputies may enter the area" to preserve life. Sheriff Israel later said he'd purposely chosen the word *may* over *shall*, which was used by some other departments, to give officers discretion, telling the Stoneman Douglas commission that he wanted an effective tactical response, not "suicide missions."

Peterson did not, at the moment the shooting began, have the proper equipment to take on a gunman armed with an assault rifle. He was not wearing his department-issued ballistic vest, having signed a waiver granting him permission not to, because he found it uncomfortable in the Florida heat, as well as difficult to move in when he had to break up fights between students. He had spent his own money, about \$1,500, to buy a patrol rifle with red-dot sighting that can improve a shooter's marksmanship—but, per what was then official policy, he had it locked in his trunk in the parking lot.

Nor, as his attorney took pains to demonstrate during the trial, was Peterson the only emergency responder who failed to enter the building to confront the shooter.

Among the seven other Broward officers who could have entered the building but didn't, Deputy Michael Kratz arrived first, about three minutes after the shooting began, and shut down a road near the school, later telling investigators from the Sheriff's Office that he thought it was important to keep three school buses full of kids out of the hot zone. He then heard four or five gunshots, coming from about 30 or 40 feet away. He did not immediately move toward the gunfire, but went to his trunk, grabbed his AR-15, and took cover behind his car. When he saw an injured student, Kratz emerged with his rifle to help escort him to safety.

Deputy Edward Eason, a 17-year veteran with the Sheriff's Office, arrived quickly and heard six to 12 shots, but completely bypassed the campus, heading instead to a nearby middle school. He told investigators for the Stoneman Douglas commission that he'd previously worked at the middle school and felt he could be helpful there.

Deputy Richard Seward arrived and heard five or six gunshots but said he did not know exactly where they were coming from. He got his ballistic vest and took cover behind his car, staying on the road for at least eight minutes before approaching the building and holding a door open for fleeing students. In explaining his actions to state investigators, Seward, who was in his mid-60s at the time, said: "I'm not that fast anymore."

Sergeant Brian Miller, a 31-year veteran, was the day-shift supervisor for Parkland deputies. After he heard Peterson's "shots fired" transmission on the radio, he drove about a mile from his office to the school. He heard three or four rapid gunshots on arrival. He went to the back of his car and put on his ballistic vest, watching as other officers ran toward campus. Miller's job, as a supervisor, was to control the scene and help coordinate the response—set up a perimeter, establish a command post, call for additional resources, dispatch deputies efficiently. But he did little, instead remaining "behind his car in a position of personal safety," according to the commission's report.

Deputy Joshua Stambaugh, a 23-year veteran who had been at a nearby private school working an off-duty detail, arrived quickly enough for his body camera to capture the sound of about five gunshots. Stambaugh put on his ballistic vest and took cover behind his Chevrolet Tahoe for about five minutes, as an officer from a nearby police force, in Coral Springs, arrived with a rifle and hustled toward campus. Stambaugh did not go with him, but appeared to call out for him to be careful: “Watch yourself!” Shortly afterward, a surveillance camera recorded Stambaugh driving away from the school, traveling about five minutes west to a nearby highway overpass. He later told Sheriff’s Office investigators he had been responding to a radio transmission that asked for an officer to set up a perimeter there. He said he took out binoculars and surveyed the school campus. He told state investigators he had been providing “overwatch” services. “So, if [the shooter] was anywhere in that school, on the stairwells, I could, you know, get vision of it and I can advise on the radio.”

Another deputy hid behind a tree, his rifle pointed toward the building. According to the commission’s report, when other officers approached him, he said, “We all can’t stand behind this tree; we’re gonna get shot.”

Stambaugh told commission investigators he could not remember the last time he’d had active-shooter training.

question: 20 years ago?

answer: No, not 20 years ago.

question: 10 years ago?

answer: I couldn’t give you a time. It was a long time ago.

According to Sheriff’s Office records, Stambaugh had attended his last active-shooter training two years earlier, on February 8, 2016, yet he genuinely seemed to have no recollection of it. This was not uncommon. Although most Broward deputies said they remembered attending training in the previous few years, according to the commission’s report, some had difficulty remembering the type of training—whether it had been lectures, or PowerPoint presentations, or scenario-based.

After the shooting, the Broward County Sheriff’s Office investigated seven officers and fired three—Miller, Eason, and Stambaugh—although each

appealed the decision, and Miller and Stambaugh were reinstated. (Seward retired shortly after the shooting took place.) No disciplinary action was taken against Kratz and two other deputies. Scot Peterson was the only officer arrested and criminally prosecuted, largely because, prosecutors argued, his role as a school resource officer made him a “caregiver” for the students. The seven counts of felony child neglect that Peterson faced were for the seven students under the age of 18 who were killed or injured on the third floor, after Peterson had arrived outside the building. The three culpable-negligence counts he faced were for those age 18 or older who were killed or injured on the third floor.

In pinning blame on Peterson in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, prior to any criminal charges, Sheriff Israel had seemed to be trying to take the focus off his agency’s poor response: Peterson’s cowardice, not the agency’s training, was the problem. But if Israel thought Peterson would be sufficient sacrifice, he was wrong. In 2019, nearly a year after the massacre, Ron DeSantis, the newly elected Florida governor, suspended Israel from office, accusing him of incompetence and neglect of duty, largely for failing to properly train his deputies to handle active shooters.



Officers from various agencies on the scene in Parkland after the shooting (Joe Raedle / Getty)

On the day of the Parkland shooting, one Broward sheriff’s deputy, Dave Hanks, arrived to find two of his colleagues, including Sergeant Miller, taking cover. Hanks looked out across campus and saw a group of men advancing

confidently toward the school. Most were from the police department in Coral Springs and seemed to know what they were doing.

“They were obviously together in a line, running with purpose,” Hanks later told investigators. He joined them, becoming the first Broward sheriff’s deputy to enter the school, about 11 minutes after the shooting began and nine minutes after Peterson had arrived at Building 12.

Though the Coral Springs Police Department is a considerably smaller agency than the Broward County Sheriff’s Office, its team performed better, according to the Stoneman Douglas Commission’s report, and it led the response inside the school. In contrast to Israel, who required active-shooter training only once every three years, the Coral Springs police chief at the time, Tony Pustizzi, had mandated active-shooter training every year since 2013—and the training included instruction on single-officer response. (Pustizzi himself was one of the first on the scene at Stoneman Douglas, and helped lead his officers’ response.) At Coral Springs, annual training was eight hours and scenario-based, and included a rifle course to simulate how to engage a mass shooter while moving. Notably, the Coral Springs policy said officers *shall*—not *may*—confront a shooter, and officers say they knew that.

Several of the Coral Springs officers who showed up first were from the SWAT team, trained to operate in high-stakes situations using military equipment. (Broward SWAT was farther away and took longer to arrive.) A Coral Springs SWAT-team leader, Nicholas Mazzei, sprinted toward Building 12, a rifle slung across his chest. A SWAT teammate, Scott Myers, was close behind, holding a pistol. Myers later told investigators he’d had an AR-15 in his trunk but didn’t want to waste time. “I made the conscious decision to run in with my handgun instead of arming myself with the rifle, knowing full well that the rifle was 1,000 times better than the handgun ... I had to make the decision that seconds mattered.”

Coral Springs had not only better training, but better real-time intelligence about the gunman’s location. Supervisors from both agencies failed to quickly merge their radio channels, a process requiring only three mouse-clicks on a computer; as a result, many Broward sheriff’s deputies said they didn’t know precisely where the shots were coming from. Additionally, Broward deputies

were on an antiquated radio system that quickly became overwhelmed and started emitting a loud noise when deputies tried to talk.

One day not long before the trial, I asked Peterson how he would describe the quality of his active-shooter training. “Shit,” he said. He told me he vaguely remembered the 2012 class where officers learned to enter the situation as a group. There was no “‘Here, deputy, you’re by yourself; go in, go find the shooter, learn tactics,’ never.” He remembered the 2016 training as officers sitting in a class with their feet up watching a PowerPoint.

Peterson says that taking cover when he heard shots so close by was both instinctive and correct: All of the training he’d received across 30 years, he told me, emphasized that if “shots are outside and you don’t know where they are, you take cover. That was my mindset.

“Everyone wants to believe that I knew Cruz was in there shooting people, and I ran. That wasn’t the case at all. I heard gunfire outside and said, ‘Shit, I’m looking for the closest cover.’”

The columbine high shooting, on April 20, 1999, in Colorado, was supposed to produce a watershed moment for policing. The attack began around 11:19 a.m. Half a dozen deputies arrived within minutes to a scene of chaos: terrified students sprinting away from the suburban school while others lay bleeding on the grass, shot while eating lunch. Explosions rocked the campus, shattering windows and filling the air with smoke. One of the two gunmen fired about 10 shots at the school resource officer, easily identifiable in his bright-yellow uniform shirt, in the senior parking lot. The deputy leaned over the top of a car and fired four shots back. The gunman disappeared inside the school. Other responding officers, one of whom drove his motorcycle through the grass in a nearby park to get there quickly, used patrol cars for cover as they escorted students to safety. Officers did not run inside the building to confront the shooters, but did what they’d been trained to do, which was set up a perimeter and wait for SWAT.

The wait-for-SWAT approach existed for good reason. Big-city SWAT teams have exponentially better training than the average patrol officer. Excellent sharpshooters in top physical shape, SWAT officers spend considerable time learning tactics, breaching, gunfighting, and close-quarter combat. Some are

expert at rappelling, hostage negotiating, and explosives. SWAT teams have a saying: “When citizens need help, they call 911. When police need help, they call SWAT.”

At Columbine, a SWAT commander arrived at 11:36 a.m. and called for all available SWAT officers to organize for entry “as quickly as possible.” The first SWAT team entered the building at 12:06 p.m. That means it took about 47 minutes from the time authorities received the first 911 call for SWAT to enter the building. (The response was also complicated by the fact that the gunmen had left pipe bombs across school grounds.) At some point, a teacher wrote a plea on a whiteboard and placed it in a window: 1 bleeding to death. Dave Sanders, a teacher who’d been hit by shotgun blasts while rescuing students, lay on the floor in a science lab. Students, including two Eagle Scouts, had tried to keep him conscious and ripped their shirts into strips to make him tourniquets and a pillow. By the time a paramedic was able to reach him, Sanders, a father of three, had died. “I’m not going to make it,” he’d said as he bled out. “Tell my girls I love them.” Authorities believe the two gunmen killed themselves about 49 minutes into the attack, after fatally wounding 12 students and Sanders.

Columbine prompted a dramatic shift in active-shooter training. Communities could no longer afford to wait for SWAT; they needed first-responding officers to advance toward the gunfire and distract, isolate, or kill the attacker. That meant agencies needed to turn the average beat cop into a kind of junior-varsity SWAT officer. The first iteration of post-Columbine training advocated a small-team response, with four or five officers advancing together. This approach works well if officers arrive around the same time. But that doesn’t always happen. In a 2015 workplace shooting on the day of a holiday party in San Bernardino, California, a husband and wife fired more than 100 rounds, killing 14. The first police officer to arrive, a lieutenant, told me he got there in one minute and 37 seconds. The second officer met up with him within 30 seconds. It took the third and fourth officers a few more minutes to get there. At that point, the now-four-person team made entry. By then, many were dead.

From the October 2000 issue: In the post-Columbine world, shoot to kill

Studying incidents like this one, agencies began authorizing teams with as few as two or three officers. But as further massacres underscored how quickly

people could be killed—most incidents are over within about five minutes—the recommended approach changed yet again, calling now for a solo-officer response. This is a Navy SEAL-level degree of difficulty: asking one officer to advance alone and take on an active shooter, in many instances one who is much better armed.

During the Peterson trial, Nicholas Mazzei, the Coral Springs SWAT-team leader, told the jury about the risks. “Single-person entry in a room isn’t what you want to do. It’s not what we ever train on a SWAT team,” Mazzei said.

“Why?” Eglarsh, Peterson’s attorney, asked. “Why wouldn’t you want to go in by yourself?”

“Because there’s hard angles that you’re going to miss,” Mazzei said.

“What happens if you miss it?” Eglarsh asked.

“You could get killed,” Mazzei said.

One of the skills that officers need when hunting a gunman, particularly in a school, is the ability to safely enter and clear rooms. SWAT teams spend endless hours practicing this. The first person in the stack, the most dangerous assignment, is usually one of the team’s quickest and most skilled gunfighters. When the officer enters a room, he’ll make his best guess as to where a gunman may be hiding—say, to the right. As he shifts in that direction, preparing to fight, the officer behind him, having read his body language, will pick a different angle—say, to the left. One by one, each officer in the stack fans out to cover another slice of danger. The more areas covered, the safer the officers. A solo-officer entry, in contrast, is essentially playing Russian roulette: Pick a direction and hope for the best.

Although solo-officer entry is now widely taught across the country, some experts question whether this makes sense. In one of the many civil cases filed in the Parkland shooting, Philip Hayden, a Vietnam veteran who formerly commanded an FBI SWAT team and spent 16 years as an instructor at the FBI Academy, was hired by Peterson’s defense team to evaluate his response to the shooting. He rejected the notion that Peterson could have done anything to

stop the killing, noting that Cruz had shot 24 people on the first floor in one minute and 48 seconds, before Peterson even arrived on the scene. As for the killings on the third floor, it would have been “magnificent,” Hayden said in his evaluation, if Peterson, or any other cop, had had the tactical skills to enter the building, see through the smoke and debris, figure out that the shooter was on the third floor, race up there, identify him, and shoot him and kill him without injuring anyone else, all within a couple of minutes. “No one existed who had those powers,” Hayden wrote in his report. “Even a highly trained tactical officer with prodigious tactical skills would not have been able to enter Building 12 and locate and stop Cruz before he had completed his killing spree.”

“If the public knew how poorly some police officers are trained and, more importantly, how poorly those undertrained officers perform—thank goodness crooks don’t know.”

Hayden, who has been involved in training thousands of law-enforcement officers, questioned the very premise of the solo-officer response: “It sounds honorable,” he said in the evaluation he submitted to the court, but it’s inadequate, and allows politicians and police departments to elide the complex, and expensive, issues that need to be addressed. To train an officer to be a “good tactician and an excellent shot within a distance of 25 yards while an individual is shooting at them with a rifle would take hundreds of hours spent conducting tactical drills and live-fire exercises and thousands of rounds fired on the handgun range every year.”

One day during the trial, I sat in a small room inside the courthouse with Peterson and two retired Broward sheriff’s deputies as they rehashed the testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Samaroo, who’d helped supervise the Broward police department’s active-shooter training from 2013 to 2018. Samaroo had described the agency’s training to the jury as rigorous and comprehensive.

“When you listen to that guy, you’d have thought we were getting SEAL Team Six training,” Peterson said. “It’s a farce.” His colleagues agreed, saying that their basic-shooting-skills test consisted of shooting pistols at targets close enough to throw a rock at.

On the calm of the training range, most police officers shoot accurately enough to pass the proficiency tests they must take in order to carry a firearm.

In real-life shooting situations, when they are moving and afraid, officers miss their targets far more often than they hit them, experts say. Although “hit rates” vary across agencies—studies have put them anywhere between 20 and 50 percent—experts agree that cops, when stressed, tend to be bad shots. At many police departments across the U.S., officers fire 100 rounds or fewer a year, usually from a distance of 25 yards or less.

“If the public knew how poorly some police officers are trained and, more importantly, how poorly those undertrained officers perform—thank goodness crooks don’t know,” Sandy Wall, a retired SWAT officer from the Houston Police Department, once told me. “The public expects a lot more out of the average cop than they are capable of delivering.”

Yet there have been examples of heroic solo entries since Columbine. In 2016, Police Chief Doug Schroeder responded to an active shooter at a manufacturing plant in Hesston, Kansas, where a gunman killed three and wounded 14. An employee pointed Schroeder toward the gunman, who was behind a door. As Schroeder advanced alone, he and the shooter exchanged gunfire, and Schroeder killed the gunman. This past May, a police officer was having a friendly chat with a mom and her children at an outlet mall in Allen, Texas, when a gunman opened fire, shooting 15 people, eight of them fatally, including a 3-year-old boy. The officer grabbed his rifle from his car and told people to leave the area as he raced toward the gunman, killing him with a shot to the head.

But many times, solo entry doesn’t end well for officers. Pete Blair, the executive director of the Texas-based Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT), and his colleague studied 84 active-shooter events from 2000 to 2010, and found that when officers attempted solo entry while a gunman was still active, a third of them got shot. “I’m not opposed to solo-officer entry, but I think the officers ought to be informed explicitly about what the risks are,” Blair said in a 2013 presentation detailing his findings for the Police Executive Research Forum. Since then, Blair told me, solo response has become the professional standard, with officers expected, if not explicitly required, to go it alone. Blair believes that if communities are going to require officers to engage active shooters one-on-one, officers must be provided with adequate tools—highly protective ballistic vests and rifles—and proper training.



law-enforcement officer runs toward the school after the shooting had stopped. (John McCall / *South Florida Sun Sentinel* / Getty)

To be good at solo entry, officers need repeated practice entering rooms, hitting moving targets, and performing under extreme stress. SWAT officers, for instance, intentionally and repeatedly enter fear states, to become accustomed to the feeling of adrenaline surging through their body so they can keep their brain online when their heart is racing at 180 beats a minute.

Consider the difference between how Mazzei, the Coral Springs SWAT-team leader, approached the high school and how two Broward deputies did. Mazzei had worked in vice and narcotics and spent 16 years on SWAT, which trained twice a month. He told the jury in the Peterson trial that he'd been in a meeting when he heard about the active-shooter call; he ran to his car, and on the quick drive, began mentally preparing for what he might encounter there. After arriving, he grabbed his loaded M4 carbine, racked a round, and ran toward the school. He saw a campus monitor lying on the sidewalk, checked for a pulse, found none, and kept advancing. When a prosecutor asked him what he'd been thinking, he said, "I don't know that I was thinking anything other than *I need to get inside the school.*" Mazzei ultimately became one of the leaders of the response, helping clear the building and rescue students.

Whereas other officers became emotional on the stand about what they'd seen inside the school, Mazzei came across as almost preternaturally unflappable.

In contrast, now-retired Broward County Lieutenant Michael DeVita told the jury he'd been at his desk taking a citizen's complaint when he received a text about the shooting. DeVita, who spent much of his 28-year career as a detective and supervisor, told jurors that he experienced tunnel vision for the first time in his life while driving to the school.

"I had such an adrenaline dump; my heart was pounding," DeVita testified. "I could only see straight ahead. I couldn't see peripherally at all." He drove so fast that the Broward sheriff's captain riding with him said, "Slow down, you're going to get us both killed." Once he arrived, he entered the administration building, where employees were hiding behind their desks, then made his way to Building 12, where he felt "stressed" and "overwhelmed," he told jurors. DeVita entered the building with his rifle; by this point, the shooter had already left the premises, although DeVita did not know it at the time. (Cruz had blended into a crowd and left the school. He would be arrested later that day, about two miles from the scene, by an officer from a neighboring town.)

Another Broward officer, Brian Goolsby, a 27-year veteran, said he, too, experienced tunnel vision before even arriving on campus. "I could feel the adrenaline," Goolsby told the jury. "My heart rate shot up. My breathing went faster." Goolsby told jurors that he was driving so fast, he ran a red light and nearly crashed into another deputy's car.

After putting on his vest and grabbing his rifle, Goolsby said his hands were shaking as he forced his body to run down the sidewalk. "My legs felt like they weighed 300 pounds," he said. "I remember trying to talk on the radio, and dry mouth—I could hardly talk; that was the effects of the adrenaline." Goolsby advanced toward the school, using cars as cover, then peeked into a window of a building while trying to locate the shooter.

Providing officers with good tactical and marksmanship instruction is hard; training them not to melt down in high-stress situations is even harder. But many big-city departments are short hundreds of officers, which means agencies have to pull officers off the street to conduct proper training, leaving fewer of them to answer 911 calls. Many agencies have to pay overtime to fill

shifts. As a result, many departments cram large amounts of materials into, say, four- or eight-hour blocks, which can create the illusion of rapid mastery, because officers seem to learn skills quickly. But studies have shown that much of what they learn is forgotten, and that shorter sessions spaced out over time are better for long-term retention.

Blair, the ALERRT director, told me that one of the greatest issues in policing right now is that the skills required of officers keep expanding. Departments have added training in de-escalation, crisis intervention, community policing, and avoiding racial bias. Yet police academies have lagged perilously behind, failing to incorporate the ongoing philosophical shifts into traditional use-of-force training, says Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, which has called for a “complete overhaul” of the current police-academy model.

Blair says we need to remember that the primary, historic function of cops—the thing that distinguishes them from all other providers of government services—is their ability to use force. When people do bad things, the police are supposed to stop them. Yet, while there are certainly exceptions, the quality and quantity of use-of-force training for the average cop fall somewhere between mediocre and abysmal. Although rookie cops generally spend more time in the academy on firearms training than on softer skills, few receive adequate ongoing education throughout their career. One law-enforcement trainer, Don Alwes, told me that Little League sports teams likely train more in a single season than a cop does over an entire career. “If our high-school sports teams trained as little and poorly as we do for life-and-death events, parents would not tolerate it,” Alwes said.

“You can’t send Officer Snuggles out to face the dragon” when a mass shooter is on the loose, a police sergeant told me. The cop who specializes in social work and the cop who can take out an active shooter single-handedly—“those ain’t the same guy.”

Over the past few years, the public has witnessed multiple distressing moments of baffling police behavior. All those cops standing, impotent, in the hallways of a Uvalde, Texas, elementary school while children were slaughtered. Cops killing Black motorists after traffic stops escalated needlessly. To policing experts, both problems fall under the same umbrella: improper use of force. Too little force, too much force—both lead to terrible outcomes.

But some experts fear that the problem is only going to get worse. In a post-George Floyd world, a public appalled by unnecessary police violence wants kinder, more empathetic officers, and less emphasis on force. But for cops to use force better, they need better training. Some cops have been frustrated by the cancellation of once-popular “warrior mindset” classes in favor of de-escalation and crisis-intervention training.

We may simply be asking cops to do too many different things. Without specialization, that can mean doing none of them well.

“You can’t send Officer Snuggles out to face the dragon” when a mass shooter is on the loose, Sergeant Scott Banes, of the Fort Worth Police Department, in Texas, told me. Banes said that the cop who specializes in social work and the cop who can take out an active shooter single-handedly—“those ain’t the same guy.”

When a gunman opened fire at a bank in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, on April 10, 2023, the first police officers on the scene were Cory Galloway and his rookie partner, Nickolas Wilt. The gunman shot Wilt, who’d graduated from the academy 10 days earlier, in the head. Galloway, who was shot in his vest, fell to the ground, scrambled down some nearby steps, took cover behind a concrete barrier, then raised his gun and fired, killing the gunman.

Galloway and Wilt, who survived his bullet wound, were lauded as heroes. What Deputy Chief Paul Humphrey, second in command of the Louisville Metro Police Department, wanted to figure out was: Could he credit the good response to the agency’s training? Or was it simply that the right officer, Galloway, happened to arrive first?

As he watched body-camera footage from dozens of officers, Humphrey saw a variety of responses. Some officers arrived on the scene with that “warrior mindset”—advancing with purpose, actively seeking the shooter. Others seemed hesitant, as if hoping that someone more capable would arrive and tell them what to do. Some had never heard rifle fire outside a training range.

“A lot of guys are really tough until they hear that rifle fire,” Humphrey, who spent nine years on SWAT, told me. “When you’re standing there with what

feels like an insignificant tool, a pistol, and you're hearing someone with a rifle going to work very close to you, it's intimidating. You feel like you're going on a suicide mission." Some people go into "the freeze response," Humphrey said, in which their own physiology renders them literally unable to move.

After reviewing the body-cam footage, Humphrey concluded that the department's training was working, because so many officers showed up and ran toward the shots. He also concluded that Galloway, who had worked in tough neighborhoods and participated in additional outside training, probably deserved the most credit.

But Humphrey says that training and experience are not the only factors that determine success in these situations: Galloway and other officers who perform well in active-shooter calls may simply be built differently.

Humphrey's conclusion echoes that of one commonly attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Out of every one hundred men [in combat], ten shouldn't even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back."

A growing pile of research supports Heraclitus: Biological wiring goes a long way toward determining whether a cop facing an active-shooter situation will respond with heroism or cowardice.

In the 1990s, Charles "Andy" Morgan III, a forensic psychiatrist at the University of New Haven, wanted to investigate the neuroscience of human fear. This is a hard topic to study, because it is nearly impossible to design ethical trials that would induce true terror. So Morgan called military bases and asked if he could observe Special Forces (Green Berets, Navy SEALs) survival training. This involved men who'd volunteered to be hunted across rough terrain; deprived of food, water, and sleep; interrogated in a mock POW camp; and sometimes waterboarded. Morgan found a friendly colonel at Fort Bragg and headed down to North Carolina, where he collected soldiers' blood and saliva, to examine their levels of the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. Morgan has documented some of the most intense stress ever recorded in humans: up to 900 units of cortisol, more than double the amount produced by first-time skydivers.

Morgan became interested in several specific chemicals, including a chain of amino acids called Neuropeptide Y (NPY). To oversimplify, NPY helps maintain an ideal level of arousal in the body. The right amount of fear helps us survive by sharpening the senses, mobilizing glucose for energy, shutting down nonessential bodily functions, moving blood to large muscle groups. But too much fear can overwhelm, and the body begins to go haywire. That's where NPY comes in, modulating the stress response so the mind can still function. Morgan believes that NPY, deployed alongside adrenaline, helps protect the thinking parts of the brain, acting as a thermostat to calibrate the optimal amount of stress without negative side effects.

At the beginning of a mock interrogation session, most soldiers had a similar baseline level of NPY, Morgan found. But when tested mid-interrogation, the soldiers who performed best had almost a third more NPY circulating in their system than other soldiers did. He found similar effects with another chemical, dehydroepiandrosterone, a steroid hormone that helps protect the hippocampus from being battered by cortisol.

Morgan has also found that people who are high in NPY tend to perform better on "threat attention bias tests," which have proved to be highly accurate in predicting which soldiers will pass the rigorous selection courses for elite military units. Soldiers higher in NPY tend to be better at quickly identifying threatening faces flashed on screens, while those lower in NPY are more likely to avert their eyes or freeze. Morgan says these tests help identify soldiers capable of moving toward danger and shooting the right targets. While running the tests at the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, Morgan told me, he and his colleagues were able to predict with about 80 percent accuracy who would be selected and who would be dropped. A low NPY level was an especially robust predictor of failure.

Morgan suspects that successful soldiers come to training with genetic advantages, a biological inheritance better suited to war-fighting. Temperamentally, humans are like dogs, he told me: Some are German shepherds; some are golden retrievers. Morgan and other scientists have been exploring whether NPY can be supplemented, added to energy drinks or nasal sprays, so we could modulate its level the way we do with insulin or thyroid hormones, making the retrievers more like the shepherds.

I asked Morgan if he thought police-academy cadets should be screened for their NPY levels. He thought for a moment, then said that a soldier's mandate—kill people who are trying to kill you—is simpler than a police officer's. The demands of policing are more complicated, with a wider “arena of activity,” he said. The skills it takes to respond to an active shooter are different from the ambassadorial skills needed in the nonviolent aspects of community policing.

Nobody is sure any longer what the job of policing is, Morgan told me, or how to weigh its different priorities. This squares with what cops have been telling me in recent years: It's never been a more confusing time to be a police officer.

“I don't envy a policeman's job,” Morgan said. “I'm supposed to be getting to know the people in the neighborhood, but I might also need to be prepared to kill someone. Also, everyone has guns, and I don't want to get shot.”

Creating officers who can perform well in all situations—including confronting mass shooters—is an expensive, time-consuming endeavor. “We want a lot of things from police,” Morgan said, “and I don't know if we're willing to pay for it.”

Sitting beside Peterson at the defense table throughout the trial was his lawyer, Mark Eiglarsh. With a pickleball tan and Ken-doll good looks, Eiglarsh exudes charisma—especially when television cameras are near. Because Peterson felt that his case had largely been tried in the press before the trial even started, he believed he needed an attorney who was good on TV.

Eiglarsh estimates that he's litigated at least 150 jury trials in his career. But he told me that Peterson's was uniquely difficult. To Eiglarsh, the gap between the moral charge—cowardice—levied against this client and the legal charges was substantial: Although cowardice may be morally reprehensible, it is not technically illegal. But a charge of cowardice carried such potent emotional weight that it might be enough to swing a jury—as it had already swung the community, and much of America—against Peterson. “Coward” is a judgment that carries the weight of millennia, perhaps the most insulting word that can be attached to a man. As Chris Walsh, a professor at Boston University, puts it in his book, *Cowardice: A Brief History*, cowards sit atop the list of those condemned to burn in the lake of fire and brimstone in the Book of Revelation,

and they are among the most wretched creatures in Dante's *Inferno*, deemed beneath contempt.

At Stoneman Douglas that day, some people did better than others, but no one present was hero enough to stop the lethal power of a psychopath armed with a semiautomatic weapon, bent on slaughtering innocent people.

Eiglarsh used the word *coward* regularly, first in his opening statement, and then by asking nearly every witness, from the school's assistant principals to its maintenance chief, if they'd known Peterson to be a coward. Nobody said yes.

Also central to Eiglarsh's defense was the idea that Peterson could not tell exactly where the shots were coming from, which Peterson said is why he did not run inside Building 12. Though he had initially radioed that the shots were coming from the vicinity of Building 12, Peterson says he believed the gunman was outside, not in the building. Eiglarsh called more than a dozen witnesses who testified that it had been impossible to tell where the shooter was, because the sound of gunshots echoed across the sprawling campus. Eiglarsh fought back against the notion that his client had done nothing, emphasizing that Peterson was the one who first alerted sheriff's deputies about the active shooter, who called a "code red" on his school radio to warn teachers and staff, who shoed away an unarmed school employee from the hot zone, and who stood with his pistol actively scanning for threats as he tried to find the gunman.

Eiglarsh also argued that if Peterson was a coward, then lots of people were: He worked hard to interrogate the proposition that any person had behaved heroically during the massacre. Prosecutors called to the witness stand one cop after another who told jurors how they had run toward the building, broken windows, rescued students, while Peterson stood idly beside a wall. But the more heroically officers portrayed themselves on the stand, the harder Eiglarsh went after them during cross-examinations, highlighting every act of hesitation, ineptitude, or futility.

As prosecutors tried to build up a series of heroes and Eiglarsh poked holes in their putative valor, the narrative that had congealed around the Coward of Broward began to soften a little, and was replaced by something probably

closer to the truth: At Stoneman Douglas that day, some people did better than others, but no one present had been hero enough to stop the lethal power of a psychopath armed with a semiautomatic rifle, bent on slaughtering innocent people.



A memorial to the victims of the Parkland shooting, outside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (Giles Clarke / Getty)

Perhaps the only cops who have recently faced harsher scrutiny for their inaction than Scot Peterson are the officers who arrived on the scene at Robb Elementary, in Uvalde, on May 24, 2022, where an 18-year-old former student with an AR-15-style rifle was going classroom to classroom shooting students and teachers. The failed police response is widely considered to be, as the *New York Post* put it, “the greatest collective act of cowardice in modern American history.”

The first police officers responded to the school within three minutes. One officer’s body camera showed him running across campus and shouting: “Oh, shit! Shots fired! Get inside. Go, go, go!” So far, a textbook response.

Officers rushed into the building, guns raised, and hustled down the hall toward the sound of an AR-15. Then the shooting stopped. The officers slowed, as though waiting to hear more gunshots. The officers still seemed poised for action: One was bent over, pointing his gun; another crouched down, peering around a corner. But as the quiet stretched on, the officers remained nearly still. Watching the surveillance-camera video of the hallway, you can feel the

loss of momentum. Then, the gunfire resumed. The shooter had fired through the closed classroom door, grazing two cops. The responding officers once again sprang to life, but this time in reverse, running away from the sound, back down the hallway. The officers had done mostly what was expected of them—up until the moment when they almost died and, whether by conscious choice or in response to an overwhelming physiological cascade, retreated to safety, and stayed there. Finally, 77 minutes after the shooter entered the school, a U.S. Border Patrol tactical unit breached the classroom and killed the gunman. Nineteen students and two teachers died, and another 17 people were injured.

Elizabeth Bruenig: The Uvalde police chose dishonor

Lieutenant Travis Norton is a 25-year police veteran from Southern California and a fellow at the National Policing Institute who studies active-shooter events and trains officers across the country. He notes that agencies don't necessarily get to send their first-string players when a crisis breaks. Whoever is on duty shows up with whatever tools they have available (mass shootings are "come as you are," he told me), and hopes that the A-team arrives soon after to take control. If the A-players aren't nearby, the most important backstop is a well-trained supervisor, Norton said. If inertia settles over a scene, as it did in Uvalde, even a single officer who knows what to do—and orders others to specific action—can quickly turn the tide and generate a respectable response.

After analyzing 15 mass shootings, Norton concluded that the biggest problem is almost always poor leadership. After events like Uvalde and Parkland, police forces pay a lot of attention to the training of frontline officers; much less attention is paid to the training received by their supervisors, especially their crisis decision-making skills. That's a problem, Norton told me. When Pete Arredondo, the Uvalde school-district police chief at the time of the shooting, did not move quickly to confront the gunman, that was a critical leadership failure, Norton said. A similar problem occurred at Parkland, when Brian Miller, the first arriving sergeant, stayed silently behind his car.

Cops tell me that another challenge of active-shooter calls the public doesn't sufficiently appreciate is that, yes, you need to move as fast as possible and make quick decisions—but quick wrong decisions can be deadly. Move too

slowly, and you might be a coward; move too quickly, and you might kill an innocent person. Either can end a career in disgrace.

On June 12, 2016, the Pulse nightclub, in Orlando, Florida, was the site of one of the country's deadliest mass shootings (49 fatalities). Lieutenant Scott Smith was among the first officers to arrive. As soon as he stepped out of his Ford Explorer, he heard rifle fire.

Smith ran to the back of his SUV and grabbed his long gun. He told me that the next moment, when officers have to force their body to leave the relatively safe cover of their car and run, often exposed to gunfire, toward the hot zone, is among the hardest of a cop's career. Some officers, if they have a well of training and experience to draw from, will move forward. Others will be unable to advance. Smith, who'd been on SWAT for 20 years and had just that weekend handled two other gunman calls, hustled across a sidewalk toward the main entrance, where it sounded like the shots were coming from.

In the aftermath of Pulse, the police response was widely criticized, largely because it had taken officers about three hours to kill the gunman, leaving wounded hostages languishing in bathrooms. Smith understood the criticism. He himself questions the decisions he and his colleagues made that day. But he says they were busy the whole time, rescuing people, getting explosives to breach a hole in the exterior wall—which they deemed a safer approach than a direct assault down a narrow hallway—and readying other tools, including two armored military-style trucks that officers could safely work behind; one truck had a ram that officers used to punch holes in cinder blocks to free survivors. They wanted to move quickly, but not recklessly.

Smith told me that soon after he got inside the club, he saw a face peek out from one of the bathroom doors—half a nose, one eye. “Let me see your hands!” Smith shouted. The man darted back and Smith, figuring him to be the shooter, fired three shots. Smith quietly berated himself for missing. Only later would he learn that he'd been shooting not at the gunman, but at a hostage.

One morning last July, I watched as a dozen officers from several local agencies attended a two-day active-shooter workshop at Baldwin High School, in Milledgeville, Georgia. They took turns advancing down fluorescently lit hallways, sweating beneath helmets, goggles, and throat guards, aiming blue

guns that fired similarly to their department-issued Glocks but shot only Simunition rounds, which sting like paintballs when they hit you.

The instruction was led by ALERRT, whose basic active-shooter course the FBI designated as the national standard in 2013. The officers worked through half a dozen scripted drills that had been modeled after real active-shooter calls.

Instructors pointed out numerous mistakes that might have gotten the officers or others killed had the scenarios unfolded in real life. One officer forgot to unholster his gun as he advanced toward the shooter. Another unloaded his magazine, then forgot to reload. Several tried to handcuff suspects while still holding their firearms—a good way to accidentally shoot someone. One officer tried to handcuff a bombing suspect, a good way to get everyone blown up. (Proper procedure would have been to evacuate the room and summon the bomb squad.) Another officer, while practicing a solo-entry drill, rounded a corner and shot the first thing she saw—me. Officers had been instructed not to shoot trainers or observers like me wearing bright-orange vests, but the trainees were breathing hard, their stress levels high enough to induce performance errors. And this stress was nowhere near what they'd face during an actual active-shooter confrontation.

A couple of weeks later, when I arrived at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, a sprawling campus in Glynco, Georgia, to undergo active-shooter training myself, a fake shooter killed me before I could even manage to pull my fake gun.

The drills in Glynco, where thousands of federal officers train every year, occur in impressively elaborate landscapes: a motel room, a cubicle-filled Social Security office, an old FedEx plane, a subway station with turnstiles, a coffee shop complete with urns of milk labeled whole and 2 percent.

During their months-long training, officers from many federal agencies—including the National Park Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives—get up to 12 hours of active-shooter training. (Trainers told me they consider 12 hours to be the bare minimum to make officers effective.) As I watched rookie ATF officers train that day, they, too, were learning basic tactical techniques—how to move down a hallway without

tripping—while also trying to adopt the psychological mindset they'd need to confront an armed gunman.

Instructors took me inside a large room filled with movie screens, in which you try to respond with the correct decisions for the simulations playing out on the screens. First, they walked me through a condensed version of basic pistol safety and shooting technique. Then came a series of drills of escalating difficulty—aiming at stationary targets, then moving targets, and eventually confronting angry men screaming at me on prerecorded videos. With a laser gun, I was supposed to decide whether and when to shoot.

As I stood there, my body flooding with stress (not fear-of-death adrenaline, merely the fear-of-embarrassment kind), something trainers had been telling me for weeks became clearer: The mechanical skills of gunfighting—how to unholster rapidly, how to rest your eyes accurately on the front sight, how to breathe, how to move quickly but smartly—needed to be mastered at a level of automaticity before the brain could have any hope of processing the myriad, complicated thinking tasks required to take on an active shooter. Where are the suspect's hands? Is that a cellphone or a gun? Is it time to shoot, or talk, or do something else?

During one drill, I aimed at a man holding a gun to a woman's head. I stood there, anxiously waiting for an opening to shoot. Suddenly, the suspect tossed the gun and released the hostage. Seeing my moment, I pulled the trigger. I looked over at the instructor, anticipating praise, but he was frowning: Once the suspect tossed the gun, I no longer had legal license to fire. I hadn't processed the evolving situation nearly fast enough.

I don't own a gun, I've shot only half a dozen times, and I've never been through a police academy, so it's no surprise that my performance was lackluster. Yet Judith P. Andersen, a policing scholar and psychology professor at the University of Toronto, told me that the average police officer may not be all that much better prepared, given how limited their training is. Some arrive on the job with prodigious firearms skills—they grew up hunting, they served in the military, they lived on farms, they are regulars at the shooting range. But some officers don't learn to shoot until they're attending a police academy, a brief time during which they're also learning how to wield handcuffs, batons, gas masks, and tourniquets, as well as familiarizing themselves with Fourth

Amendment law, de-escalation techniques, community policing, and a huge bundle of other skills. At anywhere from 10 to 28 weeks, America's police academies are of notably short duration. Finland, for instance, which has a high rate of gun ownership by European standards (though its gun-ownership rate is just one-quarter of the United States', and its gun-homicide rate is less than a 20th of ours), requires officers to earn a bachelor's degree in police studies, which takes three years.

Andersen's research has shown that teaching officers to modulate their stress response with techniques such as controlled breathing leads to dramatic reductions in use-of-force errors. But "we need to incorporate these skills from the beginning of training," Andersen said. "And it's just not happening."

"You can talk about them, judge them, armchair-quarterback them all you want," Andersen told me of police who freeze in active-shooter situations. But after only weeks of training, "the average cop is not all that different from the average citizen."

And sometimes an average citizen is better-trained than a typical cop. Stephen Willeford is a plumber in South Texas who was able to single-handedly take on an active shooter killing his neighbors in a church in Sutherland Springs. He credits his successful response, at least in part, to extensive firearms training.

Willeford had been resting around 11 a.m. on November 5, 2017, when his daughter came into his room, believing she'd heard gunfire. Willeford hustled to his steel gun safe, pulled out an AR-15, grabbed a handful of ammunition, and ran outside barefoot. As he approached the church, hearing gunfire, he shouted the first thing that popped into his mind: "Hey!" Hearing him, the gunman dropped his rifle in the church and came out with a pistol, shooting at Willeford, who ducked behind a neighbor's Dodge pickup.

In that moment, Willeford told me, he felt both terrified and completely calm. He lifted his head, balancing his rifle on the truck's hood. He fired two shots, striking the gunman in the chest and abdomen, which were protected by body armor. As the gunman scrambled to his SUV, Willeford fired another two shots, aiming for the man's side, where his bullets found flesh. The gunman fired twice more. Willeford aimed where he perceived the gunman's head to be,

shattering the SUV's driver's-side window. As the shooter sped off, Willeford jumped into a stranger's truck and together they chased the gunman 11 miles down a country road, where he crashed into a fence and shot himself.

Afterward, police officers across the country marveled at Willeford's performance. Many cops, when fired upon, unload their weapons in what's known as "spray and pray." Willeford fired only six shots, each one carefully aimed, repeatedly hitting his target, while also managing not to get shot.

When I asked Willeford how he'd achieved this, he told me he'd been shooting since he was 5, mastering an old bolt-action Remington to protect his family's cattle from coyotes. He'd competed on his church's pistol team, the Sinners, which had dreamed up ever more complicated scenarios, including one drill where Willeford, after a whistle blew, raced to a table, changed a baby doll's diaper, put the doll on his shoulder, shot at targets, then switched the gun to his weak hand and kept firing. Other times he practiced in a welding hood, able to see only through a small eyehole.

His pistol team liked competing against cops, Willeford told me, because they were easy to beat.

"There are some things in life that are worse than death, and what Scot Peterson is going through is one of them."

Three months after Willeford was hailed as a hero, the Parkland massacre happened. When Willeford heard callers excoriating the Coward of Broward on a local radio talk show, he got so irritated that he called in. "Unless your steel has been tested," Willeford recalled saying on the air, "how do you know you would be any better at it than he was?"

Read: The children of the children of Columbine

I asked Willeford what he thought about Scot Peterson's trial. He told me he did not think Peterson should be a cop anymore—he'd been tested and found wanting. But he did not believe Peterson should face criminal charges.

“I’ve been there, and I could not convict him,” Willeford told me. “I know the sheer terror he went through. You can’t imagine it.”

Besides, Willeford believes, the Coward of Broward has probably suffered enough. If he had not run toward the church that day, Willeford told me, he would not have been able to look himself in the mirror without thinking, *You coward. People were dying, and you were too afraid to help.*

“There are some things in life that are worse than death,” Willeford told me, “and what Scot Peterson is going through is one of them.”

Toward the end of Peterson’s trial, one of the prosecutors approached the podium to deliver the last words the jury would hear before deliberating.

“So,” he began. “Nike has a slogan. Their slogan is ‘Just do it.’ Having sat through this trial, just like you guys have, for the last month or so, the thought that keeps popping up is ‘Just do it.’ Just do something. Just do anything.”

Is that really the best you’ve got? I thought as I watched from a bench in the gallery. Do something, anything? This thought was immediately followed by another one: The prosecutor had just accidentally encapsulated the country’s mounting desperation about its active-shooter problem. Do something, anything.

John J. Donohue: The problem America cannot fix

On June 29, 2023, the jurors returned to the courtroom, having deliberated for four days. Around 3 p.m., the judge announced the jury’s verdict: not guilty on all counts. Whatever Peterson’s failings on the day of the shooting, jurors had not bought the argument that he was criminally responsible for the students’ deaths. Peterson laid his head on the table and wept. In the back of the courtroom, Tony Montalto—whose 14-year-old daughter, Gina Rose, a brown-eyed beauty who’d been shot in the heart, the barrel of the rifle so close that it left sear marks on her flesh—shook his head.

After Peterson's trial, the fight to assess blame in Broward County continued. In August, ballistics experts conducted a full-scale reenactment of the massacre on campus, firing 49 rounds, as part of an ongoing civil case by the victims' families and the shooting's survivors against Peterson, the Sheriff's Office, and two former campus monitors. (Parents and attorneys were hoping to discern exactly what Peterson heard during the attack in order to prove his culpability.) The morning of the reenactment, nine members of Congress had toured Building 12, preserved as if it were a museum of mass murder, with wilted Valentine's Day roses, an unfinished chess game, and open laptops populating the classrooms.

Peterson drove home to his cabin in the North Carolina mountains. After the original elation of his not-guilty verdict—which, in addition to avoiding prison, meant that he was assured of keeping his \$100,000 yearly pension—he told me that he still cycles through periods of depression. Peterson had hoped that the verdict would free him from the “emotional prison” he'd been living in, but it hadn't. He'd gained 25 pounds and still rarely sleeps through the night. And not a day goes by that the shooting doesn't haunt him. He no longer faces an actual prison sentence, but continues fighting civil lawsuits. All of the lawsuits, more than 50 of them, have been consolidated before a single judge; Lori Alhadeff, mother of Alyssa, and Manuel Oliver, father of Joaquin, are two of the plaintiffs.

When I talked with Chris Walsh, the author of *Cowardice*, a few months ago, he said that the country's collective contempt for Peterson and the Uvalde officers is telling. In Uvalde, we watched dozens of cops standing around, waiting, doing nothing. We condemn them, and it gives us someone to blame for the failure to protect innocent children.

But our judgment of those officers is ironic, Walsh told me. Because as a society, as citizens and legislators, we are those officers: equipped, well meaning—and paralyzed. Standing around, doing nothing, while children are slaughtered.

Jamie Thompson is the author of [Standoff: Race, Policing, and a Deadly Assault That Gripped a Nation](#). Her reporting on policing in Dallas won an Edward R. Murrow Award for excellence in writing.

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