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U.S.

What to Do in a Shooting? Americans Stream to Classes to Learn 'Run, Hide, Fight'

After Texas church shooting and others, practicing how to face down a shooter in libraries, churches, schools and offices



The Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library held active shooter training on Wednesday, Nov. 8, for 200 people in Clifton Park, N.Y. MIKE GROLL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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By Jennifer Levitz and Valerie Bauerlein

Nov. 10, 2017 5:30 a.m. ET

CLIFTON PARK, N.Y.

At a yellow-brick public library in a quiet upstate town, 200 people participated in active shooter training Wednesday. It was the second session the library offered this week.

Retirees, college students and young parents crouched under desks, barricaded themselves in the local history room, and fled outside into nearby woods. Many said they came so they could move beyond helplessness, conquer fear and take control of the one thing they can: their survival.

"It's going to keep happening," said Ninevah Aranas, a 77-year-old retired family-medicine doctor. "We have to be prepared because you go to church, it's not safe. You go shopping, it's not safe. Just walking around the park, it's not safe."

Similar sessions are planned this week at a hotel in Michigan, a college in South Dakota, a church in Tennessee, a hospital in West Virginia, and a middle school in Massachusetts. The demand for the courses around the country reflects a growing acceptance among many Americans that they may face a shooting in their lifetimes.



Logan McGlynn of Halfmoon, N.Y., hides under a desk during active shooter training at the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library on Wednesday. PHOTO: MIKE GROLL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Bryan Griffis, a partner in an insurance agency in Jesup, Ga., is bringing five employees to an “active shooter preparedness class” organized by the Wayne County Chamber of Commerce next week. “We need to formulate a plan,” he said.

So far this year, there have been shootings in big cities and small towns, in hospitals and churches, at a congressional baseball practice in Virginia, an airport baggage claim area in Florida and a suburban Wal-Mart in Colorado. Two of the biggest mass shootings happened in recent weeks at a country music festival in Las Vegas where 58 people were killed and on Sunday at a small town church where 26 people were slain.

Christopher Combs, a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent involved in investigating the Sutherland Springs, Texas, church shooting, at a televised press conference this week, said that the number of active shooters is on the rise, and called on people to be prepared.

“Everybody, no matter where you are, needs to think about this,” Mr. Combs said.

Despite the deadly recent events, active shooter incidents in the U.S. remain relatively rare and have leveled off at an average of about 18 annually, after increasing between 2000 and 2009, according to J. Pete Blair, who co-wrote an FBI study in 2014 on the issue.

The FBI defines an active shooter incident as involving “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area.” Its recommended response is “Run, Hide, Fight.”

The median toll of an active shooter incident is two dead and four wounded, said Mr. Blair, who leads the federally funded Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training at Texas State University.

“We’ve seen a series of incidents and an increase in lethality,” he said. “It could also be that we had a really unlucky few weeks.”

Demand for training is increasing, especially among the general public, say local police departments and safety instructors. Mr. Blair said his group has trained more than 130,000 people since it started two years ago.

Chad Remley put the active training course he took in St. Louis to use. He and his wife were at the Route 91 Harvest country-music festival in Las Vegas in October when a shooter began spraying automatic gunfire on the crowd.

He pulled his wife behind a Coca-Cola cooler where he figured the walls and liquid would block gunshots, then waited for a break in shooting. They walked quickly, trying not to run and risk falling, toward the right side of the venue where he remembered there was an emergency exit.

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- At Least 26 Dead in South Texas Church Shooting (Nov. 6, 2017)

Three weeks later, when his 9-year-old daughter wanted to go to a Katy Perry concert, he sat down with her and talked about knowing where the emergency exits are and staying calm. His wife was too

nervous to go, but Mr. Remley said he was determined.

"It's not something that I'm going to be fearful of," he said.

The Abundant Life Church in Mt. Juliet, Tenn., began formulating a safety plan with help from the local police after a gunman opened fire at a church 15 miles away in September. The task became more urgent after Sunday's shooting in Texas, said Senior Pastor Larry Grainger.

"People are asking, 'Are we doing anything? What are we doing to prepare?'" Mr. Grainger said.

At the church of fewer than 200, surveillance cameras are going up. The office will stay locked, with the secretary screening visitors via a video camera. Church doors will probably be locked 30 minutes or so after services begin, Mr. Grainger said.

The church leadership is also identifying three members—eyeing those with military or law enforcement backgrounds—who will carry guns and essentially serve as the congregation's security team.

"My hope is that none of this is ever used," Mr. Grainger said.

The Saratoga County Sheriff's Office, which led the training at the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library, has fielded requests from a dentist office, a pain-management clinic, a lumber store, and an insurance agency, said Deputy Ryan Mahan.



Susan Maciejewski took part in active shooter training because 'I'm so nervous right now,' she said. 'We have to start fighting back any way we can.' PHOTO: MIKE GROLL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The drill at the library started with a stern warning over the public address system at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday. "Intruder in the building. Intruder in the building. Lockdown. Lockdown. Lockdown. Lockdown."

The participants were given 90 seconds to take shelter, after which sheriff deputies

walked briskly around the library, opening doors and peering under desks. Some people were well hidden, while a few stood behind bookcases. Some participants froze. "You freeze, you may end up dying," Deputy Kenneth Cooper Jr. said.

Susan Maciejewski, a 68-year-old retired preschool teacher who typically visits the library with her grandchildren, climbed over the stone patio and ran as far into the woods as she could. That was what sheriff deputies had advised, saying trees, brick walls and buildings can stop bullets.

"I'm so nervous right now," Ms. Maciejewski had said before the drill. "We have to start fighting back any way we can."

Ms. Maciejewski stood behind a tree, holding her elbows tight to her side, and her flowered purse in front of her. She fought to stay still, cold in the raw windy weather. Her heart was pounding.

Write to Jennifer Levitz at jennifer.levitz@wsj.com

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