

A Shot in the Dark: an analysis of the Broward County Sheriff's Office response to the Marjory

Stoneman Douglas school shooting

Leisl Seigler

Purdue University

Brian Lamb School of Communication

lseigler@purdue.edu

Abstract

Commonly known as “the Valentine’s Day Massacre,” Marjory Stoneman Douglas was targeted by an active shooter on February 14, 2018. Many failures on the part of the Broward County Sheriff’s Office directly led to several deaths, and yet, the department failed to respond appropriately to the crisis. This paper analyzes the Broward County Sheriff’s Office’s response and offers suggestions on what the department could have done to better communicate with the community after the tragedy.

A Shot in the Dark: an analysis of the Broward County Sheriff's Office response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting

Background and Overview of Shooting

On February 14, 2018, gunman Nikolas Cruz gained access to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High (MSDH) campus. Cruz was widely considered the “crazy boy,” crazy enough that many students and faculty had always been concerned he might do harm to the school one day (Sunsentinal, 2018). Cruz entered through an unguarded gate and was spotted entering this gate with a rifle bag by unarmed baseball coach, Andrew Medina. Despite recognizing Cruz as “crazy boy,” he failed to call in the potential threat and put the school on lockdown (Sunsentinal, 2018). He was the first of three faculty members who saw Cruz, but failed to alert the school.

Cruz continues into Building 12 where the unarmed campus monitor, David Taylor, sees him enter the stairwell; Taylor turns around and proceeds in the opposite direction. A student then saw Cruz load his gun. The student ran to tell the nearest faculty member he could find, Aaron Feis, who was the football coach. Despite having a radio, Feis again failed to call in the code red and put the school on lockdown for an active shooter (Sunsentinal, 2018).

Cruz began his spree of terror two minutes after entering the school grounds, first shooting three freshmen on the first floor of their building. Monitor David Taylor heard the gun shots and hid in a second-floor closet; he did not call in a code red at this point (Sunsentinal, 2018). Cruz continued down the first-floor hall where he killed another six students as a result of poor safety policies from the school district.

Almost three minutes into the shooting, a student called 911. Because the call came from a cell phone, it was received at the Coral Springs city dispatch line. The recording indicates that gunshots can be heard in the background of the call (Sunsentinal, 2018). However, the city police did not handle calls for Parkland (the neighboring suburb where MSDH is located). As a result,

the Coral Springs dispatcher had to transfer the call to the Broward County Sherriff's Office, wasting critical minutes.

In the meantime, the gunshots had set off the school fire alarm, causing students to flood the hallways because a lock down had still not been called into effect. Students and teachers alike were gunned down almost immediately. About this time, the first Broward County officer arrived on the scene and rode in Medina's golf cart to Building 12 where he reported "possible gunfire" inside, but he did not enter (Sunsentinal, 2018). As Cruz proceeded to the second floor, Deputy Peterson hid between Buildings 7 and 8 and radios for the nearby intersection to be blocked off.

Five minutes after Cruz's arrival on campus, a second armed deputy headed toward the school. Deputy Kratz, following Peterson's request for a traffic blockade, stopped shy of the school and blocks the intersection (Sunsentinal, 2018). Simultaneously, the school finally called a code red lock down for an active shooter; there are already almost twenty people dead. Deputy Kratz further confused the situation, reporting that gunshots were coming from the football field. As deputies continued to flounder about outside, more students and teachers are killed inside on the third floor. Deputy Peterson called for a lock down; the school is already on a lock down.

Four more deputies arrive at the campus, but remain in their patrol cars stopped just north of Building 12; no one entered the school. After eight officers arrived at the scene, none entered the building, though all eight report hearing the gunshots of the active shooter (Sunsentinal, 2018). Cruz fired five more times from inside the teachers' lounge and then escaped the school. The eight officers had no idea he had left the campus. Deputy Peterson radioed for officers to stay 500 feet from the building. Adding to the confusion, the Assistant Principal and school security officer check the camera footage to tell police Cruz's location. Because the cameras are

not recorded in real time, they report false information to Peterson (Sunsentinal, 2018) and officers wasted time searching for an already escaped gunman while delaying aid to the injured.

Captain Jan Jordan arrived at the campus almost ten minutes after Cruz entered the campus. She spent seven of her first minutes there trying to make her radio work. She further failed to set up a command post, though one was requested, for another thirty minutes. Four Coral Springs officers arrived on the scene at this point and immediately entered Building 12. Captain Jordan called for a perimeter to be established around the school. Fifteen minutes after Cruz entered the campus, and around six after he escaped the campus, the first Broward County deputy entered Building 12 (Sunsentinal, 2018). Deputy Peterson continued relaying false information while eighteen more deputies, mostly from Coral Springs, enter Building 12. Further confusion ensued while deputies discussed who was actually in charge of the situation.

The school security guard relayed the Cruz's last movements in the school at this time and deputies rush to the third floor, all while Cruz visits the local Walmart and McDonalds (Sunsentinal, 2018). Over thirty minutes after Cruz left the building, officers were finally alerted to the delayed video footage and the reality that Cruz had left the campus long ago. Almost an hour after Cruz walked onto the campus, officers entered the last classroom. Cruz was eventually caught on the street (Sunsentinal, 2018).

Communication Surrounding the Shooting

Communication Prior to the Shooting

There were clearly many communication failures before the shooting ever occurred on both the school and police department's parts. The most damning communication failure was the Broward County officer training procedures. Following the Columbine shooting, officer training underwent a national overhaul. All officers are now trained to immediately run toward an active shooter and neutralize the gunman. However, Sherriff Scott Israel changed the Broward County

officer manual to say that officers “may” run toward an active shooter instead of “shall” (Sunsentinal, 2018). Furthermore, the Broward County deputies clearly did not know how to establish control of the situation in a timely fashion. This failure primarily falls on Captain Jordan who was unable to make quick decisions to neutralize the threat to the school. She had also not prepared her officers to do this in her absence. The best example of this is Deputy Peterson’s inability to decide what to do once he arrived at the school. Interviews with Peterson later revealed that he never entered the school until the other eighteen officers entered almost an hour after he arrived on campus (Sunsentinal, 2018). He wasted time protecting himself, hiding, and calling in false information instead of (at the very least) calling a lockdown for the school or attempting to neutralize Cruz.

Communication During the Shooting

Communication during the crisis was clearly a disaster. Not a single person in any leadership position within or without the school knew how to handle this situation properly. Between the faculty members’ failures to call in even a suspicious person on campus and the officers’ failure to correctly handle the situation once arriving on the scene, students and faculty in Building 12 never stood a chance of surviving Cruz’s attack. This is well evidenced in the timeline of the crisis (see Background and Overview).

Communication Following the Shooting

Following the crisis, the school district did an excellent job of keeping the community updated and informed on the situation. It planned community events to support the victims’ families and, most importantly, cancelled school for several days to give students and faculty time to process the situation and begin to recover. Additionally, teachers did not instruct the first day back to school. Students were even told to leave their backpacks and school books at home because they wanted the day to be about healing and overcoming the tragedy together as a

family, which they posted at www.browardschools.com in the days following the tragedy (retrieved from The Way Back Machine).

The Broward County Sherriff's Office, however, did not respond well to this crisis. It posted nothing on its website regarding the shooting. It did not express sympathy to the victims, acknowledge its' officers' failures, nor reassure the community that they were safe (Kennedy, 2019). Furthermore, at a hearing regarding the school's safety following the shooting, Sheriff Scott Israel did not acknowledge that any of his deputies made mistakes (Nehamas, 2018). Sheriff Israel did place Sergeant Miller on restricted administrated assignment (i.e. he was suspended) pending an investigation into why he did not enter Building 12 if he heard gunshots. While this was a positive step, six other deputies also heard gunshots and did not enter Building 12, yet no statement was made regarding their status on the force (Nehamas, 2018). Additionally, Captain Jan Jordan stepped down from captain resigned around November 20 (Nehamas, 2018), but she did not do so of her own accord; the city demanded she be removed from the position. The sheriff's office did not make this decision itself. Instead, the city had to force her to step down.

Evaluation of Response

It is clear that the Broward County Sheriff's Office did not respond adequately to this situation. As a public defense office, it was critical that the department took steps to assure the community that it was safe. Undoubtedly, parents in the surrounding area were concerned about sending their students to school, letting them go to the bus stop, or walk home from school. Many people were probably also afraid of going places where lots of people gather in an enclosed space such as malls, sports arenas, or movie theatres.

However, the police department did little to nothing to waylay those fears. Seventeen deaths, most of which were high school freshmen, certainly affected the community in a strong

manner. First and foremost, the department should have removed Captain Jordan and suspended all deputies who arrived on the scene, but took no action. Even if the deputies were allowed to later return to the force, an investigation would have had to be conducted and those deputies should have been suspended during that time. This would have demonstrated to the community that Sheriff Israel and the rest of the department were dedicated to protecting the citizens so that this type of tragedy never happened again.

Additionally, at the very least the department should have made a public and sincere apology. Although it is not the department's fault that Cruz entered the school that day with the intent to harm many people, the deputies perpetuated the situation by not immediately taking action to stop Cruz's rampage. As a direct result, seventeen people died. Several of those deaths could have been prevented had deputies been trained properly and taken action once on the scene. The apology should have also demonstrated that the police department took responsibility for the failures of its officers. By not apologizing, the police department showed the community that they refused to take responsibility for a situation that was directly perpetuated by the poor emergency response of the officers. This is a situation that called for the department to take full responsibility; it is not one that can be ignored. As hard as it must be for the sheriff to acknowledge his officers' failures, it must be done in such serious situations. This was the time to come down hard on retraining officers, suspending those who took no action, and removing officers from positions they clearly could not handle.

Another message that should have been communicated is the "no tolerance" message. Terminating, demoting, and/or suspending officers indirectly sends this message, that Broward County Sheriff's Office has no tolerance for officers who do not place public safety above their own and do everything in their power to protect those who cannot protect themselves. The

department also could have directly stated this in any message following the crisis, and though it was a necessary response, it was not communicated.

Last, Sheriff Israel himself should have done a press conference or public forum in which he apologized and communicated the aforementioned messages to the community. In a serious crisis such as this, the medium through which the message is initially communicated must be selected strategically. Face-to-face communication demonstrates severity and sincerity. After this, the department could have used social media to open up a one on one dialogue with citizens (Huffman & United States Office, 2008) to further waylay fear, uncertainty, and confusion. Social media would also have been instrumental in keeping the community informed on the status of the investigation (Tucker, 2011), something the sheriff's office failed to do following the crisis. An example statement for this situation is provided in Appendix A.

Rationale for Evaluation

In situations where public safety is compromised, it is critical that those in charge of ensuring safety do anything and everything to regain the public trust. A police department that has lost the confidence of the people is useless to that community. In an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, Deputy Barney Fife arrests almost the whole town of Mayberry on various charges because he wanted to show Sheriff Andy Taylor that he could take care of the town while Andy was away. Barney becomes the laughing stock of the town, so Andy helps by telling people he has to fire Barney because he has lost the confidence of the people and is no use to a sheriff. Although Andy was kidding and was trying to get the people to see that their jokes hurt Barney, the sentiment is true. How can sheriffs expect to maintain order if the people do not trust nor respect the deputies in the department?

More than almost any other public defense department, local police departments must maintain trust with the community. Especially in small towns, the police are a vital part of

making communities feel safe and secure. When that security is compromised in such a tragic manner, perpetuated by poor defense responses, it is the police department's responsibility to the citizens of the communities they are sworn to protect to rebuild the people's trust. This cannot be done with a simple message on social media, a website, or even a printed statement. It must be done over time using multiple strategies and messages to reach the whole community.

Closing Remarks

While the school district responded well to this crisis and demonstrated support for the grieving community, the sheriff's office failed to take the proper steps in regaining community trust and confidence. Other police department's that experience crises such as this could learn a valuable lesson in crisis management by studying the failures of Broward County. No matter the industry, it is critical that organizations take responsibility for their failures and work actively to repair the damage.

References

- Huffman, E., Prentice, S., & United States. Office Of The Assistant Secretary For Nuclear Energy. (2008). Social Media's New Role in Emergency Management. *Emergency Management and Robotics For Hazardous Environments, Albuquerque, New Mexico*, Retrieved from https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc897576/m2/1/high_res_d/927634.pdf
- Kennedy, Mike. (2019). 2 weeks after deadly shooting, students return to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School." *American School & University* [Online Exclusive] 1 Mar. 2018. *Global Reference on the Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources*. Retrieved from http://find.galegroup.com/grnr/infomark.do?&source=gale&idigest=2b030783a0a502c4f96e4c77bf56bfbe&prodId=GRNR&userGroupName=purdue_main&tabID=A003&docId=A529423062&type=retrieve&contentSet=IAC-Documents&version=1.0
- Nehamas, Nicholas. (2018). After Criticism, BSO Captain in Charge of Parkland Shooting Response Resigns. *Miamiherald*, Retrieved from www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/broward/article221975890.html.
- Sunsentinel. (2018). Unprepared and Overwhelmed. Retrieved from <http://projects.sun-sentinel.com/2018/sfl-parkland-school-shooting-critical-moments/>
- Tucker, C. (2011). Social media, texting play new role in response to disasters. *The Nation's Health*, 41(4), 1,18. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.purdue.edu/docview/866343005?accountid=13360>

Appendix A- Example Statement from Broward County Sheriff's Office

This statement is intended to be read aloud to the media. It would occur quickly after the incident and would be given by Sheriff Israel himself.

To the Citizens of Broward County,

Yesterday, a tragedy no one ever expected in this town occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the victims of this heinous and senseless act, as well as with the students and staff of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. We are not only saddened by the all too early passing of these bright students and their dedicated teachers, but also that much of this tragedy could have been avoided. It is a police officer's duty to protect the citizens in this town no matter the cost. Our officers failed to do this yesterday. The officers on the scene were plagued with disorganization and miscommunications, ultimately leading to many more avoidable deaths.

It is for this reason that the Broward County Sheriff's Office has suspended all officers who were on scene at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, but who did not act, pending an investigation. Additionally, Captain Jan Jordan has been removed from her position as captain after failing to maintain order and protect the students inside. Broward County Sheriff's Office is conducting a full and thorough investigation of the events that occurred yesterday so that we may make informed decisions about the future of the department. This office does not tolerate inaction when lives are at stake. I [Sheriff Israel] would like to personally extend my sincerest apologies to the community that my officers were not better equipped to handle this situation in the moment. You never know what is going to happen in the day and we failed to properly prepare them for this type of situation.

I have created a task force to create new training procedures and to update all training manuals to avoid this type of situation from repeating itself. Updates on this, the investigation, and more will be posted to the Broward County Sheriff's Office social media pages, as well as on our website. Any questions the community has may be directed to the special service line for this situation at 555-555-5555. Thank you for your continued faith in and support of the Broward County Sheriff's Office. We will do everything in our power to understand what happened yesterday as we move forward together as a community in search of healing. Thank You.