

Trends and Recommendations: Homicides at Colleges and Universities



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The 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech—the deadliest mass shooting in American higher education history—has shaped how most people picture US campus violence.¹ Yet, campus homicide incidents extend beyond rare and extraordinarily lethal active shooter incidents to include interpersonal disputes, intimate partner violence, and community conflicts that follow people onto college grounds.² Treating all campus homicides as a single phenomenon obscures the distinct dynamics of each type and can lead to prevention strategies that address one form of violence while neglecting others.

In addition, higher education settings differ from K–12 schools in ways that matter for prevention. College campuses are functionally open. Students are legal adults, and the campus community also includes faculty, staff, visitors, and family members. Residential life, academic life, and social life overlap in ways that create unique risk environments—particularly in dormitories, where intimate partner violence accounts for a startling share of homicides. And the perpetrator pool is broader and older than in K–12 settings, encompassing faculty denied tenure, employees with workplace grievances, and former students who retain familiarity with campus layouts long after they leave.

Active shooter incidents in higher education

Active shooter incidents at colleges and universities are rare but disproportionately deadly. Twenty incidents over 25 years (2000 to 2025) were responsible for just 7 percent of campus homicide incidents, yet they accounted for 23 percent of all deaths and 38 percent of all injuries in the data. The average active shooter event killed 4.3 people and injured 5.2—roughly four times the lethality and seven times the injury rate of all other deadly campus attacks combined.

Key Takeaways

- Campuses experience a range of homicidal incidents, including active shooter events, interpersonal violence, workplace violence, and community violence.
- Campus prevention systems that focus on only traditional-age undergraduates will miss a meaningful share of risk.
- Physical security efforts need to reconcile that most serious threats come from insiders who already have access to the campus.

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Figure 1: Key facts at a glance

 **280**

total homicide incidents at colleges and universities from 2000 to 2025

 **370**

killed (between 1 and 32 people per incident)

 **20**

(7.1%) met the *active shooter incident* definition

 **90%**

of active shooters were men

- **Of those killed:**

- 26% female and 64% male
- Victim ages ranged from 0 to 94, with a median of 22 (11 victims were newborns)
- Most victims were insiders; 54% of the victims were students, and 15% were employees of the college or university
- An additional 280 people were injured
- **86 deaths (23%) and 103 injuries (38%) resulted from active shooter incidents**

- **80% of active shooters were insiders (i.e., current or former students, faculty, or staff)**
- **65 incidents (23%) involved domestic violence, making it the single most commonly identified motive**
- **59 homicides occurred in dormitories, the most common specific location in the dataset**
- **265 of 280 perpetrators (95%) faced no access restrictions when entering campus**

Similar to incidents at K–12 schools, the insider dynamic was central to these events. Of the 20 active shooters, 16 (80 percent) had a direct affiliation with the institution: 11 were current students, 2 were former students, 2 were faculty, and 1 was a staff member. But the higher education perpetrator pool is older and more varied than that of K–12 schools. The median age was 26.5 compared to 17 in K–12 settings, and the range stretched from 20 to 67. The dataset includes a graduate nursing student, a biology professor, a campus maintenance worker, and a rejected job applicant. This breadth has a key implication for threat assessment: campus prevention systems that focus on only traditional-age undergraduates will miss a meaningful share of risk.

Nearly all active shooter events were preplanned (17 of 20, 85 percent). Most occurred inside campus buildings (15 of 20, 75 percent) during class time (13 of 20, 65 percent), typically in the morning or early afternoon. Handguns were the most common weapon (14 of 20, 70 percent), though three perpetrators used assault-style weapons. Just over half of the perpetrators (11 of 20, 55 percent) purchased their firearms legally.

Of the 20 perpetrators, 13 (65 percent) had a documented mental health history, and 12 (60 percent) showed evidence of suicidality. Ten (50 percent) died by suicide during or immediately after the attack, highlighting the overlap between suicidal crisis and outward-directed violence. Twelve (60 percent) displayed warning signs beforehand—most commonly increased aggression (9 of 20). Six had studied or been inspired by prior mass shootings, particularly the 1999 Columbine massacre.

Eleven perpetrators (55 percent) had documented current stressors; work or academic performance was the most frequently identified one (9 of 20, 45 percent) followed by financial stress (6 of 20, 30 percent). This stressor profile is distinctive. In K–12 settings, trauma histories and peer victimization feature prominently. In higher education, the stressors are more often institutional; examples include a failed dissertation defense, a denied promotion, a negative performance review, and a job rejection.

Perhaps the most consequential difference from K–12 schools is the leakage rate. Only 3 of 20 higher education active shooters (15 percent) communicated

their plans beforehand compared to 54 percent in K–12 settings. This finding has significant implications for prevention. Anonymous tip lines and peer reporting—strategies with strong empirical support in K–12 environments—will detect fewer cases on college campuses. Prevention must rely more heavily on structured threat assessment, institutional records, and the ability to connect information across systems that are not naturally interconnected.³

Domestic violence on campus

Domestic violence is the single most commonly identified motive in campus homicides. Sixty-five incidents—nearly one in four—involved intimate partner or family violence, resulting in 74 deaths and four injuries. These attacks tended to be targeted and in close range.

The victim profile is highly gendered. Two-thirds of domestic violence victims on campus were female (50 of 74). Of the victims, a former partner killed 22, and a current partner or spouse killed 16. Fourteen victims were the perpetrator’s own children. In case after case, the pattern is the same: a young woman was killed by a man she once dated, or was still dating, in the place where she was living and studying.

Dormitories are at the center of this trend. Of the 39 domestic violence homicides that occurred inside buildings, 28 took place in dorms. Another 12 happened in parking lots. In these residential and transitional spaces, victims are the most accessible, and former partners can arrive with a plausible reason to be present.

Most domestic violence perpetrators were current students (27 of 65), followed by family or friends of students (13). The median age was 22.5. Nearly a quarter (16 of 65, 24.6 percent) killed themselves after the attack, and more than a third (24 of 65, 37 percent) had documented suicidality. The murder-suicide pattern in these cases mirrors decades of cases captured in intimate partner violence literature, but this risk factor has not been well integrated into campus safety planning.⁴

Staff and faculty perpetrators

Twelve campus homicide incidents were committed by employees: four by faculty members and eight by staff. Three of these events were active shooter incidents:

- In the 2010 University of Alabama in Huntsville shooting, a biology professor killed three colleagues during a faculty meeting after being denied tenure.
- In the 2010 Ohio State University shooting, a probationary employee killed a supervisor after a negative performance review.
- In the 2021 Thomas Jefferson University shooting, a staff member killed a coworker during a workplace dispute.

The remaining nine involved a mix of interpersonal disputes, sexual violence, and retaliation.

This group of perpetrators is small, but the profile is distinctive. The median age was 44.5, the oldest of any perpetrator category. All but one were male. Workplace grievances were common motives: 6 of 12 had documented work performance stressors, and the case narratives repeatedly featured disputes over evaluations, supervision, and professional status.

What stands out most, though, is what was absent. None of the 12 staff or faculty perpetrators leaked their plans to anyone. Only one showed signs of a crisis beforehand. Only two had documented mental health histories. These people did not fit the conventional profile of someone in visible psychological distress. Their warning signs, to the extent they existed, showed up in performance reviews, human resources (HR) complaints, and workplace conflicts—the kinds of records that rarely reach a behavioral intervention and threat assessment team.⁵

Of the perpetrators, 5 of the 12 killed themselves. This finding reflects a workplace violence pattern, not a school violence pattern, and it calls for prevention structures that extend beyond the student body to encompass the entire campus workforce.⁶

The other campus homicides

The 260 non-active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2025 accounted for 284 deaths and 169 injuries—an average of just over 1 death per incident. These events looked less like planned attacks on an institution and more like community violence that happened to occur on or near college grounds.

The most common situations were domestic violence (58 incidents, 22.3 percent), escalation of disputes (57, 21.9 percent), robbery (28, 10.8 percent), accidents or negligence (13), retaliation (13), mental health crises (13), and drug-related violence (12). Firearms were involved in 61 percent of cases, with handguns being the most common weapon, but a notable share involved knives (44 incidents), physical assault (31), blunt objects (8), and vehicles (6)—a weapon profile that looks nothing like active shooter events. Perpetrators were mostly male (90 percent) and either Black (55 percent) or White (28 percent).

Homicides were the most likely to occur in September and October (28 percent) when schools were opening up for the year. These incidents overwhelmingly occurred outside buildings (60 percent), outside of class time (84 percent), and at night (41 percent). Only 30 percent of perpetrators were current students. Thirty-five percent were strangers with no school affiliation. Most fled the scene and were later arrested (68 percent), and another 10 percent escaped entirely—patterns consistent with impulsive, retaliatory, or opportunistic violence rather than targeted attacks on a campus.

Many perpetrators had criminal histories (55 percent), violent histories (22 percent), and substance use histories (11 percent). Perpetrators often showed warning signs (34 percent), were experiencing current stressors (38 percent), and had a mental health history (16 percent). The majority of perpetrators were apprehended (77 percent), with 10 percent escaping and 12 percent killing themselves on the scene.

Forty-nine incidents (17.5 percent) occurred at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Given that HBCUs enroll roughly 9 percent of Black college students in the US and have a much smaller share of total US college enrollment, this figure likely

represents a disproportionate burden of campus violence that warrants dedicated attention and investment.

Security measures: what they can—and cannot—do

The access control model that structures K–12 school safety planning does not translate to higher education. In 265 of 280 homicide incidents (95 percent), the perpetrator faced no access restrictions when entering campus. Of the 20 active shooters, 19 walked in without obstruction. College campuses are, by design and by mission, open environments. They host public events, welcome visitors, and serve communities far beyond the enrolled student body. Single points of entry and locked perimeter doors—the backbone of elementary and secondary school hardening—are neither feasible nor desirable in this setting.

Even so, physical security is not irrelevant. Controlled access to specific buildings, particularly dormitories, can limit exposure. But as the data show, the most serious threats come from insiders who already have access, and 95 percent of all perpetrators entered without encountering any barrier at all.

The leakage gap between K–12 and higher education also complicates peer-reporting strategies. Campaigns built around “see something, say something” remain valuable, but the data suggest they will detect a smaller share of active shooter threats on college campuses than in K–12 settings. The most consequential opportunities for prevention in higher education lie in systems that can identify risk earlier, including behavioral intervention teams that monitor information across student affairs, HR, academic departments, counseling services, campus police, and Title IX offices.⁷

Recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers

1. Recognize that campus homicides are not one thing

Active shooter events, domestic violence, community spillover, workplace grievance, and opportunistic crime each follow different pathways and demand different responses. Prevention investments should reflect this diversity rather than defaulting to an all-hazards approach shaped primarily by the active shooter scenario.

2. Integrate domestic violence considerations into campus safety planning

One in four campus homicides involves intimate partner or family violence. This category of risk is too large to be managed solely through Title IX compliance or student conduct processes. Campus behavior intervention teams should include domestic violence expertise, and housing and residential life staff should be trained to recognize and respond to intimate partner violence as a safety threat, not only a disciplinary matter. Screening for relationship violence during counseling intake and student conduct proceedings can surface risk that might otherwise remain invisible to security operations.

3. Extend threat assessment to the entire campus community

Campus behavioral threat assessment teams that focus on only students will miss the faculty member in a tenure dispute, the staff member facing termination, and the former student with a lingering grievance. Notably, 12 campus homicide incidents in this dataset were committed by faculty or staff, including 3 active shooter events, and none of those perpetrators leaked their plans. To be effective, threat assessment efforts in higher education must integrate information from HR, academic affairs, and employee assistance programs alongside student-facing systems.⁸

4. Build systems that connect information across institutional silos

The low leakage rate in higher education active shooter cases (15 percent compared to 54 percent in K–12) means that prevention depends less on tips and more on the ability to identify converging risk indicators across multiple institutional systems. A student's counseling records, disciplinary history, academic performance, and housing complaints may each contain a fragment of a developing crisis. Institutions need designated case management structures with the authority, staffing, and information-sharing protocols to assemble those fragments into a coherent picture and act on it.⁹

5. Treat suicidality as a violence prevention priority

Half of all active shooters in higher education settings died by suicide during or after the attack. A quarter of domestic violence perpetrators did the same. Suicidality is not a separate problem from campus violence. Policies that strengthen suicide prevention, crisis counseling, and continuity of care also reduce the risk of lethal violence directed at others.

6. Invest in dormitory-specific risk frameworks

Twenty-one percent of all campus homicides occur in dormitories. Nearly half of dorm homicides involve domestic violence, and most happen at night. Resident advisors, housing staff, and campus police need protocols specifically designed for intimate partner violence in residential settings, including guidance on safety planning for victims, communication with campus behavioral intervention teams, and coordination with community domestic violence services. This guidance is not the same as active shooter training.

7. Improve security in outdoor areas such as parking lots

A notable number of homicides occur in parking lots and outdoor spaces. Improving security in these areas through better lighting, increased surveillance, and regular patrols could deter potential perpetrators and enhance overall campus safety.

8. Train in de-escalation techniques and conflict-resolution skills

Implementing programs that teach de-escalation techniques and conflict-resolution skills could address the root causes of dispute-related homicides; such programs could equip all students, faculty, and staff with the tools needed to manage conflicts constructively, reducing the risk of escalation to violence.

9. Strengthen connection and belonging on campus

Social isolation and marginalization are recurring risk factors in targeted violence on college campuses. Evidence-informed programs that foster connection, peer support, and belonging, such as peer mentoring or small cohort models, can contribute to a comprehensive violence prevention culture.

10. Invest in community collaboration

Increased community violence spills over onto college campuses, further complicating the landscape of campus safety. As a result, campus safety cannot be isolated from the broader community context; colleges and universities should engage in comprehensive safety planning that considers external threats and ways to collaborate with local law enforcement and community organizations.

11. Normalize safe firearm storage and access restriction during crisis

Most higher education active shooters who purchased firearms did so legally (11 of 20, 55 percent). Although campuses cannot control off-campus firearm ownership, institutions and community partners can promote safe storage practices, support voluntary and court-ordered temporary restrictions during periods of acute crisis, and train clinicians and advisors to have non-stigmatizing conversations about firearm access with students and employees in distress.

12. Address campus violence at HBCUs as an equity issue

Forty-nine incidents (17.5 percent) occurred at HBCUs, a figure disproportionate to their share of total enrollment. Many HBCUs are under-resourced relative to the safety challenges they face, which often reflect the broader community violence environments in which they are located. Federal and state investment in campus safety infrastructure, threat assessment capacity, and community violence intervention partnerships should be directed to the institutions that carry the greatest burden.

13. Calibrate drills and preparedness to the campus context

Active shooter drills developed for K–12 settings do not map cleanly onto open college campuses, where thousands of adults move freely across dozens of buildings. Preparedness exercises in higher education should be announced, voluntary, and designed to emphasize reporting, communication, and decision-making rather than lockdown compliance. Drills should never normalize violence or convey the message that shootings are inevitable.

14. Plan for post-incident surges

High-profile campus shootings generate increases in threats, tips, and misinformation. Institutions should plan for surge triage capacity and risk-aware public communication that informs communities without amplifying attackers or feeding contagion dynamics.¹⁰

15. Strengthen workplace violence prevention within higher education

The staff and faculty perpetrator cases in this dataset have similar characteristics, including older perpetrators, professional grievances, no leakage, and no visible crisis. To catch early warning signs, institutions should ensure that employee assistance programs, supervisory training, and HR processes are integrated into broader campus behavioral interventional team structures.¹¹ A negative performance review that triggers an aggressive

response should be just as likely to reach a campus intervention team as a student's threatening social media post.

Methodology

The authors of this brief used the Violence Project's Higher Education Homicide Database (2000–2025) to examine trends in campus homicides.¹² We narrowed our focus to active shooter incidents, which are defined as follows in federal guidance: one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.¹³ If the data revealed patterns specific to higher education—particularly patterns related to domestic violence, staff and faculty perpetrators, and the challenges of open campuses—we drew out their implications for practitioners and policy-makers.

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