

Active Shooter Preparedness: Perceptions of NCAA Division I Athletic Directors and Campus Police Chiefs

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Since 2020, there has been a marked increase in active shooter incidents (ASIs), particularly within major cities and college towns across the United States. As such, it is important to understand how college campuses prepare for, and manage, the potential risks of an ASI. This qualitative study was grounded in vested interest theory (VIT) to investigate the perceptions of NCAA Division I athletic directors and campus police chiefs as it relates to ASI preparedness. The study demonstrated that participants had a high level of vested interest, but there were disparities in threat awareness and disagreements within certainty and immediacy of an active shooter incident.

Keywords: vested interest theory, active shooter, intercollegiate athletics, risk management, perceptions

Introduction

Thousands of fans descend onto college campuses every Saturday during the fall to watch National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Power 5 and

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Group of 5 college football games. Power 5 is used to describe five of 10 athletic conferences (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and the SEC) that are considered the most prominent and highest earning athletic conferences in college football whose teams compete in the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). Group of 5 is an assembly of five conferences that also compete in NCAA Division I FBS. Group of 5 college football teams often compete against Power 5 and Independent teams during the regular season and bowl games (Vannini, 2022). The largest seating capacity of a stadium for the Group of 5 schools is around 40,000 people, compared to the Power 5 stadiums, 10 of which seat at least 90,000 people (Chiusano, 2022). While the seating capacity at Group of 5 schools is not as great as Power 5 institutions, it still represents a significant population (Vannini, 2022).

College football gamedays attract thousands of individuals to campuses to attend a game. Safety personnel cannot account for every spectator entering the campus, thereby putting the university in a vulnerable situation. Blair and Martindale (2013) reported that schools and outdoor public venues were among the top three most frequent places for an active shooter incident (ASI) to occur. Since 1966, there have been 15 ASIs on college campuses during which at least three people were killed (Blair & Schweit, 2014; FBI, 2018; Schweit, 2016). Of those 15 ASIs, seven occurred on campuses that have FBS Division I college football teams. This is significant as FBS Division I has the greatest amount of television exposure and largest attended regular season contests in college athletics. Although legislative and crisis management advancements have been made, universities may not be fully prepared for an ASI due to the openness of the campus (Pitts, 2019; Scott et al., 2021).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2019) reported the likelihood of an ASI in the United States has increased over the past 10 to 20 years. In fact, it was reported that a minimum of 351 shootings occurred throughout the US during the first 334 days of 2015 (Walsh, 2015). More recently, it has been reported that ASIs have been rising, with a 50% increase from 2020 to 2021 (Passantino, 2022). Important to this study, the FBI (2019) reported an increased number of active shooter attacks from 12 between 2000 and 2013 to 29 between 2014 and 2019 at institutions of higher education. As such, it has been reported that there is a sense of normalization regarding ASIs (Huskey & Connell, 2021). Such a perception of normalization may generate a sense of complacency to the extent that organizations believe they are prepared to manage the risk of an ASI, when in fact they may not be ready to manage such a risk (Davis et al., 2019).

Due to an increased level of complacency, coupled with the lack of risk management, an active shooter may take advantage of large public gatherings such as Division I college football games (Blair & Martindale, 2013; Zhu et al., 2020). However, there is little research on how college athletic departments or campus police manage the risks for an ASI (Reese, 2021; Seo et al., 2012). Thus, a qualitative analysis,



using the vested interest theory (VIT), was employed to determine the attitudes and behaviors of university campus police and athletic directors for managing the risks of a potential ASI at Power 5 and Group of 5 Division I FBS college football games.

The purpose of this study was to employ VIT to explore the risk management preparedness of FBS Division I athletic departments and campus police departments in the event of an ASI at a college football game. Baker et al. (2007) stated that college stadiums and arenas are vulnerable for attacks such as ASIs because they are considered “soft targets” (p. 27). This concern was also supported by Hall (2006), who suggested that college stadiums provide a perfect target for mass casualties and residual catastrophic impact. Therefore, it is not difficult to surmise that a college stadium would be an ideal target for an active shooter wanting to inflict harm on as many people as possible.

Review of Literature

An ASI that achieved national notoriety occurred as a result of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. The Columbine ASI resulted in 12 students and one teacher losing their lives after two other students opened fire on them (Jonson, 2017). Since the incident, Columbine High School has provided opportunities to understand the characteristics and motivations of an active shooter.

Defining Active Shooter

The FBI (2018) defined an active shooter as “one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area” (p. 1). Gamache et al. (2015) defined an active shooter event as a mass shooting by an armed individual or individuals using a firearm(s) to kill as many people as possible with unrestricted access to all victims. Furthermore, Hunter et al. (2020) asserted that killing as many people as possible (i.e., Gamache and FBI definitions) fits “the definition of terrorism to a greater degree than is often reported by government officials, academics, and media outlets” (p. 365).

Blair et al. (2013) stated that, “Terrorist organizations around the globe have recognized and identified the small-arms, active shooter attack model as a viable tool to be used against civilized society” (p. 32). Additionally, sporting events such as FBS Division I intercollegiate venues are regarded as being highly representative targets for acts of terrorism, such as ASIs, since they are so connected with the American economy and culture (Masters, 2002). Atkinson and Young (2002) further highlighted the association between terrorist attacks to active shootings in sports by stating:

For many reasons, individual terrorists or terrorist organizations might find suitable targets in athletes participating in games, spectators attending the events, or selected corporate sponsors of sports contests. Especially in those



situations where athletic contests draw sizeable international audiences in geographical settings already embroiled in strife, sport can be utilized as a vehicle for political sparring, and waging and disseminating forms of political violence against others. (p. 54)

Therefore, it is not difficult to surmise that a college football stadium would be an ideal target to motivate active shooters for several reasons.

Motivations for Active Shooter Incidents

Football Bowl Subdivision Division I intercollegiate football games that attract tens of thousands annually offer worthwhile and noteworthy terror targets, such as active shooter situations (Gehring, 2014). A primary reason large sports venues such as college football games may be attractive targets is due to the stadium capacities. For example, while Michigan Stadium (known as the Big House) seats 107,601, six universities (i.e., Penn State, Ohio State, Texas A&M, Tennessee, LSU, and Alabama) have capacities of more than 100,000 spectators (Chiusano, 2022). The large numbers of people entering and exiting the venues make it challenging to manage the risks of an active shooter as most such incidents are conducted by lone shooters (i.e., lone wolf) who can easily enter the stadium and maneuver into the best position to inflict the most harm to the greatest population (Phillips, 2017).

A second reason college football games appeal to active shooters is the perception that the event is a “soft target” rather than a “hard target” (Gehring, 2014). Hard targets are “associated with the government and underpinning state control, including police and core infrastructure” (Polo & Gleditsch, 2016, p. 822), whereas soft targets are defined as “all organizations and individuals with no official role in the state apparatus” (Polo & Gleditsch, 2016, p. 822). The penchant for active shooters to attack soft targets is additionally upheld as most attacks occur at publicly accessible structures and spaces, such as college football games (Gailbulloev et al., 2012).

A third reason that ASIs occur is the shooter’s desire for notoriety and fame to promote national attention to a perceived problem, which is often ideologically based. Inarguably, college football attracts more spectators, both in-person as well as televised, than any other collegiate competition. For example, the National Football Foundation (2020) revealed that television broadcasts of college football games reached 145 million fans in 2019. Additionally, the National Football Foundation indicated that 47.5 million people attended college games in 2019. Thus, over the season college football games attract nearly 200 million people, which would provide a potential active shooter with more than an adequate exposure to highlight their cause.

A fourth possible reason an ASI could happen deals with the venue operators’ perceptions related to the likelihood of an actual occurrence. Scott et al. (2021) related that when undergraduate college students felt the university was prepared to provide safety during an ASI, they felt safer and believed no harm would befall them.



However, the majority of students had never experienced an ASI. If organizations or individuals have never experienced an ASI, they may not consider the likelihood of such an incident occurring (Miller et al., 2019; Rescher, 1983). As a result, an attitude of complacency may become pervasive, thereby decreasing the likelihood of adequately preparing for a possible ASI (Zhu et al., 2020).

Consequences of an Active Shooter Incident

Active shooter incidents have been shown to have significant repercussions on communities and their members. Brodeur and Yousaf (2022) reported that community member earnings after mass shootings, including ASIs, decreased by 2.4% for more than three years afterward. Additionally, such incidents resulted in a 1.3% decrease in employment in the county of occurrence. Jetter and Walker (2018) concerningly revealed that the media coverage of mass shootings actually increased the likelihood of ASIs happening in the future. Such findings may be a reason for Brodeur and Yousaf (2022) finding that mass shootings, including ASIs, led to a reduction of employment in the community.

Importantly, college students have been found to be sensitive toward violent actions rather than being desensitized by them (Collyer et al., 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown that terrorist attacks such as ASIs may negatively impact the mental health of individuals, including students, due to fear or stress. Lowe and Galea (2017) reported that mass shooting incidents such as ASIs created mental health problems for the surviving students and community members. After an ASI, studies have reported that students miss classes, avoid school events, or drop out of school altogether (Randa & Wilcox, 2012).

ASIs have been related to increased fears and diminishment of perceived safety by community members and students who were indirectly affected (Lowe & Galea, 2017). For example, individuals who did not attend a game during which an ASI occurred, may perceive that attending a game was unsafe. As a result, game attendance could be severely decreased, thereby limiting a revenue stream upon which most athletic departments depend. As such, it is apparent that ASIs may have negative mental health and financial effects on the individuals and communities where the attack occurred. Thus, the strategic value of developing and implementing effective risk management plans specifically for ASIs for Power 5 or Group of 5 college football games extends well beyond protection of those in attendance and includes preserving critical revenue streams for college athletics programs.

Managing Risk of Active Shooters

Dealing with the possibility of an active shooter on campus represents a convoluted task for college athletic departments and campus safety officials. Individuals entering the university campus and paying to attend a college football game are considered



business invitees (Mallen, 2001; Miller & Gillentine, 2006). When conducting athletic contests, campus police should work in conjunction with college athletic departments, which have a duty to use reasonable care for the safety and protection of their business patrons (Baker et al., 2007). Additionally, an athletic department has a duty to protect business invitees from the criminal acts of a third party such as an active shooter (Mallen, 2001). Thus, athletic departments have a duty to be prepared for a foreseeable, potential ASI.

The openness of university campuses when hosting an intercollegiate football game leaves them vulnerable to a potential attack. However, Seo et al. (2012) reported that only 76% of respondents felt appropriate emergency plans were in place if a dangerous crisis (e.g., an act of terrorism, active shooter, bomb threat) occurred on campus. To be prepared against an ASI, a risk management plan must be developed that provides a balance between rhetoric, action, and fear in a potential active shooter incident, especially at a large event such as a Division I football contest. To achieve such a balance, university athletic departments should develop and implement a comprehensive, deliberate risk management plan for active shooters (Kellom & Nubani, 2018).

Risk Management Considerations

In a broad sense, risk management is a collection of interrelated dangers that needs to be administered with a focus on understanding the foreseeable risks (Jankensgard & Kapstad, 2021; Klučka & Grünbichler, 2020; Miller et al., 2010). However, for a risk management plan to be effective several fundamental features must be developed and implemented. First, there has to be a commitment to establishing a risk policy from the highest-level administrators, including the university president, senior athletic director, and chief of campus police (Klučka & Grünbichler, 2020). Second, the participation of all game management employees and volunteers (i.e., athletic department staff and campus police) must be involved and trained to identify circumstances that may expose spectators, coaches, or players to harm (Jankensgard & Kapstad, 2021). Such a risk management approach encourages communication among and between relevant parties to decrease exposure to harm (Fraser & Simkins, 2016).

Decker (2001) stated that risk management plans are systematic and analytical processes that consider the possibility that a danger will jeopardize an asset (i.e., a structure, individual, or function). Kaplin and Lee (1997) wrote, "... risk management can implement the institution's humanistic concern for minimizing and compensating any potential injuries that its operations may cause" (p. 128). As Sharp, Moorman, and Claussen (2007) summarized, "[t]he safety and well-being of all your constituents should be one of your core values, and risk management is an important tool to carry out that imperative" (p. 17).



Developing and Implementing a Risk Management Plan

The level that event managers will accept the likelihood of an ASI occurring dictates their decision-making in developing and implementing the risk management process (Thompson, 2002). The first step in developing a risk management plan is assessing the risks. Risk assessment provides a foundation that may be used to determine the potential risks to be tackled and conveyed to those involved in the management of an event (Goldstein, 2005). Risk assessments are often conducted in two steps: threat and vulnerability assessments (Decker, 2001).

Threat Assessment

The threat assessment addresses the likelihood of an ASI as a potential threat. When conducting a threat assessment, threats such as an ASI should be estimated (Miller et al., 2010). For example, studies have cited at least 15 ASIs occurring on college campuses over the past 50 years (Blair & Schweit, 2014; FBI, 2018; Schweit, 2016). More specific to this study, it has been established that outdoor public venues such as football stadiums were cited to be among the top three most frequent places for an ASI to transpire (Balir & Schweit, 2014). If the threat assessment is not taken seriously, the likelihood of risks happening may increase (Miller & Wendt, 2012).

Vulnerability Assessment

The second assessment addresses the potential vulnerability of a target. According to Piccarello (2005), sporting events have become vulnerable to terrorist attacks such as ASIs for three main reasons. First, sports venues in the US generally symbolize American culture. Second, these venues are vulnerable because large groups of people are entering and exiting. Third, football stadiums on college campuses are often located near parking lots and buildings.

Vulnerability assessments tend to recognize worst-case scenarios that are practically indefinite. A vulnerability assessment is a process that recognizes weaknesses in physical structures, tunnels, water supplies, and lack of personnel security systems (Decker, 2001). A vulnerability assessment may identify options to diminish those weaknesses (Decker, 2001). To do so, a vulnerability assessment often requires intensive involvement between game athletic personnel and campus police. With data concerning potential threats and vulnerabilities, sport event personnel will be better positioned to foresee potential ASI scenarios. As a result, they will be able to develop and implement appropriate risk management measures.

Foreseeability

Foreseeability may be regarded as the most significant consideration in determining the extent to which a person is owed a duty of reasonable care (Rodriguez v. Sabatino, 1997). Foreseeability is considered to be the degree to which the university knew,



or should have known, that an invitee may be exposed to the probability of harm (Dobbs, 2000). The court in *Opera Company of Boston v. Wolf Trap Foundation for Performing Arts* (1987) stated that foreseeability is

... one fact to be considered in resolving first how likely the occurrence of the event in question was and, second whether its occurrence, based on past experience, was of such reasonable likelihood that the obligor should not merely foresee the risk but, because of the degree of its likelihood, the obligor should have guarded against it or provided for non-liability against the risk. (pp. 1102-1103)

To that extent, Nemeth and Mauslein (2019) reported that soft targets, such as college football stadiums, have a greater likelihood of an incident happening than a hard target. While an active shooter incident has not occurred during a college football game, Nemeth and Mauslein (2019) contended it may be foreseeable that an active shooter may engage a soft target, such as a college football stadium, which is relatively unprotected compared to a hard target that is typically highly defended.

Premises Liability

Tort law relates that before a person or organization can be held liable for unlawful activity, that entity must have breached the duty to protect (Dobbs, 2000). While a landowner cannot ensure the safety of those on the land, premises liability holds landowners and/or possessors of a property may be liable for injuries occurring on their property including land areas and facilities (American Law Institute, 1979; Miller & Schoepfer, 2017). The duty a landowner owes to individuals on the premises depends on their classification as a trespasser, licensee, or invitee.

Broadly, trespassing refers to individuals who entered a property without the landowner's express or implied consent (Dobbs, 2000). Although a trespasser is owed no duty of reasonable care, a duty exists in which the landowner cannot "... cause intentional injury, to set a trap, or cause wanton injury" (Dobbs, p. 592). Licensees have the express or implied consent of the owner to be on the premises (Dobbs, 2000). A licensee is owed reasonable care regarding only when the possessor is aware or possesses a reason to know of concealed conditions.

For an invitee there is an implied assurance to the invitee that the area has been prepared and is in reasonably safe condition while the person is there. Dobbs (2000) recognized the general duty owed by landowners to their invitees to provide reasonable protection from foreseeable criminal assaults. The courts have recognized that an invitee is owed the duty to use reasonable care in keeping up the property in a reasonably safe condition. As a result, it is imperative that sport event managers understand their duty to warn of dangers that are not known to the invitee. (*Wolford v. Ostenbridge*, 2003).



Duty to Protect Against Third-Party Actions

Since fans who go onto property owned by a university/college and pay to watch a football game or any other athletic event are business invitees, a landowner has a greater level of duty to protect patrons attending sport events from deviant behavior (Mallen, 2001). If previous experiences have occurred in which a patron was injured due to the careless or criminal conduct of a third party, the landholder may have a duty to take reasonable precautions to protect the patrons (*Bearman v. University of Notre Dame*, 1983; Dobbs, 2000). This is especially true as an athletic organization has been recognized as having a “special relationship” or duty to protect patrons at sporting events and is required if it were foreseeable that a third party could inflict harm on another person (*Hills v. Bridgeview Little League Association*, 2000).

In *Bearman v. University of Notre Dame* (1983), an inebriated person who had been at a tailgate party injured Ms. Bearman, who had been attending a University of Notre Dame football game. The court ruled that it was reasonable for the university to foresee that individual attending an intercollegiate game may become inebriated and become a danger to others in attendance. Thus, if it is foreseeable that the criminal conduct on the part of third persons may be anticipated, the landholder may have duty to take precautions against it and provide a reasonably sufficient number of personnel to afford a reasonable protection (Dobbs, 2000).

Vested Interest Theory (VIT)

This study used VIT, which hypothesizes that a person’s attitude toward a specific topic will be revealed through their subsequent behaviors. Simply, when individuals perceive something to be important (i.e., highly vested), they are more likely to act on it. As applied to this study, if an athletic director or campus police chief foresees the likelihood of an ASI occurring is high, they are likely to be highly vested. Conversely, if the likelihood of an ASI occurring is regarded as being low, the level of vestedness would be correspondingly low (Crano & Prislin, 1995). Moreover, several elements may impact the effects of vested interest including salience, certainty, and immediacy (Crano & Prislin, 1995).

Salience

Salience has been defined as an individual’s awareness of a present or potential threat (Miller et al., 2013). Crano and Prislin (1995) argued that effects of salience were higher for individuals’ attitudes if consequences were important and personalized. Miller et al. (2013) contended that during disaster preparedness, people in regions more prone to experiencing certain risk situations usually have a greater sense of behavioral consequences, and their attitudes and perceptions of risk are thereby enhanced due to certainty and outcomes of said risk.



Certainty

Certainty has been accepted as a probability moderator of VIT (Adame & Miller, 2016). Adame and Miller (2016) defined certainty as the probability an event or outcome of an event will occur. Miller et al. (2013) further discussed certainty as a relationship between personal consequences and relevant attitude–behaviors of individuals, which also affects the vested interest they may have. In the context of active shooter risk management preparedness, certainty reflects the likelihood or foreseeability that an ASI may occur at a college football game.

Immediacy

Defined as a temporary delay between an attitude–behavior action and its outcomes, immediacy is another dimension of VIT (Crano & Prislín, 1995). Miller et al. (2013) defined immediacy as a perception of time between event outcomes and event occurrence. In other words, the more time that elapses between events, the lower the perceived likelihood it will occur. As a result, Adame and Miller (2016) contended that events with immediacy will have higher vested interest resulting in more immediate action. Thus, even though an ASI may not have occurred at a college football game, the campus police and athletic department personnel have a duty to provide a reasonably safe premises by developing and implementing an effective risk management plan.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative thematic analysis design was used to explore perceptions, vested interest, and fears of Division I athletic personnel (e.g., associate/assistant athletic directors, directors of event management, event managers) and campus police chiefs overseeing gameday operations for college football. Using a deductive method in this study allowed the use of VIT to structure a strong framework for data analysis. Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) supported this deductive approach for researchers to convert theoretical frameworks to a coding framework.

Deductive approaches allow for fewer codes than inductive methods because researchers use existing theoretical concepts or themes rather than generating new ones. Terry et al. (2017) suggested thematic analysis provides theoretical flexibility and a possibility of realistic or essential alignment in a qualitative paradigm. Using thematic analysis allowed the researchers to explore genuine experiences of athletic department personnel and campus police chiefs to determine whether they were fully prepared to manage the potential risks of having an active shooter on gameday.



Participants

A purposive stratified approach was used, where key informants were drawn from a cross-section of institutions that play home football games on their college campuses. There are 23 Division I FBS programs with stadiums that were not located on college campuses, which left the study with a total of 107 Division I FBS institutions. The reason for focusing solely on stadiums located on college campuses was due to the fact that off-campus stadiums are often not under jurisdiction of campus police; rather, these stadiums use local police departments.

A review identified 115 total athletic department individuals who fit the criteria and 107 police chiefs were identified from those same institutions. Each identified individual ($N = 222$) was sent a recruitment letter (a) explaining the study's purpose, (b) delineating how their identification and data would be kept private and confidential, (c) describing the importance of the study, and (d) requesting participation in the study via recorded in-person or video interviews, or through email correspondence.

Braun and Clarke (2012) recommended a sample size between six and 15 interviews for this type of study (Table 1). Thus, the eight interviews fell within this acceptable sample size. Participants who agreed to be interviewed participated in an informal 5-10 minute phone call with the researcher to (a) establish rapport, (b) describe the interview protocol, (c) establish a time for an in-person, or video interview, and (d) thank them for agreeing to participant in the study.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Job Title	FBS Status
Jake	Male	AD for Game Operations	Group of Five
Suzanne	Female	AD of Game Operations and Championships	Power Five
Rachel	Female	Police Chief	Group of Five
Roger	Male	Police Chief	Power Five
Lynn	Female	Police Chief	Power Five
Lou	Male	Police Lt. – reports directly to Chief of Police	Power Five
Stacy	Female	Associate AD of Operations	Power Five
Rick	Male	Director of Athletic Facilities	Group of Five



Interviews

Merriam (2009) insisted that a key component to qualitative research involves the use of interviews to understand participants in a meaningful way. As such, two different interview guides were created for this study to explore the phenomena. Each interview guide consisted of 17 questions, with 13 questions being worded exactly the same. The remaining four questions were unique, and specific to either athletic personnel or police chiefs. Each interview was semi-structured and assigned a 30-60 minute time length to allow for participants to discuss active shooter preparedness in-depth, without straying too far from the interview protocol and guide.

Data were collected using semi-structured, one-on-one, open-ended interviews by the researcher with the respondents. These interviews took place over a two-week period. Four of the interviews were face-to-face and lasted an average of 42 minutes, with the longest lasting 61 minutes and the shortest interview lasting 22 minutes. One interview was conducted via video conferencing technology. This interview lasted 57 minutes. The final three interviews were conducted using an email interview protocol due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews took place over a one-week period. The average turnaround time for the email correspondence was 2.5 days, with three days being the longest and two days being the shortest. The interviewer then summarized major findings to the respondent for confirmation and verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

While not ideal, some of the interviews were completed via email correspondence due to the global pandemic. Although this is an underutilized interview approach, research has suggested that email interviews are just as reliable in qualitative research as other collection methods. Duffy et al. (2005) found online participants might be less susceptible to bias because of a lack of researcher presence during interviews. Hawkins (2018) contended that email interviews provide an ethical advantage over traditional interviews, as participants own their level of participation and control their time spent on an interview.

Data Analysis

While there are multiple processes to qualitative data analysis, this study used Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase guide for thematic analysis. The first step was to read and re-read interview transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006; Joffe, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Transcription of audio interviews and video interviews were conducted using NVivo Transcription software. The video interview that was recorded was reviewed for accuracy.

Since this study already had predetermined codes/themes, data analysis used new data to determine whether these existing codes/themes fit one or more tenets of VIT. Using tenets of VIT as codes/themes, data were organized into these categories as they related to definitions of each code/theme. Emergent concepts appropriate



to the research questions were coded and linked to data by one of the researchers. Although some experts argue multiple coders (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006) should be used to improve reliability of analysis, other scholars (Janesick, 2003; Morse & Richards, 2002) contend that a single coder is both appropriate and preferred. This argument was also supported by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), who stated, “while it is very useful to have two (or more) people working on the coding, it is not essential” (p. 3356).

Thematic analysis, with its inherent flexibility, allowed for identification of subthemes in the data. This process was supported by Braun and Clarke (2006), who stated this phase concludes when all coded data are collected and related to appropriate themes and subthemes. A review of coded data was conducted to assess whether the data represent an accurate presentation of a theoretical or analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) supported this finding, stating that data linked with each theme supports those specific themes. In this phase, themes should not only be coherent with each other, but distinct as well.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that the findings of this study met the standards of trustworthiness within qualitative research, one of the researchers asked each participant to review their transcripts and affirm whether all information was captured correctly and accurately. Each participant was given 48 hours to review their interview transcript and provide feedback or any additional information. Any information they did not agree with, or items they wanted clarification on, were logged in a research journal. Following King’s (2004) strategy to establish trustworthiness, a few predetermined codes or themes were identified. On multiple occasions, this strategy was addressed, stating the study used tenets of VIT as main themes.

To conduct a review of themes, reflexivity was established, which helped with what is also known as confirmability (Anney, 2014; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Shenton (2004) contended a study’s findings should reflect participant experiences and be absent of researcher bias. Finally, the codes and themes were then organized by subthemes, which fell under major themes. Nowell et al. (2017) stated organizing themes in this way is part of storytelling in a way best reflected by data.

Data Analysis and Findings

Due to limited literature on active shooters and athletic facilities, this study fills a critical void in active shooter research focused on athletic departments. The goal for this study was to help campus police departments and athletic directors assess whether their current efforts to manage the risk represented by the potential of active shooters at FBS college football games are enough to mitigate the possibility of an ASI. This study explored perceptions of campus police chiefs and athletic directors



responsible for overseeing gameday operations for their football stadiums. The overarching question for this study was: What is the level of overall risk management preparedness at a college football stadium for an active shooter incident?

Table 2. Interview Questions

Questions	Theme/Subtheme
How aware do you believe the athletic department is concerning the issues of an active shooter at the stadium?	Salience
What are your feelings or concerns regarding the potential occurrence of an active shooter at the football stadium?	Salience
Do you believe your stadium has a greater chance of an active shooter incident over a stadium on another campus?	Certainty
Since the Las Vegas concert shooting, what is your belief that an active shooter incident will happen at a college sporting event?	Immediacy

Theme 1: Salience

Salience is an individual's awareness of a present threat or possibility of a threat (Miller et al., 2013). Two subthemes emerged in this study regarding saliency. The first subtheme was awareness. Police chiefs believed their athletic departments were aware of active shooter potential for a variety of reasons. Roger, for instance, asserted, "I think they're very aware. We work with them every day. We have an excellent relationship with our athletic department. So, they are very aware of safety and security issues." Rachel shared this same perception, stating, "I think our athletic department is very aware. ... They participate in our command post that we have during gamedays. They actively have a role in that space during gamedays. So, I think they're pretty aware."

When it came to campus awareness, however, there were different perceptions between personnel at Power 5 institutions and those at Group of 5 institutions. Roger, a Power 5 police chief, stated, "So, the administration here is very focused on active shooter [incidents] and they really make sure that ... they are very aware, very interested." Contrastingly, Rachel, a Group of 5 police chief, said the following of their campus:

So, a good number of our faculty have spent their entire lives on a college campus. So, when you start talking about realities of some of the things that those of us in law enforcement see, it's, they feel like it's unreal, that those things don't really happen or it's like, they can't ... mentally grasp that those kinds of things go on. So, when you want to talk about an active shooter, where we know a good number of active shooting events occurred on college campuses, you'd think they would pay attention.



Lou had a similar concern with overall awareness, stating, “The major concern I have revolves around the complacency which develops over time with this potential issue. It is difficult to maintain the public’s situational awareness and understanding of the threat except for when there is a high-profile incident.”

All athletic directors were concerned about the threat of ASIs occurring at their stadiums, although there were different opinions even between athletic directors in their respective conferences. Stacy, a Power 5 athletic director, stated, “As the world continues to become more violent, it is always on our minds. Even though [redacted] is located in a rural setting, bad things can still happen.” Suzanne was less worried about her stadium, however, stating, “Where we typically have things, and more incidents happen is out by the hospital. ... That would be my concern. It’s something that starts somewhere else and then starts to come toward the stadium.” Similar to those from Power 5, Group of 5 athletic directors had differing opinions. Jake stated, “I think it’s like anywhere else. There is always potential.” Conversely, Rick argued, “It will eventually happen in America and when it does, it will be a catastrophic event due to the fact that very few schools have the money and determination with all involved to make their facilities active shooter proof.”

A major concern here was that, even though athletic directors were aware ASIs could occur, some still believed it would not happen at their stadium. This latter finding conflicted with increased ASIs nationwide over the last 10 years; as some participants believed, this could eventually lead to an ASI at a college football game. What all participants wanted to avoid was instilling fears about possible ASIs, which led to a second subtheme in this section.

Theme 2: Certainty

Certainty is the probability that an event will occur. For instance, there have been college campuses affected by active shooters in the past. However, there was disagreement among participants as to whether their stadium represented a target for an ASI. Due to her stadium’s small capacity, Suzanne noted,

Well, I would say if you’re going by just size, we’re a fairly small stadium. Our capacity is 40,000. If it’s completely full, we’re standing room. So, for a 40,000 [stadium seating capacity] vs. 80,000 and 100,000, just based on pure numbers, less likely given the facts for at least for football; I would say football is not our prime target.

Conversely, Lou had a different take on their stadium’s size, stating,

Our stadium is part of a high-profile athletic program that has come under scrutiny, making our venue potentially higher risk than other stadiums. Also, we have large gameday attendance, which is spread out over hundreds of acres, making it difficult to monitor such a large population.



Furthermore, the results suggested both athletic directors and police chiefs believed their stadiums were prepared to manage the risks and less susceptible as a target for active shooters than other stadiums. This sentiment was supported by research from Pantera et al. (2003), who noted that Power 5 conferences indicated they were in compliance with 75% of proposed security concepts in their study. Stacy supported this, stating, “[e]veryone thinks they are fully prepared until it actually happens. But I feel somewhat confident we are prepared to manage the risks of an ASI.” Rick, however, believed institutions with higher value placed on security did have an upper hand over those prioritizing security less, stating, “For some of our peers, I think we are about the same security, if not a little lower. However, I have seen what a bigger budget can do for security and those that place security at a higher importance do have an upper hand.”

Theme 3: Immediacy

Immediacy is the perceived amount of time before consequences of an event may transpire. Perceptions of a possible ASI differed among participants in both Power 5 and Group of 5 conferences. Among Group of 5 participants, two disagreed on whether an ASI would occur. Jake did not believe a situation could happen, arguing: “I don’t think that will ever happen in a situation like that. I could see a situation, somebody at the gate, where there’s crowds of people, you know, someone getting mad or has a vendetta against somebody and just goes crazy.” Rick, however, thought an ASI would occur soon, stating, “It’s only a matter of time before it does happen. As athletic budgets across America fall and interest in security and safety is placed elsewhere, a perfect storm is coming for a catastrophic event.”

Power 5 participants were similar to Group of 5 participants in their disagreement of when or if an ASI would occur at a college football game. Lou stated, “I believe an active attacker scenario is imminent as most stadiums are too large to fully protect and most venues are very soft targets because of a lack of staffing.” This assertion was also supported by Stacy, who noted, “Very likely. As I stated earlier, the world is becoming more and more violent.” Roger, however, did not think one could occur even though a stadium would be an attractive target, by stating that:

It’s hard to say. Understanding that nationally televised games may be more appealing in some ways and maybe more needs to be done, then I think it’s just general awareness. I don’t know, again, that college football games are anymore, you know, attractive targets than a large concert or something like that.

Lynn reflected that, saying, “I mean, you knew something like that could potentially happen. It’s not a matter of if, it’s when something happens on a college campus of that scale.” Finally, Suzanne shared a similar sentiment, stating, “I think it just changes. I think it’s another variable and changes the way that we look at it.”



Discussion

Previous studies have argued that university athletic departments and campus police need to take essential steps to manage foreseeable risks to prepare college football stadiums against all possible threats, including active shooters (Baker et al., 2007; Hall, 2006; Miller et al., 2008). To prepare against potential threats and vulnerabilities, risk management has been cited as the most effective approach (Decker, 2001). To develop and implement an effective risk management plan, sport event managers, including campus police and athletic department members, must be aware of three items. First, they must recognize the value of foreseeability to reduce the likelihood of an incident, given that a perceived risk and the harm from that risk is central to risk management plans (Baker et al., 2007). Second, event managers must understand their legal duty regarding premises liability, especially their duty to invitees to use reasonable efforts to protect guests from harm (Miller & Gillentine, 2006). Third, they must be aware of the potential actions of third parties (e.g., active shooters, bomb threat, fights in crowd) that may expose attendees to harm (*Bearman v. Notre Dame*, 1983). While the burden of managing the potential risk for an active shooter situation may fall on the university's athletic department and campus police (Reese, 2021; Scott et al., 2021;), such a study has not been previously investigated at NCAA Division I intercollegiate football games. Results from this study demonstrate the differences in opinion that exist as to (a) the likelihood of an ASI occurring at a football game as well as (b) the decision-maker's ability to manager and effectively respond to that risk.

The results of this study identified three emergent themes—salience, certainty, and immediacy. Regarding the first theme, salience refers to an awareness of a possible threat. The respondents indicated that their departments were aware of the possibility that an ASI could occur at their stadium. It is important that athletic department personnel and campus police keep the risk of an ASI occurring at the forefront of their minds and make it a crucial part of a comprehensive risk management plan. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the risk of terrorism was first and foremost in the minds of facility/venue managers, and much discussion on risk management surrounded this specific threat. That concern, however, has waned over the years, as no major incidents of this nature have occurred at sport venues.

All interviewed police chiefs believed their working relationships with athletic departments by meeting on regular basis assisted in communicating the levels of risk awareness for a potential ASI. One of the significant challenges for the development and implementation of an effective risk management plan is to provide a bridge between assessing the foreseeable risks and communicating them among the involved parties. Furthermore, the use of a unified command post, as most participants cited, should also continue to ensure silo risk management is prevented and that all vulnerabilities are communicated between parties in a timely manner.



Certainty is considered as the probability of a threat occurring. Risk management policies broadly accept that all risks cannot be eradicated. However, taking appropriate steps to heighten safety from known or potential threats can diminish them. The respondents were mixed regarding when an ASI may be a threat to occur at a college football game. Four participants (two police chiefs and two athletic directors) believed an ASI at a college football game was imminent. Other participants did not think such an incident would happen. These findings concerning the certainty of a threat occurring are important, as such assessments provide significant decision support tools for risk management development and implementation.

It is concerning that some of the respondents perceived that a threat such as an ASI “can’t happen here.” Having that perception infers that the stadium is invulnerable to such an incident. If event personnel perceive that an ASI “can’t happen here,” it may result in a lack of adequate information gathering and decision-making processes. As a result, the event personnel may be considered breaching of their duty of exposing spectators to the probability of harm from the actions of a third party, an active shooter. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (2020) warns that active shooters often have no pattern or method in selecting victims, which creates unpredictability and challenges in effectively responding to such an event.

College football games are considered “soft target” venues due to the large number of attendees and relative lack of security personnel (Baker et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2008; Piccarollo, 2005). The results of this study found a perception that high-profile institutions or programs that had greater seating capacity (i.e., 95,000 or more spectators) represented a more likely target; several respondents did not foresee their stadium as a desirable target. Such a perception goes against the essence of foreseeability, which states that those in authority either knew or should have known that an ASI may occur.

Police chiefs and athletic directors interviewed noted that, while an ASI could occur at a game, the likelihood remained low. While even the most unlikely probabilities must be considered, decision theorists contend that the chance of events happening cannot be zero (Korcz, 2000). Risk tends to degrade an organization’s (or an activity’s) value if left unattended (Rescher, 1983). However, there is some debate as to how “value” is assessed since it can carry vastly different meanings depending on the situation. If people are afraid or perceive threat of danger, spectator numbers may decrease at games. Yet, the implementation of a risk management plan could contribute to the value of the experience for patrons through actual improved risk management plans.

When people feel safe, they are much more likely to participate in a given activity; conversely, if they feel unsafe, they are less likely to participate. As a result, campus police and athletic department personnel should educate game attendees without instilling fear in them. To do so, the United States Department of Homeland Security



(n.d.) states that the most effective way to train staff in the area of ASI response is to conduct mock active shooter training exercises and that local law enforcement can be an excellent resource in designing such exercises. Athletic departments and sport managers should consider designing a training program with the help of local law enforcement and implement it in their own facilities and organizations.

In 2019, there were multiple shootings at high school football games (Nathanson, 2019); thus, how long before one occurs at a college football game? This question relates to the third theme of immediacy, which is the amount of time before an event may transpire. The theme of immediacy in this study affirmed previous studies that cited areas of vulnerability such as the increased seating capacities of new stadiums, the large number of patrons entering and leaving the stadium during the game, and stadium proximity to parking lots (Decker, 2001; Piccarello, 2005).

Some of the respondents believed that the likelihood of an ASI at a college football game was imminent because the venues were too difficult to protect. Moreover, the responses from this study showed that participants agreed the mass shooting in 2017 at a Las Vegas outdoor concert changed how the management of risks of an ASI at large venues or events was viewed. The Las Vegas ASI is an example of a reactive approach to risk management, following a high-profile incident. As a result, institutions implemented a number of new security protocols (Scott et al. 2021). Some of those new protocols involved securing buildings overlooking stadiums, finding weaknesses in already-developed plans, and raising awareness to all stakeholders (Erdem et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Studies

One limitation in this study was the research only involved Division I FBS football stadiums. As such, future research could conduct a qualitative analysis of athletic directors and campus police perceptions at FCS, NCAA Division II, and Division III schools of an ASI occurring at a home football game. Additionally, a quantitative analysis could be conducted by surveying athletic directors and campus police chiefs at all Division I FBS schools to gain a nationwide perspective concerning the potential occurrence of an ASI.

Other research could also include high school football games due to the numerous active shootings that have occurred at the high school level. There is little research on the preparedness that is occurring at these secondary educational institutions. Such studies could examine how high school athletic directors, local law enforcement and school resources officers are using risk management plans and how prepared they are for an ASI.

A second limitation to this study involved the sensitive nature of the questions asked, in that respondents may not be readily forthcoming regarding issues concerning an ASI. Concerns over topical material emerged during the data collection



process, and the sensitive subject area limited participation from institutions and their athletic departments and police departments; thus, many targeted participants were unwilling to discuss this important topic.

A third limitation to this study entailed the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, some interviews went from being conducted in-person to being conducted via video conferencing or email. Video interviews have drawn consistent criticisms such as disconnected calls, being inhibited by the camera, and social interruptions (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). However, since most, if not all, universities have reopened, it may now be more plausible to conduct qualitative research using face-to-face interviews for future research.

Conclusion

While risk management will not work miracles, it can assist in decreasing the number of potentially harmful surprises such as an active shooter incident. This exploratory qualitative research study examined the perception of risk management preparedness of athletic department personnel and campus police for a potential active shooter incident at Group of 5 and Power 5 college football stadiums. Although there has not been an active shooter at a college football game, there have been active shooter incidents on college campuses, which causes concerns that one could occur at a football game on campus. While past studies have examined security management at college sport venues (Faraji et al., 2018; Hall, 2006; Pantera, et al., 2003), no known studies have examined risk management preparedness for active shooters at college sport venues.

This study showed participants had an elevated level of vested interest to prevent ASIs from happening at their football stadiums. Participants believed or held perceptions they were prepared for an active shooter, but residual fear of one happening contributed to a continual sense of high vested interest to ensure that their stadiums were protected and prepared. However, ASIs have potential to result in a massive number of deaths.

Engaging in a proper risk management approach has the potential to lead decision-makers (e.g., facility managers, athletic department personnel, campus police) in making proactive changes in protecting their venue against the risks posed by an ASI. To prevent such an incident from occurring, campus police and athletic departments must continue to collaborate in order to develop and implement an effective risk management plan. Being prepared to manage the risks is key, and institutions are legally responsible to take intentional and effective steps to keep everyone safe and aware of all dangerous situations. Results from this study can hopefully aid in that process. There are still many unanswered questions. The hope is that there will be more support and desire to conduct active shooter preparedness research as actively as the research was after 9/11 in regard to terrorism and sport venues.



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