

The Police Stood Idle

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The most obvious "lesson" of the murders at Columbine HS is also the most ignored: In the case of a school shooting, standard U.S. police procedures are not simply inadequate, but hideously *wrong*.

A full-time "school resource officer," i.e., a sheriff's deputy, engaged in a brief gunfight with the two murderers at the start of their rampage near an entrance to Columbine HS. Neither he nor the killers scored any hits. The deputy stayed outside the building to care for a wounded student.

His brief gunfight probably saved two lives, by distracting one of the killers from a student and teacher he was about to murder. It also gave other students a few extra seconds in which to flee the building.

Having shot their way past the guard, the killers entered the school and began looking for people to kill. Though police officers, sheriff's deputies, and SWAT-team members began arriving at the school quickly, none entered the building for 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, the killers headed for the library. Teacher Patti Nielson was in the library along with many students. She called 911 from a library phone - and followed the 911 operator's instructions to keep the students inside the library and wait for the police to arrive.

That turned out to be a death sentence for 10 students. The two killers entered the library and began taunting the students, then killing them one by one. Through the open 911 line, the police dispatcher could hear the students being gunned down.

The Columbine HS library is on the second floor. But, because the school is built on a slope, the library door opens to a hallway, and is only 15 steps away from an exit door. While one murder after another was being perpetrated, a dozen police officers were stationed near this exit. *These officers made no attempt to enter the building, walk 15 steps, and confront the murderers.* (According to police speaking on condition of anonymity, one Denver SWAT officer did begin to enter but was immediately "ordered down" by commanders.)

Twenty minutes after the rampage began, three SWAT officers were finally sent into the building - on the first floor, on the side of the building furthest from the library, where killings were in progress. Finding students rushing out of the building, they decided to escort students out, rather than track down the killers. This began a police program to "contain the perimeter": Officers went from room to room, frisking students, searching closets and taking students out of the building. These procedures were followed in case there were more gunmen, or in case the killers were trying to blend in with other students.

The two murderers eventually tired of the library killings, and went downstairs to the cafeteria. More students were hiding in a room nearby, with the door locked. The two murderers attempted to shoot off the lock, and enter that room.

Students in the room had called 911 and the line was open, so again the killers' location was known. Many officers were massed near the cafeteria door. They knew where the murderers were. They knew that the murderers were attempting to get into a room to kill more people. *The police stood idle.*

Failing to shoot their way into the room near the cafeteria, the killers returned to the library. The students were still there, some dead, some wounded, waiting for the police to come. But instead of resuming their spree, the two murderers killed themselves.

The police, meanwhile, continued "containing the perimeter" one room at a time. It took hours for them to get to the library. In another second-floor room, science teacher Dave Sanders bled to death. He might have been saved by faster action - as was every wounded student who received prompt medical attention.

Many of the SWAT officers on the scene that day were horrified that their commanders had forbidden them to assault the killers. The Jefferson County Sheriff's office felt vulnerable enough to second-guessing that it asked members of the infamous Los Angeles SWAT team to analyze the response at Columbine. The LAPD officers concluded that the SWAT teams on the Columbine scene had followed standard procedures.

Indeed, they had. About 90 percent of SWAT team call-outs are no-knock break-ins of the homes of suspected drug dealers. There is no earthly reason why a police officer should die just to arrest a drug dealer.

Columbine, however, was different. Children were being murdered. Nevertheless, the officer-safety rule prevailed.

Based on the police inaction when the murderers were attempting to break into the room near the cafeteria, and further inaction when the murderers returned to the library where they had already killed 10 students, it is clear that no matter how many students were going to be killed, not one officer's life would be risked.

There have been several school shootings in recent years; not one has been stopped by police. There are plenty of courageous men in police uniform: When will one of them summon the moral seriousness to insist that "procedures" be suspended if, God forbid, another school shooting occurs?