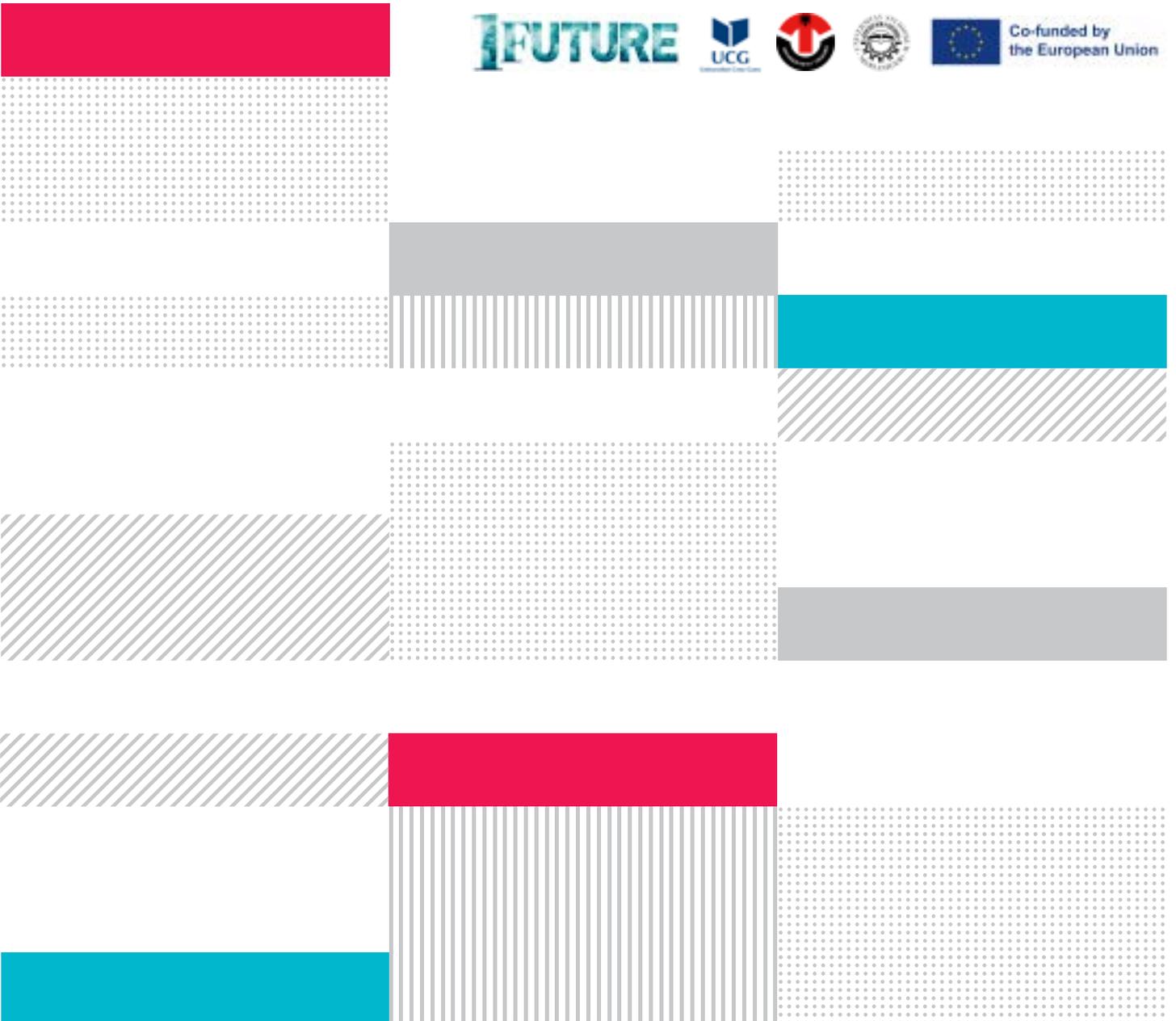

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Addressing evolving active attacks threats using integrated training curriculum

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Abstract

Increasing reach of various extremist narratives via social media and the availability of firearms and explosive-making components on the black market, particularly in the Western Balkans creates a potentially dangerous environment, particularly for the emergency services personnel. Given the lack of funds and specific training to respond to an active attack scenario, the ramifications of such event could have disastrous consequences. Undergraduate, graduate and even post-graduate students are deficient in the type, duration and quality of practical skills development, particularly in the hands-on occupations such as fire, rescue, emergency and law-enforcement services. Recent introduction of the Texas State University's ALERRT (Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training) program and subsequent training of certified instructors has created the possibility of teaching an add-on CRASE (Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events) program within the local educational institutions, the majority of which are woefully underequipped and undertrained to address such emergencies. Both ALERRT and CRASE type training in the region are adapted to include enhanced first-aid/casualty evacuation modules, situational awareness, first response, incident command and communication strategies. The presented skill-development outlines some of the new approaches in the adoption of effective strategies to address the new threats. The key factor was to re-establish the mentoring and hands-on elements in the curriculum development and engagement of various subject matter experts (SMEs) to deliver and evaluate specific skills (i.e. incident command). Another crucial element is the collaborative research outreach with various research institutions, foundations, networking organizations and educational partners in the region to create cohesive, modular and interoperable programs in public safety.

Keywords

Practical skills, Public safety, Integrated training curriculum, Emergency service

1. Introduction

A spate of mass-shooting / active-attack events that have occurred in public schools in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have left the authorities and administrators scrambling to adopt new strategies and procedures to curb such incidents. In a relatively short order, the Western Balkan region experienced multiple active attacks: Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, Serbia (May 2023), villages of Dubona and Malo Orasje (May 2023), Daruvar retirement home in Croatia (July 2024), Sanski Most High School in Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina (August 2024); Precko Elementary School in Zagreb, Croatia (December 2024), Cetinje, Montenegro (2022 and January of 2025). The final toll was over 50 dead and many more wounded.

For over twenty years, the United States dealt with the mass-shooting crisis, that reached nearly epidemic levels by 2023. [1] With an increasing number of attacks and mounting casualties, a novel and thorough approach to policing, resistance and response was needed – hence the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) was introduced in 2002 as a partnership between Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas Police Department and the Hays County, Texas Sheriff’s Office to address the need for active shooter response training for first responders [2] Texas State University ALERRT (Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training), created in 2002 in the aftermath of the active shooter event at Columbine High School in 1999, quickly expanded across the variety of agencies and institutions in the USA, and was also adapted for the training of civilians via the CRASE (Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events) program.

DTCare, a non-sectarian, non-governmental organization, operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2020, contacted ALERRT Center to organize introductory active-shooter training for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s fragmented law enforcement system and also address wider community impact through ALERRT’s specially tailored community-outreach program called CRASE – Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events. The specialized course takes the elements of the law-enforcement training and presents it to the civilian audience on how to best protect themselves and others until the law enforcement arrives. The CRASE program is intended for public institutions, schools, hospitals etc. – all potential soft-targets for an active shooter attack.

2. Training curriculum

ALERRT utilizes a two-phase process of response, thoroughly described in Blair and Martindale *Chain of Survival* [2]. The first phase is referred to as Stopping the Killing. During this phase, the primary focus of officers is on preventing the attacker from creating more casualties. This involves moving quickly toward the location of the attacker to affect an arrest (in USA it often involves the use of deadly force). Skills taught for this phase include arriving at the attack site, moving toward the crisis location, entering the location, interior movement, and room entry. During this phase, officers will bypass injured and uninjured victims to quickly close with and arrest attacker.

After the attacker has been stopped, the second phase, Stop the Dying, begins. The responders are first taught to provide basic point-of-wounding care to prevent the injured from dying at the scene, and then to transport the injured to an appropriate level of medical care. This is often a Level I trauma center in the US. Skills taught during this phase include bleeding control, basic airway management, prevention of hypothermia, simple triage, patient movement, and transporting victims in patrol cars.

Both phases of the coursework include short lectures, skills practice blocks, and extensive scenario-based training and the similar approach is used in the teaching of non law enforcement coursework like CRASE.

3. Practical training challenges

At the cessation of hostilities in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina probably had some of the best trained and effective emergency services that bore the brunt of assistance and response in the wartime contingencies. That tremendous talent and skill was lost in the post-conflict period as the institutions of higher learning were preoccupied with the reconstruction and reintroduction of various degree programs. Given the lack of funds and interest of various faculties, development of practical skills and practical education has dropped to the present all-time lows. Undergraduate, graduate and even post-graduate students are deficient in the type, duration and quality of practical skills development, particularly in the hands-on occupations such as fire, rescue, emergency and law-enforcement services [3]

The lack of hands-on education results in an increased financial and temporal burden in the emergency services, as they have to perform extensive on-the-job training procedures, which in turn reduces their own effectiveness and cohesion. It is important to note that the victims of mass-shootings have a very limited time-window to survive the incident [2]. In the short-emergency-response jurisdiction such as the United States (national average: 3-4 minutes), the stabilization of victims on-site provides an important element in their overall survival outlook. However, in the Western Balkans, where the professional medical response time is often in excess of 15 minutes [4] the reliance on in-situ assistance and stabilization is of paramount importance. Even more importantly, actively denying and resisting the active attacker appear to be better, preventive options than reliance or expectations of an expedient response by the law enforcement or emergency services.

The primary areas of practical skills expertise development therefore are in the law-enforcement and security fields, firefighting, workplace safety, medical services and information technology. The key factor was to re-establish the mentoring and hands-on elements in the curriculum development and engagement of various subject matter experts (SMEs) to deliver and evaluate specific skills (i.e. incident command). Another crucial element is the collaborative research outreach with various research institutions, foundations, networking organizations and educational partners obtained through the ERASMUS+ program on the EU level or via DTCare's network with the U.S. partners, such as ALERRT or DHS.

4. Complicating factors

The Western Balkans region is awash with firearms, ranking in the top of firearms (and light weapons) ownership in the world [5] many of them residual from the Yugoslav succession wars (1990-1995) as well as a considerable cultural component, particularly in Serrbia and Montenegro [6]. It is expected that the eventual cessation of hostilities in Ukraine will result in additional infusion of firearms and military equipment in the region [7]. Also, taking into consideration long-duration and manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generational trauma of Yugoslav succession wars [8] the prime risk envelope for active-attack is exponentially increasing.

Coupled with an increasing reach of various extremist narratives (BIRN, 2023) via social media and the availability of firearms and explosive-making components in the Western Balkans, the current situation depicts a potentially dangerous environment, particularly for the emergency services personnel. Given the lack of funds and specific training to respond to an active attack scenario, the ramifications of such event could have disastrous consequences. Undergraduate, graduate and even post-graduate students are deficient in the type, duration and quality of practical skills development, particularly in the hands-on occupations such as fire, rescue, emergency and law-enforcement services [9].

5. Implementation

With the increasing risk, one has to approach civilian active shooter response (CRASE) training with an emphasis on the avoid and deny aspects, and less so on the defend portion (given that even in the light of a successful defense against the active shooter, an individual may still be charged with capital offense(s), at the discretion of the prosecutor, if they used disproportionate level of force against the attacker).

To date, four (4) CRASE workshops were taught in Bosnia and Herzegovina – two (2) at the institutions of higher learning, one (1) in the public administrative building and one (1) in the corporate setting (banking, private security etc.). Additionally, in November of 2024 and July of 2025, ALERRT / DTCare have conducted two Level I Train-the-Trainer classes in Kiseljak, Bosnia in conjunction with CEPS College for the six law enforcement agencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our successful delivery of these initial classes has laid the groundwork for deeper collaboration in the region.

On the civilian side, particularly within the university / high-school teaching curriculum, the avoidance of the attack is generally the most applicable, but also the least one implemented or thought about. Majority of the schools and public buildings (i.e. hospitals, post-offices, public administration buildings) are very lax on security, usually have only one entrance, no clear evacuation routes and would present a potential death-trap during an active shooter response. To effectively address this – one needs to show exact examples and try to illicit response from the audience about the potential threats and ways to overcome them within a particular institution and their floor plans.

Denial of an active armed attack with locking, hiding, barricading etc. are also complex given that many of the internal doors don't have functional locks and many of the doors are outward opening (or double-swing) making them very difficult to effectively

lock out or barricade. One of the saving graces is that many of the public buildings still carry in inventory many of the heavy Yugoslav furniture which could make for effective anti-personnel barricades, capable of withstanding much of the currently available arsenal. However, given the soft-nature of the new architectural and public spaces, one has to emphasize the situational awareness and various avoidance / distraction strategies.

Given legal repercussions, the “defend” portion of the CRASE curriculum is addressed but framed within the context of an ambiguous framework of self-defense. Given that the considerable portion of the populace still vividly remembers the effects of Yugoslav-dissolution war, the issue of self-preservation is relatively ingrained into the common psyche and more attention should be given to making the surroundings safer and harder. Also, a significant accent is given on the first-aid portion (stopping the dying part) with the proper application of bandages, makeshift bandages, tourniquets and movement to safety.

There are very few courses offered on first aid, triage and such, which further complicates the potential victim assistance in the wake of an active shooter event. The four-month military conscription service ended in 2005 in Bosnia and Herzegovina; since then the neighboring countries (Croatia and Serbia) have re-instituted military conscription in 2024, with an accent onto emergency preparedness and first aid. There are no such plans in Bosnia and Herzegovina given the lack of national-level cohesion and agreement on the defense or emergency matters.

6. Concluding remarks

Based on the limited interaction with the CRASE training participants (16 hours cumulative in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and practice-based curriculum taught at CEPS College to the students of Criminal Justice and Security undergraduate curriculum, it is evident that there is a need for active-shooter / preparedness instruction at various levels, but particularly at the collegiate level. Many of the current college students are completely devoid of situational awareness and life-saving skills which would be needed for utilization in an active attack scenario.

Given that there are currently no plans to re-institute military or national service training in Bosnia and Herzegovina, instituting a basic hands-on emergency response curriculum in the institutions of higher learning would be at least suitable base to provide some life-saving skills that could be implemented in an emergency. It is therefore recommended to integrate the CRASE training curriculum at all educational levels, especially given the lack of other courses or training (i.e. first aid) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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