

Strategies for keeping your campus safe and secure

How colleges and universities are strengthening campus security to respond to rising threats.



The challenge

In February, 2023, a man opened fire in two buildings at Michigan State University, killing three students and wounding at least five others. When confronted by police, the shooter died by suicide. He had no known connection to the university and no clear motivation.

Horrifying as it is, this campus incident is far from isolated. According to the Gun Violence Archive, which defines mass shootings as incidents in which at least four victims were shot, there were 656 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2023.¹ And according to the Everytown for Gun Safety² database more than 11 percent of public mass shootings to date took place in K-12 schools or colleges.

The hard truth? Even the most conservative estimates say that at least 102 people have been killed in 13 mass shootings at U.S. institutions of higher learning since the 1960s, and hundreds more have been injured or killed by guns on college campuses.³

While shootings and other high-profile incidents strike fear in students, parents, educators and administrators, campus security forces are also dealing with other threats—including sexual violence, hate crimes and extremism. They're using a combination of core strategies to combat campus crime:



Strengthen the force by adding campus police personnel and capabilities.



Train the community to keep students and faculty prepared for potential incidents.



Adopt smart technologies that increase situational awareness and speed response.

While there is no one proven approach for ensuring campus safety, these strategies—and a robust, ever-expanding portfolio of security solutions—are helping colleges and universities strengthen security, reduce risk—and protect their communities.



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Ed Kaup
Police Chief and Assistant Vice President
of Middle Tennessee State University
(MTSU)

Protect the campus while preserving its openness

The word "campus" comes from the Latin word for field, and was first used in the 1770's to describe the large field adjacent to Nassau Hall of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). This field separated the college from the nearby town. From the very beginning, a campus set colleges and universities apart as special places of intellectual inquiry and personal growth.

The simplest way to protect a campus would be to isolate it in a distant location, build a high fence around it, and carefully inspect students and visitors at every entry point. But this draconian solution would create an environment more like a prison than a campus. And it would hardly foster a free exchange of knowledge and opinions.

The core challenge for higher-education institutions? Protect their communities while respecting the unique openness and vibrancy that make them ideal for higher education. But there are other daunting issues facing educational institutions that want to increase safety:

- **Financial constraints**
Budgets are tight and strengthening security requires commitment (and investment) from school leaders.
- **Lack of a central policy or strategy**
Without federal policy on gun control or guidance from other governing entities, college leaders are on their own when establishing their own safety strategies.
- **Negative attention**
Drawing attention to a potentially deadly problem can be difficult for educational institutions used to presenting a sunny vision to prospective students, parents and alums.

New attention for campus safety

With students returning to campus in the post-pandemic era, their safety has become a priority for university leaders. "Unfortunately, because of the prevalence of shootings and other incidents, campus safety is definitely on everyone's mind," says Ed Kaup, Police Chief and Assistant Vice President of Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). "People don't tend to differentiate between K-12 shootings and incidents at universities. They just know that there's been another school shooting, and that there have been way too many of them. And they want to see something done about it."

"There's much more focus on campus security than ever before," says Toni Isla, Verizon's executive program manager of public safety, who spent 15 years with the Chicago Police Department. "The way I think about colleges and universities is that they're very much like small cities in the way they operate. They have their own police force, administration and utilities. So educational institutions face similar security issues and are looking for solutions."

In the past, universities have tended to be quiet about addressing active threat scenarios, because they were hesitant to admit that a tragedy could happen on their campus. Chief Kaup and other security experts are confident that's all changing. "The mood has shifted and everyone accepts that they're vulnerable," he says. "Now schools want to show the public all the steps that we're taking to keep our students, faculty and visitors safe – not just from active shooters, but from all kinds of threats."

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The solution

Combine training with technology

Keeping a campus safe starts with a critical group of people – the security personnel tasked with protecting it. In the past, they may have been traditional security guards, similar to those watching after corporate headquarters or museums. But now, driven by the increased severity of potential threats, they are more likely to be highly trained and experienced. For example, the MTSU Police Department has 45 sworn police officers, including detectives – protecting approximately 21,000 students, 3,000 faculty and 200 staff. And Chief Kaup comes to his leadership role after 27 years with the Chicago Police Department.

Campus police are also collaborating more closely with local police forces, particularly at urban institutions where the dividing line between town and gown is thin. This collaboration recognizes that potential threats could come from anywhere – a student, someone in the university community, or a stranger from outside it.

They’re also working more closely with the school community. “I’d say that the most important thing contributing to campus safety is our relationships with the community,” says Chief Kaup. “Relationship-building with students and faculty is important for any campus police department, because we can’t do our job without the public’s help. It still comes down to the well-known phrase see something, say something. And students need to be reminded that it’s okay to say something so we can check it out – and keep them safe.”

Training keeps the community prepared

Many institutions are also actively training for worst-case scenarios, such as on-campus shooters or dorm fires. Campus safety personnel are working with students, resident advisors, faculty, deans and others to ensure that they know what to do during an emergency, including learning the Avoid/Deny/Defend (ADD)TM model.⁴ This training is being offered at schools that have experienced on-campus incidents of violence as well as at other institutions. Signing up for training is becoming a regular component of student orientation as schools taking a proactive role in protecting students from the unthinkable – but possible – advent of an on-campus shooter or other serious threat. As one veteran officer put it: “Training acknowledges the tried-and-true adage that you have to pray for the best, but prepare for the worst.”

Advanced technology strengthens campus security

The amount, variety and capabilities of campus security technology have expanded exponentially in recent years. This increase is driven by innovation as well as the recognition that the right technology can help raise situational awareness, deter crime and speed response times.

More specifically, technology from Verizon and its partners helps police officers and other security personnel know what’s happening across their campus. It extends their reach and vision. And it improves their situational awareness in

general, as well as during specific incidents—from monitoring individual campus intruders to ensuring the safety of large-scale campus concerts or other events.

“At Verizon, we support education at all levels, from distance learning to advanced security solutions,” says Isla. “We think of university police departments as first responders. So giving them priority access for voice and data is just the beginning. But now we offer a lot of other solutions that increase situational awareness, as well a wide selection of partner solutions, including weapon and gunshot detection, lock automation, emergency kiosks and much more.”

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Toni Isla

Executive Program Manager of Public Safety, Verizon

Higher education institutions are using advanced technology to:

Communicate, no matter what.

On-campus security technology starts with communication. “Communication is at the core of everything,” says Chief Kaup. “We have to be able to communicate quickly and reliably—across all platforms and devices.” Ensuring that public safety officers get the fastest, most reliable wireless communication and unequalled interoperability has made Verizon the #1 network for public safety.⁵ Verizon connectivity provides priority and preemption to public safety officers as part of the Verizon Frontline platform—giving first responders front-of-the-line priority.

Group First Response is another key solution from Verizon Frontline, one that expands interoperability and mission-critical communication beyond talk. It meets the important Mission Critical Push to Talk (MCPTT) standard, which provides high-quality audio, low latency, connectivity between radios and cell phones, security and encryption and much more.

The Siyata SD7 handheld device offers push-to-talk capabilities and other advanced, easy-to-use features. Together, Verizon Frontline and Siyata SD7 empower campus security officers and others with reliable, efficient and durable emergency communication—thanks to the device’s rugged design, enhanced security, instant push-to-talk button, easy deployment and intuitive use.



Bring the power of 5G to bear on campus security.

Many of the new devices and solutions for campus security—from gunshot detection to smart video—rely on fast connectivity and exceptional security. After all, information about campus investigations and incidents needs to stay private.

To meet their needs, some higher education institutions are establishing Verizon private 5G networks for their campuses, combining fast, reliable Verizon 5G connectivity with the security and privacy inherent in a private network. Also known as “non-public” networks, private 5G networks allow colleges, universities and other public sector organizations to access a custom-tailored 5G experience to defined areas, such as a campus, where high-speed, high-capacity and low-latency connectivity is crucial—regardless of whether or not it’s within a public 5G coverage area.

Gain new situational awareness.

Gone are the days of simple closed-circuit cameras placed around campus and their output—fuzzy images on unwieldy videotapes. Today’s smart video solutions enable greater situational awareness and faster response, as well investigative capabilities. These solutions pair high-resolution cameras with analytics, enabling cameras to observe and report what’s happening, including loitering, theft, or other suspicious activities. They can offer sophisticated capabilities, such as video geo-fencing, which uses video to trigger alerts—from students doing late-night graffiti to a stranger with a rifle slipping onto campus. And advanced video analytics, including near real-time and forensic video analysis, can help protect property and keep students safe.

Coordinate an informed response.

Campus police often find themselves having to make tough decisions. Is the group of strangers wandering around campus just tourists or extremists looking for trouble? Are they holding a cell phone or a gun? Where are they, right now? To make faster, better-informed decisions, officers need to have current data from a variety of sources available at their fingertips (e.g., on their mobile devices).

Universities are using real time response systems to enable communication and collaboration among a response team, boost situational awareness and optimize insights. These systems can integrate information from multiple independent systems into one view to assist threat management, manage events and deliver an effective response.



Looking ahead: New threats, new solutions

There will never be an easy, one-size-fits-all solution that keeps all campuses safe. Institutions of higher learning are too diverse for that. And campus security is ever-evolving, with new threats—and new solutions to counter those threats. But the combination of a vigilant security team, ongoing community training, and use of advanced safety solutions can make a real difference in reducing risk and keeping your campus safe.

Schools with exceptional security recommend staying in touch with the latest technologies and strategies by investigating solutions and the companies that create them via online research or trade shows. They also point out that public-private partnerships abound in higher education, and recommend that schools take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with technology leaders—like Verizon—to explore the potential of new security technologies on campus.

Inaction is the strategy that no one recommends. Not committing organizational attention or investing funding in campus security just puts schools at more risk. When asked what kept him up at night, Chief Kaup was clear: “Anyone who works in security, or who has children who are students, asks themselves the same question. ‘Have we done enough?’”



Learn more

To find out more about Verizon's portfolio of solutions for higher education, visit our [Cybersecurity and Campus Safety page](#), [verizon.com/highereducation](https://www.verizon.com/highereducation) or [contact us](#).

¹ Gun Violence Archive, October 1, 2023. Latest figures available at <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

² “How Can We Prevent Gun Violence in American Schools?” Everytown for Gun Safety Research and Policy Report, June 6, 2023. <https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-can-we-prevent-gun-violence-in-schools/>

³ Higher Ed Dive, “How Colleges Are Trying to Prevent the Next Mass Shooting,” May 4, 2023.

⁴ The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALEERT)[™] Program at Texas State University designed Avoid/Deny/Defend[™] model as an easy-to-remember method for individuals to follow during dangerous active threat situations.

⁵ Based on quarterly third-party wireless voice market share data, Q2 2024.