



## HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL GAMES: MITIGATING THE RISK OF VIOLENCE

High school football games and other athletic events often occur after the regular school day, which can present unique risks and challenges for the school and law enforcement community. In 2023, communities across the country experienced the most number of shooting incidents at athletic events, and as of September 2024, there already have been twenty-four shooting incidents at or near athletic events.<sup>1</sup> New Jersey also experienced a recent shooting at a high school football game in August 2024 that injured two females, ages fifteen and sixteen.<sup>2</sup>

It is imperative that Chiefs of Police understand the risks such events pose and have appropriate discussions with school officials to ensure areas of responsibility are defined and plans are in place. Some school officials may believe that requesting a few extra officers for security is sufficient to keep everyone safe. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies who simply provide additional officers but do not develop an agency-specific Incident Action Plan, determine if the school has its own safety and security plan, and ensure law enforcement personnel are appropriately trained for these unique events might be later strongly criticized that they failed to prepare their officers.

Law enforcement should engage in a four-pronged approach involving Planning, Adequate Staffing, Emergency Preparedness, and Training for after-school athletic events. However, the sole responsibility for securing an event at the school is not law enforcement, and absent such critical conversations with school officials, some school officials might assume that since the local law enforcement agency supplied officers for "security," then they are responsible for the overall security. It is imperative that school officials develop their own plans and not simply rely on a handful of officers to ensure that an after-school athletic event is safe.

Some considerations for the Chief of Police concerning Planning, Staffing, Emergency Preparedness, and Training:

### Planning:

- Ensure an Incident Action Plan (IAP) has been developed for each game consistent with the principles of the Incident Command System. The police department IAP should complement the school safety and security plan while providing guidance unique to law enforcement and other first responders.
- Ensure required discussions have occurred with the district Superintendent and other signatories to the [Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between Education and Law Enforcement Officials \(MOU\)](#). The MOU indicates that police and school officials pledge to discuss many issues related to school security planning.
  - Article 9.1 of the MOU includes many considerations concerning the school's School Safety and Security Plan (SSSP) development. It is likely that the school has a robust security plan for the regular school day and conducts regular emergency and security drills. However, it is imperative that the school also have a plan for after-school athletic events. The Chief of Police should ensure that the school's sole plan is not simply to hire officers for security.
  - Review articles 9.1.2 and 9.1.4 concerning the standard that school administrators should consult with law enforcement when developing SSSPs and that law enforcement agencies should review the schools' SSSPs annually. In light of the increased prevalence of violence at athletic events, ensure that discussions involving security planning also include appropriate planning for such after-school activities.
  - Article 3 of the MOU provides clear direction concerning when the school should notify law enforcement concerning planned or threatened violence. Furthermore, the law enforcement agency should ensure they have a process governing tips and intelligence gathering that prioritizes

information relating to potential violence at the school, including after-school events. Ensure there is a procedure to evaluate the history of incidents at similar events, and intelligence information received about current conflicts at the school and the community that could unfold at the athletic event. A Sample Intelligence Policy is available [here](#).

- Review the [New Jersey School Security Task Force Report and Recommendations](#) when having planning discussions with school officials. When the Chief of Police signed the MOU, the Chief agreed to Article 9.2 of the MOU, indicating that the Chief and all parties agreed to work together to implement the recommendations of the N.J. School Security Task Force. The person responsible for developing the IAP should be familiar with this resource.
- Ensure that school officials have established procedures for notifying law enforcement concerning after-school events, even when they have not requested the hiring or staffing of police officers.
- Surveillance cameras are a useful tool as part of a layered security plan; however, ensure the security plan is not overly reliant on security or video cameras to prevent violence. Effective security measures must be achieved by appropriate planning, staffing, preparation, and training that technology supports but is not reliant on. If surveillance cameras monitor the area, discuss with school officials if the cameras have the ability to alert of trespassers or suspicious activity and ensure there is a process to review notifications, especially so in the days leading up to an athletic event. If the video surveillance system covering the athletic area or adjacent areas has live viewing capability, discuss it with school officials who are responsible for monitoring it.
- Include representatives from fire, OEM, EMS, Mutual Aid coordinators, and other law enforcement agencies who might be part of an initial or mutual aid response in the planning process. Review the agency's mutual aid plan and policy to determine if any changes are necessary. A sample Mutual Aid Policy is available [here](#).
- Ensure the IAP includes a diagram of the facility, adjacent areas and identifies key areas such as staging areas for mutual aid, fire, OEM, and EMS.
- Ensure the plan also focuses on incidents beyond shootings, such as threats, assaults, flash mobs, street or parking lot takeovers, and riots.
- Discuss effective lighting in and around the stadium, locker rooms, parking lots, ticket area, and the school perimeter with school officials.
- Encourage school personnel to contact the school administrators of the opposing team's school to discuss safety concerns, security practices, and emergency guidelines and ask about past incidents of violence or rumors concerning violence.
- Discuss with school officials how certain disturbances will be handled. For example, the school security plan will likely address how disturbances will be handled between players. However, it should be discussed how disturbances will be initially handled involving a parent and coach, a parent and an official, a parent entering the field to cause or incite violence or inappropriate behavior in the stands. Clear guidance should be provided to officers as to who is responsible for what task and when it might be necessary for law enforcement involvement.
- Discuss with school officials what the plan is for securing cash and other valuables. School officials should be aware that simply because officers are staffing the event does not mean that valuable assets are secure.
- Discuss with school officials what procedures are in place for monitoring event entrances and whether enhanced security measures, such as metal detectors or advanced artificial intelligence weapon detection systems, and other threat scanning are necessary or appropriate. Determine what the school has established concerning limitations or restrictions of bringing bags, backpacks, signs, or other items into the

event area. Ensure that the person responsible for enforcing such rules is determined in advance, who will most likely be school officials.

- Encourage school officials to develop a well-structured code of conduct policy, communicate the policy to all students in advance of the event, and announce the standards at the start of the event. Furthermore, ensure the school has delineated who is responsible for enforcing code of conduct rules that do not violate the law.
- Discuss parking, traffic flow, and parking lot security with school officials. These issues might not be the responsibility of law enforcement, but absent a discussion, school officials might believe that since law enforcement is present at the event, they will handle these tasks.
- Encourage school officials to arrange for team buses to pick up and drop off players at opposite ends of the sports facility and separately from spectators.
- Discuss with the school to ensure available lighting is utilized at the stadium, fields, parking lots, and school perimeter prior to the start of the event.
- Establish enhanced police patrols of the school and athletic fields days in advance of the event and encourage school officials to do the same.
- Determine who is responsible when juveniles are waiting to be picked at the conclusion of the event. School officials might believe law enforcement will wait until all persons have left the area, but law enforcement might not be responsible for this task.
- Conduct a pre-event review of the event location to look for hazards such as items that can be used as weapons, lights that are not illuminated or blocked by shrubs, or other indicators of potential concern. This should be the responsibility of the school staff, but law enforcement also has a unique perspective when looking for such issues.

### **Provide Adequate Staffing**

- Evaluate the feasibility of prioritizing the assignment of school resource officers to the event.
- Article 7.7 of the MOU provides guidance concerning requests from school officials for law enforcement to staff extracurricular events. It's likely that in many jurisdictions, this task may be delegated to subordinate positions; however, Chiefs of Police should provide guidance to such subordinates on when they should be notified of athletic events at the school facility, especially when there is any concern or indication of the potential for a disturbance of violence.
- Ensure school officials that staffing considerations for ticket sales, venue entrances, facility exits, parking lots, bathroom entrances, and other common areas are addressed. These areas might be staffed with law enforcement officers, but this does not mean that there might not be a need for school staff members at these locations.
- Direct that police officers be in uniform and wearing clearly identifiable clothing, and also discuss with school officials the appropriateness of having plainclothes officers as part of the security plan,
- Discuss with school personnel how they will adequately communicate with law enforcement. Furthermore, police officers assigned to the event should be able to communicate with school staff.
- Ensure adequate police vehicles and other emergency vehicles are present at the scene. Officers might often be deployed on foot, and additional patrol vehicles may be needed for prisoner transports or emergency response to nearby locations where agitators have fled to or congregate.

## Emergency Preparedness:

- Determine the school's plan and capabilities to communicate with attendees and players in the event of an emergency, including an evacuation, seeking shelter for inclement weather, or other direction in the event of violence. Include the procedures in the IAP.
- Discuss with school personnel how they plan to communicate with parents in the event of an emergency. During the school day, this is likely the responsibility of school officials who can do so; however, after hours, school personnel with the authority or ability to facilitate this critical communication might not be readily available.
- Encourage school officials to participate in tabletop exercises simulating various types of emergencies occurring at after-school athletic events, as the risks, threats, and necessary actions will greatly differ from the drills concerning an active shooter event that occurs during the school day.
- Review past athletic events, determine if there are common locations where juveniles have gathered after the game, and provide enhanced patrols to deter unlawful activity.
- High school athletic events pose a risk of a "Juvenile Flash Mob." Review the Law Enforcement Bulletin, [Juvenile Gatherings, and Flash Mobs: Critical Planning and Response Considerations](#).

## Training:

Develop an agency training program that provides guidance concerning the IAP and the unique risks of an open space mass casualty event. It is imperative that active shooter training programs for schools include how to respond to and prevent violence at after-school athletic events.

## Additional Resource Considerations:

[New Jersey Department of Education – School Preparedness and Emergency Planning](#)

[School Athletic Event Security](#)

[National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security](#)

[Extending Schoolwide Systems to Support Extracurricular Activities](#)

[New Jersey School Boards – What Makes Schools Safe?](#)

[Spectator Violence in Stadiums – ASU Center for Problem-Orientated Policing](#)

## Citations and Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Riedman, D. (2024, September 1). Gunfire Continues at High School Football Games Across the Country. K-12 School Shooting Database.

<sup>2</sup>Yang, L. (2024, August 31). Shots Fire During NJ High School Football Game, School Says.

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