

Uvalde, Texas School Mass Shooting Case Study  
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### **Abstract**

On May 24, 2022, a school shooting occurred at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Nineteen students and two teachers were killed. There were concerns about miscommunication, particularly about the police's delayed response. Families and the public became upset because they wanted answers. The failed communications were experienced by law enforcement, public safety agencies, and the community after the Uvalde shooting. This paper will analyze the shooting and how communication failure affected law enforcement, public safety agencies, and the community. It will include a breakdown of operational communication failures between law enforcement agencies, radio failures, and the lack of a unified command. Public communication failures, such as inaccurate and contradictory messaging, create confusion and frustration in the public and families. Lack of empathy and proper communication with the families of victims makes their situation worse. It will discuss the communication breakdowns between the agencies (Uvalde CISD Police, Uvalde Police, Texas DPS, U.S. Border Patrol), the Impact of the misleading narratives and contradictory information released to the public, community distrust, and media coverage. It also discusses empathy failures in dealing with grieving families and providing them with timely and sensitive information. It includes a case study showing the lessons for students and professionals in crisis management, public relations, and law enforcement. There are additional interviews with different people who experienced this event: parents and journalists. They talk about the chaos and misinformation families experienced, the lack of empathy from officials, the toll it took on families, and the media's struggle with the lack of information and access. Finally, there will be a summary of what solutions could be made in a crisis to make this happen more smoothly in the future.

## The Incident

At approximately 11:33 am on May 24<sup>th</sup>, an unknown subject entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, through an unlocked outside door. The first communication from the Uvalde Police Department (UPD) was uploaded to their Facebook page, advising the public that there was a “large police presence” around the school and that they should avoid the area (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). This seemed like a good start, and the communication would keep up with the unfolding events. The following post at 12:06 pm stated that the school was on lockdown but that all students and staff were safe (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). This was untrue. The message was uploaded using copy and paste from previous non-emergency posts that had been shared in the past. This one single post led to a loss of trust for the UPD that has lingered to this day. The subsequent communication was delivered with the Raptor emergency messaging system, including emails to parents, automated phone calls and texts, and social media posts about the emergency. At 12:17 pm, the information was released that there was an active shooter situation at Robb Elementary School, and parents were urged not to show up to the campus until more information had been collected (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). The message was sent out in English only. According to DATA USA, 81% of Uvalde is Hispanic. There should have been messages in both English and Spanish sent out over the Raptor system to make sure that everyone would be able to understand what was happening.

Next was a confusing deluge of updates to the UPD Facebook account: “12:20 p.m. UCISD Post: Reunification Site for Robb Students: Robb Elementary students are being transported to the Willie DeLeon Civic Center for reunification. The Civic Center will be under Secure Status until all students are accounted for. Parents, please do not pick up students at this time. You will be notified to pick up students once all are accounted for” (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

- 12:23 p.m. UPD Updates FB post: active scene, pick up children at Civic Center.
- 12:30 p.m. UCISD Updates FB: reunification details, do not pick up children
- 12:38 p.m. UPD Updates FB post: reunification details, pick up at Civic Center.
- 12:55 p.m. UCISD FB post: Do not pick up children (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024)
- 1:06 p.m. UPD Facebook post: shooter in custody (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). This was not true and was never taken down by the UPD.

The local hospital was also sending out information during the crisis, but was not communicating with the other agencies. Parents were told to report to the hospital cafeteria for updates about their children. Security around the hospital was reinforced, and the parents spent significant time trying to get into the hospital. Once inside, they had to wait again for information. This caused even more pain and confusion for the parents of the victims.

The only way to ensure that this type of confusing information is not sent out during an incident is to have a crisis communication plan in place long before it is needed. Another critical point is that there must be only one point of contact for information to be disseminated. If every agency that responds is giving updates and information, then confusion is the only guaranteed outcome.

The first official news conference happened at 4:16 pm and was given by UCISD PD Chief Pete Arredondo, who gave the following details and did not take any questions from the media:

- Confirmation of the incident: “At approximately 11:32 a.m. this morning, there was a mass casualty incident at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.”
- Confirmation of “several injuries, adults and students, and some deaths,” but the total number of victims was not released.
- The subject was deceased and acted alone.
- The Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS) assisted UCISD PD with the investigation.
- UCISD safely released all students from other campuses.
- Asked for prayers for the families (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024)

The news conference was held at the civic center, not the school. The total number of victims was never released, and the conference was not given until over 4 hours after the event, which allowed the amount of misinformation to spread like wildfire. The news conference should have given the community confidence in the agencies' crisis handling. Instead, it added fuel to the loss of trust in the community towards its law enforcement agencies. By stating that there would be no questions, the agency was either withholding information or clueless about the answers.

### **Public Communication Failures**

Public communications are the first and most crucial intervention when a crisis occurs. It can be a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, or an emergency like a wildfire. The single most terrifying crisis will always be an active shooter situation at a school. Leaders are tasked with disseminating information in a calm, controlled, and compassionate way. How the information is delivered can help victims and victim families deal with the stress of the situation unfolding. Communications, both internal and external, must be done carefully and in a timely manner to give just the right amount of accurate information to the public when it is needed and necessary (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

### **Communication Failures in Uvalde**

The initial breakdown at the Uvalde scene occurred when Chief Arredondo dropped his two radios on the ground while running up to the school. He stated later that he felt that

the radios would not work inside the building, and he would need his hands to be unencumbered. He never asked for the radios and was never supplied with them during the entire response. Communication was utilized via cellphone and by shouting across the hall. This may have caused a student to be shot by the assailant a second time. “More than one survivor recalled hearing someone state, ‘Say ‘help’ if you need help,’” and when a child tried to say “help,” the subject reentered room 112 from room 111 and shot the victim. The adult survivor from room 111 also provided a similar account and said that the subject also hit the victim in the back around this time. Some survivors thought it was the subject, while others heard the statement from the hallway. (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

The review of the incident conducted by the Department of Justice noted that most agencies issue two distinct types of radios, one to communicate with other officers inside buildings and another to speak to external agencies. The ones designed to work inside buildings were relatively effective, but the other type did not work inside buildings. The idea that the Chief did not even attempt radio communication goes against all training for active shooter situations that have been developed over the years since the Columbine school shooting.

The radio communications that did go out soon overloaded the system, and some messages would be heard while others were not. The message that the subject had been contained or had barricaded himself in a room went out several times, even though that was not true. In some instances, the message went out while the subject was actively shooting (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

Status updates are known as L-CANS (Location, Conditions, Actions, Needs) and are sent out during a crisis to keep everyone updated. Training and protocols ensure that these L-CANS are effective. The L-CANS sent out during the Uvalde shooting did not fit the protocols and created more chaos (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

The lack of communication equipment was not the only breakdown in communication that day. Chief Arrendondo, who was the de facto person in command, attempted to use his phone to communicate with other officers in the hallways. Still, he often gave conflicting directions on multiple occasions (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

The recommendations for dealing with large spaces, such as schools that create a radio dead zone, would be to assign “runners” who relay information between officers without any technology needed (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). Sometimes the commonsense route is the best one. The main takeaway is that departments must make sure that the equipment is upgraded regularly to ensure that it will work in as many situations as possible (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

### **Communication Equipment**

There is no actual list of equipment to be used during an active shooter crisis. There are, however, guidelines for most crisis responses, and this would include communication equipment such as radios. The radio is crucial to communication during a large-scale event with several agencies responding. The minimum criteria would be that the radio would be of advanced technology and that all operators would understand the need to be succinct when communicating, and above all, not to overload the communication system, which can lead to loss of critical and even lifesaving information (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

### **Lack of Unified Command**

The Uvalde shooting highlighted the need to establish a unified command immediately. If there is no established chain of command, then the response suffers from misdirection and from misinformation, and this was certainly the case in Uvalde. The most obvious choice for command would be Chief Arredondo of the UCISD Police Department. He was the senior officer first on scene and started directing the other officers from the outset. He later attempted to negotiate with the shooter through the wall. He was not a capable leader and focused on all the wrong things. He kept asking for equipment, firepower, manpower, and keys. The protocol for an active shooter is to respond and eliminate the threat with whatever tools are at hand (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024). This protocol, like so many others, was not followed. Children were being evacuated from the school and sent to a nearby funeral home, and then they were bused to either the hospital, the high school, or the community center. There were no records of which children went where, and parents were not given any information or incorrect information. The absence of a unified command made coordinating the responding agencies impossible. The (NIMS is the tool that FEMA) has established to give emergency responders an adaptable way to coordinate a large-scale event such as a school shooting. The better coordinated the response is, the more effective it will be. When the shooting in Uvalde occurred, the policies and plans were in place for each of the responding agencies to set up the incident command and the unified command, but they were never implemented. The officers of the UCISD PD had even conducted an active shooter course just a few months before the shooting at Robb Elementary occurred. The facts all show that the responding agencies had the training and the tools needed to take out the shooter, but for some reason, they chose to forget this training when faced with an active shooter situation. The subject was not neutralized for almost 77 minutes, which is entirely unacceptable. How many children could have been saved if officers had stormed the room at the beginning and not waited for 77 minutes is a question of nightmares.

FEMA has made the receipt of federal grants contingent on all local and state jurisdictions adopting NIMS. The lack of direction and total breakdown of command in the Uvalde shooting make the need for NIMS to be mandatory for all jurisdictions, regardless of whether they receive federal money or not. Training exercises are the only way for departments to learn how to respond to active shooter situations. Mutual aid

between departments and jurisdictions is a good way to make sure that gaps in training and equipment can be filled when a need arises.

### **Information Silos**

The lack of unified command and control caused the breakdown of the way information was disseminated among agencies. Misinformation about the type of situation, where children were located, whether or not doors were locked, and how best to evacuate children and teachers was relayed among the agencies. The situation was changed from an active shooter to a barricaded individual, and this information was told to several officers inside and outside the building, even though it was never true. Chief Arredondo was said to be inside the room with the subject, trying to talk to him, but this was never what was happening. A child called 911 and was on the phone with dispatch for over 16 minutes. This information was broadcast over the radio, and those in the hallway could hear it, but those outside could not. Twelve minutes are wasted looking for keys to unlock the doors to rooms 111/112 where the shooter and victims were located but the door knobs were never checked to see if they were in fact locked. During this time, four more shots are fired inside the room. An officer receives word from his wife inside the rooms that she has been shot and is believed to be dying. The officer attempts to enter the room, and other officers remove him from the hallway and take him outside, but no other support is offered.

The communication bottleneck caused some information to be withheld from agencies, and other misinformation to be repeated. There are clear protocols for dealing with information during a crisis or emergency event, but almost every agency that responded that fateful day ignored them.

### **Public Communication Failures**

While the mass shooting was horrific, the lack of information from officials as the crisis unfolded was a tragedy unto itself. It not only contributed to the delayed response by law enforcement officers, but it also created mass confusion for the families of the Robb Elementary students and staff, who had no idea if their loved ones were safe. Part of the failure was inherent in the location itself. Uvalde, Texas, is a small community with a population of around 15,000 people. Far away from the big city, the “can't happen here” mentality appeared to be prevalent among city and school officials, as well as area law enforcement. The community was caught unprepared for a worst-case scenario. A Department of Justice report on the school shooting states, “The unfortunate reality is that the significant increase in mass shootings in every size of jurisdiction means that all law enforcement agencies, fire/emergency medical services (EMS), local governments, officials and city leaders, and health and behavioral health agencies should create trauma-informed plans for such critical incidents” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

### **Inaccurate and Contradictory Information**

Response from officials began on a timely basis. Within 10 minutes of the suspect entering the school, the Uvalde Police Department (UPD) issued an alert on its Facebook page that there was a “large police presence” and asked “the public to avoid the area.” However, at 12:06, the maelstrom of misinformation began. The Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District (UCISD) police posted on its Facebook (FB) page: “school on lockdown, students and staff are safe.” This misleading message came 33 minutes after the suspect began shooting in the school (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024). Oscar Orona, father of Robb student Noah Orona, says messages like that from the school were not unusual. “They would always send messages because of the proximity to the border,” said Orona (O. Orona, personal interview, June 13, 2025). “There was always something going on. So they always locked down the school.” Officials never corrected the false reassurance. Within the following hour, Uvalde Police and the school district issued several contradictory Facebook posts:

- 12:23 pm UPD Updates FB post: active scene, pick up children at Civic Center.
- 12:30 pm. UCISD Updates FB: reunification details, do not pick up children.
- 12:38 pm. UPD Updates FB post: reunification details, pick up at Civic Center.
- 12:55 pm. UCISD FB post: Do not pick up children.
- 1:06 pm. UPD FB post: shooter in custody (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

The suspect was never in custody. In fact, he had been killed at approximately 12:50 pm. Uvalde CISD never corrected that misinformation or messaged that the threat was over.

In the vacuum of information, rumors take over. Anxious families gathered at a funeral home across the street from the school, being kept at bay by police who would not give them any information. Parents scrambled to the civic center, then the high school, as speculation spread about where the families would be reunited. The local hospital sent a message saying parents could come by to check on their children, only to be turned away in the parking lot by security and police. Those who did make it inside waited for hours to find out the condition of their loved ones. Two and a half hours after the incident began, Oscar Orona learned his son had been injured via a phone call. “Is this a parent of Noah Orona?” And my wife’s like, “Yes, this is his mother.” “We need your consent to start treating him.” “For what? What happened?” “We can’t tell you, but you have to get to the hospital right away,” (O. Orona, personal interview, June 13, 2025). At first, the Oronas were told Noah had a flesh wound. Hours later, they were told their son was shot in the lower back, and the bullet exited his shoulder blade. He was airlifted to a San Antonio hospital for emergency surgery.

After hours of uncertainty and heartbreak came more misinformation and the blame game. Texas Governor Greg Abbott was the first official to speak publicly, at 3:23 pm. After being briefed on the shooting, he mistakenly stated that 14 students and one teacher were killed. Not nearly five hours after the incident began, UCISD Police Chief Pete Arredondo held a press conference. He released limited information and took no

questions from the media:

- Confirmation of the incident: “At approximately 11:32 am this morning, there was a mass casualty incident at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.”
- Confirmation of “several injuries, adults and students, and some deaths,” but the total number of victims was not released.
- The subject was deceased and acted alone.
- Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS) assisted UCISD PD with the investigation.
- UCISD safely released all students from other campuses.
- Asked for prayers for the families (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024).
- An hour and a half later, Arredondo held a second news conference, which lasted only 45 seconds.

### **Misleading Narratives**

Meanwhile, a Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS) spokesperson provided live interviews to the media, which became the only source of reliable information. The spokesperson provided details such as the number of victims, events leading up to the suspect entering the school, and what happened inside. The spokesperson also expressed sympathy and compassion for the victims, which the school district failed to do. The messaging from TXDPS and UCISD was not coordinated in what information they were sharing (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024).

On the second day, Governor Abbott and TXDPS Director Steve McCraw arrived on the scene, announcing that the Texas Rangers would lead the investigation. Unfortunately, even at this stage, misinformation was being shared. McCraw stated that a school police officer had engaged the shooter outside the school. He also noted that local police rushed in when they arrived, and that the school was “immediately breached [because] we know as officers every second is a life, they breached it and engaged the active shooter and continued to keep him pinned down in that location, afterwards until the tactical team could be put together. . .” In fact, it took 77 minutes before the suspect was confronted (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). While some misinformation can be later corrected, others can do irreparable harm. For instance, McCraw stated that a Robb teacher had propped open the door the suspect used to enter the building. This turned out to be false, but the damage was done. It led to the teacher being vilified and caused her emotional distress. In 2024, KENS-TV reporter Zack Briggs interviewed Amy Franco to see how she is coping with the false accusation. “Miss Franco mentally feels kind of like an outcast in the community,” said Briggs. “She has isolated herself. She uses art to heal” (Z. Briggs, personal interview, June 18, 2025).

By the third day, five leaders had spoken on the tragedy. In recap, Governor Abbott held the first news conference, followed by UCISD police chief Arredondo, the TXDPS spokesperson, and then TXDPS director McCraw. Yet there was no consistent message shared by a designated leader. “After a devastating event, the community needs consistent

leadership to avoid confusion,” cites the CBP review of the tragedy (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). The constant stream of stonewalling and misinformation was frustrating not only for families and the media but also for officials. “I’m gonna be throwing people under the bus tonight in a speech because for too long,” said Uvalde Mayor Don McLaughlin at a city council meeting. “We’ve been told we can’t talk, we can’t answer, and we can’t say anything,” McLaughlin said. “Today, that’s over with,” (Allsop 2022).

### **Lack of Empathy in Family Communication**

Throughout the tragedy itself and its aftermath, very little empathy was shown to grieving families. While the children were still under siege, some parents were detained by police as they sought answers or attempted to rescue their children, frustrated by the lack of action by law enforcement. The Customs and Border Patrol report found that families did not receive transparent and compassionate communications. “The lack of accurate, proper, and compassionate communications in Uvalde after the Robb Elementary School incident, both in the immediate aftermath as well as over a year later, resulted in further harm to victims and family members most directly impacted and more distrust in the community,” cites the report (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). That lack of compassion extended well beyond the immediate aftermath. There was a lack of organized victim forums, where families could get more information, obtain counseling, and vent their frustrations. Instead, UCISD school board meetings were overwhelmed by families seeking answers. Instead of embracing the opportunity, the board limited each speaker's comments to five minutes.

Many victims reported that they did not receive victim advocate services or support. They were also overwhelmed by paperwork to file for victim compensation. But more importantly, no one took responsibility or apologized for what happened. “This void of information about the circumstances of the death of their loved ones has contributed to their trauma,” notes the CBP report. “Families report they cannot heal without the information they need about what happened to their family members on May 24, 2022, and they are unable to even begin to recover until those in charge are held accountable,” (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024).

### **A Father's Story**

May 24, 2022, started as a happy day for Oscar Orona, his wife, and their son, fourth grader Noah. Noah's parents were on campus to attend the awards ceremony despite his mother recovering from a recent surgery. “He asked, 'Can I get home with mom?'," recalled his father in an interview (O. Orona, personal interview, June 13, 2025). Not wanting to burden his ailing wife, “I said, if you come with me, you're gonna have to go to work. Maybe it's best if we just go and, you know, have fun with your classmates. And he goes, 'OK,' and skipped to his building in the back, and I turned around and he waved, and that was the last time we saw him as Noah before all of this.” Orona says the tragedy

that followed not only changed their lives, but their son's personality as well.

In the few minutes it took him to drive back to work, word of a gunman at the school began spreading. "My wife called me and said, "Hey, they're telling me that there's a shooter near the school." I went to the school, and it was mass chaos," said Orona. He recalls a mass of people gathered at the funeral home across from the school. Rumors were already buzzing. "The shooter's outside. The shooter's outside. So I just kind of froze." Another parent told him the children were being bussed to the high school. Orona called his wife, asking her to meet him at the high school. "My wife was right there by where one of the security guards was. She said he's saying that they're not bringing him to the high school because the high school's on lockdown, that they're going to take him to the Civic Center," recalls Orona. Around this time, families began receiving text alerts stating, "school on lockdown, students and staff are safe." They were also told family reunification would take place at the civic center (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024).

If Noah showed up there, his wife would remain in high school, and Orona would go to the civic center. "There were a lot of people already there, a lot of city officials, a lot of police officers, Border Patrol, all kinds of enforcement officers," Orona recalled. "And then the rumor started, they're saying that the shooter got inside the school and killed a teacher, and then they're saying that some kids got shot and killed, and then it just started," Orona says he was in denial that his son might be injured, or worse. Buses started to arrive at the civic center. Noah wasn't on one. It wasn't until two and a half hours later that they received the call from the hospital telling them that Noah had been shot and needed to be taken to San Antonio for immediate surgery. Noah was shot in the lower back, with the bullet exiting above his shoulder blade. It tore a path about a foot long. Luckily, no major organs were damaged. He now has a long scar as a visible reminder. He also carries an emotional scar that his parents worry won't heal. "The biggest change that we started seeing was Noah before the shooting, and then this new young man after the shooting. And I say young man because he stopped being a kid," says Orona. We have an entirely different person now. He lost his innocence in that classroom."

Orona says no school district member ever reached out to offer compassion or support. "Basically, most of the contact we had was from the FBI liaisons that were assigned to us, U.S. Marshal," says Orona. But he does appreciate the outpouring of support they received from elsewhere. "From all across the United States, from across the world. People sending gifts, sending cards, sending letters, I mean, just a tremendous outpouring of support." As for the lack of communication from Uvalde school and city officials, Orona thinks they were more worried about protecting themselves than the students. "I think that instead of doing the right thing, they did what their attorneys advised them to do: don't say a word," says Orona. "I don't blame any of those people because it's one of those things where, never in 100 years would I have imagined it could have happened here. Unfortunately, it did. Unfortunately, it showed that we weren't ready, even though we had the training or supposedly had been trained. You know, nobody took the training

seriously. We weren't ready for it.”

### **Media Coverage Of the Uvalde Shooting**

Love them or hate them, news media representatives play a vital role in the coverage of significant events such as the Uvalde mass school shooting. Often, they are portrayed as vultures, intruding in the lives of people victimized by the loss of loved ones. They can also be seen as essential messengers in relaying vital information to the community and holding authorities accountable for their actions or inaction. In the case of the Uvalde shooting, the media were often a source of information that authorities failed to provide. As mentioned, there was no coordination among the various governmental agencies regarding what information to release and who would release it. In its report of the incident, U.S. Customs and Border Protection cited, “The lack of incident command also negatively impacted media messaging regarding the incident.” It also noted that local and national journalists should be considered “frontline responders” who play a key role in laying out the facts, commentary, and public discussion points. “When journalists, reporters, and others in the media do not receive information and answers, they will often become more assertive to find the details,” (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024).

One of the early points of misinformation came from Texas Governor Greg Abbott's initial news conference. After being briefed by law enforcement, he falsely said that the incident lasted only around 45 minutes, thanks to officers who rapidly neutralized the attacker. An investigative committee formed by the Texas House of Representatives chastised the Governor's office, TXDPS, and others for repeating the false narrative. It also took the media to task for repeating the misinformation and reporting unfiltered leaked information. “The Committee recognizes the natural tension between providing the public with immediate information and the need for accuracy,” states the report. “The problem, of course, is the power, speed, and unaccountable nature of social media. While it allows the truth to spread, it has done far more to amplify incorrect or incomplete information” (Burrows et al., 2022). Three days after the shooting, Abbott also issued a correction: “There’s been a lot of things that have been said — some are correct, some are incorrect,” Abbott told reporters. He said he had been “misled” in his briefing about the police response and was “livid” (Spaeth & Nayman, 2022).

Reporters trying to gather information in Uvalde were not only stonewalled. However, in some cases, they were also threatened by local authorities and even bikers who claimed to be working with police. The Reporters from the San Antonio Express-News were threatened with arrest for trespassing at the UCISD offices. “While I understand the need for privacy for victims’ families, many of those families want to push for change and want a media platform,” said Nora Lopez, the paper's executive editor. “Thwarting journalists in search of the truth and accountability isn’t what this community needs” (Preyor-Johnson, 2022). The Poynter Institute for Media Studies adds, “It’s important to allow the media to do their jobs, investigating and reporting on what happened, how the police responded, how decisions were made. The families of the victims and members of

the community deserve answers. And authorities must be held accountable, not only for what has happened, but in hopes of preventing future tragedies,” (Jones, 2022).

### **Relevance to the Profession**

While the Uvalde event ranks among the worst school shootings in U.S. history, it tragically highlighted several key failures for crisis communication professionals who deal with multi-agency active shooter response. Rarely have they found themselves so ill-prepared to handle a mass shooting crisis as it unfolded, and in the days and weeks that followed. Those shortcomings encompassed public information and law enforcement professionals who, despite their training for such an event, utterly failed in implementing what they learned, with deadly consequences.

After several investigations and reports, these areas were identified as needing to be addressed in future active shooter scenarios:

- **Neutralize the threat:** The primary action must be to save lives as quickly as possible. This means officers should act upon arrival instead of waiting for back-up or equipment.
- **Effective command coordination:** Establish a unified command to coordinate responding agencies. Crisis Management professionals must have proper training and protocols in place.
- **Crisis communication:** Just like law enforcement, crisis communication professionals need designated Public Information Officers (PIOs) to provide timely and accurate information to families, the media, and others.
- **Strong leadership:** Effective leaders must be prepared to make critical decisions, delegate responsibility, and take accountability for actions during a response.
- **Training and preparedness:** Professionals involved in crisis communication and response must regularly receive realistic training involving the various entities likely to respond. These drills should identify weaknesses and occur with such regularity that they build “muscle memory” for an effective response.
- **Provide victim services:** This should include setting up family assistance centers and long-term recovery support, particularly addressing the emotional and psychological trauma caused by mass shootings (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024).

No amount of training or tabletop drills can prevent an active shooter from taking place. But when that worst-case scenario occurs, crisis communications and law enforcement professionals can be ready to act quickly, save lives, give the public the information they need, and help the healing process begin.

### **A Reporter's Story**

Zack Briggs is a Multi-skilled Journalist (MSJ) with KENS-TV, a CBS affiliate in San Antonio, Texas. On May 24, 2022, he was working on a story on the mental health of

child abuse survivors when he got the word to return to the station to help with coverage of a reported shooting at a Uvalde elementary school. “I don't recall exactly what time it was, but I do remember just a lot of chaos,” said Briggs in an interview (Z. Briggs, personal interview, June 18, 2025). “In the newsroom, there were numerous reports from people on the ground in Uvalde, the community members saying they heard shots ring out.” Being the closest city to Uvalde with TV stations, news crews were immediately dispatched to the shooting scene 80 miles away. “The assignments desk was making calls around the clock, trying to figure out exactly what's going on,” said Briggs. “But the information we could get on the ground seemed no more conclusive than us being back at the station.” Briggs' assignment was to monitor social media for comments by law enforcement, the governor, and other political dignitaries. “There was some information coming from the school district, an alert to the community and parents,” recalls Briggs. “But as far as that information being regularly updated, I would say there was an absence of regular updates from multiple entities, including law enforcement and the school district.”

Briggs says the crews in Uvalde were also dealing with an information blackout. What's worse, the families of the children in the school were too. “In the initial phases, we heard from parents crying and panicking, wondering whether kids were alive, the status of their well-being in the hospital.” On Day 2, Briggs was sent to Uvalde to cover the story. He spoke with families for the next two weeks and shared their frustrations about the lack of straight answers. “It was definitely a struggle in the initial part of the investigation, just days after the shooting,” says Briggs. “It was hard speaking with the District Attorney and the police chief of the school district (Pete Arredondo). And the police chief of Uvalde (Daniel Rodriguez) was out of town.” Briggs says the most consistent source of information was the TXDPS press conferences. Still, the numerous news crews that had flocked to Uvalde found it hard to get concrete details. “There was a vibe of confusion among the media, including here at KENS 5,” says Briggs. “We're trying to do our best to get the information out truthfully, accurately, and promptly. Because we have family members wondering what happened exactly when? What led to this disaster, and why did it take over an hour?”

Even after most of the media left town, there was still a search for answers. In August 2022, a dozen news organizations, including TEGNA (parent company of KENS-TV), sued TXDPS for access to records related to the shooting. In December 2023, a state district judge ordered the release of those records, including security and body cam video showing the delayed response by police (Despart, 2023). Briggs was among a team of journalists assigned to review the dump of information for relevant details. “Some of the video was familiar, but to actually see reams and reams of footage of law enforcement officers going into the school, knowing who was among the first law enforcement officers to arrive on seeing it was a bit more revealing than what we had been given an access to the years prior,” says Briggs.

Briggs admits there was an uneasiness between the media and community members in

the days following the shooting. “ People would drive by and say, 'go home', but I would find that the victim's family members were a little bit more receptive to reporters,” says Briggs. In fact, he has developed a professional bond with some of the family members in the three years since the shooting, including Jesse Rizo, whose niece Jackie Cazares was killed in the school. “ I've been in contact with him regularly since the shooting, and he's been able to assist, providing perspective and connecting me with other families and community members who've been impacted by what's happened.” As for Zack himself, covering this crisis has taken its toll. “ It definitely has an emotionally draining effect,” says Briggs. Speaking with those who wonder if their loved ones will walk through the doors, those who long for an embrace, but will never happen again. When you don't have your reporter cap on, it's absolutely heart-wrenching.”

### **Teaching Note: What We Can Learn from This Case**

Here are some lessons we can learn from this crisis to make this case more valuable.

1. **Unified communication is essential:** when you have multiple agencies in any situation there should be a single central channel where all the information should be shared. With this case in particular the lack of cooperation between the police, the hospital, and the school. This resulted in information being sent through multiple sources and created mixed messaging which further made the situation more hectic.
2. **Crisis communication training:** If you want to have smooth communication, there needs to be active shooter drill practices within each agency along with other crisis drills. Each training needs to include how to share messages compassionately and how to value communication over speed.
3. Importance of being **accountable and transparent in public messages:** Agencies need to share information frequently and update it as necessary but also need to make sure that it is both accurate and transparent. In this case, several claims were made during the crisis. However the agencies that lie or fail to be accountable for their words lose the public trust. When fielding questions during a crisis, students and practitioners alike need to learn how important it is to be accountable.
4. **Empathy and sensitivity in communication:** Authorities showed insensitivity when they were communicating the information to the victims' families. This caused the families to become deeply upset. Internal and external communicators must effectively relay the facts without losing empathy and compassion.
5. Each agency needs to **plan for crisis management ahead of time.** Before any crisis could occur, it would be beneficial if the agencies could have a crisis communication plan prepared ahead of time This plan could go hand in hand with training so that way it is easily rehearsable to ensure everyone knows their role in a crisis.
6. **Test the reliability of communication systems:** From this case you can see the

importance of testing communication systems. You need to ensure that they will work in any situation since there may be obstacles such as large buildings, radio dead zones, and high system load.

7. **Communication and its influence on public trust:** It varies by situation how information is delivered can impact the public's confidence level. Here, the delays in information, inaccuracies, and lack of empathy and sensitivity affected the public's trust by the way communication was delivered. Choices regarding message selection can have long-term impacts.

### **Conclusion**

Even well after the shooting, the Uvalde community is still coming to terms with the loss of "The Uvalde 21" and holding those responsible accountable. After numerous investigations, only former UCISD police Chief Pete Arrendondo and former officer Adrian Gonzales faced any criminal charges. Arrendondo was accused of placing the lives of 10 surviving children in imminent danger by delaying the police response. Gonzales was also indicted on 29 counts of child endangerment (Serrano, 2024). Meanwhile, the families of the Uvalde victims have filed multiple lawsuits against the City of Uvalde, UCISD, TXDPS, and gun manufacturers in search of accountability and compensation. Yet nothing can ever make up for what they lost on May 24, 2022. "What people don't realize is that no matter what, we're still going to be remembered as a city that had this massive deadly shooting for probably the rest of everyone's lives," says father Oscar Orona.

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