

## ***Seven Signs A Weapon Is Being Concealed***

*Often the observable indicators that an individual is hiding a gun, knife or other weapon go undetected. Campus personnel who recognize these physical behaviors will have the information they need to prevent a planned assault.*

**by Michael and Chris Dorn**

The man stood unnoticed outside the grocery store for nearly three hours before his ex-wife arrived. As she stepped from a taxicab, the man quickly stepped toward her and, to the shock of everyone present, quickly raised a 12-gauge pump shotgun from under his coat and killed her. Before the deputy sheriff who was less than 50 feet away could react, the suspect turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

This homicide occurred even though the grocery store hired an officer to protect patrons and employees. Although the deputy was an eight-year veteran, he did not notice the obvious physical behaviors that indicated he was standing near a heavily armed individual. These indicators could have helped avert the murder had they been noticed in time.

In this case, the victim was killed at a grocery store, but similar attacks have taken place at and near schools, hospitals and institutions of higher learning. In some instances, students have entered K-12 schools and universities undetected while concealing rifles and shotguns before committing multiple-victim homicides.

One valuable tool for campus personnel is the technique of visual weapons screening. Visual screening techniques have been used to recover thousands of firearms and other weapons and have averted a number of planned weapons assaults. Visual screening is an inexpensive and effective means to help counter such dangers as campus violence, gang violence and even terrorism. Visual screening is not a theoretical concept but a proven technique tested under difficult field conditions.

### **Weapons Violators Come From All Backgrounds**

Studies indicate there is no reliable profile of the weapons violator. People who carry and use weapons unlawfully are white, Latino, Asian or any other race or ethnicity. They are male or female. They wear expensive clothing, including tailored suits, and they are from all socioeconomic classes.

A weapons violator may be a high school dropout or, as we have seen in several university shootings, may have a PhD or be working on one. The violator may at first glance look like anyone else because there is no reliable or viable profile. In fact, relying on this method can be dangerous. What is consistent about those who carry a weapon unlawfully, particularly a firearm, is the presence of certain physical behaviors. In short, individuals who carry a gun do specific things we can observe because of the presence of the gun on their person.

Rather than relying on ineffective and, in our country at least, illegal methods like profiling, police and security personnel should focus their attentions on the specific behaviors that may indicate the presence of a weapon.

## Screeners Must Consider Many Behaviors

Visual weapons screening is a valuable tool that helps officers and others with security concerns spot individuals who deserve closer observation and, when appropriate, a lawful physical search. In some cases, the indicator may be rather weak and will be observed when people are not armed - for example, the sag of a jacket on one side of the body. In other instances, such as when the muzzle of a shotgun can be seen protruding from under a trench coat, we know instantly the individual is in fact carrying a weapon (and in that case, is most likely about to use it).

One of the most important concepts of visual weapons screening is behavior clusters. For example, an individual who fails to swing his right arm may be armed and trying to avoid hitting their elbow on the weapon. But an individual who adjusts something under his clothing above the waistline, looks around very nervously and then walks away while not swinging his right arm when he spots an officer watching him is far more likely to be armed. The totality of circumstances will dictate the degree of likelihood of an individual being armed.

## Learn to Recognize These Behaviors

Officers and other campus personnel, such as school counselors and faculty members, have learned to identify the specific indicators that a person may be armed. Below are a few of the most common. It should be noted, however, that the following signs do not always indicate the presence of a weapon:

**1. Security Check:** Gun violators in particular will typically touch and/or adjust the weapons concealed on their bodies numerous times during the day. This may be a gentle and difficult to observe bump with the elbow, wrist or hand. On rare occasions, it could be a distinct grasping of the weapon as they adjust it. Violators often make this gesture when getting out of a chair or a car or when walking up a flight of stairs or high curb.

**2. Unnatural Gait:** Gun violators may walk with an awkward gait. They may fail to bend their knees because they have rifles or shotguns in their pants. They may also walk uncomfortably because they have guns, knives or other weapons hidden in their boots or shoes causing discomfort. Again, the total circumstances will indicate the likelihood of a weapon being present.

For example, an individual with a disability may also not bend the leg or walk with an unnatural gait, but he or she will likely not appear to be nervous. You will also not see the rigid line of a rifle running down the outer pants leg as the person walks or the periodic bulge from the butt of the gun above the waistband as it moves back and forth.

**3. Jacket Sag:** When you place a handgun in a jacket pocket, the coat typically hangs lower on the side where the weapon is located. In addition, you will often see the fabric pulled tight from the weight of the gun, and the weapon may swing as a violator walks. Often, the outline of the weapon may be observed in the pocket area. In some cases, the violator will attempt to hold or pin the weapon if it begins to swing or beat against their body.

In cases where the violator becomes extremely nervous when approached by an officer, he or she may actually grasp the weapon to keep it from swinging or put a hand in the pocket. While this is often seen when people have items other than a weapon in their pocket, it is also an

indicator that is very typical of the gun violator, particularly when observed with other behaviors described here.

**4. Hunchback Stride:** When trying to conceal a shotgun, rifle or submachine gun under a coat while walking, the butt of the weapon will often cause a noticeable bulge behind the armpit. Additionally, the jacket does not move naturally because it is supported by the outline of the weapon. Also, when someone wears a shoulder holster or straps on a sawed-off rifle, shotgun or submachine gun under his or her arm, a bulge in front of or behind the armpit will often be visible.

**5. Bulges and the Outline of a Weapon:** An alert officer can often spot the telltale bulge of the weapon or, in some instances, the distinct outline of a handgun, knife or brass knuckles in a violator's pocket. This may also sometimes be observed in a woman's purse, book bag or other hand carried item. In some instances, violators wrap a long gun in a blanket or long jacket.

**6. Visible Weapon:** Clearly the most reliable of all the indicators is when the weapon can actually be seen. It is astounding how many times an armed intruder has entered a facility with a rifle or shotgun protruding from under his or her jacket without being observed by staff.

In some cases, the butt of a handgun is visible because it is sticking out from a back or front pocket. A more common instance is the clip-on pocketknife that can be observed clipped to a front pocket or in the waistband.

**7. Palming:** Most often observed with the edged weapon violator but occasionally seen with gun violators, palming behaviors often indicate imminent risk to the observer. The knife violator may run the blade of the weapon up along the arm or behind the leg to conceal it from frontal view. Just before a target is attacked, a violator will also typically have his or her eyes fixed on the intended victim.

### **Apply Weapons Detection Practices Wisely**

Visual weapons screening has proven to be extremely effective, especially if the screener is properly trained. But as mentioned before, these techniques must be applied with common sense, in accordance with the laws of search and seizure for your situation and with a careful view of the overall context. Visual screening techniques are easy to learn, retain and apply as long as those who need to use them are alert and observant.

Use these simple but powerful techniques to your best advantage. The life you save may be your very own.

*World renowned for their weapons concealment and detection training programs, Michael Dorn and Chris Dorn have been teaching these lifesaving techniques for many years. For more information about the authors, visit [www.safehavensinternational.org](http://www.safehavensinternational.org)*

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