

Getting Into the Minds of Hostage-Takers



Global Hostage-Taking Research and Analysis Project

(GHosT-RAP), is a joint undertaking by the Training Division's Behavioral Science Unit and Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, FL, to analyze the motivations of captive-takers.

Like past studies of serial killers, rapists, and school shooters done by the Bureau, GHosT-RAP will provide FBI investigators and analysts, along with our law enforcement partners in the U.S. and overseas, with a viable tool to help investigate, solve, and even prevent hostage situations. It will also play an important role in supporting the Bureau's counterterrorism, intelligence, and violent crime missions.

Is research like this really needed? Just take a look at newspaper headlines during the past few years and decide for yourself:

- Hostage Standoff at School in Pakistan (2008)
- 23 South Korean Citizens Taken Hostage in Afghanistan (2007)
- Gunman Takes Hostages at Amish School in Pennsylvania (2006)
- Four Peace Activists Kidnapped by Insurgents in Iraq (2005)
- School Hostage Crisis in Beslan, Russia; 186 Children Killed (2004)
- FARC Abducts Three U.S. Contractors in Columbia (2003)

And these are just the incidents that garnered international attention. What about the bank robber holding employees of a small bank branch at gunpoint? Or the domestic violence incident that escalates and turns into a hostage situation? Hostage-taking does not just occur in war-torn parts of the world, or does not necessarily involve a large number of people; it can and does happen anywhere, anytime, with as little as one victim.

For GhosT-Rap, the FBI has--as we've done so successfully in the past--teamed with academia to conduct our research. Just like previous BSU research projects, we'll be examining the motivations of the people we're studying--in this instance, the captive-takers--but with an updated research design. Captive-taker interviews and other existing data will be scrutinized to develop behavioral-based, intelligence-driven tools to improve law enforcement training and operations and counter the hostage-taking threat through mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery measures.



NSU trustees David Rush and Sylvia Flores with NSU President Ray Ferrero, Jr., J.D. (far right), and SSA Gregory Vecchi, Ph.D. (second from right).

The concept behind GHosT-RAP started in 2002, as a collaborative domestic violence-related captive-taking research project between SSA Gregory M. Vecchi, Ph.D., who at the

time was assigned to the Miami Office, and Vincent B. Van Hasselt, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Nova Southeastern University. After being reassigned to BSU in 2006, SSA Vecchi expanded the scope of the original project, and in 2007 GHosT-RAP was established to analyze captive-taking at the global level.



SSA Vecchi with NSU President Ferrero--at last month's MOU-signing ceremony.

On January 23, 2008, the FBI and NSU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), officially establishing our relationship.

Even though it's still in its early stages, GHosT-RAP has already partnered with FBI operational units (e.g., CIRG's Personnel Recovery Coordination Group) as well as the Department of Defense, Department of State, Drug Enforcement Administration, various intelligence agencies, and other universities and private consultants to begin the research process.

The project will take several years to complete, but once it's done, law enforcement will not be the only ones to benefit from it--intelligence agencies, the military, community groups, mental health professionals, schools, businesses, and others will be able to use our findings to help them ensure the safety of their citizens, residents, students, customers, employees, and others who might otherwise be at risk.