



CANADA

Alerts sent for N.S. mass shooting – not to Nova Scotians, but to thousands of Americans and international students

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When a gunman executed the largest mass shooting in Canadian history in Nova Scotia in April, thousands of Americans and international students received a warning alert, while most Nova Scotians did not.

The students received alerts through an app called Peak, while Americans were alerted by the U.S. consulate in Halifax after Nova Scotia RCMP sent out a tweet warning of an active shooter. Most Nova Scotians had only Twitter and word of mouth keeping them informed during the over 12-hour long rampage in Colchester County where Gabriel Wortman, dressed as a police officer, killed 22 people.

The event has left many questioning why no emergency alert was issued to Nova Scotians, and why RCMP messaging to the public came only through Twitter.

Cathie Ross, general manager of St. Mary's University Students' Association, said when she received Peak's alert, "Initially, I actually thought it was the province sending us an emergency alert, I didn't realize at first it was Peak."

"A lot of people don't use Twitter — we have a lot of senior citizens — but most people have phones," she said. "Looking back, it certainly would have been helpful to those who weren't aware of the danger. It should have been an alert everyone received."

Three days after the shooting, RCMP Chief Supt. Chris Leather said in a news conference that the province's Emergency Management Office contacted them at 10:15 a.m. on April 19 to ask about sending an emergency alert.

RCMP was in the process of having the alert issued when the gunman was killed, said Cpl. Jennifer Clarke, a Nova Scotia RCMP spokesperson, adding that it would have been a one-time alert that would not have replaced tweeting live details.

When asked what caused such a delay, Leather said crafting the message and the communication between RCMP officers and the EMO is a slow process.

Many are questioning why the Twitter message wasn't immediately transferred to other platforms.

"As soon as you're on Twitter telling people what the situation is, you have stopped worrying about the risk of people knowing certain things," said Leah West, a Carleton University security law and cyber operations professor. "Once you are telling people on Twitter, you should be telling people in every possible way."

Other alert systems were able to translate messaging more quickly.

At 10:30 a.m. on April 19, international students at St. Mary's University and Dalhousie University received an alert warning them of the gunman's presence in the area through the app Peak, a service offered by a company contracted by the schools, said Samantha Morneau, Director, Student VIP International.

"Peak uses geo-tracking and in this case, sent an alert to international students in Nova Scotia", said Morneau. In addition to receiving the alert informing them of the active shooter, students receiving the message were asked to mark if they were "safe" or "unsafe," said Morneau.

"At least 2,000 students received it at St. Mary's University alone," said Ross, who received an alert about the shooter through her role with the student association.

Peak, which partners with global securities firms, has issued alerts in the province sparingly, with only one previous alert about a fire at a train station, Ross said. In both cases, she could see where students were located and received check-ins as the designate for the school.

In her garden the morning of April 19, Ross recalls the startling noise of the alert coming from the phone, one similar to an Amber Alert, she said. And then the phone rang with a member of her executive calling to see if she was safe.

For Ross, who is from Truro in Colchester Country, many of the losses hit close to home as family members of people she knew were among the victims. She wishes the RCMP had sent an alert to everyone's phone, she said.

Americans in Nova Scotia also received an alert, theirs from the U.S. Consulate in Halifax, which said their alert was based on information from Nova Scotia RCMP.

“The information we used in our emailed alert to U.S. citizens on Sunday, April 19 was taken from the Nova Scotia RCMP’s Twitter account,” said Marcia Seitz-Ehler, a spokesperson of the U.S. Consulate.

Seitz-Ehler said it is in the consulate’s protocol to alert U.S. citizens in the area to emergency situations of this nature. She did not confirm the time the alert was issued.

West, the cybersecurity professor, said protocols and lacking practice seem to be part of the problem for the RCMP.

“If you get a new tool, you figure out how to incorporate it into your already existing operating procedures and it doesn’t seem like that ever happened for this tool,” she said.

In the dynamic situation they found themselves in, “they had this tool and it sat on the shelf.”

RCMP declined to comment on alert system protocol reforms.

Jack Rozdilsky, a York University professor, noted that the Alert Ready system, which has only been used since 2018, had never been used for an active shooter or terrorism situation. “We are in the early stages of figuring out how best to use it,” he said.

“RCMP does not have a national strategy in using emergency alerts during mass shootings, whereas the playbook for Amber Alerts is now more established”, said Rozdilsky.

“But people should be asking questions, especially about the time decision-makers take to decide what should be done and disseminate a message”, he said. Right now, the RCMP are asking themselves questions, but Rozdilsky warns that this was a unique event and was hesitant to say it should necessitate mass reform of the system. “These systems are more of an art than a science,” he said.