



Veneratio Diligentia Vires

Active Shooters: Threat Assessment For Preemptive Prevention

By Dr. Joshua Sinai

BLACK LIVES
MATTER

Louise Brown walks in the "March for Black Lives" after passing by the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina June 20, 2015 three days after a mass shooting left people nine dead during a bible study at the church. REUTERS/Brian Snyder

The violent shooting outside a court in Milan, Italy, in early April 2015, in which three people were intentionally killed by the defendant, as well as an earlier shooting some four months earlier at Brigham and Women's Hospital, in Boston, MA, in which a surgeon was fatally shot by a former patient, as well as other shootings at schools, shopping malls and workplaces, demonstrated that the threat of active shooter attacks against disparate targets around the world remained a persistent concern for all those tasked with protecting such facilities and the victims who are directly impacted by such violent attacks.

Statistics about active shooter incidents bear out the notion of what appears to be increasingly frequent active shooter incidents in the United States, as well as in other global regions, such as Western Europe (particularly Belgium, France, Norway and Switzerland), two incidents in Israel in 2012 and 2013, as well as major incidents in Mumbai, India in November 2008, and in Kenya in September 2013. In the U.S., where most active shooter attacks occur, according to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) statistics, such incidents increased from 6.4 per year between 2000 and 2006 to 16.4 per year between 2007 and 2013. In terms of the types of targets attacked,

according to a 2013 Texas State University study of 84 active shooter events between 2000 and 2010, most of these incidents occurred at places where people spend much time, such as employment (37 percent), schools and universities (34 percent), public venues such as shopping malls and movie theaters (17 percent), with the remainder 12 percent occurring in other locations, such as religious institutions and military facilities. In addition to causing fatalities and injuries, active shooter attacks also result in substantial economic damages, particularly when such facilities are closed down for temporary or longer periods, as well as large insurance claims for loss of life or injuries

sustained when such facilities are proven to be insufficiently protected.

This article's objective is to demonstrate that many potential active shooter incidents can be preemptively prevented if appropriate threat and risk mitigation strategies and tactics are implemented by security managers and public safety officers. Such pre-incident prevention is possible because the perpetrators that target such venues tend to share certain common motivational characteristics and personality disorders, which are expressed by noticeable risky behaviors, making it possible for those in close contact with them to identify them

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Active Shooters

An active shooter is defined as an armed person (or several persons) who is in the process of engaging in a shooting spree, with the intent of continuously harming others, whether in an open area or confined environment, such as inside a facility. What makes this an active shooter situation is that the perpetrator continues the shooting spree while having unrestricted access to additional victims, whether they are initially intended or random targets. Active shooters generally arrive at the location of their targeted attack with the intent to commit mass murder, as opposed to killing a single victim – although it may escalate into killing others, as well. The victims may be intentionally targeted or become what are termed random “targets of opportunity.”

This category of mass killings excludes criminal incidents such as bank robberies or broken drug deals that turn lethal because such perpetrators are generally motivated by illicit financial greed. This category of mass killings does include terrorist attacks that incorporate active shooter components into their violent rampages, such as the November 2008 three-day attack by Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani terrorist group, against multiple targets in Mumbai, India, in which more than 170 people were killed, as well as the September 2013 attack by al-Shabaab, the Somali terrorist group, against the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in which more than 65 people were killed.

Although an active shooter’s objective is to inflict as many as killings possible, in some situations even the resulting one or two fatalities was a lesser outcome than had been intended by the perpetrator. As illustrative examples, although the shooting spree at the shopping mall in Columbia, MD, on January 25, 2014 caused two fatalities and a

single injury (with others suffering injuries during their escape), the fact that 19-year-old Darion Marcus Aguilar, the alleged shooter, had used a 12-gauge pump-action Mossberg shotgun, and had a large quantity of ammunition, in addition to storing explosives in his backpack, indicated that he may have intended to cause far greater fatalities than the two individuals that were killed. Similarly, in April 2014, many more fatalities and injuries could have been inflicted at the military installation at Fort Hood, Texas, had the shooter, 34-year old Ivan Lopez, not been stopped by a military police officer, after having killed 3 individuals and injured 16 others.

Active shooter incidents are generally terminated once the attacker (or attackers) is overtaken by preventative law enforcement action (as had occurred at the Fort Hood, TX incident) or upon their self-inflicted death (as had occurred at the Columbia, MD incident).

In terms of their motivation (in addition to their generally troubled psychological condition), active shooters are usually driven by an assortment of pent up grievances, anger and hatred towards their intended targets, as well as, in some cases, the notoriety and fame that such murderous rampages will generate for their horrific acts of “retributive justice” either in their lifetime or posthumously.

More specifically, different sets of motivations drive such perpetrators to attack different categories of targets. Those attacking schools, for example, might be driven by revenge for perceived bullying by other students or a sense of their own academic failure and hopelessness; workplace violence might be driven by anger over job dismissal or a highly negative performance report; while attacking shopping malls might be driven by a combination of such perceived grievances and pent up anger against a wider population.

Recent major active shooter attacks in the U.S. have included the following:

- July 20, 2012: 25-year-old James Holmes killed 12 and wounded 58 during the screening of “the Dark Knight Rises”

at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado.

- December 11, 2012: 22-year-old Jacob Tyler Roberts opened fire at the Clackamas Town Center in Portland, Oregon, killing two people and wounding one person, before taking his own life.
- September 16, 2013: 34-year-old Aaron Alexis opened fire at the Washington Navy Yard, killing 12 people and wounding 8 others.
- November 1, 2013: 23-year-old Paul Anthony Ciancia used a rifle to kill a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officer and injure several other people at Los Angeles International Airport.
- November 4, 2013: 20-year-old Richard Shoop entered the Garden State Plaza mall in Paramus, New Jersey and proceeded to fire random shots with an automatic rifle before taking his own life (no other fatalities or injuries were incurred).
- January 25, 2014: 19-year-old Darion Marcus Aguilar used a shotgun to kill two store employees and injure another person at a shopping mall in Columbia, MD, before taking his own life.
- April 2, 2014: 34-year old Ivan Lopez, an Army specialist, who was in uniform, used a concealed weapon to embark on a shooting spree at several locations at the Fort Hood military base near Killeen, Texas. Four people, including the gunman, were killed, while sixteen additional people were injured. The shooter, once confronted by a military police officer, proceeded to kill himself of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.
- October 24, 2014: Jaylen Fryberg, a 15-year-old freshman student at Marysville Pilchuck High School, in Marysville, Washington, shot five other students, killing four, before fatally shooting himself.

As demonstrated by the disparate targeting of such attacks, public venues, whether government or commercial facilities appear especially attractive to active shooters because they are generally highly

congested with people, which make them difficult for security personnel to protect. Even military installations, while relatively well protected against non-military personnel, are vulnerable to attacks by insiders (such as Major Nidal Hassan, Aaron Alexis and Ivan Lopez) who exploit their access to such facilities to carry out their shooting rampages.

Active Shooter Attacks Can Be Prevented

While the majority of active shooters who target the spectrum of such venues are generally not known by their intended victims, many of these attacks are actually preventable, since such perpetrators exhibit risky behaviors and mindsets that can be detected prior to their attacks – although these will likely differ from one perpetrator to another. For instance, prior to conducting such attacks, to those directly associated with such perpetrators, there might be a noticeable abrupt change in their personal behavior, such as homicidal or suicidal tendencies, a traumatic personal experience, such as expulsion from school or abrupt job termination, expressions of intense personal grudge and increase in ominous belligerence against others that might be expressed in person or in social media sites, a history of resorting to violence against others, and, most importantly, a recent and unexplained acquisition of weapons and ammunition. In the case of Darion Marcus Aguilar, the Columbia, MD mall shooter, his purchase of the shotgun and ammunition in December 2013, when combined with other risky behaviors, should have raised warning flags about his future shooting rampage, had they been identified by those who knew him at that crucial formative pre-incident phase. Similar warning flags likely could have been raised in the case of Ivan Lopez, particularly his purchase of the .45-caliber Smith & Wesson M&P pistol on March 1, 2014, a month prior to his attack.

Fortunately, there are numerous examples of best practices in preemptive prevention. In one noteworthy case, in November 2012 a mother decided to turn her 20-year-old son to police authorities after discovering that he had purchased a pair of assault rifles and 400 rounds of ammunition. The son, Blaec

Lammers, had reportedly become so obsessed with James Holmes' Colorado shootings at the Batman movie opening that he began to collect weapons and ammunition to carry out a similar mass shooting at the showing of "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn: Part 2" at a movie theater in Bolivar, Missouri. It is reported that he even planned to escalate his shooting spree at a nearby Wal-Mart because it would have provided him access to additional ammunition. Finally, like other active shooters, Lammers had spent time practicing his shooting skills at a gun range in Aldrich, Missouri.

Like other active shooters, Lammers shared a similar psychological profile. As explained by his mother, he was "very quiet," "very much a loner," "had a hard time making friends," and "felt like he was a failure."

In another form of preemptive prevention, following a risk assessment of a facility's security posture to determine what further controls may be required to protect its critical assets, the principle of

deterrence could be applied to make it difficult for potential active shooters to enter such potential target. Thus, for example, if such facilities could be sufficiently hardened with rings of physical and other types of protective measures, this would make it difficult for the potential attacker to carry out his operation. This principle of establishing protective security rings can be applied to varying degrees of hardness to all categories of potential targets. Finally, appropriate procedures should also be implemented and regularly exercised by security departments and their counterparts in other parts of the facility to coordinate the quick and seamless evacuation and sheltering of affected personnel and as immediate as possible law enforcement response in the event that such attacks were to occur.

Future Trends

Regarding future trends, the rate of active shooter incidents against the spectrum of different categories of venues is likely to remain relatively frequent, particularly

due to the unceasing numbers of troubled individuals who are intent on conducting such attacks, as well as the continued vulnerability of targets who have yet to implement the appropriate security hardening of their facilities. Moreover, the number of fatalities and injuries caused by such attacks is likely to continue to vary, with the majority of attacks causing low numbers of casualties, but with fewer although more "ambitious" attacks, such as in Aurora, Colorado, or the Washington Navy Yard, resulting in mass casualties. There is some good news, as demonstrated by the effectiveness of the quick responses by public safety and emergency personnel in 2014 at the incidents in Columbia, MD and in Fort Hood, Texas, with law enforcement and emergency response personnel becoming better at managing and controlling such incidents, although such improvements and upgrades may not be uniformly applied nation-wide.

In the final analysis, for effective preemptive prevention it remains

a significant challenge for families and those associated with potential attackers to continuously assess the risks associated with the mindsets and behaviors common to such individuals who appear to be on the path towards homicidal violence and to proactively intervene and deter them by referring them to mental health or other relevant counseling services in order to turn them away from carrying out their intended operations.

About the Author

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