



INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY (INSUM)

PLACES OF WORSHIP
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INSUM REPORT | United States of America (USA)

SURVEILLANCE OF PLACES OF WORSHIP IN THE U.S. TERRORISM & CRIME

Updated to urge U.S. Places of Worship Leadership to evaluate the current or develop a Security & Emergency Preparedness program.

In recent months, a marked increase in suspicious surveillance activity has been reported at churches and other places of worship across the United States. These incidents follow a recurring pattern: individuals or small groups entering religious properties under the guise of interest in faith or fellowship, while instead conducting deliberate and focused reconnaissance. Their intent appears to be gathering information about building layouts, congregation patterns, security measures, and the presence of vulnerable populations, particularly children.

These encounters have occurred in geographically diverse states—spanning California, Texas, Virginia, Ohio, Washington, and others—suggesting the phenomenon is not isolated or random. Individuals involved often avoid active participation in religious services, focusing instead on filming interior spaces, asking detailed operational questions, or inspecting areas not typically open to visitors. Many use well-rehearsed cover stories and attempt to blend into congregational settings, which can make early detection challenging.

This pattern has serious implications for both church leadership and law enforcement. The tactics used are consistent with pre-operational surveillance as defined in multiple Department of Homeland Security (DHS) threat models. Whether motivated by ideological extremism, criminal enterprise, or other unknown factors, these actions present a significant risk to faith-based communities. This growing trend calls for urgent attention, structured collaboration, and proactive safety planning.

OBSERVED SURVEILLANCE BEHAVIORS

- **Interior Surveillance:** Individuals attempt to photograph or record sanctuaries, classrooms, and common areas. Focus is often on entrances, exits, stage/platform design, and seating arrangements.
- **Exterior Surveillance:** Photo/video capture of parking lots, perimeter fencing, camera placements, entry points, and access control mechanisms.

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- **Questioning Tactics:** Subjects frequently ask about:
 - Service times and duration
 - Average attendance
 - Live-streaming capabilities
 - Security presence and procedures
 - Exit and evacuation locations
 - **Behavioral Indicators:**
 - Rare participation in service or communal activities
 - Use of cover stories (e.g., "My religious leader asked me to explore other faiths")
 - Expressed affiliation with other religions (notably Islam or Hinduism)
 - Attempts to enter sensitive areas (e.g., children's ministry zones, locked classrooms)
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GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD AND FREQUENCY

Reports have surfaced from numerous states, including but not limited to:

- **California, Florida, Virginia, Washington, Texas, Illinois, Ohio, Arizona, and West Virginia**

The **increased frequency** and **similarity of tactics** suggest a broader, possibly coordinated effort that warrants ongoing monitoring and inter-agency awareness.

THREAT ASSESSMENT

The observed behaviors reflect known indicators of **pre-attack surveillance**, a critical early phase in the operational cycle of violent actors. The repeated nature of these incidents, the geographic diversity of their occurrence, and the sophistication of some cover stories suggest that this is more than isolated curiosity. The following threat vectors should be considered:

1. Domestic or International Terrorism

- Religious institutions have long been targets of ideologically motivated attacks. Past incidents in the U.S. and abroad have involved assailants conducting surveillance in advance of assaults on places of worship.
- The observed questioning of security protocols, service schedules, and live streaming suggests efforts to identify low-risk timeframes or soft-target vulnerabilities.
- The specific interest in areas with children may reflect ideologies that seek to inflict psychological impact by targeting the most vulnerable populations.

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2. Organized Crime and Theft Rings

- Churches frequently house expensive audiovisual equipment, donation safes, and other high-value assets, often with minimal physical security in place.
- Organized criminal groups may conduct surveillance to map building entry/exit routes and identify unsecured storage areas.
- Some incidents may be connected to broader patterns of theft from nonprofit or faith-based entities.

3. Insider Exploitation and Reconnaissance for Future Entry

- Individuals conducting surveillance may intend to return later or pass on intelligence to others. In many cases, suspects never return after their initial visit—suggesting they have achieved their information-gathering goals.
- There is concern that these visits could be tied to reconnaissance for coordinated actions, such as mass thefts, arson, or coordinated attacks involving multiple sites.

4. Interest in Children's Areas and Affiliated Schools

- Multiple reports include individuals showing unusual or unexplained interest in school facilities affiliated with churches—sometimes asking questions about student access or attempting to open locked doors.
- This raises concern for possible human trafficking reconnaissance, child endangerment, or attempts to exploit vulnerabilities in child protection protocols.

5. Target Selection Based on Religious or Ethnic Bias

- Some behaviors may reflect ideological targeting based on perceived religious or political beliefs associated with a specific denomination or congregation.
- This can be particularly relevant for churches that host refugee communities, minority language groups, or outspoken social justice ministries.

6. Copycat Behavior

- Media coverage and inter-church communication about these events may inadvertently inspire copycat surveillance.
- A coordinated response is necessary to ensure situational awareness is shared without creating panic or unintentionally amplifying the issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP & STAFF

To protect congregations and facilities from emerging threats, church leadership must take proactive steps to assess risk, formalize security protocols, and engage both internal teams and external partners. The following expanded recommendations provide a framework for establishing a **resilient, responsive, and faith-aligned safety culture**:

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1. Establish a Dedicated Safety & Security Committee

- **Purpose:** Oversee the development, implementation, and continual evaluation of church safety practices.
- **Composition:** Include church leadership, key ministry leaders, security volunteers, medical personnel, and ideally someone with a law enforcement or military background.
- **Responsibilities:**
 - Review incident reports and make security recommendations.
 - Maintain updated emergency response plans.
 - Coordinate with external safety consultants or law enforcement.
- **Action Step:** Hold monthly meetings and quarterly reviews of safety protocols.

2. Create a Structured Visitor Management Process

- **ID Collection:** Politely ask all first-time visitors to present ID and sign in. Use visitor cards or secure digital platforms to log information.
- **Escort Policy:** Ensure non-members are accompanied by a trained greeter or usher when accessing non-public areas.
- **Children's Ministry Protocols:**
 - Require photo ID or check-in tags for pickup.
 - Lock classroom doors during services.
 - Equip volunteers with radios or panic buttons for emergency communication.
- **Action Step:** Train greeters and children's workers on recognizing and responding to suspicious behavior.

3. Enhance Building Access Control

- **Limit Entry Points:** Designate one or two primary entrances during service hours and lock all secondary access points.
- **Controlled Access Areas:** Restrict access to:
 - Children's areas
 - Tech rooms/media booths
 - Offices and storage areas
- **Technology Integration:**
 - Install access-controlled keypads or RFID locks.
 - Post "Staff Only" signs at restricted doors.
- **Action Step:** Conduct a quarterly audit of all physical entry points.

4. Invest in Safety Team Training and Equipment

- **Recruitment:** Select volunteers who are calm under pressure, detail-oriented, and physically capable. Screen them appropriately.
- **Training Topics:**
 - Situational awareness
 - De-escalation techniques
 - Threat recognition and response
 - Radio communication protocols
 - CPR, AED, and Stop the Bleed

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- **Uniformity:** Issue identifying lanyards, radios, or earpieces for discreet communication.
- **Action Step:** Allocate budget for training courses and safety equipment annually.

5. Conduct Routine Emergency Drills and Evaluations

- **Types of Drills:**
 - Fire evacuation
 - Lockdown/intruder scenario
 - Medical emergency response
 - Severe weather shelter-in-place
- **Frequency:** Conduct drills at least once per quarter (monthly if children's programs are active).
- **Evaluate & Refine:** After each drill, hold debriefs to identify gaps and make improvements.
- **Action Step:** Assign a drill coordinator and create a drill calendar.

6. Strengthen Community Partnerships

- **Law Enforcement Engagement:**
 - Invite officers to walk the property and assess vulnerabilities.
 - Request inclusion in neighborhood crime watch programs.
 - Share security footage and incident details promptly.
- **Neighboring Churches and Businesses:**
 - Create an informal communication network for sharing suspicious activity.
 - Consider joint security initiatives (e.g., shared off-duty officer rotation).
- **Action Step:** Build a contact list of nearby leaders and law enforcement liaisons.

7. Implement a Comprehensive Surveillance System

- **Camera Placement:**
 - Monitor all entry/exit points
 - Cover lobbies, hallways, parking lots, children's areas, and tech equipment storage
- **Camera Access:** Provide remote viewing access to safety team leaders and pastors.
- **Footage Review:** Assign someone to review footage weekly and after all major services.
- **Retention Policy:** Store footage for a minimum of 30–60 days, longer if possible.
- **Action Step:** Post signage indicating active surveillance to deter potential threats.

8. Empower the Congregation

- **Awareness Training:**
 - Offer brief presentations or handouts on "See Something, Say Something" protocols.
 - Encourage situational awareness during services and events.
- **Clear Reporting Channels:**
 - Provide a designated person or team for reporting suspicious activity discreetly.
 - Use QR codes or a reporting text line to streamline reporting.

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- **Cultural Mindset:**
 - Emphasize that vigilance is a spiritual and communal responsibility—not a lack of faith.
- **Action Step:** Launch an awareness campaign during a Sunday service or leadership retreat.

9. Monitor and Secure Church-Run Schools or Daycares

- **Secure Access:** Use buzz-in systems, locked gates, and verified pick-up protocols.
- **ID Checks:** Enforce ID verification for all visitors, even parents, during school hours.
- **Unusual Interest Protocol:** Document and report any individuals asking questions about children's areas who are not parents or guardians.
- **Staff Coordination:** Align security protocols between church and school administration.
- **Action Step:** Schedule monthly meetings between pastoral staff and school directors.

10. Maintain a Crisis Communication Plan

- **Internal Communication:** Use text trees, apps (e.g., GroupMe, Signal), or mass notification systems for immediate staff alerts.
- **Public Messaging:** Prepare templates for emails or social media posts in case of incident (e.g., suspicious person, evacuation, weather event).
- **Media Protocols:** Designate one spokesperson (usually the lead pastor or an elder) to speak to media if needed.
- **Action Step:** Develop and distribute a written crisis communication plan to all key personnel.

By implementing these recommendations, churches create an environment that balances **welcome with wisdom**—a place where people feel safe to worship, serve, and grow in faith. Building a comprehensive safety culture is not a one-time event but an ongoing commitment to stewardship, vigilance, and community responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The rise in surveillance activity targeting churches across the United States represents a clear and growing concern that transcends geographic, denominational, and demographic boundaries. The pattern is no longer anecdotal—it is systemic. The consistency in tactics, the use of deception, and the deliberate focus on building layouts and security features all suggest a calculated effort to exploit vulnerabilities in houses of worship.

This issue demands a shift in mindset from both **church leadership** and **law enforcement**. Churches can no longer afford to rely solely on hospitality, tradition, or the assumption of goodwill from every visitor. At the same time, law enforcement agencies must prioritize faith-based institutions as part of their community threat assessments, offering proactive engagement, intelligence sharing, and ongoing support.

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For **church leadership**, this means:

- Implementing layered security protocols that balance openness with protection.
- Investing in personnel training and physical infrastructure to deter and respond to threats.
- Fostering a culture of awareness, where congregants are empowered to observe and report.

For **law enforcement**, it requires:

- Treating faith institutions as legitimate soft targets in broader counterterrorism and crime prevention efforts.
- Maintaining consistent communication channels with religious organizations.
- Offering expertise, training, and real-time support to religious leaders as part of community policing strategies.

Ultimately, safety in places of worship is not just about responding to threats—it's about anticipating them. Every church that implements visitor screening, forms a trained safety team, and builds strong relationships with local law enforcement enhances not only its own security but the safety of the entire community. Every report made, every suspicious encounter documented, contributes to a growing intelligence picture that can help prevent larger-scale incidents.

Preparedness does not mean paranoia. Vigilance does not mean fear. Rather, it is the responsible stewardship of the people, resources, and sacred spaces entrusted to church leaders. By fostering a climate of cooperation, transparency, and mutual responsibility between faith communities and public safety professionals, we can uphold both the sanctity and security of our places of worship.

This is not a time for silence or hesitation—it is a time for **action, collaboration, and sustained vigilance**.

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