

Reexamination of security needed at soft targets in wake of mass shootings

BY JOEL GRIFFIN ON JUL 24, 2015



Thursday's mass shooting at a movie theater in Lafayette, La., is likely to spur cinema chains and other soft targets to implement some security changes, but they probably won't be as robust as some people would expect, experts say.

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Just over three years after James Holmes shot and killed 12 people and injured 70 others during a midnight screening at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., authorities say 59-year-old John Russel Houser, who they described as a "drifter," opened fire on a crowd of patrons at a movie theater in Lafayette, La., Thursday night killing two people and wounding nine others before taking his own life. This comes a week after 24-year-old Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez attacked a military recruiting center and a Navy operations support center in Chattanooga, Tenn. The shooting rampage resulted in the deaths of four marines and a sailor.

Both shootings have not only raised concerns about the dangers posed by lone-wolf attackers, but also what steps need to be taken to improve the security posture of soft targets.

"Obviously, these are soft targets and they offer a tremendous amount of utility to a would-be attacker and by utility, I mean the kill ratio that they might be able to achieve, the disruption of the business, of course, not just locally but nationally depending on what happens, and last but not least, the psychological impact that is generated from an event like this," said Dr. Erroll Southers, managing director, counterterrorism and infrastructure protection at TAL Global, an international security consulting firm.

Additionally, Southers, who also serves as director of homegrown violent extremism studies at the University of Southern California's Safe Communities Institute, said that in Israel, for example, you can barely enter walk into a facility without encountering some type of security presence.

"That is certainly a deterrent. I don't know that we have to get that in America, but they do that in Israel," said Southers. "You cannot walk into a mall without walking through a metal detector."

From the perspective of a potential adversary, Southers said that they are looking at targets from a variety of different angles including, how difficult it is to gain access to the location, how many people are there and what are the possible escape routes once shooting commences.

"I think as a takeaway, one of the things you're going to see – and they are probably already being done – are security assessments on venues like this," explained Southers. "One thing I would hate to see us do is overreact and throw in a lot of policies, procedures and technologies that don't address a threat that is not really there. No one should consider themselves safe because of the size of their municipality. This could happen anywhere."

Patrick Fiel, owner of PVF Security Consulting LLC, worries that media coverage of these shootings could spawn copycat incidents.

"Unfortunately, there are thousands of lone wolves preparing for their destiny," said Fiel. "What have movie theaters around the country done to prevent these tragedies occurring since the last shooting in Colorado? I'm totally in favor of uniformed police being present anywhere there are crowds. I recommend businesses work closely with a security expert to formulate a plan of action and implement the right security solutions for that venue."

Regardless of the size of the venue, Fiel said that businesses need to have some type of plan in place to deal with active shooter scenarios.

"Everyone is going to be different... but I mean the main thing is the presence of law enforcement, especially at malls, sports arenas or anywhere that is heavily populated. Uniformed police need to be there," added Fiel. "I know this could be a burden for police, but these businesses, especially theaters, are making a lot of money with your expectation, as a patron, that that place is safe. That's what is scary. When I go around the country, I see there are no security measures in place and if I see that, then that lone wolf sees it too."

Southers said theaters will likely have more of a physical security presence in the form of guards, not necessarily armed, at their facilities in the immediate aftermath of this shooting, but he doesn't think that they will immediately turn to metal detectors as a solution.

"I would imagine that certain large cinema chains will do something," said Southers. "You may even see theaters and their personnel engage in active shooter training drills and/or exercises. I would imagine there will be some kind of response and it will be a response that won't be extremely robust to the theatergoer, but I think security professionals would notice an increase."

One technology that Fiel believes theaters and others could look at implementing in the wake of this tragedy is panic buttons that send an emergency signal directly to police. What is clear, according to Fiel, is that the public really needs to make their voice heard on these issues.

