

Orlando nightclub massacre shines spotlight on 'soft targets'

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A memorial at Dr. Phillips Center for the Pulse Nightclub victims is growing in size Monday, June 13, 2016 as people come to pay their respects after the horrific mass shooting early Sunday morning in Orlando.

Just six months after the San Bernardino terrorist attack that left 14 people dead and more than 20 people injured, Americans woke up on Sunday to news that the nation had suffered the worst mass shooting in its history, as 49 people were killed and another 53 wounded inside the Pulse nightclub in downtown Orlando.

The shooter, identified as 29-year-old Omar Mateen, stormed the nightclub around 2 a.m. Sunday and opened fire with an assault rifle before calling 911 to claim his allegiance to the terror group ISIS. Mateen, who falsely told negotiators that he had explosives and accomplices inside the nightclub, was killed by police following a three-hour standoff.

The massacre is just the latest in a string of attacks carried out against what is commonly referred to in security circles as "soft targets" — which are facilities marked by easy access and limited security measures. Although the nightclub had an off-duty police officer working security at the time of the shooting, Mateen was still able to elude him and enter the facility.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, it was discovered that the shooter had twice been investigated by the FBI in 2013 and 2014, but the agency determined he did not pose a significant threat — a revelation that has raised questions about how the government should adapt its counter-terrorism efforts to account for homegrown extremism and lone wolf actors. However, Dr. Erroll Southers, managing director, counter-terrorism and infrastructure protection at international security consulting firm TAL Global, hopes this incident doesn't change what authorities are currently doing to prevent this and similar acts of terrorism.

"What I hope we don't do is go into some reactive policy or procedure that we have not engaged in previously because of what just happened," says Southers. "What this should demonstrate to us is just how often this can happen, where it can happen and the diversity of actors that can engage."

Unfortunately, as with so many past shootings, Chris Swecker, CEO of security consulting firm Swecker Enterprises and the former acting executive assistant director of the FBI, thinks all of the talk about enhancing security at nightclubs and other soft targets nationwide will evaporate once the initial spotlight from this incident begins to fade.

"I don't think it is going to change a whole lot because the practicalities are that these are places that are open for business. They're open to the public, they're customer friendly and they don't want to look like an armed camp," explains Swecker. "I don't think there is going to be a whole lot of different behavior on the part of businesses in terms of their security. You might see more armed guards with concealed carry permits. There has always been a reluctance to have armed security guards but I've never understood that myself. If you're going to have a security guard you might as well have an armed one."

No Catch-All Solution

While Swecker agrees that many business owners tend not make a lot of security upgrades in the wake of these types of attacks, Patrick Fiel, owner of PVF Security Consulting, says some of the changes they do make simply don't go far enough to mitigate against the threat of an active shooter.

"One of the things that upset me — I've done a lot [security assessments] at schools and churches recently — is they will call a [systems] integrator and say, 'Hey, come and tell me what kind of cameras I need or something like that.' That's not the answer," says Fiel. "You have to look at the totality of a solution and best practices. Just putting up a camera isn't necessarily going to stop an incident."

Southers does believe, however, that nightclubs and other venues will likely step up security in the wake of this shooting to avoid running the risk of being seen as "tone deaf" or "negligent" in ensuring the safety of patrons. Having spent a considerable amount of time in the Middle East, Southers says you can hardly find a venue in the region that doesn't have the presence of a security officer, however, he is unsure if things will ever reach that level in the U.S.

Ensuring Fast Response

Southers also heaped praise on the police response to the shooting which he believes likely saved additional lives. He believes that police use of military-grade equipment, which has been panned by some in the media, played a crucial role in helping authorities breach the nightclub and take out the gunman.

"They probably saved a lot of lives. They went straight to the shooter and tried to neutralize him and that worked," says Southers.

Along with that, Swecker says that businesses need to do their part to help facilitate a fast police response in the case of an active shooter.

"You need to have established protocols for a response," says Swecker. "I think being able to connect up your own response — whether it's a tabletop or an actual drill, people have to understand what the response protocols are and how quickly they can facilitate the official response from local police officers

— how well they can point them in the right direction, seal off locations and have building plans in the hands of police before something bad happens.”

Admittedly, Fiel says that no plan is 100-percent foolproof and that every act of terrorism cannot be prevented; however, the damage inflicted by an attacker can at least be minimized if businesses have proper safeguards in place.

“I just went to a restaurant the other day and I said, ‘Do you have a panic button?’ The answer was yes and I said, ‘When was the last you checked it?’ We tested it and it didn’t work. Things like this, it has to be embedded in training,” says Fiel. “When is the last time your employees were trained on active shooter? Probably 75 percent of the population has never been trained on active shooters in today’s businesses.”