Large Public Gatherings Attractive Targets for Violent Extremists

SCOPE: This product is intended to help public safety officials and private sector partners plan and respond to terrorism threats against mass gatherings that are not contained within a secured perimeter. Gatherings that are not official events or tournaments and where tickets are not required for attending are particularly vulnerable. This product is a resource for public safety officials and is not in response to a specific threat against the Homeland. It provides background based on previous terrorist plotting and attacks and general terrorist attack tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). The considerations in this product are not exhaustive.

Violent extremists remain interested in attacking large public gatherings such as sporting events, music venues, high-profile special events, or symbolic locations. Attackers may have unrestricted access to public gatherings that occur or extend beyond a secured perimeter, including sporting event fan zones, special event watch parties, or mass gatherings before or after an event. Terrorist media regularly advocates for attackers to use vehicles, edged weapons, and firearms against easily accessible targets where large crowds are gathered. Information about common attack methods and event vulnerabilities of large public gatherings can help the coordinators and security planners prevent, mitigate, or respond to threats or crises at these types of events.

- In March 2025, a HAMAS spokesperson issued a global call to arms for supporters to violently resist the United States' proposed plan for Gaza, with the HAMAS spokesperson urging supporters to use whatever means available to resist the US proposal.

- In January, an ISIS-Khorasan flyer highlighted a list of cultural events and festivals in Europe and the United States as targets because they were expected to draw large crowds. In May 2024, a pro-ISIS outlet published at least one graphic suggesting that an attack against a specific Cricket World Cup match in New York would draw international media attention.

- On New Year's Day 2025, a now-deceased ISIS-inspired US citizen drove a rented truck through a crowded street in New Orleans during early morning celebrations, killing 14 and injuring more than 50 individuals.

- In August 2024, authorities disrupted a plot by two teenage ISIS supporters who planned to drive an explosives-filled car into crowds outside a concert venue in Austria. Between 20,000 to 30,000 fans were expected to gather outside the stadium during the concert, a location that would probably not have had sufficient security checks and safety mechanisms to prevent such an attack.

POSSIBLE PUBLIC VENUES:

1. ROOFTOP
2. AREA AROUND STADIUM
3. GRASSY AREA
6. NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH PARTY
8. BARS/RESTAURANTS

LAYERED SECURITY MEASURES:

4. COVERT AND OVERT SECURITY AND POLICE PRESENCE
5. VEHICLE-BORNE ATTACK MITIGATION
7. SCREENING PROCEDURES AND BAG CHECKS

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CONSIDERATIONS

When public safety officials are preparing for mass gatherings, the following best practices can help them prepare for terrorist threats and allocate resources accordingly. These practices are intended to be scalable based on the venue, type of event, location, size, duration, and evolving threat landscape.

THREAT AWARENESS

- Establish and maintain access to secure information platforms to share timely, relevant, and vetted information with partner services, which can help alert partners to suspicious activity or a terrorist attack in a timely fashion and allows multiple services to take action concurrently.

- Identify and use a common lexicon and standard terminology across federal, state, local, and industry partners to increase communication effectiveness.

- Maintain awareness of violent extremist TTPs and participate in information-sharing opportunities available through state or local fusion centers and the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF).

- Maintain awareness of high-profile events that may present desirable targets for violent extremist actors, given the many people and likely media coverage.

- Conduct regular site visits of the location(s) and surrounding areas leading up to the event to understand typical patterns of human movement, which will help public safety officials identify suspicious activity.

- Establish relationships with local commercial and retail establishments, such as hotels, bars, nightclubs, and restaurants, to enhance information-sharing; consider providing suspicious activity indicators training. If applicable, work with property owners to identify and remedy potential security vulnerabilities.

- Promote training on reportable indicators and behaviors for venue security and staff, parking lot attendants, and other employees in a position to observe and report to law enforcement onsite.

- Encourage the reporting of suspicious activity through established protocols.

SECURITY PLANNING:

Security measures may vary based on event specifics and the availability of resources, particularly if multiple locations need to be secured over a prolonged period. Public safety officials and event planners are encouraged to develop, assess, and implement protocols that are tailored to their specific jurisdiction's needs for threat prevention, protection, and mitigation.

- Proactively identify and maintain a database of contacts from all supporting agencies in the event of an emergency response, including law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, emergency managers, public works, city planners, and others based on authorities, jurisdictional needs, or requirements.

- Refresh mutual and automatic aid agreements among potential responding agencies to ensure access to personnel, resources, and equipment, or facilities for the duration of a potential incident. Regularly review and update policies and procedures for implementing mutual aid.

- Regularly conduct multijurisdictional planning, training, and exercises to reinforce communications, operational coordination, and other measures required to respond to a terrorist threat or incident. Include specialty units like bike units, mounted patrol, aircraft operations, UAS/counter-UAS teams, and mobile response teams that may be deployed in the event of an emergency.

- Coordinate with the state and local emergency operations centers during event planning to ensure that information requirements and communications procedures are established.

- Coordinate with venue staff to identify UAS restrictions or planned UAS use for logistic or media purposes. Remain alert for potentially suspicious or unrelated UAS activity and report it to the proper federal, state, or local authorities.

- Assess routes, transit locations, and transportation modes by which attendees may arrive at venue locations to aid in early identification of security vulnerabilities.

- Integrate a layered security approach to minimize the potential threat posed by vehicle-borne tactics, such as vehicle ramming or VBIEDs.

- Consider closing adjacent streets, travel lanes, and parking areas and strategically placing objects such as large planter boxes or bollards to restrict the potential for unscreened vehicles near any intended target(s).

SECURITY MANAGEMENT AND PROCEDURES:

Public safety responses at mass gatherings can be challenging, especially deploying and maintaining control of resources in the event of an emergency or crisis situation.

- Conduct pre-briefings with security and public safety officials to ensure that new information regarding safety and security or medical plans, policies, and procedures are communicated. Also, share information pertaining to engagement with attendees and the authorities of safety and security personnel.

- Try to anticipate other locations where crowds might unexpectedly gather, the challenges these crowds may create, and methods to prevent bottlenecking at potential chokepoints. Avoid perceptions that certain access points are being opened first, and consider the use of video screens or entertainment between events or transition points to help maintain a calm crowd that is easier to monitor.

- Understand how active crowd control tactics can help avoid panic and crowd crush during an ongoing threat or incident. Adopt formal deescalation policies and procedures.

- Maintain awareness of traffic conditions and foot traffic. To prepare for aid response or a possible emergency evacuation of VIPs, preemptively position stand-by tow trucks, identify alternate routes, and have barricade removal plans.

- As required, enact deescalation procedures and mutual aid agreements, including provisions for shared resources across agencies or jurisdictions.

- Establish incident management operational priorities and develop an incident action plan based on these priorities. Ensure that all involved agencies are familiar with the plan, including chain of command, information requirements, and communication procedures.

- Establish security zones beyond the footprint of the event or related venue locations to provide additional distance between crowds and potential explosives or weapons.

- Consider establishing a visible law enforcement presence and using roving interagency law enforcement teams to identify and discourage suspicious activity and deter potential violent extremist attacks.

MASS CASUALTY RESPONSE:

A mass casualty event response may quickly deplete the resources of responding law enforcement, fire, and medical services. The following considerations may help first responders plan the allocation of limited resources and identify and train force multipliers.

- Cultural or language barriers between public safety officials—911 dispatch, police, and EMS—and the public may create challenges for reporting during emergency situations or when trying to report possible suspicious activity.

- Coordinate a multidisciplinary response to victim care and methods for evacuation from an incident to medical care facilities, such as police cars, taxi cabs, and personal vehicles.

- Train and prepare personnel, event staff, and volunteers who may be called upon to provide first aid and transport the wounded or injured to medical facilities, reducing the dependency on first responders during a mass casualty response.

- Coordinate the transition of the event site through the various stages of disaster management: confinement and neutralization of the threat, life-saving actions, and then the investigative phase. Identify the lead agency for each stage and ensure that all crime scene evidence is preserved through the difference stages.

RESOURCES

Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

- **Active Shooter Preparedness and Conflict Prevention Techniques:** https://www.cisa.gov/topics/physical-security/active-shooter-preparedness

- **Be Air Aware:** https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/responding-drone-calls-guidance-emergency-communications-centers

- **How to Report Suspicious Activity** Provides reporting details for fusion centers by state. https://www.dhs.gov/seesomething-say-something/how-to-reportsuspicious-activity

- **Interagency Legal Advisory on UAS Detection and Mitigation Technologies:** https://www.dhs.gov/publication/interagency-legal-advisory-uas-detection-and-mitigation-technologies

- **Mass Gathering Security Planning Tool:** https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/mass-gathering-security-planning-tool

- **Nationwide SAR Initiative:** https://www.dhs.gov/ nationwide-sar.initiative-nsi

- **Securing Public Gatherings:** https://www.cisa.gov/topics/physical-security/securing-public-gatherings

- **Sports and Special Events Incident Management:** https://ncs4.usm.edu/training/dhs-fema-courses/mgt-404-sports-and-special-events-incident-management/

- **Vehicle Ramming Mitigation:** https://www.cisa.gov/topics/physical-security/vehicle-ramming-mitigation

- **Vehicle Ramming Self-Assessment Tool User Guide and Overview:** https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/vehicle-ramming-self-assessment-tool-user-guide-and-overview

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

- **No Drone Zone:** https://www.faa.gov/uas/resources/community_engagement/no_drone_zone

PRODUCT FEEDBACK

Please use the link below to complete a short survey. Your feedback will help JCAT develop counterterrorism products that support the public safety and private sector community.

https://www.JCAT-url.com

For further information, please email JCAT
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