

Attacking Soft Targets Can Result in Wide Ranging Strategic Damages

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It is commonly assumed that attacking soft targets by a single (or multiple) attackers will have minimal impact on the targeted facility and its surrounding community, since a small cell can inflict only few casualties or physical damage. Recent attacks against such targets by one or two terrorists or active shooters – or, as part of what is termed Active Threat, such perpetrators can exhibit the characteristics of both types of violent assailants – have demonstrated, nevertheless, that their damage impacts can be severe, and last for an extensive period of time after the event.

Terrorist and other violent actors select and attack soft targets because they are easily accessible, with some of them, such as shopping malls, movie theaters, or arenas (including outdoor arenas) heavily trafficked with people, making them easy to access and attack. This is opposed to attempting to attack “hard” targets, such as government or military facilities, that are often heavily – and visibly – guarded and fortified. Although such hard targets, particularly iconic government buildings and skyscrapers, can represent lucrative symbolic targets when they are destroyed (such as the destruction of the World Trade Center towers by al Qaida’s crashing aircraft into them on 9/11), even attacking less fortified soft targets, such as nightclubs, outdoor arenas, or running marathons, still can yield sufficiently large casualties and publicity for a violent actor to justify and even prioritize attacking them. This is one of the reasons why the frequency of attacking soft targets and having to manage their aftermath in terms of the physical and psychological impact of their casualties and business continuity, liability, and physical damage to their organizations, constitute a major concern for homeland security.

This article examines the multi-dimensional and wide-ranging damages that can be caused by attacking soft targets through three high-publicity case studies. As this article also attempts to demonstrate, the impacts of attacking such soft targets can also be mitigated by the resilience demonstrated by the first responders to these events, including the ability of the affected communities to bounce back and recover. Nevertheless, the physical and psychological impact of these attacks on their victims will tragically persist in spite of best efforts by their communities to assist in their overall recovery.

To examine these issues, this article focuses on three major incidents: The April 15, 2013 bombings of the Boston Marathon, the June 12, 2016 shooting rampage at the Pulse Nightclub, in Orlando, Florida, and the October 1, 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada. The types of impacts caused by such incidents are examined in terms of their high casualties, economic damages, and psychological after effects.

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Casualties

- April 15, 2013: The Tsarnaev brothers' bombing near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, Boston, Massachusetts, caused three fatalities and more than 260 injuries. While they were under pursuit, three days later one of the brothers also shot and killed a responding MIT police officer.
- June 12, 2016: Omar Mateen's shooting rampage at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, caused 49 fatalities and 53 injuries.
- October 1, 2017: Stephen Paddock's shooting rampage from his 32nd floor hotel suite at the outdoor concert in Las Vegas, Nevada, caused 58 fatalities and more than 540 injuries.

It is important to note that the large numbers of casualties caused by such incidents, with each one representing a critical turning point in the tactics and weaponry used by such assailants against soft targets, had other repercussions, as well. These included the extensive impacts on the targeted businesses' and communities' economy, including tourism, and the psychological well-being of the victims and others involved in the incidents.

Economic Impacts

The economic impacts of violent attacks against soft targets are discussed in the three cases under consideration. Note that this discussion is intended as a concise overview.

Boston Marathon Bombing

The annual Boston Marathon is estimated to generate some \$140 million in business for local hotels, restaurants, shops and other businesses.ⁱ The bombings of the Boston Marathon were not labeled by the Federal Government as an act of terrorism for insurance claims because the losses that were incurred by the businesses along the event were less than the \$5 million required under the Safety Act, so only businesses that carried business-interruption insurance had their losses covered.ⁱⁱ For those businesses without such insurance coverage, insurers had denied approximately half of the 133 claims for such losses.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other areas, the bombings had a short-term impact on tourism, such as cancellations of dinner reservations in the days following the incident. During the city's two-day lockdown during the manhunt for the attackers, shops and offices were closed, and local transport was suspended. Security at airports was tightened.

Afterwards, however, due in large part to the city population's resilience, commerce resumed, with the next year's Boston Marathon event attracting a larger number of participants and spectator tourists.^{iv} In 2014, the city's hotel occupancy rate had increased by nearly two percent over the previous year, due to an increase in international visitors.^v

Pulse Nightclub Shootings

Tourism is Florida's primary industry, so in deciding to attack in Orlando, one of the state's most popular destination city, the shooter was likely aware that his attack would not only cause mass casualties, but economic damage and world-wide media headlines, as well. These objectives by the shooter were achieved, at least in the short-term. In one example, with the large-scale crime scene investigation lasting for several days, businesses located near the nightclub were closed down during that period, with an estimated 60 businesses closed for more than a week.^{vi} Some business owners had to obtain loans to cover their lost revenue. Due to the closed crime scene, the employees at some businesses were prevented from accessing their property for several days.

The Pulse Nightclub was located away from Orlando's main tourist attractions, particularly Disneyworld, so it did not experience any significant change in its overall visitation numbers.^{vii}

Regarding the future of the Pulse Nightclub, it immediately was shut down as an operating business. The facility's owner later established the onePULSE Foundation, and in May 2017 he announced plans to set up a memorial site and museum, which was scheduled to open in 2020.

Las Vegas Shootings

In the aftermath of the shootings against the Route 91 Harvest music festival, the most severe economic-related impact of the shootings were the extensive expenses related to the logistical measures implemented to take care of the hundreds of wounded victims at area hospitals and the expenses incurred in facilitating their travel back to their home states.

In another area, the Las Vegas economy, which is highly dependent on its tourism industry, experienced a "short-term pullback."^{viii} The city's hotels and casinos immediately expended resources to implement much tighter security measures at their facilities, although they had to tread lightly because tourists visit Las Vegas "largely for fun" and would be wary of airport-type security systems and measures.^{ix} For this reason, at the entranceways to hotel casinos, establishing a strong and overt deterrent in the form of "a visible security presence, complete with trained dogs," might make some of the gambling and other guests uncomfortable, so the employment, for example, of "imperceptible, high-tech security equipment" as weapons detection systems is likely to be preferable."^x

Psychological Impacts

The psychological impacts of the attacks upon the surviving victims was likely severe, although inductive or deductive assessments will likely take some time for academic and medical communities to produce. What is known is that in general, attacking soft targets (as well as hard targets) is intended by the perpetrators to instill fear, disrupt the social functioning of the targeted communities, and spread fear, panic and anxiety throughout the entire affected

societies, for instance, that an attack in one location could occur again in any other location, as well.

An increase in the prevalence of psychological disorders is one of the consequences of such attacks, regardless of the numbers of casualties or physical damage. While the wounded victims who survive such violent attacks will experience the physical and psychological impacts directly throughout their lives, even those in the local communities where such incidents occur and their larger societies will also experience their aftereffects. In some situations, as an expert notes, “Even emotional and behavioral changes that do not reach the level of a diagnosable disorder may contribute significantly to the overall health burden resulting from terrorist attacks.”^{xi} This might include “transient reactions, such as acute stress disorder (ASD) and bereavement. In an even smaller percentage more serious conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression will develop. For those individuals, the course of illness may be highly variable; some may experience remission, while others will have symptoms that persist for months or years. In addition to illness, there will be changes in health-related behaviors, changes in routine behaviors among members of a community, and changes in the level of overall stress experienced by survivors of terrorism.”^{xii}

Communities affected by such mass violence incidents can also take steps to upgrade their psychological resilience. Following the bombings of the marathon, for example, the two-word motto “Boston Strong” was created. As a journalist explained, it was “a handy shorthand for defiance, solidarity, and caring. In its ubiquity, ‘Boston Strong’ presents a united front in the face of threat.”^{xiii}

Later, in Las Vegas, as part of the psychological healing process, electronic billboards that are traditionally used to promote the city’s restaurants and entertainment venues instead began featuring a dedicated phone line to assist the victims and their families. They also included expressions of appreciation for first responders and casino workers who were instrumental in providing emergency response to the victims. One electronic billboard read: “We’ve been there for you during the good times. Thank you for being there for us now.”^{xiv}

Conclusion

As this analysis has attempted to demonstrate, in attacking soft targets, despite their perception as being relatively easy “targets of opportunity,” the small cell or lone wolf attackers can still cause extensive loss of life, economic damage, and psychological after effects. Understanding how to anticipate, prevent, and effectively respond to such incidents is crucial in empowering citizenry to recognize that “security is personal.” In such a way, the motto of “preparedness without paranoia” can be operationalized to enable those affected by such incidents to be prepared to respond to such incidents in a timely and measured way, thereby upgrading their resilience to seamlessly recover and stabilize their situations.

This article is part of a series of publications by KGH on the significance of understanding the wide-ranging impacts of attacking soft targets and the measures required to effectively prevent and mitigate their impacts.

ⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/id/100649334>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.wmfe.org/intersection-the-impact-of-the-pulse-shooting-on-area-businesses/61697>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v <http://www.businessinsider.com/boston-tourism-after-marathon-attacks-2013-4>.

^{vi} <http://www.wmfe.org/intersection-the-impact-of-the-pulse-shooting-on-area-businesses/61697>.

^{vii} <https://www.casino.org/news/massacre-wont-impact-las-vegas-tourism-long-term-experts-say>.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} <https://patch.com/nevada/lasvegas/las-vegas-tourism-brief-economic-dip-expected>.

^x <http://www.foxnews.com/travel/2017/10/03/las-vegas-shooting-security-experts-on-what-hotels-can-do-to-prevent-another-tragedy.html>.

^{xi} <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/disaster-psychiatry/psychiatric-and-societal-impacts-terrorism>.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/05/11/boston-strong-phrase-that-rallied-city/uNPFaI8Mv4QxsWqpjXBOQO/story.html>.

^{xiv} <https://patch.com/nevada/lasvegas/las-vegas-tourism-brief-economic-dip-expected>.