

## **Citizens as Targets and Impact on Security Professionals**

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We all spend time preparing our homes and families for unexpected natural disaster or other crisis in terms of food, water, cash, gas and other necessities to live. Yet we have to leave the safety of our homes daily for school, church, travel, shopping and recreation. Unfortunately, while we're out living our lives, you and I, and our friends and families, are now in the direct cross hairs of terrorists, criminals and people acting out on their anger. Understanding the threat is the key to learning how to survive.

We have a complex problem in our country, one that I would call a perfect storm for our citizens. Factor 1 – Terrorism. Since the attacks of 9/11, we've further "hardened our hard targets," like government buildings, utilities and military installations. Therefore, terrorists (foreign and domestic) are turning their sights elsewhere – towards easy-to-access, vulnerable places and people. We need to remember that around the world there are horrific battles being fought daily, and the battlefield lines have been redrawn to include churches, schools, hospitals, shopping venues, transportation hubs and sporting and recreational events – soft targets. Civilian fatalities in conflicts have climbed from 5% at the turn of the century to more than 90% in modern day conflicts. Gone are the days of armies on battlefields and airplanes dog fighting in the skies. Every single day there is an attack in the world where innocent men, women and children are caught in the crossfire - or the targets themselves, in an attempt to break their will, have them turn on the government or flee territory. This breach of moral boundaries is shocking

and causes a ripple effect of fear, two primary goals of terrorist groups. Soft target attacks also get more press time, which provides a morale boost for terrorist group members, and helps with recruiting. Not only do we have to worry about foreign terrorists coming to our country, but our fellow citizens are radicalizing and carrying out horrific attacks, as with the San Bernardino and Orlando and Las Vegas massacres.

Factor 2 – Crime. Criminal activity is on the rise; as security practitioners, we should not be surprised. The FBI reported a 3.9% increase in violent crimes in our country in 2015<sup>i</sup> and another 8.6% increase in 2016.<sup>ii</sup> The number of mass shootings, where four or more people are shot and/or killed in a single event are skyrocketing. As of December 1<sup>st</sup>, there have been 397 mass shootings in the United States in 2017, including the worst mass shooting in US history in Las Vegas (59 killed, 441 injured and the deadly church shooting in Texas (27 dead, 20 injured).<sup>iii</sup> Few would argue – this has been a terribly violent year. Psychologists are discussing how the public is starting to become numb to these horrific events as they “normalize” in our culture.

Factor 3 – Anger. The propensity to act out on angry impulses is great than ever. Jilted lovers go to college campuses and department stores to exact their revenge, killing complete strangers. People drive vehicles into crowds. A 14-year old boy in a rural South Carolina town kills his father, then goes to a grade school and shoots innocent children in a school yard. An angry ex-spouse goes to his mother-in-law’s church and exacts revenge by slaughtering worshipers. People step up to authority and challenge, instead of running away. They don’t trust the government or law enforcement, fed by conspiracy theories and rumors spread on the Internet through social media.

Those of us who work in the area of preparedness know the data is massive when overlaid into one chart – all terrorist activity, all criminal activity and crimes where angry people violently act on their impulses. It keeps experts awake at night, and for good reason.

My work is predicated on the idea that if citizens are aware of the threat and educated to respond, they are less afraid. They become force multipliers for law enforcement and first responders. Preparedness really starts in the mind, knowing that you are a target. As with many of you, due to the nature of my work, I've always felt like a target – while in uniform, and living and traveling in Europe and the Middle East. I intuitively assess situations, look for exits and hiding places, carry things that will help me if I get into a bind, preposition items in my car, home and at work. Also, I am trained to run towards danger, not away from it and to engage the enemy and fight to the death, if necessary. I am also proficient in self-aid and buddy care, to take care of my wounds and those of anyone around me while we wait for professional responders. And as we've witnessed with recent mass shootings, help may not quickly arrive for a variety of reasons.

The average citizen is generally not prepared. They don't realize they are a target, and if caught up in a violent situation, they typically respond poorly. They over rely on law enforcement and first responders to come in and save the day, instead of taking things into their own hands and escaping, hiding or fighting. Often, victims chose to spend their last minutes taking video and texting, instead of trying to improvise weapons and make a plan to fight the attacker. For my work, it is important to be as close to the scene as possible to grasp the event, the response and the aftermath, so I've spent probably over one thousand hours reading unfiltered eyewitness accounts and viewing graphic video and pictures from horrific terrorist

attacks. Shoppers at the Westgate Mall in Kenya did all of the wrong things during the terrorist attack, like choosing to hide instead of run when they had the chance, wrongly guessing the shooting would only last a few minutes, when the event lasted days. Watching footage from recent terrorist attacks at airports abroad, you'll see people "fleeing" from the attackers while pushing heavy luggage carts instead of dropping everything and running. In one airport attack, a man was oblivious and on his phone while the shooter was closing in behind him. There is video from an airplane accident last year where people didn't exit immediately, but got their carry-on bags from the overhead compartment and tried to jump on the escape chutes with them. Even in the miracle Hudson landing, only three passengers took their life vests from under the seat, even though the plane was clearly in the water.

We need to understand the ever-changing and complex security environment, culture and mindset of citizens and factor this into our training, preparation and response.

Thank you for all you do to help keep people and facilities safe in this increasingly violent world. I know it feels overwhelming and fruitless at times, but you may never know lives you've saved through vigilance and proactive security measures.

Dr. Hesterman is the author of *Soft Target Hardening: Protecting People from Attack* which was the security book of the year and is available on Amazon. <https://www.amazon.com/Soft-Target-Hardening-Protecting-People/dp/1482244217>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/latest-crime-statistics-released>

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<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2016-crime-statistics-released>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.massshootingtracker.org/>