Chapter 8
Exploring the Phenomenon of Mass Murder in Public Places

Selina E. M. Kerr
Independent Researcher, UK

Mary Ann Markey
Grand Canyon University, USA

ABSTRACT

In 2017, fifty-eight individuals attending an outdoor music festival in Las Vegas were shot and killed, whilst hundreds more were injured. In this chapter, the authors explore the phenomenon of mass shootings taking place in entertainment venues or places of worship. These types of venues bring unique challenges in preventing and responding to mass shooting incidents. These authors recommend initiating a threat assessment system or model to assess changes in an individual’s behaviors over time. It is of particular importance to evaluate whether the individual has been preparing for an attack. The six case studies reviewed engaged in active preparations beforehand by procuring weapons, writing manifestos and scoping out potential venues to attack. In terms of how to effectively respond to mass shootings in public locations, it is recommended that an emergency management plan with a range of scenarios is devised beforehand. Careful consideration should be given to ways to deal with individuals with special needs and how to communicate with patrons during an emergency situation.

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-eight people were shot and killed at a country music festival in Las Vegas in what is currently the worst mass shooting in the United States. The “mass shooter” is an individual who kills or attempts to kill numerous victims in the shortest period of time (Lankford, 2013, 2015). Such attacks are usually well-planned in advance, with the perpetrators tending to display “warning signs” beforehand (Douglas & Olshaken, 1999). In the United States, mass shootings first appeared in the late 1980s in the form of “going postal” attacks in postal offices and then “workplace massacres” occurred in places of employment in (see Ames, 2007). A series of school shootings followed in the United States from the 1990s onwards.
Exploring the Phenomenon of Mass Murder in Public Places

Mass shootings can also take place in an intimate partner violence situation, where the perpetrator shoots his or her partner as well as other family members (Kerr, 2018b). Looking at recent datasets compiled from FBI homicide reports, news articles and police documents, it is estimated that mass killings involving firearms occur every two weeks in the United States (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi & Castillo-Chavez, 2015).

This chapter will explore mass shootings that take place in public locations like music festivals, movie theaters, nightclubs and places of worship. These are a distinct phenomenon from other types of shooting massacres, such as those occurring in domestic situations, which are motivated by personal issues (see Kerr, 2018b). Conversely, public locations are selected by mass shooters because either the place holds some kind of symbolic significance or it affords them multiple victims to both kill and wound. This chapter aims to further explore these types of mass shootings using a selection of six case studies from the past ten years chosen for their relevance and significance: Sikh Temple, Wisconsin (2012); Aurora Movie Theater, Colorado (2012); Charleston church, South Carolina (2015); Pulse Nightclub, Florida (2016); Baptist Church, Texas (2017); Country Music Festival, Nevada (2017).

For each of the six case studies, the authors will explore the perpetrator’s motivations, psycho-social characteristics and warning signs prior to the attacks. Informing this is the methodological approach used by Böckler, Hoffmann and Zick (2015) to assess the pathway to violence in the Frankfurt Airport Attack: examining the biographical events in the lives of perpetrators to identify crises and turning points; testimonies and writings of the perpetrators where available to examine their motives; the actions of perpetrators indicating warning behaviors. Warning behaviors can provide an investigative template to help law enforcement narrow the focus of an investigation (Meloy, 2016, p. 2). Once individuals who threaten to harm others have been identified via warning signs, threat assessment can be used to evaluate these people and intervene if appropriate to reduce the risk of violence (Cornell, 2013, p. 380).

This chapter will also explore the particulars of the incidents in terms of how each of these unfolded and the fatalities/injuries sustained. Doing so should help to inform considerations about how to respond to these types of incidents. Emergency management planning allows for organizations to take heed of potential risks and plan for these to reduce their impact; as well as adapt this plan where required to deal with the unfolding crisis (Coombs, 2012, p. 106; Heath, Lee & Ni, 2009, p. 125). For schools and other educational institutions, emergency management plans should already be in place and there will be some degree of familiarity between its population. In contrast to this, entertainment venues are public locations consisting of substantial numbers of clientele, likely to be made up of a highly diverse range of individuals. In this case, crisis planning would fall within the purview of the businesses themselves. Additionally, two of the case studies focus on places of worship, which may not have any plans in place to deal with threats like active shooter incidents. Considering all of this, there are challenges in planning for the mitigation of risk in entertainment and other public venues.

This chapter will start with an overview of the literature on profiling, threat assessment and emergency management planning. It will then move on to review the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of perpetrators involved in each of the six case studies. Combining these should provide an insight into the possible pathway to violence for this type of mass shooter. This is to help inform the assessment of future threats relating to mass shootings. What is useful to determine are possible ways to mitigate the harm caused should a mass shooting incident transpire. Although advance detection and counterattack are always more effective than reaction, there still should be measures in place to defend against a potential attack (Schneier, 2006, p. 143). What are known as “emergency management plans” seek to reduce the risk of an event turning into a crisis. Such plans detail actions to take, assign roles to relevant