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Small to Mid-Size Sporting Events: Are We Prepared to Recover from an Attack?

**By Brian M. Harrell,
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Sarah Tharp-Hernandez,
and Suzanne Parker**

Note to the reader

This article describes a fictional deadly attack by a lone-wolf terrorist during a high school football event in a small town, here in the United States. The authors begin by describing an attack and then focus on the response from the medical community, city, county, state, and federal government officials. Next, the authors make several recommendations on what actions are needed to develop an effective plan to combat terrorist activities during a small- to mid-size sports event. Among the actions needed, the authors focus on the following: response planning, emergency action plan, incident command, policies and procedures, and security staff training.

Introduction

Similar to any critical infrastructure or key resource (CI/KR), American sports events are susceptible to various threats, including terrorism. The al-Qaida training manual strategically points out "blasting and destroying the places of amusement, immorality, and sin...and attacking vital economic centers" as a key objective.¹ Home grown terrorists have similar objectives while coveting media attention for their cause. Because of the openness and mass gathering nature of high school football stadiums, shopping malls, and amusement parks, they are no doubt ripe opportunities for terrorist to attack a "soft target."

The Scenario

Imagine the following scenario: it is a homecoming Friday night in Small Town, USA. The varsity football team takes the field to a large, boisterous crowd. From the corner of your eye, through the sea of letterman jackets,

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you notice an individual retrieve an ice chest. He raises it above his head, mutters a prayer, and tosses it into the unsuspecting crowd below. Within seconds, nails, screws, and glass projectiles enter the crowd of 2000, killing 25 and injuring dozens more. Unsure if additional Improvised Explosives Devices (IED) exist, the panicked crowd reacts by trampling each other to the exits, killing more.

The average local high school football stadium will have one ambulance and a small designated medical response crew on hand for possible injuries incurred to players during the game. This crew, which may include a team physician, will become the initial Emergency Medical Service (EMS) providers. As such, their first act will be to call in a Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) to 911, or the designated local emergency response number. They will report the type of incident: bomb explosion with projectiles; assess the number of injured and type of injuries: two or more dozen with burns and complex major injuries, and dozens more minor injuries; and briefly assess the safety status at the scene for incoming responders. As a result, the center receiving the call will alert and dispatch all available first responders and notify local hospitals to prepare for an MCI event.

The Normative Response

As the on-site security team tries to stabilize the panicked crowd, EMS will have to begin organizing their response and initial triage while awaiting help. All unhurt and able to walk should be asked to clear the immediate area so victims can be accessed. Those able to leave should be given a designated location so they can be monitored and triaged at a later point. Using the Simple Triage and Rapid Treatment (START) system, the only patient care given during initial triage should be to unblock airways and stop uncontrolled bleeding. Once additional crews arrive, triage can include moving patients for further treatment or transport based on their conditions, but until that point, quickly moving from victim to victim and providing only life-saving care will give the best outcome for the most patients.

In coordination with the Incident Commander (IC) and following their community's Incident Command System, the arriving EMS crews will create on-site treatment areas according to injury severity and establish a vehicle route for efficient patient transport. Limited access to the stadium will create a bottleneck in the flow of response personnel and patient evacuation, so establishing treatment areas outside the stadium will help create a more efficient ongoing medical response. As medical crews perform initial triage, they will be marking or tagging the victims using a sys-

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tem to communicate severity and minimal patient tracking information. Uninjured bystanders can assist with some aspects of triage (for example, applying pressure to bleeding or helping move victims to another area) and should be utilized to free up trained personnel to reach more patients.

The most critical patients should be transported to available emergency trauma centers. Depending on the town, this could be 30–45 miles away. Stabilizing the remaining victims until transportation can be arranged will be the goal of the staged treatment areas. Ambulances will need to be used for major injuries. Subsequently, another mode of transportation will need to be utilized, such as team buses for the non-critically wounded. To keep things moving will require the senior EMS responder on site to continually update the status and needs of the medical response with the IC, who has delegating responsibilities and is able to secure additional equipment needs personnel. Careful consideration should be taken when considering the location of the command post, as this needs to be far away from the blast site yet easily accessible. The medical response will continue with re-triaging and treatment until all victims have left the scene.

Coinciding with the medical response will be the initial wave of law enforcement officials arriving on scene. In the event of a terrorist bomb detonation at a small high school football stadium, the first IC to take control of the situation is likely to be a representative of the local police department. Local law enforcement will have primary responsibility for preserving the crime scene, establishing crowd control, and serving as a point of contact to the media and inquiring citizens. The incident commander should immediately designate a Public Information Officer (PIO) to supply information and coordinate with the media. It will be highly important to rapidly create working relationships or to call upon standing mutual aid agreements which are agreements between communities that will provide assistance to one another upon request.² These agreements would be made with nearby law enforcement agencies, fire and medical services, hospitals, specialized task forces, local and state emergency management offices and also private companies involved in response and recovery.

This type of incident is likely to overwhelm local law enforcement, especially if they have not considered the possibility of such an event, taken part in bomb threat and evacuation drills, or previously established relationships with their colleagues from other local agencies. Despite the stress a terrorist incident will put on local law enforcement, it is inevitably

local law enforcement that will be first to address the situation and begin recovery efforts until the FBI, in coordination with other federal agencies, can take over.

Secondary or Follow-On Attacks

The first hurdle the IC and local law enforcement will face will be establishing crowd control to help eliminate further damage and loss of life while simultaneously working to preserve the crime scene and prepare for the possibility of a second detonation.³ A bomb squad/WMD team should be summoned to the scene in the event additional devices are located. In 1989, at a semi-final football game in Sheffield, England, human stampeding and mass panic resulted in the deaths of 96 people. The *Taylor Report*, which inquired into the disaster, blamed failure of police control as the culprit. Although not the result of a terrorist event, the Sheffield disaster highlights the necessity for a well thought out pre-established operational order and contributes to the importance of establishing an IC under the National Incident Management System (NIMS) at a stadium disaster.⁴ Public and private law enforcement officials working at small high school football stadiums must not be complacent in maintaining knowledge of NIMS, of the layout of the stadium, and of disaster response plans and pre-established mutual aid agreements between school district officials, local jurisdictional responders, and outside responders.

Terrorists may make plans to activate a second explosion aimed at harming additional victims and emergency responders. This scenario is unlikely in the event of a 'lone wolf' terrorist who has committed a suicide bombing but is still feasible if a secondary delayed device was planted. Local law enforcement must plan to address this potential risk and also preserve the crime scene for the subsequent FBI investigation. The IC will need to immediately designate response plans for moving people away from the threat, staging victims for medical care, searching the premises for any additional suspicious packages or persons, communicating additional response needs for activation of mutual aid, establishing measures for preventing media and worried citizens from approaching the stadium; actions should also be implemented to aid in locating evidence such as eyewitness statements, bomb fragments, and video surveillance if available. Most games are filmed by both teams; this will be an excellent resource.

Along with local law enforcement support, the fire department whose jurisdiction the stadium is located in will be the first on scene. Soon after arriving and coordinating with the IC, it will be the Fire Chief's decision

on what other units are required for response such as heavy equipment rescue, helicopter landing zone, and hazmat response, just to name a few. The main role of the Fire Department in this situation is to contain and fight any fires the explosion may have caused and begin the search and rescue process through the twisted wreckage of the stadium section in which the blast occurred. The Fire Department will be a critical asset when it comes to site cleanup as well.

Response Plan

Developing a response plan for a disaster emergency is a way to maximize resources while minimizing chaos. Another way to positively affect the outcome of a disaster is in prevention planning. To prevent any terrorist disaster, it is important to have security measures to mitigate these types of threats. In this post 9–11 era, organizations must implement a security plan to prevent disasters and threats or to effectively respond to disasters when they strike. The same has to be true for an organization that manages stadium or arena activities. In order to mitigate threat, it is important to focus on the following: planning process, emergency plan for the stadium, threat and risk assessment, command post, policies and procedures, and security staff training.

The planning process is extremely important when implementing security measures to mitigate threats. In this process, the inputs of management, staff, and employees and local, county, state and federal agencies are needed for the development of a comprehensive security plan. For the process to be successful, management must fully support this initiative, which means there must be buy-in to the planning process. A key recommendation in this process is a commitment from management to establish the leadership role of a staff security coordinator for the development and implementation of a safety and security plan.⁵ This staff security coordinator must have experience in law enforcement and professional management since she or he will be responsible for key security areas and be involved in all aspects of terrorist threats. It is a post with high visibility, and the coordinator must be able to build an effective planning team and secure the budget for the initiatives.

After developing a planning process, it is necessary to put that process into action and develop an emergency plan for the stadium. Having an emergency plan in place will definitely help reduce the chaos that is likely to occur in a major disaster. It is imperative that the event security officials, local, county, state and federal entities can clearly communicate with each other as well as with the public. This emergency plan should

also focus on event preparation because it will inform security officials on the type of event and how they should focus their efforts. Officials can then rule out certain threats that might be attracted to this type of event and be better prepared to put in place preventive measures for bomb threats, unauthorized entry into the stadium, isolated attacks, and vehicles or packages left unattended. This emergency plan must also contain an evacuation plan so that the public can be informed where and how to evacuate during a disaster, and therefore will reduce any confusion that would otherwise endanger the lives of the people.

Once security is in place there needs to be a central location where all this data is processed and commands are issued; this area is known as the command post. The role of a command post is to help manage all security aspects associated with a sporting event.⁶ The command post will have a security director, law enforcement officials, and an incident commander on staff. The security coordinator and staff must determine equipment and staffing needs. It is extremely important to clearly state the roles and responsibilities of every employee in the command post, so that everyone knows what to do if a disaster occurs. The command post will also be responsible for the evacuation procedures and critical personnel staging areas so that entry and exit points can be monitored and controlled should the need for evacuation arise. If it is financially feasible a network of security cameras should be installed at all exit and entry points of the facility so that activities can be closely monitored.

It will be necessary to have a set of policies and procedures in place to dictate what is or what is not suspicious behavior and what the response should be if these policies are broken. These policies and procedures for the stadium must be strictly enforced. It is impossible to eliminate all risks; however, one cannot allow fans to breach any security policies and procedures which might compromise people inside the stadium. Policies to control fan conduct, alcohol, access to the stadium, tailgating, parking, and prohibited items are some examples.

Once policies and procedures are established, it will be necessary to train security staff on them. Without proper training, all security planning processes will be useless. Management must invest in the training of the security personnel since they need to be knowledgeable in the areas that apply to their roles and responsibilities. Security employees need to be trained in emergency response procedures, evacuation procedures, information that constitute threats, hazardous materials, how to use emergency equipment, and how to conduct a shutdown procedure, just to name a few.

Conclusion

In the United States "lone-wolf terrorism" or "individual terrorism" has been regarded as a serious threat to public safety in recent years. The scenario described above is frightening because of its impact. A disgruntled citizen, combined with a primitive weapon system against a soft target, will likely achieve success if security, preparedness, and intelligence measures are not effectively put in place. The goals of preparedness, regardless of event, should be: (1) know what to do in the aftermath of a disaster; (2) know how to do it; (3) exercise your pre-approved response plan as closely as possible; (4) be equipped with the right tools to do it effectively; and (5) compile lessons learned and areas of improvement for distribution and future use. As is true with the emergency manager and first responders in a community, members of the general public need information and training if they are to know what is best to do before, during, and after emergencies occur.⁷ If the populace, first responders, and governmental entities are working in unison prior to an emergency, a smoother response and recovery phase will likely be the result.

About the Authors

Authors Brian M. Harrell, Konrad Crockford, Pierre Boisrond, Sarah Tharp-Hernandez, and Suzanne Parker are collaborators from the Public Health Preparedness for Disaster and Terrorist Emergencies course at Pennsylvania State University. Collectively they have significant critical infrastructure protection, health care, and law enforcement experience.

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