

# PREVENTING VIOLENT ATTACKS ON GOVERNMENT FACILITIES AND PERSONNEL

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Local law enforcement plays a vital role in threat assessments, early intervention

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**O**n July 16, 2015, a gunman opened fire on two military installations in Chattanooga, Tennessee, killing four Marines and a sailor. The offender first targeted a recruiting center in a strip mall, where he fired shots from his vehicle before fleeing. He then drove to a naval reserve center, where he crashed through the security gate, exited his vehicle, and continued his assault until he was shot and killed by officers from the Chattanooga Police Department. Beyond the families and friends of those immediately affected and the first responders, this incident also affected the surrounding community and the nation as a whole.

Federal facilities, such as those in Chattanooga, are located throughout the United States. Although the targeting of these facilities is rare in comparison to other types of violence, safeguarding government personnel and individuals conducting business at these sites is a priority. Often, the public turns to law enforcement for in-

formation about what steps are being taken to prevent these tragedies.

The U.S. Secret Service has a particular stake in preventing incidents of targeted violence toward government officials, facilities, and sites. In December 2015, the agency's National Threat Assessment Center published *Attacks on Federal Government 2001–2013: Threat Assessment Considerations*, a report that studied 43 attacks targeting federal government facilities and officials that occurred between 2001 and 2013. More than half of the attacks occurred outside of the Washington, D.C., metro area, affecting communities in 15 states.

In these incidents, almost two-thirds of the attackers selected targets within 25 miles of their homes. Further, the offenders targeted not only federal buildings, but also federal officials at their private residences, federally funded university research labs, and federal agencies with offices in commercial buildings and shopping centers.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

The majority of the attackers had previously come to the attention of law enforcement for a variety of criminal activities, ranging from minor infractions to arrests for violent crimes. These findings highlight the importance of involving local law enforcement and local communities in prevention efforts, even when the federal government is the target.

Prevention efforts are more effective when community partners collaborate to include law enforcement, behavioral and mental health services, social services, local citizens, and others. Although local law enforcement plays a critical part in averting violent activity, we understand that each partner has a different role in identifying individuals who are exhibiting behaviors of concern and intervening early to address these concerns. This is particularly true in preventing acts of targeted violence in which a public official, government facility, or public venue is selected in advance.

## COMMUNITY-BASED THREAT ASSESSMENT AND ITS ROLE IN PREVENTION

Often, we are asked whether there is a checklist of warning behaviors to identify those at risk of engaging in targeted violence. More specifically, are there warning behaviors separate from activities related to planning—acquiring or manufacturing weapons, conducting surveillance, or using deceptive practices to avoid detection? With this in mind, our study sought to identify any additional concerning behaviors offenders exhibited prior to their attacks.

Although we found that all but one of the offenders engaged in some sort of concerning behavior, these behaviors were not always suggestive of someone being at risk of engaging in violence. They did, however, indicate that the individuals were experiencing some level of distress, and for half of them, their behavior elicited concern in others. These findings highlight the importance of more broadly identifying individuals who exhibit concerning behavior and developing intervention strategies that may divert them from considering violence as an option.

As law enforcement professionals, we rely on others to share information with us about a person or situation of concern, and to work with us to develop intervention strategies. One way we can enhance our efforts in this area is by encouraging the development of effective, local behavioral and/or assessment programs.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center

An improvised device blasted the entrance to the U.S. Armed Forces Career Center, a joint-service recruiting station located in Times Square. The blast caused no injuries; however, glass in the office's front door and window was shattered by the explosion, and the door's metal frame was bent. The busy recruiting office is singularly located on a triangular island in the center of the iconic Manhattan intersection and has been the site of periodic anti-war protests.

Although law enforcement plays a critical role in these programs, preventing acts of targeted violence requires the collaboration and efforts of the entire community. These partnerships may include working with representatives from federal offices in your districts, so they know with whom to share information and what community resources are available to them.

Partnering with others and sharing information helps us do the following:

1) *Identify concerning behaviors and the settings in which they occur.* The concerning behaviors exhibited by the offenders in the study ranged from actions and statements that caused low levels of worry in someone who knew the individual, to behaviors and comments that elicited alarm and fear. For example, the offenders made disturbing comments and posted bizarre content online, exhibited subtle or dramatic changes in behavior, experienced interpersonal difficulties and conflicts, stalked or harassed others, and engaged in final-act behaviors, such as leaving goodbye messages, giving away belongings, and emptying bank accounts.

These behaviors occurred in a variety of contexts to include schools, places of employment, mental health settings, and public venues. The offenders also exhibited the behaviors over the course of time, ranging from actions and statements that occurred decades earlier to those that occurred in the hours before they executed their attacks. These findings emphasize the importance of broadly outlining what behaviors should elicit concern in various settings to encourage others to recognize activities that warrant attention.

2) *Set a low threshold for the reporting of concerning behaviors to those with the authority and capacity to intervene.* Often, the reporting of information on an individual who elicits concern will not be directed toward law enforcement, particularly for those behaviors that are less concerning. For those situations, there may be more appropriate channels where information could be directed, such as mental health professionals, human resources representatives, school administrators, and others.

Even so, as law enforcement agencies, we can work with others in the community to understand more about the behaviors they see

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in various settings, and to identify those behaviors that should be reported to us for appropriate investigation and action. For example, observations of an employee’s declining work performance may be referred to a company’s human resources department. If, however, the employee makes references to harming coworkers, law enforcement should be contacted for appropriate follow-up.

3) *Gather information from multiple sources about any concerning behaviors the individual has exhibited.* If the person is brought to your attention and you initiate an investigation, you can gather information by interviewing the individual of concern, friends, and family, and those who come into contact with the individual in the community. In particular, look for evidence of changes in the person’s behavior.

At times, these changes may be subtle. For example, the individual may have generally been considered a loner, but in the last few months, the person may have become even more isolated. Another illustration is when those close to an individual who has held anti-government views for many decades notice that his or her rhetoric is becoming increasingly violent.

Also, gather information on whether the individual’s concerning behaviors are related to a preoccupation the individual may

have on a specific person or cause, whether the preoccupation has significantly impacted his or her life, or if the person has depicted the object of his or her fixation in increasingly positive or negative ways over time.

4) *Evaluate the information gathered and identify appropriate interventions to mitigate the risk.* Interventions can be quite varied and should be tailored to address each behavior or situation of concern. This may include helping the individual connect with appropriate support systems, access needed services, receive mental health treatment, and apply for benefits to reduce financial stress.

At times, the intervention may also require arrest or detention if imminent concerns about safety exist, and/or there is evidence of a criminal violation. The primary goal of all of these efforts is to ensure the safety of the individual and the community, and each community’s approach will vary based on the available resources. Regardless of whether the individual’s behaviors generate obvious concern (e.g., threats of violence) or are more subtle, they warrant some type of intervention to mitigate negative consequences for that individual and others.

## UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS AND STRESSORS

As part of the study, we examined additional aspects of the offenders’ backgrounds to include any histories of mental health symptoms and exposure to stressors. We found symptoms of paranoia, delusional beliefs, and depressive symptoms were most common.

Increasingly, law enforcement professionals are tasked with interviewing and managing individuals experiencing mental health symptoms. These individuals have either engaged in a criminal act, or someone is concerned that they may be at risk of doing so. Although most law enforcement officers are not trained mental health providers, we can take steps to gather detailed information about an individual’s symptoms and the impact these symptoms have on his or her thinking and behavior.

In a threat assessment context, our goal is not to perform a mental health evaluation or determine whether an individual meets the

## TAKEAWAYS

Local law enforcement plays a vital role in partnering with federal departments and agencies, as well as others in their jurisdictions, to prevent violence directed toward the federal government. This includes working within their communities to:

- Identify persons exhibiting concerning behaviors;
- Report concerns to a person with the authority to intervene;
- Gather information;
- Investigate whether the person is experiencing symptoms of mental illness or stressors, and if so, their impact on the person’s thinking and behaviors; and
- Identify appropriate interventions.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Over the last 15 years, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center has researched, trained, and provided consultation on the prevention of targeted violence in various contexts, including workplaces, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and government agencies. For the complete report referenced in this article, *Attacks on Federal Government 2001-2013: Threat Assessment Considerations*, and other publications and resources, visit our website at [secretservice.gov/protection/ntac](https://secretservice.gov/protection/ntac). 🌟

