

Hybrid Targeted Violence: Challenging Conventional “Active Shooter” Response Strategies

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ABSTRACT:

Hybrid Targeted Violence (HTV) is defined as an intentional use of force to cause physical injury or death to a specifically identified population using multifaceted conventional weapons and tactics. This article introduces the HTV concept to challenge first responders to prepare for violent “hybrid” multi-threat incidents. These incidents may involve conventional weapons, the use of fire as a weapon, chemical weapons, and/or improvised explosives. Attacks of this nature defy conventional thinking about the role of police, fire, and emergency medical professionals. HTV events demand cooperative strategies to efficiently neutralize complex threats that are beyond the capacity of a single first responder discipline. Recent and historical HTV incidents are identified to reinforce the compelling need for a paradigm shift in thinking that goes beyond conventional “active shooter” scenarios that do not advance “Whole Community” interdependent response strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Mass casualty attacks in the United States immediately capture the attention of the nation. These horrific and calculated acts garner international media attention due to the compelling questions of “why” and “how” such an atrocity could occur. While mass murder rampages in non-combatant environments are perceived by many to be a modern phenomenon, they are neither new nor are they growing at epidemic rates. Despite the low frequency of these events, they dramatically impact countless individuals, communities, and nations by instilling fear that such events can unpredictably occur in urban, suburban and metropolitan areas. The recent Nairobi Westgate Mall Attack, the Washington Navy Yard shooting, and the protracted Boston

Marathon bombing and subsequent violence all underscore the diversity of the communities impacted by targeted violence.

Events involving sophisticated planning, varieties of weapons, and complex tactics will undoubtedly persist globally in highly unpredictable patterns. International political attention and intense media coverage of mass casualty attacks in Africa, South Asia, and the United States have led domestic public safety professionals to consider mitigation, response, and recovery strategies for these low-frequency high-risk terror driven events.¹ The high profile lethality of these seemingly senseless acts of violence has raised the public’s expectation that first responders be poised to rapidly and skillfully protect potential victims in areas that have minimal protection, such as schools, houses of worship, workplaces, and public gathering venues.

The current Department of Homeland Security definition of an active shooter is “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases, active shooters use firearm(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims.”² That definition does not adequately describe for first responders or the public the dynamic crime scenes that may involve a variety of lethal weapons and mobile attackers, and are not restricted to a singular location. The active shooter label is no longer sufficient to accurately describe the enhanced threats that public safety will certainly be called upon to resolve. The active shooter label also does not provide a sufficiently descriptive term to comprehend the broad range of weapons and tactics that may be used in an act of targeted violence.

Influencing changes in thinking, training, and tactics requires a more explanatory term to describe these complex threats. Hybrid Targeted Violence (HTV) has been defined as an

intentional use of force to cause physical injury or death to a specifically identified population using multifaceted conventional weapons and tactics.³ We suggest this definition, based on “hybrid” weapons and tactics, better captures the operational range of hazards confronting first responders and the communities they serve.

HTV assaults often use a combination of lethal conventional weapons (i.e. fire as a weapon, firearms, improvised explosive devices, chemical weapons, etc.) and a combination of well-planned tactics (i.e. ambush, breaching, barricading, maneuver, etc.). (See figure 1). The compound effect of this form of violence requires

a more synergistic response strategy. Research associated with integrated responses to school violence has found significant inadequacies in training and interagency communication.⁴ Effective HTV response strategies blur lines between traditional law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical service duties and responsibilities. A common and cooperative operating picture must drive first responder decision making at chaotic HTV events. All responders must be principally focused on threat elimination and lethality reduction. This cooperative level of response can only be achieved through pre-event dialogue, planning, and joint public safety discipline HTV exercises.



Figure 1: Hybrid Targeted Violence formula and example.

Targeted violence directed towards innocent and defenseless people, especially children, demands a highly competent, rational reaction. Professionals must extract lessons from past events to better prevent, disrupt, and mitigate future attacks. The reality of confronting an armed attacker who has employed fire or explosives to actively kill people confounds the traditional roles that define which first responders engage a threat and which first responders stage until the scene is secure. The lack of engagement due to awaiting scene security by law enforcement and the cost associated with delayed Fire and Emergency Medical Services engagement was clearly documented in the Rand Corporation’s *Lessons on Mumbai* report.⁵ Future HTV incidents require first responders to engage as members of the same team, not members of role-defined public safety disciplines, to save lives and neutralize a no-notice rapidly lethal attack.

LEVERAGING LESSONS OF THE PAST

Preparation for future HTV events requires an appreciation for historical incidents while maintaining a keen awareness for impending threats. Past events that have involved combinations of ambush strategies, explosive devices, firearms, and other targeted assault tactics are relevant educational resources. First responders have the opportunity to glean valuable training lessons from these events by comparing local resources against actual HTV tactics. Introspective assessments involving all first responder disciplines are likely to reveal collective strengths and individual weaknesses.

Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School Attack and the Aurora Colorado Theater Ambush, the New York Police Department published a revised active shooter risk mitigation report.⁶ The NYPD’s report provides a global analysis of HTV incidents with sufficient detail to permit further research involving primary reference sources. A worldwide frame of

reference is beneficial when studying both HTV tactics and HTV response strategies by first responders in non-combatant environments.

Examples of noteworthy attacks that can serve as the basis of first responder HTV awareness and training include:

- May 18, 1927: Bath Township Michigan School Massacre: Ambush, bombing, fire as weapon, and shooting.⁷
- December 30, 1974: Olean New York High School Attack: Ambush, bombing, fire as weapon, and shooting.⁸
- April 20, 1999: Columbine Colorado High School Attack: Ambush, fire as weapon, IED's, and shooting.⁹
- December 9, 2003: Visalia California PrintXcel Plant Attack: Multiple fires as weapons and shooting.¹⁰
- November 26, 2008: Mumbai India Coordinated Attacks: Ambush, barricading tactics, explosives, fire as weapon, military maneuver tactics, and shooting.¹¹
- August 27, 2010: McKinney Texas Department of Public Safety Ambush: Ambush, fire as weapon, and shooting.¹²
- July 22, 2011: Oslo Norway Parliament and Children's Camp Attack: Ambush, distraction vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), maneuver techniques, and shooting.¹³
- December 13, 2011: Liege, Belgium Saint-Lambert Attack: Ambush, shooting, and stun grenades.¹⁴
- July 20, 2012: Aurora Colorado Theater Attack: Ambush, chemical weapons, explosive booby traps and shooting.¹⁵
- December 14, 2012: Sandy Hook Elementary School Attack: Ambush, breaching tactics, and shooting.¹⁶
- December 24, 2012: Webster New York Firefighter Ambush: Ambush, fire as weapon, and shooting.¹⁷

- April 15-21, 2013: Boston Marathon Bombing and Suspect Pursuit: Ambush, improvised explosive devices (pressure cooker bombs), and shooting.¹⁸
- September 16, 2013: Washington Navy Yard Shooting: Ambush and shooting.¹⁹
- September 21-23, 2013: Westgate Shopping Centre Attack in Nairobi, Kenya: Ambush: barricading tactics, explosives, fire as weapon, military maneuver tactics, and shooting.²⁰

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and United States Secret Service (USSS) are engaged in ongoing efforts to catalog and analyze events involving mass casualties and violence targeted at specific populations, such as schools. An advisory published in December of 2012 by the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI calls for increased vigilance and coordinated response plans across functional disciplines based on the study of over 100 multi-victim attacks between 2000 and 2012.²¹ The USSS remains an authority on school campus related violence. The USSS led study, "Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Education," provides both historical and visionary perspectives on "soft target" environments for no-notice violence.²² Artifacts from past HTV incidents and empirical analysis of HTV trends are readily available to facilitate the improvement of public safety community response capabilities.

Incidents of hybrid targeted violence and less sophisticated targeted violence have achieved high levels of lethality in both domestic and international venues. Federal, state, local, and tribal government officials are embracing the reality that these threats may present. With little to no notice, individual responders must have well-crafted strategies to cooperatively address active threats involving firearms, improvised explosives, fire as a weapon, and military style barricading and maneuvering techniques. The well-documented and studied history of these events are worthy of ongoing study to shape future response strategies.

COLLECTIVE PARADIGM SHIFT

Executive and operational leaders need to make the transition from analyzing historical HTV lessons to planning for future HTV attacks with local resources. These leaders must remain cognizant of the fact that HTV events occur with little or no notice; therefore, realistic strategies and resourcing expectations should be established. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) utilizes a “Whole Community” approach, engaging with members of the community as collaborative resources to enhance the resiliency and security of our nation. This engagement is necessary to relieve first responders of the restrictions associated with traditional “stage until the scene is secured” ideologies that are insufficient for no notice high-risk violent events.

There is considerable confusion and chaos at the start of HTV events, so much that the initial first responders rely heavily on training and past experiences to recognize and react to the atypical threats. The problem is that effective HTV responses involve multiple disciplines working collectively yet most public safety disciplines (police, fire, EMS, etc.) historically train in isolation from one another. Executive and line level first responders should be engaged in collaborative pre-event “if-then” dialogues. These conversations and tabletop exercises can benefit from no-notice scenarios that involve known casualties, the immediate threat of additional casualties, fire being used as a weapon, and uncontained armed attackers. These scenarios will demand a coordinated response from police, fire, and emergency medical services leveraging sound tactical protocols to address dynamic threats.

What is evident in all of these scenarios is a need for change in the traditional roles of each organization dispatched to a HTV event. The public, the media, and even first responders look to the law enforcement community alone to manage incidents involving violent criminal conduct. Television coverage amplifies the visual of police and SWAT officers running to the scene wearing body armor and carrying tactical firearms. Initial images of the Columbine and Virginia Tech school shootings portrayed

the fire department and emergency medical community in the “staging” area awaiting the police to deem the area safe or bring patients to them. The operational and technical resources that these “staged” disciplines bring to a HTV scene should be immediately utilized in a manner that capitalizes on their capacities in order to extinguish the threat an attacker presents to civilians and responders. Balancing first responder safety against taking life-saving action is a critical piece of calculus that warrants an assessment of tactical and logistical capabilities against HTV hazards.

A collective paradigm shift in first responder perspectives and cultures is necessary to better address hybrid threats and targeted violence. Discipline-centered basic and advanced training has not fostered a spirit of dynamic cooperation at crime scenes or on the fire ground. For example, police officers are trained to address acts of violence, firefighters are trained to fight structure fires, and EMT’s are trained to care for the injured. These fundamental roles are not realistically applicable during a HTV event.

When roles overlap, leaders across disciplines must question the methods of interoperability. For example, under the current model, can police officers, firefighters, and EMT’s simultaneously engage an active shooter within a burning building when lethal injuries are being inflicted every few seconds? Hard questions must be addressed with an honest self-assessment. Introspective organizational self-assessments should ideally occur before a HTV crisis is experienced. A culture of interdependence and resource sharing must be stimulated in a training environment in order to be inculcated in an operational environment.

TRAINING

During a HTV event, first responders are making split-second decisions involving tasks and responsibilities outside their traditional response domain, and therefore outside their general areas of expertise. It is commonly accepted that under stress, most responders will revert to what they have been trained to do. While it is easy to criticize the choices made during an event, making instantaneous

decisions is a difficult task in which instincts, prior training, and knowledge come into play. Each discipline commonly derives lessons learned and future response strategies from actual attacks and complex disasters that have occurred in the past. Thoughtful operational research has the potential to inform and educate those who may be called to respond to the next Aurora Theater Attack, Boston Marathon Bombing, or Nairobi Westgate Mall Attack.

One of the most recognizable paradigm shifts in law enforcement tactics occurred after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. According to the Columbine Review Commission, during the forty-six-minute rampage, “no efforts were made [by law enforcement] to engage, contain, or capture the perpetrators”²³ Based on the findings of the report, law enforcement policy and training now emphasize that the highest priority of arriving law enforcement officers is to rapidly stop any ongoing assault. During this same incident, fire and emergency medical service resources were staged away from the hot scene due to protocols in place at the time. This “stage until safe” approach resulted in 3½ hours passing until the last wounded survivor was removed from the school for medical care. In the years following this incident law enforcement has adopted instrumental changes in their response tactics. Unfortunately, other functional disciplines of first responders, such as fire and emergency medical services have not universally changed their tactics in the face of uncontained lethal forces. Respected organizations such as the United States Fire Administration have recognized the need to alter conventional response strategies through practitioner developed operational guidelines for active shooter and mass casualty events with the understanding that such HTV events may be well beyond the traditional training and experience of the majority of firefighters and emergency medical technicians.²⁴

Paradigm shifts in public safety tactics are most effective when a collective change occurs across all functional disciplines. The aforementioned delay in treatment by fire and EMS personnel during incidents such as the Columbine shooting is an area that warrants

constructive analysis. Conventional doctrine holds that every functional discipline has saving lives as their primary role. Integrated training involving all disciplines will benefit the collective desire to save lives in the face of the full continuum of lethal violence targeted at defenseless populations. Police, fire, and emergency medical disciplines will collectively benefit from critical conversations that yield innovative solutions to HTV events. These conversations should occur regularly and be part of a deep seeded inculcation strategy rather than a single joint exercise that yields minimal long-term benefits.

There are examples of fire and emergency medical services engaging in collaborative HTV response strategies. In 1999, the Columbine High School massacre triggered change in the Arlington County Fire Department (Virginia). In conjunction with the Arlington County Police Department, a fortified and trained group of tactical medics known as the Rescue Task Force (RTF) was established. The RTF approach to law enforcement and emergency medical service integration utilizes police as cover for medics for entry within a “warm zone” to treat injured victims with live saving tactics that have proven effective when used by the military in wartime environments.²⁵ The RTF concept has evolved over the years and it remains a highly desirable multidisciplinary response model for other jurisdictions to study and adopt.

First responders in Arlington County have embraced the difficult but necessary process of redefining their cultural and operational identities. The training and tactics that these professionals receive enhances their ability to coordinate, cooperate, resolve, contain, and mitigate the effects of a HTV. Rather than use the reality of constricting budgets as an excuse not to make the needed changes, Arlington County has recognized that building cooperative emergency service teams leads to a more economical and effective life saving force.

Development of an interdisciplinary response mindset is the essential first step. This mindset should be reflected in written plans and agreements, reinforced through regular meetings, and practiced during exercises and actual emergencies.²⁶ This collective versus

functional mindset requires a collaborative transition process and a significant change to each of the police, fire, and EMS cultures. According to a study by Stinchcomb and Ordaz on the merger of police and fire into one organization, “because the influence of culture tends to exceed the regulatory capacity of conventional policies and procedures, it can become a significant make-or-break factor in achieving organizational change.”²⁷ It is important to note that the historical and cultural artifacts of each emergency service discipline are not discarded; instead each group maintains their rich history but with a new outlook that recognizes the practical utility of dynamic collaboration.

While the event in Columbine triggered a profound change in police response, it has had less of an impact in the fire and emergency medical communities. Best practices for collaboration, such as those employed in Arlington, Virginia should serve as an example to prepare other communities to address HTV events. Effective training programs and response protocols take years to develop and usually are derived from a tragic event. Unfortunately, this means that many public safety professionals are training for past events rather than taking steps to deter future ones. The *9/11 Commission Report* underscored the inherent risk of permitting a “failure of imagination” to prepare for future threats – such as a HTV event. First responders must not fall prey to failures of imagination or parochial response strategies when faced with an HTV event. Minimizing the effect and lethality of an attacker will require rapid Whole of Community responders working as one team rather than a series of domain specific teams. The first responder profession involves a continual learning experience because those who want to do harm to the world are forever finding new ways to accomplish their missions.

WHOLE COMMUNITY

Whole Community suggests that shared understanding of community risks, needs, and capabilities leads to an increase in resources through the empowerment of community members.²⁸ While specifically used to address

national disasters, the approach is not a new concept. Sir Robert Peel, the founder of modern policing, established “principles of policing” when he organized the London Metropolitan Police Service in 1829. Peel’s principles focused on the constabulary’s dependent relationship with the community. Peel recognized that willing cooperation by the public with the police should be actively cultivated at all times. The private sector is an integral component of the whole community when it comes to a HTV event. This influential sector provides a diversity and breadth of assets and capabilities that are not fully recognized by the first responder community. By utilizing the private sector, first responders develop a “megacommunity” of organizations whose leaders and members have deliberately come together to achieve goals that could not and have not been achieved alone. Due to their fiscal and political exposure, private entities are vital stakeholders in the Whole Community model that is impacted by manmade disasters that include the types of HTV attacks experienced recently in Boston and Nairobi.

SUMMARY

Effective responses to HTV events hinge on integrated public safety professionals applying finely tuned skills to perform essential tasks cooperatively in a lethal multi-hazards environment. Joint planning, training, and understanding across disciplines are required to more efficiently neutralize chaos and confusion during the initial response to a HTV incident scene. The men and women on duty at the time of a HTV event must be an empowered and educated first line of defense. Multi-discipline Quick Reaction Forces of line level personnel will be called upon to confront armed adversaries, fight fires, breach barricades, and negotiate explosive traps all while trying to rescue the survivors and treat the wounded.

The first few minutes of any emergency call for service are the most lethal for both innocent victims and first responders. It is common for both groups to be the initial targets of a HTV attack. Quick identification and recognition of a HTV incident expedites the process

through which first responders request and receive the appropriate resources to engage the threat. Minimizing the damage inflicted by a determined attacker can pivot on a rapid recognition by all responders that a call for service is not a routine gun call, structure fire, or medical request.

The concept behind the term “Hybrid Targeted Violence” is intended to foster a collective change in mind-set to all first responder disciplines. Achieving that change through multi-discipline training and education will shorten the reaction time between attack initiation and neutralization through a Whole Community response.²⁹ Creative strategies, such as the insertion of a deliberately set fire in an active shooter training scenario can facilitate higher levels of preparedness with minimal impact on finite training budgets. The reality of a complex conventional weapons attack (i.e., Mumbai 2008) occurring again, especially in the United States, must be contemplated when developing resilience strategies.³⁰

When lives are being lost to a HTV attacker during those initial few seconds, first responders must be capable of abandoning routine response strategies and adopting synergistic strategies. This paradigm shift will maximize lifesaving forces in the face of danger that is seemingly unimaginable. Ready, resilient, and resourced collectives of interoperable first responders are needed to effectively engage and counter the unpredictable events that occur during a Hybrid Targeted Violence incident.

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