

Active Shooters in places of mass gathering

Managers of venues where large numbers of people gather are potential targets for a range of criminal activities from graffiti and pickpocketing to acts of extreme violence and terrorism. Guidelines relating to planning for “Active Shooter” incidents in Places of Mass Gathering were issued by the Australian New Zealand Counter Terrorism Committee. The Guidelines provide a good overview but they are, by design, generic and have an emphasis on how the venues should liaise with the responding emergency services, particularly law enforcement.

This article seeks to provide specific consideration to assist managers responsible for preventing and responding to incidents such as an active shooter. Planning for low likelihood/high consequence security incidents such as active shooter on site requires specific consideration of: the built environment, the activities of the site, the image and reputation of the site, the usual mix of patrons, and the preventative and response options in place or potentially available.

Security is a management discipline in its own right with a specific body of knowledge, research and education. Those venues without a qualified security manager may benefit from additional guidance as to the planning considerations. Security is predominantly about prevention and if that fails then the immediate and long-term response rests with emergency management, media, business continuity, HR and other managerial disciplines although security will still have a role. Therefore, the planning must include all the relevant managers and their knowledge, resources and skill sets.

The “Active Shooter” is a threat vector, or “source of risk”, that has been gaining greater media attention although it is not a new phenomenon and Australia has had its share of such incidents. Like most acts of violence the motive behind the attack usually will be determined after the incident. While the motive may vary, the nature of the attack will be similar: one or more people with firearms either shooting into the crowd at random or targeting specific individuals. In most cases the shooter has been in close proximity to the victims but in other incidents the shooter has been sniping from a distance; from the venue’s point of view the responses are probably the same. The role and responsibility of the facility/venue manager is to have measures in place that can hopefully deter an attack, can certainly detect it (probably not too difficult once the shooting starts), quickly analyse what is happening and, most challenging of all, respond appropriately.

While an active shooter incident is something that most venues will never experience the need for a plan becomes obvious when considering that cinemas, schools, universities, office blocks, youth camps, shopping centres and tourist sites have all been targeted. Thankfully the procedures needed to respond to an active shooter are the same or similar to the procedures for other incidents. The primary aim is to move people away from the hazard, in this case the shooter. Most venues already have procedures for informing patrons and staff of emergency incidents and guiding them towards safe egress routes.

The active shooter scenario has additional factors that should be considered and added to the existing emergency plans. The principle is that whatever measures are planned they must fit within the image and operating environment of the venue. It is no use having highly visible armed response personnel on site if the image of the venue is a welcoming, family friendly and safe environment. Similarly not having any security or response measures because "*it may send the wrong signal*" indicates to sponsors, owners and patrons that their safety and wellbeing is not considered important.

The initial identification and response will be from the floor, possibly by security staff probably by general staff, concessionaires or volunteers. ASIS International, in its Cultural Properties Council Recommendations for Preparing Museums for Active Shooter Situations, "*believe the key elements museums should have in place to respond effectively to active shooter situations are a staff that is trained to take notice of what is going on around them and to respond proactively to unusual situations or activities combined with an emergency plan that provides for rapid carefully thought out and well rehearsed evacuation plan to direct occupants away from the threat.*" Development of Active Shooter plans must take into account who will be there when the shooting starts and what are sensible response options for the particular venue.

Based on work published by the US Department of Homeland Security, the ANZ Guidelines have the same three response measures, albeit with different terminology. The US DHS advises, in priority order: Evacuate, Hide Out, Take Action against the active shooter, or as the Huston Police so aptly put it in their early published material on this topic: Run, Hide, Fight. The ANZ Guidelines have: Escape (including evacuating or seeking cover) and Act. The ANZ guideline includes two additional steps: See and Tell which are orientated towards helping the responding police resolve the situation. Noting that in all cases Act/Fight is a last resort to be used when the person's life is directly threatened.

As far as asking patrons to "Tell", given the number of communication devices in possession of the crowd, those not directly involved are likely to be on the phone to the emergency services and to everyone else. Experience suggests that an incident like this may well overload the local mobile nets.

The DHS guidelines and to an extent the ANZ ones are designed for employers who can provide specific advice and training for their staff. The key differentiator for places of mass gathering is that the venue manager needs to identify ways in which large crowds can be informed and controlled. Crowds which:

- are not familiar with the site other than maybe the public entrances and routes,
- are not aware of the emergency procedures and plans,
- are not expecting an incident,
- have not been practiced in the response measures,
- are not a cohesive group,
- are likely to react in a panicky manner, and
- can be family groups with consideration of protecting and moving children and aged relatives.

The Guidelines do not address how venue managers could communicate with large crowds and seek to control their movement once the incident has begun. It is probable that once shots are fired, and in the Australian context people realise the noise is a firearm not fireworks or other causes, panic will result as people try to leave the scene. In terms of mass gatherings this will lead to one of the greatest fears: mass unplanned and uncontrolled movement resulting in choke points, crowd crush and resultant deaths and injury. It is possible, if not probable, that more people will be killed and injured in a crowd crush than by the shooter. Venue managers tend to be aware of the risk of crowd surge based on historical examples and understand that a crush can be triggered by a range of incidents. Many sporting venues have plans in place to deal with the risk using: emergency openings, crash gates, alternate exits and even having designed specific obstacles to break up crowd surges. Other venues, particularly cultural venues, may not even have thought of the possibility.

When places of mass gathering are broken down into their distinct types (as per Table 1) specific characteristics can be recorded that will assist in planning which Active Shooter responses are preferable or even achievable. Identification of the differences between the various sub-groupings of places of mass gathering enables managers to develop site-specific preventative and response options. Some types of venues can implement searches, some have good communication systems to inform patrons of the nature of the incident and the best way to respond, some have open egress, others, such as underground transport hubs have limited points of egress.

Table 1 PMG Planning Considerations

This table groups types of venues and considerations for managing crowds during an active shooter event. Some facilities may contain a number of these venues i.e. shopping complex with cinemas and indoor sports area. The following are generalisations and the ability for patrons to escape or hide will depend on the specific built environment.

Type of venue	Descriptor	Crowd type	Comms to Patrons	Evacuation	Shelter/hide
Sporting seated	Stadia e.g. major cricket and football grounds	Most of patrons seated,	Limited	Poor, concerns over crush points	Poor
Sporting standing	Stadia. e.g. Regional sports grounds.	Patrons standing and stationary.	Poor to limited	Limited to good	Poor
Sporting internal	Sporting arena, similar considerations to "Cultural, theatre". e.g. Basketball	See Cultural theatre	Good	Poor, concerns over crush points	Poor

Sporting linear	Event occurring along a route. e.g. Triathlons, fun runs.	Patrons along the route of an event.	Poor	Good	Limited to good
Cultural theatre	e.g. cinemas, theatres, places of worship	Patrons usually seated.	Good	Poor, concerns over crush points	Poor to limited
Cultural gallery	e.g. art galleries	Patrons standing and relatively slow moving.	Good	Poor, concerns over crush points	Poor to limited
Cultural external	e.g. outdoor gigs, rural showgrounds, open-air art shows.	Patrons standing or seated on grass areas.	Poor to limited	Limited to good, depends on fencing.	Poor to limited
Retail centres	e.g. shopping complexes, factory outlet centres	Patrons standing and relatively fast moving. Some sitting in food areas, etc.	Good	Limited to good depends on size and of walkways and exits.	Limited to good
Transport hub above ground	e.g. airport, bus interchange, railway station.	Patrons standing and relatively fast moving.	Good	Limited to good depends on size and of walkways and exits.	Poor to limited
Transport hub below ground	e.g. Underground rail station.	Patrons standing and relatively fast moving.	Good	Poor, concerns over crush points	Poor
Mass transit mobile	e.g. busses, trains	Patrons seated or standing but contained in vehicles.	Good to poor	Poor	Poor
Multi-tenanted office venues	e.g. high rise office buildings	Tenants sitting	Limited, may be only by use of EWIS	Poor to limited	Limited to good (Open plan = poor)

Definitions:

Good: Probable, is expected to happen or be available.

Limited: Possible, might occur or be available.

Poor: Unlikely, not expected to occur or be available.

Preventative measures include physical screening of patrons and their goods. Some venue types such as sporting and entertainment sites conduct bag searches as a condition of entry; ensuring weapons are on the list of prohibited items will help. For others such as shopping complexes and transport hubs bag search is not a feasible option. Bag searches are of no benefit if the shooter is an employee or contractor, and exempt from search, or if the shooter is off site i.e. a sniper.

During an Active Shooter incident the responsible manager will be trying to gain “situational awareness” of what is happening and where. An active shooter can injure not just those close but at a distance: on the other side of the stadium, down walkways, in other seating areas of the theatre, or even on the other side of thin walls. The implication is that the location of the casualties may not reflect the location of the shooter. Gaining an overview will be difficult because of the panic and mass movement expected to ensue once shots are fired. Good communications with all staff who have radios will help as will accessible, comprehensive CCTV coverage of the venue.

Once there is an understanding of what is happening the main consideration must be to separate the people from the shooter. In places of mass gathering it is unlikely that it will be possible to “keep people out of public areas” therefore the emphasis is on moving people which requires being able to communicate and lead them to safe egress routes. The other option of isolating the shooter and restricting their movements is probably not feasible in most places of mass gathering as they are designed to assist in the free flow of patrons.

Some venues may have the ability to hide some of their staff and potentially some patrons in back-of-house areas. Venues such as shopping complexes may provide greater opportunities for people to hide by moving into shops but only if such procedures have been developed, promulgated and explained to all tenants. An understanding of the difference between hiding and “shelter in place” is needed before either is integrated into the emergency plan. Hiding is used to quickly get away from the hazard both visually i.e. out of sight, and physically i.e. behind barriers. SIP is a pre-planned response when the hazard is external and people are held in the site until the nature of the hazard is identified and a safe method of egress is selected. The best protection from an active shooter is leaving, if leaving is not an option then hiding, if found then fighting. Planning to shelter in place inside the same building as an active shooter would not seem to be a sensible response.

Because the location and movement of the shooter can not be predicted all decisions are going to be made as they arise and with hindsight may be found not be the best ones. But, as long as the principle of moving people away from the hazard is maintained they will be better than no decision. Not all people can be saved, those near the shooter are likely to suffer. It is the rest of the population that need protection and guidance. The other aspects such as: informing the police, meeting and briefing them, handing over responsibility for the incident and assisting with post incident investigations are covered in the ANZ Guidelines. The most important element is protecting life in the early moments once it is understood that an active shooter is firing.

Trying to communicate with a crowd, particularly if panic sets in, will be difficult. The use of the EWIS system to initiate an evacuation will help but it does not assist in guiding people in a safe direction. Another consideration is the automatic response of fire-fighters to an alarm which may lead them to enter the building. Also, the additional noise will make verbal communication difficult and once people start to self-evacuate the value of the evacuation signal is doubtful except to advise those in other areas of the venue. Having staff on the ground with direct radio communications back to the venue control centre will help. The use of modern

technology can also assist. The new generation of display boards and dynamic advertising hoardings which can be re-programmed on site can be used to direct the flow of people. If the mobile phone system is not jammed, those venues that have developed twitter, facebook and local MSM capabilities can use them to advise patrons.

A critical aspect of the emergency response is the ability for the control room staff and the other members of the ECO to work as a team. This requires that they understand the roles and functions of the others, who can do what, how and where. Control room staff may need to be trained to undertake functions or use technology not normally within their remit.

For some large events the police may have a presence and establish an on-site command capability. Even though this provides an immediate law enforcement capability it does not absolve venue management from having prepared and workable plans to address the movement of crowds, business continuity, media management and reputational protection and a clear understanding of where police authorities and responsibilities start and finish. Unless they are already on site, law enforcement will take some time to arrive; the US DHS Active Shooter Booklet states "*Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes, before law enforcement arrives on the scene, individuals must be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation*". Therefore venue managers must be prepared to respond to such an incident without immediate police assistance, The ANZ Guidelines provide considerable information on how to hand over to the police once they arrive and notes that it may be a local uniformed member. In which case, a junior police officer may rely heavily on the guidance of the venue managers until more experienced officers arrive. Venue managers should be ready to offer such guidance. It is important that the ECO use terminology that will be comprehensible to the responding emergency services and not venue-specific techno-speak.

The on-site private security guards are expected to identify the hazard and then stand between it and the patrons (for this they are paid less than almost anyone else in the building). In an active shooter situation it is not reasonable to expect them to take on an armed offender, although this does happen as reflected by the annual Australia Security Medal Foundation awards. Rather the security guards should be relied on to observe and report, which is why they should have their own dedicated radio channel monitored on site. They will also act as guides and communicators assisting people away safely. The security guards will be the real first responders.

In referring to media management and protection of reputation, the Guidelines refer primarily to the statements issued by law enforcement agencies. Anything related to the crime is the responsibility of the police; venues should consider, as part of their existing media strategy, how they would wish to portray their position and image after such an incident. The venue position may differ from that of law enforcement as may the type and amount of information they wish to release.

While Active Shooter is a specific threat vector the responses should be developed within the existing emergency management plans (EMP). Experience shows that many EMP do not adequately address issues such as active shooters. This is particularly true of the “insert client name here” generic plans which differ little between sites. Site-specific and even event-specific planning is essential if the patrons, staff and reputation of the venue are to be protected. An active shooter incident will require quick assessment and response by the emergency control organisation. Such skills can best be gained through planning involving the key players/managers and practice particularly through the use of desk-top exercises or limited exercises involving security, wardens and other staff.

The ANZ Guidelines are a good generic start but there are additional details and considerations that must be addressed when planning for an active shooter incident and provision of some of these considerations can only assist responsible venue and other managers.

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Resources:

ANZ Active Shooter Guidelines for Places of Mass Gathering

[http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/agd/WWW/rwpattach.nsf/VAP/%28339383A93E59A076831A75961C22D2A2%29~Active+Shooter+Guidelines+for+Places+of+Mass+Gathering.pdf/\\$file/Active+Shooter+Guidelines+for+Places+of+Mass+Gathering.pdf](http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/agd/WWW/rwpattach.nsf/VAP/%28339383A93E59A076831A75961C22D2A2%29~Active+Shooter+Guidelines+for+Places+of+Mass+Gathering.pdf/$file/Active+Shooter+Guidelines+for+Places+of+Mass+Gathering.pdf)

US DHS: Active Shooter How to Respond

http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/active_shooter_booklet.pdf

Houston: Run, Hide, Fight

PDF:

http://www.houstontx.gov/police/pdfs/brochures/english/Active_Shooter_Brochure_Main_Practice_2013.pdf

Video:

<http://www.readyhoustontx.gov/videos.html>