



VIGILANCE CAN EMPOWER PREVENTION OF SHOOTINGS

As we learn the details of the Orlando Pulse shooting, there is a very real temptation to see the attacker as a monster; to shake our heads and lament that there is no way to predict or prevent these kinds of horrific events. However, monsters do not carry out these massacres. People do. And these shootings can be prevented, whether terroristic or driven by other motives, through early identification and intervention prior to the escalation toward the shooters' moment of deadly commitment.

There is a consensus in the threat and violence risk assessment community that it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict this kind of violence. There are just too many variables and risk factors to accurately say if a person is likely to move forward with an attack. So if we cannot predict mass shootings, where does this leave us? Family and friends of the shooter may take to the airwaves to claim that they never saw this coming, or had no clue that he was capable of such violence, but maybe they just didn't know what to look for, or didn't understand the meaning of the signs that violence was impending.

We know it is impossible to predict a heart attack for a particular person at a specific time. However, we are very capable of identifying risk factors for heart disease and reducing the prevalence of heart attacks. We know that high cholesterol, a lack of exercise, heredity, obesity, and poor diet increase the risk of a heart attack. As we identify and mitigate these risks, we see a corresponding reduction in overall incidents of heart failure.

In the same way, if we can understand the risk factors for those who plan rampage violence, we can reduce the current epidemic of workplace massacres, school shootings, and terroristic attacks. Every attack starts with a common, central risk factor: a hardened and inflexible ideology. This could be anti-American values, religious-fueled hatred, the belief that an individual or group of people are deserving of vengeance, rejection by a romantic obsession, etc. The list is extensive.

In this case, it appears to be rage about sexual orientation. The signal is the intractable view and an unwillingness to find a common or middle ground. You might also find that such an individual objectifies and depersonalizes those who are at odds with his or her perspective. People with differences in opinions are viewed as the enemy, without humanity or the right to disagree. We see this as part of the pathway to violence at Orlando Pulse, just as we saw this in the San Bernardino attack.

Former FBI profiler Dr. Mary Ellen O'Toole refers to the escalation of this hardened perspective as "injustice collecting." The individual holds a deep grudge or resentment toward another individual, group, or society based on his belief that he is owed certain action by the



target. This could be an employee who is enraged over not receiving a promotion or the accolades s/he believed s/he deserved (e.g., Amy Bishop's 2010 shooting in Huntsville, Ala.). It could be a student targeting females at sororities to punish them due to a perceived rejection (e.g., Elliot Rodgers' 2014 rampage in Isla Vista, Calif.). It could even be a white supremacist acting against African-Americans (e.g., Dylann Roof's 2015 shooting in Charleston, S.C.). The common thread is an inflexible belief and a perseveration on the perceived injustices the attacker has suffered.

At NaBITA, the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (www.nabita.org), we teach colleges, schools, and workplaces to attend to several dozen risk factors in an effort to prepare them to intervene early with at-risk students, staff, or faculty members who may be on the pathway to violence. The goal is to help them identify those who have a narrowed fixation or focus on an individual, group, or community as a receptacle for their anger, frustration, and rage. Supervisors learn to look for those with action and time imperatives, as well as to watch for identification of a specific place or event (e.g., a performance evaluation, conduct hearing, or difficult meeting) where an individual may be asked to leave, be suspended, or fired.

Published by the American Counseling Association ([ACA](http://aca.org)), the book, *Harm to Others: the Assessment and Treatment of Dangerousness*, encourages readers to keep an eye out for social media posts and written communications that raise red flags. Current tactics that focus on crisis response, including training law enforcement in active shooter scenarios, establishing early alert text message systems for the school or workplace, and training employees how to run, hide and fight during an attack are important, but none of these tactics will stop the next shooting. Their goal is to minimize impact.

What *can* prevent tragic attacks is a well-trained, well-informed public. The Orlando Pulse shooter, like almost all others, likely left clues on his pathway to violence. This is called leakage. It is crucial in today's society that people are trained on how to identify early risk factors for rampage and predatory violence, and on how to report information to be reviewed and acted upon by Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs) and law enforcement. For more information, visit www.nabita.org.

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