

The IACP Research Advisory Committee is proud to offer the monthly Research in Brief column. This column features evidence-based research summaries that highlight actionable recommendations for *Police Chief* magazine readers to consider within their own agencies. The goal of the column is to feature research that is innovative, credible, and relevant to a diverse law enforcement audience.

Attacks Against U.S. Federal Government Officials and Facilities, 2001–2013

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The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) recently completed a study exploring 43 attacks directed against U.S. federal government buildings, sites, and officials from 2001 to 2013.¹ Incidents included in the study ranged from those in which there was no risk of harm to persons (e.g., explosives detonated outside unoccupied buildings) to those that caused significant harm to individuals or facilities. The study looked in detail at the execution of the incidents and the backgrounds of the offenders. In doing so, NTAC builds on existing best practices in the field of threat assessment by offering considerations for investigations and security practices.

NTAC gathered data on each of the incidents and the perpetrators by researching open sources, including court documents, investigative reports and interviews, public records, government reports, personal communications of the offenders and others who knew them, and media reports. To enhance the consistency of the study results, the data were then coded based on standardized definitions.

Results

Incidents

The attacks were directed against the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the U.S. federal government. In almost three-quarters of the incidents (72 percent), a building or facility was targeted, whereas in the remaining incidents, one or more public officials were targeted (28 percent). In addition to the federal targets, bystanders were indiscriminately targeted in almost half of the attacks (49 percent). For those incidents in which the offenders were identified, most were committed by lone actors (92 percent), with less than one-tenth committed by a group of two or more individuals (8 percent). The incidents occurred in 15 states and Washington, D.C. In just over half of the incidents (54 percent), the offenders selected targets within 25 miles of their homes.

The attacks most commonly involved the use of firearms (58 percent), followed by the mailing of incendiary devices or chemical or biological materials (19 percent), the use of explosives (9 percent), and other weapons (16 percent). Of the firearm incidents, 80 percent ended in less than 16 minutes. Three incidents lasted more than an hour, including one active shooter event and two hostage situations. Just under half of the incidents (44 percent) ended as a result of law enforcement intervention.

The most prevalent motive for the attacks was retaliation for perceived personal slights or wrongs committed by the government. Additional motives, in descending order, included furthering ideological beliefs, personal gain, seeking fame or attention, and other motives, including a desire to be killed by law enforcement.

Offenders

The study gathered background information on 39 of the offenders involved in the attacks. Most of the attackers were male (87 percent) and ranged in age from 20 to 81. Just under two-thirds of the offenders had a history of criminal charges or arrests (62 percent). About half of the attackers (51 percent) had previously acted violently against other people, and just over one-fifth had a history of stalking or harassing (21 percent).

All but one offender engaged in concerning behavior before their attacks, including making disturbing communications, exhibiting changes in behavior, experiencing interpersonal difficulties, and engaging in final act behaviors, such as giving away belongings or posting goodbye messages. For almost two-thirds of the attackers (64 percent), their behaviors caused others to have concern about the attackers' well-being or the risk they posed to others. Those who were concerned about the offenders included family members, coworkers, law enforcement professionals, mental health providers, and others.

Although only a little more than a quarter of the offenders (28 percent) appeared to have been diagnosed with a mental disorder, about half of them (51 percent) experienced symptoms of mental illness. The most common symptoms included paranoia, depression, and delusions.

Most of the attackers experienced stressful negative events (92 percent), with more than two-thirds experiencing at least one stressor in the six months before their attacks (69 percent). The offenders experienced stressors related to family or romantic relationships, criminal charges, their employment, civil court actions, their education, physical health, and other areas. In addition, most of the individuals had contact with the judicial system (87 percent) and law enforcement (74 percent) prior to the incidents.

Conclusions

The study's findings highlight the need to identify individuals who exhibit concerning behavior early and initiate appropriate interventions to mitigate any risks they may pose. Among the offenders, paranoia, depression, and delusions were the most prevalent. It would be beneficial to provide specific training areas to enhance law enforcement's understanding of these symptoms and the impact mental illness can have on a person's behavior. The study also found that individuals who experienced stressors in more areas of their lives were more likely to carry out attacks that caused or could have caused serious harm to others. This factor emphasizes the importance of investigating the presence of stressors across multiple areas of a person's life.

Action Items

- Recognize concerning behaviors, encourage community reporting, and identify appropriate interventions.
- Ask detailed questions about the presence of mental health symptoms and their impact on the individual's thinking and behavior.
- Recognize stressors, assess their impact, and examine options for managing them.
- Identify diverse information sources, including records, interviews, and online searches. ❖

Note:

¹All the percentages in this column are derived from the report by the National Threat Assessment Center, *Attacks on Federal Government 2001–2013: Threat Assessment Considerations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, 2015).