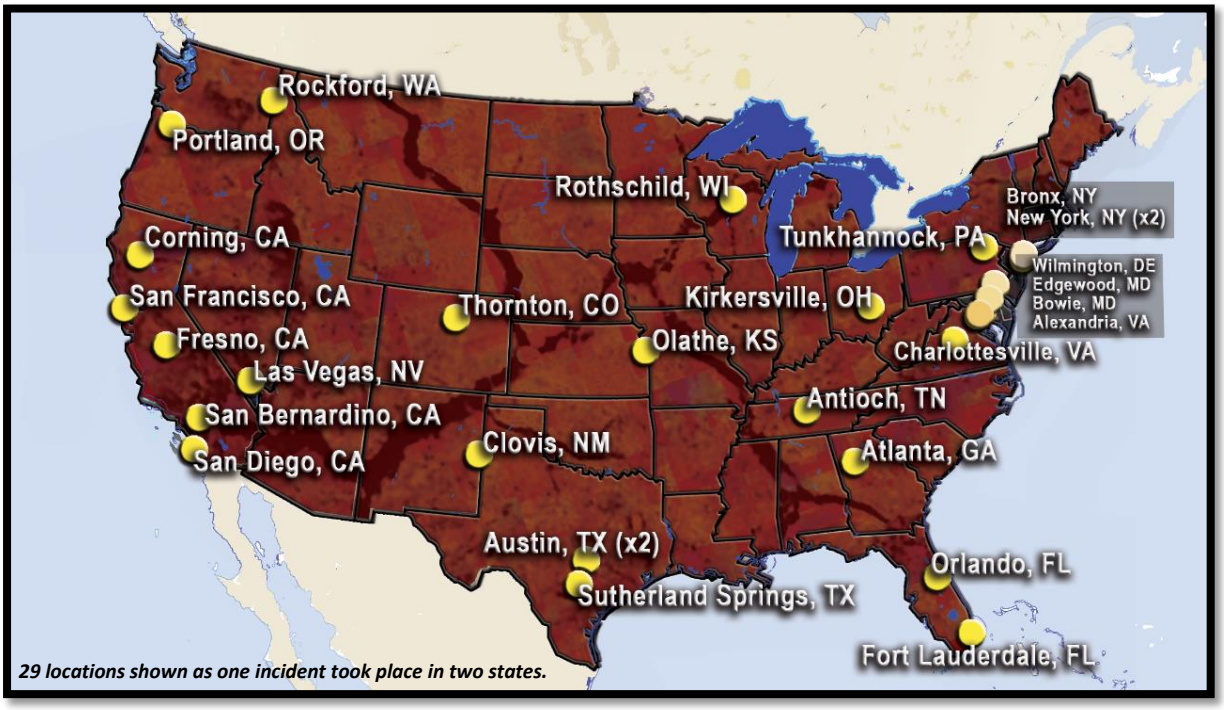
MASS ATTACKS IN PUBLIC SPACES - 2017

March 2018

INTRODUCTION



Between January and December 2017, 28 incidents of mass attacks, during which three or more persons were harmed, were carried out in public places within the United States (see map for locations). These acts violated the safety of the places we work, learn, shop, relax, and otherwise conduct our day-to-day lives.[1] The resulting loss of 147 lives and injury to nearly 700 others had a devastating impact on our nation as a whole.[2] As the uncertainty they caused continues to ripple through our communities, those charged with ensuring public safety strive to identify methods to prevent these types of attacks. To aid in these efforts, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) examined these 28 incidents, to identify key themes for enhancing threat assessment and investigative practices. Regardless of whether these attacks were acts of workplace violence, domestic violence, school-based violence, or terrorism, similar themes were observed in the backgrounds of the perpetrators[3], including:

- ★ Nearly half were motivated by a ***personal grievance*** related to a workplace, domestic, or other issue.
- ★ Over half had histories of ***criminal charges***, ***mental health symptoms***, and/or ***illicit substance use or abuse***.
- ★ All had at least one ***significant stressor*** within the last five years, and over half had indications of ***financial instability*** in that timeframe.
- ★ Over three-quarters made ***concerning communications and/or elicited concern*** from others prior to carrying out their attacks. On average, those who did elicit concern caused more harm than those who did not.

These findings, and others in this report, support existing best practices that the U.S. Secret Service has established in the field of threat assessment. They highlight the importance of gathering information on a person's background, behaviors, and situational factors; corroborating the information from multiple sources; assessing the risk the individual poses for violence; and identifying intervention points to mitigate that risk.[4]

INCIDENT OVERVIEW

THE PUBLIC SITES: The 28 incidents were carried out at 31 different sites, with nearly half (46%) at businesses (e.g., a bank, retailers, a law office, warehouses). Those that took place in open spaces represented nearly a third (32%) and included such locales as public sidewalks, a large outdoor event, attractions, and communal areas. Four attacks (14%) were carried out at educational institutions including two elementary schools, one high school, and one university. The remaining incidents took place on commuter trains, at an airport, and at churches (see Figure 1).

THE WEAPONS: Though most of the attacks were carried out using a firearm (*n* = 23, 82%), vehicles (*n* = 3; 11%) and knives (*n* = 2; 7%) were also used. Given the preliminary information on the attackers, of the 23 who used firearms, at least 10 possessed their weapons illegally at the time of the incident. Two of those ten were minors, and the others were either felons, had a protective order against them, or had some other factor that should have prohibited them from owning a firearm.[5]

THE TIMING: The attacks took place throughout the year and occurred on every day of the week. Over half (*n* = 17, 61%) took place between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. For half (*n* = 14, 50%), the violence ended within 5 minutes from when the first shot was fired or first person was harmed (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

END OF THE ATTACKS: In over half of the incidents, the attackers ended the violence by either departing the scenes on their own (*n* = 10, 36%) or committing suicide at the scene (*n* = 7, 25%). For the remaining attacks, the violence ceased as a result of actions taken by law enforcement (*n* = 5, 18%) or bystanders (*n* = 2, 7%), with a few ending when the firearm or vehicle became inoperable (*n* = 4, 14%).

THE RESOLUTION: Eight attackers (29%) committed suicide as part of the incident or soon after departing the scene. Others were taken into custody at or near the scene (*n* = 9, 32%), or apprehended at another location (*n* = 7, 25%). The remaining four were killed by law enforcement (*n* = 4, 14%).

Figure 1.

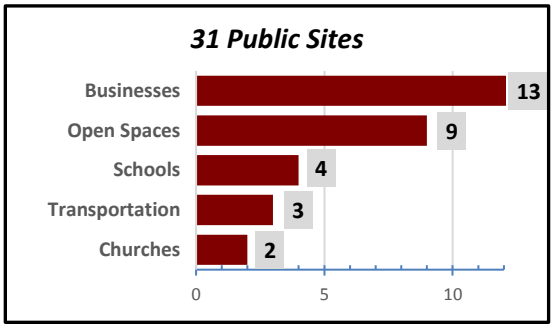


Figure 2.

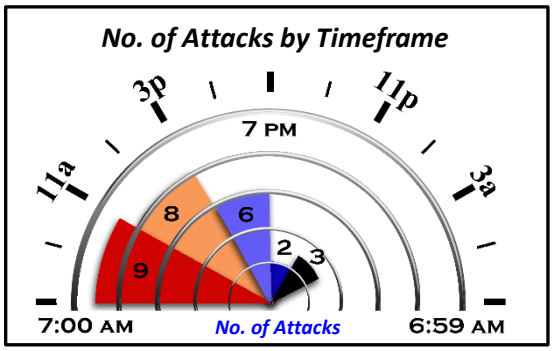
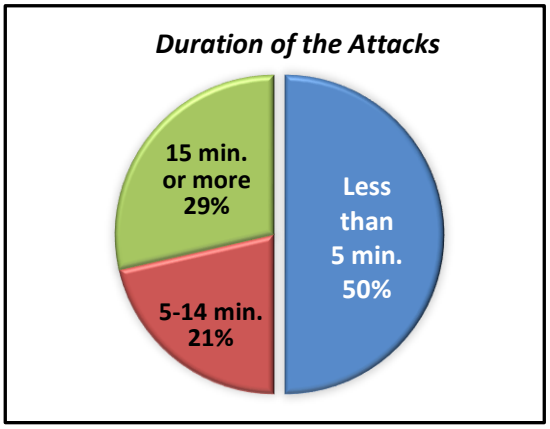


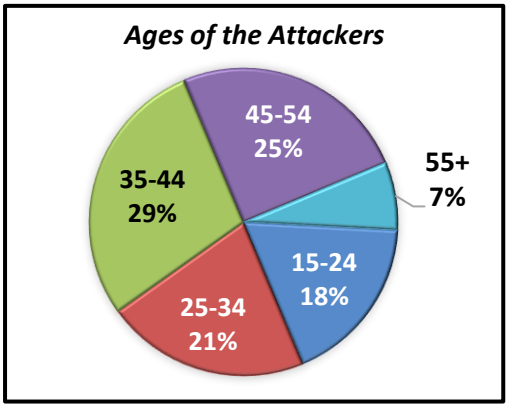
Figure 3.



THE ATTACKERS

GENDER AND AGE: All of the attackers were male. They ranged from a 15-year-old high school student to a 66-year-old retiree, with an average age of 37 years old. Though there may be a perception that mass attackers tend to be within a certain age range, for example, much older or much younger, we found almost equal distributions within major age groups (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.



SUBSTANCE USE: About half of the attackers (*n* = 15, 54%) had a history of illicit drug use and/or substance abuse. This abuse, which included alcohol and marijuana, was evidenced by such factors as the attacker receiving treatment for the abuse, suffering legal consequences, or having significant problems in their personal lives stemming from the abuse.

CRIMINAL CHARGES AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Most of the attackers (*n* = 20, 71%) had histories of criminal charges beyond minor traffic violations. Those charges included both non-violent (*n* = *16*, 57%) and violent (*n* = *15*, 54%) offenses. Further, seven of the violent offenders had charges related to domestic violence.[6] In addition to the seven, two others were the subject of domestic disturbance calls during which no charges were filed. With that, we found that one third of the attackers (*n* = 9) had histories related to domestic violence.

Table 1.

Mental Health Symptoms	*n*
Psychotic Symptoms	***9***
Paranoia	*6*
Hallucinations	*6*
Delusions	*2*
Suicidal Thoughts	***6***
Depression	***4***

MENTAL HEALTH: Nearly two-thirds of the attackers (*n* = 18, 64%) experienced mental health symptoms prior to their attacks. The most common symptoms observed were related to psychosis (e.g., paranoia, hallucinations, or delusions) and suicidal thoughts (see Table 1). Further, some attackers (*n* = 7, 25%) had been hospitalized for treatment or prescribed psychiatric medications prior to their attacks.

Those Who Plotted to or Attacked Our Schools

On April 10, the 53-year-old husband of a special education teacher entered his estranged wife's classroom at an elementary school and fired ten shots, killing his wife and an 8-year-old student. He also injured a 9-year-old student before killing himself.

On May 1, a 21-year-old student fatally stabbed one student and injured three others on a university campus. After his arrest, he claimed to be experiencing auditory hallucinations.

On August 28, a 16-year-old gunman, who had planned to attack his school after being suspended, opened fire at the public library instead, fatally shooting two and injuring four. After his arrest, he claimed he was upset that he was not liked at school and was generally angry.

On September 13, a 15-year-old gunman killed one student and injured three others at a high school from which he had been suspended over concerning notes he gave friends. After his arrest, he claimed his attack was to teach others a lesson about the consequences of bullying.

On November 14, after killing his wife the previous day, a 43-year-old gunman shot his neighbors, then fired at random persons on his way to an elementary school, possibly in search of his neighbor's son. While the school was on lockdown, the gunman fired shots that penetrated the outer walls injuring some. The attacker was ultimately killed by law enforcement. All told, he shot and wounded at least 10 and killed five, including two of his neighbors and his wife.

Though not analyzed as part of this report due to the number of those harmed, on December 7, a 21-year-old former student, who had dropped out twice, entered his former high school and killed two students then himself. He may have been suicidal.

MOTIVES & TARGETING

MOTIVES: The perpetrators had a range of motives for carrying out their mass attacks. In almost half of the incidents (*n* = 13, 46%), personal grievances appeared to be the main motivating factor. In these cases, the attackers were retaliating for perceived wrongs related to their workplaces (*n* = 6), domestic situations (*n* = 5), or being bullied or disliked by classmates (*n* = 2). One of the attackers retaliating for a workplace grievance also hoped to gain fame or notoriety for his attack (see Table 2). Beyond personal grievances, other motives were related to ideological (*n* = 1) or racially-based (*n* = 5) beliefs; influenced by mental health symptoms (*n* = 4) such as hallucinations, paranoia, or delusions; and fanatical political views (*n* = 1). Additionally, three attackers made statements or engaged in behaviors indicating that they did not intend to survive their attacks. Of these three, one committed suicide at the scene, another was killed by law enforcement responding to the attack, and the third was taken into police custody.

Table 2.

Components to Motive	*n*	Percent*
Grievances	***13***	***46%***
Workplace	*6*	*21%*
Domestic	*5*	*18%*
Personal	*2*	*7%*
Ideological or racially-based	***6***	***21%***
Mental Health / Psychosis	***4***	***14%***
Political	***1***	***4%***
Fame	***1***	***4%***
Unknown	***4***	***14%***

** Percentages exceed 100 as one case had two motives.*

BELIEFS: Though ideologies and racial biases played a role in the specific motives for some of the attackers, a total of seven (25%) appeared to have subscribed to a particular belief system, including one who strongly believed in government conspiracies, and equal numbers of those who supported white supremacy (*n* = 2) or radical black nationalism (*n* = 2), as well as those who were self-radicalized followers of ISIS (*n* = 2). Of note, histories of hallucinations, paranoia, and/or delusions were also present for five of these seven attackers, and for two of them, their particular psychosis played a dominant role in the adoption of their belief systems.

FIXATIONS: More than one-third (*n* = 11, 39%) of the attackers exhibited a fixation, defined as an intense or obsessive preoccupation with a person, activity, or belief to the point that it impacted many aspects of their lives. For some, their fixation was evidenced by seeking out or consuming a significant volume of information regarding the object of their fixation. Attackers' fixations often carried an angry or emotional undertone and revolved around several themes, including personal vendettas, romantic conflicts, personal failures, perceived injustices, delusions, sociopolitical ideologies, or other incidents of mass violence.

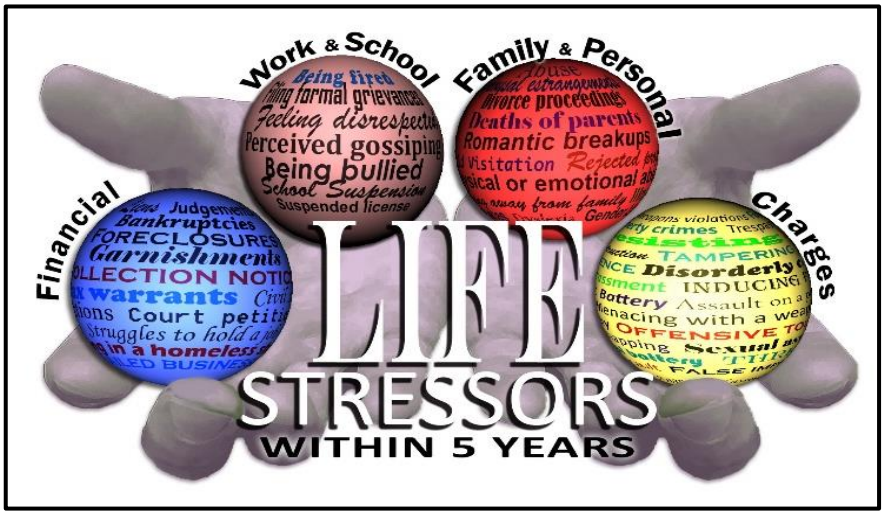
TARGETING: Over half of the attacks (*n* = 16, 57%) resulted in harm to only random persons. A few (*n* = 4, 14%) resulted in harm to pre-selected individuals known to the attacker, such as a co-worker or supervisor, while slightly more (*n* = 6, 21%) resulted in harm to both random and specific individuals. When examining the nature of the targeting and the attackers' motives, we found that:

- ★ All four of the attacks that resulted in harm to only pre-selected individuals, and no random individuals, were motivated by workplace grievances.
- ★ All five of the attacks motivated by domestic issues resulted in harm to at least one random person, outside of the person(s) targeted.
- ★ All four attackers whose motive was influenced by their psychotic symptoms inflicted harm on random persons.

KEY INVESTIGATIVE THEMES

SIGNIFICANT STRESSORS WITHIN FIVE YEARS: All of the attackers had at least one significant stressor occur in their lives in the five years leading up to the attack. For some, this was in addition to any legal consequences they may have been dealing with related to the charges described above. These additional stressors most often related to:

- ***Family/romantic relationships***, such as spousal estrangements, divorces, romantic breakups, rejected proposals, physical or emotional abuse, or the death of a parent
- ***Personal issues***, such as unstable living conditions, physical illnesses, or other significant disorders
- ***Work or school environments***, such as being fired or suspended, filing grievances, being bullied at work or at school, feeling disrespected, or being the subject of real or perceived gossip
- ***Contact with law enforcement that did not result in arrests or charges,*** such as being the subject of domestic disturbance calls or being sought for a crime unrelated to their attack



Beyond these areas, we found that over half of the attackers (*n* = 16, 57%) experienced stressors related to ***financial instability*** in the five-year period prior to their attacks. These financial stressors included an inability to maintain employment; living in homeless shelters; failed business ventures; and civil court filings and proceedings, such as judgments, evictions, tax warrants, and wage garnishments. For 10 of the attackers, these stressors occurred within one year of the attack.

AGGRESSIVE NARCISSISM: Most of the attackers (*n* = 23, 82%) exhibited behaviors that were indicative of aggressive narcissism, as evidenced by displays of rigidness, hostility, or extreme self-centeredness. For example, some inappropriately asserted control over others, as observed by their histories of domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, or harming animals. Others had a history of violent or angry outbursts following interpersonal conflicts with co-workers, neighbors, or family members. Some attackers displayed an inflated sense of self or entitlement, unrealistically believing that they were deserving of certain relationships, successes, or benefits, with some reacting angrily when they did not obtain what they believed they deserved.

COMMUNICATIONS: Most of the attackers (*n* = 22, 79%) had engaged in threatening or concerning communications. While half had threatened someone (*n* = 14, 50%), one-third threatened the target (*n* = 10, 36%) in some way prior to their attack. All 10 of the attackers in the latter group had a personal relationship to the target in that they were either co-workers, domestic partners, neighbors, or classmates. Though the presence of prior threats to the target is unusual for some forms of targeted violence (e.g., assassination), it is often seen in cases involving domestic or workplace violence, which together represent over a third of the mass attacks described in this report.

CONCERNING COMMUNICATIONS: Outside of threatening communications, three-quarters of the attackers (*n* = 21, 75%) engaged in other concerning communications that did not reach the threshold of a threat, such as making overly angry statements, racist comments, references to past attackers, suicidal language, or comments indicative of their intent to carry out an attack. In some cases, these communications caused alarm among those who observed them.

HISTORY OF ELICITING CONCERN: Most of the attackers (*n* = 22, 79%) engaged in communications or exhibited behaviors that caused concern in others. Those who expressed concern included parents, siblings, current or former romantic partners, friends, neighbors, teachers, classmates, work associates, community members, and law enforcement. The responses to the behaviors varied amongst those who noted them. Some acted on their concerns by warning others about the person, filing complaints with employers or residential building managers, or deliberately avoiding the person altogether. Others expressed concern by notifying law enforcement, pursuing protective orders, or terminating the attacker's employment. Some of those concerned spoke to the person directly and urged them to seek help, offered help, or even secured psychological evaluations for them. For nearly half of the attackers (*n* = 13, 46%), those concerned feared for the safety of the individual or others around them. Of note, the attackers who had elicited concern in others had a higher average number of total casualties (*M* = 8) than attackers who had not elicited concern in others (*M* = 4).[7]

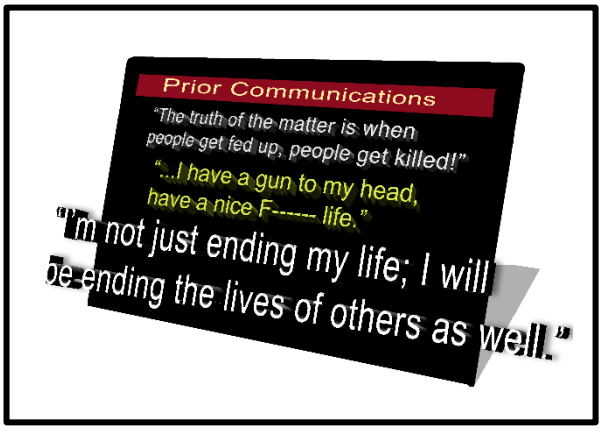


Table 3.

General Backgrounds		
	n	**Percent**
Gender - Male	**28**	**100%**
Age: *range* **15-66** *average* **37**		
Illicit drug use or substance abuse	**15**	**54%**
History of criminal charge(s)	**20**	**71%**
Non-violent	*16*	*57%*
Violent (Includes 7 with Domestic charge(s))	*15*	*54%*
History of domestic violence	**9**	**32%**
Mental health symptoms	**18**	**64%**
Known treatment	*7*	*25%*
Overall history of violence	**18**	**64%**
Investigative Themes		
	n	**Percent**
Beliefs	**7**	**25%**
Fixation	**11**	**39%**
Stressors	**28**	**100%**
Financial instability	*16*	*57%*
Aggressively self-centered nature	**23**	**82%**
Threatening or concerning communications	**22**	**79%**
History of making threats	*14*	*50%*
Threats specific to the target	*10*	*36%*
Concerning communications	*21*	*75%*
Elicited concern	**22**	**79%**
Concern about safety	*13*	*46%*

THE INCIDENTS

1) On January 6, a gunman fatally shot five and injured six at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, FL.

2) On January 29, a gunman fatally shot three in a restaurant in Bowie, MD.

3) On February 22, a gunman fatally shot one and injured two in a bar in Olathe, KS.

4) On March 22, a gunman fatally shot two at a bank In Rothschild, WI. He then fatally shot another at a law office in Schofield, WI.

5) On April 10, a gunman fatally shot two and injured one at an elementary school in San Bernardino, CA.

6) On April 13, a gunman fatally shot one and injured three on a commuter train in Atlanta, GA.

7) On April 18, a gunman engaged in a shooting spree, killing three in downtown Fresno, CA.

8) On April 30, a gunman opened fire on random people in the pool area of an apartment complex in San Diego, CA, killing one and injuring seven.

9) On May 1, a man fatally stabbed one and injured three on a university campus in Austin, TX.

10) On May 12, a gunman fatally shot three inside a nursing home in Kirkersville, OH.

11) On May 18, a man injured 22 when he drove his car into pedestrians on a sidewalk near Times Square in New York, NY.

12) On May 26, a man fatally stabbed two and injured a third on a MAX Light Rail train in Portland, OR.

13) On June 5, a gunman fatally shot five in a manufacturing facility in Orlando, FL.

14) On June 8, a gunman fatally shot three in a supermarket in Tunkhannock, PA.

15) On June 14, a gunman wounded five at a Republican Congressional baseball practice in Alexandria, VA.

16) On June 14, a gunman fatally shot three and injured two in a warehouse facility in San Francisco, CA.

17) On June 30, a gunman fatally shot one and injured six inside a hospital in Bronx, NY.

18) On August 12, a man killed one and injured 19 when he drove his car into a crowd at a rally in Charlottesville, VA.

19) On August 28, a gunman fatally shot two and injured four in a library in Clovis, NM.

20) On September 13, a gunman fatally shot one and injured three at a high school in Rockford, WA.

21) On September 24, a gunman fatally shot one and injured seven at a church in Antioch, TN.

22) On October 1, a gunman opened fire on the crowd at a music festival in Las Vegas, NV, killing 58 and wounding 546.

23) On October 18, a gunman fatally shot three and injured two in Edgewood, MD. Nearly two hours later, he shot and injured one at an auto dealership in Wilmington, DE.

24) On October 31, a man drove onto the bike and pedestrian path in New York, NY, killing 8 and injuring 12.

25) On November 1, a gunman fatally shot three inside a Walmart in Thornton, CO.

26) On November 4, a gunman opened fire on or near Interstate-35 in Austin, TX, injuring four.

27) On November 5, a gunman fatally shot 26 and injured 20 at a church in Sutherland Springs, TX.

28) On November 14, after killing his wife, a gunman shot his neighbors. He then fired randomly at others as he moved through town, and at an elementary school in Corning, CA. All told, he shot and wounded at least 10 and killed five, including two of his neighbors and his wife.

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[1] The incidents included in this report were identified and researched through open source reporting (e.g., media sources and law enforcement records); therefore, it is possible that more took place than were discovered at the time of this writing. Though there is much debate as to what defines a *mass attack*, for the purpose of this report we included acts of intentional violence in public (e.g., parks, community events, retail establishments) or semi-public (e.g., workplaces, schools, religious establishments) places during which significant harm was caused to three or more persons. We excluded violence related to criminal acts (e.g., gang or drug activity), failed attempts at a mass attack, or spontaneous group violence. Outside of the incidents included in this report, six other incidents took place in 2017 that were noteworthy due to their indiscriminate or public nature, including attacks at three transportation hubs, a car dealership, a high school, and a condominium. Despite the actions and intent of the attackers, these incidents were not included in this report as they did not result in significant harm to three or more persons.

[2] Those harmed during the attack in Las Vegas were estimated to be 58 killed and 546 injured. In reporting the total injuries and deaths, persons harmed by an attacker just prior to the mass attack were included in the total harm caused; however, any harm to the attackers themselves was not.

[3] This report was prepared for educational and research purposes. The background and behaviors reported herein are of those individuals who: 1) were arrested for the act; 2) died at the scene; or 3) died immediately following the attack. Actions attributed to individuals who have been arrested, indicted, or charged in these incidents are merely allegations, and all are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law."

[4] Additional information on the U.S. Secret Service threat assessment and publications from the National Threat Assessment Center are available on the agency's website, located at https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/.

[5] Though drug use is one of the disqualifying factors, it was not considered in this review as information was not available to confirm active use within one year of the incident.

[6] *Domestic violence* was defined as physical force or the threat of bodily harm inflicted on a romantic partner, parent/guardian, or child (of the assailant or romantic partner). If an attacker had a history of domestic violence against a parent or child, the perpetrator and the victim resided at the same location.

[7] This analysis was executed on 26 of the 28 incidents. Two incidents with significantly more casualties were excluded so as not to skew the data.