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An examination of thwarted mass homicide plots and threateners

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ABSTRACT

Thwarted mass homicide events derived primarily from news media sources were examined. This study describes who was responsible for uncovering these near-acts of violence, the intended targets, planning details, weapons, outcomes (legal or other) and the accompanying demographic factors associated with each event. Cases were divided into two groups: high-credibility and low-credibility. The majority of cases, across both groups, were characterized by threateners who were male, acting alone, in their mid to late twenties, and who targeted academic institutions. When compared to threateners in the low-credibility group, high-credibility threateners were more likely to have mental health problems and to have created materials suggesting the premeditation of a planned mass homicide event. Plots were most commonly discovered by two groups: (1) friends, family and acquaintances of threateners and (2) members of the general public. The findings of this study suggest that some threats should be taken more seriously than others and in the absence of a reliable early-warning system, tips from friends, family members, acquaintances of threateners and the general public, could serve as a valuable asset in the prevention of mass homicide.

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1. Introduction

Researchers consistently note that the literature base of mass homicide, and mass shootings in particular, is underdeveloped (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Knoll, 2013), primarily due to the lack of access to data (Huff-Corzine et al., 2014) and perhaps because of the relative rarity of these events (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Even more limited, than the base for completed events, is the research base for thwarted mass homicide events (Knoll, 2013; Madfis, 2013) and people who threaten violence (Barnes, Gordon, & Hudson, 2001; Warren, Mullen, & Ogloff, 2011). To date, only a handful of researchers have investigated "near-miss" incidents and virtually all of them have focused on students who have targeted their respective K-12 schools or their fellow classmates and peers (Daniels et al., 2007, 2010; Larkin, 2009; Madfis, 2013; Newman, Fox, Roth, Mehta, & Harding, 2004; O'Toole, 2000). A comprehensive review of the literature indicates that there is an absence of thwarted mass homicide studies dealing with events other than K-12 school-based events.

Broadly speaking, the systematic investigation of communicated threats and threatening behavior is known as threat assessment (Cornell, 2011). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) contends that threat assessment rests upon two fundamental premises: (1) not all threats are created equal and; (2) most people who make threats are unlikely to carry them out (O'Toole, 2000). Despite these facts, they believe that all threats must be taken seriously and their seriousness must be evaluated accordingly.

It might be said that threat assessment has more recently evolved into threat management, at least in the case of school-based threats. Threat management views threats as possible intervention opportunities aimed at preventing targeted violence (Cornell, 2011). Likewise, the study of averted mass homicide incidents might serve as a unique opportunity for the generation of intervention strategies.

1.1. The importance of studying thwarted plots

The Congressional Research Service recently studied 78 completed public mass shootings in the United States (Bjelopera, Bagalman, Caldwell, Finklea, & McCallion, 2013). They noted that with regard to prevention "…potential perpetrators [of public mass shootings] cannot be identified accurately, and no systematic means of intervening are known to be effective (p. 21)." Because every thwarted plot was interrupted by *something* or *someone*, knowing more about these failed efforts could teach us about what works (Dahl, 2011). It might also help to enhance our limited knowledge base (Knoll, 2013), and highlight common targets, trends, unknown threats, and methods of attack that can make the mass homicide threat picture more complete (Clayton, 2013).

The study of thwarted plots might also further our understanding of leakage, a concept first identified by the FBI in their analysis of

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school shooters. Leakage occurs when an individual "…intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act" (O'Toole, 2000, p.14). Leakage can be expressed in a variety of different forms including threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; O'Toole, 2000). Individuals can also communicate threats through videos, tattoos, writings, and drawings. Among school shooters, leakage is considered one of the most important clues that precedes an adolescent's act of violence (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). These pre-attack behaviors might be characteristic of non-student threateners but this has yet to be thoroughly investigated (Warren et al., 2011).

1.2. Difficulties studying averted plots

In the only known published study of failed terrorism plots, Dahl (2011) outlines some of the difficulties with studying these events. One problematic issue is their hypothetical nature. It is difficult to quantify events that some may perceive as never having occurred (Dahl, 2011; Madfis, 2013). Another difficulty involves classified cases not available for study. Despite exhaustive open records searches, there may remain classified cases which are only available to law enforcement, threat assessment teams and or select others, resulting in cases which may be missed. A good example of the limitations of using news media accounts to collect data comes from the book *The Gift of Fear* by De Becker (1997/2010). He and his associates have consulted on an estimated 20,000 cases yet less than 50 have made the news (1997/2010). A similar data collection challenge also exists for the study of thwarted mass homicide plots. For instance, a CBS article stated that 148 mass shootings had been prevented by the FBI in 2013. The article noted that "The FBI would not provide specific details of [the cases] they've consulted on because many are ongoing and involve people who have not been charged with crimes ("FBI: We've Prevented 148 Shootings, Attacks This Year", 2013, p. 2). Even though, unclassified and thus publicly available thwarted mass homicide cases may be fewer in number than those contained among classified materials, they are still worthy of study.

1.3. Purpose of the present study

The following research explores cases of thwarted mass homicide plots and how they were revealed, using content analysis of media and legal sources. It describes who was responsible for uncovering these near-acts of violence, the intended targets, planning details, weapons, outcomes (legal or other) and the accompanying demographic factors associated with each event. The exploratory nature of this work is intended as preliminary and is guided by the premise that the study of thwarted events can assist in the development of effective prevention strategies for targeted violence.

2. Method

Following the basic search methodology outlined by (Daniels et al., 2007) and Madfis (2013) in their studies of foiled school shootings, cases were located by entering specific keywords and phrases into the *LexisNexis* newspaper database. Additional searches included repeating those same searches in Google News and by searching the Internet, including scanning academic and government-sponsored publications to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the search results. The search terms and phrases included: foiled, averted, rampage plot, mass shooting averted, murder averted, murder plan, killing spree averted, thwarted attacks, thwarted rampages, killing spree foiled, attempted mass shooting, attempted rampage, tragedy averted gunman, foiled mass shooting, threatened to kill, threatened mass shooting, rampage threat, thwarted murder, murder foiled, and planned to kill.

2.1. Freedom of Information Act request

An additional information-gathering strategy was employed in an attempt to collect all extant thwarted mass shootings events. A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request was made in May of 2014 in response to a news report (http://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-weve-prevented-148-shootings-attacks-this-year/) regarding the FBI having disrupted or prevented approximately 150 mass shootings and violent attacks in 2013. The article goes on to say that hundreds more had been prevented in the time span previous to 2013 and extending to 2011. Requested FBI documents were those specifically dealing with the 150 averted events of 2013. Also requested was any and all information regarding the other hundreds of events similarly averted prior to 2013. They were unable to supply the requested materials.

For the purpose of this study, a mass homicide threatener is defined as an individual who expressed through his or her actions or words, the desire to kill multiple victims. Cases were excluded if they were: (1) outside of the United States; (2) one-person targets; (3) those that involved K-12 students whose current school was the desired target (see Daniels et al., 2007, 2010; Madfis, 2013 for reviews); (4) those that appeared to be international terrorism-based; (5) those where the violent act was prevented due to an accident (i.e. gun jammed); and (6) those which resulted in death or injuries to the targeted victims. Using the aforementioned search criteria, 57 cases of mass homicide threats and attempts occurring in the United States between January 1993 to June 2014, were identified.

Next, following the methodology of Allely, Minnis, Thompson, Wilson, and Gillberg (2014), in their review of perpetrators of extreme violence, the name of the individual(s) suspected of plotting an attack was entered into the search engine "Google." The resulting information (i.e. articles and when available court documents), was then reviewed. For each case, a minimum of five resources was examined and a coding form was developed to document seven specific categories of information about each case. The categories were: (1) characteristics of the suspect (i.e. age and gender); (2) intended targets; (3) planning; (4) weapons; (5) mental health problems of suspect (s); (6) means of plot revealment; and (7) outcomes (legal or other).

2.2. High-credibility versus low-credibility threats

Because "all threats are not created equal" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 5), the final step involved categorizing the 57 cases into two groups: high-credibility and low-credibility. Cases were judged as having high-credibility, and thus "actionable" (Cornell, 2010; O'Toole, 2000), when the threatener was found to have the means necessary to carry out the threat (i.e. bombs, guns, etc.) or if not in possession of the means necessary to carry out the threat, the threatener possessed plans or materials (i.e. manifesto, etc.) to secure the means necessary to carry out the threat.

3. Results

Of the 57 cases, 35 threats (61%) of mass homicide were deemed to have high-credibility and the remaining 22 (39%) were considered to have low-credibility. Between 1993 and June 2014, mass homicide had been plotted in 30 states; the majority of incidents (n = 34, 59.7%) occurring between 2012 and 2013. The states having the most plots were: California with nine, Washington with five and Nevada with three. Thirteen other states each had two plots: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Tennessee, and Utah. The remaining 14 states each had one plot: Alabama, Arizona, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Oregon, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

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