



COMPLEX COORDINATED ATTACKS ACTION GUIDE

SECURITY AWARENESS FOR PROTECTING PUBLIC LOCATIONS



OVERVIEW

A Complex Coordinated Attack (CCA), also known as a Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack, is a violent assault or series of assaults by one or more individuals or groups using one or more type of weapons with the intent to inflict harm on large numbers of people. While these types of attacks often result from various motives including terrorist ideology, the continued proliferation of CCAs overseas and domestically demonstrates that CCAs remain a concern for the conceivable future.

POTENTIAL INDICATORS

CCAs are evolving and dynamic threats, ranging from symbolic, well-planned attacks on high-visibility targets to attacks that are more dispersed and difficult to detect. Like other attack vectors, specific behaviors or circumstances may be observed in perpetrators before a CCA occurs. These potential indicators may include, but are not limited to:



Attempting to elicit information regarding a facility or building's purpose, operations, or security procedures that is beyond mere curiosity



Leaving or driving unattended or unauthorized vehicles in unusual or restricted areas



Testing security measures or emergency response in a clandestine or overt manner



Procuring or purchasing unusual quantities of possible improvised explosive device (IED) materials, such as cellphones, pagers, or timers, or of explosive precursors, such as fertilizers, fuels, or acids



Attempting to enter or entering a restricted area or protected site through impersonation of authorized personnel (e.g., police/security, janitor)



Seeking additional access to or being encountered within restricted or controlled areas



Misrepresenting one's affiliation to cover possible illicit activity by presenting false documentation, identification, or insignia



Taking photos or videos of facilities, buildings, or other infrastructure's seldom-used access points; personnel performing security functions (e.g., patrols, badge or vehicle checks); or security-related equipment (e.g., perimeter fencing, security cameras)

FACTS & EVENTS

CCAs have occurred with increasing frequency in recent years around the world, including several notable incidents within the U.S.:

- **January 1, 2025:** A lone Islamic State-inspired assailant attacked a large crowd on New Year's Eve in New Orleans, Louisiana, killing 14 and injuring at least 57. The assailant used his vehicle to strike a crowd, then exited the vehicle and engaged in a shootout with police before being fatally shot. Prior to the attack, the assailant also placed multiple pipe bombs inside coolers a few blocks away from the attack location.
- **May 21, 2020:** A lone terrorism-inspired attacker conducted a shooting and hostile vehicle attack against Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. The attacker shot at and injured one security forces member and then used his vehicle to ram the entrance gate. After exiting the vehicle, the attacker began shooting before being killed by security.
- **December 2, 2015:** Two Al-Qaeda supporters conducted an attack at a holiday gathering and employee training event in San Bernardino County, California, killing 14 and injuring at least 22. This attack used firearms and an attempted bombing.
- **April 15, 2013:** Two terrorism-inspired brothers perpetrated an attack on spectators at the annual Boston Marathon using homemade pressure cooker bombs detonated 12 seconds and 210 yards apart, near the finish line of the race. The attack killed three people and injured several hundred others.
- **July 20, 2012:** A mass shooting occurred inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, during a midnight screening of a film. The perpetrator set off tear gas grenades and fired into the audience with multiple firearms. The attack killed 12 and wounded 70 patrons. The following day, police, bomb squads, and federal agents found a large number of explosive devices and trip wires at the perpetrator's apartment.

ADVERSARIAL TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES


Attackers may employ the following tactics, which differentiate a CCA from other types of incidents:

- Use well-armed, well-trained individuals in small teams employing military- or law-enforcement-style tactics
- Strike multiple targets simultaneously or in close succession
- Strike quickly and move to another location before law enforcement can interdict or disrupt
- Delay or deny entry and exit to victims and first responders by blocking exits, chaining or rigging doors with explosives, using tear gas, or using fire or smoke to hinder law enforcement response efforts and potentially prolong the incident
- Deploy diversions to slow public safety response, consume responder resources, or draw responders toward or away from specific locations
- Coordinate timing and methods (e.g., firearms, improvised explosive devices, hazardous materials) with other attackers or accomplices providing assistance
- Conduct secondary attacks on first responders, evacuation routes, or additional sites, such as medical facilities, that are part of the response


MITIGATION STRATEGIES AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES

Implementing comprehensive planning and preparedness considerations into an organization's security practices is key to saving lives while defending against a potential CCA. The majority of the protective actions below are options for consideration when developing emergency action plans and equipping personnel to execute those plans.

PREVENTION/PLANNING

- Apply layered security concepts (e.g., physical, procedural, intelligence) to recognize and manage threats early, and become familiar with the National Incident Management System approach 
- Expect a potentially significant delay in help arriving, as first responders may be overwhelmed during a CCA
- Review existing plans to determine whether current actions could put people at increased risk for secondary attacks
- Consider how to implement support plans for survivors and families of the deceased
- Ensure recovery plans are up to date and include mental health assistance options

TRAINING/EQUIPPING

- Ensure personnel are aware of and proficient in emergency procedures and equipment to enable a more effective response 
- Train personnel to recognize and report suspicious activity and behavior
- Train personnel to provide self- and buddy-aid to mitigate delays in the arrival of emergency responders
- Equip safe-haven areas with communications capabilities, medical supplies, food, and water that can support sheltering in place for an extended period of time

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR OWNERS AND OPERATORS

For additional resources, products, and information regarding the security of public gathering locations, visit: cisa.gov/securing-public-gatherings.

For additional resources, products, and information regarding active shooter preparedness, visit: cisa.gov/active-shooter-preparedness.

For additional Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack resources, training, and FEMA grant information, visit: fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/plan.

For additional information on recognizing the signs of terrorism-related suspicious activity, visit: dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/recognize-the-signs.

For lifesaving response training, visit: stopthebleed.org.

For additional information on the National Incident Management System, visit: fema.gov/emergency-managers/nims.