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ALERT: Second Wave of High Profile Violence (Home Grown Extremists, Youth Radicalization, Imitators and Terrorists)

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OVERVIEW

In June 2014 we issued an ALERT stressing the importance that “Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) Protocols be utilized to their fullest during that Extended Critical Period” in reference to the 15 cases of multiple victim homicides and attempted homicides in a two month span across Canada and the United States. Relevant to that ALERT we noted 5 of the 15 tragedies were targeting police. Immediately following the release of that ALERT two more police officers were shot in the United States.

In the past week (October 20th - 24th) we have seen 4 incidents of high profile violence in Canada and the United States. In 3 of the 4 cases both military and police were targeted by adult perpetrators in Quebec, Ottawa and New York followed by a multiple victim school shooting in Washington State by a teenage boy.

During this time we have also experienced an increase of threat related behaviours throughout the province, country and beyond.

CURRENT DYNAMICS

An increasing number of targeted incidents are being carried out by “anti-establishment” or “radicalized” individuals, some with reported “ties” or “links” to terrorist groups. Internationally the following terms are being used to define the concerning violent behavioural trends.

‘Violent extremism’ may be defined as the use of, or incitement to violence to further a cause.

‘Ideology’ is a set of aims and ideas often closely linked to politics which can be seen as a way of creating change. This is turned by violent extremists into a simple **narrative** – a story used to explain why violence is needed.

‘Radicalization’ is the process by which a person’s views are modified, altered or changed by becoming more radical or extreme in nature.

Whether there was a formal link to a terrorist organization or the perpetrators were influenced by their own personal interest in supporting a cause (home grown extremism) the result is the same. Some perpetrators could be highly committed and dedicated terrorists, while others may be emotionally troubled, angry, suicidal and looking for a cause that matches their anger at life and gives them a final goal/purpose so they can “go out with a bang”. Therefore, Fluidity (the interaction between the homicidal and suicidal domains) is always a primary variable to consider and perpetrators this week created a context where they could kill and be killed.

Since the majority of violent offenders are “imitators”, the details of the 4 current cases are important because the weapons of choice and site selection are varied in these attacks. This means others moving on a pathway to imitate these crimes have a broader site selection in terms of where they may act out and more diversity in terms of weapon of choice. From the thwarted attack at the British Columbia Legislature on Canada Day (2013) to our current situation, the weapons of choice have included a pressure cooker bomb, hatchet, motor vehicle and firearms. Some potential perpetrators may consider “innovative” ways to carry out acts of violence to continue the current trend.

Adding to the complexity is the observation that the 3 cases of military and police based attacks appeared to be somewhat disorganized or not well planned, which may reflect the emotional state of the perpetrators at the time of the attacks. Because of the images shown in the media, any potential perpetrator who may be a “lone wolf” looking for a cause can easily identify with the aggressors, their rage and realise at the same time that they do not need to be highly skilled to terrorize.

IMPLICATIONS

Given the threat related behaviours evident in schools across Canada and the United States during this critical period we need to be extra vigilant in responding to “Worrisome Behaviours” and formal “Stage I Threat Assessment” cases.

For many years Halloween has been used by some children, youth, and adults as justification for criminal behaviour. Therefore this week it is important for parents and professionals to engage in age appropriate open conversation with our children and youth about:

- a) Respect for the deceased military and police personnel.
- b) Their perspective on what is happening in Canada and the world. Empty Vessels will often inadvertently reveal themselves when we create a context for them to talk, write, share, etc.
- c) Their feelings of safety and if they feel unsafe, where is the threat coming from? (face-to-face bullying, online harassment, home, etc.). Remember that “high profile violence can trigger or intensify already existing symptoms in troubled individuals”.
- d) Racism: The concept of “Terrorism” leads many to begin to see everyone as a potential threat if they are not “like me” or in “my group”. We need to be vigilant in distinguishing between radicalized individuals or groups versus an entire race, religion, or culture.

e) Re-educate our children and youth “If it doesn’t look right or feel right – tell an adult” (This includes restating our support for online anonymous reporting).

f) No costumes that have blood or gore and no fake weapons in our schools. Children, youth, parents and professionals alike should be cautious during Halloween especially when seeing someone in costumes with weapons of any sort. Better safe than sorry!

KEY POINTS

- 1) The school-police relationship is still the foundation for Stage I VTRA and both should be formally connecting with each other to review the VTRA protocol/process. Mental Health, Child Protection, Probation, and other related partners also need to be brought in the loop as to the contents of this communication.
- 2) Under-reaction is still the biggest problem we have where even VTRA trained professionals, for a variety of reasons, do not activate the protocol.
- 3) High profile violence does not cause people to go from zero (no risk) to sixty (extreme risk) – instead it simply “intensifies already existing symptoms”.
- 4) Keep in mind that the more a troubled individual can identify with a perpetrator the more it will increase his or her level of risk so anyone with an inordinate amount of knowledge or “master critiquer” of this current incident should be a focus of our attention.
- 5) All VTRA cases that come to your attention need to include a social networking scan on the person(s) of interest as that is where we find the most blatant pre-incident signs and indicators.
- 6) Strategically intensify connections with our highest risk children and youth (Empty Vessels: boys and girls not connected to healthy mature supports) during this time as no one can engage in a serious act of violence unless they feel “justified” in attacking that target or type of target. The power of positive, meaningful human connection is one of the best violence prevention strategies we can easily employ.
- 7) Baseline Behaviour: This is the most significant variable in Threat Assessment because any increase in Baseline denotes evolution and “serious violence is an evolutionary process”.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) District leaders and school administrators, in collaboration with other VTRA team members, should review current and past VTRA (Threat Assessment) cases as well any significant Worrisome Behaviour cases for evidence of rekindled or intensified symptom development. *As already noted, high profile violence does not cause people to “just snap”, but instead intensifies already existing symptoms in troubled individuals.
- 2) School District leaders and other partners should formally collaborate with local police regarding general counsel for identifying and reporting any safety concerns and insights into specific dynamics unique to their community relevant to this current “critical period”.

3) Utilize IT specialists from school and police to scan internet activity and social networking in their areas for evidence of threat-making or threat-related behaviour.

4) Share this information with all staff as appropriate.

5) As appropriate, communicate 'generally' with parents the actions you have taken with police and other community partners to streamline your collaboration during this critical period. Use this opportunity to remind them of your VTRA Protocols that are meant to be utilized for both typical types of threat assessment cases at the local level and also for high profile situations like the current string of terrorist-related incidents in North America.

CONCLUSION

This "second wave" is not changing the fabric of Canadian society. Our open society is still our best protection against systemic "extremism" and "radicalization". What is happening is that we are choosing to modify our degree of formal collaboration to meet the current dynamics of the international stage of which we are a part. Naturally open systems (families, schools, communities) and professional partners woven within them can see when troubled individuals are evolving. We have already proven across this country that where multi-agency protocols are in place for Violence Threat Risk Assessment (and other initiatives) our ability to assess and intervene is greatly increased.

RCMP Memo

Attached is a memo that was distributed to Youth Officers in our province as a reminder to be extra vigilant as they work with our youth.