

Unclear if tragedy will make us safer

Some experts fear Boston bombings will result in expensive and ineffective security measures.

By: Cornelius Frolik – April 21, 2013

The twin bombings at the Boston Marathon were a gruesome reminder of the American public's vulnerability to acts of terror despite countless dollars spent increasing security at high-profile events and strategic locations.

But heightened security does not guarantee safety, experts say, and it is impossible to protect the public against every danger. America is full of "soft targets" like marathons, places and events that are vulnerable to violent attacks, but there is a limit on what people are willing to spend on security, particularly if it is seen as more irritating than effective.

"Who wants to live (in a police state), and who wants to pay for that?" said Donna Schlagheck, chairwoman of the political science department at Wright State University. The Boston Marathon is one of the largest races in the nation and it was staffed by scores of police officers. Bomb technicians swept the marathon route prior to the explosions.

The level of security was higher than it is at many spectator events nationwide. That such a high-profile venue was targeted with such apparent ease has organizers of races and major sporting events across the nation, including some in southwest Ohio, reviewing their own security policies. They said there may be valuable lessons from Boston about how to improve security arrangements.

But some experts say they are concerned the Boston bombings could result in the widespread implementation of expensive and ineffective security measures simply because people feel obligated to take some sort of action.

Pointing to the money spent on air marshals and body scanners at airports, Ohio State University political science professor John Mueller said, "If you are a terrorist, you just go to an airport that doesn't have them and get on a flight."

He added that it is unclear whether scanners can detect bombs.

Mark Ensalaco, director of human rights research at the University of Dayton, said Americans should continue to participate and embrace public events "or the terrorists win."

But, he said, “It is going to be impossible to completely harden events like this.”
Inherently vulnerable

Marathons, parades, free concerts and other public events are inherently vulnerable to attacks, said Lou Marciani, director of the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security at the University of Southern Mississippi. Unlike shows and games held at stadiums — where visitors must go through several layers of screenings — audience members can come and go as they please at these venues, and it is difficult to restrict access.

“There are many, many events like that in the country,” Marciani said. “We are always going to be vulnerable ... The best thing we can do is try to reduce that risk.”

Earlier this week, organizers of the Flying Pig Marathon in Cincinnati said they conducted a security audit and were determining what additional safety measures were needed for the multi-day event in early May, which draws more than 33,000 participants.

Organizers of the Sept. 21 Air Force Marathon, which routes runners through Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and parts of Fairborn, said they too are discussing what to do to maintain a safe and secure environment. The marathon attracts more than 15,000 runners.

“We try to look at every possible contingency,” said Col. Daniel Semsel, vice commander of the 88th Air Base Wing at Wright-Patt. “We take a look at every possibility and try to figure out how we can prevent it first, and then what we do if something happens.”

The Air Force Marathon is unique because much of the course is on the base, which is a secure environment. But most marathons take place outdoors on city streets and span multiple neighborhoods or cities. Completely securing 26 miles of road is just not logistically feasible, experts said.

“That is one of the inherent vulnerabilities of something like a marathon,” Semsel said. “It’s very tough to cover, when you are talking about a 26-mile course.”

Public outreach

While some major sporting events may heighten security in response to the violence in Boston, perhaps the best possible outcome will be to raise public awareness about the importance of reporting suspicious activities to authorities, Wright State’s Schlagheck said.

“At public events, I think there will be more security, some of which you will see, and people will grumble about it, just as they do about taking off their shoes at the airport,” she said. “But I think the most important part will be the affirmative outreach to the public — if you see something, say something.”

The public can be a huge asset to law enforcement in identifying possible threats, she said. In 2010, New York City police discovered a makeshift bomb in a vehicle parked in Times Square after a vendor reported seeing smoke leaking out of the vents. The failed bomb plot involved a pressure cooker that was full of firecrackers.

The bombs used in Boston consisted of pressure cookers packed with black powder, nails and other shrapnel, investigators said. The devices were hidden in bags that were left on the street — and apparently setting off no alarm bells among those nearby.

Ensalaco said residents in countries that have long histories with deadly attacks are much better trained at recognizing warning signs.

“Most Americans probably wouldn’t know what to look for if they were at a city festival or a theater or someplace where a backpack is discarded,” he said. “I promise you in Israel, if someone sees a discarded backpack, they move away and call authorities. ... We need to have heightened vigilance without being totally paranoid of our neighbor.”

Terrorists have an uncanny ability to adapt to changing conditions and security improvements, Ensalaco said. Too often, authorities are so occupied trying to prevent a repeat of the last attack that they are unprepared for the next one, which comes with different weapons and targets, he said.

Schlagheck said education is the key to effectively fighting back against violent Boston-style terrorism. It is a far better solution than attempting to fortify soft targets, such as sporting events, churches, schools, she said.

“We have to be really smart about our response, and a great untapped resource is public awareness,” she said.

Changing targets

Terrorism is a horrible activity, but it is important to remember that the likelihood of being killed by a terrorist in America is about 1 in 3.5 million, said OSU’s Mueller, the Woody Hayes Chair of National Security Studies.

He said Americans are much more likely to die in an automobile crash (odds: 1 in 8,200), a homicide (1 in 22,000), or a bathtub drowning (1 in 1 million).

Mueller said he fears the Boston Marathon tragedy will cause authorities to now assume all sporting events are dangerous — and unnecessarily spend money in a futile attempt to secure them.

Mueller said he has studied all of the terrorist plans against U.S. targets that have been uncovered since Sept. 11, 2011, and almost none involved sporting events. Most targeted buildings, military installations and even shopping centers.

Reassessing security plans and making some upgrades can be helpful, such as securing the cockpit doors on airplanes, Mueller said. But too often, officials make expensive security changes that may not increase safety very much, he argued.

Mueller said the failed attempt to blow up a flight on Christmas Day in 2009 using an underwear bomb led to the hiring of air marshals. But he said they are extremely ineffective because they are only on a small number of flights.

“You need to figure out how much these security measures cost, and how much they reduce the risk, and whether the risk reduction justifies the cost,” he said. “They tend to

throw money at the problem. The wrong question is, are we safer? The right question is, how safe are we?"

In interviews conducted this week, several residents seemed to agree with Mueller's main point, that further security measures could be counter-productive.

"I honestly think we're doing all we can," said Dylan Streibig of Cincinnati. "I honestly think we get it mostly right."

Said Angela Craft of Dayton: "I don't think we can do any more. I think we're doing everything we can barring putting up a totalitarian state."