

# Church Vulnerability to Violence: Causes and Cures

By John Nicoletti, Ph.D.

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*This article is intended to provide information. It is not an endorsement of particular devices or methods. Each church and ministry must determine how they wish to address safety and security for their particular situation.*  
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## Violence History

Between March of 1999 and October, Churches have experienced approximately 40 incidents of violence resulting in 64 deaths and 71 injuries. The motivation for these incidents have come from several rationales including domestic violence, gang violence, avenger violence and robbery violence.

## Causation Factors

There appears to be two factors that make churches vulnerable: Physics and Psychology. Physics refers to the physical plant. Church facilities are generally wide open with many doors that are unlocked. In addition, the inside of the buildings contain many hallways and many doors. These realities make church facilities Soft Targets. Psychology refers to the attitude of the clergy and the congregation. Traditionally, churches are very open, inclusive and accepting of individuals and their behaviors. This attitude, which is very honorable and necessary, makes the congregation vulnerable. As a result of this attitude, violence signs are either missed, ignored minimized or rationalized away (he is JUST angry, upset, etc.).

## Prevention Options

Safety and security can only be achieved by compromising openness with awareness and tolerance with limitations. To lower the Physics risks churches must consider Target Hardening their buildings. This can be achieved by limiting access, adding detection hardware such as cameras, developing internal notification/warning systems, and adding security. To lower the Psychology risks churches must train their leadership on signs of violence as well as increasing the awareness of their congregations. Secondly, the church leaders must be willing to take timely action when there is a violence concern, somebody is becoming disruptive, or a member is a victim of domestic violence. Churches must follow in the footsteps of schools and businesses and develop threat and violence assessment teams (TVATs). These teams should be comprised of Church leaders, violence experts, church security personnel and law enforcement when necessary.

## Concluding Remarks

Unfortunately, violence has progressed from businesses to schools and college campuses and has now come to churches. However, the violence risk can be minimize or even prevented by the development of effective Detection and Disruption policies and procedures.

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## About the Author

### Dr. John Nicoletti

Dr. Nicoletti is a police psychologist, known nationally as an expert in violence prevention. He is a co-founder of Nicoletti-Flater Associates with his spouse Lottie Flater, and has been a police psychologist in the Denver-metro area for more than 25 years. Over the last ten years, the Nicoletti-Flater private practice has expanded into the field of violence and violence prevention. After years of work with national corporations and government agencies, such as the United Postal Service, United Airlines, NASA, Johns Manville, and the U.S. Department of Energy, Dr. Nicoletti has established himself as a national expert in workplace violence. He was an invited speaker at the 10th World Conference in Disaster Management (June 25-28, 2000; Ontario, Canada) and was a keynote speaker at the 2001 National Students Assistance Conference (April 2001, Florida). Dr. Nicoletti was also asked by the Columbine Review Commission to testify numerous times and was cited many times in The Report of Governor Bill Owens.