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Boston Is One of the Best Prepared U.S. Cities to Handle a Crisis

HENRY GRABAR APR 19, 2013 8 COMMENTS



Reuters

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Witnesses repeatedly described the scene Monday at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, where two bomb blasts ripped through a crowd of spectators, as unimaginable. Security experts called Friday's citywide "shelter-in-place" order unprecedented, and onlookers could only compare the siege in Watertown, where soldiers, SWAT teams, helicopters and armored Humvees cordoned off a large swath of the neighborhood, to a movie.

But emergency management personnel in the Boston region had not only been imagining such a complex scenario, they had been rehearsing it.

Over the past two years, area hospitals had sent teams of doctors and nurses to citywide training exercises and run internal drills for mass casualty incidents like bombs, plane crashes, and fires. Vivid, citywide disaster [simulations](#) – conducted in 2011 and 2012 – put hundreds of officials through hypothetical 24-hour crisis situations. Boston is one of four U.S. cities whose

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all-hazards plan has been [accredited by EMAP](#), the national emergency planning evaluation program.

"Even local businesses these days have response plans in place," says Rick Nelson, a veteran of the National Counterterrorism Center and a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

So when two pressure-cooker bombs exploded on Monday afternoon, Boston's emergency operations centers knew what to do. Emergency medical personnel affixed tourniquets – Boston's first responders all carry these battlefield dressings, though many [ambulances and hospitals nationally do not](#) – to bloodied limbs. The most serious casualties were distributed among area hospitals, a technique known to optimize critical care during disaster events. Boston Marathon medical tents set up for fatigued runners were transformed within minutes into trauma centers. Police officers took up positions to keep spectators off the course and turned back runners approaching the finish line.



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Police block the entrance to Boylston street near the scene of one of the explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon in Boston, Massachusetts April 15, 2013. (Scott Eisen/Reuters)

As the medical response unrolled, a parallel series of preventative measures were put into action. Service on Boston's Green Line, which has a station at Copley Square near the scene of the attacks, was suspended between Kenmore and Park Street. Security checks were installed at local transit hubs. The FAA temporarily grounded all flights at Logan International Airport.

The scene on Boylston Street was an admirable display of bravery, skill and calm by first responders and volunteers. But less remarked, and equally remarkable, was the value of the city's foresight. Few U.S. cities could have been better prepared for the events of this week.

"Everything that you saw happen within seconds of the explosion," says James Baker, the president of security consultancy Cytel Group, "was all because someone thought they should be prepared for that." Baker would know. In the past 24 months, he has helped Boston run two massive, 24-hour worst-case scenario simulations that [bore no small resemblance](#) to the situation unfolding this afternoon in Watertown.

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Over the past decade, the Department of Homeland Security has funneled billions of dollars towards the protection of U.S. cities. Boston is one of the DHS's "Tier 1" U.S. metro areas -- in DHS's view, one of the country's ten most likely targets for terrorism. The Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI), the largest part of the Homeland Security Grant Program, distributes half a billion dollars annually to 31 U.S. metros, and sent \$11 million to Boston in the 2012 fiscal year.

The Metro Boston Homeland Security Region (MBHSR) -- nine cities including Boston -- directs that money into an

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array of local counterterrorism programs. In the past few years, the MBHSR has upgraded over 5,000 portable radios for first responders and installed a communication system inside the tunnels of the Boston T.

Part of that money must go towards live drills, so over the past couple years, Boston has conducted two citywide disaster simulations with Cytel Group's Urban Shield, using the preparation and after-action reports from the first trial (in May 2011) to improve the city's preparedness in the second, in November 2012. (The city also hosted an [emergency management summit](#) last August.)

U.S. cities have been doing disaster drills for decades, and some exercises -- such as Detroit's World War II black-out drills or Portland's 1955 "[Operation Greenlight](#)" -- have been of some magnitude. But in the last decade, the trend in disaster drills has moved from the purely local exercise to the vertically integrated simulation that coordinates a response across the different levels of government. "What is different," Nelson says, "is the range and depth of missions they're responding to."

Urban Shield, which Baker started in 2007, is one of several drill programs that have sprung up over the last decade in response to DHS grants for thorough emergency preparedness training. In 2010, it received UASI's honorable mention for best overall program.

In Boston, Urban Shield was sufficiently disruptive and expansive that Mayor Thomas Menino's felt obliged to [ask residents](#) to remain calm:

"Urban Shield: Boston will run for a 24-hour period. As a result residents in the area may hear simulated gunfire, observe officers responding to simulated emergencies, or see activity in the Boston Harbor. Each scenario will be run multiple times, and organizers urge residents not to be alarmed."

The drills, which included hostage situations, HazMat incidents and a movie theater shooting, brought together emergency officials from the city, state and federal government, as well as from the Boston Police, SWAT teams, the Fire Department, EMS, local hospitals, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, the Coast Guard. All in all, there were over 600 participants in the November drill, from over fifty different departments and agencies.

"What the Urban Shield program does is test it all at the same time -- bomb squads working, swat teams working, fire, HazMat, search and rescue, command centers activated, all your radio systems, hospitals activated -- everyone's kind of working together," says Baker, who worked closely with the city to execute the simulation. "That's where you start to find your gaps -- who can't speak to whom on the radio. You identify the real problems when you get everyone together."

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Police are seen on the roof of a building overlooking Boylston Street where explosions went off at the 117th Boston Marathon in Boston, Massachusetts April 15, 2013. (Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters)

The drills are intended to be strikingly lifelike. Urban Shield has worked with Strategic Operations, a Hollywood effects company that also helps prepare army medics for the battlefield. (Their disaster scenario staff, Baker says, include an amputee.) With a generous helping of moulage, their drills aim to force officials to confront both the logistical and atmospheric challenges of a disaster.

"The leadership is outstanding," Baker says, referring to Boston. "I have found that they are proactive and forward thinking – they invested a lot of time and energy in getting ready for something that they never thought would happen."

Speaking of the Urban Shield program in a video released in September, Daniel Linskey, superintendent-in-chief of the Boston Police Department, sounded oddly prescient. "You have to train for things that may be out of the ordinary," he said, "because you can't wait for them to happen to be ready."

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Nationwide, the hierarchy of emergency management can be staggeringly complicated, and the varying power structures within U.S. states — think of how L.A. County contains 88 cities, while New York City contains five counties — make it difficult to generalize about who calls the shots.

"Even local businesses these days have response plans in place."

For example: Boston has an Emergency Operations Center run out the city's Office of Emergency Management. Massachusetts has a State Emergency Operations Center, run out of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency. The MBHSR (which runs the Boston Regional Intelligence Center) is a federal jurisdiction that contains nine cities.

What began as the Cold War-era Office of Civil Defense has long since evolved into alphabet soup, which poses two related problems for disaster planners: first, how do all these agencies communicate when something goes wrong, and second, and more importantly, how does the DHS begin to regulate and standardize city responses, making it easier for the federal government to lock up with local jurisdictions during crises?

Since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, experts say, collaboration and communication between

agencies and jurisdictions has been one DHS's highest priorities. "Government agencies are better at talking to each other, coordinating, cooperating," says Stevan Weine, a psychiatry professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago who studies counterterrorism and resilience. "They're better at partnering with other entities, local communities, the business community."



Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents arrive at the scene after explosions near the finish line of the Boston Marathon in Boston, Massachusetts April 15, 2013. (Neal Hamberg/Reuters)

Though every city has an all-hazard plan by one name or another, it can be difficult to predict how various authorities will interact in a time of crisis. "Coordination is key," Nelson says. Boston's MBHSR, like many regional DHS jurisdictions, is working to implement the National Incident Management Program (NIMS), a national framework for disaster reporting and response.

"When you talk about disasters, it's all about partnerships," says Ken Kondo, a program specialist at the Los Angeles County Office of Emergency Management. Training exercises are indispensable. Last month, Kondo says, L.A. County performed an exercise in response to an imagined 7.8-magnitude earthquake, working out hypotheticals with the National Guard, the Red Cross and dozens of city and county departments in between.

Not every effort at integration across departments has gone so smoothly. In 2003, DHS began to develop a network of "fusion centers," cross-agency intelligence outlets designed to assist law enforcement, public safety, emergency response, and other regional authorities in "preventing, protecting against, and responding to crime and terrorism." The program has had its growing pains: a 2012 Senate investigation found that fusion centers mostly gathered "irrelevant, useless or inappropriate intelligence," and often [spent money frivolously](#).

The Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC), one of 77 U.S. fusion centers, was not available for comment this week. But Mike Sena, the President of the National Fusion Center Association, who defended the program after the Senate report, said the BRIC was designed to operate in exactly the sort of inter-agency crisis situation occurring in Boston "This is what fusion centers were built for," Sena [told the Wall Street Journal](#).



Officials work on Boylston St. three days after two explosions hit the Boston Marathon in Boston, Massachusetts. (Lucas Jackson/Reuters)

The DHS has also strived to institute a system of best practices across cities. According to Cytel's James Baker, the impetus for this is obvious: "If we're doing it one way, and you're doing it another way, we should figure out which way is better."

But given the variations in the power structure, not to mention the geographic and structural differences between cities, a standard municipal operating procedure is, for now, beyond reach. "Every city has its unique requirements," Nelson says. Additionally, resource allocation varies widely. (New York City receives nearly one-third of UASI funding; many of the country's populous metros do not receive any at all.)

FEMA's "Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101" [[PDF](#)], released in 2010, tentatively positions itself as a textbook for emergency operations plans -- while acknowledging the critical differences between cities, and the virtues of bottom-up disaster planning (my italics): "This Guide recognizes that many jurisdictions across the country have *already* developed EOPs that address many emergency management operations. Therefore, CPG 101 establishes no immediate requirements, but suggests that the next iteration of all EOPs follow this guidance."



Figure 3.1: Traditional Functional EOP Format

Above, a "functional" emergency operations plan format, which FEMA estimates is the most commonly used EOP. Courtesy FEMA "Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101."

The [Emergency Management Accreditation Program](#) (EMAP) further encourages a convergence of local and state planning strategies. Established in 2003 under the guidance of DHS and FEMA, EMAP is the country's first accreditation program for all-hazards plans -- the first comparative body that holds all municipal, state, and university emergency plans to a common, respective standard. In November, under the leadership of Rene Fielding, director of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, Boston became one of only [four cities](#) nationwide to receive EMAP accreditation.

DHS-funded programs like Urban Shield also help spread best practices between cities -- as they move from region to region, they share lessons learned. (Two of the EMAP-accredited cities, Boston and Austin, have also held Urban Shield events.) Each Urban Shield simulation also draws dozens of professionals from other, smaller cities, who come to watch and learn.

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Municipal departments also study each other's tactics. While a city like Boston might have a hard time learning from New York City -- the world's most sophisticated police force is actually [too good to be helpful](#) (they have over a dozen foreign operatives, for example, and in some countries [rivaling the CIA for intelligence](#)) -- it can draw lessons from elsewhere.

For U.S. cities, Israel is a particular area of focus. In October, officials from ten U.S. police departments (though not Boston) [traveled](#) to Israel to study counterterrorism, security and resilience. And Israel is a case study for more than just police: Mass General Hospital in Boston, which received dozens of victims from the Marathon bombings, had previously [consulted](#) Israeli doctors to "revamp their disaster-response planning."

Resilience, in particular, is one area in which the Israelis excel -- and one that U.S. authorities have been [eager to import to U.S. disaster areas](#).



A member of the SWAT team trains a gun on an apartment building during a search for the remaining suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings in Watertown, Massachusetts April 19, 2013. (Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters)

"When you think about political violence, there's 'How do we stop it?', and if we can't stop it, 'How do we respond?'" says Victor Asal, director of the Homeland Security Certificate concentration at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy. "One of the components is resilience – how do you get back to the way things were. And that's different than finding out who did it."

"In Jerusalem, when a terrorist attack happens," he adds, "if you walk by six or 12 hours later, you wouldn't know it. They clean it up and they get people going."

The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, [writing in Bloomberg View](#) on Tuesday, also cited Israeli resilience. A decade ago, arriving at a Jerusalem cafe the day after a terrorist attack there killed seven people, he found the scene nearly indistinguishable from any other day. "There is no satisfactory solution to the problem of mass anonymous violence," he writes. "As a result, resilience becomes the paramount response. Keeping your wits about you as individuals, as a government and as a culture is what counts."

Whether today's Boston lockdown, prompted by the manhunt for Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, constitutes a necessary security tactic or a failure of resilience is already the subject of considerable debate. "A shelter-in-place of this magnitude is unheard of," says Nelson, who could not think of a parallel occurrence in recent U.S. history. It might be the first time since the Watts Riots of 1965 that so large an urban area has been placed on lockdown.

Keywords: Boston, London, New York, management, emergency, hazards, preparedness, plan, Boston, Disaster



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