

# Concerns over the quality and effectiveness of counter-terrorism training for UK public places

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Credit: King's College London

There is little evidence that counter-terrorism training for staff in crowded places in Britain is effective with the current approach seeming to be "quantity over quality," a new study finds.

The UK introduced a range of training and awareness events targeted at staff employed in busy crowded places in the hope of preventing attacks, helping workers to cope at the time of an incident, and supporting recovery afterwards.

However, new research by Dr. Dylan Aplin, of the School of Security Studies, prompted by the Manchester Arena [terrorist attack](#) of 2017, found there is little evidence the current training is achieving these aims, and he warns how increasing the quantity of sessions has been to the detriment of quality.

He hopes his findings will lead to improved counter terrorism (CT) training, that meets the needs of workers and focuses specifically on the most vulnerable crowded places within which they work. He also wants improved CT training and exercising to be a key part of the new Protect Duty, also known as "Martyn's law," which is currently making its way through the UK parliament.

"Since 2004 a staggering number of CT training events have been delivered across the length and breadth of the UK without audit. It is now time to understand what organizational learning has taken place through structured and regular testing and exercising, devised in partnership with particularly the private security industry, to ensure the enhanced resilience in our public spaces," says Dr. Dylan Aplin, visiting research fellow in the Department of War Studies.

In 2004, the UK approach to protecting soft targets evolved to include training and awareness of staff employed in busy crowded places because the landscape changed with more lone attackers using low-sophistication methods and short-term planning. It also became clear that workers would be the first on the scene of an attack.

This led to 10 portable training and awareness products devised through

a partnership between the Centre for the Protection of the National Infrastructure and the National Counter Terrorism Security Office, with sessions delivered by the Police Service. Subsequently the training was revised and expanded to offer more sessions, increasingly done in partnership with private business.

Dr. Aplin's research, published in [Security Journal](#) and [The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles](#), was the first study to take an evidence-based approach to examining the design, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of CT training.

He assessed the effectiveness and quality of the training on offer through interviews with those commissioning the sessions and focus groups of workers in significantly crowded places where workers had received training.

He found a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of CT training activities in improving the resilience of [public spaces](#). The study found the training was seldom integrated with other sessions to increase its effectiveness and there was a lack of evaluation and follow-up to see how it had affected learning, increased knowledge, understanding, or any changes to operational practice.

He concluded that the lack of regard for adult learning theory, the skills and experience that particularly security officers bring to sessions and a complete absence of structured evaluation meant "that the desire to increase the quantity of sessions delivered was to the detriment of quality."

"I was very surprised that although some training products have been phased out, little change has occurred since 2017 when I started my research. Despite the initial findings of the Manchester Arena Inquiry, little regard appears to have yet been taken of the need to improve the

quality of the CT training products themselves, to evaluate the ways in which they are delivered and understand how effective they have been in improving the resilience of what are now known as Publicly Accessible Locations (PALS)," says Aplin.

He said his findings reflect similar shortcomings identified in the 2021 public inquiry into the Manchester Arena bombing which found the poorly paid staff undertook sparse training, in a cursory manner, often just online and with little application of learning.

He has shared his findings with the UK security agencies in a bid to improve how training is devised and delivered and he wants to see improved evaluation of the sector and training being offered.

He hopes his recommendations will be considered as part of the new "Martyn's Law," named after Martyn Hett, who was killed alongside 21 others in the Manchester Arena attack, which he said will potentially transform the CT training landscape, potentially signaling a shift from Security Service and police-led programs to industry-led CT [training](#) for protecting Publicly Accessible Locations (PALS).

**More information:** Dylan Aplin, Counter-terrorism training for business in UK crowded places: is the desire for quantity to the detriment of quality?, *Security Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1057/s41284-023-00393-2](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-023-00393-2)

Dylan Aplin, A question of credibility: A focus group study examining the experiences of workers attending counter-terrorism training in UK crowded places, *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/0032258X231174992](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X231174992)

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