

New Zealand's Christchurch Mosque Shootings: A Case Study

Introduction: The Christchurch Mosque shootings took place on March 15, 2019, at two Christchurch mosques. White supremacist Brenton Harrison Tarrant entered both mosques consecutively with multiple weapons, shooting down and killing a total of 51 people, leaving another 40 injured. This led to New Zealand gun law reform and scrutiny of the dissemination of dangerous rhetoric through social media.¹

Facts of the Case: It was reported that Tarrant entered Al Noor Mosque first at around 00:40 GMT and began his first attack. He fired shots at about 190 worshippers, starting in the men's prayer area before heading to the women's, for around 6 minutes. He then drove 3 miles to the Linwood Mosque where another 100 worshippers were praying and began his second attack. A few worshippers were able to tackle him and wrestle the weapons away from him, forcing him to flee the scene. Tarrant was then arrested by police and several improvised explosive devices were found on his vehicle and defused. Around 17 minutes of the massacre was live-streamed on Facebook through the gunman's bodycam.² In total, 44 people were killed with 35 injured in the first attack at Al Noor Mosque, and an additional 7 were killed with 5 injured at Linwood Mosque.³ Officials report that Tarrant used five guns, including two shotguns, a lever-action firearm, and two semi-automatic rifles, all of which he had legally purchased with a license. The Australian national had posted a 74-page manifesto of his neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideologies online before the attack and had promoted the live-streaming on his Facebook page as well. The manifesto with his intent to target Muslim immigrants was posted by unnamed persons on Twitter and 8chan beforehand as well. He also posted pictures of the guns he used with neo-Nazi slogans. His aim in this attack was to deter further immigration as he viewed these immigrants as invaders. It was reported that over 40 injured victims were treated for their gunshot wounds at the nearby Christchurch Hospital, and one five-year-old child was transported to Auckland for further treatment.¹ There have been no reports on the financial impacts or infrastructure damages caused by the shootings.

Epidemiological aspects of the event: One mixed-method study was conducted on Christchurch Muslims over the age of 18 to assess the long-term psychosocial impacts to the community after a targeted terrorist attack. This was done with a target sample size of 200, using both self-reporting measures alongside diagnostic interviews by clinicians. The sample size was thus chosen for sufficient power at 80% to note any correlations of 0.2 or a two-tailed p equal to 0.05. Due to the nature of the traumatic events, one such study limitation was the representativeness of the results, as victims may have been reluctant to engage in the study as well as stigma against mental health due in part to cultural differences. The self-report measures included culturally sensitive questions to determine any exposures and impacts as well as the personal wellbeing and coping strategies of the participants. Open-ended questions were also included to assess the interview process's acceptability. This study's first phase is conducted as a longitudinal study and would therefore require follow-up in five years before any further analysis. However, it was anticipated that the response rate of people directly affected by the loss of life during the shootings could not be known and so the representativeness would be compromised, so the analysis of the study's results would use logistic regression to predict mental disorders as a function of pre-event characteristics such as sex and years living in NZ, peritraumatic stress, trauma exposure, and post-event social support and resilience. Ordinary least squares regression analyses would also be employed to anticipate somatic symptoms and grief, as well as post-traumatic growth, as the function of pre-event characteristics, peritraumatic stress, trauma exposure, and post-event social support and resilience.⁴

Management of the event: There was no evidence of active shooter training at the mosque nor any security prior to the attack. However, an independent inquiry into the police response to the attack concluded they were exemplary, arriving at Al Noor mosque within 7 minutes of the first shooting and 6 minutes after the first emergency call, and were able to track Tarrant down to Linwood and identify his vehicle to ram and stop him from further harm. However, there were some issues in the cultural competencies of the police force's response, adding responsibility to ethnic liaison staff. There were also concerns as to respecting the religious burial process of the Muslim victims since the investigation's body identification was delayed. The review also recommended the option to text during an emergency, since calling may draw the attention of the active shooter to the caller.⁵ Amid all the chaos of such a major terrorist attack, the first responders were effective and efficient in their actions, with police quickly securing the areas, evacuating everyone, assisting in assessing the victims for further medical attention, and providing initial medical care. The medical personnel was also rapid to response, with ambulances sending the victims to the hospital promptly. This level of coordination and communication between the police force and ambulance staff helped in saving further lives. This phase was completed within 33 minutes, and 18 ambulances transported 25 patients to the hospital. Twelve of the patients immediately received life-saving treatments, and all subsequent deaths were said to have been for fatal injuries that could not have been averted. Thus it is clear that the medical care response to the shootings was commendable.⁶

In my opinion, the most glaring issue in managing the event was the negligence in the gun laws that allowed for such unfit a person to be able to obtain so many guns. Though added security to mosques during major events like Friday prayer or Eid celebrations that result in many people gathering may have helped in such an instance, it is more important than the weapons available to people with malintent should not be so lethal. If Tarrant had come into the same mosques with the same motive, but only had a knife, it would have been nearly impossible for him to kill and injure so many in the space of a few minutes. Indeed, the royal commission even highlighted how the terrorist's firearm license referee was unsuitable, as he was a gaming friend who was well aware of his harmful ideologies.⁵ Thankfully, New Zealand has already moved to restrict their gun laws further, with lawmakers voting to make the changes in less than a month after the attack. Prime Minister Ardern also banned the selling of all military-style semi-automatic and assault rifles within 6 days of the tragedy.⁷

Communications of the event: The communications of the shootings were broadcasted worldwide on multiple media platforms, with clear chronological records of the events as they unfolded. This was sufficient to inform the public of the dangers, as well as to serve as a warning for other countries should it have instigated more attacks on mosques, or have been part of a larger coordinated terrorist attack. However, there were some concerns about the live-stream video posted by Tarrant on Facebook that was quickly shared globally, which contained graphic content of the gunman shooting and killing the worshippers; the fears were that of disrespecting the victims as well as disseminating racial disharmony through glorifying the attack. This was dealt with appropriately, with New Zealand officials banning and criminalizing the sharing of the video.⁸

Summarize: As one of the deadliest shootings in New Zealand's history, this horrific tragedy placed major scrutiny on previously negligent gun laws and the near indifference to hateful ideologies spread online. It has proven fatal time and time again to allow for such lethal weapons to so easily fall into the hands of volatile individuals. But this attack has also proved how necessary a competent and effective response is in averting further tragedy.

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Case Study Report

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