

Analysing person-exposure patterns in lone-actor terrorism: Implications for threat assessment and intelligence gathering



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The lone-actor terrorist population can be extremely heterogenous and difficult to detect. Intelligence is key to countering this threat. We propose a framework of person-environment interactions which may signal the emergence of motivation.

First, cluster analysis was used to identify different offender profiles across the lone-actor terrorist attack trajectory, conceptualised as relations among propensity, situation, and network (exposure).

Propensity: developmentally relevant characteristics which may impact on future offending

The unstable cluster:

High frequencies of low self-control/impulsivity (85%), difficulties managing anger (80%), inflexibility (62.5%), psychological distress (82.5%), mental illness (70%)

The stable cluster:

Lower frequencies of these indicators

Situation: situational factors relating to an offender's environment or context

The low leakage low stress cluster:

Low frequencies of leakage indicators and situational stressors (i.e. financial problems, recent stressors)

The high leakage high stress cluster:

High frequencies of leakage indicators and situational stressors

The high leakage low stress cluster:

High frequencies of leakage indicators, low frequencies of situational stressors, and evidence of a pre-existing propensity for violence (i.e. acts of violence in the build-up to an attack, a desire to hurt others)

Network: factors relating to ties to other or exposure to terrorism-supportive settings

The lone cluster:

Low frequencies of indicators suggesting ties to other extremists

The connected cluster:

Evidence of connections to other extremists

Second, patterns were identified in how offenders were classified across the three components. The analysis revealed four person-exposure patterns (PEPs): **solitary, susceptible, situational and selection.**

The **solitary PEP** lacks common indicators of a propensity to pursue terrorist action. What indicators are present may not manifest until late in the offending process.

The **susceptible PEP** suggests a style of interaction whereby cognitive susceptibility, manifesting as mental illness, is a key factor in the emergence of the propensity/motivation to commit a terrorist attack. This configuration typifies cases where radicalisation may occur in a short time span.

The **situational PEP** demonstrates how situational stressors may act as warnings of acceleration towards violent action; the challenge being to capture evidence of these stressors and their effects.

The **selection PEP** demonstrates higher frequencies of leakage and antecedent violent behaviours. These offenders may be known to the community or other agencies, suggesting specific opportunities for detection and disruption.