

What do closed source data tell us about lone-actor terrorist behaviour?

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What sets this research apart from most others in this field is the privileged closed-source data that underpins the analysis. Analysts at the UK police's North-West Counter Terrorism Unit collected data on demographic and background characteristics and antecedent event behaviours by examining and coding information contained in police data files, psychological reports (when available), interviews with case officers, intelligence reports, and open-sources for further context within each case. These data sources, unprecedented in the academic study of terrorism, were then de-identified and handed over to researchers at University College London for this analysis. The sample composed 49 individuals who engaged in or planned to engage in lone-actor terrorism within the UK between 1995 and 2015. Included were individual terrorists (with and without command and control links) and isolated dyads.

Ideology

The lone-actor terrorists in this sample subscribed to a range of ideologies. Religiously inspired lone actors constituted the largest set of actors at 51%. This is perhaps unsurprising given how loosely connected al-Qaeda's transnational network(s) became over time, coupled with the rise of ISIS and their focus on lone-actor attacks. Right wing extremists constituted the second largest group, representing 30.6% of the total sample. The third largest grouping was a clustering of individuals driven by nationalist ideas (unrelated to the extreme-right wing), left-wing, and other single issue causes. Our lone-actor terrorist sample was heavily male.

Mental Health

Just less than a third (32.7%) had a history of mental illness or personality disorder. In the vast majority of these cases, the diagnosis had been made before the individual engaged in terrorism-related activities. One third of those with a history of mental illness (10.2% of the full sample), were diagnosed with schizophrenia. A further third (12.2% of the full sample, were diagnosed with a mood disorder). The rest were an assorted collection of personality disorders (2%), intellectual disabilities (4.1%) and unknown. These confirm earlier findings regarding the elevated level of mental disorders, especially schizophrenia, within lone-actor terrorist samples compared with national base rates.

Online Behaviours & Awareness of Intentions

With regard to online behaviours and activity, it was found that, in most cases, other people knew something concerning some aspect of the offender's grievance, intent, beliefs, or extremist ideology prior to the attack or planned attack. In 26.5% of cases, the offender produced letters or public statements prior to the event outlining his/her

beliefs (but not necessarily his/her violent intent); extremist online forums were the most popular choice for such pronouncements. While just over half (51%) of those in this sample interacted face-to-face with members of a wider network, an even larger number (59.2%) did so virtually. Nearly 35% aspired, within their online postings, to copy other terrorists. In 87.8% of cases, there is evidence to suggest that the individual read or consumed literature or propaganda from a wider movement, including online. In fact, at times there appears to be direct knowledge diffusion amongst lone actors within our sample, with data suggesting that 28.6% read or consumed literature or propaganda concerning other lone-actor terrorists. Attack training occurred in a number of ways. While just over 16% received some form of hands-on training, 81.6% learned through virtual sources. In 71.4% of cases, investigators found evidence of bomb-making manuals in the offender's home or on his/her property.

For 63.3% of the sample, there was an identifiable bystander to the individual's planning/preparation behaviours. These are typically individuals who witnessed concerning behaviours (e.g. seeing the offender looking at bomb-making manuals at work) but were not privy to the individual's specific plans and were also not sympathetic to the individual's goals. In 73.5% of cases, the offenders expressed a desire to hurt others. This desire was communicated through either verbal or written statements.

Continuums

The sample was diverse. To illustrate, we plotted each lone-actor against each of Borum et al's (2012) continuums of:

- loneness (the degree to which offenders received assistance)
- direction (the degree of autonomous decision making they displayed)
- motivation (the degree to which the action was ideologically or personally driven)

