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The University of Texas at El Paso



## Violent Extremism in the U.S. and World-Wide Patterns of Terrorism

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## Abstract

The collection of open source data on violent extremism and terrorism has revolutionized our understanding of the characteristics and complexities of violent political action. This essay draws on two data bases on terrorist attacks and perpetrators collected by the START Center at the University of Maryland: the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and the Profiles of Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) data. The GTD begins with a universe of over millions of articles published worldwide in order to identify the relatively small subset of articles that describe terrorist attacks. Our team of researchers convert this pipeline into an unclassified matrix which describes the characteristics of worldwide attacks from 1970 to the present. The PIRUS data instead focuses on individuals who have committed terrorist acts on U.S. soil and includes information on about 1,500 individual perpetrators. In this essay I use the GTD to provide an overview of worldwide and U.S. terrorism trends since 1970. I then examine detailed data from PIRUS on the characteristics of a large sample of individuals who have committed terrorism-related crimes in the United States. I conclude with some implications for policies on countering violent extremism.

### **Terrorist Attacks in the World and in the United States: New Evidence from GTD and PIRUS**

What are the characteristics of world-wide terrorism and how do they compare to attacks in the United States? To address

these questions I introduce two open source data bases drawn from electronic and print media, court records, books and other unclassified sources. First, I present results from a source of information on terrorist attacks around the world called the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Second, I present results from an individual-level database called Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). Both data sets are maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. The GTD contains information on over 150,000 terrorist attacks around the world from 1970 to 2015. PIRUS contains background, demographic, group affiliation and contextual information for 1,473 individuals who committed terrorism-related crimes in the United States from 1948 to 2013.

### **The Global Terrorism Database**

The operational definition of terrorism used by the GTD is the threatened or actual use of illegal force by non-state actors, in order to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal, through fear, coercion or intimidation. In practice, we require that incidents are intentional, entail some level of violence or threat of violence, and have been carried out by subnational actors (for a complete description, see <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>). The GTD excludes most cases of state terrorism and genocide, topics that are important and complex enough to warrant separate attention and data collection.

To compile the GTD, including identifying and systematically recording details of

terrorist attacks, START relies entirely on unclassified sources, primarily electronic and print media. At present, this process begins with a universe of over 2 million articles published daily worldwide, within which a relatively small subset of articles describe terrorist attacks. We use customized search strings to isolate an initial pool of potentially relevant articles, followed by more sophisticated machine learning techniques to further refine the search results. For this subset of articles, additional manual review is required to identify the unique events that satisfy the GTD inclusion criteria and are subsequently researched and coded according to the specifications of the GTD Codebook. For each month of data collection, about 18,000 articles are manually reviewed and about 1,500 attacks are identified and recorded.

### World-Wide Terrorism Trends

A striking feature of worldwide terrorism over the past half century is how much its concentration has changed over time and across regions. This evolution is clearly illustrated by considering total attacks worldwide since 1970. According to the GTD total attacks were relatively infrequent during the early 1970s, with fewer than 1,000 incidents each year until 1977. We observe steady increases, however, throughout the decade; between 1970 and 1979, the number of attacks increased by more than 300%, from 651 to 2,661. This rise is associated especially with high levels of activity during the 1970s in Western Europe and the United States. In particular, 47% of all 1970s attacks included in the GTD occurred in Western Europe. Within Western Europe, more than three quarters of the attacks occurred in just

three countries: the United Kingdom (35%); Italy (22%); and Spain (19%). These numbers are driven by organizations involved in the so-called “Troubles” related to the republic–unionist conflict in Northern Ireland, such as the Irish Republican Army; leftist groups like the Red Brigades in Italy; and the Basque separatists, Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA), in Spain. Meanwhile, 15% of all terrorist attacks during the 1970s recorded by the GTD occurred in the United States. Many of those attacks were perpetrated by left-wing militant groups (e.g., Weather Underground) and other leftists (e.g., student radicals), black nationalists (e.g., Black Panthers), and Puerto Rican nationalists (e.g., Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional, FALN).

During the 1980s, the trends and locations of terrorism changed considerably. The annual frequency continued to increase throughout the 1980s until a distinct peak of more than 5,000 attacks, with smaller peaks in 1984 (over 3,000 attacks) and 1989 (over 4,000 attacks). This steady rise in attacks was due in large part to a surge of attacks in Latin America. More than 55% of all terrorist attacks in the 1980s took place in South America (31%) and Central America and the Caribbean (24%). After 1992, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide dropped dramatically, falling to a 20-year low in 1998. Likely the main reason for this drop-off was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many of the organizations most active in committing terrorist attacks in Latin America during the 1980s were left-wing groups with strong Marxist-Leninist or Maoist sympathies, including the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in

Colombia, and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador. Declines in attacks after 1990 were especially pronounced in El Salvador, where total attacks dropped by 82% from the 1980s to the 1990s, and Guatemala, where attacks dropped by 71% over the same period.

World-wide patterns of terrorist attacks experienced another major transition during the 2000s. Total attacks in 2000 (1,814), the year prior to the 9/11 attacks, were just a few hundred more than the corresponding figure for 1978 (1,526). Total attacks rose sharply in the aftermath of the United States and its allies invading Iraq in 2003. By 2011, total attacks reached 5,065 – nearly the same as the record level experienced in 1992. Since 2011, total attacks have shattered all previous records. In 2013, total attacks stood at 11,999, or 136% higher than the peak in 1992. Another record was set in 2014: total attacks increased by 40% from 2013, reaching the highest level in the entire time period covered by the GTD. These rapid increases in attacks since the late 1990s have produced a strong J-shape curve in the trend line. However, this pattern again changed in 2015 when we observed about a 15% decline in total attacks.

### **Terrorism in the United States**

We can also use the GTD to track terrorist attack trends in the United States over the past half century. If we look at total attacks on US soil from 1970 to 2015 the most apparent observation is that US trends are strikingly different than worldwide trends. US trends also provide strong evidence against the idea that terrorist attacks were increasing rapidly in the years just before

and after 9/11. In fact, the most obvious conclusion from examining US trends from the GTD is that terrorist attacks in the United States are sharply down over the more than four decades included in the GTD. By far, the largest number of total attacks recorded in the United States for a single year (468) happened in 1970, the first year of the series, and the year with the lowest number of total attacks (6) was 2006. Following a large drop after 1970, total attacks hit a much lower peak in the mid-1970s with about 120 attacks per year. Total attacks continued to decline throughout the period spanned by the data, dropping below 50 for the first time in 1983 (44), and below 30 for the first time in 1988 (27).

Perpetrator groups responsible for these terrorist attacks on the US homeland were extremely diverse. Of the US attacks where the GTD includes specific information about the perpetrator (82 percent of attacks in the United States), the ten organizations responsible for the largest number of attacks since 1970 were: the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN; 119 attacks); the New World Liberation Front (NWLF; 86 attacks); the Jewish Defense League (JDL; 74 attacks); the Animal Liberation Front (ALF; 73 attacks); the Earth Liberation Front (ELF; 65 attacks); Omega 7 (54 attacks), the Weather Underground (45 attacks); the Macheteros (37 attacks), the Black Liberation Army (36 attacks); and the Chicano Liberation Front (31 attacks). Many more terrorist attacks in the United States are attributed to general categories of perpetrators, rather than formal organizations. In fact, unidentified far-left militants were responsible for 169 attacks, all of which took place in the early 1970s.

Unidentified anti-abortion extremists were responsible for 168 attacks. While the majority of these attacks took place in the 1980s and 1990s, the groups responsible have not entirely stopped their attacks. Finally, an additional 155 attacks in the United States were carried out by unaffiliated individuals, including such high profile cases as Theodore Kaczynski (the “Unabomber”), Timothy McVeigh, and Nidal Hasan.

### Domestic Political Extremism in the United States

While the GTD tracks information on world-wide terrorist attacks, PIRUS instead focuses on individuals who have committed terrorist attacks or terrorism-related crimes in the United States. More specifically, individuals in PIRUS are included for committing ideologically motivated illegal violent or non-violent acts, joining a designated terrorist organization, or associating with an organization whose leader(s) has/have been indicted of an ideologically motivated violent offense. We define these cases as “domestic radicalization” in that most or all of the individuals’ radicalization occurred while they were residing in the United States.

The original PIRUS data were collected in three waves between January 2013 and June 2015. We began by reviewing the publicly available sources, including court documents, online news articles, newspaper archives, open-source non-government reports (e.g., the Southern Poverty Law Center), unclassified government reports (e.g., annual FBI terrorist reports), and existing terrorism-related datasets (e.g., the Global Terrorism Database), and eventually collected data on

1, 473 individuals who met the following criteria: (1) radicalized while living in the United States, (2) espoused or currently espouse ideological motives, and (3) showed evidence that their behavior was linked to the ideological motives they espoused.

Researchers double-coded approximately 10% of the individuals in the data to allow for iterative reliability tests of the data collection process and used the Krippendorff’s alpha procedure to test for inter-rater reliability across the double-coded cases (Krippendorff and Hayes, 2007). The score for the first wave of data collection was 0.68, the score for the second wave was 0.73, and the score for the third wave was 0.76. As a standard for acceptable reliability is 0.7, these scores indicate that the data are reliable and that the coding procedure improved between the three waves of full coding. After comparing the double-coded cases, researchers debated any discrepant coding results and came to an agreement on the coding decision that best represents the information in the available news sources and most closely aligns with the codebook.

### Predicting Violent Political Extremism

The main variable of concern in this section of the essay is whether individuals had engaged in violent or non-violent behavior. Major types of violence included are murder, assault, armed robbery and kidnapping. We also treat as violent those cases where there is strong evidence that individuals were conspiring to kill or injure even if they failed to do so. We treat as non-violent all cases where it is clear from source documents that individuals did not



intend to harm others, including acts of vandalism, illegal protest, fraud, and acts of property destruction where the perpetrators took measures to ensure that no one was injured or killed.

We then turned to the criminology literature to develop a set of potential risk factors for predicting violent political extremism. Based on social control perspectives, we assume that individuals develop bonds that connect them with pro-social society and shield them from deviance (Hirschi, 1969) and that certain life events act as “turning points” to alter or redirect behavioral trajectories (Laub and Sampson, 1993). Social connections that bind individuals to society and prevent violence include work, education, marriage, and military service.

Based on learn perspectives (Akers, 1998) we tested the idea that violent extremism is a learned behavior, that the most important part of this learning happens in small, intimate groups, and that these small groups are the primary drivers of criminal behavior. This reasoning led us to predict that compared to other political extremists, those with radical family members and those with radical peers are more likely to participate in political violence.

We also drew on several other common predictors about criminality. Based on prior research (Monahan, 1992) we expected that individuals with a history of mental illness would be more likely to turn to violent extremism. Based both on research on criminal gangs (Hagedorn, 2007) and those using terrorist tactics (Bloom, 2007), we expected that compared to other extremists, those who are engaged in

competition with rival groups or fellow group members are more likely to participate in violence. Based on a good deal of past research in criminology, we expected that individuals with a prior criminal record are more likely to turn to violent extremism. We also predicted that men will be more likely than women to turn to violent extremism and young people will be more likely than older people to turn to violent extremism. We next did a simple bivariate analysis looking at how each of these variables are related to engaging in violent political extremism.

### **Social Control Measures**

Three of the four social control measures that we examined were significantly associated with violence levels. We found that individuals with a stable employment history were less likely than others to commit acts of violent political extremism. This finding supports the common criminological argument that stable employment is a positive social bonding mechanism that motivates individuals to abstain from violent crime rather than risk sacrificing social capital. While this finding appears to be at odds with some recent accounts of terrorist perpetrators (Piazza, 2006), which generally find a weak or even positive relationship between high socioeconomic status and terrorist activity, terrorism researchers are decidedly mixed when it comes to the relationship between different measures of economic status and participation in terrorist behaviors. Our results show that there may well be a link between stable employment and the suppression of violence within the context of political extremism in the United States.

We also found at the bivariate level, that having more education was related to lower levels of participation in violent extremism and married individuals were less likely to engage in violent extremism. Of the three significant social control measures, stable employment was more important than either education or marital status. Prior military experience was insignificant in the bivariate analysis and those with current military experience were significantly more (not less) likely to engage in violent political extremism.

### Social Learning Measures

Our bivariate analysis provided considerable support for the social learning theory's premise that close social relationships play an important role in the decision to commit extremist violence. As hypothesized, compared to others, individuals who have either radical family members or radical peers are significantly more likely to engage in violent political behavior. Of the two, the connection was stronger for radical peers than radical family members. As prior research suggests (Warr, 2002), individuals who are embedded in tight, insular groups of like-minded peers are particularly susceptible to biasing dynamics and the results suggest that compared to others, such individuals are more likely to move toward extreme violent behavior. This finding is interesting in light of the growing literature on the importance of terrorist attacks engineered by lone actors (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014), who would appear to be less susceptible to the biasing dynamics of radical social networks. However, as Klausen (2015) argues, lone-actors nonetheless often establish close relationships, both virtual and face-to-face,

with peers who contribute to their movement towards violence.

### Mental Illness

In support of psychologically-based theories of crime, we also found that evidence of mental illness was consistently associated with engaging in extremist political violence. As we saw above, recent research on connections between terrorist behavior and mental illness is inconsistent with some researchers claiming no connection (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011) and others (Simi et al., 2015) claiming a positive connection. Our results generally support the latter. It could be that our results are related to the fact that in contrast to most earlier studies, which only examined individuals who engaged in violent political acts, our dependent variable included both violent and non-violent radicalized individuals.

While we find a positive relationship between violence and evidence of mental illness, it is difficult to conclusively point to the mechanism by which it operates. Mental illness might act as a "pull" factor, where it makes an individual more susceptible to ideological propaganda or extremist group coercion. By contrast, it might act as a "push" factor, as labeling theorists would predict, where diagnoses of mental illness limits individuals' participation in conventional society, forcing them to seek acceptance through less pro-social means.

### Rival Groups

Individuals who were members of groups that were in competition with like-minded organizations, or were plagued by internal strife, were no more likely to engage in acts

of violence than other individuals. It may be that outbidding is more salient to extremist violence outside of the United States, where competition over scarce resources is more intense (Bloom, 2004). Moreover, most prior research (Biberman and Zahid, 2016) supporting the outbidding hypothesis has been limited to extremist jihadi groups while our analysis includes extremists from across several ideological perspectives.

### **Criminal Record**

We also found consistent evidence that a prior criminal record was associated with engaging in violent political activity. Importantly, this association was true regardless of whether the prior criminal activity itself was violent; our measure of past criminality included non-violent crimes like drug offenses and larceny. This finding supports the common criminology finding that past crime is often a predictor of future crime, and it suggests that radicalization processes are linked to more common forms of criminality. Indeed, criminal career research (Blumstein, Cohen and Farrington, 1988) shows that a history of criminal violence is predictive of subsequently more severe behavior.

### **Gender and Age**

Finally, as expected the bivariate analysis showed that men and younger individuals were more likely than women and older individuals to engage in violent political extremism. Gender and age are among the strongest predictors of ordinary crime, and indeed they were significantly associated with engaging in violent extremism in the bivariate analysis. However, they were less important than several other variables, including employment history, radical peers, and prior criminal record.

### **Limitations of the Study**

We hasten to add that in this short summary we have concentrated only on simple bivariate relationships. In more detailed analysis (LaFree et al., 2017), several of the bivariate results reported here, education, marital status, radical family members, gender and age were no longer statistically significant. Also, like most open source data bases, PIRUS includes a good deal of missing data which can bias or skew results (Safer-Lichtenstein, LaFree and Loughran, 2017). And finally, while theories of radicalization (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011) conceptualize it as the culmination of an on-going dynamic process, our design does not allow us to measure with precision the temporal ordering of the variables we include. For example, our results provide strong evidence that a stable record of employment reduces the chances that ideological extremists will resort to violent action, but we cannot ascertain precisely how radicalization before exposure might have reciprocally impacted employment.

### **Policy Implications**

Our results are consistent with the conclusion that countering violent extremism (CVE) programs are most likely to succeed if they reflect an evidence-based understanding of extremist violence. First, our finding that stable employment appears to decrease the risk that individuals with politically extreme views will engage in violent behavior has important policy implications. Stable employment often leads to the development of positive social relationships and places demands on individuals' time and attention that can potentially depress extremist activities.

CVE programs that emphasize the acquisition of job-relevant skills may be effective for promoting sustained employment among at-risk individuals.

Second, despite evidence of an increase in lone actor terrorism behavior in the United States (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014), we find that compared to others, individuals whose radicalization occurs within the context of like-minded extremists are at a higher risk of acting violently. As peers organize into small, insular groups, common biasing mechanisms, such as groupthink and in-group/out-group bias, often set in, producing increasingly extreme behaviors. CVE programs and law enforcement interdiction strategies must not overcommit their attention and resources to countering the threat from lone actor terrorists at the expense of overlooking the vital role that peer relationships, both face-to-face and online, play in the radicalization process. Furthermore, programs based on counter-narratives must be aware of the cognitive biases that exist in cliques, most of which make members less responsive to the disconfirming evidence that may be central to counter-narratives.

Third, while documented mental illness is relatively uncommon among extremists (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011), our results indicate that mental health conditions may be linked to high propensities for violent behavior. Researchers must do more to untangle this relationship, while also taking into account a host of other potentially compounding factors, such as heavy drug use (Swartz et al., 1998) or a history of physical or emotional abuse (Jaško, LaFree, and Kruglanski, 2016). Undoubtedly, it is an

encouraging sign that there is an emerging consensus (Weine et al., 2015) among practitioners and researchers that effective CVE efforts can benefit from mental health and social service professionals as stakeholders in prevention and intervention efforts. These experts have an important role to play in working with community leaders through awareness training to recognize at-risk individuals suffering from mental health issues, building trust between communities and law enforcement, and implementing holistic approaches to countering violent extremism as a public health concern.

Finally, we find that individuals who engage in criminal behavior prior to their adoption of extremist beliefs are significantly more likely to attempt or commit acts of violence post-radicalization. Research on the links between crime and terrorist behavior has shown some similarities between terrorist groups and criminal organizations (Shelley and Picarelli, 2002), street gangs and terrorist groups (Pyrooz et al., 2017), and political radicalization within the criminal justice system (Hamm, 2008). However, our finding that having a criminal history is a predictor for engaging in violent extremist behavior suggests that domestic CVE policy should leverage existing programs that are geared toward steering at-risk youth away from crime. It also suggests that there may be CVE-relevant benefits to rehabilitation programs for non-ideological criminals. Efforts to reduce recidivism among inmates recently released from the criminal justice system may also be useful for preventing the most severe types of behavior among radicalized individuals.



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