Lone Actor Terrorist Use of the Internet & Behavioural Correlates
Context...

PAPER
PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Paul Gill, Ph.D.; John Horgan, Ph.D.; and Paige Deckert, M.S., A.B.D.

Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the sociodemographic network characteristics and antecedent behaviors of 119 lone-actor terrorists. This marks a departure from existing analyses by largely focusing upon behavioral aspects of each offender. This article also examines whether lone-actor terrorist events differ based on their ideologies or network connectivity. The analysis leads to seven conclusions. There was no uniform profile identified. In the time leading up to most lone-actor terrorist events, other people generally knew about the offender’s grievances, extremist ideology, views, and/or intent to engage in violence. A wide range of activities and experiences preceded lone actors’ plots or events. Many, but not all lone-actor terrorists were socially isolated. Lone-actor terrorists regularly engaged in a detectable and observable range of activities with a wider pressure group, social movement, or terrorist organization. Lone-actor terrorist events were rarely sudden and impulsive. There were distinguishable behavioral differences between subgroups. The implications for policy conclude this article.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, terrorism, terrorist behavior, lone-actor terrorism, lone-wolf terrorism, typology, motivation

This article analyzes the sociodemographic network characteristics and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists leading up to their planning or conducting a terrorist event. Previous research has examined the strategic qualities of lone-actor terrorists (CTA, 2011), perceptions of the threat posed by lone actors (1), the narratives that promote lone-actor terrorist events (2), lone-actor terrorist attack characteristics and impacts (3), and individual case studies (for example (4–6)). This research marks a departure from that domain because it largely focuses upon behavioral aspects of each offender.

This paper also examines differences between subgroups of lone-actor terrorists. In the limited literature that currently exists, offenders tend to be depicted in a binary fashion: subjects either “are” or “are not” a lone-actor terrorist. Lone-actor terrorists are therefore typically treated in a homogeneous manner, an exception being Pantucci’s (7) typology. Anecdotally, however, there are a number of easily distinguishable differences in lone-actor terrorists’ characteristics, behaviors, and connectivity with other groups. Specifically, this article examines whether the characteristics and behaviors of lone-actor terrorists differ based on their ideologies, network connectivity, or level of operational success.

The questions explored in this study are the following:

- What, if any, demographic characteristics define lone actors?
- What ideologies are associated with lone-actor terrorist events?
- To what extent are close friends and family or wider networks of coconspirators typically aware of the lone-actor terrorist’s intent to engage in terrorist-related offenses?
- To what extent are coconspirators typically involved in the planning stages of the offender’s intended terrorism-related activities?
- How socially isolated do lone-actor terrorist offenders tend to be?
- Is there a significant difference between lone offenders and those who commit terrorism-related offenses on behalf of a group?
- Are there key life history events that may be relevant in understanding the development of lone actors?
- Are there differences between lone-actor terrorists based on their ideology or network connectivity?

1Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London, 35 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9EZ, U.K.
2School of Criminology and Justice Studies, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Health and Social Sciences Building, 1 University Avenue, MA 01854.
3Department of Psychology, Moore Building, Pennsylvania State University

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• The study came to 7 main conclusions...
• 1. No lone actor terrorist profile
• 2. Generally, other people knew of the plot
• 3. No single route into lone actor terrorism
• 4. Detectable range of behaviours
• 5. Not all socially isolated
• 6. Differences between sub-types incl. ideology
• 7. Rarely sudden & impulsive
to have been involved in political violence or criminality. Just less than half (47.9%) interacted face-to-face with members of a wider network of political activists, and 35.3% did so virtually. In 69.1% of the cases, there is evidence to suggest that the indi-

Training for the plots typically occurred through a number of ways. Approximately a fifth of the sample (21%) received some form of hands-on training, while 46.2% learned through virtual sources. In approximately half the cases (50.4%), investigators
Virtual Activities

- Why engage in virtual interaction?
- Why engage in virtual learning?

- Drawbacks?

- Are these drawbacks apparent in face-to-face interactions?
Lone-ACTOR Terrorism & The Internet

• Finding 1 – Internet not related to a linear rise in lone-actor terrorism
Lone-A ctor T errorism & The Internet

• Finding 2 – However, it appears there is a substitution effect at play

Learnt Online- 46.2% overall

Interacted Online- 37% overall
What differences might we expect between...

• Lone actors who learnt online vs. those who did not?

• Lone actors who interacted online vs. those who did not?

• In terms of demographics & other behaviours
What we found...Finding 3

- Those who learnt through virtual sources...
  - Younger
  - No criminal conviction
  - AQ-inspired
  - Religious convert
  - No mental illness
  - No history of violence

- No mil experience
- Sought legitimization
- Accessed Bomb Manuals
- Tried to recruit others
- Indiscriminate target
- Failed to conduct attack
What we found...Finding 4

• Those who interacted through virtual sources...

• Made Verbal Statements to Others About Intent
• Recently Joined a Wider Movement
• Interacted with Others Face-to-Face

• No mil experience
• Sought legitimization
• Accessed Bomb Manuals
• Tried to recruit others
• Indiscriminate target
• Failed to conduct attack
Where next...?

- Are there particular questions we should be asking that could help inform practice with regards to lone actors?