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Political Violence and Unemployment: Socio-Economic Strain as a Potential Source of Terrorism

Reinmar C. Freis-Beattie
West Virginia University

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Political Violence and Unemployment: Socio-Economic Strain as a Potential Source of Terrorism

Reinmar C. Freis-Beattie

Thesis submitted to the
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Lisa Dilks, PhD., Chair
Jason Manning, PhD.
Joshua Woods, PhD.

Division of Sociology and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Political Violence and Unemployment: Socio-Economic Strain as a Potential Source of Terrorism

Reinmar Freis-Beattie

Why do some people commit acts of violence which are politically or ideologically motivated? Furthermore, why does the United States see such great variation in the number of terrorist incidents from year to year? To help answer these questions, Robert Agnew's (2010) General Strain Theory of Terrorism lays out a foundational model to explain what might cause terrorism. In contrast to previous strain theories, General Strain Theory of Terrorism argues that the strains most likely to result in terrorism are collective strains which are (a) high in magnitude, with civilians affected; (b) perceived as unjust; and (c) inflicted by more powerful 'others'. Collective strains affect groups or entire societies, rather than specific individuals. Collective strains increase negative emotions and attitudes, radicalize groups and individuals, contribute to a collective orientation and response, and facilitate the social learning of terrorism, while also reducing social control and access to legal coping means.

To test this theory, I argue that economic strains constitute collective strains. From this point I tested a portion of GST, focusing my analysis within the US, and examining the conduit from economic strain to increasing negative emotions to domestic terrorism using a path analysis of macro-level data collected from public sources. The analysis showed moderate support for theoretical assumptions. Some macroeconomic indicators such as unemployment can lead to domestic terrorism, while others such as poverty do not. As unemployment in the US rises, so do negative emotions and attitudes, and through this, incidents of domestic terrorism. Of course, economic factors are only one possible source of strain, and negative emotions are only one mediator in Agnew's model. From this we can conclude that General Strain Theory of Terrorism may be a worthwhile avenue for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Although it started out like any other Wednesday, April 19, 1995 would soon become one of the most tragic days in American history. On that fateful day at 9:00am Central Time a massive explosion from a 4,800 pound bomb inside a Ryder truck ripped through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and wounding almost 700 more (Sofer 2012). The explosion was so massive that it damaged buildings within a 16 block radius, and until the attacks of September 11th, 2001, was the most violent terrorist incident to ever strike US soil. The attacker, Timothy McVeigh, was a white supremacist who believed that the Federal government was attacking the civil liberties of people like him and that a race war was on the horizon. Oklahoma City was certainly the most dramatic event of domestic terrorism in the United States, but tragic events like this occur more often than we would care to admit, and there never seems to be a consensus as to the rhyme or reason.

Every year, acts of violence occur in the United States which are distinct from traditional crimes. Acts of terrorism such as these are broadly defined as politically and socially motivated acts of violence which frequently target civilians or symbols of the US government. In recent decades, and especially since the events of September 11, 2001, terrorism has become a hot-button issue in world politics and the results affect our daily lives. Though catastrophic events such as 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing stand out most in the media, in reality terrorism is much closer than we realize, often occurring as small-scale events orchestrated and carried out by US citizens. The bigger terrorist threat to the United States comes from within, rather than from an external aggressor. According to the FBI, between 1980-2001 about two-thirds of all terrorist plots were classified as "domestic", and that figure rose to 95% between 2002 and 2005

(FBI 2005). Understanding and solving the social problems of terrorism and political violence has become a top priority of both governments and scholars.

While the root causes of terrorism are controversially debated, one of the more popular ideas suggests that socio-economic strain may be a contributing factor. An unclassified Department of Homeland Security (DHS) report from April 2009 predicted an increase in domestic terrorism citing the economic climate, high unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and many returning military veterans as likely influences. This report draws many of its conclusions based on perceived similarities to the years leading up to the Oklahoma City bombing (DHS 2009).

The goal of this research is to evaluate the validity of the relationship between economic strain and terrorism. Some scholars conceptualize strain as pressure or stress exerted on an individual from an external force, which provoke individuals to engage in certain deviant behaviors (Agnew 1938). Robert Agnew (1992) described strain as "relationships where others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated (p.48)." Within this definition, strain can be interpreted as an event, an interpretation of stimuli, and emotional responses. In terrorism research, strain is frequently used synonymously with 'grievances' (Agnew 2010). Economic strain is, therefore, strain or grievances which result from economic conditions or forces.

Specifically, I examine this relationship under the framework of Agnew's General Strain Theory of Terrorism (2010). Agnew's theory focuses on how collective strains influence terrorist type behaviors, laying out the specific conditions or "paths" that lead to terrorism, such as radicalization, reduced social control, and increased negative emotions. Testing all the possible "paths" to terrorism is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I focus specifically on the role of negative emotions and attitudes and in connection to economic strains to subsequent terrorist

acts. I utilize data from the Global Terrorism Database, Stimson's Public Mood Variable, Gallup's Most Important Problem, the US Census Bureau, and Bureau of Labor Statistics to assess the validity of a path model connecting economic strain, negative emotion, and terrorism.

Though many scholars have theorized about the possible causes of terrorism (Black 2004, Ehrlich and Liu 2002, Pape 2005, Sageman 2004, Schinkel 2009), currently there is little consensus among empirical studies evaluating the validity of theoretical work. Regarding the principles Robert Agnew's theory, the literature is divided in its attempts to evaluate these ideas, with some studies finding a relationship, and others unable to reveal any significant connection between economic deprivation and terrorism. At minimum, this study will attempt to add to the current body of research, by empirically evaluating a specific theoretical perspective.

On a more practical side, since terrorism and political violence are real-world problems taken seriously by policy makers, it is essential that the root causes are examined as closely as possible, as many anti-terrorism policies affect our daily lives. In the seemingly unending period of economic strain in which the US and much of the rest of the world is experiencing, it is also pertinent to evaluate whether or not we can predict if levels of politically motivated violence will rise. Since the onset of the economic recession in 2008, the political climate in the US has steadily become more polarized and hostile. As unemployment has risen so have tempers, and the more radical voices in our system have moved themselves to center stage (Przybyla 2011). If the hypotheses presented in this research are correct, then policy makers should consider combatting economic strain to be of paramount importance in reducing and preventing political violence and terrorism within the United States.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The terrorism literature is a huge body of both theoretical and empirical research which is growing rapidly. Searching Google Scholar for the word "terrorism" currently returns over 700,000 academic sources. However, the current body of research is divided regarding the possible root causes of terrorism and politically motivated violence. In this section, I attempt to address some of the prevalent ideas and prominent studies upon which this research is built.

Theories of Terrorism

Explanations of terrorism are as wide reaching as the social sciences will allow. Perspectives from every discipline exist, whether psychological, political, economic, or sociological. Some of the prominent and relative perspectives are discussed below.

An Identity Theory approach explaining religiously and ethnically motivated terrorism asserts that the interaction between cultural identity, social identity, and personal identity can be deterministic in whether an individual participates in terrorist activity (Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, 2009). This approach focuses on terrorism more as a cultural phenomenon, namely when religious or ethnic groups such as Al Qaeda, the PLO, Chechen Rebels, and IRA engage in terrorist activities. However these ideas do not effectively explain cases of domestic terrorism in the United States. A similar, though more relevant theoretical approach, hypothesizes that group radicalization is a mechanism which can lead to terrorism (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Under this pretense, terrorism is the outcome of a process of inter-group conflict.

The logic of framing terrorism through rational choice has been argued by multiple authors (Caplan 2006; Turk 2004). The rational choice model argues that terrorism is not a haphazard or indiscriminate phenomenon, but rather one of many means to a social or political end, and with

potential risks and gains strategically calculated. In this framework terrorism is seen as a political act, used similarly to protests, voting behavior, and even warfare.

However, other scholars feel that the rational choice model, used primarily by political scientists and economists, is too narrow and simplistic (Schinkel 2004). Instead, this counter-argument posits that the social and historical context of terrorism is more important to understanding the problem. Rationalism in this sense is better defined through the group rather than the individual, where the group seeks to maximize the effect of limited resources for social or political gain (Schinkel 2004). Essentially, when these perspectives are taken together, terrorism is not a random act, but one that is employed to achieve a goal. Therefore it should be at least somewhat predictable.

These perspectives are focused primarily on the choice of terrorism as a method to address grievances or accomplish a goal. Rather than evaluate the factors which shape the choice to employ one tactic over another, I instead seek to evaluate variables which shape the impetus of terrorism. What are the root causes which influence groups and individuals to become violent in the first place? To examine this aspect of terrorism, I turn to another school of thought that focuses on the role of structural variables and how such forces may "push" individuals and groups to turn to violence. This type of theoretical framework posits that political violence and terrorism in particular, are the result of broader socio-economic trends (Ehrlich and Liu 2002). Within this perspective, Social Strain Theory, which has its roots in Merton's Anomie Theory (1938) and later updated by Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), offers an explanation of terrorism in the United States.

Social Strain Theories and Terrorism

Originating in the structuralist perspective and continuing in the tradition of Durkheim (1895), strain theory approaches have traditionally been used by criminologists to explore the link between deviance and socio-economic disadvantage (Cohen 1965). The main principle in strain theory and its sub-theories is that structural, socio-economic factors put strain on individuals which "pushes" them into deviance (Merton 1938). Merton's Anomie Theory focused on the influence of roles, class, and cultural factors along with structural conditions, on individual deviance. Merton theorized that failure to achieve specified social goals, such as the acquisition of material wealth and status, produces strain on individuals. In order to cope with strain, individuals use legitimate or illegitimate means to accomplish these social objectives, or abandon these goals, or both in five different coping strategies: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.

Despite its popularity, Anomie Theory is not without its weaknesses. The primary shortcoming of the theory is that it focuses primarily on the acquisition of material wealth as the social goal. This approach fails to explain non-utilitarian, ideological, or malicious crimes which do not result in material gain (Cohen 1997). To address the problems with Merton's original idea, Agnew re-focused strain theory and asserted that strain could come from many places, focusing instead on norms, emotions, and the individual's immediate social environment (1992).

Agnew's General Strain Theory differs from Merton in a few key ways. Metron's Anomie Theory focuses on macro-level forces, while Agnew's theory focuses more on micro- level forces of social learning and immediate social environments. This refocusing and individualizing of strain from the macro- to micro-level is the primary contribution of General Strain Theory to the strain literature. In addition, Anomie Theory does not adequately address the role of emotion

in crime (Agnew 1992; Cohen 1965), which Agnew sought to rectify with General Strain Theory, arguing that structure and the social environment pressure individuals to commit deviant acts with emotions as their primary mediator (Agnew 1992).

The same ideas about structure, strain, and social environment can be applied to terrorism, from the point of view that terrorism is a response to social and political grievances. The strain produced by structural and environmental factors pushes individuals and groups towards violence. These views have become popular enough that Agnew himself has proposed a "General Strain Theory of Terrorism" (GST) which offers a customized version of strain theory specifically for terrorism. The key difference between GST and other strain-based theories is that GST focuses on "collective strains", whereas other approaches focus on strains as perceived by individuals (Agnew 2010). In other words, in previous theories strain was conceptualized as something that is felt only by individuals (Merton 1938; Agnew 1992), GST emphasizes strain as something felt by groups, and societies as a whole, in addition to the strain felt by individuals (Agnew 2010). This idea of collective experience of strain is central to how strain can translate into terrorism under the GST framework. With GST, these ideas of structure, social control, and social environment are applicable to both the micro- and macro-levels, and encompass a much broader scope than either Anomie Theory or General Strain Theory, while staying focused on a particular social phenomena.

According to Agnew collective strains must be, "(a) high in magnitude, with civilians affected; (b) perceived as unjust; and (c) inflicted by significantly more powerful *others*, including 'complicit' civilians, with whom members of the strained collectivity have weak ties. (2010: 136)" He also argues that the likelihood of terrorism is amplified by these collective strains via increasing negative emotions, decreasing social control, diminishing ability to cope

through legal means, the cultivation of the social learning of terrorism, and a contribution to a collective emphasis and reaction. In other words, the link between the source of the collective strain and terrorism is not a direct one but, rather it follows one or more indirect paths. In this model, strain is transferred to groups and individuals via the various paths, similar to how a Newton's cradle transfers energy across several spheres while only visibly affecting the ends. According to GST, terrorism can occur through any of the paths, however the likelihood of terrorism increases as multiple paths are engaged (Agnew 2010).

Under Agnew's model (2010), collective strains affect a group or entire society. As such, individuals experience the strain as it is diffused through the collective, meaning that although their lives may only be indirectly connected to or displaced by the strain, the effects are still felt as very real, even if only vicariously. Societal level strains still create a sense of fear, worry, anger, and frustration in individuals. For example, one must not become unemployed to be fearful, angry, or frustrated about a rise in unemployment. Seeing those around you experience strain, or hearing daily accounts of the effects of strain which exists on the collective level is enough to evoke these feelings in individuals.

GST also postulates that not all strains are felt in the same way, and that very few people respond to strain with violence. Individuals and groups experience radicalization, increased negative emotions, and a collective emphasis and reaction. At the same time, collective strains reduce social control, reduce legal coping means, and facilitate the social learning of terrorism. This particular mix of forces is, according to Agnew, most likely to result in terrorism (2010). Figure 1 plots the various paths to terrorism from collective strain in Agnew's GST model.

Figure 1: Visual Conception of Agnew's (2010) General Strain Theory of Terrorism
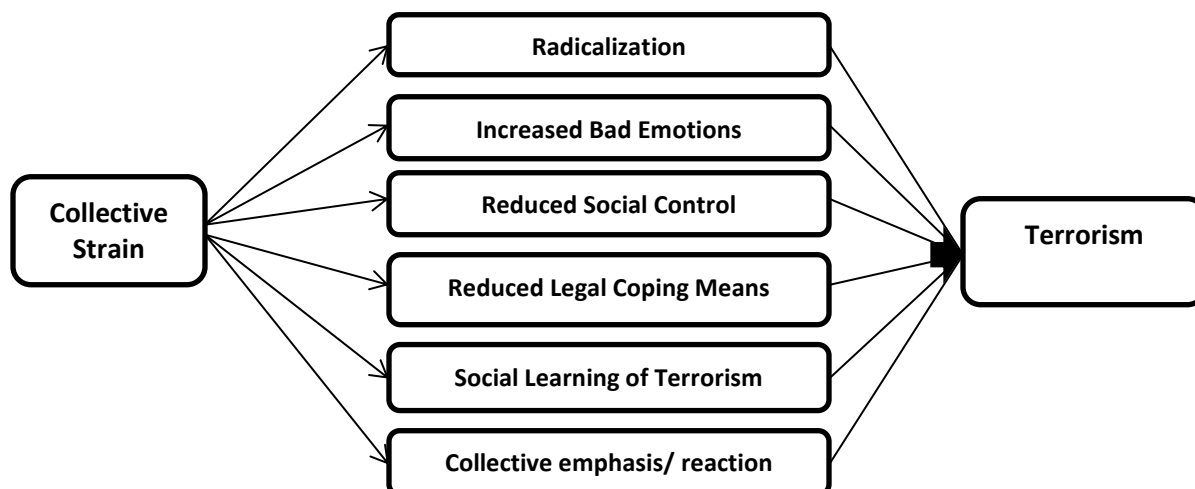
Economic Conditions as Collective Strains

In any empirical research, one of the biggest problems is translating abstract, theoretical concepts into concrete, operational variables that can be directly measured and tested. While the idea of collective strains is rather simple in itself, much of the work of operationalization has been left up to the researcher to define what constitutes a "collective strain." In addition, the task of operationalization also involves asking which collective strains are likely to result in terrorism. Furthermore, as of the final draft of this paper, no previous research exists that empirically evaluates GST. This lack of previous research exacerbates the challenge of operationalization of the model's key constructions but make the current research the first attempt to assess the validity and accuracy of Agnew's GST model (2010).

In this paper I argue that economic strains, specifically those resulting from macroeconomic forces, constitute collective strains as defined by Agnew's criteria (2010). The economic atmosphere since 2008 is (a.) high in magnitude, affecting the entire country; (b.) perceived as unjust, especially with mass unemployment (Sanders, 2012); and (c.) inflicted by significantly more powerful "others", such as the Federal Government and Wall Street as well as specific politicians and bankers who, arguably, have weak ties to the collective (Gibbs 2009). From this perspective, I assert that economic strain produced from structural forces such as a bad economy and high unemployment affect attitudes at the group and individual levels. Individuals and groups affected are then affected through one or more of Agnew's "paths to terrorism" thereby increasing the likelihood of domestic political violence.

Although this research is the first to investigate the relationship between economic variables and terrorism under Agnew's GST framework, it is not the first to explore this connection between economic factors and terrorist acts. But these studies often yield contradictory results. Generally, studies of the relationship between economic variables and violence, including terrorism, use a frustration-aggression approach. Studies in this vein which focus on economic factors such as relative deprivation have been used to explain rebellions in the past (Gurr 1970). This approach, and others emphasizing the role of grievances, echoes many of the ideas found in the contemporary strain based approach to politically motivated violence.

For instance, Weeber and Rodahever (2003) used a content analysis of US militia movement web forum posts to determine whether social or economic strain was a precipitating factor in their membership rates. Their findings support the principles of Smesler's Theory of Collective Behavior, an earlier strain-based approach, and revealed that the majority of militia members

experienced socio-economic strain before or during their membership (Weeber and Rodeheaver 2003).

A study by Burgoon (2006) argues that social welfare policies reduce incidents of international and domestic terrorism. The research hypothesizes that social welfare policies diminish support for terrorism by reducing contributing factors such as poverty, inequality, economic insecurity, and religious-political extremism, and that countries with higher social welfare spending will experience fewer domestic terrorist attacks and fewer of their citizens participate in terrorism as a result of this decrease in socio-economic strain. These hypotheses were supported by a regression analysis that examined terrorism and social welfare spending on a global scale with the country as the unit of analysis (Burgoon, 2006).

Another relevant article in support of the link between socio-economic factors and terrorism hypothesizes that countries with higher levels of minority discrimination will experience more incidents of domestic terrorism, and that more developed countries will experience lower levels of domestic terrorism (Piazza 2011). This study found that minority economic discrimination and general economic conditions were significant predictors of levels of domestic terrorism using a regression analysis (Piazza 2011). However, an earlier study by Piazza performed a cross-national analysis, but did not reveal any relationship between economic indicators and terrorism (Piazza 2006).

Another study using public opinion polls from the West Bank and Gaza Strip to analyze attitudes in support of terrorism did not find a reduction in support of terrorism among those with greater socio-economic resources (Krueger and Malekova, 2003). Krueger and Malekova (2003) also looked at Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Lebanon during the 1980s and 90s. This analysis

did not reveal an empirical relationship between either economic factors or education and participation in terrorism.

Clearly, there is some contention as to what role economic strain plays in influencing terrorism and how influential it is. My project seeks to add this small but important piece to the literature on terrorism and economic strain in two ways: (1), empirically evaluating a portion of GST and (2) addressing some of the limitations in previous empirical research. Many of the studies also examined terrorism on a global level rather than within a specific country, which I believe weakens their results by failing to account for differences in social, political, and economic factors which vary greatly between countries. It is possible that economics may be a more powerful force of stain in some societies and irrelevant to terrorism in others. Also, most of these studies do not examine data over time but merely look at a snapshot of terrorist data. Since terrorism is a highly dynamic phenomenon, with levels of violence varying greatly from year to year and between regions, I believe that an approach which accounts for changes over time is necessary to explain how dynamic social, political, and economic forces can affect terrorism.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I perform a limited test of Agnew's GST model, focusing on how economic strains act as collective strains and affect negative emotions and attitudes, which in turn lead to acts of domestic terrorism. The rationale for this is twofold: First, as a relatively new theoretical model which is broad in scope, this paper takes a first step by evaluating GST by looking at a singular path to terrorism from collective strain. Second, a limited test will give an idea as to whether further and fuller tests of GST are worthwhile avenues to pursue with a larger. Since the theory is so broad, testing its individual parts is a logical first step.

While economic strains constitute the collective strain portion of this model, a key aspect to the GST paradigm is the role of intervening or amplifying conditions that lead from collective strains to terrorism. For this research I explore the pathway through negative emotions such as fear, anger, and frustration to terrorism. Due to the emphasis of the broader strain theory literature on the importance of emotions (Agnew 1992, 2010), I feel that this is an appropriate place to start when testing GST. In addition, research into emotion and political collective action has found that anger, contempt, and efficacy play a large role in participation (Van Zomeren et al. 2004) in contentious behavior. At this point, not much research has closely examined the role of emotions in terrorism; however there is a clear case that this is a worthwhile avenue of inquiry (Rice 2009). It is also important to note that while this study focuses on the impact of macroeconomic forces, strain can originate from any number of sources, and GST is a theory about how people react to the strains which they experience (Agnew 2010). Figure 2 illustrates the relevant path of GST that will be examined here.

Figure 2: Assessed Path of Agnew's (2010) General Strain Theory of Terrorism

| Macroeconomic Strain | → | Negative Attitudes of Macroeconomics | → | Terrorism |

The theoretical pathway in Figure 2 translates into the following GST hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1: Increasing socio-economic strain will increase the level of negative emotions and attitudes in the United States.*

> *Hypothesis 2: Increasing negative emotions and attitudes will lead to increased rates of domestic terrorist attacks in the United States.*

Data and Measures

This study utilizes secondary data analysis and examines data over time to evaluate the effect of dynamic change in socioeconomic factors on terrorist incidents. The unit of analysis is the nation-year, i.e. separate data for each variable organized by year (e.g. 1990, 1991, 1992, etc.). Since the root causes of terrorism and political violence have not yet proven to be generalizable across cultures, this model will have the most validity within the United States.

Testing the relationship between economic strain, negative emotions and attitudes, and terrorism in the United States is not a simple undertaking. Firstly, both strain and negative emotions and attitudes are latent variables. They are not directly measured, but rather constructed from different proxy measures. Secondly, since the link between collective strain and terrorism is not direct, a regression analysis is not sufficient to test the relationship. This project will therefore use a path analysis, a more appropriate method for testing Agnew's model. Primary

hypotheses are derived from GST, and secondary hypotheses are derived from the individual measures used.

Terrorism

Terrorism is a controversial issue, and each agency, think tank, and group of scholars has their own unique definitional criteria. These are mostly similar definitions which are all equally vague in their parameters. Debating this however, is not the purpose of this research. For the purpose of this study, I rely on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) definitional criteria for terrorism. It is a widely cited database, and considered by many to be the best source on terrorism in the United States.

The GTD defines terrorism as "The threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation." Within this blanket definition, the GTD also specifies that the act must be intentional, must involve some level of violence or threat of violence against persons or property, and that perpetrators must be sub-national actors (GTD Codebook). In addition, the GTD includes three criteria which can be required or not, allowing for researchers to specify the strictness of their definitions:

1. The act must be aimed at pursuing political, economic, religious, or social goal.

2. There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some message to a larger audience than the immediate victims.

3. The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.

For this research, data was collected requiring all three criteria to be met for inclusion, giving us the strictest possible definition within the dataset. Incidents can also be filtered on many

categories, such as geographic location, attack type, perpetrators, casualties, etc. and can be filtered on three specific definitional criteria, with unsuccessful attacks ambiguous cases either included or excluded. In addition, one further definitional criterion can be accounted for in the GTD: whether or not a sufficient doubt exists as to whether or not the event was exclusively terrorism. Many incidents of terrorism fall into a grey area with hate crime, insurgency, organized crime, and other crimes. This can be filtered out with the GTD's "Doubt Terrorism Proper" filter in the advanced search. This was also required in this research to filter ambiguous cases. Unsuccessful attacks were included as well, since the purpose of the project is to assess the likelihood that individuals or groups will use terrorism, not how successful they are.

This project also limits the number of terrorist incidents to those which fall into the classification of "Domestic" or "Homegrown" terror (Whitaker 2001), i.e. those committed by individuals who are US citizens either de jure or de facto. Definitional criteria for domestic or homegrown acts of terror were sourced from the FBI: "Domestic terrorism is the unlawful use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States or Puerto Rico without foreign direction committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives" (FBI 2005). Data was filtered to exclude incidents which did not meet either "domestic" or "homegrown" criteria. To be included in the analysis, groups must be based in the United States, and conduct their operations within the United States territory. Filtering was made on group affiliation, individuals and unknown perpetrators were included. A list of included and excluded groups is found in Appendix A.

In my analysis, the actual measure of terrorism used as the dependent variable is the total number of terrorist incidents committed and attempted within the United States by year, filtered

using the aforementioned criteria. Recall that the goal is of course to assess the likelihood that individuals or groups turn to terrorism, not necessarily if they were successful. Once a count was made, years 1970 and 1971 were excluded as outliers, and 1993 is incomplete and counted as missing from the dataset, leaving 39 nation years for analysis.

Independent Variables: Economic Strain

My main independent variable of interest is economic strain, which I've chosen to measure with two indicators: unemployment rate, and poverty rate. I am primarily interested in the effect of the *unemployment rate*. Since unemployment is a highly dynamic force which rises and falls regularly, often translating into sudden shifts in socio-economic status for millions of individuals, I believe that it is most likely to create strain conditions which could result in terrorism. The unemployment rate is a measure of persons actively seeking gainful employment as a percentage of all workers in the United States. As defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Persons are classified as unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and are currently available for work. Persons who were not working and were waiting to be recalled to a job from which they had been temporarily laid off are also included as unemployed. Receiving benefits from the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program has no bearing on whether a person is classified as unemployed[1]."

If socio-economic strain is a contributing factor to political violence, then unemployment should be a powerful predictor of terrorism in the United States. Unemployment is often a quickly changing force which has the potential to suddenly displace large numbers of people. Following from the frustration-aggression literature, these sudden drop offs in employment and

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[1]Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2013. "Labor Force Characteristics." US Department of Labor
http://www.bls.gov/cps/lfcharacteristics.htm#unemp

socioeconomic status are most likely to result in relative deprivation effects, which have shown

to be a source of grievances in many political rebellions (Gurr 1970). This data was gathered

from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which allows public access of unemployment data specified

by month and year.

Information on the yearly *poverty rate* is freely available from the Census Bureau. The

poverty rate is calculated as a percentage of the population living under the legally defined

poverty line by income[2]. Poverty is a likely source of strain for individuals, and the poverty rate

is a dynamic variable. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once said, "Families are always rising and falling

in America." Impoverished groups and individuals are likely to feel strains associated with their

situations.

Intervening Variables: Negative Emotions and Attitudes

Agnew's model also specifies the importance of intervening variables, or variables which

amplify the various "paths" to terrorism as outlined in his theory. Agnew outlines several ways

that strain can lead to terrorism, such as increasing bad emotions, radicalization, reduced social

control, diminished legal coping means, the social learning of terrorism, and orienting a

population to a collective response (Agnew 2010). While testing all of these paths would be

ideal, it is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, I focus on one which is particularly

interesting to social psychologists: how negative emotions can lead to terrorism in the presence

of strain. Negative emotions are also a latent construct, and since there is no direct measure, I

again use proxies to gauge the extent of negative attitudes and emotions, particularly as they

relate to economic conditions in the United States.

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[2] More information about poverty rate statistics is available from the US Census Bureau
http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/

The first measure is from the *Public Mood* dataset, compiled by James Stimson[3]. The dataset aggregates public opinion surveys from 1952 until 2011 on a number of different topics and subtopics. For this analysis, I isolate the measure of public mood regarding macroeconomics, which I feel is most appropriate for assessing the relationship between economic mood and strain. Questions asked in the macroeconomic topic areas are typically based on a Likert Scale of strongly agree to agree or disagree to strongly disagree and cover a range of economic issues. Some sample questions asked include:

"Are you in favor of or against less government regulation of business?"

"Are you in favor of or against government financing of projects to create new jobs?"

"The government ought to see to it that every person who wants work has a job. Agree or disagree?"

"Do you feel rich people are asked to pay more than they should in federal income taxes, about the right amount, or less than they should?"

"I the government had to choose between keeping down inflation or keeping down unemployment, to which do you think it should give the highest priority?"

Public mood is measured on a scale of 1-100, with higher numbers associated with more liberalism, i.e. desire for more government involvement, openness to more spending (Stimson 2012). While this is a roundabout proxy measure, based on evidence from psychological research, we can expect that lower values or more conservative moods are associated with more negative emotions such as more resistance to change, and more extreme response to threats than higher or more liberalistic moods (Jost and Amodio 2011; Thorisdottir et al. 2007).

The second intervening variable used is *Gallup's Most Important Problem*, a collection of public opinion polls which assess the topic areas which are most important to Americans. The

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[3] More information on Public Mood Data available from the *Policy Agendas Project* http://www.policyagendas.org/

topic areas in the surveys are based on the topic areas used in the Public Moods dataset, and

assess what percentage of people think that a given topic is the most important problem at the

time. Once again, we used the Macroeconomic topic for our analysis. It is reasonable to think

that when more people feel that macroeconomics is the most important problem that they

experience more negative emotions, such as worry, fear, or anger, in relation to that topic. This

variable is recorded as the percentage of respondents who feel that macroeconomic issues are the

most important and pressing problems of the day.

Operationalized Hypotheses

Now that the dependent, independent, and intervening variables have been

operationalized to measure terrorism, collective (economic) strain, and negative emotions and

attitudes, respectively, I restate my hypotheses using these specific variables:

Hypothesis 1a: As the unemployment rate increases, macroeconomic public mood will decrease (i.e. become more negative).

Hypothesis 1b: As the unemployment rate increases, the percentage of Americans that view macroeconomics as the most important problem will increase.

Hypothesis 1c: As the poverty rate increases, macroeconomic public mood will decrease (i.e. become more negative).

Hypothesis 1d: As the poverty rate increases, the percentage of Americans that view macroeconomics as the most important problem will increase.

Hypothesis 2a: As macroeconomic public mood decreases (i.e. becomes more negative), the number of domestic terrorist attacks will increase.

Hypothesis 2b: As the percentage of Americans who view macroeconomic issues as the most important problem increases, the number of domestic terrorist attacks will increase.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 lists basic descriptive information for the dependent, independent, and intervening variables used in the analysis. Figures 4 through 6 plot the change in the variables over the time period under analysis in this research (1972-2011, omitting 1993). From 1972 to 2011, the United States experienced an average of 32.5 incidents of domestic terrorism, with the largest year experiencing 112 incidents, and the lowest experiencing only 1. Looking at economic indicators, unemployment averages 6.93% over the same period, ranging from 4.0% to 9.7%, the poverty rate has an average of 13.1%, with a range of 11.1% to 15.2%. As far as emotions and attitude measures go, Public Mood averages a score of 59.08, ranging from 51.9 to 66.9, and Macroeconomics as the Most Important Problem has an average of 38.62%, ranging between 11.45% and 78.78% from 1972 to 2011. Looking at the variables graphed over time, we can see that they are dynamic phenomenon which can fluctuate greatly over time. Some do so more than others, for instance, terrorism and Most Important Problem have a large range of values, while unemployment, poverty, and public mood have more moderate variation. Terrorism peaks in the 1970s and 1980s, and has steadily declined from the late 1990s to the present.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Terrorism	32.53	24.52	1	112
Unemployment	6.39	1.57	4.0	9.7
Poverty	13.1	1.23	11.1	15.2
Public Mood	59.08	3.78	51.9	66.9
Most Important Problem	38.62	16.98	11.45	78.78

Figure 3. Domestic Terrorist Incidents in the US

Domestic Terrorist Incidents in the US
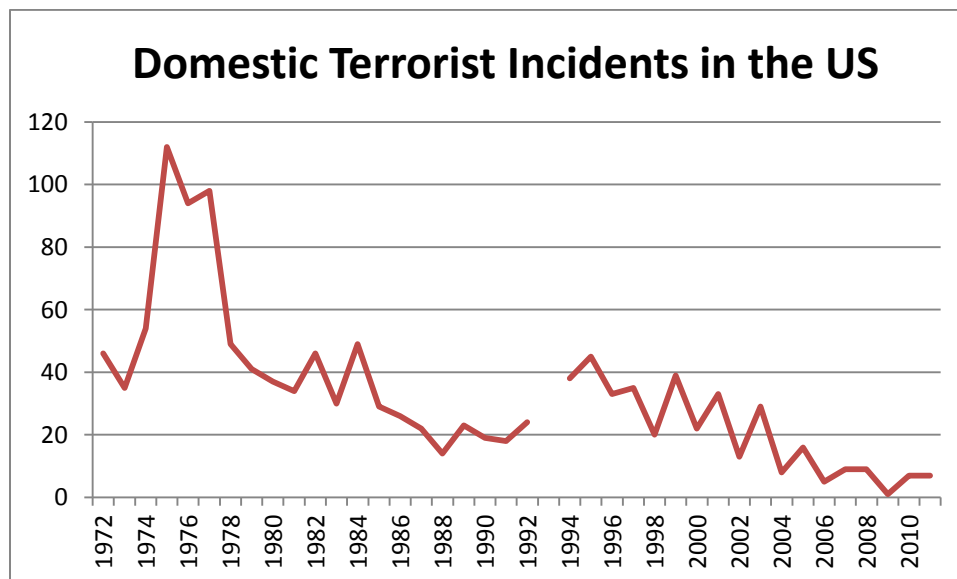
Figure 4. Economic Strain Variables

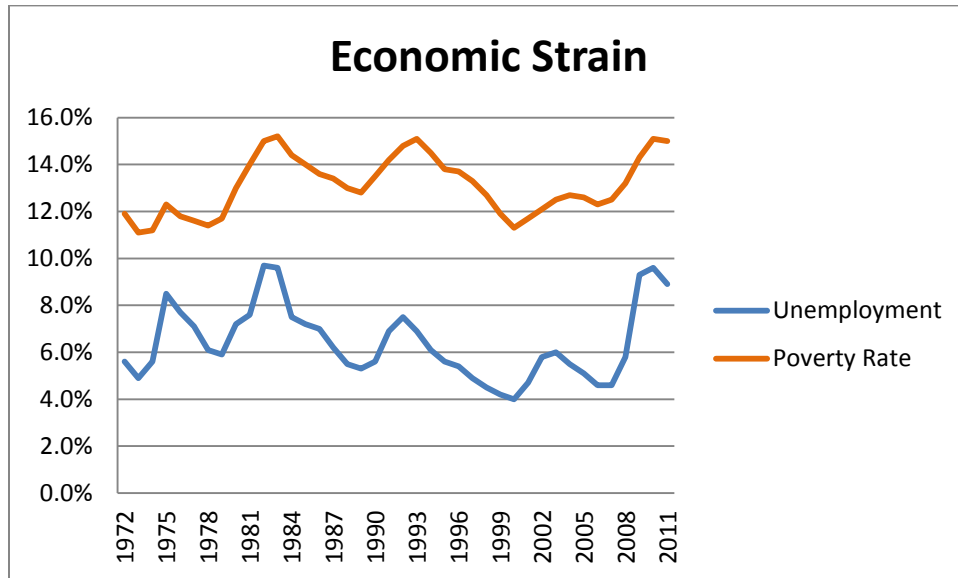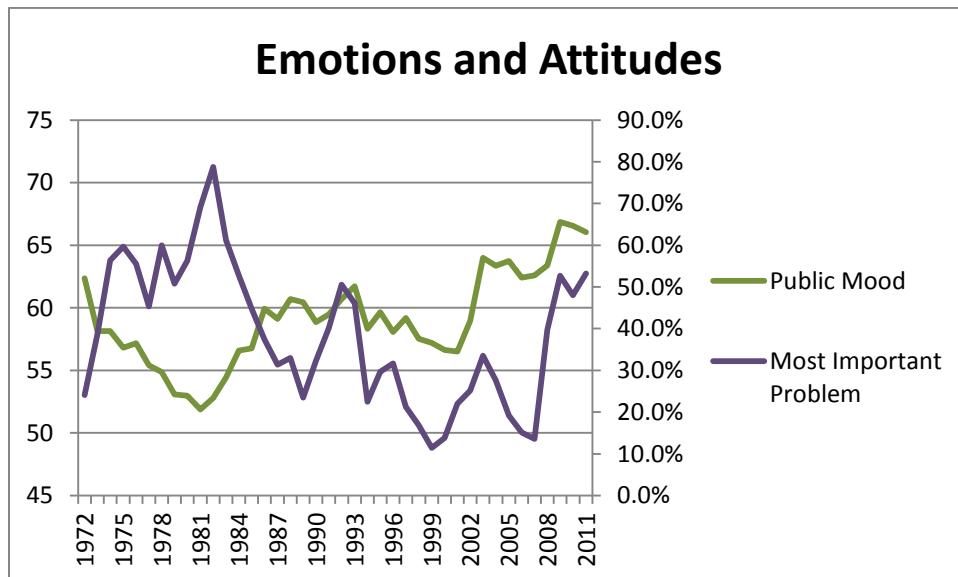**Economic Strain**

Figure 5. Emotions and Attitudes Variables

Emotions and Attitudes

RESULTS

Testing the relationship between economic strain, negative emotions and attitudes, and terrorism in the United States is not a simple undertaking. First, both strain and negative attitudes are latent variables. They are not directly measured, but rather constructed from different proxy measures. Second, since the link between collective strains and terrorism is not direct, a standard regression analysis is not sufficient to test the relationship. My analyses will therefore use path analysis, a more appropriate method for testing Agnew's model. Path analysis allows for sequential "paths" from variable to variable, mimicking the structure of the GST model in Figure 1, and the proposed path under assessment here, as previously outlined in Figure 2.

First, I examine the bivariate correlation coefficients between variables, displayed in Table 2 below. As we can see, unemployment is not correlated with Public Mood at -0.003, but has a very strong correlation with Most Important Problem at 0.819. Poverty exhibits low correlation with Public Mood at 0.197 and low-moderate correlation with Most Important Problem at 0.364. Then, Public Mood has a moderate correlation with terrorism at -0.536, while Most Important Problem has low-moderate correlation with terrorism at 0.377. These relationships are expended upon in a path analysis.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlation Coefficients

	Dependent Variable		
	Mood	Problem	Terror
Independent Variable			
Unemployment	-0.003	0.819	
Poverty	0.197	0.364	
Public Mood			-0.536
Most Important Problem			0.377

The results of the path analysis on the link between economic strain, negative emotions, and terrorist incidents are presented in Table 3. As expected, unemployment and most important problem have a significant, positive relationship. As unemployment rises, more people consider macroeconomics to be the most important problem. This supports Hypothesis 1b. In contrast, Hypothesis 1d is not supported. While the predicted relationship between poverty and the most important problem variable was positive, the path analysis finds a negative, but statistically significant relationship. Essentially, as the poverty rate increases, the percentage of Americans who view macroeconomic issues as the most important issue decreases, which is the opposite of what was theoretically predicted. Macroeconomic public mood is not affected by changes in unemployment, though it is significantly affected by changes in the poverty rate. However, the positive relationship suggests that as poverty rises, public moods towards macroeconomic factors become more liberalistic, meaning that negative emotions and attitudes actually decline. These relationships for the public mood variable do not support either Hypothesis 1a or Hypothesis 1c.

In the second stage of the path analysis, we see that macroeconomic mood is a significant predictor of terrorism in the United States. Specifically, as macroeconomic public mood decreases- meaning emotions become more negative - incidents of terrorism increase. This is consistent with Hypothesis 2a. However, the coefficients for poverty → mood and mood → terrorism go in opposite directions. Most important problem is also statistically significant when predicting terrorism, though the significance level is not as powerful as mood. Here we can see that there is some suggestion that when macroeconomic factors become more important, that terrorism increases. This supports Hypothesis 2b. Figure 7 visually represents the significant paths from table 3.

Table 3 – Path Analysis (One-Tailed Hypotheses)

	Dependent Variables		
	Problem	Mood	Terror
Independent Variables			
Poverty	-4.73***	1.06*	
	(1.56)	(.49)	
Unemployment	11.22***	-.59	
	(1.19)	(.64)	
Problem			.30*
			(.20)
Mood			-2.96***
			(.91)
R^2	.73	.07	.28
Overall R^2			.75

Notes: *p<0.10; **p< 0.05; ***p<0.01

N = 39

Figure 6. Path Analysis Model
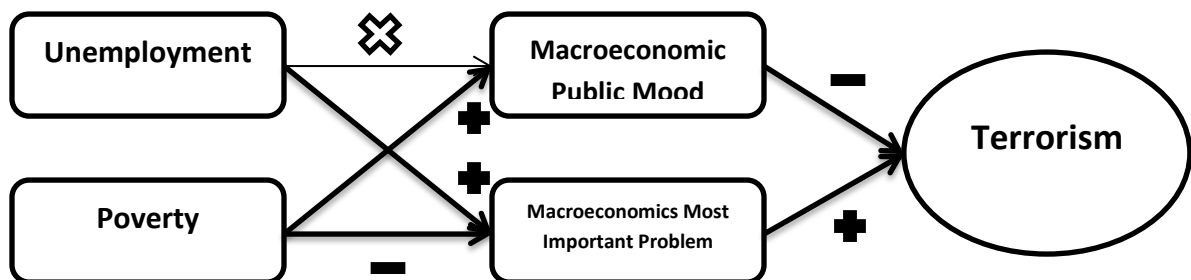
Ancillary Analyses

An ancillary analysis re-evaluated the path analysis to account for alternate models. First, the path analysis was tested without the Public Mood variable, as shown in Table 4. The results showed strong support for Hypothesis 1b, meaning that as unemployment increases, the percentage of Americans who view macroeconomics as the most important problem increases. Similarly to the first analysis, Hypothesis 1d was not supported, and even suggests the opposite: that as the poverty rate increases, the number of Americans who view macroeconomics as the most important problem decreases. Hypothesis 2b was more strongly supported in this analysis than in the initial estimation. As the number of Americans who view macroeconomics as the most important problem increases, the number of terrorist incidents increases.

Table 4. Path Analysis Excluding Public Mood (One-Tailed Hypotheses)

	Dependent Variables	
	Problem	Terror
Independent Variables		
Poverty	-4.73*** (1.56)	
Unemployment	11.22*** (1.19)	
Problem		.30*** (.20)

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01
N = 39

Due to the still existent confusion of the relationship between poverty, most important problem, and terrorism, a third analysis was done using path analysis, but excluding poverty and Public Mood as shown in Table 5. This analysis showed the strongest relationship between strain, emotions and attitudes, and terrorism. As unemployment increases, the percentage of Americans who view macroeconomics as the most important problem increases, and as this increases, so do incidents of domestic terrorism in the United States. This supports Hypotheses 1b and 2b, and the larger theoretical hypothesis much more strongly than previous analyses. Note that the statistical significance levels for ancillary analyses have dramatically increased as well.

Table 5. Path Analysis Excluding Public Mood and Poverty (One-Tailed Hypotheses)

	Dependent Variables	
	Problem	Terror
Independent Variables		
Unemployment	8.83*** (.997)	
Problem		.539*** (.212)

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01
N = 39

A final analysis was performed without any intervening variables and tested economic strain against terrorism using a regression analysis, shown in Table 6. The results showed that even without mediators, a statistically significant relationship exists. Unemployment has a strong positive relationship with terrorism, meaning that as unemployment rises, so do incidents of domestic terrorism. Similarly to previous models though, poverty has a strong negative relationship with terrorism in the US. This is the opposite of what was theoretically predicted. The results of this regression show only moderate support for the economic strain-based explanation.

Table 6. Regression Analysis without Intervening Variables (One-Tailed Hypotheses)

Variable	
Unemployment	10.97***
	(3.89)
Poverty	-16.15***
	(4.65)
Constant	173.29***
	(42.65)
R^2	.394

Note: *$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$
N = 39

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research set out to empirically evaluate a relatively new theoretical perspective, Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory of Terrorism, and to offer a possible explanation of varying levels of political violence in the United States. GST postulates that collective strains are likely to result in terrorism through various causal "paths" such as increasing negative emotions, radicalization, fostering the social learning of terrorism, reducing social control and legitimate coping means, and creating a collective orientation and response. I then argue that economic strains act as collective strains, and perform an initial test this model through increasing negative emotions and attitudes, and examining how they may result in domestic terrorism.

To do this, I performed a secondary data analysis of nation-years in the United States. Data was collected on macroeconomic indicators from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics and on emotions and attitudes towards macroeconomic issues from the public moods dataset and Gallup's most important problem survey. Terrorism data was collected from the Global Terrorism database, and filtered to include only incidents that were considered domestic terrorism without significant doubt.

A path analysis was performed which found some support for the theoretical model. Unemployment was a significant predictor of macroeconomics as the most important problem, but not public mood. Poverty was a significant predictor of public mood and most important problem, however in the opposite direction of what was expected. Public mood and most important problem were both significant predictors of the number of terrorist incidents in the United States, meaning that as emotions and attitudes regarding macroeconomics become more negative, terrorist incidents increase.

I draw two conclusions from the path analysis results. First: that there is some support of Agnew's GST model, particularly the path from strain through negative emotions to terrorism, even though the relationships tested are far from perfect. Second: that there are a number of problems and limitations that may muddle the results. Some of the relationships are actually the opposite of what was expected theoretically, further confusing the results. The small sample size may be obscuring potentially significant relationships, which can be improved by simply conducting another analysis in the future when more datapoints are available. This analysis also focuses on macro-level factors, and does not account for situational factors, which may be instrumental in pushing groups and individuals from strain to terrorism.

In addition to this, there may be problems with the latent variables not completely or accurately capturing what they are being used to measure. The terrorism variable itself has some issues, namely possible collection problems and changes in criteria. Using data which has been synthesized from multiple collection periods carries this risk. Data collected consistently from the same researchers or organization with the same criteria may yield different results. There are also other ways of measuring terrorism rather than focusing on base number of attacks. Instead, future research could focus on other quantifiable measures such as amount of damage done, number of casualties, and other measures of the 'quality' of terrorism.

It is also possible that negative emotions and attitudes are not being accurately captured. A more direct measure of public emotional state which focuses less on policy issues and more on satisfaction versus frustration and anger would possibly yield different results. The Public Mood variable in particular leaves a big question as to how much 'emotion' is actually being measured versus simply left/right leanings. Furthermore, the relationship between poverty, public mood, and terrorism is the opposite of what is theoretically predicted. It of course makes sense when we

step back and see that increases in poverty are associated with more liberal attitudes towards government involvement in economics, including taxes and social welfare. It is likely that there is very little in terms of emotion which is represented in this variable. Its predictive power may in fact be reflecting political attitudes more closely associated with a US-specific type of terrorism, specifically right-wing extremism. Essentially, when the mood is more conservative, right-wing extremists are more likely to view the government as their enemy, while other ideologies may not move to this line of thought. These same political cleavages are unlikely to be predictive of terrorism in other cultures.

Based on this analysis, we can conclude that quick, dramatic changes in macro-economic forces such as unemployment may produce the type of strain which may result in terrorism. This is easily related back to both the broader strain theory literature, as well as the frustration-aggression and relative deprivation hypotheses. A sudden increase in unemployment can potentially displace millions of workers who were previously well off. This change may be seen as more unjust, and inflicted by powerful others, and more likely to increase feelings of fear, anger, frustration, and resentment among the collective. These feelings are what Agnew (1992; 2010) argues influences people to turn to deviance and violence.

Poverty increases do not appear to result in terrorism, which is largely consistent with other research evaluating this relationship (Piazza 2006). We can conjecture that poverty is not a dramatic enough change to result in the types of strains which may cause terrorism. Poverty, unlike unemployment tends to be more of a long-term state. It is absolute deprivation, and objective strain, rather than relative deprivation and subjective strain which is associated more with deviance, crime, rebellion, and terrorism (Gurr 1970, Agnew 1992, Agnew 2010).

Ancillary analyses largely confirm the earlier conclusions of results and limitations. The same Hypotheses were supported, and made stronger with the removal of Public Mood and Poverty, two variables with clear problems in the previous analyses. What this shows is that poverty is not likely a root cause of terrorism in the United States, while unemployment may be. This makes sense when we think about the concepts: poverty is a much more static phenomenon, and individuals typically experience poverty as part of a life course. Poverty is much more of a social reality than unemployment, which represents a dynamic change in socio-economic status and creates much more turmoil in the social environment.

One more interesting point can be conjectured from the descriptive statistics alone, that the overall trend in terrorist incidents has been downward since the 1980s. This is similar to all violent crime in the US. According to the GTD the past decade has been comparatively low in terms of number of terrorist incidents. This leaves us with another question, of whether this trend is the result of post 9/11 policies being effective at deterring violence, part of broader trends of decreasing violence in the United States, or the result of some other, unmeasured factors. It is possible that law enforcement and intelligence agencies have gotten better at stopping terrorist plots before they come to fruition, therefore lowering the count of incidents. It is also possible that the 'quality' of terrorist tactics has improved, so that instead of many 'low quality' attacks, a group only needs one or two 'high quality' attacks in order to accomplish their goals. This would also lower the overall number of incidents. In addition, looking to the broader criminology literature may provide more possible explanations which could help explain this long-term trend.

The results of this study are not strong enough to definitively confirm or refute the principles of General Stain Theory of Terrorism, and should be taken for what they are: a limited test of part of a larger theoretical framework. What we can say from this analysis is that economic

strains are likely one of many factors which influence terrorism in the United States, and that increasing negative emotions is only one possible path which can lead us there. At the end of the day, this study is not about material gain or macroeconomics, but rather how individuals and groups deal with strain and stressors. This very may well be the case with a more rigorous analysis, or it could be headed in the wrong direction. One thing is certain though, more testing is needed before this theoretical approach can be accepted or refuted.

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Appendix A – Terrorist Groups

Included Groups	Excluded Groups
American Indian Movement	Al-Qa`ida
Americans for a Competent Federal Judicial System	Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)
Americans for Justice	Anti Shah of Iran
Animal Liberation Front (ALF)	Anti-Castro Command
Animal Rights Activists	Anti-Castro Group
Anti-Abortion Activists	Arabs (suspected)
Anti-Environmentalist	Armenian Group
Anti-Government Group	Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia
Armed Revolutionary Independence Movement (MIRA) (suspected)	Armenians
Army of God	Black September
Aryan Nation	Cali Narcotics Cartel
Black American Moslems	Croatian Freedom Fighters
Black Brigade (United States)	Croatian Liberation Army
Black Liberation Army	Croatian Nationalists
Black Muslims	Cuban Action
Black Panthers	Cuban C-4 Movement
Boricua Revolutionary Front	Cuban Exiles
Chicano Liberation Front	Cuban Secret Army
Chicano Radicals (suspected)	Cypriot
Christian Liberation Army (suspected)	Hanafi Muslims
Coalition to Save the Preserves (CSP) (suspected)	Imperial Iranian Patriotic Organization
Condor	Iranians (suspected)
Continental Revolutionary Army	Irish Republican Army (IRA)
Covenant, Sword and the Arm of the Lord (CSA)	Islamist Extremists
Earth First!	Jamaat-al-Fuqra
Earth Liberation Front (ELF)	Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide
Earth Liberation Front (ELF),Revenge of the Trees	Kahane Chai (suspected)
Earth Night Action Group	Latin America Anti-Communist Army (LAACA)
East Side Action Committee	Lebanese Man
Environmental Life Force	Libyan Students

Environmentalist	Luis Boitel Commandos
Evan Mecham Eco-Terrorist International Conspiracy (EMETIC)	Maccabee Squad and the Shield of David
Farm Animal Revenge Militia (FARM)	Macoute sympathizers
Fourth Reich Skinheads	Medellin Drug Cartel
Fred Hampton Unit of the People's Forces	Mexican Revolutionary Movement
Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN)	Movement for Cuban Justice (Pragmatistas)
Gay Liberation Front	Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)
George Jackson Brigade	National Front for the Liberation of Cuba (FLNC)
Independent Armed Revolutionary Commandos (CRIA)	National Integration Front (FIN)
Individual	Ninth of June Organzation
International Committee Against Nazism (suspected),Jewish Action Movement (suspected)	Omega-7
Jewish Armed Resistance	Organization Alliance of Cuban Intransigence
Jewish Committee of Concern	Otpor
Jewish Defenders (suspected)	Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (suspected)
Jewish Defense League (JDL)	Palestinians
Jewish Direct Action (suspected)	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)
Jewish Extremists	Revolutionary Commandos of the People (CRP)
Ku Klux Klan	Secret Cuban Government
Left-Wing Militants	Serbian Nationalists
May 19 Communist Order	Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA)
Mormon Extremist	Tontons Macoutes
National Socialist Liberation Front	Vietnamese Organization to Exterminate Communists and Restore the Nation (suspected)
Neo-Nazi Group	Vietnamese Refugees
New Jewish Defense League	Worldwide Organization of Native Taiwanese
New World Liberation Front (NWLF)	Young Cuba
Nuclear Liberation Front (suspected)	
Organization 544	
Peoples' Brigade For A Healthy Genetic Future	
People's Liberation Army (United States)	
Phineas Priesthood	
Posse Comitatus	
Puerto Rican Armed Resistance	

Puerto Rican Nationalists (suspected)	
Puerto Rican Revolutionary Movement	
Red Guerilla Family	
Republic of New Afrika	
Republic of Texas	
Revolutionary Cells-Animal Liberation Brigade	
Save Our Israel Land	
Secret Army Organization	
Secret Organization Zero	
Sons of the Gestapo	
Student Radicals	
The Jewish Execution with Silence	
The Justice Department	
The Order (Silent Brotherhood)	
The Order II (Bruder Schweigen Strike Force II)	
The Scorpion	
Thunder of Zion	
Tribal Thumb	
United Freedom Front (UFF)	
United Jewish Underground	
Universal Proutist Revolutionary Federation	
Unknown	
Up the IRS, Inc	
Weather Underground, Weathermen	
White Extremists	
Youths of the Star	
Zebra killers	

Appendix B – Dataset

Year	Terror	Unemployment	Poverty	Public Mood	Most Important Problem
1972	46	5.6	11.9	62.357	24.1135
1973	35	4.9	11.1	58.153	38.6482
1974	54	5.6	11.2	58.138	56.3478
1975	112	8.5	12.3	56.805	59.6859
1976	94	7.7	11.8	57.159	55.5344
1977	98	7.1	11.6	55.417	45.3159
1978	49	6.1	11.4	54.864	59.9662
1979	41	5.9	11.7	53.07	50.7661
1980	37	7.2	13	52.978	56.3124
1981	34	7.6	14	51.888	69.208
1982	46	9.7	15	52.796	78.7798
1983	30	9.6	15.2	54.425	61.2119
1984	49	7.5	14.4	56.575	52.7975
1985	29	7.2	14	56.755	44.8276
1986	26	7	13.6	59.937	37.4468
1987	22	6.2	13.4	59.114	31.3726
1988	14	5.5	13	60.69	33
1989	23	5.3	12.8	60.455	23.4375
1990	19	5.6	13.5	58.848	32.2539
1991	18	6.9	14.2	59.473	40.1276
1992	24	7.5	14.8	60.698	50.5342
1993	.	6.9	15.1	61.72	46.0902
1994	38	6.1	14.5	58.326	22.4404
1995	45	5.6	13.8	59.652	29.7101
1996	33	5.4	13.7	58.064	31.6416
1997	35	4.9	13.3	59.198	21.2364
1998	20	4.5	12.7	57.518	16.8942
1999	39	4.2	11.9	57.187	11.4541
2000	22	4	11.3	56.638	13.814
2001	33	4.7	11.7	56.513	21.9932
2002	13	5.8	12.1	58.969	25.1848
2003	29	6	12.5	63.991	33.5164
2004	8	5.5	12.7	63.357	27.6278
2005	16	5.1	12.6	63.738	19.2051
2006	5	4.6	12.3	62.403	15.1111
2007	9	4.6	12.5	62.592	13.587
2008	9	5.8	13.2	63.387	39.7258

2009	1	9.3	14.3	66.854	52.6982
2010	7	9.6	15.1	66.543	48.0118
2011	7	8.9	15	66.035	53.2516