

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
ScholarWorks@UARK

Projects

Terrorism Research Center

6-1-2015

Patterns of Lone Actor Terrorism in the United States

Brent L. Smith

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, bls@uark.edu

Paxton Roberts

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Jeff Gruenewald

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Brent R. Klein

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/tercpr>



Part of the [Terrorism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Brent L.; Roberts, Paxton; Gruenewald, Jeff; and Klein, Brent R., "Patterns of Lone Actor Terrorism in the United States" (2015). *Projects*. 12.

<https://scholarworks.uark.edu/tercpr/12>

This Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Terrorism Research Center at ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact ccmiddle@uark.edu.

Patterns of Lone Actor Terrorism in the United States

BACKGROUND

In the early 1990s, law enforcement authorities became increasingly concerned about the advent of “lone wolf” terrorism. The extreme right began advocating this “uncoordinated violence” approach in 1992 under what was called a “leaderless resistance” model. It was around this time that the emergence of the Internet allowed cyberspace to become a major source of radical propagandizing for environmental terrorists and al-Qaida-inspired movements. The rise of the Internet also provided a way in which leaders of movements could identify targets, allowing subordinates or non-affiliated extremists the opportunity to commit acts of terrorism. All of these strategies developed as a means of minimizing the civil and criminal liability of group leaders. They also thwarted traditional law enforcement efforts that usually employed confidential informants or undercover operatives within identified cells or groups of terrorists.

OVERVIEW

This research explores the differences in geospatial and temporal patterns between lone actor and group-based terrorists in the United States. These include differences in demographics, precursor activities, proximity to the terrorism incidents, and longevity of conducting terrorist activities.

Data for this analysis were derived from the American Terrorism Study (ATS). The ATS includes information on federal criminal cases resulting from FBI investigations for “terrorism or terrorism-related activities.” The analysis includes data from 264 prevented or completed terrorism incidents in the United States from 1980-present. These incidents involved 314 indictees charged with over 3,000 federal criminal counts. They were responsible for 1,788 recorded precursor activities that occurred at over 1,100 geocoded addresses.

KEY TERMS

- **Lone actors:** persons who had no help in planning, preparing, or committing the terrorism incident.
- **Group participants:** persons who had help in planning, preparing, or committing the terrorism incident.
- **Precursor activities:** any activities relevant to the terrorists’ planning or preparation.

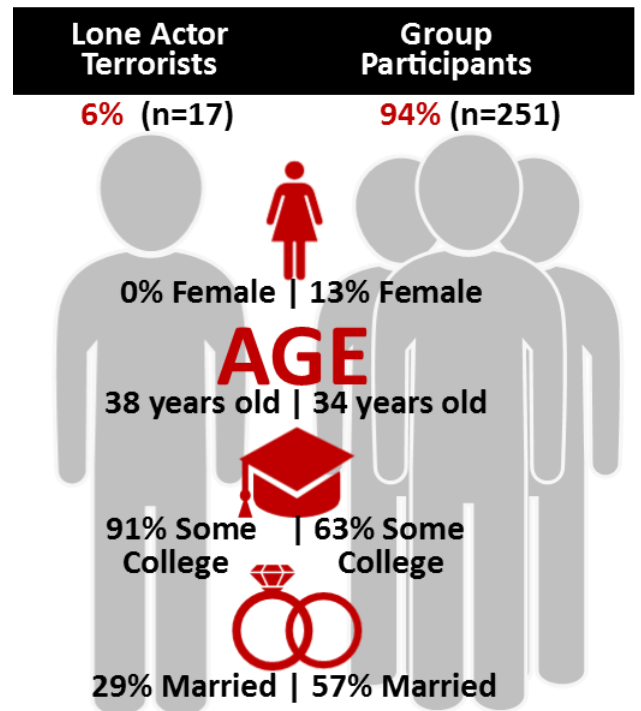
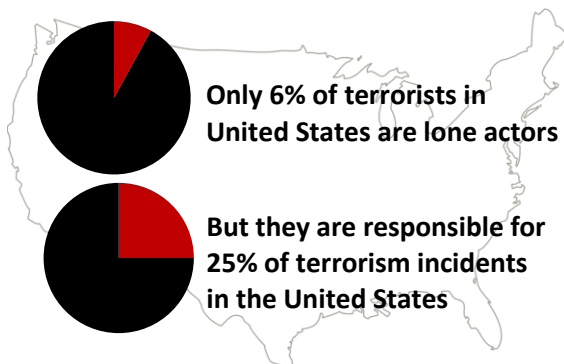
FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Lone actor terrorists are relatively rare, representing less than 10% of all terrorists in the United States. Notably, however, lone actors are responsible for a disproportionate number (65 of 264, or 25%) of U.S. terrorism incidents.

Generally, persons committing terrorism incidents in the United States tend to be overwhelmingly male, having completed a high school degree or some college coursework. They are also more likely to be married and in their mid-thirties. Comparatively, lone actors are more likely to be male and better educated than their group participant counterparts. Additionally, lone actors are significantly less likely to be married than group participants. The two groups differ slightly in age when “age” is

measured as “age at indictment.” When comparing “age at first preparatory activity,” lone actors are slightly younger than group participants.



EXTENT OF PRECURSOR ACTIVITY

Lone actor terrorists engage in significantly fewer precursor behaviors per incident than do group participants. Many of the activities of group participants involve meetings, which allow law enforcement greater opportunity to infiltrate group-level planning than the activities of lone actors. Despite this significant difference in the **volume** of precursor behavior among the two types, there is no difference in the **length** of the planning process among lone actors and group participants.

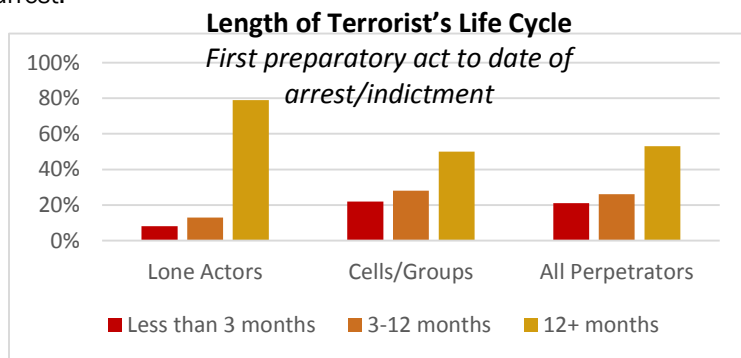
	Precursor Acts	Incidents	Precursor Acts per Incident
Loners	162	65	2.49
Cells/Groups	1,675	199	8.42

GEOSPATIAL PATTERNS

Lone actor terrorists live significantly greater distances from where they engage in precursor preparatory activities than group participants (median distances of 170 miles to 79 miles, respectively). They also live significantly greater distances from the terrorist incident location than group participants (328 miles to 118 miles, respectively). Both of these patterns indicate that lone actors go to significantly greater lengths to avoid detection than group participants.

LONGEVITY

On average, lone actor terrorists have a significantly longer life span as terrorists than group participants. On average, group participants “survive” 370 days from the time they commit their first preparatory activity until the time they are arrested. In contrast, lone actors “survive” in excess of 1,900 days from date of first preparatory behavior to date of arrest.



CONCLUSIONS

- Lone actor terrorists, while representing a very small proportion (6%) of terrorists, have been responsible for one-fourth of the terrorism incidents in the United States.
- Lone actor terrorists are significantly better educated, more likely to be male, and less likely to be married than group participant terrorists.
- Lone actor terrorists engage in significantly fewer precursor activities than group participants.
- There is no difference in the length of the planning cycle for lone actor terrorists and group participants.
- Lone actor terrorists lived significantly farther from where they prepared for an incident and where the incident occurred than did group participants.
- Lone actor terrorists have a significantly longer “life cycle” than group participants.

All of these general patterns by lone actors (more likely to be single, fewer planning activities, greater distances from residence to target, etc.) are all indicative of greater secrecy on the part of lone actors than group participants. It is not surprising, then, that lone actors are able to avoid arrest significantly longer than group participants.

RESEARCH TEAM

Brent L. Smith

Distinguished Professor and Director, Terrorism Research Center in Fulbright College, University of Arkansas
bls@uark.edu

Paxton Roberts

Research Associate and Administrative Deputy Director, Terrorism Research Center in Fulbright College, University of Arkansas

Jeff Gruenewald

Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas

Brent Klein

Graduate Research Assistant, Terrorism Research Center in Fulbright College, University of Arkansas



The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.