

Law Enforcement Assessment of the Violent Extremism Threat

Charles Kurzman and David Schanzer

June 25, 2015



Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security

About the Authors

Charles Kurzman is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

David Schanzer is director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security and Associate Professor of the Practice, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University.

Contact information

Charles Kurzman: kurzman@unc.edu, 919-962-1007.

David Schanzer: schanzer@duke.edu, 919-357-0128.

The survey data in this working paper (Tables 1-5) were derived from a survey that is part of a larger, on-going project. This project was supported by Award No. 2012-ZA-BX-0002, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Law Enforcement Assessment of the Violent Extremist Threat

Key Findings & Methods:

Law enforcement agencies in the United States consider anti-government violent extremists, not radicalized Muslims, to be the most severe threat of political violence that they face.

They perceive violent extremism to be a much more severe threat nationally than the threat of violent extremism in their own jurisdictions.

And a large majority of law enforcement agencies rank the threat of all forms of violent extremism in their own jurisdictions as moderate or lower (3 or less on a 1-5 scale).

These findings emerge from a survey we conducted with the Police Executive Research Forum in 2014, with funding from the National Institute of Justice. The sampling frame was all 480 state, county, and municipal law enforcement agencies with more than 200 sworn officers, plus 63 additional county and municipal agencies with 200 or fewer sworn officers in selected jurisdictions that experienced an incident or prosecution for violent extremism in recent years. The survey yielded responses from 339 of the larger agencies (a 71 percent response rate) and 43 of the smaller agencies (a 68 percent response rate), for a total of 382 law enforcement agencies (a 70 percent response rate), including 35 state agencies, 141 county agencies, and 206 municipal agencies, whose combined jurisdictions cover 86 percent of the U.S. population.

Primary Terrorist Threat

Of these 382 law enforcement agencies, 74 percent reported anti-government extremism as one of the top three terrorist threats in their jurisdiction; 39 percent listed extremism connected with al Qaeda or like-minded terrorist organizations. Environmental extremism was identified as a top threat by a third of the agencies.

Table 1. What are the main violent extremist threats that your agency faces? Please check up to three items below.

	Percent
Anti-government violent extremism	73.8
Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism	39.3
Environmental violent extremism	33.0
Racist violent extremism	24.3
Anti-capitalist violent extremism	14.7
Not applicable	13.6
Other violent extremism	10.5
No response	2.9

Perception of National Terrorism Threat

Of the 382 agencies, 26 percent said they believed the national threat posed by al-Qaeda inspired extremists was “severe,” while 29 percent said they believed other forms of extremism posed a “severe” threat in the United States as a whole.

The survey defined "Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism" as “violent extremism inspired by the radical Islamist ideas advocated by al-Qaeda and other like-minded extremist groups. The Fort Hood shooter (Nidal Hassan), the Flight 253 ‘underwear bomber’ (Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab), deceased cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, the suspected Boston Marathon bombers (Dzohokhar and Tamerlin Tsarnaev), and the Times Square bomber (Faisal Shazad) are all examples of al-Qaeda inspired violent extremists.” The survey defined "other violent extremism" as “violent extremism motivated by any other political, social, or religious concerns, including, but not limited to, anti-government, racist, radical, environmentalist, or anti-capitalist views. Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, the Unabomber (Ted Kaczynski), and the Sikh temple shooter, Wade Michael Page, are examples of ‘other violent extremists.’” As shown in Table 1, respondents identified anti-government violent extremism as the most prevalent form of “other” violent extremist threats.

Table 2. On a scale from 1 to 5 (5=Severe Threat, 1=No Threat), please rate how severe your agency believes the threat of violent extremism is in the United States as a whole, for the following forms of extremism:

Level of threat	Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism (Percent)	Other violent extremism (Percent)
1=No threat	2.4	1.6
2	6.3	2.9
3	27.2	20.4
4	38.2	46.3
5=Severe threat	25.9	28.8
No response	0.0	0.0

Perception of Local Terrorism Threat

Within their own jurisdictions, however, far fewer rated violent extremism as a severe threat: only 3 percent of these departments identified the threat from Muslim extremists as severe, compared with 7 percent for anti-government and other forms of extremism.

Table 3. On a scale from 1 to 5 (5=Severe Threat, 1=No Threat), please rate how severe your agency believes the threat of violent extremism is within your jurisdiction, for the following forms of extremism:

Level of threat	Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism (Percent)	Other violent extremism (Percent)
1=No threat	16.8	11.3
2	38.2	17.0
3	27.0	37.4
4	14.7	27.8
5=Severe threat	3.4	6.5
No response	0.0	0.0

The mean national level of threat reported was 3.8 on this five-point scale for al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism and 4.0 for other forms of violent extremism. Within their own jurisdiction, the mean level of threat was 2.5 for al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism and 3.0 for other forms of violent extremism, a difference that is statistically significant at the .01 level. Only 5 percent of the jurisdictions surveyed reported that al-Qaeda inspired terrorism was a greater threat than “other” forms of terrorism, whereas 45 percent of the jurisdictions surveyed assigned “other” forms as terrorism as posing the greater threat.

Comparing Threat Assessments of Large Cities, Mid-Size Cities, and Small Cities/Rural Areas

Assessments of threat on a national scale were consistent among law enforcement agencies of all sizes. In this report, we aggregate data separately for county and municipal agencies of different sizes: those serving populations of less than 200,000; those serving populations of 200,000 to 1,000,000; those serving populations over 1,000,000; and state agencies. The mean threat assessment for al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism in the United States as a whole varied only by one tenth of one point across the different size agencies; similarly, the assessment for other forms of violent extremism varied only by two tenths of one point.

Table 4. Mean National Threat Assessments by Size of Law Enforcement Agency

	All agencies	County and municipal agencies			State agencies
		Serving under 200,000 population	Serving 200,000 - 1,000,000 population	Serving over 1,000,000 population	
Number of respondents	382	143	169	35	35
Mean level of threat in the United States as a whole:					
Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.8
Other violent extremism	4.0	3.9	4.0	4.0	4.1

However, threat assessments within the agency's own jurisdiction varied more widely: Agencies serving rural areas and small cities reported a lower threat from violent extremism than agencies serving mid-sized cities, which reported a lower threat than big-city and state agencies. Within each category of agency, the mean level of threat was rated lower for al-Qaeda inspired extremism than for other forms of violent extremism. Within each category, this difference was statistically significant at a .01 level.

Table 5. Mean Local Threat Assessments by Size of Law Enforcement Agency

	All agencies	County and municipal agencies			State agencies
		Serving under 200,000 population	Serving 200,000 - 1,000,000 population	Serving over 1,000,000 population	
Number of respondents	382	143	169	35	35
Mean level of threat within your jurisdiction:					
Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism	2.5	2.2	2.6	3.1	2.8
Other violent extremism	3.0	2.6	3.2	3.5	3.4

Incidence of Ideologically Motivated Violence in the United States

These threat assessments match the relative rates of violence from Muslim extremists and right-wing extremists – an umbrella category in the scholarly literature on extremism that incorporates anti-government and racist violent extremism. Definitions of ideologically motivated violence differ widely, but right-wing violence appears consistently greater than violence by Muslim extremists in the United States since 9/11, according to multiple definitions in multiple datasets.

According to data compiled by Charles Kurzman,¹ an average of nine Muslim-Americans per year have been involved in an average of six terrorism-related plots against targets in the United States (updated for this report through June 22, 2015). Most of these plots were disrupted, but the plots that were carried out accounted for 50 fatalities, or an average of four fatalities per year. Kurzman’s report focuses on individuals accused of crimes associated with an ideologically motivated violent plot or killed during incidents of violence that were reported to be based on ideological motivations.

¹Charles Kurzman, “Terrorism Cases Involving Muslim-Americans,” Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 9, 2015, <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism>.

Table 6. Incidents of Muslim Extremism Toward Targets in the United States: Kurzman Data

Year	Muslim Extremists Source: Kurzman (2015)			
	Individual Suspects/Perpetrators	Plots (including thwarted plots)	Attacks	Fatalities
2001*	1	1	0	0
2002	6	4	3	19
2003	6	4	0	0
2004	4	2	0	0
2005	6	3	0	0
2006	10	5	2	1
2007	10	7	3	5
2008	1	1	0	0
2009	19	7	2	14
2010	12	9	2	0
2011	15	13	1	0
2012	7	6	1	0
2013	6	5	1	4
2014	6	6	4	7
2015*	19	11	2	0
Total	129	85	21	50
Average per year	9	6	2	4

**Data for 2001 counts arrests or incidents after September 11, 2001; data for 2015 counts arrests or incidents through June 22, 2015.*

In contrast, there were 337 incidents of right-wing violence each year in the decade after 9/11, causing a total of 254 fatalities, according to a study by Professor Arie Perliger at the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center.² Perliger’s data, compiled from terrorism and hate crime datasets, as well as news reports, includes “violent attacks that: (1) were perpetrated by groups or individuals affiliated with far-right associations; and/or (2) were intended to promote ideas compatible with far-right ideology.” The toll has increased since the study was released in 2012.

Another report by the Anti-Defamation League, using a more restrictive definition of right-wing extremist violence that “focuses only on premeditated plots or acts by right-wing extremist individuals or groups that rise to the level of attempted or actual domestic terrorism,” presents “a select list” of 34 attacks and 38 fatalities between

²Arie Perliger, “Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America’s Violent Far-Right,” Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, November 2012, pp. 87, 100, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/challengers-from-the-sidelines-understanding-americas-violent-far-right>.

9/11 and the end of 2014.³ This report “is not a comprehensive list of all right-wing violence. Many murders, including unplanned or spontaneous acts of violence, are not included here, nor are thousands of lesser incidents of violence. Such a compilation would be book-length.”

Other datasets, using different definitions of political violence, tell comparable stories. The Global Terrorism Database maintained by the START Center at the University of Maryland includes 65 attacks in the United States associated with right-wing ideologies and 24 attacks by Muslims since 9/11, although right-wing attacks resulted in slightly fewer fatalities (17 as against 24).⁴ The Global Terrorism Database includes incidents of non-state violence that meet one of three criteria: “Criterion I: The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. Criterion II: There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims. Criterion III: The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.”

³Anti-Defamation League, “Terrorist Conspiracies, Plots and Attacks by Right-wing Extremists, 1995-2015,” March 25, 2015, <http://www.adl.org/combating-hate/domestic-extremism-terrorism/c/right-wing-extremist-attacks-1995-2015.html>.

⁴Global Terrorism Database, START Center, University of Maryland, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>, downloaded June 4, 2015. After a review of all of the incident descriptions and notes in the dataset, right-wing ideologies were identified by the keywords “abortion,” “Ku Klux Klan,” “Minutemen,” “Nazi,” “White,” “Supremacist,” “Antigovernment,” “Pro-Life,” “Hate,” “Gun,” “Anti-IRS,” and by targets including “Reproductive,” “Health,” “Mosque,” “Obama,” “Liberal,” “Holocaust,” and “Sikh.” Islamic ideologies were identified by the keywords “Muslim,” “Arab,” “Taliban,” “Islam,” “Allah,” “Osama,” “Nidal,” “Palestinian,” and by targets including “Israel” and “Marathon.”

Table 7. Incidents of Right-Wing Extremism Toward Targets in the United States: Perliger and Anti-Defamation League Data

Year	Right-Wing Extremists Source: Perliger (2012)		Right-Wing Extremists Source: Anti-Defamation League (2015)		
	Attacks	Fatalities	Plots (including thwarted plots)	Attacks	Fatalities
2001*	--	--	1	1	1
2002	95	44	4	0	0
2003	170	10	6	1	2
2004	330	17	6	3	1
2005	180	10	2	0	0
2006	220	18	1	1	2
2007	475	43	4	2	0
2008	560	33	6	3	4
2009	460	32	4	4	6
2010	410	17	8	6	1
2011	475	30	8	4	6
2012*	--	--	8	4	8
2013*	--	--	8	2	2
2014*	--	--	6	3	5
Total	3,375	254	72	34	38
Average per year	337	25	5	3	3

**Perliger's report does not break out annual incidents by month and day, so the totals for 2001 cannot be divided pre- and post-September 11; the report covers incidents through 2011.*

Table 8. Incidents of Muslim, Right-Wing, and Other Terrorism in the United States: Global Terrorism Database

Year	Source: Global Terrorism Database, START Center, University of Maryland					
	Islamic ideologies		Right-wing ideologies		Other/unknown ideologies	
	Attacks	Fatalities	Attacks	Fatalities	Attacks	Fatalities
2001	0	0	1	2	14	5
2002	3	4	18	0	13	0
2003	1	0	5	0	26	0
2004	0	0	2	0	7	0
2005	1	0	4	0	19	0
2006	1	1	1	0	3	0
2007	0	0	3	0	6	0
2008	1	0	10	2	8	0
2009	3	14	4	4	4	0
2010	6	0	2	2	9	2
2011	0	0	2	0	7	0
2012	3	0	10	7	3	0
2013	4	5	3	0	8	2
2014*	--	--	--	--	--	--
2015*	--	--	--	--	--	--
Total	24	24	65	17	127	9
Average per year	2	2	5	1	10	1

*The current version of the Global Terrorism Database covers incidents through 2013.

The International Security Program at the New America Foundation identifies 39 fatalities from “non-jihadist” homegrown extremists and 26 fatalities from “jihadist” extremists, although it counts more “jihadist” than “non-jihadist” individuals charged with violent extremist activity (269 as against 182).⁵ The New America Foundation’s definition focuses on individuals charged or credibly reported to be involved in “violent extremist activity.”

⁵International Security Program, “Homegrown Extremism, 2001-2015,” New America Foundation, <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/extremists/analysis.html>, downloaded June 4, 2015.

Conclusions

Police Do Not See Terrorism as a Severe Threat Locally

Local police agencies see violent extremism as a much greater problem nationally than they do in their own jurisdiction. The national threat perception is probably driven by media coverage and interactions with federal authorities. Yet, when asked about what they know best, their own jurisdiction, law enforcement agencies report that terrorism is a much less severe threat. This applies equally to different types of terrorism – the police perception of the national threat is much higher than their perception of the local threat.

Police Believe that al-Qaeda Inspired Terrorism Is Less of a Threat than Other Forms of Terrorism

Local law enforcement agencies see the threat of terrorism inspired by al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist organizations as less of a threat than other forms of violent extremism, principally anti-government extremism. It is worth noting that this data was collected in early 2014, before the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS) began actively recruiting Americans. However, in follow-up telephone interviews over the past year, after ISIS stepped up recruitment, the officers we spoke with did not modify their initial responses in light of the new threat. Moreover, as we have demonstrated, police perceptions appear to correlate closely with incident data, which has not changed significantly despite the increase in ISIS recruitment activities in the past year.

Rural Agencies Perceive a Lower Terrorist Threat than Agencies in Mid-Size and Large Cities

It is not surprising that small cities and rural areas believe the terrorism threat is lower than big cities in light of the 9/11 attacks and the Boston marathon bombing. However, it is noteworthy that these trends apply to both al-Qaeda inspired and anti-government terrorism. Right-wing terrorism is often seen as being more prevalent in rural areas, yet law enforcement agencies in large cities report a higher threat from anti-government extremism than agencies in small cities and rural areas.