

Research Reveals Patterns of Terrorist Preparation

July 17 2008

Analysis of an extensive terrorism database housed at the University of Arkansas has revealed patterns in activities of terrorists preparing for an attack, information that can be invaluable for law enforcement agencies seeking to prevent terrorist attacks.

Brent L. Smith, director of the university's Terrorism Research Center, reported the research results in the current issue of the *National Institute of Justice Journal* and will present the results at an upcoming NIJ conference. Funded by a series of NIJ grants, Smith was assisted by Kelly Damphousse of the University of Oklahoma as well as Jackson Cothren and Paxton Roberts of the University of Arkansas.

“As we continue to deepen our understanding of the relationship among the location of the terrorists’ home, terrorist preparation activities and the target, this growing knowledge should help officers prevent and respond to attacks,” the researchers wrote.

While law enforcement agencies know a great deal about the behavior of traditional criminals, until now little information has been available about how terrorists prepare for attacks. The researchers found that in general terrorists “think globally but act locally.” While 44 percent of all terrorists lived within 30 miles of their targets, there was some variation by type of terrorists. International terrorists tended to live near the target while right-wing terrorists in the United States lived in rural areas and chose targets in nearby cities.

Preparation for attacks included surveillance and other intelligence gathering, robberies and thefts to raise funds, weapons violations and bomb manufacturing. Most such activities took place close to home and to the target, especially for “single issue terrorists,” such as environmental and anti-abortion extremists. One study of environmental and international terrorists found that about half of the environmental terrorists and nearly three-fifths of the international terrorists lived within 30 miles of their targets.

Similarly, more than half of the environmental and international terrorists prepared for the attacks within 30 miles of the target, with some important exceptions.

“Major crimes to procure funding for the group – like thefts, robberies and burglaries – however are intentionally committed many miles away to avoid drawing attention to the group’s location and target choice,” the researchers wrote.

The timelines for preparations varied among groups. Some environmental extremists use “lone wolf” tactics, which involve uncoordinated acts of violence by individuals, typically leading to spontaneous attacks. In particular, the researchers examined 21 incidents attributed to an environmental terrorist group known as The Family. Unlike “lone wolf” groups, The Family engaged in a broader conspiracy involving 20 or so people. Despite this, 85 percent of their preparation activities – from inspection of the target through assembly and delivery of the bomb – took place within six days of the attack.

In contrast, international terrorists tended to take longer than six months to prepare for an attack. Their acts involved a larger number of people, and they engaged in three times as many preparatory activities as environmental terrorists.

The researchers suggested that knowledge of local patterns “may be used by agencies to more efficiently patrol known, high-risk target areas and gather intelligence on suspected actions within a specific distance from potential targets.”

Source: University of Arkansas

Citation: Research Reveals Patterns of Terrorist Preparation (2008, July 17) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-07-reveals-patterns-terrorist.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.