

## Female terrorists' bios belie stereotypes, study finds

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Much like their male counterparts, female terrorists are likely to be educated, employed and native residents of the country where they commit a terrorist act, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

The findings contradict stereotypes presented in previous studies that describe female terrorists as socially isolated and vulnerable to recruitment because they are uneducated, unemployed and from a foreign land, psychologists reported in a study published online in the APA journal *Law and Human Behavior*. These assumptions are not supported by evidence, according to the study authors.

"We discovered that some of the popular notions about female terrorists do not reflect what has occurred in the past," said the study's lead author, Karen Jacques, PhD. "A more realistic description is helpful because it provides insights into the [social dynamics](#) that might promote an individual's involvement in terrorist activities."

Researchers at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom examined archival [biographical data](#) from multiple sources on 222 female and 269 male terrorists connected to one of 13 conflicts involving nationalist-separatists, social revolutionaries or religious fundamentalists, including al Qaeda, the Irish Republican Army and the Popular Liberation Army of Colombia.

Jacques and her co-author, Paul J. Taylor, PhD, examined eight variables

for each terrorist: age at first involvement, education, employment status, [immigration status](#), marital status, religious conversion, criminal activity and activist connections.

The majority of both female and male terrorists were between 16 and 35 years old, native residents, employed, educated through secondary school, not converted from another religion and rarely involved in a previous crime, the study said. Compared to male terrorists, the researchers found, women had on average more education, with the majority continuing beyond secondary school, and were more likely to be divorced or widowed, less likely to be employed and less likely to be immigrants. Collectively, the findings for female terrorists indicated more of an emphasis on individual motivations, such as personal revenge for the death of a loved one, rather than collective engagement in terrorism, the authors said.

"A surprising finding was that, unlike for other criminals, there were very few instances of previous involvement in criminal activity among both females and males," said Jacques. "This could be because they were unwilling to confess to other crimes, because criminality could attract authorities' undue attention to potential terrorists, or the possibility that having a criminal career is not a significant precursor to terrorism."

About a third of both male and female terrorists had prior connections to terrorism activities via their families. However, more than 50 percent of those with family connections to terrorism indicated that family influence did not motivate them to carry out terrorist activities, the study said.

**More information:** Article: "Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism," Karen Jacques, PhD, and Paul J. Taylor, PhD, *Law and Human Behavior*, online, April 2012.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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