

# There is almost no research on what distinguishes potential terrorists, study finds

September 25 2017, by Matt Shipman

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A recent analysis of the existing research on factors associated with an individual's risk for engaging in terrorist activity highlights how little we know about these factors and the need for additional research in this area.

"It's important to have a better understanding of what distinguishes potential terrorists from individuals who pose little or no risk of becoming terrorists, whether we're talking about Middle Eastern [terrorist](#) organizations or domestic terrorists in the United States," says Sarah Desmarais, an associate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and lead author of a paper on the work. "When we looked into this area, we found that there is surprisingly little research in the field - and that needs to be addressed."

The researchers conducted a systematic review of research literature, dating back to 1990, related to factors associated with an individual's joining a terrorist organization or perpetrating [terrorist attacks](#).

The in-depth review found 205 articles relevant to the subject matter, of which only 50 reported on findings related to empirical data. Of those 50, only 24 articles included any statistical analysis. And of those 24, only six articles compared the characteristics of terrorists to the characteristics of non-terrorists - which is essential if the work is going to offer any insight into what factors are associated with terrorist behavior.

"Basically, over the past quarter century, there have been six research articles that are useful in identifying someone who is likely to engage in terrorism," Desmarais says. "And the quality of those six studies is variable."

"There may be classified research I'm not aware of, but this highlights the need for more research in this area," Desmarais says. "It is, literally, an issue that can affect national security."

The paper, "The State of Scientific Knowledge Regarding Factors Associated With Terrorism," is published in the *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. The paper was co-authored by Joseph Simons-Rudolph, a teaching assistant professor of psychology at NC State; Christine Brugh and Eileen Schilling, graduate students at NC State; and Chad Hoggan, an assistant professor of educational leadership, policy and human development at NC State. The work was done with funding from the Laboratory for Analytic Sciences, a research partnership between NC State and the National Security Agency.

**More information:** Sarah L. Desmarais et al, The State of Scientific Knowledge Regarding Factors Associated With Terrorism., *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/tam0000090](https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000090)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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