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Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 8

Lone-Actor Terrorism

Policy Paper 4: 'Leakage' and Interaction with Authorities

Clare Ellis and Raffaello Pantucci



Co-funded by the Prevention of and
Fight against Crime Programme of
the European Union

About this Paper

This paper is the eighth publication in the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project, which aims to improve understanding of, and responses to, the phenomenon of (potentially) violent lone actors through analysis of comprehensive data on cases from across Europe. The eighteen-month project is co-funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union, and has been undertaken by a RUSI-led consortium. Partnering institutions include Chatham House, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Leiden University, one of the founding organisations of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) at The Hague.

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Executive Summary

LONE-ACTOR TERRORISTS ARE perceived as presenting acute challenges for law-enforcement practitioners in detection and disruption; acting without direct command and control from a wider network, it is assumed that without such communications they may evade the traditional ‘tripwires’ that would bring them to the attention of the authorities. The Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project aims to investigate this assumption. Through the construction and analysis of a database of 120 lone actors from across Europe it seeks to improve understanding of lone-actor terrorists, their behaviour and their activities in the period leading up to their intended attacks.

This paper outlines the policy implications of analysis in relation to changes in perpetrator behaviour, ‘leakage’ of extreme views or intention to act, and interactions with public authorities in the time leading up to an attack.

Key Findings

A key finding to emerge across the data-set was that lone-actor terrorists have often announced their intent to commit a terrorist act; they are not as invisible as is sometimes assumed. This expression of intention can manifest itself in a number of ways. First, changes in behaviour can be crucial indicators that an individual is becoming more extreme in his or her views, or is even considering committing a violent act; 34 per cent of lone-actor terrorists identified in the study exhibited a change in behaviour. Moreover, these changes were more prevalent among religiously inspired lone-actor terrorists,¹ where 50 per cent of perpetrators exhibited this potential indicator in contrast to only 15 per cent of right-wing lone-actor terrorists.

Second, individuals tell others what they are planning to do. The technical term for this is ‘leakage’, which denotes situations where the perpetrator has given indication of their extreme views or intention to act to a third party; it may be intentional or unwitting. Overall, 46 per cent of perpetrators exhibited leakage; this was consistent across religiously inspired and right-wing actors, with no significant variation. However, there were striking differences with regard to audience: 45 per cent of leakage by religiously inspired lone-actor terrorists was to friends or family, in contrast to only 18 per cent of leakage by right-wing perpetrators. Right-wing lone-actor terrorists were more likely to post telling indicators online, either through participation in the online forums of extreme groups, or postings on their own social media pages; 41 per cent of their leakage occurred on the Internet.

1. To record the ideology of lone-actor terrorists, the project adopted the categories used by Europol’s Situation and Trend Reports: ‘religiously inspired’, ‘ethno-nationalist and separatist’, ‘left-wing and anarchist’, ‘right-wing’, ‘single issue’, ‘other’ and ‘unknown’. See Europol, *European Union Terrorism and Situation Trend Report 2015* (The Hague: Europol, 2015).

Third, it is striking that law enforcement has seemingly detected a number of right-wing lone-actor terrorists by chance rather than through intelligence-led operations. Excluding cases where a perpetrator was identified during (or immediately following) an incident, 40 per cent of right-wing extremists were uncovered with an element of chance, as part of an investigation into other offences or because the perpetrator accidentally detonated a device, drawing attention to his or her activities. This stands in contrast to religiously inspired cases where 88 per cent of interventions in the database were intelligence-led.

Policy Implications

One of the most significant conclusions from the research is that lone actors should not be considered as detached as is often presumed. This form of terrorist threat is often perceived as the most difficult to detect and disrupt, yet nearly half of all perpetrators in the database (46 per cent) exhibited outward signs of their extremist beliefs or even their intention to act. While lone-actor terrorists may not trip some of the 'traditional' alarms with law enforcement by interacting with a wider extremist network, their activities and interactions with those around them do offer opportunities for detection.

Right-Wing Extremism Must Not be Overlooked

In the CLAT data-set, 33 per cent of perpetrators were classified as right-wing extremists while 38 per cent were religiously inspired.² For the British contingent, this percentage was markedly higher at 57 per cent and 35 per cent respectively.³ The right wing therefore represents a significant proportion of the lone-actor terrorist threat in Europe; yet it is perhaps concerning that, excluding cases where a perpetrator was identified during (or immediately following) an incident, a surprising proportion (40 per cent) of right-wing perpetrators were identified to some degree by chance rather than through intelligence-led operations.

Recommendation: Government bodies and law-enforcement agencies should examine their policies and procedures to ensure they are understanding and prioritising the right-wing threat appropriately, and dedicating sufficient resources to mitigate it.

Public Vigilance, Co-operation and Confidence are Crucial

Lone-actor terrorists are often less secretive than might be expected; their behaviour and activity can provide warnings of their extreme views or even intention to act. These indicators are often most evident to those around the perpetrator. Whether in the physical or virtual

2. The remainder of the data-set comprised 2 per cent ethno-nationalist and separatist, 3 per cent left-wing and anarchist, 5 per cent single issue and 19 per cent other.

3. It should be noted that there are variations across Europe in the way incidents are perceived and reported; for example, some incidents may be reported as a 'hate crime', but meet the criteria for inclusion in the database. This was particularly evident when collecting data on attacks or plots in Eastern Europe. The research team took steps to compensate; however, some cases will undoubtedly have been missed, creating the potential for selection bias in the database.

world, friends, family and work colleagues are more likely to be exposed to crucial indicators than the authorities. An important tool in combating the lone-actor terrorist threat is therefore ensuring the public is able to recognise extremist behaviour that might turn to violence, have avenues to report it, and crucially, are willing to do so. This latter point is potentially the most difficult for policy-makers to overcome, with recent research on countering violent extremism identifying that those closest to a potential extremist are often reluctant to intervene.⁴

Recommendation: Authorities should ensure that public-awareness programmes encompass the lone-actor terrorism threat, offering guidance for identifying those vulnerable to being drawn into all forms of terrorism. This needs to be done in a non-alarmist fashion and should pay similar attention to right-wing and religiously inspired threats. Moreover, providing avenues of reporting is not sufficient; steps must be taken to encourage members of the public to use them and to support them in doing so.

Opportunities to Detect Extremist Behaviour Vary According to Ideological Category

Leakage varies from ideology to ideology. In particular, this study found that religiously inspired perpetrators tended to exhibit indicators of extremism to friends or family, whereas right-wing terrorists were more likely to signal their extremist views online. This has clear implications for how detection efforts might be targeted.

Recommendation: Countering lone-actor terrorism requires a holistic response, combining public communication, community outreach and collaboration with social media companies. This response must also be targeted according to where indicators of extremism are most likely to be apparent. Relevant authorities should engage with social media companies about identifying extreme right-wing postings and reporting these through appropriate channels. For religiously inspired ideologies, more effort needs to go into channelling messages through family groups or social networks targeted at families.

4. Michael J Williams, John G Horgan and William P Evans, 'The Critical Role of Friends in Networks for Countering Violent Extremism: Toward a Theory of Vicarious Help-Seeking', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (Vol. 8, No. 1, October 2016), pp. 45–65.

Changes in Behaviour, ‘Leakage’ and Interaction with Authorities

THE TERRORIST THREAT in Europe has continued to evolve. As intelligence agencies and law enforcement have become increasingly adept at detecting and disrupting large-scale terrorist plots, the threat from such attacks has declined. In contrast, that posed by lone-actor terrorists has increased, with potential attackers turning to smaller-scale, less-sophisticated assaults. These are perceived by the perpetrators to offer a greater chance of success.

In part, this trend reflects a decision by a number of extremist groups to adopt lone-actor terrorism as a tactic and to try to inspire their supporters to carry out such attacks. Through its magazine *Inspire*, Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula has offered instructions for producing explosives and suggestions for possible attacks, a number of which were subsequently adopted by plotters – both lone-actor terrorists and networked cells.

Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) has also actively encouraged lone-actor attacks. In September 2014, Daesh spokesman Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani urged the group’s supporters not to ‘let this battle pass you by wherever you may be’, encouraging them to ‘kill a disbelieving American or European ... in any manner’.¹ In his speech it is striking that the intended attacks are to be committed using readily available implements such as knives and cars; the focus is not on the externally directed, complex explosives plots that were the hallmark of Al-Qa’ida terrorism throughout the 2000s: there is an implicit acknowledgment that simple attacks are more likely to succeed. This message has been echoed in the group’s magazine *Dabiq*, which stated: ‘The smaller the numbers of those involved and the less the discussion beforehand, the more likely it will be carried out without problems ... One should not complicate the attacks by involving other parties, purchasing complex materials, or communicating with weak-hearted individuals’.²

Lone-actor terrorists are perceived as presenting acute challenges for law-enforcement practitioners in detection and disruption. By definition, they act without direct command and control from a wider network, and it is assumed that without such communications they may evade the ‘tripwires’ that would usually bring them to the attention of the authorities. The Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project aims to investigate this assumption. Through the construction and analysis of a database of 120 lone actors from across Europe, it seeks to improve understanding of lone-actor terrorists, their behaviour and their activities in the period leading up to their intended attacks.

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1. Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani, excerpts from speech entitled ‘Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful’, cited in *Dabiq*, ‘The Failed Crusade’ (No. 4, October 2014), p. 9.
 2. *Dabiq*, ‘The Failed Crusade’, p. 44.

Lone-actor terrorism is defined by the CLAT project as follows:³

The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).

This paper outlines the policy implications of analysis of perpetrator behaviour, 'leakage' of extreme views or intention to act, and interactions with public authorities in the time leading up to an attack. It is presented in two parts: the first outlines the key findings from analysis of relevant variables in the database; the second details the policy implications of this analysis, offering specific recommendations. This paper should be read alongside:

- 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Analysis Paper'
- 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper One: Personal Characteristics of Lone-Actor Terrorists'
- 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper Two: Attack Methodology and Logistics'
- 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Policy Paper Three: Motivations, Political Engagement and Online Activity'

Key Findings

Analysis of variables relating to changes in behaviour, 'leakage' and interaction with authorities produced a number of important findings. Both the methodology used and the complete findings are detailed in a previous CLAT publication;⁴ however, in order to present the policy implications, the limitations of the study and the relevant findings are summarised below.

Limitations

Although the database contains more than 120 cases, sufficient information was not available to enable coding for every variable in relation to each lone-actor terrorist. Consequently, analysis of specific variables was sometimes conducted using a sub-set of the data where complete information was available; in this scenario, and in particular when comparing subgroups within the data-set, the sample used is more limited than the overall number of cases suggests.

There are also some important limitations to the data due to the use of open-source reporting. Whether information is publicly available in relation to an issue may depend on whether it was interesting to the journalists investigating the story; for example, whether a terrorist exhibited mental-health problems is perhaps a question more often raised in relation to lone-actor

3. For further discussion regarding this definition and how it was established, please see Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Definitional Workshop', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (December 2015), p. iii.

4. Clare Ellis et al., 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Analysis Paper', *RUSI Occasional Paper* (February 2016).

terrorists than in cases involving larger terrorist cells.⁵ Moreover, there are variations across Europe in the way incidents are perceived and reported; for example, some incidents may be reported as a ‘hate crime’, but meet the criteria for inclusion in the database. The research team took steps to compensate; however, some cases will undoubtedly have been missed, creating the potential for selection bias in the database. While every effort was made (including consultation with local experts) to try to enlarge this data pool there is an element of reporting – and consequently selection – bias. For these reasons, the consortium agreed that not all of the data supported detailed and sophisticated quantitative analysis.

There is a further limitation in relation to the specific analysis of the interaction of lone-actor terrorists with authorities; unfortunately, there is often a paucity of detail in the public domain. In many cases it is not possible to determine whether, and how, the perpetrator interacted with law enforcement, mental-health workers or social-welfare services prior to the attack for understandable reasons such as data-protection restrictions. The analysis conducted for this study therefore focused on the behaviour exhibited by the perpetrators, their attempted or undertaken action, and how they ultimately came to the attention of law enforcement.

Changes in Behaviour

Changes in behaviour can be crucial indicators that an individual is becoming more extreme in his or her views or is even considering committing violent acts. As an example, in the UK a key part of the national counter-terrorism strategy is the Channel process, ‘a multi-agency approach to identify and provide support to individuals who are at risk of being drawn into terrorism.’⁶ Channel uses a Vulnerability Assessment Framework consisting of three criteria: engagement with a cause or ideology; intent to cause harm; and capability to cause harm. Examination of the specific twenty-two factors considered in the framework reveals that changes in behaviour are a principal indicator in relation to the first two dimensions. Examples include: ‘loss of interest in other friends and activities not associated with the extremist ideology, group or cause’; and ‘using insulting or derogatory names or labels for another group’.⁷

Recognising the potential detection value of behavioural changes, the CLAT database was therefore designed to capture this information. Variables record whether public information indicates a change in the perpetrator’s behaviour in the time leading up to the (planned) attack, along with any available details regarding both the nature of the behaviour and the context in which it was noted.

5. See, for example, Toby Archer, ‘Breivik’s Mindset: The Counterjihad and the New Transatlantic Anti-Muslim Right’, in Max Taylor, P M Currie and Donald Holbrook (eds), *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 169–86. In discussing the scrutiny applied to the mental state of Breivik, the author highlights that questions are rarely raised regarding the mental health of ‘the Palestinian or Iraqi suicide bomber, of Jihadi terrorists around the world, or of ethno-nationalists radicals be they Basque, Corsican or Tamil’. See p. 170.

6. HM Government, *Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting Vulnerable People from Being Drawn into Terrorism* (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), p. 3.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Overall, 34 per cent of lone-actor terrorists exhibited a change in behaviour. Moreover, these changes were more prevalent among religiously inspired lone-actor terrorists: 50 per cent of perpetrators exhibited this potential indicator in contrast to only 15 per cent of right-wing terrorist plotters.⁸ Examples include becoming increasingly distant from family members, adopting sudden and drastic changes in attitude, and, more specifically, changing social groups or clothing style.

Leakage

The term 'leakage' is used to denote situations where the perpetrator has given an indication of extreme views or an intention to act to a third party, intentionally or unwittingly. Leakage may be limited to behavioural changes, but can also be much broader. In some extreme cases, it can include outright declarations of an intention to commit a terrorist act.

Variables captured whether leakage occurred, its nature and the audience (that is, who observed specific behaviours). Overall, 46 per cent of perpetrators conducted some form of leakage; this was consistent across the data for religiously inspired and right-wing actors, with no substantial variation. However, there were striking differences with regard to the audience: 45 per cent of leakage by religiously inspired lone-actor terrorists was to friends or family, in contrast to only 18 per cent of leakage by right-wing perpetrators. Right-wing lone-actor terrorists were more likely to post telling indicators online, where 41 per cent of their leakage occurred.

In each case of online leakage, right-wing perpetrators were also very vocal regarding their extremist views, posting explicit comments in the online forums of extreme groups or on their own social media pages. Examples include a perpetrator who left a message on the internet forum of a known far-right group, Combat 18: 'Watch TV on Sunday, I will be the star. Death to ZOG ! 88!'.⁹ In another example, an individual had joined a number of far-right groups on Facebook including Bloc Identitaire (formerly Unité Radicale), Maison Commune and Belle et Rebelle.

The research team had posited that younger perpetrators might be more careless in revealing their extremist beliefs or attack plans; however, analysis suggested no correlation between age and leakage. Similarly, there was no correlation between indications of mental-health issues and a propensity to exhibit leakage.

Interaction with Authorities

Variables were designed to capture whether the perpetrator had been previously known to mental-health practitioners, social-welfare services or law-enforcement bodies. Separate

8. To record the ideology of lone-actor terrorists, the project adopted the categories used by Europol's Situation and Trend Reports: 'religiously inspired', 'ethno-nationalist and separatist', 'left-wing and anarchist', 'right-wing', 'single issue', 'other' and 'unknown'. See Europol, *European Union Terrorism and Situation Trend Report 2015* (The Hague: Europol, 2015).

9. ZOG is an abbreviation for Zionist Occupation Government, while 88 is used to represent 'Heil Hitler'.

variables also recorded whether the engagement (or investigation) was current at the time of the attack or intervention. Unfortunately, this information was often unavailable or inconclusive, precluding extensive quantitative analysis across the database.

However, some trends were still apparent. Excluding cases where a perpetrator was identified during (or immediately following) an incident, 40 per cent of right-wing extremists were uncovered with an element of chance, as part of an investigation into other offences or because the perpetrator accidentally detonated a device, drawing attention to his or her activities. One perpetrator sustained serious injuries while testing a device and was airlifted to hospital; given the nature of his injuries, his home was searched, revealing further explosive devices. The bomb-making activities of another perpetrator were discovered during an investigation into the possession of indecent images of children, while in a third example, a perpetrator's terrorist activity was uncovered following his arrest for public-order offences after urinating on a train platform. These examples stand in stark contrast to religiously inspired cases, where 88 per cent of such interventions in the database were intelligence-led. This suggests that security forces were far more likely to be watching the broader pool of religiously inspired extremists than far-right extremists, and indeed reflects broader threat assessments and corresponding priorities across the EU.¹⁰

Policy Implications

One of the most significant conclusions from the research is that lone actors should not be considered as detached as is often presumed. This form of terrorist threat is often perceived as the most difficult to detect and disrupt, yet nearly half of all perpetrators in the database (46 per cent) exhibited outward signs of their extremist beliefs or even their intention to act. While lone-actor terrorists may not trip some of the 'traditional' alarms with law enforcement by interacting with a wider extremist network, their activities and interactions with those around them do offer opportunities for detection. To address this broader consideration, this paper makes three specific recommendations for security forces and policy-makers across Europe.

Right-Wing Extremism Must Not be Overlooked

It is clear that the media, and consequently public attention, is largely focused on violent Islamic terrorists; while this may reflect the broader threat picture, it is at odds with that posed by lone-actor terrorism. In Great Britain, two people have lost their lives as a result of lone-actor terrorist attacks in the past ten years: Lee Rigby was the victim of Islamic terrorism, while Mohammed Saleem's attacker was a right-wing extremist. In the West more broadly, since 2006 only 20 per cent of deaths from lone-actor terrorism have been attributed to Islamic extremism.¹¹

10. Europol, *European Union Terrorism and Situation Trend Report 2015*.

11. The remaining 80 per cent were attributed to right-wing extremists, nationalists, anti-government elements and other types of political extremism and supremacism. See Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2015* (Sydney, New York, NY and Mexico City: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015).

In the CLAT data-set, 33 per cent of perpetrators were classified as right-wing extremists while 38 per cent were religiously inspired.¹² For the British contingent, this percentage was markedly higher at 57 per cent and 35 per cent respectively.¹³ The right wing therefore represents a significant proportion of the lone-actor terrorist threat in Europe; yet it is perhaps concerning that, excluding cases where a perpetrator was identified during (or immediately following) an incident, a surprising proportion (40 per cent) of right-wing perpetrators were identified to some degree by chance rather than through intelligence-led operations. These particular findings raise concerns that the machinery of counter-terrorism is not well attuned to detecting a significant aspect of the lone-actor terrorist threat.

Recommendation: Government bodies and law-enforcement agencies should examine their policies and procedures to ensure they are understanding and prioritising the right-wing threat appropriately, and dedicating sufficient resources to mitigate it.

Public Vigilance, Co-operation and Confidence are Crucial

Lone-actor terrorists are often less secretive than might be expected; their behaviour and activity can provide warnings of their extreme views or even intention to act. These indicators are often most evident to those around the perpetrator. Whether in the physical or virtual world, friends, family and work colleagues are more likely to be exposed to crucial indicators than the authorities. Recent research conducted by Michael J Williams, John G Horgan and William P Evans offers further support for this finding: examining countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes more broadly, they found that ‘those best positioned to notice early signs of individuals considering acts of violent extremism likely would be those individuals’ friends’.¹⁴ An important tool in combating the lone-actor terrorist threat is therefore ensuring the public is able to recognise extremist behaviour that might turn to violence, have avenues to report it, and crucially, are willing to do so.

The latter point regarding public willingness to intercede is potentially the most difficult for policy-makers to overcome. The research of Williams, Horgan and Evans identified a general reluctance to intervene, drawing analogies with John Darley and Bibb Latané’s model of bystander intervention.¹⁵ Applying the model to CVE, they suggest two additional factors for

12. The remainder of the data-set comprised 2 per cent ethno-nationalist and separatist, 3 per cent left-wing and anarchist, 5 per cent single issue and 19 per cent other.

13. It should be noted that there are variations across Europe in the way incidents are perceived and reported; for example, some incidents may be reported as a ‘hate crime’ but nevertheless meet the criteria for inclusion in the database. This was particularly evident when collecting data on attacks or plots in Eastern Europe. The research team took steps to compensate; however, some cases will undoubtedly have been missed, creating the potential for selection bias in the database.

14. Michael J Williams, John G Horgan and William P Evans, ‘The Critical Role of Friends in Networks for Countering Violent Extremism: Toward a Theory of Vicarious Help-Seeking’, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (Vol. 8, No. 1, October 2016), pp. 45–65.

15. Williams, Horgan and Evans summarise the model as including ‘five cognitive stages between an emergency and the decision to intervene and offer assistance. Those stages are the following: (a) notice the event, (b) interpret the event as an emergency, (c) assume responsibility for providing

consideration. First, the degree to which an individual identifies with the subject (the potential extremist) may restrict his or her willingness to acknowledge that person's behaviour as extreme. Second, fears of damaging a relationship will act as a barrier to intervention: this factor becomes more important the more he or she cares about the relationship with the potential extremist.

Recommendation: Authorities should ensure that public-awareness programmes encompass the lone-actor terrorism threat, offering guidance for identifying those vulnerable to being drawn into all forms of terrorism. This needs to be done in a non-alarmist fashion and should pay similar attention to right-wing and religiously inspired threats. Moreover, providing avenues of reporting is not sufficient; steps must be taken to encourage members of the public to use them and to support them in doing so.

Opportunities to Detect Extremist Behaviour Vary According to Ideological Category

Leakage varies from ideology to ideology. In particular, this study found that religiously inspired perpetrators tended to exhibit indicators of extremism to friends or family, whereas right-wing terrorists were more likely to signal their extremist views online. This has clear implications for how detection efforts might be targeted.

Recommendation: Countering lone-actor terrorism requires a holistic response, combining public communication, community outreach and collaboration with social media companies. This response must also be targeted according to where indicators of extremism are most likely to be apparent. Relevant authorities should engage with social media companies about identifying extreme right-wing postings and reporting these through appropriate channels. For religiously inspired ideologies, more effort needs to go into channelling messages through family groups or social networks targeted at families.

help, (d) know appropriate forms of assistance, and (e) implement a decision to help.' See also, John Darley and Bibb Latané, 'Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 8, No. 4, April 1968), pp. 377–83.

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