

# THE CHALLENGE OF DETECTING IDEOLOGICALLY UNATTACHED TERRORISTS

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In the aftermath of the first attempted assassination of former President Donald Trump, investigators struggled to identify the perpetrator's motive. *Why* did he do it? Despite exhaustive searches of the shooter's residence, vehicle, and electronics, no evidence surfaced in the weeks after the shooting that would conclusively answer this critical question.<sup>1</sup> This apparent lack of motive raises important questions about acts of terrorism in which the perpetrator's ideological motivation is unknown or nonexistent and, consequently, how terrorists without an ideology may evade the attention of law enforcement and therefore be harder to catch.\*

To explore the profiles of domestic terrorists without extremist ideologies, we leveraged CNA's new dataset: the Domestic Terrorism Offender Level Database (DTOLD). The dataset includes detailed information on the 320 non-Islamist perpetrators who carried out terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020. DTOLD is based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). For each attack in the GTD that met our inclusion criteria, we identified the perpetrator and sought to determine their ideological commitments. If an extremist ideology was clear, we coded it as such. If a nonideological motivation (e.g., monetary gain) was uncovered, we coded it as "no ideology." If we were unable to find any information, we coded it as "not publicly available" (NPA).

**Our analysis of DTOLD suggests that individuals with no clear ideological motivation are less affiliated (i.e., less integrated into extremist communities) and less likely to leak (i.e., share information about their violent intentions), which may increase the challenge of identifying and preventing the acts of violence that they are planning.**

## THE IDEOLOGICALLY UNATTACHED

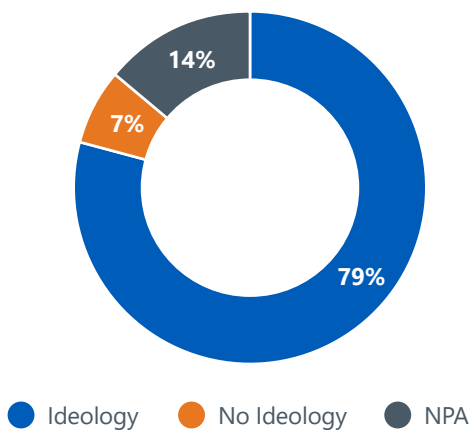
Terrorism is typically differentiated from other types of crime based on the identification of an ideological motive (i.e., terrorism is intended to advance a broader social, political, or economic goal rather than personal goals such as financial gain or revenge).<sup>2</sup> However, there is no consensus within the literature regarding the role of ideology in motivating and shaping terrorist or extremist violence.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars argue that terrorism is the result of individuals acting on behalf of an ideology and that counterterrorism efforts must focus on combating terrorist ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Others highlight the role of contextual factors, mental health, and nihilism, minimizing the role of ideology in motivating individual engagement in terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite the focus on perpetrator ideology, it can often be difficult to (1) identify ideology and (2) differentiate between terrorism and observationally equivalent crimes that also fit under the broader category of public violence (e.g., mass shootings, school shootings, hate crimes).

\* For this paper, we use Ackerman and Burnham's (2021) definition of *ideology*: "a system of societal beliefs that is judgmental of the way things are and/or ought to be, is generally intended to be propagated, and claims exclusive explanatory power within the domain it encompasses." See Gary A. Ackerman and Michael Burnham, "Towards a Definition of Terrorist Ideology," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 6 (2021), p. 1166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1599862>.

This project was supported by Award No. 2021-GG-02723, a grant from 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 authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

**Of the offenders in DTOLD, 21 percent (68 of 320) have no clear ideological commitment (i.e., no ideology or no publicly available ideology), yet they perpetrated attacks that met the GTD's criteria for inclusion.** As Figure 1 shows, DTOLD data suggest that 7 percent (24 of 320) of the individuals in the dataset have no discernible extremist ideology; that is, they appear to be motivated by something other than an extremist ideology, such as financial gain, personal revenge, or mental illness. An ideological commitment could not be determined for an additional 14 percent (44 of 320) of the individuals in the dataset because investigators were unable to find information to that effect, the information was not publicly released, or there was insufficient public reporting on the individual.

**Figure 1: Extremist Ideology in the Dataset**



Source: CNA.

## IDEOLOGY, LEAKAGE, AND AFFILIATION

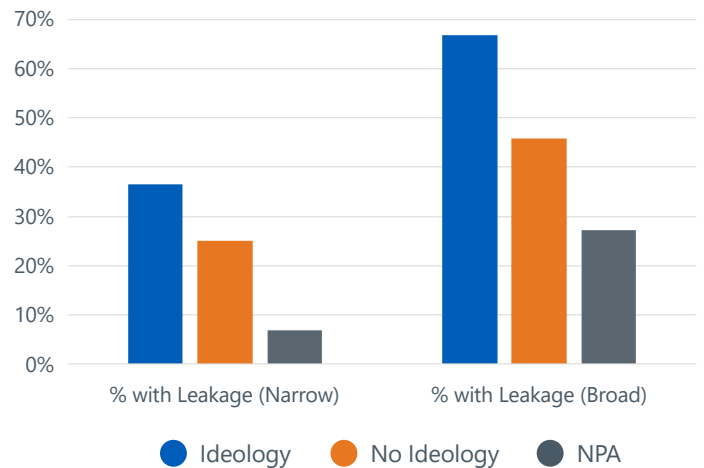
DTOLD data suggest that attacks committed by individuals who have no discernible ideology may be more difficult for law enforcement to prevent because these individuals are less detectable—because of lower leakage and lower affiliation—than offenders with clear ideological commitments.

One important datapoint for this dynamic is leakage—whether an individual plotting an attack leaks details about their intent to harm someone before committing the attack.<sup>6</sup> To evaluate leakage, we used our DTOLD data to calculate leakage defined in two ways: narrowly and broadly.<sup>7</sup> The narrow conceptualization is based on two variables in DTOLD: (1) a warning, threat, or announcement and (2) social media use before or during the attack. The broad conceptualization

is based on eight variables in DTOLD: (1) a warning, threat, or announcement; (2) social media use related to the attack; (3) evidence of extremist symbols; (4) preoccupation with a mass shooter; (5) notable or obsessive interest in firearms; (6) notable or obsessive interest in mass violence; (7) notable or obsessive interest in vigilante organizations; and (8) notable or obsessive interest in another extremist individual.

**Looking at the entirety of the DTOLD dataset, we find that 31.56 percent (101 of 320) of offenders had leakage using the narrow definition and 59.69 percent (191 of 320) had leakage based on the broad definition.** But, as Figure 2 illustrates, a breakdown by ideology reveals a pattern in the data.

**Figure 2: Ideology and Leakage**

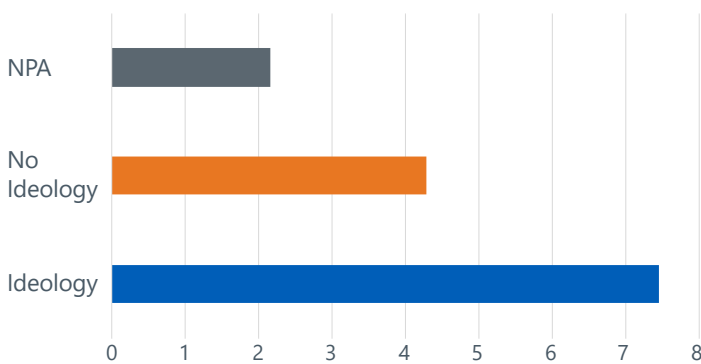


Source: CNA.

- Of individuals in the dataset with an ideology, 36.51 percent (92 of 252) had leakage defined narrowly and 66.67 percent (168 of 252) had leakage defined broadly.
- Of individuals in the dataset with no apparent ideology, 25.00 percent (6 of 24) had leakage defined narrowly and 45.83 percent (11 of 24) had leakage defined broadly.
- Of individuals in the dataset for whom there was no public information about an ideology, 6.82 percent (3 of 44) had leakage defined narrowly and 27.27 percent (12 of 44) had leakage defined broadly.

The individuals with no ideology or no publicly available ideology are also less affiliated than individuals with an ideology, meaning that they are more isolated and less connected to other extremists. We calculated affiliation scores for all offenders in DTOLD based on 20 variables related to an offender’s degree of isolation or connectedness to other extremists, with higher scores indicating more affiliation.\* As Figure 3 shows, **the average affiliation scores for those with ideologies were highest, followed by those of individuals with no ideology and then by those of individuals with no publicly available ideology.**

**Figure 3: Average Affiliation**



Source: CNA.

## DISCUSSION

This analysis has limitations. The DTOLD data are based on the GTD, and the GTD inclusion criteria allow some nonideological offenders. However, there are almost certainly other nonideological offenders who are not in the GTD, making the sample incomplete. Moreover, the DTOLD data were collected using open-source research that relied on court documents and media reporting, so individuals with NPA ideologies may have lower leakage and affiliation scores because we have less data for them in general. That said, researchers have established a clear correlation between lethality and media coverage (which is, in turn, correlated with the likelihood of having more information on the offender), and we have similar ratios of lethal\*\* to nonlethal offenders in each of the groups, which suggests

\* We based our nonbinary conceptualization of affiliation on the one outlined in Randy Borum, Robert Fein, and Bryan Vossekuil, “A Dimensional Approach to Analyzing Lone Offender Terrorism,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17, no. 5 (2012), p. 392. Affiliation scores are relative to each other and are therefore most meaningful when used in comparison to each other.

\*\* We used two definitions of *lethality* in our analysis: one limited to offenders whose acts resulted in deaths and one inclusive of those who killed or injured people.

that a lack of data may not be the cause.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, missing data does not explain the finding that **domestic terrorists without ideological motivations (i.e., those for whom we did not find an ideology but did find a nonideological motivation) have lower levels of leakage and affiliation than those with ideological commitments.**

The data raise critical issues for both researchers and practitioners. Researchers should further explore how to classify and analyze acts of violence that target the public but do not fit neatly into existing categories (e.g., domestic terrorism, mass shootings, hate crimes). Practitioners should be cognizant that ideologically unattached would-be terrorists may leak less frequently and be less affiliated, which might complicate the work of preventing the acts of violence that this type of potential offender may be planning.

## ENDNOTES

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4. Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, "Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (2019), p. 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26853737>.
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8. See Erin M. Kearns, Allison E. Betus, and Anthony F. Lemieux, "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?," *Justice Quarterly* 36, no. 6 (2019), pp. 985–1022; Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, "The Devil You Know but Are Afraid to Face: Underreporting Bias and Its Distorting Effects on the Study of Terrorism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 5 (2006), pp. 714–735; Charles W. Mahoney, "More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018), pp. 589–614; Zachary S. Mitnik, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak, "Post-9/11 Coverage of Terrorism in the New York Times," *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2020), pp. 161–185; Adam Ghazi-Tehrani and Erin M. Kearns, "Biased Coverage of Bias Crime: Examining Differences in Media Coverage of Hate Crimes and Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 8 (2023), pp. 1283–1303.

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