DOMESTIC TERRORISTS' CONTACT WITH SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS BEFORE ATTACKS

Megan K. McBride and Monique Jenkins

Within the public violence literature—that is, the literature on domestic terrorism, mass shootings, school shootings, and hate crimes, among others—leakage has been identified as a core warning behavior. Leakage occurs when a would-be assailant communicates an intention to harm a target before committing an attack.[1] This communication can vary in timing, level of detail, form, intentionality, and audience.[2] Through such a communication, an individual might directly verbalize an intent to commit an act, make more subtle threats and innuendos, or share a plan via social media.[3]

Researchers have found relatively high levels of leakage associated with acts of public violence, including adolescent-perpetrated mass murders,[4] mass shootings,[5] political and public figure assassinations,[6] and domestic terrorism.[7] For this reason, leakage—which often occurs in interactions online or with loved ones—can be an important warning sign. But leakage to family, friends, or acquaintances is not the only way to detect when an individual is intending to commit an act of public violence, and over the last decade, researchers have started to examine preattack contact with system stakeholders, such as law enforcement, mental health, and education professionals.

For example, one study found that 40 percent* of violent extremists had engaged in a crime before their act of extremist violence.[8] Another study reported differences in system contact for lone and group-affiliated actors among American far-right extremists who committed fatal attacks. Specifically, it found that 61.7 percent of lone actors, but just 51.1 percent of group-affiliated extremists had prior arrests.[9] In addition, multiple case studies exploring the personal histories of small populations of violent extremists have included information on system contact.[10] However, comprehensive research exploring previous contact between system stakeholders and individuals engaged in domestic terrorism is relatively scarce.

We sought to advance understanding of what percentage of the violent extremist population could be "catchable" in the sense that an individual had been in previous contact with a system stakeholder (e.g., law enforcement, mental health provider) or had been reported to a system stakeholder (e.g., by a friend or loved one to whom they had intentionally or unintentionally leaked information). To explore this issue, we leveraged a new dataset: the Domestic Terrorism Offender Level Database (DTOLD). The database includes detailed information on the 320 non-Islamist individuals who carried out terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020. Specifically, we sought to understand what percentage of this population was known to system stakeholders at some point before they perpetrated their attacks.

## SYSTEM STAKEHOLDER CONTACT IN DTOLD

DTOLD data shows that 61.56 percent (197 of 320) of the individuals in the dataset had contact with a system stakeholder before committing an act of domestic terrorism. DTOLD captures three types of contact between an individual and a system stakeholder: individuals who had contact with law enforcement, individuals who had contact with a mental health provider, and individuals who were reported for concerning behavior.

---

*   Note that this study relied on self-reported data, so it may have included cases in which the perpetrator was not caught and no system stakeholder was involved.

System Stakeholder Contact Before Acts of Domestic Terrorism

61.56%
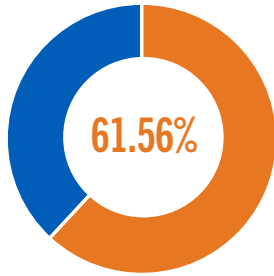
● Contact ● No Contact

Source: CNA.

Contact with law enforcement: this category includes those who had a criminal record, had been the subject of a police investigation, or had unspecified police contact (we excluded those who underwent background checks for employment, those who committed nonfelony traffic offenses, and those who provided information as a witness to a crime).
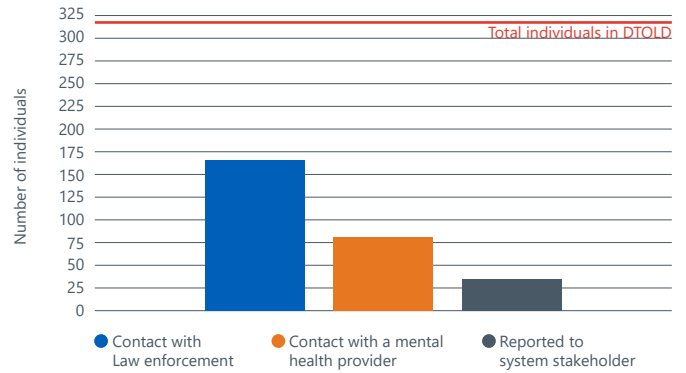
- **51.88 percent (166) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD had contact with law enforcement before committing acts of domestic terrorism.**

  - 19.69 percent (63) were convicted of a crime leading to imprisonment.

Contact with a mental health provider: this category includes those who had documented contact with a mental health provider.*

- **25 percent (80) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD had contact with mental health providers before committing acts of domestic terrorism.**

  - 18.75 percent (60) were diagnosed with a mental health condition by a professional within one year of committing the attacks.

- 10 percent (32) were prescribed medication for a mental health condition within one year of committing the attacks.

- 1.88 percent (6) had mental health histories that included a suicide attempt resulting in voluntary or involuntary hospitalization.

System Stakeholder Contact by Type

Source: CNA.

Reported for concerning behavior: this category includes those who were reported to system stakeholders (and not those who were reported to, for example, a landlord).

- **10.62 percent (34) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD were reported to a system stakeholder before committing acts of domestic terrorism.**

  - 2.8 percent (9) were reported to federal law enforcement organizations (e.g., the Federal Bureau of Investigation).

  - 6.88 percent (22) were reported to local or state law enforcement organizations.

  - 1.25 percent (4) were reported to non–law enforcement system stakeholders (e.g., court officials, probation officers).

---

* Note that some individuals had more than one indicator. Thus, although 197 of 320 individuals in DTOLD had at least one indicator, the numbers we present in this section sum to more than 197 (166 + 80 + 34 = 280). Similarly, although 80 of 320 had contact with a mental health provider, the numbers in the sub-bullets sum to more than 80 (60 + 32 + 6 = 98). And even though 34 individuals were reported for concerning behavior, the total in the sub-bullets is more than 34 (9 + 22 + 4 = 35).

DISCUSSION

This analysis does have limitations. DTOLD was built on open-source research that leveraged court documents and media reporting; however, previous research has found that increased lethality is correlated with increased media coverage, which increases the likelihood that we have more information for those who committed lethal attacks.[11] Consequently, we may be undercounting system stakeholder contact, particularly for individuals who committed non-lethal attacks, because the information is not publicly available and therefore not captured in DTOLD. Juvenile criminal records, for example, are not publicly available, and mental health issues may not appear in the public record for a wide range of reasons (e.g., because the information is protected, because the individual never told anyone, because the family feels shame).

We also stress that the data that we have presented do *not* suggest a correlation between these indicators and an increased likelihood to commit an act of domestic terrorism. Every year, millions of people are diagnosed with mental health issues, prescribed medication to treat a mental health issue, or investigated, convicted, and imprisoned for criminal offenses. Only a vanishingly small number of these people—just a handful every year—go on to commit acts of domestic terrorism.

That said, the data suggest that **more than half of domestic terrorists in the US had contact with a system stakeholder before committing their attacks**, which means that these individuals were not unknown actors. Admittedly, some system stakeholder contacts will not be actionable; for example, mental health providers may not be made privy to information that triggers mandatory reporting requirements, or law enforcement professionals may be made aware of pre-criminal acts that preclude intervention. **Nevertheless, the data suggest that it might be possible to meaningfully improve prevention and intervention efforts if we (1) improve our understanding of these contacts, (2) improve training for the system stakeholders who are likely to experience these contacts, and (3) increase communication between system stakeholders (within limits that protect the constitutionally protected rights of all Americans) to reduce the likelihood that a future perpetrator will slip through the cracks.**

ENDNOTES

1. J. Reid Meloy, Jens Hoffmann, Karoline Roshdi, and Angela Guldimann, "Some Warning Behaviors Discriminate Between School Shooters and Other Students of Concern," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 1, no. 3 (2014), pp. 203–211; J. Reid Meloy and Mary Ellen O'Toole, "The Concept of Leakage in Threat Assessment," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 29, no. 4 (2011), pp. 513–527.

2. Anne-Lynn Dudenhoefer, Charlotte Niesse, Thomas Görgen, Laura Tampe, Marcella Megler, Christina Gröpler, and Rebecca Bondü, "Leaking in Terrorist Attacks: A Review," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 58 (2021), 101582; Rianne Kleinveld, "Lone Wolf Terrorism and School Shooters: A Comparative Analysis," (Master's thesis, Universiteit Leiden, 2016); John G. Horgan, Paul Gill, Noemie Bouhana, James Silver, and Emily Corner, *Across the Universe? A Comparative Analysis of Violent Behavior and Radicalization Across Three Offender Types with Implications for Criminal Justice Training and Education*, National Institute of Justice, 2016, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249937.pdf; Miss Menna Rose and John Morrison, "An Exploratory Analysis of Leakage Warning Behavior in Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 15, no. 2 (2023), pp. 179–214.

3. Dudenhoefer et al., "Leaking in Terrorist Attacks: A Review."

4. Anthony G. Hempel, J. Reid Meloy, and Thomas C. Richards, "Offender and Offense Characteristics of a Nonrandom Sample of Mass Murderers, *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 27, no. 2 (1999), pp. 213–225.

5. Jillian Peterson, Gina Erickson, Kyle Knapp, and James Densley, "Communication of Intent to Do Harm Preceding Mass Public Shootings in the United States, 1966 to 2019," *JAMA Network Open 4,* no. 11 (2021), pp. e2133073–e2133073; Jason R. Silva and Emily A. Greene-Colozzi, "Assessing Leakage-Based Mass Shooting Prevention: A Comparison of Foiled and Completed Attacks," *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management (2023).*

6. Robert A. Fein and Bryan Vossekuil, "Assassination in the United States: An Operational Study of Recent Assassins, Attackers, and Near-Lethal Approachers," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 44, no. 2 (1999), pp. 321–333.

7. Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, no. 2 (2014), pp. 425–435; Dudenhoefer et al., "Leaking in Terrorist Attacks: A Review."

8. Gary LaFree, Michael A. Jensen, Patrick A. James, and Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States," *Criminology* 56, no. 2 (2018), pp. 233–268.

9. Jeff Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Joshua D. Freilich, "Distinguishing 'Loner' Attacks from Other Domestic Extremist Violence: A Comparison of Far-Right Homicide Incident and Offender Characteristics," *Criminology & Public Policy* 12, no. 1 (2013), pp. 65–91.

10. Meloy and O'Toole, "The Concept of Leakage in Threat Assessment."

11. 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," *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* (2017); 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.

ABOUT CNA

IIM-2024-U-038066-Final

www.cna.org | CNA