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# Informing Lone-Offender Investigations

Randy Borum, *University of South Florida*



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## Informing Lone-Offender Investigations

**Randy Borum**

*University of South Florida*

In their article, “Distinguishing ‘loner’ attacks from other domestic extremist violence: A comparison of far-right homicide incident and offender characteristics,” Gruenewald, Chermak, and Freilich (2013, this issue) make an important contribution and raise some intriguing questions about understanding and preventing acts of lone-offender terrorism. I would like to focus on three factors: the nature of “loner” attacks, the role of “radicalization,” and the role of mental illnesses.

### **Nature of “Loner” Terrorism and Attacks**

Deciding what should qualify as a “loner” or “lone-offender” attack is more complicated than it might first seem. A range of definitions has emerged (Borum, Fein, and Vossekuil, 2012; COT, 2007; Pantucci, 2011; Schmid and Jongman, 1988; van der Heide, 2009). Some definitions indicate the attacker must act alone; others allow for an accomplice. Some completely exclude cases in which there is any evidence of contact with an extremist group. Still others exclude them only when the attack is “group-involved.” Some definitions stick to the narrow, traditional requirement of political/social/ideological motivations, whereas others allow for a fuzzy blend of personal and ideological motivations.

Terrorism has always been difficult to define, in part, because the definition is dynamic (Ganor, 2002).<sup>1</sup> That Gruenewald et al. (2013) point to “school shooters” as a possible point of comparison exemplifies a potential shift in the boundaries of what is publicly regarded as “terrorism,” especially among solo offenders. Historically in defining terrorism, establishing that the act was committed to instill fear in a broader population in order to further a political, social, or religious cause has been an essential element (Schmid and Jongman, 1988). Numerous cases exist, however, of targeted violence where the attacker

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Direct correspondence to Randy Borum, University of South Florida, School of Information, 4202 E. Fowler Ave., CIS 1040, Tampa, FL 33620 (e-mail: wborum@usf.edu).

1. By 1990, there were already more than 100 different published definitions of terrorism, so I will not attempt to resolve that issue here.

clearly intended to cause fear, intimidation, and terror, but the question of whether the act was committed primarily or solely “to further a political, social, or religious cause” or to influence the policy or conduct of a government is, at least, ambiguous (Bjelopera, Bagalman, Caldwell, Finklea, and McCallion, 2013; Bowers, Holmes, and Rhom, 2010; Cantor, Mullen, and Alpers, 2000; Fox and Levin, 2003, 2005; Lester, 2002, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

As Gruenewald et al.’s (2013) analysis suggests, to understand more clearly the nature of “loner attacks,” researchers have compared different types of attackers, including but not limited to, those traditionally regarded as terrorists. Some compare solo with group offenses and offenders. Gruenewald et al.’s analysis, for example, compared homicides by far-right extremist “loners” with killings involving far-right groups. Other investigations have compared different “types” of targeted violence by lone offenders. McCauley, Moskalenko, and Van Son (2013) recently compared characteristics of school attackers with characteristics of assassins. Finally, certain mass or spree murders committed by lone offenders, although they may or may not be distinctly “political,” have sometimes assumed the character of terrorism (Bowers et al., 2010; Harrison and Bowers, 2010; Knoll, 2010a, 2010b; Liwerant, 2007; Mullen, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Does the definition of lone-offender terrorism really matter? Research applications aside, definitions probably matter only to the extent that they facilitate or obscure effective policies or practices. Very few “pure” cases of any type exist. So, instead of debating definitions, it might be more useful to consider the key areas of agreement and distinction and to view them along a continuum. Analyzing cases by their features, rather than by their types, might better aid the investigative process, particularly if each dimension is linked to a key facet of the attack and tracked across the spectrum of attack-related activity from idea to action (Borum et al., 2012).

In a previous study, my colleagues and I proposed three possible dimensions for this type of analysis: loneness, direction, and motivation (Borum et al., 2012). *Loneness* describes the extent to which the offender/attacker initiated, planned, prepared for, and executed the attack without assistance from any other person. It is the dimension of planning and acting alone, characterizing the *independence of activity*. This dimension would include the nature and degree of the suspect’s contacts with other extremists or accomplices, as well as others’ “roles,” and the nature and degree of their involvement with the suspect or with the attack. Support from others might include both material (typically involving goods or services) and expressive (typically involving social or emotional transactions that facilitate or amplify a permissive environment) types.

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2. See, for example, 50 U.S.C. 36 § 1801(c).

3. No clear, consensus-based distinction exists between mass and spree murder. Spree murder is generally defined as two or more murders committed by an offender or offenders, without a cooling-off period, and mass murder as four or more murders occurring during the same incident (usually in a single location), with no distinctive time period between the killings (see also Morton and Hilts, 2005).

*Direction*, the second dimension, refers to the nature and extent of an attacker's independence and *autonomy in all decisions* across the spectrum of attack-related activity from idea to action. It describes not only influences, but also the extent to which issues of whether, whom, when, or how to attack were "directed" by others.

Finally, *motivation* describes the extent to which the attack is significantly driven by a political, social, or ideologically based grievance, not solely by revenge or some other personal motive. Motivation is of interest, in part, because a subject's motives for an attack are usually related to the target he or she selects, and it is possibly the most difficult of the three dimensions to discern (Artiga, n.d.). As COT (2007) noted, "[a]ssigning purposes and motivations to individual acts of terror is inherently subjective and open to considerable interpretation."

Using a dimensional approach, investigators and analysts do not have to be distracted by the question of whether some concerning behavior is or is not specifically part of a "lone-offender" attack. Instead, they can focus on the degree of independence in the suspect's attack-related planning and preparation, the degree of autonomy and external influence in all attack-related decision making, and the clarity or complexity of the suspect's purpose, or what he or she hopes to achieve with the attack.

### **Role of Radicalization**

Lone-offender terrorists often are considered to be "self-radicalized extremists." But not all of these attackers are driven primarily by extremist ideologies and even fewer of them are "radicalized" in any traditional sense.

"Radicalization" is a misleading term to describe the process of becoming involved in terrorism (Githens-Mazer, 2012). Radicalizing connotes a transformative process of change by which people adopt an extreme, violent ideology—and that ideology ultimately leads them to violent action (Bhui, Dinos, and Jones, 2012). But it is clear that many who commit violence in the name of an ideology are neither devout nor highly knowledgeable about the doctrine and that they have complex and diverse sets of motivations and reasons for their activity (Borum, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; King and Taylor, 2011).

Seeking satisfying answers to why a person engages in terrorism and what causes his or her action sometimes leads to overly simplistic explanations (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Borum, 2011b; Githens-Mazer, 2012; Silke, 2008). When mass casualty violence occurs, because we assume terrorist-like acts to be politically motivated, we are poised to look for evidence of some kind of extremist ideas, associations, or beliefs.<sup>4</sup> When that evidence appears, the political connection becomes the master explanation. We easily assume the political ideas caused the action. The truth is typically more complicated. Neither "radicalization" nor grievances alone are typically sufficient to cause an individual to engage in terrorism (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Horgan, 2008).

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4. To include political, religious, and social ideological motivations.

Fanatically embracing an ideology is neither a proxy for, nor a necessary precursor to, terrorism (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Borum, 2011b; Githens-Mazer, 2012). Conflating the two concepts undermines our ability to counter either of them effectively. People become involved in terrorism and violent extremist activity in variety of ways, at different points in time, and perhaps in different contexts (Bokhari, Hegghammer, Lia, Nesser, and Tønnessen, 2006; Friedland, 1992; Horgan, 2008; see Borum, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, for reviews). Radicalizing by developing or adopting extremist beliefs that justify violence is one possible pathway into terrorism involvement, but it is certainly not the only one.

The relationship between ideas or ideologies and behavior moves in both directions. Some people attach to a grievance because they adhere to a particular ideology, but others gravitate toward an ideology because they hold a particular grievance. The same is true for group affiliation. Some join a group because they support a shared ideology, but others develop an ideological commitment because of their group affiliation. The strength of a person's conviction and commitment to a cause may precede his or her willingness to participate in violence, but participating in violence may also strengthen a person's conviction and commitment to a cause. This complexity explains, in part, why terrorists generally, or lone-offender terrorists specifically, do not share a common profile (Borum, 2011b).

Assuming that radicalization is the key to understanding and predicting terrorism is a grave misapprehension (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Borum, 2011b; Githens-Mazer, 2012). Investigators must be mindful that terrorism does not always follow a linear process where a vulnerable person is inducted into a particular ideology, and adherence to those ideas escalates until the individual inevitably is driven to commit acts of violence. Sometimes terrorism evolves that way, but not often enough, perhaps, even to be considered "typical."

### **Role of Mental Illnesses**

One of the most prominent findings from Gruenewald et al.'s (2013) study is that "mental illness" was one of only a handful of factors that reliably distinguished lone offenders from other extremist homicide offenders. Forty years of terrorism research—focusing mostly on members of organized terrorist groups—firmly debunked the notion that only "crazy" people engage in terrorism and was nearly unanimous in its conclusion that mental illness is typically *not* a major cause of terrorist behavior (Borum, 2004; Horgan, 2008; Ruby, 2002; Victoroff, 2005). Preliminary evidence suggests, however, that, at least relative to other terrorists, solo attackers seem to have psychological problems more commonly.

Gruenewald et al.'s (2013) results are consistent with those of other researchers, finding that mental health issues often occur more prominently among lone offenders than among other terrorists (COT, 2007; Fein and Vossekuil, 1999; Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2013; Spaaij, 2010). Based on news reports and other open-source documents, for example, Gill et al. (2013) found that nearly one third (31%) of the 119 lone-actor terrorists they studied had a history of mental health problems. A systematic study of the thinking and behavior

of all 83 individuals known to have attacked, or approached to attack, a prominent public official or public figure in the United States since 1949 (Fein and Vossekui, 1999) found nearly two thirds (61%) had been evaluated or treated by a mental health professional and almost half (44%) had a history of serious depression or despair. More than 40% (43%) were known to be delusional at the time of the principal attack/approach incident, and one in five had a history of auditory hallucinations.

Psychiatrist David V. James and his colleagues (2007) estimated that about half of the 24 people who attacked elected politicians in Western Europe “were pursuing (to an irrational degree) an agenda of an idiosyncratic nature, usually but not always delusional in content” (p. 339). They also estimated that nearly half (48%) of attackers of reigning monarchs or members of their immediate families throughout history (between 1778 and 1994) experienced delusions or hallucinations around the time of their attack (James et al., 2008). More recently, in 2012, reporters Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen, and Deanna Pan (2012) from *Mother Jones* magazine reviewed open-source information from 63 firearm-related mass murders (all by lone shooters) occurring in the United States since 1982 and found evidence of mental health problems in two thirds (65%) of the cases.<sup>5</sup>

These studies have suggested that it is not unlikely that investigators and analysts may find evidence of psychological problems when investigating possible lone-offender attacks. Here is the potential hazard: If the subject of an investigation can be or has been given some diagnostic label, then there is a common tendency to regard that label or disorder as a master explanation for the subject’s thinking, motives, and behavior. It is not.

Even more problematic is the assumption that having a mental disorder or mental illness necessarily makes a subject completely irrational and incapable of planned or self-interested behavior. People with mental illnesses and personality disorders, however, often can plan and execute bad behaviors just as well as those who do not have a diagnosis (Fein and Vossekui, 1999). An investigator or practitioner should not focus on categorical or diagnostic judgments. Current research on psychopathology has been converging around the idea that adaptive and maladaptive psychological processes exist on a continuum and that a bright line distinction often does not exist between what is normal and what is disordered.

Investigators and analysts should seek to understand the backgrounds, key influences on, thinking, and behaviors of “terrorists.” Knowing something about psychological abnormality, in some circumstances, may be useful for developing that understanding, but it does not substitute for it.

Several researchers have noted that whether a lone offender is *organized* may be more important than any mental disorder that an offender may have. Fein and Vossekui (1999), for example, pointed out that from an operational, protective perspective, a potential

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5. In seven other cases, the evidence of mental disorder was unclear.

assassin's degree of organization seems more significant than whether he has been diagnosed with, or suffered from, a mental disorder.

When assessing a particular case, it might be useful to focus on specific functions/processes rather than diagnoses. For an operational assessment, the key function is the subject's ability to engage in goal-directed behavior and to act on his intentions. The cognitive organizational skills necessary for goal-directed behavior involve *thinking logically* (i.e., that anticipated consequences reasonably follow from anticipated action); *coherence* (i.e., the ability to connect together different ideas and elements of thought to formulate an overarching concept or plan); *consistency* (i.e., that the assumptions, premises, and anticipated actions are "internally consistent"—that they do not conflict or directly contradict one another); and finally, *control* (i.e., capacity for self-regulation to monitor, inhibit, and intentionally execute specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functions).

### Policy Implications and Conclusions

This essay so far has focused on how emerging research might inform investigations, but there are implications for policy makers as well. One of the most of important of these is to understand that countering "radicalization" may not substantially reduce one-offender terrorism. Both may be important problems, but they do not always travel together. People with radical ideas (even ideas endorsing violence) typically do not engage in terrorism, and lone offenders who engage in terrorism or mass violence often are not driven primarily by deep ideological beliefs. Despite public reactions to, and media characterizations of, lone-offender attacks, policies should rely on established connections between policy targets and the intended outcomes.

A second policy-relevant implication is a need to generate a quicker, more effective plan to understand and mobilize people who may know (at least partially) of an attacker's ideas, intent, or plan. Gruenewald et al. (2013) touch on this point in their recommendation to sharpen threat assessment. In many cases regarded as "lone-offender attacks," the attacker is not completely invisible to the social world. The independence of his or her thinking, planning, and preparation often varies, and the attacker's autonomy in making attack-related decisions is often a matter of degree. As we have learned from studying other forms of targeted violence, attackers often communicate their intent (although they may not threaten the target directly) or engage in observable attack-related behaviors before the attack itself (Fein and Vossekuil, 1999; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski, 2002). Sometimes, the "bystanders" who come into contact with the attacker are strangers, but sometimes they are friends or family members. Those with kinship bonds may not approve at all of the attacker's intent, but they may feel restrained from acting because of love and loyalty or concern about the consequences.

Finding ways to encourage concerned people to come forward and to facilitate reporting will be critical to long-term prevention efforts. No quick fix is available, but research on reporting systems has shown that it helps to have multiple channels and options for reporting

unacceptable behavior, including anonymous reporting mechanisms (Colvin, 2011). As a general guideline, bystanders are more likely to report concerning behaviors when they perceive the reporting mechanism to be *accessible, safe, and credible* (Rowe, Wilcox, and Gadlin, 2009). Reporting procedures should be clear. Bystanders should know who and how to contact and what information they should be prepared to provide. Bystanders should feel safe when reporting, even if that means allowing them complete anonymity. When people come forward, officials can commend the bystander publicly (even if not by name) for “doing the right thing.” Officials might be cautious, however, about referring to the act of reporting as “brave” or “courageous,” which might imply that the action was dangerous and unsafe. Finally, bystanders should be assured that their reports will be treated seriously and that any official action will be thoughtful and measured. They should feel assured that officials will competently handle their report. Ultimately, credibility may need to be earned over time (Rowe et al., 2009).

Gruenewald et al.’s (2013) thoughtful article adds another arrow to the quiver of knowledge about lone-offender terrorism, and yet many questions remain. Although describing various samples seems like a reasonable starting point, it is important also to pursue questions that have operational relevance—those that can influence the thinking and action of organizations and individuals with responsibility to protect and prevent. That requires that research questions, design, and analyses be informed by a thorough understanding of the key issues and tasks that end users (e.g., investigators and analysts) are required to address and the process by which their inquiries are conducted (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, Gelles, and Shumate, 2004).

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**Randy Borum** is a Professor in the School of Information and Coordinator for Intelligence Studies at the University of South Florida. He has served on the DNI's Intelligence Science Board (ISB), and is an advisor to the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit-1 (Threat Assessment & National Security), the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), the FLETC Behavioral Science Division. Dr. Borum is the author of *Psychology of Terrorism* (2004), and is listed on the United Nations' Roster of Experts in Terrorism.