

Counter terrorism: Is counter-terrorism policy evidence-based?

Ms. Pratiksha Pandey

Research Scholar, (Law)

Apex University

Jaipur

E mail : Pratikshapandey128@gmail.com

Dr. Umashankar Sharma (Law)

Associate Professor,

Apex University

Jaipur

Abstract

Is counter-terrorism policy evidence-based? What works, what harms, and what is unknown. One the central concerns surrounding counter-terrorism interventions today, given the attention and money spent on them, is whether such interventions are effective. To explore this issue, we conducted a general review of terrorism literature as well as a Campbell systematic review on counter-terrorism strategies. In this paper, we summarize some of our findings from these works. Overall, we found an almost complete absence of evaluation research on counter-terrorism strategies and conclude that counter-terrorism policy is not evidence-based. The findings of this review emphasise the need for government leaders, policy makers, researchers, and funding agencies to include and insist on evaluations of the effectiveness of these programs in their agendas.

Introduction

Recent events involving the use of violence and terror, most notably the attacks in the United States in 2001, have ignited major increases in personal, commercial, and governmental expenditures and attention on counter-terrorism strategies. These expenditures have included a wide range of efforts. Some of them consist of more traditional law enforcement approaches such as arrest, offender targeting, investigation strategies, or the expansion of police powers through the creation of new laws while other efforts might be geared toward victims and can include treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder or developing antidotes for biological agents, or improving the emergency responsiveness of hospitals.

These remarkable trends in counter-terrorism spending and proliferation have led evaluation researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to question not only the effectiveness of these

strategies, but how one might judge their effectiveness. Are the outcomes asserted (reductions in terrorism, terror-related risk, and harm caused by terrorism) indeed connected to these programs and do counter-terrorism interventions fulfil their promise? Furthermore, is counter-terrorism policy based in evidence of effectiveness or in something else (for example, personal opinions, political ideologies, or unscientific studies)?

The concept and movement of evidence-based social policy is supported by information and research, not opinions or political ideologies. So, is counter-terrorism policy evidence-based? To examine this, we began a general, comprehensive review of terrorism research, culminating in Campbell Collaboration¹The goal was to determine what is known about the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts, as well as where knowledge is lacking, to create a more informed policy and research agenda for evidence-based counter-terrorism approaches. Our major findings from these works were that only a small percentage of empirical studies of terrorism exist and there is an almost complete absence of evaluation research on counter-terrorism strategies. Even more disconcerting was the nature of the evaluations we did find; some programs were shown to either have no discernible effect on terrorism or lead to increases in terrorism. Thus this paper also suggests recommendations for policy makers, evaluations researchers, into the assessment of the effectiveness of counter-terrorism programs. Overall, we are left with the conclusion that counter-terrorism policy is indeed not evidence-based and steps should be taken to make it more effective.²

Background

We began our inquiry with a general overview of terrorism research. A comprehensive review of terrorism literature has not been attempted since September 11³and we expected this significant event to have had a major effect on the state of terrorism research. We also anticipated that strategies to counter terrorism would cut across disciplines and include programs not traditionally seen in the context of “crime prevention” (for example, the use of war or economic sanctions in an attempt to reduce the problem). To conduct this general overview of terrorism research, we examined all articles conducted this search across seventeen separate literary databases⁴ which yielded over 1400 records. While examining articles from peer reviewed sources, significant increase in research was found and no other significant terrorist event has been followed by this much research interest on terrorism.

From this categorization, we found that approximately 3% of the articles from peer-reviewed sources appeared to be based on some form of empirical analysis. Approximately 1% could be categorized as case studies and the rest (96%) were thought pieces. This rough estimate was extremely telling. The scarcity of any empirical analysis (whether evaluative or not) on terrorism-related research supported our initial hypothesis that we would find only a small amount of evaluation research on counter-terrorism strategies. More generally, it spoke to the state of terrorism research – that despite the

¹ See <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>

² (see Lum et al., 2006[a)

³ See Halkides, 1995; Hoffman, 1992; Miller, 1988; Romano, 1984; Schmid & Jongman, 1988

⁴ The databases used were Academic Search Premier, Article, EbscoHost, EconLit, Educational Abstracts, Electronic Collections Online, ERIC (OCLC), GEOBASE, Humanities Abstracts, Ingenta, ISI Web of Science, MEDLINE, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, PAIS International Articles Only, PUBMEDLINE, Social Science Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts. The time periods covered by each of these databases can be obtained at <http://www.lib.neu.edu/gateway/databasesstrifold.pdf>

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efforts of some researchers to push empirical work forward, the general state of terrorism research lacks an empirical evidence base. Given this lack of empirical work, as well as the very recent increase in terrorism studies interest, what then were writers discussing? To gain a better understanding of the subject matters of this research, we took all articles from peer-reviewed sources and categorized the studies by subject. Using this process, thirtyfive general groups emerged which we collapsed into the seventeen categories shown in Table 1. Table 1 also reports the distribution of these categorizations for studies conducting some form of empirical analysis.

As table 1 indicates, issues related to weapons of mass destruction represented the largest proportion of articles (18.9%) followed by articles which focused on a specific issue, such as the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the problems in Northern Ireland, Al Qaeda, or September 11th (if they could not be categorized elsewhere). Additionally, political responses to terrorism, the sociology of terrorism (causes, motivations, explanations, definitions) and its impact were common topics.

Table 1: Distribution of subject matter in terrorism research

	Peer- reviewed sources (N= 4,458a)	Empirical studies only (N= 156a)
1.Weapons of mass destruction (chemical, nuclear)	18.1%	10.3%
2.Article on a specific issue such as the IRA, Al Qaeda or incident	12.2%	12.2%
3. Political responses to terrorism (war, politics, international relations)	09.5%	01.9%
4. Causes, motivations, psychology, trends of terrorism	08.7%	18.1%
5. Impacts of terrorism (political, social, economic)	07.7%	05.2%
6. Non-political responses to terrorism (medical, social, economic)	05.5%	03.9%
7. Victim ology, coping mechanisms, psychological effects of terrorism	05.4%	25.8%
8. Other (nationalism, intelligence issues, democracy and vulnerability)	05.4%	03.9%
9. Legal issues surrounding terrorism & media and public	04.6%	18.7%

attitudes towards terrorism		
10. How to define terrorism & Non-conventional, cyber and narco-terrorism.	03.0%	00.6%
11. Religion and terrorism & State-Sponsored terrorism	02.6%	01.3%
12. Research/science of studying terrorism & Domestic terrorism	00.6%	00.6%

When examining those articles preliminarily deemed to be based on the analysis of empirical information (where we anticipated finding evaluation research), the findings are both encouraging and discouraging. These preliminary findings regarding the general state of terrorism research are revealing. Certainly, as Figure 1 indicates, the study of terrorism is not simply a passing fad of little interest to scientists and evaluation researchers. Given the recent proliferation of counter-terrorism strategies, there is even more reason to evaluate these programs. Yet, there is a dearth of empirical research on counter-terrorism interventions, and within the empirical research no clear emphasis on evaluations. This is not to say that the current literature is not useful. However, this literature does not evaluate the effectiveness of the vast majority of counter-terrorism strategies and therefore we know little about whether measures might be effective or harmful.⁵

Methods:

While the general review described above provided an overall state of empirical terrorism research, Campbell systematic reviews utilize a specific process of searching for evaluations of interventions which satisfy a threshold of methodological rigor to be included in making conclusions about the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of social interventions and therefore, only a summary is provided here to delineate the evidence base of counter-terrorism policy. As the preliminary review of terrorism literature indicated, the objects of study, the research methods used, and perspectives related to terrorism are wide-ranging. The definition of terrorism, and therefore the interventions and measurable outcomes of interventions related to this definition, can be subjective, value-driven, and cover a wide-range of topics, areas, and subject matters. Thus, we chose to be highly inclusive in our initial search for evaluations of counter-terrorism research. We examined all studies that mentioned terrorism, no matter how defined, then searched for evaluations of interventions that might occur at any stage of the terrorism process, including prevention, detection, management or response strategies, as well as accepted a wide variety of possible measurable outcomes, including actual events as well outcomes such as fear or physical or mental healing.

⁵ Lum C Kennedy, L & Sherley-Are counter-terrorism strategies effective? -The results of the Campbell Systematic Review on counter-terrorism evaluation research. Journal of Experimental Criminology, 2, 489-516

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We found only 354 studies that seemed to even hint at conducting or even discussing an evaluation of a counter-terrorism program or intervention. When examining each of these studies in detail, we found that only seven (7) were scientific evaluations of a counter terrorism program. . Thus, in the example of metal detectors, we could have four separate findings within one study. In total, we discovered 86 findings that connected an intervention to a measurable outcome within the seven studies.

Results

Table 3 summarizes our findings for the subset of the 86 findings. For each intervention category, we provide the number of findings that indicated the counter-terrorism program for each category «worked» (there was a statistically significant decline in the rate of terrorism after the intervention was implemented), had «no statistically discernible effect» (there was no statistically significant change in the level of terrorism after the intervention was implemented) or that the intervention «was harmful» (showed a statistically significant increase in terrorism events after the intervention was implemented).

Table3: Summary of findings

Intervention category	Terrorism declined	Levels of terrorism did not change	Terrorism increased
Metal Detectors and Security Screening	12	03	13
Fortifying Embassies and Protecting Diplomats	03	19	06
Increasing the Severity and Certainty of Punishment	00	02	00
U.N. Resolutions and Conventions Against Terrorism	02	02	00
Military Strikes	00	05	06

However, thirteen findings indicate that metal detectors showed a harmful effect – that is, that after the intervention there was an increase in terrorism events. A closer examination indicated that the difference between beneficial and harmful findings were the outcomes measured; for findings that were beneficial, all outcomes measured were hijacking events while the findings that showed metal detectors increased terrorism measured non-hijacking offenses. As Cauley and Im (1988) and Enders and Sandler (1990; 1993) have pointed out, this difference may point to substitution or displacement effects of airport security on other types of terrorism. . It is interesting to note that fortifying embassies and protecting diplomats through increased security at embassies aren't as effective as metal detectors in airports, even though both were situational crime prevention measures intended to harden targets. This could be the result of airports being more secure and stable environments than the outsides of embassies housed in other countries or diplomats on the move. Thus, perhaps a lesson

from both of these findings is that target hardening strategies may be much more effective in more controlled environments.⁶

Increasing the severity of punishment: Landes (1978) provided the only findings concerning increasing the severity of punishment for hijackers who were apprehended. It does not appear from Landes' work that increasing the severity of punishment had a statistically discernible effect on reducing skyjacking incidents. Again, this does not mean that these strategies «don't work» and methods of time series analysis have become more advanced since Landes' work. However, given the little evidence we have, there appears to be no evidence to show otherwise.⁷

United Nations resolutions against terrorism: *Yet* another type of intervention found in the evaluation literature concerned the use of United Nations resolutions against terrorism. Although these resolutions are more general in nature, they are, in theory, supposed to provide a general deterrent effect on terrorism by establishing international norms which affect or strengthen national policies against terrorism. However, only Enders et al. (1990) discovered that a United Nations resolution against aerial hijackings (that also supported the use of metal detectors in airports) appeared effective in reducing the number of hijacking events in both the short and long term. However, resolutions without the implementation of metal detectors were not useful in reducing terrorism. Further, resolutions intended to «prevent and punish crimes against internationally protected persons» did not seem to have a statistically discernible effect.⁸

Changes in political governance: Finally, we examined findings that could be grouped in the general intervention category of «changes in political governance». While these are not interventions in the traditional sense of the term, the political nature of terrorism broadens related responses to a wide variety of arenas. For example, Barros (2003) analysed the effects of having a Socialist party in power (which he describes as the more intolerant and harsher party against rogue political groups) in Spain on the effects of ETA terrorism, while Enders and Sandler (2000) examined the effect of the end of the Cold War on terrorism time series. Their findings indicate an uncertainty about whether the existence of harsher parties on terrorism as well as the end of the Cold War may increase terrorism events. Also interesting when examining individual findings was that the harmful effect of both an intolerant party, as well as the end of the Cold War, was reflected in more dangerous outcomes (assassinations, and events which led to individuals becoming wounded or dying) while these aspects of political governance reduced the likelihood of less serious, non-casualty events.⁹

Conclusion

These findings lead us to the key focus of this paper: recommendations for improving the evidence base of counterterrorism policy. Specifically, we focus our recommendations on three types of decision-makers: government agencies and agents attempting to counter terrorism, government

⁶ Cauley, J & Im, E. (1988)- Intervention policy analysis of skyjackings and other terrorist incidents. The American Economic Review, 78(2), 27-31.

⁷ Landes, W.M. (1978)- An economic study of U.S. aircraft hijackings, 1961-1976. Journal of Law and Economics 21, 1-31.

⁸ Enders, W & Sandler, T(2000). Is transnational terrorism becoming more threatening? Journal of Conflict Resolution, 44, 307-332

⁹ Barros, C.P. (2003). An intervention analysis of terrorism: The Spanish Eta case. Defence and Peace Economics, 14(6), 401-412.

agencies funding counter-terrorism efforts, and researchers and policy-makers involved in the evaluation of these interventions. Each recommendation is intended to improve the evidence base of counter-terrorism research and also more generally suggests improvements in the infrastructure of counter-terrorism policy and research.

To government agencies and policy makers generating and implementing counter-terrorism measures

Counter-terrorism policy needs to be rational, effective, and cause as little harm as necessary. There is only one way to determine whether counter-terrorism strategies are effective – by conducting methodologically valid evaluations of those strategies. It is clear that current counter-terrorism policies, strategies and tactics lack this evidence base. In other words, programs are being used without any knowledge, understanding, or even attempts to determine whether they are effective. Government agencies and policy makers should be aware that they are appropriating large amounts of monies to programs which do not reduce terrorism, in some cases increase terrorism, or have no effect at all. Thus, government agents need to pay attention to scientific research about counter-terrorism programs when making policy choices or in the least, encouraging, facilitating, and conducting scientific evaluations of these programs. Surveying individuals about whether they think a policy works, or subjectively determining what a successful strategy «looks like,» is neither scientific nor will it generate the necessary data/information to determine the effectiveness of a particular strategy. This need for evaluation research requires that both science and scientists are welcomed into governmental counter-terrorism enterprises to facilitate evaluations. Indeed, researchers understand that much information associated with terrorism is classified and requires security protections. However, some of this secrecy is unwarranted or, at least, can be better facilitated. Many decades ago, police agencies also mistakenly believed that crime data could not be given to scientists to study. Luckily, many police agencies have overcome such fears. Through an on-going program of assessment and review, in areas such as crime prevention, police tactics, and drug abatement programs, the value and limitations of these programs have been documented. This has led to major improvements in establishing programs that can improve police effectiveness. For counter-terrorism efforts, government agencies should consider extending clearances to evaluation researchers so they can study the effectiveness of policies and assist in more effective and efficient government spending.

To government agencies funding counter-terrorism research and development

Currently, there has been an increase in funding for counter terrorism research and development, much of which has been directed towards the creation of new programs, technologies, strategies and tactics to counter terrorism. The problem is that we have a number of counter-terrorism programs that are not evidence-based. Funding is needed for the evaluation of existing counter-terrorism programs, rather than the creation of new programs. As was stressed in the previous *Psicothema* issue of 2006 (vol. 18, n° 3) dedicated to crime prevention, additionally, «process descriptions» which describe a program's procedure or determine if procedures were carried out according to a plan are not outcome evaluations. Funded evaluations should therefore include outcome evaluations which are at least moderately rigorous in design quality. Using less rigorous evaluations will result in

findings that are less reliable or believable, and may falsely exaggerate effects¹⁰. As Lum and Yang (2005) have found, funding agencies that set stronger methodological requirements for evaluation research have been able to influence the quality of research through the power of the purse. We recommend that agencies funding evaluation research on counter-terrorism strategies demand both outcome evaluations as well as the use of higher-quality evaluation designs.¹¹

Along the same lines and, especially with regard to terrorism, funding agencies should encourage the discovery of alternative or improved ways to gauge effectiveness of counter-terrorism programs. For example, can experimental and other types of quasi-experimental designs (in addition to time-series) be used to evaluate some programs (perhaps those used to respond and manage terrorism and terrorism-related by-products)? Or, are there other methods that might be useful in evaluating the effects of programs on rare events? Such methodological explorations are fundamental to developing an evidence base for counter-terrorism strategies given the nature of the subject matter.

Evaluation research can serve as a moderating and rational effect on rash policy responses based on moral panic and fear. This is important, as rash and unscientific policies can lead to other social negatives, including the violation of personal and human rights as well as individual humiliation, both of which could potentially lead to more terrorism. Scientists and policy-makers can moderate the proliferation of bad policies with more research that evaluates both the outcome effectiveness as well as the social, political, economic, or psychological effects of these interventions. The call for a larger evidence base for counterterrorism policy is not a criticism of policy makers; it is a joint responsibility between evaluation researchers and policy makers to facilitate and create.

¹⁰ (See Weisburd et al., 2001).

¹¹ Weisburd, D Petrosino, A. & Lum, C (Eds.) (2003)-Assessing systematic evidence in crime and justice: Methodological concerns and empirical outcomes (Preface). *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 587, 6-14