

Title: How “Alone” are Lone-Actors?: Exploring the Ideological, Signaling, and Support Networks of Lone-Actor Terrorists

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Research Question:

While there is growing consensus among terrorism scholars that questions the level at which lone-actor terrorists are socially and operationally isolated from others as they progress towards their first act of terrorist violence, there remains much that is not known about the extent and types of social, communication, and support relationships which they create and maintain during this formative period. With this lacuna in knowledge in mind, the current research employs social network analysis to examine patterns of social, ideological, communication, and support ties formed over a 24 month period prior to the commission of the first act of terrorist violence by two case studies of lone-actor terrorists: Timothy McVeigh, and Michael Zehaf-Bibeau.

Importance:

The threat of lone-actor terrorism remains a persistent and unique challenge for security agencies tasked with detecting, identifying, and preventing acts of ideologically and politically-motivated violence. The purpose of this study is not only to further empirically test the growing consensus among terrorism scholars that lone-actor terrorists are not nearly as “alone” as previously conceived, but also to do so using a previously unused approach that employed social network analysis to examine the structural, nature, and patterns of relations that lone-actors may form prior to committing an act of terrorist violence. Hopefully, this study provides a foundation that can help inform future research, that, when paired with the wider quantitative and qualitative empirical literature on lone-actor terrorism, will contribute to identifying certain generalizable social-structural and relational trends useful to Canadian security agencies tasked with identifying and preventing acts of lone-actor terrorism. Much more research needs to be conducted before this can be accomplished, but as the findings from the current study suggests, a better understanding of the relational dynamics of lone-actor terrorism has the potential to provide crucial insight into how and why they radicalize towards violence, how they plan and execute their plots, and how they might be prevented from realizing their goals.

Research Findings:

While the findings of this study are tempered by the fact that it is difficult to generalize research results from a pair of case studies, the research results offer empirical support to the current literature that questions the extent of the “loneliness” of lone-actors by demonstrating that both case studies were actively engaged with and were part of larger ideological, operational, and communication networks that played a role in their radicalization towards violence, and/or the planning and operational stages prior to committing an act of terrorist violence. Perhaps more importantly, the current study provides four new potential insights into the social dynamics of lone-actor terrorists that were uniquely obtainable through the use of social network analytical

methods:

- (1) The radicalization, planning, and operational stages of lone-actors are tied to and influenced by a mixture of *multiple* small-group and person-to-person social dynamics, depending on the nature of interaction (i.e., ideological, signaling, or support).
- (2) Information about terrorist plots tended to be shared the most with friends and co-workers of lone-actors. When shared, information tended to be transmitted from person-to-person, and with some few exceptions, tended not to be discussed in small groups.
- (3) The examined lone-actors relied on roughly a fifth to a fourth of their overall network for some form of material or non-material support meant to aid in the planning and execution of their terrorist plot. In both cases, the lone-actors tended to seek help from single individuals, rather than from groups or clusters of supporters.
- (4) Acquaintances of both lone-actors emerged as the most well-connected and important contributors to ideological discussions, and family members tended to play a diminished or lesser role in both lone-actors' ideological networks.

Implications:

While the findings from the current research are still too preliminary to provide concrete and actionable insight to inform sound counter-terrorism policy related to lone-actor terrorism, several provisional recommendations are offered that, if substantiated with future research, may prove to be useful to security practitioners tasked with detecting, identifying, and preventing acts of lone-actor terrorism:

- (1) Lone-actors do not radicalize, plan, or operate in complete social isolation. This means that with sufficient additional research, it is likely that effective detection and interdiction strategies can be developed to combat instances of lone-actor terrorism.
- (2) Lone-actors are connected to, and are influenced by, small-group and person-to-person dynamics, which offers security practitioners several points of interdiction. Effective counter-terrorism strategies need to take into account the nature, type, and strength of the relationships that lone-actors form in order to exploit structural weaknesses within their networks. At this early stage, the research results suggest that acquaintances tend to be the most important to lone-actors during the radicalization process and when they seek material and non-material support, and that friends and co-workers tend to disseminate information about the lone-actor's plot to other network actors.
- (3) Analysis of the signaling behaviours of the examined lone-actors suggests a certain laxity in operational security which can be exploited by security practitioners who monitor certain types of terrorist "chatter" among radical milieus known to produce, justify, or inspire acts of lone-actor terrorism.