

# NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM



## Lone Actor Terrorist Use of the Internet & Behavioural Correlates



This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no. 312827

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## PAPER

### PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

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## Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists\*<sup>†,‡</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the sociodemographic network characteristics and antecedent behaviors of 119 lone-actor terrorists. This marks a departure from existing analyses by largely focusing upon behavioral aspects of each offender. This article also examines whether lone-actor terrorists differ based on their ideologies or network connectivity. The analysis leads to seven conclusions. There was no uniform profile identified. In the time leading up to most lone-actor terrorist events, other people generally knew about the offender's grievance, extremist ideology, views, and/or intent to engage in violence. A wide range of activities and experiences preceded lone actors' plots or events. Many but not all lone-actor terrorists were socially isolated. Lone-actor terrorists regularly engaged in a detectable and observable range of activities with a wider pressure group, social movement, or terrorist organization. Lone-actor terrorist events were rarely sudden and impulsive. There were distinguishable behavioral differences between subgroups. The implications for policy conclude this article.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, terrorism, terrorist behavior, lone-actor terrorism, lone-wolf terrorism, typology, motivation

This article analyzes the sociodemographic network characteristics and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists leading up to their planning or conducting a terrorist event. Previous research has examined the strategic qualities of lone-actor terrorists (CTA, 2011), perceptions of the threat posed by lone actors (1), the narratives that promote lone-actor terrorist events (2), lone-actor terrorist attack characteristics and impacts (3), and individual case studies (for example [4–6]). This research marks a departure from that domain because it largely focuses upon behavioral aspects of each offender.

This paper also examines differences between subgroups of lone-actor terrorists. In the limited literature that currently exists, offenders tend to be depicted in a binary fashion; subjects either "are" or "are not" a lone-actor terrorist. Lone-actor terrorists are therefore typically treated in a homogeneous manner, an exception being Pantucci's (7) typology. Anecdotally, however, there are a number of easily distinguishable differences in lone-actor terror-

ists' characteristics, behaviors, and connectivity with other groups. Specifically, this article examines whether the characteristics and behaviors of lone-actor terrorists differ based on their ideologies, network connectivity, or level of operational success.

The questions explored in this study are the following:

- What, if any, demographic characteristics define lone actors?
- What ideologies are associated with lone-actor terrorist events?
- To what extent are close friends and family or wider networks of coconspirators typically aware of the lone-actor terrorist's intent to engage in terrorist-related offenses?
- To what extent are coconspirators typically involved in the planning stages of the offender's intended terrorism-related activities?
- How socially isolated do lone-actor terrorist offenders tend to be?
- Is there a significant difference between lone offenders and those who commit terrorism-related offenses on behalf of a group?
- Are there key life history events that may be relevant in understanding the development of lone actors?
- Are there differences between lone-actor terrorists based on their ideology or network connectivity?

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- The study came to 7 main conclusions...
- 1. No lone actor terrorist profile
- 2. Generally, other people knew of the plot
- 3. No single route into lone actor terrorism
- 4. Detectable range of behaviours
- 5. Not all socially isolated
- 6. Differences between sub-types incl. ideology
- 7. Rarely sudden & impulsive

# Gill et al, 2014 – Findings Related to Virtual Activities



to have been involved in political violence or criminality. Just less than half (47.9%) interacted face-to-face with members of a wider network of political activists, and 35.3% did so virtually. In 69.1% of the cases there is evidence to suggest that the indi

Training for the plots typically occurred through a number of ways. Approximately a fifth of the sample (21%) received some form of hands-on training, while 46.2% learned through virtual sources. In approximately half the cases (50.4%), investigators



# Virtual Activities



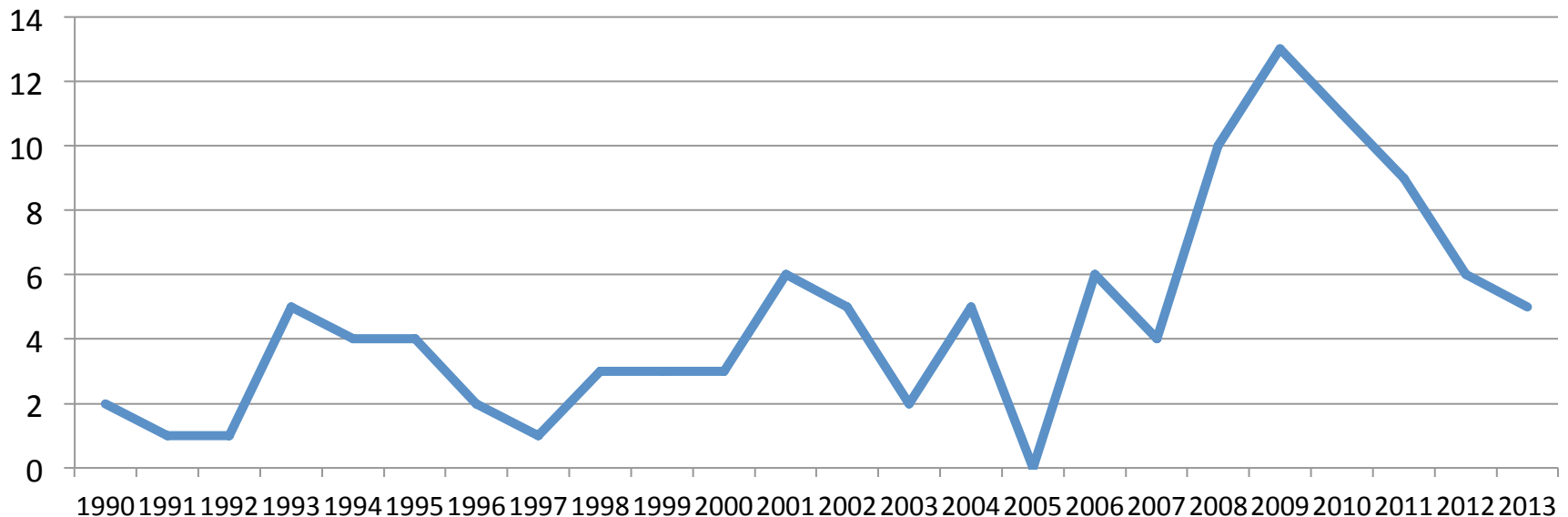
- Why engage in virtual interaction?
- Why engage in virtual learning?
- Drawbacks?
- Are these drawbacks apparent in face-to-face interactions?



# Lone-Actor Terrorism & The Internet



- Finding 1 – Internet not related to a linear rise in lone-actor terrorism

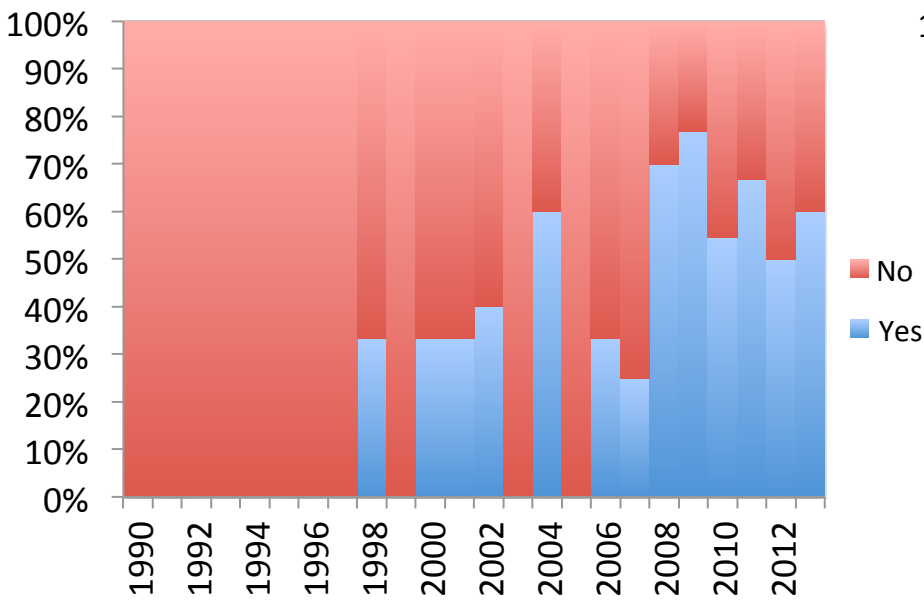


# Lone-Actor Terrorism & The Internet

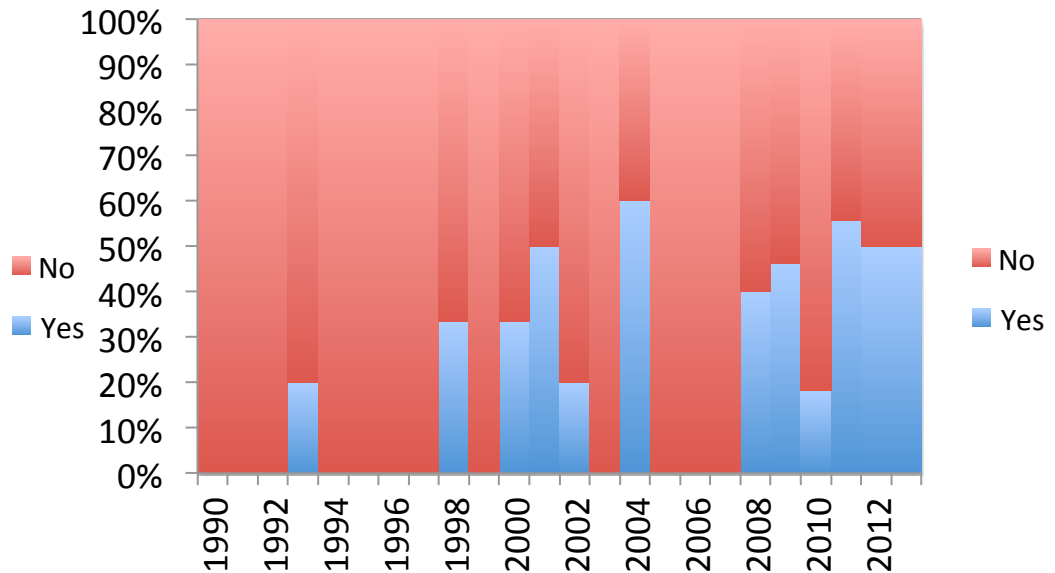


- Finding 2 – However, it appears there is a substitution effect at play

Learnt Online- 46.2% overall



Interacted Online- 37% overall



# What differences might we expect between...



- Lone actors who learnt online vs. those who did not?
- Lone actors who interacted online vs. those who did not?
- In terms of demographics & other behaviours





## What we found...Finding 3



- Those who learnt through virtual sources...
- Younger
- No criminal conviction
- AQ-inspired
- Religious convert
- No mental illness
- No history of violence
- No mil experience
- Sought legitimization
- Accessed Bomb Manuals
- Tried to recruit others
- Indiscriminate target
- Failed to conduct attack



## What we found...Finding 4



- Those who interacted through virtual sources...
- Made Verbal Statements to Others About Intent
- Recently Joined a Wider Movement
- Interacted with Others Face-to-Face
- No mil experience
- Sought legitimization
- Accessed Bomb Manuals
- Tried to recruit others
- Indiscriminate target
- Failed to conduct attack



## Where next...?



- Are there particular questions we should be asking that could help inform practice with regards to lone actors?

