Terrorist Plots Against the United States

What We Have Really Faced, and How We Might Best Defend Against It

Kevin J. Strom, John S. Hollywood, Mark Pope

RAND Homeland Security and Defense Center

For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1113.html

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© Copyright 2016 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark

Support RAND

Make a tax-deductible charitable contribution at

www.rand.org/giving/contribute

www.rand.org

Preface

This is the prepublication draft of a chapter for the upcoming book *The Handbook of the Criminology of Terrorism*, Gary LaFree and Josh Freilich (eds), Malden, Mass.: Wiley, forthcoming. It reflects the results of research funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate through the Institute of Homeland Security Solutions (IHSS), which conducts applied social science research that seeks to improve detection, analysis, and understanding of homeland security threats and enhance response and recovery. It should be of interest to practitioners and policymakers who wish to learn about the nature and magnitude of the terror threat facing the US over the past few decades, as well as the most promising approaches to combat that threat.

The research for this working paper was led by IHSS researchers at RTI International, Inc., in Research Triangle Park, NC. Part of the research was conducted by RAND's Homeland Security Defense Center (HSDC). HSDC projects examine a wide range of risk-management problems, including coastal and border security, emergency preparedness and response, defense support to civil authorities, transportation security, domestic intelligence, and technology acquisition. Center clients include the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Justice, and other organizations charged with security and disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

HSDC is a joint center of two research divisions: RAND Justice, Infrastructure, and Environment and the RAND National Security Research Division. RAND Justice, Infrastructure, and Environment is dedicated to improving policy and decisionmaking in a wide range of policy domains, including civil and criminal justice, infrastructure protection and homeland security, transportation and energy policy, and environmental and natural resource policy. The RAND National Security Research Division conducts research and analysis for all national security sponsors other than the U.S. Air Force and the Army. The division includes the National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center whose sponsors include the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the defense agencies, and the U.S. Department of the Navy. The National Security Research Division also conducts research for the U.S. intelligence community and the ministries of defense of U.S. allies and partners.

Questions or comments about this report should be sent to the project leader, Kevin J. Strom, at kstrom@rti.org. For more information about IHSS, see http://sites.duke.edu/ihss/ or contact the director at eyerman@rti.org. For more information about the RAND Homeland Security and Defense Center, see http://www.rand.org/hsdc or contact the director at hsdc@rand.org.

Abstract

This chapter describes the results of an analysis of 150 completed and foiled terrorist plots against the United States from 1995 to 2012 to better understand the true nature of the terrorist threat faced by the United States. The findings focus on the types of terrorist ideologies and motivations most represented, the magnitude of attacks, how plots are most often thwarted and by whom, and the missed clues in successful attacks. Overall, the United States has been more successful at thwarting terrorist plots in the years since 9/11 than compared to the 6 years prior. From 1995 to 2012, plots by Al Qaeda and affiliated related movements (AQAM) constituted almost 40% of all plots. White Supremacist-related and Militia/Anti-Government–related plots combined accounted for about another 40%, with the remaining plots due to a variety of motivations.

Table of Contents

Figures

Tables

Terrorist Plots against the United States: What We Have Really Faced, and How We Might Best Defend Against It

Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, and the nature of the terrorist threat against the United States homeland continues to evolve. The passage of time, however, provides an opportunity to empirically examine terror plots against the United States because there are more data points to include for analysis. The focus of this chapter is to understand better the true nature of the terrorism threat that the United States has faced over the last almost 20 years, as well as what measures have been most effective at identifying and stopping terrorist plots before they are executed. Specifically, we analyze 150 executed and foiled plots, for all ideologies/motivations, against the U.S. homeland over a 14-year period (1995–2012) to address four topics of interest to researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the general public: (1) whether the American public is safer from terrorist attacks today than a decade ago, (2) what the terrorism landscape is like and what its relative threat is, (3) what types of information and activities have led to foiling plots, and (4) when plots did reach execution, what, if anything, went wrong with counterterrorism efforts.

Previous research on terrorism has largely focused on the characteristics, motivations, and ideologies associated with completed or successful terrorist attacks. For example, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), a major repository for information on terrorist events maintained by START, only includes events that have moved beyond the planning stages (e.g., GTD does not capture suicide bombers that blow themselves up while making vests, which would be included in this study's dataset) (Lafree, Dugan, & Miller, 2015). Furthermore, since 9/11, terrorism research has tended to focus specifically on radical Islamic terrorism (e.g., Ackerman & Tamsett, 2009; Hoffman, 2003; Sageman, 2008). Yet, as indicated by Dahl (2011) and Strom et al., (2010), learning from thwarted plots and unsuccessful attacks and including all ideologies and motivations can prove to be highly valuable in understanding and replicating what counterterrorism measures work best and how policies and resources can be used collectively to improve security. Furthermore, by examining both successful attacks and thwarted plots within an analysis framework, we can identify the relative risk and the completion rate associated with particular types of behavior and groups over time. This analysis allows us to understand which terrorist threats against the United States should be prioritized based on an empirical assessment of their frequency, modus operandi, and success rate.

Research Using Foiled Plots

Including foiled plots in studies on terrorism has become more common in the last 10 years in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. One reason for not including foiled plots is that identifying these types of incidents and obtaining reliable information about them has been problematic. Following the 9/11 attacks and the massive attention given to terrorism, sources including news outlets and organizations dedicated to tracking terrorism, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, began publishing information on thwarted plots. The U.S. government has also occasionally released information on foiled plots, as evidenced by a list of 10 plots released by the White House in 2005 (Douglas & Youssef, 2005).

Because information on foiled plots is released by numerous entities, developing a dataset to analyze these types of events has several notable challenges. For one, researchers typically only know about failed plots that are reported publicly (typically following arrests), so an expectation of some level of underreporting is warranted (Strom et al., 2010; Dahl, 2011). Furthermore, because there are no agreed-upon standards about what failed plots should be included, researchers must develop their own inclusion criteria and coding decisions based on their research interests. For example, Strom et al. (2010) include the Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing attempt as "executed" because it reached the point of ignition, whereas Dahl (2011) counts it as a "failed attack." As a result, it is possible to produce somewhat different findings from different studies due to these nonstandardized inclusion criteria and coding decisions.

Despite these challenges, several studies have emerged since 2006 that include information on or derive findings from foiled plots. Jenkins (2006) includes an appendix that although solely focused on jihadist terrorism with little analysis of the plots, lists 46 failed plots from 1993 to 2006. McNeil, Carafano, and Zucker (2010) and Difo (2010) each identify approximately 30 failed plots since 9/11, again focusing on jihadist terrorist plots, and argue that between 2001 and 2009 that the system worked well to prevent attacks and that all but two of the failed plots they examined were stopped by law enforcement.

Strom et al.'s initial work examined 86 executed and foiled plots occurring from 1999-2009 that did or were intended to cause casualties or catastrophic damage to critical infrastructure. This study included all terrorist ideologies and motivations and they found that almost 80% of the foiled plots were foiled due to the efforts of the general public, including family members of plotters, and state and local law enforcement. Dahl (2011) uses an expanded time frame of 1987–2010 and includes overseas plots to identify 176 terrorist plots against American targets that have been thwarted. Similar to Strom et al. (2011), Dahl finds that plots are most often foiled through conventional law enforcement activities rather than through the "connecting the dots" processes that have so widely been advocated.

Failed Plots and Suspicious Activity Reporting

Since 2001, the U.S. counterterrorism community has sought methods to detect and disrupt terrorist plots as far "left of the boom" as possible (Carafano, 2009) and many measures have been put into place in order to prevent attacks. These measures range from provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act to controversial programs such as the warrantless wiretapping of phone calls originating in the United States to the increased use of confidential informants by the FBI (Shields, Smith, & Damphousse, 2015). Many of these measures are largely done on the intelligence side of U.S. counterterrorism policy, however, as noted previously, existing research on foiled plots has shown that the majority of plots are thwarted using information provided by the general public or state/local law enforcement. Historically, a major drawback to thwarting plots has been the lack of coordination and standardization of counterterrorism practices at the state and local levels, which has impeded the sharing and analysis of crucial information (Suspicious Activity Report Support and Implementation Project, 2008). For example, in the absence of federal guidance, local jurisdictions developed different procedures for collecting, reporting, and prioritizing suspicious activity reports (SARs). SARS are reports of activities and behaviors potentially related to terrorism collected from incident reports, field interviews, 911 calls, and tips from the public and some have advocated that a robust SAR program is crucial to preventing terrorist attacks (Steiner, 2010). Recent research on the Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI), an effort to establish reporting standards with respect to SARS, has validated that there is good alignment between pre-incident activities of previous terrorist attacks and the indicators identified as important by the NSI. Furthermore, this research has found that some of these indicators were observable by the public prior to an attack (Gruenewald et al., 2015).

Since 9/11, a key component to detecting and thwarting terrorist plots are the more than 17,000 state and local law enforcement agencies that collectively represent terrorism's "first-line preventers" as argued by Kelling & Bratton (2006). This argument centers on the idea that the community policing model, ascribed to by most U.S. police departments, fits well for terrorism prevention since the same close connections to the community which allow for the prevention and investigation of general crime also allows officers to identify individuals or behavior in their jurisdictions that are out of the ordinary and could be terrorist-related as well as prompt citizens to report suspicious behavior to law enforcement (LaFree, 2012). Despite the vast size of the U.S. law enforcement network and the growing recognition of their importance in the counterterrorism process, state and local resources are still commonly underutilized. The Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI) was launched in part to remedy this deficiency by establishing "a unified process for reporting, tracking, and accessing of (SARs)" (National Strategy for Information Sharing, 2007, pp. A1–A7). The NSI includes a functional standard that identifies activities that should be considered suspicious activity with a potential nexus to terrorism or criminal activity including attempts to elicit information and testing/probing security mechanisms.

Methods and Plots Coding Scheme

Building on the previous research described above, we now discuss our process for identifying and coding completed and foiled terrorist plots in order to develop an analysis dataset. This analysis extends the previous research by Strom et al. (2010) by including plots occurring from 1995-2012 and looking specifically at the risk associated with different types of terrorist plots. Plots included in this study meet several criteria that follow the same approach as our previous research (Strom et al., 2010). First, plots must meet the definition of "terrorism" used by START's Global Terrorism Database (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2012). By this definition, terrorism is "an intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non-state actor" that meets two of the three following criteria:

(1) "The act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal."

(2) "The act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims."

(3) "The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities."

Using these criteria excludes from our data set attacks primarily due to mental illness (a number of mass shootings) and "ordinary" hate crimes in which acts are focused strictly on the victims. Second a "plot" incorporates a single conspiracy. Plots with multiple targets count as one "case". For example, the 9/11 attacks are counted in our dataset as one case, not four. Third, the plot had to be against a "U.S. terrorism target"—on U.S. soil outside of a conflict zone. This criterion does include U.S. embassies, consulates, and military bases abroad; however, it excludes countries with high insurgent and paramilitary activity against the U.S. military. This means that plots to travel to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or other "War on Terror" locations and attack U.S. targets there (or recruit and train others to do so) were excluded, which is consistent with Dahl's (2011) methodology.

Fourth, the plot had to be intended to cause casualties directly or cause catastrophic damage to critical infrastructure (which would cause casualties by definition). In other words, the data set does not include cases aimed primarily at property, including most attacks by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). We offer two justifications for this coding decision. First, attacks against people are generally regarded as more serious than attacks on property. Second, our study identified hundreds of attacks on property that had been labeled "terrorism," ranging from small-scale vandalism to large-scale arson; which of these would truly constitute "terrorism" is hard to determine, especially because the amount of media coverage and investigative effort for property attacks is typically much lower than for attacks on people.

Fifth, the plot had to reach sufficient maturity. This means that it actually reached execution ("executed") or there was an arrest for a terrorist conspiracy ("foiled"). Executed plots did not have to be successful in causing casualties; they just required that the perpetrators attempted an attack on the target site or were engaged in some level of active pre-planning and preparation to conduct an attack. For example, a suspect who has researched a target and constructed a suicide

vest but did not complete the attack would be included. Similarly, we would include a plot involving an individual who was attempting to obtain supplies for explosives to conduct an attack and was apprehended during that process. As such, foiled plots included both plans for the perpetrators to attack a target directly or to conduct reconnaissance and preparatory work for another group to carry out the attack. Cases in which the arrested were released or acquitted at trial were dropped from the database. In some cases, there were acquittals or plea bargains for some charges and convictions on others; these were usually retained provided the convictions were clearly terrorism-related. Implicitly, this means the perpetrators had to take significant and genuinely threatening action towards carrying out the attack; plots that were little more than expressed desires to engage in violence were not included. Thus, for example, threads on extremist bulletin boards expressing aspirations to attack specified targets were excluded.

Finally, information about the plot had to be openly available, discussed in media articles, legal records, government publications, and research databases. Plots that were not available in open source data and known only to intelligence and law enforcement were not included. Most of what is missing are plots still under investigation (not yet mature enough to make arrests) or plots that never reached sufficient maturity to surface (e.g., they collapsed on their own, including numerous plots that never got past early brainstorming).

Identifying Plots

Plots were identified using a combination of pointer references from the Global Terrorism Database, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2002, 2006), other sources identifying lists of plots derived from specific ideologies (including the Heritage Foundation's list of plots related to Al Qaeda and Affiliated Movements [AQAM; Carafano, Bucci, & Zuckerman, 2012], the Southern Poverty Law Center [2012] list of plots related to right-wing extremism, and the Fur Commission [2011] lists of plots related to animal and environmental extremism); targeted web searches, and database searches which is consistent with similar studies (Freilich et al., 2014). Candidate plots found were then compared to the criteria listed above to see if they met the criteria for inclusion.

Cases were characterized through reviews of open source articles, including government reports, media accounts, and watchdog group reports. All articles reviewed were open source. A content analysis on the information for each discovered plot coded the driving ideology, means of attack, magnitude of the plot (estimated casualties if the plot was successful), and whether and how the plot was foiled. Each code was determined by the agreement of at least three research team members.

Analyzing Plots

Multiple open source articles were reviewed for each plot. The authors prepared summaries on each plot in general, the planned attack, the initial clue about the plot (if applicable), how the investigation progressed, and the end result of the plot (execution and/or results of legal

proceedings). Plot attributes were coded across a variety of attributes, including motivating ideology, group size, target type, nature of the attack, magnitude (actual or estimated number of casualties if the attack had succeeded, binned by order of magnitude), type of initial clue (initial information bringing about law enforcement attention), source of initial clue, and "triggering clue" leading to an arrest or full investigation, with each code reviewed by at least three of the co-authors. Attack magnitude for foiled plots is, by necessity, subjective. In making the judgments, likely casualties were estimated if the target had been destroyed. For example, for aircraft bombing attempts, it was assumed that everyone on the airplanes would have been killed, and for large-scale bombing conspiracies, it was assumed that targeted buildings would have been largely destroyed (with both types of plots usually garnering "100–999 casualties" labels). Mass shooting conspiracies were typically labeled as having "10–99 casualties," based on historical experience, such as the Columbine shootings (39 casualties) and the Fort Hood shootings (46 casualties).

Data on plots were entered into a customized Microsoft Access database, with the main table extracted to Microsoft Excel 2010 for analysis. Most tabular analyses described in the article were conducted through applying Pivot Tables to the main table. The main table of the database is available as a Microsoft Excel file.

Results

Nature of the Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Figure 1 shows graphs of the plots per year by ideological motivation. The top four ideologies which include AQAM, Inspired by AQAM, Militia/Anti-Government, and White Supremacist are shown. Here, "AQAM" is "Al Qaeda and Affiliated Movements," which includes foreign groups; "Inspired by AQAM" comprises U.S. residents who radicalized on their own. An "Other" category is also shown which comprises a range of ideologies including anti-abortion, anti-Muslim, Leftist, Rightist, state-sponsored, and other or unknown.

There were 150 plots over the 18-year period, or an average of 8.33 plots per year, with an average increase of 0.22 plots per year over this time period. AQAM and Inspired by AQAM groups each represented approximately 19% of the total plots. White Supremacist and Militia/Anti-Government plots accounted for 20% and 17% of plots, respectively. The biggest increase over time pertains to the Inspired by AQAM group, with no plots until 2002 and an average increase after that of 0.28 plots per year, which was significant at the .001 level (p-value = .000049). At the same time, AQAM (foreign group) plots ramped up at first but then fell off between 2010–2012, as shown by a significant negative quadratic trend term (p-value of quadratic term = .021).

6

Figure 1. Plots by Ideological Motivation
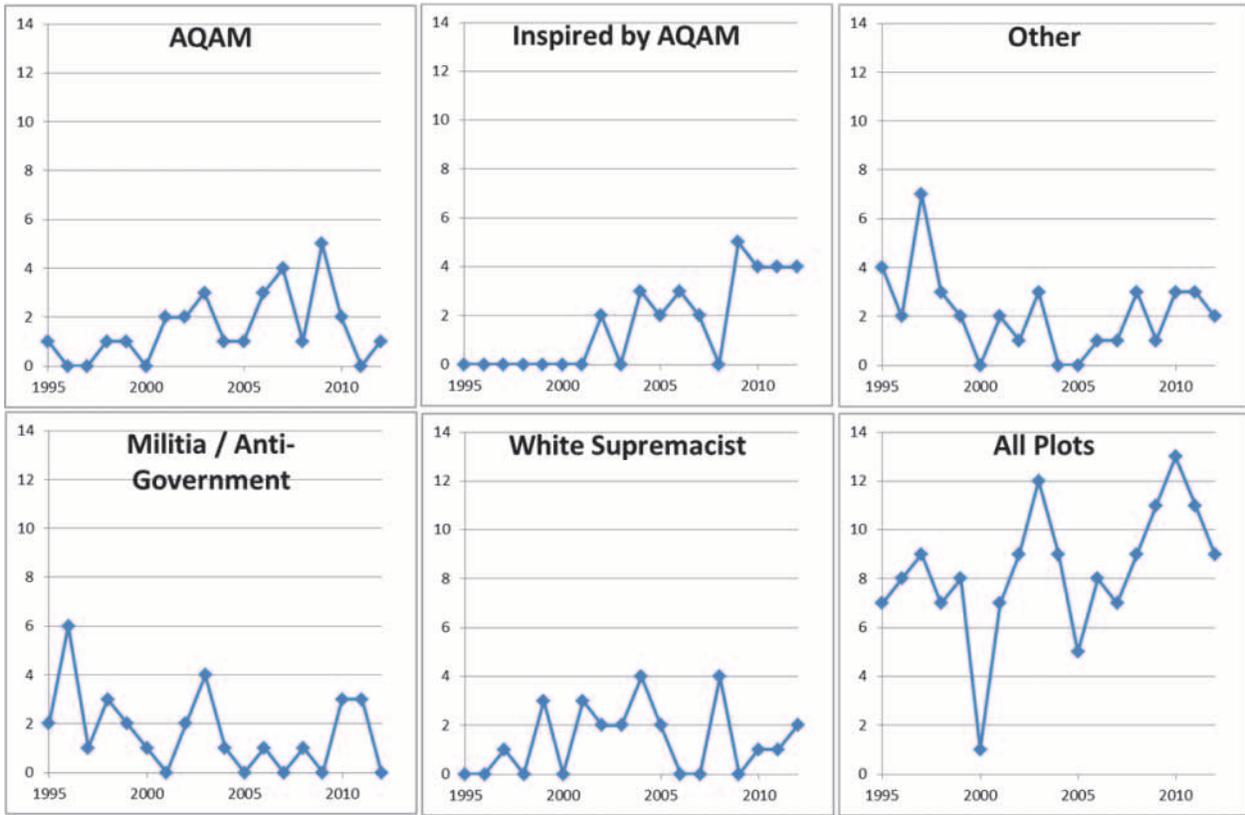
AQAM = Al Qaeda and Affiliated Movements.

Figure 2 shows the plots by estimated magnitude, in terms of numbers of casualties—actual for executed plots, and estimated for failed plots. Over time, we see an increase in 100–1000 casualty plots that is significant at the .05 level (average of 0.18 plots per year, p-value of .019). At the same time, we see a cluster of 1,000+ casualty plots between 1999 and 2006, with no catastrophic-scale plots since 2006. This ramp-up and drop-off in the most consequential terrorist plots is significant at the .01 level, as shown by a negative quadratic trend term (p-value = .005). Because five of the six 1,000+ casualty plots are by AQAM groups, this shows a migration of AQAM and those inspired by AQAM away from catastrophic plots since 2006 which may be the result of better counter measures against these types of plots. For reference, the one other catastrophic plot, the San Joaquin Militia's plot to destroy portions of Sacramento by detonating propane storage tanks, dates back to 1999 (ADL, 2002).

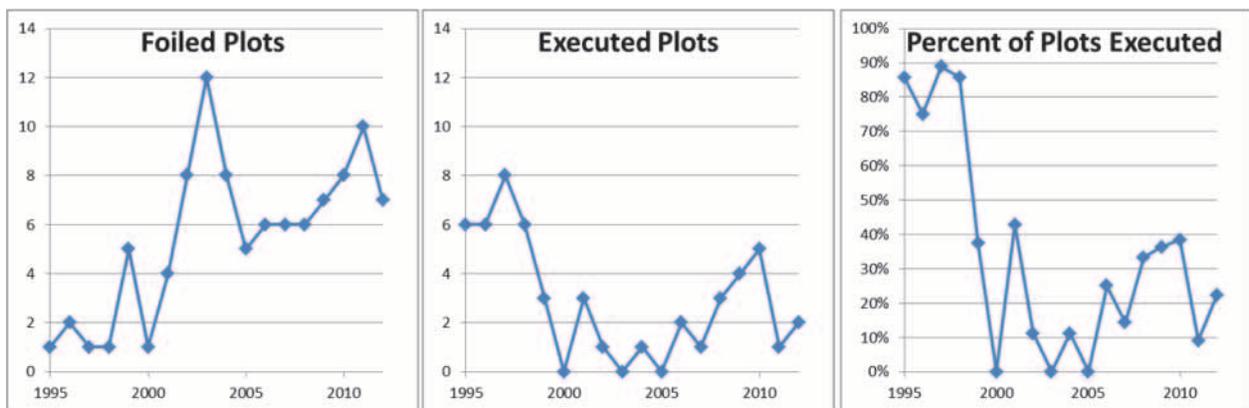**Figure 2. Plots by Estimated Magnitude**

Figure 2. Plots by Estimated Magnitude
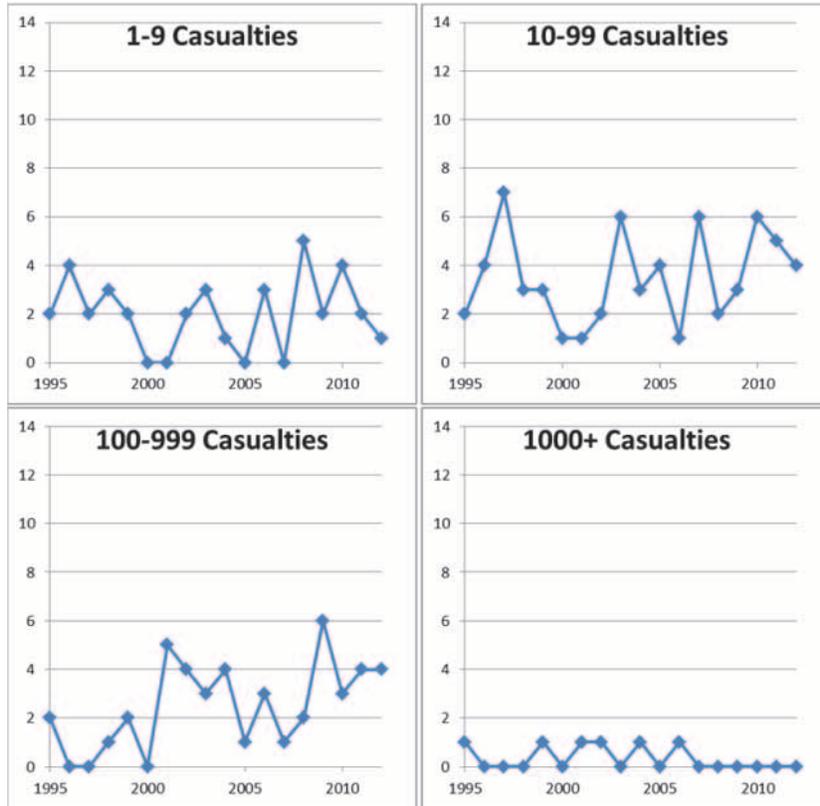
Success in Thwarting Plots

Figure 3 compares the numbers of plots that reached execution to the number of plots that were foiled over time.

Figure 3. Foiled and Executed Plots



Figure 3. Foiled and Executed Plots

As shown, from 1995- 2001, only 31.9% of plots were foiled. Following the 9/11 attacks, from 2002 through 2012, 80.6% of plots were thwarted prior to reaching execution. On average, the percent of plots reaching execution declined by 3.42 percentage points per year, which is significant at the .01 level (p-value = .009). On average, the total number of foiled plots increased by 0.433 per year, which is significant at the .01 level (p value = .001). The total number of plots reaching execution declined by 0.21 per year, despite the overall increase in plots; this decrease was significant at the .1 level (p-value = .055).

How U.S. Terror Plots Were Foiled

Initial clues about plots. Figure 4 shows the sources for the initial clues received for both foiled and executed plots (if applicable).

Figure 4. Sources of Clues for Foiled and Executed Plots
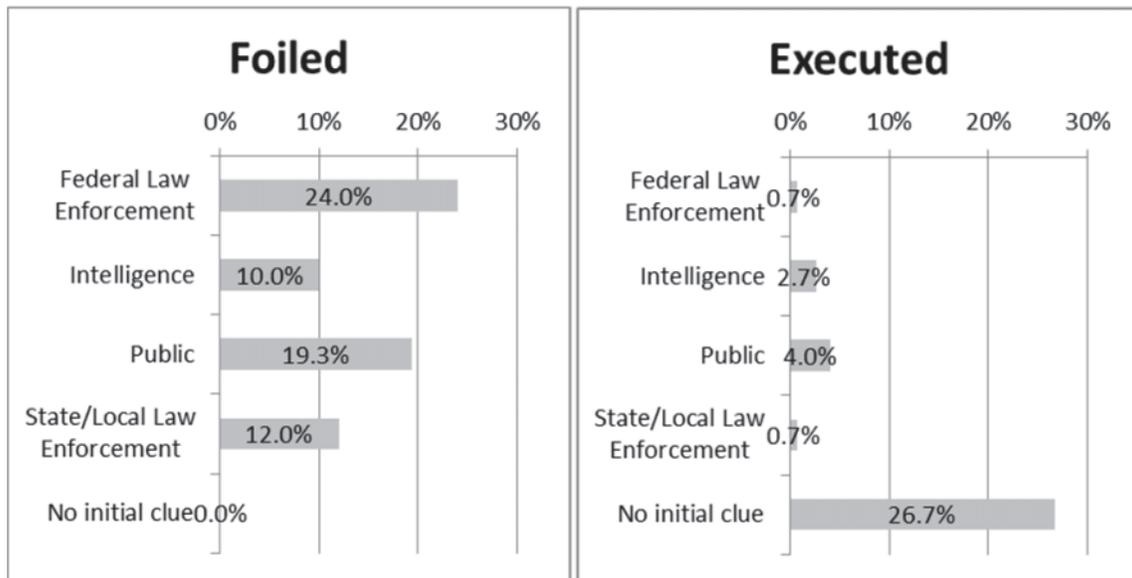
Intelligence efforts only generated initial clues in about 14% of the plots, which is not that surprising given that a large majority of plots are by people residing in the U.S. Federal law enforcement (e.g., FBI, U.S. Marshalls) efforts generated the biggest source of initial plots, followed by reports from the public and state and local law enforcement. No initial clues prior to execution were identified for over one quarter of the plots. Within the sources of clues, we see that there were a number of missed opportunities in which clues came from intelligence and from the public but were not acted on in time. Table 1 shows the types of information that constituted initial clues about terror plots.

Table 1. Initial Clues about Terror Plots

Type of Activity (n = 150)	Foiled Plots	Executed Plots
Links to Terrorism Suspects and Activity	13.33%	2.00%
Association with Suspects/Terrorists	11.33%	2.00%
Prior Terrorist Activity	2.00%	
Discoveries by Agents and Informants	18.67%	
Undercover Agent Solicitation	16.00%	
Online Solicitation	2.67%	
Crime and Criminally Suspicious Activity	10.00%	0.67%
"Ordinary" Crime (not related to plot)	4.67%	0.67%
Precursor Crime (related to plot)	4.00%	
Criminally Suspicious Activity	1.33%	
Tips from the Public	10.00%	3.33%
Tip about Terror-Related Activity	10.00%	3.33%
Threats from Perpetrators	1.33%	0.67%
Threat to Authorities from Perpetrators	1.33%	0.67%
SARs Potentially Related to Terrorism	12.00%	1.33%
Extremist Rants Reported by Bystanders	2.67%	
Reporting of Paramilitary Training (U.S. or Overseas)	1.33%	
Reporting of Potential Surveillance Activity	1.33%	
Detection of Smuggling-Like Behavior	0.67%	0.67%
Discovery of Suspicious Documents	2.00%	0.67%
Discovery of Suspicious Packages	2.67%	
Reporting of Suspicious Purchases	1.33%	
Not Applicable (No Initial Clue)		26.67%
Not Applicable (No Initial Clue)		26.67%

Findings agents and informants (part of federal, state, and local law enforcement efforts for the most part) were the single largest source of clues leading to foiled plots. Most of these discoveries were from in-person investigative work; there were a few cases in which would-be terrorists solicited agents and informants online. For example, the FBI used an inside informant and another informant posing as a weapons provider to build a case against a militia group based in Alaska where six members were ultimately arrested in connection with an alleged conspiracy that included plotting to kill judges, an IRS agent and Alaska State Troopers. This finding is consistent with the FBI's increased use of informants since 9/11 to infiltrate and uncover terrorist plots (Bartosiewicz, 2012).

Identifying associations with known suspects were the second largest source of clues. Here, the associations were stronger than simple acquaintance or business associations. Examples included making suspicious communications together, being roommates, and participating in meetings associated with terrorist planning. Investigating prior terrorist activity (typically smaller-scale activity) also helped identify perpetrators who were planning future attacks. That said, there were several cases in which associations were discovered, but plots reached execution anyway. After 9/11, there has been an increased emphasis on reporting suspicious activity that

has a potential relationship to terrorism, through the NSI and "See Something, Say Something" campaign, for example (O'Keefe, 2011; Kimery, 2010).

From 1995 to 2012, SARs constituted the third largest source of initial clues leading to foiling plots. A wide variation of types of suspicious activity reported, including the following:

- Potential target site surveillance
- Extremist "rants" that were interpreted by those hearing them as implying the speaker wanted to be personally involved in carrying out violent attacks
- Smuggling-like behavior of would-be terrorists trying to get through transit points
- Discoveries of suspicious documents, such as target site surveillance write-ups or boxes of fake government ID cards
- Paramilitary training—either training in the United States or seeking travel overseas to train
- Suspicious purchases of weapons, poisons, or explosive precursors
- Several cases of would-be attackers making violent threats to authorities

Despite the range of different types of SARs, all were atypical and threatening, with aggravating circumstances. Unsolicited public tips that a subject was engaged in terror-related activity tied for the fourth largest source of clues. Receiving these tips depends heavily on strong relationships between authorities and the communities containing potential terrorists. This category had the largest executed-plot rates as there were issues with both evaluations of the tips and ensuring follow-ups.

While not commonly thought of as a primary method to uncover a terrorist plot, discoveries of terror plots during routine law enforcement investigations of seemingly ordinary crimes and criminally suspicious activity also constituted the fourth single largest source of initial clues. Investigating crime provides a 2-for-1 bonus: in addition to solving the crimes themselves, in very rare cases, such investigations led to foiling a terrorist plot. This finding implies a need to ensure well-established processes are in place to report terrorism-related discoveries during criminal investigations.

Discoveries that became initial clues leading to terror plots have five themes in common—they were threatening, atypical, significant, credible, and specific (TASCS).

- *Threatening*: The activity has a clear relationship ("nexus") to an aspect of terrorism or "ordinary" but serious crime. Note that this does not have to relate to a specific plot—traveling overseas to get paramilitary training from a terrorist group constitutes being "threatening."
- *Atypical*: Common, benign explanations for the reported behavior are highly unlikely.
- *Significant*: The behavior reflects genuine commitment.
- *Credible*: The report appears to be reliable.
- *Specific*: The report is detailed.

Investigations following initial clues. Figure 5 summarizes what investigative activities occurred once initial clues were received.

Figure 5. Investigations Following Initial Clues
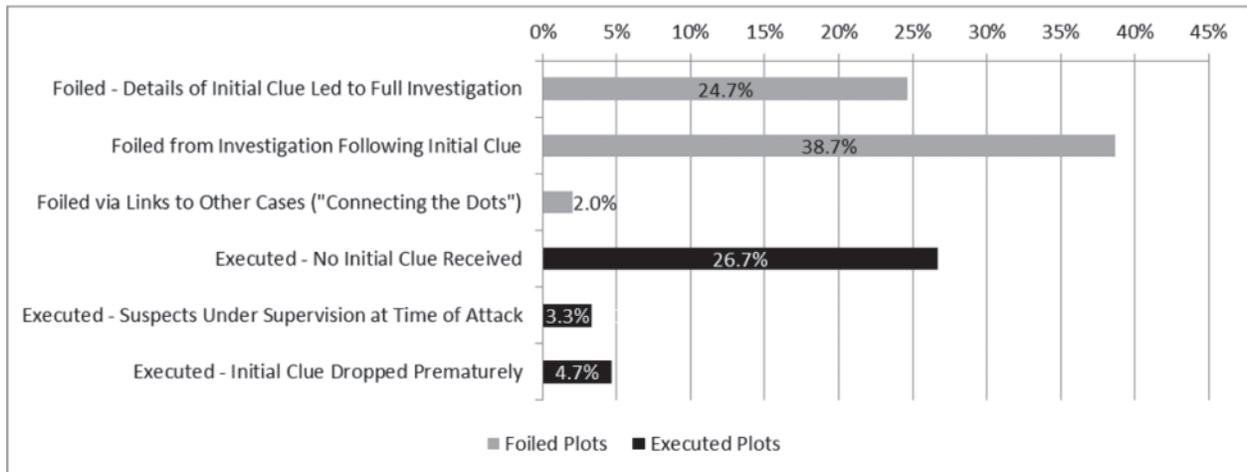
As Figure 5 shows, most plots required additional investigative activities following receipt of an initial clue regarding a plot. Interestingly, investigative activities related to connecting the reported activity to other cases of known terrorist activity—commonly referred to as "connecting the dots"—only led to plots being foiled in a handful of cases. One example involves a planned attack on a Columbus, OH shopping mall that was foiled as a result of following up on persons named by a subject who had plotted to destroy the Brooklyn Bridge.

In the bulk of cases that reached execution, no clues were received in advance. In a few cases, the suspects were under active investigation or criminal supervision at the time of the attack; these consistently were small-scale attacks in the "grab a gun and start shooting" category. For example, the perpetrator of the 2009 shooting at an Army recruiting office at Little Rock, AK, was under preliminary investigation after being detained in Yemen.

Of great concern are cases in which an initial clue was received, but was not forwarded to all agencies needing to know about it, or no follow-up investigative activities were conducted. Table 2 shows the seven largest plots in terms of numbers of actual or potential deaths and whether clues were dropped prematurely. As shown, in five of the seven largest plots, initial clues were received but dropped prematurely – and there were only seven executed plots with dropped clues.

Table 2. Largest Plots and Whether Clues Were Dropped Prematurely

Plot	Casualties	Dropped Clues?
9/11 attacks (2001)	2,977 killed	**Yes**
Attempted Christmas-day bombing of NW 253 (2009)	290 potential deaths	**Yes**
Bombings of Kenya and Tanzania U.S. embassies (1998)	224 killed	**Yes**
Attempted "shoe bombing" of AA 63 (2001)	197 potential deaths	No

Plot	Casualties	Dropped Clues?
Oklahoma City bombing (1995)	168 killed	No
Columbine High School shootings (1999)	15 killed	**Yes**
Fort Hood shootings (2009)	13 killed	**Yes**

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter has attempted to provide empirical evidence on several key issues related to the nature of the recent terrorist threat against the United States homeland and how best to identify and thwart plots. The analysis dataset included 150 completed and foiled terrorist plots across all motivating ideologies to obtain the broadest perspective possible. We now discuss implications of this analysis in light of the broader issues of (1) whether the American public is safer from terrorist attacks today than a decade ago, (2) what the terrorism landscape is like and what current threat levels are, (3) what types of information and activities have led to foiling plots, and (4) when plots did reach execution, what, if anything, went wrong with counterterrorism efforts.

First, it is often asked whether we are safer since 9/11, particularly considering the amount of resources invested in preventing terrorism. The clear implication of this research is that we are much safer post 9/11 and are particularly better at thwarting plots. The proportion of foiled plots has jumped from a 32% interdiction rate in the years prior to 2001 to more than an 80% interdiction rate in the years following 2001. Further, there has been a migration away from terrorists even attempting catastrophic attacks (1,000+ casualties) since 2006. However, there is a continued and slightly increasing risk from smaller-scale attacks. The smallest scale attacks (1 to 9 casualties) are especially notable because they have reached execution almost 60% of the time. This is not surprising given the extreme challenge of identifying and thwarting smaller scale plots, which usually involve single actors or a few individuals and little pre-operational planning. While numbers of plots by single actors vary widely by year, these single actor plots accounted for 47% of the total plots in our dataset. It is with many of these "lone wolf" cases that the efforts of informants or undercover agents, often through solicitation over the Internet, have been most helpful.

Second, although AQAM—and more recently homegrown radicals who are inspired by AQAM—continue to be a focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, it is vital not to overlook other types of terrorist groups. Over the 1995-2012 timeframe, AQAM-related plots constituted just under 40% of all plots, about the same percentage as White Supremacist-related and Militia/Anti-Government–related plots combined. Thus, while many individuals only think of radical Islamic terrorism post 9/11, the terrorism threat landscape includes many motivating ideologies, and these groups do not stop simply because counterterrorism efforts focus on one particular ideology.

Third, there is a continued need to stress the importance of both law enforcement and the public in preventing attacks and to support prevention efforts. More than 80% of plots foiled

from 1995 to 2012 were foiled due to observations by law enforcement or the general public. For officers, there is an ongoing need to provide processes and training so they can identify and report terrorism-related observations and materiel. For the public, in addition to continuing educational programs and well-known reporting processes, there is a strong need to maintain good relations with communities that might have contacts with potential terrorists. Given that almost 30% of foiled plots have been thwarted because of reports from the public, it is vital that members of the public in all communities are comfortable enough with authorities to report potential terrorist-related activity to them.

Finally, there is a strong need to support process management and "quality assurance" so that initial clues are properly pursued and key findings are shared among all investigators. As noted, in five of the seven largest terrorist plots that reached execution, there were clues about the plot that were prematurely dropped.

References

Ackerman, G., & Tamsett, J. (2009). *Jihadists and weapons of mass destruction*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Anti-Defamation League. (2002). Would-be militia bombers sentenced. Retrieved from

http://archive.adl.org/learn/news/bombers_sentenced.html#.VYmojPPD9aQ.

Bartosiewicz, P. (2012, June 13). Deploying informants, the FBI stings Muslims. *The Nation*. Retrieved from http://www.thenation.com/article/168380/deploying-informants-fbi-stings-muslims

Carafano, J. (2009, December 28). *Re-learning the lessons from the thwarted Detroit airline bombing*. Heritage Foundation Web blog. Retrieved from http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/12/Re-Learning-the-Lessons-from-the-Thwarted-Detroit-Airline-Bombing

Carafano, J. J., Bucci, S. P., & Zuckerman, J. (2012). Fifty terror plots foiled since 9/11: The homegrown threat and the long war on terrorism (Heritage Foundation Backgrounder 2682). Retrieved from http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2012/pdf/bg2682.pdf

Dahl, E. J. (2011). The plots that failed: Intelligence lessons learned from unsuccessful terrorist attacks against the United States. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 34*(8), 621–648.

Difo, G. (2010). *Ordinary measures, extraordinary results: An assessment of foiled plots since 9/11*. Retrieved from https://americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Foiled-Plots.pdf

Douglas, W. & Youssef, N. (2005). At least 10 al-Qaida terrorist plots thwarted since 9-11, Bush says. Knight Ridder Newspapers. Retrieved from http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2005/10/06/12612/at-least-10-al-qaida-terrorist.html#storylink=cpy

Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2002). *Terrorism 2000-2001*. Retrieved from http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/terror

Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2006). *Terrorism 2002-2005*. Retrieved from http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/terrorism-2002-2005/terror02_05.pdf

Freilich, J.D., S.M. Chermak, R. Belli, J. Gruenewald & W.S. Parkin. (2014). Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB). Terrorism and Political Violence 26(2): 372-384

Fur Commission USA. (2011). *Animal extremist/ecoterror crimes*. Retrieved from http://www.furcommission.com/animal-extremist-ecoterror-crimes/

Global Terrorism Database. (2004). Codebook: inclusion criteria and values. Retrieved from http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

Gruenewald, J.W., Parkin, S., Smith, B.L., Chermak, S.M., Freilich, J.M., Roberts, P., & Klein, B. "Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative: Identifying Suspicious Activities from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS)." Report to the U. S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD: START, 2015.

Hoffman, B. (2003). Al Qaeda, trends in terrorism, and future potentialities: An assessment. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *26*(6), 429–442.

Jenkins, B. M. (2006). *Unconquerable nation: Knowing our enemy, strengthening ourselves*. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG454.pdf

Kelling, G. L., & Bratton, W. J. (2006). *Policing terrorism.* New York: Manhattan Institute.

Kimery, A. (2010). DHS 'see something, say something' expanded to federal buildings. Homeland Security Today. Retrieved from http://www.hstoday.us/channels/dhs/single-article-page/see-something-say-something-expanded-to-federal-buildings/6bcbad62204e54da32de72f238ff33b1.html.

LaFree, G. (2012). Policing Terrorism. *Ideas in American Policing* series. Police Foundation.

LaFree, Laura Dugan, Erin Miller. Putting Terrorism in Context: Lessons from the Global Terrorism Database. London:Routledge. 2015

McNeil, J. B., Carafano, J. J., & Zucker, J. (2010). *30 terrorist plots foiled: How the system worked*. Retrieved from http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/04/30-terrorist-plots-foiled-how-the-system-worked

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database* [Data file] (2012; http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd).

National Strategy for Information Sharing (NSIS). (2007, October). *Information sharing: Success and challenges in improving terrorism-related information sharing*. Retrieved from http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/infosharing/NSIS_book.pdf

O'Keefe, E. (2011). If you see something, say something' going bilingual. The Washington Post. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/post/if-you-see-something-say-something-going-bilingual/2011/12/12/gIQAlEjIqO_blog.html.

Sageman, M. (2008). *Leaderless Jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project. (2012). *Terror from the right: Plots, conspiracies, and racist rampages since Oklahoma City.* Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center.

Steiner, J. E. (2010). More is better: The analytic case for a robust suspicious activity reports program. *Homeland Security Affairs, 6*(3). Retrieved from https://www.hsaj.org/articles/80

Strom, K. J., Hollywood, J., Pope, M. W., Weintraub, G., Daye, C. M., & Gemeinhardt, D. A. (2010, October). *Building on clues: Examining successes and failures in detecting U.S. terrorist plots, 1999–2009.* Research Triangle Park, NC: Institute for Homeland Security Solutions.

Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) Support and Implementation Project. (2008*). Findings and recommendations of the Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) Support and Implementation Project*. Retrieved from http://iwitnessvideo.info/files/mccarecommendation- 06132008.pdf.