Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 3

Lone-Actor Terrorism
Database Workshop

Sebastien Feve and Kelsey Bjornsgaard

About this Paper

This paper is the third publication in the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project, which aims to improve understanding of, and responses to, the phenomenon of (potentially) violent lone actors through analysis of comprehensive data on cases from across Europe. The eighteen-month project is co-funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union, and has been undertaken by a RUSI-led consortium. Partnering institutions include Chatham House, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Leiden University, one of the founding organisations of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) at The Hague.

Lone-Actor Terrorism
Database Workshop

Sebastien Feve and Kelsey Bjornsgaard

Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies

Over 180 years of independent defence and security thinking

The Royal United Services Institute is the UK's leading independent think-tank on international defence and security. Its mission is to be an analytical, research-led global forum for informing, influencing and enhancing public debate on a safer and more stable world.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities, sustaining its political independence for over 180 years.

London | Brussels | Nairobi | Doha | Tokyo | Washington, DC

Executive Summary

The objective of the Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project is to collate known lone-actor terrorist plots across Europe; analyse profiles of perpetrators to inform future policy development; and work with key front-line practitioner groups to better counter the threat of potentially violent individuals based on the findings of the research. On 25–26 March 2015, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue hosted an international workshop on 'Building a European Database of Lone-Actor Terrorist Incidences'. The aim of the workshop was to discuss the development of the project database and some of the underlying principles that would inform data collection and retention.

A previous workshop in The Hague had established a working definition for the project:[1]

> The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).

However, important questions remained regarding the operationalisation of this definition and its application in the project. Three practical challenges were identified and discussed in detail at the workshop: defining and coding 'ideological aloneness', 'operational aloneness' and 'mental-health issues'.

Ideological Aloneness

In terms of ideological 'aloneness', participants highlighted the fine line between a lone-actor terrorist's ideology being inspired by, associated with and directly influenced by a terrorist group or network. It was argued that the medium of engagement – for example, whether it was offline or online – was an important consideration for determining ideological 'aloneness'.

Operational Aloneness

With regards to operational aloneness, the working definition chosen by the CLAT consortium requires that lone-actor terrorists operate without direct support in the 'planning, preparation and execution of their attack'. However, it was agreed in the workshop that a perpetrator may receive some indirect support from a terrorist organisation but still be classed as a 'lone actor'. Factors for consideration include the degree of engagement with a broader network, and in particular with the command-and-control structures of terrorist groups.

---

1. Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Definitional Workshop', Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 2, *RUSI Occasional Paper*, December 2015, p. 9.

Mental Health

Mental-health issues can include a wide range of disorders, from depression to paranoid schizophrenia. It is necessary to distinguish these types of disorders to understand the role of mental illness in lone-actor terrorism. Moreover, the reporting of clinical diagnoses among lone-actor perpetrators is rare. It was suggested that the consortium distinguish between cases where a clinical diagnosis has been made and those which rely on proxy indicators (such as news reporting that alludes to mental-health issues).

Data Collection and Presentation

Workshop participants also discussed practical issues regarding data collection, retention and presentation. It was recognised that coding decisions must often be made using imperfect data; the importance of establishing mechanisms to ensure consistency and of developing a codebook (setting out how incidents are categorised and recorded in the database) to facilitate transparency were therefore highlighted. Data visualisation was also considered, with participants underlining both its advantages in presenting key trends and the dangers of unintentionally obscuring the raw data.

ON 25–26 MARCH 2015, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) hosted an international workshop on 'Building a European Database of Lone-Actor Terrorist Incidences'. The aim of the workshop was to discuss the development of the CLAT project database and some of the underlying principles that would inform data collection and retention.

A previous workshop, hosted by the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism at Leiden University in The Hague on 14–15 January 2015, discussed some of the core definitional issues regarding the concept of the lone actor. In consultation with approximately thirty academics and professionals specialising in the issue of terrorism and lone-actor terrorist violence, a working definition for the project was established:[1]

> The threat or use of violence by a single perpetrator (or small cell), not acting out of purely personal-material reasons, with the aim of influencing a wider audience, and who acts without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack, and whose decision to act is not directed by any group or other individuals (although possibly inspired by others).

The working definition was broken down to form the following criteria, each element of which must be met for a case to be included in the database:

1. Violence, or the threat of violence, must be planned or carried out
2. The perpetrator(s) must be an individual, dyad (involving two people) or triad (involving three people)
3. The perpetrator must act without any direct support in the planning, preparation and execution of the attack
4. The perpetrator's decision to act must not be directed by any group or other individuals
5. The motivation cannot be purely personal-material gain
6. The target of the attack extends beyond those victims immediately impacted by the act.

The workshop hosted by ISD in March 2015 sought to discuss the specific challenges in operationalising some of the core conceptual elements of the working definition. It also sought to explore some of the considerations in developing a terrorism database and the specific challenges of collecting data on the profiles of perpetrators.

Workshop Overview

The workshop focused first on understanding the challenges in identifying lone-actor cases and collecting data, and then on the specific challenges in building a database which records multiple variables.

---

1.   Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Definitional Workshop', Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 2, *RUSI Occasional Paper*, December 2015.

The discussions during the workshop sessions on 25 March focused on:

- Current gaps in the study of lone-actor plots, and the value of establishing another terrorism database. This raised various perspectives on how a new database could improve counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policy and practice in Europe
- Summarising the outcomes of the definitional workshop held in The Hague, including the overall working definition of the research project
- Understanding and observing mental-health drivers and assessing the motivations of 'school shooters' and the parallels with lone actors.

The discussions during the workshop sessions on 26 March focused on:

- How to develop a database, including an overview of existing terrorism databases and incidents data
- The challenges of collecting data on terrorism cases generally and lone-actor plots specifically
- The value of existing databases and what they reveal (or do not reveal) about lone actors
- The working principles and methodologies in data collection, retention and presentation which could be applied or adapted to this lone-actor terrorism database
- The role of infographics and data visualisation in presenting terrorism data.

The first section of this report outlines the discussion regarding data collection and the associated challenges in operationalising the project's definition of lone-actor terrorism. The discussion focuses on three particular issues: determining 'ideological aloneness', 'operational support' and 'mental-health issues'. The subsequent sections examine more practical questions regarding data collection, retention and presentation.

Key Discussion Points

The following section explores some of the key issues and points raised during the two days of discussion. The section is designed to provide a broad overview of some of the core themes raised at the event; it is not, however, intended to serve as a comprehensive record of discussions. Points are also not attributed to individual participants.

The definitional workshop in The Hague offered a conceptual framework for identifying lone-actor terrorism cases. However, in order to operationalise it, difficult decisions must be made about how to define and code those elements that comprise it. In total, three practical 'profiling challenges' were discussed during the two days that were seen as particularly relevant to understanding and countering the lone-actor terrorist threat in Europe. These included determining the following:

- Ideological aloneness: What are the possible thresholds of external influence in providing the ideological basis for lone-actor violent extremism?

- Operational aloneness: What are the possible avenues through which lone-actor terrorists may receive indirect operational support?
- Mental health: What is the relative role of mental health in driving the lone-actor terrorist threat and how can this be observed?

Ideological Aloneness

One of the greatest challenges in classifying incidents as lone-actor terrorism is devising a threshold of independence that must be met for cases to be included on the database. It is well recognised that although lone-actor terrorists may act alone, they do not act in a vacuum. Individuals are almost always inspired or influenced by external influencers and influences. This is particularly the case when it comes to adopting the ideology that leads someone to plan and undertake a violent attack.

One participant suggested that the line between inspiration, association and direct influence is particularly fine in relation to the lone-actor perpetrator subset. Unpacking these concepts and identifying observable indicators for each is key to understanding degrees of external influence. In other words, the question is '*how alone* is a lone actor?' – and not whether they are alone or not.

To establish degrees of ideological aloneness, researchers may need to develop a typology of external influence. This would enable those working with the database to identify types of external influencers and influences during the data-collection phase within individual cases.

It was argued that this entails defining both the medium of engagement through which perpetrators might have been influenced (that is, offline and/or online) and the intensity of this external influence (that is, whether the engagement with influencers was merely unilateral consumption or involved production and dissemination of ideological content, for example).

Understanding these types of engagement may provide valuable insight into the mediums through which to identify 'leakage' or other opportunities for law-enforcement agencies to identify communications by individuals at risk of perpetrating acts of lone-actor violence.

The role of the Internet and social media, as an avenue through which lone-actor terrorists are able to connect to broader networks and external influences, was identified as particularly critical.

Operational Aloneness

According to the working definition adopted by the consortium, lone-actor terrorists operate without direct support in the 'planning, preparation and execution of their attack'. This leads to questions on what qualifies as 'operational aloneness'.

It was argued that positioning operational support as a dichotomy is unhelpful to efforts to prevent attacks, as it oversimplifies the reality. When considering the issue of lone actors, there are different degrees of engagement with established command-and-control structures of terrorist groups or networks. If a perpetrator has had ongoing, two-way engagement

with terrorist groups or networks that provide direct support through physical assistance – for example, by facilitating travel abroad to receive operational training – then this would constitute direct operational support and related incidents would not be included in the lone-actor terrorism database.

It was noted, however, that there are varying degrees of operational assistance that fall short of direct support from established groups. Examples of the type of support which may be received include the use of training manuals produced and disseminated online by established terrorist groups and networks, or a specific call to action or instructions/general guidance issued by a prominent figure.

Determining these operational-support thresholds is imperative to understanding the criteria for the inclusion of cases in the database. Defining relative degrees of operational support may also be valuable as future preventative and policing tripwires.

Mental Health

It is widely speculated that a higher proportion of lone-actor terrorists may suffer from mental-health issues than both the general population and the broader constituency of terrorist perpetrators.[2]

One key element of understanding the role played by mental health in the lone-actor perpetrator subset is to understand the range of disorders that fall within the existing terminology. Currently, the term 'mental illness' is used to describe a range of issues, from depression to paranoid schizophrenia. It is necessary to distinguish these types of disorders to understand the role of mental illness in lone-actor terrorism.

One workshop participant highlighted that it can be difficult to find reliable sources of information on the state of an individual's mental health. Many lone-actor perpetrators are unlikely to have received a clinical diagnosis. It is therefore necessary to be clear when distinguishing between clinical diagnoses of lone-actor perpetrators and any proxy indicators that suggest the existence of mental-health issues (for example, news reporting).

Overall, understanding the relative role of mental health in driving the decision-making process is extremely challenging. Both the 'school shooter' and 'fixated loner' perpetrator cohorts were discussed as being interesting cases in which psychological drivers could blend with political/ideological motivations in justifying attacks.

Data Collection and Presentation

There are no perfect solutions for collecting, categorising or presenting terrorism incidents data generally, or data on lone-actor profiles specifically. Building a lone-actor terrorist database using publicly available data will be a process that relies on making informed but often imperfect decisions.

---

2.   Raffaello Pantucci, Clare Ellis and Lorien Chaplais, 'Lone-Actor Terrorism: Literature Review', Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series No. 1, *RUSI Occasional Paper*, December 2015.

The transparency of the decision-making process is vital. Given that all decisions impact how information is recorded in the database, it is imperative that these are made public and the reasoning clearly articulated.

It was recognised that investment in a database codebook (setting out how incidents are categorised and recorded) is therefore critical. This is important for understanding how decisions are made by coders and for supporting the continuity of the database beyond the termination of the consortium's seed funding for the database.

One participant suggested that the key challenge will be to identify collective standards for inclusion (inclusivity boundaries or 'necessary conditions'). Decisions as to whether incidents meet these standards will regularly have to be made based on missing or conflicting information, especially when it concerns the profiles of perpetrators.

The consortium will also need to be mindful of the data-collection challenges that exist in different national jurisdictions and the associated challenges in reporting acts of lone-actor violence in different regions – these may lead to the over- or under-reporting of cases, as well as create unique challenges in collecting data longitudinally.

The availability of English-language source material across the EU is another data-collection issue. It was therefore suggested that where possible, the consortium should work with in-country experts to overcome these difficulties and ensure consistent data collection.

The consortium should also seek to minimise the systematic biases in data collection across participating organisations by establishing methods of information exchange and data coding that reduce the potential for bias across research teams. As part of this effort, participating bodies need to develop systems to discuss borderline cases for potential inclusion in the database, as well as methods for double/triple coding.

It was noted that it should not be the consortium's objective to resolve conceptual debates on lone-actor terrorist violence, but to construct a flexible database that can be adapted and applied by the end user (particularly given the wide-ranging geographical scope of the database) to meet the analytical interests and goals of the individual researcher. The consortium should therefore aim to record and present a wide range of variables related to the profiles of perpetrators that will allow the end user to structure the information as required and to perform his or her own analysis of the data in a way which minimises the need for raw-data modification.

When selecting an information 'source pool' the consortium should be explicit about the source hierarchy and apply systematic methodologies to both identify and treat potentially biased or less-reliable source information, particularly given that incident data on lone-actor violence are often incomplete (especially when dealing with profiles).

Data Visualisation

The consortium should be mindful about what information is approved for public distribution (even if this information is already in the public domain), particularly given that data will be collected and retained on the profiles of individual perpetrators. The consortium will need to have checks and balances on the data provided and these will need to be clearly communicated to different target audiences. This is particularly important to avoid data being sensationalised.

It was suggested that careful consideration should also be given to how the data will be presented. Data visualisation is a valuable tool as it offers the possibility of presenting complex data in an accessible format; however, it may also lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. When using data visualisation, less is often more: complex infographics may obscure and undermine the raw data.

Finally, it is important that the consortium is explicit about how to communicate the limitations and uses of the data that will be presented to the end user, and to identify what questions the data can answer and how it can best be used to answer them.

About the Authors

Sebastien Feve is Strategic Development Manager at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) where he focuses on supporting the expansion of the Institute's programmes of work and international partnerships related to counter-extremism and counter-terrorism. Prior to this, Sebastien managed the Policy Planners' Network on Countering Radicalisation and Polarisation (PPN), an intergovernmental network of eleven government agencies from the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Finland and Spain.

Kelsey Bjornsgaard is the Counter-Narrative Associate at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) where she focuses on developing strategic communication to counter extremist narratives. She works primarily with grassroots organisations and her expertise include counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy in the US and UK, international relations and narrative theory. Kelsey holds an MA in International Conflict Studies from King's College London and a BA in International Studies from the University of Oklahoma.