LIMITATIONS TO THE TERRORISM LITERATURE

How limited primary and causal research undermines the literature on terrorism

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INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and practitioners in the terrorism field are interested in better understanding the factors that drive violent extremism and terrorism, and that distinguish between violent extremists and the wider population. One of the main aims of SAFIRE was to bring clarity to these questions. However, the lack of empirical and causal research into the drivers of violent extremism and terrorism has made it challenging to provide clear answers to these and other pressing questions for policymakers and practitioners working in this field. In fact, empirical and causal research is essential to enable policymakers and practitioners to make informed decisions. In the absence of such research, policymakers and practitioners cannot be confident that their decisions will affect the phenomenon of interest in the way that they expect; their decisions may instead lead to unexpected outcomes.

The challenges with the terrorism literature are not new: over thirty years ago, Schmid and Jongman reviewed more than 6000 studies of terrorism published between 1968 and 1988 and found that only a limited number attempted an empirical examination of the patterns and relationships associated with terrorist attacks. The authors concluded that 'perhaps as much as 80 percent of the literature is not research-based in any rigorous sense' (cited in Silke, 2004, p. 60).

One of the main contributions that SAFIRE can make to the terrorism research field is therefore to shed light on the limitations to the large literature on terrorism. This understanding can help researchers, policymakers and practitioners place an appropriate level of emphasis on and confidence in findings from the literature, and clarify how they may be able to contribute to advancing the field of terrorism research.

This paper on the quality of the terrorism literature reports results from a study that was based on a sub-sample of the extensive literature on terrorism. The results are therefore intended to be illustrative of the limitations to the wider evidence base.

METHOD

To review the evidence base for factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism, RAND Europe carried out an extensive review of the publicly available English language social science literature published since 1970, when terrorism became a more prominent issue in Europe. The study team searched Google Scholar for relevant sources, using combinations of three types of key words: key words relating to the phenomenon of radicalisation, including extremism, terrorism and violence, key words relating to the topic of interest namely factors, causes, story, background, explanation, and key words relating to levels of analysis including individuals, people, groups, organisations, movements.

The study team identified c. 1200 results, of which 133 documents related to factors associated with violent extremists and terrorists and were therefore considered relevant to the study. These ranged from journal articles and books to reports published by research organisations and public administrations. Upon further review, sources that were not empirical (e.g. third party commentaries) or clearly cite their references were also excluded from the study in an effort to avoid reifying non-evidenced assertions. Based on these criteria, 65 sources were ultimately selected for review. The sources are classified by type and by sampling population in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1 Description of the literature by type

Literature characteristic	Number of sources
Autobiographies	3
Primary research (interviews)	11
Of which involved a control group	1
Secondary research	51
Of which the sample was benchmarked against the general population	2

Table 2: Description of the primary literature by sampling population

Population interviewed	Number of sources
Community stakeholders	7
Government representatives	5
Community leaders	3
Experts	3
Individuals considered violent radicals by intelligence services	3
Terrorists (incarcerated)	2
Journalists	1
Industry representatives	1
Project staff	1

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study team found the literature on factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism to be substantial, offering numerous insights into the process of violent radicalisation. However, the team found that only a minority of the literature consisted of empirical and/or causal research, which could explain the causes of violent extremism and terrorism.

First, as Table 1 shows, only 11 out of 65 of the studies that RAND Europe reviewed could be characterised as primary studies. Of these, Table 2 shows that only five out of the 26 studies consisted of research directly with individuals considered violent extremists or terrorists; the majority of primary studies in the literature that RAND Europe reviewed involved interviews with individuals considered to have specialist knowledge in relation to violent radicals and terrorists. This suggests that the evidence on factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism and those that distinguish between violent extremists and the rest of the population has limited validity. In other words, one can only have limited confidence that the results from the literature accurately reflect the characteristics of the violent extremist and terrorist population, and not the assumptions and biases of those that have reported the characteristics of violent extremists and terrorists to the researchers.

Second, Table 1 shows that only three out of the 65 studies adopted a research design that enabled the researchers to explore the causality of the factors that they reported to be associated with violent extremism and terrorism. In fact, unless it is possible to attribute a link between a factor and a phenomenon, the factor can only be said to appear associated with the

phenomenon; other factors, which may not be obvious to the researcher, may have caused the phenomenon of interest. To attribute a link between a factor and a phenomenon, research can adopt designs that are experimental, like comparing outcomes in one population that shares a given factor with another population that does not share this factor (the so-called control group). Causal research can also be based on designs that are quasi-experimental, for example when comparing the population of interest with information available about another 'benchmark' population, to assess what key differences in characteristics may be able to help explain differences in outcomes. The lack of causal research in relation to factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism suggests that the findings from the literature cannot, on the whole, be used to explain what drives people to violent extremism or terrorism or to predict outcomes.

The lack of empirical and causal research that has marked the terrorism field since the 1960s is likely to be due in part to difficulties in gaining access to violent extremists and terrorists and to the small numbers of subjects available. Violent extremists and terrorists represent a very small portion of the wider population, they typically operate underground, and when in custody, their access is closely guarded by the authorities. As a result, carrying out empirical and causal research in this field is time-consuming, costly and requires perseverance. However, it is by no means impossible.

Some researchers have carried out high-quality research in recent years, as some of the work studied exemplifies. Government authorities who have greater access to violent extremists or terrorists through the intelligence sector or the justice system also carry out some high quality research – but their work is often classified and therefore does not tend to inform the wider public field of terrorism research.

The gaps in empirical and causal research, together with the likely contributing factors to these gaps do not only affect the literature on factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism; the same challenges were found in other studies carried out by the research team in relation to violent extremism and terrorism, for example on individual disengagement from Al-Qaida inspired groups (see Disley et al., 2011) and the role of the internet in radicalisation (see Edwards et al., 2013).

The limited empirical and causal research on factors associated with violent extremism and terrorism limits the value of the existing evidence base to inform the decisions of policymakers and practitioners. There are a number of steps that researchers, their funders, policymakers and practitioners can take to limit the detrimental impact of this situation and begin addressing it.

First, to improve access to empirical data, researchers, policymakers and practitioners would benefit from increased collaboration. Policymakers and practitioners can reduce the time and cost involved in researchers' efforts to gain access to empirical data. Policymakers and practitioners would also benefit from regularly publishing their data and/or results, even if these need to be treated in order to be cleared for public distribution. Both actions would enable researchers to carry out further reliable research to improve insights into violent extremism and terrorism in support of policymaking and practice.

Second, researchers should uphold the highest scientific standards in the terrorism field. This would lead to an increase in primary and causal research. Research funders can exert significant influence to ensure that the standards of research in the terrorism field are raised: they can specify strict criteria for funding, and delegate the evaluation, monitoring and delivery of research projects to research-savvy officers.

Third, commissioning and conducting a greater number of evaluations of counter-terrorism policies and programmes could contribute to both an improved understanding of the factors that lead to counter-terrorism as well as growing evidence base.

Regardless of these efforts, a fourth recommendation of this paper would be to assess policymakers' and practitioners' capacity to assign the appropriate level of confidence to the evidence that they draw on; and should this level be considered insufficient, to provide training in this regard. This effort would ensure that the limitations of the literature do not have a detrimental impact on policy-making and practice.

In the meantime, it may also be beneficial to draw on parallel literatures that have a stronger evidence base and may help shed light on some of the phenomena associated with violent extremism and terrorism, such as vulnerability, persuasion, indoctrination, and sociopathy.