Collaborative approaches to countering terrorism
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On 3rd June 2017, eight people were killed and 48 injured in a pre-planned attack by three terrorists who used a vehicle to ram pedestrians on London Bridge in the UK’s capital city, killing two. The van used then crashed onto Borough High Street, close by to London Bridge, where the terrorists got out and began attacking citizens with knives. Off duty police officers and civilians engaged the attackers and were stabbed during the attack, with the terrorists killing five people in the adjoining market and one slightly thereafter. Armed officers arrived eight minutes after the initial emergency call was made and the terrorists were shot dead within 20 seconds of the police arriving at the scene. The entire event lasted only 10 minutes. This attack came fewer than three months after the Westminster attack (March 2017) and under two weeks after the Manchester Arena bombing during an Ariana Grande concert (May 2017).

Of the three attackers on 3rd June 2017, two were known to the police. Khuram Shazad Butt had been questioned by the police previously and was investigated but ultimately classed as a low police priority. Youssef Zaghba was being monitored continuously whilst residing in Italy by Italian law enforcement who informed the UK authorities about Zaghba and their concerns. Rachid Redouane was the only one of the three not known to the police.

Success in countering terrorism is often borne of tragedy, and the terrorist attacks at London Bridge are no exception. The police operational tactics employed during this attack were formulated through the application of Operation Plato (UK Government, 2016), a strategy created to respond to terrorist firearms attacks in which the assailants move at fast pace. This policy application was a significant step up for law enforcement agencies in the UK and moved policing from a ‘threat containing and negotiation resolution’ position to one of ‘confronting and neutralising’. The application of this policy remains a proportionate response to an extreme terrorist threat which was independently evaluated and confirmed by Lord Toby Harris, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism and Member of the joint Committee on National Security Strategy within the UK Parliament. Although the tragedy at London Bridge resulted in loss of life, the operation itself was largely reported as successful in preventing a higher number of deaths (Harris, 2017). This was the first time that UK police had used these tactics to eliminate a terrorist threat. The subsequent ‘Run, Hide, Tell’ strategy was launched as a result of this incident.

The 2011 Blackett Review of High Impact Low Probability Risks undertook an extensive consultation with both subject matter experts and the intelligence community. This yielded eleven recommendations designed to strengthen government approaches to terrorist threats. Interestingly, six of the recommendations are related to greater collaboration between intelligence communities and those external to it who hold subject area expertise, such as academics. According to the Blackett Review (2011), academics could lend their expertise to the credibility of key risk assumptions held by the intelligence community, support analysis, aid detection of early signs of threat, consider to best way to engage in communication regarding risk and provide scrutiny to risk assessment. All in all, these are positive steps for academics who are interested in working with law enforcement personnel with respect to data analysis.

We do not know if the London Bridge attack would have ended differently, or not have occurred at all, had academic researchers had been involved in tracking Zaghba or Butt. We do know that many academics are keen to work alongside law enforcement on counter
terrorism (CT) strategy and many in law enforcement welcome such overtures to progress their own work, reinforcing the Blackett Review (2011) recommendations.

The relationship between academics and law enforcement agencies has improved recently with efforts to provide sound evidence-based research, securing fresh perspectives in sustainable strategic and operational CT outcomes. Forces in the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada have developed evidence-based processes, applying rigorous academic research techniques to measure what works in CT strategy.

The UK College of Policing defines evidenced-based policing (EBP) as:

… an approach in which police officers and staff work with academics and other partners to create, review, and use the best available evidence to inform and challenge policing policies, practices, and decisions.

Law enforcement is well equipped to devise strategies and operations to respond quickly to terrorist attacks, and in some cases to prevent them, e.g., the UK has an extensive history in dealing with Irish Republican, Far Right and Islamist extremism (Sinclair, 2014). Academic CT researchers often have the luxury of time and rigorous research methods to investigate how and why a terrorist might undertake an attack so combining efforts might yield even better CT outcomes.

Cultivating relationships

Studying concepts as broad as terrorism has always been challenging and considering the different approaches law enforcement and academics take when researching terrorism only further muddies the waters. The key factors that complicate relationships between academia and CT policing remain trust, confidence, access to sensitive data and competing interests (Lum and Kennedy, 2012). These often serve as barriers for undertaking targeted research and until the value of EBP is realised across law enforcement, effective collaboration remains limited (Lum and Koper, 2017). It is therefore important to develop and cultivate relationships with law enforcement agencies who are engaging in relevant work which compliments and furthers the existing terrorism literature. It is also worth reflecting on how particular researchers work with policymakers, law enforcement or government to inform agendas on terrorism research. Without external perspectives, law enforcement are at risk of isolation of thought, stagnation of policy development and limited application of methodological rigour to achieve strong operational outcomes.

One of Sageman’s (2014) critiques is that there is an ‘unbridgeable gap’ (p. 565) between academic researchers and the intelligence community. Since this critique, the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) and the Defence and Security Accelerator (DASA) were formed in the UK, and the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) in the US, all of which bring together academics, government, and other stakeholder groups. CREST, DASA and NCITE join a few other centres which were in operation prior to Sageman’s critique, such as the US Minerva Research Initiative (MRI) and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). Centres such as these help link researchers, stakeholders and analysts though more might be needed to help bridge the gap Sageman highlights. Data hubs are also an emerging trend in policing and many forces have established Strategic Insight Teams dedicated to EBP, such as the one developed by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in 2018.
Government agencies are more interested in preventing people from engaging in terrorism than understanding the pathway to and through it. It should be noted some police forces have established EBP research groups, bringing together academics and police officers to develop shared understandings, and might be interested in looking at the ‘why’ in addition to the ‘prevent’ approach. For example, Societies of Evidenced Policing that exist in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand and the UK College of Policing do just that. Another such group is the UK CT Evidence-Based Review Group established 2021 in partnership with the Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters (CTPHQ). This group seeks to support CT legitimacy and effective policing outcomes by liaising with multi-disciplinary academic researchers and are key in developing a vanguard of academic and CT partnerships.

Targeting, Testing and Tracking (Sherman, 2015) is a model where academic-style systematic analysis aids law enforcement in identifying high priority problems. This is similar to an academic inductive methodological approach initially searching for patterns in data, for example suspected terrorists’ behavioural indicators of attack preparation. Once the analysis of the behavioural indicators is completed, results are disseminated to see if tracking could be implemented. Foiled attacks would establish the impact of the findings. If they are found to be useful, a result might be implementation of a new method of detecting individuals engaging in reconnaissance for attack planning. The relationships between academia and law enforcement in using EBP such as the Targeting, Testing and Tracking model remains critical both in devising methodological approaches and interrogating incoming data.

When researchers from different disciplines such as psychology and political science work together, they must adapt and find a common language to communicate with each other. Interdisciplinarity of this sort has allowed for cross-fertilisation of research and approaches to data analysis. Research projects that might have otherwise not been undertaken could be considered in those interdisciplinary cracks and crevices (Silke, 2004). A common thread among CT academics across disciplines is the tendency to delve into the underlying reasons someone might engage in terrorism or political violence. The emphasis is to seek to understand why something is happening, how a person got to a particular point and what the triggers were for those behaviours. Academic and law enforcement collaborations similarly need to find a common language. Indeed, this is noted by Anderson (2017) though he also states that terminology is important when information is shared as academics and law enforcement may use similar words to mean different things, for example, data.

The importance of data

Fundamental to effective CT research is access to good quality and accurate data. UK policing is not currently in a position to capture accurate, measurable, and valid data sets. This means that considerable time is required to assess, identify limitations, and clean data where appropriate. Police collect most demographic data on a voluntary basis and therefore these data are often skewed and have gaps (such as ethnicity or age reporting) (Ford, 2021). The operating parameters of CT policing make it both difficult to access primary data to conduct research on suspected terrorists and assess useful secondary data contained within police databases as it is often incomplete. Accurate data is key to undertaking good quality research, and Ford’s (2021) study identified several shortcomings in how data were collected, recorded and analysed. The police service should consider how to improve data collection as this would provide better opportunities for quality research.

Even if good data are available, in intelligence community research analysts provide findings to law enforcement as finished products. This does not foster a culture where other analysts
may access and interrogate data to see if they reach the same conclusions as the original researcher. Furthermore, intelligence analysts do not always describe the analytical method used, and data often come from multiple, inconsistent sources and via different collection processes (e.g., interviews, crime reporting, witness statements) which may impact the rigour of a study. This makes it challenging to conduct analysis with the level of scrutiny that academic research mandates. Using data in this way tends to rely on the analyst’s own analytical skills, which may or may not use meticulous methodological technique, and depends on the analyst’s own interpretation of the data to draw conclusions.

From an academic standpoint, the term ‘data’ usually means empirical evidence gathered in furthering the understanding of a given research question. This is done in a standardised way, with the study having been through a university ethics committee review to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and lack of deception where possible. Academics typically expect a full description of the methods used, excerpts of the data and with increasing regularity, access to the raw data for themselves. This approach to data analysis, reporting and availability of data for interrogation are therefore at odds with CT analytical methods.

The type of CT data law enforcement and academics use are different as well. Historically much of the academic research used secondary data when researching terrorism or writing theoretical pieces on the subject (Silke, 2001); law enforcement on the other hand has access to primary data. This allows for quite different forms of analysis and the ability to draw theoretical versus more concrete conclusions. As Schuurman points out in his chapter of this book, recently there has been an increase in the use of primary data in terrorism studies with almost 60% of articles now using some form of it. This shift provides a valuable opportunity for a bridge between practitioners and academics, if data are to be shared.

In government, evidence gathering may take an unsystematic approach that drives forward a CT agenda which is at odds with the academic promotion of knowledge. For example, government data collection may involve a case study approach of gathering background information on a person of interest with some evidence to predict what sorts of actions the person might undertake. There is, however, no ethics committee or concern with protecting participants, primarily because the participants are those suspected of engaging in nefarious activities. Law enforcement will gather empirical evidence by interviewing suspects or persons who can provide information about a suspect. They may look at crime reporting or use information collected covertly. This approach of collecting primary data should broadly resonate with academics (perhaps not the covert data collection part). Both academics and law enforcement begin their research with a question to answer; for academics the question stems from findings of prior studies which helps to direct the next steps in research. For law enforcement, research questions are most often based on reporting about a suspect. However, law enforcement data collection may not be done in a way academics would consider sufficiently rigorous. Furthermore, law enforcement data are not always stored in a single database (Anderson, 2017). They may be found in regional databases which officers will need to access, search and then collate with other information about a particular suspect.

This allows for data to be broadly accessible by those in law enforcement, though they have been collected in different ways by different people and this might be problematic to meet academic data requirements. Additionally, academics are trained on various methodological and data analytic techniques which are not required for all CT analyst careers. Thus, academics could engage in a thorough analysis of the data but might not be willing to if they cannot evidence that the data were collected in an ethical and consistent manner. As Sageman (2014) points out, there are instances when the intelligence community data are sufficiently
thorough, collected in a rigorous way and credible but the community are unable to use it to its full potential due to inadequate training in data analysis. On the other hand, academics possess the skills to engage in thorough methodological data analysis though the quantity and quality of data available to them once cleaned may be insufficient to draw valuable conclusions (Knight and Keatly, 2019), partly evidencing Sageman’s ‘unbridgeable gap’ (Sageman, 2014: p. 565).

Academics endeavour to use data to target and test existing theories, or develop new theories, based on findings from rigorous research (Sherman, 2015). The findings are then shared in the academic community and beyond, including with policymakers and those in law enforcement. Academics disseminate their findings, and sometimes make available their data, so that others may scrutinise their work. Law enforcement’s goals are to bring a person to justice so providing a version of academia’s open science practices into the CT fray might lead to cooperation challenges. This is hardly surprising as many traditional organisations such as policing retain a ‘status quo bias’ (Kahneman, 2013) maintaining current practice over innovation. Even when intelligence analysts engage in strategic projects they do not typically publish and share their findings, rather they use that information to better understand how to refine their tradecraft.

A possible key to cooperation in analysis is shared trust and having a pool of academics who are security cleared to work with law enforcement researchers. This is underway in some circles and Davies (2017) argues this enhances beliefs that law enforcement research can be trusted. A focus on what academic research could do in assisting law enforcement analysis needs to be undertaken broadly. Much academic CT research takes a problem-solving approach (Al-Kassimi, 2019) which fits well with the requirements of law enforcement. Reliance on evidence and the scrutiny of that evidence by external parties is crucial. Allowing academics and external reviewers to look at raw data, support analysis and interrogate findings is essential. This approach could lead to a working partnership, albeit a one-way relationship.

There has been a convergence between insider (law enforcement) and outsider (academic) research in the context of key developments to law enforcement research and policing more generally (Davies, 2017). On the one hand, ‘outside’ law enforcement scholars are incentivised to work collaboratively with insiders as part of knowledge exchange funding schemes. On the other, the police in particular have become increasingly driven by an evidence-based approach encouraging greater analytical capabilities of insiders. This blurring of outsiders and insiders brings a series of advantages to law enforcement research, including enhancing methodological techniques, opportunities for knowledge exchange, wider dissemination of results and greater policy impact. In order to continue down this cooperative path, law enforcement needs to adopt a reflexive approach asking wider research questions than simply ‘what works’ (Davies, 2017).

**Analytical approaches**

In both academic and intelligence-focused research, a key goal is to use data to draw conclusions about an initial question. In academia, the questions could be ‘what do we notice about behaviour when people are lying’ or ‘what political ideologies lead us to suspect someone is a terrorist’. In law enforcement, we may come across similar questions but the way they are phrased might be ‘why did a suspect engage in particular behaviours’ or ‘is that a sign of terrorist activity?’ Some intelligence analysis techniques are similar to academic
research methods, but there are others that are specific to intelligence researchers. Three intelligence-specific analytic approaches are discussed here.

Intelligence cycle

A common model used in law enforcement research is called the intelligence cycle. This may also be used by military analysts, who sometimes overlap with law enforcement, especially if it comes to looking at suspected terrorist activities overseas. The intelligence cycle is more commonly used by intelligence and law enforcement agencies (e.g., FBI) than the other models and information about it is readily available online (e.g., https://www.intelligencecareers.gov/icintelligence.html). It has less psychological science behind it than the Assessment of Competing Hypotheses (described below) though is effective in delivering conclusive pieces of intelligence. There are some variations in labels used within the cycle, though most feature the same general ideas. The cycle discussed here covers the following: planning, collection, processing, analysis and dissemination. Others might use the term ‘direction’ instead of ‘planning’ or include a review component at the end. A commonality across these modules is that they are cycles, implying that intelligence analysis and research are never ending. Just like with academic research, we need to consider the data and then go back and re-assess it. It could be a political change that alters the conclusions, more refined methodological techniques or new data that had not been previously used.

The first stage in the cycle, planning, is about learning what the big questions are that need to be addressed. Unlike with academia, these are questions that are generated at high levels in law enforcement or by policymakers, including the Prime Minister or President. The questions will guide what sort of hypotheses researchers consider and will help to form a plan about how to engage in data gathering and analysis.

The second stage is collection which is similar to when academic researchers engage in data collection. Most law enforcement research questions are derived from practical topics that need answering. These could be things such as ‘why do some people follow a radicalisation pathway’ or ‘how can buildings be made more secure from terrorist threats’. In both cases, there are specific data necessary to address the research question. Some data collected will come from interviews with suspected terrorists, or they may come from physical or technical surveillance. Human sources can provide a plethora of useful information, but law enforcement needs to go through a lengthy vetting process with human sources. They also need to determine if the source could know the information and is willing to provide it or is serving as a double agent. Too often law enforcement believed a source who was not acting in good faith and sometimes this has resulted in the death of law enforcement personnel.

In addition to desk research and human intelligence provided, technical and physical surveillance comes from a range of sources. These can come from signals, such as phones or other technology. They may also come from images, such as satellites or even social media. Open sources may provide useful information in research. Much like an academic who uses discourse analysis to investigate news reporting, a law enforcement researcher might review open-source information for data about a particular threat or hot spot for terrorist activity. Neither ethics applications nor approval are needed for intelligence data collection, unlike academic work, though sometimes a request for data needs to be approved by a court.

In processing, researchers need to take the data they have collected and develop it into something useable. At one level, this means simply organising the data in a way that allows
it to be analysed. With quantitative data, it may require cleaning and depositing it into one database. With qualitative data, it might involve transcribing the data or getting it translated into the researcher’s own language. Satellite or social media data might need to be standardised such that synthesis with other pieces of data can all be put together.

Analysis in law enforcement is similar to, but encompasses more than, academic analysis. At one level, law enforcement analysis involves evaluating and analysing the data to produce a coherent picture to answer the research question. It is usually the discussion section of academic research where researchers fit their analysis into the larger research picture, linking it back to theory. For law enforcement, analysis does that but goes further; it asks for alternative explanations for the data. Is there a possibility that even though the data seem to point to X event, it could be that event Y will take place instead? In addition, rather than thinking about how the findings from the data fit into the larger theoretical picture, law enforcement researchers must think about the threat picture and if there are opportunities for intervention. This may not sit comfortably with academic researchers who are used to using their findings to contribute to knowledge. Law enforcement research is about finding the threat, warning the appropriate people, and stopping it.

Dissemination, or finished intelligence, may be thought of as having an academic paper published. The distribution list is far narrower, usually law enforcement analysts disseminate their final reports to the person who requested it and into the intelligence community. The finished product could deliver a warning about a potential threat, or it could provide technical assistance, such as how to secure bridges from potential terrorist attacks. It could simply provide information about day-to-day events, such as unrest in particular communities that might be susceptible to extremist behaviours. The information may be used to guide policy, judicial or military action; it may be used to refine the research question in which case the analyst starts on the intelligence cycle again.

Assessment of Competing Hypotheses

A well-known method amongst intelligence analysts is the Assessment of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) proposed by Richard Heuer (Heuer, 1999). It is used when people need to make decisions where an error could lead to a disastrous outcome. The goal of ACH is to lessen the risk, avoid confirmation bias and encourage critical thinking by comparison of various hypotheses.

This method allows for analysts to generate hypotheses from their research questions and to test them against the evidence available. When using ACH, the analyst needs to engage in four steps: 1) undertake a search for information/data, 2) organise the information/data to assist with its analysis, 3) analyse the data, and 4) write the findings for dissemination. Broadly speaking this matches what academic research does with the exception of step three, ‘analyse the data’. Analysing the data in ACH is the stage where the analyst uses the data to refute, rather than simply test, a hypothesis. The hypothesis that is considered to be the truth (note in ACH a hypothesis is ‘true’ whilst in academia a hypothesis is supported) is the one with the least amount of data refuting it (Heuer andPherson 2010).

Dhami, Belton and Mandel (2019) argue ACH requires the researcher to rate the data as consistent (or inconsistent) with each hypothesis, lending support to the hypothesis that has the greatest credibility as it has the least evidence against it. There is space to re-assess the hypothesis as more data become available, thereby allowing for an iterative process in hypothesis support.
The way that data are organised and presented can influence how individuals process that information (Gigerenzer and Hoffrage, 1995). In fact, most information that comes in about potential terrorist attacks is fraught with what ifs. ACH works by considering all the data against each of the hypotheses. If the data do not support the hypothesis, the hypothesis is rejected. If the data do support the hypothesis, it is retained. The researcher will continue to look for data to refute the hypothesis and if that occurs, the hypothesis may then be rejected. The hypothesis which has no data points disconfirming it is the one to be considered the truthful hypothesis (in intelligence terms), so a law enforcement team use it to proceed with their operation.

Analytical judgement is crucial in ACH; decisions about rejection and acceptance of hypotheses is based on numerical totals of data supporting each hypothesis, which is in turn based largely on an analyst’s judgement. Further, it requires analysts to consider every piece of data in order to reject or continue to accept hypotheses. This is time consuming and potentially ignores some context around the data, which could help elucidate whether it supports or rejects hypotheses. ACH might be problematic then if there is a reliable terrorist threat and answers are needed rapidly.

PESTEL Model

Several police forces employ randomised control trials to evaluate the outcomes of academic research undertaken within policing. The opportunity to evaluate academic rigour to policing operations is broadly welcomed by law enforcement agencies that uses several planning frameworks to assess strategic objectives. The PESTEL model (Frue, 2017) was originally developed by Francis J. Aguilar in 1964 and involves the collection and portrayal of information about external factors which have, or may have, an impact on law enforcement objectives. It is an analysis of the political, economic, social and technological factors in the external environment of an organisation, which can affect its activities and performance. However, the model is not without its limitations as it does not consider the internal factors of policing and is used to explore its listed factors externally rather than internally. So, if an organisation uses the model in isolation, the analysis will not provide an opportunity to match organisational strengths to existing requirements. Some PESTEL users oversimplify the amount of data used for decisions as it is easy to use insufficient data. The risk of capturing too much data may lead to 'paralysis by analysis'. The data used may be based on assumptions that later prove to be unfounded.

More recently, development and application of the National Decision Model (College of Policing, 2013) by UK law enforcement agencies focuses on building an information and intelligence picture to determine activity underpinned by a defined Code of Ethics. The key to effective outcome evaluation is the academic rigour to the research proposal and methodology that is applied. Utilising systematic and meta-analytic techniques enables effective scrutiny of qualitative and quantitative research design and assures a high-quality review of material.

Conclusion

We started this chapter by exploring the collaborative approaches between academics and CT analysts, recognising existing limitations to enhancing partnerships. Those early EBP trailblazers such as Sherman have empowered an effective route to strengthen and progress further collaboration. As society moves towards the use of data hubs, analysis of big data and innovative scientific research to provide solutions to CT strategy, there remains a clear case
for further collaboration between academics and CT law enforcement. The rise of EBP as a model in which CT organisations can access the best possible research to deliver strong operational and strategic outcomes is compelling. Increased awareness amongst senior law enforcement decision makers of underpinning decision-making processes with a sound research-based approach leads to enhanced internal and external legitimacy and secures credible responses to the external scrutiny of associated policy and policing tactics.

Collaborative law enforcement and academic work is already established, and new CT researchers are in a good space to further this work. Academics have the skills and methodological knowledge but need to learn the law enforcement side. Linking with existing law enforcement-academic research frameworks will further strengthen collaboration. For example, at Arizona State University the Centre of Problem-Orientated Policing has been developed. The University of Michigan supports an Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research and at George Mason University, the Centre for Evidence-Based Crime Policy is focused on applying scientific research to policing policy. Law enforcement needs to be made aware of the value academics can bring to policing, especially as there is greater and greater emphasis on EBP academic research groups. The key to good law enforcement research is not only the collection of data but rigorous analysis and of telling the story associated with those data.

Ensuring a consistent and applied approach requires persistence and buy in from all parties. It may be realised through improved familiarisation of what works and the opportunity to research emerging and topical issues, resolving the question often posed by senior law enforcement professionals of ‘so what?’. Through highlighting the mutual benefits of access to enhanced targeted research and to rich sources of data for both CT law enforcement and academics, we collectively may focus with precision on delivering an approach that both informs and protects society from the worst that terrorism intends.

References


It should be noted that critical terrorism studies (CTS) researchers may be opposed to this kind of collaboration. Please see the CTS chapter by Achieng, et al in this book for a full discussion.