

# Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative

## *Identifying Suspicious Activities from the Extremist Crime Database and the American Terrorism Study*

### OVERVIEW

The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI) is a standardized process that includes stakeholder outreach, privacy protections, training, and facilitation of technology for the purpose of identifying and reporting terrorism-related suspicious activity in jurisdictions across the country. This study was undertaken to validate the NSI by comparing pre-incident activities of terrorists and violent criminal extremists in the United States to the 16 SAR categories or “SAR indicators” that are criminal in nature and those that require additional information or investigation before they can be determined to be criminal in nature:

Non-Criminal Activity/Further Investigation Required: Weapons Discovery; Materials Acquisition/Storage; Acquisition of Expertise; Observation/Surveillance; Recruiting; Photography; Eliciting Information; and Testing of Security.

Criminal Activity/Terrorism Nexus: Expressed or Implied Threat; Sabotage/Tampering/Vandalism; Misrepresentation; Theft/Loss/Diversion; Breach/Attempted Intrusion; Cyberattack; and Aviation Activity.

Data on terrorism cases and associated SAR indicators come from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS), two open-source terrorism projects supported in part by START. A total of 351 cases were examined. The cases ranged in date from 1972 to 2013. Although most incidents occurred in the United States, several occurred abroad, and the ones in the United States were perpetrated by those having both domestic and international ideologies.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Pre-incident activities occurring prior to acts of terrorism crimes do often align with existing SAR indicators.
- SAR indicators with the highest prevalence were weapons discovery, materials acquisition/storage, expressed or implied threats, and observation/surveillance.
- Many of the indicators were observable prior to terrorist attacks, and some indicators were observed by the public.
- Although several non-SAR activities emerged, none of these patterns rose to the level of necessitating a new type of SAR indicator.

### FINDINGS FROM THE EXTREMIST CRIME DATABASE (ECDB)

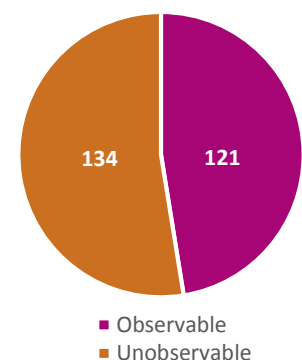
In the 48 terrorism cases that were selected for the study, a total of 255 pre-incident SAR indicators were identified.

- 47 percent of the identified indicators (121 of 255) were classified as observable.
- 59 percent (72 of 121) of the observable indicators were actually observed/reported.

Weapons discovery, materials acquisition/storage, acquisition of expertise, and observation/surveillance accounted for 57 percent of the observable noncriminal SAR indicators.

Observable non-criminal SAR indicators, or indicators that require additional information before they can be determined to be criminal in nature, were only observed 45 percent of the time, while observable criminal SAR indicators were observed almost 90 percent of the time.

Identified SAR Indicators



### FINDINGS FROM THE AMERICAN TERRORISM STUDY (ATS)

In the 303 terrorism cases studied, 2,541 precursor behaviors were identified; 80 percent (2,032) of the identified pre-incident indicators aligned with one of the 16 SAR indicators.

Just seven SAR indicators accounted for 79 percent (2,011 of 2,541) of the overall precursor behaviors of the 303 cases:

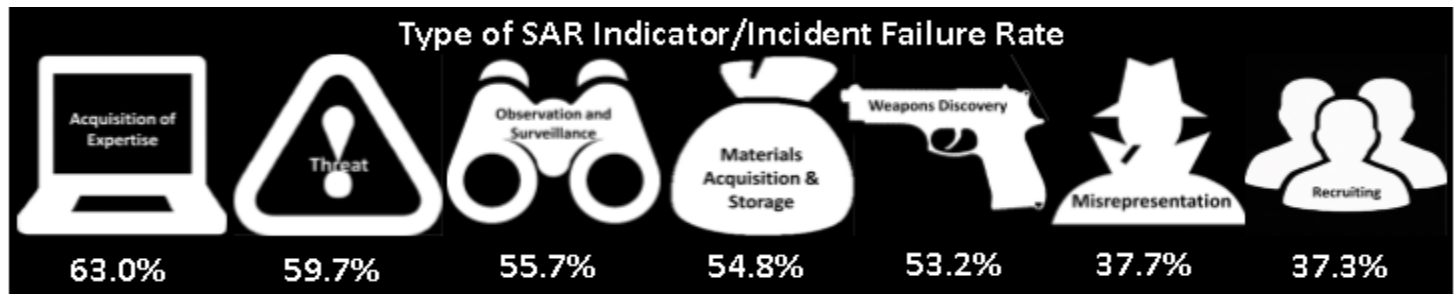
- Materials acquisition (497)
- Weapons acquisition (380)
- Threat (374)
- Misrepresentation (334)
- Acquiring expertise (196)
- Surveillance (160)
- Recruiting (70)

99 percent (2,011 of 2,032) of the SAR pre-incident activities identified in the study align with one of the aforementioned seven most commonly identified indicators.

20 percent (509 of 2,541) of the identified pre-incident activities associated with the 303 terrorism cases were not classified as an SAR indicator.

- The majority of the 509 non-SAR activities involved three types of actions: meetings; other forms of communication, such as e-mails and phone calls; and travel.
- The study characterized the 509 non-SAR activities as those that are typically noncriminal and tend to occur most often in the early stages of planning.

Terrorists who engage in the following five SAR activities are significantly less likely to complete the planned terrorist incident: materials acquisition, weapons acquisition, threat prior to incident, expertise acquisition, and surveillance.



## METHOD

The ECDB collects information on violent and financial crimes committed by ideologically motivated extremists in the United States since 1990. All extremist crimes included in the ECDB involve illegal activities that were investigated by law enforcement and involve one or more offenders that were arrested or killed during an extremist attack. The ECDB research team selected 48 terrorism from its database that include ideologically motivated homicides, arsons, bombings, and failed or foiled terrorism plots. All terrorist cases involve those associated with ideologies of the extreme far-right (e.g., anti-government extremists, anti-abortionists, white supremacists) (n=18), the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front (ELF/ALF) (n=13), or al-Qa’ida and affiliated movements (AQAM) (n=17). Linked to terrorism cases are data on 255 pre-incident activities also gathered from open-source materials. The team then identified and coded pre-incident activities from available materials that could fit within the 16 SAR indicators. Attempts were also made to identify additional behaviors that were reported in the open-source and occurred prior to the completion of the act or the offender’s arrest, but did not fit within one of the 16 SAR categories. Those interested in learning more about the how the ECDB was built and its reliability should see:

- 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
- Chermak, S.M., J.D. Freilich, W. Parkin & J.P. Lynch. 2012. American terrorism and extremist crime data sources and selectivity bias: An investigation focusing on homicide events committed by far-right extremists. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 28(1): 191-218

The ATS provides a record of federal criminal cases associated with an indictment in federal criminal court as a result of an FBI investigation for “terrorism or terrorism-related activities” from 1980 to the present. The ATS research team examined 303 terrorism cases that may involve any type of crime that was investigated by the FBI as terrorism (e.g., bombings, hijackings, assassinations, armed assaults, etc.). Included terrorism cases involve members of the extreme far-left (n=56), extreme far-right (n=90), the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front (ELF/ALF) (n=89), al-Qa’ida and affiliated movements (AQAM) (n=57), and those terrorists primarily concerned with a single-issue (e.g., abortion provision) (n=11). In total, there were 2,541 pre-incident activities identified from federal court records and media documents associated with those cases. The research team then coded for whether existing data on pre-incident activity fit into one or more of the existing 16 SAR categories and searched open-source court records and other materials for additional activities not currently coded in the ATS database.

## RESEARCH TEAM

**Jeff Gruenewald**, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas  
**William S. Parkin**, Department Criminal Justice, Seattle University  
**Brent L. Smith**, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas  
**Steven M. Chermak**, School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University  
**Joshua D. Freilich**, Doctoral Program in Criminal Justice, John Jay College, CUNY  
**Paxton Roberts**, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas  
**Brent Klein**, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas.

The full report is available at:  
[http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_V\\_alidationofNationwideSARInitiative\\_Feb2015.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_V_alidationofNationwideSARInitiative_Feb2015.pdf)

Questions about this report can be directed to William Braniff at [braniff@start.umd.edu](mailto:braniff@start.umd.edu)



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