# The Mobilization Puzzle: How Individual, Group, and Situational Dynamics Produce Extremist Outcomes

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## About This Report

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## About START

Established in 2005 as U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence led by the University of Maryland, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) uses state-of-the-art theories, methods, and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics, and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

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## Executive Summary

This study introduces a new data resource, the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States-Plots (PIRUS-Plots) dataset, that builds on previous NIJ investments in the PIRUS and Social Networks of American Radicals (SoNAR) datasets. PIRUS-Plots introduces new variables related to successful, failed, foiled, and nebulous extremist plots in the United States for 1,433 ideologically motivated crimes that occurred between 1990 and 2021. The new variables introduced in PIRUS-Plots cover:

1. *Event-level* details, such as the dates and locations of the plots, the type of plot (financial crime, property crime, low casualty plot, or mass casualty plot), the number of people involved in a plot, target information, weapon information, and casualties.
2. *Preparatory actions* taken by perpetrators, including variables measuring the presence of the Department of Homeland Security's Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative indicators.
3. *Outcome* details about the plots, including whether the plots were successful, failed, or foiled.
4. *Law enforcement engagement* details, including interdiction strategies and information about when and how law enforcement became aware of the plots.
5. *Arrests and criminal proceedings*, which contain information about the criminal charges, convictions, plea agreements, and, if applicable, raids related to plots in the database.

The new PIRUS-Plots dataset is designed to be used in conjunction with PIRUS and SoNAR, and contains plot ID, subject ID, and network ID keys that enable querying all three datasets as a relational database.

Our primary motivation in designing PIRUS-Plots was to provide a robust set of variables across multiple domains (the *event* or plot-level, the *subject* or perpetrator level, and the *social network* level) so that distinct radicalization and mobilization pathways can be observed, modeled, and understood. We also provide disaggregated information about the type of plots that goes beyond the non-violent/violent distinction to include observations about whether a plot was strictly non-violent, a low casualty plot, or a mass casualty plot. Crucially, we also introduce a control category that is missing from most terrorism research: plots that involved nebulous

threats but never resulted in actual mobilization. By disaggregating observations about plot types in this way, we enable scholars and practitioners to study and understand how risk factors, protective factors, social networks, and law enforcement strategies vary across different plot types, determining which plots ultimately succeed and which fail.

**Key Findings**

*Plot trends*

- The rate of mass casualty plots—those designed to kill or injure four or more people—have surged in recent years and now represent the most common type of terrorist plot in the United States.
- Mass casualty plots are unique from other types of extremist crimes in terms of perpetrators, weapons and targets, and mobilization behaviors.
    - They are most likely to be perpetrated by individuals acting alone or as members of small, isolated cliques.
    - They typically involve the use of firearms against civilian "soft" targets.
    - They often involve the expression of a threat prior to the attack, the use of the internet and social media for attack planning and preparation, and the acquisition of firearms, but they rarely involve other mobilization behaviors, such as testing security, photographing potential targets, or attempted intrusions into secure facilities.
- The average extremist only participates in one premeditated violent or non-violent plot, but those who do commit more than one extremist crime tend to be connected to the domestic far-right.
- The success rate of terrorist plots has fallen from a high of 48.4% in the 1990s to a low of 25.4% in the most recent decade.
- The most common way law enforcement become aware of terrorist plots, including those that seek to cause mass casualties, is through bystander reporting, the use of informants, and through separate criminal investigations.
- Those who do succeed in committing violent attacks are most likely to be associated with the domestic far-right, particularly white supremacist movements.

*Who mobilizes?*

- Individuals who radicalize as part of a clique are 5.5 times as likely to mobilize to violent (i.e., low casualty or mass casualty) crimes compared to individuals who make nebulous threats but do not mobilize.
- Younger individuals are more likely to mobilize to low casualty and mass casualty crimes compared to those who only make threats but never mobilize.
- Extremists from the domestic far-left, such as anarchists and environmental/animal rights extremists, are more likely to mobilize to non-violent crime, whereas white supremacists and jihadist extremists are more likely to mobilize to violence. Xenophobic/nativist

extremists are more likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes compared to low casualty crimes.

- Subjects with military backgrounds are nearly 2.5 times as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes compared to non-violent crimes, and 1.9 times as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes compared to low casualty crimes.
- Lone offenders are more than twice as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes.

*What does mobilization look like?*

- Correspondence analysis shows that those who mobilize to property crimes are distinguished by their acquisition and assembly of weapons, their surveillance of targets, acquisition of identification documents, acquiring expertise for their plots, and testing security at their targets.
- Public justifications for the use of violence and misrepresentation separate low casualty plots from both mass casualty and non-violent plots.
- Expressing or implying threats distinguishes both low and mass casualty plots from non-violent plots, suggesting that this indicator is useful for separating violent from non-violent offenders.
- Mass casualty plots are distinguished from low casualty plots by eliciting information, foreign support, weapons collection/discovery, materials acquisition, and the use of the internet and social media for plot planning.

*Who succeeds?*

- Overall, most plots—70%—fail.
- Plots committed by perpetrators with denser network connections are more likely to succeed.
- Plots in which a perpetrator acquires a weapon are close to 10 times more likely to succeed, and plots against soft targets are 200% more likely to succeed.
- Plots involving perpetrators who express threats or engage in recruitment are sizably and significantly less likely to succeed, as are plots involving difficult to acquire weapons or hard targets (82% less likely).
- Law enforcement interdiction strategies, such as the presence of an informant or the collection of bystander tips, both reduce the likelihood of plot success by over 90%.

## Introduction

It took the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and, more importantly, the four coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, to produce substantial interest in research into counterterrorism. In the past two decades, the situation has changed dramatically. Scholars have made major gains in promoting an evidence-based understanding of violent political extremism (for reviews, see Jensen, forthcoming; LaFree & Freilich, 2016). Most notably, researchers have successfully modeled radicalization trajectories that more accurately reflect the real-world experiences of extremists by treating the phenomenon as a set of complex causal configurations and pathways (e.g., Fahey & Simi, 2019; Horgan, 2008; Jensen, Seate, & James, 2018; Ravndal, 2018). This analytical evolution has been supported by data and methodological advancements in the field of terrorism studies that have made it possible to more evenly align ontology and methodology in the study of political violence. However, despite these advances, some observers remain critical of the current state of terrorism studies, and radicalization research in particular (King & Taylor, 2011; Monahan, 2017; Sageman, 2014; Schuurman, 2018; Schuurman & Eijkman, 2013; Silke, 2001; Silke, 2009). In a recent assessment, renowned terrorism expert, Marc Sageman (2014), concludes that extremism research is a stagnate field of inquiry that has failed to produce insights that are useful to counterterrorism professionals. Sageman (2014: 565) goes as far as to suggest that "we are no closer to answering the simple question of 'What leads a person to turn to political violence?'" than we were 40 years ago.

While we believe that this critique overlooks much of the recent knowledge accumulation in terrorism studies, the ability of current research to inform terrorism prevention, intervention, and interdiction efforts has been slowed by at least three problems. First, most studies of

radicalization lack control groups, focusing instead on only the most violent and successful extremists (e.g., Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013a, 2013b; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Pape, 2005; Sageman, 2004). This research has done a great deal to advance our understanding of the etiology of terrorism, but its generalizability is limited by the exclusion of extremists who pursued non-violent aims and especially by overlooking perpetrators who failed to achieve their goals. Simply, radicalization research is too often based on cases that may not represent the typical extremist who will be encountered by law enforcement officials or prevention practitioners.

Second, despite repeated warnings from the research community about conceptual misspecification in radicalization research, the majority of terrorism scholarship continues to conflate radicalization and mobilization, implicitly or explicitly assuming that they are conceptually identical or that one naturally follows the other (Borum, 2011; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Neumann, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010). But as more research energy has been directed at understanding terrorism, there has been acknowledgment of the need to treat complex issues like radicalization in a more conceptually sophisticated manner. For instance, in the first edition of their influential book *Friction* (2011), Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko identify 12 different pathways into terrorism, but spend little time distinguishing between radicalization and mobilization. However, in the second edition of the book, published only six years later (2017), the authors presented a "two-pyramid model," recognizing that radicalization and mobilization are conceptually distinct. McCauley and Moskalenko (2017:5) sum up the importance of the distinction by noting that while millions of individuals may sympathize with a goal being promoted by a terrorist organization, only one in a thousand will act on this support. While law enforcement and counterterrorism officials are mainly concerned about this small

group who will mobilize to commit extremist crimes, much of the radicalization research to date has instead concentrated on explaining the processes by which individuals and groups increasingly commit themselves to extremist ideologies. Mobilization, which typically refers to the processes by which individuals and groups move from intent to the preparatory steps that are required to commit terrorist attacks (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018), involves more than the presence of violence justifying views. And while radicalization and mobilization are sometimes intimately linked, they need not be. Indeed, the link between having an attachment to extremist beliefs and committing an act of terrorism is often weaker than most may assume (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Horgan, 2012; Khalil, 2014; Pew, 2011).

And finally, as Sutherland noted over 70 years ago (1947:5), to fully understand behavioral outcomes, including deviant or illegal ones, it is necessary to have data on both the individual and the situation. As research on terrorism has progressed, researchers have devised more inclusive models, but much of the most influential existing research on the pathways into terrorism has not included situational variables (e.g., Gill et al., 2014; Gruenewald et al., 2013a; Webber & Kruglanski, 2017). We can achieve a more complete understanding of extremist mobilization by examining not only the individual and social characteristics that motivate people to act, but also the capabilities, knowledge, and situational dynamics that make action possible. Armed with more inclusive models, we can also do a better job of forecasting which individuals are prepared to cause the most harm.

These three problems are not simply a barrier to academic progress. They are shortcomings that have important implications for law enforcement and criminal justice professionals. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is currently expending massive resources to keep more than 2,000 domestic and 1,000 international terrorism investigations open, even

though many of these cases will never result in mobilization outcomes (Wolfe, 2021). The ability to efficiently work through and resolve extremism investigations is in part hindered by a knowledge deficiency when it comes to the factors that constitute mobilization risk. Similarly, criminal justice officials are grappling with an unprecedented number of extremist offenders being released from U.S. prisons, and as Monahan (2017) has forcefully argued, extant research has provided them little guidance on how best to gauge the risk of recidivism or how to appropriately build and implement reintegration strategies (Morton & Silber, 2018).

The project detailed in this report begins to address these shortcomings. We aimed to model mobilization and terrorism outcomes as the interaction between individual characteristics, social networks, and event-level situational opportunities for action. To do this, we built on two existing databases—Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS; see Jensen et al., 2016) and the Social Networks of American Radicals (SoNAR)—to create a relational database that links the radicalization characteristics of nearly 2,000 U.S. extremists and their social networks to the mobilization dynamics of their violent and non-violent plots. Linking PIRUS and SoNAR to this new dataset on extremist plots allowed us to address the lack of control groups in radicalization research by performing analyses that include mobilized and non-mobilized subjects, violent and non-violent extremists, and successful and unsuccessful attackers. Furthermore, we are able to model mobilization trajectories in a way that shows how individual and group-level characteristics interact with event-level context, such as knowledge accumulation, financing, weapons availability, and target characteristics, to explain who mobilizes to violence, what that mobilization looks like, and importantly, who succeeds.

This report proceeds in six sections. First, we review the previous literature on extremist mobilization and provide the justification for creating a new dataset on extremist plots. We also

discuss the goals of this project. Second, we describe the inclusion criteria and data collection methodology that were used to construct the PIRUS-Plots dataset. Third, we provide an overview of the events in the PIRUS-Plots data, focusing on plot types, mobilization behaviors, and outcomes. Fourth, we provide results from a series of logistic regressions models that explain who mobilizes and to what types of crimes. Fifth, we analyze why some plots succeed while others fail using key concepts from Routine Activities Theory (RAT). Finally, we conclude with the policy implications of our work.

## Previous Research and Project Goals

There is perhaps no area of inquiry in the field of terrorism studies that has grown more in recent years than research on radicalization. This rapid growth has greatly advanced our knowledge about the causes of political extremism (for a review, see LaFree & Freilich, 2017). That said, very few radicalization studies have been designed to include comparison groups and high dimensional data. For example, we are unaware of any studies of violent extremism that include the full-range of ideologies, non-violent or immobilized extremist reference groups, and systematically collected large-n individual, group, and event-level data. Perhaps most importantly, very few studies make a conceptual or analytical distinction between radicalization and mobilization. Below we review the current state of the literature on radicalization, paying particular attention to studies that have attempted to explain mobilization by referencing individual and group characteristics, and those which have compared non-violent and violent extremists and successful and unsuccessful plots.

### "No Variation" Research Designs in the Study of Political Extremism

There has been explosive growth in research on radicalization in recent years, which has resulted in an ever-expanding list of mechanisms believed to be associated with political

extremism. In 2014, Gill, Horgan, and Deckert identified over 100 radicalization indicators in the literature and the list has surely grown in the years since. However, despite the accumulation of knowledge, the limitations of research on radicalization indicators are well documented (Borum, 2015; Gill, 2015; Monahan, 2012, 2017; Sarma, 2017; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). Scholars have highlighted issues stemming from the low base rates of terrorist offending, the ubiquity of common risk factors in the general population, and the conflation of various terrorist roles into a single extremist behavior. However, we note that few studies have overcome what we identified above as a paramount obstacle in the study of extremist mobilization: the lack of adequate control groups in empirical assessments of extremism. In fact, with some notable exceptions (Chermak, Freilich, & Suttmoeller, 2013; Jensen et al., 2018; Lafree et al., 2018; Becker, 2021; Holt et al., 2018; Jaskoski et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2022; Schuurman, 2020; Schuurman & Carthy, 2023), the most influential studies of radicalization have focused solely on the entry processes and behaviors of violent extremists (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013a, 2013b; Kruglanski et al., 2009; Pape, 2005; Sageman, 2004). As others have pointed out, the lack of control groups in most studies of extremism weakens the robustness of research findings and significantly limits their generalizability beyond the immediate subjects under investigation (Bloom, 2009).

**Assessments of Extremist Mobilization**

Early efforts to examine the characteristics associated with criminal offending date back to at least the 1920s when Bruce et al. (1928) studied the records of 3,000 former inmates of the Illinois prison system and identified 22 variables that distinguished those who committed new crimes while on parole from those who did not. The risk assessment tool Bruce et al. (1928) derived from their study was later implemented to help criminal justice professionals make

informed decisions on parole terms in the state prison system. Similar risk assessment tools have been developed and adopted throughout the United States in the decades since, helping researchers and practitioners measure the likelihood of criminal reoffending, as well as make informed decisions about release conditions and sentencing.

Comparable efforts to model the risks of extremist offending have a relatively shorter history yet have seen a great deal of progress over the past 15 years (Borum, 2015; Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling, & Hoggan, 2017; Gill, 2015; Monahan, 2012, 2017; Sarma, 2017; Schuurman & Taylor, 2018). Initial efforts to understand extremist offenders were based on relatively simple models that often conflated the cognitive aspects of radicalization with the behavioral pathways of mobilization. For example, an influential study by Moghaddam (2005) conceptualized radicalization as an ever-narrowing staircase, where each step endows individuals with a greater commitment to violence justifying views. Such steps include the perception of unjust treatment as part of an identified group, the identification of an out-group, and the moral justification for violence. However, mobilization was not systematically analyzed in this staircase model. Rather it was assumed to co-occur with an individual's increasingly extreme views. Other linear models of radicalization, such as Silber and Bhatt's (2007) famous NYPD model or McCauley and Moskalenko's (2008) early work on pathways to radicalization, also downplayed the relationship between radicalization and mobilization.

Over time, researchers have begun to distinguish radicalization and mobilization, and we are gradually seeing a more nuanced portrayal of the processes that lead individuals and groups to adopt extremist views and engage in extremist behaviors. Most notably, recent research has abandoned linear process models in favor of treating radicalization and mobilization as complex causal pathways (Fahey & Simi, 2019; Horgan, 2008; Jensen et al., 2018; Ravndal, 2018).

Moreover, researchers have acknowledged that the links between extremist beliefs and behaviors are often not straightforward. Indeed, it is generally agreed that most individuals who adopt extremist views will never mobilize on their behalf (Horgan, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011). Others may mobilize to commit extremist acts without deep commitments to political ideologies (Horgan, 2012). Thus, there is a growing recognition in the radicalization literature that mobilization must be treated as a separate phenomenon from the adoption of extreme views.

Yet, despite these advances, it is surprisingly difficult to find empirical studies of extremism that keep mobilization conceptually and analytically distinct from the radicalization indicators that make individuals receptive to extremist views. Take, for example, Kruglanski et al.'s (2009; 2014) influential thesis on the quest for personal significance and violent extremism. The researchers emphasize key cognitive conditions as contributing factors to mobilization, including ideological commitment, personal honor, and morality salience. While undoubtedly important contributors to extremist violence, these cognitive variables are present in the backgrounds of countless individuals who will never mobilize to commit acts of terrorism. This is true of other studies that link individual-level cognitive and background characteristics to extremist outcomes. For example, Kleinmann's (2012) study of 83 U.S. jihadist extremists found that cognitive factors, such as mental health issues, histories of abuse and neglect, past traumatic experiences, and factors related to identity were often precursors to mobilization. The crucial point is that while these cognitive and background characteristics may be important contributors to individuals' adoption of violence-justifying views, and perhaps even their willingness to engage in extremist acts, they do not actually address the processes by which extremists mobilize from intent to action.

Much of the research on violent extremism to date has conflated radicalization and mobilization. For example, Slootman and Tillie (2006) identify 20 demographic (e.g., young, male, first generation immigrant), socioeconomic (e.g., employment, income, household size), socio-cultural (e.g., measures of acceptance in one's community, community cohesiveness), and attitudinal (e.g., attitude toward democracy, local political participation, religious beliefs) factors that lead to extremist mobilization, but do not provide an explanation for why some of these ideologically-engaged extremists actually commit violent acts on behalf of their beliefs. This approach is also common in studies that specifically look at how terrorist groups recruit individuals to commit attacks. In one example, Gerwehr and Daly's (2006) assessment of al-Qaeda recruitment strategies include key mobilization factors that are primarily derived from prior studies of cult behavior. These include cultural disillusionment, emotional distress, lack of an intrinsic religious or value system, weak family ties, and certain personality traits, such as suggestibility or the tendency to think in black-and-white terms. Again, these may be important factors for understanding why some individuals are susceptible to extremist ideologies, but they certainly do not explain all aspects of extremist mobilization.

**Comparing Violent and Non-Violent Extremists**

Another key to solving the mobilization puzzle involves designing research that appreciates the diversity in the types of mobilization that typically occur in the extremist space. While most terrorism research in recent years has focused solely on individuals and groups who mobilized to violence, a few recent studies have compared these extremists to those who mobilized to non-violent outcomes. For example, LaFree and colleagues (2018) analyzed a sample of nearly 1,500 U.S.-based extremists from the PIRUS dataset who engaged in non-violent and violent extremist crimes to identify the characteristics that separate the two groups. In their sample, non-violent

extremist mobilization included acts that were still criminal in nature but did not involve or intend violence against people (e.g., financial support to terrorist groups, "paper terrorism" tactics, weapons charges, etc.). They found that individuals with previous criminal history, membership in small groups of peers, and evidence of mental illness were significantly more likely to engage in acts of violent extremism than without those characteristics. Likewise, they found that individuals with a history of stable employment were significantly less likely to do so. Similarly, Jensen, Atwell Seate, and James (2018) analyzed 50 life-course narratives of violent and non-violent extremists based in the U.S. to identify sufficient pathways for extremist violence. Specifically, they found two key conditions, a shift in individual cognitive frames and the perception of a community crisis, to act as necessary conditions which distinguish violent from non-violent extremists. These conditions further combine with a host of emotional, psychological, material, and group-based mechanisms to form eight pathways to violent mobilization, with many pathways containing elements of strong group biases and psychological rewards for engaging in violence.

Significantly more research has been conducted at the organizational level of analysis, whereby social movement scholars have compared violent and non-violent organizations in an attempt to understand collective mobilization. External factors like competition within and among groups and movements are often cited as key mechanisms driving organizations (or factions of organizations) towards violent tactics (della Porta, 2013; Tarrow, 2011). Internally, group characteristics, such as racist or religiously motivated ideologies (Asal et al., 2016; Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008), operational competencies (Asal & Rethemeyer 2008), large membership, and decentralized leadership (Asal et al. 2016), have been linked to violent mobilization among groups. In contrast, organizations that fail to mobilize to violence often do so in an effort to build

strategic alliances, advance goals through institutional means, or avoid state repression (Busher et al., 2019; della Porta, 2013; Simi & Windisch, 2018).

While these studies of violent and non-violent individuals and groups have greatly advanced our knowledge of varied behavioral outcomes, extant research has not systematically studied how the interaction of individual characteristics and group dynamics impacts mobilization risk. The work discussed below offers a way to empirically test how these factors work in tandem to mobilize extremists to violence in some instances but not others.

**Mobilization and the Outcomes of Extremist Plots**

In addition to paying more attention to non-violent extremists, we stand to gain important insights into extremist mobilization by considering the situational dynamics that make action possible. Indeed, many of the answers to 'who mobilizes?' or 'who is successful in committing extremist acts?' may very well lie in how knowledge is transferred between individuals and groups, how incentives spark action, how weapons are acquired, and what targets are selected. There has been considerable work on the nature of extremist plots, their preparatory stages, and their outcomes, but none of these studies have been combined with the full range of group and individual variables to explain mobilization. For example, Klein, Gruenewald, and Smith (2017) utilized data from the American Terrorism Study to examine the impact of opportunity, group structure, and temporally patterned precursor activities in 88 far-right terrorist incidents in the United States from 1980 to 2002. Their study included a robust set of event-level variables for assessing plot success, including target vulnerability and attractiveness, weapon type, whether the perpetrators were acting as lone actors or as a group, and the number of "preparatory acts" prior to the event being carried out. Perhaps not surprisingly, they found that successful attacks tend to involve targets that are more vulnerable, lone actors, and conventional weaponry.

However, their study was limited by its exclusive focus on far-right extremists and its lack of information about individual perpetrators and their capabilities.

In a comparable study, Crenshaw et al. (2017) analyzed 121 terrorist plots directed against the United States and 314 non-U.S. plots between 1993 and 2017. They found that 82% of the U.S. plots were partially or totally foiled and most of the foiled plots were stopped through government surveillance or informants. While the Crenshaw et al. (2017) research was a significant contribution to our understanding of plot success, the depth of their data on the individuals and networks was limited and they examined only jihadi-inspired attacks. Further, Crenshaw et al.'s (2017) study critically lacked data on individuals' behaviors during the mobilization process, such as actions included in the Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) system.

In another recent study, Strom et al. (2016) analyzed 150 completed and foiled terrorist plots against the United States from 1995 to 2012. They found that the United States has been more successful at thwarting terrorist plots in the years since 9/11 than compared to the six years prior. They provide a list of activities engaged in by police and investigators (e.g., undercover work, precursor crimes) and link these to whether plots were executed or foiled. However, as with the Crenshaw et al. research, the Strom et al. study lacks specific data on the individuals and networks involved in these plots, although it does include the method of plot discovery and SAR behaviors observed during the planning stage.

Dahl (2011) examined 176 failed and thwarted terrorist plots against the United States from 1987 through 2010, focusing on analyzing the roles of intelligence officers and law enforcement officials in disrupting plots. This study challenges the popularly held notion of intelligence failure—that is, terrorist attacks succeed because of an inability to "connect the dots" prior to an

attack occurring. Rather, Dahl (2011) contends that attacks are most often foiled because officials have access to precise, tactical information, often derived from human sources, about terrorists' activities during the planning stage. However, Dahl (2011) does not include successful plots in his analysis to serve as a valid comparison sample (i.e., selection on the dependent variable). Also like the studies mentioned above, Dahl's (2011) study also has limited data on perpetrator-level factors, which we argue are essential to forming a complete assessment of mobilization risk.

Notably, some recent studies have begun to integrate more perpetrator-level data with plot-level data to examine the various dimensions of success and failure in terrorist attacks. In an examination of 57 thwarted mass homicide events between 1993 and 2014, Sarteschi (2016) gathered data on terrorist offenders including their age, gender, mental health concerns, and references to infamous mass shooters, as well as event-level information, such as target type and types of weapons acquired. She found support for the importance of members of the community close to the perpetrator (i.e., friends and family) in uncovering plots before they could be carried out. However, Sarteschi's (2016) data did not allow for a robust examination of how such factors may relate to attacks that are ultimately successful. Gruenewald et al. (2016) examined dimensions of successful and unsuccessful violent plots perpetrated by jihadist terrorists in the United States from 1990 to 2014. While their study did not include information on the investigative strategies of law enforcement and intelligence agencies and how those strategies impacted success rates of plots in their data, and is further limited to only jihadist cases, their study is a significant contribution to the field in that it complements plot-level information with basic information on the perpetrators involved, including demographic measures and whether

participants in the plots received any tactical training that may have increased their capability to carry out successful attacks.

**Event Datasets and Extremist Mobilization**

A substantial barrier to analyzing extremist mobilization using the appropriate measures and comparison groups lies in the lack of high dimensional data on individuals, networks, and extremist events. Although there has been substantial growth in the availability of event-level data related to extremist crimes and terrorist attacks in recent years, there currently is not a dataset available to researchers that allows them to analyze extremist mobilization using the full spectrum of relevant causal variables, antecedent actions, ideological affiliations, and event outcomes. For example, while the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB; see Freilich et al., 2014) relates U.S. extremists to their associated events, it only includes a limited number of crimes (homicides and financial crimes), does not contain network information, and is not publicly available. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD; see LaFree & Dugan, 2007) does not include foiled plots or information about terrorist offenders and does not contain information about the preparatory stages of terrorist attacks. The American Terrorism Study (ATS; see Smith & Damphouse, 2007) only includes individuals and events that resulted in federal indictments from FBI investigations. Furthermore, it does not contain network information and its most recent updates are not publicly available. The Failed, Foiled, and Successful Plots Project (Crenshaw et al., 2017) only includes information on jihadist plots, does not include individual or network data, and is not publicly available. Finally, the Terrorism and Extremist Violence in the United States (TEVUS; see TEVUS Portal, 2017) project, which attempts to integrate GTD, ECDB, and ATS data, is not available in a structured format, only includes plots that were foiled by the FBI

and resulted in a federal indictment, and it is limited in the amount of individual-level data that it provides on extremist perpetrators.

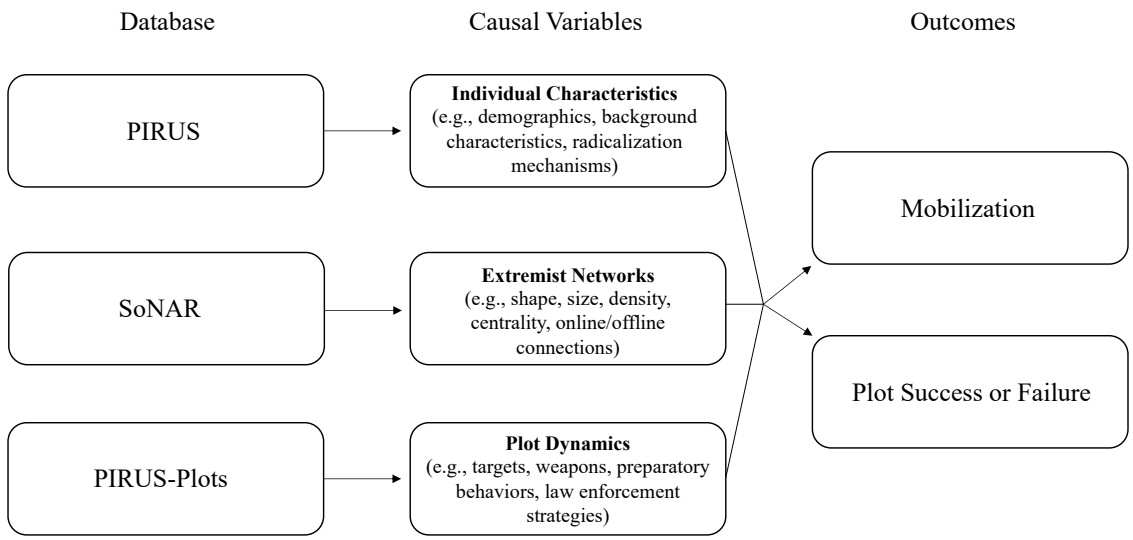
In recent years, researchers have begun to examine the success of efforts aimed at countering terrorism, with a specific focus on detecting and responding to the mobilization of extremist perpetrators (Dahl, 2014; Jonathan-Zamir & Weisburd, 2013; Phillips, 2019). These analyses have generally been conducted at the individual level (comparing violent to non-violent extremists [Crenshaw et al., 2017; Gruenewald et al., 2016; Klausen, Morrill, & Libretti, 2016; Klein, Gruenewald, & Smith, 2017; LaFree et al., 2018; Strom, Hollywood, & Pope, 2016]); group level (comparing violent to non-violent groups [Asal et al., 2016; Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Busher, Holbrook, & Macklin, 2019; Horowitz & Potter, 2014; Phillips, 2015; della Porta, 2013]); or event level (comparing successful to unsuccessful/foiled plots [Dahl, 2011; Gruenewald et al., 2016; Strom et al., 2016]). However, no prior research of which we are aware has thus far integrated individual, group, and event-level information to more accurately capture the variables that determine why some individuals mobilize to violence and why only a few succeed in achieving their goals.

**Conceptual Framework and Goals**

To address these needs, we constructed an *event*-level dataset of all violent and non-violent extremist plots that were planned or executed by the *individuals* in PIRUS and the *group* networks identified in SoNAR from 1990 to 2021. Figure 1 illustrates how these data sources align with our multilevel conceptual treatment of mobilization and plot success. The new PIRUS-Plots data, which is described in more detail below, includes terrorism-related actions in which individuals and groups engage prior to conducting illegal acts, such as financing, weapons training, target selection, site surveillance, and dry runs, and it distinguishes between events of

different types (e.g., mass casualty, pre-meditated low-casualty, financial crimes, sabotage) and different outcomes. These data also include variables related to law enforcement interdiction strategies and bystander intervention, including when law enforcement became aware of the individual(s) and their extremist activities, whether an informant played a role in plot development and interdiction, and whether a family member, friend, or member of the community provided crucial information that allowed for the disruption of a plot.

**Figure 1: Data Collection and Analytical Framework**




These data are designed to achieve the following goals:

1. *Provide law enforcement, criminal justice professionals, and researchers with a large relational database on radicalization characteristics, social network dynamics, and event-level details and outcomes*. With this project, we have made publicly available a third dataset that is linked to PIRUS and SoNAR, allowing for fully integrated analyses of radicalization and mobilization.

2. *Build on and improve existing NIJ-funded data on individual-level radicalization and extremist social networks.* This project builds on earlier NIJ investments in collecting, validating, and analyzing the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database and the Social Networks of American Radicals (SoNAR) datasets.

3. *Perform analysis that improves radicalization research using multiple control groups and model mobilization trajectories using integrated, cross-level techniques*. This project addresses the "no variation" research design bias that is present in most radicalization studies by distinguishing violent extremists according to plot type (i.e., financial crimes, non-violent property plots, low casualty violence, and mass casualty attacks), and successful attackers from those who failed or were foiled in their extremist behaviors. The inclusion of events and preparatory actions, in addition to individual and network characteristics, allows us to determine how causes and context interact to mobilize extremists to non-violent and violent action.

## The Profiles of Individual Radicalization-Plots (PIRUS-Plots) Dataset

### Inclusion Criteria

The data for this project build on PIRUS, which is a cross-sectional database of the characteristics of a sample of extremists who radicalized in the United States from 1948-2021. The PIRUS project began in January 2013 with a comprehensive name search in open-source records, such as news reports, court documents, academic articles and books, and anthologies. This process produced an initial name list of approximately 3,900 individuals from various ideological milieus and time frames for possible inclusion in the dataset. Each of these observations were then reviewed to determine whether the individuals should be included in the dataset based on the following set of inclusion criteria:

- The individual met all three of the following:
  - The individual radicalized in the United States;
  - The individual espoused ideological motives; and
  - The individual engaged in ideologically motivated criminal acts.
- The individual also met **one** of the following five criteria:
  - The individual was arrested for ideologically motivated activities;
  - The individual was indicted for ideologically motivated activities;
  - The individual was killed as a result of their ideologically motivated activities;
  - The individual is/was a member of a designated terrorist organization as listed by the U.S. State Department; or
  - The individual is/was associated with an organization whose leader(s) or founder(s) has/have been indicted of an ideologically motivated violent offense.

Random sampling techniques were then used to draw an initial sample (n=1,473) from the qualifying cases for inclusion in the PIRUS database. This process has been repeated in the years

since the initial data release to update the database with cases from 2014-2021. PIRUS now includes information on 3,204 subjects. As of 2019, the database is comprehensive of all United States extremists that meet the above criteria. An update which is set to be completed in January 2024, will add cases from 2022 to the database.

PIRUS includes individuals who ascribed to far-right, far-left, jihadist, and single-issue ideologies and it includes 147 variable fields about the subjects' criminal activities and/or violent plots, their relationships with extremist groups, their radicalization processes, their ideological beliefs, and their demographic characteristics and personal histories. PIRUS is coded entirely from open-sources, such as newspaper articles; secondary datasets; peer-reviewed academic articles; journalistic accounts, including books and documentaries; court records; police reports; transcribed interviews; and information credited to the individual being researched (e.g., verified personal websites, autobiographies, and social media accounts).

The PIRUS data were originally designed to study individual-level background characteristics, risk factors, and vulnerabilities that play a role in radicalization processes that end in criminal outcomes. In 2017, with support from NIJ, we began collection for a new dataset—Social Networks of American Radicals (SoNAR)—that expanded the PIRUS data by linking subjects who had known relationships with each other. SoNAR allows users to explore how social networks, in addition to individual-level characteristics, contribute to the radicalization trajectories of U.S. extremists. Given their shared goal of understanding radicalization, PIRUS and SoNAR include limited information related to the extremist crimes committed by the subjects in the data. The new PIRUS-Plots dataset addresses the limitation of PIRUS and SoNAR by significantly expanding the number of event-level variables for each subject in the datasets from 1990-2021. The PIRUS-Plots data are designed to be used in

conjunction with PIRUS and SoNAR, allowing researchers to explore how the interaction of individual-level, network-level, and event-level characteristics produce different mobilization outcomes. The PIRUS and SoNAR data now include unique alpha-numeric identification variables that links all subjects in the two datasets to their corresponding events in the PIRUS-Plots data. Likewise, the PIRUS-Plots data include the subjects' original 4-5 digit identifiers from PIRUS and SoNAR, allowing the three data sources to be analyzed as relational data.

To be included in the PIRUS-Plots data, a subject in PIRUS and SoNAR had to be arrested, charged, and/or criminally convicted for participating in an extremist plot, which we define as a premeditated illegal act committed by a non-state actor in the United States that was intended to kill or injure persons or cause substantial property damage for the purposes of attaining a political, social, economic, or religious goal. To be considered a "plot," the individual(s) had to take at least one actionable step toward completing the crime, such as attempting to acquire a weapon or surveilling a target. This means that acts of violence or property damage that occurred spontaneously during public demonstrations or following chance encounters are not included in the dataset. Incidents in which the perpetrators made threatening statements but took no appreciable steps to carry out an attack (e.g., failing to identify a specific target or acquire a weapon) are included in PIRUS and can be used as a reference category for studying mobilization (see below). Financial crimes, such as tax fraud, theft, and sending money to designated terrorist organization, are included as a subset to the PIRUS-Plots database.

To construct the PIRUS-Plots data, we reviewed each PIRUS case from 1990-2021 to assess whether the subjects were involved in premeditated ideologically motivated events. The PIRUS cases were reviewed against the following PIRUS-Plots inclusion criteria:

1) The plot was initiated between 1990-2021.
2) The plot targeted, or was carried out, within the United States or its territories.

3) The plot was premeditated. Premeditation is defined as an intentional and thoughtful action that is instigated by the perpetrator.
4) There is evidence that perpetrator(s) took steps toward completing the crime, such as acquiring a weapon or the materials necessary to construct a weapon, surveilling or researching a target, raising funds for the plot, recruiting co-conspirators, or engaging in military-style training. Individuals who made threatening statements but took no actionable steps toward conducting attacks are excluded from the data.
5) There is substantial evidence in open-sources that the plot was ideologically motivated.

Finally, we used the Global Terrorism Database's (GTD) rules for coordinated attacks and single incident determination.[1] Therefore, plots or attacks that occurred in the same geographical space at the same point in time were considered one event. However, if plots or attacks were separated by time or place, we recorded multiple events in the data, meaning that individual perpetrators can appear more than once in the database.

**Sources and Coding Procedures**

Once all plots connected to PIRUS subjects were identified, coding of the cases began using open-source materials, including court and police records, news articles, biographies, and personal statements. Project researchers recorded the relevant details of the plots using a structured coding template and detailed codebook. Approximately 15% of the cases were double coded to ensure inter-coder reliability. Project researchers adopted a systematic approach for addressing missing data in source materials. Whenever information for a particular variable was not presented in the sources, coders were instructed to treat the information as missing, even if strong logical arguments could be made for treating the values as "No" or "0". In these cases, coders assigned a missing value code of "-99," or "-88" if the observation was not logically possible (e.g., variables related to how a plot was foiled are coded -88 for successful attacks).

[1] https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf

Project researchers only entered a value of "No" or "0" when there was confirmation in sources that the variable was absent in a particular case.

Routine quality control was performed on the data throughout the life of the project and included inter-coder reliability checks, data reconciliation in the cases of coding disagreements, and checks for logical impossibilities, data entry errors, and format consistency. Approval of the final dataset was made only after the project's lead investigators and data collection manager had thoroughly reviewed the data for errors and inconsistencies and verified that missing values could not be found in the available sources.

**Variable Selection**

Variables for the PIRUS-Plots dataset were selected by reviewing the literature on extremist mobilization and the outcomes of terrorist plots, as well as cognate subject areas, such as non-ideological mass shootings. The variables in PIRUS-Plots are divided into the following sections:

1. **Event details:** This section includes information on the nature of the ideologically motivated crimes. Variables in this section include the beginning and end dates of the plot, type of plot (property crime, low casualty plot, or mass casualty plot), number of individuals involved in the plot, location of the crime, target information, weapon type, and casualties.
2. **Preparatory actions:** This section captures the actions perpetrators took in preparation to complete the crimes. This includes surveillance of targets, weapons training, weapons or parts acquisition, weapons assembly, financing, recruiting, foreign support, and writing manifestos or making public justifications for violence. Additionally, it includes the Department of Homeland Security's Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative indicators, enabling users of the data to analyze the presence of SAR indicators across plots.
3. **Outcome details:** This section records whether the plot was successful, foiled, or failed. It also details the factors that led to the success, foiling, or failure of the attacks. Successful attacks are defined as attacks that were executed (e.g., the explosive device detonated, or shots were fired). Foiled attacks are plots that were prevented by an outside actor, such as law enforcement, an informant, or a family member. Failed attacks are defined as plots that were not successful due to the actions of the perpetrator(s), such as a decision to abandon the attack or change targets, or weapon failure, such as an explosive device that failed to detonate.

4. **Law enforcement engagement**: This section contains information on the level of law enforcement engagement in the plots, including the stages at which law enforcement became aware of the plots, the use of sting operations and informants/undercover agents, and citizen reporting.
5. **Arrests and criminal proceedings:** This section captures information on the criminal charges, convictions, and plea agreements of the perpetrator(s) involved in the plots, along with information on raids, if applicable.

**Research Questions**

The PIRUS-Plots data were designed to address a broad array of research questions related to extremist mobilization and the outcomes of terrorist plots. In combination with PIRUS and SoNAR, users of the PIRUS-Plots data can analyze how individual-level, network, and event-level factors combine to form distinct radicalization and mobilization pathways, especially as they relate to different types of terrorist plot activity (e.g., low casualty targeted violence versus mass casualty plots). Moreover, with the inclusion of law enforcement specific variables, PIRUS-Plots can be used to examine the interdiction strategies that are most commonly associated with foiled terrorist plots. Some of the questions PIRUS-Plots was designed to answer include:

1. What individual-level characteristics distinguish (1) violent from non-violent extremists, (2) individuals engaged in plots from individuals who did not conspire to kill, injure, or damage property, and (3) successful from unsuccessful perpetrators? Do these characteristics maintain their explanatory power when network and event-level data are added to the analysis?

2. What are the most reliable individual-level, network-level, and event-level indicators of extremist mobilization? Is it possible to determine which individuals are at the highest risk of mobilization?

3. Which mechanisms most commonly act as trigger points that spur extremists into action? Is extremist mobilization most commonly a gradual or rapid process? Has this changed over time and with the availability of extremist content online?

4. What determines the likelihood that a plot will succeed? Conversely, what factors are predictive of plot failure? How has the recent move to low sophistication attack strategies impacted interdiction rates and plot outcomes?

5. What law enforcement interdiction strategies are most commonly associated with plot failure? Does the introduction of undercover agents or confidential informants typically result in the arrest of high or low mobilization risk extremists? What are key causes of interdiction failures?

6. Are individuals from certain ideological groups and subgroups more likely to be interdicted by law enforcement prior to successfully committing an extremist crime?

Below, we provide preliminary results that address several of these questions. However, given the size and scope of PIRUS, SoNAR, and the new PIRUS-Plots data, users will have the opportunity to expand on these results and design their own studies that explore additional questions to the ones listed above.

## Results Part I: An Overview of the PIRUS-Plots Data

### The Events and Their Perpetrators

After reviewing the subjects in PIRUS whose criminal activities occurred between 1990-2021 (n = 2,623), we identified 1,433 ideologically motivated crimes that meet the criteria to be included in the PIRUS-Plots dataset. These events occurred in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Most cases, however, were concentrated in high-population areas of the United States, such as California (9.3%), Texas (9.1%), New York (8.9%), and Florida (7.2%). The events in PIRUS-Plots are classified as one of four primary types:[2]

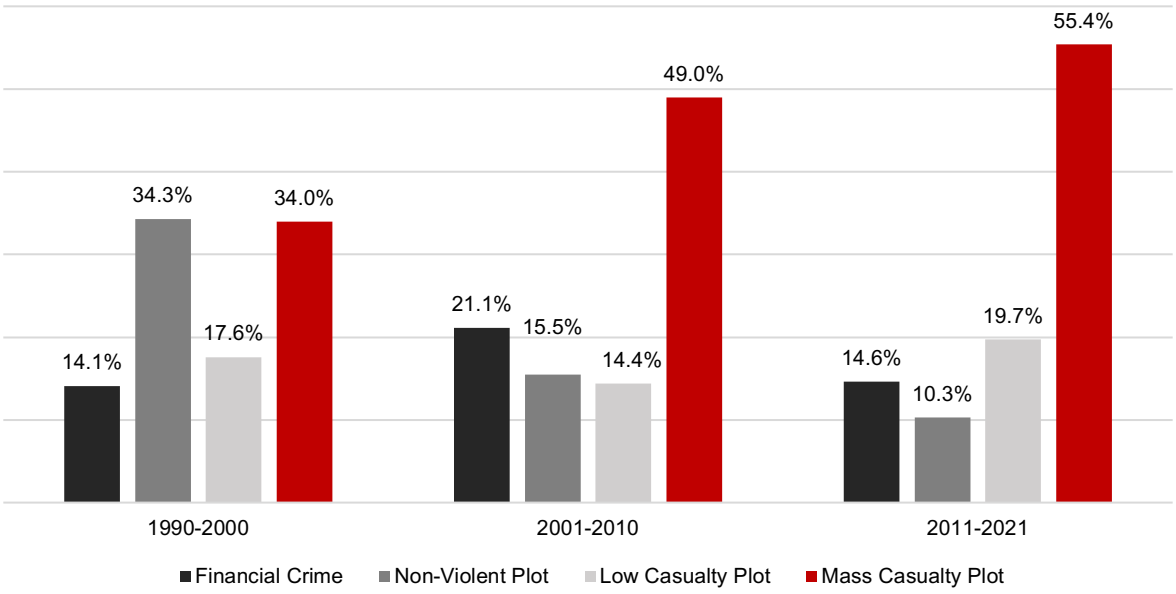
1. **Financial crime**, which is defined as an "illicit financial operation involving a set of activities (i.e., techniques) aiming at a specific goal to obtain unlawful gain or other economic advantage through the use of deliberate deception."[3] Approximately 16% (n = 232) of the events in PIRUS-Plots are classified as financial crimes.
2. **Property crime**, which is an event in which the perpetrator(s) sought to destroy or otherwise render property, including critical infrastructure, inoperable and took steps to

[2] Plot type in the PIRUS-Plots data is coded on an ordinal scale that reflects the severity of the crimes in terms of the (potential) loss of human life. Financial crimes are considered the least severe events in the data, while mass casualty crimes are considered the most severe. Events in the data are only coded for one plot type, even when multiple outcomes were possible or were present. For example, attacks that were committed with the intention of killing or injuring large numbers of people in addition to destroying property are coded as mass casualty events, not property crimes.
[3] https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/where-political-extremists-and-greedy-criminals-meet-comparative

ensure that no one would be hurt or killed in the attack (e.g., targeting an unoccupied building in the middle of the night). Property crimes that were not intended to significantly disrupt or destroy the functionality of the targets (e.g., spray painting graffiti on a building) are not included in the PIRUS-Plots data. Approximately 17% (n = 243) of the events in the data are coded as property crimes.

3. **Low casualty plot/attack**, which is a violent plot or attack in which the perpetrator(s) intended to harm, or successfully harmed, fewer than four total victims (deaths and injuries). These cases include targeted attacks on specific individuals, such as plots to assassinate government officials or other notable figures. Low casualty plots and attacks make up approximately 20% (n = 284) of the events in the PIRUS-Plots data.
4. **Mass casualty plot/attack**, which is defined as a violent plot or attack in which the perpetrator(s) intended to harm, or successfully harmed, four or more victims. To make the distinction between low casualty and mass casualty plots/attacks, we first identified those crimes in which four or more people were hurt or killed. For crimes that did not meet this threshold, including failed and foiled plots, we reviewed statements made by the perpetrators about their intentions, as well as the combinations of proposed targets (e.g., soft or hard targets) and weapons (e.g., explosive devices, assault weapons, etc.), to determine if the crimes were intended to kill or injure four or more victims. Mass casualty plots and attacks represent 47% (n = 674) of the events in the PIRUS-Plots data.

**Figure 2: Plot Type by Decade**




While each of these event types are present throughout the observation period of the data, terrorist plots designed to produce mass casualties have increased sharply over the past two decades, growing from under 35% of all extremist crimes in the 1990s to over 55% of the plots in the most recent decade (see Figure 2). At the same time, the PIRUS-Plots data show that

property crimes have declined considerably. Indeed, from 1990-2000, non-violent plots that targeted property were the most common types of extremist crimes in the database, making up nearly 35% of all events. However, the data show that property crimes are now the least frequent type of extremist event in the United States, making up just 10% of all crimes in the data for the last 10 years. These temporal shifts in plot type dynamics appear to be the product of simultaneous declines in the activities of extremist groups and movements that have historically engaged in non-violent crimes, and the dramatic increase in the presence and influence of extremist movements that use large-scale violence to spread fear in U.S. communities. For instance, 92% of all events in PIRUS-Plots associated with environmental and animal rights extremism consist of non-violent property crimes. However, nearly 50% of these crimes occurred in the 1990s, while only 13.4% took place during the most recent decade. As non-violent crimes associated with the environmental and animal rights movement have waned over the last two decades, the criminal activities of groups and movements who promote mass casualty terrorism to achieve their goals have surged. These actors, which include individuals inspired by or linked to foreign jihadist groups, like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as extremists who are embedded in various domestic extremist movements, such as neo-fascist accelerationism, were responsible for the majority of the crimes in the data from 2011-2021.

**Table 1: Crime/Plot Types by Ideology**

**PIRUS-Plots: Crime/Plot Types by Ideology**

| | Financial.Crimes | Property.Crimes | Low.Casualty.Plots | Mass.Casualty.Plots | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Islamist | 89 | 10 | 20 | 203 | 322 |
| White Supremacist | 34 | 37 | 93 | 131 | 295 |
| Xenophobic_Nativist | 6 | 10 | 29 | 66 | 111 |
| Anti_Government | 83 | 17 | 38 | 160 | 298 |
| Conspiracy_Theory | 0 | 1 | 16 | 10 | 27 |
| Anti_Abortion | 6 | 45 | 9 | 24 | 84 |
| Environmental_Animal | 1 | 89 | 2 | 6 | 98 |
| Black_Nationalist | 0 | 0 | 31 | 9 | 40 |
| Anarchist | 7 | 33 | 15 | 37 | 92 |
| Other | 6 | 1 | 31 | 28 | 66 |
| | 232 | 243 | 284 | 674 | 1433 |

These results reflect a more general pattern in the data that shows that the types of extremist crimes that are committed in the pursuit of political objectives are not evenly distributed among the ideological movements that are present in the United States (see Table 1). For example, nearly 85% of all mass casualty plots and attacks in the data were committed by individuals linked to, or inspired by, foreign jihadist groups or movements that are typically considered to be part of the domestic "far-right," including white supremacist, nativist, and anti-government groups. Individuals who are typically classified as "far-left," including those associated with the environmental and animal rights movements, black nationalism, and anarchism, were only responsible for 7.7% of the mass casualty plots and attacks in the data. Instead, individuals linked to traditional far-left movements were more commonly involved in low casualty plots and, especially, non-violent property crimes. Finally, the financial crimes in the data were heavily concentrated among Islamist and anti-government extremists. For the Islamist extremists, these

crimes typically involved attempts to funnel money to international terrorist organizations, while most of the anti-government financial crimes in the data were connected to the fraudulent activities of the sovereign citizen movement.

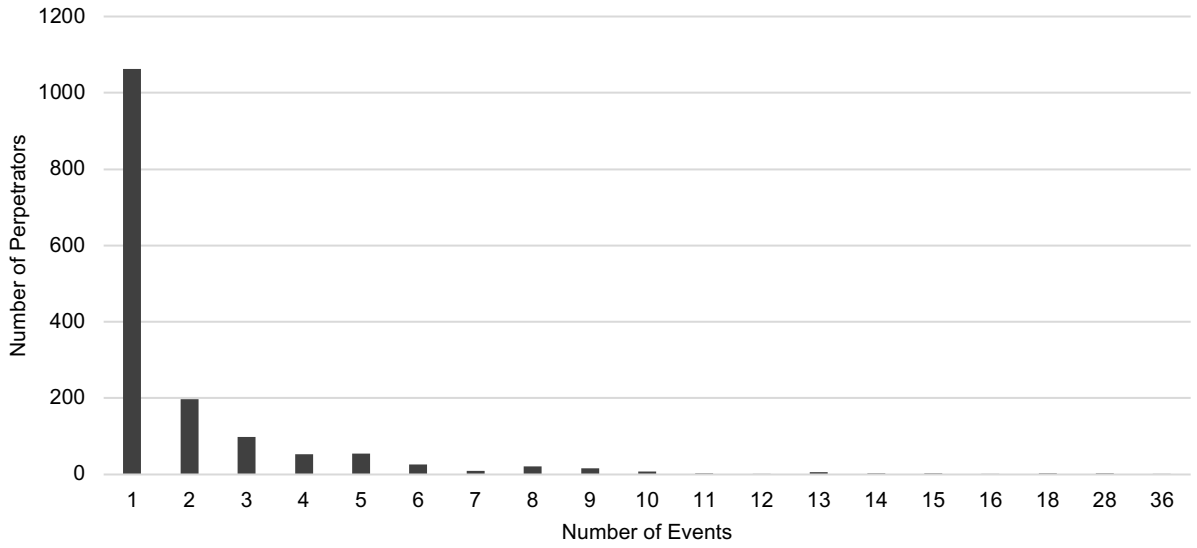
For those individuals in the data who plotted to commit property crimes or violent attacks, ideology appears to be connected to their preferred attack methods (see Table 2). Given their high rates of participation in plots intended to produce mass casualties, individuals linked to the domestic far-right and international jihadist groups preferred attack types that are capable of causing significant loss of human life, including armed assaults and bombings. More than 60% of the white supremacist plots in the data are classified as armed assaults, while 58% of the anti-government and 57% of the Islamist events in the data are coded as bombings. By comparison, the events linked to far-left perpetrators, such as environmental or animal rights extremists and anarchists, are more commonly classified as infrastructure attacks, which typically involved the use of incendiary devices or sabotage equipment to destroy buildings or damage critical infrastructure.

## Table 2: Attack Type By Ideology

| | Anarchist | Anti-Abortion | Anti-Government | Black Nationalist | Conspiracy Theory | Environmental Animal Rights | Islamist | White Supremacist | Xenophobic Nativist |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assassination | 0.0% | 2.6% | 7.9% | 5.0% | 11.1% | 0.0% | 3.9% | 4.2% | 7.6% |
| Armed Assault | 49.4% | 25.6% | 44.2% | 87.5% | 74.1% | 6.2% | 54.5% | 60.5% | 54.3% |
| Bombing | 17.6% | 21.8% | 58.1% | 15.0% | 3.7% | 9.3% | 56.7% | 28.7% | 38.1% |
| Hostage Taking | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6.5% | 0.0% | 25.9% | 1.0% | 5.2% | 3.1% | 1.9% |
| Infrastructure Attack | 35.3% | 57.7% | 3.3% | 0.0% | 3.7% | 85.6% | 2.1% | 11.9% | 7.6% |
| Unarmed Assault | 4.7% | 2.6% | 7.0% | 0.0% | 7.4% | 0.0% | 2.1% | 4.2% | 7.6% |
| Unknown | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 2.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% |

In addition to ideology, the PIRUS-Plots data reveal that violent plots and attacks are more common among extremists who offend alone or as a part of isolated cliques of co-conspirators. For instance, during the most recent decade, perpetrators who planned to commit, or committed, attacks alone were responsible for 71% of the crimes included in the PIRUS-Plots data. This represents a notable increase over the previous decade, when lone actors were responsible for 55.1% of the crimes in PIRUS-Plots, and a dramatic increase over the period from 1990-2000, when lone actors only accounted for 37.7% of the terrorist plots and attacks. Individuals who acted alone were responsible for nearly three quarters of the violent plots and attacks from 2011-2021, including 72.4% of the mass casualty crimes. Members of cliques—small, interconnected groups typically consisting of two to four offenders whose illegal activities were isolated from broader networks or organized extremist groups—were responsible for an additional 23% of violent plots and crimes during the past decade. This means that nearly 98% of all violent plots and attacks that occurred from 2011-2021 were committed by individuals who were not acting under the direction of extremist groups and their leaders.

**Figure 3: Number of Events Per Pepetrator in PIRUS-Plots**



Finally, the PIRUS-Plots data show that most individuals who committed extremist crimes the United States during the past three decades were only involved in one premeditated plot or attack (see Figure 3). More than 1,550 individuals participated in the illegal events documented in the PIRUS-Plots data and most of them (n = 1,052 or 67.6%) only appear in the data once. Of the 505 subjects who participated in more than one plot or attack in the data, 59.8% were associated with traditional far-right movements, including white supremacist, anti-government, and nativist groups. By comparison, only 19.8% of the individuals who were inspired by, or connected to, foreign terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda or ISIS, appear more than once in the data. This suggests that multiple offending, including reoffending and, potentially, recidivism, is more common among far-right domestic extremists in the United States.

**Attack Preparation and Mobilization**

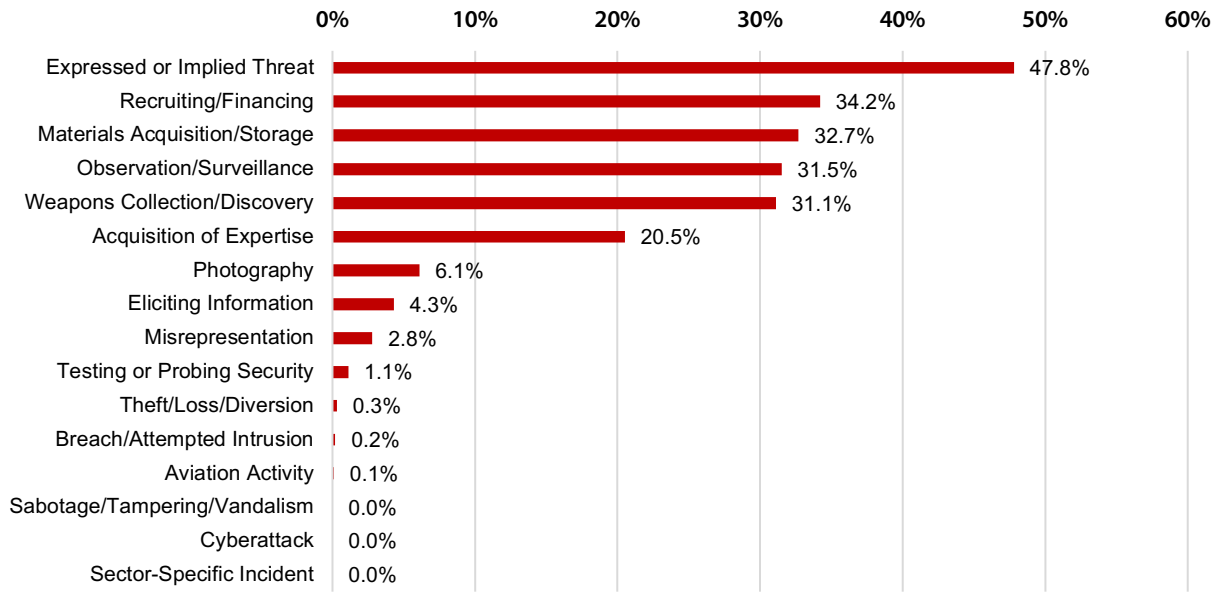
The PIRUS-Plots database records a variety of preparatory steps that extremists can take when mobilizing to commit premeditated property crimes or violent attacks. These behaviors include:

- Weapons or parts acquisition
- Weapons assembly (e.g., bomb making or altering a firearm)
- Weapons or military style training
- Securing transportation to/from attack sites
- Surveilling targets
- Recruiting accomplices
- Plot financing
- Making public statements that provide ideological justification for attacks (e.g., posting manifestos online, making statements of responsibility)
- Forging or acquiring building access identification/materials
- Securing foreign support for attacks, including financial and logistical support, providing weapons, training, and assistance in target selection, and general mentorship.

The decision of which mobilization activities to include in PIRUS-Plots was in part based on the pre-attack behaviors identified in the Department of Homeland Security's Nationwide

Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI), which provides federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement with a standardized process for identifying and reporting suspicious activities that might be tied to terrorism and related crimes.[4] The PIRUS-Plots data include all 16 SAR indicators from the NSI as variables fields, allowing users to analyze a standard set of mobilization characteristics that have been vetted and verified by researchers external to DHS and the NSI program (Gruenewald et al., 2015). The 16 SAR indicators are described in Appendix A of this report and are used here to illustrate mobilization trends in the PIRUS-Plots data.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Mobilization Indicators in PIRUS-Plots Events**

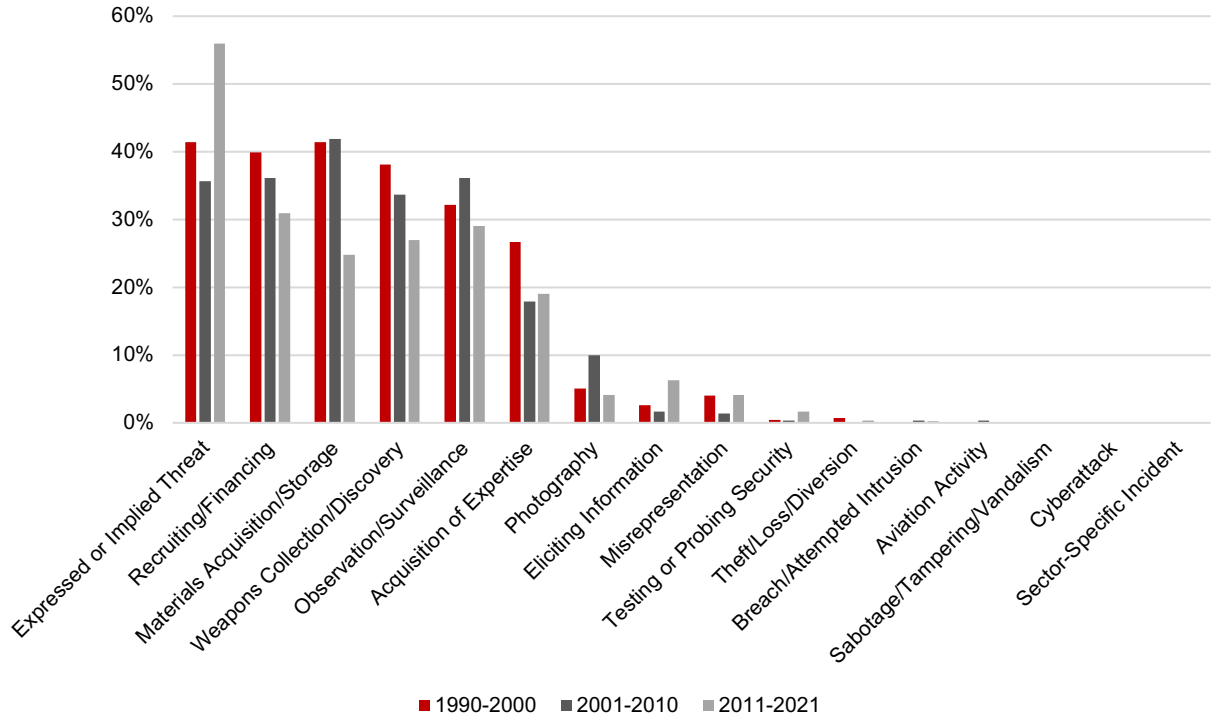



On average, an event in PIRUS-Plots had a mobilization window (i.e., the time from initial target selection to arrest or attack) that lasted between one and two years. However, during the most recent decade, the perpetrators of 90% of the plots and attacks in the data mobilized in under a year and in some cases, just a few weeks. The typical crime in the data averaged 2.2

[4] U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (n.d.). *Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI).* https://www.dhs.gov/nationwide-sar-initiative-nsi

mobilization, or SAR, behaviors, but this rate was higher for some terrorist plot types. For instance, plots and attacks targeting critical infrastructure involved 3.1 SAR behaviors on average, while plots against civilian targets typically involved less than two. The SAR indicators that were most frequently present in the data are expressed or implied threat (47.8%), recruiting/financing (34.2%), observation/surveillance (31.5%), weapons collection/discovery (31.1%), acquisition of expertise (20.5%), and photography (6.1%, see Figure 4). Of the most common SAR indicators in the data, five—recruiting/financing, observation/surveillance, weapons collection/discovery, acquisition of expertise, and photography—are not inherently criminal in nature and when observed, require additional investigation to determine if they are linked to terrorist activity or related criminal schemes. Expressed or implied threat is the only criminal SAR indicator that was present in a significant number of PIRUS-Plots cases. Expressed or implied threats were often made by the perpetrator(s) of terrorist crimes to persons unaffiliated with the events, such as friends, family members, or civilian bystanders. However, as we illustrate below, expressed or implied threats are also commonly made to informants whose relationships with law enforcement were unknown to the perpetrator(s) plotting the crimes. In other cases, the expression of threats happened on social media or through other types of public digital communications. Additional SAR indicators that capture pre-attack criminal behaviors, such as theft/loss/diversion or attempted intrusions into restricted facilities, were present in less than 1% of all cases. We did not find evidence in open-sources of the presence of the sabotage/tampering/vandalism, cyberattack, or sector-specific SAR indicators in the pre-attack and preparatory phases of the terrorist crimes included in PIRUS-Plots.

**Figure 5: Mobilization Indicators in PIRUS-Plots by Decade**




As Figure 5 demonstrates, the relative frequencies of the SAR indicators in terrorist plots changed throughout the timespan covered by the PIRUS-Plots data. Importantly, in the most recent decade (2011-2021), the rate of expressed or implied threats that were made during the preparatory stages of terrorist plots and attacks increased significantly. As depicted above, the presence of this mobilization indicator increased by over 20% between 2001-2010 and 2011-2021. This increase appears to be the product of recent developments in digital communications technologies and an expansion in law enforcement disruption strategies based on the use of informants and community policing. First, the rapid and massive expansion in the use of social media and online forums by aspiring terrorist offenders has not only provided greater opportunities for individuals to issue public threats, but it has significantly increased the probability that those threats will be observed by law enforcement or concerned members of the public. Previous research has shown that the bystander effect—the hesitation or unwillingness of

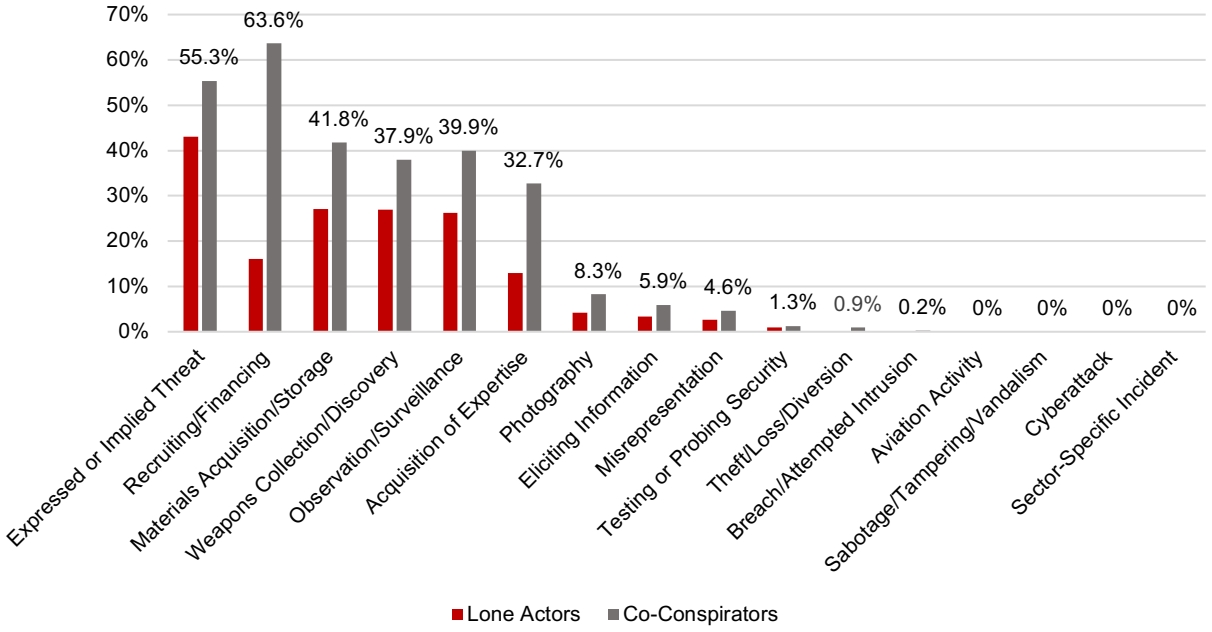
people to come forward and report concerning statements or behaviors—is most pronounced among friends and family members of the individuals engaging in suspicious activities (Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2016). Threats that are made on social media, however, can be observed by members of the broader public who do not have personal relationships with individuals making concerning statements, increasing the likelihood that they will report what they have seen online.

Second, there has been a notable increase in the use of informants and community policing techniques to disrupt terrorist plots in recent years, and this has led to increased reporting of explicit or implied threats to law enforcement. From 2011-2021, informants were present in nearly 40% of the cases in PIRUS-Plots compared to just 23.4% of the cases from 2001-2010 and 25.6% from 1990-2000. Informants are often individuals with known links to extremist communities or past offenders who are in a better position than law enforcement or members of the broader public to hear the expression of concerning statements or witness suspicious behaviors. Informants are often compensated for sharing information with law enforcement, which increases the incentives for them to report what they hear and see.

The most recent decade in the PIRUS-Plots data also shows a decline in the frequency of recruiting and financing, materials acquisition and storage, and weapons collection and discovery as pre-attack behaviors in terrorist plots. The decline in recruiting activities correlates strongly with the rise in lone actor plots that were described above. Given their preference for operating without co-offenders or significant direct help, lone actors do not typically engage in extensive recruiting for the purposes of committing terrorist attacks. Indeed, as Figure 6 shows, according to the PIRUS-Plots data, lone actor offenders were less likely to engage in every mobilization activity identified by the NSI when compared to offenders who co-conspired with others to

commit terrorist attacks; however, the most dramatic difference between the two types of offenders was in terrorist recruitment. Lone offenders only made attempts to recruit others to join them in planning or conducting terrorist attacks in 16% of their incidents in the PIRUS-Plots data.

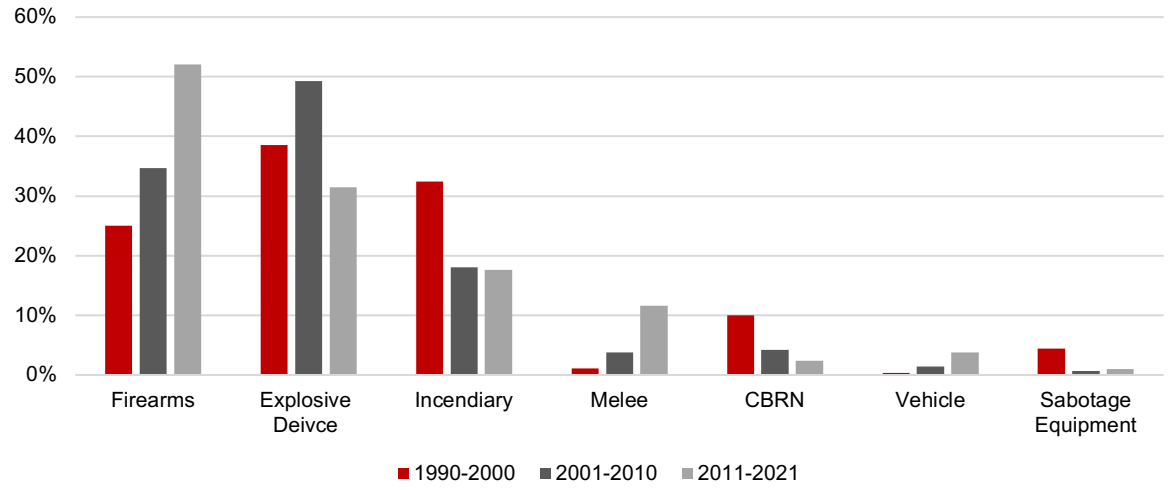
**Figure 6: Presence of SAR Indicators by Lone Actors vs. Co-Conspirators**




Similarly, the decrease in weapons-related mobilization activities appears to correspond with an increase in less sophisticated terrorist plots involving the use of readily available weapons. Data from the most recent decade in PIRUS-Plots show a sharp decline in the number of terrorist plots and attacks involving the use of explosives, CBRN materials, and other hard to acquire weapons, and a corresponding increase in plots and attacks involving the use of firearms, which in most cases are legal to own and easy to acquire. As Figure 7 shows, plots involving the intended or actual use of explosives declined from a high of nearly 50% of all terrorism-related events from 2000-2010 to 31.5% of incidents in PIRUS-Plots in the most recent decade. Over the same period, plots in which the perpetrators intended to use, or used, firearms nearly doubled,

and they now constitute a majority of terrorist crimes committed in the United States. Plots involving the use of explosives, toxic agents, and other weapons of mass destruction typically require extensive periods of planning where individuals must acquire, assemble, and store the weapons. The relative complexity of these types of attacks increases the odds that the perpetrators will be detected by law enforcement or that their behaviors will be witnessed by outside observers who deem them to be suspicious. Perpetrators who plan attacks involving the use of firearms, on the other hand, often already possess the weapons and when they do not, they can easily acquire them through legal means. Given the ubiquity of legally owned firearms in the United States, the mere act of purchasing a gun is unlikely to arouse suspicion in a third party unless it is paired with other concerning behaviors.

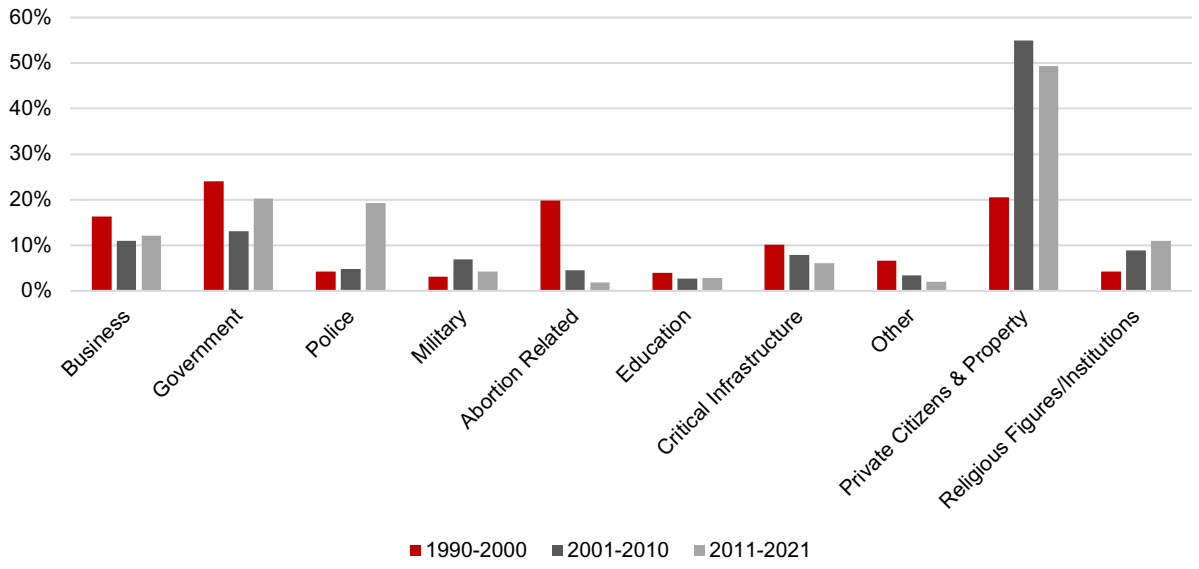
**Figure 7: Primary Weapon Type in PIRUS-Plots by Decade**




Other pre-attack mobilization indicators, such as photography, eliciting information, misrepresentation, and testing security, showed less decade-to-decade variation, but were comparatively rare in terrorist plots that occurred from 2011-2021. These behaviors were present in less than 10% of all recent cases, which reflects a post-9/11 change in terrorists' preferences toward attacking targets that do not require specialized knowledge or credentials to access and

lack significant security deterrents. As Figure 8 illustrates, plots and attacks targeting civilian victims and publicly accessible property rose to 55% of all events in PIRUS-Plots from 2001-2010 compared to 20.6% from 1990-2000. These targets continued to make up approximately 50% of all terrorist plots and attacks in the most recent decade. Other so-called "soft targets," such as businesses and religious figures and institutions, continued to account for significant percentages of the victims of terrorist plots and attacks in recent years. The shift away from plots involving hard targets and complex weapons to ones that target civilian victims with easy to acquire weapons means that terrorist mobilization now typically involves fewer preparatory steps than it did in previous decades.

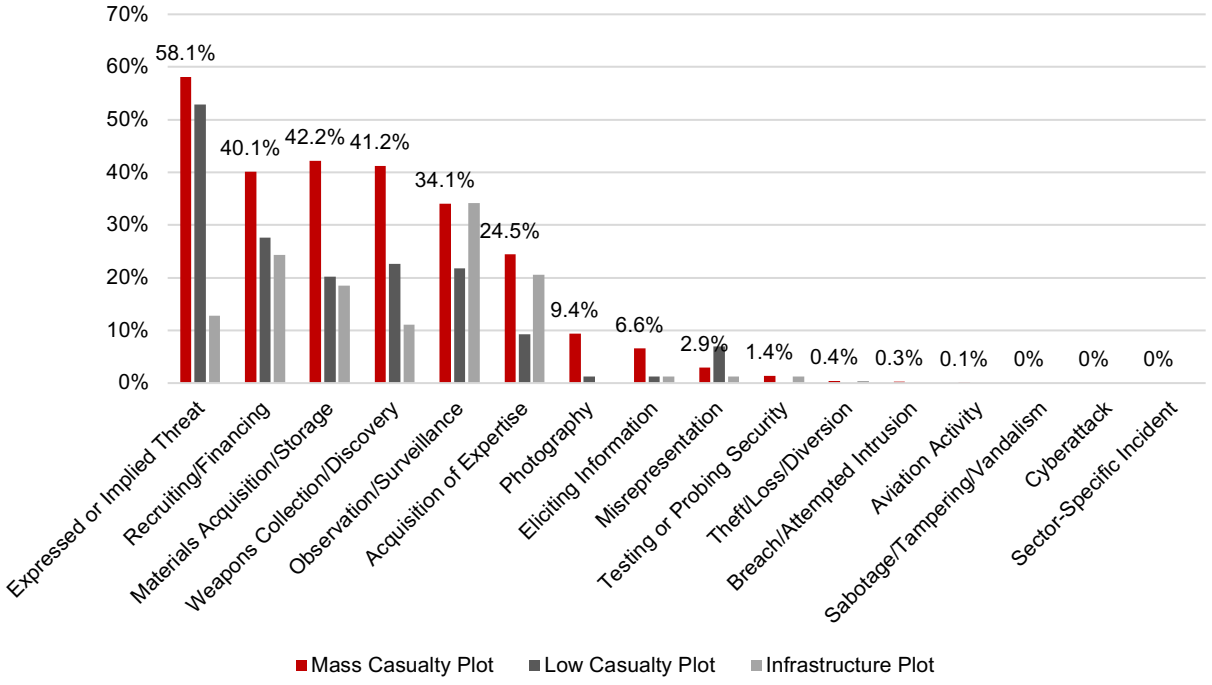
**Figure 8: Target Types in PIRUS-Plots by Decade**




In addition to the growth in plots against soft targets, the dramatic increase in violent plots, including those that seek to cause mass casualties, has led to a corresponding change in the types of mobilization behaviors that are present in the PIRUS-Plots data. For instance, the most commonly occurring SAR indicators in mass casualty plots were expressed or implied threats and materials acquisition, whereas the most common mobilization behaviors in crimes that

pursued "hard" targets and critical infrastructure were observation and surveillance, recruiting and financing, and acquiring expertise (see Figure 9). The variation in the presence of these mobilization behaviors reflects the different operational requirements of the two types of attacks. Recently, most mass casualty terrorist plots have targeted private citizens in public areas, and they often did not require extensive planning or preparation by the perpetrators of the crimes. Indeed, in most cases, the perpetrators of mass casualty crimes did little more than identify targets and secure weapons (typically firearms). By comparison, property crimes often target critical infrastructure, which tends to be highly secure and less familiar to aspiring terrorists. Thus, planning an infrastructure crime often requires the perpetrator(s) to conduct surveillance of a potential target, identify co-offenders with unique knowledge or operational skills, and acquire the expertise necessary to breach the target's security deterrents, gain access to the facility, and use the appropriate weapons and techniques to destroy complex property assets.

**Figure 9: Mobilization Indicators by Terrorist Plot/Attack Type**



## Table 3: Mobilization Indicator by Ideology

| | Anarchist | Anti Abortion | Anti Government | Black Nationalist | Conspiracy Theory | Environmental Animal Rights | Islamist | White Supremacist | Xenophobic Nativist | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Breach/Attempted Intrusion | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Misrepresentation | 0.0% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 12.5% | 11.1% | 2.1% | 4.7% | 4.6% | 1.9% | 3.3% |
| Theft/Loss/Diversion | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.5% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Sabotage | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Cyberattack | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Expressed Threat | 32.9% | 21.8% | 59.1% | 15.0% | 22.2% | 10.3% | 67.4% | 59.0% | 47.6% | 31.7% |
| Aviation Activity | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Eliciting Information | 8.2% | 0.0% | 8.8% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6.4% | 3.8% | 1.0% | 0.0% |
| Testing of Security | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.0% | 3.0% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Recruiting/Financing | 40.0% | 11.5% | 42.3% | 85.0% | 7.4% | 14.4% | 45.5% | 40.2% | 13.3% | 3.3% |
| Photography | 1.2% | 3.8% | 8.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 13.3% | 3.8% | 4.8% | 1.7% |
| Surveillance | 17.6% | 26.9% | 29.3% | 10.0% | 25.9% | 54.6% | 47.6% | 26.8% | 21.9% | 18.3% |
| Material Acquisition/Storage | 20.0% | 14.1% | 62.3% | 2.5% | 7.4% | 25.8% | 33.5% | 29.9% | 20.0% | 43.3% |
| Acquisition of Expertise | 14.1% | 12.8% | 23.3% | 2.5% | 0.0% | 35.1% | 31.8% | 13.0% | 23.8% | 10.0% |
| Weapons Collection | 20.0% | 7.7% | 64.7% | 15.0% | 7.4% | 9.3% | 28.3% | 29.9% | 22.9% | 45.0% |
| Sector Specific Incident | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |

Finally, the PIRUS-Plots data indicate that pre-attack mobilization behaviors often vary by ideology, which likely reflects each milieu's preference of weapon and attack types (see Table 3). For instance, as noted above, perpetrators inspired by, or connected to, foreign terrorist groups and domestic far-right movements display the highest rates of participation in mass casualty plots and attacks in the PIRUS-Plots data. Not surprisingly, the mobilization indicator that is most highly correlated with mass casualty terrorism—expressed or implied threats—was present in the plots linked to the individuals from these ideological movements at comparatively high rates. Indeed, expressed or implied threats was present in 48 to 67% of the plots and attacks perpetrated by individuals associated with domestic nativist, anti-government, and white supremacist movements, as well as perpetrators inspired by international jihadist groups. The plots in the data that were linked to domestic anti-government groups, like the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, and Boogaloo Movement, also displayed high rates of the materials acquisition and weapons collection mobilization indicators. This is because the individuals from these groups were the most likely to plot attacks involving the use of explosive devices. In comparison to the domestic far-right, individuals associated with far-left movements, such as environmental and animal rights extremism, more often targeted property, including critical infrastructure, in their illegal activities. Their mobilization behaviors more closely aligned with the types of preparatory acts that are necessary to access restricted sites, including target surveillance, recruiting, and acquisition of expertise.

**Plot Outcomes and Law Enforcement Interdiction**

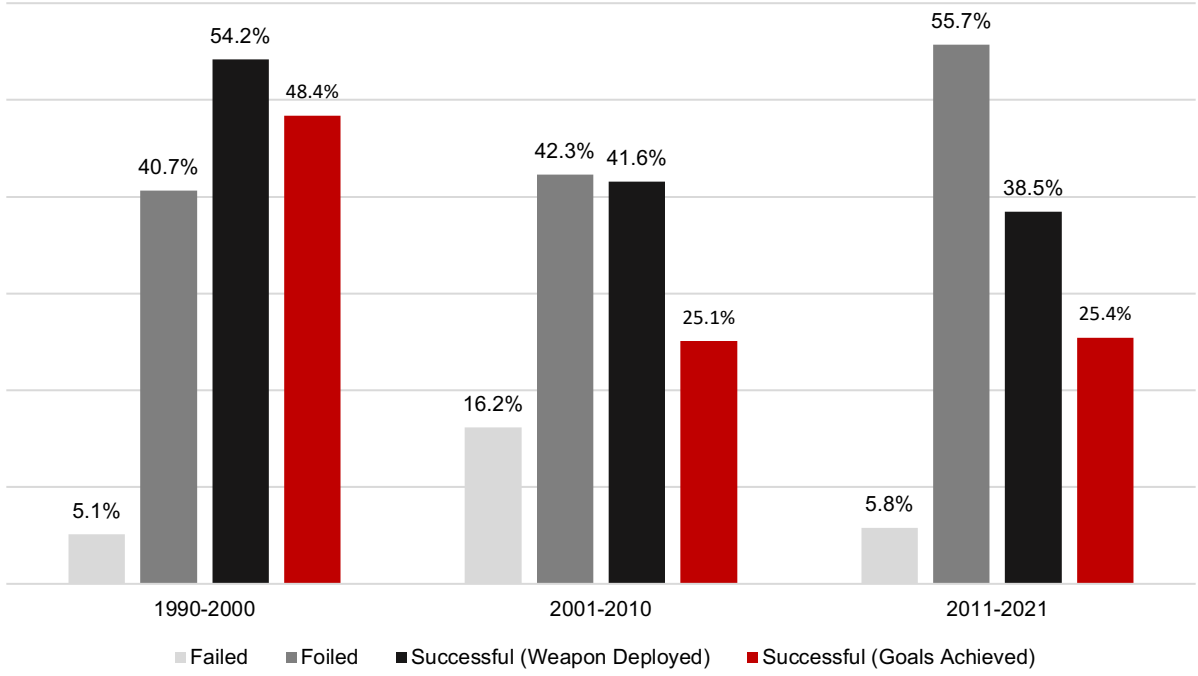
The PIRUS-Plots data includes measures for the outcomes of each event, including whether they resulted in successful attacks. Plot success is related to the perpetrators' tactical, rather than strategic, objectives and is measured two ways in the data. First, for property crimes and violent

attacks, success can reflect whether the perpetrators deployed weapons (i.e., pulled the trigger of a firearm or detonated an explosive device), regardless of whether they achieved their broader tactical goals in terms of property destruction or victim casualties. Thus, according to this definition, a mass casualty plot is considered to have resulted in a successful attack if the perpetrator(s) used a weapon against a target even if the attack did not result in four or more combined victim casualties. This operationalization of success follows the standard used by the Global Terrorism Database (LaFree et al., 2015). Using this definition, the PIRUS-Plots data show that from 1990-2021, 42.8% of the 1,201 premediated property crimes and violent plots that occurred in the United States resulted in successful attacks.

Second, plot success can be operationalized in terms of whether the perpetrators achieved their tactical goals. For mass casualty plots, this type of successful outcome is only coded if the attack resulted in four or more combined victim casualties (deaths or injuries). Likewise, assassination plots would only be coded as successful according to this definition if the target of the attack died due to the perpetrator's actions. Using this definition, the success rate of the events in the PIRUS-Plots data falls to just over 30 percent.

In addition to plot success, the data include two types of unsuccessful outcomes: plots that were foiled by law enforcement in the planning stages and attacks that failed due to perpetrator error, weapon failure, or a change in target preference. For an event to be coded as "foiled" in PIRUS-Plots, law enforcement must have disrupted the plot before the perpetrators could attempt to deploy a weapon or complete the attack. Attacks are coded as "failed" if the perpetrators attempted to deploy a weapon but were unsuccessful due to operational error or weapon failure (e.g., a bomb was placed near the target but failed to detonate). Approximately 50% of the events in PIRUS-Plots are coded as foiled plots, while just over 8% are coded as attack failures.

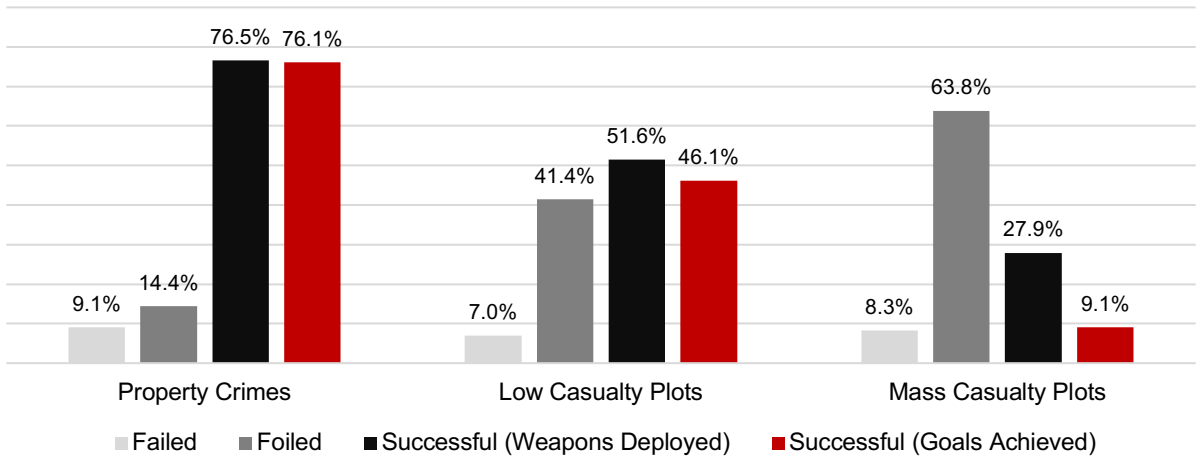
**Figure 10: Plot Outcomes by Decade**




The relative frequencies of event outcomes in the PIRUS-Plots data have changed over time, however, with attack success rates falling steadily since the earliest years in the data (see Figure 10). For example, nearly 50% of the events in the PIRUS-Plots data from 1990-2000 are coded as resulting in successful attacks in which the perpetrators achieved their tactical goals. In the most recent decade in the data, this success rate is just over 25%. This again reflects the shift away from non-violent crimes, which have high comparative success rates, to plots intended to produce mass casualties, which typically fail. It also reflects the increased focus on terrorism as threat to public safety that followed in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing and, especially, the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, federal law enforcement efforts to counter terrorism expanded rapidly after 9/11, and by 2005, the FBI had increased the number of Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTF) throughout the country from just 35 prior to the attacks to more than 100

(U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Today, there are more than 200 JTTFs located throughout the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

**Figure 11: Outcome by Plot Type**




Not surprisingly, the outcomes of the events in PIRUS-Plots are often tied to the goals, attack methods, and relative complexity of the plots (see Figure 11). Individuals who engaged in property crimes achieved a higher rate of success than either low casualty or mass casualty attack plotters, regardless of which definition of success is used. Mass casualty plots were especially likely to be foiled by law enforcement during planning stages, and less than 10% of them caused casualties totaling more than four victims. Low casualty plots, which can involve relatively unsophisticated attack methods like unarmed assaults or outcomes that are difficult to achieve, such as the assassination of a political leader, were more evenly balanced in terms of outcomes, with approximately 50% resulting in successful attacks. Although the plots to commit violent attacks in the data were less often successful than property crimes, those that did succeed had a notable impact on public safety. The violent attacks recorded in the PIRUS-Plots data were

responsible for 573 victim fatalities and 2,821 injuries.[5] On average, a successful violent attack in the data caused 1.7 fatalities and 8.6 injuries.

**Table 4: Plot Outcomes by Target Type**

**Plot Outcomes by Target Type**

| | Foiled | Failed | Weapons.Deployed | Goals.Achieved |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Business | 0.29 | 0.10 | 0.61 | 0.48 |
| Government | 0.73 | 0.04 | 0.23 | 0.14 |
| Police | 0.49 | 0.06 | 0.45 | 0.23 |
| Military | 0.67 | 0.09 | 0.24 | 0.13 |
| Abortion Related | 0.18 | 0.09 | 0.72 | 0.68 |
| Education | 0.28 | 0.08 | 0.64 | 0.50 |
| Critical Infrastructure | 0.70 | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0.21 |
| Private Citizens & Property | 0.44 | 0.10 | 0.46 | 0.28 |
| Religious Figures and Institutions | 0.43 | 0.10 | 0.47 | 0.33 |

The relationship between property crimes and attack success reflects a more general trend in the data that shows that difficult and/or complex attacks on "hard" targets are far less likely to succeed than ones that pursue civilian victims and other "soft" targets (see Table 4). For instance, the plots in the data that targeted military personnel and bases (76% unsuccessful), critical infrastructure (76% unsuccessful), and government facilities (77% unsuccessful) were the least likely to result in successful attacks. By comparison, plots against soft targets, such as

[5] The PIRUS-Plots data only include terrorist plots linked to individuals who radicalized in the United States. Thus, attacks committed by foreign actors on U.S. soil, such as the coordinated attacks committed on September 11, 2001, are not included in the data. Likewise, the death and injury estimates reported here do not include those that resulted from attacks committed by foreign actors.

businesses, schools and universities, private citizens, religious figures and institutions, and medical facilities that provide abortion services, had success rates ranging from 46 to 72%.

**Table 5: Plot Outcomes by Ideology**

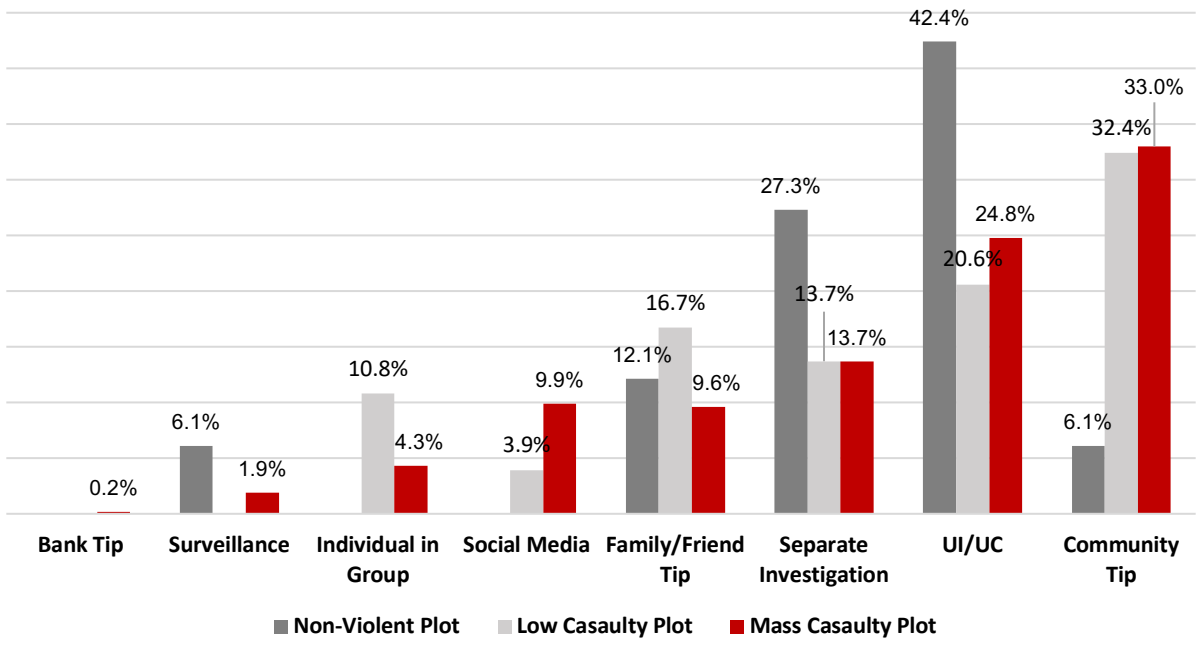
**Plot Outcomes by Ideology**

| | Foiled | Failed | Weapons.Deployed | Goals.Achieved |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anarchist | 0.27 | 0.08 | 0.65 | 0.48 |
| Anti_Abortion | 0.17 | 0.10 | 0.73 | 0.68 |
| Anti_Government | 0.72 | 0.13 | 0.15 | 0.07 |
| Black_Nationalist | 0.13 | 0.00 | 0.88 | 0.15 |
| Conspiracy_Theory | 0.26 | 0.00 | 0.74 | 0.44 |
| Environmental_Animal Rights | 0.11 | 0.11 | 0.77 | 0.72 |
| Islamist | 0.74 | 0.07 | 0.19 | 0.12 |
| Other | 0.17 | 0.23 | 0.60 | 0.38 |
| White_Supremacist | 0.51 | 0.02 | 0.46 | 0.36 |
| Xenophobic_Nativist | 0.56 | 0.07 | 0.37 | 0.23 |

Finally, the PIRUS-Plots data show that individuals associated with certain ideological milieus were more often successful in committing attacks. While perpetrators from the extremist far-left, such as those linked to black nationalism, anarchism, and the environmental and animal rights movements, were responsible for a relatively small portion (18.5%) of all plots in the data, they succeeded more often in deploying weapons and achieving their tactical goals than individuals from the domestic far-right or those inspired by foreign jihadist groups. As we noted above, most of the events in PIRUS-Plots that are coded as far-left consisted of non-violent property crimes or low casualty violence, each of which have relatively high success rates. By comparison, plots tied to the domestic far-right, including those perpetrated by white

supremacist, anti-government, and nativist extremists, were more likely to be foiled by law enforcement or fail due to operational errors. Plots inspired by, or linked to, foreign terrorist organizations, like al-Qaeda and ISIS, were the most likely to be stopped by law enforcement in the planning stages, which is likely the result of counterterrorism officials disproportionately focusing on international terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Rostow & Rishikof, 2015; German & Robinson, 2018).

**Figure 12: Mode of Law Enforcement Discovery by Plot Type**




The PIRUS-Plots data show that terrorist plots can be foiled for several reasons, including law enforcement interdiction strategies, bystander reporting, and insider tips. Figure 12 shows the primary mode by which law enforcement was made aware of the events in PIRUS-Plots that were foiled before attacks could be attempted. Our analysis reveals that tips provided by members of the community played a disproportionate role in stopping plots that were intended to cause victim casualties. In nearly one third of foiled violent plots, law enforcement officials were alerted to the schemes by bystanders who had witnessed suspicious activities or overheard

concerning statements. Reporting from family members and friends of the attack plotters also played a notable role in bringing potentially violent attacks to the attention of law enforcement. More than 15% of low casualty plots and nearly 10% of mass casualty plots were reported to law enforcement by individuals who had personal relationships with the perpetrators of the crimes.

In addition to bystander tips, violent plots were often disrupted using confidential informants and undercover law enforcement agents. Nearly a quarter of the mass casualty plots in the data that were foiled involved the use of informants or undercover agents, while just over 20% of the low casualty plots were foiled through similar interdiction techniques. The use of informants in terrorism investigations has produced considerable controversy (German, 2013; Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011; Said, 2010), with critics claiming that the technique has unfairly targeted members of ethnic and religious minority communities because of its disproportionate use in international terrorism cases (Norris & Grol-Prokopczyk, 2015; Sinnar, 2019). The PIRUS-Plots data lends some support to these claims, showing that informants and undercover agents were far more likely to be used to disrupt plots associated with global jihadism than plots connected to domestic extremist groups. Informants and undercover agents were used to foil 316 plots in the data and 41.8% of these were crimes perpetrated by individuals who were inspired by, or connected to, international jihadist groups. Less than one quarter of the foiled plots that involved the use of informants or undercover agents were linked to domestic anti-government or white supremacist perpetrators.

The use of informants and undercover agents was also the primary method by which property crimes were foiled, accounting for more than 40% of the disruptions of these non-violent plots. A considerable number (27%) of non-violent plots were also foiled when law enforcement became aware of them through separate criminal investigations. Finally, it is worth noting that

regardless of plot type, very few events in the data were disrupted through law enforcement surveillance techniques or through insider tips from individuals who reported their co-conspirators to police.

## Results Part II: Who Mobilizes?

The field of terrorism studies has made significant strides in recent years to empirically test and verify its theories of radicalization. Importantly, numerous studies have addressed a shortcoming of earlier radicalization research by evaluating samples of extremists who participated in different types of plots and attacks (Becker, 2021; Holt et al., 2018; Jaskoski et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2017; LaFree et al., 2018; Schuurman, 2020; Schuurman & Carthy, 2023), adding much needed variation to the research designs that are commonly used in work on terrorism. These studies have generally sought to explain individual-level involvement in violent extremism by comparing extremists who committed attacks that resulted in victim casualties to those who limited their criminal behaviors to non-violent crimes, such as vandalism or arson attacks (Becker, 2021; Holt et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2017; LaFree et al., 2018; Schuurman & Carthy, 2023). This work has produced important insights into the roles that individual and group-level factors play in producing violent outcomes. However, while this research has helped explain an important behavioral outcome of radicalization (violent vs. non-violent extremism), it does not fully address critical questions related to mobilization, including why some individuals act on behalf of their extremist beliefs while others do not and what mobilization looks like in the context of different types of terrorism.

The shortage of research on questions related to mobilization may be due to a lack of data—it is notoriously difficult to find information on individuals who harbor extremist beliefs but do nothing illegal in pursuit of their ideological goals (Schuurman, 2020). However, we argue that

explanations of mobilization have also eluded radicalization researchers because of issues related to sample design and variable inclusion. First, by comparing individuals who committed violent attacks to those who committed non-violent crimes, most studies of radicalization only include samples of individuals who mobilized. Participation in extremist crimes that are non-violent in nature is not evidence of the absence of mobilization. It is simply a measure of one type of mobilization outcome. As we discussed above, the process of mobilizing to non-violent extremism often involves more planning and preparation than is required to commit acts of violence. Second, even within their samples of mobilized individuals, most studies of radicalization fail to distinguish between different types of violence. There is an assumption that the mobilization processes that lead to mass casualty terrorism are the same as the ones that produce less severe violent outcomes. However, there is no *a priori* or empirical reasons that we are aware of to assume that this is the case. Rather, it seems more sensible to assume that low casualty and mass casualty perpetrators follow different mobilization trajectories (Jensen et al., 2023a). Finally, studies of radicalization tend to focus predominantly on the social and cognitive factors that lead to the adoption of extremist beliefs, rather than the behaviors that constitute mobilization. We know comparatively little about the preparatory and pre-attack behaviors that individuals and groups engage in when they are mobilizing to commit different types of extremist crimes.

In this section of the report, we provide an initial attempt to address these shortcomings in the radicalization research literature by analyzing the individual and group-level factors associated with mobilization, and by identifying the mobilization behaviors associated with different types of extremist outcomes. We do this by first examining a sample of subjects from the PIRUS and PIRUS-Plots data that includes individuals who mobilized to commit violent and

non-violent crimes and those who espoused extremist sentiments but took no appreciable steps to commit physical attacks (what we call "nebulous" threats). We then look specifically at the subjects in the sample that engaged in criminal activities to determine if there are individual and group-level factors that explain why some extremists mobilize to violence while others do not. Importantly, for this portion of our analysis, we disaggregate violence and examine which factors are predictive of low versus mass casualty terrorism. We then conclude by using correspondence analysis to determine which mobilization behaviors cluster around the three different plot types (non-violent, low casualty violence, and mass casualty violence) that are included in the PIRUS-Plots data.

**Variables**

The literatures on terrorism and radicalization identify important individual, sociodemographic, and group-level risk factors for radicalization. A comprehensive review of these variables is beyond the scope of this report, but it is important to acknowledge that radicalization is not simply a product of individual traits or group dynamics. Rather, it is the result of the interaction of individual risk and protective factors, peer and group influence, and environmental constraints. Our goal in this section is not to add to an ever-growing list of radicalization indicators (see, for example, Gill, Horgan, and Deckert, 2014), but rather to determine if commonly used variables in studies of radicalization can distinguish individuals who mobilize from those who do not and to assess whether they maintain their significance when violence is treated as a more dynamic concept. Below, we briefly review the variables that we selected for inclusion in our analyses.

*Individual-Level Risk and Protective Factors*

A recent metanalysis on the individual-level factors associated with radicalization finds that being male, having a past criminal history, and being unemployed are consistent and strong predictors of radical behavior (Wolfowicz et al., 2021), and thus we include these measures in our models below. Other studies have suggested that being older (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008; LaFree et al., 2018; Lee, 2011), married (Bakker, 2006; Becker, 2019; Berrebi, 2007; LaFree et al., 2018), or having a record of military service (Becker, 2019; LaFree et al., 2018) can increase individuals' commitments to prosocial norms and act as protective factors that keep them from participating in violence. However, while single men in particular appear to be at the highest risk of violence (Meloy & Gill, 2016), the effect of intimate relationships on limiting radicalization has been small in some studies (LaFree et al., 2018) and statistically insignificant in others (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). Similarly, recent research has found mixed results when it comes to the relationship between radicalization and military service (Becker, 2019; Haugstvedt & Koehler, 2023; LaFree et al., 2018), suggesting that it may not be a strong protective factor that keeps individuals from engaging in violent extremism. Indeed, in the case of mass casualty terrorism, preliminary research indicates that having a military service background might actually be a significant mobilization risk factor (Jensen et al., 2023b). We include measures of these factors in our analyses to determine if they have protective roles in preventing mobilization or if they make mobilization more likely for certain types of extremists.

In addition to these risk and protective factors, we include measures of mental illness and substance use disorders in our predictive models. The relationship between mental illness and radicalization has long been contested by researchers, who generally agree that terrorism is not the result of psychopathy (see Gill et al., 2021, for a review). However, recent studies have found links between certain neurodevelopmental and mental health disorders and violent extremism

(Gill & Corner, 2017; LaFree et al., 2018), especially among lone actors (Corner & Gill, 2015; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013; Sarma et al., 2022). Substance use disorders often accompany mental illness and some studies suggest that they too can increase the risk of participating in extremist violence (Koehler, 2021).

*Network-Level Variables*

While radicalization can be a highly individualized process, it rarely happens in a social vacuum. The connections that people have to other extremists, and their relative positions in radical social networks, can shape their pathways into and out of extremism. Importantly, studies show that the presence of radical peers in one's social network can increase the odds that they will radicalize to the point of engaging in violence (Cherney et al., 2020; LaFree et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). The negative influence of deviant peers is especially pronounced in cliques, which, due to their isolation from countervailing views, are subject to echo-chambers effects, groupthink, and a process of one-upmanship that makes violence an increasingly likely outcome (Bakker, 2006; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; LaFree et al., 2018; Nesser, 2006). To account for these dynamics, we include a measure of degree centrality, which counts the number of connections to other criminal extremists the subject had when they committed their crimes. Importantly, this variable not only captures a subject's connections to the co-conspirators who helped them plan and commit crime(s), but it also establishes if the individual had known communication ties to other extremists with whom they did not co-offend. We also include variables that capture whether the subject committed their crime(s) as a part of an extremist clique or whether they acted alone.

An individual's relative position in an extremist network can also influence their radicalization trajectory. Extremists who enjoy leadership roles in extremist networks are less

likely to radicalize to violence than network members with less social status or influence, who often must participate in acts of violence or other crimes to rise through the ranks (Abrahms & Potter, 2015; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Jasko & LaFree, 2020; Shapiro & Siegel, 2012). To account for the roles that leadership and social influence play in radicalization, we include a measure of eigenvector centrality in the models below. Eigenvector centrality measures the transitive influence of a person in network, and it is often used in social network analysis as a proxy for leadership (Golbeck, 2013). Subjects with high eigenvector centrality scores are connected to many people who are also well connected, which suggests that their influence likely spreads across the network.

*Movement-Level Variables*

Research suggests that extremist movements play an important role in socializing individuals to radical worldviews (Turk, 2004). Influential voices within extremist movements act as the central narrators that convince their followers that violence and other anti-social behaviors are just and necessary to achieve far-reaching political, social, religious, and economic goals (McCauley & Segal, 2009; Smith et al., 2020). Some movements are also adept at spreading tactical knowledge, allocating resources, and forming co-offending ties that make armed resistance and violence possible (Beck, 2008). Finally, movements often provide their participants with a sense of identity, social status, and community that they otherwise could not attain (Kruglanski, 2014). In most movements, social prestige is reserved for those who are willing to act and in some, such as neo-fascist accelerationism, prestige is only conferred on those who are willing to be violent.

In the models below, we include a measure for the primary movement affiliation of the subjects in our sample. These movement categories are the same as the ones that were used in the

previous section, and they are defined in Appendix B of this report. Based on our own previous research (Jensen et al., 2016; LaFree et al., 2018), we assume that the global jihadist movement and those linked to the traditional far-right, such as white supremacist, nativist, and anti-government groups, will have followers who mobilize to violence more often than individuals associated with far-left movements (e.g., environmental and animal rights groups, anarchists, etc.).

*Dependent Variables*

We include two types of dependent variables in the models below. The first set of models addresses the question of "who mobilizes?" We use a categorical dependent variable that measures if the subject (1) espoused extremist views but did not mobilize, (2) mobilized to commit a non-violent property crime, or (3) mobilized to commit a violent attack. Subjects in the "did not mobilize" subsample consist of individuals who were criminally charged for making threatening statements but did not identify specific targets or take any appreciable steps to carry out attacks. In the second set of models, we more closely examine the mobilized subsample in the data to determine if there are individual, network, or movement-level variables that can reliably classify extremists for three mobilization outcomes: (1) non-violent property crimes, (2) low-casualty violence, and (3) mass casualty violence.

*Summary Statistics and Methods*.

**Table 6.** Descriptive Statistics for Mobilization Variables

| **Variable** | **N = 1,313**[1] |
|---|---|
| **Plot Type** | |
| Nebulous | 132 (10%) |
| Non-violent | 356 (27%) |
| Low Casualty | 265 (20%) |
| Mass Casualty | 560 (43%) |
| **Age** | |
| Mean (SD) | 35 (14) |
| Median (IQR) | 32 (24, 45) |
| Range | 15, 88 |

**Table 6.** Descriptive Statistics for Mobilization Variables

| Variable | N = 1,313[1] |
|---|---|
| (Missing) | 10 |
| **Marital Status** | |
| Unmarried | 666 (68%) |
| Married | 311 (32%) |
| (Missing) | 336 |
| **Gender** | |
| Female | 122 (9.3%) |
| Male | 1,191 (91%) |
| **Military Experience** | |
| No | 1,084 (83%) |
| Yes | 229 (17%) |
| **Employed** | |
| No | 192 (24%) |
| Yes | 594 (76%) |
| (Missing) | 527 |
| **Mental Illness** | |
| No | 956 (73%) |
| Yes | 357 (27%) |
| **Alcohol/Drug Use** | |
| No | 1,046 (80%) |
| Yes | 267 (20%) |
| **Previous Criminal Activity** | |
| None | 892 (68%) |
| Non-violent | 227 (17%) |
| Violent | 194 (15%) |
| **Lone Offender** | |
| No | 729 (56%) |
| Yes | 584 (44%) |
| **Part of a Clique** | |
| No | 919 (70%) |
| Yes | 394 (30%) |
| **Degree Centrality** | |
| Mean (SD) | 4 (7) |
| Median (IQR) | 1 (0, 4) |
| Range | 0, 48 |
| **Eigenvector Centrality** | |
| Mean (SD) | 0.65 (1.72) |
| Median (IQR) | 0.00 (0.00, 0.00) |
| Range | 0.00, 9.92 |
| **Total Plots** | |
| Mean (SD) | 2.14 (2.54) |
| Median (IQR) | 1.00 (1.00, 2.00) |
| Range | 0.00, 36.00 |
| **Ideology** | |
| Other | 47 (3.6%) |
| Anarchist | 102 (7.8%) |
| Anti-Abortion | 49 (3.7%) |
| Anti-Government | 309 (24%) |
| Black Nationalist | 20 (1.5%) |

**Table 6.** Descriptive Statistics for Mobilization Variables

| **Variable** | **N = 1,313**[1] |
|---|---|
| Conspiracy Theory | 33 (2.5%) |
| Environmental/Animal Rights | 79 (6.0%) |
| Islamist | 322 (25%) |
| White Supremacist | 259 (20%) |
| Xenophobic/Nativist | 93 (7.1%) |
| **Decade** | |
| 1990s | 204 (16%) |
| 2000s | 262 (20%) |
| 2010s | 595 (45%) |
| 2020s | 252 (19%) |

[1]n (%)

Summary statistics for the variables included in the mobilization analysis are provided in Table 6. As can be seen, a plurality of individuals (43%) mobilized all the way to mass casualty crimes. Non-violent crimes occur at the second most frequent rate (27%) followed by low casualty crimes (20%) and individuals who did not mobilize (10%). Most offenders are unmarried (68%), employed (76%), male (91%), and only a small number (17%) have military experience. Mental health concerns and substance use disorders are less common (27% and 20%, respectively), and most offenders (68%) do not have a prior criminal history.

A sizable proportion of the subjects are lone actors (44%) and 30% radicalized as part of a clique. The degree centrality and eigenvector centrality statistics show that most individuals have sparse connections to other extremists in their social networks, and only a small number of individuals occupy leadership roles. The total number of plots an individual was involved in ranges from zero (i.e., for nebulous threats) to 36, with an average of 2.14 and a median of 1. This suggests that most individuals are involved in only a small number of plots, while a small number of individuals are involved in many plots. Ideologically, Islamists (25%), anti-government (24%) and white supremacist (20%) extremists constitute the largest subgroups, followed by anarchist (7.8%), xenophobic/nativist (7.1%), environmental/animal (6.0%), and

anti-abortion (3.7%) extremists. Conspiracy theory and Black nationalist extremists constitute less than 3% each, while individuals with Other sub-ideologies represent 3.6% of observations.

Importantly, two key variables have many missing values: 527 missing cases for employment and 336 missing cases for marital status. Out of our whole sample of 1,313 observations, this corresponds to a missing values rate of 40% and 26%, respectively. As being married and having a stable employment history have been shown to be protective factors against *violent* radicalization (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022; Lafree et al., 2018), the large proportion of missing values for these variables must be addressed. We therefore follow other terrorism researchers in using multiple imputations by chained equations (MICE) to populate missing observations in these critically important variables with plausible values (Demir et al., 2022). The MICE package in R is used to impute missing values for marital status and employment. We also impute values for age, but there are only 10 total missing entries. MICE is a robust algorithm that leverages rows of complete observations across all variables as predictors in order to derive reasonable imputations (Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). We use random forest classifiers to impute values for marital status and employment and regression trees to impute our 10 missing age values. To derive robust estimates, we ran 20 iterations of imputations. The remainder of our mobilization analysis is based on the full, imputed dataset.

As we explained above, most of our dependent variables are categorical. In the case where the dependent variable is not dichotomous, we estimate several logistic regressions, resulting in multiple dichotomous models across several reference and treatment groups. Additionally, given the dependencies of observations in our datasets we estimate cluster-robust standard errors for our regression models to reduce the probability of mis-specifying our models and committing type I errors.

Importantly, individuals in both PIRUS and PIRUS-Plots belong either to (1) *components* or (2) *crime groups*, respectively. At the individual level in PIRUS, a subject's component is the core community they are socially embedded in within a broader extremist network. Subjects who had known associations with each other, regardless of whether they committed crimes together, are coded as being members of the same components. At the plot level, the crime group refers to the group of individuals who co-offended in the same plot. Hence, when fitting our models for statistical inference, we expect that our observations and error terms will be correlated amongst individuals who are part of the same component or crime groups. This is a violation of the assumption of the independence of observations in generalized linear modeling that risks miscalculating standard errors and leading to erroneous statistical inferences (Zeileis, 2004; Zeileis et al., 2020). We correct for these dependencies by using cluster-robust variance estimation—specifically, the CR2 method recommended by Pustejovsky and Tipton (2018).

*Results*

Table 7 reports the results of two logistic regression models comparing (1) non-mobilized subjects to those who mobilized to non-violent crimes and (2) non-mobilized subjects to those who mobilized to violent crimes. In each case, the reference category is the subsample of non-mobilized subjects. In the case comparing nebulous threats to non-violent mobilization, all violent offenders were dropped from the analysis and the plot type variable was recoded as a dichotomous measure where 0=not mobilized and 1=non-violent plot/attack. For the model comparing nebulous threats to violent mobilization, non-violent offenders were dropped from the analysis and the plot type variable was recoded into a dichotomous measure where 0=not mobilized and 1=low casualty *or* mass casualty plot/attack.

Considering the non-mobilized/non-violent comparison first, we observe that married individuals are nearly twice as likely to mobilize to non-violent crimes relative to unmarried ones ($p<.05$). Additionally, we see that individuals who are part of a clique are over four times as likely to mobilize to non-violent crimes relative to those who are not part of a clique ($p<.05$). Ideologically, we observe the largest effect for the environmental and animal rights subgroup, who are nearly 24 times more likely ($p<.05$) to mobilize to non-violent crimes compared to the reference group ("Other"). Anti-abortion extremists are over 16 times more likely ($p<.001$), anarchists 6.9 times as likely ($p<.01$), anti-government extremists about 4 times as likely ($p<.05$), and Islamists 4 times as likely ($p<.05$) to mobilize to non-violent crimes. None of age, gender, employment status, military experience, mental health concerns, substance use disorder, previous criminal activity, lone offender status, or one's position in a social network (degree centrality and eigenvector centrality) are significant predictors of mobilization to non-violent crime.

Considering mobilization to violent crimes, the results are similar, though with some important differences. Age is now a significant negative predictor of mobilization to violent crimes, with each year added reducing an individual's likelihood of mobilizing to violence by 3% ($p<.001$). Additionally, those with a violent criminal history are close to twice as likely to mobilize to violent crimes relative to those who made nebulous threats ($p<.05$). Being part of a clique is an important factor for those who mobilize to violent extremism relative to the individuals who did not mobilize, with clique members being 5.5 times more likely to mobilize to violence ($p<.001$). Additionally, the more connections an individual has in their extremist network, the more likely they are to mobilize to violent extremism, with each additional connection (degree centrality) increasing their odds by 31% ($p<.05$). Ideologically, we observe

that both Islamists and white supremacists are more than twice as likely to mobilize to violence relative to individual who did not mobilize (p<.05 for both).

**Table 7: Predicting Who Mobilizes to Non-violent Crimes and Violent Crimes**

| | Nebulous vs. Non-violent | | Nebulous vs. Violent | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| **Age** | 0.99 | 0.011 | 0.97*** | 0.008 |
| **Gender** | | | | |
| Female | — | — | — | — |
| Male | 0.41 | 0.227 | 0.73 | 0.399 |
| **Marital Status** | | | | |
| Unmarried | — | — | — | — |
| Married | 1.93* | 0.578 | 1.42 | 0.351 |
| **Employed** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 1.90 | 0.643 | 1.57 | 0.384 |
| **Military Experience** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 1.31 | 0.489 | 1.97 | 0.693 |
| **Mental Illness** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.91 | 0.291 | 0.73 | 0.178 |
| **Alcohol/Drug Use** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.58 | 0.232 | 0.75 | 0.225 |
| **Previous Criminal Activity** | | | | |
| None | — | — | — | — |
| Non-violent | 0.99 | 0.376 | 1.20 | 0.349 |
| Violent | 0.88 | 0.413 | 1.85* | 0.578 |
| **Lone Offender** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.44 | 0.185 | 1.14 | 0.456 |
| **Ideology** | | | | |
| Other | — | — | — | — |
| Anarchist | 6.94** | 4.94 | 1.71 | 0.862 |
| Anti-Abortion | 16.3*** | 12.8 | 1.22 | 0.830 |
| Anti-Government | 3.97* | 2.70 | 1.08 | 0.447 |
| Black Nationalist | 4.47 | 7.61 | 2.88 | 3.64 |
| Conspiracy Theory | 0.29 | 0.436 | 1.86 | 1.09 |
| Environmental/Animal Rights | 23.7* | 32.1 | 0.55 | 0.990 |
| Islamist | 4.00* | 2.55 | 2.42* | 1.09 |
| White Supremacist | 2.83 | 1.88 | 2.29* | 0.963 |
| Xenophobic/Nativist | 1.39 | 1.12 | 1.02 | 0.477 |
| **Part of a Clique** | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 4.11* | 2.61 | 5.49*** | 2.63 |
| **Degree Centrality** | 1.15 | 0.111 | 1.31* | 0.152 |
| **Eigenvector Centrality** | 0.98 | 0.127 | 0.94 | 0.161 |

**Table 7: Predicting Who Mobilizes to Non-violent Crimes and Violent Crimes**

| | Nebulous vs. Non-violent | | Nebulous vs. Violent | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| No. Obs. | 488 | | 957 | |
| Null deviance | 570 | | 768 | |
| Residual Deviance | 363 | | 617 | |
| Log-likelihood | -182 | | -309 | |

[1]*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
[2]OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

The next set of logit models, presented in Table 8, analyze the subsample of individuals who mobilized to examine which factors predict who is more likely to commit which types of crimes. The first model compares non-violent offenders to low casualty offenders (non-violent is the reference category), the second model compares non-violent offenders to mass casualty offenders (non-violent is the reference category), and the third model compares low casualty offenders to mass casualty offenders (low casualty is the reference category).

Considering the protective factors first, we do not find that age has any significant effect on the likelihood of committing a low casualty crime versus a non-violent crime or committing a mass casualty crime versus a low casualty crime. Age does, however, reduce the likelihood of committing a mass casualty crime over a non-violent crime by 4% (p<.001). We do not find that either marital status or employment status have significant effects in any model. By contrast, having military experience has important implications, particularly for mass casualty crimes. While those with military experience are not significantly more likely to commit a low casualty crime versus a non-violent crime, they are about 2.5 times more likely to mobilize to a mass casualty crime compared to a non-violent crime (p<.001) and about 1.9 times as likely to mobilize to a mass casualty crime compared to a low casualty crime (p<.001).

| **Table 8: Mobilization of Crimes** | Non-violent vs. Low Casualty | | Non-violent vs. Mass Casualty | | Low Casualty vs. Mass Casualty | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| **Age** | 0.98 | 0.012 | 0.96*** | 0.007 | 0.98 | 0.011 |
| **Gender** | | | | | | |

| **Table 8: Mobilization of Crimes** | Non-violent vs. Low Casualty | | Non-violent vs. Mass Casualty | | Low Casualty vs. Mass Casualty | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| Female | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Male | 1.23 | 0.450 | 1.95* | 0.572 | 2.16 | 0.925 |
| **Marital Status** | | | | | | |
| Unmarried | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Married | 0.75 | 0.184 | 0.97 | 0.222 | 1.30 | 0.235 |
| **Military Experience** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 1.53 | 0.537 | 2.48*** | 0.592 | 1.87** | 0.448 |
| **Employed** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.56 | 0.208 | 0.66 | 0.189 | 0.93 | 0.157 |
| **Mental Illness** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.65 | 0.214 | 0.87 | 0.202 | 1.10 | 0.223 |
| **Alcohol/Drug Use** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.88 | 0.292 | 1.16 | 0.286 | 1.44 | 0.295 |
| **Previous Criminal Activity** | | | | | | |
| None | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Non-violent | 1.10 | 0.311 | 1.35 | 0.358 | 1.04 | 0.320 |
| Violent | 2.35* | 0.902 | 2.63** | 0.783 | 0.94 | 0.271 |
| **Lone Offender** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 1.62 | 0.693 | 2.41** | 0.761 | 2.38** | 0.636 |
| **Part of a Clique** | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | 0.70 | 0.311 | 1.17 | 0.403 | 1.90* | 0.616 |
| **Degree Centrality** | 1.03 | 0.066 | 1.02 | 0.035 | 1.00 | 0.012 |
| **Eigenvector Centrality** | 0.94 | 0.085 | 1.03 | 0.066 | 1.03 | 0.045 |
| **Ideology** | | | | | | |
| Other | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Anarchist | 0.08* | 0.099 | 0.30 | 0.246 | 4.46 | 3.99 |
| Anti-Abortion | 0.10** | 0.082 | 0.17 | 0.168 | 2.50 | 1.42 |
| Anti-Government | 0.33 | 0.227 | 0.80 | 0.526 | 2.74 | 1.52 |
| Black Nationalist | 0.08 | 0.126 | 0.33 | 0.290 | 5.24 | 7.34 |
| Conspiracy Theory | 6.43 | 9.63 | 3.09 | 4.12 | 0.51 | 0.367 |
| Environmental/Animal Rights | 0.01*** | 0.008 | 0.03*** | 0.026 | 6.42 | 10.1 |
| Islamist | 0.34 | 0.292 | 0.74 | 0.483 | 2.60 | 1.41 |
| White Supremacist | 1.18 | 1.27 | 0.76 | 0.519 | 0.81 | 0.461 |
| Xenophobic/Nativist | 1.18 | 1.07 | 1.09 | 0.825 | 0.95 | 0.532 |
| **Total Plots** | 0.98 | 0.061 | 1.08* | 0.040 | 1.11* | 0.051 |
| **Decade** | | | | | | |
| 1990s | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| 2000s | 0.72 | 0.382 | 0.52 | 0.224 | 0.77 | 0.290 |
| 2010s | 0.65 | 0.413 | 0.74 | 0.372 | 1.38 | 0.431 |
| 2020s | 1.06 | 1.30 | 0.84 | 0.625 | 0.94 | 0.419 |
| No. Obs. | 621 | | 916 | | 825 | |
| Null deviance | 848 | | 1,224 | | 1,036 | |

| **Table 8: Mobilization of Crimes** | Non-violent vs. Low Casualty | | Non-violent vs. Mass Casualty | | Low Casualty vs. Mass Casualty | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| Residual Deviance | 637 | | 964 | | 925 | |
| Log-likelihood | -319 | | -482 | | -463 | |

[1]*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
[2]OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

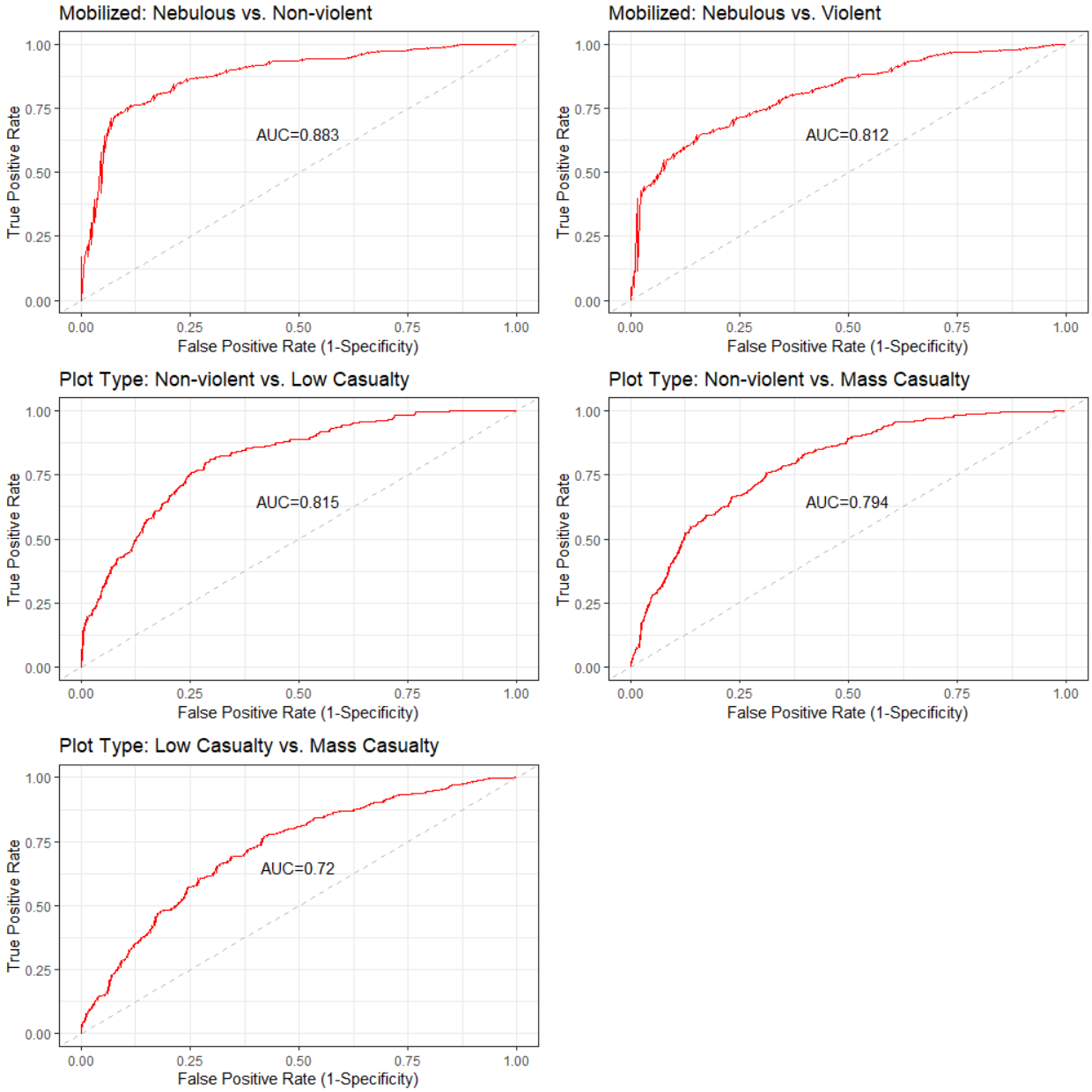
The mental health and substance use risk factors have no significant effects in any model. However, individuals with a violent criminal history are about 2.4 times as likely to mobilize to low casualty crimes relative to non-violent crimes (p<.05) and more than 2.6 times as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes relative to non-violent crimes (p<.01). Being a lone offender has significant implications as well. Lone offenders are 2.4 times as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes relative to non-violent ones (p<.01) and about 2.4 times as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes relative to low casualty ones (p<.01). Being part of a clique also has effects on the likelihood of mobilizing to violence, with individuals who are part of a clique being close to twice as likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes relative to low casualty ones (p<.05).

Considering an offender's ideology, we find that anarchists are 92% less likely to mobilize to low casualty crimes relative to non-violent ones (p<.05). Similarly, anti-abortion extremists are 90% less likely to mobilize to low casualty crimes relative to non-violent ones (p<.05). With a very small coefficient, environmental and animal rights extremists are 99% less likely to mobilize to low casualty crimes compared to non-violent ones (p<.001) and 97% less likely to mobilize to mass casualty crimes relative to non-violent ones (p<.001). No other ideological subgroups have statistically significant effects on the likelihood of mobilizing to different types of extremism in any of the models.

Finally, considering our control variables, the number of plots an individual is involved in appears to influence the likelihood of mobilizing to violent crime. Each additional crime an

individual is involved in increases their likelihood of mobilizing to a low casualty crime compared to a non-violent crime by 8% ($p<.05$), and by 11% ($p<.05$) for mass casualty crimes compared to low casualty crimes. Our decade controls have no statistically significant effects in any of our models.

**Figure 13: ROC Curves for Mobilization and Plot Type Logit Models**



Observing the residual deviance estimates for our models in Table 7 and Table 8, we see that our logistic regressions fit the data well, performing better than null models. Additionally, as the receiver operator characteristic (ROC) curves in Figure 13 show, our fitted models are accurate predictors, exceeding the performance of a random classifier (the gray dotted line). The area under the curve (AUC) is above or approaches 80% for all but one model (low casualty vs. mass casualty mobilization) and is highest for the model predicting who is likely to mobilize to non-violent crimes from non-mobilized individuals (88.3% AUC). The lower AUC for the low casualty vs. mass casualty model suggests that distinguishing predictive factors between these two categories is more challenging than when comparing non-violent to low casualty and non-violent to mass casualty offenders. Nevertheless, this model still performs adequately and better than chance.

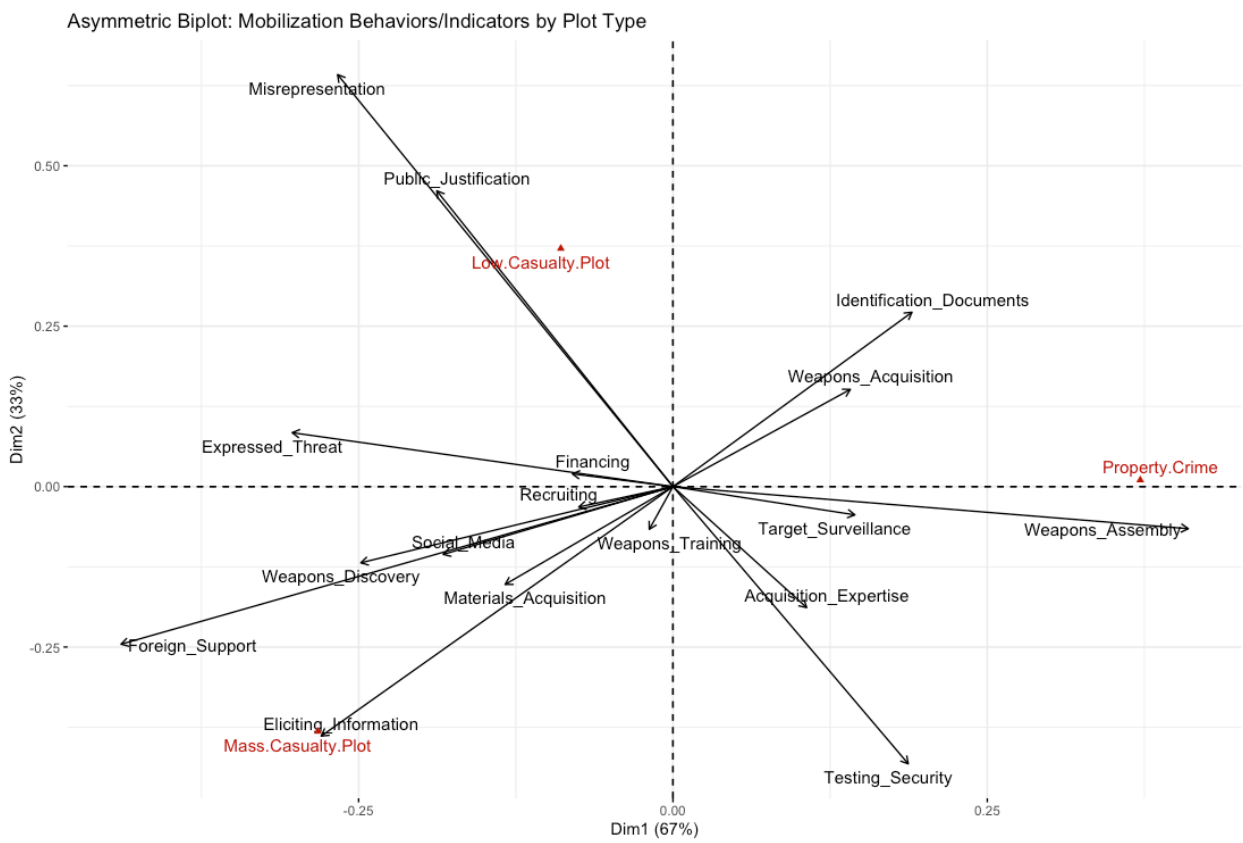
**What Does Mobilization Look Like?**

As we noted above, contemporary radicalization research focuses primarily on the cognitive and social processes that lead to certain criminal outcomes. Far less attention has been paid to what mobilization looks like for the individuals who engage in those crimes. In this section, we explore which mobilization indicators and behaviors cluster together when considering plot type. We use correspondence analysis (CA) to determine if there are sets of mobilization characteristics that cluster around non-violent property crimes, low casualty plots, and mass casualty plots. CA is similar to principal components analysis, but it is designed to be used with categorical rather than continuous data. The method is used to reveal the between and within group relationships of two sets of variables. It does this by assigning factor scores to the rows and columns in a contingency table. These scores represent the similarity structure of the data,

and they can be used to graphically display which variables cluster together when plotted in a two-dimensional space.

In our analysis, row values represent the mobilization behaviors that were discussed in the previous section of the report, while the column values are the three plot types—property crime, low casualty violence, and mass casualty violence—that are included in the PIRUS-Plots data. This analysis builds on the summary statistics provided in the previous section by showing which mobilization behaviors tend to cluster with the different types of extremist plots.

**Figure 14: Mobilization Behaviors by Plot Type**




The results of the correspondence analysis are displayed as an asymmetric biplot in Figure 14. The purpose of using an asymmetric, rather than symmetric, biplot is that is allows for the direct interpretation of the distance between row and column values. The factor scores of the

rows and columns are used to determine their plot coordinates. Since these scores are based on deviations from the average column, row values that are located near the point of origin (where the dimension 1 and dimension 2 axes intersect) do not provide much useful information for determining which mobilization behaviors distinguish the three plot types from each other. In our analysis, weapons training, financing, and recruiting are located near the point of origin, suggesting that they are not mobilization behaviors that are unique to a particular type of extremist plot.

Rather, row values that are far from the point of origin and located near column values suggest which mobilization behaviors separate property crimes, low casualty violence, and mass casualty plots from each other. Our analysis shows that property crimes are distinguished from the other plot types by the following mobilization behaviors: weapons assembly, weapons acquisition, target surveillance, identification documents, acquisition of expertise, and testing security. As we noted in the previous section, many property crimes in the PIRUS-Plots data involved the planned or actual use of explosive devices to target critical infrastructure. These types of plots require perpetrators to acquire the materials necessary to assemble weapons and they often must research their targets to determine how best to breach security deterrents. Only mass casualty plots involving explosives or targeted assassination attempts, which are both comparatively rare, have similar requirements, explaining why these mobilization indicators are clustered around non-violent property crimes.

The correspondence analysis shows that public justifications for the use of violence and misrepresentation separate low casualty plots from both non-violent property crimes and mass casualty plots. Given that misrepresentation is coded infrequently in the data, issuing public justifications for the use of violence appears to be the key factor that distinguishes low-casualty

plots from the others. Interestingly, expressed or implied threats sits at the midpoint between low and mass casualty plots but far from property crimes. This suggests that this mobilization indicator reliably separates violent from non-violent plots but is less useful for distinguishing between different types of violence.

Finally, the correspondence analysis shows that the mobilization behaviors that separate mass casualty plots from low casualty and property crimes are eliciting information, foreign support, weapons collection/discovery, materials acquisition, and the use of the internet and social media for plot planning and preparation. The relationship between foreign support and mass casualty plots is driven by the jihadist cases in the data, many of which were designed to cause a significant number of deaths and injuries. As noted above, many mass casualty plots were perpetrated by lone actors, and thus it is not surprising that the use of the internet and social media for plot planning and preparation is closely associated with this type of extremist outcome.

## Results Part III: Who Succeeds?

Next, we turn our attention to predicting the success or failure of domestic extremist plots. We explore two outcome variables: (1) *plot successful* and (2) *plot goals achieved*. As we noted above, the plot successful variable is a dichotomous measure coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator deployed a weapon in pursuit of their plot, *regardless* of the number of casualties they inflicted or the extent of the property damage they caused. This is the same standard used by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The plot goals achieved variable is a dichotomous measure codes as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator succeeded in achieving their tactical goals for the plot. This is a stricter standard that goes beyond deploying a weapon and instead considers if the tactical outcome of a plot is what the perpetrator intended to achieve.

Data for the plot success analysis comes from PIRUS-Plots. It is based on a sample of 1,532 unique individual-plot pairs. That is, unlike base PIRUS, a subject can appear multiple times in PIRUS-Plots if they were involved in multiple plots. Each row no longer refers to a unique subject but rather a unique subject-plot co-occurrence. Importantly, those who only made nebulous threats (see the previous section on mobilization) are not present in PIRUS-Plots: only individuals who mobilized to a non-violent, low casualty, or mass casualty crime are included. Additionally, an individual may be involved with different crime groups across multiple crimes in PIRUS-Plots. As we explained above, we use cluster-robust standard errors to correct for the resulting dependence of observations in our models.

For this analysis, we also test the efficacy of the routine activities theory (RAT) of crime for explaining successful outcomes in extremist plots. While not conventionally applied to the study of political violence and terrorism, RAT's focus on the situational factors that create opportunities for crime may provide terrorism researchers with novel ways of thinking about successful terrorist outcomes while also identifying targeted policy recommendations, such as situational crime prevention strategies that aim to discourage perpetrators, harden targets, and increase security (Clarke, 1997, 2016; Newman, 1972). In the following, we briefly describe RAT before turning to an analysis of the success or failure of violent plots that offer preliminary results about the theory's utility to terrorism studies.

**Routine Activities Theory**

According to the original formulation of RAT proposed by Cohen and Felson (1979), it is posited that for a crime to occur, three elements must converge in space and time: (1) a motivated offender who is willing and able to commit a crime; (2) a suitable target—*i.e.,* an object, person, or place that is perceived as vulnerable by the perpetrator; and (3) a lack of

"guardians," or any person or mechanism that might prevent the crime, such as police, security systems, or even passersby. Cohen and Felson (1979) originally deployed RAT to explain the rise in crime rates in the United States starting in the 1960s, concluding that much of the postwar crime boom can be attributed to aggregate changes in people's "routine activities." For example, postwar America experienced rapid growth in suburban populations, shifts in family dynamics as women entered the workforce and children remained in school longer, and the increased availability of valuable and relatively light consumer products. These changes meant that homes (and whole neighborhoods) were increasingly unoccupied during the day and contained progressively more highly valuable and portable objects. Cohen and Felson (1979) point out that above and beyond perpetrator motivation, these postwar changes increased the number of suitable targets for crime and reduced the crime-stopping efficacy of guardianship. Thus, RAT emphasizes that crimes are not random but are influenced by everyday behaviors and conditions that provide opportunities for crimes to occur.

RAT has been tested at both the macro- and micro-level with relative success. While several studies have found general support for the theory (cf. Dugan & Apel, 2005; Fisher et al. 1998; Maume, 1989; Messner & Blau, 1986; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 1998; Pratt, Holtfreter & Resig, 2010), Akers and Sellers (2013) nevertheless argue that the empirical validity of RAT is still not well-established. One of the most common criticisms of research utilizing RAT is that, with few exceptions (e.g., Greene-Colozzi & Silva, 2020; Sasse, 2005; Stahura & Sloan, 1988), most scholarship has not examined all three elements of the theory—motivated offenders, suitable targets, and capable guardians—simultaneously. Specifically, researchers generally focus on the characteristics of victims or guardians while taking the influence of offender traits and motivations for granted. Moreover, studies that do include offender-level variables often neglect

a key element of the theory: the offender's *capability*. Additionally, we know of no published research that has tested the impact of the offender's motivation and capability, suitable targets, and guardianship on political violence.[6]

In the following analyses, we test the utility of RAT as a theoretical framework for predicting the likelihood that U.S. extremists succeed in executing violent plots. We introduce measures for each of the three categories of RAT and evaluate their predictive significance for identifying successful violent extremist crimes.

*Motivated and Capable Offenders*

Of the three major components of RAT, the motivated and capable offender concept is the least empirically developed. Only a handful of studies have incorporated measures of perpetrator motivations into their evaluations of RAT (Lankford, 2016; Silva & Greene-Colozzi, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies do not capture the role that an offender's *capability* plays in explaining criminal activity. Similarly, while the terrorism literature has produced scholarship and practitioner reports examining why some plots succeed while other plots fail, these studies tend to focus on law enforcement interdiction strategies rather than the salient features of the offenders themselves (Crenshaw et al., 2017; Dahl, 2011; Difo, 2010). Other studies focus on terrorist organizations or groups at the expense of individual-level factors (Demir et al., 2022; Jackson & Frelinger, 2009).

We argue that perpetrators' capabilities, an overlooked component of RAT, likely plays an important role in a plot's success. In addition to including the individual-level variables age (continuous), military experience (1=yes, 0=no), previous criminal activity (0=none, 1=non-

[6] Some studies, such as Parkin and Freilich's (2015) research on the victims of far-right homicides, look at the relationship between one of RAT's key components and political violence, but we are unaware of any studies that analyze all three.

violent, 2=violent), lone actor (1=yes, 0=no), and degree centrality (continuous) from the mobilization literature (see above), we introduce a series of variables that capture the operational capabilities of perpetrators. *Leakage*: *Expressed Threat* is a dichotomous variable that is coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator communicated any threats about their plot prior to attempting it. *Leakage: SAR Indicators* is a dichotomous variable that is coded as 1 ("yes") if an individual engaged in any SAR behavior other than expressing threats prior to the plot. *Leakage: Social Media* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator used social media to discuss, plan, or prepare for their plot.

Additionally, we include several preparatory variables. *Preparation: Surveillance* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator engaged in surveillance of their target prior to their plot. *Preparation: Acquired Weapon* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator acquired the weapon(s) necessary for their plot. *Preparation: Trained for Plot* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator engaged in training activities before or during their plot. Finally, *Preparation: Recruited for Plot* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if a perpetrator attempted to recruit others for the plot.

We expect that a motivated and capable offender, wishing to maximize the probability of succeeding in their plots, would take steps to engage in operational security. Operational security, then, is a core feature of an offender's capacity. Good operational security would reasonably include preventing "leakage" by not expressing threats about plots, not disclosing details about plots on social media, and being careful about recruitment (Rose & Morrison, 2023). Additionally, motivated and capable offenders who want to succeed in their plots should be intentional about not engaging in suspicious behaviors that may tip off bystanders or law enforcement. Based on the mobilization literature, we would expect that the social networks of

motivated and capable offenders matter, and that the more connected an individual is to other extremists, the more capable they may be at succeeding in their plots due to the dissemination of knowledge and tactical expertise.

*Suitable Targets*

Target characteristics are the most studied aspect of RAT. In fact, the emphasis placed on the traits that make targets more attractive to individuals has led some scholars to refer to RAT as a theory of victimization rather than a theory of crime (Akers & Sellers, 2013; Meier & Miethe, 1993). This aspect of RAT is valuable to policy makers because it provides practical preventative measures for reducing victimization and hardening targets. Researchers have examined both how suitable targets affect the likelihood of ordinary crime (Freilich & Newman, 2017) and terrorism (Clarke & Newman, 2006). For example, Clarke and Newman (2006) argue that target risk can be assessed by how Exposed, Vital, Iconic, Legitimate, Destructible, Occupied, Near and Easy (EVIL DONE) the target is. Exposed targets are those that are more readily visible or stand out while vital targets are those that are important to the functioning of a society, like power plants or water supplies. Iconic targets are those with great symbolic meaning. Clarke and Newman (2006) argue that legitimate targets are those considered to be more deserving of an attack (e.g., military entities) as opposed to others (e.g., children). Finally, the authors argue that targets that are more easily destroyed, more occupied, nearer to the offender, and easier to access are more likely to be at risk for a terrorist attack.

Here, we consider two target variables that are consistent with the EVIL DONE paradigm: (1) the hardness of a target; and (2) the proximity of the perpetrator to their target. *Soft target* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if the plot's target is soft (e.g., private citizens, businesses, schools, police officers, non-governmental or religious organizations) and 0 ("no") if

it is hard (e.g., military targets, government targets).[7] Additionally, we include a variable *distance to plot* that measures the distance in miles between where a plotter lives and where their target is. We expect that successful perpetrators will prefer soft targets, as they are unlikely to encounter significant security obstacles or capable guardians that may derail their attack. Likewise, perpetrators may reasonably prefer targets that are near where they live, as they will be more familiar with the area.

*Capable Guardians*

The absence of a capable guardian plays a critical role in the creation of criminal opportunity. Felson (1995) defines a guardian as someone or something whose presence prevents crime. Though a simple concept, the ambiguity of this definition has allowed for various interpretations. According to RAT, guardianship can take any form so long as its presence makes it harder for an offender to carry out a crime. Hence, Cohen and Felson (1979: 590) argue that guardianship should not be limited to official agents of protection, like law enforcement, and that "guardianship by ordinary citizens of one another and of property…may be one of the most neglected elements in sociological research on crime." As a result, studies have operationalized capable guardians in many ways ranging from presence of a dog or alarm system (Garofalo & Clark, 1992), to female labor force participation (Bennett, 1991).

Diverse definitions of guardianship also exist in the terrorism literature. For example, Bigot (2017:156) measures guardianship as the presence of military, intelligence, and police forces. Robinson, Marchment, and Gill (2019) measure guardianship as a security guard or staff member witnessing a crime, while also including the presence of fencing, lighting, and the use of CCTV.

[7] We include police officers in the list of soft targets, even though they are armed, because of their public visibility and accessibility. As Cohen (2021) points out, police function as "street-level bureaucrats," having more direct contact with the general public than any other legal agents, and thereby make themselves more susceptible to a surprise attack than other types of government employee.

Notably, Robinson, Marchment, and Gill (2019) find that compared to non-extremists, extremist perpetrators were less concerned about the elevated risks associated with guardianship measures. This suggests that the role of guardianship in preventing crime may have a different impact on political violence compared to more conventional types of crime. It also suggests that traditional law enforcement interdiction strategies, such as the use of informants or the collection of civilian tips, are likely to be of particular importance to reducing the likelihood of extremist plot success, as past research shows (Dahl, 2011).

Based on these considerations, we introduce several measures of guardianship. *Informant* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if an informant was privy to a plot. We expect that the presence of informants will have a negative effect on plot success. *Bystander tip* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if law enforcement received a report or tip from a civilian pertaining to the plot. Like informant, we expect that the presence of bystander tips will have a negative effect on the likelihood of plot success. *The number of police (habitation)* is a count variable pertaining to the size of the local police force in the locality that an offender lives. The variable is standardized to represent the number officers per 1,000 residents. We use the habitation police force because we assume that if an individual is plotting a crime, even outside of their own locality, it is likely that most preparation and suspicious activity will take place in their immediate proximity. Moreover, most offenders commit crimes in the proximate area they live (Gill, Horgan, & Corner, 2019; Jackson, Ratcliff, & Smith, 2017).[8]

*Closest FBI field office* is a continuous variable that measures the distance, in miles, between where a perpetrator lives and the nearest FBI field office. *Post-2002* is a dichotomous variable

[8] Our plot distance variable had 94 missing values (6.1%). Because we know that most plots occur near where an offender lives, and because the distribution of plot distances is heavily skewed by only a small number of plots that occur far from a perpetrator's habitation, we imputed the median value of the plot distance variable for the 94 missing cases.

coded as 1 ("yes") if a plot occurred in the post-2002 counterterrorism landscape and is meant to control for the vast expansion of counterterror law enforcement activities after the 9/11 attacks. Finally, *attack in past two years* is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 ("yes") if the county or city in which a plot occurred had been the victim of a prior attack within the past two years.[9] This variable controls for any subsequent counterterror law enforcement improvements or activities that may have enhanced the guardianship capabilities of local police forces following a previous attack, and which may therefore make subsequent attacks less likely.

**Plot Success Results**

The summary statistics for the variables included in our analysis of successful plots are presented in Table 9. Only a minority of plots succeeded (30%), and even fewer achieved their ultimate tactical goals (19%). In addition to the motivated offender, suitable target, and capable guardian variables described above, we also include control variables for the type of violent plot (1=mass casualty, 0=low casualty), whether a plot is difficult—defined as being either an assassination attempt or a bombing—or not (1=yes, 0=no), and whether or not the perpetrator is an Islamist (1=yes, 0=no). To determine which factors are significant predictors of plot success and achieving plot goals, we fit a series of logistic regression models to compare the effects of the motivated offender, suitable target, capable guardian, and control variables on the outcomes separately before combining them into a full model.

**Table 9: Summary Statistics for Plot Successful and Goals Achieved Variables**

| Variable | N = 1,532[1] |
|---|---|
| **Dependent Variables** | |
| Plot Successful | |
| No | 1,076 (70%) |
| Yes | 456 (30%) |
| Plot Goals Achieved | |

[9] First, we checked for county-level data on previous attacks within the past two years. If we were missing data for the county level, we used city-level data instead.

**Table 9: Summary Statistics for Plot Successful and Goals Achieved Variables**

| Variable | N = 1,532[1] |
|---|---|
| No | 1,240 (81%) |
| Yes | 292 (19%) |
| **Motivated and Capable Offender** | |
| Age | |
| Mean (SD) | 35 (14) |
| Median (IQR) | 31 (24, 47) |
| Range | 15, 88 |
| (Missing) | 6 |
| Military Experience | |
| No | 1,172 (77%) |
| Yes | 360 (23%) |
| Previous Criminal Activity | |
| None | 951 (62%) |
| Non-violent | 333 (22%) |
| Violent | 248 (16%) |
| Lone Actor | |
| No | 910 (59%) |
| Yes | 622 (41%) |
| Degree Centrality | |
| Mean (SD) | 4 (6) |
| Median (IQR) | 2 (0, 5) |
| Range | 0, 47 |
| Leakage: Expressed Threat | |
| No | 564 (37%) |
| Yes | 968 (63%) |
| Leakage: SAR Indicators | |
| No | 302 (20%) |
| Yes | 1,230 (80%) |
| Leakage: Social Media | |
| No | 1,086 (71%) |
| Yes | 446 (29%) |
| Preparation: Surveillance | |
| No | 959 (63%) |
| Yes | 573 (37%) |
| Preparation: Acquired Weapon | |
| No | 222 (14%) |
| Yes | 1,310 (86%) |
| Preparation: Trained for Plot | |
| No | 713 (47%) |
| Yes | 819 (53%) |
| Preparation: Recruited for Plot | |
| No | 785 (51%) |
| Yes | 747 (49%) |
| Total Plots Planned by Group | |
| Mean (SD) | 5 (7) |
| Median (IQR) | 3 (1, 6) |
| Range | 1, 36 |
| **Suitable Target** | |
| Distance to Plot | |

**Table 9: Summary Statistics for Plot Successful and Goals Achieved Variables**

| Variable | N = 1,532[1] |
|---|---|
| Mean (SD) | 303 (599) |
| Median (IQR) | 37 (2, 248) |
| Range | 0, 4,873 |
| Soft Target | |
| No | 482 (31%) |
| Yes | 1,050 (69%) |
| Capable Guardianship | |
| Informant | |
| No | 985 (64%) |
| Yes | 547 (36%) |
| Bystander Tip | |
| No | 1,218 (80%) |
| Yes | 314 (20%) |
| Number of Police (Habitation) | |
| Mean (SD) | 2.19 (1.05) |
| Median (IQR) | 1.98 (1.59, 2.54) |
| Range | 0.00, 11.80 |
| Closest FBI Field Office | |
| Mean (SD) | 67 (75) |
| Median (IQR) | 36 (12, 110) |
| Range | 0, 428 |
| Post-2002 | |
| No | 433 (28%) |
| Yes | 1,099 (72%) |
| Attack in Past 2 Years | |
| No | 1,099 (72%) |
| Yes | 433 (28%) |
| **Controls** | |
| Type of Violent Plot | |
| Low Casualty | 429 (28%) |
| Mass Casualty | 1,103 (72%) |
| Difficult Plot | |
| No | 721 (47%) |
| Yes | 801 (53%) |
| (Missing) | 10 |
| Islamist | |
| No | 1,168 (76%) |
| Yes | 364 (24%) |

[1]n (%)

Table 10 contains the logistic regression fits for the plot successful outcome. As can be seen, the full model has the lowest residual deviance and the lowest log-likelihood, indicating that it is a better fit for the data than the separate models. We therefore focus our analysis on the results of the full model.

Considering the motivated offender factors first, we observe that plots committed by individuals with more connections in their social network have a higher likelihood of success. Indeed, as the degree centrality finding shows, each additional connection increases the likelihood of plot success by 26% ($p<.05$). Plots perpetrated by offenders who express threats has a sizable negative effect on plot success, reducing the likelihood by 79% ($p<.001$). Plots committed by offenders who acquire weapons for their plots are nearly 10 times more likely to succeed ($p<.001$), though plots involving individuals who engage in recruitment activities are 82% less likely to succeed ($p<.05$). Interestingly, none of age, military experience, previous criminal activity, or the lone actor status of an offender appear to have statistically significant effects on plot success in our model, nor does having other SAR indicators, leaking information about a plot to social media, surveilling a target, training for a plot, or the number of total plots planned by a group.

Considering the suitable target variables, we observe that selecting a soft target for a plot increases the likelihood of success by 200% ($p<.01$), although the distance a perpetrator lives from their target has no effect on plot success. With respect to capable guardians, there are important findings for our law enforcement variables. The presence of an informant significantly reduces the likelihood of plot success by 93% ($p<.01$). Similarly, when law enforcement receives a bystander tip, the likelihood of plot success falls by 92% ($p<.001$). The size of the police force in a perpetrator's inhabiting area has no statistically significant effects on plot success, and neither does proximity to a FBI field office. A plot taking place in the post-2002 threat landscape also does not have statistically significant effects on plot success, and neither does a plot taking place in a city or county that has experienced an attack in the past two years.

Finally, considering our control variables, we observe that subjects executing mass casualty events are 69% less likely to succeed than those who participate in low casualty events (p<.01). Similarly, perpetrators who choose difficult plots are 82% less likely to succeed compared to those who do not (p<.01). Being an Islamist has no statistically significant effects on plot success in the full model.

**Table 10: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Plot Success**

| | Motivated Offender | | Suitable Target | | Capable Guardian | | Controls | | Full Model | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| **Motivated/Capable Offender** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.98 | 0.014 | | | | | | | 1.00 | 0.014 |
| Military Experience | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 1.17 | 0.757 | | | | | | | 0.67 | 0.420 |
| Previous Criminal Activity | | | | | | | | | | |
| None | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Non-violent | 1.42 | 0.557 | | | | | | | 1.56 | 0.601 |
| Violent | 1.12 | 0.355 | | | | | | | 1.09 | 0.365 |
| Lone Actor | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.71 | 0.461 | | | | | | | 2.14 | 1.08 |
| Degree Centrality | 1.13** | 0.050 | | | | | | | 1.26* | 0.138 |
| Leakage: Expressed Threat | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.16*** | 0.067 | | | | | | | 0.21*** | 0.091 |
| Leakage: SAR Indicators | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.45* | 0.171 | | | | | | | 1.02 | 0.428 |
| Leakage: Social Media | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.78 | 0.305 | | | | | | | 1.30 | 0.604 |
| Preparation: Surveillance | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 1.63 | 0.839 | | | | | | | 1.42 | 0.769 |
| Preparation: Acquired Weapon | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 11.8*** | 6.18 | | | | | | | 9.93*** | 6.83 |
| Preparation: Trained for Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.42 | 0.243 | | | | | | | 0.81 | 0.367 |
| Preparation: Recruited for Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.16* | 0.117 | | | | | | | 0.18* | 0.148 |
| Total Plots Planned by Group | 0.94 | 0.052 | | | | | | | 0.92 | 0.053 |
| **Suitable Target** | | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 10: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Plot Success**

| | Motivated Offender | | Suitable Target | | Capable Guardian | | Controls | | Full Model | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] |
| Distance to Plot | | | 1.00 | 0.000 | | | | | 1.00 | 0.000 |
| Soft Target | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | — | — | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | 3.78*** | 1.45 | | | | | 3.00** | 1.22 |
| **Capable Guardianship** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informant | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.04** | 0.038 | | | 0.07** | 0.067 |
| Bystander Tip | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.09*** | 0.049 | | | 0.08*** | 0.060 |
| Number of Police (Habitation) | | | | | 0.93 | 0.097 | | | 1.07 | 0.129 |
| Closest FBI Field Office | | | | | 1.00 | 0.003 | | | 1.00 | 0.003 |
| Post-2002 | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.62 | 0.318 | | | 0.27 | 0.205 |
| Attack in Past 2 Years | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.54 | 0.185 | | | 0.72 | 0.274 |
| **Controls** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Type of Violent Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low Casualty | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |
| Mass Casualty | | | | | | | 0.43* | 0.149 | 0.31** | 0.117 |
| Difficult Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | | | 0.12*** | 0.044 | 0.18** | 0.095 |
| Islamist | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | | | 0.42* | 0.150 | 0.50 | 0.239 |
| No. Obs. | 1,526 | | 1,532 | | 1,532 | | 1,522 | | 1,516 | |
| Null deviance | 1,861 | | 1,866 | | 1,866 | | 1,858 | | 1,854 | |
| Residual Deviance | 1,260 | | 1,768 | | 1,351 | | 1,432 | | 832 | |
| Log-likelihood | -630 | | -884 | | -676 | | -716 | | -416 | |

[1]*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
[2]OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

Turning now to predicting whether a plot achieves its tactical goals, we present an additional set of logit models in Table 11. As can be seen by the residual deviance and log-likelihood estimates, the full model fits the data best and our analysis therefore focuses on the complete fit. Considering the motivated offender factors first, we do not find much evidence that the features of perpetrators are significant predictors of achieving plot goals, though perpetrators

who acquire weapons for their plots are about 3.5 times more likely to achieve their goals than those who do not (p<.05). Observing the suitable target variables, we find that plots targeting soft targets are about 5.2 times more likely to achieve their goals (p<.001) than plots targeting hard targets, which is consistent with the plot success model. Additionally, the results for the law enforcement variables are largely the same as the plot success model. The presence of an informant reduces the likelihood of achieving plot goals by 98% (p<.05), and law enforcement receiving a bystander tip reduces the likelihood of achieving plot goals by 92% (p<.001). However, a new finding is that plots occurring in the post-2002 period are 78% less likely to achieve their ultimate goals than plots occurring pre-2002 (p<.05).

The results of our control variables also follow the trends observed for plot success. Mass casualty plots are much less likely to achieve their ultimate goals (91% less likely, p<.001), and difficult plots are 80% less likely to achieve their ultimate goals (p<.05). Once more, we do not find any statistically significant results for our Islamist ideological control.

**Table 11: Logistic Regression Models Predicting whether Plots Achieve their Ultimate Goals**

| | Motivated Offender | | Suitable Target | | Capable Guardian | | Controls | | Full Model | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| **Motivated/Capable Offender** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age | 0.97* | 0.015 | | | | | | | 0.98 | 0.012 |
| Military Experience | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 1.83 | 0.976 | | | | | | | 1.74 | 0.732 |
| Previous Criminal Activity | | | | | | | | | | |
| None | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Non-violent | 0.96 | 0.351 | | | | | | | 0.80 | 0.308 |
| Violent | 1.22 | 0.397 | | | | | | | 1.18 | 0.424 |
| Lone Actor | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.37 | 0.194 | | | | | | | 0.71 | 0.294 |
| Degree Centrality | 1.01 | 0.044 | | | | | | | 0.99 | 0.046 |
| Leakage: Expressed Threat | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.32* | 0.147 | | | | | | | 0.42 | 0.208 |
| Leakage: SAR Indicators | | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 11: Logistic Regression Models Predicting whether Plots Achieve their Ultimate Goals**

| | Motivated Offender | | Suitable Target | | Capable Guardian | | Controls | | Full Model | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[12] | **SE**[2] |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.82 | 0.321 | | | | | | | 1.81 | 0.877 |
| Leakage: Social Media | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.62 | 0.282 | | | | | | | 1.44 | 0.769 |
| Preparation: Surveillance | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 1.73 | 0.937 | | | | | | | 1.52 | 0.875 |
| Preparation: Acquired Weapon | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 6.17** | 3.60 | | | | | | | 3.49* | 1.96 |
| Preparation: Trained for Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.37 | 0.226 | | | | | | | 0.65 | 0.287 |
| Preparation: Recruited for Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | — | — | | | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | 0.19** | 0.118 | | | | | | | 0.49 | 0.287 |
| Total Plots Planned by Group | 0.99 | 0.047 | | | | | | | 0.93 | 0.045 |
| **Suitable Target** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Distance to Plot | | | 1.00 | 0.000 | | | | | 1.00 | 0.000 |
| Soft Target | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | — | — | | | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | 11.5*** | 4.88 | | | | | 5.17*** | 2.36 |
| **Capable Guardianship** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Informant | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.01*** | 0.009 | | | 0.02* | 0.031 |
| Bystander Tip | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.10*** | 0.059 | | | 0.08*** | 0.053 |
| Number of Police (Habitation) | | | | | 1.0 | 0.102 | | | 1.05 | 0.103 |
| Closest FBI Field Office | | | | | 1.00 | 0.003 | | | 1.00 | 0.003 |
| Post-2002 | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.36* | 0.158 | | | 0.22* | 0.134 |
| Attack in Past 2 Years | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | — | — | | | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | 0.42* | 0.165 | | | 0.50 | 0.205 |
| **Controls** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Type of Violent Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low Casualty | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |
| Mass Casualty | | | | | | | 0.13*** | 0.047 | 0.09*** | 0.033 |
| Difficult Plot | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |
| Yes | | | | | | | 0.10*** | 0.041 | 0.20** | 0.110 |
| Islamist | | | | | | | | | | |
| No | | | | | | | — | — | — | — |

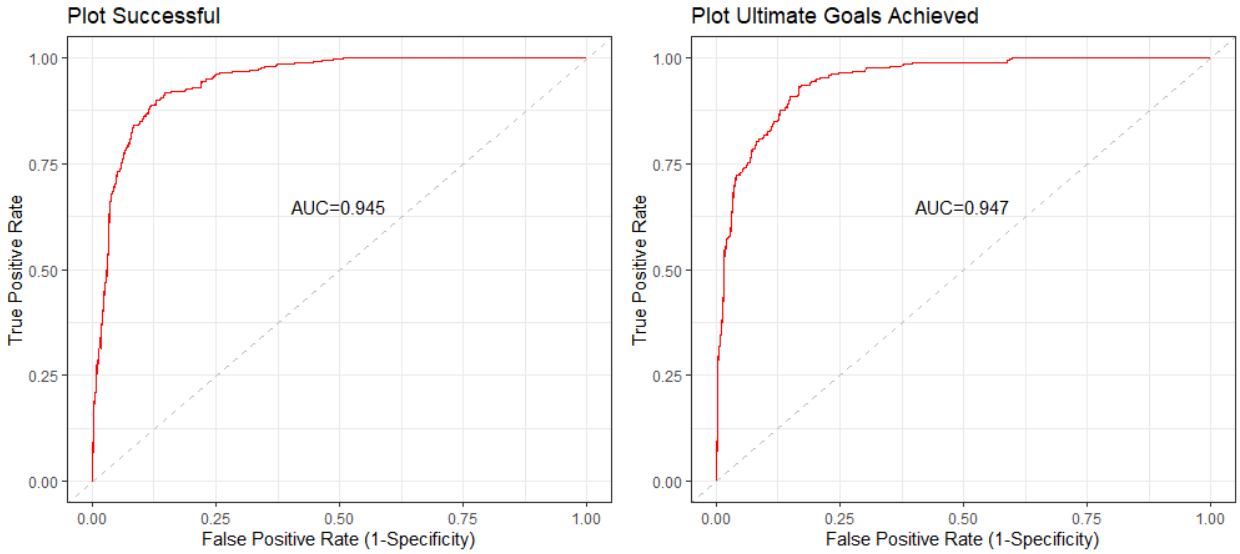
**Table 11: Logistic Regression Models Predicting whether Plots Achieve their Ultimate Goals**

| | Motivated Offender | | Suitable Target | | Capable Guardian | | Controls | | Full Model | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Predictor** | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] | **OR**[1,2] | **SE**[2] |
| Yes | | | | | | | 0.72 | 0.279 | 0.82 | 0.388 |
| No. Obs. | 1,526 | | 1,532 | | 1,532 | | 1,522 | | 1,516 | |
| Null deviance | 1,490 | | 1,492 | | 1,492 | | 1,488 | | 1,486 | |
| Residual Deviance | 1,178 | | 1,338 | | 1,074 | | 1,015 | | 680 | |
| Log-likelihood | -589 | | -669 | | -537 | | -508 | | -340 | |

[1]*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
[2]OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error

Figure 15 plots the ROC curves to assess the fits of the full plot successful and plot goals achieved models. As can be seen, the results are excellent. Both models fit the data very well, obtaining AUC scores approaching 95%. This is evidence of reliable model fits, and both models perform significantly better than a random classifier.

**Figure 15: ROC Curves for Plot Successful and Plot Goals Achieved Logit Models**




## Conclusion

The findings that we have presented in this report have several important implications for criminal justice professionals and violence prevention practitioners. Perhaps most important, the PIRUS-Plots data reveal that terrorist plots and attack planning have evolved significantly over

the past three decades, with mass casualty terrorism emerging in recent years as the most common event-type for U.S. extremists. Mass casualty attacks have a sizeable impact on public safety, and they can significantly influence community perceptions of danger. They also display unique mobilization characteristics that have important implications for counterterrorism and terrorism prevention.

First, most mass casualty crimes are committed by people acting alone and without significant direct help from extremist groups. Thus, suspicious activities related to group-based attack planning and preparation, such as recruiting, financing, and military-style training and exercises, are often absent from mass casualty plots. The most common mobilization indicators associated with mass casualty terrorism—expressing a threat, using online resources for attack planning, and acquiring firearms—may not be visible to, or cause alarm among, law enforcement. Indeed, our findings suggest that bystander reporting, not law enforcement surveillance, is the most common way that mass casualty plots are foiled, which underscores the critical role of community-police trust in stopping acts of terrorism.

Second, while our analysis supports the conclusion that the NSI's SAR indicators remain relevant to detecting terrorism in the United States, the recent surge in mass casualty plots warrants a further examination into whether our understanding of mobilization indicators is keeping pace with terrorist adaptation. Contemporary mass casualty attacks are rarely complex or sophisticated. Instead, they typically involve the use of firearms and the exploitation of insecure "soft" targets. Terrorist perpetrators are less often engaging in the behaviors that are the most suspicious, such as breaching security deterrents, falsifying identification documents, or acquiring explosives or other complex weapons, because their goals and tactics do not require them to do so. Attacks targeting business, civilians, and places of worship often require little

more on the part of the perpetrator than identifying a target, researching its location in public sources, and purchasing a firearm. More work is needed to determine what mobilization looks like in mass casualty crimes, and what constitutes suspicious behaviors. For instance, are there types or quantities of firearms or ammunition that should arouse suspicion in a reasonable person? Does the illegal purchase of unregistered firearms or the manufacture of 3D printed guns constitute suspicious behaviors that could be indicative of a terrorist plot? Are there lessons about "leakage" and other pre-attack behaviors from the literature on non-ideological mass shootings that could provide insights into the warning signs of an impending mass casualty terrorist attack?

Despite the increase in relatively simple plots involving firearms and civilian targets, our analysis finds that most extremists who mobilize are interdicted before they can attempt their attacks. We find that aspects of motivation and capability on the part of the perpetrator, the presence of suitable targets, and capable guardianship all play a role in explaining the poor attack success rate of U.S. extremists. Many perpetrators of mass casualty plots and other types of violent crimes are stopped due to their own actions—namely, their inability to avoid leaking their attack plans to family, friends, acquaintances, or community members. Again, it is reporting from these concerned bystanders, rather than the size or proximity of police, that is responsible for the interdiction of most terrorist plots.

Finally, for community-based prevention programs, we find that the individuals who mobilize to violence tend to be notably different than individuals who espouse extremist views but do not mobilize or those who mobilize to commit non-violent crimes. Mobilization to violence involves the intersection of individual-level characteristics, social networks, and movement influences. Most importantly, individuals who mobilize to extreme forms of violence,

including mass casualty terrorism, tend to act alone or as members of small, isolated cliques; they often have military backgrounds and/or previous criminal histories that include the use of violence; and they often are aligned with movements that promote mass casualty terrorism and elevate the social status of their most lethal adherents. In addition to addressing individual-level concerns related to previous criminality and identity-seeking, prevention and intervention programs must consider the role that social dynamics, including those that occur in online spaces, play in radicalization to violence. And, as we have argued elsewhere (Jensen et al., 2023b), far more work needs to be done to address extremism in the military and veteran communities.

## Appendix A: Descriptions of the SAR Indicators and Examples

| SAR Indicator | NSI Description | Examples of Included Behaviors | Examples of Excluded Behaviors |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Breach/Attempted Intrusion** | Unauthorized personnel attempting to enter or actually entering a restricted area, secured protected site, or nonpublic area. Impersonation of authorized personnel (e.g., police/security officers, janitor, or other personnel). | Impersonating an airport employee to access and take photos of restricted areas. | The breach of restricted area as part of a public demonstration and not in preparation for a future attack. |
| **Misrepresentation** | Presenting false information or misusing insignia, documents, and/or identification to misrepresent one's affiliation as a means of concealing possible illegal activity. | Individual purporting to be acting on behalf of government officials or law enforcement to gain entry to a restricted building. | Individual purporting to be a member of law enforcement directly following the crime. |
| **Theft/Loss/Diversion** | Stealing or diverting something associated with a facility/infrastructure or secured protected site (e.g., badges, uniforms, identification, emergency vehicles, technology, or documents {classified or unclassified}), which are proprietary to the facility/infrastructure or secured protected site. | Individual(s) stealing weapons from a military base to be used in a future plot. | Any case where theft was the final goal of the perpetrators and not done to further a subsequent attack. |
| **Sabotage/Tampering/ Vandalism** | Damaging, manipulating, defacing, or destroying part of a facility/infrastructure or secured protected site. | No cases included in PIRUS-Plots. | Any case where sabotage, tampering, or vandalism was the final goal of the perpetrators and not done to further a violent plot. |
| **Cyberattack** | Compromising or attempting to compromise or disrupt an organization's information technology infrastructure. | No cases included in PIRUS-Plots. | Any case where a cyberattack was the final goal of the perpetrators and not done to further a violent plot. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Expressed or Implied Threat** | Communicating a spoken or written threat to commit a crime that will result in death or bodily injury to another person or persons or to damage or compromise a facility/infrastructure or secured protected site. | Individual(s) expressing threat to a friend or family member or an informant/undercover agent working on the case. | Posting anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic, or de-humanizing signs, symbols, memes, or language on social media or another public forum, but not in reference to a specific target. |
| **Aviation Activity** | Learning to operate, or operating an aircraft, or interfering with the operation of an aircraft in a manner that poses a threat of harm to people or property and that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. Such activity may or may not be a violation of Federal Aviation Regulations. | Receiving aviation training to for the expressed purpose of committing a subsequent attack. | Receiving aviation training unrelated to planning an attack (e.g., working as a pilot before radicalizing). |
| **Eliciting Information** | Questioning individuals or otherwise soliciting information at a level beyond mere curiosity about a public or private event or particular facets of a facility or building's purpose, operations, security procedures, etc., in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Individual(s) calling a target to ask about their "most active" days; Perpetrator(s) inquiring about specific individuals' presence at a particular event. | Accessing information about a potential target online via publicly accessible information. |
| **Testing or Probing of Security** | Deliberate interactions with, or challenges to, installations, personnel, or systems that reveal physical, personnel, or cybersecurity capabilities in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Attempting to enter a protected facility prior to the attack to test and assess its level of security and/or identify potential access points. | Surveilling a target without trying to enter the facility. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Recruiting/Financing** | Providing direct financial support to operations teams and contacts or building operations teams and contacts; compiling personnel data, banking data, or travel data in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Attempting to recruit co-conspirators online to participate in, or help plan, an attack; engaging in fraudulent activities to raise the funds need to commit an attack. | Planning an attack with a co-conspirator with whom the individual co-radicalized; self-financing a terrorist plot with personal funds. |
| **Photography** | Taking pictures or video of persons, facilities, buildings, or infrastructure in an unusual or surreptitious manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. Examples include taking pictures or video of infrequently used access points, the superstructure of a bridge, personnel performing security functions (e.g., patrols, badge/vehicle checking), security-related equipment (e.g., perimeter fencing, security cameras), etc. | Taking pictures or videos of a target. | Accessing photographs of a target that exist online or in other public sources. |
| **Observation/ Surveillance** | Demonstrating unusual or prolonged interest in facilities, buildings, or infrastructure beyond mere casual (e.g., tourists) or professional (e.g., engineers) interest and in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. Examples include observation through binoculars, taking notes, attempting to mark off or measure distances, etc. | Travelling to a target and conducting reconnaissance in preparation for an attack. | Obtaining address or location details about a target information through public sources that are freely available online. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Material Acquisition/Storage** | Acquisition and/or storage of unusual quantities of materials such as cell phones, pagers, radio control toy servos or controllers; fuel, chemicals, or toxic materials; and timers or other triggering devices, in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Possession of the materials needed to make an explosive device or CBRN weapon; possessing a viable explosive device or CBRN weapons. | Possessing firearms, firearms parts, or ammunition. |
| **Acquisition of Expertise** | Attempts to obtain or conduct training or otherwise obtain knowledge or skills in security concepts, military weapons or tactics, or other unusual capabilities in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Engaging in military-style training in public areas in preparation for committing an attack; test detonations of explosive devices in open, public areas. | Firearms practice in the backyard of private residence or an officially sanctioned gun range; military experience prior to radicalizing. |
| **Weapons Collection/ Discovery** | Collection or discovery of unusual amounts or types of weapons, including explosives, chemicals, and other destructive materials, or evidence, detonations or other residue, wounds, or chemical burns, that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | Storage of materials to create an explosive device or CBRN weapon or storage of a viable explosive device or CBRN weapon. | Storing firearms, firearms parts, or ammunition. |
| **Sector-Specific Incident** | Actions associated with a characteristic of unique concern to specific sectors (e.g., the public health sector), with regard to their personnel, facilities, systems, or functions in a manner that would arouse suspicion of terrorism or other criminality in a reasonable person. | No cases included in PIRUS-Plots. | Any case in which a sector-specific incident was the final goal of the perpetrators and not done to further a subsequent attack. |

## Appendix B: Descriptions of Ideological Movements

**Anarchist**
In 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) defined anarchist violent extremists as opposing "all forms of capitalism, corporate globalization, and governing institutions, which are perceived as harmful to society" (ODNI, 2021). For our purposes, "Anarchists" include those primarily stemming from left-wing political views and are categorized differently than those who oppose the government from a right-wing perspective. Anarchists "often advocate for a radically inclusive form of governance, perhaps best understood as a non-hierarchical form of direct democracy," contrary to the more exclusive politics of right-wing anti-government ideology (Jackson, 2022). We include anti-fascist (Antifa) extremists, and those who engaged in violence against police officers motivated by the 2020 racial justice protests, under the anarchist label.

**Anti-Abortion**
Anti-abortion extremists are those who organize primarily around the belief that abortion is wrong and must be stopped. While opposition to abortion is common in pro-life activism in the United States, anti-abortion extremists take their beliefs a step farther by engaging in violence to physically disrupt operations of clinics, including threatening, injuring, or even killing those inside (ADL, 2015). While this is a form of "single issue terrorism" (meaning the extremists are centered on a very specifical and narrow issue), studies have found that anti-abortion extremists are often integrated into the broader right-wing scene through ideological consumption (Miller, Yates, & Kane, 2022). Some well-known anti-abortion extremist groups include the Army of God, the American Coalition of Life Activists, Operation Rescue, and Lambs of Christ, although lone actors are also common.

**Anti-Government**
Anti-government extremism, sometimes referred to as the "Patriot" movement, operates on the core principle that the federal government is illegitimate and must be resisted by any means necessary. Several groups fall under the anti-government umbrella, with the two most prominent being sovereign citizens, who believe they are not bound by the authority of any government and often engage in pseudo-legal arguments and paper terrorism tactics, and the patriot/militia movement, who believe they must prepare for an eventual conflict with the government, such as by learning paramilitary skills (Jackson, 2019, 2022). Some researchers further classify tax protestors, constitutional sheriffs, and segments of the survivalist/"prepper" communities, as well as conspiracy theorists, under this label (Beutel & Johnson, 2021). While the major tenant of anti-government extremism is characterized by "intense fear and loathing of the federal government" rather than racism or ethnic and religious bias, we consider this ideology to be part of the larger far-right ecosystem. Left-wing anti-government sentiments are captured in the "anarchist" ideology. Particularly well-known anti-government groups include the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters, as well as other regional militias, and those radicalized by the perceived government failures during the 1990's at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas.

**Black Nationalist**

Black nationalist extremism is an ideology that espouses hatred toward whites, the LGBTQ+ community, and Jews. It arose as a response to the real and brutal oppression of Black people in the United States, however, many of those who adhere to the ideology promote explicitly racist and violent ideas. Black nationalists have advocated for a separate territory for African Americans in the United States, similar to arguments made by white nationalists for a "white homeland." This ideological category encompasses radical elements of groups like the Black Hebrew Israelites and the Nation of Islam, as well as Moorish sovereign citizens. Moorish sovereigns have borrowed paper terrorism and pseudo-legal tactics from far-right, anti-government sovereign citizens. However, they combine this with a belief that African Americans "constitute an elite class within American society with special rights and privileges that convey on them a sovereign immunity placing them beyond federal and state authority" (SPLC, n.d.). This ideology often carries out violent attacks on law enforcement.

**Conspiracy Theory**

Though many extremist ideologies contain some elements of conspiracy theories in their guiding narratives, this category focuses on those who carry out attacks motivated primarily by their belief in conspiracy theories, including QAnon—the idea that "the world is controlled by the "Deep State," a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, and that former President Donald Trump is the only person who can defeat it" (ADL, 2020). Other conspiracy theories that have motivated extremists include Flat Earth theories, Holocaust denial, 5G paranoia, and conspiracies about the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Environmental/Animal Rights**

The Environment/Animal Rights ideological category includes those motivated by exploitation or destruction of natural resources and the environment and those motivated by real or perceived abuse and exploitation of animals, including narrower issues such as logging, fishing, nuclear energy, whaling, pipeline construction, and the use of fur (Eagan, 1996; Hwang, 2021; ODNI, 2021). Historically, the most well-known groups in the area were the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and Animal Liberation Front (ALF), but our category also includes more recently founded organizations, such as Direct Action Everywhere (DxE). These groups are typically grass roots organizations who carry out direct action in the form of sabotage or violence.

**Islamist**

Islamist extremists believe that "the West (and America specifically) is at war with Islam, and it is the duty of Muslims to defend the global Muslim community through violent means" (ADL, 2021). Islamists, sometimes called Jihadists, are distinctly radical, and they utilize the Muslim faith for their own violent means. Many who radicalize into Islamist ideology attempt to travel abroad to become foreign fighters in Muslim majority countries. However, others carry out attacks in the United States. Groups that fall under this category may include ISIS, Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and al-Shabaab, among others.

**White Supremacist**

White Supremacists, sometimes known as White Nationalists, espouse an ideology that proclaims non-white persons to be inferior to white people of European descent. The primary goal of many white supremacists is to create a white ethnostate (SPLC, n.d.). They often cite the "Great Replacement" or "White Genocide"—the idea that whites in the United States are being

systematically replaced and destroyed—as justification for carrying out violent attacks against non-whites. Much of this ideology developed from the historical neo-Nazi, Klan, and skinhead movements. However, modern white supremacists sometimes invoke Christian or European Identity to couch their views in more socio-cultural characteristics rather than exclusively racial ones to appeal to a contemporary audience (Miller, Yates, Kane, 2022).

**Xenophobic/Nativist**

Although there is overlap with the White Supremacist category, the Xenophobic/Nativist ideology focuses primarily on immigration and ethnicity. These extremists employ a hatred or fear of the "other" and use this "other" to define who can be an "authentic" member of a nation and who cannot (Beutel and Karcic, 2022). This ideology often manifests as anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attacks, as well as patrolling the southern border.

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