



START

U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism before and after the April 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings

*Report to the Resilient Systems Division,
Science and Technology Directorate, U.S.
Department of Homeland Security*

October 2013

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism
*A Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Center of Excellence
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About This Report

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This research was supported by the Resilient Systems Division of the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through Award Number 2010ST108LR0004 made to START. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START.

This report is part of a series in support of the Prevent/Deter Program. The goal of this program is to sponsor research that will aid the intelligence and law enforcement communities in identifying potential terrorist threats and support policymakers in developing prevention efforts.

About START and JPSM

START is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. 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.

JPSM is the nation's oldest and largest program offering graduate training in the principles and practices of survey research. Founded in 1993, it is sponsored by the Federal Interagency Consortium on Statistical Policy and located at the University of Maryland. To date, it has more than 200 graduates working in government agencies, academic settings, and private survey research firms. Its award-winning faculty is drawn from the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, and Westat.

Citations

To cite this report, please use this format:

LaFree, Gary, and Stanley Presser, Roger Tourangeau, Amy Adamczyk, "U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism before and after the April 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings," Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate's Resilient Systems Division. College Park, MD: START, 2013.

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Executive Summary

This report examines the possible impact of the Boston Marathon bombings on American beliefs and attitudes about terrorism and government countermeasures by comparing answers given by independent samples of American adults immediately before and after the bombings.

When comparing the samples that completed the survey before and after the bombings, there was no difference in the proportion of respondents—roughly one in six—who said they had thought during the previous week about the possibility of a terrorist attack in the United States. However, those who completed the survey after the Boston bombings were more likely to assign a higher probability to a terrorist attack in the United States, with about 26 percent viewing an attack as somewhat, very, or extremely likely after the bombings compared with about 13 percent before the bombings. There was no difference between the samples in the probabilities respondents assigned to a terrorist attack in their own community or to a terrorist attack in which their friends, relatives, or themselves were victims. Fewer than 3 percent of the respondents saw either possibility as somewhat, very, or extremely likely. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who said they had done something different because of the possibility of a terrorist attack was the same in the samples that completed the survey before and after the bombings—about 6 percent.

As might be expected, respondents who completed the survey after the Boston bombings were less likely than those who completed it before to judge that the government was effective in preventing terrorism in the United States. Thirty-one percent of those who completed the survey before the bombings viewed the government as very effective compared with 22 percent of those who completed it after. However, there was essentially no difference before and after the Boston bombings in the proportion saying that terrorists will always find a way to carry out major attacks in the United States—roughly three out of four respondents—and in the proportion saying the government can eventually prevent all major attacks in the United States—about one in four.

People who completed the survey after the bombings were generally more likely to say they would call the police if they became aware of terrorism-related situations such as a person talking about joining a terrorist group, reading material from a terrorist group, distributing handouts supporting terrorism, traveling overseas to join a terrorist group, or talking about planting explosives in a public place. The increase in those saying they would be “somewhat” or “very” likely to call the call police ranged between 7 percentage points (if respondents became aware of someone talking about planting explosives or distributing handouts supporting terrorism) to 12 percentage points (if respondents became aware of someone reading materials from a terrorist group).

The proportion of respondents aware of the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign was the same in the samples that completed the survey before and after the bombings—roughly one in four—as were predictions of the campaign’s effectiveness. Of those who said they had heard about the campaign, about four in five said they thought the campaign would be somewhat or very effective. Likewise, willingness to attend a meeting about terrorism with either local police or people from the Department of

Homeland Security (DHS) was unchanged, with about 60 percent of respondents saying they would be willing to meet with either local police or DHS officials.

Events in Boston provided us with an unexpected opportunity to examine how public attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism policies in the United States changed before and after an actual terrorist attack. The most striking change in attitudes following the Boston Marathon bombings was an increase in respondents' willingness to call the police in a variety of terrorism-related situations. On the other hand, most of the other attitudes toward terrorism and government responses to it were not significantly different among those who completed the survey before and after the event. Taken together, the results suggest that public attitudes toward terrorism and government responses to it are fairly stable even in the face of highly publicized events. But at the same time, a highly publicized event appears to increase the willingness of the American public to help the authorities prevent future attacks.

Introduction

On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring more than 260. Subsequent investigation determined that this was an act of terror and identified two Chechen brothers who had immigrated to the United States as refugees in 2002 as the alleged perpetrators. In this report, we examine the differences in Americans' beliefs and attitudes about terrorism and government efforts to counter it before and after this event.

To complete the full project of which this is a part, researchers from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and the Joint Program in Survey Methodology (JPSM) first completed a review of past surveys on attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism,¹ as well as consulted with academic and government experts. We found that existing survey data did not provide comprehensive baseline information about U.S. beliefs and attitudes on terrorism and counterterrorism—baseline information that would be valuable for informing government policies and programs and developing appropriate countermeasures for the country. Our project employed advanced survey methodologies, coupled with informed understanding about perceptions of terrorism, of violence, and of government policy, to develop and implement a more refined survey instrument than had been available in the past.

The final questionnaire developed for the project included items related to whether participants had thought about the possibility of terrorism in the preceding week. Questions also addressed whether participants thought a terrorist attack was likely in the United States in the next year. Other questions dealt with participants' views of government effectiveness at preventing terrorism, including programs such as "If you See Something, Say Something" campaign. Participants were also asked about how likely they would be to call the police in response to various actions related to terrorism and their willingness to meet with officials to discuss terrorism.

Baseline results from a nationally representative sample of 1,576 adults who completed the questionnaire via the web in the fall of 2012 are described in our March 2013 report "[U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism](#)."²

In the spring of 2013, approximately six months after the fall 2012 baseline administration, respondents were re-contacted and invited to answer the same set of questions (though they were not told the questions were the same). At the time of the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, most of the original respondents had completed the spring 2013 survey. A comparison of the spring 2013 results completed before the bombings with those from the fall 2012 baseline administration showed virtually no change,

¹ Joint Program in Survey Methodology and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "U.S. Attitudes towards Terrorism and Counterterrorism: A Supplemental Module for the General Social Survey." Unpublished report: University of Maryland (January 18, 2011).

² Gary LaFree, Stanley Presser, Roger Tourangeau, Adamczyk, Amy, "U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism," Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate's Resilient Systems Division. College Park, MD: START, 2013.

as might be expected from the relatively short time between the surveys and the lack of notable events related to terrorism during the intervening time.

Another 112 respondents completed the survey after the bombings (between April 15 and May 7), but their small number and distinctiveness (e.g., they were of lower social and economic status) meant they do not provide a good basis for drawing inferences about the impact of the bombings on public attitudes. Instead we arranged for the same web questionnaire to be answered by an independent, nationally representative sample a month later. In this report, we compare the answers of the 1,173 respondents who completed the survey between April 2, 2013 and April 15, 2013 with those of the 302 respondents who completed the survey between May 15, 2013 and June 2, 2013.

Methods

Of those selected for the original fall 2012 baseline survey (administered from September 28, 2012 to October 12, 2012), 62 percent responded and 74 percent of those completed the spring 2013 survey before the bombings (from April 2, 2013 to April 15, 2013). Taking into account nonresponse at the various stages of recruitment and retention over time, the overall response rate for the sample that completed the spring 2013 survey before the bombings was 2 percent. Of those selected for the comparable survey after the bombings, the overall response rate was also 2 percent. These response rates are typical of those obtained by high quality web surveys. Such surveys have been shown to produce results similar to those of high quality phone and in-person surveys that achieve higher response rates. Both samples were part of the Knowledge Networks (now GfK) panel, the members of which were recruited from a probability sample of addresses in the United States and were provided a computer and an Internet connection if they did not have them.

To account for nonresponse and noncoverage, the estimates presented in this report were weighted to totals from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) for nine variables: region, urbanicity, age, sex, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, income, and Internet access from home. This standard survey procedure ensures that the distributions of these background variables for both samples match those in the CPS and is likely to improve the survey estimates to the extent the survey variables are related to these background variables.

All the estimates in this report exclude missing data, which range between 1 and 2 percentage points across the questions.

Results

The Salience of Terrorism

There was no difference before and after the Boston Marathon bombings in the proportion of respondents—roughly one respondent in six—who said they had thought during the previous week about the possibility of a terrorist attack. This was true for the random half sample that was asked about the possibility of “a terrorist attack in the United States” and the half sample that was asked about the possibility of “a major terrorist attack in the United States like the one that occurred on September 11, 2001.”

However, as shown in Table 1, respondents who completed the survey after the Boston bombings were more likely than those who completed it before to assign higher probabilities to a terrorist attack in the United States, though this was mainly true for the random half sample in which the attack was described simply as a terrorist attack: not for the half sample in which the attack was described as a major attack like the one that occurred on September 11, 2001.

Table 1: Perceived Probability of a Terrorist Attack Before and After the Boston Marathon Bombings by Type of Attack

	A Terrorist Attack in U.S.		A Major Terrorist Attack in U.S. Like 9/11	
	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>
Extremely Likely	0.4%	5.1%	0.8%	2.1%
Very Likely	3.4%	8.3%	1.5%	0.7%
Somewhat Likely	9.5%	13.5%	9.0%	11.8%
About as Likely as Unlikely	35.7%	39.7%	26.7%	32.6%
Somewhat Unlikely	18.9%	12.8%	20.4%	14.6%
Very Unlikely	16.5%	14.7%	25.0%	20.8%
Extremely Unlikely	15.6%	5.8%	16.5%	17.4%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(575)	(154)	(582)	(146)

There was no difference before and after the Boston bombings in the probabilities respondents assigned either to a terrorist attack in their own community or to a terrorist attack in which their friends, relatives, or themselves were victims. Fewer than 3 percent of the respondents saw either possibility as “somewhat,” “very,” or “extremely” likely. Similarly, the proportion of respondents saying they had done something different because of the possibility of a terrorist attack was the same before and after the Boston bombings—about 6 percent.

Views of Terrorism and of Government Responses to Terrorism

As might be expected, respondents who completed the survey after the Boston Marathon bombings were less likely than those who completed it before to judge that the government was effective in preventing terrorism in the United States (see Table 2).

Table 2: Perceived Government Effectiveness in Preventing Terrorism: Before and After the Boston Marathon Bombings

	Before	After
Very Effective	30.9%	21.8%
Somewhat Effective	56.0 %	56.7%
Not too Effective	9.1%	19.5%
Not Effective at All	4.0%	2.0%
TOTAL	100% (1149)	100% (298)

However, there was essentially no difference before and after the Boston bombings in the proportion saying that terrorists will always find a way to carry out major attacks in the United States—roughly three out of four respondents—and in the proportion saying the government can eventually prevent all major attacks in the United States—about one in four.

After the bombings people were generally more likely to say they would call the police if they became aware of situations related to terrorism: a person talking about joining a terrorist group; reading material from a terrorist group; distributing handouts supporting terrorism; traveling overseas to join a terrorist group; and talking about planting explosives in a public place. The increase in those saying they would be very or somewhat likely to call the call police ranged between 7 percentage points (in the planting explosives and distributing handouts scenarios) to 12 percentage points (in the reading materials from a terrorist group scenario). Table 3 presents the distributions for all five scenarios.

Table 3: Likelihood of Calling Police, by Item and Before or After Boston Marathon Bombings

If Aware of Person(s)		Very likely	Somewhat Likely	Not too likely	Not at all likely
Talking about Joining a Terrorist Group	Before	39.4	31.5	21.4	7.7
	After	54.1	25.0	13.5	7.4
Talking about Planting Explosives	Before	76.2	11.3	6.7	5.7
	After	80.6	13.6	1.9	4.0
Reading Material from Terrorist Group	Before	18.7	25.5	41.3	14.5
	After	24.2	31.4	31.3	13.1
Traveling Overseas to Join Terrorist Group	Before	50.0	25.8	16.2	8.0
	After	62.5	21.0	10.0	6.5
Distributing Handouts	Before	43.6	28.8	18.9	8.7
	After	52.0	27.2	13.6	7.1

“If You See Something, Say Something” Campaign and Willingness to Meet with Authorities

As shown in Table 4, there was no change in the proportion of respondents who said they had heard of the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign after the Boston bombings, though the proportion who said they had not heard of the campaign increased. This is due to a corresponding decrease in those who said they were not sure whether they had heard of the campaign. These results are likely explained by the greater salience of terrorism in the immediate aftermath of the Boston bombings, as opposed to change in awareness of the campaign. (Of those who said they had heard something about the campaign, there was no difference between those who completed the survey before and after the bombings in predictions of how effective the campaign would be. Roughly four respondents in five said they thought the campaign would be “very” or “somewhat” effective.) Similarly, the willingness to attend a meeting about terrorism with either local police or people from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was unchanged, with about 60 percent of respondents saying they would be willing to meet with either local police or DHS officials.

Table 4: Familiarity with “If You See Something” Campaign: Before and After the Boston Marathon Bombings

	Before	After
Heard About	26.3%	27.6%
Not Heard About	50.1%	57.7%
Not Sure	23.6%	14.7%
TOTAL	100%	100%
	(1153)	(297)

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the Boston bombings had effects on American views of some aspects of terrorism and counterterrorism measures but not on others. There was no difference between the samples that completed the survey before and after the bombings in the proportion of respondents who said they had thought during the previous week about the possibility of a terrorist attack. Respondents who completed the survey after the bombings were more likely than respondents who completed it before to assign higher probabilities in the next year to “a terrorist attack in the United States” though the change over time was mainly for the perceived likelihood of “a terrorist attack” as opposed to “a major attack in the United States like the one that occurred in September 11, 2011.”

There was no difference between those who completed the survey before and after the Boston bombings in the probability they assigned either to a terrorist attack happening in their community or to the respondents or their friends or relatives becoming victims of terrorist attacks, and similarly no difference in the proportion saying they had done something different because of the possibility of a terrorist attack.

Respondents were less likely after the Boston bombings than before to judge the government as effective in preventing terrorism in the United States. At the same time, there was no difference before and after the Boston bombings in the proportion saying that terrorists will always find a way to carry out major attacks in the United States and in the proportion saying the government can eventually prevent all major attacks in the United States.

The largest differences between those who completed the survey before and after the Boston bombings involved expressed willingness to call the police in situations related to terrorism. After the bombings, people were more likely to say they would call the police if they became aware of terrorism-related situations such as a person talking about joining a terrorist group, reading material from a terrorist group, or distributing handouts supporting terrorism.

The proportion of respondents who said they had heard of the “If you See Something, Say Something” campaign was the same in the samples that completed the survey before and after the bombings as were evaluations of the campaign’s likely effectiveness. Likewise, the willingness to attend a meeting about terrorism with either local police or people from the Department of Homeland Security was unchanged.

These findings support a view of public attitudes toward terrorism and government responses to it that are at once resilient to high profile events like the Boston Marathon bombings but also responsive to such events. Respondents’ views regarding the inevitability of terrorism and the ability of the government to completely prevent it were not significantly different before and after the Boston bombings.

Understandably, respondents who completed the survey after the Boston bombings were less likely than those who completed it before to judge the government as effective in preventing terrorism. Perhaps most importantly from a policy standpoint, respondents who completed the survey after the Boston bombings were significantly more likely to say that they would call the police if they became aware of a variety of terrorism-related situations. These findings suggest that while American attitudes toward terrorism and responses to terrorism are fairly stable, the public will be more willing to help authorities counter terrorism in the wake of a highly publicized terrorist event. More generally, the results underscore a long understood characteristic of policing in general: that to be effective policing requires direct citizen engagement and cooperation.