

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

Identifying Suspicious Activities from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS)

Report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

February 2015

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism A Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Center of Excellence Based at the University of Maryland

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About This Report

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This report is part of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) project, "Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative: Identifying Suspicious Activities from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS)," led by William Braniff, START Executive Director

This research was supported by the U. S, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through Award Number 2011-MU-BX-K006. 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 DHS or START.

About START

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (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 <u>infostart@start.umd.edu</u> or visit <u>www.start.umd.edu</u>.

Citations

To cite this report, please use this format:

Gruenewald, Jeff, William S. Parkin, Brent L. Smith, Steven M. Chermak, Joshua D. Freilich, Paxton Roberts Brent Klein "Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative: Identifying Suspicious Activities from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS)." Report to the U. S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD: START, 2015.

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Introduction

This report seeks to validate the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative by comparing pre-incident activities of terrorists and violent criminal extremists in the United States, or "SAR indicators," to the 16 SAR categories¹. Data on terrorism cases and associated SAR indicators come from two open-source terrorism projects known as the *Extremist Crime Database (ECDB)* and the *American Terrorism Study* (ATS). Though both projects include data on terrorism cases in the United States, each have relied on unique inclusion criteria, coding schemes, and primary sources of information. These fundamental differences have resulted in unique strengths that allow each project to address similar and different questions regarding the extent and nature of terrorists' pre-incident activities, as well as the extent to which these activities align with established SAR categories. The following four general questions will guide the remainder of this report:

- 1) What is the prevalence of terrorists' pre-incident activities aligning with existing SAR categories (or "SAR indicators"), and how does this vary by terrorism movement and crime type?
- 2) To what extent are SAR indicators observable versus actually observed,² and how does this vary by terrorism movement and crime type?
- 3) How do SAR indicators relate to "successful" completion of terrorism cases?
- 4) What are examples of pre-incident activity committed by terrorists that do not fit within the 16 SAR categories and how prevalent are these activities?

This analysis draws on two databases which limit inclusion of cases to extremist crime (the ECDB) and terrorism-related indictments (ATS). Therefore, the analysis cannot assess the ability of SAR indicators to predict terrorist behavior. However, the data from these sources can help verify that the SAR categories include activities that we frequently see in terrorism cases.

Data Sources and Methods

Both the ECDB and ATS have collected data on pre-incident activities associated with terrorism cases. Some terrorism cases may involve multiple associated terrorism incidents that involve the same terrorist group or set of offenders who commit multiple related crimes. In this report, these related incidents are considered collectively as a single "terrorism case." This section describes each of the two databases in more detail and the methods used by the ECDB and ATS research teams to validate the SAR categories.

U.S. Extremist Crime Database: The first database is the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), which was originally developed by Dr. Joshua D. Freilich and Dr. Steven Chermak with support

¹ The 16 SAR categories are outlined in the ISE-SAR Functional Standard. Nationwide SAR Initiative "Information Sharing Environment Functional Standard Suspicious Activity Reporting Version 1.5", http://nsi.ncirc.gov/documents/ISE-FS-200_ISE-SAR_Functional_Standard_V1_5_Issued_2009.pdf.

² Observable SAR indicators are those that were observed by individuals, other than the offenders themselves, prior to the completion of the terrorist case.

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from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. The ECDB collects information on violent and financial crimes committed by ideologically motivated extremists in the United States since 1990.³ All extremist crimes included in the ECDB involve illegal activities that were investigated by law enforcement and involve one or more offenders that were arrested or killed during an extremist attack.⁴ In total, 48 terrorism cases are purposefully selected from the ECDB and include ideologically motivated homicides, arsons, bombings, and failed or foiled terrorism plots. All terrorist cases involve those associated with ideologies of the extreme far-right (e.g., anti-government extremists, anti-abortionists, white supremacists) (n=18), the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front (ELF/ALF) (n=13), or al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements (AQAM) (n=17). Terrorism cases are selected based on the amount of open-source material collected in addition to the validity and reliability of the available information. Linked to terrorism cases are data on 255 pre-incident activities also gathered from open-source materials. An ECDB research assistant was trained to identify pre-incident activities from available materials that could fit within the 16 SAR indicators. The research assistant updated the ECDB opensource search files by conducting quality checks of the files and identifying any additional open-source materials that might be missing. If the files had missing data, the case was sent to a second research assistant who conducted targeted follow-up searches to identify new open-source materials that might be available. Once the open-source files were complete, the research assistant coded each case for SAR indicators. Attempts were also made to identify additional behaviors that were reported in the opensource and occurred prior to the completion of the act or the offender's arrest, but did not fit within one of the 16 SAR categories.⁵

American Terrorism Study: The second database utilized in this report is the American Terrorism Study (ATS), maintained by the Terrorism Research Center (TRC) at the University of Arkansas. The ATS was originally developed by Dr. Brent L. Smith in the late 1980s and has been supported by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), START, and the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT). The ATS provides a record of federal criminal cases associated with an indictment in federal criminal court as a result of an FBI investigation for "terrorism or terrorism-related activities" from 1980 to the present. The FBI has provided the names of indicted persons as well as the dates of indictment, court case numbers, and federal jurisdictions to the ATS project director over the past 25 years. Data for the current analysis involve an examination of 303 terrorism cases that may involve any type of crime that was investigated by the FBI as terrorism (e.g., bombings, hijackings, assassinations, armed assaults, etc.). Included terrorism cases involve members of the extreme far-left (n=56), extreme far-right (n=90), the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front (ELF/ALF) (n=89), al-Qa'ida and affiliated

³ Open-source data include court documents, watchdog reports, media articles, scholarly accounts, and other publicly available sources.

⁴ Unlike other terrorism databases, the ECDB does not rely strictly on any single definition of terrorism, such as the FBI's terrorism definition, as a criterion for inclusion. Therefore, ideologically motivated crimes that are not officially labeled terrorism for political or legal reasons are included in the ECDB.

⁵ After working through several cases, it was determined that many behaviors that fit within the sector-specific SAR category fit more appropriately into one of the other SAR categories; therefore, sector-specific SAR indicators were not included in the ECDB-related analysis.

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movements (AQAM) (n=57), and those terrorists primarily concerned with a single-issue (e.g., abortion provision) (n=11). Beginning in 2003, NIJ began funding data collection on "pre-incident activities" of terrorism cases to enhance the ATS's capability of examining terrorists' precursor conduct. Since 2008, the Department of Homeland Security through START has also assisted in this endeavor. In total, there are 2,541 pre-incident activities identified from federal court records and media documents associated with the 303 terrorism cases analyzed in this report. Eighty percent (2,032 of 2,541) of the pre-incident activities are classified under the 16 SAR categories. These 2,032 pre-incident activities and the remaining 509 non-SAR activities are the basis for this examination of the SAR Initiative. For this project, a graduate research assistant and a TRC intern were trained to code for whether existing data on pre-incident activity fit into one or more of the existing 16 SAR categories. The graduate research assistant and a number of the same and other materials for additional activities not currently coded in the ATS database.

Findings

The results of the ECDB and ATS projects are presented in two general sections. First, the results of the ECDB-based evaluation focus on issues of SAR indicator prevalence across ideological movement and crime types, as well as the extent to which SAR indicators are observable and actually observed. Second, the results of the ATS-based evaluation address issues of SAR indicator prevalence and the relationship between SAR indicators and terrorist attack outcomes.

Results from the ECDB Project

Overall Prevalence of SAR Indicators

The 255 pre-incident activities were coded to align with the 16 SAR categories. Additionally, each preincident activity was coded as "unobservable," "observable," or "observable and observed." Illustrative examples drawn from open-source materials for the most prevalent indicators are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Example of Unobservable, Observable, and Observed Observable Indicators

SAR Category	Unobservable Indicator	Observable Indicator	Observable Indicator Observed	
Weapons discovery ⁶	An offender was constructing a pipe bomb in their home.	Suspects had buried weapons on public land, but nobody witnessed the act.	Offenders transporting assault weapons were pulled over by a law enforcement officer as their behavior aroused suspicion.	
Implied threats ⁷	An offender created a videotape threatening violence against specific targets that was never released.	A group of suspects participated in explosives training on public land, but the activity was not witnessed by others.	A suspect makes death threats of which are reported to law enforcement.	
Acquisition of expertise	An explosives manual is found in the home of the suspect after the suspect was arrested.	A group of suspects participated in explosives training on public land, but their training was not seen by others.	An offender was captured on video learning how to use a firearm they purchased under the instruction of a third party.	
Observation/surveillance	An offender conducted electronic surveillance on targets through the Internet.	An offenders hid in the woods outside the target's home but was not detected.	A victim saw the offender tailing them in a vehicle prior to the attack.	

⁶ "Weapons discovery" is defined as the discovery of unusual amounts of weapons or explosives that would arouse suspicion in a reasonable person.

⁷ "Implied threats," defined by the SAR Functional Standard, Part B as communicating a spoken or written threat to damage or compromise a facility/infrastructure, is extended here to also account for threats to individuals (e.g., law enforcement officers, military officials, or even citizens were coded).

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Table 2 presents the relative prevalence of the pre-incident activities aligning with SAR indicators identified in open-source materials from the ECDB project. The SAR indicators with the highest prevalence overall are weapons discovery (16.9%), followed by materials acquisition and storage (16.1%), expressed or implied threat (14.9%) acquisition of expertise (12.2%), and observation/surveillance (11.4%). Out of the top five most prevalent indicators, four can be considered to be non-criminal in nature. Expressed or implied threat is the only criminal SAR indicator in the top five. As shown in Table 2, there is no evidence in the open-source materials of eliciting information, testing of security, and aviation activity. Out of all the identified SAR indicators, 31.8% are SAR indicators related to defined criminal activity and potential terrorism nexus activity. The remaining 68.2% of SAR indicators are potential criminal or noncriminal activities that require additional information or investigation before they can be determined to be criminal in nature.

An attempt was also made to determine whether SAR indicators were observable and what percent of those had been observed by individuals other than the offenders themselves prior to the completion of the terrorist case. Out of the 255 identified SAR indicators, 47.5% were considered observable, and 59.5% of the observable indicators were observed by other people. As shown in Table 2, the most observable indicators are materials acquisition and storage and expressed or implied threats. Weapons discovery, while the most prevalent indicator more generally, only makes up 14.9% of all observable SAR indicators, there is no difference larger than 5%. This demonstrates stability in the distribution of SAR indicators that are identified and those that are potentially observable. If this pattern holds for a larger sample of ideological violence, analysts can expect that the distribution of observable indicators should be similar to the distribution of all indicators identified.

Figures 1 and 2 represent graphically the relative prevalence of SAR indicators and the percent of observable indicators actually observed, for each SAR indicator, as presented in the first and third columns of Table 2.

Table 2. Prevalence of Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Indicators							
	% of SAR		% Observable		% Observable		
	Indicators		Indicators		Indicators		
	(n=25	55)	(n=12	1)	Obser	ved	
					(n=7	2)	
Non-Criminal/Further Investigation	on Require	d					
Weapons Discovery	16.9%	(43)	14.9%	(18)	83.3%	(15)	
Materials Acquisition/Storage	16.1%	(41)	19.8%	(24)	29.2%	(7)	
Acquisition of Expertise	12.2%	(31)	13.2%	(16)	31.3%	(5)	
Observation/Surveillance	11.4%	(29)	9.9%	(12)	41.7%	(5)	
Recruiting	7.8%	(20)	8.3%	(10)	40.0%	(4)	
Photography	3.9%	(10)	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	
Eliciting Information	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	
Testing of Security	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	
Total	68.2%	(174)	66.1%	(80)	45.0%	(36)	
Criminal Activity/Terrorism Nexus							
Expressed or Implied Threat	14.9%	(38)	19.8%	(24)	95.8%	(23)	
Sabotage/Tampering/Vandalism	5.9%	(15)	5.0%	(6)	66.7%	(4)	
Misrepresentation	4.7%	(12)	1.7%	(2)	100.0%	(2)	
Theft/Loss/Diversion	3.1%	(8)	3.3%	(4)	75.0%	(3)	
Breach/Attempted Intrusion	2.7%	(7)	4.1%	(5)	80.0%	(4)	
Cyberattack	0.4%	(1)	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	
Aviation Activity	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	
Total	31.8%	(81)	33.9%	(41)	87.8%	(36)	





Figure 2. Prevalence of Suspicious Activity Reporting Indicators, Criminal Activity/Terrorism Nexus



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The breakdown for SAR indicators that were actually observed show that non-criminal SAR indicators that were observable were only observed 45% of the time, while observable criminal SAR indicators

were observed almost 90% of the time. In addition, there is a significant disparity for several indicators when comparing the relative percentage of all indicators to the percentage of observable indicators that were actually observed (See Figure 3). The largest shift can be seen for the expressed or implied threat indicator. Although it only made up approximately 15% of all indicators, it accounts for almost a third of all observed indicators. Also, when only examining the distribution of observable indicators that were actually observed, the indicators that are connected to criminal activity or had a terrorism nexus were more likely to be observed than non-criminal activity (with the exception of weapons

discovery). For these indicators, although they appear in an *ex-post facto* open-source examination of extremist criminal violence, there appears to be limited opportunities for outside observation prior to the recorded crimes based on the relatively low percentages of observable indicators, thus decreasing intervention opportunities of law enforcement. For the non-criminal indicators, it is also possible that these top SAR indicators are often not observed because they are understandably misperceived by law enforcement and the public to be innocuous.

SAR Indicators across Terrorist Ideology and Crime Type

The ECDB project also considers the average number of SAR indicators across terrorist ideologies and

crime types. As shown in Table 3, extreme far-right cases involve the greatest average number of SAR indicators per case, followed by ELF/ALF, while AQAM cases have the lowest number of indicators per case. Table 3 also compares criminal and non-criminal SAR indicators across movement and crime type. On average, each case examined has 3.6 identified non-criminal indicators and 1.7 criminal indicators, a ratio of 2.1 non-criminal indicators for every one criminal indicator. AQAM cases have the largest difference between the number of criminal and non-criminal indicators identified, with 2.6 non-criminal indicators for every 1 criminal indicator. Extreme right cases have the smallest difference, with a ratio of only 1.9 non-criminal indicators identified for each criminal indicator.

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

Examples of extreme far-right perpetrators include racist skinheads, other white supremacists, militia and patriot group members who engage in criminal activities in furtherance of their agendas as well as others who criminally target abortion providers.



Figure 3. Prevalence of all Suspicious Activity Reporting Indicators, Comparing the Relative

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	Tuble 5. Average Number of SAR indicators deloss facology and er intertype							
		Indicators	Non-	Criminal	Ratio	Observable	Observed	Ratio
			Criminal					
Ideology	ELF/ALF (n=13)	5.7	3.9	1.8	2.2	2.6	0.5	5.2
	Extreme Far-Right	5.9	3.8	2.1	1.9	2.6	1.8	1.4
	(n=18)							
	AQAM (n=17)	4.4	3.2	1.2	2.6	2.4	1.8	1.3
Туре	Arson/Bombing	5.7	3.9	1.8	2.2	2.6	0.5	5.2
	(n=13)							
	Homicide (n=25)	4.4	2.6	1.8	1.5	2.7	2.0	1.3
	Plots (n=10)	7.2	5.8	1.4	4.1	2.0	1.4	1.4
Total	All Cases (n=48)	5.3	3.6	1.7	2.1	2.5	1.5	1.7

Table 3. Av	erage Number	of SAR Indicators	across Ideology	and Crime Type*
	0			

*The ratios presented are based on the non-rounded average numbers and therefore might not be equal to the ratios calculated using the average numbers presented on the table.

As for type of crime, failed and foiled plots have the highest average number of indicators per case at 7.2, while homicides have the lowest number (4.4 per case). Failed and foiled plots also have the least number of criminal indicators per case (1.4), but the highest number of non-criminal indicators identified

per case (5.8). This results in approximately 4.1 non-criminal SAR indicators identified for every criminal indicator. Homicide cases have the smallest ratio, with 1.5 non-criminal SAR indicators for every one criminal SAR indicator. For all categories, both across ideology and type, there are more non-criminal indicators than criminal indicators. Specifically, AQAM and plot indicators have the largest ratios, where more non-criminal indicators are identified prior to the successful completion of the ideological act or the intervention by law enforcement. This highlights the importance of working with communities to help them understand potential indicators that occur in the "pre-criminal" space, where law enforcement is less likely to observe them.

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The last three columns in Table 3 present information about the average number of observable indicators, the average number of observed indicators, and the ratio between the two. On average, 2.5 observable SAR indicators are identified for each terrorism case. This number is fairly consistent across terrorist ideology, with AQAM cases having approximately 2.4 observable indicators per case, and 2.6 observable indicators occurring per case for both the ELF/ALF and the extreme far-right cases. For crime type, there are, on average, 2.7 observable indicators for each homicide, 2.6 for the arsons and bombings, and 2 indicators for the failed and foiled plots. There is more variation, however, for the number of observable indicators actually observed. On average, only half an indicator is observed for each ELF/ALF case, yet for the other two categories 1.8 indicators are observed. This results in a ratio for the ELF/ALF cases of 5.2 observable acts for every act actually observed. Contrastingly, extreme far-right and AQAM terrorism cases have a ratio of 1.4 and 1.3, respectively. In other words, for every 1.4 and 1.3 observable.

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acts, there is an indicator observed by someone other than the offenders or their co-conspirators. A very similar pattern can be seen when looking at observable and observed indicators across crime type.

Results from the American Terrorism Study

Prevalence of SAR Indicators

For nine of the 16 SAR categories, fewer than 10 precursor activities were recorded as having occurred in the 303 terrorism incidents (see Figure 4). Of these nine, there are no recorded events for three of the categories: intrusions, sector tests, or sector activities. These findings support the results of the ECDB project evaluation.





Type of SAR Indicator

One explanation for the lack of recorded activities for these terrorism cases may be due to an arrest that occurred as a result of intrusions, sector tests, or sector activities that occurred so early in the planning process that these activities were not linked to an eventual FBI terrorism investigation. Consequently, these activities may not have made it into the ATS database if the FBI did not report the behavior as "terrorism or terrorism-related." The fact that there is no evidence of these three activities does not necessarily negate the importance of these three types of activities as SAR indicators.



Figure 5. Most Prevalent SAR Indicators

Type of SAR Indicator

In contrast, the seven most commonly observed SAR indicators (see Figure 5) account for 79% of all indicators associated with the 303 terrorism cases studied (2,011 of 2,541 precursor behaviors). Over three-fifths of the SAR indicators (1,591 of 2,541) fit within four SAR categories: materials acquisition, weapons acquisition, threat, and misrepresentation). When combined with three other categories (acquiring expertise, surveillance, and recruiting), these seven indicators account for 99% (2,011 of 2,032) of the pre-incident activities that fit any of the 16 SAR categories.

Relationship of SAR Indicators and the Success or Failure of a Terrorism Case

The ATS analysis also considered whether the commission of pre-incident activities aligning with SAR indicators was related to the outcome of terrorist cases (success or failure). Specifically, findings show that the more frequently terrorists engaged in SAR identifiable activities, the greater the chance that law

enforcement interdiction would occur before the incident could take place.⁸ We analyzed the seven most prevalent SAR indicators (see Table 4) to see if this relationship emerged. Five of the most prominently occurring SAR indicators are significantly related to incident failure. In other words, terrorists who engage in these activities are significantly less likely to complete the planned terrorist

99% of the SAR pre-incident activities identified by the ATS align with one of the seven most prevalent SAR indicators.

⁸ "Failure" might also include incidents that failed due to device failure or other reasons that did not involve law enforcement interdiction.

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incident. These five SAR activities included materials acquisition, weapons acquisition, threat prior to incident, expertise acquisition, and surveillance.

Type of SAR Indicator	Incident Failure Rate
Evidence of Materials Acquisition	54.8%
Evidence of Weapons Acquisition	53.2%
Evidence of Threat Prior to Incident	59.7%
Evidence of Acquisition of Expertise	63.0%
Evidence of Surveillance	55.7%
Misrepresentation	37.7%
Recruiting	37.3%

Table 4. Most Prominently Occurring SAR Categories and Incident Failure

For example, terrorists who engaged in "materials acquisition" as part of the planning and preparation process failed to carry out the terrorist incident in 54.8% of the cases. Generally, the more times terrorists engaged in these SAR indicators, the less likely they were able to successfully complete the terrorist incident.⁹ However, two of these more prominent SAR indicators (misrepresentation and recruiting) are less significantly related to incident failure.

Terrorists who engage in materials acquisition, weapons acquisition, threats made, expertise acquisition, and surveillance are significantly less likely to complete the planned terrorist incident.

Identification of Other Pre-Incident Activities not Captured by SAR Categories

Twenty percent (509 of 2541) of the pre-incident activities associated with the 202 terrorism cases could not be classified within one of the existing 16 SAR categories. Although this may have been simply a lack of understanding on the part of the researchers in regards to how these behaviors should have been coded, it is also possible that law enforcement officers who rely on the same SAR indicators may experience similar difficulties. The majority of these 509 activities involve three types of activities: 1) meetings; 2) other forms of communication, such as emails and phone calls; and 3) travel. The overwhelming majority of these 509 activities were recorded in federal court records as "overt acts" of conspiracies associated with the 303 terrorism incidents. Many of these behaviors may not have been criminal in and of themselves, but when taken in context, they became essential elements of counts in a federal indictment. For example, a small minority of these acts included the purchase of airplane tickets that would not have constituted a criminal act, but when placed in context of the larger conspiracy, the behaviors became "overt acts" in the conspiracy.

⁹ It should be noted that the FBI might choose to not label some criminal acts as "terrorism" that many would view as terroristic. It is also possible that some cases initially labeled by the FBI as terrorism are ultimately not officially counted as terrorism. Nonetheless, most FBI officially designated acts or attempted acts of terrorism do result in an indictment, arrest, and, to a lesser extent, conviction.

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The overwhelming proportion of these non-SAR behaviors appear to be associated with the discussionbased *planning* process, rather than action-oriented *preparation* for the incident. Furthermore, a separate analysis of the sequencing of pre-incident activities being conducted for the National Institute of Justice suggests that these "non-SAR activities" associated with the *planning* process generally occur early in the planning and preparatory cycle. Consequently, these non-SAR activities are less likely to come to the attention of law enforcement officials for two reasons: 1) they are usually non-criminal and, 2) they tend to occur early in the planning and preparation cycle.

Discussion

The results of the ECDB and ATS projects confirmed that pre-incident activities occurring prior to acts of terrorism crimes do often align with existing SAR indicators. SAR indicators with the highest prevalence were weapons discovery, materials acquisition/storage, expressed or implied threats, and observation/surveillance, although the ECDB project found variation in the prevalence of SAR indicators across terrorist ideologies and crime types. The ECDB project also found that many of these indicators were observed by the public. Although several non-SAR activities emerged that might be of interest to law enforcement when considered in conjunction with SAR indicators, none of these patterns rose to the level of necessitating a new type of SAR indicator. Furthermore, the ATS project found that "non-SAR activities" identified in available data were most associated with the early planning activities of terrorists, and may have been less likely to come to the attention of law enforcement officials because they tended to be non-criminal in nature. Importantly, ATS findings also demonstrated that terrorism cases involving prevalent pre-incident activities that fit into SAR categories were significantly related to incident failure.

Appendix A. Sample of Cases from the Extremist Crime Database

Please email <u>infostart@start.umd.edu</u> to request this file.



Appendix B. Cases from the American Terrorism Study

Please email <u>infostart@start.umd.edu</u> to request this file.