

1 Introduction

Although research on political extremism and terrorism from criminology scholars began to appear in the 1980s and 1990s (Turk, 1982; Smith, 1994; Hamm, 1998), before the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, there was relatively little interest in these topics among criminologists. In fact, at the turn of the twenty-first century it was not at all clear that most criminologists considered terrorism and politically motivated violence to be a legitimate part of criminology. Terrorism was mostly left out of the lexicon of criminology because it did not fit neatly into the model of mainstream criminology. It is not strongly associated with the poorest members of society, its perpetrators rarely see themselves as criminals and most governments do not collect reliable data on how often it occurs.

However, this situation began to change dramatically in the early 2000s. In fact, in a review of the major developments in criminology during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a growing interest in research on terrorism and responses to terrorism would surely qualify as a major turning point. In the space of just twenty years, the study of terrorism and political extremism went from a relatively uncommon niche to a widely recognized criminological specialization. This expansion was no doubt fueled in part by the coordinated attacks of 9/11, but also by a continuing drum beat of high-profile attacks from around the world. A handful of influential examples include the 2002 bombings in Bali; the 2004 Madrid train bombings; the 2005 bombings in London; the 2008 coordinated attacks in Mumbai; the 2011 attacks in Oslo; the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings; the 2015 Beirut bombings; the 2016 bombings in Brussels; the 2017 vehicle ramming attack in Barcelona; the 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand; the 2020 mass shooting in Vienna – and many more. Moreover, while interest in terrorism in the wake of 9/11 was driven mostly by concerns with Islamist extremism, more recently, attention has turned toward domestic threats, especially from right-wing radicals.

Signs of the adoption of terrorism as a major specialty in criminology are everywhere. Terrorism research now appears in nearly all mainstream criminology journals; college courses on terrorism and political violence have been added to the curricula of most criminology and criminal justice departments; and a growing number of criminology students are choosing terrorism and political extremism as suitable topics for class papers, research topics, theses and dissertations. The American Society of Criminology (ASC) has added a Division on Terrorism and Bias Crime that now has as many members as long-standing specializations like organized crime and juvenile delinquency. The European Society of Criminology (ESC) has created a working group on radicalization, extremism and terrorism. And the ASC, the ESC and the

Academy of Criminal Justice Studies now routinely feature dozens of papers and panels on terrorism and counterterrorism each year at their annual meetings.

Defining terrorism has long been a challenge for both researchers and policy makers. The word terrorism starts with the root word “terror” and adds the Greek suffix “ism” to form a noun that can denote a wide variety of behaviors and predispositions, including violent action, adherence to a cause, or belief in specific doctrines or principles. In practice, most research on terrorism either focuses on terrorist attacks or groups, or individuals who support terrorist causes. In this Element, I define terrorist attacks as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-state actors to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation” (LaFree, Dugan & Miller, 2015: 13). “Threatened” is an important part of this definition because acts like aerial hijacking can be carried out not only by engaging in violence but by threatening to. The reference to “non-state actors” means that I am excluding state-sponsored terrorism. This is an important exclusion. Although valid estimates are hard to come by (Rummel, 1994; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), it is likely that far more individuals are killed and injured through state-sponsored terrorism than from the attacks of subnational actors. However, to this point in time, no one has succeeded in obtaining comprehensive data on the terrorist acts committed by states – which is far more challenging than studying individuals and groups engaged in terrorism, many of whom actively seek media attention.

Note that this definition of terrorism applies to actual or threatened terrorist *attacks*. Defining terrorism in terms of the *perpetrators* who carry it out is broader in scope than an inventory of attacks because criminal laws in most countries not only prohibit individuals from committing terrorist attacks but also outlaw individuals from providing material support to terrorist organizations, even if these individuals are not directly involved in attacks. For example, providing funding to a terrorist group or supporting a terrorist organization as an accountant or a driver qualifies as a criminal offense in most countries. To account for individual terrorist perpetrators, I adopt the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; 2017) definition of political extremism as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.” Throughout this Element I will refer to terrorists as those who commit or attempt to commit terrorist attacks, and political extremists as those who encourage or support illegal, politically motivated violence.

The integration of terrorism research into the criminological mainstream in the early 2000s marks a major turning point in criminological history. The purpose of this Element is to explore this integration, paying particular attention

to similarities and differences between terrorism and more ordinary forms of crime. I will begin by considering the ways that criminology has contributed to the study of terrorism and the impact the increasing interest in terrorism has had on criminology. I will also provide empirical comparisons of terrorist attacks and political extremists to more ordinary crimes and criminal offenders. This Element should be useful to criminologists who have an interest in bringing terrorism into their treatment of crime and to terrorism researchers who have an interest in bringing criminology into their treatment of terrorism and political extremism. In the remainder of this section, I consider how terrorism and responses to terrorism compare with other types of crime. In Section 2, I examine contributions that criminology has made to the study of terrorism. In Section 3, I compare terrorism and other types of crime for the United States, and in Section 4, I do similar comparisons worldwide. In Section 5, I summarize the relationship between criminology and terrorism studies and offer conclusions about the future of this relationship.

Comparing Terrorism to Crime

An appropriate starting point for the argument that terrorism and illegal political extremism should be a part of criminology is provided by Edwin Sutherland, whose famous definition of criminology (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960: 3) includes the “scientific study of making laws, breaking laws, and reacting toward the breaking of laws.” Clearly, terrorist attacks as well as behaviors that support terrorist causes involve breaking criminal laws. Moreover, most individuals who are accused of engaging in terrorism are prosecuted under laws prohibiting terrorism-related behavior and then processed by regular criminal justice systems. Clarke and Newman (2006: i) make the connection between criminology and the study of terrorism most directly: “Terrorism is a form of crime in all essential respects.” At the outset, we can agree that terrorism represents both the breaking of laws (i.e., criminal behavior) and reactions to the breaking of laws (i.e., criminal justice responses), and as such is a legitimate topic for criminology research. However, given that the term “crime” includes behaviors as diverse as homicide and jaywalking, robbery and polluting navigable waters, it is not surprising that terrorism resembles some forms of crime more than others.

Since its creation in 1929, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), collected by the FBI, has provided the major official source of crime data for the United States. The UCR gathers its most extensive data on eight types of crime, referred to as “Part I crimes”: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and

arson (added under a congressional directive in 1979). For comparison purposes, I will consider these eight crimes identified by the UCR as “ordinary” crimes. These crimes are certainly ordinary in the sense that they are common. In 2019, the UCR reported a total of more than eight million Part I crimes (FBI, 2020). Larceny was most frequent, with over five million reported cases. Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter was least frequent, with just over 16,000 cases. In the next two subsections, I consider similarities and differences between terrorist attacks, terrorist perpetrators and more common types of crime and criminal offenders.

Similarities between the Study of Terrorism and the Study of Crime

A basic similarity between terrorism and other types of illegal behavior is clear from Sutherland’s already cited definition of criminology (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960: 3): criminology has traditionally been divided into *etiology* (an emphasis on “breaking laws”) and *criminal justice* (an emphasis on “making laws” and “reacting toward the breaking of laws”). The same logic can be used to divide the study of terrorism into two major specialties. Studies of how individuals decide to engage in acts that support terrorism can be seen as focusing on the *etiology* of terrorism, while studies examining what legal procedures are best suited to discouraging individuals from engaging in terrorism and reacting to their crimes if these procedures fail can be seen as issues of *counterterrorism* (when the emphasis is on stopping terrorist attacks) or *deradicalization* (when the emphasis is on reforming terrorist perpetrators or those at risk of becoming terrorist perpetrators).

Another important similarity between the study of ordinary crime and terrorism is that both are inherently multidisciplinary; researchers engaged in doing either come from a wide range of academic disciplines. Thus, both criminology research and terrorism studies include contributions from political science, psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology as well as a long list of other fields. This feature has made criminology one of the most interdisciplinary areas of study in the social sciences and offers similar advantage to those studying terrorism. However, at the same time, terrorism studies, like criminology, shares the drawbacks of an intensively multidisciplinary focus. In particular, such a focus complicates communication between researchers, encourages theoretical confusion, and makes it more difficult to develop a shared conceptual framework.

Finally, the study of terrorist perpetrators, like the study of more ordinary criminal offenders, faces the policy challenge of whether to focus on reducing contact between offenders and their subcultures versus reducing criminal

behavior. Terrorism researchers make this distinction by contrasting deradicalization and disengagement initiatives. Horgan (2009: 153) defines deradicalization as “the social psychological process whereby an individual’s commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity” and disengagement as “the process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation” (152). Both strategies are based on rehabilitation principles and seek to reduce future terrorist attacks, but they measure success differently. Disengagement strategies categorize a violent extremist who decides to set aside the use of violence for strategic purposes as a success due to the reduction in violence, whereas deradicalization initiatives do not consider these cases a success unless the individual also rejects extremist beliefs (Sumpter, 2017). These challenges are similar to policy approaches to criminal gangs in terms of whether the emphasis should be on reducing gang involvement or disengaging gang members from violence (Decker, Pyrooz & Moule, 2014).

Differences between the Study of Terrorism and the Study of Crime

Having listed several similarities, I identify five important differences between the study of terrorism and the study of more common types of crime.

Terrorist Perpetrators, Unlike Common Criminals, Do Not See Themselves as Criminal

First, although common criminals vary widely in terms of how they perceive their activities (cf., Katz, 1988; Black, 1998; Anderson, 1999), it is safe to say that few criminals see themselves as altruists. By contrast, many terrorist perpetrators see themselves not as criminals but as individuals making sacrifices for a noble cause (Pedahzur, Perliger & Weinberg, 2003; Hafez, 2006). Indeed, many members of the most prominent terrorist groups in the world – including the Islamic State, al Qaeda, Shining Path, Euskadi ta Askatasuna or Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the LTTE and the FARC – often conceive of themselves as freedom fighters and positive agents of change.

Lack of Traditional Criminology Data on Terrorism

Second, although data on crime are far from perfect, criminologists have traditionally had three major options for studying criminal behavior, corresponding to the major social roles connected to criminal events: “official” data collected by legal agents, especially the police; “victimization” survey data collected from the

general population, which include both crime victims and nonvictims; and “self-report” survey data collected from offenders. However, all three of these sources are problematic when it comes to gathering data on terrorism (LaFree & Dugan, 2004). Few countries develop systematic data on terrorism-related crimes and certainly no worldwide official police data on terrorism exists. Indeed, thus far, the United Nations (UN) has been unable to provide a definition of terrorism that is accepted by all member nations. Police departments in most countries do not maintain separate records for terrorism-related offenses, and much primary data collected by intelligence agents are not available to researchers working in an unclassified environment. Nor are data collection challenges confined to the police. Most individuals convicted of behavior that would be widely regarded as terrorism do not show up in court records as terrorist perpetrators because they are convicted not of terrorism but of more common crimes connected to terrorist behavior, like weapons violations and homicide.

Official data on terrorism in the United States provides an example. The UCR does not include statistics on terrorist attacks. Following the passage of a National Defense Authorization Act, starting in 2015, the FBI (in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence) began reporting data on domestic terrorism (FBI, 2021). The annual report also includes intelligence assessments, a discussion of investigative activities and a list of recommendations. However, this reporting system is limited to arrests, uses a different methodology than the UCR data collection for ordinary offenses and is not integrated with the UCR system.

Starting in 1973, each year the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), administered by the US Census Bureau, has interviewed approximately 240,000 persons in 150,000 households about their experience as crime victims, including assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, rape and robbery (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). However, victimization surveys have been of little use in providing statistical evidence on the characteristics of terrorist attacks or its perpetrators. Despite the attention it gets in the media, terrorist attacks are much less common than more ordinary types of violent crime and thus, even with extremely large sample sizes, few individuals in most countries will have been victimized by terrorists. Indeed, victims of terrorism often have no direct contact with perpetrators (e.g., in many bombings), and in too many cases, terrorism victims are killed by their attackers, leaving no one to survey.

A final option for crime data in general is the self-report survey, where individuals are asked to describe their participation in past criminal behavior (Hindelang, Hirschi & Weis, 1979). Self-report surveys in criminology have been especially useful for either studying minor crimes or reporting on criminal

behavior when respondents were juveniles (Huizinga & Elliott, 1986; Farrington, Ohlin & Wilson, 1998). Self-report surveys based on interviews with current or former terrorist perpetrators have also provided some excellent scholarship (McCauley, 2002; Horgan, 2004). However, most active terrorists are unwilling to participate in interviews, and even when they are willing, doing interviews with them raises obvious challenges. Terrorism researcher Ariel Merari (1991: 90) described the problem succinctly: “The clandestine nature of terrorist organizations and the ways and means by which intelligence can be obtained will rarely enable data collection which meets commonly accepted academic standards.” Hence, self-report surveys have been of little use in providing national let alone worldwide statistics on terrorist attacks or the characteristics of perpetrators.

*Common Crimes Are Usually Local; Terrorism Often National
or International*

Third, for most ordinary crimes, criminal justice decisions are made locally and rarely gather international or even national attention. By contrast, terrorist attacks are frequently reported outside of the local area where they occur and often gather worldwide coverage. For example, incidents like the January 2015 attack on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, or the April 2013 attack on the finish line of the Boston Marathon create enormous media attention. A Google search of the latter while this Element was being prepared yielded sixty-four million hits. However, this distinction does not mean that terrorist perpetrators are always unmindful of local targets. For example, as we shall see later, there is evidence that terrorist perpetrators, like ordinary offenders, often choose targets in familiar locations (Hasisi et al. 2020b).

*Common Criminals Seek Anonymity; Terrorist Perpetrators Seek Media
Attention*

Fourth, although ordinary criminals are usually struggling to avoid detection much less an audience, a large audience is precisely what many terrorist perpetrators are seeking. A half-century ago, terrorism researcher Brian Jenkins noted that (1975: 15), “terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening, and not a lot of people dead.” Hoffman (1998: 131) argues that terrorist groups seek maximum publicity for their actions, and because of this fact, getting picked up by the print, and increasingly, the electronic media, is critical to their perceived success. Because a common goal of terrorism is to gain media attention, terrorist attacks are often carefully orchestrated. This is much less common with ordinary crimes.

Terrorism, Unlike Common Crime, Is Often a Means to Broader Goals

Finally, the goal of most ordinary crimes is to obtain a particular material reward, such as money or valued goods, or to kill or injure a specific victim. By contrast, the overriding objective of terrorism and its ultimate justification is to further a political cause. Thus, criminals often have selfish, personal motives, and their actions are not intended to have consequences or create psychological or political repercussions beyond the criminal act. By contrast, the fundamental aim of terrorist perpetrators is often to overthrow or change the dominant political system. Terrorism expert Martha Crenshaw (1983: 2) points out that “the intent of terrorist violence is psychological and symbolic, not material.” This conclusion was well supported in a recent study with my colleagues (Becker et al., 2022) in which we examined forty-five US gang members and thirty-eight US political extremists. Compared to gang members, extremists were far more likely to be motivated by the perceived moral authority of their actions. By contrast, we found that gang members were more likely to cite material rewards or group prestige as their main motive for criminal involvement. At the same time, it is clear that the motives of political extremists are not universally nonmaterial. For example, in a study of suicide bombers, Perry and Hasisi (2015) find that perpetrators frequently consider self-gratifying benefits in making the decision to launch attacks.

Conclusions

Much of the confusion about whether political extremism and terrorism are suitable concerns for criminology research comes from the fact that these topics do not fit neatly into mainstream criminology. Terrorism and violent political extremism clearly qualify as criminal, and they also share several important characteristics with more ordinary crime, including the natural division between criminal etiology and law enforcement, an interdisciplinary emphasis and a tension between isolating offenders from criminal subcultures versus stopping or curtailing their offending. However, differences are also apparent and include the fact that terrorist perpetrators, unlike more common criminal offenders, typically do not see themselves as criminals, are often seeking media attention and typically view their actions as furthering broader goals. Moreover, the study of terrorism lacks the main sources of traditional data that are available in criminology, and unlike most common crimes, terrorism frequently has national or even international implications. In the next section, I consider some of the ways that criminology has influenced research on the causes and consequences of terrorism.

2 Impact of Criminology on Terrorism Research and Policy

As terrorism began to gather more policy and research attention in the early 2000s, it made sense to look for theoretical guidance and methodological tools from social and behavioral science disciplines that seemed relevant for understanding the causes and consequences of terrorism, but were more established than the field of terrorism studies. In the first part of this section, I consider how researchers interested in terrorism began to tap criminology theories for help in understanding terrorism. In the next part of the section, I explore how the application of research methods commonly used in criminology have been applied to terrorism. And finally, I consider some of the advantages of responding to terrorism using traditional criminal justice systems.

Theoretical Contributions

A common criticism of early terrorism research was that it lacked a theoretical framework that would help researchers interpret empirical findings (Borum, 2017; Freilich & LaFree, 2015). In looking over the recent criminology literature on terrorism and political extremism, we can conclude that while it has been a relatively slow process, researchers have begun to apply theoretical perspectives from criminology to help understand terrorism and responses to terrorism. In a recent review with my colleague Yesenia Yanez (LaFree & Yanez, In press), we identified a set of twelve refereed criminology journals that publish high-quality empirically based research.¹ We looked for all articles in these journals from 2000 to 2020 that contained the terms “radicalization,” “extremism” or “terrorism.” We excluded articles that focused only on hate crimes, nonideologically motivated mass shootings or genocide. I summarize our findings in Table 1.

Our review of criminology journals over the past twenty-one years yielded 107 terrorism-/extremism-related articles, suggesting that research on radicalization, political extremism and terrorism now represents a major subfield within criminology. Moreover, we found evidence that the pace at which researchers interested in terrorism are adopting criminological perspectives is accelerating over time. As shown in Table 1, nearly four-fifths of the terrorism research articles applying criminological theories appeared after 2010. Our review also suggests that criminology research on terrorism has often lacked theoretical grounding. Thus, Table 1 shows that nearly half of the articles we

¹ The journals reviewed were *Annual Review of Criminology*, *British Journal of Criminology*, *Criminology*, *Criminology and Public Policy*, *European Journal of Crime and Justice*, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *Journal of Criminology*, *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Justice Quarterly* and *Law and Human Behavior*.

Table 1 Criminological theories used for research on terrorism in twelve journals, 2000–20

Theoretical perspective	N	% N	N since 2010	% since 2010
Situational/routine activities	20	19	19	95
Rational choice/deterrence	10	9	8	80
Anomie/strain	4	4	4	10
Criminal subcultures	4	4	2	50
Life course	4	4	4	100
Differential association/ learning	3	3	3	100
Social control	2	2	2	100
Social disorganization	2	2	2	100
Collective action theory	1	1	1	100
Conflict/radical	1	1	1	100
Psychological	1	1	1	100
Situational action	1	1	1	100
Social construction	1	1	1	100
Symbolic interaction	1	1	1	100
Atheoretical analysis and reviews	52	49	35	67
Total	107	100	85	79

identified in these leading criminology journals were atheoretical – that is, focused on various aspects of terrorism or counterterrorism that did not include a specific theoretical framework.

Excluding the atheoretical articles, we found fifty-five articles (51.4 percent) that advanced at least one criminological theory. For the articles that were grounded in a specific theory, the most common were situational/routine activities followed by rational choice/deterrence perspectives. Following at some distance were criminal subcultures, life-course approaches, anomie/strain and differential association/learning. Many influential criminology theories were uncommon (e.g., social control, symbolic interaction) or altogether absent (e.g., labeling, biological). Among the atheoretical articles, the most common topics (in order) were policy arguments, empirical examinations of specific aspects of radicalization, extremism or terrorism (e.g., lone-wolf attacks, female perpetrators), literature reviews and articles about the criminal justice processing of terrorist/extremist cases. I consider in more detail each of the theoretical categories we identified in the next several sections.