



START

U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism

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

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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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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.

The Joint Program in Survey Methodology (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 160 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, Westat and other organizations.

Citations

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Executive Summary

Existing survey data do not provide comprehensive baseline information about U.S. beliefs and attitudes on terrorism and counterterrorism. Improved understanding of public attitudes can inform programs and tools related to managing public risk perception, increasing effectiveness of pre- and post-event communication by Federal, state, and local officials, and building and supporting more resilient social networks within and across communities. In this project, we collected systematic survey data from a sample of Americans in response to a range of newly developed survey questions.

The survey was developed by two leading survey methodologists, following consultations with a research team of experts who study the dynamics of terrorism, counterterrorism, and community resilience, as well as with practitioners and officials from throughout the homeland security community. The questions were administered to members of a web panel by the on-line survey firm Knowledge Networks, and a second wave of the survey will be issued approximately six months after the first wave to allow for analysis of attitudes over time. The first wave of the questionnaire was completed, from September 28, 2012 to October 12, 2012, by 1,576 individuals 18 years of age and older.

The first section of the questionnaire assessed the salience of terrorism by asking respondents whether they had thought about terrorism in the preceding week, how likely they thought a terrorist attack in the United States was in the next year, and whether they had done anything differently in the past year because of the possibility of such an attack. About 15 percent of the sample said they had thought about the prospect of terrorism in the preceding week, significantly more than the fraction who said they had thought about hospitalization (10 percent) and violent crime victimization (10 percent), but about the same fraction as those who said they had thought about job loss (16 percent).

The second section of the questionnaire posed questions about how likely respondents would be to call the police in response to various actions potentially related to terrorism and how concerned respondents felt the government should be about these actions. Respondents who said they had thought about a terrorist attack in the last week were more likely than other respondents to say they were likely to call the police in response to the various situations described to them.

The survey then assessed respondents' awareness and evaluation of government efforts related to terrorism in the United States. A large majority of the respondents said that the U.S. government has been very effective (33 percent) or somewhat effective (54 percent) at preventing terrorism; less than 13 percent characterized the government as not too effective or not effective at all.

In a final section of the survey, we asked respondents about two specific programs focused on increasing communication between members of the public and the government on topics related to terrorism. The first was the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign. Most respondents (more than 56 percent) said they had not heard anything about this campaign, and a substantial number (more than 20 percent) were not sure whether they had heard anything about it. Of those who had heard something about the campaign, most thought it would be very (18 percent) or somewhat (67 percent) effective.

We also considered responses to a question about whether individuals would be willing to meet with local police or with people from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to talk about terrorism. Clear majorities of respondents said they would be willing to meet with people from DHS (57 percent) and with local police (58 percent) to talk about terrorism. Most people (88 percent) gave the same answer to the two questions. People who saw the government as very or somewhat effective in preventing terrorism were more likely to say they were willing to attend such meetings than those who saw the government as not too effective or not at all effective at preventing terrorism.

We took all of these inputs—from past survey research, policy makers and practitioners and researchers—and drafted the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire went through several iterations. For the exact design of the module and the wording of specific questions we relied heavily on our project colleagues from JPSM. Throughout the process they worked especially to ensure that the resulting questionnaire reflected the best principles of survey design.

Results and Discussion

The first wave of the study involved providing self-administered questionnaires to a random sample of computer users from the national panel created by Knowledge Networks (KN). The KN national panel consists of a probability sample of non-institutionalized adults residing in the United States. (Members of the sample who did not own a computer were given one when they joined the panel.) The questionnaire was completed, from September 28, 2012 to October 12, 2012, by 1,576 individuals 18 years of age and older. Of the panel members invited to participate in our survey, 62.0 percent completed it. To account for nonresponse and noncoverage, the estimates presented in this report were weighted to 2012 totals from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) for seven variables: age, sex, region, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, and income. This standard survey procedure ensures that the distributions of these background variables for the 1,576 cases match those in the CPS and is likely to improve the survey estimates to the extent the survey variables are related to the background variables.

The questionnaire draws on items from major national surveys, but also includes new items that we crafted. It was pretested by Knowledge Networks prior to the main data collection. In total, the questionnaire asked about 60 items divided into two main sections.

To provide preliminary information about the results of the survey, we have divided the responses into three broad sections. In the first section respondents were asked whether they had thought about terrorism, how much it worried them and how likely they thought it was to occur in the future. To contextualize these judgments, respondents were first asked similar questions about being hospitalized, being the victim of a violent crime, and losing their job (all of which were preceded by an item about general anxiety).

The second section of the questionnaire posed questions about how likely respondents would be to call the police in response to various actions potentially related to terrorism and how concerned respondents

cover. We expected that these concepts would reflect the major theoretical perspectives adopted by scholars who study public opinion about terrorism and about possible policy responses to the threat of terrorism. The workshop generated lively discussion and the participants helped us identify important concepts to measure, items and batteries of items that have been successfully used to measure these concepts in prior research, and key areas that have been neglected in the research done to date and therefore require that new items be developed. In addition, the experts at the workshop provided criticisms of existing items.

Among all respondents (those who reported they *had* thought about terrorism in the preceding week and those who reported they *had not*), about 5 percent said a terrorist attack was extremely or very likely to happen in the United States in the next year.⁷ Slightly fewer respondents said it was extremely or very likely that they would experience hospitalization (3 percent), violent criminal victimization (2 percent) or a job loss (3 percent). Even fewer respondents assigned these chances to a terrorist attack in their own community (1.5 percent).⁸ The distributions of answers across the entire range of categories for these items are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Likelihood ratings of negative events					
	Terrorist Attack in the US	Terrorist Attack in Community	Hospitalization	Violent Crime	Job Loss
Extremely Likely	1.7%	0.8%	1.2%	0.7%	1.7%
Very Likely	3.0%	0.6%	2.1%	0.9%	1.2%
Somewhat Likely	9.6%	2.3%	5.0%	2.0%	3.8%
About as Likely as Unlikely	31.2%	16.2%	20.4%	19.0%	14.1%
Somewhat Unlikely	18.4%	13.0%	12.6%	13.5%	15.1%
Very Unlikely	19.1%	26.8%	25.4%	29.1%	27.2%
Extremely Unlikely	17.1%	40.2%	33.3%	34.7%	36.8%
Total	100% (1547)	100% (1551)	100% (1559)	100% (1547)	100% (844)

Respondents who had thought about terrorism were more likely than those who had not thought about it to say an attack was extremely or very likely in the next year (12 percent versus 3 percent). Further, just over one-fifth (21 percent) who had thought about terrorism said they had done something different compared to less than one-twentieth (4 percent) who had not thought about it.

⁷ There was no difference in the proportion of respondents saying such an attack was extremely or very likely between the version that asked about “a terrorist attack in the United States” and the one that asked about “a major terrorist attack in the United States like the one that occurred on September 11, 2001,” but respondents to the latter were somewhat more likely (41 percent versus 31 percent) to say it was extremely or very *unlikely*.

⁸ The questionnaire also included an item about the likelihood that the respondent, the respondent’s friend, or the respondent’s relative would be victimized by a terrorist attack. The answers to this item were very highly correlated with answers to the item about an attack in the respondent’s community (Pearson’s $r = .76$). Thus our attempt to use the items to distinguish direct and indirect harm did not succeed, and, given the overlap in answers between the items, we have not included results from the respondent/friend/relative item elsewhere in this report.

What leads people to think about terrorism? As shown in Table 3, respondents who said they had thought about one negative event were more likely to say they had thought about each of the other negative events. Moreover, of those who had thought about neither hospitalization nor violent criminal victimization, 11 percent reported having thought about terrorism, whereas the figure was 29 percent for those who had thought about either hospitalization or victimization and fully 51 percent for those who had thought about both.

Table 3: Having thought about one event by having thought about another				
		Thought about terrorism		
	Thought about hospitalization	YES	NO	
	YES	32.0%	68%	100% (147)
	NO	12.9%	87.1%	100% (1399)
	Thought about victimization	YES	NO	
	YES	43.2%	56.8%	100% (148)
	NO	11.7%	88.3%	100% (1398)
	Thought about job loss	YES	NO	
	YES	22.8%	77.2%	100% (136)
	NO	10.7%	89.3%	100% (709)
		Thought about hospitalization		
	Thought about victimization	YES	NO	
	YES	34.7%	65.3%	100% (147)
	NO	6.8%	93.2%	100% (1400)
	Thought about job loss	YES	NO	
	YES	14.0%	86.0%	100% (136)
	NO	6.2%	93.8%	100% (706)
		Thought about job loss		
	Thought about victimization	YES	NO	
	YES	38.1%	62.9%	100% (84)
	NO	13.8%	86.2%	100% (763)

This suggests that general anxiety plays a role in thinking about negative events, a hypothesis borne out by the pattern of results from the question “On how many of the past 7 days have you felt anxious and tense?” which was the survey’s very first item. Respondents who had thought about hospitalization, or about violent crime victimization, or about job loss, reported anxiety on twice as many days as

respondents who had not thought about each of those possibilities. The association with thinking about terrorism was similar, but weaker (2.8 days versus 1.8 days), suggesting that although generalized anxiety is related to thinking about terrorism, it is somewhat less strongly related in that realm than for the other, more personal, realms.

Toward the end of the questionnaire we measured whether respondents had direct experience with the more personal negative events. As might be expected, past experience with an event was related to thinking about it in the future. Having been hospitalized during the last decade increased the likelihood of having thought about the possibility of being hospitalized in the future (from 7 percent to 13 percent); having been the victim of a violent crime in the past decade increased the odds of thinking about the possibility of being criminally victimized (from 9 percent to 38 percent); and having lost a job in the last decade increased the chances of thinking about that possibility (from 12 percent to 27 percent).

More interestingly, neither hospitalization nor job loss in the past decade was related to thinking about the possibility of terrorism, but having been criminally victimized was. Whereas 14 percent of those who had not been violent crime victims had thought about terrorism in the last week, 31 percent of the violent crime victims had thought about terrorism. The same distinctive effect of having been the victim of violent crime held for thinking about the other events: neither past hospitalization nor job loss was related to thinking about the other events, but past violent criminal victimization increased the likelihood of thinking both about hospitalization and about job loss.

Although having been the victim of violent crime greatly increased the odds of respondents saying they had thought about terrorism in the past week, the very small number of people who reported such victimization (4 percent) means that it cannot explain most of the variation in whether people said they thought about terrorism. Thus, we next considered whether people's living in the kinds of places terrorist events have occurred was related to reporting such thoughts.

Surprisingly, we found no evidence that living in a metropolitan area increased the odds of having thought about terrorism. And although metropolitan area residents were 3 percentage points more likely to say a terrorist attack was extremely or very likely in the next year, they were also 6 percentage points more likely to say it was extremely or very unlikely to occur. Likewise, although we have too few cases in the metro Washington, D.C. or New York areas to make inferences about their residents, there was little sign that respondents in the States of New York, New Jersey or Connecticut differed from respondents living in other states in thinking about terrorism or in judging its likelihood.

Table 4: Percent having thought about terrorism by gender, age, education and race/ethnicity		
Men	13.6% (745)	$\chi^2_1 = 1.13$
Women	15.8% (810)	
18-29	7.4% (324)	$\chi^2_3 = 19.0^{**}$
30-44	13.2% (403)	
45-59	15.7% (426)	
60+	21.3% (402)	
Less than HS	11.1% (186)	$\chi^2_3 = 1.82$
High School	15.8% (474)	
Some College	14.1% (444)	
BA or More	15.7% (451)	
White	17.2% (1049)	$\chi^2_3 = 11.0^*$
Black	11.9% (176)	
Hispanic	8.8% (223)	
Other	5.7% (88)	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 5: Likelihood of terrorist attack in U.S. by gender, age, education, and race/ethnicity

	Extremely Likely	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	About as Likely or Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Very Unlikely	Extremely Unlikely	Total	
Men	1.6%	2.7%	8.2%	28.4%	17.8%	20.1%	21.3%	100% (747)	$\chi^2_6 = 15.7^*$
Women	1.7%	3.2%	11.0%	33.9%	18.8%	18.1%	13.2%	100% (802)	
18-29	0.4%	1.1%	2.0%	25.3%	16.7%	24.8%	29.7%	100% (323)	$\chi^2_{18} = 81.1^{**}$
30-44	1.2%	1.7%	8.9%	36.8%	21.3%	14.9%	15.1%	100% (398)	
45-59	3.2%	3.3%	10.7%	29.6%	18.1%	21.5%	13.6%	100% (422)	
60+	1.6%	5.3%	15.2%	32.1%	16.9%	16.1%	12.7%	100% (406)	
Less than HS	1.2%	2.3%	9.7%	41.5%	12.8%	18.0%	14.6%	100% (183)	$\chi^2_{18} = 36.1^{**}$
High School	2.0%	3.7%	11.4%	36.4%	16.1%	16.9%	13.5%	100% (469)	
Some College	1.5%	3.4%	8.2%	32.3%	17.7%	17.4%	19.6%	100% (447)	
BA or More	1.8%	2.2%	9.1%	20.6%	23.5%	23.4%	19.5%	100% (450)	
White	1.7%	3.3%	11.4%	31.1%	19.2%	19.2%	14.1%	100% (1040)	$\chi^2_{18} = 36.5^{**}$
Black	1.8%	2.4%	5.4%	31.8%	16.8%	16.1%	25.6%	100% (187)	
Hispanic	1.3%	2.3%	6.7%	34.8%	17.5%	22.9%	14.5%	100% (221)	
Other	3.1%	1.7%	3.1%	24.3%	15.4%	11.6%	40.8%	100% (88)	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4 shows the relationship of thinking about terrorism and respondents' gender, age, education, and race/ethnicity, and Table 5 shows the relationship of estimates of the likelihood of a terrorist attack and respondents' gender, age, education, and race/ethnicity. Men and women answered both items in a similar fashion. Likewise, education was largely unrelated to reports of having thought about terrorism, though college educated respondents were somewhat more apt to have said terrorism is extremely or very unlikely to occur in the next year. Blacks, Hispanics and Asians were all significantly less apt to have said they thought about terrorism and blacks and Asians (but not Hispanics) were somewhat more apt to say terrorism was unlikely. Finally, age was clearly related to both thoughts and probability estimates – older respondents were more apt to say they thought about terrorism and to believe it was likely to occur in the next year.

Respondents' Views of Terrorism and Government Responses to Terrorism

In a second section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked how likely they would be to call the police in response to various actions potentially related to terrorism and how concerned they felt the

government should be about these actions. In general, responses to these two items were strongly correlated — that is, the same things that respondents said they were likely to call the police about they also said the government should be concerned about. Tables 6 and 7 show the responses to the two sets of questions. The correlations between the answers to corresponding items ranged from .65 (for the two items about someone “talking about joining a terrorist group”) to .76 (for the pair of items about someone “stockpiling guns in their home”). If we treat the two sets of items as four-point scales, the average difference between corresponding items is .3 to .4 of a scale point, with answers to the items about the appropriate level of government concern closer to the “very concerned” end of the scale than answers to the items about calling police were to the “very likely” end of the scale. Respondents indicated they would be more likely to call the police or think that the government should be very concerned about someone “talking about planting explosives in a public place” than any other activity. Responses to the two items about someone talking about planting explosives in a public place were the closest to each other, on average differing by only .13 of a scale point.

Table 6: Likelihood of calling police					
	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not Too Likely	Not at All Likely	Total
A Person					
...talking about breaking into a house	69.6%	18.9%	5.3%	6.2%	100% (1542)
...talking about joining a terrorist group	41.4%	28.7%	20.8%	9.1%	100% (1545)
...talking about planting explosives	76.1%	13.1%	4.6%	6.1%	100% (1543)
...reading material from terrorist group	20.6%	28.5%	35.4%	15.5%	100% (1544)
...stockpiling guns	38.7%	24.9%	23.4%	13%	100% (1542)
...traveling overseas to join terrorist group	52.0%	23.4%	14.7%	9.9%	100% (1547)
...distributing handouts in support of terrorism	46.2%	28.4%	17.4%	7.9%	100% (1540)

Table 7: Appropriate level of government concern					
	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned	Not Too Concerned	Not at All Concerned	Total
A Person					
...talking about joining a terrorist group	56.3%	31.0%	7.6%	5.1%	100% (1533)
...talking about planting explosives	82.6%	11.1%	2.5%	3.9%	100% (1533)
...reading material from terrorist group	32.1%	42.4%	18.7%	6.8%	100% (1537)
...stockpiling guns	49.5%	29.0%	13.7%	7.8%	100% (1547)
...traveling overseas to join terrorist group	67.1%	22.6%	5.6%	4.7%	100% (1541)
...distributing handouts in support of terrorism	57.7%	30.8%	7.4%	4.4%	100% (1537)

As a benchmark for these items, we asked respondents how likely they would be to call the police if they overheard people talking about breaking into a house in their neighborhood. About 70 percent of the

respondents said they would be very likely to call the police in this situation; a somewhat higher percentage said they would be very likely to call the police if they heard someone talking about planting explosives in a public place (76 percent). At the other end of the spectrum, about 21 percent of the respondents said they would be very likely to call the police if they heard about someone reading material from a terrorist group.

Respondents who said they had thought about a terrorist attack in the last week were more likely than other respondents to say they were likely to call the police in response to the various situations described to them. For example, more than 80 percent of those who had thought about terrorism in the previous week said they would be very likely to call the police if they heard two people talking about breaking into a house in their neighborhood (versus 68 percent of those who did not report thinking about terrorism in the past week). Table 8 shows the comparisons between those who thought about terrorism in the past week and those who did not for each of the items. Heightened concern — higher proportions reporting themselves very likely to call the police and higher proportions thinking the government should be very concerned — among those who thought about terrorism in the last week is apparent for each of the items, with one exception. Both groups exhibit similar — not very high — levels of concern about someone stockpiling guns in their home.

Table 8: Likelihood of calling police and appropriate level of government concern, by thought about terrorism

	Very Likely to Call Police		Government Should be Very Concerned	
	Thought About Terrorism	Did Not Think About Terrorism	Thought About Terrorism	Did Not Think About Terrorism
A Person				
...talking about breaking into a house	80.6% (264)	67.8% (1268)	—	—
...talking about joining a terrorist group	55.8% (265)	39.1% (1270)	73.1% (265)	53.3% (1259)
...talking about planting explosives	87.4% (264)	74.1% (1269)	91.8% (264)	80.9% (1260)
...reading material from terrorist group	28.5% (264)	19.4% (1269)	40.0% (265)	30.9% (1263)
...stockpiling guns	37.3% (264)	39.1% (1268)	49.4% (265)	49.3% (1263)
...traveling overseas to join terrorist group	66.9% (265)	49.4% (1272)	80.9% (265)	64.7% (1267)
...distributing handouts in support of terrorism	62.4% (264)	43.3% (1267)	69.9% (264)	55.1% (1264)

The questionnaire also included three items asking respondents about their overall views about the threat of terror, the effectiveness of the government anti-terrorism efforts, and their confidence in the people running the executive branch of the federal government. A large majority of the respondents said that the U.S. government has been very effective (33 percent) or somewhat effective (54 percent) at preventing terrorism; less than 13 percent characterized the government as not too effective or not

effective at all. Despite this positive view of the government’s efforts to prevent terrorism, a large majority (69 percent) endorsed the view that “terrorists will always find a way to carry out major attacks no matter what the U.S. government does.” As might be expected, there is a relationship between views about the government’s effectiveness at preventing terrorism and about whether terrorists will always find a way to mount attacks on the United States, though it is not a very strong relationship. Only 63 percent of those who rated the government’s efforts as very effective at preventing terrorism said that terrorists will always find a way to carry out attacks versus 75 percent of those who rated the government’s efforts at preventing terrorism as not too effective or not effective at all (see Table 9).

Respondents’ overall confidence in “the people who run the executive branch of the federal government” was also related to their views about the possibility of preventing all major terrorist attacks (see Table 9). Among respondents who have a great deal of confidence in the people running the executive branch, more than 38 percent say that government can prevent all major terrorist attacks but for those who have hardly any confidence in the people running the executive branch, less than 22 percent think that government can prevent all major terrorist attacks.

Table 9: Belief that terrorists will always find a way to carry out attacks, by perceived effectiveness of government in preventing terrorism and confidence in people running executive branch

	Terrorists will always find a way	Government can eventually prevent all major attacks	Total
Effectiveness of government at preventing terrorism			
Very effective	63.0%	37.0%	100% (510)
Somewhat effective	70.9%	29.1%	100% (814)
Not too or not at all effective	75.1%	24.9%	100% (191)
Confidence in people running executive branch			
A great deal	61.6%	38.4%	100% (266)
Only some	65.7%	34.3%	100% (750)
Hardly any	78.1%	21.9%	100% (498)

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

The survey also asked respondents about two specific programs focused on increasing communication between members of the public and the government on topics related to terrorism.

Conclusions

Terrorism continues to resonate as a significant threat to American citizens, especially those who have been victims of violent crime or who have recently experienced relatively high levels of anxiety. About 15 percent of the sample indicated that they had thought about the prospect of terrorism in the United States during the preceding week, significantly more than the fraction who said they had thought about hospitalization and violent crime victimization, but about the same fraction as those who said they had thought about job loss. Among the respondents that reported that they had thought about terrorism in the preceding week, about 5 percent said a terrorist attack was extremely or very likely to happen in the United States in the next year. Interestingly, there was no evidence that living in a metropolitan area increased the odds of having thought about terrorism. The survey results also revealed that respondents who said that they had thought about a terrorist attack in the last week were more likely than other respondents to say they were likely to call the police in response to various scenarios described to them. A large majority of the respondents said that the United States government has been very effective or somewhat effective at preventing terrorism.

Public outreach efforts and community-oriented programs with respect to terrorism do address a salient concern held by the American public. While these survey results highlight the belief that the United States government is addressing terrorism effectively, they also highlight areas where increased government focus can improve these attitudes. Specifically, increased marketing for the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign, which is positively perceived by those aware of it, would likely benefit DHS. Similarly, increased levels of public education might increase reporting levels of relevant suspicious activity, such as overhearing that an individual plans to travel abroad to join a terrorist organization. Finally, this survey offers support for increased levels of community engagement between DHS, local law enforcement, and local communities, as the results suggest considerable willingness for such engagement exists among American citizens.