



U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Examining Results from a Four-Wave Survey Conducted between September 2012 and July 2014

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About This Report

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About START and JPSM

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 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

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Executive Summary

This report examines Americans' beliefs and attitudes about terrorism and government efforts to counter terrorism based on responses to 5,558 questionnaires administered in four waves between September 2012 and July 2014. The fact that the Boston Marathon bombings occurred near the end of wave 2 of this project allowed us to examine the stability of respondents' attitudes following a major, well-publicized attack. We examine the results for three major groups of items.

The first group of items tracked public concerns about terrorism. We found little movement in any of these items across the four waves except for some limited evidence of an increase in the proportion of individuals who said they had changed their behavior in the past year because of the possibility of a terrorist attack. This effect largely dissipated by wave 4.

The second group of items examined how likely respondents said they would be to call the police in various terrorism-related scenarios. Once again we found a good deal of stability across the four waves, although directly after the Boston Marathon bombings an increased proportion of respondents did report that they would be very likely to call the police if they heard about a person travelling overseas to join a terrorist group. Again this increase dissipated by wave 4.

The final group of questions asked about the overall effectiveness of the government's anti-terrorism efforts, whether respondents had heard of the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign, and whether they would be willing to meet with the police or DHS officials to discuss terrorism. Respondents saying the U.S. government was somewhat or very effective at preventing terrorism was generally high (over 87 percent during wave 1), and there was a small but statistically significant decline in this rating over the four waves (82 percent for wave 4).

Finally, we found a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who said they had heard about the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign between waves 1 and 4. Further analysis showed that these increases were driven especially by respondents who had bachelor's degrees or more advanced education.

Taken together, the results suggest that public attitudes toward terrorism and government responses to it are fairly stable even in the face of a well-publicized attack such as the Boston Marathon bombings. Nonetheless, this highly publicized terrorist attack was followed by some increased concern about terrorism, and a larger proportion of respondents saying they would report a specific terrorism-related behavior to the police. All of these effects largely dissipated in the six months between waves 3 and 4. The results also showed growing awareness of the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign that did not dissipate and was explained mostly by growing awareness among more highly educated respondents.

Introduction

This report describes the results of a survey of Americans' beliefs and attitudes about both terrorism and government efforts to counter terrorism. Before designing the survey we reviewed past surveys and consulted with academic and government experts in the area. We found that existing survey data did not provide comprehensive information about U.S. beliefs and attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism efforts—baseline information that would be valuable for informing government policies and programs and developing appropriate countermeasures for the country.¹ Our project employed advanced survey methodologies, coupled with informed understanding about perceptions of terrorism, violence, and government policy, to develop and implement a more refined survey instrument than had been available in the past.

The questionnaire developed for the project included items related to whether participants had recently thought about the possibility of terrorism. Other questions dealt with how likely participants would be to call the police in response to various actions related to terrorism and their views of the government's effectiveness at preventing terrorism. Finally, respondents were asked about specific programs such as the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign, and about their willingness to meet with officials to discuss terrorism.

In all, 5,558 questionnaires were completed as part of this project. The initial, wave 1 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.²

In the spring of 2013, approximately six months after the first 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 wave 2 results completed **before** the bombings with those from wave 1 showed little change, 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.³

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, and Amy Adamczyk, "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.

³ Gary LaFree, Stanley Presser, Roger Tourangeau, and Amy Adamczyk, "U.S. Attitudes toward Terrorism and Counterterrorism," August 2013 memo to Allison Smith and Danielle Hawkins.

To examine whether the Boston Marathon bombings might have had an impact on public attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism, we administered the same questionnaire (in the same way) to a new nationally representative sample of 302 American adults between May 15 and June 2, 2013. Those results, described in our September 2013 report, showed an increase in participants' expressed willingness to call the police in a variety of situations linked to terrorism, but little change across a host of other items (such as worrying about terrorism and perceptions of its likelihood).⁴

A third wave of the survey was conducted in January and February 2014. There was again little change across most items, but—notably—the increase in expressed willingness to call the police observed immediately after the Boston Marathon bombings persisted.

In this report, we present the results of a fourth wave of the survey conducted in July 2014, which provides an opportunity to examine whether the changes initially observed after the Boston Marathon bombings persisted or whether they proved to be more transient. We also more generally compare the results across the four points in time.

Methods

The four waves of the survey were conducted with almost the identical computerized questionnaire administered via the web.⁵ All of the 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. Wave 4 consisted of a total of 1,060 individuals of whom: 419 were interviewed in all four waves; 141 were interviewed in waves 2, 3, and 4; 317 were interviewed in waves 3 and 4; and 183 were newly drawn for wave 4.

Taking into account nonresponse at the various stages of recruitment and retention over time, the overall response rate for the various waves was between 1 and 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.

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 the various 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. (Although the percentages we report are weighted, sample

⁴ Gary LaFree, Stanley Presser, Roger Tourangeau, and 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.

⁵ Results in this report are limited to the four major waves and do not include results from the sample of 302 respondents following the Boston Marathon bombings.

sizes are unweighted, and all the figures we report exclude missing data, which range between 1 and 2 percentage points across the questions.)

Results and Discussion

The first group of questions tracked concern about terrorism. For example, we asked respondents in each wave whether they had thought about a terrorist attack (or a major terrorist attack) in the past week. There were no consequential differences between the two versions of the question (approximately half of the respondents were asked about “a major terrorist attack like the one that occurred on September 11” and the remainder were asked about “a terrorist attack”), and we combine the results for the two versions. Table 1 displays the figures for all four waves for the six questions tapping concern about terrorism. There is very little movement in any of these items across the four waves of data collection, although for a couple of the items (see the third and final rows of Table 1), there was an uptick of concern in wave 3, which followed the Boston Marathon bombings, with a significant increase in the percentage of respondents who reported changing behavior in the past year because of the possibility of a terrorist attack. This effect dissipated in wave 4.

TABLE 1: Concern about Terrorist Attack, by Item and Wave

Item	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
% who thought about terrorist attack in last week	14.7%	17.2%	15.6%	14.6%
% who say thinking about terrorist attack in last week made them extremely or very worried	24.4 %	22.1%	23.4%	22.5%
% who say terrorist attack in U.S. is somewhat, very, or extremely likely in next year	14.0 %	14.7%	15.8%	13.3%
% who say terrorist attack in own community is somewhat, very, or extremely likely in next year	3.7%	3.3%	3.3%	3.5%
% who say they, a friend, or relative are somewhat, very, or extremely likely to be victim of terrorism in next year	3.6%	3.2%	3.7%	3.3%
% who did something differently in past year because of possibility of terrorist attack	6.0%	5.6%	8.1%	5.2%

A second group of questions asked respondents whether they would call the police in various situations. For example, one item asked the respondents how likely they would be to call the police if they overheard someone talking about joining a terrorist group. Table 2 shows the results for six questions in this group.

Once again, there is little movement in the responses across waves, but with wave 3 again representing something of an exception. For all items, the highest percentages of respondents who said they were very likely to call the police came in wave 3, although the increase from wave 2 to wave 3 is statistically significant only for the item related to hearing about a person travelling overseas to join a terrorist group. By wave 4, however, the percentages had dropped and were very close to those observed in the first wave.

TABLE 2: Proportion Very Likely to Call Police, by Item and Wave

About a situation in which a person is...	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
...talking about planting explosives	76.1%	76.5%	80.4%	75.2%
...traveling overseas to join terrorist group	52.0%	52.3%	59.4%	52.7%
...distributing handouts supporting terrorism	46.2%	45.7%	51.4%	45.8%
...talking about joining terrorist group	41.4%	41.7%	45.6%	40.6%
...reading material from terrorist group	20.6%	20.1%	23.3%	20.7%
...talking about breaking into house (comparison item)	69.6%	68.2%	73.6%	68.1%

The final group of questions asked about the overall effectiveness of the government’s anti-terrorism efforts, whether terrorists would always find a way to carry out attacks, whether respondents had heard of the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign, and whether they would be willing to meet with the police or with officials from the Department of Homeland Security to discuss terrorism. Table 3 shows the results by wave.

TABLE 3: Reports on Final Items, by Item and Wave

Item	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
% saying U.S. government somewhat or very effective at preventing terrorism	87.4%	85.0%	84.0%	82.1%
% saying terrorists will always find a way to carry out major attacks in the U.S.	68.8%	73.6%	75.9%	73.2%
% heard of “See Something, Say Something” campaign	22.8%	26.7%	36.2%	38.0%
% heard of “See Something, Say Something”—New cases only	22.8%	24.5%	29.2%	30.3%
% willing to attend meeting with police about terrorism	58.5%	59.8%	60.9%	58.0%
% willing to attend meeting with DHS officials about terrorism	57.4%	58.2%	60.1%	55.2%

Once again, the public’s views on each of these topics exhibit great stability across the four waves of data collection. There was, however, a marginally significant decline in the proportion saying the government was very or somewhat effective at preventing terrorism in the United States (from 87.4 percent in wave 1 to 82.1 percent in wave 4).

The clearest trend in Table 3 is the increase in the proportion of respondents who say they had heard about the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign. Across all respondents, the percentage increased from 22.8 percent to 38.0 percent across the four waves. Because we asked respondents about this campaign in each wave, some of this increase could be an artifact of the repeated questioning. The fourth row of the table includes only “new” cases—that is, respondents completing the survey for the first time. Even within this group, there is a statistically significant increase in proportion saying they had heard of the campaign (from 22.8 to 30.3 percent). Although there are relatively few new cases in wave 4 (180), we looked to see if this increased recognition of the campaign was concentrated in any age, race, or education subgroups. One relatively clear pattern seemed to emerge—the highest education group (those with a college degree or more advanced education) showed the highest awareness of the campaign in wave 1 and also showed the sharpest increase in awareness across waves. Table 4 shows the wave 1 and wave 4 results by education group. Only the highest education group showed much change across waves. However, because of the small number of new wave 4 cases, the interaction between wave and education apparent in Table 4 is not statistically significant.

TABLE 4: Percent Saying They Had Heard of the “If You See Something, Say Something” Campaign, by Wave and Education Group

Group	Wave 1	Wave 4
Less than high school diploma	9.6%	10.3%
High school graduate	19.5%	23.2%
Some college	24.4%	23.4%
Bachelor’s or higher degree	30.0%	52.3%

Conclusions

Taken together, our results based on polling large samples of Americans about their attitudes toward terrorism and counterterrorism in four separate waves over a two-year period demonstrated considerable stability. We found few differences across the four waves in the proportion of respondents who said they had thought during the previous week about the possibility of a terrorist attack or in the perceptions of respondents about the probability that “a terrorist attack in the United States,” a terrorist attack in their community, or a terrorist attack in which the respondents or their friends or relatives became victims would occur in the next year. While there was a significant increase in the proportion saying they had done something differently because of the possibility of a terrorist attack in wave 3, this effect dissipated by wave 4. Overall, the apparent salience of terrorism did not change much over the four waves examined.

That said, we found the most evidence for change in select responses before and after the Boston Marathon bombings and in the proportions of respondents who had heard of the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign. Respondents who said they had done something differently because of the possibility of an attack increased significantly after the Boston Marathon bombings, but this difference disappeared six months later when the wave 4 survey was conducted. Similarly, following the Boston Marathon bombings an increased proportion of respondents said that if they heard about a person travelling overseas to join a terrorist group, they would be very likely to report it to the police, although again, this effect had dissipated six months later by the time the wave 4 survey was conducted. We should hasten to add that our design does not allow us to say with certainty whether these effects were produced only by the Boston Marathon bombings or by some combination of other events that took place between waves 2 and 3.

The proportion of respondents who said they had heard of the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign steadily increased over the four waves. We found that these increases held even when we limited our analysis to “new” respondents who had not previously been surveyed. Further analysis showed that the increased familiarity of the campaign was limited to highly educated respondents.

These findings support the view that there is considerable stability in public attitudes toward terrorism and government responses to it. If the findings for the Boston Marathon bombings can be replicated, they also suggest that the public may be more willing to help authorities counter terrorism in the wake of a highly publicized terrorist event. Finally, changes in the proportion of respondents who expressed familiarity with the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign suggest that it is possible to increase awareness for a specialized program such as this one, although our results suggest that in this case the groups affected represent a relatively narrow segment of the U.S. population.