Social Learning and Social Control in the Off and Online Pathways to Hate and Extremist Violence

Final Progress Report

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Principal Investigator: Gary LaFree
Contact: glafree@umd.edu

Grant Manager: Cathy Girouard
Contact: Cathy.Girouard@usdoj.gov

Introduction

In this overview, we report on the purpose of the grant, the data collected, the project design and methods, the data analysis, the findings and the implications for criminal justice policy in the United States. The grant proposal included three data analysis sections: (1) a large-N analysis of extremist hate offenders and other political extremists from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the Profiles of Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) data; (2) a set of original case studies on individuals either connected to hate crime or politically motivated extremism; and (3) the social media experiences of more than 25 offenders who have engaged in violent and non-violent activities in hate groups and more than 25 offenders who have engaged in either violent or non-violent activities in extremist political groups. We review the contributions of each before closing with a brief set of conclusions.

Large-N Analysis of ECDB and PIRUS

Purpose:

To compare perpetrators who only committed hate crimes, only committed extremist crimes and who committed both types of crimes.

Subjects:

We combined 2,100 cases in the ECDB with 1,500 cases from PIRUS.

Project Design and Methods:

In order to create a sample for analysis, we leveraged the detailed individual profiles captured in PIRUS with the incident-level and individual-level data captured in the ECDB. To link records, we conducted a name-matching process. Individuals from PIRUS were matched against individual names within ECDB events, and a crosswalk file was created. Since ECDB begins in 1990, all matches were conducted against individuals whose first known ideologically motivated criminal act in PIRUS was 1990 or after. Overall, 454 individuals were linked between the two databases.

Data Analysis:

To leverage the relevant data in the linked sample, we explored whether the radicalization history of those individuals who engage in financial crimes (according to ECDB classification) differ considerably from those who engage in violent extremism and from those who engage in both. To do this, we take suspect and incident level data from the ECDB to place perpetrators in one of three offense categories: (1) purely financial (or non-violent), (2) violent, or (3) mixed/both. Purely financial includes suspects who are involved in ideologically motivated schemes that are meant to collect support through illegal means but are not acts of actual or threatened violence. Violent includes perpetrators who either successfully commit an act of ideologically motivated violence, or have planned an act of violence that was foiled by law enforcement or failed. Suspects who have engaged in both types of criminal activity are coded as mixed.

Findings:

Individuals in the linked dataset are more likely to be violent (61% linked vs. 38% of non-linked), especially for those within an Islamist ideology (90% of violent PIRUS cases linked). PIRUS cases with an Islamist ideology are also found within ECDB at a higher rate (88% linked) than far-right cases (42% linked). Single-issue cases (including anti-abortion attacks) are the least prevalent in the linked data (only 13% linked overall), while linked far-left cases are more likely to be non-violent (48% linked) than violent (29% linked). The linked sample contains a higher proportion of single individuals, those aged between 25 and 34 years old, non-U.S. citizens, those who had at least one known radical friend, and those with high educational status. We found no linked/non-linked significant differences for married individuals, gender distribution, military service, those with a radical family member, employment status, lone offender attacks, and those with previous criminal records.

Of the 454 linked individuals, 56% (257 out of 454) contained a match between PIRUS coding of violent individuals and ECDB's coding of ideologically-motivated violence. These matches were split

between non-violent (78 cases) and ideologically motivated violent (179 cases). In contrast, over 40% of cases in the linked data do not match violence criteria between ECDB and PIRUS. The largest categories of discrepancy are ECDB-ideological violence/PIRUS non-violent (93 cases), ECDB non-violent/PIRUS violent (62), and ECDB non-ideological violence/PIRUS violent (39 cases). There are three main reasons for these discrepancies. First, ideologically-motivated actions that purposely avoid human casualties or destroy only property are considered violence in ECDB and non-violence in PIRUS. Second, individuals who have joined a terrorist group, traveled overseas to fight for a terrorist group, or been charged with conspiracy to kill or injure are classified as violent by PIRUS but not ECDB. Finally, threatened violence with no operational progress towards a plot, possession of illegal weapons with only vague operational plans, and armed standoffs that don't end in injury are categorized as non-violent by PIRUS and violent by ECDB.

Overall, the results show that the key differences in violent classification between PIRUS and ECDB are centered on three types of perpetrators: those who (1) provided themselves as material support to a terrorist organization, often foreign (65 cases); (2) engaged in violence that attempted to avoid human casualties (51 cases); and (3) participated in violence that wasn't purely ideological or had more personal motives (18 cases). These three types accounted for 68% (134 out of 197 cases) of all violence discrepancies between the two datasets, and reflect general differences in coding criteria. A total of 155 cases (or 79% of all discrepancies) were the result of identifiable definitional issues between the two datasets. Forty-two cases (21% of discrepancies) remain unresolved and will require further investigation to determine whether they are definitional differences or misapplication of coding criteria for the two datasets.

Policy Implications:

By linking ECDB and PIRUS we identified a number of key concerns related to the linked data for analysis. A manuscript comparing the data sets is under way (see Appendix A). While the linked dataset

remains relatively representative in comparison to the unlinked dataset, the differences in classifying violent and non-violent in ECDB and PIRUS limit the valid use of the data. If we use a PIRUS classification of violent/non-violent, the resulting analysis may confound those who take immediate violent action intending to harm individuals with those who join terrorist organizations and recruit or finance terrorism with only the intent to harm. If we use the ECDB criteria for violent/non-violent, then we equate members of groups like ALF and ELF that avoid human casualties with those who are willing to sacrifice their life to kill or maim others. This definitional difference represents a key challenge to using the linked dataset for further analysis comparing offenders. Future research should consider developing an equivalent to the PIRUS dataset for a sample of hate crime offenders, and then conduct the relative comparisons between those two samples. Although outside the parameters of this grant, the National Institute of Justice has recently awarded a grant to create a hate crime version of PIRUS, which bodes well for the ability of future researchers to address these issues.

Hate Crime and Extremist Crime Case Studies

We developed 38 detailed case studies focused on indoctrination or radicalization processes of criminal extremists, selected from ECDB and PIRUS. Individuals included have committed either nonviolent crimes, targeted violence (hate crime), or politically-motived violence (terrorism). We focused our efforts on the role that social learning and social control play in three distinct phases of exposure to extremist content, entry into a specific extremist group or movement, and committing an act of violent or nonviolent criminality.

Subjects:

We selected cases based on year of activity (before and after 2005); ideology (far-left, far-right, jihadi); type of crime (hate versus extremist ideology); target (anti-government versus others); level of violence; and whether the perpetrator acted alone or with others.

Project Design and Methods:

We used a case study method to examine whether social control and social learning processes vary across extremist offenders engaging in ideologically motivated hate crimes, versus U.S. anti-government/society political violence. We examined whether these extremists share career pathways, how they move from non-violent to violent participation, and what role social media plays in influencing these processes. Open sources were gathered according to prior search protocols for the ECDB and PIRUS. We constructed the case studies to produce a picture of the life-course of profiled individuals, including major educational and life events, civic engagement and/or delinquency, social connections and influential relationships. Whenever possible, the case studies included original source material, such as quotes from offenders that captured their own perceptions of the importance of specific life events.

Data Analysis and Findings:

To begin the analysis, we created a template that operationalized key constructs from social learning and social control theories, including both offline and online behaviors. We used this template to address our key research questions. Thus far, we have completed two manuscripts based on the case study data. First, in Holt et al. (2018) we examined the relationship between social control and social learning theories to account for radicalization and escalation. We developed a matched sample of two far right and two Islamist perpetrators who engaged in either violent or non-violent crimes and examined the relationship between associations on and off-line and its influence on behavior.

In a second paper, Mills et al (under review) we analyzed two violent far-rightists and two violent Islamists, two hate/bias offenders, two anti-government offenders, two pre-2005 cases that had a low likelihood of Internet use and two post-2005 cases that had a high likelihood of Internet use. We used a qualitative case-study method to examine whether social control and social learning processes vary across extremist offenders engaging in ideologically motivated hate crimes versus US anti-government political violence. We examined whether these two types of extremists share the same criminal pathways, whether they move in similar ways from non-violent to violent participation, and what role social media

plays in influencing them. Our analysis demonstrated important similarities and differences across ideologies and offender types. We found support for the use of an integrated social control-social learning model to explain radicalization and the commission of extremist violence. This study is currently under review at a criminal justice journal.

Policy Implications:

These case studies have important implications for criminal justice policy. First, both the hate and extremist offenders not only broadcast their intentions to commit criminal acts, but many had multiple interactions with law enforcement. For example, our results showed that all of the offenders examined had previous contacts with law enforcement before the incident that got them into our databases. Their offense histories suggest that they had weak commitment to conventional norms and behaviors and were open to belief systems at odds with conventional norms. Though only a small percent of all extremists ever carry out a terrorist attack, a relatively high proportion of individuals who carry out attacks have a prior criminal record. This finding suggests that law enforcement has an opportunity to intervene before acts of politically motivated violence escalate and additional acts are committed.

Second, these case studies show that the pathways for hate and terrorism offenders differed. This is not only a topic that has important implications for future research and theory testing, but is also important in terms of investigative strategies and risk assessment tools. The fact that different offenders were at varying stages of radicalization when committing violent offenses suggests that prioritizing dangerous behavior as opposed to radical beliefs may be useful.

On and Off-line Behavior of Perpetrators

The purpose of this analysis was to identify similarities and differences in the use of social media by extremists, terrorist perpetrators, and individuals who engaged in hate crimes. Few prior studies have systematically identified patterns of social media usage across extremist ideologies and over time.

Such information is essential in light of the prominence of online communications for both recruitment and messaging among jihadists and far right actors. Though organized groups use social media and forums as platforms for communication, it is unclear how individuals use media sites to express their beliefs and facilitate ideologically motivated crimes. It is possible that individuals may differ in their use of platforms over time, with individuals who more recently engaged in an act of violence being more inclined to utilize social media sites. There may also be differences in the use of platforms relative to specific ideologies.

Project Design and Methods:

To assess the use of social media, we selected 52 individuals who engaged in successful or failed acts of violence or fraud in furtherance of an ideological agenda in keeping with the definitions of the PIRUS and ECDB databases. The sample focused on cases occurring primarily after 2007 due to the extensive penetration of social media platforms during this period. Specifically, there was a rise in Twitter, Facebook, and other media account usage by individuals, especially among adults 18 and older, during this period.

Our data collection generated 21 Islamists, 29 far-right actors, and 2 associated with far left groups (n=52). For the final data set we included 34 perpetrators from PIRUS, 12 from ECDB and 6 individuals who appeared in both data sets. Five incidents associated with jihadist ideologies and 3 with far-right ideologies occurred before 2007. The remaining 44 perpetrators were involved in incidents that occurred after 2007. Our research team used case histories available on the cases drawn from both databases, including offender demographic and incident details, to create search terms to identify the individual associated with the incident across multiple platforms. Open source searches were conducted using search engines such as Google and Bing, as well as the search tools available within social media platforms to identify any primary accounts associated with or used by the individual associated with an incident of violence or hate crime. The team specifically searched for accounts made through the primary

social media platforms used historically within the United States (friendster, myspace), as well as more contemporary platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube). Ancillary platforms were also included to be comprehensive, specifically livejournal and vkontakte, as well as any personal websites, blogs, forum accounts, or other platforms such as dating sites. The analysis focused on whether individuals had (1) no account, (2) verifiable accounts (whether deleted or active), or (3) possible accounts which included names but no posts, or similar names but no way to access the content.

Findings:

The most common platform used in this sample was Facebook (9; 17.2%), which is in keeping with general patterns of social media use. We found a greater number of far-right actors with Facebook accounts (confirmed 7; 13.4%) than Islamist accounts (2; 3.8%). There was a substantially smaller number of users on other platforms, including Google+ accounts (1; 1.9%), YouTube (3; 5.7%), Twitter (3; 5.7%), LiveJournal (2 possible, 3.8%), Friendster (2 confirmed, 3.8%; 1 uncertain, 1.9%), vkontake (1; 1.9%), and directly identifiable personal websites (3; 5.7%), or involvement in forums (2; 3.8%; 1 questionable; 1.9%). A limited number of other relevant content was identified, including two blogs, one 4chan account, an Infowars account, a personal site for prisoners, and various dating profiles. Some platforms could not be fully validated. For instance, there were 9 instances of individuals with possible SnapChat accounts, though we could not access these accounts or validate the information. Three individuals had identifiable Instagram accounts (3; 5.7%), though 8 additional accounts were possibly associated with an actor, but not identifiable (15.2%). Twitter use was slightly higher among Islamists (2; 3.8%) than far right actors (1; 1.8%). Myspace use was similarly limited, though there was slightly greater representation by those on the far right (n=3; 5.8%). Instagram use was uncommon; only two far-right and one Islamist account could be identified. Two Islamists appeared to have Friendster accounts and two appeared to have Livejournal accounts. One confirmed vkontakte account was

identified associated with an Islamist actor. Two far right actors appeared to participate in forums, and two had personal websites, while one far left actor had one. No evidence of such engagement was observed for Islamists.

Policy Implications:

This analysis suggests patterns of social media use vary across ideological groups and may reflect the general use of these platforms within the larger US population. The differences observed across platform may also reflect the interests and background of perpetrators. For instance, the limited use of LinkedIn may be due to the general differences in the professional background of these actors. Similarly, the limited use of Snapchat may be a function of its recent emergence and the young age of its user base. There is a need for more research examining the actual use and quantity of messages expressive of ideological beliefs within and across ideological agendas.

Conclusions

Our major conclusions follow logically from the three research strategies that animated our project. First, to this point in time there have been very few large-N data sets on political extremists in the United States and none that we are aware of that allow direct comparisons with hate crime perpetrators. This project allowed us to link together data from PIRUS and the ECDB--two of the largest current data sets on these topics. We are in the process of producing at least one research article based on this linkage. However, the project also raised concerns about the complexity of linking these data sets. In particular, the fact that ECDB and PIRUS define violence in different ways limited the number of cases available for the analysis.

Second, we collected 38 detailed case studies focused on indoctrination or radicalization processes of criminal extremists, selected from ECDB and PIRUS. We focused our efforts on the role that social learning and social control play over the life course. Our results show that both the hate and

extremist offenders had multiple interactions with law enforcement. This finding suggests that law enforcement has an opportunity to intervene before acts of politically motivated violence escalate and additional acts are committed.

Finally, in order to identify similarities and differences in the use of social media by political extremists and individuals who engaged in hate crimes, we selected 52 individuals who engaged in successful or failed acts of violence or fraud in furtherance of an ideological agenda in keeping with the definitions of the PIRUS and ECDB databases. Our analysis suggests that patterns of social media use vary across ideological groups and may reflect the general use of these platforms within the larger US population.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PRODUCTS

Becker, M. 2018. When extremists become violent: Examining the association between social learning, social control, and engagement in violent extremism. Unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland.

Carson, J.V. & James, P. A. Forthcoming. Definitions favorable to terrorism: Social learning and the case study of Daniel McGowan. Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice and Criminology.

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Holt, T.J., J.D. Freilich, S.M. Chermak & G. LaFree. 2018. Examining the utility of social control and social learning in the radicalization of violent and non-violent extremists. Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict 11(3): 125-148. DOI: 10.1080/17467586.2018.1470661.

Mills, C.E., J.D. Freilich, S.M. Chermak, G. LaFree & T.J. Holt. Social learning and social control in the off and online pathways to hate crime and terrorist violence. Under review

LaFree, G., K. Jasko. 2018. Leaders and followers in extremist groups. Unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland.

LaFree, G., B. Jiang & L. Porter. 2018. Prisons and violent political extremism in the United States. Revise and resubmit, Journal of Quantitative Criminology.

Sahani, S. & G. LaFree. 2018. Examining the association between social media and violent extremism: a social learning approach. Unpublished manuscript, University of Maryland.