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## Opportunity, Temporal Patterns, and Successful Outcomes of Far-right Terrorism Incidents in the United States

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Opportunity, Temporal Patterns, and Successful Outcomes of  
Far-right Terrorism Incidents in the United States

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Far-right Terrorism Incidents in the United States

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, 2013  
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This thesis is approved for the recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the impact that far-right terrorism opportunity structures and temporal patterns of precursor activity have on incident outcomes. Data from the American Terrorism Study (ATS) are extracted for several attributes of far-right opportunity, in addition to measures for temporal patterns of planning and preparatory behaviors. Bivariate and multivariate findings generally support expectations that target attractiveness and vulnerability, far-right group structures, and patterns of precursor activity are significantly associated with incident outcomes. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research and several implications for homeland security policy.

## **Acknowledgments**

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of my committee members for their continued help and support throughout this project. To Dr. Jeff Gruenewald (my committee chair), Dr. Brent Smith, and Dr. Chris Shields, I offer my sincere appreciation for your mentorship both inside and outside of academia.

I also thank my parents and siblings for their unwavering support, encouragement, and kindness.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the late Shay Santana Sherrod. Let this be a reminder that no project is too great to stand in the way of friendship. *La vie est belle.*

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## INTRODUCTION

On the morning of April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh awoke with one goal in mind – punish the United States government. After months of meticulous planning and preparation, McVeigh carefully drove a Ryder rental truck carrying 7,000 pounds of explosives to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Shortly after 9 a.m., he ignited the fuse, exited the truck, and waited for the bomb to detonate. The devastating explosion, which killed 168 and injured over 500 more, was the worst act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history (Michel & Herbeck, 2001). Many Americans were surprised to learn that a homegrown, right-wing extremist was capable of preparing for, and successfully executing, a large-scale attack on the federal government. However, McVeigh was not the only far-right extremist planning a major terrorist attack on U.S. soil in the spring of 1995. In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, members of a group known as the Oklahoma Constitutional Militia spent months recruiting, acquiring explosive materials, and holding meetings to discuss a plot to detonate improvised explosive devices at gay bars, abortion clinics, and civil liberty watch group offices. Fortunately, law enforcement was able to successfully interdict the plot and arrest members of the group before the attacks occurred, potentially saving countless lives.

Research suggests that the individuals who adhere to violent far-right ideologies pose a significant risk to the American public (Gruenewald, Freilich, & Chermak, 2009; Riley, Treverton, Wilson, & Davis, 2005; Simone, Freilich, & Chermak, 2008). One study, for example, found that between 1978 and 2000, far-right terrorists claimed over 250 lives (Hewitt, 2003). More recently, Freilich and Chermak (2007) observed that far-rightists have committed over 270 homicides since 1990, resulting in over 500 deaths. Although violent far-right extremists have carried out numerous ideologically motivated terrorist acts, many other planned

attacks have either failed or are foiled by law enforcement. While it is clear that McVeigh and the members of the Oklahoma Constitutional Militia diverged in their decisions regarding target selection, weaponry use, affiliation with groups, and other preparatory activities, precisely what distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful attacks remains unclear. In order to devise more informed terrorism prevention practices, it is necessary to advance our understanding of how situational behaviors, far-right group dynamics, and pre-incident decision-making shape *successful* outcomes.

To date, research on violent right-wing extremism has primarily focused on the background characteristics of far-right terrorists themselves (Smith, 1994). Most empirical studies have stopped short of examining why some far-right terrorism incidents are unsuccessful while others succeed. However, we do know something about the opportunity structure of terrorism that shapes terrorist outcomes. In their book *Outsmarting the Terrorists*, Clarke and Newman (2006) draw from tenets of situational crime prevention (SCP) to suggest that terrorists are rational decision-makers who carefully assess *opportunities* to commit attacks. Specifically, the level of target attractiveness and vulnerability, as well as the weaponry required for specific forms of attack, are viewed as two important elements of opportunity that shape terrorists' decision-making processes.

Another key element of terrorist opportunity involves the type of group structure under which terrorists operate. Clarke and Newman (2006) suggest that terrorists often operate within organized group structures to overcome logistical difficulties of planning an attack. Further, Becker (2014) adds that, compared to terrorist groups, lone wolves have relatively limited access to firearms and explosives manufacturing expertise, fewer resources, and sometimes lack surveillance capabilities, which could potentially impact terrorism incident success. However, in

a recent report, Smith, Roberts, Gruenewald, and Klein (2014) discovered that lone actor terrorists have significantly longer lifecycles than group affiliated actors, suggesting that lone actors may be more able to extend the longevity of their campaign by avoiding law enforcement detection.

Lastly, we also know something about *how* terrorist acts are achieved, or the steps terrorists take prior to engaging in terrorism events. In a preliminary study of the temporal patterns of terrorists' precursor conduct, Smith and colleagues (2008) found that terrorist offenders engaged in antecedent behaviors,<sup>1</sup> on average, three months prior the planned attack. Importantly, right-wing terrorists committed almost half (43%) of all antecedent behaviors more than six months in advance to the terrorism incident. The most common types of activities included meetings to discuss plot formation and weapons procurement, manufacturing, and testing. While Smith and colleagues (2008) acknowledged some limitations to their study, it is clear from the preliminary findings that far-rightists generally spend a considerable amount of time engaging in planning and preparatory behaviors that may be in some ways temporally patterned.

Although previous research has advanced our understanding of terrorist opportunity and temporal patterns of terrorists' precursor activity, extant research has yet to consider how each correlates with far-right terrorism incident success. The goal of the current study, then, is to explore the relationship between far-right opportunity structures (e.g., targets, weaponry, and group structures), temporal patterns of precursor conduct, and incident outcomes. Two broad research questions guide the current study: (1) ***How do opportunity structures affect the likelihood of successful far-right attack outcomes?*** (2) ***How do temporal sequences of planning processes affect the likelihood of successful far-right attack outcomes?*** To address

the above questions, the current study extracts and analyzes data from the American Terrorism Study (ATS) related to “officially designated” far-right terrorism incidents occurring in the United States from 1978 to 2010.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are two primary reasons why so little is known about the relationship between terrorist opportunity, temporal patterns of precursor conduct, and the outcomes of far-right terrorism incidents. First, scholars note that terrorism research has traditionally been conducted atheoretically (Damphousse & Smith, 2004; Hamm, 2007; Smith, 1994). As LaFree and Hendrickson (2007) suggest, studying terrorism from a criminal justice perspective offers important insights into terrorist behavior. While some recent studies have attempted to apply criminological theory to explain the etiology and commission of terrorist-oriented crime (e.g., Boba, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 2006; Dugan, LaFree, & Piquero, 2005; Freilich & Chermak, 2009; Hamm, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2004; Weisburd & Lerner, 2006), few terrorism studies to date have been both theoretically framed from a criminological perspective and rooted in empirical analysis (for exceptions, see Dugan, LaFree, & Piquero, 2005; Smith & Damphousse 1996, 1998).

Second, the quality of research on right-wing terrorism in the United States has been relatively poor. In a systematic review of far-right studies, Gruenewald, Freilich and Chermak (2009) noted several shortcomings in the existing literature. Most remarkably, they found that 83 percent of far-right studies lacked a quantitative analysis, including basic descriptive statistics. This may be due to the number of methodological issues regarding terrorism research overall (see Freilich, Chermak, & Caspi, 2009), as well as the limited availability of data on far-right terrorism. In a more general critique of terrorism research, Silke (2001) also points out that

terrorism studies have been largely unempirical, further stunting efforts to statistically test theoretical explanations of terrorist offending.

### **Contribution of the Current Study**

The current paper contributes to the literature by overcoming several theoretical and methodological limitations in prior research, as well as by informing policies and practices of local law enforcement. First, this study proposes a cohesive theoretical approach for understanding terrorism incident outcomes by drawing from multiple strains of criminological theory. From rational choice theory, I argue that terrorists make logical decisions to increase their chances for success. Although the ultimate goal of terrorism might be to alter a country's social or political landscape, successfully executing single attacks is an important step toward this end.

This thesis also contributes to the literature by overcoming methodological limitations. Specifically, the current study empirically analyzes 88 “officially designated” far-right terrorism incidents from 1978 to 2010. Concerns regarding the “poor” quality of right-wing terrorism studies will be addressed by utilizing data from the American Terrorism Study (ATS) in order to (a) empirically measure the relationship between far-right opportunity structures, temporal patterns, and attack outcomes, and (b) quantitatively explain why some far-right terrorist attacks succeed while others do not. The ATS provides a unique opportunity to conduct this study, as it includes data on failed, foiled, and successful far-right incidents, in addition to information on far-rightists' target selection, weaponry, and group structure. Moreover, the ATS contains one of the most comprehensive data sets on terrorists' pre-incident activities, allowing for temporal analyses to be conducted. For these reasons, the results from the proposed study hold a

significant amount of promise for future terrorism research and law enforcement counter-terrorism investigations.

Finally, this paper extends the growing literature on the local role of policing in homeland security, and specifically, in preventing future terrorist attacks. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it has been suggested that law enforcement should shift their traditionally reactive anti-terrorism role to a more proactive approach (Marks & Sun, 2007; Shields, Damphousse, & Smith, 2009). As part of an encompassing homeland security strategy, law enforcement agencies are increasingly focused on the prevention of terrorism incidents through intelligence-led policing (ILP) strategies (Carter & Carter, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 2007; McGarrell, Freilich, & Chermak, 2007), including the sharing of information among federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies (Carter, Chermak, McGarrell, Carter, & Drew, 2013; Marks & Sun, 2007). Greater emphasis has been placed on the local role of law enforcement in the prevention of terrorist attacks (Docobo, 2005; Thatcher, 2005). By exploring the situated spatial-temporal dimensions of far-right terrorist attacks and pre-incident activities, local law enforcement can employ more informed intervention strategies, as well as make it more difficult to carry out terrorism incidents (Docobo, 2005).

The remainder of this paper unfolds in three sections. First, I discuss the past and present threats of far-right terrorism in the United States, while also highlighting the various ideologies, targets, and tactics of far-right terrorism. Second, the theoretical approach utilized in the current study is presented along with prior research examining successful and unsuccessful terrorist attacks. Third, I provide a review of the data and chosen method utilized in the current research. Fourth, the findings from bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses are provided. Finally, I

discuss results from the findings section while also suggesting policy implications and directions for future research.

## **FAR-RIGHT TERRORISM IN THE UNITED STATES**

Violent right-wing extremism in the United States has endured a multifaceted and dynamic history involving several transformations (Berlet & Lyons, 2000; Smith, 1994). While the most recent reports indicate that the number of far-right groups has declined slightly (Potok, 2014), far-right extremists continue to maintain a significant presence in the U.S. In fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reports that over 900 right-wing groups are operating within the U.S currently (Potok, 2014). Most members of far-right groups do not engage in crime and still fewer commit serious violent offenses. Nevertheless, there have been several high-profile mass shootings committed by far-rightists just in the past few years, including deadly attacks at a Sikh Indian temple and Jewish recreational center. Furthermore, a recent survey of state police agencies found that police continue to view far-right terrorism as a prominent threat (Chermak, Freilich, & Simone, 2010). In order to develop informed terrorism prevention strategies, it is necessary to understand the varied threats posed by far-right terrorists.

While far-right wing extremism is ideologically distinguishable from other terrorist movements (e.g. Al Qaeda and affiliated movements, eco-terrorism, etc.) who may be operating within the U.S., there are also several ideologically based divisions that constitute the broader right-wing movement. Many far-rightists are most aptly classified as white supremacists, belonging to such groups as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Arena & Arrigo, 2000; Bushart, Craig, & Barnes, 1998; Flint, 2001; Hewitt, 2000; Sprinzak, 1995) or the violent, prison-based

organization known as the Aryan Brotherhood (Irwin, 1980; Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Orlando-Morningstar, 1997; Pelz, Marquart, & Pelz, 1991). Other far-rightists are adherents of the Christian Identity movement who are fueled by a racially bigoted set of religious beliefs (Arena & Arrigo, 2000; Barkun, 1997; Hoffman, 1987; Hoffman, 1995; Kaplan, 1993; Sharpe, 2000; Smith, 1994). During the last few decades, the Christian Identify movement has had significant influences on informal and formal groups of racist, neo-Nazi, skinhead groups (Ezekiel, 2002; Hamm, 1994; Whitsel, 2001), and the fervently anti-government Christian patriot and militia movement (Barkun, 1996; Durham, 1996; Levitas, 2002; Neiwert, 1999). Other groups like the anti-Christian Creativity Movement may borrow heavily from these other divisions in regard to their white supremacist and anti-Semitic beliefs, but are unique in their rejection of religious beliefs (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Durham, 2003; Michael, 2006). Still, other right-wing extremists are more concerned with a single political or social issue. Examples of single-issue far-rightists include anti-abortion activists (Blanchard, 1996; Carlson, 1995; Grimes, Forest, Kirkman, & Radford 1991; Kaplan, 1996; King & Husting, 2003; Wilson & Lynxwiler, 1988) and sovereign citizens who flatly reject their U.S. citizenship and their responsibilities to pay taxes (Anti-Defamation League, 2012; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011).

Right-wing extremists adhering to these various ideological beliefs have been responsible for crimes against a number of target types, including racial and ethnic minorities, federal government buildings and employees, abortion clinics and doctors, religious institutions, and religious minorities. The types of crimes committed by far-rightists have included extortion, lynching, assault, and armored car robberies. The most serious of these crimes includes murder, and since 1990 right-wing extremists have engaged in over 270 homicides that have resulted in over 500 deaths (Freilich & Chermak, 2007).



In sum, right-wing terrorists remain a substantial threat to the United States, and in order to effectively protect the public, it is important to understand why and how far-right terrorism incidents are successfully executed. In the following sections, the theoretical approach guiding this study is presented along with prior evidence of why some terrorist attacks succeed and others fail.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The following theoretical framework draws from several criminological strains and concepts to provide a comprehensive approach for understanding far-right terrorism incident success. The ensuing discussion of the current study's theoretical orientation is broken down into two general sections. First, I review the main propositions of rational choice and how they relate to terrorists as *rational* actors. Second, I provide a background of the criminal event perspective as it relates to crime and terrorism, situating key variables of interest within the proposed theoretical framework.

The utilitarian rational choice theory asserts that criminals consciously assess the risks associated with crime and *choose* to offend, and thus are not solely driven to commit crime because of structural or social conditions. Cornish and Clarke (1986) argue that criminals are fundamentally self-interested and that "crimes are broadly the result of rational choices based on analyses of anticipated costs and benefits" (p. VI). In other words, individuals engage in crime only when the expected benefits of the criminal act outweigh the anticipated costs. Similarly, terrorists analyze the costs and benefits of carrying out specific terrorist attacks. While the ultimate goal of terrorism might be to change the political or social structure of the United States, an important step toward this end is carrying out successful terrorism incidents.

## **Structuring Opportunities for Crime and Terrorism**

Since terrorism research has yet to provide a cohesive theoretical framework for understanding terrorism incident outcomes, the proposed thesis draws from the criminological literature discussing crime as “events” and the various opportunities that shape criminal event outcomes. I begin by borrowing from the criminal event perspective (CEP) developed by Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco (2001), which argues that crime is a process that includes precursor, transaction, and aftermath stages within certain social contexts. While CEP is not itself a theory of crime, it does draw from several theoretical strains, including situational, offender, and victim theories. First, CEP views crime as a result of the intersection of offenders and situations, and as the interactions between offenders themselves. Importantly, *opportunity* is viewed as a necessary precondition for crime to occur. Moreover, the criminal event perspective assumes that crime is not homogenous; crime involves different motives, targets, and situational and social contexts. Thus, different types of crimes may be made up of distinct opportunity structures in which routine criminals exploit. Lastly, the CEP views criminal events as having precursors, or “factors that precede and shape the content of events” (Meier, Kennedy, & Sacco, 2001, p. 11). This is particularly relevant for the study of terrorism, as extant literature has documented that terrorists engage in precursor activities prior to committing terrorism incidents (Smith & Damphousse, 2009).

While traditional theories tend to deemphasize the importance of opportunity and its role in shaping criminal outcomes, the criminal event perspective places opportunity as a crucial prerequisite for crime. Similarly, Clarke’s (1980) situational crime prevention (SCP) or “opportunity theory” considers situational incentives a major correlate of criminal events. Indeed, SCP assumes that criminal events are “situated” by occurring within particular spatial

and temporal settings. Thus, the intersection of offenders and the physical environment produces unique opportunities to break the law (Clarke, 1980). Underlying the SCP approach is the belief that in order to prevent criminal events from occurring, the opportunities to offend must be decreased.

Extending situational crime prevention theory to the study of politically and socially motivated crime, Clarke and Newman (2006) argue that *terrorism* can also be reduced by removing opportunity, suggesting the opportunity structure of terrorism may play an important role in shaping terrorist event outcomes (successful or failed). According to Clarke and Newman (2006), terrorism occurs when motivated individuals, or violent extremists, come into contact with opportunities more conducive to attack. Thus, terrorists rationally assess and exploit the opportunities afforded in order to increase their chances for successfully executing attacks.

Although opportunity is largely associated with the relations between offenders and targets/victims of crime, the criminal event perspective also contends that opportunity can involve the relations among offenders themselves. In this way, Warr (2001) suggests that older and more experienced criminals engage in a process called “active opportunity,” in which criminals search for trustworthy co-offenders to aid in the identifying and carrying out of criminal acts (p. 78). Among adolescent groups, the availability of delinquent peers can also be considered a form of opportunity. Sutherland (1947) long ago revealed the importance of delinquent peer association as a necessary condition for crime to occur. As a component of opportunity, delinquent peer association increases situational inducements for crime, as well as provides motivation to engage in delinquency (Warr, 2001).

For terrorists, co-offending presents both positive and negative consequences associated with terrorism incident success. For instance, collaborating with likeminded others allows

terrorists to attain new skills, such as for building destructive devices, operating weaponry, and conducting surveillance of targets that are often necessary for the successful commission of a terrorism incident. However, despite the potential opportunity-inducing benefits of operating within an organized group, collaborating with other known violent extremists increases the likelihood for law enforcement interdiction. Thus, terrorists may also adopt a “leaderless resistance” or lone wolf strategy in order to reduce the risk of law enforcement detection, and in increase the opportunity to commit acts of terrorism (Smith et al., 2014).

Finally, the criminal event perspective considers the precursor stage of crime to be a significant aspect in shaping criminal outcomes. To this point, Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco (2001) suggest that the temporal ordering of behaviors preceding crime is an important factor affecting the content of the criminal event itself. Indeed, criminology has a rich tradition in examining temporal patterns of behaviors associated with routine crime. Wolfgang’s (1958) study on patterns of homicide in Philadelphia, for example, is one of the earliest works analyzing temporal relationships. In addition, other criminological studies on organized crime have shed light on how antecedent preparatory crimes are necessary to fund and maintain complex criminal syndicates (Abadinsky, 2000; Albanese, 1996).

More recent studies of terrorist-oriented crime have also described the type and temporal ordering of precursor behaviors. In a study examining terrorist opportunity, Roach, Ekblom, and Flynn (2005) identified several conditions under which terrorism might occur by looking at precursor variables, such as efforts to obtain resources and training. In another study, Cothren et al. (2008) found that terrorists of various ideological backgrounds participate in antecedent preparatory events, revealing ideologically unique patterns of precursor behaviors.

Although terrorism is often a sophisticated form of crime that requires forethought and preparation, engaging in a high volume of precursor acts over a long period of time might alert criminal justice third parties, and by extension, impact the occurrence of the crime itself. To this end, Meier, Kennedy, and Sacco (2001) maintain that an essential attribute of the precursor stage of criminal events is the presence of bystanders, witnesses, or law enforcement, whose actions prior to the criminal act might prevent the crime from taking place. Extending this idea to terrorist-oriented crime, it follows that terrorists who participate in a large degree of antecedent preparations run the risk of being discovered by law enforcement through undercover agents and confidential informants, thus decreasing the potential opportunities to successfully carry out attacks.

Synthesizing the aforementioned theories and related concepts, the current paper suggests that terrorists aspire to successfully carry out single attacks, and they do so by logically making decisions to increase their chances for success by analyzing the opportunity structure of terrorism, and considering the benefits and risks associated with working in groups, and engaging in planning and preparatory acts before committing attacks. It is also held that some components of terrorist opportunity structures, including the level of attractiveness and vulnerability of targets, the weaponry required for specific forms of attack, and terrorist group dynamics, will impact the successfulness of far-right terrorism incidents. In addition, the proposed theoretical framework maintains that the nature of antecedent behaviors, including the frequency of preparatory behaviors and the amount of time terrorists take planning and preparing for terrorism events, structure opportunities for terrorism, and by extension, the effectiveness of terrorist attacks. In the sections to follow, I discuss prior evidence regarding terrorism incident

success/failure, as well as the previous research on terrorist opportunity (including the targets, group structures, and weaponry terrorists choose) and temporal patterns of preparatory conduct.

## **PRIOR EVIDENCE**

Law enforcement counterterrorism strategies should be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of how terrorist attacks are successfully executed. In one of the few studies to empirically examine unsuccessful domestic terrorism incidents to date, Dahl (2011) studied 176 failed terrorist plots in order to identify the most effective counterterrorism measures. He found that terror plots failed primarily because of law enforcement intervention, though some terrorists called off attacks (5%), and other attacks were attempted, but failed (8%). Of the domestic plots that failed due to law enforcement actions, the vast majority was thwarted because of human intelligence derived from undercover agents, confidential informants, and tips from the public (Dahl, 2011).

Other research on terrorist attack success/failure has relied on case study examples to identify some of the conditions that might shape terrorism incident outcomes. The Department of Homeland Security, for example, studied several factors correlating to operational success, including access to targets, terrorist training, and operational proficiency. This report identified the steps required to complete attacks, such as target selection, attack method and weaponry selection, training, and intelligence gathering (Department of Homeland Security, 2007). Additionally, Jackson and Frelinger (2009) found that terrorism incident success often depended on whether terrorists' operational skills, knowledge of intended targets, and technical capabilities were well matched to the requirements of the operation. Although these studies have made

important steps toward understanding why some terrorism incidents succeed and others fail, no study has analyzed the causal links between terrorist event opportunity structures or the temporal patterns of precursor conduct that could potentially shape far-right incident outcomes.

### **Terrorist Opportunity**

Clarke and Newman (2006) contend that terrorism is the result of an interaction between motivation and opportunity. As a consequence, they applied principles of situational crime prevention (SCP) to the study of terrorism “opportunity structures”, or “the arrangements of everyday life that create the opportunities that terrorists exploit” (Clarke & Newman, 2006 p.7). Terrorist opportunity involves four categories: (1) targets, (2) weapons, (3) tools, and (4) facilitating conditions.<sup>2</sup>

While it may appear as though terrorists have an unlimited selection of targets to choose from, ideological beliefs dictate the types of targets selected for attack (Drake, 1998). Thus, far-rightists execute attacks on nonwhites, federal government buildings and/or personnel, abortion clinics/doctors, and Jewish institutions and/or persons. What is more, Clarke and Newman (2006) maintain that some targets offer greater rewards with fewer costs. Therefore, terrorists logically choose targets based on assessments of the target’s attractiveness and vulnerability for specific attacks. Accordingly, terrorists rationally select targets that are attractive (iconic, legitimate, and near), and vulnerable (exposed, destructible, and easy to attack) (Clarke & Newman, 2006). It is expected that when target attractiveness and vulnerability is high, terrorists are more likely to execute attacks.

In addition to terrorists’ selection of targets, the weaponry utilized for certain terrorism incidents are a subsequent component of terrorist opportunity. Clarke and Newman (2006)

contend there are three basic categories of weapons for terrorists to choose from: guns and other small arms, explosives, and unconventional weapons (e.g. nuclear, chemical, and biological). Characteristics of the weaponry providing terrorists with the greatest opportunities include weapons that are “multipurpose, undetectable, removable, destructive, enjoyable, reliable, obtainable, uncomplicated, and safe” (Clarke & Newman, 2006, p.108). Legault & Hendrickson (2009) argue that firearms maintain each of these nine characteristics of opportunity. Indeed, it appears that firearms are relatively safe, lethal, easy to use, and readily available in the United States, making firearms a primary weapon of choice among domestic terrorists (Legault & Hendrickson, 2009, p. 536). What is more, it seems as though firearms are less sophisticated and uncomplicated to use when compared to explosive devices, suggesting that firearms are less likely to malfunction during the commission of an attack.

Although not part of the opportunity structure examined by Clarke and Newman (2006), terrorist group structure types can also be considered a unique form of terrorist opportunity. Conventional wisdom suggests that terrorists operating within a structured, hierarchical unit may provide support networks in which to aid in the planning and commission of terrorism events. However, working as an organized group may open the terrorist conspiracy to law enforcement intervention through undercover agents and confidential informants (Damphousse & Smith, 2004). To overcome the risks associated with group-based terrorism, many far-rightists have adopted a leaderless resistance model of “unstructured violence” calling for small cell networks and lone attackers (Damphousse & Smith, 2004). In fact, the United States in recent years has experienced an upsurge of attacks perpetrated by lone wolf, or unaffiliated terrorists (Hewitt, 2003; Spaaij, 2010). What is more, lone wolf attacks in the U.S. have been largely perpetrated by far-rightists, and many expect such attacks to increase (Bates, 2012; Damphousse & Smith,



2004; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013b; Hewitt, 2003; Michael, 2012). Importantly, Gruenewald, Chermak, and Freilich (2013b) found significant offender, victim, and incident differences between far-right lone wolves and lone wolf packs that do not operate alone and who affiliate with other extremists operating within a formal or informal far-right organization. In a more recent study of federally indicted terrorist-offenders, Smith et al. (2014, p.2) found that lone actor terrorists are significantly more educated, live greater distances from the incident location, and engage in significantly fewer precursor activities relative to terrorist groups/cells.

### **Temporal Patterns of Precursor Conduct**

The work of Smith and colleagues (2006) has significantly advanced our understanding of how criminal and non-criminal precursor behaviors of far-right terrorists' are temporally patterned. Using data from the American Terrorism Study (ATS) Smith, Damphousse, and Roberts (2006) found that prior to committing a terrorism incident, far-rightists most often engaged in weapons violations, bank fraud, threats, and bank robberies in preparation for planned terrorist attacks. Far-rightists also engaged in non-criminal antecedent behaviors, such as meetings and phone calls to discuss logistics of the plot. Of all antecedent activity, most of which was both criminal and non-criminal preparatory behavior,<sup>3</sup> over 70 percent occurred greater than one month in advance to the incident act. Nearly half of the antecedent acts analyzed were carried out at least six months before the terrorism incident. Importantly, Smith et al.'s (2006) findings reveal that far-rightists engage in a significant amount of precursor activity (some of which is criminal in nature) that occurs over a long period of time, providing law enforcement with opportunities to possibly infiltrate the terrorist conspiracy and thwart the intended attack.

In sum, several scholars have examined key components of the opportunity structures thought to shape terrorist decision-making, but none have empirically examined how opportunity and other important factors thought to shape terrorist events affect the successfulness of terrorist outcomes. Grounded in the rational choice and related criminal event perspectives, the proposed study seeks to extend prior research by testing six hypotheses related to how successfulness of far-right terrorist incidents is shaped by opportunity structures and the temporal patterning of terrorists' precursor behaviors.

**H<sub>1</sub>** The more attractive the target, the more likely the incident will be successfully executed.

**H<sub>2</sub>** The more vulnerable the target, the more likely the incident will be successfully executed.

**H<sub>3</sub>** Terrorism incidents involving firearms and other conventional weapons are more likely to be successfully executed than incidents involving Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and other nonconventional weapons.

**H<sub>4</sub>** Terrorism incidents involving lone perpetrators are more likely to be successfully executed than incidents involving groups or cells.

**H<sub>5</sub>** The shorter the planning cycle, the more likely the terrorism incident will be successfully executed

**H<sub>6</sub>** The fewer precursor events, the more likely the terrorism incident will be successfully executed.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

Data on far-right terrorism incidents are extracted from a single source known as the American Terrorism Study (ATS). Over the past 30 years, the ATS has collected information on federally investigated criminal cases resulting from indictments under an FBI "terrorism enterprise" investigation. In addition to maintaining data on incidents resulting from FBI

investigations, the ATS also includes “commonly known” acts of terrorism beyond those prosecuted in federal court that were carefully selected by a panel of terrorism subject matter experts.<sup>4</sup> The ATS relies on the FBI’s definition of domestic terrorism, which states that terrorism is the “unlawful use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States or Puerto Rico without foreign direction committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005, p. V).” Once identified, terrorism incident data are then collected and coded by a team of researchers<sup>5</sup> who utilize information derived from court case documents (e.g. indictments, sentencing memorandums, and transcripts) augmented by open source media information, such as books, government reports, newspapers, and online media articles.

The unit of analysis for the current study is incidents of far-right terrorism, which include a total number of 88 successful (46) and unsuccessful (42) terrorism incidents. All far-right incidents involved perpetrators who were motivated by one or more right-wing sub-ideology, including white supremacy, anti-semitism, posse comitatus, neo-fascism, anti-abortion, and anti-government. Thus, far-right incidents perpetrated by individuals adhering to nationalist/separatist sub-ideologies (e.g. Jewish Defense League and Yahweh) and those incidents for which a distinct far-right sub-ideology could not be identified were excluded from analysis.

In order to maintain the most robust, consistent, and reliable sample possible, several additional steps were taken to reduce missing data, confirm existing values, and increase the reliability of previous coding. For example, a group of trained coders were selected to review a number of ATS terrorism case studies with existing incidents and associated precursor events.

These select case studies were carefully examined and coders were able to identify additional planned, foiled, failed, and successful far-right terrorism incidents for analysis. Moreover, this team of coders verified existing incident-level variable coding, as well as reduced the volume of missing precursor event data.

To be sure, although steps were taken to increase the total number of far-right incidents for this study, caution should be used when generalizing statistical results to “all” far-right terrorist activity and related violent crimes. That said, despite the conservative population of terrorism incidents contained within the ATS, the database has provided researchers and practitioners with consistent and reliable measures for analyzing terrorism cases over the past several decades.<sup>6</sup>

### **Dependent Variable**

The ATS includes terrorism incidents successfully perpetrated by far-rightists and planned far-right attacks that were failed or foiled, making it possible to test models that predict far-right incident success. The dependent variable in the current study, *incident outcome*, is binary coded (0 = unsuccessful incident, 1 = successful incident). Unsuccessful incident outcomes are defined as (a) planned terrorism incidents in which a target or target type was explicitly identified and at least one overt step (e.g. collecting weapons, reconnoitering the target, etc.) was made toward carrying out the plot, and (b) attempted incidents that failed to injure the targeted victim, cause significant damage to the intended target, or were cancelled for whatever reason (Dahl, 2011). Terrorist plots that were foiled by police or attempted incidents in which the terrorists’ weaponry failed to detonate are common examples of unsuccessful

terrorism incidents. Successful incident outcomes are terrorism incidents in which the weapon was delivered to the intended target *and* caused significant amounts of damage.

### **Independent Variables**

The first set of independent variables predicting attack success involves the opportunity structure of terrorism. Following Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, and Klein's (2015) operationalization of Clarke and Newman's (2006) EVIL DONE framework to the targets of eco-terrorism, the current study measures the attractiveness (vital, iconic, legitimate, and near) and vulnerability (exposed, destructible, easy) of far-right terrorists' target selection.<sup>7</sup> In addition, other measures of terrorist opportunity are also included in the current study, such as the weaponry utilized in far-right terrorism incidents and far-right group structures. The final set of independent variables predicting attack success involves the temporal patterns of precursor activity, including two independent measures of terrorism planning cycles and two variables examining the volume of precursor activity occurring prior to a terrorism incident.

#### ***Attractiveness of Targets***

The first measure of target attractiveness is *vitalness*, which is binary coded (0 = non-vital, 1 = vital). Target vitalness is operationalized as the impact that the terrorism incident has on the routine operations of the targeted organization. Organizations that conduct daily operations from multiple physical locations are considered a relatively non-vital target, as the complete destruction of the target would only minimally impact the day-to-day operations of the larger organization (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). A single IRS office or employee, for example, is coded as non-vital to the continued day-to-day operations of the IRS as an agency. Contrastingly, vital targets are more attractive to far-rightists as the complete destruction of the

target would significantly affect the day-to-day activities of the larger organization (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). Common examples include religious institutions (e.g. synagogues, mosques, and churches) and local businesses that conduct all operations within a single targeted site.

The next component of target attractiveness is *iconicity*. For the current study, target iconicity is binary coded (0 = low iconic value, 1 = high iconic value) and measured as whether or not a target is symbolic to far-right terrorist ideology. Incidents involving government organizations, Jewish institutions, minorities, and abortion providers are more attractive for having high iconic value, while incidents targeting utilities (e.g. electrical transmission lines) and local commercial organizations are less attractive and have a relatively low iconic value. Another measure of target attractiveness is target *legitimacy*. In the current study, legitimacy is binary coded (0 = non-legitimate, 1 = legitimate) and operationalized as the extent to which terrorist sympathizers might view the target as being directly responsible for ideologically based grievances (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). Targets considered unattractive and non-legitimate involve targeted organizations that house children or a portion of the general public. For instance, many anti-government far-right sympathizers condone Timothy McVeigh for killing several small children who were inside the first floor daycare center at the Alfred P. Murrah federal building. Consequently, the Murrah building is considered in the current study as illegitimate, as it houses a segment of the general public. On the other hand, incidents involving institutions that house *only* the individuals directly associated with the targeted organization are considered attractive and legitimate targets. Additionally, specific individuals (e.g., IRS agents, federal judges, abortion doctors, etc.) identified by sympathizers of far-right terrorism as worthy of harm are also considered legitimate targets.

The final component of target attractiveness is the *nearness* of targets. Near targets are attractive, as they are relatively close to the terrorist's residence, easily accessible, and require little effort to attack (Clarke & Newman, 2006). To measure this variable, coders calculated a straight-line distance estimate (in miles) between the address of the closest perpetrator's residence at the time of the incident and the address in which the target was located at the time of the incident.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Vulnerability of Targets***

The first measure of target vulnerability involves the degree to which targets are exposed. *Exposed* targets are binary coded (0 = non-exposed, 1 = exposed) and operationalized in this study as how accessible the target is to the public, in addition to how often the target is frequented by the general public. Targets that are inaccessible without permission from owners/managers, and targets that are accessible, but rarely frequented by the public are considered non-exposed targets (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). Common examples include federal buildings, private dwellings, and electrical transmission lines. Conversely, targets that are accessible and routinely frequented by the public are considered relatively exposed and vulnerable targets, such as abortion clinics, religious institutions, and community centers.<sup>9</sup>

Another component of target vulnerability is target *destructibility*, which is binary coded (0 = less destructible, 1 = destructible). Far-rightists are often interested in attacking vulnerable targets that can be easily damaged or completely destroyed (Clarke & Newman, 2006). Thus, target destructibility is operationalized in the current study in terms of the weaponry required to incapacitate the target. Moreover, consideration is also given to the size and structural make-up of the intended target (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). Among the least destructible and vulnerable of targets are multi-story buildings or high-rise structures (e.g. electrical transmission lines), targets

with multiple structures on site, and buildings with a large surface area that require strategically placed Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) for destruction. In contrast, the most destructible and vulnerable of targets often contain materials that serve as fire accelerants (e.g. fuel), or require conventional weaponry, such as firearms, knives, and blunt objects (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). Common examples of destructible targets include propane tanks, natural gas lines, and human victims.<sup>10</sup>

The last component of target vulnerability considers how *easily* the target can be accessed without detection (Gruenewald, et al., 2015). For the current study, the easiness of targets is binary coded (0 = difficult, 1 = easy) and determined after evaluating several security measures associated with a specific target or target type, including screening procedures (human or technological), targeted police patrols, and private security. Among the least easy and vulnerable of targets are incidents involving organizations or individuals in which evidence of one or more security measures is indicated. Common examples include high-ranking government officials, federal buildings, and federal courthouses. Conversely, targets coded as relatively easy and vulnerable to attack involve incidents in which specific security measures are not indicated in the source material (e.g. private dwellings, specific individuals, religious institutions/persons, minorities, etc.).

### ***Far-right Weaponry and Group Structures***

Additional components of opportunity for the current study include the type of weaponry used in the terrorism incident and a measure for far-right group structure. Far-right terrorists' *weaponry* is binary coded (0 = sophisticated weaponry, 1 = conventional weaponry) and defined as the level of complexity involved in manufacturing and utilizing the weapon. Sophisticated weapons commonly include Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Improvised Incendiary



Devices (IIDs), and other unconventional weapons (e.g. ricin). Conventional weapons, on the other hand, include firearms, knives, blunt objects, or bodily weapons (e.g. hands, feet, fists). *Group structure* is operationalized as the total number offenders involved in executing the terrorism incident, as well as the level of assistance received by co-conspirators in planning and preparing for the intended attack. Following Smith, Roberts, Gruenewald, and Klein (2014), this variable is comprised of far-right loners and far-right groups/cells (0 = groups/cells, 1 = loners). Groups/cells are defined as persons who did receive some assistance in planning, preparing, or executing terrorism incidents, while loners had no help in planning, preparing, or committing the terrorism incident (Smith et al., 2014, p. 1).

### ***Temporal Patterns of Precursor Conduct***

Lastly, the current project drew data on far-right terrorists' precursor activity in order to evaluate the impact that temporal patterns of precursor behaviors have on incident success. The ATS includes information on a number of antecedent events that are linked to terrorism incidents. These antecedent activities are typically committed to assist in the preparation and planning of a terrorism incident, though some events are committed for order maintenance, internal security, or for personal reasons (Smith et al., 2008, p. 10). To maintain the most consistent and reliably coded data possible, the current study only examines *significant* antecedent events, or those events that most closely relate to the terrorism incident. These "significant" antecedent acts are defined as pre-incident activity committed in direct or indirect preparation for a specific terrorism incident, or to ensure the continued survivability of the terrorist group or conspiracy. Therefore, precursor acts relating to non-terrorist activity (e.g. joining a radical, non-violent movement and non-extremist related precursor crimes), events committed for personal reasons, and any event in which the explicit content of the act was

unknown (e.g. private meetings and other communications held for unknown reasons) were excluded from analysis. In this way, the current study is attempting to reduce the potential for bias by only including terrorist activity that is most likely to be recorded in the source material, regardless of the incident outcome.

The first temporal variable, *conspiracy length*, provides a measure for the terrorist planning cycle. This variable is operationalized as the length of time that takes place between the date of the first known antecedent event and the terrorism incident date.<sup>11</sup> The next variable, *number of antecedent acts*, is a continuous measure defined as the total number of known antecedent events committed in direct or indirect preparation for a specific terrorism incident, or to ensure the continued survivability of the terrorist group or conspiracy. These events commonly include meetings to discuss group-related activities, violence committed for order maintenance and group survivability, weapons acquisition/storage, and member recruitment.

The next temporal variable, *preparatory length* is a more precise measure for the terrorist planning and preparation cycle. Preparatory length is operationalized as the length of time that takes place between the date of initial plot formation to the terrorism incident date. Plot formations are recognized as the first known antecedent event in which there is explicit evidence of intent to commit terrorist violence against a specific target or target type.<sup>12</sup> The final variable, *number of preparatory acts*, measures the total volume of preparatory events associated with a specific terrorism incident. Preparatory acts are defined as recorded antecedent behavior beginning with the initial formation of a terrorist plot and including any subsequent event committed with the explicit purpose of directly assisting in the preparation for executing a specific terrorism incident. The most common preparatory events identified are meetings to

discuss plot formation, recruitment, acquiring funding, reconnoitering targets, weapons acquisition/manufacturing, and training.

It is important to note that although the ATS includes one of the most comprehensive data sets on terrorists' antecedent behaviors, these data do not necessarily reflect the total number of preparatory and planning events associated with a single terrorism incident. Researchers may never know the total volume of weapons purchases, meetings, or other precursor acts that occur prior to terrorism incidents. However, since the current study only includes the most significant antecedent events for analysis (i.e. those events most closely related to the terrorism incident), potential threats to validity are considerably reduced. Moreover, if we assume that the amount of excluded or "missing" significant antecedent event data is distributed at random, statistical inferences are possible.

## **FINDINGS**

I begin the analysis by examining the bivariate relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable using appropriate tests of significance (chi-square analysis, Fisher exact test, and t-test of means). Next, I rely on binary logistic regression to assess the key attributes associated with successful and unsuccessful far-right terrorism incidents. Since the outcome variable is binary coded (0 = unsuccessful incident, 1 = successful incident), this is the appropriate multivariate statistical method (Long, 1997).<sup>13</sup> Considering the relatively small sample size in the current study ( $n = 88$ ), results from the multivariate analysis should be interpreted with caution.

I first regress the dependent variable, incident outcomes, on measures of target attractiveness and vulnerability, and then successively add weaponry and group structure variables to a subsequent model. In a separate analysis, I include measures of target attractiveness and vulnerability, as well as weaponry and group structure, in order to evaluate the fully saturated “opportunity” model. Lastly, I examine whether, and to what extent, independent measures of temporal patterns of precursor activity predict incident outcomes, net the effects of the opportunity variables found to significantly vary across incident outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

### **Bivariate Findings**

As shown in Table 1, the incidents included in this study are nearly even split between successful (52.27%) and unsuccessful (47.7%) incident outcomes. The first set of “opportunity” variables considers how measures of target attractiveness – one of the theoretically important dimensions of opportunity – compare across incident outcomes. The findings support my first hypothesis, showing that targets located in close proximity to the terrorists’ residences are significantly more associated with successful far-right incidents. Specifically, successful far-right terrorism incidents involve targets that are located, on average, 106 miles from the closest perpetrators’ residence compared with an average of approximately 329 miles for unsuccessful incidents. Conflicting with my research expectations, targets considered legitimate for attack are proportionately *less* likely to be associated with successful far-right incidents, though statistical significance is only marginal ( $p \leq .10$ ). That is, it appears that successful incidents are slightly less likely to involve targets deemed worthy of attack by sympathizers. In addition, all other measures of target attractiveness fail to support hypothesis 1. Levels of target vitalness, though slightly more associated with successful incidents, do not reach a level of statistical significance.

Moreover, I find no statistical difference in incident outcomes for targets considered especially iconic based on the tenets of far-right ideology.

**TABLE 1. Attributes of Far-right Terrorism Incidents by Outcome Type (N = 88)**

Variables	Successful Incidents (n = 46)		Unsuccessful Incidents (n = 42)		Chi <sup>2</sup> /T-test <sup>a</sup>
	n	Percent	n	Percent	
Target Attractiveness					
Vital target	19	22.40	16	18.80	
Highly iconic target	35	39.80	31	35.20	
Legitimate target	20	22.70	25	28.40	±
Near target	40	106.40 (avg.)	37	329.30 (avg.)	**
Target Vulnerability					
Exposed target	30	34.10	17	19.30	*
Destructible target	16	18.20	19	21.60	
Easy target	31	36.00	17	19.80	*
Weaponry					
Conventional weaponry	16	18.40	11	12.60	
Group structure					
Loner	26	29.50	9	10.20	*
Temporal Patterns					
Conspiracy length	34	273.91 (avg.)	39	257.44 (avg.)	
Preparatory length	25	150.56 (avg.)	37	249.70 (avg.)	
Num. Antecedent	46	4.04 (avg.)	42	19.31 (avg.)	***
Num. Preparatory	46	1.46 (avg.)	42	7.17 (avg.)	***

<sup>a</sup> The Fishers exact test was used to compare categories of small sample sizes (n ≤ 5)

<sup>b</sup> ±p ≤ .10. \*p ≤ .05. \*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*p ≤ .001.

Next, I consider attributes of opportunity involving the vulnerability of far-right targets. In support of hypothesis 2, exposed far-right targets are significantly more associated with successful incidents than unsuccessful incidents (p ≤ .05). Successful incidents involve targets that are accessible and routinely frequented by the public over 34 percent of the time, while unsuccessful incidents involve exposed targets approximately 19 percent of the time. The next variable considers the level of ease at which targets are penetrated. The results provided in Table

1 support hypothesis 2, as targets involving no security measures are proportionately more associated with successful incidents 36 percent of the time, while targets protected by targeted police patrols, private security, screening procedures, or other security measures are associated with unsuccessful incidents nearly 20 percent of the time. Finally, bivariate significance tests indicate that there are no meaningful differences across incident outcomes involving destructible targets, thus failing to support hypothesis 2.

The final set of “opportunity” variables considers both the sophistication of weaponry used in the incident in addition to far-right group structure. As shown in Table 1, it appears that weaponry sophistication does not vary to the level of statistical significance across far-right incident outcomes, despite conventional weaponry being proportionately more associated with successful incidents. Consequently, hypothesis 3 is not supported by the analysis. In contrast, the findings did provide some support for hypothesis 4, as successful incidents are proportionately more likely to involve far-right loners than unsuccessful incidents ( $p \leq .05$ ).

I also attempt to capture the nature of temporal patterns of precursor conduct across incident outcomes. Notably, I find no support for hypothesis 5 expecting to find differences in the length of the terrorist planning cycle between successful and unsuccessful far-right incidents. Interestingly, it appears that both measures for planning and preparation cycle length used in the current study fail to reach a level of statistical significance at the bivariate level. This is not surprising given the small amount of variation in conspiracy and preparatory length between successful and unsuccessful incidents (see Table 1). Conversely, the analysis does reveal statistically significant and substantive differences involving the number of significant precursor acts across incident outcomes, providing support for hypothesis 6. Results from Table 1 indicate that successful incidents are significantly more likely to involve fewer antecedent acts than

unsuccessful incidents. In fact, incidents that fail or are foiled by law enforcement intervention involve nearly 5 times as many antecedent events when compared with successful incidents. What is more, an average of approximately 2 pre-incident preparatory events are associated with successful far-right incidents, while slightly more than 7 preparatory events are associated with unsuccessful incidents (nearly than 4 times as many).

### **Multivariate Findings**

Next, I examine the extent to which measures for terrorist opportunity and the temporal patterns of precursor conduct predict incident outcomes. Table 2 displays the results for regressing incident outcomes on attributes of the far-right terrorism opportunity structure. Model 1 presents the results from the logistic regression analysis for target attractiveness and vulnerability, model 2 provides findings for far-right weaponry and group structure, and model 3 displays the results for the fully saturated opportunity model.

The results from the first model suggest that near targets are significantly and negatively associated with incident outcomes when controlling for other target variables ( $p \leq .05$ ). That is, as far-rightists live in closer proximity to the target location, the likelihood of successfully completing the terrorism incident increases. Next, it appears that incidents involving exposed targets are marginally more likely to be successfully carried out by far-rights ( $p \leq .10$ ). Lastly, easy targets (or targets with no security measures) are significantly more likely to be associated with successful incident outcomes ( $p \leq .05$ ). Target variables shown not to be significant include vital, iconic, legitimate, and destructible targets. In sum, the significant findings presented in model 1 provide only partial support for research expectations that the more attractive and vulnerable a target is, the more likely the far-right incident will result in success.

**TABLE 2. Predicting Incident Outcomes Using Opportunity Variables**

Variables	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR
Target attractiveness and vulnerability						
Vital target	-1.10(.72)	.332	---	---	-1.01(.84)	.364
Iconic target	1.13(.73)	3.093	---	---	.96(.81)	2.601
Legitimate target	.12(.83)	1.126	---	---	-.44(.96)	.645
Near target	-.003(.001)*	.997	---	---	-.003(.001)*	.997
Exposed target	1.35(.77) <sup>±</sup>	3.840	---	---	.19(.89)	1.218
Destructible target	-.69(.64)	.501	---	---	-1.52(.93)	.218
Easy target	1.55(.78)*	4.730	---	---	2.33(.94)**	10.317
Other opportunity characteristics						
Conventional weaponry	---	---	.33(.50)	1.387	1.32(.96)	3.760
Loner	---	---	1.52(.48)**	4.578	2.46(.82)**	11.692
Constant	-.88(.98)	.414	-.57(.32)	.641	-1.44(1.12)	.237
Chi <sup>2</sup>	22.34		11.55		35.78	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.353		.166		.518	
-2 Log likelihood	78.19		108.77		64.75	

<sup>±</sup>*p* ≤ .10. \**p* ≤ .05. \*\**p* ≤ .01. \*\*\**p* ≤ .001.

The second model shows the results for regressing incident outcomes on far-right weaponry and group structure. As expected, I find that incidents involving far-right loners are significantly more likely to be successful relative to incidents involving groups/cells (*p* ≤ .01). In contrast to research expectations, I find no significant differences in incident outcome regarding far-right weaponry, suggesting that conventional weapon use has no effect on far-right incident success.

In the third model, I enter each opportunity variable in a final cumulative model in order to understand how specific attributes of far-right opportunity impact incident success. Interestingly, incidents involving near targets are significantly more likely to result in success, which supports hypothesis 1 (*p* ≤ .01). In addition, easy targets are significantly more likely to be successfully attacked relative to more hardened targets that involve protective security measures, lending some support for hypothesis 2 (*p* ≤ .05). Finally, I find support for hypothesis 4, as



incidents perpetrated by far-right loners are significantly more likely to be successfully carried out after controlling for other important opportunity variables ( $p \leq .01$ ). However, I find no significant association between the vitalness of targets, target iconicity, target legitimacy, target exposure and destructibility, far-right weaponry, and incident success.

**TABLE 3. Predicting Incident Outcomes Using Temporal and Opportunity Variables**

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR
Temporal patterns								
Conspiracy length	.002(.002)	1.002	---	---	---	---	---	---
Preparatory length	---	---	.000(.002)	1.000	---	---	---	---
Num. Antecedent	---	---	---	---	-0.08(.04)*	.952	---	---
Num. Preparatory	---	---	---	---	---	---	-.24(.10)*	.787
Significant opportunity controls								
Near target	-.003(.001)*	.997	-.003(.001)*	.997	-.002(.001)*	.998	-.003(.001)*	.997
Easy target	2.58(.92)**	13.195	1.96(.95)*	7.118	1.58(.72)*	4.877	1.62(.73)*	5.049
Loner	3.18(.96)**	24.079	3.24(1.98)***	25.453	1.64(.84) <sup>±</sup>	5.133	1.87(.78)*	6.504
Constant	-2.50(1.08)	.082	-1.91(.96)*	.148	-0.25(.83)	.780	-.28(.78)	.753
Chi <sup>2</sup>	30.51		28.36		35.380		38.48	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.494		.533		.502		.536	
-2 Log likelihood	60.98		48.13		68.26		65.16	

<sup>±</sup> $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Next, I include a series of logistic regression models that test each independent measure of temporal patterns of precursor behavior against incident outcomes, net the effects of other statistically important opportunity variables.<sup>15</sup> As is shown in Table 3, the results for the first model indicate that conspiracy length is positively associated with successful incidents, though not statistically significant. It appears the length of time that takes place between the first known antecedent event and the incident date does not significantly impact far-right incident outcomes, providing no support for hypothesis 5. Notably, the opportunity variables remain statistically significant and in the expected direction, supporting research expectations.

In the second model, I examine how preparatory length impacts far-right incident outcomes controlling for the effects of opportunity. The results suggest that preparatory length is generally unassociated with incident success. That is, the length of time that takes place between the formation of the terrorist plot and the terrorism incident does not appear to significantly impact the likelihood of incident success, lending no support for hypothesis 5. Importantly, however, the remaining opportunity variables in model 2 maintain statistical significance.

The third model introduces a temporal variable that attempts to measure the impact that the volume of precursor events has on incident success. As expected, I find that the number of antecedent acts occurring prior to an incident vary significantly across incident outcomes ( $p \leq .05$ ). Specifically, it appears that as the number of antecedent acts decrease, the greater the likelihood of a successful far-right incident. Moreover, with the introduction of this variable, far-right group structure appears to lose statistical power, indicating a weak-to-modest association with incident success ( $p \leq .052$ ). This could be an artifact of the relatively small sample size in the current study, so caution should be used when interpreting results. However, the findings from model 3 suggest that easy and near targets remain significantly associated with successful far-right incidents.

The fourth and final model examines the impact that the number of preparatory behaviors has on incident outcome. Providing further support for hypothesis 6, the results in Table 3 show that relative to unsuccessful incidents, successful far-right incidents are more likely to involve fewer preparatory acts, net the effects of other variables. The findings in model 4 also indicate that near and easy targets, as well as loners, remain significant predictors of successful far-right incidents, controlling for other statistically important variables.

In sum, the results from the multivariate statistical tests suggest that some measures of far-right terrorist opportunity and the temporal patterns of precursor conduct are important predictors of incident outcomes. Notably, near targets, easy targets, and far-right loners are shown to be consistently associated with far-right incident success across all models presented in Tables 1 and 2. Moreover, both variables measuring the volume of precursor activity taking place prior to far-right incidents appear to have significant decreasing effects on far-right incident success. That is, fewer antecedent and preparatory acts are significantly associated with successful far-right incidents. In the following section, I provide a discussion of these major findings, in addition to suggesting directions for future research and potential policy implications.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study set out to explore the impact that far-right terrorism opportunity structures and temporal patterns of precursor behavior have on incident outcomes. Given the relative paucity of research examining this issue, the current study contributes to the criminological literature in two broad ways. First, this paper integratively applied several theoretical strains to the study of ideologically motivated crime, providing a holistic approach for understanding terrorism outcomes. It was assumed that far-rightists carefully assess the costs and benefits associated with particular terrorism incidents, and that calculated decisions about target selection, weapon use, group structure, and precursor activities might ultimately affect the successfulness of terrorist attacks. Although the current study did not test any one theoretical model, the findings did suggest some support for tenets of situational crime prevention and other “opportunity” theories.

Additionally, this paper attempted to overcome several methodological limitations that have traditionally stunted efforts to advance empirically based explanations of terrorist offending. As noted by Gruenewald et al. (2009), the empirical rigor of previous far-right terrorism studies has been lacking. For instance, most far-right research has been absent original observations as well as quantitative analyses, including basic descriptive statistics. In order to overcome this issue, the current study utilized data from the American Terrorism Study (ATS) to empirically analyze 88 far-right terrorism incidents occurring over the past 30 years. The bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses yielded several key findings that have implications for both future terrorism research and homeland security policy.

First, this study found that incidents involving more attractive targets are more likely to result in success. Specifically, I found that near targets are negatively associated with successful far-right incidents, indicating that the closer far-rightists live to the target location, the more likely the terrorism incident will be carried out successfully. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding the geospatial patterns of domestic terrorist attacks, suggesting that the overwhelming majority of terrorism incidents occur relatively close to the terrorists' residences (Cothren et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006). Moreover, studies on criminals' "journeys to crime" consistently show that offenders select easily accessible targets located in close proximity to where they live (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984; Phillips, 1980; Repetto, 1974; Wright & Decker, 1997). In the current case, it would seem that successful far-right terrorists rationally select familiar targets for which potential risks can be avoided when executing the terrorism incident. This finding also supports previous research maintaining that terrorist attack success often depends on whether terrorists' knowledge of intended targets is well matched to the requirements of the planned operation (Jackson & Frelinger, 2009).

Next, findings from the current study partially support research expectations predicting that the more vulnerable a target is, the more likely the incident will be successfully executed. In particular, I found that easy targets were significantly more associated with successful incidents relative to more hardened targets that involve protective security measures. As a crime-reducing mechanism of the situational crime prevention approach, target hardening has been shown in the criminological literature to be a successful approach to preventing specific forms of crime (for a review of this literature, see Clarke, 1992). In the current study, it appears that target hardening can also be used to explain why some far-right terrorism incidents are averted, supporting Clarke and Newman's (2007) argument that long term terrorism prevention practices necessitate plans to protect the most vulnerable of targets within communities.

Third, findings showing that successful far-right incidents were significantly more likely to be carried out by lone actors were supportive of my research expectations. Since the advent of the "leaderless resistance" model of terrorism, far-rightists have increasingly utilized a "lone wolf" strategy to impede traditional law enforcement efforts intended to thwart potential attacks. Indeed, prior research on terrorists who utilize such tactics has shown that lone acting terrorists are significantly better educated, participate in significantly fewer precursor events per incident, live significantly farther away from the target location, and are better suited to avoid arrest than group-based terrorists (Smith et al., 2014, p.2). These patterns of lone actor terrorism in the United States highlight the clandestine nature of lone acting terrorism, suggesting that far-right lone actors are better equipped to avoid detection and infiltration by law enforcement, allowing them to successfully execute attacks.

Finally, the results of this study also support expectations that incidents involving fewer antecedent and preparatory acts were significantly more likely to be successfully executed. One

explanation for this is that the selection of familiar targets located near the terrorists' residences require them to engage in less precursor behaviors, such as surveillance of intended targets or meetings to discuss infiltrating a target's security measures. Moreover, the current study also found that far-right incidents are more likely to be executed by lone actors, who by definition do not participate in some pre-incident planning and preparation activities that are typically associated with group-based terrorism (Smith et al., 2014). Additionally, findings from prior studies indicate that certain precursor acts are significantly more associated with unsuccessful terrorism incidents. For example, researchers from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS) recently discovered that terrorists who engaged in some of the most common types of precursor behaviors, such as materials and weapons acquisitions, attempts to acquire expertise, and surveillance of targets were significantly less likely to complete the planned incident (Gruenewald, Parkin, Smith, Chermak, Freilich, Roberts, & Klein, 2015).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although the current paper is an important first step toward understanding terrorism incident success, this study was limited in a number of ways. First, the analysis only covered a relatively small number of far-right terrorism incidents, despite efforts to increase the sample size. Consequently, caution should be given when interpreting the results of multivariate analyses.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the current study specifically intended to examine characteristics associated with incident success for a single category of domestic terrorism. However, our understanding of the correlates of terrorism incident outcomes would be well served to also consider characteristics of incident success across other ideological movements. A future study

should comparatively analyze attributes of opportunity, planning and preparation length, and the volume of precursor activity associated terrorism incident success across other terrorist movements, including international terrorism and eco-terrorism.

Second, as the current study is the first attempt to operationalize the attractiveness and vulnerability of far-right terrorists' target selection, future research should build upon this approach and explore different ways to measure target vulnerability and attractiveness. Again, our understanding of target selection would benefit greatly by extending the ideas set forth in this study to other forms of terrorism. Future research should comparatively study target vulnerability and attractiveness across domestic terrorist movements to gain a better understanding of how specific terrorist groups select targets to attack.

Finally, the current study was limited in the availability of temporal data to analyze. Verification of both the dates of the precursor events and the date of the terrorism incident was required for inclusion in this study. Future research should attempt to find ways to decrease the amount of missing temporal data, in addition to exploring new ways to measure terrorist longevity. For example, in the future researchers may wish examine the "life-span" or "life cycle" of individual terrorist-offenders. This research would hold a great deal of promise for counter-terrorism policy, as conceptualizing such a concept would involve measuring length of time that occurs between the first antecedent activity committed and the date of arrest. Moreover, future research should explore terrorism incident success on an individual level by measuring the impact that terrorist longevity, level of group involvement, and other personal characteristics (e.g. education, mental health, etc.) have on incident success.

## **Policy Implications**

Since the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, terrorism prevention remains a top priority among homeland security officials, and a shared responsibility across all levels of law enforcement including federal, state, local, and tribal police. As part of a broad homeland security strategy, law enforcement agencies are increasingly focused on the prevention of terrorism through intelligence-led policing (ILP) strategies, which build upon the basic tenets of community policing, problem solving, and partnerships (Carter & Carter, 2009; McGarrell, Freilich, & Chermak, 2007). Additionally, greater emphasis has been placed on the role of local law enforcement in the prevention of terrorist attacks through the identification and protection of vulnerable and attractive targets (Clarke & Newman, 2007). This section integrates findings from the current study into a broader discussion of the policy implications, and also suggests possible best practices for terrorism prevention.

As demonstrated in this study, terrorists who select targets closer to home are significantly more likely to successfully execute attacks. Research on the geospatial patterns of domestic terrorism maintains that terrorists tend to plan, prepare, and carry out attacks relatively close to home (Smith et al., 2006). In this way, far-right terrorism appears to be a local event committed by violent extremists who may already be known to local law enforcement officials. Since local police agencies are most likely to collect vital information about the groups or individuals at risk for engaging in terrorist crimes, ILP tactics based on the systematic analysis of raw information, and the use of problem-solving strategies, may aid in the identification of imminent threats prior to the commission of a terrorism incident (McGarrell et al., 2007). Moreover, the results from the current analysis also suggest that successful far-right incidents involve significantly fewer antecedent and preparatory behaviors. At first glance, this finding



presents a problem for local law enforcement, as it appears that successful far-rightists commit attacks without engaging in a high volume of precursor events, and thus, provide law enforcement with relatively fewer opportunities for infiltration and interdiction. Nonetheless, terrorism remains a local problem and law enforcement must remain vigilant. Focusing preventative patrols on potentially high-risk target areas (Smith, 2008), while also gathering intelligence on known violent extremists and their suspicious activities through community partnerships and routine police work would be a promising strategy for thwarting future plots.

Another key finding of this study is that far-right terrorism incidents perpetrated by lone actors are significantly more likely to be successfully executed. While some scholars assert that loner attacks cannot be prevented (Barnes, 2012), the underlying principles and tactics of ILP as a broad framework for combatting terrorism suggests otherwise. For example, one of the distinguishing features of ILP involves the gathering of intelligence on key threats (Carter & Carter, 2009), including threats posed by violent extremists, organizations, and the interactions between violent extremists. One way in which the literature has shown that loners interact is through the public sharing of information through Internet postings and participating in chat rooms (Artiga, 2010; Kaati & Svenson, 2011; Michael, 2012; Gruenewald et al. 2013b). Terrorism prevention practices, therefore, would be well suited to monitor far-right loners' reliance on the Internet in order to gather actionable intelligence. Furthermore, local law enforcement agencies could create websites and chat rooms that attract the attention of far-right extremists in order to more closely monitor their activities. Finally, engaging in counterpropaganda tactics over the Internet that avert the frustrations and beliefs that lead to far-right extremist violence may provide law enforcement with a promising avenue to prevent future acts of lone wolf terrorism (Dugan & Chenowith, 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2013b).

Lastly, findings from the current study suggest that targets that are more vulnerable and easy to penetrate are significantly more likely to be successfully attacked. According to Clarke and Newman (2007), a key role for local law enforcement in the prevention of terrorism is identifying and protecting targets that are attractive to terrorists and vulnerable to attack. One way to reduce the vulnerability of far-right targets is to utilize directed police patrols in high-risk target areas, or “hot spots” for far-right terrorism, which has been demonstrated in the criminological literature to be an effective approach to reducing specific forms of crime (Cohen & Ludwig, 2003; McGarrell, Chermak, Weiss, & Wilson, 2001; Sherman & Rogan, 1995). Other strategies for reducing vulnerability to far-right targets would include hiring private security guards, installing screening procedures, and constructing fences and other physical barriers to prevent the target from being easily accessed. Although such tactics are an expensive option for added protection, the presence of these security measures would better safeguard against future attacks.

## **Conclusion**

Far-right terrorists in the United States have been shown to be a persistent and serious threat to public safety over the past 30 years. While scholarship on fatal far-right attacks is growing, to date no study has examined attributes of far-right terrorism incident success. The current paper sets out fill specific gaps in the extant research by exploring the impact that far-right opportunity structures and temporal patterns of precursor conduct have on incident outcomes. Several notable findings emerged from the analysis, indicating that far-right incident success was significantly associated with low levels of target vulnerability and attractiveness, group structures of far-right actors, and a low volume of antecedent and preparatory conduct.

While the findings of this study are important for our overall understanding of why some terrorism incidents succeed while others fail, they are not conclusive. Rather, the findings in the current study suggest that more research on this topic is needed for both theoretical development and the furtherance of practical terrorism intervention strategies.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Antecedent conduct is defined as “the totality of non-terrorist crimes committed by a terrorist group. Antecedent offenses may be of two types: preparatory crimes – crimes committed to assist in the preparation of a terrorist incident; and ancillary crimes – crimes committed for order maintenance, internal security or personal reasons” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> While I concur that tools and facilitating conditions are important to terrorist opportunity structures, the proposed study focuses exclusively on how *target selection* and *weapon use* structure terrorist’ opportunities for successfully completing terrorist attacks.

<sup>3</sup> According to Smith, Damphousse, and Roberts (2006, p.2), preparatory behaviors are defined as both criminal and non-criminal conduct by far-right terrorists in preparation for a terrorism incident.

<sup>4</sup> Subject matter experts included Steven Chermak (militias); Mark Hamm (white supremacy groups); Austin Turk (political violence); Ron Arnold (environmental extremism); and Bill Dyson (leftist terrorism). For a full review of this methodology, see Smith et al (2006, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> These researchers were primarily graduate research assistants and undergraduate interns affiliated with the University of Arkansas’ Terrorism Research Center housed in Fulbright College. However, researchers from the Mercyhurst College Institute for Intelligence Studies (MCIIS) in Erie, Pennsylvania were also utilized for a select number of cases.

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see Better Management Oversight and Internal Controls Needed to Ensure Accuracy of Terrorism-Related Statistics, General Accounting Office report, January 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Given the volume of unsuccessful terrorism incidents included in the sample, the current study did not measure the *Occupied* status of targets, which is operationalized as whether the target was occupied during the time of attack (Gruenewald, Allison-Gruenewald, & Klein, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Incidents were excluded from analysis when the resident locations for all the perpetrators involved in the attack could not be identified and for targets in which the address information could not be identified. For incidents in which only information on the city was known, a straight-line distance calculation was computed between the city of the closest perpetrator’s residence and the city in which the target was located.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that strictly human targets were coded in relation to the physical location at which the incident occurred. For example, since members of the Order murdered Jewish radio host Alan Berg at his home, the target’s exposure was placed in the context of Berg’s private dwelling, and coded as accessible, but rarely frequented by the public (non-exposed). Additionally, for planned incidents involving human targets where the location of the intended attack was unknown, the environment in which the target was housed on a daily basis was considered. For instance, target exposure for planned attacks against specific abortion clinic

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employees were coded as exposed, since targets of this nature are routinely housed in the medical clinic for which they are employed and frequented by the public.

<sup>10</sup> For a majority of cases, coders used *Google Maps/Images* to evaluate the size and physical structure of targets in order to accurately assess target destructibility. For structures or buildings that could not be located on *Google Maps/Images*, the target structure-type was considered and the least amount of weaponry required for destruction was coded.

<sup>11</sup> In some cases there was incomplete temporal data for significant precursor events and terrorism incidents. Coders, therefore, attempted to add missing values by estimating dates. If only the event or incident month was known, the 15th day of the month was coded. If only the event or incident year was known, coders used the mid-point for that given year. If information like the season or time of year was available, coders used the mid-point of that season. For planned incidents in which not date was given, arrest dates were used. This coding scheme was also used to add missing values for calculating the *planning length* variable.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that accurately identifying evidence of explicit intent to engage in terrorist activity presented significant challenges in some cases. For example, in one precursor event linked to a far-right incident targeting federal law enforcement agencies, a group of far-right militia members conducted weapons training using a poster of a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) agent. During the training session, one of the co-conspirators turned to the group, held up the target, and stated, “this is our objective.” Consequently, coders identified this as the first evidence of a plot formation, as the actions of the militia group implied the formation of a terrorist plot.

<sup>13</sup> Since the dependent variable is nearly evenly distributed, I also conducted a series of OLS regression analyses to assess the robustness of the primary findings. The results from the OLS regression generally mirror key findings from the logistic regression models.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that because some of the predictor variables are closely related (i.e. variables measuring the attractiveness and vulnerability of targets), I conducted a series of tests to check for multicollinearity among the independent variables. First, I examined the correlations. The results showed that all correlation coefficients were less than .5, indicating no potential multicollinearity issues. Next, I conducted collinearity diagnostics to measure the extent to which the regressors are related to each other. The variance inflation factors (VIFs) revealed a score of less than 5 for each predictor variable, suggesting that multicollinearity is not an issue in the current study.

<sup>15</sup> Consideration is given to the potential for over estimating odds ratios, which could lead to biased estimates. As logistic regression models require a minimum of 10 valid cases (in the current study, incidents) per independent variable (Agresti, 2007), I conduct a series of binary logistic regression models in which a 10 to 1 ratio is maintained.

<sup>16</sup> Although not shown in the current study, I analyzed a series of fully saturated logistic regression models regressing incident outcomes on each measure of the far-right opportunity

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structure, in addition to independent measures of temporal patterns of precursor conduct. The results indicated only marginal differences from the findings presented in the current study. However, it should be noted that in order to conduct these analyses the 10 to 1 ratio required for logistic regression was violated, so interpretations should be made with extra caution.

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