UCL Jill Dando Institute of
Security and Crime Science

Terrorism during the COVID-19 pandemic
Nadine L. Salman & Paul Gill, UCL Jill Dando Institute
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The problem
Terrorism is broadly defined as *an action or threat designed to influence the government or intimidate the public. Its purpose is to advance a political, religious or ideological cause.*

As well as direct violence or threat, there are other terrorism-related problems including:
- Radicalisation (the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies)
- Supporting terrorism and extremism (material or otherwise)
- Inciting or encouraging acts of terrorism and violent extremism

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What we know about terrorism and how we know it
Terrorism and violent extremism can take many forms. It can be perpetrated by groups (such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda), as well as individual 'lone-actors' or smaller unaffiliated groups. Violent extremists can be inspired by religious, political, or ideological causes, including (but not limited to) jihadist extremism, far-right extremism, and single-issue causes.

Terrorist attacks can target a range of locations. Target attractiveness can be summarised through the TRACK framework: Tolerable, Relevant, Accessible, Close and/or Known. Increasingly, recent attacks have targeted "soft targets" – often public places with limited security, such as markets, pedestrianised areas, and concert venues. A range of different attack methods have also been used. In recent years, there have been attacks in the UK and Europe using knives, vehicles, and less commonly, firearms and IEDs.

There are many different models and theories describing how and why people become vulnerable to radicalisation. This often requires a combination of both susceptibility and selection factors. Factors within individuals can be associated with susceptibility to radicalisation and involvement in terrorism and violent extremism. For example, personal grievances, life changes, and mental ill health can all make an individual more susceptible. Conversely, factors such as positive social and family influences may make an individual less susceptible.

Exposure and support for terrorism can take place both online and offline. This can include the exposure to or dissemination of terrorist publications and messages which could incite or encourage terrorism. Support for terrorism can also include providing material or monetary support to terrorist groups.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic
The COVID-19 pandemic may reduce opportunities for some types of terrorism-related problems, whilst increasing opportunities for others.

In most countries, the COVID-19 response involves restrictions in movement. This could mean that a) it will be more difficult for a would-be attacker to travel to their target for hostile reconnaissance or the attack itself unnoticed, and b) there are fewer people and gatherings outside to be targeted. Attackers may even be afraid of becoming infected, and therefore stay at home. Indeed, ISIS discouraged its followers from carrying out attacks in Europe due to such fears.

Similarly, the closure of many potential target venues and public places means that these may no longer be attractive or viable targets to a would-be attacker. While this may reduce the opportunities for an attacker, it may also result in displacement to other crowded and vital places, such as hospitals, parks, supermarkets, or medical/food supply chains.

People are currently spending more time at home. This can have implications for their vulnerability to radicalisation and involvement in terrorism. There has been growing concern about isolation and mental health during the pandemic, particularly for those who live alone. For those living with others, family conflict and domestic violence may also be stressors. Additionally, many have lost jobs, been furloughed, or otherwise experienced disruptions to their career and education. This can result in economic hardship, as well as frustration and boredom. These factors taken together may increase individuals' vulnerability. Conversely, spending more time at home may result in decreased in-person exposure to potentially radicalising peer groups, and in some cases increased exposure to positive familial influences.

People at home may also spend more time online. This could result in increased exposure to some radicalising influences, or increased engagement in online spaces that support or encourage terrorism and violent extremism. For example, there is already evidence that far-right forums have been using COVID-19 to reinforce anti-immigration sentiments and conspiracy theories. Some have called for flouting government guidelines, and even 'weaponising' COVID-19 by deliberately attempting to infect certain religious or ethnic groups. While this may encourage action and support for extremist groups, it may also provide opportunities for online interventions.

Finally, another impact of the COVID-19 response is that the number of UK Prevent referrals may dramatically decrease. This is because most referrals come from educators or the police, who now have reduced interaction with potentially vulnerable people due to current measures.

Some ideas in response

Many counter-terrorism and -radicalisation measures are already in place. However, specific issues that may arise during the current pandemic could be addressed by:
- Increasing security in public places (particularly hospitals, parks, and supermarkets)
- Continued monitoring, moderation and intervention on social media and online forums
- Teaching safe online behaviours to teenaged children and parents
- Encouraging Prevent referrals from other groups (e.g. family, neighbours, colleagues)
- Maintaining contact and interventions with individuals already identified as at-risk
- Supporting mental health during the pandemic
- Providing or supporting engagement in sociable and positive activities and work

Relevant resources

Action Counters Terrorism Campaign: https://act.campaign.gov.uk/
Clarke, R., & Newman, G. (2006). *Outsmarting the terrorists*. Praeger Security International.
Educate Against Hate: https://educateagainsthate.com/
Marchment, Z., & Gill, P. (2020). Spatial Decision Making of Terrorist Target Selection: Introducing the TRACK Framework. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 1-19.