

# **(Unintended) Consequences of Counter-Terrorism Training and Public Vigilance Campaigns on Minority Groups**

**Paul Dresser, Jamie  
Harding, Mike Rowe**

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## Background

The study underpinning this briefing evaluated training provided by NaCTSO – the National Counter-Terrorism and Security Office – to the public. The evaluation was conducted using survey data collected among people who had undertaken the training, semi-structured interviews with NaCTSO staff and counter-terrorism professionals, and documentary analysis of counter-terrorism campaigns.

NaCTSO is responsible for the Protect and Prepare pillars of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy. Together with the National Protective Security Authority (NPSA), NaCTSO has sought to encourage vigilance on the part of the public and the reporting of suspicious behaviour in publicly accessible locations. There has been a focus on crowded places, as these are particularly vulnerable to terrorist attack. Martyn's Law – which requires certain locations and events to consider and mitigate the risk of terrorism - will require more stakeholders to demonstrate that they have taken appropriate and proportionate counter-terrorism measures. The training discussed in this policy briefing is intended to support these measures. It sought to remedy some of the weaknesses of public awareness campaigns of the past, which sometimes had the unintended impact of presenting entire communities as suspicious, usually on the grounds of ethnicity and/or religion.

## Findings

- Feedback surveys from participants were received in relation to two training programmes. The ACT Operational training program is designed to help UK-based companies, organizations, and individuals to understand and mitigate against current terrorist methods, and to prepare for and respond to terrorist incidents. The ACT Awareness training programme is primarily targeted at staff working within venues and public spaces; it covers good practices to help counter terrorism and increase security awareness.
- The feedback surveys asked slightly different questions between the two programmes. Considering 'Act Operational' training, only 42.5% of respondents had rated their knowledge as 'very good' or 'good' before the presentation, but this figure has risen to 96.9% after the presentation. 104 of the 132 respondents rated their level of knowledge as having improved and, of the remaining 28, 19 had given themselves the highest rating prior to the training (so it could not have been improved).
- Each element of the Act Awareness training was regarded as 'extremely useful' or 'very useful' by a large majority of people undertaking the training: 95% said this of the element on identifying and responding to suspicious activity, 94% for identifying and responding to suspicious items, 91% for current threat and threat levels, and 90% for responding to a firearms or weapon attack. 88% of respondents said that the training was extremely useful or very useful for their job role and 70% said that they would be extremely confident or very confident in dealing with a terrorism-related incident.
- In relation to both forms of training, the figures provided above were supported by more detailed comments in response to the open questions on the survey. Words such as "informative", "engaging", and "interesting" were frequently used in response to these questions. There was no suggestion that survey respondents felt desensitised or overloaded with information; many expressed a desire for further training.
- Ten semi-structured interviews with NaCTSO staff and counter-terrorism practitioners provided some qualifications to the positive picture that emerged from the surveys. The greatest concern was over the use of the term 'Islamist' threat; a threat description set by the Home Office that has superseded the term 'international terrorism.' Respondents frequently reported that this term invited accusations of stereotyping and bias, which practitioners had to mitigate. For many, the word 'Islamist' was too close to 'Islam', with the associated risk that all Muslims could be seen as terrorism suspects.
- Other concerns included that virtual training was less effective than face-to-face training. The choice of music before the session was seen by some as indicating that some ethnic groups were particularly likely to be terrorism suspects. There was a concern that less experienced professionals might lack confidence in dealing with issues around bias when they were raised by course participants.
- Professional respondents emphasised the importance of the training focusing on suspect behaviour rather than suspect people; a key distinction made under SCan (See, Check and Notify) training. They suggested that the distinction could reduce the risk of people being suspected on the basis of demographic characteristics such as their

age and/or gender. It was consistent with the concern in training materials to quash notions of the 'typical' terrorist.

- Several respondents referred to the importance of thinking about 'normal' or 'baseline' behaviour in a given situation, so that the public could clearly identify behaviour that departed from the norm. However, there were also references to 'gut instinct' as a basis for suspicion, with the obvious danger of bias that may arise from this. Given the necessarily open-ended definition of what constitutes suspicious behaviour, the potential for stereotyping – most notably on ethnic/religious grounds – remains.
- Professional respondents emphasised the importance of first emphasising the diversity of people who can become terrorists, exploring the local context, and encouraging trainees to examine the idea of 'baseline' behaviour within their environment. This could provide the appropriate context for subsequent training that advised trainees how to respond to behaviour that departs from the norm.
- After 'seeing', training covered the most effective method of 'checking' someone whose behaviour raises suspicion. Analysis of training materials suggested that friendly conversation – the 'power of hello' - and eye contact are seen as effective checks on suspicious behaviour. However, this advice could be problematic for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other neurodevelopment disabilities (NDDs). Those with ASD/NDD typically experience impairments in terms of social interactions, meaning that their behaviour in social situations can be seen as atypical and difficult to read. The subjective nature of what is 'normal' or 'baseline' behaviour adds to the danger that people with ASD/NDD can be seen as suspicious because of their condition.

## Conclusion and recommendations

- The term 'Islamist' needs to be reconsidered and an appropriate alternative term devised.
- Providing training to the public around terrorist threats does not seem to increase public fear so there should be no reluctance to make such training more widely available.
- The order in which training material is provided should be considered carefully to ensure trainees are provided with a holistic understanding of counter-terrorism prior to undertaking more specialist training centred on hostile reconnaissance.
- Training should concentrate on suspicious behaviour rather than suspicious people. It should be emphasised that behaviour which is atypical is not necessarily suspicious.
- The overlap between suspicious behaviours and behaviours frequently associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other neurodevelopment disability (NDD) may lead to individuals with these conditions being treated with undue suspicion. Training should therefore include discussion of behaviours that may appear abnormal but are not grounds for suspicion.
- Further research should examine whether greater confidence felt by the public in identifying a potential terrorist threat is matched by greater willingness to report such a threat. It should also examine whether positive impacts of training are sustained.

### Further engagement/more information

Correspondence should be sent to the lead author [paul2.dresser@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:paul2.dresser@northumbria.ac.uk)

More information on the research can be found at: <https://www.protectuk.police.uk/threat-risk/threat-analysis/unintended-consequences-research-identifying-impact-nactso-public>;

and: <https://www.protectuk.police.uk/news-views/impact-and-unintended-consequences-nactso-products-and-campaigns>.

### Authors

Dr Paul Dresser, Assistant Professor in Criminology, Northumbria University

Dr Jamie Harding, Assistant Professor in Criminology and Sociology, Northumbria University

Professor Mike Rowe, Professor of Criminology and Sociology, Northumbria University.

The authors and professional partners from NaCTSO have disseminated policy and practice recommendations underpinning this research via the following knowledge exchange events:

- Findings and recommendations shared cross-government: Home Office, Counter-Terrorism Policing, City of London (National Disruptive Effects Unit), and National Protective Security Authority (NPSA);
- Findings and recommendations presented to the Counter-Terrorism Security Advisor Network;
- Findings and recommendations presented to NaCTSO and wider stakeholders;
- Findings and recommendations presented at the Research Centre for Crime and Policing Seminar Series, Northumbria University.

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**Centre for Crime and Policing**

Northumbria University

Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 8ST

