

Presentation title:

Mental disorder, psychological problems and terrorist behaviour

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This 2022 Campbell Collaboration systematic review is sponsored by the USA Department of Homeland Security for the Five Research and Development (5RD) Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) network. The review focuses on mental health and its association with terrorist involvement. The review examines evidence based on 56 papers reporting on 73 terrorist samples. Our findings do not support the assertion that there are remarkably high rates of mental health difficulties in the terrorist population. As a benchmark, we estimate that the lifetime prevalence rate of diagnosed mental disorders in the general population is 29%. We report that the lifetime prevalence rate of diagnosed mental disorder in terrorist samples was 17.4%. This increased to 23.2% for the studies reporting lifetime prevalence rates of suspected disorder, and 28.5% for studies reporting any psychological problems. At any one time, 14.4% of those involved in terrorism may have a disorder or suspected disorder (as opposed to a psychological problem). When we isolated studies that reported rates prior to either engagement in terrorism or detection for terrorist offences the lifetime prevalence rate for any psychological problem was 27.8%. Finally, based on single study estimates, the odds of having a lifetime history of mental health difficulties between those involved in terrorist behaviour and non-terrorist offending varied depending on the comparison group. The findings do not offer support for the mental health-terrorism hypothesis. Trends in the data, however, may point to higher rates among some terrorist samples than others, and in particular among lone-actor terrorists. We will discuss the policy and research implications of these findings.