

In the shadow of 9/11: How the study of political extremism has reshaped criminology*

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Abstract

White-collar crime and illegal political extremism share several characteristics with relevance to criminology. Neither is associated with lower socioeconomic status individuals, both involve perpetrators that rarely see themselves as criminal, and both face unique data challenges. Following Edwin Sutherland's influential research, the study of white-collar crime became a recognized specialization within criminology. Similarly, following the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, political extremism became increasingly accepted as a legitimate research topic in criminology. I explore several ways that the study of terrorism has influenced criminological research and how responses to terrorist attacks since 9/11 can help us understand policing. Terrorism research has vividly illustrated the socially constructed nature of crime, has encouraged researchers to see not only the deterrence potential of punishment but also its capacity to produce backlash, has accelerated cross-national criminology research, and has hastened the embrace of open sources as an important form of criminal justice data. Changes in policing following 9/11 and the resulting war on terror also provide critical insights into the extent to which policing depends on community trust and legitimacy. As with the embrace of white-collar crime nearly a century ago, mainstream criminology has been enriched by widening its scope to include political extremism.

KEYWORDS

open-source data, policing, political extremism, terrorism, white-collar crime

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 1939, for his presidential address before a joint meeting of the American Sociological and American Economic Societies, Edwin Sutherland coined the term “white collar crime.” He contrasted “crime in the upper or white-collar class composed of respectable or at least respected business and professional men” with “crime in the lower class, committed by persons of low socioeconomic class” (Sutherland, 1940, p. 1). Although Sutherland was not the first scholar to call attention to crimes of the powerful (Bonger, 1916; Norris, 1903; Ross, 1907; Steffens, 1904), he was the first to call such offenders “white collar.” At the time, few scholars were actively engaged in research on white-collar crime.

Similarly, even though research on political extremism and terrorism from criminology scholars began to appear in the 1980s and 1990s (Hamm, 1998; Smith, 1994; Turk, 1982), before the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, there was little interest in these topics among criminologists. In fact, at the turn of the twenty-first century, it was not at all clear that most criminologists considered terrorism and politically motivated violence to be a legitimate part of criminology. When Laura Dugan and I considered this question in a 2004 essay, we relied on Sutherland’s (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 3) definition of criminology (“the study of the breaking of laws and reactions to the breaking of laws”) to argue that terrorism was a legitimate topic for criminological study.¹

There are at least three parallels between the study of white-collar crime and illegal political extremism. First, unlike more traditional forms of crime, neither white-collar crime nor illegal political extremism is associated with low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals. Sutherland (1940, p. 6) famously argued that criminology was too absorbed with lower class criminality and that if accurate crime data were available, it would show no direct association between poverty and delinquency. Similarly, although illegal political violence is rarely linked to the richest members of society, prior research (Berrebi, 2007; Krueger, 2007; Piazza, 2006) has consistently demonstrated that those who participate in terrorist acts are not the poorest members of their societies. An early study by Russell and Miller (1977) compiled profiles of more than 350 individual terrorist cadres and leaders across 18 different terrorist groups and concluded that the majority of these individuals had middle-class backgrounds. Sageman’s (2004) survey of 172 members of Islamic terrorist groups found that approximately three quarters came from upper- or middle-class backgrounds. Slightly more than one quarter (27 percent) came from working-class or poor backgrounds. In a U.S. county-level analysis I did with Bianca Bersani (LaFree & Bersani, 2014), we found that terrorist attacks were *least* common in counties with high unemployment, a high percentage of families below the poverty line, and a large number of individuals in low-wage occupations.

Second, unlike those who commit street crimes, white-collar offenders and political extremists rarely see themselves as criminals. In his classic criminology textbook, Sutherland (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 45) noted that white-collar offenders lack “a developed feeling of moral

¹In this address, I rely on the FBI (2017) definition of illegal political extremism as behavior “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals” and use the term interchangeably with terrorism.

indignation” about the white-collar crimes they commit. Similarly, many terrorist perpetrators see themselves as altruists, making sacrifices for a noble cause (Hafez, 2006; Pedahzur et al., 2003).

Finally, for both the study of white-collar offenders and those who engage in illegal political extremism, official police data of the sort used to study common law crimes like robbery and burglary are generally unavailable. Sutherland (1949) was a vocal critic of the fact that governments did not collect systematic data on white-collar crime. Those interested in studying terrorism face similar data challenges. Most countries of the world do not make public official police data on terrorist perpetrators. In fact, the majority of offenders prosecuted for political extremism in the United States are not legally processed for terrorism-specific charges but for other related offenses, such as weapons violations and money laundering (Smith et al., 2002). Moreover, even though a good deal of information on individual terrorist perpetrators is collected by clandestine organizations, these data are usually unavailable to researchers working in an unclassified environment.

To remedy the data challenges facing those studying white-collar crime, Sutherland (1949) relied on an early version of what today we call “open source data;” he used court records and newspaper accounts to review decisions against 70 corporations for various types of criminal violations. In parallel, most contemporary criminology research on illegal political extremism is based on open source databases that track extremist attacks, groups, or individuals (for a review, see LaFree, *in press*).

Following the pioneering work of Sutherland, the study of white-collar or corporate crime became a recognized specialization within criminology and has continued to attract researchers and students for the past eight decades. Similarly, I argue that following the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, the study of political extremism has been increasingly accepted as a legitimate research topic in mainstream criminology. Research on illegal political extremism now appears in nearly all criminology journals; college courses on political extremism and terrorism have been added to the curricula of many criminology and criminal justice departments; and increasingly, criminology students are choosing political extremism as a suitable topic for class papers, research topics, theses, and dissertations. The American Society of Criminology (ASC) has added a Division on Terrorism and Bias Crime that now has as many members as more long-standing specializations, including white-collar/corporate crime. And the ASC, the European Society of Criminology, and the Academy of Criminal Justice Studies now routinely feature dozens of papers and panels on radicalization, political extremism, and terrorism each year at their annual meetings. In a recent review of 12 influential criminology journals with my colleague Yesenia Yanez (LaFree & Yanez, *in press*), we identified 105 empirical studies of illegal political extremism since 2000 alone. Although the scientific rigor of this rapidly expanding research literature has been uneven (LaFree & Freilich, 2019; Silke, 2009), it is clear that research on political extremism now represents one of the major growth areas in social science scholarship and, further, that criminology has figured prominently in these developments.

Political extremism, like white collar-crime, was in large part left out of the lexicon of criminology because it did not fit neatly into the model of mainstream criminology. Sutherland called for an end to the myopia of a criminology that ignored the crimes of the rich and powerful. Similarly, before the attacks of 9/11, most criminologists ignored political extremism. Now that the study of political extremism has been widely accepted into mainstream criminology, it is changing how criminology looks at crime and how we understand policing and the operation of the criminal justice system. In the sections that follow, I explore four areas where widening our criminological focus to include political extremism has changed the face of criminology research. I then explore briefly how changes in policing after 9/11 provide critical insight into the extent to which the police depend on community trust and legitimacy. As with the embrace of white-collar crime nearly a

century ago, mainstream criminology has been enriched by widening its scope to include political extremism.

2 | IMPACT OF ILLEGAL POLITICAL EXTREMISM ON CRIMINOLOGY

I assume that when researchers with specific substantive specializations expand into new fields of study they have an impact on the fields they enter. When my colleagues and I wrote the grant proposal that eventually became the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), we consciously tried to incorporate researchers from fields like criminology and psychology, which were mature and yet had paid little attention to political extremism, on the assumption that this would help jump start the scientific understanding of terrorism. It seems likely, however, that the field being established may have as much impact on the already recognized field as the other way around. Although cataloguing all of the means by which the study of political extremism has influenced criminology is beyond the scope of the current address, I want to discuss at least four prominent ways that research on extremism has contributed to mainstream criminology.

2.1 | Socially Constructed Nature of Crime

Even though Sutherland's differential association theory is generally considered to be a positivist approach because it focuses on specific acts that can be measured, nevertheless, Sutherland (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978) maintained that individual motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes are social constructions emerging out of interactions with others. Sutherland (1940, p. 1) argued that the only reason why many individuals treat those who commit burglary as criminals while ignoring thefts committed by white-collar offenders depends on social constructions. Following Sutherland, Becker (1963) claimed that deviance and crime are not objective properties of certain actions or behavior but definitions constructed through social interaction. In Becker's words (1963, p. 9), "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.'" These arguments provide strong parallels between white-collar crime and illegal political extremism. Neither white-collar offenses nor political extremism are simply "out there" to be counted in the same way that we might count other physical objects (LaFree & Dugan, 2004; Turk, 2002). Rather, to qualify as white-collar crime or terrorism, a particular act must be recognized and defined as such. And in both cases, no matter how heinous an act, there are invariably disagreements in terms of whether the act is seen as a criminal offense. With regard to the study of terrorism, this situation has been captured with the familiar cliché that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."

Examining the beliefs and behaviors of those who participated in the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol provides a recent example. After assembling on the ellipse of the Capitol complex for a protest supporting President Donald Trump's attempts to overturn his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, breaching multiple police perimeters, and occupying, ransacking, and vandalizing parts of the building (Dozier, 2021; Washington Post, 2021). One Trump supporter was shot and killed by Capitol Police during the attack, and one Capital Police officer was pepper sprayed and later died of a stroke (Chicago Tribune, 2021). A week after the riot, the House of Representatives impeached Trump for incitement of

insurrection, making him the only U.S. president to have been impeached twice (New York Times, 2021). At the time this address was written, more than 500 people had been charged with federal crimes relating to the attack (Axon et al., 2021).

Was this an act of illegal extremist violence, or was it a patriotic attempt to support democratic institutions by protesting election fraud? Although a majority of Americans view these events as a dangerous attack on democracy, it is also clear that this position is far from unanimous. In a survey of more than 1,000 adults conducted in January 2021, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI, 2021a) found that 60 percent of Americans agreed that harsh and violent language in politics contributes “a lot” to violent actions in society. In a PRRI (2021b) survey of more than 5,000 Americans two months later, however, the pollsters found that 28 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” and the same percentage of Republicans agreed with the statement “there is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.”

What the study of terrorism underscores for criminology is that crime and deviance are not light switches that can be turned on and off but more like dimmer switches with a broad spectrum of interpretations. This view of crime suggests that the line between offending and not offending is far more porous and variable than is commonly assumed. It seems most likely that those who believe that violence may be necessary to “save our country” will never arm themselves and attack the federal government. Only a small fraction of individuals who feel this way will ever engage in acts of illegal political violence.

Similar reasoning can be applied to diverse types of illegal political extremism. For example, McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) pointed out that according to opinion polls, more than half of Muslims in the United States and the United Kingdom believe that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam and at least five percent of Muslims in the United States and the United Kingdom see suicide bombing of civilians in defense of Islam as “often” or “sometimes” justified. But obviously, the number of Muslims in the United States and the United Kingdom that will ultimately turn to suicide bombing is a tiny fraction of this total. These examples illustrate a huge challenge with countering violent political extremism: how to deter the tiny proportion of individuals who will engage in violence without further radicalizing the much larger group who experience varying degrees of sympathy for the cause.

Although the socially negotiated nature of the line between crime and noncrime seems obvious when examining illegal political violence, as Sutherland made clear, it applies equally well to all forms of criminal behavior. Howard Becker (1963, p. 9) stated this relationship succinctly: “Deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’” As I argued in an earlier book (LaFree, 1989, p. 10), legal sanctions are not always or even usually applied when the law is broken, many and perhaps most individuals who break the law are never identified, others who do not break the law are nonetheless treated as criminals, and, in general, there are fewer differences between criminals and noncriminals than we usually assume. Even though none of these arguments are new, the study of illegal political extremism helps our discipline remember them.

2.2 | Importance of Backlash

Another contribution of expanded research into political extremism is an increased awareness of the potential negative consequences of harsh punishment for future criminal behavior—what

terrorism researchers (Argomaniz & Vidal-Diez, 2015; Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012; LaFree et al., 2009a) refer to as “backlash” effects. Deterrence or rational choice models have long been highly influential in criminology (Klepper & Nagin, 1989; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; Wright & Decker, 1997). With few exceptions (Carson et al., 2020; Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012; Loughran et al., 2016), however, mainstream criminology has concentrated more on whether the imposition of punishment deters and less on whether it might increase future criminal behavior.

As with social construction perspectives, we can easily find criminological support for the argument that the imposition of punishment on a particular individual or group may increase future levels of illegal behavior. Thus, early labeling theorists (Becker, 1963; Tannenbaum, 1938) pointed out that punishment leads to identity changes in individuals as well as to social changes in society that result in criminal offenders increasing their deviant behavior after their official labeling. Lemert (1951, p. 77) famously referred to this concept as “secondary deviance.” Sherman (1993) argued that whether punishment results in deterrence will depend on whether offenders experience sanctioning as legitimate, the social bonds between the sanctioning agent and the individuals or groups being sanctioned, and the extent to which offenders can deny their shame by seeking support from others in the community. Tyler (2000; for a review, see Tyler, 2006) provided substantial support for the conclusion that punishment is more likely to be perceived as legitimate by the punished when the punishment is perceived to be procedurally fair. Thus, even though the importance of backlash is by no means unique to the study of political extremism, political extremism makes its importance obvious.

Thus far empirical research that has directly tested which anti-extremist or counterterrorist policies lead to backlash or deterrence has been limited (for reviews, see Dugan et al., 2005; Lum et al., 2006). Moreover, far more studies have tested for deterrence than backlash effects of counterterrorist policies. A growing empirical literature, however, includes tests for backlash effects of specific counterterrorist measures within countries (Campbell & Connolly, 2003; Soule, 1989) and across countries (Chalk, 1998; Nevin, 2003).

With my colleagues Laura Dugan and Raven Korte, I analyzed terrorist attacks that occurred over a 23-year period in Northern Ireland to test the relative strength of deterrence and backlash models for the risk of new terrorist strikes (LaFree et al., 2009a). We identified six major British strategies aimed at reducing political violence in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1992 and then used Cox proportional hazard models to estimate the impact of these interventions on the risk of new attacks. In general, we found the strongest support for backlash models. The only support for deterrence models was a military surge called “Operation Motorman,” which was followed by significant declines in the risk of new attacks. The results underscored the importance of considering the possibility that counter-terrorist interventions might increase as well as diminish subsequent violence.

Dugan and Chenoweth (2012) examined the impact of repressive (e.g., military strikes and negative public proclamations) and conciliatory (e.g., military withdrawals and positive announcements) responses by Israel on Palestinian terrorism from 1987 to 2004. They found considerable support for conciliatory responses leading to decreases in terrorism and no support for deterrence claims. In a more recent article focused instead on the United States, Dugan and Chenoweth (2020) found evidence for an “emboldenment” hypothesis; violent hate crimes (i.e., a backlash effect) against Latinx populations increased when government elites signaled supremacy over those groups, emboldening some members of the dominant group to commit violent action. These studies encourage researchers who study more common types of crime to also consider the possibility that punishment or the threat of punishment might produce backlash as well as deterrence.

2.3 | Internationalization of Criminology Research

Criminology, in general, and American criminology, in particular, has historically been strongly concentrated on domestic research. Prominent appeals to the scholarly community to move beyond theorizing and research confined to national borders have appeared repeatedly over the course of the past several decades (Adler, 1996; Farrington, 2000; Zimring, 2006). Potential benefits of internationalization include developing new theories, assessing the generalizability of existing theories, and identifying best practices for criminal justice policies (Barberet, 2007; Bennett, 2009; Hagan, 2021). Nevertheless, despite nearly universal support for the idea of greater internationalization in the field of criminology, progress has been slow.

Messner (2021) recently analyzed 580 research articles that appeared in the journal *Criminology* from 2000 to 2019 in terms of whether the data used were limited to the United States or some other single country, or were comparative. He found that the proportion of articles based on U.S.-only data declined from 87.6 percent during the first five years to 75.6 percent for the most recent five years in the series—illustrating a trend toward greater internationalization. Most of the growth in research outside of the United States, however, was built on data from single countries other than the United States. For the entire sample, only 24 studies (3.8 percent) were based on comparative analysis across more than one country.

Modern efforts to develop comparative criminology can be traced back to the General Statistical Congress, convened in Brussels in 1853 (Campion, 1949). Conference participants were convinced of the need for cross-national crime statistics but were immediately confronted by the challenge of how to reconcile differing legal definitions of crime across countries and the fact that many countries were unwilling or unable to share valid crime data. In many ways, criminologists still face the same challenges that confronted those who attended the 1853 Brussels conference. Nearly all comparative criminology research is limited to studies of homicide, where legal differences are considered to be less important, and even most cross-national research on homicide (for reviews, see LaFree, 1999; Nivette, 2011) is based on less than a third of all the world's countries. And of course, these countries are not a random sample but strongly over-represent Europe and North America while under-representing countries of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Hagan (2021; Hagan & Greer, 2002; Hagan & Hanson, 2016) pointed out that a major consequence of this insular approach is that mainstream criminology has generally ignored a wide range of international lawbreaking, including war crimes, genocide, mass incarceration, and torture.

In contrast to studies of more common types of crime, research on terrorism and political extremism is highly comparative. There is now an entire corpus of literature looking at terrorist attacks for all countries of the world. There are also dozens of studies of terrorism and political violence that are not comparative but have been conducted on individual countries around the world. Whereas international comparative research is somewhat uncommon in mainstream criminology, it is the norm for research on terrorism and political extremism.

2.4 | Growing Importance of Open Source Data

None of the three data sources most commonly used by criminologists—“official” police data or victim or self-report surveys—are useful for the study of terrorism and political extremism. At present, most countries of the world do not collect or make public official police data on terrorist perpetrators. Victimization surveys are of little use because few individuals in most countries have

been directly victimized by terrorists, victimization that occurs is often random, and all too often victims are killed by their attackers. Self-report surveys are limited by the fact that getting access to known terrorists for research purposes raises obvious risks and logistical difficulties. As a result of these challenges, terrorism researchers were early adopters of open source data: unclassified information drawn mostly from court records and print and electronic media.

There have been more than a dozen major open source databases on terrorism and political extremism since the late 1960s (LaFree, *in press*). At present, the most comprehensive of these is the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which now includes data on more than 200,000 terrorist attacks starting in 1970. Current data collection for the GTD begins with a universe of 2 million articles published daily worldwide in order to identify the small subset of articles that describe terrorist attacks. The GTD team of 15–20 members uses customized search strings to isolate an initial pool of potentially relevant articles and then relies on natural language processing methods to automatically identify and remove duplicate source articles by measuring similarities between pairs of documents. In addition, the GTD team has developed a machine-learning model using feedback from trained staff that classifies electronic and print media identified by the initial automated processes to determine how likely they are to be relevant to terrorism. At present, the GTD team reviews each month 15,000 to 30,000 articles to identify attacks to be included in the database.

The GTD has been used both to support terrorism research and to inform policy. From 2012 to 2018, the GTD supplied unclassified data to the U.S. Department of State (2018) for the Annex of Statistical Information that accompanies the annual report to Congress called Country Reports on Terrorism. The GTD now receives more than 1,000 annual citations on Google Scholar, the GTD website draws greater than 2 million page visits a year, and the GTD is consulted by every U.S. agency concerned with defense or intelligence and is relied on by governments and businesses around the world.

Research on terrorism has long been criticized because the term lacks a universally accepted definition (Gibbs, 2013; McCauley, 2017; Young & Findley, 2011). A frequently cited review of terrorism studies by Schmid and Jongman (1988, p. 5) famously uncovered more than 100 different research definitions of terrorism. Although the lack of a universal definition of terrorism raises challenges, it also offers an unexpected advantage. As noted, one of the biggest difficulties of doing cross-national research on crime is that every country has a distinct legal definition. Researchers using open sources, however, can develop a single uniform definition and apply it to all countries of the world. For example, the definition of terrorism we have adopted for the Global Terrorism Database is “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-state actors to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation” (LaFree et al., 2014, p. 13).

Although the use of open source data in the study of terrorism and political extremism began to gain momentum nearly 50 years ago (Gurr, 1979; Jenkins et al., 1977; Sandler et al., 1983), it was far less common in criminology. But this situation has been changing rapidly in recent years. For example, open source data are now being used to study criminology issues as diverse as police use of force (Ross, 2015), mass shootings (Kissner, 2016), violence in schools (Towers et al., 2015), fatal officer-involved shootings (Cesario et al., 2019), and bias and hate crime (McDevitt et al., 2003).

Criminologists are also expanding rapidly into the use of open source social media data to study various aspects of crime and reactions to crime.² The full impact of these new data sources on

² By “social media,” I mean applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking, including such influential platforms as Facebook, Twitter, and Google Search.

criminology is still evolving but is likely to be profound. Current estimates are that at least one billion people spend more than an hour on social media every day (Crockett, 2017). Perrin (2015) reported that more than 60 percent of U.S. adults now use social media, and Facebook, currently the most popular social network in the United States, has an audience of 214 million U.S. subscribers (Statista, 2021). In terms of criminological applications, thus far social media has been applied most commonly in etiological analysis (Bendler et al., 2016; Malleson & Andresen, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). For example, Hipp et al. (2019) used Twitter data to construct estimates of the population at various locations at different times and showed that such estimates can help predict the amount of crime during two-hour time periods over the course of a day. Social media data are increasingly being examined by criminologists interested in forms of crime that are either enhanced by, or made possible by, social media itself, such as hate crime (Müller & Schwarz, 2021), cybercrime (Maimon & Louderback, 2019) and various types of online extortion (Wolak et al., 2018). Criminologists are also starting to use social media data to track fear of crime (Intravia et al., 2017).

Open source databases have important limitations, including government censorship, selective media coverage, conflicting information, and false, multiple, or no claims of responsibility. Of course, all crime data have limitations. For example, official crime data sources like the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports have long been criticized for many of the same issues as those commonly leveled against open source event databases (Lynch & Addington, 2006; O'Brien, 1985). Victimization and self-report surveys face growing challenges with the mounting costs of in-person interviews and the difficulty of sampling individuals who have abandoned landlines for cell phones (Langton et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2008). Researchers interested in terrorism were early adopters of open source databases, and these data sources are making it possible to study a wide range of criminal behavior that either cannot currently be studied as well or at all with any other data source.

3 | IMPACT OF ILLEGAL POLITICAL EXTREMISM ON POLICING

As this address was being prepared, the United States was rocked by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis, Minnesota, police on May 25, 2020. Protests demanding justice for Floyd, often accompanied by demonstrations against police brutality, took place in cities throughout the United States and around the world and were often accompanied by activist calls to “defund the police.”³ Although this slogan is open to many interpretations, a common argument by supporters is that financing community programs to combat poverty, substance abuse, homelessness, and mental disorder is a more effective crime response than investments in the police (The Guardian, 2020). In a law review article published a few months after Floyd's death, Akbar (2020, p. 1786) argued that “police violence is routine, is legal, takes many shapes, and targets people based on their race and class.” Even though many suggestions associated with the defund the police argument are unpopular with a majority of Americans, a Reuters/Ipsos (2021) poll in early 2021 found that 76 percent of people queried were in favor of redirecting funds from police to programs targeting specific issues like homelessness and mental health.

³ According to *The New York Times* (2020), the “defund the police” slogan was popularized by a group called the “Black Visions Collective” shortly after the murder of George Floyd. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/magazine/black-visions-collective.html>

Given the breadth and strength of these negative reactions to the police, it is easy to forget that less than 30 years ago, public opinion was strongly supportive of the police. This support was likely related to the fact that innovations in policing were widely associated with leading to the largest drop in street crime of the twentieth century. In a short time period in the 1980s and 1990s, police experimented with a variety of innovative new methods including community policing (Greene & Mastrofski, 1988; Trojanowicz, 1989), problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1979), broken windows policing (Kelling & Coles, 1996; Wilson & Kelling, 1982), and hot-spots policing (Sherman & Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd & Braga, 2006). During the same period, there were substantial declines in crime. Between 1991 and 2000, homicide rates dropped by 44 percent (Levitt, 2004) and data from both the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) revealed large declines in every major crime category. During the 1990s, UCR data show that crimes reported to the police fell between 24 and 46 percent across the various crime categories. The reduction in criminal victimizations in the NCVS was even greater, ranging from 45 to 58 percent (Levitt, 2004). Although there is much debate over the specific causes of the crime drop that began in the 1990s, many researchers, policy experts, and lay people attributed at least part of the decline to new policing practices (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Eck & Maguire, 2000; Kelling & Sousa, 2001).

So, what happened from the 1990s when a wide range of policing innovations seemed to credit police with historical decreases in crime to the early 2020s when angry citizens were publicly demanding that local governments cut funding or even eliminate the police? A comprehensive answer to this question is beyond the scope of the current address, but I argue that at least part of the shift in attitudes toward the police has been due to changes in policing associated with the “war on terror” triggered initially by the Bush administration’s response to the coordinated attacks of 9/11 and continued by subsequent administrations to the present day.⁴ If the focus of the police before 9/11 was on preventing and controlling crime and fear of crime, after 9/11 the police were increasingly expected to do their regular duties but also help authorities identify potential terrorists and prevent their attacks.

Terrorist attacks were by no means a new development in the United States. The United States experienced a variety of terrorist violence in the years before 9/11 (see LaFree & Bersani, 2014), including the devastating attack in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, which claimed the lives of 168 people and injured more than 680 others (LaFree et al., 2014, p. 40). The impact of 9/11 on policing in the United States, however, was unprecedented. In the sections that follow, I argue that the war on terror that got under way in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks changed the nature of policing in at least three important ways: deemphasized community-oriented policing, increased the militarization of the police, and prioritized the threat of international over domestic terrorism.

3.1 | Moving Away From Community-Oriented Policing

Although the 1990s stand out as a period of unprecedented experimentation with innovative new models of policing in the United States, what most of these reforms had in common was a strong emphasis on building trust between police and communities. In fact, in their broad overview of

⁴ In this address, I concentrate on policing changes since 9/11. It is worth noting, however, that public policy on the proper role of the police was also fiercely debated in earlier periods (Kelling & Moore, 1989). For example, policing shifted more toward militarization, surveillance, and the use of undercover agents and informants in the early 1970s when President Nixon officially declared a “war on drugs” (Tonry, 1994).

the evolution of policing in America, Kelling and Moore (1989) singled out “community involvement” as the most recent of three major movements in the twentieth century reform of policing (the two earlier movements were professionalism and constitutionalism). Broadly defined, community policing emphasizes bridge building, collaborative problem solving, and continuous consultation between police and the community (Brown & Wycoff, 1987; Lurigio & Skogan, 1994; Wycoff & Skogan, 1994). By the early 1990s, community-oriented policing had become especially popular and was receiving unprecedented levels of political and financial support (Vaughn Lee, 2010). A 2000 national survey found that more than 90 percent of police departments in cities with more than 250,000 in population reported having full-time, trained community policing officers in the field (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). Things began to change rapidly after 9/11, however, with growing pressure on the police to add counter terrorism to its list of responsibilities.

To understand the impact that this change had on relations between the police and communities, it is useful to contrast high and low policing models (Brodeur, 1983). High policing targets crimes that are general threats to society, such as terrorism and illegal immigration, whereas low policing instead focuses on crimes that only affect individuals, like robberies and burglaries (Bayley, 2006). Bayley and Weisburd (2009, p. 82) pointed out that compared with low policing, high policing “is less transparent, less accountable, and less careful with respect to human rights.” Low policing is generally associated with reactive policing; police get involved in most common crime situations by reacting to a call for service. By contrast, high policing is much more proactive. Tracing a terrorist requires proactive action and is unlikely to happen as a result of someone calling the police for assistance.

Following 9/11, police at federal, state, and local levels generally moved toward proactive/high policing and away from reactive/low policing. The FBI led the way in these developments. Smith et al. (2011) argued that prior to 9/11 the FBI was primarily a reactive agency in which preventive intelligence gathering was deemphasized. After 9/11, the FBI rapidly became a more proactive, intelligence-driven law enforcement organization. These shifting goals were supported by major policy changes, most notably, the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, which greatly expanded the involvement of federal law enforcement in domestic terrorism cases. Other major policy changes included the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center and the passage of less restrictive guidelines for conducting terrorism investigations (Smith et al., 2011, p. 10). These legislative changes, as well as nonlegislative administrative changes, had a major impact on policing.

The sweeping new powers afforded to law enforcement agencies after the Patriot Act (e.g., wiretapping and monitoring Internet activity) were clearly an important departure from the principles of community-oriented policing (Brown, 2007). Thacher (2005) argued that the PATRIOT act encouraged local law enforcement to prioritize surveillance and counterterrorism over developing personal relationships with community members. To promote this new emphasis on counterterrorism, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) created dozens of “fusion centers” with the task of encouraging state and local police to share information with federal law enforcement agencies (especially the FBI and DHS). Fusion centers encouraged local police to put more time, energy, and resources into high policing tasks.

Similarly, starting in New York City in 1980, the FBI began establishing Joint Terrorism Task Forces, or JTTFs, to combat terrorism. The JTTFs include locally based experts with skills relevant to counterterrorism, including investigators, analysts, and linguists. JTTFs are composed of individuals from across the law enforcement and intelligence communities and are coordinated through the interagency National Joint Terrorism Task Force, working out of FBI Headquarters. Today there are approximately 200 JTTFs around the country, including at least one in each of

the FBI's 56 field offices, with hundreds of participating state, local, and federal personnel (FBI, 2021).

These modifications in the roles of the police were reinforced by budgetary and training changes. In general, funding for community-oriented policing programs declined and funding for "all hazards" homeland security programs grew (Davis et al., 2010, p. 17). The funding shifts increased reliance on homeland security grants, which emphasized a regional, multijurisdictional approach to preparedness and the adoption of an all-crimes, all-hazards method for information sharing and intelligence analysis. Local law enforcement training also followed these changes, and the number and extent of training opportunities for counterterrorism and homeland security multiplied while opportunities for training in community-oriented policing declined (Davis et al., 2010; Jiao & Rhea, 2007).

The shift from community-centered low policing to proactive high policing has far reaching implications. Most basically, if more police time and energy is expended on high policing tasks, there is commensurately less available for low policing tasks. Weisburd et al. (2009) demonstrated this connection in a study of Israeli police. The researchers found that as the police shifted away from general duties to intelligence gathering, covert penetration, and the use of informants, a common public criticism was that they were less effective at responding to ordinary crime. Indeed, a related study by Weisburd et al. (2010) found that heightened terrorist threats in Israeli communities led to declining clearance rates.⁵ And the impact on the community is likely to go far beyond time management issues. High policing can fundamentally change the cooperative relationship between the police and the community that is at the heart of community-oriented policing. Instead of seeing their job as one of public service and collaborative problem solving, police officers engaged in counterterrorism are more likely to understand their role as one of surveillance and suspicion (Bayley & Weisburd, 2009; Weisburd et al., 2010).

3.2 | Militarization of the Police

As the role of the police is increasingly modified to include counterterrorism support as well as more traditional forms of crime fighting, it is natural for police in the field to shift away from community service to community surveillance (Kohn, 2008). Following 9/11 a variety of measures that encouraged this transition were hurried through the House and Senate. Fusion centers illustrate this shift, and Monahan (2010) argued that police operating in fusion centers have been granted a great deal of leniency to engage in collecting data on citizens and bypassing laws protecting individuals from unreasonable searches. The degree of militarization in U.S. police departments varies greatly, but it is easy to find examples of local police departments adopting military-style weapons, tactics, attire, and organizational structures since 9/11 (Gama, 2016; Kraska & Kappeler, 1997; Mummolo, 2018). The increased use of SWAT teams represents one highly visible example of a heightened commitment to the use of militarized equipment and tactics (Balko, 2013; Szoldra, 2014). SWAT teams often receive advanced combat training and exhibit a command structure modeled on military special forces units (Kraska & Kappeler, 1997).

The increased militarization of the police likely affects police–community relations in at least two ways. First, police operating on an increasingly military rather than a civilian model are more

⁵The researchers found that Arab communities were an exception to this pattern and argued that heightened surveillance in these communities, combined with a police orientation that sees the solving of crime as a method of gaining information on terrorism, may explain the difference.

likely to cross over to violations of civil liberties. Compared with military operations, criminal justice approaches are more limited in scope and are more specific in terms of defining the nature of wrongs committed. Although far from perfect, the criminal justice systems in Western democracies build in protections for defendants. Judges, defendants, and even prosecutors are trained to protect the rights of the accused. Even though trials represent a contest with winners and losers, the lawyers that preside over the proceedings receive similar training, often have experience in opposing positions (e.g., prosecutors that become defense attorneys), and generally share similar concerns with regard to justice. In contrast, the role of the military in war is necessarily broad and vague in terms of the specific behavior to which it responds. Moreover, the all-out nature of war encourages governments to put victory ahead of other concerns. Thus, the military framework is likely to result in the death of innocent civilians (euphemistically referred to as “collateral damage”), a high probability of mistreatment and possibly even torture of prisoners, and a low level of concern with the civil rights of those accused of wrong doing. The potential impact on the community of this militarization is demonstrated in a study of 470 protesters who participated in “Occupy” protest events in Israel in 2012 (Perry et al., 2017). The authors found that the more respondents perceived the police as using paramilitary methods, the less trust they had in the police.

Second, by embracing the military model, police are encouraged to think of their main task not as service to the community but as a bold and exciting new career choice. Making a similar observation, Bayley and Weisburd (2009, p. 94) noted that “counterterrorism can lure ambitious officers away from the core activities that have connected policing to the communities they serve.” In fact, this shift was no doubt welcomed by many individuals interested in policing careers. Braga and Weisburd (2006) pointed out that one of the main challenges to implementing community-oriented policing in the 1980s and 1990s was that many police officers did not consider community policing to be “real police work.”

The militarization of the police after 9/11 is likely due to a variety of forces, including the war on drugs and federal initiatives that supplied localities with excess military equipment and funds to purchase arms (Balko, 2013; Wofford, 2014). Nevertheless, the movement in this direction was certainly compatible with changing views of the police in the aftermath of 9/11.

3.3 | Focus on International Threats

A final impact of 9/11 on the police in the United States was a major increase in the perceived threat of international terrorism. The United States experienced a steady stream of terrorist attacks during the post–World War II era, including attacks by student radical groups, Black power advocates, Puerto Rican separatists, and environmental and animal rights extremists (LaFree et al., 2014, pp. 39–41). Almost all of these attacks, however, were domestic. In fact, prior to 9/11, the threat of international terrorism was not even a serious part of U.S. strategic defense planning (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017).

Perceptions of the importance of international terrorism changed dramatically after the coordinated attacks of 9/11. Suddenly, terrorism moved from irrelevance to American national security to the top of the agenda. Similarly, the threat of international terrorism became a huge and lasting area of concern to the general public. Martha Crenshaw and I (Crenshaw & LaFree, 2017, p. 5) argued that a major part of the public fear of terrorism generated by 9/11 is because it was a foreign attack. Even though domestic right-wing terrorism has likely caused more harm to American citizens at home, radical Islamists have been at the center of American concerns about terrorism for

the past two decades. Candidate Trump's presidential campaign focused heavily on threats related to terrorism (Best, 2018), and President Trump's executive order 13769, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," stated directly that the United States must reduce the threat of terrorism by banning travel from the residents of a group of mostly Muslim countries.

There is evidence, however, that coordinated attacks by foreign adversaries like 9/11 are incredibly rare. In a study with Sue-Ming Yang and Martha Crenshaw (LaFree et al., 2009b), my colleagues and I examined all domestic and international terrorist attacks by 53 foreign terrorist groups identified by the U.S. Department of State as posing the greatest threat to Americans. These groups include most of the foreign terrorist organizations that have so occupied public fears about terrorism in recent years, including al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Abu Sayyaf Group, and Lashkar-e Taiba. Indeed, these terrorist groups were active, accounting for nearly 17,000 attacks and 42,000 fatalities between the years 1970 and 2004. We found, however, that just 3 percent of attacks by these designated anti-U.S. groups were directed at the United States. Moreover, 99 percent of attacks targeting the United States did not occur on U.S. soil but were aimed at U.S. targets in other countries (e.g., embassies or multinational corporations). We also found that more than 90 percent of the non-U.S. attacks were domestic (i.e., nationals from one country attacking targets of the same nationality in the same country). In short, the actual attack patterns of these terrorist organizations purposely selected because of their avowed hatred of the United States showed that they in fact rarely attacked the United States but instead overwhelmingly attacked non-U.S. targets in their own countries.

This example is not unique to the United States. My colleagues and I (LaFree et al., 2014, p. 170) found in a worldwide analysis of terrorist attacks that nearly four fifths were domestic. The incredible impact of 9/11 on assumptions about terrorism in the United States has left police and the public with the false assumption that most terrorist threats here and elsewhere are international and has encouraged police to downplay the more common terrorist threats from domestic sources.

4 | CONCLUSION

In preparing this address, I was struck by several similarities between white-collar crime and illegal political extremism. Neither is associated with low SES individuals, both involve perpetrators that rarely see themselves as criminal, and both face unique data challenges. Following Sutherland's influential research, the study of white-collar crime became a recognized specialization within criminology. Similarly, following the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001, the study of political extremism has been increasingly accepted as a legitimate research topic in mainstream criminology. In this address, I explored several ways that the study of terrorism and counterterrorism has influenced criminology research and how terrorist attacks starting with 9/11 have affected policing. Terrorism research has vividly illustrated the socially constructed nature of crime, has encouraged researchers to see not only the deterrence potential of punishment but also its capacity to produce backlash, has accelerated the internationalization of criminology, and has hastened the embrace of open sources as an important form of crime data. September 11th and the resulting war on terror have had major effects on policing that have pushed the country away from the positive attitudes toward the police observed in the 1990s to the strong negative attitudes toward the police being observed in the 2020s.

Although I have focused mostly on how criminology has been enriched by incorporating political extremism, research and policy on political extremism has also benefitted from criminological

perspectives. This is especially evident in the role of the criminal justice system in terms of countering extremism and terrorism. From a practical standpoint, it is hard to imagine any effective defense against terrorism that does not include traditional policing. At present, there are more than 800,000 full-time sworn police officers in the United States (National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund, 2021). By contrast, there are a few thousand FBI special agents working on terrorism cases (Bjelopera, 2012). As Kelling observed, once terrorists are in the country, “Police, not the FBI or the CIA, have the best tools for detecting and prosecuting these crimes” (in Howard, 2004, p. 7). This conclusion was strongly supported by Dahl (2011) whose study of why terrorist plots fail showed that the most common method for foiling domestic plots is human intelligence and the most common form this intelligence takes is through police contacts with the community.

The involvement of police and the criminal justice system in counterterrorism also has important political advantages. Policy makers generally have two major options for responding to terrorism: criminal justice and military approaches. These two approaches were starkly contrasted by U.S. reactions to the first and second attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City. On February 16, 1993, a truck bomb in the basement parking garage of the WTC killed six, injured hundreds, and destroyed a half a billion dollars’ worth of property. The U.S. response to this attack relied on traditional criminal justice system processing. After trials and convictions, six Arab men were sent to U.S. prisons. On September 11, 2001, a second attack on the WTC brought down the Twin Towers and, along with two other coordinated attacks, caused nearly 3,000 deaths. But unlike the mostly criminal justice response to the 1993 attack, the war on terror that began after 9/11 was followed immediately by the military invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the deaths of thousands, an estimated 2 trillion dollars in spending from the United States alone, and an unfolding process that has substantially altered not only U.S. but also world history. One immediate consequence of this broad targeting was that Muslim populations both in the United States (Abdo, 2006, p. BO3) and elsewhere (Weber, 2006) developed increasingly negative attitudes toward the U.S. government, which in turn made them more susceptible to extremist views advanced by radical Islamist groups.

Criminal justice responses to terrorism have clear limits. For example, it is difficult to imagine an effective response to the 2016 attacks of the Islamic State based only on a criminal justice response. A criminal justice response to terrorism, however, also has several clear advantages. First, compared with a military approach, a criminal justice approach is more limited in scope. The targets of criminal justice investigations are individual wrong doers—not entire countries or categories of people. Second, not only is a criminal justice approach more limited in scope than a military approach, but also compared with rules of war, the rule of law is more specific in terms of defining the nature of the wrongs committed. In a joint session of Congress a few days after the 9/11 attack, President Bush (2001) pledged that the war on terror “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.” By contrast, crime is never eliminated, only managed. And finally, compared with a military approach, a criminal justice approach has more built-in limitations and safeguards. Although criminal justice systems are far from perfect, they offer more opportunities than military systems for balancing the enforcement of law against the need to preserve civil liberties.

So, even though it is clear that pulling police into counterterrorism functions raises challenges, it also brings benefits. Most successful investigations of terrorist groups resemble successful police operations. Stopping terrorists requires detailed, accurate, timely community-level intelligence. It requires communities that trust the police and are willing to share information with them. In short, the community-oriented approach favored by successful police departments in the 1990s is the same kind of approach most likely to uncover terrorist operations. Such investigations are

long term, culturally sensitive, and micro level. This approach strongly contrasts with the typically short-term, macro-level orientation of conventional military operations. As Dahl (2011, p. 635) noted, “The most important step toward preventing future attacks is to focus on local and domestic intelligence and to figure out how to gather the necessary intelligence while still maintaining the proper balance between civil liberties and security.”

Because this address began as a lecture rather than as a research project, I have taken great liberty in glossing over details that would no doubt have been flagged had it been submitted as a standard research publication. Perhaps the most obvious limitation is in my discussion of the impact of terrorism on the police. Although 9/11 pressured the police to move from community-oriented approaches to all hazards approaches, support for community-oriented programs did not disappear. Moreover, these changes were likely most pronounced in larger rather than smaller cities and rural areas. Also, part of recent changes in reactions to police brutality may simply be a reaction to the growing ubiquity of cell phone cameras and social media access. Perhaps most importantly, my discussion of the changes in policing has been limited almost entirely to examples from the United States. Terrorism threats, however, have raised challenges for police departments around the world. Perhaps the most troubling contemporary example is the way that China has used the threat of terrorism to incarcerate millions of ethnic Uighurs (Buckley & Mozur, 2019). The fact that I did not have space to consider the worldwide implications of terrorism on policing and criminal justice more broadly does not mean that this issue is not important. Indeed, the use of the threat of terrorism to justify the treatment of the Uighurs in China is extremely consequential: China includes nearly a fifth of the world’s population, it will soon become the world’s largest economy, and it is increasingly presenting itself as a serious alternative to Western democracy.

Criminology can serve a useful purpose for the study of terrorism and counterterrorism by providing a framework that helps keep it in perspective. Crime is never eliminated, only managed. As sociological pioneer Emile Durkheim (1933) pointed out nearly a century ago, no known society has ever existed without crime. Similarly, the goal of eliminating all terrorist attacks may not only be impossible it may represent a situation where the cure is worse than the potential disease. Most terrorism does not present an existential threat. Terrorist attacks are rare, and mass casualty attacks are rarer still. Responses to terrorism encourage immediate and far-reaching responses that are not easily rolled back. The security apparatus that was adopted post-9/11—digital surveillance tools, license plate readers, mobile X-ray vans—has primarily remained in place as 9/11 recedes. Most individuals that claim support for terrorist goals will never engage in illegal criminal behavior for a terrorist cause. The rule of law requires that we not punish people for their thoughts and beliefs.

Illegal political extremism, like white-collar crime a century ago, was generally left out of mainstream criminology because it did not fit conventional models. It is not strongly associated with poverty and its perpetrators rarely see themselves as criminals. Sutherland called for the end of a criminology that ignores the crimes of the rich and those who do not recognize their criminal behavior as criminal. Similarly, integrating political crimes into criminology forces us to rethink conventional ideas about crime. The socially constructed nature of crime is fairly obvious when it comes to terrorism and political extremism, but it is applicable to all forms of crime. The possibility that harsh punishment can provoke backlash as well as deterrence is apparent in the study of terrorism, but it has great relevance for the study of all crimes. The strong comparative emphasis of research on political extremism and the pioneering use of open source data have been critical for the study of political extremism, but they apply equally well to more ordinary crime. The disadvantages of highly militarized policing models are apparent in terms of countering political extremism, but they are just as ineffective in countering

ordinary forms of crime. As with the embrace of white-collar crime nearly a century ago, mainstream criminology has been enriched by widening its scope to include political extremism.

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