Emergency Management Fact Sheet – Highlighting Research to Practice

Research Article: Cognitive Defense: Influencing the Target Choices of Less Sophisticated Threat Actors

Citation: Wasson, Jesse and Bluesteen, Christopher (April 2017). "Cognitive Defense: Influencing the Target Choices of Less Sophisticated Threat Actors." *Homeland Security Affairs* 13, Article 1. https://www.hsaj.org/articles/13770

Background:

In this 2017 article Dr. Wasson and Mr. Bluesteen address the frustration homegrown extremists have in lashing out at targets in their local communities "without discretion". They recognize that private and public parties are holding more of the burden of deterrence than government. Findings from national security, criminological, and psychological disciplines were used to improve understanding deterrence at the target level. The authors state "The universal goal of deterrence is to influence decision making so that individuals, groups, or states choose not to take actions deemed undesirable by the deterrer." They discuss how motivation and opportunity are factors that can be addressed. Less sophisticated extremists may also "think faster" when it comes to selecting targets because they don't have to be involved with formal decision making and working with others. However, they may base decisions on some specific biases such as: accessibility, availability, representativeness, and relativity that can be influenced by emergency management professionals and first responders.

Practitioner Takeaways:

- Domestic terrorists are highly susceptible to efforts that deny them opportunity. That may be in not allowing them access to key information or mitigate access to capabilities.
- Because they may have less opportunity, these types of extremists are more likely to select softer targets with smaller payoffs.
- Defensive actions visible or even just perceived by the potential attacker may deter them.
- Deterrence may also include concealing information about what is needed for the attacker to act.
- These less sophisticated extremists have fewer resources, lack perfect information, and therefore are limited in the decisions they can make.
- Consider deterrence as a force that either pushes a potential attacker away from a target or pulls them towards it. Both can be done by the type of information communicated through visual or audio indicators (signs, employees, building facades), old media (TV, radio, print), and new media such as social networks and websites.
- When considering and selecting targets, threat actors may be deterred by signage about security systems, the penalties they may incur, or even information on a website about those penalties. Even communicating an organization has redundant systems to be resilient, may also deter them.
- Reduce the amount of information released to the public so it is less available by threat actors.
- Search engine "de-optimization" may be a way to minimize internet information.

Where to find this item: For more specific details about this topic, review the full article, which is publicly available.