The NCITEr Newsletter: April 2021

National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center

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 APRIL 2021

Dear NCITE Community,

The worst domestic terrorist attack to occur on U.S. soil happened my sophomore year of high school in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma City bombing, which killed 168 people, occurred 26 years ago. The anniversary was April 19. Given the national focus on domestic terrorism, that event seems less like history and more like a warning for the future.

This third edition of The NCITEr features an interview with one of the lead investigators of the bombing. Kim Carter was assistant director of the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation when the bombing happened. He recently retired as director of the Oklahoma Office of Homeland Security. His long law enforcement career shows a return to focus on the threat of domestic terrorism that the bombing made painfully clear in 1995.

There are a lot of parallels to make between that event and where we stand today, with federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies raising alarms about domestic terrorism. One important fact to draw out is that mitigation and prevention strategies can and do work. This is a point that John Cohen, Department of Homeland Security assistant secretary for counterterrorism and emerging threats, made so emphatically during his recent testimony before Congress.

This is why our newsletter also features stories on John Picarelli, NCITE board member and director of the DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention. OTVTP has doubled one of its big grant programs, and the window to apply is still open. The NCITEr also features soon-to-graduate ITIN fellow Sue Yi and researchers from the University of Maine and King’s College London.

Check out upcoming events, too. And send ideas for the next edition our way!

GINA LIGON
NCITE Center Director
GET TO KNOW

KIM CARTER
Former Director
Oklahoma Office of Homeland Security

KIM CARTER
OKC bombing a horrific reminder of dangers of domestic terrorism

That Wednesday morning in April 1995, Kim Carter was at work in Oklahoma City, five miles from downtown, when he heard the blast. The floor shook and the windows rattled violently inside the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation building where Carter, a former Oklahoma City cop, worked as assistant director of investigations.

“Never heard anything like it before,” Carter said, figuring that something must have gone wrong in the building’s small fingerprint lab.

Then he looked out the window.

“I see a plume of smoke rising from downtown.”

READ MORE
SUE YI
ITIN Fellow, UNO

SUE YI
Melding creativity with technology
Like a lot of college students, Sue Yi started in one major and graduated with a degree in another.

The Bellevue, Nebraska, native began in creative writing at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and finished in IT Innovation, a field where she is currently enrolled as a master's-level candidate in NCITE’s ITIN Fellows Program. The program currently pairs four master’s-level students, including Yi, with NCITE projects so that student innovation has a real, tangible bearing on helping the Homeland Security frontline. The idea is to turn innovation into products sooner through the master’s program than later in a doctoral one. And it gives students like Yi hands-on experience working on real-world problems.

JOHN PICARELLI
Director
DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention

JOHN PICARELLI
Terrorism prevention crucial
John Picarelli began the interview with an apology. He was sorry for canceling a previously scheduled meeting. His schedule has been harried. The always-busy work of the DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention that he leads has gotten, well, busier in the wake of current events.
First the U.S. Capitol siege in January made very real the warnings Homeland Security, the FBI, and federal intelligence agencies had been making about the threat of domestic violent extremism. Five people died in the siege, close to 400 now face federal charges, and some congressional leaders are calling for a 9/11-style investigation.

Then March brought back-to-back mass shootings — eight slain in Atlanta, 10 in Boulder — that have further unsettled a nation wearied by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, economic fallout, and turbulent past year. April, too, is seeing violence with eight killed in a recent mass shooting in Indianapolis.

**ASK A RESEARCHER**

Answers reflect a collaboration among the authors cited below.

SHIRAZ MAHER

Director, ICSR

International Centre for the Study of Radicalization

**In the past year, how have U.S. groups influenced extremist groups in Europe, Russia, and elsewhere?**

Ideologically motivated violent extremists (IMVE) have become more active and dangerous in the last 10 years and have developed a significant online presence and infrastructure. Growing digital ecosystems that are predominantly occupied by IMVE actors break traditional geographical boundaries, which has permitted the establishment of close transnational relationships. Analysis of social media data, court documents, travel histories, and other data points highlights how not only prominent individuals, but also rank-and-file IMVE actors have actively sought out relationships with translation IMVE groups and movements.
CHARLIE WINTER
Senior Research Fellow ICSR
International Centre
for the Study of Radicalization

What influence has the COVID-19 pandemic had on terrorist-extremist group behavior?

In the first half of 2020, the common consensus was that groups like the Islamic State would benefit from the global outbreak of COVID-19, using the additional demands it brought upon states the world over as an opportunity to engage in more acts of violence (both terroristic and military in nature). While most analysis noted that many other contributing factors existed independently of COVID-19 — among them failing economies, corrupt or ineffective security apparatuses, and factionalist political systems — it was generally agreed that Daesh would make much of the opportunities afforded to it by the pandemic.

READ MORE

MARC-ANDRÉ ARGENTINO
Research Fellow ICSR
International Centre
for the Study of Radicalization

What are trends to watch in 2021?

The first trend to watch for in 2021 is the continued impact COVID-19 will have on radicalizing individuals and mobilizing ideologically motivated violent extremists (IMVE). The unpredictability around the outcome of the pandemic and the uncertainty around secondary and tertiary effects of the pandemic create a large pool of potential threat vectors that are in constant flux and evolution. However, some threat vectors will continue to be present such as protests against COVID-19 restrictions, and new threat vectors can present themselves with the arrival of vaccines, as was seen with the bombing of a vaccine facility in the Netherlands or...
the tampering and sabotage of vaccines by conspiracy theorists or extremists, as was seen in the U.S.

RESEARCH ROUNDPUP

GWU tracking Capitol arrests

Shortly after the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol, the George Washington University Program on Extremism began tracking arrests and charges through PACER, the federal online court document repository.

GWU had been using PACER to track ISIS sympathizers in the U.S.

The tracker is continually updated and provides granular data on gender, age, military background, and home county. Before publication, arrest totals numbered 382 people – 332 of them men. They came from 40 states and the District of Columbia. Learn more here.

GWU also released a preliminary assessment of the data last month. Read it here.

Karyn Sporer
NCITE PI
University of Maine, sociology

Families MIA from SAR trainings, policies
Those most likely to see something are not being engaged to say something, according to a new NCITE-funded examination of barriers to suspicious activity reporting by families of violent extremists.

In a 12-page SAR Needs Assessment produced this year, lead writer and NCITE Investigator Karyn Sporer said both internal and external factors are preventing the activation of one of the first lines of defense in terrorism and targeted violence prevention – families. Family engagement is not a topic that DHS addresses in the 11 online training modules Sporer and a team of six other NCITE researchers found. It wasn’t mentioned at three other DHS trainings on the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Initiative (NSI). Nor was it mentioned in two documents on SAR, though community engagement was.

Interviews with nine members of the NSI found additional institutional barriers, including not enough staffing to devote the time needed to build relationships and not enough collaboration among law enforcement agencies.

To be sure, external barriers exist that include a lack of trust of law enforcement and a lack of general understanding among the public of the NSI and Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR).

“Materials did not include explicit guidance on how NSI partners should engage with the community, nor was there information on how NSI partners can educate community members about identifying and reporting suspicious activity behaviors,” the report says.

The report does point out that trainings clearly emphasize the importance of civil and privacy rights, a cornerstone in building community engagement and trust. And authors noted the important role the DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention plays in engaging members of various localities.

But there is room for improvement. Policy recommendations include:

- Increasing engagement with K-12 and higher education.
- Using community forums and roundtables more often.
- Partnering with other groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to build legitimacy and trust.
- Expanding training to focus on cultural sensitivities, transparency, and community policing.

In addition to Sporer (University of Maine, sociology), other authors of this report include: NCITE PI Pete Simi (Chapman University, sociology), NCITE Co-PI Matthew DeMichele (Center for Courts and Corrections Research, RTI International), NCITE Co-PI Steven Windisch (Temple University, criminal justice), Amy Aghajanian, (Chapman, sociology), Nathan Dufour (University of Nebraska at Omaha, criminal justice), Corinne Tam (Chapman, sociology)

INSIDE NCITE
NCITE, INSIDE

NCITE staff moved into new headquarters, which opened April 7 at the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Mammel Hall. NCITE occupies the second floor of the Rod Rhoden Business Innovation Center, which sits inside the College of Business Administration.

Staff has had the opportunity to get vaccinated, and the new space promises an even more exciting, collaborative second year.

GRANTS AVAILABLE

The Department of Homeland Security’s Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention and the National Institute of Justice at the Department of Justice have announced grants for research exploring domestic terrorism. Deadlines are approaching.

Learn more about the DHS grants here. Learn more about the NIJ grants here.

Catrina Doxsee
Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies
EVENT: APRIL 21
UCF SPRING SEMINAR SERIES Measuring Trends in U.S. Domestic Terrorism
The University of Central Florida, an NCITE partner researching online radicalization, organized a successful spring speaker series that offers two more opportunities to learn about aspects of extremism and radicalization. Catrina Doxsee, research associate for the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) will speak at noon EST on April 21. She will focus on domestic terrorist activity in a threat environment characterized more by decentralized networks and radicalized individuals than discrete groups. She will present findings from a new data set of about 1,000 domestic terrorist attacks and plots since 1994. Two ways to watch: Zoom or online.

EVENT: APRIL 26
COUNTER DISINFO UNIVERSITY FAIR
HOSTED BY U.S. DEPARTMENTS OF STATE & HOMELAND SECURITY
Register now for this virtual event, which is open to U.S. and international college and university students, professors, and members of the U.S. government, state, local, tribal, and territorial government representatives and international government partners. It is not open to the public. Agenda features keynotes from senior government officials, research findings lightning pitches, and a moderated Q&A. Time: 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. EST
EVENT: MAY 11
NCITE PRESENTS: U.S. COAST GUARD IN COUNTERTERRORISM
Join us May 11 for a look inside the Coast Guard’s counterterrorism operations. Get a primer on how the oldest DHS component – founded in 1790 – has adapted to meet the changing threat environment.
This was an event previously scheduled in February, when record cold temperatures hampering power delivery forced NCITE to cancel. We are excited to present this event now with our guest presenters, Dr. Dane Egli, U.S. Coast Guard Counterterrorism and Defense Operations senior policy advisor, and USCG Lt. Commander Matt Brinkley in Omaha. We will premiere this event this through our website. If you’d like reminders, register below

REGISTER NOW

EVENT: MAY 19-20
DHS Centers of Excellence Summit
There’s still time to register for the virtual DHS S&T Centers of Excellence Summit, which runs May 17-21 with main events on May 19 and 20 that include keynote speeches, COE showcases, and panels on pressing national security issues. The panel on domestic extremist threats is sponsored by NCITE and START.

REGISTER NOW
EVENT: JUNE 29-30
ENVISION NCITE:
ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2021
NCITE’s first annual meeting and conference will be held June 29-30. This invitation-only event is designed for DHS and Homeland Security Enterprise partners and prospective stakeholders and for NCITE researchers, all NCITE Principal Investigators, Investigators, and students. The event includes time for networking and engagement around ongoing DHS challenges. Although we are proud to show our accomplishments, the focus will be on helping DHS through a “reverse pitch.” DHS stakeholders will bring problems to the table for NCITE minds to comb through and propose scientific research. Stay tuned for registration!

Interesting people? Upcoming events?
Send ideas for our next NCITEr edition to NCITE’s egrace@unomaha.edu.

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GRANT ACKNOWLEDGMENT & DISCLAIMER
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