

## WHO IS THE TERRORIST? RE-EXAMINING THE SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS OF TERRORISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

### Kim Terörist? Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki Teröristlerin Sosyodemografilerinin Yeniden İncelenmesi

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#### Özet

Bu makale, Corley, Smith ve Damphousse'ın 2005 yılında yaptıkları "Amerikan Terörizminin Değişen Yüzü" adlı terörist profili çalışmalarını daha küçük ancak daha güvenilir bir örneklem kullanarak yeniden ele almaktadır. Sözkonusu profil çalışmasında terör suçundan yargılananların tamamını kapsayan ancak yargılama sonucunda kişinin beraat etmesini ya da hüküm giymesini göz ardı eden bir örneklem kullanılmıştır. Dolayısıyla, 391 kişiden oluşan veri setinin yaklaşık olarak üçte bir oranında küçülmesi ve 275 kişiye düşmesi pahasına, sadece yargılama sonucunda hüküm giyen ve suçluluğu kesinleşen kişilerin örnekleme dâhil edildiği bu çalışma ile Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki teröristlerin sosyo-demografileri yeniden incelenmiştir. Ayrıca, bu çalışmada yargılama sonucunda beraat eden kişileri terörist olarak etiketlemenin de doğru olmadığı hususu tartışılmaktadır. Ancak bu çalışma sonunda ortaya çıkan terörist profili ile 2005 yılında yapılan çalışmanın sonuçları birbirine benzemekte ve önemli bir farklılık arzetmemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Teröristler, Profilleme, Sosyo-demografikler, Etiketleme.

#### Abstract

With a significant change in sample size, this article attempted to replicate the study of Corley, Smith, and Damphousse's "The Changing Face of American Terrorism", in which the authors talked about profiling of terrorists using data that includes all

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indicted individuals for their participation in officially designated terrorist activities, but, ignoring whether a person was acquitted or convicted at the end of the trial. Therefore, this study reexamines the sociodemographics of terrorists in the United States using a smaller but more accurate sample than the previous research has used. This study took only the individuals who were convicted, pleaded guilty, and/or plead guilty to a lesser charge as a result of their indictment, and ran the analysis using a sample with 275 cases at the cost of losing one-third of 391 cases in the dataset. Besides, this study discusses the fallacy of labeling the individuals who are acquitted at the end of their trials. Despite this fact, this study revealed similar results and without any important difference from the previous terrorist profiling research of 2005.

**Key Words:** Terrorists, Profiling, Sociodemographics, Labeling.

## **Introduction**

Who is the terrorist? Hypothetical answers to this question might describe the terrorist as one who is young, Muslim, educated, and middle-class, the same traits as the author of this essay. It is, of course, ridiculous and useless to generalize from a few incidents or the results of a study with a small number of cases to justify conclusions about the personality and demographic traits of terrorists in general. One must be very careful in wording while interpreting the results of such a study as well as choosing the sample used to reach generalized conclusions. On the one hand, it is not surprising to reach such a conclusion in an environment that universally accepted definition of terrorism does not exist and the disinformation about the logic of terrorist acts is high. On the other hand, however, I do not agree that “the variations in definitions of terrorism have given some legitimacy to the aphorism ‘One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’” (Smith, 1994:5). Actually, Smith talks about the fact that some people try to justify what they do by concealing themselves behind the darkness of definition, but I believe that the search for the legitimacy of terrorism is in vain. No religion, ethnicity, civilization, or any ideology can justify killing innocent people.

Right after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, former Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem discussed the reaction of his predominantly Muslim country against military action after meeting with President Bush, and emphasized that more consideration should be taken in the discussion of terrorism. He stated that “terrorism has no justification, whatever justification. Terrorism has no religion or geography. There is

no such thing as Muslim, Christian or Jewish terrorism. An act of terrorism is not limited to those who pull the trigger or take concrete action. It also entails those countries which provide opportunities to terrorists, put money in their pockets, protect, aid and harbor them”<sup>1</sup> (Ismail Cem, Former Turkish Foreign Minister, PBS online news hour, September 27, 2001).

Because of the ambiguity in the field, however, “researchers have an enormous obstacle to overcome when examining individuals who really may or may not be considered terrorists” (Corley et al., 2005:50). Corley et al. (2005) emphasize the presence of substantial variation regarding which people to include in terrorism datasets. “In the absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism and inconsistent operationalization, demographic descriptions of terrorists are difficult at best” (Corley et al., 2005:50).

The importance of the problem demonstrates itself especially during labeling of a person as terrorist. There are two aspects of the problem: labeling a person by a term with no agreed-upon definition, which inhibits accuracy of subsequent studies; and labeling a person arrested for a terrorist offense regardless of the fact that he was convicted or acquitted. One of the most important things to consider is that the individuals who were arrested or indicted for terrorist offenses can not be called and labeled as terrorists. The maxim, ‘a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty,’ can not be overlooked.

For these reasons, this study prefers to use the data only on individuals who were convicted and/or pleaded guilty and call them as terrorists. In understanding any social phenomenon, good data are essential and the more data the better (Hewitt, 2003) as long as the data are clean and accurate. However, as Hewitt (2003:16) reasonably argues, “a simple analysis of good data is to be preferred to a sophisticated analysis of poor data.”

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to produce much more accurate results through reexamining the socio-demographics of terrorists in the United States with a simple analysis of good data. This study also discusses the fallacy of labeling someone as a terrorist even though s/he

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved online in November 22, 2006 from [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/july-dec01/turkey\\_9-27.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/july-dec01/turkey_9-27.html).

is acquitted at the end of trial. Furthermore, it is important to look at the socio-demographics of terrorists, in which the cues of the factors for decision making process of becoming a terrorist can be found.

### **1. Re-examining the Socio-demographics of Terrorists in the United States**

Regarding the limitations of the datasets in the field of terrorism, we may all agree that finding reliable data is difficult task for the students of terrorism (Heyman and Mickolus, 1980). Smith and Damphousse (1998) collected one of the most useful datasets for an examination of the demographics of terrorists in the United States. After collecting and analyzing their dataset Smith and Damphousse claimed that the previous studies on terrorist profiling are now outdated. Recently, Corley et al. (2005) attempted to compare demographic data of American terrorists of the 1980s and the 1990s to identify if changes in profiling have occurred. This is the most recent study of profiling of American terrorists about whom I have information.

Since 1980, the FBI has had a counterterrorism program including demographic data on persons indicted, which supplemented its data for the American Terrorism Study (ATS) which began in 1988. Corley et al. (2005) argue that their dataset includes only those individuals who have been identified by the FBI through a “terrorism” investigation as designated by the attorney general’s guidelines. However, in terms of the sample population, Corley et al. (2005) made no difference among individuals who were convicted or acquitted at the end of the trial. All law enforcement agencies in the world should or do carry out their terrorism investigations based on a guideline from the highest authority. The attorney general’s guidelines designated for terrorism investigation is not enough for me to gather data on terrorists, examine their backgrounds, and to deduce certain profiles of terrorist. I don’t know yet whether they are terrorists or not. If I must have and should choose a criterion, then I should look at the results of the trial.

In another important study on American terrorist profiles, Hewitt (2003) analyzed more than 700 individuals using a larger dataset, but he also looked at the individuals including those who were allegedly committed terrorist acts and not actually convicted. Both Hewitt and Corley et al. were confused about how to call those individuals throughout the text. Sometimes they call them terrorists, while they

repeatedly remind us that they are individuals who were indicted or arrested for a terrorist offense. For example, in his book, "Understanding Terrorism in America from the Klan to Al Qaeda", Hewitt put different and confusing titles on tables in chapter five, which is arguably talks about terrorists and the socio-demographics of American terrorists. He titled as "Table 5.1 Percentage distribution by age of those arrested for terrorist offenses" and "Age and sex of terrorists, by ideology of group" on the next one at the same page. Are they individuals arrested and indicted for terrorist offenses or really terrorists that can accurately be labeled so? Although both analyses are regarding the same population, Hewitt refers to them differently (either terrorists or those arrested for terrorist offenses) in two different contexts. In his 1994 study<sup>2</sup>, Smith criticizes political and conceptual problems regarding terrorists in the criminal justice system; Smith (1994) explains very well the methodology and especially the sampling procedure. He attempted to justify why he used the data on individuals indicted and why he labeled them as terrorists. Although he devoted a chapter and some parts of the others to discuss the problems with the definition of terrorism, his analysis does not obviate the problems with labeling terrorists and with prosecuting them. Referring to Edwin Sutherland (1945), he preferred to use a broader context for terrorists with the expansion of definition, which bears logical and methodological problems. Although Hewitt does not mention in his study the ambiguity over exactly who engages in terrorism, Smith admits this fact and suggests that it is fair to include individuals indicted in a study of terrorists' profile regardless of their conviction or plea. However, in terms of correcting the error of labeling such individuals as terrorists, neither eliminates this problem.

Nevertheless, both studies are the examples of an empirically pursued objective study. Their contribution to the terrorism study should be noted today and in the future. I would agree with them if there were not only a universally accepted definition of terrorism and terrorists but also an infallible guideline which would make courts' decisions at trial superfluous. But I believe that any labeling for individuals arrested or indicted in this structure is questionable and seems to be invalid because it is against one of the main principle of law: "a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty."

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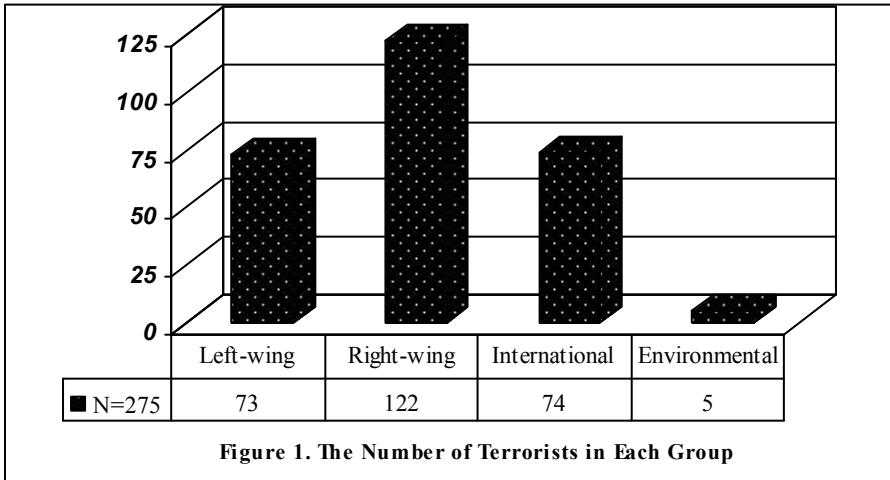
<sup>2</sup> Brent L. Smith has coauthored with Sarah H. Corley and Kelly Damphouse in 2005 working on the same but larger data set and using different methodology, but they kept the sampling procedure as the same of Smith's 1994 study.

I assume that many like Tappan (1947) will be anxious about using the term and sampling in empirical research with that inclusion in the dataset at issue. Indicted individuals cannot be labeled as terrorists and an empirical study in this way would not provide a valid insight about the “Terrorism in America” or “Profiling of Terrorists in the United States.” For purposes of empirical research, this is a big problem. “In studying the offender there can be no presumption that arrested, arraigned, indicted, or prosecuted persons are criminals unless they also be held guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of a particular offense” (Tappan, 1947:100). According to Tappan (1947), it would be quite inaccurate to study all suspects or defendants as criminals. His argument is even applicable to an empirical study of terrorism and terrorist profiles. Recalling the substantial disagreement about the definition of terrorism, it would be quite difficult to name someone indicted as a terrorist. In fact, it is also arguable to label as terrorist one convicted because of the ambiguity in the definition of terrorism in federal law and because of the inadequate criminal legislation aimed at terrorism and terrorists (see Maggs, 2005; Smith, 1994 for a detailed discussion). However, individuals who were convicted and/or pleaded guilty are nearly all terrorists and represent the closest possible approximation to those who have breached the law aimed at terrorism, which is imperfectly defined so far (see Tappan, 1947, for the discussion of sampling for a study of criminals).

## **2. Methodology**

In a study of terrorism, a researcher should be very careful to consider the differences among terrorist groups and/or the type of terrorist activity and categorize them by analyzing the incidents or individual terrorist members in categories based on their own unique group such as Left-wing, Right-wing, International, and Environmental. Previous research reasonably categorizes terrorists based on a typology of these terrorist groups. Regarding the substantial differences among terrorist groups, some scholars conducted their analyses to make a comparison between two categories like right-wing vs. left-wing (Handler, 1990; Smith, 1994). Others put the terrorist profile into four categories including international (Corley et al, 2005) and even seven or eight categories including black nationalists, Puerto Ricans, and Anti-abortionists (Hewitt, 2003). The ideological differences between Domestic and International terrorists with the differences between left-wing and right-wing terrorists that

Corley et al. (2005) briefly explained forced me to separate these groups and examine the demographics based on group types.



Using a classification of terrorists under the different types of terrorist groups they are associated with, which has already been provided in the dataset, I looked at the demographics as follows: group type, gender, race, age, education, income, and community status. In the indictment dataset I had, the number of individuals was 391. While 275 of them were convicted and/or pleaded guilty, 72 of them were dismissed or acquitted, and 6 of them were unknown and extradited. I took only 275 of them as the sample in reexamining the social demographics of terrorists in the United States. Figure 1 illustrates that out of 275 terrorists, 73 of them are classified as left-wing, 122 of them as right-wing, 74 of them as international, and 5 of them as environmental. Since the number of terrorists from the environmental group is not great, I did not want to illustrate it in the tables or discussion of the results.

### **3. A Profile of Domestic (Left and Right-wing) and International Terrorists**

According to Russell and Miller (1977), terrorists are likely to be young, leftist, between the ages of 22 and 25 years old, single males, from middle-to upper-class with some university education backgrounds. After 1990s, their research called "Profile of a Terrorist" seemed to be irrelevant to American terrorists (Corley et al., 2005) and cannot be regarded as definitive (Hudson, 1999). All characteristics may change when the data are analyzed under different clusters regarding different terrorist groups. Handler (1990) made a distinction between the old assumptions and new facts about American terrorists. Following Handler's research, Smith (1994) clearly addressed this change over time putting Russell and Miller's study into question.

Citing Corley et al. Handler (1990) found that right-wing terrorists were mostly white males from lower to middle-class families. In left-wing groups, women were more visibly involved and given leadership positions within the group and were more likely to be involved in the actual acts of violence and terror. Left-wing terrorists usually were from middle to upper-class families. Smith (1994) used a more comprehensive database than Handler's and divided the demographic information of terrorists into three categories such as left-wing, right-wing, and single-issue (focused on primarily environmental issues). The 1998 study of Smith and Damphousse included the international type of terrorism. However, using last two decades data nobody examined the terrorists' profile of three categories such as Left-wing, Right-wing, and International. Corley et al. (2005) included international terrorists but they also divided into 1980s and 1990s terrorist indictments and compared each other.

In general, the demographic findings of Smith and Morgan's study were similar to the study of Handler on left-wing and right-wing groups. Both studies found that left-wing terrorists were more likely to be better educated than right-wing terrorists. Strentz' study (1990) also suggested that right-wing terrorists have a limited or a high school education while left-wing terrorists have a university education. This study of reexamination found that both international and left-wing terrorists mostly have more than a high school education (57%) while right-wing terrorists usually have either less than a high school or a high school education (57%). One thing I want to indicate is that left-wing terrorists



come from either less or well educated group of people. In this particular group, terrorists with high-school diplomas only are very rare.

**Table 1:** The Demographics of Terrorists in Each Group

Education		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	< High school	37.5%	30.6%	14.8%
High school	5.4%	26.1%	27.8%	
> High school	57.1%	43.2%	57.4%	
Income		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	\$ 0-1500	80.0%	72.6%	50.0%
\$ 1501-3000	12.0%	11.0%	34.4%	
\$ 3001-4500	2.0%	5.5%	0	
\$ >4500	6%	11%	15.6%	
Community status		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	Low stat/prestige	84.0%	97.8%	93.3%
High stat/prestige	16.0%	2.2%	6.7%	
Age		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	Average	37	40	34
Min.-Maximum	23-58	17-72	17-72	
Gender		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	Female	24.7%	9.0%	2.7%
Male	75.3%	91.0%	97.3%	
Race		Left-wing	Right-wing	International
	Caucasian	13.7%	100.0%	76.4%
Black	34.2%	0	8.3%	
Hispanic	52.1%	0	15.3%	

At different times in their studies, Corley et.al (2005), Smith and Damphousse (1998), Smith (1994), and Smith and Morgan (1994) all suggested that indicted individuals were older than the previous research (Russell and Miller, 1977; Handler, 1990) described. The average age of indictment was 39 years for right-wing terrorists and 35 for left-wing

terrorists instead of 22-25. Similar to the recent studies, this study found that the average age and minimum-maximum ages for the terrorists are as follows: Left-wing with an average of 37 (n=69 and min-max 23-58), Right-wing with an average of 40 (n=116 min-max 17-72), and International with an average of 34 (n=68 min-max 17-72).

Previous research on demographics of terrorists has suggested that the terrorists are predominantly male. Acknowledging the same thing, Smith and Morgan (1994) also found that the ratio of female terrorists in left-wing groups was higher than in right-wing terrorist groups. Regarding the convictions and guilty pleas, the current study suggests that male domination in all three categories is a reality, and right-wing and international groups have fewer female members than left-wing groups.

Smith and Morgan (1994) showed that left-wing terrorists were mostly nonwhite (%71) while right-wing terrorists were mostly white (%97). Comparing the demographics of terrorists in the 1980s and the 1990s, Corley et al. (2005) also reached a similar conclusion about the race/ethnicity of the terrorists and indicated that about three-fourths of international terrorists are Caucasian and the second-largest race among members of this category is Hispanic. Concerning a comparison based on race, the current study demonstrates similar results such as Left-wing with mostly Black and Hispanic members (86.3%), Right-wing with 100% Caucasian members, and International with 76.4% Caucasian and 15.3% Hispanic members.

Corley et al. (2005) said that the data collection for income has some important limitations that had an impact on the accuracy of the results due to lack of financial records in the case file, due to the inmate status of some of the indicted individuals for charges other than terrorist crime, and due to the intention to understate their assets to qualify for a court appointed attorney. Therefore, in the analysis, the Pearson Chi-Square value (15.657) was not large enough and the significance level was not so high (at the level of 93%). Nevertheless, it can be interpreted to some extent as follows: in all three categories terrorists are less likely to have an income higher than \$1,500.

In the codebook of the dataset, the American Terrorism Study Team included and coded a very interesting and useful variable about the community status of terrorists classified as low and high status/prestige. Again, the Pearson Chi-Square value is not high for this tabulation and the decision that is made during the data collection about whether an individual has low or high status in the community may be critically

argued. But it may be worthwhile to indicate that almost all terrorists in three categories (Left-wing, Right-wing, and International) have low status/prestige in the community they are coming from (84%, 98%, and 93% of the sample, respectively).

## Conclusion

The current study re-examined the socio-demographics of terrorists in the United States. This study attempted to address the severity of the mislabeling problem in terrorism study, especially, when an empirical research on terrorism is undertaken. Methodological problems of previous research on profiling terrorists in the United States are considered and the most recent analysis of profiling is conducted in an attempt to avoid the methodological problems of empirical research-to some extent-in this field.

Although the results of the study were similar to those of previous research on the subject matter, examining not only domestic but also international terrorists' demographics at the same time might shed some new light on understanding the differences between domestic and international terrorists besides a comparison between Left-wing and Right wing terrorists' demographics. Also, using two decades of data with a smaller but more accurate sampling-even if it is still not free from the problems of representation of all terrorists-and having replicated this research might be perceived as a proof of the results of previous research on profiling.

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