

Communicating with the public to prevent terrorism and reduce the impact of attacks

In 2019, in consultation with a wide range of domestic and international partners, CTPN cities published a series of strategic reports that examined counter terrorism initiatives that aim to build resilience and help keep our cities safe from terrorism. This included a report on [Protecting Major Events and Crowded Places](#) that identified a number of areas for future developments in securing soft targets in times of an increasingly complex threat. It demonstrated the importance of risk and threat assessments, vulnerability analyses and the implementation of protective security measures. The current policy brief builds on this prior work conducted by CTPN partners to focus on the ways in which public communication can be used to protect crowded places.

Effective public communication can help prevent attacks on crowded places by encouraging reporting. It can also reduce the impact of attacks by informing the public about how to protect themselves. Despite this, there has historically been limited research on the impact of communication campaigns on public perceptions of the likelihood or risk of terrorist attacks, or the effectiveness of the messaging in informing protective health behaviours prior to or during an attack.

Our research applies theories of risk perception, risk communication and health psychology to explore the effectiveness of existing campaigns in preventing attacks by increasing reporting behaviours (e.g. 'See it, Say it, Sorted') and protecting life by increasing the likelihood of members of the public engaging in protective health behaviours (e.g. 'Run, Hide, Tell') when an attack occurs. We conducted this research in the UK and Denmark. Differences in communication practice and experiences of terrorism make these ideal comparison countries for assessing the extent to which counter terrorism communication campaigns need to be adapted to take into consideration local concerns.

See It, Say It, Sorted

Pre-event communication is often understood in terms of providing information about protective actions that can be taken when an event occurs. Pre-event communication in a counter terrorism context also has the potential to prevent a terrorist attack from taking place. We used a [survey experiment](#) to examine the impact of communication campaigns designed to encourage public vigilance and reporting on railways.

Results indicate that the 'See It, Say It, Sorted' campaign is effective in encouraging members of the public to report suspicious behaviour in train stations. However, in addition to reporting suspicious behaviour to a member of rail staff or a police officer, as requested, most respondents answered that they would also consider reporting to a member of staff in the concourse café. This highlights the importance of providing all members of staff with training on how to respond to reports, rather than only training those directly responsible for security.

Results also suggest that future public vigilance campaigns should address differences in lay and official definitions of suspicious behaviour. Guidance about specific suspicious behaviours can reduce uncertainty, a key barrier to reporting, and increase reporting intentions. Our work also brings further evidence to bear on previous studies indicating that members of the public tend to focus on more familiar, traditional criminal activity such as pick-pocketing or car theft.

In contrast, individuals are less willing to report terrorism-related behaviours if they are uncertain about the relationship between the behaviours and attack planning. Communication about other drivers of reporting, such as the perceived benefits of reporting, may increase the likelihood of reporting suspicious behaviour on railways.

We found higher levels of intended reporting in the UK than Denmark, despite higher baseline levels of trust and identification with the police in the latter context. This suggests that expectations regarding the likelihood of a future attack may have more influence on reporting intentions. Importantly the influence of the 'See it, Say it, Sorted' campaign on encouraging reporting in both countries suggest that public vigilance campaigns developed in the UK are likely to be suitable for use in other European contexts.

Run, Hide, Tell

The UK National Police Chiefs' Council released a Stay Safe film and leaflet including 'Run, Hide, Tell' guidance for members of the public in 2015 in response to marauding terrorist attacks in Paris, France. Other countries, such as Denmark, did not provide this type of pre-event communication due to concerns about scaring the public. We conducted three survey experiments, which demonstrated that 'Run, Hide, Tell' guidance does not increase perceived risk from terrorism. It does, however, increase trust by increasing public perceptions of security services' preparedness to respond and the perceived quality of police advice for keeping people safe during an attack.

[Our research](#) also found that 'Run, Hide, Tell' has a positive impact on encouraging protective behaviours (e.g. immediately running to find a hiding place) and reducing public intention to engage in risky behaviours (e.g. calling someone who may be hiding during an attack). However, it also highlights the need for future communications to address the psychological costs associated with following the guidance (e.g. that running towards a place of safety may conflict with the desire to look for or wait for a friend or family member) and target specific problem behaviours.

As with the previous study, we found that despite some national differences in intended behaviours, the impact of the 'Run, Hide, Tell' campaign was remarkably consistent, not only in relation to increasing confidence in security services' preparedness and trust in police advice, but also in its impact on behavioural intentions across all three stages. This lends further support to the contention that this type of guidance is likely to be suitable for use in different national contexts.

A one-year follow-up study demonstrated some reduction in positive impacts of the guidance over time. For example, one year on, people were more likely to call someone who may be hiding during an attack than they were following initial receipt of the guidance. However, people who previously received the guidance remained more likely to adopt protective health behaviours and less likely to engage in such risky behaviour than those who had not received any information.

Run, Hide, Tell vs Run, Hide, Fight

'Run, Hide, Tell' remains UK official advice to the public on how to keep safe during a marauding terrorist firearms attack. However, in 2018 Norwegian security authorities issued alternative guidance to the public to 'Run, Hide, Fight'. The recommendation to 'fight' as a last resort is consistent with the US approach and informed by experience from the 2011 Utoya attack, which demonstrated that it is not always possible to avoid confrontation.

We were interested in understanding the potential benefits and unintended negative consequences of each of these campaigns. Would, for example, the UK approach discourage people from acting as a last resort or would the Norwegian guidance encourage people to adopt risky behaviours in situations where it would still be possible to run?

[Our research](#) provides some support for both campaigns, as both sets of guidance increased public intention to adopt protective health behaviours. However, while we did not find evidence that the 'Run, Hide, Fight' campaign encouraged unwanted risky behaviours, our results did suggest that 'Run, Hide, Tell' guidance may discourage proactive planning of what to do in the worst-case scenario. This suggests that 'Run, Hide, Tell' guidance may benefit from providing additional information on what to do if it is not possible to avoid confrontation.

As with the previous studies, the impact of both sets of guidance was consistent across national contexts, despite the different histories of the UK and Denmark in marauding terrorist firearms attacks and experiences with pre-event communication. These findings suggest that the guidance will have a similar impact irrespective of whether it represents a change of guidance (e.g. introducing 'Run, Hide, Fight' in the UK) or if it is the introduction of this type of guidance for the first time (e.g. the use of either set of guidance in Denmark).

Recommendations

Our results provide evidence-based, detailed guidance about what counter terrorism organisations can do to increase the likelihood of members of the public reporting suspicious behaviour or following protective health advice when a terrorist attack occurs. Our work addresses practitioner concerns about causing panic or increasing fear by demonstrating that the provision of guidance does not increase the perceived risk of terrorism. It also demonstrates that communication targeted at increasing public reporting of suspicious behaviour in crowded places is effective if it reduces uncertainty and reinforces the perceived benefits of reporting. Additionally, communication designed to better enable members of the public to protect themselves if an attack occurs can enhance trust in responding organisations, as well as encouraging protective behaviours and discouraging potentially dangerous actions during a marauding terrorist attack. Recommendations include the need to:

- Provide training to all staff working in crowded places. Members of the public are likely to report suspicious behaviour to staff working in the shops and restaurants in crowded spaces, as well as security or operational staff.
- Address differences in lay and official definitions of suspicious behaviour to reduce uncertainty as a barrier to reporting.
- Include guidance about specific suspicious behaviours to increase reporting intentions.
- Communicate the benefits of reporting suspicious behaviour.
- Engage in pre-event communication to encourage protective behaviours.
- Provide reassurance, but not at the cost of detailed, actionable guidance.
- Target intuitive behaviours that are potentially dangerous.
- Consider the psychological barriers that may prevent the public from following advice.
- Recognise that while some benefits of communication hold over time, messages need to be repeated using multiple formats to maximise retention and effectiveness.
- Provide additional information on what to do if it is not possible to avoid confrontation.

This work and the CTPN strategic reports are of even greater importance in the wake of the UK Government's 2021 [protect duty consultation](#). This consultation recognised the lack of legislative requirement for organisations or venues to consider or employ security measures at most public places and sought views on requirements for venues to implement security measures. Translating these findings into strategic communication advice on the ground is something that all cities could benefit from to enhance community resilience and reduce the risk and impact of attacks.

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