

Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative

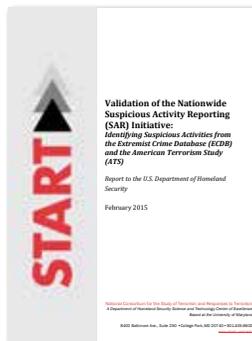
Identifying Suspicious Activities From the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) and the American Terrorism Study (ATS)



Background

The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI) is a standardized process that includes stakeholder outreach, privacy protections, training, and facilitation of technology for the purpose of identifying and reporting terrorism-related suspicious activity in jurisdictions across the country. The decision to share this type of reporting is primarily based upon a determination of whether or not a SAR aligns with 1 or more of the 16 behavioral indicators that are outlined in the Information Sharing Environment (ISE) SAR Functional Standard (http://nsi.nrc.gov/documents/SAR_FS_1.5.5_PMISE.pdf) as being observed behaviors reasonably indicative of preoperational planning related to terrorism or other criminal activity.

In order to review the validity of the 16 categories of indicators contained in the ISE-SAR Functional Standard, the [University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism \(START\)](#) recently undertook an initiative to compare pre-incident activities of terrorists and violent criminal extremists in the United States, or "SAR indicators," to the 16 SAR categories. START released its findings in the [Validation of the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting \(SAR\) Initiative \(NSI\) report](#).



Study Objectives

The START study leveraged data on terrorism cases and associated SAR indicators from two open source terrorism projects—the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), which is maintained by the ECDB staff at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Michigan State University, and the American Terrorism Study (ATS), maintained by the Terrorism Research Center at the University of Arkansas. The following four general questions guided the research:

- 1 What is the prevalence of terrorists' pre-incident activities aligning with the Functional Standard's 16 ISE-SAR indicators, and how does that vary by terrorism movement and crime type?
- 2 To what extent are SAR indicators observable versus actually observed, and how does this vary by terrorism movement and crime type?
- 3 How do SAR indicators relate to "successful" resolution of terrorism cases?
- 4 What are examples of pre-incident activity committed by terrorists that do not align with the Functional Standard's 16 ISE-SAR categories, and how prevalent are such exceptions?

Study Findings

ECDB Findings

- In the 48 terrorism cases that were selected for the study, a total of 255 preoperational ISE-SAR indicators were identified.
 - 47 percent of the identified indicators (121 of 255) were classified as observable.
 - 59 percent (72 of 121) of the observable indicators were actually observed/reported.
- Weapons discovery, materials acquisition/storage, acquisition of expertise, and observation/surveillance accounted for 57% of the observable noncriminal ISE-SAR indicators.

ATS Findings

- In the 303 terrorism cases studied, 2,541 precursor behaviors were identified.
 - 80 percent (2,032) of the identified pre-incident indicators aligned with 1 of the 16 ISE-SAR indicators.
 - The 7 most commonly identified ISE-SAR indicators accounted for 79 percent (2,011 of 2,541) of the overall precursor behaviors identified in the 303 cases:
 - Materials acquisition (497)
 - Weapons acquisition (380)
 - Threat (374)
 - Misrepresentation (334)
 - Acquiring expertise (196)
 - Surveillance (160)
 - Recruiting (70)
- 99 percent (2,011 of 2,032) of the ISE-SAR pre-incident activities identified in the study align with one of the aforementioned 7 most commonly identified indicators.
- Terrorist Failure Rate: The study revealed that terrorists who engaged in the following five ISE-SAR activities were significantly less likely to complete the planned terrorist incident: materials acquisition, weapons acquisition, threat prior to incident, expertise acquisition, and surveillance.
- 20 percent (509 of 2,541) of the identified pre-incident activities associated with the 303 terrorism cases were not classified as an ISE-SAR indicator.
 - The majority of the 509 non-ISE-SAR activities involved three types of actions: meetings; other forms of communication, such as e-mails and phone calls; and travel.
 - The study characterized the 509 non-ISE-SAR activities as those that are typically noncriminal and tend to occur most often in the early stages of planning.

Conclusions

The START study verifies the utility of the NSI, which provides law enforcement and homeland security agencies with a uniform method for gathering and reporting raw tips, leads, and reports of suspicious activity. This data is reviewed and vetted by trained fusion center personnel using established standards. From an analytical perspective, the study supports how the vetting efforts of trained analysts may ultimately lead to the enhancement of terrorist investigations. Furthermore, analysts' reliance upon the established 16 ISE-SAR behaviors is validated by this study and will ultimately assist them in the potential reporting of SAR and the development of products that use and evaluate SAR.

The START research illustrates that those involved in preoperational planning related to terrorism do participate in tangible behaviors that align with the ISE-SAR Functional Standard. The study found that not only were many of the indicators observable prior to terrorist attacks, but there was also evidence that some indicators were observed by the public. These findings reflect the importance of the observation and subsequent

reporting of such tips, leads, and suspicious behaviors. Although an action or an activity reported may not seem significant, when reviewed and/or combined with other similar actions or activities, it may become an essential element in preventing criminal or even terrorist activity.

The findings can also be leveraged to inform training and outreach enhancements. **For example, the START study outlines the existence of missed opportunities to identify behaviors indicative of preoperational planning related to terrorism.** There are instances when individuals involved in preoperational acts linked to terrorism openly displayed 1 or more of the ISE-SAR 16 behaviors and were not reported. Such a finding is a reminder of the importance of public outreach and awareness, as well as SAR training for frontline officers and homeland security partners, regarding reporting suspicious activities. These findings also validate the relevance and continued importance of maintaining NSI SAR training that is delivered via a partnership between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

