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RESEARCH REPORT

TERRORISM HOAXES IN CANADA:

Data and Trends

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What are Hoaxes?

Terrorism hoaxes are those incidents that are believed to be acts of serious terrorism, but by virtue of involving lies, benign materials, and/or empty threats do not actually involve any direct risk of harm. Hoaxes are distinct from:

- Threats, which involve a perpetrator's intent for follow-through;
- False alarms, which are a function of observer suspicion and not a perpetrator's ill intent;
- Pranks, which do not satisfy definitions for terrorism (they are not intended to intimidate/coerce, and are not conducted for ideological purposes); or
- Foiled/failed attacks, which fail to cause casualties or damage on account of external intervention and/or tactical shortcomings.

Within the context of a broader, cross-national research project on hoax perpetrators' strategic logic (Tishler 2018), this brief presents an overview of available data regarding hoaxes in Canada and the trends they document.

Existing Hoax Data

Empirical research on terrorism hoaxes is limited, because hoaxes are frequently excluded from large sample terrorism events database on the grounds that they do not directly yield casualties or property damage. Some data sources do include information on terrorism hoaxes, but they are limited by their scope of coverage (see Figure 1).

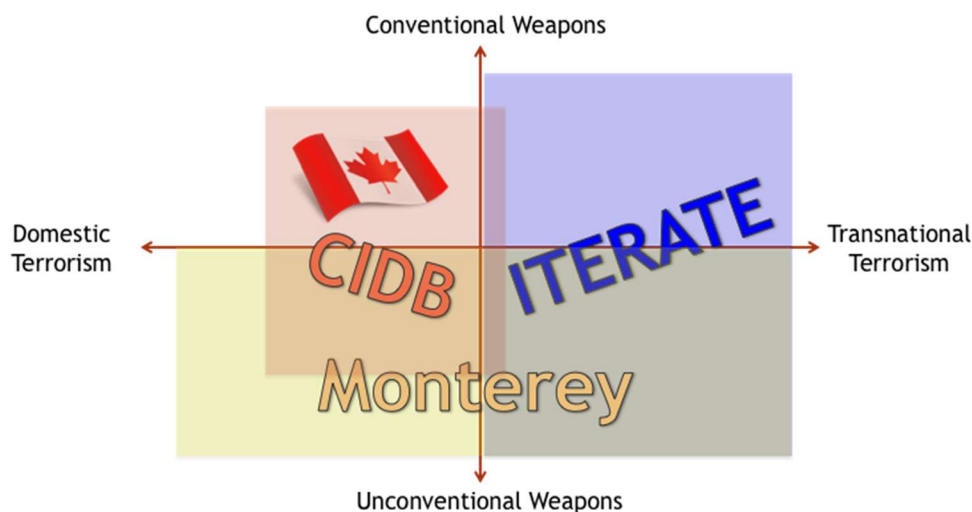


Figure 1. Coverage for Hoax Events in Available Datasets



International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE) covers all weapon types, but is limited to those events that implicate more than one country (Mickolus et al. 2012). The *Monterey Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism Database* (WMDDDB) covers any geographic orientation, but is limited to those events involving chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons (Monterey Terrorism Research and Education Program 2012). The *Canadian Incident Database* (CIDB) covers all weapon types, but only as they relate to Canadian perpetrators, victims, and/or targets (“Canadian Incident Database [CIDB]” 2016). Within this single-country context, it provides insight into the frequency of non-CBRN domestic incidents, which are excluded in ITERATE and the WMDDDB.

Trends in Terrorists’ Use of Hoaxes in Canada

Comparing the proportion of hoaxes amongst all terrorism incidents in Canada across the three datasets (Table 1) reveals important trends:

1. Cross-national datasets significantly underreport terrorist activity in Canada;
2. Domestic events—at least in the Canadian context—are far more likely to be hoaxes than events with a transnational orientation; and
3. Incidents in Canada purporting to involve CBRN weapons are very likely to be hoaxes.

Table 1. Frequency of Incidents and Hoaxes in Canada, Controlling for Years of Coverage

	All Incidents	Hoaxes Only (Hoaxes as a % of all incidents)
ITERATE (1968-2012)	54	8 (14.8%)
WMDDDB (1968-2012)	49	41 (83.7%)
CIDB (1968-2012)	564	103 (18.3%)
CIDB Full Sample (1960-2015)	871	153 (17.6%)



Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of hoaxed and serious terrorism events in Canada across various weapon types. For the most part, hoaxers in Canada use the same tactics as their non-hoaxing counterparts: explosives, bombs, and dynamite are both the most frequently used and hoaxed weapon-type. These weapons are simulated or threatened in 81.7% ($n=125$) of Canadian hoaxes. In this majority of cases, hoaxers are simulating tactics that are frequently observed in their real form: a copycat effect. On the other hand, CBRN incidents—whether hoaxed or real—are incredibly rare in Canada and are the only serious weapon type to ever be hoaxed more frequently than actually employed. For the CBRN-interested minority of hoax perpetrators in Canada there is thus an aspirational dimension to the tactics employed: they hoax what they cannot carry out in reality (Tishler 2013).

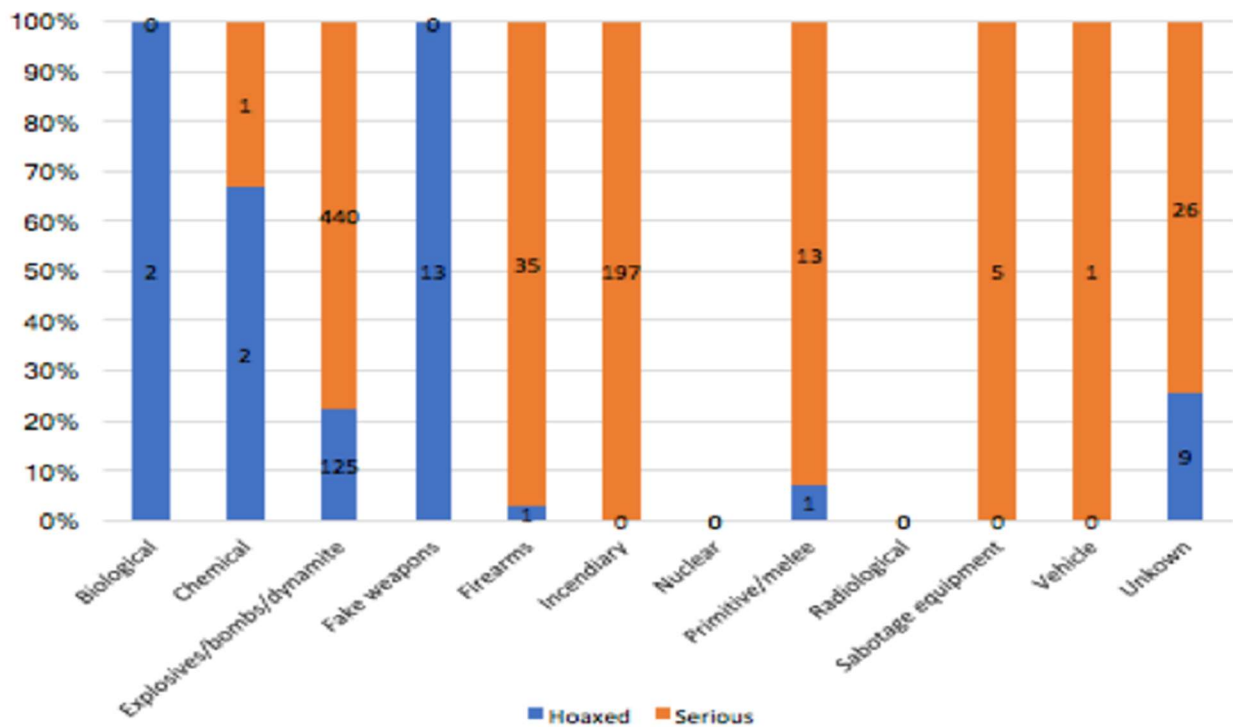


Figure 2. Percent Likelihood of Event Types in Canada Being Hoaxed or Serious, 1960-2015

Terrorism hoax events in Canada have followed a similar temporal distribution as non-hoaxed events (Figure 3). The two main exceptions are the 1985-1982 and 2014-2015 periods, where hoax incidents were more frequent than non-hoaxed ones. CIDB event descriptions show that many hoaxes in the 1985 period involved hoaxed bomb warnings against airports and airplanes, and occurred in the year following the June 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182. That a high volume of hoaxers in this period mimicked the Air India bombers' tactics indicates that hoaxers may exploit heightened levels of societal fear and sensitivity regarding particular threats, to generate maximum disruption.



The hoaxes in the 2014-2015 period occurred following the October 2014 car-ramming and shooting incidents in St-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa. They also correspond with a broader shift away from terrorism incidents perpetrated within Canada to Canadian-affiliated incidents abroad (N. Tishler, Ouellet, and Kilberg, n.d.). This hoax activity may be explained again by heightened sensitivity to the terrorist threat in Canada following the fatal incidents of October 2014, but also by a corresponding increased difficulty in carrying out serious incidents in the homeland due to augmented counterterrorism efforts; perpetrators may substitute into hoax activity when “real” terrorism acts become too difficult to execute.

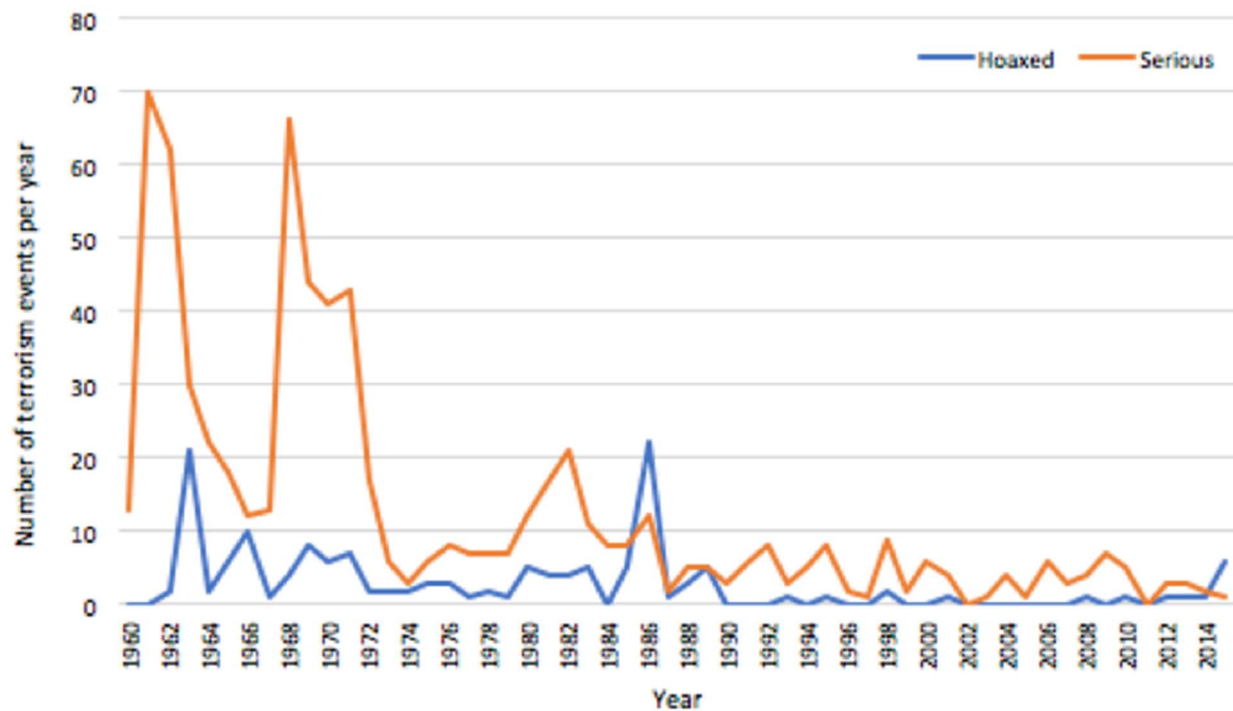


Figure 3. Frequency of Terrorism Events in Canada, 1960-2015



Conclusions for Research and Policy

Terrorism events datasets in general suffer from a number of well-documented flaws (see LaFree 2010, 24; LaFree, Dugan, and Miller 2015, 22–24; Mickolus 2002, 151–54; Sheehan 2012), many of which are accentuated when dealing with hoaxes. Questions of attribution are particularly challenging with respect to hoaxes, since they may—by definition—involve lies about what activity was carried out, and by whom. False flag hoaxes may also be carried out by competing terrorist organizations or non-terrorist pranksters. Even where incidents are appropriately attributed to their perpetrators, they may be wrongly identified as hoaxes. Based on observation alone, it is difficult to distinguish between an intentional hoax and a serious plot designed by incompetents.

As noted above, the Canada-centric CIDB corrects for the limited scope of hoax event data available in a cross-national context. In covering domestic hoaxes relating to conventional weapons, the CIDB captures a massive portion of terrorism hoax activity that is invisible in cross-national analyses based on the WMDDb and ITERATE. The frequency of these incidents indicates that Canada is a target of terrorism hoax activity. Canadian citizens are victim to hoaxes' associated costs: lost productivity due to evacuated educational institutions and places of work; wasted emergency response and enforcement resources; and increased societal fear and suspicion.

While the CIDB's enhanced coverage generates a comprehensive picture of the hoax landscape in Canada relative to other forms of violent extremism, it is unclear to what degree the trends it documents are extrapolable to other national contexts. More importantly, the observational nature of the data limits the degree to which it may support analyses of perpetrator intent or strategy.

Given terrorist groups' clandestine nature, however, observational events data is frequently the best (and only) data available for examining trends in terrorist activity over time. Funding a team of coders intimately familiar with the language and historical context of the country they are evaluating—as was done for the CIDB—can significantly enhance the validity of terrorism events data.



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Author Bibliography

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Suggested Highlights

- Canada is a target of terrorism hoax activity, and Canadian citizens are victim to its associated costs: lost productivity due to evacuated educational institutions and places of work; wasted emergency response and enforcement resources; and increased societal fear and suspicion.
- In providing coverage of domestic hoaxes involving the use of conventional weapons, the Canada-centric *Canadian Incident Database* (CIDB) captures a massive portion of terrorist hoax activity that is invisible in cross-national analyses.
- Key trends:
 - 1) Cross-national datasets significantly underreport terrorist activity in Canada;
 - 2) Domestic events—at least in the Canadian context—are far more likely to be hoaxes than events with a transnational orientation; and
 - 3) Incidents in Canada purporting to involve CBRN weapons are very likely to be hoaxes.