

The Dallas Morning News

Safer or not, living with terror is now an American pastime

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September 9, 2016

Tyler Carson moved from Arlington to New York in May to pursue a career in acting. Since then, he's become more paranoid about his safety.

He eyes people with suspicion, especially on the subway or in other public places. Security measures at airports seem helpful, he said, but he believes it's difficult for authorities to thwart "mass shootings and mass stabbings and mass whateverings" in other areas.

"If I wanted to kill a thousand people in a day, all I would have to do is walk into a subway station where there's not a damn lick of security, with a bomb on me," said Carson, 22, a recent University of Texas at Arlington graduate. "And all of the sudden, everybody's dead."

A surprisingly large number of Americans believe it's easier for terrorists to attack the U.S. today, despite all the spending on homeland security and the absence of a large-scale attack since 2001.

Many security and terrorism experts agree that the roughly \$1 trillion in homeland security spending since Sept. 11, 2001, has closed numerous safety gaps that could have been exploited by terrorists. Fifteen years later, we are safer but not completely safe, they say.

The chances of being a victim of a terrorist attack in the U.S. are about 1 in 4 million. That means you are considerably more likely to die from a random street shooting or a vehicle accident.

Yet there are different security threats today that were not as common in 2001, like cyberattacks and lone wolf terrorists. They may not lead to large body counts, but the randomness, violence and capacity for disruption of such events have the ability to spread fear.

Until this summer, Carson considered the Dallas area a haven, free from major threats. But after the deadly July 7 ambush on officers in downtown Dallas, he began to feel less safe at home, too.

"I feel like I have to be more careful because this is the world we live in now," he said.

Dave McIntyre, a homeland security expert and lecturer at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, said a major terrorism event like the World Trade Center attacks is less likely today.

The attacks using hijacked aircraft against the Trade Center in lower Manhattan and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killed almost 3,000 people and injured more than 6,000 others. A fourth plane that was steered toward Washington crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers tried to stop the hijackers.

But terrorists have gotten better at selecting easier targets, McIntyre said.

“We are better prepared now against the threats we had in the past,” he said. “But we don’t know if we’re better prepared against threats in the future.”

McIntyre pointed to better training and coordination among state and federal agencies as well as the cooperation of private industry. But he said the government is more focused on preparing for smaller events rather than something big like a nuclear strike in a U.S. city.

No matter what the U.S. does this year, the terrorists will come up with a better approach next year, he said.

Sometimes, new approaches are easier to pull off, like the July attack in Nice, France. In that case, a Tunisian man drove a cargo truck into a crowd of people on a beachfront promenade celebrating Bastille Day, killing 86 people and injuring over 400 others.

McIntyre said we should be “intelligently concerned” but there is no reason to hide under our beds.

“We can’t afford to go asleep,” he said. “We’re facing an enemy who is adapting faster than we are.”

Public perception

The Pew Research Center interviewed 1,200 adults about terrorism recently, and 40 percent said they believe terrorists are more able to attack the U.S. now than they were around the 9/11 attacks. In 2002, only 22 percent of people had that answer.

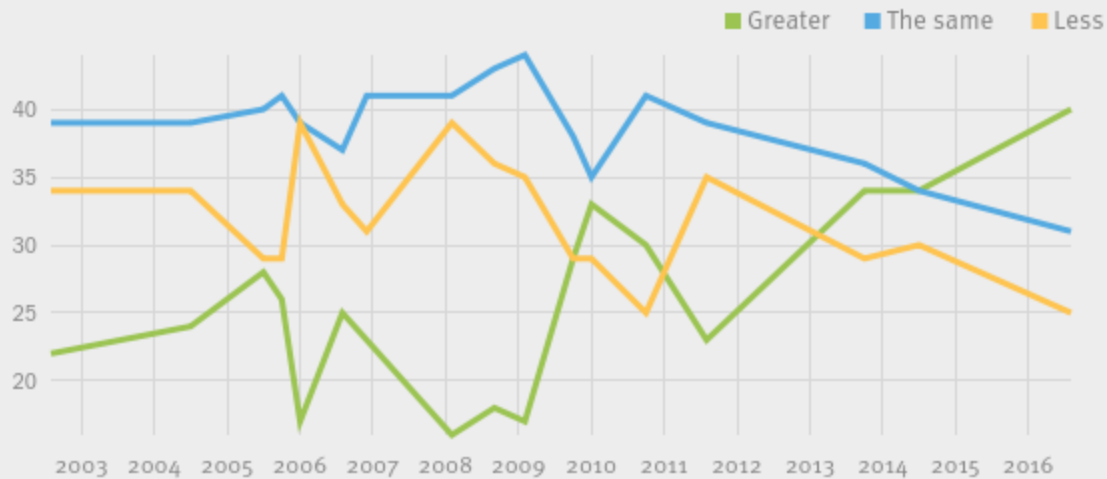
About half of the people interviewed this year said they believe that the government's policies to address terrorism aren't enough to protect the country; 33 percent said the policies had gone too far.

There seem to be partisan differences, too.

About 60 percent of Republicans interviewed for the Pew survey said they believe that terrorists are better able to attack the U.S. than they were in 2001. Only 30 percent of Democrats answered the same way.

Pew's survey on terrorism

Overall, do you think the ability of terrorists to launch another major attack on the U.S. is greater, the same or less than it was at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks?



The 2016 survey was based on responses from 1,201 adults -- living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia -- who were contacted at random on their landline or cellphone numbers between Aug. 23 and Sept. 2.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center

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Becky and Leo Kinney, who were returning Wednesday to their home in Highland Village in Denton County after visiting family in Portland, Ore., said they appreciate tighter security at airports but have a tough time letting their guard down.

Leo Kinney said he believes the U.S. is the safest country in the world. He said he also realizes that it isn't completely safe from "the bad guys."

"The bad guys are always trying to come up with ways to outsmart us," he said. "We're prepared for the next one — and the sad part is, there will always be a next one."

John Mueller, an adjunct political science professor at Ohio State University and a terrorism expert, said that despite all the gun violence in the U.S., international terrorist attacks seem to resonate more with people. It doesn't matter that foreign terrorists have failed in their attacks and are not very effective, he said.

"People seem much more afraid of some things and much less afraid of other things," Mueller said. "It's hard to figure out."

Bathtub drownings kill about 300 people per year, he said. And driving a vehicle comes with a 1 in 8,000 chance of dying. It is much more likely to kill people, but no one sits around worrying about it, Mueller said.

Mueller it's unclear if some of the money spent on homeland security has actually achieved anything beyond creating the perception of safety among the public.

The Transportation Security Administration, for example, has confiscated numerous firearms and other weapons at airports. But a 2015 report found that TSA screeners failed to detect explosives and guns 95 percent of the time during undercover tests at some of the nation's busiest airports.

'Pushing them back'

Journalist Steven Brill spent a year researching federal spending on homeland security measures for *The Atlantic* and concluded that we are safer from large-scale events like the destruction of the World Trade Center towers.

“But we have not plugged some of the most threatening security gaps,” he concluded.

Brill said dirty bombs, which combine radioactive material with conventional explosives, still pose a significant threat because they can do great harm and can be smuggled into a U.S. city relatively easily.

“Why place all those resources at our big freight ports when a pleasure boat carrying a dirty bomb can arrive in Florida from the Bahamas with no inspection?” he asked.

Joe Lieberman, a former U.S. senator from Connecticut who is senior adviser for the Counter Extremism Project, said the 9/11 attacks “woke us up” to the fact that “we were in a new war.”

Lieberman spoke at a Washington, D.C., forum organized by *The Atlantic* about homeland security efforts since September 2001 as well as current threats.

He said that if the security reforms that exist today were in place in 2001, the attacks would not have been successful.

But Lieberman conceded that the “spreading menace of radical Islamist terrorism” is still a threat, particularly in influencing lone wolves.

“They’re using a wonderful development in our world, which is the internet, but they’re using it to communicate, to radicalize and sometimes to attack,” he said.

Lieberman said that there’s no question federal spending since 2001 has made Americans safer, but that they should not let down their guard.

“We’re under continuing threat because of how few people can do enormous damage to us on this unconventional battlefield. But we’re pushing them back.”

New threats

Although organized foreign terrorist groups have not been successful in planning a large-scale attack in the U.S. since 9/11, they have been able to use social media and the internet to inspire others to carry out smaller strikes.

Lone wolves, as they are called, are typically young men who feel isolated and angry about something or who suffer from undiagnosed mental illness. They are particularly vulnerable to Islamic extremist propaganda online. And with the availability of powerful rifles in the U.S., they can do considerable damage in public areas or buildings.

“Multiple one-off attacks have become relatively common, from the Boston Marathon to Orlando to San Bernardino to Fort Hood to Garland to Chattanooga,” Brill wrote in his magazine piece.

Amanda Moulton was at Klyde Warren Park with her 2-year-son, Maddox, on Thursday. She said she isn't worried as much about an international terrorist attack as she is about isolated incidents of domestic terror, such as the 2012 Aurora theater mass shooting in Colorado, in which a gunman killed 12 people and injured 70 others.

"It doesn't keep me from doing things but it does cross my mind when I'm out," the young mom from Lewisville said as her son ran through spouts of water at the park. "But I won't stay home because I'm worried."

In Garland last year, police killed two men who tried to attack a controversial art exhibit featuring cartoons about the prophet Muhammad. The Islamic State took credit for the attempted attack but authorities did not seem to believe that the suspects, Nadir Soofi and Elton Simpson, ever communicated directly with the group.

In Orlando this summer, a gunman reportedly pledged allegiance to IS before killing 49 people in a popular gay nightclub.

And on July 7, a lone gunman ambushed police officers in downtown Dallas, killing four Dallas officers and one DART officer. Several people were injured in the attack. Micah Johnson told police he was targeting white officers to avenge the fatal shootings of black men across the country by police.

Living with risk

Targets are everywhere, such as stadiums and churches filled with people, said Mueller.

“We just can’t stop living because we may pose a target to some nutcase terrorist,” he said.

Mueller said it’s not possible to ever get the risk down to zero.

“We live with risk all the time," he said.

Darryl Miller scanned the street outside DFW International Airport on Wednesday, clutching a cart holding his duffel bags.

“Before, you could hardly see police officers," he said. "I might have seen one or two, but now every exit or entryway you'll see one or two police officers or a vehicle circling the area."

Miller said he feels safer flying because of visible improvements in airport security. The lines at security checkpoints are longer, and there are more security officers inside and outside the terminals, he said.

“With anything, we can ‘what if’ it to death, but there are procedures in place,” Miller said. “If we knew 9/11 was going to happen, you think 9/11 would happen? No.”