

Fame-Seeking, Fixation, and Leakage

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In April 2024, a Maryland teenager was arrested after the authorities received a tip about a document in which the teenager outlined his plans to carry out two school shootings.¹ The document describes the teen's desire for fame and to "set the record for the most kills."² He was also a member of a Discord chat in which participants glorified school shootings, and he had previously been hospitalized for homicidal ideations and a preoccupation with school shootings.³ Ultimately, he leaked information about the document to another person he was hospitalized with, who then reported him to the police, preventing the attack.⁴ This case is representative of a broader pattern in which a desire for fame and an obsession with mass violence manifest in a potential attacker's leakage behaviors.

Leakage refers to a would-be attacker's intentional or unintentional communication of an intent to do harm before an attack.⁵ Under a very narrow definition, *leakage* includes behaviors such as making specific or veiled threats, posting a hit list or manifesto, or sharing details of a plan in person or online.⁶ However, leakage can also include a broad range of concerning or warning behaviors that signal violent intent. Examples include the use of extremist symbols and obsessive interest in firearms, mass violence, or a previous perpetrator of targeted violence.⁷ Leakage can occur at any stage of an individual's attack preparations, and recognizing and reporting the warning signs is key to disrupting plots.⁸

Key Takeaways

- Recent trends in extremist tactics and networks indicate that perpetrators are increasingly motivated by fame-seeking, identifying with or claiming inspiration from previous attacks or attackers, and obsessed with acts of mass violence.
- Offenders who sought fame or who were obsessed with mass violence were significantly more likely to "leak" their plans in explicit ways (e.g., posting details of their plan online).
- Offenders who sought fame or claimed inspiration from a previous attack or attacker were significantly more likely to leak in less-explicit ways (e.g., exhibiting an obsession with previous mass shooters).
- Both Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) practitioners and bystanders (e.g., friends, family, teachers) should be trained on how to recognize and act appropriately when they observe leakage or other warning behaviors.

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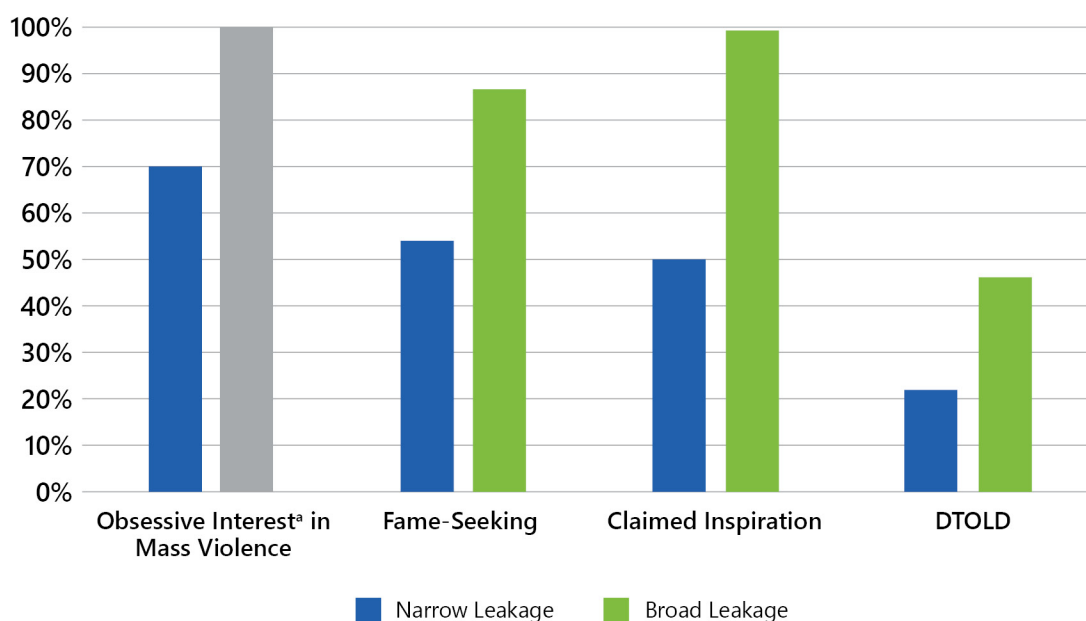
Individuals who want to be famous for perpetrating mass violence expect to claim credit for their actions, and people who are fixated on mass violence or previous attackers often want to talk about it, whether in person or online.⁹ Given these patterns, we would expect high rates of leakage by would-be attackers with these motivations. To explore this relationship, we leveraged CNA's Domestic Terrorism Offender-Level Database (DTOLD).^{*} If a relationship between fame-seeking, fixation, and leakage exists, this finding could inform how threat assessment professionals interpret reports of concerning behaviors and evaluate the level of threat they may represent.

Analysis

DTOLD contains detailed information on 319 non-Islamist perpetrators[†] who carried out terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020.

In DTOLD, we define *leakage* in two ways: narrow and broad. *Narrow leakage* refers to offenders making a warning, threat, or announcement or using social media before or during the attack (e.g., posting about it beforehand, livestreaming it). *Broad leakage* includes the narrow leakage behaviors, use of extremist symbols, and notable or obsessive interest in firearms, mass violence, vigilante organizations, or another extremist individual. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of

Figure 1. Prevalence of leakage by motivation in DTOLD



Source: CNA.

^a Note: Broad leakage is a composite variable made up of seven variables, one of which is obsessive interest in mass violence. Thus, 100 percent of offenders with obsessive interest in mass violence have broad leakage (bar grayed out). Claiming inspiration from a previous attack or attacker is not part of the composite broad leakage variable.

^{*} The inclusion criteria for DTOLD are as follows: (1) the attack is included in the Global Terrorism Database; (2) the attack occurred in the United States; (3) the attack occurred between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020; (4) the perpetrator was 18 or older at the time of the attack; (5) if charges were filed, the case did not result in acquittal or mistrial nor were the charges dismissed; and (6) the attack meets the Federal Bureau of Investigation's definitions of *domestic violent extremism* and *terrorism*.

[†] We determined that because it does not derive from domestic influences, Islamist terrorism does not fit sufficiently within the definitions of *domestic violent extremism* or *domestic terrorism* to be included. Therefore, we excluded 53 individuals who we identified as being responsible for an attack in the Global Terrorism Database but who were motivated at least partially by Islamist extremism.



narrow and broad leakage for subsets of perpetrators motivated by fame, claiming inspiration from previous attacks or attackers, or fixated on acts of mass violence. Rates of leakage among these perpetrators are notably higher than those among DTOLD perpetrators without these interests or obsessions.

Our analysis suggests that the domestic terrorists in DTOLD who had fame-seeking motives or who claimed inspiration from a previous attack or attacker were statistically significantly more likely to leak than offenders without those characteristics.

Narrow leakage

We found that fame-seeking and obsessive interest in mass violence were statistically significantly associated with narrow leakage. Fame-seekers were about three times more likely to narrowly leak than other offenders.[‡] In addition, those obsessed with mass violence were about seven times more likely to narrowly leak. That is, **when offenders in DTOLD sought fame or were obsessed with mass violence, the chances were between three and seven times higher that they would signal their violent intentions ahead of time.**

[‡] We found that fame seeking ($p < 0.001$) and obsessive interest in mass violence ($p < 0.001$) are both statistically significantly associated with narrow leakage.

[§] We found that fame-seeking ($p < 0.001$) and claiming inspiration from a previous attack or attacker ($p < 0.001$) are both statistically significantly associated with broad leakage.

However, under this narrow definition, we found no significant relationship between leakage and claiming inspiration from a previous attack or attacker.

Broad leakage

We also found that **fame-seeking and claiming inspiration from a previous attack or attacker were both significantly associated with broad leakage.**[§] In fact, all offenders who claimed inspiration from a previous attack or attacker exhibited broad leakage. We could not test the relationship between broad leakage and obsessive interest in mass violence because the latter variable is part of the definition of *broad leakage*. However, we did determine that obsessive interest in mass violence accounts for 15 percent of broad leakage in DTOLD.

Limitations

Although these findings offer important implications, they are subject to some constraints. First, DTOLD was constructed with open-source data (e.g., court records, investigative reports, newspaper articles). As a result, information on some variables was not publicly

available. To complete our analysis, we replaced missing values with the most typical value for each variable.¹ This approach was not a perfect solution, but it helped us mitigate the “media bias effect,” which means that certain types of attacks or attackers receive more media attention and coverage than others, resulting in greater information availability for them compared to others.¹⁰

Second, the threat landscape has evolved significantly since 2020 (the end of the time frame for inclusion in DTOLD). In addition, because DTOLD includes only perpetrators who were identified and charged between 2001 and 2020, it may not be representative of everyone who has committed an act of domestic terrorism. We therefore have limited ability to generalize the findings beyond the specific perpetrators in the database.

Implications

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications for practitioners. In recent years, perpetrators of targeted violence have increasingly been participants in online ecosystems characterized by fame-seeking, identification with or claiming inspiration from previous attackers, and obsession with mass violence.¹¹ For example, the perpetrator of the 2025 Annunciation Catholic Church shooting was obsessed with previous mass shooters and wanted to be a famous mass shooter; they wrote in their diary that “they will remember me when it’s done.”¹² As extremist tactics and ecosystems evolve, the challenge of detecting extremist plots will continue to grow. Detecting leakage is critical to preventing attacks, and this analysis provides crucial information about who is likely to leak and how.

BTAM practitioners should be well trained on how to identify and respond to both broad and narrow leakage, and they should be aware that individuals with the motivations we have discussed are highly likely to leak if they are planning violence. In addition, given

the recent trends of attacks and plots perpetrated by individuals with these motivations, training for bystanders who are likely to observe leakage (e.g., family, friends, mental health professionals, teachers) is essential to ensure signals of violent intent are not missed.

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