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RICE UNIVERSITY

ANALYZING THE ISLAMIC EXTREMIST
PHENOMENON IN THE UNITED STATES:
A STUDY OF RECENT ACTIVITY

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The Islamic Extremist Phenomenon in the United States

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The Islamic Extremist Phenomenon in the United States

Abstract

The study of terrorism strives to identify logic and patterns in a phenomenon that is in constant flux. Weapons, tactics, recruitment, financing, and other elements are fluid as they evolve and adapt to current conditions and the environment. Successful policy requires remaining abreast of the ever-evolving threat and responding accordingly. As such, U.S. policymakers need to understand the current dynamics and trends in order to mitigate and combat the threats to our nation.

The purpose of this paper was to compile as much factual data as possible on U.S. citizens and individuals domiciled in the United States who have been reported in the news and have been suspected to have ties to Islamic extremist activity from approximately January 2009 to April 2011. The aim of the project was to explore any perpetrator patterns that presented themselves in the hopes that the revelations could help equip decision-makers with insight to the threat and assist the creation of proactive policies in the fight against terrorism derived from Islamic extremism.

Background

Methodology

Research focused on individuals named in the media as having been subject to detentions, arrests, deportations, and other activities and having suspected ties to terrorist activity from approximately January 2009 to April 2011. The persons included reflect the researchers' best efforts to identify persons fitting the criteria; it is comprehensive, but should not be considered exhaustive. Sources for factual data included the international and U.S. press, general Internet media, public records, and official court documents. To the extent there have been inaccuracies reported in the press, these inaccuracies may also be reflected in the data. Researchers did not have access to law enforcement or classified information, nor did they undertake any independent investigation beyond the research sources. It is important to note that persons involved in jihadist and/or terrorist activity may be charged with crimes that do not carry the word "terrorism." For example, Carlos Bledsoe was tried for murder in the death of military

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recruiters in Little Rock, Arkansas, although he claimed to be a member of Al Qaeda and claimed the act to be his “jihad.”

Purpose

The purpose of this paper has been to compile as much factual data as possible on U.S. citizens and individuals domiciled in the United States who have been reported in the news and have been suspected to have ties to terrorist activity from January 2009 to approximately April 2011. The data collected will serve as a foundation for future research, and to detect and quantify trends in an ever-changing threat environment.

Providing the policymakers with this type of data can allow a factual discussion and diminish rhetoric. Consequently, policy can be crafted to address current and future needs in the face of change and adaptation by those determined to bring harm to our country and its citizens.

The strength of this project lies in the collection and analysis of public data that can provide policymakers and researchers with basic information that can inform policy formulation. Subsequently, no policy recommendations or suggestions have been made. Instead, the data has been allowed to speak for itself, and bring factual data to the current public debate.

Analysis

The analysis group contained 104 persons. The first stage of the analysis compared the data of the analysis group to nationwide federal statistics on arrests in general (excluding strictly immigration offenses) and on the “violent offense” subgroup. The second stage explored the characteristics of the analysis group—age, country of origin, religion of birth family, education, criminal history, foreign travel, and associated organizations.

Analytical Results

The initial analysis compared the analysis group to national crime statistics compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2009 for 183,986 persons who were arrested and booked

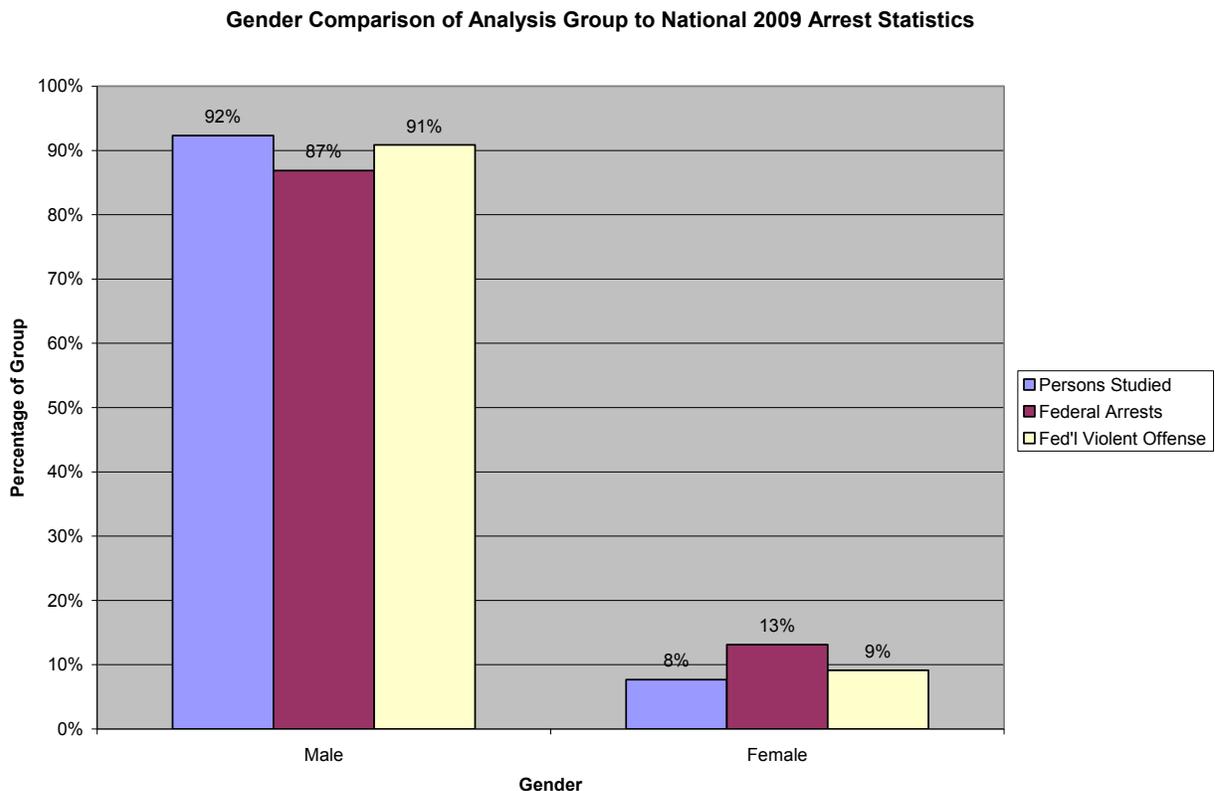
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nationwide.¹ For the comparison, aggregated national statistics (excluding immigration violations) and violent offense statistics were used.

Gender

The analysis group was 92% male and 8% female. The statistics associated with gender showed the analysis group to be comparable to the national statistics of violent offenders.

Figure 1



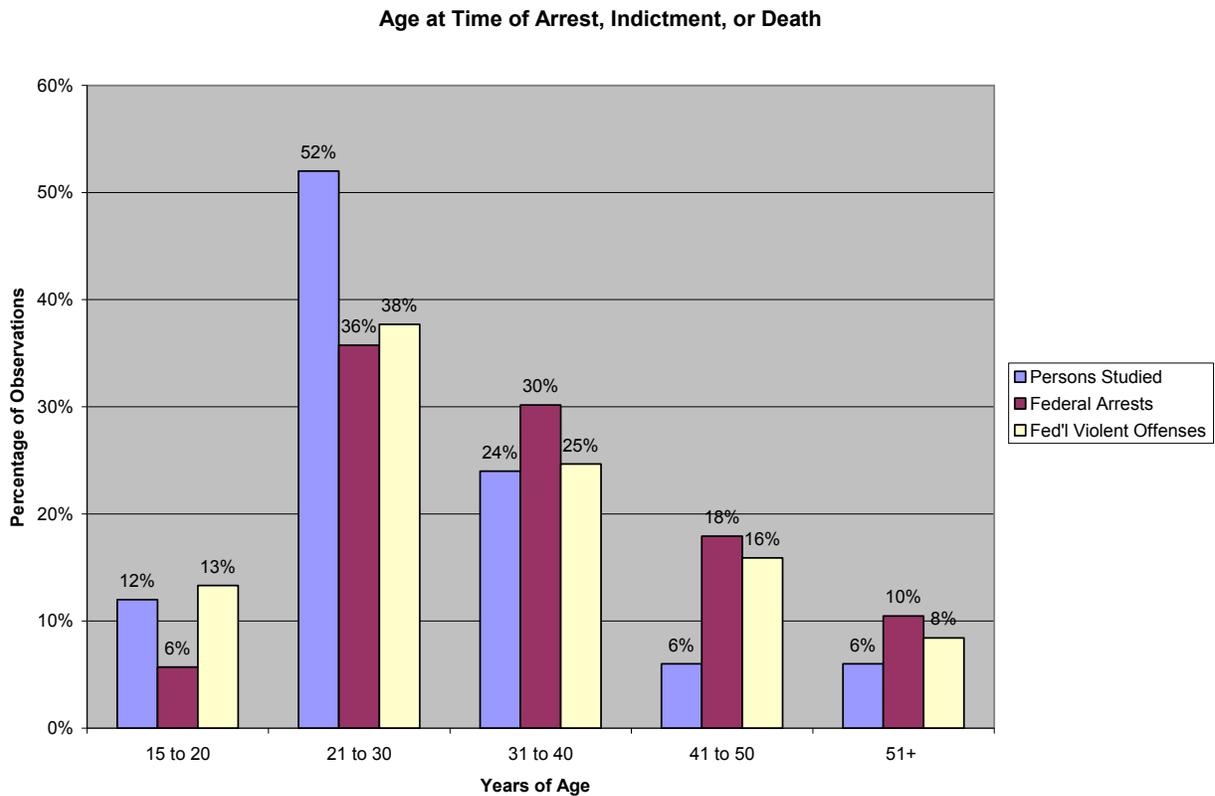
Age

Age was known for 100 persons in the analysis group. The statistics associated with age indicate the analysis group to be more heavily weighted to persons in their 20s. Of the persons studied for whom age was known, 64% were 30 years old or younger, versus 42% for those arrested for federal arrests nationwide, and 49% for those arrested for violent offenses. Further analysis of the 64% figure reveals 37% were 24 or younger and 27% were 25 to 30 years of age. Given that

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a year or more of indoctrination occurs before the individual would be arrested, indicted, or killed, this indicates indoctrination occurred for a large portion of the group during the formative stages of the high school and college years.

Figure 2



Citizenship

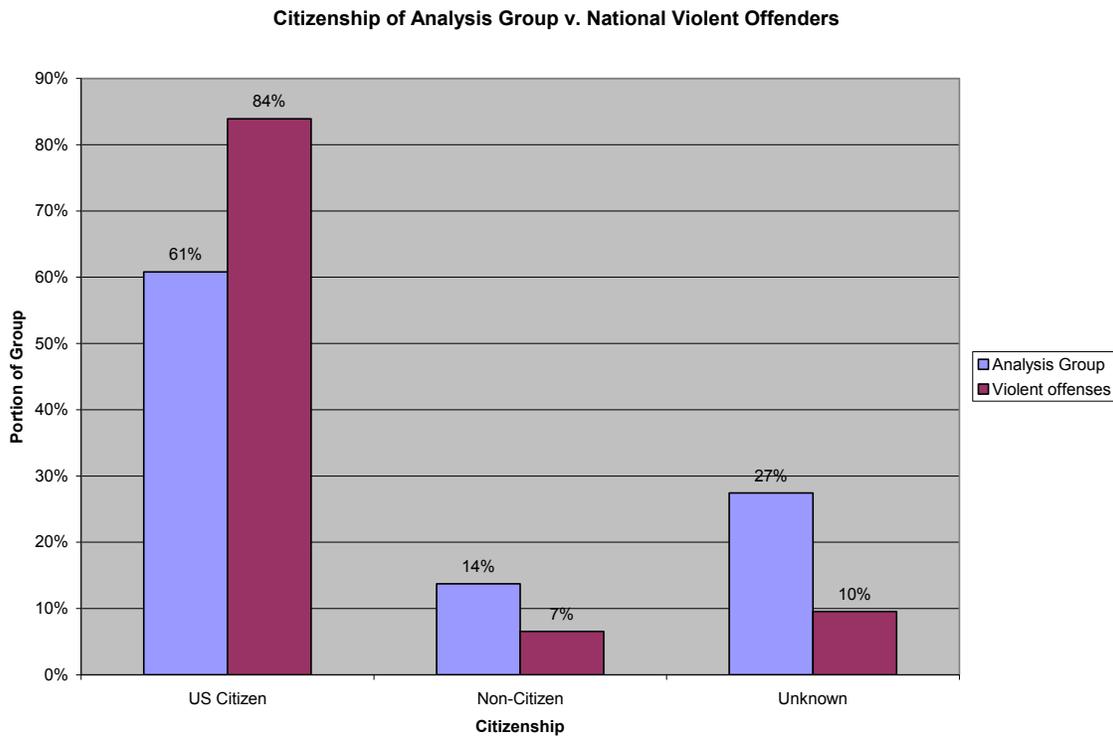
The statistics associated with citizenship indicate the analysis group is more heavily associated with non-citizens than violent offenders nationwide. Proportionally, there are more instances of “unknown” citizenship status in the analysis group, so figures are provided with and without the “unknown” data.

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Table 1

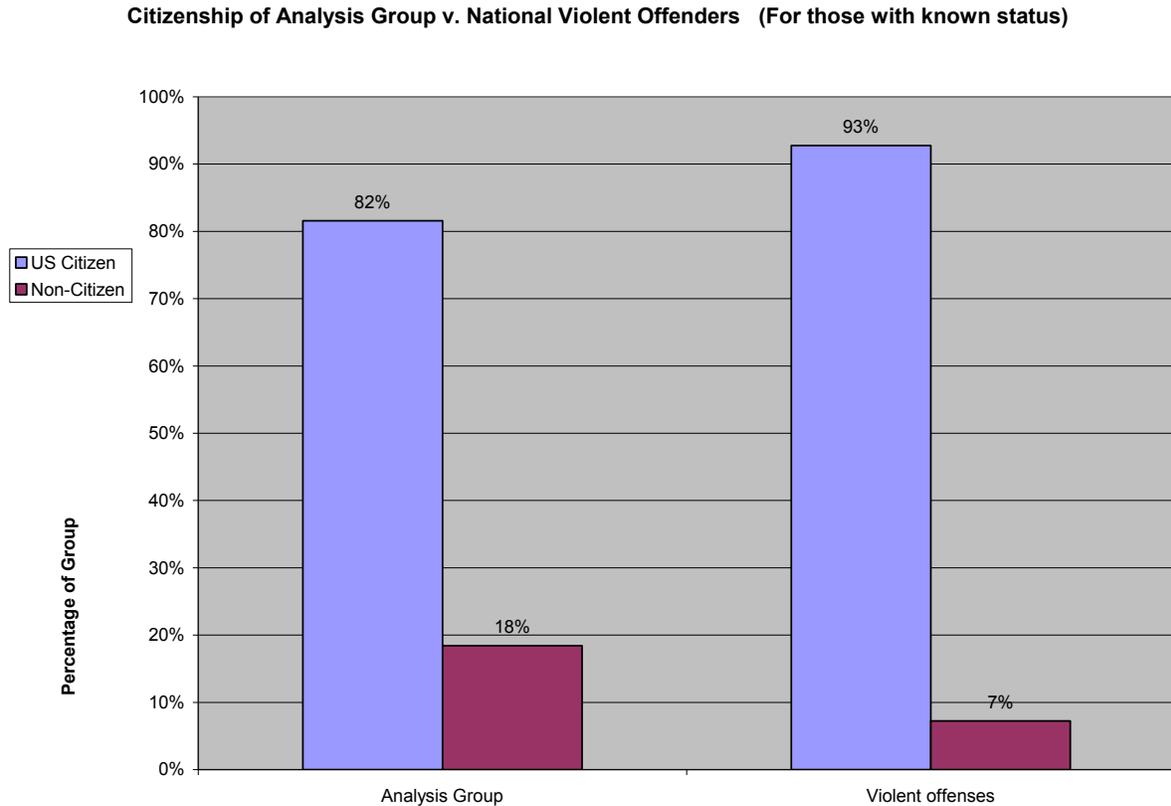
	Analysis Group	Violent Offenses
U.S. citizen	62	3,817
Non-citizen	14	298
Unknown	28	435
Total	104	4,550

Figure 3



Taking out the cases where the status is not known, the non-citizens again tend to be more heavily represented in the analysis group.

Figure 4



In conclusion, analysis of the sample group indicates those suspected of involvement in Islamic extremist activities or with extremist groups tend to be men, 30 years of age or younger. In comparison to federal statistics on offenders, there is a higher propensity for the analysis group perpetrators to be younger and foreign-born than the general population of violent offenders.

Detailed Analysis of Studied Group

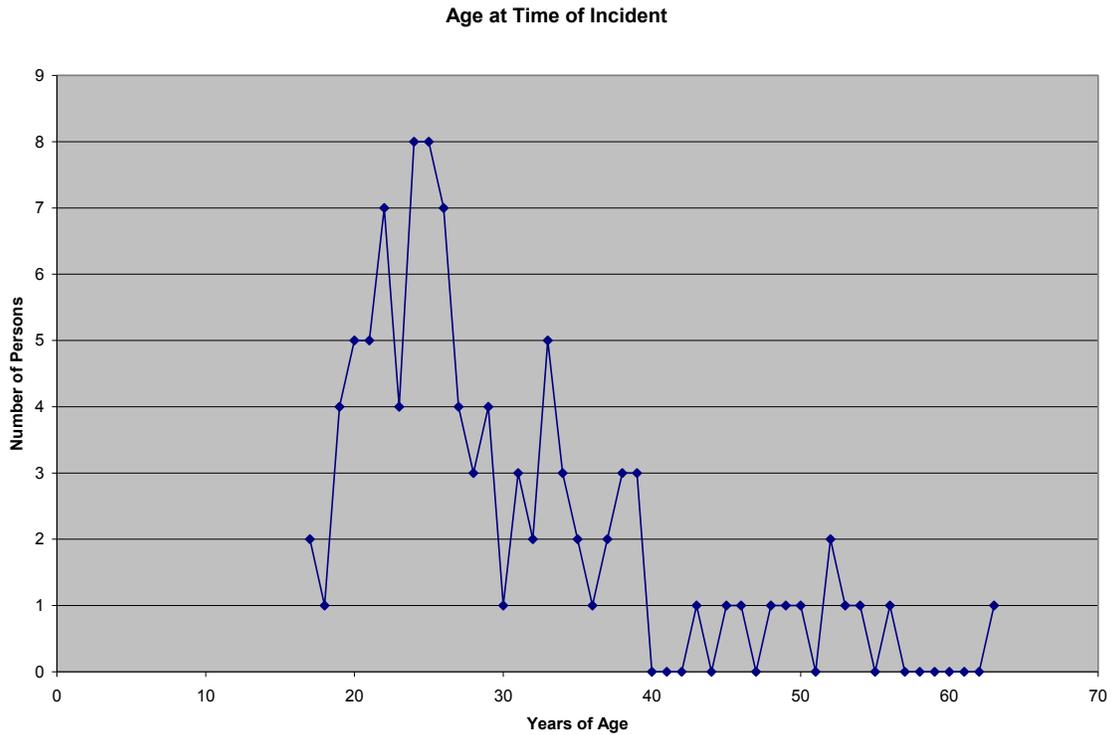
Detailed correlation analysis of the group is limited by the sample size. Nonetheless, points of interest are documented.

Age

For those 99 for whom age was known, the median age of the study group was 26.

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Figure 5



Citizenship and Immigration Status

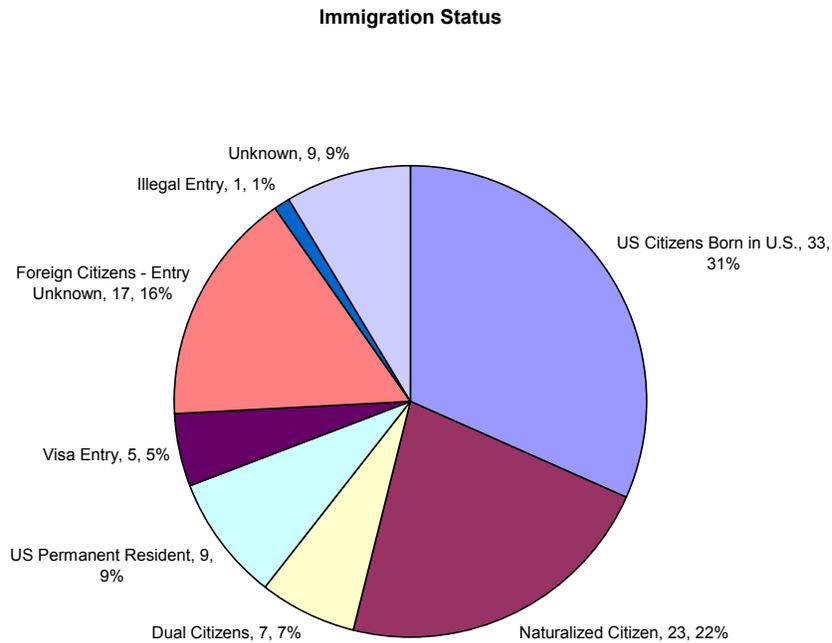
Immigration status was noted for the group, but there is an inherent limitation: the sample is focused on persons in the United States suspected of being tied to Islamic extremism and/or foreign Islamic extremist organizations and on U.S. persons suspected of the same activities abroad. The sampling does not include those persons suspected of being tied to Islamic extremism and/or extremist organizations in the United States that, although they may have resided in the United States at one time, were not U. S. citizens and were not detained in the United States.

With this caveat, the results indicate that 60% of the 104 persons studied are known to be U.S. citizens; 31% were born in the United States, 22% were naturalized citizens, and 7% were dual citizens. Foreign-born individuals may have become naturalized citizens; come to the United States on a student, investment, or work visa; become a permanent resident; or been domiciled within the country for a specified time period. (Those known to be born abroad who are now U.S. citizens are assumed to be naturalized in the absence of information on dual nationality.)

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The immigration details for 27% of the analysis group could not be fully determined; they were either foreign citizens for which immigration data was not available, or the citizenship was not clear. Only one person in the analysis group was known to be an illegal immigrant, but others in the 27% may be as well.

Figure 6



Conversion to Islam

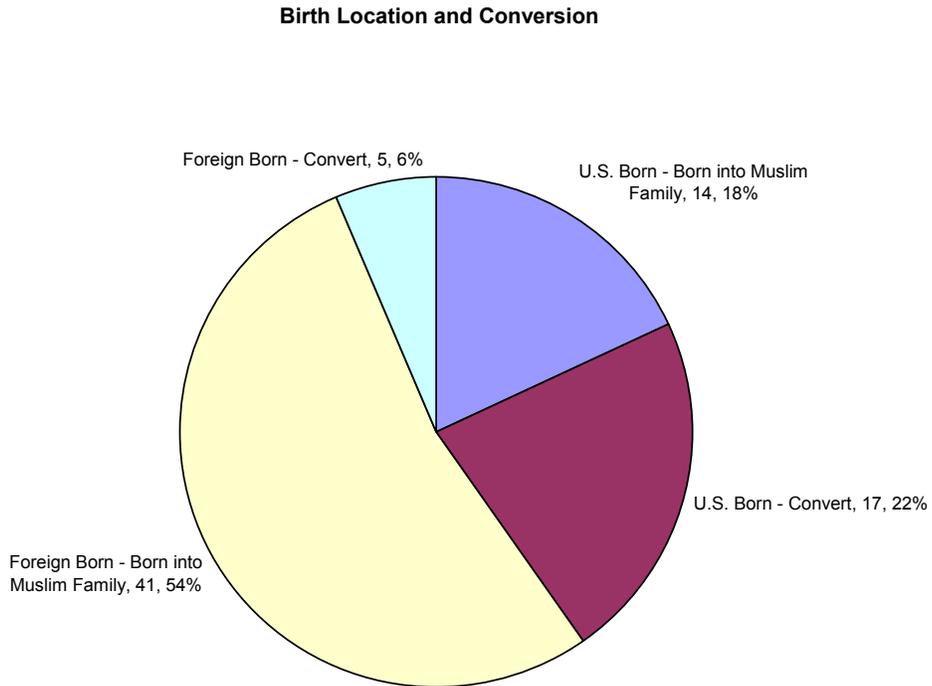
In looking at the analysis group’s place of birth and conversion to Islam, information was available for 77 persons. The data revealed 60% of the analysis group was born outside the United States, and 40% was born in the United States.

Table 2

Converts/Born in U.S.			
	U.S.- born	Born abroad	Total
Born into Muslim family	14	41	55
Convert	17	5	22
Total	31	46	77

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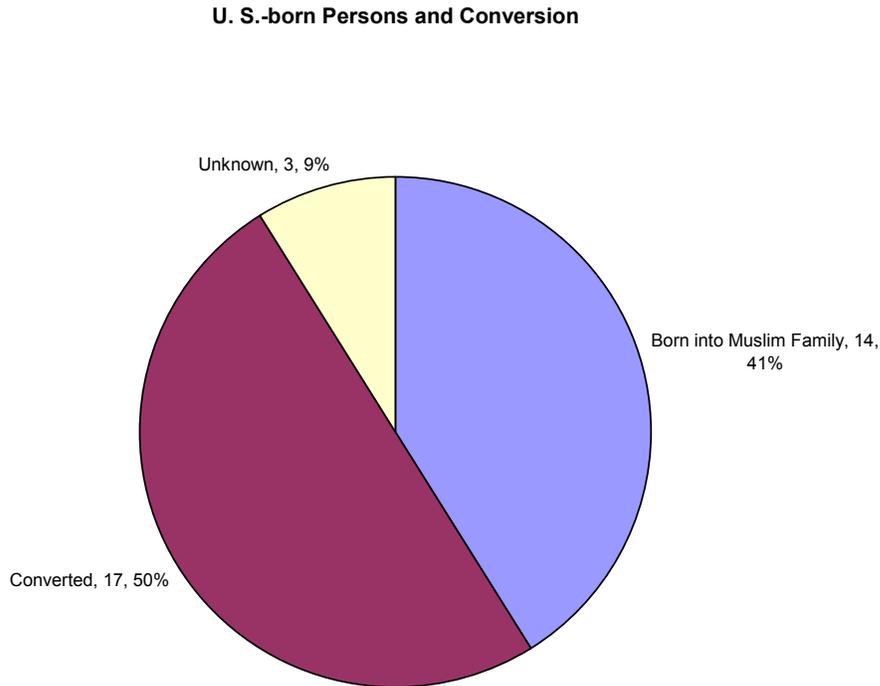
Figure 7



U.S.-born Persons

A total of 34 persons (including one dual citizen) were known to have been born in the United States. Of these, 14 were born into a Muslim family, 17 were converts, and no determination could be made for three. For the 31 persons where information was available, 55% had converted to Islam and 45% were born into a Muslim family.

Figure 8



Of these same 34 persons born in the United States, 14 (or 41%) were known to have a prior criminal history. Of the 14 with a known prior criminal history, 11 (or 78%) were known to have converted to Islam. Of the 11 converts, 6 (or 55%) are known to have converted to Islam in prison. Again, these figures may be understated, in that some individuals may have criminal records that were not found during the research.

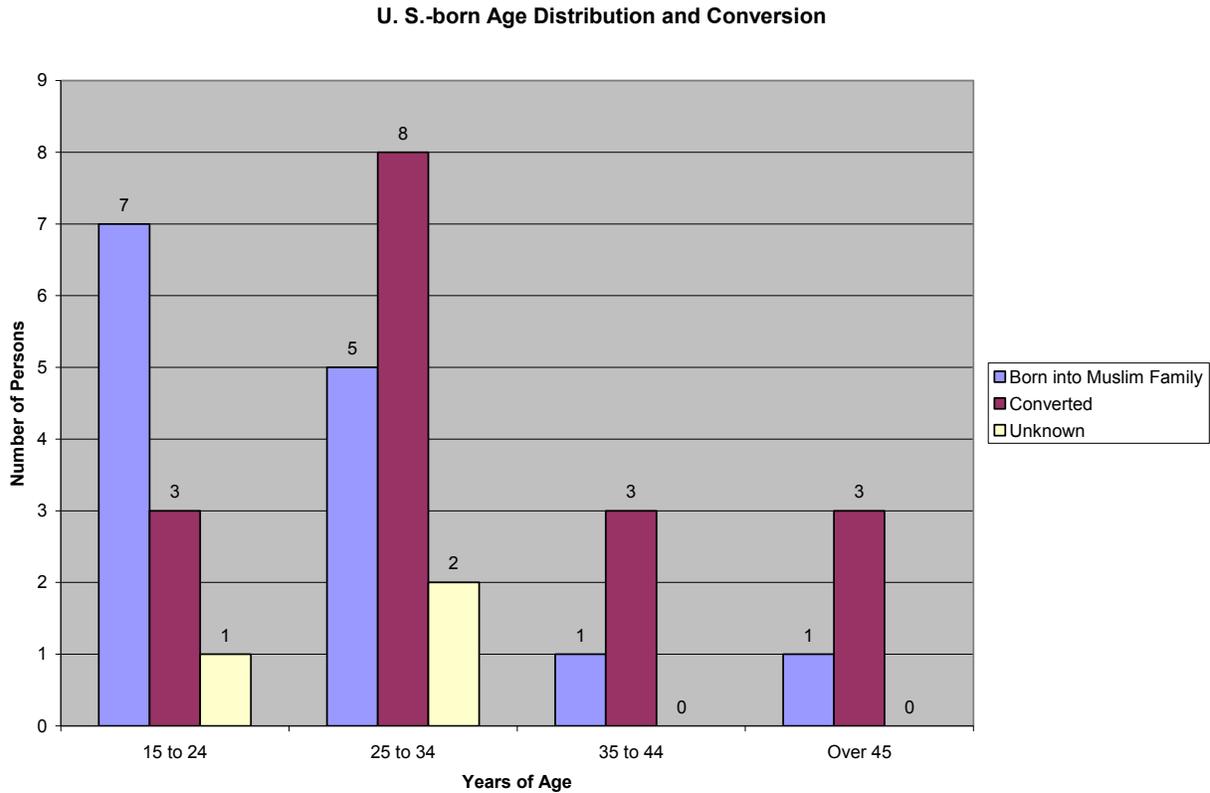
Looking solely at the 17 converts, 11 (or 65%) were known to have a prior criminal history. These figures may be understated, particularly given the young age of the analysis group. First, prior criminal history may not have been reported in the press or referenced in court documents; and second, juvenile criminal records are not a matter of public record, although journalists or law enforcement may comment on a juvenile record.

Figure 9



For the same 34 U.S.-born persons, approximately 32% were under 24 years of age, and 76% were under the age of 34. Also note the propensity of converts to be involved from the ages of 25 to 34, whereas the involvement by person born into a Muslim family tended to decline after the age of 24. This would imply interest in extremist activities declines among those born into a Muslim family from the time they are in their early 20s, whereas converts' interest in extremist activities increases into their 20s and does not decline until their 30s. As an alternative, the push by extremist-inspired recruiters for conversion during the academic years of age may be relatively recent, and thus the extremists cultivated during these years may not yet have reached their mid-30s and 40s.

Figure 10

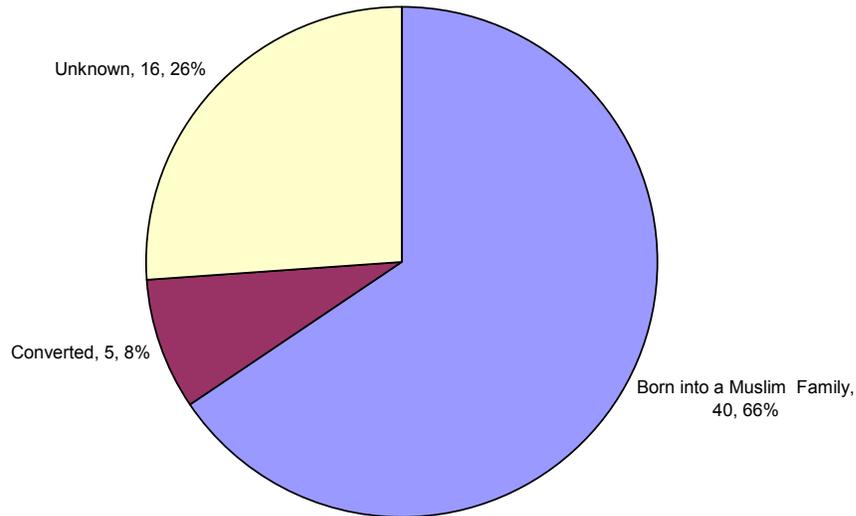


Foreign-born Persons

There were 61 persons who were known to have been foreign-born. For 26% of this group of 61, no information on religious origin was available; 8% were known to be converts to Islam; and 66% were known to be born into a Muslim family. The ratio of 1 out of 9 foreign-born persons having been converts to Islam would be expected to apply to the 26% of the foreign-born group for which no information was available.

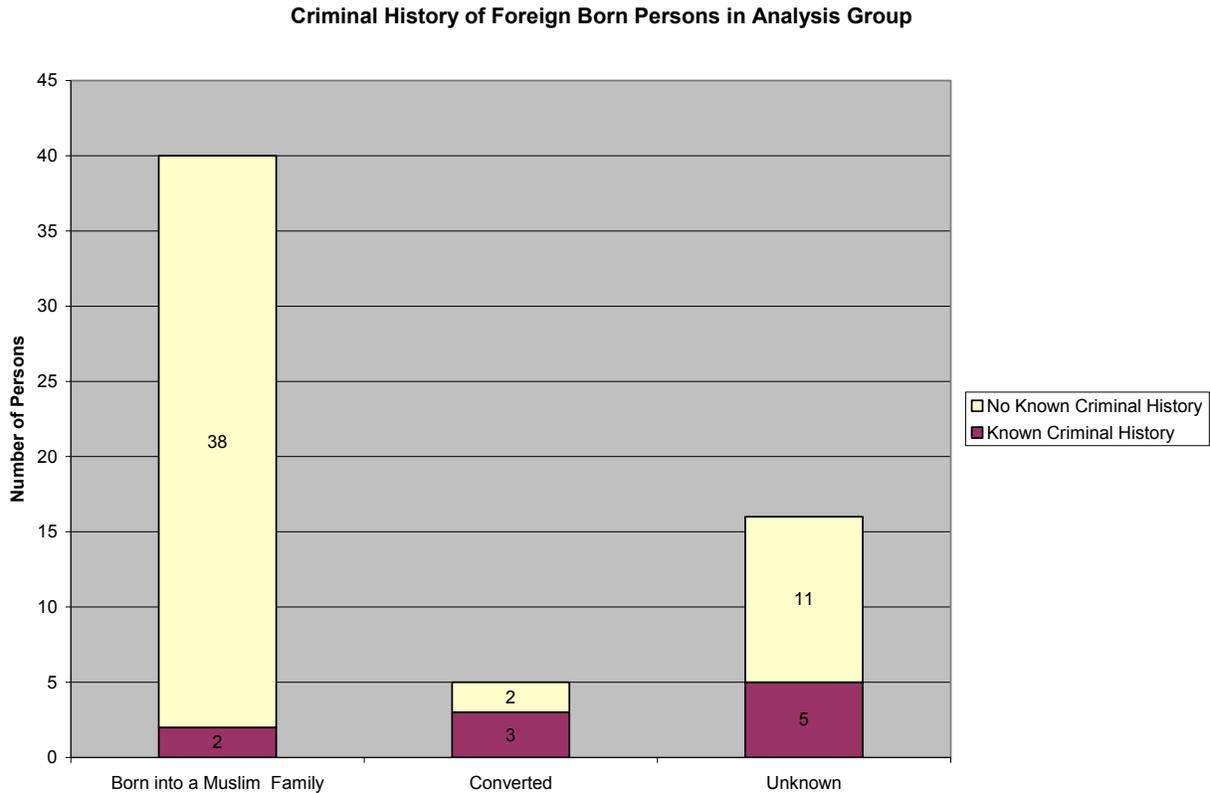
Figure 11

Foreign-born Persons in Analysis Group and Conversion



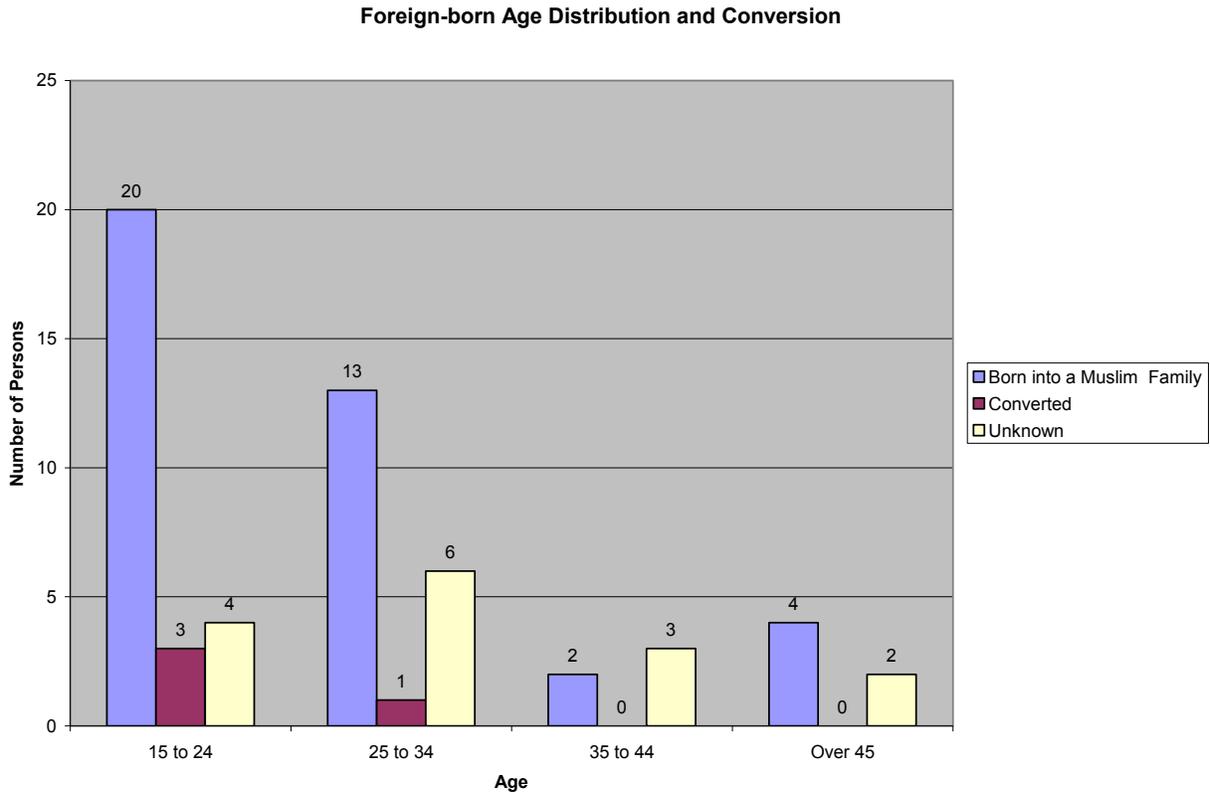
Of these same 61 foreign-born persons, 10 (or 16%) had a known prior criminal history. This figure is likely understated, because criminal activity overseas has a lower probability of being reported in public sources. Note that three of the five foreign-born converts (or 60%) had a prior criminal history. This approximates the 65% criminal history rate for U.S.-born persons. The source of the correlation between conversion and criminal activity begs for further research in the cause and effect relationship. Further detail on the timing of the conversion—i.e., if it occurred in prison, before the time of arrest, or after release—would provide valuable data.

Figure 12



Age and religious background information was available for 58 persons in the analysis group. Figure 13 is a representation of that data. For these 58 foreign born persons, approximately 46% were 24 years old or younger, and 81% were under the age of 34 at the time of the incident. In this instance, the propensity of converts to be involved in an incident tied to extremist activities after the age of 24 drops along with that of persons born into a Muslim family.

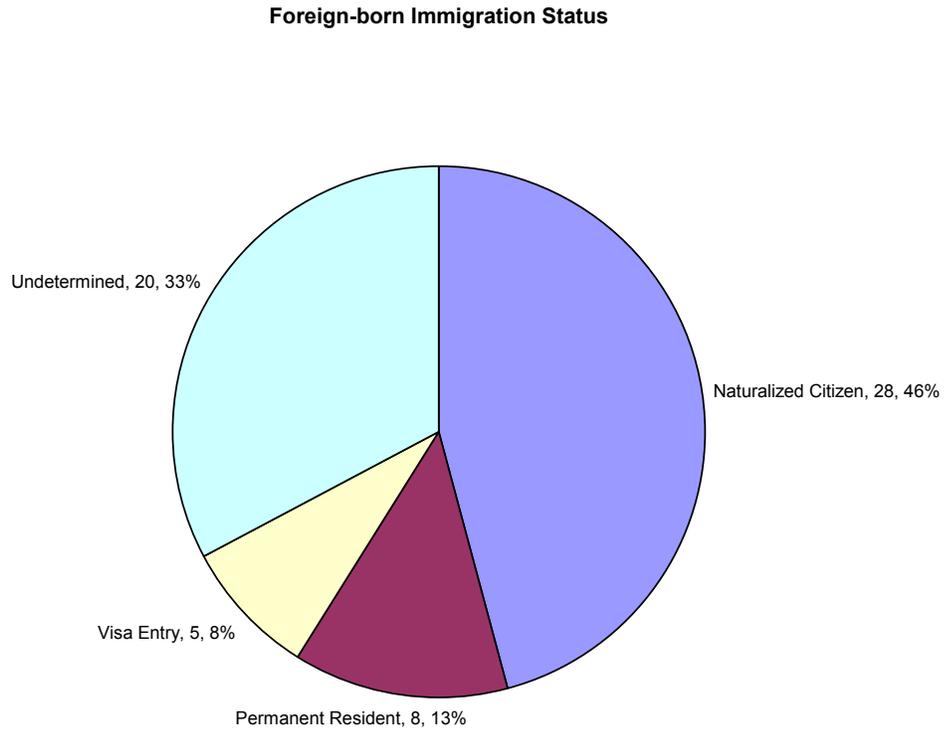
Figure 13



Looking more closely at the 61 persons known to be foreign-born, the data indicates 46% are known to have become naturalized citizens (including dual citizens), 15% are permanent resident aliens, and 8% entered on visas.

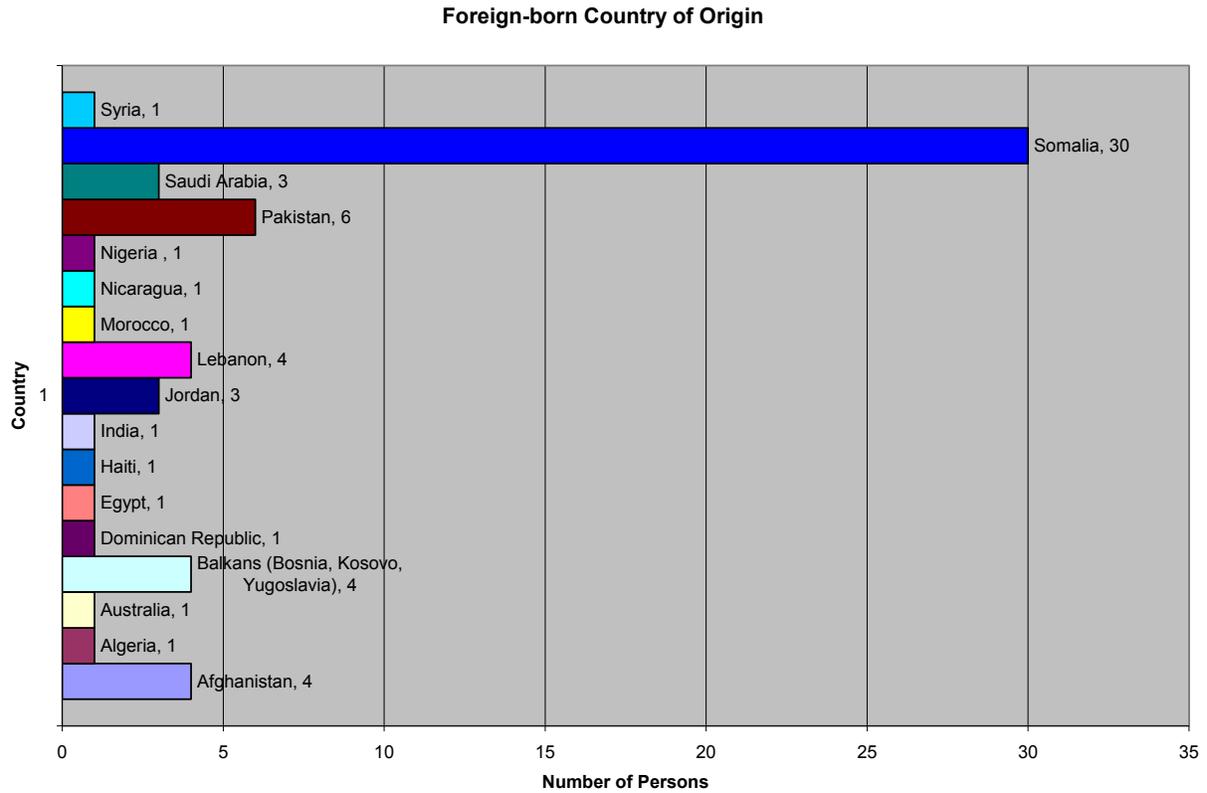
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Figure 14



There were 64 foreign-born persons for whom information was available on their country of origin. Note that Somali refugees were considered to be from Somalia, even though they may have resided in Kenyan refugee camps. The break out can be seen in Figure 15, below.

Figure 15

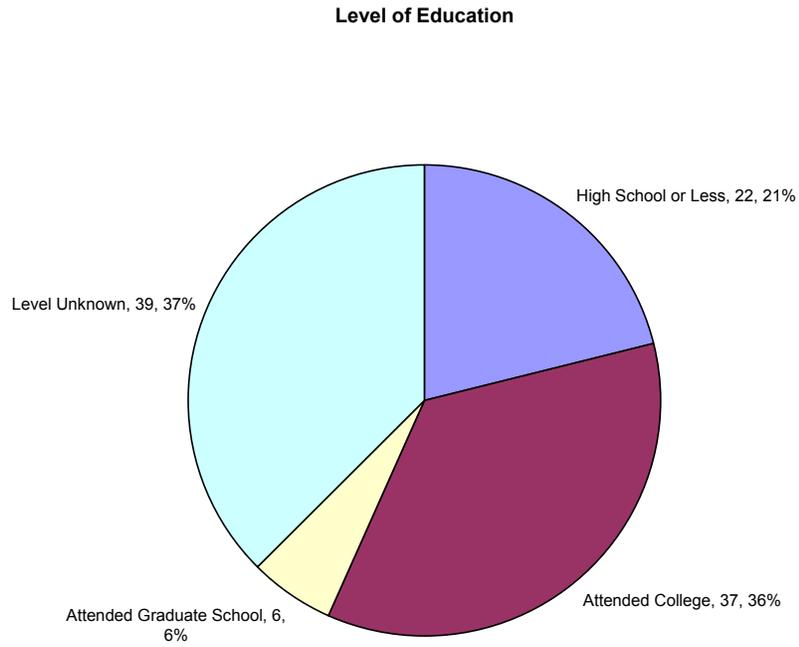


Education

The analysis group consisted of a large number of college students. For the entire group of 104, 21% had an education level that included high school, and 36% were found to have attended college.

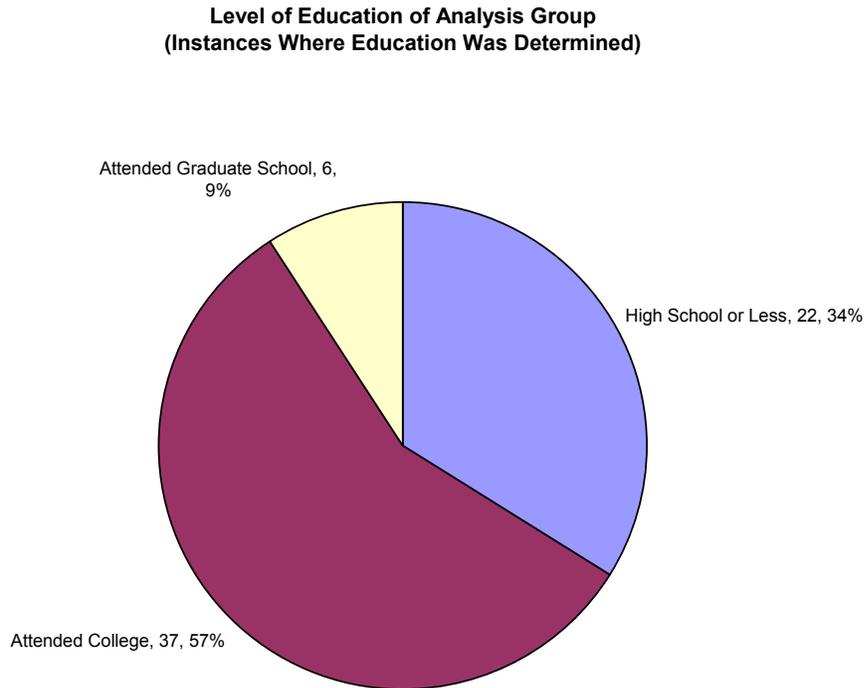
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Figure 16



Looking more closely at those persons for whom data was available, 34% attended at least high school, 57% had attended college, and 9% had attended graduate school. Below is the representation without the “unknown” data.

Figure 17



A college degree was found for 32 of the 43 who attended college and graduate school. Of the 32, 16 (or 50%) were earning degrees in science and engineering.

Of the foreign population, data on citizenship status was available for only 42 of the 68 persons, or 62%. Within the subset that is known, 67% are naturalized citizens, 21% are permanent residents, and 12% entered on a visa.

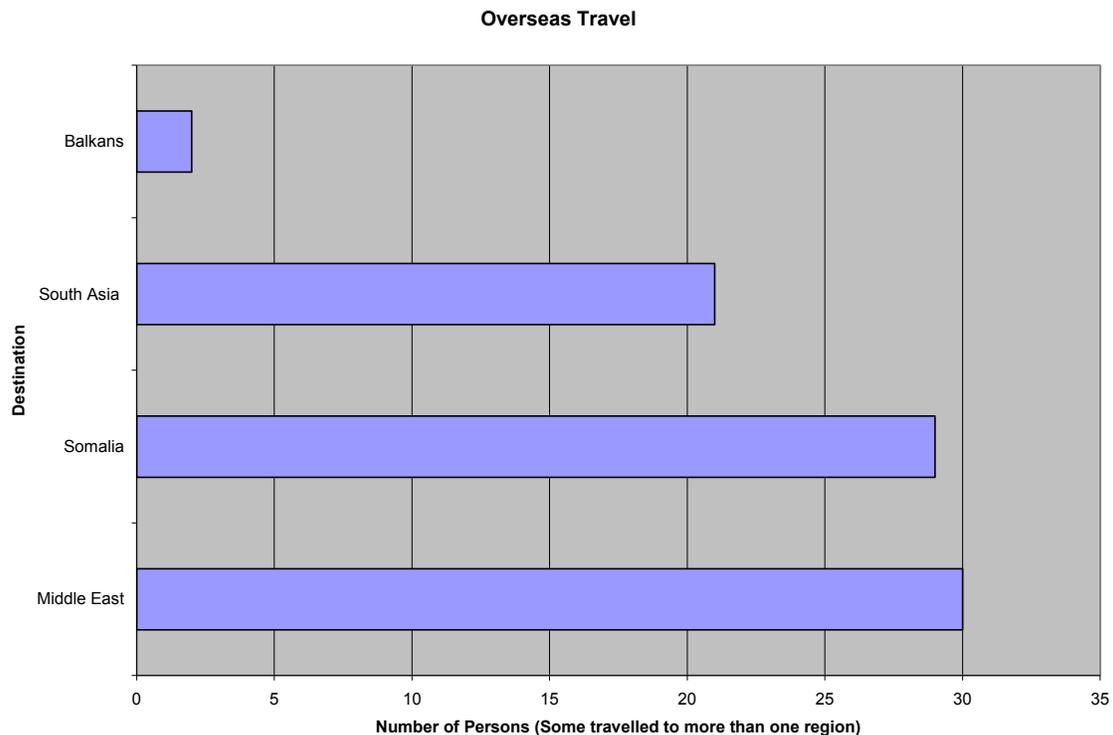
Overseas Travel

One of the most striking revelations of the data is the percentage of the analysis group that has travelled overseas to special interest regions. Concern has been expressed about travel of individuals to overseas locations for radical training and/or indoctrination. Particular areas of concern are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. At the time of their arrest, 69 of the 104 individuals studied (66%), had travelled overseas or were in the process of attempting to travel overseas to special interest areas. Special interest areas were defined as the Middle East

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(including Egypt), Somalia, South Asia, and the Balkans. This figure is believed to be understated, in that there were non-U.S. citizens noted that had recently entered the United States, but there was information that they left the United States and then returned. In such a case, no foreign travel would have been included. In some cases, an individual had travelled to more than one special interest area.

Figure 18



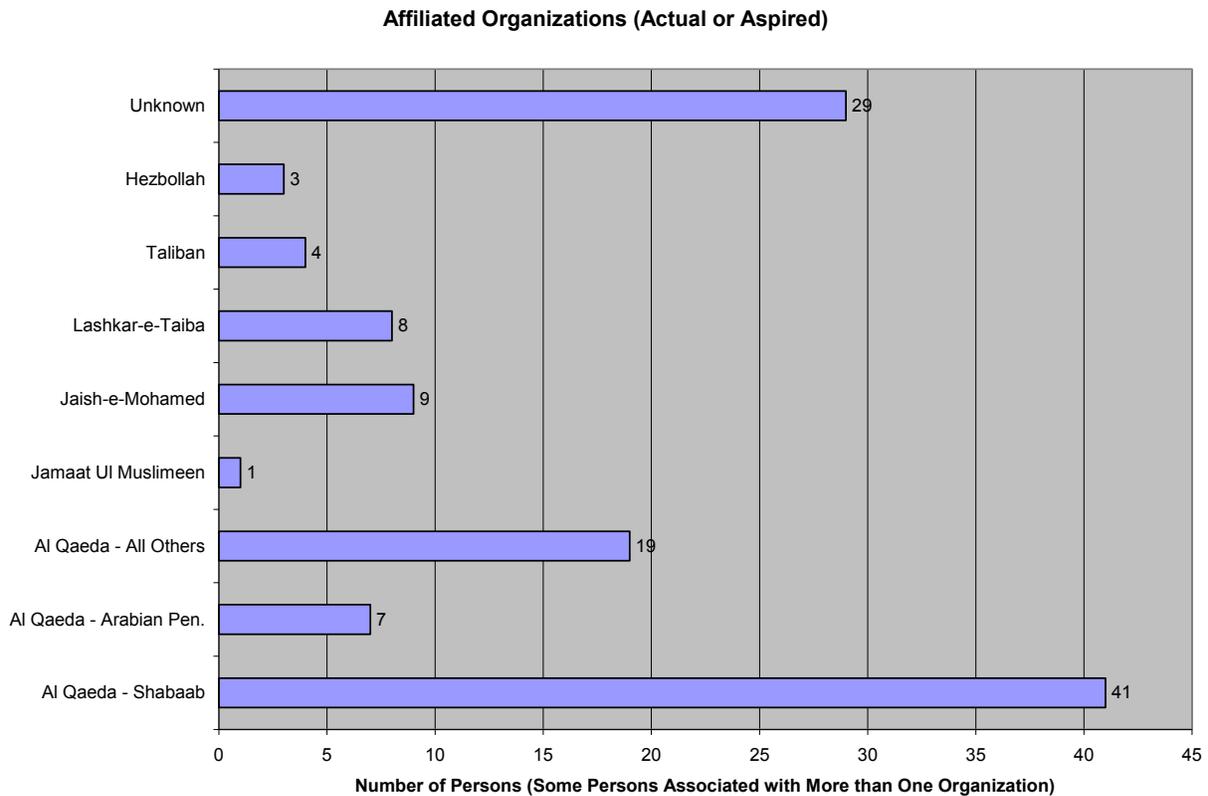
Associations

The majority of the individuals studied were associated with other persons studied, a group, an ideologue, or Internet extremism. Only 10 persons out of the 104 studied had no known association with another person, group, or Internet activity. In some cases the relationships were well established; in other cases the person was aspiring to become a member of the group. Of the 104 persons, 73 or 70% had an association with an internationally recognized terrorist organization, i.e., they were members of the organization, associated with the organization, and/or made efforts to join the organization. Associations were noted most often with Al Qaeda and its associated branches, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al-Shabaab. Indeed, 64 or

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62% of the entire group of 104 were associated with, or aspired to be affiliated with, Al Qaeda. Some of the individuals had an association with more than one group. Consequently, Figure 19 below recognizes the number of persons associated with a group.

Figure 19



Of the 29 persons with no known association to a terrorist organization, 11 or 38% have been involved with Internet activity and/or been followers of Anwar al-Awlaki. Another four, or 14%, are known to have entered the country on a visa, so associations may have occurred prior to entering the United States, and therefore have been less likely to be reported.

Social media has become a recruiting tool, an outlet for extremist activity, and the vehicle for promoting radical ideology, such as that of Anwar al-Awlaki (a.k.a. Anwar al-Aulaqi). Websites like Revolution Muslim have attracted participation from numerous individuals who later engage in more serious jihadist activities. Internet activity plays a role in extremism for a notable portion

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of the analysis group. Brought together by online journals, blogs, services, and chat rooms, the participants enter forums where the extremist ideology becomes self-reinforcing. Some individuals were noted as participating in more than one online entity, such that the identities of the various forums and organizations seem to blur. The Islamic Thinkers Society and Revolution Muslim have been particularly active in the United States and are associated with Al Muhajiroun. Examples of the online entities involved include:

- Islamic Thinkers Society
- Revolution Muslim²
- Al Maghrib Institute/Islamic Networks³
- Inspire and Jihad Reflections

While many members of the analysis group have not been involved in social media, those participating represent a distinct cadre and an identifiable threat for consideration.

For a select subgroup, Internet extremism was a significant part of their activity. For 25 persons from age 18 to 46, the Internet contributed to, or was a part of, their radicalization. Ten of the 25 also were followers of Anwar al-Awlaki (who was killed on Sept. 30, 2011). Anwar al-Awlaki was known to have at least 17 followers in the analysis group from the age of 20 to 39. As an example, Colleen LaRose (also known as “Jihad Jane”), an online editor for *Revolution Muslim*, pulled her plan and participants together through the Internet, and was then arrested when members of the group met in Ireland. At least one member of her group had been in contact with Najibullah Zazi, of the New York subway plot. Other *Revolution Muslim* members in the analysis group have been involved in similar activities.

Conclusion

Outside of the broad classification assessment that approximately two-thirds of those involved in extremist activities are men under the age of 34, no one, all-encompassing profile can be made of the individuals in the analysis group. Consequently, the data calls for the examination of

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subgroups and the safeguarding against the development of incorrect stereotypes that might hamper threat detection.

Those pursuing Islamic extremist activities have been recruited, indoctrinated, and motivated by a variety of methods. While the exact moment of the radicalization process cannot be determined, nor can all the influences involved, many of the persons in the analytical group were active online, at their mosques, or in student groups, or listened to extremist audio-visual recordings.

For example, many of the Minnesota Al Shabaab members and recruiters were associated with the Abubakar As-Siddique mosque in Minneapolis. The former convicts associated with James Cromitie also were associated with the Newburgh mosque and the prison chaplain that was a mosque leader. The individuals arrested with Ramy Zamzam belonged to the Islamic Circle of North America Youth Group at the Fairfax mosque. (The Fairfax mosque is reportedly a branch of the Islamic Society of North America's Dar al Hijra mosque.) Zamzam's group also was active on the Internet, and they made their connections with Al Qaeda affiliates through their Internet activity. Others have been brought together or incited through the Internet and social media—such as Revolution Muslim, Islamic Networks, Islamic Thinkers Society, *Inspire Magazine*—and online posting of the lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki.

The following section turns from the individuals to those who have inspired and/or recruited them. While some may believe the extremist threat is limited, and the strategies being pursued are similarly limited, this analysis of current events has led to the conclusion that Islamic extremists are recruiting for violent jihad with a multitude of strategies, and the strategies range in sophistication. At the highest level are highly structured organizations that recruit, train, and finance their operatives and missions. At the lowest level are those who are incited to violence through Internet propaganda, and may or may not be part of a larger structure. These individuals may be “lone wolves,” or collaborate with others online; they may or may not have ever met. Finally, at the strategic level, there are efforts to recruit during the high school and college years of age.

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Al Qaeda has been a driving force in its three primary sections (Al Qaeda-Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the remaining Al Qaeda organization) among those in the analysis group. Together they account for 63% of the analysis group. However, some of these Al Qaeda-associated persons may have had an association with other organizations as well. Al Qaeda also has served as a pioneer in online recruitment and incitement to violence.

Some have suggested organizations operating in the United States under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations play a role in the radicalization as well.

Somalia and Al Shabaab stand out in relative importance to the group. This is the result of the confluence of several factors. First, the Al Qaeda affiliate, Al Shabaab, has recruited heavily in the United States with the use of American recruiters on the Internet and in the mosques. Second, for the international extremist movement, Somalia has been cast a primary battleground for jihadis worldwide, and so there have been calls to join the fight. Third, the successful recruiting efforts in the Somali communities of the United States led to the disappearance of many young Somali men, which in turn resulted in a robust investigation and multiple arrests. The arrests occurred during the time period that was the focus of the research herein.

While many may consider Al Shabaab a relatively new organization, it is in name only. Al Shabaab is the successor to Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI). AIAI was funded by wealthy Saudis in the 1990s, participated in the U.S. East Africa Embassy bombings, was recognized as a terrorist organization, and had its finances sanctioned in September 2001. AIAI announced its dissolution approximately five years ago, only to have its leaders create the Islamic Courts Union, of which Al Shabaab is the youth military arm. Al Shabaab was not designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State until February 2008, giving it several years to operate in the United States unfettered.⁴

The information presented herein is in the form of facts, figures, and data. As the analysis group expands and is tracked over time, additional information will be available. In order to have our national security strategy and posture aligned with the threats facing the country, policymakers must be able to move beyond anecdotal evidence. The ultimate intent of this project was to

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enable policy planners to do just that. By providing decision-makers with detailed insight as to who has been tied to terrorist activity from approximately January 2009 to April 2011 and by describing their personal background with as much comprehension as public sources allow, the appropriate personnel can become further educated as to who poses the greatest threat, why, when, and how.

If you would like to provide additional information, comments or make an inquiry, please write to:

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Appendix A: Organizations with U.S. ties associated with analysis group members

Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT)⁵

Two individuals

Islamic Center of New England⁶

Three individuals

Islamic Circle of North America

Five individuals

Islamic Society of North America and Affiliates

12 individuals

Jamaat al Muslimeen

One individual

Muslim Alliance of North America

One individual

Muslim American Society

Four individuals

Muslim Students Association

Eight individuals

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Notes

1. BJS Federal Justice Statistics Program website (<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/fjsrc/>).
2. There are reports that Revolution Muslim leaders may now be operating the website Islampolicy.com.
3. Al Maghrib Institute and Islamic Networks have both been located in Houston, Texas, and have been reported to have a close association. Over the years their conferences and teachings have included the works of Anwar al-Awlaki.
4. "Designation of al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," *Federal Register* Vol. 73, No. 53, Public Notice 6136.
5. This organization is banned in most countries in the Middle East, Russia, and Germany. Its status in the U.K. is under regular review, but it was banned from campuses because of its intimidation and harassment of women who did not wear a hijab. Two members of the group were responsible for the attempt to bomb German trains in 2006, and two other U.K. members in a bombing in Tel Aviv in 2003.
6. The Islamic Center of New England in Quincy, MA, is the headquarters of the New England Islamic Council.