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## Postdicting Violence With Sovereign Citizen Actors: An Exploratory Test of the TRAP-18

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The sovereign citizen movement is one of the largest antigovernment nationalism or domestic terrorist collectives in the United States. In the last decade, over a dozen public officials were injured or killed by individuals adhering to sovereign citizen ideology. The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy, Habermeyer, & Guldemann, 2015) is a collection of 18 behavior-based warning signs for terror incidents which has been used to assess primarily international terrorism samples. In this study, the researchers applied the TRAP-18 to both violent and nonviolent incidents involving sovereign citizen members. Using chi-square tests for independence and a logistic regression analysis, the researchers found support for the TRAP-18. The sum of the TRAP-18 scores was able to postdict violent outcomes within the events included within the study. This important finding should guide future research on the use of the TRAP-18 involving sovereign citizens' collectives and other domestic groups who exhibit violence.

### **Public Significance Statement**

The present study finds the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) tool was useful in differentiating violent domestic terrorism incidents from those that did not escalate to violence. It advances the concept that appropriately trained professionals may be able to identify warning behaviors in order to predict and prevent violent incidents.

*Keywords:* sovereign citizens, terrorism, radicalization, TRAP-18

The sovereign citizen movement is one of the largest antigovernment nationalism collectives in the United States, with an estimated 300,000 believers (Laird, 2014; Potok, 2015). While the sovereign citizen ideology varies greatly (for a review, see Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Counterterrorism Analysis Section, 2011; Loesser, 2015; Theret, 2012), sovereign citizens do not believe the current federal and state

governments are operating within their legal constraints. Many United States-based law enforcement and intelligence agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and FBI, will categorize antigovernment nationalists as domestic terrorists at the instance when these individuals take criminal action in furtherance of the antigovernment ideology (Bjelopera, 2013, 2014). The majority of individuals who believe in sovereign citizen ideals never commit crimes in furtherance of their beliefs; however, the United States has recently seen many sovereign citizens commit criminal actions ranging from filing false liens (e.g., *paper terrorism*) to violence (Loesser, 2015; Theret, 2012).

In the past decade, researchers from a broad spectrum of fields have created recruitment and radicalization models aimed to provide a better

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understanding (and, possibly, prediction) of terrorism. One such model, the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy et al., 2015), consists of 18 behavior-based potential warning signs: 10 distal and eight proximal characteristics. The distal characteristics are those which may develop over time but do not necessarily translate to an immediate risk; the eight proximal characteristics are those which often appear closer to an action (Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy et al., 2015). Several studies have utilized TRAP-18 to retroactively evaluate terrorist incidents; however, to date, researchers have not yet applied the TRAP-18 to a solely American domestic terrorist collective of sovereign citizens or to a sample of both violent and nonviolent incidents.

The present study examines how well the TRAP-18 is able to postdict violence. As outlined by Knight, Woodward, and Lancaster (2017), the research field examining how, when, and why individuals choose violent versus nonviolent actions is quite limited. Merari (2010) compared 15 would-be suicide bombers with a dozen individuals imprisoned for other terrorist actions, finding avoidant-dependent personality disorder was present in more (60%) potential suicide bombers versus (17%) other terrorist prisoners. Other differences included both higher suicidal tendencies (40% vs. 0%) and depressive symptoms (53% vs. 8%), and lower psychopathic and impulsive-unstable tendencies (Merari, 2010). Based on case studies of violent versus nonviolent individuals, other researchers suggest violently radicalized individuals showed the decision to be emotional, social, and status conscious (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) suggested there may be at least two characteristic profiles for lone offenders. These studies only focus on Islamic terrorism lone offenders (Knight et al., 2017; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2010). With this in mind, this study will apply the TRAP-18 to recent incidents involving a United States-based domestic extremist collective: sovereign citizens.

### **Terrorism Radicalization and TRAP-18**

Terrorism radicalization is the process of an individual deciding to move toward terrorist ideals (Young, Rooze, & Holsappel, 2015). This type of radicalization differs from political

radicalization in motivations (viz., the perspective is one of victimization which turns into personal grievance), ideology (viz., extreme, nonstatus quo political or religious leanings), and causality (Chin, Gharabeh, Woodham, & Deeb, 2016; Karakatsanis & Herzog, 2016). Instead of just believing abortion is wrong, a radicalized individual may believe a valid option to stop abortion would be to kill abortion doctors.

Radicalization researchers have created both a myriad of process theories (e.g., the matrix: de Wolf & Doosje, 2010; 12 mechanisms: McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; and staircase to terrorism: Moghaddam, 2005) and structured professional judgment (SPJ) guidelines (Cook, Murray, Amat, & Hart, 2014). The latter were developed to allow even an outsider (e.g., clergy member, teacher) to identify individuals with potential for group-based violence or other violent radicalization. Among the recent SPJ tools are the multilevel guidelines for the assessment and management of group-based violence (Cook, Hart, & Kropp, 2013), Identifying Vulnerable People (Cole, Alison, Cole, Alison, & Weyers, 2014), and the TRAP-18.

TRAP-18's eight proximal warning behaviors evaluate conditions favorable to targeted violence (Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy et al., 2015): *pathway* (attack research, planning, or implementation), *fixation* (abnormal preoccupation on an individual or cause), *identification* (self-identification as a fighter/warrior/agent of change), *novel aggression* (an initial violent action unrelated to the target), *energy burst* (increased frequency/variety of behaviors related to the targeted individual or cause leading up to a violent incident), *leakage* (communication to an outside party of the individual's intent for violence), *last resort* (individual feeling there is no other way to solve the grievance than violence, and for that violence to be now), and *directly communicated threat* (communication of violence to target or law enforcement before action). These warning signs were identified through dozens of case studies, interviews, and other empirical research (Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012; Silver, Horgan, & Gill, 2018).

Meloy and Gill's (2016) 10 distal characteristics hone on the individual's lone-actor status: *personal grievance and moral outrage* (conflu-

ence of factors shaping an individual to have a strong viewpoint about the targeted individual or cause), *framed by an ideology* (justifying beliefs for action), *failure to affiliate with an extremist group* (failure/rejection of individual with desired terrorist or other group), *dependence on virtual community* (communication using social media and other online vectors with like-minded individuals), *thwarting of occupational goals* (setback/failure in academic/life pursuits), *changes in thinking and emotions* (thinking pattern becomes absolute and simplistic), *failure of sexual-intimate pair bonding* (individual fails to sexually or intimately bond), *mental disorder* (historic or present major mental health disorder), *greater creativity and innovation* (innovative terrorist action or process imitated by others), and *criminal violence* (past criminal history).

Meloy et al. (2015) initially applied TRAP-18's eight proximal warning signs to the Anders Breivik case. Breivik, the Norwegian lone terrorist responsible for killing 77 individuals in July 2011, was found to have evidence of six of the eight warning signs. In their seminal study, Meloy and Gill (2016) applied the full TRAP-18 to a sample of 111 lone-actor terrorists identified in a previous work (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014). This sample included radical Islamic extremists, extreme right-wing terrorists, and single-issue terrorists spanning from 1990 to 2013 (Gill, 2015). The bulk of the sample (43%) were defined as Al-Qaida-inspired (Gill et al., 2014), with 34% being right-wing terrorists. Of the right-wing terrorists, specific examples included Ted Kaczynski (Unabomber), Timothy McVeigh (Oklahoma City bomber), and Eric Rudolph (Olympic Park bomber). Meloy and Gill (2016) found 70% of the entire sample exhibited at least half of the TRAP-18 characteristics, with all 111 exhibiting the "framed by an ideology" characteristic. In their case study on the 2011 Frankfurt, Germany, airport attack, Böckler, Hoffmann, and Zick (2015) found the individual who conducted this attack against American soldiers exhibited nine distal and six proximal signs—over 80% of the TRAP-18's indicators.

### Sovereign Citizens

McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing coconspirator, Terry Nichols, was a sovereign citizen

known to have connections to other antigovernment groups (Bjelopera, 2013; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013; Hunter & Heinke, 2011; Meyer, 2013; Weir, 2015). Since April 1995, other self-identified sovereign citizens have been associated with incidents that escalated into violence (Hersterman, 2013; Laird, 2014). The May 2010 killing of two West Memphis, Arkansas, police officers by self-identified father-son sovereign citizens Jerry and Joseph Kane and the July 2016 killing of three police officers in Louisiana by sovereign citizen Gavin Eugene Long reinforce this linkage (Sturgis, 2016; Swenson, 2012).

The sovereign movement, sans these incidents, is not one of violence. According to most sovereign theories, the main sovereign grievance narrative is that the existing United States government actually replaced the original, common law government established by the founding fathers (Crowell, 2012; FBI Counterterrorism Analysis Section, 2011). This governmental change occurred sometime in the past—usually believed between the 1850s (Civil War or Emancipation) and the 1930s (Great Depression), when the United States went off the "gold standard" (Loesser, 2015; Theret, 2012). Therefore, the current government, with its enforcement of taxes and other regulations, limits individuals in their ability to live free.

Sovereign citizens often see their movement as a way to not only get out from under a tyrannical government, but a way to free themselves from debt (Laird, 2014; Loesser, 2015). According to prevailing sovereign theories, the existing United States government is a corporation that uses citizens as collateral for its debts. When a person is born, the United States government establishes a Department of Treasury account for the citizen. Sovereigns, in a process referred to as "freeing the strawman," can complete a series of tasks—court filing, apostille acquiring, notary public notations—to access these United States Treasury funds (Loesser, 2015; MacNabb, 2010; Theret, 2012). Many sovereigns also view public order regulations (e.g., driver's licenses, vehicle registrations) as unnecessary under the common law system. When challenged, sovereign citizens will often quote archaic or esoteric laws that stipulate driver's licenses are only needed for commercial vehicle use. It is in these interactions with

law enforcement and public officials where the incident may become tense.

The sovereign movement's origins can be traced to racism and anti-Semitism, but its current form generally lacks these caveats (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Modern day followers often refer to themselves as "freemen" or "sovereigns," or may participate in one of many loosely organized groups like the Republic for the united [*sic*] States of America (RuSA) or the Moorish Nation (FBI Counterterrorism Analysis Section, 2011; Laird, 2014). RuSA's goal, for example, is "to stabilize America and its economy, with the intent of freeing the American People and People around the world from [the US Corporation, posing as the Federal Government]" (RuSA, 2014, p. 1).

The importance of the current study is twofold: it is the first study to apply the TRAP-18 specifically to individuals associated with the American sovereign citizen movement, and it is the first study to apply TRAP-18 to groups of individuals who did not resort to violent behavior. Given the exploratory nature of our study, the primary research question is as follows: is the TRAP-18 an effective tool in postdicting violence in incidents involving members of the sovereign citizen movement? This is also the first study to examine differences between violent and nonviolent individuals associated with a United States-based domestic terrorism collective.

## Method

### Sample

The sample consists of 58 United States-based individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement. Of these, 30 individuals or groups planned or committed violent or dangerous actions, and 28 individuals committed nonviolent criminal actions (Table 1). Both samples were nonrandom samples of convenience. Fort Hays State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined on June 7, 2017 that this project was exempt from IRB review according to federal regulations.

The researchers identified the incidents through LexisNexus, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Global Terrorism Database developed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, and

Table 1  
*Sex and Mean Scores for Violent and Non-Violent Sovereign Citizen Incidents*

Sex	Violent			Nonviolent		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Male						
TRAP-18 score	7.14	3.45	29	2.67	2.11	21
Female						
TRAP-18 score	8.0		1	1.86	1.35	7

*Note.* TRAP-18 Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol.

press releases. All the incidents occurred between 2004 and 2014. Using the search terms "sovereign," "freeman," and "paperless," the researchers initially identified 43 violent and 30 nonviolent individuals or groups. Fifteen individuals were not included in the analysis due to the inability to connect them to the sovereign citizen ideology, either through membership in a known organization (e.g., RuSA), self-identification as a sovereign citizen, or designation by a federal agency.

The researchers coded violent or dangerous behaviors as:

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 5)

The incidents classified as violent included shootings, standoffs, high-speed pursuits, or threats, and the violent sample represented 10 individuals killed and 15 injured. For nonviolent incidents, the researchers looked for individuals who had committed or were believed to have committed a nonviolent crime, such as paper terrorism.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Using a process similar to Gruenewald et al. (2013), the researchers applied systematic search techniques to uncover as much open source material available. The researchers utilized various search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo), paid databases (e.g., LexisNexus, Proquest, Westlaw), and the Homeland Security Digital Library to identify relevant information. The primary researcher organized dossiers con-

taining all the available information on each individual or group.

Since this is the first examination of whether the TRAP-18 can postdict violence within a United States-based domestic sample, the researchers wanted to best understand which items on the TRAP-18 were associated with violent incidents within the sampled events. For the analytical approach, discrete chi-square tests for independence were run for each of the individual items within the TRAP-18 to explore each individual item's relationship with the dependent variable: whether the incident involved violence. Then, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed to assess the impact of the independent variable, the score of the TRAP-18 across all items, on whether the incident contained violence.

### Interrater Reliability

Two raters evaluated the whole sample ( $N = 58$ ; 1,044 codings) using the TRAP-18 codebook (Meloy, 2017) against information from the dossiers. After reviewing Meloy and Gill (2016) and Gruenewald et al. (2013), a psychology graduate student (Ariana Fisher; Rater 2) and the primary researcher (Rater 1) completed the ratings independently. For each participant, the raters indicated whether each TRAP-18 characteristic was absent, present, or unknown (coded as 0 = *absent*, 1 = *present*, and 2 = *unknown*). Average Cohen's kappa was good for the proximal characteristics,  $\kappa = .687$ , and excellent for the distal characteristics,  $\kappa = .812$ . The average for the entire TRAP-18 was excellent,  $\kappa = .757$ . For the analyses, Rater 2's codings were utilized.

### Results

The current exploratory study examines whether the TRAP-18 can be used to postdict violence within a sample of 58 individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement. For an overall TRAP-18 score, the researchers summed the present variables with a potential upper limit score of 18 (see Table 1). The mean scores were low for the overall sample, 4.90 ( $SD = 3.65$ ), and for both the violent, 7.17 ( $SD = 3.40$ ), and nonviolent, 2.46 ( $SD = 1.95$ ), samples. The standardized mean differ-

ence (Cohen's  $d$ ) between the violent and non-violent samples was 1.70.

A chi-square test for independence was initially run for each individual item on the TRAP-18 against the dependent variable of violence (Table 2). The researchers were unable to run the chi-square analysis on three items: fixation, dependence on virtual community, and change in thinking, which were present in all the cases ( $N = 58$ ). However, these three variables were included in the final logistic regression model.

Six proximal warning behaviors and four distal behaviors showed significant association to the incidents containing violence. Among the six significant proximal behaviors, four (e.g., pathway, identification, leakage, and last resort) were positively related to violence, and the remaining two (e.g., novel aggression and energy burst) were negatively related to violence. Novel aggression showed the weakest effect size,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 6.19, p = .045, \phi = .33$ , followed by energy burst and leakage,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 9.94, p = .007, \phi = .41$ , and  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 10.21, p = .006, \phi = .42$ , respectively. Pathway and identification showed nearly similar effect sizes,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 11.37, p = .003, \phi = .44$ , and  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 11.65, p = .003, \phi = .45$ , with last resort having the strongest,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 27.76, p = .000, \phi = .70$ .

Among the four significant distal characteristics, all four were positively related to violent incidents. Thwarting of occupational goals had a medium effect size,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 6.46, p = .040, \phi = .33$ . Framed by an ideology had a strong effect size with  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 13.76, p = .001, \phi = .49$ . Both personal grievance and criminal violence were the strongest of the distal characteristics,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 14.95, p = .001, \phi = .51$ , and  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 16.83, p = .000, \phi = .54$ , respectively. The remaining five variables did not show significance.

Next, a binary logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of TRAP-18 score on the likelihood of violence occurring within the sampled incidents involving sovereign citizens. Using the summed TRAP-18 score as the one independent variable, the full model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 33.88, p < .000$ . This suggests the TRAP-18 model, in total, was able to distinguish between the indi-

Table 2  
*Chi-Square Test for Independence Using TRAP-18 Frequencies for Violent and Nonviolent Events*

Warning behavior	Violent		Nonviolent		$\chi^2(1)$	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Pathway	18	31	10	17	11.37	.003
Fixation	29	50	0	0		
Identification	42	74	2	3	11.65	.003
Novel aggression	3	5	32	55	6.19	.045
Energy burst	7	12	17	29	9.94	.007
Leakage	14	24	12	20	10.21	.006
Last resort	17	29	5	9	27.76	.000
Directly communicated threat	14	24	9	15	2.87	.238
Personal grievance and moral outrage	22	38	5	9	14.95	.001
Framed by an ideology	42	72	2	3	13.76	.001
Failure to affiliate	5	9	16	28	5.97	.051
Dependence on a virtual community	15	26	0	0		
Thwarted occupational goals	9	16	13	22	6.46	.040
Changes in thinking and emotion	10	17	0	0		
Failure of sexual-intimate pair bondin	7	12	17	29	5.16	.076
Mental disorder	9	16	2	3	2.90	.234
Greater creativity	4	7	40	69	8.11	.071
Criminal violence	16	28	13	22	16.83	.000

*Note.* TRAP-18 = Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol.

vidual cases within the sample that were violent and nonviolent. The model as a whole explained between 44.2% (Cox and Snell  $R^2$ ) and 59% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in the presence of violence, and correctly classified 75.9% of cases. As shown in Table 3, the TRAP-18 scores made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model, recording an odds ratio of 2.10. This indicated that those with a higher TRAP-18 score were over two times more likely to be involved in a violent incident, controlling for all other factors in the model.

### Discussion

This study applied the 10 distal characteristics and eight proximal warning behaviors of Meloy and Gill's (2016) TRAP-18 to a sover-

eign citizen sample. Unlike other TRAP-18 research (Böckler et al., 2015; Meloy & Gill, 2016), this is believed to be the first study to apply the TRAP-18 to both violent and nonviolent incidents. As Cook (2014) stated, there is an increasing need to couple group- and individual-level characteristics in order to better understand and respond to violent incidents. Furthermore, it has been argued that SPJ tools have the potentially viable and important use for better understanding violence within groups, especially within organized crime and, as the focus of the current study, the sovereign citizen collective (Burton & Amat, 2013; Egan et al., 2016; Van Allen, 2012).

Following Monahan's (2012) conclusion that an SPJ approach to addressing risk for violence may be useful if researchers are able to identify

Table 3  
*Summary of Binary Regression Analysis Predicting Violence Within Sovereign Citizen Incidents*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI	Wald statistic	<i>p</i>
Sum of TRAP-18 scores	.74	.20	2.10	[1.43, 3.09]	14.12	.000

*Note.* TRAP-18 = Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol; CI = confidence interval for odds ratio (*OR*).

robust individual risk factors using retrospective information on known groups, the researchers found that the TRAP-18, as a whole, was able to successfully postpredict violent behavior within the sample. This finding is an important first step toward the utilization of the TRAP-18 as an SPJ tool to assess violence within United States-based domestic groups.

While not fully capable of responding to Gøtzsche-Astrup's (2018) request for causal versus correlational research, the current research aimed to identify the antecedents of violent behavior. Interestingly, six proximal (pathway, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, and last resort) and four distal (personal grievance, framed by an ideology, greater creativity, and criminal violence) TRAP-18 variables significantly postdicted violence in the current sample. The current project used a sample of individuals with analogous belief patterns who expressed their views using both violent and nonviolent methods and this difference between their belief expressions was detected by the TRAP-18 tool in its entirety.

The nuances illuminated by the current study may indicate sovereign citizens, or domestic terrorists, in general, potentially exhibit different warning signs than traditional international terrorists. For instance, the absence of a directly communicated threat as significant may indicate violent sovereign citizens are often more impulsive on their actions. The lack of information related to virtual communities is likely due to this communication medium not being as prominent as others or law enforcement failing to reveal the information to the press.

As discussed in both Silver et al. (2018) and Meloy and O'Toole (2011), leakage is a common predictor in violent incidents, and, as outlined by Silver et al. (2018), leakage is often related to personal grievance. Both leakage and personal grievance were significant in the sample and positively related to violence.

The absence of fixation is important to note. Meloy et al. (2012) found fixation—or progressive obsessions with the target—as an important warning behavior across different groups. The absence of it in the nonviolent sample is interesting while coupled with the significance of identification. Meloy et al. (2012) suggested fixation and identification may be elements on a similar continuum, where an individual is focused on something so much that they eventu-

ally self-identify as it. It is quite possible the open source information did not allow the raters to clearly identify fixation behaviors in the non-violent sample.

### Limitations and Future Research

As hinted above, the main limitation to this research is the lack of information, and, hence, the lack of variables. This is always a concern when retroactively evaluating incidents. Even with a broad investigative arm, there will be intelligence gaps regarding incidents or people. As such, the data and results could actually indicate something completely different if greater access to sensitive or complete information was obtained.

The current results support the criterion validity of the TRAP-18, in its entirety, to postdict violent or dangerous behaviors in the sample; however, the variance in results compared with other studies may indicate that sovereign citizens or domestic terrorists exhibit different warning signs than other types of terrorists. To further unpack this, future research should focus the application of the TRAP-18 on other types of domestic terrorism. Much more research needs to be conducted before any claims can be made regarding the use of the TRAP-18 with domestic violent groups and events. However, the current study is an important first step toward realizing the capability of the TRAP-18 as being able to postdict violence within these events.

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