



PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES

*A Research Synthesis exploring the
trends and gaps in knowledge –
executive summary*

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Executive summary

This research synthesis for the Research Council UK's (RCUK) Global Uncertainties Programme examines key findings from academic works and public reports concerning public attitudes in Britain on terrorism, cyber-security, threats to infrastructure, proliferation of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons and technologies, ideologies and beliefs, and transnational organised crime. The synthesis draws on public opinion data from private polling firms and media sources, as well. For certain themes, particularly terrorism, comparisons are made with research on public attitudes in the United States (US).

The key findings of this review are the following:

- There is little systematic inquiry of public attitudes across the topical areas covered by this review.
- While public attitudes are not a *primary* focus of academic works there are many references to public opinion and perceptions of risk. In general, there is greater analysis of public attitudes to terrorism, the proliferation of CBRN and certain aspects of ideologies and beliefs (relating to violence and extremism).
- Public attitudes to government responses to threats are an important area of academic study and public enquiry but are often uninformed by public attitudes to the actual threats themselves.
- A secondary focus of academic and public reports on public attitudes concerns the role of the media in shaping levels of public concern. However, there is less attention to the role of information networks more broadly and new media such as blogging and social networking in forming public opinion.

More specific findings for each of the themes are summarised below.

Terrorism

Public opinion research has not been an important focus in the study of terrorism in the United Kingdom (UK), with most recent academic work on public attitudes to terrorism concentrated in the US. Although the actual risk that people will be personally affected by terrorism is extremely small, polling indicates that a significant minority of people expressed concern that they will be a victim of a terrorist attack. Public attitudes both in UK and the US regard terrorism as a more important public policy priority in the aftermath of September 11th. Framing issues in terms of fighting terrorism increases support for specific laws, measures and policies. There is broad public support for post-September 11th counterterrorism measures although there are notable exceptions such as opposition in UK to government proposals to extend the pre-charge detention period for terrorism suspects and opposition in the US to government monitoring of personal phone conversations, emails and post. In the US, the literature indicates there is public acceptance for measures that specifically target Muslims, and it appears the proportion of the public who express negative views of Muslims is increasing.

Cyber-security

There is no clear definition of cyber-security, which obscures rigorous study of public attitudes to the problem. Most of the work on attitudes to cyber-security is conducted by private Internet security firms and government agencies. The predominant focus of these is on attitudes of businesses to cyber-attacks and security measures they have adopted to address potential threats. There is otherwise very little evidence of public attitudes to cyber-security. In the academic literature, one notable thread of research examines the use of the Internet by criminal networks and terrorist organisations. These works critique suggestions in parts of the popular media that extremist and terrorist organisations may use the Internet to launch attacks. In turn, researchers have critiqued the use of the term 'cyber-terrorism' and explain that while terrorist groups are using the Internet, thus far they have shown little inclination to launch 'cyber-terrorist' attacks. A second thread of debate in the literature concerns government legislative and regulatory responses to the perceived threat of cyber-attacks even though there have been no confirmed incidents of physical infrastructure being compromised by 'cyber-terrorists'.

Critical infrastructure

The protection of critical infrastructure has recently entered public debate through related concerns of terrorism and cyber-security. It is feared that these might disrupt or destroy physical infrastructure such as public transportation, water supplies, and energy for industry and household uses. As the term 'critical infrastructure' has become more widely used in public debate, its meanings have also changed which makes it difficult to assess public attitudes to threats to critical infrastructure. At present, there is no systematic assessment of public attitudes to critical infrastructure protection, a field that is emerging and quite fragmented. There is also no coherent body of academic works or public reports on public attitudes to critical infrastructure. Like cyber-security, researchers have noted that the popular media and entertainment industry have helped heighten public concern that certain critical infrastructure is vulnerable to attack or of shutting down. Some studies have also assessed how responses to address the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, such as the creation of safety zones and barriers in urban planning, have generated greater fear among people and feelings of personal insecurity.

Proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons and explosives (CBRN)

Public perceptions of CBRN weapons are highly influenced by the Cold War era. They are often confused with weapons of mass destruction and, hence, lead to high levels of fear amongst the public. These weapons are seen as very specific and distinct from other weapons by the public in part due to the consensus and taboo around using CBRN weapons. Grassroots social movements have been and remain influential in shaping public attitudes to CBRN weapons, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament being an example of this. However, the taboo against using CBRN weapons may be eroding slightly with the emergence of what some have termed 'non-lethal' chemical or biological weapons, such as a fentanyl derivative that was used with disastrous outcomes by Russian authorities during the Moscow theatre siege in 2002. Recent studies show that public opinion still regards nuclear weapons as a positive deterrent for peace and security and is against unilateral disarmament while supportive of multilateral disarmament. For chemical and biological weapons, ignorance essentially shapes public outlooks. The use of a particular terminology in the media (whether CBRN, 'poison gas' or 'bioterror') clearly shapes perceptions of these potential threats. A number of works on risk communication emphasise the need to balance the provision of adequate information to the public with the need to avoid overstating the threat, or adequate

threat communication. Researchers of CBRN also stress that particular weapons will become more attractive to terrorists the more the public fears them. Thus, understanding public attitudes and informing them accordingly is a crucial part of their governance.

Transnational organised crime

Public attitudes to transnational organised crime are difficult to assess as it is a very specific category of crime that blurs with crime in general. In the UK, there is no survey programme that examines concern about 'organised crime' as a sub-category of crime in general yet public opinion polls indicate that a large majority of people consider organised crime to be a big problem. Further, opinion surveys show that 'crime' ranks in the top five issues that are of greatest concern to the British public. The importance of crime as a public policy issue increased perceptions of threats, with a growing proportion of the public feeling that levels of crime and insecurity are worsening even though official crime statistics show that crime levels are declining. Drugs are seen as the leading cause of crime in UK. Further, drug dealing and drug smuggling, two important areas of transnational organised criminal activity, are thought to be the most harmful to society when the public is asked to rank different types of crime.

Ideologies and beliefs

This review considers public attitudes to ideologies and beliefs relating to the perceived causes of conflict, social division and radicalisation. In particular, it focuses on the attitudes and beliefs of British Muslims, who increasingly have come to be viewed as a threat to security. Opinion surveys comparing the values and beliefs of the general public and British Muslims confirm that Muslims are more conservative than the general public on social issues such as abortion, sex before marriage and homosexuality. Surveys also indicate that Muslims are loyal to both country and religion and express confidence in democratic institutions, indeed more than non-British Muslims do for some institutions. While the attitudes by the general public of Muslims has not changed greatly after the September 11th and London July 7th attacks of 2005, the literature indicates there are growing concerns amongst the British public that Muslims are not integrating. This compares with distinctly more negative attitudes to Muslims in the US (evident in recent political controversies and media coverage concerning the proposed 'Ground Zero mosque' and the aborted burning of Qur'ans by a radical Florida preacher). Academic works have been strongly critical of US or UK policies and programmes (such as *Prevent*) to fight radicalisation and extremism under the rubric of counterterrorism. A further strand of academic study examines how public views of Islam are altering state-society relations and undermining confidence in the multi-cultural model that has been the basis of Britain's citizenship regime and approach to social cohesion.