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Abstract

On January 6, 2021, hundreds of individuals converged on and breached the U.S. Capitol building in an effort to overturn the presidential election results. For the current study, open-source research was conducted on 101 federally-indicted participants of this event – half who were indicted on assault or other violent felony crimes and the other half for trespassing or non-violent misdemeanor charges. Then, we used the Terrorism Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy & Gill, 2016) to examine these Capitol insurrection participants indicted for their actions. Four proximal warning behaviors and one distal behavior were significantly found to be related to the individuals indicted for violent crime. Similar to previous work using the TRAP-18, these results indicate that several dimensions of the tool postdicted violent behavior in this sample. Interestingly, this was the first study to test the TRAP-18 validity in a large group of extremists acting in concert.

Keywords: TRAP-18; Capitol insurrection; Violence

Public Significance Statement:

This study found that a terrorism-focused assessment tool, the TRAP-18, was able to postdict violent behavior in a random sample of 101 individuals who were indicted for crimes related to the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol insurrection. It found the TRAP-18 was able to successfully postdict violence in this large group of individuals acting in concert.

The January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol: What the TRAP-18 can tell us about the Participants

On the afternoon of Tuesday, January 6, 2021, hundreds of individuals converged on the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Stirred on by speeches made by then-President Donald Trump and others, these individuals broke through police barricades and illegally entered the Capitol building. While not the first time a U.S. government building had been attacked by an American citizen, this was the first time for the Capitol building. This event underscored palpable tension regarding the November 2020 election results which indicated Joseph Biden had won election over Trump. This insurrection at the Capitol was aired live around the world. After approximately six hours, law enforcement was able to secure the Capitol and establish order.

The days following this incident were filled with reports of arrests and indictments. By summer 2021, over 300 people had been indicted for their participation in the event. The number of those currently indicted is nearly three times this amount (Tanner, 2022). The Program on Extremism at George Washington University (GWU) and others have conducted extensive research into the individuals who participated in the event, their background, and their motives. The current research follows suit by examining a sample of the individuals indicted under the lens of the Terrorism Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy & Gill, 2016).

Structured Professional Judgment Tools

Terrorism researchers have attempted to create theories that describe the radicalization of individuals. While defined many ways, radicalization can describe the process in which an individual escalates thinking and behavior to a point where action is possible (Romaniuk, 2015). Researchers have created several process theories like the 12 Mechanisms (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), Staircase to Terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005), and the matrix (de Wolf & Doosje, 2010). These processing theories describe stages an individual likely takes in their path

to radicalization. However, no one theory has been useful or inclusive enough to describe the pathway for all criminal violent offenders or terrorists.

Some terrorism researchers took a different path, focusing on identifying key behaviors or risk factors in individuals on the pathway to radicalization. They used a technique that was created in clinical settings: Structured professional judgement tools (SPJs). SPJs were created to allow professionals (e.g., clinicians, law enforcement or intelligence practitioners) to identify individuals with potential for group-based violence or other violent radicalization. Among the original set of these SPJs was the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA-2; Elaine Pressman & Flockton, 2012). Soon after, several others were introduced including the Extremist Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+; Lloyd & Dean, 2015), Multi-Level Guidelines (MLG; Cook et al., 2013), Identifying Vulnerable People (IVP; Cole et al., 2014), and the TRAP-18 (Meloy & Gill, 2016). Several of the latter were created in ways that teachers or clergy members could use them in a productive manner.

TRAP-18

The TRAP-18 (Meloy & Gill, 2016) was created with two separate lists of indicators—eight proximal warning behaviors and ten distal characteristics. Together, these variables are meant to identify individuals with potential for terrorism, specifically, or criminal violence, generally. All the proximal indicators are immediate warning behaviors prior to the event, and the distal characteristics (e.g., history of mental disorder; Meloy, 2017). When reviewing or coding a potential terrorist, the individual coding notes whether each indicator is Present, Absent, or Unknown. Absent and Unknown codings are recorded as a 0, and Present codes recorded as a 1. The total Present codes are then summed together. The TRAP-18 has a potential inclusive score range from 0 to 18.

The eight proximal warning behaviors are the following (Meloy et al., 2015, 2019; Meloy & Gill, 2016): 1) pathway (attack research, planning, or implementation); 2) fixation (abnormal preoccupation on an individual or cause); 3) identification (self-identification as a fighter/warrior/agent of change); 4) novel aggression (an initial violent action unrelated to the target); 5) energy burst (increased frequency/variety of behaviors related to the targeted individual or cause leading up to a violent incident); 6) leakage (communication to an outside party of the individual's intent for violence); 7) last resort (individual feeling there is no other way to solve the grievance than violence, and for that violence to be now); and, 8) 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 (see Meloy et al., 2012, 2019; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; Silver et al., 2018).

Meloy and Gill's (2016) ten distal characteristics hone in on the individual's lone-actor status both static (e.g., history of violence) and dynamic (e.g., ideological framing): 1) Personal grievance and moral outrage (confluence of factors shaping an individual to have a strong viewpoint about the targeted individual or cause); 2) framed by an ideology (justifying beliefs for action); 3) failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group (failure/rejection of individual with desired terrorist or other group); 4) dependence on the virtual community (communication using social media and other online vectors with like-minded individuals); 5) thwarting of occupational goals (setback/failure in academic/life pursuits); 6) changes in thinking and emotions (thinking pattern becomes absolute and simplistic); 7) failure of sexual intimate pair bonding (individual fails to create a sexually intimate bond); 8) mental disorder (historic or present major mental health disorder); 9) creativity and innovation (innovative terrorist action or process imitated by others); and, 10) criminal violence (past criminal history).

Research Using the TRAP-18

Dozens of studies have now been conducted evaluating the TRAP-18. Meloy et al. (2015) 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 proximal warning signs. Meloy and Gill (2016) applied the full TRAP-18 to a sample of 111 lone-actor terrorists identified in a previous work (see 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 sample exhibited at least half of the TRAP-18 characteristics, with all 111 exhibiting the "framed by an ideology." In their case study on the 2011 Frankfort, Germany, Airport attack, Bockler, 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.

The TRAP-18 has been validated multiple times with multiple lone-actor and other groups. Recently, Meloy et al. (2021) time sequenced the TRAP-18 indicators on 125 lone-actor terrorists, finding virtually all of the distal characteristics preceded the proximal warning behaviors. Collins and Clark (2021) used to TRAP-18 to analyze a 2018 case involving an perpetrator who identified as an Incel (e.g., involuntary celibates). Contrary to other findings, Brugh et al. (2020) recently compared U.S. and European jihadism-inspired lone actors (N = 77)

using public information, and they found greater relevance of TRAP-18 items to the U.S.-based lone actors (vs. the total sample).

Numerous other studies have used the TRAP-18 to postdict behavior (Challacombe & Lucas, 2018; Guldimann & Meloy, 2020; Meloy et al., 2019, 2021). Amman and Meloy (2021) recently elaborated on TRAP-18's usefulness in application to identifying those within a large group those individuals who are at highest risk for being violent toward their target, reviewing some literature about the January 6th insurrection.

Purpose

The current research applies the TRAP-18 to a sample of individuals indicted for their roles in the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Based on previous studies, it was believed that the TRAP-18 may help to elucidate any publicly available precipitating factors of these individuals. This illumination may demonstrate, after the fact, the fungibility of the TRAP-18 on data sets beyond the lone wolf or international terrorist actors.

Method

Sample

As of January 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice had indicted over 700 individuals for various federal crimes relating to the January Capitol insurrection (Tanner, 2022). In partnership with the Program on Extremism at George Washington University (GWU), we obtained a list of those individuals indicted. The group was then separated into those indicted for assault vs. those indicted for other crimes. Then, 101 insurrection participants were randomly selected: 51 participants were indicted for assault or interference with an officer; 50 participants were indicted for trespassing and other crimes.

From the 101 participants, age data were available for 85; the average age of participants was 39.24 years (*SD* = 12.23). Five of the participants identified or were identified as female. The sample included participants from 33 states with New York (*N* = 11), Texas (*N* = 11), and Florida (*N* = 10) being the highest represented. One was identified as an active member and four as former members of law enforcement. GWU identified one as a member of the military reserves, with 17 being former members of the military. The sample also included nine members of Proud Boys, five individuals connected with QAnon, two with Oath Keepers, and two with the 3%ers.

Research Methodology

For this archival research, a team was created, including the two leads (the first author – who was the project lead/reliability coder; and the second author – who was the primary coder) and four undergraduate students. The first author then led the group in an hour-long training session on open-source archival research methods, including using closed- and open-ended search terms. Following this training session, the team all conducted individual research on the same one randomly selected indicted individual. The researchers met and discussed the findings, concluding that all found the same material regarding the individual. We performed this step in order to ensure the entire research team was calibrated and identifying the same materials.

The archival research involved the team conducting searches in twelve databases: Google; Yahoo; FBI Vault; Homeland Security Digital Library (HSDL); Primo; Twitter; Facebook; LexisNexis; DuckDuckGo; YouTube; SearX; Westlaw; and, Reddit. Additionally, the team conducted searches on Parler. This information was curated and placed in a password-protected cloud storage drive with access limited to the research team.

Interrater Reliability

Two raters examined the entire sample (*N* = 101; 1818 codings) using the TRAP-18 codebook (Meloy, 2017) to code the information from the dossiers. Utilizing information from Meloy and Gill (2016) and Gruenewald et al. (2013), the lead researcher and the primary coder completed the ratings independently. The lead researcher was aware of the purpose of the study (to analyze whether the TRAP-18 as a whole, and its individual items were able to postdict whether the person was violent or not during the insurrection); however, the primary coder was unaware of the purpose of the coding until after it was completed. For each participant, the raters indicated whether each TRAP-18 characteristic was absent, present, or unknown (coded as absent or unknown=0; present=1). Average Cohen's kappa was for the entire TRAP-18 was excellent, $\kappa = .80$. For the analyses, the primary coder's data were utilized.

IRB

IRB approval exemption for this study was sought and received. The sponsoring university determined was not considered human subjects research since the data were archival and deidentified. The IRB's condition was that information was deidentified as best as possible.

Results

The current study examined whether the TRAP-18 can be used to postdict violence within a sample of 101 people who participated in the January 6 insurrection. For an overall TRAP-18 score, the researchers summed the present variables with a potential upper limit score of 18 (see Table 1). The scores ranged from 2 to 11. The mean scores were low for the overall sample, 6.08 (*SD*=2.34), and for both the violent, 6.79 (*SD*=2.28), and non-violent, 5.33 (*SD*=2.19), samples.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

A Chi-square test for independence was initially run for each individual item on the TRAP-18 against the dependent variable of violence (see Table 2). The researchers were unable to run the Chi-square analysis on one item, *Creativity and Innovation* which was not present in any of the cases (*N*=58). However, this variable was included in the final logistic regression model.

Four proximal warning behaviors and one distal behavior significantly predicted violence. The four significant proximal behaviors (i.e., Pathway, Identification, Leakage, and Directly Communicated Threat) were positively related to violence. *Pathway* showed the strongest effect size, χ^2 (1, n = 101) = 8.56, p = .003, *phi* = .29. *Directly Communicated Threat* and *Leakage* showed nearly similar effect sizes, χ^2 (1, n = 101) = 4.53, p = .037, *phi* =.21, and χ^2 (1, n = 101) = 4.44, p = .036, *phi* = .21, respectively. Phi effect sizes are reported in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

One distal behavior was also positively related to violent incidents. *Personal Grievance and Moral Outrage* showed an effect on predicting violent behavior, χ^2 (1, n = 101) = 5.19, p = .023, *phi* = .23. The remaining thirteen variables did not show significance.

Fisher's exact tests were used to determine if there were significant associations between the dependent variable of violence and the six TRAP-18 dimensions with less than 5 observations. There were no significant associations between violence and these seven variables: *Novel Aggression* (two-tailed p = .233); *Energy Burst* (two-tailed p = .118); *Changes in Thinking* (two-tailed p = 1.0); *Failure of Sexual-Intimate* (two-tailed p = .518); *Mental Disorder* (two-tailed p = .093); and, *Criminal Violence* (two-tailed p = .271).

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 January 6

insurrectionists. Using the summed TRAP-18 score as the independent variable, the full model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 9.26, p < .002$. This suggests the TRAP-18 model, in total, was able to distinguish between the individuals within the sample who were violent and non-violent during the insurrection. The model as a whole explained between 10% (Cox and Snell R square) and 13% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in the presence of violence, and correctly classified 71.3% of cases.

Discussion

The current study applied the TRAP-18 to individuals indicted for their role in the January 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol insurrection. This research applied the structured professional judgement tool to both violent and non-violent participants, similar to Challacombe and Lucas (2018). The findings indicated several of the non-violent insurrection participants had few distal or proximal behavior markers. This may indicate that their passion about the election coupled with peer-pressure and the prompting of noted officials may have enticed them to act. This is not the case with those in the violent group. The open-source data suggest most individuals charged for violence had prepared for the event.

The TRAP-18 Indicators

Of the 18 indicators, four proximal warning behaviors—*Pathway, Identification, Leakage,* and *Directly Communicated Threat*—and one distal behavior—*Personal Grievance and Moral Outrage*—were found positively related to violent incidents. The remaining thirteen variables did not show significance. Most likely, this is related to the use of public sourced information for the codings and, unlike the typical use of the TRAP-18, there was no follow-up investigation to examine these characteristics. Additionally, many of the people charged with crimes in the insurrection removed social media posts related to discussions of their plans for

January 6, possibly at the instruction of their legal representatives. In particular, this condition affected the information available regarding distal characteristics. The distal characteristics of *failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group*, *thwarting of occupational goals*, *changes in thinking and emotions*, *failure of sexual-intimate pair bonding*, and *creativity and innovation* were mostly coded "unknown", meaning the information was not available through public sourcing of information. Most of the people who participated in the insurrection demonstrated a belief system justifying their actions. Therefore, the distal characteristic of *Framed by an Ideology* was almost always coded as present, which affected this item as having any significance in predicting violence.

The four proximal warning behaviors related to violent incidents also provide us with some interesting findings. *Pathway* is a very strong predictor for targeted attacks across multiple studies (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Fein & Vossekuil, 1999; Meloy et al., 2019). Meloy et al. (2019) found this indicator in greater than 85% of cases examined. Therefore, is it not surprising that this indicator was prominent among the violent cadre in this sample.

Identification is considered an indicator representing the movement from *fixation* to self-identity (Meloy et al., 2019, 2021). In the present study, *fixation* was not a significant predictor, but *identification* was related to the violent incidents. The individuals examined appeared to have moved beyond just being fixated to actually identifying with the cause of overturning the election (Fisher et al., 2021).

Leakage is very common among studies on attackers, yet not something considered predictive (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). The current study found it to be postdictive. A potential explanation for this is the strong reliance on social media by many of the individuals involved in the insurrection. The insurrectionists appeared to be proud to be supporting this cause. This is

also why the current study found directly communicated threat so high and postdictive – the insurrectionists did not appear ashamed of their actions. This also appears to be why the *Direct Threat* warning indicator was also found to be significantly related to violent insurrections. Some insurrectionists even live-streamed the attack, which is something seen among transnational far-right terrorism (Counter Extremism Project, 2019; Dixon, Jr., 2021; Kupper et al., 2022).

For the current study, we did not code all the participants with *creativity and innovation*. Meloy's (2017) definition of this indicator refers to a major aspect of the attack not being done in contemporary times, or the attack is imitated by others. One could argue that this indicator was present in every participant. However, as we are yet still finding out details on that day through various investigations, it is seeming more likely that some individuals were caught up in the activities of the day and participated without really considering the implications. This led us to believe this indicator should not be applied to the entire sample.

It is also interesting to note that, despite the fact that many of the items on the TRAP-18 were difficult to assess based on publicly-sourced information, the total TRAP-18 score still predicted the propensity for violence quite accurately. Over 70 percent of the participants were placed in the correct classification for violent behavior. This suggests that the TRAP-18 is a robust predictor of violent behavior, and this supports findings from other studies with similarly high classification rates (viz., Bockler at al., 2015; Challacombe & Lucas, 2018; Meloy & Gill, 2016). In many cases, someone investigating a person suspected to be radicalized to violent ends would be able to access far more data points.

As mentioned above, the data suggest that those indicted for non-violent crimes did not appear to have prepared for the insurrection. Trump and his supporters constantly challenged the election results during the lead-up to the insurrection (Baker, 2020; Blow, 2020; Itkowitz et al.,

2020; Martin & Burns, 2020; Sonmez et al., 2020; United States. Congress. House. Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2022). This was coupled with months of purportedly misleading or inaccurate information being heralded as fact, and the constant abrasive challenges to any individual or group that did not support Trump (Baum-Baicker, 2020, p.; Hasen, 2020; Lischka, 2019; Rizzo, 2020). In many ways, these precipitating incidents established a groupthink atmosphere. On January 6th, many of these emotionally-charged individuals were told that this was their last chance to keep Trump—their hero—in the White House. Those who had prepared likely took the lead, and the others possibly just went along with the mob.

As with any research exclusively using open-source data, there is an information-limitation bias to overcome. For example, Challacombe and Lucas (2018) found non-violent sovereign citizens often lacked many open-source reporting about their events vs. violent actors. Yet, the current study found some violent participants had limited data. The lack of data on these specific individuals could be related to state or local political pressures on various media outlets. To overcome this challenge and if possible, presentence interviews could be obtained.

This study applied the TRAP-18 to a large group of individuals acting in concert, and it found this SPJ was able to postdict violence within the sample. This finding suggests that Meloy and Gill's (2016) TRAP-18 may be useful in other areas than just the lone-actor or sovereign citizen spaces as studies to date has suggested. Further studies should continue to examine the usefulness of the TRAP-18 on different data sets.

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Table 1

TRAP-18 Means and Standard Deviations by Charge

Charge	*N*	Mean	Std. Dev.
Misdemeanor	49	5.33	2.193
Felony	52	6.79	2.278
Total	101	6.08	2.344

Table 2

Chi-Square Tests for using TRAP-18 Indices to Predict Violent and Non-Violent insurrectionists

Warning Behavior	Violent n	Violent %	Non-Violent n	Non-Violent %	$\chi^2(1)$	Φ
Total Items TRAP-18					23.27*	
Pathway					8.56**	.29
Unknown/Absent	34	61.8	21	38.2		
Present	15	32.6	31	67.4		
Fixation					2.90	.17
Unknown/Absent	8	73	3	27		
Present	41	46	49	54		
Identification					6.25*	.25
Unknown/Absent	24	65	13	35		
Present	25	39	39	61		
Novel Aggression					2.16	-.15
Unknown/Absent	47	47.5	52	52.5		
Present	2	100	0	0		
Energy Burst					3.93*	.20
Unknown/Absent	49	50.5	48	49.5		
Present	0	0	4	100		
Leakage					4.41*	.21
Unknown/Absent	41	54.7	34	45.3		
Present	8	30.8	18	69.2		
Last Resort					1.11	.11
Unknown/Absent	21	55.3	17	44.7		
Present	28	44.4	35	55.6		
Directly Communicated Threat					4.52*	.21
Unknown/Absent	38	55.9	30	44.1		
Present	11	33.3	22	42.3		

Personal Grievance and Moral Outrage						5.19*	.23
Unknown/Absent	25	62.5		15	37.2		
Present	24	39.3		37	60.7		
Framed by an Ideology						.952	.10
Unknown/Absent	0	0		1	100		
Present	49	49		51	51		
Failure to Affiliate						.256	.05
Unknown/Absent	44	49.4		45	50.6		
Present	5	41.7		7	58.3		
Dependence on a Virtual Community						.000	.00
Unknown/Absent	15	48.4		16	51.6		
Present	34	48.6		36	51.4		
Thwarted Occupational Goals						1.013	-.10
Unknown/Absent	41	47.6		47	53.4		
Present	8	61.5		5	38.5		
Changes in Thinking and Emotion						.002	.00
Unknown/Absent	48	48.5		51	51.5		
Present	1	50		1	50		
Failure of Sexual-Intimate Pair Bonding						.586	-.08
Unknown/Absent	43	47.3		48	52.7		
Present	6	60%		4	40		
Mental Disorder						3.61	.19
Unknown/Absent	47	51.6		44	48.4		
Present	2	20		8	80		
Greater Creativity							
Unknown/Absent	49	48.5		52	51.5	___	___
Present	0	0		0	0		
Criminal Violence						1.92	.14
Unknown/Absent	47	50.5		46	49.5		
Present	2	25		6	75		

**p<.01; *p<.05; Φ=.10-.30 small effect size