

Domestic extremist criminal damage events: behaving like criminals or terrorists?



Arlene Robinson, Zoe Marchment and Paul Gill

Theory

Localised activities of domestic extremism (DE) typically consist of activities, such as the destruction of property, that would constitute 'criminal damage' offences. These activities fall under a broad DE strategy of 'direct action', designed to cause operational difficulties, damage to reputation, and/or financial losses for the target. Property damage is a ubiquitous criminal direct action tactic perpetrated by left-wing extremists in Bristol to advance a variety of causes. Like other extremist events, direct action acts committed by UK DEs are used to convey a message. As such, the offenders may have a limited choice set of targets that will be relevant to their ideology to choose from. The lack of an ideological basis guiding non-DE criminal damage events means that they may be taking different factors into consideration when selecting targets. For DEs, the selected targets are more likely to be of a symbolic nature, relevant to their ideology. Therefore, committing acts in more 'public' places may be necessary, and carried out regardless of SCP measures.

Method

Using police data and online claims of responsibility, this study quantitatively analysed the target locations of 95 'direct action' property damage incidents by left-wing extremists in Bristol. We compared these crimes with 95 conventional property damage incidents in the same area, to identify ways in which they differ. The variables related to situational factors providing guardianship at a target location and were as follows: the presence of (a) capable guardians, (b) fencing, (c) lighting and (d) CCTV; the degree of target visibility; the target type (public/private building); whether the crime involved the use of an instrument.

Findings

The results suggest that left-wing extremists do not behave in the same manner as conventional criminals as they fail to conform to theoretical expectations regarding the effect of guardianship on target selection decisions. Instead, DEs appear to adhere to decision-making schemas more commonly associated with terrorists. The perceived presence of a capable guardian did not have a significant effect on DE target selection compared to the non-DE sample. However, the presence of lighting and CCTV at a target location were significantly associated with DE events. DE events were more likely to occur in places where fencing was present when compared with non-DE criminal damage events and were significantly more likely to occur in public places. The different locations in which criminal damage offences plays could be indicative of a different behavioural underpinning. The lack of an ideological basis guiding non-DE criminal damage events means that they may be taking different factors into consideration when selecting targets. For DEs, where the selected targets are more likely to be of a symbolic nature, they may believe the potential rewards are worth the associated risks.