

What Do We Know About Public Perception of Terrorism Risks?

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The events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) confronted the American public with a reality that had previously been of peripheral concern. Since there have been a limited number of terror-related attacks on United States soil, it is relatively unclear how Americans perceive the likelihood and consequences of different attack types. It is also unclear how the American public might react and respond in the event of different attack types. We apply the psychometric model to answer the question of how terrorism risk is related to perceived likelihood and consequence of an attack. Specifically, we asked survey participants to assess the risk of various natural, manmade and terror-related disasters. Each disaster was evaluated based on the risk to themselves and society, probability of disaster occurrence in the next year and the expected number of fatalities from a given event. We further extend the analysis to compare aggregated and individual responses across disaster type and risk attributes. Understanding the terrorist threat is critical to maintaining public moral, sustaining economic activity, and limiting disruption to normal daily routines. Obtaining a deeper understanding of how Americans perceive the terrorist threat will assist the development of policies and procedures for educating and preparing the nation for the impacts of an act of terrorism if it were to occur.