

Public Perception of Terrorism in Canada

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Intoduction

A study done in 2006 by Louise Lemyre, Michelle C. Turner, Jennifer E. C. Lee, and Daniel Krewski found that surveyed Canadians deemed terrorism as a low to moderate threat to the Canadian population as a whole and an even lower threat to individuals (Lemyre, Turner, Lee, and Krewski, 2006). In risk perception, usually there is more fear surrounding spectacular hazards or events that are less likely occur as opposed to hazards or events that are statistically more harmful. However, in this study, the opposite was found. By assessing components of risk perception, the results of Lemyre et al.'s study are not as surprising as initially thought, and why risk perception is important in emergency management and security.

Risk Perception

Risk perception focuses on why people fear the things they do and why they do not fear other things. Damon Coppola says that "... people do not tend to fear the things that are statistically most likely to kill them" (Coppola, 2015). Statistically, heart disease and automobile accidents are more likely to harm the general population, yet most people do not fear these things.

Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff, and Sarah Lichtenstien say that "people respond to the hazards they perceive" (Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstien, 1979). People do not necessarily react or consider hazards that statistically could cause more harm but react to hazards that can be easily understood. Perceived risk can be easily influenced and biased by how memorable the hazard is, and how conceivable it is in the imagination. Usually, people are more afraid of things they can imagine or remember (Coppola, 2015), whether it be an event they experience or something they see through the media. In addition, perceptions are often based on inaccurate

information from media outlets and social media, as opposed to the knowledge of qualified experts (Slovic et al., 1979).

Summary of Lemyre, Turner, Lee, and Krewski's 2006 Study

The 2006 study completed by Lemyre et al. assessed terrorism-related risk perceptions of 1'502 Canadians and found that respondents worried little about terrorism in Canada (Lemyre et al., 2006). Terrorism was not considered a large threat to the general Canadian public, nor was it found to be of great concern to individuals themselves. These findings contrasted that of similar studies performed in the United States and the United Kingdom, where relatively large-scale terrorist events occurred within the region (Lemyre et al., 2006). Data was also collected on the perception of the occurrence of specific types of terrorism, perception of the occurrence of specific effects of terrorism, and what credible information sources on terrorism are (Lemyre et al., 2006). Computer viruses were perceived to be a specific type of terrorism most probable to occur. Lowered sense of security was perceived to be a specific effect of terrorism most probable. Canadian media was perceived to be the most credible source of information on terrorism (Lemyre et al., 2006).

Analysis of Risk Perception in Lemyre et al.'s 2006 Study

The results of Lemyre et al.'s study at first glance contradicts how risk perception was discussed earlier in this paper. The study found that Canadians do not perceive terrorism as large threat to themselves or Canada as a whole. Spectacular occurrences, such as terrorism, tend to be more feared however that was not the case. There are few reasons as to why terrorism in Canada is perceived as a low threat.

Imaginability and Memorability

Slovic et al. discussed how perceived risk is influenced by the imaginability and memorability of the hazard (Slovic et al., 1979). People tend to be more afraid of things they can imagine and/or remember. Terrorism can be considered as something that is memorable and quite imaginable. However, at the time of the study, no major terrorism events had occurred on Canadian soil (Lemyre et al., 2006). The lack of events make the idea of a terrorist incident in Canada less imaginable and therefore not a huge risk.

Media Involvement

Perceptions of risk are often developed from new sources and media outlets, whether the perceptions be correct or incorrect. Lemyre et al.'s study showed that Canadians believe that the media is the most reliable source for information on terrorism, which proves this point (Lemyre et al., 2006). Media plays a hand in imaginability and memorability of a risk by often reporting on uncommon deaths or spectacular events more frequently than everyday events, which can cause the public to view rare events as more of a risk as opposed to more common occurrences (for example, plane crashes versus automobile crashes) (Coppola, 2015). However, the media cannot report on what has not happened, so there is no widespread media coverage. In addition, reporting on terrorism is very delicate procedure. Many reports utilize euphemistic language to mask and/or soften the language of violence to make it more palatable to viewers (Martin, 2018). This can inadvertently desensitize consumers to the severity of terrorism and how much of a threat it can be.

Importance of Risk Perception in Emergency Management and Security

Considering the general public does not usually utilize statistical likelihoods to determine risks, risk perception is based solely on what someone experiences or learns in the media. This

can cause problems for risk managers if they deem a threat for their facility as low risk and do nothing about it. If the public perceives the threat as severe, they may view the lack of action as negligent on the facility's part (Coppola, 2015). One very simple way to combat this would be to utilize effective public education and risk communication in order to prevent misperceptions of risk.

Conclusion

Lemyre et al.'s study is an excellent example of how risk perception works, as well as how important it is in security and emergency management. Misperceptions of risk could be a hinderance for managers, so it is important to work to limit incorrect perceptions. Although it may not have been a serious threat in 2006, terrorism is still as present, if not more so in 2021, which may have altered perception since then.

References

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