

Matthew Brashears gets grant to thwart terrorism

Cornell University

By [George Lowery](#) [1]

A Cornell sociologist is launching a new study to develop methods of identifying covert social networks, including terrorists who are preparing attacks, human traffickers and drug smugglers, among other groups.

Matthew Brashears, assistant professor of sociology, has received a three-year, \$797,000 grant from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency for the study that aims to help the U.S. government thwart terrorist attacks.

"We're very excited to have a chance to do this kind of work," said Brashears, who wrote the grant proposal with sociology doctoral candidate Michael Genkin. "It's becoming very difficult in the modern age to interdict decentralized criminal activities. Developing better and more reliable ways to identify terrorist activities ahead of when they carry out an attack is something that everyone would like to see happen."

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, social scientists have received more funding for counter-terrorism research because, Brashears noted, "It's fundamentally a social problem, not in the sense of how do you find terrorists to stop them, but in the context of why does transnational terrorism emerge in the first place? How can we cut off the supply of terrorists, not just find them once they become terrorists?"

To answer these questions, Brashears will begin by examining a data set of teenagers in American high schools "because we have all kinds of network data on them," he said. "We're going to try and detect hidden networks within these high schools under conditions in which we don't have to worry about the subjects trying to hide," he said. After that, Brashears' team will collect data specific to terrorism.

Brashears' goal is to develop techniques to uncover covert social networks that could be used by terrorists, human traffickers or drug smugglers -- "any group of people who have to link up to achieve an objective and don't want to be detected by the wider society," he said.

He continued, "Essentially, we're trying to replace the profiling techniques that are in use now with much better, more reliable methods for detecting terrorist cells that are preparing for a weapons of mass destruction attack. The idea is to pick up indicators that can be detected with passive information collection mechanisms, things that don't require expensive or advanced intelligence capabilities, and use those to tip off intelligence agencies that somebody's planning one of these destructive attacks."

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The government and researchers face the needle in a haystack issue: how to track down small numbers of terrorists among millions online.

"The hardest thing to do is to find the first person, and from there it gets comparatively easier," Brashears said. "But methods for finding those first people are not very well developed at this point, and we're hoping to change that."

[SOURCE](#) [2]

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