

Keeping protests within the law

Law enforcement agencies in the UK are acting before trouble develops to protect researchers from threats and harassment by animal rights extremists. Other countries should consider adopting similar policies and tactics.

Animal rights activists have disrupted the lives of researchers for many years, but this disruption has recently become less widespread in the UK. There has been “a sudden and very marked decline in targeting individual researchers around the country in a personal way,” the director of the Research Defense Society (an organization that monitors such campaigns and receives police briefings) told *The Guardian*. Other countries would do well to emulate this commitment to protecting scientists.

The UK took an important step in 2004 when the police formed the National Extremism Coordination Tactical Unit. Its aim was to provide guidance and tactical advice to local police forces dealing with extremism and to liaise with pharmaceutical and academic institutions. The unit participated in Operation Achilles, which is thought to be the largest investigation of animal rights extremism ever undertaken. After 2 years of work by about 700 officers in the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands, 30 people were arrested on suspicion of crimes including firebombing, arson and vandalism. The trial is currently underway.

Targets of the investigation included people and organizations linked to the campaign against Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) in Cambridgeshire. Among those arrested was Greg Avery, who runs Stop Huntingdon Cruelty, a group that has led the 8-year campaign to intimidate shareholders and other companies into cutting ties with HLS. (The Bank of England, under pressure from the government, is now the only bank that will hold the HLS account.) Many UK researchers believe that a few hardcore activists contribute to most animal rights extremism in the UK, and focusing on this group seems likely to reduce intimidation tactics.

The strategy seems to be effective. In Oxford, another magnet for animal rights protests, a researcher said, “Individuals no longer get threats targeted specifically at them, and protestors no longer turn up at people’s homes. This certainly happened in the past, and Thames Valley police have made it very clear that they want to know about such threats and will respond to them.” Last year, animal rights activists threatened to disrupt a departmental Christmas party in Oxford. Coordinated support from the university and the local police reassured the owner of the pub where the party was held, and the celebration went ahead. Crucially, the police took action before an incident happened, which is important for making researchers feel safer.

In contrast, Dario Ringach and Michael Podell received little support from law enforcement or their universities in the United States in dealing with sustained campaigns of threats and intimidation, which ultimately led each of them to stop studying animals. The passage of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act raised hopes that the United States might adopt a tougher approach, but one scientist in Los Angeles said that the situation has not improved. In October, the Animal Liberation Front

took responsibility for flooding the house of a local researcher, causing \$20,000–40,000 in damage. Because the new federal law applies only to crimes committed across state lines, it has not been effective against extremists who act within a state. To crack down on intimidation of researchers, legislatures will need to pass stronger state laws and the police will need to respond proactively to threats.

There are valid concerns that strong policing tactics, such as the use of the Serious and Organized Crime and Police Act 2005 (normally used against international crime cartels) in the UK, may stifle legitimate protests as well. Indeed, some measures such as anti-social behavior orders (ASBOs) have been used to prevent protests that, at first glance, appear to be legitimate. An ASBO prevented one activist from going within a mile of Huntingdon Life Sciences for 3 years, and another was barred from entering Cambridgeshire or contacting anyone associated with Huntingdon Life Sciences. Breaching these ASBO conditions could result in a prison sentence for these individuals, though the actions would be legal for anyone else. However, in both cases, the ASBO was put in place after a long campaign of malicious, personally targeted harassment, which had earlier resulted in court convictions.

In other cases, even when tactics are legal, they are aimed at intimidating people rather than expressing legitimate dissent. An example is protestors photographing undergraduates who attend lectures at departments where researchers are involved in animal research. Given the past history of animal rights groups publicizing the names and addresses of their targets, this is deeply distressing for many students. The difference between intimidation and legitimate protest can be difficult to define, but so far the UK authorities have done a good job of making this distinction. The announcement of Operation Achilles was accompanied by a statement that lawful animal rights campaigners had every right to express their personal views. Rallies and protests continue in Huntingdon and are a familiar sight to anyone who frequents Oxford city center.

Of course, many UK scientists continue to feel intimidated by the threat of animal rights extremism. The researcher that we interviewed preferred not to be quoted by name. Recently, a UK academic who works primarily on humans considered removing his name from a paper submitted to *Nature Neuroscience* when the referees requested *in vivo* data from another primate species. However, things are slowly improving, and policymakers in academic institutions and law enforcement agencies elsewhere would do well to develop similar strategies. The UK has led the way in animal rights extremism and it seems only fitting that it should lead the way in effectively dealing with such extremism as well. ■

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