

The Homeland Security Threat Landscape: An Exploratory Analysis of Public Perception and Strategic Response

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ABSTRACT: This research critically examined the dynamic evolution of the homeland security threat landscape and the shifting perceptions that shape strategic responses within academic, governmental, and operational domains. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created in the wake of the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and expert assessments, this study identifies critical gaps in perception and understanding, highlighting areas where policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must focus to mitigate and respond to evolving threats effectively. Drawing on 112 anonymous surveys, this study highlights the dynamic interplay between real-world events, media framing, and governmental responses that shape both public understanding and strategic priorities. To determine which threat United States citizens perceived as the most significant and most detrimental to Homeland Security, a study was conducted by surveying 112 people. The study employed a 2x3 factorial design (male vs. female) with age groups (19-34, 35-49, and 50+) in a non-repeated measure to examine the threat they perceived as the most significant and most detrimental to the United States Homeland Security. The options provided were derived from the initial 2002 department proposal, the 2020 threat assessment, and the 2025 threat assessment. The findings of this research aim to inform strategic decision-making and enhance the resilience of homeland security systems in the face of an increasingly complex and interconnected threat environment. This research contributes to the academic discourse by offering a conceptual model for understanding perception-driven security policy and by proposing pathways for aligning perception with evidence-based threat management.

KEYWORDS: disaster preparedness, climate security, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, interagency coordination, terrorism, homeland security, threat perception, national security, domestic extremism, emergency management, risk assessment, security studies, public policy, threat evolution, strategic planning, public perception, security intelligence

Introduction

Homeland security threats continue to occupy a central position in national security discourse and significantly influence the political landscape. Politicians often leverage the evolving threat environment to campaign on their commitment to safeguarding the American public. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, ensuring the safety of U.S. citizens has remained a paramount priority. Over the past two decades, methodologies for protecting the nation have evolved substantially, driven largely by technological advancements and the government's increasingly sophisticated use of these tools. While terrorism was the predominant focus in the immediate post-9/11 era, culminating in the declared War on Terror, a diverse array of threats persists today.

Since the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, the threat landscape has shifted, with issues such as cybersecurity and border security emerging as dominant concerns within public discourse and media coverage. This study aims to elucidate the perceptions held by American citizens regarding the most significant threats facing homeland security. The findings are intended to inform homeland security practitioners in refining strategic priorities and resource allocation to address the threats most salient to the public. Moreover, longitudinal application of this research can facilitate comparative analyses over time, thereby providing valuable insights into the evolving nature of public threat perception.

Literature Review

Historical and Foundational Reflection

On September 11, 2001, members of the foreign terrorist organization Al-Qaeda orchestrated a coordinated attack on the United States by hijacking four commercial airplanes. Two of these aircraft were deliberately flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, one struck the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and the fourth, intended for a target in Washington, D.C., crashed in a field in Pennsylvania due to the courageous intervention of passengers aboard. These attacks resulted in the deaths of 2,976 individuals and caused injuries to thousands more, many of whom continue to suffer from long-term health complications stemming from the collapse of the towers (FBI, 2016a). Although the 9/11 attacks represent the deadliest terrorist incident on American soil, they were preceded by other significant acts of terrorism. In 1993, the World Trade Center was targeted in a bombing perpetrated by foreign terrorists, resulting in six fatalities (FBI, 2016c). Additionally, in 1995, a domestic terrorist detonated a truck bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people (FBI, 2016b). The magnitude and impact of the September 11 attacks served as the primary impetus for the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The Rise of Domestic Terrorism

In 2024, the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a report identifying lone offenders of domestic terrorism as the greatest threat to homeland security. The report highlighted, “Many of these violent extremists are motivated and inspired by a mix of socio-political goals and personal grievances against their target” (FEDagent, 2024). Domestic terrorist incidents can include but are not limited to mass shootings, public bombings, and attacks on political candidates. Since 2016, there has been a dramatic rise in attacks and plots motivated by partisan political beliefs (McCabe, n.d.).

In 2025, a man in Boulder, Colorado, threw Molotov cocktails at demonstrators attending a march for Israeli hostages. The attack was carried out by an extremist who “hated Zionists and targeted them because they needed to stop taking over” (Halpert, 2025). The attack in Colorado is only one of many recent domestic terrorist attacks to occur on American soil. In July of 2024, in Butler, Pennsylvania, a lone gunman attempted to shoot and assassinate President Donald Trump, which resulted in one victim’s death and injuries to the President and other spectators (FBI, 2024).

Crisis on the Border

The United States’ southern border has been a major talking point among politicians and a significant focus for homeland security practitioners. The lack of proper vetting poses a significant threat to national security. Since fiscal year 2021, 382 individuals on the terrorist watch list have been apprehended at our borders (Newhouse, 2024). In fiscal year 2023, 3.2 million encounters were made with undocumented migrants at the southern border, each hailing from a different country (Trigger & Culbertson, 2024). Illegal immigration has placed a strain on the critical infrastructure of communities throughout the country. Many Mexican cartel organizations exploit hopeful migrants and subject them to human trafficking and forced labor.

In addition to human trafficking, Mexican cartel organizations make large profits from illegal drug trafficking into the United States through the southern border. Drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl have resulted in the overdose deaths of thousands across the country. In 2022, deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (primarily illicitly manufactured fentanyl) rose to 73,838 deaths (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). The rising number of deaths because of the actions of Cartels and other criminal organizations resulted in President Trump declaring them as foreign terrorist organizations and global terrorists on January 20, 2025 (The United States Government, 2025). The declaration of Cartels as foreign terrorist organizations places and emphasizes the need for enhanced security at the southern border.

A Response to Crisis: The Birth of DHS After 9/11

In June 2002, President G. Bush proposed the creation of a new department, the Department of Homeland Security. The purpose of this new department was to establish a single department whose primary mission was to protect the American Homeland (Bush, 2002). Before the Department of Homeland Security was established, more than 100 different government agencies shared the responsibility of protecting homeland security, which undoubtedly led to ineffective and inefficient communication and collaboration. On November 25, 2002, Congress signed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, effectively establishing the Department of Homeland Security (107th Congress, 2002).

Building a New Security Architecture

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security consolidated many of the previous 100 agencies that were responsible for homeland security. Some members now part of the DHS are the U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Transportation Security Administration, and many more. The initial proposal for the DHS did not include a threat assessment but a threat preparedness. The publication on threat preparedness identified that the DHS would secure the United States' borders, the transportation sector, ports of entry, and critical infrastructure. The DHS was also tasked with synthesizing and analyzing intelligence sources and communicating that information to public and private sector stakeholders. The DHS was also the lead coordinator in efforts between federal, state, and local officials to protect the American people against bioterrorism and other weapons of mass destruction. Lastly, the DHS was responsible for training first responders and managing federal emergency response efforts (Bush, 2002).

Centralizing Security: Goals, Threat Assessment, Risks, and Realities

The Department of Homeland Security did not release a Threat Assessment until 2020, which identified seven threats to the United States Homeland. The threats included terrorist threats, cyber threats, transnational crime organization threats, foreign influence activity, economic security threats, illegal immigration threats, and natural disaster threats (Department of Homeland Security, 2020). The assessment further identified subcategories of threats; for instance, the terrorist threats included violent extremism in the United States and foreign terrorist threats. The cyber threats identified included ransomware and identity theft, carried out by nations like China and Russia, as well as foreign cyber threats to the 2020 presidential election. Transnational crime organizations included threats involving Mexican-based Cartels and the illicit drug trafficking, human smuggling, and border territory wars that they partake in. Foreign influence activity included

Russian influence utilizing overt/covert methods of aggravating social and racial tensions, along with manipulation of AI and misinformation of the 2020 Presidential election. Economic Security identified the COVID-19 destabilization of the United States supply chain. The assessment also identified how illegal immigration consisted of illegal human trafficking by land and sea, while natural disasters consisted of hurricanes, wildfires, and floods.

The most recent Department of Homeland Security Threat Assessment, published in 2025, consisted of only four types of threats. The threats included Public Safety, consisting of terrorism, illegal drugs, and nation states' influence in operations and transnational repression; Critical Infrastructure Security; disruptive cyber-attacks and disruptive physical attacks targeting critical infrastructure; Border Immigration and Security, such as Migration and terrorist watchlist encounters, and Threats to economic Security; economic manipulation and coercion, economic espionage and influence (DHS, 2025).

Advancements in Technology and Cyber Threats

Since the establishment of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, technological advancements have significantly transformed both national security operations and global interdependence on digital infrastructure. While technology serves as a powerful asset for consumers and governmental functions, it also introduces complex vulnerabilities. Nation-states and hostile actors have increasingly exploited these vulnerabilities through cyber-attacks aimed at disrupting the American way of life. In response to the growing cyber threat landscape, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Act of 2018 was signed into law on November 16, 2018, formally creating the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) (CISA, 2018). CISA is tasked with safeguarding the Nation's critical infrastructure from both physical and cyber threats. It actively works to defend against advanced cyber adversaries and foreign actors that exploit security gaps to steal data, extort financial resources, or undermine essential services (CISA, n.d.).

The 2025 Homeland Threat Assessment issued by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) underscores the persistent and escalating cyber threats posed by foreign adversaries such as the People's Republic of China and Iran, noting that these actors are likely to continue targeting the integrity of U.S. infrastructure in the near future (Ribeiro, 2024). The global impact of cybercrime is substantial, with ransomware attacks alone projected to cost businesses \$15.63 trillion by 2029 (Katz School of Science and Health, Yeshiva University, 2024). Another emerging concern is the misuse of deepfake technology, which can generate convincing synthetic media to impersonate public officials, thereby undermining democratic processes and public trust. In countering such evolving threats, homeland security professionals are increasingly leveraging artificial

intelligence (AI). AI systems, particularly those utilizing machine learning, offer powerful tools for identifying malicious patterns, analyzing vast datasets in real-time, and anticipating potential cyberattacks (Neumann University, n.d.).

Empirical Questions

Given the apparent changes to the Homeland Security Threat landscape, this study sought to identify what current citizens considered the most significant threat to the United States Homeland Security and measure how their perception of threats has changed.

1. What do current citizens see as the largest threat to Homeland Security?
2. Do the results vary based on gender? (Male v. Female)
3. Do the results vary by age group? (19-34,35-49,50+)

Data Analysis

Sampling/Demographic

This study utilized a 2x3 factorial between persons, non-repeated measures design. The independent variables included both male and female genders along with age groups of 19-34, 35-49, and 50+.

Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age 19-34	Age 35-49	Age 50+	Age 19-36	Age 36-40	50+

Methodology

Data Analysis Procedures

This study utilized a random sample of participants and an anonymous Google survey. One hundred and twelve U.S. citizens participated in an anonymous Google survey. Participants were distributed a link and given a disclaimer to read. They were asked to identify the most significant, the most detrimental, and the most minor threats to the United States Homeland Security. The disclaimer stated that participation in the survey was voluntary and participants could stop taking it at any time. Within the disclaimer, participants were advised that completing the survey indicated their acknowledgment and agreement with the disclaimer. Participants were then asked to identify their gender (male or female) and their age group (19-34, 35-49, 50+). Subsequently, participants were asked to identify the most significant, the most detrimental, and the least significant threats to the United States Homeland Security. Threat options were derived from the published threats published by the Department of Homeland Security in 2020 and 2025. The threat options included for all three questions included:

- Natural Disasters (hurricanes, wildfires, tornados, flooding, etc.)
- Cyber Threats (ransomware, cyber-attacks by foreign countries like China and Russia that target critical infrastructure, election interference)
- Economic Security Threats (supply chain disruption, economic manipulation carried out by other countries)
- Border/Immigration Security Threats (border encounters with terrorist watch list members, illicit drug trafficking into the U.S., human trafficking, drug cartel crimes, etc.)
- Domestic Terrorist Threats (mass/school shootings, homegrown violent extremists, racially motivated supremacy groups)
- Foreign Terrorist Organization Threats (Al-Qaeda, ISIS, 9/11 attack, etc.)
- Biological Threats (COVID-19, etc.).

Results

Interpretation of Findings

The analysis of threat perception by gender yielded notable findings. Male respondents predominantly identified border and immigration security as the most significant threat, receiving 20 votes, with cybersecurity threats closely trailing at 19 votes. Conversely, female respondents viewed cybersecurity and border/immigration security threats as equally significant, each garnering 15 votes. Age-based analysis revealed that 34% of participants aged 19–34 considered cybersecurity to be the foremost threat, whereas 42% of respondents aged 35 and older perceived border and immigration security as the most critical concern. Among those aged 35–49, 50% identified cybersecurity and domestic terrorism as the secondary highest threats. Within the male cohort, 36% prioritized border and immigration security as the leading threat, followed by cybersecurity. Meanwhile, 52% of female respondents ranked cybersecurity and border security as the most pressing threats, with domestic terrorism as the subsequent concern.

Overall, border and immigration security emerged as the most significant threat, accounting for 31% of total votes, closely followed by cybersecurity at 30%. Notably, only 3.6% of respondents ($n = 4$) identified foreign terrorism—exemplified by events such as the September 11 attacks—as the predominant threat, indicating a marked shift in public perception from the initial threat framework that motivated the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. This evolution reflects changing societal concerns regarding the contemporary homeland security landscape.

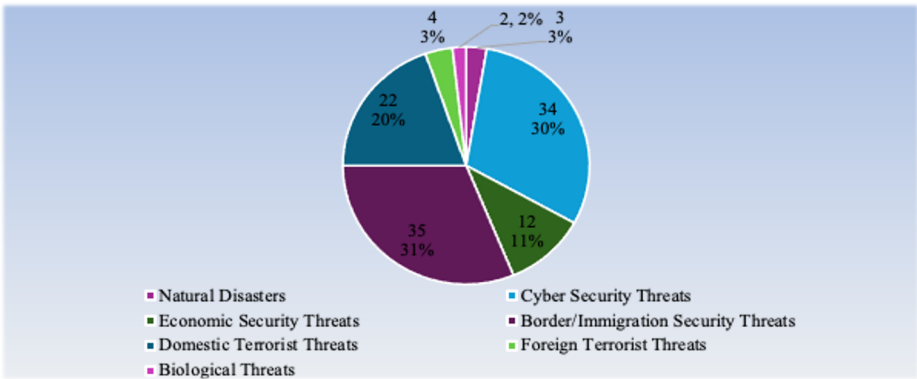


Figure 1. Current Threat Perception (N=112)

Source: Data obtained with anonymous online survey of 112 people (2025)

Note: A pie chart visually represents the current threat perception

The most significant threat identified by respondents in this study was border and immigration security, receiving 35 votes (31% of total responses). Cybersecurity followed closely as the second most perceived threat, with 34 votes (30%). Domestic terrorism was identified as the third most significant threat, garnering 22 votes (20%). Biological threats were perceived as the least significant, receiving only 2 votes (2% of total responses).

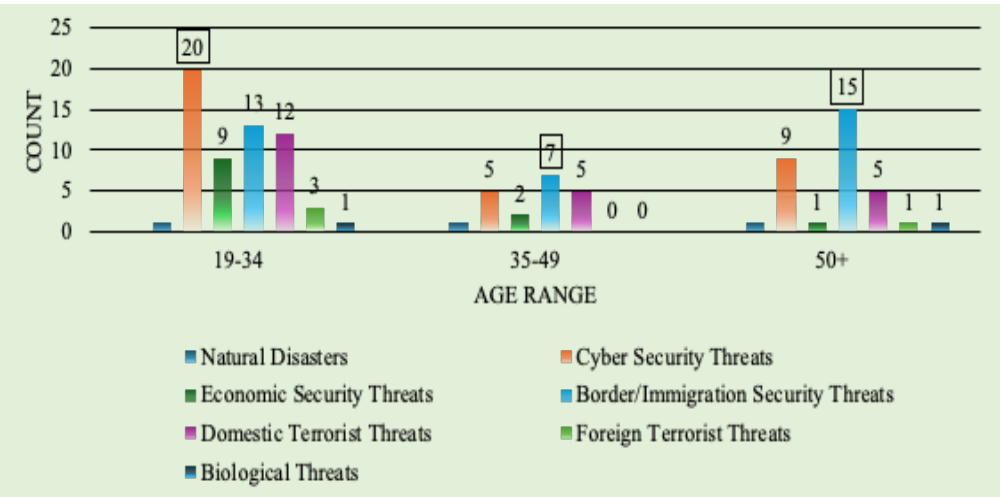


Figure 2. Current Threat Perception Breakdown by Age Range (N=112)

Source: Data obtained with anonymous online survey of 112 people (2025)

Note: A bar graph illustrates the trend of threat perception by age group

Analysis by age group revealed that participants aged 19 to 34 most frequently identified cybersecurity as the most significant threat to Homeland Security, accounting for 20 responses. In contrast, participants aged 35 and older (including those 50 and above) most commonly perceived border and immigration security as the primary threat to Homeland Security.

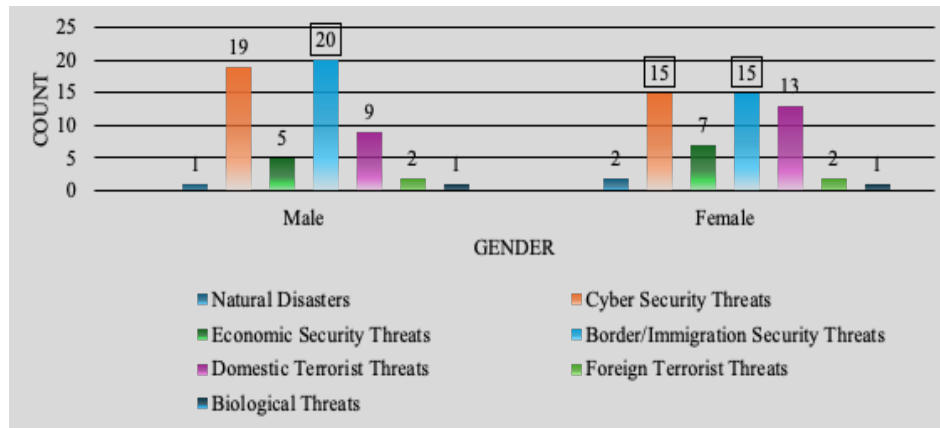


Figure 3. Current Threat Perception Breakdown by Gender (N=112)

Source: Data obtained with anonymous online survey of 112 people (2025)

Note: A bar graph illustrates the trend of threat perception by age group

A total of 112 U.S. citizens participated in the survey, comprising 57 males and 55 females. The majority of respondents ($n = 59$; 53%) were between the ages of 19 and 34. Participants aged 50 years and older represented 29% of the sample ($n = 33$), while 18% ($n = 20$) were between the ages of 35 and 49.

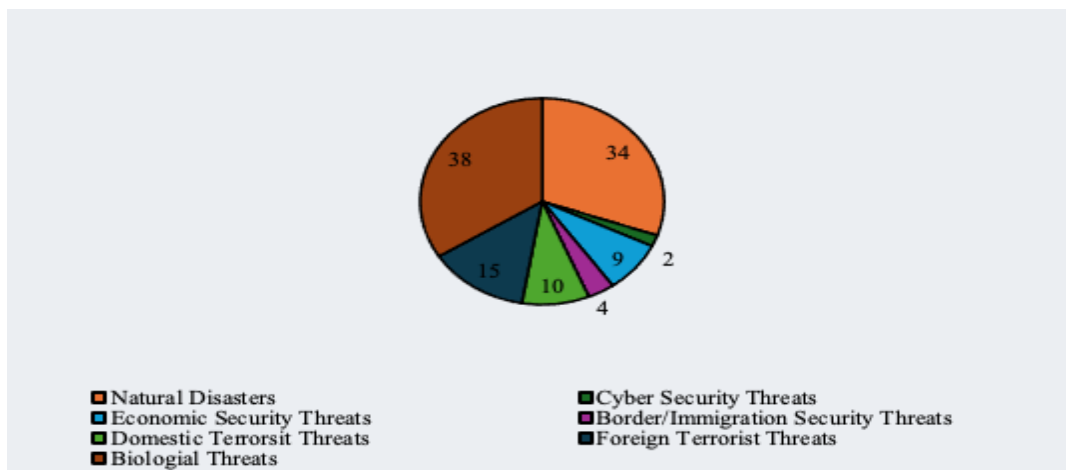


Figure 4. Current Perception of the Smallest Threat (N=112)

Source: Data obtained with anonymous online survey of 112 people (2025)

Note: A pie chart visually represents the smallest threat perception

Among the range of threats assessed in the study, biological threats were perceived as the least significant, receiving 38 votes, accounting for 34% of the total responses. Natural disasters followed closely, identified as the second-least concerning threat with 34 responses (30%). Foreign terrorist threats ranked third, with only 15 respondents (13%) identifying them as a primary concern. Notably, both border and immigration security, as well as cybersecurity threats, were viewed

as the least critical among participants, each receiving only 6 votes (5% of the total), indicating a comparatively lower level of perceived urgency in these areas.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that border and immigration security, along with cybersecurity, were perceived as the most significant threats to U.S. Homeland Security by survey respondents. In contrast, biological threats and natural disasters were ranked as the least concerning. Notably, the perception of the most significant threat was consistent across gender groups. However, age-based differences emerged: among respondents aged 19–34, cybersecurity received 20 votes (34% within that age group), suggesting that younger individuals view technological threats as especially critical. This aligns with broader trends, as advancements in technology have increasingly enabled hostile actors to exploit cyber vulnerabilities to disrupt societal functions. Conversely, respondents aged 50 and older identified border and immigration security as the most pressing threat, highlighting ongoing concerns about border integrity.

Although there is limited data capturing the public's perception of threats at the inception of the Department of Homeland Security in 2001, the September 11 attacks were the foundational impetus for its creation, emphasizing foreign terrorism as a central concern. Today, however, only 4 respondents (3.6%) identified foreign terrorist threats as the most significant concern, underscoring a marked shift in perceived threats over the past two decades. These findings support the need for further exploration into how threat perception evolves over time. Future research could facilitate comparative analyses examining the influence of political discourse, global developments, and media framing on the public's understanding of national security threats.

Conclusion and Future Scope

This exploratory study investigated public perceptions of the evolving homeland security threat landscape, offering valuable insights into how different demographic groups prioritize national security concerns. The findings indicate that border and immigration security, alongside cybersecurity, are regarded as the most urgent threats in the current national security landscape, with generational differences playing a significant role in shaping these perceptions. These results present key opportunities for practitioners within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Conducting annual, comprehensive threat perception assessments using a demographically diverse respondent pool can provide actionable insights into how U.S. citizens view emerging threats. Such data can enhance strategic preparedness, strengthen national resilience, and foster greater public trust in DHS operations and affiliated agencies. Moreover, routinely gathering and integrating public perception data can position DHS as more

responsive and attuned to the concerns of the American public, reinforcing democratic engagement.

Looking ahead, future homeland security strategies must adopt a more integrated and anticipatory posture—leveraging advanced technologies, enhancing interagency coordination, and engaging communities in resilience-building efforts. As the threat environment continues to evolve, so too must the frameworks guiding national security, ensuring that protective measures remain proactive, inclusive, and aligned with the values they are intended to defend. Future research should consider examining the influence of media framing, political affiliation, and regional variation in shaping public perceptions of homeland security threats. Incorporating expert risk assessments alongside public opinion data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of discrepancies between perceived and actual threat likelihoods. Ultimately, developing a more nuanced grasp of how the public's views on homeland security threats evolve over time can support more informed, transparent, and adaptive policy formulation and strategic planning.

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