

Defining Homeland Security

Daniel C. Durham

Sam Houston State University

Defining Homeland Security

In the shadow of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks the United States Department of Homeland Security was established as a single cabinet-level organization combining 22 existing federal agencies with responsibilities for protecting the United States into a single department with the intent of improving accountability, information-sharing, and providing for a unified command structure. Ostensibly, considering that the impetus for establishing the Department of Homeland Security was a direct result of an act of terrorism, the concept of homeland security became synonymous with protecting the United States from terrorist events. However, defining homeland security with a sole focus on terrorism fails to adequately address various other hazards and issues that are critical for the successful response to crisis events by the diverse agencies that comprise the Department of Homeland Security. While there are commonalities associated with the meaning of homeland security embodied in various government and scholarly documents, more than sixteen years after the Department of Homeland Security was established, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term.

Literature Review

In the years before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there was discussion within the Federal government about the need to expand national security policy to address concerns with the increasing occurrence of radicalized terrorism (Newmann, 2002). However, it was not until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred that a series of presidential directives were issued addressing the concept of homeland security with the focus of preventing future terrorist attacks. Even though this resulted in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the most substantial federal government reorganization since the 1947 National Security Act, a definition of the term homeland security did not exist (Dorff, 2005).

Varying Definitions in Strategic Documents and Mission Statements

As the Department of Homeland Security evolved, strategic documents such as the National Security Strategy and Quadrennial Homeland Security Review were developed with each providing a varying meaning of homeland security. While there were commonalities associated with the definitions identified in many of these documents, there were also significant differences attributable to complexities related to policymaking issues for the disparate agencies within the Department of Homeland Security (Robinson & Mallik, 2015). Arguably, it would be the National Security Strategy that would provide a more visible transition of the homeland security concept from terrorism to also encompass natural disasters.

Evolving Definitions in the National Security Strategy

In 2002 the first United States National Security Strategy for Homeland Security defined the concept of homeland security as being, “A concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur” (Office of Homeland Security, 2002, p. 2). However, in light of the significant failure and rampant criticism of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, while the definition of homeland security remained unchanged in the 2010 second version of the National Security Strategy, there was a concession that non-terrorist related events, while not necessarily being considered in the vein of homeland security, does have a potential to present actual or perceived exploitable vulnerabilities (Office of Homeland Security, 2010). By 2012 the concept of homeland security identified in the National Security Strategy provided discussion that the range of threats and hazards to the United States included natural disasters, large-scale cyber-attacks, and pandemics in addition to terrorism (Office of Homeland Security, 2015).

Homeland Security Lexicon

Concurrent with the evolving concept of homeland security in the National Security Strategy, the mission of the Department of Homeland Security expanded from an initial focus on preventing terrorist attacks to incorporate activities to secure the nation's borders, enforce immigration laws, secure cyberspace, coordinate disaster response, and support economic security (Bellavita, 2008). As such, it would be a reasonable assumption that the Department of Homeland Security should strive to formulate a more comprehensive definition of homeland security to provide organizational leaders with an opportunity to set the direction for strategic and operational planning while simultaneously providing a positive impact on employee performance, values, and organizational culture. Nevertheless, the 2017 Department of Homeland Security Definition and Lexicon Manual continues to use the same basic definition of homeland security as used in the 2002 United States National Security Strategy for Homeland Security (DHS Lexicon Terms and Definitions, 2017).

Continuing Debate

Given the absence of an agreed-upon definition, the concept of homeland security continues to be the subject of debate for establishing government policies, conducting research activities, and developing academic curricula (Kahan, 2013). Further, the perception of homeland security is perceived differently by various disciplines with law enforcement focusing on terrorism, emergency preparedness and fire service organizations preferring an all-hazards approach, and federal agencies predominantly aligned towards terrorism and major catastrophes (Comiskey, 2014). Given this different meaning to different groups, perhaps the best course of action would be to apply a homeland security definition that is most applicable to a given scenario whether it be a terrorist act, natural disaster, or other triggering event (Bellavita, 2008).

Discussion

The competing and varied definitions of homeland security are seemingly the results of attempts to incorporate all possible events as well as address the missions of various federal, state, and local agencies into a few concise sentences. As a result, the absence of agreement aside, the definitions provided are either too long and convoluted or brief to the point of being near meaningless. Arguably, the lack of an agreed-upon definition has an adverse impact on the development of cohesive strategies and policies within government entities. However, in actuality, the overall response to a threat or incident of any type requires the coordinated and integrated efforts of a multitude of federal, state, and local agencies bringing together their individual and often unique skill sets to protect the interests of the United States. Perhaps then it is not so ironic that the basic concept of protecting the nation, citizens, and American way of life is already delineated in the mission statement for the Department of Homeland Security.

Conclusion

Defining the term homeland security in a manner that would address the interests of government policymakers, homeland security professionals, and academia is, at best, a daunting task. Making this endeavor all the more difficult is that many proposed definitions of homeland security are focused on political or organizational self-interests rather than having a unifying or comprehensive focus. That said, the definition of homeland security developed for this topical essay is provided below.

Homeland Security: *Leveraging the expertise of all personnel within government agencies to strengthen the coordinated Federal, state, and local effort for prevention, protection, and response to natural and human-made threats to the interests of the United States and its allies.*

References

- Bellavita, C. (2008). Changing Homeland Security: What is Homeland Security? *Homeland Security Affairs*, 4(1), pp.1-30. <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/118>
- Comiskey, J. (2014). *How Do College Homeland Security Curricula Prepare Students for Homeland Security?* Doctoral. St. John Fisher College. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f2ac/dd44e66d74765e6952e6a3a2798e1794094e.pdf>
- DHS Lexicon Terms and Definitions. (2017). Instruction Manual 262-12-001-01: DHS Lexicon Terms and Definitions. 2, p. 293 https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_0116_MGMT_DHS-Lexicon.pdf
- Dorff, R. (2005). Failed States After 9/11: What Did We Know and What Have We Learned? *International Studies Perspectives*, 6(1), pp.20-34.
- Kahan, J. (2013). What's in a Name? The Meaning of Homeland Security. *Journal of Homeland Security Education*, 2, pp.1-14. <https://ijspre.org/whats-in-a-name-the-meaning-of-homeland-security/>
- Newmann, W. (2002). Reorganizing for National Security and Homeland Security. *Public Administration Review*, 62(s1), pp.126-137.
- Office of Homeland Security (2002). *National Strategy for Homeland Security*. Washington, DC: Office of Homeland Security, p.2. <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/nat-strat-hls-2002.pdf>
- Office of Homeland Security (2007). *National Strategy for Homeland Security*. Washington, DC: Office of Homeland Security, p.3. https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/nat_strat_homelandsecurity_2007.pdf

Office of Homeland Security (2010). *National Strategy for Homeland Security*. Washington, DC:

Office of Homeland Security, p.18. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=24251>

Office of Homeland Security (2015). *National Strategy for Homeland Security*. Washington, DC:

Office of Homeland Security, p.1-29. [http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/](http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015.pdf)

2015/02/2015.pdf

Robinson, S. and Mallik, N. (2015). Varieties of Homeland Security: An Assessment of US

State-level Definitions. *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*,

12(1).