
DEVELOPING A PUBLIC EARLY WARNING SYSTEM FOR GENOCIDE AND MASS KILLING

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report summarizes the findings from the Museum's Sudikoff Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention on October 5, 2011, which was made possible by the generous support of the Sudikoff Family Foundation. The seminar brought to the Museum a distinguished group of scholars, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and former policy makers to explore the possibility of developing a public early warning system for genocide and mass killing. Participants discussed the need for such a system, investigated how the system might be structured, and identified the key costs and challenges of creating and maintaining the system. The discussion was divided into four main sessions, each of which is summarized here.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

A living memorial to the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires leaders and citizens worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.

The Museum's efforts to prevent and respond to genocide and related crimes against humanity are guided by the Committee on Conscience, a standing committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Museum's governing board. The Committee on Conscience works to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

ONLINE RESOURCES

An online edition of this report and additional information on the subject can be found on the Museum's website at ushmm.org/genocide/earlywarning.

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SESSION I: IS A PUBLIC WARNING SYSTEM NECESSARY?

The first session of the day addressed the broad question of whether a public early warning system is necessary today and how such a system could be most useful. There was a strong consensus among the participants that a high-quality warning system with global coverage could be extremely valuable. Although several systems exist, it was agreed that none makes forecasts in ways that take advantage of the most sophisticated statistical techniques and expert survey methodologies or that can be assessed subsequently for accuracy. The announcement in August of a **presidential study directive (PSD-10)** establishing an Atrocities Prevention Board suggests that this might be an opportune moment to make a contribution in this area. Although participants recognized that early warning by itself could not ensure effective action is taken to prevent or respond effectively to genocide and mass killing, it was agreed that it is a key first step in any effort to do so.

Several participants emphasized that audiences outside the US government, including NGOs, IGOs, and foreign governments, might be especially interested in a public early warning system because these groups lack the US government's capabilities to collect intelligence on a global level. Participants also highlighted the importance of thinking carefully about how best to introduce the system to the public, to distinguish it from existing efforts, and to communicate warnings to achieve the maximum effect. Many agreed that it would be important for a variety of groups to partner together to increase the credibility and visibility of the system, foster cooperation from a diverse set of experts, share resources, and decrease the risk that the system becomes politicized. Participants also noted that the development of such a system would require a sustained commitment, since it would take at least five years for it to achieve a track record with which to gauge its success.

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SESSION II: WHAT KINDS OF VIOLENCE SHOULD AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM SEEK TO FORECAST?

This session addressed the crucial question of how to define the kinds of violence the system would seek to forecast. Participants considered three main conceptual aspects of the definition. First, what kinds of groups can be targets of the violence (e.g., ethnic and religious groups, or political/ideological groups as well)? Second, what is the scale of the violence and how will it be measured (e.g., a quantitative threshold, a proportion of the targeted group, or evidence of sustained systematic attacks)? Third, what is the objective or intent of the violence (e.g., to destroy a specific group as such, or to kill large numbers of civilians)?

The group discussed key trade-offs between different ways of defining the violence the system would be designed to predict. Although there was no consensus, most participants agreed that a broader definition—focusing on a wide range of large-scale, intentional killing of civilian groups—was more desirable than a narrow definition limited only to violence likely to be consistent with the UN Genocide Convention. The group also discussed the use of different terminologies. Many participants agreed that it would be wise to avoid the word “genocide,” which has specific political and legal connotations, in favor of a broader term such as “mass atrocity” or “mass killing.”

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SESSION III: EXPERT SURVEYS

During this session, participants discussed the feasibility of using a systematic expert survey as one aspect of the early warning system. A survey to determine which countries are at risk for mass violence would lend credibility to the early warning system and provide a baseline against which to compare the performance of statistical forecasting models.

Participants discussed a variety of questions about how this component of the early warning system might be structured. Some suggested that experts should not be asked to make direct forecasts, since previous research has shown they tend to perform poorly when attempting to predict low-frequency, high-emotionality events such as genocide and mass killing. Instead (or in addition), experts might be asked to generate key indicators and suggest values for specific variables that could then be used to improve the performance of statistical models. Participants also discussed what kinds of experts ought to be polled. There was agreement that a wide range of expertise was desirable, including that of scholars, analysts at human rights NGOs, and area specialists.

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SESSION IV: STATISTICAL MODELING

The final session focused on the use of statistical models to generate early warning of genocide and mass killing. Participants discussed ways that existing forecasting models could be improved upon. Most agreed that a key advance would be to move away from existing models that rely primarily on identifying slow-changing, structural risk factors (like infant mortality rates or trade-openness) to a more dynamic one that attempts to capture the shorter-term triggers of mass killing.

Most participants also agreed that the model should not follow existing “conditional” designs that assess a country’s risk of genocide or mass killing only once it has experienced some other form of political instability. Rather, the model should generate risk scores for all countries over a range of forecasting windows (e.g., one, two, and five years). Participants agreed that it would be valuable to forecast violence perpetrated by nonstate actors, although they also noted technical barriers to modeling this kind of violence. There was also a strong consensus that any output of the model would need to be made readily accessible and understandable even to nonexperts. A related suggestion was to create an interactive web interface that would allow any user to change the values of the risk factors in the model to determine its effect on a state’s probability of experiencing mass killing.

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