



SCIREA Journal of Sociology

ISSN: 2994-9343

<http://www.scirea.org/journal/Sociology>

January 9, 2026

Volume 10, Issue 1, February 2026

<https://doi.org/10.54647/sociology841528>

Characteristics and Investigative Strategies for Line-Based Investigations in Cases Threatening National Security

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Abstract

Line-based investigation is a pre-filing investigative system in China. It is employed by investigative agencies that, upon receiving leads on suspected crimes threatening national security, lack sufficient evidence to formally open a case. Through analysis and vetting, preliminary assessments are made, prompting proactive, specialized investigations based on relevant intelligence to uncover criminal facts and identify suspects. This approach is an investigative model targeting crimes that are in progress or in preparation. Line-based investigation is characterized by its systematic organization, clear objectives, proactive nature, unspecified targets, and phased process. Its investigative strategies include conducting intelligence analysis, executing field verification, strengthening investigative control, managing operational development, and emphasizing enforcement and case resolution.

Keywords: National security cases; Line-based investigation; Characteristics; Investigative strategies

Introduction

Since the launch of the nationwide special campaign against violent terrorism in 2014, public security organs across China have accumulated significant experience in investigating crimes

that threaten national security (hereinafter referred to as "national security cases"), steadily enhancing their case-handling capabilities. The investigation of national security cases refers to the specialized work conducted by investigative agencies targeting activities, suspects, and leads related to threats to national security. Line-based investigation is an organizational model for these investigations. This model is significant for standardizing investigative practices in national security cases, upholding judicial fairness, optimizing resource allocation, increasing investigative efficiency, and guiding the overall work on such cases. This paper explores the concept, characteristics, and investigative strategies of line-based investigation.

I. Origin and Definition of Line-Based Investigation

(I) Formation of the Line-Based Investigation Model

1. The Emergence of Line-Based Investigation

According to China's *Criminal Procedure Law*, formally opening a case (*li'an*) requires three conditions to be met: "a belief that a criminal act has occurred, the necessity of pursuing criminal liability, and proper jurisdiction." In reality, however, criminal cases are often intricate. Differences in subjective perception and professional capability can lead to significantly different conclusions about the same case. This has resulted in practices such as "no filing without a breakthrough," "filing only after a breakthrough," and "no filing for doubtful cases." Consequently, some leads, even in suspected homicides, go uninvestigated. The number of cases filed falls far below the actual number of incidents, creating a large volume of hidden cases. This not only fails to objectively reflect the true state of public order but also deviates from the principle of "law enforcement for the people."

The concept of line-based investigation was initially proposed to address cases of missing persons suspected to be crime victims. Historically, public security agencies treated missing person reports as general public order matters, conducting only routine searches. Such incidents often had underlying causes but lacked concrete evidence and were frequently left unresolved.^[1] In practice, some criminal cases first manifest as a missing person. When perpetrators meticulously plan their crimes—destroying bodies and evidence—the crime scene is compromised and evidence is scarce. By the time the crime is clearly discovered, public security agencies are often faced with a cold case where time has passed and evidence has been lost, resulting in a significant number of hidden, dormant, suspicious, and difficult cases. Certain crimes are initially characterized by concealed facts, unidentified victims, hard-

to-locate and easily damaged crime scenes, and scarce, low-value evidence. In such cases, which lack proactive reporting from victims or witnesses, the primary challenge becomes "how to detect the crime in a timely manner," exposing the limitations of traditional, retrospective investigation in handling such offenses.

2. Establishment of the Line-Based Investigation System

Cases involving threats to national security, drug offenses, and official misconduct often originate from criminal leads fraught with uncertainty. In practice, the tentative nature of these leads necessitates investigative measures to determine whether a crime has actually occurred. Consequently, investigative agencies implemented an investigation and verification system to bridge the gap between criminal leads and formal criminal cases. Pre-filing investigation and verification help seize the investigative initiative and lay a solid foundation for the formal investigation that follows. However, the lack of clear and detailed regulations on how to conduct these verifications in a standardized, transparent, timely, and effective manner created difficulties for investigative agencies and hampered their effectiveness. This pressing need drove the exploration that led to the establishment of the line-based investigation system.

Line-based investigation was formally established and implemented as a system after 2000. Today, its application extends beyond cases of missing persons suspected of being victimized and is gradually being applied to major, complex cases, including economic crimes, drug-related offenses, crimes threatening national security, and organized crime.

(II) Definition of Line-Based Investigation

1. Distinguishing Line-Based Investigation from Investigation and Verification

As previously noted, the legal foundation of line-based investigation is the investigation and verification system¹, yet its application by public security organs is not fully comprehensive or standardized. In some cases under the jurisdiction of public security agencies, criminal leads do not point to specific individuals. The primary focus of the investigation is to identify

¹ For example, Chapter 5 ("Investigation"), Articles 49 through 54 of the *Counter-Terrorism Law* stipulates the initiation of investigation procedures, measures, and outcomes. Public security organs must promptly conduct an investigation upon receiving a report or discovering suspicion of terrorist activity requiring verification. During the investigation, authorities may, in accordance with the law, question, inspect, and summon suspected terrorists; collect or capture biometric information (e.g., portraits, fingerprints, iris images) and biological samples (e.g., blood, urine, exfoliated cells); retrieve information and materials; and inquire about, seal, seize, or freeze assets, or impose restrictive measures. If the public security organ discovers criminal facts or suspects through investigation, it shall file a case for investigation in accordance with the *Criminal Procedure Law*. If the relevant time limit expires without a case being filed, the relevant measures shall be lifted.

a definite suspect, following a "case-to-person" model. Conversely, cases subject to line-based investigation often present ambiguity regarding both the suspect and the facts of the crime. Line-based investigation thus enhances the proactivity of public security organs in combating crime, improves the efficiency of criminal case verification, and affords earlier protection to victims. Years of practice have demonstrated that the line-based investigation system not only remedies the lack of institutional norms for investigation and verification but also strengthens the capacity of public security organs to respond to severe crime trends and meet public expectations.

Line-based investigation employs systematic principles and methods to institutionalize the investigation and verification process, leveraging systemic advantages to solve problems and foster development. It provides better standardization for the initiation, operation, supervision, evaluation, and redress of verification procedures. The scope of cases suitable for line-based investigation also differs from that of general verification. In fact, not all cases requiring verification by public security organs necessitate the initiation of a line-based investigation. Due to limited investigative resources and the need to balance efficiency and fairness, only a selection of eligible cases undergoes this process. In other words, line-based investigation is not a mandatory stage or a necessary procedure for all criminal cases but is rather a selective and alternative one. For cases with relatively simple facts where a standard preliminary inquiry is sufficient to determine whether to open a case, line-based investigation is unnecessary.

2. Definition of Line-Based Investigation

Line-based investigation is specialized work promptly initiated by investigative departments on leads that meet the criteria for a missing person suspected to be the victim of a crime, do not yet meet the standards for opening a criminal case, but have a high probability of developing into a homicide. It is an organizational model for investigative work that begins with leads obtained by an investigative department. In the context of national security, line-based investigation is a pre-filing investigative system in which investigative agencies, upon receiving leads of suspected activities threatening national security but lacking sufficient evidence to decide on filing a case, make a preliminary assessment through analysis and vetting. They then promptly initiate a specialized investigation based on relevant intelligence leads, employing various special investigative means to uncover the facts of the crime and identify the suspects.

The "line" in line-based investigation refers to leads, suspicions, indications, or partial,

directional evidence. The subjects of a line-based investigation are criminal intelligence leads within the investigative agency's jurisdiction that have been reviewed and deemed to require such an investigation. For example, in a case involving an unidentified person suspected of engaging in activities that threaten national security, the "unidentified" status itself constitutes a suspicion. Indications such as engaging in illegal religious studies or having contact with overseas individuals involved in such activities are the matters that a line-based investigation aims to clarify.

3. The Essential Nature of Line-Based Investigation

The term "investigation" has both broad and narrow definitions. In its broad sense, it encompasses all investigative actions, including both non-compulsory and compulsory measures. In its narrow sense, it is interpreted restrictively to refer only to compulsory investigative measures. A review of laws, judicial interpretations, and related normative documents reveals a general reticence to endorse the use of compulsory measures prior to the formal opening of a case. According to Article 108 of the *Criminal Procedure Law* (2018), "investigation" refers to the work conducted by public security organs and people's procuratorates in criminal cases to collect evidence and ascertain the facts of the case in accordance with the law, as well as related compulsory measures. The work of collecting evidence and ascertaining facts includes interrogating suspects; questioning witnesses and victims; conducting examinations, inspections, and expert evaluations; carrying out identifications; and conducting searches, seizures, freezes, and issuing wanted notices. Compulsory measures include summons by warrant, release on bail pending trial, residential surveillance, criminal detention, and arrest. According to Article 174 of the *Provisions on the Procedures for Handling Criminal Cases by Public Security Organs*, public security organs must promptly review accepted cases or discovered criminal leads. If the facts of the case or the lead are unclear, an investigation and verification may be conducted when necessary, subject to approval by the head of the case-handling department. During this process—that is, before a case is formally opened—public security organs may, in accordance with relevant laws and regulations, take measures that do not restrict the personal or property rights of the subject, such as questioning, inquiries, examinations, expert evaluations, and the collection of evidentiary materials. However, they may not impose compulsory measures on the subject, nor may they seal, seize, or freeze the subject's property or employ technical investigative measures. As these pre-filing actions constitute the work of collecting evidence and ascertaining case facts as prescribed by the *Criminal Procedure Law*, they fall within the

scope of "investigation" as defined by Chinese law.

Line-based investigation is essentially a pre-filing investigative system. In China's criminal procedure, opening a case is an independent litigation stage. It is not merely the act of deciding whether to file and handling formalities but encompasses receiving reports, accusations, and surrenders; discovering criminal leads; conducting a pre-filing review; making the filing decision; transferring cases; and issuing filing notifications. These are all critical components of the case-opening procedure, oriented around the objectives of criminal litigation. The pre-filing review includes both general review and pre-filing investigation. For cases requiring a pre-filing investigation, some can be resolved through verification alone, while others require line-based investigation to determine whether a case should be formally opened.² This system is effectively an adaptation within China's current legal framework, similar to the "preliminary investigation" procedures found in countries like France and Italy. While China's *Criminal Procedure Law* affirms the independent status of the case-filing procedure, line-based investigation is legally grounded in the widely practiced and judicially recognized investigation and verification system. It serves to complete the pre-filing review for special cases and achieve specific social functions.

4. Definition of Line-Based Investigation

Line-based investigation is a pre-filing investigative system in China. Upon receiving leads on suspected crimes threatening national security, but when lacking sufficient evidence to determine whether a formal case can be opened, investigative agencies make preliminary inferences through analysis and identification. They then proactively initiate specialized investigations based on relevant intelligence leads to uncover the facts of crimes that threaten national security and to identify suspects. It is an investigative model targeting crimes that are in progress or in preparation.^[2]

II. Characteristics of Line-Based Investigation in National Security Cases

(I) Systematic Organization

Line-based investigation is not a single, innovative investigative measure, technique, or strategy. Rather, it is an investigative mechanism and organizational model that

² Furthermore, China's current legal system provides a "backdoor" avenue to achieve the objectives of pre-filing review: the matter is initially investigated as an administrative case, and the decision on whether to file a criminal case is postponed until sufficient evidence is obtained.

comprehensively employs existing investigative channels, means, and tactics—both traditional and modern—to identify national security cases, organizations, and personnel. It provides clarity on the investigative subjects, content, targets, and outcomes, representing a systematic integration of all available investigative resources.

(II) Clear Objectives

The purpose of line-based investigation is to ascertain whether criminal acts threatening national security have occurred, determine the necessity of pursuing criminal liability against the suspects, and decide whether the case should be formally opened based on the facts. Through this process, it also aims to maintain national security, preserve social stability, and protect the public.

(III) Proactive Nature

After collecting and organizing intelligence on crimes threatening national security and conducting an analysis and assessment, public security organs utilize their knowledge of high-risk regions, at-risk populations, and local patterns of such crimes to comprehensively analyze and identify potential suspect groups. For those confirmed to be active locally and requiring further work, a line-based investigation is initiated. This involves professional analysis and operational development to conduct investigations following a "person-to-case" model. Once a line is established, investigative agencies can employ more extensive, covert, and long-term means to promptly obtain various forms of evidence—such as clothing insignia, bladed tools, explosive devices, illicit books, and subversive songs—as well as trace evidence, audiovisual materials, and electronic data. This enables the swift resolution of hidden and suspicious cases, curtails criminal behavior, deters threatening organizations and personnel, effectively reduces the incidence of such cases, and helps achieve the objectives of criminal litigation. Therefore, line-based investigation is a proactive, offensive action for investigating ongoing or potential national security cases and serves as preliminary work for specialized case investigations.

(IV) Unspecified Targets

At the outset of a line-based investigation, it is generally unknown whether a crime threatening national security exists, what its nature is, who the suspects are, or what the specific facts and circumstances are. Instead, the facts of the crime and the identity of the suspects are gradually discovered during the course of the investigation.

(V) Phased Process

Theoretically, a line-based investigation begins upon receipt of a lead regarding a suspected national security case. In practice, it commences with the formal approval to establish the line and concludes when the case is formally opened for investigation (*li'an*). A line-based investigation has a clear start and end time; once a case is formally opened, it transitions into the standard investigation phase, and the term "line-based investigation" no longer applies.

III. Investigative Strategies for Line-Based Investigation in National Security Cases

The basic workflow of a line-based investigation for national security cases includes intelligence collection, organization, analysis and assessment, early warning, and execution of the investigation. The key to this process is timely and accurate intelligence analysis. "Data analysis and criminal intelligence are crucial to objective decision-making mechanisms."^[3] In the modern information society, where crimes threatening national security are increasingly dynamic and sophisticated, whoever controls intelligence gains the initiative.^[4]

(I) Conducting Intelligence Analysis

This process must be timely, comprehensive, professional, and accurate. First, police analyze the *modus operandi*, conducting an in-depth assessment of the criminal tendencies of persons of interest to identify their habitual methods and characteristics. Second, they establish activity trajectories. By integrating information on a subject's vehicles, communication tools, online virtual identities, associates, and use of false identities—obtained through video surveillance, covert tracking, technical surveillance, and cyber investigation—police comprehensively analyze and map the subject's movements. Third, they analyze associates. An analysis is conducted on the subject's accomplices, companions, and other contacts, compiling information on their criminal records, activity trajectories, and *modus operandi*, with a focus on uncovering potential links to threatening organizations. Finally, they identify person-to-case connections. By integrating data on crimes in local and surrounding regions, police analyze and compare the subject's fingerprints, DNA, footprints, tools (e.g., knives), jihadist flags, books, audiovisual materials, other suspicious items, and activity trajectories to uncover leads linking the person to a case.

(II) Executing Field Verification

Line-based investigation is essentially a proactive model that employs reverse thinking. Upon receiving a directive for operational development, police promptly proceed to the location indicated by an intelligence alert to conduct inquiries and interviews, verify the alert's authenticity, and determine the potential suspect's whereabouts. Police conduct field verification of leads provided by intelligence analysis to further uncover a subject's connections, especially with domestic suspects, their companions, associates, or close relatives³, as well as with overseas organizations or personnel. They verify information on the subject's vehicles, communication tools, online virtual identities, use of false identities, and any suspicious items carried. They acquire fingerprints, footprints, and biological samples and gain an understanding of the subject's abnormal activities, patterns, scope of movement, and trajectories. Through follow-up professional analysis, technical investigation, and network investigation, they identify leads that link the person to a case.

(III) Strengthening Investigative Control

Public security organs employ measures such as investigative interviews, tracking, surveillance, use of confidential informants, and strategic positioning to exercise comprehensive control over suspected organizations and personnel. This control extends to: investigating the internal dynamics of organizations (their structure, leadership, division of labor, objectives, and plans); monitoring activities related to online and offline recruitment and training; tracking the collection, theft, purchase, manufacture, storage, and transportation of weapons and ammunition; monitoring communication activities and the establishment of secret operational bases; and observing their use of transportation, passport and visa processing, border crossings, and the selection of targets, times, and locations for attacks. Through such investigative control, public security organs gain a full grasp of the scale and current status of these organizations and personnel, ensuring that high-risk individuals are identified and controlled immediately upon their arrival.

(IV) Managed Operational Development

If general unlawful acts are discovered during an operation, the operation should continue if conditions permit and the subject remains controllable. For leads related to organized or serial

³ [Refers to] Associates, contacts, close relatives, etc., who have engaged in activities such as illegal religious practices, "jihad," or "martyrdom for paradise"; or who have been trainees in education and training centers, or individuals involved in illegal scripture studies.

crimes, the scope of the investigation should be expanded and the operation carefully managed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organization, its personnel, and all related cases.

(V) Emphasizing Enforcement and Case Resolution

For active criminal behavior and leads on individuals or groups discovered through professional analysis and operational development, in-depth investigation must be conducted. This includes gathering evidence, making timely arrests, and taking enforcement action in accordance with the law. If analysis and operational development confirm that a person of interest has committed a crime, a formal case investigation (*li'an*) shall be initiated following relevant procedures. If criminal suspicion is ruled out, the line-based investigation shall be terminated. If suspicion cannot be ruled out but it is necessary and feasible to continue the operation, the line-based investigation may proceed.

Conclusion

Line-based investigation, which initiates specialized work based on criminal leads obtained by counter-terrorism departments, is a proactive and offensive method for investigating potential crimes threatening national security. It allows authorities to seize fleeting opportunities, advance the starting point of counter-terrorism investigations, and lower the rigid standards for initiating an investigation. It provides an institutional guarantee for counter-terrorism agencies to proactively detect threats and take action, thereby optimizing the allocation of investigative resources and improving overall efficiency. Through the collection, organization, and analysis of intelligence on such crimes, police utilize their knowledge of high-risk regions, at-risk populations, and local crime patterns to identify potential suspect groups. For those confirmed to be active locally and requiring further work, a line-based investigation is initiated to conduct professional analysis and operational development, carrying out "person-to-case" counter-terrorism investigations. For cases where a preliminary review is insufficient to determine if criminal behavior has occurred, line-based investigation enables rapid evidence collection and accurate assessment. In practice, this method has partially altered the previously passive approach of waiting for threats to materialize before opening a case. By intervening at the earliest moment, investigative agencies can promptly gather and analyze leads, and launch comprehensive specialized investigations. This transforms the traditional, passive "case-filing" (*li'an*) model into an

active, "line-based" (*lixian*) offensive operation. It allows for the timely acquisition of trace evidence, audiovisual materials, and electronic data—such as clothing insignia, bladed tools, explosive devices, illicit books, and subversive songs. This facilitates the swift resolution of hidden and suspicious cases, curbs criminal behavior, deters threatening organizations and individuals, effectively reduces the formation of difficult cases, and helps achieve the objectives of criminal litigation. Therefore, line-based investigation is a quintessential model of proactive investigation.

Acknowledgements

The achievements presented here are part of the outcomes from the 2023 National Social Science Fund of China Program (Project No: 23BGJ024)

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