Left-Wing Terrorism and Political Violence in the United States

AUTHORS
Daniel Byman
Riley McCabe

Data Selection and Process

This research effort aims to identify the scope, nature, and ideology of the terrorism threat in the United States. To analyze this, the CSIS Warfare, Irregular Threats, and Terrorism Program (WITT) compiled a dataset of 750 terrorist attacks and plots that occurred in the United States between January 1, 1994, and July 4, 2025.[1]

This time period was selected in order to provide context on the history of domestic terrorism in the United States in recent decades. The dataset begins in 1994 rather than earlier in the decade due to sourcing challenges. WITT relied heavily on START Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data for the early years of the dataset; a full record of incidents in 1993 is unavailable due to data loss.

WITT drew from the following databases and sources: the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)'s Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map; Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events; START GTD; the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)'s Hate Map; New America's "Terrorism in America After 9/11" report; and press releases and reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Justice (DOJ).[2] WITT cross-referenced events against criminal complaints and affidavits when possible as well as local and national news sources such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times.

Incidents were compiled, coded, and reviewed for accuracy and consistency by a team of WITT researchers. External reviewers also routinely review the dataset.

Definition of Terrorism

WITT defined terrorism as the deliberate use or threat of premeditated violence by nonstate actors with the intent to achieve political goals by creating a broad psychological impact of fear or intimidation.[3] For inclusion in the dataset, incidents had to meet all parts of this definition.

Determinations were based on publicly available information as of July 2024.

Common types of events excluded include:

- **Economic sabotage:** Attacks against infrastructure intended to impose costs on a business or government are often used by terrorist groups and are sometimes considered a form of "economic terrorism." These attacks

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were generally excluded from the CSIS dataset for a combination of two reasons: the perpetrator sought to avoid killing or maiming people or the perpetrator intended to send a message to a narrow audience, most frequently the management of a targeted business firm. In practice, this led to the removal of several attacks by environmental groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several of these groups explicitly stated their opposition to harming people and designed their attacks to minimize risk to human life, typically engaging in arson at unoccupied locations at the time of the attack.[4] For similar reasons, many attacks on Tesla facilities and vehicles that occurred in early 2025 were excluded as acts of economic vandalism.

- **Escalation at demonstrations:** Violence at demonstrations has dramatically increased in recent years.[5] However, these incidents were generally excluded from the CSIS dataset for two main reasons: lack of lethal force and lack of evidence of perpetrators' desire to have a widespread psychological impact or achieve political goals through violence. Attacks at demonstrations that did meet these criteria were kept in the dataset, such as the Charlottesville car attack in August 2017, where James Alex Fields Jr. deliberately drove his car into a crowd of people peacefully protesting the nearby Unite the Right rally, killing one person and injuring 35.[6] Fields sought to kill counterprotesters indiscriminately and made comments to his mother and posts on social media that suggested premeditation and a desire to spread fear.[7]

- **Hate crimes:** There is an overlap between terrorism and hate crimes. However, not all hate crimes–defined by the FBI as "crimes in which the perpetrators acted based on a bias against the victim's race, color, religion, or national origin"–include violent elements.[8] WITT excluded incidents in which there was no actual or serious threat of violence against the physical well-being of people, such as graffiti, trespassing, or damage to objects. WITT also excluded incidents where a hate crime was unlikely to reach a broader audience. In practice, this meant asking whether a reasonable person could expect news of the violence to reach beyond those targeted to a broader political community. Hate crime attacks that were excluded almost always targeted a particular individual based on their membership of a larger community, as opposed to most (though not all) terrorist attacks that seek to kill indiscriminately in order to maximize fear.[9]

- **School shootings:** Attackers who commit school shootings are typically motivated by a mix of personal grievances, including grievances with classmates, school staff, and romantic partners, as well as a desire to kill, commit suicide, or achieve fame or notoriety.[10] In most school shootings, the attacker does not have clear political objectives, and therefore these incidents are generally excluded from the dataset.

- **Support for foreign terrorist organizations:** Incidents in which U.S. residents attempted to provide material support to foreign terrorist

organizations without connection to specific violent plots or attacks in the U.S. homeland were excluded.

- **Attacks involving non-lethal weapons:** Attacks using nonlethal weapons were generally excluded, except for attacks clearly intended to kill or maim and cases of arson in contexts where a political issue's history gave the attack the character of an implicit lethal threat.[11] Most of the latter cases were arson attacks against religious institutions, abortion-related targets, and political offices.[12] Likewise, incidents where perpetrators made deliberate efforts to avoid harming people were excluded, such as instances of economic sabotage or attacks not intended to cause or threaten harm to the physical well-being of people.

- **Riots:** While riots may involve violence that threatens to kill or maim others, they are often spontaneous, driven by collective unrest, anger, and opportunistic criminal activity that does not target human beings. In many cases, rioters lack the strategic intent to achieve broader political objectives. However, some riots, such as the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, are included in the CSIS dataset if they involved actors who clearly premediated their violence and had clear political objectives.

- **Robberies:** Robberies–even those targeting individuals on the basis of ethnicity, race, or religion–were generally excluded from the dataset since the primary motivations of perpetrators are financial, not political. Robberies committed to fund terrorist activities were also excluded, although such activities would be coded separately if they involved a specific plot or attack.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the dataset.

First, since WITT drew from multiple data sources–few of which covered most or all of the time period–there is likely inconsistency in how thoroughly events were recorded across years. In particular, fewer sources (including news reports to cross-reference) exist for cases earlier in the time period. In addition, data collection methods used by WITT's sources improved over time. For example, START expanded its collection methodology in 2012, resulting in more comprehensive event records.[13] The result is that changes in methodology might have produced unpredictable biases, although the expansion of collection capabilities over time would probably result in a bias toward overstating the growth of terrorist violence over time across the full scope of the data. This bias is unlikely to impact short-term analysis of trends.

Second, due to incomplete public information on disrupted plots, the dataset may not include every plot during the period. However, WITT included every plot that it could verify. Terrorist plotting is studied far less than terrorist attacks, and it is not clear how (or if) any selection bias would impact analysis.[14]

Third, there was often limited information available on motivations for violent incidents. WITT maintained a high standard of proof and excluded incidents for which a political motive could not be determined. Consequently, the dataset may understate the number of attacks. The amount of available information would be expected to increase over time, leading to another bias toward overstating the growth of terrorist violence over time across the full scope of the data. This bias is also unlikely to impact short-term analysis of trends.

Despite these limitations, WITT believes that the dataset of 750 events offers a fair representation of terrorism in the United States from January 1, 1994, to July 4, 2025.

Codebook

YEAR, MONTH, DAY

These columns record the date on which the incident occurred. In the case of plots, WITT recorded the date on which the plot was interrupted, such as the date of arrest.

STATE, CITY, LAT, LONG

These columns record the location of the incident by the name of the state and city and by its geographic coordinates. In the case of plots, if a specific target location was unknown, WITT recorded the location at which the perpetrator was apprehended.

SUMMARY

This column provides a brief description of the incident.

ORIENTATION

WITT categorized each terrorist incident into one of five perpetrator orientations: ethnonationalist, jihadist, violent extreme-left, violent extreme-right, and other. Terms such as extreme-right and extreme-left terrorism do not correspond to mainstream political parties in the United States, such as the Republican and Democratic parties, nor do they correspond to the overwhelming majority of political conservatives and liberals in the United States.

Extreme-right terrorists are motivated by ideas of racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority, believing it is tyrannical and illegitimate and that it infringes on individual liberties; misogyny, including incels ("involuntary celibates"); hatred based on sexuality or gender identity; belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory; opposition to certain policies, such as abortion; or partisan extremism, where violence is justified against political opponents and parties perceived as advancing left-wing agendas.[15] Some extremists on the violent far-right have supported "accelerationism," which includes taking actions to promote social upheaval and incite a civil war.[16] While perpetrators of some right-wing attacks may have religious ties, such as some within the Christian Identity movement, these attacks are motivated primarily by concepts of white supremacy and are therefore coded as right-wing. Similarly, though (primarily Christian)

religious ideology may influence some perpetrators of abortion-related attacks, these traditionally fall under the definition of right-wing terrorism.

Extreme-left terrorists are motivated by an opposition to capitalism, imperialism, or colonialism; Black nationalism; support for environmental causes or animal rights; support for LGBTQ+ rights; adherence to pro-communist, pro-socialist beliefs or "anti-fascist" rhetoric; opposition to government authority, believing it is a tool of oppression responsible for war and social injustices; support for decentralized political and social systems, such as anarchism; or partisan extremism, where violence is justified against political opponents and parties perceived as advancing right-wing agendas.[17]

Jihadist terrorists are motivated by a violent interpretation of Islam that frames global events as part of a struggle between Muslims and perceived enemies of Islam. They justify violence to defend or expand the Muslim community, oppose Western influence and secular governance, and establish political authority under strict interpretations of sharia. Many jihadists view their struggle as part of a global religious war rather than limited to local grievances.

Ethnonationalist terrorists are motivated by ethnic or nationalist goals, including self-determination. In recent decades, issues driving ethnonationalist terrorism in the United States have included political divisions within the Haitian and Cuban exile communities and Puerto Rican independence. While anti-Semitic motives are classified as right-wing, attacks on Jewish individuals or institutions intended as a response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are classified as ethnonationalist.

Incidents in which a political motive was established but did not meet any of these criteria were classified as **other**.

IDEOLOGYSUBTYPE

This column denotes the primary ideological subcategory of the perpetrator within the five broader perpetrator orientations tracked in the Orientation column.

GROUP

This column provides the name of the group, network, or ideology subset to which the perpetrator belonged, if known and if relevant. Individuals perpetrated most attacks, not groups. Not all variable values indicate formal organizations. In cases where attackers were inspired by a specific group but lacked material ties to that group, the label "(inspired)" was appended to the label. For example, nearly all Salafi-jihadist attacks in the United States since 9/11 were carried out by individuals inspired by foreign terrorist organizations but who did not have communication or material or operational support for those groups.

PERPETRATOR SEX

This column notes the sex of the perpetrator(s) involved. In instances where the perpetrator's identity remains unknown, sex is tagged as "Unknown."

PERPETRATOR AGE

This column notes the age of the perpetrator(s) involved. In instances where the perpetrator's identity remains unknown, age is tagged as "Unknown."

PLOT

This column distinguishes between attacks ("0") and disrupted plots ("1") in the dataset. Incidents were defined as plots if a perpetrator demonstrated plans or intention to commit an act of terrorism that was prevented, most often due to law enforcement intervention or failure during the preparation stages (such as explosives detonated during production). Incidents were defined as attacks if action was taken to carry out an act of terrorism. This includes both attacks that succeeded and those that failed.

Consistent with WITT's definition of terrorism, as described in the previous section, the authors coded credible threats of violence as attacks rather than plots.

LE

This column denotes whether the perpetrator (or at least one of the perpetrators, if multiple) was a current or former member of a U.S. law enforcement agency. If coded "0," the perpetrator was identified and had no affiliation with law enforcement. If coded "1," the perpetrator was identified and had an affiliation with law enforcement. If coded "U," the perpetrator was not identified to the public or the affiliation could not be confirmed.

Since WITT coded if an incident involved at least one perpetrator affiliated with law enforcement, the full extent of participation by individual members of law enforcement is not illustrated in the dataset. Rather, this column tracks the number of incidents that can be linked to current or former law enforcement personnel. Incidents that involved multiple perpetrators affiliated with law enforcement received the same coding as single-perpetrator incidents with these affiliations.

LESTATUS

This column notes the nature of the perpetrator's relationship to law enforcement if the value of LE is "1." Categories tracked are "Active" and "Former." If LE has a value of "0" or "U," LEStatus is listed as "n/a."

MIL

This column denotes whether the perpetrator (or at least one of the perpetrators, if multiple) was a current or former member of the U.S. military. If coded "0," the perpetrator was identified and had no affiliation with the military. If coded "1," the perpetrator was identified and had an affiliation with the military. If coded "U," the perpetrator was not identified to the public or the affiliation could not be confirmed.

Note that this variable only tracks connections between perpetrators and the U.S. military. Perpetrators who were connected to foreign armed services– such as Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, the Royal Saudi Air Force officer who committed a mass shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola in December 2019– were coded as "0."

Since WITT coded if an incident involved at least one perpetrator affiliated with the military, the full extent of participation by individual members of the military is not illustrated in the dataset. Rather, this column tracks the number of incidents that can be linked to current or former military personnel. Incidents that involved multiple perpetrators affiliated with the military received the same coding as single-perpetrator incidents with these affiliations.

MILSTATUS

This column notes the nature of the perpetrator's relationship to the U.S. military if the value of MIL is "1." Categories tracked are "Active," "Reserve," and "Former." If MIL has a value of "0" or "U," MILStatus is listed as "n/a."

TARGET

This column identifies the primary target of the attack or plot.

Example of values include:

- Abortion facility
- Business
- Demonstrators
- Educational institution
- Government
- Journalists and media
- Law enforcement
- Military
- Private individuals
- Pro-life center
- Religious institution
- Transportation and infrastructure

LOCATION TYPE

This column identifies the type of location at which an incident occurs.

Example of values include:

- Church
- Educational institution
- Event venue
- Government building or political office
- Hotel
- Law enforcement facility
- Military base, installation, or facility
- Mosque or Muslim community center
- Public transportation
- Residence
- Restaurant or bar
- Store or business
- Street or public area
- Synagogue or Jewish community center

Location type and target vary in that the location type notes where an attack occurred and the target notes what or who was the object of the attack. For example, if a politician is attacked at their private residence for their role or work in government, the target is marked "Government" while the location is marked "Residence."

DEMONSTRATION

This column records whether or not an incident was related to a public demonstration. If coded "0," the attack or plot was not related to a demonstration. If coded "1," the attack or plot was related to a demonstration. Terrorist incidents related to public demonstrations were defined to include terrorist attacks committed by demonstrators, attacks targeting demonstrators, and attacks intentionally timed to occur alongside demonstrations, often to obscure the identity or the intent of the perpetrators. Public demonstrations include protests, sit-ins, marches, and other public gatherings intended to advance a social or political cause.

WEAPON

This column records the primary weapon used in attacks or expected to be used in plots.

Example of values include:

- **Chemical or biological:** ricin, anthrax, and other such substances
- **Explosives and incendiaries:** bombs, Molotov cocktails, arson, and other weapons that create a blast or fire
- **Firearms:** automatic, semi-automatic, and non-automatic rifles; shotguns; handguns; unknown and other gun types
- **Melee:** close-contact weapons that do not involve projectiles, typically involving stabbing or bludgeoning, for example, knives, machetes, axes, and hammers
- **Vehicle:** cars, trucks, vans, sports utility vehicles, and other automobiles, typically used in ramming attacks
- **Other:** weapons that do not fall into any other category, such as a bow and arrow

VICTKILLED

This column records the number of victim fatalities caused by a terrorist attack. Perpetrator fatalities are excluded.

DBSOURCE

If applicable, this column notes the original source(s) cited by the databases from which WITT compiled incidents.

WITTSOURCE

This column notes the source(s) through which WITT researchers identified the event for inclusion in the dataset. See the data selection section on page 1 of this methodology for more details on each.

Endnotes

1	The United States was defined as the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

2	Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 651–660, doi:10.1177/0022343310378914; "ADL H.E.A.T. Map," ADL Center on Extremism, accessed September 30, 2024, https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map; "Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events," Janes, accessed September 30, 2024, https://www.janes.com/military-threat-intelligence/terrorism-and-insurgency; "Hate Map" Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed September 30, 2024, https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map; and Peter Bergen and David Sterman, "Terrorism in America after 9/11," New America, December 15, 2023, https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/.

3	For other examples of definitions of terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1–41; and Global Terrorism Database, Codebook: Methodology, Inclusion Criteria, and Variables (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 2021), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

4	John E. Lewis, testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, May 18, 2004, https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/testimony/animal-rights-extremism-and-ecoterrorism.

5	Catrina Doxsee et al., "Pushed to Extremes: Domestic Terrorism amid Polarization and Protest," CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, May 17, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/pushed-extremes-domestic-terrorism-amid-polarization-and-protest.

6	Paul Duggan, "Charge upgraded to first-degree murder for driver accused of ramming Charlottesville crowd," *Washington Post*, December 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/driver-accused-of-plowing-into-charlottesville-crowd-killing-heather-heyer-due-in-court/2017/12/13/6cbb4ce8-e029-11e7-89e8-edec16379010_story.html.

7	Meghan Keneally, "Charlottesville Driver Hinted Counterprotesters 'need to Be Careful' before Car Ramming," ABC News, December 5, 2018, https://abcnews.go.com/US/charlottesville-driver-hinted-counterprotesters-careful-car-ramming/story?id=59632401.

8	"Hate Crimes," Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed May 15, 2020, https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/hate-crimes.

9	Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 35.

10	"Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence," U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, 2019, https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf.

11	Any bladed weapon, firearm, explosive, incendiary, chemical or biological weapon, or vehicle was considered a lethal weapon. Incidents involving airsoft and BB guns, less-lethal chemical agents like pepper spray, and improvised blunt weapons like protest signs or stones were excluded unless there was clear intent to kill.

12	Although the justification for inclusion of arson attacks against religious institutions stems primarily from bombings of Black churches, CSIS included all such attacks against religious institutions. The justification for including abortion-related targets is a history of bombings targeting abortion clinics, but CSIS included arson attacks against both pro-choice and pro-life targets.

13   START, *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, October 2019), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

14   Thomas Hegghammer and Neil Ketchley, "Plots, Attacks, and the Measurement of Terrorism," SocArXiv, September 4, 2020, https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/t72yj.

15   Extreme-right terrorists are often described as believing that social and racial inequality is inevitable, desirable, and natural. They also possess views that include anti-egalitarianism, nativism, and authoritarianism. See Jacob Aasland Ravndal et al., *RTV Trend Report 2019: Right Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2018* (Oslo, Norway: Center for Research on Extremism, 2019), 3, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/trend-report-2019.pdf. Also see Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, "Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (December 2018): 5–22, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a1-ravndal-and-bjorgo.pdf; Ehud Sprinzak, "Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: the Case of Split Delegitimization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 17–43, doi:10.1080/09546559508427284; and Cas Mudde, "Right-Wing Extremism Analyzed: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideologies of Three Alleged Right-Wing Extremist Parties (NPD, NDP, CP'86)," *European Journal of Political Research* 27, no. 2 (1995): 203–24, doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.1995.tb00636.x.

16   On proponents of accelerationism see, for example, James Mason, *Siege*, book manuscript, 1992. On the threat from accelerationism, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, "The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationist Groups Worldwide," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 20, 2020, https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/.

17   Much of the literature on terrorism has classified Black nationalist groups as far-left. Many adherents of Black nationalism have opposed colonialism and imperialism, supported Marxist-Leninist views, advocated anarchism, and cooperated with other far-left individuals and groups. See, for example, William Rosenau, "'Our Backs Are Against the Wall': The Black Liberation Army and Domestic Terrorism in 1970s America," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (2013): 176–92, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2013.747074; Dana M. Williams, "Black Panther Radical Factionalization and the Development of Black Anarchism," *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 7 (2015): 678–703, doi:10.1177/0021934715593053; and Steven Windisch, Gina Scott Ligon, and Pete Simi, "Organizational [Dis]trust: Comparing Disengagement Among Former Left-Wing and Right-Wing Violent Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 6 (2019): 559–80, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2017.1404000.