

# U.S. Terrorism Incidents Dataset Methodology

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## *Purpose and Scope*

This dataset documents terrorist attacks and plots that have occurred in the United States.<sup>1</sup> It is maintained by the Warfare, Irregular Threats, and Terrorism Program (WITT) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to support research on the terrorism threat in the United States.

WITT's definition of terrorism and coding rules have been refined over several years. Earlier analyses published by CSIS drew on prior versions of the dataset. Figures cited in those works may not be replicable using this dataset.

## *Definition of Terrorism*

WITT defines terrorism as deliberate, premeditated lethal violence—or attempted lethal violence—perpetrated by nonstate actors and intended to achieve political goals by creating a broad psychological impact of fear or intimidation.<sup>2</sup> The dataset includes plots as well as completed attacks. To be included, an incident must meet all parts of this definition.

## *Data Collection*

WITT identifies incidents through a combination of databases, government records, and news reporting. Sources consulted include but are not limited to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the Anti-Defamation League's Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map, Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events, the START Global Terrorism Database, New America's "Terrorism in America After 9/11," and press releases and reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Justice.<sup>3</sup> Candidate incidents are cross-referenced against criminal complaints, charging documents, and national and local news reporting.

Incidents are compiled, coded, and reviewed by a team of WITT researchers and periodically reviewed by external reviewers.

## *Inclusion Criteria*

### **WHAT IS EXCLUDED**

**Hate crimes.** Hate crimes and terrorism overlap, but many hate crimes lack the intent to create broad psychological impact. Incidents are excluded when the

perpetrator targeted a specific individual based on identity without apparent intent to influence a broader audience.

**Economic sabotage.** Attacks on property intended to impose costs on a business or government where the perpetrator sought to avoid harming people are excluded.

**Non-lethal attacks on unoccupied targets.** Arson, vandalism, and similar property destruction directed at unoccupied targets are excluded when the perpetrator had no reasonable expectation that anyone would be present to be killed or injured. Incidents are evaluated by the perpetrator's reasonable expectation of occupancy at the time of the attack.

**School shootings.** School shootings are typically motivated by personal grievances with classmates, staff, or romantic partners, or by a desire for notoriety.<sup>4</sup> They are excluded unless the perpetrator articulated a clear political objective.

**Riots.** Riots are typically spontaneous and driven by collective unrest rather than political objectives. They are excluded unless the participants clearly premeditated their violence, pursued political goals, and sought to create a broader psychological effect beyond the immediate area affected.

**Robberies.** Robberies are excluded as financially motivated. Robberies committed to fund terrorist activity are also excluded, although such activities are coded separately if they involved a specific plot or attack.

**Gang violence.** Gang violence is excluded as driven by territorial, financial, and intra-group motives rather than political goals.

**State-directed violence.** Political violence, including assassinations, directed by foreign state intelligence or military services is excluded, including when carried out by recruited nonstate intermediaries on U.S. soil.

**Non-political violence against politically coded targets.** Domestic violence, workplace violence, and other forms of non-political violence are excluded when the perpetrator's grievance was personal, even when the target occupies a politically salient role.

**Material terrorist support without a specific plot.** Attempts to provide material support to terrorist organizations are excluded when not connected to a specific violent plot or attack in the United States.

**Nihilistic violent extremism.** Violence driven by nihilism, subcultural status-seeking, or shock-value performance is excluded because it lacks political motive.

## **EDGE CASES**

**Critical infrastructure.** Attacks on critical infrastructure—electrical grid, water systems, pipelines, life-safety transportation, and emergency communications—are included when the perpetrator targeted the infrastructure in order to cause downstream lethal harm, regardless of whether the immediate target was occupied.

**Escalation at demonstrations.** Violence breaking out at demonstrations is generally excluded as opportunistic and tied to the immediate dynamics of the event rather than premeditated political violence. Incidents are included only when the perpetrator used the demonstration as cover for a planned attack, or when the violence at the demonstration was itself premeditated and lethal in intent and sought to create a broader psychological effect.

**Violence by perpetrators with mental illness.** Mental illness does not by itself disqualify an incident. Incidents are included when the perpetrator's goals were political according to their own understanding of the world—even a delusional one—and the violent action followed from those goals according to their own logic.

**Online threats.** Online threats do not on their own constitute terrorism. Incidents are included when threats establish a target class or specific target through repeated posts or an articulated plan and the perpetrator took steps to acquire or build weapons beyond what they may already have legally possessed. Legal possession of common firearms is not by itself evidence of operational preparation.

**Unknown perpetrators.** When the perpetrator of an attack is not identified, target type alone is not sufficient evidence of political motive. Attacks with unknown perpetrators are included only when the perpetrator left behind sufficient material to make a judgement (e.g., a manifesto), claimed responsibility in the name of a political group or cause, or carried out the attack in a manner matching a known movement's recognized tactics or targeting.

**Law enforcement sting operations.** Plots developed through law enforcement undercover operations are included when the perpetrator brought substantive operational commitment—taking material steps toward execution, articulating specific targets, and contributing to the plot's planning—even where undercover agents participated in shaping it. Plots where the perpetrator's role was limited to passive agreement with a plan supplied by law enforcement are excluded.

### *Ideological Coding*

Each incident is coded with an ideological orientation and a subtype. Terms such as “left” and “right” as used in this dataset do not correspond to mainstream political parties in the United States, such as the Democratic and Republican parties, nor do they correspond to the overwhelming majority of political liberals and conservatives in the United States.

Ideological coding rests on what is publicly knowable about the perpetrator's motive at the time of the incident: written statements, social-media posts, statements to law enforcement, target choice, symbols left at or near the scene, and affiliation with a formal group. However, most perpetrators in the dataset are not affiliated with organized movements that articulate their beliefs through founding documents or leadership statements. Coders must reconstruct motive

from incomplete and sometimes contradictory evidence. When a perpetrator's history shows ideological inconsistency or when they draw on multiple traditions, the framing of the incident itself—what they said, wrote, and targeted at the time—governs the determination.

**Right.** Violence motivated by white supremacy and neo-Nazism; conspiratorial and identity-based antisemitism, anti-Muslim animus, and similar identity-based hostility toward groups framed as outsiders; anti-government extremism, including militia movements, opposition to perceived government overreach, sovereign citizen ideology, and pro-law-and-order grievance against government leniency; opposition to abortion; anti-LGBTQ+ animus; misogyny, including involuntary celibate (incel) ideology; accelerationism; and partisan extremism against Democratic Party-aligned targets.

**Left.** Violence motivated by anti-government extremism grounded in opposition to police, law enforcement, or state authority understood as an instrument of oppression against marginalized racial, ethnic, or economic groups; anarchism; anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist worldviews, including violence directed at corporate actors framed as exploitative and violence framed as solidarity with foreign populations against U.S. or allied state power; environmental and animal rights extremism; pro-choice violence; racial-grievance violence by perpetrators from minority racial groups targeting the dominant racial group framed in terms of historical or systemic oppression; pro-LGBTQ+ violence directed at perceived opponents; and partisan extremism against Republican Party-aligned targets.

**Jihadist.** Violence motivated by a violent interpretation of Islam that frames global events as a struggle between Muslims and perceived enemies of Islam, justifying 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.** Violence motivated by ethnic or national identity grievance, often tied to self-determination, homeland claims, or diaspora politics. This includes violence related to the Israel-Palestine conflict framed in national-territorial terms and violence connected to diaspora politics surrounding Cuba, China, Taiwan, Iran, South Asia, and elsewhere.

**Other.** Violence motivated by ideological grievances that do not fit into other orientations.

The subtype column captures the specific ideological motive of the incident at a more granular level than orientation. Subtype values are descriptive labels—for example, white supremacist, antisemitic, anti-government, anti-abortion, environmental and animal rights, anti-Muslim, and partisan extremism.

## *Limitations*

**Inclusion judgment.** Many incidents fall close to the threshold for inclusion, and the edge cases described above require coder judgment. Reasonable analysts may include or exclude the same incident based on how they weigh the available evidence.

**Ideological coding inferentiality.** Orientation and subtype determinations are based on coders' best reconstruction of motive from the evidence available. When that evidence is incomplete or contradictory, reasonable analysts working from the same sources may reach different conclusions.

**Salad-bar ideologies.** Some perpetrators draw on multiple ideological traditions without internal coherence, blending elements from across the political spectrum. Coding such incidents into a single orientation and subtype necessarily flattens this complexity.

**Subtype overlap.** Subtypes are not mutually exclusive in practice. An attack may be motivated by more than one ideological subtype, but each incident is coded with the primary subtype that best captures the incident. Analyses of specific ideological categories may benefit from cross-referencing multiple subtype values.

**Source asymmetry.** Coverage of incidents varies across years and ideological categories. Some periods and types of violence are more thoroughly documented than others, reflecting the maturity of source databases and the priorities of the press and law enforcement. Trend analysis across long time periods should be made with this in mind.

**Plot detection asymmetry.** Disrupted plots in the dataset often depend on what law enforcement detects, charges, and reports publicly. Different ideological categories receive different levels of attention from law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and the apparent frequency of plots in a given category may reflect surveillance intensity rather than underlying prevalence.

**Recency of coding.** Incidents coded soon after an incident occurred rely on early evidence. Later evidence—court filings, expert testimony, family statements, and journalistic investigations—may shift how the incident is understood across multiple dimensions, including motive, inclusion, and basic facts. Coding reflects the best available evidence at the time of each release.

**Low numbers.** The United States experiences relatively few terrorism incidents each year. When dealing with small samples, the inclusion or exclusion of a few borderline incidents can shift apparent trends. Coding decisions are especially consequential under these conditions, and trends drawn from short time periods or narrow ideological categories should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

## *AI Usage*

WITT uses AI tools to assist with research and coding review. All final coding decisions are made by human researchers.

# Endnotes

- 1 The United States is defined as the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.
- 2 For other examples of definitions of terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1-41; 22 U.S.C. § 2656f(d)(2), Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2656f>, which defines terrorism for purposes of the State Department’s annual Country Reports on Terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents”; and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s working definition of domestic terrorism as “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature,” “Terrorism,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism>.
- 3 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 May 26, 2026, <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map>; “Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events,” Janes, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://www.janes.com/defence-intelligence-datasets/news-events-analysis>; “Terrorism and Targeted Violence (T2V) in the United States,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://www.start.umd.edu/t2v>; 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/>.
- 4 “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](https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf).