

Methodology and Codebook

The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States

Data Selection and Process

This research effort aimed to identify the scope, nature, and orientation of the domestic terrorism threat in 2020. To analyze this, the CSIS Transnational Threats Project (TNT) compiled a data set of 61 terrorist attacks and plots that occurred in the United States between January 1, 2020 and August 31, 2020.¹

TNT drew from the following databases and other sources: the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map; Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events; and press releases from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Justice (DOJ).² TNT 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 five TNT researchers. Four external reviewers also checked the data set, and two additional external reviewers provided comments during the research process.

This project expanded on a previous data set of terrorist attacks and plots since January 1994, which was used to compare terrorist activity in 2020 to previous years.³

Definition of Terrorism

TNT defined terrorism as the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact.⁴ For inclusion in the data set, events had to meet all parts of this definition. TNT did not seek to address other issues, such as hate crimes, protests, riots, or broader civil unrest.

In 2020, there were many incidents that did not meet the definition of terrorism and were therefore excluded, regardless of whether the events were considered other types of crimes. Determinations were based on publicly available information as of October 2020.

Common reasons that events were not deemed to be terrorism included:

- **Absence of violence or the threat of violence:** There is 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.⁵ TNT excluded incidents in which there was no actual or threatened violence. This included, for example, graffiti and trespassing.
- **Non-political motives:** TNT also excluded incidents in which the perpetrators’ motives were not political in nature. Frequently, these perpetrators had personal motivations, such as greed. For example, TNT did not include incidents during public demonstrations (such as looting) that were attributed to apolitical criminals. Similarly, TNT did not code the Kyle Rittenhouse incident in Kenosha, Wisconsin, as a terrorist attack. TNT assessed that he lacked a clear political motive for the killings.
- **Undetermined motives:** In some cases, no motive for an incident was identified. Though some of these events may have been tied to political motives, if there was no evidence, they were excluded from the data set. For example, there were many examples of vehicles driving into protests during the summer of 2020. However, many could not be definitively connected to political intention and were therefore excluded.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the data set.

First, due to incomplete public information on disrupted plots, the data set may not include every plot during the period. However, TNT included every plot that could be verified.

Second, there was often limited information available on motivations for violent incidents, particularly regarding violence during riots—including objects such as Molotov cocktails thrown by unknown individuals—and vehicle attacks at demonstrations. TNT maintained a high standard of proof and excluded incidents for which a clear political motive could not be determined. Consequently, the data set may understate the number of attacks. For example, there were approximately 570 violent protests between May and August 2020, based on ACLED data. Yet TNT only verified 61 terrorist incidents in 2020—including 49 between May and August—since most of the violence did not meet the definition of terrorism. Similarly, though some sources recorded over 100 far-right vehicle attacks at protests in 2020, TNT only verified 11 as terrorist attacks.⁶ As investigations and court cases proceed and new evidence emerges, the data set can be updated accordingly.

Finally, in comparing the level of terrorist activity in 2020 to previous years, the data may contain some selection bias. Due to the inclusion of sources such as ACLED, which has closely monitored all incidents related to demonstrations between May and August 2020, the 2020 data set may have detected more small-scale incidents—particularly threats with firearms—than in previous years.

Despite these limitations, TNT believes that the data set of 61 events offers a fair representation of terrorism in the United States from January to August 2020.

Codebook

ORIENTATION

TNT categorized each terrorist incident into one of five perpetrator orientations: Ethnonationalist, Religious, Violent Far-left, Violent Far-right, and Other. Terms such as far-right and far-left terrorism do not correspond to mainstream political parties in the United States, such as the Republican and Democratic parties, which eschew terrorism. Nor do they correspond to the vast majority of political conservatives and liberals in the United States, who do not support terrorism.

Far-right terrorists are motivated by ideas of racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority, including the sovereign citizen movement; misogyny, including incels (“involuntary celibates”); hatred based on sexuality or gender identity; belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory; or opposition to certain policies such as abortion.⁷ Some extremists on the violent far-right have supported “accelerationism,” which includes taking actions to promote social upheaval and incite a civil war.⁸

Far-left terrorists are motivated by an opposition to capitalism, imperialism, or colonialism; Black nationalism; support for environmental causes or animal rights; pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support for decentralized political and social systems, such as anarchism.⁹

Religious terrorists are motivated by a faith-based belief system. This may include Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or other faiths. Within the religious category, TNT further distinguished cases in which the perpetrator adhered to a jihadist ideology. After completing the coding process, TNT found that all religious incidents in this data set were also Salafi-jihadist in nature. The terms are therefore used interchangeably in the analysis. While perpetrators of some other 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 violent far-right. Similarly, though (primarily Christian) religious ideology may influence some perpetrators of abortion-related attacks, these traditionally fall under the definition of far-right terrorism.

Ethnonationalist terrorists are motivated by ethnic or nationalist goals, including self-determination. In recent decades, issues driving ethnonationalist terrorism in the United States included political divisions within Haitian and Cuban exile communities and Puerto Rican independence. While anti-Semitic motives are classified as violent far-right, attacks on Jewish individuals or institutions intended as a response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are classified as ethnonationalist. Of the 61 domestic terrorist attacks between January 1, 2020 and August 31, 2020, none were committed by ethnonationalist terrorists.

Incidents in which a motive was established but did not meet any of these criteria were classified as **other**. These incidents included attacks and plots conducted by members of the anti-government Boogaloo movement.¹⁰

JIHADIST

This column denotes whether an attack or plot was conducted by a Salafi-jihadist perpetrator, inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. If coded “0,” the incident was not

connected to Salafi-jihadism. If coded “1,” the incident was committed by a Salafi-jihadist. All non-religious events are coded “0.” TNT found that all religious terrorist incidents in the data set were Salafi-jihadist in nature, so the terms are used interchangeably in this analysis.

PLOT

This column distinguishes between attacks (“0”) and disrupted plots (“1”) in the data set. 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 attacks that both succeeded and failed.

Consistent with TNT’s definition of terrorism, as described in the previous section, the authors coded credible threats of violence as attacks rather than plots. Threatened violence still conveyed a political message, caused public fear, and required a law enforcement response. It included, for example, perpetrators pointing firearms at protesters with a veritable threat to use force.

YEAR, MONTH, DAY

These columns record the date on which the incident occurred. In the case of plots, TNT 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, TNT recorded the location at which the perpetrator was apprehended.

SUMMARY

This column provides a brief description of the incident.

TARGET

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

Codings include:

- **Abortion Related:** medical staff and facilities related to abortion, such as women’s health clinics;
- **Business:** private companies and stores;
- **Demonstrators:** individuals participating in public protests, rallies, and other demonstrations to achieve a political goal;
- **Government, Military, and Police:** personnel, property, and locations related to the local, state, and federal government; the military; and law enforcement;
- **Journalists and Media:** individuals, property, and locations related to journalism and news media;
- **Private Individuals:** individuals targeted based on personal characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or immigration status;
- **Religious Institutions:** targets such as houses of worship, religious leaders, and religious congregations;

- **Transportation and Infrastructure:** targets such as public transportation, airports, trains, bridges, dams, utilities, and pipelines;
- **Other:** targets which were not included in other categories; and
- **Blank:** indicates a plot for which a specific target was not publicly specified.¹¹

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 codings indicate formal organizations.

Examples include:

- Antifa
- Atomwaffen Division
- The Base
- Boogaloo
- Incel
- Ku Klux Klan
- QAnon

WEAPON

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

Codings include:

- **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; and non-lethal guns, including airsoft rifles¹²;
- **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; and
- **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.

TNTSOURCE

This column notes the source(s) through which TNT researchers identified the event for inclusion in the data set.

DBSOURCE

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

Endnotes

- 1 The United States was defined as the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. From January to August 2020, terrorist attacks and plots were recorded in 25 states. No incidents were recorded in the District of Columbia or 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 25, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map>; and “Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events,” Janes, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.janes.com/military-threat-intelligence/terrorism-and-insurgency>.
- 3 For more detail on the methodology and findings of the data set of events from January 1, 1994 to May 8, 2020, see Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, “Methodology,” CSIS, June 17, 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200616_Jones_Methodology_v3_0_0.pdf; and Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, “The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States,” CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>.
- 4 On definitions of terrorism, see, for example, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1–41, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commercial_books/CB386.html; and Global Terrorism Database, *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, October 2019), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>.
- 5 “Hate Crimes,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/hate-crimes>.
- 6 See, for example, Grace Hauck, “Cars Have Hit Demonstrators 104 Times Since George Floyd Protests Began,” *USA Today*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/08/vehicle-ramming-attacks-66-us-since-may-27/5397700002/>.
- 7 Far-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/topics/online-resources/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): 203–224, doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.1995.tb00636.x.
- 8 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/>.
- 9 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): 176–192, 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; 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): 559–580, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2017.1404000.

- 10 On the ideology of the Boogaloo movement see, for example, “Affidavit in Support of an Application for a Criminal Complaint,” U.S. Department of Justice, September 4, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1313661/download>.
- 11 Three far-right plots in the data set did not have specified targets and were excluded from the target analysis.
- 12 One far-left incident in the data set involved use of an airsoft rifle, which was coded as “firearm” in this data set.