Violent Attacks on Houses of Worship

October 31, 2023

HIGHLIGHTS

Approximately 3.2% of all congregations nationwide are Jewish and 0.6% are Muslim, but those religions were the target of 22% and 17%, respectively, of attacks documented in this report.

The AME Emanuel Church in Charleston, S.C., following a June 17, 2015, shooting in which nine parishioners were killed. (Associated Press)

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, several devastating mass shootings and a rise in hate crimes left houses of worship feeling vulnerable and looking for ways to protect their congregants. Aiming to understand the threat houses of worship face, A-Mark Foundation has identified 59 violent attacks targeting congregants, clergy, or staff at a house of worship between January 2012 and December 2022. This report examines the different types of attacks carried out and the motivations of the 58 total perpetrators of those 59 attacks.

There were 10 violent attacks targeting houses of worship in 2012. Between 2013 and 2018, the number of attacks averaged 3.5 a year before peaking in 2019 at 11. The number of attacks dropped in 2020 and 2021, likely due to pandemic closures, before rising again to nine attacks in 2022. There were four attacks during the first four months of 2023, indicating that this year could see a high number of attacks as well.

Shootings were the most frequent attack type and caused 74 of the 79 deaths (94%) and 51 of the 83 nonfatal injuries documented in this report (61%). Stabbings and arson were the joint second-most frequent types of attack, causing 6% and 0% of deaths respectively.

In many cases, motives were difficult to determine, especially in attacks and attempted attacks that resulted in no deaths or injuries, as these incidents generally received less public attention. Overall, the motives of 17 of the 59 perpetrators remain unknown (28%). When a motive could be identified, approximately 67% of the perpetrators were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. The rest are categorized as interpersonal conflict or other.

The distribution of motives significantly changes based on the religion practiced at the house of worship targeted. Only 18% of attacks targeting Christian or Catholic places of worship were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. However, attacks targeting Jewish (93%) and Muslim (83%) houses of worship were overwhelmingly motivated by antisemitic or Islamophobic hate.

The A-Mark Foundation found that 40% of the perpetrators in the documented attacks on houses of worship have histories of mental illness, were diagnosed with a mental illness during trial, or were found unfit for trial or not guilty by reason of insanity. A smaller portion of perpetrators (17%) were diagnosed with or received treatment for a serious mental illness (SMI), such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or major depression. While this is still a minority of perpetrators, the prevalence of serious mental illness among these perpetrators is nearly six times greater than the prevalence of serious mental illness in the general population. In some cases, serious mental illness presented a challenge in determining what motivated the perpetrator. Still, a motive unrelated to mental illness could be identified for most of the attacks carried out by mentally ill perpetrators, such as interpersonal conflict or racial, ethnic, or religious hatred.

Given the range of motivations and factors in the documented attacks, this report concludes that meaningfully reducing the threat to congregants, staff and clergy at houses of worship requires a comprehensive approach. It should include removing barriers for individuals to receive mental health treatment, better enforcement and possible reform of gun laws, and increased efforts to combat white supremacy, such as deradicalization and curbing the spread of extreme racism online. However, all these efforts take time. In the short term, the report recommends that the government and private sector continue collaborating to provide resources for houses of worship to increase their security.

Violent Attacks on Houses of Worship, 2012-2022

A-Mark Foundation has identified 59 violent attacks targeting congregants, clergy, or staff at a house of worship in the United States between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2022. This chart details the different types of attacks carried out and the motivations of the 58 total perpetrators of the attacks. All columns can be sorted numerically or alphabetically by clicking on the headers. Click on the header of the incident date column to re-establish the original order. All perpetrators are male unless marked (F) for female or (U) for unknown / unverified.

INCIDENT DETAILS

Incident Date	Location Name / Target	Town / City, State	Religion	Type of Attack	Number Killed	Number Injured	Bias / Motive	Name	

#	Date	Location	City, State	Religion	Attack Type			Motive	Perpetrator
1	January 1, 2012	Imam Al-Khoei Foundation	New York, NY	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Islamophobia / Anti-Arab	Ray Lazier Lengend
2	January 1, 2012	Hindu Temple	New York, NY	Hindu	Arson - people inside	0	0	Anti-Hindu / Anti-Arab	Ray Lazier Lengend
3	January 1, 2012	Shi'ite Mosque	New York, NY	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Islamophobia / Anti-Arab	Ray Lazier Lengend
4	January 3, 2012	K'hal Adath Jeshurun Temple	Paramus, NJ	Jewish	Attempted Arson	0	0	Antisemitism	Anthony Graziano, Aakash Dalal
5	January 11, 2012	Congregation Beth El	Rutherford, NJ	Jewish	Arson - people inside	0	1	Antisemitism	Anthony Graziano, Aakash Dalal
6	May 12, 2012	St. Peter's Episcopal Church	Ellicott City, MD	Christian	Shooting	2	0	Other	Douglas Franklin Jones
7	August 5, 2012	Sikh Temple of Wisconsin	Oak Creek, WI	Sikh	Mass Shooting	6	4	White Supremacy	Wade Michael Page
8	October 24, 2012	World Changers Church International	College Park, GA	Christian	Shooting	1	0	Unknown	Floyd Palmer
9	November 18, 2012	Masjid Al-Saaliheen	New York, NY	Muslim	Stabbing	0	1	Islamophobia	Bernhard Laufer
10	December 2, 2012	First United Presbyterian Church	Coudersport, PA	Christian	Shooting	1	0	Interpersonal	Gregory Eldred
11	March 31, 2013	Hiawatha Church of God in Christ	Ashatabula, OH	Christian	Shooting	1	0	Interpersonal	Reshad Riddle
12	April 28, 2013	St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic Church	Albuquerque, NM	Catholic	Stabbing	0	4	Other	Lawrence Capener
13	April 13, 2014	Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City	Overland Park, KS	Jewish	Shooting	3*	0	Antisemitism / White Supremacy	Frazier Glen Miller, Jr.
14	December 9, 2014	Chabad-Lubavitch	New York, NY	Jewish	Stabbing	0	1	Antisemitism	Calvin Peters
15	June 17, 2015	Emanual African Methodist Episcopal Church	Charleston, SC	Christian	Mass Shooting	9	3	Anti-Black / White Supremacy	Dylann Roof
16	July 26, 2015	Anna Prayer Mountain Church Retreat Center	Urbana, MD	Christian	Stabbing	1	1	Anti-Asian (Anti-Korean)	Song Su Kim
17	September 13, 2015	Corinth Missionary Baptist Church	Bullard, TX	Christian	Attempted Shooting	0	0	Islamic Extremism	Rasheed Abdul Aziz
18	December 11, 2015	Islamic Society of the Coachella Valley	Coachella, CA	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Islamophobia	Carl Dial
19	February 28, 2016	St. Peter's Missionary Baptist Church	Dayton, OH	Christian	Shooting	1	0	Interpersonal	Daniel Schooler
20	August 13, 2016	Al-Furqan Jame Masjid Mosque	New York, NY	Muslim	Shooting	2	0	Unknown	Oscar Morel
21	August 14, 2016	Hillvue Heights Baptist Church	Bowling Green, KY	Christian	Stabbing	0	1	Interpersonal	Ethan Buckley
22	August 28, 2016	Glory Chapel International Cathedral	Hartford, CT	Christian	Stabbing	0	1	Unknown	Tyrell Mohown
23	October 23, 2016	St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church	Sumter, SC	Christian	Stabbing	0	1	Interpersonal	Billy Lewis
24	February 17, 2017	St. Augustin Church	Des Moines, IA	Catholic	Stabbing	0	1	Unknown	Ashley Eckhardt (F)
		Dar al-Farooq							Michael McWhorter

#	Date	Name	City	Religion	Type	Killed	Injured	Motivation	Perpetrator	
25	August 5, 2017	Dar al-Farooq Islamic Center	Bloomington, MN	Muslim	Bombing	0	0	Islamophobia	Michael McWhorter, Joe Morris, Michael Hari^	29
26	September 24, 2017	Burnette Chapel Church of Christ	Antioch, TN	Christian	Mass Shooting	1	7	Anti-White	Emanuel Kidega Samson	
27	November 5, 2017	First Baptist Church	Sutherland Springs, TX	Christian	Mass Shooting	26	20	Interpersonal	Devin Patrick Kelly	
28	February 7, 2018	Kingdom Acts Ministries	Corpus Christi, TX	Christian	Stabbing	1	3	Unknown	Marco Moreno	
29	October 18, 2018	Iglesia Ni Cristo	Seattle, WA	Christian	Arson - people inside	0	0	Unknown	Miles L. Stanstad	
30	October 27, 2018	Tree of Life Synagogue	Pittsburgh, PA	Jewish	Mass Shooting	11	6	Antisemitism	Robert Gregory Bowers	
31	November 23, 2018	Congregation Bais Yeshuda	Los Angeles, CA	Jewish	Attempted to Run Over Worshippers	0	0	Antisemitism	Mohamed Mohamed Abdi	
32	March 24, 2019	Dar-ul-Arqam Mosque	Escondido, CA	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Islamophobia / White Supremacy	John T. Earnest	
33	April 27, 2019	Chabad of Poway Synagogue	Poway, CA	Jewish	Mass shooting	1	3	Antisemitism / White Supremacy	John T. Earnest	
34	May 11, 2019	Chabad Jewish Center	Arlington, MA	Jewish	Arson - people inside	0	0	Antisemitism	Unnamed (U)	Unk
35	May 16, 2019	Chabad Jewish Center	Arlington, MA	Jewish	Arson - people inside	0	0	Antisemitism	Unnamed (U)	Unk
36	May 16, 2019	Chabad Lubavitch Jewish Center	Needham, MA	Jewish	Arson - people inside	0	0	Antisemitism	Unnamed (U)	Unk
37	July 28, 2019	Young Israel of Greater Miami Temple	North Miami Beach, FL	Jewish	Shooting	0	1	Antisemitism	Carlints St. Louis	
38	November 20, 2019	Fairmount Presbyterian Church	Cleveland Heights, OH	Christian	Stabbing	0	1	Other	Meredith Lowell (F)	
39	December 10, 2019	Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception	Washington, DC	Catholic	Stabbing & Vehicle Ramming	0	2	Interpersonal	Dorsey Lee Mack III	
40	December 15, 2019	Thai Buddhist Temple	Las Vegas, NV	Buddhist	Arson & Shooting	0	0	Unknown	Derek Debrowa	
41	December 28, 2019	Congregation Netzach Yisroel	Monsey, NY	Jewish	Stabbing	1	4	Antisemitism	Grafton Thomas	
42	December 29, 2019	West Freeway Church of Christ	White Settlement, TX	Christian	Shooting	2	0	Other	Keith Kinnunen	
43	April 24, 2020	Cape Girardeau Islamic Center	Cape Girardeau, MO	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Islamophobia	Nicholas Proffitt	
44	July 11, 2020	Queen of Peace Catholic Church	Ocala, FL	Catholic	Arson - people inside	0	0	Anti-Catholic	Steven Anthony Shields	
45	July 18, 2020	Grace Covenant Church	Chantilly, VA	Christian	Stabbing	0	3	Unknown	Chance Harrison	
46	November 22, 2020	Grace Baptist Church	San Jose, CA	Christian	Stabbing	2	3	Unknown	Fernando De Jesus Lopez-Garcia	
47	May 8, 2021	Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center	Falls Church, VA	Muslim	Stabbing	0	0	Islamophobia	Jonathan Lincoln	
48	August 14, 2021	Mount Zion Church	Scott County, MS	Christian	Shooting	0	0	Unknown	Robert D. Bailey	
		Islamic			Arson -				Angel	

#	Date	House of Worship	Location	Religion	Attack Type	Deaths	Injuries	Motive	Perpetrator	
49	October 11, 2021	Islamic Center of Tacoma	University Place, WA	Muslim	Arson - people inside	0	0	Unknown	Angel Joseph Rodriguez	
50	November 7, 2021	Nashville Light Mission Pentecostal Church	Nashville, TN	Christian	Attempted Shooting	0	0	Unknown	Dezire Baganda	
51	January 15, 2022	Congregation Beth Israel	Colleyville, TX	Jewish	Attempted Shooting	0	0	Other	Malik Faisal Akram	
52	January 16, 2022	St. Timothy Catholic Church	San Antonio, TX	Catholic	Pointed Gun at Parishioners	0	0	Unknown	Unnamed	Unk
53	February 4, 2022	Iglesia Faro De Luz Church	Aurora, CO	Christian	Shooting	1	2	Interpersonal	Jose De Jesus Montoya Villa	
54	April 30, 2022	St. Vincent Pallotti Catholic Church	Abilene, TX	Catholic	Stabbing	0	3	Unknown	Miguel Martin Carrillo	
55	May 15, 2022	Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church	Laguna Woods, CA	Christian	Mass shooting	1	5	Anti-Asian (Anti-Taiwanese)	David Chou	
56	June 2, 2022	Cornerstone Church	Ames, IA	Christian	Shooting	2	0	Interpersonal	Johnathan Lee Whitlach	
57	June 16, 2022	St. Stephen's Episcopal Church	Vestavia Hills, AL	Christian	Shooting	3	0	Unknown	Robert Findlay Smith	
58	July 7, 2022	St. Joseph Catholic Church	Upland, CA	Catholic	Arson - people inside	0	0	Unknown	David Martinez	
59	October 5, 2022	Holy Family Cathedral Church	Tulsa, OK	Catholic	Stabbing & Arson	0	1	Unknown	Daniel Edwards	

* These three victims were killed over two locations; two outside the Community Center and one outside a nearby affiliated retirement home.

^ At the time of the attacks and during trial, this perpetrator was publicly identifying as male under the name Michael Hari. After the trial, Hari revealed that she is transgender and asked the court to legally recognize them as a woman with she/her pronouns and use the name Emily Claire Hari.

Table: A-Mark Foundation • Get the data • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Methodology

This report aims to include all incidents in which a perpetrator violently attacked (or attempted to violently attack) congregants, staff, or clergy at a house of worship or affiliated property. Attack types include shootings and attempted shootings, stabbings and attempted stabbings, vehicle ramming, and arsons and/or bombings when the perpetrator knew or had reason to believe congregants, staff, or clergy were inside the house of worship targeted.

To distinguish as best as possible acts of violence targeted at houses of worship and affiliated persons from other types of violence that occur at or near a place of worship by happenstance, this report excludes stabbings and shootings that occurred outside a place of worship during carjackings, robberies, or other types of assault unrelated to the house of worship. Moreover, this report also excludes spontaneous acts of violence that erupted during arguments; attacks that occurred during private events, such as a birthday party at a church hall; and attacks that occurred when only the perpetrator and targeted victims were inside the house of worship [1].

Attacks listed in this report include the religion of the house of worship targeted to determine how often each religion is targeted. Although Christianity encompasses Catholicism, there are perceived differences between the Catholic church and other Christian denominations. To avoid giving the impression that no Catholic churches had been attacked, this report proceeds by grouping together attacks against Christian (non-Catholic) and Catholic houses of worship under the terminology "Christian or Catholic houses of worship."

This report uses four broad categories of motive to describe the 59 attacks documented: Interpersonal Conflict (9 attacks), Racial/Ethnic/Religious Hate (28 attacks), Unknown (17 attacks), and Other (5 attacks).

See Appendix A for a full description of the methodology.

Mental illness, violence, and hate crimes: Challenges in determining a motive

In late December 2019, an individual burst into a Hasidic rabbi's home and stabbed five people during a Hanukkah celebration attended by synagogue and community members [2]. In the aftermath of the attack, investigators found journals belonging to the perpetrator that contained references to Adolf Hitler, "Nazi culture," and drawings of swastikas, quickly prompting widespread condemnation of the attack as an antisemitic hate crime [3].

However, according to the perpetrator's attorney, the attack was not motivated by antisemitism but by mental illness. The perpetrator's family and attorney reported that he had stopped taking the medication he was prescribed to treat major depression and psychosis, which was so severe that he had been "hospitalized several times" just that year [4]. The family and attorney of the perpetrator emphasized that he was not a hate-filled bigot. He was simply sick.

Determining a motive in cases like this is challenging and contentious. The remainder of this section will consider the relationships between mental illness, violence, and bigotry and what role, if any, mental illness plays in driving violent attacks.

Mental illness and violence

According to the New York Police Department, nearly half of the 100 people arrested for hate crimes in the first four months of 2022 had previously been "designated as emotionally disturbed by the police." [5] For some, the apparent prevalence of mental illness among these perpetrators bolsters the idea that mental illness itself drives violent attacks, especially in the context of hate crimes. In an opinion piece for The New York Times, a former director of the New York Police Department's Intelligence Analysis Unit even suggests that the commission of such an attack might itself "be considered evidence" that the perpetrator has a mental illness. [6]

Mental and public health researchers have wrestled with understanding the relationship between violence and mental illness for

decades. Numerous studies have found a link between mental illness and violence, and it was long believed by many prominent researchers that the cause of the violence was fundamentally linked to the mental illness itself [7]. However, contemporary research refutes that explanation. In the last two decades, a robust body of literature has emerged showing that the majority of violent attacks are not committed by individuals with mental illness, and most of those with mental illness are not violent [8]. Moreover, when individuals with mental illness do commit acts of violence, mental and public health experts often emphasize that the mental illness was not the causal factor [9].

Still, there is a persistent public perception that mental illness and violence are fundamentally linked [10]. This is especially true of public attitudes toward serious mental illness (SMI), a category of mental illnesses that includes schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression, which affects approximately one in 25 (4%) of adults in the U.S. [11] [12] However, researchers estimate that individuals with SMI are responsible for less than 5% of criminal violence overall [13].

Regardless of the presence of a mental illness, the likelihood that any person will act violently is influenced by a host of factors. For example, previous violence, especially cruelty and aggression during childhood, is a strong predictor that a person will commit future acts of violence [14].

For the relatively few who suffer from SMI, some identifiable variables influence the likelihood of violent behavior. One clear and consistent link is the lack of effective treatment [15]. Untreated psychosis, which can cause hallucinations and/or delusions, can especially increase the likelihood that an individual will commit a violent act [16].

High levels of stress and lack of social support are major factors in influencing an individual to behave violently, regardless of mental illness [17]. Because of public stigma and barriers to accessible and effective treatment, people with mental illness, particularly SMI, experience high rates of unemployment, incarceration, homelessness, and social alienation [18]. Consequently, individuals with SMI are more likely to experience chronic stress and impaired social support. In turn, the relationship between stress and violence may be more acute for individuals with SMI, especially when the individual is not receiving effective treatment [19].

Memorial outside the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pa., following a mass shooting that killed 11 people on October 27, 2018 (Brendt A Petersen/Shutterstock)

Mental illness and racial, ethnic, and religious hate

In addition to treating SMI as the driving force behind violence, some have controversially argued that racism is itself a mental illness, claiming that extreme racism is akin to suffering from psychosis-induced delusions [20]. In one high-profile example, former FOX host Tucker Carlson described the 18-year-old mass shooter who killed 10 people at a supermarket in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Buffalo, NY in May 2022 as a "mental patient" whose mind was "diseased." [21]

Many Americans seemingly accept the proposition that racism is a psychological issue. Consider, for example, the trend of celebrities and public figures declaring that they are seeking mental health treatments after sparking controversy for overtly racist behaviors or statements. [22] This indicates a public attitude that overt racism is an abnormal problem occurring at the individual level that can be treated, rather than a social, structural, or systemic problem. [23]

While many researchers have also accepted this idea, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has rejected it since the late 1960s, when a group of psychiatrists asked the APA to formally classify extreme bigotry as a mental illness. [24] Given the prevalence of racist beliefs and behaviors within the United States, the APA argued that racism was normal, and therefore, was not a mental illness. [25]

Tahir Rahman, a forensic psychologist whose work has addressed intersections of violent extremism and mental illness, uses the term "extreme overvalued beliefs" to describe the ideologies and beliefs, such as extreme racism, that can propel individuals to carry out acts of violence. [26] Rahman emphasizes that extreme overvalued beliefs are distinct from psychotic delusions. Unlike delusions, which are fixed, false beliefs not shared by others, an extreme overvalued belief is often shared among a cultural or religious group. [27] Therefore, extreme racism that leads to or motivates acts of physical violence is a result of racist attitudes and behaviors in society rather than delusions. [28]

According to Sander Gilman, a historian at Emory University who explored the relationships between mental illness, race, and racism in the book Are Racists Crazy?, a person with SMI may "incorporate racism into their overall paranoid delusional systems." [29] In these cases, however, the individual experiences other symptoms related to their SMI, as delusions occurring without any other psychosis-related symptoms are extremely rare. [30] In short, extreme racism is not itself a mental illness, and "not all racists are mentally ill." [31]

Rahman says that regardless of whether a perpetrator is mentally ill, it is crucial to condemn any attack that contains elements of extremism or racial, ethnic, or religious hate. [32] If these attacks are not condemned, Rahman cautions, "people who are extremists will view that as an opening," [33] meaning it could potentially lead to more violence and allow the dangers and prevalence of violent extremism to be minimized. Moreover, some activists, psychiatrists, and researchers warn that blaming hate-motivated attacks on mental illness could result in "legal excuse-making" by allowing violent racists to avoid accountability for their actions. [34] For example,

the continued conflation of violent extreme racism with mental illness could make it more likely for a violent perpetrator motivated by racist beliefs to successfully claim that they are not guilty by reason of insanity.

In sum, determining the relative influence of mental illness in motivating a perpetrator to commit a violent act can be complicated and problematic, especially concerning violent attacks that contain elements of racial, ethnic, or religious hate. In those cases, this report categorizes the motive as racial/ethnic/religious hate, but includes a note that the perpetrator has a history of mental illness.

Findings and discussion

Thousands of acts of violence have been committed at or near houses of worship in the last ten years. The Faith Based Security Network (FBSN) has documented more than 1,500 deadly force incidents between 2012 and 2019 at places of worship. [35] However, most of these attacks were spontaneous, arising from arguments between staff or congregants, or happened nearby and perhaps spilled over onto the house of worship's property. After thoroughly reviewing FBI data, the FBSN's Deadly Force Incidents, the Anti-Defamation League's H.E.A.T map, and open-source media research, A-Mark Foundation has compiled a database of 59 violent attacks (including attempted attacks) targeting the staff, clergy, and/or congregants at houses of worship between 2012 and 2022 committed by a total of 58 perpetrators.

Violent Attacks on Houses of Worship, 2012-2022

Locations of 59 violent attacks targeting a house of worship in the United States between 2012 and 2022. The darker the symbol, the more recent the attack.
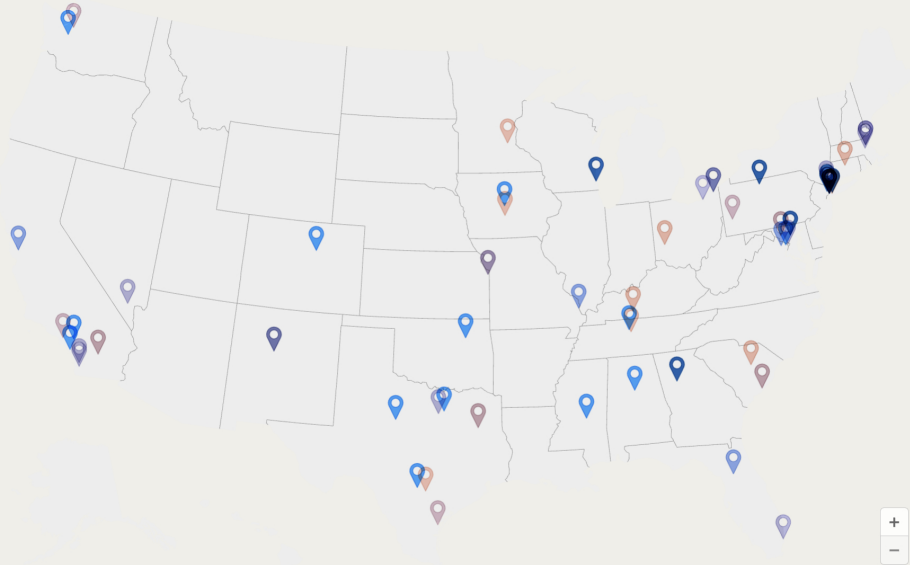

Map: A-Mark Foundation • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Timeline

The frequency of attacks dropped precipitously from 2012 to 2013 and remained somewhat low before peaking in 2019, with 11 attacks that year. The number of attacks fell by more than half in 2020, staying low in 2021 as well, before surging to nine attacks in 2022. Given the high levels of attacks in 2019 and 2022, the decrease in attacks during 2020 and 2021 may be related to closures during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By early April 2023, four attacks had already occurred, indicating that 2023 may ultimately see a similar number of attacks, if not more, than previous peak years in 2019 and 2022.

Timeline of Violent Attacks

Fifty-nine houses of worship were the target of a violent attack between January 2012 and December 2022, more than five each year on average.
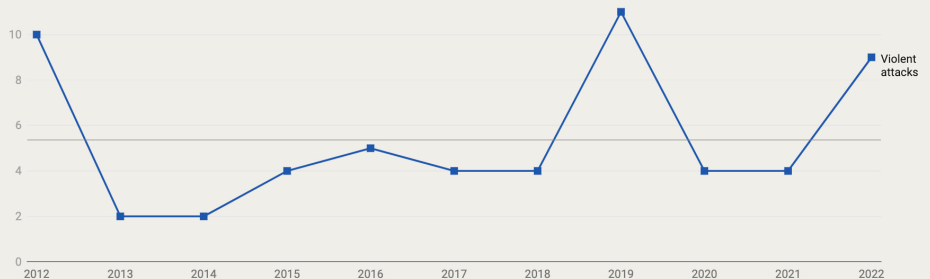
Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Houses of worship targeted

Duke University's National Congregations Study estimates that more than 91% of all congregations in the United States are Christian or Catholic, so, unsurprisingly, most of the attacks (56%) documented in this report occurred at Christian or Catholic churches. [36] Jewish and Muslim houses of worship were both disproportionately targeted. While only accounting for approximately 3.2% of all congregations nationwide, 22% of the attacks documented in this report targeted congregants, staff, or clergy at a Jewish house of worship. Muslim congregations account for 0.6% of religious congregations nationwide, yet attacks against mosques and Islamic centers account for 17% of the attacks documented in this report.

Share of Attacks by Religion

Attacks on Muslim, Jewish and Catholic houses of worship are disproportionately often, non-Catholic Christians disproportionately rare.

6%	
	Other Non-Christian
	Buddhist
22%	Jewish
13%	Catholic
	Christian (Non-Catholic)

50
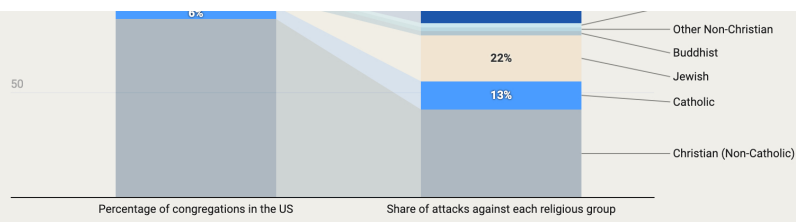
Percentage of congregations in the US   Share of attacks against each religious group

Attack types

Shootings, including attempted shootings, were the most frequent type of attack, accounting for 40% of the attacks. Of the 79 deaths and 83 nonfatal injuries that resulted from the attacks documented in this report, 74 of the deaths and 51 of the nonfatal injuries resulted from shooting incidents. Approximately 28% (seven of 25) of the shooting attacks were mass shootings. [37] Despite only accounting for 12% of all attacks, mass shooting deaths make up 70% of all deaths and 58% of nonfatal injuries recorded in this report. Stabbings and arson attacks were less frequent, both making up 27% of documented attacks. Stabbing attacks resulted in five deaths and 28 nonfatal injuries, and arson resulted in no reported deaths and one injury.

Deadly Mass Shootings

Gun violence, especially a few mass shootings, is responsible for the majority of deaths.
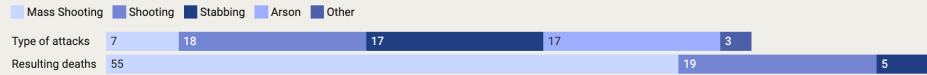
■ Mass Shooting ■ Shooting ■ Stabbing ■ Arson ■ Other

Type of attacks	7	18	17	17	3
Resulting deaths	55			19	5

Shootings accounted for 17 of the 33 (52%) attacks targeting Christian or Catholic houses of worship and 5 of the 13 (38%) attacks targeting Jewish houses of worship; only one of the 10 (10%) attacks directed against congregants, clergy, and/or staff of a Muslim house of worship was a shooting. The most frequent methods of attack at mosques and Islamic centers were arson (60%) and stabbings (20%). The one documented attempted bombing with an explosive device (a pipe bomb) occurred at a mosque.

Who are the perpetrators?

Consistent with violent crime trends generally, the overwhelming majority (approximately 90%) of the perpetrators were men. [38]

Where race or ethnicity could be confirmed, 41% of perpetrators were white (not Hispanic or Latino), and 26% were Black. Approximately 12% of attackers were Hispanic or Latino, 7% were Asian, and one (0.02%) was Native American, a member of the Caddo Nation. [39] Five of the seven (71%) mass shooters included in this report were white, one was Asian, and one was Black.

Motives

The most frequent motive for an attack was racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, accounting for approximately 49% of the perpetrators' motives. Excluding the perpetrators where a motive could not be determined, the proportion of perpetrators motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred increases to 69%. Interpersonal disputes motivated 19% of perpetrators where a motive could be determined, and the remaining 12% were categorized as Other.

There are clear differences in motives depending on the religion practiced at a given house of worship. Of all attacks targeting congregants, staff, or clergy at Jewish houses of worship, 93% were motivated by antisemitic hate. Attacks motivated by Islamophobic hate account for 83% of all attacks targeting Muslim houses of worship. However, excluding those attacks where a motive cannot be determined, the proportion of perpetrators motivated by Islamophobia who attacked congregants, staff, or clergy at Muslim houses of worship increased to 100%.

Shades of Hate

Of the 28 attacks unequivocally driven by hate, the majority was motivated by hate against Jews and Muslims.
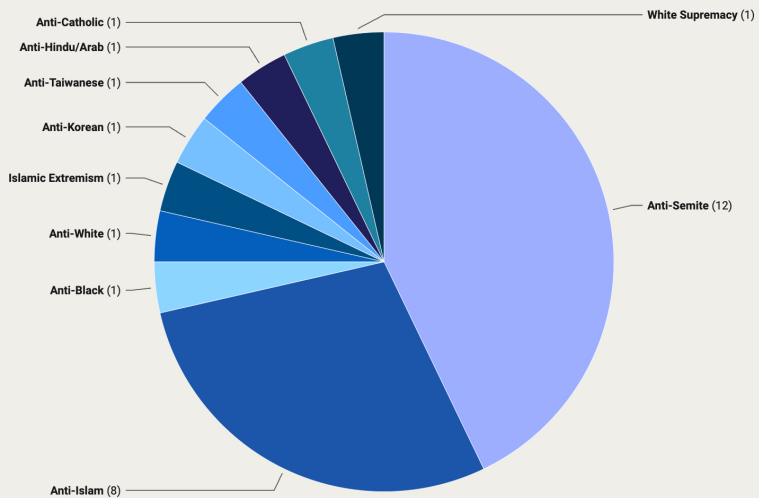
Motives for attacking Christian houses of worship are far more varied. Excluding attacks where a motive could not be determined, 47% of attacks were motivated by interpersonal disputes, 32% of attacks were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, and 21% were motivated by other reasons.

Of the seven mass shootings documented in this report, six were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred.

Different Religions Attacked for Different Reasons

The motives of the attackers differ whether their target was a Jewish, Muslim or Christian/Catholic house of worship.

■ **Racial/ethnic/religious hate** ■ Interpersonal ■ Other ■ Unknown
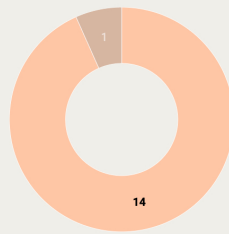
Attacks on Jewish house of worship　　Attacks on Muslim house of worship　　Attacks on Christian/Catholic house of worship
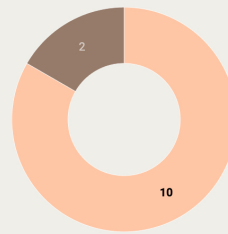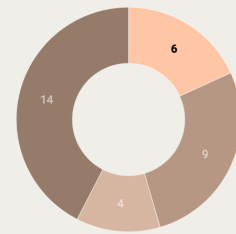
Chart: A-Mark Foundation • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Mental illness

Approximately 40% of the perpetrators have histories of mental illness, were diagnosed with a mental illness during trial, or were found unfit for trial or not guilty by reason of insanity.

Moreover, 17% of all perpetrators reportedly had an SMI. While this is still a minority of perpetrators, the proportion of perpetrators with SMI is over four times larger than that of individuals with an SMI in the general population.

Four of the 58 perpetrators (7%) were eventually found not guilty by reason of insanity. While such a small number may seem insignificant, researchers estimate that only 0.26% of all defendants are found not guilty by reason of insanity, meaning the proportion in this report is more than 27 times larger than that of all defendants. [40] Furthermore, one perpetrator was found guilty but not criminally responsible, while another three were deemed incompetent to stand trial due to mental illness and prescribed treatment.

Of the 40% of perpetrators who reportedly had a mental illness, the most common motive was racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, accounting for 43% of perpetrator motives. Interpersonal disputes account for 22% of these perpetrators' motives, with other and unknown motives accounting for approximately 17% each.

Three of the seven perpetrators who carried out mass shootings reportedly had a mental illness, and two of those three were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred.

43% of the perpetrators with mental illness were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. Of those, 40% were specifically motivated by Islamophobia, 30% by antisemitism, 10% were anti-white, 10% anti-Asian (anti-Korean specifically) and 10% Islamic extremism.

The prevalence of mental illness among the perpetrators documented in this report (40%) is notably higher than the prevalence of mental illness in the general population (20%). [41] There is an even greater over-representation of serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression among these perpetrators (24%) compared to rates of SMI among adults in the U.S. (4%). [42] [43] The total number of attackers with SMI is still quite small, and SMI was not the single driving force behind the attacks.

Solutions

Between 2013 and 2018, attacks targeting the congregants, clergy, or staff of houses of worship fell from a high of 10 in 2012, to an average of 3.5 per year. In 2019, the number of attacks grew substantially, peaking at 11. Although there was a significant decrease in 2020 and 2021, likely attributable to closures related to COVID-19, the frequency of attacks during those years only fell to the same levels as those from 2015 through 2018. In 2022, the number of attacks again rose to nine, and as such, it is very possible that if not for COVID-19 closures, the number of attacks may have been significantly higher in 2020 and 2021.

Implemented solutions

Given this general upward trend, thousands of houses of worship have implemented increased security measures to protect their congregants, staff, and clergy. These measures include hiring armed security guards, using metal detectors, and even creating lists of preapproved house of worship entrants.[44]

The rise in attacks has also prompted the federal government to take action, including increasing the amount of funding that houses of worship can apply for to pay for additional security measures through the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Nonprofit Security Grant Program. [45] [46] In 2016, the program provided $25 million in funding, raising to $250 million in 2022, with President Biden proposing a further increase to $360 million in fiscal year 2023. [47] [48] The Biden administration also established the Protecting Places of Worship Interagency Policy Committee, which aims to enhance coordination between government agencies in supporting the security of houses of worship. Additionally, the DHS developed an online training module and other security guides designed to help nongovernmental partners, including houses of worship, learn to identify, evaluate, and report suspicious activities. [49]

One such training guide, "Mitigating Attacks on Houses of Worship," was published by the DHS' Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) in December 2020. This comprehensive security guide advises houses of worship on implementing a holistic security strategy, conducting vulnerability assessments, and improving community readiness and resilience. [50]

These types of training may effectively thwart some attacks or, at minimum, reduce the number of injuries or deaths that occur during an attack. For example, when congregants at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas were taken hostage during a Shabbat service in January 2022, the rabbi threw a chair at the perpetrator, providing an opportunity for a safe escape. The rabbi had previously undertaken several active shooter training sessions, which, he said, gave him the knowledge of how to handle the situation. [51]

Training sessions and increased federal funding for security are undoubtedly valuable and crucial steps in helping houses of worship identify, mitigate, and thwart known, sometimes active, threats. However, meaningfully reducing the overall risk of attacks that houses of worship face requires a comprehensive approach that also addresses the variety of motives that drive perpetrators to carry out these attacks.

Mental health approaches

Given the over-representation of serious mental illness among the perpetrators of these attacks, one approach that could reduce the frequency of attacks is to increase efforts to address and treat mental illness. To be clear, mental health approaches will not stop most attacks, and mental illness is not the sole or even causal factor driving those with SMI to commit these attacks. However, there are

ways to reduce the likelihood that an individual with SMI will resort to violence.

A crucial step involves addressing the stigma surrounding mental illness and the associated view that individuals with mental illness are dangerous. As discussed earlier in this report, lack of social support increases the likelihood that an individual will resort to violence, regardless of mental illness. However, stigma around mental illness, especially SMI, often leads to decreased social support and increased alienation. In turn, this increases the likelihood of violence. In practice, public figures and the media should stop blaming violent incidents on mental illness and stop invoking mental illness to wholly explain a perpetrator's motive. [52]

Advocates also emphasize that persons with mental illness should have a voice in influencing policy decisions related to mental health. In addition to increasing the likelihood that policies related to mental health will reflect lived experiences, giving persons with mental illness a voice in the policy making process would increase visibility, which could reduce the fear and stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses. [53]

Furthermore, removing barriers to treatment is also essential. Researchers estimate that only around 40% of persons with SMI receive treatment in a given year. [54] High costs, lack of availability, and lack of information make it extremely difficult for individuals to actually receive diagnoses and treatments for mental illness. [55] According to experts, the risk for violence of individuals with SMI significantly decreases if they undertake an effective treatment plan.

Research indicates that incarceration significantly increases the risk of violent behavior for persons with mental illness. [56] There is also an over-representation of individuals with mental illness in prisons. [57] Given the highly stressful environment and lack of treatment options, experts say that it is critical to ensure that individuals with mental illness are kept out of prison or jail if they pose no real threat to society, including in cases where the individual poses no threat while receiving effective treatment. [58] In cases where an individual with mental illness must be incarcerated because they pose a threat, it is crucial that the facility have appropriate resources to treat mental illness.

While the efforts described in this section are undoubtedly important steps in reducing the likelihood that an individual with mental illness will resort to violence generally, mental health is only one factor motivating a person to commit an act of violence. Moreover, broadly speaking and in the specific context of the attacks in this report, most violent perpetrators are not mentally ill.

Deradicalization & combating bigotry

At least 49% of the perpetrators in the documented attacks were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. [59] The overwhelming majority (81%) of these attackers were driven by white supremacy, Islamophobia and antisemitism. [60] Given the prevalence of white supremacy as a motive for committing these attacks, a holistic approach to reducing the threats faced by houses of worship should incorporate efforts to combat white supremacy and bigotry, more broadly.

The Center for American Progress (CAP) published a comprehensive blueprint of policy initiatives to combat white supremacist violence. In addition to advocating for increased efforts to identify groups and prosecute illegal activity, CAP emphasizes the importance of reducing the power of white supremacist groups to recruit individuals online. [61] One way of doing this involves developing training guides on cybersafety and digital media literacy to help internet users identify white supremacist recruitment tactics and propaganda. According to the blueprint, programs aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating individuals seeking to disengage from white supremacist groups are also crucial to help prevent and reduce white supremacist violence.

In June 2021, the Biden administration introduced the first-ever "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism," which was directly informed by the finding that white supremacist violence is one of the most lethal elements of domestic terrorism within the United States. [62] In addition to calling for enhanced analysis of the domestic terrorism threat and improved law enforcement information sharing, the strategy emphasizes the importance of engaging community partners to identify white supremacist activity and prevent violent attacks.

In line with the CAP recommendations, the Biden administration's strategy also aims to curb online recruitment and mobilization, in part by creating "innovative ways to foster digital literacy and build resilience to recruitment and mobilization." [63] Further, the Biden administration joined a partnership of international governments and technology companies aimed at addressing the pervasiveness of online white supremacist content and propaganda. [64]

While the strategy's implementation is too recent to determine whether it has been or will be effective, the explicit recognition of the danger posed by white supremacy suggests that the Biden administration is taking the threat seriously and implementing significant steps to address it.

Upholding current gun laws and reducing access to guns

Almost 94% of the deaths and 61% of the nonfatal injuries that resulted from the attacks documented in this report occurred during attacks carried out with a firearm. Better enforcement of current gun laws and increased efforts to restrict gun access may prove necessary to meaningfully reduce the threat of violent attacks targeting the congregants, staff, and clergy at a house of worship.

Under existing law, the perpetrator of the deadliest attack in this report should not have been able to purchase a firearm. Devin Patrick Kelley, who carried out a 2017 mass shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas, that killed 26 and injured another 20, was court-martialed in 2012 while serving in the Air Force for assaulting his wife and child. [65] The Air Force failed to enter his domestic violence charges into a database that would have flagged Kelley and prevented him from purchasing a weapon.[66]

Proper enforcement of current gun legislation and enacting new legislation to make it more difficult for dangerous individuals to obtain deadly weapons may effectively reduce the number of attacks carried out at houses of worship. Two initiatives highlighted by the CAP include enacting legislation that would require background checks for guns sold by unlicensed individuals and transfers between private parties and legislation to ban "ghost guns." [67] The term "ghost gun" refers to firearms sold online that are only partially finished when sold. Current law requires that serial numbers are engraved on every firearm, but these serial numbers are not required to be engraved on "partially finished firearms, frames, and receivers." Thus, when "unfinished" firearms are purchased and used to commit a crime, the weapon is untraceable. According to CAP, ghost guns are "increasingly being used by violent white supremacists." [68]

Photo: Worshippers attend a prayer service in the Al-Furqan Jame Masjid mosque in the Queens borough of New York on Aug. 16, 2016, three days after the mosque's Imam, Maulana Alauddin Akonjee, and his associate, Thara Uddin, were shot dead while walking home from the mosque. (AP Photo/Ezra Kaplan)

Conclusion

Thousands of acts of violence have been committed at or near houses of worship in the last ten years. Most of these attacks were spontaneous, arising from arguments between staff or congregants, or happened nearby and spilled over onto the house of worship's property. Thousands of arson attacks have also been carried out over the past decade. While spontaneous eruptions of violence and arson attacks are undoubtedly frightening and can send an intimidating message, this report has aimed to clarify what motivates a perpetrator to enter a house of worship and deliberately harm the congregants, staff, or clergy, what attacks cause the most harm, and how often these attacks occur. Answering these questions is a crucial step toward identifying ways to keep congregants, staff, and clergy safe when they worship.

This report has found that violent attacks targeting houses of worship increased between 2013 and 2023, peaking in 2019 with 11 attacks, and again in 2022 with nine attacks. Four attacks occurred during the first four months of 2023, indicating that this year may likely see a high number of attacks as well. The motives behind the 59 attacks documented in this report vary considerably but fall into four broad categories: interpersonal conflict (15% of attacks); racial, ethnic, or religious hatred (49% of attacks); other (8% of attacks); and unknown (27% of attacks). While 49% of attacks were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, 81% of these were specifically motivated by white supremacist ideology, including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

However, the distribution of motives significantly changes based on the religion practiced at the house of worship targeted. The perpetrator's motive is unknown in 42% of attacks at Christian or Catholic sites of worship, and the second most common motive of attacks targeting Christian or Catholic churches was interpersonal conflicts (27%). While only 18% of attacks targeting Christian houses of worship were motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, this was the motive of 93% of the perpetrators targeting Jewish houses of worship and 83% of the perpetrators targeting Muslim houses of worship.

More than three-quarters of all deaths occurred in attacks motivated by either interpersonal conflict (40%) or racial, ethnic, or religious hatred (43%), and nearly all these attacks involved a firearm. Shootings were the most frequent method across the 59 attacks (40%) and caused 94% of the 79 deaths and 61% of the 83 nonfatal injuries documented in this report.

To meaningfully reduce the threat to congregants, staff and clergy at houses of worship, a comprehensive approach is necessary that addresses the motivations and attack methods that cause the most harm. Considering the frequency and lethality of shooting attacks, better enforcement of current gun laws and further reforms to restrict gun access may prove necessary to protect worshippers.

The prevalence of attacks motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred indicates that finding ways to reach and deradicalize individuals with violent racist beliefs would likely have a significant impact in protecting worshippers. Addressing attacks motivated by interpersonal conflict may prove more challenging. However, 45% of attacks motivated by interpersonal conflicts involved a male perpetrator targeting a woman with whom he had or previously had a relationship, and at least two of these perpetrators had previously been arrested for assaulting a woman. Enhancing broad efforts to reduce domestic and sexual violence may help further decrease the risks faced by houses of worship.

The over-representation of mental illness, especially serious mental illness, among the perpetrators is also a notable trend, even if these perpetrators only represent a minority and mental illness is not the sole cause or motive for violence. While only 20% of the general population of adults in the U.S. have a mental illness, 40% of the perpetrators documented in this report had histories of mental illness, were diagnosed with a mental illness during trial, or were found unfit for trial or not guilty by reason of insanity. This group of perpetrators is responsible for 44% of the deaths and 57% of the nonfatal injuries documented in this report. Further, over half of all attacks motivated by interpersonal conflicts were carried out by perpetrators with mental illness. One cannot say with any certainty that these attacks would not have happened if the perpetrator had received effective treatment or if their social support systems had been stronger, but working to improve treatment and social support for those with mental illness may have some impact in curbing this violence.

However, even if these initiatives were implemented today, it would likely be a long time before we would see the effect. In the meantime, increased security measures made available by funding and online training may be the best option for houses of worship to protect their congregants.

Appendix A: Full Methodology

Defining violent attacks at houses of worship

The aim of this report is to analyze violent attacks against houses of worship and the motivations behind these attacks. The operational definition of a violent attack against a house of worship is broadly derived from a security guide published in December 2020 by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) titled, "Mitigating Attacks Against Houses of Worship." [69] CISA's security guide focuses on targeted violence in which "a perpetrator deliberately targeted a HoW [house of worship] to: 1. Kill or injure one or more persons affiliated with a HoW, including clergy, staff and congregants; 2. Cause significant property damage to a HoW; and/or 3. Engage in cyber crimes targeted at a HoW, including such acts as network intrusions, software piracy, identity theft, financial fraud, and phishing."

CISA's definition excludes attacks in which a perpetrator remains unidentified or a specific interest in the place of worship cannot be determined, including attacks "related to gang violence, drug violence, or other incidents with a separate criminal nexus; violence from the surrounding community that encroached onto HoW property by happenstance; [and] spontaneous, impulsive acts that were not

planned and where the HoW was not specifically targeted."[70]

This report deviates from CISA's criterion in two primary ways:

- First, this report includes attempted acts of targeted violence to widen the dataset and with the goal of gaining better insight into what motivates violent attacks at houses of worship. For example, an incident in which a person walked into a church with a gun, but congregants managed to subdue them and confiscate the firearm before any injuries occurred. [71]

- Secondly, this report does not include cyber crime or incidents of property damage. While incidents that result in significant property damage, such as arson, are undoubtedly frightening and can send an intimidating message, most arson incidents occur outside of normal operating hours of the houses of worship and typically intend only to cause property damage rather than physical harm. [72]

As such, this report aims to include all incidents in which a perpetrator violently attacked (or attempted to violently attack) congregants, staff or clergy at a house of worship or affiliated property. Attack types include shootings and attempted shootings, stabbings and attempted stabbings, vehicle ramming, and arsons and/or bombings when the perpetrator knew or had reason to believe congregants, staff or clergy were inside the house of worship targeted. To distinguish as best as possible acts of violence targeted at houses of worship and affiliated persons from other types of violence that occur at or near a place of worship by happenstance, this report excludes stabbings and shootings that occurred outside a place of worship during carjackings, robberies, or other types of assault unrelated to the house of worship. Moreover, this report also excludes spontaneous acts of violence that erupted during arguments; attacks that occurred during private events, such as a birthday party at a church hall; and attacks that occurred when only the perpetrator and targeted victims were inside the house of worship. [73]

Finding cases

This report primarily relied on open-source media reports to compile a list of incidents and find relevant details. However, the FBI's hate crime data, [74] The Violence Project, [75] CISA, the Anti-Defamation League H.E.A.T. Map, [76] and ProPublica's report on hate incidents against mosques and Islamic centers from 2013 through 2017 [77] also served as valuable resources in finding incidents to include in this study. Because the information included in this report is limited by the availability of public information and the lack of a centralized tracking system, there are likely attacks at houses of worship that would meet this study's criteria that have not been included. This report aims to be as systematic and consistent as possible, but determining whether an incident meets our criteria involves some subjective judgements.

Religions

Attacks listed in this report include the religion of the house of worship targeted to determine how often each religion is targeted. Although Christianity encompasses Catholicism, there are perceived differences between the Catholic church and other Christian denominations. Relatively few attacks specifically targeted Catholic churches, and only one was related to Catholicism itself. To avoid giving the impression that no Catholic churches had been attacked, this report proceeds by grouping together attacks against Christian (non-Catholic) and Catholic houses of worship under the terminology "Christian or Catholic houses of worship." In order to see the attacks against Catholic houses of worship specifically, we have separated the attacks in our chart, listing attacks against Catholic houses of worship under the term "Catholic," and attacks against all other Christian congregations under the term "Christian."

Categorizing motives

This report uses four broad categories of motive to describe the 59 attacks documented: Interpersonal Conflict (9 attacks), Racial/Ethnic/Religious Hate (28 attacks), Unknown (17 attacks), and Other (5 attacks). Incidents are categorized as being motivated by an Interpersonal Conflict if all of the following circumstances apply: the perpetrator specifically targeted someone with whom they had a personal relationship, such as a friend, family member, or romantic partner; the perpetrator knew the targeted individual(s) would be at a specific place of worship; and the perpetrator deliberately sought out and violently attacked the individual(s) at the place of worship.

Incidents in which a perpetrator deliberately targeted a person(s) or general congregants at a place of worship because of the race, ethnicity, or religion of its congregants are categorized as being motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. In cases where the perpetrator was killed in the commission of the attack or a perpetrator has not been apprehended but there are significant indicators of racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, this is understood as the attack's motivation.

However, this report also includes bias descriptions to specify which racial, ethnic, or religious group the perpetrator targeted. Race and ethnicity are categories that are difficult to define and often confused or conflated. Race is typically associated with physical characteristics, while ethnicity tends to connote a group with a shared cultural and historical identity. [78] However, the lines are not always clear, and religion can be an additional complicating factor.

For example, in 2019, former President Trump signed an executive order [79] stating that antisemitic discrimination is a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and that "Jews can be considered to have been targeted on the basis of their nationality or race as Jews." [80] However, the notion that there is a separate racial, ethnic, or national category of "Jews" is historically fraught and hotly contested, with some Jews embracing what they consider "a Jewish ethnic identity." [81] Others point out that there are Jewish people of all races and nationalities, and lumping all Jewish people together erases that diversity. Responding to the news of Trump's executive order, some rabbis caution that defining Jews as a separate racial or national group has sometimes led to violence throughout history. [82]

Those who perpetrate antisemitic attacks sometimes target Jews based on religious practices or values, but much of the growing hostility toward Jewish people in recent years has been "based on perceived ethnic characteristics shared by Jews." [83] For the purposes of this report, attacks motivated by antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Black racism, and so forth are listed under the broad category of racial, ethnic or religious hatred and feature a specified bias description.

A motive could not be determined in many cases. In some instances, a perpetrator was killed by authorities while committing the attack, and authorities subsequently could not determine the motivation. In other cases, especially attempted attacks that received relatively little media attention, authorities might have not disclosed information about what motivated the perpetrator. In such cases, the motives for the attacks were categorized as Unknown.

If an attack was not motivated by either interpersonal conflict or religious, ethnic, or religious hatred, but a different, unrelated motive is given, the incident's motive was categorized as Other. Relatively few instances fall into the Other category.

Cite This Page

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1   For example, during a supervised visitation at a church in Sacramento, a man shot his three children, their chaperone, and himself. While this event is tragic and occurred inside the church, it would not be included because no one else was present, and no events or services that were open to other congregants or the public were occurring.

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