Methodology

Data Selection and Process

This research effort aimed to identify the scope, nature, and orientation of the terrorism threat in the United States. To analyze this, we compiled a data set of 893 terrorist incidents occurring in the 50 U.S. states and Puerto Rico between January 1, 1994, and May 8, 2020.

This time period was selected in order to provide context on the history of domestic terrorism in the United States in recent decades, and in particular to allow analysis of how the current right-wing threat compares to the last major wave of right-wing violence in the 1990s. The data set begins in 1994 rather than earlier in the decade due to sourcing challenges. We relied heavily on START Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data for the early years of the data set, and due to data loss, a full record of incidents in 1993 is unavailable. Nonetheless, we concluded that 1994 served as a strong starting point, allowing us to examine both the build up to the 1995 peak in right-wing activity and, overall, over 25 years of terrorist activity in the United States.

In total, we drew from the following data sets: START GTD (1994-2017); Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events (2009-2020); the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI) (1994-2009); and the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map (Anti-Semitic Incidents: 2016-2020, Extremist/Police Shootouts: 2008-2020, Extremist Murders: 2008-2020, Terrorist Plots & Attacks: 2002-2020, Islamist: 2002-2020, Left Wing: 2008-2020, Right Wing: 2002-2020). We also compiled events as recorded in ADL publications[1] and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) annual reports and news releases (1994-2020). We cross-referenced events against local and national news sources, including the *New York Times, Washington Post,* and *Los Angeles Times.*

Data were compiled by four researchers, each covering a different quarter of the time period. Two researchers reviewed the full data set to ensure consistency across these sections.

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1 *A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States* (New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2017), https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/CR_5154_25YRS%20RightWing%20Terrorism_V5.pdf; *Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2018* (New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League (ADL), 2019), https://www.adl.org/media/12480/download.

Definitions and Coding

TERRORISM

We defined terrorist incidents as those in which non-state actors used or threatened violence to achieve a political goal and produce broad psychological impact. For inclusion in the data set, events must meet all parts of this definition. Common reasons for exclusion included:

- *Absence of violence or the threat of violence:* There is substantial 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"[2]—include violent elements. We excluded incidents in which there was no actual or threatened violence. This included, for example, graffiti.

- *Non-political motives:* We also excluded incidents in which the perpetrators' motives were not political in nature. Frequently, these perpetrators had personal motivations, including revenge or financial gain. For example, there were 11 incidents of arson at luxury homes in the Phoenix area between April 2000 and January 2001. Though these crimes were committed under the guise of ecoterrorism, the perpetrator, Mark Warren Sands, was later found to have personal rather than political motives.

- *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, on October 27, 1998, pipe bombs were found on the steps of two libraries in Concord, New Hampshire. The perpetrators—and their motives—were never found.

Our sources often differed in their terrorism determinations in regard to school shootings and cases in which a perpetrator's mental illness was closely tied to their motive. In evaluating these cases, we adhered to the requirements described above. School shootings were only included if there was a clear political motive. Cases involving severe mental health concerns were included only if the perpetrator was of the belief that their actions would further a political goal.

ATTACKS AND PLOTS

We included both attacks and foiled plots in the data set, but a variable was added to distinguish between the two. Incidents were defined as plots if they 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 detonating 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.

We coded threats of violence as attacks rather than plots, even if the threat turned out to be a hoax. This is consistent with our definition of terrorism, as described in the previous

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

section. Hoaxes still caused public fear and required a law enforcement response. If an incident was a hoax, we noted this in the variable tracking tactics.

MULTIPLE INCIDENTS

Multiple attacks were coded as one incident if they were committed as part of one coordinated plan by the same actor(s) simultaneously or in rapid succession. For example, the September 11, 2001 attacks at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, were coded together as one event rather than four. Similarly, the October 1999 letter campaign in which an animal rights group, the Justice Department, mailed approximately 80 letters containing razor blades to scientists conducting AIDS and cancer research with non-human primates is listed as one event rather than 80.

To facilitate additional analysis of the nuance in these cases, we created a variable to track the number of separate targets attacked or threatened in such cases. We retained the geographic coordinates of the individual targets to permit geographic analysis and mapping of terrorist events.

IDEOLOGIES

We categorized each terrorist incident into one of five perpetrator orientations: right-wing, left-wing, religious, ethnonationalist, and other.

Right-wing 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; and/or opposition to certain policies such as abortion.

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

Religious terrorists are motivated by a faith-based belief system. This may include Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or other faiths. Within the religious category, we further distinguished cases in which the perpetrator adhered to a Salafi-jihadist ideology. After completing the coding process, we 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 had religious ties, such as some within the Christian Identity movement, these attacks were motivated primarily by concepts of white supremacy and are therefore coded as right-wing. Similarly, though (primarily Christian) religious ideology may have influenced some perpetrators of abortion-related attacks, these fall under the definition of right-wing terrorism.

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

Incidents in which a motive was established but did not meet any of these criteria were classified as *other*. For example, in 2003, Dwight Watson drove a tractor into a pond in the Constitution Gardens in Washington, D.C., and claimed to have an organophosphate bomb in order to protest specific federal policies on tobacco subsidies.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the data set.

First, since we drew from multiple data sources—few of which covered most or all of the time period—there is likely some inconsistency in how thoroughly events were recorded across the years. In particular, fewer sources (including news reports to cross-reference) exist for cases earlier in the time period. In addition, data collection methods used by our sources improved over time. For example, START expanded its collection methodology in 2012, resulting in more comprehensive event records.[3]

Additionally, there were 109 START GTD entries between the years 1994 and 1997 that did not include event summaries to identify the incident. Members of our team identified and coded 99 of these events through cross-referencing other data sources and researching incidents matching the date, location, and other variables indicated in the GTD data, such as weapon type and target type. However, we were unable to verify 10 of these incidents (four in 1995, four in 1996, and two in 1997), and subsequently removed them from the data set.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our data set of 893 events offers a fair representation of terrorism incidents in the United States between January 1, 1994 and May 8, 2020.

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3 "Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables," (codebook, START Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, October 2019), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.