

Violent acts in houses of worship are rare but deadly – here's what the data shows

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In the cases where four or more people were killed, every perpetrator was a man in his 20s to 40s, with an average age of 32. Compared with other homicides at worship sites, these shooters were far more likely to have a history of mental health problems: 60% vs. 18%. They were also far more likely to have been thinking about or planning suicide – 70% vs. 17% – and to die by suicide during or after the attack: 60% vs. 10%.

There were other similarities, too. Among attackers who killed four or more people, 20% had served in the military, and 60% had a criminal background. Among attackers who killed fewer people, those numbers were 4% and 43%. Deadlier shooters more often leaked their plans or showed signs of being in crisis beforehand.

When and where

Violence is most likely to strike on Sundays – a quarter of all cases – followed by Saturdays. That reflects worship patterns: Sundays are the busiest day for most Christian denominations, while Saturdays are common for Jewish services.

Incidents cluster around mornings and nights, with mornings most common — the prime window for weekly services. And despite headlines about shootings inside sanctuaries, 71% of homicides occurred outside – in parking lots, courtyards or on steps – when people were gathering or leaving.

In two-thirds of cases, it was unclear whether the perpetrator had a connection with the congregation. Most of the other cases, though, involved attackers with clear ties, including members, relatives, pastors and employees. In dozens of cases, domestic disputes spilled into worship settings. Because services are routine, predictable gatherings, they can become flash points for private conflicts that turn deadly.

Attacks happened across the nation, but were concentrated in the South. The region tends to have more frequent attendance at religious services and looser firearm laws – a combination that helps explain the South's overrepresentation, though no region is

untouched.

Which faiths are affected

Ninety-seven percent of deadly incidents occurred at Christian churches, reflecting how many there are in the United States.

But, adjusting for the number of congregations, the data underscores other faiths' vulnerability to targeted violence. Jewish and Muslim houses of worship, community centers and cemeteries, for example, contend with frequent threats and vandalism.

Only one incident at a gurdwara – a Sikh temple – appears in the dataset. Because there are so few in the U.S., though, that single case translates into the highest rate for any faith tradition, once the total number of congregations are taken into account. Stabbings or shootings also occurred at six Jewish synagogues and community centers, further suggesting disproportionate risk.

Two incidents involved mosques. Yet that contrasts with data showing high levels of Islamophobia in the U.S., suggesting that most violence against Muslims may occur in other settings.



People attend a vigil on Aug. 5, 2013, to mark the one-year anniversary of a shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

Why this research matters

Homicides in houses of worship remain rare, but when they occur, firearms make them deadlier. Victims have included pastors, rabbis, imams, monks, congregants, staff and children.

Numbers cannot capture the grief of families in Grand Blanc or Minneapolis, or the trauma that survivors carry. But they can reveal patterns that ground conversations about safety and prevention.

Houses of worship are meant to be open spaces of peace and refuge. The challenge is balancing this higher purpose with practical security. By studying these past tragedies, Americans may better prepare for the future – and prevent more families from enduring the heartbreak of recent weeks.

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