



# Serious Violence at Places of Worship in the U.S.—Looking at the Numbers

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September 2019

Violence at places of worship in the U.S. appears to have been increasing over the last two decades. While the most tragic and shocking incidents dominate media attention and public awareness, many smaller incidents of violence occur at places of worship every week. In order to develop an accurate picture of the scope and nature of these violence incidents, and better prepare religious leaders to protect against them, Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) examined official FBI data on incidents of serious violence committed at places of worship.

Each year the FBI gathers detailed data on a sample of crimes reported to local police through the *National Incident-Based Reporting System* (NIBRS). NIBRS data is gathered about 49 different types of criminal offenses as reported to approximately 5,300 local, county, and state law enforcement agencies across 32 states. The law enforcement agencies participating in NIBRS make up only about 31% of the law enforcement agencies in the nation, and police only about 20% of the U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, NIBRS data do serve as a good *sample* of what crimes are occurring at places of worship, and how they occur.

## Prevalence of Violent Serious Crime at Places of Worship

We examined the NIBRS data for the 17 years from 2000 through 2016 (the most recent year NIBRS were publicly available). We examined all incidents of armed robberies, aggravated assaults, shootings, stabbings, or bombings that were reported to have occurred at (or on the property of) a place of worship. This revealed 1,652 such incidents of serious violence at places of worship; an average of 97 incidents per year within NIBRS-reporting jurisdictions. A total of 155 deaths and 742 injuries resulted during these 17 years of data, for an annual average of 9 deaths and 44 wounded. Since NIBRS-reporting agencies only cover about 20% of the nation's population, the national-level numbers are actually much higher. **Extrapolating to the whole U.S. population, we estimated that there are actually about 480 incidents of serious violence at places of worship in the U.S. each year. These incidents produce about 46 deaths and 218 serious injuries annually. This is a serious problem.**

## The Settings

As the vast majority of places of worship in the U.S. are Christian churches, it is not surprising that 94% of the incidents occurred at Christian churches. Likewise the denominations of these Christian churches generally parallel the proportions of places of worship across the nation, with Baptist (21%), Roman Catholic (15%), Methodist (7%), Lutheran (4%), and Presbyterian (4%) topping the list. The only religions that showed a clearly disproportionate rate of violence incidents were Islamic mosques and Sikh temples. Islamic mosques make up less than 1% of the places of worship in the U.S., yet 2% of all violence incidents occurred at mosques. Sikh temples make up less than 0.1% of the places of worship in the U.S., yet 1% of all violent offenses occurred at these temples. Examining the details of each of these Islamic and Sikh incidents revealed three primary motives for these offenses; religious / ethnic-bias hate crimes, personal disputes between members of the place of worship or people from the surrounding neighborhood, and neighborhood crime that spilled over onto the property of the place of worship due to the location being in a high crime area.

## Motives and Methods

When examining the violent crimes at all types of places of worship, many of the cases had multiple motives. For example, an individual may be suffering a mental health crisis, but also targeting a family member as part of an act of domestic violence. The NIBRS data, however, identifies a *primary* motive for each incident. These primary motives included mental illness / derangement (28%), robbery (26%), family dispute / domestic violence (17%), personal dispute (14%), ethnic, racial, or religious hate crime (6%), and 9% were undetermined.

A majority of the incidents (52%) occurred outside of the building, while 48% occurred inside. Of the incidents that occurred inside the building, the assailant entered via a main entrance 29% of the time, while the remaining 71% involved entry via a side entrance, back door, or window. Approximately 58% of the incidents occurred immediately before, during, or immediately after a formal event (worship service, prayer service, youth event, etc.). Another 14% occurred during weekday office hours, and 28% occurred afterhours when the building was unoccupied by church staff. Incidents that occurred when the building was unoccupied included beatings, shootings, or robberies involving individuals from the surrounding neighborhood that happened to occur on church property, as well as fire-bombings of a place of worship. Most of the incidents, including the most severe mass shooting incidents, were over quickly, with most lasting no longer than 6 minutes.

Only about 13% of the reported incidents involved unarmed physical violence, such as punching and kicking. It is possible that far more incidents of this type of violence occurred annually, but were simply resolved within the congregation and not reported to the police. Such incidents are also more likely to be classified by the police as simple assaults (a lesser offense), and therefore not included within the NIBRS categories of serious violence. Nevertheless, 57% of the reported incidents involved a firearm (75% of these involved handguns and 25% rifles, assault rifles, or shotguns), and 14% involved knives or other bladed weapons. Another 11% involved a club or

other blunt object, 3% had a motor vehicle used as a weapon, and 2% involved an explosive or incendiary device.

### **The Assailants**

Approximately 77% of the incidents involved only one assailant, while 23% had two or more assailants. Almost all of the multiple-assailant incidents were robbery situations. The assailants were overwhelmingly male 91%, but 9% were female. Of the assailants that were identified, their ages ranged from 15 to 73 years old. In situations where the assailant's race / ethnicity could be determined, 50% were White (non-Hispanic), 40% were African-American or Black, 8% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian. The overwhelming majority of offenses were intra-racial in nature, meaning that the assailant and the victims were of the same race or ethnicity. For instance, 93% of the incidents at predominantly African-American churches involved an African-American assailant. Likewise, 87% of serious violence incidents at predominantly White churches were committed by White assailants.

Approximately 75% of the known assailants had prior criminal arrest records, 43% had prior arrests for violent offenses, and 60% had been previously treated for a serious mental illness or disorder. A full 67% of the assailants had no affiliation with the congregation involved, while 10% were loosely affiliated (came at least once before), and the remaining 23% of the assailants were regular congregants, former regular congregants, clergy or staff, or former clergy or staff.

### **Common Case Examples**

In order to provide a better picture of the most common types of scenarios found within the data, ten specific case examples are described below.

Case 1: A funeral was being held at a Baptist church for the grandson of one of the regular congregants. The deceased was a 23-year old who had gang affiliations, and the funeral was attended by several other young men with gang affiliations, but no affiliation to the church. As the attendees were leaving the funeral, a violent dispute broke out between two 22 year-old males who pulled out handguns and opened fire on one another. Family members and bystanders had attempted to break up the incident, and when the shooting began they were caught in the crossfire. None of the shooters were hurt, and both fled the scene. Unfortunately, six bystanders had been hit by bullets, two of which died.

Case 2: The leadership of an Islamic mosque had been in a dispute for several months with a man who ran a convenience store directly across the street from the mosque. The dispute had involved a number of issues that the man felt had hurt his business, including attendees of the mosque filling up the parking spaces at the convenience store so that customers had no place to park. The store owner and the imam of the mosque had engaged in several heated arguments over these issues. On the day of the violence incident, as the imam and an associate were leaving the mosque after services, the shop owner confronted them and another heated argument ensued. The store owner then stabbed both men several times with a knife before fleeing the scene.

Case 3: On a Wednesday morning a formal prayer service was being held with 30 people in attendance at a large, non-denominational church. The assailant was a 52-year-old male with a prior criminal record who had formerly been a janitor at the church. His employment had been terminated on the previous Monday and he blamed the worship pastor for his termination. The assailant entered the church through a side door, armed with a handgun. He entered the prayer service from a side door to the chapel room and shot the worship pastor several times at close range. The assailant then fled the scene without harming anyone else.

Case 4: A 62-year-old woman was exiting the main doors of her African Methodist Episcopal church after Sunday morning services when she was ambushed by her estranged 46-year-old daughter. The daughter had a history of mental health problems and had recently been released from jail. The daughter stabbed her mother several times before being overpowered by other members of the congregation. The mother was critically wounded but survived.

Case 5: On a Thursday night, a Catholic church was hosting English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. A 66-year-old woman and her 41-year-old daughter were walking across the parking lot to attend the classes when the older woman's ex-husband drove up and opened fire with a handgun. The ex-husband had previously engaged in domestic violence and had a restraining order against him. The assailant immediately fled the scene after the shooting. The wife died of her injuries, and the daughter was critically wounded.

Case 6: At midday on a Friday, a 25 year old male was walking through the parking lot of a Baptist church and approached two men (ages 22 and 31) sitting in a car within the church parking lot. The assailant produced a handgun, pointed it at the men in the car, and demanded their valuables. The men resisted and each was shot twice, but survived the incident. The shooter fled with their wallets, watches, jewelry, and phones. None of the individuals involved were affiliated with the church and it appears to have been a robbery of two drug dealers.

Case 7: On a Friday morning a 56-year-old homeless man with a history of mental health problems entered the office area of an Episcopal church and aggressively demanded access to the church's food pantry. The man was a frequent visitor to the food pantry and had already reached his limit for the number of times he could visit the pantry in a month. The church secretary and rector directed him to other resources in the area and he angrily stormed out. He returned a short time later with a handgun, shooting and killing both the secretary and the rector, before turning the gun on himself to commit suicide.

Case 8: On a Wednesday evening, an 82-year-old man was leaving a prayer service at his Church of God church when he was confronted in the parking lot by a 15-year-old and a 17-year-old male. The youths produced handguns to rob the man, who tried to talk the youths out of what they were doing. Unhappy that the man was not complying fast enough, the teens shot and killed the man, took his belongings, and fled in the man's car.

Case 9: On a Wednesday afternoon, a man and woman in their fifties walked into a Catholic church. The church was unoccupied, but open to the public at all hours of the day. A motion-activated camera inside recorded that the couple knelt at the altar to pray. While praying, the man removed a handgun from his waistband and shot the woman four times in the torso. The man then

shot himself with the gun. Both died. Both individuals lived in another town and were not affiliated with this particular Catholic parish. The incident is believed to have been a domestic violence-related.

Case 10: At 8:00 a.m. on a Monday morning at a Baptist church, a 33-year-old male entered the church through the children's ministries door, armed with a baseball bat. The assailant, who had a personal dispute with a specific church staff member, demanded to see this staff member. He threatened the church office staff with the bat. When the assailant learned that the staff member he was seeking was not present, he struck several of the office staff, smashed several windows, broke furniture, and then fled the scene.

### **Are You Prepared?**

Places of worship are expected to be places of peace, love, and acceptance, yet are often targeted for violence. Through understanding how serious violence at places of worship typically transpires, religious leaders can work with their volunteers and staff to institute policies and practices that can reduce the likelihood of these events occurring, or reduce the potential damage these events can create. Serious violence at places of worship happens far too frequently to ignore. People who attend places of worship need to prepare in advance for how to respond when events like these occur.

### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016). *National Incident-Based Reporting System Data Codebook*. Quantico, VA: Federal Bureau of Investigation.