

RELIGIOUS RACISM IN NORTH AMERICA:

RACIALLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS AGAINST PLACES OF WORSHIP IN THE 21st CENTURY

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**International Commission to Combat
Religious Racism**

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INTRODUCTION

Four years ago today, on March 15, 2019, a white supremacist stormed into Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand and shot at worshippers while they were gathered for their Friday prayers. Before his rampage was over, the perpetrator killed fifty-one people and seriously injured forty others. Unfortunately, this brutal attack was just one in a long history of racially motivated attacks on places of worship.

Altogether too frequently, the press and public officials characterize such attacks as isolated and the perpetrators as “lone wolves.” They examine the background of the attacker, searching for clues about what led him down the wrong path and caused him to carry out such a supposedly unusual act. They look for evidence of mental illness, bullying, and negative encounters with people of the same religious background as the victims.

Scholars have recently denounced such statements and beliefs, arguing that there are strong racial and religious biases in public and official perceptions of who is labeled as an “extremist” or “terrorist” and whose actions are viewed as isolated versus whose are regarded as representative of their religious community and race.¹ In response to these arguments, this report assesses racially-motivated attacks on places of worship and religious community centers in the United States and Canada over the past 20 years. Instead of studying each attack in isolation and looking into the background of the individual perpetrators, it compiles data about multiple cases and analyzes patterns and trends. In an effort to shift the focus away from the perpetrators, they are not listed by name in this report. Instead, the cases are identified by the target/victim, the date, and the type of attack.

In total, this report analyzes fifty separate cases involving fifty-eight locations and fifty-five known perpetrators. These cases were identified based on news reports, social media posts, and other reports on violence against religious communities. Then official sources, such as court records or press releases from the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, were consulted to collect more accurate data on the perpetrators and the attacks. Official data was available in 70% of all cases; it was available in 85% of the cases where the perpetrator has been identified.

¹ For example, see Khaled A. Beydoun, “Lone Wolf Terrorism: Types, Stripes, and Double Standards,” *Northwestern University Law Review Online*, Vol. 112 (2018): 1213-1244; Caroline Corbin, “Terrorists Are Always Muslim but Never White: At the Intersection of Critical Race Theory and Propaganda,” *Fordham Law Review*, Vol. 86(2) (2017): 455-472.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A RACIALLY MOTIVATED ATTACK?

In this context, “racially motivated attack” means that the cases in this report all have one or more factors that suggest that the perpetrator was at least partially motivated by racial bias. Most frequently, the racial motivation was overt—the perpetrator stated that they planned to start a race war or were targeting people of a particular racial community. In other cases, the perpetrator was affiliated with a group that believes in the supremacy of one race over others. Another common sign was the use of racial slurs in the perpetrator’s threats, “manifestos,” social media posts, or statements to authorities. Vandalism that included racist graffiti such as the words “white power” or swastikas was also considered evidence of racial motivation.

WHY FOCUS ON PLACES OF WORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY CENTERS?

The bulk of the report discusses acts of discrimination and violence that took place in or around mosques, synagogues, churches, and Sikh and Hindu temples. The other cases involve attacks against identifiably religious cultural or community centers.

Places of worship and religious community centers are certainly not the only locations where extremists have carried out acts of racially motivated discrimination or violence against religious communities. However, aside from a few high profile attacks, intent can be more difficult to determine in other cases. Was the perpetrator merely acting out of racial bias? Were they aware of the victim’s religious affiliation? With attacks against places of worship, it is typically much clearer that the perpetrator meant to target a religious community. Additionally, this emphasis on places of worship and other religious spaces helps us to understand the threat of discrimination and violence in sacred spaces where communities gather.

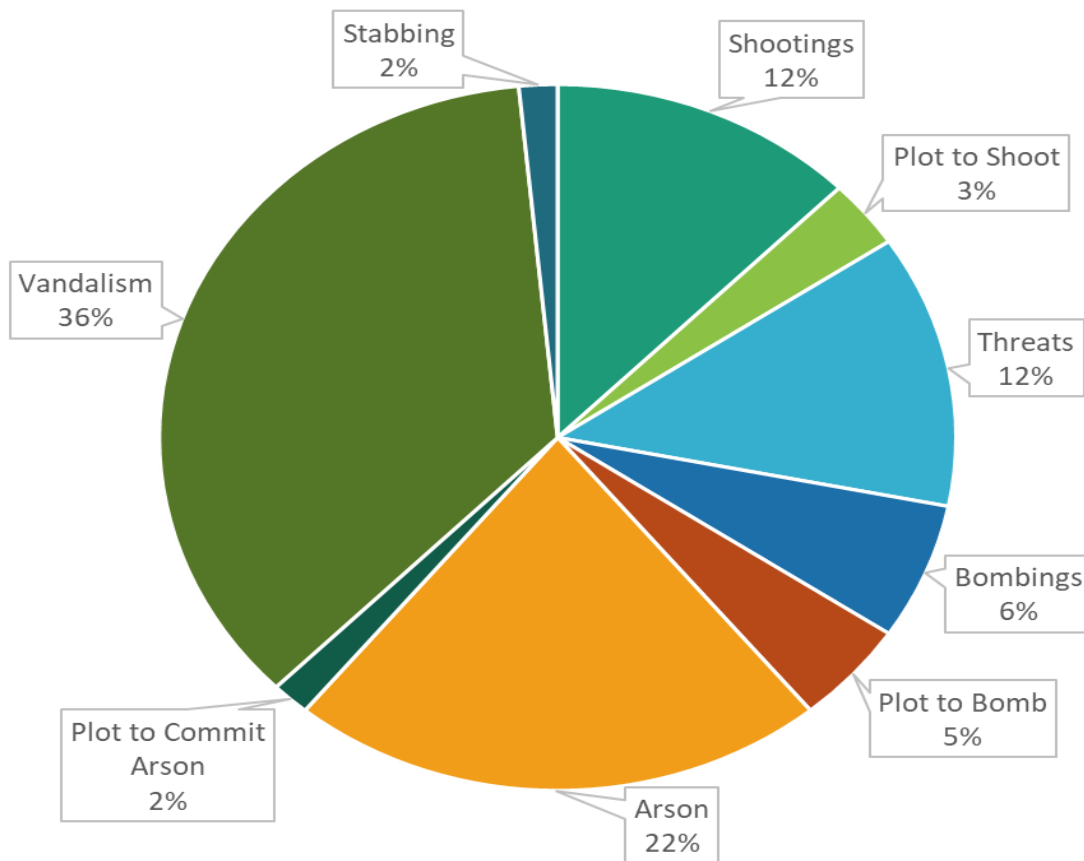
THE CASES

1. Temple B'nai Israel in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, April 1, 2004,
2. Greater Love Missionary Baptist Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lansing, Michigan, April 16-17, 2005
3. Congregation Beth Shalom synagogue, Modesto, California, February 2006
4. Lewiston Auburn Islamic Center, Lewiston, Maine, July 3, 2006
5. Islamic Center of Columbia, Tennessee, February 9, 2008
6. Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Knoxville, July 27, 2008
7. Macedonia Church of God in Christ, Springfield, Massachusetts, Nov. 5, 2008
8. Temple Israel and Beth Messiah Synagogue, Norfolk, Virginia, April 2009
9. Dar El-Eman Islamic Center, Arlington, Texas, July 2010
10. Salman Alfarisi Islamic Center, Oregon, November 2010
11. Faith in Christ Church, Crane, Texas, Dec. 28, 2010
12. Imam Al-Khoei Foundation mosque and an unidentified Hindu temple, Queens, New York, January 1, 2012
13. Sikh Temple of Wisconsin, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, August 5, 2012
14. Plot to carry out "training missions" on mosques, March 2014
15. Overland Park Jewish Community Center, April 13, 2014
16. Islamberg, New York, April 2015
17. Emanuel A.M.E. Church, Charleston, June 17, 2015
18. Tawfiq Islamic Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, September 30, 2015
19. Plot to Bomb and Shoot Black Churches and Synagogues, September-November 2015
20. The Islamic Society of North America, Indianapolis, Indiana, February 2016
21. Unidentified Mosque, Charleston, South Carolina, July 11, 2016
22. Masjid Al Salam mosque and Fort Smith Islamic Center, Fort Smith, Arkansas, October 2016
23. Apartment Complex With a Mosque, Garden City, Kansas, October 2016.
24. Bayonne Muslim Center, Bayonne, New Jersey, October 2016
25. Islamic Cultural Centre, Quebec City, Canada, January 2017

THE CASES

26. American Turkish Eyup Sultan Cultural Center, Brooklyn, New York, March 2017
27. Islamic Society of Augusta, Georgia, June- August 2017
28. The Dar al-Farooq Islamic Center, Bloomington, Minnesota, August 5, 2017.
29. Burnette Chapel Church of Christ, Nashville, TN. September 24, 2017.
30. Jami Omar Mosque, Ottawa, Canada, January 2018
31. Jamaat Ul Muttaqeen Mosque of Pembroke Pines, Florida, May 2018
32. Congregation Shaarey Tefilla synagogue, Carmel, Indiana, July 2018
33. Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, October 27, 2018
34. Markaz Ul Islam Mosque, Edmonton, Canada, January 2019
35. St. Mary Baptist Church, Port Barre, Louisiana; Greater Union Baptist Church, Opelousas, Louisiana; and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, Opelousas, Louisiana, March-April 2019
36. Dar-ul-Arqam Mosque and Chabad of Poway synagogue, San Diego county, California, March -April 2019
37. Beth Israel Sinai Congregation, September 21, 2019
38. Conspiracy to Vandalize Synagogues Across the U.S., September 2019
39. Temple Emanuel Synagogue, Colorado, November 1, 2019.
40. Guru Maneyo Granth Gurdwara Sahib, Orangevale, California, January 2020
41. South Street Temple, Lincoln, Nebraska, January 15, 2020
42. Unidentified African American Church, Virginia Beach, Virginia, June 7, 2020
43. Al Rashid Mosque, Edmonton, Canada, July 2020
44. The International Muslim Organization mosque, Toronto, September 12, 2020
45. Ashbury United Methodist Church and Metropolitan AME Church, Washington D.C., December 2020
46. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Massachusetts, December 2020
47. Moorhead Fargo Islamic Center, Minnesota, April 25, 2021
48. Baitul Hadi Mosque, Edmonton, Canada, July 2021
49. Langley Islamic Centre, Langley, British Columbia, Canada, August 26, 2021
50. Congregation Beth Israel synagogue, Austin, Texas, October 31, 2021

TYPES OF ATTACKS

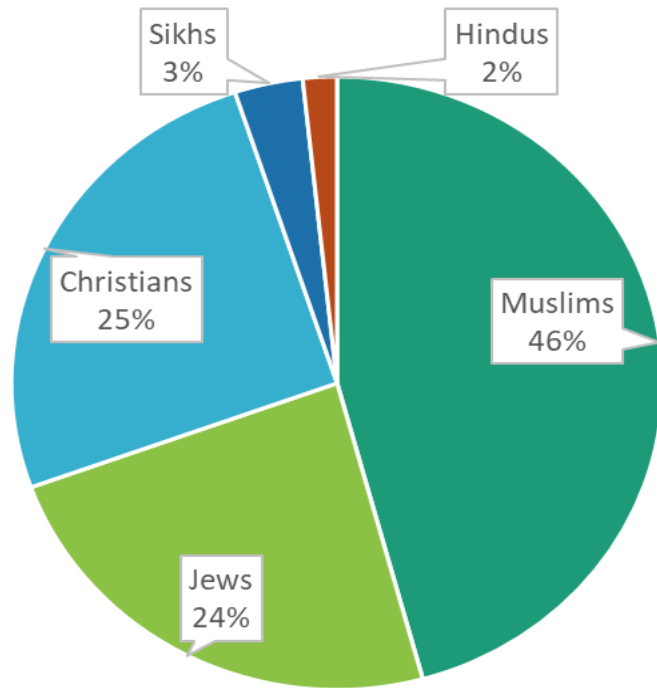


There were four main types of racially motivated attacks carried out against places of worship and religious community centers over the past twenty years: vandalism, arson, bombings, and shootings. The other cases were mostly composed of threats or plots to carry out these same types of attacks. The only exception was one incident in which the perpetrator stabbed the victim outside of a place of worship.

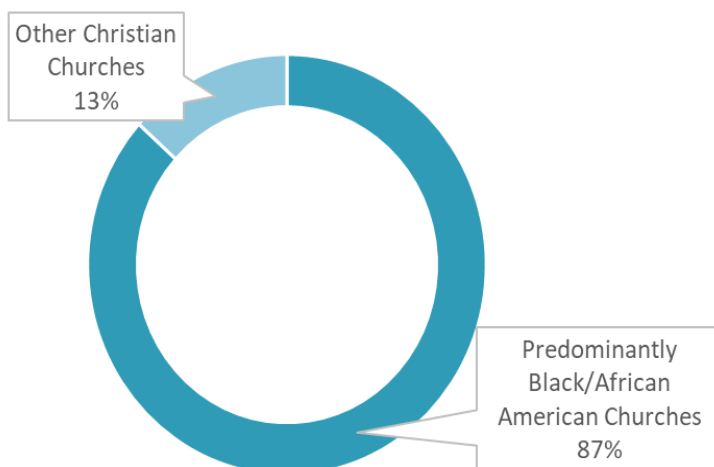
Aside from injuries to firefighters in some cases of arson, the only injuries or fatalities occurred in stabbings or shootings. Arsons and bombings often targeted unoccupied places. In cases where the targeted buildings were occupied, the fires were quickly extinguished and the bombs failed to detonate or did not harm the worshippers when they exploded.

RELIGION OF THE TARGETS

The chart to the right shows that attacks were not evenly spread across religious communities. Muslims represented nearly half of targeted victims in all of the racially motivated attacks in this database. Christians and Jews were each targeted in approximately one-fourth of cases. Hindus and Sikhs were only the victims in one and two cases, respectively.



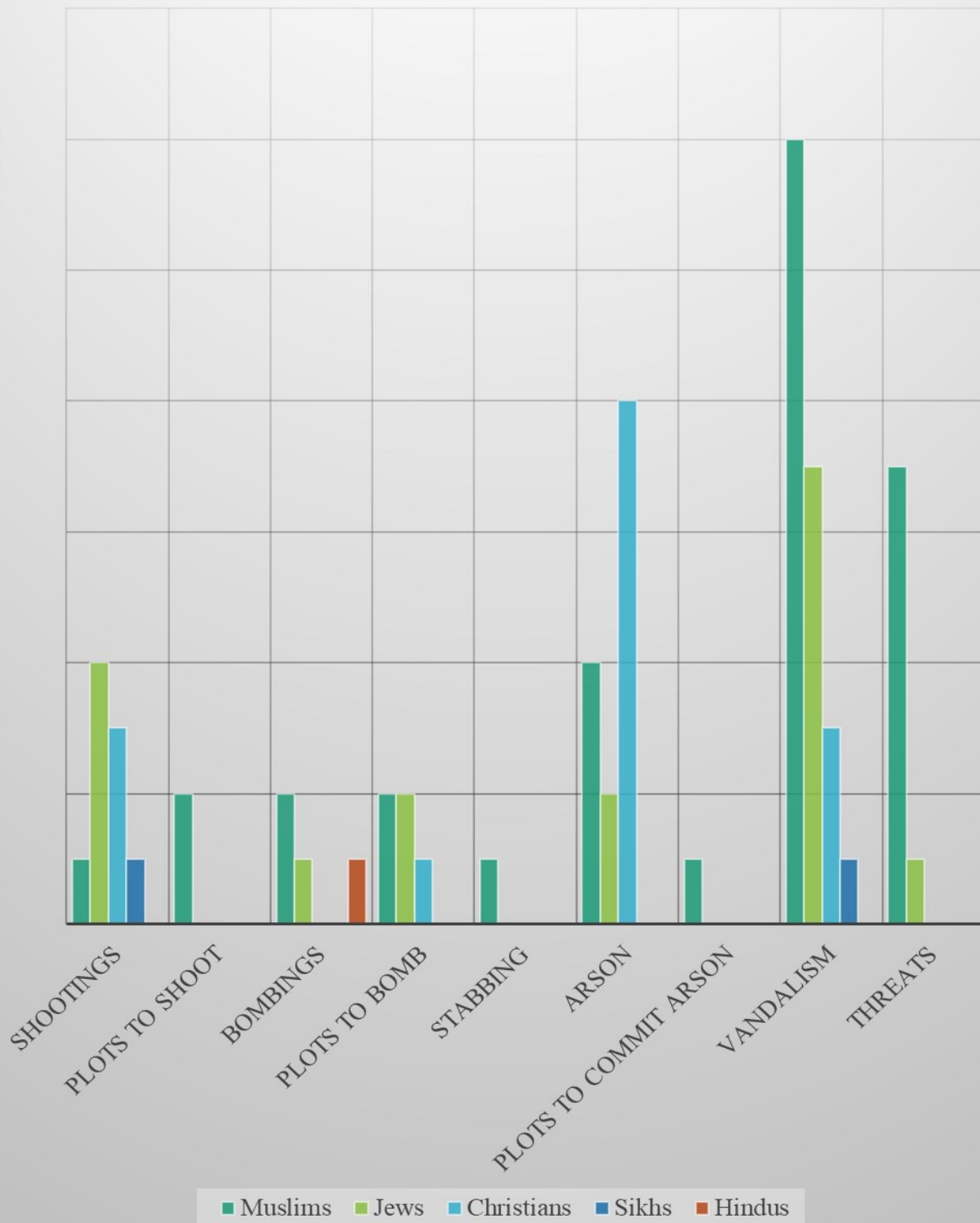
■ Muslims ■ Jews ■ Christians ■ Sikhs ■ Hindus



The chart to the left shows that the vast majority, 87%, of the Christian communities that were targeted were predominantly Black or historically Black churches. Considering that this study examines racially motivated attacks, this data is not surprising.

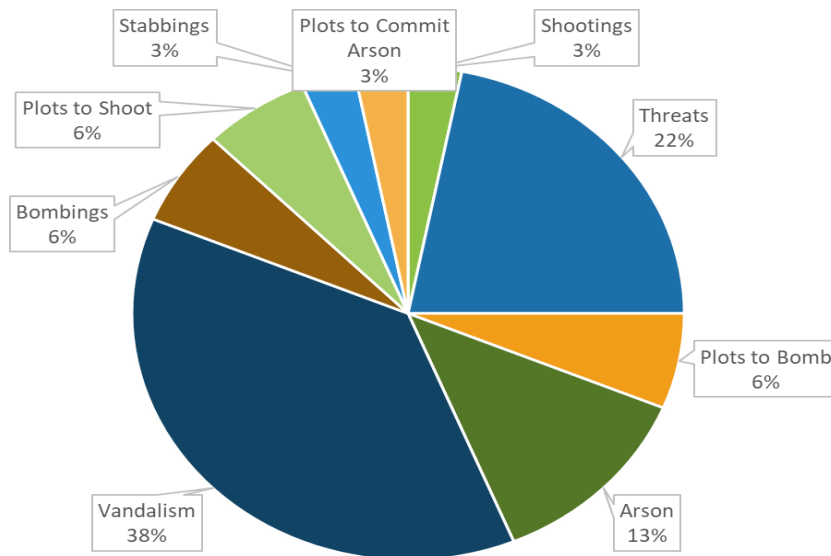
The graph on the next page provides a further breakdown of the combined data on the types of attacks and the religious communities targeted.

Breakdown of Attacks: Religion of the Targets

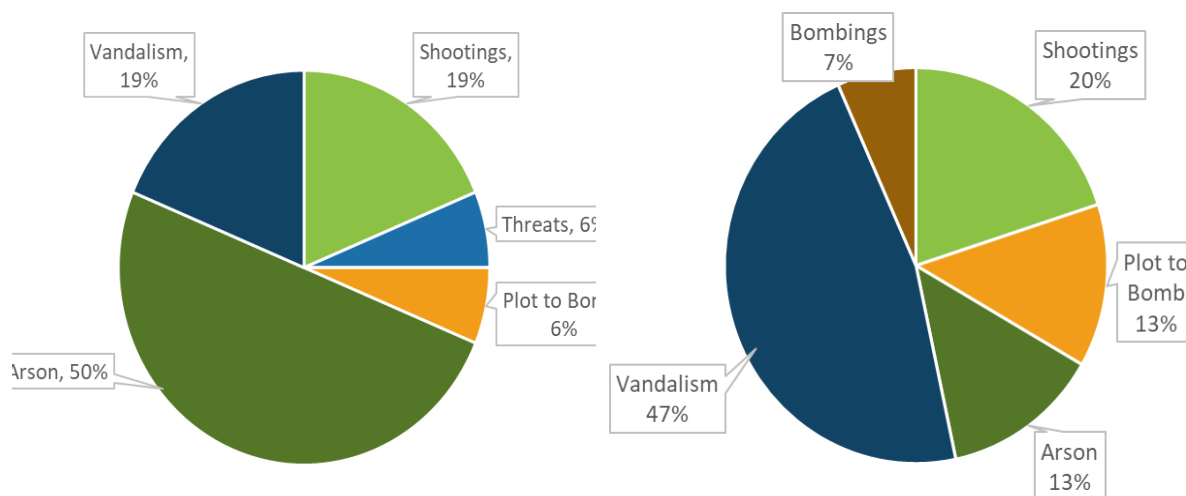


Common Types of Attacks

As this and the preceding page indicate, each community experienced different kinds of attacks. For example, Muslims were most likely to receive threats by phone or mail. Jewish synagogues and community centers were frequently vandalized. Christians, especially predominantly Black churches, were often the target of arsonists.



Muslims

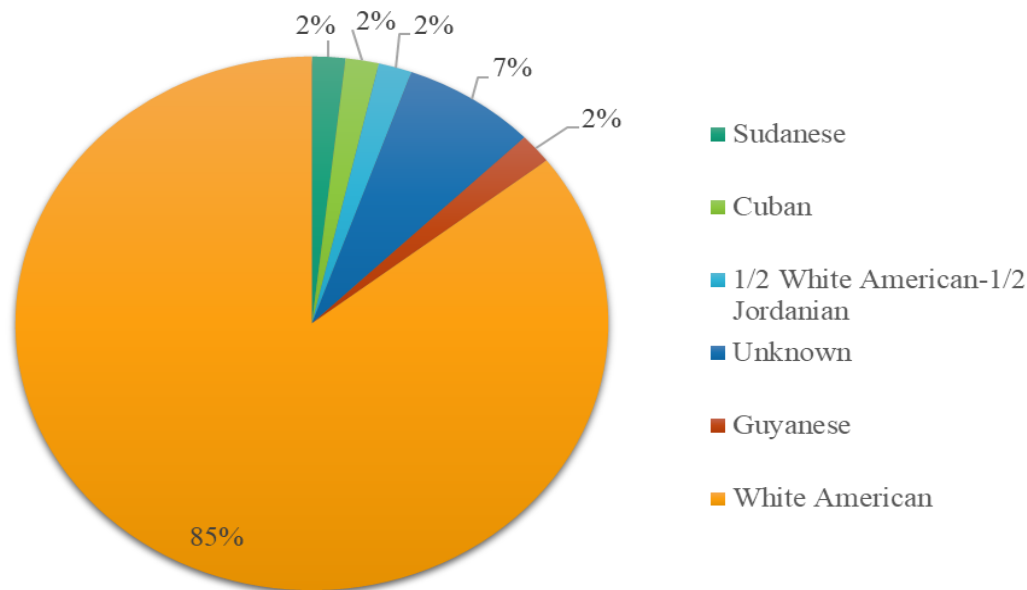


Christians

Jews

THE PERPETRATORS

RACE AND NATIONAL ORIGIN



Origins of Known Perpetrators

Out of the 55 known perpetrators in the database, details about racial and/or national origins were available for 51 people. Of these, a clear trend emerged: perpetrators of racially motivated attacks on religious communities in North America were far more likely to be White American than any other racial, ethnic, or national group. These individuals represented 85% of perpetrators in cases in which the attackers were identified and more than 90% of perpetrators in the cases in which the origins of the perpetrators were known.

The prevalence of White American perpetrators directly corresponds to the types of racial biases that motivated these attacks. Many of the perpetrators were self-identified white supremacists who reported that they carried out these attacks to send a message to the religious communities that they were not welcome in the U.S. or Canada. Several indicated their desire to start a “race war.”

RACE & NATIONAL ORIGINS

Other Perpetrators

Only one known perpetrator belonged to each of the other groups. In 2012, a Guyanese male (race unknown) carried out a series of attacks in Queens, New York that included firebombing a mosque and a Hindu temple. Upon arrest, the man told authorities that he hated Arabs, Muslims, and Middle-Easterners.

In 2017, a Black male opened fire on a Christian church in Antioch, Tennessee, killing 1 and wounding 7. He claimed to be acting in retaliation for the white supremacist attack on the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015. All of the victims were white; reports indicate that the perpetrator avoided shooting Black congregants. This was one of very few cases in the database which the perpetrator had been diagnosed with a serious mental illness prior to the attack. The shooter had been diagnosed with “schizoaffective disorder bipolar type” and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from trauma during his childhood in war-torn Sudan.

The other two individuals, though not purely White American, were both affiliated with groups that are known to have strong white supremacist or pro-Western agendas.

*Of the four perpetrators
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immigrants.*

In 2019, a 22-year-old male who was half White American and half Jordanian vandalized a synagogue in Racine, Wisconsin. This individual was a member of “The Base,” a neo-Nazi, white supremacist group. He was part of a conspiracy to vandalize properties belonging to African Americans and Jewish Americans.

In 2020, an Afro-Cuban male stole and burned a banner that read “#BLACKLIVESMATTER” from a historic Black Church in Washington D.C. This individual was affiliated with the Proud Boys— a “pro-Western” group.

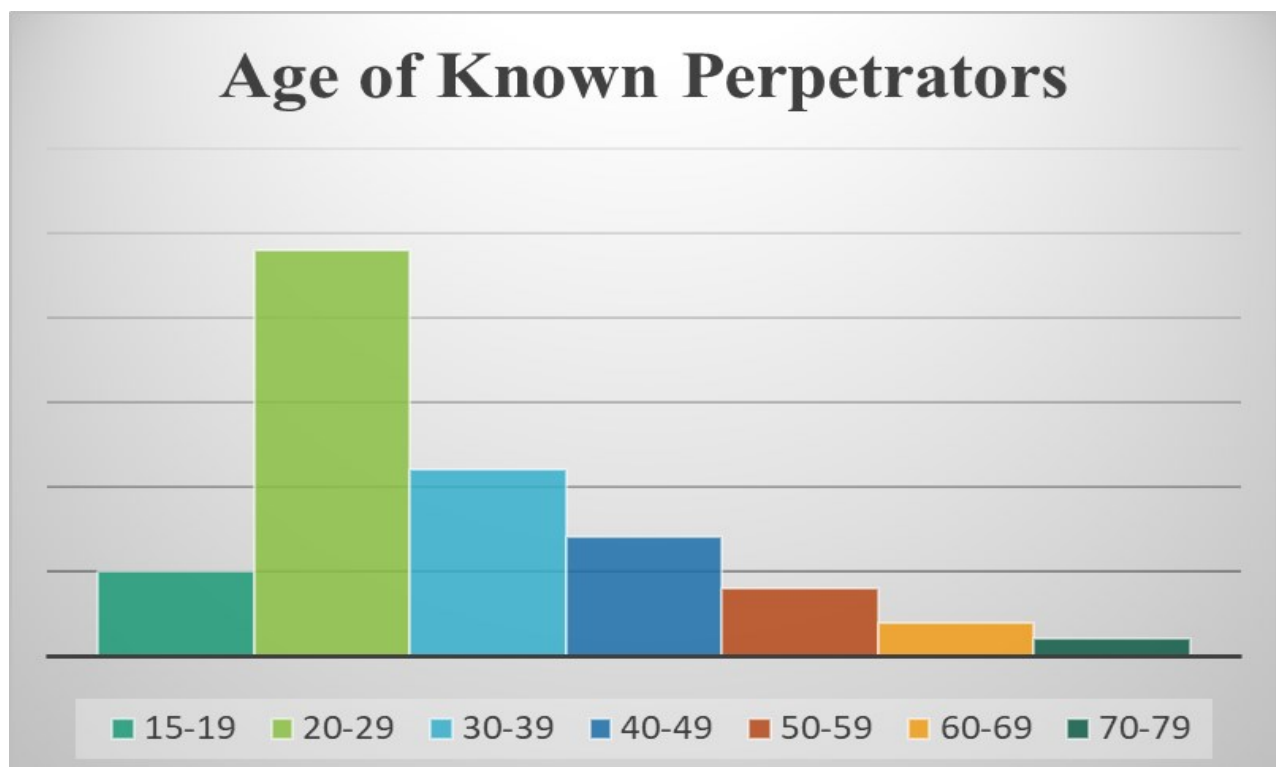
Of the four perpetrators who were not White American, it is interesting to note that all were first or second generation immigrants. If this group represented a larger percentage of all perpetrators, this data could suggest the need for further research on immigrants’ views of race, religion, and belonging in the United States and Canada, and whether those views make them more prone to racially motivated attacks on religious communities. However, 4 known perpetrators is such a small number that the only definitive takeaway from the data on race and national origin is that White males are, by far, the most likely perpetrators of such attacks in North America.

THE PERPETRATORS

In nearly all the cases in which the perpetrators were identified, sources provided their approximate ages. The youngest perpetrator was also the only female— a 17-year-old who vandalized a synagogue in Carmel, Indiana, with her 20-year-old husband. The two planned to break into the synagogue and detonate a homemade “Drano bomb.” However, they became nervous when they saw the security cameras so they left after spray-painting Nazi symbols on the exterior of the building and burning the ground outside the synagogue. The couple reported spending long hours chatting online with white nationalists before the attack.

The oldest perpetrator was a 73-year-old male who shot and killed three people outside a Jewish community center and a retirement center in Overland Park, Kansas in 2014. He was a former “grand dragon” of the Ku Klux Klan.

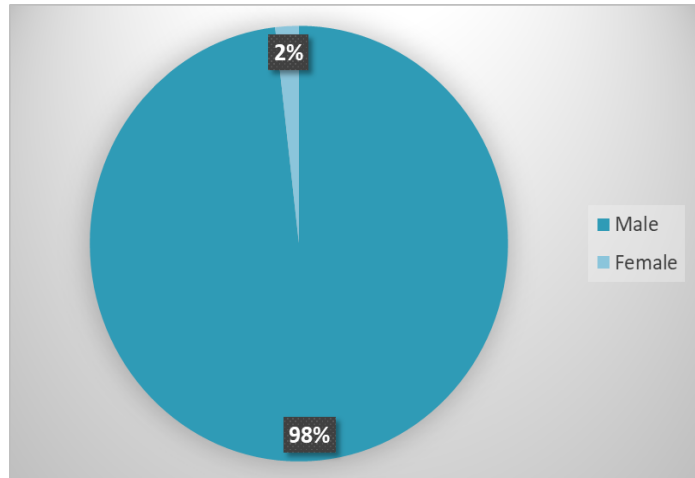
Despite the wide range of ages, clear patterns emerge from the data. Nearly half of known perpetrators were in their 20s at the time that they carried out the attack. Nearly 3/4 (74%) were under the age of 40.



THE PERPETRATORS

GENDER

Of the 55 perpetrators who were identified, all except one were male. The only female was a 17-year-old who vandalized a synagogue with her husband in Carmel, Indiana. Her case is discussed on page 12.

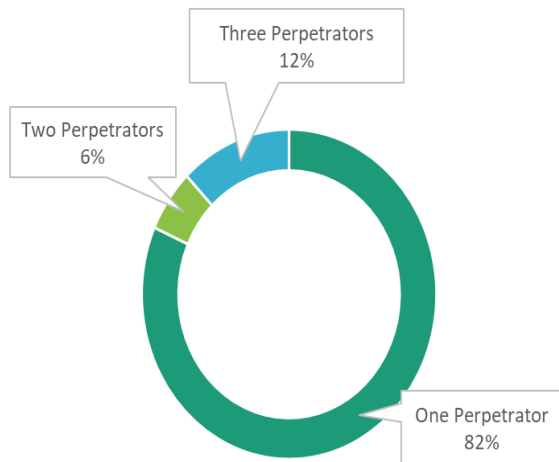


RELIGION

News reports and official records rarely referenced the religious beliefs of the perpetrator. In the few cases where religion is mentioned, it was usually noted because their religious beliefs fueled their racial discrimination. For example, one belonged to The Church of the Creator and another is believed to be affiliated with the Order of Nine Angles, both of which are rooted white supremacist ideology. The [Church of the Creator](#) is centered on the desire to populate the world with White people and speaks about the concept of Rahowa, which stands for “racial holy war.” The Order of Nine Angles is a “[U.K.-based Nazi, Satanist occult group](#).” At least three of the four individuals who were described as Christians were members of the [Christian Identity movement](#), “which claims people of European descent are the ‘chosen people,’ that Jews are the enemy, and people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds are meant to be exterminated or enslaved” and promotes “[committing acts of violence against enemies](#).” Two were followers of [Asatru](#), which has been described as “an offshoot of the racist Odinist religion that emphasizes the magical elements of pre-Christian European polytheism.”

GROUPS/ CONSPIRACIES

The data about patterns of attacks and group affiliations provides significant evidence that supports moving beyond the narrative that racially motivated attacks against religious communities are “one offs” and their perpetrators are “lone wolves.” In 65% of the cases where the attackers were identified, there was more than one perpetrator, the perpetrator was part of a larger group of extremists, and/or the perpetrator planned or carried out more than one attack. In nearly half of the cases in the database, the perpetrators were not “lone wolves.” They carried out the attacks with one or two other people and/or they belonged to a larger group that promotes discrimination and violence against other racial or religious groups.



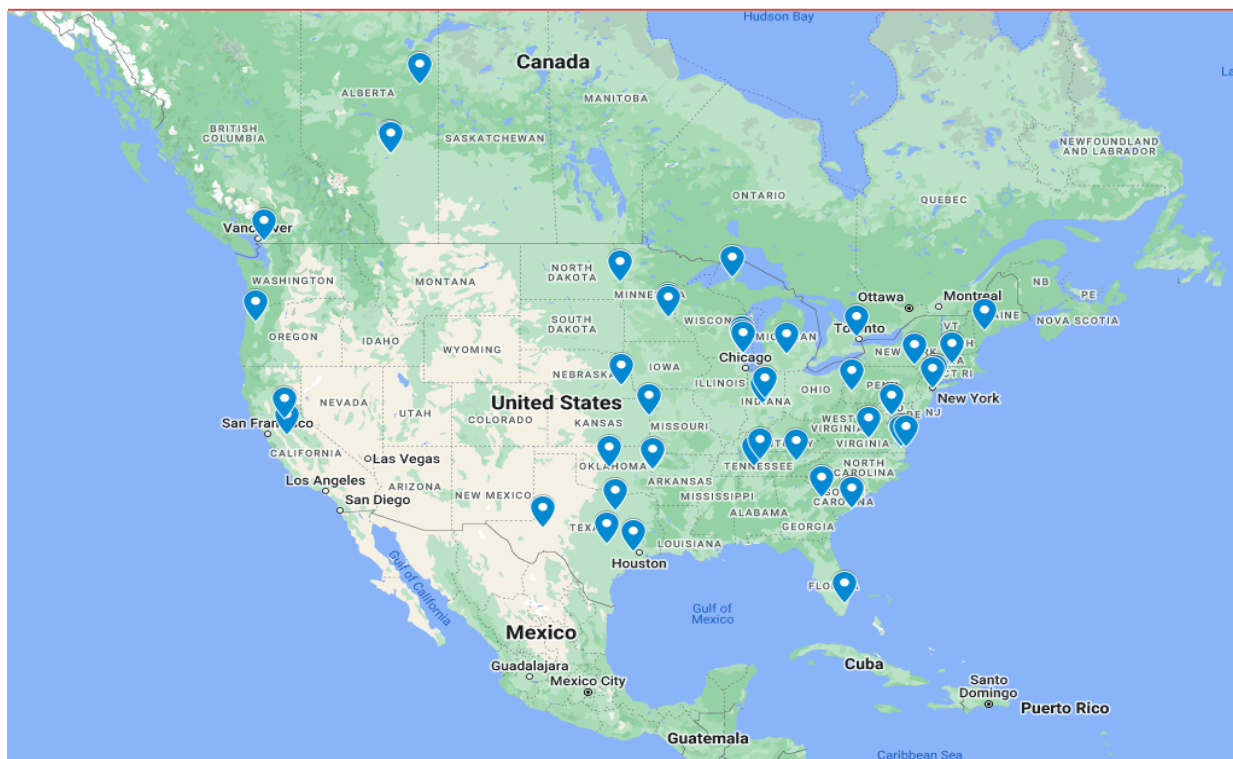
In almost one-fifth of cases, there was more than one perpetrator. However, there were never more than three perpetrators directly involved in a single attack.

Nevertheless, in 45% of cases, the perpetrators were part of, encouraged by, or trying to gain admission to a larger group of extremists who believe in racial supremacy. In many cases, these were well-known groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or the Aryan Brotherhood. In a few instances, the perpetrators organized their own groups for the purpose of training, obtaining weapons, and carrying out attacks. Several other people were caught while trying to recruit co-conspirators.

MULTIPLE ATTACKS

Racially motivated acts of discrimination and violence against religious communities are rarely a one-time occurrence. In 53% of cases, the perpetrators attacked more than one place of worship or community center, or they attacked other non-religious sites.

LOCATION OF THE ATTACKS



Of the 58 attacks included in this database, a precise city and state could be identified in 57 cases. Of these, 50 occurred in the United States and 7 took place in Canada. There were not enough known attacks in Canada to draw conclusions about the most common locations where places of worship were being targeted. In the United States, on the other hand, some patterns emerged.

Out of the incidents that occurred in the United States, 44% of them took place in the South. The Midwest followed with 28%, then the Northeast with 18%. The West had the lowest frequency, with 12% of attacks. Nearly all of the attacks in the West occurred in California.

If one looks at the nine divisions of the United States, further patterns emerge. Two-thirds of cases occurred in four regions: the South Atlantic (20%), West South Central (18%), East North Central (17%) and West North Central (14%)

* Regions and divisions are based on the federal government's [census categories](#). South Atlantic includes Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, District of Columbia, and West Virginia; West South Central is Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas; East North Central is Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin; and West North Central is Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Click [here](#) to view the interactive map of cases.

CONTACT US

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