

Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2015

An Anti-Defamation League Report

When it came to domestic terrorism and extremism, the year 2015 was a grisly one for the United States. In the past twelve months, the names of a number of American cities became unwelcome shorthand for the carnage that extremist killers wreaked in them: Charleston, Chattanooga, Colorado Springs, San Bernardino. Each of these cities became scenes of tragedy and death, thanks to the cold-hearted ideological motivations of angry killers.

It is thus no surprise that these and other domestic extremist killers have collectively amassed a higher number of victims in 2015 than in any previous year since 1995, the year of the Oklahoma City bombing. Preliminary tallies by the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism indicate that a minimum of 52 people in the United States were killed by adherents of domestic extremist movement in the past 12 months.

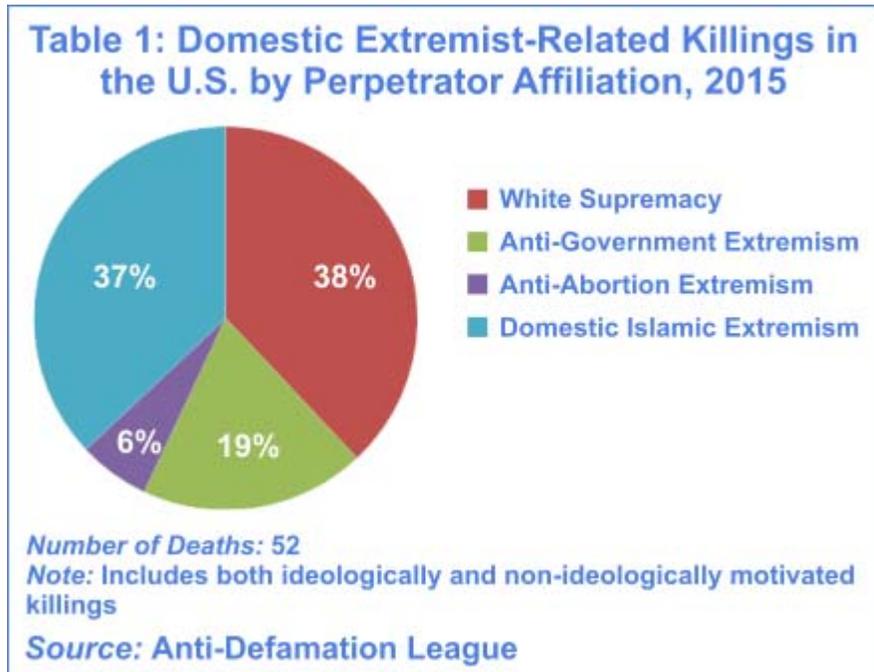
This number is bound to grow further still, as extremist connections to some murders often take years to be revealed—and there are likely still other murders whose extremist connections may never see the light of day. Still, the 52 people known to have died at the hands of domestic extremists are disturbing enough, more than the numbers killed in 2013 and 2014 put together. The victims included police officers, government workers, service members, and civilians from all walks of life.

It is true that the number of Americans killed by domestic extremists is small compared to the overall number of murders in the United States or even the number of those who die from gun violence each year. But these deaths represent merely the tip of a pyramid of extremist violence and crime. For every person killed at the hands of an extremist, many more are wounded or injured in attempted murders and assaults. Every year, police uncover and prevent a wide variety of extremist plots and conspiracies with lethal intentions. And extremists engage in a wide variety of other crimes related to their causes, from threats and harassment to white collar crime. Then, too, extremist-related violence has the power to shock or spread fear within an entire community—or an entire nation—as Americans have so clearly seen for themselves this past year.

THE PERPETRATORS

The United States is a large country, with room enough for a plethora of fringe and extremist views. Thus, in any given year, adherents of a variety of extremist movements may be motivated to commit violent acts.

In 2015, however, there were fewer movements represented than in some past years. The 52 deaths came at the hands of adherents of only four domestic extremist movements: white supremacists, anti-government extremists, domestic Islamic extremists, and anti-abortion extremists (Table 1).



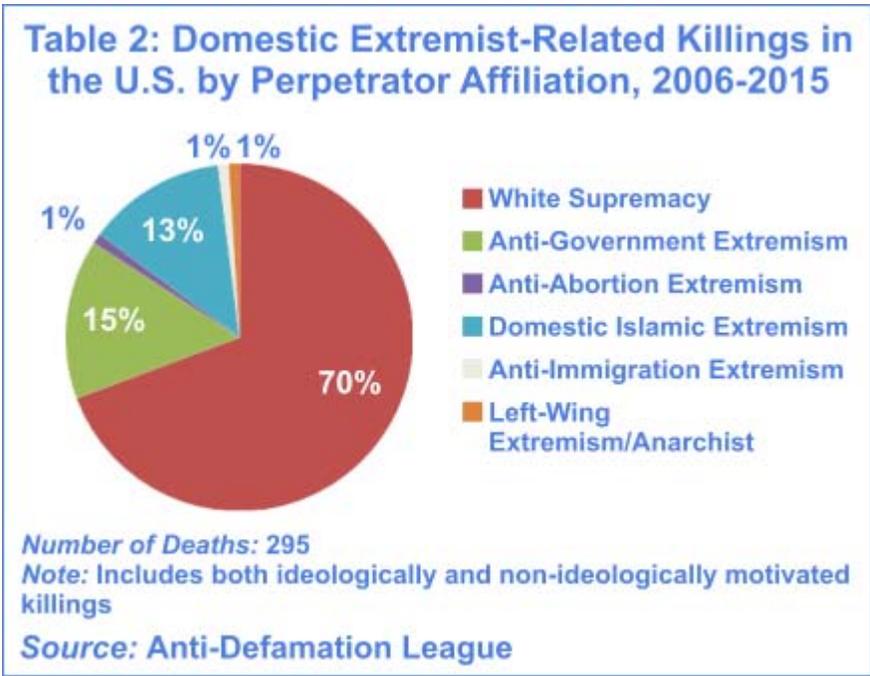
As has been the case every year since 1995, white supremacists have been responsible for the largest number of deaths, at 20. One incident, the June 17 mass shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, which killed nine, was responsible for almost half of these deaths.

Usually, right-wing anti-government extremists account for the next highest number of murders each year (Table 2), but in 2015, in a disturbing development, domestic Islamic extremists were responsible for 19 deaths, almost as many as were white supremacists. All of these deaths stemmed from two shooting rampages: the July 16 attacks by Muhammad Youssef Abdulazez on military targets in Chattanooga and the December 2 rampage by Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife Tashfeen Malik at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. In 2015, a record number of Americans were arrested for alleged crimes related to Islamic extremist activity, almost all of them in support of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS's continued existence—and its strategy of on-line recruiting—poses the distinct risk that more such arrests, or murders, will occur in 2016.

Anti-government extremists did contribute 10 deaths to the grisly toll, typically in incidents that received less media coverage than the major extremist-related shooting sprees of 2015. For example, on June 18, 2015, in Okanogan County, Washington, a militia movement activist, James Faire, allegedly killed a person and injured another during a confrontation at a rural property where he and a woman had been illegally squatting. Faire reportedly deliberately ran the victims

over with his truck, twice for one of them. Anti-government extremists in the Pacific Northwest have rushed to their defense, claiming that Faire and the woman—charged in relation to the crime, though not charged with murder—were “set up” by the government.

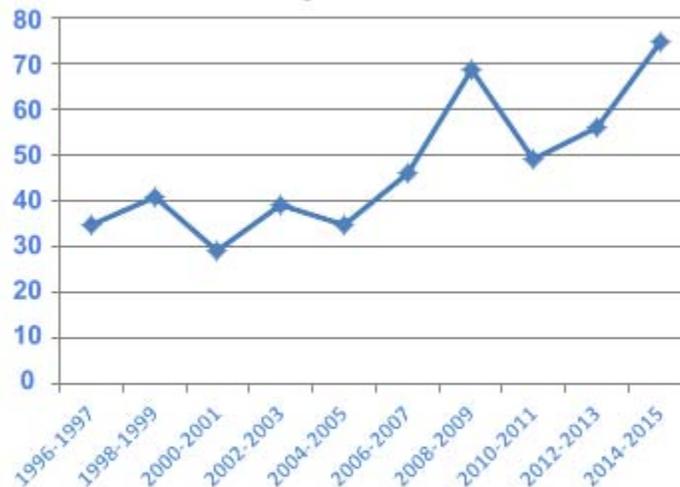
Finally, the shooting rampage at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs on November 27 by an anti-abortion extremist contributed three more murders to the grim total. The suspected shooter, Robert Lewis Dear, who recently declared in court that he is guilty, killed a police officer and two civilians before surrendering to police. He also injured five more officers and four additional civilians. He has been charged with first-degree murder. It was the first deadly abortion-related shooting since the murder of Dr. George Tiller in Kansas in 2009.



One of the victims in the Colorado Springs shootings was University of Colorado Springs police officer Garrett Swasey. He was one of two police officers killed by extremists in 2015, the other being Wisconsin state trooper Trevor Casper, who died at the hands of white supremacist and fugitive bank robber Steven Snyder, who had already killed one person that day. Casper, only 21 years old, was new to the Wisconsin State Patrol and was killed on his first solo day as a state trooper. He died a hero, killing Snyder even after being mortally wounded himself. In the past 10 years, domestic extremists have killed no fewer than 28 police officers.

Extremist movements that have sometimes been responsible for deaths in recent years, including anti-immigration extremists and left-wing extremists/anarchists, had no reported incidents on the 2015 list. Nevertheless, the variety of movements whose adherents did kill in 2015 illustrates the multiple threats that the U.S. faces from domestic extremists—and the risks inherent in inadequately responding to any of those threats. Moreover, the overall trend seems to point towards increasing fatalities (Table 3).

Table 3: Domestic Extremist-Related Killings in the U.S. by Year, 1996-2015



Number of Deaths: 474

Note: Includes both ideologically and non-ideologically motivated killings

Source: Anti-Defamation League

THE MURDERS

The 52 murders documented by the Center on Extremism in 2015 occurred in 17 separate incidents, with nine of the incidents involving multiple murders. This is unusual, in that most extremist-related examples of murder involve a single victim. In the 16 incidents of 2014, for example, only five involved more than one victim. In 2013, a year that saw 18 lethal incidents, only four involved multiple victims. In this sense, as well as in raw numbers, 2015 was a particularly deadly year.

Ideology played a primary or substantial role in 10 of the 17 incidents in 2015, accounting for 34 of the 52 victims. The other seven incidents involved murders in which the perpetrator's ideology seems to have played little to no role in the violence. Typically, white supremacists make up the vast majority of non-ideological perpetrators, as white supremacists engage in a large amount of gang-related and traditional criminal violent activity in addition to their hate- or ideologically-motivated violence. In this sense, they are doubly dangerous. However, in 2015, it was, rather unusually, anti-government extremists who were responsible for most of the non-ideological deaths, including several multiple murders with domestic/family violence motives.

For some murders, it is very hard to make a determination as to the role ideology may or may not have played in the violence. This difficulty was quite evident in one murder from this past year,

the September slaying of an Iranian-American man, Shayan Mazroei, outside an Orange County bar. The suspected murderer, Craig Tanber, is a documented member of PEN1 (Public Enemy Number 1), a large and violent white supremacist prison and street gang. Moreover, the incident allegedly began with a confrontation between a female friend of Tanber and the victim, in which the friend used racial slurs against the victim. However, despite the urging of the Iranian-American community, prosecutors have declined to charge Tanber with a hate crime, stating that there was evidence of racism on the part of the friend, “but there is no evidence of a crime committed by her, hate crime or otherwise, that started the incident.” In these statistics, the Center on Extremism has not counted this murder as an ideologically-motivated crime, but one could certainly make a case to the contrary.

One aspect of the murders that is not difficult to determine is the weapons used by the killers. Although it is common for many to think of extremist-related crime in the sense of bombs or weapons of mass destruction, overwhelmingly the weapon of choice for the extremist killers of 2015—as is the case virtually every year—was firearms. In fact, 48 of the 52 victims were killed by firearms. The other victims were killed by a variety of means, including two stabbings, a blunt instrument killing, and the above-mentioned motor vehicle incident. All of the multiple murder incidents involved the use of one or more firearms.

The blunt fact is that, in the past 50 years, firearms in the hands of domestic extremists have killed far more Americans than have bombs, blades, chemical or biological weapons, or any other type of weapon. Indeed, one need only look at the most deadly incidents involving domestic extremists to see how prevalent the use of firearms is. With the exception of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, every deadly incident on the list involved the use of firearms. It is also noteworthy that five of the most deadly incidents featured on the list occurred within the past six years—three of them in 2015 alone (Table 4). Right-wing extremists have long known the ease and efficiency of firearms as a weapon for terrorist and extremist violence; domestic Islamic extremists may unfortunately be catching on. The combination is likely in the future to add still further to the toll of life taken by domestic extremists in the United States.

Table 4: Deadliest Acts of Violence by U.S. Domestic Extremists, 1966-2015

Rank	Fatalities	Year	Ideology	Weapon	Description
1	168	1995	Right-Wing Extremism	Bomb	Bombing of Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols
2	14	2015	Islamic Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings at Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, by Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik
3	13	2009	Islamic Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings by Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, Texas
4 (tie)	9	2015	Right-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, allegedly by Dylan Storm Roof
4 (tie)	9	1972-1973	Left-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings of police officers and whites in Dec 1972 and Jan 1973 in New Orleans by Mark Essex
6	8	1972	Left-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings on St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands) by alleged black power activists
7 (tie)	6	2012	Right-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings at Wisconsin Sikh temple by Wade Michael Page
7 (tie)	6	1977	Right-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Workplace shootings by Frederick Cowan in New Rochelle, New York
8 (tie)	5	2015	Islamic Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings by Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez at military locations in Chattanooga, Tennessee
8 (tie)	5	2001	Right-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Workplace shootings by Joseph Ferguson in Sacramento, California
8 (tie)	5	1979	Right-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Shootings of left-wing extremists by white supremacists in Greensboro, North Carolina
8 (tie)	5	1971	Left-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)/Blades	Deadly escape/hostage attempt by George Jackson and other prisoners
8 (tie)	5	1978	Left-Wing Extremism	Firearm(s)	Assassination of Congressman Leo Ryan and others by members of the People's Temple in Guyana

Source: Anti-Defamation League

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism has compiled a list of around 900 known murders/killings by perpetrators associated with domestic extremist movements of all types since 1970—essentially the post-Civil Rights era. These are primarily murders committed by American extremists on U.S. soil, though a few cases involving American extremists murdering other Americans abroad are also included.

The incidents are derived primarily from public sources, leading to some limitations regarding cross-era or cross-movement comparisons. Generally speaking, information on extremist-related killings from the 1970s and 1980s is more difficult to obtain than for later years; thus it may not be meaningful to compare or contrast figures from the earlier era with figures from the 1990s or later.

The main limitation of cross-movement comparisons is that extremist connections to killings are easier to determine for some movements than for others. For example, white supremacists, who frequently sport many racist and white supremacist tattoos, or may be documented as white supremacists by gang investigators or corrections officials, are often more easily identifiable. In contrast, it may be more difficult for police or media to identify, say, anti-government extremist associations that a suspect might have. This issue comes up most often with non-ideological killings rather than ideologically-motivated ones. It is fair to say that non-ideological murders committed by extremists other than white supremacists are probably underrepresented here.

In addition, because murders that occur behind bars often gets little or no reporting by the media, and are typically not publicized by prison officials, prison-based violence by all extremist movements is definitely under-represented.

With any such list, the inclusion or exclusion of certain borderline cases may be a judgment call based on the best evidence available, judgments with which others may possibly disagree.