Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2016

An Anti-Defamation League Report

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One word looms over the landscape of deadly extremism and terrorism in the United States in 2016: Orlando.

The June 2016 shooting spree at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, by Omar Mateen—who killed 49 people and wounded 53 more—dwarfed in its lethality all other extremist-related murders this past year.

Mateen, who claimed his attack in the name of ISIS, though there are no known connections between him and that terror organization, achieved the dubious distinction of being the deadliest domestic terrorist since Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

ADL’s preliminary tally of extremist-related murders for 2016 is already at 69, a figure that includes the 49 killed by Mateen as well as 20 other murders committed by white supremacists, anti-government extremists such as sovereign citizens, and black nationalists. This grisly toll puts 2016 as the second deadliest year for domestic extremist-related deaths in the United States since 1970, the earliest year for which ADL maintains such statistics.
Were it not for the Orlando shootings, 2016 might have been considered a “mild” year for extremist-related deaths. Including Orlando, there were only 11 lethal incidents in the U.S. in 2016 that can so far be connected to extremism, compared to 29 incidents in 2015. Moreover, the number of incidents involving multiple fatalities in 2016 was only five, half the number of such incidents in 2015. The Pulse massacre was a single event so egregious in its casualty tolls that it can actually distort statistics and perceptions surrounding the extremist landscape.

The Pulse nightclub shootings also represented the only lethal incident involving domestic Islamic extremists in 2016, though a particularly deadly one. As with all extremist movements, it is important to note there were also other incidents in 2016 where domestic Islamic extremists attempted or plotted at deadly violence, but were unsuccessful.

Over the past 10 years (2007-2016), domestic extremists of all kinds have killed at least 372 people in the United States. Of those deaths, approximately 74% were at the hands of right-wing extremists, about 24% of the victims were killed by domestic Islamic extremists, and the remainder were killed by left-wing extremists.

Though not the most lethal, in some ways the most troubling extremist-related murders that occurred in 2016 were the murders of police officers at the hands of black nationalists. Eight police officers were killed in two incidents in which extremists deliberately targeted police officers for murder. In July 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson, who had ties to black nationalist groups such as the New Black Panther Party, killed five police officers (and injured nine others) in Dallas, Texas, in an ambush attack aimed at police maintaining public order at a Black Lives Matter protest. That same month, Gavin Eugene Long ambushed and shot six police officers, three of them fatally, in Baton Rouge. Long was an adherent of black nationalism as well as the anti-government sovereign citizen movement. Both incidents were acts of retaliation against police officers in response to controversial police shootings of African-American men.
The year 2016 was unusual in that right-wing extremists did not dominate the murder statistics, as they have each year for more than 30 years. Anti-government extremists and white supremacists were responsible for only a minority of extremist related deaths in 2016, though they did commit two triple homicides. These low figures also occurred during a year in which non-violent right-wing extremist activity was high, in large part due to agitation and propaganda by the so-called alt-right and other extremists in connection with the 2016 presidential election.

Because extremist murder statistics are volatile and can vary considerably between any two given years, the relatively low numbers of deaths connected to right-wing extremists should not yet be taken as indicative of a trend, particularly given the high numbers in recent years. Similarly low numbers in 2017, however, might indicate some sort of shift.