



# **Twenty-Five Years of Ideological Homicide Victimization in the United States of America**

*Report to the Office of University Programs,  
Science and Technology Directorate,  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security*

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**National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism**  
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## About This Report

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## Introduction

This brief report presents the preliminary results of 25 years of ideological victimization committed by al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements and the extremist far-right in the United States from 1990 to 2014. Excluding the homicide victims associated with the four attacks on 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing, 62 individuals were killed in 38 ideologically motivated homicide events committed by extremists associated with al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements<sup>1</sup> and 245 were killed by far-right extremists in 177 ideologically motivated incidents. The data for this report originates from the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source dataset that examines ideologically motivated and routine criminal activity, both violent and financial, committed by ideological extremists. Although the results of incident and suspect data have been released, this is the first report that focuses solely on victimization characteristics. In addition, this report also compares two distinct types of ideological victimization, homicides committed by adherents to far-right extremism (FRE) in the U.S. and those committed by individuals who associate themselves with al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements (AQAM).

## Inclusion Criteria

This report includes all homicide victims identified in open-source materials who satisfied the ECDB's inclusion criteria.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, our inclusion criteria for each victim comprises that:

- The victim was killed in a homicide event identified in open-sources
- At least one of the offenders involved in the incident was an ideological extremist
- The homicide event was ideologically motivated<sup>3</sup>
- The extremist ideology to which the offender adhered and the incident was motivated was connected to al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements or far-right extremism<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This numbers also includes one homicide victim killed in an ideologically motivated, secular nationalist incident.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth discussion about the data collection process for the ECDB and the reliability and validity of the data, please see "Freilich, J., Chermak, S., Belli, R., Gruenewald, J., & W. Parkin. (2014). Introducing the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB). *Terrorism & Political Violence*, 26, 372-384" and "Chermak, S., Freilich, J., Parkin, W., & J. Lynch. (2012) American Terrorism and Extremist Data Sources and Selectivity Bias: An Investigation Focusing on Homicide Events Committed by Far-Right Extremists. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 28(1), 191-218"

<sup>3</sup> A homicide was coded as ideologically motivated if specific indicators were identified that provide evidence that the offender engaged in the fatal, criminal act based at least partly on their extremist ideology. These indicators could include, but are not limited to, personal statements made by the offender, physical evidence such as a note or manifesto, or comments made by law enforcement or lawyers stating that the motive was ideological. For a longer discussion on these indicators and determining how coders determined whether an incident was ideologically motivated or not, see "Gruenewald, J. (2011). A comparative examination of homicides perpetrated by Far-Right Extremists. *Homicide Studies*, 15(2), 177-203" and "Parkin, W., Freilich, J. & S. Chermak. (2015). Ideological Victimization: Homicides Perpetrated by Far-Right Extremists. *Homicide Studies*, 19(3), 211-236."

- The victim was killed within one of the 50 states or the District of Columbia
- The victim was killed between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 2014

## Results

Between 1990 and 2014, 62 individuals were killed by AQAM offenders in 38 incidents (1.6 victims per homicide incident) and 245 individuals were killed by FRE offenders in 177 incidents (1.4 victims per homicide incident). Once again, this does not include the nearly 3,000 individuals killed in the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by AQAM offenders or the 168 individuals killed in the Oklahoma City bombing perpetrated by FRE offenders. Table 1 presents these results, as well as temporal and geographic characteristics of ideological homicide victimization.

The temporal distribution of the homicide victimizations varies between the two ideologies. For the AQAM victims, only slightly more than 16 percent were killed prior to the year 2000, compared to slightly more than 45 percent of FRE victims. Although the numbers of victims are relatively smaller for AQAM, almost two-thirds of their victims were killed during the 10-year period between 2000 and 2009. FRE victims, on the other hand, appear to be killed in cycles, with the first half of each decade consistently being lower than the second half. Although research has shown fluctuations in violent crime trends based on seasonality, the temporal distribution of ideological victimization does not appear to be consistent with this research, at least for AQAM victims. More than half of AQAM victims were killed during the fall and slightly less than a quarter during the winter. FRE victims, whose temporal distribution is more similar to trends found in homicide victimization in general, were more likely to be killed during the spring or summer (60.8%), and least likely to be killed during the fall and winter (38.8%).

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<sup>4</sup> As operationalized in Freilich et al (2014:380), “Far-right extremists subscribe to aspects of the following beliefs: They are fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, suspicious of federal authority, and reverent of individual liberties, especially their right to own guns and be free of taxes. They believe in conspiracy theories involving imminent threats to national sovereignty or personal liberty and beliefs that their personal or national ‘way of life’ is under attack. Sometimes such beliefs are vague, but for some the threat originates from specific racial or religious groups. They believe that they must be prepared to defend against this attack by participating in paramilitary training or survivalism,” while Al-Qa’ida and associated movements “adhere to aspects of the following beliefs: They believe that only acceptance of Islam promotes human dignity. Islamic extremists reject the traditional Muslim respect for ‘People of the Book’ (i.e., Christians and Jews). They believe that ‘Jihad’ (i.e., to struggle in God’s path like the Prophet Muhammad) is a defining belief in Islam and includes the ‘lesser Jihad’ that endorses violence against ‘corrupt’ others. Islamic extremists believe that their faith is oppressed in nominally Muslim Middle-Eastern/Asian corrupt governments and in nations (e.g., Russia/Chechnya) that occupy Islamic populations. The U.S. is seen as supporting the humiliation of Islam, and exploiting the region’s resources. They believe that America’s hedonistic culture (e.g., gay rights, feminism, etc.) negatively affects Muslim values. Islamic extremists believe that the American people are responsible for their government’s actions and that there is a religious obligation to combat this assault. They believe that Islamic law—Sharia—provides the blueprint for a modern Muslim society and should be forcibly implemented.”

**Table 1. Temporal & Geographic Characteristics of Ideological Homicide Victimization**

		AQAM		FRE	
		N	%	N	%
Victims*		62		245	
Incidents		38		177	
Victims/Incident		1.6		1.4	
Years	1990-1994	6	9.7%	43	17.6%
	1995-1999	4	6.5%	68	27.8%
	2000-2004	19	30.6%	41	16.7%
	2005-2009	20	32.3%	60	24.5%
	2010-2014	13	21.0%	33	13.5%
Season	Winter	14	22.6%	49	20.0%
	Spring	8	12.9%	76	31.0%
	Summer	8	12.9%	73	29.8%
	Fall	32	51.6%	46	18.8%
	Unknown	0	0.0%	1	0.4%
Census Region	Midwest	3	4.8%	33	13.5%
	Northeast	13	21.0%	46	18.8%
	South	35	56.5%	81	33.1%
	West	11	17.7%	85	34.7%
Census Division	East North Central	3	4.8%	21	8.6%
	East South Central	5	8.1%	21	8.6%
	Mid-Atlantic	8	12.9%	33	13.5%
	Mountain	2	3.2%	41	16.7%
	New England	6	9.7%	14	5.7%
	Pacific	9	14.5%	44	18.0%
	South Atlantic	13	21.0%	32	13.1%
	West North Central	0	0.0%	12	4.9%
	West South Central	16	25.8%	27	11.0%

\*These numbers do not reflect the nearly 3,000 victims killed in the AQAM terrorist attacks in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001 and the 168 victims killed in the FR terrorist bombing in Oklahoma on April 19, 1995.

**Table 2. Incident Characteristics of Ideological Homicide Victimization**

		AQAM		FRE	
		N (62)	%	N (245)	%
Targeting	Purposeful	12	19.4%	106	43.3%
	Representative	23	37.1%	93	38.0%
	Random	12	19.4%	23	9.4%
	Unknown	15	24.2%	23	9.4%
Ideological Motivation	High	25	40.3%	114	46.5%
	Medium	34	54.8%	97	39.6%
	Low	3	4.8%	34	13.9%
Victim Type	Business	0	0.0%	5	2.0%
	Civilian	39	62.9%	69	28.1%
	Government	18	29.0%	32	13.1%
	Race/Ethnicity	3	4.8%	130	53.1%
	Other	2	3.2%	9	3.7%
Line of Duty	Law Enforcement	2	3.2%	31	12.7%
	Military	13	20.6%	0	0.0%
Only Fatal Victim	Yes	28	44.4%	148	60.4%
Others Injured	Yes	50	79.4%	116	47.3%
Primary Weapon	Firearm	45	72.6%	154	62.9%
	Knife	5	8.1%	34	13.9%
	Bodily Weapon	0	0.0%	19	7.8%
	Blunt Object	4	6.5%	15	6.1%
	Other	5	8.1%	14	5.7%
	Unknown	3	4.8%	9	3.7%

The geographic distribution of victimizations also varied, 56.5 percent of AQAM victims died in the South, followed by the Northeast (21.0%), West (17.7%), and Midwest (4.8%). For the FRE victims, the plurality was killed in the West (34.7%), followed closely by the South (33.1%). The percentage of FRE victims who were killed in the Northeast and Midwest were also relatively close (18.8% and 13.5%, respectively). When broken down by census division, we find the largest differences in the percentage of victims killed across ideologies in the Mountain and West South Central areas. In the Mountain states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado), almost 17 percent of FRE victims were killed, compared to slightly more than 3 percent of AQAM victims. Conversely, 25.8 percent of AQAM victims were killed in West South Central States (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas), compared to 11 percent of FRE victims.

Examining individual and incident level characteristics across ideologies identifies both similarities and differences in the types of victims killed by AQAM and FRE extremists in the United States (Table 2). When examining levels of targeting, we find that FRE victims were more often purposefully targeted for an ideological homicide than AQAM victims (43.3% to 19.4%, respectively). This is to say that the offenders knew of the victims and purposefully decided to kill them for ideological reasons. However, there was little difference in the percentage of victims who were targeted for what they represented (37.1% versus 38%). In these victimization events, ideological offenders targeted their victims not because they knew of them, but because they represented something that was antithetical to their ideology, such as a military officer or a bi-racial couple. The last type of targeting behavior examined is that related to random victimization. In these homicide incidents, these individuals are chosen neither for what they represent, nor purposefully based on the offenders' prior knowledge of the victim, but were considered victims of "random chance." Random targeting was more prevalent among AQAM-related homicides, at 19.4 percent of all events, as compared to FRE homicides, at 9.4 percent.

The next incident level variable measures the ideological motivation behind the homicide incident. In the ECDB, an ideological event can range from 1 to 4, where 1 represents a low level of ideological motivation for a victimization event and 4 represents a high level of ideological motivation for a victimization. In events coded with a low level of ideological motivation, there is a single indicator that points toward the event being ideologically motivated, while there is also evidence that the victimization might not be ideologically motivated. For a high level of ideological motivation, there are multiple indicators of ideological motivation and no indicators that question whether or not it was ideologically motivated.<sup>5</sup> Victimization events coded as a medium level of ideological motivation had either a single piece of evidence supporting ideological motivation and no contradictory evidence or multiple pieces of evidence supporting an ideological motive and at least one contradictory piece of information. Far-right extremist victims were more likely to be killed in events with a high level of ideological motivation when compared to AQAM violence (46.5% to 39.7%, respectively), but also were more likely to have a higher level of low ideological motivation (13.9% to 4.8%, respectively).

For victim type, the majority of AQAM victims were civilian targets, while the second largest category was government victims. For the government victims, this is partially connected to another variable, which shows more than 20 percent of AQAM victims were in the military and killed in the line of duty. Compared to this, FRE victims were most often targeted for racial or ethnic reasons, specifically as their

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<sup>5</sup> An example of a victimization event with a high level of ideological motivation would be the murder of an African-American and his friend by a group of skinheads. Immediately prior to the homicide the offenders remarked that they were disappointed skinheads were less active in their area and felt they needed to do something, decided to search for victims in a neighborhood where they knew minorities lived, and specifically targeted a minority and his friend, who was white, for being a race traitor. There was no evidence of an alternative motive. On the other side of the ideological motive spectrum, a victimization event coded as low ideological motivation will have mixed support. For example, a the murder of a minority by a white supremacist was coded as ideologically motivated as officials stated race played a part in the killing; however, there was also evidence that the offender may have acted in self defense, plus there was a history of prior conflicts between the victim and offender.



status as minorities. This was followed by civilian targets (28.1%) and then government targets, primarily law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty (12.7%).

**Table 3. Individual Characteristics of Ideological Homicide Victimization**

		AQAM		FRE	
		N (62)	%	N (245)	%
Age	<10	5	8.1%	3	1.2%
	10-19	3	4.8%	28	11.4%
	20-29	20	32.3%	45	18.4%
	30-39	9	14.5%	52	21.2%
	40-49	4	6.5%	54	22.0%
	50-59	13	21.0%	33	13.5%
	>59	4	6.5%	29	11.8%
	Unknown	4	6.5%	1	0.4%
Sex	Female	16	25.8%	44	18.0%
	Male	44	71.0%	200	81.6%
	Unknown	2	3.2%	1	0.4%
Race	Asian	4	6.5%	15	6.1%
	Black	15	24.2%	80	32.7%
	Hispanic (any race)	4	6.5%	18	7.3%
	White	29	46.8%	118	48.2%
	Other	6	9.7%	12	4.9%
	Unknown	4	6.5%	2	0.8%

In 44.4 percent of AQAM cases, there was only one homicide victim, while 79.4 percent of fatal victims were killed in incidents where another individual was injured. For FRE victims, 60.4 percent were the sole fatality, and 47.3 percent were killed in homicide incidents where another individual was violently victimized, but not fatally. Finally, 72.6 percent of AQAM victims were killed by a firearm, compared to 62.9 percent of FRE victims, who were more likely than AQAM victims to be killed with a knife or bodily weapon.

Table 3 presents individual level characteristics of the ideological victims, specifically basic demographic data. Although the age of FRE victims appears to be normally distributed, peaking around the ages of 40 to 49 (22.0%), the ages AQAM victims peak in the age category of 20 to 29 (32.3%), but also are high in the older category of 50 to 59 (21.0%). For sex, FRE victims are more often male when compared to AQAM victims (81.6% to 71.0%, respectively). In addition, there are no severe deviations in race and ethnicity between the two types of ideological victims, with the largest departure between the two occurring for victims who were Black. In this instance, FRE victims were Black 32.7 percent of the time, while AQAM victims were Black only 24.2 percent of the time.

## Conclusion

Over the last 25 years, when including the ideological victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Oklahoma City bombing, offenders associated with AQAM have killed nearly seven and half times more people than FRE in one-fifth as many incidents. However, when these two outliers are removed, another story unfolds. Under these circumstances, there are nearly four times as many FRE victims as AQAM. The purpose of this analysis is not to discount the victims of these events, but to examine ideological victimization without the disproportionate impact of such catastrophic acts of terrorism.

For the most part, these two types of ideological victimization appear to be more unique than similar. It is thus important to, as this study did, disaggregate the study of terrorism by ideology. Victims of AQAM were killed at different times and in different locations when compared to FRE victims. AQAM victims were killed in events that more often had multiple victims, where others were injured, and the use of a firearm was the primary weapon of the offender. FRE victims were more often the sole victim (both fatal and not), and although a firearm was still the primary weapon used, they were more likely than AQAM victims to be stabbed or beaten to death. Although both sets of victims had disproportionate numbers of individuals killed in the line of duty, especially when one considers the percentage of the general population engage in active military or law enforcement service at any given point in time, AQAM victims were more likely to be military, while FRE victims were more likely to be law enforcement. Finally, AQAM victims were younger (45.2% were under 30, compared to 31% of FRE victims) and more often female, when compared to FRE victims (25.8% to 18%, respectively).

In some ways, AQAM victims appear to have characteristics that are slightly closer to that of “typical” homicide victims and even the general population. This could be a mechanism of the fact that AQAM victims are much more likely to be random or representative victims than are FRE victims. In these circumstances, it could be argued that a victim’s routine activities and lifestyle play a larger role in their risk of ideological victimization. If an individual is fatally victimized by an AQAM offender depends on whether they are in the proverbial wrong place at the wrong time. FRE victims, however, are more likely to be targeted purposefully for assassination based on the offender’s previous knowledge of the individual. In these circumstances, their lifestyle and routine activities only dictate when and where, not if, they are victimized. These victimization patterns over the last 25 years demonstrate that ideological victimization from terrorist and extremist violence varies across ideologies and underlines the importance of future research in the fields of criminology and victimology in attempting to understand these differences and reduce victimization risk.