

## SUICIDALITY AMONG DOMESTIC TERRORISTS

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Despite the focus on suicide terrorism over the past 20 years—particularly by media outlets, policy-makers, and academics—scholarship regarding suicidality in domestic terrorism remains sparse. The post-9/11 research related to suicidality in terrorism has largely focused on the suicide terrorism of Islamist extremists.<sup>1</sup> The research that touches on domestic terrorism, however, is both limited and inconclusive. Lankford, for example, has argued that suicidality is one of three key similarities between perpetrators of suicide terrorism and perpetrators of mass shootings.<sup>2</sup> But a 2017 article by Freilich et al., whose research focused on far-right and jihadi attacks in the US, found that suicide attackers were no more likely than non-suicide attackers to have previously attempted suicide.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, suicidality among those who carry out public shootings is well documented. Jillian Peterson and James Densley, leveraging The Violence Prevention Project's (TVPP's) Mass Shooter Database, found that 70 percent of the 197 individuals who committed mass shootings over the past 60 years either had a history of suicidality or intended to die carrying out their attack.<sup>4</sup> Retrospective research by the US Secret Service on school shooters from 1974 to 2000 found that at least 78 percent had experienced suicidal thoughts or engaged in suicidal behavior before their attack.<sup>5</sup> And an analysis leveraging the Columbia Mass Murder Database found that nearly half of all mass shooters died by suicide at the scene of their attack.<sup>6</sup> Mass shootings, as Peterson and Densley have noted, may in fact be "crimes of despair."<sup>7</sup>

Collecting data on suicidality is difficult, but 19.3 percent (62) of the individuals in DTOLD have been coded positively for at least one of the three indicators of suicidality.

We leveraged a new dataset—the Domestic Terrorism Offender Level Database (DTOLD)—to explore whether domestic terrorism attacks may also be crimes of despair. The database captures publicly available information (e.g., media reporting, court records) on the life histories of 320 individuals who carried out a non-Islamist terrorist attack in the United States between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020.

Our data suggest that domestic terrorists in general may be more suicidal than the general population but significantly less suicidal than mass shooters *except when domestic terrorists kill four or more people* (notably, four is the number of deaths required for a shooting to meet the Federal Bureau of Investigation's definition of a mass shooting).

DTOLD contains three variables relevant to the question of suicidality: history of suicidality (including suicide attempts and suicidal ideation), intention to die while committing a terrorist attack, and death by suicide during or immediately after a terrorist attack.

Collecting data on suicidality is difficult, but 19.3 percent (62) of the individuals in DTOLD have been coded positively for at least one of the three indicators of suicidality. This rate is notably higher than the rate calculated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is 4.37 percent for men (89 percent of those in DTOLD are men). This rate is still lower, however, than TVPP's rate of 70 percent among mass shooters.

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## SUICIDALITY AND LETHALITY IN DTOLD

As the Venn diagram makes clear, these variables overlap considerably, with some individuals falling into two or even three of the categories. The core findings, however, are clear:

### 11.6 percent (37) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD had a history of suicidality

- 8.4 percent (27) had a history of suicidal ideation
- 3.1 percent (10) had attempted suicide

### 10 percent (37) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD intended to die in their attack

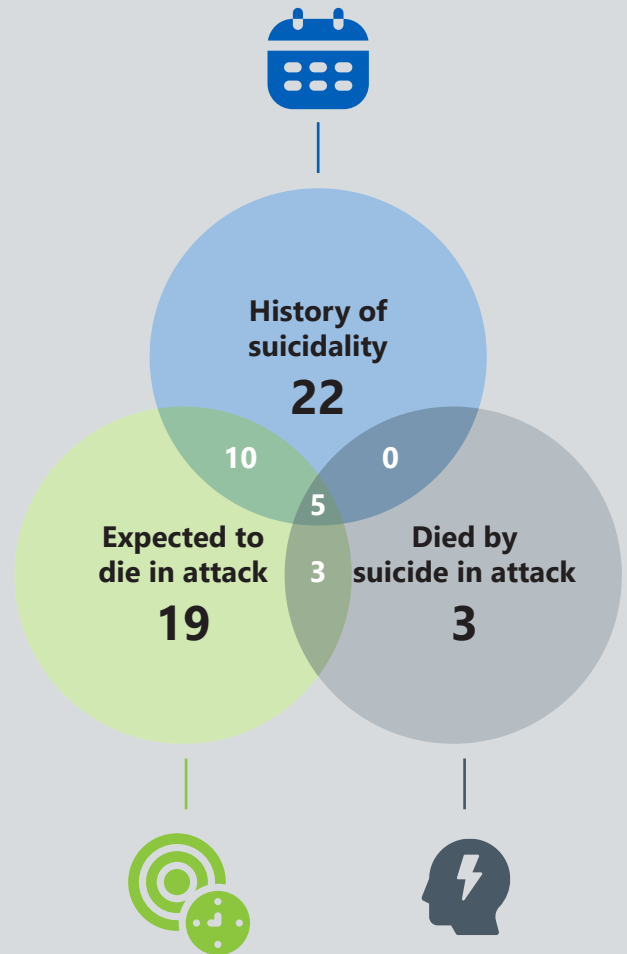
- 7.2 percent (23) can be considered “suicide terrorists” because they intended to die by suicide during their attack
- 3.1 percent (10) intended to die in their attack

### 3.4 percent (11) of the domestic terrorism offenders in DTOLD died by suicide in (i.e., during or immediately after) their attack

A more interesting picture begins to emerge, however, when we divide the DTOLD database into three segments based on an inclusive definition of lethality (individuals who *killed or injured* no one, those who *killed or injured* one to three people, and those who *killed or injured* more than four people).<sup>8</sup> Parsing the data this way reveals that suicidality is not distributed evenly across the full dataset.

- 9 percent (17 of 183) of those whose attacks resulted in no deaths or injuries were suicidal
- 18 percent (17 of 93) of those whose attacks resulted in one to three deaths or injuries were suicidal
- 54 percent (24 of 44) of those whose attacks resulted in four or more deaths or injuries were suicidal

## Suicidality in Domestic Terrorists



Source: CNA.

Perhaps most compelling are the findings if we focus *exclusively on the number of individuals killed* in an attack (see chart below). **The sample size for this analysis—particularly for those who kill four or more people—is too small to support conclusions about the population, but the distribution of suicidality across the three categories does become more stark.**

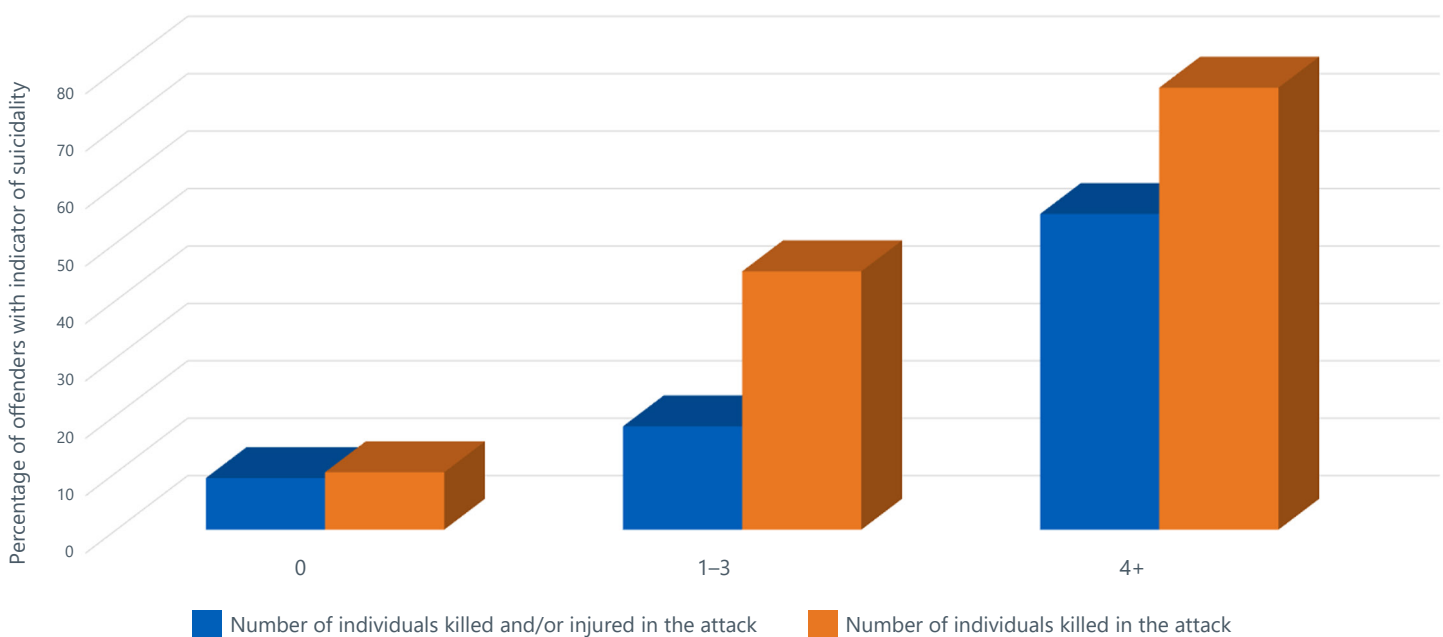
- 10 percent of those whose attacks resulted in no deaths were suicidal (25 of 256)
- 45 percent of those whose attacks resulted in one to three deaths were suicidal (23 of 51)
- 77 percent of those whose attacks resulted in four or more deaths were suicidal (10 of 13; notably, the sample size here is too small to support conclusions about the population)

This analysis does have limitations. First, DTOLD and TVPP’s Mass Shooter Database overlap slightly, and 9 of the 10 individuals who killed four or more people are in both datasets (meaning that the DTOLD rate of 77 percent is likely just a replication of TVPP’s rate). Second,

DTOLD was created via open-source research focused on court documents and media reporting, and previous research makes clear that increased lethality is correlated with increased media coverage, which in turn increases the likelihood of having more information on those who commit lethal attacks.<sup>9</sup> Third, information on suicidality may not appear in the public record for several reasons (because the information is protected, because the individual never told anyone, because the family feels shame, etc.). Finally, researchers have found other variables that influence the relative lethality of terrorist attacks,<sup>10</sup> and the descriptive statistics above do not take these into account.<sup>11</sup>

That said, the specific finding of 77 percent is less interesting than the suggestion that suicidality may be loosely correlated with lethality. In addition, our analysis found only a very small statistically significant relationship between lethality and missing data, which makes us confident that this result is not merely an artifact of media coverage. In short, although these data are inconclusive, they do appear to support the idea that a subset of domestic terrorist attacks—specifically those that result in deaths or injuries—may in fact be crimes of despair.

### Suicidality and Lethality



Source: CNA.

## ENDNOTES

1. David Cook, "Suicide Attacks or 'Martyrdom Operations' in Contemporary Jihad Literature," *Nova Religio* 6, no. 1 (2002), pp. 7–44; Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003), pp. 343–361, doi:10.1017/S000305540300073X; Ellen Townsend, "Suicide Terrorists: Are They Suicidal?," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 37, no. 1 (2007), pp. 35–49; Assaf Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2008), pp. 46–78; Adam Lankford, *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Katherine R. Seifert and Clark McCauley, "Suicide Bombers in Iraq, 2003–2010: Disaggregating Targets Can Reveal Insurgent Motives and Priorities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014), pp. 803–820.
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8. We focused on the number four because those who killed more than four people meet the same lethality requirement stipulated in the definition of mass shootings that the Federal Bureau of Investigation uses.
9. See Erin M. Kearns, Allison E. Betus, and Anthony F. Lemieux, "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?," *Justice Quarterly* 36, no. 6 (2019), pp. 985–1022; Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, "The Devil You Know but Are Afraid to Face: Underreporting Bias and Its Distorting Effects on the Study of Terrorism," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 5 (2006), pp. 714–735; Charles W. Mahoney, "More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018), pp. 589–614; Zachary S. Mitnik, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak, "Post-9/11 Coverage of Terrorism in the New York Times," *Justice Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2020), pp. 161–185; Adam Ghazi-Tehrani and Erin M. Kearns, "Biased Coverage of Bias Crime: Examining Differences in Media Coverage of Hate Crimes and Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46, no. 8 (2023), pp. 1283–1303.
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11. We are currently working on a more in-depth analysis of this issue that will tease out whether this pattern holds after accounting for other causes of lethality.

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