

Domestic Terrorism and Histories of Violence Perpetration

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For decades, researchers have sought to identify risk factors for radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. As part of these efforts, scholars have examined whether—and how—prior violent or criminal behavior is related to these outcomes.

Among other things, researchers have made the following findings:

- Violent and non-violent pre-radicalization criminal behavior “is the single strongest non-ideological predictor of post-radicalization violence among US extremists.”¹
- Both violent and non-violent extremists are more likely than the general population to have violent criminal pasts.²
- Violent extremists are more likely than the general population to have non-violent criminal pasts, whereas non-violent extremists are less likely than the general population to have non-violent criminal pasts.³

- Among radicalized persons, individuals with criminal records are more likely to engage in violent extremism.⁴
- Radicalized individuals (28.6 percent of non-violent radicals and 68.4 percent of violent extremists) are more likely to express a desire to engage in violence than the general population (6.6 to 7.4 percent).⁵

In 2025, CNA completed a new dataset—the Domestic Terrorism Offender-Level Database (DTOLD)*—that we used to examine the history of violence perpetration among domestic terrorists in the United States. The database contains detailed information on 319 non-Islamist perpetrators[†] who carried out terrorist attacks in the United States between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020. Unlike prior research efforts that have included non-violent cases, DTOLD contains information on only violent extremists. As a result, we could not analyze how past crime and violence relates to whether individuals engage in violent versus non-violent

* The inclusion criteria for DTOLD are as follows: (1) the attack is included in the Global Terrorism Database; (2) the attack occurred in the United States; (3) the attack occurred between January 1, 2001, and December 31, 2020; (4) the perpetrator was 18 or older at the time of the attack; (5) if charges were filed, the case did not result in acquittal or mistrial nor were the charges dismissed; and (6) the attack meets the FBI’s definitions of *domestic violent extremist* and *terrorism*.

† We determined that because it does not derive from domestic influences, Islamist terrorism does not fit sufficiently within the definitions of *domestic violent extremism* or *domestic terrorism* to be included. Therefore, we excluded 53 individuals who we identified as being responsible for an attack in the Global Terrorism Database but who were motivated at least partially by Islamist extremism.

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extremism. Therefore, we focused on a different but related outcome: whether past crime and violence relate to whether the offender killed or injured anyone during their attack.

History of violence perpetration in DTOLD

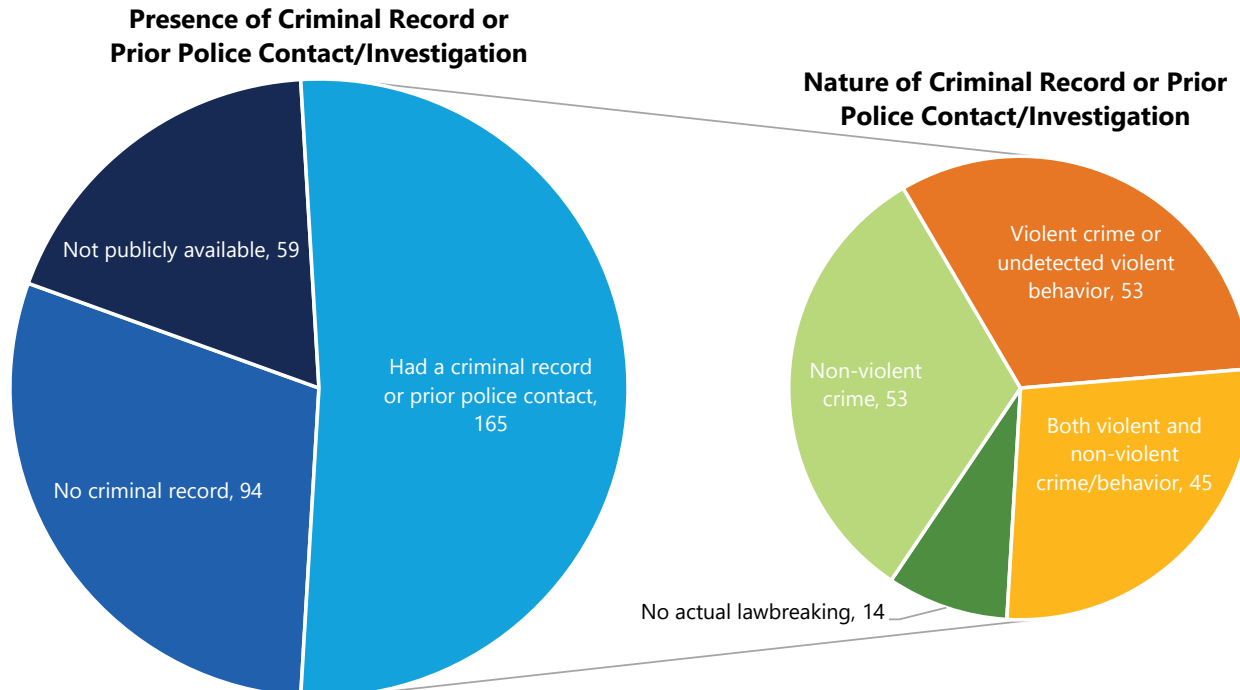
Around half of the offenders in DTOLD (51 percent) had a known criminal record, had non-trivial contact with police, or were the subject of a police investigation prior to carrying out their attacks (see Figure 1). Of the 165 offenders with a pre-attack criminal history,

- 32 percent had committed a non-violent crime (e.g., credit card fraud, curfew violation);
- 32 percent were convicted of a violent crime or engaged in undetected violent behavior (e.g., armed robbery, attempted murder); and
- 27 percent had engaged in both non-violent *and* violent crime.

A small percentage had not engaged in any actual lawbreaking but did have contact with police for such reasons as participating in protest activity, engaging in domestic disputes, and making non-criminal threats.

To determine whether previous crime and violence are associated with lethal or injurious attack outcomes, we looked at whether the offender had a criminal record, the nature of any previous criminal record (e.g., violent or non-violent), whether the offender had been previously imprisoned, whether the offender had committed any previous homicides, and whether the offender had a known affiliation with a gang, prison gang, or militia (and their role in the gang or militia if applicable). We found that only two of these variables were significantly correlated with attack outcome: known affiliation with a prison gang and gang affiliation.[‡]

Figure 1. Presence and nature of criminal record or police contact in DTOLD



Source: CNA

[‡] We used Fisher's exact test to test the association between previous crime and violence and the outcome of an attack. We found that prison gang affiliation ($p = 0.0079$) and gang affiliation ($p = 0.0305$) are both significantly correlated with an attack outcome.

Offenders with no known affiliation with a prison gang were less likely to inflict death or injury (n = 92) than otherwise (n = 51). And although the sample size was extremely small, the opposite was true for offenders with a known affiliation with a prison gang as an adult. These individuals were much more likely to inflict death or injury (n = 6) than not (n = 1) (Table 1).

A similar trend appeared when we examined gang affiliation (e.g., affiliation with gangs that do not primarily operate inside prisons). Offenders with no known gang affiliation were less likely to inflict death or injury; in addition, offenders with a gang affiliation as an adult, or as both a juvenile and an adult, were more likely to inflict death or injury (Table 2). Once again, the sample size for offenders with a gang affiliation was very small, and there was some overlap with the sample of offenders with a prison gang affiliation (n = 3).

Of note, we found no significant relationship between whether an attack was lethal or injurious and the following variables: pre-attack criminal record, nature of any pre-attack criminal record, previous imprisonment, militia affiliation, any role in a gang or militia, or previous homicides. Because seven of

the nine variables we tested were not significantly correlated with the lethality or injurious nature of an attack, it is possible that previous crime and violence may not be strong indicators of attack outcome.

Limitations

This analysis did have limitations. First, DTOLD was constructed using open-source data—primarily court documents and media reporting. As a result, information on some variables was not publicly available. To complete our analysis, we replaced missing values with the most typical value for each variable.⁵ This process also helped us mitigate the “media bias effect” (the documented fact that certain types of attacks and attackers receive more media attention and coverage than others, resulting in a greater availability of data about them as compared to other attacks and attackers).⁶ However, our process for substituting values was not a perfect solution.

Second, DTOLD includes only perpetrators who were identified and charged. We were unable to identify the perpetrators for 237 of the 599 attacks documented in the Global Terrorism Database that occurred within the time frame for inclusion in the dataset. As a result, our

Table 1. Relationship between prison gang affiliation and attack outcome

	Did not inflict death or injury	Inflicted death or injury
No known affiliation with a prison gang	92	51
Affiliation with a prison gang as an adult	1	6
N/A (never imprisoned)	89	80

Source: CNA

Table 2. Relationship between gang affiliation and attack outcome

	Did not inflict death or injury	Inflicted death or injury
No known gang affiliation	178	126
Gang affiliation as an adult	4	9
Gang affiliation as both a juvenile and an adult	0	2

Source: CNA

⁵ More specifically, we used imputation based on the mode for each variable with a missing data rate of 40 percent or less. Variables with a missing data rate of 41 percent or higher were excluded from the analysis.

sample may not be representative of everyone who has committed an act of domestic terrorism because people who were not caught or not charged may have different characteristics. We therefore have limited ability to generalize the findings beyond the specific group of perpetrators in the database.

Third, as noted previously, perpetrator history—including the person’s past crime and violence—is just one type of variable that could account for attack lethality. Other relevant variables include attack characteristics (e.g., weapon type, attack duration), target characteristics (e.g., religious institutions or government buildings), ideological factors (e.g., group affiliation, ideology type), and other contextual variables (e.g., location, security presence, bystander intervention).⁷

Implications

Despite these limitations, our findings related to street and prison gang affiliation fit within a broader line of research about links between violent extremist groups and criminal street gangs.⁸

Moreover, it might be tempting to think that those with previous criminal histories (those who have committed violent crimes, have criminal records, have served time in prison, etc.) will be more likely to perpetrate lethal or injurious attacks. But this analysis suggests, at least preliminarily, that such a conclusion may not be accurate.

The key takeaway for practitioners, especially those involved in threat assessment, is that a nuanced approach is necessary to evaluate risk and prevent violence. One should not rely on, or too heavily weigh, certain risk factors even if they seem intuitively true. Moreover, even though prevention efforts such as red flag laws and background checks are important tools for prevention, they may not always apply—especially if a potential attacker has no criminal history (29 percent of offenders in DTOLD had no criminal record). This finding highlights the importance of upstream initiatives that focus on detecting early warning signs and diverting individuals off the pathway to violence.



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