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Trends and Recommendations: House of Worship Targeted Homicides

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Homicide at houses of worship is statistically rare relative to homicide overall. When it does occur, however, it is often highly lethal, symbolically charged, and disruptive well beyond the immediate event. In addition, houses of worship are intentionally open and community facing, complicating prevention and response.[1] A single attack can reshape congregational life, suppress attendance, and generate fear across an entire faith community.

This brief draws on the Violence Prevention Project's public dataset of house of worship homicides occurring from 2000 to 2025.[2] The dataset captures homicide incidents that occurred at or were directly connected to churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other faith-based religious facilities in the United States. It then narrows to active shooter incidents, which presents distinct risks and prevention challenges for faith communities and local jurisdictions.[3] The deadliest year recorded in the dataset was 2017, when 47 people were killed at places of worship. Of those people, 42 were killed with firearms, and 26 were killed in a single shooting at First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas.

Figure 1. Key facts at a glance

399
homicide incidents occurred at or near houses of worship from 2000 to 2025.

512
were killed and 213 injured across all incidents.

27
homicide incidents (7%) were active shooter incidents.

44%
of active shooter incidents involved ideological motivation.

- Active shooter incidents accounted for 103 killed (20% of deaths) and 127 injured (60% of injuries).
- The average number of fatalities per active shooter incident was 3.8 (vs. 1.3 across all incidents).
- 37% of active shooter perpetrators had some prior connection to the congregation (e.g., a member, employee, volunteer), 37% were strangers, and 26% had unknown affiliation.
- Active shooter incidents in the dataset occurred at congregations primarily serving Christian (22), Jewish (4), and Sikh (1) communities.

Source: Jillian Peterson and James Densley, *House of Worship Homicides*, Violence Prevention Project, 2026, https://www.theviolenceproject.org/databases/house-of-worship.

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Patterns across all homicides at houses of worship

Most homicide incidents connected to houses of worship are not active shooter events. Rather, they often involve interpersonal disputes, domestic violence spillover, or conflicts occurring near—but not because of—the religious institution itself. In rare instances (five cases, or 1.3 percent), homicides connected to houses of worship involved suspects of crimes being killed while fleeing police. Treating all house of worship violence risk as active shooter risk obscures these distinctions and can lead to misaligned prevention strategies. Most incidents follow patterns of community violence more broadly and are typically addressed through existing violence prevention, domestic violence, and criminal justice systems.

Across incidents, violence at houses of worship reflects the predictable and open nature of these spaces. In line with worship patterns, violence is the most common on Sundays (a quarter of all cases) and the second-most common on Saturdays. Sundays are the busiest days for most Christian denominations, and Jewish services are commonly held on Saturdays. Regular service schedules, high attendance at known times, and limited formal guardianship create conditions that can be exploited by motivated offenders.[4] These features do not cause violence, but they shape opportunity—particularly for individuals seeking access to specific people, symbolic targets, or large gatherings. Domestic violence spillover cases, which make up a significant share of Saturday incidents, are disproportionately likely to occur in parking lots.

Active shooter incidents at houses of worship

Active shooter incidents at houses of worship differ sharply from other worship-related homicides in both scale and intent. Although they represent a small share of all incidents, they are far more lethal and are typically premeditated. That premeditation often includes prior surveillance; for example, the 2015 attacker at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston and the 2025 Annunciation shooter in Minneapolis both reconnoitered the buildings before returning with firearms. Such attacks are often designed to maximize casualties, exploit predictable gathering times, and evoke symbolic or ideological messages to intimidate a community, rather than to resolve a specific interpersonal conflict.

Although most worship-related homicides occur in exterior spaces, such as parking lots and walkways, active shooter incidents are more likely to occur *inside* the building during services, when density is highest. These interior attacks account for a disproportionate share of fatalities and injuries, underscoring why preparedness efforts must address both exterior arrival/departure spaces and interior gathering periods.

Ideological grievance and hate-motivated targeting

Nearly half of active shooter incidents in the dataset involved ideological motivation, including anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, anti-Sikh, and other forms of religiously targeted hate. In these cases, the target was the faith community itself rather than a specific individual. As a result, prevention efforts must shift away from mediating disputes and toward identifying escalations in grievance, fixation, and threat communication, which are often expressed before such attacks through harassment, disruption of services, or online signaling aimed at the group.

Contagion, imitation, and amplification

Evidence suggests that some attackers study prior house of worship shootings and draw on earlier incidents as reference points for timing, tactics, and expected outcomes. For example, the perpetrator of the 2019 Poway Synagogue shooting explicitly referenced the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting in a manifesto posted before the attack. Following highly publicized attacks, short-term imitation risk may increase,[5] particularly within the same faith community. For this reason, rapid threat reporting and coordinated response are essential during the immediate aftermath of major incidents.

Online spaces can intensify this dynamic. In some corners of social media, such as True Crime Communities, attackers may be discussed in ways that intentionally or unintentionally heroize or mythologize their actions.[6] For a small subset of individuals already experiencing grievance or crisis, this attention can reinforce the perception that violence offers recognition or meaning. Prevention efforts must rapidly respond to warning signs and engage in risk-aware communication.

Implications for practitioners and policy-makers

Local jurisdictions cannot—and should not—attempt to harden every house of worship. The most effective approach would be to combine early identification, coordinated intervention, and low-cost preparedness in order to preserve openness. The following are steps that jurisdictions can take to improve the safety of houses of worship.

1. **Distinguish everyday violence from active shooter risk**

   Most homicides connected to houses of worship are not active shooter events. For practitioners, this distinction matters operationally. Interpersonal or domestic spillover violence is best addressed through existing community violence and domestic violence systems focused on victim protection and dispute intervention. Targeted or active shooter risk, by contrast, requires different prevention planning, such as early identification of concerning behavior, behavioral threat assessment, clear reporting pathways, and coordinated response.

2. **Recognize when the target is the faith community, not a person**

   When faith-based targeting is more likely, such as during religious holidays or following national incidents, jurisdictions should strengthen community liaison relationships and information sharing while discouraging the circulation of attacker-generated materials that can fuel imitation. Jurisdictions should also work with law enforcement to ensure that motive is systematically documented in incident reports involving houses of worship, consistent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's expanded Uniform Crime Reporting categories. Gathering better data on motivation is a prerequisite for better prevention targeting and resourcing.

3. **Train on behavioral indicators and warning signs to increase bystander intervention**

   Most small and mid-size congregations have no paid security staff. Many rely on rotating volunteers and have limited administrative capacity. Violence prevention efforts should be tailored accordingly, offering short, periodic training for clergy, lay leaders, greeters, and ushers on what to look for and—critically—who to call. Greeters are the people best placed to notice a visitor who photographs the space, asks unusual questions about service times and exits, or returns without engaging.

4. **Create a pathway for people to report what they see**

   Congregations should maintain a simple concern log (e.g., a notebook, a shared online document) that persists across volunteer rotations and can be reviewed before each service. The concern log should capture three windows: before, during, and after worship. Examples of concerns could be a visitor who asks pointed questions about when the building is least staffed; someone sitting through a service who watches the exits, does not join any activity, and leaves without speaking to anyone; or a car that is left in the parking lot after everyone else has gone. Individually, none of these concerns may mean anything. Collectively across multiple Sundays and multiple volunteers, they can form a pattern—but only if someone is writing them down.

Congregations also need clear, trusted pathways to report threats and concerning behavior to outside partners, especially after a high-profile threat or attack on religious freedom. Fixation on prior attackers, repeated admiration of attacks, comparison to earlier attacks, and obsessive engagement with attacker narratives should be treated as potential warning signs when they co-occur with grievance, crisis, or behavioral deterioration. Jurisdictions should simplify reporting channels and establish rapid communication loops among congregations, local government, and law enforcement.[7]

5. Emphasize physical preparedness that preserves openness

Congregations should adopt measures that are visible but not militarized, such as trained greeters and ushers, basic access control during non-service hours, internal communication plans for emergencies, and trauma-informed recovery planning after incidents. Given that a substantial share of violence occurs outside buildings, preparedness efforts should extend beyond interior spaces to include parking lots, walkways, and arrival/departure periods, using measures that are visible, proportional, and consistent with congregational values. Areas to focus on are improving lighting quality, limiting access points during off-hours, and mitigating the vulnerability of arrival and departure windows, when known attendance patterns converge with poor sightlines.

References

1. Christopher P. Scheitle and Jeffery T. Ulmer, "Profane Concerns in Sacred Spaces: The Challenges and Consequences of Implementing Security Measures in Religious Congregations," *Journal of Applied Security Research* 13, no. 1 (2018): pp. 29–44.

2. Jillian Peterson and James Densley, *House of Worship Homicides*, Violence Prevention Project, 2026, https://www.theviolenceproject.org/databases/house-of-worship.

3. Consistent with federal guidance, we define an *active shooter* as one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area. We exclude firearm-related incidents involving self-defense, gang violence, drug-related violence, residential or domestic disputes, barricade/hostage situations, shootings in relation to another criminal act, or crossfire as a byproduct of another ongoing criminal act. Not all perpetrators of homicides at houses of worship meet this definition, but they account for a disproportionate share of deaths and injuries and require different prevention strategies. See Pete J. Blair and Katherine W. Schweit, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, Texas State University and US Department of Justice, 2014, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-study-2000-2013-1.pdf/view.

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5. James N. Meindl and Jonathan W. Ivy, "Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 3 (2017): pp. 368–370.

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7. Reid Meloy et al., "The Role of Warning Behaviors in Threat Assessment: An Exploration and Suggested Typology," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 30, no. 3 (2012): pp. 256–279; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, *Mitigating Attacks on Houses of Worship Security Guide*, Department of Homeland Security, Dec. 2020, https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/mitigating-attacks-houses-worship-security-guide.

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