Understanding Terrorist Use of Explosives in the United States

Austin C. Doctor
Angie Benda
Lauren Moss

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ncitereportsresearch
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE
Understanding Terrorist Use of Explosives in the United States

Austin Doctor, Angie Benda, and Lauren Moss
University of Nebraska at Omaha

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remain a weapon of choice for terrorists and violent extremists, presenting a sustained threat to U.S. homeland security. Using public court records pertaining to U.S. federal charges, NCITE researchers have counted 98 incidents occurring from January 2009 through May 2024 in which individuals motivated by a violent extremist ideology plotted or attempted an IED within the United States.

A close look at the data reveals an evolving threat landscape. Within the first five months of 2024, ideologically motivated IED incidents had already reached a five-year annual high. Analysis of the data indicates that U.S.-based violent extremists see value in using IEDs against a wide range of local targets, especially critical infrastructure and crowded spaces. Moreover, as a tactical instrument, the IED is appealing to would-be attackers across the violent extremist ecosystem.
DEFENDANT PROFILE

Typical age of defendant is 28.

Youngest: 15
Oldest: 75

(In 83% of recorded incidents, the attacker works alone.)

IED INCIDENTS BY IDEOLOGICAL MOTIVATION

- AGAAVE
- Salafi Jihadist
- REMVE
- Single Issue
AVERAGE NUMBER OF INCIDENTS PER YEAR AND RATE OF SUCCESS

There are approximately 6.5 incidents per year on average.

- 11 Successful (11.2%)
- 87 Unsuccessful (88.8%)

IED INCIDENTS BY TARGET TYPE

- Critical Infrastructure
- Crowded Spaces
- Educational Institution
- Government Building
- Law Enforcement
- Military
- Multiple
- Place of Worship
- Private Business
- Public Elected Official
- Unspecified

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF IED INCIDENTS

1. New York (16)
2. Florida (10)
3. California (8)
ABOUT THE DATA

The data used in this report were compiled from public sources, including court records and news media reports, and are limited to IED incidents identified in federal charges initiated between January 1, 2009 and May 31, 2024. The incidents in the dataset capture only federal charges and do not include: incidents in which direct attribution is unclear, criminal IED incidents not clearly associated with an ideological motivation, bomb threats and hoax explosive devices, federal investigations that did not result in a charge, or relevant cases in which relevant court documentation remain sealed. Thus, the data paint a reasonably representative but non-exhaustive picture of the terrorist IED threat to U.S. homeland security.

ABOUT NCITE

The National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, or NCITE, is a research consortium focused on counterterrorism and targeted violence prevention. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as a Center of Excellence. Based at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, NCITE includes 50+ researchers at partner institutions across the U.S. and Europe.

GRANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DISCLAIMER

The research in this report was supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate under Contract Award No. 70RSAT21G00000002 / 70RSAT22FR0000050: “Workshop and Report on Research Challenges in Combating Terrorist Use of Explosives in the United States.” The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.