PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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# PT

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# About

## Perspectives on Terrorism

Established in 2007, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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# Words of Welcome

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XVII, Issue 2 (June 2023) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (ISSN 2334-3745). This Open Access journal is a joint publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague, Netherlands; the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV); and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University. All past and recent issues can be found online at https://pt.icct.nl/.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is indexed by JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar where it ranks No. 3 among journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. Jouroscope™, the directory of scientific journals, has listed PT as one of the top ten journals in the category free open access journals in social sciences, with a Q1 ranking. Now in its 17th year of publication, PT has close to 8,000 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers and website visitors in academia, government and civil society worldwide. Subscription is free and registration to receive an e-mail of each quarterly issue of the journal can be done at the link provided above.

The Articles published in the journal's four annual issues are fully peer-reviewed by external referees, while its Research Notes and other content are subject to internal editorial quality control. The current issue opens with a research article by Shandon Harris-Hogan, in which a detailed analysis of far-right violence and terrorism in Australia between 1990 and 2020 reveals how only a small number of incidents were perpetrated by individuals associated with organised far-right groups, while the vast majority of attacks have been committed by lone actors or small unorganised groups, often spontaneously. Next Mengyan Liu, Natalie Anastasio, Hope LeFreniere, and Arie Perliger examine how the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in anti-Asian violent extremism and hostility in the US, highlighting factors that facilitate hate-related violence against minorities during public health crises. In the following article, Isabelle Frens, Jelle van Buuren, and Edwin Bakker explore the rise of 'anti-institutional' narratives and threats against a variety of targets in the Netherlands including the government, media, the scientific community, and the judicial system.

Next, a thought-provoking piece by Ahmed Ajil examines the challenges of 'positionality' when conducting field research on terrorism, and provides a personal account of what it means to be an Arab Muslim ethnographer studying violent extremism. And our final two research articles address the intersections of terrorism and the metaverse. First, Gabriel Weimann and Roy Dimant examine some potential uses of the metaverse by terrorists and suggest preemptive measures to minimise the risks of them doing so. Then Suraj Lakhani focuses on the potential for gamification of violent extremism in the increasingly immersive online spaces of the evolving metaverse.

This issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* also includes an extensive bibliography on Terrorism and the Media (including the Internet), compiled by our information resources editor, Judith Tinnes. This is followed by a review from our Book Reviews Editor, Joshua Sinai, of the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism*, edited by Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn. This issue of the journal has been prepared by members of the Editorial Team, with significant assistance from Tim Wuisman and Jake Wright (both of whom are Junior Lecturers at ISGA), and from Ms Jodi Moore, for which we are most grateful.

Prof James Forest, Editor-in-Chief

PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Is Far-Right Violence Actually Increasing in Australia?

## Tracking Far-Right Terrorism and Violence in Australia Between 1990–2020

Shandon Harris-Hogan*

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In recent times, governments throughout the Western world have warned of an increase in far-right violence. A range of government and academic sources has also made spectacular claims regarding a rise in far-right violence in Australia. However, for a variety of reasons, the actual prevalence of far-right violence occurring in Australia remains largely unknown. To address this gap in knowledge, the following documents acts of far-right violence and terrorism in Australia between 1990 and 2020. This study demonstrates that no clear increase has actually occurred. A total of 181 incidents are identified across almost all geographic locations, with concentrations of violence noted in Melbourne and North Queensland. A clear spike in violent incidents was identified between 2005 and 2010. However, a complete reduction in fatal violence has occurred since that time, and there has also been a notable reduction in violent events across most years since that peak. Notably, only a vanishingly small number of incidents were perpetrated by individuals associated with organised far-right groups. Rather, the vast majority of attacks are committed by lone actors or small unorganised groups, often spontaneously. To date, this more chronic form of far-right violence has been almost entirely overlooked by policymakers. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see if Australia's existing counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism infrastructure, built primarily to address a Jihadist threat that is highly networked, geographically concentrated, and transnationally linked, can be adapted to combat a far-right that is largely unorganised and geographically decentralised.

**Keywords:** Far-right, Australia, counter-terrorism, targeting, lone actor

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# Introduction

In February 2020, the Director-General of Australia's leading domestic intelligence agency noted that in Australia, "the extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing."[1] This assessment followed the killing of 51 people by an Australian right-wing extremist in Christchurch in 2019. However, it is not immediately clear where this threat emerged from, and by what level it had grown. Indeed, for a range of reasons, the prevalence of right-wing violence in Australia across the decades preceding this statement is largely unknown. Although this dearth of knowledge is not unique to Australia, it clearly makes effective responses difficult to implement. To better understand right-wing violence in Australia, and whether or not the problem is actually increasing, the following will explore incidents of far-right terrorism and violence that occurred between 1990 and the end of 2020.

This paper will begin by presenting a brief history of the far right in Australia, before analysing a range of statements made regarding the prevalence of right-wing violence over time. It will then explore the intersecting reasons, both political and methodological, why the scale of such violence has remained opaque. This study then documents incidents of far-right terrorism and violence in Australia that had fatal, or near-fatal outcomes. It charts who the targets of this violence were, where the violence occurred, and how such events have evolved over time. It then analyses the perpetrators, and the weapons used in each incident. The final section will discuss how these findings might be used to guide more targeted counter-terrorism policies and countering violent extremism practices moving forward.

# The Far Right

In recent times, governments throughout the Western world have warned of a rise in far-right violence.[2] While 'far right' remains a scholarly contested concept, definitions have become "more parsimonious and more similar" across recent decades.[3] Broadly, the 'far right' is an umbrella concept, generally used to refer to both the 'radical' and 'extreme' variants of right-wing politics.[4] The "radical right refers to milieus, organisations and individuals who pursue right-wing beliefs* via democratic processes."[5] By contrast, right-wing extremism opposes democratic principles and practices, and advances a highly selective view of the national citizen that excludes religious, racial, and sexual minorities.[6] Such actors also view violence as a potentially legitimate means to achieve their political and ideological goals. However, researchers have noted "increasingly porous borders and growing links" between the radical and extreme right in recent times, somewhat blurring this definitional distinction.[7] Scholars including Perry and Scrivens,[8] Fangen and Nilsen,[9] and Mudde[10] have also highlighted the country-specific nature of the far right, suggesting that understanding this phenomenon also requires understanding the specific sociopolitical environment of a particular location. The following therefore aims to understand violence perpetrated by 'far-right' actors within the Australian context.

A wide range of academic studies has provided detailed analysis of violent extremist activity in Australia. However, much of this research has focused on the Jihadist phenomenon.[11]

* 'Right-wing beliefs' here refers to the view of social inequality as inevitable, natural or even desirable.

Historically there has been a "lack of scholarly interest" in far-right activism and violence in the Australian context,[12] although this has begun to shift with recent works produced by Campion[13] and Smith.[14] While some studies analysing the activities of right-wing milieus have also recently emerged,[15] these typically do not incorporate incidents of physical violence. The few studies that do rely almost exclusively on idiosyncratic case studies or "non-probability samples of victimisation experiences."[16] Recently, an attempt was made to quantify past incidents of right-wing violence for the Victorian Governments 'Inquiry into Extremism,'[17] and this work will be explored later. Overall though, research into right-wing activity in Australia, and particularly far-right violence, remains "conceptually and empirically underdeveloped."[18] To address this shortcoming, the following will systematically document and analyse far-right violence that occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020.

## The Far Right in Australia Historically

In order to fully contextualise the far-right violence being perpetrated today, it is important to recognise that radical right-wing beliefs are historically ingrained into Australian society. In 1901, Australia's first Prime Minister stated "I do not think that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality," and the first action of the Commonwealth of Australia was to introduce an Immigration Restriction Act. This 'White Australia Policy' remained in place until the 1970s.[19] Radical right policies were also domestically focused, with Indigenous Australians remaining segregated from many activities within society until the 1960s and 70s.[20]

Organised far-right groups first appeared in Australia after World War I, beginning with the ex-soldier's fascist movement (known as the White Army).[21] Later came the Australia First Movement, whose members were interned during World War II[22] after becoming involved in "conspiratorial plans" to kill prominent Australians and potentiality side with the Japanese.[23] Post–World War II, most attempts to form far-right groups failed to attract "even a moderate following."[24] The victory of the Allies, together with the continuation of various ethno-exclusivist government policies across the following decades, combined to make the extreme right largely "irrelevant."[25] However, a shift away from Nazism (and towards Communism) as the primary existential threat to Australia in the post-war years, coupled with efforts to remove the racial exclusivity previously entrenched in Australian law, seeded the rise of several violent extreme-right groups throughout the 1980s.

In 1982, Jim Saleam and Frank Salter established National Action (NA). In 1985, following a failed leadership coup within NA, Jack van Tongeren founded the Australian Nationalists Movement (ANM). These two groups adopted a more explicitly neo-Nazi identity than previous actors, and their primary target group shifted towards the 'immigrant.'[26] Both groups became increasingly violent throughout the 1980s, and by 1988 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) noted that the "politically motivated activity" of these groups had "reached a peak."[27]

Inspired by The Turner Diaries,[28] ANM attempted to manufacture a crisis in race relations by conducting a series of attacks against Asian targets.[29] By August 1989, ANM had caused over

one million dollars (AUD) in damage[30] and had attacked left-wing opponents of the group. There was also talk of murdering senior police officers and government officials and nail-bombing a Vietnamese pool hall. In response, Operation Jackhammer arrested eight senior ANM figures in Perth and Sydney.[31] When sentencing van Tongeren to 18 years in prison for 53 offences including assault occasioning grievous bodily harm, arson, and causing an explosion, the Judge noted that it is "no overstatement or exaggeration to term your campaign of those months a terrorist campaign and … you waged a guerrilla war against the public."[32] Separately, two NA members were convicted of repeatedly shooting at the home of the Australian representative to the African National Congress,[33] and Saleam was jailed for supplying the shotgun.[34]

Following the jailing of NA and ANM's leadership, both organisations imploded in a spectacular storm of internal violence. ANM supporter David Locke had his throat slit by two group members who believed him to be a police informant,[35] while ANM associate Colin Irvine stabbed and killed Daniel Mark English.[36] Two weeks later, Irvine was shot and killed by the Western Australian tactical response group.[37] Within NA, Wayne 'Bover' Smith was shot eight times by NA member Perry John Whitehouse, who suspected him of speaking to police,[38] while NA member Erich Kuhn was killed by his older brother in a drug-related dispute.[39] Finally, Dane Sweetman (the individual who inspired the movie Romper Stomper) and Martin Bayston murdered fellow skinhead David 'Pommy' Noble during a drunken argument at a party celebrating Hitler's birthday.[40] The removal of so many key actors left the remnants of both groups — and by extension the Australian extreme right — largely impotent. This was acknowledged by ASIO, who in 1991 noted that Australia's "racist right … had suffered serious set-backs."[41]

The emergence of the extreme right as the primary "discernible domestic threat of politically motivated violence,"[42] moved the government to commission a 'National Inquiry into Racist Violence' (NIRV) in December 1988. At the launch of this inquiry, a "widespread community perception that racist attacks … were on the increase" throughout Australia was noted.[43] A significant segment of the inquiry was therefore dedicated to documenting "acts of violence or intimidation based on racism directed at persons, organisations or property."[44] However, since the conclusion of this inquiry in 1991, the level of serious violence and terrorism perpetrated by the extreme right in Australia is almost entirely unknown. There are 2 reasons for this.

## A Gap in Knowledge

*The first reason for this gap in knowledge is that there exists no national system for monitoring extreme-right violence in Australia.*

As far back as the 1980s, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) highlighted that "no statistics were being kept on racially-motivated *[sic]* crimes."[45] The problems caused by this lack of systematic data collection were subsequently underlined by the NIRV, which formally recommended that "such statistics be collected, collated and analysed nationally by the appropriate Federal agency."[46] As the national crime statistics agency, this recommendation was presumably directed towards the AIC. However, the Institute appears to have made no effort to collect such data, and since that time has produced only one publicly available report even mentioning racist violence. As recently as 2017, a member of the Australian Federal Police

(AFP) noted that it was highly unlikely anything would change in this area "until somebody dies … until the day a white supremacist walks into a mosque."[47] Unfortunately, even following the murder of 51 individuals during Friday prayers by a 28-year-old Australian, there remains no observable movement towards building a national system to monitor and analyse right-wing terrorism and violence.

Across most jurisdictions, violence characterised by the motivations of the offender is not usually considered "legally different to an act of violence motivated by profit or revenge."[48] The clearest method for distinguishing right-wing violence would be to prosecute offenders using terrorism legislation. However, such legislation was not introduced in Australia until the mid-2000s. Moreover, until the prosecution of Phillip Galea in mid-2016 for "acts in preparation for a terrorist act,"[49] no right-wing actor had been charged using Australian terrorism legislation. Hence the current legal framework does not provide a clear ability to consistently distinguish these events from a multitude of other criminal activities.

Limited hate crime provisions have been introduced within a small number of Australian states.[50] For instance, in 1999 the NSW police force began recording 'bias crime,'† and a dedicated Bias Crime Unit was formed in 2015.[51] However, in 2019 this unit contained only one member[52] responsible for monitoring all bias crime across a population of more than 8 million people. It seems fair to assume that this unit might be somewhat under-resourced. A dedicated bias crime policy was also implemented by Victoria Police in 2011. However, a recent study found that there remained a failure of "officers to identify bias crime, despite dedicated training."[53] While such efforts are undoubtedly a step in the right direction, this work is not uniform, and is limited in both its scope and geographic coverage.

More recently, the Victorian Parliament initiated a large 'Inquiry into Extremism,' specifically focused on understanding right-wing activity. Buried within a long list of recommendations (specifically recommendation 34) was that Victoria "develop a strategy to collect, monitor and regularly report government data on vilification conduct and prejudice-motivated crime."[54] While on the surface this recommendation appears promising, unfortunately no guidance was provided regarding the scope of data to be collected. Even if implemented, the likelihood of a national dataset emerging anytime soon remains highly questionable.

*The second reason for this gap in knowledge is a dearth of empirically based research into right-wing terrorism and serious violence.*

While large datasets monitoring far-right violence globally do exist, they do not provide the level of granular detail required to draw nuanced conclusions regarding domestic trends.[55] For instance, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) is probably the most frequently used dataset in quantitative terrorism research, and serves as a basis for global policymaking.[56] However, the GTD suffers significant shortcomings when it comes to tracking far-right terrorism. One analysis found that incidents are "registered haphazardly … often lack source references, and substantial information about perpetrators and context is often missing – or even misleading."[57] More significantly, the data presented are frequently misinterpreted. This occurred most egregiously

† While not a specific offence, a 'Bias Crime' can be used as an aggravating factor in sentencing in NSW.

within a report produced by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which claimed to have identified a 320 percent rise in far-right terrorism between 2012 and 2018.[58] Following the release of that report, Interpol warned of "a dramatic rise in right-wing violence" globally,[59] and the United Nations (UN) voiced deep concern about a "growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism."[60] Both based their threat assessments on data produced by GTI.[61] However, the GTI report did not control for changes in data collection by the GTD that had been implemented over time.‡ So despite other authoritative research demonstrating that fatal far-right attacks remained 'relatively stable' across this period (including within both Western Europe[62] and the USA[63]), this claim of a significant increase in far-right violence continues to be repeated throughout a range of research globally.

An attempt was made by a group of Australian academics to quantify past incidents of right-wing terrorism and violence for the Victorian 'Inquiry into Extremism.'[64] This study identified 91 incidents between 1990 and 2020, and these cases are later considered by this study.§ However, this submission was the only academic work identified that has actually attempted to quantify incidents of far-right violence. In the absence of any meaningful government–run monitoring effort and/or longitudinal academic scholarship, a number of community groups have attempted to track various forms of right-wing violence. Such efforts have largely focused on documenting incidents perpetrated against a particular ethnic group, or on monitoring a specific geographic location. For example, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has produced an annual report on Antisemitism for more than a decade, the Asian Australian Alliance documented incidents of racism perpetrated against Asian Australians following the COVID-19 pandemic, and a biannual report documenting incidents of Islamophobia has been produced since 2014. While these reports are helpful for understanding fractions of the problem, such efforts are often organised around limited budgets, and are only able to document limited periods of time and/or small geographic areas.

More problematically, these studies apply extremely vague definitions of incidents and amorphous inclusion criteria, resulting in reports that inconsistently document an extremely wide variety of phenomena (well beyond just serious violence). The National Inquiry into Racist Violence acknowledged this issue, noting that although "a number of attempts were made by organisations to quantify the incidence, this was seldom done in any systematic or methodical manner."[65] Moreover, while such efforts are helpful in providing recognition for victims, and generating a perception of action following general incidents of racism (particularly in the face of community outrage), issues of measurement validity can lead to the over-inclusion of cases, which in turn can exaggerate the extent of the problem.[66] The large disconnect between what is being 'documented' and more general legal standards can also unintentionally create unrealistic expectations with regard to potential responses. So, while these efforts are well intentioned, such over-inclusive and unsystematic studies are not particularly helpful for analysing or planning proportionate responses to right-wing violence. A systematic and permanent method to monitor right-wing violence in Australia is clearly required.

‡ The GTD explicitly cautions against comparing incidents that occurred pre 2012 with those post because of the implementation of automated searches

§ 18 of these incidents are ultimately included in the sample below. 70 cases were excluded. Three incidents were unable to be identified.

Looking at immediately comparable countries internationally, New Zealand also does not maintain a national dataset tracking this phenomenon. Official data are collected in the United States, where the Federal Bureau of Investigation assembles national hate crime statistics annually. However, the results have been described as "terribly uneven," "incomplete and skewed" and largely "meaningless."[67] The UK and Canadian governments do collect national hate crime statistics, but do not distinguish between incidents committed between minority groups and those committed by far-right actors.

Looking beyond government efforts, one submission to the Victorian Inquiry specifically highlighted the Norwegian example as "best practice."[68] Following a significant far-right terrorist attack in Oslo in 2011, the Norwegian government funded a Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). The centre has established and maintains the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, which thoroughly and reliably documents incidents of far-right violence across Western Europe post-1990.[69] An equivalent dataset would be helpful to guide Australia's counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts.

## A State of Confusion

In the absence of any systematic effort to quantify incidents of far-right violence in Australia, a range of actors has made spectacular claims regarding the prevalence of this phenomenon. Some dismiss such violence as a fringe issue. Others depict right-wing violence as escalating alarmingly in both intensity and frequency. Indeed, comments regarding an 'increase' in far-right violence are made regularly, and often without reliable data or historical context.

As noted, the National Inquiry into Racist Violence was instigated due to a "widespread community perception that racist attacks, both verbal and physical, were on the increase,"[70] and by 1991, the inquiry had found that far-right groups had become "more violent in recent years."[71] The following year, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) noted that "violent threats and assaults … had rocketed since the Gulf crisis began,"[72] while throughout the early 1990s Australia was also "experiencing a dramatic increase in levels of anti-homosexual violence."[73] In 1995 ASIO warned of an "upsurge in the activities of … neo-Nazis, and right-wing militia groups,"[74] and a year later stated that "radical conservatism is on the rise in Australia, and that neo-Nazi and extreme national militias had publicly indicated their willingness to resort to violence."[75] By 1997, an academic study was proclaiming that "all available evidence points to an upsurge in the incidence of hate crime … in Australia."[76] A Government report appeared to confirm this "upsurge" two years later.[77]

By 2000, Australia was being warned that "attacks on Jews and their institutions in Australia had reached record levels"[78] and an academic study published in 2002 concluded that the 9/11 attacks had prompted "a dramatic upsurge" in Islamophobic violence.[79] In 2004, community groups repeated claims of an "alarming increase in attacks on Arab and Muslim Australians … from offensive remarks about race or religion to physical violence."[80] Then in a statement bereft of historical context, in 2005 ASIO declared "white supremacists as a newer and lesser-known threat than well-monitored Islamic radicals."[81] That same year, "tough new police powers aimed at halting Sydney's racial violence" were passed at an "emergency session" of Parliament.[82] By

2009, the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute was making a series of recommendations to combat a perceived "increase in the number of allegedly racially motivated attacks in Australia."[83]

Moving forward to 2012, another academic study concluded that "all available evidence" indicated an escalation in hate crime.[84] In 2014 community groups were warning that there was a need to "respond against the increase in racist violence,"[85] and in 2016 ASIO again warned of the "growing threat that far-right groups may pose for public safety, especially by promoting communal violence."[86] Victoria then reported a "50 per cent increase in racist attacks" in 2018.[87] Based on the above statements (which are illustrative and far from exhaustive), one might reasonably conclude that incidents of far-right violence increased consistently between 1990 and 2020. Unfortunately, in the absence of reliable longitudinal data, it is impossible to know how accurate such declarations have been.

Rather than focusing on violent incidents, recent commentary has shifted towards highlighting the 'threat' posed by far-right actors. In 2019 ASIO stated that "the threat from the extreme right-wing in Australia has increased,"[88] and in 2020 that the "extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing."[89] ASIO also noted that the far right now occupied between 30 percent and 40 percent of the CT caseload, up from around 10 percent previously.[90] This comment was widely interpreted as being due to a rise in far-right activity, rather than a decline in the influence of the Islamic State. The government went on to warn that "the possibility of a mass casualty attack being far right is now higher than it was 5 years ago."[91] So has the threat presented by the far right actually escalated? Or have government agencies simply paid more attention to right-wing actors following the Christchurch massacre in March 2019? To provide an evidence base by which to judge these claims, the following will identify and document incidents of right-wing violence and terrorism that have occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020.

## Methodology

Establishing a precise operational definition of what constitutes serious right-wing violence is difficult. More generally, the ideological core of the extreme right consists of exclusionary nationalism, which holds that "the nation-state should be inhabited by natives only, and that non-natives are considered a fundamental threat to the survival of the nation."[92] This nativist view produces an ideological common ground for the far right and provides a list of shared enemies.[93] These groups, including racial, religious, and sexual minorities, as well as political actors who promote social inclusion, are then seen by those on the extreme right as legitimate targets for violence. When identifying incidents of far-right violence, a primary focus will therefore be on documenting incidents with clear statements and/or actions demonstrating nativist elements in their targeting. Events where a perpetrator self-identifies as right-wing, racist, etc., are given particular emphasis.

Two primary criteria were used to determine the inclusion of incidents: motive and severity. As a general rule, the dataset contains only events containing evidence to support a hypothesis of right-wing motivation. Here victims were deliberately targeted based on an element of their identity (race, religion, and/or sexuality) by a member (or members) of the nativist 'white' majority. Thus, the following will incorporate both acts motivated by a coherent far-right

ideology and incidents committed due to racist beliefs, as target selection can be considered a political message in and of itself. Incidents also do not require premeditation. As such, this study includes both acts of violence traditionally considered terrorism (which is most often deliberately planned and involves claims of responsibility) and more spontaneous attacks committed against perceived enemies or people regarded as unwanted by the far right.[94] Incidents where motivation remains unclear have not been included, nor have incidents caused by disputes within (or between) right-wing groups.[95]

To be included, incidents must also have been severe enough to inflict significant physical injury on the victim(s), or have been perpetrated in a way that could have been physically disabling or even deadly. More specifically, the attack had a fatal, or near fatal outcome, or the perpetrator(s) proactively used potentially lethal weapons, and/or the attack caused significant injuries requiring hospitalisation or medical treatment."[96] Incidents of harassment or low-level physical violence have been excluded, as well as vandalism and other events of material damage (such as firebombs targeting empty buildings). While other datasets include these lower-severity incidents, such events are excluded here for two reasons. The first reason is that the threshold for committing severe physical violence is significantly higher than for making threats or hurtful remarks. As such, physical attacks should be treated as "analytically distinct phenomenon."[97] The second reason relates to issues of representivity; i.e. "the extent to which existing datasets that include far-right violence correctly mirror the actual universe of far right violence," and measurement validity.[98] As hate crimes, including harassment and lower-level violence, are significantly underreported and difficult to verify, and this study aims to be as consistent and all-encompassing as possible in its documentation of incidents, the threshold for inclusion has been set high and defined narrowly.

Along with incidents meeting the above criteria, three additional 'preparatory' activities have also been included. The first involves discoveries of bomb-making materials or significant weapons repositories belonging to far-right actors. A judgment of 'significant' is clearly subjective, but such repositories have been determined as 'significant' (or not) within the context of Australia's limited availability of weapons more generally. The second preparatory activity included involves terrorist plots that were disrupted or failed. Although such plots make up a significant share of terrorist activity, many previous studies completely overlook foiled or failed attacks,[99] resulting in skewed representations of overall terrorist activity.[100] Foiled and failed plots are included in order to capture the totality of planned and perpetrated activity (not just the number of attacks that happened to avoid police detection). The final group involves cases of far-right actors being detained in prison beyond their original sentences (after being jailed for right-wing–motivated offences that did not reach a level of severity to warrant inclusion), as their release was considered too high of a risk to the community.[101] These cases will be discussed in more detail during the analysis.

All incidents that occurred in Australia and met the aforementioned criteria were organised and catalogued into a Microsoft Excel database. In general, databases remain an underutilised resource in terrorism studies,[102] and such repositories have the potential to generate valuable insights by aggregating data and tracking trends across time.[103] When information was entered into the database, all individuals involved (both victims and perpetrators) were systematically

deidentified and each incident assigned a unique identifier code. Cases included occurred between 01 January 1990 and 31 December 2020, a time period selected for two reasons. Firstly, 1990 was the final full year that the National Inquiry into Racist Violence was able to collect national data. Thus, this study commences where previous known work on this topic ceased. Secondly, this is the same time-period that the aforementioned RTV dataset has covered with regard to fatal attacks in Western Europe.[104] Moving forward, this will facilitate more reliable comparisons of right-wing terrorism and violence across geographical locations. Information about relevant incidents was also organised and coded across the same 25 unique variables used by the RTV dataset.

## *Data Collection*

Information contained within the database was collected and triangulated via several interlinked stages of data collection. The process commenced with the use of a customised Boolean search string to query the Factiva news database. Initial searches were conducted by year, with more specific phrases and names used to elicit further information once potential incidents were identified. Approximately two-thirds of total cases were identified from this process. To identify cases that appeared in news sources beyond those covered by Factiva, the same search process was repeated using both ProQuest (an alternative news database to Factiva) and Trove (an online news collection hosted by the National Library of Australia). To cover the landscape of Australian news outlets which may have reported on violent incidents and create a more "complementary analysis" of press sources,[105] the digitised archives of left-wing publications including Green Left Weekly and the Star Observer were also searched.

The second stage of the data collection process involved the detailed reading of authoritative sources beyond traditional media.¶ This included the small number of previous academic studies of far-right activity in Australia and reports produced by a range of State and Federal Government agencies. These studies pieced together how current understandings of domestic far-right activity have emerged.

The third stage involved exploring the data generated by a range of interest groups. This began with aggregating monitoring exercises undertaken by a range of community organisations and identifying potential incidents missed by the media. This was followed by a review of current and historical** blogs and social media accounts run by anti-fascist actors including (but not limited to) 'Slackbastard,' 'Fight dem Back,' and the 'White Rose Society.' On the flip side, publications produced by a range of far-right organisations were reviewed, including historical newsletters and even a PhD written by the founder of National Action Australia (a document that raises some complicated ethical questions). While such data allowed a deeper understanding of events from a community perspective, incidents identified by these actors were not included unless they were able to be verified via additional information sources.

¶ Thank you to Tim Wilson and the St. Andrews CSTPV team for facilitating access to the Global History of Terrorism Archive.

**Accessed via Internet archive 'Wayback Machine.' https://archive.org/web/

The final stage involved searching for the court or coronial inquest documents associated with each individual event (with various unique data points for each incident used to search the Australasian Legal Information Institute database). For 19 percent of the sample, more authoritative and detailed information was able to be drawn from the sentencing comments of judges, detailed histories of perpetrators and even telephone intercepts and listening device transcripts presented in court. This additional information allowed for a more detailed recording of these incidents, and more nuanced assessments of the motivations of perpetrators. This review also resulted in the exclusion of a small number of incidents that were reported as far-right violence in the immediate aftermath of the attack, but were ultimately found to have been committed for other reasons. Overall, the triangulation of multiple data sources helped to reduce the biases and deficiencies inherent in each individual source, revealed different evidence (of varying quality), and helped to increase the credibility of the following analysis.[106]

## *Limitations*

Several limitations to this study must be noted. As this dataset was built using open sources of information, it is likely some incidents have been missed. Specific details within cases may also be missing, even where court documents, normally considered the 'gold standard' for information,[107] have been identified. This is the unfortunate result of studying any illicit network, and it is unrealistic to expect that any dataset could cover the details of all serious right-wing incidents occurring throughout a three-decade period across one of the geographically largest countries on Earth. The ability to identify violent incidents is also not even across time. The digitisation of many news archives only traces back to the late 1990s, making earlier searches less systematic. While some major newspapers have searchable archives reaching back to 1990, these sources primarily focus on major geographical locations. Therefore, the coverage of incidents in more regional areas throughout the 1990s will likely be less comprehensive. For this reason, significant caution should be used when comparing results pre-1997 to more recent data drawn from a wider variety of sources.

Media and community reports are also of a more uneven quality than information elicited from primary sources. Community actors can selectively exaggerate specific aspects of what happened, and information can differ significantly from the final, corroborated version of events found in court documents. Media reports can also be heavily biased towards fatal and/or spectacular attacks.[108] So along with missing data, there may also be mistakes in the database.[109] Finally, several of the more recent cases remain before the Australian judicial system, and cases will require revision as additional details become available. As such, this work should have absolutely no bearing on the guilt or innocence of any individuals.

## *An Additional Note Regarding Anti-Queer Violence*

It is also worth briefly noting the slightly different inclusion criteria operationalised for documenting violence targeting the Queer community.[††] Unlike incidents where target

†† 'Queer' is here being used as an umbrella term to capture a range of gender and sexuality identities including (but not limited to) lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual.

selection is premised on a negative view of ethnic minorities, attacks committed by actors adhering to homophobic beliefs are not necessarily far-right *per se*. Incidents included in this sample demonstrate a clear link to right-wing beliefs and a degree of premeditated targeting. Conversely, incidents categorised as spontaneous have largely been excluded, as such events were overwhelmingly committed by individuals seemingly motivated by issues other than right-wing extremism. Such incidents fall into two broad categories.

The first involves the victim initiating an interaction, and the perpetrator(s) reacting violently to a perceived homosexual advance. The second category involves spontaneous violence committed in public areas, often late at night, and frequently involving alcohol. Here there has been no known prior interaction between the victim(s) and perpetrator(s), and very limited information about the perpetrator is known (beyond the fact that they targeted the victim — at least in part — based on the latter's identity). While these incidents clearly contain homophobic elements, it is unable to be determined if such attacks were motivated by right-wing beliefs specifically.

A number of attacks against the Australian Queer community were also excluded as they were perpetrated by individuals from a range of other minority groups. Thus, the following dataset documents only a fraction of total attacks against the Queer community in Australia. Any attempt to more fully understand violence motivated by homophobic beliefs should therefore be conducted through a wider lens than just right-wing terrorism and violence.

## Results

An initial sample of 289 incidents was identified during this data collection process and coded into the database. Upon initial review, 44 were immediately excluded. In these cases, not enough information was available to sufficiently determine motive. Four incidents of internal violence among far-right groups were also excluded. Of the remaining 241 incidents, 117 were determined as warranting inclusion. The remaining 124 incidents were then reviewed across a series of meetings together with the RTV dataset research team. These group discussions explored a range of viewpoints related to the motive and severity of each incident. A number of coding rules were established, and these meetings facilitated an increased level of intercoder reliability between this study and the RTV dataset.[‡‡] Ultimately, from 289 incidents, 108 events were excluded, leaving a final sample of 181 unique cases. The following will explore these 181 events to determine whether incidents of right-wing violence and terrorism have actually increased in Australia over time.

## Incidents

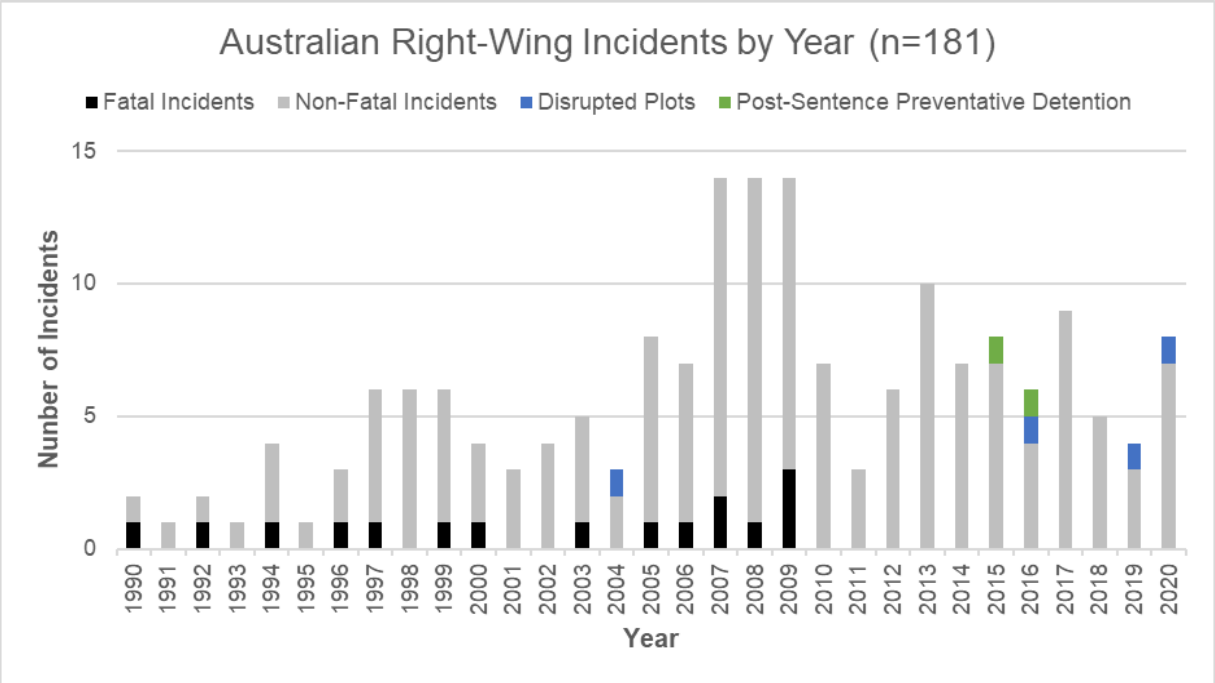
The first thing to note regarding the 181 incidents identified is that they are not evenly distributed across the period studied. As indicated by Figure 1 (which visualises the yearly distribution of incidents), a clear spike in violent incidents occurred between January 2005 and the end of 2009.[§§] This five-year period accounts for almost one-third (57) of total incidents.

‡‡Thank you to Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Madeleine Thorstensen, Charlotte Tandberg, Anders Ravik Jupskås, and Simone Sessolo for their advice and guidance in the development of this dataset.

§§ This period included the Cronulla Riots. The riots began on 11 December 2005 at North Cronulla Beach, with

How this happened will be explored throughout the following analysis.

*Figure 1 – Australian Right-Wing Incidents by Year*




The second notable finding is that, despite repeated statements from a range of government and academic sources, incidents of right-wing violence have not increased in recent years. There has been a comparative increase in the total number of incidents across the most recent decade, with 66 events taking place in the ten years following the 2005–2009 peak, compared to just 41 incidents across the decade preceding it. However, since 2013 the total number of incidents has largely trended downwards. Hence, recent statements indicating an increase in right-wing violence in Australia do not appear grounded in evidence or context.

As noted, previous reports of an increase in violent incidents need to be differentiated from statements warning of an increasing 'threat' of violence. To better understand such statements, it is necessary to examine the severity of the violence that is occurring. To do so, these 181 incidents have been divided across four broad categories. These include fatal incidents, non-fatal incidents, disrupted terrorist plots, and post-sentence preventative detention orders.

A total of sixteen fatal events occurred between 1990 and the end of 2020. These incidents resulted in sixteen separate fatalities, with no mass casualty attacks conducted by right-wing perpetrators. Importantly, 50 percent of these fatal incidents took place during the 5-year peak, while the remaining 50 percent occurred prior to 2005. With zero individuals killed by an act of right-wing violence for more than a decade in Australia, any perceived increase in the overall 'threat' cannot be based on violent events (either in total or severity). Notably, while a

a predominantly Caucasian Australian crowd becoming violent towards targets of Middle Eastern appearance. Ultimately 104 people were charged with 285 criminal offences (51 in relation to the events of 11 December, and 53 to reprisal attacks that occurred over the following days). For more detail see: New South Wales Police, Cronulla Riots Review of the Police Response: Chronology. Volume 2 of 4 (Sydney: Strike Force Neil, date unknown)

general decline in violence (and particularly lethal violence) may come as a surprise to many in Australia, this very much mirrors findings from Western Europe, where a clear decrease in lethal violence has also been occurring across recent times.[110]

Regarding the potential for such violence to occur, four foiled or failed terrorist plots were also identified within the dataset. Each was ranked according to 'attack plausibility,'[111] assessing a combination of relevant factors including capability and target selection.[112] The most advanced of these plots occurred in 2020 on the New South Wales South Coast, with 3 individuals arrested as part of a 'semi-mature' plot. In 2016 and 2004, plots categorised as 'intermediate' were intercepted by police in Victoria and Western Australia. A 'semi-vague' plot was also intercepted in Adelaide in 2019. These recent plots are often used as evidence of an increasing threat, particularly as prior to 2016 no right-wing individual had faced 'terrorism' charges. However, the limited maturity of two of these recent plots, coupled with the identification of a small number of other potentially violent cases in earlier years (see paragraph below), indicates an increasing willingness of police to intervene earlier in the investigative process (particularly following the 2019 Christchurch attack), rather than an increased threat of right-wing mass-casualty violence per se.

An additional five cases were coded as 'preparation for armed struggle.' Here, bomb-making materials and/or major arms repositories belonging to right-wing actors were discovered, but without any known discussions of potential targeting. These cases included a large cache of explosives found in an underground bunker in the lead-up to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, two men charged with manufacturing explosives in the aftermath of the 2005 Cronulla riots, a former soldier arrested in 2011 for storing explosives and weapons at his mother's house (and testing explosives in his backyard), a large cache of weapons discovered in 2015 by a Taskforce Maxima (investigating a drug distribution in far-North Queensland), and an Australian member of The Base¶¶ charged with possession of bomb-making materials. Although not considered plots, these cases certainly had the potential to evolve into incidents of mass casualty violence. Whether some of these events would have attracted a more serious terrorism charge if identified within today's political climate is an open question. However, the regular occurrence of such events over a period of time suggests that the threat of mass casualty violence by extreme-right actors is not new.

The third category involves individuals issued with post-sentence preventative detention orders. Here two Australians were jailed in New South Wales for right-wing–motivated offences that did not reach a level of severity to warrant inclusion. These men were subsequently assessed as posing an 'unacceptable risk to the community' (at least in part because of their beliefs), and were subjected to further detention and/or supervision beyond the terms of their original sentence. The emergence of these cases in recent years provides further evidence of an increasing political 'awareness' of far-right actors and lower risk tolerance for potential violence.

The final and largest category involves non-fatal incidents, which account for 85 percent (154)

¶¶ As of 2022, The Base was one of three extreme-right groups prescribed as 'Terrorist organisations' by the Australian Government, along with National Socialist Order and *Sonnenkrieg* Division.

of events within the dataset. For the reasons noted above, the period between 1990 and the end of 1996 also likely under-records such lower-severity violence. Clearly, non-fatal community–level attacks are the primary way in which right-wing violence manifests in Australia. It is also immediately clear that police, policymakers, and the media in Australia almost entirely overlook these more chronically occurring acts of violence when assessing the threat posed by the far right.

## Target Group

The primary identity group targeted in each of these 181 cases is presented below in Table 1. While a range of other individuals, including good Samaritans and bystanders, may also have been injured in these events, Table 1 lists only the primary target of the attack. Though these categories may be broad and imprecise, they reflect what the perpetrator understood their target to be (rather than a description of the victim specifically). Due to variations in the type of target selected over time, Table 1 is divided into three discrete time periods.

*Table 1 – Targets of Violence*

| Primary Identity Targeted | 1990–1999 | 2000–2009 | 2010–2020 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Indigenous Australian | 13 | 21 | 6 | 40 (22%) |
| Asian | 6 | 12 | 14 | 32 (18%) |
| Indian subcontinent | - | 9 | 19 | 28 (15%) |
| Muslim / Middle Eastern | 2 | 12 | 9 | 23 (13%) |
| Black African | 1 | 10 | 6 | 17 (9%) |
| Queer | 8 | 2 | 6 | 16 (9%) |
| Pacific Islander | - | 3 | 1 | 4 (2%) |
| Jewish | - | 2 | 1 | 3 (2%) |
| Bystander | - | 2 | - | 2 (1%) |
| Left-Wing | 1 | - | 1 | 2 (1%) |
| Deserter | 1 | - | - | 1 (1%) |
| Unknown | - | 3 | 10 | 13 (7%) |
| **Total** | **32** | **76** | **73** | **181** |

Since the colonisation of Australia, there has been extensive violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities. Between 1788 and 1930, 421 unique massacre sites of Indigenous Australians have been identified, with notable clusters occurring between 1872 and 1896.[113] Serious violence was also perpetrated by far-right actors against this group in the years immediately preceding this analysis.*** Such events included:

- an incident at a 'whites only' roadhouse in Willowra, where Indigenous people could only purchase alcohol from a hole cut in the back door. The publican refused service to two Indigenous men who entered requesting food, and an argument followed. One Indigenous man was shot dead, and the other wounded.[114]

*** More than 500 Indigenous Australians have also died in custody since 1991.

- five Indigenous people drinking together in Alice Springs that were given alcohol by a group of 'white' men. The alcohol was laced with a poisonous substance, and all five were killed.[115]
- a group of 'Anglo' men that drove through a remote Indigenous campsite, harassing residents and attacking them with baseball bats. The group later returned with guns, shooting a young boy in the knee and a pregnant woman in the stomach.[116]

Table 1 demonstrates that Indigenous people have also been the most frequent target of right-wing violence in Australia post 1990. Along with accounting for almost one in every four attacks committed across the past three decades, 50 percent of fatal incidents were also perpetrated against Indigenous targets.

On paper, there does appear to be a reduction in the number of attacks targeting Indigenous Australians across the past decade. However, these figures should be treated with caution. While there are almost certainly unreported incidents targeting all minority groups (at least to some degree), this problem is likely particularly pronounced among Indigenous communities. Not only does this group have a troubled relationship with police and the criminal justice system (with high levels of distrust making individuals hesitant to report), but much of the violence targeting Indigenous Australians also occurs in extremely remote locations (with limited media coverage and policing presence). This means that the percentage of total incidents recorded against Indigenous Australians is likely underestimated.

The other group potentially underrepresented is the Queer community. While incidents involving such victims appear largely concentrated in metropolitan locations, many events likely remain unreported due to a historical distrust of (and mistreatment by) police.[117] Moreover, when violence against the Indigenous or Queer communities is reported, the subsequent reaction from media and government is simply not comparable to the volume of coverage (identified by this study) following incidents targeting other ethnic or religious communities. This may be due (at least in part) to the fact that the Indigenous and Queer communities have comparably less well-organised and well-resourced advocacy groups than the Jewish, Muslim, or Indian Australian communities do. So, while the Indigenous and Queer communities are the victims of more than 60 percent of fatal events and account for 30 percent of total incidents across the sample, violence targeting these groups likely constitutes an even greater percentage of overall incidents.

Forty-three percent of attacks targeted minority ethnic groups. These attacks cluster around specific locations and time periods and appear to directly correlate with waves of migration (and an associated increase in the visibility of these communities). This phenomenon is particularly notable for the Indian community. No violence was identified as targeting this group prior to 2005. However, they are the most targeted victim group since that time, and the only community to suffer a significant increase in attacks across the past decade. There is also a clearly identifiable escalation in the targeting of the Muslim community following 11 September, 2001. While a reported increase in violent incidents following the first Gulf War appears to be over-emphasised by previous studies,[118] an increase is certainly evident post–September 2001.

Finally, it is worth noting the consistency in the total number of incidents occurring across the past two decades (with 76 incidents in the 10 years between 2000–2009, and 73 in the eleven years between 2010 and the end of 2020). While there has been an evolution in the targets of far-right violence, the number of attacks occurring appears remarkably stable. What has occurred is a complete reduction in fatal attacks.

## Perpetrator Type

Table 2 presents the type of attacker identified as committing each incident. Of the 174 incidents where the perpetrators were able to be identified, more than 90 percent were carried out by lone actors (single perpetrators who commit attacks alone), informal groups (three or more individuals with a general right-wing commitment, but whose association primarily relies on social bonds) or unorganised perpetrators (two or more perpetrators with unknown or no association to any specific right-wing group, cell, or gang).

*Table 2 – Perpetrator Type*

| Attacker | Incidents | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Directed / Organised / Affiliated | 10 | 5% |
| Social / Informal / Unorganised | 99 | 55% |
| Lone actor | 65 | 36% |
| Unknown | 7 | 4% |
| **Total** | **181** | **100%** |

Contrarily, only 5 percent of perpetrators had any known affiliation to an organised far-right group (whether acting on instruction from the group, or on their own initiative).††† Moreover, most of the incidents affiliated with organised groups occurred during the early 1990s. To be clear, organised far-right groups were active throughout the period studied, and their actions pose a larger existential threat to Australian liberal democracy by gradually widening the Overton window and undermining government institutions. They also frequently harass and intimidate opposition and minority groups, both online and offline.[119] However, while such organisations may be increasingly visible, only a vanishingly small number of violent incidents have been perpetrated by individuals associated with organised far-right groups in Australia across the past twenty years. When extreme right groups do perpetrate serious (including lethal) acts of violence, it is much more likely to be directed towards other members of the far right rather than the wider community.

For twenty of these 181 incidents, the level of planning involved could not be determined. More than half (58 percent) were coded as spontaneous. Such acts were mostly triggered by unexpected encounters and were predominantly perpetrated by lone actors or small unorganised groups. None resulted in fatalities. The remaining incidents involved a perpetrator (or perpetrators) pursuing a predefined person or target group in a premeditated attack.

††† Among actors affiliated with organised groups, there is no evidence of any connection to transnational far-right networks. While information may of course be missing, and there is certainly evidence of ideas being shared trans-nationally, those perpetrating violence appear geographically isolated and almost entirely disconnected form wider transnational networks.

Every single fatal attack (sixteen) was determined to be premeditated, as were (by definition) all four disrupted terrorism plots. Thus the twenty cases with the most serious outcome (or potentially most serious) were all premeditated. Given these differences in overall outcomes, future research may benefit from analysing premeditated and spontaneous attacks as distinctly different forms of far-right violence.

Notably, only five of the 57 premeditated incidents were carried out by a lone actor (excluding foiled attacks), and none were affiliated with any form of organised group. Where lone actors associated with the far right have carried out premeditated attacks in other broadly comparable Western countries, these events have had a devastating impact (see for example the 2019 Christchurch or 2017 Quebec attacks). Thus, better understanding this subgroup of five perpetrators might be helpful in reducing the risk of a mass casualty incident of far-right violence in Australia.

## Weapons

The primary weapon (or method of attack) used in each incident is documented in Table 3.

*Table 3 – Primary Weapon Used*

| Attack Type | Number of Total Incidents | Percentage Total | Number of Fatal Incidents |
|---|---|---|---|
| Severe beating | 90 | 50% | 5 |
| Knife / sharp object | 26 | 15% | 3 |
| Blunt instrument | 23 | 12% | 5 |
| Firearms | 13 | 7% | 2 |
| Glass | 10 | 6% | - |
| Explosives | 8 | 5% | - |
| Car | 4 | 2% | 1 |
| Petrol bomb | 3 | 2% | - |
| Sexual assault | 2 | 1% | - |
| Arson | 2 | 1% | - |
| Other | 1 | 1% | - |

Differences in the level of planning behind each incident are also reflected in the type of weapon used. As the majority of right-wing violence appears to be spontaneous, it is no surprise that 50 percent of incidents involved no weapons. A number of the blunt-instrument attacks also appear to involve improvised weapons spontaneously discovered at the scene of the event, as do all 10 incidents classified as 'glassing.' Such cases broadly involve a perpetrator attempting to push an empty beer or whisky glass into a victim's head or face (as opposed to using glass as a stabbing weapon or a bottle as a blunt object). This particular type of violence appears unique to Australia. While the use of a glass bottle as a weapon was occasionally documented within the RTV dataset, this was largely in the context of group or mob using bottles as projectiles. Overall, the vast majority of right-wing attacks in Australia appear to come from lone actors or small unorganised groups, perpetrating spontaneous acts of violence using readily available (or no) weaponry. As noted by the 2022 RTV report, such "lower-scale, but still severe, right-

wing violence is probably causing more fear and intimidation … than mass-casualty terrorist attacks are."[120]

Only 12 percent of incidents involved the use (or planned use) of explosives or firearms, which is likely related to the extreme difficulty of obtaining such weapons. Australia is widely recognised as having some of the most stringent firearm regulations in the world,[121] and many of the components used to construct explosives are also heavily monitored. The scarcity of such dangerous weaponry is likely also responsible (at least in part) for the low levels of lethality among Australian incidents. That less than 10 percent of incidents produced a fatal outcome, and that there were zero mass casualty attacks across the period studied, is surely related to the low numbers of firearms used in attacks, and that any firearms used were of a low calibre and/or capacity. Such firearm controls may also have contributed to the Christchurch gunman's decision to conduct his attack in New Zealand, and not his country of birth, Australia.[122] In his manifesto, the attacker showed significant awareness of firearm restrictions, and noted his attack would impact future gun ownership in New Zealand.[123] Less than a month after the incident, New Zealand's parliament banned military-style, semi-automatic weapons.[124] Thus the banning of firearms, particularly high calibre rifles such as the AR-15–style guns used by the Christchurch shooter or the semi-automatic rifle used by the Utøya attacker, should be considered an important step in helping prevent mass casualty attacks.

## Location

In terms of where this violence has occurred, Figure 2 visualises the location of all 181 incidents. As demonstrated below, far-right violence clusters around major population centres, and has occurred in every capital city across Australia. While Figure 2 does not immediately highlight any specific city or region as particularly problematic, it is worth analysing this information in more detail.

*Figure 2 – Australian Incidents by Location*

Seventy-six percent of all incidents occurred within Australia's three most populous states. As these states host approximately 77 percent of Australia's total population, these results are somewhat unsurprising. The Northern Territory and Queensland do have a marginally higher share of incidents than their share of population, while South Australia and NSW have a marginally lower share. However, given the small number of incidents, not too much can be read into these small variations. But when incidents are broken down between metropolitan and regional areas, two locations appear significant.

*Table 4 – Incidents by Location and Compared to Population*

| State | Capital city | Regional | Total | Percentage | % of population‡‡‡ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Victoria | 41 | 7 | 48 | 26% | 25% (6,593,300) |
| Queensland | 14 | 31 | 45 | 25% | 21% (5,296,100) |
| New South Wales | 26 | 18 | 44 | 25% | 31% (8,130,100) |
| Western Australia | 14 | 7 | 21 | 12% | 11% (2,773,400) |
| Northern Territory | 4 | 4 | 8 | 4% | 1% (250,400) |
| South Australia | 6 | 0 | 6 | 3% | 7% (1,815,500) |
| Tasmania | 6 | 0 | 6 | 3% | 2% (571,200) |
| Australian Capital Territory | 3 | 0 | 3 | 2% | 2% (455,900) |
| **Total** | **114 (63%)** | **67 (37%)** | **181** | **100%** | **25,890,000 approx.** |

In terms of both total incidents, and events relative to population, metropolitan Melbourne (the capital of Victoria) emerges as the epicentre of far-right violence in Australia. Almost one quarter of total incidents, including one in four lethal events, occurred at this location. Interestingly, almost 30 percent of metropolitan Melbourne incidents occurred between mid-2007 and the end of 2009. This cluster of events provides further context to the spike in violence previously identified.

In recent years, Melbourne has also been home to some of Australia's most prominent organised far-right groups. Thus, the location often recognised as the most progressive capital city in Australia also appears to be the 'capital' of far-right activism and violence. This finding supports previous research suggesting that while public repression and stigmatisation of far-right actors and opinions may prevent some from joining radical right groups, it may also fuel anger and resentment among the far right and push more hardcore supporters towards increasingly extreme and violent actions.[125] This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated historically in the emergence of Black Vienna during the early 20th century.[126] It is therefore unfortunate that the Victorian Government's recent inquiry into far-right extremism did not explore the prevalence of far-right violence in Victoria (and who may be committing it), or more critically analyse how government messaging might be impacting levels of far-right activism and violence.

‡‡‡ Approximate population estimates are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics - March 2022. See https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release.

While large cities predictably produced clusters of violence, more than one in three incidents occurred within regional locations, including five of the 16 fatal events. In particular, North Queensland (including far-North Queensland) emerged as particularly significant. Although this area is relatively sparsely populated and geographically enormous, North Queensland accounts for more than 17 percent of total violence. A cluster of incidents is also clearly identifiable in this area between January 1997 and December 1999. Interestingly, the regional areas surrounding Melbourne experienced a comparatively low number of events. Overall though, incidents occurring in regional areas appear to significantly outpace their expected share of violence (relative to population size). Given the lack of media and policing resources dedicated to regional locations, these figures also potentially underestimate the problem. Hence there is a clear need to better understand far-right violence in regional areas throughout Australia, particularly in North Queensland.

## Discussion

Since the conclusion of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in 1991, the prevalence of serious right-wing violence and terrorism in Australia is largely unknown. Despite vast sums of money being invested into understanding and countering violent extremism,[127] there remains no systematic national method to monitor right-wing violence (a key recommendation from 1991). Consequently, government agencies, academics, and media pundits have regularly been able to announce increases in violence, without also having to provide any longitudinal evidence by which to have these claims judged. Based on the highly-regarded RTV dataset, this study has provided an evidence base by which such statements can now be assessed.

While there has been an evolution in the type and targets of violence in Australia over time, this study has demonstrated that no clear increase in serious right-wing violence has occurred in recent years. A clear spike in violent incidents was identified between January 2005 and the end of 2009. This surge may have been related to the arrest of the country's first 'homegrown' Jihadists in 2005, an event that sparked much public debate regarding the role of immigration and immigrants. Research comparing this spike in violence to what occurred in Canada following the arrest of the Toronto 18, or in the UK following the 7/7 bombings, may shed further light into this hypothesis. Further research is also clearly required to understand why events decreased from 2010 onwards. Regardless of the specific drivers, a key takeaway is that between January 2010 and December 2020 there was a complete absence of fatal right-wing violence, and a notable reduction in violent incidents across most years.

This paper did identify an increase in terrorist plots in recent times, mirroring findings from Western Europe.[128] Still it remains difficult to determine whether these events indicate a growth in planned mass-casualty attacks by right-wing actors, or if these arrests are indicative of an increase in government attention (and an increased willingness of police to intervene earlier) following the 2019 Christchurch attack. Initial evidence from this study would suggest the latter, and does not support claims of an 'increasing' threat of far-right violence in Australia. However, further research comparing the maturity of recently foiled far-right plots, to violence planned and perpetrated by Jihadist actors, would assist in making a more fulsome assessment.

Only a vanishingly small number of violent incidents were perpetrated by those associated with organised far-right groups. While such associations were common throughout the 1980s, serious violence affiliated with far-right groups has been almost nonexistent across the past 20 years. This indicates that research into modern Australian far-right groups is largely disconnected from research into far-right violence. Notably, this is the complete opposite of what has occurred with Australian Jihadist violence. Here the study of Australian Jihadist groups and Australian Jihadist violence heavily overlaps, as more than 90 percent of incidents have been planned or perpetrated by those affiliated with groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS.[129] This suggests that while prescribing groups as 'terrorist' organisations may be useful for combating Jihadists, this action would likely have a very limited effect on reducing levels of right-wing violence in Australia. Other responses are clearly required.

The vast majority of right-wing attacks appear to have come from lone actors or small unorganised groups perpetrating spontaneous violence using readily available (or no) weaponry. Current methods for policing and prosecuting violent extremist activity almost entirely overlook this more chronic form of violence, as do media outlets and policymakers, who tend to focus on highly idiosyncratic and spectacular incidents of premeditated violence that are not representative of the overwhelming majority of cases. A similar phenomenon is seen with Jihadist violence, highlighting the importance of methodologically rigorous and well-maintained databases to source information.

One positive finding was that zero mass casualty attacks occurred across the period studied. This may be related to the fact that only 7 percent of incidents involved the use (or planned use) of firearms. Where firearms were actually used in a realised attack, these weapons were only of a low calibre and limited capacity, lessening the potential for significant casualties. A small number of planned attacks also appear to have been detected as perpetrators attempted to procure firearms. Hence, high levels of firearm regulation have almost certainly helped to identify (and in turn prevent) planned attacks, and have likely reduced casualties when attacks have occurred. Relatedly, the Christchurch attacker appears to have chosen New Zealand (at least in part) to access firearms not readily available in Australia. Moving forward, the strict regulation of firearms, particularly the banning of high-calibre rifles such as those used in the Christchurch or Utøya attacks, should be considered a key pillar of Australian counter-terrorism efforts.

Indigenous Australians have not traditionally been recognised as victims of violent extremist activity, despite being the most frequent target of right-wing violence in Australia. This community was the victim of almost one in every four attacks committed across the past three decades, including 50 percent of fatal incidents. This finding has implications for scholarly understandings of the far right, and what nativist views of society mean when applied to settler colonialist states with Indigenous populations. Moreover, while CVE efforts are often focused towards religious and ethnic minorities with well-organised advocacy groups, this study indicates that Indigenous communities need to be given a more prominent voice in such discussions—particularly in more regional locations, where more than one in three incidents have occurred.

That right-wing violence has been spread across all major Australian cities and regional centres has significant implications for CT efforts. Australia's CT infrastructure was primarily constructed to address a Jihadist threat which is highly networked, geographically concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney, and linked transnationally. While metropolitan Melbourne experienced the highest number of far-right events, less than 40 percent of total incidents occurred within the country's two largest cities. Right-wing violence is a much more geographically diffuse phenomenon. Whether the post Christchurch focus of CT agencies on far-right actors can be effectively deployed to combat this geographically decentralised and unorganised threat is highly questionable. While existing practices will likely identify targets associated with organised groups in major metropolitan locations, this study has demonstrated that such actors are not those most likely to commit right-wing violence.

Addressing the hundreds of right-wing perpetrators identified in this study would also require more agile and less centralised CVE programs, incorporating a wider range of existing services. However, conducting individually tailored interventions with far-right actors would likely be a more effective use of CVE resources than existing programs intended to build resilience or prevent violence across entire communities. To date, such prevention efforts remain largely unable to demonstrate any impact on the problem of violent extremism in Australia,[130] and building social cohesion or increasing resilience remains "more the role of cultural metaphor than … a well-developed scientific concept."[131]

## Conclusion

This work has documented incidents of far-right terrorism and violence that occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020 and questions the prevailing logic that right-wing violence is increasing. Tracking incidents across a three-decade period has allowed conclusions to be made regarding right-wing violence that are grounded in data and able to be compared to other Western countries. This evidence has shown that while increasing attention may be focused on the far right post-Christchurch, in Australia, serious incidents of right-wing violence have not increased in either frequency or severity across recent years. Rather, this study has demonstrated an almost complete reduction in fatal violence across the last decade. Though headline worthy, whether or not instances of violence increase or decrease across any particular year is potentially not the most helpful question. Instead, it is important to recognise where and how this violence is occurring and analyse whether Australia's existing CT and CVE infrastructure can be effectively deployed to combat the chronic violence that continues to manifest. Ultimately, this may require reducing the hyperfocus on far-right groups with prominent branding and rhetoric, and reallocating resources towards combating those extreme-right actors that actually engage in violence.

This study has also confirmed that far-right violence is a context-dependent phenomenon and that the problem manifests in unique ways within and across Australia. Future research should aim to better understand why violence has evolved in particular ways in Australia over time. Studies that report a spike in right-wing violence in Australia in future years should also be read with significant caution. Much of the country spent large parts of 2020 and 2021 in strict

COVID-19-related lockdowns — hence any 'increase' in violent events across 2021 or 2022 should be understood in the context of increased public interaction following the lifting of significant social restrictions. These specific circumstances may cause a blip in the data. Moving forward, statements regarding trends in right-wing violence should be made within historical context, rather than focusing on any one particular year or event in isolation. While the data presented here may be imperfect, they provide a basis by which such judgements can now be made.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Public Health Crisis and Hate Crimes:
## Deciphering the Proliferation of Anti-Asian Violence in the US before and during COVID-19

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The substantial increase in far-right violence in the United States in the last few years was also manifested by the intensification of attacks against Asian American communities and individuals. This trend was especially evident during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current paper utilises a natural experimental design and a multitude of analyses (descriptive, geospatial, and advanced regressions) to illustrate the intricate combination of factors that facilitated anti-Asian violence during the pandemic and the various paths in which public health crises may enhance the persecution of minorities. The findings illustrate that the main drivers of anti-Asian violence are not related to changing focus among organised hate groups, but to environmental and economic stress factors which, combined with existing xenophobic narratives, have legitimised anti-Asian violence. Additionally, we identified a clear association between othering rhetoric, also operationalised by President's Trump *kung flu* remarks and the subsequent increase in anti-Asian violence. Overall, our findings provide important insights into our understanding of the endogenous and exogenous factors that facilitate hate-related violence against minorities during public health crises.

**Keywords:** Asian-American victims, hate crimes, targeted violence, bias crimes, COVID-19

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# Introduction

The link between public health crises and the prosecution of minorities and vulnerable populations is well documented in human history.[1] Most evidence illustrates that xenophobia and racism increase in societies affected by major health crises such as pandemics, especially those that involve major loss of life.[2] In the middle of the 14th century, many towns in German-speaking territories massacred their Jewish communities.[3] Some historians attribute these massacres to the anxiety created by the Black Death, a disease that was sweeping over Europe during this period.[4] However, others presented a more complicated picture. Ritzman asserted that, in many cases, the plague was a thin veil that disguised deep-rooted antisemitic sentiments and practices in that society. [5] Many of those massacres were carefully planned and supported by various religious and political associations, and were continued regardless of the impact of the plague. This more nuanced picture of the historical context highlights a debate over whether or not a public health crisis is indeed a trigger for the persecution of minorities. Moreover, how and to what extent can a public health crisis still facilitate violence against different minority groups in the modern era, considering that the public is more knowledgeable about the origins of health risks, and minorities in many democracies enjoy legal and constitutional protections?

An opportunity to examine these questions emerged from two parallel developments in the United States (US) during 2020 and 2021. First, the US suffered one of its most challenging recent public health crises with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first year since the pandemic outbreak, more than half a million Americans died due to COVID-19 complications.[6] The development of policy response and vaccines occurred roughly in the same period. Second, despite the implementation of lockdowns and similar measures, which were supposed to limit social interactions, a growing number of reports seemed to suggest a dramatic increase in bias crimes against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the US, believed and publicised to have originated in China, potentially triggered deep-rooted animosity and negative sentiments towards Asian Americans.[7] This widespread change in public attitudes has had a direct impact on Asian American communities. According to a survey report by the Pew Research Center, a third of Asian Americans "fear threats, physical attacks, and most say violence against them is rising."[8] Nearly half of the responders reported that they have "experienced an incident tied to their racial or ethnic background since the [COVID-19] pandemic began."[9] These reports of Asians being targeted are similar to those which followed the spread of SARS in 2003, another respiratory disease that originated in Southeast Asia. In 2003, it was found that states like New York and California which had greater numbers of SARS cases and larger Asian American populations saw the highest levels of anxiety regarding the disease. More worryingly, as the racialisation of the SARS disease in the media proliferated, racist attacks towards Asians in North America also increased.[10]

The current study uses a natural experimental design defined by a clearly identified intervention, in this case, the proliferation of COVID-19. The study is based on the US experience with COVID-19 and anti-Asian violence to identify the specific ways in which pandemics may facilitate hostility and violence against minorities. Key considerations when developing such a design are the

source of variation in exposure and the size and nature of the expected effects. In the case of the current research, the intervention was abrupt and affected the entire US population. Thus, it is difficult to negate the impact of the intervention and makes the evaluation process more straightforward. Specifically, we will be (i) evaluating if COVID-19 led to an increase in anti-Asian violence; (ii) utilising a multifaceted approach to examine various factors that may be associated with the emergence of anti-Asian hate-related violence.

# Literature Review

## *Epidemics and a History of Hate*

Throughout history, othering, discrimination, and hate directed at minority groups have been linked to numerous pandemics/epidemics.[11] Epidemics, for the purposes of this paper, refer to abnormal spikes in a specific disease's prevalence, which can have devastating impacts on societies in the form of skyrocketing death tolls and negative economic impacts.[12]

As already mentioned above, one of the most well-known examples of hate and violence being unleashed against minorities in history occurred following the outbreak of the Black Death from 1347–1351.[13] During the spread of this deadly illness, minorities across Europe including Catalans and Jews were mass murdered and targeted.[14] Individuals from these ethnic groups were burned alive out of fear that they were the sources of the disease due to stereotypes that they were filthy and contaminated.[15] More recent instances of health-related hostilities towards minorities occurred when New York City saw a spike in infectious diseases in the early 20th century.[16] In this instance, Jewish individuals and other immigrant populations, such as Italians, were targeted due to the stereotypes at the time that associated them with dirty, slum-like living conditions.[17] At roughly the same period, the Black community, specifically in Chicago, was blamed for the spread of influenza.[18] Underlying racial hatred made White people perceive their Black neighbours as vessels of disease.[19] Thus, they were seen as deserving of punishment and thus unworthy of proper medical treatment for bringing disease into White communities.[20] More recently, in 2003, when mass media publicised the H1N1 virus's suspected origins in Mexican pig farms, the outbreak was subsequently associated with Hispanic Americans. This racial association increased suspicion and othering of Hispanic minorities at the time.[21] In each of these instances, certain minority groups were targeted due to their specific ties to a given public health crisis either due to preexisting stereotypes about a disease, or reports about disease origins.

To conclude, throughout periods of societal health crises, it has been common for the dominant societal group to engage in othering where underlying racism/xenophobia might surface and result in marginalised and stigmatised groups being scapegoated.[22] Yet, importantly, the examples above reflect that not all minorities are targeted during public health crises. Only groups that were already suffering from negative stereotypical associations regarding health and disease at the time, or those that were associated with a disease's origin, were targeted.

## *COVID-19: Impact on Minorities*

Reminiscent of past epidemiological events, both internationally and specifically in the American context, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to have disproportionately affected minorities both medically and socially.[23] Not only were minorities dying and becoming ill from COVID-19 at rates disproportionate to their representation in the population, but minority groups were also experiencing increases in stigmatisation, blaming, hate, and even violence due to the pandemic.[24] Many of the pandemic's negative consequences impacting American society were heightened for minority groups including a lack of access to health services and pandemic precautions, decreased mental health and well-being, and traumatic experiences with hate/violence.[25] Basic COVID-19 prevention precautions in the US, such as the enforcement of mask wearing, took an unequal toll on minority communities. Black and Asian Americans (compared to White Americans) reported higher levels of race-based social identity threats either from the police or the public.[26] Black Americans also reported feeling greater levels of fear regarding police and societal biases, with worries that stereotypes regarding Black criminality could affect the interpretation of their mask wearing.[27] Relatedly, Asian Americans experienced greater stigmatisation for wearing masks due to negative societal associations between Asia, masks, and disease.[28] Additionally, the pandemic's negative impacts on mental health disproportionately affected minorities. Recent research found that due to the heightened perceptions of stigmatisation and fear, Asian Americans experienced greater levels of psychological distress compared to other racial groups.[29]

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately taken a negative toll on the mental health of minorities, but it has also resulted in an increase in race-based hostility and violence. According to FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) crime statistics, hate crimes in 2020 (the first year of the pandemic) have been at their highest since 2008.[30] In a survey that simulated discriminatory intent after being primed about COVID-19, it was found that minorities, including Hispanics and Asians, were more prone to experiencing prejudice and discrimination in relation to the pandemic.[31] Multiple studies have produced similar findings, with one study of visible minorities in Canada reporting that minorities perceived an increase in race-based harassment and attacks during COVID-19, with Asians experiencing the greatest impact.[32]

In addition to research related to the impact of COVID-19 on minorities generally, some studies have specifically examined the association between the pandemic and anti-Asian hate.[33] In order to capture the large volume of anti-Asian hate that was manifesting online, one study created a dataset of hateful tweets towards Asian Americans and found that hateful individuals tended to coalesce rather than exist in isolation.[34] Additionally, several studies have found that after President Trump referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" and kung flu, there was an increase in anti-Asian hate speech online and behaviours such as discrimination against Asian-owned businesses.[35] Cao et al. even found that hate incidents in Trump-supporting counties spiked by 4000 percent in the days following his "China virus" tweet.[36] Exposure to this hate online and in society resulted in many Asian Americans living fearfully during the pandemic, with some reporting feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods and not being comfortable walking alone at night.[37] In one study looking at public perceptions, Asian Americans were reported as

being two times as likely to have experienced COVID-19-related discrimination compared to Whites.[38]

Considering the above dynamics, we can hypothesise that: (H1) *the likelihood that a county experiences anti-Asian violent incidents will increase during the COVID-19 pandemic* and that the (H2) *Public othering of the Asian community in relation to the pandemic will result in an increase in anti-Asian hate incidents.*

## *Explaining Hate during Health Crises – Theoretical Perspective*

Pandemics have long been associated with hate, and greater amounts of violence are historically associated with especially deadly epidemics.[39] Several explanations are commonly used to understand such dynamics. To begin with, health crisis situations tend to undermine the legitimacy and popularity of state authorities.[40] This dynamic then increases the likelihood of violence against authorities and epidemic control-related personnel.[41] In such a situation, it is unsurprising that authorities are facing greater challenges in generally maintaining law and order, as well as specifically protecting vulnerable societal groups such as minorities.

Some scholars assert that health crises trigger underlying societal prejudices and stereotypes, which then guide individuals' attitudes and actions due to heightened awareness of threats and stress.[42] For example, news reports with certain linguistic cues might trigger individuals to recall prior epidemiological events that were connected to underlying ethnic fears or blaming.[43] Such a process seems to have been at play in the case of COVID-19. A long history of discrimination, stigmatisation, and fear regarding the Asian–American community has culminated in anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The identification of Wuhan, China, as the source of COVID-19 by mass media, President Donald Trump's coining of the name *Chinese Virus*, and similar evocative rhetoric surrounding the pandemic and Asians sparked both preexisting and new fears and prejudices for many Americans towards the minority group.[44] It is thus not surprising that an examination of social media use during the pandemic found that when individuals trust that social media is accurate, they are more likely to have feelings that Chinese individuals are a threat.[45]

Moreover, media reports during the early pandemic were focused on hygienic issues present in Chinese wet markets, with discussions about the consumption of bats. These types of discourse set the stage for xenophobic sentiments to emerge against Asian Americans.[46] Many Asian Americans' fears regarding societal perceptions of the illness spreading/originating in their communities led them to develop worries about "coughing while Asian" in public so as not to become a target.[47]

The impact of hateful rhetoric on the facilitation of hate crimes is also understood from a psychological cost-benefit perspective. A model presented by Polinsky and Shavell posits that the "hater" (potential perpetrator who holds hateful sentiments) would decide to commit an offense only if the illegal perceived gain would exceed the expected sanction.[48] The *taste* for hate (perceived gain) can be enhanced "if the misfortunate events and suffering inflicted on the hated by others add to the hate capital of the hater we are considering, [...] The hater may start

to feel better if they are being legitimated by a group."[49] In other words, an individual/group that holds hateful beliefs may become morally justified when others share in these sentiments as well, or condone hateful/discriminatory behaviour, and thus perceive an elevated evaluation of potential gains.

Other perspectives on prejudice and hate hypothesise that blaming some *other* for the circumstances soothes one's anxieties about disease contraction or spread.[50] Similarly, the integrated threat theory (ITT) posits that when a group perceives a threat (such as an epidemic), prejudice and discrimination towards a minority group are likely to enhance group solidarity and a sense of resiliency.[51] The relatively high number of anti-Asian assaults by other minority groups, especially spontaneous attacks,[52] reflect such potential facilitators of hate.

The dynamics presented above, which illustrate a specific process in which COVID-19 facilitated anti-Asian sentiments while having potentially more limited effect on other types of crimes, led us to hypothesise that *(H3) general crime rates will not be correlated with anti-Asian hate crime rates.* Hence, we would like to examine if the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes is resulting from growing animosity towards Asian Americans or from a broader increase in crime, resulting more from the overall increase in stress factors during a public health crisis.

## *Economics, Relative Deprivation, and COVID-19*

Psychological literature also explains economic-related drivers of hate. Olzak and Nagel argue that hate manifests when access to resources is threatened by the expansion of a previously segregated minority group into the same housing and labour markets that a majority group already occupies.[53] Thus, it is important to consider how shifting economic conditions, combined with instability and insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic impacted trends of anti-Asian hate.

Despite overt racism and harmful stereotypes experienced by the Asian community in the US, given our data, anti-Asian violence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was a rare event. However, racist rhetoric in the public sphere may not be the only driving factor in initiating this spate of politically motivated hate-related violence. Prior to 2020, anti-Asian sentiments could be attributed to the steady economic development of Asian communities in comparison to other racial and ethnic minorities in the US. Over a period of 30 years, from 1980 to 2010, neighbourhood inequality between White Americans and Asian Americans in the US closed drastically, more than any other racial or ethnic group has achieved in the same amount of time.[54] Targeting Asian Americans prior to COVID-19 could indicate levels of racial resentment and jealousy of Asian Americans' growing prosperity despite their status as a racial minority.[55] Non-Asian individuals thus may have acted violently towards Asian Americans based on the belief that they are comparatively deprived, competing for the same opportunities, or losing social, political, and economic status.[56]

In the context of COVID-19, these grievances were expressed through stigmatisation and targeting of Asian Americans and their property because of biases that accumulated due to the pandemic. Expectations set by historical precedent which are not met or guaranteed relative to

their group's past position may drive grievance and the willingness to politically mobilise or, in some cases, commit violence against a targeted out–group.[57] Members of dominant groups may perceive a loss of status, albeit social, economic, or political, as a deprivation relative to their historical position.[58] Thus, those whose status deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic were relatively deprived in comparison with their past selves. Mask mandates, quarantines, shop closures, social distancing, and other governmental mandates, as well as resource scarcity and economic uncertainty, increased grievances and financial anxiety across the country.[59] The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues throughout the socioeconomic stratum which increased social tension and economic issues, raising the likelihood of the majority perceiving a threat. This provides further context for the rarity of anti-Asian incidents prior to the pandemic. COVID-19's detrimental economic and social effects were placed on the shoulders of Asian Americans by elites who were deflecting blame.

Additionally, those who were impacted by unemployment during the pandemic were also looking for targets. Blue-collar and service jobs were furloughed to stop the spread of the disease, fuelling grievances. Furloughed workers may have taken a drop in pay or in working hours, which resulted in taking on other middle- and low-paying employment or side hustles.[60] Many experienced a decrease in their quality of life and work/life balance, as well as high levels of economic anxiety.[61] While they may have remained employed on paper, many people likely lost income or the stability of a steady paycheque. Further, these low-wage earners who were required to work in-person jobs were more likely to be at risk of contracting COVID-19, thereby increasing their family's risk.[62] This resulted in disparate mortality and morbidities for those in the working class.[63] We posit that employed people who were struggling to make ends meet may have had more grievance and motivation to target an out–group because of the economic toll they faced by no fault of their own.

COVID-19 provided sufficient motivation for political mobilisation due to heightened economic anxieties, which resulted in the perception that the in-groups were not only being deprived, but that it was the fault of the scapegoated group (Asian Americans).[64] This further develops into a perception of threat from the aggrieved in-group to justify social ostracisation or even violence.[65] In conjunction with othering, scapegoating, and disparaging political rhetoric, the loss of economic stability and certainty caused a small number of aggrieved individuals to feel justified, and implicitly supported by society and political elites in using violence against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To test the role of the above-discussed economic-psychological drivers of hate, we will test *(H4) if counties experiencing economic instability are more likely to experience anti-Asian incidents* and *(H5) if counties with larger Asian populations will lead to more victimisation as well.*

## Analytical Approach

Prior studies examined COVID-19–related anti-Asian hate from a historical perspective or by addressing societal underpinnings of hate and/or public perceptions regarding the pandemic.[66] While these studies have highlighted important aspects regarding the nexus between health

crises and anti-Asian sentiments, several gaps in our understanding of these dynamics are still present.

While there is evidence that hate speech and feelings of hate towards Asian Americans have increased during COVID-19, there is limited research and data about violent manifestations of anti-Asian hate in the US.[67] This is despite the fact that results from other countries, such as the UK, reflect that hate crimes against Asian people increased in the months following the outbreak of COVID-19.[68] While campaigns, such as STOP AAPI HATE have attempted to capture anti-Asian coronavirus-related hate incidents, their estimates seem to be overinflated due to data collection and inclusion issues.[69] In contrast, official data regarding anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic have proven to be problematic in several ways. In addition to the issues already inherent in this data, such as misreporting: first, there are significant discrepancies in reported numbers of anti-Asian hate incidents between the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and Uniform Crime Report (UCR); second, these official crime statistics have found that there was a decrease in anti-Asian motivated hate crimes which does not align with the studies that report an increase in hate manifestation.[70] This suggests that many anti-Asian violent incidents are going unreported.[71] Even more troubling is that while these official data sources were able to indicate some trends in hate-related violence prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the pandemic likely greatly affected the quality and reliability of these data. This is evidenced by substantial underreporting to UCR from high Asian population areas, including Los Angeles and New York City.[72] Lastly, it has been found that Asian victims, compared to non-Asian victims of hate crimes during the pandemic, are significantly less likely to report to the police.[73]

In order to address this empirical gap, the current study will apply a data-driven, multifaceted approach to examine trends in anti-Asian hate in the US. Specifically, we examine if there was an increase in anti-Asian violent incidents resulting from stigmatisation linked to COVID-19,[74] as well as if they had distinct characteristics compared to other types of crime. In addition, we aim to address several additional potential facilitators of anti-Asian violence based on the theoretical assumptions of integrated threat theory and related explanations, which were discussed in the previous section. Specifically, we will follow suit with other similar studies conducted in the context of COVID-19 and examine the association between the spread of negative stereotypes and trends in anti-Asian violence, the association between economic factors (especially economic gaps between Asians and other groups) and anti-Asian violence, and if the potential increase in anti-Asian violence is a manifestation of a more general social breakdown (thus manifested in a general increase in crime), or is indeed an indicator of specific animosity towards Asian-Americans.[75]

In the theoretical section, we formulated five hypotheses which will be tested and help to answer these questions:

H1: Incidences of anti-Asian violence are more likely to occur during the COVID-19 pandemic.
H2: Anti-Asian violence is more likely to occur in response to public othering of the Asian community in relation to the pandemic.

H3: Anti-Asian hate incidents will not be associated with general crime trends.
H4: Areas with more economically unstable conditions are more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident.
H5: Areas with greater Asian populations are more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident.

# Data and Methods

## *Data*

In order to obtain a reliable mapping of anti-Asian hate crimes, we utilised the University of Massachusetts Lowell far-right and hate crimes dataset[76] that documents violent incidents (against property or people) in the US that: 1) were perpetrated by far-right-affiliated groups or individuals; and/or 2) were intended to promote ideas compatible with far-right ideology.[77] Data gathering for the dataset was based on a variety of resources, including the Global Terrorism Dataset; the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) hate crime chronology; informative reports by various relevant organisations such as SPLC, the Anti-Defamation League, the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism, relevant academic texts, and various media source datasets (e.g. Lexis–Nexis). In the last couple of years, the dataset was subjected to multiple rounds of quality and accuracy assessment to ensure that it does not include ambiguous events or inaccurate information. The current database includes 9274 incidents ranging from 1990 to 2021, with 114 anti-Asian incidents recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020 to May 2021.

As opposed to using official crime data to document cases of anti-Asian violence for the reasons listed earlier, there are several reasons this dataset is useful in answering the proposed questions. First, this dataset is completely inclusive of instances of anti-Asian violence, but also documents other types of identity-based violence as well as other instances of hate for comparison purposes. Not only did this dataset originally capture cases of anti-Asian violence, but extra efforts were taken to ensure that the data were sufficient and that efforts towards correcting missingness were taken. Additionally, this dataset is beneficial in that it captures incidents that local law enforcement may not have reported to be hate incidents, but upon examination of evidence, are classified to be so. Issues in police documentation and reporting of hate incidents, which can be subjective in many jurisdictions, are addressed with this dataset which instead uses news sources and thus is more inclusive.[78]

The original dataset includes information regarding the tactics, target selection, perpetrators' ideological and organisational affiliation, casualties, and location/time of each incident. For the purposes of this paper, the data were transformed from event data to panel data at the county level. This transformed dataset includes 35,867 observations of county-years between 2010 and 2020. Additionally, the data were segmented to examine attacks just between January 2020 to May 2021 (COVID-19 observation period) for the second analysis.

For the purpose of the current research, we identified all incidents which targeted Asian Americans and related property (schools, businesses, places of worship, etc.). Once these events had been identified, additional cases were identified through keyword searches of news articles on Google and LexisNexis. Keywords to identify Asian hate incidents included: hate crime, racist attack, racially motivated, racist plot, hate crime plot, anti-Asian attack, and anti-Asian hate crime. Inclusion criteria for cases that were identified via these searches and from preexisting data were the following: a) the incident had to occur in the physical realm (online threats/harassment were not included), b) the incident had to have occurred in the US, c) the victims were Asian-Americans and the perpetrator perceived the victim of their attack (whether person or property) to be Asian or affiliated with Asians (restaurant etc.) and targeted them precisely due to this perception.

After the identification of anti-Asian hate incidents, the city, state, and county Federal Information Processing Series (FIPS)*, codes where the attack occurred were coded to merge later with county-level variables. The additional county-level variables in the dataset included non-anti-Asian hate incidents, as well as additional data related to the overall criminal and socioeconomic characteristics of the county. The latter data were obtained from the Uniform Crime Report (crime data) and the US Census (population data). To conclude, the county-level dataset used for this analysis is comprised of 35,867 county-years observations and includes essential data on various characteristics of the localities, such as socioeconomic (percentage of unemployment, the portion with a college education, etc.), demographic (such as the size of specific minority groups, the portion of the immigrant population), electoral (voting preferences), and sociopolitical (such as level of access to health services, type of local government) metrics. Such data enable us to develop nuanced models which can allow isolating the specific environmental factors which may be associated with anti-Asian violence.

## *Variables' Operationalisation*

The outcome of interest in this study is whether a county experiences an anti-Asian violent incident in a given year. An anti-Asian incident was operationalised as any violent incident, including vandalism and major property damage such as arson, assault, and intimidation, which had a clear anti-Asian motivation, as well as direct physical attacks against Asian Americans. With the original data format being count data, the variable that measured the number of anti-Asian hate incidents per county-year was transformed into a binary variable to indicate whether or not an attack occurred in that county-year rather than how many had occurred. The data were modified in this way to address the low amounts of variability in the number of incidents a county experienced. Almost all counties never experienced more than one anti-Asian attack in a given year, if they experienced any at all, thus making it nonsensical to examine whether counties experienced fewer or more attacks when they only varied by one count. Thus, a binary variable indicates whether a county-year experienced an incident that was motivated by anti-Asian sentiments or not, with zero indicating that that county did not experience any anti-Asian hate incidents that year.

*The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) manages geographic codes such as FIPS which are organisational codes for all US counties, originally known as Federal Information Processing Standards codes.

Lastly, despite the decision not to use federal crime data for the outcome variable, it was utilised in the modelling to account for other types of crime, as our original dataset was not measuring this. Additionally, official crime data are the best source for reporting about general types of crimes. Measures, such as homicide from the Uniform Crime Report (UCR), are much more reliable than hate crime statistics due to more reliable reporting about these types of crimes both to and from police. These general crime variables were included to examine if the incidence of anti-Asian violence was associated with a potential general increase in crimes overall. Count crime data was extracted from the UCR and was transformed into rates based on county populations (number of crimes in the county per 10,000 individuals in the county), with the following variables being included in the analysis: murder rate, rape rate, robbery rate assault rate, and property crime rate. The estimates taken directly from the UCR were utilised until 2019 and no further due to data availability issues for county-level data as well as possible reliability issues regarding UCR data for 2020. Linear interpolation based on the prior nine years was utilised to obtain estimates for 2020 crime rates.[79]

Additionally, some demographic, sociological, and economic variables were included as control measures. First, population estimates for each county-year were included based on the US Bureau of the Census American Community Survey (ACS) estimates. The population estimates were then transformed for parsimony in the model to be the logarithm of population per 1,000. Additionally, a variable for the percent of each county's population that was Asian was created using other population estimates from the ACS that included racial information. ACS data was also used to obtain the median income in each county-year. The median income variable was chosen as opposed to the mean due to its insensitivity to potential outliers. Additionally, the unemployment rates in each county-year for the population that was over the age of 16 was included (also from the US census). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) election data were utilised to create a variable to indicate the percentage of the votes in each county for the democratic candidate in the most recent presidential election.[80] Additionally, a numeric measure for the summary of a county's real GDP (gross domestic product) from the Bureau of Economic Affairs (BEA) was also included as an economic indicator.[81] This variable, as opposed to GDP in monetary value, was chosen in order to compare across years since real GDP accounts for inflation over time (Tim Callen, n.d.). For the dollar real GDP and chain-type quantity indexes for real GDP's ability to be used interchangeably for cross-year comparisons, quantity indexes were chosen for interpretability with the reference year being 2012.[82] Lastly, the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths were gathered from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC reports aggregate totals of COVID-19 cases and deaths daily.[83] Reported cases and deaths were then summed by state and month based on report data for a monthly total (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the variables included in our analysis).

*Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics for Analysis 1 (County Level)*

| Variable | *f* | Mean | Std. Dev. | Range | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Anti-Asian Incident* | | | | | |
| *Yes* | 92 | | | | 35,867 |
| *No* | 35,775 | | | | |
| *% Population: Asian* | | 1.23 | 2.66 | 0 – 52.23 | 32,204 |
| *Population (logged)* | | 10.27 | 1.47 | 3.71 – 16.14 | 35,364 |
| *Median Income* | | 47,514.49 | 13,650.24 | 10,499 – 142,299 | 35,344 |
| *Unemployment Rate over 16* | | 7.51 | 4.06 | 0 – 40.90 | 35,330 |
| *GDP* | | 105.30 | 27.88 | 10.63 – 1330.42 | 33,976 |
| *% Votes for Democratic Candidate* | | 36.06 | 15.41 | 0 – 92.46 | 34,679 |
| *Murder Rate* | | 0.32 | 0.62 | 0 – 25.71 | 34,523 |
| *Manslaughter Rate* | | 0.04 | 0.62 | 0 – 61.52 | 34,534 |
| *Rape Rate* | | 3.06 | 3.25 | 0 – 80.53 | 34,523 |
| *Assault Rate* | | 87.63 | 71.85 | 0 – 1387.98 | 34,524 |
| *Robbery Rate* | | 2.89 | 5.20 | 0 – 126.79 | 34,523 |
| *Property Crime Rate* | | 170.84 | 127.69 | 0 – 7536.55 | 34,524 |

*Note*: All rates are per 10,000 individuals in a county

*Table 2 – Descriptive Statistics for Analysis 2 (Attack Level)*

| Variable | *f* | Mean | Std. Dev. | Range | *N* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Anti-Asian Incident* | | | | | 829 |
| *Yes* | 117 | | | | |
| *No* | 712 | | | | |
| *Tactic Property* | | | | | |
| *Violent* | 504 | | | | 821 |
| | 317 | | | | |
| *COVID-19 Cases* | | 9,155,672 | 18,261,707 | 0 – 109,369,212 | 829 |
| *# Victims* | | 0.45 | 1.79 | 0 – 40 | 772 |

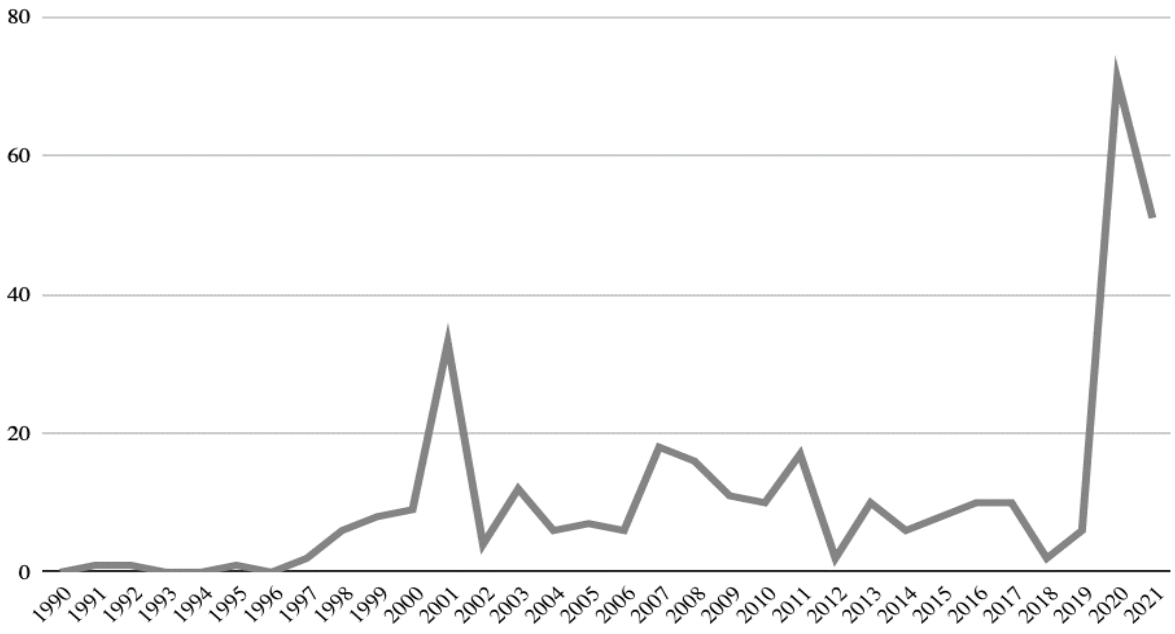
# Results

## *Descriptive Statistics and Empirical Context*

Before evaluating the proposed hypotheses, it is important to provide some context about the proliferation of anti-Asian violence in the US. Additionally, it is important to note that the results from this study are exploratory in nature. Thus, this limits our ability to draw conclusions, but

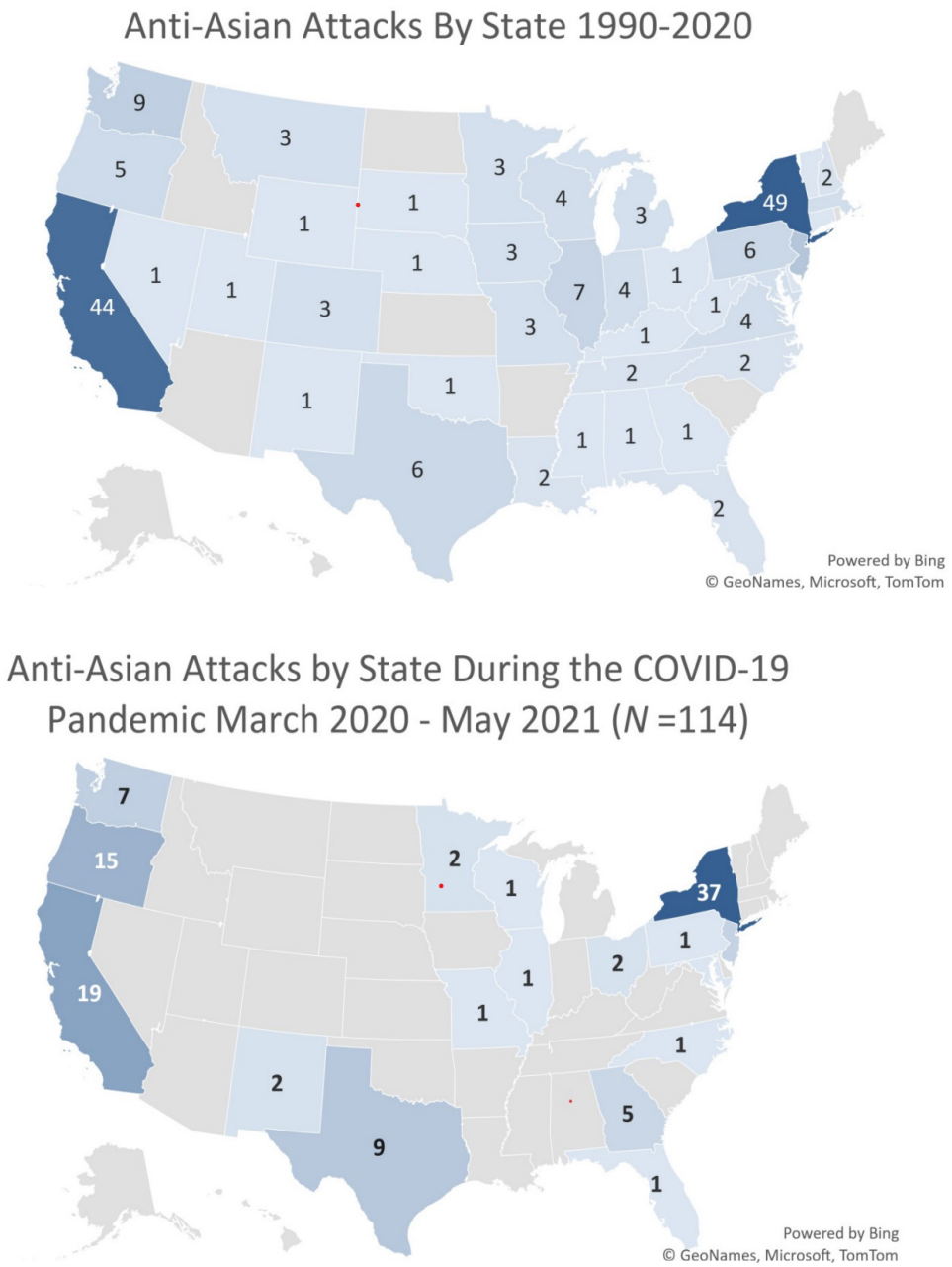
does allow for the illumination of possible trends or relationships. Our descriptive data provide preliminary evidence (see Figure 1) that anti-Asian attacks are increasing overall, especially in the last several years. With the exception of the year 2001, anti-Asian violence prevalence had been relatively low until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-Asian attacks in 2001, however, can be explained by another societally impactful event, the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Post-9/11, negative sentiments towards Muslims in America were prevalent. However, many attackers misidentified Asian individuals (especially Sikhs) as Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent. This likely accounts for this spike in attacks targeting Asian Americans during that time frame.[84] As Figure 1 demonstrates, despite some fluctuations in the levels of violence during 2020 and 2021, the number of incidents spiked in these years. This provides preliminary support that the outbreak of COVID-19 contributed to this dynamic, especially since we were able to identify that at least 37 percent of the total attacks between 2020-2021 (N=122) were overtly COVID-related (the perpetrators indicated their hate was directly associated with COVID-19 during the attack). For instance, in June 2020, an Asian restaurant in New Jersey was vandalised with graffiti reading "coronavirus" and "COVID-19."[85] In another incident in February 2021, Denny Kim, a 27-year-old Korean American veteran of the US Air Force, was beaten by two men who shouted anti-Asian slurs at him and called him "Chinese virus."[86]

*Figure 1 – Anti-Asian Attacks in the US per Year (N=309)*



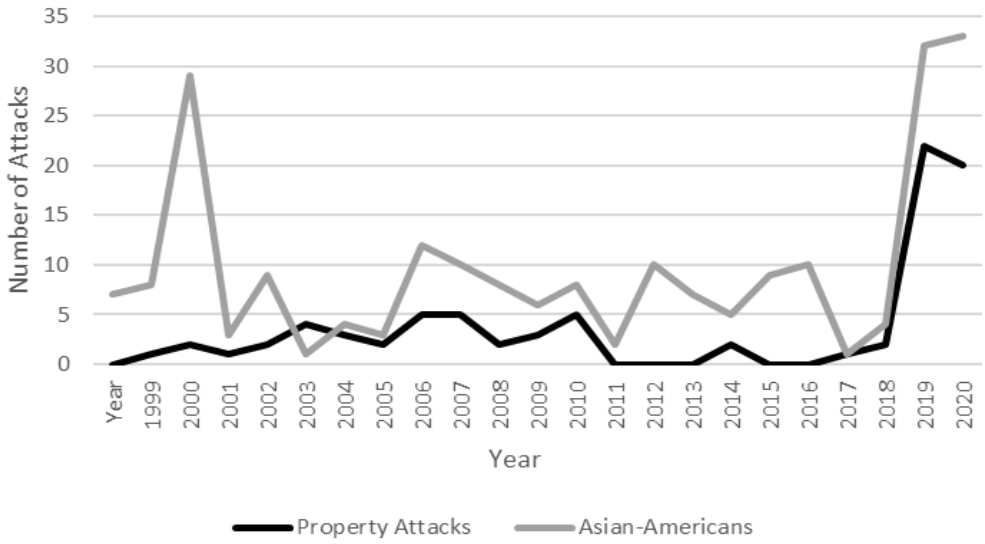

To better comprehend the overall geographical dispersion of anti-Asian violence, we also created two heat maps. One map depicts the timeframe our data captures pre-COVID-19, and one for the post COVID-19 to further illustrate the distribution of these attacks across the country.

*Figure 2 – Heat Maps of anti-Asian Violent Incidents*




The maps provide several insights. First, anti-Asian violence seems to be mostly concentrated in the states of New York and California. This may indicate that the size of the Asian population in a state may be associated with the level of violence in that state. This can be seen with New York, California, Texas, and the North-West in general, which historically have had particularly large Asian communities and large numbers of attacks.[87] Additionally, it seems that while the outbreak of COVID-19 led to an increase in anti-Asian violence, it had a more limited impact on its geographical distribution which remained mostly the same both before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. Lastly, as is also the case with the geographical distribution of all hate crimes, most anti-Asian violence is concentrated in blue states (i.e., usually perceived as progressive and left leaning). Perliger provides several explanations for this trend, and their applicability to anti-Asian violence will be discussed in the concluding section.[88]

*Figure 3 – Anti-Asian Attacks by Attack Type*




Lastly, as seen in figure 3, post and pre-COVID-19 anti-Asian attacks have similar characteristics. Before the pandemic, more than 70 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes targeted people of Asian descent physically. About 20 percent of attacks were aimed against property owned or regularly used by Asian Americans. Interestingly, when comparing specifically the spike during 2001 with attacks seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a distinct difference in how perpetrators were expressing hate towards their intended victims. During the 2001 period, while there was a spike in physical violence against Asian Americans, there was virtually an absence of attacks targeting property. However, when examining attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was both a spike in the number of physical attacks but also in the number of property attacks as well, indicating an increased prevalence of perpetrators choosing symbolic targeting. During the pandemic, about 60 percent of anti-Asian attacks were against people, and about one-third were against their property.

## *Advanced Modelling of Research Hypotheses*

### *Analysis 1: County-level Analysis from 2010 to 2020*

In order to test if the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the perpetration of anti-Asian hate incidents, we utilised our dataset which captured hate incidents and county level data of US counties (nested within states) between 2010 and 2020. To best address the nested and longitudinal nature of this data, a mixed-effects binary logistic regression model was utilised (see table 2). This model was selected due to its ability to correct for dependence in the data structure, as well as its ability to predict a binary outcome variable. Other modelling with linear probability would have produced nonsensical values and induced heteroskedasticity. Additionally, the intraclass correlation identified that a nested model would be a better fit for the data.

Additionally, it is important to note that the outcome variable of interest (whether a county experienced an anti-Asian hate incident) is highly imbalanced. With the minority class making up less than 1 percent of the data, there is a need to address this imbalance in the modelling.

However, modelling approaches to address this in binary outcome multilevel data are relatively sparse, with most of the approaches only handling non-nested data structures. Bayesian approaches were explored with this data to address the imbalance, however, due to the highly complex binary and multi-level structure, convergence on any model was unsuccessful or had inconclusive (all zero) results. Thus, in order to address any potential issues an unbalanced outcome variable might have on the results, the data was also analysed in a non-nested manner with a bias reduction model based on the original Firth method.[89] These results can be found in the appendix. When compared with the nested models that will be presented, the bias reduced models affirm our findings.

The final modelling presented in table 3 was run in a stepwise fashion, grouping variables by economic factors, crime variables, and population measures. The full model includes all predictors as well as several control variables. Upon examination of these results, there is overall substantial support for H1 across all models. Counties were more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident during the COVID-19 pandemic ($p < .001$). Additionally, when examining the years prior to COVID-19, the likelihood that a county would experience an anti-Asian hate incident was actually decreasing. The full model illustrates that in just 2018, anti-Asian hate was significantly less likely to be occurring ($p < .05$). This indicates that there may have been a downward trend in these hate incidents before the effect of COVID-19 increased the likelihood of this type of hate in 2020.

The model also highlights several implications regarding hypothesis 3, examining whether anti-Asian hate is occurring independent of other crime trends. This hypothesis was mostly supported, showing that generally anti-Asian hate incidents are not explained by general crime trends. However, both the crime model and the full model illustrate that some types of crimes may have a relationship with anti-Asian hate. Importantly, counties with lower murder rates are actually more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident ($p < .001$). This finding provides excellent support for hypothesis 3, indicating that anti-Asian hate incidents are not associated with high crime areas. This suggests there is another explanation for this phenomenon other than general crime trends, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The manslaughter, rape, assault, and property crime rates had no association with the outcome across all models, providing more support for this hypothesis. However, the model did find that counties with higher robbery rates were more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident ($p < .001$). This can possibly be explained by the similarities between some anti-Asian incidents and robberies. Not only were there instances in this data where anti-Asian attacks also included robbery, but both robberies and bias motivated attacks often involve strangers and occur in similar manners, which may suggest why these two types of crimes are associated in this model.

In examining hypothesis 4, which examines economic hardships, the results appear to be somewhat contradictory across models and even across variables, however there may be an explanation for this phenomenon. First, the directionality of the relationship between the economic indicators and the outcome switches from the economic model to the full model. This might indicate that these measures are highly sensitive, and possibly do not explain much of the variance in the outcome. While a county's GDP has no association with the likelihood of experiencing an anti-Asian hate incident, both the unemployment rate and median income

do have an association with the outcome. While the directionality of these measures appears to be contradictory, there may be an explanation for these patterns. As this model has found a strong association between anti-Asian incidents and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that the strange economic trends from the pandemic may be affecting these results. During the COVID-19 pandemic, PEW research found that despite high levels of unemployment, income levels overall stayed the same due to low-wage employees being mostly affected by job loss.[90] Thus, these results might actually indicate that areas with lower overall income, but also low levels of unemployment (possible middle-class counties with few low-wage workers) may be more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident, which does provide support for hypothesis 4 regarding economic deficiencies being related to the experience of anti-Asian hate.

Lastly, hypothesis 5 was also supported. Both the population model and the full model reflect that counties with larger numbers of Asian populations were more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident *($p < .05$)*. This could indicate that communities with more Asian individuals could be victimised by anti-Asian hate at higher rates simply due to greater access to the intended target type (Asians). Another explanation is that the sizable Asian population further amplifies and triggers the other factors that facilitate anti-Asian violence.

Several control variables were also associated with the outcome. First, counties with a greater number of votes for Democratic candidates were more likely to experience an anti-Asian hate incident. This suggests that these types of incidents may be especially prevalent in *blue* cities ($p < .001$). The relationship between the population of a county and the outcome also suggest that cities may be more likely to experience anti-Asian hate, where counties with larger populations are more likely to have an anti-Asian hate incident in a given year ($p < .001$). Finally, in examining the models overall, the pseudo-R-squared suggests that the inclusion of more or different variables across models does not improve the ability to explain the outcome. This could suggest that much of the outcome's variance is explained by the constant across all models, namely the effect year has on the outcome. This may indicate even more the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic (and the negative societal associations between Asians and the virus) had on the occurrence of anti-Asian hate incidents.

*Table 3 – Mixed Effects Binary Logistic Regression Model*

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Anti-Asian Incident in County (yes/no)* | | | |
| **Variable** | **Economic Model** | **Crime Model** | **Population Model** | **Full Model** |
| | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) |
| | | | | |
| *Median Income* | 0.79*** (0.12) | | | -0.32** (0.15) |
| *Unemployment Rate* | 0.38* (0.22) | | | -0.77** (0.37) |
| *GDP* | 0.05 (0.07) | | | 0.17 (0.10) |
| *% Votes for Democrat Candidate* | | | | 0.49*** (0.17) |
| *Murder Rate* | | -0.63*** (0.24) | | -0.97*** (0.36) |
| *Manslaughter Rate* | | -0.89 (1.39) | | 0.02 (1.90) |
| *Rape Rate* | | -0.23 (0.18) | | -0.04 (0.21) |
| *Robbery Rate* | | 0.58*** (0.08) | | 0.33*** (0.10) |
| *Assault Rate* | | 0.05 (0.17) | | 0.01 (0.22) |
| *Property Crimes Rate* | | 0.10 (0.06) | | -0.09 (0.21) |
| *Population* | | | | 1.79*** (0.17) |
| *% of Population: Asian* | | | 0.51*** (0.06) | 0.08* (0.05) |
| *2011* | 0.22 (0.49) | 0.41 (0.51) | 0.39 (0.50) | 0.52 (0.51) |
| *2012* | -1.72** (0.82) | -1.93* (1.05) | -1.52* (0.82) | -1.39 (0.86) |
| *2013* | -1.66** (0.82) | -1.57* (0.88) | -1.41* (0.81) | -1.84* (1.10) |
| *2014* | -1.35* (0.71) | -0.98 (0.77) | -1.13 (0.71) | -0.88 (0.74) |
| *2015* | -0.20 (0.53) | 0.33 (0.56) | -0.06 (0.54) | 0.02 (0.58) |
| *2016* | -0.25 (0.53) | 0.36 (0.56) | -0.09 (0.54) | 0.07 (0.57) |
| *2017* | -0.21 (0.52) | 0.53 (0.54) | -0.0003 (0.52) | 0.12 (0.57) |
| *2018* | -1.93** (0.83) | -0.92 (0.84) | -1.64** (0.83) | -1.53* (0.86) |
| *2019* | -1.14* (0.63) | 0.02 (0.63) | -0.73 (0.61) | -0.67 (0.68) |
| *2020* | 1.16*** (0.44) | 2.29*** (0.46) | 1.55*** (0.43) | 1.62*** (0.53) |
| *Constant* | -6.66*** (0.42) | -7.19*** (0.47) | -6.94*** (0.46) | -8.76*** (0.52) |
| | | | | |
| Observations | 33,927 | 34,523 | 35,377 | 33,635 |
| Log Likelihood | -473.85 | -458.28 | -453.18 | -338.86 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 979.69 | 954.55 | 934.36 | 727.72 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 1,114.61 | 1,115.09 | 1,052.99 | 938.30 |
| Conditional Pseudo R-Squared | 0.61 | 0.60 | 0.62 | 0.63 |
| | | | | |
| *Note:* all predictors were scaled for model convergence, all rates are per 10,000 individuals in the county, *p**p***p<0.01 | | | | |

### *Analysis 2: Incident Data between January 2020 and May 2021*

To complement the results found in the main model above, and be able to best test hypothesis 2, the original dataset was transformed in several ways for more granularity. First, instead of using nested data, the data was kept in its original incident-level form for this analysis. Therefore, instead of comparing across counties or states, this analysis will be comparing across incidents to examine whether certain environmental conditions may be associated with anti-Asian incidents. Additionally, this model also uses a much smaller time frame for analysis in order to just capture months (rather than years) where the COVID-19 pandemic was occurring. By doing this, and also by incorporating predictors at the state level rather than county, we were able to include incidents from 2021 as well, while in the full model this was not possible due to data availability issues.

In order to identify whether anti-Asian rhetoric impacted anti-Asian hate, we utilised a binary logistic regression with piecewise slopes that yielded a model with 772 attacks that occurred between January 2020 (the approximate start of COVID-19) to May 2021 (the end of data collection efforts). Specifically, this model aims to examine the effect of President Trump referring to the coronavirus as *kung flu* in late June 2020 at a campaign rally in Tulsa. Data indicates that after that event, there was a dramatic rise in anti-Asian sentiments both on social media and across various public spheres, with lower levels of patronage at Asian-owned businesses illustrating how this rhetoric translated into discrimination. Thus, this analysis is a natural experiment examining how negative rhetoric directed against a minority group may be connected to outgroup violence. In order to best suit a binary outcome (whether an incident was an anti-Asian incident), a binary logistic regression is used, which applies the correct logic to deal with a bounded count of this nature. To handle the imbalance in the outcome variable, robust standard errors were presented.

Additionally, in order to specifically test the effect of President Trump's rhetoric, piecewise slope segmentation was utilised. As opposed to allowing time to be captured in the model as a factor where each month would be evaluated individually, a piecewise slope model allows two separate regressors for time. One regressor estimates the months before the rhetoric and one for after with a breakpoint occurring at the event (rhetoric use). This type of analysis has been utilised both for longitudinal data and non-dependent data structures. This allows us to evaluate whether incidents were more likely to be motivated by anti-Asian hate post Trump using this hateful rhetoric.

Based on the results presented in table 4, there is substantial support for hypothesis 2, which examines whether hateful rhetoric impacts anti-Asian hate. It can be seen that in the month prior to President Trump using the phrase *kung flu*, the probability that an incident was motivated by anti-Asian hate was actually lower. After the breakpoint (*kung flu*) was implemented in the model, however, it can be seen that incidents that occurred in the months post- *kung flu* were actually more likely to be motivated by anti-Asian bias. Importantly, when examining the diagnostics for the piecewise slope segments, the linear hypothesis test indicated that these two segments were in fact statistically distinguishable from one another. This verifies that the likelihood an incident was motivated by anti-Asian hate was statistically different in the months

before and after *kung flu*. These findings were significant while controlling for both the number of COVID-19 cases at the time, the number of victims targeted in the attack, and the attack type. This model also indicates that attacks that were motivated by anti-Asian hatred during COVID-19 were also more likely to be violent attacks rather than attacks against property. Additionally, to ensure that these results were not simply the result of the data responding randomly to a breakpoint, several dummy models with arbitrary breakpoints were also run (see Appendix) to affirm that there is significance in analysing the period pre and post President Trump stating *kung flu*.

*Table 4 – Binary Logistic Regression With Piecewise Slopes (DV=Anti-Asian Incident)*

| ***Variables*** | ***B* (Std. Error)** |
|---|---|
| *COVID-19 Cases* | -0.00 (0.00) |
| *# of Victims* | -0.0003 (0.04) |
| *Violent Attack* | 0.83* (0.66) |
| *Pre-Kung Flu* | -0.25*** (0.08) |
| *Post-Kung Flu* | 0.41*** (0.14) |
| *Constant* | -2.67*** (0.22) |
| | |
| *N* | 772 |
| *Model* | 79.66 *** |
| *Log Likelihood* | -212.88 |
| *Akaike Inf. Crit.* | 437.77 |
| *McFadden's Pseudo R-Squared* | 0.16 |
| | |
| *Note:* standard errors transformed to robust standard errors | *p**p***p<0.01 |

# Discussion

The current research aimed to provide insights into the potential nexus between hate-related violence and public health crisis via an in-depth examination of the characteristics of anti-Asian violence before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. We utilised a natural experimental design and a multitude of analyses (descriptive, geospatial, and advanced regressions) to illustrate the intricate combination of factors that facilitated anti-Asian violence during the pandemic.

Despite the increase in the volume of anti-Asian attacks during the pandemic, their geographical distribution seems to be consistent with the geographically narrow pre-COVID-19 trends. Before 2020, anti-Asian violence was an attribute of specific regions of the country, namely areas with large Asian communities, such as the New-York metropolitan area and urban

centres in California. Somewhat surprisingly, the geographical distribution of anti-Asian attacks remained concentrated in those regions despite the increase in violence and its alleged facilitation by a nationwide event such as the outbreak of COVID-19. This, compounded by the fact that a substantial portion of anti-Asian violence is spontaneous and perpetrated by lone actors, reflects its opportunistic nature. The main drivers of anti-Asian violence are not related to changing focus among organised hate groups, but the overall social environment encourages individuals to act when the opportunity arises. Moreover, this reflects the importance of environmental and economic stress factors which combine with existing xenophobic narratives into the legitimisation of anti-Asian hate.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the direct impact of the pandemic, specifically on anti-Asian hate. The outcome of the mixed-effects logit regression (Table 3) illustrates the overall effects of the emergence of COVID-19 on anti-Asian violence. The model also reflects a trend that was visible in the geospatial visualisation of the spread of anti-Asian violence: that the attacks were concentrated in more progressive blue states (votes for a Democratic candidate were positively and significantly associated with anti-Asian violence). As Perliger noted,[91] this is a result of multiple factors. Anti-Asian incidents occur in large, densely populated areas, which tend to vote more for the Democratic party. Additionally, the rapid transition of Asian-Americans to previously *White* wealthy suburban areas generated high levels of backlash, which included hate-related violence. Communities, which until recently were reasonably homogeneous and experienced limited interactions with minority groups, are experiencing changes in their demographics and social, cultural, and political characteristics. Hence, some members of these communities, who feel that such changes are breaking the traditional social and economic fabric of their town, express their dissatisfaction via militant activism, especially against those whom they consider to be strong economic competitors. Indeed, multiple studies illustrated the areas that are experiencing demographic diversification, and mainly the absorption of non-White populations, are the ones that are also enduring the highest levels of far-right violence.[92]

Our findings also seem to provide support for the role of toxic rhetoric in the increase of anti-Asian animosity. As shown in table 4, there is a positive relationship between anti-Asian incidents and 'othering' rhetoric operationalised by the president's *Kung Flu* remarks (and the subsequent increase in anti-Asian behaviour). Hence, it is not just the overall sense of the social breakdown and lack of security that drove hate to new heights, but the related rhetoric seems to provide further legitimacy to anti-Asian sentiments. The contradictory findings regarding economic indicators may be explained by the fact that the pandemic reduced the economic well-being of many in the middle and working classes, growing resentment. This further applies to relative deprivation by the inverse relationship with median income. This builds resentment in people who are still struggling financially despite working and doing everything proscribed by society to achieve the *American Dream*. It may also be a result of multiple methodological challenges in this research which limited its ability to identify such associations on a county level. Hence, a state-level analysis may be more effective with regard to the examination of such linkages.

While these results are highly promising, there are some caveats that may impact the conclusive power of these findings. First, regarding the data, there are some limitations in the ability of the

data to cover the true number of anti-Asian hate incidents in the US. Due to the open-source search method for building this dataset, there are limitations in the number of incidents that can be captured as this is not capturing unreported or possibly not newsworthy incidents. Additionally, it is possible that the way this data was collected could be introducing bias as well. Since media reports were utilised to identify incidents, not only are 'not newsworthy' events not being captured, but it is also possible that media in more liberal areas are more likely to write about hate incidents than small, rural news sources. Additionally, smaller news sources were less likely to show up in the search process for the building of this dataset, which could impact the number of incidents that were documented for rural areas. When examining the results from this data, it is important to keep in mind these potential biases that may be impacting the conclusions that are drawn. While the dark figure of crime is absolutely a factor here, as it would be for official hate crime data as well, this data still provides a great baseline of data to gain insights from.

In addition to deficits that are inherent to this dataset and many others of its kind, there are data availability issues that impact the complexity and comprehensiveness of these models. Compiling high quality data for such a wide timespan and at the county level is a challenging endeavour, one which limits the number of predictor and control variables in these models. For future studies, several variables should be considered which the authors feel could be important in these models. One potentially important variable that may be interesting for future studies to examine as data becomes available, is examining whether trust in the media on the county-level may impact violence. Additionally, health data at the county level would be an interesting measure to include in light of examining the impact that a global health crisis has on society. In addition, there were modelling and estimation challenges that were faced with this data. Future efforts may be able to look into alternative means for analysing rare events data that would be successful.

To conclude, our findings reflect that hate-related violence can be generated by the interaction of broad societal facilitators with temporary factors, such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future follow-up studies can thus benefit from looking at additional triggering temporal factors, as well as identifying how they specifically interact with particular societal dynamics, to generate various forms of hate-related violence.

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*Arie Perliger is a professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. In the past 20 years, Dr Perliger was engaged in an extensive study of issues related to terrorism and political violence, security policy and politics (including the nexus of security and climate change), politics and extremism of the Far Right in Israel, Europe, and the US, Middle Eastern Politics, and the applicability of Social Network Analysis to the study of political violence.*

## Appendix

| *Bias Reduction Binary Logistic Regression Model* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Dependent variable:* | | | |
| | *Anti-Asian Incident in County (yes/no)* | | | |
| **Variable** | **Economic Model** | **Crime Model** | **Population Model** | **Full Model** |
| | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) | *B* (Std. Error) |
| *Median Income* | 0.0001*** (0.0000) | | | -0.0000** (0.0000) |
| *Unemployment Rate* | 0.14*** (0.03) | | | -0.17** (0.08) |
| *GDP* | 0.003* (0.001) | | | 0.01*** (0.002) |
| *% of Votes for Democrat Candidate* | | | | 0.04*** (0.01) |
| *% of Population: Asian* | | | 0.13*** (0.01) | 0.03** (0.01) |
| *Murder Rate* | | -1.25*** (0.27) | | -1.34*** (0.41) |
| *Manslaughter Rate* | | -1.73 (1.76) | | 1.73*** (0.28) |
| *Rape Rate* | | -0.05 (0.04) | | 0.02 (0.05) |
| *Robbery Rate* | | 0.12*** (0.01) | | 0.06*** (0.01) |
| *Assault Rate* | | -0.001 (0.002) | | -0.001 (0.002) |
| *Property Crimes Rate* | | 0.001*** (0.0003) | | -0.002 (0.001) |
| *Population* | | | | 1.18*** (0.11) |
| *2011* | 0.14 (0.45) | 0.32 (0.49) | 0.38 (0.48) | 0.50 (0.48) |
| *2012* | -1.50** (0.72) | -1.63* (0.90) | -1.28* (0.75) | -1.17 (0.75) |
| *2013* | -1.57** (0.72) | -1.26* (0.75) | -1.27* (0.75) | -1.54* (0.90) |
| *2014* | -1.22* (0.64) | -0.91 (0.71) | -0.91 (0.66) | -0.85 (0.68) |
| *2015* | -0.24 (0.49) | 0.24 (0.52) | 0.03 (0.51) | -0.08 (0.54) |
| *2016* | -0.23 (0.49) | 0.30 (0.52) | 0.02 (0.51) | -0.03 (0.53) |
| *2017* | -0.19 (0.48) | 0.45 (0.51) | 0.12 (0.50) | -0.02 (0.53) |
| *2018* | -1.63** (0.72) | -0.98 (0.77) | -1.32* (0.75) | -1.47* (0.76) |
| *2019* | -0.95* (0.56) | -0.02 (0.59) | -0.48 (0.57) | -0.77 (0.62) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *2020* | 0.97** (0.39) | 2.06*** (0.42) | 1.49*** (0.41) | 1.37*** (0.48) |
| *Constant* | -10.37*** (0.58) | -6.38*** (0.41) | -6.38*** (0.37) | -19.93*** (1.44) |
| | | | | |
| Observations | 33,927 | 34,523 | 35,377 | 33,635 |
| Log Likelihood | -541.36 | -508.46 | -527.35 | -341.70 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,110.72 | 1,050.93 | 1,078.69 | 729.39 |

*Note:* *p**p***p<0.01

| **Piecewise Slopes Dummy Models** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | |
| | *Incident was anti-Asian (yes/no)* | | | | |
| | **Model 1** Post-*kung flu* | **Model 2** Post-*kung flu* | **Model 3** Post-*kung flu* | **Model 4** Pre-*kung flu* | **Model 5** Pre-*kung flu* |
| *COVID-19 Cases* | -0.00* (0.00) | -0.00** (0.00) | -0.00 (0.00) | -0.00 (0.00) | 0.00 (0.00) |
| *# of Victims* | -0.004 (0.06) | 0.0002 (0.07) | 0.00 (0.06) | 0.001 (0.06) | 0.001 (0.06) |
| *Violent Attack* | 0.73*** (0.28) | 0.61** (0.28) | 0.63** (0.27) | 0.81*** (0.26) | 0.65** (0.26) |
| *Pre-Sept 2020* | -0.14** (0.06) | | | | |
| *Post-Sept 2020* | 0.79*** (0.11) | | | | |
| *Pre-Nov 2020* | | -0.004 (0.05) | | | |
| *Post-Nov 2020* | | 1.15*** (0.17) | | | |
| *Pre-Jan 2021* | | | 0.15*** (0.04) | | |
| *Post-Jan 2021* | | | 1.04*** (0.30) | | |
| *Pre-May 2020* | | | | -0.22* (0.12) | |
| *Post-May 2020* | | | | 0.31*** (0.06) | |
| *Pre- March 2020* | | | | | 15.14 (601.73) |
| *Post-March 2020* | | | | | 0.13*** (0.05) |
| *Constant* | -2.62*** (0.30) | -2.88*** (0.30) | -3.53*** (0.32) | -2.89*** (0.37) | -33.33 (1,203.46) |
| | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Observations | 772 | 772 | 772 | 772 | 772 |
| Log Likelihood | -201.32 | -202.90 | -219.00 | -218.79 | -218.68 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 414.63 | 417.81 | 450.00 | 449.58 | 449.36 |

*Note:* $^{*}p^{**}p^{***}p<0.01$

# Endnotes

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Article

# Rallying Around Empty Signifiers:
## Understanding and Defining Anti-Government Protest in the Netherlands

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As in many other parts of Europe, anti-government protest has been a topic of political and academic discussion in the Netherlands for some years. The definition of what anti-government protest entails and which groups and individuals it refers to is not as straightforward as it may seem. Where other institutions have attempted to place anti-governmental protest movements in frameworks of traditional extremist movements, the Dutch authorities describe the anti-government protestors as a group that is characterised by its pluriformity and fluidity. In 2022, they have even changed the term 'anti-governmental' to 'anti-institutional' to more broadly refer to the set of targets that the movement opposes, which includes government, but also the media, the scientific community, experts and the judicial system. In this paper we try to understand the anti-government, or anti-institutional, protest in the Netherlands using a different lens. We use Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory and its concept of empty signifiers to show how opposed interests and goals can be seen as a unified ideology to its proponents. Instead of trying to primarily define the group of people who are anti-government by their actions or characteristics, we look at how those actors define themselves and how they see their struggle against the authorities. We describe the rise and dynamics of anti-government protest in the Netherlands since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on "genealogies" and the eclectic topics of the protest movement. We compare our observations with the definition of anti-governmental protest and the anti-institutional narrative as used by the authorities. We arrive at the conclusion that analysing the anti-government protest through the lens of their shared ideas and grievances gives us more insight into the nature and dynamics of this movement than solely looking through the lens of the potential threat to the democratic legal order.

**Keywords:** Anti-government extremism, definition of extremism, empty signifier, protest, protest movement

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# Introduction

As in many other parts of Europe, anti-government protest has been a topic of political and academic discussion in the Netherlands for some years. The phenomenon received even more attention after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the, sometimes violent, protesting of anti-COVID measures. Because of the eclectic nature of the protests, the Dutch authorities have found it difficult to understand and define the kind of protest they were confronted with and to determine what specific actors and groups to monitor. During the first COVID-19 protests in 2020, the Dutch authorities observed that, beyond the protesting of COVID-19 measures, there was an undercurrent of people who had stopped focusing specifically on these and instead seemed to be protesting something more fundamental.

Since this first observation, the search for how to define most accurately what it was exactly that was being observed has proved challenging. The observed undercurrent was first connected to observations of a new type of extremism that had been observed in the year prior, labelled *anti-government extremism*, which was defined by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) until 2022 as a form of extremism in which government and democracy are fundamentally rejected for non-ideological reasons.[1] The AIVD sets this narrative apart from other types of radical narratives, such as that of the extreme right, the extreme left, and that of identity extremists such as jihadists.[2] Explaining this phenomenon, it states that that this type of extremism is the result of "experienced or perceived injustice, indignation, and considerable unease."[3]

In 2022 the AIVD started to use the term anti-institutional extremism instead of anti-governmental extremism, as certain individuals and groups increasingly also started to focus on other institutions than the government within the democratic legal order, such as the police and the media.[4] In 2022 it also mentioned ideological motives behind an "extremist anti-institutional narrative."[5] The anti-institutional extremists oppose a loosely defined oppressive "elite" with which they are at war.[6] The AIVD uses the term extremism as it has observed certain individuals and groups "actively striving for or supporting profound changes in society, changes that could endanger (the continued survival of) our democratic legal order, possibly through the use of undemocratic methods …"[7] and because it sees a preparedness to carry out both non-violent and violent activities.[8]

Governmental agencies in other Western countries have used similar labels and qualifications to describe the protest movements that emerged in the context of the COVID-crisis, but give different interpretations of what the term *anti-governmental* refers to. The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission in its report *Spotlight on COVID-19, Violent Extremism and Anti-Government Movements* speaks of several extremist groups, both from the violent left and right.[9] In the United States, anti-governmental extremism is a term that often refers to the "hard right" or the Patriot movement.[10] The different interpretations of the term illustrate that the search to understand and define it is far from finished yet.

In this paper we attempt to arrive at a different understanding of anti-government, or anti-institutional, protest in the Netherlands by using an alternative lens. We look at how the actors

define themselves and how they see their struggle against the authorities. We use the concept of empty signifiers to analyse and understand the phenomenon of anti-governmental protest. An empty signifier is a word or phrase that does not have a fixed meaning in what it refers to, which means it is able to link together a broad spectrum of different demands under the same cause. The concept can help to focus on the collective purpose of the movement, instead of its stated goals, in order to better understand it. The outline of the paper is as follows. First, the concept of empty signifiers is explained, along with its use in pluralistic movements as an enabler of collective identity. Second, the rise and dynamics of anti-government and anti-governmental, or anti-institutional protest, in the Netherlands since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic is described, focusing on various categories of groups or "genealogies" of the protest movement, in which the use and function of empty signifiers is demonstrated.

## Empty Signifiers

Anti-governmental protest is a complex and difficult-to-study phenomenon, because of its pluriformity and fluidity, as demonstrated in the Dutch definition of anti-institutional extremism, which can apply to a host of different themes. However, there are academic frameworks to analyse seemingly fragmented social phenomena. Ernest Laclau developed a framework for analysing the ambiguity and extreme plurality of views that is often found in populist movements.[11] This is a similar pluralism and ambiguity that can be observed in the study of anti-governmental sentiments. Populist discourse tends to rely on ambiguity as it is meant to be a tool to help band a plurality of views together to strive for a common cause.[12] The main concept of Laclau that will be used in this paper is that of the *empty signifier*.[13] The concept of the empty signifier can shed light on how the described anti-governmental movement constitutes itself and what, despite seeming incompatibilities, its common goal is for which it can make a stand.

In *On Populist Reason,* Laclau describes what characterises populist rhetoric compared to more obviously ideologically driven counterparts.[14] He identifies the use of so called *empty signifiers*. Empty signifiers are words or phrases that will be frequently used by a group that seeks to gain a voice in the political sphere, but that are in essence *empty*. What is meant by this is that the same word can be used to refer to different meanings, which means that the word itself is "emptied" of a fixed meaning. An example of a phrase like this is *the people* (e.g., *the people* won't stand for this), which can refer to different material groups at any moment, depending on the topic that the user is talking about at that moment. A phrase like *the people* functions essentially as a placeholder within the rhetoric to signify that the speaker is referring to the listener; the ingroup; the morally right side of the issue that the speaker is referring to. Conversely, an empty signifier can also be used to refer to what the ingroup is opposed to. Typical examples of empty signifiers that are used to signify an enemy concept is *the elite*, *the system* or *society*.

Although the meaning of these types of words is fluid or empty, they do serve an important role in rhetoric. A function is that it can foster a sense of collectivity across a heterogeneous group of people. By using a word that is empty and has no fixed meaning, it allows a listener to project their own personal meaning on it. The same word can be interpreted differently by every listener to fit best with what they need to hear at that moment to feel validated and potentially move

into action. This means that the same rhetoric can be used to appeal to different individuals or groups that have different material needs, demands or grievances, but still foster a sense of collectivity between them because they are using the same words to refer to them. This can result in a movement that is composed of individuals and organisations that on the surface seem like they cannot have anything in common. Individuals who have different pre-existing grievances can feel like the speaker is referring to their specific grievance and thus can all feel represented by the same piece of rhetoric, even if they may, on closer examination, find out that their interests are in fact not aligned, or in some cases, are even opposed to each other.

The use of an empty signifier is essential to the formation of a collective identity in a movement that has conflicting demands. There is always a tension between the inherent heterogeneity of the different demands within a group and the group's will to be a homogeneous totality. Populist group formation rests on the fundamental inability of a group to form itself as a coherent, unambiguous totality. This impossibility is a constant "presence of absence" that propels Laclau's political mechanism; and affection, "rhetoric", personalism and even memes, serve as empty indicators, which – instead of a linear, rational and logical articulation of all demands – can form a unit.[15]

By emptying the signifier of inherent meaning, the collective identity is able to rest on what each participant of a movement does have in common with each other. The issue of the meaning of each signifier is less important than the fact that it is a facilitator of affect. In other words: the empty signifier allows groups to communicate to each other that they are experiencing the same emotions about large social issues. Additionally, empty signifiers facilitate a type of social critique that applies to the most fundamental building blocks of a society. Because these fundamental building blocks are all encompassing, it is impossible to articulate these critiques perfectly. As Laclau states: "As I have said, in a local struggle I can be relatively clear about both the nature of my demands and the force against which we are fighting. But when I am trying to constitute a wider popular identity and a more global enemy through an articulation of sectorial demands, the identity of both the popular forces and of the enemy becomes more difficult to determine. It is here that the moment of emptiness necessarily arises, following the establishment of equivalential bonds."[16] With both of these qualities, empty signifiers allow the formation of a collective identity and thereby the ability to form a movement.[17] Laclau does not consider populism to be a threat to democracy, but rather sees it as the very embodiment of democratic politics.[18]

Although Laclau's study focuses on populism and large-scale politics, its framework can be useful to understand the formation of any collective identity in pluralistic group compositions. The theory is sometimes criticised for being a theory that focuses on rhetoric to such an extent that it becomes devoid of a clear normative horizon, but in the case of the anti-governmental movement, it can be used as a steppingstone towards understanding the various demands that seem present in it.[19] The initial observation of this paper is that the movement that is currently described as anti-governmental is so heterogeneous that it is difficult to determine what exactly is being referred to with that term. This is because, just like the movements described by Laclau, the movement is comprised of people and groups with different demands. Anti-governmental protest needs to establish an enemy to facilitate its own cohesion, but because the system is too

broad to be an effective enemy, empty signifiers need to be used to refer to it.

## COVID-19 Demonstrations in the Netherlands

In March 2020, the first restrictive measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic were enforced in the Netherlands. Initially, the measures were limited to a ban on large-scale events, social distancing, and a strong advice to start working from home. On 23 March, an *intelligent lockdown* was announced, which meant that all non-essential public spaces were shut down and everyone was strongly advised to stay inside their homes whenever possible. Although these measures initially were supported by a clear majority among the public, the first demonstrations against them were quickly organised as well.

The first documented protest, on 28 April, counted a few dozen people who protested multiple issues that they felt were connected to each other. The protest was not centrally organised. The call to protest was made on Facebook under the hashtag #*Stopthelockdown*, created by a group named "Demonstratie van het Volk" ("Demonstration of the People"[20]), which was shared by various individuals and small organisations. This demonstration would be the prelude to a series of similar manifestations and demonstrations. Throughout 2020-2022 protest of various sizes were organised throughout the Netherlands on a regular basis by various organisations who were loosely connected, but who would also occasionally disagree about tactics and strategies.

On 21st June 2020, action group "Viruswaanzin" ("Virus Madness") organised a demonstration with tens of thousands of attendants. The demonstration ended in heavy riots, mostly because of the groups of hooligans who took the opportunity of the protest to instigate fights with the police.[21] During this protest the eclectic character of the protesting attendants became visible for the first time. Hooligans were standing shoulder to shoulder with classic hippies who were standing up for "love and peace". Anthroposophists were protesting vaccinations together with Reformed Christians. Libertarian-aligned small business owners demanded an end to the COVID-19 restrictions because of economic interests. Extreme-right groups mingled with the demonstrators. Farmers expressed their solidarity. Various protesters carried signs and flags, or laid flowers "in remembrance of democracy." Online, new actors, such as influencers who would normally be focused on fashion, cosmetics, healthy lifestyles, and spirituality, were starting to get entangled with more political communities. Exploiting their social media status as "micro-celebrities", they have spread misinformation, conspirational thinking and far-right extremist ideas.[22]

The majority of the protests was peaceful, but sometimes they ended in (heavy) rioting. When a national curfew was announced, there were riots that lasted for several days. The Dutch police reported that they had to use violence more often in 2021 than in previous years, usually at protests aimed at the COVID-19 restrictions.[23] The National Coordinator of Terrorism and Security stated in 2021 that "the persistence and intensity of protests has not been seen in many years in the Netherlands: where in previous years the deployment mobile unit was necessary only a few times to restore public order, this has now been necessary dozens of times since

June 2020".[24] In addition to riots and demonstrations that got out of hand, there have been a number of acts of vandalism against health facilities and several house visits and threat letters, intimidating government officials, journalists, and COVID-19 experts.

Although the common thread of the eclectic COVID-19 protest is resistance against what the demonstrators consider the establishment, the list of grievances that are expressed is long and diverse and spans much more than just the measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Facebook post that started the initial hashtag *#Stopthelockdown* reads: "Dear fighters, […]. Our human rights have been ignored since the outbreak of COVID-19." The protest was described as "a call for freedom and a protest against amongst others 5G transmission towers, a restriction on freedom of movement and privacy and against the destroyed economy".[25] The protestors are against a totalitarian state, which they find exemplified in the restriction of their "freedom of movement and social freedom" and how "we are being monitored by drones, facial recognition and our fellow citizens via whistle-blow hotlines". They also mention censuring of these issues by mainstream media platforms.[26] Later, as the protests gained public awareness and grew in size, the topics and slogans of the COVID-19 protests became even more diverse. Demonstratie van het Volk, creators of the initial hashtag, linked up with "Nederland in Opstand" ("The Netherlands in Revolt")[27]. Nederland in Opstand not only fights against the COVID-19 measures, but also for more affordable health insurance, closed borders, and the preservation of *Black Pete*.[28]

As established in the theory about empty signifiers, the parts of the population that did not feel seen, heard, or represented by the political establishment were given the opportunity to manifest and give space to their pent-up resentment, embraced, and encouraged by unexpected allies in a "fundamental conflict about the future course of society."[29] Thus, new assemblies of social spheres that were formerly separate from each other were formed. A community of individuals that had long since been agitating against the health risks of electro-magnetic radiation was suddenly granted a much larger stage for their complaints and grievances; critics of vaccines and the pharmaceutical industry found an audience with big name influencers with a giant follower base. The pro-*Black Pete*[30] activists could share their idea of cultural loss with others who felt that everything had been taken from them by the establishment.

In some cases, the coalitions were the product of active attempts to digitally create connections and networks of groups that mutually supported each other. Despite protesting for a different cause, calls to join COVID-19 protests were shared in farmer's protest groups and calls to join farmer's protests were shared in platforms that rallied against the COVID-19 measures.[31]

## Genealogies of the Dutch Anti-Government Protest Movement

The data are based on a study into conspiracy constructions and hatred of the system in the Netherlands between 2000-2014 by Van Buuren, which is still relevant today, and additional current research of the authors using the same methodology.[32] The data was collected on (online) platforms of anti-corona activists, such as websites, newspapers and social media. When

necessary and possible, the data was also complemented with sources from mainstream media, like digital archives of newspapers and magazines (via LexisNexis), parliamentary archives (via Parlando) and policy documents of ministries. Relevant sources were collected in the 2000-2014 study and maintained and expanded with developments as they were happening. Based on the continued observation of these sources, combined with the observation of the protests, the following assertions can be made: despite the mosaic of protest, there are a few categories of groups or "genealogies" that can be distinguished, although there is also overlap in terms of discourse and protesters. Per genealogy, the classic empty signifier *the elite* can refer to different conceptualisations of the opposing force, but because of the fluid nature of the empty signifier, the interpretation of the word can change for individuals and groups over time.

The first genealogy is formed by spiritual spheres that have traditionally been critical of vaccinations and have been proponents of alternative lifestyles and medicine. The *soft language* that permeates the protest movement is strongly influenced by this segment: the signifiers are love, connection, awakening, light, and growth[33]. When they use the empty signifier referring to *the elite*, they are protesting an institution that in their view is based on fear and hatred, which is juxtaposed with the natural intuition of *the people*.[34] Often, they see the elite as distinctly connected to the perceived control over health or nutrition, possibly from pharmaceutical companies, as these are the *opponents* to the alternative lifestyle they are proponents of. As different conspiracy theories are closely linked to spiritual ideas and practices, the phenomenon has been coined as "conspirituality".[35]

The *soft language* has also nestled itself into a second genealogy, mixed with a harsh anti-government narrative. This is the protest of angry freelancers, small business owners and entrepreneurs, in other words: the protest of the middle class and libertarians, according to Callison and Slobodian.[36] They compare it with the world of disruption and innovative capitalism and discern "a sort of neoliberal logic": there is a belief that it is not only impossible to control the economy centrally, but also the truth: to concentrate the truth in a single institute is to do it violence. Here, *the elite* threatens democracy and personal freedom. Opinions on holism and spirituality are mixed with a "dogged discourse of individual liberties", a large distrust of anything that is centralised and an ideological preference for libertarianism. COVID-19 is seen as a pretext from the global elites to push for a radical transformation of daily life.

A third genealogy is formed by a part of the Protestant-Christian communities. The insight that the establishment - represented in media, politics, and science - is malicious and that a parallel society must be established quickly, therefore presents itself as a divine message. When they refer to *the elite* versus *the people*, this can refer to a quite literal fight between good and evil: good Christians versus people under the influence of Satan. References are made from various pulpits to the Devil's plan of the "Plandemic" and the "Great Reset", a Satanic plan to enslave civilians and persecute Christians. Christian end-of days prophets with a message about the corona pandemic and the accompanying vaccine as proof of the coming apocalypse are given a new audience. Two leaders of the "Red Pill Journaal" ("Red Pill News"), a conspiracy channel that focuses mainly on the alleged Satanist paedophile networks of the elite, were re-baptised as Christians in the tradition of the Pentecostal church. The telegram channel "De Bataafse Republiek" ("The Batavian Republic"), managed by them, organised "Batavian prayer groups",

in which hundreds of people took part praying for the alleged victims of sadistic abuse, but also recounting the divine mandate to resist.[37]

A fourth genealogy is formed by the extreme right. From the beginning of the protests against the corona policy, extreme right-wing activists and groups, such as the "Nederlandse Volks-Unie" ("Dutch People's Union"), the "Dietse Volkspartij" ("Dutch Peoples Party") and the new group "Wij zijn Nederland" ("We are the Netherlands"), have joined the protests. For this genealogy, *the elite* often specifically refers to the classic conspiracy of the Jewish elite that is attempting to eliminate the white race and Dutch culture. Right wing extremists are present at numerous demonstrations with the Prince Flag and are active on the social media channels.[38] We are the Netherlands focuses on all patriots, freedom-loving and anti-vaccination activists, people for the preservation of our traditions and culture, the 100,000 Trump Fans, the Wappies[39], the conspiracy theorists, the anti-government activists, the Anti-Globalists, the nationalists, the Virus madness activists, the entrepreneurs and SMEs, the football supporters, the caravan dwellers, the craftsmen and craftsmen, the farmers and country people and every sober, Dutch and self-thinking Dutchman…[40]

Also the far right political party "Forum voor Democratie" ("Forum for Democracy") is engaged in the protests. Both in the streets, at manifestations, and in Parliament, Members of parliament from Forum are spreading narratives delegitimising the Dutch political order, calling for people's tribunals and flirting with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[41] Moreover, Forum and other Dutch actors from the far right played a role in actively spreading and amplifying transnational narratives and conspiracy theories both at home and abroad, such as the assumed role of the World Economic Forum in exploiting corona for "The Great Reset" or the existence of "biolabs" in Ukraine in which viruses are manufactured.[42]

Finally, a fifth genealogy is formed by a mixed group of citizens who turned against the government out of dissatisfaction, resentment, and bad experiences with the authorities: the dropouts. Historian Remieg Aerts sees the corona protests as a movement without ties to institutionalised organisations, without a clear goal, but with an outspoken anti-establishment attitude. According to Aerts, the anti-establishment attitude is fuelled by social media, but it is also the result of 25 years of neoliberalism: "A large space has arisen between the government as a powerful executive apparatus and citizens who feel little or no further connection with the state. That sentiment is also fuelled by the benefits scandal, or the earthquakes in Groningen, which make citizens feel abandoned. Corona has been a pressure cooker." [43] People who fall under the banner from this perspective can feel heard and seen by the empty signifiers proclaiming that "it is not right" and can use *the elite* to refer to the government as a symbol for general failure of the social system.

This overview of the genealogies shows how the emptiness of conspiracy narratives and other protest narratives have the potential to form a discursive arena for an mix of political grievances, hopes and demands that are not accepted within the institutionalised political order.[44] However, it is important to note that the fact that these different genealogies came together during the corona protests does not mean that there are no frictions between them or that the far right is successful in trying to hegemonise the protests. Research by the British Commission for

Countering Extremism shows that right wing extremist groups do try to exploit feelings of anger and unrest over the COVID-19 measures, but that this does not mean that have managed to gain much support within the broad coalition of anti-corona demonstrators.[45] In Telegram groups of Dutch farmers there was in fact much discussion whether or not they should work together with Forum for Democracy.[46] A minority, organised in more radical organisations of farmers, such as the Farmers Defense Force, opted for close cooperation with Forum, while more moderate groups distanced themselves from them.

Still, as the protest movement progressed, ubiquitous slogans emerged, which could be observed on signs at the protests, on social media, but also on professionally produced merchandise which can be worn to show alliance to the cause.[47] Of course, due to the eclectic nature of the protesters, rallying cries were rarely linked to any particular cause, as it would alienate the protestors who do not happen to support that one. Many slogans show a radical indeterminacy that is up for interpretation for any individual, like:

> *"It is not right"; "I am done with it"; "We are tired of the lies"; "The Netherlands in Resistance"; "Giving up is not an option"; "No Great Reset"; "Freedom & Happiness"; "Make Holland Great Again"; "No pricktatorship"[48]; "I fight for freedom"; "I am awake"; "Stop the madness", and; "We are done with the government".*

These slogans function as empty signifiers, that provided a way to create a sense of collectivity, not based on a shared ideology or readily apparent characteristic, but based on a shared feeling that there is something very wrong in society. When further analysing the empty signifiers, we see two types of topics: shared values such as autonomy, individuality, freedom and identity, and worries over a dystopian future of invasive technologies and global institutions that are allowed to make far-reaching decisions about the future, with no accountability to the common people. The continued presence of what are commonly considered to be conspiracy theories also function as empty signifiers. Conspiracy theories may distinctly appeal to different social groups from various social structures.[49] A conspiracy theory is often described as a narrative that functions as a tool to make sense of a system that feels like it is actively working against you.[50] The components of the typical conspiracy, a secret organisation with malicious intent against those lower in the hierarchy, are able to be interpreted in the same way that any other empty signifier can: the organisation can be understood to be any material group and so can the oppressed majority and each person can decode the narrative according to their social or political interests, which may be a necessary tool for them to be able to express and mobilise around greater dissatisfactions.[51]

## Comparing Empirical Observations and the Definition of Anti-Governmental Extremism

We can conclude that the authorities do struggle with labelling and interpretation of the phenomenon of anti-governmental, or anti-institutional, extremism, whereby they also (have to) look mainly from a security perspective. In this article, have looked at the phenomenon from a different perspective to allow the analysis of the movement from a non-security perspective as

well. We have introduced the populism studies concept of empty signifiers to illustrate and add to the AIVD observation of the versality of the anti-institutional narrative within the protests and to expand on our understanding of anti-government protest. By using empty signifiers, the protest is not only able to accommodate a great variety of themes and grievances, uniting various groups with different interests under the same banner, it also gives protesters the means to communicate about their shared emotions about the systematic things that they oppose.

In the search for the definition of the anti-governmental narrative, we can raise the question if we can label the above-described protest movement as anti-governmental or anti-institutional extremism. Based on observations thus far, the anti-governmental movement does not reject the basic principles of democracy – people mainly want a different interpretation of the system and its institutions, like the government, media, or technology. The potential for violence is estimated to be low – but the intimidating effect of threats is high.[52] Even so, the AIVD annual report concludes that the anti-institutional narrative undermines the democratic legal order: the narrative states that current democratic institutions are all part of, or under the control of, the malicious elite and thus erodes the legitimacy of, and trust in, the institutions in the longer term. The reasoning is that too much distrust can hinder the work of members of parliament, judges, etc., and will eventually cause civilians to drop out of society entirely. All of this can threaten the continued existence of the democratic legal order, apart from the potential of any violence occurring. Of course, restraint is required with the application of the extremism label because the milieu of anti-governmental and anti-institutional protest was, is, and will remain diverse and it is still too unclear whether the narrative embraced to a certain extent by a hundred thousand people can indeed undermine the democratic legal order by thinking and acting. Moreover, it remains complicated to determine where to draw the line. Are all anti-governmental individuals and groups 'extremist'? This type of question and the fluidity of the group of anti-government protestors make it difficult to study and understand this phenomenon. Seeing the anti-government protests through the lens of their shared ideas and grievances will give us additional insight into the nature and dynamics of this movement in addition to solely looking through the lens of security or the potential threat to the democratic legal order.

Further empirical research into the anti-governmental movement and its online and offline manifestations is needed. In particular (quantitative) studies into the language that is used by the various genealogies can help to gain insight into the use and importance of empty signifiers. It can also help to better assess the usefulness of this concept and improve its use in researching and understanding the origin and development of the anti-government protest and the anti-institutional movement in the Netherlands.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Studying Terror Through My I's:
## Autoethnographic Insider/Outsider Reflections of an Arab-Muslim Researcher

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The phenomena referred to as terrorism and political violence have become a major object of academic interest over the past two decades. While the lack of first-hand data collection has been criticised, a growing number of researchers are conducting field research and interviews with individuals involved in these phenomena. Among them, there are scholars with ethnic, cultural or religious subjectivities that place them sometimes as insiders and other times as outsiders with respect to their research subjects. The way this insider/outsider-positionality impacts the research is explored in this paper through my experience as a scholar of politico-ideological violence which is analysed using the tool of autoethnography. The findings point to the difficulties related to navigating a securitised identity in a securitised research field and to the fact that while the Arab-Muslim identity can often facilitate access to the field, on other times it can become a major obstacle. It is argued that scholarship on terrorism and political violence may benefit from increased efforts to promote reflexivity among researchers.

**Keywords:** Positionality, terrorism, autoethnography, reflexivity, Iraq, Lebanon

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# Introduction: Studying Terrorism "From Below"

Empirical research into terrorism and political violence has exploded over the past two decades. Nevertheless, the field continues to be criticised for a lack of first-hand empirical data collection, with most research being based on secondary data and open sources.[1] Some explanatory factors include the difficulty of gaining field access, a reticence to provide interviewees with a potential platform to publicise their ideas or whitewash their image, apprehensions that interviewing as a social practice may be seen as a form of complicity or connivance, fear of legal consequences of getting involved with offenders, doubts regarding the veracity of interviewees' accounts, and a general aversion to fieldwork.[2] As a result of this, some argue that researchers on political-ideological violence have remained "removed from the violent field"[3] and preferred working with second- and third-hand data while benefitting from the relative comfort of the ivory tower.[4] This is unfortunate for arguably, some of the best research on political violence "is undertaken by researchers, who, on some level, interact with the people being researched"[5] and who understand that the phenomenon is "politically, socially and morally sensitive."[6]

This situation is gradually improving. In fact, there is a growing presence of researchers in the field, and, as a result, a nascent body of scholarship is engaging with the methodological challenges of conducting field-based qualitative inquiry into various forms of politico-ideological violence. Much has yet to be done in this respect, however, and this paper aims to make a contribution in this direction. Based on doctoral research conducted between 2018 and 2020 involving over 100 interviews with individuals who had joined terrorist groups, non-violent activists and practitioners, and ethnographic immersion in relevant contexts in Lebanon, Switzerland and Canada,[7] I will be discussing methodological issues related to qualitative inquiries when it comes to terrorism research.

The complex web of interactions between the researcher, the object of research and the researched can be referred to as *positionality.*[8] I believe that the researcher's positionality in such a sensitive and highly politicised field must be critically engaged to produce knowledge that not only has value in terms of knowledge production but also considers the importance of scientific integrity.

In the present analysis, I will therefore focus particularly on my positionality as an Arab-Muslim researcher and discuss critically how I have both positively and negatively shaped and been shaped by my research on various forms of terrorism and political violence in relation to the Arab World. For this, I will be using the method of autoethnography. Through an ongoing, iterative and thorough autoethnographic explorative process, I am putting my personal and cultural attributes, experiences and perspectives at the service of this research, analytically, methodologically and ethically, by critically appraising how the research affects me emotionally and intellectually and how it may in itself be revealing of certain aspects of the phenomenon under study.

## Engaging with One's Positionality in Research on Political Violence and Terrorism

It has been lamented that among those who conduct grounded research into political violence and terrorism, especially through interviews, only a few document the details of their methodology and reflect upon them.[9] With the growing number of researchers on the ground who seek direct contact with active or former terrorist sympathisers or offenders, insights have started to emerge regarding the methodological challenges of conducting field-based research on politico-ideological violence. They usually relate to the difficulty of gaining access to research subjects, the challenges of situating the narrative of the interviewee, and concerns related to safety and research ethics.[10] More critical works, especially with the late arrival of ethnographers in the field, has brought about a more committed discussion of positionality and reflexivity, i.e., an ongoing analysis of the ways in which the research process, subjects and findings are affected by the researcher.[11] Taking reflexivity seriously can contribute to producing knowledge not only on "the workings of our social world but also […] on *how* this knowledge is produced."[12]

The field of terrorism research (like academia more generally) has focused on jihadist forms of terrorism and been criticised for its Western-centrism,[13] with the majority of works being produced in North-American and European universities by White and predominantly male scholars. The challenges pertaining to research methods when it comes to terrorism and political violence have therefore long focused on challenges specific to cultural "outsiders", such as the difficulty of access, the mistrust towards foreigners, attempts at manipulation, and the sort of juvenile exaltation related to meeting the dangerous Other.[14] Such works often fall prey to an orientalist and securitising lens, where the engagement with the research subjects remains shallow and distant, which makes it difficult to provide truly emancipatory reflections that may help us envisage the phenomenon and the relevant research methods in a different light.

Meanwhile, thanks to the growing diversity among academic researchers, there is a body of scholarship produced by scholars who share certain cultural attributes with the individuals under study. In relation to jihadist forms of terrorism, this often means sharing religious (e.g., Islamic), sectarian (e.g., Sunni, Shia), ethnic (e.g., Arab, Kurdish, Afghan) or nationality characteristics (e.g., Nigerian, Lebanese), depending on the research context and the specific phenomenon under study. As a result of this, there has been a renewed impetus to the *insider/outsider* debate in the social sciences and specifically in relation to the field of terrorism and political violence. Insiders are researchers who in one way or another belong to a particular ethnic or religious community or who match the gender, socio-economic status or political orientation of the individuals they are interested in studying. Oriola and Haggerty, for instance, discuss the challenges of doing research as "academic homecomers", i.e. individuals who travel to the Global North to study and return home to conduct research.[15] Oriola, as a Yoruba man who was pursuing his PhD in Canada and came back to Nigeria to study violent militancy, experienced the ambivalence and malleability of the insider/outsider status first hand and noted cogently:

> *While I resented being perceived as an 'Other' by my own people, to my chagrin I also realized that I was no longer fully Nigerian in the same way that the Agge people were. My time away had apparently made me less warm and somewhat aloof in my interpersonal relations. Rather than being regarded as yet another citizen, I was often treated as a*

> *stranger needing protection and guidance, something that was both appreciated and unsettling.*[16]

In a fascinating study, Adebayo and Njoku also discuss how their positionality has been redefined during the research process, as Nigerians working in the Nigerian context.[17] Miled presents a compellingly self-critical account of her experience conducting research with Muslim youth in Canada in a highly politicised context marked by the War on Terror and Islamophobia, noting that

> *as a Muslim, my research cannot be disconnected from the embodied experiences of being the Muslim in the West. From these experiences, my research emerges; the academic and the personal eventually become intertwined in shaping my research. I admit that it is hard to map the contours of a research done by a Muslim researcher researching Muslim youth; the boundaries of researcher/researched and the insider/outsider get blurry, fluid and changing.*[18]

Badurdeen similarly observed that during her research on al-Shabaab in Kenya, her positionality and identity as a Muslim woman, arguably providing her with an insider status, has both facilitated and hampered the research process.[19] Necef, in analysing his interviews of an incarcerated jihadist in the Netherlands, recognised that it is not only his presumed Muslim identity but also his own left-wing extremist past that have shaped his positionality and influenced the way he engaged with the interviewee.[20]

The insider status does not per se facilitate research, and the nuanced debate emerging on such questions is a highly fruitful one. There has been some scholarly debate regarding the benefits of being an 'insider' instead being an 'outsider' when it comes to the study of political violence.[21] In terms of analysis of the findings, the insider status can make it difficult to see certain themes that are so commonplace to a particular culture, identity or type of existence.[22] In that case, outsider status can be beneficial because the fresh view can be helpful in recognising and naming dominant themes that are simply too normalised to insiders. I realised this myself, when I only found later in the analysis of the data that Anti-Americanism and the Iraq War were such dominant themes for individuals who mobilised for causes and conflicts in the Arab World. They are so commonplace in discussions between Arabs that it can be difficult to identify their role for grievances and politico-ideological mobilisations.

Papadopoulos and Lees criticise this dichotomic conceptualisation of a researcher's identity for being simplistic and reductionist, while at the same time arguing for a process of ethnic matching between the researcher and the researched.[23] Joosse, Bucerius and Thompson agree in part, but also put forward the potential benefits of being a 'trusted outsider' and argue for a combination of insiders and outsiders in immersive fieldwork and interviewing.[24] The insider-outsider debate is of course reminiscent of academia's traditionally problematic engagement with the Other and there is a risk that interviewees' identities are instrumentalised (via *tokenisation*) by research directors who themselves have no 'insider status' but end up translating the research findings into their own words.

Ahmed suggests going beyond the insider-outsider dichotomy by reflecting on this question using different 'I's': in her case, the 'non-Islamic appearance I', the 'Muslim I', the 'British I', etc. These multiple subjectivities allow for a more nuanced engagement with the insider-outsider debate. Following, I am engaging critically with the multiple identities and subjectivities that have influenced my research in recent years, especially during my doctoral research.

## Studying the Self: Autoethnography

In my doctoral research, I conducted a mainly interview-based study on politico-ideological mobilisation and violence for causes and conflicts in the Arab World. I interviewed a total of 109 individuals, including former and active terrorist offenders, political activists, and practitioners including social workers, police officers and religious figures. Interviews took place in three countries, namely Lebanon, Switzerland and Canada. For an ongoing and iterative analysis of my positionality and reflexivity, I used autoethnography.[25]

Autoethnography denotes, in essence, the study and documentation of self. Autoethnographers study their own life stories to reveal sociological phenomena through 'privileged' knowledge that comes by lived experiences.[26] Self as subject offers advantages unavailable through other methodologies. Narrative theories of identity emphasize that we understand our lives through constructed narratives of a cohesive self.[27] Typical methodologies capture only pieces of individual life narratives. In autoethnography, the full scope of perceived experience is accessible, including unflattering or taboo aspects typically hidden or euphemised in others' responses.[28] Adding autoethnography as an instrument allows for a triangulation of data collection, a thorough engagement with the researcher's subjectivity and therefore a more holistic engagement with the object under study. In addition to fieldnotes, I therefore engaged in a continuous process of autoethnographic writing. The purpose of these writings has been to document the reflective and autoethnographic confrontation with the research project and object, the methodological difficulties and the personal challenges. Autoethnographic and reflective writing allows the reader to contextualise the findings presented by the researcher. Importantly, autoethnographic analysis in relation to the research method and the research object provides research findings in their own right, which are of particular interest to other social scientists.

The autoethnographic data consists of notes that I took during activities immediately related to the research, such as fieldwork, transcription and analysis, in the form of fieldnotes and memos. On MAXQDA[29], the parts of interview transcripts that were deemed pertinent methodologically were coded using the label 'method' – the coded segments were added to the autoethnographic material. Beyond this material that is immediately related to my doctoral research, I also wrote reports whenever I communicated orally on my research, for instance during conferences, workshops and lectures. I also included reactions to my written communication about the research, in the form of anonymous peer reviews for instance, replies by editors to submitted opinion pieces, as well as comments on published opinions. Finally, my doctoral research was also a personal journey. I therefore included ongoing reflections and spontaneous thoughts about the research during unrelated activities, which I took care to always note down in my

personal digital notebook. I will also draw on a collaborative autoethnography conducted during my doctoral research in which I engaged thoroughly with methodological aspects of my work, and for which I compiled a considerable body of material including personal reflections and diary entries.[30]

The autoethnographic writing process has also proved a useful way of handling the psychological and emotional repercussions of conducting fieldwork on such a highly sensitive phenomenon. I always found it relieving to write, especially after finding myself in difficult and stressful situations. It helped me process strong emotions such as sadness and anger and make sense of them, also in relation to the phenomenon at hand. For me personally, autoethnography has since become a form of self-therapy.

# Findings

After presenting the intricacies of handling an Arab-Muslim identity in the context of terrorism research, I will engage with the multiple subjectivities that have shaped and impacted my research process.

## *'As an Arab, I would be afraid': Navigating a Securitised Identity*

During the Q&A session following a presentation of my latest findings at an international conference, a heavy atmosphere hung over the room. Several researchers in the audience, some of which I knew had ties to governmental research centres, pointed out the risky and potentially illegal nature of my research methods. Someone I later got to know more closely spoke up and said "As an Arab-American, I would be very afraid if I was in your shoes".[31]

I was slightly surprised that this was such a dominant concern, although one has to take into account that there are significant barriers to conducting fieldwork in North American academia, which can lead to a certain sensitivity in this respect. The question, however, was one that accompanied me throughout the research. Many people asked me how I was making sure to protect myself both during my fieldwork but also against potential legal consequences. On the one hand, these amplified concerns reveal stereotypical ideas regarding the phenomenon, and it would be interesting to analyse them in depth in a separate research endeavour. On the other hand, of course, they are certainly warranted.

Early on, I exchanged with researchers who were also doing fieldwork in Lebanon, as well as with institutional actors regarding my research project. I got in touch with the Swiss embassy in Lebanon and its representative for questions related to P/CVE was very helpful in connecting me with NGOs and researchers on the ground. I met with a fellow researcher who informed me about various measures he had taken in order to ensure his safety on the ground, including special insurance and daily check-ins. I did not resort to any particular measures other than informing the Swiss embassy, my university and my supervisor, as well as my family and my fiancée regarding my plans in terms of fieldwork in Lebanon. I also gave them the contact of the NGO I was working with during my fieldwork. Moreover, I sent a formal request to the General Security Directorate to enter Roumieh prison and provided them with several identification

documents, and an official letter from my university.

What kept me up at night, however, was the risk of exposing myself to potential legal entanglements. I was in contact with individuals who had been convicted for terrorism-related offences and corresponded to the (stereo)typical "risk" profile of a potential terrorist. Also, my political views which I share publicly are not necessarily radical, but can be state-critical and provocative.

To mitigate these risks as much as possible, I tried to preserve an unproblematic profile and maintain links with various institutional agents. Through my work in the realm of the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism, I was regularly in touch with representatives from the police and the intelligence services. Regarding my social media activity, I changed the name of my profile and remained careful regarding the content I posted. When communicating with individuals whom I strongly suspected were being monitored, I tried to remain as clear and straightforward as possible, knowing that in criminal trials, messages via Facebook and WhatsApp were used to incriminate individuals. Expressions such as "brother" or involving "God" have been treated as part of a code language used by terrorists in criminal trials.[32] Importantly, I decided against using crypted communication channels to avoid conveying the impression of clandestinity. However, some respondents preferred encrypted applications like Signal or Telegram, which I switched to in those cases.

In general, however, I felt safer in Switzerland than I did in Lebanon, where my worries were reinforced by statements made by individuals I met. For example, social worker Sara told me that:

> *any researcher should be afraid in a place like this. I don't have anyone protecting me if someone decides to hide drugs in my car. Once, they asked me whether I considered Hezbollah a terrorist organisation. Of course, the goal was to intimidate or incriminate me. I told them that I study Sunni groups only.*[33]

The risks of being associated with the terrorist phenomenon were exacerbated through my Arab-Muslim identity. This was true in general, but became particularly tangible in the Lebanese context, where my physical appearance seemed to correspond to a particular risk profile and prompted actions by security actors which became almost systematic. On several occasions, I was stopped when driving to Tripoli in Northern Lebanon. Several informants later told me that a full beard was clearly a marker that attracts security services' attention. I also soon noticed that army and police officers seemed to be systematically shaved and wear their hair very short. This seemed to create a visible barrier in terms of physical appearance between "legitimate" individuals and "illegitimate" or "suspicious" ones.

One situation was very revelatory in this respect. When trying to enter the campus of a university to conduct interviews with student activists, I was visibly spotted by the security guard at the entrance from far away and denied entry before even I was asked about a potential permit. I then called my friend who came down to talk to the security guards and contacted the head of his department over the phone. While he was on the phone, several individuals who looked

"Western", meaning white, blond and blue-eyed, were simply smiled at by the guards and waved through. My friend looked annoyed and later told me that this discriminatory practice was very common and so revelatory of a lasting imperialist legacy and inferiority complex, and that no American or European-looking individual would have been stopped the way I was. This phenomenon was not entirely new to me, but I was still struck by its flagrancy and blatancy in an Arab country and in that particular situation.

Hence my engagement in research on terrorism was doubly challenging. Not only was I entering a highly securitised field, which, regardless of one's identity, inevitably prompts questions related to safety and security. I was also entering this field with a securitised identity, that of an Arab-Muslim male which in many ways corresponds to the Western-centrist archetypical risk profile of a potential extremist or terrorist. Navigating this securitised identity has meant a constant vigilance and alertness to the potential legal repercussions of my presence in the field, where the boundaries between legitimacy and illegitimacy can quickly become blurred. It also required careful handling of the insider/outsider-positionality, for being too much of an insider could easily be perceived as form of complicity.

## *'You're Arab, you understand': Navigating Multiple I's*

Questions related to my positionality as insider and/or outsider, respectively, were present throughout my entire research process. I was confronted early on with the insider-outsider question, even before I had really started my research. When I presented my research proposal, I was surprised by some of the feedback which insisted on my highlighting my cultural background and linguistic competencies to increase my chances of obtaining funding. The recurring and insisting nature of the comments had a somewhat alienating effect on me, for I felt – a little naively – that they were not focusing on my competencies as a researcher nor the content of my proposal. Back then I was thus already put forward as somehow being the 'right man for the job' based on my ethnic and cultural characteristics. I think that these assumptions turned out to be justified, yet only in part. Resembling the researched in some important aspects has been extremely useful most of the time. Sometimes, however, certain "insider" characteristics have rather complicated my work.

Being "ethnically Arab" has been helpful not only for methodological reasons, i.e., being able to conduct interviews with individuals in (sometimes) the only language they spoke, but also simply to be accepted as "one of us" who is allowed to speak "for us" to a certain degree. This resonates with arguments I put forward elsewhere.[34] For instance, Sara, a social worker who acted as a generous gatekeeper during my stay in Lebanon, said to me very clearly: "You are Arab, you understand these things better. What I can't take is when a foreigner is talking about us". Similarly, my "Muslim I" – defined mainly by my first name, *Ahmed* being primarily an Islamic name derived from the name of the prophet *Mohammed* – has been useful in the sense that I am more readily assumed to understand the difficulties of navigating Muslimness and expected to be less judgmental.

Respondents that I approached often expressed this very frankly. For instance, Ramon, an individual in Switzerland convicted for terrorism-related offences, called me, after I sent him a

letter through his lawyer, stating clearly that my Arab-Muslim identity was a reason why he felt he could share his experiences with me, something he had repeatedly declined to do with other researchers and journalists: "You know, you're Arab, an Iraqi, you understand these things. You understand what I went through and what they are doing". In another situation, after observing the criminal trial of a Swiss-based individual, I approached him and introduced myself as a researcher with my name. He was visibly stressed after the trial proceedings, but the relief on his face was palpable when he asked "You're a Muslim? Finally". He didn't explain what he meant by "finally" but I felt like it referred to his feeling that finally somebody was there who could look at what was happening through a more nuanced lens.

With Justin in Lebanon, who considers himself a "right-wing Christian radical", the opposite was the case. Early in the interview he made it very explicit that, in his eyes, I was primarily a Muslim: "Excuse me, I know you're Muslim, but my father hates Muslims. That's why my parents were a bit worried about me meeting you". He himself, however, seemed to like me a lot and made efforts to meet up again after the interview. Although he was very open about his concerns and his antipathy towards Syrian and Palestinian Muslims, my Muslimness can be expected to have been a barrier. Before we started the meal, he made the sign of the cross, but in a very rushed manner, as if he assumed it could offend me. And at the end of the interview, when we were walking to our cars, he pointed to the cross hanging from his rear-view mirror, saying "See, that's the car of a Christian radical", laughing somewhat nervously, which I interpreted as a form of discomfort.

In Switzerland and Canada, my "Arab I" often overlapped with my "Migrant I", for, in the eyes of my interviewees who were also immigrants, themselves Arab or sympathetic to the Arab World, or invested in anti-racist and anti-imperialist causes, I was readily presumed to be an insider or an ally. The migrant identity facilitated contact with most interviewees in Canada and Switzerland. Daniel, a leftist internationalist who joined Kurdish groups fighting in Syria, pointed to our common experience as second-generation immigrants:

> *It's really good to talk. You know, that's one of the problems also. It's like the thing with being a secondo [second-generation immigrant in Switzerland]. These are experiences that very few people have been through. You can't share them with anyone.*

This phenomenon has accompanied me throughout my life, leading me to mingle and connect more easily with individuals of migrant backgrounds or who know the feeling of being culturally or ethnically different. The Iranian philosopher Shayegan coined the term *cultural schizophrenia*, arguing that

> *this issue can only be addressed and analyzed by those who have been raised in cultures like what we have lived in. While it's about death, nobody can die on behalf of others. Similarly, those who have lived outside our civilization cannot wholeheartedly experience the presence of such a gap in their conscious. In other words, this duality is our unique and non-transferable fate.*[35]

I believe it is mainly my own experience (assumed because of my physical appearance and my name) of cultural schizophrenia, this inherent duality of being or growing up in a place one is not "really from", that made me an "insider" for many interviewees outside the Arab world.
In the case of individuals who are originally Arab but who do not speak the language very well, I noted something else. While talking to Khaled, an Arab-Canadian, who is very invested in causes related to the Arab World, but does not speak Arabic very well, I realised a power imbalance in our interaction, where I felt that I was suddenly construed as "more legitimately" Arab. This was sometimes also the case with individuals from the Maghreb region, against whom, unfortunately, there are many stereotypes in the Arab Mashreq concerning their lack of "Arabness", mostly due to their specific local dialects. From these collective stereotypes, some repercussions could be felt on the individual level. The ensuing position of inferiority of my interviewee could be clearly felt and was not unproblematic, for it created a sort of discomfort and insecurity that usually hampers authenticity and openness. To counterbalance this phenomenon in those cases, I usually switched to the language that the interviewee seemed more comfortable with.

With other interviewees, especially older ones, I was placed into a position of inferiority. This was the case in my interviews with religious men or older Arab researchers. With all of them, I felt like I was being lectured and treated like a son of theirs. This was a position that sometimes felt inadequate because I did not feel taken as seriously as I would have liked to be, but it was a comfortable position from my perspective as a researcher. It allowed me to lean back and sit comfortably in the position of the naïve and eager student and ask questions to which I received long and elaborate answers. It is also a position I am very familiar with as a young Arab man in general, because Arab culture posits respect for elders as a highly valuable attribute.

Being or appearing Arab can be problematic when conducting research, at least partly, on Arabs. During a trial observation at the Federal criminal court in Switzerland listening to the testimony of a Kurdish-Iraqi man accused of supporting the Islamic State group, I realised something important. At one point he stated:

> *I know some things about the legal system, and I don't trust the federal police. I know that Switzerland sent a message to the Lebanese authorities accusing my wife there of planning a terrorist attack. She spent three months in jail because of that. The authorities don't care what happens to those people, whether they are arrested or killed. They are comfortably sitting in their offices. So, if it was just you, the judge, and me, I could give you the names. We could even call them now. But like this, with everyone present in this room, I will not risk their lives. I don't know if there are spies here.*

He repeated this concern, that spies might be present, several times during the trial. It was only after the third time that he said it that it struck me that I, the only one in the room that resembled an Arab or Iraqi, could in fact be perceived as a spy. Especially since I had no obligation to introduce myself. I was simply sitting there, very attentively, taking notes. Of course, I was suspicious! This outside perception may have hampered many of my attempts to gain access to individuals from the Arab World, especially those who were wary not to get into further legal troubles.

As an Arab, but more specifically, as an Iraqi, both terrorism and the war against terrorism have been topics that have always had very personal relevance for me. When the US-led coalition started bombing Baghdad, I was about 12 years old. I personally remember getting up early that day, because of some noise in our house. I went down to the living room and saw my parents standing in front of the TV, watching the first bombings, speechless. At the time, most of my family members were still living in Baghdad. Today, almost everybody has fled to Turkey, Jordan, Egypt or Europe and North America. I also recall going to school that morning and my French teacher, a usually rather serious not to say stoic woman, being strongly affected and expressing her sadness about what was happening. Ever since, my home country has been haunted by civil wars, attacks by terrorist groups, and violent extremist gangs. My grandfather was killed at the hands of extremists, targeted for standing up against the growing sectarianism in the country's capital. My cousin was kidnapped for several weeks. Terrorist attacks that cost tens to hundreds of lives became a normal feature of life in Iraq after 2003. At the same time, it is with sadness that I observe the country's engagement with the problem – which rests on sweeping criminalisation, torture and indefinite detention of those associated closely or loosely with jihadist groups – as well as its violent repression of non-violent protests by a people that is fed up with the never-ending corruption of the ruling class. The repressive posture and the anti-democratic means of engaging with political dissent are breeding the next generation of young men who will turn to violence as an answer to their grievances.

On a more technical level, my "Iraqi I" has been a two-sided sword. On the one hand, Iraqis are well respected in the Arab World, for they are considered to be of the "true Arabs", for their cultural heritage and their local dialect which is close to formal Arabic. Also, while in some countries, Iraqis are specifically stigmatised, in Lebanon, there are few negative sentiments against Iraqis, in contrast to the strong prejudices held against Syrians or Palestinians for example.[36] And although an insider thanks to my Arab identity, I was somewhat an "outsider" because of my Iraqi identity. Being an outsider in that respect was helpful because it allowed me to remain something of a black box, not easily classifiable to Lebanese interviewees, some of which have strong feelings against Lebanese from other regions, confessions or political affiliations.

As a general observation, it can be said that I am seen primarily as an Iraqi when I am in the Arab World. Although I usually introduce myself as a Swiss-Iraqi or an Iraqi living in Switzerland, most people forget about that information soon afterwards. This is usually helpful in interactions with ordinary citizens. However, with official actors, especially police and military officers, or even during border control, it is problematic. Although my Swiss passport should grant me the privileges of a Swiss citizen, authorities always dig for further information about my Arab documents, refusing to simply treat me as a Swiss citizen. I was frequently questioned in a separate room while other foreigners passed through customs much more quickly. When I left Lebanon in the summer of 2019, a border control officer specifically told me: "You keep popping up in relation to a suspect, because your name in the Swiss documents is ambiguous [Arab documents usually include the name of the father and the grandfather]. I highly recommend that you procure Arab papers for the next time you come to Lebanon."[37] During my second research visit to Lebanon, I first tried to obtain authorisation to enter the refugee camp Ein El-Hilweh by personally submitting my request as a researcher. I was waiting for what seemed to be the head

officer to take a decision on my request, while sitting in a room with two subordinate officers. The conversation between the two revealed much of the debate regarding competing identities, a foreign and an Arab one:

> *Officer A: I don't think he should tell the organisation that he wants to go visit in there… that he is Iraqi. It might get him killed, because they consider him as an unbeliever. But being Swiss might also get him killed.*
>
> *Officer B: I don't think he should tell the organisation that he is Iraqi. Maybe someone simply doesn't like him and gets him into trouble.*
>
> *Officer A: But how should he conceal that? His accent is very obvious.*
>
> *Officer B: No, his passport is Swiss, the rest doesn't matter.*[38]

When the head officer finally arrives, he passes by me, casually asking officer A "What does he want here?" I get up to introduce myself and explain that I would like to enter the camp for research. He asks me where I am from. When I say "Swiss", he just stares at me, visibly unhappy about my answer. I then add that I am originally Iraqi and he says: "Ah, Iraqi, that sounds about right". He then quickly rejects my request, suggesting I get the consent of an organisation that would be responsible for me inside the camp, which was what I ended up doing.

The Iraqi identity also turned out to be problematic because of the conflict between Sunni and Shia groups, which has been exacerbated by the Iraqi civil war after 2003. Many of my interviewees in Tripoli had strong anti-Shia sentiments. As discussed above, these feelings are fostered certainly by sectarian hatred in general, but also by the Lebanon-specific role of Hezbollah, which has a strong grip on the security apparatus which criminalises and terrorises them, and the local conflict with Alawite groups sympathetic to the Assad regime, which are associated with the Shia sect.

It was therefore very common to be asked where in Iraq I was from exactly. Depending on my answer, I would be assumed to be either of Shii or Sunni background: Western (e.g., Fallujah) or Northern Iraqis (e.g., Mosul) would be assumed to be Sunni, and Southern Iraqis Shia. I usually responded that I was from Baghdad, which was neither predominantly Sunni, nor Shia, and made it difficult to categorise me. Some of my interviewees relentlessly tried to find out more regarding this aspect. Sometimes it led them to ask directly, as when Walid asked me "Are you Sunni?" At other times, it transpired subtly, as when Sheikh Nassif, whom I had already told I was from Baghdad, introduced me to Rashid, a former member of a group led by Ahmed Al-Aseer in Southern Lebanon, as "this is our Iraqi brother…from Mosul, right?" Interestingly, it would have been easier to be of Christian confession, to be placed outside the Sunni-Shia divide. A fellow Lebanese researcher, who was also conducting research with Islamist groups in Tripoli at the time, warned me that I should be very careful, and that he found it to be advantageous to be a Maronite Christian. When meeting a fundamentalist cleric, for instance, he told me he had tried to avoid revealing his background, but when he finally did, the cleric shouted: "Oh, you should have told me! I was afraid you could be Shii!"[39] Aziz also told me very clearly that "here in Saida or in Tripoli, people can be very stubborn. For example, a Sunni might not want to talk to a Shii". On another occasion, a situation brought this issue to the fore subtly yet powerfully. During a meeting with ex-detainees who had been in Roumieh prison for terrorism-related offences,

one of the interviewees, Salman, asked me where I was from and I answered that I was Iraqi. He looked at Sara, and said, in a serious tone, "you should have told me". I and everyone else in the room froze and the discomfort and tension grew instantly to an unbearable intensity. After a few seconds, he shouted: "*ala rasnah al-iraqeen*!" (literally, "Iraqis are on top our heads"), meaning, rather positively, that he welcomed me, and everyone broke into laughter, as a visible sign of relief. Whether he genuinely meant it or also simply wanted to defuse the situation remains unclear.

The Sunni-Shia divide haunted me also outside the Arab World, notably in Switzerland. Sometimes, the question was asked respectfully, after my answer regarding my precise origin in Iraq was judged to be insufficient. Sheikh Mouloud, for instance, asked me, at the end of our interview: "Just out of pure curiosity, I don't have anything against any sect, but are you Sunni or Shii?" In another situation, my Iraqi origin was a barrier. I asked an acquaintance, who had gotten in touch with an Iraqi refugee who had been convicted of terrorism-related offences in Switzerland, whether he could ask him about a potential interview. He got back to me with the following message:

> *I just met the man and asked him whether he would meet you for an interview. He replied that it depended on whether you are Kurdish, Shii or Sunni. If you are Sunni, I could give you his number, otherwise it would be out of question.*[40]

Since I had made the choice, from the outset of my research, not to give in to sectarian classifications, I was unable to get access to that person.

Finally, specifically to the Swiss context, I was also juggling with multiple subjectivities. Having grown up in the Swiss German part, I am fluent in Swiss German and therefore have a very present cultural and linguistic "Swiss German I". On the other hand, having spent many years in the French-speaking part, I am usually also considered as a "Francophone Swiss". In fact, I have realised throughout my various activities, both in academia and policymaking, that I am rather stubbornly associated with the francophone part of Switzerland. For instance, individuals from francophone Switzerland have repeatedly and unconditionally considered me as "one of them", often rather surprised that I am originally Swiss German and also frequently forgetting that I am. On the other hand, Swiss German actors, especially in discussions and meetings at the federal level, tend to repeatedly put me into the Swiss francophone box, even after we may have had several side talks in Swiss German. A hypothetical explanation is that there are barely any actors of Arab-Muslim background operating at a federal level. When they are, they are usually coming from the francophone part of Switzerland, where they are also represented more strongly than in the German-speaking cantons. My repeated categorisation as francophone Swiss can, in my view, be understood as emanating from a specifically Helvetic racist classification of the Arab-Muslim Other. It is a classification that makes it hard to reconcile this Other, when he arrives to a certain socio-political status, with a Swiss German identity.

On a technical and cultural level, my fluency in both Swiss German and French has allowed me to navigate both contexts in all their subtleties and details. I have realised, over the past years, that although there are many bilingual speakers in the Swiss context, the cultural mobility

often remains rather limited. Especially when it comes to research, the so-called *Röstigraben* – a metaphoric expression meaning the gap between francophone and German-speaking Switzerland – remains very present. Hence, being able to conduct interviews in both contexts and get a good grasp of the regional specificities was certainly beneficial for my research in the Swiss context.

Finally, a further insider/outsider vector that I have found to be relevant for my research runs along the line of political affiliation. Since many of my interviewees are critical of state power, it would have been difficult to arrive at the same depth in the conversation had I been leaning towards state-centric positions. Also, as part of my research, I have engaged more seriously with leftist, internationalist, communist, socialist and anarchist ideas, some of which have influenced my political views. Therefore, being somewhat well-versed in these ideologies and adhering at least to parts of them myself has been a facilitating factor during my interviews. It has enabled me to get access to gatekeepers and interviewees who would otherwise have refused to help me. In the Lebanese context, I was also asked about my specific political affiliations on several occasions, as for instance with a Lebanese Alawite on my position towards the Syrian regime or a former Hezbollah sympathiser regarding my view on Lebanese politics.

## Concluding Discussion: Towards a Holistic Engagement with Securitised Research Terrains

Autoethnography was used in this paper to explore both the research topic and the methodology through an in-depth investigation of my role as a researcher in the field of politico-ideological violence and my positionality. Conducting research into terrorism and political violence as an Arab-Muslim inevitably prompts questions regarding one's own safety and potential incrimination. While it is generally problematic for any researcher to conduct research into illegal activities, it is even more problematic to conduct research into terrorism as an Arab-Muslim researcher. I have tried to be careful throughout my research as to the ways in which my research could potentially make me liable for a criminal offence.

Importantly, I have engaged in-depth with the different subjectivities that define me as a person and as a researcher. Although an outsider in some respects, I can be considered as an insider in many others. Oftentimes, I was inevitably both an insider and an outsider at once. The status of an insider has been generally useful throughout the research although it was sometimes an obstacle to my research efforts. The subjectivities that have been discussed, namely the "Arab I", "Muslim I", "Migrant I", "Iraqi I", and "Swiss I" have all had some impact on my research and certainly on the findings. Many of my subjectivities overlap with those of my interviewees, thereby allowing me to gain a more in-depth understanding of their trajectories by tapping into my own. A major finding is that the Arab-Muslim identity is generally helpful in the research process, because of the researcher's ability to navigate the terrain linguistically and culturally. It is a two-sided sword, however, because the Arab-Muslim researcher must make an additional effort not to be categorised along national, religious, sectarian or political affiliations, of which some can seriously hamper his or her access to the field and to interviewees.

As a generally helpful attribute, researchers engaging with individuals of which many are highly critical towards the state and its institutions may benefit from questioning the extent to which they themselves have been influenced by state-centrism and thereby adopted a lens that is judgmental and moralistic. State-centrism makes it extremely difficult to engage holistically with a phenomenon that is born to a large extent out of the actual or perceived wrongdoings of states and conventional actors.

Related to this, it can be said that I have been both subject and object of my research on radicality. Over the past three years, I have myself gone through significant emotional and cognitive changes that have taken me into different directions but mostly fostered a more determined and more radical posture. Early during my fieldwork, in March 2019, I wrote in my fieldnotes: "If you come looking for the crime, be prepared to find pain, suffering and injustice."

Previously, I had worked on refugees' living situations and feelings of insecurity before shifting my focus to political violence and terrorism. I was hoping that this change of perspective would allow me to gain some distance from the desperation and misery of the individuals I was interested in. I was wrong. Worse even, the individuals I was dealing with, the purported or actual terrorist offenders, were not only already at the global bottom in socio-economic and political terms. In addition, they were criminalised and demonised, and experienced the full-fledged and merciless power of the state. The injustice of their situations was too flagrant and the more I understood about terrorism and counter-terrorism, the more my indignation grew.

Hence, I myself experienced several moral shocks, went through moments of great indignation and anger, phases of profound alienation and disappointment, but also, like my interviewees, appropriation and even responsibilisation.[41] I felt that I could not remain idle when I understood the serious implications for individuals who were designated as terrorists, and realised that the way they were dealt with was often not only unjust, but also counterproductive. I see my academic work as my engagement, and whenever possible, I transport the findings of my research into the public sphere by participating in conferences, giving workshops or writing accessible articles and opinion pieces outside of academic journals.

I have grown more interested in and increasingly critical of hegemonic power and the ways in which it influences state and international politics and, crucially, knowledge production. I have experienced how anything in the name of security as a big noun seems to override everything that can be seen as security as a small noun,[42] the feelings of security and fundamental rights of individuals and groups who usually lack the means and the power to defend themselves. This has prompted a philosophical and epistemological questioning of the bases of my pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, and concessions.

Importantly, working on this topic with my cultural, religious, and ethnic background, inevitably exposed me to the racist and imperialist violence of mainly epistemic nature. Whether it is the public debate surrounding terrorism, Islam, and Muslimness, and *dangerous others* or the theories and their underlying assumptions, or my personal experiences of alienation and othering in politics, academia or in both professional and personal interactions: I had to grapple with this violence emotionally and cognitively and needed to find ways to use it constructively

for my work and my personal life.

At some point, I stumbled over Lola Olufemi's book *Feminism, Interrupted,* and part of her introduction struck me as it encapsulated what my research endeavours, including the various enlightening readings, have done for me at a personal and emotional level:

> *Everybody has a story about how they arrived and keep arriving at radical politics. Some of us are politicised by the trauma of our own experiences, by wars waged in our names, by our parents and lovers, by the internet. It's useful to share the ways we become politicised if only because it helps politicise others. Growing up as a young black woman, I felt the oppressive way the world was organised with my body and through interpersonal relations long before I could articulate what those feelings meant. Revelling in the discovery of the word 'feminism' and its history as a political practice in my early teenage years at school, I found a personal freedom. I read ferociously. Black feminism, Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Anarchafeminism, Eco-feminism. Feminism opened up my world. I saw in it, conflicting theorists and activists, all giving their ideas about the way the world should be. Perhaps most memorably, it released me from the desire to comply with the world as it is.*[43]

I had the unspeakable privilege to devote time and resources to these questions that opened my eyes, that destabilised me, that made me question everything I had ever believed was true. I found peace and consolation in the works of scholars who choose to defy mainstream academia by asking courageous questions and seeking frightening answers. This process has allowed me to deal more confidently with the ontological insecurity arising from working at the crossroads of my personal racialisation and radicalisation, but also my privileges and the ways in which I myself am an enactor of injustices in this world, be they political, socioeconomic, epistemic or else.

Violent extremism, terrorism and political violence are likely to always constitute a major field of research and interest for many scholars around the world and first-hand data collection will continue to grow in importance. I believe that a holistic engagement with such highly securitised research terrains requires a particularly pronounced effort by the researcher to truly practice reflexivity in order to engage with one's positionality, multiple subjectivities and their impacts on the research questions, process, analysis, findings, presentation and dissemination. Autoethnography is by far not the only instrument that can support and structure reflexivity, but it is a very potent and accessible one, if care is taken continuously to produce autoethnographic writings. If reflexivity becomes an inherent part of research, scholarship in this field is likely to gain significantly in quality and foster a truly holistic scholarly engagement with the phenomena at hand.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Metaverse and Terrorism: Threats and Challenges

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The metaverse is currently the leading hype in the digital world because of its seemingly infinite potential and possibilities. Large corporations are drawn to the metaverse because it appears as the cutting edge of digital and technological developments. The metaverse is presented by communication technology companies as the next Internet, a leap towards a universe of boundless, interconnected virtual communities. However, there are many potential risks and challenges that the metaverse raises, including technical, legal, security, business, tax, privacy, security, and users' well-being and safety (among many others). Cyber-savvy terrorists have been highly resourceful in adapting and applying online platforms and have taken advantage of every new development, platform, and application. Based on their past record, it is reasonable to assume that the metaverse is a new dimension that terrorists and violent extremists are poised to study, examine, and possibly utilise. This research article explores some potential uses of the metaverse by terrorists and suggests preemptive measures to minimise the risks of them doing so. If the advancement of the metaverse or similar developments is inevitable, we should consider risks and abuses and think more carefully about them when moving forward.

**Keywords:** Metaverse, terrorism, cybersecurity, virtual reality

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# Introduction

The term "metaverse," combining "meta" and "universe," was first introduced in the 1992 science fiction novel *Snow Crash*. The author, Neal Stephenson, used the term to describe a virtual reality-based advanced form of the Internet.[1] The metaverse presents an immersion of the physical and virtual worlds in the digital sphere, using 3D technologies and online communication devices like computers and smartphones, allowing people to have real-time interactions and experiences across long distances. The metaverse is presented by communication technology companies as the next Internet, a leap towards a universe of boundless, interconnected virtual communities where people can socialise, communicate, collaborate, enjoy remote concerts and performances, and buy and sell products using virtual reality devices. In 2021 Mark Zuckerberg presented his vision for the future:

> *In the metaverse, you'll be able to do almost anything you can imagine—get together with friends and family, work, learn, play, shop, create—as well as completely new experiences that don't really fit how we think about computers or phones today... In this future, you will be able to teleport instantly as a hologram to be at the office without a commute, at a concert with friends, or in your parents' living room to catch up. This will open up more opportunity no matter where you live.*[2]

The metaverse is currently the leading hype in the digital world because of its seemingly infinite potential and possibilities. Large corporations are drawn to the metaverse because it appears as the cutting edge of digital and technological developments. The underlying promise of a new universe where the physical and digital worlds can combine and bring together thousands of individuals is perceived as enhancing fundamental areas of daily life. Metaverse technologies have already been developed in online gaming. The *Second Life* virtual world platform of 2023 may be the first metaverse, which integrated many aspects of social media interactions into a three-dimensional world. Similarly, *Fortnite*, the computer game introduced in 2017, is based on a virtual battlefield where imaginary reality becomes real using metaverse technologies. *Roblox* is another metaverse platform where gamers can play user-generated games, based on virtual reality experiences. *Roblox* also allows users to buy virtual items and attend remote events, including concerts, mass ceremonies, and parties. But it is the wider range of uses and opportunities beyond gaming that make the metaverse so attractive in various domains such as education, commerce, politics, entertainment, communication, and social interaction.

Because of its immense potential in benefiting the digital communications world, many tech giants are already entering the world of the metaverse. Facebook changed its name to Meta, officially becoming the most famous metaverse company and raising global interest in the concept and its potential. Zuckerberg also announced that he would invest USD $50 million in partnerships with other firms to promote the metaverse concept and technology. Other leading tech companies like Google, Microsoft, and NVIDIA began investing in metaverse development and were joined by other kinds of companies like Nike, Walmart, Adidas, and PepsiCo.[3] But as with other technological revolutions and developments, the potential and promise are fraught with possible negative ethical and social consequences associated with the massive use of these technologies.

A white paper written by a team from *Telefónica* describes some of the social risks and challenging concerns associated with the metaverse. The authors acknowledge that the opportunities of the metaverse abound and add: "While we believe that the potential benefits will, by far, outweigh the risks, it is also important to reflect, in advance, on those potential risks, with the goal to mitigate them before they actually happen".[4] There are many potential risks and challenges that the metaverse raises, including technical, legal, security, business, tax, privacy, security, and users' well-being and safety (among many others). Some of the risks stem from deliberate malicious actions and others from unintended consequences of innocent ones. If the advancement of the metaverse or similar developments is inevitable, we agree with the team from *Telefónica* about the need to consider risks and abuses—especially regarding cyber-savvy terrorists, which others have also highlighted[5]—and think more carefully about them when moving forward. After briefly reviewing how terrorists have used online technologies over the last few decades, this special correspondence explores some potential uses of the metaverse by terrorists and suggests preemptive measures to minimise the risks of them doing so.

## Online Terrorism

Terrorist networks have always relied on the mass media for publicity, psychological warfare, propaganda, and political achievements. The upsurge of media-focused terrorism has led several terrorism and communication scholars to reconceptualise modern terrorism within the framework of symbolic communication theory: "As a symbolic act, terrorism can be analysed much like other media of communication, consisting of four basic components: transmitter (the terrorist), intended recipient (target), message (bombing, ambush) and feedback (reaction of target audience)".[6] Dowling introduced the concept of "rhetoric genre," arguing that "terrorists engage in recurrent rhetorical forms that force the media to provide the access without which terrorism could not fulfil its objectives".[7] Weimann and Winn used the "theatre of terror" framing to analyse modern terrorism as an attempt to communicate messages by orchestrated violence.[8] The "theatre of terror" metaphor materialised dramatically in numerous events like the Munich Olympics attack in 1972 or the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, DC. These media-oriented terrorist acts reached huge, frightened audiences in dramatic television broadcasts that turned them into media events.

Then came the World Wide Web and the Internet. At first, the Internet seemed to be a bridge between populations and cultures and an ideal promoter for interaction, businesses, education, communication, and politics. But with enormous growth in the size and use of the Internet, utopian visions of the promise of online media were confounded by the spread of incitement, pornography, violence, and the abuse of the Internet by extremist organisations. The online web of computer-mediated communication proved an ideal medium for extremists as communicators: it is decentralised, liberal, and open to all, cannot be subjected to genuine regulation or control, is not censored, and allows free access to everyone who wishes to partake in it. Groups committed to terrorising societies to achieve their goals have used the great virtues of the Internet—ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, fast flow of information, and more—to their advantage.

As several studies have revealed, terrorists have used the Internet for a broad range of purposes,[9] a range far too broad to address comprehensively in this space. Researchers have illustrated many common patterns, such as how they use websites and social media to launch psychological campaigns, recruit and direct volunteers, raise funds, incite violence, and provide training. They also use it to plan, network, and coordinate attacks. Hoffman and Ware concluded that "today's far-right extremists, like predecessors from previous generations, are employing cutting-edge technologies for terrorist purposes."[10] As a general summary, it is widely agreed that cyber-savvy terrorists have been highly resourceful in adapting and using online platforms and have taken advantage of every new development, platform, and application for communicative and instrumental purposes. They began in the late 1990s with websites, forums, and chatrooms. Since 2014, they have been using the new social media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram), eventually adding online messenger apps (e.g. WhatsApp and Telegram), new platforms (e.g. 4chan, 8chan, and TikTok), anonymous cloud storage, and the Dark Net. They have been quick to learn how to use the most recent advancements in cyberspace, and thus it is reasonable to assume that the metaverse is a new dimension that terrorists and violent extremists are poised to study, examine, and possibly utilise.

## Metaverse As a Toolbox for Terrorism

Like all technological innovations, the metaverse introduces new prospects, threats, and challenges, including its potential use by terrorists and radical, violent extremists. Researchers at the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology and Education (NCITE) Centre in Omaha, Nebraska, concluded that "we see a potential dark side to the metaverse. Although it is still under construction, its evolution promises new ways for extremists to exert influence through fear, threat and coercion. Considering our research on malevolent creativity and innovation, there is potential for the metaverse to become a new domain for terrorist activity".[11] The metaverse may become a new territory for terrorist activity, a promising platform to improve and advance their online activities, including radicalisation, recruitment, training, fundraising and the coordination of attacks.[12] The two features that make the metaverse so attractive as a communication platform are presence and embodiment. Presence means that people feel they are communicating with one another directly, without any type of mediating channel or computer interface. Embodiment means that the users feel that their virtual body or avatar is their real, actual body. These two features of the metaverse enable a range of effective manipulation and deceptive influencing efforts.

According to the NCITE, the advancement of the metaverse will unlock new vulnerabilities that will be utilised by terrorists, complicating counter-terrorism measures in several ways. Thus, it additionally raises new challenges for counter-terrorism efforts, distinct from those already presented by social media platforms and earlier technologies, because of its considerably more immersive and emotional qualities based on its ability to produce parallel digital worlds.[13] It appears that like with other online new platforms, terrorists will want to add the metaverse to their present ecosystem, due to the operational benefits that it has over the present platforms. These benefits include substantial operational security, resilience to takedown, better interactivity, improved use of virtual contact, blending artificial intelligence with virtual reality,

and more. As noted earlier, it is vital to examine some of the potential uses of the metaverse by terrorists and suggest preemptive measures to minimise the potential risks. To assess potential threats, we began by scanning the literature on metaverse and similar platforms including published reports by international organisation like the European Commission, EUROPOL, the World Economic Forum, the Council of the European Union, academic papers, and conference reports. This scan resulted in a wide-ranging list of threats and risks that we then organised into eight categories, representing the most important and plausible challenges.

## *Indoctrination and Recruitment*

Online recruitment and engagement are trademarks of modern extremism. The metaverse risks expanding this capability by making it easier for individuals to socialise and congregate.[14] Combining artificial intelligence with augmented reality within the metaverse will allow extremist leaders to convene and meet with their supporters, develop and sustain virtual idealistic societies, and increase their spheres of influence. Because of the extreme emotional environment made possible by the metaverse, it may be challenging for some individuals to differentiate between real life and virtual reality.[15] Some users may consider that what takes place in the metaverse is not factual even if it has real consequences for their lives. By blending artificial intelligence and augmented reality in the metaverse, online recruiters for terrorist or violent extremist groups will be able to meet in a virtual room with potential followers and entice them with visions of the future.

Similarly, a resurrected Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi could interact with would-be supporters in a virtual garden or lecture hall inside the metaverse. The metaverse could help extremist leaders develop and maintain virtual idealistic and social communities, granting them power, enabling them to increase their ranks and spheres of influence with fewer challenges. Historical, spiritual, and idealistic subjects could be portrayed using avatars, bringing back to life dead terrorists and tyrannical leaders in a virtual resurgence, which could galvanise followers and inspire them to continue their struggles.[16]

The ability of the metaverse to impact users' emotions, as well as gather data on users' emotions could be abused by terrorists. Digital helmets and glasses will soon make it possible to capture individuals' feelings and responses in real time, allowing the exploitation of this information by terrorists and others. For instance, it will be possible to gather data on what individuals are glancing at within the metaverse, understand what is appealing to them, adjust the narrative accordingly, and then reach out to them. Terrorist groups could even produce their own metaverse, bringing together their supporters in a safe haven where diverse shapes of extremism are promulgated. This virtual world presents unique opportunities for extremists to remain in contact with each other and wield power over a radicalised community through events and regular gatherings. Extremist organisations could produce metaverse rooms where they freely distribute misinformation and hate speech, creating digital ecosystems for themselves that would be more technically advanced than the echo chambers and influence silos that are already prevalent on today's social media platforms. Thus, the metaverse could boost terrorist recruitment with new and appealing propaganda techniques in an online environment where emotional engagement is more robust, gradually obviating the need for offline meetings.

Already companies are using the metaverse to employ new staff; terrorist groups could do the same to recruit new members. In the future, numerous metaverse renditions or metaverse-like surroundings could materialise (depending on investments and the technological innovations created by companies like Meta), allowing the creation of regional metaverses connected to a state, company, or community. In this way, the physical territory lost by ISIS could be replaced by a virtual caliphate.

## *Planning and Coordinating Attacks*

The metaverse presents new opportunities for planning, coordinating, preparing, and conducting acts of terror. Advanced planning and coordinating attacks can be achieved by surveillance and data collection, and extremist leaders could devise virtual backgrounds with models of any material structure, enabling them to move members through pathways leading to critical goals.[17] Members can learn feasible and efficient routes, coordinate alternative pathways if some are obstructed, and devise contingency strategies for cases of emergency. Augmented reality items, with virtual indicators such as arrows, can guide violent extremists, pinpointing marked targets when conducting an attack in the physical world. Operatives, potential attackers, and followers can plan from within their homes while also making social contacts and building trust in their counterparts, all the while presenting themselves to others in their chosen digital avatar design:

> *A resurrected bin Laden could meet with would-be followers in a virtual rose garden or lecture hall. Violent extremists can plot from their living rooms, basements, or backyards—all while building social connections and trust in their peers… When extremist leaders give orders for action in the physical world, these groups are likely to be more prepared than today's extremist groups because of their time in the metaverse.*[18]

The metaverse can be used to circumvent classical communication channels when designing and preparing attacks, as noted also by the Council of the European Union report.[19] Using the capabilities of the metaverse, terrorists can organise gatherings and share thrilling immersive experiences of attacks on various targets, reinforced by an outpour of images and videos of individuals' grievances. They could produce their own gaming space, for example, an Assassin's Creed–style game for jihadists. Likewise, emotional historical events could be recreated to shock and disturb users, galvanising followers. For example, significant terrorist attacks like the collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York or the attack at the Bataclan music venue in Paris could be reenacted in virtual reality.

## *Virtual Training*

Terrorists have used various online platforms to teach and train attackers. The Internet is home to dozens of sites that provide information on how to build chemical and explosive weapons, how to launch attacks on infrastructure facilities, and how to conduct cyberattacks on computer systems. The metaverse could deliver a secure and more effective training and simulation climate for online instruction. Some companies already use the metaverse to provide combat

training to their employees. The emotional and immersive element of the metaverse makes training more lifelike and absorbing, transcending the experiences acquired with video games. At the same time, VR technology makes the metaverse vulnerable to mishandling by violent extremists and terrorists, who could use it to provide and obtain combat training, including training in precision shooting, tactical training, hostage taking, and surveillance. Finally, the gaming sector of the metaverse is far more susceptible to bolstering extremist activity and radicalisation because of the absence of oversight, the preservation of anonymity, and the ability to supply combat training.[20]

## New Targets

The latest virtual and mixed-reality environments have the potential to create new targets, such as structures, events, and individuals in the physical and virtual worlds.[21] Terrorists can discover virtual targets in the metaverse such as economic and social events. For example, a 9/11 commemorative service produced and hosted within the virtual domain could become a target for violent extremists who would re-enact the attack. Likewise, a metaverse wedding could be interrupted by attackers who object to the religious or gendered pairing of the partners, and similarly, a symbolic killing of avatars by terrorists in various gruesome ways. These actions would take a psychological toll on the users and result in real-world suffering. Similarly, damaging an augmented or virtual reality business can result in real-world financial losses.[22] Like physical locations, new virtual and mixed reality spaces may become the potential new targets. As technology evolves and becomes smaller and better incorporated into individuals' day-to-day lives, it may become increasingly difficult to switch off the metaverse or disregard the damage it could cause.

## Spreading Disinformation

Disinformation has acquired a dual meaning: on one hand, as fabricated or fake news, which circulates online and offline, and on the other, as a powerful weapon used to discredit authorities, institutions, and media channels. We focus first on the former interpretation. The current Web 2.0 has given rise to the spread of fake news, disinformation, and lies because of the absence of effective gatekeeping and fact-checking, especially on social media outlets. Terrorists and extremists soon realised the potential of online channels for the spread of disinformation that may serve to fuel debate, distrust, loss of confidence, and panic. Because this may destabilise society and communities, law enforcement has been tasked to protect against such malicious activities, but the challenges that disinformation poses in the metaverse are even more troublesome. Rand Waltzman, an information scientist at the Rand Corporation, wrote about metaverse and disinformation.[23] Based on 40 years of experience as a programme manager at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), Waltzman warned that we are not even close to being able to defend users against the threats posed by the metaverse, where malicious actors will be able to take the age-old dark arts of deception and influence to new heights or depths:

> *At the heart of all deception is emotional manipulation. Virtual reality environments, such as Facebook's (now Meta's) metaverse, will enable psychological and emotional manipulation of its users at a level unimaginable in today's media... The metaverse will usher in a new age of mass customization of influence and manipulation. It will provide a powerful set of tools to manipulate us effectively and efficiently. Even more remarkable will be the ability to combine tailored individual and mass manipulation in a way that has never before been possible.*[24]

The two special communicative features of the metaverse, namely presence and embodiment, are very relevant for effective spread of disinformation, manipulation, and deceptive influencing.

## Desensitisation

Since the 1990s, concerned educators, parents, politicians, and researchers have railed against violent video games, their primary concern being that certain games desensitise players to extreme violence. Although there have been a small number of instances when experience with violent video games was linked to criminal acts by young people (most notably, tragic school shootings), scholarly research has largely refuted a causal connection.[25] However, studies have highlighted desensitisation to violence as a risk factor: playing violent video games was correlated with lower empathy, desensitisation to violence at both the neural and behavioural levels, and decline of cognitive and emotive reactions to violent impulses.[26] The absence of compassion and desensitisation may be encouraged by in-game ethical disengagement methods that selectively halt ethical management tools, contributing to the endorsement and practice of violence to a more significant extent.[27] The risk of desensitisation is heightened in the metaverse. While exploring some popular metaverse platforms, journalist Yinka Bokinni had a harrowing realisation:

> *The worst thing is how numb you become. The casual way people were using extremely violent language that was homophobic, racist and sexist meant that after my third or fourth dive into the metaverse, I became desensitized to it... It's a space in which it's become normalized.*[28]

Similar concerns were raised by Kieron Allen who argued that the metaverse, through user immersion, may have an alarming desensitising effect.[29] The most obvious mechanism by which metaverse games can facilitate radicalisation processes is that of the popular first-person shooter games, which can desensitise the user to violence and cause moral disengagement.[30] When analysing a virtual world called *Second Life* from the extremist viewpoint, Cole discovered that using an avatar exposed to the explicit content of radical Islamic propaganda, "continuous auditory and visual stimuli can cause a person to self-identify with an extremist group's views".[31] Bajwa concluded a study on "Malevolent Creativity & the Metaverse" with the statement: "Results show that the concatenation of malevolent creativity, innovation and subcultural extremism may bridge the gap between ideation of mass shootings and mobilization".[32]

## Financing Terrorism

With the increasing use of cryptocurrencies, the metaverse offers terrorists greater prospects of anonymous funding.[33] The financial blacklists—and more commonly, the steps used at present to counter the financing of terrorism—would have little effectiveness in the metaverse. Blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies are the foundation blocks of the metaverse, enabling users to supply digital identification and verification of ownership, digital display of acquisitions such as non-fungible tokens (NFTs), and crypto value transfer. Individuals will presumably be requested to possess a cryptocurrency wallet to access the metaverse and maintain their digital investments, stimulating an upsurge in their use. There are growing concerns about the utilisation of cryptocurrencies in terrorist financing because of anonymity, the potential of making immediate payments, and the capability to conduct cross-border transfers without any oversight by any government authority or bank. For example, crypto assets could be used for money laundering or fundraising. Tracing interactions will be far more difficult in the metaverse because of its strong ties with cryptocurrencies. One can envision money being made dealing with identity artifacts, such as swastikas or terrorist symbols, as NFTs, which are then used to customise avatars and portray one's affiliation with terrorist organisations. Terrorist groups can boost their financial reserves and bolster their communities through online shows or avatar contests, which are presently being organised to increase funds for violent right-wing extremism. Such decentralised financing could assist terrorist organisations in devising their online ecosystems and managing their metaverses, a concern noted in the report of the Council of the European Union.[34]

## Financial Terrorism

Terrorists have used various forms of cybercrimes to raise funds, launder money, steal money, and attack financial institutions. The metaverse may expand their financial arsenal. According to a report by Elliptic, USD $14 billion worth of crypto assets has been declared stolen owing to scams in 2021 alone.[35] The more common dangers are the diverse types of phishing and fraud scams that transpire within the metaverse, entangling malicious fake sites devised to obtain their targets' crypto assets. Those sites can impersonate the login panel of a prominent metaverse platform such as Decentraland, a global network of users in the metaverse, using meta-related coins for cryptocurrency exchange. One of the successful strategies used by cybercriminals and cyberterrorists is social engineering, which manipulates individuals' psychological vulnerabilities and has become a significant threat within the metaverse. There are many methods that scammers use to earn individuals' trust. They can act to represent authorised metaverse projects by acquiring control of notable social media accounts, imitating trusted organisations or avatars within the metaverse, and conning individuals to click on a phishing link or transmit funds to the scammers' wallets. Similarly, scammers can act as technical staff for metaverses and mislead users into transferring private keys or leading them to a phony site by pretending they want to assist them with a technical problem.

A prominent fraud threat for crypto investors is the "rug pull," when the developers of a cryptocurrency project desert the project abruptly, seizing users' funds with them. Usually, when launching a metaverse project, developers detail their objectives in a roadmap, whether

it is online game development or charity fundraising, after which they begin campaigns to collect funds to carry the project to the subsequent stage. These techniques may be useful for terrorists and extremists who already use online platforms for fundraising and fake charity activities.[36]

## Can We Have a Safer Metaverse?

The metaverse is still in the developmental stage, incorporating real and virtual realities, using artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and other augmented reality software to create a new virtual platform. It is not easy to assess the impact of this future online platform though several studies on the effects of virtual reality outlets (for example in the context of gaming, teaching, training, and more) did provide empirical evidence on the impact on users mainly in terms of involvement, emotional impact, immersion, and excitement. But can we limit the use of this future platform or similar developments by terrorists and extremists? Will it have adequate safeguards built into it to protect its functions and uses from being abused?

For some time, a game of cat and mouse has been played between state actors and online terrorists. This has been changing since important non-state actors, like META, have been assuming a bigger role in the war against terrorism. The old battlefield has changed into one that is no longer just physical but also virtual, where non-state actors play a key role, given their influence and expertise.[37] As both sides are trying to outmanoeuvre each other, a vicious cycle of innovations and countermeasures takes shape. It is necessary to break this cycle with a new long-term strategy, with preemptive measures requiring the participation of all relevant partners. Several steps are needed to devise a concrete and interconnected strategy that will thwart terrorist organisations before they strike first.

### *Public and Private Partnership (PPP)*

Most of the online infrastructure, including communication systems and platforms, is privately owned, but it is largely in the hands of state authorities to act upon its security. This creates a situation in which market forces alone are not sufficient to provide security in most of the critical online sectors. At the same time, the state is incapable of providing full security on its own. Therefore, cooperation between the state and the private sector in cyber protection is not only useful but inevitable. Public-private partnerships (PPP), a form of cooperation between the state and the private sector, are widely seen as necessary to combat terrorist use of the Internet in general and cyberterrorism in particular.[38] The fundamental character of PPP can be described as follows: "Its goal is to exploit synergies in the joint innovative use of resources and in the application of management knowledge, with optimal attainment of the goals of all parties involved, where these goals could not be attained to the same extent without the other parties".[39] According to Antigone Davis, the Global Head of Safety at Meta, to provide wide-ranging security as the metaverse develops, it is critical to partner with other actors within governments, industries, academia, and civil society.[40] Joint, coordinated contributions to the metaverse are a sensible approach that will require research, partnership, and investment in security. For example, as Davis noted, Meta is investing in controls that permit users to

administer and report troublesome content and conduct security tooling design to create immersive experiences. Yet Meta, or any other company, cannot do this alone but needs allies from all segments of society to create a safer and more interconnected network.

## *Early Engagement*

During the early phases of the development of any product, the foundations are laid based on prerequisites established by the developers. Thus, redesigning a system to satisfy certain requirements is far more challenging than incorporating these requirements from the start. For example, it is vital for civil society and law enforcement to convey their demands early during the adoption of the metaverse by engaging with the main actors designing metaverse platforms. This allows both sides to understand how to make the metaverse more secure, adjust lawmaking, and prepare for law enforcement.[41] It would be informative to discover how individuals intend to contact the moderators of a platform or the police. If this means that there should be a way to reach the appropriate authority directly, such a component should be considered. There should be an API standard that law enforcement could use to connect to all relevant platforms for policing purposes. Such requests should become part of an industry criterion for the interoperability of future metaverses, like the present Metaverse Standards.[42] Metaverse and similar platforms will also operate in various regulatory landscapes. Given the legislation in Western societies, it seems likely that some laws (and maybe new ones) will limit the exploitation of the metaverse and cause the providers to act and implement safeguards.

## *Monitoring the Metaverse*

When new technologies emerge, they are largely ignored by security and law enforcement as initially was the Internet. The Europol report on the risks of the metaverse noted that "[l]egislating for new technology is often compared to driving a car only using the rearview mirror. It is often done in retrospect, and by that time new dangers are ahead of you, it is too late".[43] Yet, societies, governments, and security agencies learned to use cyber surveillance and cyber monitoring methods to fight crime, terrorism, and online abuse. Governments such as Estonia, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have been supporting online police monitoring. Such state support is crucial to producing invaluable experience within virtual reality. When police officers are active online, they are more accessible to individuals living in secluded areas and to individuals who spend much of their time online. Because of the large variety of open online platforms, gaining experience on designated primary platforms is essential. And because online platforms are naturally global, constructing a network of law enforcement specialists can be most beneficial. The EUROPOL report concluded that "[w]e recommend law enforcement to monitor the development of the metaverse and to start building experience with online policing and early iterations of the metaverse. Doing this officially will help organisations stay informed on the subject and enable them to assess developments accurately, answering threats as they emerge."[44] However, monitoring online platforms raises the ethical issues of privacy, free speech, and civil liberties. Thus, monitoring the metaverse and identifying users should follow the ideal balance between protecting national security and minimising the unintended consequences to human rights, as outlined in several publications.[45]

## Identification Policy

At present, it is quite easy for cyber-savvy individuals to commit unethical or illegal activities online and evade consequences because the appropriate authorities cannot identify them. If individuals enter the metaverse through a virtual private network (VPN), identifying them when they break the rules or perpetrate a crime becomes more difficult.[46] There should be a method by which individuals' identities can be confirmed before being permitted to enter the metaverse. The joke about Web 1.0 was that "no one knows you are a dog." Web 2.0 tried to solve the identity problem by authenticating users, starting with Facebook's "real name" policy. Creating a mainstream metaverse should require an equally strong identification policy, resulting in solid motivations for metaverse communities to protect themselves. Requiring individuals to identify themselves when creating their accounts and avatars may reduce identity theft on a large scale. Users could also be requested to confirm their ages to stop children from entering dangerous areas within the metaverse.[47]

## User Education

Criminals and terrorists are highly creative and manage to keep a step ahead of regulators and businesses in their measures to safeguard data. Educating users on measures they can take to safeguard their identities and acquisitions within the metaverse and the preventive actions they can take will play an important role. The European Commission's revised digital education action plan seeks to ensure that 70 percent of 16–74-year-olds in the EU have at least a fundamental digital understanding by 2025.[48] Unfortunately, many adults have been reluctant to spend time or money gaining cybersecurity proficiency, making them ripe targets for cyberattacks. In contrast, because young people are often keen to learn, schools will be especially important for providing adequate training on cybersecurity.[49] The knowledge gained by these students can assist them in providing a cyber defence for themselves and others.[50] Cybersecurity education has also been shown to change students' perspectives, and cybersecurity awareness can help young Internet users profit from the Internet without becoming targets of cyberattacks.[51] Delivering essential knowledge to improve metaverse users' understanding of cybersecurity is vital for reducing the risks of the platform. This requires a broader education in the online world and how it operates. Moreover, such defensive education should not be limited to school-age populations: firms and companies, as well as advanced educational systems like colleges and universities, may be involved in such digital education.

## Confronting Financial Crime within the Metaverse

Combatting financial crime within the metaverse requires a multi-level approach involving many stakeholders operating jointly. This is certainly a challenge when considering the potential use of the metaverse by terrorists and extremists. A special report on "Financial Crime in the Metaverse is Real: How Can We Fight Back?" prepared by the European law firm of *Wolf Theiss,* describes the particulars of such multi-level counter-operation.[52] End users must be mindful that partaking in any new technology makes them possible targets of criminal actors including terrorists. Therefore, to guard against suspicious incursions and fraud scams, individuals must remind themselves to think logically and not allow their fear of missing out to lead to impulsive

decisions. Furthermore, companies operating inside the metaverse must cooperate with safety and risk teams early to pinpoint potential vulnerabilities, warn their employees about these threats, and test apps rigorously before they go live. To safeguard against code exploits, users and companies must participate in metaverse projects where smart contract codes are designed and examined by a technically trustworthy and respected team. Finally, considerable measures have been taken by states and governments to devise practical legal measures to control and combat crimes linked to crypto assets. To meet this challenge, the EU has been involved in giving directives to align its collective membership legal frameworks, for instance, the 5th AML Directive (EU) 2018/843 and the Directive (EU) 2019/713.

## Conclusion

When Zuckerberg announced Meta, in October 2021, he also announced that privacy and security should be built into the metaverse from day one. There are serious doubts about the success of the metaverse. Currently, AI hype, especially around large language models (LLMs), has overtaken metaverse-related hype in the mass media and in academic discourse. This may lead to reductions in investments and developments of metaverse and metaverse-adjacent activity. But even the most pessimistic speculations about the future of the metaverse do not rule out the emergence of fused platforms, merging the physical and virtual realities using advanced communication platforms. It is not yet clear how these developments will turn out, but the technology is advancing apace, promoted by numerous global technology giants.

The history of the Internet and related technologies has taught us that multiple unanticipated effects are likely to arise, so unexpected side effects of innovation may have most significant consequences. Whatever the outcome may be, all relevant parties must partake in the development of metaverse or similar platforms and keep up to date on its future products. Understanding what is being devised by potential abusers will be essential for developing a preemptive strike strategy to counter terrorist attacks within the metaverse. There is an opportunity to proactively prepare and contribute to shaping a safer metaverse and similar platforms. There are already numerous tools and initiatives deployed in online platforms that could be retooled for deployment in the metaverse. This includes initiatives from public-private partnerships such as the EU Internet Forum (EUIF) to tech company initiatives, such as GIFCT, from legislation such as the EU's Terrorism Content Online Regulation (TCO) to the UN-supported Tech Against Terrorism.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When Digital and Physical World Combine:
## The Metaverse and Gamification of Violent Extremism

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From early Bulletin Board Systems adopted by neo-Nazis to the Islamic State's more recent prolific use of social media platforms, an aspect of terrorism studies that is generally agreed upon is that violent extremists are often early adopters of emerging technologies. These groups, organisations, and networks have demonstrated innovative uses of these digital spaces, harnessed for recruitment, coordination, community building, attack planning, propaganda dissemination, and other purposes. Alongside studying these phenomena, it is important to explore where future trends lie; particularly as findings and recommendations can ensure that relevant stakeholders are aware of and can begin to prepare for emerging threats. This paper considers the potential exploitation of Web 3.0, specifically the metaverse, by violent extremists and explores conceivable opportunities to undertake nefarious activities within these spaces. There is a particular focus on the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse, an issue—i.e. the gamification of violent extremism—that is causing increasing concern to terrorism practitioners more generally. Although it is difficult to predict exactly how violent extremists will utilise, exploit, and misuse the metaverse and related technologies due to the early stage of its conceptualisation and development, it is possible to develop hypotheses based on past trends and current examples demonstrating manipulation of online spaces that resemble aspects of the metaverse. In fact, aspects of the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse may well have distinct overlaps with current threats, but simply utilise emerging technologies and take place within developing and more immersive online spaces.

Keywords: Metaverse, gamification, violent extremism, terrorism, video games, gaming

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# Introduction

Violent extremists have been using media tools and technologies to further their own cause—e.g. for the spread of propaganda, recruitment, attack planning, communications strategies, etc.—for numerous decades. From the early use of murals, to newspapers, magazines, and billboards, to photocopying and distributing extremist materials, to the use of radio, film, and television, to more modern-day uses of what can be defined as the Internet, violent extremists have been particularly innovative and early adopters of technologies.[1] With the online element, there are numerous examples that exemplify this innovative adoption of technology, including the use of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs); as indicated by the name, these were basic bulletin-board-type online spaces which people could reach through computers using dial-up connections to access various forms of information.[2] These mostly text-based (and basic pixel-generated pictures), hobbyist-run services played a large part in the online landscape of the 1980s and 1990s. The adoption of online technologies only increased with subsequent developments of the Internet. This includes both jihadist and far-right extremist-related forums with the emergence of Web 1.0, and the use of both mainstream and obscure social media platforms since the introduction of Web 2.0.[3]

An aspect that is at the forefront of thought for many stakeholders working in this field is determining where future threats lie. In this regard, there are a number of particular considerations around violent extremists' exploitation of emerging technologies and/or those aspects that have previously been overlooked. This includes how violent extremists will utilise and manipulate the decentralisation associated with the emergence of Web 3.0, or related concerns regarding the opportunities afforded to them through the expansion of the metaverse. However, research and literature in this area are still at an emergent point due to the early stages of conceptualisation and development of the metaverse, even though aspects of it already exist (as mentioned later). Connected to the metaverse, though of course standalone and distinct in its own ways, there is growing concern of late with the intersection between violent extremism and video gaming[4], with "gamification"—i.e. "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts"[5]—being one of these intersections. Gamification has been present and had a disconcerting influence on numerous recent real-world attacks, including Christchurch, Halle, and Buffalo[6]. This paper discusses a range of these aforementioned aspects, but has a particular focus on the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse; thought to be (at the time of writing), one of the first pieces, if not the first piece, of literature to consider this particular problem.

There are, however, various considerations that need to be mentioned at this early juncture. First, although this paper mentions both jihadist and far-right examples throughout, there is a particular focus on the latter. This is primarily due, at least anecdotally, to the predominant use of gamification emanating from the far-right. However, it is critical to not underestimate others' use of the concept and its implementation in or with emerging technologies.[7] Second, it is also important to emphasise that the metaverse is, as will be discussed throughout the paper, an emerging technology, one that is debated both definitionally and conceptually. Thus, aspects of the analysis will naturally be speculative. Saying that, however, the analysis is based on current appropriate examples of violent extremism, and aspects and technologies that

resemble, according to relevant experts in the field, the metaverse or what it may come to look like. In this regard, although new technologies afford new types of threats, it is important to remember that other threats will have distinct similarities to current and past ones though simply use new technologies to achieve their goals and take place within developing and more immersive online spaces.

Nevertheless, this paper is structured as follows. The first and following section provides a brief introduction, overview, and conceptualisation of the metaverse, outlining its potential uses. The section thereafter considers how violent extremists could exploit the metaverse more generally. The conversations thus far provide a foundation for the following section which considers the potential for the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse, providing an exploration of particular examples relating to this threat. As part of this, the paper more generally explores the intersection between video gaming, violent extremism, and the metaverse. A short conclusion follows which discusses where future research should focus.

## The Metaverse

The term "metaverse" was thought to be conceived by sci-fi author Neal Stephenson in his 1992 novel, *Snow Crash*, which sees the chief protagonist socialise, shop, and defeat enemies through their avatar. However, the concept predates this and was popularised within William Gibson's 1984 novel, *Neuromancer.*[8] Almost 40 years later, there are several companies, such as Facebook (which has renamed to Meta), that appear to vehemently believe the metaverse represents the future of our online experiences[9], demonstrated by committing extremely large resources to developing the concept (though at the time of writing there have been numerous redundancies at Meta, an issue affecting the tech sector more widely). Many other tech companies—small, large, and everything in-between—are also investing early in the metaverse and contributing to building the infrastructure, including Microsoft, Apple, and Google, with various non-tech companies such as Nike also starting to consider and map out their presence in this space. Although it is difficult to predict concisely, demonstrated by the wide range of figures presented, many believe that the global metaverse market will be in the hundreds of billions of dollars within the next decade, and that "by 2026, 25% of people will spend at least an hour daily in the metaverse…"[10]

What, though, is the metaverse? The metaverse is challenging to define and conceptualise due to it being in the very early stages of development. It is this complexity and ambiguity that makes it difficult to precisely predict what the concept will come to resemble. Unsurprisingly, there is disagreement about what the metaverse will look like or what it will represent. This is "because the term doesn't really refer to any one specific type of technology, but rather a broad (and often speculative) shift in how we interact with technology."[11] Some have described it—or at least a potentially prominent aspect of it—as being "a 3D version of the Internet and computing at large…[and] always being within a computer and inside the Internet."[12] What can also reasonably be determined is the metaverse is proposed to be a vast network of virtual environments in which extremely large numbers of people can interact with one another.[13] It is thought servers will be able to host potentially thousands or even millions in the future, where

people can intermingle in the same space or spaces. It is predicted to "provide users immense autonomy in terms of personal expression and creativity in a permissionless and decentralized digital space."[14] In its simplest understanding, the metaverse is thought to develop into "a shared virtual space that is interactive, immersive and hyperrealistic."[15]

The metaverse represents a vision which is the setting for numerous online activities, including gaming, play, studying, shopping, working, socialising[16], worship[17], and even watching sports and presumably buying virtual merchandise within virtual stadiums.[18] Many of these activities will be undertaken through the adoption of existing (and developing) augmented (AR), virtual (VR), and mixed-reality technologies (MR), making the metaverse a "persistent, synchronous, and live experience…providing an extremely social atmosphere as it bridges the physical and digital divide."[19] Here, AR is "a combination of synthetic and physical reality in which users can move in a real-world improved by virtual data that allow them to have extra information, useful for carrying out complex tasks…", MR, "where the environment in which people move is a combination of the real and the virtual…", and VR, "in which users enter a completely virtual dimension by using an avatar, through which they can experience an alternative life in a dimension that reproduces, replaces, and enhances the real world."[20]

Although the metaverse is still at its very early stages of conceptualisation and development, there are aspects and elements that already exist. These include the hosting of Metaverse Fashion Week in Decentraland in 2022, live concerts in various online spaces (including Fortnite) which have attracted audiences in the millions[21], various VR social media platforms like VRChat and AltspaceVR, virtual workspaces like Immersed[22], and the ability to purchase virtual real estate through companies like Sandbox.[23] Public services have even started to explore the potential opportunities offered through presence in these spaces, including cities like Seoul providing access to many of its public services through the metaverse[24], and organisations like INTERPOL launching a global police service in the metaverse.[25] Further, through the use of VR headsets, for example, users can already access a range of online virtual domains that include Meta's Horizon Worlds, Decentraland, and OverTheReality.[26] These wide-ranging examples have led some to argue that "limits are non-existent in the metaverse."[27]

Although there are multiple opportunities to access experiences in virtual, augmented, and extended realities, there are some issues present such as a lack of a single portal for access.[28] Resultantly, some argue that insinuating one of these activities constitutes the metaverse is similar to stating that "Google is 'the Internet'."[29] This has led to the outlining of a number of different elements that the metaverse needs to encompass to be labelled as such, including: "realism" (or "presence"[30]), i.e. the notion or feeling of actually being in a virtual space with others, enabling "people to become emotionally immersed in the virtual world"[31]; "ubiquity", i.e. the ability to access virtual spaces through all devices using one virtual identity[32]; "interoperability", i.e. being able to travel seamlessly between different virtual spaces and, critically, being able to bring with you the same virtual assets, including your avatar(s), clothes, cars, currencies, etc., as well as your identity (some believe this is vital for the metaverse to work[33], though others question the extent of how quickly this can be developed due to technological and legal difficulties[34]); "standardization", i.e. "interoperability of platforms and services across the metaverse"[35]; and "scalability", i.e. "having the network architecture deliver sufficient power

to enable massive numbers of users to occupy the metaverse without compromising the efficiency of the system and the experience of the users."[36] These considerations have led some to reflect upon whether single games or platforms should be referred to as the "metaverse" and a collection of metaverses referred to as a "multiverse of metaverses."[37]

## The Metaverse and Violent Extremism

As with most, if not all, emerging technologies, alongside the vast range of positive aspects and opportunities, the metaverse can be exploited by iniquitous actors and can bring new and emerging threats and risks. As the idea and actuality of the metaverse develops, a pressing concern is public safety. With consideration of the risks posed by violent extremist-related issues, there is already concern amongst some researchers that "its evolution promises new ways for extremists to exert influence through fear, threat, and coercion…[thus] there is potential for the metaverse to become a new domain for terrorist activity."[38] This is emphasised through the introduction of what might resemble a borderless society, particularly if the intended seamless objective of the metaverse is achieved. The lack of physical presence required to undertake acts of violent extremism within immersive environments in different locations is accentuated here. There is, however, very little written about this and the intersection between violent extremism and the metaverse more generally, particularly when it comes to academic literature; an issue that is expected due to the very early nature of the threat. Saying that, the issue is starting to generate some traction, though in the very early stages.

In a blog released at the beginning of 2022, researchers at least begin to outline ways in which the metaverse can be exploited by violent extremists.[39] The first of these is recruitment, which the authors argue can be enhanced through the use of artificial intelligence, and other metaverse-related features. In this regard, prominent violent extremists and recruiters can address their followers, and potential recruits, in new and innovative ways. They will, as the authors outline, "be able to sit on a virtual park bench with any number of potential followers and entice them with visions of the future…meet with would-be followers in a virtual rose garden or lecture hall." Thus, the "emerging metaverse affords extremist leaders a new ability to forge and maintain virtual ideological and social communities and powerful, difficult-to-disrupt ways of expanding their ranks and spheres of influence."[40] Second, labelled as "coordination", the metaverse could offer preparation for action in the physical world through training and familiarity within the digital world. This can be undertaken within the comfort of their own personal spaces, like home. Here, "the metaverse offers new ways to coordinate, plan and execute acts of destruction across a diffuse membership."[41]

As argued within a report released by EUROPOL[42], with "virtual environments becoming more realistic, this may provide an increasingly useful environment for training, both in generally available applications and in specifically (re-)created environments and scenarios. As an increasingly accurate and complete digital twin[43] of reality becomes available, this may provide real-time information on planned targets. At some point, this may even allow for military reconnaissance and planning to be carried out within the metaverse." The third and final consideration is the potential afforded by the metaverse for new targets. The authors argue

that just as physical structures—buildings, bridges, etc.—can be attacked in the real world, the same can occur in the virtual world. This can be in the form, for example, of "swastikas on synagogues, disruptions of real-life activities like banking, shopping and work, and the spoiling of public events."[44] These types of incidents could "take a psychological toll and result in real-world harm."[45] Finally, in addition to these three considerations, amongst others, it can be also reasonably argued that the metaverse can be used for propaganda, linking to the recruitment aspect above (and of course adding radicalisation to this), and for the financing of terrorism through the exchange of cryptocurrencies and NFTs (non-fungible tokens) within this space (often utilising anonymity), similar to the concerns associated with gaming more widely.[46]

## Video Gaming, Violent Extremism, and the Metaverse

Although the metaverse is envisaged to be far more expansive than video gaming alone, it is difficult to not at some point consider intersections between the two; where gaming is widely thought to form an important part of the metaverse and a dominant force in its future. There are already a number of examples of gaming which arguably demonstrate core elements of the metaverse[47]. These include "massively multiplayer virtual reality games such as World of Warcraft, Rec Room or Horizon Worlds, where participants use avatars to interact with each other and manipulate their environment,"[48] or Second Life, "a simulation game that lets users experience virtual reality in which their avatar could shop, eat, shower, and do everything they would in real life."[49] As early as 2003 when it was first launched, Second Life was "often referred to as an early example for its replication of all aspects of life."[50] More recent examples of gaming are considered to be even closer representations of the metaverse (or at least envisions of it), including Roblox and Minecraft.

However, although there are various positive economic, health, social, and psychological benefits of gaming[51], the intersection between video gaming and violent extremism is an issue that is becoming of increasing concern within policy, security, counter-terrorism, and academic circles.[52] These anxieties have been quite general in nature, but also specifically in relation to those games mentioned above that represent elements of the metaverse. Research on Minecraft, for example, has found instances of hate speech, amongst other issues.[53] Further, as outlined in a report published by EUROPOL, games like Roblox, for instance, can be used to create a virtual Caliphate or White supremacist state, where "[m]embers of such places could live their virtual lives according to rules that may contradict fundamental laws and values of the society they live in in the physical world."[54] These spaces could provide opportunities for recruitment for acts of violent extremism in other virtual worlds or even in the real/physical world.[55] In some cases these fears have even been realised, with the construction of Nazi gas chambers in Roblox as one example.[56] Furthermore, these concerns become particularly pertinent when considering the merging and overlapping of other gaming-related aspects, such as using cryptocurrencies within gaming to purchase items and the potential use of NFTs by (violent) extremists[57], as mentioned above in relation to the metaverse.

Considering the intersection between video gaming and violent extremism more broadly, although research is at a nascent stage, there have been attempts to outline a framework

that demonstrates this, or at least begins to set out its parameters. One such framework was developed by the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network and consisted of six "types of video game strategies related to extremist activity."[58] This includes the: "production of bespoke games"; "modding mainstream games"; "in-game chat"; "gaming-adjacent communications platforms"; "gaming cultural references"; and "gamification". It is the final aspect, i.e. gamification, that the remainder of this paper specifically focuses on.

## The Gamification of Violent Extremism in the Metaverse

Gamification was originally developed to address challenges in business, and at its very core refers to "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts."[59] The implementation of gamified approaches aims to facilitate some sort of behaviour change[60], and harness the "motivational potential of video games"[61], something that can lead to customers and users solidifying their identification and commitment to particular organisations and brands. It is considered to be a motivating force as it provides competition, an element of fun, positive reinforcement as rewards are offered (in the form of points, for example), and a social aspect where people have opportunities to connect with friends and others. Motivation here, as discussed by Lakhani and Wiedlitzka[62], can be thought of as both intrinsic and extrinsic, with the former relating to the undertaking of activities for personal satisfaction, and latter referring to "motivation external to the behavior…and is usually derived from the outcomes of the behavior, such as rewards, punishments, or social pressure."[63] As outlined in numerous studies[64], this often assumes the form of points, badges, and leaderboards (PBLs); something "that give consumers information about their achievements, progress and high scores."[65] This has prompted numerous sectors to implement gamification into their strategies, including finance, education, government, health, news, entertainment, marketing and advertising, public engagement, and environmental protection, amongst others.[66]

Of late, as gamification becomes of increasing interest, there is at the same time increasing concern within academic and policy circles regarding its intersection with violent extremism.[67] Within this particular context, the concept of gamification can broadly be thought of as either "top-down" or "bottom-up"[68], or "organisational" and "organic". In terms of the former, it "refers to the strategic use of gamification by extremist organisations, such as the use of apps which offer points for undertaking various tasks, in order to recruit, disseminate propaganda, or encourage engagement and commitment, for example."[69] Bottom-up gamification, on the other hand, emerges organically with small groups of individuals within online communities.[70] As the metaverse is still in the relatively early stages of development and only some very limited aspects of it are currently being used by the public, predicting what gamification will look like within this context is not absolute and in many regards speculative, as mentioned earlier. However, considering recent examples of gamification (not necessarily within a metaverse-type context) might prove a useful starting point. These examples are discussed alongside possible scenarios pertaining to the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse. The first of these relates to attacks within immersive spaces, potentially using virtual reality (or similar) technologies, and the second explores utilising augmented reality technologies.

## *Points, Objectives, and Achievements within Immersive Spaces*

It is predicted that the metaverse will be, as outlined earlier, the setting for a plethora of activities which include gaming, play, studying, shopping, working, socialising, worship, and even watching sports. As with the physical (or real) world, attacks in the metaverse could take place within any of these settings and could include various assaults on people (or more so their avatars) or virtual infrastructure. With the latter, there is the possibility that online places of worship, as one example, can be vandalised, such as violent extremists daubing virtual graffiti like swastikas on a synagogue or mosque in the metaverse. Places people shop, or virtual property, could also be destroyed by violent extremists in targeted attacks against particular communities, of course dependent on the strength of online security or how vulnerable systems are to attacks by hackers. Frequent verbal assaults could occur within these immersive spaces against particular targets or communities, something that could even be recorded by the perpetrators and shared across networks to encourage others to partake in similar types of activities or sent to other potential victims as a form of ridicule or for intimidation purposes. It is critically important to outline that "[a]lthough these incidents happen in a virtual world, they can feel very 'real' and 'violating' to the person involved."[71] The targeting of children is also a possibility within these spaces, something that may not feel as "serious" to the perpetrator as it is being undertaken in a virtual realm, rather than the physical one. There are already concerns, as reported by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, that in some metaverse-related apps, children are being confronted with abuse, harassment, bullying, racism, and pornographic content.[72] There are also serious concerns regarding the online sexual exploitation of children within the metaverse.[73] These attacks not only have psychological implications for those who witness or are the victims of these attacks, but there are wider implications for businesses too, where "the method of attacking virtual targets may help violent extremists achieve their objective of creating widespread fear and psychological harm in the real world, even putting business owners at risk of financial loss."[74]

Another aspect that remains unclear with how people will engage and immerse within the metaverse relates to their avatar, and whether this avatar could be subject to physical assaults. Much of this could depend on various factors including how secure systems are from hackers and where in the metaverse they happen to be (presumably different developers will have different layers of security that will not be uniform). Theoretically at least, there could be "physical" attacks on avatars. There should not be the assumption that avatars and virtual representations online are necessarily protected, something that has already become clear through various incidents including reports of a female avatar being virtually gang-raped in the metaverse.[75] What is important to note here are the offline harms connected to the online, demonstrated by the victim outlining that "the incident felt like it had happened in real life due to the technological advances of simulation."[76]

How, though, does this intersect with gamification? Of course, the examples discussed above could and do take place in the physical world and may well happen regardless of gamification in the virtual world, though there needs to be consideration whether the gamification of these types of attacks could have some implication on motivation and behavioural change. This could be linked to the PBL aspect of gamification discussed earlier. Although engaging in acts of hate

and/or violent extremism, and motivation more generally, are complex considerations where gamification alone is likely not enough to galvanise people to engage in nefarious acts[77], the use of PBLs have been linked to, as discussed previously, "extrinsic motivation"[78], i.e. "motivation external to the behavior…and is usually derived from the outcomes of the behavior, such as rewards, punishments, or social pressure."[79] It can be reasonably hypothesised that these types of attacks could be undertaken within the metaverse, or a combination of both online and offline (i.e. actions in the virtual and real world), where a points system is set up to reward nefarious activities. A cursory glance across gamified attacks in the physical world over the last few years demonstrates the increasing popularity of implementing these types of strategies.

One example of this is the "Punish a Muslim Day" leaflets produced and distributed across the United Kingdom in 2018 by White supremacist, David Parnham.[80] Parnham was later sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison.[81] The flyer stated that on 03 April 2018, people partaking in certain actions would be rewarded with a points-based system.[82] These included: "Verbally abuse a Muslim" (10 points); "Pull the head-scarf off a Muslim 'woman'" (25 points); "Throw acid in the face of a Muslim" (50 points); "Beat up a Muslim" (100 points); "Torture a Muslim using electrocution, skinning, use of a rack" (250 points); "Butcher a Muslim using gun, knife, vehicle or otherwise" (500 points); "Burn or bomb a mosque" (1,000 points); and "Nuke Mecca" (2,500 points). Another incident that holds similarities to the "Punish a Muslim Day" example was the 2019 attack in Halle, Germany. The perpetrator, Stephan Balliet, murdered two people after failing to gain access to a synagogue in an attempt to conduct a massacre.[83] In his manifesto released online, Balliet outlined a range of "objectives" and "achievements" that he intended to "unlock"[84]. These had numerous overlaps with the types of objectives and achievements found in countless video games, though within his own example these objectives and achievements were shrouded in violent extremism.[85] In this regard, as part of the gamified attack, "[p]oints would be scored, he explained, for killing Jews, Muslims, Christians, blacks, children and communists, as well as through the use of different means, including 3D-printed guns, grenades, swords, a nail-bomb, and his 'secret weapon,' which likely referred to his car. The gunman was doubtless hoping future attackers would tally up his 'high score'—and eventually try to beat it."[86]

## *Augmented-Reality Attacks*

Prior to discussing augmented-reality-type attacks that can be gamified, it is important to outline an example that provides the foundation for this. In 2019, 28-year-old Australian national Brenton Tarrant, a self-described "ethno-nationalist" and "eco-fascist", murdered fifty-one Muslim worshippers and attempted to kill forty more primarily at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. It has been labelled as "one of the worst mass shootings in New Zealand's history and its deadliest ever terrorist attack."[87] The Christchurch Attack has dominated the limited, though evolving and expanding, literature on the gamification of violent extremism, and for that matter also the non-academic discourse in this area. It has been widely argued that the perpetrator, purposefully or otherwise, gamified his attack, or at least "included several gamified elements within his assault."[88] In this regard, wider empirical research has focussed on the Christchurch Attack and determined that there are various overt and subtle indicators of gamification found across different elements of the assault, including the perpetrator's 74-page manifesto, livestream video, and original post on

8chan along with the 749 replies posted by other 8chan users before the thread was taken down.[89]

The video element of the attack is particularly interesting within this context as it was filmed using a GoPro camera mounted onto the assailant's helmet, which in turn was connected to his mobile phone and livestreamed to his Facebook page. It has been argued "that his attack had distinct features of video games and in many respects, at times, felt like a video game. The livestreaming of the attack, for example, had distinct parallels with popular 'Let's Play' videos where audiences watch people play video games live (or as a recording afterwards),"[90] "giving the viewers the illusion of watching footage from a first-person shooter game (FPS)."[91] The FPS gaming genre, i.e. playing a video game through the eyes of the character or avatar, is one of the most popular genres and used as a style in renowned global gaming franchises including Halo, Call of Duty, and the cult classic Castle Wolfenstein. There were also wider gaming contexts witnessed throughout the livestreaming, including during the attacker's journey between the first and second location. Throughout this drive, there were distinct parallels with the popular gaming franchise Grand Theft Auto (GTA), which "included his actual driving, where he reached speeds of 130 kilometres in a fifty kilometre per hour zone, driving erratically…[and] as with most GTA games, the assailant used his weapon, in this case a second shotgun, to fire out of his car at pedestrians near the first mosque. Similarly, he also attempted, unsuccessfully, to shoot the drivers of two cars he passed on the road."[92]

Considering this within the context of this paper, there could conceivably be Christchurch-style attacks in the metaverse at a place of virtual worship or shopping centre, or personally against people in the online realm, all of course depending on how vulnerable the systems are to infiltrators. However, what is particularly interesting to consider in this regard is how virtual and real worlds could overlap, which with extended reality (an umbrella term that covers VR, AR, and MR) could have some implication on people's actions in the physical world.[93] As argued in wider literature, "[t]he decentralized and open nature of the metaverse, as well as its convergence through Internet technologies and Extended Reality (XR), will provide extremists with malevolent, creative ways to conduct their activities without the constraints and limitations of centralized platforms that limit their autonomy."[94] Considering this, there is the risk that AR (or even MR for that matter) can be used during a terrorist attack that is being livestreamed on a social media or gaming platform, for example. It has been argued that AR can be key for the metaverse to really reach its true potential.[95] Thus, a "metaverse centred on augmented reality wouldn't be a completely new digital world—it would intersect with our real world."[96] Wearing an augmented reality headset or glasses, or smaller devices as the technology develops, perpetrators could use "targets" or a virtual gun "scope" on the screen, as is regularly demonstrated in video games.

Further, as an aspect of the Christchurch Attack concerned the "high score" or "body count" of the perpetrators from the perspective of target or receptive audiences, using this as a yardstick to measure the "success" of subsequent similar attacks[97], assailants using these types of technologies could incorporate live-score counters on the screen which increase with every person they kill, once again connecting to the PBL considerations above and, linked to this, extrinsic motivation.[98] In fact, after the Christchurch Attack, New Zealand White supremacist

Philip Nevile Arps asked a friend to add a "kill count" to the perpetrator's original video, where a screenshot was discovered on the friend's phone "overlaid with text that read 'Call of Duty Mosque NZ edition'"[99]; a reference to the popular global video game franchise. In terms of live action, this technology has already been developed (and is continually developing) and has been available for public use for numerous years, with games like Father.io providing people with the opportunity to use their mobile phones to engage in real life massive multiplayer first-person shooters using augmented reality in any physical location they wish.

It is also highly plausible that immersive environments—ones that are accurate geographically and architecturally—can be used as training aids for real-world attacks. As Elson et al.[100] explain, "[w]ith sufficient reconnaissance and information gathering, extremist leaders could create virtual environments with representations of any physical building, which would allow them to walk members through routes leading to key objectives. Members could learn viable and efficient paths, coordinate alternative routes if some are blocked, and establish multiple contingency plans if surprises arise." Further, augmented reality objects, including virtual arrows, can be used to help guide violent extremists in the physical world and to identify marked targets. After the attack has taken place, the perpetrator could utilise the technology to determine escape routes that pose the lowest risk of being apprehended, something that can be practiced in different scenarios within the metaverse prior to the actual real-world attack. Globally, this approach has been adopted by various militaries "which consider virtual training to be effective and efficient, both economically and in terms of containing operational risks."[101] Further questions need to be asked whether there is the potential for escape routes to be updated—to avoid roadblocks or updates about the movement of law enforcement for instance—in real time by supporters who have access to additional information (e.g., live media reporting or social media updates by the public close to the scene of attack, etc.).

Thinking more broadly beyond gamification though still connected and important to mention, elements of the metaverse and video gaming more generally can be used for training purposes, including "the possibility to learn to use weaponry, as in the case of Second Life."[102] Aspects of this can be demonstrated in previous examples, including the 2011 Oslo attacker, Anders Breivik, who reportedly "gamified elements of his attack and was a keen gamer himself, where it is thought that he trained for his assault using popular FPS [First-Person Shooter] franchise, Call of Duty."[103] He often even imagined himself as an avatar.[104] Thus, the metaverse has the potential to provide different types of functions in this regard, "where people could practice by playing games in virtual 3D spaces that are constructed to resemble one of their targets."[105] The potential of having "practice runs" within these types of digital environments will only strengthen and lead to better organised, coordinated, and impactful attacks.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a foundation for a new and under-researched area of study, one that concerns emerging technology that has the potential to meaningfully change many people's everyday lives. In this regard, with consideration that at the time of writing there is still uncertainty about how the metaverse will develop (as discussed in depth earlier), the

metaverse can be thought of as a "network of always-on synthetic environments, parallel to and integrated with the physical world. In it, users, through their avatars, can interact with each other and with digital objects and move from one virtual environment to another, experiencing heterogeneous activities in real time, as in a sort of alternative life, parallel to the physical one."[106] As alluded to earlier in this paper, there are naturally, in a similar way to video gaming[107], numerous positive economic, health, social, and psychological benefits that come with the metaverse for individuals and communities. For example, the metaverse could be used to perform virtual therapy and remote surgeries for the healthcare sector. It can add much depth to online learning and education, something that can reach people in poorer communities and developing countries. More widely, the US Army is already exploring using the metaverse for training soldiers.[108] Also, as mentioned at the fore of this paper, INTERPOL has launched the first global police metaverse, which offers immersive training courses to law enforcement across the globe. Numerous law enforcement agencies are also using or exploring the use of virtual reality and immersive environments for counter-terrorism-related training.

There is, unfortunately, the potential for the metaverse to be used for nefarious activities, often through "malevolent creativity"[109], which "stresses a dark side to creativity, asserting that certain groups use creativity to fulfil their aims towards conducting acts that have intentionally harmful consequences for another group."[110] One particular way this could manifest is through the intersection between violent extremism and the metaverse, a consideration that (although vast) can include aspects such as recruitment, coordination, selection of new targets[111], radicalisation, attack planning, funding terrorism, etc. This article has drilled down on one particular element of this, namely the gamification of violent extremism in the metaverse and provided the foundation for thinking in this area, but also outlined a number of potential scenarios in which this can play out in the future. Although the importance of gamification within the metaverse should not be underestimated, at the same time it needs to be reiterated that engaging in acts of hate and/or violent extremism, and motivation more generally, are complex considerations where gamification alone is likely not enough to galvanise people to engage in violent acts.[112]

Reflecting upon this, and the intersection between violent extremism and the metaverse more broadly (topics that are at the very early stages of development), it is important to outline a number of more general considerations for future research; where future research is critical to ensure that relevant stakeholders are aware of and can begin to prepare for emerging threats. For example, there needs to be consideration about how harm manifests in the metaverse and how this differs (and of course overlaps) with other online spaces. What does this mean in terms of both physical and psychological harm? As well as the psychological harm online activity can have in the physical world, there needs to be the consideration of how emerging technology can be used to inflict physical harm, e.g. through the improvement of immersion of experiences using "new interfaces like haptics, interaction and feedback through sensory suits or even neural links."[113] Another consideration is how recruitment and radicalisation might take place in the metaverse. There are, however, points of caution here. For one, there should be an avoidance of stigmatisation, where the conflation of technologies and risk to radicalisation can be unhelpful. As seen in wider work, radicalisation is a complex phenomenon that needs to be considered holistically, where "it is not analytically useful to dichotomize between an

online and offline domain."[114] More broadly, of course, considerations around how artificial intelligence can overlap with the issues raised in this paper need to be explored.

Further and finally, although aspects of the metaverse will be new and unknown, ones that need different types of solutions, this does not mean that historical examples of violent extremism cannot be useful to help determine where threats may emerge from and what targets could be. Naturally, aspects of this will be new threats and targets, though others will be well-known targets, the core difference being the use of emerging technology to attack them or representations of them within online or immersive spaces — e.g. virtual places of worship. This is critical to consider, particularly when it comes to considerations around preventing and countering violent extremism, as previous ideas, approaches, and tools will be useful. It is likely that the metaverse will play an increasingly important role in people's lives, and as this develops, so will violent extremists' adoption and use of this technology. It is clear that much work needs to be dedicated to better understand this phenomenon at an early stage; this paper has sought to instigate this conversation and provide some foundation for this.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BIBLIOGRAPHY

# Terrorism and the Media (Including the Internet) Part 6

Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes*

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This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on the multi-faceted relationship between terrorism and the media, including the Internet. To keep up with the rapidly changing media landscape (particularly social media) and the technological developments in the online environment, the most recent publications have been prioritised during the selection process. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text and reference retrieval systems have been employed to broaden the search.

**Keywords:** Bibliography, resources, literature, Internet, social media, mass media, terrorists, extremists, cyberterrorism, narratives, counter-narratives

NB: All websites were last visited on 12 May 2023. This subject bibliography is the sixth instalment of a six-part series. To avoid duplication, this compilation only includes literature not contained in the previous parts. However, meta-resources, such as bibliographies, were included in the sequels. For an inventory of previous bibliographies, see: *https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies*.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEW

# Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism: Groups, Perspectives and New Debates

*Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn (Eds.)*

Reviewd by Joshua Sinai*

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This conceptually innovative, comprehensive, and detailed *Handbook* provides one of the first coverages of what the editors term "non-violent extremism" across a wide spectrum political, religious, and socio-economic ideologies around the world. While acknowledging that extremism, even in its non-violent manifestation of "cognitive radicalization", is generally viewed as a potential precursor and conveyer belt to engagement in the "behavioural radicalization" of terrorism (p. 1), the volume's editors argue that non-violent extremism needs to be considered as a stand-alone field in the discipline of extremism and radicalisation in all their manifestations.

To examine these issues, following the editors' introductory overview, the *Handbook* is divided in four parts, consisting of 32 case studies, with each one focusing on different types of non-violent extremism. The first part focuses on what the editors term "vocal extremism" across multiple ideologies, including the misogynistic Incel movement (although one could argue that it is, in fact, a violent extremist movement, where some supporters have conducted violent attacks against their supposed adversaries). The second part focuses on non-violent religious extremists, such as Islamist, Buddhist, and Hindu movements. The third part deals with non-violent, right wing "vocal extremists" in countries such as the United Kingdom, Romania, Turkey, Greece, and the United States (although in US, right wing extremists also engage in violent activities). The final part examines what the editors' term "post-modern extremisms" as manifested by non-violent left-wing, feminist, and environmental movements (although when environmental extremists damage a power plant, isn't this a form of violent engagement?).

There is much to commend in this *Handbook.* The editors' definition of non-violent extremism is particularly noteworthy, which they explain as "radicals who have moved to the next step, opposing the enemy (mostly the establishment) with all the legal tools available (generally protests, petitions, demonstrations, and online campaigns) but without using violence" (p. 3).

Also valuable is the editors' formulation of a table on the comparative components of non-violent extremist ideologies along the variables of ideologies, the "enemy to fight," the "group to protect," and the "change to achieve," which are applied to the movements adhering to Islamism, Buddhism, Far Right, Incel, Far Left, Feminism, and Eco-radicals (p. 489).

The *Handbook's* conclusion offers several important findings, including identifying some of the inhibitors that might constrain extremist groups or individuals from engaging in terrorist violence. Citing the work of Busher, Macklin and Holbrook*, a fivefold typology is used to delineate the constraints on violent escalation, such as "(1) Strategic, (2) Moral, (3) Group-level (self-identification with non-violence), (4) boundary softening (in terms of out-groups or perceived 'enemies'), and (5) any organizational developments (that aid the above)…" (p. 493).

In another finding, the editors raise the possibility that among the "post-organisational" extremist movements, such as QAnon, which are inherently leaderless and organisationally fragmented, they might end up as an "antechamber to paths of extremist violence or at least provide subcultures in which the dehumanising ideas exist that can in turn leader to political violence," since they lack the "formal, hierarchical structures [that] put a 'cap on violence' within extremist social movements" (p. 494).

Regarding future research, the editors recommend analysing "how individuals over groups or organisations per se will become even more prescient and important. As we see a shift to non-violent groups largely existing online, formalized structures and memberships will become even more eroded and opaque" (p. 494). To this, I would add that to examine the contentious issue of the extent to which non-violent extremist movements might potentially serve as a gateway by some of their members into violent extremism, future research should populate databases with such individuals, their affiliations, their motivations, and their violent incidents to derive a representative sample of cases to generate statistically-based empirical findings.

In spite of some shortfalls, the *Handbook* offers important insights drawn from the up-to-date panoramic overview of active non-violent extremist movements around the world. The *Handbook* is a valuable resource for understanding the important phenomenon of non-violent extremist movements as a separate sub-discipline in the study of how pathways into extremism do not always lead to terrorist violence but can remain at a non-violent phase.

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**Joel Busher, Donald Holbrook, and Graham Macklin, "How the 'Internal Brakes' on Violent Escalation Work and Fail: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Intra-Group Processes of Restraint in Militant Groups," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, (2021). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1872156.*

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