

Geospatial Analysis of US Domestic Terrorist Attack Sites and the Attacker's
Area of Residence

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MAP LINK:

<https://priceusc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b84720e8fde34ed7a8c9d8a8c3bb9109>

I. INTRODUCTION

“We face one of the most serious terror threat environments since the 9/11 attacks as foreign terrorist organizations continue to exploit the Internet to inspire, enable, or direct individuals already here in the homeland to commit terrorist acts.”

-US Department of Homeland Security, 2017
(Shortell, “DHS Issues Homegrown Terror Bulletin,” 2017)

“The primary terrorist threat to the homeland today, without question, is homegrown violent extremists. That’s what keeps us up at night.”

-FBI Director Wray, August 2018 (Reavy, 2018)

In the late 2000’s, US security concerns shifted from international terrorism to domestic terrorism (Bui et al., 2012) as intelligence agencies realized that attacks were more likely to come from people already living within the US borders (Bui et al., 2012). The internet has allowed for people to become radicalized without ever needing face to face contact with others.

Director Wray’s usage of ‘homegrown’ refers to the place where the perpetrator embraced violent extremist ideologies. In this context, homegrown refers to the person becoming radicalized while residing within the US. The person can be from another country, but if he or she embraced violent extremist ideology in the US, that person would be considered homegrown (Southers, 2013).

With domestic terrorism, specifically homegrown agents, becoming the focus of prevention efforts, it is important to explore current data to recognize potential tendencies of domestic terrorists. The object of this project was to explore the following questions:

- Do perpetrators tend to live closer to or further from the attacked site?
- Does this distance differ significantly based on ideology?

Using GIS to create a story map allows for an easy-to-read and interactive experience to for users to determine perpetrator tendencies and possible relationships between ideology and distance.

II. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

To map the domestic attack sites, latitude and longitude coordinates were taken from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) for all attacks on United States soil from 2012 through 2017. The GTD is updated by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). START has created the GTD using open-source new materials as well as data from Pinkerton Global Intelligence Services, a private security agency that does not release comprehensive data publicly.

Before an entry can be added to the GTD database, the GTD team determines whether the report is credible. If it is credible, then the research team compares the information to the criteria they use to determine if the report fits the terrorism definition.

The reported attack must meet at least two of the following three criteria to be deemed a terrorist attack by START:

1. The act is done to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal.
2. Evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey a message to a larger audience (other than the victims) is present. It is not limited a personal matter between two parties.
3. The incident or action is outside the context of legitimate warfare. (Outside humanitarian law)

The last criterion means that civilians or non-combatants are the targets. Non-combatants also include active military members who may be on leave and therefore not on official duty at that moment. These criteria are common in most definitions of terrorism.

In addition to the GPS coordinates, the GTD database also includes data for the date of the attack, the city and state where it took place, the ideology classification of the perpetrator, and the news source used by the research team to find the information. This information was provided by the research center in an excel spreadsheet format. In order to use it within a story map, the spreadsheet needed to be converted to a .CSV file from its previous .XLS file.

To find the locations of the attacker's residence, publicly available news articles were searched (See Appendix 5 for source list). Articles that mention the city, town, or neighborhood, where the perpetrator resided prior to the terrorist attack, were used.

Once the city, town, or neighborhood was found, the distance was determined using google maps. If google maps listed several routes to get to the attack site, the shortest route was chosen under the assumption that a perpetrator would take the shortest route for the shortest time. The distance in miles was entered into a separate column in a spreadsheet.

The entries were divided into the following groups for two reason. First, to preserve the presentation of the map without congesting many different colors. Second, because I believed that those distances could be supported by a reasonable expectation of estimated drive time.

Distance Group	Estimated Drive Time
0-20 miles	0-40 minutes
20.1-40 miles	20-60 minutes
60-90 miles	60-120 minutes
90.1-130 miles	90-180 minutes
130+ miles	130+ minutes

Points that were classified in the spreadsheet as 'Same City' are indicated as such on the relevant points on the map. Points with a distance of 'Same City' are entries that could be verified where the perpetrator resided within the same city as the attack.

When a user selects a point, a bubble will open to indicate the distance by either a numerical value or by 'Same City-Distance 20 miles or Less.' The points that have a distance of 0 to 20 miles or have a distance indicated as 'Same City' are indicated on the map in the same color and under the same legend group of 0-20 miles. This is because the largest city displayed on the map is Houston, with an estimated radius of almost 20 miles. Therefore, all other entries that are categorized under 'Same City' would have a distance of less than 20 miles. Those points therefore fall under the 0-20 miles category and are displayed accordingly on the map.

There were 36 entries that were originally classified as terrorism but later were put into question by newly added information to the GTD. These entries are not included in order to preserve the accuracy. An additional 89 entries were excluded from the map because the distance could not be found.

The colors were chosen to provide a color ramp for the viewer. Red is used to indicate that the perpetrator's residence was closer to the site. White indicates the furthest distance.

Separate layers were created from each legend group. Each point in these groups was then geocoded and displayed on the story map. Buffers were added to each layer to illustrate the geographic range where the attacker resided. Each buffer has a radius that is equal to the mileage in the 'Distance' column. Buffers for 'Sam City' entries are 20 miles.

The user is able to interact with the points to find out the estimated distance and additional information about the attack and the perpetrator.

III. LIMITATIONS

The data limitations restrict the accuracy of the map and the analysis. GPS coordinate data of each perpetrator's residence was not publicly available and therefore a precise distance could not be used for the entries. Furthermore, public records are not available regarding the route an attacker took to get to a target site. Additionally, the time of day could impact the perpetrator's selected route and therefore the distance would differ, even if the GPS coordinates of the residence was known.

This information would have allowed for more entries to be used and therefore provide a more accurate map and analysis of the attacks between 2012 and 2017. There would be no need to have a 'Same City' category. Additionally, the 89 entries where the distance could not be determined would have been able to be included in the map an analysis.

Another limitation is the missing ideology for 8 entries. If data were available to positively identify these missing ideologies, it would provide a more conclusive analysis regarding distance and ideology.

Yet another important limitation results from missing information about the severity of an attack. Part of this difficulty is stems from the possible definitions for severity in this context. Severity may be defined as the most lives lost, people injured, the financial cost to the victims/institution/government, or the greatest area damaged.

While there is some data available for lives lost, research for this project has shown that almost all attacks do not result in death. Attacks that result in death are the exception, and attacks with mass casualties are an extremely rare occurrence. However, this claim is based only on the research of this project. Additional data needs to be publicly released to substantiate this finding.

A government consensus on the definition of terrorism would also have helped this data because the GTD research team would not have to create their own definition. Multiple definitions may cause certain attacks to not be classified as terrorism when they actually were.

Given these limitations, this map and analysis should not be used to conclude any answers to the questions asked for this project. Instead, this map provides an estimate that can help to determine whether further research on distance trends is worth the effort.

IV. ANALYSIS

The mean distance for all attacks is 198.4 miles with a standard deviation of 591.06. However, these findings include outliers, causing the mean and standard deviation to be skewed.

Entries that are classified under ‘Same City’ are not included in either the mean or standard deviation. Results can be seen in Appendix 1. The ‘Count’ column in Appendix 1, and subsequent appendices, refers to the number of entries classified under a given distance group.

67% of all attack sites used in this project are estimated to be within 20 miles of the perpetrator’s area of residence. 73% of all attack sites in this project are within 40 miles. Both percentages include entries classified under ‘Same City.’ These percentages indicate a possible tendency; that the majority of attackers may look to attack a site that is at most 1 hour from their residence via car, depending on the traffic conditions of the area.

In an effort to exclude large outlying data points in the 130+ group, all sites within 40 miles were isolated and analyzed for a mean. This dropped the mean from 198.4 miles to only 11.7 miles. Entries classified under ‘Same City’ are not included in the count, mean, nor standard deviation to preserve a more accurate estimate because ‘Same City’ entries do not have an estimated distance, merely a maximum distance. The smaller 11.7 mile mean further demonstrates that attackers may have a tendency to target sites within a 1-hour maximum drive from their residence.

Appendix 2 provides the mean and standard deviation of each ideology group. These groups were classified by the GTD research team and have been kept as is for this analysis. Entries that were classified under ‘Same City’ are not included in Appendix 2. Also, there are 6 entries that GTD had classified as ‘Unknown’ for their ideology group. These 6 entries are also not included in Appendix 2.

By analyzing all points in the map, the largest mean distance for a group that has a count larger than 1 is Jihad-Inspired extremists; with 688 miles. This might indicate that perpetrators with this ideology are willing to travel far to carry out an attack. The shortest distances for groups with a count larger than 1 are Anti-Semitic extremists with 6 miles, followed by Muslim extremists with 9.4 miles. This may indicate that these groups tend to not travel farther from their place of residence to attack a targeted population.

Appendix 3 illustrates how these numbers change when only attacks that were located within 40 miles of the attacker’s area of residence are analyzed. Points that were classified under ‘Same City’ are not used in Table 3. Additionally, Appendix 3 excludes 4 entries that were classified by GTD with ‘Unknown Ideology.’

By looking only at entries that have a 40 miles radius or less, perpetrators classified as Jihadi-inspired Extremists have a mean distance of 11.3 miles instead of 688 miles. This ideological group is no longer the group with the highest mean distance, out of all groups with more than 1 count. Other ideological groups that have a significant decrease include Anti-Government Extremists, Anti-Muslim Extremists, Anti-White Extremists, and White Extremists. This significantly shifts the analysis from Appendix 2. These ideological groups no longer appear to be willing to travel far distances to attack a target.

Appendix 4 includes the ‘Same City’ entries. It also has an analyzed distance of 10 miles instead of 40 miles. Due to the exact unknown distance for ‘Same City’ entries, 10 miles was entered as the distance for Appendix 4 to see if this provided different results from Appendix 3. Groups classified by GTD as ‘Unknown Ideology’ are included as well. Ideology groups with a * symbol next to the name are entries that were affected by the inclusion of ‘Same City’ entries.

One significant drop in average distance occurred for Anti-White Extremist groups. The mean dropped from 12.15 miles to 4 miles. However, there is only a single entry for this group within the 10-mile distance, so this may be considered an outlier.

If we are to analyze only the entries that have a count larger than 1, the most notable entry is Jihadi-Inspired extremists. With the inclusion of ‘Same City’ entries, the count has increased from 6 to 9, however the mean distance has dropped from 11.3 to 8.3 miles. The standard deviation for this group decreased significantly from 8.1 in Appendix 3 to 3.31 in Appendix 4. This indicates that Jihadi-Inspired extremists are much more likely to reside in an area that is closer to the attack site than was originally indicated in Appendix 3. However, this indication needs further research to support the claim. One counter argument could be that the additional 3 entries for Jihadi-Inspired Extremists may have a distance closer to 20 miles than to 10 miles, thus changing the mean and standard deviation.

V. CONCLUSION

During this project, it was found that perpetrators seem to favor targets that are closer to their areas of residence instead of further. Specifically, targets within 20 miles seem to be heavily favored. This was expected because a closer target provides a possible attacker the easiest access to gather intelligence on the site. Therefore, there appears to be a travel convenience factor that is used into an attacker’s decision.

Given the data limitations, this should not be taken as conclusive evidence of a tendency. Instead, the map and data only illustrate a possible relationship. Counter arguments should also consider that the perpetrator chose the attack site and then moved closer to that location. This data is not taken into account in this project, and it is necessary data if tendencies are to be accurately analyzed.

It is clear that all attacks on US soil between 2012 through 2017 were perpetrated by homegrown violent extremists. This highlights the need to focus government resources on homegrown attackers. Additionally, the most violent groups illustrated on this map are white extremists and jihadi-inspired extremists.

Despite the unavailable data, this map is able to provide a starting perspective to show whether this is something that is worth looking into or not. Given the security concerns of the country and the analysis based on the data estimates and assumptions, there is enough proof to warrant a second look.

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Appendix 1

DISTANCE GROUP	COUNT	MEAN DISTANCE (miles)	STANDARD DEVIATION
0 to 20 miles	33	9.26	5.92
20.1 to 40 miles	6	25.55	5.01
60 to 90 miles	4	73.82	5.89
90.1 to 130 miles	5	112.32	13.69
130.1+ miles	18	1029.23	1046.45
Same City	34	Unknown	Unknown

Appendix 2

IDEOLOGY GROUP	COUNT	MEAN DISTANCE (miles)	STANDARD DEVIATION
Anti-Abortion Extremists	2	39.9	41.6
Anti-Government Extremists	7	437.1	666.2
Anti-Muslim Extremists	4	257.3	453.7
Anti-Police	3	402.9	362.7
Anti-Republican Extremists	1	820	0
Anti-Semitic Extremists	2	6	.98
Anti-Trump Extremists	1	2551	0
Anti-White Extremists	5	43.5	70.3
Citizens for Constitutional Freedom	1	184	0
Court Reform Extremists	1	8.4	0
Incel Extremists	1	0	0
Iraqi Extremists	1	20.6	0
Jihad-Inspired Extremists	12	688	1329.8
Muslim Extremists	7	9.4	8.3
Neo-Nazi Extremists	1	530	0
Pro-LGBT Rights Extremists	1	29	0
Right-Wing Extremists	1	81.7	0
Sovereign Citizens	1	21.9	0
White Extremists	8	143.1	195.8

Appendix 3

IDEOLOGY GROUP	COUNT	MEAN DISTANCE (miles)	STANDARD DEVIATION
Anti-Abortion Extremists	1	10.5	0
Anti-Government Extremists	3	11.9	6
Anti-Muslim Extremists	2	8	6.4
Anti-Police Extremists	1	12.8	0
Anti-Semitic Extremists	2	6	.98
Anti-White Extremists	4	12.2	5.9
Court Reform Extremists	1	8.4	0
Incel Extremists	1	0	0
Iraqi Extremists	1	20.6	0
Jihad-Inspired Extremists	6	11.3	8.1
Muslim Extremists	7	9.4	8.3
Pro-LGBT Rights Extremists	1	29	0
Sovereign Citizens	1	21.9	0
White Extremists	4	14.9	15.5

Appendix 4

IDEOLOGY GROUP	COUNT	MEAN DISTANCE (miles)	STANDARD DEVIATION
Anarchists*	1	10	0
Anti-Abortion Extremists*	2	10	0
Anti-Arab Extremists*	1	10	0
Anti-Government Extremists*	2	8	2.83
Anti-Muslim Extremists*	6	9	2.45
Anti-Police Extremists*	1	10	0
Anti-Semitic Extremists	2	6	1.41
Anti-Sikh Extremists*	1	10	0
Anti-White Extremists	1	4	0
Court Reform Extremists	1	8	0
Incel Extremists*	3	6.66	5.78
Jihadi-Inspired Extremists*	9	8.33	3.31
Muslim Extremists*	8	7.25	3.37
Right-Wing Extremists*	1	10	0
Sovereign Citizens*	2	10	0
White Extremists*	7	8	3.83
Unknown*	4	8	4

Appendix 5

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