



Attacks on Houses of Worship

2023 Year in Review



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Introduction

The Faith-Based Information Sharing & Analysis Organization (FB-ISAO) provides members with information, analysis, and capabilities to help reduce risk while enhancing preparedness, security, and resilience. We are an all-faiths and all-hazards information-sharing organization.

By incorporating an all-faith approach, FB-ISAO unites, builds trust, and strengthens resiliency among the entire community of faith, and enhances public-private partnership.

The FB-ISAO [Operational Resilience Working Group](#) (ORG) constantly monitors the threat environment to support our threat assessment mission. Timely threat analysis and situational awareness require a steady and reliable stream of current threat information with which to establish a baseline, conduct analysis, and spot developing trends. Ideally, the data is collected and distributed as it is reported. While groups like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the FBI share their collections, their reporting is often delayed; moreover, they focus their efforts on incidents affecting their mission, faith, or ethnic group to the exclusion of others. Government collections often exclude threats, protests, and violent acts that fall under First Amendment-protected speech because those threats fall outside of their mandated reporting. Moreover, the FBI and other governmental organizations are limited to those incidents that are officially reported to them which may contribute to undercounting.

To remedy these shortcomings, FB-ISAO embarked on an experimental project to collect, collate, analyze, and assess threats and attacks on U.S. houses of worship. The ORG chose houses of worship as the unit of analysis, as opposed to the broader category of faith-based organizations, to keep the scale of the endeavor manageable and bypass debate over which entities are or are not faith-based organizations, so as not to skew the results.

Methodology

Data is collected daily from an AI-filtered data stream of 400 open-source websites published or maintained by the news media, news aggregators, non-profit research organizations, online commentators, social media sources, and government agencies. The collection spans the ideological, political, and religious spectra. While not exhaustive, the effort does produce a robust and varied stream of reporting that can rapidly be collated, analyzed, and made available for near real-time assessments.

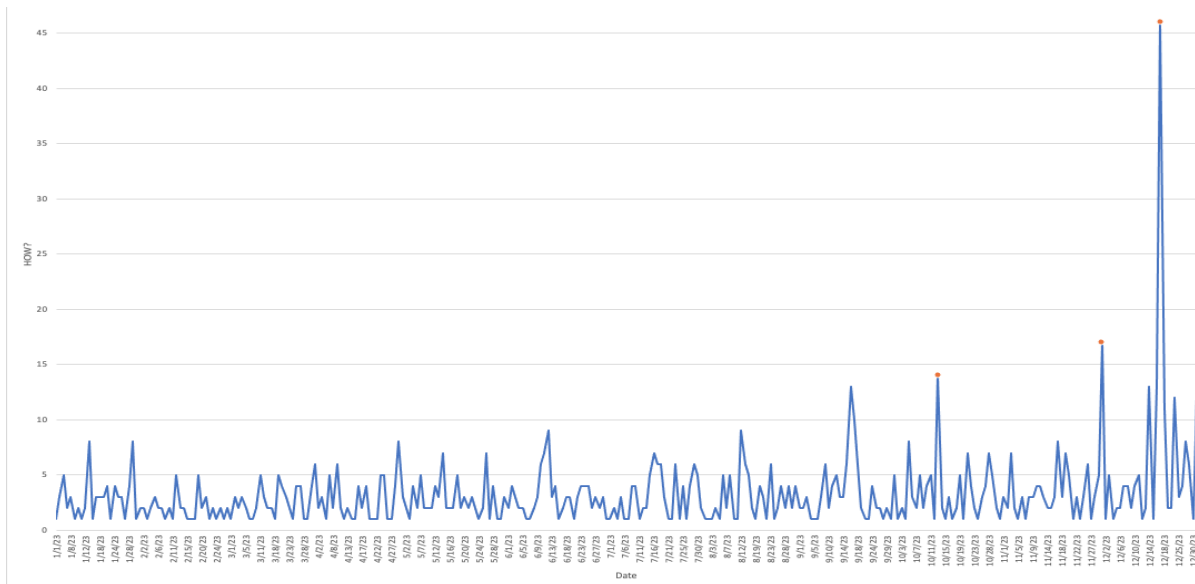
- All data are open-source and publicly reported online or in print media.
- Every incident included in the data set is traceable back to its online source – except for incidents reported to FB-ISA0’s Slack channel as a Suspicious Activity Report (SAR).

With very few exceptions, only incidents with targets identified individually by name and/or location are included; this is most notably reflected in the recent surge of bomb threats and hoax swatting assaults in the second half of 2023, in which reports spoke of multiple dozens of threats received over the identified period. Only those reports that specifically identified the recipients by name, physical, or email address were included. In addition, reports that state an occurrence is the “nth such incident this period” count and record only those instances for which specific dates and particulars are provided. These practices allow the ORG to err on the side of caution and protect the distribution from overreporting and misattribution.

Data Analysis

- Monitor developments and spot patterns in near real-time.
- Analyze trends in target affiliation, timing, attack types, weapons use, and locations.
- Establish baselines and identify changes in modus operandi.
- Provide month-to-month and year-on-year analyses and comparisons.

Figure 1: Incident Trend Line



The data collection commenced on January 1, 2023. As can be seen in **Figure 1**, the reporting for the first three quarters of the year fell into a stable pattern with periodic spikes. The observable increase in the frequency of attacks towards the end of the year

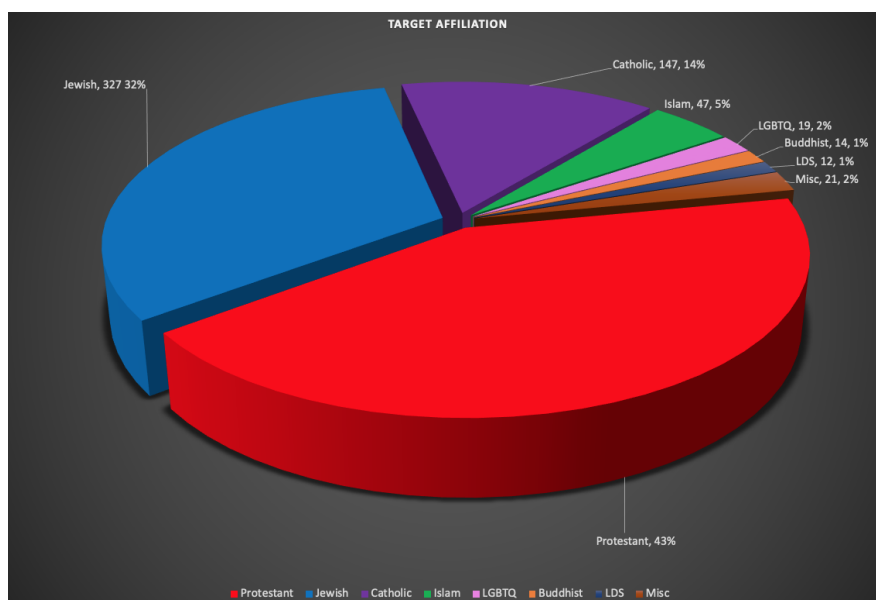
is directly attributable to the onset of reported swatting and bomb threats that occurred against Jewish houses of worship beginning in late July, followed by a wave of incidents after the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas and any spillover events.

Distribution by Faith

Over the year, FB-ISAQ recorded a total of 1027 attacks on houses of worship. These acts were unevenly and disproportionately distributed across the spectrum of religious affiliation, as displayed in **Figure 2**.

- Forty-three percent (43%) of reported incidents were against Protestant churches. The FB-ISAQ ORG was able to identify Protestant denominations in 58% of incidents. Of those:
 - ✓ 40% are Baptist
 - ✓ 15% are Methodist
 - ✓ 12% are Lutheran
 - ✓ 8% are Presbyterian
 - ✓ 7% Episcopalian
 - ✓ 7% are Other Christian (not further identifiable by open-source reporting)
- 32% of attacks targeted **Jewish** synagogues
- 14% targeted **Catholic** churches
- 5% targeted **Muslim mosques**
- The remainder targeted the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS), Buddhist, Messianic, Sikh, Satanic, self-identified LGBTQ congregations, and miscellaneous others including those that escape further categorization.

Figure 2: Target Affiliation by Religion



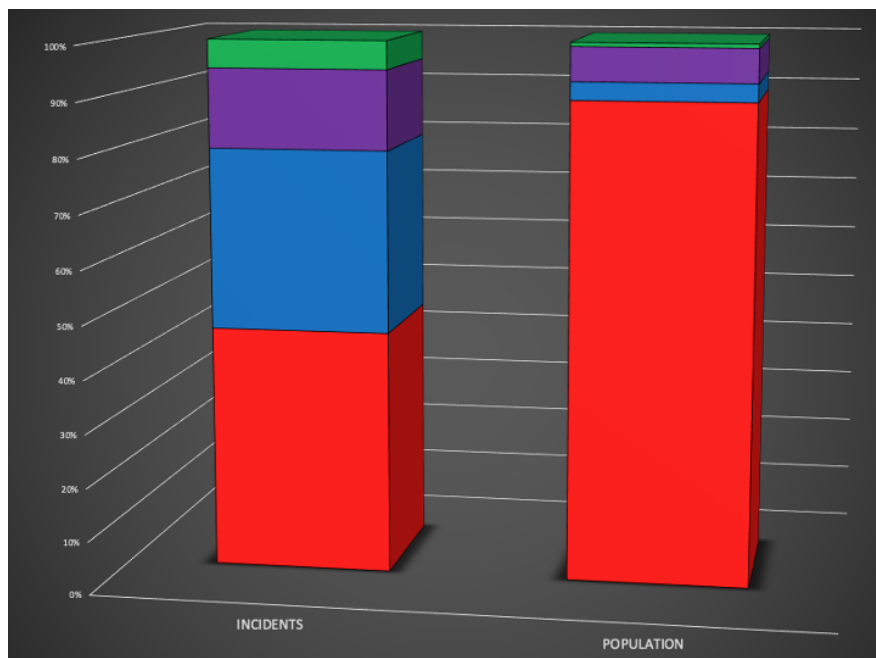
The distribution trends against demographics. A 2022 Duke University study found that among U.S. houses of worship:

- 85% of are Protestant
- 6% are Catholic
- 3.2% are Jewish
- 0.7% are Muslim

This would indicate that Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim facilities, which make up less than 10% of houses of worship incur 51% of incidents. These minority-based religions are disproportionately targeted given their respective populations. Furthermore, based on the data, the majority denomination, which represents Protestant houses of worship, is underrepresented.

Figure 3 illustrates this disparity: the column on the left depicts the percentage of incidents targeting each of the four main religions while the column on the right depicts the percentage of houses of worship claimed by each religious affiliation. The religions are color-coded, with red representing Protestants, blue representing Jews, purple representing Catholics, and green depicting Muslims.

Figure 3: Disparate Distribution of Incidents by Population



Monthly Distribution

Through November of 2023, attacks against all houses of worship averaged 77 incidents per month. December, with the influx of swatting and bomb threats that began in July, saw the total expand to 184, a 106% increase over the previous month, and a 138%

increase over the average. The dotted line, in **Figure 4**, is the moving 3-month average which shows a steady increase in activity as the year progressed. The inset box shows incidents by quarter and highlights the sharp increase in the fourth quarter over the preceding three quarters.

Figure 4: Distribution of Incidents by Month and Quarter



The increase in activity, which targeted primarily Jewish facilities, was made up entirely by the increase in bomb threats and swatting reports. The bar charts below clearly show the onset of bomb threats (represented by the blue band at the top of each column) in the August through December period, eclipsing the incidence of vandalism, theft, arson, assaults, and graffiti (the lower 5 bands in each stack) that had dominated the distributions in the first eight months of the year.

Note: Swatting and Bomb Threats were executed remotely in all cases and did not require the perpetrators to acquire weapons or other traceable materials. Nor did the perpetrators need to be present at the scene, impeding their pre-incident detection, identification, and capture. In fact, in many cases, perpetrators targeted facilities that live-streamed their worship services so that they could watch the incidents play out in real-time without putting themselves at risk.

Distribution by Attack Type

Figure 5 shows the distribution of attacks by percentage of each month's total count. As the graph illustrates, in the last quarter of 2023, several changes are observable:

- The total incident count hovers close to 80 incidents per month through November
- Incidents of vandalism, theft, arson, and graffiti decline

- Incidents of bomb threats and swatting increase dramatically
- Incidents of swatting take a notable decline as bomb threats skyrocket
- The data also reveals how the different incident types dominate the distribution at different times as the year progresses

Figure 5: Incidents by Type of Attack

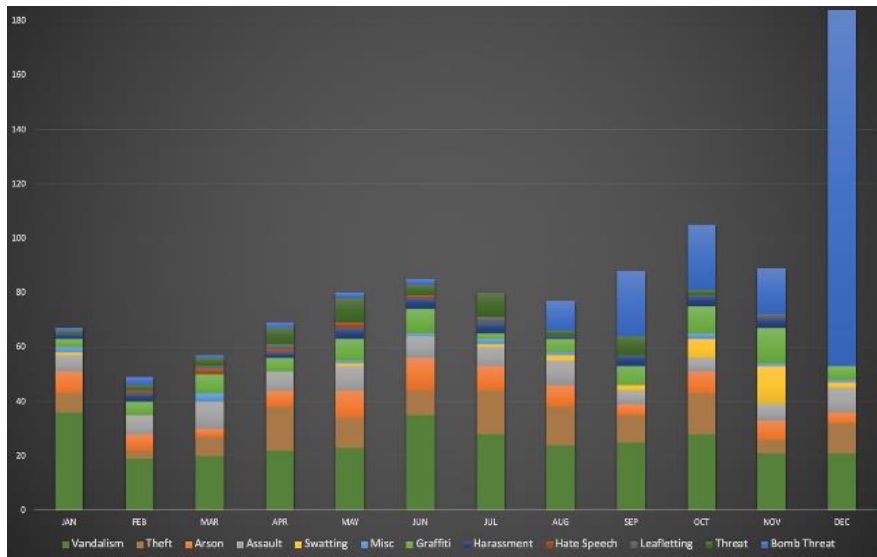


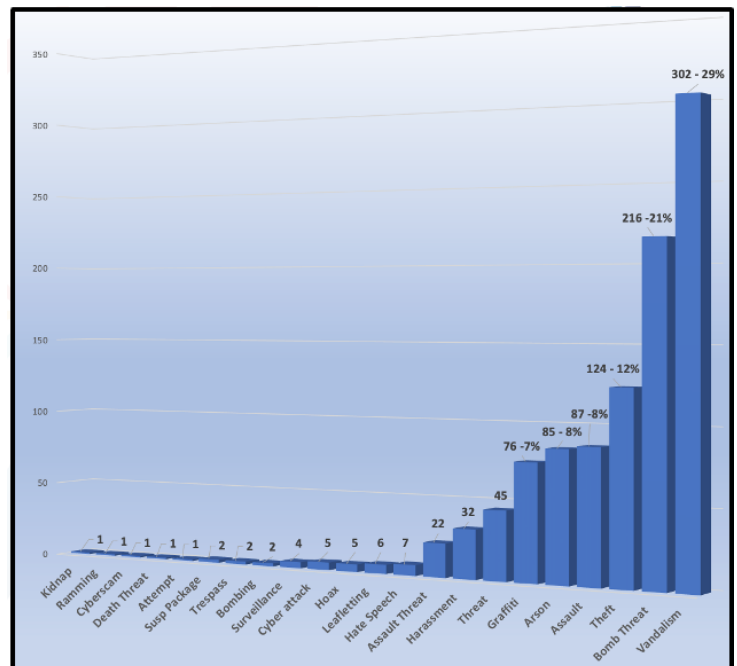
Figure 6 depicts the total number of incidents by type for the year. Over half (56%) of incidents are property crimes and break down as follows:

- Vandalism (29%)
- Theft (12%)
- Arson (8%)
- Graffiti (7%)

These incidents all require physical access to the facility, and by extension, potential exposure of the perpetrator to witnesses or CCTV.

Threats of violence make up 32% of the total. These include bomb threats (21%), threats of assault, including swatting (7%), harassment (3%), hate speech, and leafletting (1%) These incidents do not require physical access to the facilities or individual

Figure 6: Distribution of Incident Attack Types



targets of the threats and can be perpetrated remotely, either electronically or telephonically, or in the case of leafletting, via a momentary drive-by.

Only 17% of incidents involved physical violence and were split evenly between physical assaults on individuals (8%) and arson (8%).

Target Affiliation

Figure 7: Target Affiliation

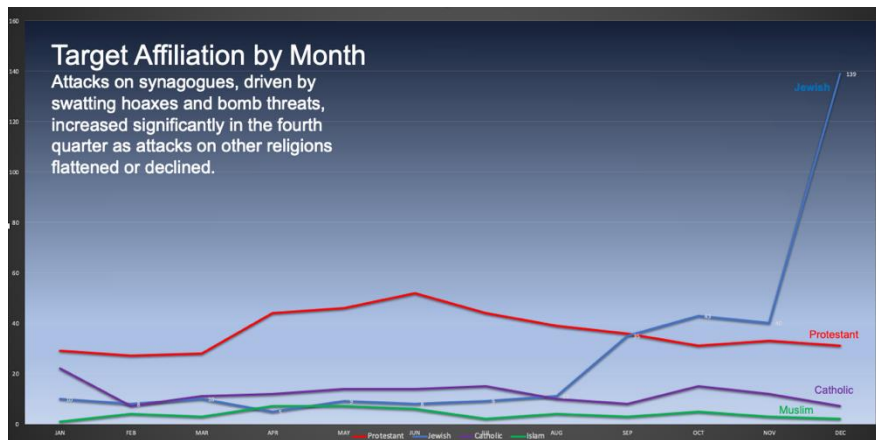


Figure 7 shows target affiliation by month. Through August, the ordinal distribution of attacks remains the same – the largest number of attacks target Protestant houses of worship, followed in order by Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, with minor deviations in order. This order changed dramatically in the fourth quarter as attacks on synagogues, driven by swatting hoaxes and bomb threats, increased significantly while attacks on other religions held steady or declined. This dramatic change in targeting and incident type elevated attacks against Jews from third place in the first three quarters of 2023, behind Protestants and Catholics, to first place for each month in quarter four. The rest of the order remained the same.

Casualties

Only 5% of all incidents (52 out of 1027) had reported casualties, with 25 individuals killed and 59 wounded. Four of these were 'mass casualty' events (four or more casualties) in which 11 people were killed and 16 wounded.

Figure 8: Crosstabulation of Casualties by Faith

Affiliation	Killed	Wounded
Protestant	21	49
Islam	1	5
Catholic	3	2
Sikh	0	2
LDS	0	1
Jewish	0	0
Grand Total	25	59

As shown in **Figure 8**, 84% of all casualties were incurred in attacks on Protestant houses of worship.

Use of Weapons in Attacks

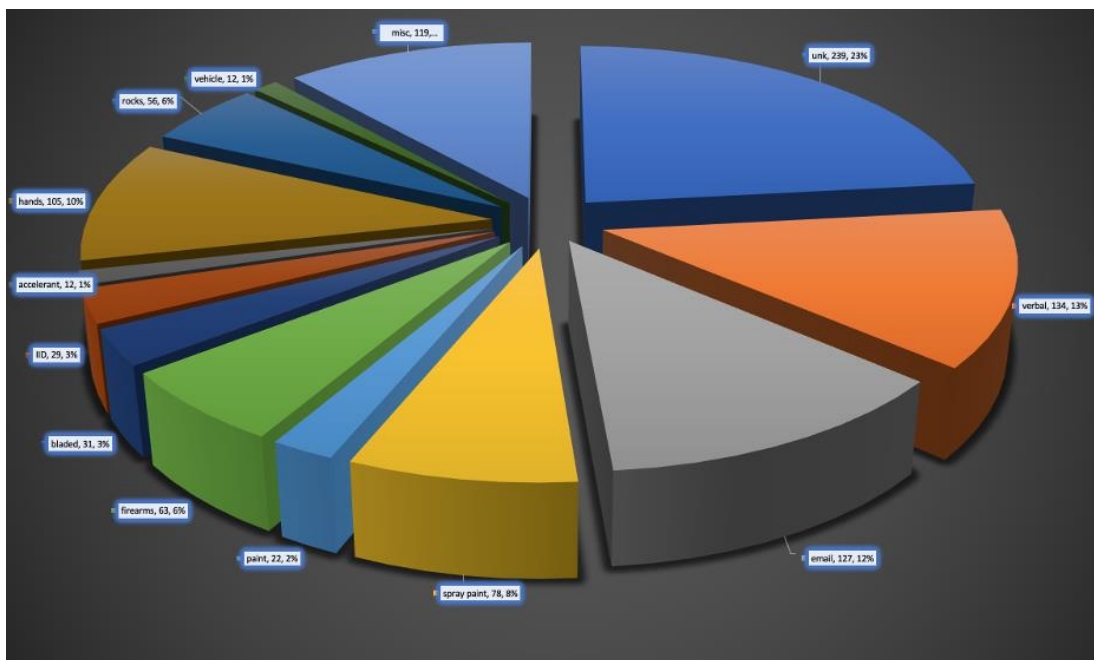
A quarter of all attacks consisted of communicated threats. About half of those threats were delivered verbally and half were delivered via emails and texts. Another quarter (23%) of incidents recorded no weapon. Of the remaining 52% of incidents, the most reported implements of destruction were paint, hands, firearms, fire, and bladed weapons, as shown in **Figure 9**.

Weapons were reported in 9% of incidents:

- Firearms in 6%
- Bladed weapons in 3%

Note: Based on findings, a facility is three times more likely to be attacked with paint, rocks, and hands than a bladed weapon or firearm.

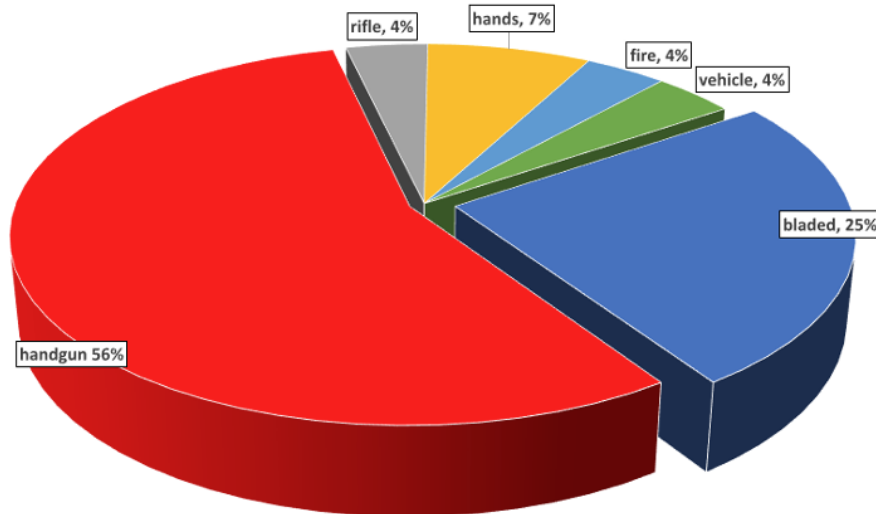
Figure 9: Distribution of Weapons Used



Lethal Weapons and Incident Locations

Of the 52 incidents in which people were killed or wounded, handguns were the most prevalent weapon used which amounted to 56% of the time, as illustrated in **Figure 10**. Bladed weapons were used a 5% of the time. Rifles were used in only 4% of attacks, the same frequency as with vehicles, and fire (arson.) In cases where injuries were reported, 7% of injuries were inflicted using hands or fists.

Figure 10: Weapons Used in Incidents with Casualties



Of the incidents in which people were killed or wounded, two-thirds notably occurred outside the house of worship – on the grounds or in the parking lot. This finding may be attributable to several factors:

- An increase in messaging on the benefits of target hardening such as layered security approaches, including the use of hardened perimeters and entrances.
- An increase in resources available to assist with target hardening.
- An increase in funding available under the Nonprofit Security Grant Program.
- Public-private partnerships that support individual houses of worship with information sharing, best practices, and resources. Those organizations include FB-ISAQ, SCN, CEN, FBSN, and others.

However, as the data shows, building interiors remain vulnerable targets.

- 37% of incidents occurred in the parking lot.
- 30% of incidents occurred elsewhere on the facility grounds.
- The remaining 33% occurred indoors.
- Two of the altercations began inside but security personnel moved them outdoors, where the injury took place.

Distribution by Faith and Location

The data distribution reveals interesting patterns in the types of attacks that different religions faced. **Figure 11** displays the variety of attacks facilities experienced for the year. Looking at the top attacks per religion:

- Protestant churches faced vandalism, theft, arson, assaults, and graffiti, in that order.
- Jewish houses of worship encountered bomb threats, vandalism, harassment, graffiti, and assaults – but comparatively few thefts, assaults, and arsons.
- Catholic churches experienced vandalism, theft, threats, arson, assaults, and graffiti.
- Mosques were targets of vandalism, assaults, theft, graffiti, and arson.

Note: The numbers in red represent the primary target of each attack type while, the numbers in orange indicate the secondary target for each row. The primary target in each instance was predominantly either Protestant or Jewish (71% of categories).

Figure 11: Crosstabulation of Incident Type by Religion

	Protestant	Jewish	Catholic	Islam	LGBTQ	Buddhist	LDS	misc	Sikh	Orthodox	Satanic	Messianic	Hindu	Apostolic	Total
Vandalism	160	27	85	10	10	2	3	2	2					1	302
Bomb Threat	12	194	2	3			1				2				214
Theft	75	3	22	7	2	9	3		1	1			1		124
Assault	58	6	7	9			3		2	2					87
Arson	65	1	8	4	2	3	1	1							85
Graffiti	36	21	7	7	2		1	1					1		76
Threat	14	18	9	3				1							45
Harassment	4	22	2	1	3										32
Assault Threat	7	13		2											22
Hate Speech	1	5		1											7
Leafletting	3	2												1	6
Cyber attack	2	1	3												6
Hoax		5													5
Bombing	1		1									2			4
Surveillance		4													4
Susp Package		2													2
Trespass		1	1												2
Death Threat	1														1
Kidnap		1													1
Attempt		1													1
Ramming	1														1
Total	440	327	147	47	19	14	12	5	5	3	2	2	2	2	1027

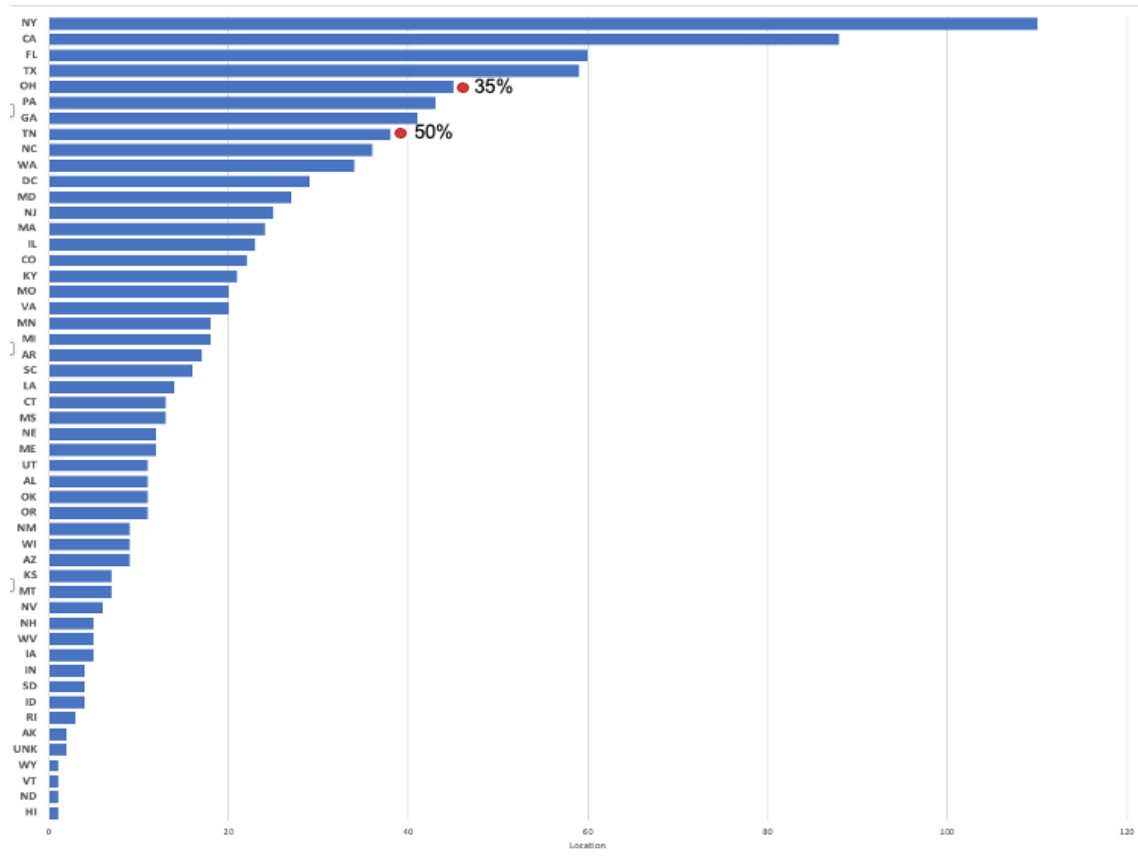
Distribution by Geographical Location

The next phase of our analysis involved assessing the location of incidents. Incidents occurred in every state and the District of Columbia, except Delaware – see **Figure 12** below. Half of all the incidents occurred in just nine states:

- 35% of attacks occurred in just five states: New York, California, Florida, Texas, and Ohio.

- Four states account for 15% of the incidents: Pennsylvania, Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

Figure 12: Distribution of Incidents by State



Ninety percent of all reported incidents fell into seven categories: vandalism, bomb threats, theft, assaults, arson, graffiti, and other threats. As displayed in **Figure 13**, these clustered in the nine states (New York, California, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina) noted above. The incidents were not evenly distributed, as different states experienced distinct mixes of incidents.

- New York had the most bomb threats and thefts and second most vandalism.
- California was the top location for vandalism, assaults, graffiti, and threats but also experienced bomb threats and thefts.
- Texas was the top location for arsons.

Figure 13: Crosstabulation of State by Incident Type

STATE	Vandalism	Bomb Threat	Theft	Assault	Arson	Graffiti	Threat	Harassment	Assault Threat	Hate Speech	Leafletting	Cyber	Hoax	Surveillance	Bombing	Trespass	Susp Package	Attempt	Death Threat	Ramming	Kidnap	TOTAL	
NY	21	42	18	7	4	5	3	5	1	1		1			1						1	110	
CA	29	10	13	9	6	8	7	2	1					2									87
FL	19	14	4	3	7	6	1	3	2									1				60	
TX	11	9	12	4	10	2	3	3	2	1				1		1						59	
OH	15	10	3	4	2	2	3	3	3													45	
PA	10	13	4	1	1	6	3	1	2		1				1							43	
GA	9	7	8	3	5	4	1	3	1													41	
TN	15	3	8	8	3					1												38	
NC	18	3	3	2	1	1	3	1	3	1												36	
WA	8	1	2	5	2	6				2			5			2		1				34	
DC	2	12	3	1	2	1		7						1								29	
MD	17	4	3	1					1											1		27	
NJ	8	4		6	2	2	2	1														25	
MA	6	11			2	5																24	
CO	2	5	12		1		2				1											23	
IL	6	1	2	6	4		2					2										23	
KY	3	4	3			2	2		3	3	1											21	
MO	6	5	1	3	3	1	1															20	
VA	7	4	2	3	1		2			1												20	
MI	8	3	1	1		3	1	1														18	
MN	8	2	1		5	1	1															18	
AR	4	7	1			3	1	1														17	
SC	6	1	4		3	1						1										16	
LA	4		1	3	3	2	1															14	
CT	3	6				1	2	1														13	
MS	5	3	2	3																		13	
ME	5	3	1			2				1												12	
NE	6		1	3		1			1													12	
AL		8	1	1					1													11	
OK	4	3	1		3																	11	
OR	3	3		1	3	1																11	
UT	2	5	1	2		1																11	
AZ	1	3		1	3				1													9	
NM	5	1	1	1											1							9	
WI	4		2	2		1																9	
KS	2		2		1	2																7	
MT	4	1			1	1																7	
NV	1	1			2		1					1										6	
IA	2			1	1	1																5	
NH		2	1		1	1																5	
WV	2		1	1	1																	5	
ID	2		1		1																	4	
IN	2					2																4	
SD	3				1																	4	
RI		1		1			1															3	
AK	1					1																2	
UNK							2															2	
HI		1																				1	
ND	1																					1	
VT	1																					1	
WY	1																					1	
TOT	302	216	124	87	85	76	45	32	22	7	6	6	5	4	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1027	

90%

The FB-ISAO ORG found that the location of the incidents also varies according to faith, as shown in **Figure 14**. These results are in keeping with demographics.

- New York was the number one location for attacks on Jews, Catholics, and Muslims.
- Protestants were attacked most frequently in California and Texas, but also in Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida.

- Outside of New York, Jews were most frequently attacked in California and Florida.
- Catholics were most frequently attacked in New York, California, and Ohio.
- Muslim facilities were most attacked in New York, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania.
- When looking deeper into state data, the following is observed:
 - ✓ The top two targets in New York were Jews and Catholics.
 - ✓ In California, the targets were Protestants and Jews.
 - ✓ In Florida, the targets were Jews and Protestants.
 - ✓ In Texas, the preponderance of victims was Protestant.
 - ✓ In Pennsylvania, DC, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Alabama the primary impacts were to the Jewish community.

Figure 14: Crosstabulation of State by Religion

	Protestant	Jewish	Catholic	Islam	LeftIQ	Buddhist	LDs	Imic	Sikh	Orthodox	Satanic	Muslim	Hindu	Apostolic	Total
NY	12	60	27	9			1	1							110
CA	35	27	14	3	2	2			2	1			1	1	88
FL	22	24	9	3	1		1								60
TX	35	13	5	2	1	1			1				1		59
OH	15	15	14		1										45
PA	11	16	6	5		4		1							43
GA	26	11	2		2										41
TN	31	2	1		1			1		2					38
NC	24	6	2	2					2						36
WA	16	11	2	2	1	2									34
DC	6	20		1	1			1							29
MD	13	8	1	2	2									1	27
NJ	5	12	6	1	1										25
MA	7	11	4							2					24
IL	15	2	4		1	1									23
CO	14	4	1				2	1							22
KY	6	13	2												21
MO	12	5	2		1										20
VA	13	4	1	2											20
MI	8	5	4		1										18
MN	6	2	2	8											18
AR	9	7	1												17
SC	14	1	1												16
LA	8		6												14
CT	3	6	3		1										13
MS	9	3						1							13
ME	4	4	3		1										12
NE	7	1	4												12
AL	2	9													11
OK	7	1			1							2			11
OR	3	4	3	1											11
UT	1	4					6								11
AZ	4	4				1									9
NM	4	1	1	3											9
WI	5		3	1											9
KS	4	1	1			1									7
MT	4		3												7
NV	2	2	1				1								6
IA	4			1											5
NH	1	3	1												5
WV	4	1													5
ID	1		1			1	1								4
IN	3		1												4
SD	3		1												4
RI		1	1	1											3
AK	1		1												2
UNK		2													2
HI		1													1
ND			1												1
VT	1		1												1
WY			1												1
Total	440	327	147	47	19	14	12	5	5	3	2	2	2	2	1027

Key Findings and Conclusions

- Attacks on Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic houses of worship are distributed disproportionately vis a vis their respective populations. Faiths whose houses of worship represent less than 10% of the total were targets in 51% of attacks. Mainline and Evangelical Protestant churches constitute more than 80% of all houses of worship in America but were targeted less than half the time.
- Attacks in December 2023 increased 100% over the preceding month, a three standard deviation increase over the preceding 11-month average. This was driven in part by the introduction of swatting and bomb threats to the distribution (incidents that do not require the perpetrator ever to be in proximity to the target or expose themselves to detection.)
- From a protective security and target hardening standpoint, the community spends an outsized portion of its time and resources protecting its principal assets – people, members, staff, and clergy, from mass casualty events -- which occurred in less than 0.4% (four out of 1027) of attacks. Understandably, the community plans and drills for the worst case rather than the most likely. There were, however, zero casualties reported in 95% of incidents; and of the 52 incidents during the year in which casualties were reported, 92% of those had fewer than four victims. Most incidents (83%) involved property crimes (vandalism, graffiti, theft), threats, hoaxes, and harassment.) Seventeen percent of the incidents that did have the potential to be life-threatening (assaults, arson, and bombings) were split evenly between attacks on people (8%) and attacks on property (8%).
- What is feared the most (guns for mass casualty effect) are used the least: Firearms and bladed weapons are reported in fewer than 10% of incidents. The most common weapons reported are also the most commonly available: fists and common everyday objects found on-scene, including rocks, bricks, spray paint, work tools, and other blunt objects.
 - ✓ Keeping facility grounds clean of rocks, scrap, and items that can be used as blunt instruments could reduce serendipitous vandalism and damage done to statuary, windows, doors, and building exteriors.
- In reviewing the data, hardening entrances and barriers to indiscriminate and unwelcome entry appears to pay off. Two-thirds of the incidents involving casualties occurred outside the house of worship, in the parking lot.
 - ✓ Fences, security patrols, and access controls can save lives by keeping assailants at bay.

- Handguns were used in more than half (56%) of the 52 incidents with casualties which is less than 3% of all incidents, and bladed weapons were employed 25% of the time. Long guns were used in only 2 of these incidents.
- Targets vary by location, faith, and demographics. Furthermore, the types and targets of attack vary by faith and state. The distribution of incidents by state correlates positively with population and demographic densities.
 - ✓ Threat assessments should take the faith and location of the house of worship into consideration.
- Every state experienced at least one incident, except Delaware. Half of all incidents were clustered in 9 states.

Implications

Effective security depends on timely and accurate threat analysis and assessment. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to protecting houses of worship. There are a few well-established best practices – limiting the number of entrances, practicing situational awareness, and pushing out perimeters. However, as the data show, the actual threat varies widely depending on location, faith, and local threat characteristics. By the same token, security is ephemeral, and as the threat evolves, the measures that afforded protection in the past may no longer be adequate. House of worship would do well to embrace the idea that situational awareness and frequent updates to response and mitigation strategies to reflect changes in the threat environment be ongoing endeavors. Understanding how the actual threat is evolving – and how it presents itself against a particular house of worship – can inform the means and mechanisms that should be employed and the options that are available when designing security programs and facility hardening. Too often, the community understandably reacts against fear and the perception of threats rather than addressing the facts on the ground, what is present in the here and now, and whether anything has changed materially since a review was last conducted. Effective data and analysis can help filter out what is feared and could happen and help an individual house of worship focus on what is likely to happen and what needs to be protected against. Making fact-based, data-driven decisions can help a house of worship spend more wisely and prepare more effectively.

About FB-ISAO

The Faith-Based Information Sharing & Analysis Organization (FB-ISAO) provides members with information, analysis, and capabilities to help reduce risk while enhancing preparedness, security, and resilience. The FB-ISAO is an all-faiths and all-hazards information-sharing organization.

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