

## Use of Firearms in Terrorist Attacks in the United States 1970-2014

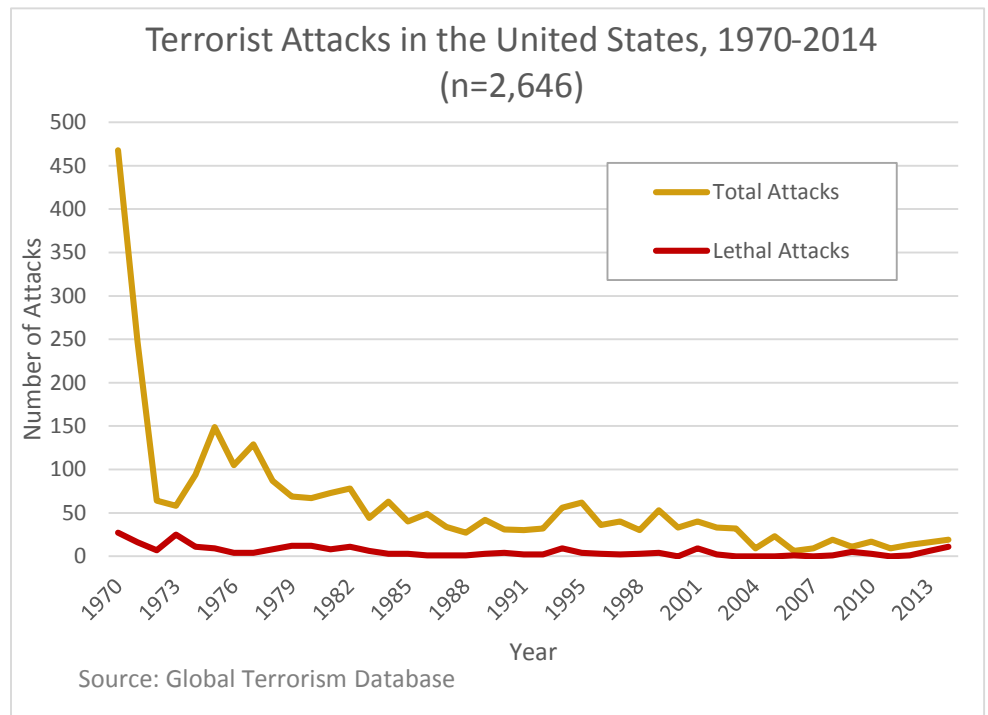
Gun violence in the United States and abroad remains a topic of discussion among the general public, government and law enforcement community. To better understand how firearms have been used in terrorist attacks, START examined the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and compiled this report. The analysis within this report pertains only to attacks that meet the [GTD's inclusion criteria and definition of terrorism](#): the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.

### TERRORIST ATTACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

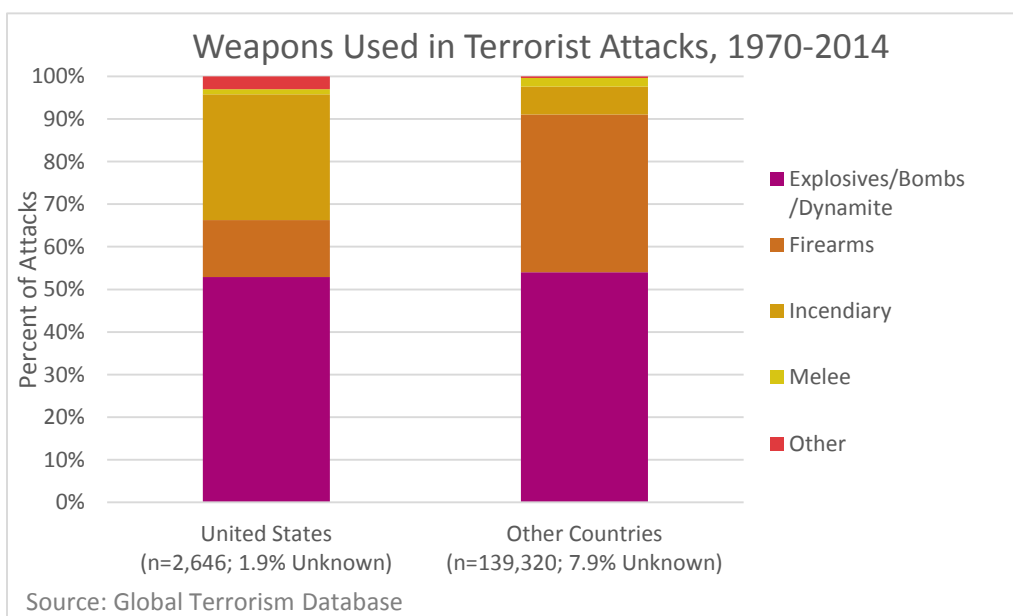
The majority of the 2,646 terrorist attacks carried out in the United States (including Puerto Rico) between 1970 and 2014 took place in the 1970s. Excluding attacks in Puerto Rico, there were 2,400 attacks in the United States during this time period, 324 of which involved firearms.

Most of these attacks were non-lethal, either because they were intended to cause only property damage rather than human casualties, or because they intended to cause casualties, but were unsuccessful.

Important exceptions to this include the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and the April 19, 1995 attack in Oklahoma. These were responsible for 90 percent of all deaths due to terrorist attacks in the United States between 1970 and 2014.



### WEAPONS USED IN TERRORIST ATTACKS



Between 1970 and 2014, more than half of all terrorist attacks in the United States involved explosives as the primary weapon. This is consistent with the use of explosives in terrorist attacks in other countries.

Also between 1970 and 2014, 346 terrorist attacks in the United States and Puerto Rico involved firearms as the primary weapon. At 13 percent of all attacks for which the weapon type is known, this is approximately one-third as common as firearm usage in terrorist attacks in the rest of the world, where 37 percent of attacks involved firearms as the primary weapon.

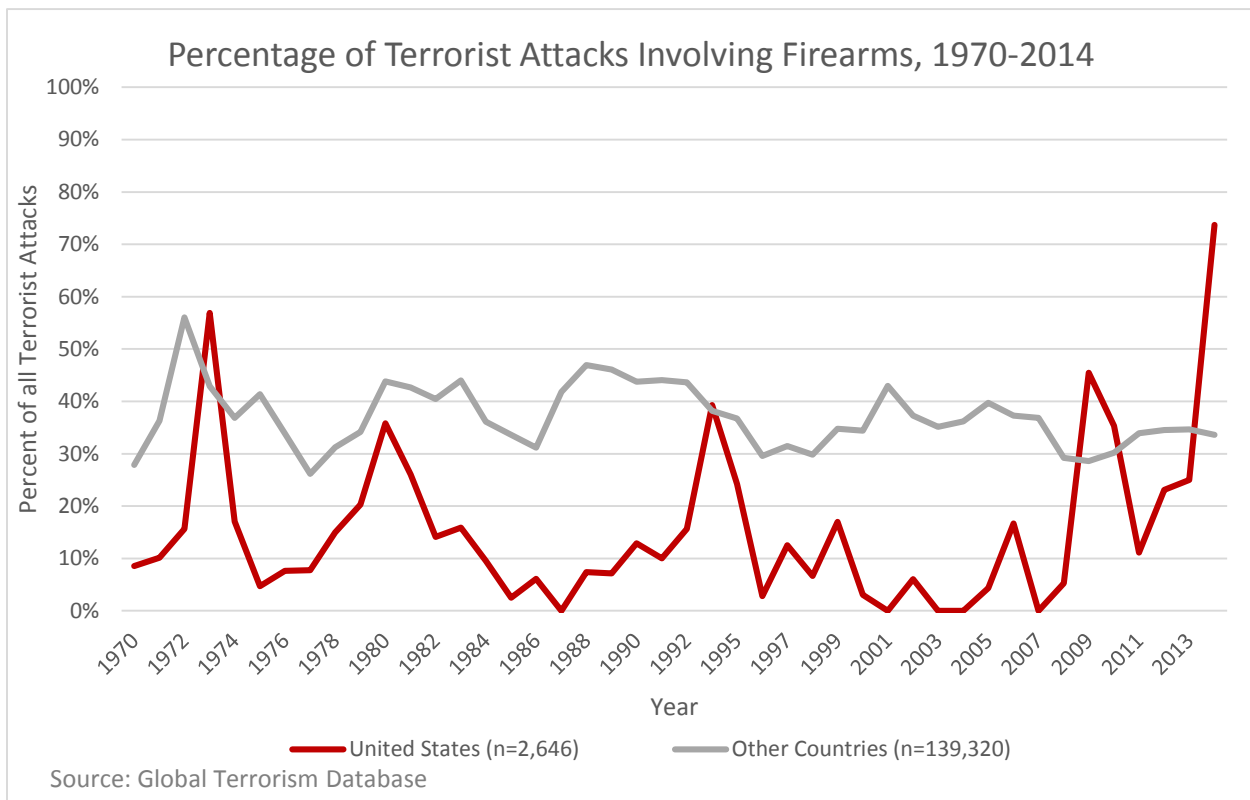
In contrast, the use of incendiary weapons, such as arson or Molotov cocktails was much more common in the United States. These were the primary weapons in 30 percent of terrorist attacks in the United States, compared to 7 percent of terrorist attacks in other countries.

## TERRORIST ATTACKS INVOLVING FIREARMS

The use of firearms in terrorist attacks outside the United States between 1970 and 2014 ranged from a maximum of 56 percent of all attacks in 1972 to a minimum of 26 percent of all attacks in 1977. In general, this trend does not appear to consistently increase or decrease over time.

In the United States, the change over time in percentage of terrorist attacks involving firearms was somewhat more volatile. This is partly due to the relatively low number of attacks in the 21st century.

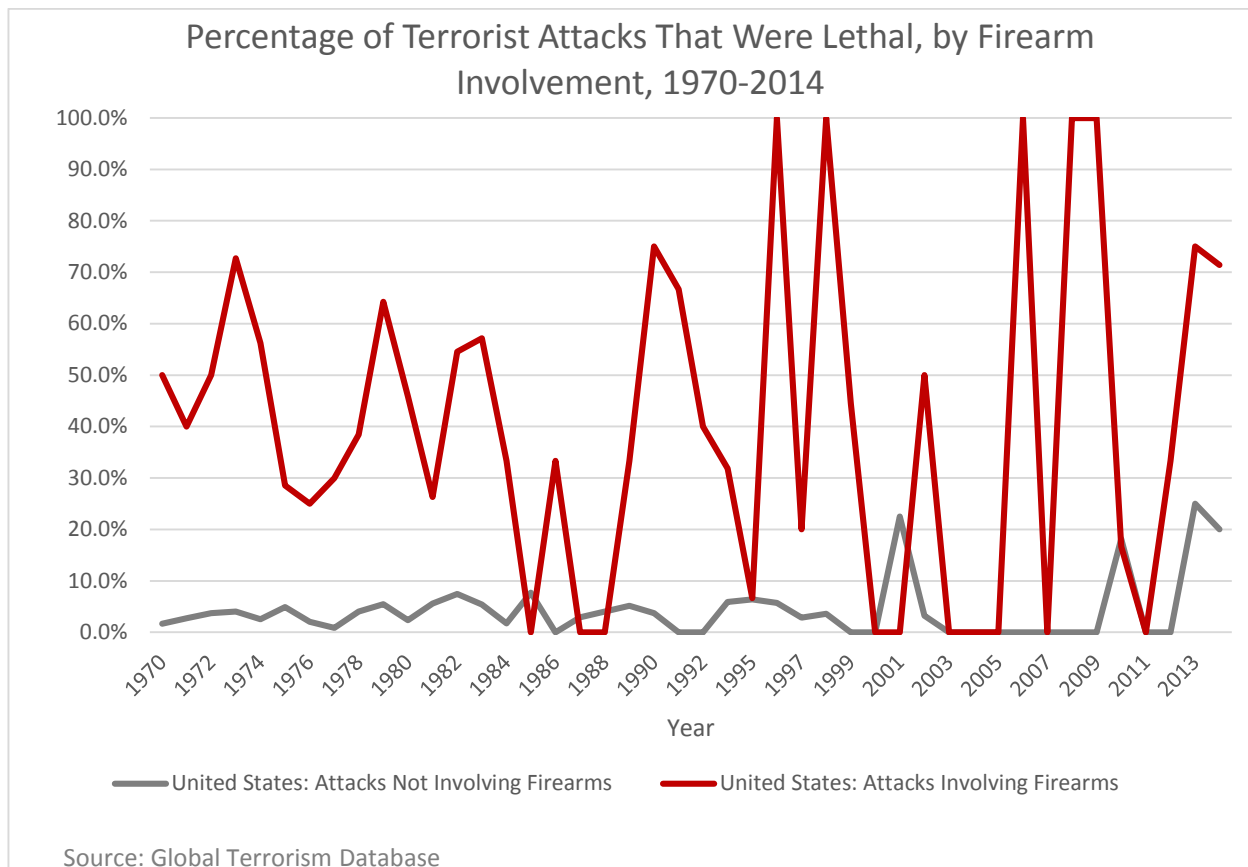
At several times during the 1970 to 2014 time period, no terrorist attacks in the United States involved firearms. The rate peaked in 2014 when 14 of the 19 terrorist attacks in the United States (74%) involved firearms.



## LETHALITY OF TERRORIST ATTACKS INVOLVING FIREARMS

Despite the potential for attacks involving explosives to cause exceptionally high numbers of casualties, in general, attacks involving firearms are more likely to be lethal. For example, while attacks involving arson or explosives may be intended to cause only property damage, or both property damage and human casualties, firearms are more often used in attacks aimed at causing human casualties.

- In the United States between 1970 and 2014, the average percentage of terrorist attacks that were lethal was 4 percent if the attack did not involve firearms and 40 percent if the attack did involve firearms.
- In other countries, the difference was somewhat less pronounced; on average 29 percent of attacks that did not involve firearms were lethal, while 70 percent of attacks that did involve firearms were lethal.



## US LOCATIONS OF TERRORIST ATTACKS INVOLVING FIREARMS

MOST COMMON LOCATIONS OF TERRORIST ATTACKS INVOLVING FIREARMS	NUMBER OF ATTACKS, 1970-2014
CALIFORNIA	65
NEW YORK	60
PUERTO RICO (COMMONWEALTH)	30
ILLINOIS	23
TEXAS	14
VIRGINIA	13
FLORIDA	12
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	12
NEW JERSEY	12
OHIO	10

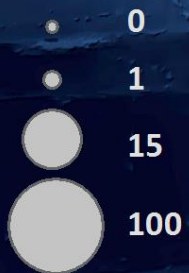
SOURCE: GLOBAL TERRORISM DATABASE

Between 1970 and 2014, terrorist attacks involving firearms took place in 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. These attacks most commonly took place in California (65 attacks) and New York (60 attacks).

Many of the locations in the United States where terrorist attacks involving firearms were most common were also locations where terrorist attacks not involving firearms were most common. This suggests that these locations are not disproportionately impacted by the use of firearms in terrorist attacks. Exceptions to this include Texas (ranked 5th among states where firearms were used in terrorist attacks, but 12th in terms of terrorist attacks that did not involve the use of firearms), Virginia (ranked 6th for attacks involving firearms, but 20th otherwise), and New Jersey (ranked 9th for attacks involving firearms, but 16th otherwise).

# Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 1970-2014

Number of  
People Killed



**Red** = Attacks involving firearms  
**Grey** = Attacks involving all other weapons

**START** >>>

**GTD**  
GLOBAL TERRORISM DATABASE

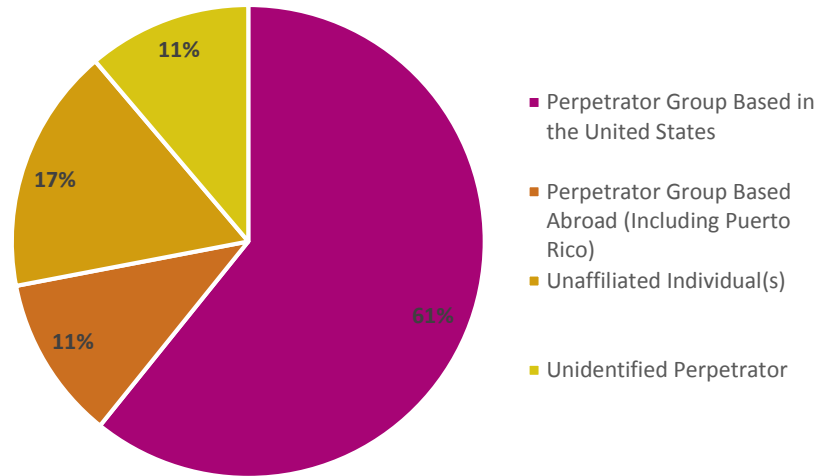
## PERPETRATORS OF TERRORIST ATTACKS INVOLVING FIREARMS

### 1970-2014

The perpetrators of terrorist attacks involving firearms in the United States between 1970 and 2014 were most commonly groups or organizations based in the United States (61%).

Perpetrator groups or organizations based abroad (including most commonly, in Puerto Rico) were responsible for 11 percent of all terrorist attacks involving firearms in the United States during this time period. Unaffiliated individuals carried out 17 percent of the attacks involving firearms, and 11 percent were carried out by perpetrator groups or individuals that were unidentified.

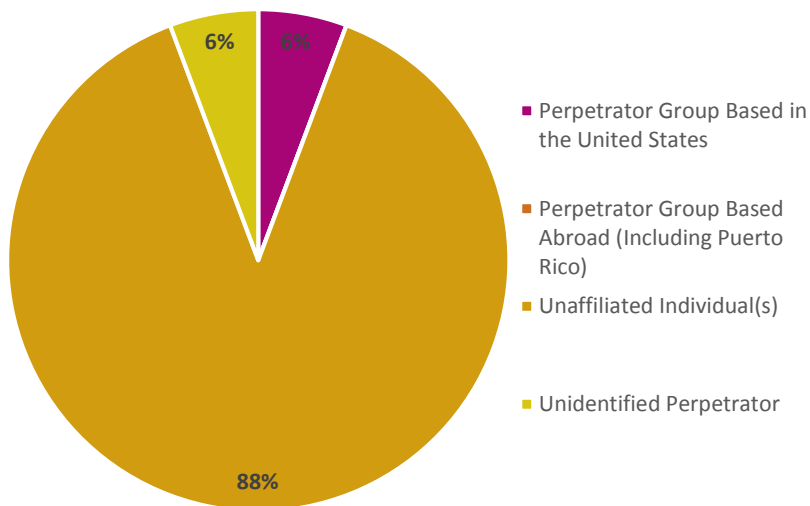
Perpetrators of Terrorist Attacks Involving Firearms in the United States, 1970-2014 (n=357)



Source: Global Terrorism Database

### 2000-2014

Perpetrators of Terrorist Attacks Involving Firearms in the United States, 2000-2014 (n=35)



Source: Global Terrorism Database

In more recent years patterns of perpetrators have shifted dramatically, such that between 2000 and 2014 none of the 35 terrorist attacks in the United States involving firearms were carried out by perpetrator groups based outside the United States.

In fact, only two attacks (6%) were carried out by perpetrators who identified with a group or organization. Both of these took place in 2014 and were attributed to individuals who self-identified with the Sovereign Citizen movement.

The vast majority (88%) of terrorist attacks involving firearms in the United States between 2000 and 2014 were carried out by unaffiliated individuals.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The data presented here are drawn from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The GTD contains information on more than 140,000 terrorist incidents that have occurred around the world since 1970. For more information about the GTD, visit [www.start.umd.edu/gtd](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd).

The GTD is a project of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). START aims to provide timely guidance on how to reduce the incidence of terrorism and disrupt terrorism networks, as well as enhance the resilience of society in the face of terrorist threats at home and abroad. Additional information about START is available at [www.start.umd.edu](http://www.start.umd.edu).



This report was authored by Erin Miller and the map produced by William Kammerer. Please contact Erin Miller with questions at [eemiller@umd.edu](mailto:eemiller@umd.edu).



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