

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIOLENT LONE-OFFENDERS: A COMPARISON OF ASSASSINS AND SCHOOL ATTACKERS

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PURPOSE

IDENTIFY characteristics and
motives associated with lone
-actor violence

DEVELOP hypotheses about
lone-actor terrorists that
may help distinguish them
from group-based perpetra-
tors

SUPPORT additional research
to help guide resources for
minimizing the threat of fu-
ture violence

“The risk that we’re especially
concerned over right now is the
lone wolf terrorist, somebody
with a single weapon being able
to carry out wide-scale massa-
cres...”

“...they can do a lot of damage,
and it’s a lot harder to trace
those lone wolf operators.”

- U.S. President
Barack Obama,
2011



BACKGROUND

In the post 9/11 world, lone-offender attacks have become more salient and have attracted increasing attention from policymakers and security officials. While there is no profile for group-based terrorists, this project seeks to determine whether there may be a profile for lone-actor offenders. In particular, this research highlight aims to improve understanding of lone-actor terrorists by looking at two similar types of violent offenders: assassins and school-attackers. These actors resemble lone-offender terrorists in that they plan and perpetrate violence, the great majority act alone, and most act out of some perceived grievance rather than for material self-interest.

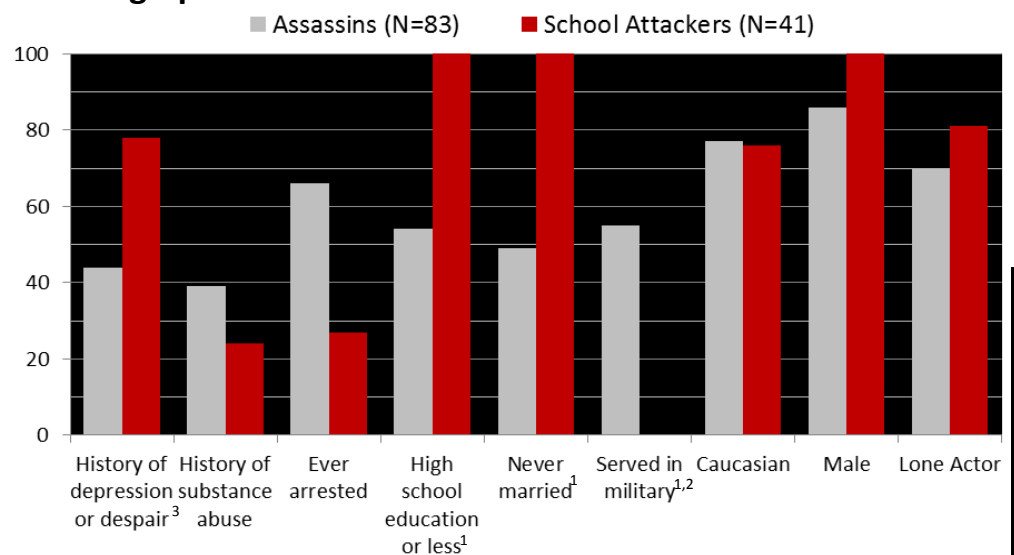
Data for this study are drawn from two U.S. Government-sponsored reports: *Assassination in the United States* (1999) and *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative* (2002).

MAJOR FINDINGS

Personal and background characteristics of assassins and school attackers:

- Both assassins and school attackers were predominantly white males, and both groups of offenders were predominantly lone-actors (81% and 70%).
- Both showed high rates of mental health problems. Nearly half of assassins (44%) and more than half of school attackers (78%) had histories of depression, despair, or suicidal ideation.
- Otherwise, demographics of the two groups varied significantly. Assassins differed from school attackers in education, marriage, service in the military and history of substance abuse and arrest. Assassins (16-73 yrs.) also tended to be older than school attackers (11-21 yrs.).

Demographic Characteristics of Assassins and School Attackers



1 Percentage of school attackers assumed, not explicit in *School Report*

2 Corrected percentage of assassins, $41/83 = 49\%$ where *Assassins Report* gives 51%.

3 Percentage of school attackers reported having suicidal thoughts or suicidal attempts

Lone-actor terrorists plan and carry out attacks without assistance or organizational support.



(1978-1995) "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski carried out a bombing campaign against those he saw as forwarding the technological progress he feared.



(2009) U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan opened fire on his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, killing 12 and wounding 31 individuals.



(2011) Anders Breivik bombed a government building in Oslo, Norway before carrying out an armed attack against a youth camp, killing 77 people.

INDIVIDUAL MECHANISMS OF RADICALIZATION IDENTIFIED IN TERRORIST CASE HISTORIES

GRIEVANCE: Personal grievance is the perception of unjust jury to self or loved ones. Political grievance is the perception of unjust jury to a larger group or cause.

STATUS AND RISK SEEKING: Status seeking can be seen in efforts to gain attention and fame. Risk seeking can be seen in fascination with guns and violence.

UNFREEZING: A change in circumstances, especially a sudden change, that leaves an individual in a personal crisis of disconnection and stress.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Despite broad differences in demographic background, assassins and school attackers showed four common characteristics: depression, grievance, unfreezing, and a history of weapons use. As demonstrated in the table below:

- The prevalence of **grievance** was high for both assassins and school attackers. Grievance may be common in lone-actor violence.
- Status and risk seeking** was reported for only a minority of assassins and school attackers. More common for both perpetrator groups is a **history of interest in violence** and **experience with weapons** excluding military service.
- The prevalence of **unfreezing** was high for both groups of offenders.

Mechanisms of Radicalization Identified for Assassins, School Attackers

	Assassins (N=83)	School Attackers (N=41)
Grievance	67%*	81%
Status and risk seeking	38%	24%
Unfreezing	"almost half" **	98%
History of weapons use (excluding military service)	71%	63%
History of interest in violence	59%	44%

*N=73 in Assassins Report were coded in relation to grievance **best summary figure available

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Depression, grievance, unfreezing and weapons experience deserve attention in future research because these characteristics are common for two predominantly lone-actor violence perpetrators—assassins and school attackers—and may be common also for lone-actor terrorists. One possibility is that it is an accident of circumstances whether individuals with these characteristics claim a political goal and are identified as terrorists. A second possibility is that future research will find characteristics that differentiate terrorists from assassins and school shooters. Either way, results may serve as a useful guide for channeling resources to minimize the threat of future violence from lone-actor perpetrators.
- Results also suggest that the mechanisms of radicalization identified in case histories of terrorists may be important in moving individuals to other kinds of violent crime. Thus, these mechanisms may be studied in the broader context of criminology.

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<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/240>.