Attacks on Educational Institutions

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Abbreviations:
GTD: Global Terrorism Database
US: United States

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Abstract

Background: Educational institutions around the world have long been targets of terrorist attacks. Schools, colleges, and universities often lack security measures against intentional threats and may be viewed as relatively easy, soft targets with high potential for mass casualties. The long-term psychosocial impact on children, youth, and survivors of terrorist attacks are significant and recovery remains a challenge. Deliberate attacks on students and children, in particular, can also often gain mass-media attention, provoke significant community unrest, and place a spotlight on the local government's inability to protect the vulnerable. This study is an epidemiological examination of all terrorism-related events targeting educational institutions from 1970-2019.

Method: Data collection was performed using a retrospective search through the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The database was searched using the internal search functions for all events that occurred from January 1, 1970 - December 31, 2019. "Educational institutions" as a primary target type was selected for the purpose of this study and events were further sub-classified by country and attack type. All classifications were pre-determined by the GTD.

Results: The GTD listed 4,520 attacks against educational institutions, recording 3,732 deaths and 9,920 wounded. This accounted for 2.7% of all terrorist attacks (total 168,003 attacks against all target types). There has been a downtrend in attacks since the 2014 peak when 344 attacks were recorded that year. Pakistan recorded the most attacks with 969 events, followed by Afghanistan (369), India (311), and Iraq (279). The most common attack types included bombing/explosions (2290), facility/infrastructure attacks (636), armed assaults (628), hostage takings (kidnappings [415]), assassinations (357), unarmed assaults (72), unknown (67), hostage takings (barricade incidents [46]), and hijackings (9).

Eight hundred seventy-three of the 4,520 attacks were recorded against teachers, professors, and instructors and 486 attacks were recorded against "other personnel" such as security and non-teaching staff.

Conclusion: Terrorist attacks on educational institutions are rare but significant target types. In total, 41.2% of attacks on educational institutions occurred in South Asia, followed by 18.9% in the Middle East and North Africa. Western Europe and North America accounted for 3.9% and 3.6%, respectively. Educational institutions around the world should evaluate their risks and put in place appropriate hardening measures as well as preparedness and recovery plans to intentional threats.

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Introduction

Educational institutions around the world have long been targets of terrorist attacks. Schools, colleges, and universities often lack security measures against intentional threats and may be viewed as relatively easy, soft targets with high potential for mass casualties. The long-term psychosocial impact on children, youth, and survivors of terrorist attacks are significant and recovery remains a challenge.[1,2] Deliberate attacks on students and children, in particular, can also often gain mass-media attention, provoke significant community unrest, and place a spotlight on the local government's inability to protect the vulnerable. This study is an epidemiological examination of all terrorism-related events targeting educational institutions from 1970-2019.

Methods

Data collection was performed using a retrospective database search through the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).[3] This database is open-access with publicly available data

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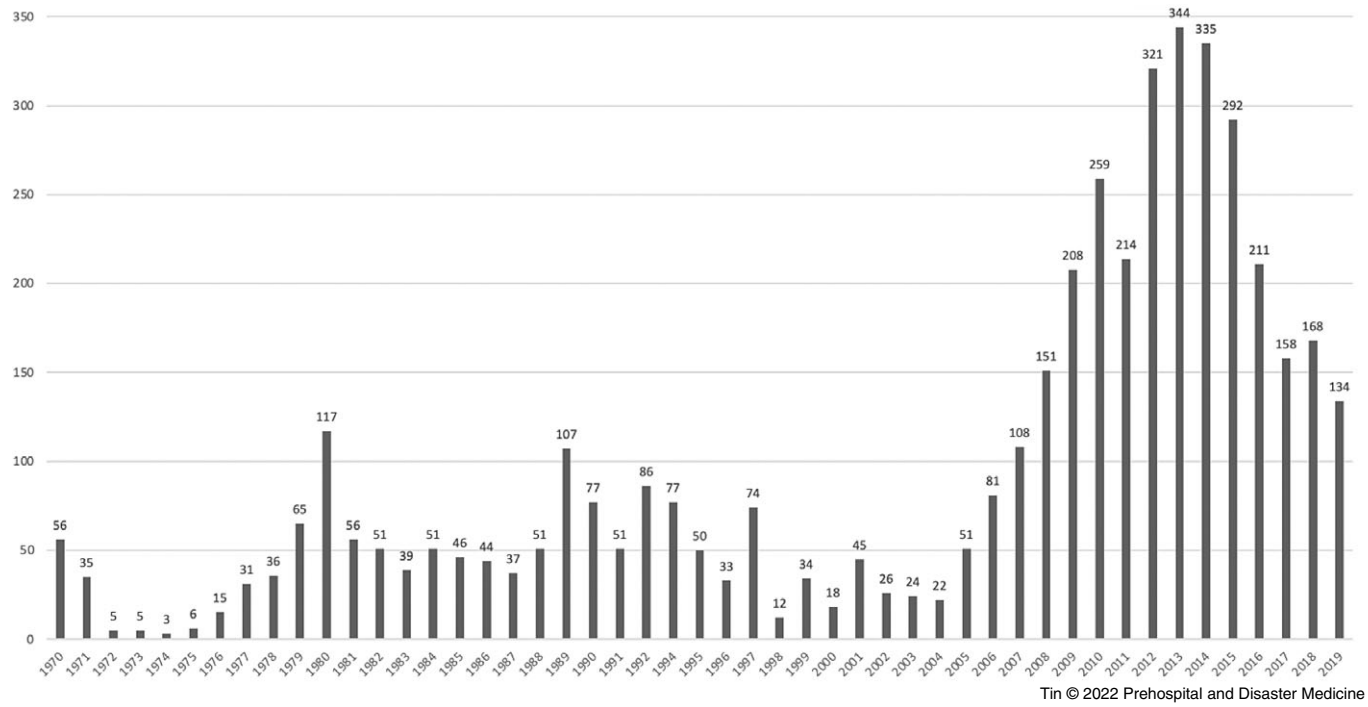


Figure 1. Terrorist Attacks Against Education Institutions, by Year.

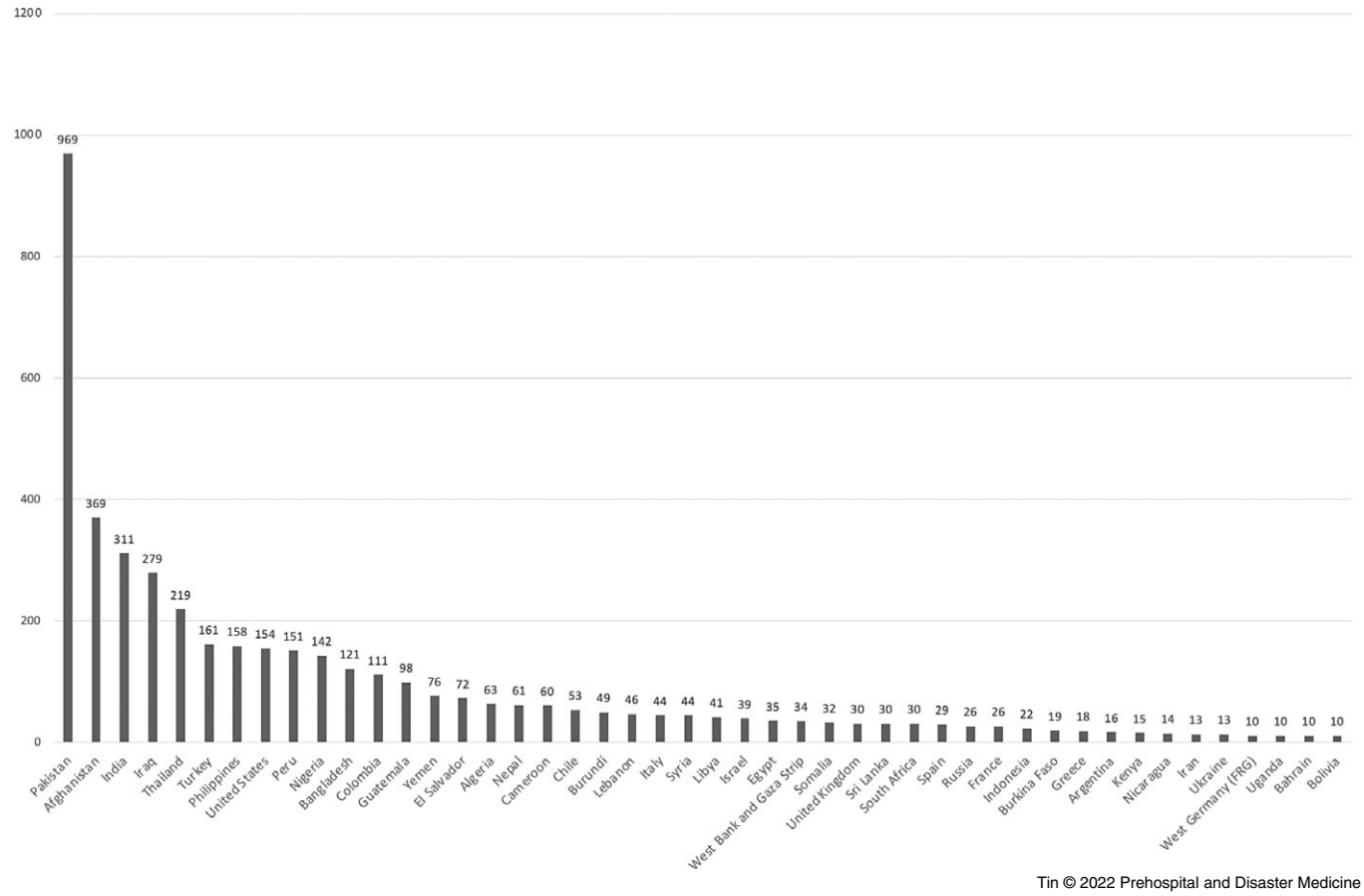


Figure 2. Number of Attacks on Educational Institutions per Country.
Note: Only countries with 10 or more attacks reported.

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Pakistan	969	Israel	39
Afghanistan	369	Egypt	35
India	311	West Bank and Gaza Strip	34
Iraq	279	Somalia	32
Thailand	219	United Kingdom/ Sri Lanka/ South Africa	30
Turkey	161	Spain	29
Philippines	158	Russia/ France	26
United States	154	Indonesia	22
Peru	151	Burkina Faso	19
Nigeria	142	Greece	18
Bangladesh	121	Argentina	16
Columbia	111	Kenya	15
Guatemala	98	Nicaragua	14
Yemen	76	Iran/ Ukraine	13
El Salvador	72	West Germany (FRG)/ Uganda/ Bahrain/ Bolivia	10
Algeria	63	Japan/ Mali/ Honduras	8
Nepal	61	Ecuador	7
Cameroon	60	Sudan/ Mexico	6
Chile	53	Venezuela/ Papua New Guinea/ Germany/ Uruguay/ Saudi Arabia/ Ethiopia/ China/ Haiti/ Namibia	5
Burundi	49	Mozambique/ Vietnam/ Myanmar	4
Lebanon	46	Belgium/ Senegal/ Morocco/ Sweden/ Ireland/ Jordan/ Kosovo/ Togo/ New Caledonia/ Democratic Republic of the Congo/ Panama/ Dominican Republic/ Georgia	3
Italy/ Syria	44	Tajikistan/ South Sudan/ Albania/ Canada/ Niger/ Portugal/ Tanzania/ Rwanda/ Costa Rica/ Croatia/ Bosnia- Herzegovina	2
Libya	41	Kuwait/ Guinea/ Bulgaria/ East Germany (GDR)/ Cyprus/ Ivory Coast/ Yugoslavia/ Ghana/ Paraguay/ Swaziland/ Soviet Union/ Brazil/ Estonia/ Austria/ United Arab Emirates/ Taiwan/ Angola/ Netherlands/ Djibouti. Hungary/ Macedonia/ Kazakhstan/ Poland/ Mauritania/ Tunisia/ Kyrgyzstan	1

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Table 1. Number of Attacks on Educational Institutions, by Country

collection methodology utilizing artificial intelligence that identifies events from news media around the world daily, as confirmed by human evaluation of the events by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (College Park, Maryland USA).[4] The GTD defines terrorist attacks as: "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." The GTD database does not include acts of state terrorism. The GTD contains no personal identifiers for victims and links specific events to open-source news articles.

The GTD database was downloaded and searched using the internal database search functions for all events that occurred from January 1, 1970 - December 31, 2019. Years 2020 and 2021 were not yet available at the time of the study. "Educational institutions" as a primary target type was selected for the purpose of this study and events were further sub-classified by country and attack type. All classifications were pre-determined by the GTD. The GTD codes "Educational Institution" as "attacks against schools, teachers, or guards protecting school sites. This includes attacks against university professors, teaching staff, and school buses. It also includes attacks against religious schools but excludes attacks against military schools."

Results were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Corp.; Redmond, Washington USA) for analysis. Attacks met inclusion criteria if they fulfilled the three terrorism-related criteria below, as set by the GTD. Ambiguous events were excluded when there was uncertainty as to whether the incident met any of the criteria for GTD inclusion as a terrorist incident. These criteria were determined within the database and not by the authors:

> Criterion I: The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal.
>
> Criterion II: There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.
>
> Criterion III: The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities (ie, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law, particularly the admonition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants).

Results

The GTD listed 4,520 attacks against educational institutions, recording 3,732 deaths and 9,920 wounded as a result. This accounted for 2.7% of all terrorist attacks (total 168,003 attacks against all target types).

There has been a downtrend in attacks since the 2014 peak when 344 attacks were recorded that year (Figure 1). Pakistan recorded the most attacks with 969 events, followed by Afghanistan (369), India (311), and Iraq (279; Table 1 and Figure 2).

The most common attack types included bombing/explosions (2290), facility/infrastructure attacks (636), armed assaults (628), hostage takings (kidnappings [415]), assassinations (357), unarmed

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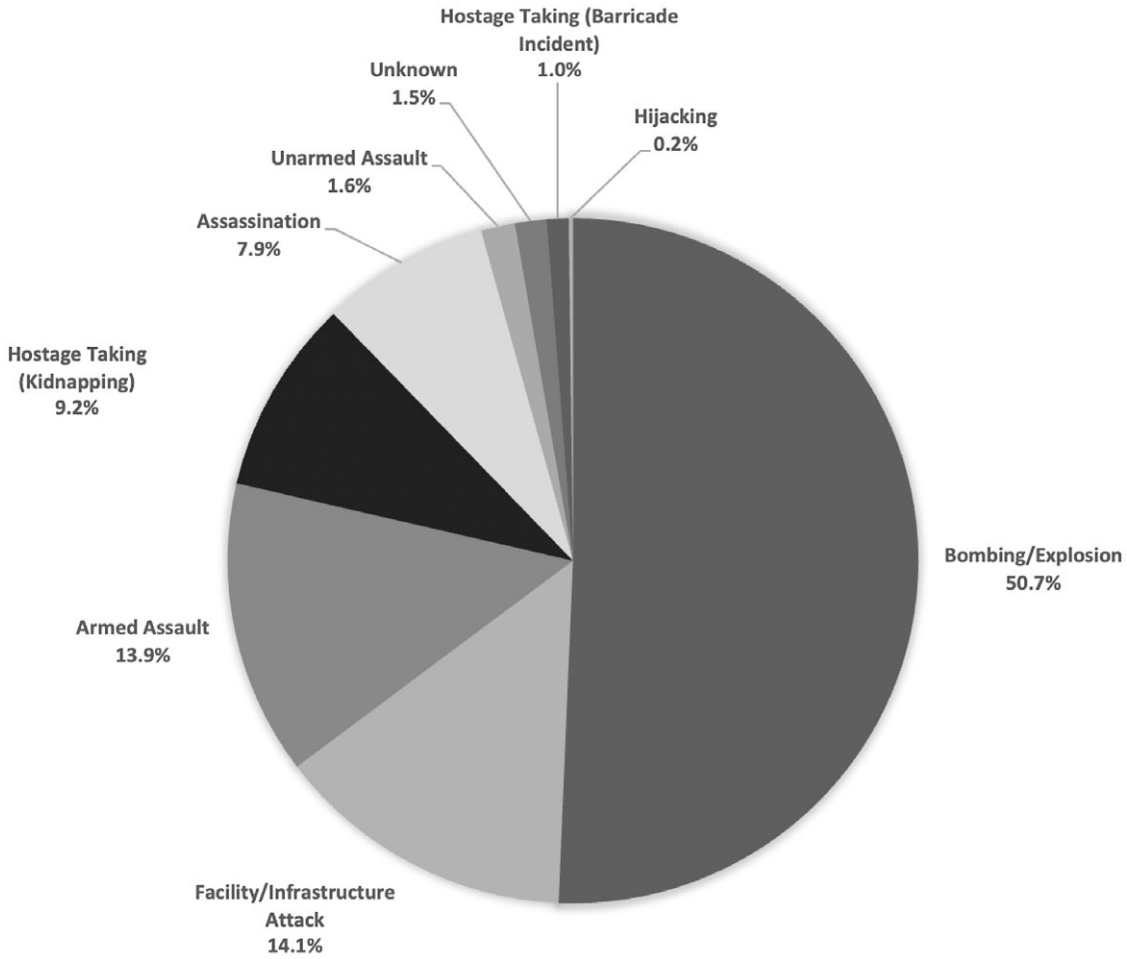


Figure 3. Attack Types on Educational Institutions.

assaults (72), unknown (67), hostage takings (barricade incidents [46]), and hijackings (9; Figure 3).

Eight hundred seventy-three of the 4,520 attacks were recorded against teachers, professors, and instructors and 486 attacks were recorded against "other personnel" which included security and other non-teaching staff.

Discussion

Terrorist attacks on educational institutions have been a consistent long-standing tactic used around the world. Religious extremists have previously dubbed educational institutions as "foundations that produce apostates" and "nurseries of those who challenge God's sovereignty" and vowed to carry out attacks against schools.[5] However, attacks on children, in particular, can be detrimental to a terrorist organization's goals, as they may face a particularly heavy-handed government response as well as face backlash amongst their own supporters if the violence against innocent victims is perceived to be excessive or unjustified.

While terrorist attacks against educational institutions on Western soil have been relatively rare, it would not be unreasonable to assume that terrorist tactics can be transplanted across regions and educational institutions around the world should evaluate their risks as well as their preparedness plans against such threats.[6]

The United States (US), with the unenviable record of being a global leader in school mass-shootings, is potentially also seeing a shift in attitude towards violence against schools.[7] Such events within the US have historically fallen outside the definition of terrorism (which varies between countries, as well as at the federal and state level in the US), but there appears to be willingness by lawmakers to introduce new legislation to treat broader threats against schools as terrorist threats.[8] On December 1, 2021, the perpetrator of the Oxford high school shooting (Oxford Township, Michigan USA), which killed four and injured seven, was charged with "terrorism causing death" under Michigan's 2002 anti-terrorism statute, the first time in US history where a terrorism charge was filed in relation to a gunfire incident on school grounds.[9,10]

Terrorism threats are potentially increasing in complexity and soft targets such as educational institutions need to consider hardening measures and enhancing preparedness against these rare but significant events.[11,12] The psychosocial sequelae such traumatic events have on children and young adults can be significant, needing more robust institutional recovery support.[13,14] There is also general consensus amongst the medical community that more training and education is needed to better improve pediatric mass-casualty response, as well as better education and training in Counter-Terrorism Medicine.[15–18]

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Limitations

The GTD is a comprehensive record of documented global terrorist events. It is maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, and is the basis for other terrorism-related measures, such as the Global Terrorism Index (GTI). Reliance wholly on the GTD is partially mitigated by confirmation with other lay sources and searches for other online searches, but if there are incidents not reported in the GTD, this could limit the veracity of the findings. Using pre-existing databases such as the GTD as a data source also inherently introduces potential challenges such as miscoding errors or data entry errors. Furthermore, the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of the term terrorism can create inconsistencies between databases in the labelling of such events. Clear and detailed documentation of terrorist events is further hindered by restrictions on reporting, the lack of independent corroboration, and the lack of transparency within certain government sources. Infrastructure needed to report, detect, and investigate terrorism events is likely lacking in many parts of the world leading to potential under-reporting of events.

Conclusion

Attacks on educational institutions accounted for 2.7% of all terrorist attacks and are rare but significant target types. In total, 41.2% of attacks on educational institutions occurred in South Asia, followed by 18.9% in the Middle East and North Africa. Western Europe and North America accounted for 3.9% and 3.6%, respectively. Educational institutions around the world need to evaluate their risks and put in place appropriate hardening measures as well as preparedness and recovery plans to intentional threats.

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