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SPECIAL FEATURE

# Violent attacks on Middle Easterners in the United States during the month following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks

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**Objectives:** To document and describe hate related violent attacks on Middle Easterners or those perceived to be Middle Easterners during the month following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC.
**Methods:** The LexisNexis database of newspaper reports were used to identify incidents of hate related violent acts against Middle Easterners or those perceived to be Middle Easterners in the US between September 1 and October 11, 2001. A total of 100 incidents of hate related violence were identified in the 2659 news articles that were reviewed.
**Results:** Of the 100 incidents of violent victimization that took place during the period September 1 to October 11, only one incident occurred before September 11. The 99 incidents that occurred after September 11 involved at least 128 victims and 171 perpetrators. Most violent victimizations occurred within 10 days of the attacks, involved male perpetrators and male victims, and occurred in convenience stores, on the streets, at gas stations, at schools/colleges, and at places of worship.
**Discussion:** Most violent victimizations occurred in the 10 days immediately following the terrorist attacks indicating that interventions that promote tolerance and understanding of diversity need to be implemented quickly in order to be effective. In addition, patrolling by police and Neighborhood Watch programs around convenience stores and gas stations may also be effective strategies for reducing hate related violent crimes.

Following the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, several sources including police and advocacy groups reported what seemed to be an increase in violent hate crimes against Middle Easterners or those perceived to be Middle Easterners.[1–3] A recent FBI report confirmed that there was indeed a dramatic increase in the number of hate crimes motivated by bias toward the Islamic religion in the year 2001 compared with the year 2000.[4] However, little is still known about the incidence, characteristics, or circumstances of the violent hate crimes against Middle Easterners following the terrorist attacks. The objective of this study was to use newspaper reports to document and describe hate related violent victimizations of Middle Easterners or those perceived to be Middle Easterners during the month following the September 11 attacks.

## METHODS

The Nexis database, which is the companion service to Lexis in the LexisNexis information service, was used to identify and collect information reported in the media about violent victimizations experienced by Middle Easterners or those perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent. The Nexis database provides access to the full text of over 30 000 domestic and international news sources.[5] These news files are updated daily and organized into libraries allowing users to focus searches topically and geographically to identify relevant articles. For this study, articles were selected using key words describing hate crimes, harassment, and different types of violent acts and key words identifying victims who were either Muslims or Middle Easterners. Key words also included religious terms (Muslim, Islam, Sikh) and the names of countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The LexisNexis database search yielded 2659 news articles that were each reviewed to identify incidents that met the case definition.

To meet the case definition, an incident had to have the following characteristics: (1) the incident took place in the US between September 1 and October 11 (the period between September 1 and 11 was included to establish a baseline); (2) the incident was described as a homicide, a physical assault on a person, a threat with a weapon, or an attack on people in buildings (for example, drive-by shootings, explosions, arson); (3) the victim was a Muslim or from a Middle Eastern country, or was perceived to be a Muslim or from a Middle Eastern country; and (4) there was evidence that the incident was motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender's bias against Muslims or Middle Easterners. Evidence of such a motive was defined according to the Hate Crime Data Collection Guidelines of the US Department of Justice.[6] Verbal assaults without physical contact were excluded. Physical attacks lacking evidence that they were bias-motivated were also excluded.

## RESULTS

Our review found 100 incidents of violent victimization during the period September 1 to October 11 (fig 1) that met the case definition. Only one of these incidents occurred before September 11 and will not be discussed further. More than three quarters (77%) of the 99 incidents that occurred after September 11 were reported in the 10 days immediately after the terrorist attacks (9/11–9/20). The 99 incidents involved at least 128 victims and 171 perpetrators and included 15 attacks on people in buildings. Incidents were reported in 26 states with California (n=23) and New York (n=15) reporting the most incidents. The violent incidents included murder (7%), attempted murder (7%), aggravated assault (36%), simple

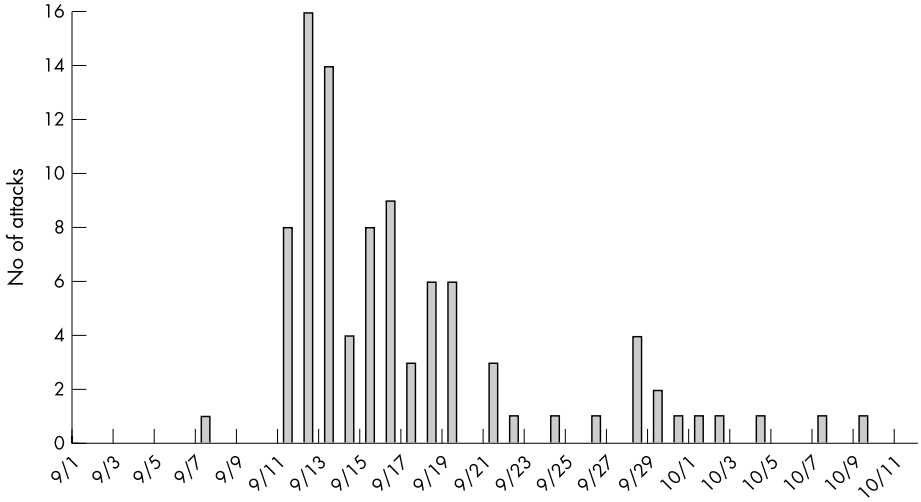


**Figure 1** Hate related violent attacks on Middle Easterners, United States, September 1 to October 11, 2001. (Seven attacks are not included in the figure due to missing information about their exact date.)

assault (28%), intimidation (5%), arson (1%), and destruction of property (15%). The locations of these violent incidents were convenience stores (13%), on the street (13%), gas stations (12%), school/college (11%), places of worship (9%), other locations (24%), and unspecified locations (18%). Among all incidents, 12% involved multiple victims, 40% involved multiple perpetrators, and 68% involved the use of a weapon.

Of the 105 victims with known sex, 84% were males. The mean age of the 39 victims who had their age reported was 33 years (ranging from 3 to 71 years). Information about injuries was reported for 96 of the victims, and 39% of these victims were injured. Of the 81 victims with known national origin, 42% were Middle Easterners, 44% were South Asians, and 14% were of other national origins (Latin American, Native American, Moroccan, Somalian, Sudanese, Guyanan). Of the 52 victims with known religious affiliations, 75% were Muslims, 19% were Sikhs, and 6% were Christians. At least nine victims (7%) were neither Middle Easterners nor Muslims.

Of the 133 perpetrators with known sex, 98% were males. The mean age of the 33 perpetrators who had their age reported was 32 years (ranging from 13 to 76 years). Of the 15 occupied buildings that were attacked, seven were gas stations and convenience stores, four were places of worship, two were community centers, one was a private residence, and one was a specialty store. Six of the attacks were arson/explosions, five involved gunfire, two involved throwing rocks, and two were unspecified vandalism.

## DISCUSSION

These results suggest a backlash of violence against Middle Easterners in the US immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Baseline rates of hate crimes against Middle Easterners in the US are not known. However, FBI reported 93 anti-Islamic hate crime assaults in 2001 compared with only 12 anti-Islamic hate crime assaults in 2000.[4 7] In fact, the FBI reported that anti-Islamic religion incidents increased by more than 1600% between the years 2000 and 2001 which they attributed to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.[4]

Unlike previous reports of violent hate crimes against Middle Easterners following the 9/11 terrorist attacks[1–3] we used a stringent case definition to include only those violent acts that were motivated by the perpetrators' bias against Middle Easterners or Muslims and that resulted in actual injuries or risk of injuries. We also reviewed violent incidents occurring before September 11 (September 1 to September 10) to document a potential increase in violent acts against Middle Easterners or Muslims that could be attributed to the terrorist attacks. Our findings show that there was a substantial increase in violent attacks on Middle Easterners following the terrorist attacks.

There are some similarities between the characteristics of violent attacks targeting Middle Easterners described in this report and the violent hate crimes reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics for the years 1997 to 1999.[8] For example, both reports found that the majority of victims and perpetrators of violent hate crimes were males. In addition, 12% of the violent attacks against Middle Easterners in this review involved multiple victims, which is comparable to the 17% of violent hate crimes involving multiple victims as reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.[8] However, our findings indicate that violent attacks against Middle Easterners were more likely to involve multiple offenders (40%) than violent hate crimes overall (25%).[8]

The findings in this report are subject to at least three limitations. First, what is published in the media and how it is described is often incomplete and subject to the biases of reporters and editors. The extent of this bias is unknown because news reports have so rarely been used to collect public health data on injuries.[9–11] A previous study found that newspapers under-reported suicides, rapes, and assaults compared with official records but reported more incidents of homicide than were documented by city and county law enforcement.[9] However, it is often difficult to measure the bias of newspaper coverage since there may not exist any other sources to which the data can be compared. Second, the current report represents a serious undercount of violent hate crimes targeting Middle Easterners and those perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent because of our stringent case definition, the limited information on the motivation of the perpetrators, and because many crimes may not have received any press coverage. Finally, due to the nature of the data that we collected we can not infer that the reported acts of violence against Middle Easterners were caused by the terrorist attacks. However, we found that the perpetrators in at least 30 of the incidents specifically mentioned the September 11 terrorist attacks, or accused the victims of being terrorists, while they attacked their victims. These statements clearly link the perpetrators' bias against Middle Easterners to the terrorist attacks on September 11.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION

There are three implications of our findings. First, despite its limitations, the media can be a useful source of information

**Key points**

- There was a significant increase in violent hate crimes against Middle Easterners in the 10 days following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.
- Most violent hate crimes involved male victims and male perpetrators.
- The most common locations of violent hate crimes were gas stations and convenience stores.
- Public health and criminal justice professionals should anticipate violent hate crimes shortly after well publicized attacks on the US that are perpetrated or appear to be perpetrated by members of ethnic and religious minorities.

about violent hate crimes. The primary value of using media reports is that the information can be gathered, summarized, and disseminated relatively quickly and inexpensively compared with other methods of data gathering. Second, public health and criminal justice professionals should anticipate violent hate crimes shortly after well publicized attacks on the US that are perpetrated or appear to be perpetrated by members of ethnic and religious minorities. Moreover, since most violent victimizations occurred in the 10 days immediately following the terrorist attacks, interventions that promote tolerance and understanding of diversity need to be implemented quickly in order to be effective. Public health messages that highlight religious and cultural similarities of people from different ethnic backgrounds may help to decrease tension and hostility. Finally, many violent victimizations occurred in businesses owned or operated by minorities such as convenience stores and gas stations suggesting that increased presence at these locations by police and neighborhood watch programs may be a useful strategy to prevent violent hate crimes.

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