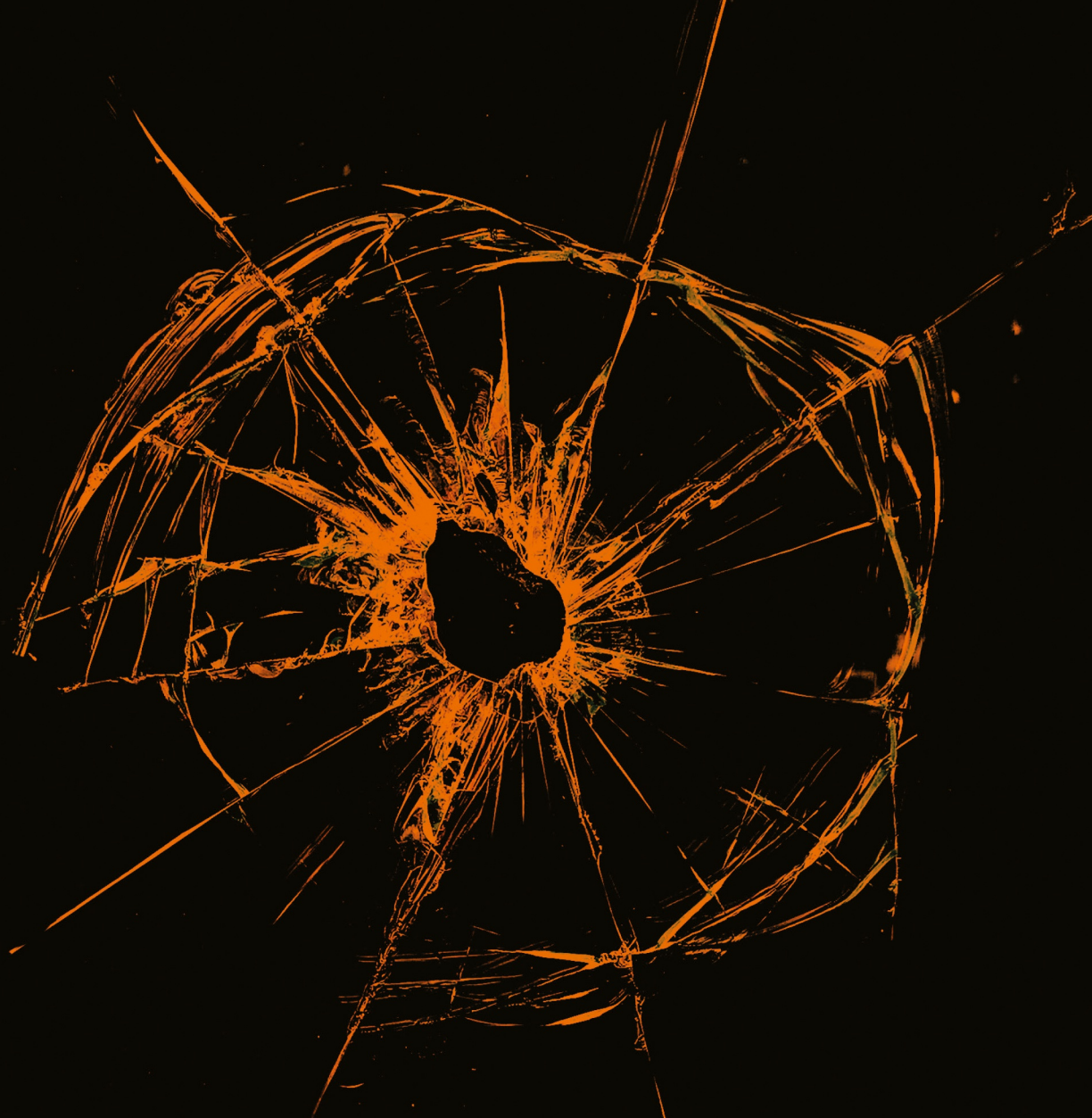




Handbook of Gun Violence

Edited by **Nicholas D. Thomson**



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Terrorism and gun violence

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Introduction

Terrorist weapon selection is a major determinant of the lethality, damage, and broader impacts that stem from terrorist attacks (Palfy, 2003). While the potential lethality of firearms is lower compared to chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons (Asal et al., 2023), firearms have emerged as one of the most prominently used terrorist weapons in many nations (Gruenewald, 2011; Legault & Hendrickson, 2009; Miller, 2015). Due to their ease of use and ability to avoid law enforcement interdiction, previous research has highlighted that firearms may also be favored for terrorism due to their increased likelihood of fulfilling violence goals (Gruenewald et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2017). This growing pool of research has revealed the importance of understanding terrorist weapon selection as it can provide important insights into terrorist decision-making and provide additional opportunities for terrorism prevention (Freilich et al., 2019). Particularly as the availability of firearms can influence their use for terrorism (Carson et al., 2022), there is growing evidence that traditional firearms policies targeting other violence and health outcomes could also influence terrorism as an additional consequence.

In response to initial criticisms that terrorism research was previously atheoretical (Lum et al., 2006; Silke, 2001), the terrorism research literature has now produced many theoretically-driven insights that have helped to drive counterterrorism policy and practice (Wilner, 2014). Among these key findings, a growing array of studies across many international settings suggests that there is a rational component to terrorist decision-making (Carson et al., 2020; Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012). While this is in part due to the relative focus on rational choice theory within studies on terrorism (Fisher & Kearns, 2023), these findings have also importantly revealed that some widely touted counterterrorism practices have inadvertently increased terrorism by increasing the likelihood of violent backlash (Hsu et al., 2020; LaFree et al., 2009; Piazza & Choi, 2018; Siqueira & Sandler, 2007). Beyond providing insights regarding what should and should not be done to prevent and reduce terrorism, these key findings highlight that it is vital to measure the impact of all counterterrorism efforts rather than assuming success from any strategy (Dev & Grabiszewski, 2019). These scientific advances have further illustrated that careful consideration of the theoretical and empirical literature is essential for developing counterterrorism policies to avoid increasing terrorism regardless of their political support or interpretation (Dugan & Fisher, 2023). At present, however, few theories attempt to explain terrorist weapon choices. While numerous theories attempt to explain why some individuals commit terrorism, there remains a vital theoretical and empirical research gap that needs investigation to better understand the link between firearms and terrorism.

Among criminological theories, Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) provides the only specific predictions for terrorist weapon selection (see Clarke & Newman, 2006). Anchored on the premise that the identification and removal of criminal opportunities can reduce crime and terrorism (Clarke & Newman, 2006; Freilich et al., 2019), SCP incorporates elements of other criminological prevention approaches including routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Kleemans et al., 2012), crime prevention through environmental design (Cozens & Love, 2015; Matijosaitiene & Petriashvili, 2017), and approaches that seek to understand the geographic distribution of crime (LaFree et al., 2010; Sherman et al., 1989). Also incorporating frameworks for understanding likely terrorist reactions and adaptations to prevention strategies (Clarke & Newman, 2006), SCP provides a framework that can be used to guide policy and anticipate the consequences of changes to terrorist opportunity. As many of the existing studies on SCP and terrorism have been descriptive and some prominent hypotheses remain untested however (Freilich et al., 2019), this chapter discusses the value of this approach and highlights opportunities to leverage this theory to further understand the intersection of terrorism and gun violence.

Terrorism is interconnected with other crime types, politics, culture, and other policy domains (Haubrich, 2006; Theron, 2021). Prominent terrorist attacks can spur policy debates on gun control policy and other adjacent domains (Kearns et al., 2019); however, recent evidence suggests that political will, the presence of a salient threat, and media support are all

needed to drive policy responses (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). This further complicates legislative challenges, with recent findings also demonstrating that terrorists in democratic countries have recently used firearms more than their counterparts in other nations (Bures & Burilkov, 2023). Considering these observations, this chapter outlines the importance of understanding weapon availability and the necessity of engaging a wider array of theoretical perspectives to investigate how and why terrorists use the weapons they select. A descriptive analysis of the use of firearms for terrorism is presented using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) from 2000 to 2020 to highlight key temporal and geographic patterns, followed by a discussion of firearm legislation efforts connected to terrorism. This chapter then concludes by providing a series of recommendations that would further advance the understanding of the nexus between firearms and terrorism.

Why terrorists use firearms

Understanding why terrorists use the weapons that they do is a primary research question that holds immense value for prevention efforts. As with all terrorist research, since the September 11th attacks in the United States, there has been a growing focus on terrorist weapon acquisition and the subsequent impacts this has on both the incidence and lethality of terrorism. These efforts began with examining claims regarding the credibility of the threat held by terrorist organizations gaining access to weapons of mass destruction (O'Neil, 2003), with subsequent analyses focusing more specifically on chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons (Asal et al., 2012; Campbell & Murdie, 2023; McCann, 2022, 2023). Throughout these attempts, the majority of the research in this domain has remained centered on environmental and group-based factors (Tishler, 2018). Driven in part by the lack of available data suitable for needed analyses (Ackerman & Pinson, 2014), in criminology and other disciplines this has been additionally hampered by the lack of theoretical explanations that engage with *how* people commit acts of terrorism. While some novel attempts have been made to model behavior based on private-sector technology companies (Jackson, 2001) and employing novel empirical approaches (Clark & Guarrieri, 2021), there remains a need for long-established theories to provide frameworks to drive the next generation of research on terrorist weapon use.

Criminology has a rich tradition of studying the details and methods of crime. Disciplinarily centered on studying the making of laws, the breaking of laws, and the reaction to the breaking of laws (Sutherland, 1924), studying the craft of crime and weapon acquisition continues to be an important domain (Shaw, 1930; Steinmetz, 2015). However, Hamm and Spaaij (2016) highlight that case studies, especially qualitative case studies, have been presented as being at odds with quantitative approaches to studying terrorism. Especially for emerging research questions with little previous guiding research, case studies have value for driving theoretical understanding however this is contingent on “the case one is speaking of and how it is chosen” (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 225). Indeed, when quantitative terrorism data are difficult to obtain, these approaches dominated the study of terrorism (Silke, 2001). The difficulty of studying terrorism is compounded by the sparse attention paid to *how* terrorism is committed. There is immense value in studying how theories like general strain theory influence the likelihood of terrorism (see Agnew, 2010), however, due to the heterogeneity in the impact and lethality of terrorist attacks it is vital for future efforts to engage with providing predictions for *how* questions. Consequently, for major criminological theories including controls theories, general strain theory, social learning theory, and social disorganization (Fisher & Kearns, 2023), this chapter emphasizes the need to focus attention predicting terrorist weapon selection to build upon previous attempts seeking to understand terrorist precursor activities (Smith et al., 2016; Smith & Damphousse, 2009).

Situational crime prevention and weapon selection

Of the few studies that have engaged terrorist weapon selection, they have almost all been from the rational choice perspective and have been dominated by SCP. Rooted in environmental criminology, SCP is premised on the approach that altering the situational determinants of crime can be used to reduce the likelihood of crime (Clarke, 2009). From this perspective, crime is the product of the intersection of motivation and situational determinants, and it is presented that “opportunity is an important cause of crime” (Clarke, 2013: 179). Despite arguments that criminal opportunities are ubiquitous (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 2011), SCP instead presents that individuals encountering more recognizable criminal opportunities are more likely to commit crime, and those who regularly are presented with opportunities proactively seek out additional future criminal opportunities as well (Clarke, 2013). Particularly as the motivations and opportunities for terrorism are more sparse compared to other crime types (Morris, 2015), the benefits of this perspective and its 25 techniques for preventing crime have been reflected in the growing terrorism research base grounded in SCP (Freilich et al., 2019). While the majority of these studies have been descriptive, with nearly half being theoretical in nature (29 of 60 studies), SCP has provided the basis for multivariate examinations that have helped to test its crime prevention claims (Freilich et al., 2019;

Hsu et al., 2018). As will be discussed later in greater detail, these studies have produced favorable initial evidence for some (but not all) of the SCP models, and have generated some insights into why some terrorists may favor firearms over explosives (Mandala & Freilich, 2018).

This growing research base is in part due to previous efforts to specifically apply SCP to the context of terrorism. In *Outsmarting the Terrorists*, Clarke and Newman (2006) argue first that there are similarities between nonideological crime and ideologically-motivated terrorism, with both requiring motivation, determination and planning, and the ability to exploit opportunities among other factors. Importantly, Clarke and Newman (2006) also expand SCP to engage with both the backgrounds of individuals and the specific context of terrorist opportunities, with understanding the targets, weapons, tools, and facilitating conditions of terrorism being the focus of both understanding terrorist behavior and preventing terrorist action. To provide actionable policies and to drive falsifiable predictions to test the theories of SCP, Clarke and Newman (2006) additionally provide acronyms of factors that are important for terrorist targets (EVIL DONE), facilitating conditions (ESEER), and for weapon selection (MURDEROUS). While the ESEER set of hypotheses has gone untested (see Freilich et al., 2019), and recent examinations of EVIL DONE have concluded that “it is not the best approach for predicting and mitigating” terrorism (Monaghan et al., 2023: 1), both still hold potential value for future study although they fall beyond the scope of this chapter.

Importantly, SCP provides a specific explanation for why terrorists use firearms, and this theory proposes that terrorist weapon selection is driven by nine distinct factors. Summarized with the acronym “MURDEROUS,” Clarke and Newman (2006) present that terrorist weapon selection is driven by a weapon’s attributes. Specifically, they argue that weapons that are: “M: Multipurpose,” “U: Undetectable,” “R: Removable,” “D: Destructive,” “E: Enjoyable,” “R: Reliable,” “O: Obtainable,” “U: Uncomplicated,” and “S: Safe” are most likely to be selected by those motivated to commit acts of terrorism. A growing body of literature has begun to emerge that supports that these factors may be behind why firearms are prevalent terrorist weapons (Legault & Hendrickson, 2009). Even with the introduction of metal detectors and other devices increasing the detectability of firearms (Dugan et al., 2005), the general ability of those using firearms to avoid law enforcement interdiction compared to other weapons (Gruenewald et al., 2019), their ease of use (Klein et al., 2017; Mandala & Freilich, 2018), and their obtainability (Carson et al., 2022) have all been presented as supporting evidence for SCP and the MURDEROUS acronym. These initial efforts however leave many unexamined hypotheses within this framework, and there remain many opportunities for qualitative and quantitative attempts to verify these considerations in weapon selection and to examine the impact of prevention efforts aiming to leverage these aspects to reduce terrorism.

Terrorist weapon selection does not exist in a vacuum, however, and there are additional factors that will be required to be engaged with to better understand weapon selection. The lethality potential of firearms has been highlighted as a key factor for terrorists (Tessler et al., 2017), yet it remains that firearms have less destructive (D in MURDEROUS) potential than CBRN weapons. In their narrative discussion, Clarke and Newman (2006) discuss how destructibility may be offset by safety (S in MURDEROUS) and other factors. If this is the case, then it does not necessarily follow that increases (or decreases) in any individual MURDEROUS factor would influence terrorist use of guns or the incidence of terrorism in general. While Clarke and Newman (2006): 108 explicitly state that “the most important feature is that the weapon is easily obtainable” (O in MURDEROUS), the prevalence of firearm use for terrorism is then likely due to the relative maximization of the MURDEROUS factors. If this is the case, then policies that focus on a single factor may be less likely to impact terrorism, or may inadvertently increase the lethality of terrorism by decreasing the viability of less destructive options. Further, this chapter argues that the MURDEROUS framework should be understood to be based on an individual’s perceptions rather than objective realities. Following from the deterrence literature’s understanding that rational decision making is rooted in individual perceptions (Nagin, 2013), it is thus necessary to gather data from would-be offenders to properly assess the value of SCP. Particularly as the enjoyability of a weapon (E in MURDEROUS) is part of weapon selection, data measuring subjective and relative opinions, and their weighting would be needed to properly test this theory. Given the accessibility of data issues that routinely prevent potentially valuable terrorism research (Schumann et al., 2019), this chapter highlights that testing these ideas on adjacent populations provides a valuable interim step. The difficulty of advancing this theoretical approach to understanding the use of firearms for terrorism also highlights the value of expanding this literature into other theoretical perspectives that may also prove to be fruitful for policy, prevention, and understanding.

The use of firearms for terrorism

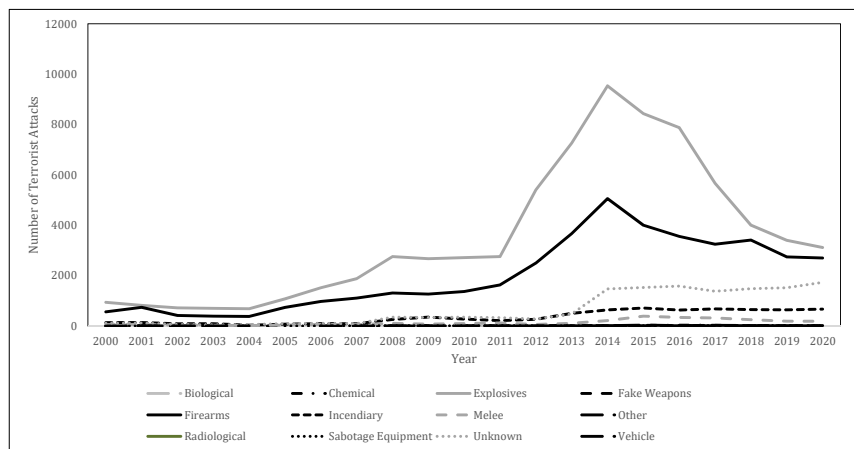
The terrorism research literature has grown rapidly since 2001, driven in part by the production of large-scale datasets (Fisher & Dugan, 2019). Although many methodological issues persist (McCann, 2023; Schuurman, 2020), databases including the GTD (LaFree & Dugan, 2007), the United States Extremist Crime Database (Freilich et al., 2014), the Big Allied and Dangerous databases (Asal et al., 2018), the American Terrorism Study (Smith & Damphousse, 2002),

the Terrorism Recidivism Study (Hodwitz, 2019), and others have collectively revealed much about the incidence and impact of terrorism that was previously often only speculated on (Silke, 2001). Leveraging these advances, the next section of this chapter documents trends in the use and lethality of firearms for terrorism between 2000 and 2021 using data from the Global Terrorism Database (hereafter “GTD”).

Frequency of terrorist attacks 2000–2020

In line with the predictions of SCP, firearms were among the most frequently used weapons for terrorism between 2000 and 2020. Across this 21-year period, firearms were the primary weapon used in 41,757 terrorist attacks globally, with only explosives being used more frequently ($f = 73,930$). Importantly, it should be noted that every year during this period, there were more attacks that used explosives as the primary weapon compared to firearms. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the use of firearms peaked in 2014 ($f = 5056$) before declining from this by 47% by 2020 ($f = 2698$). This follows a similar trend to explosives usage during this period; however, the use of explosives did decline more rapidly between 2014 and 2020. Within the GTD, up to four weapons are recorded for each terrorist attack. Including terrorist attacks where firearms were used but were not the primary weapon, there were 52,862 firearm terrorist attacks globally between 2000 and 2020. When firearms were used in terrorist attacks, they were the primary weapon in 79% of these attacks. This suggests that firearms are predominantly a primary weapon of choice rather than being a weapon used to support other more destructive weapons during this period. Furthermore, this demonstrates that even after including the secondary use of firearms for terrorism ($f = 52,862$), there were still more terrorist attacks globally that employed explosives ($f = 73,930$). This is consistent with Clarke and Newman’s (2006: 113) assertion that the increased destructive potential of explosives coupled with their increased media coverage is more in line with the strategic goals of terrorist organizations. While more tailored analyses are required to test these claims, the relative use of terrorist weapons is in line with SCP’s MURDEROUS framework.

FIG. 1 Yearly frequency of terrorist attacks across primary weapon type used (2000–2020).



SCP is silent when it comes to the global geographic distribution of terrorism. Although this criticism is not unique to this theory, this again presents an opportunity for future research to leverage broader theoretical and prevention efforts. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the global use of firearms for terrorism was driven by nine countries between 2000 and 2020. Afghanistan ($f = 5197$), India ($f = 3647$), Iraq ($f = 4774$), Nigeria ($f = 3066$), Pakistan ($f = 4594$), Philippines ($f = 3460$), Somalia ($f = 1704$), Thailand ($f = 1611$), and Yemen ($f = 1737$) together accounted for 71.3% of global firearm terrorist attacks that used firearms as the primary weapon during these 21 years. Although terrorism is incredibly rare in many nations that poses challenges for assessing global terrorism trends (Fisher & Becker, 2021), the concentration of firearm terrorism within these nine countries suggests that there could be increased counterterrorism benefits for focusing future research and policy efforts in these nations (see Sherman, 2007). This echoes recent findings that outlier nations with regard to both terrorism and gun availability (obtainability) have the ability to drastically influence empirical findings (Carson et al., 2022). Beyond these empirical challenges and policy opportunities for reducing global terrorism, future research should seek to examine whether there is important national-level variation in the perceived enjoyability of firearms and other MURDEROUS principles. Connected to variation in the prioritization of masculinity and other cultural factors (Cukier & Sheptycki, 2012), cross-national analyses could be used to examine whether there are important differences in the relative importance placed upon weapon safety and reliability.

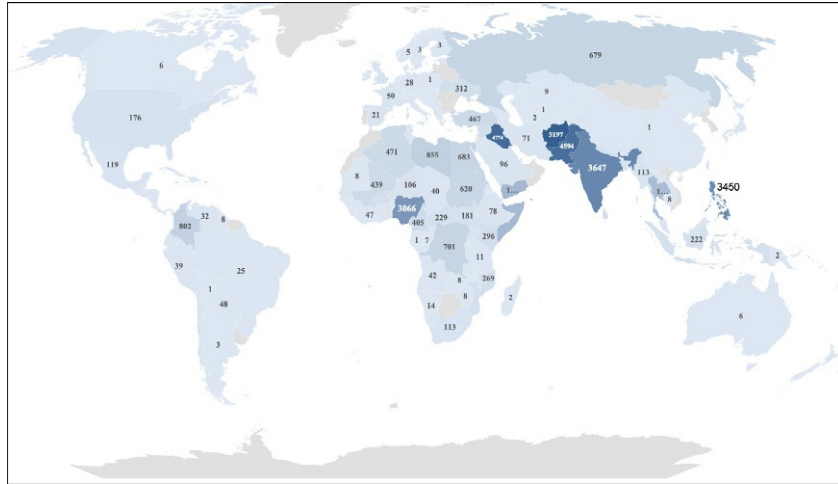


FIG. 2 Geographic distribution of terrorist attacks from firearm terrorist attacks (2000–2020). Map lines delineate study areas and do not necessarily depict accepted national boundaries.

The use of firearms for terrorism is also concentrated within a relatively small number of terrorist groups. While the number of firearm terror attacks is limited by both the longevity and how prolific each terrorist organization is, [Table 1](#) displays that 31 terrorist organizations committed 100 or more firearm attacks between 2000 and 2021. Importantly, it should be noted that some terrorist organizations included in this table did not operate in the nine countries identified previously. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for example primarily committed their attacks in Turkey, and the Liberation

TABLE 1 Terrorist organizations committing 100 or more firearm terrorist attacks 2000–2020.

Terrorist organization	Frequency of attacks 2000–2020
Taliban	3688
Al-Shabaab	1455
New People's Army (NPA)	1428
Boko Haram	1383
Fulani extremists	924
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	913
Communist Party of India—Maoist (CPI-Maoist)	745
Maoists	595
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	496
Houthi extremists (Ansar Allah)	466
Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	454
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	348
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)	267
Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)	262
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	226
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)	185
Sinai Province of the Islamic State	180
Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State	179
National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN)	174

Continued

TABLE 1 Terrorist organizations committing 100 or more firearm terrorist attacks 2000–2020—cont'd

Terrorist organization	Frequency of attacks 2000–2020
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM)	150
Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)	148
Janjaweed	130
Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)	124
Donetsk People's Republic	118
Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)	113
Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)	112
Al-Qaida in Iraq	106
Baloch Liberation Front (BLF)	104
Garo National Liberation Army	103

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) primarily committed their attacks in Sri Lanka. This highlights the potential that members of specific terrorist organizations may be atypical with other terrorists in their nation with regard to the use of firearms and the MURDEROUS criteria. As this may also be a product of links to other terrorist organizations (Asal et al., 2016), the goals of the terrorist organization (Piazza, 2009), and the size of the terrorist organization (Gaibullov & Sandler, 2013), more nuanced multivariable analyses are required to better examine whether this is attributable to the MURDEROUS factors or whether this is evidence of rival theoretical explanations.

Lethality of terror attacks 2000–2020

As noted previously, the frequency of terrorist attacks only provides a partial picture of terrorist activity. While Clarke and Newman (2006: 113) claim under the discussion on the importance of how destructive terrorist weapons are that “bombings achieve a much greater return to terrorists than do shootings,” this does not diminish the lethality of firearms (Cook et al., 2017). After excluding primary weapon types that resulted in 10 or fewer terrorist fatalities, Fig. 3 below demonstrates that in some years between 2000 and 2020 there were more fatalities from firearm terrorist attacks than there were from attacks using explosives. Indeed, firearm fatalities outnumbered explosive fatalities for the last 3 years included in the GTD (2018–2020), with 3289 more people killed globally during this period from firearm terrorist attacks than from attacks that used explosives. Combined with the previous observation that terrorist bombings outnumbered firearm attacks every year between 2000 and 2020, this indicates that in some years terrorist firearm attacks had a higher lethality rate than terrorist

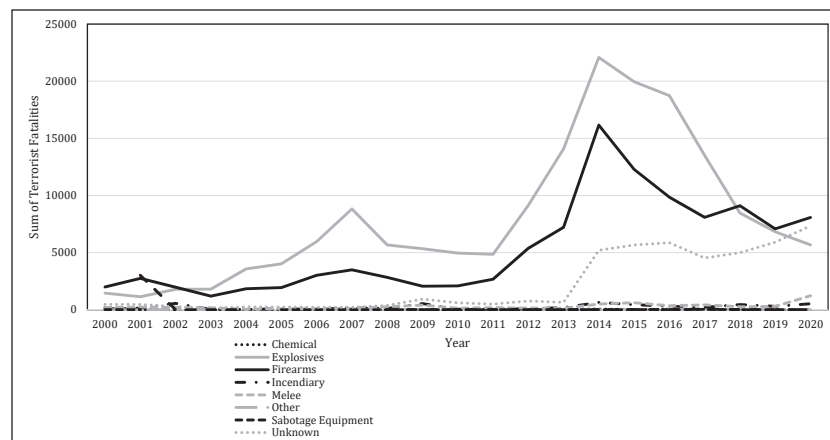


FIG. 3 Yearly sum of terrorist fatalities across primary weapon type used (2000–2020).

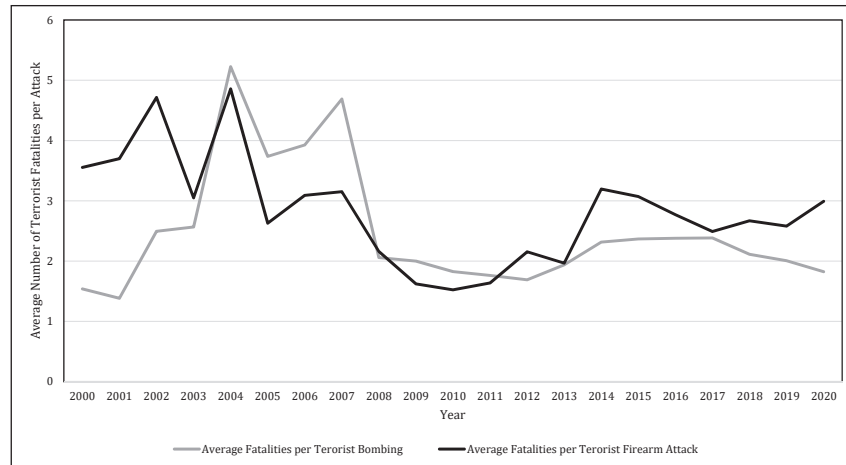


FIG. 4 Average number of terrorist fatalities from terrorist bombings and firearm attacks (2000–2020).

bombings. Indeed, when the average number of fatalities for terrorist bombings is compared to terrorist attacks where the primary weapon was a firearm (Fig. 4) there are few differences between the weapon types. Further, the average number of fatalities per attack was higher for firearms compared to explosives for every year from 2012 to 2020. These observations highlight the importance of focusing on empirical data compared to potential lethality and damage from terrorism. Although it remains that explosives have the potential to kill more than firearms, particularly in crowded spaces and in suicide terrorist attacks (Edwards et al., 2016), these yearly averages indicate that the theoretical hierarchy of weapon destructiveness may not be reflected in actual terrorist attacks. It should be noted that Figs. 3 and 4 do not include destruction of property and other nonlethal injuries, however, this does indicate that destructiveness (D in MURDEROUS) is more complex in reality than allowed for in its initial version (Clarke & Newman, 2006).

Out of the 111,016 terrorist fatalities from attacks that used firearms as the primary weapon, 21,546 occurred in Afghanistan (19.4%). While this number and the number of fatalities in Iraq (14,171) are due in part to the Iraq War and the Global War on Terror (Fisher & Asal, 2021), Fig. 5 displays that fatalities from firearm terrorist attacks are highly concentrated geographically in similar countries to the incidence of firearm terrorism (see Fig. 2). Notably, however, Afghanistan (21,546), Nigeria (15,425 fatalities), Iraq (14,171), Pakistan (7717 fatalities), and India (5330 fatalities) are more extreme outliers when looking at terrorist fatalities and these five countries accounted for 57.8% of the global fatalities from firearm terrorism between 2000 and 2020. Consequently, while this descriptive analysis suggests that there are similar geographic patterns to both the incidence and fatalities from firearm terrorism, future studies investigating the predictive ability of SCP should model each of these two outcome variables separately in analyses examining the impact of SCP interventions and policies.

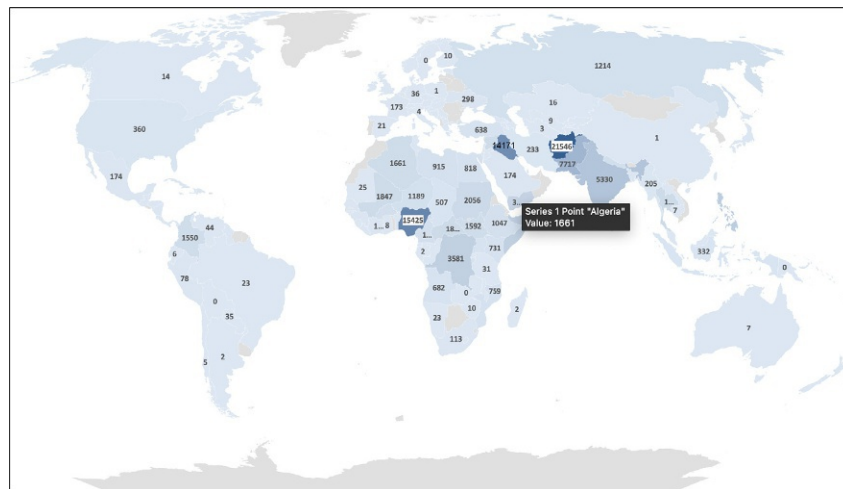


FIG. 5 Geographic distribution of terrorist fatalities from firearm terrorist attacks (2000–2020). Map lines delineate study areas and do not necessarily depict accepted national boundaries.

Excluding unknown perpetrators, 79 different terrorist groups killed 100 or more people in firearm terrorist attacks between 2000 and 2020. As can be seen in [Table 2](#) which displays the 20 terrorist organizations responsible for the most terrorist fatalities during this period, there is a great deal of overlap between the most prolific terrorist organizations (see [Table 1](#)). Despite these similarities, organizations such as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) were among the most lethal terrorist groups despite committing fewer than 100 firearm terrorist attacks. In combination with the discussion above, there is thus important within-country and within-terrorist group variation in lethality from the use of firearms that future theoretical and empirical endeavors will need to address.

TABLE 2 Terrorist organizations committing the most fatalities in firearm terrorist attacks 2000–2020.

Terrorist organization	Terrorist fatalities 2000–2020
Taliban	18,861
Boko Haram	10,460
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	7530
Fulani extremists	4639
Al-Shabaab	3320
New People's Army (NPA)	1387
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	1347
Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	1317
Muslim extremists	1238
Communist Party of India—Maoist (CPI-Maoist)	1237
Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO)	1110
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)	1067
Houthi extremists (Ansar Allah)	897
Maoists	868
Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)	800
Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)	694
Khorasan Chapter of the Islamic State	646
National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)	644
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	622
Anti-Balaka Militia	617

Taken together, the descriptive analyses above demonstrate that weapon choice is an integral part of determining the incidence and lethality of terrorism. Although these analyses did not include any formal hypothesis testing stemming from SCP, they do highlight a range of factors that future studies will need to address and provide a host of opportunities to focus on a range of locations and organizations that could generate insightful theoretical and policy-relevant findings. These findings further highlight that firearms are a prominent and lethal tool used by terrorists globally and demonstrate that further empirical research is vital to understand the impact of firearms on terrorism and to devise adequate prevention methods.

Preventing firearm terrorism

Terrorism studies have revealed much about terrorism prevention, including that many practices inadvertently increase terrorism ([Hsu et al., 2020](#); [LaFree et al., 2009](#); [Piazza & Choi, 2018](#); [Siqueira & Sandler, 2007](#)). Importantly, [Carson \(2014\)](#) demonstrates that changes in legislation and legal sanctions can influence terrorist actions, providing additional

domains for terrorism prevention. The findings from this study also indicate that some legislative changes have the potential to decrease some types of terrorism while increasing others, demonstrating that a broad array of impacts must be considered when using legislation to impact terrorism and related domains. The following section discusses some of the recorded attempts to use legislation regarding the use and acquisition of firearms to reduce terrorism.

Impact of legislation on preventing terrorism

Only two studies have been conducted on the impact of gun legislation on terrorism. The first (Shor, 2016) used a cross-national time-series analysis of the impact of counterterrorism legislation on terrorism incidents worldwide from 1981 to 2009. One form of counterterrorism legislation examined was “limitations on weapons.” Shor (2016) finds that there were no short-term benefits to terrorism prevention for legislation restricting weapons. However, there was a positive effect regarding the gradual accumulation of legislation (passed in the prior 10 years or more) on the distribution and acquisition of weapons. The study could not parse out, however, whether the legislation’s impacts were confined to preventing terrorism any more or less than general interpersonal violence at large, and “limitations on weapons” were not defined by the authors (e.g., as restricting firearms, explosives, chemical precursors).

The second study examined the impact of gun legislation on terrorism incidents involving firearms across 143 countries from 2015 to 2019 (Bures & Burilkov, 2023). The authors found that there is a strong correlation between gun availability and firearms-involved terrorism, especially by lone wolf actors. However, they also found that in stable nations, gun control laws barely had an impact on terrorism and had no observable effect on weapon selection. In unstable countries, there was a small and significant effect of gun control laws reducing lone wolf attacks. Put simply, gun control seemingly does not affect group-based terrorism. The authors point out that firearms ownership and gun legislation are weakly correlated, in that other exogenous factors such as gun culture or hunting popularity can exert influence over the rate of ownership, which can then mediate the results. The study itself is merely cross-sectional and leveraged a rolling average of terrorism incidents (and firearms-involved terrorism incidents) from 2015 to 2019 as the outcome while leveraging gun ownership statistics from 2017 as the primary independent measure. Moreover, sensitivity analyses did not exclude the United States and other outlier nations, which prior gun crimes research has shown exerts undue influence on the cross-national modeling of the impacts of gun ownership on gun crime (see Carson et al., 2022). As such, additional research is needed to validate these findings.

Legislation passed postattack

Overall, very little has been done following major terrorist attacks to curb access to firearms anywhere in the world. One notable example occurred in New Zealand after the Christchurch shooting in 2019 whereby a white supremacist engaged in a mass shooting of two mosques. Subsequently, parliament overwhelmingly passed legislation that restricted the sale of semiautomatic weapons and magazines with capacities of more than 10 rounds while also setting aside funds for gun buyback programming (Every-Palmer et al., 2020).

One study of gun reform efforts in the United States found that following mass shootings there was a 15% increase in gun reform bills proposed at the state level thereafter (Luca et al., 2020). While this study did not focus on the role of political violence in altering the legislative process, it demonstrates that mass shootings foster increased media attention relative to other gun-related crimes and that political parties are responsive to this attention, albeit in different manners. In fact, domestic extremists in the United States overwhelmingly use firearms when killing others (ADL, 2022; Bahney, 2018; Giffords, n.d.). A review of terrorist incidents across North America, Western Europe, and Oceania between 2002 and 2016 found that while firearms were used in less than 10% of all cases, they constituted 55% of all deaths and had much higher rates of fatality than other weapons (Tessler et al., 2017). Despite this reality, very little has been done to address gun access following terrorist attacks in these countries. However, some policy changes have been pursued, but generally after notable mass shootings not involving terrorists.

Following the deadly Uvalde (Texas) school shooting in 2022, the United States Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (Pub. L. 117–159), which included a myriad of reforms, including extended background checks for purchasers under the age of 21, and increased funding for mental health and crisis intervention services and red flag laws. Related to the latter is the goal to fund more implementation and examination of extremism-risk protection orders (ERPOs; also known as “red flag laws”), which are a commonly used tool to prevent gun violence by otherwise lawful owners who are experiencing a mental health crisis or who have made threats to self or others. Notably, the Act increased penalties for straw purchasers of firearms, including a sentence of up to 25 years if the firearms are used by terrorists. Nevertheless, many have recognized the role of gun reform in curbing violent extremism. For example, former Secretary of Homeland Security

Jeh Johnson noted that gun control is central to preventing terrorism, albeit industry executives and politicians have noted that existing gun control measures did not stop recent terrorist attacks including the San Bernardino, CA shooting (Gass, 2016). While many have advocated for prohibiting the sale of firearms to those on the terror watchlist in the United States (Bahney, 2018; Giffords, n.d.), others have pointed out the lack of oversight and standards as well as due process protections for including someone on the watchlist (Flowers, 2016). Nevertheless, between 2004 and 2015, 91% of all cases where known or suspected terrorists on the terror watchlist were subjected to background checks and still received firearms (GAO, 2016).

The irony is that major terrorist attacks may increase demand for firearms. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, gun sales in the United States increased (Smith, 2002). Similar behaviors occurred after the San Bernardino (2015) and Pulse Nightclub (2016) shootings (Gayathri, 2017), and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest that ensued in 2020 (Levine & McKnight, 2020). Likely, fear of a lack of future access to firearms is actually what is driving the uptick in sales. Research is needed here to discern how mass casualty events spark changes in purchasing patterns to validate these assertions further. More importantly, examining *how* terrorists acquire weapons (either through lawful conventional purchases or through secondary markets) is also useful for bolstering supply-side regulations.

It is not only challenging to prevent rare events like terrorism or mass casualty events but is also hard to prevent access to something that law-abiding members of the public have access to. Some have noted that reforms are still plausible for preventing terrorists from acquiring firearms, however. Several nonprofit and advocacy organizations have proposed the following as mechanisms to reduce terrorist's acquisition of firearms (see Bahney, 2018; Edmund, 2022; Giffords, n.d.), given the foregoing challenges:

- Permits to purchase firearms
- Prevent suspects on the terror watchlist from acquiring firearms
- Reinstating the federal assault weapons ban
- Institute additional extreme risk protection order (ERPO) laws—including at the federal level—to temporarily remove firearms from at-risk persons (including those tied to terrorist groups or movements)
- Alter liability protections for gun manufacturers to incentive changes in industry behavior

While these recommendations are specific to the United States, such mechanisms could reasonably be implemented in other countries where such a need exists. Moreover, the United States experiences a disproportionate amount of gun violence, including mass shootings by terrorists and nonideologically motivated actors, compared to other comparable countries (Gramlich, 2023).

Future directions for research on terrorism and gun violence

This chapter has denoted the current knowledge on the use of firearms by terrorists. However, that knowledge is extremely limited given the dearth of research on this topic. The current theoretical knowledge concerning why terrorists leverage firearms is limited, but growing (Carson et al., 2022; Clarke & Newman, 2006; Monaghan et al., 2023), and additional empirical work is needed to test key research questions surrounding the impact of availability, firearms legislation, and counterterrorism policies on their use. The following section delineates two areas for researchers to focus on; additional theoretically-driven analysis of the gun-terrorism relationship, and more evaluation research to discern best practices for gun violence prevention efforts. Additional knowledge in these domains has the potential to improve prevention efforts, such as understanding the strategic utility of firearms over more deadly weapons (e.g., tactical chemical weapons) in achieving terrorist group aims, or how existing national-level gun legislation can inhibit groups from acquiring sufficient arms to conduct attacks.

The foregoing analyses demonstrated the utility of SCP in studying the gun-terrorism relationship. For example, the incidence and number of fatalities from firearm terrorism follow notable geographic patterns. As such, future research relying on SCP to examine the impact of a given intervention or legal regime should model each of these two outcome variables separately. Relatedly, researchers should ensure that additional criminological theories (e.g., general strain and control theories) are tested to discern the predictive utility of various theories in explaining both the prevalence of firearm terrorism and the viability of respective prevention efforts. However, bolstering such endeavors also requires the improvement of existing methodological approaches.

The limited research has used cross-national models to examine within- and between-country variation in terrorists' use of firearms (Bures & Burilkov, 2023; Carson et al., 2022; Shor, 2016), but there is an immense need for research that compares the phenomena across time, space, and ideologies. For example, time series or longitudinal analyses can reveal additional insights into patterns of firearms violence by terrorists, thereby allowing for the modeling of the effect of various interventions. Subnational or regional research may provide a more granular picture of the gun-terrorism relationship

while avoiding ecological fallacies. Coupling more granular level analyses with time-series data may also avoid existing pitfalls of using fixed or rolling averages (e.g., terrorism incidents) to examine these relationships as well as to provide a better understanding of the lagged effects or feedback loops associated with existing legal and enforcement regimes on gun availability and subsequent terrorism. Put simply, researchers should try to build novel datasets to examine the gun-terrorism relationship more at the granular level while allowing for a longitudinal design. Such efforts are more useful for rigorous evaluation research as well. Similarly, research that is group-centered may provide additional utility as well, as the foregoing review has shown that group size, goals, and relationships with other groups may modify their behaviors. As such, researchers could further examine SCP's MURDEROUS framework by looking at how firearms are used by *specific* groups over time when controlling for context and other related factors (e.g., local legal regimes, political context).

Related to the need for additional research and theoretical development on the gun-terrorism relationship is the need for firearms policy to be tested and evaluated. Such work is challenging due to both the nature of combating rare events like terrorism and the need for methodological rigor for such tests to occur. Moreover, each country's firearms policies and laws are highly variable and inextricably linked to other policies that impact otherwise lawful gun ownership (e.g., background checks). For example, the United States does not have uniform firearms laws, which impedes both enforcement and testing of policy effects. When looking at the period of 2016–2020, close to three-quarters of traced guns that crossed state lines originated from states with no background check requirements (Everytown, 2021). From 2017 to 2021, 93%, 61%, and 56% of firearms recovered from crimes in New York City, Baltimore, and Chicago, respectively, originated from out of state as well (Wilson et al., 2023). These realities dramatically impact researchers' ability to test the effects of policies and interventions aimed at preventing gun violence in general.

While robust experimental research methods are likely out of the question when examining the effects of gun violence prevention efforts—whether at the local, regional, national, or international level—it is still essential to examine gun violence prevention efforts using more manageable techniques. Such analyses have the potential to yield immense payoffs for determining “what works” in preventing future violent behavior and determining which policies can be leveraged to fill gaps in enforcement (e.g., use of mental health reporting requirements for purchasers), such as the foregoing concerns with enforcement in the United States. While research has demonstrated the relationship between firearms and violence (see above), it is unclear whether current prevention efforts are even useful. For example, in the United States, extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs) are a popular tool that has been adopted by almost two dozen states (see Everytown, n.d.). These tools allow family members, law enforcement officers, or prosecutors to petition courts for various forms of relief in removing firearms from the possession of someone of concern (e.g., a family member making threats of self-harm). However, there is immense variability in these laws, and the implementation literature is almost nonexistent, despite some evaluation work on their utility in preventing suicides (Swanson, 2020). Future work would need to focus on how ERPOs are actually implemented by practitioners; whether there are disparities in enforcement; and the associated outcomes and impacts of such orders. Addressing these baseline research domains would allow policymakers to craft more effective solutions to preventing both interpersonal and mass casualty violence.

Overall, addressing gun violence in general via evidence-based practices can provide utility for preventing terrorist's use of firearms as well. Researchers still need to contextualize their analyses, however. For example, research on terrorist groups' use of firearms in conflict zones needs to take additional factors into account when determining their analytic strategies, such as the level of state stability, the influence of transnational gun trafficking efforts, and the groups' prior strategic decision-making (e.g., how firearms have been used before to achieve group goals). While some of the aforementioned research on the gun-terrorism relationship has included macro-level indicators (e.g., economic, policy), conducting macro-level multinational analyses include a lot of noise that can obfuscate findings, such as the inclusion of the United States inclusion in models can bias the results given the high prevalence of recreational ownership (Carson et al., 2022). This is why novel approaches to addressing this pressing issue are needed, such as leveraging sensitivity analyses, causal modeling, or locally focused studies. Similarly, empirical analyses and evaluation research need to take into account the impact of legal regimes. Comparing countries that have drastically different gun ownership laws may not provide as much utility as examining the relationship between availability, access, legal constraints, and violence at a more granular level. Put differently, the more narrowly focused the analysis the more nuanced and likely fruitful as the law drives availability and thus behavior.

Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that general restrictions on gun availability can have a demonstrable and measurable effect on the gun-terrorism relationship as well; especially in stable countries with lax or permissive firearms laws. The key is that researchers measure and study this relationship more acutely when striving to bolster prevention efforts via rigorous analysis and evaluation. The improvement of extant datasets and measurement will only improve the quality and rigor of evaluation research as well; thereby producing a positive feedback loop. A summary of key recommendations is provided below in Table 3.

TABLE 3 List of recommendations.

Recommendations
Ensure analyses of firearm terrorism are theoretically situated (e.g., SCP)
Design future SCP-focused analyses of the gun-terrorism relationship around different outcomes of concern (e.g., incidence, fatalities)
Conduct analyses of gun-terrorism relationship at local and regional levels
Build longitudinal datasets for the study of the use of firearms by terrorists
Conduct group-centered analyses, if possible
Design research of the gun-terrorism relationship around the national-level context
Conduct analyses of gun-terrorism relationship by accounting for relevant firearms law and regulations
Leverage novel methodological approaches to produce viable policy-driven results
Conduct evaluation research of general gun violence prevention efforts to improve existing counter-terrorism efforts

Conclusions

Terrorists use a wide array of weapons to achieve their respective goals, however, firearms are among the most popular weapons used by terrorists in many nations around the world due to their wide availability. The descriptive analyses executed in this chapter demonstrate that weapon choice is inextricably linked to the incidence and lethality of terrorism. The analyses also highlighted the range of factors that future studies will need to address and provide a host of opportunities to focus on a range of locations and organizations that could generate insightful theoretical and policy-relevant findings. This chapter leveraged SCP to explain terrorists' use of firearms. This theoretical approach is based on the notion that altering the situational determinants of crime can be used to reduce the likelihood of crime (Clarke, 2009). From this perspective, crime is the product of the intersection of motivation and situational determinants with opportunity. As predicted by SCP, firearms were among the most frequently used weapons for terrorism between 2000 and 2020; with only explosives being used more frequently during this period. The analyses also showed that there were comparable geographic patterns concerning the incidence and fatalities from firearm terrorism. Put simply, SCP provides a useful framework for the study of firearms use by terrorists, but more theoretical testing is needed, including the use of additional criminological theories.

A review of the extant literature on the gun-terrorism relationship demonstrates a growing, but small evidence base exists for contextualizing and responding to the use of firearms by terrorists. The commonly advocated prevention tools for practitioners and policymakers to leverage include numerous common-sense and practical solutions such as preventing suspects on the terror watchlist from acquiring firearms, reinstating the federal assault weapons ban, instituting additional extreme risk protection order (ERPO) laws, and altering liability protections for gun manufacturers to incentive changes in industry behavior. A clear lesson from this review is that approaches to tackling conventional gun violence will likely improve terrorism-centric approaches as well. This is because much of the problem centers on access to firearms and the patchwork of laws and regulations that determine who can purchase firearms. Importantly, local and national-level contexts need to be accounted for to craft meaningful prevention efforts. For example, many developed countries have firearms laws that vary at the state or local level, whereas developing or conflict states face other concerns that need to be addressed through international interdiction and antitrafficking efforts. Put simply, the myriad legal, political, and environmental contexts influence this relationship in a significant manner.

This chapter also provided important recommendations for researchers to use in improving the science of gun violence prevention in general and counter-terrorism efforts, specifically. Notably, the need to improve existing data collection and model specification efforts to provide more nuanced findings remains for practitioners and policymakers to leverage in creating and implementing pragmatic solutions to a rare, but deadly problem.

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