

# Great disparities exist in how news media cover terror attacks

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Terror attacks carried out by Muslims receive on average 357 percent more media coverage than those committed by other groups, according to a University of Alabama researcher's newly published study.

Dr. Erin Kearns, UA assistant professor of criminology and [criminal justice](#), is lead author of "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?," which analyzes disparities in how news [media](#) cover attacks perpetrated by both Muslim and domestic terrorists and how the imbalance in news coverage may shape people's perceptions of threats.

The study, published in *Justice Quarterly*, found perpetrator religion is a major predictor of news coverage of a terrorist attack. Other factors also drive coverage but to a lesser extent. The study authors note that in the U.S., "members of the public tend to fear the 'Muslim terrorist' while ignoring other threats."

Kearns, along with co-authors Allison Betus, a Presidential Fellow with Georgia State University's Transcultural Conflict and Violent Extremism Initiative, and Anthony Lemieux, associate professor at GSU and director of the university's Global Studies Institute, looked at all [terror attacks](#) in the U.S. between 2006 and 2015. Using information from the Global Terrorism Database, they reviewed national print and online media to analyze coverage.

"We were initially interested in how media label attacks and

perpetrators," Kearns said. "But, in collecting the data for that, Allison and I realized that there were large disparities in the amount of coverage across attacks."

Researchers concluded that out of 136 terror attacks in the U.S. over a span of 10 years that the authors studied, Muslims committed on average 12.5 percent of the attacks yet received more than half of the news coverage.

The research team found that factors other than the perpetrator's religion also affect coverage. When the perpetrator was arrested, there was a 287 percent increase in [news coverage](#) on average, and attacks against the government received 211 percent more coverage. The number of fatalities in a given attack also affected the extent of coverage. The study found that for each additional fatality, an attack received 46 percent more coverage.

"While others have looked at differences in framing, this assumed that attacks are getting covered in the first place," Kearns said. "We see here that this isn't always the case. So, the public may not even be aware of many of these attacks."

This is the first study to specifically look at how perpetrator religion impacts coverage across such a wide scope of terrorism cases, the researchers said. It highlights the inequity in [media coverage](#) in the digital age following the 9/11 terror attacks. The researchers said this imbalance can create misconceptions about the prevalence of attacks and fuel prejudice and discrimination.

In a related study, the same group of researchers found a strong trust in science is the overarching factor in determining if Americans will change misperceptions about the threat of terror attacks.

The research published recently in the journal *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* found neither the information source, amount of detail about terror attacks, a person's level of Islamophobia, nor trust in media impacted whether people were willing to update their views

A recent Gallup poll cited by the authors found that nearly half of Americans believe they or a family member are likely to be the victim of a terrorist attack. According to figures from the Global Terrorism Database, 99 people have been killed in 136 terror attacks in the U.S. since 9/11.

**More information:** Erin M. Kearns et al, Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?, *Justice Quarterly* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2018.1524507](https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2018.1524507)

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