

How terrorism affects our attitudes

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many studies have investigated how terrorism affects people. A new, large meta-study has compiled the results of 325 previous studies to tease out some overall results across contexts. The meta-study includes responses from more than 400,000 people.

"To a certain extent, [terrorism](#) is connected with hostile attitudes towards other [ethnic groups](#), political conservatism and increased patriotism

toward the state," says Amélie Godefroidt, a postdoctoral fellow in NTNU's Department of Sociology and Political Science.

Terrorism thus contributes—admittedly to a small but still significant degree—to the fact that individuals develop stronger prejudices against cultures other than their own and rally around what they perceive as traditional values of their own culture.

Definition of terrorism varies widely

The extent of terrorism varies from year to year and is both a matter of definition and dependent on the eyes that witness it. But no matter how you calculate it, far more people die in [terrorist attacks](#) in non-Western countries.

One study claims that 95% of the terrorist-related deaths in the world in recent years have taken place in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

Although deaths resulting from terrorist acts make up far less than one per thousand of all the deaths in the world, and only up to a few percent in the most severely affected areas, terrorism impacts the world view and attitudes that many of us hold.

Low risk, but many people are afraid

In other words, the risk of being a victim of a terrorist attack is minimal in most places. Nevertheless, researchers have shown in the past that more than half of the population in some countries fears being victimized by terrorists.

In the U.S., for example, around 40% of the population fears that their family will be affected by terrorism, whereas the risk is probably more

like 1 in 3.5 million. This finding does not include attacks like school shootings and similar actions, which are considered to be other criminal activity.

Strongest reactions produced by Islamist violence

The results of the studies that have now been compiled were collected between 1985 and 2020. The research does not present a clear-cut picture, however, because not all terror works the same way.

Godefroidt points out that the effect of terrorism varies greatly.

Some types of terrorism lead to more obvious counter-reactions than others.

"Islamist violence consistently generates stronger reactions than other types of terrorism. People in Israel and the United States generally react more strongly to terrorism compared to people in other countries. And following Islamist attacks, people become particularly more hostile towards strangers who make them think of Islam, such as Arabs or refugees," says Godefroidt.

A lot we don't know about terrorism

The meta-study also shows that there is a lot we still do not know about the effect that terrorism has on us. Although numerous studies have been carried out on terrorism, some areas have not yet been extensively researched.

"We found several gaps in our current knowledge, including a lack of research on non-Islamist terror and conducted in non-Western countries." The study thus reveals several areas that more researchers

need to address in order to gain a more complete picture of how terrorism affects us.

"Among other things, we need more research on terrorism carried out by people from the extreme right wing. We also need to have more research on non-Western countries that are among the places that suffer the most from terrorist attacks, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria and Pakistan," Godefroidt says.

More information: Amélie Godefroidt, How Terrorism Does (and Does Not) Affect Citizens' Political Attitudes: A Meta-Analysis, *American Journal of Political Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12692](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12692)

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