



Active Attacks with Motor Vehicles: A Short Report and Case Study of the 2025 New Year's Day Attack in New Orleans, LA.

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Accepted: 13 May 2025
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Abstract

On New Years Day, 2025, a truck was driven at high speed into a crowd of people in New Orleans, LA, killing 14 and injuring at least 57 others. Though rare, vehicle-based attacks of this sort have a high potential for casualties and are increasingly used by attackers with connections to terrorist organizations. In this short report, we (1) provide a case study of the New Years Day attack in New Orleans, (2) give an international context by describing the prevalence of vehicle-based attacks abroad, (3) note the special attraction to the use of vehicles as weapons by terrorist organizations, and (4) give a descriptive analysis of vehicle-based attacks in the United States using the only publicly available dataset explicitly including information on vehicle-based mass casualty events—the Active Attack Data. We conclude by providing recommendations for the prevention of vehicle-based attacks.

Keywords Active attack · Motor vehicle · Terrorism · Mass casualty

Introduction

On January 1, 2025, a man intentionally drove a rented Ford F-150 Lightning pickup truck into a crowded section of Bourbon Street in New Orleans, Louisiana, ultimately killing 14 people and injuring 55 others before crashing his vehicle (FBI, 2025; Tucker et al., 2025). After the crash, he died in a subsequent gunfight that injured two responding police officers. Recent research has primarily concentrated on firearm-based mass violence events, such as mass shootings and active shooter incidents (see, for example: Blair et al., 2020; Blair & Duron, 2022; Capellan, 2015;

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Martaindale & Blair, 2019; Martaindale et al., 2023; NIJ, 2024). While each of these terms describes slightly different types of events, they all share a focus on attacks involving firearms intended to harm multiple victims (Sandel and Martaindale, 2022). Despite significant scholarly, media, and governmental attention on firearm-based attacks, attacks utilizing alternative weapons, such as vehicles, have received comparatively limited consideration. This disparity is likely due to the lower frequency of vehicle-based attacks in the United States, resulting in a lack of comprehensive data. To address this gap, this research brief utilizes the only publicly available dataset explicitly including vehicle-based mass casualty events (activeattackdata.org).

The dataset specifically covers “active attacks”, defined as events where an individual (or individuals) actively kills or attempts to kill multiple unrelated people in a public space (Sandel & Martaindale, 2022). This definition aligns closely with those used by the FBI and DHS for active shooter scenarios. However, unlike the FBI’s active shooter definition, which explicitly involves firearms, the active attack definition includes other weapons such as vehicles and knives (FBI, 2024). Although vehicle-based mass casualty attacks are rare, understanding these events is crucial for informing law enforcement strategies and enhancing preparedness for public safety personnel and event organizers. To facilitate such understanding, this brief provides a detailed case study of the January 1, 2025, attack in New Orleans, along with two recent international vehicle-based incidents. Subsequently, we present descriptive statistics for all recorded vehicle-based active attacks in the United States from 2000 through January 2025. Finally, we offer recommendations based on the trends observed in the data.

New Orleans, LA—January 1, 2025

The vehicle attack in New Orleans began at approximately 3:15 a.m. on January 1, 2025. The incident occurred on Bourbon Street, a popular tourist destination frequently visited during events such as Mardi Gras and New Year’s celebrations. At the time of the attack, Bourbon Street was crowded with people celebrating New Year’s Eve and visitors attending the 2025 Sugar Bowl, scheduled later that day.

Media reports identified the attacker as a 42-year-old U.S. Army veteran with ten years of service. Prior to the attack, he reportedly faced significant financial and personal challenges. Although he had converted to Islam many years prior, reports indicate he became self-radicalized shortly before the incident. While not directly supported by ISIS, the attacker pledged allegiance to the group in five videos posted to Facebook between 1:29 and 3:02 a.m. and had an ISIS flag in his vehicle (FBI, 2025; Tucker et al., 2025). He prepared extensively, wearing body armor, planting two improvised explosive devices, and carrying both a handgun and rifle.

The attacker rented the truck in neighboring Texas and drove to New Orleans, deliberately bypassing a police vehicle and street barricades by driving onto the sidewalk. This allowed him access to Bourbon Street, which was closed to regular traffic. Once on Bourbon Street, he accelerated rapidly, covering a three-block stretch between Canal and Conti streets. After crashing the truck, he exited the

vehicle armed with an AR-10 rifle and immediately engaged responding police officers (Stock, 2025). The gunfight resulted in the attacker's death and injuries to two officers. The entire incident lasted approximately two minutes, resulting in 14 fatalities and injuries to 57 others (FBI, 2025).

Regrettably, the steel bollards installed on sidewalks intended to prevent such vehicle attacks had been temporarily removed. Reports indicated that the city was in the process of replacing these bollards before the Sugar Bowl event scheduled later that day (Silva & Llamas, 2025). Further complicating prevention efforts, the city of New Orleans previously acquired 45 steel barriers specifically designed to block vehicle access when streets are closed but failed to deploy these barriers on January 1, 2025 (Stickler & Silva, 2025).

International Vehicle Attacks

Vehicle-based attacks are not unique to the United States; several significant incidents have occurred internationally. For instance, on December 20, 2024, a 50-year-old man intentionally drove a rented sedan into a crowded market area in Magdeburg, Germany. The attacker accelerated for approximately 400 yards before coming to a stop and being apprehended. The incident resulted in six fatalities and nearly 300 injuries (BBC, 2025).

The targeted market was part of an annual Christmas event held in Magdeburg's city square, attracting approximately two million visitors each year. Despite existing security measures, including concrete barriers intended to prevent vehicle attacks, an emergency access gap—required for emergency vehicles—had not been properly secured. Authorities had failed to block this gap with a vehicle and chain as prescribed by security protocols.

Motivations behind the Magdeburg attack remain under investigation. German officials revealed that the attacker emigrated from Saudi Arabia nearly two decades earlier. Although his online activities included anti-Islamic sentiments, he also expressed criticism of Germany's handling of Saudi refugees (Sidhu et al., 2024). Officials are still exploring potential ideological connections or inspiration from extremist groups such as the Islamic State. Another prominent international attack occurred on July 14, 2016, in Nice, France. During a Bastille Day parade, a driver commandeered a 19-ton cargo truck, accelerated to nearly 60 mph, and deliberately breached crowd-control barriers, police vehicles, and lane separators to access crowded pedestrian areas. The driver deliberately targeted pedestrians along a 1.1-mile stretch, continuing for approximately five minutes until police gunfire ultimately halted his attack. This attack resulted in 86 fatalities and 434 injuries (BBC, 2016). The Islamic State later claimed responsibility, and investigations revealed that the attacker had become radicalized only months prior—similar to the timeline observed in the New Orleans incident.

Current Literature on Vehicle Attacks

The attacks in Nice (2016) and New Orleans (2025) illustrate the connection between vehicle attacks and extremist ideologies. Although limited, terrorism research has explored both targeted locations (e.g., bus stops: Jenkins & Butterworth, 2017) and broader patterns of vehicle-based terrorism. Houser (2022), using the *Global Terrorism Database*, documented 257 vehicle attacks between 1970 and 2019, resulting in over 808 fatalities and 1,715 injuries. Houser noted that vehicle ramming became the most lethal terrorist attack method beginning in 2016. Similarly, the *Counter Extremism Project* documented 83 vehicular terrorist attacks between 2006 and 2025, resulting in 261 deaths and 1,476 injuries (Counter Extremism Project, 2025).

Although this review emphasizes vehicle-ramming incidents, Jasani et al. (2020) examined the use of ambulances as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). Their research identified 20 ambulance-based attacks, primarily in the Middle East ($N = 15$) and Southeast Asia ($N = 5$). Terrorists exploited ambulances' inconspicuous nature to bypass security checkpoints before detonating explosives.

Wounding Patterns

Researchers analyzing wounding patterns from vehicle attacks and accidents in Israel between 2008 and 2016 found that intentional attacks resulted in significantly more severe injuries and higher mortality rates compared to accidental incidents (Almog et al., 2016). Unlike typical accidents that occur during deceleration, intentional attacks usually involve acceleration into crowds, causing victims to suffer more frequent and severe head, facial, and spinal injuries. Such intentional mass casualty incidents also rapidly overwhelm local medical facilities and emergency response resources.

Ties to Terrorism

Although existing literature often connects vehicle attacks to terrorism, it remains unclear precisely how frequently attackers select vehicles based on extremist affiliations. Nevertheless, extremist organizations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS have actively promoted vehicle-based attacks through propaganda. For example, Al Qaeda's Inspire Magazine published "The Ultimate Mowing Machine" in 2010, providing guidance on maximizing casualties through vehicle attacks (Inspire, 2010). Similarly, following the Nice incident, ISIS's Rumiyah magazine (2016, 2017) explicitly encouraged the use of trucks and all-terrain vehicles, providing detailed instructions on selecting targets and planning attacks to maximize casualties, such as choosing crowded locations with limited escape routes and carrying additional weapons (see also Jasiński, 2018).

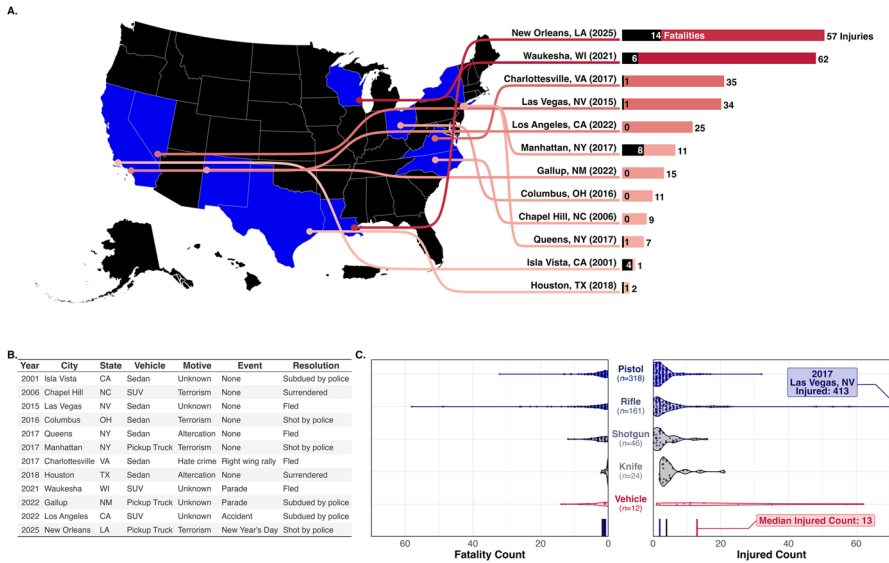


Fig. 1 Vehicle-based active attacks in the United States from 2000–2023, as well as the 2025 New Year's Day attack in New Orleans, LA. Panel **A** presents the geographical distribution of vehicle-based attacks as well as a barchart documenting the number of individuals injured or killed in each. Panel **B** provides general information about the attack including the vehicle type, motive, whether/what kind of event was targeted, and how the attack was resolved. Panel **C** presents violin plots comparing vehicle-based active attacks to attacks with other primary weapons in terms of both injuries and fatalities. Median injuries and fatalities are denoted as vertical lines in the rug of the plot

Internationally, vehicle-based attacks have increasingly become associated with terrorism. In contrast, domestic vehicle attacks in the United States remain relatively infrequent and less directly tied to terrorist activities (Jasiński, 2018). The subsequent descriptive data section explores motivations behind vehicle attacks within the United States in greater detail.

Vehicle Attacks in the United States

Between 2000 and 2023, vehicles were used in 11 of the 567 (2%) recorded active attacks in the active attack database (activeattackdata.org) (Fig. 1, Panels A & B). Although relatively rare, vehicle-based attacks cause the highest median number of injuries per incident (median = 13), compared to knife attacks (median = 4) and fire-arms (median = 2 for pistols, shotguns, and rifles, respectively) (Fig. 1, Panel C). As with international cases, U.S. perpetrators predominantly rely on the vehicle itself to inflict harm. Only two recorded incidents (Columbus, OH, 2016; Queens, NY, 2017) involved attackers carrying additional weapons (both carried knives). The New Orleans attack on January 1st, 2025, stands out because the attacker carried two firearms—a rifle and handgun—which he used against police after crashing his vehicle.

Vehicle attacks typically target densely populated locations or events with high foot traffic, such as parades, festivals, holidays, and sporting events, to maximize potential casualties. Notably, the three most severe vehicle attacks in the U.S., in terms of casualties, occurred during special events (Fig. 1, Panel B). Predictably, heavier vehicles used in densely crowded areas result in higher casualties. The two deadliest vehicle attacks in the U.S.—Waukesha, WI (2021) and New Orleans, LA (2025)—occurred during special events involving large crowds, using an SUV and a truck, respectively. Each resulted in nearly double the casualties (68 and 71, respectively) compared to the third deadliest incident in Charlottesville, VA (2017), which involved a sedan had 36 casualties.

Identifying motivations behind vehicle attacks in the United States remains challenging. Nevertheless, four incidents (one-third of all vehicle attacks, including January 1st, 2025) were classified as terrorism-motivated (Fig. 1, Panel B). Though infrequent, these attacks resulted in 22 fatalities and 88 injuries, comprising 61.1% of fatalities and 32.7% of injuries from all vehicle-based attacks. These statistics highlight the disproportionate threat vehicles can pose as instruments of mass violence. Unlike firearms, vehicles are restricted to outdoor settings accessible via streets or roads. However, their omnipresence allows attackers to blend into normal traffic patterns, significantly reducing detection opportunities before an attack.

Recommendations

Federal agencies have acknowledged the threat of vehicle attacks and provided guidance for mitigation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) outlines best practices in its guide *Site and Urban Design for Security Against Terrorist Attacks* (FEMA.gov, 2007). Similarly, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), part of the Department of Homeland Security, has published dedicated resources specifically addressing vehicle ramming threats (CISA, 2025). Their recommendations are consistent with the data reported here. Key recommendations include recognizing the potential for ramming attacks, clearly delineating event perimeters, and establishing robust standoff zones to physically separate vehicles from crowds. Whenever possible, existing natural features and structures (e.g., terrain, buildings) should be leveraged as barriers. These natural barriers should be reinforced with additional protective measures such as physical barricades or strategically placed heavy vehicles, to effectively reduce the risk of unauthorized vehicle access.

Conclusion

While much less commonly used than firearms in mass casualty events in the US, vehicles are capable of inflicting substantial harm and at the median produce more injuries than firearms or bladed weapon attacks. Fortunately, relatively straight forward interventions can be used to both prevent these attacks and mitigate the damage that they cause.

Data Availability Data on active attacks in the United States are publicly available and were downloaded from ActiveAttackData.org.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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