

What Is the “Real Risk” from Terrorism in America?

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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As We Show In This Updated list, You're Much More Likely to Be Killed By Brain-Eating Parasites, Toddlers, Lightning, Falling Out of Bed, Alcoholism, Food Poisoning, Choking On Your Meal, a Financial Crash, Obesity, Medical Errors or "Autoerotic Asphyxiation" than by Terrorists

Preface: [Bad government policy](#) has increased the level of terrorism. And [corruption in our security agencies](#) has allowed attacks to succeed which should have been stopped.

Even so, the levels of terrorism are still much lower than many assume. Government officials and counter-terror experts may [hype the terror threat](#) to promote their agendas. But – as shown below – your risk of being killed in a terror attack is actually much lower than being killed by virtually any other cause.

Daniel Benjamin – the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the United States Department of State from 2009 to 2012 – [noted](#) in January (at 10:22):

The total number of deaths from terrorism in recent years has been extremely small in the West. And the threat itself has been considerably reduced. Given all the headlines people don't have that perception; but if you look at the statistics that is the case.

Time Magazine noted in 2013 that the chance of dying in a terrorist attack in the United States from 2007 to 2011, according to Richard Barrett – coordinator of the United Nations al Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team – was [1 in 20 million](#).

Let's look at specific numbers ...

The U.S. Department of State reports that only [17](#) U.S. citizens were killed *worldwide* as a result of terrorism in 2011.* That figure *includes* deaths in Afghanistan, Iraq and all other theaters of war.

In contrast, the American agency which tracks health-related issues – the U.S. Centers for Disease Control – [rounds up](#) the most prevalent causes of death in the United States:

Table B. Deaths and death rates for 2011 and age-adjusted death rates and percentage changes in age-adjusted rates from 2010 to 2011 for the 15 leading causes of death in 2011: United States, final 2010 and preliminary 2011

[Data are based on a continuous file of records received from the states. Rates are per 100,000 population; age-adjusted rates per 100,000 U.S. standard population based on the year 2000 standard; see Technical Notes. For explanation of asterisks (*) preceding cause-of-death codes, see Technical Notes. Figures for 2011 are based on weighted data rounded to the nearest individual, so categories may not add to totals]

Rank ¹	Cause of death (based on the <i>International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision, 2008 Edition, 2009</i>)	Number	Death rate	Age-adjusted death rate		
				2011	2010	Percent change
...	All causes	2,512,873	806.5	740.6	747.0	-0.9
1	Diseases of heart (I00-I09,I11,I13,I20-I51)	596,339	191.4	173.7	179.1	-3.0
2	Malignant neoplasms (C00-C97)	575,313	184.6	168.6	172.8	-2.4
3	Chronic lower respiratory diseases (J40-J47)	143,382	46.0	42.7	42.2	1.2
4	Cerebrovascular diseases (I60-I69)	128,931	41.4	37.9	39.1	-3.1
5	Accidents (unintentional injuries) (V01-X59,Y85-Y86) ^{2,3}	122,777	39.4	38.0	38.0	0.0
6	Alzheimer's disease (G30)	84,691	27.2	24.6	25.1	-2.0
7	Diabetes mellitus (E10-E14)	73,282	23.5	21.5	20.8	3.4
8	Influenza and pneumonia (J09-J18) ⁴	53,667	17.2	15.7	15.1	4.0
9	Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis (N00-N07,N17-N19,N25-N27) ⁵	45,731	14.7	13.4	15.3	-12.4
10	Intentional self-harm (suicide) (*U03,X60-X84,Y87.0) ²	38,285	12.3	12.0	12.1	-0.8
11	Septicemia (A40-A41)	35,539	11.4	10.5	10.6	-0.9
12	Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (K70,K73-K74)	33,539	10.8	9.7	9.4	3.2
13	Essential hypertension and hypertensive renal disease (I10,I12,I15)	27,477	8.8	8.0	8.0	0.0
14	Parkinson's disease (G20-G21) ⁶	23,107	7.4	7.0	6.8	2.9
15	Pneumonitis due to solids and liquids (J69)	18,090	5.8	5.3	5.1	3.9
...	All other causes (residual)	512,723	164.6

Comparing the CDC numbers to terrorism deaths means:

- You are [35,079](#) times more likely to die from heart disease than from a terrorist attack
- You are [33,842](#) times more likely to die from cancer than from a terrorist attack
- You are [4,311](#) times more likely to die from diabetes than from a terrorist attack
- You are [3,157](#) times more likely to die from flu or pneumonia than from a terrorist attack
- You are [2,091](#) times more likely to die from [blood poisoning](#) than from a terrorist attack
- You are [1,064](#) times more likely to die as your lungs [swell up](#) after your food or beverage [goes down the wrong pipe](#)

(Keep in mind when reading this entire piece that we are consistently and substantially *understating* the risk of other causes of death as compared to terrorism, because we are comparing deaths from various causes within the United States against deaths from terrorism *worldwide*.)

Wikipedia [notes](#) that obesity is a contributing factor in 100,000-400,000 deaths in the United States per year. That makes obesity [5,882](#) to [23,528](#) times more likely to kill you than a terrorist.

The annual number of deaths in the U.S. due to avoidable medical errors is as high as [100,000](#). Indeed, one of the world's leading medical journals - Lancet - [reported](#) in 2011:

A November, 2010, document from the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services reported that, when in hospital, one in seven beneficiaries of Medicare (the government-sponsored health-care

programme for those aged 65 years and older) have complications from medical errors, which contribute to about 180 000 deaths of patients per year.

That's just Medicare beneficiaries, not the entire American public. Scientific American [noted](#) in 2009:

Preventable medical mistakes and infections are responsible for about 200,000 deaths in the U.S. each year, according to an investigation by the Hearst media corporation.

And a new [study](#) in the Journal of Patient Safety says the numbers may be up to [440,000](#) each year. But let's use the lower – 100,000 – figure. That still means that you are [5,882](#) times more likely to die from medical error than terrorism.

The CDC says that some [80,000](#) deaths each year are attributable to excessive alcohol use. So you're [4,706](#) times more likely to drink yourself to death than die from terrorism.

Approximately [38,329](#) Americans die each year from drug overdoses. That's [2,255](#) times more than from terrorists.

Wikipedia notes that there were [32,367](#) automobile accidents in 2011, which means that you are [1,904](#) times more likely to die from a car accident than from a terrorist attack. As CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria [wrote](#) last year:

“Since 9/11, foreign-inspired terrorism has claimed about two dozen lives in the United States. (Meanwhile, more than 100,000 have been killed in gun homicides and more than 400,000 in motor-vehicle accidents.) “

President Obama [agreed](#).

According to a 2011 CDC report, poisoning from prescription drugs is even [more likely to kill you](#) than a car crash. Indeed, the CDC stated in 2011 that – in the majority of states – [your prescription meds are more likely to kill you](#) than *any other source of injury*. So your meds are *thousands of times* more likely to kill you than Al Qaeda.

The financial crisis has also caused [quite a few early deaths](#). The Guardian [reported](#) in 2008:

High-income countries such as the UK and US could see a 6.4% surge in deaths from heart disease, while low-income countries could experience a 26% rise in mortality rates.

Since there were 596,339 deaths from heart disease in the U.S. in 2011 (see CDC table above), that means that there are approximately [38,165](#) additional deaths a year from the financial crisis ... and Americans are [2,245](#) *times more likely to die from a financial crisis than a terrorist attack*.

Financial crises cause deaths in other ways, as well. For example, the poverty rate has skyrocketed in the U.S. since the 2008 crash. For example, the poverty *rate* in 2010 was the [highest in 17 years](#), and more Americans numerically were in poverty as of 2011 than for

[more than 50 years](#). Poverty causes increased deaths from [hunger, inability to pay for heat and shelter](#), and other causes. (And – as mentioned below – suicides have skyrocketed recently; many connect the increase in suicides [to the downturn in the economy](#).)

The number of deaths by suicide has [also surpassed car crashes](#). Around [35,000](#) Americans kill themselves each year (and more American soldiers [die by suicide than combat](#); the number of veterans committing suicide is astronomical and [under-reported](#)). So you're [2,059](#) times more likely to kill yourself than die at the hand of a terrorist.

The CDC notes that there were [7,638](#) deaths from HIV and [45](#) from syphilis, so you're [452](#) times more likely to die from risky sexual behavior than terrorism. (That doesn't include death by autoerotic asphyxiation ... discussed below.)

The National Safety Council reports that more than [6,000](#) Americans die a year from falls ... most of them involve people falling off their roof or ladder trying to clean their gutters, put up Christmas lights and the like. That means that you're [353](#) times more likely to fall to your death doing something idiotic than die in a terrorist attack.

The same number – [6,000](#) – die annually from texting or talking on the cellphone while driving. So you're [353](#) times more likely to meet your maker while lol'ing than by terrorism.

The agency in charge of workplace safety – the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration – reports that [4,609](#) workers were killed on the job in 2011 within the U.S. homeland. In other words, you are [271](#) times more likely to die from a workplace accident than terrorism.

Approximately [4,000](#) Americans drown each year ... [235](#) times more than from terror attacks.

The CDC notes that [3,177](#) people died of “nutritional deficiencies” in 2011, which means you are [187](#) times more likely to starve to death in American than be killed by terrorism.

About [2,200](#) Americans die each year from acute alcohol poisoning (i.e. extreme binge drinking) ... [129](#) times more than from terror attacks.

Some [2,000](#) Americans die each year from heat or cold. That's [118](#) times more than from terrorism.

Approximately [1,000](#) Americans die each year from autoerotic asphyxiation. So you're [59](#) times more likely to kill yourself doing weird, kinky things than at the hands of a terrorist.

There were an average of [928](#) Americans killed by police officers in the United States each year in “justifiable homicides”. That means that you were more than [55](#) times more likely to be killed by a law enforcement officer than by a terrorist. That number does not include *unjustifiable* homicides.

Some [411](#) Americans are electrocuted each year ... [24](#) times more than die from terrorism.

Nearly 400 Americans die each year due to drug allergies from penicillin. More than 200 deaths occur each year due to food allergies. Nearly 100 Americans die due to insect allergies. And 10 deaths each year are due to severe reactions to *latex*. [See this](#). There are many other types of allergies, but that totals 710 deaths each year from just those four

types of allergies alone ... making it [42](#) times more likely that you'll die from an allergic reaction than from a terror attack.

Some [450](#) Americans die each year when they fall out of bed, [26](#) times more than are killed by terrorists.

Scientific American [notes](#):

You might have toxoplasmosis, an infection caused by the microscopic parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, which the CDC estimates has infected about 22.5 percent of Americans older than 12 years old

Toxoplasmosis is a brain-parasite. The CDC reports that more than [375](#) Americans die annually due to toxoplasmosis. In addition, [3](#) Americans died in 2011 after being exposed to a brain-eating amoeba. So you're about [22](#) times more likely to die from a brain-eating zombie parasite than a terrorist.

Around [34](#) Americans a year are killed by dog bites ... around [twice](#) as many as by terrorists.

The 2011 Report on Terrorism from the National Counter Terrorism Center notes that Americans are [just as likely](#) to be "crushed to death by their televisions or furniture each year" as they are to be killed by terrorists.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control show that Americans [are 110 times more likely to die](#) from contaminated food than terrorism. And [see this](#).

The Jewish Daily Forward noted in May that – even including the people killed in the Boston bombing – [you are more likely to be killed by a toddler than a terrorist](#). And see [these statistics](#) from CNN.

Reason [notes](#):

[The risk of being killed by terrorism] [compares annual risk of dying](#) in a car accident of 1 in 19,000; drowning in a bathtub at 1 in 800,000; dying in a building fire at 1 in 99,000; or being struck by lightning at 1 in 5,500,000. In other words, in the last five years you were four times more likely to be struck by lightning than killed by a terrorist.

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) has just published, [Background Report: 9/11, Ten Years Later](#) [PDF]. The report notes, excluding the 9/11 atrocities, that fewer than 500 people died in the U.S. from terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2010.

Scientific American [reported](#) in 2011:

John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State University, and Mark Stewart, a civil engineer and authority on risk assessment at University of Newcastle in Australia ... contended, "a great deal of money appears to have been misspent and would have been far more productive—saved far more lives—if it had been expended in other ways."

Comparison of Annual Fatality Risks

Hazard	Territory	Period	Total fatalities for the period	Annual fatality risk
World War II	World	1939–45	61,000,000	1 in 221
Cancers	United States	2009	560,000	1 in 540
War (civilians)	Iraq	2003–8	113,616	1 in 1,150
All accidents	United States	2007	119,000	1 in 2,500
Traffic accidents	United States	2008	34,017	1 in 8,000
Traffic accidents	Canada	2008	2,431	1 in 13,500
Traffic accidents	Australia	2008	1,466	1 in 15,000
Homicide	United States	2006	14,180	1 in 22,000
Traffic accidents	United Kingdom	2008	2,538	1 in 23,000
Terrorism	Northern Ireland	1970–2007	1,758	1 in 43,000
Industrial accidents	United States	2007	5,657	1 in 53,000
Homicide	Canada	2008	611	1 in 55,000
Intifada	Israel	2000–6	553	1 in 72,000
Homicide	Great Britain	2008	887	1 in 67,000
Homicide	Australia	2008	290	1 in 76,000
Terrorism	United States	2001	2,982	1 in 101,000
Natural disasters	United States	1999–2008	6,294	1 in 480,000
Drowning in bathtub	United States	2003	320	1 in 950,000
Terrorism	United Kingdom	1970–2007	2,196	1 in 1,100,000
Home appliances	United States	Yearly average	200	1 in 1,500,000
Deer accidents	United States	2006	150	1 in 2,000,000
Commercial aviation	United States	1989–2007	1,955	1 in 2,900,000
Terrorism	United States	1970–2007	3,292	1 in 3,500,000
Terrorism	Canada	1970–2007	336	1 in 3,800,000
Terrorism	Great Britain	1970–2007	434	1 in 5,200,000
Lightning	United States	1999–2008	424	1 in 7,000,000
Transnational terrorism	World outside war zones	1975–2003	13,971	1 in 12,500,000

Mueller and Stewart noted that, in general, government regulators around the world view fatality risks—say, from nuclear power, industrial toxins or commercial aviation—above one person per million per year as “acceptable.” Between 1970 and 2007 Mueller and Stewart asserted in a separate paper published last year in [Foreign Affairs](#) that a total of 3,292 Americans (not counting those in war zones) were killed by terrorists resulting in an annual risk of one in 3.5 million. Americans were more likely to die in an accident involving a bathtub (one in 950,000), a home appliance (one in 1.5 million), a deer (one in two million) or on a commercial airliner (one in 2.9 million). [Let’s throw a couple more fun facts into the mix ... The risk of choking to death on food is [1 in 4,404](#), and the risk of dying by falling out of furniture (including couches, chairs and beds) is [1 in 4,238](#). So you’re almost a thousand times more likely to die from one of these rare causes of death than terrorism.]

The global mortality rate of death by terrorism is even lower. Worldwide, terrorism killed 13,971 people between 1975 and 2003, an annual rate of one in 12.5 million. Since 9/11 acts of terrorism carried out by Muslim militants outside of war zones have killed about 300 people per year worldwide. This tally includes attacks not only by al Qaeda but also by “imitators, enthusiasts, look-alikes and wannabes,” according to Mueller and Stewart.

Defenders of U.S. counterterrorism efforts might argue that they have kept casualties low by thwarting attacks. But investigations by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies suggest that 9/11 may have been an outlier—an aberration—rather than a harbinger of future attacks. Muslim terrorists are for the most part “short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning”

and small in number, Mueller and Stewart stated. Although still potentially dangerous, terrorists hardly represent an “existential” threat on a par with those posed by Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

In fact, Mueller and Stewart suggested in Homeland Security Affairs, U.S. counterterrorism procedures may indirectly imperil more lives than they preserve: “Increased delays and added costs at U.S. airports due to new security procedures provide incentive for many short-haul passengers to drive to their destination rather than flying, and, since driving is far riskier than air travel, the extra automobile traffic generated has been estimated to result in 500 or more extra road fatalities per year.”

The funds that the U.S. spends on counterterrorism should perhaps be diverted to other more significant perils, such as industrial accidents (one in 53,000), violent crime (one in 22,000), automobile accidents (one in 8,000) and cancer (one in 540). “Overall,” Mueller and Stewart wrote, “vastly more lives could have been saved if counterterrorism funds had instead been spent on combating hazards that present unacceptable risks.” In an e-mail to me, Mueller elaborated:

“The key question, never asked of course, is what would the likelihood be if the added security measures had not been put in place? And, if the chances without the security measures might have been, say, one in 2.5 million per year, were the trillions of dollars in investment (including overseas policing which may have played a major role) worth that gain in security—to move from being unbelievably safe to being unbelievably unbelievably safe? Given that al Qaeda and al Qaeda types have managed to kill some 200 to 400 people throughout the entire world each year outside of war zones since 9/11—including in areas that are far less secure than the U.S.—there is no reason to anticipate that the measures have deterred, foiled or protected against massive casualties in the United States. If the domestic (we leave out overseas) enhanced security measures put into place after 9/11 have saved 100 lives per year in the United States, they would have done so at a cost of \$1 billion per saved life. That same money, if invested in a measure that saves lives at a cost of \$1 million each—like passive restraints for buses and trucks—would have saved 1,000 times more lives.”

Mueller and Stewart’s analysis is conservative, because it excludes the most lethal and expensive U.S. responses to 9/11. Al Qaeda’s attacks also provoked the U.S. into invading and occupying two countries, at an estimated cost of several trillion dollars. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in the deaths of more than 6,000 Americans so far—more than twice as many as were killed on September 11, 2001—as well as tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans.

In 2007 New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said that people are more likely to be killed by lightning than terrorism. “You can’t sit there and worry about everything,” Bloomberg exclaimed. “Get a life.”

Indeed, the Senior Research Scientist for the Space Science Institute (Alan W. Harris) estimates that the odds of being killed by a terrorist attack is about the same as being hit [by an asteroid](#) (and [see this](#)).

Terrorism pushes our emotional buttons. And politicians and the media tend to blow the risk of terrorism out of proportion. But as the figures above show, terrorism is a very unlikely cause of death.

Indeed, our [spending](#) on anti-terrorism measures is [way out of whack](#) ... especially because [most of the money has been wasted](#). And see [this article](#), and this 3-minute video by professor Mueller:

Indeed, mission creep in the name of countering terrorism actually makes us [more vulnerable to actual terrorist attacks](#). And corrupt government policy is arguably [more dangerous than terrorism](#).

Indeed, the terrorism deaths Americans have suffered were unnecessary ... and were largely due to [corruption](#) in our security agencies. And see [this](#).

* Note: Subsequent official reports – published in [2012](#) and [2013](#) – show that even *fewer* Americans were killed by terrorists than in the previous year.

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