



Center for
Religious Liberty

HOSTILITY AGAINST CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES

Analyzing Incidents from 2024



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ANALYZING INCIDENTS FROM 2024
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INTRODUCTION

Due to the perceived increase in acts of hostility against churches in the United States, Family Research Council (FRC) set out to analyze publicly available data to better understand the problem and determine whether there has been a statistically significant increase over time. The inaugural report of our findings was published in December 2022 and covered incidents that occurred between January 2018 and September 2022.

Since the launch of that initial report, FRC has continued to track acts of hostility against U.S. churches and publish annual updates. This update analyzes the data from 2024 and compares it to the previous six years (2018-2023). Our findings indicate that, although the annual number of incidents did not rise from the record high of 485 in 2023, the total in 2024 (415) remains significantly higher than the yearly totals recorded in 2018 through 2022.

Although the motivations for many of these incidents remain unknown, the rise in crimes against churches is taking place in a context in which fewer Americans are attending religious services or identifying with a specific faith. According to Gallup, 42 percent of U.S. adults regularly attended religious services 20 years ago, but now that number has fallen to 30 percent.¹ This decline means that fewer Americans share a common understanding of what church buildings represent. Additionally, a Pew Research Center study found that “80% of U.S. adults say religion is losing influence in American life.” This number has increased by six percentage points since 2022 and is the highest it has been in Pew’s surveys.²

In popular culture, Christianity is often treated lightly or outright mocked. The rapper Lil Nas X sparked controversy in 2024 by promoting his song “J Christ” with a depiction of himself on a cross. Demonic imagery has been embraced by pop culture figures like hip-hop artist Doja Cat.

Stock photo of church under repair



With Christianity seemingly losing influence and respect in American life and fewer people feeling emotionally or spiritually connected to churches, there may be less societal pressure to discourage would-be criminals from targeting churches.

It is important to note that not all crimes against churches are motivated by hatred for Christianity. Some vandals appear to be motivated by financial gain through theft, while other culprits are teenagers engaging in a destructive pastime. However, there are still incidents that seem to be targeting churches intentionally and with malicious intent.

Regardless of the perpetrator's motives, such crimes can leave churches in physical, financial, and emotional disarray. Some churches struggle to cover the costs of repairs and fear future offenses.

Acts of hostility against churches can send the message—regardless of whether it is the perpetrator's intent—that churches are not wanted in the community or respected in general. This may cause congregants or church leaders to feel unsafe. In some instances, the goal of the hostility is undoubtedly to interrupt the normal work of the church.

This report is concerned with the actions of individual civilians. However, additional data outside the purview of this report indicates growing opposition to Christianity in the public sphere. In 2024, FRC published a report titled "Free to Believe? The Intensifying Intolerance Toward Christians in the West," which highlights representative incidents of hostility toward Christian churches, organizations, and individuals by Western governments in the past four years. Acts such as prayer, worship, holding church services, preaching, and speaking Christian views have resulted in fines and arrests.³

The Trump administration recently sought to address the perceived increase in animosity toward Christianity in the United States by issuing an executive order titled "Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias."⁴ The order stated:

[H]ostility and vandalism against Christian churches and places of worship surged, with the number of such identified acts in 2023

exceeding by more than eight times the number from 2018. Catholic churches and institutions have been aggressively targeted with hundreds of acts of hostility, violence, and vandalism.

The existence of such an order shows that even the federal government has taken notice of the growing trend of hostility against U.S. churches.

The free exercise of religion has always been an essential component of American society and is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution as a basic right. Attempts to prevent religious exercise through threats or violence should be soundly condemned by anyone who values the First Amendment.



Stock photo of a fire at the Church of the Assumption

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

In December 2022, Family Research Council released an extensive publication documenting a sharp rise in acts of hostility against churches in the United States. In that initial report, we identified a total of 420 documented acts of hostility that occurred between January 2018 and September 2022.

Since the launch of that initial report, FRC has continued to track acts of hostility against churches. This edition of the report analyzes the data from 2024 and compares it to the previous six years (2018-2023).

How 2024 Compares to Previous Years

To conduct this research, FRC analyzed open-source documents, reports, and media outlets to assess the number of acts of hostility against churches that have taken place since 2018. We looked at incidents of vandalism (including intentional destruction of property, defacement of property, burglary, and ransacking), arson (including attempts), gun-related incidents (occurring on church property or targeting the church or its members), and bomb threats (both real and false). Other aggressive acts targeting churches or their property that did not fall under the aforementioned categories (including physical assault, disruption of church services, and general threats of harm) were categorized as “other.”

FRC’s first report, released in December 2022, identified 420 incidents that took place between

January 2018 and September 2022, showing a steady increase over those five years. We then released a supplemental report that included data through the end of 2022, which reported incidents as follows: 50 in 2018, 83 in 2019, 54 in 2020, 96 in 2021, and 191 in 2022. Our 2023 report documented 436 incidents.

After further investigation, we identified additional incidents from 2020 to 2023, resulting in the following updated totals reflected in this year’s report: 55 in 2020, 98 in 2021, 198 in 2022, and 485 in 2023. The year 2023 marked a record high for hostile incidents. Its 485 were more than double the total from 2022.

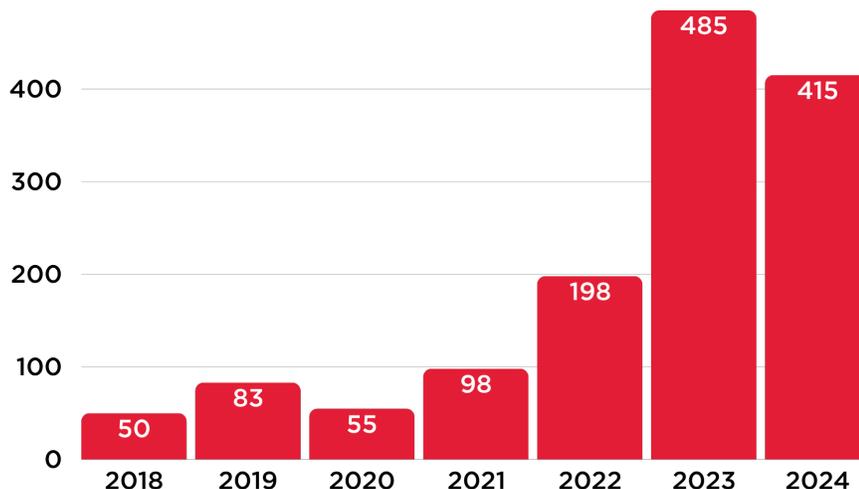
In 2024, the number of incidents leveled off with 415. However, this total from one 12-month span is nearly equal to the findings from our very first report, which covered 57 months.

As of writing, we have identified 1,384 acts of hostility against U.S. churches that occurred between January 2018 and December 2024.

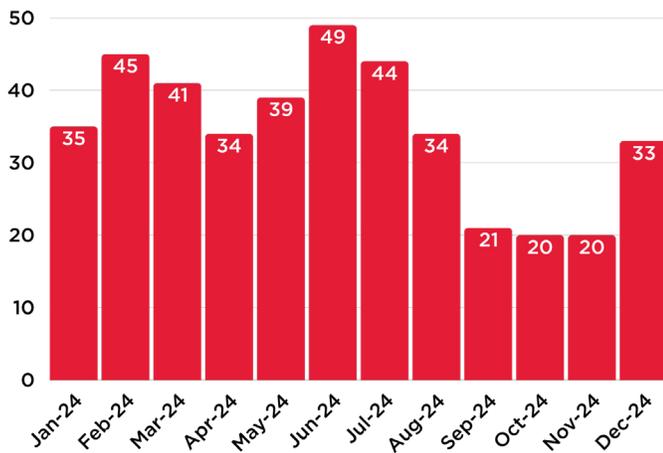
2024

Family Research Council identified 415 hostile incidents in 2024, affecting a total of 383 churches. The data was obtained by reviewing open-sourced documents, reports, and media coverage that contained terms such as “church threats,” “church vandalism,” and “church arson.”⁵

Incidents per year, 2018-2024



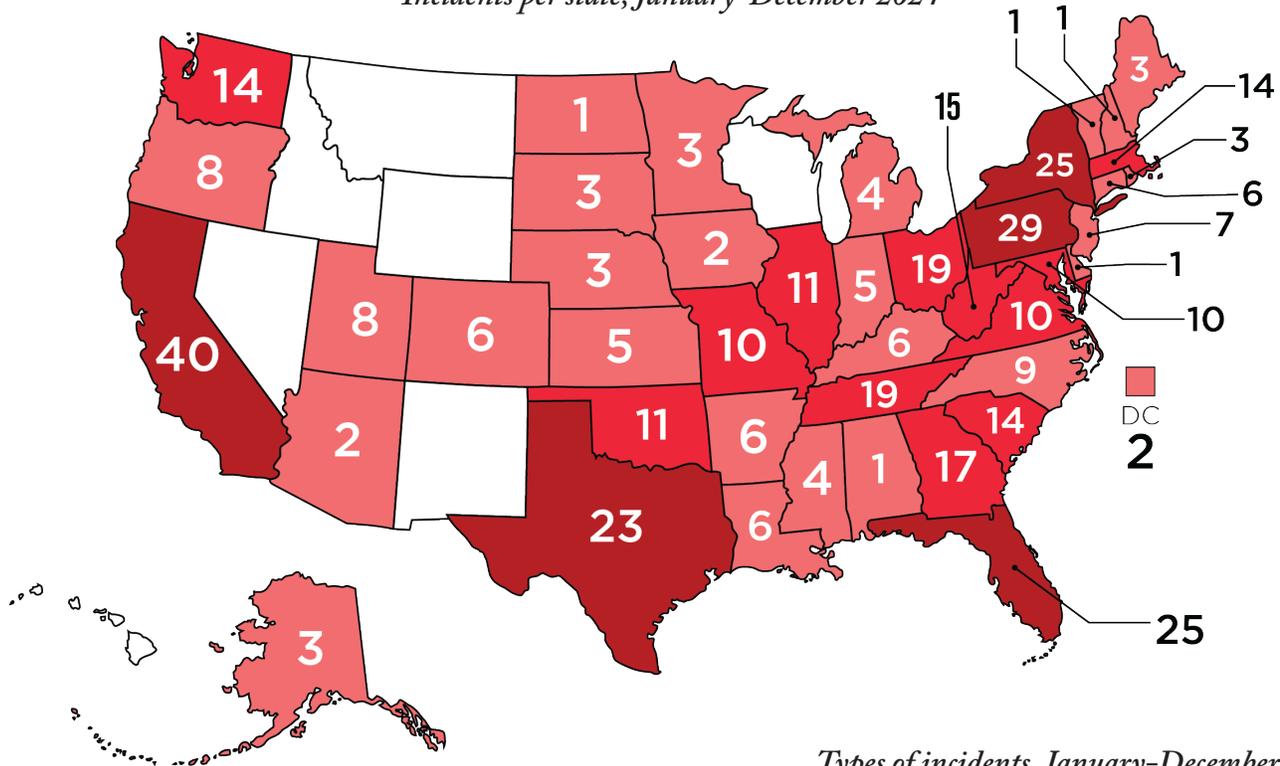
Incidents per month, January–December 2024



There was an average of 35 hostile incidents per month. June experienced the highest rate of hostility, with approximately 22 percent of these incidents related to LGBT issues. Hostility levels were lowest from September to November. This is a change from 2023, when the lowest levels were from February to April.

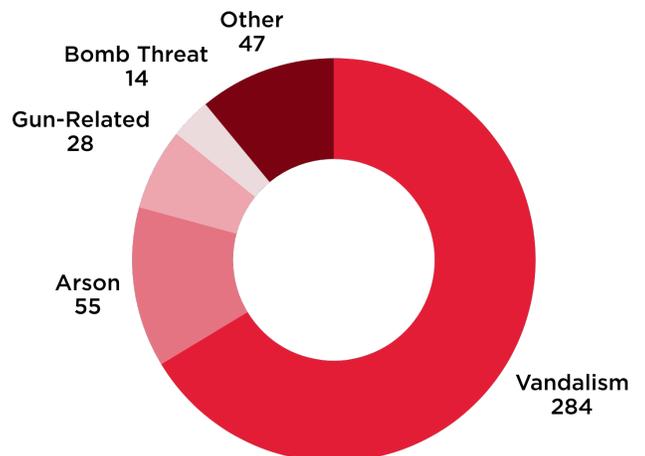
In 2024, hostile acts against churches were identified in 43 states. As in previous years, states with larger populations tended to have more incidents. California had the most, with 40 incidents, followed by Pennsylvania with 29, Florida and New York with 25, Texas with 23, and Tennessee and Ohio with 19.

Incidents per state, January–December 2024



Vandalism was once again the category with the most incidents (284). There were also 55 instances of arson, 14 bomb threats, and 47 “other.” The number of gun-related incidents (28) was more than double the previous year’s total (12). Thirteen incidents fell into more than one category, the most frequent combination being vandalism paired with either gun-related incidents or other forms of physical aggression.

Types of incidents, January–December 2024



Vandalism

Acts of vandalism remained the most prevalent type of hostility against churches, accounting for 284 of the 415 incidents FRC identified in 2024. In most cases, the motives and identities of the perpetrators were unknown, and some of the churches may have merely been victims of opportunistic vandalism. Numerous churches experienced repeated vandalism, and some were victimized as part of a string of attacks on multiple churches.

Some acts of vandalism appear to have been motivated by anger toward a particular church or churches in general. Other incidents seemed to have had political motivations, targeting churches based on their views regarding human sexuality or dignity. Some perpetrators were juveniles or individuals likely dealing with mental health challenges. A few vandals appeared motivated by financial gain, stealing valuable materials such as copper wiring and air conditioning parts. Several incidents were investigated as hate crimes.

Many instances of vandalism involved inexplicable destructive behaviors, such as smashed windows or destroyed statues.⁶ Bethel Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon, a small church of approximately 25 mostly older congregants, has suffered from repeated vandalism.

The most recent incident left the entire building damaged by fire extinguisher chemicals. Previously, rocks were thrown through a church window weekly, and on one occasion, multiple windows were broken. Deacon Mary Brown stated, “I don’t know who we’ve irritated. It’s baffling.” The church was uncertain when it would be able to reopen the building for services.⁷

The extent of damage has led some church leaders to believe the vandalism was intentional. First Christian Church in Brenham, Texas, had just completed a restoration project when more than 15 of its windows were shattered by rocks and bricks. Pastor Charles Topping told a local news station, “It was angry, intentional, from all I could see. It hurts me there is that kind of anger towards a church. As far as I know, we didn’t offend anyone, we didn’t malign anyone. That’s not what we’re about. But when I look at the damage, it breaks my heart to know that somebody could harbor that much anger against not only this building but also against God.”⁸

Vandalism and theft can cause significant financial loss for churches. Zion Lutheran Church in Snohomish, Washington, sustained an estimated \$39,000 in damages from a vandal throwing eggs and other objects at the building.⁹ North Peoria Church of Christ in Oklahoma sustained a major loss when thieves stole their air conditioning units, resulting in an estimated \$100,000 in damages.¹⁰

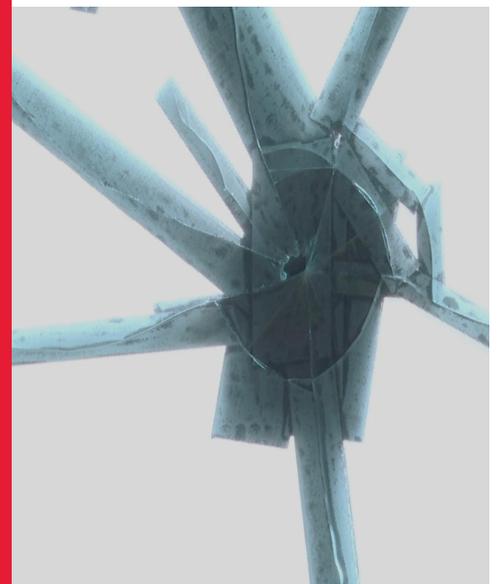


Vandalism of First Christian Church of Brenham, Texas, in September 2024

Credit: KBTX

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In Ohio, four churches in two adjacent counties were victims of arson over a span of four months. All four churches were completely destroyed.”

Firefighters work to fight the flames of First Christian Church in Nevada, Missouri, in August 2024

Credit: Shannon Becker/
 KOAM-TV

Arson

In 2024, there were at least 55 incidents of arson, arson attempts, or fires with unknown causes. In most cases, the arsonist’s motivation was unknown, although some may have been struggling with mental health issues.

One incident in Athens, Tennessee, left St. Mark AME Zion Church severely damaged, the fire having completely burned through the roof and inside of the building. Before starting the fire, the perpetrator also killed Lina Buchanan, the church secretary. As he fled the scene, the perpetrator was stopped by a maintenance worker. He told the worker that he was going to “get God’s water.” Thankfully, the perpetrator was identified through security camera footage and arrested by police. The church’s pastor expressed hopes for rebuilding the historic structure that dates back to the 1860s.¹¹

Believer’s Joy Worship in Jacksonville, Florida, was set on fire by a woman whom the church had previously tried to help during her mental health struggles. The flames reached 30 feet high before firefighters managed to extinguish them. The church’s pastor noted that the woman had disrupted services in the past, but “we forgive her, we have to go on, and we just hope she can get some help and continue on.”¹²

In Ohio, four churches in two adjacent counties were victims of arson over a span of four months. Authorities believe that the same individual is responsible for all four incidents, given the short timeline, proximity, and similarities among the incidents. All four churches were completely destroyed.¹³



Stock photo of red paint splattered against church doors

Gun-Related Incidents

Gun-related incidents were the only notable increase in comparison to previous years. In 2023, there were 12 such incidents, but that number jumped to 28 in 2024. The severity of these incidents varied. Some involved threats to shoot up the church,¹⁴ while others involved a person coming into the church building or onto church property brandishing a gun.

In one incident near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a man walked into Jesus' Dwelling Place Church and pointed a gun at the pastor mid-sermon. A church deacon quickly tackled the gunman, preventing a potential tragedy.¹⁵ In Georgia, another armed man disrupted the services of three separate churches. He even recorded himself while doing it, inviting others to join him in his actions.¹⁶

In San Francisco, California, a young man fired several shots at the main doors of St. Augustine Catholic Church while people were inside. No one was injured.¹⁷ A woman wielding a long gun at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, injured two people before being shot and killed by police.¹⁸

Bomb Threats

In 2024, there were 14 reported bomb threats, most of which turned out to be hoaxes communicated through phone calls or emails. In some cases, suspicious packages were left on church doorsteps.

Two churches in Cocoa, Florida, received packages with notes claiming that they contained bombs. The perpetrator had political motivations, saying he was targeting “wokism” and was angry about taxes, grifters, and the war in Ukraine. He was identified through security camera footage and was subsequently arrested.¹⁹

Other

In 2024, there were 47 incidents categorized as “other,” an increase of nine from the previous year. Most of these incidents involved violent crimes or threats that did not fit into the other categories.

In one incident in Louisville, Kentucky, a man broke into Zion Baptist Church and vandalized the building while staff members were inside. When one staff member heard noises coming from upstairs, he went to investigate and was attacked by the intruder with a hammer. The staff member was able to hide and call the police.²⁰

In another incident in Hudson, New York, a man wearing a mask and a long black cloak entered St. Mary's Church during its Sunday morning mass and shouted, “All hail.” He walked to the front of the church, holding a glass bottle over his head, before being subdued by church members.²¹

Motive Types

Although a perpetrator's motives are not always apparent, a few motive types were recorded in 2024. Incidents motivated by pro-abortion sentiments dropped significantly, with cases falling from 59 in 2022 and 11 in 2023 to just two in 2024. Satanic incidents also decreased, from 12 in 2023 to one in 2024.

Anti-LGBT incidents decreased as well, although they remained high at 33 in 2024 (compared to 42 in 2023). Many of these incidents involved vandalism against churches that support LGBT activity, often in the form of stealing pride flags.²²

One specific abortion-related incident involved a vandal spray-painting a church in Portland, Oregon, with the messages “F--- U” and “My body, my choice.”²³

CONCLUSION

Although the total number of incidents slightly decreased in 2024, we observed a continuation of many of the previous year's trends. Vandalism remained the most common type of incident, many states with high numbers of incidents in 2023 also ranked among the top in 2024, and many incidents were similar in nature to those from the previous year. Some significant differences in 2024 were the increase in gun-related incidents and the decrease in incidents motivated by pro-abortion sentiments.

We identified 415 incidents in 2024; however, this figure may not represent the full scope of hostility against churches, as many cases likely went unreported to law enforcement or unpublished by news outlets or other publicly available sources. We rely on these sources for our data, which we compile and analyze to find patterns.

FRC will continue raising awareness about the concerning trend of hostility directed at churches in the United States. Although the total number of incidents did not increase in 2024, it remained high, indicating a persistent lack of respect and even intolerance toward Christianity and religion in America.

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Some significant differences in 2024 were the increase in gun-related incidents and the decrease in incidents motivated by pro-abortion sentiments.

Stock photo of vandalized Catholic statues



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