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Yes, the media do underreport some terrorist attacks. Just not the ones most people think of.

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At his first address to a joint session of Congress last month, President Trump reiterated his administration's focus on "radical Islamic terrorism." A few weeks earlier, his administration had provided a list of terrorist attacks it claimed were underreported by the news media. The list primarily included attacks by Muslim perpetrators.

The implication was clear: Muslims do more harm than the media want you to believe. Terrorism scholars quickly discredited that suggestion.

How we did our research

When there's a terrorist attack, the coverage seems to dominate the cycles for hours, days and sometimes weeks. How can it be accurate to claim that the media really underplays or hides terrorism? Fortunately, this is a question that we can investigate through research.

In a recent study, we found that the news media do not cover all terrorist attacks the same way. Rather, they give drastically more coverage to attacks by Muslims, particularly foreign-born Muslims — even though those are far less common than other kinds of terrorist attacks.

Here's how we defined terrorism and measured the coverage. We first looked at all attacks in the United States between 2011 and 2015, as listed in the Global Terrorism Database. The GTD defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation."

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, when most people in the United States hear the word "terrorism," they think of Muslims. But terrorism comes in many forms. For example, the GTD includes the attack by Frazier Glenn Miller, a white supremacist and former grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, on a synagogue in Overland Park, Kan.; Robert Dear's attack on Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs; and Wade Michael Page's attack on a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin, along with many other lesser-known attacks.

In total, there were 89 attacks committed by different perpetrators in the United States during the five-year period we examined. Between 2011 and 2015 in the United States, Muslims perpetrated 12.4 percent of those attacks.

We then searched for media coverage of each attack from U.S.-based print sources in LexisNexis Academic. Since many Americans get their news online, we supplemented the print media with coverage from CNN.com. Each article we counted had focused primarily on the act of terrorism, its perpetrators or the victims, and it had to appear in a U.S.-based media source between the attack date and the end of 2016. We found 2,413 news articles that met our criteria.

Of the 89 attacks, 24 did not receive any media coverage from the sources we examined. The small proportion of attacks that were by Muslims — remember, only 12 percent — received 44 percent of the news coverage. In only 5 percent of all the terrorist attacks, the perpetrator was both Muslim and foreign-born — but those four attacks got 32 percent of all the media coverage.

In real numbers, the average attack with a Muslim perpetrator is covered in 90.8 articles. Attacks with a Muslim, foreign-born perpetrator are covered in 192.8 articles on average. Compare this with other attacks, which received an average of 18.1 articles.

Certainly, how much media coverage a particular terrorist attack gets is influenced by a host of factors. For example, if the perpetrator is arrested, we get more coverage of the indictment, hearing, trial and so on. Attacks against governmental facilities or employees receive more coverage. And as the adage — “if it bleeds it leads” — has it, more deaths and injuries mean more media coverage.

But even controlling for all this, attacks by a Muslim perpetrator get, on average, about 4½ times more coverage. In other words, whether intentional or not, U.S. media outlets disproportionately emphasize the smaller number of terrorist attacks by Muslims — leading Americans to have an exaggerated sense of that threat.

When does violence get labeled “terrorism”?

Researchers have recently been exploring why a violent incident does or does not get labeled “terrorism.” What factors — such as religious, racial or national identity — make a particular act more likely to be labeled that way?

Our own research, and that of our colleagues, shows that people are more likely to consider an attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim. That’s true, even though the chance of an American being killed by an foreign-born terrorist, measured over the past 40 years, is 1 in 3.6 million each year, as a recent Cato Institute report noted.

But since the news media focus so disproportionately on attacks by Muslims, particularly foreign-born Muslims, it’s no wonder that so many Americans think that these groups make our country less secure.