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Was the 2019 Christchurch attack a black swan event? Understanding far-right violence in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

On 15 March 2019, far-right actor Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at the al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. Media and politicians presented this event as an ‘end of innocence’ for New Zealand, with many wondering how such an attack could occur in an extremely isolated and generally peaceful location. However, for a range of reasons, it is not immediately clear whether the Christchurch attack represented a black swan event, or is better understood as a spectacularly lethal version of a poorly documented phenomenon chronically occurring across the country. To understand the extent to which severe far-right violence is actually occurring within New Zealand, this article documents incidents both before, and immediately following the Christchurch attack. It identifies a chronic level of attacks motivated by far-right beliefs which, when considered on a per-capita basis, suggests that serious far-right violence may actually be more prevalent in New Zealand than other broadly comparable countries. Moving forward, it is crucial that New Zealand develop a comprehensive government-funded method to systematically monitor and respond to far-right attacks, and that this response is not designed solely through the narrow prism of a single, highly idiosyncratic event.

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Introduction

On the 22nd of July 2011, Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in twin terrorist attacks motivated by far-right beliefs. The impact of this incident was felt across the Western world, including as far away as New Zealand. Although New Zealand has a similar population size to Norway, as well as comparable standards of living and levels of general violence, then Prime Minister John Key noted his difficulty imagining such a mass-casualty event ever occurring in New Zealand (New Zealand Parliament, 2011). Other commentators explained that a far-right terrorist attack was ‘extremely unlikely’ to occur in New Zealand. Reasons included that the country had a ‘more homogeneous political environment,’ that most immigrants ‘had similar cultural backgrounds,’ and that New Zealand is ‘an island’ (New Zealand Press Association, 2011).

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Unfortunately, New Zealand has not stood immune to serious incidents of far-right violence.

Australian Brenton Tarrant, a man who held ‘unusually racist beliefs’ (THE QUEEN v BRENTON HARRISON TARRANT, 2020) and had a fixation on ‘white genocide’ (Moses, 2019), settled temporarily in Dunedin in 2017. While studying Breivik’s modus operandi, Tarrant discovered that ‘New Zealand was as target rich of an environment as anywhere else in the west’ (Macklin, 2019, p. 19). On 15 March 2019, Tarrant perpetrated the deadliest far-right terrorist attack since 22 July, killing 51 people in a mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand.¹ What is not immediately clear is whether the events of 15 March represented a Black Swan event – an incident characterized by its extreme rarity, significant impact and the widespread retrospective claims that the event was predictable (see Taleb, 2011)? Or if the Christchurch attack is better understood as a spectacular and more lethal incidence of a chronically occurring phenomenon within New Zealand? To answer this question, one must first understand the context in which this attack took place. The following will therefore analyse incidents of severe far-right violence in New Zealand both before, and immediately following, March 2019.

This paper begins by presenting a brief history of the far-right in New Zealand,² before analysing why the prevalence of far-right violence occurring throughout the country remains unclear. It then documents incidents of far-right violence across New Zealand that had fatal, or near-fatal outcomes, before analysing how such events have evolved over time. The final section then discusses how New Zealand’s efforts to counter far-right violence must extend beyond just responding to the Christchurch attack.

The far-right and New Zealand

While ‘far-right’ remains a contested concept, there is a growing consensus across relevant academic literature regarding a definition (Carter, 2018). Within terrorism studies, ‘far-right’ is typically an umbrella term used to refer to both the radical and extreme right (Bjørge & Ravndal, 2019), a distinction also adopted by the ‘Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019’ (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2020, p. 104). Here the radical right refers to milieus, organizations and individuals who pursue right-wing beliefs via democratic processes. By contrast, right-wing extremism opposes democratic principles and practices, and advances a highly selective view of the national citizen that excludes religious, racial and sexual minorities (Parliament of Victoria, 2022, p. 5). Importantly, such actors view violence as a legitimate means to achieve their political and ideological goals. Notably, across recent years researchers have observed ‘increasingly porous borders and growing links’ between the radical and extreme right (Pirro, 2023, p. 103), blurring this distinction somewhat. One area where scholarly understandings of the far-right remain underdeveloped, is how violence motivated by far-right beliefs varies across different socio-political environments and geographical locations. To further develop these localized understandings, the following will analyse far-right violence throughout New Zealand, identifying elements unique to this location, and factors in line with trends across immediately comparable countries.

March 2019 was certainly not the first time New Zealand had experienced violence motivated by far-right beliefs, with lethal incidents able to be traced back more than a century. For instance, on 24 September 1905 former British Artillery soldier Edward

Lionel Terry executed a 70-year-old Chinese gold prospector. On the day of the murder, Terry wrote to the governor stating that he would not allow 'Britons to be jeopardised by alien invaders, and to make this decision perfectly plain, I have this evening put a Chinaman to death' (La Rooij, 2022, p. 94). When surrendering to Wellington police the following day, Terry handed over a copy of his self-published political manifesto *The Shadow*, a book dedicated to his 'Brother Britons' and containing a 12-page introduction on the 'need for racial purity' (Tod, 1996).

Although examples of lethal violence are identifiable, historically New Zealand has remained relatively free of organized extreme-right groups (O'Maolain, 1987, p. 202). This may be due (at least in part) to the restrictive immigration policies implemented since New Zealand ended its status as a Colony of Britain in 1907. Ethnic competition theory notes that increasing levels of immigration will often lead to the mobilization of far-right resources, and that concentrated waves of newcomers perceived as ethnically or racially distinct will increase support for radical right parties (Arzheimer, 2018, p. 156), and even violence towards immigrant groups (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). An Immigration Restriction Amendment Act directed primarily against those of Asian descent was introduced in 1920, and as recently as 1964 the Minister of Immigration still promoted deliberately limiting the intake of particular ethnic groups to avoid 'creating racial frictions and tensions' (Battersby, 2018, p. 70). However, as previously restrictive immigration policies were wound back throughout the second half of the twentieth century, an organized far-right began to emerge. This included the National Socialist Party of New Zealand in the late 1960s, while by the 1970s the New Zealand branch of the League of Empire Loyalists had evolved into a Christchurch based offshoot of the British National Front (called the New Zealand National front) (O'Maolain, 1987, p. 203).

By the 1980s, organized extreme-right groups such as the Christchurch Skins and the United National Front Nazi Party (Uniteds) began to appear (Gilbert & Elley, 2020, p. 281). Activities primarily centered around Christchurch, and a small music scene which included bands such as Desperate Measures and Aryan Army (Gilbert, 2010, p. 415). The New Zealand Nationalist Workers Party, whose members were key suspects in the 1984 bombing of a trade union hall which killed the caretaker (Freney, 1984, p. 29),³ even republished Edward Terry's book (O'Maolain, 1987, p. 202). New Zealanders were also involved in the far-right movement transnationally,⁴ with Christopher Martin attempting to assassinate a member of the African National Congress in 1986 (that target would later become President of South Africa) (Clark, 2023, p. 244). Following the collapse of apartheid, the head of the Church of the Creator in South Africa also relocated to New Zealand to establish a local branch (Searchlight, 1994, p. 22).

The 1990s saw the continued rise of organized skinhead street gangs (Gilbert & Elley, 2020, p. 281), with groups holding openly white supremacist beliefs beginning to draw the attention of security agencies (Battersby & Ball, 2019, p. 197). After being formed inside Christchurch prison in the early 1990s, the Fourth Reich became particularly prominent across the Christchurch area (Battersby & Ball, 2019). In October 1989 the United's also became nationally recognized, after member Glen McAllister shot a 22-year-old with a pump action shotgun in Christchurch's Cathedral Square. McAllister, who had just been released from jail for stabbing another skinhead, then turned the gun on himself (Suall et al., 1995, p. 56). The Christchurch chapter of the Road Knights were also involved in a number of high-profile violent incidents, as were affiliated groups

such as the Psychoskins and Bandenkriegs (Gilbert, 2013, p. 143). Involvement in such groups was predominantly socially driven, with the majority of individuals joining through close friendship and familial connections (Addison, 1996, p. 51).

The period between 1992 and 1994 was reported as being 'heavy with conflict,' with Asian immigrants the predominant targets of far-right violence (Addison, 1996, p. 61 & 111). In response, an early Countering Violent Extremism program was established, designed to assist people leaving the white-power movement. However, this initiative dissolved when the founder of the program left to establish a Hammerskins branch in New Zealand (Gilbert, 2010, p. 421). The subsequent arrest of several key figures during the mid-1990s caused a noticeable reduction in overt skinhead activity (Addison, 1996, p. 103 & 108), and by the turn of the century the 'visible face' of the white supremacy movement had largely disappeared (Gilbert & Elley, 2020, p. 285). Since this decline in organized group activity, it is not immediately clear the extent to which violence motivated by far-right beliefs has occurred across New Zealand. The reasons for this dearth of knowledge are explored below.

Government monitoring far-right violence

Far-right violence has clearly impacted New Zealand society across a significant period of time, and according to the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service, remains the country's 'dominant' ideologically motivated threat (2023, p. 21). However, the frequency and severity of the far-right violence actually occurring across the country remains largely unknown. This is because New Zealand authorities have not systematically recorded national hate crime data across time (Taonui, 2019). Despite repeated calls from the New Zealand Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to systematically monitor such violence, successive New Zealand governments have not considered such work a 'priority' (Human Rights Commission, 2019, p. 1). Consequently, there remains limited information regarding whether far-right violence has increased or decreased in New Zealand over time, who may be perpetrating this violence, and whether particular groups are targeted more than others (Wilson & Shastri, 2020).

More recently, New Zealand's 'Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019' explicitly highlighted this information gap. Among more than 40 wide-ranging recommendations, the report noted that authorities should begin to systematically capture 'hate-motivations for offending,' and train front-line officers to 'identify potential hate crimes' (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2020). Although no movement towards capturing 'hate crimes' in New Zealand law is yet visible, authorities have begun to record thousands of extremely broadly defined 'hate-motivated' incidents (Graham-McLay, 2023). Thus far, it remains unclear how useful such wide-ranging data might be for actually understanding the contemporary problem of severe far-right violence. In the concurrent absence of longitudinal historical data, this means that a range of policy actions are being undertaken almost entirely through the prism of the 2019 Christchurch attacks, and without a detailed understanding of the type and scale of far-right violence occurring across time.

While this situation is far from optimal, New Zealand is not unique in this knowledge gap. Looking across other members of the 'Five-Eyes' intelligence sharing network,⁵ Australia does not maintain a national dataset tracking serious far-right violence (Harris-

Hogan, 2023). Canadian law-enforcement agencies across some (but not all) provinces do collect broad hate crime statistics, but do not distinguish between incidents committed between minority groups, and those committed by far-right actors. National statistics kept in the United Kingdom also do not make this distinction. While data is kept by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States, this data has been described as ‘terribly uneven,’ ‘incomplete and skewed’ and largely ‘meaningless’ (Miller-Idriss, 2022). There is also no current arrangement to share and analyse information related to domestic violent extremism across ‘Five-Eyes’ countries. Hence, discussions of far-right violence across the ‘five-eyes’ have not featured ‘nearly as prominently’ as other transnational terrorist threats (Harris, 2019).

Although security services have been aware (at least to some degree) of the threat of far-right violence within New Zealand, one author noted that there emerged ‘a collective national contentment to simply forget that political violence had occurred’ (Battersby & Ball, 2019, p. 203). At the beginning of 2019 the New Zealand government assessed the risk ‘of a terrorist incident as low’ (Geddis & Geddis, 2019, p. 190), and security practitioners noted the complete absence of any ‘plan for dealing with terrorism at a national level’ (Battersby & Ball, 2019, p. 202). Media and politicians subsequently presented 15 March as an ‘end of innocence’ for New Zealand, and emphasized that the countries’ previous ‘immunity’ from terrorism had been ‘shattered’ (Battersby & Ball, 2019, p. 191). Yet without longitudinal data regarding the prevalence of far-right violence, it is unclear whether the Christchurch attack represented a truly black swan event, or is better understood as a spectacularly lethal version of a poorly documented phenomenon chronically occurring within New Zealand.

Additional sources of information

In the absence of a national, government funded effort to monitor far-right violence, a range of community groups have attempted to track incidents across specific locations and / or time periods. Most notably, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission documented over 100 racially and religiously motivated incidents that occurred between 2004 and 2012, with events ranging from murder through to property damage.⁶ Unfortunately, these annual reports were discontinued by the Race Relations Commissioner due to ‘chronic lack of resources’ (Human Rights Commission, 2019, p. 1). While other groups have subsequently attempted to monitor far-right violence across limited geographic areas, a more permanent and systematic national effort is required.

It is also worth noting that large datasets monitoring terrorist violence globally do exist. However, an analysis of the widely cited Global Terrorism Database (GTD) found that far-right incidents were ‘registered haphazardly ... often lack source references, and substantial information about perpetrators and context is often missing’ (Ravndal, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, the enormous breadth of such databases means that they inevitably overlook a significant number of incidents. One analysis of airplane hijackings undertaken by terrorist groups (a spectacular and widely noticed phenomenon) identified four times more incidents than had been recorded by the GTD (Veilleux-Lepage, 2020, p. 44). Overall, databases such as the GTD simply do not provide the level of granular detail required to draw nuanced conclusions regarding domestic trends (Harris-Hogan et al., 2020).

More locally, no academic study attempting to quantify incidents of far-right violence in New Zealand was identified by this paper. A small number of studies have looked at far-right activity historically (Cunningham et al., 2023). Others have analysed particular far-right gangs (see for example Gilbert & Elley, 2020 or Battersby & Ball, 2019) or online forums containing New Zealand related content (see for example Comerford et al., 2021A). Such research has helped to form a general picture of far-right activity in New Zealand. However, outside of the spectacular but highly idiosyncratic attack undertaken by Brenton Tarrant, acts of severe violence motivated by far-right beliefs have not received consistent scholarly attention. The following therefore aims to provide a method for defining and tracking incidents of severe far-right violence, and to build a longitudinal evidence base by which to understand such violence in the New Zealand context.

Methodology

Two primary criteria were used to determine the inclusion of incidents within the following analysis. For a case to be integrated into this dataset, there must have been sufficient evidence to positively determine that the attack was primarily motivated by far-right beliefs. Incidents therefore needed to involve clear statements and / or actions demonstrating that victims were deliberately targeted based on an element of their identity (for example race or religion) by a member of the nativist 'white' majority. Particular attention was given to perpetrators who self-identified as far-right or racist. Incidents where motivation remained ambiguous were excluded, as were attacks between minority communities. Thus, the following presents a dataset of violent acts motivated by far-right beliefs, rather than an analysis of violence perpetrated by far-right actors within New Zealand.

The second primary inclusion criteria related to the severity of the violence being planned or perpetrated. To be included, incidents must have been severe enough to inflict significant physical injury on the victim, or have been perpetrated in a way that could have been physically disabling or even deadly. More specifically, the attack had a fatal, or near fatal outcome, or the perpetrator(s) proactively used potentially lethal weapons, and / or the attack caused significant injuries requiring medical treatment. Such severe physical attacks are here separated as a 'distinct phenomenon,' requiring specialized investigative frameworks to understand and analyse (Ravndal & Jupskås, 2021, p. 133). Incidents of harassment and vandalism have been excluded, as the psychological threshold for committing such attacks was considered much lower. Moreover, as such events are more frequent and less likely to be reported, it was not possible to systematically document the universe of these lower-level incidents within this study. Finally, the inclusion of an incident did not require premeditation. Thus, this dataset includes both acts of planned and premediated far-right violence traditionally conceptualized as terrorism, and spontaneous attacks committed against enemies of the far-right more commonly referred to as hate-crimes.⁷

The period covered by the following analysis is 01/01/1996–31/12/2020. This timeframe, set between the decline in organized skinhead activity that occurred during the mid-1990s, and the immediate aftermath of the 2019 Christchurch attack, has to date not been the focus of much scholarly attention. Individual incidents that met the

aforementioned criteria were systematically deidentified, assigned a unique identifier code, and recorded into a Microsoft Excel database. Each case was coded across 25 unique variables (including perpetrator type, primary weapon used and primary target of the attack), modeled directly on the highly regarded Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset (for more detail see Ravndal et al., 2022). As systematic, comprehensive and comparable datasets continue to be an underdeveloped resource within terrorism studies (Schuurman, 2020, p. 1020), this decision was made to facilitate more direct and reliable cross-national comparisons of far-right violence.

Individual events were identified via several interlinked stages of data collection. Building directly on the process used to identify incidents of far-right violence occurring in Western Europe (Ravndal, 2016) and Australia (Harris-Hogan, 2023), searches commenced with yearly queries of both the Factiva and ProQuest news databases using a customized Boolean search string.⁸ Individualized searches of unique phrases and names associated with specific incidents were then conducted to elicit further information. These searches of local news sources identified approximately 70% of total cases. To identify additional incidents missed by traditional media sources, the second stage involved detailed reading of previous academic studies and government reports related to far-right activity in New Zealand (including aforementioned reports produced by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, and the 'Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019'). A review of material produced by a range of community level interest groups was then undertaken to better understand the phenomenon at a grass-roots level. The final stage of data collection involved searching for the court and or coronial inquest documents associated with each individual event. The digitization of detailed court records throughout this timeframe enabled a representative sample of approximately 15% of cases to be analysed in a level of authoritative detail not possible for all events. Overall, the triangulation of multiple data sources helped to identify a more comprehensive set of cases, reduced the biases and deficiencies inherent in each individual source, and increased the comprehensiveness of the following analysis.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be noted. The number of events documented below may not entirely correspond to the number of attacks actually taking place in New Zealand. Although only recording the most severe incidents, not all attacks may have been reported to authorities, or have found their way into the public domain. Incidents may also have been recorded in insufficient detail to positively confirm motivation. This is the unfortunate reality of studying any largely covert activity. Media reports are also of a more uneven quality than information elicited from the final, corroborated version of events found in court documents, as media stories are often produced using fewer sources and within more immediate timeframes. Media can also selectively emphasize or exaggerate certain aspects of a story due to preconceived ideas or inherent biases (Moskalenko et al., 2023). Hence, there may be mistakes within some of the media sources used. Several more recent cases also remain before the judicial system. Thus, the database will need to be reviewed periodically to ensure that all information is as accurate and up to date as possible.

Results

169 potential incidents were identified and coded into the database. In order to develop the most reliable dataset possible, each case was individually reviewed to confirm that the incident met the above criteria. 77 attacks were immediately included. 69 events were immediately excluded as there was not sufficient detail to confirm that the attack was primarily motivated by far-right beliefs, or the incident was not of sufficient severity to warrant inclusion. Three incidents of internal violence within extreme-right groups were also excluded. The remaining 20 incidents were then reviewed together with the RTV research team (based at the Center for Research on Extremism), in order to access a diverse range of specialist input, and gain an increased level of intercoder reliability between this study and the RTV dataset.⁹ Ultimately, 86 unique cases were included and will be explored in the following analysis.

Incidents

The 86 incidents of serious far-right violence identified by this study are organized by year in [Figure 1](#) (below). What is immediately clear is that these events are not evenly distributed across time.

More than 75% of incidents (65) occurred across the first 15 years analysed, with New Zealand averaging just two incidents per year post-2010. Along with this clear decrease in the frequency of events, has come a simultaneous reduction in the severity of attacks. Of the seven fatal incidents identified, four took place during the 1990s, and 15 March 2019 is the only lethal event to occur post-2010. This reduction in the frequency of fatal attacks very much mirrors international trends, where a clear decrease in instances of lethal violence has also occurred across Western Europe (Ravndal et al., 2022) and Australia (Harris-

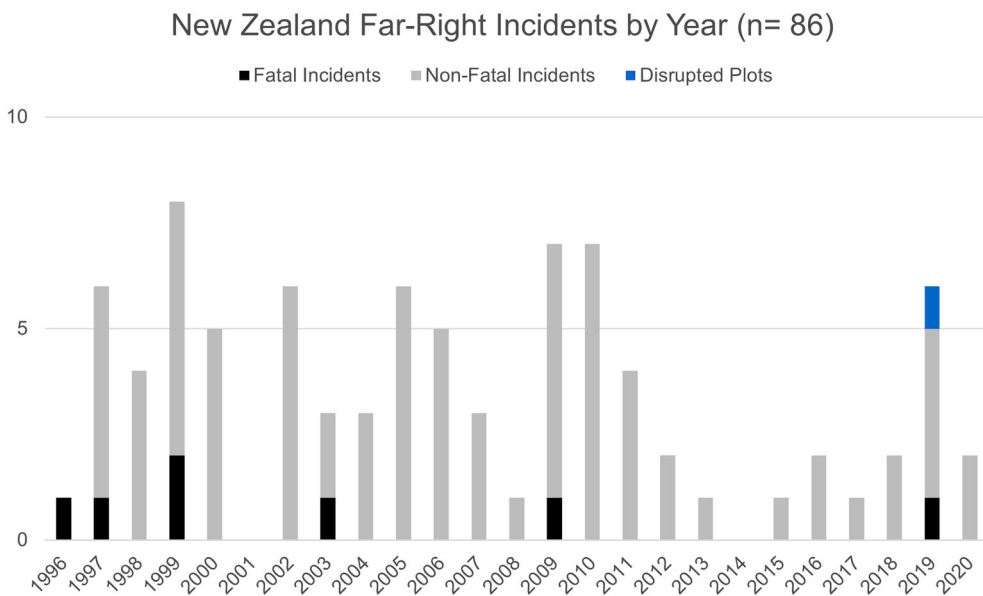


Figure 1. Incidents of far-right violence.

Table 1. Perpetrator type.

Attacker	1996–2000	2001–2010	2011–2020	Total
Directed / Organized / Affiliated	11	5	1	17 (20%)
Social / Informal / Unorganized	7	23	10	40 (47%)
Lone actor	6	13	10	29 (33%)
Total	24	41	21	86

Hogan, 2023). So while it is important to acknowledge the massive psychological and physical impact that the Christchurch attack had a on New Zealand society, this event appears a significant outlier from broader trends.

That said, Tarrant does appear to have immediately inspired New Zealand’s only disrupted far-right terrorist plot. While the event was not widely reported (likely due to it occurring in the week immediately following the 15 March attack), and few specific details are available, a former member of the Russian special forces who had relocated to New Zealand was involved in a ‘semi-vague’ plot.¹⁰ On 26 March 2019, police searched 3 properties linked to the man following ‘concerning emails’ sent to schools in the Christchurch area threatening violence (Bayer, 2019). Police found evidence that he may have been planning an attack on government or police targets (details of the officers that arrested Tarrant were discovered on a list of potential targets), and he was in possession of multiple firearms, including a modified semi-automatic rifle. On 27 March, the suspect was surrounded by armed police and a negotiation team. After a 3-hour stand-off he was found dead from self-inflicted stab wounds (Sherwood, 2019).

Tarrant’s actions also appear to have inspired far-right actors transnationally. In April 2019, 19 year-old John Earnest set fire to the Dar-ul-Arqam mosque in Escondido, California, leaving graffiti in the parking lot that read ‘For Brenton Tarrant’ (Johnson, 2019). The following week, Earnest walked into the Poway Synagogue and used an AR-15 to kill an elderly female worshipper and wound three others, including the Rabbi (United States Attorney’s Office, 2021). While previous research found that a significant terrorist incident did not necessarily increase the risk of a further attack in the immediate aftermath (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 5), the Christchurch event appears to have immediately inspired others, both domestically and internationally (for discussion of subsequent international attacks also linked; see Macklin, 2022). However, there is no evidence that the attack has inspired any further acts of severe violence domestically (across the following 21 months analysed), and incidents appear to have largely reverted to previous levels.

Overall, more than 90% (78) of the incidents identified were non-fatal. While such events have reduced in frequency post-2010, this more chronic violence remains the primary way in which far-right violence manifests in New Zealand. So, while much attention has understandably focused on the events of 15 March, this highly idiosyncratic attack does not appear particularly helpful for understanding the overwhelming majority of violent incidents that have occurred in New Zealand.

Perpetrator type

Table 1 documents the type of attacker identified as committing each incident, with perpetrator type able to be identified across all 86 events.

Across the period analysed, there was a notable reduction in the number of perpetrators affiliated with organized extreme-right groups. Prior to 2002, almost 50% of perpetrators were members of (or connected to) organized groups such as the Road Knights or Southern Hammerskins. Within the security sector, there was also concern that members of the Fourth Reich may have been ‘planning a mass killing’ (Battersby & Ball, 2019, p. 198). Fortunately this mass casualty violence never materialized, and those affiliated with extreme-right groups have only perpetrated two violent attacks since 2005. Across the last 15 years analysed, unorganized social groups and lone actors have almost exclusively been the perpetrators of far-right violence in New Zealand.

In more recent years, various organized alt-right groups have emerged (Battersby & Ball, 2019). At its core, the alt-right is a ‘white-nationalist movement’ and significant figures within the movement ‘want to see the creation of a white ethnostate’ (Hawley, 2017, p. 11). The most prominent alt-right group in New Zealand has been the Dominion Movement, which disbanded shortly after the Christchurch attacks, but re-emerged as part of Action Zealandia (Comerford et al., 2021B, p. 48). However, the drive to participate in ‘real-world’ activities appears much weaker here than in previous organized extreme-right groups (Gilbert & Elley, 2020, p. 286), and the bulk of their activities have thus far been undertaken online. Hence, while individuals associated with the alt-right movement have made threats of violence online (Comerford et al., 2021B), during the period analysed this has not evolved into serious physical violence.

Victims

The primary identity group targeted in each of these 86 cases is presented below in Table 2. Although such victim descriptions are broad and imprecise, these categories reflect what the perpetrator understood their target to be.^a

Members of the New Zealand Asian community have been the primary victims of far-right violence, with one in every three incidents targeting this group. A cluster of attacks directed towards this community is clearly identifiable between 2003 and 2010. This mirrors a similar grouping of attacks specifically targeting Asian tourists that took place

Table 2. Targets of violence.

Primary identity targeted	1996–2000	2001–2010	2011–2020	Total
Asian	1	18	9	28 (33%)
Māori	9	7	1	17 (20%)
Indian subcontinent	3	6	3	12 (14%)
Black	1	3	2	6 (7%)
Queer	2	1	2	5 (6%)
Muslim / Middle Eastern	–	2	3	5 (6%)
Pacific Islander	3	1	–	4 (5%)
Bystander / Good Samaritan	–	–	1	1 (1%)
Left-Wing	1	–	–	1 (1%)
Deserter	1	–	–	1 (1%)
Jewish	–	–	–	0 (0%)
Unknown	3	3	–	6 (7%)
Total	24	41	21	86

^a‘Queer’ is here being used as an umbrella term to capture a broad range of gender and sexual identities. While the long and complicated history of this term needs to be acknowledged and understood, it is being used here to be as inclusive as possible to individuals with a range of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

around 1993. Those incidents led Japanese authorities to officially warn tourists against visiting Christchurch (Addison, 1996, p. 103). Notably, New Zealand's Asian population grew by 74% between 1991 and 1996, and by a further 37% between 1996 and 2001 (Gilbert, 2013, p. 141). On the surface, these waves of immigration, and the subsequent increase in the visibility of the local Asian population, appears to have triggered an increase in far-right attacks. More recently, all incidents identified in 2020 were perpetrated against Asian targets. Given the reported increase in violence directed towards Asian communities worldwide following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2020), such targeting may also continue beyond the period analysed.

While there was clear targeting of visible ethnic minorities across the period studied, only a small number of incidents were directed towards religious communities. Notably, attacks targeting the Muslim community occurred in clusters around significant events. Two incidents occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 7/7/2005 London bombings, with one perpetrator explicitly referencing that event. Another occurred in the weeks following the Christchurch massacre. So while attacks targeting the Muslim community appear rare, when they occur, such events seem to follow high-profile terrorist attacks involving the Islamic community.

Additionally, no incidents of anti-Semitic violence were recorded in the dataset. This is not to say that New Zealand is immune to such violence. For instance, in 1990 a 52-year-old woman yelled anti-Semitic remarks before stabbing four children (aged between six and eight) at a Jewish day school in Auckland. The woman later refused legal representation on grounds that 'there will be no more bloody Jews for me' (Jones, 1990). However, incidents targeting the Jewish population identified across the period analysed were perpetrated by other minority groups, rather than the nativist majority. A similar phenomenon was also observed in Western Europe, where many violent anti-Semitic incidents were not captured by the RTV dataset because they were carried out by Muslim perpetrators (Due Enstad, 2017). Overall, far-right violence in New Zealand has overwhelmingly targeted ethnic minorities, rather than religious communities or left-wing opponents.

Attack type

30% of incidents were determined to be premeditated, including all seven of the fatal events identified. Thus, while more rare, premediated attacks have consistently achieved the most severe outcomes. On the flip side, 70% of attacks appeared spontaneous, including the overwhelming majority of incidents that occurred post-2005. To further understand the nature of these events, Table 3 (below) documents the primary method of attack chosen.

Table 3. Primary weapon used.

Attack type	Number of total incidents	Percentage total	Number of fatal incidents
Severe beating	52	60%	5
Blunt instrument	12	14%	–
Knife / sharp object	7	8%	1
Firearms	6	7%	1
Car	4	5%	–
Explosives	1	1%	–
Petrol bomb	1	1%	–
Sexual assault	1	1%	–
Other	2	2%	–

As the majority of violence identified was spontaneous in nature, it is hardly surprising that 60% of incidents involved no weaponry. Several attacks involving blunt instruments also utilized improvised weapons discovered at the scene of the attack, such as a brick, metal pole or lump of wood. Overall the vast majority of attacks perpetrated in New Zealand have come from lone actors or small unorganized groups, conducting spontaneous acts of violence using readily available (or no) weaponry.

Significantly, only 7% of attackers used firearms. This limited gun violence is clearly responsible (at least in part) for the low levels of lethality across most events. By contrast, the Christchurch attack clearly demonstrated the potential for mass casualties to occur when perpetrators access high caliber weaponry. Tarrant legally obtained two AR-15 style rifles, two shotguns and a lever-action firearm (Macklin, 2019, p. 19), and in his manifesto, Tarrant noted that the ability to obtain these guns legally contributed to his decision to conduct the attack in New Zealand – and not his native Australia. Notably, there had been multiple previous attempts to strengthen New Zealand’s gun control legislation. This included a 1996 government review that recommended ‘a ban on military style semi-automatics ... and that all firearms be individually registered to their owners,’ as well as an ‘Arms Amendment Bill’ proposed in 2005 (Every-Palmer et al., 2021, p. 276). Unfortunately, reform only actually occurred following the 2019 attack.

Location

Figure 2 (below) maps the location where all identified incidents took place. Only 36 attacks occurred on the North Island, an area that accounts for approximately three quarters of New Zealand’s population. Notably, this follows trends in more general violence, with Māori adults living on the North Island significantly ‘less likely to experience ... violent interpersonal offences’ compared to those living on the South (New Zealand Government, 2021, p. 3).

That almost 60% of incidents occurred on the South Island, a region that accounts for only one in four people, indicates a significant geographical concentration in violent far-

Table 4. Incidents by location and compared to population.

Regions (16)	Total incidents	Percentage of attacks	Percentage of population ¹¹
Northland (NI)	1	1%	4% (185,800)
Waikato (NI)	5	6%	10% (475,600)
Auckland (NI)	9	10%	34% (1,654,800)
Bay of Plenty (NI)	–	0%	7% (320,800)
Hawke’s Bay (NI)	5	6%	4% (172,400)
Gisborne (NI)	–	0%	1% (49,500)
Taranaki (NI)	3	3%	2% (121,200)
Manawatu-Whanganui (NI)	5	6%	5% (247,500)
Wellington (NI)	8	9%	11% (525,900)
West Coast (SI)	4	5%	1% (32,400)
Canterbury (SI)	24	28%	13% (622,800)
Otago (SI)	7	8%	5% (235,000)
Southland (SI)	5	6%	2% (100,500)
Nelson (SI)	5	6%	1% (52,700)
Tasman (SI)	2	2%	1% (54,000)
Marlborough (SI)	3	3%	1% (48,700)
Total	86	100%	4,900,600 approx.

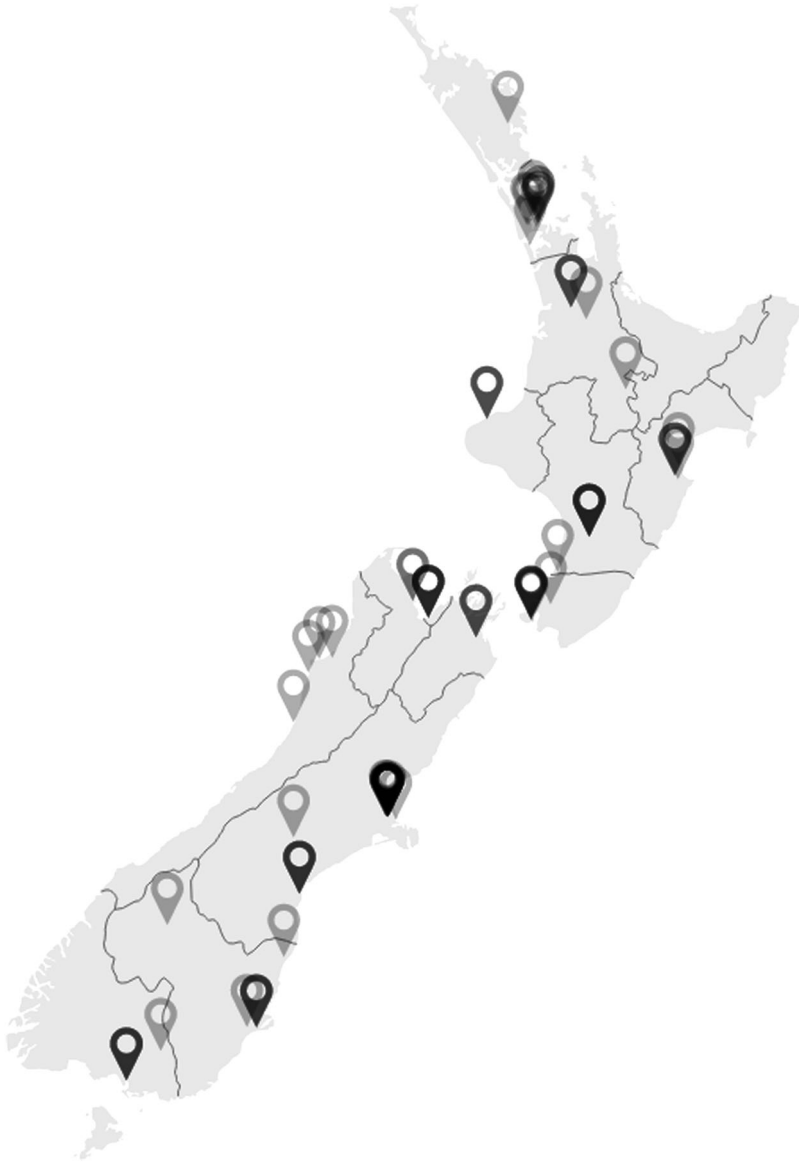


Figure 2. New Zealand incidents by location.

right activity. To further understand this phenomenon, [Table 4](#) breaks incidents down across each of the 16 New Zealand regions.

New Zealand's two major population centers show significant variation in the percentage of attacks experienced relative to population size. While more than one third of New Zealand's population lives in the Auckland region, this area accounts for just 10% of violent acts. Conversely 28% of violence occurred in Canterbury, which is home to only approximately 13% of the population. This difference across these two major population centers largely accounts for the discrepancy in the number of attacks experienced between the North and South Islands.

More specifically, there has been a major concentration of far-right incidents around the Christchurch area. While the organized skinhead activity that centered around Christchurch in the 1980s and the early 1990s had largely disappeared from public view by the early 2000s, violence motivated by far-right beliefs continued to manifest throughout the period studied. So while the nature and method of violence has evolved across time, something ingrained into the Christchurch community appears to have caused recurring patterns of violence to manifest. It also remains unclear how aware Tarrant was of this history when, despite living in Dunedin, he chose Christchurch as the location for his attacks. What is clear, is that Christchurch has been the primary location for both extreme-right groups, and far-right violence, across a significant period of time.

Discussion

86 serious attacks motivated by far-right beliefs were identified by this study. By comparison, New Zealand's closest neighbor (Australia) experienced 168 incidents across the same period (Harris-Hogan, 2023). However, Australia's population is approximately five times greater than that of New Zealand. So while New Zealand has not experienced close to the absolute number of attacks documented in the United Kingdom (Ravndal et al., 2022) or Australia, when incidents are considered on a per-capita basis, it is clear that New Zealand also has a long-standing problem with serious far-right violence.

The 86 attacks documented above predominantly targeted ethnic minorities, with members of the Asian community the primary victim group. On the surface, this appears to confirm previous research into gang activity in New Zealand, which found that 'white power groups surged to national attention, in large part as a result of... increasing levels of Asian immigration' (Gilbert, 2010, p. 415). Given the enormous impact of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide, such violence may also extend beyond the period analysed. Conversely, religious minorities have not been targeted nearly as frequently by far-right attackers. While the longer-term impact of the 2019 Christchurch attack is as yet unclear; in the short-term, far-right violence appears to have reverted to previous trends in New Zealand. It is also noteworthy that Indigenous Māori people were the targets of one in five attacks. In Australia, an almost identical percentage of attacks also targeted the Indigenous community (Harris-Hogan, 2023, p. 16). Given the consistent targeting of Indigenous persons across both countries, Indigenous voices need to be systematically included into future policy responses.

This study demonstrated that the type of far-right violence being perpetrated throughout New Zealand has evolved across time. For instance, prior to 2001, attacks motivated by far-right beliefs were largely perpetrated by individuals affiliated with organized extreme-right groups. However these groups, which emerged out of a strong skinhead scene present across the 1980s and early 1990s, had largely disappeared by the mid-2000s. Since that time, far-right violence has been overwhelmingly perpetrated by lone actors or small unorganized groups. This evolution very much aligns with experiences across other broadly comparable countries. For example, throughout the 1990s Norway was home to several organized extreme-right groups that were responsible for attacking immigrants and threatening political opponents (Fangen & Carlsson, 2013, p. 330). However, the increased police attention that followed the 2001 stabbing of an African-Norwegian teenager by three individuals connected to a neo-Nazi group, caused a significant decline in

organized activity. By 2010, extreme-right groups had become only 'a minor problem' in Norway (Storberget, 2010). This shift towards a less organized far-right threat was then spectacularly illustrated by Anders Breivik only one year later. Similarly, very little violence in Australia has been perpetrated by individuals affiliated to extreme-right groups since the early 1990s (Harris-Hogan, 2023, p. 17). Thus, the move away from organized violence witnessed in New Zealand appears in line with broader international trends. Moving forward, security services will need to avoid an over-focus on organized groups when assessing the potential for severe violence motivated by far-right beliefs.

Another evolution broadly in line with international trends is the significant reduction in the frequency of attacks across New Zealand post-2010. While the high psychological and human impact of the Christchurch massacre may give the impression that incidents of serious far-right violence are increasing in frequency, it is important to understand trends longitudinally. Overall, 75% of identified incidents, and 86% of fatal attacks, occurred prior to 2011. Notably, a significant drop in the frequency of violent incidents also occurred across Australia post-2010 (Harris-Hogan, 2023). Given that affiliated violence reduced substantially more than a decade previous, additional explanations are required as to why this reduction occurred.

On the surface, the rise of social media platforms and smartphone applications appear potentially relevant here. While involvement in online platforms is not a new phenomenon for the far-right, with organized groups and supporters active on a range of forums since the 1990s, increasing social media use has been a growing trend among far-right actors worldwide (Haanshuus, 2018). Activism limited solely to the internet and social media activity, commonly referred to as 'Slacktivism,' has become 'particularly attractive' for countries with a small or struggling organized far-right scene. Here the virtual community can compensate for the lack of a larger community of support (Burris et al., 2000, p. 232). For instance, militant far-right groups that were active in some Norwegian communities during the 1990s largely moved 'from the street to the computer' (Bjørge & Gjelsvik, 2015, p. 48). This 'Slacktivism' phenomenon also appears to have occurred within the New Zealand far-right, where organized activity previously taking place in physical locations, is now overwhelmingly contained within online echo-chambers. This shift away from organized in-person interactions may have in-turn helped to reduce acts of physical violence motivated by far-right beliefs across New Zealand.

Since 2005, the overwhelming majority of attacks have been perpetrated by lone actors or small unorganized groups, conducting spontaneous acts of violence using readily available (or no) weaponry. To date, this more chronically occurring form of severe violence has been almost entirely overlooked by policymakers and practitioners when assessing the threat posed by the far-right. To better understand and more holistically respond to the problem of far-right violence in New Zealand, it is necessary to systematically monitor such violence across time. This need was noted by the *Christchurch Royal Commission* which, among 44 wide-ranging recommendations, noted that the Government should revise existing methods to capture and record 'hate-motivations' (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2020, p. 9). In response, New Zealand authorities have begun documenting thousands of 'hate-motivated' incidents. While this is certainly a step in the right direction, such incidents are clearly extremely broadly defined. This raises serious questions regarding how systematic this effort is, and how useful such enormously wide-ranging data will actually be in developing

nuanced understandings of contemporary far-right violence. One recent analysis found that the way the commission's recommendations were being implemented 'leaves New Zealand society little better off when it comes to understanding the nature and scale of the threat' (Rogers et al., 2023, p. 4).

To complement these more general efforts, and assist in making policy responses more targeted and nuanced, New Zealand authorities should consider implementing a discrete ongoing capability to monitor violent attacks motivated by far-right beliefs. Ideally this program would combine specialist subject matter experience in developing consistent definitions and inclusion criteria, with access to official police data, to provide a comprehensive method to both monitor violence, and analyse trends over time.

Relatedly, organized responses to the problem of violent extremism in New Zealand remain almost non-existent. A formal government led strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE) first emerged as long ago as 2003 in the United Kingdom, and in 2009 in Australia (Harris-Hogan, 2020, p. 98). By contrast, New Zealand released its first 'Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism National Strategy' in mid-February 2020. Moreover, unlike responses produced by its Five Eyes partners, the New Zealand CVE strategy was only six pages long, and provided very little in the way of implementation guidance (Battersby et al., 2020, p. 7). The *Christchurch Royal Commission* was also criticized for its 'lack of expertise on counterterrorism' (Rogers et al., 2023, p. 10). A specialist capability to monitor and analyse severe far-right violence could also be extended to advise in the development of systematic process for CVE intervention and disengagement, and could also make recommendations regarding future potential legislation. Overall, establishing a specialist capability to monitor and respond to far-right violence across New Zealand would ensure that the country is not responding to this chronically occurring problem solely through the narrow prism of a single, highly idiosyncratic event.

Conclusion

The events of 15 March 2019 represented a spectacularly lethal version of a poorly documented phenomenon chronically occurring within New Zealand. While the nature of this violence has evolved over time, and lessened in frequency post-2010, severe violence motivated by far-right beliefs manifested consistently across the period analysed. Despite occurring on an isolated island, this study confirmed that this violence followed a number of key transnational trends. Simultaneously, far-right violence manifested in some unique ways within New Zealand, with a significant concentration of incidents in and around the Christchurch area. The limited use of firearms also appears to have contributed to the low-levels of lethality across the period analysed. Hence gun control measures should be seen as a key pillar of future counter-terrorism efforts. Although much recent attention has been paid to the *Christchurch Royal Commission*, thus far systematic policy responses appear limited. Moreover, while there has been a considerable focus on understanding the events of March 2019, the highly idiosyncratic nature of this event makes it largely unhelpful for understanding the overwhelming majority of far-right incidents occurring in New Zealand. Moving forward, understanding the experiences of broadly comparable countries, including the Norwegian response to the 22 July mass casualty attack, and Australia's work developing a comprehensive counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism infrastructure, may prove valuable.

Notes

1. Tarrant conducted consecutive attacks at the al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, but was detained before he could complete a third attack at the Ashburton Mosque. An improvised explosive device found in his car was also successfully defused (THE QUEEN v BRENTON HARRISON TARRANT, 2020).
2. While this study will use the official and more widely recognised name New Zealand, it also acknowledges the Māori-language name for the land – Aotearoa.
3. The Sydney offices of the International Socialists were bombed by National Action on the same evening, suggesting links between extreme-right organisations in Australia and New Zealand (Freney, 1984, p. 29).
4. New Zealand man Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk, who claimed to be the rightful King of Poland, Hungary and Bohemia, was also an ‘enabler’ for extreme-right propaganda internationally for nearly fifty years. For more information see Macklin & Fowlie, 2019.
5. The ‘Five Eyes,’ is the world’s oldest formalised intelligence network. In the aftermath of World War II, the US and UK expanded their existing intelligence sharing arrangements to include allies Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Pfluke, 2019, p. 303). Today these countries operate one of the most comprehensive intelligence sharing networks in the world.
6. This work identified approximately 75% of the 39 incidents of severe right-wing violence noted by this analysis across the same period.
7. For further discussion on the distinctions between far-right terrorism, violence and hate crimes, see Bjørge and Ravndal (2019, p. 6).
8. For further detail about the annual queries and customised search strings used, please see <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/>
9. Thank you to Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Simone Sessolo, Charlotte Tandberg, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Hedda Stang Lund for their advice and guidance in the development of this dataset, and for their assistance in understanding the RTV dataset and the coding process that sits behind it.
10. A ranking of ‘semi-vague’ was based on a combination of factors related to ‘attack plausibility,’ including capability and target selection. For more detail on the application of this plot hierarchy see Ravndal et al. (2022, p. 27).
11. Approximate population estimates are as at 30 June 2018 from Stats NZ (latest available census). Retrieved from: <https://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/WBOS/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLECODE7512>

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