

Violence Against Members of Congress and Their Staff: A Brief Overview

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Questions about the personal security and safety of Members of Congress and their staffs are of enduring concern for the House, Senate, and the United States Capitol Police (USCP). Broader interest in the media and among the public arises in the aftermath of an incident such as the June 14, 2017, attack on at least 17 Members of Congress, several staff, USCP officers, and members of the public in Alexandria, Virginia. In that incident, a Member was critically wounded, and others, including another Member, a congressional staffer, USCP officers, and a member of the public were injured during a shooting that occurred as Members were practicing for an annual congressional baseball game.

There may also be concern about the level and extent of threats against Members. Since consistent threat information is not publicly available, however, it cannot be determined whether the number of threats against Members and congressional staff has increased, decreased, or remained the same over time.

Violence Against Members of Congress

[Since 1789, 12,242 individuals have served in Congress.](#) Official records, supplemented from available news accounts, suggest that there have been at least 22 identified instances of attacks involving a total of at least 41 Members who were targeted by assailants. In 11 of those instances, the attacks were thwarted, or resulted in no serious injuries to Members. Another four incidents resulted in the wounding of eight Members. Finally, seven instances resulted in the deaths of seven Members.

In these examples, with the exception of a 1954 shooting in the House chamber, and the Alexandria attack affecting more than one Member, individual Members were usually the target of violence. In others, Members or congressional staff may have been secondary targets in attacks that targeted Congress or other components of the U.S. government or electoral process. These data exclude Members who participated in wars as combatants, or circumstances when Members attempted or committed suicide. Several other instances, in which some Members voluntarily initiated violent activities, including duels, fistfights, beatings, and other individualized conflicts, sometimes with other Members, are excluded from consideration. Also excluded are incidents in which the Capitol was attacked, but no Members or staff were reported as injured. Examples include the burning of the Capitol during the War of 1812; the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in which the Capitol and Congress may have been a target; and bombings in the Capitol in 1915, 1971,

and 1983. A final group of exclusions includes incidents in which Members were involved in violent activities or killed, but the circumstances do not appear related to their roles as Members.

Violence Against Congressional Staff

In at least six of the incidents of attacks on Members, some congressional staff were also affected. In 1905, "Doc" Thompkins, private secretary to Representative John M. Pinckney of Texas, was wounded in a riot in which Representative Pinckney was killed. In 1935, Earle Christenberry, secretary to Senator Huey Pierce Long of Louisiana, opened a package containing a bomb, which did not explode. In a 1978 incident, Jackie Speier, who currently serves as a Representative from California, was a staff member working for Representative Leo Joseph Ryan of California when she was critically wounded by gunfire in an attack in Guyana. Representative Ryan was killed in the attack. A 1998 incident in which a gunman entered the Capitol resulted in fatalities to two USCP officers. A January 2011 attack in Tucson, Arizona, resulted in a congressional staff member and several constituents being killed, and a Member and a number of others, including other congressional staff, critically injured.

Identifying instances of violence against congressional staff poses significant challenges. Because they are private citizens who do not receive extensive, sustained public attention, there is no assurance that all instances of violence against them can be identified. Violence against staff that is reported here happened in the course of their official duties. Identifying all who have served Congress in a staff capacity, and then identifying whether they have suffered violence during that service, presents all but insurmountable obstacles to compiling an exhaustive and authoritative inventory of violent incidents.

A consequence of these challenges is that the material presented here cannot with authority be said to comprise all of the attacks on Members of Congress or staff that have ever occurred.

Responses to Violence Against Congress

On at least three occasions, incidents of violence involving Members of Congress have led to congressional legislative or administrative responses. These include

- a prohibition of the giving or accepting, within the District of Columbia, of challenges to a duel, following the death of Representative Jonathan Cilley of Maine, who was killed in a duel with Representative William J. Graves of Kentucky on February 24, 1838;
- the enactment of law in the 91st Congress (1969-1970) making it a federal offense to assassinate, kidnap, or assault a Member of Congress or Member-elect, or to endeavor or conspire to commit such offenses following the assassination of Senator Robert Francis Kennedy of New York on June 6, 1968; and
- the initiation of congressional mail screening following the delivery in the fall of 2001 of letters containing anthrax spores to the offices of Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota.