

# Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) Codebook

Humanitarian Outcomes

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## Humanitarian **Outcomes**

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## Record of changes to the AWSD and the codebook

Date of revision	Revision
February 18, 2021	<p>The institution type categories were adjusted to allow users to sort for National Red Cross/Crescent Society victims. The categories listed are now:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN, INGO, ICRC and IFRC, NRCS, NNGO (label changed from LNGO to match other databases from Humanitarian Outcomes).</li> </ul>
January 14, 2020	<p>The following AWSD categories were changed online and the information recategorised, where necessary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aerial bombardment: Under 'means of attack' aerial bombardment was recategorised and now only includes bombing (missiles, cluster bomb, barrels bombs, chemical attacks) from aircraft (planes, UAVs and helicopters). As a result of this disaggregation, 'shelling' became its own category and is defined by ground originating mortar attacks, heavy artillery fire and RPGs.</li> <li>Bombing: Under 'means of attack' bombing was renamed 'Other Explosives' to include lobbed grenades, stationary bombs, and some IEDs (i.e. pressure cooker bombs, IEDs attached to buildings)</li> <li>'Suicide VBIED' and 'Remote VBIED' incidents were sorted into the current 'VBIED' category and then the 'suicide VBIED' and 'remote VBIED' categories were removed. Details around the nature of the attack (i.e. whether it was a suicide attack) were moved into the public information section.</li> </ul> <p>* Note: These changes should not have changed overview statistics in the annual <i>Figures at a Glance Report</i>. However, as these figures can change with new incident information received after the publication of the report, it is recommended to download the latest dataset.</p>
Spring 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Source' and 'Verified' category: The source category was made public and records the original source of the incident. The 'verified' category was created to help users identify whether the incident has been confirmed by an agency or through the triangulation of information.</li> </ul>
February 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NNGO/NRCS column was split to separate columns and NRCS was combined with IFRC at the request of the Federation.</li> </ul>
November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adjustment of motive distinctions and criteria</li> </ul>
January 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addition of private field (available on request) on deconfliction information</li> </ul>

## Introduction to the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD)

The AWSD is a publicly available database that records major incidents of violence against aid workers. It is global in scope, collecting incidents from all countries that have a humanitarian operational presence, and granular in detail, including geographic coordinates as well as the perpetrators involved, the tactics of violence used, and the types of staff and organisations affected. Humanitarian Outcomes partners initiated the database in 2005 and made it available online in 2010, with funding support from the US, Canadian, and Irish governments. The database includes incidents dating back to 1997, with more comprehensive reports dating from 2000-onwards. This is due to the better availability of data resulting from improved media reporting around aid worker security incidents and more comprehensive security reporting by humanitarian organisations. It is a 'living' database, meaning that incidents are updated as new information becomes available, including incidents from past years.

The database is organised on the attack ('incident') as the primary unit of analysis. Incidents are sourced, coded, and manually entered into the database by human operators who review the incidents to ensure that they meet the parameters for inclusion. When a coder cannot determine whether the incident meets the parameters, the incident is referred to two other members of the database team for review and assessment. Incidents and specific categories of information are periodically reviewed for coding consistency.

The AWSD records incidents of 'major violence' against aid workers, the definition of which includes acts with the following outcomes: kidnapping, killing, wounding (i.e. serious injury requiring medical attention), rape and sexual assault.

Aid workers are defined as the employees and associated personnel (paid and volunteers) of not-for-profit aid agencies (both national and international) that provide material and technical assistance in humanitarian relief contexts.

This includes both emergency relief and multi-mandated (relief and development) organisations: NGOs, local volunteer groups, the International Movement of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, donor agencies and the UN agencies belonging to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN-Habitat, WFP and WHO) plus IOM, UNRWA, UNMAS and when applicable, the World Bank. The aid worker definition includes various locally contracted staff (e.g., drivers, security guards, etc.), and does not include UN peacekeeping personnel, human rights workers, election monitors or purely political, religious, or advocacy organizations. Contracted workers and vendors of the humanitarian organisations, even though not considered staff, are included if affected by violence in the course of their work supporting the humanitarian mission..

Incidents affecting staff from private or state-run health care systems are recorded in the AWSD if they are directly or indirectly supported by humanitarian agencies through the provision of financial support that provide for human resources. Private clinic staff whose salaries are paid by an INGO or a World Bank supported national government run Ebola programme are two examples. Incidents meeting these parameters would be included in the AWSD.

The AWSD does not include information on safety incidents such as road accidents, illness, mine personnel that are hurt or killed as a result of mine clearing operations that result in accidental detonations, health care workers that are not part of or supported by an aid agency or incidents that occur to family members of humanitarian staff.

## Data collection

The AWSD research team updates the database on a daily-to-weekly basis, with incident information collected from a variety of sources including online news and social media sources using Humanitarian Outcomes' purpose-built data-collection tool, direct reporting and data-sharing partnerships with humanitarian consortia and agencies, global security reports, and public reporting by agencies.<sup>1</sup>

Incidents are included if parameters for inclusion are met and when enough due diligence is conducted to confirm that the incident did occur and was not initially misreported. This can include triangulating initial reports by looking at different sources of information to following up on the incident with the reporting source. All incidents are entered as 'pending' until they go through the annual verification process.

## Verification of incident information

At the beginning of each year, all AWSD incidents entered in the previous year are systematically verified to ensure that the data are as accurate as possible.

Any incidents that meet the parameters for inclusion but are missing primary information are followed up with the reporting agency, when available. Direct follow-up is the primary and preferred method of verification. This also allows the verification team to follow-up on incidents from earlier years in order to gather information that was not initially available due to the incident still being active, such as in the case of on-going kidnapping incidents. Incidents that cannot be verified or matched to an agency

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<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian Outcomes does not source information from other similar datasets without permission and mutual agreement that in so doing strengthen both datasets for different purposes that do not overlap or duplicate aims and missions.

are verified through other means, including photographic evidence, confirmation via partner agencies, NGO security consortiums, and media outlets. Updates to the database are continuously accepted and actively sought for previous years, especially for incidents whose information is likely to change, such as kidnapping incidents or multiple casualty complex attacks where the initial data may have been misreported in the initial chaos of an unfolding event.

### **Primary verification**

All incidents in which the affected organisations can be determined are verified with those organisations to confirm or correct details and make changes to the data after the initial event has passed, on the assumption that, with time, more information has emerged and solidified and the event details can be more readily confirmed. Verification of local partner incident information is also requested in areas where access to local organisations is difficult to obtain due to language or other barriers.

### **Secondary verification**

Incidents that cannot be matched to a specific agency are assessed as to the overall credibility of the report in question, the reporting agency, their standards, and practices. When possible, the information is also triangulated through different outlets that have separate information streams to ensure that the incident occurred.

### **Public availability**

The AWSD is an ongoing project of Humanitarian Outcomes and can be accessed via [www.aidworkersecurity.org](http://www.aidworkersecurity.org) or <https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/aid-worker-security-database-awsd>. Users can custom search or download the entirety of the data in a .csv file. Humanitarian Outcomes also makes this data available through an Application Programming Interface (API). Information about the API is made available on request through [info@aidworkersecurity.org](mailto:info@aidworkersecurity.org).

## Data user agreement

The AWSO is publicly available and free to use for non-commercial purposes. Under this license, it is permissible to share and adapt the database for research purposes as long as credit is given to the source by referencing the database in research work or any new non-commercial product that is produced from the dataset. The Aid Worker Security Database is supported by grants that make it possible to provide the information to the public at no cost. However, to be accountable to our donors, we request that any work that uses the AWSO or its analytical products are brought to Humanitarian Outcomes' attention. Please send a link to work utilizing or created using AWSO data to [info@aidworkersecurity.org](mailto:info@aidworkersecurity.org).

Any use of data drawn from this website should include the following in the citation, 'Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org'.

## Spatial data information

The AWSO includes spatial location information for incidents including: (1) country, (2) administrative area names at the provincial and district level, (3) city, town, (4) other identifying information (road names and markers) and, (5) incident geocodes. Geocodes were added retroactively to years before 2010, using [OpenCage](#), [Nominatim](#), [Open Street Map](#), and [GeoNames](#), which were used under [Open Database](#) and [Creative Commons](#) licenses. Global spatial data from 2010 onwards are obtained by using different open source geocoding websites including [Google Maps](#) and [LatLong](#), at the time the incident is entered into the database by a member of the AWSO team.

## Spatial data caveats

Spatial information is coded at the point of the incident occurrence and best efforts are always made to provide precise coordinate locations. Occasionally, precise location information is unavailable. In those incidents, where only the general area locations are known, the geocodes were placed at the closest center-point to the location.

For instances where only the country or province is known, the geocode is coded at the center point of the country or province. This is particularly relevant in some instances of aerial bombing where an entire locale is affected in a single incident or where the precise geolocation cannot be obtained.

Road attacks without precise location information or identifying markers (closest village, refugee camp, etc.) are coded in the midpoint of the road. Otherwise, they are coded to the most precise

location information available, and additional locational information is included in the 'details' field, where possible.

### Confidentiality and anonymity

The database does not include the names of individual victims or the agencies affected by an incident. This is done in consideration of the victims and their families who may not wish to have the names publicised in this format and to afford equal respect to the many victims for whom this information is not available. The institutional affiliations are listed within broad categories (UN/Red Cross/NGO/other) to encourage open sharing of what is considered sensitive information from an organisational perspective. The Red Cross Movement is listed by name due to the explicit request of the agency but does not include additional personally identifying information within the incident description.



## Victim descriptive data

Victim - descriptive data	
<b>Aid workers affected</b>	<p>Aid workers are defined as personnel and contractors attached to humanitarian or multi-mandated aid agencies (UN, NGOs, and the Red Cross movement) that operate in humanitarian relief context providing assistance.</p> <p>Not included: Personnel of commercial contracts working on reconstruction projects, missionaries or other personnel of organizations that have a primarily religious mission, human rights workers or staff of political/advocacy organizations, electoral monitors and peacekeeping personnel.</p>
<b>Organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN – UN agencies and offices that engage in field-level humanitarian assistance (includes all agencies belonging to the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (IASC): FAO, IOM, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, WHO, as well as UNRWA, OCHA and UNMAS</li> <li>• ICRC – International and national staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross</li> <li>• IFRC – International Federation of the Red Cross/Crescent international and national staff</li> <li>• INGO – International NGOs that program aid in in humanitarian contexts.</li> <li>• NNGO- National NGOs</li> <li>• NRCS - National Red Cross/Red Crescent societies</li> </ul>
<b>Type of staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other - Funding bodies, other international organizations involved with humanitarian programming (i.e., the World Bank and donor agency staff)</li> <li>• International – Expatriate or ‘mobile staff working for international NGOs</li> <li>• National - Staff working in their country of origin. Includes both national staff of international NGOs, local contractors and aid workers working for local NGOs</li> <li>• Sex of victims</li> </ul>

## Gender coding

Organisations have gotten significantly better at reporting the gender of affected staff members over the last ten years. On some occasions this information is still not included in incident reports. These are marked ‘unknown’ unless they can be reasonably surmised according to work rules.

## Staff type coding

Incidents where staff type is not captured by the reporting agency and cannot be verified are generally coded as national staff members due to the greater likelihood considering that national staff member incidents tend to be underreported while international staff members are usually denoted as such in media and other reporting.

## Incident descriptive data

Incident - descriptive data			
<b>Outcomes</b>	<p>The nature of the violence in terms of its outcome for the victim:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Killed</b></li> <li>• <b>Kidnapped</b> – Held for at least 24 hours. If a victim was killed in the course of a kidnapping, the incident is counted as a killing. Kidnappings are events in which the aid worker is abducted and held against their will regardless of whether a formal ransom demand is made.</li> <li>• <b>Wounded</b> – Injuries sustained from intentional violence (includes landmines) requiring medical treatment.</li> </ul>		
<b>Type/methods of violence</b>	<b>Tactic 1 (Means of violence)</b>	<b>Tactic 2 (the broader type or context of the incident)</b>	<b>Location</b>
	<b>Aerial bombardment</b> (attacks via aircraft, including UAVs)	<b>Ambush</b> (attack on road)	<b>Home</b> (private home, not compound)
	<b>Bodily assault</b> (beating with no weapons or non-fire weapons other than firearms, such as a knife or club)	<b>Combat</b> (or police operations) / Crossfire	<b>Office</b> , org compound or project site
	<b>Body-borne IED</b>	<b>Individual attack or assassination</b>	<b>Project site</b> (village, camp, distribution point, hospital, etc.)
	<b>Complex attack</b> (explosives in conjunction with small arms)	<b>Mob violence</b> (rioting)	<b>Other public location</b> (street, market, restaurant, etc.)
	<b>Kidnapping</b> (released, rescued, or escaped)	<b>Raid</b> (armed incursion by group on home, office, or project site)	<b>Road</b> (vehicle in transit)
	<b>Kidnap-killed</b>	<b>Detention</b> (by official government forces or police, where abuse takes place)	<b>Custody</b> (official forces/police)
	<b>Landmine or UXO detonation</b>		
	<b>Other Explosives</b> (i.e., set explosives with a stationary target, lobbed grenade)		
	<b>Rape or serious sexual assault</b> (defined as forcible sexual contact.)		
	<b>Roadside IED</b>		
	<b>Shelling</b> (mortar, artillery fire, RPG)		
	<b>Shooting</b> (small arms /light weapons, e.g. pistols, rifles, machine guns)		
	<b>Vehicle-born IED</b> (unknown whether remote control or suicide)		
	<b>Unknown</b>		

## Aerial bombardment

Aerial incidents sometimes have an added challenge when determining how many incidents should be counted in the AWSD as separate events. When multiple aid workers are affected in an aerial bombardment event that occurs in the same part of town and in the same aerial assault, even if multiple aid workers are affected, it is counted as one event.

Aid workers who are affected by 'double tap' aerial assault strikes on the same area, when there is a pause in the bombardment and the state actor returns to strike the area again with the intent of ensuring maximum impact and damage, are counted as a separate incident.

Incidents that occur in different cities or different parts of the same city, where there is a distinct difference in geographic distance between the two, are counted as separate incidents.

Where this is not possible to ascertain, the incident is recorded as reported by the agency. Otherwise, if no agency report is available, the incident is recorded as one incident with multiple casualties until further information becomes available.

## Deconfliction

If information is available from the source on any deconfliction efforts made by the organisation, it is noted in a private section of incident details. Due to the nuances of different types of deconfliction efforts, this information is not available from the public download but is available upon request.

## Perpetrator Descriptive Data

In most recorded attacks, the identity of the perpetrator(s) is unconfirmed or unknown. However, when available, the AWSD tracks this information. In 2017, the AWSD team reviewed and coded perpetrator data from 2011 to 2016 for the Aid Worker Security Report, *Behind the attacks: A look at the perpetrators of violence against aid workers*. The rest of the perpetrator information from 1997 to 2012 was reviewed and publicly released in September 2019. Identifying perpetrators presents many challenges, perpetrators might be incorrectly identified even in official reports, and even when a group takes responsibility for an attack it could be a false claim. When available, additional information on how the perpetrator was identified is included in the 'details' column.

Perpetrator Description		
Individuals	<b>Unaffiliated</b>	Perpetrator acted alone and was most likely not affiliated to a official group or organisation. E.g. common criminal acts, lone wolf attacks, or attacks by civilians (or mobs).
	<b>Aid recipient</b>	Aid beneficiary with grievance that results in a confrontation with staff member(s) of supporting aid organisation, which leads to a serious attack.
	<b>Staff member</b>	A current or former employee of an aid organisation with a grievance or perceived grievance that results in a confrontation that leads to a serious attack.
Organised groups	<b>Criminal</b>	Organised criminal groups like “pirates”, cartels, syndicates, mafia, gangs. Includes groups whose primary motivation is criminal activity funding and commercial enterprise. Distinct from other groups that have a primary ideological aim.
	<b>State</b>	Officially recognised authorities, representatives, or groups authorized by the state. This includes military forces, law enforcement and security forces, paramilitary forces like militias, foreign state entities. 1. Foreign or coalition forces 2. Host state 3. State: unknown 4. Police or paramilitary
	<b>Global</b>	Global in operational scope and scale of ambition. Includes Al Qaeda core, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State.
	<b>Non-State Armed groups</b>	Control or influence over a territory overlapping current national boundaries on ethnic or ideological grounds. Includes Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram.
	<b>National</b>	Insurgent groups fighting national government. E.g. the Taliban.
	<b>Subnational (local)</b>	Smaller groups seeking autonomy or control over areas within the existing state. E.g. Mai Mai militias.
	<b>Unknown</b>	Perpetrator cannot be discerned from available information or through verification.

## Actor type

Actor type is categorised by the primary instigator group responsible for the event. When there is no group denoted and the field has been categorised as 'unaffiliated', that means the actor does not fall into a group category and that the perpetrator was most likely working on their own (i.e. individual attack by a civilian, lone wolf attacks). Initially, the actor categories only tracked perpetrator groups, but two other individual categories were added, 'staff member' and 'aid recipient' as it was determined that these could have relevance and be of interest to the humanitarian community.

In incidental crossfire incidents, it is often difficult to determine which side was responsible for the wounding or killing of the aid worker. Although these account for less than 12% of incidents in the AWSD, when they do occur the primary actor is coded as 'unknown' and any additional information about the perpetrators is noted in the incident description.

In a multiple actor event, the perpetrator with a political motive and intention to affect the aid worker is listed as the primary actor. For example, if an aid worker is kidnapped by a criminal group and then sold to a non-state armed actor, the non-state armed actor is listed as the primary perpetrator. However, the incident description will include additional details on the primary instigator of the event.

In some cases, especially regarding kidnapping and criminal incidents, identifying whether the individual acted alone or as part of a group is challenging. The AWSD makes the best assumption based on information from security managers or lists the perpetrator group and name as 'unknown' in cases where it is not possible to determine the perpetrator group. The incident description category may include further information.

## Motive Descriptive Data

When it can be reasonably determined from the available information, perpetrator motives are considered in relation to the victims' status as an aid worker.

Motive	
Political	<p>Incident is related in whole or part to the victims' affiliation with an aid organization or their specific activities, presence, and perceived identity, i.e., when the purpose of the attack is to disrupt, divert, or punish the delivery of aid to advance of a political, military or ideological agenda.</p> <p>Incidents are classified as politically motivated (as opposed to incidental or unknown) when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Political actors (governments, militaries, militias, NSAGs) explicitly claim responsibility and deliberate intent for the attack</li> </ul> <p>Or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Corroborated reports include firsthand determinations or evidence of the identity of the perpetrator</li> </ul> <p><b>Or when two of the following criteria apply:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Reports include the (known or strongly suspected) identity of the perpetrator as a political actor, i.e. first-hand determinations and evidence cited in the original incident report)</li> <li>* Severity/lethality of tactics used (e.g., bombs, suicide attacks, targeted IEDs, etc.);</li> <li>* A high degree of deliberate violence inflicted without apparent economic motive (e.g., aid workers killed or seriously injured with vehicles/facilities burned, but not robbed).</li> <li>* Aid worker victims were not part of larger group containing potential military targets (e.g. police, government, national military)</li> </ul>
Economic	Economic motives only, including robberies and banditry - no political agenda or benefit.
Incidental	Aid worker status not known or not relevant to the perpetrators in either economic or political sense.
Disputed	Pertaining to events where the perpetrator is likely culpable based on available evidence but contests the accusation or issues no statement.
Unknown	Motive cannot be discerned from available information or through verification.

## Source category

The source category records the primary means by which the incident was identified. There are four different classifications for the source category.

- **Focal point** – the incident was reported through a security manager at the affected agency or a security consortium.
- **Media** – the incident was collected through print, broadcast or internet media sources.

- **Official report** - the incident was mentioned in an official document by a humanitarian agency, security consortium or other authority.

When available, primary sources cited in the media are noted in the 'details' section of the database. Regardless of who or what the primary source was, all incidents are revisited during the verification process in order to update information and confirm the verification of the information with an agency security manager, where available, or another method of verification.

### Verified category

- **Verified** – incidents whose information has been confirmed by the affected agency or by other means (see the section on verification) are listed as being verified.
- **Pending** – these incidents are likely to have occurred, but the incident information is being/has to be confirmed through a process of verification.
- **Archived** – Incidents that may have additional information that could be made available on a case-by-case basis by request. Also, some historical incidents from the 1990s that did not have enough information to verify through agencies.

# Appendix

Figure 1: Aerial bombing motive classification workflow

