

# Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD)

## Codebook



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## Record of changes to the AWSD and the codebook

Date of revision	Revision
May 2025	Addition of new incident type: The AWSD starts tracking detentions/arrests of aid workers by host states and de facto authorities as a new category, changes made to public site and codebook
January 2025	Addition of deconfliction marker: private field (available on request) on deconfliction information
November 2021	Adjustment of motive distinctions and criteria
February 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 2020	<p>Refinement of definitions: 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	'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.

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

The AWSDB is a publicly available database that records major incidents of violence and detention 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 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 AWSDB records major security incidents against aid workers, the definition of which includes acts with the following outcomes:

- Killing
- Kidnapping or abduction by non-state or criminal elements for more than 24 hours
- Serious wounding, defined as injuries that would require medical attention
- Detention or arrest by host state, police, or de facto authorities for more than 24 hours<sup>1</sup>
- 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, IOM, OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, UN-HABITAT, UNFPA, UN Women, WFP and WHO, excluding OHCHR) plus UNRWA, UNMAS and others, when applicable. For instances where the affected organisation falls outside of these categories but their activities are considered humanitarian, the 'Other' category is used. 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 organisations. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Detention is distinct from abduction/kidnapping in that it is the holding of a person against their will by a person or group acting under cover of authority, but without formal charges, a clear timeline or conditions for their release.

Incidents affecting staff from private or state-run health care systems are recorded in the AWSO 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 AWSO.

The AWSO does not include accidental safety incidents such as road accidents, illness, mine personnel that are hurt or killed as a result of accidental detonations during mine clearing operations, 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 AWSO research team updates the database on a daily 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>2</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.

## Annual verification

At the beginning of each year (January), all AWSO incidents entered in the previous year are systematically verified to ensure that the data is as accurate as possible.

All incidents with organisational information, regardless of the primary collection source, are verified with the affected group to confirm or correct details and make changes to the data after the initial event has passed. 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 ongoing kidnapping incidents. 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.

Incidents that cannot be verified or matched to an agency 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 initial details may have been misreported in the initial chaos of an unfolding event.

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<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian Outcomes works closely with other security and conflict datasets to strengthen aid worker security data and reduce duplicative collection efforts.

Each incident publicly lists whether or not the verification process has been completed in the 'verified' column, which includes one of the below labels:

- **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.

## Spatial data information

The AWSO records location information for incidents, including:

1. Country name and code (admin 1)
2. Sub-national region (admin 2)
3. Province/district (admin 3)
4. City, town, village or road markers (admin 4)
5. Geocodes (GPS coordinates)

Location admin level descriptors (1-4) are found in public sources or provided directly by the reporting organisation. Private source location descriptors are entered based on individual agreements and discussions with the focal point to ensure no confidential information or specific sensitive locations are shared unintentionally. In instances where the location names are deemed sensitive by the reporting contact, the incident is coded only with admin levels 1-2. In other circumstances where a redacted location is requested, a limited date can also entered (ie. month name only without an exact day) to ensure further anonymisation. Where the incident location was reported publicly, admin level names are completed using open source mapping and internal spelling standardisation documentation.

Geocodes are also included for all incidents in the AWSO and are assigned in different ways depending on the source of the incident. 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. For incidents 2010 onwards, geocodes are researched by the AWSO team for each individual incident using open-source geocoding websites including Google Maps and [LatLong](#), at the time the incident is entered. In rare cases, geocodes are provided to the AWSO team by the organisation or individual reporting the incident. In these cases, the team obtains permission to publish these coordinates publicly, confirming no sensitive or confidential locations are exposed by the geocodes. In the event there is some risk to staff or humanitarian operations by the coordinates, they are edited in accordance with the AWSO geocode research techniques (below).

## Geocode research techniques

The majority of geocodes entered in the AWSO public fields are researched by the AWSO team at the time the incident is entered into the database. This research is guided by the following conventions:

1. *Municipality (village, city, town)*: geocodes are entered as the centre point of the described municipality
  - a. Example: A staff member was killed in Village A.
2. *Public place/landmark inside a municipality*: geocodes are entered as the publicly listed location of the landmark
  - a. Example: A staff member was killed outside the main hospital in City A.
3. *Distance from municipality on named route*: geocodes are estimated using kilometer information and open source mapping.
  - a. Example: A staff member was killed 20km north of City A on the R20 axis.
4. *Travel route between two named locations (no km mark)*: geocodes are placed at the midpoint between the two named locations.
  - a. Example: A staff member was killed while travelling between Village A and Village B.

Large scale aerial bombardment/artillery shelling of densely populated areas and intense urban combat create complicated circumstances for selecting precise geocodes and are therefore most often entered in accordance with 1 and 2 (above). When data is being used for mapping, geocodes are sometimes slightly offset to allow for multiple attacks to be visible with mapping software.

## 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

<b>Aid worker</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 organisations that have a primarily religious mission, human rights workers or staff of political/advocacy organisations, 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 humanitarian contexts.</li> <li>• NNGO – National NGOs</li> <li>• NRCS – National Red Cross/Red Crescent societies</li> <li>• Other – Funding bodies, other international organisations involved with humanitarian programming (i.e., the World Bank and donor agency staff)</li> </ul>
<b>Type of staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <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 and UN agencies, local contractors and aid workers working for local NGOs</li> <li>• Sex of victims</li> </ul> <p>Note: there are a small number of incidents in which the information is unclear whether the victim was a national or international staffer. In these cases, they have been entered as national staffers, pending verification, given this greater likelihood.</p>

## Gender

Organisations have improved at reporting the gender of affected staff members over the last ten years, but for the majority of incidents this information is still available. These are marked ‘unknown’ unless they can be reasonably surmised according to work rules (ie. Drivers, security guards).



## Incident descriptive data

Outcomes	The nature of the incident in terms of its outcome for the victim:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Killed</b></li> <li><b>Detained/arrested</b> – Held for at least 24 hours by host state, police, or de facto authorities. If a victim was killed or seriously injured in the course of a detention, the incident is moved to the appropriate category (killing or injury)</li> <li><b>Kidnapped</b> – Abducted or held hostage for a duration of at least 24 hours by non-state or criminal elements. If a victim was killed in the course of a kidnapping, the incident is counted as a killing and moved to that category, but the location is kept as where initial kidnapping occurred.</li> <li><b>Wounded</b> – Injuries sustained from intentional violence (includes landmines) serious enough to warrant medical treatment.</li> </ul>		
Methods	Means of attack	Attack Context	Location
	<b>Aerial bombardment</b> , missiles, rockets, drones, and any airborne weaponry	<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/compound</b>
	<b>Shelling</b> , artillery weapons and explosives launched from ground operations	<b>Individual attack or assassination</b>	<b>Project site</b> (village, camp, distribution point, hospital, etc.)
	<b>Body-borne IED</b>	<b>Mob violence</b> , rioting	<b>Public location</b> (street, market, restaurant, etc.)
	<b>Detention/arrest</b> , held by state actors or de facto authorities and not injured, killed or their wellbeing is unknown	<b>Raid</b> (armed incursion by group on home, office, or project site)	<b>Road</b> (vehicle in transit)
	<b>Complex attack</b> (explosives in conjunction with small arms)	<b>Detention</b> , during detention or during the arrest/restraint process	<b>Custody</b> , under control of perpetrator
	<b>Roadside IED</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>Unknown</b>
	<b>Vehicle-borne IED</b> , remote detonation or suicide		
	<b>Other explosives</b> , grenades, RPG etc.		
	<b>Kidnapping</b> (released, rescued, or escaped)		
	<b>Kidnap-killing</b>		
	<b>Rape or serious sexual assault</b>		
	<b>Landmine</b>		
	<b>Shooting</b> (small arms /light weapons, e.g. pistols, rifles, machine guns)		
	<b>Unknown</b>		

## Aerial Bombardment

Aerial incidents sometimes have an added challenge when determining how many incidents should be counted in the AWSDB 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 maker

If information is available from the source on any deconfliction efforts made by the humanitarian actors (for instance formal notification or clear visibility as humanitarian (such as clearly marked vehicles, project sites, and facilities including displacement camps and hospitals), it is noted in a private column in the database. 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 information

In most recorded attacks, the identity of the perpetrator(s) is unconfirmed or unknown. However, when available, the AWSDB tracks this information. In 2017, the AWSDB 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.

<b>Individuals</b>	<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.
<b>Organised groups</b>	<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>	Foreign or coalition forces	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.
		Host State	
		State: Unknown	
		Police or Paramilitary	
	<b>Non-state armed groups</b>	Global	Global in operational scope and scale of ambition. Includes Al Qaeda core, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State.
		Regional	Control or influence over a territory overlapping current national boundaries on ethnic or ideological grounds. Includes Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram.
		National	Insurgent groups fighting national government. E.g. the Taliban.
		Subnational (local)	Smaller groups seeking autonomy or control over areas within the existing state. E.g. Mai Mai militias.
<b>Unknown</b>	<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). In some cases, especially regarding kidnapping and criminal incidents, identifying whether the individual acted alone or as part of a group is challenging and assumptions are made by the AWSD team based on the information available. 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. Sometimes perpetrator information is purposefully excluded from incident reports at the request of reporting organisations. As national conflict dynamics change, perpetrator categories are adjusted to reflect varying governments. As an

example, incidents coded after August 2021 in Afghanistan categorise the Taliban as 'Host State' and all incidents prior to that date label them as a Non-state armed group.

In combat/crossfire incidents, it is often difficult to determine which side is responsible for the wounding or killing and the database codes these incidents as unknown unless there is significant evidence to support responsibility. In conflicts where only one party has aerial bombardment capabilities, perpetrator responsibility is assigned based means of attack.

### Perpetrator motive

When it can be reasonably determined from the available information, perpetrator motives are considered in relation to the victims' status as an aid worker and whether or not they were actively working on humanitarian activities or 'off-duty':

- **Political** – Incident is related in whole or in part to the victims' affiliation with an aid organisations or their specific activities, presence, perceived identity. Used when the purpose of the attack is to disrupt, divert, or punish the delivery of aid to advance political, military or ideological agenda
- **Economic** – The primary goal of the perpetrator was economic, such as robbery, or banditry
- **Incidental** – The victims' status as an aid worker was not known or relevant to the perpetrator. Also used to denote when the victim was 'off-duty'
- **Unknown** – Perpetrator's motive cannot be discerned from the available information

### Source Category

The source category records the primary source the AWSD team collected it from. 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.
- **ACLED** – Due to a data sharing partnership established with the [Armed Conflict Location and Event Data \(ACLED\)](#) database in 2019, incidents sourced from their dataset are labelled as such.

## 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 AWSD 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 AWSD or its analytical products are brought to Humanitarian Outcomes' attention. Please send a link to work utilizing or created using AWSD 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*'.

## Appendix

### Aerial bombing motive classification workflow

