

In the **literal sense**, a **witch hunt** is a search for witches, usually during a time of strange occurrences that cause panic and hysteria. In the atmosphere of intense fear, people are assumed guilty without proof, secret accusations are accepted, evidence can be falsified, and confessions are elicited through torture of the accused.

Today the term "**witch hunt**" is often used **metaphorically** to describe situations that share the above characteristics. Even in modern times there are many cases when people have been assumed guilty of criminal behavior based on fitting a particular profile in an atmosphere charged with fear, rather than on evidence of guilt.

In 1692, the bizarre behavior of several young Puritan girls was attributed to Satanic attacks through witchcraft. Amid the panic and hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts, over 200 people were charged with witchcraft, and 19 men and women were hanged. Years later they were all exonerated of the charges against them.

Before the United States Civil War (1861-1865), the search for runaway slaves could result in free men and women being "captured" and sent to the south as slaves because they appeared to fit a particular profile.

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, thousands of Japanese Americans were relocated from their homes to "War Relocation Camps." The camps are also known as "[Japanese Internment Camps](#)." The internment was based on suspicion and fear that Japanese Americans may be spies.

In the "cold war" era after WW2 there was a growing fear in the US that Americans who held communist beliefs were working to negatively influence the lives of Americans by infiltrating government jobs and the media. During this "Second Red Scare" [Senator Joseph McCarthy](#) held hearings and accused many people without evidence of "unAmerican activities," causing many to be persecuted, many people lost their jobs, and some people were imprisoned.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, persons fitting the "[terrorist profile](#)" were detained and questioned without evidence of any criminal activity.

In 1983 members of the [McMartin](#) family were charged with multiple counts of ritual child abuse upon children who attended their day care center. During the 1980s Ritual Satanic Abuse caused a scare and panic in the US and in Canada.

Before the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," policy was passed into law in 1993, there are reports of the military searching out persons who might be gay, charges being pressed against them, and discharging them from service.

In 1994 three teenage boys were tried and convicted of the 1993 murders of three young boys in West Memphis, Arkansas, based solely on the authorities belief that the crime appeared to be of a Satanic nature, and the teens fit the profile of Satanists (they enjoyed listening to the band Metallica; the oldest teen usually wore black and he was interested in Wicca). Research the [West Memphis Three](#).