Statement before the Senate Committee on

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

"Domestic Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Examining the Threat of Racially, Ethnically, Religiously, and Politically Motivated Attacks, Part I"

A Testimony by:

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"Domestic Terrorist Tactics and Targets"

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and distinguished M~~m~~embers of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on "Domestic Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Examining the Threat of Racially, Ethnically, Religiously, and Politically Motivated Attacks." The threat from domestic terrorism in the United States is serious and continues to evolve. As this testimony highlights, objective analysis and sound data are particularly important to gauge the nature of the threat and effective responses.

This testimony is divided into five sections. The first outlines the contours of domestic terrorism and highlights the data set compiled by analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The second section focuses on trends in domestic terrorist incidents and fatalities. The third assesses patterns in terrorist targets. The fourth section analyzes terrorist tactics and weapons. And the fifth highlight policy implications.[1]

I. Terrorism

Terrorism includes the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact.[2] Violence and the threat of violence are important components of terrorism.[3] U.S. Code, which is the official compilation of general and permanent laws of the United States, defines domestic terrorism under 18 U.S. Code § 2331 as "violent acts or acts dangerous to human life" that occur primarily within U.S. territory. It organizes terrorism acts into three components: the act is intended to "intimidate or coerce a civilian population," it aims to "influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion," and it involves "mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping."[4]

In focusing on terrorism, this testimony does not cover the broader categories of hate speech or hate crimes. There is some overlap between terrorism and hate crimes, since some hate crimes include the use or threat of violence. But hate crimes can also include non-violent incidents, such as graffiti and verbal abuse. Hate crimes and hate speech are obviously concerning and a threat to society, but this analysis concentrates only on terrorism and the use—or threat—of violence to achieve political objectives. In addition, this analysis does not focus on protests, riots, looting, and

[1] This testimony relies on data and analysis published in several articles, including Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, and Jared Thompson, *The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 12, 2021), https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states; and Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, *The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 30, 2020), https://www.csis.org/analysis/tactics-and-targets-domestic-terrorists.

[2] On definitions of terrorism, see, for example, Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1–41, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commercial_books/CB386.html; and Global Terrorism Database, *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, October 2019), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

[3] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Also see, for example, Global Terrorism Database, *Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, October 2019), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

[4] 18 U.S. Code § 2331.

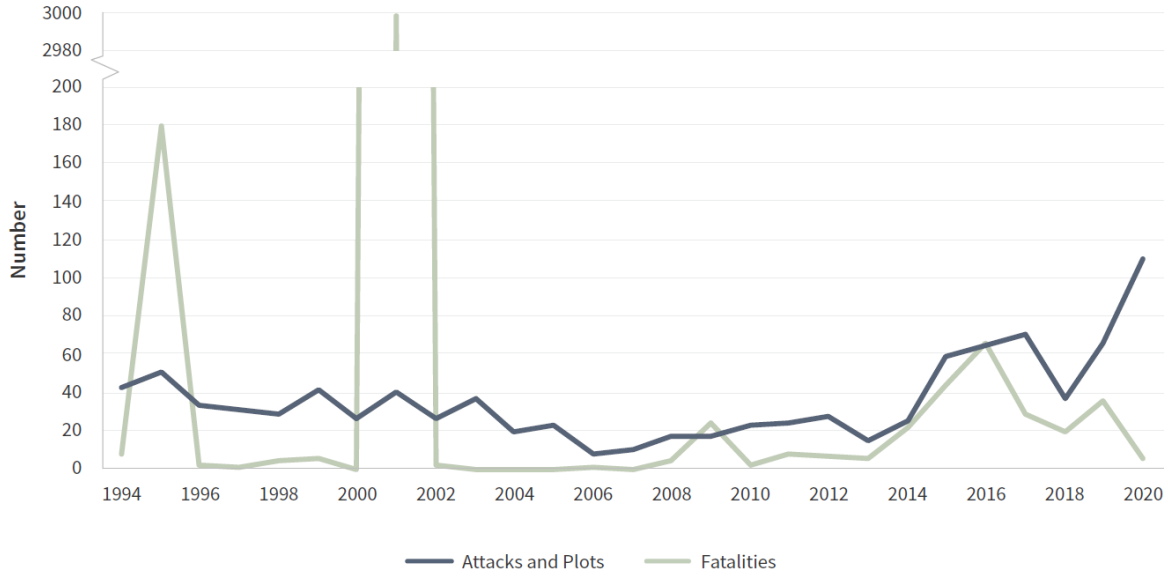
broader civil disturbances—unless they meet the definition of terrorism. While these incidents are important to analyze, most are not terrorism. Some are not violent, while others lack a political motivation or the intention to create a broad psychological impact.[5]

This testimony leverages a CSIS data set, which includes 980 cases of terrorist plots and attacks in the United States between January 1, 1994, and January 31, 2021. The data set is divided into such categories as the incident date, perpetrator, location, motivation, number of individuals wounded or killed, target, weapons used, and perpetrators' current or former affiliations with law enforcement and the military.

II. Trends in Incidents and Fatalities

In 2020, the number of domestic terrorist attacks and plots increased to its highest level since at least 1994, though fatalities were relatively low. Across all perpetrator ideologies, there were 110 domestic terrorist attacks and plots in 2020—an increase of 45 incidents since 2019 and 40 more incidents than in 2017, the year which previously had the most terrorist attacks and plots since the beginning of the data set. Despite this sharp increase in terrorist activity, the number of fatalities from domestic terrorist attacks was at its lowest level since 2013. Five people were killed in terrorist attacks in 2020—an 86 percent decrease from 2019, when 35 individuals died in terrorist attacks.

Figure 1: Number of Domestic Terrorist Attacks and Plots and Fatalities, 1994–2020



Note: Fatality data exclude perpetrators. Data from 1995 include the Oklahoma City bombing, in which 168 victims died. Data from 2001 include the 9/11 attacks, in which 2,977 victims died.

Source: Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

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[5] Christopher Wray, "Worldwide Threats to the Homeland," Statement before the House Homeland Security Committee, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., September 17, 2020, https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/worldwidethreats-to-the-homeland-091720.

There are several possible explanations for this drop in lethality. First, there were 21 terrorist plots recorded in 2020 which were disrupted before an attack could take place. Some decrease in fatalities, then, may be attributed to the effective work of the FBI and other law enforcement agencies in preventing attacks.

Second, there were no mass-casualty terrorist attacks in 2020. All five victims were killed with firearms in five separate attacks. In comparison, there were seven fatal attacks each in 2018 and 2019, resulting in 19 and 35 fatalities, respectively. Though the number of fatal attacks was similar, each of these previous years included a mass-casualty attack that significantly raised the total. In 2018, Robert Bowers murdered 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2019, Patrick Crusius murdered 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. This alone does not explain the reduction, however, because there was ample opportunity for similar mass-casualty events in 2020. Soft targets such as demonstrators and private individuals were frequent targets of terrorist attacks and plots. Furthermore, previous CSIS analysis found that vehicles were increasingly common weapons in terrorist attacks in 2020, joining firearms, explosives, and incendiaries as some of the most commonly used weapons—all of which have high potential lethality.[6]

Third, the restraint shown in those attacks may point to perpetrators prioritizing sending a message through fear rather than fatalities. Though there has been substantial rhetoric about bringing about a second civil war—such as from the Boogaloo Bois and some white supremacists—many extremists may wait for their ideological adversaries to act first, whether through violent action or policy change that is perceived as an existential threat. This is consistent with the philosophy put forward by militia leaders such as the Three Percenters' co-founder Mike Vanderboegh, who in 2008 advised his followers not to "fire first" and instead to wait and act under the justification of the common defense so as to "not cede the moral high ground."[7] In this way, most domestic terrorists—at least thus far—have not been interested in killing large numbers of Americans, which is a shift from the goal of Salafi-jihadists that support al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

III. Targets

CSIS data show that the U.S. government, military, and law enforcement were increasingly targeted by domestic terrorists. As shown in Figure 2, government, military, and police personnel and facilities were the target of 34 of 89 attacks in 2020 from perpetrators of varying ideologies, making them the most frequent targets.[8] Of these 34 attacks, 19 targeted the government, 15 targeted law enforcement, and 1 targeted the military.[9] The attacks were led by perpetrators of various ideologies.

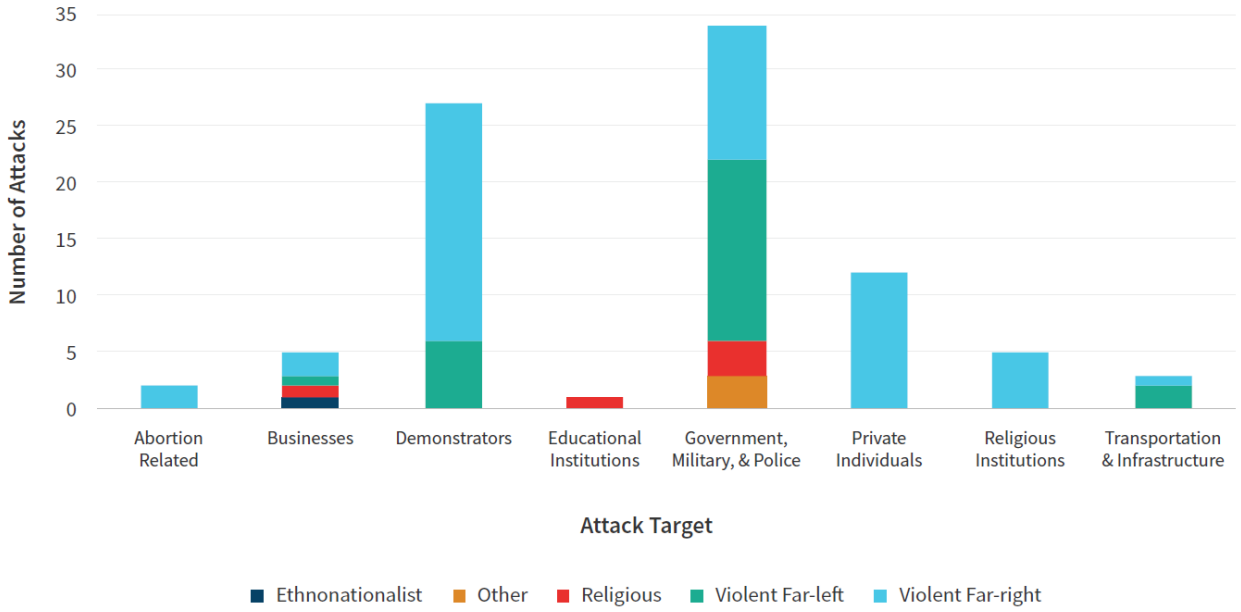
[6] Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Nicholas Harrington, Grace Hwang, and James Suber, "The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States," CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, October 22, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states.

[7] Mike Vanderboegh, "Resolve," 2008.

[8] Target data include only terrorist attacks and not foiled plots, the targets of which are not always known.

[9] In one case, Brian Maiorana made terrorist threats against both law enforcement and government targets. This incident is counted in both subcategories.

Figure 2: Targets of Domestic Terrorist Attacks by Perpetrator Orientation, 2020



Note: Target data exclude foiled terrorist plots, the targets of which are not always known.
Source: Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

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In addition, the percentage of domestic terrorist attacks against government, military, and police agencies *increased* over the past five years. In 2020, 38 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks targeted these institutions. This was the second-highest percentage since at least 1994—exceeded only in 2013, when attacks against government, military, and police targets comprised 46 percent of all attacks. The frequency of attacks against military and—in particular—law enforcement targets may be due, in part, to a growing belief by extremists that security agencies are the most visible arm of what they consider an illegitimate and oppressive government.

For some anti-fascists, the police are quintessential symbols of a repressive state—including against minority populations.[10] "As for the police . . . the historical record shows that along with the military they have also been among the most eager for a 'return to order,'" wrote Mark Bray in *Antifa: The Anti-fascist Handbook.*[11] These views may explain why some anti-fascists and anarchists conducted attacks against police stations and police vehicles during the protests in the summer of 2020. As highlighted by the events on January 6, 2021, however, some white supremacists and likeminded individuals also consider law enforcement the main security arm of a government they believe is illegitimate. "Traitors! Traitors! Traitors!" chanted some individuals

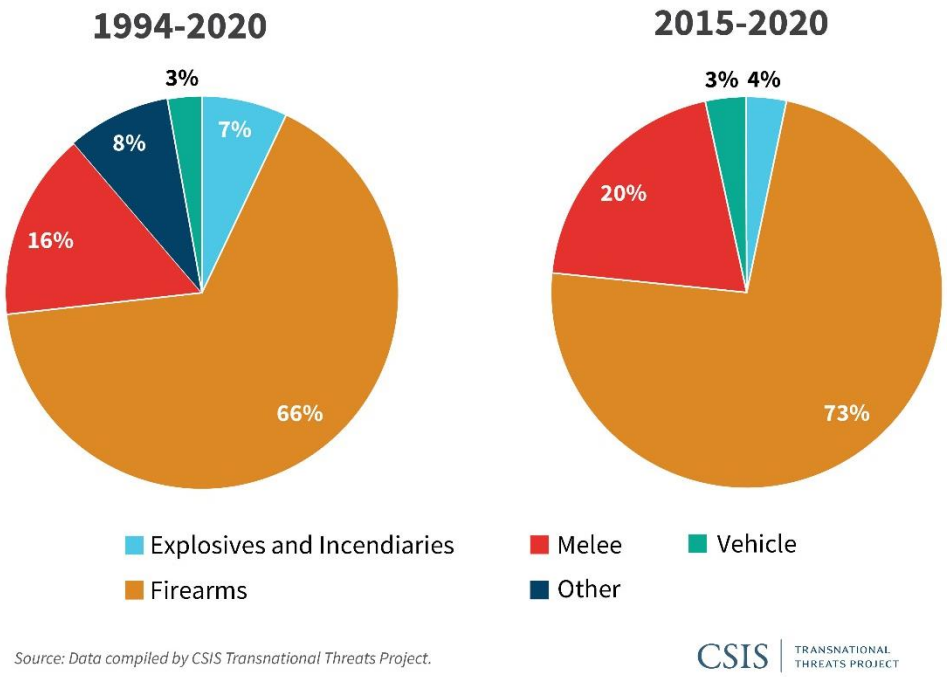
[10] See, for example, *We Are Antifa: Expressions Against Fascism, Racism and Police Violence in the United States and Beyond* (Vancouver, Canada: Into the Void, 2020).
[11] Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-fascist Handbook* (Brooklyn, New York: Melville House, August 2017), 130.

on the Capitol steps on January 6. "The blue does not back you," read a message from a pro-Proud Boys group on the social networking service Parler, "They back the men who pay them."[12]

IV. Tactics and Weapons

Domestic terrorism tactics and weapons have evolved over the past several decades.[13] Explosives and incendiaries were the primary weapon in 50 percent of all attacks by white supremacists, anti-government militias, and other likeminded individuals from 1994 to 2020. The data set combined explosives (such as homemade bombs) and incendiaries (such as Molotov cocktails) into one category. Notable explosives and incendiaries included arson and fire-bombing attacks targeting abortion clinics, government facilities, and places of worship. Firearms were the primary weapon used in 27 percent of attacks, making them second most frequent type of weapon. In fact, firearm usage increased from 1994 to 2020. As shown in Figure 4, firearms were the most frequently used weapon in 66 percent of fatal attacks between 1994 and 2020. Between 2015 and 2020, however, perpetrators used firearms in 73 percent of fatal attacks. Melee weapons—primarily knives—were the main weapon in 20 percent of fatal attacks by white supremacists and likeminded individuals since 2015.

Figure 3: Primary Weapons Used by White Supremacists and Like-Minded Individuals in Fatal Terrorist Attacks



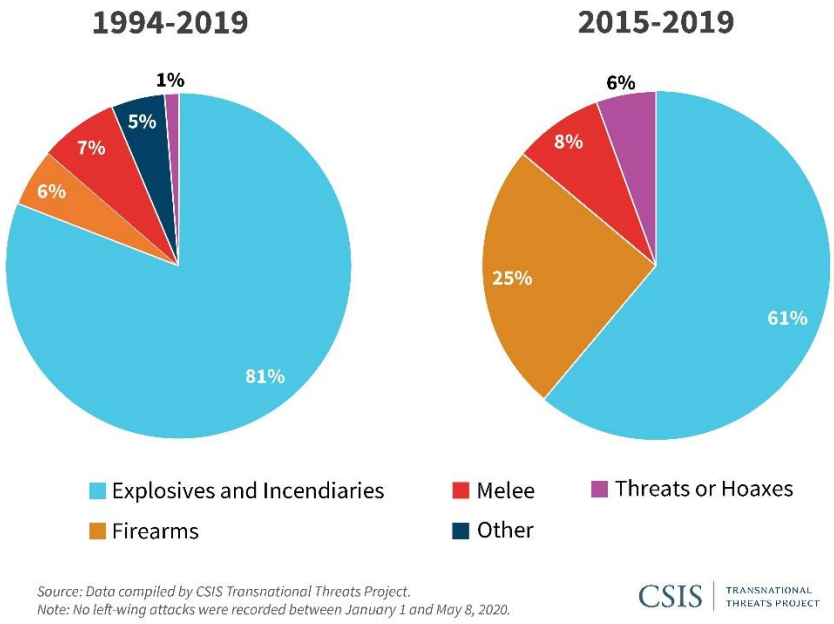
[12] Marisa J. Lang and Peter Jamison, "Police Support on the Right May Be Eroding, Experts Warn," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/capitol-police-officers-support/2021/01/08/a16e07a2-51da-11eb-83e3-322644d82356_story.html.

[13] Data in this section covers the period January 1, 1994 to May 8, 2020.

Explosives and incendiaries were by far the most common weapon used by anarchists, anti-fascists, and likeminded individuals. However, firearms have been increasingly common in these attacks. For example, in June 2017 James Hodgkinson open fired on a Congressional Republican baseball practice. Six people were injured, including House Majority Whip Steve Scalise and Representative Roger Williams, before police shot and killed Hodgkinson.[14] As shown in Figure 4, 81 percent of all attacks by anti-fascists, anarchists, and other likeminded individuals between 1994 and 2019 involved explosives and incendiaries.[15] For instance, in December 2018, Elizabeth Lecron purchased black powder and screws in an attempt to bomb a pipeline she believed was polluting a local river.[16]

The second most common weapons were melee weapons such as knives, hatchets, and hammers, which accounted for 7 percent of attacks. Examples included the destruction of property—including construction equipment—by groups like the Animal Liberation Front and Environmental Liberation Front. Firearms were the third most common weapon, used in 6 percent of attacks. However, firearms have been more common in recent years, and they were the primary weapon in 25 percent of attacks between 2015 and 2019.

Figure 4: Primary Weapon Used by Anti-fascists, Anarchists, and Likeminded Individuals



[14] "Law Enforcement Shares Findings of the Investigation into the June 14 Alexandria, Virginia Shooting," Federal Bureau of Investigations, Office of Public Affairs, June 2017, https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/washingtondc/news/press-releases/law-enforcement-shares-findings-of-the-investigation-into-the-june-14-alexandria-virginia-shooting.

[15] No left-wing attacks were recorded from January 1 to May 8, 2020.

[16] "Toledo Woman Charged After She Purchased Black Powder and Screws That She Believed Were Going to be Used to Make a Bomb as Part of a Terrorist Attack," Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, December 2018, "https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndoh/pr/toledo-woman-charged-after-she-purchased-black-powder-and-screws-she-believed-were.

V. Conclusion

In light of these findings, there are several policy implications. First, the U.S. government does not publicly release data on terrorist attacks and plots, nor on the characteristics of perpetrators. However, if a centralized data collection effort were established, data analysis could offer an objective mechanism for apportioning counterterrorism resources and efforts relative to actual threats. For example, CSIS data show that domestic terrorist attacks and plots from violent far-right and far-left actors are on the rise, while Salafi-jihadist-inspired terrorism is declining. This presents a clear case for continuing to redirect resources away from Salafi-jihadist to other types of extremism.

Second, law enforcement and intelligence agencies need to adapt to the bottom-up aspect of domestic terrorism. Countering international terrorism is often a top-down process. State and local law enforcement agencies often rely on at least some intelligence collected by the CIA, NSA, and U.S. partners, which is then passed down to local Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) for threats in the U.S. homeland. But domestic terrorism is inherently bottom-up. Many attacks involve one or a small number of individuals that do little—if any—coordination with others inside or outside the United States.

Consequently, state and local law enforcement agencies have a particularly important role to play in identifying terrorism "left of boom." Based on the example of some countries, such as the United Kingdom, state and local police departments should have a single point of contact for terrorism intelligence wherever feasible. This person would serve as the main contact with local JTTFs and Fusion Centers and be in charge of outreach with the local community. With roughly 800,000 police officers in the United States, it is impossible to conduct counterterrorism effectively from the top-down for domestic terrorists.[17] The need for a single point of contact is greatest at small and medium-sized police departments, since most metropolitan police forces have robust intelligence capabilities.

Third, the U.S. government, its partners overseas, and the private sector need to continue to aggressively target individuals and groups that espouse violence on digital platforms. This is a war of ideas on virtual battlefields—just as much as on the streets of U.S. cities and towns. Virtually all domestic extremists use the internet and social media platforms to release propaganda, coordinate training, raise funds, recruit members, and communicate with others. They have used various combinations of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gab, Reddit, 4Chan, 8kun (formerly 8Chan), Endchan, Telegram, Vkontakte, MeWe, Discord, Wire, Twitch, and other online communication platforms.

The United States will never be able to stop every attack, but it can prevent most of them. The Provisional Irish Republican Army reminded British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984 after failing to kill her at the Grand Brighton Hotel: "Remember, we only have to be lucky once. You have to be lucky always."[18] While some luck may be required to counter a wave of domestic

[17] See, for example, "Law Enforcement Facts," National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 2020, https://nleomf.org/facts-figures/law-enforcement-facts.

[18] Quoted in Jo Thomas, "This Time, the IRA Comes Close to Thatcher," *New York Times*, October 14, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/14/weekinreview/this-time-the-ira-comes-close-to-thatcher.html.

terrorism, proactive steps—such as improving bottom-up intelligence collection in the United States and countering extremism on digital platforms—can help mitigate the threat.