The Issue

There has been a significant rise in the number of domestic terrorist attacks and plots at demonstrations in the United States, according to new CSIS data. The result is escalating violence in U.S. cities between extremists from opposing sides, a major break from historical trends. In 2021, over half of all domestic terrorist incidents occurred in the context of metropolitan demonstrations. In addition, the most frequent targets of attacks were government, military, and law enforcement agencies, who are increasingly at the center of domestic terrorism by extremists of all ideologies.

Introduction

On the evening of February 19, 2022, Benjamin Smith—who had become enraged at the Black Lives Matter movement, Covid-19 restrictions, and the local homeless population—opened fire on protesters that were demonstrating against police violence near Normandale Park in Portland, Oregon. One woman was killed, and four people were hospitalized with gunshot wounds. In August 2020, only four miles away from Normandale Park, Michael Reinoehl, an anti-fascist, shot and killed Aaron “Jay” Danielson, a member of the far-right group Patriot Prayer. These attacks unfolded against a backdrop of nearly two years of heightened protest activity in urban areas of the United States. Although most demonstrations have been peaceful, some have devolved into violence.

Other acts of terrorism have occurred amid growing political polarization and the mainstreaming of extremist beliefs. Most recently, on May 14, 2022, Peyton Gendron, motivated by the far-right “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, opened fire in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, killing 10 people and injuring 3. This conspiracy theory—which alleges that immigration is being weaponized to diminish the influence and existence of the white population—has been shared on mainstream platforms with increasing frequency. The Department of Justice (DOJ) is investigating the attack “as a hate crime and an act of racially-motivated violent extremism.”

To better understand the trends in U.S. domestic terrorism, CSIS compiled a data set of 1,040 terrorist attacks and plots in the United States between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2021. The 2021 data are new, and they yield several main findings.

First, there was a significant increase in the number and percentage of domestic terrorist incidents at demonstrations in cities in 2020 and 2021. In 2019, only 2 percent of all U.S. terrorist attacks and plots occurred at demonstrations, but this portion rose to 47 percent in 2020 and 53 percent in 2021. The result is that some metropolitan areas of the United States—such as Portland, Seattle, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.—are becoming focal points of domestic terrorism, where extremists from opposing sides square off against
each other and against law enforcement agencies. This development has created a “security dilemma” in metropolitan areas, where attempts by one side to improve its own security threatens the security of others, leading to further escalation.

Second, U.S. law enforcement agencies have increasingly become a target of domestic terrorists from all sides of the political spectrum. The government, military, and especially law enforcement were the primary targets of domestic terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, composing 43 percent of all attacks. They were most likely to be targeted regardless of perpetrator ideology: they were selected in 48 percent of violent far-left events, 37 percent of violent far-right events, and all Salafi-jihadist events in 2021. This development indicates that U.S. security agencies—particularly law enforcement—are increasingly at risk from domestic terrorism.

Third, there was an increase in the percentage of attacks and plots by anarchists, anti-fascists, and other likeminded extremists in 2021. While white supremacists, anti-government militias, and likeminded extremists conducted the most attacks and plots in 2021 (49 percent), the percentage of attacks and plots by anarchists, anti-fascists, and likeminded extremists grew from 23 percent in 2020 to 40 percent in 2021. This rise has occurred alongside an increase in violence at demonstrations. However, although there was a historically high level of both far-right and far-left terrorist attacks in 2021, violent far-right incidents were significantly more likely to be lethal, both in terms of weapon choice and number of resulting fatalities.

The remainder of this brief is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of terrorism and outlines the data set used in this analysis. The second examines trends in terrorist events in the United States that are related to public demonstrations. The third describes additional findings from the data set. The final section provides brief policy implications.

**TERRORISM**

This analysis focuses on terrorism, which is defined as the deliberate use—or threat—of violence by non-state actors in order to achieve political goals and create a broad psychological impact. For inclusion in the data set, events had to meet all parts of this definition. This definition is consistent with the official U.S. government definition of domestic terrorism under 18 U.S. Code § 2331 as “acts dangerous to human life” that occur primarily within U.S. territory and are intended “(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.”

The brief does not analyze the broad topic of hate speech or hate crimes, though hate speech and hate crimes are clearly concerning. There is some overlap between hate crimes and terrorism since some hate crimes include the use or threat of violence. However, some hate incidents, such as graffiti, do not involve the use or threat of violence. The brief also does not include other forms of civil disturbance or criminal activity outside of the definition of terrorism, such as looting or trespassing. Some of these disturbances do not involve violence, and many individuals that participate in these activities lack political goals or an intention to cause broad psychological impact. However, the data set does include terrorist attacks committed by demonstrators, attacks targeting demonstrators, and attacks intentionally timed to occur alongside demonstrations, often to obscure the identity or the intent of the perpetrators.

This brief discusses four categories of terrorist ideologies: violent far-right, violent far-left, religious, and ethnonationalist. Events for which a political motive was identified that did not fit into one of these categories were classified as “other.” When discussing perpetrator ideologies, it is important to note that extremist ideologies do not correspond to mainstream political parties in the United States. Violent far-right terrorists are generally motivated by ideas of racial or ethnic supremacy; opposition to government authority, including perceived overreach related to issues such as Covid-19 policies; misogyny, including incels (“involuntary celibates”); hatred based on sexuality or gender identity; belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory; or opposition to certain policies, such as abortion. Violent far-left terrorists are motivated by an opposition to capitalism, imperialism, or colonialism; Black nationalism; support for environmental causes or animal rights; pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support for decentralized political and social systems, such as anarchism. Religious terrorists are motivated by a faith-based belief system, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or other faiths. All attacks recorded in the CSIS data set that were coded as religious were inspired by a Salafi-jihadist ideology, so the terms are used interchangeably in this analysis. Ethnonationalist terrorists are motivated by ethnic or nationalist goals, including self-determination.

Finally, data suggest that violence is most often planned
and perpetuated by a single individual or small network rather than centralized, hierarchical terrorist groups. These individuals are frequently inspired by broader ideological movements or networks, and they often become radicalized and access resources through online platforms. Many networks are inspired by the concept of “leaderless resistance,” which rejects large, structured organizations in favor of decentralized networks or individual activity.12

Using these definitions, CSIS compiled and analyzed a data set of 1,040 terrorist attacks and plots in the United States between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2021.13 The data set includes information such as the incident date, location, perpetrator ideology, target, weapons used, fatalities, relation to public demonstrations, and perpetrators’ current or former affiliation with the military or law enforcement.14 A full methodology and codebook for the data set is linked at the end of this brief.

THE SECURITY DILEMMA: DOMESTIC TERRORISM AND PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS

Over the past two years, there has been a rise in the percentage of domestic terrorism attacks and plots at demonstrations. This phenomenon is linked to the proliferation of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations in some urban areas of the United States caused by political polarization, Covid-19 mandates, racial injustice, elections, and other factors. As ideologically opposed individuals and groups organize against each other in urban areas of the United States, there has been a spiraling of radicalization, extreme rhetoric, and violence—a phenomenon often referred to as reciprocal radicalization.15 As this situation increasingly provokes violent action, it can also be understood as a “security dilemma,” in which one side’s efforts to increase its own security, typically with firearms, melee weapons, or incendiaries, decreases the security of others.16

At the core of the dilemma is a situation of escalating violence in some metropolitan areas of the United States that pits such groups and loose networks as anti-fascists and anarchists against white supremacists, anti-government militias, and a host of others, such as the Three Percenters, Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer, and Oath Keepers. A condition of instability and spiraling violence makes security the first concern for groups and networks. When individuals seek to protect themselves by acquiring weapons, others react by acquiring arms of their own. As tensions rise, it becomes difficult to know the intentions of others. The security dilemma has occurred overseas in situations of emerging anarchy, such as the collapse of a state.17 Notably, this trend has emerged amid extremist rhetoric that increasingly portrays political conflict in the United States in martial or revolutionary terms—whether as a call to action to prevent violence by opponents or, as in accelerationist ideologies, in an attempt to hasten the violent collapse of the state.18

This phenomenon has triggered a spike in politically motivated violence in the United States. For instance, militia members have gathered with firearms and other weapons at protests over the past two years to “protect” local businesses from looters.19 Meanwhile, anti-fascists have organized “direct action” campaigns to prevent far-right networks from demonstrating and, when that is impossible, to impose consequences, often through violence. On its website, Rose City Antifa—an anti-fascist coalition based in Portland, Oregon—explains that it does not rely on law enforcement to counter “fascist activity” because “[t]he state upholds white supremacy at every level of government and the police frequently work with far-right aggressors to brutalize people opposing state oppression and violence. We cannot count on state actors to push forward the cause of justice, equity, and community safety. It’s up to us to keep us safe.”20 Although some of these mobilizations have included members of formal groups, most have involved loose ideological networks of individuals who have organized online.

Within this analysis, “demonstrations” may include protests, sit-ins, marches, and other public gatherings intended to advance a social or political cause. To be clear, the vast majority of demonstrations have been peaceful. As Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware argue with data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “of the more than 10,600 demonstrations and protests held throughout the United States between May and August 2020, more than 10,000—nearly 93 percent—were peaceful, with demonstrators not engaging in violence.”21 Peaceful demonstrations and protests are important to exercise First Amendment rights. Nevertheless, the data show that in a politically charged climate—especially in metropolitan areas—some demonstrations are incubators of domestic terrorism. This is particularly concerning in light of recent studies indicating that a historically high percentage of Americans believe that violence against the government or against individuals with opposing views can be justified.22

The rest of this section analyzes the connection between
domestic terrorist activity and demonstrations in the United States in three parts. First, it assesses the portion of terrorist attacks and plots related to demonstrations since 1994. Second, it evaluates the most common targets of attacks related to demonstrations in recent years, including whether attacks were more likely to be committed by demonstrators or to target them. Finally, it assesses the ideological motivation of individuals who have committed or planned domestic terrorist attacks in connection with demonstrations in 2020 and 2021.

PERCENTAGE OF TERRORIST ACTIVITY RELATED TO DEMONSTRATIONS

The United States began to see a rise in domestic terrorist activity linked to public demonstrations in 2020. By 2021, more than half of all domestic terrorist incidents occurred during public demonstrations. To better understand this changing context for domestic terrorism, this section examines trends in the subset of domestic terrorist attacks and plots that were related to demonstrations.

As shown in Figure 1, the data set recorded no terrorist incidents in the United States during demonstrations between 1994 and 2010. Some domestic terrorism incidents occurred at demonstrations between 2011 to 2012 and 2015 to 2017, but the percentage of all terrorist attacks and plots at demonstrations did not exceed 8 percent in either period. For example, in October 2011, an individual threw a homemade chemical bomb into an Occupy Maine encampment in Portland, Maine. In July 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson opened fire at a peaceful march in Dallas, Texas, killing five police officers and wounding nine other officers and two civilians. But the overall numbers were low.

There was a substantial increase in terrorist attacks and plots at demonstrations in 2020, with the percentage of all domestic terrorist activity jumping from 2 percent (1 of 65 incidents) in 2019 to 47 percent (52 of 110 incidents) in 2020. Although fewer attacks occurred in 2021 than in 2020, the percentage of all U.S. terrorist attacks and plots related to demonstrations continued to grow. In 2021, 53 percent of all domestic terrorist activity (41 of 77 incidents) occurred at demonstrations. For example, on August 22, 2021, anti-government and anti-vaccination extremists gathered in Portland, Oregon, for an event titled “Summer of Love: United We Stand Divided We Fall,” which was intended to show opposition to Covid-19 vaccinations and demand the release of individuals arrested during the January 6 attack at the U.S. Capitol. During this event, Dennis G. Anderson reportedly showed lynching videos to counterprotesters, made racist remarks and threats with a knife, and then began shooting at counterprotesters.

DEMONSTRATORS AS TARGETS AND PERPETRATORS

To better understand how terrorist attacks unfolded in the context of public demonstrations, CSIS analyzed data on the targets of attacks in 2020 and 2021 that occurred at demonstrations. Demonstrators were the targets of 41
percent of all terrorist attacks and plots related to public demonstrations, making them the most common target of such incidents in 2020 and 2021. For example, in October 2021, William Aslaksen argued with members of a crowd protesting against the federal Covid-19 vaccination mandate in Palmdale, California, then intentionally drove his Jeep Wrangler into the crowd, injuring one woman. Demonstrators were not targeted equally across the two years, however. In these types of attacks, demonstrators were the target in 30 cases in 2020 and 9 in 2021.

Government, military, and police locations and personnel were the second-most common target of terrorist incidents related to demonstrations from 2020 to 2021, composing 37 percent of all such incidents during the two-year period. They were the most common target in 2021. The most prominent instance was the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, by individuals attempting to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. Between 2020 and 2021, businesses were targeted in 14 percent of terrorist events related to demonstrations, and the remaining 7 percent were directed against other targets, including journalists, private individuals, religious institutions, and infrastructure.

**IDEOLOGIES BEHIND DEMONSTRATION-LINKED TERRORIST ATTACKS**

In 2020, most attacks related to demonstrations (58 percent) were conducted by violent far-right perpetrators, including white supremacists, militia members, and other anti-government extremists. Many of these attacks were related to the 2020 presidential election or opposition to racial justice protests and Covid-19 restrictions. In 2021, however, 73 percent of attacks related to demonstrations were orchestrated by violent far-left individuals, including anarchists, anti-fascist extremists, and violent environmentalists. These incidents were largely related to opposition to far-right ideologies and opposition to law enforcement, including perceptions that law enforcement was sympathetic to the far-right or operated with corruption or bias. While this ideological opposition has long existed, the sharp increase in violent far-left activity related to demonstrations likely is linked to the historically high level of far-right violence in 2020, which coincided with extensive media coverage of police violence against Black individuals and heightened tensions surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and 2020 presidential election. As Rose City Antifa and other far-left groups have articulated, in the face of perceived state inaction or complicity, far-left extremists may see themselves as the only ones able to act.

**OTHER DATA FINDINGS**

CSIS data also highlighted trends in the number and type of U.S. terrorist attacks and plots. This section analyzes the data in three parts: incidents and fatalities, perpetrator ideology, and types of weapons and targets.
INCIDENTS AND FATALITIES

The total number of domestic terrorist attacks and plots decreased from its height in 2020, though 2021 still had the second-highest number of attacks and plots in the past three decades. In 2021, there were 77 terrorist attacks and plots in the United States, a decrease of 30 percent from the prior year.

However, the number of fatalities increased from 5 in 2020 to 30 in 2021, as shown in Figure 3. This level was roughly comparable to 2019, when there were 35 fatalities from terrorism in the United States. The recent increase in domestic terrorist activity began around 2014. From 2014 to 2021, there have been an average of 31 fatalities per year, indicating that the 30 deaths in 2021 were typical of this period. This is substantially more than the period from 1994 to 2013, when there were only three years in which more than eight individuals were killed in terrorist attacks in the United States: 1995, 2001, and 2009. These were primarily due to the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9/11 attacks, and the Fort Hood shooting, respectively.

The return to a higher level of fatalities in 2021 may indicate that the lower number of deaths in 2020 was an anomaly. For instance, this number may have been the result of the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdown policies, which disrupted routines and reduced mass gatherings. Or it could have been caused by perpetrators’ prioritization of less lethal tactics, such as melee weapons and incendiary devices.

Terrorist attacks and plots in 2021 spanned 18 states and Washington, D.C., as shown in Figure 4. While many of these events took place in large metropolitan areas, these cities were dispersed across the continental United States. The highest concentration of incidents occurred in and around Portland, Oregon, where CSIS tracked 18 terrorist attacks and plots in 2021. The next highest number of terrorist incidents occurred in New York City, where there were 7 attacks and plots in 2021.

PERPETRATOR IDEOLOGY

Violent far-right attacks and plots remained the most frequent type of domestic terrorism in 2021, but violent far-left perpetrators committed a growing percentage of attacks. As shown in Figure 5, of the 77 terror events in 2021, 38 events (49 percent) were perpetrated by those on the violent far-right, 31 events (40 percent) by the violent far-left, 3 events (4 percent) by Salafi-jihadists, 2 events (3 percent) by ethnonationalists, and 3 events (4 percent) by those with other motives.

Most violent far-right perpetrators were motivated by white supremacist or anti-government sentiments, and they committed most of the fatal attacks in 2021. Of the 30
fatalities in 2021, 28 resulted from far-right terrorist attacks. White supremacists killed 13 people, a violent misogynist killed 8, anti-government extremists killed 4, and an anti-vaccination perpetrator killed 3. On June 26 in Winthrop, Massachusetts, for example, Nathan Allen shot and killed two Black individuals after crashing a stolen box truck. Allen had frequently read extremist material and had written journals filled with white nationalist beliefs, including calls for white people—who he believed to be “apex predators”—to kill Black people.30

Most violent far-left perpetrators were motivated by anarchism, anti-fascism, or anti-police stances. Although these actors committed a historically high number of terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, only one resulted in a fatality. On June 24 in Daytona Beach, Florida, Othal Wallace shot and killed local police officer Jason Raynor.

Figure 4: Location of U.S. Terrorist Attacks and Plots, 2021

Figure 5: U.S. Terrorist Attacks and Plots by Perpetrator Orientation, 1994–2021

Source: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.
Note: No attacks occurred in Hawaii, Alaska, or Puerto Rico in 2021.
Wallace had links to several Black nationalist paramilitary groups, including the Not F****g Around Coalition and Black Nation, the latter of which he founded in early 2021.\textsuperscript{31}

The three religious terrorist events in 2021, all of which were committed by individuals inspired by Salafi-jihadist beliefs, made up a relatively low percentage of all domestic terrorist activity. Two of these incidents were disrupted plots, but the third was an attack resulting in one fatality. On August 29, Imran Ali Rasheed shot and killed a Lyft driver in Garland, Texas, then opened fire inside a police office in Plano, Texas. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed that Rasheed left a note indicating that he may have been inspired by a foreign terrorist organization and had previously been investigated for terrorist connections.\textsuperscript{32}

**WEAPONS AND TARGETS**

In 2021, violent far-right attackers primarily used highly lethal weapons, such as firearms, while far-left attackers mainly used melee weapons, such as knives or bludgeoning weapons, which are less lethal. Regardless of perpetrator ideology, most terrorist fatalities in 2021 were from firearms: 9 of the 11 fatal attacks were committed with firearms, accounting for 26 of the 30 deaths.\textsuperscript{33}

Of the 38 far-right terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, 16 used firearms, 9 involved explosives and incendiaries, 4 were melee attacks, and 2 were vehicular attacks. On March 16, for example, Robert Aaron Long conducted a shooting spree at three spas in the Atlanta metropolitan area, killing eight individuals and injuring one. Long viewed the women working at these spas as a “temptation” and aimed to help other men suffering from “sex addiction” by killing them.\textsuperscript{34}

Of the 31 far-left terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, 19 were melee attacks, 3 primarily used explosives or incendiaries, 2 used firearms, and 1 was a vehicular attack. The large number of melee attacks was a diversion from the violent far-left’s traditional reliance on explosives and incendiaries.\textsuperscript{35} Most of these melee attacks involved deliberate property damage, and some attacks also included incendiaries as a secondary weapon. On October 12, after a memorial gathering for a local anarchist activist in Portland, Oregon, a group of approximately 100 individuals smashed windows, destroyed property, and set fires at banks, retail stores, and government buildings, causing over $500,000 in damage.\textsuperscript{36} This attack was later shared on anarchist news websites.

**Figure 6: Primary Weapon Used in U.S. Violent Far-Right and Violent Far-Left Terrorist Attacks and Plots, 2021**

![Primary Weapon Used](image.png)

Source: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.
Government, military, and police locations and personnel were the most frequent targets of domestic terrorist attacks in 2021 regardless of perpetrator orientation. As seen in Figure 7, of the total 77 terrorist attacks and plots in 2021, 29 were directed against government, military, and police targets. These perpetrators identified with a range of ideologies and movements, including the QAnon conspiracy, the sovereign citizen movement, militia groups, anarchism, anti-fascism, environmentalism, and other anti-government and anti-authority philosophies. The next most common target for violent far-left perpetrators was businesses, while the next most common target for violent far-right individuals was private individuals, frequently targeted based on identity categories such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

The reliance by violent far-right perpetrators on weapons such as guns, explosives, and incendiaries is consistent with their larger share of fatal attacks in 2021. These attacks often targeted people directly, particularly government personnel and private individuals. Meanwhile, violent far-left perpetrators primarily used melee weapons and incendiaries to cause property damage, particularly against government and police buildings and businesses. These data indicate that while both violent far-right and violent far-left actors committed a historically large number of terrorist attacks in 2021, violent far-right actors were more likely to pursue their motives with lethal intent.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

With domestic terrorism occurring at a high rate across the country, including in the context of public demonstrations, policymakers need access to comprehensive, objective data to better understand the threat, better assess what factors are causing an increase (or decrease) in the threat levels, and craft recommendations. Political polarization in the United States has grown in recent years, including among the general public, members of Congress, and within political parties. Despite this political polarization, however, policymakers—including from the legislative branch—need to pursue bipartisan efforts to reject all forms of terrorism. By definition, terrorism involves the use or threat of violence and is illegal. Freedom of speech is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but violence is not. In fact, violence and the threat of violence can undermine the ability and willingness of individuals to express their ideas in accordance with their First Amendment rights. As Portland commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty concluded in a statement after the February 2022 shooting, “We know this [violence
against demonstrators] has a chilling effect on civic engagement.”38 Studies on public willingness to participate in demonstrations and voice political opinions have reached the same conclusion.39

The rest of this section outlines several recommendations for policymakers and law enforcement, with the goal of bridging ideological divides, gaining public trust, and establishing more effective counterterrorism policies.

First, the U.S. government should publicly release comprehensive data on terrorist attacks and plots, the characteristics of perpetrators, and other factors such as tactics and targets. Data analysis could offer an objective mechanism for apportioning counterterrorism resources and efforts relative to actual threats. The FBI (and more broadly the DOJ) or Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should issue annual or biannual reports to the House and Senate Judiciary, Homeland Security, and Intelligence Committees that assess the domestic terrorism threat; analyze domestic terrorism incidents that occurred in the previous six months or one year; and provide transparency through a public quantitative analysis of domestic terrorism-related assessments, investigations, incidents, arrests, indictments, prosecutions, convictions, and weapons recoveries.

It is concerning that the U.S. government does not publicly release comprehensive data on domestic terrorist attacks and plots. Without reliable data, it is virtually impossible to adopt effective counterterrorism policies. Instead, it has historically taken high-profile attacks, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing or the 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, to trigger federal review and policy change. In the wake of the Capitol attack, several federal agencies are conducting internal reviews and policy updates. Now is an ideal time to bridge these activities by establishing a coordinated approach to data collection and management across relevant federal and state government bodies—such as the recommendations for data standardization across systems compiled by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Countering Extremist Activity Working Group. Secretary Austin created the group in April 2021 to implement a set of counterextremism policy changes in the DOD and to develop recommendations for longer-term counterextremism efforts.40

Second, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies need additional help, including resources, to identify and respond to domestic terrorism “left of boom” (before an attack occurs). The DHS, DOJ, and FBI should continue to review their respective counterterrorism training and resource programs that are provided to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies and ensure that such programs include sufficient training and resources in understanding, detecting, deterring, and investigating acts of domestic terrorism. Congress should also consider encouraging the DHS to increase funds for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which provides funding for nonprofit organizations, including houses of worship, to improve and upgrade their security.

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 as much as on the streets of U.S. cities and towns. Virtually all domestic extremists use the internet and social media platforms to issue propaganda, coordinate training, raise funds, recruit members, and communicate with others. Policymakers should continue to demand that these digital platforms take down content that supports domestic terrorism and violates their terms of service.

Fourth, state and city officials should consider legislation banning or restricting the presence of firearms and other weapons at public demonstrations, which could ameliorate the security dilemma emerging in some U.S. cities. As CSIS analysis shows, firearms are used in most fatal domestic terrorist attacks, and a growing portion of terrorist attacks and plots are occurring at demonstrations. Furthermore, a recent study found that armed demonstrations are six times more likely to become violent or destructive than unarmed demonstrations.41 Although the First and Second Amendments preserve the right to free speech—including symbolic speech—and to bear arms, respectively, judicial precedent suggests that armed protest may not fall under the umbrella of symbolic speech, and therefore may be restricted in the interest of public safety.42

In addition, a recent study found that the presence of firearms at demonstrations significantly reduces the likelihood of individuals attending the event and voicing their opinions due to a perceived threat from individuals with opposing views.43 The study also found that the perception of danger from armed protests and the subsequent chilling effect were significant regardless of the ideology of respondents. This implies that legislation more closely governing the presence of weapons at demonstrations could be supported by policymakers from across the political spectrum if there is assurance and evidence that it will be enforced evenly, regardless of demonstrators’ beliefs or motives.

Despite the worrying data trends, there is cause for hope.
Over the past year, a growing number of federal efforts to counter domestic extremism have prioritized better understanding the scope and nature of domestic extremism and developing long-term strategies to respond to and prevent terrorist activity. This indicates a willingness to take a methodical, research-driven approach to domestic counterterrorism efforts. With significant agreement that terrorism is illegal and a threat to the United States, policymakers must now find ways to collaborate to establish longer-term systemic responses that prioritize transparency to protect the security of all Americans.

Catrina Doxsee is an associate director and associate fellow with the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Seth G. Jones is senior vice president and director of the International Security Program at CSIS and author most recently of Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare (W.W. Norton, 2021). Jared Thompson is a research associate with the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS. Grace Hwang is a program coordinator and research assistant with the Burke Chair in Strategy and Transnational Threats Project at CSIS. Kateryna Halstead is a research assistant with the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS.

The authors give special thanks to Colin Clarke for his review of the document—including the data set—and his helpful critique. They also thank CSIS colleagues Michelle Macander, Brian McSorley, and Devi Nair for their insightful comments. Finally, thanks to Leena Marte and William Taylor for their graphic design and to Jeeah Lee, Katherine Stark, and Rayna Salam for their publication support.

For an overview of the methodology used in compiling the data set, please see here.

This brief is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this brief.
ENDNOTES


8 18 U.S. Code § 2331.


Of the 1,040 terrorist events between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2021, 831 were terrorist attacks and 209 were disrupted plots. Of the 77 terrorist events in 2021, 64 were terrorist attacks and 13 were disrupted plots.


Although the absence of terrorist incidents in the United States during demonstrations between 1994 and 2010 may be due in part to methodological limitations in tracking events in the earliest period that the data set covers, any incidents overlooked were likely not part of a significant trend.


The finding that most fatal domestic terrorist attacks involve firearms—regardless of perpetrator ideology—is consistent with past CSIS research. See, for example, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Dosssee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists," CSIS, CSIS Briefs, July 30, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/tactics-and-targets-domestic-terrorists.


Jones, Dosssee, and Harrington, "The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists."


See, for example, Diana Palmigiani, "Fired Up Or Shut Down: The Chilling Effect Of Open Carry On First Amendment Expression At Public Protests" (PhD diss., Northeastern University, 2021), https://repository.library.neu.edu/feu/311382/fulltext.pdf.


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43 Palmer, “Fired Up Or Shut Down.”