

Democracy Dies in Darkness

The rise of domestic extremism in America

Data shows a surge in homegrown incidents not seen in a quarter-century

By **Robert O'Harrow Jr.**, **Andrew Ba Tran** and **Derek Hawkins**

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Domestic terrorism incidents have soared to new highs in the United States, driven chiefly by white-supremacist, anti-Muslim and anti-government extremists on the far right, according to a Washington Post analysis of data compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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The surge reflects a growing threat from homegrown terrorism not seen in a quarter-century, with **right-wing extremist attacks and plots** greatly eclipsing those from the **far left** and causing more deaths, the analysis shows.

The number of all domestic terrorism incidents in the data peaked in 2020.

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Since 2015, **right-wing extremists** have been involved in 267 plots or attacks and 91 fatalities, the data shows. At the same time, attacks and plots ascribed to **far-left** views accounted for 66 incidents leading to 19 deaths.

“What is most concerning is that the number of domestic terror plots and

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the database project at CSIS, a nonpartisan Washington-based nonprofit that specializes in national security issues. “It’s so important for Americans to understand the gravity of the threat before it gets worse.”

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those incidents were caused by people who showed support for **white supremacy** or claimed to belong to groups espousing that ideology, the analysis shows.

Victims of all incidents in recent years represent a broad cross-section of American society, including Blacks, Jews, immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, Asians and other people of color who have been attacked by right-wing extremists wielding vehicles, guns, knives and fists.

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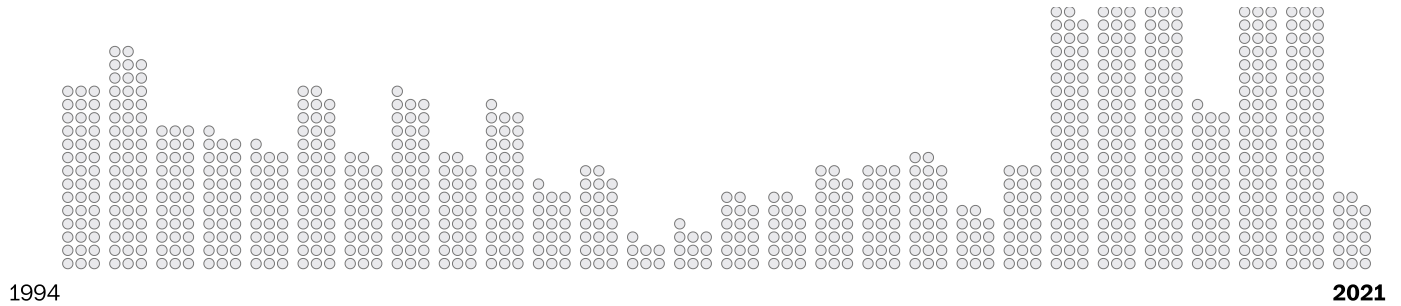
Dozens of **religious institutions** — including mosques, synagogues and Black churches — as well as **abortion clinics** and **government buildings**, have been threatened, burned, bombed and hit with gunfire over the past six years.

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Kenneth Robinson, pastor of Briar Creek Road Baptist Church in Charlotte — one of several **predominantly Black churches** attacked in the spring and summer of 2015 — said some members remain apprehensive.

“Trauma is a way of life for us,” Robinson said. “So we grieve, but we keep pushing forward.”



Democracy Dies in Darkness**Domestic terror incidents by year**

Both far-left and far-right attacks hit groundbreaking levels in 2020, the database shows, with far-right incidents still the much larger group.

The 73 far-right incidents were an all-time annual high in the CSIS database, which goes back to 1994.

Left-wing attacks reached 25 in 2020. Those incidents include multiple attempts by extremists to derail trains to hinder oil pipeline construction and at least seven incidents in which police and their facilities were targeted with guns, firebombs and graffiti. The incidents included the [burning of a Minneapolis police precinct](#) during protests over the death of George Floyd.

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Pastor Kenneth Robinson stands in front of a section of Briar Creek Road Baptist Church in Charlotte that was set on fire in 2015. (Logan Cyrus for The Washington Post)

In August, a supporter of President Donald Trump was shot dead in Portland, Ore., by a suspected gunman who was a [self-described antifa supporter](#). That killing was the only death last year attributed to far-left violence, the data shows. There were two deaths attributed to far-right attacks.

The Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol spurred renewed national attention on domestic terrorism and on hate-driven violence.

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The Post focused its analysis primarily on far-right attacks since 2015 because they account for a clear majority of the rising domestic terrorism events and fatalities charted by the CSIS.

The far-right incidents last year broke into distinct waves emerging amid government shutdowns in the spring, widespread racial demonstrations in the summer and confrontations over the presidential election results in the late fall, The Post's review of the CSIS data shows.

The CSIS database is one of the best public sources of information about domestic terrorism incidents, which the group's analysts define as attacks or plots involving a deliberate use or threat of violence to achieve political goals, create a broad psychological impact or change government policy. That definition excludes many violent events, including incidents during nationwide unrest last year, because CSIS analysts could not determine whether attackers had a political or ideological motive.


Data released by the CSIS on Monday includes the Jan. 6 breach of the Capitol as one of 11 far-right terrorism incidents that month — the most for any January in the database. [The new report](#) highlights more involvement in far-right attacks and plots by military service members, veterans and current and former police officers, some of whom participated in the riot at the Capitol.


Following the Capitol incident, FBI Director Christopher A. Wray [told federal lawmakers](#) that confronting domestic terrorism is a top national security priority of the agency.

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communities afflicted by terrorism over prior decades.

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“January 6 was not an isolated event,” Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 2. “The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and it’s not going away anytime soon.”

Domestic terrorism data

The database includes 980 incidents since 1994, the first year in the CSIS records.

Incidents do not have to be adjudicated in the court system to be included. Dozens of incidents have no identified perpetrator but have details about the

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The attacks and plots on U.S. soil are bucketed as far right, far left, religious or “ethnonationalist,” which supports nationalist goals that often include dividing society along ethnic lines. Under the CSIS system, the attacks on 9/11 are in the religious category because the perpetrators were Islamist terrorists.

The data shows that far-right attacks diminished following a federal crackdown in response to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. In the attack, Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb outside a federal building, killing 168 people. It remains the deadliest homegrown terrorist attack in American history.

Right-wing extremism began [gathering fresh momentum](#) after the election of Barack Obama, the nation’s first Black president, according to an April 2009 Department of Homeland Security intelligence assessment. “Right-wing extremists have capitalized on the election of the first African American president, and are focusing their efforts to recruit new members, mobilize existing supporters, and broaden their scope and appeal through propaganda,” the assessment said.

Some attacks do not have an easily discerned motive or a single ideological thread. To refine the types of extremism involved in each case, The Post compiled court records, social media postings, news accounts and other material from local, state and federal law enforcement authorities.

For example, the extended review enabled the The Post to determine that at least 15 attacks or plots involved predominantly Black churches over the past six years. One of them was New Shiloh Christian Center in Melbourne, Fla. Three times in early 2015 fires were set at the church and cars vandalized. No suspect was caught.

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Bishop Jacquelyn Gordon, senior pastor at the New Shiloh Christian Center, says she is “always on high alert” after three fires and car vandalism in 2015 at the church in Melbourne, Fla. (Zack Wittman for The Washington Post)

Some members left the congregation and others remain fearful, said New Shiloh Bishop Jacquelyn Gordon.

“We all felt threatened,” she said. “I’m always on high alert, because I had no idea who did this.”

Over the past six years, 16 mosques and 13 synagogues also were attacked or threatened by extremists on the far right, The Post’s analysis of the database found.

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Rabbi David Wolkenfeld said worshipers began to fret about security even as they gave thanks that the building was not destroyed.

“It’s really hard. Shocking, shocking to see,” he said. “I’m at a loss when I think about that. Violence toward innocent people is just something I can’t get my head around.”



Rabbi David Wolkenfeld at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel in Chicago, one of the houses of worship attacked in the past six years in domestic terrorism incidents reviewed by The Washington Post. (Youngrae Kim for The Washington Post)

Pastor Ernest Richards said he had the same sense of disbelief as he watched his church burning in July 2018, an incident that the CSIS includes as a far-left

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church with a similar name where a pastor was critical of homosexuality. A suspect was never identified.

“I was just angry at a person who could do this,” said Richards, 88, who no longer leads the church. “My anger turned into a state of pity. How can you do that?”

‘Just because they’re mad’

Members of militias and other extremist groups — such as the KKK, Aryan Cowboys and the Base — had roles in at least 67 attacks since 2015, according to The Post’s examination.

But a large majority of perpetrators appear from the data to be operating independently, a defining characteristic of many recent attacks, counterterrorism researchers have said. Some of those loners are prolific users of social media out of which they assemble a jumble of personal beliefs or ideologies, researchers said.

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One of the prevailing theories among far-right conservatives is about a “Great Replacement,” the belief that the White race is being replaced by people of color, according to a nationally representative survey of 1,000 American adults last month by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats at the University of Chicago.

The Post’s review of the database found 30 attacks or plots attributed to right-wing violence against Black Lives Matter since 2015, a large majority of them last year.

Perpetrators beat BLM activists in the streets and attacked them with mace, knives, guns or explosives, records show. Right-wing extremists used their vehicles as weapons against activists, plowing into crowds of racial justice demonstrators on at least nine occasions over the past six years, according to The Post’s analysis.

Businesses affiliated with racial justice protests were vandalized and torched, among them a Black-owned coffee shop in Shoreline, Wash. It was pelted with molotov cocktails after midnight on Sept. 30 last year.

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Surveillance video of an incident in which molotov cocktails were thrown at Black Coffee Northwest on Sept. 30, 2020. (Black Coffee Northwest)

Darnesha Weary, co-owner of Black Coffee Northwest and a Black Lives Matter coordinator in Shoreline, said the shop later was vandalized with neo-Nazi graffiti. Weary expressed outrage about the attacks and the fact that no one has been caught.

“No one should feel like they have the audacity to go try and burn someone’s building,” she said. “And just because they’re mad.”

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Darnesha Weary is co-owner of Black Coffee Northwest, a business in Shoreline, Wash., that was vandalized and torched last September. (Jovelle Tamayo for The Washington Post)

Social media and terrorism

Bruce Hoffman, a professor and counterterrorism specialist at Georgetown University, said extremists have exploited social media and the Internet in recent years to share theories, along with grievances, tactics and potential targets.

“It’s the propellant,” Hoffman said about social media. “That’s what’s giving the reach.”

From 2015 to 2020, the use of websites or social media such as Facebook and encrypted chat services by right-wing extremists rose in five of the six years, The

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The Post review included a case if the social media engagement was mentioned by investigators in incidents or cited in news accounts.

The trend peaked in 2020, with 24 incidents that The Post could identify. That represents about one out of five incidents of right-wing violence in that year.

Extremists who lurk online and are unaffiliated with a group pose special challenges for law enforcement because they leave few clues about their intentions and targets, counterterrorism officials and researchers said in interviews.

“Social media has afforded absolutely everything that’s bad out there in the world the ability to come inside your home,” one federal counterterrorism official told The Post, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss law enforcement matters. “And so that makes it hard for law enforcement to see potential tripwires and indicators.”

Among the extremists drawing inspiration online was Taylor Michael Wilson, a 26-year-old from Missouri. Before and after Wilson attended a deadly 2017 right-wing rally in Charlottesville, he immersed himself in right-wing propaganda, court records showed later.

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train and pulled the brakes in a remote stretch of Nebraska. At the time, he was carrying a .38-caliber handgun, ammunition speed-loaders and a knife. He also had with him a business card for the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement, court records show.

After a struggle, a train conductor pinned him down until authorities arrived. Wilson later told a deputy: “I was going to save the train from the black people,” records state.

Federal authorities later confiscated more than a dozen firearms, including an automatic rifle and hundreds of rounds of ammunition, tactical gear and white-supremacist literature, documents show. A roommate told investigators Wilson joined a neo-Nazi group after meeting members online. Wilson expressed interest in “killing black people,” court records show.

Wilson pleaded guilty in 2018 to a count of terrorism attacks and other violence against railroad carriers and mass transportation systems. He was sentenced to 14 years in federal prison.

Growing threats

Attacks on immigrants have been recurring in recent years. So have attacks on people of color assumed to be immigrants or Muslim, according to statements by perpetrators during the episodes as recounted by the victims.

There have been 15 anti-immigrant-related incidents since 2015, resulting in 27 fatalities and dozens of injuries, a review of the CSIS cases shows. Some of those attacks drew national attention, including an [Aug. 3, 2019, massacre at a Walmart in El Paso](#), by a gunman who authorities say posted a manifesto railing

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People attend a memorial for 15-year-old Javier Amir Rodriguez, who was killed in the 2019 attack at a Walmart in El Paso. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

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A Minneapolis police precinct burns in May during protests over the death of George Floyd. The fire is one of the 25 left-wing attacks for 2020 listed in data analyzed by The Post. (Joshua Lott for The Washington Post)

But there also were local incidents, such as the shootings in Wisconsin by now-convicted killer Dan J. Popp of his neighbors. On March 6, 2016, Popp, then 39, approached a father and son in the hallway of the apartment complex where he lived, [court records show](#). Popp demanded to know where they were from.

When they told him they were from Puerto Rico, Popp said, “Oh, that’s why you don’t speak English.”

Popp retrieved a rifle from his room, told them, “You guys got to go,” and shot dead Jesus R. Manso-Perez, 40. He kicked down the door to another unit that belonged to a Hmong family. Popp found them hiding in a bedroom and killed Phia Vue, 36, and Mai Vue, 32.

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Family members hold photos of Phia and Mai Vue, who were slain in their apartment. (Mike De Sisti/Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel/AP)

Among emerging trends is the number of military service members and veterans involved in attacks and plots in recent years.

The Post found 36 instances in the CSIS data from 2015 through January 2021, including the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

In that incident alone, more than 40 people charged with conspiracy and other crimes had served in the military, according to another, separate Post analysis of

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Police officers, government officials and politicians also were targets in 2020 in at least 15 right-wing domestic terrorism attacks or plots, a review of the CSIS data shows.

In Monday's CSIS report, the security group warned that right-wing extremists are increasingly attempting to recruit military service members and veterans.

The report, titled "The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States," cited a Department of Defense report sent to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees last month. [That report said](#) that DOD "is facing a threat from domestic extremists (DE), particularly those who espouse white supremacy or white nationalist ideologies."

One of the right-wing terrorism incidents in 2020 involved Navy veteran Timothy Wilson, 36. He had been planning for months to commit some kind of attack that was based on his hatred of Black people, Jewish people, the federal government, refugees and other potential targets, according to a federal affidavit.

Wilson, a father of four who worked for a time at a charitable organization after his Navy stint, communicated with other extremists through an encrypted chat app, the affidavit shows. He shared bombmaking techniques, boasted about his arsenal of guns and ammunition, and talked about recruiting potential collaborators, according to the affidavit.

His contacts included Jarrett William Smith, a 24-year-old Army infantry soldier stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., who offered information online about how to make improvised explosive devices, according to federal investigators. On

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Smith was arrested and in February 2020 pleaded guilty to unlawfully distributing instructions for making explosive devices. He was sentenced in August to 30 months in prison.

For his part, Wilson began meeting an undercover FBI agent who was posing as an extremist collaborator. Wilson plotted to bomb a public building, and in March 2020, as coronavirus shutdowns were taking hold, Wilson decided to accelerate his plans and blow up a hospital treating covid-19 patients, according to investigators.

Wilson accepted an offer from an undercover agent of a truck he was told contained explosives. When authorities tried to take him into custody, Wilson fatally shot himself.

In congressional hearings in recent years, counterterrorism specialists and other witnesses told lawmakers the federal government needs more data on domestic terrorism to understand how to address the rising violence.

“Any expert is going to tell you that this is the most serious security threat to the American people today,” said Rep. Jamie B. Raskin (D-Md.), who held oversight hearings in 2019 that questioned the federal response to rising white-supremacist violence. “And yet we don’t have any good description of the magnitude and the dimensions of the problem.”

About this story

Details on The Post’s methodology and data can be [found on GitHub](#).

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