

Southern Poverty Law Center charges should send chills in Ohio

 dispatch.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2026/05/19/southern-poverty-law-center-trump-splc-white-extremist-ohio/89998403007

Art Jipson

50 white extremist groups thrive in Ohio's heart. SPLC indictment helps them | Opinion

Ohio-connected extremists have been responsible for some of the most high-profile acts of racist and political violence in recent years.

May 19, 2026, 4:37 a.m. ET

- The Trump administration has indicted the Southern Poverty Law Center for its methods of monitoring clandestine groups.
- Ohio is a major hub for extremist groups, and organizations like the SPLC provide intelligence to law enforcement and communities.

Monitoring clandestine groups often requires undercover methods, confidential informants and opaque funding structures – practices that are ethically complex but frequently necessary.

The Trump administration's indictment of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) turns those methods into grounds for prosecution, sending a signal to every organization, newsroom and researcher that monitors [extremism](#) in the United States to reconsider whether the risks still outweigh benefits.

The likely result is a chilling effect across civil society.

This is especially important to Ohioans because the state is home to nearly [50 active white extremist](#) and anti-government groups – including Klan factions, neo-Nazi networks, Proud Boys chapters, Active Clubs and militia organizations – making it one of the most concentrated hubs of organized white supremacist activity in the country.

Extremists thrive in the Heart of it all

Ohio-connected extremists have been responsible for some of the most high-profile acts of racist and political violence in recent years, such as the 2017 Charlottesville car attack [carried out by an Ohio resident](#), a white supremacist plot organized in [Columbus to shoot power substations](#) and trigger [widespread blackouts](#) and an attempted mass shooting targeting women at an Ohio university [inspired by incel ideology](#).

At the same time, the state's rapidly changing demographics and decades of manufacturing job losses have created conditions extremist recruiters actively exploit – conditions that make communities vulnerable to narratives of grievance, decline and replacement.

Organizations like the SPLC have been among the few institutions that systematically track these groups and provide intelligence to law enforcement and communities. If the infrastructure for monitoring extremism is dismantled or deterred, Ohioans who live alongside these networks stand to lose the most.

Yet it is precisely that monitoring work the federal government now is putting on trial.

[The 11-count indictment](#) alleges that between 2014 and 2023, the SPLC used millions in donor funds to pay informants within groups such as the Ku Klux Klan without adequately disclosing those payments.

The charges – wire fraud, false statements to a bank and conspiracy to commit money laundering – focus not on personal enrichment but on whether donors were misled and whether such payments could constitute material support for extremist activity.

The SPLC has defended its actions as necessary to gather intelligence and prevent violence, noting that similar methods are routinely used by law enforcement.

Southern Poverty Law Center has been a consistent target

[As a scholar of extremism](#) with decades of research on White supremacy, including collecting private materials and conducting interviews with members of the American Nazi Party, Klan factions, the former [White Aryan Resistance](#) and other groups, the indictment cannot be understood as a purely legal matter. It is also the culmination of decades of political and cultural conflict between the SPLC and the far right.

[Since its founding in 1971](#), the SPLC's mission has made it a target.

According to the organization's historical records, court filings and public statements, figures like David Duke and Richard Butler, founder of the Aryan Nations, targeted the SPLC as early as the 1970s and 1980s. Duke called for investigations into the group, while [Butler labeled the SPLC the real hate group](#).

Critics, particularly within far-right circles, have long accused the organization of partisanship, bias and overreach, especially as it broadened its definition of extremism. Over time, these critiques evolved into a broader narrative portraying the SPLC as politically motivated, illegitimate and hostile to free speech.

The indictment now lends institutional weight to those claims, transforming what was once rhetorical opposition into formal legal action.

The SPLC's authority depends on its credibility as an independent watchdog. If donors believe they were misled, that credibility may erode.

The SPLC may be the first target, but it is unlikely to be the last.

If the legal theory underlying the indictment is upheld, its implications could extend to other organizations engaged in monitoring extremist activity, including the [Anti-Defamation League](#) and similar watchdog or research institutions. These groups vary in methodology, but they share a common institutional role in documenting and analyzing extremist networks.

The case may also prove groundbreaking regardless of its legal outcome. Even if the SPLC is ultimately acquitted, the indictment itself may achieve its purpose. Defending against 11 federal counts will require millions of dollars in legal fees, diverting resources from the organization's core mission.

This case is more than a legal dispute.

It is a test of how a democracy responds when institutions tasked with monitoring extremism become targets of state power – and whether the infrastructure that has tracked white supremacist violence for more than half a century will survive the political forces now arrayed against it.