

Statement of Professor Brian Levin

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WORLDWIDE THREATS TO THE HOMELAND, PART I

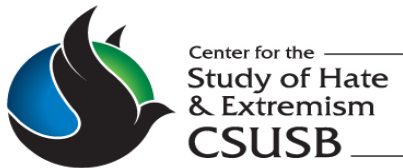
Committee on Homeland Security

U.S. House of Representatives

2167 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20515

Thursday, September 17, 2020



Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, and Members of the Committee, my name is Prof. Brian Levin. Thank you so very much for your work to protect our country and for another opportunity to present some of my concerns and our latest findings on extremism.

I am a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice, who is also on faculty at our National Security Studies program at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). I write, however, on behalf of CSUSB's two-decade strong independent research and policy institution, the *Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism* ("CSHE"). Our quantitative and qualitative trend analysis on violent manifestations of political conflict and prejudice across both borders and the ideological spectrum has been used by scholars, journalists and policymakers around the world. Earlier this year the research we presented to you was awarded the Wang Family Excellence Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the CSU 23 campus system.

Political Corruption of Intelligence Cycle Presents Its Own National Security Risk

This month Politico released portions of a leaked DHS report from August 2020 that resembled both my testimony before you last year and our 2019 report released before the El Paso domestic terror attack:

"Lone offenders and small cells of individuals motivated by a diverse array of social, ideological, and personal factors will pose the primary terrorist threat to the United States... [W]e assess that white supremacist extremists – who increasingly are networking with likeminded persons abroad – will pose the most persistent and lethal threat."

- Unreleased 2020 DHS Draft Domestic Terrorism report

"A broad range of ideologies still exist, capable of inspiring mass violence, infrastructure attacks, targeted assassinations, or plots from geographically disparate and often autonomous loners and small cells, who often operate in their home regions, sometimes combining a mix of idiosyncratic motivations...White nationalism/far right extremism continue to be most ascendant, despite the incapacity of many of their most prominent groups and leaders. The overwhelming majority of declining extremist domestic homicides in 2018 were by white nationalist/far right sole assailants who attacked around the mid-term elections.

– 2019 Report to the Nation, Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, CSUSB

"White supremacist/far right extremists are now, the most ascendant transnational terror threat facing the homeland, in a fluid and somewhat diversifying risk matrix."

– B. Levin Testimony, September 10, 2019, Homeland Security Committee

Shortly, after the privilege of addressing this Committee, I addressed and facilitated at a joint National Counterterrorism Center conference, together with FBI and DHS, to examine the US Government's approach to confronting the threat of domestic terrorism (DT) and to inform future DT policy. I and others told participants about the disturbing trends we were seeing with respect to the expansion globally and domestically of white supremacist/ far right extremism. Then acting ODNI director Joseph Maguire in open-source statements said the conference was a "call to action" for "informed policymaking" and a post-conference report concluded a "whole of government approach" including informational exchange was needed. Soon after, Mr. Maguire

was out and we still do not have the level of transparency and coordination necessary for a whole of government approach. This is acutely evident as even the routine testimony of relevant agency officials and the release of official information products have been severely curtailed and delayed relative to prior administrations. Recent whistleblower allegations, denied by DHS, state that leadership pressured analysts to minimize risks, that CSHE findings contend are primary ones, to wit: that of white supremacy/far right extremism and Russian election interference.

Moreover, the President, as well as high ranking administration officials and pundits have irresponsibly fomented fear by exaggerating an evolving hard-left threat into an omnipresent boogeyman that strains credulity to include non-existent plots and crimes, along with extending the reach of suspicion to locations and individuals engaging in peaceful protected First Amendment activity. The president's words matter and we have data showing that violence and conspiracy theories spread when he undertakes fiery rhetoric around fear-inducing catalytic events.

At the same time, President Trump has routinely tweeted incendiary and bigoted posts, like videos of Blacks violently attacking Whites, he has consistently downplayed the threat posed by morally bankrupt white supremacists. Even after a white supremacist massacred fifty Muslim worshippers in New Zealand, the president was dismissive of this expanding global threat, stating, "I don't, really...I think it's a small group of people that have very, very serious problems." When a Canadian mosque was fatally attacked an administration official at the time, Sebastian Gorka, dismissed it as a "fake hate crime."

We vigorously urge this and other committees to exercise their independent fact-finding and oversight authority to get to the bottom of this matter forthwith, as a corruption of intelligence analysis for political purposes represents a national security risk in itself, as well as an abrogation of the public trust.

Diversifying Election Season Threat Includes Informal Associations, Particularly Though Not Exclusively on Far Right

Our forecast before this Committee last year still holds "White supremacist/far right extremists are now, the most ascendant transnational terror threat facing the homeland, in a fluid and somewhat diversifying risk matrix."

According to CSHE's latest preliminary data, white supremacist/far right extremist motivated homicides have killed at least 29 people in 2019. More people were murdered domestically in 2019 by just a handful of white supremacist/far right individuals, than all of those killed by all extremists in 2018. The unreleased leaked DHS report puts white supremacist homicides even higher at 39, and states, as we did, that last year was the worst in decades for domestic terror fatalities. Last November FBI hate crime figures for 2018 showed that the level of violence for hate crime hit its highest level since 2002. Moreover, CSHE research also found that while smaller cities hit multi-year peaks in 2018, the three largest American cities; New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, hit near two-decade highs as anti-Semitic incidents topped each city.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the “largest share” of recent increasing attacks were anchored to “far-right ideology”: “Over the past four years, there were more than 60 terrorist attacks annually in the U.S., which include shootings, assaults and bombs, a trend not seen since the early 1980s, according to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland.”

In the first part of the year, during the pandemic, crime and hate crime are down (though hate crimes generally rise significantly in the second half of election years), but murder, arson and hate crimes against Asians are up significantly.

Some of the worst months for FBI hate crime revolved around elections, police use of force controversies, large rallies and a Black major party candidate – four variables of prominence today. As we said last year our 2018 data showed the majority of white supremacist homicides clustered roughly before election time when polls indicated a possible party shift in a highly contested mid-term election. Presidential election month, November 2016, was the worst month in 14 years with 758 FBI reported hate crimes. Interestingly, other data showed a corresponding increase in the volume of both bigoted speech on 4chan, as well as an increase in manipulative racially divisive ad buys by the Russians on Facebook around that time. The day after the elections – November 9, 2016, was the worst day in 13 years. It was also the day three interdicted militia extremists planned to truck bomb a Garden City, Kansas apartment complex populated by Somali-American Muslims. The month of the fatal Charlottesville attack was the third-worst month last decade. Except for two recent national election months, the last months with higher totals than August 2017, were around the election of Barack Obama, when escalating anti-Black hate crime hit levels not seen since.

This pattern of bursts in hate crime, vile internet chatter, foreign interference and terror around conflictual political events is repeating itself today. However, the current extremism risk is amplified, broadened and diversified due to a variety of emerging factors. These include the pandemic, increased gun sales, mental health distress, economic uncertainty, militia organizing, foreign interference, political polarization, the expansion of QAnon conspiracism and vigilantism into the mainstream, Civil War proclamations from the likes of the Boogaloo Bois, and statements by this administration promoting the idea of a fraudulent “rigged” election.

At this year’s recent protests, the bulk of arrested extremists reflect an emerging trend: They appear to be acting as semi-competent do-it-yourselfers. The fact that most of them are not acting at the direction of some vast, nationally organized and well-trained terror network is of particular relevance.

In New York in late May, two young lawyers were charged in connection with a Molotov cocktail attack on a vandalized police car. While they participated in a Zoom solidarity meeting with reform activists, it appears that they, like many other violent extremists, took the next step, not as card-carrying members of an “Antifa group” but as impulsive independents. In Portland, last month, Michael Forest Reinoehl, 48, however, became the first far-left suspected extremist motivated homicide in many years, though he too acted alone.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and Princeton University reviewed over 10,600 protests this year, including those of Black Lives Matter and some COVID related ones, concluding that only 5%, or 570 exhibited violence by protestors. According to the University of Chicago Project on Security and Threats, between May 27 and July 25, vehicles rammed protestors 84 times domestically with civilian motorists accounting for 77 instances and police in seven. Motive was not determined for most, but about one-third were deemed “malicious” CSHE’s review of the two fatal ramming events in Washington and California found no ideological motive.

Even peaceful protestors have also been the focus of social media vitriol and emerging armed groups ranging from “Civil Guards” to more overtly extremist ones. The United States Supreme Court in *Presser v. Illinois* (1886) made it quite clear, however, that para-military organizing of the likes we are seeing now is unprotected by the First and Second Amendments. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, a teenaged gun enthusiast and police advocate was charged with two counts of murder after he showed up to a “civil guard” defense event.

In Las Vegas, three members of the right-wing Boogaloo Bois, operating as an autonomous cell, were charged with plotting to attack peaceful protestors. Even in those prominent cases where investigators are looking at possible ties to groups, including that of a Ku Klux Klan leader in Virginia who ran his truck into protestors, authorities find most carried out their attacks alone. A California man who was recently charged with murder after attacking two police and security officers had scrawled phrases associated with the boogaloos at the scene, but is also believed to have acted independently, with one abettor. He is also alleged to have fomented another a plan to kidnap children of local school officials.

These newer independent actors and the large public gatherings that they crash, however, present unique challenges for authorities, as they leave fewer precursor clues than do traditional group members – in part because they congregate quickly on Facebook, as well as in increasingly encrypted global online platforms. They act quickly in response to catalytic events that are hyped by some news outlets and an echo-chamber social media. And frighteningly, the availability of handguns and assault rifles has made lone gunmen more lethal, as four of the five worst mass shootings in the U.S. all occurred over the past decade.

Moreover, the range of institutions and individuals identified as legitimate targets for aggression in various emerging subcultures has expanded to include protestors and political rivals, as well as local government officials involved in elections, aid distribution, education and public health. The broad “liberate/reopen” movement, which includes everyone from those with legitimate grievances to armed insurrectionists and conspiracists served as both a template and a galvanizing gathering place for a smaller subset of grievance-oriented extremists, who will likely be active as the election nears.

Caution Respecting Major Statutory Overhauls

With dozens of statutes available to combat domestic terrorists and the unknown impact on civil liberties from major changes, I hold the same basic cautious position today that I did when I testified almost 25 years ago regarding a broad overhaul of domestic federal statutes.

CSHE does however, support the following:

Enacting HR 3106, the Domestic Terrorism DATA Act to improve the availability and production of timely government data on terrorism and the Jabara-Heyer NO HATE Act;

Enhancing both statutory and administrative provisions to counter the growing threat against public officials and elected office holders;

Amending 18 USC §231 to punish not only trainers, but trainees in violent methods designed to foment civil disorder;

Improving background checks and closing loopholes on firearms purchases, as well as the placement of restrictions on semi-automatic rifles, and extended magazines inter alia;

Providing greater funding and resources to enhance interagency coordination to combat the threat that white supremacist /far right extremism poses to the homeland.

CSHE contends that the risk of domestic violent extremism is rising over coming months and that we must institute the “whole of government” approach that officials promised us last year.

Sincerely,

Prof. Brian Levin

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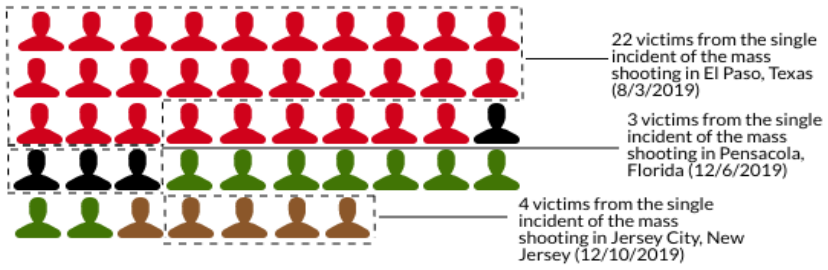
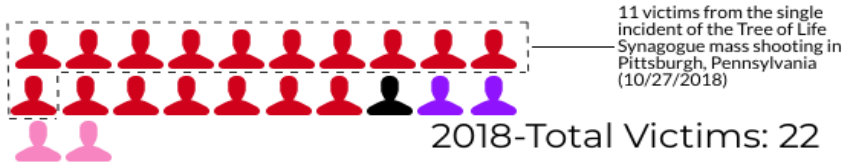
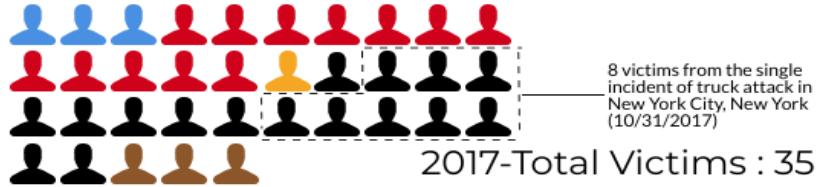
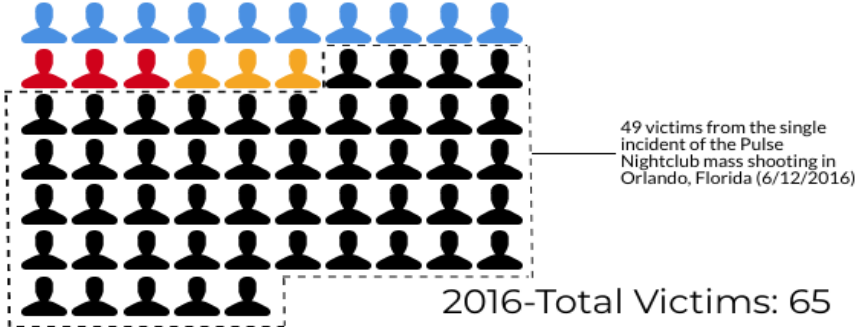
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CSHE: Extremist Homicides By Year and Motive 2016-2019



* Two victims of 2019 events died in 2020

-  Fatalities by Attackers with Anti-Government/Anti-Police Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Anti-LGBTQ Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with White Supremacy Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Salafist-Jihadist Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Black Supremacy Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Hispanic Supremacy Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Extreme Misogyny Ideology
-  Fatalities by Attackers with Mixed/Unk Ideology

