# Anti-State Terrorist Plots and Attacks in the United States

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Recently, several studies have found that threats against state targets, including public officials, elections, and law enforcement, have been on the rise in the United States.[1] In this brief, we take a closer look at terrorist plots and attacks in the United States that targeted government, police, and military entities over a thirty year period (1992-2022). This brief looks specifically at 460 premeditated plots and attacks against state targets in which the perpetrators either (1) successfully committed attacks, or (2) mobilized to violence but were interdicted by law enforcement before they could carry out attacks.[2] For this brief, evidence of mobilization includes the acquisition of weapons or weapons-making materials, target surveillance, the recruitment of co-conspirators, raising funds for an attack, or engaging in military-style training. Using data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project, this brief shows that anti-state terrorist plots and attacks have increased sharply, reaching all-time highs over the past five years. Anti-government extremists, including those associated with organized militias and loosely connected anti-government movements, have been responsible for most of these crimes. The PIRUS data reveal that in terms of risk and protective factors, individuals associated with anti-government extremism tend to be different from other types of U.S. extremists. Specifically, anti-government extremists tend to be much older and have higher rates of protective factors than other individuals in the data. Further, PIRUS data shows that military veterans in the anti-government movement have been connected to a disproportionate number of mass casualty plots and attacks.[3] This brief provides thoughts on what these findings mean for violence prevention programs in the United States both broadly and more specifically for the military veteran community. Concluding commentary authored by We the Veterans and Military Families, START's partnering organization on the Veterans Preventing Misinformation and Violence Project, highlights the importance of preventing radicalization in the veteran community in order to address one facet of rising anti-state violence.

ANTI-STATE TERRORIST PLOTS AND ATTACKS

Plots and Attacks Targeting Government, Police, and Military, 1992-2022

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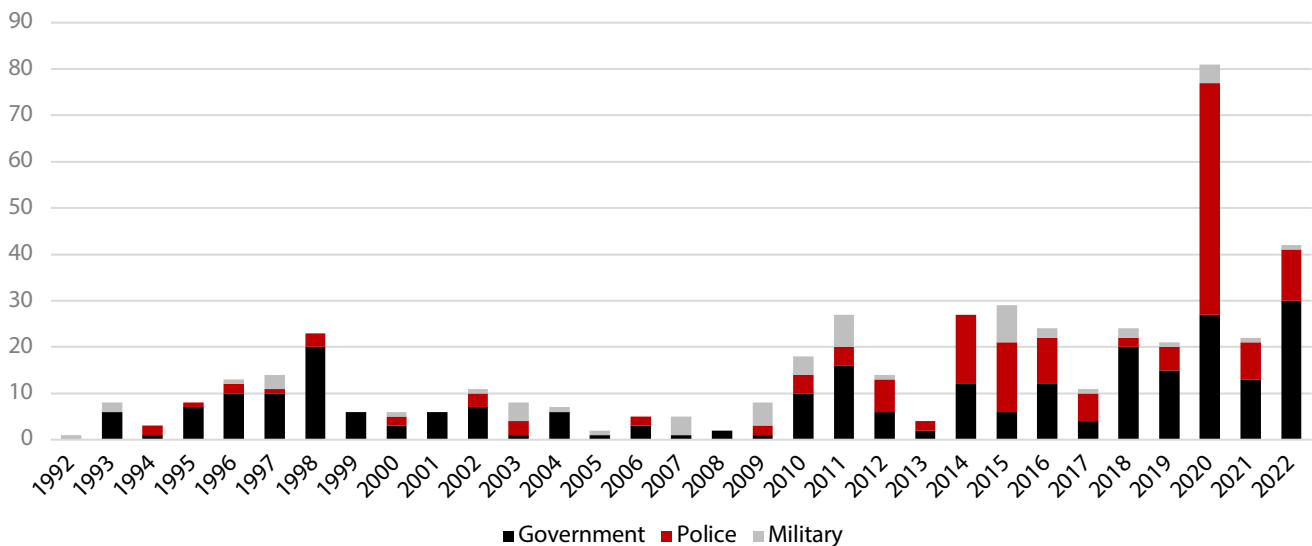
[1] Pete Simi, Gina Ligon, Seamus Hughes, and Natalie Standridge, "Rising Threats to Public Officials: A Review of 10 Years of Federal Data," *CTC Sentinel*, 17(5), May 2024; Christine Zhu, "Threats, harassment of election workers have risen, poll shows," *Politico*, May 1, 2024; Bridging Divides Initiative, *Understanding Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials)*, https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/UnderstandingThreats.

[2] Crimes in which individuals made threats against state targets, but took no appreciable steps to carry out attacks, are not included in this brief.

[3] Michael Jensen, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers, PIRUS: Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds (College Park, MD: START, 2023), https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/pirus-mass-casualty-extremist-offenders-us-military-backgrounds.

- During the thirty year period covering 1992-2022, there were 460 premeditated terrorist plots against state targets. This included plots and attacks on government buildings, elected and unelected public officials, government personnel, election sites, and poll workers. It also includes plots and attacks on police and military targets, including officers, service members, and facilities. Most of these plots and attacks (63.9%) are coded as mass casualty, meaning that the perpetrators intended to harm 4 or more victims (deaths or injuries).

- Importantly, the PIRUS-Plots data show that anti-state plots and attacks have increased recently, reaching historical highs in the past few years.

- For instance, during the latter half of the 1990s, when the Patriot Movement was at its peak in the United States,[4] there were an average of 13 terrorist plots per year targeting the government, police, and military. By comparison, there were an average of 36 anti-state terrorist plots per year from 2018-2022. In 2022, there were 30 discrete terrorist plots targeting government personnel and buildings, elections, and public officials—the highest number for any year in the data.

Anti-State Terrorism: Outcomes by Plot/Attack Type, 1992-2022

Legend: ▨ Foiled Plot ■ Failed Attack ■ Successful Attack
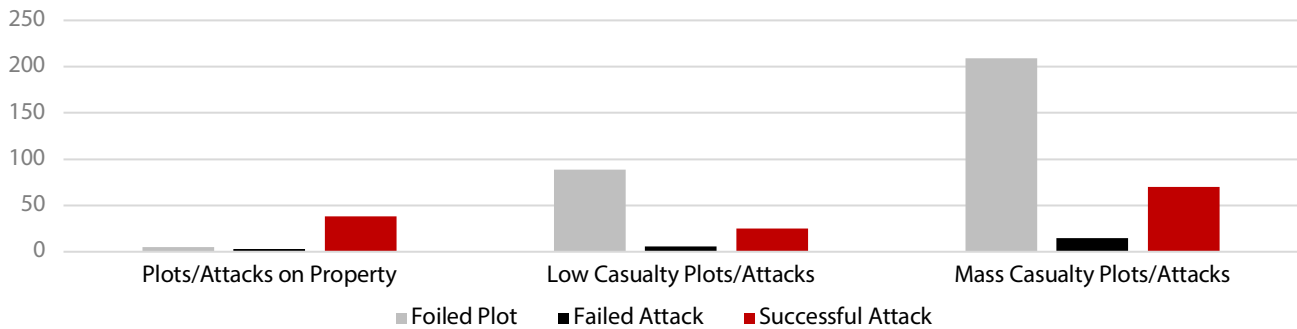
- Approximately 30% of these plots resulted in successful attacks in which the perpetrators deployed weapons and caused some type of observable harm, such as damage to property. Success rates were far higher (82.6%) for plots and attacks that targeted property. Low casualty and mass casualty plots and attacks had similar success rates at 20.8% and 23.8% respectively.

- The successful attacks resulted in 269 victim deaths and 978 injuries. Most of these casualties (168 deaths and 650 injuries) were the result of the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which remains the deadliest domestic terrorist attack to occur on U.S. soil.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ANTI-STATE TERRORIST PLOTS AND ATTACKS?

Anti-State Terrorist Plots and Attacks in the United States by Ideology, 1992-2022

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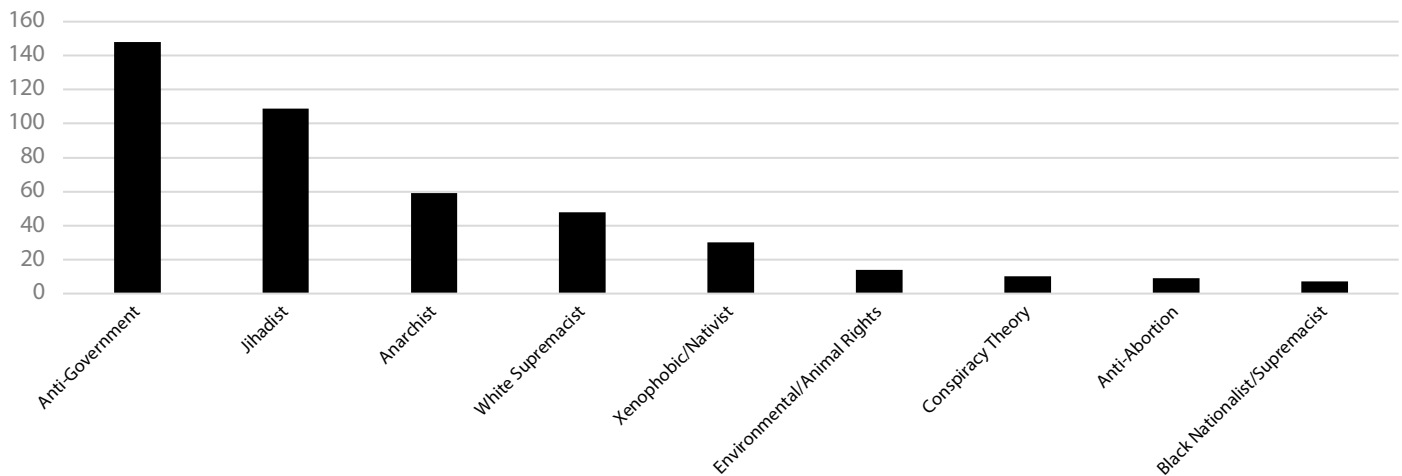
[4] Southern Poverty Law Center, "The 'Patriot' Movement Timeline," https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/patriot-movement-timeline; "Militias 'in retreat'," BBC News, May 11, 2001.

- Perhaps not surprising, these anti-state terrorist plots and attacks, including recent increases, have been driven by perpetrators classified as "anti-government extremists" in the data.

- This category includes organized anti-government groups, like the Oath Keepers; loosely affiliated militia movements, like the Three Percenters and Boogaloo Movement; Sovereign Citizens; and unaffiliated actors who espoused the core views of the anti-government movement.

- These views include unsupported claims about government attempts to undermine people's constitutional rights; conspiracy theories about the "New World Order" and threats from foreign governments; a rejection of state authority in the areas of taxation, land ownership and rights, and policing;[5] and, more recently, claims of election fraud.[6]

- Unlike previous periods, however, recent increases in anti-state terrorist plots and attacks by anti-government extremists have been perpetrated by individuals acting alone.

- For instance, just under 28% of plots and attacks in the 1990s were perpetrated by individuals acting alone without the support of organized groups. From 2018-2022, however, nearly 70% of anti-state plots and attacks perpetrated by anti-government extremists involved individuals who acted alone. Some of these actors self-identified as members of loose movements, like the Three Percenters or Sovereign Citizens. However, nearly half of them had no known links to named movements.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISTS

	Anti-Government (n=600)	Other Far Right (n=1060)	Far Left (n=391)	Jihadist (n=592)
Protective Factors				
Age	42.5	34.4[***]	31[***]	28.6[***]
Married	45.2%	24.2%[***]	14.0%[***]	34.0%[***]
Parent	59.0%	31.5%[***]	21.5%[***]	35.5%[***]
U.S. Military Background	27.6%	17.1%[***]	7.0%[***]	7.1%[***]
Some College	58.8%	50.0%[*]	68.3%	57.6%
Risk Factors				
Unemployed	17.8%	21.9%	24.4%	23.8%[*]
Mental Health Concerns	24.7%	18.6%[**]	19.2%[*]	18.1%[**]
Substance Use Disorder	22.2%	23.0%	17.1%	12.3%[***]
Criminal History	50.1%	45.4%	31.7%[***]	32.5%[***]
Outcome				
Violent	61.0%	60.0%	48.8%[***]	71.8%[***]
Mass Casualty Plot	33.3%	22.3%[***]	17.4%[***]	31.9%

Chi-square/t tests in relation to Anti-Government Extremists. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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[5] Alejandro J. Beutel and Daryl Johnson, *The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia* (New Line Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2021); Sam Jackson, "What is Anti-Government Extremism?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16(6), December 2022.

[6] James Piazza, "Allegations of Democratic Election Fraud and Support for Political Violence Among Republicans," *American Politics Research*, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1532673X241263083; *A Year After the Insurrection, 2020 Election Lies Continue to Animate the Right* (Anti-Defamation League, 2022), https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/year-after-insurrection-2020-election-lies-continue-animate-right.

- Data from PIRUS suggest that individuals associated with the anti-government movement in the United States can be distinguished from other subjects in the data on measures of protective factors and extremist outcomes.

- The anti-government subjects in PIRUS who committed crimes in the United States from 1992-2022 had significantly higher rates of protective factors than other types of far-right extremists (e.g., white supremacists, anti-abortion, etc.), individuals on the extremist far left, and subjects associated with, or inspired by, Jihadist groups operating abroad.

- Specifically, anti-government extremists were much older than other extremists in the data, with an average age of nearly 43 years old at the time of offense/arrest. By comparison, both the far-left and Jihadist offenders from this period were on average more than a decade younger than the anti-government extremists when they committed their crimes.

- Anti-government extremists also had far higher rates of military service backgrounds than other subjects in the data during this period. Importantly, at nearly 28%, the rate of military service among anti-government extremists was more than four times the national average of military service in the adult population, which is estimated at 6 percent.[7]

- Finally in terms of protective factors, the anti-government extremists were more often married and/or the parents of children than other types of extremists in the PIRUS data.

- When it comes to risk factors, the anti-government extremists were similar to the other subjects in the PIRUS data, with the exception of mental health concerns and unemployment. While mental health concerns were notably higher for anti-government extremists, they had the lowest unemployment rates in the data.

- On the measure of pre-radicalization criminality, anti-government extremists were similar to other far right subjects in the data; although, they did have higher criminal history rates than either far-left or Jihadist subjects.

- Finally, on the measure of substance use concerns, anti-government extremists were not significantly different from other extremists in the data, except for Jihadist offenders.

- Despite significantly higher rates of protective factors and similar rates of risk factors, the anti-government extremists during this period were significantly more likely to plot or commit mass casualty attacks.

IMPLICATIONS

- Anti-state terrorist plots and attacks have risen sharply in recent years. The PIRUS data suggest that slowing this trend will require a greater focus on individuals affiliated with the anti-government movement in the United States.

- Importantly, these individuals are more often acting alone or without the assistance of organized groups than they were in previous decades. Violence prevention efforts, therefore, must go beyond simply targeting militia groups or named movements. More attention must be paid to the mainstream narratives that are mobilizing people to act on their own without any engagement with fringe or criminal communities.

- Despite higher rates of protective factors and similar rates of risk factors, anti-government extremists have more often been involved in mass casualty plots and attacks than the other types of extremists in the United States.

- As we have highlighted in a previous brief,[8] military veterans in the anti-government movement have been connected to a disproportionate number of these plots and attacks. Prevention programs, therefore, must better support individuals with military service backgrounds in order to address radicalization within the veteran community.

- Age is an especially important metric to consider when analyzing anti-government extremism in the United States.[9] Middle-aged adults are typically preoccupied with their careers, their children, and caring for aging parents, all of which act as deterrents to crime, including violent extremism. With an average age of nearly 43 years old, however, anti-government extremists often defy this trend.

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[7] Katherine Schaeffer, *The Changing Face of America's Veteran Population* (Pew Research Center, 2023), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/11/08/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20the%20U.S.,military%20draft%20ended%20in%201973.

[8] Michael Jensen, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers, *PIRUS: Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds* (College Park, MD: START, 2023), https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/pirus-mass-casualty-extremist-offenders-us-military-backgrounds.

[9] Michael A. Jensen, "The Link Between Age and Extremism," *Generations Today*, March/April 2023.

- Therefore, violence prevention programs, which tend to be based on addressing youth radicalization, need to consider why older age cohorts might be susceptible to radicalizing to violence.

- This is especially important for programs that address the risk of violence through education, work experience, or the development of pro-social bonds that already exist at high rates among older individuals.

CONSIDERATIONS

To support efforts to mitigate anti-government extremism and its nexus to the veteran community, as well as to bolster patriotism and civic engagement, We the Veterans and Military Families recommends considering the following:

- **For researchers**: It is critical that academic and research institutions work hand-in-hand with organizations like We the Veterans and Military Families to study the success of efforts to pre- and debunk the false anti-government narratives that are exploiting and may resonate with service members who experienced significant negative events during military service. We also need more research on the pathways veterans and military family members take from service to extremism so that organizations can build more prevention efforts on those pathways. Finally, we need more research on both domestic and foreign malign influence campaigns targeting this community so that we can expose them to community leaders and the public. Veterans and military family members (VMF) must be more aware of and better protected from disinformation online, particularly campaigns espousing anti-government sentiments. Veterans are the most trusted class in America, which not only makes them a bigger target for online disinformation campaigns, but should make them more of a priority to protect online.

- **For practitioners:** To address the challenge of older cohorts radicalizing five or more years after transitioning out of the armed forces, prevention organizations should ensure they offer programming for older, more established veterans and military family members who may already have jobs, families, and other known protective factors. Prevention programs tend to focus on youth radicalization and highlight the development of protective factors, which might not be as effective for older cohorts who are more established in their work, education, and pro-social relationships.

- **For veterans and military families**: We must to vigilant and check on fellow veteran and military family (VMF) community members and help them find ways to get better connected through membership and participation in Veteran and Military Service Organizations as well as through continued acts of service – either through local volunteerism, getting involved in local or state government, or signing up to become a poll worker with other veterans and military family members ahead of the next election cycle. Additionally, being careful and curious with the information you are consuming, believing, and sharing has never been more critical. Veterans and the military community are frequent targets of online misinformation campaigns that try to co opt their leadership skills and trust for dangerous and violent goals. Ensure that you and your loved ones are thinking twice before reacting to or sharing potential materials of disinformation with others – especially those which express discontent with America or other Americans – because the information that you're sharing could be a campaign being pushed by a foreign bad actor, rather than a fellow American.

- **For all Americans**: Remember that we all have much more in common than what divides us. When a group of people believes their opponents hold extreme views, they become more threatened by each other. But where is that belief coming from? Each of us can play a role in bridging these gaps, by choosing a more diverse selection of news sources to be exposed to different perspectives, by pausing when something you see or hear on a media platform makes you feel reactive. It's important that we as Americans see each other as part of the same fabric, rather than as an enemy – so we don't fall prey to groups that are highly motivated to create division on our soil. Recent research reveals that the vast majority of us agree on equal protection under the law (91%), the right to vote (91%), and freedom of speech (90%), among other fundamental values. In a similarly united but concerning vein, 82% feel the country is headed in the wrong direction.

START and We the Veterans and Military Families have partnered on the Veterans Preventing Misinformation and Violence project aimed at promoting a public health approach to violence prevention. Through the project, the team seeks to engage veterans, their families, veteran service organizations, and military family service organizations to foster a violence prevention ecosystem.

The findings discussed in this brief are part of a larger effort by the Radicalization and Disengagement team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism to understand of the processes and patterns of radicalization in the United States military and to identify tools that can mitigate radicalization risks. Data for this brief come from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project, including a recent expansion to the data—PIRUS-Plots—that records event-level details of extremist crimes that occurred in the United States between 1990 and 2022. The PIRUS-Plots data are based on open source materials, including court records, police accounts, and news articles. The data include more than 1,500 extremist criminal events, including foiled plots, failed attacks, successful attacks, and financial crimes.

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The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit start.umd.edu or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.