

A TRAGEDY IN THREE ACTS

COVID-19 and Compounding Crises

Violent Extremist Exploitation of COVID-19

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the threat of violent extremism by providing new opportunities, motivations, and capabilities to violent extremists. The virus has created anger, fear, social isolation, and profound uncertainty about the future. These factors have contributed to more online activity, and have increased the attractiveness of ideologies that promise “certainty.” Concurrent crises exacerbate these challenges, all at a time when first responders are stretched thin and adapting operations to the pandemic, likely complicating responses to violent extremist and terrorist attacks. This brief introduces this aspect of this challenge. It is a small part of a larger, mixed-methods study that aims to provide the first responder community with operationally relevant insights on COVID-19.

A Tragedy in Three Acts

1. Anti-Lockdown Protests: the uncertainty around COVID-19 has opened the door for mis- and dis-information to undermine government responses. Anti-government, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and conspiracy theory extremists blame certain groups for the virus, thus encouraging violent extremism.
2. George Floyd Protests: The wave of protests touched off by the death of George Floyd has also created opportunities for extremists to target perceived enemies, like law enforcement, or sew civil unrest indiscriminately to accelerate the downfall of the government.
3. The U.S. General Election and the second wave of COVID-19: political polarization around COVID-19 this Fall will add to a charged environment where violent extremist ideas will resonate.



Boogaloo Boys Patch

IN THIS BRIEF

- Violent Extremism Overview
- A Tragedy in Three Acts
- Implications

RELEVANT FOR



SO WHAT?

Responding to COVID-19 alone is a challenge. COVID-19's effect on violent extremism only compounds the threats you will need to respond to.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The goal of the project is to measure the impact of COVID-19, identify and share best practices organizations can put in place to protect themselves in the short term, and identify strategies to make first responder organizations more resilient to pandemics in the future.



Resource Referrals

For project news and updates:

- Visit www.start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders
- Subscribe to START's newsletter at www.start.umd.edu/newsletters
- Follow us on social media with #COVIDFirstResponders

Implications

The threat of violent extremism is occurring while first responders are already stretched thin due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, it is not just that COVID-19 is affecting the availability of first responders to respond to threats, but responding to civil unrest created or exacerbated by violent extremist groups, for example, is more difficult and entails additional COVID-19 induced officer safety considerations. Similarly, an emergency medical response to a mass casualty attack, already challenging in many contexts, may be complicated by the need to protect communities and first responders themselves from COVID-19.

Regrettably, violent extremists recognize and seek to take advantage of this reality. Domestic extremists and international terrorist organizations alike have stepped up calls for violence and have even perpetrated a number of attacks. Some extremists have also called for infected individuals to weaponize the virus by coming in close contact with government officials and other targets.



Additionally, the virus has incited violence and hate crimes against the Asian population, as well as Jewish Americans, who are blamed by some violent extremist organizations for COVID-19.

Less visible, but no less concerning, violent extremist recruitment is predicted to be on the rise due to COVID-19.



Considering these challenges, START and SSTS are working to produce and quickly disseminate operationally useful insights for first responders grappling with COVID-19, and its myriad second-order effects. These materials will be posted to the project microsite as they become available. Additional materials on the nexus between COVID-19 and violent extremism can already be found on the microsite at www.start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders.

CONTACT

Amy Pate / Barnett Koven

START >>> infostart@umd.edu

Nathan Meehan

info@secondssight-ts.com

www.seconsight-ts.com

start.umd.edu/COVIDFirstResponders

AUTHORS

- Madeline Romm (START)
- William Braniff (START)
- Barnett Koven (START)

This brief is based on the lecture "Strengthening Interagency Capacity to Address Terrorist Threats."

This project is funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Social Science Technology Center as Task 2 of "Advance Situational Awareness Capabilities in Support of Targeted Violent and Threat Prevention in the United States" (award #70RSAT20FR0000082). The views and conclusions contained in the document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the University of Maryland, or START.