



# A New Transnational Agenda to Combat Rising White Supremacist Violence and Terrorism

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## INTRODUCTION

There can no longer be any doubt that the United States faces a major challenge in metastasizing white supremacist violence both at home and abroad. Through hate crimes and terrorist acts, white supremacists are murdering our fellow citizens, targeting Latinos in Walmarts, Jews in synagogues, LGBTQ people in nightclubs, women in yoga studios, Sikhs in temples, Muslims at universities, and African Americans in churches. They are motivated predominantly by changing demographics, which they see as a dire threat to white dominance. At the same time, the antigovernment movement has become increasingly violent, with these organizations found to be involved in plots to kidnap sitting governors, shoot racial justice protesters, and kill cops. The antigovernment movement has become a major proliferator of dangerous conspiracies, such as QAnon, that federal law enforcement has warned are [connected](#) to terrorism. Though not white supremacist, the antigovernment movement increasingly [exhibits](#) bigotry and overlap with the ideologies of hate-based organizations, in particular those motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim hatred.

More Americans are now [killed](#) by white supremacists and other right-wing domestic extremists than by Islamist extremists. All the major federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies--the FBI, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and the State Department--agree that white supremacists are a bigger terrorism threat to the U.S. than groups such as ISIS or al-Qaeda. The open acknowledgment of this reality represents a sea change in how the U.S. views the terrorist landscape, a major shift from the years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

It is time for the U.S. to rethink and retool its counterterrorism policies to address a challenge that will inevitably grow as Western societies become more diverse. To be clear, this does not mean dismantling efforts to evaluate and counter other extremist movements. We must also learn from the failures of earlier efforts, where counterterrorism strategies have been used to target communities, primarily Muslims, leading to mass surveillance and the violation of civil liberties. Failed strategies such as these, and other programs like the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) framework of the Bush and Obama eras that similarly [functioned](#) to abuse the rights of and demonize the Muslim community, should not be revived.

The Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) was founded in 2020 to confront far-right extremism and its associated violence transnationally, as white supremacy and other bigotry-fueled movements are no longer confined by national borders. The global white supremacist movement, motivated largely by the Great Replacement theory that argues white people are being “replaced” by immigrants and people of color in their historic homelands, has inspired several [attacks](#) including [six mass murders](#) since October 2018. These include the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, attacks staged at two American synagogues, an El Paso Walmart, a synagogue in Halle, Germany, and two shisha bars in Hanau, Germany, where the shooter is believed to have been targeting Muslim immigrants. Law

enforcement and other officials in many Western countries agree that white supremacy is now their major terrorism threat, as hate ideologies are also causing growing numbers of hate crimes against marginalized populations.

To confront this changed threat landscape, GPAHE proposes a new transnational policy agenda based on a fundamental rethinking of counterterrorism policies going forward. To begin, we must accept that white supremacy is a qualitatively different threat than Islamist and other forms of extremism and that this challenge will demand a long-term, fundamentally different counterstrategy.

A new mindset is also called for: white supremacy is an inculcated way of thinking for the U.S. and many Western societies. This historic legacy is a powerful motivator for today's white supremacists who believe that a return to the ways of the past, when white supremacy was the law of the land, is necessary to stop the impending white genocide. This thinking resonates with people in all walks and stages of life, and those willing to resort to violence to reinstate this imagined past are fueled by radical right politicians and influencers across the globe.

Countering this rising threat will not be easy or, given the forces propelling it, quick.

Despite the difficulties of addressing the very real dangers of white supremacist domestic terrorism, it is crucial that all reforms to our current counterterrorism agenda take into account the ideas and concerns of the marginalized communities that are most affected by this type of violence. Hearings and investigations and other activities undertaken in advance of policy changes must involve civil society actors and people from the communities who are most directly impacted by rising white supremacy, and most likely to suffer from unintended consequences of policy changes.

## THE PROBLEM

White supremacy is an amoral belief system that stands opposed to the values of inclusive, equitable democracies and is the genesis of the structural racism that pervades our country and systems. In recent years, the white supremacist movement has grown in size and sophistication, becoming a worldwide movement that shares a coherent set of ideas and strategies across borders. In general, white supremacists across the world believe that white people should dominate people of color, that they should live in whites-only ethnocracies, and that white people have a distinct and superior culture – the result of genetic exceptionalism. White supremacists now view themselves as part of a transnational white population, not as citizens of various countries. And they are developing deep online connections across borders.

This requires a rethinking of how we view terrorism as “foreign” and “domestic” as these categories do not apply in a way that was true in past eras. Terrorism cannot solely be seen as something foreign and coming from the outside, predominantly from the Islamic world. Terrorists are born and bred in our own backyards and their motivations for violence are rooted in a vision, though false, of the superiority of American and European white “history.” Many Americans have forgotten that Timothy McVeigh’s 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building was inspired by antigovernment and white supremacist ideas and was the largest mass casualty attack in the U.S. prior to 9/11. The threat from homegrown terrorists has risen over the decades, expanding as our counterterrorism infrastructure turned all of its attention to Islamist extremism in the years after 9/11.

## Broad Agreement that White Supremacy is America's Greatest Terrorism Threat

The evidence of the rising threat posed by white supremacists is not in dispute. In June 2020, the bipartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [analyzed](#) a data set of terrorist attacks in the United States that occurred between January 1994 and May 2020. CSIS concluded that “far-right terrorism has significantly outpaced terrorism from other types of perpetrators, including from far-left networks and individuals inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Right-wing extremists perpetrated two-thirds of the attacks and plots in 2019 and over 90 percent between January 1 and May 8, 2020.” Other studies of terrorism have [concluded](#) the same.

American law enforcement and intelligence agencies agree. In August 2019, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) quietly [added](#) white supremacist violence to its mandate. In September 2019, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [declared](#) white supremacy as big a threat as ISIS or al-Qaeda. DHS warned that “white supremacist violent extremists have adopted an increasingly transnational outlook” driven by their connections with “like-minded individuals online.” DHS [specified](#) the sharing of the “ethnic replacement” scheme, more commonly called “The Great Replacement,” which motivated the Tree of Life synagogue, the El Paso Walmart, and the Christchurch shooters among others, as particularly problematic. It is the favorite propaganda of [growing](#) accelerationist, neo-Nazi terrorist movements, which aim to disrupt social stability and democracy through mass violence. As further evidence

of DHS' concerns of rising white supremacy, in October 2020 the department [announced](#) \$10 million in grants for organizations working to combat white supremacy in the U.S.

In February 2020, the FBI [announced](#) that it now considered the risk of violence from these groups as “on the same footing” as threats posed to the country by foreign terrorist organizations such as ISIS. In June 2020, the U.S. State Department [deemed](#) white supremacist terrorism “a serious challenge for the global community.” In April 2020, the State Department [designated](#) the Russian Imperial Movement (which offered training to American organizers of the 2017 Charlottesville, Va., riots) and members of its leadership as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists.” This is the first time in history that the State Department labeled a white supremacist terrorist group in this manner. In September 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray [wrote](#) in a statement for a Congressional hearing, “2019 was the deadliest year for domestic extremist violence since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995” and the top threat to the country is from “racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists.” Another delayed DHS assessment, [released](#) in October 2020 concluded white supremacists are “the most persistent and lethal threat” the country faces.

As most federal agencies now agree that white supremacy is the biggest threat facing the nation, it is time for the country's elected leadership to publicly agree. That starts with the highest office, the presidency. Unfortunately, the dangers of white supremacist violence have been downplayed, even ignored, in recent decades. In 2009, the DHS [disbanded](#) a unit that was dedicated to investigating domestic and homegrown terrorist violence and that had concluded white supremacist terrorism was on the rise. The most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) [mandated](#) that the FBI compile and release a wealth of data on domestic terrorism, including white supremacist violence, and how the FBI and partners are combating the threat. So far, the FBI has [failed to produce](#) the required assessment, which would go a very long way toward understanding the threat and the allocated resources. In the future, the highest office must be realistic about the threat of rising white supremacy and direct intelligence and law enforcement agencies to engage appropriately.

Some important pieces of legislation to counter rising white supremacist violence have been proposed in this Congress. In mid-September 2020, in a unanimous vote that showed the bipartisan nature of concerns over white supremacy, the House [passed](#) the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2020. Unfortunately, the bill was [rejected](#) by the Senate. The bill would enhance the federal government's efforts to prevent domestic terrorism by requiring federal law enforcement agencies to regularly assess this threat, focus their resources on the most significant domestic terrorism threats, and provide training and resources to assist state, local, and tribal law enforcement in addressing these threats. This bill has [broad support](#) among civil rights organizations. In late September 2020, the House also [passed](#) the Transnational White Supremacist Extremism Review Act, which would direct DHS to develop and disseminate a terrorist threat assessment of foreign violent white supremacist extremist groups. The bill acknowledges the transnational nature of white supremacy. Additionally, the Khalid Jabara and Heather Heyer National Opposition to Hate, Assault, and Threats to Equality Act which would incentivize accurate data collection, provide hotlines for reporting hate crimes, encourage law enforcement agencies to adopt hate crime policies that assist law enforcement with federal research and permit courts to require individuals convicted under the Hate Crimes Prevention Act to participate in community service or educational programs as a condition of supervised release, should be passed.

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*Given this landscape, GPAHE recommends the following policies:*

### **1. Conduct Accurate Assessment of Resources Dedicated to White Supremacist Terrorism**

It is critical to first determine exactly what resources to confront the white supremacist threat are being deployed, something that congressional oversight committees have had a difficult time assessing. There have been [many indications](#) that law enforcement personnel and other resources targeting white supremacy are much less robust than those for Islamist extremism, but the lack of transparency and information sharing by federal agencies makes it difficult to know. For example, *The New York Times* [reported](#) in 2018, “At the F.B.I., counterterrorism agents candidly admitted that domestic terrorism was seen as a backwater and that the only path to advancement was through international terrorism cases.” Other reports found the same. An FBI veteran quoted in 2018 said the FBI considered far-right extremism “[the lowest priority](#)” amongst its counterterrorism efforts.

In July 2020, DHS and NCTC officials actually [refused](#) to brief the House Homeland Security Committee on the current terrorism threat picture America faces. As of late October 2020, the FBI was four months late in providing a [report](#) required by the most recent National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that stipulated it declare how many

agents and intelligence analysts the FBI and DHS had assigned to domestic terror, provide an accounting of violent incidents stretching back to 2009, and explain “the rankings of domestic terrorism in relations to other threats” in each of the FBI’s field offices. The NDAA also required details on “the necessity of changing authorities, roles, resources or responsibilities within the Federal Government to more effectively prevent and counter domestic terrorism activities.”

There is some information about terrorism caseloads. At a congressional hearing in May 2019, the head of the FBI’s counterterrorism division testified that the bureau was [investigating](#) 850 domestic terrorism cases and that, of those, about 40 percent involved racially-motivated violent extremists. In September 2020, FBI Director Wray said in a congressional [hearing](#) that there had been about 100 arrests of domestic terrorism suspects in the prior nine months and that most, though he did not specify how many, involved a form of white supremacy (an FBI spokesperson later clarified that there were about the same number of international terrorism arrests).

Even though many congressional hearings have asked intelligence and federal law enforcement officials for clarification on the issue of resource deployment, the situation remains opaque. There is already some legislation drafted that could help root out the facts. The House Homeland Security Committee has drafted [legislation](#), the Domestic Terrorism Documentation and Analysis of Threats in America (DATA) Act, in order to foster transparency surrounding domestic terrorism data and increase research on the issue. It would require the FBI, DOJ, and DHS to produce an annual, unclassified joint report that provides the following: data on domestic terrorist incidents; assessments, investigations, indictments, prosecutions, and convictions with a domestic terrorism nexus; and the number of full-time staff working on domestic terrorism employed by DOJ and DHS, among other requirements. The passage of this legislation as well as further hearings are needed to determine the necessary additional resources to combat white supremacist terrorism. In the future, federal law enforcement agencies should be required to produce annual reports on their activities to combat non-Islamist extremist terrorism, something required by the aforementioned Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2020 that has passed the House.

Depending on the resource findings, it may be time to consider reconstituting the DHS’ far right extremism intelligence unit that was [shut down](#) early in the Obama Administration. The baseline data is also needed to determine whether increased staffing and additional resources in agencies such as DHS, NCTC, and FBI are warranted, including whether there is a disproportionate resource deployment for Islamist extremism versus white supremacist extremists. Our resources need to match this new and growing challenge.

There are other measures that could be immensely helpful in understanding how America can better address white supremacist violence. Currently, there is no centralized database tracking all domestic terrorism cases. This means the exact number of cases, how they were prosecuted, and the outcomes are unknown. Such a database would be helped by the FBI specifically tagging the threat and cases it prosecutes as white supremacist rather than the more general “racially-driven violent extremists,” as the FBI now [calls](#) terrorism committed by white supremacist and any other groups motivated by other hate ideologies (this more generic term was adopted after [heavy criticism](#) was rightly levied at the FBI for creating the term “black identity extremists” in an era when the real violence was clearly coming from white supremacists). While the FBI once tracked 11 categories of terrorism, including a specific one for white supremacy, the 2019 [list](#) featured just four, including “racially motivated violent extremism,” which suggests that there is an equivalency between white and non-white violent extremism (confusingly, on the FBI’s [website](#) it mentions six ideologies instead of four). There is not. This change means it’s now harder to narrow down exactly what resources the FBI is putting toward the specific threat of white supremacy. A 2020 [report](#) by NCTC, which was the result of a meeting of some 120 experts convened by NCTC in 2019, alluded to this problem, saying that the government’s criteria for publicly labeling attacks as “domestic terrorism” is “opaque and inconsistent” and that “the U.S. government needs to find a way to increase public trust by being transparent with the public about how [domestic terrorism] definitions are derived, defined, and used.”

## **2. Domestic Terrorist Designations and New Legislation Not Needed**

There has been much [discussion](#) about the need for a new domestic terrorist designation like that given to foreign terrorists and their organizations. It is the position of GPAHE that designations are not needed to combat white supremacist terrorism. For too long, enhanced terrorism powers have, sometime unintentionally and sometimes not, led to harming civil rights advocates, marginalized communities, and others. We cannot forget the FBI’s efforts to undermine civil rights activists in the 1960s, including [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), as well as other abuses of power that have occurred when terrorism capabilities have been enhanced. The recent [example](#) of the use of enhanced terrorism

capabilities, much of it ultimately found to be [unlawful](#), against the Muslim community by the NYPD in the years after 9/11 is a case in point. In other cases, federal law enforcement has used domestic terrorism powers to [wrongly target](#) animal rights and environmental rights activists, and other groups the government of the time viewed as having “unpopular” or controversial beliefs.

Combating white supremacist terrorism should not become a tool for undermining civil rights.

There has also been much [discussion](#) about the need for new domestic terrorism legislation. It is the position of GPAHE that new legislation is not necessary to combat white supremacist terrorism. As a first step, it would be more sensible to enforce the more than 50 current laws that are available to those battling domestic terrorism and make sure that adequate resources are directed to this aim.

The issue appears not to be a lack of legal authorities but rather an unwillingness by law enforcement to use its current capabilities against far-right extremism in the same way it does with other forms of extremism. A recent [study](#) of multiple domestic terrorist attacks came to this conclusion while documenting the interruption of terrorist plots: “[L]aw enforcement priorities remain skewed. The database shows that during the first three years, 2017-2019, cases involving Islamist extremists were preempted 18 times, compared with seven completed attacks, or 72%...In contrast, a minority of right-wing extremist cases were preempted – 18, compared with 30 realized attacks, or 37.5%.” The study further finds many in law enforcement just don’t consider white supremacy and antigovernment extremism as the serious threat they are.

There are multiple other statutes available for use against white supremacists including hate crime laws, RICO laws, and the Genocide Prevention Act. Unfortunately, in recent years the FBI has treated hate crimes as a lesser issue, [ranking](#) enforcing civil rights violations like hate crimes fifth on its list of eight distinct missions. There is also the challenge that, at least since 9/11, federal prosecutors have used terrorism and other laws more forcefully to [charge](#) violent extremists in the United States connected to Islamist or foreign terror organizations, while applying them much less often when it comes to domestic attacks committed by white, American-born men.

### **3. Consistent Hate Crime Reporting Necessary**

Uniform identification and reporting of hate crimes is essential to getting a handle on white supremacist violence in the U.S. Each year, data on approximately 6,000 hate crimes are reported to the FBI. From repeated [studies](#) by the Department of Justice, we know that the actual number of hate crimes in the U.S. is more like 250,000. The gap between these numbers must be rectified as the low numbers reported to the FBI allow for a quick dismissal by critics that there is a problem of hate violence in the U.S. Accurate data on the actual number and categories of hate crimes is needed to understand patterns and trends to better confront the policy challenges this plague of violence against marginalized communities represents.

Compared to other countries that collect this data, the U.S. is woefully behind for several reasons: in about half the cases, victims [never](#) report the crime to police; many of the country’s law enforcement agencies do a poor job categorizing and then collecting hate crime data; many law enforcement agencies lack proper hate crime training; and most importantly, agencies are [not required](#) to participate in the crime reporting systems that gather and compile the information that produces the data set on which the FBI hate crime statistics report is based. In 2018, of the 16,039 agencies that participated, 87 percent reported zero hate crimes.

Hate crimes data reporting must be mandatory. This will require designing and implementing uniform classification and federal reporting requirements that apply at the state and local levels. Law enforcement must be trained on hate crimes. And current federal hate crimes legislation must be improved to demand federal agency action as many parts of the federal government do not report hate crimes (the FBI only began to do so in [2018](#)). Fighting hate crimes must be designated as a core responsibility of the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division, and the division must work with civil rights organizations and affected communities to incorporate those groups’ recommendations into federal legislation and priorities.

There are also lessons to be learned from other countries, in particular the U.K. which is often cited as a [model](#) for hate crime data collection. The U.K. Home Office, which is responsible for immigration and security, created the Home Office Data Hub, which aggregates and classifies all police-recorded data. The Data Hub is able to [obtain](#) data directly from the crime recording systems of local forces. In 2018, England and Wales – with a combined population that is 20 percent that of the United States – had 103,379 reported hate incidents.

#### **4. Agencies Need to Coordinate in Order to Adequately Counter White Supremacy**

It is time to create interagency task forces to coordinate efforts across the many federal agencies working to combat white supremacy. A 2020 [report](#) issued by NCTC concluded that “there is no whole-of-government [domestic terrorism] threat picture.” It said federal officials cannot even agree on what to call violent extremists inside the United States, their efforts are “rarely integrated,” and combating the “potent” threat is not a top priority in some agencies. At this point federal agencies involved in this issue include the FBI, DHS, NCTC, and the State Department. State and local law enforcement agencies also play a role in DHS Fusion Centers and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces. This activity targeting white supremacy needs to be well-coordinated across agencies and prioritized for maximum effectiveness.

Because white supremacist terrorism has been framed for years as a “domestic” issue, it has largely been seen as outside the remit of the American Intelligence Community (IC), which includes agencies such as the CIA, NSA, and other bodies reporting to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). That was also true of NCTC until the agency quietly moved into white supremacy monitoring in 2019, although the agency is still limited in their ability to share information. It was also true of the State Department until their April 2020 [decision](#) to declare the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists.” It is time now to consider what the appropriate role of the IC should be in combating white supremacy as it has morphed into an international terrorism threat.

At this point, many white supremacist groups and online networks are truly international. This is particularly true of the very dangerous [accelerationist groups](#) such as Atomwaffen Division and The Base (the English translation of al-Qaeda), among others. Governments in [Germany](#), the [UK](#), [Australia](#) and many other countries have come to the same conclusion. In April, the Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) of the U.N. Security Council [published](#), “Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism.” CTED reported that ten of its states have this concern and “although extreme right-wing terrorism is not a new phenomenon, there has been a recent increase in its frequency and lethality, with some individuals, groups and movements pursuing transnational aims in a national context, drawing on international networks, ideas and personalities, and seeking to mobilize others, often using the Internet. This has led to multiple large-scale terrorist attacks targeting minorities.” In many [European countries](#) and [other parts of the world](#), intelligence agencies have recently [taken up](#) the monitoring of white supremacist movements as a result of this shifting landscape.

A thorough consideration of what role, if any, the IC should play in countering the white supremacist threat should be a focus of the next administration. As these groups do not respect national boundaries or keep their activities within the domestic realm, neither can the efforts to counter them. Additionally, the [Transnational White Supremacist Extremism Review Act](#), which would direct DHS to develop and disseminate a terrorist threat assessment of foreign violent white supremacist extremist groups, and which passed the House in September 2020, should be seriously considered.

If more of the Intelligence Community takes up this issue, it is incumbent upon them to find experts on this movement who will not be influenced by the past emphasis on Islamist extremism. Many can be found in the ranks of academia and among nonprofits that battle hate and extremism. A 2020 NCTC report made clear that this expertise does not exist in the IC at this point. The [report](#) said that intelligence officials are hampered by a “lack of analytic research” and formal threat assessments to draw on in their work, and that gap in valuable intelligence “in turn reinforces the lack of policymaker prioritization.” A former DHS counterterrorism chief in late October made clear that no agency in the federal government can provide [a true threat landscape](#) of global white supremacy, and since the FBI’s focus is on prosecutions, not intelligence and analysis, such a capability is missing. This expertise is essential if the agencies are to actually contribute to the transnational battle against white supremacy.

As with any changes, consideration of the effects of any actions on civil liberties and human rights, both in the U.S. and abroad, must be a priority in the discussion. The IC has engaged in [rights violations](#) many times in the past, and any changes must ensure that does not happen again as violent, transnational white supremacy is confronted.

#### **5. Need for International Cooperation and Learning from Allies**

As white supremacist extremism is now an international movement propelled by networks that transcend borders, the U.S. needs to [work with](#) allies affected by this menace. There is no other way to effectively counter a threat that knows no national borders. As a Brookings Institute report recently [said](#), “By working with allies around the world, the United States can prevent the groups and cells from helping each other, as [it does already with jihadi organizations](#). In addition, a global effort can reveal otherwise unknown individuals who have ties to extremists back at home.”

There are several transnational efforts underway to coordinate the response to white supremacist terrorism. Both Europol and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) are now [sharing information](#) with each other on right-wing extremism, but the U.S. is not a part of these information sharing efforts. The Five Eyes intelligence alliance, involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K., and the U.S., is another venue where information about white supremacist terrorism could become a focus.

In September 2020, the E.U. [announced](#) the creation of a new high level post, its first ever Anti-Racism Coordinator along with a new Anti-Racism Action Plan. The U.S. should look closely at this as a model for our country. The U.S. could also learn from efforts against right-wing extremism in other countries. For example, Canada is currently strengthening its efforts against extremism in the military and their measures are worth examining. Germany has a problem with right-wing extremists in the military and police forces. America could learn from the efforts being made by our allies to fight the white supremacist challenges we also face here.

## 6. Curb Tech Companies Role in Proliferating White Supremacy

The true accelerant of white supremacy worldwide is the Internet. It was much more difficult for extremists in earlier eras to connect and recruit when their only tools were faxes and phones, and no one was providing a platform for monetizing or advertising their content. Much as Hitler used the then-new radio technology to push his views into German families' homes, thereby radicalizing an entire country into genocidal thinking, extremists who saw the potential of the Internet in the 1990s have been able to successfully use mainstream online platforms and search systems in the same way. Given that the major platforms did not begin to enforce anti-hate terms of service until after the Charlottesville, Va., riots in 2017, and still are [muddling](#) their responses to these issues today, there is no way to know how many worldwide were and still are radicalized online.

One answer to slowing the spread of white supremacy and reducing the violence it engenders lies in curbing the proliferation of these ideas online. A July 2020 [study](#) of recent domestic terrorist events found “that incidents involving people who were exposed to violent extremist ideologies almost entirely online – rather than through contact in real-world settings – rose substantially starting in 2015, amounting to nearly one in five incidents ... [since then] nearly every case we catalogued in recent years involved some degree of online radicalization.” This conclusion applied to all forms of extremism – right-wing, left-wing and Islamist.

The flourishing of white supremacy is directly related to how it has been allowed to proliferate online. For years now, there has been a double standard when it comes to how online platforms treat content produced by white supremacists compared to content by Islamist extremist groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda. For the latter, deplatforming is the accepted, and actually, demanded strategy, one pushed by the American government, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and the major technology platforms. In fact, it would be inconceivable for social media platforms to allow ISIS propaganda to grow and spread unchecked, or to be monetized, but that is exactly what happens with white supremacy.

Beginning around 2015, Twitter implemented a [mass suspension](#) of ISIS and similar accounts. By 2018, Twitter had [removed](#) some one million Islamist extremist accounts. YouTube took [similar actions](#) and in 2017 began redirecting users searching for this material to Islamic clerics denouncing the radical movement. And it worked. A study, “[The ISIS Twitter Census](#),” found that the deplatforming of ISIS accounts was successful. “The data we collected also suggests that the current rate of suspensions has also limited the ISIS network’s ability to grow and spread, a consideration almost universally ignored by critics of suspension tactics. The consequences of neglecting to weed a garden are obvious, even though weeds will always return.” Graphic online images of beheadings and other violence were also greatly reduced, the study found.

This mass purge of ISIS did not encounter a political backlash or calls that the takedowns violated free speech principles. The American government supported the deplatforming. We know that a similar deplatforming of white supremacy could have the same suppressive effect. Experts [agree](#) that it is critical to curbing these heinous ideas and to reducing the number of recruits into potentially violent activities.

In 2016, major tech companies [launched](#) a shared database of “hashes,” or digital “fingerprints,” of Islamist extremist imagery so as to be able to identify and curb the spread of the movement’s content online. This work would ultimately become the joint tech company effort, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), which now has dozens of companies using its information to identify Islamic extremist material. In September 2019, it was announced that GIFCT would become a standalone nonprofit institution that will counter all forms of extremist

content regardless of its ideological underpinnings. It remains to be seen exactly how they will take on white supremacy, though it has promised to do so. A recent [report](#) from the Brookings Institution noted that its progress has been “often reactive and fitful.” It is also worrisome that Tech versus Terrorism, a close partner of GIFCT, has [repeatedly](#) asked governments to provide terrorism designations prior to deplatforming material. Since there may never be such a thing for white supremacist groups in many countries, this harmful material will proliferate on platforms, radicalizing more people into white supremacy.

The U.S. should finally join the Christchurch Call, a voluntary effort spurred by the Christchurch mosque attacks, that aims to stop the spread of terror-inducing content online. The U.S. [declined](#) to sign on, citing free speech, even though the Call is a voluntary commitment by governments and the largest tech companies to improve their efforts to tackle extremist content. Some 40 governments have now [signed](#) on. The Call asks for signatories to voluntarily ensure passage of effective counterterrorism laws and to take measures to remove extremist content from social media. Additionally, the U.S. should stop inserting American language protecting tech companies into international treaties. The recent [inclusion](#) of the U.S. Section 230 language, which broadly protects American tech companies from liability for material posted on their platforms, into the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement means the U.S. is exporting its own flawed model of Internet regulation into other countries.

Two pieces of proposed legislation are worth consideration for determining the way forward on this issue. One is The National Commission on Online Platforms and Homeland Security Act that would address the proliferation of terrorist content on social media and other online platforms. The [legislation](#) would create a bipartisan commission of non-government experts to examine the ways platforms have been exploited to carry out targeted violence, acts of terrorism, and covert foreign state influence campaigns intended to affect U.S. elections. The platforms would be examined to determine if they have transparent, consistent, and equitable policies, and whether or not these rules are enforced consistently and effectively.

Additionally, The [Raising the Bar Act](#) could help establish a baseline for each platform in their handling of hate content, and then hold the platforms accountable for doing better. GPAHE is a [member](#) of the International Coalition Against Cyber Hate (INACH), which works with the European Commission (EC) to monitor hate online at major platforms and whose members conduct the [monitoring exercises](#) that the EC uses to determine how well each company is doing. This data has been invaluable in Europe for holding the major platforms accountable and has led to [improved efforts](#) to combat hate online. Not surprisingly, the technology companies seem to improve the enforcement of their terms of service after each round of monitoring. If passed, The Raising the Bar Act could potentially have the same effect here in the United States.

In mid-July 2020, GPAHE put forth a set of [recommendations](#) for white supremacist content on mainstream platforms. It includes the following: dangerous and terrorist-connected propaganda and groups must be deplatformed; policies against hate speech and postings by violent extremist groups need to be clearly defined to include white supremacist propaganda and groups; these policies must be rigorously enforced; deplatforming organized white supremacist groups must be prioritized, and white supremacy must be recognized as a driver of terrorism at the same level as Islamist extremism by GIFCT and the major technology companies; algorithms and search systems should never recommend white supremacist content; both AI systems and content reviewers must be trained to prioritize white supremacist material for removal; identifying white supremacist and other hate content should not be outsourced to civil society and anti-racist activists; and there should be no monetization of white supremacist material through ads, and payment processors should not allow their products to be used by extremists. Uniform adoption of these recommendations across the tech sector would go a long way toward ending the scourge of white supremacy.

## 7. Rooting Out Military Extremism

A thorough [hearing](#) on white supremacist extremism was held in February 2020 by the House’s Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee. GPAHE’s co-founder Heidi Beirich testified alongside other experts and provided [written testimony](#) on the extent of this problem in the United States. There have been dozens of white supremacist terrorist and attempted terrorist acts committed by serving and former members of the Armed Forces, both in the U.S. and [around the world](#). Timothy McVeigh, who committed the Oklahoma City bombing, the largest domestic terrorist attack in the U.S. before 9/11, was a veteran who had both white supremacist and militia sympathies.

Active military personnel are well aware of this problem and polling by the *Military Times* in [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#) and [2020](#) indicates that white nationalist views appear widespread. Congresswoman Jackie Spier has recently [advanced](#)

[legislation](#) as part of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that would significantly help with this issue and reform the military's climate surveys. In the 2020 poll, troops identified "white nationalism as a national security threat on par with al-Qaida and the Islamic State Group, and more worrisome than the danger posed by North Korea, Afghanistan or Iraq."

Military regulations currently state that groups that advocate for "illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, ethnicity or national origin" are forbidden to military troops. So are groups that advocate "the use of force, violence or criminal activity or otherwise advance efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights." Active participation includes fundraising, demonstrating, rallying, recruiting, training, organizing or leading members, distributing material, including posting online, and having tattoos associated with such gangs or organizations. These regulations are strong, but if they are not enforced in a systematic manner, then they only serve as paper tigers. Research into how enforcement works in the military and the priority it is given by investigators and unit commanders is advised to determine the effectiveness of these regulations.

Currently, the regulations do not bar troop participation in antigovernment groups and militias, a situation that must change. Many of these groups call for civil war against the government and have been involved in violence in the past year, including the killing of police officers, attempted bombing of a social justice protest in Las Vegas, and a kidnapping plot against two sitting governors. These groups are often conspiracymongers who proliferate material from movements such as QAnon, a [conspiracy theory](#) that promotes the idea that Democratic politicians run child sex trafficking rings, among other dangerous allegations, and which is [linked](#) to several acts of violence. Adherents of this kind of thinking pose a danger to the troops and the U.S.

There is also a need for stronger screening measures to keep extremists out of the ranks, including a tattoo database to draw on, and changes to the psychological and health tests. Also, prospective troops fill out a lengthy questionnaire that asks whether they've ever been a member of an organization "dedicated to terrorism," one that advocates for violence, or commits violence with the goal of discouraging others from exercising their constitutional rights. Unfortunately, this process relies heavily on self-reporting and it is unclear how that self-reporting is verified if at all.

There is a need for more rigorous enforcement procedures and the collection of data on how military bans against white supremacist activity are enacted. One problem with the current regulations is that penalties are left largely up to commanders, usually at the unit level, and can include a range of outcomes, such as reprimand, loss of security clearance, or discharge from service. The lack of documented evidence, which could help identify trends and squash the rise of white supremacists in the military, is an additional problem.

Federal agencies must work together on these issues. It is unclear how the military shares information on extremists with other branches and other federal agencies, including the FBI. When the services become aware of an extremist in their ranks, no one has an answer to what happens to that information after that soldier is dismissed or if the services alert each other when they find someone enlisted with extremist views. It is also unclear if the Armed Services investigate the networks in the military that the white supremacists may have been involved in or recruited from. A look at how the services interact with and share information with each other on extremists and with the FBI and Department of Justice once the service member leaves the military is warranted.

Additionally, the military must fulfill its legal requirement to track and report hate crimes data to the FBI. They have never complied with that mandate.

## **8. Rooting Out Law Enforcement Extremism**

U.S. law enforcement and criminal justice systems have a long history of racism resulting in the over-policing, over-incarceration, and killings of Black and brown communities, and our nation is facing a racial reckoning in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and other Black people at the hands of police. As our nation engages in the necessary hard work to find a path to reform, transparency, and constitutional policing and to build trust between marginalized communities and police, it is critical that white supremacists are rooted out of law enforcement agencies.

There is evidence that extremism can be found among many police officers, though a lack of research means it is unclear how widespread the problem is. In 2019, *Reveal* published a [report](#) that found "Hundreds of active-duty and retired law enforcement officers from across the United States are members of Confederate, anti-Islam, misogynistic or anti-government militia groups on Facebook." The officers involved came from every level of law enforcement,

from the NYPD to local patrols. In the wake of the report, more than 50 police departments opened investigations into these allegations.

Similar results were found in a BuzzFeed [investigation](#) from the same year. And according to Georgetown Professor of Law Vida B. Johnson's [research](#), as of December 2019, there have been at least 100 different scandals, in more than 40 different states, involving police officers who have sent racist emails and text messages, or made racist comments on social media since the 1990s. The problem isn't only among the country's police departments. In 2019, a [report](#) by ProPublica found that Border Patrol agents were posting wildly offensive comments and memes in a secret Facebook group that had 9,500 members, including the head of the agency. A year later, Customs and Border Patrol leaders [refused](#) to provide congressional investigators with the names of employees who made offensive posts or even identify the agents who'd been disciplined. Another [analysis](#) found white supremacists and militia members in police forces in states including Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia.

The FBI itself is concerned about this problem. In its 2015 *Counterterrorism Policy Directive and Policy Guide*, the agency [warned](#) that "domestic terrorism investigations focused on militia extremists, white supremacist extremists, and sovereign citizen extremists often have identified active links to law enforcement officers." And this is not a new problem. In a 2006 [bulletin](#), the FBI warned of white supremacists infiltrating police departments and the threat that posed to the public. There is also evidence that militias and antigovernment groups have become a [substantial problem](#) in law enforcement, something that is rarely discussed or addressed. In general, law enforcement agencies at all levels lack [systems](#) for vetting personnel for potential supremacist links.

As of today, there is no official record of officers who are tied to white supremacist or other extremist groups because, in the U.S., there is no federal policy for screening or monitoring the country's law enforcement officers for extremist views. The 18,000 or so police agencies across the country are largely left to police themselves. No single code of conduct or ethics policy governs the thousands of jurisdictions in the U.S. that employ police officers. Different law enforcement agencies have widely differing standards for the behavior they accept from their personnel. In general, as the Brennan Center has [documented](#), "officers' racist activities are often known within their departments and generally result in punishment or termination following public scandals."

This lack of standards is happening just as the problem is likely growing in tandem with the rise of white supremacist and antigovernment movements generally. Similar to military personnel, police officers do not have the full First Amendment rights of other citizens. "There are limitations on what government employees can do, especially where their speech implicates their ability to do their jobs properly," Chiraag Bains, the former senior counsel to the head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, [told The Guardian](#) in 2019. "So, if they're associating with a white supremacist group, it's within the police department's authority to say that the person cannot do that job." Bains added that police officers are sworn to uphold the Constitution, which promises equal treatment under the law to all Americans, regardless of race. A U.S. court of appeals has [found](#) that the "interest in maintaining a relationship of trust between the police and fire departments and the communities they serve" outweighs officers' right to free expression.

It is time for oversight to be brought to the issue of white supremacy and policing. The next administration should form a task force to investigate and make recommendations on how to root out hate-based and antigovernment activity in law enforcement agencies. A set of guidelines for local and state law enforcement agencies should be created and adopted at the state level. In addition, all police officers should be educated on hate movements by law enforcement training institutions.

## 9. Community Response

The federal government already has an agency, the Community Relations Service (CRS), that has been active in helping communities riven by hate violence. Established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, CRS was [created](#) to serve as the "Nation's Peacemaker." Starting in 2009, in addition to working in communities terrorized by hate violence and tension relating to alleged discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin, CRS began work on prevention and response to hate crimes committed on the basis of actual or perceived gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability. CRS' purpose is to serve communities and foster an American culture that respects and values diversity. Going forward CRS must be fully funded.

In October 2020, DHS announced that it was [awarding](#) about \$10 million in grants to several organizations dedicated to stopping white supremacist and far-right violence, and identifying extremists of all kinds. This appears to be

a restart of a program abruptly cancelled in 2017. Among the grantees are Life After Hate, a nonprofit staffed by former neo-Nazis that helps white supremacists leave the movement, university researchers studying how to combat disinformation circulated online by white supremacists, and Arizona State University's McCain Institute is creating a network of specialists nationwide to accept referrals of people feared at risk of committing violence. The institute said it expects to primarily handle far-right threats, including white supremacists.

This kind of community support is welcomed, and these programs appear to be very different from the CVE framework of prior administrations. During the Bush and Obama eras, CVE programs were used to spy on the Muslim community under the guise of providing social services and turned neighbors against each other. Programs such as Life After Hate do not follow that model and are entirely voluntary.

There are other efforts in the U.S. to further deradicalization processes, including the [Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab](#), or PERIL, at American University. There are also successful Exit programs which help white supremacists and other extremists leave these movements in other countries that the U.S. could learn from. The best known, [Exit Sweden](#), began in the late 1990s and is funded by the government. It provides a whole host of social services to help people leave extremist movements. Efforts such as these should be expanded as the answers to deradicalizing extremists are going to be found in such research and civic engagements. In addition, involvement of community activists and organizations affected by white supremacist activity and violence in all of the issues examined here is imperative if the best solutions are to be found.

## 10. Gun Control Measures

And of course, almost none of the attacks mentioned in this brief would have been possible without relatively easy access to firearms. When it comes to extremism, there are specific actions that may help keep guns out of the hands of extremists. The removal of the so-called "[Charleston Loophole](#)," which allowed Dylann Roof, the racist who killed nine black people in Charleston in 2015, to obtain a weapon that he should not have had is a start. Legislation was put forward by the House in 2019 to close the loophole but it did not move forward. Efforts to also close the hate crime loophole, which allows those convicted of hate crimes to obtain weapons, could stem the tide of violence from extremists. The [Disarm Hate Act](#) was put forward in the House in 2019 but did not move forward.

There also appears, at least superficially, to be a link between domestic violence and extremist violence. Increasingly, [misogynistic movements affiliated with white supremacy](#), such as the Incel movement, have been involved in mass violence. Closing [loopholes](#) that allow domestic violence perpetrators to obtain guns could be helpful not just in reducing the horrors of domestic violence but also mass acts of terrorism. Finally, ghost guns, built either from kits of disassembled gun parts or on 3D printers, are a favorite of extremists. Boogaloo Bois forums and other places neo-Nazi accelerationists congregate are filled with manuals to create these weapons, which are also untraceable. Either banning or regulating ghost guns, as the [Untraceable Firearms Act](#) would do if made law, could potentially reduce violence.

**The Global Project Against Hate and Extremism** (GPAHE) uses research, advocacy, and education to counter the rising tide of extremism across borders by: documenting and exposing how extremist and hateful movements use social media and the internet to organize, propagandize, and recruit followers and sympathizers; educating anti-hate actors, policymakers, and the public about extremist movements, their leadership, and their activities; and examining how extremist movements influence each other across borders, specifically analyzing the impact of American extremists on other countries.

*This brief was written by Heidi Beirich and Wendy Via, co-founders of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism.*

