

SEPTEMBER 2020



# DEMONSTRATIONS & POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

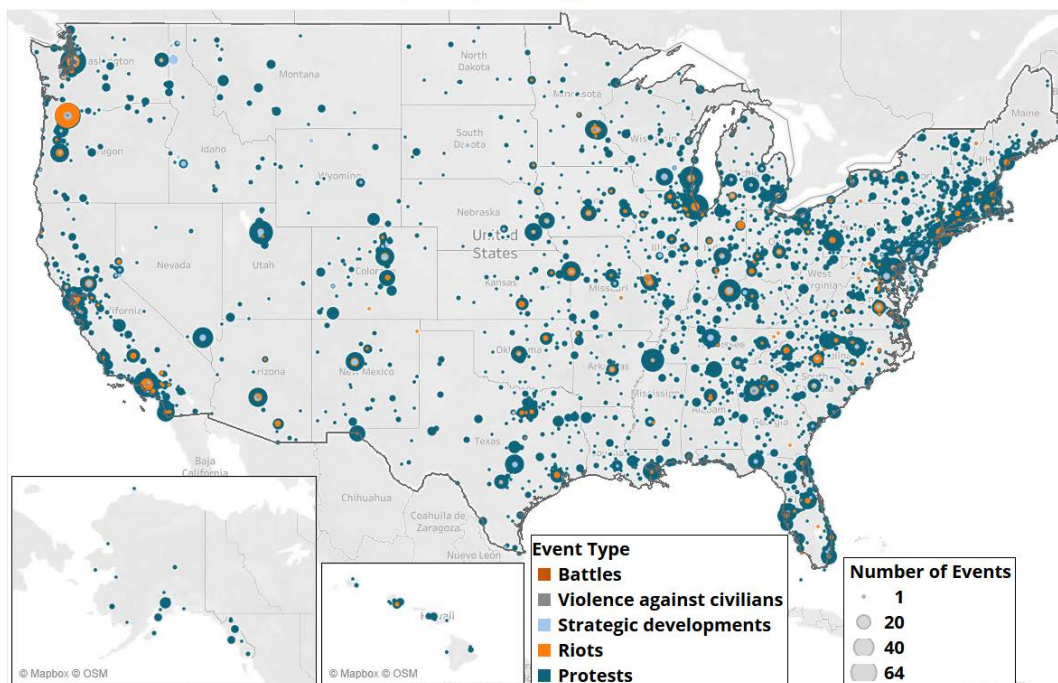
*NEW DATA FOR SUMMER 2020*

# Introduction

The United States is at heightened risk of political violence and instability going into the 2020 general election. Mass shootings hit a record high last year ([BBC, 29 December 2019](#)), violent hate crimes are on the rise ([Al Jazeera, 13 November 2019](#)), and police killings continue unabated, at 2.5 times the rate for Black men as for white men ([FiveThirtyEight, 1 June 2020](#); [Nature, 19 June 2020](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic has killed well over 180,000 ([New York Times, 3 September 2020](#)) and disrupted the economy, while George Floyd's death in police custody has sparked a massive wave of protest across the country.

The [US Crisis Monitor](#) — a joint project between ACLED and the [Bridging Divides Initiative \(BDI\) at Princeton University](#) — collects real-time data on these trends in order to provide timely analysis and resources to support civil society efforts to track, prevent, and mitigate the risk of political violence in America. With supplemental data collection [extending](#) coverage back to the week of Floyd's killing in May, the dataset now encompasses the latest phase of the Black Lives Matter movement, growing unrest related to the health crisis, and politically motivated violence ahead of the November general election.

**Political Violence, Demonstrations, & Strategic Developments in the US**  
(24 May - 22 August 2020)



The [US Crisis Monitor](#) is made possible by support from the [Bridging Divides Initiative](#) at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs' Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination.



These data reveal that the United States is in crisis. It faces a multitude of concurrent, overlapping risks — from police abuse and racial injustice, to pandemic-related unrest and beyond — all exacerbated by increasing polarization. This report maps these trends with a view toward the upcoming election, when these intersecting risks are likely to intensify.

## Black Lives Matter: Racism & Police Violence

The longstanding crisis of police violence and structural racism in America hit a new flashpoint this year. On 25 May 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill. One officer pinned Floyd to the ground and knelt on his neck for eight minutes and 15 seconds, killing him. Other officers looked on ([BBC, 16 July 2020](#)).

Floyd's death prompted a surge of demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM)<sup>1</sup> movement that quickly spread from Minneapolis throughout the country. Between 26 May, the day after Floyd's death, and 22 August, ACLED records over 7,750 demonstrations linked to the BLM movement across more than 2,440 locations in all 50 states and Washington, DC.

While Floyd's killing ignited the demonstrations, the protest movement has also organized around other victims of police violence and racism across the country. In August 2019, police officers

### ***Nationwide Demonstrations***

While the US has long been home to a vibrant protest environment, demonstrations surged to new levels in 2020. Between 24 May and 22 August, ACLED records more than 10,600 demonstration events across the country. Over 10,100 of these — or nearly 95% — involve peaceful protesters. Fewer than 570 — or approximately 5% — involve demonstrators engaging in violence. Well over 80% of all demonstrations are connected to the Black Lives Matter movement or the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACLED conducted a pilot data collection program for the US last summer, allowing for comparison of the current moment with the same time period last year. In July of this year alone, ACLED records nearly 2,000 demonstrations — an increase of 42% from the 1,400 demonstrations recorded in July 2019.

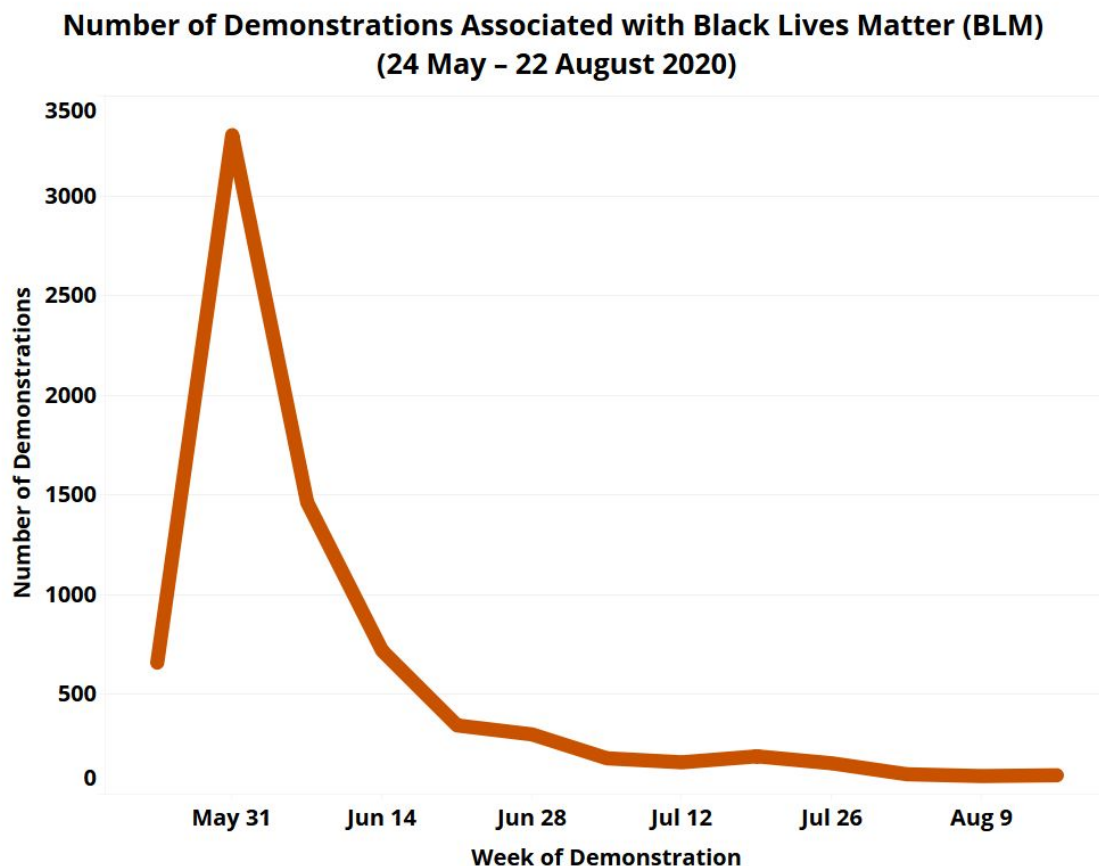
confronted Elijah McClain while he was walking home from a convenience store in Aurora, Colorado. McClain died after authorities reportedly tackled him, put him in a carotid hold, and had first responders inject him with ketamine ([The Cut, 11 August 2020](#)). At the start of 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed by a former police officer and his son while out jogging in south Georgia ([New York Times, 24 June 2020](#)). The assailants claim they suspected him of breaking into nearby homes. In

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, the acronym “BLM” is used to abbreviate the phrase “Black Lives Matter” when referring to the movement writ large. It is not meant to suggest all associated events are directly affiliated with the national BLM organization.

Louisville, Kentucky, police raided the wrong home while attempting to serve a warrant and exchanged gunfire with one of the occupants; his partner, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old paramedic who was sleeping at the time, was shot and killed by the officers ([New York Times, 1 September 2020](#)). Demonstrations over Floyd's killing have also called for justice in these cases and other past incidents that remain unresolved. In many local communities, protests marking Floyd's death have doubled as acts of remembrance for people like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Trayvon Martin — whose killing in 2012 originally sparked the BLM movement ([CNN, 26 February 2017](#)). Even amid the current round of demonstrations, new cases have been added to the list, from Rayshard Brooks, an unarmed Black man killed by police in Atlanta, Georgia ([CNN, 15 June 2020](#)), to Jacob Blake, an unarmed Black man shot seven times by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin ([CBS News, 26 August 2020](#)).

The demonstrations remain ongoing. Though reported events associated with the BLM movement have gradually declined since their peak in late May and early June, ACLED still continues to record dozens of demonstrations each week (*see graph below*).

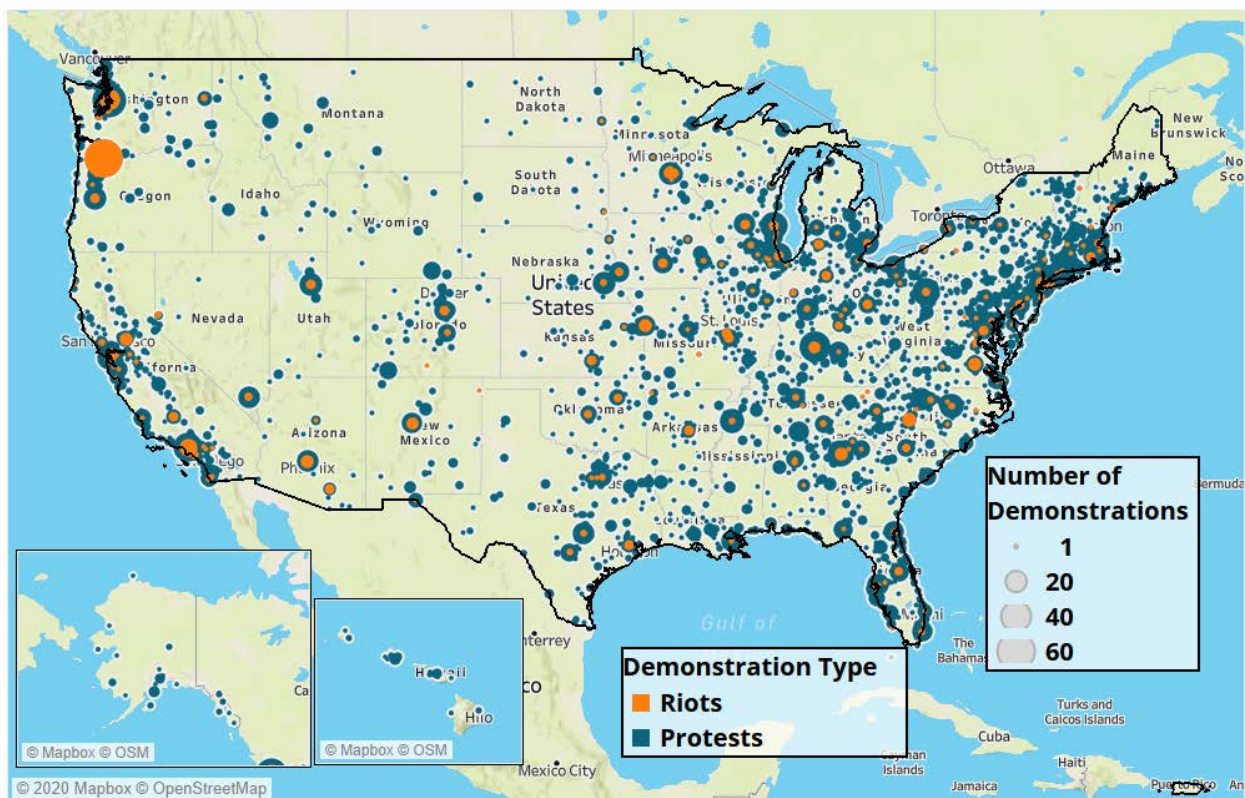




## An Overwhelmingly Peaceful Movement

The vast majority of demonstration events associated with the BLM movement are non-violent (*see map below*). In more than 93% of all demonstrations connected to the movement, demonstrators have not engaged in violence or destructive activity. Peaceful protests are reported in over 2,400 distinct locations around the country. Violent demonstrations, meanwhile, have been limited to fewer than 220 locations — under 10% of the areas that experienced peaceful protests. In many urban areas like Portland, Oregon, for example, which has seen sustained unrest since Floyd's killing, violent demonstrations are largely confined to specific blocks, rather than dispersed throughout the city ([CNN, 1 September 2020](#)).

### Demonstrations Associated with Black Lives Matter (BLM) by Demonstration Type (24 May - 22 August 2020)



Yet, despite data indicating that demonstrations associated with the BLM movement are overwhelmingly peaceful, one recent poll suggested that 42% of respondents believe “most protesters [associated with the BLM movement] are trying to incite violence or destroy property” ([FiveThirtyEight, 5 June 2020](#)). This is in line with the Civiqs tracking poll which finds that “net approval for the Black Lives Matter movement peaked back on June 3 [the week following the

killing of George Floyd when riots first began to be reported] and has fallen sharply since” ([USA Today, 31 August 2020](#); [Civiqs, 29 August 2020](#)).

Research from the University of Washington indicates that this disparity stems from political orientation and biased media framing ([Washington Post, 24 August 2020](#)), such as disproportionate coverage of violent demonstrations ([Business Insider, 11 June 2020](#)). Groups like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have documented organized disinformation campaigns aimed at spreading a “deliberate mischaracterization of groups or movements [involved in the protests], such as portraying activists who support Black Lives Matter as violent extremists or claiming that antifa is a terrorist organization coordinated or manipulated by nebulous external forces” ([ADL, 2020](#)). These disinformation campaigns may be contributing to the decline in public support for the BLM movement after the initial increase following Floyd’s killing, especially amongst the white population ([USA Today, 31 August 2020](#); [Civiqs, 30 August 2020a](#), [30 August 2020b](#)). This waning support also comes as the Trump administration recently shifted its “law and order” messaging to target local Democratic Party politicians from urban areas, particularly on the campaign trail ([NPR, 27 August 2020](#)).

Despite the media focus on looting and vandalism, however, there is little evidence to suggest that demonstrators have engaged in widespread violence. In some cases where demonstrations did turn violent, there are reports of *agents provocateurs* — or infiltrators — instigating the violence. During a demonstration on 27 May in Minneapolis, for example, a man with an umbrella — dubbed the ‘umbrella man’ by the media and later identified as a member of the Hells Angels linked to the Aryan Cowboys, a white supremacist prison and street gang — was seen smashing store windows ([Forbes, 30 May 2020](#); [KSTP, 28 July 2020](#)). It was one of the first reports of destructive activity that day, and it “created an atmosphere of hostility and tension” that helped spark an outbreak of looting following initially peaceful protests, according to police investigators, who believe the man “wanted to sow discord and racial unrest” ([New York Times, 28 July 2020](#)). In another example on 29 May in Detroit, a number of non-residents reportedly traveled to the city to engage in violent behavior during a demonstration, leading to multiple arrests ([MLive, 2 June 2020](#)).

In many cases, violent demonstrations have specifically targeted statues seen to represent the country’s legacy of racist violence, such as monuments celebrating colonial figures, slave owners, and Confederate leaders. Since Floyd’s killing, there have been at least 38 incidents in which demonstrators have significantly damaged or torn down memorials around the country, including statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and colonial explorer Christopher Columbus. Although these incidents account for a small subset of demonstrations, the trend has become another battlefield for the hyper-partisan “culture wars” over America’s history of racism ([Bloomberg, 7 June 2020](#)), and a lightning rod for polarized debate over an appropriate response to the ongoing protest movement. In some communities, pressure has led to official efforts to remove monuments and to rename public facilities like schools, with town hall meetings and other

fora providing peaceful opportunities for discussion and reconciliation, which can ultimately help to reduce polarization ([NPR, 12 July 2020](#)). In others, however, clashes have broken out between those opposed to these memorials, such as the Stone Mountain monument to Confederate leaders in Georgia, and those who support keeping them ([AJC, 15 August 2020](#)).

By the end of June, President Donald Trump seized on the topic to issue an executive order authorizing federal agents to pursue demonstrators who pull down statues or damage federal property, spurring the creation of the Protecting American Communities Task Force (PACT) and the deployment of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents to protest sites across the US.

## **A Violent Government Response**

The initial government response to the demonstrations was not uniform. Many early protests were held peacefully and without incident. In certain cities, like Los Angeles, California and Camden, New Jersey, authorities even expressed support by joining marches, taking a knee, or attending community meetings on reform ([ABC7, 1 June 2020](#); [CBS8, 15 June 2020](#); [NJ Spotlight, 12 June 2020](#)). In some cases these efforts reduced tensions between the community and the police, while in others demonstrators raised concerns that these displays served more as “PR stunts” than genuine acts of solidarity, potentially obscuring the scope of police abuse ([ABC, 6 June 2020](#)). At the start of June, for example, while some police officers kneeled with demonstrators in Buffalo, New York, separate reports surfaced showing the city’s police violently pushing an elderly protester to the ground, fracturing his skull, the next day ([ABC, 6 June 2020](#); [NPR, 30 June 2020](#)).

Overall, ACLED data indicate that government forces soon took a heavy-handed approach to the growing protest movement. In demonstrations where authorities are present, they use force more often than not. Data show that they have disproportionately used force while intervening in demonstrations associated with the BLM movement, relative to other types of demonstrations.

Despite the fact that demonstrations associated with the BLM movement have been overwhelmingly peaceful, more than 9% — or nearly one in 10 — have been met with government intervention, compared to 3% of all other demonstrations. This also marks a general increase in intervention rates relative to this time last year. In July 2019, authorities intervened in under 2% of all demonstrations — fewer than 30 events — relative to July 2020, when they intervened in 9% of all demonstrations — or over 170 events.

Authorities have used force — such as firing less-lethal weapons like tear gas, rubber bullets, and pepper spray or beating demonstrators with batons — in over 54% of the demonstrations in which they have engaged. This too is a significant increase relative to one year ago. In July 2019, government personnel used force in just three documented demonstrations, compared to July 2020, when they used force against demonstrators in at least 65 events. Over 5% of all events linked to the BLM movement have been met with force by authorities, compared to under 1% of

all other demonstrations. In some contexts, like Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon (*see below*), the heavy-handed police response appears to have inflamed tensions and increased the risk of violent escalation ([New York Times, 31 May 2020](#)).

## **Militarized Federal Reaction**

The escalating use of force against demonstrators comes amid a wider push to militarize the government's response to domestic unrest, and particularly demonstrations perceived to be linked to left-wing groups like Antifa, which the administration views as a "terrorist" organization ([New York Times, 31 May 2020](#)). In the immediate aftermath of Floyd's killing, President Trump posted a series of social media messages threatening to deploy the military and National Guard to disperse demonstrations, suggesting that authorities should use lethal force if demonstrators engage in looting ([New York Magazine, 1 June 2020](#)). The president called governors "weak" for allowing demonstrations in their states and instructed them to call in the National Guard to "dominate" and "cut through [protesters] like butter" ([Vox, 2 June 2020](#)). Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas, an advisor to the president, recommended that the administration "send in the troops" and give "no quarter for insurrectionists, anarchists, rioters, and looters" ([New York Times, 3 June 2020, 23 June 2020](#)).

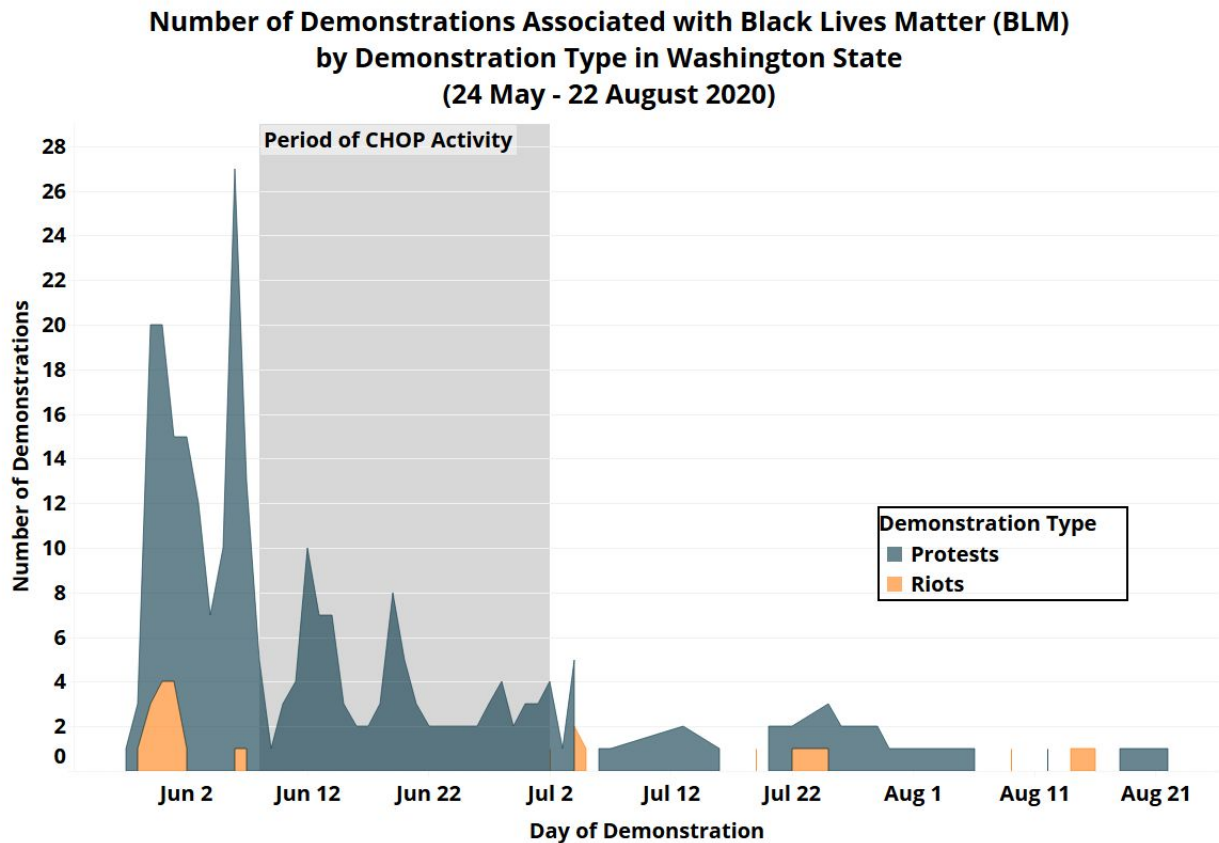
Rhetoric soon translated to action: in early June, the government used National Guard troops, Secret Service agents, and US Park Police — among other federal agents — to violently disperse peaceful protests in Lafayette Square outside the White House to create a photo opportunity at St. John's Church ([Vox, 2 June 2020](#); [New York Times, 10 June 2020](#)). The incident prompted a rare public condemnation from former Secretary of Defense James Mattis and an eventual refusal from current Defense Secretary Mark Esper to support the invocation of the Insurrection Act, which would allow the deployment of active-duty troops to respond to demonstrations ([Atlantic, 3 June 2020](#); [TIME, 3 June 2020](#)). Still, by the end of the month, DHS established the PACT and deployed agents around the country, including in Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and Washington, DC ([Al Jazeera, 23 June 2020](#)). Since Floyd's killing, ACLED records over 55 federal and National Guard deployments across the country, including members of PACT as well as forces affiliated with Operations Legend and Diligent Valor.

## **Seattle, Washington**

Seattle became an early hotspot of the protest movement and a target of the crackdown. Washington's governor swiftly deployed the National Guard throughout the state and by Independence Day weekend the federal government sent agents assigned to PACT to guard monuments and to quell demonstrations. Demonstrators remained largely peaceful, but tensions rose as standoffs outside the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct intermittently turned violent, with widespread use of tear gas, flashbang grenades, and pepper spray ([Spokesman-Review, 3 June 2020](#)).



In early June, under pressure from elected officials raising allegations of excessive force, police withdrew from the East Precinct and demonstrators established a protest encampment they called the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) zone, independent of police and government control ([Seattle PI, 22 June 2020](#)). While CHOP was marred by criminal violence ([Vox, 2 July 2020](#)), the creation of the encampment coincided with a lull in violent demonstrations. Although riots were reported before 8 June (when CHOP was established) and after 1 July (when it was dismantled), only peaceful protests were recorded during the intervening period (*see graph below*).



Authorities cleared CHOP and arrested dozens of demonstrators by the start of July, but the episode set an important precedent: President Trump warned that protesters would be met with “serious force” if they attempted to replicate CHOP elsewhere in the country ([Washington Post, 24 June 2020](#)).

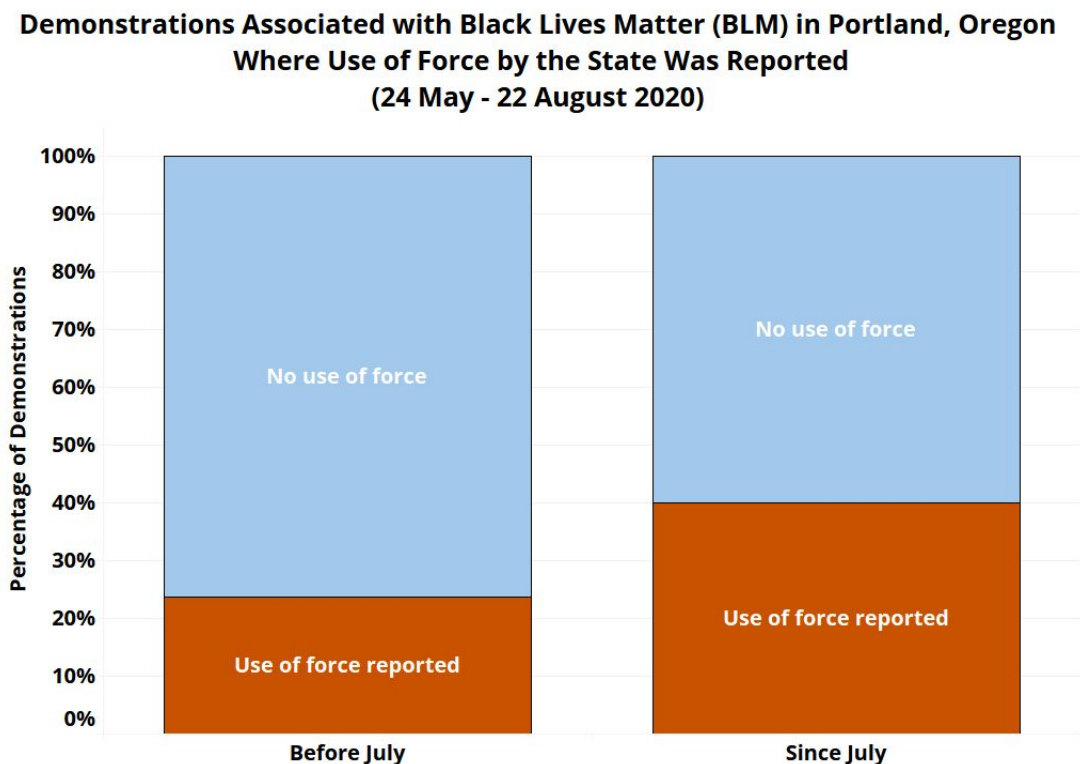
### Portland, Oregon

After Seattle, the heavy-handed government response took center stage in Portland, where demonstrators have gathered daily since Floyd’s killing. Throughout June, demonstrators rallied outside the Multnomah County Justice Center and other prominent government sites in downtown Portland, sporadically clashing with police who blanketed the city with tear gas and impact munitions. A federal judge soon issued a restraining order against the Portland Police Bureau,

instructing it to limit the use of tear gas over concerns that its officers were employing excessive force against demonstrators and violating their Fourth Amendment rights ([OPB, 19 July 2020](#)). By the end of the month, the order was expanded to restrict the use of other less-lethal weaponry like rubber bullets, and Oregon state legislators passed a new law that mandated police warn protesters before firing tear gas. Demonstrations continued, but tensions cooled.

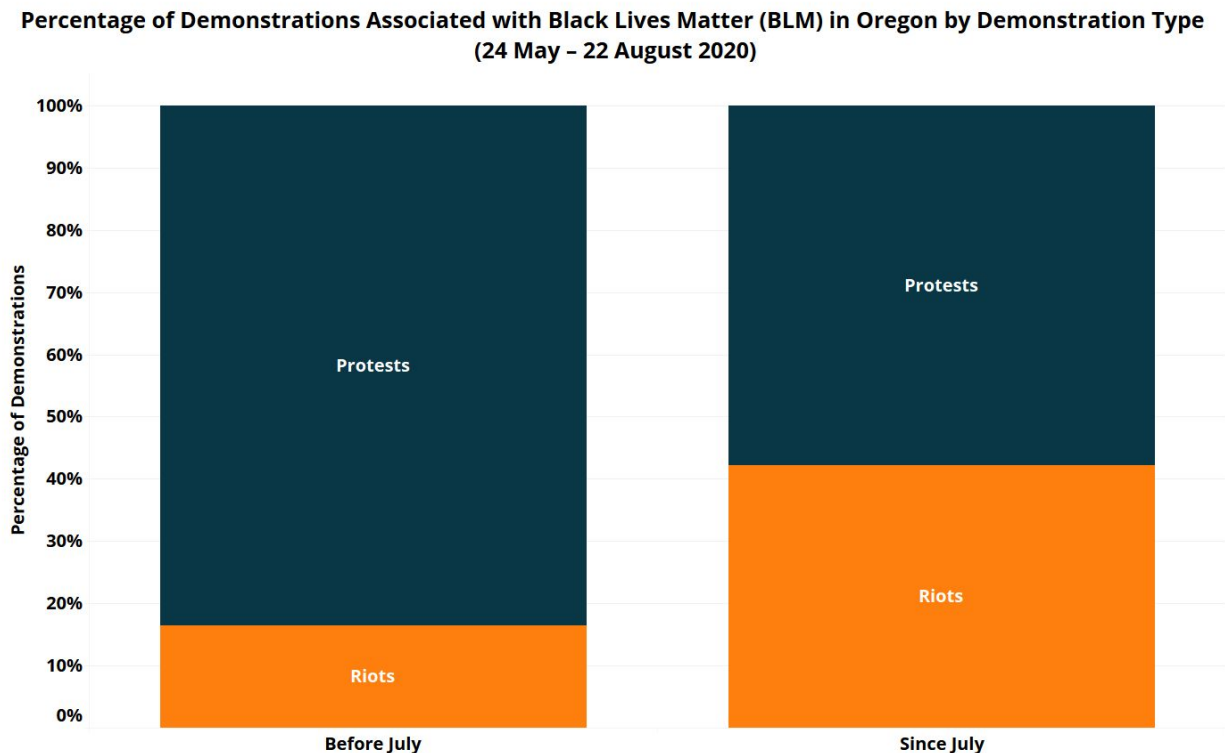
The situation changed in July, when PACT agents and other federal personnel took a more active role in the response as part of Operation Diligent Valor. Against the wishes of local officials ([Business Insider, 22 July 2020](#)), federal authorities began aggressively policing the demonstrations, using excessive force and arbitrarily detaining suspected protesters in unmarked vehicles ([Oregon Live, 16 July 2020](#); [USA Today, 4 August 2020](#)).

Prior to the deployment of PACT at the start of July, approximately 8% of demonstrations in Oregon were met with government intervention, and authorities infrequently used force against demonstrators. Since July, however, nearly 28% of demonstrations have been met with intervention and force by government personnel. In Portland specifically, under 24% of demonstrations were met with state force before July. Since July, this figure has risen to 40% of all demonstrations (*see graph below*).



Although federal authorities were purportedly deployed to keep the peace, the move appears to have re-escalated tensions. Prior to the deployment, over 83% of demonstrations in Oregon were non-violent. Post-deployment, the percentage of violent demonstrations has risen from under

17% to over 42% (see graph below), suggesting that the federal response has only aggravated unrest. In Portland, violent demonstrations rose from 53% to nearly 62% of all events after federal agents arrived on the scene.



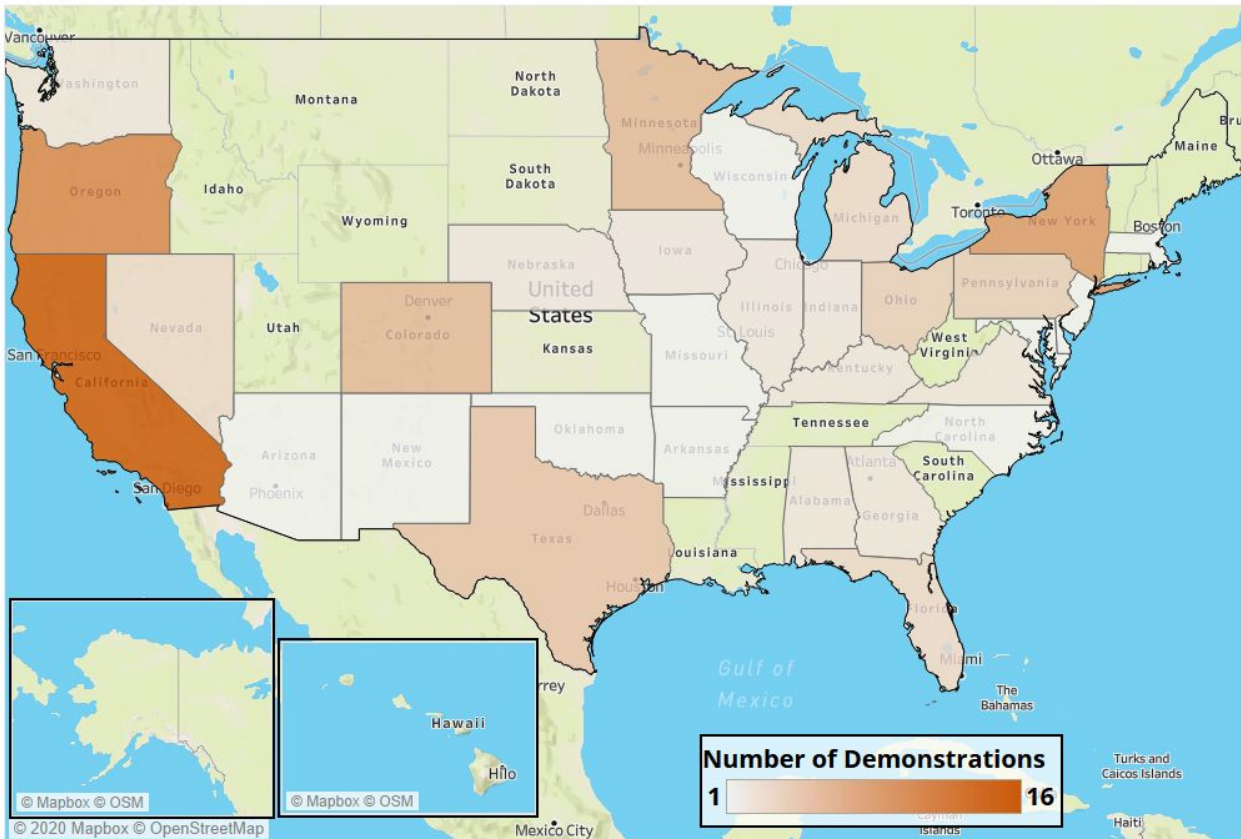
In late July, officials announced that federal agents would reduce their presence in Portland following talks between Governor Kate Brown and Vice President Mike Pence, but would remain on standby ([Guardian, 29 July 2020](#)). Some reports indicate that the pullback has lowered tensions ([The Week, 3 August 2020](#)), but President Trump has warned that federal authorities will not fully leave Portland until local authorities “secure their city” ([Guardian, 29 July 2020](#)). As of early September, the federal government began deputizing Oregon State Police to respond to demonstrations in Portland, in coordination with US Marshals, potentially signalling renewed federal intervention in the city ([KOIN, 1 September 2020](#)).

## Widespread Attacks on the Press

Reporters have also been targeted as part of the government response. As journalists have worked to cover the unprecedented wave of protests, they have simultaneously faced what Reporters Without Borders has called “an unprecedented outbreak of violence” around the country ([RSE, 31 May 2020](#)). Government forces are the primary perpetrators of these attacks, from beatings and assaults to violent arrests. Since May, ACLED records over 100 separate incidents of government violence against journalists in at least 31 states and Washington, DC during demonstrations associated with the BLM movement (see map below). The greatest number of these have occurred

in California — such as on 30 May at a peaceful protest in Santa Monica when police hit an ABC7 news crew with tear gas ([ABC7, 31 May 2020](#)), or on 31 May at a demonstration in Long Beach when police injured a KPCC/LAist journalist with non-lethal rounds ([LAist, 31 May 2020](#)).

**Number of Demonstrations Associated with Black Lives Matter (BLM)  
where Journalists were Targeted  
(24 May - 22 August 2020)**

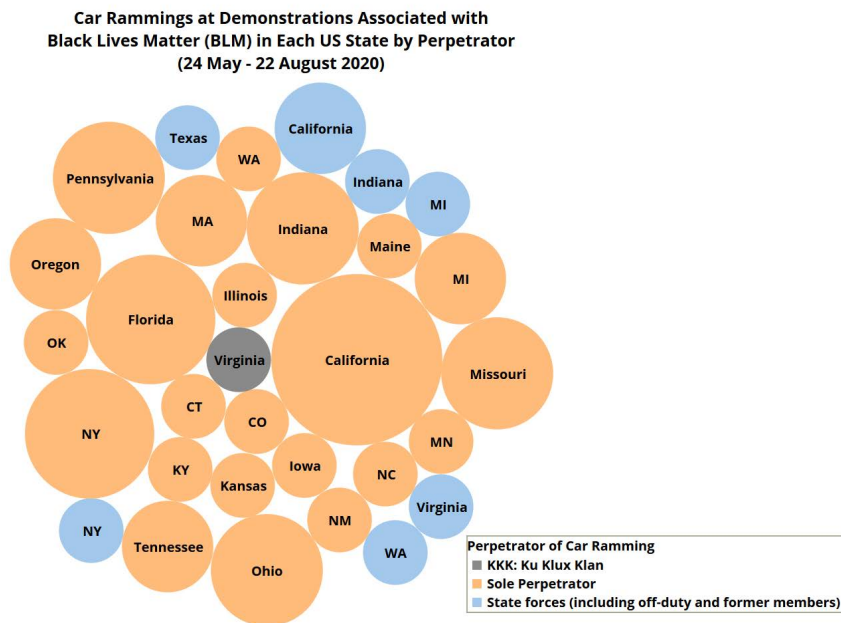


## High Rates of Non-state Actor Involvement in BLM Demonstrations

Government forces are not the only actors intervening in demonstrations. Amid increased political polarization and deepening mistrust in state institutions, militias and other non-state actors are increasingly engaging with demonstrators directly.

## Car-Ramming Attacks

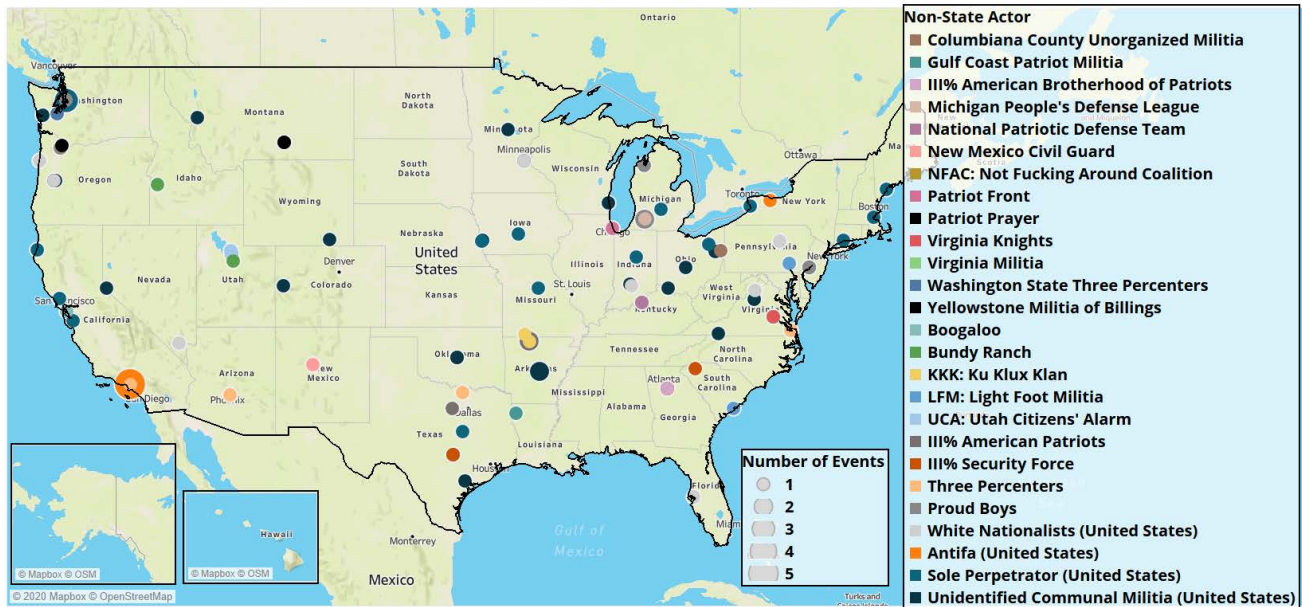
Since Floyd's killing, dozens of car-ramming attacks by individual perpetrators — in some cases acting independently with no reported affiliation, and in others linked to hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan ([Henrico Citizen, 12 August 2020](#)) — have been reported at demonstrations around the country (see chart below). Other cases have involved those affiliated with the government, such as the military and law enforcement, including an on-duty police officer at a demonstration in Anaheim, California on 25 July ([Fox11 Los Angeles, 28 July 2020](#)); an off-duty police officer at a demonstration in Seattle, Washington on 4 July ([King5, 9 July 2020](#)); an army sergeant at a demonstration in Austin, Texas on 25 July ([KTSM, 31 July 2020](#)); and an off-duty jail correctional officer at a demonstration in Kokomo, Indiana on 30 May ([Kokomo Tribune, 1 June 2020](#)).



Non-state groups are becoming more active and assertive. Since May, ACLED records over 100 events in which non-state actors engaged in demonstrations (including counter-demonstrations) — the vast majority of which were in response to demonstrations associated with the BLM movement. These non-state groups include organizations and militias from both the left and right side of the political spectrum, such as Antifa, the Not Fucking Around Coalition, the New Mexico Civil Guard, the Patriot Front, the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo Bois, and the Ku Klux Klan, among others (*see map below*).



**Events Associated with Non-State Actors  
(24 May - 22 August 2020)**



Overall, over 20 distinct non-state groups have actively engaged in demonstrations this summer. In July 2020 alone, ACLED records nearly 30 events in which non-state actors engaged demonstrators — up from zero in July 2019.

Whether they are affiliated with an organized group or not, there is also a growing presence of armed individuals at demonstrations, with many claiming they are standing by to ‘keep the peace’ if not to openly intimidate perceived ‘enemies.’ At least 50 such incidents have been reported around the country since 24 May. Reports that police not only tolerate the presence of certain armed individuals at demonstrations ([Washington Post, 30 August 2020](#); [Huffington Post, 28 August 2020](#)), but in some cases actively encourage their involvement suggest this trend will continue, amplifying the risk of violence. On the night of 25 August in Kenosha, Wisconsin, for example, during protests against police brutality following the shooting of Jacob Blake, police allegedly told armed members of the Kenosha Guard over a loudspeaker, “We appreciate you guys. We really do,” and shared water with them ([USA Today, 29 August 2020](#)).

While many of these incidents have not turned violent, recent events in Kenosha indicate just how quickly the situation can escalate.<sup>2</sup> A call to arms on Facebook by the Kenosha Guard brought multiple armed individuals to the city to ‘protect lives and property,’ including those not technically affiliated with the group — such as Kyle Rittenhouse. Before the end of the night, Rittenhouse shot three demonstrators, two of whom died of their injuries ([CNN, 28 August 2020](#)). Police initially allowed Rittenhouse to leave the scene, but he was later arrested and charged with

<sup>2</sup> This report includes data from 24 May through 22 August 2020. Events from 23 August onwards, including violence in Kenosha, Wisconsin on 25 August, will be included in subsequent data releases by the *US Crisis Monitor*.

homicide. Since then, President Trump has not only failed to condemn Rittenhouse's actions, but has instead suggested that the shootings were in self-defense ([NPR, 31 August 2020](#)).

## A Rising Number of Counter-Protests Turning Violent

In addition to armed individuals standing by without directly engaging demonstrations, there has also been an increase in the number of counter-protests confronting opposing demonstrators.<sup>3</sup> Between 24 May and 22 August, over 360 counter-protests were recorded around the country, accounting for nearly 5% of all demonstrations. Of these, 43 — nearly 12% — turned violent, with clashes between pro-police demonstrators and demonstrators associated with the BLM movement, for example. In July alone, ACLED records over 160 counter-protests, or more than 8% of all demonstrations. Of these, 18 turned violent. This is a significant increase relative to July 2019, when only 17 counter-protests were reported around the country, or approximately 1% of all demonstrations, and only one of these allegedly turned violent.

This trend threatens to quickly escalate confrontations between protesters and counter-protesters into violent clashes. Recent events in Portland, Oregon on the night of 29 August point to how such confrontations can rapidly turn deadly.<sup>4</sup> On that night, a caravan demonstration — including members of Patriot Prayer, Three Percenters, and Proud Boys — took

place in support of President Trump. The demonstrators drove trucks through the crowd and shot paintball guns and pepper spray at counter-demonstrators rallying in support of the BLM movement. During the confrontation a member of the right-wing Patriot Prayer armed group was shot dead by an unknown individual. President Trump tweeted a message of condolences for the deceased, alleging that he

### ***MilitiaWatch***

To monitor the activity of militias, ACLED benefits from a partnership with MilitiaWatch, a research project and blog that tracks, documents, and analyzes contemporary US militia movements, and provides reports connecting long-term militia trends to broader political events. MilitiaWatch gathers data from open source and semi-open source content created by and for militia members, allowing for an analysis of militia activity from their own perspectives. Information such as recruitment drives, training exercises, the creation of new groups or splinter groups, or important announcements such as a militia's support for a political group — as well as more specific details as to the identity of militias active during demonstrations — are all tracked by MilitiaWatch and are included within ACLED data.

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<sup>3</sup> These are events in which demonstrators are met with counter-protesters. If two protests occur at the same time, in the same place, and they are essentially 'counter' to one another — for example, one is pro-BLM, and the other is anti-BLM — the events are coded as a single event instead of as two separate events. Depending on whether each side engages in destructive or disruptive behavior, the actor on each side is coded accordingly.

<sup>4</sup> This report includes data from 24 May through 22 August 2020. Events from 23 August onwards, including violence in Portland, Oregon on the night of 29 August, will be included in subsequent data releases by the *US Crisis Monitor*.

had been “murdered in Portland by ANTIFA” ([Insider, 31 August 2020](#)) — despite the fact that it remains unclear who is responsible for the shooting.

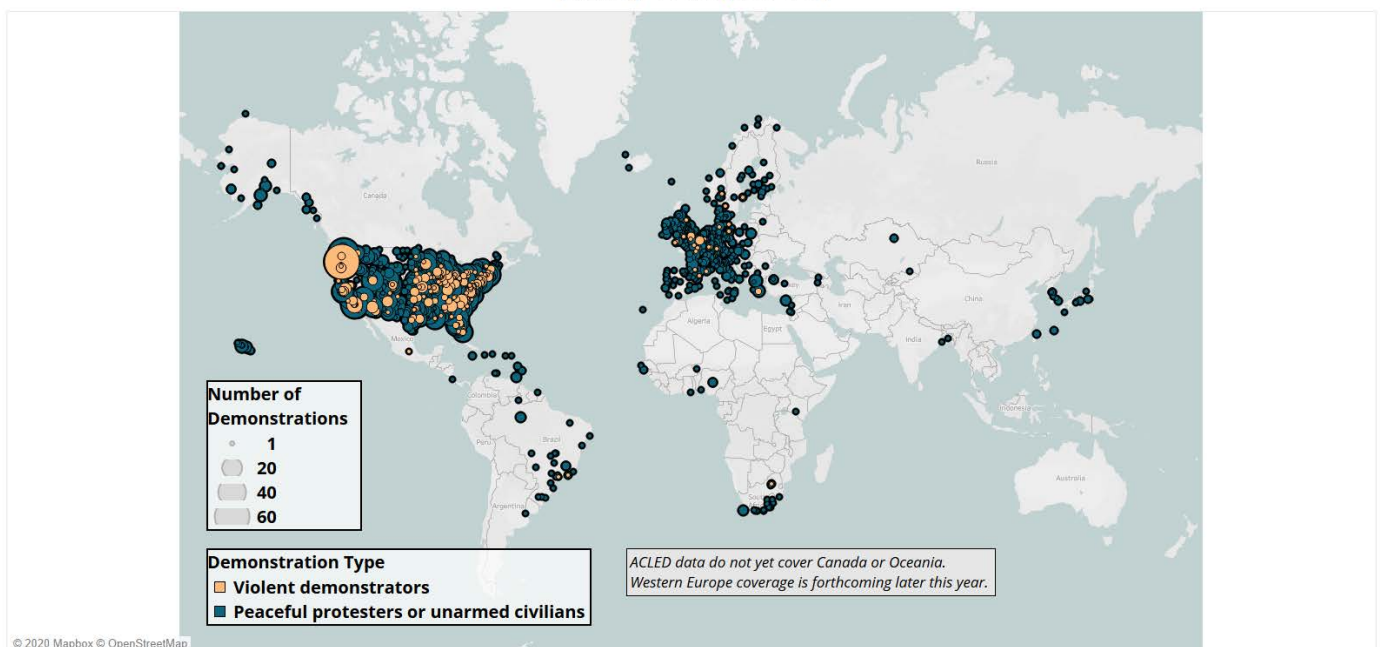
The rise in non-state intervention and violent counter-demonstrations is set against a growing pattern of non-violent hate incidents. As racial justice protests have spread across the country, so too have displays of racist symbols like nooses, believed to be warnings or acts of intimidation targeting activists and protesters associated with the BLM movement. In late June, for example, a stuffed animal monkey was found hanging from a tree in Santa Rosa, California ([ABC, 29 June 2020](#)). In mid-July, a couple in Saginaw, Michigan found a noose and a note saying “Accessory to be worn with your BLM T-shirt! Happy Protesting!” slipped through the window of their car ([Michigan Live, 13 July 2020](#)).

## Comparing BLM Trends Globally

While the US faces a unique combination of overlapping crises, many of these trends are mirrored around the world — and the racism and police brutality exemplified by the killing of George Floyd prompted a global response.

In the week’s since Floyd’s killing, at least 8,700 demonstrations in solidarity with the BLM movement were reported across 74 countries, including the US. Demonstrators focused their outrage on American symbols — including embassies, consulates, and Trump properties — but they also rallied around local cases of police brutality and racial inequality. The BLM movement has offered a ‘brand’ of anti-racism and anti-police violence activism for a range of contexts around the world. In many countries, demonstrators have been ‘applying their own martyrs’ to the solidarity protests, and are using BLM as an inspiration for structuring domestic movements against police violence, discrimination, and political repression.

**Global Demonstrations Associated with Black Lives Matter (BLM)**  
by Demonstration Type  
(24 May - 22 August 2020)



# COVID-19: A Global Health Crisis

Unrest over police brutality and racist violence erupted at the height of another crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. America has emerged as the new epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak. With only 4% of the world's population, the US was estimated to have a quarter of confirmed cases by the end of June ([CNN, 30 June 2020](#)). At time of writing, more than 180,000 Americans have died, and over six million have been infected ([New York Times, 1 September 2020](#)).

## COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement

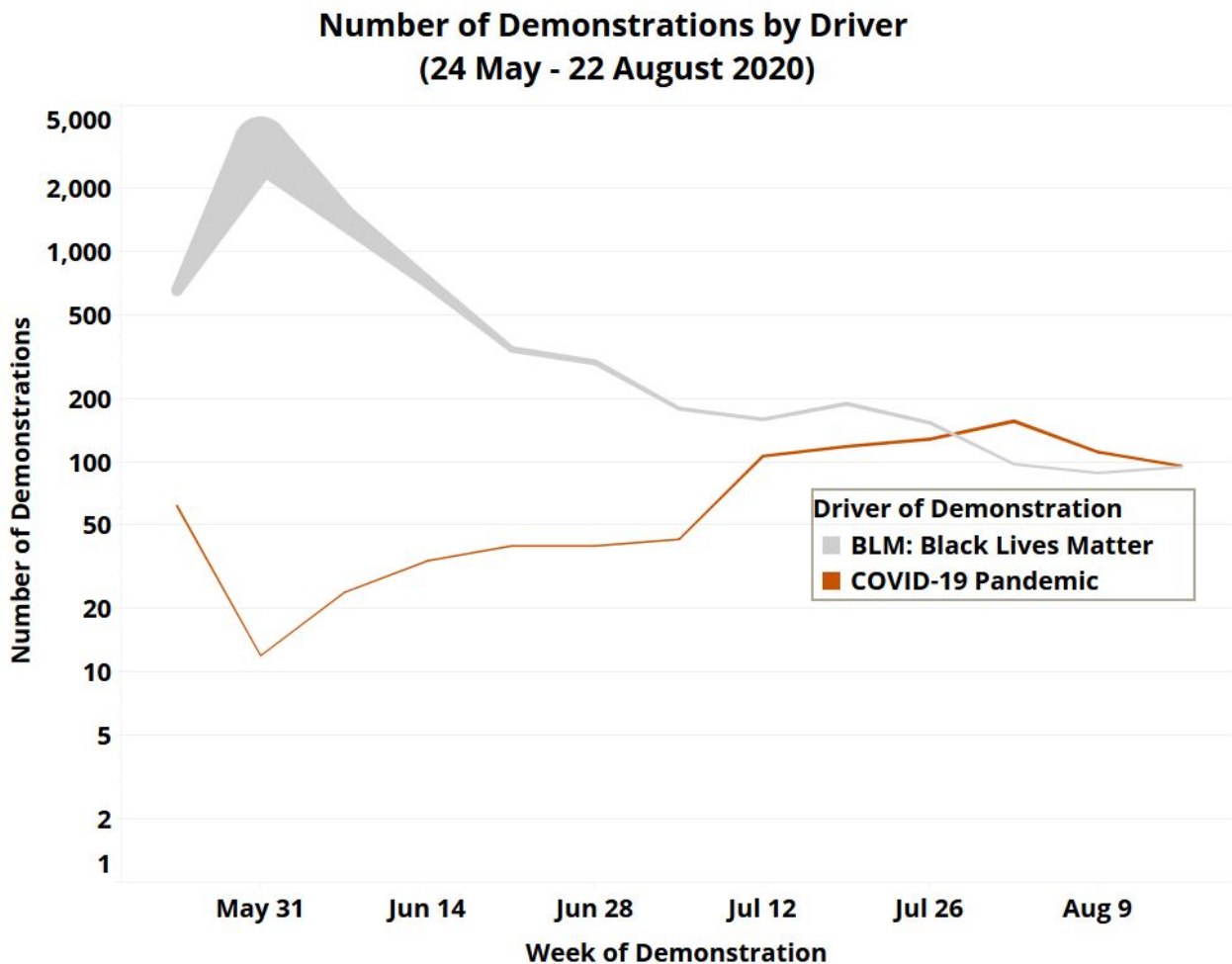
In America, the health crisis and the latest wave of demonstrations associated with BLM are intertwined. The current BLM protest movement has become one of the largest in US history in part because it emerged within a socio-economic environment deeply disrupted by the pandemic. Research indicates that people who lost their jobs and livelihoods are more likely to participate in the protests ([Washington Post, 5 August 2020](#)), especially as the pandemic has left clear winners and losers in its wake. The “Strike for Black Lives” for example, is an effort to unite “the interconnected fights for racial and economic justice” ([USA Today, 20 July 2020](#)). As part of this movement, essential workers have been protesting in remembrance of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and other Black people killed by police, while also calling for the Senate to pass the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act: a stimulus package to address the pandemic's economic impact — which has hit some harder than others. The number of Black Americans working in front-line jobs impacted by the pandemic is disproportionately high, Black workers continue to earn less than their white counterparts ([SHRM, 11 June 2020](#)), and almost half of Black households are concerned with their ability to make rent on a monthly basis ([CBS News, 16 June 2020](#); [SHRM, 26 June 2020](#); [Urban Institute, 2 June 2020](#)). According to the Brookings Institution, COVID-19 has now become the third largest cause of death amongst the Black population ([CBS News, 17 August 2020](#)).

## Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The economic fallout from the pandemic is devastating. According to the University of New Hampshire, all 50 states have experienced “extreme job loss,” and 43 have recorded losses “worse than in the Great Recession” ([Ettlinger & Hensley, 2020](#)). The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the pandemic will shrink the economy by approximately \$8 trillion over the next decade ([Washington Post, 1 June 2020](#)). More than half of all businesses that closed due to lockdown measures have reportedly closed for good ([Bloomberg, 22 July 2020](#)), and the country is now facing a mass eviction crisis — which is projected to disproportionately affect minority communities ([Politico, 12 June 2020](#)).



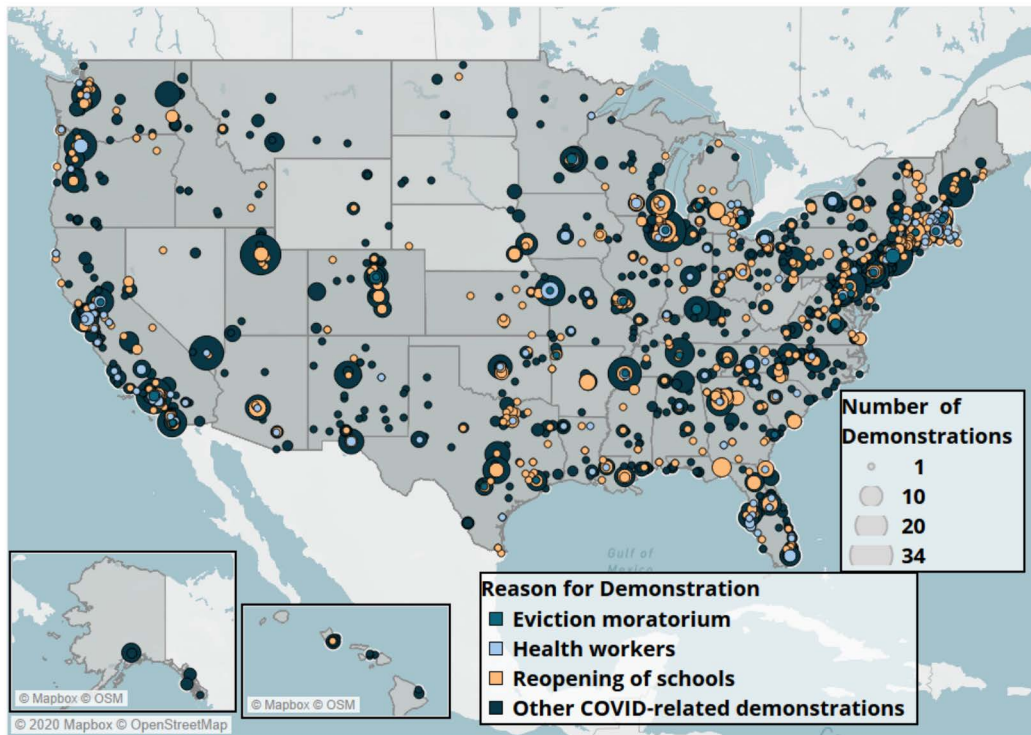
As the situation deteriorated over the summer, demonstrators took to the streets over these issues and more, protesting unemployment, evictions, and unsafe working conditions, as well as school reopenings and mask mandates. The pandemic has not escaped politicization, with regular confrontations between demonstrators for and against lockdown restrictions, and support for social distancing measures often polarized along party lines. Since 24 May, over 1,000 pandemic-related demonstrations have been reported in 47 states and Washington, DC, particularly in California, New York, Florida, and Texas. In early August, demonstrations connected to the pandemic surpassed demonstrations associated with the BLM movement for the first time in months (*see graph below*).



Demonstrations around school reopening, mass evictions, and healthcare workers are explored below (*see map below*).



## Demonstrations Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic (24 May – 22 August 2020)



### School Reopenings Face Challengers from Both Sides

With the school year beginning, demonstrations led by teachers, students, and parents both for and against reopenings are on the rise. In July, the Trump administration called for schools to reopen for in-person teaching, despite renewed concern over the coronavirus outbreak ([New York Times, 23 July 2020](#)). Demonstrations organized by teachers and students have surged in response. Although some — including many parents — support the president’s call to reopen, the vast majority of demonstrations oppose in-person teaching, with participants arguing that it remains unsafe to return to the classroom. Several schools that already reopened were almost immediately forced to quarantine hundreds of students, compounding these worries ([Wall Street Journal, 17 August 2020](#)). More than 330 demonstration events over school reopenings have been reported across 42 states in recent weeks, and they show few signs of stopping. So far, reports indicate that all have been peaceful and have faced no government intervention, though some have been met with counter-protesters.

### Mass Evictions Pose Widespread Risks

The country is simultaneously facing a looming eviction crisis. Due to the pandemic’s economic impact, millions of Americans have fallen behind on rent payments. The COVID-19 Eviction Defense Project suggests that “19 to 23 million — or 1 in 5 — people living in renter households are at risk of eviction by October” ([CNBC, 24 July 2020](#)). According to Princeton University’s

Eviction Lab, evictions are likely to disproportionately affect the Black community ([BBC, 7 August 2020](#)).

While the government has held the crisis at bay through stimulus measures and both federal and state eviction moratoriums, the federal moratorium and a \$600-a-week supplement to unemployment benefits lapsed at the end of July ([CNBC, 24 July 2020](#)). Further relief negotiations have stalled in Congress over spending disagreements, prompting the president to sign executive orders extending the lapsed supplemental federal unemployment benefits, but reducing it to the \$400-a-week contribution. President Trump also made the plan contingent on states coming up with 25% of that payment, raising concerns that some states, already stretched thin financially during the pandemic, may opt out of the program. Trump's executive action also does not reinstate the previous federal moratorium on evictions, but instead only directs federal agencies to "consider" measures to prevent evictions ([Washington Post, 9 August 2020](#)). The National Low Income Housing Coalition has called Trump's order an "empty shell of a promise to renters" ([NLIHC, 9 August 2020](#)).

As the end of the notice period following the lapsed federal moratorium approached, demonstrations linked to the eviction crisis have broken out around the country — especially in the northeast, which has registered over one-third of these demonstrations. Since 24 May, at least 37 demonstrations have been reported across 15 states. At the start of September, the CDC issued a new nationwide moratorium on evictions through December. The policy has been welcomed as an "essential" step by housing advocates like the National Low Income Housing Coalition, though they remain concerned that "it is a half-measure that extends a financial cliff for renters to fall off of when the moratorium expires and back rent is owed" ([NPR, 1 September 2020](#)). While the move may stave off the eviction crisis and a surge in associated demonstrations for now, the threat is set to re-emerge by the end of the year.

## **Health Workers on the Frontlines**

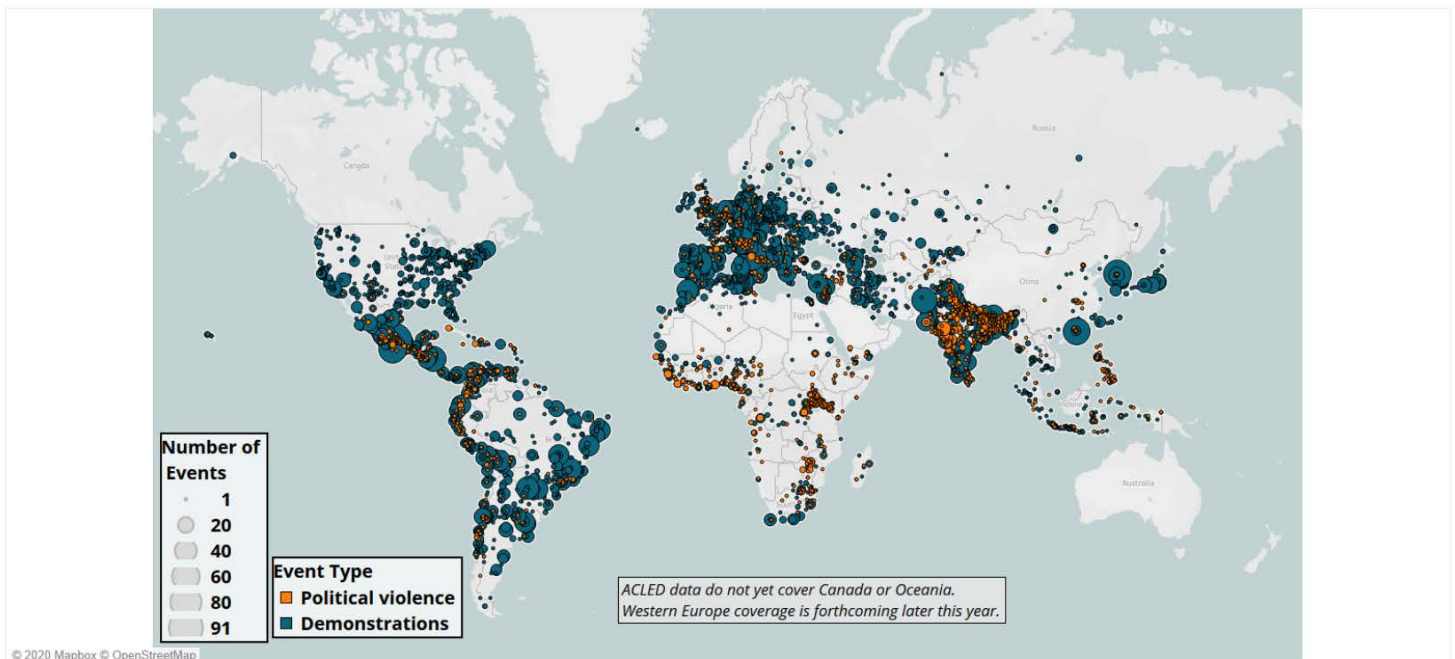
From the pandemic's frontlines, healthcare workers have led demonstrations calling for better working conditions, greater COVID-19 protections, and a stronger government response to the crisis nationwide. In August, for example, members of National Nurses United (NNU) held protests at healthcare facilities across the country as part of the "National Day of Action to Save Lives" ([NNU, 3 August 2020](#)). The nurses called on the Senate to pass the HEROES Act, a pending bill that the House of Representatives passed in May to provide \$1 trillion in additional aid to states. They also demanded that hospitals adhere to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, provide adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and take steps to prevent overwork. A recent survey conducted by NNU suggests that only 24% of nurses think they are provided with a safe workplace, while 87% indicate that they have had to reuse a single-use PPE at least once ([NNU, 27 July 2020](#)). Another 27% of nurses reported short-staffing ([NNU, 27 July 2020](#)).

ACLED records nearly 70 demonstrations involving healthcare workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 19 states and Washington, DC since 24 May, with the highest concentration, by far, in California — the state with the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases ([New York Times, 31 August 2020](#)).

## Comparing COVID-19 Trends Globally

As in the US, the pandemic has also shifted political violence and demonstration patterns worldwide — trends that ACLED has monitored through its [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker \(CDT\)](#) (*see map below*). Movement restrictions and social distancing rules led to a precipitous decline in demonstration activity at large, even as the crisis triggered new demonstrations over government pandemic responses. Mob violence, fueled by fear of the virus and opposition to lockdown measures, has also increased, as has democratic backsliding and state repression. Conflict dynamics have changed along with the evolving strategic priorities of violent actors, while calls by the UN Secretary-General for a global ceasefire have largely fallen on deaf ears.<sup>5</sup>

**Global Demonstrations and Political Violence  
Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic  
(24 May – 22 August 2020)**



<sup>5</sup> For more on the most significant changes to global political violence and demonstrations trends since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, see ACLED's report: [A Great and Sudden Change](#).

## Other Concurrent Crises in America

In addition to nationwide unrest over police brutality, racial inequality, and the COVID-19 pandemic, a multitude of other risk factors shape demonstration and political violence trends in the US.

Violence targeting women, for example, remains a major flashpoint. In July, a self-proclaimed “anti-feminist” attorney attacked the home of US District Judge Esther Salas, killing her son and shooting her husband. Such violence can also fuel demonstrations, as in the case of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen, who was murdered in April after being sexually harassed at a Texas military base by another soldier. The killing has triggered protests across nearly half of all US states over sexual violence in the military.

Hate crimes also remain a widespread threat, with attacks targeting a range of minority groups outside the context of the BLM protest movement (*for more on violence and acts of intimidation targeting demonstrators associated with the BLM movement, see above*). Around 23 June, for example, a group vandalized an Indian restaurant in Santa Fe, New Mexico and spray-painted racist slurs over the walls and furniture of the establishment ([KOB4, 23 June 2020](#)). On 4 July, a Black man was reportedly harassed and attacked by five white men at a public park south of Bloomington, Indiana. According to the victim, he was assaulted while the assailants repeatedly threatened to “get a noose” ([Bloomingtonian, 5 July, 2020](#)). On 17 August, three individuals attacked and robbed a group of transgender women on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, California, threatening to kill them because of their gender identities. A crowd of bystanders filmed the event, shouting anti-transgender slurs, while police drove by without intervening; they never showed up to the scene ([KTLA5, 18 August 2020](#)).

## Looking Forward

While these data present only a snapshot of demonstration activity and political violence in America, the trendlines are clear: demonstrations have erupted en masse around the country, and they are increasingly met with violence by state actors, non-state actors, and counter-demonstrators alike. With two months until the election, the US faces deep divisions over racial inequality, the role of the police, and economic hardship exacerbated by an ineffective pandemic response. The administration has taken multiple steps to inflame these tensions, from announcing further federal deployments in “Democrat-led cities” like Chicago and Albuquerque ([AP, 22 July 2020](#)) to threatening a postponement of the election altogether ([BBC, 30 July 2020](#)). In this hyper-polarized environment, state forces are taking a more heavy-handed approach to dissent, non-state actors are becoming more active and assertive, and counter-demonstrators are looking to resolve their political disputes in the street. Without significant mitigation efforts, these

risks will continue to intensify in the lead-up to the vote, threatening to boil over in November if election results are delayed, inconclusive, or rejected as fraudulent.

*To keep track of these risk factors in real time, check the [US Crisis Monitor](#). Updated weekly, the data and crisis mapping tool are freely available for public use. The project seeks continued funding to ensure that data collection continues through the 2020 election and beyond. If you are interested in supporting this work, please contact [admin@acleddata.com](mailto:admin@acleddata.com).*

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