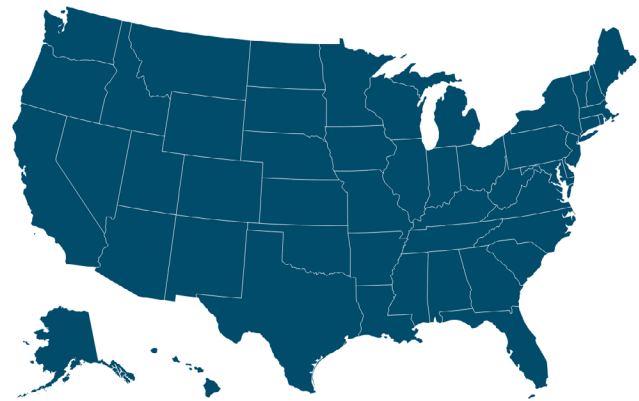




Armed
Assembly:
Guns,
Demonstrations,
and Political
Violence in
America

ACLED
and
Everytown

August 2021



ABOUT

About The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is the highest quality and most widely used real-time data and analysis source on political violence and protest around the world. ACLED codes the dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and demonstration events in more than 190 countries and territories, with over a million individual events recorded to date. The ACLED team conducts analysis to describe, explore, and test conflict scenarios, and makes all data and research open for free use by the public. Learn more and access the data at www.acleddata.com.

About Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund

Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (the “Everytown Support Fund”) is the education, research and litigation arm of Everytown for Gun Safety, the largest gun violence prevention organization in the country with nearly six million supporters. The Everytown Support Fund seeks to improve our understanding of the causes of gun violence and help to reduce it by conducting groundbreaking original research, developing evidence-based policies, communicating this knowledge to the American public, and advancing gun safety and gun violence prevention in communities and the courts. Learn more at www.everytownsupportfund.org.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, loosely organized militias began to patrol Kenosha, Wisconsin, openly carrying guns in direct response to the demonstrations for racial equity in the city after the police shooting of Jacob Blake. One of those who answered a militia's call-to-arms was Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old from Illinois who arrived in Kenosha illegally armed with an AR-15-style rifle. He patrolled the streets openly brandishing his long gun and, within hours of his arrival, had shot three people among the demonstrators, killing two. Rittenhouse has since been charged with murder and is awaiting trial.

The violence in Kenosha may have been even worse had the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) not arrested two heavily armed individuals who had driven from Missouri to Kenosha — after the highly publicized shootings — allegedly “with the intention of possibly using the firearms on people.”¹ The two men had attended a Trump rally in Kenosha and planned to continue on to Portland, Oregon. Both were members of the Missouri-based 417 Second Amendment Militia, and one reportedly said he was willing to “take action” if police were defunded.²

The fatal shootings in Kenosha came at the tail-end of a summer spike in demonstrations nationwide following multiple police shootings and the murder of George Floyd. While the rate of demonstrations per week³ in the United States has decreased since then, the country continues to witness demonstrations and to grapple with sometimes violent confrontations between counter-demonstrators. In the past year and a half, the sight of demonstrators and counter-demonstrators armed with firearms has become more common, and the risk of violent escalation has remained high.

This collaboration between the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (Everytown) presents quantitative research on demonstrations in the United States during the 18-month period from January 2020 through June 2021, documenting 560 events where demonstrators, counter-demonstrators, or other individuals or groups were present and carried or brandished firearms (see *inset definition on the following page*).

While most demonstrations in the country have remained peaceful, analysis of the data reveal clear patterns and characteristics that raise the risk of violent or destructive activity during public gatherings,⁴ including easy access to firearms. Armed demonstrations comprise nearly 10% of all violent or destructive demonstrations in the United States, and are violent much more often than unarmed demonstrations. Contrary to claims that the presence of guns in public spaces makes people safer, demonstrations involving at least one armed individual tend to be violent or destructive 16% of the time.

1. Alexander Mallin and Meredith Deliso, “Blue Lives Matter Supporters Arrested with Slew of Firearms outside Kenosha after Police Received Tip about Possible Shooting, DOJ Says,” ABC News, September 3, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/blue-lives-matter-supporters-arrested-slew-firearms-kenosha/story?id=72808923>.

2. Ricardo Torress, “Two Missouri men arrested in Pleasant Prairie on firearms violations after coming to Kenosha,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 5, 2020, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/milwaukee/2020/09/03/missouri-men-charged-firearms-violations-after-coming-kenosha/5711198002/>.

3. ACLED is an event-based dataset, and therefore only records demonstration *events*; the number of ‘demonstration events’ recorded by ACLED may differ from the number of ‘demonstrations’ recorded via other methodologies. This is because the number of demonstrations is reliant largely on reporting and the terminology used in doing so. While the word ‘demonstrations’ is used throughout this report, ‘demonstrations’ refer to ‘demonstration events.’

4. Destructive behavior refers to actions such as looting or vandalism.

Armed demonstrations refer to demonstrations⁵ in which individuals and groups — including militias, militant social movements, and unaffiliated individuals and groups — are present and identified as equipped with firearms in print, photographs, and/or video. Such demonstrations vary from hundreds of armed members of a militia marching through a city to an individual pointing a firearm at demonstrators from a vehicle. Demonstrations are not considered armed if the only armed individuals are active-duty law enforcement and/or military units. Off-duty law enforcement and military personnel, however, are included as armed individuals and/or groups, as relevant.

The outcome of this ACLED-Everytown collaboration is the first real-time, publicly available resource tracking armed presence at demonstrations across the US. Building on ACLED's established data collection methodology,⁶ this project allows users to systematically compare trends in demonstrations with an armed presence to those without for the first time, in a way that has not been possible until now. ACLED continues to track the presence of firearms at demonstrations in real time through its regular data collection work, with all data made available to the public.⁷

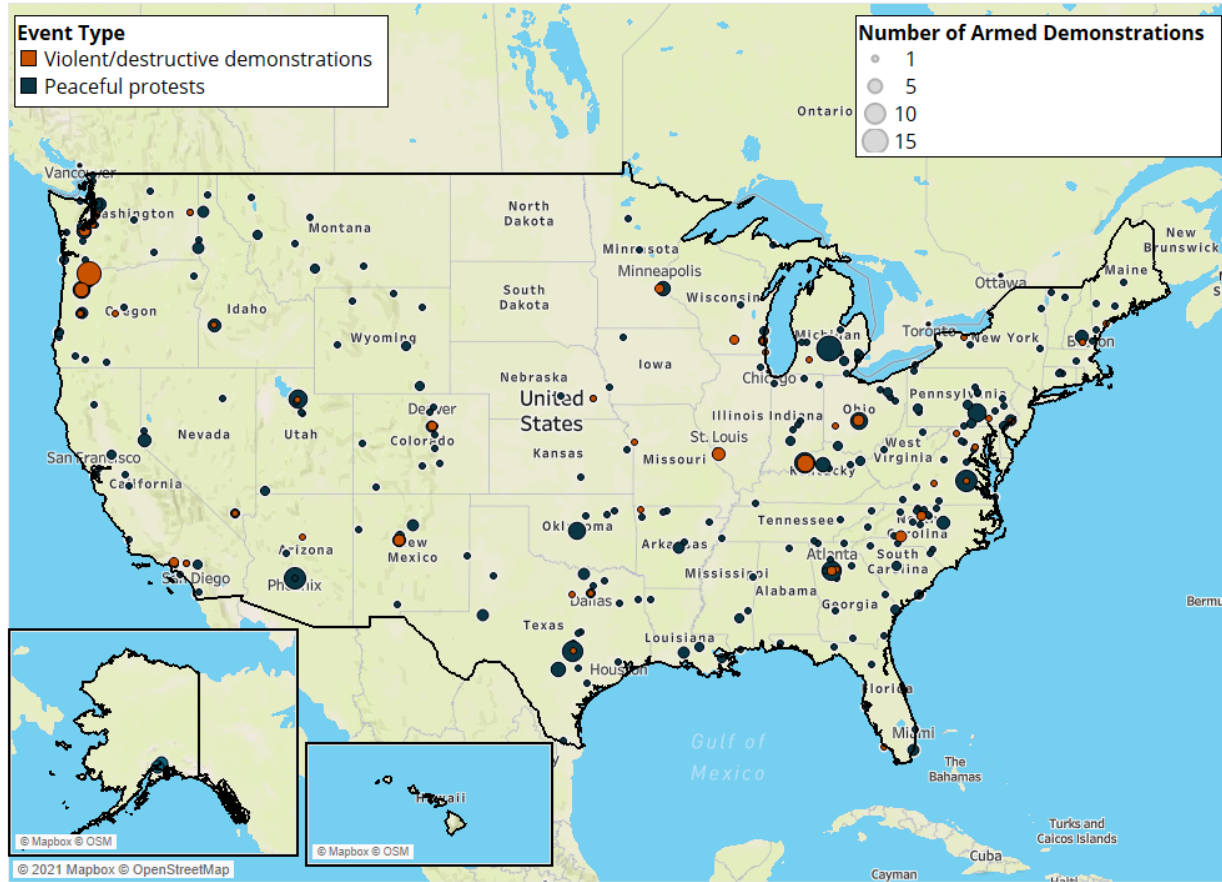
The analysis finds that the presence of armed groups and individuals at a demonstration strongly correlates with an increase in violent or destructive behavior during public gatherings: **armed demonstrations are nearly six times as likely to turn violent or destructive compared to unarmed demonstrations.** In addition, **the majority of armed demonstrations have been driven by far-right mobilization and reactions to left-wing activism**, such as opposition to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, support for former President Donald Trump, opposition to gun regulations, and opposition to pandemic-related public health restrictions. As one example, nearly 84% of armed demonstrations associated with the BLM movement included armed groups or individuals *opposing* pro-BLM demonstrators. At least 18% of all armed demonstrations have occurred on the grounds of government facilities, with more than 100 reported at legislative buildings and vote counting centers across 25 states and Washington, DC. Militia groups and militant social movements, like the Proud Boys and Three Percenters, are active in over 54% of all armed demonstrations. Further, demonstrations in states that permit the open carry of firearms were more than five times as likely to have an armed presence at demonstrations.

5. ACLED codes all physical congregations of three or more people (single-person demonstrations are not coded) as a demonstration when they are directed against a political entity, government institution, policy, group or individual, tradition or event, businesses, or other private institutions. This includes demonstrations affiliated with an organization (e.g. NAACP), a movement (e.g. BLM), or a political party (e.g. Republicans), as well as those affiliated with identity groups (e.g. LGBT, women, Native Americans). ACLED also codes demonstrations around a certain topic, even if not associated with a specific identity group or organization (e.g. against climate change, anti-vaxxers, COVID-19 restrictions, etc.). For more on ACLED, see this [methodology primer](#).

6. ACLED collects data on political violence and protests across the globe. For its US coverage, the ACLED team reviews over 3,200 sources to collect information on events. New data, covering the week prior, is published weekly. Additionally, new sources of information are constantly reviewed to determine their ability to provide further information on distinct events, and so is continuously expanding the scope of coverage. For more on ACLED methodology regarding its US coverage, see [this methodology primer](#).

7. All data can be accessed through ACLED's [export tool](#) and [API](#). A curated file of all data on armed demonstration events in America is available for download at ACLED's [US Research Hub](#), updated weekly.

Armed Demonstrations in the United States (1 Jan 2020 - 30 June 2021)



ARMED DEMONSTRATIONS IN AMERICA

Danger of armed demonstrations

Between January 2020 and June 2021, there were more than 30,000 public demonstrations in the US. Of those, at least 560 demonstrations included the presence of an armed individual, other than law enforcement. While armed demonstrations represent a small proportion of the total number of events, this subset is significantly more likely to involve violence or destructive behavior.

Roughly one out of every six demonstrations where firearms were present included reports of violent or destructive activity. For demonstrations where no firearms were identified, that figure is one out of 37. While armed demonstrations account for less than 2% of the total number of demonstrations in the US, they account for 10% of all violent or destructive demonstrations. Armed demonstrations turn violent or destructive about 16% of the time, compared to less than 3% of the time for unarmed demonstrations, where demonstrators might engage in violence — through use of weapons other than firearms or unarmed physical violence — or destructive activity.

That trend is mirrored in which events turned deadly. A fatality was reported at approximately one out of every 2,963 demonstrations where no firearm was identified, compared to about one out of every 62 demonstrations where there was a firearm identified.

These findings undermine a central argument of gun rights proponents that armed individuals are ‘guarantors’ of safety in public or private spaces. The report directly contradicts arguments advocating for more publicly

armed individuals, as promoted by the National Rifle Association (NRA) after the Sandy Hook school shooting. NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre reacted to that shooting with the now notorious motto, “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”⁸ For years before and since, in the face of massive public support for common sense gun laws, the NRA has stipulated that easy access to firearms was central to individual and community safety. On the contrary, we find that at recent demonstrations, the presence of an armed person is correlated to more — not less — violence and destruction, and is a detriment to public safety and the right to organize, compared to demonstrations with unarmed participants.

In many events, the violence or destructive behavior reported during these demonstrations is carried out by those who are armed, resulting in firearms *directly* contributing to more dangerous demonstrations. This is not always the case: in some events, a demonstration turns violent or destructive due to the actions of people other than those armed. Nevertheless, the trend that armed demonstrations are more likely to be violent or destructive shows how the presence of firearms at a demonstration can serve to escalate tensions in contentious contexts, *indirectly* contributing to a more dangerous environment. In addition to the shooting in Kenosha, there have been multiple other shootings at demonstrations and counter-demonstrations where guns were present:

- In Tyler, Texas on 26 July 2020, armed men, including some associated with the white supremacist Aryan Brotherhood, attacked a rally for a Democratic congressional candidate, injuring his aide.⁹
- The previous day, also in Texas, an armed pro-BLM demonstrator was killed by an active-duty Air Force Sergeant in Austin after the airman drove his car into a crowd of demonstrators and then opened fire. The airman later claimed self-defense due to the presence of armed demonstrators, although he previously posted tweets glorifying violence against BLM supporters.¹⁰
- In another incident in Albuquerque, New Mexico on 15 June 2020, a group called the New Mexico Civil Guard came armed to a protest about a controversial colonial statue, with the stated intent of ‘defending’ the monument.¹¹ Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham called out the presence of “heavily armed individuals” at the protest “to menace protesters and to present an unsanctioned show of unregulated force.”¹² An armed man who was also at the protest to defend the statue allegedly threw a woman to the ground and then opened fire into the crowd. The man has been charged with aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.¹³
- In Las Vegas, Nevada on 1 June 2020, a man who was not involved in an ongoing pro-BLM demonstration fired randomly into a crowd of demonstrators, severely injuring a police officer. Police responded by shooting into the crowd, killing an armed demonstrator who was legally carrying and did not present a threat to officers, according to a later police investigation.¹⁴
- On 29 August 2020 in Portland, Oregon, hundreds of vehicles formed a caravan demonstration in support of President Trump. During the rally, which included the Proud Boys and III% militia members, demonstrators used pepper spray and shot paintball guns at pro-BLM counter-demonstrators, as well

8. Meghan Keneally, “Breaking down the NRA-backed theory that a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun,” ABC News, October 29, 2018.

9. Tim Craig, “U.S. political divide becomes increasingly violent, rattling activists and police,” *Washington Post*, 27 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/protests-violence/2020/08/27/3f232e66-e578-11ea-970a-64c73a1c2392_story.html

10. Jolie McCullough and Meena Venkataramanan, “U.S. Army sergeant who shot Austin protester Garrett Foster posted tweets about retaliating against demonstrators,” *Texas Tribune*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/07/31/daniel-perry-austin-protest-garrett-foster/>.

11. “The Uprising, The Boog, and A Shooting,” MilitiaWatch, June 17, 2020, <https://militia.watch/read/uprising-boogaloo-shooting/>.

12. Samuel Gilbert, “Armed Vigilantes under Scrutiny after Statue Protester Shot in New Mexico,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2WDemum>.

13. Elise Kaplan, “Charge Refiled against Baca in Protest Shooting,” *Albuquerque Journal*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.abqjournal.com/1475487/charges-refiled-against-baca-in-protest-shooting.html>.

14. Rio Lacanlale, “Police: No videos found of protester raising gun at officers,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/police-no-videos-found-of-protester-raising-gun-at-officers-2330670/>

as at journalists. They also drove their trucks through crowds of counter-demonstrators who had tried to block the streets.¹⁵ Amidst the clashes, a member of Patriot Prayer, Aaron ‘Jay’ Danielson, was shot and killed by an opposing activist, Michael Reinoehl. Reinoehl claimed he was acting in self-defense, as he thought he and his friend were going to be stabbed.^{16,17}

This non-exhaustive list of cases exemplifies how the presence of firearms at demonstrations can endanger demonstrators, bystanders, and police.

Armed demonstration trends over time

After relatively few armed demonstrations early in 2020, April saw a sharp increase, accounting for three times the average number in the first three months of 2020. All of the armed events that month were demonstrations against government stay-at-home orders during the coronavirus pandemic, two-thirds of which took place on the grounds of legislative buildings across the country (*see graph on the following page*). Armed demonstrations against stay-at-home orders continued through May, nearly matching the number in April.

By the end of May, following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the country witnessed a surge of demonstrations for racial justice. Armed counter-demonstrators and others openly brandishing guns attended many of these events, resulting in the largest spike in demonstrations where firearms were present (*see graph on the following page*). The three-month period after George Floyd was killed accounts for more than half of the total number of armed demonstrations recorded across the 18-month reporting period. Nearly 84% of the armed demonstrations associated with the BLM movement included armed groups or individuals that were present to *oppose* pro-BLM demonstrators.

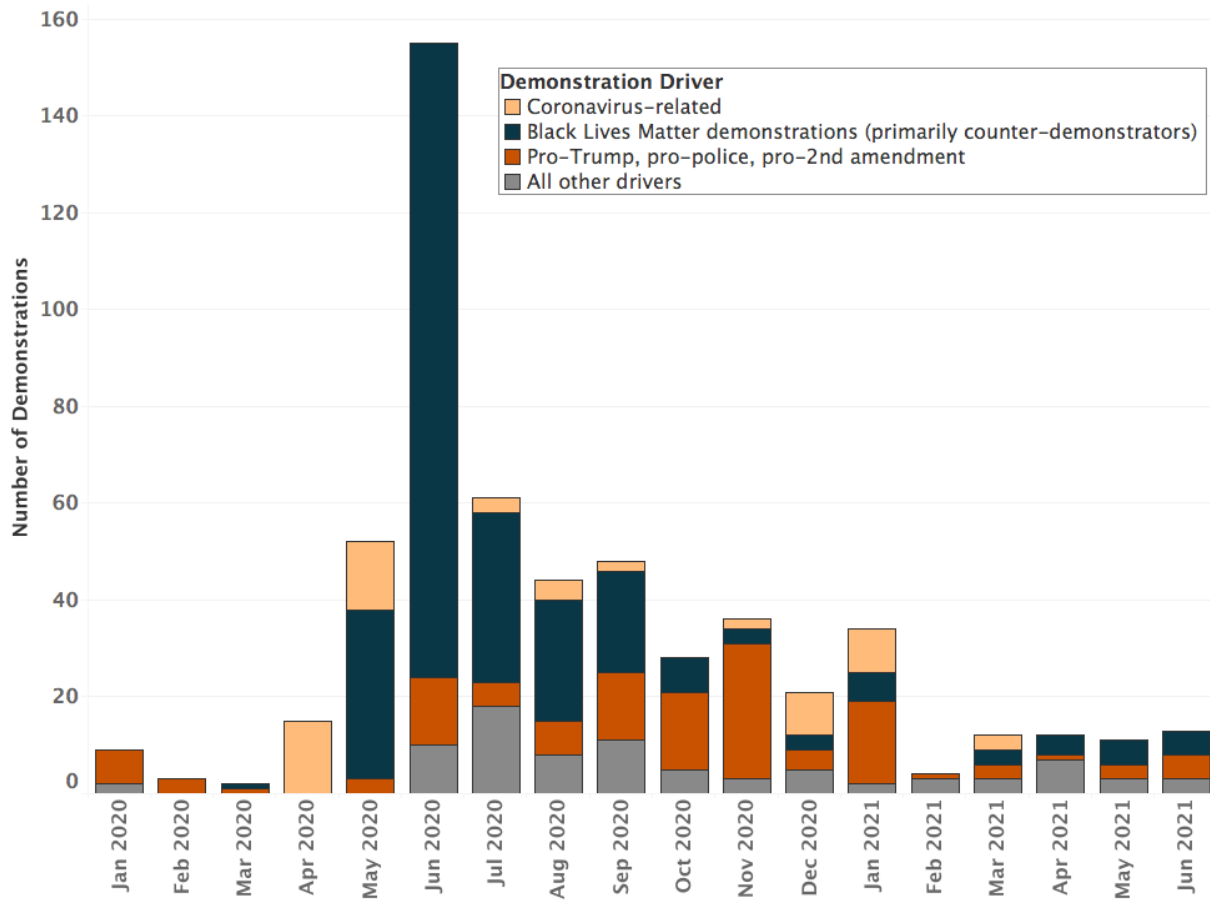
The summer and fall of 2020 saw a number of demonstrations around the presidential election where firearms were brandished. The election’s aftermath, and the corresponding ‘Stop the Steal’ movement, additionally resulted in significant armed demonstration activity (*see graph on the following page*).

15. Ben Kessler, “Pro-Trump caravan and protesters clashed before shooting death in Portland’s streets,” NBC News, August 30, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fistfights-streets-pro-trump-caravan-protesters-clashed-prior-portland-death-n1238811>

16. Andrew Hay, “Oregon man says Portland shooting was self defense,” Reuters, September 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-race-protests-portland/oregon-man-says-portland-shooting-was-self-defense-idUSKBN25U1ND>

17. Subsequently, a federal task force shot and killed Reinoehl in September. Law enforcement initially claimed that Reinoehl was armed, but subsequent evidence has emerged suggesting that he “wasn’t obviously armed” and that authorities shot him without warning. Then-President Trump appeared to celebrate the alleged extrajudicial killing, saying “they knew who he was; they didn’t want to arrest him, and in 15 minutes that ended.” Mike Baker and Evan Hill, “Police Say an Antifa Activist Likely Shot at Officers. His Gun Suggests Otherwise.” New York Times, April 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/us/michael-reinoehl-killing-investigation.html>. Josh Campbell, “Trump gloats about US Marshals’ killing of Portland ‘antifa’ suspect,” CNN, October 15, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/15/politics/trump-fugitive-shooting/index.html>.

Armed Demonstrations by Driver (Jan 2020 – Jun 2021)



Prevalence of armed demonstrations in public spaces

Approximately 97% of all armed demonstrations in the US during the period of January 2020 to June 2021 took place in public spaces.¹⁸ Public demonstrations — whether armed or unarmed — are common, as the purpose of protest activity is often to build public support and to garner media coverage for a particular cause. However, the fact that nearly all armed demonstrations have occurred in public spaces may have relevance for policymakers who have the ability to regulate the presence of firearms in or near public locations such as parks, schools, or government facilities.

Nearly one in six armed demonstrations during the reporting period took place at government buildings like statehouses, vote counting facilities, or the US Capitol. More than 100 armed demonstrations have been held at these locations in 25 states and Washington, DC. Michigan (11), Arizona (9), Texas (8), Pennsylvania (8), Ohio (8), and Oregon (6) have registered the most armed demonstrations at legislative buildings or vote counting facilities.

The data indicate that protest issues that animate right-wing actors, such as the ‘Stop the Steal’ conspiracy theory, extreme gun rights, anti-lockdown activism, and general support for former President Donald Trump, are linked to a higher number of armed demonstrations at legislative buildings than other types of protest issues. For example, nearly half of the armed demonstrations against pandemic-related stay-at-home orders and more than 65% of armed ‘Stop the Steal’ events during this time period took place at government facilities.

18. Public spaces refer to places that are publicly accessible without barriers to entry. Public land, parks, forests, nature reserves are public spaces. Government-owned land without restrictions (i.e. wildlife refuges like Malheur) are public. Private spaces include, but are not limited to, places like private schools/universities, private businesses (e.g. banks, restaurants, hotels, etc.), and residential/commercial areas in which access is prohibited.

Additional impact of armed demonstrations on speech

Even when no shots are fired, the presence of armed demonstrators is in and of itself a show of violent intimidation. Such forms of intimidation have occurred throughout the country by a variety of actors, ranging from unaffiliated individuals to members of well-known anti-government militias. For instance, in the small town of Omak, Washington on 4 June 2020, armed members of the Montana Three Percenters and unidentified militia groups lined the route of a peaceful march for George Floyd, with some standing on nearby roofs. “Honestly, it was terrifying,” said one rally-goer. “They claimed they were there to protect the city from outsiders, but it felt more like preparation to kill.”¹⁹ No other pro-BLM demonstrations have been reported in Omak since then, though an unopposed ‘Stop the Steal’ protest took place months after this incident. Similarly, in Crown Point, Indiana on 1 June 2020, a group of armed men lined the route of a peaceful BLM protest. One pro-BLM protester told local media that the armed presence was an attempt to “intimidate us.”²⁰ Again, no other pro-BLM demonstrations have been reported in Crown Point since the incident.

Perhaps most infamously, in St. Louis, Missouri on 28 June 2020, a white couple drew national attention when they aimed firearms — from their front porch — at protesters who had peacefully marched through their neighborhood up until that point. While no shots were fired, both pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges associated with the incident, yet they both have subsequently been pardoned by the governor of Missouri.²¹

These cases and dozens like them elucidate how firearms are used to intimidate protesters, and the chilling effect armed demonstrators can have on free speech and lawful protests.

States that prohibit open carry of firearms have lower instances of armed demonstrations

Instances of individuals brandishing firearms at demonstrations have become even more common in states that permit the open carry of guns.²² Between January 2020 and June 2021, demonstrations in open carry states — that is, states that permit the open carry of firearms — were over five times more likely to have an armed presence. Put another way, roughly one out of every 231 demonstrations in states that prohibit open carry involved individuals carrying guns. That figure is one out of every 43 demonstrations in open carry states. The data make clear that demonstrators in these states avail themselves of laws that enable them to openly carry firearms, adding more deadly weapons to already contentious situations.

Of particular note are the more than 100 armed demonstrations that took place on the grounds of legislative buildings or vote counting facilities, as all of these events occurred in states that permit the carrying of firearms on statehouse grounds. The only armed demonstration at a capitol building that prohibits firearms was the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021. In the time period studied, there were several prominent examples of armed demonstrators entering capitol buildings, sometimes by force. These events have regularly featured rhetoric challenging the legitimacy or authority of the duly elected officials serving in the building, as well as referencing the Second Amendment and guns as a means of violently combating the purported tyranny of the government institution.

On 30 April 2020, demonstrators against Michigan’s coronavirus restrictions, some of whom were openly carrying long guns and are members of local militias, entered the state capitol and confronted law enforcement, de-

19. Isaac Stanley-Becker, “As Protests Spread to Small-Town America, Militia Groups Respond with Armed Intimidation and Online Threats,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 2020, <https://wapo.st/2CMajot>.

20. Evelyn Holmes, “Armed bystanders line Black Lives Matter protest in Crown Point, Indiana”, WLS-TV, June 7, 2020, <https://abc-7chicago.com/timely-crown-point-news-black-lives-matter-protest/6234379/>.

21. Eduardo Medina and Chris Cameron, “Missouri Governor Pardons St. Louis Couple Who Aimed Guns at Protesters”, *New York Times*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/us/politics/mark-patricia-mccloskey-pardon.html>.

22. Open carry states include any state that allows the open carry of handguns and/or long guns, with or without a permit.

manding to be allowed on the floor of the legislative chamber.²³ On 24 August 2020, demonstrators, including a member of the Bundy Ranch and the leader of the far right People’s Rights Organization, smashed windows in the Idaho statehouse to interrupt a session dealing with the coronavirus. At least one was openly carrying an AK-style assault rifle with a high capacity magazine.²⁴ On 21 December 2020, far-right groups, including Patriot Prayer, stormed the Oregon state capitol. Some of the demonstrators were armed.²⁵ All three of these states permit the open carry of firearms.

MOTIVATIONS OF ARMED DEMONSTRATORS IN AMERICA

Protest issues

Most armed demonstrations are driven by far-right mobilization and reactions to left-wing activism. Opposition to the BLM movement (48%), pro-Trump organizing (18%), pro-Second Amendment organizing (10%), and opposition to COVID-19 restrictions (10%) account for the majority of armed right-wing demonstrations. These four subject areas collectively account for 77% of all armed demonstrations between January 2020 and June 2021.

While approximately 94% of pro-BLM demonstrations have been peaceful,²⁶ these demonstrations have frequently drawn armed counter-demonstrators. Demonstrations related to the BLM movement (including those in support of and against) comprised approximately 58% of the demonstrations where armed individuals were present — a total of 322 demonstrations. The data show that the engagement of counter-demonstrators increases the likelihood that demonstrations will turn violent or destructive.

It is important to note that armed presence at demonstrations associated with the BLM movement *does not imply* that the pro-BLM demonstrators were armed. In fact, nearly 84% of these armed demonstrations included an armed presence of groups or individuals *opposed* to the BLM movement. Such armed actors include right-wing militia groups, militant social movements, and unaffiliated individuals. The vast majority of these actors are right-wing groups, like the Three Percenters (III%) and the Proud Boys. While some of these events involve armed groups *in support of* the BLM movement — such as some Antifa contingents or the United Pharaoh’s Guard — such cases comprise a minority of events.

Armed groups at demonstrations

Violent or destructive activity is six times as likely to take place at armed demonstrations involving militias or militant social movements compared to other demonstrations. More than half (54%) of all armed demonstrations involve these groups, and they can often play a lead role in organizing demonstration violence or serving as vanguards to disorder. As an example, the proportion of demonstrations involving militias and militant social movements surged in the run-up to the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021,²⁷ and “more than a dozen extremist groups” reportedly took part in the riot on 6 January.²⁸ Although a minority of those arrested

23. Lois Beckett, “Armed protesters demonstrate against Covid-19 lockdown at Michigan capitol”, The Guardian, April 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/30/michigan-protests-coronavirus-lockdown-armed-capitol>.

24. Keith Ridler, “Crowd shatters glass to get to Idaho House session on virus”, Associated Press, August 24, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-id-state-wire-us-news-2262f803692a574ec7ede04cc174397f?s=09>.

25. Lauren Dake and Dirk VanderHart, “Far-right protesters disrupt Oregon Legislature special session”, OPB, December 21, 2020, <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/12/21/oregon-legislature-special-session-protests/>.

26. Roudabeh Kishi, Hampton Stall, Aaron Wolfson, and Sam Jones, “A Year of Racial Justice Protests: Key Trends in Demonstrations Supporting the BLM Movement”, ACLED, May 25, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/05/25/a-year-of-racial-justice-protests-key-trends-in-demonstrations-supporting-the-blm-movement/>.

27. “US Crisis Monitor Releases Full Data for 2020,” ACLED and BDI, February 5, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/05/us-crisis-monitor-releases-full-data-for-2020/>

28. Masood Farivar, “Researchers: More Than a Dozen Extremist Groups Took Part in Capitol Riots,” Voice of America, January 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/2020-usa-votes/researchers-more-dozen-extremist-groups-took-part-capitol-riots>

for storming the Capitol had demonstrable connections to “extremist organizations”;²⁹ the outsized role in organizing the attack played by actors like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers shows how the involvement of such groups can raise the risk of violence among a larger number of unaffiliated individuals at a demonstration.

Tracking armed group presence at demonstrations can pose unique challenges. Reports do not always clearly identify how many people were armed (i.e. a single individual, or a group). Further, in cases where it is clear that an armed group is present, their affiliation (i.e. the name of the group) might not always be known or reported. For example, in 34% of armed demonstrations where it is determined that armed groups were present, the name of at least one of the present groups is not known. In 22% of such events, none of the present groups are identified by name. When groups are clearly identified in reports, the information is included in ACLED data,³⁰ but this broader ambiguity in reporting around armed group activity means that the involvement of named groups in armed demonstrations may be underreported. This is, on one hand, due to groups often operating semi-clandestinely and, on the other hand, local reporters’ unfamiliarity with the particulars of armed group affiliation by patch, name, or other claims.

The table below displays the most active named militias and militant social movements involved in armed demonstrations. Far-right groups constitute the vast majority: 84% of the named groups present at armed demonstrations are right-wing actors.

Top Groups in Attendance at Armed Demonstrations	
Groups	Armed Events
Boogaloo Boys and affiliates	67
Three Percenters (III%) and associated groups	56
Proud Boys	42
Oath Keepers	14
NBPP: New Black Panther Party	11
Patriot Prayer	9
Michigan Liberty Militia	9

The Boogaloo Boys and their affiliates are active in the largest number of armed demonstrations — over a tenth of all armed demonstrations. While the Boogaloo movement is largely dispersed and lacks organizational structure, the movement’s sole ideological goal is to accelerate the US towards open combat and civil war, which they view to be an inevitability.³¹ The Boogaloo movement is inextricably linked with gun culture, and many of the elements that animated the boom in anti-government extremism in the past three decades have also animated the Boogaloo movement, including opposition to new gun laws. Boogaloo adherents online routinely discuss right-wing extremist content and post memes glorifying gun violence,³² including specifically

29. Joe Palazzolo, Erin Ailworth and Rebecca Davis O’Brien, “Most Capitol Riot Suspects Have No Far-Right Group Ties, a Challenge in Fight Against Extremism,” The Wall Street Journal, February 12, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/most-capitol-riot-suspects-have-no-far-right-group-ties-a-challenge-in-fight-against-extremism-11613139086>;

Lois Beckett, “Most alleged Capitol rioters unconnected to extremist groups, analysis finds,” The Guardian, March 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/04/us-capitol-attack-individual-extremist-far-right-groups>.

30. ACLED tracks the presence of militia groups, militant social movements, and unidentified armed groups at demonstrations via thousands of sources, including traditional media, trusted social media accounts, and through partnerships with organizations tracking such trends. For more on ACLED methodology, see [this methodology primer](#).

31. Robert Evans and Jason Wilson, “The Boogaloo Movement Is Not What You Think” Bellingcat, May 27, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/27/the-boogaloo-movement-is-not-what-you-think/>; Cassie Miller, “The ‘Boogaloo’ Started as a Racist Meme” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 5, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/05/boogaloo-started-racist-meme>

32. Alex Newhouse and Nate Gunesch, “The Boogaloo Movement Wants To Be Seen as Anti-Racist, But It Has a White Supremacist Fringe” Middlebury Institute, May 30, 2020, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publi>

about the Kenosha shootings.³³ While some Boogaloo Boys are explicitly right-wing, others have attempted to infiltrate and use BLM demonstrations as a way to accelerate the political situation towards mass violence — which is why Boogaloo adherents have shown up armed both to support and oppose BLM demonstrations.³⁴

The Three Percenters movement is, similar to the Boogaloo movement, more of a brand of militant movements than a cohesive national organization. There are a multitude of III% actors, including national organizations, coalitions, local groups, and other affinity organizations. The movement's core ideological view is the ahistorical notion that only 3% of American colonists took up arms against the British, indicating their accepted position that a small number of activists can affect large amounts of change through force of arms. The III% movement has a history of violence, often picking unarmed or otherwise undefended targets (e.g. unarmed counter-demonstrators,³⁵ refugee communities,³⁶ Muslim organizations,³⁷ etc.).

The Oath Keepers stem from a similar sociopolitical origin as the III% movement, as they were also formed in direct response to Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election. They derive their membership from former and current police officers and military, those they deem to have 'taken the oath' to defend the Constitution. Conspiracy theories around forced civilian disarmament are key to the Oath Keepers' worldview. In fact, the first of the 10 orders each member agrees to disobey is "any order to disarm the American people."³⁸ Overall, approximately a quarter of all demonstrations — armed or unarmed — involving the Oath Keepers have turned violent or destructive.³⁹

The Proud Boys have been present at over 40 armed demonstrations. This group was founded in large part to take pro-Trump momentum from the 2016 election — in particular from the online alt-right — and channel it into street violence in defense of right-wing goals and ideals. The group was highly involved in the storming of the US Capitol and has been increasingly armed with long guns, despite their historical preference for crude weapons and chemical agents.⁴⁰ Overall, nearly a quarter of all demonstrations — armed or unarmed — involving the Proud Boys have turned violent or destructive.⁴¹

Importantly, all of the actors that top the list of groups involved in armed demonstrations have been identified previously as movements of concern due to their proclivity for violence, especially around the 2020 presidential election.⁴²

Members of many of these groups see firearms as central to their activism. In broader far-right activism, displaying the firearms themselves can often serve as the protest, allowing for a smaller group of activists to expand their impact when counter-demonstrating against their political adversaries.

[cations/boogaloo-movement-wants-be-seen-anti-racist-it](#)

33. Hampton Stall, Dave Foran, and Hari Prasad, "What's in a Meme? The Rise of 'Saint Kyle'" GNET, October 29, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/29/whats-in-a-meme-the-rise-of-saint-kyle/>

34..For more on the Boogaloo movement, see [this ACLED actor profile](#) and [this Everytown primer](#)

35. Lisa Hagen "Counter-Protesters Allege Militia Assaults At Gunpoint After Atlanta Rally" WABE, December 22, 2020, <https://www.wabe.org/counter-protesters-allege-militia-assaults-at-gunpoint-after-atlanta-rally/>

36. Brett Barrouquere "3 Members of a Kansas Militia Once Plotted To Bomb a Mosque, Now Are Going to Prison" Southern Poverty Law Center, January 25, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/01/25/3-members-kansas-militia-once-plotted-bomb-mosque-now-are-going-prison>

37. Matthew Teague "Armed '3%' militia fights against proposed mosque in tiny Georgia town" Guardian, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/13/three-percent-militia-georgia-muslim-mosque-isis-doraville>

38. <https://oathkeepers.org/declaration-of-orders-we-will-not-obey/>

39. For more on the Oath Keepers, see [this ACLED actor profile](#).

40. For more on the Proud Boys, see [this ACLED actor profile](#) and [this Everytown report](#).

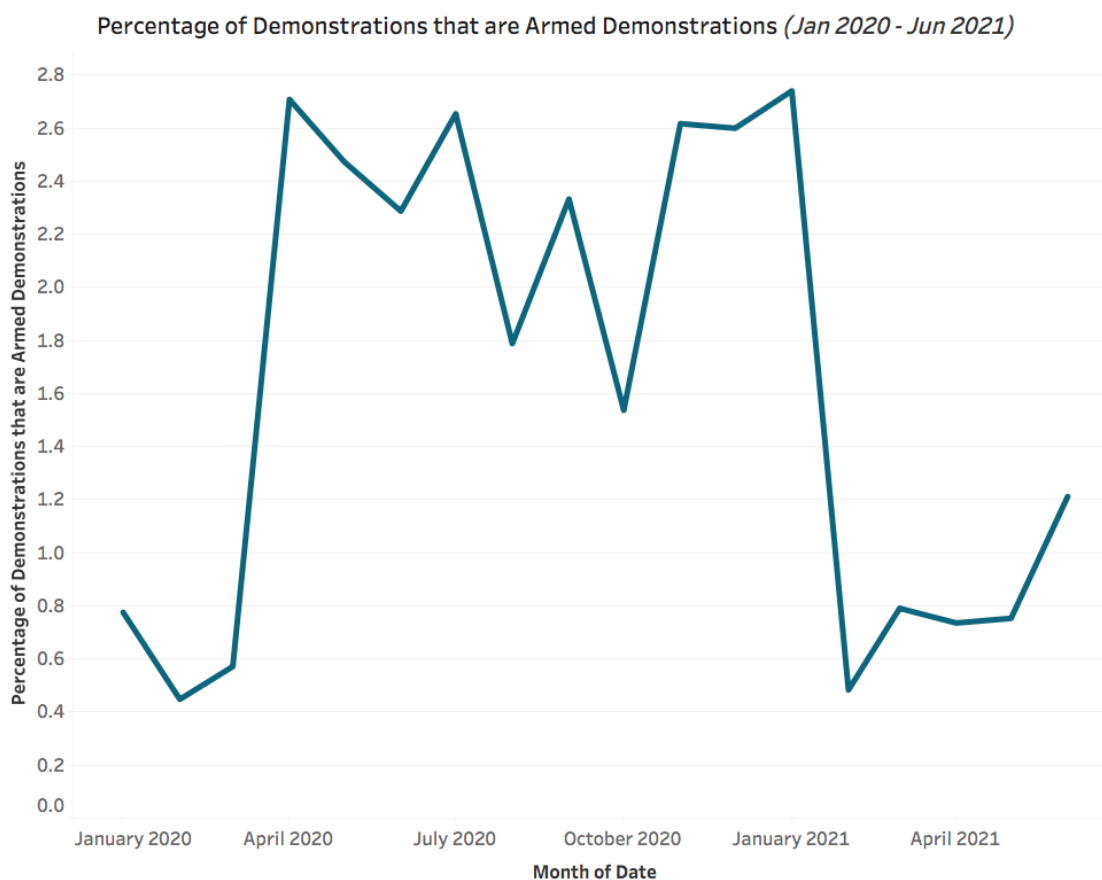
41. Ibid.

42. "Armed & Dangerous: How the Gun Lobby Enshrines Guns as Tools of the Extreme Right," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, September, 30, 2020, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/extreme-right/>; Hampton Stall, Roudabeh Kishi, and Clionadh Raleigh, "Standing By: Right-Wing Militia Groups & the US Election" ACLED, October 23, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/10/21/standing-by-militias-election/>

Relatedly, carrying a firearm conveys a sense of power to the wielder that, when coupled with the uniform and rank status within a militia group, gives a wielder a self-imposed sense of discipline and justification. At times, police officers have themselves helped to inspire this feeling, discussing positioning for militia groups in Louisville or tossing bottles of water to vigilantes in Kenosha.⁴³ In another case, an Albuquerque shooter touted his relationship to the former sheriff, likely as justification for his actions and as a shield against impending accountability.⁴⁴ An expansive investigation by the *New York Times* using footage alongside ACLED data showed that police frequently “gave armed groups a pass” at demonstrations in 2020.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

While armed demonstrations declined amid an overall decrease in far-right mobilization and militia activity in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021, the proportion of demonstrations with an armed presence has been on the rise in recent months. In June, armed demonstrations were more than twice as common as in February (see graph below).



43. David Choi, “We appreciate you guys’: Wisconsin police in armored vehicles thanked armed militia and gave out water bottles” *Business Insider*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/kenosha-police-thanked-armed-militia-and-gave-water-2020-8>; Eric Litke, “Fact check: Police gave Kyle Rittenhouse water and thanked him before shooting” *USA Today*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/08/29/fact-check-video-police-thanked-kyle-rittenhouse-gave-him-water/5661804002/>

44. Tamar Lapin, “Man accused of shooting New Mexico protester is ex-city council candidate”, *New York Post*, June 16, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/06/16/man-accused-of-shooting-new-mexico-protester-is-ex-city-council-candidate/>; Nick Estes, “Some got shot in Abq by the fascist New Mexico Civil Guard shot someone” *Twitter*, June 15, 2020, <https://twitter.com/nickwestes/status/1272759289333993479?lang=en>; MilitiaWatch, “The Uprising, The Boog, and A Shooting” June 17, 2020, <https://militia.watch/read/uprising-boogaloo-shooting/>

45. Stella Cooper, Evan Hill, Dmitriy Khavin, Arielle Ray, and Drew Jordan, “‘I Am On Your Side’: How the Police Gave Armed Groups a Pass in 2020” *New York Times*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007424380/police-black-lives-matter-protests.html>

The resurgence of armed anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine demonstrations⁴⁶ ahead of a potential fourth wave of COVID-19,⁴⁷ as well as the threat of increased armed activity leading into important dates in the QAnon conspiracy around former President Trump’s “reinstatement,”⁴⁸ raises the risk of further violence at demonstrations during the second half of the year. With the Department of Homeland Security warning in August of a possible spike in “conspiracy theory-fueled violence” based on its “assessment of the current threat environment in its similarity to situations to 2020 and 2021 that manifested in acts of violence and destructive behavior by individuals and groups, including the 6 January 2021 breach of the US Capitol,” this risk may only increase ahead of the first anniversary of the attack.⁴⁹ In order to support efforts to mitigate these risk factors, ACLED and Everytown will continue to monitor and analyze these trends in real time, making all data available to the public.

46. Jonathan Levinson, Troy Brynelson, and Ryan Haas, “Police absent during political violence in downtown Portland,” OPB, August 10, 2021, <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/08/09/portland-downtown-violence-police-absent-protests/>; Zane Sparling, “Left-, right-wing groups clash at rally in downtown Portland,” Portland Tribune, August 7, 2021, <https://pamplinmedia.com/pt/9-news/517933-413825-proud-boys-antifa-clash-at-rally-in-downtown-portland>; Kelly Weill, “Proud Boys Are Back to Brawling on America’s Streets,” Daily Beast, August 11, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/proud-boys-are-back-to-brawling-on-americas-streets>

47. Chris Wilson, “A Fourth Wave of COVID-19 Is Brewing in the U.S. Is There Enough Time to Stop It?” Time Magazine, July 19, 2021, <https://time.com/6081407/covid-19-fourth-wave/>

48. Ken Dilanian, “Feds warn of potential violence fueled by false election claims,” NBC News, August 11, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/feds-warn-potential-violence-fueled-false-election-claims-n1276567>

49. Geneva Sands, “Homeland Security warns of potential conspiracy theory-fueled violence in August,” CNN, August 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/06/politics/homeland-security-warning-political-conspiracy-threat-violence/index.html>