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Far-Right Extremism's Threat to Police Safety and the Organizational Legitimacy of Law Enforcement in the United States

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

The relationship between far-right extremism and law enforcement in the United States has a long and complicated history. In 2020, this relationship was on display as both far-right extremists and law enforcement agencies were brought into the national spotlight for their roles in multiple unprecedented events. This research discusses how far-right extremism's anti-government ideology, in particular, represents an external threat to law enforcement officers. This threat is discussed through the presentation of 30-years of data on law enforcement officers killed in the line-of-duty by far-right extremists from the Extremist Crime Database. In addition, the research also examines law enforcement's implicit and explicit support for far-right extremism, which creates an internal threat against the legitimacy of the profession. Finally, policy initiatives that come from, and build upon, prior research are discussed to reduce these threats.

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In 2020, the United States experienced three extraordinary events with deleterious impacts on the public that continue to reverberate. First, the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) forced federal, state, and local governments to take unprecedented measures to curb the pandemic's death toll as researchers raced to find a safe and effective vaccine. These public health measures often meant the implementation of controversial mask mandates in public places, as well as limits on the number of people that could congregate together and the ways in which those gatherings could take place. Although the federal government provided general guidance and sought to slow the impacts of the pandemic by restricting international travel and providing additional unemployment benefits and resources for businesses, state and local governments were burdened with determining the best course of action for their schools, businesses, and the public more generally. This resulted in wide variation in how public health mandates were imposed, including how long they lasted and to what degree they were enforced. In some cases, local law enforcement refused to enforce mandated restrictions (Hubbard, 2021). In many states, protestors gathered at state capitals to express their displeasure with such mandates and regulations. Often, these protestors were armed, and, in some circumstances, they were associated with far-right extremist ideologies (Kirkpatrick & McIntire, 2021). A federal protection officer was killed by two adherents of the anti-government boogaloo movement and later a sheriff's deputy who attempted to arrest one of the suspects. The suspects were fueled by anger about pandemic lockdowns and more generally by anti-government beliefs proliferated online (Leahy et al., 2020). In another incident, six members of the Wolverine Watchmen, an anti-government extremist militia in Michigan, were arrested for plotting to kidnap the state's governor because of the public health related lockdown order she placed on the state to slow the spread of the virus (*United States of America v. Fox, Croft, Jr., Garbin, Franks, Harris & Caserta*, 2020).

A second notable social development during this time was the sustained nationwide protesting of police use of deadly force against unarmed Black individuals. Protests ignited soon after the flashpoint event where police killed George Floyd, a Black man stopped by police for allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a convenience store in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Like so many other high-profile incidents involving police use of deadly force, the entire encounter was recorded by a citizen bystander who posted it online. The video showed officers restraining Floyd, holding him on his side in a prone position while one officer pushed his knee into

his neck, resulting in his death (Bailey et al., 2020). Within days, the graphic video of Floyd's death spread on social media and news outlets, fueling protests against police brutality across the nation. Law enforcement officers in many cities were targets of protest-related violence. Calls by social movement groups and progressive politicians to "defund the police" followed, aligning with the political narrative suggesting that those who are politically conservative are generally more supportive of police than those more liberal (Scott, 2020; Searcey et al., 2020). Headlines highlighted violent altercations between police and demonstrators, including anti-police violence by those associated with Antifa, a far-left extremist movement, as well as police violence against the public (Baker et al., 2020; MacFarquhar, 2020). In some cases, extreme far-right militia groups made appearances at protests to show support for law enforcement and to oppose the protestors (Ali, 2020; Partlow & Stanley-Becker, 2020). Violence between protestors also occurred, including one protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where a teenager shot and killed a protester calling for the defunding of police. Law enforcement officers were criticized after a video was released showing them allowing the shooter to exit the crime scene without interdiction. The Kenosha shooter had been at the protests to assist a local militia in protecting businesses (Armus, 2020). At another protest in Portland, Oregon, an Antifa supporter shot and killed a member of Patriot Prayer, a far-right extremist group. The suspect initially escaped but was later killed while resisting arrest and firing on a federal task force attempting to arrest him (Golden et al., 2020).

The third extraordinary event was President Donald Trump's delayed acknowledgement of defeat in the 2020 election and reluctance to begin the symbolic and pragmatic process of peacefully transferring executive powers to the incoming administration. Although national security experts feared a heightened risk of violence at voting locations during the 2020 election because of armed "observers" (Fisher, 2020), far-right extremist groups and individuals associated with extreme far-right ideologies mobilized online during the period between election day and inauguration day. Unfounded stories of voter fraud and conspiracy theories were peddled by prominent politicians and spread across right-wing media and social media outlets. Then, on January 6, 2021, President Trump and several of his allies urged protestors attending a large "stop the steal" rally at the White House Ellipse to march to the Capitol and put a stop to Congress's certification of the 2020 presidential election results. The protest eventually transitioned into a violent riot and breach of the United States Capitol, resulting in the deaths of five people,

including a Capitol police officer (Leatherby et al., 2021; Safdar et al., 2021). Far-right extremists associated with the boogaloo movement, QAnon, and groups like Proud Boys and Oath Keepers were present (Thompson & Fischer, 2021; Yaffe-Bellany, 2021). In addition, law enforcement officers, both current and former, were on capitol grounds participating in the Capitol riot (Hsu, 2021).

The role of law enforcement, generally, and the actions of specific police officers, specifically, have been prominent features of each of these three intersecting storylines. Seemingly contradictory, some law enforcement officers have become victims of far-right extremism, while other law enforcement officers have engaged in actions that may seem to signal tacit support for the behaviors and ideologies of the extreme far-right. Therefore, the events of 2020 drive the central research question of this research: *What threat does far-right extremism present to law enforcement officers and agencies?* We ultimately conclude that the answer to this question is complicated and that the threat can be separated into two types of risk to law enforcement – an external risk of law enforcement falling victim to violence by far-right extremists and an internal risk of police complacency or even involvement in far-right extremism that threatens the public trust and the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies.

The structure of this essay continues in three sections. The first section focuses on the external risk that extreme far-right ideologies, and anti-government beliefs more specifically, present to the safety and well-being of law enforcement. We present findings from the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) to better understand the most serious manifestation of this risk to law enforcement, line of duty deaths. The second section discusses the internal risk of far-right extremism to law enforcement organizational legitimacy and community trust. To do so, we present information on how, when, where, and, if possible, why law enforcement engages in behaviors that implicitly, and even explicitly, signal support for extreme far-right ideologies. Finally, the concluding discussion section summarizes these findings and presents policy initiatives that can reduce the risk of far-right extremist violence against law enforcement and increase public trust in law enforcement by reducing the likelihood that agencies will hire and retain far-right extremists and sympathizers.

A Recent History of Anti-Government Ideology and Far-Right Extremism

Definitions of what constitutes far-right extremism can vary between researchers, practitioners, and the public. For this research, the

ECDB's operational definition of far-right extremism is utilized. Importantly, members of mainstream conservative political groups and those who hold mainstream fundamentalist religious beliefs are not considered far-right extremists. The ECDB definitions states that far-right extremism refers to groups and/or individuals that support violence and/or criminal activity explicitly, or implicitly, to further aspects of one or more of the ideals found in this list: fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, xenophobic, and anti-immigration (as opposed to universal and international in orientation); suspicious of centralized federal and state authority; reverent of individual liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes); believe in conspiracy theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty; belief that one's personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent (sometimes such beliefs are amorphous and vague, but for some the threat is from a specific ethnic, racial, social, or religious group); belief in the need to be prepared for an attack either by participating in or supporting the need for paramilitary preparations and training and/or survivalism; support of and/or inclusion in misogynistic subcultures; and opposition of women's reproductive health choices specifically related to abortion (Freilich et al., 2014). Far-right extremists will likely not support all of these views, while adherents to one or more of these ideals have posed threats to law enforcement in the past. Moreover, extremist views most directly aligning with far-right anti-government ideology pose heightened risks to law enforcement as the most visible symbol of the government.

Far-right extremist groups like Posse Comitatus, which originated in the 1960s, to more recent iterations of groups associated with the militia and patriot movement, sovereign citizens movement, and boogaloo movement, share overlapping anti-government ideologies. Notably, members of all of these groups have threatened, attacked, and in some cases killed law enforcement officers over the last several decades. The militia movement of the 1990s began in part as a reaction to multiple events connected to the federal government, including gun control legislation, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Los Angeles riots in 1992 following the acquittal of officers charged with the media-sensationalized beating of Rodney King, and the standoffs between federal law enforcement and U.S. citizens in 1993 at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and in 1993 at Waco, Texas (Crothers, 2002; Dougherty, 1995; Dyer, 1997; Hodge, 2019; Pitcavage, 2001). These focusing events occurred against the national backdrop of declines in agriculture, specifically family farming, and

manufacturing jobs in rural and small-town America. It is hypothesized that anti-government ideological rhetoric, paired with the witnessing of job and economic loss in specific industries, reinforced the militia worldview and acted as a catalyst for action (Van Dyke & Soule, 2002).

Members of the militia movement are skeptical of federal and state government, while supportive, to some degree, of local government and police, especially elected county sheriffs' departments (Freilich et al., 1999). Building off prior literature, Freilich and Pridemore (2005) argue that a militia in the 1990s was one that

deploys or encourages paramilitary ritual and uses informal social networks, charismatic leaders, and various forms of consciousness raising to mobilize individuals on behalf of an ideology that expresses antipathy toward the federal government, multi-national corporations and organizations (e.g., the United Nations), and international treaties (e.g., GATT). These organizations seek to protect fundamental American rights such as individual liberty and gun rights. Most militia groups oppose centralized authority, federal bureaucracy, government encroachment, land use regulations, taxes, global institutions and treaties, and multi-national corporations. Closely related is the desire to protect the sovereignty of the United States. (p. 259)

Specific to this definition, protecting the sovereignty of the United States manifests itself as a conspiracy theory that includes a belief that a tyrannical federal government is working with the United Nations and other international groups to create a one-world government that will end with the United States being subsumed and losing its autonomy to globalization (Freilich et al., 1999). This adherence to conspiratorial beliefs was one of two core main overarching beliefs that formed anti-government militia ideology. The other was an unwavering support for one's right to own guns without regulation or interference from the government – whose growth and perceived overreach into the daily life of Americans needed to be checked by the threat of an alert and armed citizenry (Pitcavage, 2001).

The ideological underpinnings of the militia movement's ideology, however, was not new to far-right extremists in the United States. For one, it is connected to the Posse Comitatus, a far-right extremist group that rose to prominence in the early 1970s. Group adherents believed that U.S. counties were the only legitimate political jurisdictions in the nation and that the county sheriffs were the only legitimate agencies capable of enforcing laws. The Posse

Comitatus members also believed that the sheriff could form a posse of local men to assist in enforcing the law. A religio-historical conspiracy theory known as Christian Identity suggesting that the federal government had become illegitimate and corrupt shaped the group's views of the law (Barkun, 1997; Pitcavage, 2001). Like the Posse Comitatus, adherents of the militia and patriot movement advance conspiratorial, anti-government beliefs and choose to operate outside of traditional legal and political processes (Crothers, 2002). While the extreme far-right in America was supportive of the government when their interests were more aligned, this changed during the country's socio-cultural transformation of the 1960s civil rights movement. The federal government's use of authority to defend the civil rights of Black Americans became evidence of their corruption (Pitcavage, 2001).

Also of importance is the fact that anti-government far-right extremist groups, such as the sovereign citizens (discussed more below) are not exclusively so, and they share overlapping ideologies with the White supremacist movement and groups (Sarteschi, 2020b). For example, members of the Posse Comitatus subscribed to the Christian Identity movement, whose "main tenets involve racism and anti-Semitism, but another important Identity belief is that one should follow God's laws, not man's laws, and that the government, clearly not following God's laws, is therefore not legitimate" (Pitcavage, 2001, p. 960). Importantly, even when formal ties between anti-government and White supremacist groups do not exist, they still share many of the same underlying beliefs (Hodge, 2019). Related to this are the findings by Katz and Bailey (2000) demonstrating that even within the movement there are two types of militias, those that focus primarily on constitutional issues, such as the right to bear arms, and those that incorporate White supremacist ideologies (see also Jackson, 2019).

The militia movement was reenergized in 2020, after increasing again during President Obama's administration (Ross, 2016), as far-right extremists protested gun control legislation and public health policies, such as lockdowns, to control the pandemic. Although existing prior to 2020, parts of often unorganized movements, such as the boogaloo movement and QAnon, as well as those with more traditional group structures like the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters, became more active. Researchers following the online activity of these and others on social media found that

certain extremist subgroups have been coalescing demonstrably over social media into what we term a "Militia-sphere," in

which the pandemic is dismissed as a political excuse or hoax to enable governments to curtail individual freedoms, and in which law enforcement officers and other government officials are portrayed as the willing instruments of this oppression. The Militia-sphere's messaging has grown increasingly extreme as the pandemic has progressed, to the point of threatening and enacting violent attacks. (Finkelstein et al., 2020, p. 2)

This research demonstrates that social media has allowed extremist movements to engage with each other in unprecedented ways to discuss, propagate and refine their ideology and messaging. In addition, it also shows how the messaging and tone can escalate in support of violent rhetoric and behavior.

Another movement within the anti-government wing of the extreme far-right is the sovereign citizens movement. The origin of the sovereign citizens movement can be tied back to the Posse Comitatus, tax-protestors, and militia/patriot movements from the 1970s forward (Neiwert, 2003). One of the core beliefs of the sovereign movement, as similar to the other extreme far-right anti-government movements, is the illegitimacy of state and federal government, but they are also distrustful of local government (Berger, 2016; Hodge, 2019; Loeser, 2015; Sarteschi, 2020b). More specifically, sovereign citizens believe that through ritualistic legal behaviors they can remove themselves from the authority of the government. Born from conspiratorial thinking, sovereign citizens began folding other far-right extremist conspiracies into its belief system, such as the push for a new world order and singular government, international banking actors controlling the U.S. financial sector, and anti-Semitism (Hodge, 2019). Sovereign citizens are preoccupied with the government's ability to tax and control land ownership. The movement regained momentum after the Great Recession of 2008, catalyzed by an unprecedented number of home foreclosures and loss of jobs and savings (Hodge, 2019). Sovereign citizens refuse to obtain social security numbers, carry any form of state-issued identification, and pay taxes (FBI, 2011). They are also known for engaging in forms of so-called paper terrorism, or the filing of false liens and frivolous lawsuits to clutter up the courts and target public officials, including law enforcement officers, who they believe have aggrieved them (Stafford, 2013; Sweeney, 2018).

Although the sovereign citizen movement originated with White far-right extremists, parts of the movement's anti-government beliefs and tactics have increasingly been adopted by others urban,

correctional, and Black, non-far-right communities. One example of this is that of the Moorish sovereign citizen movement, who also claim, through a convoluted legal argument not based on reality, that the government is illegitimate (Sarteschi, 2020a). Another example is that of Korryn Gaines, a young Black woman who held sovereign citizen beliefs and was killed in a shoot-out with police after a standoff occurred while they attempted to serve an arrest warrant (Anderson & Mbakwe, 2016). This expansion of sovereign citizen ideology demonstrates how far-right extremism beliefs can increase the risk of violent altercations between the public and law enforcement as they are merged into other extremist groups and movements.

Other groups and movements have integrated these far-right extremist ideologies and manifested over the last decade, such as the Boogaloo Bois, Three Percenters, Patriot Prayer, Oath Keepers, the Alt-Right, Proud Boys, and QAnon. Members, affiliates, and sympathizers of these groups and movements participated in protests, riots, and violence across the United States in 2020, and many were represented at the Capitol Riot in January, 2021. The boogaloo movement has become publicly associated with internet memes, Hawaiian shirts, and the belief in an inevitable second civil war against the federal government and its supporters. Although ideologically diverse, the boogaloo movement includes many far-right extremists, their ideals, their iconography, and their symbolism (Evans & Wilson, 2020). QAnon, which originated online in 2017, has adherents who believe in an ever-evolving set of anti-government conspiracy theories targeting Democrats and other potential enemies. What began as an online movement has shifted to the real world, threatening acts of political violence (Garry et al., 2021). However, Moskalenko and McCauley (2021) argue that QAnon's threat of extremist violence is most likely exaggerated and that deradicalization efforts could actually feed into the movement's anti-government conspiracy theories. Although their ideology is extreme, their actions, for the most part, have so far not been.

The Extreme Far-Right's Risk to Law Enforcement

Far-right extremist anti-government views, built on conspiracy theories that have little to no factual support and selective (or simply erroneous) readings of American legal history, directly challenge the legitimacy of the government. Law enforcement is not ignorant of the threat presented by far-right extremists and has shown concern for anti-government and anti-law enforcement rhetoric coming from parts

of the extreme far-right, such as the militia and sovereign citizen movements. Often, this rhetoric is targeted at law enforcement as a tactic to communicate that extremists should be taken seriously (Mulloy, 2008). The underlying anti-government ideology can create an “overwhelmingly hostile” relationship between law enforcement and far-right extremist movements (Pitcavage, 2001, p. 965). How violence against law enforcement is labeled, albeit as typical criminal activity, hate crime, or terrorism, shapes criminal justice responses to this form of violence. In addition, jurisdictional challenges regarding whether violence falls under local, state, and federal statutes further complicates the tools law enforcement and prosecutors can use and creates an environment of uncertain and nonuniform outcomes across cases (Ong, 2020).

Law Enforcement as Victims

For multiple reasons, law enforcement officers risk being targeted by far-right extremist violence. First, the anti-government and anti-law enforcement ideologies held by far-right extremists place them at odds with law enforcement generally, as they are part of the executive branch’s enforcement apparatus at all levels of government. This anti-law enforcement zeal means that law enforcement may purposefully be targeted for ideologically motivated violence, but also may be at a higher risk of violence when far-right extremists are presented with opportunities to commit violence against law enforcement during their routine patrol and investigative work. An example of purposeful targeting would be that of Aareon Swenson, who in April of 2020 used social media to live-stream his stalking of law enforcement officers in Texas with the intent of causing injury and death. Swenson was an anti-government extremist connected to the boogaloo movement (Finkelstein et al., 2020; LaRowe, 2021). Second, even if an individual is seemingly supportive of law enforcement or focuses exclusively or almost exclusively on other far-right extremist ideals, such as White supremacy, any engagement in criminal activity will put them in direct conflict with law enforcement if their crimes are brought to the attention of law enforcement.

The sovereign citizen movement in particular continues to pose both violent and non-violent risk to law enforcement and other government officials. Sateschi (2020) found that 27 law enforcement officers were killed and 65 were injured by sovereign citizens between 1983 and 2020. Of those officers killed, 30% died during traffic stops, 30% died during ambushes, and 22% died during standoff situations. One of the reasons that sovereign citizens pose such a

threat to law enforcement is because they believe that the techniques and rituals they have been taught to extradite themselves out of the United States judicial system will be effective. When they inevitably are not, they will sometimes engage in threats of violence or acts of violence against criminal justice system actors (Hodge, 2019). Aside from the risks of deadly violence, sovereigns also target law enforcement officers with acts of paper terrorism. Unfortunately, the risks presented by the sovereign citizen is only growing, as its ideology and tactics are spreading outside of the extreme far-right into other extremist communities (Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counterterrorism Analysis Section, 2011; Greenberg & Arnett, 2021)

While sovereigns tend to believe that the county level sheriff is the true government, while the federal government is illegitimate, like most Americans, sovereigns rarely if ever personally engage with federal law enforcement officers. Instead, they are much more likely to encounter local law enforcement in their daily lives through law enforcement officer’s routine duties, such as conducting traffic stops. Also, the laws that far-right extremists are most likely to break are state laws and local ordinances, which are outside of the jurisdiction of the federal government and enforced by city police and county sheriff departments. Therefore, the belief that local law enforcement will protect far-right extremists from hypothetical attacks by illegitimate federal agents is contradictory to the more likely scenario of far-right extremists engaging state and local police officers as they enforce non-federal laws. In places where state and local jurisdictions pass legislation counter to extreme far-right beliefs, for instance because they are seen as infringements on personal liberties, the risk of violence targeting law enforcement officers only increases.

Examining deadly acts of far-right extremist violence targeting law enforcement, a study by Suttmoeller and colleagues (2013) found that if we were to exclude the Oklahoma City bombing deaths, including seven federal law enforcement officers and one local sheriff’s deputy, the vast majority (86.1%) of law enforcement homicide victims killed by far-right extremists were from local agencies and state (11.1%) agencies between 1991 and 2009. This breakdown compares similarly to line-of-duty deaths more generally based on United States Department of Justice’s Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) data. They also found that more than half of the murders were committed by multiple offenders and multiple law enforcement officers were killed, and more than three-fourths of law enforcement were killed by extremist offenders using firearms. Close to half of victimizations occurred in the South,

with slightly more than a third in the West. Law enforcement were aware of the offender's ideological extremism prior to the killing in only 20% of cases.

In another study, Gruenewald and colleagues (2015) rely on a mixed-method approach to better understand the motivational circumstances in which law enforcement are killed by far-right extremists. Deadly attacks on police officers were categorized into four categories - avoiding arrest, mission offense, defending property, and defending family. They identified several differences across the homicide events. For example, in homicides categorized as mission offenses, where ideologically motivated offenders purposefully targeted law enforcement, almost two-thirds of these homicides occurred during an officer's routine activities unrelated to emergency calls for service. Similarly, for this category of far-right extremist homicide, there were no warning signs that the offenders would choose to escalate to deadly violence, with the officers being taken by surprise in 75% of the events. Finally, offenders on a mission to kill law enforcement were killed nearly two-thirds of the time during the event, either by being shot by an officer or by killing themselves.

Current Findings on Line-of-duty Deaths by Far-Right Extremists. In this section, we build upon the prior research of Suttmoeller and colleagues (2013) and Gruenewald and colleagues (2015) to present findings from the most recent data from the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) on line-of-duty deaths committed by far-right extremists. The ECDB collects information on ideologically motivated and routine criminal acts committed by ideological extremists (Freilich et al., 2014). A comprehensive open-source database, the ECDB has been shown to be both a valid and reliable source of data on fatal violence committed by extremists, including those who adhere to extreme far-right ideologies (Chermak et al., 2012). For this research, only incidents occurring between 1991 and 2020 where a public law enforcement officer, such as a police officer, county sheriff, state police officer, or federal agent, was killed in the line of duty were included. This excluded law enforcement officers who were off duty and working in private security capacities. Similarly, judges or other actors within the criminal justice system who were killed also were not included in the analysis for the current study. These homicides may have been motivated by ideological or non-ideological circumstances. The former category includes line-of-duty deaths where an offender targeted a law enforcement officer for ideological purposes or the officer was killed while responding to another type of ideologically motivated criminal activity. The latter includes incidents where officers were killed in the line of duty during routine

encounters with individuals who only happened to be extreme far-right adherents, for example, traffic stops or serving warrants. Data were collected at the incident, victim, and offender levels of analysis to provide context to the victimization events. At the incident level, variables included in the descriptive analysis include whether the incident was ideologically motivated, the census region of the country, the urbanicity of the county where the homicide occurred, the season in which the homicide was committed, the year in which the homicide was committed, whether a firearm was used, the number of offenders, the number of victims who were law enforcement officers, whether the homicide occurred during a traffic stop, and whether the homicide involved a siege situation. At the victim level, the gender, race/ethnicity, age, and law enforcement agency type were collected. Finally, the gender, race/ethnicity, age, and sub-ideology were collected for the offenders.

Table 1 presents incident level attributes for 48 homicides where at least one law enforcement officer was killed in the line of duty by at least one far-right extremist. Of these incidents, 58.3% were ideologically motivated, and 41.7% were non-ideologically motivated, that is, homicides that occurred during routine interactions or criminal activity and the victims were not targeted because of the extremist's ideological affiliation. When examining geographic distribution, nearly half of the incidents occurred in the West census region of the United States, and more than a third occurred in the South. Less than 15% occurred in the Midwest and Northeast regions. This is compared to the average of the 2000 and 2010 population totals for these regions, which showed that 22.9% of the United States population lived in the West, 36.5% in the South, 22.3% in the Midwest, and 18.3% in the Northeast (Mackum & Wilson, 2011). Also, when measuring urbanicity, slightly less than two-thirds occurred in urban areas, and slightly more than one-third occurred in suburban areas. No events occurred in rural areas as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture's rural-urban continuum codes (Economic Research Service, 2010).

We explored the temporal variation in line-of-duty deaths by season and the year the homicide occurred. Most events occurred in the spring (31.3%), followed closely by summer (29.2%), with larger subsequent decreases in the fall (22.9%) and winter (16.7%). Also, when the data were disaggregated across presidential terms, we see that out of all full terms, President Clinton's first term had the lowest number of police officer deaths and that the percent of law enforcement homicide incidents across all other

Table 1. Incident level characteristics of far-right homicides of law enforcement officers in the United States, 1991–2020.

		%	N
Motivation	Ideological	58.3	28
	Non-Ideological	41.7	20
Region	Midwest	8.3	4
	Northeast	6.3	3
	South	37.5	18
	West	47.9	23
Urbanicity	Urban	62.5	30
	Suburban	37.5	18
Season	Spring	31.3	15
	Summer	29.2	14
	Fall	22.9	11
	Winter	16.7	8
Presidential Terms	George H.W. Bush, Term 1	2.1	1
	William J. Clinton, Term 1	8.3	4
	William J. Clinton, Term 2	14.6	7
	George W. Bush, Term 1	14.6	7
	George W. Bush, Term 2	16.7	8
	Barack H. Obama, Term 1	14.6	7
Weapon	Barack H. Obama, Term 2	16.7	8
	Donald J. Trump, Term 1	12.5	6
	Firearm	93.8	45
Offenders	Other	6.3	3
	Single	58.3	28
LE Victims	Multiple	41.7	20
	Single	79.2	38
Traffic Stop	Multiple	20.8	10
	Yes	25.0	12
Siege Situation	No	75.0	36
	Yes	29.2	14
Total	No	70.8	34
		100.0	48

full terms was remarkably stable with seven or eight incidents. President Trump's first term was slightly lower at six incidents, although this does not count any events that occurred in January 2021, the final month of his administration and during which a Capitol Police Officer died from a heart attack after protecting the capitol during the insurrection. Depending on whether suspects are ever charged with his death will determine whether President Trump's administration presided over a term with the same number of ideological homicide incidents in which a law enforcement officer was killed as his three predecessors. For the other incident level variables, the vast majority of incidents involved firearms (93.8%), the majority were committed by single offenders (58.3%), and close to 80% involved a single law enforcement homicide victim. Finally, 25% of incidents occurred during a traffic stop, and nearly 30% were part of siege situations.

Victim characteristics (Table 2) and suspect characteristics (Table 3) were also collected. The 67 law enforcement victims were almost exclusively male, with only one female victim. Similarly, 86.6% were White non-Hispanic, while 10.4% were Black non-Hispanic, and only 3% were White Hispanic. For the age distribution of the victims, approximately one-third were between the ages of 30 and 39, and one third

Table 2. Victim level characteristics of far-right homicides of law enforcement officers in the United States, 1991–2020.

		%	N
Gender	Male	98.5	66
	Female	1.5	1
Race/Ethnicity	Black Non-Hispanic	10.4	7
	White Hispanic	3.0	2
	White Non-Hispanic	86.6	58
Age	20-29	10.4	7
	30-39	37.3	25
	40-49	32.8	22
	50-59	14.9	10
	60+	4.5	3
Agency Type	Federal Law Enforcement	16.4	11
	Local Police	38.8	26
	Sheriff's Office	31.3	21
	State Police / Patrol	13.4	9
Total		100.0	67

were between the ages of 40 and 49. Only 10.4% were between the ages of 20 and 29, while 14.9% were between 50 and 59, and only 4.5% of law enforcement victims were 60 or older. For victim characteristics, 70.1% of victims were employed by local police departments or a county sheriff's office, while only 16.4% were federal law enforcement officers, and 13.4% were state police or patrol.

Table 3. Suspect level characteristics of far-right homicides of law enforcement officers in the United States, 1991–2020.

		%	N
Gender	Male	86.7	72
	Female	13.3	11
White Non-Hispanic	Yes	96.4	80
	No	3.6	3
Age	<20	2.4	2
	20-29	32.5	27
	30-39	34.9	29
	40-49	14.5	12
	50-59	8.4	7
	60+	7.2	6
Far-Right Sub-Ideology	Anti-Government	51.8	43
	White Supremacist	30.1	25
	Non-Extremist	18.1	15
Total		100.0	83

Offender characteristics demonstrated that they were usually male (86.7%) and White non-Hispanic (96.4%). In addition, these individuals were between 20 and 29 years of age about one-third of the time and 30 and 39 years of age about one-third of the time. Finally, as for whether offenders' extremist beliefs aligned more directly with anti-government or White supremacist ideologies, 51.8% of suspects involved in incidents where a law enforcement officer was killed were anti-government, 30.1% were White supremacists, and 18.1% were not extremists. Non-extremist suspects co-offended with extremists, though there was no explicit evidence that they adhered to a far-right extremist ideology. It should be noted that far-right extremist offenders were coded based on their primary belief systems, though many held a range of both anti-government and White supremacist beliefs. In fact, some far-right extremist anti-government ideologies, such as the sovereign citizens movement, which present themselves as non-racist, actually adhere to doctrines that are racist in nature (Crothers, 2002).

Although far-right extremist rhetoric exudes a disdain for federal law enforcement and support of local law enforcement, the data show that, specifically for the most serious forms of criminality against law enforcement, homicide victims usually worked for local departments (70%). Federal agents only account for 16.4% of far-right extremist homicide victims, and eight of these were murdered during the Oklahoma City bombing. A reasonable argument could be made to remove these victims as well as the sheriff's deputy that was killed because the bombing is both a statistical and practical outlier of far-right extremist violence. This would mean that 79.3% of law enforcement victims were employed by local agencies, 15.5% were state patrol or police officers, and 5.2% were federal agents. Although the employment levels have fluctuated over the 30 years of the data, according to Brooks (2019), approximately 12.5% of full-time law enforcement officers in the United States were employed by the federal government in 2016. Therefore, depending on how one weighs the Oklahoma City Bombing in a victim-level analysis, far-right extremists either killed slightly more federal officers than their approximate make-up in the law enforcement community or many fewer. A conservative interpretation of the data, however, might be that even with the anti-government rhetoric aimed at the federal government, law enforcement officers in the United States share a relatively rare but equal chance of being murdered by a far-right extremist. Delving deeper into the data, however, it does appear that federal agents are much more likely to be specifically targeted and killed during ideologically motivated far-right extremist events, while local law enforcement officers are more likely to be killed during a routine interaction with a far-right extremist during the course of their law enforcement duties.

Far-right extremism poses a very real and a very consistent risk to the lives and livelihoods of law enforcement officers through both violent criminal activity and acts of paper terrorism. In addition, far-right extremist anti-government ideology poses a direct and unequivocal challenge to the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies and the governments for which they work. As shown, the militia movement, sovereign citizen movement, and boogaloo movement have little respect for federal and state law and limited respect for local law enforcement contingent on whether adherents of these movements believe laws infringe on their freedoms. Nonetheless, far-right extremists are as likely, or even more likely, to target local police departments and county sheriffs than state and federal officers when accounting for the number of officers employed by those types of jurisdictions. Although line-of-duty deaths at the hands of far-right extremists remain extremely rare, even in the context

of the relatively rarity of line-of-duty deaths, law enforcement officers in certain areas of the country, engaging in specific routine tasks, appear to be at a higher risk of victimization than others.

Threats to Law Enforcement Legitimacy

The second type of risk far-right extremism poses to enforcement comes with the hiring and retaining of officers who explicitly or tacitly promote far-right extremists' illegal activities. This type of risk is a threat to the legitimacy of policing to particular communities where such issues persist and beyond. In addition, agencies that tacitly express support for far-right extremism, such as by policing individuals associated with far-right extremist groups or broader movements differently than other members of the community, or have the outward appearance of doing so, face the risk of losing organizational legitimacy and public trust, especially among those communities typically targeted by far-right extremists. This concern is supported by congressional testimony provided by Dr. Pete Simi who stated that while conducting his research, far-right extremists expressed to him a belief that law enforcement officers supported their cause (*The Rise of Militia Violent Extremism*, 2021). This section addresses the internal risks posed by far-right extremists to law enforcement agencies by discussing their historical and contemporary relationship with the extreme far-right, as well as the ways in which law enforcement agencies may underestimate the risk of far-right extremism to themselves and their communities.

Far-Right Extremists in Law Enforcement. The history of policing in the United States demonstrates how some tenets of far-right extremist ideologies, including racism and nativism, have been reflected in policing for centuries. Some of the earliest forms of police forces included colonial militias suppressing Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans through slave patrols, which consisted of White men authorized by law to police enslaved Africans, often violently (Castle, 2020; Kienscherf, 2019; Ritchie, 2017; Vitale, 2017). In this way, the formation and functions of modern law enforcement have historically been undergirded by White supremacy, in not only the North and South, but as the U.S. expanded westward (Hernández, 2017; Kuzmarov, 2012; LeBrón, 2019; Muhammad, 2010; Murakawa, 2014; Vitale, 2017).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan emerged, conducting campaigns of terror in the south against freed slaves. While the federal government's first anti-terrorism legislation targeted Klan violence (Shimamoto, 2004), some law enforcement officers are known to have joined or

collaborated with the Klan in the ensuing decades (Castle, 2020; Equal Justice Initiative, 2017; Ward, 2018). This allowed the Klan to operate in some places as a form of "shadow government" (German, 2007, p. 143). Moreover, research has found that law enforcement officers, specifically sheriffs and deputies, participated in roughly half of all lynchings between 1930 and 1933 (Murakawa, 2014). While some law enforcement officers colluded with the Klan and carried out state violence against Black people during the 1960s civil rights movement, police throughout the country also aligned themselves with another far-right extremist group, the John Birch Society. Indeed, one study found that up to 3% of the John Birch Society's members were law enforcement (Breland, 2020, para. 19) and showed that police officers were "represented at four times their share of the U.S. workforce" (Shanahan & Wall, 2021, p. 79). Concerns over far-right extremists within law enforcement are not new. A recently unredacted version of a 2006 report by the FBI Counterterrorism division addressing White supremacist infiltration of law enforcement reveals that

although white supremacist groups have historically engaged in strategic efforts to infiltrate and recruit from law enforcement communities, current reporting on attempts reflects self-initiated efforts by individuals, particularly among those already within law enforcement ranks, to volunteer their professional resources to white supremacist causes with which they sympathize. (p. 3)

As German (2020) points out, an internal FBI policy guide divulges 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 those in positions to check NCIC for warrants" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015, p. 89). A more recent FBI report in 2021 warns that "white supremacists and other right-wing extremists would 'very likely seek affiliation with military and law enforcement entities in furtherance of' their ideologies" (Margolin, 2021, para. 3).

In a report for Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, journalists investigated extremist groups on Facebook and identified at least 400 active or former law enforcement officials, including nearly 150 officers who were involved with violent anti-government groups, including the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters (Carless & Corey, 2019b, para. 3). They also found that a number of the identified officers were alleged to have engaged in racist actions on the job or other forms of misconduct.

Using limited data and narrow criteria, the Anti-Defamation League ([ADL]; 2021) identified

76 instances in which [former or current] members of law enforcement were identified as a member of – or showed overt support for – an established extremist group or movement [between 2010 and 2021]. This included 73 unique cases (one incident per person) and three instances where an officer was hired by a different agency after the officer's extremist associations were reported, or 73 individuals overall. Approximately 80% of this group are or were members of local law enforcement agencies. (para. 14)

The ADL reports that 40% of these officers were associated with anti-government groups and another 33% associated with White supremacist groups, while the remaining officers associated with other fringe groups including QAnon, the Proud Boys, and those involved in the Capitol Riot. In addition, 40% of the identified extremist officers in their analysis kept their jobs while some officers who were terminated were hired by another department, evidencing the historical pattern of “recycling of unfit racist officers” (Ward, 2018, p. 175).

Some police departments have taken action to remove extremists from their ranks, launching investigations and terminating such officers. At the same time, these efforts have been undermined as extremist officers have been able to successfully avert or challenge any imposed disciplinary sanctions, including termination. Some officers have even risen through the ranks after their extremist ties have been exposed (German, 2020). There are also numerous examples of police officials ignoring, downplaying, or outright defending officers involved in far-right extremism (Carless & Corey, 2019a, 2019b; Crowell & Varnham O'Regan, 2019; German, 2020). As others have noted (Castle, 2020; German, 2020), even the 2006 FBI report fails to emphasize the immediate and violent danger that the presence of extremist law enforcement officers poses to oppressed communities beyond a vague reference to “abuses of authority and passive tolerance of racism within communities served” (p. 3).

In the years leading up to January 6, 2021, numerous stories emerged involving far-right extremists employed as law enforcement officers. German's (2020) report on far-right extremism within law enforcement mentions a number of such cases. In 2015, an Alabama police department fired an officer after his long known - and ignored - membership in, and law enforcement recruitment efforts for, the League of the South was publicized. Another officer

also involved with the group was allowed to retire. In 2016, a Philadelphia police officer, with links to a neo-Nazi group, displayed his Nazi-style eagle tattoo while policing protests outside the Democratic National Convention; the local police union openly defended the officer, and he faced no discipline after an investigation (Samaha, 2017). In 2017, news reports revealed that an Oklahoma police chief owned neo-Nazi websites and was involved in neo-Nazi groups. The chief resigned and was hired by another department. In 2018, sheriff's deputies were fired for their membership in the Proud Boys in Washington and Louisiana, while a Connecticut police department failed to discipline an officer involved with the group in 2019. In 2020, police departments in California and Illinois investigated officers seen to be wearing clothing with logos for the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers while policing protests after the murder of George Floyd (German, 2020). Finally, on January 6th, there were law enforcement officers on both sides of the barricades as Capitol police officers clashed with the crowd. Within days, the FBI had arrested active and former law enforcement officials for crimes during the riot at the Capitol (Pulver et al., 2021). As of July 2021, 20 active or former members of law enforcement, including a former police chief, have been arrested (Hsu, 2021; Hymes et al., 2021). In the period since January 6th, law enforcement agencies and government officials have begun reviewing how to identify and remove extremists from their ranks (see, e.g., Fox, 2021; Kindy et al., 2021).

Underestimating the Threat. Recent events, up to and including the security failures during the Capitol Riot, have called into question law enforcement's response to growing far-right violent extremism. Law enforcement in the United States has long been critiqued because of the perception that agencies downplay or ignore the threat of far-right extremists, fail to label far-right extremists as a terrorist threat, and focus most, if not all, resources on other threats that may not present as much risk as far-right extremism (Castle, 2020; Chermak et al., 2010; Freilich et al., 2009; Scrivens & Perry, 2017; Simi, 2010). Reviewing law enforcement training materials related to terrorism, Chermak and colleagues (2009) described the relative dearth of domestic terrorism related resources as most resources focused on international and Islamist terrorism. In a survey of U.S. state police agencies, Freilich and colleagues (2009) found that state law enforcement considered Islamist extremist, as well as environmental and animal rights extremists, as the greatest threats to national security ahead of all far-right extremist types. Their survey also revealed that state agencies viewed environmental and animal rights extremists, whose tactics almost exclusively have avoided injuring or

killing, as more of a threat to state security than many far-right extremist types, including militia/patriot, sovereign citizens, Christian Identity, KKK, anti-abortion and anti-immigration extremists - all groups with adherents that have killed civilians and/or law enforcement. Lastly, Freilich and colleagues' research shows a disconnect between state agencies' perception of the terrorist threat versus reality as they viewed Islamist extremists as both the top threat to both national and state security even though Islamist extremists "were not in the top five in terms of being active criminal incidents and arrests" (p. 463). The reverse was true for sovereign citizens, who were not rated as a serious threat, but were rated among the highest for arrests, criminal activity, and number of supporters. In survey of law enforcement personnel who had taken part in terrorism prevention and intelligence trainings, Carter and colleagues (2014) report that respondents ranked sovereign citizens as the top potential threat, followed by Islamist extremists, militia/Patriot extremists, racist skinheads, and neo-Nazis, evidencing a shift in the perceived threat rankings compared to Freilich and colleagues' (2009) findings. They further compare their results to the Freilich and colleagues' survey, which was administered in 2006-2007, and find that law enforcement personnel's "concern about whether most groups were a serious terrorist threat actually declined for most groups," including most far-right extremist groups despite increased activity by far-right extremists after the election of President Barack Obama.

Examining far-right extremist mobilization in Canada, Perry and Scrivens' (2018) interview-based research suggests that a weak response on the part of law enforcement has enabled far-right extremist groups to flourish. They observe a pattern of apathy among law enforcement interview subjects with regard to the threat of far-right extremism, writing,

In addition to the neglect paid to any known RWE [right-wing extremism] presence, some police personnel deny—at least publicly—that there is any risk associated with the extreme-right. They trivialized their potential for growth and violence. Even in cities where officers admitted to RWE membership numbering in the 100s, the threat was downplayed. Rather, they were much more interested in left-wing extremism, or more likely, Islamist-inspired extremism. Militant groups such as *al-Shabaab* are considered terrorist entities, but violent RWE groups such as *Aryan Nations* or *Blood and Honour* are not. At best, RWE groups are deemed "three man wrecking crews" or "losers

without a cause," thereby minimizing the relative threat posed by the latter. (p. 181)

Such findings parallel Freilich and colleagues' (2009) survey as previously discussed. While Perry and Scrivens' work focuses on Canada, Castle (2020) extends their work to the U.S. context, finding similar patterns of "disavowal of risk" and "minimization of threat" in U.S. law enforcement's response to far-right extremist mobilization in the two-year period leading up to and including the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, where a White supremacist carried out a vehicle-ramming attack, killing Heather Heyer and injuring another 35 counter protestors (Duggan, 2018). Studying responses to Charlottesville at all levels of law enforcement, Castle argues that "police forces ignored the history of racial terror in the city by white supremacists and the state apparatus, trivialized the presence of white power groups descending on the city in large numbers, minimized the violence against protestors at the University of Virginia (UVA) on August 11 as 'not serious,' and elevated the perceived threat from counter-protestors and activists - the primary target of intelligence efforts" (p. 222).

Reviewing other examples of police responses elsewhere, Castle shows that law enforcement repeatedly trivialized white supremacist activities, including law enforcement involvement with White supremacist organizations with a history of domestic terrorism, framing their actions, both criminal and noncriminal, as nonthreatening and downplaying their threat to communities and the country. At the same time, law enforcement prioritized charging anti-racist counter-protestors and victims of White supremacist violence and concentrating "intelligence efforts on two manufactured threats - 'Black separatists' and 'Black identity extremists' (BIE). . . . Legal experts have argued that the creation of BIE coincided with political pressure on the FBI to identify an equivalent violent threat to the documented danger posed by white supremacists" (Castle, 2002, p. 228-229). This echoes Perry and Scrivens' (2018) finding that law enforcement would rather focus on policing leftists and other groups than addressing the threat of far-right extremism. Indeed, this response has played out time and again. While the Ku Klux Klan underwent a massive resurgence and lynchings persisted, federal law enforcement went after "reds," targeting leftist and labor activists and organizers and disrupting labor and racial equality movements. While the Klan members and other white supremacists attacked and murdered Blacks and civil rights activists, the FBI and its COINTELPRO focused on disrupting the civil rights, antiwar, and independence movements as well as other New Left organizations (German, 2007; Vitale, 2017).

While failures to recognize the threat of far-right extremism may be a byproduct of insufficient training, another explanation points to law enforcement not viewing far-right extremists as a threat to *them*. Perry and Scrivens expand upon this explanation, writing, “Leftists and Islamists...are thought to represent a threat to highly symbolic targets such as the state and state (or other) elites. RWEs, in contrast, largely target those ‘at the fringes’. . . . On the one hand ‘we’ are threatened; on the other, ‘they’ are threatened” (p. 182). Despite numerous deadly attacks on law enforcement by far-right extremists, law enforcement has not only minimized the threat of far-right extremists, but in some instances appears to protect, support, and collaborate with such groups (Castle, 2020). One piece of evidence supporting this hypothesis was during the George Floyd and defund the police protests in the summer of 2020. Media accounts reported local law enforcement in multiple jurisdictions doing little to police anti-government militia members attending protests on the pretense of supporting police and protecting property. Scenes from these protests showed police officers taking pictures with armed vigilantes, giving militia members water, soliciting militias to mobilize, and referring to a roving militia as “armed friendlies” (Hvistendahl, 2020; Mathias, 2020).

The internal risk that threatens the legitimacy of law enforcement agencies comes from multiple issues: historical connections and collaborations with White supremacists to over policing and actively oppressing, often through violence, racial and social minority populations; a failure to explicitly state the risk that far-right extremist ideologies pose to their community members and even to law enforcement officers; and an unwillingness to identify and remove far-right extremists and sympathizers from their ranks. All of these issues threaten to delegitimize law enforcement organizations. This risk is not uniform for all departments across the country. In areas of the country where departments serve a diverse group of community members, there will be less tolerance of agencies and command staff who have been found to employ, whether knowingly or not, individuals associated with far-right extremism. With an increasing media spotlight on police misconduct and responses to racial and ethnic groups in the digital age, news coverage of law enforcement officers who are White supremacist and anti-government extremists will continue to have deleterious impacts on the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement agencies.

Discussion

January 6th acted as a focusing event, or a time when policymakers, experts, and other claimsmakers set policy agendas by defining social issues, diagnosing its causes, and seeking support and resources that can be leveraged to address specific social problems (Birkland, 1998). These processes continue to unfold today. Despite the video footage of the violence, media outlets and politicians have developed competing frames as to whether the violence at the Capitol should be labeled an insurrection, a riot, or legal protests. *Examining the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol* (2021) congressional hearings provided testimony from Capitol Police officers, and a select congressional committee is being formed at the time of this writing to formally investigate the January 6th Capitol Riots (Wolfe, 2021). While it will take much longer for a complete picture of the many precipitating events that led to the attacks, a lack of preparedness and breakdowns in communication are clear.

In addition to the violence against law enforcement, there have been to date more than 20 off-duty police officers charged for criminal acts committed during the Capitol Riots (Hsu, 2021). This is an exemplary event that highlights how even though far-right extremists often espouse support for law enforcement, these actors can pose very real risks to law enforcement. Moreover, perceived support for far-right extremism by police officers risks delegitimizing law enforcement. To help counter these risks, we highlight several policy initiatives for reducing both the risks of victimization to police officers and public trust and perceived legitimacy of law enforcement agencies.

Reducing Risks of Violent Extremism Targeting Law Enforcement

To protect law enforcement from the risk of violent victimization by far-right extremists, we suggest four policy solutions. First, law enforcement officers should be educated about the threat of far-right extremist victimization and domestic violent extremism more generally. For years, researchers have argued that law enforcement training needs to be developed using best practices and empirical evidence at the local, state, and federal level to focus on the threat of far-right extremism (Chermak et al., 2009). In fact, during his congressional testimony, Dr. Pete Simi stated that there must be training for law enforcement officers and agencies to educate them about far-right extremism and encourage departments to publicly clarify policy positions on these issues (*The Rise of Militia Violent Extremism*, 2021). In addition

to focusing on the threat of far-right extremism, generally, training should also focus on how far-right extremists and their ideologies threaten law enforcement, specifically. As noted, extremists who are distrustful of the government or believe that the government is illegitimate, pose an acute threat to local law enforcement officers. Discussing the threat of far-right extremism, however, should be paired with education on other forms of domestic extremism and terrorism. For example, training sessions that discuss the threat of far-right extremism, far-left extremism, and radical Islamic terrorism, can help to ensure that discussions about the threat of far-right extremism is not conflated with mainstream conservative political ideologies. The benefit of such training should be framed as providing law enforcement with the tools to protect the lives of the public as well as their own.

Second, agencies should utilize already existing national databases that track criminal histories and other data about individuals to identify those who are members of formal far-right extremist groups and those who have been identified as adherents to certain extreme far-right ideologies, such as the sovereign citizen movement. This would allow officers who are engaged in their routine duties, such as conducting traffic stops or serving warrants, to know if an individual has a history of viewing law enforcement or the government more generally as a threat. Although some far-right extremists may already be in law enforcement databases, especially if associated with violent street gangs, the accuracy of that data has been questioned. While noting general issues with the reliability of gang databases, Reid and Valasik (2020) point out substantial underreporting of White gang members in law enforcement databases and wide disparities in estimates of White supremacist gang involvement by agencies in the same locale. They also argue that this under policing of White supremacist gang members is evident in cities with substantial presence of violent White supremacist groups, such as Portland, Oregon. They write that “presently, the only time members of white power groups are systematically categorized in a database is upon entering a correctional facility” (p. 32). Therefore, these databases should be improved and expanded upon. This function can be supported by the organizations mentioned below, namely the Joint Terrorism Task Forces and the state fusion centers, in addition to individual police departments.

Third, there is a need to strengthen legal and criminal justice responses to far-right extremism. Law enforcement can further protect themselves and the public by focusing resources to make sure all criminal activity committed by extremists is swiftly investigated and prosecuted. In many states, violence against law enforcement officers results in more

severe penalties when a suspect is convicted, and this should be the case when offenders are far-right extremists. In addition, sometimes when there is not enough evidence to arrest potential extremists on charges connected to planned ideological violence, law enforcement will disrupt potential plots through other means, such as those used prior to January 6th Riots (Rotella, 2021). Pitcavage (2001) argues that it was the normal processes of the criminal justice system that ended with the convictions of militia members who broke the law that decreased public interest, and therefore activity, in the movement. A vector autoregressive analysis of time-series data also showed that there were significant decreases in far-right extremist fatal violence after the passing of the Patriot Act in 2001 and the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009, both of which created new tools for investigating and prosecuting ideologically motivated violence (Freilich et al., 2020). Currently, the Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2021, another piece of federal legislation, is being considered by Congress to authorize “the creation of offices in three agencies - Homeland Security, the Justice Department, and the FBI - to monitor, investigate and prosecute cases of domestic terrorism” with an emphasis on White supremacists (The Editors, 2021). However, there has been substantial pushback against new counterterrorism legislation, even if it focuses on far-right extremism, with concerns about its impact on civil liberties (Baker, 2021), whether it will be used to instead focus on minorities and the far-left (Yachot, 2021), and repeating the mistakes made with the swift passage of the PATRIOT ACT after the 9/11 attacks (Ibsen & Pham, 2021).

Fourth, there is already a criminal justice infrastructure developed over the last twenty years for identifying, responding to, and prosecuting domestic extremist and terrorist activity. These agencies and organizations can focus a considerable amount of resources on far-right extremists as long as there is the political will to support such investigations and prosecutions. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the newly created Department of Homeland Security supported the development of fusion centers that focused on intelligence-led policing to identify and combat terrorist threats. These centers were meant to leverage the resources, expertise, and information from each level of government to investigate potential criminal and terrorist acts (Lambert, 2010). Other mechanisms that have been in place by law enforcement to identify and prosecute terrorists include the federal Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), which unite local and federal law enforcement to share intelligence and work cases together (Martin, 1999). In 2008, JTTFs were located at all of the FBI’s field offices and in 100 cities

in the United States (Barker & Fowler, 2008), a number that currently has increased to 200 cities (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021). However, they are not without their critiques, as those who oppose the task forces believe that they have in the past, and will continue to in the future, threaten the civil liberties of the public (Yin, 2011), similar concerns have been leveled at fusion centers (Lambert, 2010; Regan & Monahan, 2014). All JTTFs have the capacity to investigate far-right extremist threats against law enforcement and the public and should do so. Even though far-right extremists are almost never charged with terrorism due to the nature of U.S. terrorism laws focusing primarily on international terrorist organizations and offenses, the government authorities should still consistently and publicly label ideologically motivated acts committed by far-right extremists as terrorism (Norris, 2020). JTTFs and fusion centers can play an integral part in this process by prioritizing investigations into anti-government extremists and White supremacists engaged in criminal activity. These entities can also facilitate data sharing on extremist threats using technological tools, such as eGuardian, which allows agencies to share information with JTTFs, and vice-versa (Durner, 2012). With technology such as this, as well as others such as the National Crime Information Center (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021b), there is no reason that information on individuals who pose a threat to law enforcement and the public because of their extremist views that support and advocate for violence, government destabilization, and other criminal acts, cannot be systematically collected.

Reducing Risks to Law Enforcement Legitimacy

The true risk to law enforcement legitimacy due to far-right extremists working within these agencies is unknown. The number of officers associated with far-right extremism is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain for two reasons: First, although some far-right extremists openly associate with extremist ideologies and groups, many more support and believe in extremist ideologies, but these beliefs are never made public in a way that can be identified and tracked. Second, there is no national effort to identify and track far-right extremists in law enforcement (*The Rise of Militia Violent Extremism*, 2021). These insights are important, and the first leads to an argument for better policies related to hiring, retaining, and firing law enforcement officers if they are connected to far-right extremism beliefs. The second, which calls for a database to track law enforcement officers who have been connected to far-right extremist beliefs, is also important to make sure

that officers do not move from department to department.

Building off the first point, which is to identify applicants and to reduce the risk to law enforcement legitimacy, policies and procedures must be put into place to filter out far-right extremists from the applicant pool during the hiring process. Law enforcement agencies screen their applicants using a large number of techniques to determine whether they are a suitable fit for the job. In descending order of the most frequently used techniques, Wood (2017) reported on Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) data to show that the majority of agencies surveyed used background investigations (97.4% of departments utilize this technique), followed by drug tests (96.0%), credit history checks (94.7%), driving record checks (77.0%), criminal record checks (74.7%), physical agility tests (70.8%), personal interviews (55.8%), and voice stress analyzer (55.3%). Although not used as frequently, applicants can also be asked to complete personality inventory tests and psychological examinations. Building off these screening techniques, law enforcement agencies that do not already, should screen their employees for sympathies and affiliations to extremist ideologies. It is important for law enforcement to have zero tolerance and to filter out all ideological extremists from their applicant pools. To preserve legitimacy, agencies must develop hiring protocols and codes of conduct that explicitly state, and are publicly communicated, that ideological extremists will not be employed with the agency. In addition, elected officials such as mayors, city councils, and county commissioners, as well as civilian oversight boards, and even police unions, should make it clear that it is unacceptable to have any ideological extremists on staff.

Hiring far-right extremists, specifically, creates two threats to the department's organizational legitimacy. The first is when extremists and their beliefs weaken or partially replace those of the organization. Fortunately, there is research that shows that officer perceptions of policing did not vary greatly across individual characteristics but are more associated with the departments in which the officer works (Cordner, 2017). This is positive news for command staff attempting to increase legitimacy and make sure White supremacist ideology does not exist, or is removed, in their departments as certain aspects of police culture are not deterministic and can be shaped internally. The second threat to legitimacy is when the community knows or suspects that the department employs far-right extremists. For police departments to have a positive impact on public safety, the communities they serve must support them and view them as legitimate and fair. Also, law

enforcement unions, which are increasingly under attack for an inability to police their own and frequently defend the indefensible, should make it clear that extremist ideologies will not be tolerated and that they are antithetical to a peace officer's role of defending and enforcing the laws of our communities and nation without prejudice. From a basic organizational management perspective, one should not hire people who do not believe in the mission of their organization. Far-right extremist ideologies are antithetical to everything that law enforcement represents - the rule of law, the legitimacy of government, and the equal protection of everyone who lives within their community.

As stated, the employment of far-right extremists in law enforcement agencies will most likely have a significant impact on the department's perceived legitimacy, especially among communities long targeted by far-right extremist ideology and violence. Possibly of interest in addressing this issue after the fact are the results of Tyler and Wakslak's (2004) seminal work on police legitimacy, where they found that the public's view of law enforcement was impacted by whether they believed they had been treated fairly and with respect by officers. Specifically, police legitimacy was higher and the perception of racial profiling was lower if the public viewed their interactions with law enforcement as procedurally just. For departments that have already been impacted by employing individuals who later have been publicly identified as far-right extremists, refocusing their efforts on treating those they serve with fairness and respect could be a significant step forward in rebuilding legitimacy and trust with their communities. As legitimacy and trust increase, so does cooperation with law enforcement, which is necessary for police to effectively and safely do their job (Bolger & Walters, 2019).

For anti-government extremists, whether members of a formal or informal organization (e.g., a militia) or even sympathizers to these causes, hiring for a government law enforcement position would place individuals within the very organizations that they believe are illegitimate. This undermining of the organization from within might start with the officer who was hired but could also spread if the individual proselytizes to their colleagues. In addition, officers are sworn to uphold both the U.S. constitution and the state constitution. Although some anti-government extremists might sincerely believe that they are defending these constitutions, they are in fact defending a warped and incorrect interpretation of these legal documents, which is out of sync with most of the population and those they are sworn to protect and to serve. A belief that state and federal laws are illegitimate in and of itself impacts their ability to

uphold such laws. At a minimum, hiring anti-government extremists could lead to poor and unequal policing of a community, and at a maximum, hiring anti-government extremists could result in a purposeful undermining of the core functions of the department from within.

Employing White supremacists also poses a danger to the legitimacy of the organization aside from the overlap of anti-government ideology found within White supremacist ideology. Law enforcement officers are hired to serve and protect all members of their communities equally. Hiring officers that believe their race and/or ethnicity is superior to others will mean having officers in the community that believe one segment of the population is entitled to a better level of service than another segment. This could manifest itself in multiple ways: investigating some reports of victimization and not others, believing some suspects and victims over others, using discretion to arrest some populations more often and other populations less often, policing some neighborhoods over others, violating the constitutional rights of some communities, and violently victimizing communities who represent social and racial groups antithetical to their ideology. Although decades of research have shown that, for myriad reasons, disparate policing does occur (Balko, 2020), it is still an ideal to which the justice system, in order to maintain legitimacy, must strive to achieve through reform, transparency, and accountability. Not having a clearly communicated policy that hiring White supremacists and anti-government extremists is expressly forbidden opens up departments to accusations of supporting such groups, which are actively attempting to delegitimize the government and oppress members of the community. Clearly communicating such a policy signals to the public and the potential application pool that the department supports attempts at democratic and unbiased policing and rejects hate and extremism. In addition to hiring, law enforcement must have policies in place to remove officers if extremist affiliations are detected after being hired. Ward (2018) suggests a number of measures to combat White supremacism in policing, including "hypersurveillance" and zero tolerance of racist sympathies, whether expressed in social media, attire, tattoos, or other discourse" (p. 180). The author further states that biased comments cannot be dismissed as unharmed and should be viewed in the larger context that such perspectives can threaten the civil liberties of those being policed.

The negative impact on the law enforcement profession cannot be overstated when departments fail to properly vet new hires for extremist sympathies or affiliations, or fail to terminate such employees if these connections are discovered. Decentralized

government, which leads to wide variation in training, standards, and culture within law enforcement agencies across the country, leave all departments and officers at risk of being penalized by an unconscionable act or horrible mistake committed by a single officer. In the United States, the failure of departments to hold their employees to high standards and/or officers to act professionally at all times is magnified by the fact that there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States employing more than three-quarters of a million sworn officers (Banks et al., 2016). As has been seen time and again, one horrible mistake, or one premeditated act of violence, that is covered by national media not only reflects negatively on the department where that officer was employed, but also on the other 17,999 agencies. Therefore, it is also important that departments are willing to condemn illegal and biased acts committed by law enforcement outside of their jurisdictions, while also supporting and encouraging other agencies to implement their own hiring policies and codes of conduct that will reduce the likelihood of employing an ideological extremist.

It is vital to understand the potential impact that biased policing, police violence, and associations with extremists can have on the legitimacy of a department in the eyes of their community. It is also important to understand that departments have little to no control over how they are represented in social media and the 24-hour news cycle. Any opportunity to tell their own story, communicate their policies, and signal their values, should be taken. Unfortunately for law enforcement agencies, there is evidence that consuming online news can negatively impact a person's attitudes on police legitimacy, specifically if they are White. The authors hypothesize that White respondents are less likely to have interactions with law enforcement in real life and therefore their perspectives are more likely to be influenced by the media (Intravia et al., 2018). This further supports the idea that the negative impact of law enforcement agencies employing, or even implicitly supporting far-right extremists, creates the risk of not only damaging their legitimacy, but also the legitimacy of other departments. The hiring and/or failure to fire a far-right extremist in a police department, especially if the story is picked up by traditional news media and amplified across social media, will likely also negatively impact other departments. More so now than ever, these are also issues that law enforcement officers must deal with specific to how they are viewed by the public as activists push back against the argument that there are only a few "bad apples" in policing. In many ways, the insular nature of these organizations have only exacerbated these issues, with decades of refusal to allow clear and convincing

oversight and accountability to the public and even elected officials. Even this, however, is an overgeneralization as some agencies are much better at being transparent and holding themselves accountable to the communities they protect and serve than others, and all suffer from both the collective and individual failures of departments across the country.

Limitations & Future Research

The most important limitation to this research is availability of data. Although the data on law-enforcement killed by far-right extremists is valid and reliable, it only provides information on the most severe form of ideologically motivated violence. The threat related to homicide attempts, aggravated assaults, failed and foiled plots, and even non-violent victimization such as acts of paper terrorism, should also be considered when attempting to fully understand the threat that far-right extremism poses to law enforcement. Also, this information is currently anecdotal with no national data collection on the scope of far-right extremists working within law enforcement agencies. Although previously discussed, one anti-government extremist or White supremacist working as a sworn officer is one too many for any agency, and the scope of the problem should dictate the appropriate policy responses. To this extent, future research should attempt to empirically determine the extent to which far-right extremists being hired by police departments, sheriff's departments, and state and federal agencies is a problem.

Conclusion

From 2020 until January 6, 2021, both the external and internal threat of far-right extremist violence against law enforcement officers and their agencies manifested across the United States during the pandemic, the George Floyd and defund the police protests, and through the end of the 2020 presidential election cycle. In many ways, the year 2020 presented as a microcosm of the nuanced relationship between law enforcement and far-right extremists. As demonstrated based on original data and other prior research, far-right extremists threaten the safety of law enforcement officers in the United States. Anti-government extremists who do not believe that they are subject to the laws of the jurisdiction where they live, pose the risk of escalating to violent acts when encountering law enforcement when they engage in both ideologically motivated and routine criminal activity. In addition, law enforcement agencies who hire far-right extremists face the very real prospect of becoming illegitimate in the eyes of the communities to whom they are sworn to serve and protect. Decades

of criminological research has shown that lack of trust in law enforcement makes the job of policing a community more difficult and more dangerous. Although multiple paths forward were outlined that build on prior research and empirical knowledge, only decisive action by law enforcement and policymakers will result in outcomes that reduce the risk of external violent victimization to police and protect law enforcement agencies from being delegitimized by the presence of far-right extremists within their ranks.

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