

# THE THREAT FROM WITHIN

**The mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, has renewed the debate over how to combat terrorism from white extremists**

BY SABRINA TAVERNISE, KATIE BENNER, MATT APUZZO, NICOLE PERLROTH, AND JOE BUBAR

**A makeshift memorial**  
for the victims in El Paso





**White supremacists** march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 (left); Days later, demonstrators rally in Chicago to condemn racism. Many see recent violence targeting minority or ethnic groups as part of a resurgence of white supremacist activity.

In August, a gunman opened fire in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing 22 people. Like many other recent mass shootings, from Charleston, South Carolina, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Roseburg, Oregon, this one was committed by a shooter with ties to white extremism.

Homegrown terrorism is now as big a threat as terrorism from abroad, law enforcement officials say. And that includes attacks by white supremacists. The shooting in El Paso is the largest domestic terrorist attack against Hispanics in modern history. It has made it very clear how unprepared the U.S. is to fight homegrown terrorism.

The U.S. has spent almost 20 years intensely focused on the battle against Islamic extremists. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, rerouted the machinery of government to focus on the fight against threats of violence from the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. But those types of attacks have waned in recent years. They have been replaced by violence from white supremacists. Increasingly, this violence is more an internet-driven phenomenon of lone wolves rather than organized groups. It's a trend that experts say will prove very difficult to combat.

After the El Paso shooting, President Trump pledged to give federal law enforcement

authorities "whatever they need" to combat domestic terrorism. But officials say that preventing attacks from white supremacists and white nationalists would require adopting the same type of broad and aggressive approach used to battle international extremism.

"We need to catch them and incarcerate them before they act on their plans," says Rod Rosenstein, the former deputy attorney general. "And we can accomplish that by monitoring terrorist propaganda and communications."

But combating domestic terrorism presents unique challenges that touch many aspects of American life. These include politics, civil liberties, and business. It also involves complicated new questions around the issue of technology.

### **Fighting Homegrown Terrorism**

Federal officials have broad powers to disrupt foreign terrorist plots. For example, they can take preventive action by wiretapping or using an undercover online persona to talk to people anonymously in chat rooms to search for Islamic militants (also called jihadists).

But domestically, federal officials have far fewer options. A federal statute defines domestic terrorism but carries no penalties. The First Amendment protects freedom of speech. That makes stopping terrorist acts

## **Does the First Amendment protect hate speech?**

MARK RALSTON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (MEMORIAL); SAMUEL CORUM/NADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES (CHARLOTTESVILLE); MAX HERMAN/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES (CHICAGO)

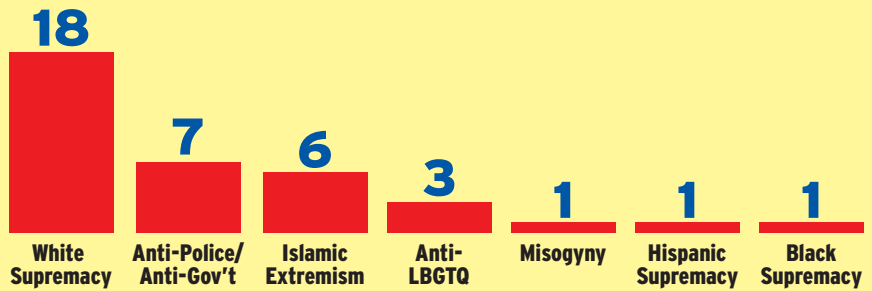




# Who's Behind the Violence?

Hate/Extremist Killings by Ideology of Perpetrator, 2016-18  
(Number of incidents per category)

SOURCE: CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HATE AND EXTREMISM



by Americans before they happen more challenging. No government agency is responsible for designating domestic terrorism organizations. And individuals who are considered domestic terrorists are charged under laws governing hate crimes, guns, and conspiracy. They aren't charged with terrorism.

"It's a big blank spot," says Mary McCord, a former top national security prosecutor.

The issue is urgent. Right-wing extremists killed more people in 2018 than in any year since 1995. And the

attack in El Paso and an April shooting in a synagogue in Poway, California, alone have claimed as many lives as all extremist homicides "of any stripe" in 2018, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino (*see graph, above*).

## The Internet & Free Speech

These attacks are becoming increasingly difficult to stop. Experts say that's partly because the nature of white supremacy has changed. It used to be that white supremacists, for the most part, operated in groups, often living in the same area, says Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism.

"Now," Levin says, "so-called lone wolves are turbocharged by a fragmented and hate-filled dark web which has become a modern-day, virtual neo-Nazi boot camp available 24/7 anywhere in the world with an internet connection."

On the internet, white nationalists can align with other radicals. They can

become inspired and find the resources they need to act online. Although these men often act alone, the F.B.I. says that technology has allowed American terrorists to plug into a global community of terrorists who hold similarly hateful ideologies.

The F.B.I. has sought to enlist technology companies in its efforts to combat the threat. But companies

have been slow to respond.

These companies have been shielded, in part, by the First Amendment as well.

"From the perspective of the courts," says Jonathan

Turley, a constitutional law expert at George Washington University, "white supremacy is a hateful but protected form of speech."

Many people also see the rise in domestic terrorism as part of the increasing racialization and divisiveness in the nation's immigration debate. In the wake of the El Paso shooting, President Trump faced intense new criticism for his rhetoric about immigrants and minorities. Trump has called the immigrants heading toward the border an "invasion." That word was echoed by the El Paso shooter in a manifesto he posted online.

Many Democrats seeking the presidency in 2020 called Trump out for his language. They say it has fueled racial divisions and emboldened white supremacists.

Republicans in turn blasted Democrats for what they said was playing politics with tragedy. And President Trump

denounced "racism, bigotry, and white supremacy" in a speech from the White House after the shootings. In it, he said that "hate has no place in America." He also called for "bipartisan solutions" to address gun violence. The shootings renewed the debate over tougher gun laws. (*see Debate, p. 22*).

## More Aggressive Tactics?

Even before the El Paso massacre, other racially- or religiously-motivated mass shootings had prompted calls to give the F.B.I. new powers to combat domestic terrorism. This includes making domestic terrorism a federal crime with specific penalties. It also includes allowing the F.B.I. to investigate people before they commit crimes.

But some civil liberties advocates worry that the government might abuse those powers. For instance, after the 9/11 attacks they sounded alarms when law enforcement officials interrogated innocent Muslims, compiled maps of Muslim communities, eavesdropped in mosques, and infiltrated Muslim student groups. At the time, many Americans tolerated those kinds of tactics as the price to pay for their security. But experts wonder: Would they be as accepting of aggressive law enforcement tactics when the targets aren't Muslims but white Americans? •

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**DEBATE: Does the U.S. need stricter gun control laws? p. 22**

# Latinos Under Siege

Across the country, Latinos expressed fear after the El Paso massacre



**Marching  
against hate  
in El Paso**

After the El Paso shooting that targeted Latinos, a Florida retiree found herself imagining that her grandchildren could be killed. A daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants cried alone in her car. A Texas lawyer bought a gun to defend his family.

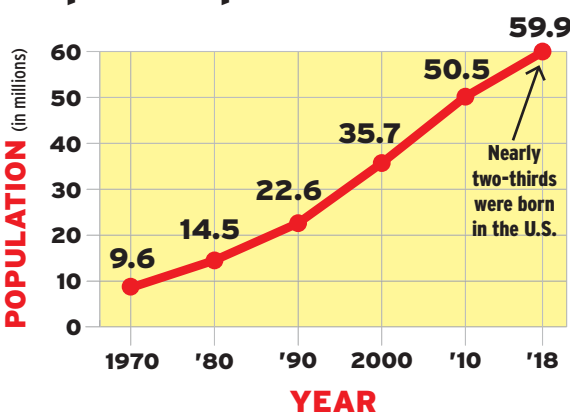
For many Latinos across the U.S., the shooting in August felt like a turning point, calling into question everything they thought they knew about their place in American society.

"At least for Latinos, in some way, it's the death of the American dream," Dario Aguirre, 64, a Mexican American lawyer in Denver, says about the impact of the killings on him and those around him.

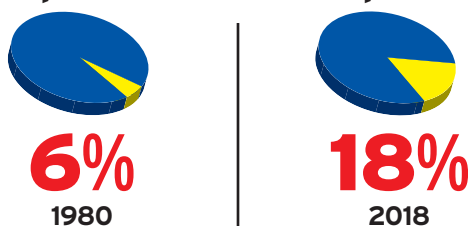
Close to 60 million Latinos live in the U.S., accounting for nearly one in five people in the country. That's up from nearly 15 million in 1980, or about 6 percent of the

**'For Latinos, in some way, it's the death of the American dream.'**

## Hispanic Population in the U.S.



## Hispanic Share of U.S. Population



SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

population, according to the Pew Research Center (see *graphic*). Nearly two-thirds of Latinos were born in the U.S.

From Miami to Los Angeles, many say the seeds of anti-Hispanic sentiment have been apparent in the country for years. But, they say, the current political climate and attacks inspired by hate have made them feel unwelcome and unsafe.

Kenia Peralta, an 18-year-old in Los Angeles and the daughter of immigrant parents from El Salvador, says the shooting prompted her to question her identity as an American.

"If this is what America is supposed to be, only white, then I guess I am not American," she says. "I will always be seen first as Hispanic, no matter if I was born here."

—Simon Romero, Caitlin Dickerson, Miriam Jordan, and Patricia Mazzei of *The Times*