



NJOHSP

EXECUTIVE INTELLIGENCE BRIEF

June 1, 2021

Changes in Extremist Operating Environment Due to COVID-19

COVID-19 altered the operational landscape of domestic and international violent extremists who viewed the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion and revival. While attacks and resulting deaths decreased across the globe, violent extremists increased online recruitment activities, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, and modified strategies for attack. The lifting of COVID-19 restrictions on populations in the United States and elsewhere will likely cause a reemergence of attacks and other violent extremist activity.

- Online recruitment efforts expanded over the last year, as groups sought to maintain and increase membership while continuing to spread propaganda. Lockdown restrictions and unemployment forced people to stay home, which resulted in more time spent online and a greater risk of radicalization. According to open source reporting, multiple white racially motivated extremist platforms emerged online at the onset of the pandemic, including one focused on messaging related to COVID-19, and membership grew exponentially.
- Various actors leveraged pandemic fears and knowledge gaps to spread disinformation and sow discord within the United States. Disinformation has the potential to expend unneeded resources, incite panic, create distrust between the government and people, increase polarization in groups, influence governmental actions or law enforcement responses, or cause undue harm. Domestic extremists conducted psychological operations that attempted to target audiences with selective information to influence their emotions and objective reasoning. These same groups also attempted to fuel anti-government sentiments and incite supporters, which included falsehoods demonizing vaccination efforts and conspiracies seeking to link these efforts to minorities and immigrants. Anti-government extremists exploited knowledge gaps pertaining to COVID-19 testing, mortality rates, conspiracy theories, and vaccine development to gain support for their causes, which center around vaccine fatality rates and adverse reactions, genetic information, and vaccine mandates.
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, homegrown violent extremists and others targeted public spaces where people used to gather, such as concert venues and religious facilities. Lockdown restrictions forced groups to shift plots and attacks to other critical infrastructure targets through other means, with a particular focus on telecommunications and government facilities.

Analyst Comment: While COVID-19 altered the operating environment and changed the way extremists recruit members, share their ideologies, and plot attacks, the lifting of restrictions may result in pre-pandemic actions.