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COMMUNITIES UNDER ATTACK: **PROTECTION NEEDS IN THE UNITED STATES**

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I. Introduction

Communities across the United States are facing extreme restrictions on civic space, militarized approaches to public safety, increasing identity-based violence, violent racist rhetoric from political leadership, and record levels of detention. Simultaneously, funding cuts for violence prevention programs, public health, and social services at state and federal levels are constraining the resources available to communities to keep themselves safe.

This brief is an attempt to highlight the impacts of key threats to civilians on targeted communities, and explores how community-led efforts can work to support safety and prevent violence in the U.S. This brief is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all forms of violence encountered by civilians in the U.S. but focuses specifically on targeted, systematic violence against civilians.

II. Methodology

This assessment, completed by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in September 2025, was informed by interviews with 9 experts working on community safety, violence prevention, and justice and accountability efforts throughout the U.S. Interviews and analysis were supported by desk research including official U.S. government data, academic research, and outputs from policy institutions and civil society groups. This brief is also rooted in NP's experience supporting community safety and interrupting cycles of violence across the U.S. since 2020.



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III. The shrinking protection environment: attacks on civic space

Civic space – the environment in which civil society and individual civilians can contribute to policymaking that impacts their lives by organizing, sharing information, engaging in dialogue, and expressing dissent – has been under threat in the U.S. for the past decade with restrictions escalating rapidly since January 2025. These restrictions manifest in the use of force by local, state and federal governments ('state violence') and often perpetrated in service of political goals ('political violence'), including attacks on nonprofits and civilian protestors. In response, many international monitoring groups have issued warnings about faltering civic freedoms and democratic backsliding.

The U.S government relies heavily on violence to enforce restrictions on civic space and quiet dissent. Violence by the state has long been a part of American society and historic abuses have laid the foundation for the violence that many communities experience today. Violence by the state takes many forms – both directly and indirectly inflicting harm on communities.

Direct state-sanctioned violence has been exacerbated by increasing militarization of U.S. police which increases violent behavior and killings by police. Police violence is widespread - at least 1,260 people killed by police in 2024, more than any other year in the past decade – and discriminatory, with Black people 2.8x more likely to be killed by police than white people in the U.S.

The unwarranted and illegal deployment of U.S. National Guard forces in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Memphis, Portland and Chicago are a demonstration of the militarization that further embeds discriminatory practices and raises broader concerns about authoritarianism. Threats of future National Guard or other military deployment continue to incite fear and show a consistent pattern of government overreach and disregard for democratic practices demonstrated by the current Administration since it took office in January 2025.

Rising rates of politically motivated violence also contribute to shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding. Political violence in the United States has been notably increasing since 2016 and is now at the highest level in over 50 years. This trend is punctuated by alarming attacks such as the shooting of two Minnesota lawmakers along with their partners in June 2025, the attempted assassination of then Republican Presidential Nominee Donald Trump in July 2024, the violent attack of Paul Pelosi, and the murder of political activist Charlie Kirk in September of 2025. Behind these heavily covered attacks against well-known political figures lies a steadily increasing trend of threats and harassment against local public officials, federal judges and Members of Congress.

Threats of political violence in the U.S. frequently include references to firearms. This reflects extremely high levels of gun ownership among civilians in the U.S. compared to other advanced democracies, and a spike in first-time gun purchases alongside increasing acceptance of political violence during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The accessibility of firearms contributes to elevated lethality in both political and identity-based violence.

Freedom of assembly and the right to protest are under attack. Since 2017, 45 states and the Federal government have introduced more than 355 anti-protest bills, 55 of which have been enacted (primarily in the South and Midwest). Several of these laws have been cited by the United Nations as violations of international law and the U.S. constitution.

These crackdowns on dissent are discriminatory, delineating who is allowed to protest and who is not. International students participating in pro-Palestine protestors have been systematically targeted for visa cancellation and National Guard forces were deployed to Los Angeles to quell largely peaceful protests against immigration raids. Meanwhile, blanket clemency was extended to more than 1,500 people charged for their involvement in storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Refusing rights, justice, and protections to some groups, while actively defending and protecting others, demonstrates the targeted nature of current state violence.

Civic space is further restricted through targeting civil society organizations, especially those essential to protecting political access, the rule of law, and representative democracy. A clear pattern of removing federal funding, attacking the credibility, and threatening the tax-exempt status of unaligned nonprofit organizations has emerged since the Trump administration began its second term. Journalists and the media are also constant targets in ongoing restrictions on speech with critical outlets being threatened with legal action and funding restrictions on key public media outlets such as PBS and NPR. These actions serve to limit dissent, call into question the credibility of opposition actors, and eliminate access to support for communities at risk.



III. Communities at Risk

In a society where civic spaces are shrinking, authoritarianism is on the rise and police forces are militarized, everyone is less safe. However, many groups face increased risk due to identities that they embody.

Identity-Based Violence is prevalent throughout the United States increasing as both state and non-state actors are emboldened by violent political rhetoric and the removal of protections for targeted groups. In 2024, according to FBI data, there were 11,679 reported hate crimes in the U.S. This is the second highest recorded level, with the highest level at 12,498 in 2023. The true number of incidents is likely far higher as FBI data is marred by significant gaps, inconsistency, and underreporting.

In tandem with and at times tacitly supported by violence by the state, groups espousing hatred and violence are increasingly in popularity. The Southern Poverty Law Center's Hate Map shows 1371 groups with hate and antigovernment ideologies across the U.S. The following section presents a non-exhaustive snapshot of groups within the U.S. that are at increased risk of targeted violence and therefore in need of focused support and protection strategies.

A note on intersectionality:

Each person holds multiple and interrelating identities that shape their risks of experiencing violence. When people embody multiple identities that are targeted for violence, they face elevated risks due to the overlap and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination (termed intersectionality by Crenshaw). For example, Black transgender women in the U.S. face extreme levels of violence representing 78% of all transgender women murdered in the U.S., a phenomenon linked to the overlap of racist and transphobic hate. Similarly, LGBTQ+ migrants face heightened risk of targeted violence due to the overlap of their queer identity and migrant status. LGBTQ+ migrants from BIPOC communities are at even greater risk of violence. Other factors such as socio-economic levels and geographic location within the U.S. also affect the likelihood for people and communities to be targeted for violence. These compounded risk factors must be taken into consideration when designing protection programming in order to offer inclusive and comprehensive support to targeted individuals.

1. Migrant Communities

State violence and identity-based violence are closely aligned in ongoing state-sanctioned attacks against migrant communities. There has been a notable surge in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity since the beginning of the Trump administration in January 2025 with deportations reaching the highest rate in more than a decade at nearly 1,500 people a day. Deportations frequently return migrants to violent and dangerous contexts that they initially fled from, seeking safety in the U.S., or to detention centers in third countries with egregious human right records, a clear violation of the international principle of "*non-refoulement*".

The targeting of migrant communities is rooted in racism and xenophobia with politicians perpetuating harmful myths and exaggerations to blame immigrants for economic struggles, cultural changes and violence. The inherently discriminatory nature of immigration enforcement was recently legally protected in a Supreme Court ruling allowing for racial profiling by immigration officials. Attacks on legal pathways for immigration and fear tactics designed to make the U.S. unlivable for undocumented migrants reflect an intentional effort to deter migration to the U.S. This deterrence strategy is brutally implemented in Southern borderlands resulting in high levels of migrant deaths.

ICE raids are not only occurring more frequently, but also with increasing rates of violence. Masked immigration officials in full tactical gear are frequently deploying teargas, flash-bang grenades, and other violent weapons during raids. This has on multiple occasions resulted in the death and/or injury of people targeted by federal immigration officials. On September 12th, 2025, Silverio Villegas-Gonzalez was shot and killed by an ICE officer during a traffic stop in Chicago. On October 21st, 2025, Carlitos Ricardo Parias and a deputy U.S. Marshal were both shot by law enforcement during an attempted ICE stop. On December 31st, 2025 Keith Porter Jr. was killed by an off-duty ICE agent during New Year celebrations in Los Angeles. On January 7th, 2026, Renee Good was killed by an ICE agent while monitoring ICE activity in Minneapolis. On January 8th, 2026 Yorlenys Betzabeth Zambrano-Contreras and Luis David Nico Moncada were shot by a Customs and Border Protection Agent during a targeted traffic stop in Portland. These examples are not uncommon and are likely to increase as the expedited recruitment and training of ICE officers supported by significant increases in federal funding for immigration enforcement is likely to lead to more wrongful detentions, greater use of force, and other abuses.

The increase in local police departments partnering with ICE serves to further alienate immigrant communities and limit their options for response when harms are committed against them. Such partnerships deteriorate public trust, with police themselves raising

concerns that this is resulting in a decrease in public safety. The intentional creation of an environment of fear also has significant negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of immigrants and their communities, with knock-on effects that destabilize local economies and businesses that are cornerstones in local neighborhoods.

Migrants who are detained by ICE are likely to experience violence and neglect in detention centers. Many are forcibly disappeared with little to no resources for family members to track their whereabouts. Hundreds of detainees have been transferred or removed from databases without a trace. The results of mistreatment while in custody can be fatal. At least 23 migrants *died in ICE custody* in fiscal year 2025, making it the deadliest year for ICE detainees in at least two decades. It is likely that rates of detainee deaths will continue to increase as horrific conditions, denial of medical care, and long wait times leave detainees desperate and increasingly likely to attempt suicide or succumb to illness and injury.

2. LBGTQ+ Communities

LBGTQ+ communities, particularly transgender people, are a strategic target and scapegoat for the current administration, and political attacks are emboldening violent attacks by others. In 2024, according to FBI data submitted by local jurisdictions, attacks based on a victim's sexual orientation made up 17.2% of all hate crimes, and 4 percent were based on gender identity. Between May 1, 2024 and May 1, 2025, GLAAD tracked 932 anti-LGBTQ+ incidents in 49 US states and the District of Columbia – the equivalent of 2.5 incidents every day. Legislative attacks against the LGBTQ+ community, attempting to restrict rights, access, and visibility, are also substantial. Thus far in 2025 over 600 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced. Most focus on restricting the rights of transgender people.

Transgender people have long been pushed to the margins of American society, denied basic human rights and targeted for acts of violence. Spurred by political rhetoric and dehumanization, attacks against the transgender community are now rising dramatically. In the 2025 GLAAD ALERT Desk Report (2024-2025), 52% of all anti-LGBTQ+ incidents specifically targeted transgender and gender non-conforming people (485 out of 932 incidents) an increase of 14% when compared to the 2023-24 reporting period. Simultaneously, the rights of transgender people were under attack with more than 600 anti-transgender state and federal bills introduced in 2024 alone – a new record.

Since January 2025, attacks on the trans community have been further heightened by villainizing and hateful rhetoric from public officials and further institutionalized through a series of executive orders seeking to exclude transgender people from public spaces. Legislative and administrative attacks have included denial of healthcare, exclusion from military service, prohibition from participating in sports, removal of gender-affirming identification, and erasure of trans people from historical accounts. These restrictions place transgender people at risk, alienate and ostracize them from engagement in public life, limit healthcare access, and restrict freedom of movement.

"Attacks against the trans community not only increase their risk of experiencing violence but also place at increased risk every person who does not present in a way that is aligned with traditional gender binaries," says Arli Christian, Senior Policy Council at the ACLU. While transgender people certainly bear the brunt of these policies, they create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that makes everyone less safe.

3. Racial and Ethnic Communities

Spurred by "culture wars," renewed visibility of white supremist movements, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, violence against ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S. is resurging. Race, ethnicity, or ancestry was the most significant motivation for hate crimes reported to the FBI in 2024 (53.2%) and independent monitoring mechanisms reflect high levels of targeted violence against Black, Indigenous, AAPI, Latino and Arab communities (among others).

Black people have been targets for violence from state and non-state actors throughout U.S. history. This racial targeting has been given new momentum through widespread police impunity and racism being encouraged by political leaders. Black communities bear the brunt of police violence and are also most likely to be targeted for identity-based violence by fellow civilians. Routine interactions with police such as traffic stops are disproportionately violent for Black people, and police are unlikely to be held accountable for this violence.

> *"We have elders who have survived the civil rights era and are seeing similarities between 2025 and 1964"*
>
> - Bria Nelson,
> Racial Justice and Equity Researcher,
> Human Rights Watch

Indigenous communities have likewise experienced a long history of violence and subjugation. The rate of missing or murdered indigenous women far outpaces those of other demographic groups, and indigenous communities as a whole face escalated risks of violence when compared with the general American population. The removal of key reports related to this violence from government websites demonstrates a decreased desire for accountability and intentional obscuring of data.

Asian American and Pacific Islanders continue to experience targeted attacks which rose dramatically with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the number of reported hate crimes against the AAPI community decreased after 2021, levels of hate against the AAPI remain high with over half (53%) of AAPI adults surveyed by Stop AAPI Hate reporting having experienced a hate act in 2024. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy have also contributed to a strong surge in AAPI hate since November 2024, underlining continued attacks against AAPI communities.

Anti-Latinx and anti-Arab violence is closely associated with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments discussed elsewhere in this report. However, these sentiments have clear connections to racial prejudices and white supremacy.

4. Religious Minorities

Attacks on religious minorities are surging, prompted by a growing embrace of Christian nationalism, as well as anti-Semitic and Islamophobic targeting related to the war between Israel and Palestine. Christian nationalism has long been prevalent in the United States with many believing the U.S. to have a God-ordained mandate for the protection and flourishing of white Christian Protestants. While affiliation with Christian identity has declined across the U.S. in recent years, it has continued to dominate political discussions and has been manipulated as a justification for recent "culture wars" supported by the "Make America Great Again" movement.

Decades of conservative leaders have cast their vision of the U.S. within Christian theological framing with 64% of white evangelical Christians either adhering to or sympathizing with Christian nationalism and a majority of Christian nationalism adherents or sympathizers agreeing that they would "prefer for the U.S. to be a nation primarily made of people who follow the Christian faith". Christian nationalism adherents are nearly seven times as likely as rejecters of Christian nationalism to support political violence and show an increased propensity to resort to violence in disagreements. Even among those who might not agree fully with Christian nationalist goals, there remains large support for continued influence of

Christian ideas in policymaking with 44% of Americans agreeing that "the government should not declare the U.S. a Christian nation but should promote Christian values." This overwhelming support for Christian tradition pushes those practicing other faiths to the margins and places them at increased risk of violence due to their religious beliefs.

Acts of targeted hate against Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities have risen markedly since the attacks by Hamas on October 7 2023 and the ensuing genocide perpetrated by the Israeli government in Gaza. These acts have resulted in death, injury, the destruction of religious sites, and loss of personal property. Hatred against Jewish communities in the U.S. is at the highest level it's been in decades with conflation of actions by the Israeli government with Jewish communities as a whole contributing to this trend. Hatred against Muslim communities in the U.S. is also rising with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) receiving 8,658 incoming complaints of anti-Muslim incidents nationwide in 2024, the highest number of complaints in the organization's history. CAIR itself has been targeted for the removal of its nonprofit status in by House Ways & Means Committee Chairman Jason Smith, a direct example of attempts to silence dissent and criticism of U.S. actions in support of Israel. Advocacy against the genocide in Gaza has also been severely limited by the current administration's expansive definition of antisemitism used to curtail any criticism of the Israeli state further entrenching associations of Jewish people with the Israeli government and pro-Palestine movements with Hamas.

A third religious minority that has been consistently targeted for violence are Sikhs with 153 attacks against the Sikh community reported to the FBI in 2024.The Sikh community is not only targeted by fellow community members, but also as a part of a global transnational repression scheme.

5. Homeless People

Homeless people are significantly more likely to experience violence than the general population with about 14% to 21% of unhoused people estimated to have been victims of violent acts, compared with around 2% of the general population. Disregard for the safety of homeless people and direct calls for violence against them are prevalent, such as flippant remarks from Fox news commentator Brian Kilmeade calling for lethal injections of those living on the streets. This rhetoric coincides with dangerous Executive Orders calling for the removal of unhoused people from public areas, expansion of involuntary civil commitment, and an end to effective "housing first" programs among other actions. Such dehumanization of homeless people paints them as expendable and contributes to targeted violence with at least 588 killings and nearly 2000 violent attacks since 1999 that appear to be motivated by victims' unhoused status.

6. Women, Femmes, and Those Seeking Reproductive Care

Restrictions on reproductive care and attacks against those seeking it present an increased risk of violence for women, the queer community, and healthcare providers. Since the Dobbs decision overturned abortion protections previously provided by Roe v. Wade in fall 2022 there has been a sustained increase in violence against abortion providers, healthcare centers, and those receiving abortion care.

This violence is also directed against those protesting or participating in other actions aiming to protect abortion access. These actions tend to see higher levels of escalation from counter protestors in the form of targeted threats and violent attacks. This has led rights organizations such as the Women's march to think critically about their safety when deciding when and where to hold actions as the risk analysis varies across the U.S. "Even more than a regional component, there is a rural-urban component. Those in smaller towns and communities have higher levels of threats" shared Tamika Middleton, Managing Director for the Women's March.

Middleton also noted increasing violence in the reproductive justice space "our sense is that the frequency and the blatantness of the threats have been more intense not just since the election, but since the campaign." Violent and misogynistic rhetoric is increasing online and "people feel more justified, and more safe in expressing violent threats". This rhetoric manifests in legislation that moves beyond banning abortion to criminalizing it and entrenching punitive responses that perpetuate violence. In *South Carolina* there have been repeated attempts to make abortion a felony with the same sentencing as homicide and in Texas legislation has opened the doors for civil suits against those seeking or aiding in abortions, *including those outside of the state*.



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Responding to growing violence in the U.S.

1. Unarmed Responses

In the face of threats, violence, and exclusion communities have come together to address the challenges they are facing and keep one another safe. As many threats come from, or are implicitly supported by state actors, nonviolent community-led safety initiatives are essential to defending civic space, protecting targeted groups, and interrupting escalating cycles of violence and militarization. Unfortunately, many formal safety initiatives have been significantly reduced due to funding cuts from the federal government which deprioritize community-led interventions in favor of securitized intervention.

In response to this need mutual aid networks are expanding their support to include safety work, immigrant rights groups have created anonymous and accessible reporting systems to alert community networks of ICE activity, and organizations designed to train and support community safety initiatives have been seeing increasing demand for their expertise. Peacebuilding initiatives such as Common Ground USA are attempting to bring Americans together to foster collaboration, connection, and trust across differences. Others, like Cure Violence, are working to disrupt violence within communities and change social norms through partnership with credible messengers and local actors. In response to fears about closing civic space and increasing political violence Meta Peace Team and other groups are training, organizing and activating community members to deescalate conflict during high-tension moments such as protests and elections. The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) is a consistent supporter of these nonviolent response efforts to growing political violence by producing action-oriented research, convening cross-sector partners, and translating evidence into practical tools — notably its Community Safety and De-Escalation Directory, an interactive, state-by-state map that connects communities to available safety and de-escalation trainings.

Multiple interviewees noted the need for increased digital safety and media literacy training, as well as security planning and nonviolent intervention tactics. Groups like 18 Million Rising and Beacon are addressing this need by equipping civilians with tools for digital safety and utilizing new technology to provide civilians with vital safety information in times of crisis.
This risk analysis is a key step to understanding the existing and emerging challenges that threaten and undermine community safety in the U.S. It also informs how NP operationalizes nonviolent protection in the U.S., specifically through:



1. **Providing direct protective presence and accompaniment** to communities experiencing fear, intimidation and heightened risk in civic and public spaces. Guided by context-specific risk analysis, NP prioritizes presence to individuals and communities disproportionately affected where threats and targeted intimidation are most acute. Protective presence and accompaniment focus on deterring immediate threats like harassment and escalation while ensuring people can engage and participate safely in their communities.

2. **Strengthening local infrastructures for community-led safety and nonviolent interventions.** Various communities face increased risk and gaps in preparedness, access, and capacity to enact nonviolent protection measures and resources. Effective safety interventions consider all contextual factors and provide support that meets the specific needs of communities and individuals. NP addresses this by building the capacity of youth leaders, grassroots organizers, volunteers, and faith leaders to anticipate, prevent and respond to risks through nonviolent community-led approaches. This includes the creation of community safety teams to shift protection from short-term presence to sustainable community-led safety models.

3. **Deepening partnerships and networks to enhance nonviolent protection coordination.** It is increasingly crucial that community safety groups coordinate closely with one another as risks emerge. Focusing on collaboration and information sharing, NP works with community organizations to develop safety protocols, enhance early-warning systems, and improve readiness. This ensures efficient and timely responses while strengthening coordination, data sharing, and learning across community safety networks.