

Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Agencies Can Take Additional Steps to Counter Domestic Threats (Accessible Version)

GAO-23-106758, June 2023

Violent extremism and domestic terrorism pose a threat to safety in the United States. GAO has identified areas where federal agencies could improve how they prevent and counter such threats.

The Big Picture

Violent extremism and domestic terrorism pose a serious and growing threat to safety in the U.S.:

- In January 2022, officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) testified that the number of FBI investigations of suspected domestic violent extremists had more than doubled since the spring of 2020.
- According to our analysis of FBI data, the number of FBI’s open domestic terrorism-related cases at any point during the fiscal year, grew by 357 percent from 1,981 to 9,049 from 2013 to 2021.
- In April 2021, the Secretary of Homeland Security stated that domestic violent extremism posed the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat to the homeland.
- The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) tracked a total of 231 domestic terrorism incidents, resulting in 145 deaths in the U.S. from calendar years 2010 to 2021.

We discuss our extensive body of work using the definitions below.

- **Violent extremism** is generally defined as planning or committing ideologically-, religiously-, or politically-motivated acts of violence.
- **Domestic terrorism** is generally defined by statute as acts dangerous to human life that violate U.S. criminal laws, occur primarily in the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S., and appear intended to coerce a civilian population; influence government policy or conduct; or affect government conduct by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.
- **Preventing violent extremism** in the U.S.—sometimes referred to as countering violent extremism (CVE)—focuses on reducing individual

and societal risk factors associated with violent extremism to prevent and provide intervention for individuals on the path to violence.

- **Counterterrorism** in the U.S. focuses on collecting intelligence, gathering evidence, making arrests, and responding to incidents.

Examples Showing Preventing Violent Extremism Is Different from Counterterrorism



Source: GAO analysis of information from the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security; FBI (adapted photograph); Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-23-106758

What GAO’s Work Shows

We have evaluated federal actions to counter violent extremism and domestic terrorism, and have identified some opportunities for improvement.

1. Strengthening Strategic Planning

In July 2021, we reviewed DHS’s 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* and the related plans that outlined the department’s vision for its counterterrorism activities. We found that [the strategy contained some but not all of the key elements](#) of a comprehensive strategy as shown in the graphic below. For example, the strategy did not include a discussion of what external factors may affect DHS in meeting its goals.

- ✓ **We recommended** that DHS revise or supplement its strategy to include all key elements of a comprehensive strategy. This recommendation remained open as of June 2023.

together to counter domestic terrorism threats and share relevant information, and update them accordingly. This recommendation remained open as of June 2023.

Extent to Which DHS' Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence Included the Seven Elements of a Comprehensive Strategy, as of Jan. 2023

Elements of a comprehensive strategy	GAO assessment
Mission statement	●
Problem definition, scope, and methodology	◐
Goals and objectives	●
Activities, milestones, and performance measures	◐
Organizational roles, responsibilities, and coordination	◐
Resources and investments	○
Key external factors that could affect goals	○

Legend
 ● Fully included ◐ Partially included ○ Not included

Source: GAO analysis of DHS Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence and the Framework's Public Action Plan and the Implementation Plan. | GAO-23-106758

In April 2017, we also assessed an interagency CVE task force led by DHS and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to coordinate government efforts and partnerships to prevent violent extremism in the U.S. We found that the [task force did not have either a cohesive strategy with measurable outcomes](#) or a process for assessing its overall progress.

- ✓ **We recommended** that DHS and DOJ direct the task force to (1) develop a cohesive strategy with measurable outcomes, and (2) establish a process to assess the progress of its CVE efforts, including its effectiveness. While the task force was disbanded, the recommendations serve as a reminder that strategic planning for CVE can be improved and as a guide for future improvement efforts.

2. Strengthening Collaboration and Intelligence Sharing Efforts

In February 2023, we found that FBI and the DHS Office of Intelligence & Analysis (I&A) faced challenges fully collaborating and sharing domestic terrorism information. FBI and DHS I&A have a longstanding interagency memorandum and other formal interdepartmental agreements. Given the rapidly evolving threat landscape, however, they have [not assessed the relevance of these agreements to their joint mission](#) in preventing domestic terrorism attacks respective to their role.

- ✓ **We recommended** that FBI and DHS I&A collaborate to assess whether existing formal agreements fully articulate a process for working

In February 2023, we also found that DHS I&A, among other agencies, [did not consistently share all threat information](#) with relevant stakeholders prior to the Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021. Specifically, DHS I&A did not share threat products with certain law enforcement partners that it developed using publicly available information from open sources.

- ✓ **We recommended** that DHS I&A assess the extent that its internal controls ensure personnel consistently follow its policies for sharing threat-related information with relevant agencies such as the U.S. Capitol Police. This recommendation remained open as of June 2023.

U.S. Capitol



Source: Orhan Çam/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-106758

In May 2023, we found that four legislative branch entities that have the primary responsibilities for protecting Congress, including from violent extremism and domestic terrorism, reported challenges receiving and sharing physical threat information from the Intelligence Community (IC). For example, these entities stated the IC does not always differentiate their security function from general congressional oversight and their requests for threat information are often routed to the Office of Legislative Affairs instead of directly to threat analysts.

- ✓ **We recommended** that the IC develop and implement a plan to address the identified challenges with sharing physical threat information between the IC and legislative branch. We also recommended that the legislative branch entities develop a process to continue to assess and regularly communicate their threat information needs to the IC. These recommendations remained open as of June 2023.

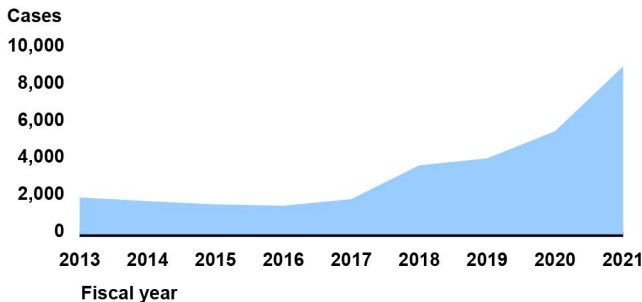
3. Strengthening Data Collection and Reporting

In February 2023, we found that FBI and DHS I&A [did not comprehensively report domestic terrorism](#)

[incident data](#), in accordance with an annual reporting requirement to Congress. We found FBI tracks data related to its investigations and manually identifies and compiles domestic terrorism incident and plot data, while DHS I&A has a database specifically of domestic terrorism incidents and plots.

- ✓ **We recommended** that FBI and DHS I&A coordinate to report domestic terrorism incident data from both agencies in response to the annual requirement. These recommendations remained open as of June 2023.

Number of Open FBI Cases with Domestic Terrorism-Related Classification Codes, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2021



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data. | GAO-23-106758

Accessible Data for Number of Open FBI Cases with Domestic Terrorism-Related Classification Codes, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2021

Fiscal Year	Total FBI Cases
2013	1,981
2014	1,783
2015	1,606
2016	1,535
2017	1,890
2018	3,714
2019	4,092
2020	5,557
2021	9,049

Note: These data vary from similar data FBI has publicly reported because, for example, our data reflect the number of investigations open at any point during each fiscal year. FBI has reported similar data as of the end of each fiscal year. For more details, see Table 4 in [GAO-23-104720](#).

In February 2023, we also found that FBI and DHS I&A [did not fully process threat information prior to the Capitol Attack](#) on January 6, 2021. Specifically, FBI personnel did not process all relevant information related to potential violence, including tips from social media. Additionally, DHS I&A personnel did not process some open source threats obtained from manual searches or other agencies in reports.

- ✓ **We recommended** that FBI assess the extent to which and why personnel did not process information related to the Capitol Attack, according to its policy. We also recommended that DHS I&A assess the extent to which its internal controls ensure personnel follow its

policies for processing open source threat information. These recommendations remained open as of June 2023.

In February 2021, we found that DHS lacked data to assess the overall effectiveness of its CVE grant program. Specifically, DHS [did not obtain necessary data from individual grantees](#)—such as performance information—to evaluate the grant program. DHS also did not have an approach to ensure grantees’ performance measurement and data collection efforts were sufficient for evaluating the overall program.

- ✓ **We recommended** that DHS take steps to ensure grantees collect and submit data that would enable DHS to evaluate whether individual grants and the overall program have achieved intended outcomes for future CVE-related grant programs. DHS addressed this recommendation in April 2022, and if effectively implemented the collected data will help DHS better manage the program.

Upcoming GAO Work

We plan to issue reports in 2023 and 2024 related to the financing of domestic violent extremist activities, the relationship between hate speech on the internet and domestic violent extremism, the expenditures on programs countering terrorism and their effectiveness, and the use of social media by domestic violent extremists.

More from GAO’s Portfolio

Domestic Terrorism: [GAO-23-104720](#)

Violent Extremism: [GAO-21-507](#), [GAO-21-216](#), and [GAO-17-300](#)

Threat Information Sharing: [GAO-23-105951SU](#)

Civil Rights and Civil Liberties: [GAO-22-104456](#)

Capitol Attack: [GAO-23-106625](#), [GAO-22-104829](#), [GAO-22-105001](#), [GAO-22-105963](#), and [GAO-21-105255](#)

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Contact Us:

For more information, contact: Triana McNeil, McNeilT@gao.gov, (202) 512-8777.

Chuck Young, Managing Director, Public Affairs, YoungC1@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800.

A. Nicole Clowers, Managing Director, Congressional Relations, ClowersA@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400.

Contributors: Dave Lutter (Assistant Director), Kelsey M. Carpenter (Analyst-in-Charge), Richard Catherina, Eric Hauswirth, Susan Hsu, Jennifer Kamara, Amanda K. Miller, Erin O'Brien, Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, Janet Temko-Blinder, and Mary Turgeon.

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