



BDI Issue Brief: Trends in Demonstrations at Homes, May-December 2020

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Key Trends:

- At least 360 demonstrations at homes occurred persistently throughout the past 8 months (May - December 2020), with threatening behavior by various actors recorded at low levels since May.
- The period immediately post-Election Day has seen an **increase in both the number of protests outside homes and recorded presence of armed and unlawful paramilitary actors**. These actions are particularly concerning if they remain paired with online threats and/or spread to targeting of local officials.
- For the full period of data, more demonstrations at homes have focused on city- and county-level officials' private homes, involved repeat visits, and were used as a repeat tactic by specific groups.

I. Introduction

In contrast to demonstrations in public spaces, protests around or outside of individual homes carry additional symbolic meaning, potential implicit threat, and, in some cases, legal restrictions. While threats and incitement to violence are [not protected](#) by the First Amendment, the line between protected peaceful protest at a home and unprotected threatening activity is by nature thinner, making it essential to frame any analysis in more specific details of intention and tactics.

To examine the specifics of these current trends, Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) drew on publicly available data compiled by the US Crisis Monitor¹ as well as other open source reporting to provide specific descriptive and actionable insight on self-styled demonstrations that occurred outside of homes, as well as related threats or violence.

Our analysis does not include all other types of political violence targeting homes, including for example vandalism, like swastikas painted on homes of Jewish families, and direct threats to people and their families outside these self-styled demonstrations. The US Crisis Monitor does record some of these examples, including a [noose left outside the home](#) of a mixed race couple in Michigan in July, a Black man [in Delaware in June](#), and an election worker finding a noose outside his home [in Georgia](#) just this month — as well as the [attack by a politically-motivated extremist](#) against Judge Ester Salas' son and husband in her home in August. Additional research would be needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of these current threats and attacks beyond the setting of demonstrations specifically. Indeed, threats to the homes of elected leaders and activists, especially those of color, are

¹ [The US Crisis Monitor](#), Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Data for 1 May 2020 to 12 December 2020.

not new to the US context. From the murder of Florida NAACP leader [Harry T. Moore and his wife](#) to attempted [bombings](#) against national leaders and [white allies](#), homes were frequent targets throughout the civil rights movement and beyond. While penalties have increased, [use of cross burning as a form of intimidation](#) continues to this day. Even as legal and public discourse condemn these outright threats more readily today, demonstrations at homes take place in this context.

Though [protests outside of homes are not new](#), recent high profile demonstrations, including at the [Michigan Secretary of State's house](#) and [outside the homes of health officials](#) in Idaho, have renewed calls for condemnation of any demonstration outside private residences. Demonstrations at homes can have a spillover effect, impacting family members and neighbors, who often have little to do with the issue at hand. As noted in our analysis, many demonstrations occur at homes of unelected officials who many argue are “just doing their job” as a local health official, police officer, or other more bureaucratic role. Even for elected officials, in the modern era of online doxxing and video, demonstrations have the potential to pull in audiences beyond a given neighborhood and can be accompanied by substantial online harassment and threats. Likewise, activities that may be legal and non-threatening in public spaces - like lawful open carry of weapons - take on a new dimension when outside a private residence.

Yet, as also evident in our analysis, activists across the political spectrum have argued demonstrations at homes of public officials making decisions about citizens' lives are justified. Many officials now work from home amidst the pandemic, allowing them to avoid impact from or engagement with demonstrations in more public spaces or at public offices. Among other justifications, protesters also argue issues like evictions, homelessness, pandemic-restrictions, and social justice deeply impact constituent's own homes — highlighting the need to engage officials in direct, creative, or uncomfortable ways to draw meaningful parallels to the impact of their decisions.

II. General Description

The US Crisis Monitor recorded 361 separate demonstrations outside of homes in 38 states and the District of Columbia between 1 May 2020 and 12 December 2020. These demonstrations occurred outside of both personal homes and official residences of state and city officials (like official governor mansions) and involved a variety of actors and tactics.

Demonstrators held sit-ins, cookouts, and noise protests, marched through neighborhoods with banners, and organized car caravans. Recorded protests also included more aggressive behavior, though at significantly lower rates, with protesters burning flags, setting off fireworks and flares, throwing objects, including eggs and paintballs, and engaging in other forms of vandalism.

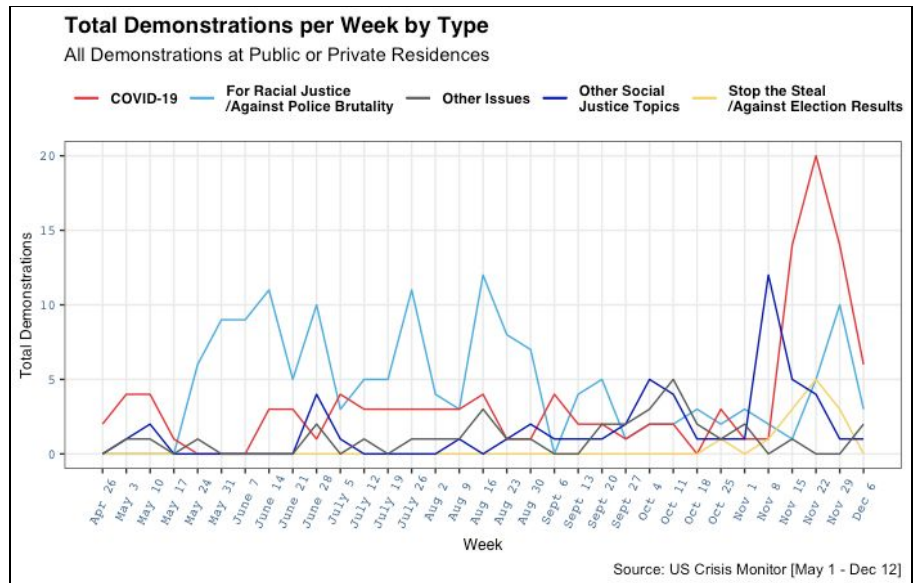
A. Prevailing Issues

Demonstrations recorded since May 2020 have covered a range of issues, but were most often linked to the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19 related issues:

- 42% (151) of all demonstrations were against police brutality and/or associated with BLM or “defund the police.” The majority of these events occurred between May 24 and September 6, tracking with the overall height of the BLM movement.
- 32% (115) of all demonstrations were associated with COVID-19 issues, including against public health restrictions and for specific policy measures.
- 15% (52) of demonstrations were centered on other justice issues.²

In the post-election period, “Stop the Steal” demonstrations began occurring at the doorstep of state officials, accounting for 12% of all demonstrations at homes in the past month (see yellow line at right).³

As also evident in the graph to the right, the count of all demonstrations at residences have increased significantly in the past month (from November 15 through December 12) — **a quarter (25%) of all demonstrations at homes recorded in the US Crisis Monitor occurred in the past 4 weeks, spurred in large part by demonstrations against newly imposed COVID-19 restrictions.**



Over this time period, 40% of all demonstrations at public or private residences were *against* imposed or proposed COVID-19 mandates - whereas prior Covid-related protests were more of a mix of demonstrations both for and against Covid restrictions.

B. Geography of Protests

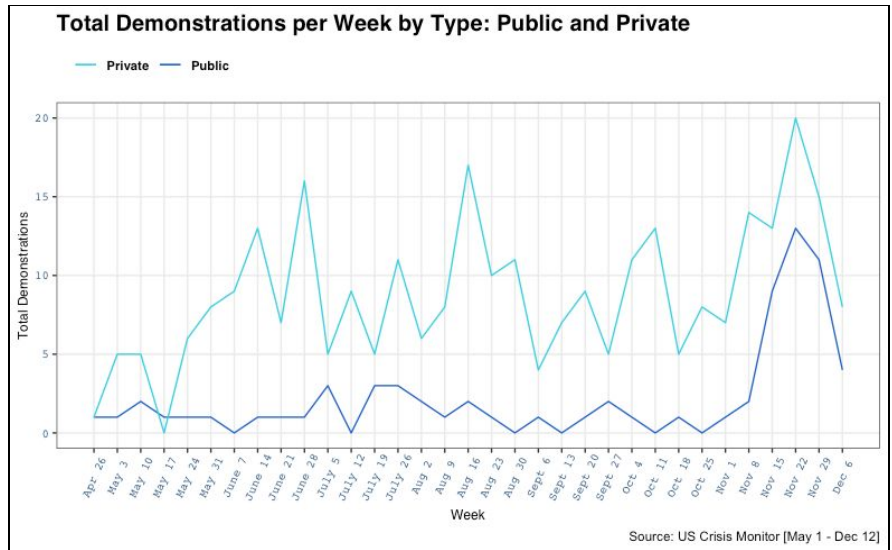
As depicted in the graph below, demonstrations at *private* homes have accounted for 81% (291) of the 361 demonstrations recorded. While demonstrations at publicly-owned, official governor and mayor residences rose significantly in the post-election period (from 12.5% of all demonstrations recorded between May 1 to November 3 to 35% of all demonstrations recorded from November 4 to December 12 period), these were driven almost exclusively by “Stop the Steal” rallies and demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions as well as high activity recorded at the public Los Angeles Mayor’s residence.

² Includes demonstrations calling for housing, labor, prison, or justice reform, immigrant or workers’ rights, and increased environmental protections, or protests against gun violence.

³ 10% (35) demonstrations fall into a miscellaneous other category, including demonstrations in support of the USPS or against the Supreme Court Nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, protests addressing international issues, and demonstrations calling for officials to resign, among others.

At the local level, the story is more complex. Just under 25% of all demonstrations occurred in 1 of 5 cities: Los Angeles (34), District of Columbia (18), Wilmington, Delaware (13), Chicago (10), and Portland (9).

These concentrated high demonstration counts have largely been driven by singular events or issues. In Los Angeles, 14 of the 34 demonstrations were against Mayor Garcetti’s possible appointment to the president-elect’s cabinet. Wilmington recorded 10 consecutive days of protests outside the Mayor’s home against gun violence and 4 of the 10 recorded demonstrations in Chicago were outside the home of the University of Chicago’s Provost calling on the University to disband its police department.



The remaining three-quarters of demonstrations, 277 total, were spread across at least 156 cities and 38 states throughout May to December 2020.

III. Key Trends to Watch

Within the context of these overall characteristics, several key trends emerge:

(1) Demonstrations at homes have occurred consistently throughout the past 8 months, with threatening behavior, by various actors, recorded at low levels since May.

11% (41) of all demonstrations at homes also recorded some form of intimidating behavior, including the presence of armed or unlawful paramilitary actors, acts of vandalism, or the use of threats or hate messages. *Though our team re-coded additional details on verbal threats and vandalism, this number is also potentially an undercount given the focus on explicit physical violence in the initial data source.*

Just under half (44%) of these 41 events recording some form of intimidation occurred since November 4. This shift coincides with increasing online and other [threats to election officials](#) following the November election and [threats to local officials over Covid-19](#) restrictions. Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs has been a [target of escalating threats](#) with protesters gathering outside of her home on November 7 chanting “we are watching you.”

Protesters demanding higher wages for Amazon workers have [set up symbolic guillotines](#) in front of Jeff Bezos’ Washington, DC mansion in June and August. In July, upwards of 200 people, some

armed, marched to the home of a Richmond Councilwoman, calling for the case of [Marcus-David Peters](#) to be reopened, where the protesters then [pointed lasers into the bedroom windows](#) of the Councilwoman's children. People demonstrating against COVID-19 mandates, left threatening messages outside the home of a Contra Costa County Public Health Officer in June, and in early-May, [armed men demonstrated outside the house of the Ohio Department of Health Director](#).

Protests outside or near homes have also been the subject of threats or direct violence, either as they protested or when passing by an unrelated home. In June, a St. Louis couple [waved a pistol and AR-15-style rifle](#) at Black Lives Matter protesters who were headed toward Mayor Lyda Krewson's house after she publicly [released the name and home addresses](#) of residents who suggested defunding the police. In September, a Milwaukee man [brandished a shotgun at BLM activists](#) who gathered to protest the homeowner's prior racist and threatening behavior. Likewise, in March, the husband of LA County District Attorney Jackie Lacey, [pointed a gun](#) at unarmed Black Lives Matter activists demonstrating outside of the DA's home. In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, demonstrators marching from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Washington, DC were shot by a homeowner who [fired several rounds at the group](#) as they sat alongside a two-lane road — one marcher was hospitalized with a gunshot wound.

(2) The period immediately post-election day has seen a sharp increase in the recorded presence of armed and unlawful paramilitary actors, largely outside the homes of State officials.

"Stop the Steal" rallies and protests against newly imposed COVID-19 restrictions have not only contributed to the recent spike in demonstrations at homes but also account for the increased recorded presence of armed and unlawful paramilitary actors. Since November 8, 10% of all demonstrations at residences have recorded armed or unlawful paramilitary actors, all of which were either "Stop the Steal" (7) or against COVID-19 restrictions (5).⁴ **Overall, 10 of the 14 demonstrations at homes recording the presence of armed or unlawful paramilitary actors occurred since the election,** suggesting a shift in dynamics observed since May.

Following the presidential election, the swing states of Georgia, [Michigan](#), and [Minnesota](#) all recorded at least one armed demonstration at state officials' homes. Protesters organized by People's Rights, a multi-state network of right-wing activists founded by Ammon Bundy, have also taken up protesting at residences as a tactic to oppose COVID-19 restrictions, protesting outside the home Boise Mayor Lauren McClean as well as [outside the homes of 3 members of the Central District Health board](#). Armed protesters have also shown up at the Governors' residences in Oregon and Minnesota to protest COVID-19 stay-at-home orders.

The US Crisis Monitor does not include data for March through April, the height of COVID-19 demonstrations. While a more complete analysis would compare prior unlawful paramilitary or other armed activity during that period, the shift to more armed activity post-election nonetheless represents either a new or concerning resurgence in activity after summer demonstrations which largely did not involve similar tactics and often addressed issues more local in nature.

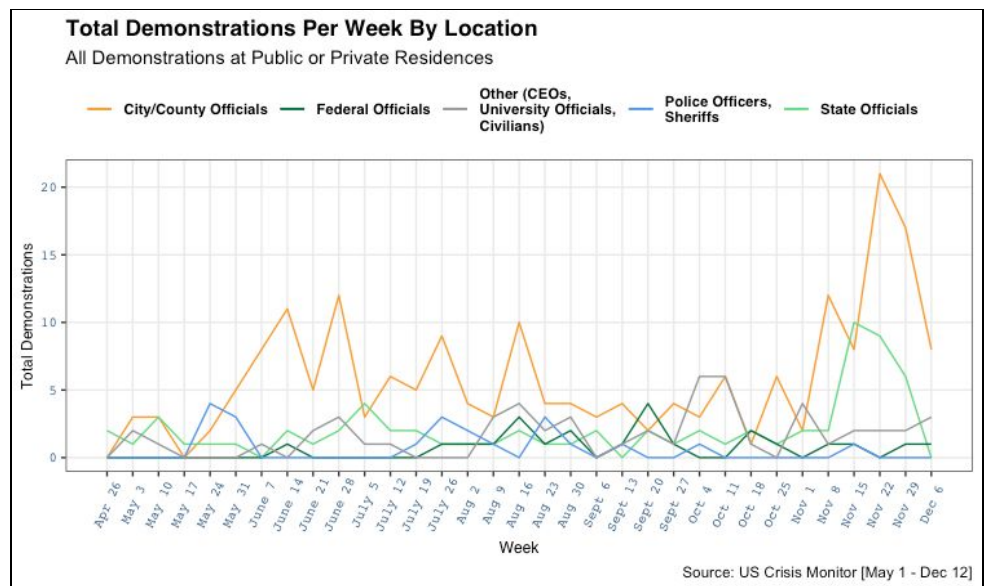
⁴ 2 events were hybrid "Stop the Steal" / ReOpen

(3) For the full period of data, more demonstrations at homes have focused on local officials, involved repeat visits, and were used as a repeat tactic by specific groups

The majority of demonstrations, both pre-election (51% of all demonstrations) and post-election (59% of all demonstration) occurred at the homes of local city or county officials and mayors. In addition to demonstrations outside of governors' homes, demonstrations outside of city and county officials' homes helped drive the overall post-election increase. The share of demonstrations taking place outside of city and county officials' homes rose from 21% pre-election to 28% post-election, the majority (55%) of which were against COVID-19 mandates.

Protests at mayors' homes continue to make up a plurality (31%) of all demonstrations post-election; however, the high rate post-election is largely due to the 18 recorded protests outside of Mayor Garcetti's home in Los Angeles and the 10 consecutive days of protests outside the Mayor's home in Wilmington, Delaware.

Other officials have faced repeat visits, often over consecutive days: Protesters gathered for 4 consecutive days outside of the home of Gallatin City-County Health Officer Matt Kelley in Bozeman, Montana. Similarly, the City Council President in Akron, Ohio and the Public Health Director in Los Angeles have seen protests outside their homes several times.



Protests outside of police residences have almost fully tapered off since the height of the summer BLM demonstrations, with only 1 demonstration recorded since mid-October. Earlier in the summer, protestors largely associated with the BLM movement demonstrated outside the homes of police officers involved in fatal shootings or arrests. Protesters showed up at the [Minneapolis](#) and [Florida](#) homes of Derek Chauvin, the police officer charged with murder in George Floyd's death. In California, at least [three people were arrested](#) during a protest at the home of an [officer who shot and killed Andres Guardado](#), an 18-year-old Latino.

Certain organizations and groups have adopted showing up at officials' homes as a tactic. Various labor groups, including local unions and branches of SEIU, are also among consistent actors showing up at homes to demonstrate. The Sunrise Movement, a youth climate advocacy organization, have held at least 6 protests since early September at various residences in [Washington DC](#), Georgia, and California. Finally, [Cancel the Rents](#) held upwards of 7 demonstrations at the homes of federal, state, and city officials since May. In these rent-related demonstrations in particular, protestors linked the

location of the demonstration to their issue, for example [marking the governor's mansion in a symbolic eviction](#) for failing to protest Maryland renters from the same during the pandemic.

IV. Implications / Recommendations

From these findings, several initial implications and recommendations emerge, with direct implications for organizers, local and federal law enforcement, social media platforms where demonstrations are planned and related online threats are made, as well as local and state officials who may be the subject of additional demonstrations:

- Stop the Steal and election-related demonstrations - largely at state official's homes - are different in nature than other demonstrations throughout the summer, recording significantly more armed or unlawful paramilitary activity and greater focus on State officials. These trends are particularly concerning if they remain paired with online threats and/or spread to targeting of local officials.
- While the symbolic line between peaceful demonstration and intimidation may be thin, threats and incitement to violence are [not protected](#) by the First Amendment. Links between online threats and offline behavior should be monitored, with threats and incitement to violence surfaced and addressed across the board, against officials and regular citizens alike — especially in the context of this nation's long history of political violence at homes.
- While many demonstrations outside of individuals' homes are designed to provoke a response from elected officials, in some localities the reaction has been to [establish ordinances](#) curtailing this type of protest tactic entirely. While such measures are intended to protect the privacy of public officials, such legislation may also have a chilling effect on protests across the political spectrum and lend support to [past](#) and [current efforts](#) to impose penalties for protest activity more broadly. Efforts to address the very real nature of threats should proceed accordingly, to ensure important First Amendment rights to engage public officials on essential issues are preserved.