



Case Study: Grand Traverse County, Michigan December 2022

Executive Summary

The Bridging Divides Team (BDI) team¹ conducted interviews in Grand Traverse, Michigan, to better understand the local realities of [political violence](#)² in the United States and highlight community responses. To understand what this looks like in practice, BDI structured our text around drivers of conflict and community mitigation strategies taking place in Grand Traverse.

While these are not the only points of tension or unity in Grand Traverse, this case study offers a snapshot of community response and an opportunity to highlight the complexities of a specific local context. Case studies can offer meaningful local analysis of conflict dynamics and highlight responses to destructive conflict and political violence from the communities at the front lines of these challenges. We hope the details below will provide a foundation to contextualize political violence and evaluate mitigation strategies used in other communities.

Drivers of Conflict

Interviewed residents coalesced around four significant drivers of conflict in Grand Traverse.

1. Some local leaders' refusal to accept 2020 election results negatively impacting community trust.
2. Efforts to pass "Second Amendment Sanctuary City" resolutions mobilizing residents and drawing in paramilitary groups.
3. Local government and non-government group actions to reject state-level COVID-19 health measures elevating related tensions and violence.
4. Persistent tensions at school boards intersecting with racial justice efforts.

Community Mitigation Strategies

Interviews coalesced around three major mitigation strategies in Grand Traverse.

1. Prepare residents for potential heightened tensions around the November 2022 election cycle.
2. Create Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led coalitions to improve the lives of BIPOC residents in Grand Traverse and support the LGBTQ+ community.
3. Bring community members together across and beyond party identity.

Taken together, interviews in Grand Traverse County illustrated both concerning trends and encouraging models of resilience. Intensifying anti-democratic and violent activity in civic spaces suggest cause for ongoing concern in maintaining the trust between local leaders and their constituents. In addition, COVID-19 acted as a catalyzer of both localized violent incidents or threats and conflict across issues - including reproductive freedom, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights. Finally, despite fears around democratic erosion and failing institutional capacity at the state and national level, solutions that utilize, combine, and empower local Grand Traverse leaders, residents, and organizations actively mitigate existing and future political violence.

¹ Authors: Augusta Dell'Omo, Ph.D., Associate Policy Researcher and Tewonia Alamu, Senior Research Specialist-Michigan Lead and Partnership Coordinator, with support from Jacob Bendicksen, Senior Research Specialist; Joel Day, Ph.D., Research Director; Yvette Deane, Senior Research Specialist; and Shannon Hiller, Executive Director, Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative.

² For this study, BDI uses the violence-prevention organization *Over Zero's* definition of political violence: "physical harm or intimidation that affects who benefits from or can participate fully in political, economic, or sociocultural life."

Case Study

Michigan's political relevance in the 2020 presidential election and the 2022 midterms informed the state's selection for study by the BDI team. BDI selected Grand Traverse County specifically for several reasons.

First, Grand Traverse, located in Northern Michigan, acts as the economic “hub” of the area; throughout the United States, regional hubs are often centers of political mobilization, with related potential for political violence.³ Second, significant state and national attention focus on other major metropolitan areas in the state⁴—BDI researchers sought to focus on a less studied site. Finally, an internally-developed Index measuring the potential risk of political violence and democratic disruption informed BDI's site selection, via over a dozen indicators on political relevance, mobilization, history of violence, and polarization and social trust. In combination with Grand Traverse's [demographic changes](#), these factors made the county an excellent candidate for a case study.⁵

BDI researchers asked interviewees to reflect on how they saw political violence impacting their community. The following observations are based on nearly a dozen Zoom and phone interviews, desk research, and other reporting or documents provided during discussions. BDI researchers spoke to residents in various local positions (leaders, officials, concerned observers), across the political spectrum, throughout the summer and fall of 2022. Using snowball sampling, BDI researchers had semi-structured conversations with individuals in the Grand Traverse area. While we asked respondents to focus on political violence since 2020, respondents highlighted incidents as early as 2016.

BDI is incredibly grateful to the local leaders, organizers, and residents in the Grand Traverse community who generously gave their time to make this project possible.

³ BDI focuses on counties due to that being the level of data availability — but we acknowledge that these issues impact surrounding counties, particularly those that are a part of the Grand Traverse Metropolitan Statistical Area. Paul Staniland (2010), “Cities on Fire: Social Mobilization, State Policy, and Urban Insurgency,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (12): 1623-1649 and R. Balme, “Regional Government,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Pergamon 2001): 12914-12917.

⁴ These include Detroit-Warren-Ann Arbor, Grand Rapids-Kentwood-Muskegon, and Lansing-East Lansing.

⁵ Grand Traverse's evolving demographic landscape is critical to understanding the county, which interviewees described as [politically segregated](#). Traditionally a vacation and retirement destination, Traverse City has seen an [influx of adults and young families](#) from [coastal areas](#). Grand Traverse County's [census reported](#) a population of 92,600, with its median household income as \$66,457. Grand Traverse County [remains overwhelmingly white](#), with 95% of the population identifying as White, 3.2% as Hispanic or Latino, 2% as Two or More Races, 1.3% as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.9% as Black or African American.

Summary

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1. Some local leaders' refusal to accept 2020 election results negatively impacting community trust

Community members raised the importance of Grand Traverse as a "purple" county. Yet, the county remains politically segregated, with Traverse City going "blue," and rural areas going "red." This political segregation heightens feelings of polarization. Residents feared for poll workers - citing redistricting, the potentially disruptive role of poll challengers, and officials' responses to election violence. Across the political spectrum, interviewees reported concerns about the proliferation of the "Big Lie" and wanted Republicans to speak out about the integrity of the 2020 elections. Additionally, case study participants cited the unpopularity of Governor Whitmer among right-leaning voters as a catalyzing effect amongst the extreme right-wing, especially after the Governor's support for adding the Reproductive Freedom for All Amendment to the Constitution, through a citizen-led ballot initiative.

Both Democratic and Republican respondents expressed serious concerns about local officials involved in election de-certification, directing specific outrage at the actions of the U.S. Representative from Michigan's 1st Congressional district, Jack Bergman. In December 2020, Bergman [helped coordinate](#) county officials and out-of-state political operatives who examined Dominion voting machines in nearby Antrim County. Additionally, Bergman voted against certifying Biden's election as president. Some interviewees also identified Antrim County, a county notable for its 2020 [election denial activity](#), as a source location for election-related militia activity. Randy Bishop, a right-wing radio show host in Antrim County [running for Michigan Senate](#), drew particular attention as an outside agitator to election denial activity [in Grand Traverse](#).⁶

In response to Bergman's election denial activity, some constituents [demanded that Bergman apologize](#) and encouraged donors to withdraw support unless he retracted his statements. In February 2021, the Grand Traverse County Board voted down a resolution to recognize the service of Bergman to the district, specifically citing his support of the [Texas lawsuit challenging the results of the 2020 election](#). Interviewees refer-

⁶ Bishop ran as a Democrat and [lost](#) in the August 2 primary.

enced the legislative impact of these claims, pointing to efforts to make ID mandatory, with organizations like [Secure MI Vote](#) regularly canvassing in Grand Traverse. Election denial candidates from Michigan on the 2022 midterm ballot [include](#) Attorney General challenger Matthew DePerno, Secretary of State challenger Kristina Karamo, State House challenger Angela Rigas, and State House incumbent Matt Maddock. DePerno and Karamo lost their races, while Rigas and Maddock won.

2. Efforts to pass “Second Amendment Sanctuary City” resolutions mobilizing residents and drawing in paramilitary groups

The majority of community members interviewed expressed frustration at the efforts to [make Traverse City a “Second Amendment Sanctuary City”](#) by the Grand Traverse Board of Commissioners in March 2020, with some calling the circumstances surrounding the debates “embarrassing” to the community. This sentiment included Republicans, with many interviewees reporting on the Second Amendment Sanctuary City debates’ negative impact on business and economic growth in Traverse City.⁷

During a March 2020 Board of Commissioners discussion on the resolution, two men in “Proud Boys” shirts [spoke at length](#), declaring themselves “proud, Western chauvinists” and speaking in support of the measure. During a virtual public meeting a year later, on January 21, 2021, in the weeks after January 6, East Bay Township resident Keli MacIntosh asked the Board of Commissioners to denounce the Proud Boys. In response, Board of Commissioner Vice Chair Ron Clous went off screen, [reappeared brandishing a black rifle](#), and then set it down. Commission Chair Rob Hentschel laughed at Clous’s behavior.⁸ After the incident, Clous [told](#) the Record-Eagle that the Proud Boys were “probably the most respected folks that got up and talked (at the March 2020 meeting). They were decent guys and treated us with respect.” With debate on the resolution ongoing, lack of condemnation of Clous’ behavior by the board likely contributed to further normalizing unlawful paramilitary activity and implicit threat in civic space.

Some residents who spoke against the Second Amendment Sanctuary City resolution at hearings reported mailed threats to their homes. Both Republican and Democratic interviewees expressed concern about the presence of heavily armed individuals in and around Grand Traverse, repeatedly referencing the influence of Proud Boys in normalizing threats in civic space. Some individuals mentioned seeing III%ers and knowing about anti-government militias north of Traverse City.⁹ Many respondents highlighted these threats as having a chilling effect on participation in public forums, even as the debates mobilized large swaths of the community.

⁷ Modeling the idea of the “sanctuary cities” effort to resist immigration policies, gun activists created Second Amendment sanctuary cities that reject the enforcement of state or federal gun laws perceived to violate the Second Amendment. Experts view these laws as [symbolic with no legal weight](#). For more on Michigan’s gun laws, see [here](#).

⁸ Critically, ACLED did not record the incident with Board of Commissioner Vice Chair Ron Clous, validating the importance of qualitative interviews.

⁹ Notably, ACLED did not record militia activity in Grand Traverse. Qualitative interviews validate the data of organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center, which note statewide Proud Boys and Patriot Front actors.

3. Local government and non-government group actions to reject state-level COVID-19 health measures elevating related tensions and violence

Deliberate anti-mask activity [against businesses enforcing masking](#) occurred in 2020 and 2021 throughout the city of Grand Traverse.¹⁰ On January 20, 2021, the County Board of Commissioners [supported a resolution declaring](#) the right of individuals to self-determine what was best for their health. On August 18, 2021, the Grand Traverse County Commissioners [voted to limit](#) the county health department's ability to promote the COVID-19 vaccines, essentially banning public vaccine mandates. The resolution, [submitted by Commission Chair Hentschel](#), prohibited the county from questioning claims for facemask exemption, advising employers to impose mask mandates, and required a disclaimer on any vaccine materials. Additionally, [the County Commission directed the resolution be sent to all 83 Michigan counties](#), the State House and Senate, and Governor Whitmer's Office.¹¹ Many discussants stated this led to a negative perception of the Board of Commissioners, with local op-eds going so far as to refer to a "[culture of authoritarianism](#)" through restricting information, promoting misinformation, and disregarding state and local legislation and experts.

After criticizing the action of the County Commissioners, the medical director of the County Health Department [saw his contract terminated](#), which he suspected was because of his vocal criticism. Residents and members of [Traverse Indivisible organized a show of support](#) for the medical director. After the County Commissioner's resolution, anti-mask and anti-vaccination events continued. At an August 26, 2021 event hosted by the "Citizens Liberating Michigan" in response to required universal masking for all K-12 students and staff, a reporter for the Record-Eagle [was shoved into a fence and punched in the face](#).¹² One of the men arrested for the attack, Joseph Welsh, ran - and [lost](#) his race - for County Commissioner. On August 2, 2022, the County Assistant Prosecuting Attorney [dismissed charges against Welsh](#).

4. Persistent tensions at school boards intersecting with racial justice efforts

Community members noted persistent patterns of racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color residents in Grand Traverse, contributing to a climate of fear and division. Interviewees testified to the presence of hate symbols like the Confederate flag.¹³

Notably, in April 2021, students from two Grand Traverse high schools [participated in a Snapchat "slave trade"](#) of their Black classmates, where students placed bids on them. In the chat, students [posted genocidal comments](#) regarding Black, Jewish, and LGBTQ+ people. Parents of students whose images were used in the Snapchat group called for

¹⁰ ACLED noted only two COVID-related events - on April 15, 2020, residents gathered in Traverse City to protest the stay-at-home orders by Governor Whitmer. On August 26, 2021, residents demonstrated against mask mandates. However, interviewees noted anti-mask demonstrations not recorded by ACLED, such as one at a [local food co-op](#).

¹¹ While Chair Hentschel initially directed the resolution sent to every county in the United States, the passed version only sends the resolution to Michigan counties.

¹² This event occurred only a few months after the "Unlock Michigan" rallies and [attack on the Michigan State Capitol](#) in April 2021.

¹³ In November 2016, Traverse City police suspended an officer without pay for driving a truck with a Confederate flag around demonstrators protesting the election of Trump. Interviewees highlighted symbols as contributing to community climate, with Black Lives Matter and Pride flags promoting solidarity with targeted communities and Confederate Flags symbolizing opposition.

the Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS) to expel all students involved in the group. TCAPS [attempted to pass a resolution](#) focusing on combating racism through teacher training, expanding library offerings, and reviewing the curriculum with a “social equity and diversity lens.” Some white parents in Traverse City [balked at the accusation that the community](#) was racist in a June 28, 2021 meeting, despite extensive [testimony](#) from Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students on the daily harassment they faced. After pressure from parent groups who inaccurately viewed the resolution as Critical Race Theory, [the Board removed the measures](#) emphasizing diversity, the words “racism” and “racial violence,” and a task force to implement the policies. Northern Michigan E3 - the UpNorth anti-racism task force that formed in 2020 - [criticized the resolution](#) as “soft” and challenging to use to hold TCAPS accountable. Some individuals who spoke in support of the resolution against racism received death threats, with some reporting the threats to law enforcement.¹⁴

Interviewees also noted frequent counter-demonstration activity around equality issues, specific vigils after mass shootings and [police violence, LGBTQ+ activity](#),¹⁵ and at polling stations. Protests after the murder of George Floyd occurred in Traverse City, with counter-demonstrators antagonizing. In one instance, on June 6, 2020, a [passing truck bearing a “Trump” flag](#) repeatedly drove around the demonstration, which respondents reported as unsettling and disturbing. Protestors also noted the presence of men in battle fatigue with assault rifles and body armor at other rallies.¹⁶ ACLED reported the counter-protestors included armed Proud Boys. One individual reported being followed home after a vigil to honor the victims of mass shootings. Consistently, case study participants noted the overlap of election denial, Second Amendment Sanctuary City, COVID denial, and anti-CRT participants, rhetoric, and tactics.

¹⁴ Via a September 6, 2022 interview.

¹⁵ Anti-gay groups exist in the county, specifically the SPLC-designated hate group TC Family.

¹⁶ One resident, who joined a gathering after the murder of George Floyd, reported harassment by trucks “[rolling coal](#).” Conversations around policing continued into 2021, specifically on the County Sheriff’s Department and the December 2021 purchase of a [\\$260,000 Bearcat armored vehicle](#). Over 200 residents [wrote emails](#) to the County Commissioner opposing the purchase, viewing it as escalating the sheriff department’s power.

Community Mitigation Strategies

Community members and organizations pursue ongoing strategies to mitigate political violence in Grand Traverse. While by no means an exhaustive list, interviewees routinely cited these organizations and initiatives. Furthermore, these organizations [fit into various categories](#) for preventing political violence, [including](#) building deterrence, conducting informational interventions, enforcing norms and behaviors, promoting intergroup social contact, and creating networks and collaborations.

Interviews coalesced around three major mitigation strategies in Grand Traverse.

1. Prepare residents for potential heightened tensions around the November 2022 election cycle.
2. Create Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led coalitions to improve the lives of BIPOC residents in Grand Traverse and support the LGBTQ+ community.
3. Bring community members together across and beyond party identity.

1. Prepare residents for potential heightened tensions around the November 2022 election cycle

Some groups and local government officials focused on preparing Grand Traverse residents for potential heightened tensions around the November 2022 election cycle. Michigan's Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission split [Grand Traverse into two districts](#) and the County Redistricting Commission increased the number of commissioners.

Organizations like the [League of Women Voters](#) focus on voter registration and mail-in voting to reduce the attractiveness of polling locations as targets for violent actors. The League of Women Voters hosted candidate forums and events to answer questions about poll workers' electoral process and de-escalation training. Additionally, the League runs an "observer core" that disseminates local government meeting records to the public.

Grand Traverse City and County clerks hosted public trials of voting machines to dispel misinformation about elections. Interviewees highlighted these activities as important actions to rebuild confidence in democratic processes, but also noted that these events were not well attended.

Community members highlighted the actions of [the Meta Peace Team](#) in Northern Michigan, a group of non-violence-trained volunteers acting as a well-trained peace team at contested events, specifically protests and demonstrations. Meta Peace Team also acted as a non-violent de-escalation resource at polling sites in Michigan during the 2022 midterms.

2. Create Black, Indigenous, and People of Color led coalitions to improve the lives of BIPOC residents in Grand Traverse and support the LGBTQ+ community

Some residents concentrated on improving the lives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Grand Traverse and supporting the LGBTQ+ community in the face of continued threats. [Northern Michigan E3](#), which formed in 2020, [issued ten demands](#) to the County Sheriff's Department, the City Police Department, the County Commission, and City Commission. E3 successfully pressured the Sheriff's Department and the City Police Department to purchase and implement body cameras.¹⁷ Organizations like [Title Track Michigan](#), in combination with We The People - MI, hosted ten [cohorts of its "Understanding Racial Justice" online course](#) in the drive to engage white community members in racial equity. Organizations like [For Love of Water, the Watershed Center Grand Traverse Bay](#), and the [Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities](#) support environmental protection.

While curriculum changes remain a persistent tension, State Senators Wayne Schmidt (R- Traverse City) and Jeff Irwin (D-Ann Arbor) [worked with Indigenous education leaders](#) to allocate \$750,000 for a new optional student curriculum. It teaches students about the history of Indigenous Peoples in Michigan and the history of Indian boarding schools.

Respondents highlighted the importance of Traverse City's "Up North Pride" in building an inclusive place for LGBTQ+ people. Residents described Traverse City as where LGBTQ+ individuals feel safe and positively identified efforts like "[Queer Prom](#)" for LGBTQ+ kids.

3. Bring community members together across and beyond party identity

Respondents also highlighted the efforts to unite people across the political spectrum. On [August 13, 2022](#), [Braver Angels](#) hosted a "[red/blue workshop](#)" in Traverse City to bring Democrat and Republican-leaning citizens together for structured conversations. The event - broadcast on CBS Sunday Morning - also included over 25 observers. Participants positively reported on the workshop and described finding friendship and camaraderie, but questions about the long-term impact remain.

Interfaith groups like the Grand Traverse Spiritual Activists Leading Together seek to engage the residents on [racial justice](#), [affordable housing](#), and voting rights issues in order to move beyond partisan affiliations to focus on issue-based solutions. Persistent issues of affordable housing and support for unhoused communities remain salient, even if not driving the majority of most contentious activity.

¹⁷ Interviewees distinguished City and County policing. Traverse City Police Department Chief increased "[community policing](#)" programs in 2022, including a community advisory board, a response team for overdose cases, and mental healthcare. By October 2022, Traverse City Police Department seeks to have a social worker on staff to respond to addiction, housing, and mental health issues. However, the potential hire was [divisive](#), with the Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers recommending against embedding social workers in police departments. The Grand Traverse County sheriff's office continues to be viewed negatively by some residents. Additionally, [the Michigan ACLU sued](#) the County Sheriff, Undersheriff, and Jail administrator over the failure to prescribe addiction treatment for incarcerated people and a high number of suicides at the jail.

Community members also discussed the importance of coalition building across political and religious divides and committing to shared action even when organizations do not completely align in order to combat growing Christian nationalism. Similarly, interviewees identified the importance of shared events like the [Traverse City Film Festival](#), [National Cherry Festival](#), [Up North Pride](#), and [Indigenous Peoples' Day](#) to bring people together.

Conclusion

Examining conflict drivers and political violence in Grand Traverse elicits several key findings.

First, the trajectory and drivers of conflict in Grand Traverse reveal the ramifications of intensifying anti-democratic and persistent threats in civic spaces. Perhaps best highlighted by the brandishing of a weapon in a Board of Commissioners meeting and the attack on a journalist, these incidents, when left unchecked, erode democratic norms and chill civic participation.

Second, COVID-19 proved a pivotal issue in Grand Traverse, influencing almost every aspect of civic and social space. While inseparable from the particularly contentious nature of COVID-19 restrictions in Michigan, COVID-19 clearly acted as a catalyzer of both localized violent incidents or threats and conflict across issues - including reproductive freedom, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights.

Finally, even as interviewees expressed fears around democratic erosion and failing institutional capacity at the state and national level, they routinely invoked the capacity of everyday Grand Traverse residents to build community resilience addressing political violence. Respondents consistently returned to the possibility of localized community resilience and reconciliation and the urgency of rebuilding civic participation and democratic norms in local government.

The case study in Grand Traverse County offers an opportunity for practitioners and academics alike to gain a deeper understanding of dynamics that can lead to violence, as well as mitigation measures to confront and undermine those who use violence or threats of violence as a political strategy. Deeper understanding of this particular context can ground future studies and build additional capacity in communities around the United States in periods of heightened risk.