



## **Issue Brief: Understanding Emerging Trends in Protests and Political Violence Around Abortion and Reproductive Rights in the United States**

**July 2022**

### **I. Introduction**

On May 2, 2022, a leaked draft of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* revealed the likelihood the decision would overturn the 1973 precedent set by *Roe v. Wade*, which had generally legalized abortion. The leaked draft of *Dobbs v. Jackson* catalyzed immediate protests, with political mobilization continuing after the official release of the decision on June 24, 2022.

The overturn of *Roe v. Wade* signals a major victory for anti-abortion rights (i.e. pro-life) activists, catapulting abortion and broader family planning access into the national conversation amidst the 2022 midterm elections. This Issue Brief examines emerging trends since the May 2nd *Dobbs v. Jackson* draft decision leaked, mainly focusing on offline mobilization. The brief contextualizes this activity within historical violence related to abortion and reproductive rights. It concludes with observations on potential activity moving forward into the 2022 election cycle.

### **II. Methodology**

BDI reviewed two datasets — [The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) and [Crowd Counting Consortium \(CCC\)](#) — for keywords and tagged events related to abortion, the Supreme Court leak overturning *Roe v. Wade*, or the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision. The team then conducted a manual review of related search terms to add or confirm events of interest. BDI collected events between May 2 and July 1, adding events from social media monitoring and reporting on related issues.

### **III. Historical context of post-*Roe*, pre-*Dobbs* targeted violence**

According to a [2010 RAND Corporation report](#), abortion rights related violence following the 1973 *Roe* decision largely targeted abortion providers. Incidents included over 300 acts of extreme violence, among them [arson, bombings, shootings, and use of butyric acid](#). Other trends of note included:

- an increase in violence directed towards abortion providers in the 1990s, including lethal incidents affiliated with the militant anti-abortion group the [Army of God](#). Between 1993 and 2016, anti-abortion rights supporters murdered [11 people](#) and attempted 26 additional murders;
- the [first known murder of an abortion provider](#) on March 10, 1993, when an anti-abortion rights extremist shot Dr. David Gunn in the back as the doctor walked into a clinic in Pensacola, Florida; and

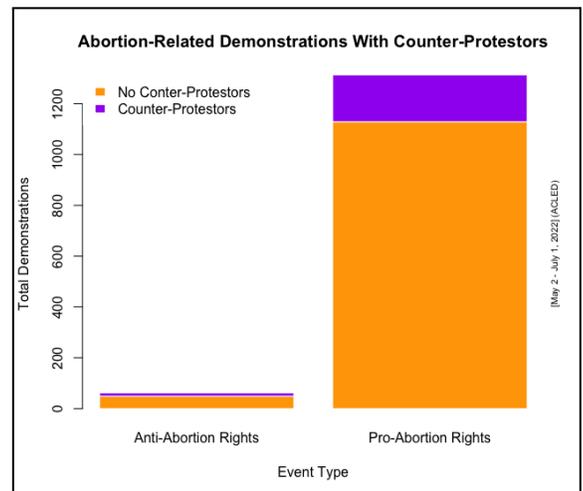
- anthrax attacks, including one [violent actor](#) who sent 550 anthrax threat letters to abortion clinics and threatened to kill 42 employees by name.

A report by the [National Abortion Federation](#) documented a further increase in abortion rights related violence in 2021. According to the report, abortion providers [experienced significant increases](#) in stalking (600%), blockades (450%), hoax devices/suspicious packages (163%), invasions (129%), and assault and battery (128%) since 2020.

Abortion rights advocates have not committed similar acts of targeted violence in the same period. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence referenced “abortion-related domestic violent extremism” as a [potential driver of ideological violence in 2021](#), citing only past incidents of anti-abortion rights violence, but also outlining warning signs of pro-abortion rights (i.e. pro-choice) violence. A widely-publicized [bulletin from the Department of Homeland Security](#) from June 24, 2022, cited primarily incidents following the leak of the *Dobbs* draft when projecting potential future pro-abortion rights violence rather than longer term historical trends.

#### IV. Offline Activity Following Leak of *Dobbs* Decision

Following the leak of the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson* draft decision, thousands of protests have occurred across the United States. [According to aggregate data from ACLED](#), between May 2 and July 1, there were 3,071 protests, with the overwhelming majority peaceful (98%) and a plurality pro-abortion rights (43%). California (12%), New York (10%), and Pennsylvania (6%) had the most protests, with Planned Parenthood and March for Our Lives as the most involved actors, each participating in 8% of the demonstrations.



Activity included counter-protesting, with a slight majority of these occurring in D.C. (9%), Texas (9%), and Florida (6%). At least 14% of the pro-abortion rights protests in this time period were met with counter-protests. Unlawful paramilitary (i.e. militia) groups' presence can also be a factor in increased potential for violence. At least 45 protests recorded unlawful paramilitary presence, 23 of which were demonstrations on reproductive rights. 18 of them involved anti-abortion rights actors, with the majority of these actors being the Proud Boys, who counter-protested 13 pro-abortion rights demonstrations in this time period.

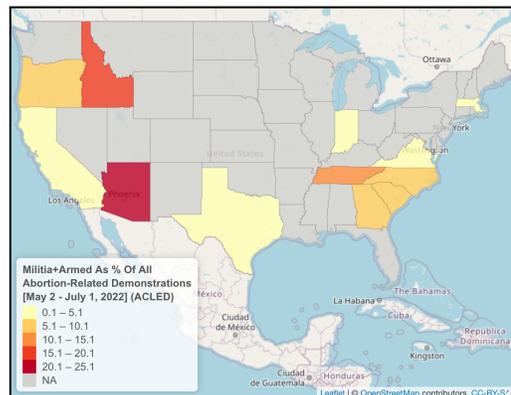
##### A. Pro-Abortion or Reproductive Rights Activity

Following the *Dobbs* leak, pro-abortion rights demonstrations occurred more than anti-abortion rights demonstrations (see figure above). A disproportionate number of counter-protests occurred at pro-abortion rights demonstrators from May 2-July 1. Some pro-abortion rights protestors were the target of violent action, including conflict with right-wing unlawful paramilitary groups and law enforcement.

### 1. Activity of Concern Around Pro-Abortion Rights Demonstrations or Locations

At least 184 pro-abortion rights protests, or 14% of such protests, recorded counter-protests between May 2 and July 1. This counter-protest rate was higher than both the 8% of all protests (235 of 3,071) met with counter-protests, compared to an average counter-protest rate of 5% since January 2020. Prominent examples of counter-protests and related incidents since July 1 include:

- At least seven instances of anti-abortion rights advocates causing violence and harassing others on June 24, including [pepper spraying](#), [egging](#), [punching](#), and [stabbing](#) pro-abortion rights protestors;
- [armed counter-protesters](#) and [Proud Boys](#) met pro-abortion rights demonstrators in Atlanta, Georgia;
- Proud Boys and [Groypers](#) joined counter-protesters at pro-abortion rights demonstrations in [Phoenix, Arizona](#), Nashville, Tennessee, and Dallas, Texas;
- Three potential or attempted car-ramming incidents -- in Cedar Rapids, [Iowa](#),<sup>1</sup> injuring one pro-abortion rights demonstrator; in Eugene, [Oregon](#), and one in Appleton, [Wisconsin](#).
- A Boogaloo Boi and a Three Percenter [appeared](#) at a reproductive rights demonstration in Eugene, Oregon.



From May 2- July 1, ACLED recorded at least 25 instances of law enforcement intervention at pro-abortion rights events. In 22 of those 25 state interventions, police dispersed crowds with tear gas, smoke, arrests, shoving and/or riot gear. Incidents included:

- Police use of [tear gas](#) against pro-abortion rights protests in Phoenix, Arizona in response to protesters banging on State Senate doors;
- Police in Los Angeles [shot a woman](#) at close range with less-than-lethal munitions and threw actor Jodie Sweetin [to the ground](#) as she led a protest away from a freeway;
- An officer [shoved a woman](#), tased, and [arrested six protestors](#) in Greenville, South Carolina, where law enforcement have since initiated an internal review; and

<sup>1</sup> In June 2021, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds signed [a bill granting immunity to drivers](#) who hit protesters while attempting to leave the area of a protest. The bill is similar to a spate of bills in other states [decriminalizing car attacks](#) against protesters.

- a Republican State Senate candidate and off-duty police officer in Rhode Island [punched his Democratic opponent](#) at a pro-abortion rights protest outside the State House in Providence. He was [charged with simple assault and disorderly conduct](#) and has withdrawn from the race.

Property damage occurred as well, [with a suspicious package at the Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health](#) and an [arson attack](#) on the only abortion clinic in Casper, Wyoming.

## **B. Anti-Abortion Rights Activity**

From May 2-July 1, ACLED recorded at least 62 anti-abortion rights protests. Anti-abortion rights advocates demonstrated most often in Texas (8%), Ohio (8%), and California (6%). According to ACLED, 97% of anti-abortion rights protests remained peaceful, and no tear gas was used by law enforcement. At least 31 events occurred in front of or targeted Planned Parenthood and other reproductive and sexual healthcare centers since May 2, a likely undercount given [recent trends in clinic targeting](#). Documented incidents including:

- Anti-abortion rights protestors gathered outside the Jackson Women’s Health Organization in Mississippi. Several individuals “harassed” those entering the clinic. Police arrived to monitor the situation when clinic workers reported that one anti-abortion rights demonstrator backed his vehicle up and hit a clinic volunteers.
- Anti-abortion rights protestors rallied at the Lakeland Women’s Health Center in Florida. As one Black woman approached the entrance to the clinic, one of the demonstrators yelled racial epithets and approached her. Police arrested him for breaching the peace.

Though unlawful paramilitaries were primarily recorded counter-demonstrating pro-abortion rights protests, unlawful paramilitary actors also joined anti-abortion rights demonstrators on at least [two occasions](#).

### **1. Activity of Concern Around Anti-Abortion Demonstrations or Locations**

Since the leaked draft decision on May 2, presumed pro-abortion rights actors – including some acting under the moniker [Jane’s Revenge](#) – vandalized [at least 30 anti-abortion rights targets](#)<sup>2</sup>, including “crisis pregnancy centers.”<sup>3</sup> Most of these attacks consisted primarily of vandalism or property destruction (84%). However, there have also been more severe instances with at least five [cases](#) of attempted arson.

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<sup>2</sup> Estimates of pro-abortion rights vandalism or other incidents were verified from multiple sources, including [informal lists on social media](#), [June 24 DHS Bulletin](#), [The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) and [Crowd Counting Consortium \(CCC\)](#) and other monitoring. All numbers are best estimates as of July 8, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “Crisis Pregnancy Centers” are usually faith-based non-profits with a mission of dissuading pregnant people from having abortions. [Few centers have medical professionals on staff](#) and many practice “abortion reversal” procedures deemed non-scientific or unethical by the medical field.

Examples in which Jane’s Revenge moniker [has been used to claim responsibility in](#) various acts of vandalism and property destruction include:

- [Graffiti of a Catholic church](#) in New York City on June 27
- [Vandalism of two Michigan “crisis pregnancy centers”](#) on June 19 and 20
- [Vandalism of Michigan representative’s campaign office](#), located inside an anti-abortion organization building on June 21
- An arson attack and property destruction in [Amherst, New York](#) on June 7 targeting “crisis pregnancy center.” The attack injured two [firefighters](#) in the aftermath, the first injuries from the attacks.

It [remains unclear](#) if Jane’s Revenge is a coordinated group with a delineated structure. However, the “Jane’s Revenge” tag and language may continue to serve as a unifying message in attacks against [anti-abortion pregnancy centers](#). Analysts primarily obtain information about Jane’s Revenge from their [blog](#), [allied news aggregators](#), news coverage, and Telegram groups. On June 7, 16 Republican lawmakers called on the DOJ to [investigate Jane’s Revenge](#) as a domestic terrorist threat. Facebook parent company Meta [internally designated Jane’s Revenge as a terrorist organization](#). In a brief released June 24, [DHS](#) called Jane’s Revenge as “a network of loosely affiliated suspected domestic violent extremists,” referencing Jane’s late May blog post calling for a “night of rage.”

In a June 7 Bulletin, the DHS initially noted attacks on churches and religious institutions as [an area of concern](#) given the potential Supreme Court decision. The Diocese of Stockton, California, reported that the [DHS later warned clergy leadership about the risk of targeted attacks on churches](#). Catholic news outlets widely reported the existence of the June 24 DHS brief, which cited [11 incidents of vandalism](#) against religious facilities, raising the alarm of more attacks against faith-based institutions. In the lead up to and following these warnings, right-wing media also emphasized the threat from a “night of rage,” prompting [wider calls for self defense and vigilantism](#).

Following the *Dobbs* decision announcement, a “night of rage” largely did not materialize. According to ACLED, there were at least 10 events that included harassment, vandalism, or violence on June 26 across the United States. Some pro-abortion rights protesters vandalized buildings and cars and threw smoke bombs. However, pro-abortion rights advocates committed only half of those actions. Unidentified protestors, unlawful paramilitary groups, and Proud Boys committed the other acts of harassment, vandalism, and violence.

Additionally, threats to Supreme Court Justices have garnered significant attention. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the Court’s opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, received harassing [packages](#) to his former home. Police arrested and charged a man with attempted murder after making [threats to Justice Brett Kavanaugh](#) and appearing outside the Justice’s Maryland house

armed with a gun, knife, and various tools before calling the police to report himself. Pro-abortion rights activists regularly [demonstrate outside the homes](#) of Justices Alito, Kavanaugh, Thomas, and Barrett, a trend expected to continue and [drive local discourse](#) around broader first amendment rights.

## V. Preliminary Conclusions and Looking Ahead

In the period between the leaked and official releases of the *Dobbs* decision, violence remained primarily directed toward pro-abortion rights demonstrators with a few high profile, high impact incidents targeting anti-abortion rights religious institutions driving rising tensions. Incidents targeting pro-abortion rights groups also included a wider range of unlawful paramilitary, anti-abortion rights protestors, and law enforcement actors. Violence predominately against pro-abortion rights demonstrators appears likely to continue, as the issue remains in the legislative and legal spotlight with groups mobilize in large numbers.

While it remains too soon to make a definitive judgment about what type of pro-abortion rights group Jane's Revenge is, or will be, both the fear generated by associated rhetoric and violent action against churches, "crisis pregnancy centers," and officials remain an area of concern. Though a "night of rage" [did not materialize in \*Dobbs\*' immediate aftermath](#), right-wing influencers continued to [play up the risk of political violence from demonstrators](#) opposed to abortion bans. This rhetoric increases the risk that right-wing paramilitary and other individuals will appear at demonstrations in opposition or claiming to provide security, while also continuing to stoke generalized partisan fear. Social media both exacerbates building fear and provides opportunities for extremist groups, like the [Proud Boys](#), to join demonstrations to advance their own goals.

At least 90 elected prosecutors across the United States have [signed a letter](#) committing to not enforcing abortion bans in their jurisdictions, setting the stage for continued attention in both local communities and individual states. So-called "trigger law" abortion bans went into immediate effect in [13 states](#). Several other states are likely to [pass their own new restrictions](#), while others have moved to protect state-specific abortion rights. Republican officials - including former Vice President Mike Pence - stated their [intention to pursue a national abortion ban](#) if the Republican Party gains a Senate majority after the midterms. With further restrictions at stake at multiple levels of government, the election period will likely increase protests activity and potentially violent or targeted incidents further from the new post-*Dobbs* baseline.