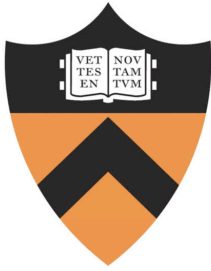




Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset



October 20, 2022



Bridging
Divides
Initiative



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LEAGUE
OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER



To join the collaboration as this dataset grows, email BDI@princeton.edu

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Executive Summary

Threats to and harassment of local officials present a significant challenge to American democracy by discouraging civic engagement, undermining the work of public servants, and creating unprecedented stress on the cornerstones of democratic society including elections, education, and public safety processes. A heightened environment of fear among local officials seems ubiquitous, but the data behind the phenomenon is opaque. This project is the **first of its kind - an ongoing longitudinal study** to systematically evaluate events of threats and harassment across the United States using public event-based data.

Why new data?

- At present, there are no other systematically tracked, public data available on a national scale. This dataset provides an initial assessment of known public threats to local officials across the US, as well as a clear agenda for expanding data collection efforts.
- As opposed to surveys and stories, event-based data allow for empirical assessment of observable incidents. This allows analytical transition from perceptions to patterns, and the promotion of more effective evidence-driven policy. These event data complement existing survey data showing how these issues are worthy of more attention and analysis.
- Event-based data provide decision-makers with specific understandings of threat/harassment locations, targets, perpetrators, and the nature of threats in order to craft specific responses and mitigation strategies for local elected officials, law enforcement, community leaders, and public interest organizations.
- Impartial data about how threats and harassment function can reduce the politicization of events and provide clarity for policymakers seeking better intervention strategies.

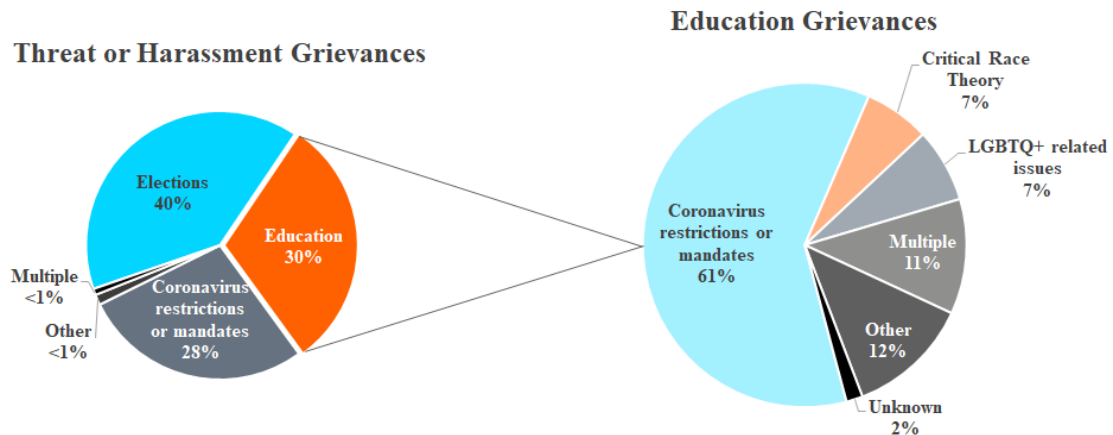
What does the dataset include?

- The Threats and Harassment Dataset (THD) is a product of collaboration across multiple organizations, integrating existing events collected by others and newly-coded events into a new dataset with 400 unique observations between January 1, 2020 and September 23, 2022.
 - Incidents included are narrowly focused on **threats and harassment to local officials**, not state and federal targets
 - Initial coding focused on officials in three policy areas: **election, education, and health**. This broadens the scope of officials considered beyond mayors and other elected officials to include additional contested civic spaces.
- Details on threats and harassment of local officials specifically address:
 - Incidents beyond legal definitions of criminal conduct, encompassing incidents that a common person would find threatening or harassing. This acknowledges that even activity that is not illegal can impact democratic norms, continues to erode civic space, and create a climate of fear.
 - Information on both perpetrators and targets of threats and harassment. This allows concerned parties to understand more fully the impact on individuals and communities.
- Final incidents were produced after review of:
 - Over 10,000 news stories
 - 3,000 evaluated incidents
 - Thousands of public protest events tracked in public datasets - the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED).
- The Threats and Harassment Dataset is a living dataset, which will continue to grow with additional incidents from state and federal levels, new mechanisms for reporting incidents, and data collection on outcome variables.

Findings: What does the initial data tell us?

The dataset offers a lens for understanding how threats and harassment are impacting all parts of local democracy--individual leaders, communities, and institutions. By observing incidents and trends in the data over time, researchers and policymakers can also better understand longer-term threats to our democracy.

- The project specifically examined threats and harassment to local elections, health, and education officials, counting incidents across 43 states. Of the 400 cases observed, 40% were related to elections, 30% related to education, and 29% related to health issues (overwhelmingly COVID-19 issues).



- Across issue areas, threats of **death** and **gun violence** are more than twice as common as any other form of threat, comprising 34% of all threats and 13% of all cases. **Intimidation** accounts for 61% of all harassment cases. See Figure 4 for a full breakdown of tactics.
- **Women** officials were targeted at a higher frequency than others, totaling 42.5% of incidents. Adjusting for the proportion of women in local offices, we estimate that women are targeted 3.4x more than men.
- Approximately half of all recorded cases of threats and harassment targeted someone who had previously been targeted or who received **multiple threats**. The remainder were aimed at new targets.
- Education related incidents mainly involved the intersection of COVID-19 and education (61%), followed by so-called “critical race theory” (7%), and LGBTQ+ related issues (7%).
- Threats or harassment of **election officials** or **poll workers** span 21 states and make up about 35% of all incidents tracked. Of these incidents, the states with the highest percentage of threats or harassment incidents include **Pennsylvania** (16%), **Georgia** (14%), **Michigan** (13%) **Wisconsin** (10%), and **Arizona** (6%) which make up 59% of all threats or harassment to election officials or poll workers. These findings appear to reinforce the FBI’s analysis that threats are more frequent in states with contested election results and lingering election denial activism.¹

¹ Jeff Pegues, “Seven States Continue to See Unusual Levels of Threats to Election Workers,” CBS News, October 3, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/election-worker-threats-7-states/>.

Recommendations

Based on initial data analysis, we offer **five recommendations** to improve data collection and better support community organizations and protect civic space.

- 1. Support robust, safe, and easily accessible self-reporting:** Trusted avenues to receive reports to civil society monitors and partnership with law enforcement can both fill gaps in our understanding of chronically underreported events, as well as improve the field's ability to support victims and targets of threats and harassment.
- 2. Diversify sources of reporting and incident collection:** Data collection should be expanded to include reporting from journalists, social media, crowd-sourcing, and other sources in order to diversify and increase public reporting of observable cases. This will require careful documenting and clearer methodologies to verify non-traditional sources but may increase the accuracy of the total count.
- 3. Increase data sharing and collaboration:** Increased and ongoing data sharing and collaboration is necessary between civil society monitors, government, and civil society organizations. By finding secure and appropriate ways to share data about how communities are evolving in their response to threats and harassment, the government, analysts, and, most importantly, targeted communities, can improve understanding of the full picture.
- 4. Elevate community responses:** Future data collection can elevate community responses to threats and harassment, including the need to center additional future data collection efforts on tracking outcome variables, such as policy innovation, resignations, or civil and criminal penalties. This shift builds on the strength of longitudinal data structure and could perhaps create a typology of mitigation efforts to reveal more about the strength of democratic institutions and norms, beyond just incidents of threat. We could then ask questions about how effectively specific interventions can help protect communities against negative events.
- 5. Invest in comprehensive policy frameworks to protect civic space:** Stronger policy frameworks are needed to protect civic space. Analysis of the dataset shows how critical new policy coordination and new resources are to systematically address incidents of threats and harassment. These may include anti-doxing and privacy protections, better partnerships between sectors, and transparent reporting of incidents from social media platforms and law enforcement who already receive reports. Table 8 in the report provides a curated list of civil society and government resources and policy recommendations.

About the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University

The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) is a non-partisan research initiative based at Princeton University that tracks and mitigates political violence in the United States. BDI supports efforts to grow and build local community resilience throughout elections and other periods of heightened risk, laying a foundation for longer-term work to bridge the divides we face as a nation.

About ADL - Center On Extremism

The ADL Center on Extremism (COE) is the foremost authority on extremism, terrorism and hate both foreign and domestic. Its staff of investigators, analysts and technical experts strategically monitor, expose and disrupt extremist threats across the ideological spectrum—on the internet and on the ground. COE provides resources, expertise and trainings that enable law enforcement officers, public officials and community leaders, as well as Internet and technology companies to identify and counter emerging threats.

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Additional data collection, coding, analysis, writing, and editing were provided by researchers from both ADL's Center on Extremism and Princeton's Bridging Divides Initiative teams.

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Introduction

Threats to and harassment of local officials present a significant challenge to American democracy. These actions make civic spaces feel unsafe, keep public servants from doing their work, and jeopardize democratic processes such as public meetings and elections. Public officials of both parties, and many serving in non-partisan offices, have become targets of doxing, armed protests at their residences, personal and virtual threats to their body and family, vandalism, and threats of violent acts. Intimidation and threats of violence have driven some out of local office, while a new crop of hardliners and anti-government fringe candidates line up to take their place.² As stated by San Jose councilmember Dev Davis, a target of violent threats, “this further erodes our democracy and our ability to attract good people to run for public office.”³ Threats to and harassment of officials discourage civic engagement and create unprecedented stress on democratic processes, which exacerbates polarization and feeds an anti-democratic cycle.⁴

Intimidation of officials harms American democratic foundations, and also exact an individual human toll. Vanessa Montgomery, a polling manager in the city of Taylorsville, Georgia and her daughter, a poll worker, left to deliver ballots to an elections office in Bartow County after the polls closed for the Georgia runoffs for two U.S. Senate seats on January 5th 2021. On the way, she was followed by an SUV for 25 minutes that nearly ran them off the road. Her daughter had called the police, and the dispatcher helped guide them to a parking lot, where officers met and escorted them to the election office. In August 2021, Supervisor Clint Hickman of Maricopa County, Arizona, received a voicemail that warned, “People are going to be coming and visiting the homes of the board of supervisors and basically executing their families. Should be fun.” Such threats should never be tolerated, and yet this report tracks hundreds of similar incidents that appear in public accounts, accentuating the challenge confronting civic spaces and democratic institutions.

Why new data?

In order to better make sense of the frequency, severity, purpose, and geographic distribution of incidents of threats and harassment, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Center on Extremism and Princeton University’s Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) partnered on a new data collection effort. This project synthesizes existing data from multiple sources and adds new observations to create incident-level data and novel insights on threats and harassment of local officials from across the United States. Other partners in this project contributed data and expertise, including the National League of Cities, the Prosecution Project, Tech Policy Press, and the Brennan Center for Justice.

Data on threats and harassment is critical to making evidence-based decisions to protect civic spaces. A lack of national, longitudinal, and event-based data means statements about the threat landscape are often subject to political interpretation and speculation, driving the politicization of claims about the phenomenon itself.⁵ Unfortunately, event-based data on threats and harassment incidents are not systematically made public or tracked

2 Zach Montellaro, “When an Election Denier Becomes an Election Chief,” Politico, August 29, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/29/election-denier-secretary-state-mail-voting-00054018>; David Leonhardt, “A Crisis Coming: The Twin Threats to American Democracy,” The New York Times, September 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/17/us/american-democracy-threats.html>; Leonhardt, “A Crisis Coming: The Twin Threats to American Democracy.” Alan Greenblatt, “Threats Mount Against Public Officials: ‘Not What I Signed Up For,’” Governing, December 16, 2020, <https://www.governing.com/now/threats-mount-against-public-officials-not-what-i-signed-up-for.html>; Patrick Sisson, “Why Local Officials Are Facing Growing Harassment and Threats,” Bloomberg News, June 29, 2022, Not only are resignations a problem, but we also note jurisdictions are losing expertise because some of these people have been in their positions for decades. Not only are threats and harassment deterring good people from running for these positions but the new set of officials do not have the years of experience or expertise, perhaps making the process more prone to error. On this, see Greenblatt, “Threats Mount Against Public Officials: ‘Not What I Signed Up For’”; Sisson, “Why Local Officials Are Facing Growing Harassment and Threats.” Montellaro, “When an Election Denier Becomes an Election Chief”; Leonhardt, “A Crisis Coming: The Twin Threats to American Democracy.” 3 Maggie Angst, “San Jose Bomb Squad Finds Explosive Device at Councilwoman’s Willow Glen Home,” The Mercury News, June 14, 2022, 4 Rachel Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/15/five-strategies-to-support-u.s.-democracy-pub-87918>; Michelle M. Mello, Jeremy A. Greene, and Joshua M. Sharfstein, “Attacks on Public Health Officials During COVID-19,” JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association 324, no. 8 (August 25, 2020): 741–42; Perry Stein and Tom Hamburger, “Over 1,000 Election-Worker Threats Reported in Past Year, Official Says,” The Washington Post, August 3, 2022 5 See for example, NSBA Board of Directors, “NSBA Apologizes for Letter to President Biden,” National School Board Association, October 22, 2021; Loadenthal, “Eco-Terrorism? Countering Dominant Narratives of Securitisation: A Critical, Quantitative History of the Earth Liberation Front (1996-2009),” Perspectives on Terrorism [Vol. 8., No. 3] 8, no. 3 (June 2014), https://www.academia.edu/5559097/_2014_Eco_Terrorism_Countering_Dominant_Narratives_of_Securitisation_a_Critical_Quantitative_History_of_the_Earth_Liberation_Front_1996_2009_.

by law enforcement, and when efforts to track threats do materialize, they can be hampered by lack of reporting or inadequate outreach to impacted communities.⁶ There is also a lack of systematic data collected particularly for local officials. When data are collected, lack of law enforcement coordination and lack of feedback to victims may depress reporting.⁷ Additionally, while surveys have been conducted in a limited way for mayors, there is a particular lack of information related to non-mayoral elected positions, administrative appointees, and lower-level municipal officials.

This is the first dataset that attempts to address these missing data, evaluating the period from January 1, 2020 - September 23, 2022. Event-driven data, as opposed to surveys, allow for empirical assessment of incidents, which in turn allows the field to transition from perceptions to patterns, and thus more effective evidence-driven policy. Decision-makers need specific understanding of event locations, targets, and the nature of threats to craft specific responses and mitigation strategies for local elected officials, law enforcement, community leaders, and public interest organizations.

An initial report, ongoing data collection

This ongoing data collection effort helps to better define and illuminate the environment of threats and harassment that local officials face in the United States today. In this report, we evaluate existing evidence and data on threats and harassment and discuss the methodological contribution of this study, namely event-based data supported by externally validated news accounts. This initial study presents mapped incidents and a descriptive summary on threats to and harassment of locally elected, appointed, or professional municipal officials to further the discussion on the nature of the current dangerous political environment, particularly for officials in the education, health, and electoral sectors. A final section discusses overall trends and implications of the statistical findings, while noting limitations and plans to expand the data collection efforts.

Analysis of this dataset of threats against local officials can help policymakers, researchers, community groups, law enforcement, and other practitioners to better understand the scope and scale of threats facing local officials and design informed responses. In addition to the urgent need to make sense of ongoing threats against local officials, timely and continuously updated collection of these data can also help a range of stakeholders better understand interventions that might protect civic processes. The report notes existing policy recommendations and presents five specific recommendations for future data collection and policy interventions on threats and harassment.

Existing Evidence on Threats and Harassment

Survey data indicate that threats and harassment have reached an inflection point. A recent study finds increasing general support for the use of threats and harassment against officials, with respondents justifying such attacks on ideological grounds.⁸ In 2021, a Women Mayors Network survey showed that political violence against mayors is common and “more prevalent for women mayors and mayors of color.”⁹ The sobering findings reinforce observed sexualized and gendered violent threats against women in politics, amplified under new levels of polarization and with social media tools.¹⁰

6 For previous attempts to create event-based data on threats and harassment see J. Reid Meloy et al., “A Research Review of Public Figure Threats, Approaches, Attacks, and Assassinations in the United States,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 49, no. 5 (September 2004): 1086–93.

7 Ruby Edlin and Turquoise Baker, “Poll of Local Election Officials Finds Safety Fears for Colleagues — and Themselves,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, March 10, 2022.

8 Rachel J. Topazian et al., “US Adults’ Beliefs About Harassing or Threatening Public Health Officials During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 7 (July 1, 2022): e2223491.

9 Rebekah Herrick and Sue Thomas, “An Intersectional Exploration of Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence of Mayors in 2021,” n.d.,

10 Mona Lena Krook, *Violence Against Women in Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Sarah Sobieraj, *CREDIBLE THREAT OSDP C: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Management Association and Information Resources, *Social Issues Surrounding Harassment and Assault: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (IGI Global, 2018); Simon Montlake, “Rage from the Right: Threats against Lawmakers Rise for the GOP, Too,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 4, 2022.

Another survey of elected officials conducted by the National League of Cities indicates that “87 percent of local officials surveyed observed an increase in attacks on public officials in recent years, while 81 percent reported having experienced harassment, threats and violence themselves.”¹¹ Unfortunately, many of the reports lack sufficient information to meet the legal threshold for prosecution. The Department of Justice Election Threats Task Force indicated that, out of the over 1,000 cases reviewed, only 11% met the threshold for prosecution, and less than 5% provided the information needed to launch an investigation.¹² As recently as October 3, 2022, the FBI warned that threats to election workers in key swing states continue at heightened levels.¹³ These findings and limited public safety response to the issue indicates that the threat and harassment landscape deserves additional attention.¹⁴

While surveys present a strong foundation to build upon, they are incomplete snapshots in time. Such snapshots speak to a level of threat, but differences between surveys mean they often do not reliably provide the data necessary to make specific claims about increases or decreases over time.

Furthermore, surveys that rely on membership lists to gather respondents, rather than representative samples of a broader landscape of elected officials, are likely to produce a response bias. Finally, survey instruments by themselves may lack event analysis, focus on a limited set of individuals such as elected officials, and may ignore appointed, professional, or volunteer officials, who also receive threats. Self-reporting incidents within a survey structure may also leave out salient details that allow for descriptive analysis. For example, extant studies present a relatively small number of observations from which to draw inferences, are speculative on cause, do not describe threat-type, and fail to disaggregate types of actors and perpetrators. Scholars are left wondering about who the actors and targets are, how to measure different types of threats, and where these actions took place. Studies focusing on event data can answer these questions with an empirical grounding.

The field would do well to pursue longitudinal surveys, especially pre- and post-election to track how threats and harassment frequency evolves over time. The ADL and BDI, in partnership with CivicPulse, have recently launched surveys with nationally representative samples of elected officials over time. Initial findings will be released in coming weeks. For more information on this survey instrument and to join the collection effort, please contact BDI@princeton.edu.

Introducing the Threats and Harassment Dataset (THD): Methodology

Collaboration is crucial to synthesize existing data and ensure non-duplication of effort. This project began with dozens of meetings among key stakeholders to discuss potential existing sources of community collection or monitoring, gaps in data collection requiring new research, and whether such research was already underway by other groups. The project builds on and synthesizes existing survey and event-based data. Data provided from the Prosecution Project, Tech Policy Press, the Brennan Center for Justice, the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) provided about 217 observations, which were consolidated, re-coded, and included through the BDI/ADL methodology outlined below.¹⁵ Each case from these partner databases was verified for inclusion and coded using a common set of variables outlined below.

This is a “living” dataset. The intent remains to grow the federation of civil society organizations and researchers working together to identify events of threat and harassment. Future iterations of this data will incorporate broader inclusion criteria and require a broader coalition of partners tracking and reporting incidents, especially

¹¹ Clarence E. Anthony et al., “On The Frontlines of Today’s Cities: Trauma, Challenges, and Solutions” (National League of Cities, 2021).

¹² “Readout of Election Threats Task Force Briefing with Election Officials and Workers,” Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, August 1, 2022, Readout of Election Threats Task Force Briefing with Election Officials and Workers.”

¹³ Pegues, “Seven States Continue to See Unusual Levels of Threats to Election Workers.”

¹⁴ “Local Election Officials Survey (March 2022),” Brennan Center for Justice, accessed September 18, 2022, Finds Safety Fears for Colleagues — and Themselves.”

¹⁵ Each of these organizations provided data for the project, but analysis and classification of an event as threat/harassment was solely conducted by BDI/ADL.

to build on trusted relationships with communities most frequently targeted.

Scope and Definitions

As expansive as the problem is, THD does not attempt to capture it all. Instead, the data focuses on incidents of threats and harassment to local officials by perpetrators expressing a collectively-felt grievance related to education, elections, or health, from January 1, 2020 to September 23, 2022. These are carefully chosen parameters - defining a set of deliberate, narrow, and considered scope conditions.

The first is that we are concerned with threats and harassment. While incidents of attacks, arsons, and the like are critical in understanding elements of political violence, they are outside of the scope of consideration here since they are already captured in criminal data. Likewise, we are not collecting data on political disagreement, even when it is strong, expressive, or persistent. The term “*threat*” is defined as instances in which one person communicates to another their intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action at least in part due to that person’s role as a public official. A ‘threat’ can be any comment or communication that might reasonably cause the person receiving the threat to fear for his or her own safety or for their own or their immediate family’s safety. A threat can be present even if there is no intent on the part of the perpetrator to carry out the threat. Following the methodology of ADL’s *Audit of Antisemitic Incidents*, we will count criminal and non-criminal threats.¹⁶

The term “*harassment*” is defined as instances of knowing and willful conduct directed at a specific person at least in part due to that person’s role as a public official, and that a reasonable person would consider aggressively pressuring, intimidating, alarming, tormenting, or terrorizing another person without serving a legitimate purpose.¹⁷

The data only focus on local officials as targets. People in general are threatened regularly - celebrities, writers, pastors, health workers, and more - but these are outside the scope of this project. Intentionality of targeting local officials is also key. The data do not capture instances of “incivility,” rudeness or swearing, calls for resignation, impeachment, or recalls, if it is judged that a reasonable person would not identify them as a specific threat or targeted harassment.

Note that the incidents of concern involve both a public official target and a perpetrator. We evaluate “dyadic”

Threat Examples:

- In Pennsylvania, City Commissioner Al Schmidt was forced to leave his home and had to live under 24-hour police protection after threats targeted his children and included photos of his home. One such email was sent to his wife in December of 2020, with the subject line, “Albert RINO Schmidt, committed treason.” The email said, “Your husband should tell the truth, or your three kids...will be fatally shot,” and then mentioned their children’s ages and their address, and said that the police could not help them. The email was signed “Q,” in likely reference to the extremist QAnon conspiracy theory and included a link to a picture of the family’s home.
- A resident in Brainerd, Minnesota told Brainerd School Board members during a meeting on June 14, 2021 that he would “dump hot coals” on all their heads. The resident made the threat while protesting critical race theory as “demonic”.

Harassment Examples:

- Individuals, including government workers, gathered outside Boston Mayor Michelle Wu’s home on January 12, 2022 to protest the city’s coronavirus vaccination mandates, including a new vaccine mandate for Boston public employees. The group brought bullhorns, shouted, and blasted loud music outside her home into the early morning hours. See page 27 for findings on harassment at homes.
- Fulton County Director of Registrations Richard Barron and his staff were surveilled outside of where they worked in December of 2020. Barron stated, “They started to do surveillance on my staff, taking pictures of all of the individuals that would come in and go in and out of the warehouse, they would take pictures of their license plates.”

¹⁶ “Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2021,” ADL, April 26, 2022

¹⁷ Like with threats, following the methodology of ADL’s Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, we will count criminal and non-criminal harassment. “Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2021.”

pairs of actors - a perpetrator and target. For targets, we especially look for health officials (e.g., county or city public health directors), election officials (e.g., registrars, clerks, or poll workers), local government officeholders (e.g., mayors, county supervisors or commissioners, city council members), and school officials (e.g., school boards, principals, superintendents). Since many perpetrators are anonymous or unknown, we sometimes cannot distinguish between perpetrators if there are many threat or harassment events against one target. Such cases are aggregated and coded as a single event against one target and flagged as that official receiving repetitive or compound threats during the incident.

Incidents may often involve one perpetrator affecting many targets (such as all of the members of a school board) or many perpetrators acting against a single target (such as the group of people gathered outside the Boston mayor's home, described in the example above). In the interests of data fidelity, we record such incidents as a single event, unless discrete actions are directed against each member of a collective body. Repeated behavior, collectively, constitutes a single harassment incident (e.g., one single phone call doesn't necessarily constitute harassment, but hundreds of phone calls might) unless further information indicates that they should be disaggregated. If threats are also included in the repeated behavior, then we would code it as threat and harassment unless further information indicates that they should be disaggregated. In order to create a comparability of events, we strive to express each in the form of a dyadic event in which a discrete action involves a specific perpetrator and a specific target.

Incidents are coded with additional variables, such as the location and time of the threat or harassment, in order to better understand tactics and strategies. Location of an event alone does not determine inclusion, such as at an office or a home. Home demonstrations, for example, do not always meet the inclusion criteria. In particular, cases where the location is publicly owned have a higher threshold for inclusion. For private locations, we side with inclusion when there are public alternative locations where events could reasonably be held. The threatening or harassing behavior at the home location contextualizes inclusion determination (e.g., repeated intimidating or disturbing behavior, doxing, armed protestors, encroachment on private property, intentionally targeting children or partners). Inclusion also considers whether an official might feel harassed by the actions, but is only included in the dataset if other criteria are also met. Similarly, the inclusion of cases is determined by the behaviors itemized above, rather than the belief or ideology of the participants.¹⁸

The most limiting scope condition is important: we collect incidents where a collectively felt grievance is observable, regardless of whether they are based on observable facts or mis/dis information. This data narrows the inclusion criteria to incidents where a collective grievance can be reasonably ascertained. This therefore excludes personal vendettas, perpetrators with individual issues, and idiosyncratic and ungeneralizable fringe cases. In this first release of data, we focus on three causes of grievance in particular: those related to education, health, and elections. These are validated by specific rhetoric employed or the nature of the target as an education, election, or health official. These scoping definitions narrow the total number of cases in order to focus on incidents with maximum variable observations; the true number of threats and harassment against local officials is far higher than what is reported here. Future releases of the dataset may explore expansions of this condition.

¹⁸ The authors recognize that the coding of events at homes deserves ongoing conversation and refinement. Deference to an official's subjective feelings of the events err towards including borderline events, or events where behaviors of harassment beyond the act of coming to a private residence are unclear. We acknowledge that there is an ongoing debate about the value or acceptability of protest at official's homes, especially in the context of COVID-19 restrictions of public space. We note the following inclusion criteria not to intervene in this ongoing debate, but to provide maximum transparency in how coding adds to the discussion. Inclusion decisions evaluated 1) whether the location was a private residence, as opposed to public, 2) whether that private residence event was distinguishable or concurrent to other threats and harassment, 3) whether alternative locations could reasonably be used to communicate with an official, and 4) events that occurred at a private residence, in the age of social media and video, are functionally doxing incidents, as well as an act of intimidation (e.g. comments like, "I know where you live...", in the absence of other coding indicators, were a default coding decision). For more analysis on home demonstrations, see Autumn Lewien and Shannon Hiller, "BDI Issue Brief: Trends in Demonstrations at Homes, May-December 2020" (Princeton University, 2021).



Threats and Harassment Case Selection

In addition to the incidents provided through data partnerships, this project reviewed more than ten thousand media stories resulting from a refined NexisUni search string, rendering an estimated 3000 incidents, which were then closely evaluated for inclusion. Researchers also evaluated thousands of cases from the ACLED and CCC datasets as a complement to the possible cases identified through NexisUni. Applying the rigorous inclusion criteria above narrowed results substantially. Researchers scanned the NexisUni database twice: first restricted to a given state, tracking all local news sources within a search string parameter. Then, researchers scanned all relevant cases written by the Associated Press and The New York Times. This two-pronged method located cases where search criteria rendered results nationally, but not locally, and vice versa. A series of inclusion criteria were applied to each case (a decision tree of inclusion logic is available in supporting documents, along with a project guide with search terms used for both Boolean NexisUni searches and ACLED/CCC scans). Of the thousands of incidents scanned, a majority were outside the inclusion criteria, such as threats to or harassment of state or federal officials (rather than local officials), or instances where a dyadic relationship or collective grievance could not be identified. These were preserved as possible incident candidates for inclusion in future iterations of the dataset, but not included in the data presented here.

The research team employed multiple verification and blind review of inclusion and coding by different researchers to reduce bias and increase data accuracy and replicability. The data evaluated for this report included four steps of coding verification: cases were first individually selected for inclusion by an initial researcher; a second researcher verified each case for inclusion; after verification, a third researcher coded the case; and a fourth researcher again reviewed the case and coding to verify that it qualified for inclusion. Any borderline cases were subject to an additional fifth level of verification, in which they were reviewed by a committee of researchers from both BDI and ADL.

Findings

This first event-based data collection effort identified 400 incidents of threats and harassment against local officials between January 1, 2020 and September 23, 2022. Several thousand possible cases at the federal and state levels were excluded based on the previously described limited inclusion criteria.¹⁹ The data show that threats and harassment of local officials is a nationwide issue, but cases concentrate in so-called “swing states.”²⁰ The general grievance categories targeted in data collection show the following breakdown between the three areas monitored: elections account for about 40% of incidents, with education and coronavirus around 30% each. Disaggregating these areas further shows additional claims, such as incidents related to LGBTQ+ issues, public health mandates, and false electoral claims. Figure 1 shows the cluster of almost 50% of cases around the 2020 election, but notable spikes for health and education targets are also evident at other times.²¹ The data also reveal that women are targeted more than men, confirming prior studies.²² Threats or harassment were most frequently made in conjunction with a broader demonstration, followed by verbal communication, then by email and other forms of communication.

Figure 1. Incident Trends by Issue Area (n=335)

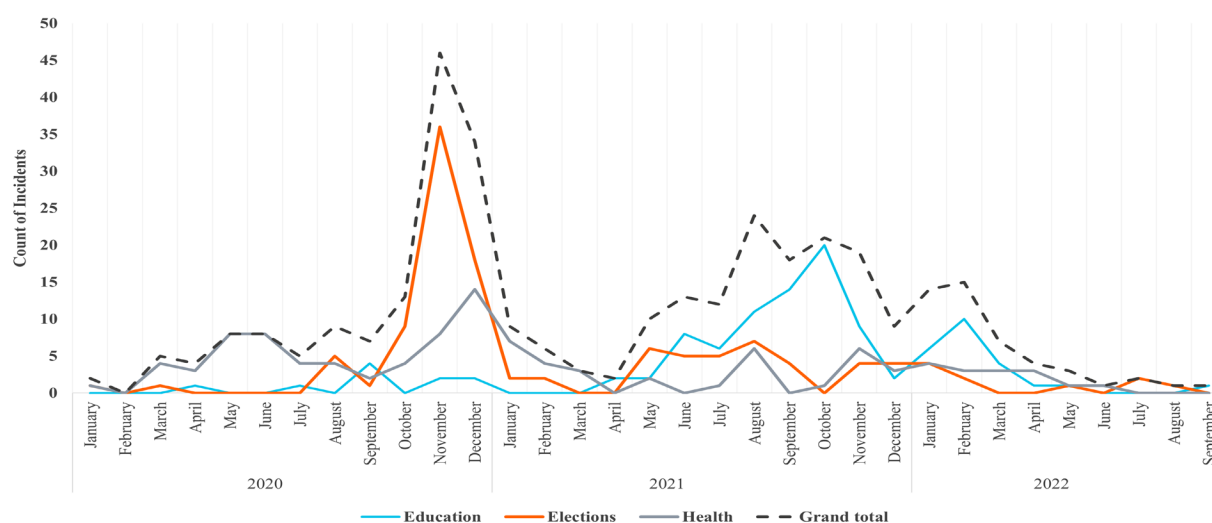


Table 1 categorizes the cases by whether they were incidents of threats or harassment. Just over half of 400 cases considered consisted of harassment, with approximately a third consisting of threats. The remaining 10% of cases involved both threats and harassment.

19 As discussed later in the paper, THD will broaden inclusion criteria both in actors evaluated (state, federal, not just local) as well as the motivation or grievance behind the incident. Such expanded data collected is underway. To be a part of the coalition of groups working to collect this data, email BDI@princeton.edu.

20 As noted in Figure 6b however, controlling for population size demonstrates that low event counts in states like Idaho and Nevada boosts their expected incident frequency.

21 Incidents were aggregated at the month-level to compare over time. Incidents for which we only had the month and year, were set to the first day of the month for the purposes of this analysis. If we could not determine precise dates (i.e., the month and year) for the incident, then they were excluded from the analysis.

22 Future data collection will also include additional demographic information of perpetrators and targets. For studies on women as targets, see Sisson, “Why Local Officials Are Facing Growing Harassment and Threats”; Rebekah Herrick et al., “Gender and Race Differences in Mayors’ Experiences of Violence” (Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2022).

Table 1: Number of Incidents

Incident	Count	Percent
Harassment	210	53%
Threat(s)	145	36%
Threat(s) and harassment	45	11%
Grand Total	400	100%

The majority of targets were election officials, or poll workers, followed by school officials, together amounting to just about two-thirds of all recorded cases, as reported in Table 2. Other government and health officials made up approximately another third, with the remainder belonging to other categories.

Figure 2a: Map of Incident Numbers²³

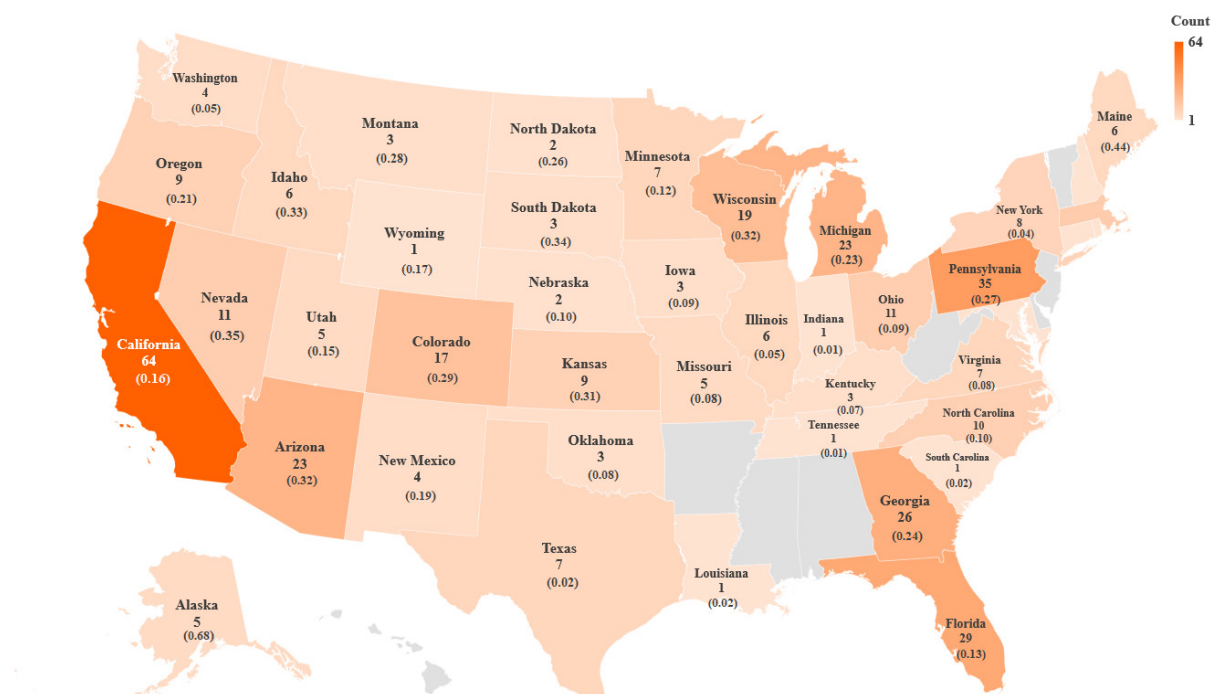


Figure 2a displays the count of threat and harassment by state, where states with a higher number of incidents are displayed in darker shades of orange. Out of all the incidents tracked, California (64) has the highest number of incidents, followed by Pennsylvania (35), Florida (29), Georgia (26), Arizona (23), and Michigan (23). Other than California, the states with the most cases are all generally considered to be “swing states,”

²³ The map displays 400 incidents of threats or harassment across 43 states. In parentheses, the number of incidents per 100,000 individuals (based on the 2020 Census) is displayed.

itemized in Figures 5-6. The low number of cases in some states cautions a reminder that these are cases that were reported upon publicly. We discuss the need for more data below. However, low incident counts in some states seem to also align with survey responses and qualitative analysis. For example, in Indiana, the low incident count aligns with elected official's reported experience in that state.²⁴ States missing incidents have confirmed reported events of threats and harassment of state and federal officials but lack reported cases involving local officials. These low count states may also have incidents where local officials received threats but did not provide enough public information to warrant inclusion in this version of THD; these may be included as we work towards "THD-2.0."²⁵

Figure 2a also displays the number of incidents per 100,000 individuals, normalized by state population (2020 Census) as shown in parentheses. At first glance, Alaska (0.68), Washington D.C. (0.58), Maine (0.44), Nevada (0.35), and South Dakota (0.35) appear to have a greater number of incidents given their population size.

Figure 2b. Overperforming and Underperforming States based on Expected Values (Total Incidents)

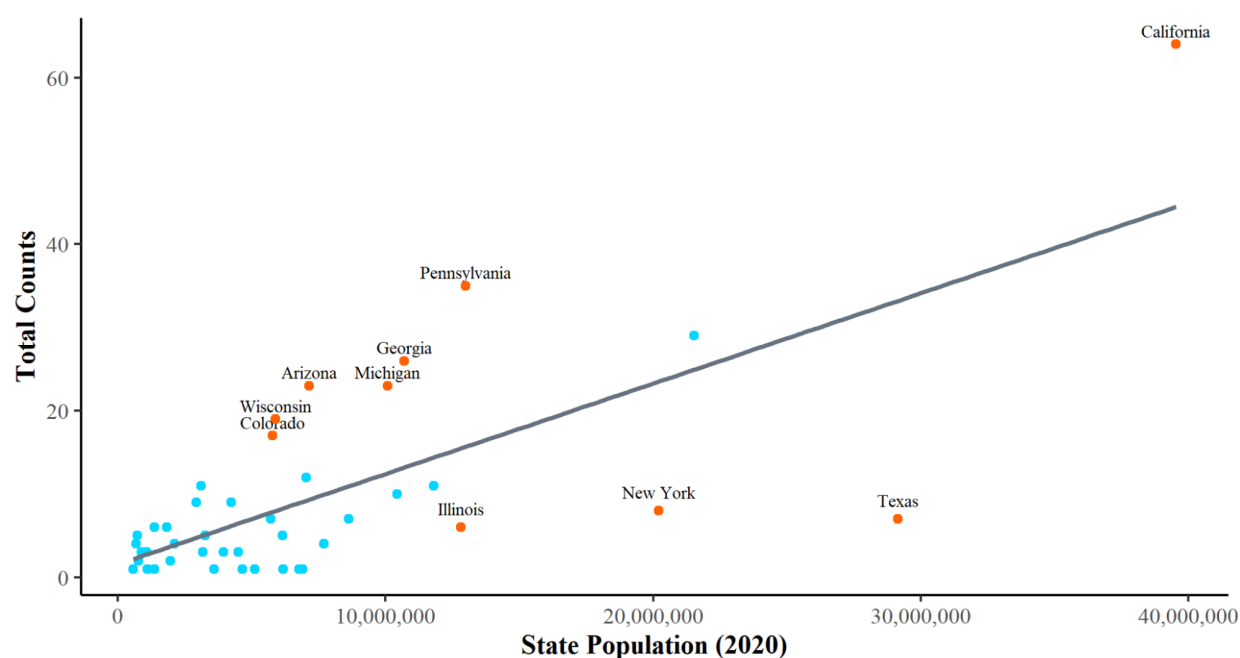


Figure 2b displays the count of threat and harassment incidents by state population (2020 Census). As a robustness check, we estimate a linear regression between the state population and total incident counts and examine the residuals to determine which states are over-performing or under-performing based on their expected values.²⁶ Figure 2b displays a scatterplot of the total counts of threat and harassment incidents by the state population. States are displayed in orange if their residual was at least one standard deviation above or below zero. As shown in the plot, there are 7 states that recorded more incidents than expected based on population: California (3), Pennsylvania (2.3), Arizona (1.6), Georgia (1.5), Wisconsin (1.3), Michigan

²⁴ Leslie Bonilla Muñiz, "Election Harassment? Indiana Officials Say Not Here," Indiana Capital Chronicle, September 8, 2022.

²⁵ Linda So and Jason Szep, "Reuters Unmasks Trump Supporters Terrifying U.S. Election Officials," Reuters, November 9, 2021.

²⁶ In a regression analysis, the residuals are the difference between the observed value and the predicted value.

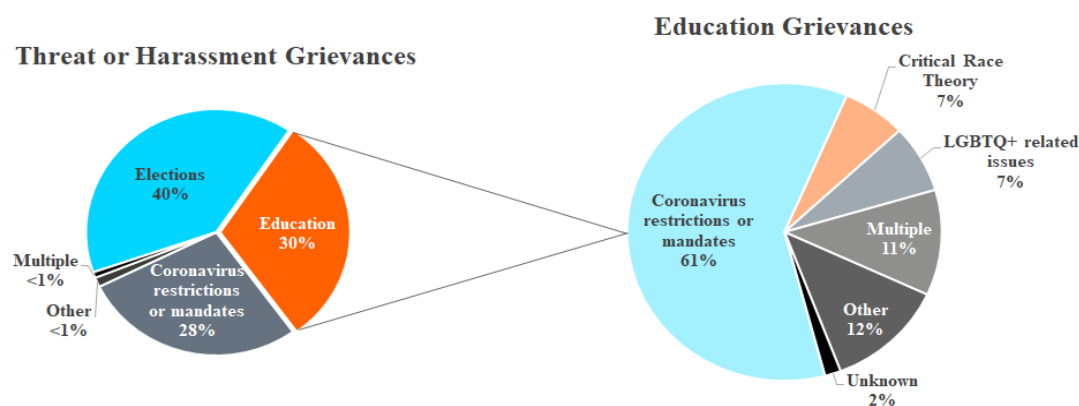
(1.2), Colorado (1.1).²⁷ Additionally, there are three states with fewer incidents than expected based on their population: Texas (-3.5), New York (-1.9), and Illinois (-1.1).

Table 2: Threat Target

Threat Target	Count	Percent
Election officials or poll workers	139	35%
School officials	123	31%
Elected or appointed government officials	84	21%
Health officials	47	12%
Other	7	2%
Grand Total	400	100%

Table 3 and the pie chart in Figure 3 break down collectively felt grievances and issue-areas cited during threat and harassment incidents. The over-representation of the COVID-19 grievance is explained by the variable capturing both public health mandates for the general population as well as school-specific grievances such as masking or vaccine requirements. As disaggregated in Figure 3, COVID-19 mandates marked the majority of incident grievances in the education sector. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of grievances in the states with the highest frequency of incidents. COVID-19 restrictions, mask mandates, and election-related claims made up the plurality of grievances expressed in conjunction with threats and harassment.

Figure 3: Threat Grievances

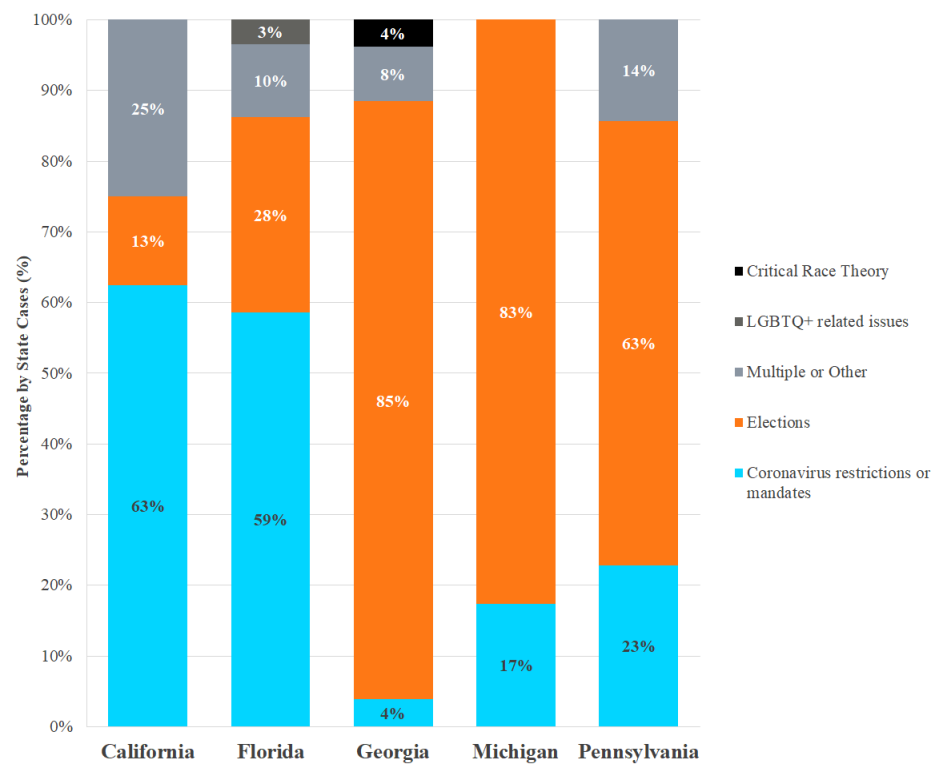


²⁷ The standard deviation is listed in parentheses.

Table 3: Threat Issue Area

Threat Issue Area	Percent
Elections	40%
Education	31%
Coronavirus restrictions or mandates	18%
Critical Race Theory	2%
LGBTQ+ related issues	2%
Multiple	4%
Other	4%
Health	28%
Other	1%
Multiple	1%
Grand Total	100%

Figure 4: Top 5 States by Grievance ²⁸



²⁸ The states with the largest percentage of threat or harassment incidents are displayed, where a breakdown of grievances for each state's incidents are displayed. The number of incidents in the top five states account for 44% of the 400 total incidents: California has 64 incidents, Florida has 29, Georgia has 26, Michigan has 23, and Pennsylvania has 35.

Figure 5. States with at least 2 Percent of Threat Incidents²⁹

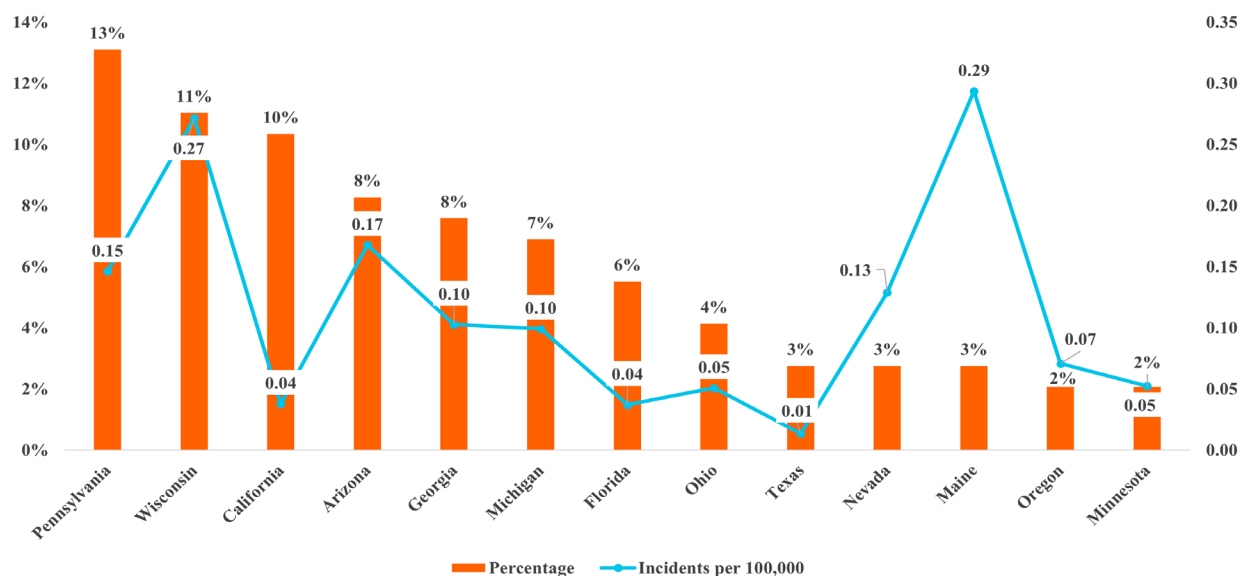
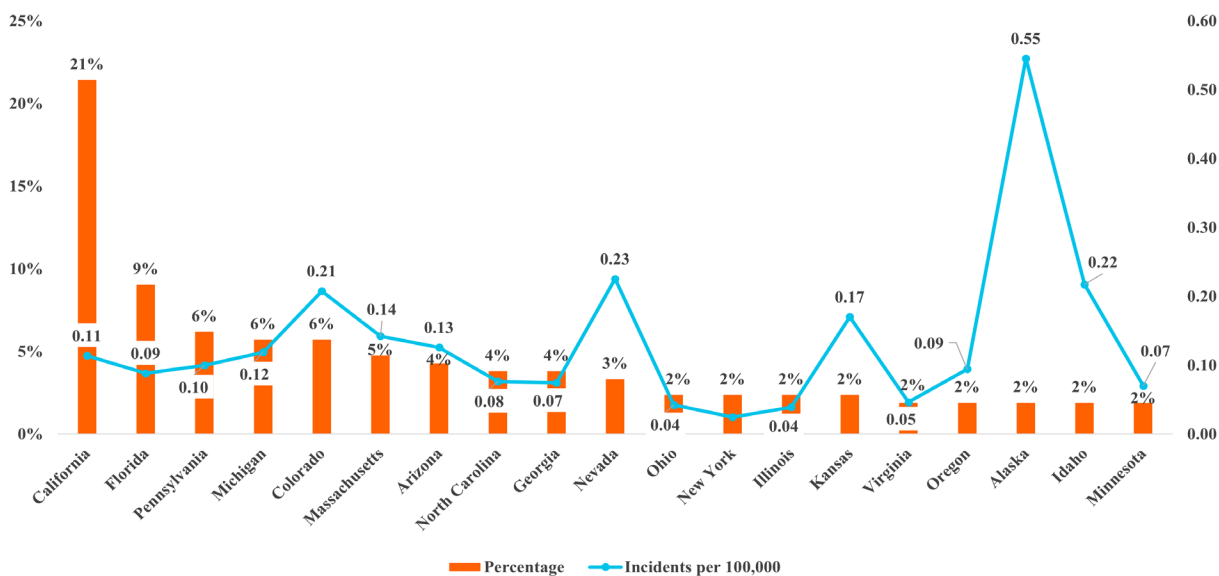


Figure 6: States with at least 2 Percent of Harassment Incidents³⁰



Figures 5 and 6 show the breakdown of the states with at least 2 percent of incidents of threats and harassment, respectively. While raw event counts feature the most populous state, California, predominantly, normalizing for population (per 100,000) shows California underperforming against other states. Noticeably, Maine and Nevada outperform their event-count in Figure 5, and Alaska, Nevada, and Idaho outperform their event-count in Figure 6.

²⁹ The figure displays states that have 2% or more of the 145 threat incidents. The states represented in the figure account for 92% out of the 145 tracked threat incidents.

³⁰ The figure displays states that have 2% or more of the 210 incidents of harassment. The states represented in the figure account for 87% out of the 210 tracked harassment incidents.

Figure 7a: Threats or Harassment to Election Officials or Poll Workers³¹

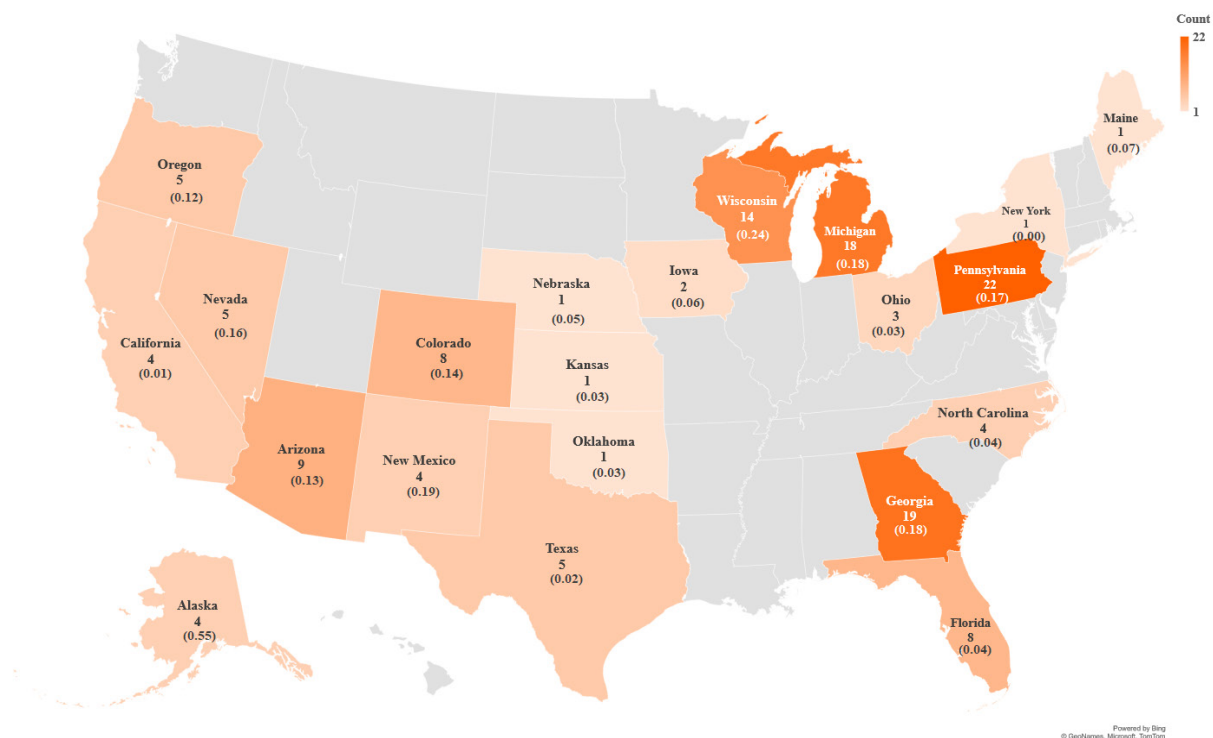


Figure 7a shows threats or harassment of election officials or poll workers, which span 21 states and make up about 34% of all incidents tracked. Of these incidents, the states with the highest percentage of threats or harassment incidents include Pennsylvania with 22 incidents (16%), Georgia with 19 incidents (14%), Michigan with 18 incidents (13%), Wisconsin with 14 incidents (10%), and Arizona with 9 incidents (6%) which, together, account for 59% of the 139 threats or harassment incidents targeting to election officials or poll workers. These findings appear to reinforce the FBI’s analysis that threats are more frequent in states with contested election results and lingering election denial activism.³²

³¹ The map displays 139 incidents of threats or harassment to election officials or poll workers across 21 states. In parentheses, the number of incidents per 100,000 individuals (based on the 2020 Census) is displayed.

³² Pegues, “Seven States Continue to See Unusual Levels of Threats to Election Workers.”

Figure 7b: Overperforming and Underperforming States based on Expected Values (Election Incidents)

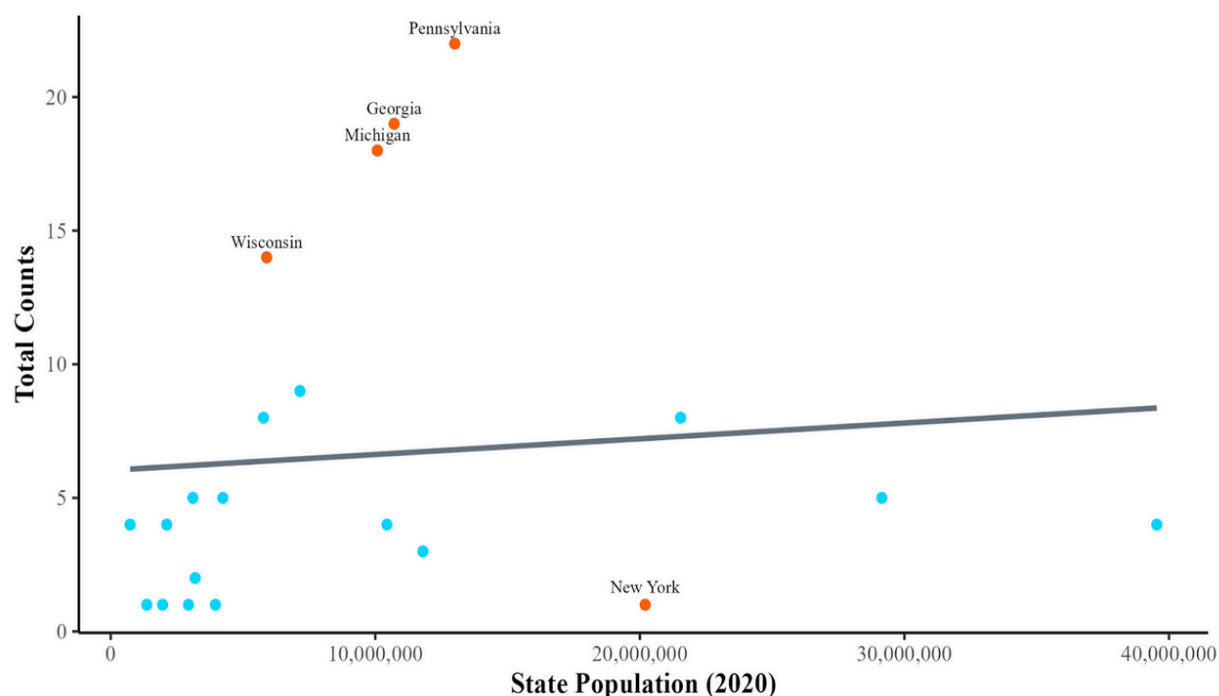


Figure 7b displays the count of threat and harassment incidents targeting election officials or poll workers by state population. As another robustness check, we estimate a linear regression between the state population and total incident counts targeting election officials or poll workers and examine the residuals to determine which states are over-performing or under-performing based on their expected values.³³ States are displayed in orange if their residual was at least one standard deviation above or below zero. As shown in the plot, there are 4 states that recorded more incidents than expected based on population: Pennsylvania (2.4), Georgia (1.9), Michigan (1.8), and Wisconsin (1.2).³⁴ Additionally, there is one state with fewer incidents than expected based on their population: New York (-1.0).

Table 4a: Threats and Harassment to Gender³⁵

Gender	Count	Percent
Female	169	42%
Male	113	28%
NA	98	25%
Unknown	20	5%
Grand Total	400	100%

³³ In a regression analysis, the residuals are the difference between the observed value and the predicted value.

³⁴ The standard deviation is listed in parentheses.

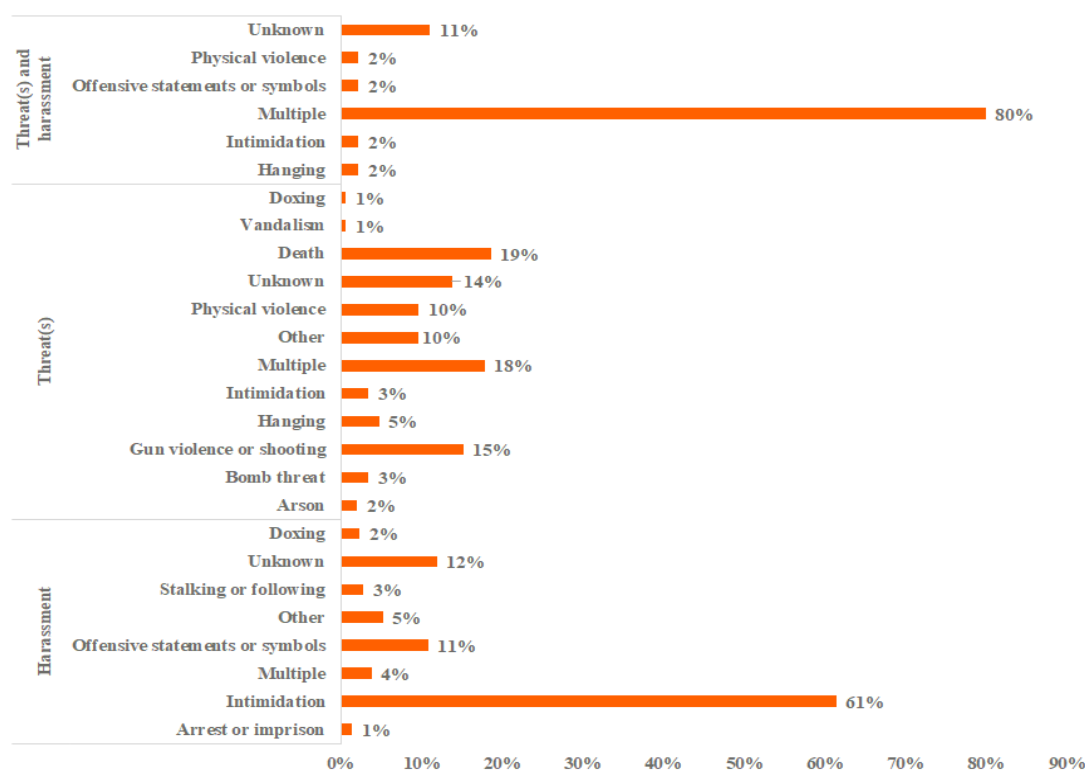
³⁵ In cases where targets are transgender, coders recorded as the target's reported identified gender. NA includes incidents where multiple genders were present in the target group or where identifying a gender was not applicable (e.g., when an entire office or polling place was targeted).

Table 4b: Threats and Harassment to Gender Adjusted for Percentage

Gender	Percentage of Officeholders	Percent in Dataset
Female	30.5%	42.2%
Male	68.9%	28.0%

As shown in Table 4a, women officials were targeted at a higher frequency than men. While raw numbers show the cases targeting women at 42%, when adjusting for the percentage of women in public office in a given municipality, we estimate that women receive threats and harassment 3.4 times more frequently than men.³⁶ Women as the plurality of targets aligns with similar findings from other recent survey-based studies.³⁷ Coding marked “NA” reflects instances where a whole office or many elected officials of multiple or unspecified gender were the recipient of a threat or harassment.

Figure 8: Nature of Threat or Harassment



Threats of death or gun violence are more than twice as common as any other form, shown in Figure 8. Officials were also often targets of multiple forms of threat (e.g., threats of gun violence and hanging). While doxing constituted a small percentage of overall cases, it regularly occurred with other threats or harassment, so is

³⁶ Data on women in municipal office comes from Rutgers University, “2022 Women in Municipal Office” (Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). 2022. “2022 Women in Municipal Office.” Center for American Women and Politics, 2022).

The estimate: $\frac{[(\% \text{ of women targeted}) / (\% \text{ women officeholders})] / [(\% \text{ of men targeted}) / (\% \text{ men officeholders})]}{}$. This translates to: $\frac{[(169/400)(400/4234)] / [(1298/4234)]}{[(113/400)(400/4234)] / [(2911/4234)]}$. This estimation is imperfect since the universe of cases in THD goes beyond elected office to other sorts of officials. We lack data on percentages of women for such cases.

³⁷ Herrick et al., “Gender and Race Differences in Mayors’ Experiences of Violence.”

also captured partially in the “multiple” categories. By its nature, doxing may also lead targeted officials to avoid more public news coverage that could invite more attention, which could therefore lead to an undercount in the data. Harassment most often took the form of intimidation (see examples above), where 32% of cases of harassment targeted an official’s home and 34% targeted their workplace. Of all threats and harassment cases, 27% occurred at an official’s workplace, 21% occurred at an official’s home, and 15% occurred through social media. Both death threats and harassment at homes could be due to reporting bias, where only the most dramatic threats are elevated to news coverage. However, it could also be that outbursts may escalate to death threats after a series of other threats, or that perpetrators attempt to get a visceral reaction from officials by resorting to the most provocative statements.

The methods by which threats or harassment were communicated varied, with electronic, demonstrations, and verbal threats, each making up approximately 20% of the total. See Table 5 for a full breakdown of threat and harassment communication methods.

Table 5: Method of Communication

Method of Threat	Female	Male	Not Applicable or Unknown	Grand Total
Electronic	9%	7%	6%	20%
Demonstration	9%	8%	4%	20%
Verbal	5%	6%	8%	19%
Multiple	9%	4%	3%	16%
Unknown	6%	3%	1%	9%
Written	2%	1%	3%	6%
Presence of individual(s) or display of symbols	2%	<1%	2%	4%
Property damage or defacing	<1%	<1%	2%	3%
Other	<1%	<1%	1%	2%
Grand Total	43%	28%	29%	100%

Approximately half of all recorded cases of threats and harassment targeted someone who had previously been targeted; the remainder were aimed at new targets (see Table 6). This variable includes targets who received multiple incidents of threats or harassment that were counted as a single event due to insufficient data. Over half of targets were recipients of compound incidents. This suggests that some lightning-rod political offices or individuals may be more likely to receive threats, or that perpetrators may “pile-on” by replicating behavior previously modeled.

Table 6: Incidents with Repeated Targets / Compound Events

Repeat event?	Count	Percent
Yes	218	54.5%
No	182	45.5%
Grand Total	400	100%

Roughly one-quarter of recorded cases of threats and harassment came when the perpetrator and target were in the same place at the same time (e.g., shouting a threat at an official at a school board meeting), as outlined in Table 7. Nearly half occurred when the perpetrator and target were in a different place and at a different time (e.g., a voicemail or social media post). Another 10% occurred at the same time, but in a different place (e.g., a phone call). Another 5% occurred in the same place, but at different times (e.g., vandalism or leaving a letter). This variable speaks to tactics of threats or harassment, but also levels of proximity and thus perhaps credibility of a threat, demonstrating both a claim and an opportunity to carry it out.

Table 7: Same Time, Same Place

Same Time, Same Place	Count	Percent
Different Time, Different Place	196	49%
Same Time, Same Place	103	26%
Same Time, Different Place	40	10%
Both Unknown	28	7%
Different Time, Same Place	22	6%
Unknown Time or Place	9	2%
Multiple	2	<1%
Grand Total	400	100%

Initial Discussion

This dataset offers a lens for understanding how American democratic and other foundational institutions are under significant threat.³⁸ At roughly one event every three days, the trendlines show that the steady drumbeat of intimidation and attack on local officials is substantiated, consistent across multiple sectors of governance, and wide-ranging in scope. Local officials in education, healthcare, and election administration are often serving the public in a hostile environment, marked by targeted threats on their life and harassment against them and their families. Such an environment raises the costs of public service beyond what many may be willing to bear, and chips away at the infrastructure necessary to carry out basic functions of effective democratic governance.

The findings here show an incomplete, yet valuable first glimpse of what an event-based research program offers, including new insights on targets, tactics, grievances, geographies, and other crucial factors for understanding threats and harassment to local officials. As this living dataset grows with new cases incorporating broader inclusion criteria and a greater range of possible targets, such longitudinal, event-based data will provide an opportunity to track incident levels over time and understand how policy interventions can impact the threat and harassment landscape.

³⁸ Leonhardt, “‘A Crisis Coming’: The Twin Threats to American Democracy.”

Surprising outcomes

Several surprising outcomes are worth noting. The overwhelming plurality of events occur when the perpetrator and victim are not together — different time and different place. This shows an unexpected distance between the two, perhaps a positive sign for the safety of officials, while indicating that online, mail, and other asynchronous threats are worth their own special analysis and may require a different set of interventions than in-person threats. Additionally, the lack of events in some states is both methodologically and theoretically intriguing. Even adjusting for population, we still expect most incidents to occur in “swing states” and see a lack of incidents in Southern and Plains States. These findings are worth further exploration around the relationship to diversity, polarization, and demographic variables. With more data, future studies may be able to further disaggregate motivations and mitigations at the local level that influence threat and harassment outcomes.

Concerns related to the under-reporting of incidents

Even with a robust methodology combining extant data and building new observations with reporting sources, we note the relatively small number of observations relative to the pervasive feeling of fear obviously present amongst local officials.³⁹ Undercounting the overall sentiment of threat is possible for several reasons.

First, in many cases, the project categorizes multiple, repeated rounds of threats from a perpetrator to a target as a single incident due to the fact that news stories aggregate multiple events, making disaggregation difficult. Second, this iteration excluded observations of state and federal officials, an arguably greater pool of cases which could be included in future studies of this data. Additionally, as discussed above, the narrow inclusion criteria intentionally focus on observable, objective reporting and maintains a very high bar for inclusion. For example, our team excluded close to 100 cases where we know that some sort of relevant incident occurred, but we were unable to locate an externally validated description and the cases were too vague to code most variables.

Future iterations of this project could expand the dataset by both deepening and widening observations. Observations could include a wider range of actors, including state and federal targets, as well as local officials in areas beyond the health, education, and elections. Other issues also drive incidents, including housing and homelessness, climate and natural disasters, cost of living, and many more.

News reports provide an externally validated, publicly observable basis for inclusion, but surely drive an undercounting of events. Deepening cases will require intake mechanisms beyond those which receive reporting, requiring crowdsourcing of incidents even as we maintain rigorous validation standards.

A lack of available observations may be driving an undercount in other ways as well. This demands more fine-grained, detailed reporting at the local level to build a fuller representation of the threat and harassment landscape. It could be that states with the highest levels of raw event count (e.g., California, swing states) are highly heterogeneous ideologically, amplified by population size and capacity of news coverage. Smaller states may have fewer points of contention and less capacity to report on incidents when they do occur.⁴⁰ In this way, one might hypothesize that population and ideological flash points may be interacting with the capacity of news coverage, resulting in other states having fewer reported incidents. With the limited sample of event-based data provided here, future studies can begin to answer such questions.

³⁹ Edlin and Baker, “Poll of Local Election Officials Finds Safety Fears for Colleagues — and Themselves.”

⁴⁰ Clara Hendrickson, “Local Journalism in Crisis: Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms,” November 12, 2019,

What is driving the climate of fear?

The delta between observed cases (N=400) and the fact that some officials are reportedly taking extra security precautions — or even resigning — in the face of overwhelming threats, presents a puzzle. It is possible that widespread awareness of high-profile cases, rather than the raw number of public incidents, is driving the overall narrative.⁴¹ Just as possible, the overall number of threats officials receive may be rising, but the threats lack the specificity to report publicly or code robustly. For example, researchers on this project excluded dozens of cases where reports were too vague to code, but nevertheless may, in the aggregate, add to an increased climate of fear among local officials. High-profile events like those recorded here, combined with unrecorded low-information events, may be the empirical reality driving the narrative around threats and harassment.

Understanding community responses and needs

The data also provide a foundation to begin asking questions about the effects of threats and harassment of officials. Future, deeper data collection efforts in this research should also focus on outcome indicators, such as resignations changing the rules of public comment, limiting protest at private residences, and creating extra security measures.⁴² Additionally, more longitudinal data year-over-year can help researchers better understand if trends of threats and harassment are increasing or decreasing, as well as how interventions produce changes in the threats and harassment landscape.

The toxic ecosystem of harassment and threatening behavior towards elected officials should also motivate policy responses. Several resources and ideas for more direct policies to confront perpetrators deserve amplification. The National League of Cities has outlined a series of policy recommendations worth careful consideration, including physical safety measures, modeling civil discourse, and investing in mental health and wellbeing.⁴³ Civil defamation, no-contact orders, and expanding criminal statutes offer approaches that local officials can tailor to their needs.⁴⁴ Community leaders can also invest in de-escalation trainings.⁴⁵ See *Table 8 for an illustrative list of resources*.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings in this report point to more than “incivility” — the data show a regular pattern of death threats, harassment, intimidation at official’s homes, and more. Event-level data help to create a fuller picture of observable cases — not just relying on firsthand accounts and perceptions, but rather on verified incidents. The data also help us imagine direct intervention and policies that could better support and protect both civic space and those providing critical services to the country.

Threats and harassment of local officials occur at a time when partisan rhetoric has grown increasingly strident and in some cases violent, and when many Americans may be disinclined to value democratic norms over partisan identity or policy preference.⁴⁶ Understanding such behavior better equips decision-makers, community leaders, and the

41 “Local Election Officials Survey (March 2022).”

42 For an example of outcome indicators, such as resignations and changing the rules of public comment, see Eric S. Page and Dana Griffin, “After Racism and Threats, San Diego Board of Supervisors Changes Meeting Rules,” NBC San Diego, November 10, 2021.

For outcomes like limiting protest at private residences, see Terry McSweeney, “Demonstrators Gather at Los Gatos Mayor’s Home Calling for Her, Councilmembers Resignation,” NBC Bay Area, October 19, 2021, For outcomes such as creating extra security measures, see Laura Romero, “Colorado Voting Officials Adopt Safety Measures as State Becomes Target for Election Conspiracists,” ABC News, May 9, 2022.

43 Anthony et al., “On The Frontlines of Today’s Cities: Trauma, Challenges, and Solutions.”

44 Kristi Nickodem, “Dealing with Harassment and Threats Towards Local Government Officials and Employees,” Coates’ Canons NC Local Government Law, July 28, 2022.

45 “De-Escalation Resources,” Bridging Divides Initiative, accessed September 20, 2022.

46 Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *The American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 392–409; Topazian et al., “US Adults’ Beliefs About Harassing or Threatening Public Health Officials During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

broader public to create space for de-escalation, healing, and safety. Reducing space for threats and harassment is a critical step for protecting democratic norms and institutions. *For a curated list of policy responses and range of interventions, please see Table 8.*

Finally, a note about the typical political incidents that are not included in this dataset and are orders of magnitude more frequent than threats and harassment. Everyday incidents of political engagement perhaps tell us more about our democracy than the data collected here. The strength and resilience of American democracy is in the incidents of contention and dispute that are heated but do not cross the threshold into harassment and threat. Our strength is in the number of incidents that do not occur. Threats and harassment are concerning, but they are a water drop compared to the ocean of everyday healthy democratic practice resolving disputes through normal political debate, public comments, civic engagement, and invested community leaders taking the people they serve seriously. Such a perspective offers more than resilience in the face of stress – it centers hope and optimism as the core experience in public life.

Recommendations

Based on this initial data analysis, we offer **five recommendations** to improve data collection to better support community organizations and protect civic space.

1. Support robust, safe, and easily accessible self-reporting

While this dataset is anchored in “objective” observations, this perhaps underscores the larger point that most events are unreported by victims. The delta between survey data showing pervasive levels of harassment and low incidents reported here may be a function of real events not being reported. Creating streamlined avenues of self-reporting, which can be validated by a trusted third party, would markedly improve data collection. While mechanisms may exist for referring cases to law enforcement, these do not seem to be tracked consistently from jurisdiction to jurisdiction or communicated between local, state, and federal levels of law enforcement. Some behaviors may not even be prosecutable, though they may still have a chilling effect on democratic governance.⁴⁷ This can lead to paralyzing frustration and discourage self-reporting of future cases. Civil society can fill this gap with a federation of organizations and researchers collaborating together to ensure that there are ongoing partnerships to coordinate the collection of self-reports, prevent duplication and establish feedback loops and action-oriented communication with officials submitting incidents. Practitioners and researchers should also carefully navigate types of responsive support that civil society or government can provide to people reporting such incidents. Because it is likely there are multiple sources of self-reporting and bystander-reporting, it increases the need for responsible data sharing as outlined in the fourth recommendation below.

One important self-reporting tool is under development by the National League of Cities, which may be a trusted centralized repository of incidents, providing both a location for reports and a database for study nested within an organization with capacity to provide feedback and support to victims at the local level.

2. Diversify sources of reporting and incident collection

As noted above, event data is only as good as the report that it is drawn from. The lack of capacity within newsrooms to report on every instance of verbal harassment, for example, is a serious limitation to collecting data from news stories. Protecting civic space requires a more robust foundation of facts drawn from a

Other Potential Sources of Incident Reporting

- More news accounts
- Trusted law enforcement and civil society
- Social media
- Video / transcript from public meetings
- Detailed survey instruments
- Bystander/witness reporting
- Crowdsourcing

⁴⁷ According to the DOJ, only 11% of incidents reported to the threats task force are “prosecutable.” See “Readout of Election Threats Task Force Briefing with Election Officials and Workers.”

host of sources. News stories are a good foundation and newsrooms and local journalists should certainly report on incidents of threats and harassment. However, news accounts are limited by space and editorial choices, and by the fact that not all threats are best dealt with in public. Collecting private accounts requires trusted data sharing arrangements from law enforcement and civil society groups who are currently receivers of this non-public data. Future data collection could expand beyond news stories and use survey tools to collect incidents rather than sentiments, as well as scrape social media and collect video or transcript evidence from public meetings. Finally, witness reporting and broader crowd-sourcing techniques have been shown to work for reporting incidents of protest beyond news coverage and could be replicated for better reporting of threats and harassment.⁴⁸

3. Increase Data Sharing and Collaboration

The THD project began by understanding what was being collected by others and attempting to integrate several streams of work into one collaborative, living data collection effort. In that spirit, partnership is necessary to collect data on threats and harassment. This includes coordinating a reporting mechanism for self-reported incidents, tracking event data with standardized variables and indicators, and sharing a commitment to data management and privacy. Partners should work to ensure they are not providing a platform to amplify threatening and harassing content, but rather to celebrate resilience and safeguard civic spaces. Such a coalition could also serve as a repository for data from law enforcement on cases of interest that may not be prosecutable.

4. Elevate community responses

Threats and harassment create a host of undesirable outcomes – resignations and lack of engagement, for example. The strength of longitudinal data is its ability to track outcomes over time to answer questions about the impact of threats and the prevention of threats. There are also outcomes of interest that speak to the resilience of communities in this environment. It is critical for the scholars and practitioners to move towards understanding outcome stories, not just cataloging the problem. As communities implement the policy recommendations suggested by partners in Table 8, do threats decrease or change because of these policy changes? What mitigation efforts change the environment over time? Do certain threat types result in different community mitigations compared to other threat types? Tracking robust community and policy responses, perhaps by creating a typology of mitigation efforts, could reveal more about the strength of democratic institutions and norms than incidents of threat. We could then ask questions about how interventions can protect against negative outcomes. Stories of outcomes also provides a foundation for creative multi-method work, bringing in case studies, testimonials, interviews, and other qualitative research approaches to process-trace the causes and consequences of community resiliency measures.

5. Comprehensive Policy Frameworks To Protect Civic Space

Many organizations have proposed a robust list of policy ideas that could better protect civic space and confront incidents of threat and harassment. See Table 8 for a curated list of reports with specific policy ideas from ADL and partner organizations at the National League of Cities, States United Democracy Center, the Bipartisan Policy Center, and others. Examples of elements likely to be essential to any framework include:

- Stronger civil doxing laws. Many cases of harassment occur around doxing – the act of revealing personal, private information without consent. Policymakers should consider including special protections for unelected government workers targeted because of their positions. For example, California recently passed a law to allow for election officials to remove their address from public records.⁴⁹
- Built-in reporting and transparency tools would enhance safety on social media platforms or places hosting election-related, public health, and related news content. Such required tools could build new mechanisms for tracking and reporting incidents that give granular detail on those making the

⁴⁸ See Crowd Counting Consortium, crowdcounting.org.

⁴⁹ Adam Beam, “California Lawmakers OK Bill to Hide Public Worker Addresses,” Associated Press, September 1, 2022.

comments. Social media has uniquely enabled viral hate-filled threats and harassment, which, while not measured comprehensively in this report's methodology, certainly contribute to the overarching climate of fear and concern. Tools like ADL's BackSpaceHate campaign are critical to bolster holes in state criminal and civil law that can be used to go after those who issue threats and harassment online.⁵⁰

- Law enforcement should more proactively work with leaders across communities to keep local officials safe in a timely way. As the Bipartisan Policy Center report notes, "18 U.S.C. §245 contains language that prohibits physical threats or reprisals against candidates, voters, poll watchers, and election workers [...] DOJ should consider further defining the circumstances under which it will invoke Section 245."⁵¹ Law enforcement needs greater clarity around when to invoke this element of existing law. Similarly, Colorado officials recently reported lack of federal support for purchasing security upgrades for election officials.⁵² Without clearer direction and funding support, localities without capacity to address these issues will produce a patchwork of haphazard responses, or worse, do very little at all. The call for more concerted law enforcement response is echoed in the report by the US Election Official Security Commission, linked below in Table 8.
- A whole of society response (government, industry, academic, and community sectors) to threats and harassment would better integrate other areas of security, including mobilizing communities to counter hate. Effort should be made to learn from the work of groups countering hate and creating resources for community action.⁵³ Broader institutional support for work countering targeted violence in the public arena would coordinate grant funding and the broader agenda between public and nonprofit actors.

Table 8: Policy Recommendation Resources

Illustrative policy recommendations, from across civil society and government, include:

- ADL's [PROTECT and REPAIR Plans](#)
- [National League of Cities: Harassment, Threats and Violence Directed at Local Officials Rising at an Alarming Rate](#)
- [The US Election Official Security Commission Security Resources](#)
- [States United Democracy Center: Threats to Election Officials Resource Guide for Law Enforcement](#)
- [Bipartisan Policy Center: Deterring Threats to Election Workers](#)
- [Brennan Center: Election Officials Under Attack - How to Protect Administrators and Safeguard Democracy](#)

How To Get Involved / Requesting Data Access

The THD collection effort will continue and expand over time. Future iterations will address issues discussed above but are contingent on additional partnerships. A viable "living" dataset needs access to more direct reporting. Working with partners like ADL and other organizations, BDI will work to create reliable crowdsourced and self-reported incident-level data. This effort should maximally avoid duplication and enable participation from a wide range of stakeholders, civil society advocates, and elected officials themselves to ensure that future iterations of this data better reflect the threat and harassment landscape. Due to the sensitive nature of the information and possibly identifiable information, the data on threats and harassment discussed here will not be posted publicly; however, researchers can request access to raw data in accordance with our terms of use at the BDI project webpage. Please visit: <https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/THD>.

⁵⁰ ADL, "Backspace Hate," ADL, April 20, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/backspace-hate>.

⁵¹ Grace Gordon, David Levine, Christopher Thomas, Rachael Dean Wilson, "Deterring Threats to Election Workers" (Bipartisan Policy Center, July 20, 2022).

⁵² Kira Lerner, "Election Officials Can't Access Federal Funding for Security as Violent Threats Mount," NC Justice Center, August 23, 2022.

⁵³ See for example, ADL, "Backspace Hate," "Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Response Guide," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, Bard Center for the Study of Hate, Western States Center, and the Montana Human Rights Network, "A Community Guide to Opposing Hate" (Bard Center for the Study of Hate, Western States Center, and the Montana Human Rights Network, 2022). and Brown, Rachel, and Laura Livingston. 2019. "Counteracting Hate and Dangerous Speech Online: Strategies and Considerations." 34. Toda Peace Institute. See also the broader argument from Sally Kohn, *The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing Our Humanity* (Algonquin Books, 2018).

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