Far-left versus Far-right Fatal Violence:
An Empirical Assessment of the Prevalence of Ideologically Motivated Homicides in the United States

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A B S T R A C T   A N D   A R T I C L E   I N F O R M A T I O N

As domestic terrorism incidents in the United States continue to rise, concerns have grown regarding the threat from left-wing extremists, specifically anarchists and anti-government protesters. The current political schism in the country continues to drive the conversation of far-left versus far-right threats, and data about the threat of far-left extremism have been lacking. Using open-source data from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database, this exploratory study seeks to address this gap in the literature by assessing the differences between far-left and far-right ideologically motivated fatal violence between 1990 and 2020. Results indicate over the past three decades the overall prevalence and deadliness of far-right extremism far outweighs that of the far-left, even though far-left violence has increased over the last five years. The implications of these results and corresponding policy suggestions are discussed.

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As domestic terrorism incidents in the United States continue to rise, concerns have grown regarding the rising threat from left-wing extremists (Camera, 2021; Campion & West, 2020; Goldman et al., 2021), specifically anarchists and anti-government protesters. During the latter portion of Trump's presidency, his administration routinely pressed the issue of the left-wing threat, especially Antifa, insisting the problem of terrorism "is not a right wing problem" ("In America, Far-Right Terrorist Plots," 2020). Attorney General William Barr claimed Antifa was responsible for instigating violence and "domestic terrorism" during the protests in Minneapolis triggered by the killing of George Floyd (Tucker, 2020). Conservative media outlets, such as FOX News, have also picked up on this narrative, blaming Antifa and other left-wing supporters for "cynically [using] Floyd's tragic death as an excuse to spread mayhem and destruction" (Hanson, 2020, para. 2). Similarly, another narrative that has gained traction during the first half of 2021 centers around beliefs that the insurrection at the Capitol last year was an Antifa attack. Conservative media personalities like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson echoed sentiments by network colleague Laura Ingram that rioters were actually Antifa, and not Trump sympathizers (Anderson, 2021). Due to these concerns, but despite evidence to the contrary (Freilich et al., 2009), public discourse leans heavily into the narrative that far-left and far-right extremists are equivalent threats (Goldman et al., 2021).

To provide context to the heightened rhetoric around the threat of ideological extremism, the purpose of this article is to inform the discussions through an exploratory, empirical examination of ideologically motivated homicides committed by far-left extremists and to compare these to similar far-right violence. Specifically, using open-source data from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), this article provides descriptive information about the frequency of far-left ideologically motivated homicides over the last 30 years, which has not yet been done. Descriptive statistics provide data on these homicides to assess differences across several key characteristics, including frequency, lethality, ideological motivation, and shifts across presidential administrations. Suggestions for future research and more robust empirical analysis are offered, along with discussions on policy implications relative to the research.

The main contributions of this article to the literature on far-left extremism include (1) the results of an exploratory descriptive study that provide a comparative overview of far-left and far-right ideologically motivated homicides, something that has not been assessed before in the empirical literature; (2) A comprehensive definition of far-left extremism, which encompasses a more inclusive conceptual approach relative to what has been addressed in prior research; and (3) the expansion of Extremist Crime Database to include ideologically motivated far-left homicides for theory testing and further analysis.

Literature Review

Recent Events

Last summer, America erupted as the growing unrest around racial justice issues came to a head with the highly publicized murders of Ahmaud Arbery (Fausset, 2020), George Floyd (Hill et al., 2020), Breonna Taylor (Oppel et al., 2020), and others. Frustrated with the slow pace of criminal justice reform and issues surrounding law enforcement accountability, protestors flooded the streets of every major city in a show of solidarity against racism, oppression, and police brutality. While the vast majority of demonstrations were peaceful and operated within the confines of the law, fringe movements connected to the left did engage in criminal acts. At the same time, protests against government regulations enacted to stop the spread of COVID-19 were led by right-leaning conservatives (Fitzsimons, 2020). In August of 2020, Michael Reinoehl, a known Antifa supporter, shot and killed Aaron J. Danielson, supporter of the far-right group Patriot Prayer, during police protests in Portland, Oregon (Hill et al., 2020). This, including a series of anti-police shootings by Black Separatists/Nationalists over the last seven years (Associated Press, 2016a, 2016b; Hosenball & Murphy, 2016; Serna et al., 2017), have led to the perception of a prevailing and imminent far-left threat. These conversations have remained at the forefront of public and political discourse, especially within political campaigns.

During the final days of the 2020 Presidential Election Campaign, discussions of the direction of the nation were supercharged with rhetoric regarding the problem of left-wing protestors, with the Trump Administration moving to designate Antifa as a terrorist organization (Haberman & Savage, 2020). The previous election of President Trump, who quickly became a target of the movement's supporters, fueled the growing interest of Antifa as a terrorist movement (Copsey & Merrill, 2020; LaFree, 2018). While the Trump administration and supporters continued to refer to Antifa as an official group, it is, in reality, more of a movement of individuals who share similar philosophies and ideologies rooted in anti-fascism (Bogel-Burroughs & Garcia, 2020; LaFree, 2018). Given the unofficial designation of this ideology, and being that this is not a formal group with any direct ties to terrorism, discussions tying Antifa supporters/sympathizers to terrorist action have been

done inconsistently and used as a broad catchall for most far-left individuals. Given how political discourse can drive public opinion (Matsubayashi, 2012), addressing the existence of ideologically motivated fatal violence within the context of presidential administrations serves as an integral aspect of the current analysis. In a previous study, Hewitt (2003) addressed the manner in which government policies have provoked American terrorism. Considering the significant overlap between terrorism and extremist violence, this paper similarly addresses political systems as they relate to the occurrence of far-left and far-right extremist violence. The far-left has been more active in recent years; however, the idea that it poses a greater threat than the far-right is counter-intuitive to academic research and security assessments (Haines, 2021; Jones, 2018; Koehler, 2019; Silva et al., 2019). For example, right-wing terrorism has been steadily increasing since 2011, with atypical increases occurring after 2016 (Jones, 2018). As Trump and other conservatives talked about the dangers of Antifa and anti-government thought, the far-right continued to escalate its activities (Goldman et al., 2021). Even while domestic policy shifted resources to combat Antifa and leftist groups (Swan, 2020), far-right extremists continued to plot and act against public safety interests.

In Oakland, California, in late May of 2020, while citizens began to protest the killing of George Floyd, Steven Carrillo and Robert A. Justus ambushed two federal security guards at a courthouse, killing one (Beran, 2020). Days later, as authorities attempted to apprehend Carrillo, he attacked them using pipe bombs, leading to the subsequent shooting death of another deputy. Initial reports attributed these attacks to Antifa or other leftist groups, given the rise of anti-police demonstrations in the area. However, Carrillo and Justus are members of another fringe movement called the boogaloo movement, a loose network of anti-government, anti-police, libertarians that gained significant traction in 2020 (Anti-Defamation League [ADL], 2020). Although not uniformly far-rightists, most individuals who identify with the boogaloo movement adhere to far-right anti-government and/or white supremacist ideologies and hope to inspire a civil war within the United States (Evans & Wilson, 2020). Also in 2020, Kyle Rittenhouse traveled to Kenosha, Wisconsin, and killed two people during demonstrations protesting the shooting of Jacob Blake by police (Lenthang, 2021). Given that he travelled there for the explicit purpose to "protect businesses amid the protests" and was outspoken about his rights to defend his community, he is also not ideologically far-left. In fact, evidence suggests Rittenhouse travelled to Kenosha in response to a Facebook post by the leader of local militia group, Kenosha Guard (Rosenberg-Douglass, 2020). These examples demonstrate how the skewed perception of extremism in this country overestimates perceived threats, while trivializing the impact of far-right extremism (Castle, 2020).

This paper does recognize aspects of the far-left opposition that could warrant cause for concern and lead to the perception of possible escalation. The murder of George Floyd created shockwaves on both a national and global scale, with an unprecedented gathering of protestors across every major city. The protests that took place in Portland, Oregon, were of significant concern for law enforcement and government officials alike. While the majority of these protests were peaceful, pocketed instances of civil unrest, looting, arson, and assaults towards police and counter-protestors have occurred (Logan & Ligon, 2021), which further contributes to the narrative of a growing left-wing threat. These instances of escalating violence are significant to the discussion of the impact posed by the anti-fascist movement. Most anti-fascists denounce the use of violence, except when deemed necessary as reactionary measure of protection against white supremacy (Vysotsky, 2020). Undoubtedly, militant anti-fascists will engage in political violence, and the Antifa mantra "by any means necessary" implies that any and all tactics are available, including lethal violence, should the need present itself (Copsey & Merril, 2020). A series of shootings inside Seattle's self-proclaimed police-free zone, otherwise known as the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP), indicates the inherent dangers of a radical escalation (Golden, 2020).

Terrorism Research in the United States

This article addresses aspects of far-left and far-right violent extremism in the United States, specifically as it relates to ideologically motivated homicides. Terrorism in the United States, similar to aspects of global terrorism, has undergone several different waves over the last 60 years. During the time span between the 1960s through the 1980s, domestic terrorism was dominated by far-left ideology that included anti-government movements driven predominantly by those with anti-capitalist grievances (Hewitt, 2003; Smith, 1994). During the late 1980s, there was a resurgence in activity corresponding to "single-issue" groups aligned with left-wing ideology, specifically environmental and animal rights extremism. Individuals and organizations connected to environmental rights issues contributed to criminal and terrorist acts against corporations and government agencies involved in activities such as animal research and deforesting. These acts often damaged property but very rarely caused injury (National Consortium for

the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2019). The Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front, two of the main "groups" associated with this wave of far-left extremism, engaged in hundreds of arsons and bombings, two-thirds of which occurred in the western United States (Chermak et al., 2013). During this period, far-right extremists, such as White supremacists, Neo-Nazis, skinheads, sovereign citizens, and paramilitary groups were active and more likely to engage in interpersonal violence that resulted in injury and death (Chermak et al., 2012; Gruenewald, 2011; Gruenewald et al., 2013a; 2013b; Parkin & Freilich, 2015; Parkin et al., 2015).

Although not always reflected in public and political discourse, far-right extremism has been one of the most prevalent and consistent extremist threats in the United States since the 1960s (Klein et al., 2017; Smith, 1994). Even after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, far-right ideologically motivated homicides have occurred much more frequently than jihadi violence inspired by Islamic extremism (Parkin et al., 2020). The relatively constant risk of far-right ideologically motivated violence occurring against the public and government representatives is empirically dissimilar to the way far-left extremist ideologies have manifested themselves through a series of intermittent waves. However, the current perceived rise of anarchist and anti-government movements has resulted in a growing concern by parts of the government and the public that the risk presented by the far-left is equal, if not greater than, that presented by the far-right. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to empirically assess whether one form of terrorism and extremist criminal violence, namely ideologically motivated homicide, manifests itself differently across the far-left and the far-right.

Extremist Violence in the United States

As stated, this article assesses event-level data corresponding to ideologically motivated homicides committed by far-left or far-right extremists. When addressing the problem of terrorism, methodological rigor has been significantly affected by problems of inadequate definitions that are not uniform across studies. Similar to how studies concerning terrorism have historically relied on a variety of definitions, and no universal definition has been established (Hoffman, 2017), the same has been true of extremism. As this paper addresses aspects of extremism within the United States, the analysis focuses entirely on events that occurred within the 50 states between 1990 and 2020 and utilizes the below definitions of far-left and far-right extremism.

Terrorism scholarship, and by extension extremism scholarship, increased exponentially after the 9/11attacks, with studies indicating that more than 50% of peer-reviewed articles were published in the two-year period immediately following these attacks (Lum et al., 2006). At the precipice of the terrorism scholarship wave, investigators were limited in the kind of information they could access (i.e., government files, reports; Silke, 2001, 2009). An important contribution of this article is that it analyzes data from an open-source database that has been operating for more than a decade, allowing for wider and more reliable access to information.

The direction of research agendas tends to be driven by political and public discourse (Reid, 1997; Sageman, 2014), creating pressure to produce studies that are often biased against an unknown other. In addition to political discourse, public discourse (predominantly mass media) plays a major role in the way terrorism is defined, which subsequently drives the kind of data and data collection strategies used to assess the problem. Government agencies, for example, may face tremendous political pressure to interpret terrorism in a particular way (i.e., terrorism as a problem of a particular religion or country), and their research may suffer from issues of selectivity bias (LaFree & Dugan, 2004). Therefore, by adhering to definitions that operate independently from political agendas, the inclusion and identification of incidents remains a constant over time.

Far-left Extremism

For this analysis, far-left extremism refers to groups and/or individuals that (1) support violence and/or criminal activity explicitly, or implicitly, to (2) further aspects of one or more of the following ideals: Marxist and/or Socialist and/or Leninist and/or Stalinist beliefs; anarchist beliefs (including individual autonomy and collective equality); support for extreme egalitarianism and/or a classless society and/or workers' and ordinary persons' rights; opposition of capitalism and/or corporate malfeasance; opposition of racism, particularly within institutions that historically have suffered from system racism; a belief that American society in general, and the criminal justice system, especially the police and other law enforcement agencies, in particular are systematically/institutionally racist; opposition of militarism and/or American imperialism and/or colonialism both abroad and domestically; suspicion of traditional mainstream religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity); a belief in Black Separatism/Supremacy and/or militant Black nationalism; support for Puerto Rican Independence; support for biodiversity and biocentric equality (i.e., that humans are no greater than any other form of life and have no legitimate claim to dominate earth); the earth and/or animals are in imminent danger; the government and /or parts of society such as corporations are responsible for this

danger; this danger will ultimately result in the destruction of the modern environment and/or whole species; the political system is incapable and/or unwilling to fix the crisis by taking actions to preserve American wilderness, protect the environment, and support biological diversity; there is a need to defend the environment and/or animals.

This definition is somewhat of a departure from more traditional approaches towards the study of far-left terrorism and a novel contribution to the study of extremism. The inclusion of environmental and animal-rights extremist groups here departs from earlier studies referencing these factions as single-issue entities, with weak ties to the left-wing terrorist agenda (Smith, 1994). More recent literature has made significant connections between the ideological grievances of environmental and animal rights groups and left-wing terrorism (Carson, 2017; Carson et al., 2017; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). The phenomenon is most commonly associated with the emergence of revolutionary groups of the 1960s through the 1980s (Malkki, 2018). During the 1980s, left-wing terrorism was most closely associated with groups that were generally considered as anti-U.S., anti-imperialist, with more global concerns over America's exploitation of non-White peoples from less industrialized nations (Hoffman, 1986). The current wave of left-wing terrorism appears to have less global concerns, while still adhering to the anti-capitalist structures of the more traditional left-wing movements of the 1960s. The inclusion of anarchists in the current definition is particularly important for addressing the issue of modern-day left-wing terrorism. While it is true that anarchist attitudes towards violence vary considerably, some factions of contemporary anarchism argue that since current hierarchical power structures are maintained through violence, violence is then necessary to defeat these structures (Borum & Tilby, 2005); it is those violence structures that are considered in the current context. These same ideals of a necessary violence are the same mechanisms that exist within the Marxist/Leninist/Stalinist movements identified in the first part of the definition.

Far-right Extremism

The definition of far-right extremism refers to groups and/or individuals that (1) support violence and/or criminal activity explicitly, or implicitly, to (2) further aspects of one or more of the following ideals: fiercely nationalistic, anti-global, xenophobic, and anti-immigration (as opposed to universal and international in orientation); suspicious of centralized federal and state authority; reverent of individual liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes); believe in conspiracy theories that involve a

grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty; belief that one's personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent (sometimes such beliefs are amorphous and vague, but for some the threat is from a specific ethnic, racial, social, or religious group); belief in the need to be prepared for an attack either by participating in or supporting the need for paramilitary preparations and training and/or survivalism; support of and/or inclusion in misogynistic subcultures; opposition of women's reproductive health choices specifically related to abortion (Freilich et al., 2014).

Method

The United States Extremist Crime Database

The aforementioned definitions for far-left and far-right extremism have been developed for use in the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), which is an open-source relational database that examines incident, perpetrator, and victim/target-level data to determine the nature of criminal behavior, both ideological and routine, by extremists who commit violent and financial crimes. The ECDB tracks far-right, far-left, jihadist-inspired, and environmental and animal rights related extremism (Freilich et al., 2014). The database identification and coding methodology has been quantitatively assessed and found to be valid and reliable (Chermak et al., 2012). Through open-source data collection and analysis, a method that has proven to be as reliable, if not more so, compared to official sources (Baćak et al., 2019; Chermak et al., 2012; LaFree, 2019; Sheehan, 2012), the ECDB is a multi-level relational database that addresses the impact of far-right, Al Qaeda/ISIS inspired, and environmental/animal rights related extremism within the United States. Throughout the past decade, the ECDB has produced research empirically testing aspects of extremism, both conceptually and practically (Asal et al., 2016; Chermak et al., 2012; Freilich et al., 2017; Gruenewald et al., 2013a; Gruenewald & Pridemore, 2012; Mills et al., 2017; Suttmoeller et al., 2015). This article uses ECDB data to examine ideologically motivated homicides in the United States between 1990 to 2020 committed by far-left and far-right extremists. For an incident to be included in the ECDB and included in this research, it must be ideologically motivated and at least one suspect must have been a far-left or far-right extremist at the time of the incident.

The sample of far-right ideologically motivated homicides was pulled from the ECBD and was constructed by first identifying crimes from various sources in an attempt to create a list of fatally violent incidents by far-right extremists in the United States from 1990-2020 (Freilich et al., 2014). These

sources included existing terrorism databases, official sources (FBI, DOJ), scholarly and journalistic accounts, material published by private watch groups, and media publications. The ECDB uses multiple coders, thereby adhering to inter-rater (i.e., coder) reliability. First, a strict procedure is set into place for coders to check inconsistencies. Second, coding abnormalities are continually checked across coders. Third, filling in values for certain ECDB variables requires little interpretation as the variables capture basic facts such as a suspect's race, age, or gender. Fourth, a database analyst subsequently validates all incident records, verifying that coders systematically apply coding rules when creating relational records for suspects, victims, targets, and their networks. Where coding inconsistencies occur, records are updated and corrected so that coding procedures are uniform across all research assistants and incidents. Fifth, a measurement of inter-rater reliability for selected individual and situational characteristics of far-right homicides indicates coder agreement between 89% and 98% of the time. When coders disagree, it was usually not because of differences in the values coded, but because one coder found a document that contains information that could be coded, while the second coder did not find it. It is thus important to have multiple coders both search and code each incident when using open-source materials.

Outside of environmental and animal rights extremism, the ECDB does not collect information on far-left violent extremism. The sample of far-left ideologically motivated homicides was independently identified using the same procedures listed above. Crimes committed by far-left extremists were identified from various sources to create a list similar to that of the far-right homicides. Once homicides were identified, multiple coders collected information on the situational characteristics of interest for the current analysis. To ensure inter-rater reliability, far-left homicides in this sample were coded simultaneously to address any inconsistencies.

Variables

The data are split across ideology, which are operationalized according to the ideological affiliation of the offenders and whether it falls within the definitions of far-left and far-right that were previously presented. The number of fatalities, generally, and the number of law enforcement deaths, specifically, are also captured. The weapons type variable is a categorical variable, corresponding to the primary weapon that suspects used during each homicide. These included arson/bombing, blunt or bodily weapon, firearm, knife/sharp object, or other. Ideological motivation is also captured. This variable covers motives that include anti-government,

generally, or anti-law enforcement, specifically. Additional categories included anti-race/ethnicity, anti-social minority, and other ideological motivations. Finally, the presidential term in which the incidents occurred was coded according to each term, for example "George W. Bush Term 1" or "Barak H. Obama Term 2."

The last variable of this assessment corresponds to ideological strength, which determines the extent to which an incident was motivated as a direct result of the perpetrator's extremist ideology. Ideological strength in this context ranges from zero (no ideological connection) to four (strong ideological connection). Incidents that indicated no ideological motivation are excluded from the analysis, although they are still captured and coded within the ECDB. To determine a weak to strong ideological bond, open-source materials are mined for a series of pro and con ideological indicators. For example, a homicide where a known white supremacist targets and kills Black men because he is looking to start a race war (pro indicator), with no evidence to the contrary, would be considered ideologically stronger than an incident with the same situational information plus the suspect had a history of mental illness that was used in court to challenge their competency to stand trial (con indicator). An incident with an ideological strength of *four* has multiple pro indicators and no con indicators, a *three* has only one pro indicator and no con indicators, a *two* has multiple pro indicators and at least one con indicator, and a *one* has only one pro indicator and at least one con indicator. The scale of *one* to *four* was then recoded so that a *one* was a weak ideological strength, a *two* or *three* was a moderate ideological strength, and a *four* was a strong ideological strength.

Analysis

This article provides a descriptive overview of the key characteristic differences between far-left and far-right extremism. Given the descriptive approach of this paper, results are presented primarily in tabular form. In addition, line graphs provide a visual representation of incidents and victim counts across time split by ideology.

Results

Trends

A popular narrative surrounding the issue of extremism in the United States concerns the rising threat of incidents overall. Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of ideologically motivated homicides occurring between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 2020. During this time, there were 269 ideologically motivated homicides (an average of 8.7 incidents per year). Far-left homicide incidents accounted for 15.6% of these homicide events, and far-right homicides accounted for 84.4%. Incidents peaked at years 1999 (*n*=18), 2009 (*n*=18), and 2017 (*n*=16). Since 2017, ideologically motivated homicides decreased dramatically from 22 incidents to 7 incidents the following year and have remained relatively consistent since (Figure 1). The trend lines in this figure depict this overall decrease in ideologically motivated homicides for the far-right, a trend that is also reflected among other types of ideologically motivated extremist events (Silva et al.,

Table 1. Ideologically motivated extremist homicides in the United States, 1990–2020

	Far-left		Far-right		Total
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*
Homicide Incidents (% across total incidents)	42	15.6	227	84.4	269
Fatalities (% across total fatalities)	78	13.0	523	87.0	601
Average fatalities per incident w/ Oklahoma City	1.9		2.3		
Average fatalities per incident w/o Oklahoma City	1.9		1.6		
One Fatality	30	71.4	182	80.2	212
Multiple Fatalities	12	28.6	45	19.8	57
Law Enforcement Deaths	16	38.1	32	14.1	48
Weapon Type					
Arson/Bomb	3	7.2	0	0.0	3
Blunt or Bodily Weapon	0	0.0	36	15.9	36
Firearm	38	90.5	126	55.5	164
Knife/Sharp Object	1	2.4	48	21.1	49
Other	0	0.0	17	7.5	17
Ideological Strength					
Strong	15	35.7	142	62.6	157
Moderate	16	38.1	59	26.0	75
Weak	11	26.2	26	11.5	37
Ideological Motivations					
Anti-Government	3	7.1	7	3.1	10
Anti-Law Enforcement	6	14.3	28	12.3	34
Anti-Race/Ethnicity	14	33.3	97	42.7	111
Anti-Social Minorities	6	14.3	73	32.2	79
Other	13	31.0	22	9.7	35
Presidential Administrations					
George H. W. Bush	2	4.8	22	9.7	24
William J. Clinton, Term 1	4	9.5	41	18.1	45
William J. Clinton, Term 2	3	7.1	44	19.4	47
George W. Bush, Term 1	1	2.4	24	10.6	25
George W. Bush, Term 2	1	2.4	22	9.7	23
Barack H. Obama, Term 1	5	11.9	28	12.3	33
Barack H. Obama, Term 2	9	21.4	21	9.3	30
Donald J. Trump	17	40.5	25	11.0	42

2019). However, the far-left, as it has relatively low numbers during the first 25 years of the dataset, shows a gradual linear increase over the period under study. Similarly, Figure 2 indicates a steady rise and fall in the number of ideologically motivated homicide victims, very similar to the rise and fall of other types of violence (Blumstein & Wallman, 2020). Prior research discusses the cyclical pattern on terrorism, highlighting how it generally occurs in waves (LaFree et al., 2009), and the same appears true here. Given the significant overlap between terrorism and extremist violence, the trends observed in the current analysis are not surprising. Although both the far-left and far-right homicide events appear to occur in waves, the baseline for the number of far-right events is higher than the far-left's baseline.

With the exception of 2017 when far-left homicides ($n=12$) out-numbered far-right homicides ($n=10$), the far-right has consistently been higher than the far-left. Not only do these figures echo prior research demonstrating the significance of the far-right threat (Jones, 2018; Jones et al., 2021; Simi & Bubolz, 2017; Stevenson, 2019; Ware, 2000), but the results presented here also speak to the overall consistency of the movement. A far-right ideologically motivated homicide has occurred at least once every year since 1990. By comparison, far-left ideologically motivated homicides were present for only 17 years of the 31-year timespan of the current analysis.

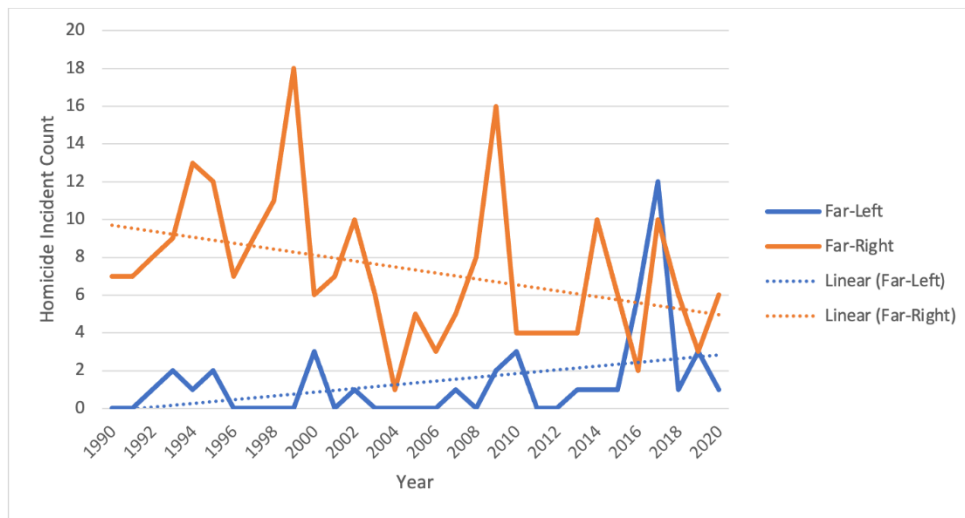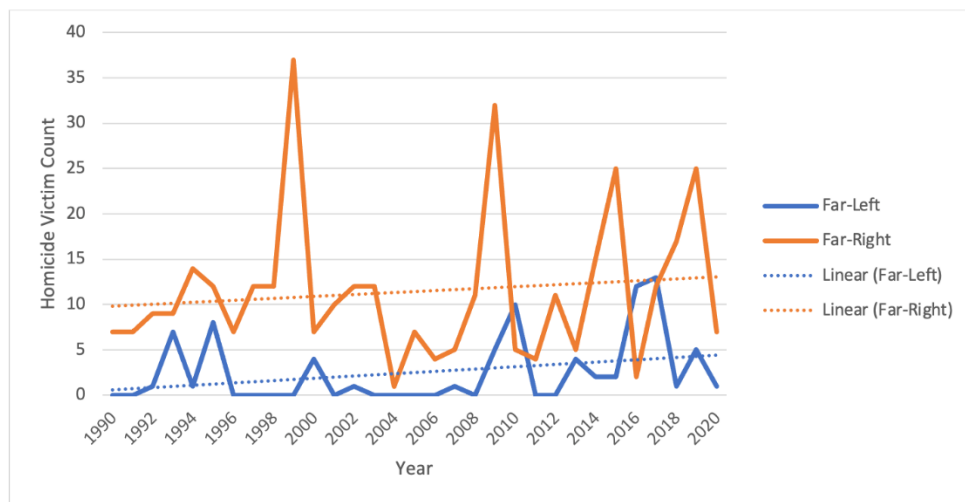Figure 1. Ideologically motivated homicide incidents in the United States, 1990–2020 ($n=269$)

Figure 2. Ideologically motivated homicide victims in the United States, 1990–2020 ($n=433^*$)

*does not include the 168 homicide victims killed during the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995

Fatalities

Compared to the universe of all homicides, ideologically motivated homicides and extremist violence are extremely rare. For example, even though the country experienced a surge in homicides during 2020 with over 19,000 incidents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), there were only eight ideologically motivated homicides for the same year, and only one of these ideological homicides pertained to the far-left. When comparing the lethality of far-right ideologically motivated homicides to the far-left, the results are consistent with the findings mentioned above. The far-right continues to surpass the far-left in both frequency of incidents and deaths. Even with the exclusion of deaths from the Oklahoma City Bombing[1] (n=168), deaths from far-right ideologically motivated homicides average 11.5 per year from 1990-2020, compared to only 2.5 deaths from the far-left for the same period. Far-left deaths surpassed far-right deaths for only three years of the current temporal analysis, 2010 (far-right=5, far-left=10), 2016 (far-right=2, far-left=12), and 2017 (far-right=12, far-left=13). When assessing other differences in fatalities, the majority of incidents (79%) resulted in one fatality, whereas only 31% resulted in two or more fatalities, further supporting findings from prior research detailing the rare occurrence of mass casualty events with regards to terrorism and extremist violence (Taleb, 2007). The ideological differences in this respect are a bit more nuanced. When comparing fatality differences between the far-left and the far-right, a larger proportion of far-left homicides resulted in multiple casualties (29%, n=12) than the far-right (20%, n=45) indicating that far-left homicide incidents are more likely to have multiple homicide victims.

Weapons Used

The majority of all ideologically motivated homicides involved a gun or some other firearm (n=164). This is not a surprising finding considering that most homicides are committed with a firearm and that prior research indicates terrorists are most likely to be involved in firearm offenses (Legault & Hendrickson, 2009). When comparing firearm use between the far-left and the far-right, the far-left has a much higher use proportionally of firearms (90.5%) than the far-right (55.5%). Knives and sharp objects are used to a lesser degree (n=49) followed by blunt/bodily weapons (n=36). Interestingly, where the far-left has a higher incidence of firearm use compared to the far-right, the results here indicate the far-right has a higher incidence of knife use (21.1%) compared to the far-left (2.4%). Part of these differences may be explained by far-right extremists being more likely to engage in intimate violence (Parkin et al., 2015).

Ideological Strength

The ECDB uniquely measures the strength of ideological association between suspects and their motives for committing an attack. The range of ideological association/intensity was recoded from a numeric range (1-4) to an ordinal range (Weak, Moderate, Strong). An interesting result to highlight here is that far-right incidents tend to have a stronger ideological association (62.6%) compared to the far-left (35.7%).

Ideological Motivation

A key facet of this paper attempts to explain how these two ideological movements overlap in their motivations. The current analysis collapsed motivations into five general categories: anti-government (n=10), anti-law enforcement (n=34), anti-race/ethnicity (n=111), anti-social minorities (n=79), and other (n=35). Incidents with an anti-government motivation generally resist the legitimacy of the law and the institutions that uphold them. For the far-right, the belief is that there is too much government oversight and intervention, whereas for the far-left, the government is not doing enough to protect civil liberties. Anti-police rhetoric has permeated both sides of the ideological spectrum, and the current analysis indicates this continues to be the case with both the far-left and the far-right targeting law-enforcement 14.3% and 12.3% of the time, respectively. The most significant ideological motivation corresponds to anti-race/ethnicity, and this is the case for both the far-left (33.3%) and the far-right (n=42.7%). This was collapsed from the more specific motivations driven by a general disdain of race relations, such as animosity towards individuals perceived as Black, White, Arab, Asian, and Hispanic. Incidents targeting anti-social minorities consist of marginalized groups including feminists, LGBTQIA+, religious minorities (i.e., Jewish and Islamic), leftists, and the homeless. Anti-social minorities comprise the second most significant target for the far-right (32.3%), though it is not as significant an issue for the far-left, accounting for only 14.3% of their incidents. All other motivations include opposition to abortion, racism, fascism, a general dislike of sex-offenders, and seeking retribution for personal and institutional wrongs. These motivations represent the second most significant target for the far-left (31.0%).

Presidential Administration

In addition to assessing the volume of incidents over time, this paper analyzed the occurrence of ideologically motivated homicides across presidential terms. The period of the analysis spanned across five different presidential administrations:

George H. W. Bush (*n*=24), William J. Clinton (*n*=92), George W. Bush (*n*=48), Barak H. Obama (*n*=63), and Donald J. Trump (*n*=42). It is important to note that these administrations are categorized according to the specific presidential term for more nuanced comparisons (i.e., George W. Bush, Term 2 versus Barak H. Obama, Term 1); the temporal analysis includes only two years of the George H. W. Bush administration. Far-right incidents appear to be relatively consistent across all presidential terms, with the majority of incidents occurring during Terms 1 and 2 of the Clinton administration (18.1% and 19.4%, respectively). Interestingly, most of the far-left incidents occurred in the later portion of the analysis, with the highest proportion of incidents occurring during the Trump administration (40.5%).

Discussion

An integral aspect of this paper is the comparison between far-left and far-right ideologically motivated homicides in response to concerns regarding the recent up-tick in far-left violence. The results indicate that there is little evidence to support the position of a heightened risk of a far-left threat. When comparing far-left extremist homicides to far-right extremist homicides, there are distinct differences between the ideological perspectives but also some interesting similarities. As expected, the far-right has been more active when it comes to ideologically motivated homicides than the far-left. With more incidents per year in all but one year over a 31-year period, they account for a larger portion of fatalities and are more likely to target racial and ethnic minorities. However, the data demonstrate that far-left extremist homicides have a higher proportion of multiple fatalities and accounted for a slightly larger relative percentage of ideological homicides that are anti-police when compared to the far-right. In other words, while far-right extremists are responsible for a higher frequency of incidents, far-left extremists more often kill more than one individual and are also slightly more likely to target law enforcement when they engage in fatal violence. However, in raw numbers, the far-left has engaged in fatal violence much less often than the far-right and killed far fewer people over the last three decades. Importantly, though, these results indicate that the characteristics regarding far-left and far-right extremist homicides are more complex than what has been previously discussed.

Given the unexpected nature of some of these findings, a more in-depth discussion of these phenomena is warranted. Concerning the proportion of single and multiple fatalities, it is interesting how even though far-left extremists account for less than a third of ideologically motivated homicides, perpetrators appear to target more victims per incident compared to the far-right or, in some regard, are more successful at fatal violence when they choose to engage in it. This could be attributed to the fact that far-left extremists are more discerning of their targets and seek to make a larger statement, therefore selecting targets that could require more planning and effort. For example, the data here indicate most far-left incidents are motivated by anti-race (specifically anti-White) sentiments and seeking retribution from oppressive systems. Because of these overarching systemic motivations, it could stand to reason that far-left extremists are more purposeful in the targets they choose and are able to attack multiple victims due to better strategic planning. Far-right extremist homicides are also primarily motivated by anti-racial/ethnic sentiments, an expected finding considering the movement's roots in White supremacy. Smith (1994) found that far-left and international terrorists tend to operate/attack within more urban settings, whereas far-right terrorists attack more rural areas. Since urban areas are more densely populated, far-left extremists might have more availability of targets, thereby contributing to the larger proportion of multiple victims. Further investigation for this result would be useful to determine the exact nature of these relationships. In addition, like the perspectives discussed above, the differences in the ideological strength of the homicide events could also be attributed to what the two movements consider legitimate. A larger proportion of far-right homicides were coded with an ideological strength as strong (62.6%) compared to the far-left (35.7%), indicating that evidence of an ideological motivation with no contradictory evidence is more likely for the former.

While this paper attempts to show the differences between far-left and far-right ideological homicides, it also attempts to establish the ways in which they are similar. For both the far-left and the far-right, the most significant issue is related to anti-race/ethnicity perspectives. Even though the far-right is motivated to a large extent by anti-race and ethnicity grievances, and the far-left driven by anti-White sentiments, this finding is very much consistent with prior research indicating how ideologically motivated homicides are inter-racial (Parkin et al., 2015). Homicide research (not ideologically motivated) indicates that these events are overwhelmingly intra-racial because of the inter-personal nature of this type of violence. However, within this context, it is not as surprising that victims are mostly of a different race than the perpetrators because of the increased social distance between the two groups. Ideologically, perpetrators and victims tend to have little in common, and each represents something with what the offender

disagrees. Additionally, not identifying with a victim allows a perpetrator to dehumanize the victim, an ideal that has been explored at length within prior theoretical and terrorism research (Liddick, 2013; Sykes & Matza, 1957). This is also inherent to the category relating to anti-social minorities, which represent other marginalized groups of society (i.e., anti-feminist, anti-gay), and whom the far-right is more likely to target for their identity being antithetical to their ideology.

Looking at the rate at which far-left and far-right extremists pursue anti-government and anti-law enforcement targets (21.4% and 15.4%, respectfully) and ideological strength, further investigation would be warranted as to the relationship between these two variables. Freilich and Chermak (2009) found that law-enforcement targeted by far-right extremists were mostly an occurrence of opportunity, which could explain why anti-police homicides account for a smaller proportion of events compared to the far-left. Law enforcement and government officials represent a clear threat to the far-left, both individually and institutionally, so it would stand to reason that those perpetrators would purposely seek out these targets, therefore accounting for the larger proportion of anti-government and anti-law enforcement targets.

Finally, an interesting facet of this research addresses the occurrence of ideologically motivated homicides across presidential administrations. The analysis addressed the frequency of ideologically motivated homicides for each term, as opposed to the overall length of each administration. The majority of all ideologically motivated homicides occurred during both terms of the Clinton administration (January 1993- January 2001), a period during which homicides and violent crime began to decrease from historic highs. During the first term of the Clinton administration there were 45 ideologically motivated homicides, 41 of which were far-right ideologically motivated. Similarly, during the second term of the Clinton administration, there were 47 ideologically motivated homicides, and 44 were from the far-right. Since the far-right is rooted in conservative political ideals, it makes intuitive sense that far-right ideological homicides might peak during a democratic presidential administration. This period also coincided with increases in far-right ideological homicides that were anti-government and motivated by the approach of the new millennium (Parkin et al., 2015).

From the onset, the Clinton administration was tasked with confronting a great deal of scrutiny regarding the federal government's errors in judgement and questionable policies of engagement. One month before Clinton was elected to office, an 11-day standoff in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, resulted in the death of two civilians and one U.S. Marshal. One year later, another deadly standoff, this time in Waco, Texas, ended with an estimated 80 fatalities, including four ATF agents. The combination of these two events helped galvanize the far-right, creating a major resurgence of extremist violence (ADL, 2012; Crothers, 2019; Pitcavage, 2001). A direct result of these deadly events was a growing agitation among militia and White supremacist groups that helped fuel the motivation for the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing (Giordano, 2002; Kaplan, 1996). This, in addition to several social welfare and military policies, such as the appointment of Janet Reno to Attorney General, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" allowing gay service members into the military, several increases in federal taxes, striking down anti-abortion legislation, and several allegations of abuse of power and misconduct quite possibly created the environment for far-right ideological grievances to grow (ADL, 2012; Miller Center, 2020).

On the other hand, far-left ideological homicides occurred most during the Trump administration, accounting for almost half of all far-left ideological homicides for the period. Like the mechanisms contributing to the prevalence of the far-right during the Clinton administration, policies and rhetoric during the Trump administration that directly challenged left-wing ideals could have contributed to the exponential resurgence of the movement. During his campaign, a not yet elected Trump would routinely use anti-immigrant rhetoric, contributing to the rifts between the right and the left. During his time as president, several domestic and foreign policies (e.g., a travel ban that targeted predominantly Muslim countries, the funding and building of a wall along the U.S. – Mexico border, and a controversial move to bar trans-persons from serving in the military), along with public calls that invigorated private citizens to take matters into their own hands created an environment where far-left extremists could have felt compelled to react. This is reflected in the "other" category of the ideological motivations, which corresponded to retribution against centuries of systemic oppression and institutional racism. However, further inquiry into the specific nature of these motivations indicates the revenge enacted by far-left extremists is a response to some of the more egregious actions by the far-right. For example, in 2015, a former television studio employee shot and killed two reporters on air as a reaction to the Charleston Church shooting. The shooter, Bryce Williams, faxed a 23-page manifesto in which he wrote, "What sent me over the top was the church shooting. And my hollow point bullets have the victims' initials on them" (Thomas et al., 2015, para. 6). In 2017, Emanuel Kidega Samson opened fire on a group of congregants at the Burnette Chapel Church of Christ in Antioch, Tennessee. Samson claimed

responsibility for the attack, indicating he also acted in revenge for the Charleston shooting (Kovaleski & Blinder, 2017).

Policy Implications & Future Research Directions

A number of noteworthy implications stem from the differences and similarities between far-left and far-right ideologically motivated homicides. First, the prevalent and consistent nature of far-right ideological homicides suggests that this movement should be a prioritized concern for government policy and law enforcement agencies. As mentioned earlier, prior research has shown that law enforcement agencies indicate that the far-right is the most significant threat (Freilich et al., 2009). The results from this paper are consistent with these findings. This suggests that counter-measures should be put in place in proportion to the threat and risk of each ideological perspective. Because the far-right is responsible for more ideological homicides, and more fatalities, there should be more resources available to combatting this threat. Despite calls from top security officials calling for a recognition of the far-right as a viable threat, security briefings to state and local partners disproportionately have emphasized a far-left threat (Swan, 2020). The disconnects between empirical data and what policy emphasizes highlights a potential issue with domestic counterterrorism policy. In addition to more accurate countermeasures, there should be better strategic planning to account for the differences of multiple fatalities between the two ideologies. As discussed, while the far-left is responsible for a smaller number of ideologically motivated homicides, a larger proportion of incidents have multiple victims and a slightly higher victim count on average, suggesting that left-wing extremists are more deadly when they do engage in fatal violence. In addition, although far-right ideologically motivated homicides are trending slightly downward over time, far-left violence is slightly trending upward.

Second, opportunity reduction has proven an effective strategy in mitigating the consequences of crime. Findings from the current analysis are consistent with other homicide and terrorism research relating to the use of firearms (Legault & Hendrickson, 2009). Both far-left and far-right extremists relied heavily on the use of guns, supporting calls for increased gun-control. Limiting the availability and access to firearms could reduce the impact of ideologically motivated homicides by affecting all homicides. Other research on terrorist and extremist crime has discussed how these types of crime are inherent to the same opportunity structures as other more traditional types of crime (Clarke & Newman, 2006). Reducing the availability of guns will subsequently reduce the opportunity. Merely reducing the availability of certain weapons, however, is not enough for adequately reducing the opportunity for crime. Due to the nature of ideological crime and how it is driven by myriad personal and political grievances, in particular intra-racial and ethnic conflict, policy aimed towards cultural competency to improve race relations could help reduce the ideological motivations inherent to the types of crime discussed here.

Limitations

While this paper relies on information from a nationally recognized database that has been operating for more than a decade, there is no guarantee that *all* far-left and far-right ideologically motivated homicides have been captured for the study period. The ECDB is an open-source database that relies on de-classified, publicly available information to identify ideologically motivated violence occurring in the United States since 1990. While acknowledging the conflicting nature of news-reporting and public information sharing, the severity of this type of violence, and the newsworthiness of homicides (i.e., "if it bleeds, it leads"), it is reasonable to expect that this study captured the majority of all far-left and far-right ideologically motivated homicides for which information was available. In addition, this research focused only on ideologically motivated homicide; studies that expand to other ideologically motivated crime, such as failed and foiled plots, arsons and bombings, or assaults, may find different patterns between far-left and far-right extremist behaviors.

Conclusion

The findings from this study echo a large body of research pointing towards an increased threat by far-right extremism over other ideological perspectives. The results indicate that the far-right remains the greatest threat to public safety for the most severe form of violence, namely ideologically motivated homicide. However, some interesting nuances highlight areas in which the far-left might create cause for concern; the far-left has a larger proportion of homicides with multiple fatalities and a slightly higher rate of homicides targeting law enforcement, albeit at a frequency much lower than the far-right. In addition, far-left extremist violence has increased over the last five years, showing that there may be socio-political scenarios in which the far-left's threat to domestic security increases to levels much higher than its average over the last three decades. This shows the importance of relying on data-driven policies that strategically prioritize domestic extremist threats and reduce opportunities for ideological violence in a meaningful way.

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Endnotes

[1]   Fatalities from the Oklahoma City Bombing were excluded from Table 1 and Figure 2 as it is an extreme outlier and skews the data in such a way that it hides any underlying patterns.