

War on government: 'Sovereign citizens' bring surge of violence

FBI cites anti-government movement as one of its 'top threats'

PREMIUM

By Sean Salai

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A 50-year-old “sovereign citizens” movement that rejects government authority has resurged over the past two years with an influx of members from QAnon, Jan. 6 rioters and Black Americans, authorities tell The Washington Times.

Members of the loosely organized movement, known online by names such as SovCit and American State Nationals, claim to promote nonviolent resistance to laws infringing on personal liberty.

Scholars and police officials say the groups have records of attracting radicals who provoke violence when confronted over their refusals to carry state-issued identification, register their automobiles or license their guns.

“The surge since 2021 likely has to do with the increase in SovCit ideology in QAnon groups, as well as the [U.S.] Capitol attack,” said Nicole Hemmer, a Vanderbilt University historian who studies U.S. extremist movements. “It fed a more radicalized anti-law-enforcement strand on the far right, which feeds into sovereign citizen ideas.”

The FBI says the anti-government movement, though not illegal, is one of its top threats.

The movement, estimated to have 100,000 to 350,000 core followers, collects no membership dues, takes no attendance at meetings and provides no contact information online.

Officials say reports show its ranks swelling again as crime soars in the pandemic era and even while some past leaders serve time for financial scams, violent crimes and other violations.

“It really is an amorphous group that changes beliefs, methods and means to stop what they see as government overreach, especially federal and state,” said a senior law enforcement official speaking on the condition of anonymity. “They want what they want and will never accept someone [or] something directing them to adhere to societal needs deemed by the Republic to be for the greater good.”

Last week, Utah police fatally shot Chase Allen, 25, during a routine traffic stop to check a fake license plate on his car that asserted his sovereign citizenship. Police said Allen reached for a gun in his holster while disputing their authority. The incident, still under investigation, is the latest in a series of clashes with people claiming to be U.S. nationals but not citizens.

Other incidents over the past two years include:

- On July 3, 2021, Massachusetts State Police arrested 11 members of the Black militia group Rise of the Moors who refused to surrender unregistered firearms during a standoff that closed Interstate 95 in Wakefield for nine hours.

The Rhode Island-based group, which claims sovereign Moorish citizenship under a U.S.-Moroccan treaty, has refused to recognize a state court’s authority to try its members.

- In July 2021, five self-proclaimed sovereign citizens moved into an empty \$1.5 million Maryland mansion, changed the locks and tried to claim it from the rightful owners. Police eventually removed them from the Baltimore

County home and arrested the ringleaders.

- At an October court hearing in Wisconsin, Darrell Brooks declared himself a “sovereign citizen” who would defend himself legally, derailing his trial for driving his SUV through a Christmas parade in Waukesha in November 2021.

Brooks was convicted in November and given six consecutive life sentences in prison for the incident, in which six people were killed and 62 others were injured.

- In a January court appearance over their activities on Jan. 6, 2021, Ohio couple Shawndale and Donald Chilcoat were the latest of several U.S. Capitol rioters who used a sovereign citizen legal defense to reject a federal court’s jurisdiction over them. The couple were arrested in August on multiple charges stemming from videos they posted to social media of themselves entering the Capitol building and posing on the Senate floor.

Judges have consistently rejected the movement’s legal stance as nonsensical, rambling and unsupported, but a sizable share of adherents have proved willing to go to jail and even die in police standoffs to defend it.

In a statement emailed to The Times, the FBI said the sovereign citizens’ belief that U.S. residents “are immune from government authority and laws” is a form of violent anti-government or anti-authority extremism, “one of the FBI’s top threats.”

The bureau said the movement has First Amendment protection and that membership is “not illegal in and of itself.”

“Holding such views is not sufficient for an investigation,” the FBI said. “The FBI focuses on individuals who commit or intend to commit violence and criminal activity that constitutes a federal crime or poses a threat to national security.”

Rise of a movement

Analysts say sovereign citizens emerged in the early 1970s as offshoots of the tax protest movement, which argued that the federal income tax was unconstitutional, and of Posse Comitatus, a now-defunct Christian

conspiracy group that peddled antisemitic and White supremacist beliefs.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish civil rights group that has tracked the movement for decades, sovereign citizens reached their mature form by the mid-1980s and gained followers from right-wing militia groups in the 1990s. The movement has since spread from its rural origins in several Western states to the urban centers of every state in the country and to Canada, New Zealand, Britain, Ireland and other nations.

Sovereign citizens have also attracted a following of Black members of Moorish splinter groups, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the ADL's Center on Extremism.

“The ideology they created was about the government, not race, and the percentage of White supremacists compared to the total movement has consistently decreased over the decades,” Mr. Pitcavage said. “Starting in the mid-1990s, people of color, especially Blacks, began to join the movement, and now there are tens of thousands of people of color in the movement. In many Midwest and Northeastern cities, most sovereign citizens are probably Black.”

Perhaps the best-known sovereign citizen is Terry Nichols, who plotted with Timothy McVeigh the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people, including 19 children, and wounded at least 680 others in the deadliest domestic terrorist attack on record. Nichols, who sought revenge against the federal government for the sieges at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Several past sovereign leaders and followers are in prison for a number of offenses. Their crimes include shooting police officers during routine traffic stops; fraudulent legal filings or documents intended to harass judges and police officers, such as placing phony liens on their homes for millions of dollars; and mortgage, investment and immigration scams that have netted tens of millions of dollars.

The FBI issued two warnings about sovereign citizens in 2010 and 2011 that said followers had killed six police officers in standoffs since 2000. In 2013, the Obama administration flagged the movement as part of a campaign to

combat online violent extremism.

In another domestic terrorism report, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security said sovereign citizens played roles in 12 incidents from 2015 to 2018. They included a 2016 tax evasion conviction in Georgia, a 2015 shooting that left two Florida police officers wounded and a sovereign citizen dead, and the 2015 arrest of a West Virginian who plotted to overthrow the state government.

The report noted the convictions of 18 people, including several sovereign citizens, for occupying Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016.

Although sovereign citizen beliefs vary, a core tenet holds that a long-ago conspiracy infiltrated the original, legitimate U.S. government and slowly replaced it with an illegitimate, tyrannical de facto government. That illegitimate government has since enslaved Americans by forcing them to unknowingly sign away their sovereignty through "contracts" such as driver's licenses, Social Security cards and ZIP codes.

Sovereign citizen websites, resources and groups advise members on the legal declarations and actions they must take to divorce themselves from the "illegitimate" government and return to the original "legitimate" government that requires them to follow God's law and the common law, recognizing only the authority of local sheriffs.

"Once you have divorced yourself from the illegitimate government, it has no more jurisdiction or authority over you," said the ADL's Mr. Pitcavage. "This is why the sovereign citizen movement and its adherents constantly get in trouble with the law, which they think they can ignore, no matter how big or small, from gun laws to zoning ordinances."

Analysts say the Great Recession and the rise of social media helped the movement add Black members from 2009 to 2012. Now they say the pandemic and a struggling economy have made it easy for sovereign citizen "gurus" to recruit QAnon conspiracy theorists and vaccine skeptics. These groups are already inclined to reject government authority.

Many of the newer groups have rebranded themselves as “American state nationals” on alternative social media platforms such as Telegraph, where officials say they most commonly recruit members.

The ADL said gurus working to grow the movement over the past two years include David Straight, Bobby Lawrence, Anna Riezinger and Russell Jay Gould.

The Times attempted, largely without success, to reach these leaders and their groups for comment.

A representative of Washitaw Nation, a Louisiana-based Black group that the Southern Poverty Law Center identifies as a violent Moorish offshoot of the movement, responded to an email with several pages of an alleged family tree supporting his claim to be a royal prince.

An official at the American state nationals assemblies — a network of state groups whose website contains resources for resisting the “de facto government” by refusing to file income taxes, car registrations or driver’s license paperwork — claimed to have no ties to the sovereign citizens movement.

“From my understanding, those who profess to be sovereign citizens are often on their own and not a part of their state assembly,” Evangeline Grace Knipfing, the group’s recording secretary, said in an email. “In recent news, I’ve seen state nationals being equated with sovereign citizens, but the two are very different. I couldn’t tell you the difference, since I’d have to have knowledge of what a sovereign citizen does.”

Jacqueline Gordon, the widow of George Gordon, a Missouri-based lawyer and radio host who died in 2014 after ADL identified him as an early leader in the movement, defended his record.

The George Gordon School of Common Law has taught biblical common law since her husband started it in 1982, Mrs. Gordon said in a telephone message.

She rejected the claim that Gordon's principle of withdrawing from government-issued "contracts" to obey only God had any connection to a formal movement. She said he intended it as a moral code for individuals only.

"We don't teach people to be anarchists, but we teach them how to be individuals and [how] they've given up that individuality through adhesion contracts," Mrs. Gordon said.

Correction: A previous version of this story misidentified one of the countries where the sovereign citizens movement has spread.

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Surge in mail crime points to phase-out of checks, bill payers risk losses by using USPS boxes

PREMIUM

By Sean Salai

Check fraud has nearly doubled amid a surge in organized mail crime that started during the COVID-19 pandemic, and experts say it could spell the end of the once-popular payment method.

The number of check scams that banks reported to the Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network soared from 350,000 in 2021 to 680,000 last year, even as check use continued a 30-year slide. The agency, known as FinCEN, estimated that check fraud cost victims \$24 billion last year.

Most incidents arose from thieves taking mail out of commercial bins, residential mailboxes and even blue collection boxes where bill-payers place checks in stamped envelopes. Others came from gangs of young thieves robbing letter carriers, often at knifepoint or gunpoint, to get the "arrow" keys that open postal boxes throughout a metropolitan area.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service received about 300,000 complaints of mail theft in 2021, more than double the 2020 tally. Last month, the U.S. Postal Service reported that 305 letter carriers were robbed on the job in the first half of fiscal 2023, which ended March 31. That put direct thefts on track to more than double the 412 reported in all of fiscal 2022.

Bank investigators say those statistics show that checks have become the riskiest way of paying bills in the digital age, even though many older adults believe otherwise.

"Checks are probably going to be phased out as the next generations grow up without using them," said Mark D. Solomon, a vice president of the International Association of Financial Crimes Investigators, a California-based nonprofit. "Financial institutions and retailers have become very suspicious of them because of how much fraud there is right now."

Improved verification methods and EMV chip card technology, instead of the magnetic stripe, have made it harder for criminals to counterfeit debit and credit cards or get more than a few dollars from stolen cards, said Mr. Solomon, who has spent years investigating financial crimes for banks.

He said that draws criminals back to the ease of “washing” checks with household chemicals, rewriting them to pay more, counterfeiting checkbooks and using or selling the banking and routing numbers.

“Seniors think checks are a safe way to pay bills, but there are much safer ways of conducting transactions right now,” Mr. Solomon told The Washington Times. “Checks are more vulnerable than other payment methods to being compromised, counterfeited or stolen.”

Reports of check fraud grew early in the pandemic as criminal gangs formed to target government relief checks. As the COVID stimulus ended, fraudsters started stealing more bill payments from individuals and small businesses.

Criminal rings also have become bolder about stealing the financial identities of check fraud victims, according to the banking industry.

Many criminal gang leaders now train “mules” to talk persuasively to bank tellers as they create fake identities or businesses, opening lines of credit based on old account information sold on the dark web. They then use the new debit card and personal identification number (PIN) to drain more money from a victim.

Investigators say the crime rings recruit homeless and financially strapped individuals as members on social media. In one case in Southern California last year, nearly 60 alleged gang members were arrested on charges of committing more than \$5 million in check fraud against 750 victims.

Check use has declined steadily since 1992 as more adults switch from cash and checks to credit and debit cards for most purchases. Today, checks are primarily used to pay bills.

Consumers wrote nearly 3.4 billion checks last year, down from more than 19 billion checks in 1992, according to data from the Federal Reserve. The average check amount rose from \$695 to \$2,652 over the same period — about \$1,000 more per check than three decades ago, adjusted for inflation.

That makes scammers likelier to make money from fake checks than by stealing electronic payment information or cards.

Investigators say thieves spend small amounts on stolen credit cards to avoid detection and are usually stopped after the bank calls cardholders to verify the transactions.

Fraudsters can rewrite a \$20 check for \$5,000 without a bank having any way of knowing what the check should look like. With checks they cannot wash, fraudsters use the banking and routing numbers to print counterfeits.

Mobile phone deposit applications mean the thieves never have to look a bank teller in the eye. Others create fake IDs to make in-person deposits.

The difficulty of catching check scams shows the need for banks and retailers to have alternative payment methods, said John Berlau, director of finance policy for the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute.

“These new problems with checks show the importance of secure debit and credit cards for consumers and retailers,” Mr. Berlau said in an email.

The American Bankers Association recommends using pens with “indelible black ink” that is harder to wash, verifying deposits with check recipients and reviewing bank statements online to protect transactions.

The association also advises reporting suspected fraud to the U.S. Postal Service and banks.

“Working together as an industry, alongside law enforcement, the Postal Service and regulators, offers us the best chance at success,” Sarah Grano, a spokesperson for the American Bankers Association, told The Times.

The safest way of making a payment by check is to drop it off in person at a local post office or just before closing hours, and never leave it in a postal box overnight, according to USPS.

Postal inspectors say they are seeing more organization and coordination of check fraud than ever before as criminal rings share data through encrypted messaging and restricted content on the dark web.

Last month, the Postal Service announced several new security measures to protect checks in the mail. The measures include the installation of 12,000 high-security blue collection boxes in high-risk areas nationwide and the replacement of 49,000 arrow locks on postal boxes with electronic locks.

“Generally, crime has increased since the start of the pandemic, our carriers are in neighborhoods delivering to 160 million delivery points daily, six days a week, and sometimes are in the wrong place at the wrong time,” U.S. Postal Inspector Michael Martel, national spokesman for the Postal Inspection Service, said Tuesday.

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated John Berlau’s position on the use of checks.

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Check your phone bill — a tax for the new 988 suicide hotline may be coming soon

PREMIUM

By Sean Salai
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Calls and texts have been pouring in to the nation's suicide prevention hotline since last summer after the government simplified the number to 988.

While calls and texts come in at record rates from those seeking help with drug addiction or suicidal thoughts, the cost of maintaining the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is rising.

The Biden administration has been picking up the tab, but federal law makes state and local governments responsible for expanding more than 200 call centers that route contacts to mental health counselors.

Taxpayers and consumers are beginning to pay those costs as state legislatures pass bills to add fees to phone bills or add budget funding for the call centers.

California, Colorado, Nevada, Virginia and Washington have created phone taxes to fund the call centers by adding 12 to 50 cents to monthly bills for phone lines.

Another six — Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas and Vermont — are considering similar fees.

Congress designated the 988 dialing code during a pandemic relief spending spree in 2020 and authorized state governments to levy telecommunications fees to cover the costs.

President Trump signed the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act into law that October, and the Biden administration has since deposited nearly \$1 billion of startup money into 988 operations.

“Significant investments in capacity at the federal, state and local levels have helped ensure that the 988 Lifeline has been able to respond to many more people in crisis,” Monica Johnson, director of the 988 & Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office, told The Washington Times. “Data following the transition to 988 in July 2022 continues to show an increase in overall calls, texts and chats from the year prior, all while answer rates are significantly improving.”

Virginia was the first state to enact a phone tax funding 988 operations under Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat who signed it into law in March 2021. The service fee adds 12 cents a month to the cellphone bills of Virginians with subscription wireless plans. Those with prepaid wireless services pay 8 cents per retail transaction.

Conservative policy analysts are skeptical about adding a “suicide tax” to residents’ monthly phone bills.

“This is an unfunded mandate, pure and simple, and the federal government needs to rethink their funding mechanism,” said Raven Harrison, a Texas-based Republican political strategist. “We also need to be looking at utilizing churches and other charitable organizations to help shoulder the load because rarely does the government do anything better or more effectively than the private sector.”

According to the nonprofit National Alliance on Mental Illness, at least 20 other states have approved or are debating 988-related legislation that does not involve a phone tax.

The Democratic-dominated Maryland General Assembly has approved a bill that would route money directly from state budgets to 988 call centers or mobile crisis services. Legislation in other states would create task forces to study potential funding alternatives.

“The way Congress set this up is reasonable,” said Ed Haislmaier, senior research fellow in health policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “The federal government can’t do something and tell states to pay for it, but it can facilitate a program in a way that removes obstacles to states doing things.”

The situation recalls the Obama administration’s 2009 push to expand Medicaid benefits through the Affordable Care Act, said James Carville, a Democratic Party political strategist. He pointed out that many Republican-led states, especially in the Deep South, have refused to pay for that expansion.

“Frankly, I think cruelty is part of the appeal when you don’t want to pay for something that benefits people who aren’t like you,” Mr. Carville said. “The idea is that you don’t need a suicide hotline or [psychiatric] drugs and counseling if you get depressed — you can just suck it up and soldier on.”

According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the 988 hotline answered 404,194 calls, chats and texts in February. That was an increase of 161,678 contacts from the same month last year, before the change.

Call volume in February increased year over year by 48%. The number of online chats rose by 247%, and the number of text messages shot up a staggering 1,599%.

The crisis centers absorbing this spike “are fundamentally operated at the local level” and need state funding mechanisms to expand services as demand keeps growing, said Dani Bennett, a spokesperson for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services.

“States are taking a range of approaches, including assignment of coalitions and commissions, leveraging state Medicaid funding and passing legislation that allocates specific funding to 988 response,” Ms. Bennett said.

Through the substance abuse and mental health agency, HHS funds Vibrant Emotional Health — the 988 line’s nonprofit administrator — to support telephone networking, data collection, quality assurance, operator training and call routing.

Federal money also funds a small network of national crisis call centers and text and chat services that back up the local centers during overflow.

The Democratic-led Congress and White House included \$501.6 million for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the fiscal year 2023 omnibus spending package. That followed a \$432 million investment from the Biden administration.

Ms. Bennett said the federal grants do not cover mobile crisis response, community behavioral health clinics or dedicated crisis care-related funds, so states must find ways to pick up the tab in those areas.

“The federal investments have been used to scale up crisis center capacity, national backup center capacity and to provide special services, including a subnetwork for Spanish language speakers, to ensure all Americans have access to help during mental health crises,” Ms. Bennett said. “Prior to this investment, the lifeline, which has existed since 2005, had been long unfunded and under-resourced.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs, HHS and the Federal Communications Commission developed the suicide lifeline, which also links to the Veterans Crisis Line. The original number functions alongside the 988 code.

The number of people contacting the old hotline spiked during pandemic lockdowns and stayed elevated during remote work arrangements, mental health counselors say. Call centers reported an uptick in suicidal adults with work-from-home jobs who felt unable to get out of bed or were abusing opioids to numb their loneliness.

State and local call centers received 3.6 million calls, chats and texts on the hotline in 2021, the FCC reported last year. The FCC expects that number to double in the first full year of the 988 number.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide was the second leading cause of death in 2020 for people ages 10-14 and 25-34. From April 2020 to 2021, the CDC found that more than 100,000 people died from drug overdoses, up significantly from pre-pandemic levels.

To fund the 988 expansion, Democratic-leaning states have led the way in adding fees to monthly telephone bills. That method also funds 911 call centers in many parts of the country.

In 2021, Washington state enacted a law imposing a monthly 40-cent tax per phone line to fund 988 operations.

That fee will bring in an estimated \$11 million each year. A separate bill pending in the Legislature would develop informational materials, launch a social media campaign, fund mobile rapid response crisis teams and report hotline usage data.

In neighboring Oregon, lawmakers are considering a monthly tax of 50 cents per phone line. Minnesota Democrats have introduced bills in the House and Senate that would impose a monthly phone fee of 12 to 25 cents.

Other states have sought ways to fund the 988 expansion without a phone tax.

The Maryland measure will set aside \$12 million in 2025 for 988 operations.

An Ohio spending bill would provide roughly \$21 million in fiscal year 2024 and about \$26 million in fiscal 2025 “to support statewide operations and related activities” of 988.

In Wyoming, lawmakers rejected a proposed \$46 million allocation to the 988 hotline. It opted in February to create a 988 trust fund and reserve account — both of which remain empty — that can receive private donations and state budget allocations until 2028.

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