

There Are No Lone Wolves

By the Editorial Board, *The New York Times*, Nov 19, 2022

Sometime in May 2020, Payton Gendron, a 16-year-old in upstate New York, was browsing the website 4chan when he came across a GIF. It was taken from a livestream recording made the previous year by a gunman as he killed 51 people and wounded more than 40 others at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The killer had written a manifesto explaining that he was motivated by the fear of great replacement theory. Seeing the video and the manifesto “started my real research into the problems with immigration and foreigners in our white lands — without his livestream I would likely have no idea about the real problems the West is facing,” Mr. Gendron wrote in his own manifesto, posted on the internet shortly before, officials say, he drove to a Tops grocery store in Buffalo and carried out a massacre of his own that left 10 Black people dead.

On the day of the shooting, State Senator James Sanders echoed the horrified response of many: “Although this is probably a lone-wolf incident, this is not the first mass shooting we have seen, and sadly it will not be the last,” he said.

It’s unfortunate that the term “lone wolf” has come into such casual use. It aims to describe a person who is radicalized to violence but unconnected to an organized terrorist group like Al Qaeda. But it is wrong to think about violent white supremacists as isolated actors.

While the majority of adherents to the white supremacist cause aren’t directly affiliated with formal organisations, they describe themselves as part of a global movement of like-minded people, some of whom commit acts of leaderless violence in the hopes of winning more adherents and destabilizing society.

White supremacy has been part of the story of this country since its earliest days, but the modern notion of replacement is a foreign import. The idea of hostile replacement by immigrants has gained currency and some acceptance around the world, even after inspiring mass killers around the globe. Extremists driven to murder are a tiny fraction of those who subscribe to racist ideologies, but the mainstreaming of their ideas can make the turn to violence easier for some.

That’s why it is alarming to see the great replacement idea espoused by political leaders around the globe.

“White power activists in the 1990s thought that political action on their cause was not possible — that the door to that was closed. That’s not true anymore,” said Kathleen Belew, a professor at Northwestern.

Domestic law enforcement agencies in the United States already have effective tools to target organized extremist groups, including wiretaps and undercover informants. They also don’t face language and cultural barriers that they may have had focusing on jihadis. A pervasive problem, though, is the political will to turn the power of the state against white supremacists. Too often, extremism researchers point out, there’s a reluctance in white-majority nations to see that white extremists are as threatening as nonwhite foreigners.

One of the precarious aspects of the domestic fight against far-right and white supremacist extremists is that the government’s response must try to avoid alienating people who believe in things like expansive gun rights or strict limits on immigration yet eschew violence. Often, they are the only credible messengers who can reach the deeply radicalized and talk them back from a more violent course.

Recognizing that violent white supremacy is a global problem should help the United States and its allies develop more cooperative, international solutions. Success will be difficult to measure; the ideology may never disappear, but levels of violence can be reduced. Most important, if lawmakers and ordinary Americans make a concerted effort to drive extremist rhetoric out of mainstream politics, the influence of these groups will again fade.