

Should political violence be addressed like a threat to public health?

By Michael Luo, *The New Yorker*, October 17th, 2024

In the middle of the nineteenth century, filth of every kind accumulated on the streets of New York, which led to an inspection and a report by a committee of concerned physicians. In response, state lawmakers introduced legislation that led to the establishment, in 1866, of the Metropolitan Board of Health, one of the country's first municipal public-health authorities. The modern-day public-health movement in the United States was born.

An important revelation from then, was that social and environmental factors could significantly affect people's health, so that policymakers began turning their attention to issues such as product and workplace safety as a way to save lives. The principal aim of public health is prevention. It takes its scientific cues primarily from epidemiology, which studies the prevalence of diseases and their determinants to shape control strategies.

In recent years, public-health researchers have begun to consider whether a new societal threat deserves their scrutiny: political violence. One of the researchers leading this effort is Garen Wintemute. He told me that, during the coronavirus pandemic, he and his researchers tracked a nationwide surge in firearms purchases, particularly among first-time gun owners. He immersed himself in the available data on political polarization and its connection to violence and concluded that the subject urgently needed study, because people seemed to be "arming up" and the result "could reshape the future of the country." He eventually directed a third of his thirty-person team to spend at least some of their time on a new project: researching the possibility that people might resort to violence to achieve their political ends.

Wintemute's team conducted their first broad-based survey in 2022 and found that nearly a third of the population believed that violence was usually or always justified to advance certain political objectives. Nearly one in five agreed strongly or very strongly with the statement that "having a strong leader for America is more important than having a democracy." The willingness to justify violence was greater among people who identified as "strong Republicans" than those who identified as "strong Democrats."

Yet certain findings offered Wintemute reason for optimism. A survey published last month found that only 6.5 per cent of the population believes strongly or very strongly that a civil war is coming, and just 3.6 per cent that the "United States needs a civil war to set things right." Wintemute also found that, of those who considered it very or extremely likely they'd participate as a combatant in a large-scale conflict, more than forty-four per cent said they would be "not likely" to join if they were dissuaded by family members.

The threat of violence has hovered like a nimbus cloud over this election season and the spectre of the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol remains omnipresent.

Is political violence an imminent threat to Americans or not? The promise of public health is that it rests on scientific data and offers pragmatic solutions. Treating political violence like a contagion could help safeguard the future of American democracy. But, if we simply wait for the disease to strike, it may already be too late.