

Preventing Political Violence: Local Governance Practice Brief #1

Pittsburgh Bureau of Police Case Study

Working Draft¹

The threat of extremist group political violence poses a very real threat to American civil society and state actors alike. This threat extends to law enforcement agencies, who are relied upon to safeguard our lives, property, and constitutional rights in environments characterized by polarization and misinformation. Although best practices are still emerging, it is becoming increasingly clear that those agencies which prioritize prevention through preparedness and coordination put themselves in a position to avert violence. This practice brief aims to help shed light on specific actions being taken at local levels to navigate rising threats, while maintaining and enhancing public safety.

When members of a far-right extremist group came to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to protest in the fraught days after the 2020 Presidential Election, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police had a plan that kept the city safe from a potentially explosive confrontation. This practice brief describes some of the steps taken by local officials before, during, and after this potentially precarious situation to make sure the action remained non-violent and preserved constitutional protections for other groups.

What happened:

On Saturday November 7th, 2020, as Black Lives Matter supporters and other left-leaning groups celebrated news of President Joseph R. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris's election victory with a permitted rally on the city's South Side, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) became aware that vehicles-driven by members of the far-right group Patriot Front were heading to Pittsburgh. Although the group's specific goals that day were unknown to officials, the prospect of a public demonstration led by such an extremist faction was sobering. Patriot Front, formed in the aftermath of the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017, advocates for a white ethno-state, and for violence against immigrants and "Jewish elites."² Although members have been arrested for unlawful weapons possession, assaulting police officers, and destroying immigrant encampments, they primarily seek to spread their white supremacist ideology and recruit adherents through online recruitment and public propaganda "banner" drops.³ A high-visibility confrontation between Patriot Front members and those celebrating the election results in a swing state could have

¹ This brief was completed under the Direction of Kroc IPJ's Impact:Peace Director, Rachel Locke.

² Southern Poverty Law Center, "Patriot Front," Extremist Files, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/patriot-front>.

³ Carol Schaeffer and Fritz Zimmermann, "They Are Racist; Some of Them Have Guns. Inside the White Supremacist Group Hiding in Plain Sight," *Pro Publica*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.propublica.org/article/they-are-racist-some-of-them-have-guns-inside-the-white-supremacist-group-hiding-in-plain-sight>.

helped serve the group's core propaganda goals – while putting Pittsburghers in a potentially volatile situation.

The FBI's tip set off a chain reaction within the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police (PBP). Aided by an open and active preexisting line of communication on extremist activity in the region, the FBI immediately reached out to PBP's Intelligence Unit to alert local officials to crucial details regarding the incoming group. This information supplemented the Intelligence Unit's existing file on far-right extremist groups, allowing the Intelligence Unit to quickly compile a "situational awareness brief" on the Patriot Front's identifying characteristics. The brief was quickly disseminated to relevant members of the PBP, particularly commanders and mid-level supervisors.

The group-specific context provided by the PBP's awareness brief complemented the Bureau's substantial preparation for protests. PBP's mandate in responding to public demonstrations was well-understood among command staff, line supervisors, and patrol officers alike: protect the exercise of any group's constitutional rights to free speech and assembly as long as the exercise of those rights does not infringe on other Pittsburghers' rights or safety. Unless protesters – even unpermitted protesters – menace others, destroy property, or hold space in one of a few busy intersections and other hazardous locations like tunnels and bridges, PBP seeks to avoid directly confronting the group. Instead, assigned units monitor participants' direction and activity, help maintain traffic safety, and leapfrog blocks so as to protect the general public and create a buffer between the group and those they may seek to provoke. If direct communication does become necessary between police and members of the group, principles of procedural justice – which form the basis of the Bureau's tactical protest training – are deployed to manage the situation and keep tensions low.⁴

When approximately two dozen Patriot Front members arrived at the City-County Building in Downtown Pittsburgh, numerous units were already in place. PBP's Special Response Team (SRT), the unit responsible for direct responses to civil unrest, was already positioned at their staging area, which had been selected in advance precisely because of preexisting concerns that disruptive groups might choose to demonstrate at city "places of significance" (earlier in Summer 2020, the staging area was the site of a precarious confrontation between so-called militia members with long guns and protesters calling for police reform that the PBP was determined not to repeat). The PBP Cycle and Bicycle Units were also mobilized to provide an extra layer of nimble monitoring and rolling road closures in case the demonstration went mobile. The Civil Affairs Unit (CAU), which liaises

⁴ Procedural justice is the theory that the way police and other legal authorities interact with the public shapes public views about those authorities. The Pittsburgh Bureau of Police conduct trainings on the four central principles of procedural justice – treating people with dignity and respect, giving members of the public "voice," neutral decision-making, and transparency – in order to improve public perceptions of police. See, e.g. National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, "Procedural Justice," accessed March 26, 2021, <https://trustandjustice.org/resources/intervention/procedural-justice#:~:text=Procedural%20justice%20focuses%20on%20the,law%2C%20and%20actual%20crime%20rates.>

with protest leaders on the ground, went to work collecting information to confirm the Intel Unit's educated guess as to the Patriot Front's likely plans. Seeking to avoid the possibility of inter-group violence, the CAU also touched base with contacts from ideologically opposed groups to gauge the likelihood that any counter-protest might arise.

This extensive preparation and coordination ensured that Patriot Front activity could fizzle without an escalation toward violence and relatively little public attention. As anticipated in the situational awareness brief, the group sought to spread their hateful ideology through a few speeches and printed leaflets. While the Patriot Front did violate at least one local ordinance by setting off some canisters of red and blue smoke for dramatic effect, PBP exercised discretion not to intervene and potentially spark a violent reaction from Patriot Front members, opting instead to follow their preexisting strategy and allow the demonstration to run its course. After less than twenty minutes, the Patriot Front rode out of the city as quickly as they arrived.

The details of the day can be recalled in precise detail by those in the PBP who acted decisively to avert strife and violence, but media coverage of the demonstration is scarce — the one newspaper story suggests why that might be: "Patriot Front delivered their message to virtually no one."⁵ According to PBP leadership, the hallmarks of a successful response were met by keeping the potentially explosive situation contained, protecting constitutional rights and public safety while avoiding giving the group free press.

Getting Ready – Putting Preventive into Action:

Coordination across city agencies, and between city, state, county, local, and federal partners was key to the PBP's success. The presidential election and the sordid history of far-right extremism in Allegheny County both helped sharpen their preparedness. Unfortunately, Pittsburgh has a particularly hideous history of far-right extremism: the city has seen at least three deadly attacks by white supremacist gunmen in the last twenty years,⁶ and the Ku Klux Klan may have had as many as 250,000 members in Pennsylvania at its height in the 1920s, with its greatest concentrations in the center and western parts of the state, near Pittsburgh.⁷ Even if their numbers are somewhat diminished today – it is difficult to count the number of sympathizers with specificity – this legacy of concentrated hate group activity persists. Indeed, a supervisory analyst at the FBI warned in the

⁵ Griffin Sendek, "White supremacist, fascist group holds rally Downtown," *The Duquesne Duke*, November 12, 2020, <http://www.duqsm.com/white-supremacist-fascist-group-holds-rally-downtown/>.

⁶ Bob Bauder and Tom Davidson, "Richard Baumhammers still on death row 20 years after killing spree," *TribLive*, April 28, 2020, <https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegheny/baumhammers-killing-sprees-was-20-years-ago/>; Sonia Scherr, "Carnage in Pittsburgh: Deadliest Extremist Attack on Police Officers Since Oklahoma City," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, April 6, 2009, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2009/04/06/carnage-pittsburgh-deadliest-extremist-attack-police-officers-oklahoma-city>; Lesley Stahl, "Recovering From the Deadliest Anti-Semitic Attack in U.S. History," *CBS News*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tree-of-life-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-deadliest-anti-semitic-attack-in-u-s-history-60-minutes-2019-10-20/>.

⁷ Philip Jenkins, "Pennsylvania's Dark History of Hate," *Tablet Magazine*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/pennsylvanias-dark-history-of-hate>.

days after the Patriot Front action that the Pittsburgh area “has become a hub” for white supremacy groups.⁸

This pronounced history of extremist activity has led PBP leadership to cultivate close relationships with complementary law enforcement partners. PBP’s relationship with the FBI has been particularly crucial. PBP and the FBI intelligence leader are in direct, regular contact, and had discussed intelligence indicating that a Patriot Front rally would occur in Pittsburgh in the days after the election. The PBP also assigns one intelligence detective to the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, which focuses in part on domestic hate groups.

Formal and informal intelligence partnerships cultivated between Pittsburgh command staff and with law enforcement leaders through national professional organizations have also helped. PBP Commander Eric Holmes participated in the Police Executive Research Forum’s Summer 2019 law enforcement executive forum; the 67 executives in the class participate in a group chat, and Commander Holmes was in touch with the Intel Commander of the LAPD (whose intelligence capacity is expansive) in the run up to the election to discuss trends, threats, and preparedness. Similar conversations were also ongoing among the Major City Chiefs Association’s Intel Commanders group, the NYPD’s Century Program, the Cincinnati (OH) Police Intel Unit, and a local liaison from the Department of Homeland Security.

In addition to these national partnerships, PBP has prioritized coordination among local agencies to bolster these agencies capacities in their own jurisdictions. Allegheny County has nearly 150 police departments. Many of these are relatively tiny, with jurisdictions of less than half of one square mile.⁹ Their small size means less opportunity for specialization, less robust intelligence infrastructure, smaller budgets, and less training. Given the propensity of far-right extremists to live in these more rural locales, this more limited capacity poses a risk of missing threats.¹⁰ PBP regularly convenes the leadership of these smaller departments to discuss cross-cutting threats, including far-right political extremist activity.

The election provided an opportunity to activate and strengthen these longstanding connections. One month before the election, PBP convened an all-stakeholder meeting to discuss the city’s Election Day operational plan. Representatives from the mayor’s office, City of Pittsburgh public safety department, emergency management, Elections Bureau, PA State Police, Allegheny County District Attorney’s Office, Allegheny County Police, Allegheny County Sheriff’s Department, Allegheny County Emergency Operations Center, Allegheny County Jail, Red Cross, street outreach

⁸ Torsten Ove, “Pittsburgh a ‘hub’ for white supremacy, FBI analysts say,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2020/11/12/Pittsburgh-Pennsylvania-hub-white-supremacy-racism-extremism-FBI-proud-boys-patriot-front-neo-nazi/stories/202011120145>.

⁹ Lauren Renaud and Lizzie Silver, “The Overlapping Police Departments of Allegheny County,” *Lauren Renaud*, June 28, 2016, <http://www.laurenrenaud.com/blog/2016/6/28/the-overlapping-police-departments-of-allegheny-county>.

¹⁰ For example, the shooter in the Tree of Life massacre was from Baldwin, PA, a town of fewer than 20,000 with a police department with less than 20 officers about 20 minutes from Pittsburgh.

workers, medics, fire department, jail, courts, university police departments, hospital public safety, and others met to discuss how the day should run. As part of that discussion, Commander Holmes described the PBP's operational posture and current intelligence. Reinforcing the multi-faceted nature of the effort, they were also careful to delineate which responsibilities were not within their remit: for example, the role of the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office in protecting polling sites. They talked through contingencies, including what would happen if there was a power outage or if members of the public sought to disrupt the voting or vote-counting processes with weapons.

Two of the PBP's community-facing units also tried a more proactive approach to building a line of communication with leaders of various groups. "We let them know that we're here and we're willing to talk to them. We ask them if they can give us a police liaison." Although the Patriot Front did not establish a police liaison in advance of this demonstration, other extremist groups have done so in the past, giving some notice about plans to demonstrate and other operational goals, which in turn helps with PBP's own planning and deployment. These PBP units are complemented by the Pittsburgh Mayor's Office for Protests and the State Police Heritage Affairs Section, all of which are in regular contact.

Aftermath and looking ahead:

Although the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police handled this particular incident of extremist group activity with skill, far-right political violence is likely to continue to pose a variety of challenges for years to come. It seems clear that well-established, de-escalatory protest response protocols; robust coordination among local, state, and federal officials; proactive relationship-building and intelligence gathering; and nuanced, group-specific situational awareness are central to effective police department responses to this charged and volatile issue. Even so, a variety of questions remain.

Now that there has been a political transition and the fraught election year of 2020 is over, other priorities will compete for immediate attention over concerns of political violence. Maintaining vigilance in the face of competing priorities is unlikely to be easy. Indeed, this "quieter" period offers the opportunity for law enforcement agencies to engage in the slower, longer-term work of further developing robust local resilience against hate. For PBP, this will mean continuing to serve as a cross-jurisdictional convener, and building relationships with communities that have historically been targeted by both far-right extremist violence and disproportionate police attention.

Further, the constraints imposed by jurisdiction and law will continue to create challenges that require expanded cross-jurisdictional coordination and training. Larger jurisdictions with significant intelligence gathering and analysis capacity tend to be made up of citizenry who are far more liberal than those in the surrounding areas (this is the case in Pittsburgh). This may mean that nonviolent far-left groups receive attention from law enforcement officials that is disproportionate to the threat that they actually pose, even as groups espousing – and preparing for – intergroup violence are allowed to operate under the radar.

Institutional biases also pose an ongoing challenge for law enforcement groups dealing with the far right.¹¹ How will PBP try to mitigate institutional biases that can lead to overlooking the threats posed by far-right groups? How will PBP make clear that participation in and sympathy for such extremist groups – a live issue in light of the extensive membership of active and former law enforcement in groups like the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters as well as reports that dozens of those who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6th were police – will not be tolerated? How will members of the department wade through an increasingly polarized and confusing media environment without importing their own political biases into their priority-setting and decision-making? How can police training and policy improve to better prepare officers to confront extremist groups? And how can historical education about local hate groups help contextualize their response?

The rising risk of political violence cannot and will not be solved by law enforcement alone. In fact, approaches to political violence that center police agencies run the risk of doing significant harm, potentially re-entrenching systems that have contributed to the white supremacy that fuels many of the most dangerous American hate groups. Even so, responsible police agencies will be crucial to protecting the public safety and constitutional rights of groups targeted by those who espouse violence. The way that agencies like the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police respond to these complex, overlapping challenges – critically evaluating their own role in mitigating harm – will matter enormously to the future of political violence in America. This brief recounts a non-incident worth celebrating. Studying instances like this, where law enforcement preparedness prevented an escalation that could have led to violence, should help all of us build resiliency against rising hate.

¹¹ David D. Kirkpatrick and Alan Feuer, “Police Shrugged Off the Proud Boys, Until They Attacked the Capitol,” *N.Y. Times*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/14/us/proud-boys-law-enforcement.html>.