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QAnon-inspired violence in the United States: an empirical assessment of a misunderstood threat

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ABSTRACT

National security experts in the United States have recently warned that the QAnon conspiracy theory is a danger that could soon rival more traditional terrorist threats. Are their fears warranted? Are QAnon supporters like other U.S. extremists? This paper addresses these questions by examining 100 QAnon sympathizers who committed crimes in the United States through August 2021. We argue that while QAnon presents a danger, it is not a traditional terrorist threat. QAnon offenders have not displayed the motivation or capabilities required to successfully carry out terrorist attacks. Rather, QAnon adherents have been primarily motivated to commit acts of interpersonal violence, often targeting those around them, including their own children. Moreover, while QAnon offenders come from diverse backgrounds, we find that many share characteristics that distinguish them from other U.S. extremists. QAnon crimes have been committed by a significant number of women, as well as individuals struggling with mental health concerns, substance use disorders, and family disruptions. Traditional counterterrorism strategies are not designed to mitigate threats of violence that are primarily found in the household. We argue that a public health response based on violence prevention and support services would be a more effective strategy for countering the conspiracy theory.

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Introduction

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