

Researcher sees 'alarming' risk of political violence in US

April 3 2024, by Daniel Strain



A crowd amasses in front of the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6, 2021. Credit: [CC image](#) via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Editor's note: This article contains content around violence and racism that may be upsetting for some readers.

Regina Bateson first traveled to Guatemala in 2005 as a young foreign service officer working in the U.S Embassy in Guatemala City. At the time, the Latin American nation was less than a decade out from the peace accords that had ended its brutal civil war.

According to estimates, nearly 200,000 people died or vanished in the war between 1960 and 1996—most were Indigenous Maya, and most had been killed at the hands of the government or its agents. But, in some ways, Guatemala after the turn of the millennium was not much safer. By 2011, the [homicide rate](#) in Guatemala City had reached 104.5 deaths per 100,000 people, more than eight times the homicide rate in Denver in 2022.

Amid all that violence, Bateson, now an assistant professor of political science at CU Boulder, discovered a contradiction that shaped the rest of her life. She had assumed that the most deadly regions of Guatemala would also be the areas that had been the most wracked by war. But that wasn't the case.

To the budding researcher, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the patterns of violence in her new home.

"That was puzzling to me. I talked to a lot of people about it when I was there, and nobody had a solid explanation for why that was," she said. "That was what motivated me to go to graduate school."

Today, Bateson studies vigilantism and other forms of political violence. Her time in Guatemala and elsewhere has [taught her lessons about the ways](#) that these acts can emerge around the globe. Vigilantism, she said, is almost always carried out by a group in power targeting people who have much less power, in many cases motivated by racism or xenophobia. She added that many of the [warning signs](#) for violence have reared up across the United States, including the spread of armed and organized militias.

When she returned to Guatemala for her dissertation research, for example, Bateson encountered an organization known as the Guardianes del Vecindario in Joyabaj—a small town in the department of El Quiché,

where the government had perpetrated acts of genocide. The group, or la patrulla ("the patrol") as locals called it, echoed the civil patrols that roamed the region during the civil war. The group's several hundred members walked the streets at night, wearing black ski masks, stopping passersby and searching cars. In some cases, patrollers detained, beat and even tortured people they suspected of crimes.

"People are afraid to do anything bad now that the patrol is here," one Joyabaj resident told Bateson at the time.

Closer to home, there's still a lot that concerned people in the United States can do to resist an escalation in violence, Bateson said. In 2018, she ran as a Democrat in the primary to represent California's 4th Congressional District, ultimately coming in third.

"The court system matters. The judiciary matters," she said. "Our institutions provide a check on violent and authoritarian behavior that doesn't exist in many other places."

Fuzzy lines

When talking about vigilantism, Bateson often points to the case of David Chen, owner of Lucky Moose Food Mart in Toronto.

In 2009, Chen and a few of his staff members chased down a man they believed had stolen plants from their market, tying him up and tossing him into a van. Police arrested both the vigilantes and the alleged thief. But in the years that followed, politicians including then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper showed up at the market to take photos with Chen. Eventually, the government passed a bill to expand the scope of citizens arrests in Canada, and Chen was cleared of all charges.

Bateson [defines cases of vigilantism like this](#) as "the extralegal

prevention, investigation or punishment of offenses."

Culturally, the word "vigilante" may conjure up images of Batman or Charles Bronson, star of the 1974 film "Death Wish"—lone wolves taking the law into their own hands. But, as Chen's case shows, vigilantism is an inherently political act, Bateson said, and the lines between vigilantes and official state institutions can become "fuzzy."

"Vigilantism threatens [human rights](#) and the rule of law," Bateson said. "Vigilantism is also a way for people, usually those with more power in society, to shape public debate."

She added that vigilantes around the world tend to draw on the same language and themes to justify their actions—whether that's in countries with high violent crime rates, or in much safer places like Canada or Scandinavia. Often, vigilantes act on fears that may be unfounded or are deeply rooted in racism and xenophobia.

"They say, "We have to step in, and we have no choice because the state is either absent or not being aggressive enough," Bateson said. "But the people targeted by vigilantes may have done absolutely nothing wrong and are just perceived as a threat because of their identity."

Alarming trends

The United States has not been immune to such deadly vigilante violence, including horrific acts by lynch mobs. The NAACP estimates that between 1882 and 1968, [4,743 people were lynched in the United States](#), more than 70% of whom were Black. This year, six former law enforcement officers from Mississippi were sentenced for a 2023 incident in which they broke into a home and tortured two Black men.

Bateson has seen "alarming" signs that the United States may be

teetering on the brink of political violence today as [extremist groups](#) around the country become more organized.

In recent years, she said, far-right organizations, including some of those responsible for the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, have created robust social networks across the country. Even as some group members have faced prosecution, the Southern Poverty Law Center has found that [militias have continued organizing](#) online and underground. Armed militias are patrolling stretches of the southern border with Mexico, seeking to stop and detain migrants crossing north.

"Vigilantism is hard on a logistical level," she said. "It's hard to carry out, but there's a lot of infrastructure in place to support it in the U.S. right now."

Bateson also points to the rise in politicians using what she calls "dehumanizing" language.

"The fact that [political rhetoric](#) is singling out particular groups as 'poisoning the blood of the country' has really caught the attention of people who study political violence," Bateson said. "Dehumanizing language like that is such a red flag. Throughout history, it has preceded significant violence targeting vulnerable groups."

But there's still time to reverse this trend. In the United States, the rule of law and political institutions, while under pressure, remain strong compared with many other parts of the world.

"Being pro-democracy and pro-rule of law is not an exclusively Democratic, Republican, Green or Libertarian agenda. It's not a partisan position," Bateson said. "Being active in your political party and promoting candidates whose values align with what you want to see for the country's future is so important."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

Citation: Researcher sees 'alarming' risk of political violence in US (2024, April 3) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-alarming-political-violence.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.