

# Metal Against Marchers: An Analysis of Recent Incidents Involving Vehicle Assaults at U.S. Political Protests and Rallies

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The protests against racism and police conduct taking place throughout cities and towns across the United States have been mostly peaceful, but a few of them have led to violent confrontations between protesters, counterprotesters, and police, and in a number of incidents, vehicles were driven into protesters. These encounters are being described as “attacks” or “domestic terrorism,” but as this report indicates, the events taking place at the protests differ in a number of ways from the vehicle ramming attacks previously carried out by terrorist organizations and reviewed in our earlier report, “*Smashing into Crowds*”—*An Analysis of Vehicle Ramming Attacks*.<sup>1</sup>

This report examines the spate of reported vehicle assaults and other vehicle-related events that have occurred since the protests began in late May 2020. It describes the varied circumstances of the events and the apparent motivations of the drivers, and it offers preliminary (and tentative) judgments about where these incidents fall on a spectrum of hostility and premeditation. Finally, it compares and contrasts the current events with the incidents discussed in the earlier study.

The number of vehicle ramming incidents reported varies greatly. *The New York Times* reported on October 9 that “more than 50 people have driven vehicles into peaceful protesters,”<sup>2</sup> but Ari Weil, a researcher at the University of Chicago who has been tracking this phenomenon, reported that as of early July, there had been “104 incidents of people driving into protests.”<sup>3</sup> Neither source offers a list of the events it includes.

Part of the disparity in numbers arises from what researchers and reporters include in the total. Not all of the reported incidents appear to be malicious or even intentional. This is not to imply any sympathy with those who have intentionally used vehicles to intimidate or attack protesters. We firmly believe in the right of peaceful protest, whatever the cause. But we also find that with hundreds or thousands of people on the streets—and in some urban areas, highways—some incidents started with drivers encountering protesters accidentally. Others reflect panic. Still others result from angry encounters that turn violent. Only a few appear to be premeditated murder as opposed to premeditated intimidation.

Some of the reporting may reflect biases. Protesters recalling the deliberate August 12, 2017, vehicle-ramming attack in Charlottesville, Virginia, which killed one protester, Heather Heyer, and injured 25 others, became increasingly apprehensive after the deliberate vehicle ramming on May 28, 2020, and understandably tended to see any approaching vehicle as hostile and potentially dangerous and were therefore inclined to report encounters as attacks. On the other hand, drivers have defended their actions as accidental or provoked by fear of being surrounded and harmed by angry mobs and described their actions as self-defense. Many of the incidents are still under investigation. Uncertainty reigns. Interpretations differ. We are not in a position to adjudicate the competing claims, and our conclusions are subject to revision.

## The Numbers

As of October 12, 2020, we looked at 52 vehicle-related incidents at protests. (We do not claim that we have captured the entire universe of cases, but we are confident that we have not missed any deadly attacks.) These events include incidents at protests by Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter rallies, and one demonstration supporting President Trump. Incidents at Black Lives Matter protests predominate, accounting for 50 of the events.

Weil assigns malicious intent to 43 (or 45 percent) of the 96 events involving civilian vehicles that occurred prior to July. (His total of 104 includes 8 incidents involving police vehicles.<sup>4</sup>) There have, of course, been additional incidents since that time.

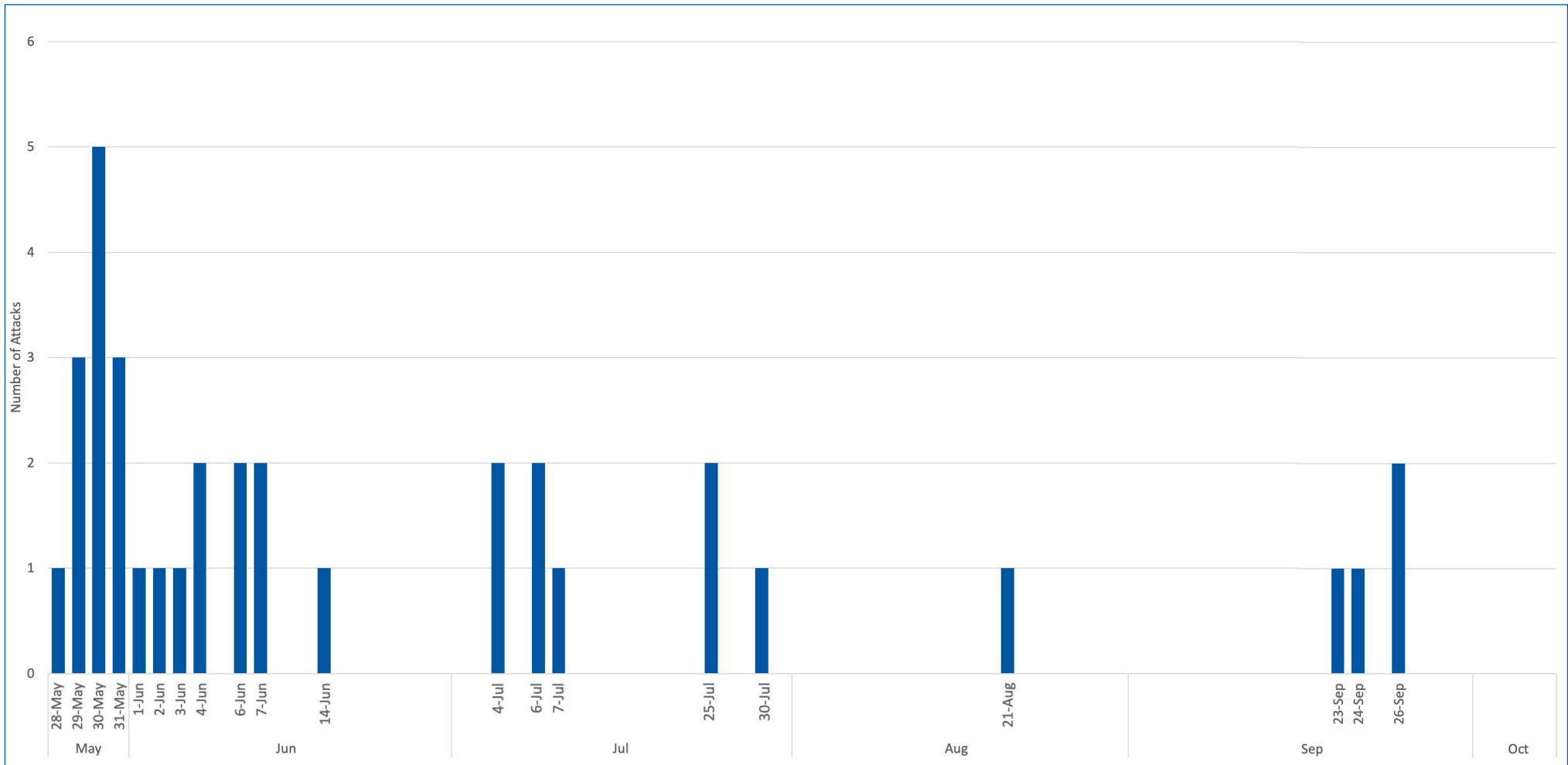
We dismissed nine of our total of 52 incidents as clearly falling into the category of accidental encounters, leaving 43 that merited closer examination. Of these, we assessed that 19 (or 44 percent) clearly displayed malicious intent. Another 16 (37 percent) were possibly malicious. The remaining seven incidents appear to be unintentional or the result of panic. As we will show below, the 35 cases (67 percent of the total we started with, and 81% of those we more closely analyzed) still represent an unprecedented surge in volume over that during any four-month period in our previous survey of vehicle ramming attacks. The numbers reported by Weil's research would make that surge even higher.

The largest cluster of apparently intentional attacks—21 attacks—took place between May 28 and June 7, an 11-day period. In contrast, the next largest cluster that we have previously seen in any two-week period involved six incidents. This happened in 2017 and again in 2018 and involved various types of perpetrators in several different countries. The 2020 cluster is unique in that it involves more than three times as many attacks, all of which occurred in a single country, the United States.

The 2020 attacks also comprise the largest occurrence of vehicle ramming events against demonstrations and the only string of events that has occurred in an economically advanced country. Our data include a total of 52 vehicle ramming attacks targeting demonstrations worldwide since 1963, including the 2020 incidents in the United States. Of these, 44 (or 86 percent of the vehicle ramming attacks, including one against a Trump rally in February) occurred after January 1, 2020. The only advanced country other than the United States that has had a ramming attack against demonstrators is Sweden, which had one attack in June 2017.

Clearly, this is a phenomenon worthy of examination, but these attacks are very different from the recorded terrorist vehicle ramming attacks. The 2020 attacks in the United States are unique in having so few casualties—only one of them resulted in a fatality. In another incident, a driver claiming that he acted in self-defense shot and killed an armed protester. Another armed protester fired at the vehicle as it fled the scene. The driver was later arrested. (One additional case involved a fatality, but it may have been an accident.)

In contrast, vehicle ramming attacks by jihadist terrorists in Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017 resulted in 16 fatalities. In 2018, three vehicle ramming attacks were carried out by mentally disturbed drivers in China. In one of these incidents, the driver intentionally drove into a crowd, then continued to attack people with a dagger and a shovel, killing a total of 16 and injuring 43. This suggests, but does not prove, that the drivers in the recent U.S. incidents, almost all of whom drove at relatively low speeds, were not attempting to cause fatalities.



**Figure 1. Malicious and Possibly Malicious Vehicle Ramming Attacks, May 28-October 12, 2020**

## **A Complex Array of Circumstances and Motives**

Caution is necessary in labeling all of the vehicle ramming incidents as deliberate or terrorist attacks. Although there are some superficial similarities with earlier terrorist vehicle ramming attacks, there are many important differences. Not all of the encounters between drivers and protesters appear to be hostile. Instead, they fall along a spectrum of circumstances and motives: In some cases, it appears that a driver unexpectedly found himself or herself in the middle of a crowd of demonstrators blocking the road and tried to stop or go around them.

In other cases, drivers may have unexpectedly found themselves in the middle of a crowd of demonstrators who responded by throwing objects or beating on the car and fled in panic, possibly hitting some of the demonstrators. In a number of cases, it appears that drivers found themselves in a crowd, which led to a heated exchange during which the driver pushed through the pedestrians—it could be described as the vehicle-pedestrian equivalent of road rage. In still others, drivers deliberately drove to a demonstration and then ploughed through a crowd to display belligerence and intimidate the protesters—this would be the vehicular equivalent of brandishing a weapon. The last category would be instances where a driver carried out a premeditated attack aimed at causing injuries and death. These are, of course, theoretical points along a spectrum. Events and people are complicated and don't fall neatly into analysts' columns.

We would set aside the first two types of incidents—accidental encounters and panic—although with some uncertainty about whether a driver was motivated more by fear or anger. We would include as “malicious intent” the latter three types of incidents—those resulting from angry confrontations or premeditated displays of belligerence, and deliberate attacks. Most of these appear to be angry confrontations or attacks with intent to intimidate; however, apart from setting aside non-malicious attacks, we have not tried to sort out the specific motives in each of the malicious-intent cases.

Malicious intent is not the same as intent to kill, which would clearly describe nearly all of the vehicular attacks by terrorists reported in our previous study. In looking at the incidents of confrontations in the United States between drivers and protesters, we do not have a clear-cut example of a premeditated vehicle ramming attack specifically calculated to kill. Invariably, however, there are conflicting claims. In a July 4, 2020, Seattle incident, Summer Taylor was killed and another female was seriously injured after being hit at high speed. The driver, a 27-year-old African-American male, claimed it was a horrible accident but was charged with reckless driving, vehicular assault, and vehicular homicide. In another incident in Queens, New York, the driver who tried to ram protesters was charged with attempted murder, as was the driver who attempted to ram a counter-demonstration in California.

## **Our Criteria for Determining Malicious Intent**

Our assessments of malicious intent were based on a number of criteria. Whether the attack was stealthy was an important criterion. Terrorist attacks have the element of surprise—a vehicle suddenly accelerates and at high speed plows into a crowd, swerving through it to cause as many casualties as possible. None of the incidents at the protests displayed this attribute. Most of those we judged to be motivated by malicious intent were preceded by confrontations.

Where it was possible to do so from video coverage or eyewitness accounts, we looked at the speed of the vehicle and whether the driver appeared to be swerving to hit protesters. Most of the incidents at the protests appear to have occurred at low or medium speeds. In only 11 of the 43 cases we examined does it appear that the driver clearly swerved the vehicle to hit protesters. In another four cases, swerving may have been done to escape rather than to cause casualties.

Whether there were fatalities or injuries was another factor—29 of the incidents resulted in injuries, but only two resulted in the death of a protester. One of these involved a confusing confrontation between the driver and a protester, with questions of self-defense raised. (In another case, a car killed a pedestrian near a protest, but the incident occurred at night, is still under investigation, and may have been accidental.)

Whether the driver fled the scene was a third factor. In 25 cases, the driver clearly fled at least the immediate scene and sometimes got away or tried to get away entirely. In another five cases, the driver may have fled. Finally, we were dependent on media reporting, which sometimes includes videos and eyewitness accounts, but we recognize that police investigating the incidents have greater access to information. Therefore, whether the incident resulted in criminal charges against the driver was another factor. Fourteen of the attacks resulted in charges ranging from attempted murder to various other crimes, such as felonious assault. In other events, the police are still searching for the driver, and criminal charges may result. We recognize that some protesters have complained that police are unsympathetic toward them or sympathetic toward the drivers, resulting in biases. We must also take into account that a number of the incidents are still under investigation.

There were only seven events that combined all of these criteria. Fleeing the scene either to evade arrest or to get away from the demonstrators was the most common attribute, occurring in 30 cases. Swerving the vehicle was the least common attribute, involved in only 15 cases. Twenty-two cases involved injuries or fatalities and a driver who fled the scene. Fourteen involved injuries or fatalities and criminal charges. Only six involved fatalities or injuries, a fleeing driver, and criminal charges.

Beyond the circumstances of the event, we looked for aggravating criteria such as evidence of extremist affiliations. For example, did the attackers belong to an extremist group? Or did they display signs or flags on the vehicle or shout slogans against the demonstrators? In one case, the driver of the vehicle was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, which certainly is an indication of likely hostility to Black Lives Matter protests. In 15 cases, the driver had signs or said or wrote something on social media indicating opposition to the protesters. In some of these cases, however, it is difficult to determine the exact combination of ideology and anger in the verbal exchanges.

We also looked at other factors that might help clarify the incidents. For example, was there evidence of mental illness or intoxication? Such evidence appeared in only two of the cases—one involving possible mental illness and another involving possession of a controlled substance. Driving while intoxicated is not a mitigating factor, and drunk drivers are committing a serious crime, but it may cause an attack to be viewed differently from a deliberate politically inspired attack.

Our purpose in looking at the circumstances and motivating factors in these incidents is not to label some of the attacks as terrorism. Terrorism is a narrow term, legally defined. Whether prosecutors choose to bring or add terrorism charges in a particular case is also a tactical choice. In fact, many terrorists are tried and convicted for ordinary crimes—e.g., murder, aggravated

assault, use of explosive devices to cause harm—avoiding the need to get into the political pretensions of the accused.

Malicious intent is a much broader term that does not require proof of a political motive, and it seems more useful in this particular inquiry. As our previous report on vehicle ramming attacks pointed out, some of the attacks clearly were carried out by terrorists, who also were also the most lethal attackers. But other attacks were motivated by hatred of a particular category of people, mental or emotional problems, or other issues. To the victims and those charged with security, these distinctions are less important.

Consistent with past research carried out by the Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI), our primary focus is on events. Entries in the MTI database are not limited to terrorism but also include serious violent crimes, as well as actions by mentally disturbed individuals. The purpose of our analyses is to identify trends that transportation operators and those charged with security should be aware of, to look for lessons learned, and to consider countermeasures. The ultimate goal is protecting passengers and staff in public surface transportation systems or, in this report, protecting the public and public officials from attacks that use transport as a weapon.

### **Encouragement on Social Media?**

There have been reports of memes circulating on the Internet and online discussions among right-wing extremists promoting vehicle ramming attacks. These began to appear before the 2017 vehicle ramming attack in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>5</sup> A January 2017 article entitled “Here’s a Reel of Cars Plowing Through Protesters,” which made it into online national news, included a video montage of vehicles driving through demonstrators. The images were accompanied by the rap song, “Move Bitch.”<sup>6</sup> The original compiler of the video wrote, “Here’s a compilation of liberal protesters getting pushed out of the way by cars and trucks. Study the technique; it may prove useful in the next four years.”<sup>7</sup> The video was removed in August 2017 following the death of a demonstrator in Charlottesville.

Many social media platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, seem to have deleted some of the exhortations, but the messages are still moving through the social media ether. It is hard to find them except on channels such as 4chan or in groups used by right-wing extremists and private groups in encrypted platforms like Telegram. But some of platforms used in the past may no longer be as viable a way of getting the message across.

It is difficult to determine with a high degree of confidence whether any of the attacks were responses to the exhortations. However, comments on social media referring to protesters as road bumps,<sup>8</sup> or posts showing a blood-splattered truck with the caption “Just drove through Minneapolis, didn’t see any protesters”<sup>9</sup> and T-shirts bearing slogans like “ALL LIVES SPLATTER—NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR PROTEST—KEEP YOUR ASS OUT OF THE ROAD” reflect continuing extreme animus toward the protesters.<sup>10</sup> And even those expressions that are purportedly intended to be humorous in fact dehumanize the victims. They may be viewed as a kind of approval or a softer form of encouragement. This kind of affect suggests that the vehicle assaults are symptomatic of deeper societal divisions. It does not bode well for the country.

Hostility, more than political aims, seems to drive the confrontations and collisions against protesters. There is little evidence of planning. The malicious attacks display emotion, anger, and contempt for the protesters and their causes, but the encounters appear to be more about intimidation than about premeditated murder, and while there have been numerous injuries, there have been only two deaths, and one more possibly accidental death. However, the potential for the loss of life—and in possibly great numbers under the circumstances—is clear.

Many of the attacks follow altercations or other confrontations, raising the possibility that other psychological factors may also be at work, although these are, of course, more speculative. Vehicles are not simply modes of motor transportation. To many—especially Americans, cars and trucks symbolize personal freedom, which is not to be impeded by the collective behavior of people shutting down streets. Some young men may view their vehicle as a symbol of their masculinity, an extension of their physical space, even their own being. Protesters invade this space when they block or surround a vehicle. Touching the vehicle can provoke rage.

The increased number of incidents may not reflect the Internet’s power of persuasion, which is difficult to measure, but could also reflect a contagion effect in which one event inspires another. We saw this in our 2019 analysis, although it was not as pronounced because the events were more contextually and geographically dispersed.<sup>11</sup>

### **Comparing Events at Protests to Terrorist Vehicle Ramming Attacks**

The incidents involving vehicles driven into protesters differ in many respects from the vehicle ramming attacks analyzed in MTI’s earlier research.

The 2019 MTI study reported that “the volume and lethality of vehicle ramming attacks has increased over the long run, although based upon the first nine months, it appears that the number of attacks will significantly decline in 2019.”<sup>12</sup> The incidents taking place at the protests in the United States in 2020 reversed that trend, pushing the number of incidents higher, although their inclusion would push the lethality rate (fatalities per incident) lower. Excluding the incidents at U.S. protests, the worldwide total of vehicle ramming attacks for the first nine months of 2020 is only eight, with 158 injuries, 154 of them resulting from a deliberate attack on a festival in Volkarsen, Germany, on February 24, 2020. It appears in that case that the driver was mentally disturbed.

The vehicle ramming attacks analyzed in the 2019 study and the 2020 anti-protest cases vary in the reasons for their occurrence. The earlier attacks appear more purposeful. To be sure, both sets of incidents reflect underlying hostilities, and drivers appearing to be mentally unstable accounted for nearly half of the earlier attacks, while serious mental issues arise in very few of the 2020 cases targeting protesters.

However, more of the earlier cases could be connected with ongoing campaigns of terrorist violence—jihadists, Uighurs, some of the Palestinian attacks—even if they were carried out by individual perpetrators who were inspired, as opposed to being directed to take action. Only two of the 2020 cases can be connected with an identifiable group. None of the 2020 cases thus far shows evidence of being ordered or assisted by an organization. This could be interpreted as being consistent with the right-wing extremist doctrine of leaderless resistance, but the circumstances of the cases also suggest more impulsive behavior.

Many of the earlier cases of deliberate vehicle ramming were a terrorist tactic. The deliberate attacks in 2020 are instead displays of contempt and intimidation. This observation is by no means intended to imply that the drivers involved in the 2020 cases are somehow less guilty. In a number of cases, their actions were the direct consequence of deliberately seeking confrontation and a desire to intimidate. We are simply pointing out that premeditated murder and hostility-fueled rage are different.

At least half of the pre-2020 vehicle ramming attacks were premeditated, with the rest apparently conducted by drivers who were mentally disturbed. As indicated previously, only a few of the 2020 cases display evidence of premeditation or planning. More than 18 percent of the earlier cases involved vehicles that were rented, stolen, hijacked, or borrowed—methods of acquisition that suggest a planned attack. We believe that all of the 2020 cases involved the drivers' own vehicles. Attacks that involved rented or hijacked vehicles also had the highest lethality rate. In many of the serious earlier attacks, there was evidence of reconnaissance, another indicator of a planned attack. Only a handful of the 2020 cases indicate careful premeditation. Planned attacks are deadlier.

The biggest difference between the two sets of events is the speed of the vehicle involved. The vehicles in the earlier cases appear to have been driven at higher speeds, whereas roughly three-quarters of the 2020 cases appear to involve moderate or low speeds. And previously, in incidents where higher speed was not used for high lethality, the size of the vehicle was. A large commercial truck can kill many without using excessive speed. This was the case on Bastille Day (July 14) in 2016, when a truck was used in a vehicle ramming attack in Nice, France, where 86 were killed, and in a December 2017 attack on a Christmas Market in Berlin, Germany, where 12 were killed. Altogether, more than 500 people were injured in the two attacks. In no case in the 2020 cluster were heavy commercial vehicles used, although large pick-up trucks did appear.

That makes a great difference in the number of fatalities. The average lethality rate for the earlier cases is 2.6 fatalities per attack. The average lethality rate for the 2020 cases is 0.05 fatality per incident, including the second case, which we judge to be questionable.

The final difference is the absence of suicide attacks: 0 in the 2020 incidents versus 17 percent of the earlier cases. This also makes a difference in the lethality rate. In the earlier cases, suicide attacks were more than three times as deadly as non-suicide attacks.

## **Concluding Observations**

People and vehicles move in close proximity—at intersections, they may be only inches apart. In 2019, nearly 7,000 pedestrians were killed in the United States as a consequence of collisions with vehicles. If more people move onto the streets and roads, one might expect to see an increased number of collisions. Between 15 million and 26 million people in the United States are reported to have participated in the Black Lives Matter protests alone, making it perhaps the largest movement in U.S. history.<sup>13</sup> Participants at other public demonstrations and rallies would add considerably to this number.

With so many more people on the streets, one could expect an increase in the number of pedestrian deaths. Figures of pedestrian deaths are not yet available for 2020, although overall



roadway deaths are higher than in previous years, despite the decline in traffic owing to shutdowns caused by the pandemic. (Drivers appear to be driving faster on empty highways.<sup>14</sup>)

The protests have produced a number of collisions between vehicles and pedestrians, but remarkably few involving injuries or fatalities. The vast majority of the thousands of protest marches and demonstrations have occurred without injuries or property destruction. It would appear that participants in the demonstrations and drivers in the cities and towns where they are occurring are keeping out of each other's way. Nonetheless, protesters must understand that blocking streets—especially unexpectedly—is dangerous.

How to protect protesters, even as they attempt to surge past police barriers or deliberately block highways, poses a major challenge for police. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of the protests are directed against police brutality, which engenders a degree of hostility toward the same law enforcement officers who are trying to control the situation. In some cases, police have returned the hostility with unnecessary force or callous displays of inappropriate sentiments.

However, given the magnitude of the protests and counterprotests and the often strong emotions motivating them, the small number of incidents involving vehicles and protesters also suggests that police, often under difficult conditions, are managing to separate protesters and vehicles.

We realize that this observation may infuriate some readers. There are competing narratives about almost every aspect of the protests. Protesters claim that police are passive accomplices of drivers who are attacking them, failing to arrest the drivers, sometimes arresting pedestrians instead. Even when drivers are arrested, prosecutors may refuse to prosecute, as happened in at least one case. Bias cannot be excluded in all of these cases, but it is too early to say that justice is not being done.

The numbers cited in this review have meaning. In the more than 10,000 demonstrations during the late spring and summer of 2020,<sup>15</sup> there were something on the order of 100 incidents. Ari Weil assigned malicious intent to 43 of these events, while we discern malicious intent in 35 of them. In either case, it is a very small number.

However, a handful of dramatic incidents can drive perceptions and widen the gulf between protesters and counterprotesters. The news media should be cautious not to fuel the divide by misportraying events, which, as we describe here, are often complex. Misportrayal of events has consequences.

Protecting those engaged in lawful protest is a responsibility of both the police and those protesting. Communications are essential. Despite difficult circumstances, it is in the interest of public safety to work out and abide by advance agreements that will reduce danger to protesters and prevent escalation in hostility. This requires protesters to communicate with the authorities, including the police. It also means standing up to the extremists who would exploit the situation to further their own agendas. The goal is to ensure that all participants understand standards of behavior and to create defensible barriers to protect all.

It is the responsibility of the authorities to ensure the protection of those exercising the right of peaceful assembly while rigorously enforcing the law. Protesters who threaten lives or destroy

property are criminals, as are those who threaten protesters with violence. Avoiding escalation in violent situations may be a tactical goal, but the authorities must be willing to protect all citizens and investigate all cases and where appropriate bring charges against lawbreakers, whoever they are, when circumstances dictate. Perceptions of bias corrode respect for the law.

Further analysis of the incidents of collisions between vehicles and demonstrators may also point to some tactical lessons, including the use of rapidly deployable, portable barriers or the use of other city vehicles to block traffic in fluid situations.

While there have been few fatalities from vehicle ramming attacks in the United States thus far, the potential for serious loss of life is clear. MTI's previous research showed that incidents with the highest number of fatalities occur when attackers are able to plow into public gatherings or people walking on partially pedestrianized streets. In effect, a demonstration, a protest march, pedestrianizes a street. It puts a lot of people in harm's way. It takes only one individual extremist to create a tragedy involving hundreds of casualties, as we saw in the 2016 vehicle ramming in Nice, France, where the driver of a truck drove through a crowd, killing 86 people and injuring 458.

A tragedy of this magnitude could inflame the country and certainly would be deeply embarrassing to local authorities and potentially worse if police were judged to be derelict in preventing such an attack.

## Endnotes

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