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“In a way, they’re inherently a vigilante movement,” said Joe Wiinikka Lydon, an analyst with the Southern Poverty Law Center.

“I think that the biggest threat is that you have groups that have taken it upon themselves to decide what is legal and what’s not legal,” said Wiinikka Lydon. “They are not really accountable to anybody else to wield potential lethal force. It’s also dangerous because a lot of these groups are driven by what we call anti-government conspiracy theories.”

One group that’s been active in Upstate in recent years is the New York Watchmen. They deny they’re a militia, but describe themselves as a “civil defense” group. The Watchmen have marched in the streets dressed in tactical gear.

Charles Pellien leads the New York Watchmen and talked on a podcast in 2020 about the kind of people they recruit. “We take the military guys and former police officers, and we’ve got special forces veterans,” said Pellien, in a clip first reported by WBFO, the public radio station in Buffalo. “We’ve got several black belts in our group. We’ve got [mixed martial arts] fighters. We’ve got championship boxers. So we’re not just some ragtag bunch of guys out there that don’t know what we’re doing.”

There have been brutal fights between right-wing groups like Pellien’s, flaunting their tactical gear, and counter-protesters on the left. That kind of violence has unfolded in larger Upstate cities like Albany and Buffalo.

What’s happening in the North Country?

In the rural North Country, there hasn’t been much of that type of violent extremism that we know of. Incidents around the region seem more scattered and harder to define.

But far-right groups have rallied and posted propaganda around the North Country and there is statewide data on far-right extremism. The Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 53 hate and anti-government groups in New York in 2022.

Research tracks both far-right and far-left extremism in the U.S., but experts and top security officials say extremism on the right is much more violent, and more likely to be deadly.

“We’re seeing surges in targeted



A bumper sticker in Lewis County. EMILY RUSSELL/NORTH COUNTRY PUBLIC RADIO



threats, some of which has erupted into violence,” said Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a professor at American University and director of the Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab. She said the threat of extremism has a much broader impact beyond physical violence — making many more people feel unsafe or uneasy.

State and federal agencies like the FBI are tracking threats in the North Country and throughout New York. They’re also tracking which groups are trying to recruit around the region.

Last fall, signs for a far-right group known as Patriot Front were posted in the Adirondack communities of Keene and Upper Jay. The group also hung signs in Plattsburgh in 2018.

Another group that’s tried to recruit in the area is the Ku Klux Klan. Over the years there have been reports of KKK flyers in Fulton, Montgomery and Oneida counties.

In 2021, a data leak from a Three Percenters group showed that about a third of its registered members were from St. Lawrence County.

There are also “sovereign citizens” around the region, people who believe laws don’t apply to them. “I’ve had more issues with sovereign citizens than I have with Oath Keepers or other individuals,” said Fulton County Sheriff

Rich Giardino, who himself has been part of a far-right sheriffs’ group. “Sovereign citizens are resistant and say that they’re not compliant with the laws. Those lead to more high-risk confrontations with police.”

How far-right groups and ideas took root

People are turning to authoritarian groups, leaders, and ideologies around the world, including in Upstate New York. Many experts say economic inequality is a contributing factor.

“Historically, you had jobs that were kind of very masculine jobs, around timbering and mining, and that were shaping the communities in this area and shaping people’s livelihoods, shaping people’s sense of who they are,” said Joe Henderson, a professor at Paul Smith’s College who studies the far-right. “And in a lot of rural areas in the United States, those kinds of careers are gone now.”

Good-paying, middle-class jobs have evaporated in rural areas like the North Country. Henderson said, “People are correctly angry” about that, “but who are they angry at?”

“What happens often when you have social disruption, cultural disruption, economic disruption, is there’s groups

of people who look around for kind of some authority. And they want someone to kind of ‘make it great again,’” Henderson said.

The propaganda video from the Proud Boys’ three rallies in Saratoga County echoed that feeling. Cynthia Miller-Idriss from American University says propaganda for a group like the Proud Boys specifically targets people who feel something’s been stolen from them.

“Whether that’s a white majority country, or your Second Amendment rights might be taken away by the government supposedly, or a conspiracy theory about Jews or feminists taking something away, or an election being stolen — all those types of propaganda are very much rooted in the idea that you’re going to lose something,” said Miller-Idriss.

There has been some of that targeted propaganda on the ground in Upstate New York, but Miller-Idriss said way more recruitment is happening on the internet. “It’s impossible to overstate how much toxic online spaces in particular have played a role in the spread of hateful content, and in the normalization of that content,” said Miller-Idriss. “It’s not that we hadn’t seen this stuff before. It’s just a new form and it’s sort of supercharged in the online environment.”

That trend has led to real-world violence, like with the QAnon conspiracy theory that inspired a shooting at a pizza shop in Washington, DC in 2016. That theory, based on the false claim that Democratic elites are running a child sex ring, was born online and has made it out into the real world in upstate New York.

The impact of conspiracy theories

In the summer of 2020, there was a rally in Watertown where people held signs that said Save the Children, which has become a QAnon hashtag — although the organizer reportedly said QAnon did not inspire that event.

Then, in the spring of 2022, there was a similar gathering in Plattsburgh. A woman in a Facebook video from that rally holds a sign that said “Trump saves children — Biden abducts them.” The QAnon theory has no basis in reality and the FBI considers the movement a national security threat.

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