

How the 118th Congress Can Prevent Violent Conflict & Promote Peace in the United States

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Alliance for
Peacebuilding

About the Alliance for Peacebuilding

The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP), named the “[number one influencer and change agent](#)” among peacebuilding institutions worldwide, is an award-winning nonprofit and nonpartisan network of 180+ organizations working in 181 countries to prevent and reduce violent conflict and build sustainable peace. AfP cultivates a network to strengthen and advance the peacebuilding field, enabling peacebuilding organizations to achieve greater impact—tackling issues too large for any one organization to address alone.

We are the Alliance for:

- **Accelerating collective action** through collaboration and exchange;
- **Advocating for policies, laws, and funding** to advance the peacebuilding field;
- **Creating standards of practice** to align peacebuilding around common tools, frameworks, and approaches;
- **Developing an evidence base** to ensure better policies and practices; and
- **Shaping new narratives** to develop and amplify effective peacebuilding messaging.



Alliance for Peacebuilding

The [Alliance for Peacebuilding](#) (AfP) urgently calls lawmakers to action to collectively work together to address grievances across the political spectrum and provide the necessary resources to fund vital programs to prevent and reduce violent conflict and extremism and build sustainable peace in the United States.

[Conflict experts globally have been sounding the alarm](#) for years that conflict dynamics are increasing in the U.S., leading to escalating political violence, hyperpolarization, and democratic backsliding. Support for [political violence is growing](#), and U.S. [intelligence assessments](#) find that white supremacist and militia groups represent the most dangerous and persistent threat to U.S. domestic peace and security. While domestic extremism and violence are not new in the U.S., [homegrown incidents have surged](#) to levels not seen in a quarter-century. Nearly three-quarters of voters in an [NBC News poll](#) said they believed things in the U.S. were headed in the wrong direction and that threats to democracy are the most significant challenge facing the country—even more than the cost of living. Additionally, [many studies](#) find anti-democratic attitudes and support for partisan violence are at [concerning levels](#) among the American public. Partisan animosity is also [growing](#) along with othering, aversion, and moralization, which are three core key ingredients that fuel increasing political sectarianism.

Unfortunately, the data matches Americans' perceptions. The U.S. is consistently sliding down indices that measure peace and security. In 2021, the [Fragile States Index](#) found the U.S.' overall total fragility score dropped the most compared to any other country due to worsening social cohesion indicators and political violence, including efforts to delegitimize the election process. The 2022 [Fragile States Index](#) found that U.S. social cohesion scores fell once again for the 14th straight year. The social cohesion score of the U.S. is dragged down by

a lack of “connectedness” (based on a lack of cohesive identity, trust in national institutions, and belief in being treated fairly) on the [Social Cohesion Index](#). Social cohesion is necessary for democratic countries to function, and it is essentially the social capital that supports shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups. Strong social cohesion creates a sense of solidarity that ties societies together and helps ensure political and social capital so that societies can trust and collaborate, which is essential for overcoming major crises.

The [2022 Global Peace Index](#) found peacefulness in the U.S. deteriorated again, following a consistent trend beginning in 2015. The report cites civil unrest, political terror, and political instability as primary drivers of deterioration. Americans are increasingly [willing to compromise democratic principles for partisan gain](#). U.S. democracy has also been consistently falling in indices that measure democratic trends. Since 2016, the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) has classified the U.S. as a “flawed democracy,” pointing to extreme polarization and gerrymandering as key issues. In 2021, the [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#), for the first time, added the U.S. to an annual list of “backsliding” democracies, citing election disinformation, voter disenchantment, and the division surrounding measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, [no one is immune to polarization](#). [Polarization experts](#) believe in-group and out-group dynamics in a polarized society cause people to become the most extreme versions of themselves, assigning increasingly sinister motives to all those they consider the “other.” Since 2016, each political side’s rhetoric that the other is “[un-American](#)” has increased.



[Online fora and social media](#) are also [significantly contributing to partisanship and political violence, as well as accelerating the radicalization of U.S. extremists](#). In the U.S., 47 U.S.C. §230 (often referred to as “[Section 230](#)”) protects social media companies from the types of liability traditional publishers face for harmful content posted by users. The law, originally designed for a very small internet in the 1990s, [has not kept pace with the modern internet’s exponential growth to billions of websites](#) and the nefarious uses of individual and organizational actors.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has many potential triggers that could spark conflict and violence. Police-involved violence has become a significant provocation for unrest in the U.S. and police use of force is a [leading cause of death for men overall](#), and [disproportionately](#) for men of color. Police reform faces significant challenges, with [18,000 separate police departments](#) governing their own policies and practices. Efforts to change police culture and promote systemic change are essential to build new mechanisms for community engagement, increase police legitimacy, enhance public trust, and prevent and mitigate violence at the community level. Supporting community-led violence prevention efforts complements other efforts to strengthen and reform police departments, but these initiatives remain grossly underfunded.



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Even though grievances may be significant, whether and how violent conflict breaks out also depends on the resilience of societal institutions, mechanisms, or other factors to suppress or resolve conflict through nonviolent means. [Conflict resilience](#) is the capacity of communities, states, and societies to prevent and reduce violence and manage shocks or long-term stressors driving grievances. Civil society is one of the most resilient institutions in the U.S. and organizations are working to [prevent violent extremism](#), [strengthen democratic institutions](#), [advance criminal justice reform](#), [collect accurate data on violence](#), [provide trauma healing to communities](#), [promote local-level mediation](#), [build social cohesion](#), and [reduce political and community violence](#).

Organizations like [IREX](#), [Build Up](#), and [Search for Common Ground](#) are working to build community resilience to disinformation, empower people to recognize and reject divisive narratives and hate speech, and create resistance against those who use online communications platforms to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize extremists. [NewGen Peacebuilders](#), [The Karuna Center for Peacebuilding](#), and other groups are piloting programs around the U.S. to integrate peacebuilding and conflict resolution curricula in schools that build skills to prevent future conflict, violence, and violent extremism. And [Urban-Rural Action](#), [Peace Catalyst](#), [Global Peace Foundation](#), and many other organizations are creating space for politically, ethnically, geographically, and other diverse identities to engage in constructive dialogue at the local level and deepen understanding of various perspectives and societal challenges. However, current resources are insufficient to address the drivers of increasing violence and extremism.



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Recommendations

The 118th Congress must urgently support the following initiatives to prevent and reduce increasing violent conflict and extremism and build peace for all Americans by:

- Doubling the [Department of Homeland Security's \(DHS\) domestic extremism prevention grants](#) from \$20 million, as enacted in FY23, to \$40 million. The Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program supports the development of local capabilities to prevent violence and extremism. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions receive these funds to raise social awareness, promote civic engagement, build youth resilience, and develop threat assessment and bystander training from Texas to Portland. TVTP programming also supports [exit movements](#) that assist individuals in leaving extremist groups, reintegrating, and participating constructively in society. \$20 million is not enough to adequately support research and impact local communities across the country to achieve the upstream prevention aims of the TVTP program. If the U.S. is serious about addressing its violent conflict and political violence drivers, then more funding is essential to reduce and prevent violent extremism, including grievances creating more mainstream support for political violence;
- Providing additional resources to DHS and its civil society partners to scale early warning systems that analyze threats and provide recommendations for quick and adaptive programs and activities. Civil society organizations, including ACLED and The Trust Network, amass data and disseminate reports of threats through early warning systems. These data collection mechanisms are critical to track hotspots and identify programs and activities for quick interventions;

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- Investing in a new, holistic initiative to protect American democracy with an initial allocation of at least \$200 million to increase civic education, increase online literacy, prevent mis/disinformation, address drivers of conflict and domestic extremism, protect the U.S. electoral system, and reduce other threats to U.S. democracy. In addition, this support should advance the recommendations set forth in the report from the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, [Our Common Purpose: Reinventing U.S. Democracy for the 21st Century](#), to revitalize public trust in government, bolster institutions, empower voters, reduce toxic polarization, and strengthen civil society and social cohesion;
- Increasing funding for civic education, including enhanced support for the [Civics National Activities](#) grant program, which promotes innovative instruction, learning strategies, and professional development in American history, civics and government, and geography, with an emphasis on activities and programs that benefit low-income students and underserved populations;
- Providing funding and support for industry standards and regulatory or policy measures that both promote a free internet and social media platforms while also preventing “the use of online services to disseminate terrorist and violent extremist content,” as outlined in the [2019 Christchurch Call](#). This support can include social media resiliency efforts to help Americans identify, report, and combat the spread of violent propaganda and mis/disinformation;
- Expanding funding for U.S. peacebuilding initiatives, such as the Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service, which should receive at least \$50 million, up from the \$25 million provided in FY23. Additionally, Congress should provide the full \$30 million, as passed in the House Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Programs’ FY22 and FY23 appropriations bills, rather than the \$10 million provided in the FY23 enacted bill, to support conflict resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding at the local level through the DOJ’s Community Approaches to Advancing Justice grants initiative;
- Supporting multiple federal agencies to integrate conflict prevention initiatives in existing programs and ensure interagency coordination. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) must play an increased role to create a [much-needed shift to a public health model](#) for preventing domestic violent extremism through its Community Violence Intervention programs. [Mental health challenges](#) exacerbate the [grievances and isolation](#) that can fuel radicalization. Congress must urgently fund programming to address the [relationships](#) between mental health and political and socio-economic polarization, cognitive radicalization, and violent extremist behavior. Congress should take a holistic approach to prevent violent conflict and extremism by providing at least \$125 million annually to HHS;
- Advancing legislation that builds relationships across and within ideological and other identity-based divides in the U.S., in close consultation with experienced peacebuilders to facilitate the exchange of lessons learned from both home and abroad. Such legislation should ensure the institution of best peacebuilding practices, as well as guardrails to ensure programs and initiatives are conflict-sensitive and avoid creating or exacerbating conflict dynamics. The [Building Civic Bridges Act](#), introduced in the 117th Congress, for instance, should clearly articulate what exactly “bridgebuilding” means, the evidence on which its programs will be based, and how the programs under the bill will promote social cohesion and

rebuild resiliency by fostering improved tolerance and cooperation. Legislation should also entail basic monitoring and evaluation requirements to ensure accountability and evidence-based programming;

- Supporting \$225 million to improve police-community relations generally, as well as \$150 million for a community-based violence intervention and prevention initiative, as passed in the House Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Programs appropriations bill for FY23. \$150 million for community violence intervention and prevention can substantially prevent community-level violence while reducing the demands on local police departments and complementing other efforts to strengthen and reform police departments;
- Increasing funding to agencies such as the National Institute of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services to research and study the impact of policing on communities and develop programs to support police culture reform and community-based engagement;
- Providing resources to feasible yet transformative approaches to U.S. policing, as modeled within Police2Peace's Peace Officer [Project](#) and [Promise](#). These approaches orient policing around a "do no harm" approach across policies and behavior, shifting the role of police officers in communities to keepers of peace, rather than enforcers of the law. Similarly, Congress should allocate funding that supports community engagement and reductions in the use of force, as well as transparency and accountability;
- Reintroducing and passing the bill to create a [Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Commission](#) to examine the effects of slavery, institutional racism, and discrimination against people of color, and how U.S. history continues to impact laws and policies today; and
- Passing [H.R.61](#), the Leading Against White Supremacy Act of 2023, which aims to prevent and prosecute the commission and conspiracy to commit white supremacy-inspired hate crimes by expanding the scope of hate crimes as defined in title 18 of the U.S. Code.

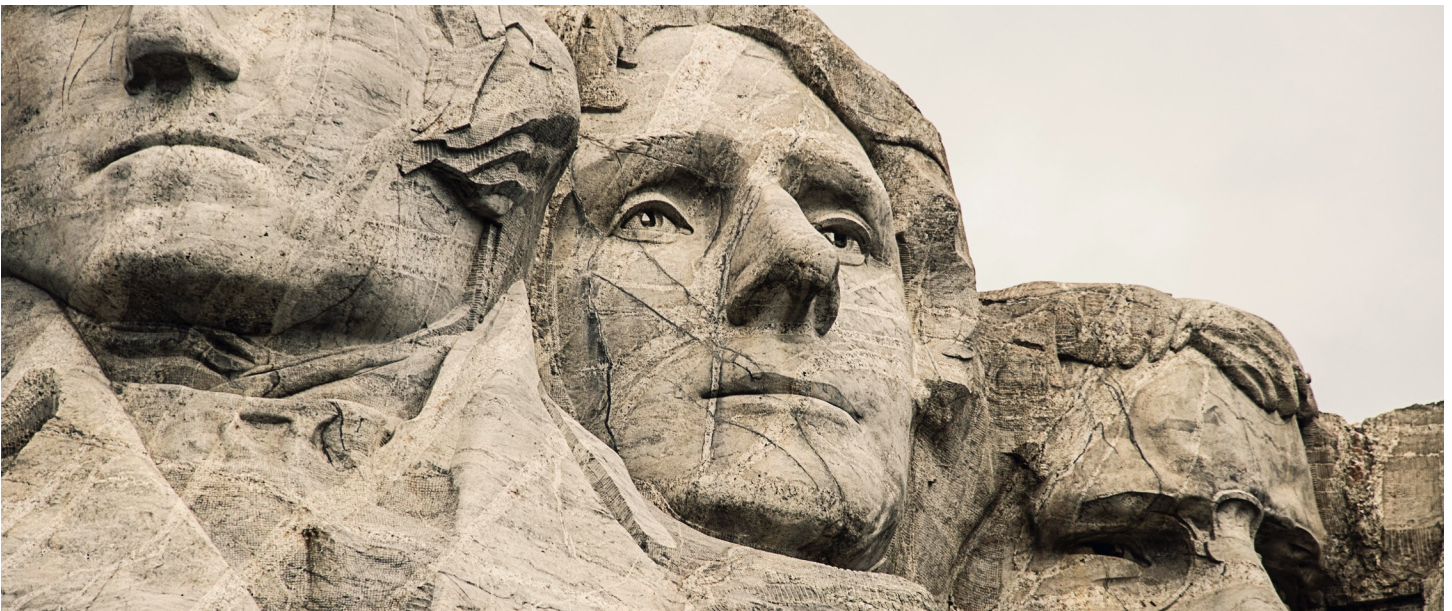


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