

# Why it's likely to be antifa, not neo-Nazis, behind the anarchy in America's streets

James M. Casey, opinion contributor 6/3/2020



© Getty Images Why it's likely to be antifa, not neo-Nazis, behind the anarchy in America's streets

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Violence in U.S. streets in response to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis has highlighted the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, but how much do you know about two other groups - [neo-Nazis](#) and the anti-fascists known as [antifa](#) - who are reported to be involved in the riots spawned by Floyd's encounter with police?

Black Lives Matter largely began to protest violence committed against black Americans during encounters with police. Before Floyd, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Ill., Eric Garner in New York

and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, among others, died from confrontations with police. The movement begun in 2013 now has 16 chapters across the U.S. and Canada - larger, perhaps, than most groups that people join. Since then, it has played a leading role in police-brutality protests but never has been accused as a group of fomenting the kind of violence, property damage and looting seen in recent days.

Quite the opposite is true, however, of those other two groups - one on the extreme right, one on the extreme left - that have turned violence and mayhem into signature tactics.

Neo-Nazis in the United States are a more formal "group," because one often can join an individual club. Formed worldwide in the aftermath of World War II, they have roots in white hate groups such as the [Ku Klux Klan](#). Although the KKK still exists, other neo-Nazi groups such as the [National Socialist Movement](#), the [Aryan Brotherhood](#) and the [Hammerskins](#) are more numerous and active today. The groups don't work with each other, but they are not necessarily rivals. Before the Oklahoma City [Federal Building bombing](#) in 1995, a number of state and local "militia groups" had elements of neo-Nazi philosophy, including their perceived superiority of white people and the need to rid the U.S. of minorities.

After Oklahoma City, many militia groups largely faded into the background because their members decided they were opposed to the mass killing of innocents. Many neo-Nazi organizations that remained have structure, membership lists and hierarchies. They plan events and telegraph [marches and rallies](#), often hoping to incite violence with counter-protesters and law enforcement by spewing hate-filled rhetoric and challenging the terms of what otherwise would be lawful First Amendment activities.

Much of the violence we have witnessed over the past few days likely can be attributed to antifa. The name and their anti-fascist claim are newer than their ideology and violence. Antifa members are anarchists with a bent for socialism. Many may not know what they want so much as what they don't want, such as the status quo, capitalism and private corporations. Their roots reach back to the 1970s when groups such as the [Weather Underground](#) and [Black Panther Party](#) rained down violence across the country.

More recent anarchist activities by demonstrators who would come to be called antifa include the destruction of parts of Seattle while protesting the [World Trade Organization's meeting](#) in 1999, the Animal Liberation Front/Earth Liberation Front ([ALF/ELF](#)) crimes during the 1990s and 2000s, and the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movements of 2011 to 2012.

Formal membership in these groups does not exist, making it difficult for law enforcement to track their unlawful activities. Leaders are not well known, and they communicate via [Signal](#) and other encrypted platforms. Members are generally younger, in their late teens and early 20s, so the groups evolve quickly. The moniker "anti-fascist" came more into vogue after their appearance at the 2017 [Unite the Right rally](#) in Charlottesville, Va., where they clashed with right-wing protesters, resulting in at least three deaths and dozens of injuries. Antifa members claim a tenet of their ideology is opposing fascist groups such as neo-Nazis.

Unless and until law enforcement assigns blame for all the violence across the country this week, nobody knows for sure who did what, though individuals may be arrested. Many of the tactics of violence we've witnessed are classic antifa methods, including vast destruction of businesses, covert organization and planning to facilitate transportation and logistics, and antifa symbols on clothing or spray-painted on buildings. These generally are not the tactics of neo-Nazis, whose ideology of hate is not conducive to joining a protest that began in response to the death of a black man. Neo-Nazis typically do not destroy commercial property as a tactic. Their tattoos, symbols and Confederate battle flags are recognizable and easily spotted. If this were a provocative "false flag operation" as some have speculated, that would be out of character, too.

Nobody can justify criminal violence, but some are looking for a single, least-bad scenario that fits their narrow political beliefs to use in assigning blame. No individual or monolithic group owns this violence. We have seen police officers flashing white power symbols. A few white supremacists have been arrested for inciting violence. Black youths are among those who have been arrested for looting.

Most likely, there are three agendas in play: The protesters who organized marches to voice their outrage over Floyd's and other deaths; the looters and opportunists; and the anarchists who are rioting and causing most of the damage. These anarchists are highly indicative of groups that have engaged in similar tactics going back decades, for the most part separate and apart from neo-Nazi, white nationalists groups.

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