

## Religious Pro-Life Americans Under Attack: A Threat Assessment of Post-*Dobbs* America

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# Introduction

“If abortions aren’t safe, neither are you!” A range of dangerous actors in the United States today are making good on this threat, often marking their acts of violence against pro-life institutions with this and similarly menacing warnings. As a result, these institutions are facing an increasingly perilous reality in post-*Dobbs* America: some of the most fervent opponents of pro-life Americans and their institutions have become more malicious, even violently so, in their attacks.

On May 2, 2022, a news outlet published a leaked draft of the Supreme Court’s opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. Criminal attacks on pro-life congregations and organizations across America immediately and dramatically increased. Hostile actors targeted pregnancy resource centers, education and advocacy organizations, churches, and even schools. The attacks continued at a high frequency after the Court handed down its *Dobbs* decision on June 24, 2022. Attackers often committed multiple crimes against the same organization, including arson, death threats, property destruction, and menacing or vile graffiti. Perpetrators attacked several of the same organizations on multiple days.

These crimes not only imperil American citizens, their institutions, their property, and, often, their life’s work. When aimed at pro-life congregations and organizations motivated by religious conviction, they also constitute assaults on the inalienable right of religious freedom guaranteed to all Americans in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. As such, they threaten to destroy the pluralism so central to our ability to live in harmony despite our differences—*e pluribus unum*.

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) commissioned a former FBI counter-terrorism and intelligence expert to assess the crimes, and the prospects for future attacks, in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision. The assessment that follows is part of RFI’s ongoing, multi-year investigation into criminal attacks on religious institutions in the United States, during which government officials, law enforcement agencies, and the media have too often responded inadequately or not at all. We anticipate that the multi-year Investigative Report will be released in 2023 and updated as needed.

RFI will also release in 2022 its *Crisis Toolkit for Religious Institutions*, designed to help non-profit and for-profit institutions prepare for, mitigate, and respond to non-violent attacks. The Toolkit does contain guidance, however, that may be pertinent for navigating the aftermath of criminal attacks such as those identified in this post-*Dobbs* report, and in forthcoming RFI reports.

# What Is at Stake?

Many religious Americans hold convictions that lead them to defend unborn life, natural marriage, and innate male-female difference, among other weighty matters. For more than a decade, hostile actors have targeted these people and their institutions with litigation, legislation, government administrative action, and public smear campaigns with increasing intensity. Crimes against pro-life institutions are part of this broader assault on religious freedom.

As of late August 2022, perpetrators have attacked at least 63 pro-life organizations, across 26 states and the District of Columbia, since the *Dobbs* leak. Twenty-eight of the 63 pro-life organizations are religious.<sup>1</sup> In the majority of organizations attacked, most of the staff and volunteers are motivated by religious convictions to do this work. While Christians have been at the forefront of the pro-life movement in the United States for decades, Jews, Muslims, and those of other religious traditions, as well as some atheists and agnostics, have made important contributions to the effort.

Pro-life people of religious faith defend unborn human lives out of their love of God and neighbor. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other religious traditions have clear, centuries-old teachings about human life leading them to protect, defend, and care for unborn children and their mothers. Those teachings forbid them to abort unborn children, refer women to abortionists, provide employee insurance that pays for abortion, help women obtain abortion-inducing drugs, claim that abortion is moral, or enable abortion in other ways.

In pro-life medical offices, healthcare workers recognize and care for two patients: the child, unborn or born, and the mother. Pro-life pregnancy resource centers that do not offer direct medical services will refer or connect women to clinics, hospitals, or other facilities where they will receive such care. Pregnancy resource centers provide daily necessities, such as baby diapers, formula and food, clothing, and other supplies. They pay for, help find, or directly provide living accommodations. The span of pro-life centers covers a wide range of services, including adoption referrals, pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, counseling, parenting classes for men and women, help finding employment, emotional support, post-abortion healing, and much more. Education and advocacy organizations advance pro-life principles in law, public policy, and culture.

Some Americans oppose these activities and reject the underlying convictions. But under the American Constitution, citizens, including religious ones, have the right to hold pro-life views and pursue pro-life activities. When political and cultural elites ignore violent attacks against citizens because of their pro-life views and work, they threaten pluralism and democracy itself.

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# Two Case Studies

On June 7, 2022, arsonists firebombed and vandalized CompassCare Pregnancy Services' medical office in Buffalo, New York.<sup>2</sup> CompassCare is a Christian organization. The vandals scrawled "Jane was here" on the walls, a phrase the pro-abortion group Jane's Revenge has used after committing crimes for which it took credit.

CompassCare told RFI that it has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair the damage. Thankfully, the day after the firebombing, churches in Buffalo provided three secure, undisclosed, alternate locations for use while the damaged office was rebuilt, so that CompassCare could continue serving its mothers and babies. Despite supply chain and labor challenges, the repairs were completed in 52 days. CompassCare began serving patients in its rebuilt office during the week of August 8th.

Law enforcement agencies have not arrested anyone for the attack on CompassCare. However, the organization is facing a probe from the New York State Commissioner of Health.<sup>3</sup> The basis of the Commissioner's probe and related public report is a state law enacted on June 13, 2022, only six days after the firebombing. The law targets any pregnancy center that provides so-called "limited services," meaning that it "fails to provide or refer for the

full range of comprehensive reproductive and sexual healthcare services reimbursed under the state's Medicaid program including, but not limited to... abortion care."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, CompassCare—in the wake of suffering a violent and destructive attack because of its pro-life commitments—will be scrutinized and potentially subject to injurious action by the government of New York because it is pro-life. This law and its resulting state action will likely increase the risk environment by affirming and encouraging the perception that pro-life pregnancy centers are bad actors who operate outside the boundaries of socially acceptable activity.

A second attack occurred in Portland, Oregon, where in June a mob of 75 to 100 people smashed the ground floor windows of the Hinson Baptist Church's office building and defaced the facility with graffiti, including "Abort the court," "My trans," and "Abortion is a human right." The building's tenants include the executive and administrative offices of a pregnancy resource center.<sup>5</sup> Hinson Baptist told RFI that neighbors helped board up the windows by midnight that day and removed the graffiti before noon the next day.



CompassCare Pregnancy Services' medical office (Buffalo, NY)



CompassCare Pregnancy Services medical office (Buffalo, NY)



Hinson Baptist Church (Portland, OR)



# Placing the Dobbs Attacks into the Context of Growing Assaults on American Catholic Sites: 2020-Present

Criminal attacks on Catholic sites across America over the past two years—mostly targeting churches—and the negligible public response from federal law enforcement agencies and the media, provide essential context for assessing recent crimes against pro-life institutions. **Perpetrators have attacked 32 Catholic churches since the Dobbs leak, including 17 churches where the criminals demonstrated their pro-abortion motive through graffiti or by damaging pro-life memorials or symbols.**<sup>6</sup> Even when there was no overt evidence of a pro-abortion motive, the close timing between the spike in attacks and the timing of the *Dobbs* leak and the *Dobbs* decision, suggests the Catholic Church’s pro-life record likely motivated the attacks.

But the pattern of crimes against Catholic sites started long before the leak. On May 28, 2020, people associating themselves with mass protests against the murder of George Floyd set fire to pews in the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis, Minnesota,<sup>7</sup> and over that weekend also attacked churches in Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Louisville, and New York City, and a Catholic bookstore in Chicago run by the Daughters of St. Paul, an order of nuns. The Daughters locked themselves upstairs to escape the attackers who entered the bookstore.<sup>8</sup> **From the arson in Minneapolis to the present, offenders have attacked at least 174 Catholic sites across 38 states and the District of Columbia.** At many sites, those responsible committed multiple crimes.

RFI has examined evidence concerning attacks on Catholic targets from data in the FBI’s “Hate Crimes Statistics 2020,”<sup>9</sup> the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ news story tracker,<sup>10</sup> and RFI’s direct communications with dioceses in which the FBI received reports of incidents in 2020. RFI has

a high degree of confidence that the actual number of incidents far exceeds the number reported. Some individual or institutional victims have not reported incidents to law enforcement agencies or news outlets. There are also long-standing problems with the reliability of state and federal law enforcement “hate crimes” data collection and reporting.<sup>11</sup>

According to RFI’s analysis, crimes against 174 Catholic targets since May 28, 2020, have included:

- 4 incidents of assaulting a person
- 26 incidents of arson
- 76 incidents of desecrating statues
- 66 incidents of destroying property
- 16 incidents of theft
- 81 incidents of graffiti

Not all crimes against Catholic or other religious institutions have included explicit evidence of anti-religion hostility. A lack of clear evidence of hostility against religion in general, or a particular religion, does not, however, prove the absence of such a motive. Moreover, any criminal attack, particularly a violent one, on a religious institution can still have the effect of inhibiting the free exercise of religion. RFI’s analysis provides clear evidence of anti-Catholic animus in many attacks on Catholic sites over the past two years.

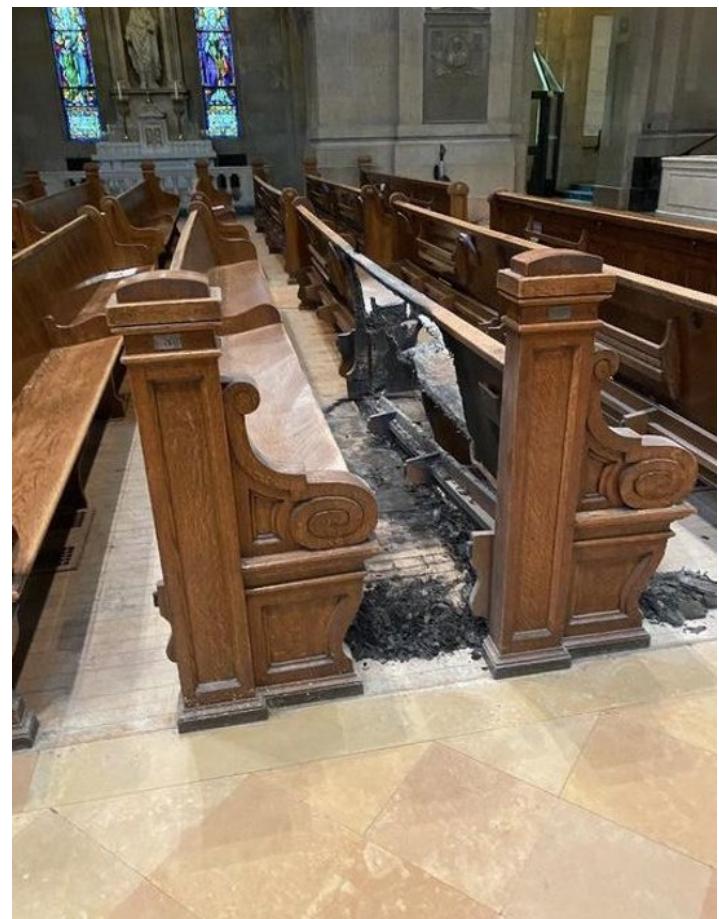
The surge in attacks after the *Dobbs* leak is also notable in light of the Catholic Church’s consistent teachings through time on the inviolable dignity of unborn human life. Criminals attacked 136 Catholic sites from May 28, 2020, to the date of the *Dobbs* leak—an average of one site attacked every five days.

Since the leak, there have been 39 known attacks on Catholic sites—an average of one site attacked every three days. The sites were predominantly churches, plus three pregnancy resource centers, and four schools.

The day after the *Dobbs* decision, arsonists burned to the ground the 145-year-old St. Colman Catholic Church in Shady Spring, West Virginia.<sup>12</sup> On June 30, 2022, arsonists set an early morning fire outside St. Anthony of Padua School in Lorain, Ohio, causing \$1 million in damage.<sup>13</sup>

RFI began its investigation into criminal attacks on religious institutions many months before the *Dobbs* decision. The almost non-existent public response from the Department of Justice, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and national media to attacks on Catholic churches, from late

May 2020 to the present, presented a public-interest imperative to conduct an Investigative Report. In order to understand the full spectrum of these attacks, to raise public awareness, and to counter the destructive impact of such wrongdoing on religious freedom and the common good, RFI is assembling an advisory group that includes former Department of Justice and FBI professionals, retired prosecutors, former state and local law enforcement agency personnel, and experts in security for religious institutions, physical site security technology, cybersecurity, mental health, and journalism. State and media indifference to attacks on any of America's religious traditions has consequences for religious free exercise, pluralism, and the safety and security of all religious communities in America. As noted, RFI anticipates releasing the report in 2023 and updating it as needed thereafter.

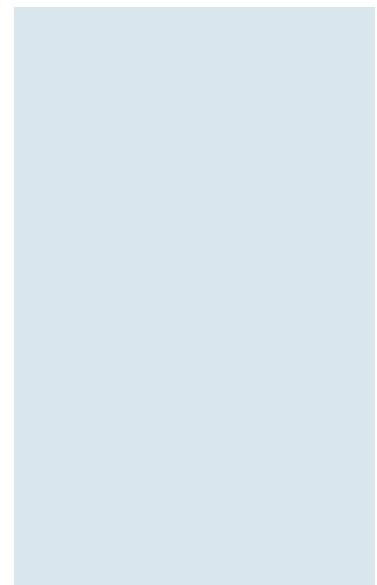


Basilica of St. Mary (Minneapolis, MN)

# Many Attacks on Religious Institutions Are Federal Crimes

It is a federal crime when anyone “intentionally obstructs, by force or threat of force, including by threat of force against religious real property, any person in the enjoyment of that person’s free exercise of religious beliefs, or attempts to do so.” Under the same federal statute it is also a crime when someone “intentionally defaces, damages, or

destroys any religious real property, because of the religious character of that property, or attempts to do so.”<sup>14</sup> Violating this statute is punishable by fines and imprisonment, depending on the extent of the property damage inflicted and whether any person is injured as part of the attack.<sup>15</sup>



St. Colman Catholic Church (Shady Spring, WV): Before and after the arson attack



Mountain Area Pregnancy Services (Asheville, NC)

# Threat Environment and Threat Outlook

Below is a summary of the current threat environment and outlook. It is provided by RFI to help pro-life congregations and organizations prepare for potential attacks; raise awareness among the general public; and prompt action by government officials, elected representatives, and the media. What follows is based on an extensive review of relevant cases, available data, and open source information conducted by a former FBI counter-terrorism and intelligence expert and that expert's application of threat forecasting best practices.

- 1. The social environment for committing criminal attacks on pro-life congregations and organizations is “permissive.”** It is likely that perpetrators have sufficient numbers, commitment, and capability **to continue these attacks; law enforcement’s posture** in preventing or investigating attacks is **often passive**, especially at the federal level; some state or local office-holders have failed to express immediate condemnation of such attacks or have themselves introduced deeply troubling rhetoric into the public discourse. For example, just after the *Dobbs* decision Illinois State Senator Sara Feigenholtz (D-IL-6) posted a profile picture on social media showing a statue of a Catholic bishop holding a gun to the head of a pregnant Lady Liberty (the Statue of Liberty).<sup>16</sup>
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- 3. There is an ideological overlap between some of the groups that engaged in large-scale violence in cities following the murder of George Floyd, and those who have attacked or would likely attack pro-life targets, particularly actors whose ideologies are Marxist or anarchist, and that envision the elimination of religion and the family.**
  - Groups such as Jane’s Revenge, known for its signature, “If abortions aren’t safe, neither are you” graffiti at attack sites, Ruth Sent Us, and their imitators, as well as Satanists, have emerged as threats. Some Satanists, such as The Satanic Temple, claim to have a “Satanic Abortion Ritual”<sup>17</sup> and have a record of stealing and desecrating Eucharistic hosts from Catholic churches.<sup>18</sup> Graffiti on Catholic churches has sometimes included Satanic symbols.
  - Individuals splintering from such groups, or drawing inspiration from them, pose potential threats to pro-life entities.
- 4. Cyber-attacks on pro-life entities, including states with laws protecting the unborn, are also likely.** The hacker group SiegedSec’s assaults on Arkansas and Kentucky government servers foreshadowed this threat. After hacking servers in these two states, the group published the personal information of certain government employees, and justified its actions because of the states’ pro-life laws and policies. In a statement, the group warned that “the attacks will continue... Our main targets are any pro-life entities, including government servers of the states with anti-abortion laws.”<sup>19</sup>

5. **Low Threat Crimes**, already quite prevalent, are likely to continue unabated nationwide for the rest of 2022. Such crimes will become routine, occurring as often as one to three times per day, so long as the environment remains permissive.
- Low Threat Crimes are property damage crimes that are repairable or replaceable within a few months' time. Low Threat Crimes do not include assaults. Examples include graffiti, broken windows and doors, damage to statues, or failed attempts to create further harm.
6. **Medium Threat Crimes** will likely increase in frequency. The likelihood of more advanced attacks on pro-life property will rise. Medium Threat Crimes will likely occur frequently for the rest of 2022, perhaps as often as one to three times per month, unless aggressive prevention measures change the environment, including investigation and prosecution.
- Medium Threat Crimes often involve property crimes causing significant monetary or functional damage that cannot be repaired or replaced in less than a year. Assaults are Medium Threat Crimes if they result in no physical harm to persons (for example, if criminals disrupt a Mass or service and scuffle with congregants without injury to congregants).
7. **High Threat Crimes**, mimicking past incidents, are likely to increase, and are a significant component of this forecast. We must assume they will occur with greater frequency because significant numbers of hostile actors are aggrieved and calling for vengeance. Attempted or successful High Threat Crimes may be expected to occur one to three times in the remaining months of 2022 and perhaps beyond.
- High Threat Crimes are crimes that entail significant attempted or successful injurious or deadly assaults. Examples include armed and unarmed attacks, arson with congregant members inside or against church buildings, and vehicular assault.
8. **In states where the *Dobbs* decision triggered pro-life laws, Low Threat Crimes may increase to Medium, and Medium Threat Crimes may increase to High**, including in Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.<sup>20</sup> The same may occur in states that had pro-life laws prior to the *Dobbs* decision, including Alabama, Arizona, Michigan, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.<sup>21</sup>
9. The past two years of attacks on pro-life institutions in the United States have primarily targeted Catholic churches and schools. Post *Dobbs*, other Christian pro-life institutions have increasingly been the targets of violent attacks. Those responsible for, and devoted to, such places of worship, schools, and other institutions should also remain vigilant.
10. **Further increasing the vulnerability of many pro-life congregations and organizations is their inadequate preparedness in the following areas:**
- Building and surrounding property security
  - Security training and organization for staff, volunteers, and others on-site, including church congregants
  - Financial resources dedicated to security
  - Cyber security
  - Relationships with local law enforcement agencies
  - Property defense technology
  - Legal support, resources, and education for security measures
  - Security coordination with similar entities, including institutions within and beyond their own religious community
  - Media engagement
  - Insurance
  - Multi-faith engagement

# Conclusion

It is imperative that pro-life congregations and organizations, and responsible media outlets, take the current threat environment seriously and that government authorities act decisively to prevent, investigate, and prosecute criminal attacks against these institutions. As noted, RFI is developing another resource, in consultation with its advisory group, that will feature recommendations on how religious institutions can prepare for, prevent, mitigate, and respond to attacks, including those outlined in this post-*Dobbs* Threat Assessment.



# Endnotes

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