

The Sovereign Citizen Movement in the United States

A BACKGROUNDER FROM THE ADL CENTER ON EXTREMISM



Our Mission:

“To stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.”

About

Center on Extremism

The ADL Center on Extremism is the foremost authority on extremism, terrorism and hate, both foreign and domestic. We monitor extremism across the ideological spectrum. Our staff of investigators, analysts, researchers and technical experts strategically monitors, exposes and disrupts extremist threats — on the internet and on the ground. We provide resources, expertise and educational briefings that enable law enforcement officers, public officials and community leaders, as well as internet and technology companies to identify and counter emerging threats. Learn more about COE's work and the latest in the fight against extremism by visiting [adl.org/coe](https://www.adl.org/coe).

ADL

ADL is the leading anti-hate organization in the world. Founded in 1913, its timeless mission is “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” Today, ADL continues to fight all forms of antisemitism and bias, using innovation and partnerships to drive impact. A global leader in combating antisemitism, countering extremism and battling bigotry wherever and whenever it happens, ADL works to protect democracy and ensure a just and inclusive society for all.

Table of Contents

Key Points	04
Origins and Ideology	05
Sovereign Citizen “Gurus” and Groups	07
Moorish Sovereign Citizens and Other Sovereign Citizens of Color	09
Sovereign Citizen Tactics: “Paper Terrorism” Harassment	11
Sovereign Citizen Tactics: Scams and Frauds	14
Sovereign Citizen Confrontations, Threats and Violence	17
Growing the Sovereign Citizen Movement in the U.S. and Abroad	21

Key Points

- The sovereign citizen movement is a large anti-government extremist movement whose adherents believe the government is the illegitimate product of a conspiracy that subverted the original, lawful government. They claim people can take steps to divorce themselves from the illegitimate government, after which it has no authority or jurisdiction over them.
- Sovereign citizens are known for their abstruse pseudo-legal arguments, as well as other unusual behaviors, such as inserting gratuitous punctuation marks in their names or flouting motor vehicle regulations while proclaiming they are “travelers,” not “drivers.”
- In the United States, sovereign citizens come in two main varieties: “traditional” sovereign citizens and “Moorish” sovereign citizens. Moorish sovereign citizens are primarily Black and often pepper standard sovereign citizen beliefs with additional concepts or terminology derived from the Moorish Science Temple, a religious sect, or other fringe Black groups or religious sects.
- Sovereign citizens engage in a large amount of criminal activity, including 1) harassment and retaliation tactics collectively known as “paper terrorism,” 2) scams and frauds, sometimes large in scope, and 3) violence, including armed standoffs, shootouts, murders and terrorist plots.
- Sovereign citizens in recent years have been able to grow their movement by appealing to new audiences, including anti-vaxxers, QAnon adherents, and MAGA supporters. The movement has also spread extensively in jails and prisons around the country. Sovereign citizens have increased their international presence as well, spreading to a number of countries around the world.

Origins and Ideology

The sovereign citizen movement is a large anti-government extremist movement whose adherents believe that they can ignore laws, regulations, court orders and taxes because they have divorced themselves from what they claim is an illegitimate, tyrannical government. Though “sovereign citizen” is the most common term movement members use to refer to themselves, they may also use a variety of other self-descriptions, including American state national, state citizen, constitutionalist, free man/woman upon the land, Moorish national, and many others.

The sovereign citizen movement evolved from ideas originally pioneered by two older anti-government movements, the tax protest movement and the Posse Comitatus movement. The tax protest movement began in the late 1960s and still exists today; its followers use pseudo-legal and frivolous arguments to falsely claim that most Americans do not actually have to pay federal income taxes. The Posse Comitatus movement emerged in the early 1970s as a collection of locally-based groups who claimed that the county sheriff was the ultimate authority in a county and that it was the sheriff’s job to prevent the imposition of “unlawful” federal or state laws or regulations. The Posse Comitatus died out by the late 1980s.

Over the years, anti-government extremists from both movements developed theories about the “true” nature of government. In the early United States, they claimed, humans had lived under God’s law and the common law, not under the heavy hand of “statute law.” The Constitution and early American government, they said, enshrined these principles. But a conspiracy infiltrated and subverted the original government, the de jure government, replacing it with an illegitimate, tyrannical de facto government. The conspirators replaced constitutional law and common law with commercial law (also referred to by sovereign citizens as Roman Civil Law, Law Merchant, Equity Law, Maritime Law and Admiralty Law).

Sovereign citizens believe that, in order to subjugate Americans, the conspiracy offered them “privileges” such as Social Security or driver’s licenses, which sovereigns claimed were contracts in disguise designed to ensnare people into the commercial jurisdiction of the illegitimate government as subjects and slaves rather than citizens. To use licenses or permits or even zip codes is to voluntarily surrender one’s sovereignty to the de facto government. The Fourteenth Amendment, they argue, even created a new category of citizenship, “citizens of the United States,” which anyone could become by accepting a proffered “contract.” Most Americans unknowingly did so, delivering their own sovereignty into the hands of the conspiracy. However, there was a way out: someone who learned the truth could take certain steps, such as declarations or filings, and divorce themselves from the illegitimate government to return to God’s law and the common law. John T. Sexton, for example, a Michigan sovereign citizen, [mailed a notarized document](#) to his local police department in 2022 declaring that he was “not a resident of any state under the 14th Amendment and hereby publicly disavow any contract, form, agreement application, certificate, license, permit or other document which I may have signed,” so that he could declare himself a sovereign citizen. Once someone took such steps, they were ostensibly immune to all the laws, regulations, court orders and taxes of the illegitimate de facto government. That government no longer had any jurisdiction over them at all; they could ignore its dictates at will, from taxes to motor vehicle regulations to zoning restrictions. None of that mattered anymore.

The basic concepts behind the sovereign citizen movement cohered by the mid-1980s, but sovereign citizen theorists have continued to add new ideas and variations, making the beliefs and practices of the movement increasingly baroque, complicated and ornate. A sovereign citizen theorist could come up with a new idea and spread it; if it proved popular, it became added to the “lore” of the movement, leading sovereigns to do more and more strange things, such as inserting punctuation into their names (like “John-Elmer; Doe” or “:Maria-Elizabeth: Dennison:”) or putting brackets around zip codes in mailing addresses. A sovereign citizen signature might include not just a name, but also a Uniform Commercial Code reference, a Latin phrase or two, a red-inked thumbprint and even a postage stamp. At their most extreme, some sovereign citizens adopt an alternative English syntax, dubbed “Quantum Grammar,” making their writings almost incomprehensible—simply because one sovereign citizen theorist, David Wynn Miller, proposed the notion in the 1990s and it caught on. Many sovereign citizens use a peculiar form of double-speak involving homonyms. For example, a sovereign citizen might try to link birth certificates and paper currency to maritime law by claiming that a “birth certificate” is really a “berth” certificate and “currency” is actually “current” plus “sea.”

Sovereign citizen arguments and theories tend to have two things in common:

1. **They are pseudo-legal in nature.** Though, to a layperson, they often seem to have the form and appearance of legitimate legal documents, to judges, attorneys and others versed in the law, sovereign citizen claims and theories are typically little more than meaningless nonsense. It is common for judges to characterize sovereign citizen documents or filings using terms such as “gibberish” or “gobbledygook.”
2. **They are often examples of “magical thinking.”** People who engage in magical thinking believe that specific words, rituals or actions can affect events in the physical world. Like the way a wizard might assemble the ingredients and incantations for a spell, sovereign citizens string together legal terms and phrases, quotations from court cases, and other language and symbology in ways they think will allow them to become immune from laws and regulations, free of debts and obligations, or enabled to create their own money, courts, or even law enforcement agencies. If they fail, they are told that it is just because they didn’t use the correct phrase or file the correct document.

The first boom period for the sovereign citizen movement was in the early-to-mid 1980s, when a severe recession and a major farm crisis created an audience of angry and financially desperate people receptive to the claimed solutions promised by early sovereign citizens. The movement experienced a second surge in the mid-to-late 1990s as part of the upswing of far-right anger that resulted in the Oklahoma City bombing (indeed, one of the bombers, Terry Nichols, had engaged in sovereign citizen activities). Sovereign citizens saw a third period of growth starting in the late 2000s, fueled by another serious recession and the mortgage crisis; during this surge, sovereign citizens were also able to exploit social media to spread sovereign ideas to many new audiences. Since 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the sovereign citizen movement has been on the rise again.

Sovereign Citizen “Gurus” and Groups

For decades, the sovereign citizen movement has been dominated by theorists or “gurus” who invent the pseudo-legal theories and tactics of the movement and market them to adherents. Sovereign citizen gurus hold seminars around the country and online, compose filings and instruction manuals and offer “legal” advice and guidance, all for a price. Some sovereign gurus may have only local followers, while others enjoy celebrity status within the movement and are so influential that other sovereign citizen theorists advertise they are teaching the theories or methods of that sovereign guru.

The theories and tactics taught by these leaders of the sovereign citizen movement have no basis in real law, and many are illegal. Indeed, one of the hazards of being a sovereign citizen guru is the risk of arrest. Most high-profile sovereign citizen influencers of the 2010s ended up behind bars before the end of the decade. James Timothy Turner, an Alabama sovereign citizen who headed the sovereign citizen group Republic for the United [sic] States of America (RuSA), [received an 18-year sentence](#) in 2013 on fraud and conspiracy charges for his seminars that taught people how to use fictitious financial instruments to pay off taxes, mortgages, and other debts. James T. McBride, leader of the Ohio-based sovereign citizen group Divine Province, was [convicted in 2014](#) for a \$500,000 scheme in which he sold thousands of bogus diplomatic identification documents that he claimed would allow purchasers to avoid arrests and taxes. Later in the decade, Colorado sovereign guru Bruce Doucette [received a 38-year sentence](#) after his conviction on 34 counts of racketeering, tax evasion, retaliation against judges and other charges, while Winston Shrout, an Oregon-based sovereign and perhaps the most popular and influential guru of the 2010s, [earned a 10-year sentence](#) on charges related to tax evasion and fictitious financial instruments.

Despite such convictions, some sovereign citizen influencers have managed to avoid prosecution, while new sovereign gurus have stepped forward to fill the gaps left by those sent to prison. Today, there are hundreds of such theorists with varying degrees of popularity and influence. Anna Maria Reizinger, an Alaskan sovereign citizen who calls herself Anna Von Reitz and is a self-appointed “judge,” is one of the most influential current sovereign citizen gurus; in recent years, she has influenced followers around the country to create groups called “assemblies.” Russell Jay Gould, who has also called himself a judge as well as “Postmaster General of Our World,” is the most popular of the host of sovereign theorists who teach “Quantum Grammar,” claiming the unusual language guarantees victory in court. A number of sovereign gurus spreading the “Moorish” variant of the ideology to primarily Black audiences have connections to one of the oldest Moorish groups, R. V. Bey Publications, based in New York and New Jersey.

The most popular sovereign citizen gurus since 2021 have been David and Bonnie Straight and Bobby and Teah Lawrence. The two couples, along with other sovereign influencers who work with them, routinely bring hundreds of paying attendees to their frequent seminars around the country and sell a variety of sovereign-related products to their followers. They have done more than any other recent sovereign influencers to recruit from among QAnon adherents, the MAGA movement and the anti-vax movement.

Most sovereign citizens follow the teachings of one or more sovereign influencers. It is also common for sovereign citizens in a local area to network together or meet, either online or in the physical world. Most sovereigns don't belong to organized groups, though such groups do exist. Some are created by sovereign citizen gurus largely as a vehicle for their own activities, but perhaps the most common type of group is the fictitious entity group. Fictitious entity groups purport to be some type of legitimate authority, often judicial or governmental in nature. For example, sovereign citizens have created fictitious governmental agencies, law enforcement agencies, consulates and embassies, Native American tribes, other indigenous groups, juries and courts, and even bogus countries and colonies. In the 1990s, sovereign citizens around the country created scores of so-called "common law courts." In the 2010s, sovereign citizens tried to form "common law grand juries" in every county in the country. Recently, the most popular type of fictitious entity group has been the "assembly," coming in varieties that include state assemblies, county assemblies, jural assemblies, and de jure assemblies. Some sovereign citizens claim assemblies are a fourth branch of government, representing "we the people," which acts as a check on the other branches.

Among the different types of fictitious entity groups, bogus law enforcement agencies are perhaps the most troubling. Sovereigns have created such groups since the 1990s. The fake "officers" of such groups often have bogus identification cards and badges, as well as accoutrements such as "raid" jackets identifying them as law enforcement or decals or markings on their vehicles. Sovereign citizens have used these fake credentials to get out of traffic stops, to get past courtroom and airport security measures, and to intimidate people. In the 2000s and early 2010s, many sovereigns posed as "county rangers." In recent years, a number of sovereign citizens have declared themselves "constitutional marshals," including one in Costilla County, Colorado, who claimed he was willing to [take over the county jail](#) and told the sheriff that he was a "true peace officer." Any sovereign citizen or sovereign citizen group can create a fake police agency. In 2021, two men associated with a Moorish sovereign citizen group, the Tsalagi Nation, [were arrested](#) in Georgia and charged with impersonating police officers and possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime after they were stopped by law enforcement in Rhode Island who noticed their bogus "Tsalagi Nation Tribal Marshal Rhode Island Tribal Police" license plate. The men, who had their own identification cards, badges and jackets, allegedly told deputies they were "conducting an investigation." Other members of the group were arrested in Rhode Island that same year after allegedly trying to bring firearms into a federal building.

Moorish Sovereign Citizens and Other Sovereign Citizens of Color

One of the major segments of the sovereign citizen movement today consists of the so-called “Moorish” sovereign citizens, the very existence of which illustrates the flexibility of sovereign citizen ideology and its ability to appeal to people of different backgrounds. As the sovereign citizen movement developed in the 1970s and 1980s, virtually its entire membership was white; in fact, many pioneers of the movement were full-fledged white supremacists, adherents of a racist and antisemitic religious sect known as Christian Identity. However, the new belief system they created was mostly race-neutral and focused its hostility on the government rather than on racial or religious minorities.

In the early-to-mid 1990s, probably first in New York City, some adherents of an Afrocentric fringe religious sect of long standing, the Moorish Science Temple (MST), encountered sovereign citizen ideology and began to combine sovereign ideas with MST concepts. Other fringe Black groups, such as the Washitaw Nation in Louisiana, also encountered sovereign citizen ideas and found them useful. By the late 1990s, particularly in major cities along the East Coast and in the Midwest, there were an increasing number of Black sovereign citizens, most of them also associated with the MST.

Moorish sovereign citizens tend to import traditional sovereign citizen beliefs and arguments wholesale while adding their own emphases and flourishes, such as a focus on a 1786 treaty between the infant United States and Morocco, which Moorish sovereigns claim gave Blacks (as “Moors”) special immunities and privileges. Many Moorish sovereign citizen groups also assert—as did both the MST and the Washitaw Nation—that they have some sort of indigenous status. Because Moorish sovereign citizens often claim to be from another nation—Moorish, indigenous or otherwise—it is common for Moorish sovereigns to claim “diplomatic” status, such as using bogus diplomatic license plates, asserting diplomatic immunity, or describing their groups as consulates or embassies. For example, one Moorish sovereign citizen active in Maryland [has described himself](#) as “consul general” of the “Morocco Consular Court at the Maryland state republic.” A Moorish sovereign [claimed during a traffic stop](#) in Missouri to be a “lawful diplomat sovereign,” leading to a 2020 conviction on a federal charge of impersonating a foreign diplomat.

As the number of Moorish sovereign citizens grew, their ideas spread beyond the MST and attracted some adherents from other fringe groups, from religious sects like the Nuwaubian Nation and various Black Hebrew Israelite groups to Black nationalist groups like the New Black Panther Party. From the late 2000s, Moorish sovereign citizens significantly increased their numbers by spreading sovereign ideas on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. In the 2020s, there are dozens of Moorish sovereign citizen groups, including the Moorish National Republic Federal Government, the Moorish National Republic of Peace, Rise of the Moors, the Al Aniyunwiya National Mu’urish Republic, and the Unami Buffalo Nation, among many others.

Moorish sovereign citizens are not generally separatist in nature unless they also adhere to another group or belief system that advocates such views. They may or may not cooperate with white sovereign citizens, depending on the group or individual. There have been a few Moorish sovereign citizen groups over the years that have sold materials to white sovereign citizens or even allowed them as members.

It is important to note that not all MST adherents are sovereign citizens (indeed, some warn their co-religionists against getting involved), nor are all Moorish sovereign citizens necessarily associated with MST beliefs. Moreover, there are also people of color who get involved with the traditional sovereign citizen movement without ever adopting “Moorish” theories. Today, there are tens of thousands of Black people involved in the sovereign citizen movement in the United States as either Moorish or traditional sovereign citizens.

The emergence of Moorish sovereign citizens helped open the door to people of almost every race, ethnicity or background to become sovereign citizens, making the movement the most multicultural movement in the American far right. In some other countries to which the movement has spread, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, promoters have attracted some people from native or indigenous communities to the sovereign citizen movement. In the United States, though, the Native American community has not been receptive to its ideas (especially to false claims by others of indigenous status). However, the sovereign citizen movement has attracted some native Hawaiians to its ranks, particularly from the indigenous Hawaiian independence movement, with which it has long been associated.

Sovereign Citizen Tactics: “Paper Terrorism” Harassment

The oldest and most popular tactics used by adherents of the sovereign citizen movement are “paper terrorism” harassment tactics wielded against law enforcement officers, public officials, businesses, and private citizens.

“Paper terrorism”—a term first coined in the 1990s by Nick Murnion, a county attorney in Montana who long battled an aggressive group of sovereign citizens known as the “Montana Freeman”—is the use of bogus legal documents and filings, or the misuse of legitimate documents and filings, by a sovereign citizen to harass, intimidate, and retaliate against his or her perceived enemies. The [case of Raymond McLaughlin](#), a police officer in Windsor, Connecticut, provides a good example. McLaughlin became active in the sovereign citizen movement in the 2000s, eventually leading his department to fire him and his mortgage company to foreclose on his home. Angry at the judge who eventually ordered his foreclosure, McLaughlin mailed tax forms to the IRS that falsely claimed he had paid over \$300,000 to the judge, hoping that this would cause the IRS to investigate or audit the official. In the end, McLaughlin’s hopes were dashed, and he was convicted in 2018 of making a false statement on a federal tax form.

McLaughlin’s use of a fraudulent IRS filing to harass someone has been a paper terrorism tactic employed by sovereign citizens since the 1980s. It remains popular. Adrienne Avril Perer, a Colorado sovereign citizen, allegedly [sent bogus IRS 1099-A forms](#) to two police officers and a judge following traffic stops of Perer in 2021 and 2022 for having bogus sovereign citizen license plates on her car. The forms claimed the victims owed her large sums of money—\$3 million in the judge’s case. Her tactics [disrupted the case](#) against her, resulting in recusals and postponement.

Bogus IRS filings are merely one form of paper terrorism. One of the oldest and simplest tactics is filing a frivolous lawsuit. After Perer was charged for her false IRS forms, for instance, she retaliated with a \$22 million lawsuit against three prosecutors and an investigator. In another case, an Arkansas sovereign citizen, Iyanga Bey, was arrested in Massachusetts in 2021 after state troopers allegedly [found a gun and 16 magazines](#) in her car, for which she did not have a license. In retaliation, she filed a \$70 million lawsuit against a number of state troopers, a tow truck company, and even two public defenders. A federal judge dismissed Bey’s case in 2022, the typical end to most harassing sovereign citizen lawsuits. Although they are almost invariably dismissed, these lawsuits cause frustration and harassment for the victims while also clogging the court systems that sovereigns believe are illegitimate.

Other sovereigns come up with other methods of harassment. In 2022, Darris Moody, a North Carolina sovereign citizen, mailed bogus “criminal writs of execution” to a variety of officials that [accused them of environmental crimes and treason](#), plus threatening to offer [bounties of up to \\$20,000](#) to anybody who could deliver them to a “tribunal.” Eyoel-Dawit Matios, a Colorado sovereign, allegedly utilized the services of a bogus arbitration

association in 2021 to demand city officials in Loveland [pay him \\$300 million](#). A Texas sovereign citizen, Sybil Joy Ehninger High, reportedly did the same thing, using the same fake arbiter to [claim a nearly \\$3 million judgment](#) against two Tarrant County judges. These arbitration incidents are [one of the newest variations of paper terrorism](#), appearing in a number of states from 2019 to the present.

One of the most popular paper terrorism tactics is also one of the very oldest: the bogus lien. Sovereign citizens have placed harassing liens on the properties of their perceived enemies since the late 1970s. In contrast to a legitimate lien, typically placed by a business on the property of someone who owes them money (for example, a roofing company placing a lien on the property of someone whose home they re-roofed but who failed to pay), a harassing lien is filed against the property of someone who owes the filer no money but has simply angered the filer. Although such liens (and other documents sovereigns file that have similar effects) are bogus, they remain in the system until removed, clouding the title to that property and causing other problems. Depending on state law, getting bogus liens removed can be a costly and time-consuming process involving the court system. Since the 1980s, different states (and the federal government) have passed laws intended to criminalize bogus liens or make them easier to remove, but they remain a problem. Often, sovereign citizens don't know about the possible legal consequences of filing such liens or, if they do, don't care. And once a harassing lien is in the system, a victim must still get it removed, regardless of any punishment given to the sovereign citizen who filed it.

Disturbingly, the use of bogus liens by sovereign citizens is on the upswing, with incidents occurring around the country. These are just some of the bogus lien incidents that have occurred in recent years:

May 2023, Baraboo, Wisconsin. Sauk County officials [filed criminal slander of title charges](#) against a Wisconsin sovereign citizen, Ann Retzlaff, for filing bogus liens against bank employees, a company owner and others involved in the foreclosure of a campground Retzlaff owned.

April 2023, Sedona, Arizona. The city of Sedona sued [six people](#) for filing bogus liens in 2022 against multiple city officials, [writing in their complaint](#) that “these filings were nothing more than an attempt to bully, harass and intimidate these public officials.” The sovereign citizens who allegedly filed the harassing liens claimed that the officials had committed over a hundred violations of the Constitution.

February 2023, Gunnison, Colorado. Brett Andrew Nelson [was arrested](#) after a grand jury indicted him on 24 charges for filing bogus liens—as well as bogus quitclaim deeds, powers of attorney and arbitration documents—against judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers and others in several counties. The [victims all had some involvement](#) in custody or other cases involving Nelson.

February 2023, Cleveland, Ohio. A federal judge sentenced dentist and long-time sovereign citizen Douglas Smith to four years in prison for tax evasion, contempt of court, and [filing harassing liens](#) against the judge and prosecutors in his case.

November 2022, Catron County, New Mexico. A sovereign citizen named Trapper Killsmay (formerly named David Goldsmith) [filed a \\$20 million lien](#) on the properties of seven Social Security Administration employees. He was subsequently arrested on a federal charge of retaliating against a federal employee by making a false claim. According to prosecutors, Killsmay was a “serial filer” of harassing liens over the previous decade, having filed almost a billion dollars of such liens.

September 2022, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Prosecutors charged sovereign citizen Tucorrie Wilton Chichester with 10 counts of threatening a public servant after he allegedly [threatened to put liens](#) on the homes of deputies who had pulled him over for a traffic stop.

May 2022, Springfield, Illinois. The Illinois Attorney General's office charged Derick L. Turner, an Illinois sovereign citizen, with [placing a bogus lien](#) on the property of the Illinois attorney general himself. Turner allegedly also [filed liens](#) against three local prosecutors because they were involved in traffic and misdemeanor cases against him.

July 2021, Arlington, Texas. Sovereign citizen Jonathan Reynolds allegedly [placed a bogus lien](#) on the property of an Arlington police officer, who the month before had pulled him over for a traffic stop. He was not prosecuted for the harassing lien, but the investigation into the lien did lead to his conviction for lying on a federal firearms form. He received a sentence of three and a half years in federal prison.

April 2021, San Diego, California. Federal prosecutors charged sovereign citizens Edward Deloach and Michael Jones (also known as Ajamu Ayobamidele Bey and Noble Phoenix Micha El) with [filing bogus liens](#) against 11 federal judges and law enforcement officers involved in a 2019 drug-smuggling case involving the two men.

June 2020, Houston, Texas. A federal judge sentenced inmate and sovereign citizen Noel Exinia to 18 months in prison for filing bogus liens against a different federal judge who had years earlier given Exinia a 50-year sentence in a drug-smuggling case. He also filed harassing liens against a prosecutor in that case.

January 2020, Augusta, Georgia. A federal judge sentenced sovereign citizen Timothy J. Pate to 25 years in prison for [filing a multitude of bogus liens and involuntary bankruptcy filings](#) against IRS employees, a federal judge, and other public officials. The anti-government extremist was angry that the government did not give him millions of dollars in tax refunds that he had fraudulently demanded.

With paper terrorism tactics, sovereign citizens take advantage of the open nature of the U.S. legal system. Anyone can file a form with the IRS, a lawsuit in a court, a document with a county recorder or a Uniform Commercial Code form with a secretary of state without typically having to prove validity or legitimacy beforehand (some local or state officials in some states are empowered to reject bogus sovereign citizen documents). The cost to file such documents is generally minimal, while the costs, time expended, and aggravation suffered by the victims can be considerable. Though paper terrorism tactics often result in prosecutions for the sovereigns who use them—with consequences sometimes more severe than whatever their original clash with authority involved—the harm has typically already been done to the victims.

Sovereign Citizen Tactics: Scams and Frauds

In July 2023, Kartarius Johnson (aka Tareeq Akhil Anad) received [an almost 20-year federal prison sentence](#) in a federal courthouse in Mobile, Alabama, on charges that included wire fraud, aggravated identity theft and making false statements to government agencies. Johnson, a sovereign citizen, had run a multi-faceted fraud scheme targeting financial institutions and government agencies, including the Small Business Administration, from which he obtained COVID-19 relief funds. Johnson used the money to pay for cars, jewelry, and vacations and attempted the purchase of a Rolls-Royce and a \$4 million home.

Johnson's scheme was merely one of many scams and frauds perpetrated by sovereign citizens in the United States in recent years. For decades, the sovereign citizen movement has attracted con artists and people seeking to get rich quick who realized that its pseudo-legal language and documents could be useful tools in fleecing others—even, at times, other extremists. The lengthy history of sovereign citizen scams has included pyramid schemes and investment scams, tax frauds and mortgage scams, as well as a variety of more esoteric cons. These schemes can often be quite lucrative to the sovereigns involved—at least, until they get caught. A group of sovereign citizens in the United States and Norway, for example, ran an investment scheme that [took in almost \\$13 million](#) in just a few years, much of which they converted into millions of dollars' worth of Iraqi silver dinar coins. One of the ringleaders died before being brought to justice, but another, John Winer, [received a 22-year sentence](#) in 2022.

Many recent sovereign citizen schemes have targeted the Internal Revenue Service, using bogus tax returns to get massive but undeserved refunds from the tax agency. In July 2022, for example, sovereign citizen Alice Felder-Lucas of Columbia, South Carolina, received a [federal sentence of more than three years](#) after fraudulently obtaining a federal tax return of more than \$700,000 from the IRS. She used the money to buy a house and a car, among other items; the IRS only retrieved a fraction of the money it was tricked into giving her.

In an even larger case, David Isagba and his wife Joyce of Leesburg, Florida, filed for nearly \$3 billion in fraudulent tax returns over a decade. The IRS caught most of the phony claims, but not all, resulting in a \$5.8 million payment to the Isagbas, which they used to buy a house and luxury vehicles. David Isagba eventually [pleaded guilty](#) to charges related to the scheme, receiving a 14-year sentence in December 2022. Joyce went to trial and was convicted in June 2022 of conspiracy and mail fraud. The Isagbas set up bogus trusts to assist in their scheme; so, too, did a Milwaukee sovereign citizen, Janeen Rogers, who reportedly created the Noble Sun Trust [to help her file fraudulent returns](#) totaling \$13 million. Like the Isagbas, she didn't get the whole amount, but the IRS did send her a refund check for \$3.25 million. She was arrested in May 2022. Danielle Takeila Edmonson and her father, Kenneth Roger Edmonson, two sovereign citizens from Broward County, Florida, [used fraudulent tax return claims over several years](#) to get hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax returns from the IRS. This scheme eventually resulted in [convictions and federal prison sentences](#) in 2020 of 72 months for the daughter and 51 months for the father. Despite the potential consequences of tangling with the IRS, sovereign citizens persist in this tactic; these are just some of the sovereigns caught employing bogus tax return schemes in recent years.

One group of sovereign citizens, led by a New Jersey sovereign, John Barry, Jr., combined the bogus tax return scheme with another common type of sovereign citizen scam: the mortgage scam. Barry and his accomplices promoted a [“mortgage recovery scheme”](#) that promised people they could extinguish their mortgages but which actually involved filing fraudulent tax returns to get refunds—more than \$4 million in total. The scammers took 20-35% of the refunds sent to the clients. Barry received a 12-year federal sentence in 2021 for his involvement with the scheme despite [his argument](#) that the courts had no jurisdiction over him.

Other sovereign mortgage scammers have used different schemes. Anthony Williams, a Hawaiian sovereign and self-declared “private attorney general,” created a business, Mortgage Enterprise Investments, with which he and others [scammed hundreds of desperate homeowners](#) in Hawaii and other states, especially targeting Filipino immigrant families who were not native speakers of English. In 2020, Williams [received a 20-year sentence](#) for federal wire fraud and mail fraud convictions. Ronald Allen Wright, a South Carolina sovereign citizen, promised people facing foreclosure that they could get rid of their debts by filing financial claims against their birth certificate (a popular sovereign citizen theory dating back to 1999). He found many of his victims, including some who were elderly, through churches and other religious organizations and charged them over \$140,000 for his meritless scheme. Wright’s scheme eventually [earned him a 10-year federal prison sentence](#) following conspiracy and fraud convictions.

Rather than targeting property owners, many sovereign citizens target properties themselves. During the mortgage crisis that began in the late 2000s, sovereign citizens devised a new tactic: illegally seizing empty homes using bogus deeds or other filings, then living in them rent-free or even renting them out to others as pretend landlords. Such sovereign citizen “squatting” incidents still occur regularly. At first, people employing the scheme targeted houses that banks had foreclosed upon but not yet resold, as well as houses empty for other reasons. This version of the scheme is still popular. Police arrested two sovereign citizens, for example, in Brownsburg, Indiana, in April 2020 on criminal trespassing and other charges for [moving into a home](#) that was empty because its previous owner had passed away. Similar incidents have occurred in other states in recent years.

Over time, however, some sovereigns became more ambitious by taking possession of mansions or multiple properties. In August 2022, for example, Darius Throne Hall and Nataija Shaieena Fields were arrested for allegedly [breaking into and squatting in a \\$16 million mansion](#) in North Carolina owned by a NASCAR driver. In 2021, a group of sovereign citizens reportedly similarly [seized a mansion](#) in Baltimore County, Maryland, that a woman had put up for sale after her husband died. The sovereigns moved in, changed the locks and put a chain across the entrance to the property. In Davidson, North Carolina, a sovereign couple, Turmaine Thorne and Taqiyah Barber, allegedly [took possession](#) in 2019 of a mansion up for sale due to the deaths of its original owners.

Another group of sovereign citizens allegedly created a phony credit repair company for a [complicated scheme](#) in which they used or stole the identities of clients of that business, used those identities to obtain credit cards and mortgages on property, then rented out those properties to others. Led by two California

brothers-in-law, Steven Tetsuya Morizono and Albert Lugene Lim, they obtained millions of dollars' worth of property. The two ringleaders were arrested in March 2022 while three others [were arrested](#) later that year after several months on the run. As of this writing, they are still awaiting trial.

There have also been a small number of incidents in which sovereign citizens have claimed ownership of properties without attempting to "squat," including some properties still occupied by homeowners. In May 2022, for example, a Tennessee sovereign, Erica A. Elliott, was [sentenced to a diversion program](#) after pleading guilty to forgery and bogus lien charges for having filed a bogus lien for \$19 million on a mansion in Knoxville, Tennessee, in an apparent attempt to claim an ownership stake. In other instances, sovereigns have shown up at the doorsteps of homeowners, claiming to be the true legal owners of the homes. The motivation behind these odd incidents is unclear, but some may be possible attempts at extortion, with people making claims hoping that owners might pay them off to drop them.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic offered sovereign citizen scammers new opportunities. Some, like Amos Mundendi, a Texas sovereign and "[Moorish National](#)," sought to defraud the government. Mundendi and several accomplices created straw companies to falsely obtain [\\$30 million in COVID-19 relief funds](#) from the Small Business Association. Convicted on fraud charges, Mundendi received a 42-month prison sentence in 2023. Utah sovereign Gordon Pedersen [took a different tack](#), peddling "structural alkaline silver" as a cure for the coronavirus, claiming that the substance "resonates...at a frequency that destroys the membrane of the virus." When indicted on federal fraud charges, Pedersen fled instead of appearing in court in 2020 but was tracked down and caught in August 2023.

Finally, on a more modest scale, one of the oldest and simplest of sovereign citizen scams is the use of fictitious financial instruments. Such instruments, dubbed "Bills of Exchange," "Bonded Promissory Notes" or a variety of other names, often look like checks or money orders, but are entirely worthless, no matter the monetary amount that appears on the documents. Since the early 1980s, sovereign citizens have created such instruments to pay off debts and purchase luxury automobiles or to use them in other scams, such as mortgage scams in which the sovereign citizen sells a desperate homeowner a fictitious instrument that purportedly can be used to pay off a mortgage.

Such bogus instruments are still common in the 2020s. In 2020, for example, Kevin Martin, an Arizona sovereign citizen, was arrested on fraud charges after he allegedly [used bogus checks to purchase](#) an Aston Martin and a Mercedes, as well as \$226,000 in gold coins. Two years later, a Rhode Island sovereign unsuccessfully tried to use a "certificate of deposit" [to buy a Range Rover](#) in Boston. In 2023, Verdell Terria Jones pleaded guilty to [using counterfeit U.S. Treasury checks](#) to purchase a vehicle in Jacksonville, Florida. She was arrested in 2017 but became a fugitive rather than face trial and was only caught in April 2023. A Massachusetts sovereign, Nathan McGuire, [sent a bogus sovereign citizen money order](#) for \$5 million to an investment company, then sued the company in 2023 after it ignored the fictitious instrument.

Sovereign Citizen Confrontations, Threats and Violence

Because of its extremist ideology as well as the volatility of many of its adherents, the sovereign citizen movement has a well-deserved reputation for threats and violence. Sovereigns most often direct their anger at law enforcement officers and government officials, but businesses and individuals can also easily become targets.

In 2021, for example, a Michigan sovereign, Misty Thompson, was arrested for [stalking a local judge](#) overseeing a child custody case involving Thompson. After they arrested her, law enforcement officers discovered she had a loaded handgun, knives, and a baseball bat in her car. After an Idaho sovereign, Erik Ehrlin, was arrested for assaulting a U.S. Forest Service officer in 2022, federal agents searching his home discovered that he had [bullets with potential targets written on them in red](#), including one with the words “DIE McLean,” referencing a local mayor. He was sentenced in August 2022 to six and a half years in prison for the assault and unlawful possession of weapons.

It doesn't necessarily take much to set off a sovereign citizen. In 2021, Michael Nissen, a New Mexico sovereign citizen, received a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence for [threatening to shoot police officers in the head](#) for giving him traffic tickets. Jared John Nielsen, a Utah sovereign citizen, was arrested in 2023 for [threatening to shoot](#) his own gas station co-workers.

Sovereign citizens can be equally volatile in the courtroom, engaging in a variety of disruptive behaviors or even violent acts. Lequan Hill, a New York sovereign arrested in 2022 for murder, allegedly [shouted profanities](#) at the judge and his own attorney while being arraigned, claiming loudly that the court had no jurisdiction over him. Ermal Myftari, a Connecticut sovereign, became so disruptive in court in 2021 while making similar arguments that the judge eventually had to expel him from the courtroom. That was the [same fate](#) for Latuwan Partee, an Indiana sovereign, in 2022. Anthony Matthews, an Ohio sovereign citizen, [fought with courtroom security officers](#) following an argument with the judge. In 2021, Joseph Catarineau, a Texas sovereign and airline pilot, became so angry after being denied bail in his fraud case that he [attacked the bailiff](#), then fought with the judge and prosecutor who rushed to help her.

Traffic stops are among the most dangerous situations for police officers dealing with sovereign citizens. Though sovereign citizen traffic stop videos have become a source of entertainment for some on YouTube, the fact is that a sovereign citizen can turn even the most routine of traffic stops into a violent confrontation. Sovereign citizens believe that police have no jurisdiction over them nor any right to pull them over, and some can be motivated by that belief to assault or even kill.

Most sovereign citizen traffic stops are confrontational, as the sovereigns involved typically refuse to cooperate or challenge the authority of any officer. Many traffic stops, though, go beyond mere belligerence. Roan Sterling,

a North Carolina sovereign pulled over for an expired tag in June 2023, refused to roll down his window to speak with the officer, then backed into a patrol car. He allegedly [led deputies on a chase](#) through multiple counties before Sterling's car finally crashed. In August, a West Virginia sovereign citizen, David Lee Gibson, similarly [led local police on a chase](#) after they attempted to stop him for not having plates or taillights on his motorcycle. When police finally caught up to him after he ran out of gas, he allegedly tried to pull a gun on them before being subdued by officers. Zane Ian Joseph Strange, a Colorado sovereign, was [charged with felony assault](#) on a police officer in Montana in 2023 after the officer tried to conduct a traffic stop on Strange for having invalid plates. A Tennessee sovereign was convicted of aggravated assault in 2019 for an incident in which he [bit off the end of a Knoxville Police Department officer's thumb](#) as he fought with officers during a traffic stop.

The fact that sovereign citizens frequently have weapons on their person or in their vehicle makes traffic stops even more dangerous, as it is easy for a sovereign to employ deadly force. When Eddy Jerrelle Perez led police in California on a chase in 2023 following an attempt to stop him for an invalid plate, he allegedly [threw a "ghost gun" out of his car](#)—one of [several he owned](#) ("ghost guns" are homemade firearms without serial numbers). The officers may have been lucky, as Perez allegedly once shot at a vehicle in a road rage incident in 2020. In another California incident, police arrested two sovereign citizen brothers in 2022 following a traffic stop in which police allegedly found an improvised explosive device in their vehicle.

Two recent traffic stops involving sovereign citizens were among the most serious. In March 2023, officers from the Farmington, Utah, Police Department had to [shoot and kill a sovereign citizen](#), Chase Allen, while conducting a traffic stop during which a combative Allen attempted to pull a handgun from his hip holster. Although other anti-government extremists attempted to make a martyr out of Allen, the Davis County Attorney [cleared the officers](#) of wrongdoing, saying that the officers "fired in self-defense because deadly force was in the process of being engaged against them."

In the other incident, a tense armed confrontation occurred between law enforcement in Massachusetts and a group of sovereign citizens. In March 2021, a Massachusetts state trooper saw two vehicles parked along the side of I-95 with their hazard lights on. The trooper stopped to see if anybody needed help, only to discover a [large group of armed men](#) wearing tactical gear. The men were members of a Moorish sovereign citizen group called Rise of the Moors and were on their way to Maine to [engage in paramilitary training](#). After the men said they had no identification, the trooper called for backup. Help arrived, but in the meantime, some of the Moors had moved into the nearby woods to take up positions with their firearms, creating a standoff situation that lasted through the night. Eventually, 11 members of Rise of the Moors were finally convinced to surrender, at which point the state police arrested them on various charges, primarily weapons violations. One bad decision by either the sovereigns or law enforcement could have resulted in a firefight.

In other recent incidents, violent shootouts and standoffs have occurred. Jada Davis, a Missouri sovereign citizen, allegedly [shot at police officers](#) asking her to move her parked vehicle in early 2023. Luckily, no one was hurt. In July 2023, police arrested Robert Clifton Tanner, a Louisiana sovereign citizen, after he allegedly [shot the driver of a tow truck](#) who had come to repossess Tanner's vehicle. An Ohio sovereign, Derrick Jamar Lewis, [shot at Dayton police officers](#) attempting to arrest him in 2020 on a warrant, precipitating a day-long standoff during which he held his girlfriend and her two children as hostages. In 2022, he received an 18-

year sentence after a jury found him guilty of numerous charges related to the confrontation. That same year, an Oregon sovereign citizen, Micaiah Clinton, [shot a Woodburn police officer twice](#) as law enforcement attempted to arrest him at a truck stop for violation of his probation. The officer survived, but Clinton was killed in return fire.

A number of violent incidents have involved attempts to evict sovereign citizens. The sovereign citizen movement often attracts people who struggle with financial issues as well as those who have issues with authority. When these issues combine, as they often do with evictions, sovereign citizens can be at their most explosive. An attempt in 2022 to evict a Washington sovereign, Teri Sahn, [led to an hour-long standoff](#) before law enforcement officers were able to remove her from the property. In 2020, when deputies came to evict a Columbus, Ohio, sovereign citizen, Monica Greer Justice, [she shot two of them](#) and was only arrested after a seven-hour standoff. In 2023, William Hardison, a sovereign citizen in Pittsburgh, [opened fire at deputies](#) attempting to evict him from his home, initiating a six-hour-long shootout and standoff that ended in Hardison's death.

Sovereign citizens, like other anti-government extremists, are often well-armed, making them particularly dangerous in a confrontation. When FBI agents raided the home of Arizona sovereign John Gehman Howard in 2019, [they found 23 firearms](#), including a ghost gun, as well as 7,600 rounds of ammunition. He subsequently received a five-year prison sentence for unlawful possession of firearms. Darrell Sorrey, an Iowa sovereign citizen, received his own five-year sentence in 2022 for making pipe bombs. The investigation that ended in his arrest began in 2020 after his father accidentally crashed a truck, which exploded because it contained ammunition, fireworks, and improvised explosive devices. A Missouri sovereign, Archie Richardson, was arrested in 2021 for [making pipe bombs](#); neighbors had repeatedly complained about explosions on his property. Pepo Herd El, a Massachusetts sovereign citizen, [attracted attention in 2020](#) for riding a bus while wearing body armor, carrying a loaded weapon and three magazines, and having a knife. A search of his home allegedly [revealed materials and drawings](#) "indicating an intention to make explosives, ammunition and gun parts." Herd El, a convicted felon, was not allowed to possess any firearms. Police in Vermillion, Ohio, discovered in 2021 that a local sovereign, James E. Thompson, also a convicted felon, had allegedly [modified an AK-47 rifle to be fully automatic](#).

Sovereign citizens have committed a number of murders in recent years. Most recent murders by sovereign citizens have been primarily non-ideological—that is, the apparent motive for the murder was not directly related to their sovereign citizen ideology. However, these violent incidents illustrate the volatile personalities that the sovereign citizen movement so often attracts. These recent murders include:

- **Bogota, Columbia, January 2023.** A Wisconsin [sovereign citizen](#), John Poulos, allegedly [murdered his Colombian girlfriend](#), Valentina Trespacios, while visiting that country in early 2023. He fled to Panama but was captured and extradited to Colombia to face charges of femicide.
- **Rochester, New York, November 2022.** Lequan Hill allegedly stabbed to death a man trying to break up a family argument. When arraigned on second-degree murder charges the next day, he yelled at the judge and his court-appointed attorney, [claiming he was a sovereign citizen](#) and that the court had no authority over him.

- **Greenwood, Mississippi, August 2022.** Authorities in Alabama arrested Edward Bush, Jr., a [self-declared sovereign citizen](#), for allegedly [killing his cousin and shooting his brother](#) in Mississippi.
- **Albany, New York, May 2021.** Natural Wise Joseph, a sovereign citizen who claimed his legal name was his “strawman” and [his actual name was “X,”](#) shot a man to death for unclear reasons. Joseph [pleaded guilty](#) to second-degree murder in 2022.
- **Hartford, Connecticut, July 2020.** Sovereign citizen Jerry Thompson was charged with murder after [killing his landlord](#) with a samurai sword following a dispute over rent. Thompson, who beheaded his victim, was [convicted of murder](#) in August 2023.
- **Kalamazoo, Michigan, March 2019.** Sovereign citizen Anthony Ozomaro allegedly killed his girlfriend by shooting her in the head while she was in bed. Charged with murder, he was [found incompetent to stand trial](#) in 2022.
- **Sumter, South Carolina, August 2018.** A jury in February 2022 [convicted](#) sovereign citizen Demetrious Brown of murder for [shooting a man at an auto repair shop](#) in 2018.

Growing the Sovereign Citizen Movement in the U.S. and Abroad

One of the main reasons sovereign citizens are currently so active in the United States is that the movement has enjoyed a growth spurt since 2020. Sovereign citizens have exploited recent events and developed new sources of recruits to grow the movement. Though it is difficult to know the exact size of such a loose movement, there may be as many as 350-400,000 adherents nationwide, although not all are equally active or involved.

The COVID-19 Reaction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic set the stage for the new sovereign citizen resurgence. Many people on the right and the far right emerged early in the pandemic as opponents of public health measures taken by federal, state and local governments, whether because of anger over perceived government overreach and [“medical martial law”](#) or fear and anger caused by the spread of anti-vaccination sentiments. The tactics and pseudo-legal theories of the sovereign citizen movement, which itself distrusted the medical establishment almost as much as it distrusted the government, seemed to many to offer possible solutions.

In March and November 2021, for example, angry citizens in Utah filed two lawsuits seeking \$1.5 billion in damages against the state and a local school district for allegedly violating their constitutional rights through anti-pandemic measures. Both lawsuits [included sovereign citizen language](#) attacking the legitimacy of the Utah state government and the federal government. Also in November, a Utah sovereign citizen group, Friends of the Original Constitution, [put up a billboard advertisement](#) in Ogden that declared “mandates are unconstitutional.” Some sovereign citizens offered their “services” to businesses upset at anti-coronavirus measures. Rick Martin, head of the Texas-based “Constitutional Law Group,” was one of these, providing ostensible legal notices for businesses to display that proclaimed government officials would be “trespassing unlawfully” by entering the property of such businesses. When Martin allegedly attempted to represent one defiant Michigan restaurant owner in court in March 2021, the non-attorney Martin was [arrested for contempt of court](#).

Others went even further. In May 2021, a Minnesota sovereign citizen and anti-vaxxer, Thomas Edward Humphrey, was charged with theft after video recording himself [stealing vials of vaccine](#) from two pharmacies. Later that year, two Oregon sovereign citizens were arrested for [assaulting the owner](#) of a Eugene bakery who required them to wear masks in the business. In the United Kingdom, where the commingling of anti-vaxx and sovereign citizen ideas was even greater than in the U.S., sovereign citizens even [appointed themselves as fictitious “constables”](#) to disrupt vaccine distribution and intimidate public health workers and others.

One of the unfortunate side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was that it exposed many people to sovereign citizen ideas—and some found those ideas contagious.

MAGA, QAnon and Capitol Stormers

The most important new sources of recruits for the sovereign citizen movement over the past several years have been the MAGA and QAnon movements. The MAGA movement can be described as a loose movement of die-hard Donald Trump supporters, while [QAnon](#) is a Trump-centric conspiracy movement formed originally by followers of an anonymous oracular figure dubbed “Q,” who from 2017 to 2020 promoted the claim that then-President Trump was waging a war to bring to justice a malevolent cabal of Satan-worshipping Democratic and left-leaning pedophiles who controlled the U.S. government as the “Deep State.”

Unlike many far-right movements, the sovereign citizen movement had not especially embraced Donald Trump while he was president. Though many sovereigns liked him personally, anybody who occupied the presidency was—according to their beliefs—head of an illegitimate government. Once Trump was no longer president, however, this obstacle fell away. Moreover, following Trump’s election loss and the January 2021 Capitol storming, MAGA supporters seemed in disarray, and QAnon adherents even more so (especially because “Q” stopped making posts in December 2020).

From an early stage, some sovereign citizen gurus saw potential in these large audiences and moved to reach out to them, incorporating MAGA or QAnon references in their rhetoric or taking part in events and tours that featured MAGA or QAnon speakers. The sovereign influencers most effective in reaching out to these new audiences have been David and Bonnie Straight and Bobby and Teah Lawrence (who began as disciples of the Straights in 2021 and now partner with them). The Straights and Lawrences teach standard sovereign citizen theories but pepper their presentations with terms and phrases important to QAnon lore, such as “the Cabal,” “the Storm,” and “medbeds,” as well as references to the coronavirus and to Donald Trump, whom they portray as a sovereign citizen (or “American State National,” the term the Straights and Lawrences prefer to use). Trump will regain power and restore the “Constitutional Republic,” Bobby Lawrence told his followers on Telegram in 2021, but this can “only be accomplished via We the People reclaiming our Birthright by becoming American State Nationals.” The unsuccessful lawsuits brought by Trump supporters over the 2020 election results, Lawrence claimed in a 2022 seminar, were failures because they did not employ sovereign citizen theories.

Within weeks of Trump leaving office, some MAGA and QAnon supporters showed evidence of having adopted sovereign citizen ideas, particularly the idea that the U.S. government is just a corporation created in 1871, not the legitimate government. Many QAnon supporters claimed Trump would return to power as the “19th president” (because there had been 18 presidents prior to the alleged creation of the corporation, and all presidents since then had been illegitimate), an idea also taught by sovereign citizen gurus like the Lawrences. [Collaboration](#) between the Straights and Lawrences and prominent QAnon influencers such as Ann Vandersteel and Allen and Francine Fosdick was instrumental in bringing many QAnon and MAGA adherents to the sovereign citizen movement.

There have already been several concerning incidents involving extremists with both QAnon and sovereign citizen beliefs. In March 2023, for example, a Colorado adherent of both movements, Tracy Jo Remington, was [arrested on assault and conspiracy charges](#) along with her partner, Bryan Hill, after a boobytrap they had allegedly constructed at their residence injured a door-to-door salesman. The most serious incident

committed by a QAnon sovereign was the [2020 murder](#) of a Florida sovereign citizen guru, Christopher Hallett, allegedly by one of his Kentucky followers, Neely Raye Petrie-Blanchard, who turned on him. Petrie-Blanchard—still awaiting trial—was involved with both movements before Trump left office.

Other right-wing activists have also discovered the sovereign citizen movement and used its tactics. Kimberly Reichs, a self-declared “Iowa Mama Bear,” began her activism in opposition to school mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, then moved on to anti-LGBTQ+ activism over school-related issues. In February 2023, Reichs [self-filed an \\$87 million lawsuit](#) against an Iowa school district over a 2022 after-school show put on by an LGBTQ+ student group that featured a drag performance. Reichs’ filings employed sovereign citizen language and displayed other hallmarks of the movement, such as enclosing zip codes in brackets and accompanying signatures with thumbprints.

One of the most interesting examples of the dissemination of sovereign citizen ideas to MAGA supporters is their spread among criminal defendants arrested for their involvement in the January 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol. The COE has identified over a dozen defendants with ties to the movement. While a couple of them were involved with the sovereign citizen movement prior to the Capitol storming, most appear to have encountered the ideology only in the aftermath of their arrest. Many were likely told they could benefit by using sovereign arguments in their defense.

Typically, such Capitol stormers revealed their sovereign citizen leanings in pre-trial hearings, where they declared the government had no authority over them. In many cases, defendants fired their attorneys and represented themselves; in some, defendants failed to attend hearings or trials. Both actions are common within the sovereign citizen movement. The [case of Eric Bochene](#), a Capitol stormer from New York, provides an example of both. Bochene was arrested in May 2021 and charged with four offenses related to his participation in the Capitol storming. Bochene represented himself using sovereign citizen arguments in pre-trial hearings. In July 2023, Bochene skipped a required status conference in Washington, D.C., causing a judge to issue a warrant for his arrest. U.S. marshals tracked him down two weeks later. Shortly thereafter, Bochene decided to [make a plea deal](#).

Capitol stormers who represented themselves using sovereign citizen arguments did not fare very well; most of their cases ended in guilty pleas or convictions. However, one defendant who “went sovereign,” James Beeks, had better luck. Beeks, a Florida [Oath Keeper](#) charged with serious crimes related to the Capitol storming, was [acquitted by a federal judge](#) in a stipulated bench trial, the judge ruling there was insufficient evidence to prove Beeks had been involved with the Oath Keepers’ conspiracy.

Parents and Prisoners

The surge in the sovereign citizen movement in the 2020s is not due just to the discovery and exploitation of new audiences, but also to an increased spread of sovereign citizen beliefs among some of its more traditional sources of recruits. Two of these sources have proven particularly important in recent years: 1) parents facing custody issues or battling child protective services agencies and 2) inmates of jails and prisons.

For decades, the sovereign citizen movement has exploited angry or fearful parents, from ex-spouses frustrated at having to pay child support to mothers or fathers involved in custody disputes to parents whose children may have been removed by child protective services agencies. The movement purports to offer solutions for desperate parents who use its sovereign citizen pseudo-legal arguments and tactics. In recent years, sovereign citizens have stepped up their efforts to attract such parents, with some sovereign citizen influencers even specializing in making such promises to parents. “In our Child Protective Services cases,” promises one sovereign citizen website called ChildRecovery.net, “we serve [in person] the Supreme Court and the Attorney General to get a declaratory judgment and/or to testify to the lawful enactment and Constitutionality of the Statutes you are being charged with.” Sovereign citizen gurus demonize the courts and government agencies while promising they can win custody battles, retrieve children removed by Child Protective Services, and more. Some gurus, [like David Straight](#), mix in QAnon-style references to portray Child Protective Services employees as Satanic sex traffickers to make parents even more fearful and angry. In January 2023, Bonnie Straight urged their followers to contact law enforcement in Fayette County, Kentucky, to demand that Child Protective Services “stand down” from any action involving one of the Straights’ followers—or risk being “sued in federal court” for kidnapping and child trafficking.

One disturbing result of this penetration has been a recent spate of incidents in which sovereign-connected parents who had lost custody of their children have kidnapped them from their legal custodians. Kentucky sovereign citizen Neely Petrie-Blanchard, for example, who was active with E-Clause, a sovereign citizen group that catered to angry parents, allegedly [kidnapped her two children](#) from the custody of their grandmother in March 2020. It was while she was out on bail from this incident that she reportedly murdered Christopher Hallett, her E-Clause mentor, as described above, because she had somehow [become convinced that Hallett had turned on her](#) and was helping to keep her from her children.

Other recent sovereign-related kidnapping incidents include:

- **Parker, Colorado, December 2019.** Cynthia Abcug, a [sovereign citizen and QAnon](#) believer with ties to E-Clause, plotted to kidnap her son, who had been removed from her care by Colorado officials earlier that year. Police arrested Abcug in Montana on a warrant for conspiracy to commit kidnapping. A [jury found Abcug guilty](#) of the kidnapping conspiracy charge in August 2022. She later received a sentence of 60 days in jail.
- **Salt Lake City, Utah, September 2020.** Emily Jolley, a [sovereign citizen and QAnon adherent](#), allegedly kidnapped her son from the custody of his father during a monthly supervised visitation. Authorities located the child in Oregon in October and [arrested Jolley](#), charging her with felony obstruction of justice.
- **Lawton, Oklahoma, October 2021.** Sovereign citizen Katie Christine Campbell allegedly [abducted her three-year-old daughter](#) instead of returning her, as a court had mandated, to her father. It took law enforcement six months to track Campbell down and retrieve the child. Police charged her with felony child stealing.
- **Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, February 2021.** Sovereign citizen Rebecca Ellen Kirschenbaum, ordered to give custody of her son to another person, [instead fled with the child](#). Police quickly arrested her, charging her with kidnapping of a minor, concealing the whereabouts of a child and endangering the welfare of a child. In December 2021, a jury convicted Kirschenbaum—[who represented herself](#)—on all three charges.

- **Spokane, Washington, July 2022.** Police [arrested sovereign citizen Howard Padden](#) on charges of custodial interference, criminal impersonation and second-degree kidnapping for allegedly using sovereign citizen pseudo-legal paperwork to convince a set of foster parents to relinquish control of a girl placed in their custody to Padden.
- **Stillwater, Oklahoma, August 2022.** Elijah David Erlebach and Samantha Siong Ricks [were arrested on charges of child stealing](#) for an alleged attempt by the pair to abduct Ricks' child from its foster parents. Erlebach was a sovereign citizen from Missouri, while [Ricks had ties to QAnon and other far-right groups](#). Both appear to be still awaiting trial as of October 2023.

As important as angry parents are to sovereign citizens, they cannot compare to the significance of inmates in jails and prisons, which have become one of the most significant conduits through which sovereign citizen ideology spreads. The growth of sovereign citizen ideology behind bars first became noticeable in the late 1990s, as the surge of sovereign citizen activity during those years resulted in many criminal convictions. In prison, the sovereigns did not stop being sovereigns; rather, they taught sovereign citizen ideas and tactics to other inmates, telling them that if they made the proper declarations, filed the correct documents, and advanced the right arguments in court, their legal troubles would vanish. Many inmates found these promises attractive—and once again, the pseudo-legal nature of sovereign citizen arguments and documents convinced many people that they must have legitimacy. Some inmates dabbled with sovereign citizen filings, often with a “what have I got to lose?” attitude, while others became true believers, immersing themselves in sovereign citizen ideology and lore.

Since then, sovereign citizen ideology has become increasingly common behind bars, steadily spreading and making converts. Perhaps the most high-profile convert to sovereign ideology in recent years has been former Subway pitchman Jared Fogle, sentenced in 2015 to 188 months in federal prison on child pornography charges. In 2017, with the help of another inmate, Fogle [declared himself a sovereign citizen](#) and claimed the government had no jurisdiction over him. This was the first in a series of [filings](#) and [lawsuits](#) filed by Fogle (or for [him by another inmate](#)) using sovereign citizen arguments.

Countless other inmates have made similar sovereign arguments. Tim Griffin, an Iowa man arrested for methamphetamine possession, [made numerous sovereign citizen arguments](#) prior to his trial and conviction; when sentenced in May 2023 to 15 years in prison, he told the judge, “Let the record show: I do not consent to the sentence.” Deon Waynewood, an Idaho Falls resident convicted of child sexual battery in 2022, [also made sovereign citizen arguments](#) in court, claiming Idaho law had no authority over him. A Georgia defendant, Addae Simmons, accused of selling drugs to high school students, similarly asserted that the [court had no jurisdiction](#) to try him; however, in 2022, he had a change of heart and pleaded guilty.

Of particular interest are the many people around the country charged with murder in recent years who adopted sovereign citizen stances at some point during their judicial proceedings. In these cases, the defendants do not appear to have been active sovereign citizens prior to their arrests, strongly suggesting they learned about the movement while they were in jail awaiting trial.

Perhaps the most high-profile of these was Darrell Brooks, sentenced in late 2022 to six life sentences (and centuries of additional time) for killing six people and injuring dozens more when he deliberately drove his vehicle into a Christmas parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in 2021. Brooks represented himself in court during his televised trial, repeatedly attempting to use [sovereign citizen arguments](#) to defend himself and becoming frustrated when the judge would stop him.

However, Brooks was hardly alone. Some of the other murder cases involving defendants-turned-sovereign include:

- Larry Teague, one of three men convicted of shooting a supermarket security guard in Flint, Michigan, in 2020, argued during his 2023 sentencing that [he was a sovereign citizen and that the judge had no authority to sentence him](#). The judge did, anyway, giving Teague a sentence of life without parole.
- Desmond Crews, sentenced to 55 years in prison after pleading guilty to killing one child and wounding another when he opened fire at trick-or-treaters in Hammond, Indiana, in 2021, filed a motion to withdraw from his plea deal because he [wanted to claim sovereign citizen status](#).
- Markese Lampley, charged with killing a restaurant employee during an attempted robbery in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 2020, [represented himself at his 2021 murder trial using sovereign citizen arguments](#). He was convicted and received a sentence of life without parole in August 2021.
- Jamon Rayon Buggs, charged with a 2019 double homicide in Orange County, California, [advanced sovereign citizen arguments](#) in multiple legal proceedings, including demanding in 2022 to be re-arraigned so that he could refuse to “enter into a contract” with the state of California and thus escape any jurisdiction it might have over him.
- Markeith Loyd, charged in 2017 for the murder of an Orlando, Florida, police officer while police were searching for him after he killed his pregnant former girlfriend, claimed in later court proceedings [that he was a sovereign citizen](#) and rejected the court’s jurisdiction over him. However, prior to his conviction and subsequent death sentence, he dropped the sovereign citizen arguments and accepted attorneys.
- Steven Lorenzo, charged in 2016 with a 2003 double-murder in Tampa, Florida, represented himself for years before his trial [using sovereign citizen pleadings](#), calling the courtroom a “fiction, corporate court.” Following a 2022 guilty plea, a judge eventually [sentenced him to death](#) in February 2023.
- Orin Bivens, charged with murder for the 2015 killing of the husband of his ex-wife, [used sovereign citizen arguments in court hearings](#) in 2019-2020.
- Kenneth Williams [represented himself and used sovereign citizen arguments](#) at his 2021 sentencing following his conviction on charges of first-degree murder for the 2013 killing of a teenage girl in the Chicago area. He received a 42-year sentence.

Despite the lack of success that sovereign citizen defendants experience in court, sovereign tactics are likely to spread even further in jails and prisons.

Sovereign Ideas Spreading Abroad

Though this report focuses on sovereign citizen activity in the United States, sovereign citizens ideas have spread to many other countries—a testament to the ideology’s flexibility.

For many years, the sovereign citizen movement operated only in the United States. By the late 1990s, however, sovereign citizen ideas had spread to Canada, because of Canadians such as Eldon Warman, who had absorbed tax protest and sovereign citizen ideology while living in the United States, as well as American sovereign citizens such as David Wynn Miller who started holding seminars in Canada. First known as “detaxers,” Canadian sovereign citizens later became better known as “free men/women on the land.” By the mid-2000s, thanks to American sovereign citizen promoters holding seminars abroad and the influence of the internet, the sovereign citizen movement had gained footholds in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. In subsequent years, the sovereign citizen movement steadily expanded throughout the English-speaking world, including places such as Singapore, South Africa, and Jamaica.

Early sovereign citizens in foreign countries tended to repeat the arguments of American sovereign citizens, even to the extent of citing American court cases or American laws, such as the Uniform Commercial Code. As movements matured, they produced their own local sovereign citizen gurus who adapted sovereign ideas to the history and laws of the countries where they resided. Today, thanks to the internet, there are sovereign citizen theories in the United States that originated in places such as Great Britain and Australia.

By the 2010s, the sovereign citizen movement had even spread into European countries where English was not the native language and legal systems were not based on English legal traditions, including Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, among others. In 2020s, anti-government extremists in the Czech Republic, belonging to a [group called the Legitimate Creditors of the Czech Republic](#), claimed that the division of Czechoslovakia into two countries was invalid and the Czech Republic illegitimate. The Czech Republic’s Interior Ministry [acknowledged](#) in 2023 that “the attitudes associated with [the sovereign citizen movement] now have considerable reach.”

One of the main reasons for the growth of sovereign citizen activity in the Czech Republic was the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also spurred increased activity in countries where the movement was already active, particularly Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In these countries, sovereign citizen ideas and anti-vaccine ideas freely mingled. In the Canadian province of British Columbia, for example, anti-vaxxer sovereign citizens [stormed a 2023 hearing](#) involving a lawsuit by a prominent Canadian anti-vaxxer and declared themselves a “common law grand jury under the Magna Carta.” In Great Britain, sovereign citizen ideas provided [what one journalist characterized as](#) a “framework [anti-vaxxers] believe allows them to fight back against coronavirus vaccines, vax-passes, and other restrictions—but also more broadly against the sinister forces supposedly orchestrating the pandemic.” In these countries, the overlap between the sovereign citizen movement and the anti-vaccines movement was greater than in the United States.

The spread of the sovereign citizen movement into other countries around the world not only has consequences for those countries but also means that ideas and tactics originating among sovereign citizens abroad will increasingly find their way back to the United States.