

# Analysis of U.S. Campus Encampments Related to the Israel-Palestine Conflict

## Action, Reaction, and Engagement in Dialogue

### Executive Summary

Students at colleges and universities across the United States have established protest encampments over an array of issues related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, prompting a wide range of responses from school officials, law enforcement, counter-protesters, and local communities. This Issue Brief analyzes the latest data on the campus protests to map key trends in demonstration activity and responses to the encampments as of May 12, with a specific focus on incidents of physical violence and destructive activity, such as assaults, clashes, substantial property damage, and use of force by police.<sup>1</sup> The Brief also reviews ongoing dialogue and de-escalation efforts to manage tensions among campus communities, as well as the protest movement's trajectory going into the summer.

Other analyses of the encampment protests have focused on the types of claims and statements made by protesters and counter-protesters, including important and at times significantly divergent assessments of forms of speech that rise to the level of hate speech, threats, harassment, or incitement to violence. This Issue Brief does not contribute directly to that critical debate and its implications for the wider risk environment. While there have been multiple incidents of escalatory behavior like invasions of personal space and derogatory or hateful speech involving protesters, counter-protesters, and bystanders in the vicinity of encampments, cases where no physical contact was made are beyond the scope of this analysis. This analysis instead focuses solely on explicit acts of physical violence and related activity in and around encampment protests, in an effort to fill a gap in available research on physical threats and de-escalation opportunities, with a view toward providing a firmer foundation for policy responses on campus aimed at addressing the risk of immediate physical harm and preserving essential rights to free speech and assembly.

### Key Trends

- **Encampment actions have spurred a new wave of Israel-Palestine demonstrations.** At least 3,700 demonstration events related to the Israel-Palestine conflict have been reported in the United States between the October 7 Hamas attack and May 12.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the *Methodology* section for an in-depth explanation of methodology and coding decisions.

<sup>2</sup> According to data collected by [ACLED](#), analyzed by BDI. See *Methodology* section for detailed explanation of coding decisions.

- While demonstrations declined at the beginning of 2024, mass arrests at the Columbia University encampment in April sparked a new wave of protests.
- BDI analysis of ACLED and CCC data finds that there have been approximately 1,150 encampment demonstrations at nearly 150 colleges and universities, spanning at least 35 states as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, DC.
- **Most demonstrations have not been violent or destructive.** At the vast majority of encampment demonstrations – 95% or almost 1,090 events – there were no reports of encampment protesters engaging in physical violence or destructive activity.<sup>3</sup>
  - Of these events where no violent or destructive activity by protesters was reported, law enforcement was present or intervened in more than 200 cases.
  - Of the approximately 60 events that did include reports of violent or destructive activity, these incidents involved physical confrontations with law enforcement, physical confrontations with counter-demonstrators, the throwing of projectiles (e.g. bottles, cans) at law enforcement, or damage to occupied buildings.
- **Encampment demonstrations have attracted a significant level of counter-protests.** At least 13% of encampment protests – over 150 events – have been met with counter-protesters.
  - Of these events, some type of violent or destructive activity or physical confrontation between opposing groups was reported in nearly 40 cases.
  - Incidents of car rammings or attempted car rammings at encampment protests and other pro-Palestine demonstrations have also risen, with at least 5 cases reported across 5 states in recent weeks.
- **Encampment demonstrations have seen a high level of law enforcement engagement.** Law enforcement has been involved in over a fifth of all encampment demonstrations, at 23% of events, or over 260.
  - In approximately 75 events, law enforcement intervened but did not make arrests, including issuing warnings and declaring unlawful assemblies, rousing protesters throughout the night, setting up barriers, restricting entrances, or removing things from encampments.
  - In approximately 100 events, or 9% of all encampment demonstrations, law enforcement intervened and made arrests. Over 3,000 people have been arrested or detained on campuses so far.
  - In at least 24 events spanning 22 institutions, law enforcement used “less-lethal” munitions, like beanbag rounds, tear gas, and/or pepper spray,

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<sup>3</sup> According to [ACLED](#) and [CCC](#) data, re-coded for analysis by BDI. See *Methodology* section for detailed explanation of coding decisions.

while in at least 11 additional events they used batons, most often when clearing encampments.

- In at least 5 instances, law enforcement appeared to place snipers on rooftops overlooking campus protests. Multiple cases occurred within a week of the 1970 [Kent State shooting](#) anniversary.
- **Individuals associated with groups like the Proud Boys and white nationalist movements have renewed limited engagement with demonstrations related to the war.** These actors have largely sought to capitalize on media attention and to take advantage of social and political tensions to promote their agendas.
  - Such groups have engaged in counter-protests at encampments and alternative demonstrations near encampments in states like New York, California, and Illinois.
  - In multiple cases, including in Georgia and Arizona, protesters have successfully identified attempted co-option and taken action to reject or sideline these actors.
- **Dialogue and de-escalation efforts have had an impact at multiple campus encampments, including initiatives led by faith leaders and other community groups.**
  - At least 20 schools in more than 10 states have come to agreements with protesters to end encampments, at times as the result of a dialogue process, though some agreements have faced push back or criticism.
  - Open lines of communication between protesters, community members, law enforcement, and administration officials often identified alternative approaches to address tensions surrounding encampments without escalation.

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# I. Background

Campus communities around the United States have been deeply affected by the Hamas attack on southern Israel and the Israeli military response, which have together resulted in a staggering [death toll](#) of more than 1,000 Israelis, over 30,000 Palestinians, and hundreds of aid workers. Since mid-April, students at colleges and universities across the country have established protest encampments [to call for](#) a ceasefire in Gaza, an end to the humanitarian crisis, and divestment from Israeli companies, among other issues related to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

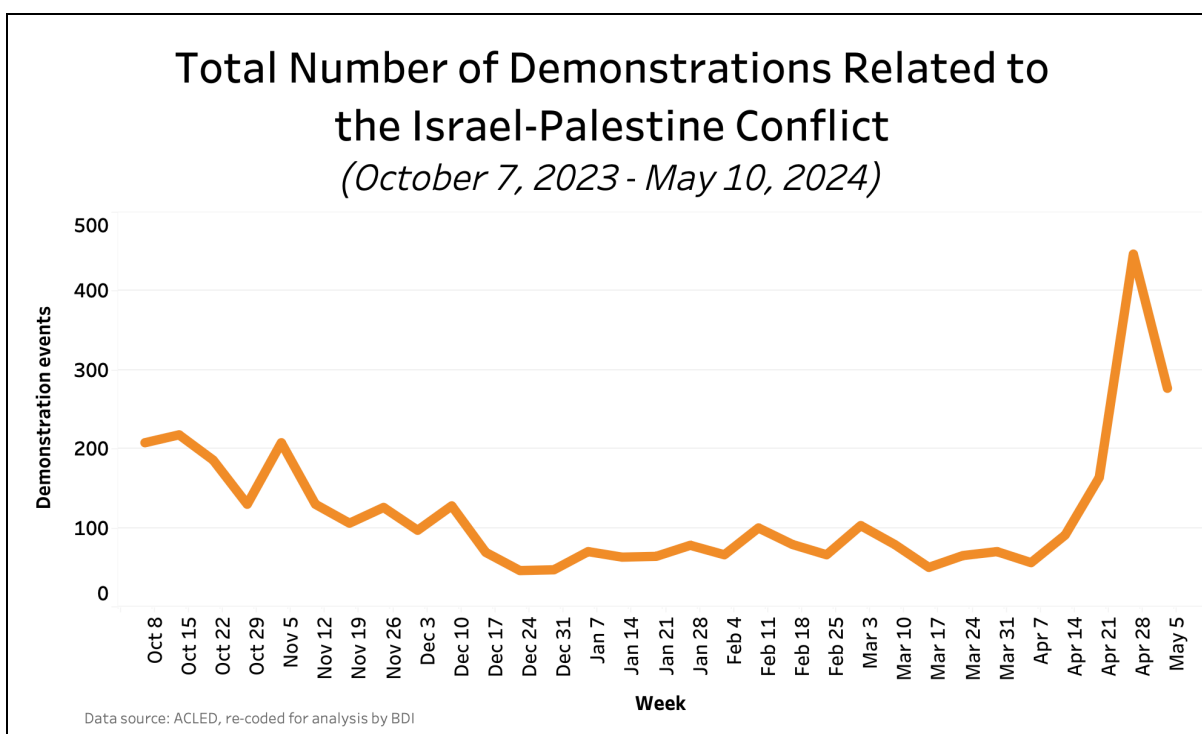
On April 17, following [similar protest actions](#) at schools like Vanderbilt University, students at Columbia University in **New York** set up a “[Gaza Solidarity Encampment](#)” on the school’s campus. The next day, university leadership requested law enforcement assistance to clear the encampment, [citing](#) the presence of tents as a “safety concern and violation of university policies.”<sup>4</sup> Law enforcement arrested over 100 students along with [at least two legal observers](#). Partially in response to the events at Columbia, [encampment](#)-related demonstration events have since been reported at approximately 150 colleges and universities across the country.<sup>5</sup>

The campus encampment actions have led to a significant overall increase in demonstrations related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Roughly twice as many demonstrations linked to the conflict – including but not limited to encampment demonstrations – were recorded by ACLED during the week of April 26 (nearly 450 demonstrations) than in the week [immediately following](#) the Hamas attack in October (nearly 220 demonstrations), which was previously the most active week and a period during which the majority of demonstrations were in support of Israel (see *graph below*).

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<sup>4</sup> As with many campus communities, the encampment and response at Columbia took place in the context of [significant internal and external](#) pressure, following [other contentious decisions and events](#) over the fall and early spring. This Brief focuses on encampment trends explicitly, acknowledging further conflict analysis on each campus may yield additional local trends or unique drivers.

<sup>5</sup> This estimate includes all unique campus encampment-related demonstration events recorded by ACLED and CCC from April 17 to May 12, as re-coded by BDI for analysis. Separately, ACLED recorded 495 encampment demonstrations for April 14-May 10 and CCC recorded 1,090 events for April 17-May 5. BDI identified 438 matching events between the two datasets. It is important to note that both ACLED and CCC are event-level datasets, meaning that the individual event is the fundamental unit of observation. Each event represents an action that took place in a specific location, on a specific day, involving specific actors. In the context of this analysis, this means that a campus encampment demonstration that takes place in the same location for multiple days will be coded as multiple individual but related events. The number of encampment-related demonstration events is therefore different from the number of discrete encampments, as the former will include an event for each protest-day of an encampment that lasts for more than one day. This provides a broader understanding of the scale of encampment-related demonstration activity over time and space, rather than a literal count of individual encampments. *For more, see the Methodology section below.*



## II. Campus Encampment Protests

BDI analysis of data collected by ACLED and CCC indicates that there have been approximately 1,150 encampment-related demonstrations on campuses since mid-April. In almost 1,090 events, or 95%, there were no reports of protesters engaging in violent or destructive activity.<sup>6</sup> Direct analysis of similar subsets of the data by [ACLED](#) and [CCC](#) support the same overall analysis.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> According to ACLED and CCC data, re-coded for analysis by BDI. These figures refer to unique protest events, meaning they can represent a single campus encampment remaining for multiple days, with each day counted separately. See *previous footnote or Methodology section below for more detail*.

<sup>7</sup> ACLED and CCC have both assessed the level of violence reported at conflict-related demonstrations based on their own datasets and methodologies. ACLED [estimates](#) that, between the Hamas attack on October 7 and May 3rd, the “majority of student demonstrations — 97% — have remained peaceful.” Likewise, CCC [finds](#): “This movement has not been violent...Our project tracks several features of protest events that might be construed as indicators of protester violence, including property damage caused by protesters and injuries to police present at the event. In the more than 10,000 pro-Palestine actions we have recorded since October 7, we have only seen property damage at 128 of them and police injuries at 13. The vast majority of the instances of property damage involved graffiti or similar defacement of property, and virtually all of the police injuries occurred while making arrests. If we look only at actions on school campuses, the incidence of property damage is 30 and police injuries 6, with similar caveats about the what and the how.” For this Issue Brief, BDI draws on both datasets, re-coded for analysis of physical violence and destructive activity (see *Methodology section below*), and focuses specifically on campus encampment-related events for the period of April 17 to May 12. It arrives at a similar conclusion.

In over 60 events, or 5% of all encampment protests, demonstrators are reported to have damaged property and/or engaged in violent activity.<sup>8</sup> These incidents include cases of protesters:<sup>9</sup>

- Engaging in physical confrontations related to law enforcement attempts to clear encampments, particularly along skirmish line, in approximately 25 events;
- Engaging in physical confrontations with counter-protesters, in nearly 40 events;
- Throwing projectiles – including water bottles and cans – at law enforcement, in over 10 events; and
- Using a fire extinguisher or chemical irritant against counter-protesters, in 1 event each.

At more than 20 institutions, encampment protesters established makeshift barricades in or around their encampment using wooden boards, metal fences, and repurposed barricades.

As depicted in the graph below, of the estimated 63 events where violent or destructive activity by encampment demonstrators was reported, this activity occurred *after* the arrival of law enforcement and/or counter-protesters, in approximately 58 cases. Of these, 12 events took place at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) and Columbia, accounting for roughly 20%. *See sections III, IV, and V below for additional detail on counter-demonstrations, law enforcement intervention, and other types of engagement.*

In at least five events, protesters engaged in violent or destructive activity *before* law enforcement or other actors arrived. Most of these events involved damage caused during occupations of university buildings. The Hamilton Hall [incident](#) at Columbia and [an incident](#) at the Portland State University library encampment, outlined below, are two of the most prominent cases.<sup>10</sup>

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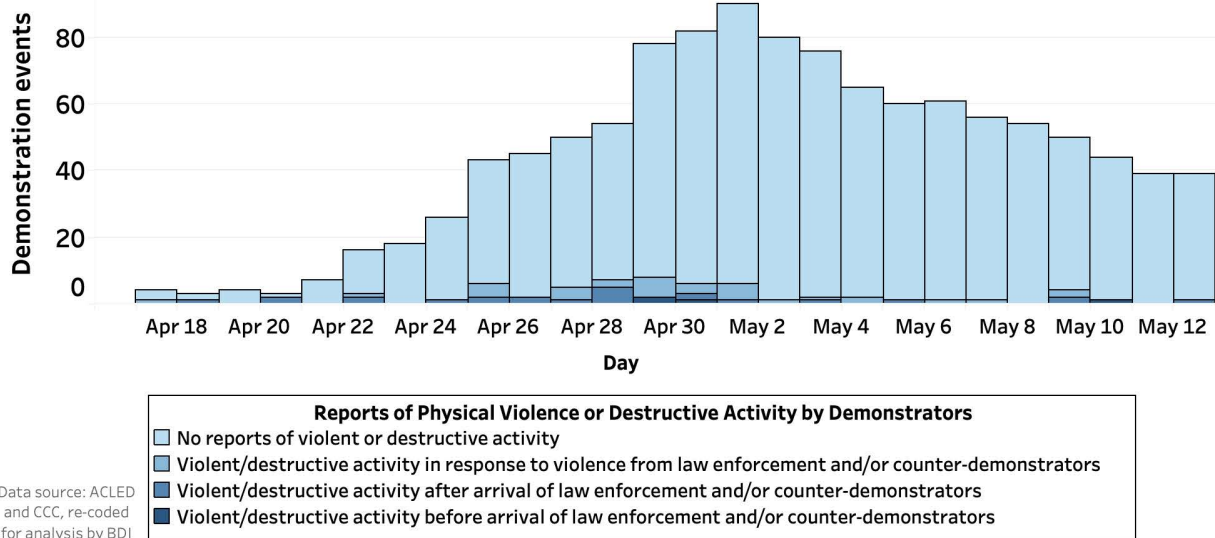
<sup>8</sup>As outlined in the *Appendix: Methodology* section below, this Brief does not code for speech, including speech, signs, or slogans that may be threatening or intimidating, by any parties involved. Though speech, signs, and symbols are important elements of understanding overall conflict dynamics, they are beyond the scope of this Brief. *See Appendix: Methodology for a full explanation of coding decisions.*

<sup>9</sup> These sub-categories of activity are not mutually exclusive (e.g. projectiles can be thrown during an incident where protesters are engaging with police attempting to clear an encampment). They therefore do not add up to the total number of relevant events.

<sup>10</sup> Reports of non-physical confrontation are not coded, and some physical confrontation around building occupations may be under-reported or unverifiable. For example, in one incident CCC noted students "had brief confrontation with university staff who were attempting to lock building doors" but [reporting](#) on these events was limited.



## Encampment-Related Demonstrations on College Campuses: Reports of Violent or Destructive Activity Before or After External Intervention (April 17 - May 12, 2024)



### Sit-ins or building occupations

At approximately 20 universities, protesters purposefully occupied or engaged in sit-ins within campus buildings. The majority lasted for a single night or less, and in nearly half no violent or destructive activity was reported. For example, at the City University of **New York**, on May 14, protesters [occupied](#) the Graduate Center lobby for several hours before leaving after coming to an agreement with school officials; no violent or destructive activity was reported and no arrests were made. At Princeton University in **New Jersey**, on April 29, 13 people were arrested after protesters [occupied](#) the school's Clio Hall for several hours and demonstrators confronted law enforcement outside, though no violent or destructive activity was reported.

Widely reported examples of building occupations that included significant confrontation or duration include:

- On May 15, dozens of students at the University of **California**, Berkeley [occupied](#) an abandoned university-owned building near campus. Protesters erected banners and sprayed graffiti, cut fences, and broke windows. Police arrested at least 15 students.
- On May 15, University of **California**, Irvine students [occupied](#) the Physical Sciences Lecture Hall. The next day police broke up the occupation and arrested 50 protesters.



themselves inside. In response, several [hundred](#) riot police forced their way into the building and deployed tear gas, shoved, and dragged students from the premises. One officer fired a gun, though the discharge was later reported as accidental according to the NYPD. Dozens of people were arrested and multiple demonstrators were taken to the hospital for injuries sustained during the police raid.

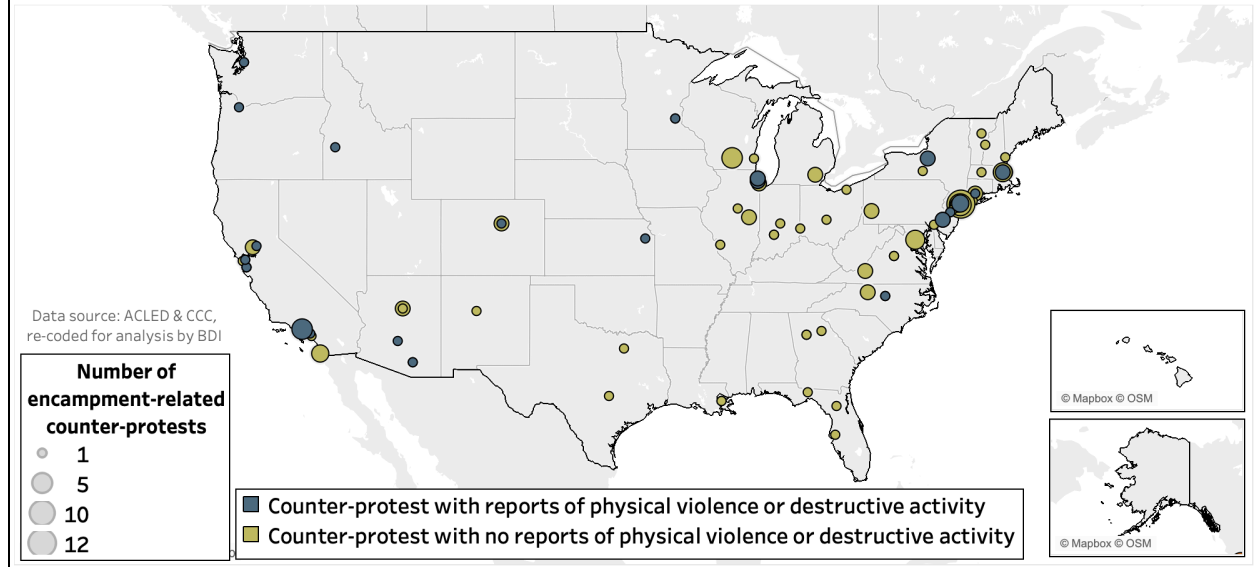
- On April 29, dozens of protesters [occupied](#) the Student Union Building at the University of **New Mexico** in Albuquerque. While inside for just over one night, the university reported that students “vandalize[d] the building, damaging furniture, walls, and doors, writing graffiti with markers, paint, and chalk, on the walls, on banisters, in bathrooms, and more.”
- On April 29, students at Portland State University in **Oregon** [occupied](#) the university’s library. On the fourth day, May 2, police officers cleared the building, [arresting](#) at least 12 people, including four students. The university stated that the damage from the occupation of the library would [cost](#) between \$750,000 and \$875,00, however the [library’s collection](#) was largely unscathed.
- On April 22, at **California** State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, students [started](#) a sit-in at Siemens Hall. Police tried to enter but were blocked by the barricade students set up. On April 23, students occupied a [second building](#) on campus. On the ninth day of the occupation, April 30, officers [cleared](#) the buildings and arrested dozens of people.

### III. Counter-Demonstrations

Counter-demonstrators have been present during at least 13% of all recorded encampment demonstrations – over 150 events – across more than 80 institutions in 30 states. In over 75% of these counter-demonstrations, no physical violence or destructive activity was recorded at the event, by or against counter-protesters. At almost 40 events where counter-protesters were present, some type of violent or destructive incident or physical confrontation was reported between opposing groups, including attacks on encampments and clashes between the two sides. These incidents of violent or destructive activity at counter-demonstrations were reported at just over 20 locations (*see map below*). In addition:

- Law enforcement was present at the majority of encampments that saw counter-protests, at almost 110 events.
- In at least 15 events, law enforcement separated counter-protesters and protesters, or were involved in escorting counter-protesters or protesters away from confrontations before they became physical.

## Encampment-Related Demonstrations on College Campuses: Counter-Protests (April 17 - May 12, 2024)



While many cases of violent or destructive activity at counter-demonstrations involved skirmishes between opposing sides, in some cases encampments have seen direct attacks or assaults by or against counter-protesters:

- In **Illinois**, two counter-protesters [attacked](#) pro-Palestine protesters with flag poles at the DePaul University encampment. In the early morning on May 16, police in riot gear cleared the encampment, arresting at least two people, after students in the encampment and the administration reached an [impasse](#) in the dialogue process. In a statement, DePaul President Robert Manuel [cited](#) “physical altercations, credible threats of violence from people not associated with our community” and “responses to the encampment that have inadvertently created public safety issues” as reasons for clearing the encampment.
- At Syracuse University in **New York**, a person not affiliated with the university [made](#) a Nazi salute near an encampment and reportedly punched a student in the face.
- At University of **California**-Berkeley, multiple scuffles and confrontations between protesters and counter-protesters were reported, including demonstrators [attempting](#) to forcibly take flags from the opposing side. In one case, a protester tried to rip an Israeli flag out of a counter-demonstrator's hands leading to a brief struggle, after which another demonstrator could be seen punching the pro-Israel demonstrator in the head.

- At the University of **Pennsylvania**, an individual [sprayed](#) tents and signs with an odorous substance which organizers compared to “skunk spray.”
- At the University of **Washington**, a counter-demonstrator, coming from an event featuring Charlie Kirk, founder of the right-wing student organization Turning Point USA, [threw](#) several punches at pro-Palestine protesters before they pushed him into a bush.
- In at least two instances, protesters were reportedly threatened by individuals with knives: an [incident](#) at University of California, Los Angeles and an [incident](#) at Chapman University, both in **California**. In two additional incidents:
  - Law enforcement removed a counter-protester who [entered a seder with a knife holster](#) at the University of **Pennsylvania**.
  - In Auraria, **Colorado** encampment organizers [reported](#) that a person walked through the encampment with a knife and damaged banners, bike tires, and scooters.

There has also been at least one example of large-scale melee-style violence at the UCLA encampment in **California**, where counter-protesters first [waved bananas](#) after learning that a protester had a potentially fatal banana allergy and [allegedly threw](#) a bag of mice into the encampment. Approximately 100 pro-Israel counter-demonstrators then [attacked](#) the encampment late at night, after administrators threatened campers with expulsion:

- The counter-demonstrators attempted to tear down the encampment, assaulted protesters, [shot](#) fireworks, sprayed tear gas and other chemicals, and threw metal barricades and wood while yelling anti-Palestinian and anti-Black slurs.
- Multiple student journalists were reportedly [sprayed with an irritant and beaten](#).
- In response, some encampment members used [pepper spray](#) and fought back to keep the counter-demonstrators away from their barricades.
- Authorities [did not intervene](#) for over an hour and allowed most counter-demonstrators to leave the scene.
- A CNN [investigation](#) found that “some of the most dramatic attacks caught on camera that night were committed by people outside UCLA – not the university students and faculty who were eventually arrested.” The assailants [included](#) people “known throughout southern California for frequenting and disrupting a variety of protests and public gatherings” and “right-wing provocateurs ... seen protesting LGBTQ rights in public schools at school board and city council meetings around Los Angeles.” Reports [suggest](#) that the organizers of the counter-demonstration may also have received outside fundraising support.
- The next day, Hillel at UCLA [posted](#) an open letter from student leaders denouncing what it called “fringe members of the off-campus Jewish community” who did not represent “the estimated 3,000 Jewish Bruins at UCLA...We cannot have a clearer ask for the off-campus Jewish community: stay off our campus. Your actions are harming Jewish students.”

- The encampment was subsequently dispersed by police, and hundreds of protesters were arrested. An [investigation](#) has since been opened into the counter-demonstrators who attacked the encampment.

[Dehumanizing rhetoric](#) from supporters and opponents of the encampments, as well as calls for extrajudicial efforts to disperse demonstrators, may further increase the risk of protest clashes and vigilante violence. Senator Tom Cotton of Arizona [has encouraged](#) opponents of the protests to “take matters into [their] own hands” to move through roadblocks caused by pro-Palestine protesters, for example, insisting that protesters should be thrown off bridges for disrupting traffic.

## Car-ramming incidents

Against this backdrop, incidents of car rammings or attempted car rammings at university encampment protests and other pro-Palestine demonstrations have risen. At least five cases have been reported in recent weeks:

- On May 2, a driver [accelerated](#) toward pro-Palestine demonstrators at Portland State University in **Oregon**. Demonstrators confronted the driver, who fled and pepper sprayed protesters trying to catch him. Protesters smashed the car's windows and spray painted graffiti on the car.
- On May 3, a man [drove](#) through a group of protesters blocking the street around the [encampment](#) at the state capitol in Boise, **Idaho**.
- On May 3, a man tried to [drive](#) through protesters blocking an intersection outside of Washington University in St. Louis, **Missouri**. When protesters tried to stop the driver from passing, the man got out of his vehicle and an altercation ensued.
- On May 7, a driver [hit a demonstrator](#) participating in a protest organized by Columbia University Apartheid Divest in front of a Barnard College trustee's home in **New York**.
- On May 8, a Community Service Specialist vehicle, a [branch](#) of the Bloomington Police Department in **Indiana**, [pushed into demonstrators](#) who were crossing the street in a crosswalk.

The current uptick in car-ramming incidents follows a widespread surge in [car attacks](#) during the [2020 racial justice protests](#), when more than 100 cases were reported.

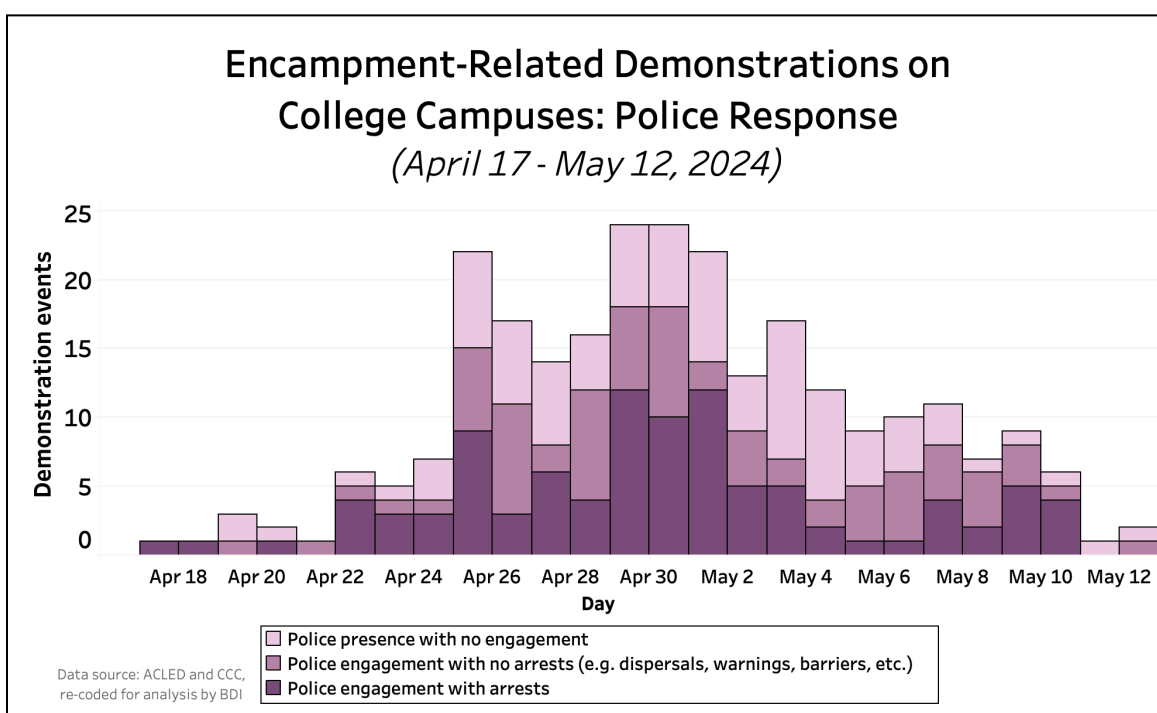
## IV. Law Enforcement Engagement

Law enforcement have been present at just under a quarter of all encampment demonstrations recorded by ACLED or CCC, at 23%, or over 260 events (*see graph below*).

At more than 200 of these events with a recorded law enforcement presence, or 78%, no violent or destructive activity by protesters was reported.

Types of law enforcement engagement have varied significantly:

- At almost 90 events, law enforcement was present but did not engage.
- At approximately 75 events, law enforcement was present and intervened but did not conduct arrests, instead issuing warnings and declaring unlawful assemblies, rousing protesters throughout the night, setting up barriers, restricting entrances, or removing things from encampments, among other activities.
- At approximately 100 events, law enforcement was present, intervened, and conducted arrests. At least 25 of these instances involved some type of use of force<sup>11</sup> against protesters.



Law enforcement was present at the majority of encampments that saw counter-protests, at almost 110 events, as outlined above. In at least 15 events, law enforcement in some way separated counter-protesters and protesters, or were involved in escorting counter-protesters or protesters away from confrontations. *For more information on Counter-Demonstrations, see section III.*

<sup>11</sup> While “[t]here is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of use of force,” per the [National Institute of Justice](#), see the *Appendix: Methodology* section below for examples of specific coding decisions used for this analysis.

Approximately 9% of all encampment demonstrations have seen arrests, with more than 3,000 arrests reported to date across 100 events in more than 50 colleges and universities. Additional analysis, involving coding of university policies and arrest documents, would be necessary to determine the specific legal or regulatory cause for intervention in each case. However, information is available on whether or not police were intervening in response to physically violent or destructive activity that day, or if this activity occurred after police intervention, and is analyzed in further detail below.

## Use of force and “less-lethal” munitions

Many of these arrests have been coupled with significant use of force, [such as](#) the deployment of tear gas, pepper spray, and “less-lethal” munitions like beanbag rounds, as well as the use of batons or aggressive arrests (such as in Washington University in Saint Louis in **Missouri**, where [law enforcement detained](#) non-violent protesters who reportedly attempted to resist arrest by handcuffing and throwing them to the ground, in some cases causing [severe injuries](#)).

According to analysis of data from ACLED and CCC, law enforcement deployed chemical irritants or “less-lethal” munitions in at least 24 events at 22 institutions. At several of these events, law enforcement also used batons against protesters. In at least an additional 11 events they used batons without “less lethal” munitions. These tactics were most often when clearing encampments. For example:

- At the University of **Texas** at Austin, [law enforcement used](#) flash bangs and pepper spray to disperse demonstrators who sat on the ground, linked arms, and tied themselves to each other; and
- At Emory University in **Georgia**, law enforcement [deployed](#) tear gas, rubber bullets, and other munitions, and observers recorded video of officers tasing a demonstrator while cuffed and on the ground.

Among others, additional institutions where chemical irritants or “less-lethal” munitions were deployed include:

- In **Virginia** at [Virginia Commonwealth University](#) and [University of Virginia](#);
- In **Florida** at [University of South Florida](#);
- In **North Carolina** at [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#);
- In **New Mexico** at [University of New Mexico](#);
- In **California** at [University of California-San-Diego](#), [University of California-Los Angeles](#), and [University of California-Irvine](#);
- In **Arizona** at [University of Arizona](#);
- In **Oregon** at [Portland State University](#);
- In **New York** at [New York University](#) and [City College of New York](#);

- and in **Washington, DC** at [George Washington University](#).

## Interference with religious practices

In at least three reported cases, law enforcement removed religious attire from detained students, including:

- **Arizona** State University's Tempe campus, [where](#) ASU police [removed](#) hijabs from four [women](#) during arrests. According to reports, each woman pleaded with officers to not remove their head covering, before being booked and jailed for 15 hours without their hijab.
- **Ohio** State University, where protesters say law enforcement, including Ohio Highway Patrol, [forced women](#) to remove their hijabs and refused to provide space to pray. Demonstrators [said](#) "people were praying in tents as officers moved in to rip them open."
- A [statement](#) from the the DePaul Divest Coalition and Students for Justice in Palestine, as well as initial [reports](#) from the May 16 clearing of the encampment at DePaul University in **Illinois** by Chicago police, also indicate a woman's hijab was "pulled off" as they were arrested during the sweep.

In **Oregon**, Reed College is [investigating](#) the destruction of Jewish student's mezuzah and a rock thrown through their window the next day. The incident took place around an on-campus protest. Administrators and student protesters have [condemned](#) the violence.

## Escalation and confrontation

Law enforcement intervention has at times also escalated otherwise non-violent demonstrations into violent confrontations. In over 65% of cases in which protesters engaged in violent or destructive activity – more than 40 events – the violent or destructive activity occurred *only after or during* law enforcement intervention that day. Examples include:

- The University of Southern **California**, where law enforcement intervention using rubber bullets against largely [peaceful protesters](#) was followed by isolated incidents like the throwing of a water bottle at the police line.
- The University of **Arizona**, where school police wearing riot gear entered an encampment late at night, [firing](#) rubber bullets, tear gas, and pepper balls, and were then met by students throwing water bottles and pushing back against the police line. One student [said](#) "he was hit in the head...by a rubber bullet and suffered a concussion."
  - In a [later incident](#) at the University of Arizona, demonstrators and faculty marched to campus to set up a second encampment during commencement festivities. Law enforcement, including state troopers dressed in riot gear,



responded and dispersed the group using chemical irritants and rubber bullets. Authorities arrested two faculty members who stood “in front of the camp ‘to provide protection against potential police violence.’” School officials allege that protesters threw items and spiked police vehicles as the sweep occurred.

- The University of **North Carolina** at Chapel Hill, where [repeated law enforcement interventions](#) caused multiple injuries and were met with protesters pushing barricades and throwing water at law enforcement.

In at least five instances, law enforcement appeared to place snipers on rooftops overlooking campus protests at [University of California-San Diego](#), [University of California-Los Angeles](#), **Indiana** University [Bloomington](#) and [Dunn Meadow](#), and [Ohio State University](#), leading to reports that their presence was contributing to heightened tension, fear, and unease in campus communities.<sup>12</sup> In none of the incidents were the weapons used against demonstrators, but the appearance of armed snipers overlooking campus increased concerns among students and protesters. Several of the instances occurred within a week of the [Kent State shooting](#) anniversary, when the Ohio National Guard killed four students and wounded nine during a protest opposing the Vietnam War in 1970.

Many officials and political leaders have called for a dramatic increase in the use of force to remove remaining encampments, including the deployment of the National Guard. Former President Donald Trump [described](#) the law enforcement raid at Columbia as “a beautiful thing to watch” and has encouraged further intervention. He has been joined by Republican Congressmembers like House Speaker [Mike Johnson](#), Senator [Tom Cotton](#), and Representative [Jim Banks](#) in calling for National Guard engagement. In response to the encampment movement, President Joe Biden has [stated](#) that “dissent must never lead to disorder” and “order must prevail,” but has indicated that he does not support the deployment of the National Guard.

## V. Proud Boys and White Nationalist Engagement

Anti-government, white nationalist, and neo-Nazi actors have also renewed limited engagement in demonstrations around the Israel-Palestine conflict, largely in an effort to capitalize on increased attention on the campus encampments and to take advantage of social and political tensions. A number of these groups had previously engaged in demonstrations related to the conflict when the situation first escalated after the Hamas attack in October, in some cases attempting to co-opt pro-Palestine protests. Recent examples include:

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<sup>12</sup> There were multiple claims that at University of Nevada, Reno, police staged snipers at a demonstration on April 25. The University police chief [said](#) that the officers set up an observation point and did not have a sniper.

- In Philadelphia, a [White Lives Matter](#) supporter claimed to spread propaganda fliers near the encampment at the University of **Pennsylvania**.
- Gavin McInnes, founder of the [Proud Boys](#), was [identified](#) at Columbia University in **New York**, while Christian nationalist “MAGA pastor” [Sean Feucht](#) led approximately 100 pro-Israel and Christian nationalist counter-demonstrators to the school’s encampment and held a “United for Israel” march. The counter-demonstrators [called](#) the students “terrorists,” swung a flagpole at opposing demonstrators, and attempted to rip a Palestinian flag from the encampment.
  - Feucht also reportedly [hosted](#) a “United for Israel” rally at the University of Southern **California**, where he [gave a platform](#) to Che Ahn, a key figure of the [New Apostolic Reformation](#), a far-right Christian dominionist movement.
- Proud Boys [allegedly](#) protested against the University of Chicago encampment in **Illinois**, though images and reporting do not clearly show the group’s insignia or name specific members.
- Multiple actors associated with far-right organizations, including the southern **California** Proud Boys, have been reported at [counter-protests](#) to the UCLA encampment.
- Additionally, there have been several recorded instances of actors with no identified affiliations to organized groups at or around encampments making [Nazi salutes](#), such as at [Syracuse University](#) in **New York** and University of **Wisconsin** in [Madison](#). In both instances, encampment organizers [condemned the acts](#).
  - It was determined that the individual at Syracuse was not a student at the university, and he also [reportedly](#) punched a student before “an off-duty residential community safety officer de-escalated the incident.”

In several cases, protesters have successfully identified attempted co-option and taken action to reject or sideline these actors. Examples include:

- Students at Emory University in **Georgia** identified, isolated, and [removed](#) antisemitic self-described “MAGA Communism” provocateur [Jackson Hinkle](#) from an event he and a colleague had attempted to join.
- At the **Arizona** State University encampment, protesters quickly recognized and booed away [Ryan Augustine Sanchez](#), a well-known neo-Nazi who was in [attendance](#).

## VI. Dialogue and De-Escalation Efforts

Amid heightened tensions, many campus communities have created space to dialogue on the issues raised by protesters and to engage in de-escalation efforts aimed at reducing the risk of harmful conflict or violence.

## Limited law enforcement engagement

In some locations, law enforcement and local officials have opted to refrain from engaging the protest encampments, conducting full sweeps, or carrying out follow-up interventions. In **Massachusetts**, the campus police at Harvard University [decided not](#) to clear the encampment because it remained peaceful; it ultimately [ended voluntarily](#) after an agreement with school leadership. While Denver law enforcement arrested 45 people at Auraria Campus in **Colorado** at the end of April, the police [refused](#) to return and clear demonstrators a second time, stating that there was “no legal way” for them to dismantle the encampment again that was “safe” and “appropriate.” At the University of **California-Irvine**, the [mayor called](#) on police to stand down after visiting and observing the encampment and asked the administration to “handle the situation without any physical force by police [against] unarmed students using their first amendment right to protest, as many students have done previously throughout the years.”

In other cases, school leadership has declined to call in law enforcement to clear encampments. The public University of **California system**, for example, has largely [pursued](#) a “hands off” approach in cases where protests have not been violent, do not impede campus operations, and do not interfere with education. At the University of **Wisconsin** in Madison, following an initial intervention, campus leaders agreed to refrain from calling law enforcement again as long as discussions related to the protests were [constructive](#), and they ultimately [reached an agreement](#) to end the encampment. In **Connecticut**, Wesleyan University [refused](#) to call in law enforcement [unless](#) “serious violations of University rules and of the law” made it “necessary,” indicating that administrators “much prefer to talk with protesters,” and they ultimately came to an agreement. At the University of **California, Riverside**, school leadership initially [responded](#) to protesters by acknowledging some of their core concerns about the conflict, “a note that organizers said set a positive tone for negotiations,” before they reached an agreement as well.

## Communication processes and agreements

In addition to situations where law enforcement and school officials have decided to limit the police response, multiple colleges and universities have directed students towards established processes, created new fora, or otherwise sought avenues for communication and dialogue. The resulting steps or agreements have at times [faced criticism](#) both for not addressing student or community concerns over antisemitism or other forms of discrimination earlier, as well as from activists who sought greater reforms from school leadership. However, multiple cases have resulted in resolutions to end encampments without further disruption.

At time of writing, at least 20 school administrations reached various types of [agreements](#) with protesters as a means to end encampments. Agreements have typically entailed

[pledges](#) from administrations “to take certain steps in exchange for the dismantling of protesters' encampments as graduation approaches.” Examples include:

- [Evergreen State College](#) in **Washington**
- [Rutgers University](#) in **New Jersey**
- [Northwestern University](#) in **Illinois**
- [University of Minnesota](#)
- University of **Wisconsin** in [Madison](#) and [Milwaukee](#)
- [Brown University](#) in **Rhode Island**
- [Johns Hopkins University](#) in **Maryland**
- [Middlebury College](#) in **Vermont**
- [Vassar College](#) and [Bard College](#) in **New York**
- [Wesleyan University](#) in **Connecticut**
- [Harvard University](#) in **Massachusetts**, though some students have since [accused](#) the school of violating the agreement by putting protesters on probation.
- [Sacramento State](#), [Occidental College](#), University of California-[Berkeley](#), and University of California-[Riverside](#) in **California**, though after the agreement at Berkeley a dozen demonstrators were later arrested for [occupying an abandoned building](#) near campus for over a day

In several cases, such as at [Cornell University](#) in **New York** and [Tufts University](#) in **Massachusetts**, protesters ended their encampments without an agreement or police intervention, though dialogue or discussion with school leadership often remains ongoing.

## Additional civil society initiatives

Local peacebuilding organizations and de-escalation practitioners have also engaged with schools, students, and law enforcement to defuse tensions, respond to threats, and provide community safety alternatives to police intervention. Since the start of the campus protests, BDI has collected responses from de-escalation and community safety groups that are included in our state-by-state [De-Escalation Directory](#) to gather more information about frameworks for approaching the current risk environment. Responses from organizations around the country – including in **Oregon, Texas, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Wisconsin** – have highlighted a range of best practices and key areas for engagement. Initial examples include:

- **Constructive dialogue and open communication between students, administrators, and – in some cases – law enforcement.** Practitioners stressed that creating intentional opportunities for constructive dialogue over core issues and demands, as well as open and easily accessible lines of communication before, during, and after protest actions, have proven effective in building trust and reducing the risk of miscommunication, which in turn reduces the risk of otherwise avoidable

negative outcomes. In at least one case, a local de-escalation team communicated with city leaders and law enforcement supporting adjustments in tactics to demonstrate more restrained action by the police to prevent further escalation. Open communication among campus communities has also created space for interfaith dialogue and the accompaniment of faith leaders at protest actions, which has in some cases further reduced tensions (see *inset Case Study*).

- **Physical safety measures and protection against threats and violence.**

In cases where opportunities for dialogue and open communication are limited – particularly situations where law enforcement is contributing to escalation and protesters are targeted for violence by organized counter-demonstrators or other outside actors – practitioners have focused on providing resources for physical and legal protection. These include creating legal support networks for those facing arrest or disciplinary action, building capacity for alternative responder systems, and offering trainings for bystander intervention, personal physical safety during arrests, protest marshaling, and street medic assistance. Others have focused on providing resources for managing stress while engaging in dialogue on controversial topics or facing threats and harassment. Groups in states like **Massachusetts** and **Oregon** have made a range of de-escalation and community safety trainings available to campus communities during the current wave of demonstrations, and in some cases the encampments themselves have organized these resources: at the University of **Michigan**, the encampment hosted teach-ins that included de-escalation trainings.

**Case Study:** Faith leaders in Wisconsin have highlighted the dialogue process at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee encampment as “a beautiful success story” for de-escalation. The wider Milwaukee community was intentionally involved in the protest action – and response – from the beginning of the mobilization. Elders from all the Abrahamic faiths were invited by protest organizers to accompany them during the encampment, as well as leaders from a broad coalition of nearly 60 organizations and religious groups. The coalition also provided safety and security support to protesters during the encampment, while a local restaurant distributed food as a means to bring people together, offer sustenance, and de-escalate tensions.

As the encampment went on, organizers hosted interfaith worship sessions. For example, one night Muslim participants conducted their evening prayers and, immediately afterward, Jewish leaders used the same tarps and blankets to host a Shabbat service.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee administration decided to open up a dialogue with protest leaders. A local church was involved in supporting the protesters, and their building served as a space for the dialogue to take place. The dialogue ultimately led to an [agreement](#) that ended the encampment, while calling for a ceasefire and release of hostages held by Hamas, though the University of Wisconsin’s president expressed “[disappointment](#)” that the deal does not enforce punishments for camping, and the resolution has been [criticized](#) by Hillel Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, and the Anti-Defamation League. Protest leaders are talking about raising funds to re-plant the grass that was damaged due to the encampment as an additional positive gesture.



## VII. Preliminary Conclusions and Looking Ahead

The campus encampment actions prompted a resurgence in mobilization over the Israel-Palestine conflict around the United States. Early [indications](#) suggest that campus protests may begin to taper off as the school year ends, and initial protests at commencement ceremonies have continued on a similar non-violent trend. Still, tensions may continue to run high into the summer, as remaining commencement ceremonies proceed amid ongoing demonstrations and some protest organizers refocus on upcoming political events, like the Democratic and Republican conventions. In Chicago, [activists say](#) they will no longer “follow city protocol after police cleared the DePaul [University] Gaza [encampment]” when they hold protests against the Democratic National Convention, which is set to be hosted in the city this August.

The data suggests that increased intervention by law enforcement and counter-protesters is unlikely to reduce protest mobilization, and may instead contribute to heightened risk. If mobilization persists through the summer, and the war in Gaza intensifies, outside actors linked more directly to protest violence like neo-Nazi groups and the Proud Boys may ramp up efforts to engage or co-opt the demonstrations for their own purposes, only further aggravating the risk environment.

Some campus communities have demonstrated alternative approaches. Students have packed up their encampments after agreements with administrators to address, or open processes to discuss, key issues at schools like Rutgers and Sacramento State. Officials at schools like Harvard and Wesleyan have refrained from clearing peaceful encampments in the absence of violent threats, opening space for dialogue. Local peacebuilding organizations and de-escalation practitioners from across the country are working with school stakeholders to bridge divisions and create opportunities for open communication and non-violent conflict resolution while taking practical steps to keep students and other members of campus communities safe. Elevating these alternative de-escalation and community safety responses to continued mobilization through the summer – and monitoring for early warning signs of increased risk – will be integral to effective policy and community efforts aimed at addressing the risk of immediate physical harm and preserving essential rights to free speech and assembly.

# Appendix: Methodology

## Definitions and scope

This Issue Brief analyzes trends in *physical protest activity* and *physical violence or destructive activity*.

For the purposes of this analysis, *physical protest activity* includes encampments as well as associated rallies, marches, and demonstrations, among other actions. It does not include purely digital or online protest actions, or planned protest activities that did not physically occur.

*Physical violence* encompasses intentional acts of physical violence or force, including physical fights between protesters and counter-protesters, physical assaults on protesters or bystanders, throwing of projectiles, car rammings, and police use of force such as “less-lethal” munitions and violent arrests (e.g. throwing detained persons to the ground and causing injury). It does not include cases of verbal harassment or intimidation that do not manifest as direct physical contact. While there have been multiple incidents of escalatory behavior like invasions of personal space using derogatory or hateful speech involving protesters, counter-protesters, and bystanders in the vicinity of encampments, cases where no physical contact was made are beyond the scope of this analysis, which is focused narrowly on physical acts of violence or destruction.

*Destructive activity* includes significant acts of property destruction and vandalism, such as breaking windows or setting fires, as well as barricading buildings. It does not include lower-level property defacement like graffiti.

Other analyses of the encampment protests have focused on the types of claims and statements made by protesters and counter-protesters, including important and at times significantly divergent assessments of the types of speech that rise to the level of hate speech (e.g. antisemitism, Islamophobia), threats, harassment, or incitement to violence. This Issue Brief does not contribute directly to that debate. Its analysis instead focuses solely on explicit acts of physical violence and related activity in and around encampment protests, in an effort to fill a gap in available research on physical threats, in order to provide a firmer foundation for policy responses on campus aimed at addressing the risk of immediate physical harm and preserving essential rights to free speech and assembly.

## Data sources and re-coding decisions

To conduct this analysis, BDI drew on internal open-source monitoring as well as two publicly available data sources – the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) and the [Crowd Counting Consortium \(CCC\)](#) – and used keywords and tags to isolate



demonstration events related to the Israel-Palestine conflict and specifically to identify campus encampments. BDI manually re-coded each event for analysis purposes and removed overlapping events from the two data sets.

BDI re-coded events of recorded physical violence or destructive activity, including:

- Use of crowd control or “less-lethal” munitions by anyone (e.g. tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets)
- Projectiles (throwing water bottles, chairs, flag poles)
- Instances of physical assaults or confrontations that make physical contact, including fighting, pushing, punching (e.g. “scuffles”), forced removal of religious attire (e.g. hijabs, kippah), and forcible dispersal or arrests by police (e.g. those that involve the use of batons or throwing detainees to the ground).
- Significant destruction of property (e.g. breaking windows), with low-level property defacement like graffiti excluded.

Events were not coded for verbal statements made by protesters or other actors unless they were relevant to physical violence or destructive activity.

It is important to note that both ACLED and CCC are event-level datasets, meaning that the individual event is the fundamental unit of observation. Each event represents an action that took place in a specific location, on a specific day, involving specific actors. In the context of this analysis, *this means that a campus encampment demonstration that takes place in the same location for multiple days will be coded as multiple individual but related events*. The number of encampment-related demonstration events is therefore different from the number of discrete encampments, as the former will include an event for each protest-day of an encampment that lasts for more than one day. This provides a broader understanding of the scale of encampment-related demonstration activity over time and space, rather than a literal count of individual encampments. BDI analysis of ACLED and CCC data indicates that there have been approximately 1,150 encampment-related demonstration events at nearly 150 colleges and universities between April 17 and May 12.

Per ACLED [methodology](#): “In practical terms, this means that only events taking place on different days, involving different types of violence, with different types of actors, or in disparate locations are considered separate events. Events that share the same date, actors, a proximate location, and event type will be aggregated when it cannot be clearly discerned that the events were discrete and independent. The number of demonstrations is reliant largely on reporting and the terminology used in doing so. For example, five separate demonstrations happening in Atlanta around a single topic within a few blocks of each other may be reported in a newspaper as ‘demonstrations happened in Atlanta’ or ‘five demonstrations happened in Atlanta.’ Both are ‘correct’ in their terminology, but if they are coded differently as a result (1 vs. 5), this would introduce a bias. ACLED codes an event

based on an engagement in a specific location, such as at a city level (e.g. Atlanta) on a specific day in order to avoid such biases. The number of ‘Demonstration’ events recorded by ACLED may differ from the number of ‘demonstrations’ recorded via other methodologies by other datasets.”

Likewise, CCC [notes](#): “When events span multiple days, as many of the recent student encampments have, we create a separate entry for each day, so we can properly record variation over time in the size and behavior of those actions, and so we properly represent the time and energy associated with them. Technically, then, our overall count is of protest-days rather than separate events, but in the vast majority of cases the two are the same.”



Bridging  
Divides  
Initiative

The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) is a non-partisan research initiative based at Princeton University that tracks and mitigates political violence in the United States.

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