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Sovereign Citizens

A Growing Domestic Threat to Law Enforcement

By the FBI's Counterterrorism Analysis Section



They could be dismissed as a nuisance, a loose network of individuals living in the United States who call themselves “sovereign citizens” and believe that federal, state, and local governments operate illegally. Some of their actions, although quirky, are not crimes. The offenses they do commit seem minor, including regularly false license plates, driver’s licenses, and even currency.

However, a closer look at sovereign citizens' more severe crimes, from financial scams to impersonating or threatening law enforcement officials, gives reason for concern. If someone challenges (e.g., a standard traffic stop for false license plates) their ideology, the behavior of these sovereign-citizen extremists quickly can escalate to violence. Since 2000, lone-offender sovereign-citizen extremists have killed six law enforcement officers. In 2010, two Arkansas police officers stopped sovereign-citizen extremists Jerry Kane and his 16-year-old son Joseph during a routine traffic stop on Interstate 40. Joseph Kane jumped out of the vehicle and opened fire with an AK-47 assault rifle, killing both officers.

The sovereign-citizen threat likely will grow as the nationwide movement is fueled by the Internet, the economic downturn, and seminars held across the country that spread their ideology and show people how they can tap into funds and eliminate debt through fraudulent methods. As sovereign citizens' numbers grow, so do the chances of contact with law enforcement and, thus, the risks that incidents will end in violence. Law enforcement and judicial officials must understand the sovereign-citizen movement, be able to identify indicators, and know how to protect themselves from the group's threatening tactics.

Ideology and Motivation

The FBI considers sovereign-citizen extremists as comprising a domestic terrorist movement, which, scattered across the United States, has existed for decades, with well-known members, such as Terry Nichols, who helped plan the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, bombing. Sovereign citizens do not represent an anarchist group, nor are they a militia, although they sometimes use or buy illegal weapons. Rather, they operate as individuals without established leadership and only come together in loosely affiliated groups to train, help each other with paperwork, or socialize and talk about their ideology. They may refer to themselves as "constitutionalists" or "freemen," which is not necessarily a connection to a specific group, but, rather, an indication that they are free from government control. They follow their own set of laws. While the philosophies and conspiracy theories can vary from person to person, their core beliefs are the same: The government operates outside of its jurisdiction. Because of this belief, they do not recognize federal, state, or local laws, policies, or regulations.¹

One prevalent sovereign-citizen theory is the Redemption Theory, which claims the U.S. government went bankrupt when it abandoned the gold standard basis for currency in 1933 and began using citizens as collateral in trade agreements with foreign governments.² These beliefs can provide a gateway to illegal activity because such individuals believe the U.S. government does not act in the best interests of the American people. By announcing themselves as sovereign citizens, they are emancipated from the responsibilities of being a U.S. citizen, including paying taxes, possessing a state driver's license, or obeying the law.

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Illegal Activity

The Redemption Theory belief leads to their most prevalent method to defraud banks, credit institutions, and the U.S. government: the Redemption Scheme. Sovereign citizens believe that when the U.S. government removed itself from the gold standard, it rendered U.S. currency as a valueless credit note, exchanging one credit document (such as a dollar bill) for another. They assert that the U.S. government now uses citizens as collateral, issuing social security numbers and birth certificates to register people in trade agreements with other countries. Each citizen has a monetary net worth, which they believe is kept in a U.S. Treasury Direct account, valued from \$630,000 to more than \$3 million. These accounts, they claim, are in a third-party's name, a "strawman," that they can access, which they commonly refer to as "freeing money from the strawman." In essence, it is extorting money from the U.S. Treasury Department. Sovereign citizens file legitimate IRS and Uniform Commercial Code forms for illegitimate purposes, believing that doing so correctly will compel the U.S. Treasury to fulfill its debts, such as credit card debts, taxes, and mortgages.³





Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, Oklahoma City.

At a minimum, these activities create a voluminous influx of documents that clog the courts and other government agencies. But, the idea behind the Redemption Theory also leads sovereign citizens to find criminal sources of income as they travel the country, teach fraudulent tactics to others for a fee, and participate in white collar crimes. The latter offenses include mail, bank, mortgage, and wire fraud; money laundering; tax violations; and illegal firearms sales and purchases.

At seminars, sovereign citizens charge participants a fee in exchange for information on Redemption Theory schemes and other methods to avoid paying taxes, sometimes even selling materials, such as CDs or DVDs. They also sell fraudulent documents—including drivers' licenses, passports, diplomat identification, vehicle registrations, concealed firearms permits, law enforcement credentials, and insurance forms—to other sovereign citizens and illegal immigrants and charge fees for “consultant services” to prepare sovereign-citizen paperwork. Several recent incidents highlight their activities.

- In Sacramento, California, two sovereign-citizen extremists were convicted of running a fraudulent insurance scheme, operating a company completely outside of state insurance regulatory authorities. The men sold “lifetime memberships” to customers and promised to pay any accident claims against members. The company collected millions of dollars, but paid only small auto insurance claims and ignored large ones.⁴
- In Kansas City, Missouri, three sovereign-citizen extremists were convicted in a phony diplomatic credential scandal. They charged customers between \$450 and \$2,000 for a diplomatic identification card that bestowed “sovereign status,” supposedly to enjoy diplomatic immunity from paying taxes and from stops and arrests by law enforcement.⁵
- In Las Vegas, Nevada, four men affiliated with the sovereign-citizen-extremist movement were arrested by the Nevada Joint Terrorism Task Force on federal money laundering, tax evasion, and weapons charges. The undercover investigation revealed that two of the suspects allegedly laundered more than a million dollars and collected fees for their services.⁶

One example of a white collar crime that escalated into a standoff includes a New Hampshire husband and wife convicted of federal income tax evasion, failure to honor federal payroll taxes, and other conspiracy fraud charges. Elaine A. and Edward L. Brown, both sovereign-citizen extremists in their 60s, never appeared at their 2007 trial or at sentencing. In protest, the Browns barricaded themselves in their home during the summer and fall of 2007, receiving supporters, issuing militant and threatening statements, and stockpiling weapons and explosives. They were charged with weapons offenses after their arrest in October 2007 when law enforcement discovered pipe bombs, improvised explosive devices made of gun powder cans with nails and screws taped to the outside, and a large cache of handguns and rifles that included .50-caliber rifles.⁷

However, even when sovereign citizens go to prison for crimes, they continue criminal activity behind bars. Inmates provide a new population for them to sway to adopt the sovereign-citizen ideology; they then can train these inmates to help them defraud banks, credit institutions, and the U.S. government. They can create fraudulent businesses from inside prison walls and complete fraudulent financial documents to receive lines of credit from legitimate banks. The learning system goes both ways—inmates can teach sovereign citizens new criminal methods that they can use either from inside the prison or when they are released.

Indicators

“It is important to realize sovereign citizens' tactics to harass and intimidate law enforcement, court, and government officials, as well as financial institution employees.”

Sovereign citizens often produce documents that contain peculiar or out-of-place language. In some cases, they speak their own language or will write only in certain colors, such as in red crayon. Several indicators can help identify these individuals:

- References to the Bible, The Constitution of the United States, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, or treaties with foreign governments⁸
- Personal names spelled in all capital letters or interspersed with colons (e.g., JOHN SMITH or Smith: John)
- Signatures followed by the words “under duress,” “Sovereign Living Soul” (SLS), or a copyright symbol (©)
- Personal seals, stamps, or thumb prints in red ink
- The words “accepted for value”⁹

They also carry fraudulent drivers’ licenses to indicate their view that law enforcement does not have the authority to stop their vehicle or may write “No Liability Accepted” above their signature on a driver’s license to signify that they do not accept it as a legitimate identification document.

Intimidation, Obstruction, and Protection

It is important to realize sovereign citizens’ tactics to harass and intimidate law enforcement, court, and government officials, as well as financial institution employees. Methods can range from refusing to cooperate with requests, demanding an oath of office or proof of jurisdiction, filming interactions with law enforcement that they later post on the Internet, and filing frivolous lawsuits or liens against real property. They convene their own special courts that issue fake but realistic-looking indictments, warrants, and other documents. They also can use real government documents, including suspicious activity reports, in an attempt to damage the credit or financial history of specific individuals.

While these efforts may seem obviously fraudulent, it is important to address these actions, which can have devastating outcomes for the individuals they target. The sovereign citizens’ efforts also can be a gateway for them to harass, terrorize, and target others in hopes of changing behaviors that they perceive as threatening.

The Court Security Improvement Act of 2007 is one protection for officials who the sovereign citizens could target. The provisions under Title 18 created a new criminal offense for false liens against the real or personal property of officers or federal government employees, including judges and prosecutors. It also created as a new crime the disclosure of personal, identifying information to intimidate or incite violence against these individuals.¹⁰

Conclusion

Although the sovereign-citizen movement does not always rise to violence, its members’ illegal activities and past violent—including fatal—incidents against law enforcement make it a group that should be approached with knowledge and caution. It is important that law enforcement be aware of sovereign citizens’ tactics so agencies can warn the public of potential scams, spot illegal activity and understand its potential severity, and be prepared for and protect against violent behavior or backlash through intimidation and harassment.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Terrorism Operations Unit and Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit, *Sovereign Citizen Danger to Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC, 2010).

² U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Terrorism Operations Unit II, *Sovereign Citizens: An Introduction for Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC, 2010).

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit, *Sovereign Citizen Extremist Movement* (Washington, DC, 2011).

⁴ U.S. Attorney’s Office, Eastern District of California, “Two ‘Sovereign Citizens’ Sentenced in Illegal Insurance Scam,” press release, 2/24/2010; <http://sacramento.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel10/sc022410.htm> (accessed June 14, 2011).

⁵ U.S. Attorney’s Office, Western District of Missouri, “Three Men Sentenced for Conspiracy to Use Fake Diplomatic Identification,” press release, 2/8/2010; <http://kansascity.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel10/kc020810.htm> (accessed June 14, 2011).

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney, District of Nevada, “Members of Anti-Government Movement Arrested on Federal Money Laundering, Tax Evasion and Weapons Charges,” press release, 3/6/2009; <http://www.justice.gov/usao/nv/press/march2009/davis030609.htm> (accessed June 14, 2011).

⁷ U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Attorney’s Office-District of New Hampshire, press releases, 1/18/2007 and 7/9/2009, “Jury Convicts Lebanon Dentist and Husband in Tax Case,” and “Edward and Elaine Brown Convicted”; http://www.justice.gov/tax/usaopress/2007/txdv07WEM_Browns.pdf and <http://www.atf.gov/press/releases/2009/07/070909-bos-edward-and-elaine-brown-convicted.html> (accessed June 14, 2011).

⁸ The authors wish to stress that the majority of individuals who carry or refer to these resources are law-abiding citizens. However, in some instances, possession of these items may serve as one indicator of a sovereign-citizen extremist.

⁹ *Sovereign Citizens: An Introduction for Law Enforcement.*

¹⁰ Court Security Improvement Act of 2007; <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-110publ177/pdf/PLAW-110publ177.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2011).

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