

## The Impact of Social Distancing on Engagement with Violent Extremist Content Online in the United States

### Initial Observations

Moonshot CVE has been monitoring engagement with white supremacist extremist content on search engines across the United States over the past three years. In moments of crisis, we have often recorded shifts in engagement with white supremacist extremist content on Google. In the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks, we tend to see searches for this spike. Since the first Covid-19 case in the U.S. in January 2020, the U.S. has been grappling with the many devastating effects of this pandemic.

On March 16th, President Trump announced a 15 day plan to slow the spread of coronavirus in the U.S., including telling sick and older people to stay at home, and urging everyone to avoid gatherings of more than 10 people. This has since been extended until April 30th. Since then, individual states have implemented their own enhanced measures, ranging from closing of restaurants and bars to issuing state-wide stay-at-home orders. As millions of people are working from home, and children attending school remotely, there are increasing concerns that this may shift patterns of engagement with violent extremist and terrorist content online.

Moonshot is conducting an ongoing assessment of the impact of the global pandemic, and federal and state responses, on levels of engagement with white supremacy content on Google across the U.S. This document sets out some initial findings, based on an assessment of white supremacist search traffic from March 30th-April 5th, 2020, as compared to national and state averages for the 8 months prior to March. Moonshot will update these findings over the course of the coming months to assess trends over time.

**13% nationwide increase**  
in engagement with white supremacist content on Google



**There is a shift in white supremacist search traffic across the United States the week commencing March 30th, 2020, which aligns with the implementation of “stay at home” directives for most states.**

State and local directives using a variety of definitions, such as “shelter in place” or “safer at home”, have pushed residents to stay home. Moonshot is assessing whether length of time under these directives leads to higher engagement with white supremacist content online. The below graph shows average change in state search traffic between March 30th - April 5th 2020, based on the number of days each state was under “stay at home” directives. Please note these are early results and may shift over the coming weeks.

**Impact of social distancing on white supremacist search traffic**  
Shift in engagement by # of days under local “stay at home” directive



**21%**

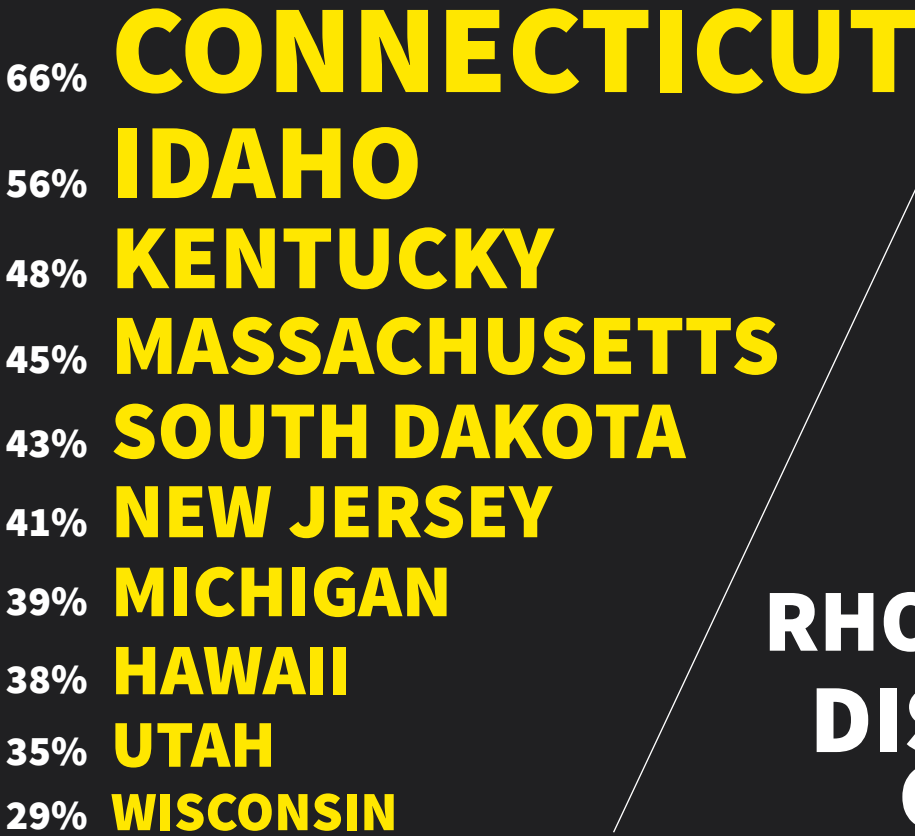
Average increase in engagement in states with local “stay at home” directives in place for **10 or more days**

**1%**

Average increase in engagement in states with local “stay at home” directives in place for **less than 10 days**



States experiencing greatest **increase**  
in engagement with white supremacist  
content on Google

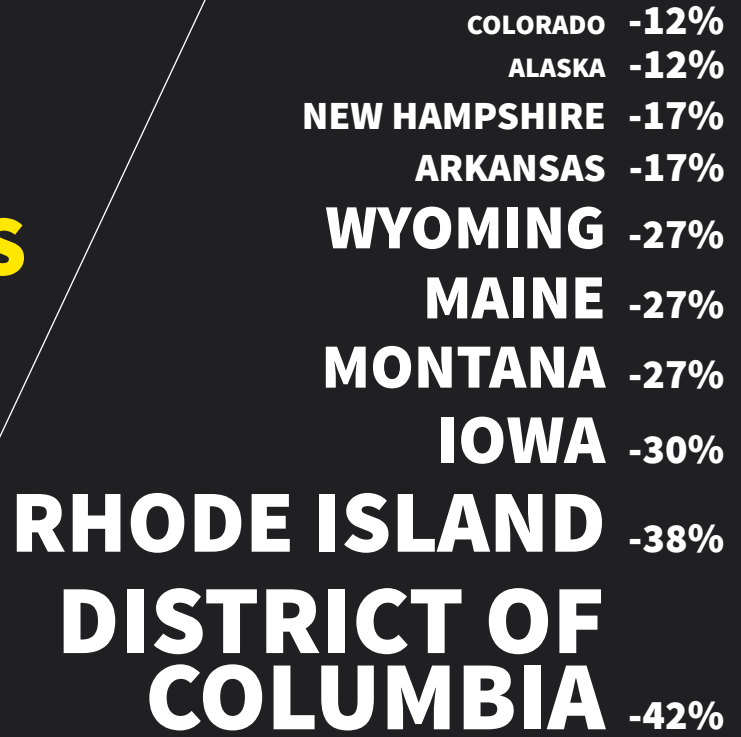


Percentage  
increase



States experiencing greatest **decrease**  
in engagement with white supremacist  
content on Google\*

\*Including District of Columbia



Percentage  
decrease

Washington D.C. typically records the highest rates of engagement with white supremacist content on Google per capita. We attribute this largely to the government and research community clustered in Washington D.C. As government employees have moved to remote working and are focused on other priorities at the moment, D.C. has experienced the largest drop in engagement with white supremacist content.

Percentage change in engagement with white supremacist content  
in states with highest volume of confirmed Covid-19 cases

State	Percentage increase	Covid-19 cases <sup>1</sup>
New York	2%	67,174
New Jersey	41%	16,636
California	23%	7,421
Michigan	39%	6,508
Massachusetts	45%	5,752

<sup>1</sup> Confirmed Covid-19 cases as of 30th March, when this spike in search traffic was recorded.

**44%**  
**DECREASE**

in engagement with white supremacy content in

**MANHATTAN**

In the city hit hardest by Covid-19, Manhattan was the only borough that experienced a decline. Brooklyn, Queens, The Bronx, and Staten Island saw on average a 28% increase in white supremacist search traffic.