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OPINION

Violence against judges is on the rise. Proposed protections are needed now | Opinion

By Mark Martin and Julian Mann

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Violence toward judges and court personnel has skyrocketed. In 2023, the U.S. Marshals Service [investigated 457 threats](#) against federal judges compared to 224 threats in 2022 — an alarming increase.

These threats often end in tragedy. State Circuit Court Judge Andrew Wilkinson of Maryland was [shot and killed](#) in his driveway by a man whom he ruled against in a divorce case. And Esther Salas, a sitting federal district judge in New Jersey, saw her son killed in a [targeted attack](#) at her home. Her son was shot to death when he answered a knock at the front door.

Although the majority of attacks occur outside the courtroom — often at a residence — the courthouse is not immune. A defendant [dove over the bench](#) at his sentencing hearing to batter Nevada District Court Judge Judge Mary Kay Holthus. And just two months ago, Kentucky District Judge Kevin Mullins was [gunned down in his chambers](#) by a disgruntled deputy.

This type of violence is not reserved for judges alone. Prosecutors, clerks and other court staff have also faced an alarming uptick of threats. We often hear about the rule of law being under attack. In this instance, the phrase is literal.

We all benefit when society understands and allocates sufficient resources for judicial security. Judges and court personnel uphold the rule of law. They, along with law enforcement, are on the front lines. When they are not adequately protected, the rule of law is diminished.

In South America we see how this plays out. In Colombia, judges have long been [attacked or killed](#) due to their rulings in sensitive cases. Even though the government has in good faith taken protective measures, judicial security threats remain widespread.

America is a far cry from Colombia, yet we are perilously close to experiencing similar rule of law challenges. Violence begets violence, and if adequate measures are not taken to stem the violence against judges and court personnel, it will certainly diminish the rule of law in America.

The time to increase judicial security is now.

At the federal level, U.S. House members must support [Senate Bill 3984](#), the Countering Threats and Attacks on our Judges Act, and their constituents should encourage them.

“The bill will establish a State Judicial Threat Intelligence and Resource Center to provide technical assistance, training, and monitoring of threats for state and local judges and court personnel,” according to the National Center for State Courts, one of many sponsoring organizations. The bill was unanimously passed in the Senate and is now pending in the House.

At the state level, in 2024 alone, [judicial security bills](#) have advanced in Georgia, Florida, Virginia, and Maryland. It's time for the Carolinas and other states to enact similar measures. After District Court Judge Julie Kocurek was [ambushed](#) outside of her home in Austin, Texas, she courageously and successfully advocated for a judicial security bill in the Lone Star State.

Let's come together and protect our court personnel before tragedy strikes again. If just one targeted attack on a judicial employee is avoided, it will be worth the effort. Just ask the widows and widowers of the deceased Colombian judges.

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