
FRAMES OF MISINFORMATION, EXTREMISM, & CONSPIRACISM

Web Forums and Social-Media Discussions

Monthly Summary

June 2023

Richard Lee Rogers

Youngstown State University
Dept. of Criminal Justice & Consumer Sciences

Web Site: <https://www.rogersperspectives.com>

Email: rlrogers02@ysu.edu

December 18, 2023

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This report contains top-line monthly numbers from a purposive sample of forums and websites known for hosting misinformation, extremism, and conspiracism (MEC sector).

This project receives funding from the Ohio Supercomputer Center through a faculty grant.

Activity Summary (1 of 2)

Methodological Notes: Activity levels are measured as prevalence and density rates. Prevalence is defined as the % of posts with at least one key word, phrase, or stem identified with particular themes. Density is defined as the identified words, phrases, and word stems as a % of total words. Because the study of language and ideology is a key aspect of the larger project, results are limited exclusively to posts with at least 30 words.

Key Changes

- The definition of a frame now includes both keyword themes and online community type on the assumption that the posting of material on particular channels is framing even if no keyword themes are present. The use of frame does not indicate support for ideas of the frame, e.g., an Extreme Right post might critically mention socialism, an Extreme Left concept. The meaning of the use of a frame is a subject for more detailed analyses not reported here.
- Community definitions are in flux right now. It will take one or two more reports to complete this transition.
- Social Dysfunction is a new frame. It encompasses violence and aggression, accelerationism, toxicity, militarism, violent crime, and social disorder and chaos. Violence discourse is a subframe of Social Dysfunction.
- Density, the % of words per post, has been added as a new measure for violence and other forms of Social Dysfunction. The use of Prevalence, % of posts with the frame present, continues to be used across all frames.
- The number of words per post was raised slightly to 30 words. This is approximately 2 sentences in contemporary English.
- There are several new graphs, including the return of the Antisemitism graph (Fig. 12), “heat maps” for the density of violent discourse (Fig. 8 and 17), and a timeline for the Education subframe (Fig. 18).
- New data sources include American Renaissance (Extreme Right), Anarchist News (Extreme Left), Daily Stormer (Extreme Right), Gateway Pundit (Extreme Right), Health.News (Health Misinformation), Palmer Report (Extreme Left), Taki’s Magazine (Extreme Right), Unicorn Riot (Extreme Left), and WorldNetDaily (Religion).

General Trends

Average daily balance activity rose from 6,727 posts per day in May to 7,247, an 7.7% increase. The average daily balance was 13% above the same month in the previous quarter and 59% below the all-time study high in August 2021 (Fig. 1).

Of the select frames tracked in this report, QAnon returned to its spot as the largest with a prevalence rate of 31.4%, narrowly ahead of Religion at 31.3%. The largest percentage growth appeared in the Extreme Left (53.3%) and QAnon (9.9%) (Fig. 2, 3, and 4). (Relative sizes of frames are affected by the selection of channels for the purposive sample.)

Activity Summary (2 of 2)

Social Dysfunction and Violence

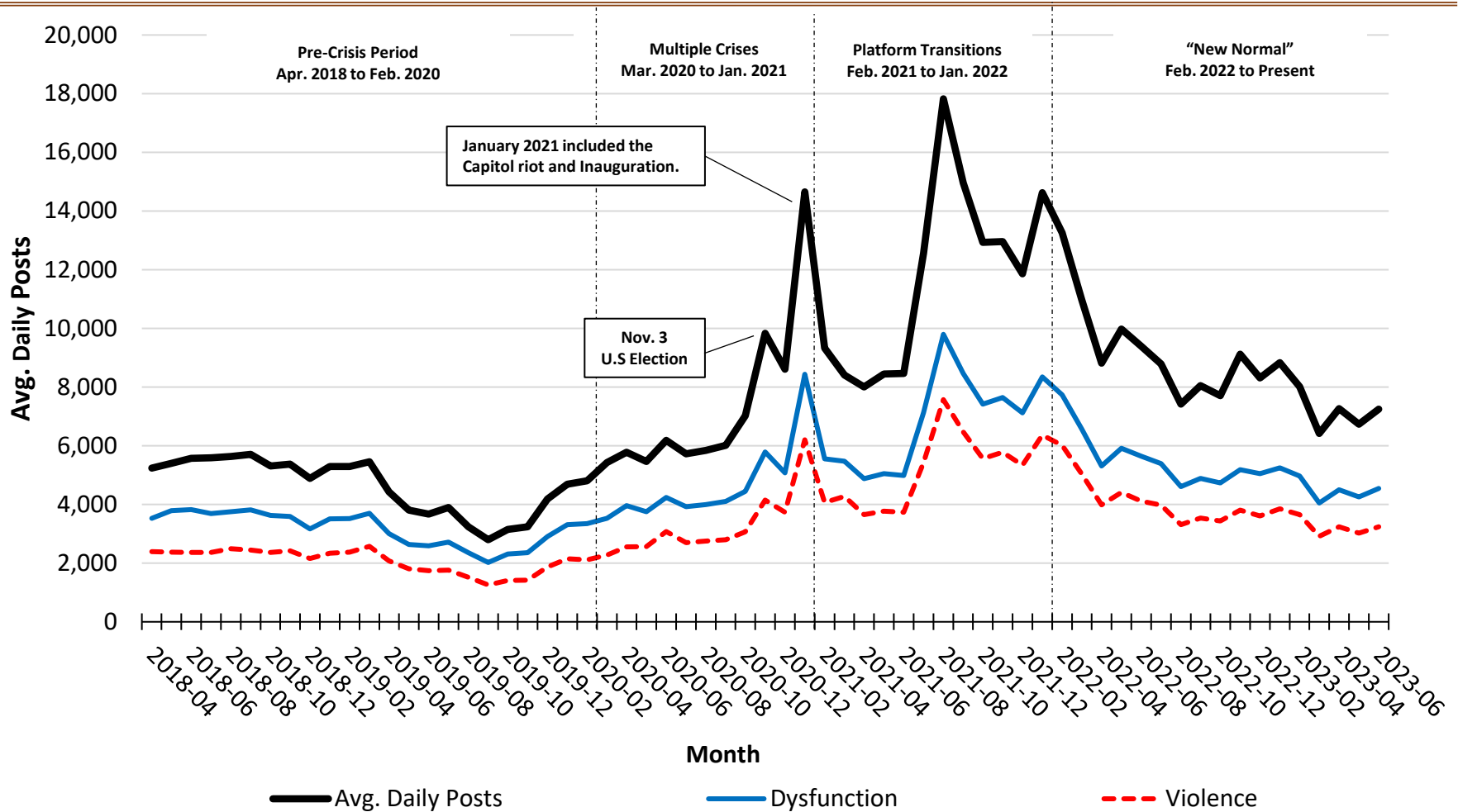
- The prevalence rate for discourse describing social dysfunction was 62.7%, and prevalence for violent discourse was 44.1%. The density for social dysfunction was 1.96 and for violent discourse was 1.21. Both prevalence rates are regarded as HIGH. The density rate for social dysfunction is HIGH and for violence discourse is MODERATE (Fig. 6).
- In June, the density for violent discourse was 1.51 in the Public Safety frame. Similar rates were found among Education (1.38), Extreme Left (1.37), and NWO Conspiracies excluding QAnon (1.37). For all these frames, the level of violent discourse should be considered as MODERATE (Fig. 7). While the Extreme Right did not have one of the highest levels of violent discourse in June, it exhibited the highest level of violent discourse among a select group of frames over the entire course of the study (Fig. 8). (The high rate of violence with the Public Safety frame is not a surprise given the topical content of this frame, which includes words describing violent crime.)

Other Topics (Highlights)

- The Religion frame rose 3.2%, which was less than the MEC sector as a whole. As a result, the prevalence of religious discourse fell from 32.7% to 31.3%. This level of discourse remains HIGH (Fig. 9). Prophetic discourse fell from 21.3% of the Religion frame to 20.9%. God & Country language, an indirect measure of Christian nationalism, was 9.4% of the Religion frame, and the language of spiritual warfare was 6.8% of the Religion frame (Fig. 10). For the second consecutive month, the largest of the select frames intersecting with the Religion frame was the Public Safety frame (Fig. 11).
- The level of antisemitic discourse remained roughly the same from May to June with a HIGH level of violent discourse prevalent at 61.9% of antisemitic discourse (Fig. 12).
- The prevalence rate for health-related discourse was 22.3% in June, which is a MODERATE prevalence rate (Fig. 13). The largest select frame within the Health frame was QAnon at 36.3% of the Health frame, followed by Public Safety (34.7%) and Religion (34.3%) (Fig. 15). Across the entire study, the density of violent discourse was highest across Extreme Right, Libertarian / Freedom Movement, and QAnon communities (Fig. 17).
- The Education subframe remained steady from May and was down 12.7% from its nearest short-term peak in February (Fig. 18).
- References to pedophilia, grooming, and child sex trafficking were steady from May and but were up 64.4% from March. The low level of activity in March may be related to a possible cyberattack discussed in recent previous reports (Fig. 20)

Figure 1

Avg. Daily Activity by Month

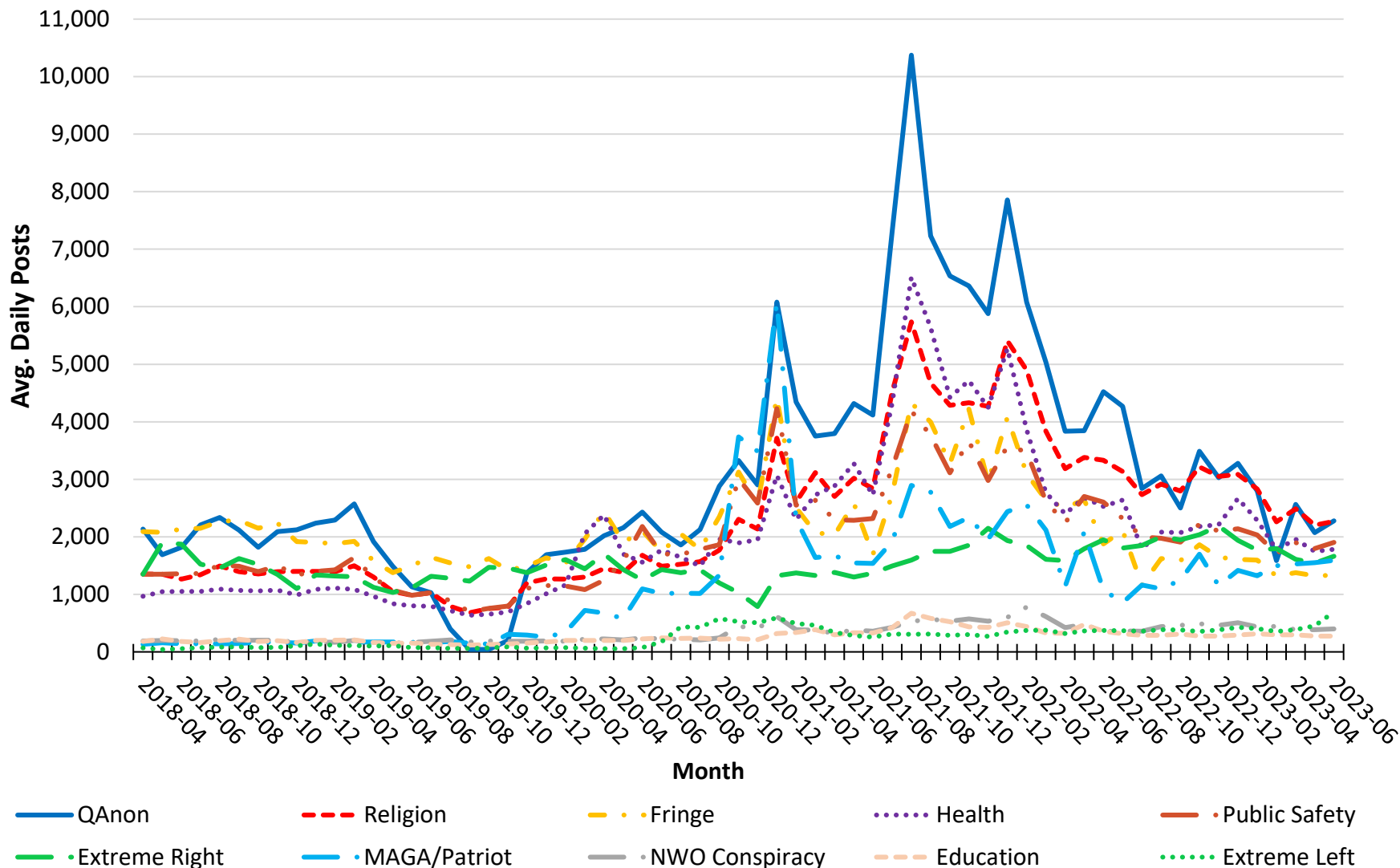


Note: See Appendix C for total recovered posts.

Periods: The period of multiple crises refers to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and 2020 presidential election activity. Platform Transition highlights the rise of new extremist and conspiracists forums in the universe of platforms, many due to their expulsion from Facebook and Twitter and the collapse of Parler.

Figure 2

Avg. Daily Posts by Month for Select Frames



Notes: See Appendix C for total recovered posts by frame. Frames are not mutually exclusive. QAnon and NWO Conspiracy are subframes of a composite NWO Conspiracy frame.

Figure 3

Avg. Daily Activity for Past Four Months for Select Frames

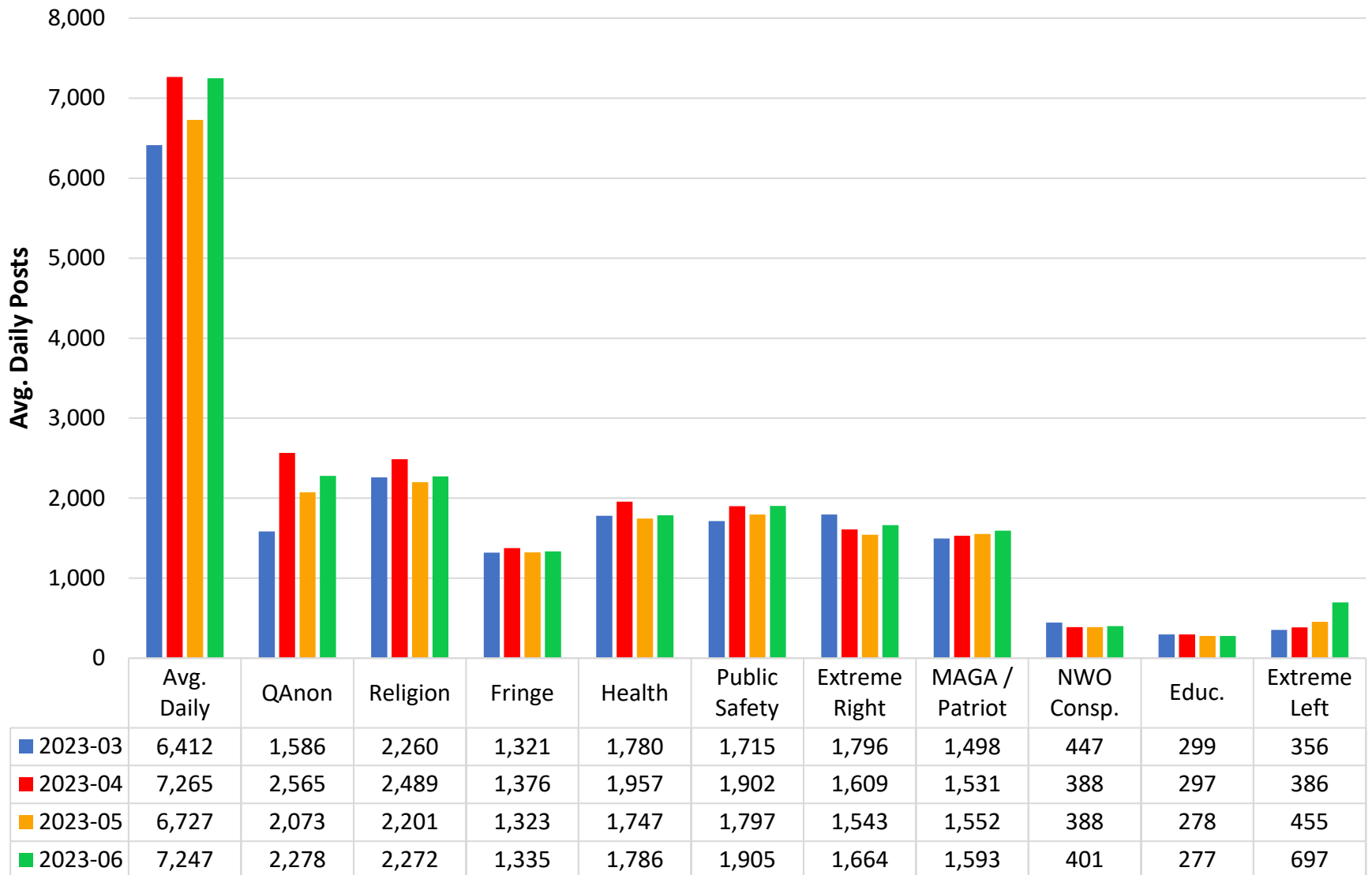


Figure 4

Prevalence by Month for Select Frames (Mean Rates of 25% or More)

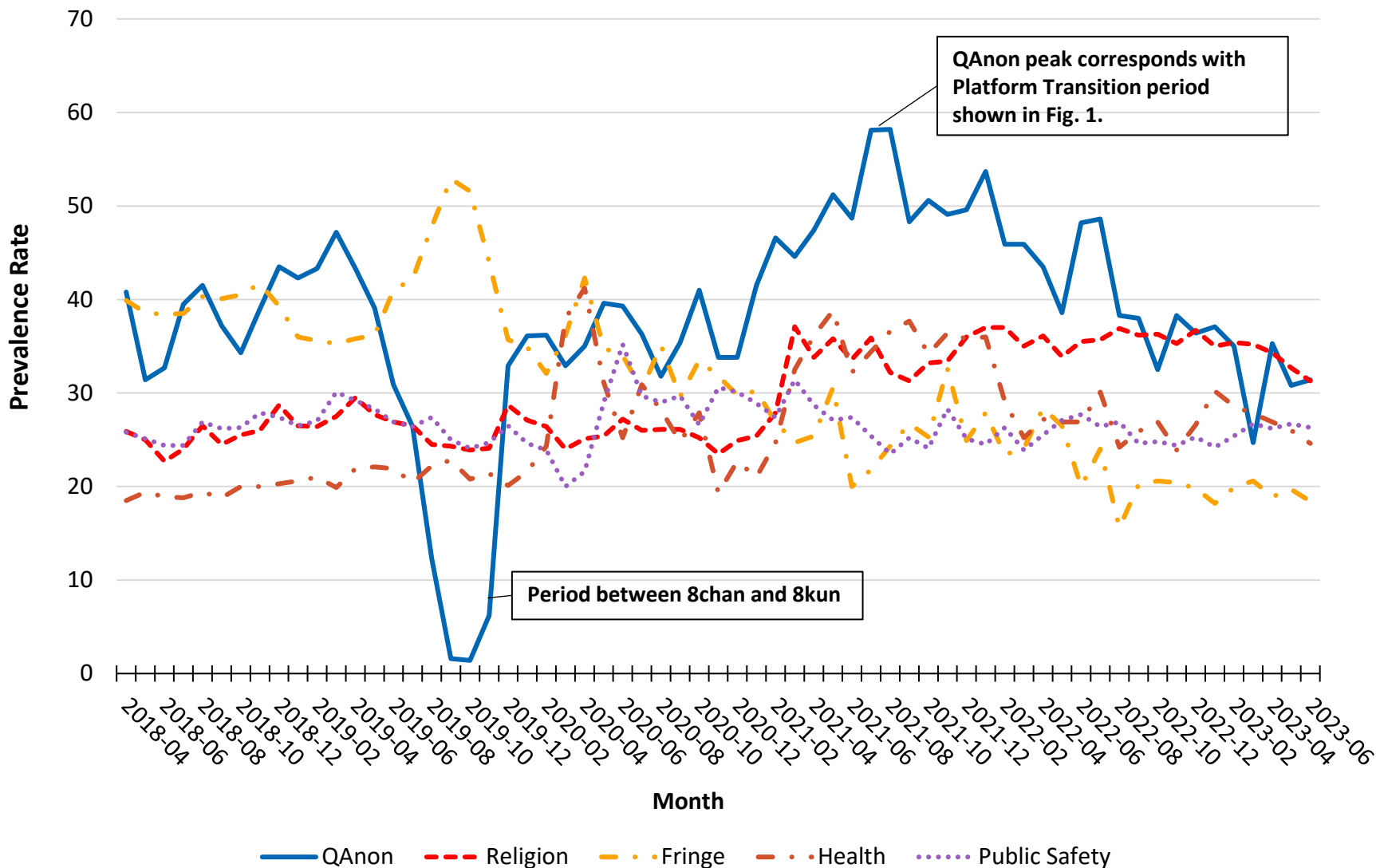


Figure 5

Daily Posts for Most Recent 4 Months

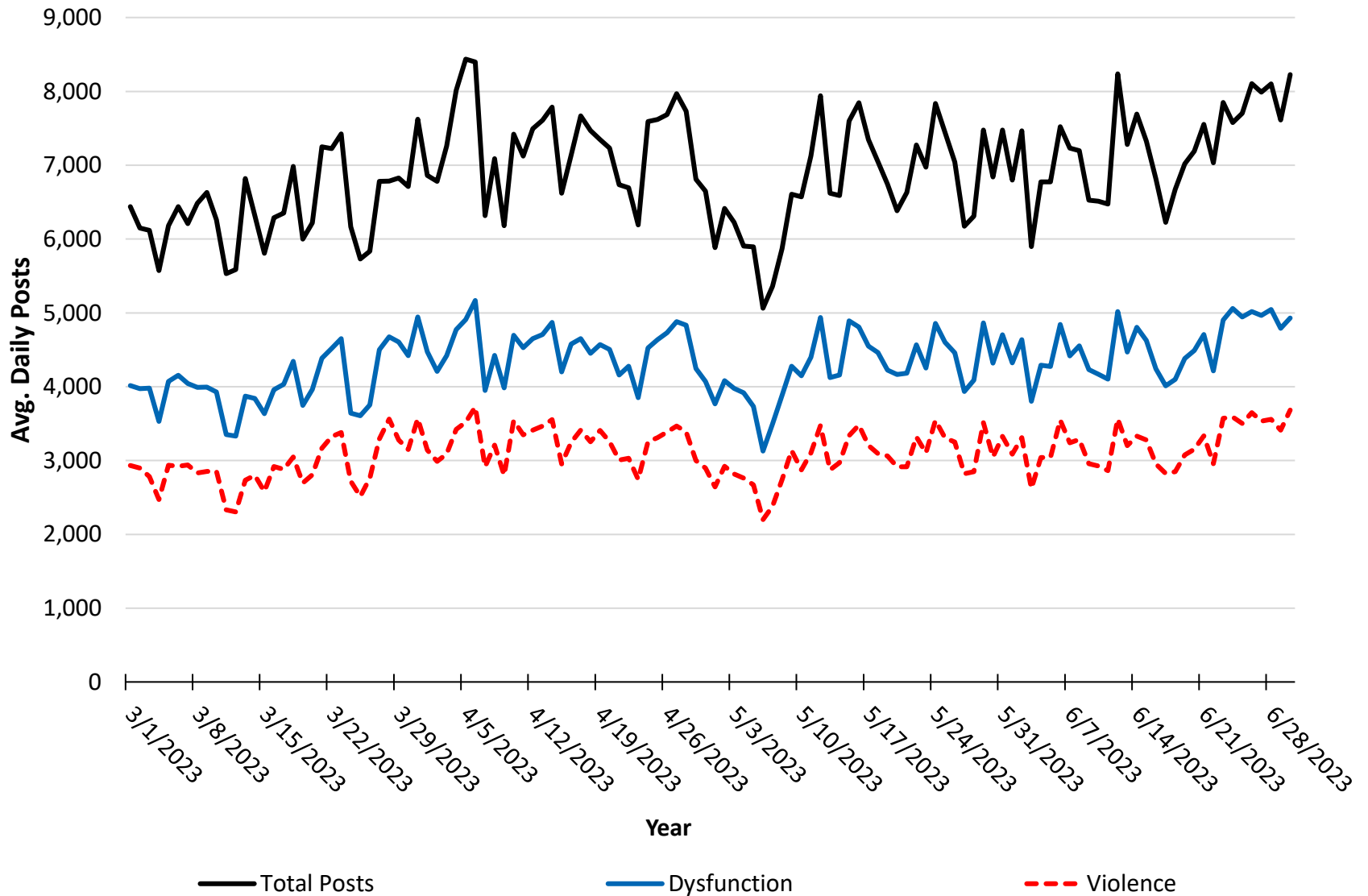


Figure 6

Social Dysfunction and Violence Prevalence and Density by Month

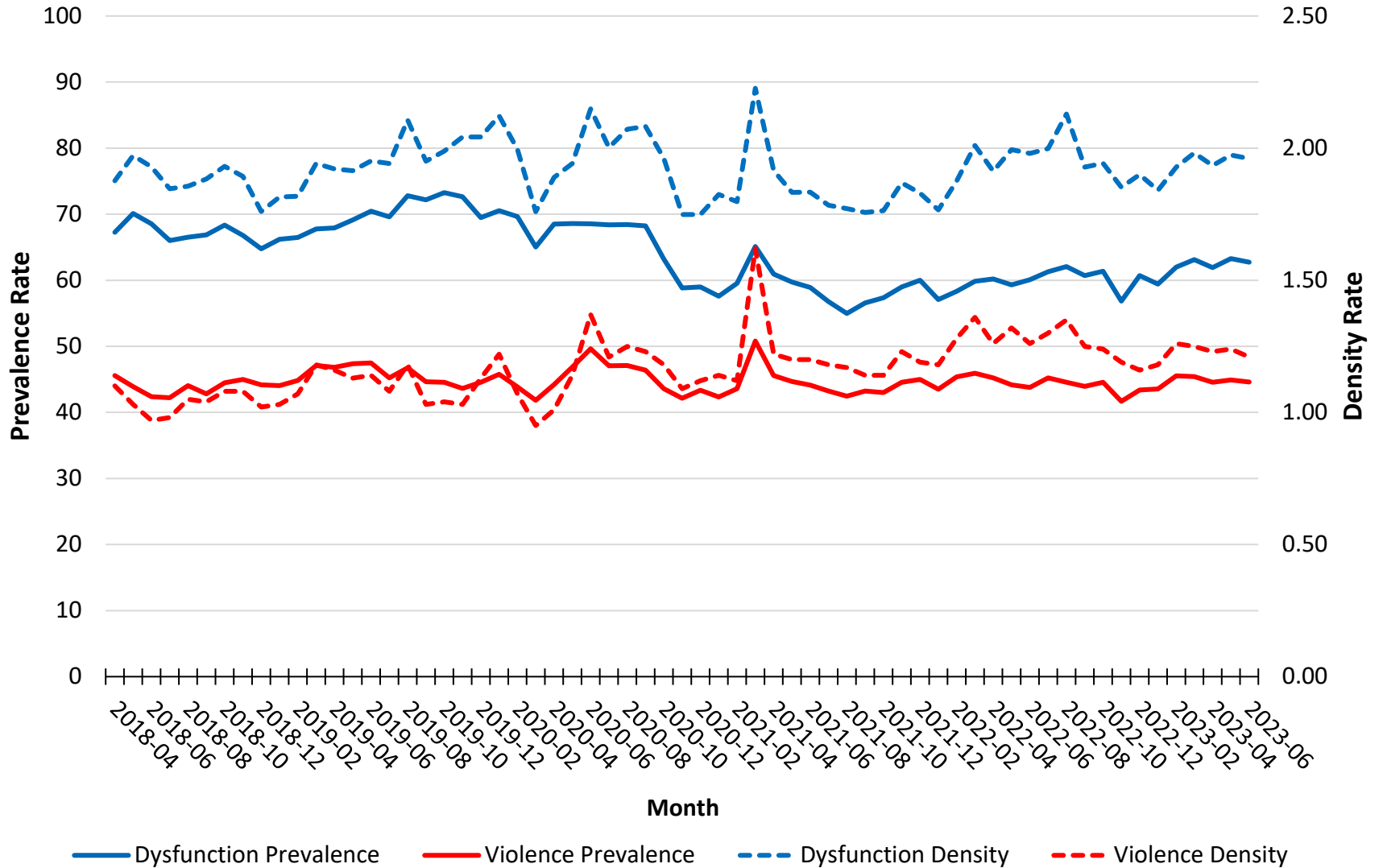
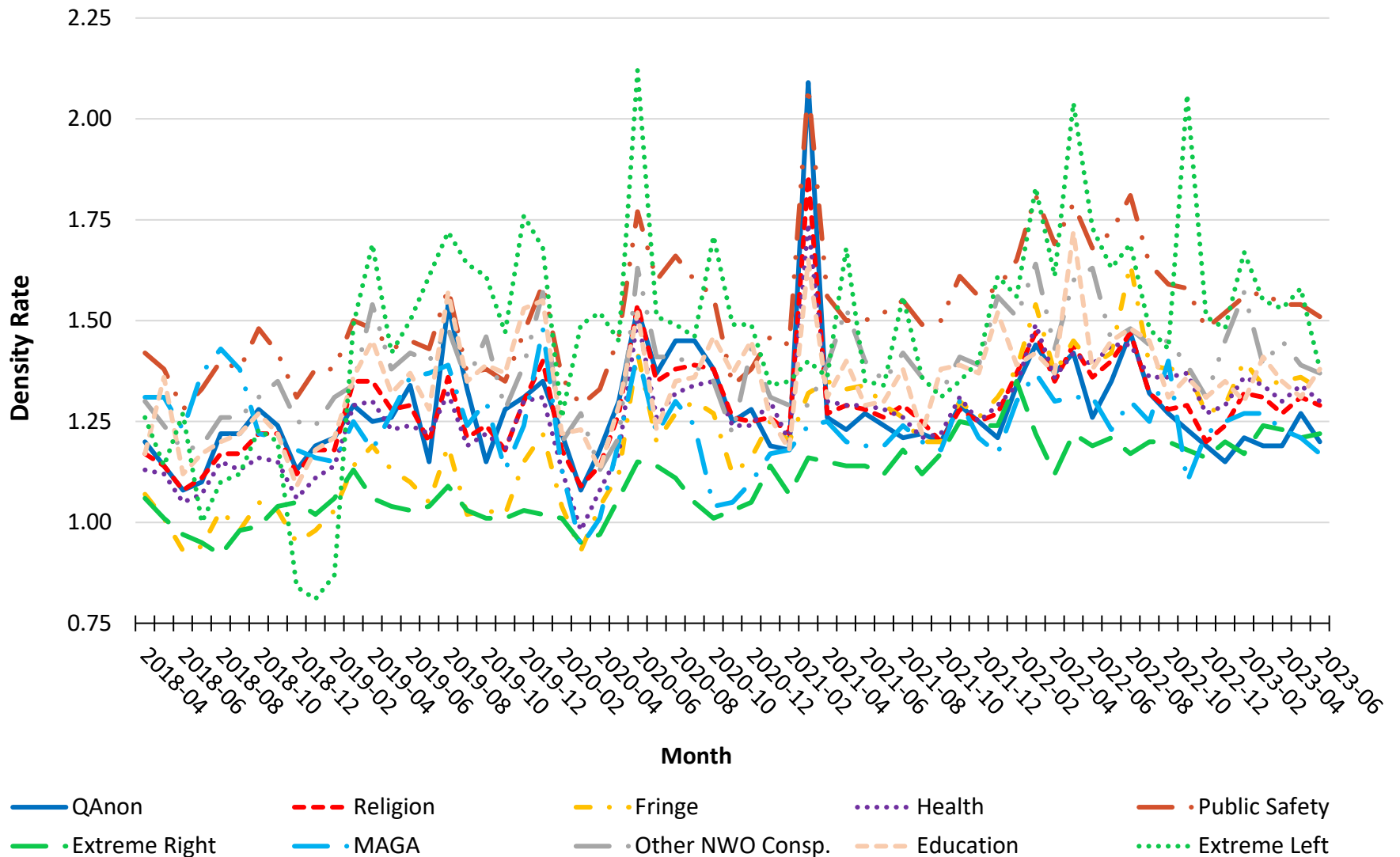


Figure 7

Violence Density by Month for Select Frames



Notes: See Appendix C for total recovered posts by frame. Frames are not mutually exclusive. QAnon and NWO Conspiracy are subframes of a composite NWO Conspiracy frame.

Figure 8

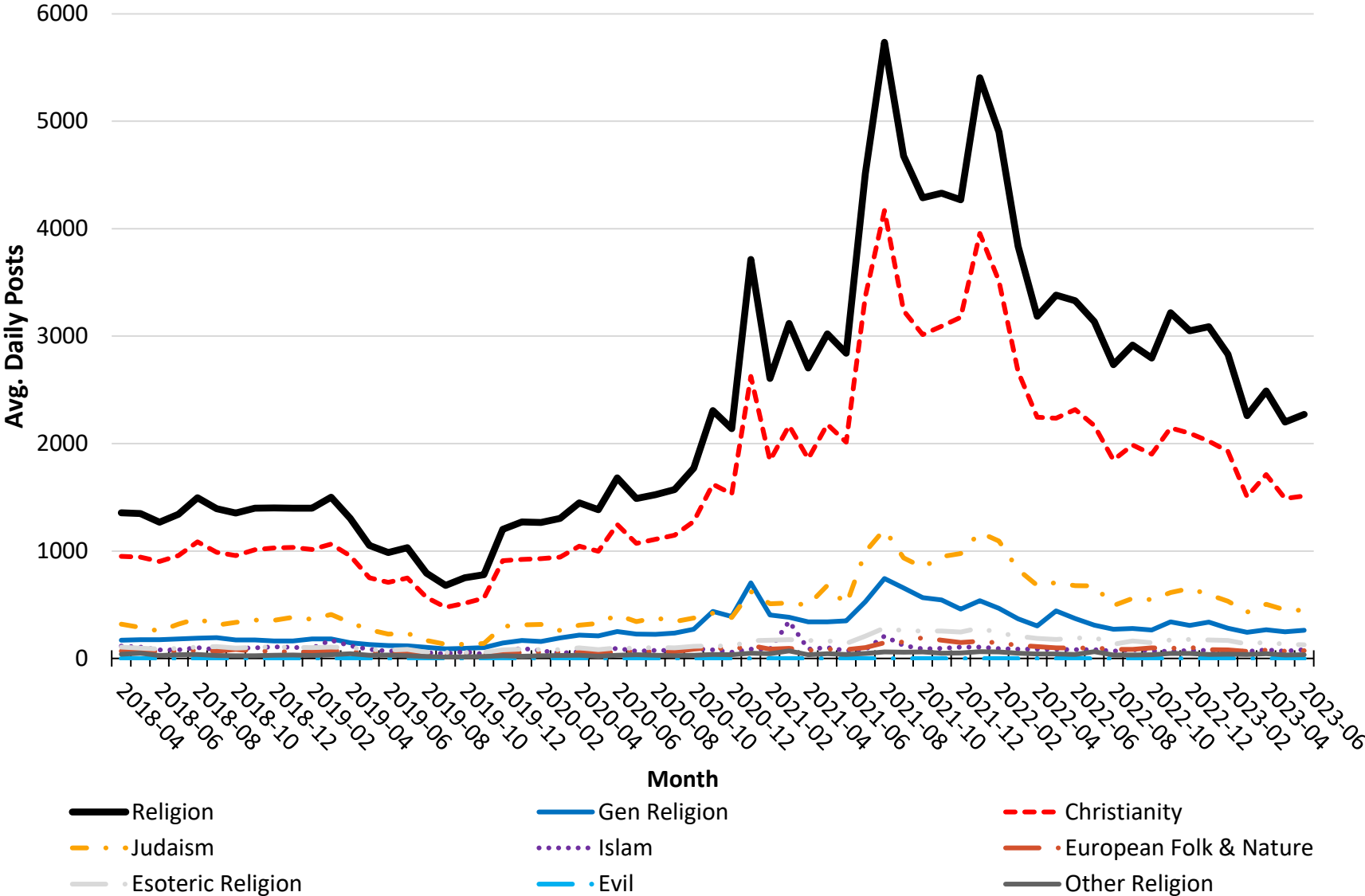
Violence Density by Select Frame and Community (Full Study)

Frame	Online Community									Total
	ER	LF	HM	QA	EL	RE	MA	MS	CF	
PS	1.83	1.67	1.55	1.63	1.63	0.91	1.45	1.58	1.22	1.54
NW	1.50	1.56	1.42	1.39	1.45	1.27	1.28	1.11	0.95	1.23
QA	1.41	1.68	1.73	1.13	1.47	0.92	1.25	0.96	1.36	1.13
RE	1.36	1.37	1.15	1.21	1.34	1.08	1.13	0.96	0.89	1.13
MA	1.35	1.31	1.03	1.12	n/a	1.31	1.05	0.99	n/a	1.13
ED	1.33	1.41	1.07	1.24	1.32	1.11	1.10	1.01	0.88	1.13
HE	1.30	1.38	1.14	1.25	1.23	1.13	1.12	0.94	0.86	1.13
EL	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.09	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.09
FR	1.48	1.49	1.27	1.33	1.41	1.25	1.27	1.04	0.82	1.05
ER	1.34	1.26	n/a	1.23	n/a	1.09	n/a	0.93	0.82	1.00
Total	1.33	1.28	1.15	1.13	1.08	1.08	1.06	0.93	0.82	1.05

Density: 1.67 = high; 1.33 = moderately high. *Frame codes:* PS = Public Safety; NW = NWO Conspiracy; QA = QAnon; RE = Religion; MA = MAGA/Patriot; ED = Education; HE = Health; EL = Extreme Left; FR = Fringe; ER = Extreme Right. *Community codes:* ER = Extreme Right; LF = Libertarian / Freedom Movement; HM = Health Misinformation; QA = QAnon; EL = Extreme Left; RE = Religion; MA = MAGA; MS = Masculinity; CF = Conspiracy / Fringe.

Figure 9

Avg. Daily Posts by Month for Religion Frame



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Figure 10

Prevalence Rate w/in Religion Frame by Month for Select Religion Themes

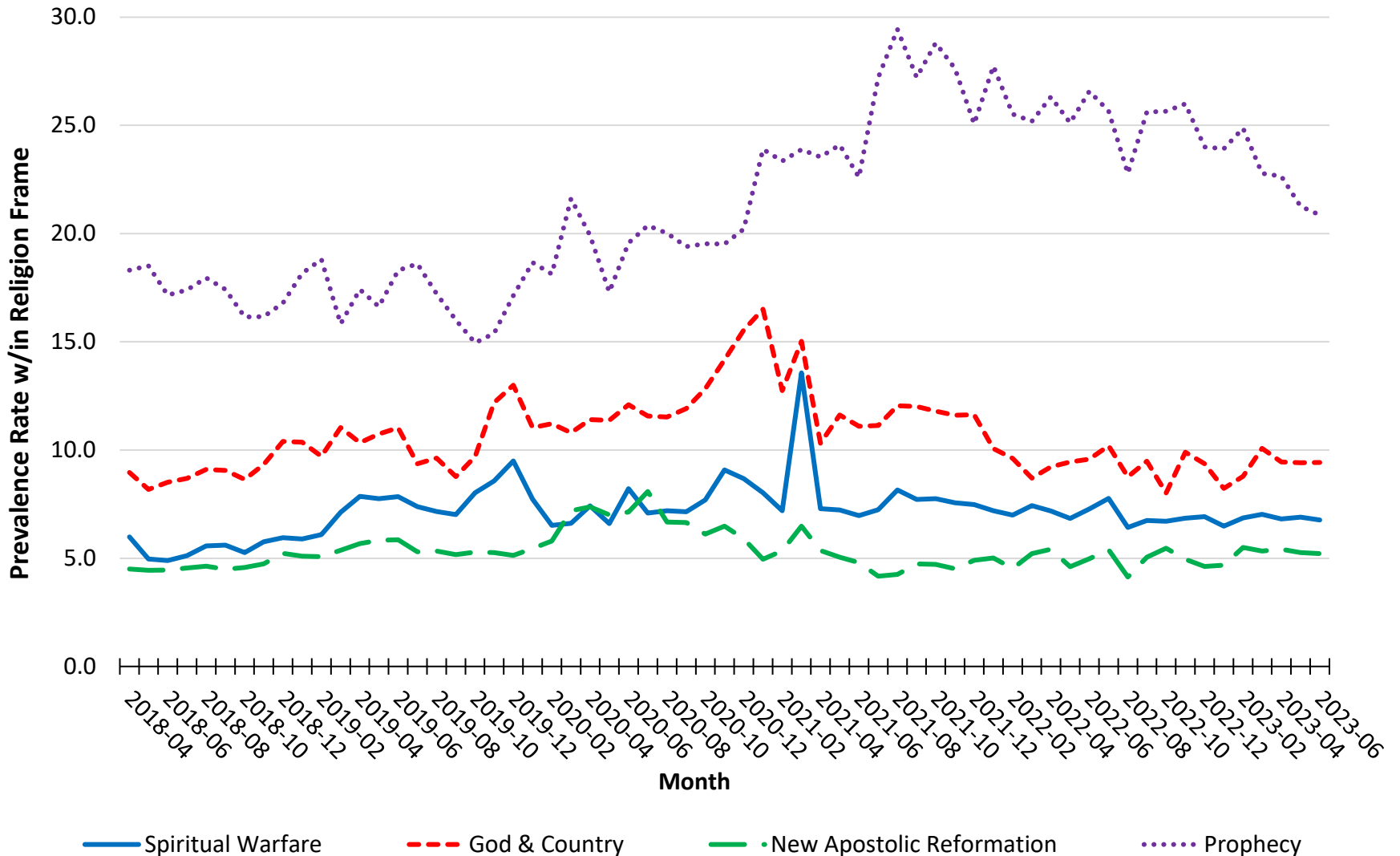


Figure 11

Prevalence w/in Religion Frame by Month for Select Frames

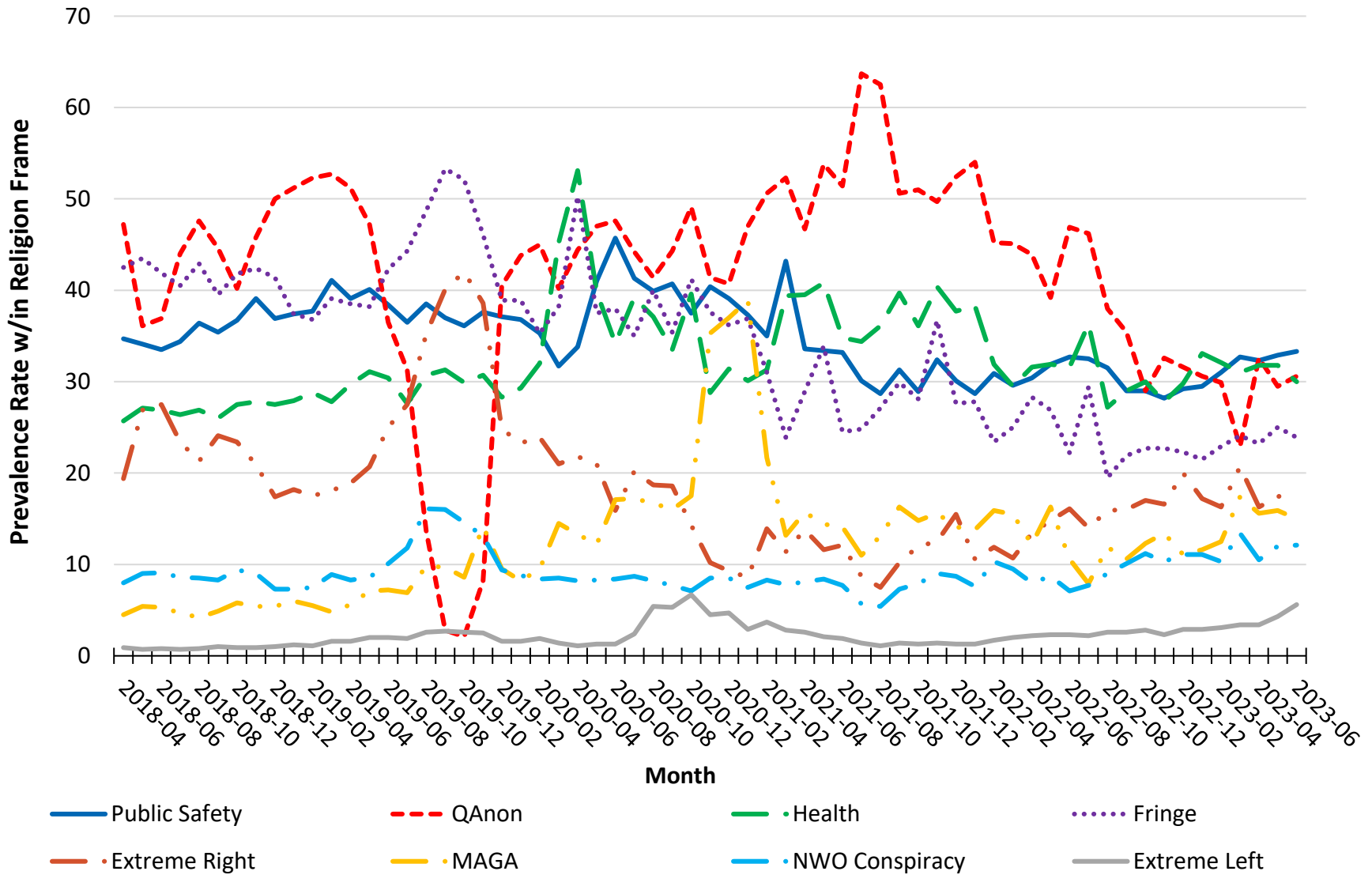


Figure 12

Avg. Daily Posts by Month for Antisemitism Subframe

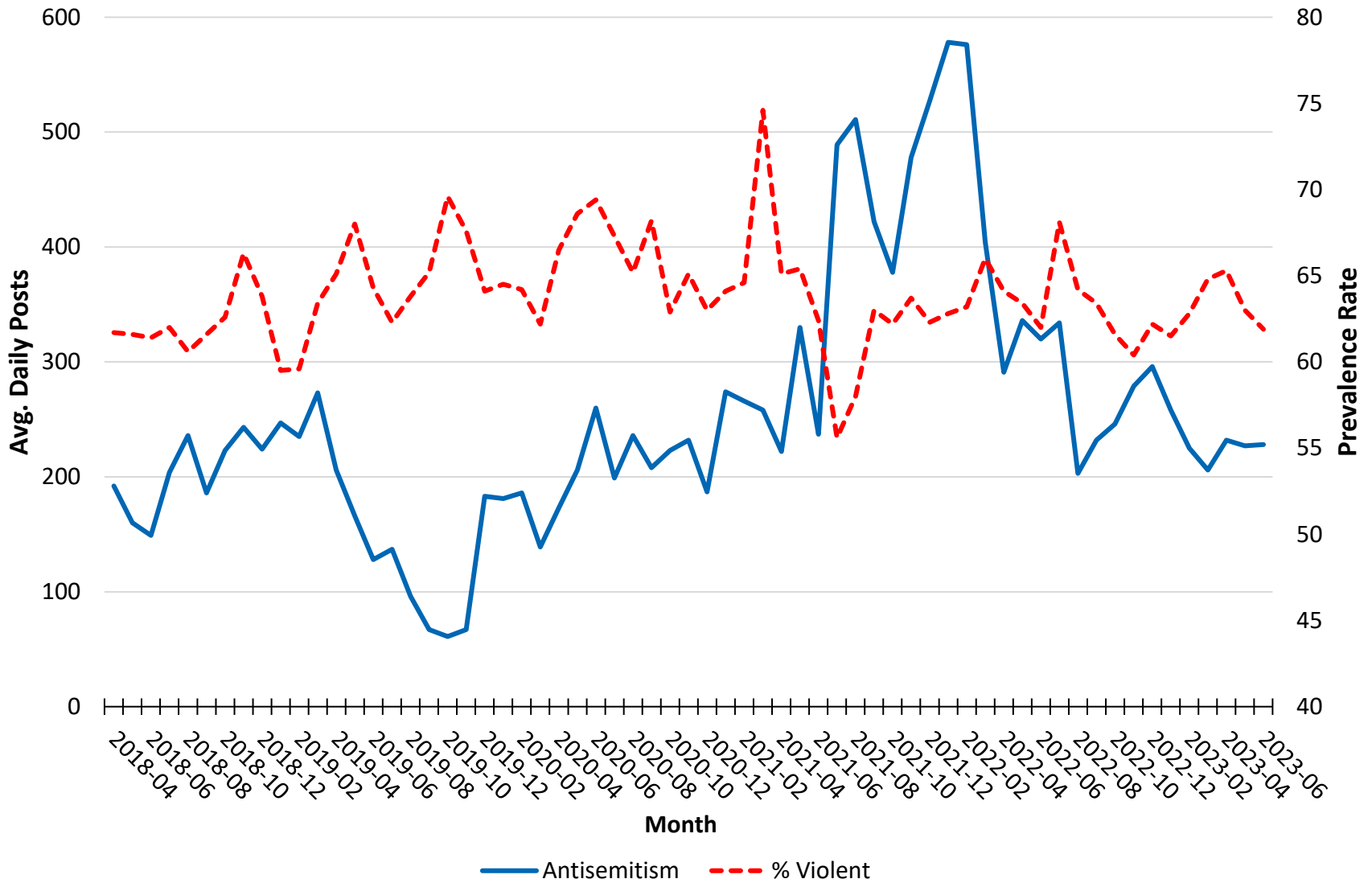


Figure 13

Health Frame Avg. Daily Activity by Month including Most Topics

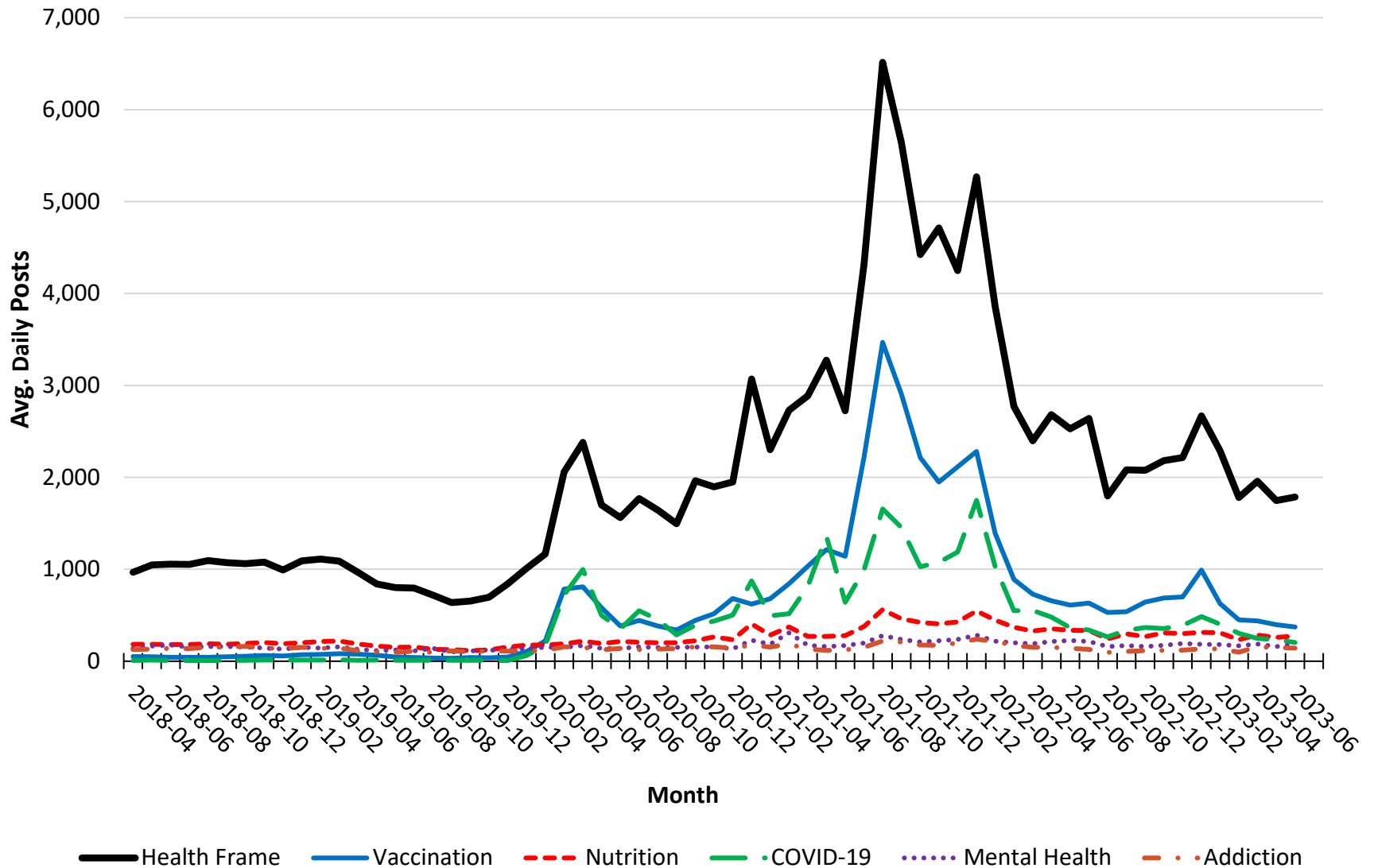


Figure 14

Violence Density by Health Frame including Most Cited Topics

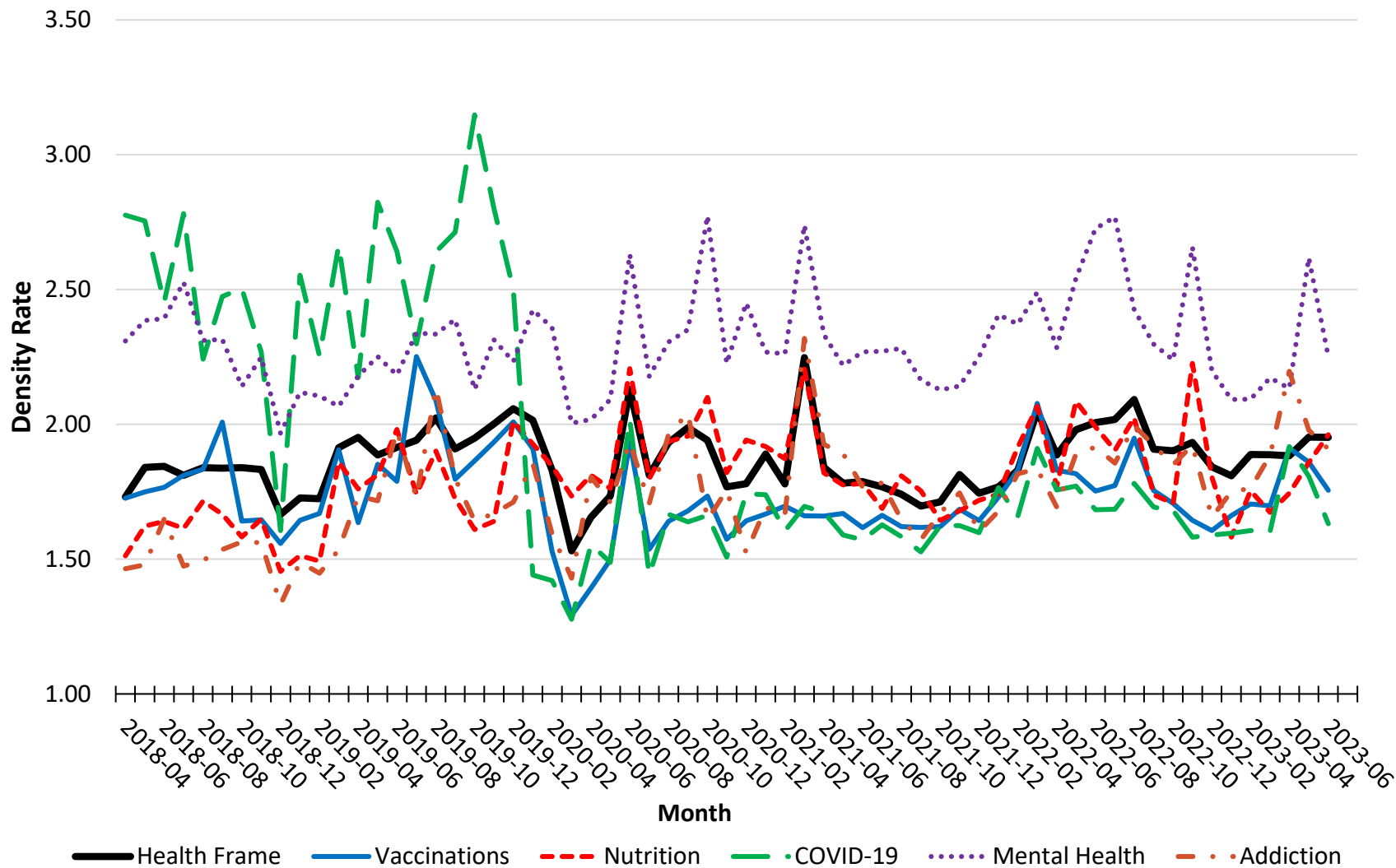


Figure 15

Frame Prevalence w/in Health Frame by Month for Select Frames

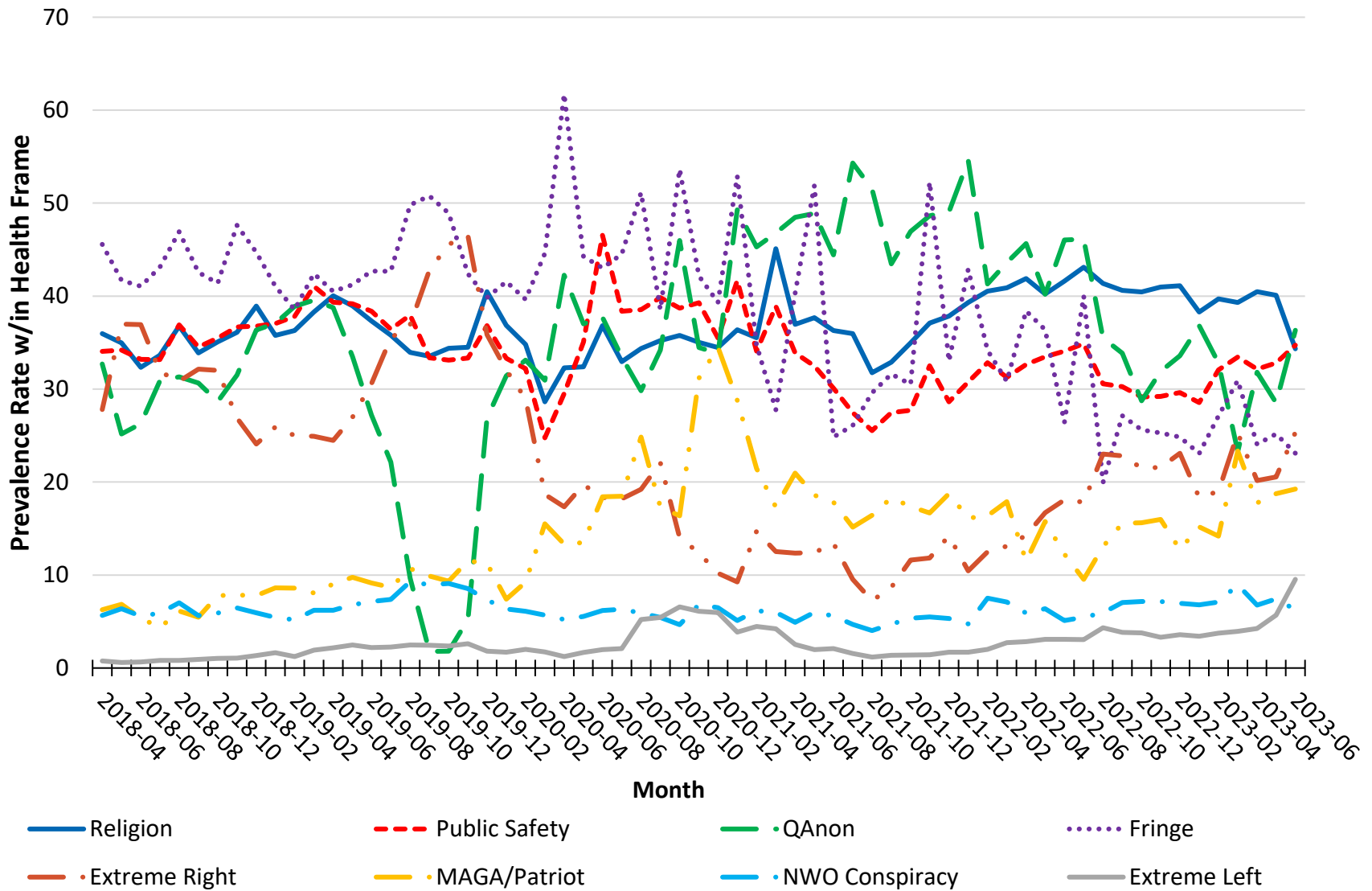


Figure 16

Health Misinformation Sites Avg. Daily Posts by Month

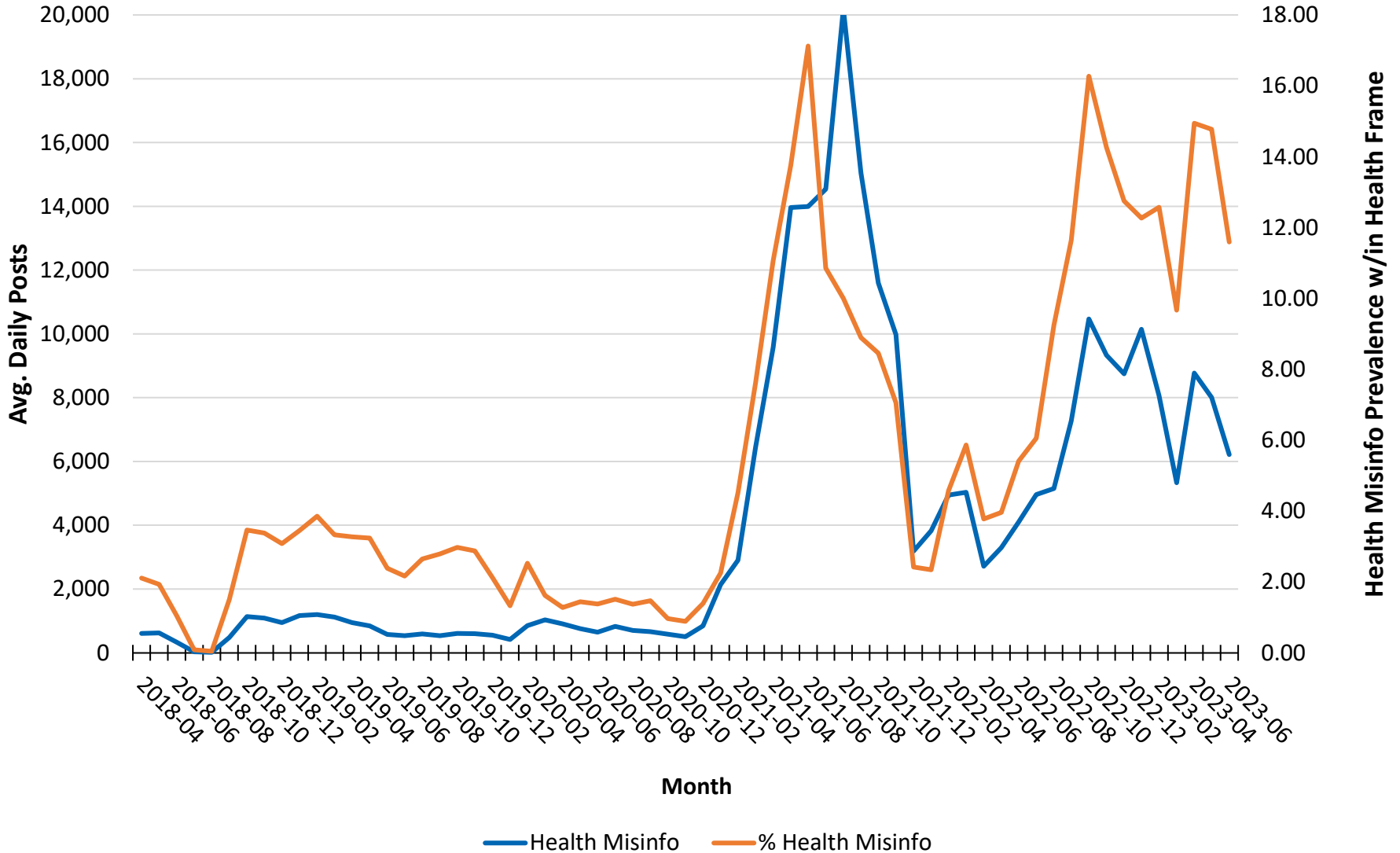


Figure 17

Violence Density for Health Topics by Community (Full Study)

Topic	Online Community									Total
	ER	LF	QA	EL	RE	MA	HM	MS	CF	
COVID	1.43	1.44	1.37	1.32	1.19	1.20	1.12	0.96	0.91	1.21
Vaccines	1.43	1.44	1.37	1.31	1.20	1.20	1.12	0.97	0.91	1.20
Food	1.43	1.43	1.36	1.32	1.17	1.20	1.09	0.97	0.90	1.20
Mental Health	1.43	1.42	1.36	1.31	1.17	1.20	1.09	0.97	0.89	1.18
Addiction	1.43	1.43	1.36	1.26	1.17	1.20	1.08	0.97	0.88	1.19
Contag. Diseases	1.41	1.43	1.36	1.31	1.17	1.20	1.09	0.96	0.90	1.19
Cancer	1.38	1.39	1.35	1.21	1.15	1.18	1.09	0.96	0.88	1.18
Cardio	1.42	1.41	1.36	1.21	1.16	1.19	1.10	0.95	0.88	1.18
Respiratory	1.35	1.34	1.35	1.09	1.12	1.16	1.09	0.92	0.86	1.16
Diabetes / Obesity	1.27	1.31	1.33	1.04	1.05	1.12	1.04	0.91	0.84	1.13
Total	1.38	1.36	1.24	1.25	1.15	1.12	1.13	0.98	0.88	1.13

Figure 18

Avg. Daily Activity by Month for Education Subframe

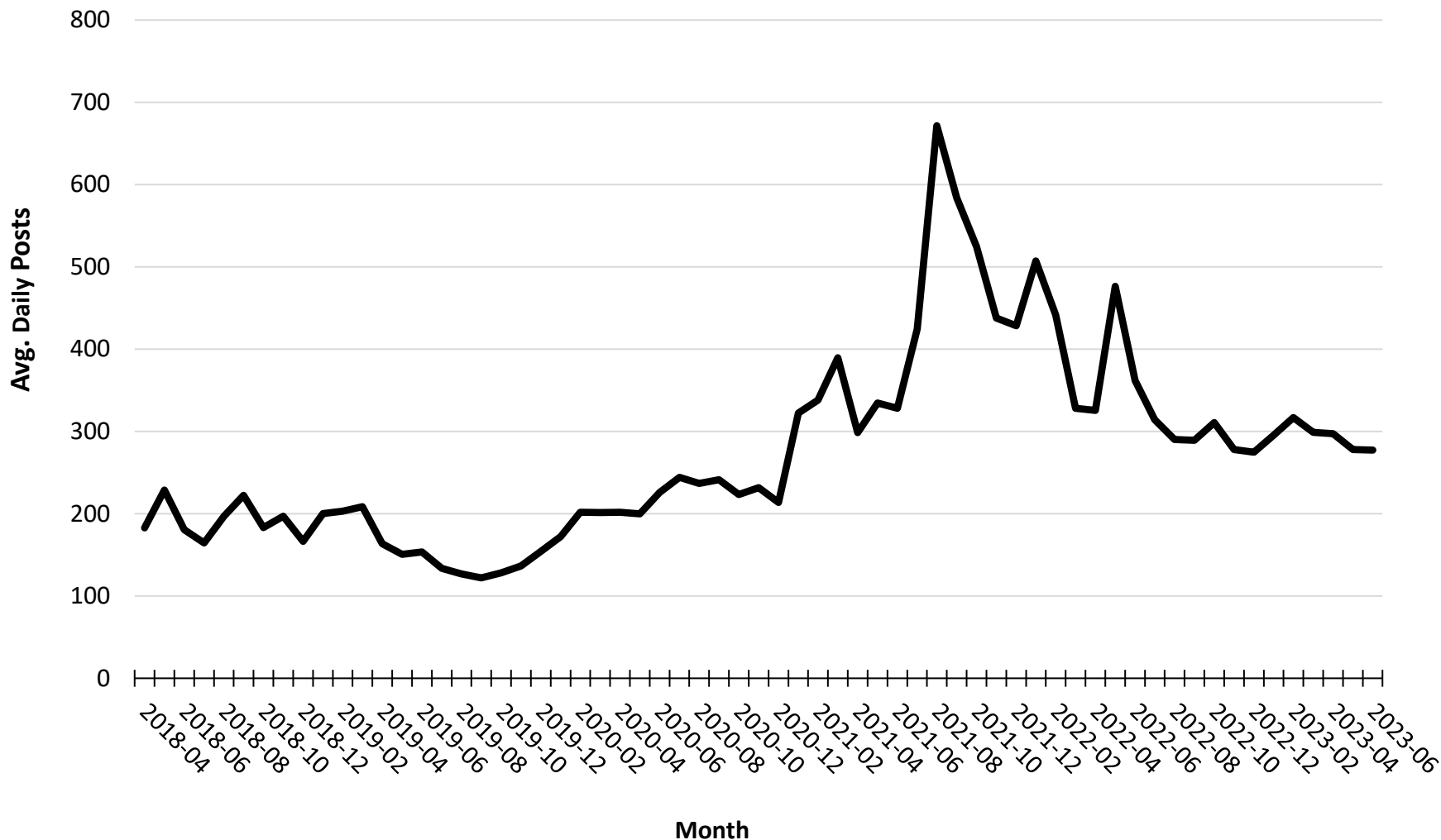


Figure 19

Avg. Daily Posts for Public Safety Frame and Subframes by Month

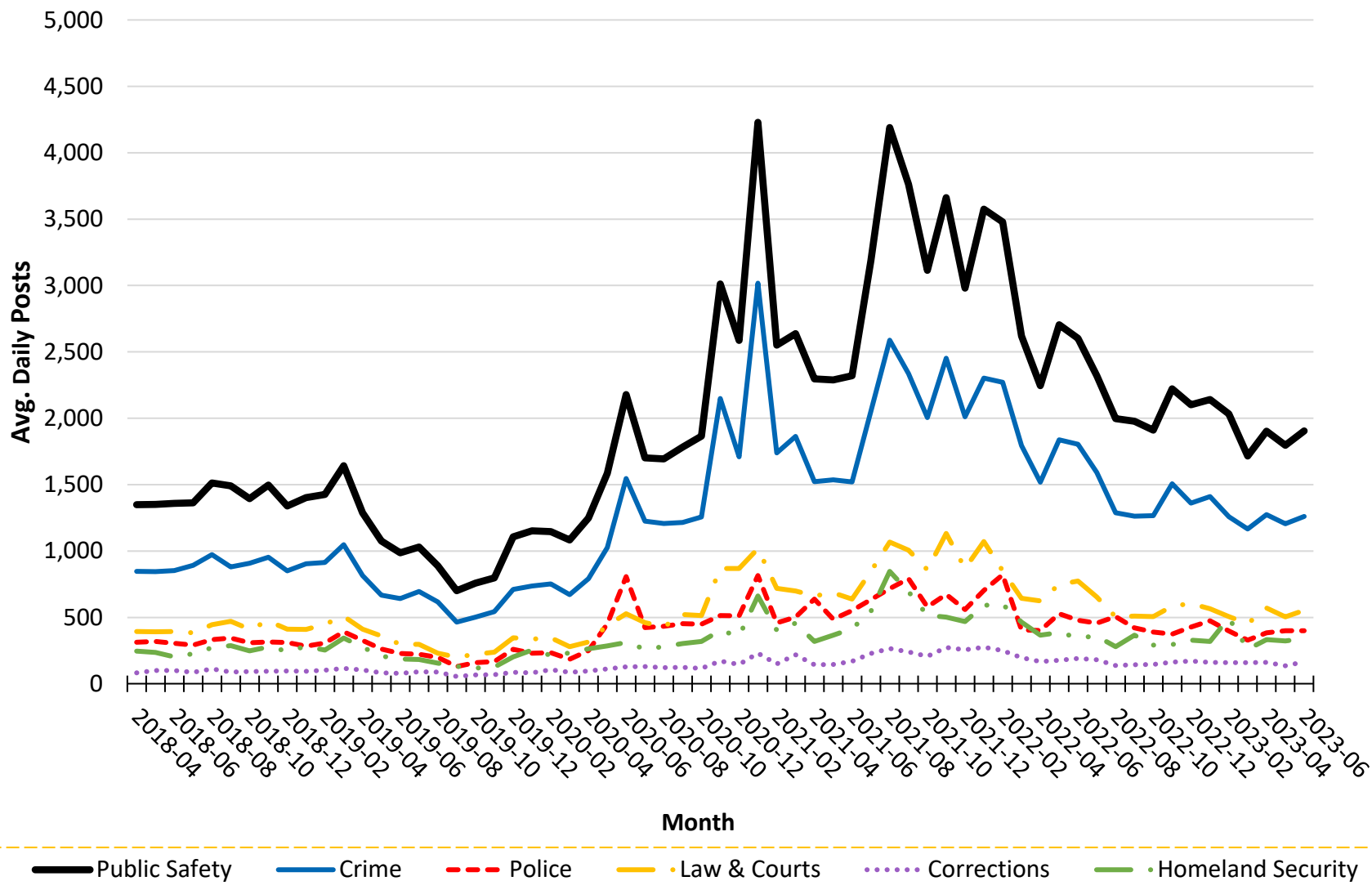


Figure 20

Avg. Daily Posts for Pedophilia and Child Sex Trafficking

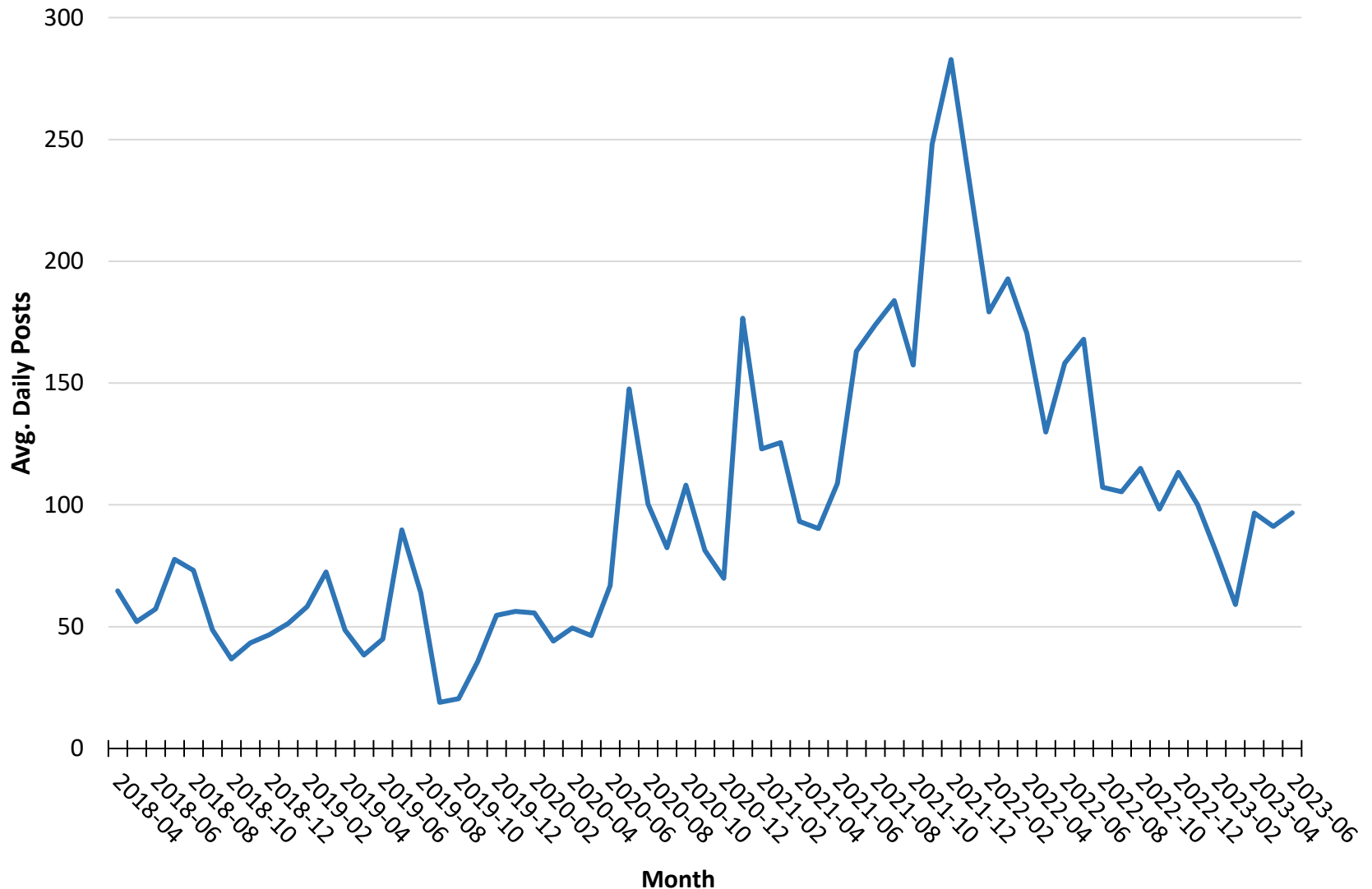
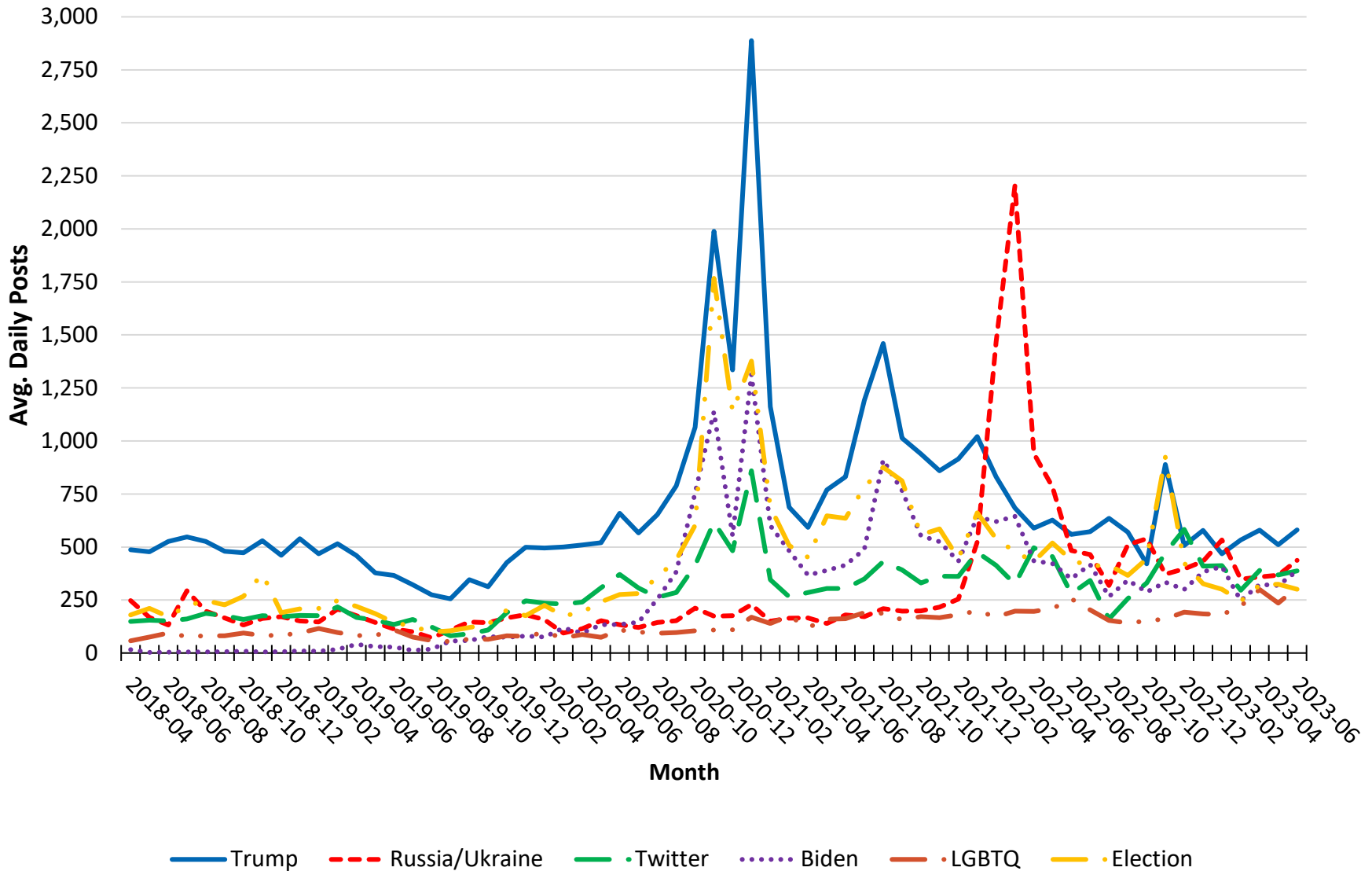


Figure 21

Avg. Daily Posts for Contemporary Topics by Month



Appendix A

Frame Definitions

Activity: Measured as prevalence rate and density rate


Frame: A group of posts identified by theme or community type

Theme: Based on key words, phrases, or stems

Community: A self-defined forum or channel on a web site or social-media platform

Appendix B

Posts by Platform

Platform	# Posts	% Posts
Telegram	3,893,183	27.0%
8kun	3,037,274	21.1%
Incel.is	2,166,971	15.0%
Communities.Win	2,132,273	14.8%
Other	1,954,470	13.6%
Hexbear	328,946	2.3%
Ron Paul / Liberty Forum	168,884	1.2%
Stormfront	154,273	1.1%
Rapture Forums	124,698	0.9%
Graham Hancock	96,796	0.7%
Raddle	87,766	0.6%
WorldNetDaily (WND)	77,533	0.5%
Health.news	39,436	0.3%
Gateway Pundit	33,045	0.2%
Anarchist News	30,949	0.2%
Daily Stormer	28,962	0.2%
Palmer Report	25,400	0.2%
American Renaissance	17,292	0.1%
EndChan	8,215	0.1%
Taki's Magazine	2,704	0.0%
Unicorn Riot	970	0.0%
Total	14,410,040 	100.0%

Appendix C

Select Frame Counts

Frame	3/23 or Before	4/23 or Later	Total	% Total
Total	13,567,388	842,652	14,410,040	100.0
QAnon	5,677,372	258,710	5,936,082	41.2
Religion	4,197,110	281,115	4,478,225	31.1
Fringe	3,980,092	163,306	4,143,398	28.8
Health	3,789,715	221,637	4,011,352	27.8
Dysfunction	3,599,192	226,765	3,825,957	26.6
Public Safety	3,586,979	223,061	3,810,040	26.4
Extreme Right	2,743,598	201,693	2,945,291	20.4
MAGA / Patriot	2,103,470	188,294	2,291,764	15.9
NWO Conspiracy	589,814	49,546	639,360	4.4
Extreme Left	434,337	57,635	491,972	3.4

Appendix D

Interpreting Key Results

Purposive Sample

- The purposive sample should be thought of as a particular type of indicator, like a stock market indicator. It provides an important look at trends, but it is not the only way that “market” activity can be measured.
- The purposive sample is designed to capture the diversity of the MEC sector and thus may oversample some groups, so it may be hard to compare volume numbers across forum types. Nonetheless, many of the best known channels in the sector are included in the study, so the trends within a forum type are noteworthy.
- I use a disseminated-based strategy to manage the complications of informed consent and protect confidentiality and copyright ownership of content creators and platforms (Franzke et al., 2020).

Definitions

- *Average Daily Posts*: The number of posts divided by the number of days in the time period.
- *Prevalence Rate*: The percent of posts where a particular theme is present. The effect size for prevalence rates is interpreted using Cohen’s d with no frame activity as the benchmark. As a result, a high or large amount of activity is deemed present when the prevalence rate exceeds 25%, a moderate level of activity is achieved above 15%, and a small activity is regarded as present at 5%.
- *Density Rate*: The percent of words where a particular theme is present. Assuming the typical English-language sentence is 15 words and a theme is mentioned once in a sentence, the density rate would be 6.67. Thus, using Cohen’s d , a high level of activity is deemed present when the density rate is above 1.67, a moderate rate exceeds 1.00, and a small level of activity is regarded as present at 0.33.

Note: Thresholds for prevalence and density rates may be recalculated once non-MEC benchmarks are established.

References

General Background

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Merlan, A. (2019). *Republic of lies: American conspiracy theorists and their surprising rise to power*. Metropolitan Books

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press.

Report Citations

franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. Association of Internet Researchers. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>

Hagen, S., Straume, Ø., Bishop, E., Vavra, M., Koščík, M., Štebe, J., Ryan, L., Rød, L.M., Payne, E., Somby, A., L'Hours, H., Emery, T., Cizek, T., Krejci J., Høgetveit, M., & Jessop, C. (2019). *Guidelines on the use of social media data in survey research. Deliverable 6.2 of the SERISS project funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme GA No: 654221*. <https://seriss.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/SERISS-D6.2.-Guidelines-social-media-data-.pdf>

Rogers, R. L. (2021). Spiritual warfare and the Apocalypse: The religious framing of political violence among the American new right. In Crews, G., Markey, M. A., & Kerr, S., Eds., *Mitigating mass violence and managing threats in contemporary society*. IGI Global.

This report identifies patterns and tracks trends related to the framing of social and political extremism in conspiracy and right-leaning extremist discussion forums. The methodology implements automated text analysis based on key words, phrases, and word stems on a purposive from 13 major web-based and social-media platforms.

These numbers are top-line and are released through monthly and quarterly reports to facilitate timely monitoring. Although the trends in activity are interesting in themselves, the reports are not “market share” or “share of voice” reports because of the purposive nature of the sample. It is quite easy to get a different result simply by chance the mix of online forums. For example, if I want the religion frame to be the largest, I add more religion forums.

In spite of this limitation, the following should be noted:

1. Findings from the study are credible because the research includes several large, well-known discussion forums that are regarded as newsworthy.
2. Looking at the trend lines is a logical first step, even in a purposive study, if for no other reason than to see if the times lines correspond with known trends.
3. While the absolute numbers are easily misinterpreted when discussing overall volume and comparisons across sites, the use of a purposive sample can yield meaningful conclusions about trends within an online community, and comparisons of characteristics of online communities can be reasonably made when the data is standardized, e.g., comparisons are made on percentages and not absolute values.

The intent is not to address all issues in a single document. Rather, activity reporting is the first step in addressing key qualitative questions about how conspiracists and extremist movements coopt existing mainstream beliefs and practices to legitimate their positions and mobilize followers. The key questions include:

1. What frames are used to legitimate extremist views and interpretations of current events?
2. How has the use of frames in support of extremism changed over time?
3. What interactions are forming between frames?
4. To what extent do extremism, conspiracism, and fringe beliefs constitute a unified system of ideology, and to what extent are they decoupled?
5. To what extent are extremism, conspiracism, and fringe beliefs becoming mainstream?

Some specific issues are tracked with an eye on further research:

1. To what extent is religious discourse turning militaristic?
2. To what extent is political discussion turning violent? Most notably I am paying attention to the ongoing promotion of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 presidential election.
3. How is the core mythology of QAnon evolving?
4. How is QAnon and other New World Conspiracy theories interacting with religious communities?
5. What is hypermasculinity, and how is it influencing extremist discourse?
6. What conspiracy theories and misinformation are infiltrating the discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The quarterly reports will provide the most detailed top-line analysis, supplemented by monthly updates through flash reports. In addition, separate reports regarding the tracking of trends related to left-wing extremism, public-health (mis)information, and religion forums are in development. Detailed analysis of trends will be handled through peer-reviewed publications.

Coding has been made public and a link to a publicly shared Google drive can be online at <https://www.rogersperspectives.com/tracking-of-extremism-report>