

China Dissent Monitor

Issue 8: April – June 2024

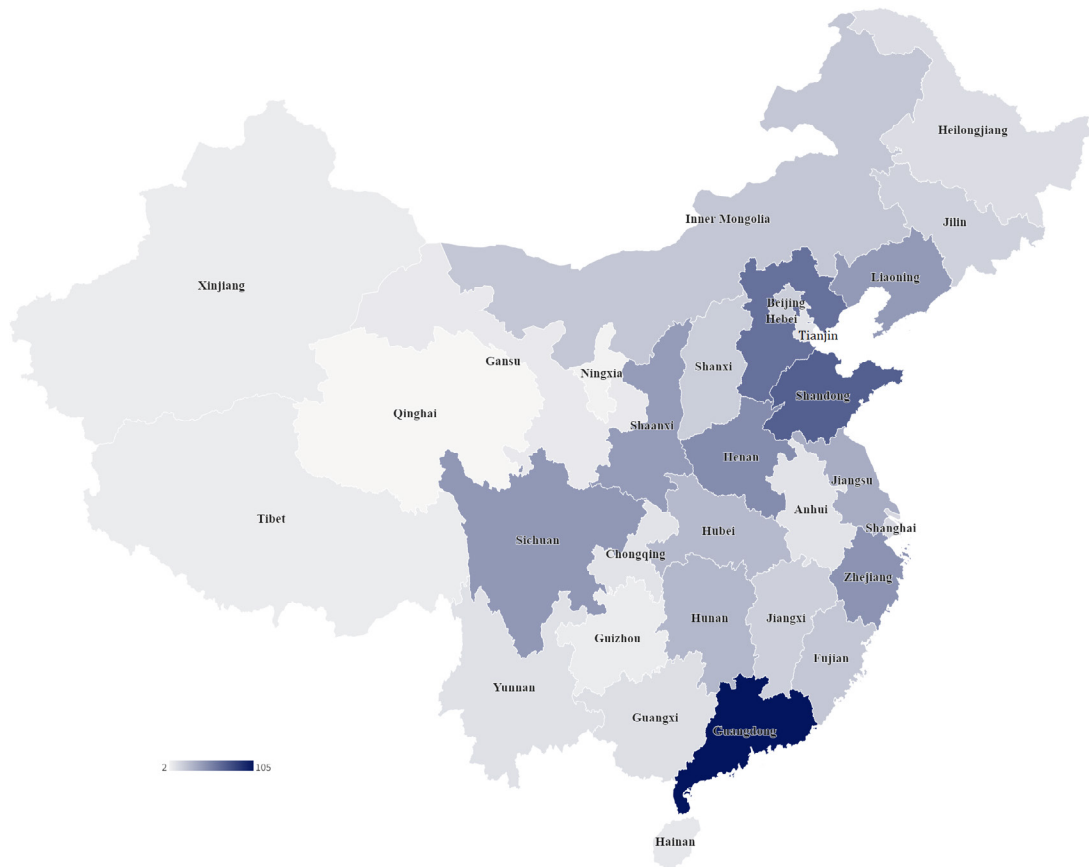
DISSENT EVENTS: 6,396

WHAT IS THE CHINA DISSENT MONITOR?

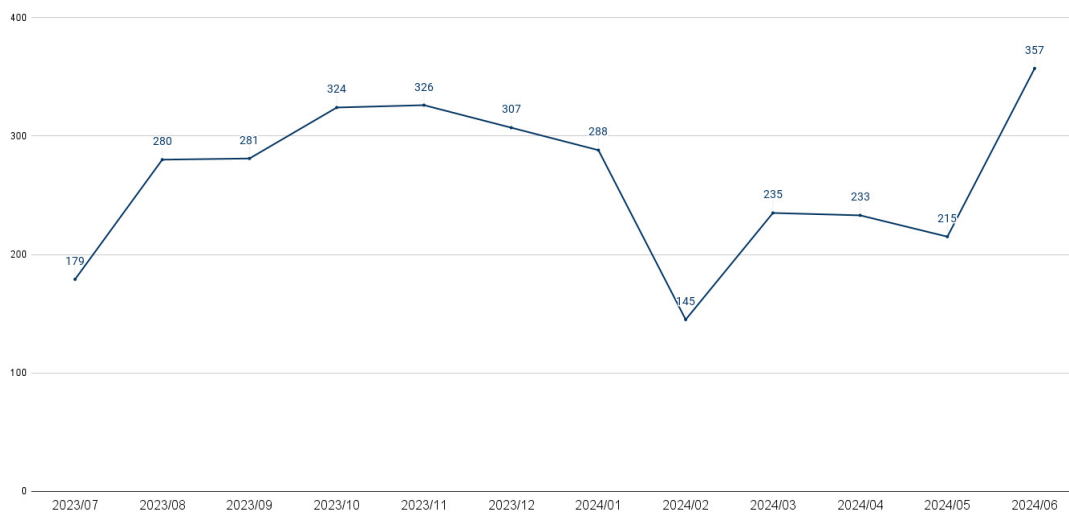
The China Dissent Monitor (CDM) collects and shares information about the frequency and diversity of dissent in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was created in response to the information gap resulting from media restrictions in the PRC and risks associated with collecting information from within the country about dissent and protest. The project prioritizes capturing offline collective action in public spaces, though cases of less public and online dissent are also included to illustrate diversity among dissent actions. Sources for the CDM database include news reports, civil society organizations, and PRC-based social media, including the application of a machine-learning algorithm developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Doublethink Lab. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Documenting nearly 6,400 dissent events over two years.** CDM logged 805 dissent events in the second quarter of 2024, a 18 percent increase over the same period in 2023. The majority of events are labor (44 percent) and homeowner (21 percent) protests, with the remainder involving diverse groups like rural residents, students, parents, investors, consumers, members of religious groups, activists, Tibetans, ethnic Mongolians, and members of the LGBT+ community. The top regions for protest events were Guangdong (13 percent), followed by Shandong, Hebei, Henan, and Zhejiang. CDM has logged a total of 6,300 cases of dissent since data collection began in June 2022.
- **Land grabs and corruption in rural China.** CDM documented 228 protests led by rural residents over the past two years, most of which were linked to forced relocation and unfair land acquisition. These cases shed light on the corruption and discontent that arises from widespread land expropriation.
- **Changing landscape for transportation leads to driver protests.** CDM analyzed 91 protests led by taxi, ride-hailing, delivery, bus, and truck drivers in China. Many of these events were sparked by policies affecting transportation workers, such as regulation on ride-hailing apps and self-driving taxis.
- **Over 2,800 protests linked to the struggling property sector.** Dissent by homeowners and construction workers constitute 44 percent of all dissent cases in CDM's database, reflecting the major impact of the real estate crisis on citizens' livelihoods. Despite central government attempts to abate the sector's collapse, CDM data indicates that protest frequency has not declined.
- **Top protest cities.** Analysis of CDM's data collected over two years indicates that Shenzhen, Xi'an, and Sanya have more protests over economic grievances on a per capita basis than any other cities in China. Many other highly ranked cities are located in Guangdong Province.



Distribution of protest events (April to June 2024)

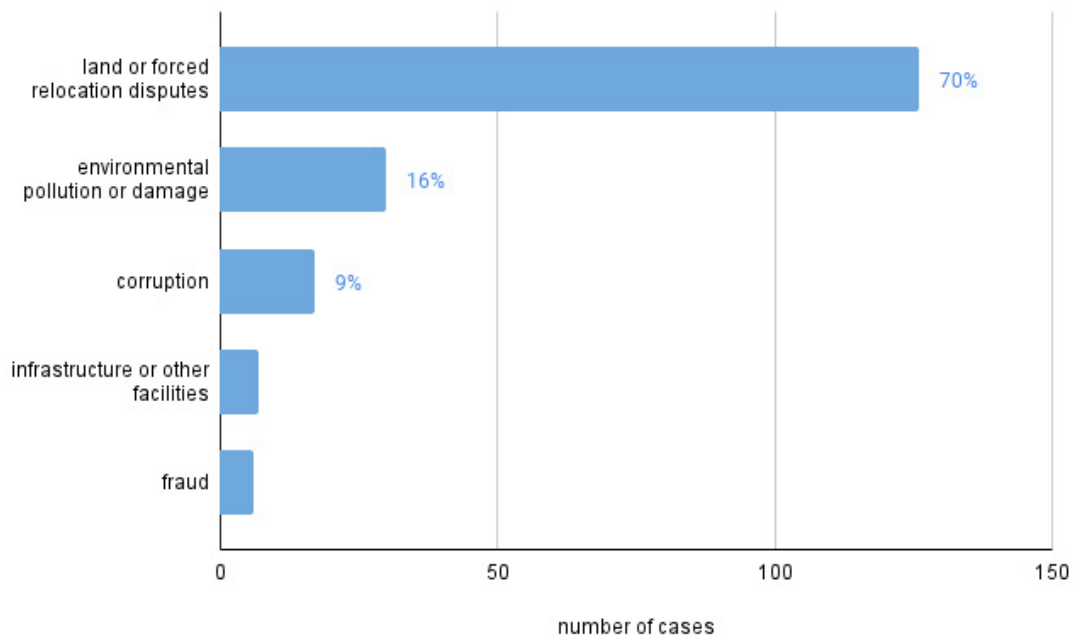


Total dissent events recorded, by month

FEATURED ANALYSIS

RURAL RESIDENTS VOICE DISCONTENT OVER LAND DISPUTES

Rural dissent driven by land disputes and forced relocation. Since June 2022, CDM has recorded 228 protest events led by rural residents. Among cases that have been fully coded, 70 percent are related to land disputes, most of which involve grievances against forced relocation or unfair land acquisition practices. These events span a wide geographic area across 24 provinces and cities. Previous [research](#) indicates there is probably much more rural dissent in China that CDM has not documented. This could be the result of censorship or because such protesters are less likely to post online than urban residents. As such, this dataset should only be viewed as a sample of a larger number of protests.



Issues linked to rural dissent

Unfair compensation and government corruption. Since the mid-1990s, rapid urbanization has led to conflicts over rural land expropriation and significant social unrest in China, including the [Wukan protests](#) that stunned the world in 2011. While urban land is state-owned, rural land belongs to village collectives. Motivated by the profits of land capitalization, rural governments often sell land to corporations for property development or for construction projects such as power plants, highways, or crematoriums, under the guise of the “public interest.” Low compensation for land seizure and relocation, as well as inadequate or nontransparent negotiations, deepen discontent among villagers. Over 80 percent of the protests (134 cases) targeted local government, with 16 cases explicitly accusing local administrators of corruption for selling collectively owned lands without villagers’ consent. This process is ripe for corruption, with local officials commonly [pocketing](#) the difference between the low compensation price for villagers and the high selling price to developers. In addition, there is rarely an opportunity for meaningful public input on how repurposed land will be used.

Rural land protests and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) legitimacy. The intensity and nature of such disputes may even undermine regime legitimacy among affected citizens, as some [research](#) has discussed. This may in part explain why more than half (56 percent) of land protests documented by CDM have resulted in repression, as local authorities fear that the protests could lead to greater political risks. Such a legitimacy crisis can be observed in a case that occurred in Zhaotong City, Yunnan



Rural residents of Huwu Town in Zhejiang Province were violently removed by police when protesting unauthorized excavation of their land (case 2523). Source: Douyin

Province, where villagers of the Mulu community occupied a construction site from May 2024 for a month to protest an inadequate resettlement plan offered after their original residence had been demolished a decade ago. When a large team of police dispersed the crowds and their barricades, protesters shouted slogans such as “the government is beating people up” and “Xi Jinping’s gang is beating people up” (cases 3263, 3358, 3649). While it is uncommon to see rural protesters directly criticizing the central government—much less the authoritarian leader of the country—this exemplifies how grievances over land disputes can shift toward regime legitimacy.

The infeasibility of institutional channels. A study by the Beijing-based Public Administration and Policy Review indicates that peasants and villagers facing land disputes rarely use institutional channels to address their grievances, as lawsuits are usually unaffordable. Instead, they resort to noninstitutional actions like public gatherings, petitions, noncooperation, and even obstruction of construction sites to hold authorities accountable and gain public attention.

These collective actions sometimes persist for months or even years, highlighting deadlocks between villagers and authorities (cases 273–7, 2883, 2896, 3648). These drawn-out conflicts are exacerbated by the intransigence of local officials and developers who stand to lose money if they give into residents’ demands for better compensation. CDM has documented limited government concessions in only 2 percent (four) of cases. While this may be an undercount because concessions are not always publicized, there is a striking discrepancy between the frequency of documented repression and concessions.



Residents of Xinzhai Village in Guangdong Province gathered in front of a Communist Party office to protest against the use of their farmland for a solar power plant (case 2519). Source: Douyin

Ethnic minorities face land seizure. The CCP’s investment in renewable energy has accelerated building of related infrastructure, which requires vast amounts of land including in areas where ethnic minorities live. In October 2023, an ethnic Mongolian community in Boliin-ail Township, Inner Mongolia (which some ethnic Mongolians refer to as Southern Mongolia) protested against the expropriation of grazing land for a wind farm project (case 2469). In Anshun City, Yunnan Province, Hmong residents of Mu’an Village protested against the unlawful acquisition of their land for a solar power plant and the indiscriminate cutting down of their fruit trees (cases 2894, 2895). Similarly, in February 2024, hundreds of Tibetans from Dege County, Ganzi Prefecture, gathered in front of the Dege County government building to demand that authorities cancel the construction of Gangtuo Hydropower Station, which forced them to relocate, resulting in the violent arrest of more than 100 protesters (case 2522). China’s shift toward clean energy suggests a substantial impact on rural land use, likely leading to more land expropriation to install related facilities. CDM has documented 13 land dispute cases directly linked to green energy facilities.

New policies aimed at rural governance. Earlier this year, China’s central authorities emphasized rural revitalization as a key priority of their [No. 1 Central Document](#) for the year, pointing to a need to promote rural industrial development and improve rural governance with a “people-centered” development philosophy. [New policies](#) announced at the [Third Plenum](#)—a once-every-five-years meeting at which CCP leaders set social and economic goals—seem to follow these initiatives, allowing farmers to utilize their legally owned homes by renting or becoming shareholders. However, unless authorities address fundamental issues like inadequate consultation or compensation for land acquisition, systemic corruption, and ineffective remedy, it is not clear if these policies will reduce rural land protests.

CHANGES IN DRIVER PROTESTS



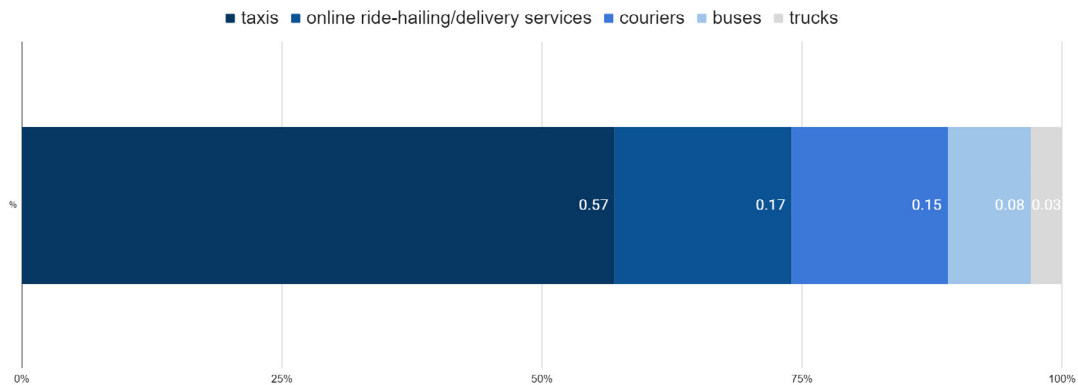
Bus drivers in Qingfeng County, Henan Province hung banners on their vehicles to protest 16 months of unpaid wages (case 1349).
Source: Weibo

Drivers unify in demands to the government. CDM has recorded 91 protests led by transportation workers since June 2022.¹ As with other labor dissent, disputes over pay remain the leading cause of driver protest, accounting for nearly 60 percent of the cases. The remainder are sparked by concerns about competition from ride-hailing and e-bike-sharing services, as well as dissatisfaction with industry regulations. The impact of China’s deteriorating economy seems to have led to an uptick in wage-arrear protests by bus drivers after [a decline](#). Although only six cases of bus driver protests linked to wage arrears were recorded by CDM, they may be an indicator of the deterioration of local governments’ financial situation.

Unlike workers in other industries, drivers more often challenge the local government directly, with more than one-third of cases involving such challenges compared to only 7 percent for other types of workers. This might be because driver grievances are often linked directly to government

decisions: bus drivers are paid by the local government, while taxis are directly affected by changing government policies. In addition, nearly half of the drivers chose to protest by striking (52 cases), compared to only 6 percent for other workers. Driver dissent is relatively large-scale, with participants united in their collective action. More than a quarter of the driver protests have at least a hundred participants, compared to less than 7 percent of protests for workers in other industries. CDM has recorded several cases of drivers parking collectively and protesting outside local government offices (cases 423, 996, and 1400). In more than 10 percent of cases, protesters have directly expressed their dissatisfaction with regulatory policies and demanded changes from local authorities.

¹ Nearly 80 percent of this dataset is drawn from the labor rights NGO [China Labour Bulletin](#).



Proportion of driver protests, by subgroup

Technology changes the landscape. The rise of transportation apps has changed the transportation ecosystem and played a significant role in these disputes. The third-highest number of protests by transportation workers were against ride-hailing and delivery platforms such as DiDi, Lalamove, and Meituan (14 cases), some of which involved company policy changes and promotions that lowered drivers' incomes. Such protests [were not reported before 2016](#). At the same time, the rise of online ride-hailing services has led to protests by traditional cab drivers for their loss of business. [A report](#) noted that the size of China's traditional taxi market has decreased from 495.3 billion yuan (\$68.21 billion) to 470.1 billion yuan (\$64.74 billion) due to the impact of ride-hailing apps. Related protests account for nearly one-fifth of driver protests, making it the second-most protested issue. However, protests by taxi drivers have decreased compared to the three-year period after online ride-hailing services were legalized in 2015, when protests by taxi drivers made up 70 percent of all driver protests, according to [analysis](#) by China Labor Bulletin.

Since 2019, several tech firms have launched e-bike sharing services across China, making the transportation market even more competitive. Such services provide an alternative to taxis for travel within the city. CDM recorded four incidents of taxi drivers protesting e-bike sharing and even directly impeding users from approaching the bikes (cases 1696, 2542, 2544, and 3624).

Backlash against automated driving. While online ride-hailing app drivers have been subject to protest by traditional taxi drivers, the ride-hailing app drivers themselves have recently become protesters against technological advancements that do away with drivers altogether. China announced 20 pilot cities for self-driving cars in early July, including Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Chengdu. Concerned about losing business, several online ride-hailing app drivers rallied in Hangzhou to protest the self-driving cars being put into operation (case 3617). In another case, taxi drivers in Wuhan went on strike to protest the negative impact of self-driving cars on their work (case 3598).



Taxis drivers in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province carried out a caravan protest in front of the Bureau of Transportation to demand greater rights to operate and own their vehicles (case 3619). Source: China Labour Bulletin, WeChat

With only two cases so far, more workers are likely to mobilize in the future as self-driving technology matures and its application expands. The Beijing city government is currently soliciting opinions on the Beijing Autonomous Vehicles Regulations (北京市自动驾驶汽车条例) and planning to use the same technology for logistics, sanitation, and police patrols. If this vision comes to fruition, technology would threaten to replace workers across many sectors, and protests would likely follow.

PROPERTY PROTEST CONTINUES TO ROIL

Real estate crisis driving protests across the country.

China has been embroiled in a multiyear property crisis that has been a drag on the economy. Residential property values have [fallen](#) for 11 straight months, worsening debt burdens for real estate development companies that underlie stalled housing projects and other real estate disputes. CDM has tallied 2,820 protest events linked to this sector, constituting 44 percent of all dissent cases in the database. These have occurred in more than 370 provincial-level cities across every region in China.



Homebuyers of a Poly residential project in Chengdu, Sichuan Province protested construction quality, demanding a refund (case 3658). Source: Weibo

Homeowners and construction workers seek remedy. Just over half of these protests are led by homeowners angry over developers failing to complete residential projects or fulfill other commitments. The remaining events are comprised of construction workers seeking due wages that developers are unable or unwilling to pay. In these events, protesters use demonstrations, signs, collective petitioning, occupation and obstruction to demand remedy from the company or local government. Most of these protests are moderate in size, with tens of participants, and CDM has only documented large-scale protests with more than 100 participants in 2.5 percent of events.

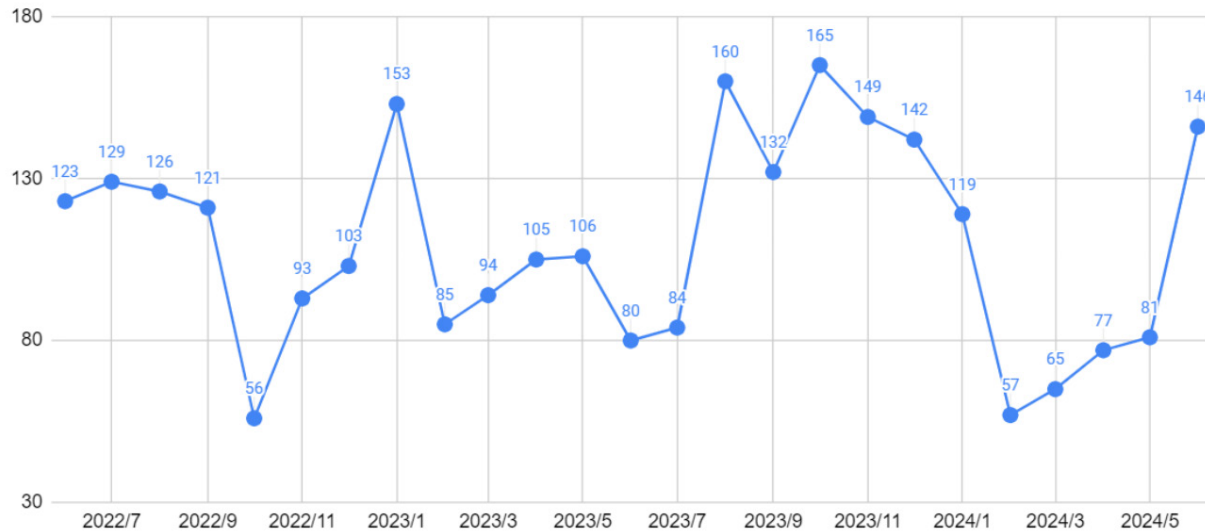
Protests against top real estate companies. With property sales and new construction [falling](#) by more than 20 percent year-on-year, most of China's [major developers](#) are facing liquidity crises, and CDM's data reflects this. Of those protests for which CDM could identify the parent company, 106 events were connected to Country Garden, the largest private developer in China until it defaulted on bond payments in October 2023. Evergrande, whose debts led it to file for [bankruptcy](#) in August 2023, is linked to at least 71 events.

Government efforts yet to abate grievances. The central government has repeatedly attempted to prevent a collapse of the property sector, which constitutes a [quarter](#) of China's gross domestic product (GDP), through a series of subsidies, loans, and other tools. The most [recent](#) steps unveiled in May 2024 were central bank

Country Garden	106
Evergrande	71
Sunac	59
Poly	55
Vanke	47
Greenland	36
Wanda	31
CR Land	18
Longfor	17
CIFI	12
C&D	6
Jinmao	4
Yuxiu	3

Amount of protest events linked to property developing companies

funding of 1 trillion yuan (\$138 billion) and permission for local governments to purchase some private housing. Nevertheless, protests have continued as these solutions have so far fallen short of reversing the underlying problems in the property sector. There were 1,377 events linked to this sector from July 2022 to June 2024, a 10 percent year-on-year increase. CDM documented this trend even as a government [censorship campaign](#) at the beginning of 2024 appeared to reduce the amount of protests published on video platforms like Douyin.



Protests linked to the property sector, by month



Homebuyers in Puyang, Henan Province protested a stalled housing project (case 3675). Source: Weibo

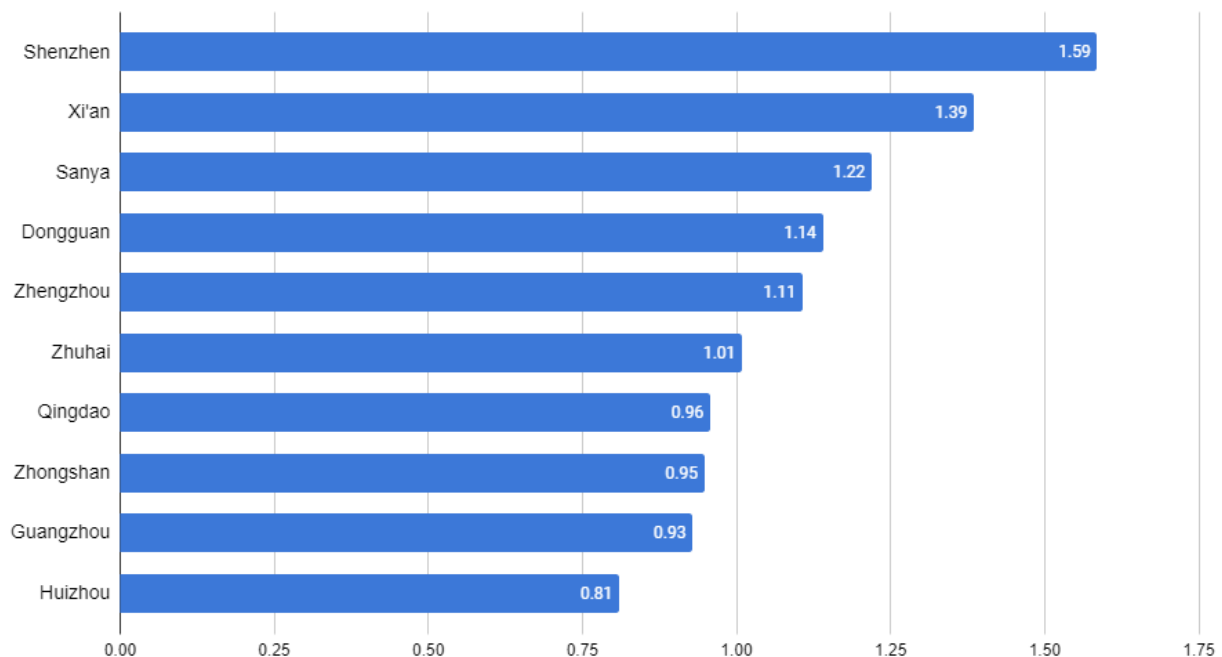
Putting down protests. While the government has not been able to stop the crisis, it frequently suppresses those affected by it. CDM recorded some form of repression in 26 percent of protests linked to the property sector. Police detention or arrest was confirmed in 5 percent and violence against protesters was confirmed in 9 percent. All of these are likely undercounts because CDM documentation of the protests are often limited to images or short videos that do not reveal how police respond later. Moreover, authorities may be seeking ways to prevent future collective action. Beginning July 1, [new rules](#) permit state security personnel to arbitrarily search citizens' personal electronic devices. Police can use such new powers to surveil aggrieved homebuyers and create a greater sense of fear that discourages citizens from organizing collective action.

BY THE DATA

TOP 10 PROTEST CITIES

CDM has so far documented more than 6,000 cases of dissent that have occurred in the PRC over a two-year period. These events span every region, but are not equally distributed. Much of the population is concentrated in the eastern half of the country, which naturally leads to a greater number of protest events in those areas. For example, in absolute terms, Guangdong has more protest events than any other region, but on a per capita basis, it is ranked third behind Shaanxi and Beijing. If we zoom in to the city level, there is a similar concentration in populous cities. While the events in CDM's database cover 500 prefecture-level cities, the 30 locations by protest events include more than 50 percent of the protests. In addition to the size of cities, the type of protest is another factor. The chart below illustrates the top 10 cities for protests per every 100,000 residents for events related to economic grievances, such as unpaid wages, stalled housing projects, or corporate fraud.

Many of the top cities on a per capita basis are in Guangdong's Pearl River Delta, in part reflecting the frequency of instances where labor in the country's manufacturing hub has been impacted by the country's overall economic slowdown. In contrast, a higher proportion of dissent in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, is linked to the property sector. Sanya, located in Hainan province, is the least expected entry on this list. The 13 economic protests in this city are not dominated by any single sector, but in a city of only one million people, the relative frequency puts it higher than any city except Shenzhen and Xi'an.



Number of economic protest events per 100,000 residents