VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN AMERICA

WHAT CAN WE LEARN   FROM FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS?

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Violent homegrown extremism: growing in lethality and frequency

Number of extremist plots and attacks on American soil

Year	Value
2013	5
2017	54
2019	44

Data source: Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harring. "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States." *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* June 17, 2020

2020-2021:
Many high-profile cases

The Dallas Morning News

El Paso shooter faces additional count for 23rd death; injuries will also be added to indictment

Incoming DA will decide whether the case of Patrick Crusius should be moved to federal court.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Eleven dead, six wounded in massacre at Squirrel Hill synagogue

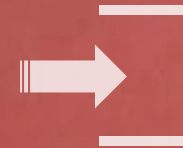Authorities investigating shooting incident as hate crime

The Washington Post

Local

Woman dies after shooting in U.S. Capitol; D.C. National Guard activated after mob breaches building

Policymakers and researchers are committed to answering key questions

Risk/Contributing Factors
What risks are common among individuals who engage in extremist behavior?

Pathways In
How do individuals become radicalized?
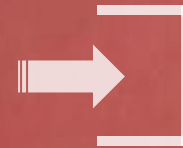
Exiting
How do individuals become deradicalized?

Answers can inform radicalization prevention and intervention measures

We were able to get first-person insights into these and other questions

Risk/Contributing Factors
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Exiting
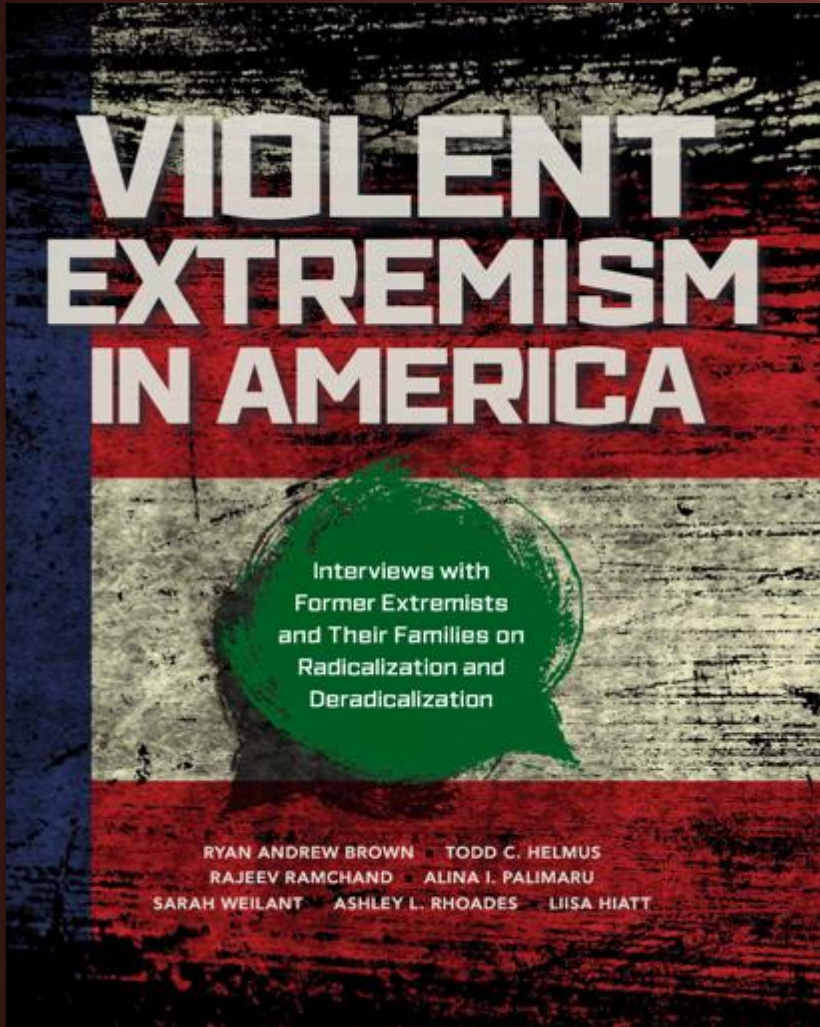How do individuals become deradicalized?

Mitigation
What strategies are effective for preventing radicalization or promoting deradicalization?

Answers can inform radicalization prevention and intervention measures

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Study methods in brief

Interviews:
36 former extremists, family, and friends

32 cases:
24: white supremacists
8: Islamic extremists

Modeled on "Psychological Autopsies"
Allowed us to find out more about the person and their life before extremism

Key Findings

Risk/Contributing Factors

Pathways In

Exiting

Mitigation

Financial Instability

Noted in 22 of 32 cases

With 11 years in [the military], I should be able to get a job on base, no problem, as a contractor. Nah, that didn't happen.

So, I decided to blame my problems on somebody else and say, 'Oh, it's the black people's fault.'

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

- **Financial challenges** served as a driver towards extremism for some
- Others spoke of how financial challenges caused them to **work in jobs tied to the extremist organization** they joined

Mental Health

Noted in 17 of 32 cases

" *I also have a learning disorder. . . . The military won't take me. Like, I've been denied numerous jobs. . . . That's, like, something I've always struggled with in my life.* "

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Those who cited mental health challenges as a driver noted that they have been **dealing with such challenges throughout their lives**

Social Factors

Noted in 16 of 32 cases

> "I always think that a lot of racism...is not even from some white people but from other minority groups for being [South Asian], for being Muslim. Things that I didn't even choose but I was, you know? But I was...hated for those things.

Former Islamic extremist, RAND interview

Victimization, stigmatization, or marginalization affected interviewees in this group, especially when growing up

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Key Findings

Risk/Contributing Factors

Pathways In

Exiting

Mitigation

Reorienting Event

Noted in 17 of 32 cases

"
I kind of got in this mindset of well, what else have I been lied to about? And something about the whole antisocial nature of [the Third Reich] appealed to me...
"

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Dramatic or traumatic life events such as a gun possession charge, rejection by the military, a friend's suicide, and an extended period of unemployment prompted many to reconsider previously-held views.

Propaganda

Noted in 22 of 32 cases

At the age of 15, I wanted to get to know skinheads, people I only knew from the music. Do they really exist? Where are they?

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Online materials, music, and literature were cited as especially inspiring radical views among interviewees.

Pathways In

Social Bonds

Noted in 14 of 32 cases

> " *I was feeling bullied, you know, until a friend told me, 'I belong to this organization that is a lobby for people like us, you know – with European backgrounds.* "

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Interviewees noted extremist beliefs helped them both **create and form close bonds** with others

Key Findings

Risk/Contributing Factors

Pathways In

Exiting

Mitigation

Disillusionment and Burnout

Noted in 15 of 32 cases

"We're out there marching about illegals bringing drugs into our nation and yet at the time, we were using illegal drugs. All of it just started to seem more and more hypocritical and it just didn't make sense to me anymore."

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Group hypocrisy, infighting, and ineffectiveness were cited as key drivers of feelings of disillusionment. Many of those who exited also did so due to **exhaustion** from the energy needed to maintain violence and hatred.

Intervention

Noted in 22 of 32 cases

...And she grabbed me and she hugged me and she said, 'It's okay, man. It feels good to let it out.' And I was like, 'I am so sorry.' And I just started—like, I'm getting emotional right now because that was a really important part of my recovery from hate, and [friend's name] made that happen.

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Most interviewees cited interventions by **life partners, friends, former radicals, or acquaintances from different racial or ethnic groups.** 11 cases cited formal interventions by law enforcement, nonprofit groups, and religious personnel.

Intervention

Successful vs. failed

Successful interventions featured a mix of
- *Diverse cultural or demographic exposure*
- *Emotional support and kindness*
- *Financial and/or domestic stability*

19 respondents experienced **failed interventions** at the hands of family members, friends, authority figures (school principals, church leaders, etc.), or police/intelligence. Heavy-handed attempts to intervene often backfired, encouraging further extremism.

Key Findings

Risk/Contributing Factors

Pathways In

Exiting

Mitigation

Must Address Marginalization and Deepening Polarization

...We really need to have some kind of resource [in schools] that addresses the politically incorrect questions like people like me had. You know, I had questions like, "Why is it that...we're making a big fuss about Chinese New Year when we don't make a fuss over [Europeans] holidays?"

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Interviewees noted how childhood is likely to be the most important time to be exposed to **diverse people and ideas and to develop critical thinking skills**. **Media literacy** and educational outreach are key, as well as placed to safely disagree and debate.

Addressing Mental Health, Supporting Families, and Involving "Formers" to Intervene

> *{O]ne of the reasons that I haven't seen a psychiatrist lately is because I just can't afford it. I think I would benefit from it, but it's inaccessible.*

Former white supremacist, RAND interview

Some interviewees noted how there needs to be **accessible mental health services** to support those who have left radical groups. Some interviewees also talked about the importance of families and friends knowing the "**warning signs**" of radicalization.

Recommendations

What Do These Findings Suggest About Policy and Practice?

Scale up & evaluate "home grown" interventions:

- Addiction-based approaches
- Outreach via social networks
- Exposure to diversity
- Mentored spaces for disagreement
- Education, outreach, and media literacy

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Policy trade-offs and approaches

- Trade-off between detection/interdiction and "soft" approaches
- Promote assistance for families and friends
- Expand accessible mental health screening, care, and support

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Further research

- Blend data science and ethnography
- Use targeted geographic approach to better understand drivers of extremism at the "ground level"

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Thank you