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ATAC
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Radicalization in the Ranks

An Assessment of the Scope and Nature of Criminal Extremism in the United States Military

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Executive Summary

This project finds that criminal extremism with a nexus to the United States military is a limited, but possibly growing, problem that is primarily centered in the veteran community. From 1990 through 2023, 730 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed criminal acts that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals. Subjects with U.S. military backgrounds represent a small portion (14.7%) of the broader set of extremists who have committed criminal offenses in the United States since 1990. Moreover, the majority (84.1%) of these subjects were no longer serving in the U.S. military when they committed extremist crimes. However, there has been an upward trend in recent cases of criminal extremists with military backgrounds, suggesting that extremism in the ranks may be a growing concern. For example, from 1990-2010, an average of 7.1 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds committed extremist crimes. Since 2011, that number has grown to 44.6 subjects per year.

In addition to these aggregate trends, this study finds that:

- Approximately 15% (231 subjects) of the individuals who have been charged for participating in the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021, have U.S. military backgrounds.
- Just under 16% (116 subjects) of the extremists with military backgrounds who committed crimes in the United States since 1990 were actively serving at the time of their offenses or arrests.
- Approximately 74% of criminal extremists with military backgrounds served in the U.S. Army or Marine Corps, including Reserve and National Guard units.
- More than half of the subjects espoused anti-government views or were members of organized militias. An additional 32% of the subjects promoted views of white supremacy and/or xenophobia, while 6% were connected to, or inspired by, Salafi Jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
- Radicalization processes among active service members are likely to involve risk factors related to military service, including membership in extremist cliques with fellow service members. Veterans, on the other hand, often face age-related risk factors for radicalization, such as failed relationships, unemployment, and previous encounters with the criminal justice system, as well as psychological vulnerabilities tied to their military service, including high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder.

A public health model that focuses on education, prevention, treatment, and evaluation provides the best opportunity for the long-term mitigation of the risks associated with extremism in the armed forces. A public health model should prioritize:

- Data collection and scientific discovery on the scope and nature of extremism in the ranks.
- Prevention programs that (1) inoculate incoming service members (and future veterans) against extremist recruitment; (2) disseminate tailored awareness briefs about extremist narratives and recruitment techniques; (3) devise non-punitive responses to extremism that increase the likelihood that concerning behaviors will be reported; and (4) form partnerships with the Department of Veterans

Affairs and community-based veterans' organizations to counter radicalization among past service members.

- Interventions for at-risk service members that address a variety of concerns, including mental health, substance use disorders, anti-social relationships, previous criminality, and unemployment.

Finally, this study argues that while it might be appealing to use military separations as a quick fix to the problem of extremism in the ranks, military discharges could result in transferring risk to local law enforcement agencies if they are not accompanied by the provision of rehabilitation services. Furthermore, as an all-volunteer force that depends upon willing recruits, the Department of Defense should be aware that veterans who engage in extremist crime cause significant damage the reputation of military service and undermine U.S. national security as a result. Simply put, separations from the military neither address the underlying issues that cause individuals to radicalize, nor shield the military from blame when violence occurs in U.S. communities. Thus, when military separations are used to counter extremism in the ranks, they should be paired with referrals for support services, and potential risks to community safety should be effectively communicated to law enforcement partners.

Introduction

On February 5, 2021, United States Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, announced a 60-day stand-down across the Department of Defense (DoD) to address the problem of extremism in the U.S. military.[1] The announcement, which directed commanding officers and supervisors to meet with their personnel to discuss impermissible behaviors related to extremism and dissident ideologies, came after it was reported that many of the individuals who stormed the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, had U.S. military backgrounds.[2] The stand-down announcement was followed by a memorandum in April 2021 establishing the Countering Extremism Working Group (CEWG), which was tasked with devising a series of recommendations for mitigating the spread of extremism in the ranks.[3] While both the stand-down order and the memorandum establishing the CEWG note several pressing concerns related to extremism in the military, including the need to modernize vetting procedures for new recruits, both documents prioritize the goal of achieving a better understanding of the scope and nature of the problem through the collection of high-fidelity data. This report, which details the results of an effort to expand the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database with information on the nexus of extremism and military service, is intended to help in this effort by providing statistical

[1] Lloyd J. Austin III, *DoD Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks* [Memorandum] (Department of Defense, 2021), available at https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/05/2002577485/-1/-1/0/STAND-DOWN-TO-ADDRESS-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-RANKS.PDF

[2] Tom Dreisbach and Meg Anderson, "Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military," *NPR* (January 21, 2021), https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military.

[3] Lloyd J. Austin III, *Immediate Actions to Counter Extremism in the Department and the Establishment of the Countering Extremism Working Group* [Memorandum] (Department of Defense, 2021), available at /https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/09/2002617921/-1/-1/1/MEMORANDUM-IMMEDIATE-ACTIONS-TO-COUNTER-EXTREMISM-IN-THE-DEPARTMENT-AND-THE-ESTABLISHMENT-OF-THE-COUNTERING-EXTREMISM-WORKING-GROUP.PDF

information on the military backgrounds of individuals who committed extremist crimes in the United States from 1990 through 2023.[4]

For this project, we sought to compile an auxiliary dataset to PIRUS that contains all known cases of individuals with military backgrounds who committed extremist criminal acts in the United States over the past 34 years. In compiling the dataset, we expanded the list of variables related to military service that are available in PIRUS to include branch affiliations, years of service, combat deployments, conditions of separation, and more. Findings from these auxiliary data are detailed in three results sections of this report.

The first section explores the scope and nature of criminal extremism in the ranks, detailing the rates of military service among criminal extremists and analyzing their military branch, ideological, and extremist group affiliations. This section also provides a closer look at the individuals with military backgrounds who have been charged with criminal offenses related to the Capitol breach of January 6, 2021.

Section two provides a closer look at risk factors for radicalization, comparing subjects with military backgrounds to those without records of military service. This section explores the rates of substance use disorders, anti-social relationships, and social mobility challenges among past U.S. service members who committed extremist crimes and situates these radicalization risk factors within the larger extremist context in the United States.

The final section of results examines the risk factors and vulnerabilities for radicalization that are unique to subgroups of criminal extremists with U.S. military backgrounds. Using hierarchical clustering methods, the results in this section show how the radicalization pathways of extremists with military backgrounds are likely to differ depending on whether individuals are active in the military at the time of their involvement in extremism or if they have military-specific risk factors for radicalization, such as previous deployments to combat zones or diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This report concludes with recommendations for policy and future research, paying particular attention to the potential benefits of applying a public health model to countering the spread of extremism in the U.S. military.

About the Data

The auxiliary dataset that was compiled during the project's period of performance builds on the PIRUS database, which is a representative sample of individuals who committed criminal offenses in the United States on behalf of their extremist views and/or affiliations. The data that were compiled for this project rely on PIRUS inclusion criteria, which require that a subject (1) radicalized (in whole or in part) in the United States; (2) that they adhered to or espoused views that justify the use of illegal means, including violence, to achieve political, economic, religious, or social goals; and (3) that they committed a criminal offense that was clearly motivated by their

[4] For more information on the PIRUS database, see Michael A. Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Research Brief: Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS)," (May 2020), available at https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_ResearchBrief_May2020.pdf. The PIRUS data can be accessed at: https://www.start.umd.edu/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus-keshif

ideological views and resulted in their arrest, indictment, or death. Moreover, to be included in the auxiliary dataset for this project, there must be evidence in public sources that the subjects served in the U.S. military. This includes individuals who were on active duty, guard, or reservist status at the time of their criminal offenses, as well as those who were separated from the military prior to their radicalization and/or arrests. The resulting dataset is a comprehensive accounting of all publicly identified criminal extremists with military backgrounds who committed offenses in the United States from 1990 through 2023.

All data for this project were coded from public sources, including federal and state court records, public police reports, and print and online news media. Official DoD records or Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) files were not consulted for this project unless they were entered into the public domain through criminal justice proceedings or news reporting. Given that some aspects of military service appear in public documents less often than official service records, the statistics on deployments, combat experience, terms of separation, and diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder that are presented in this study should be considered conservative estimates. Finally, to facilitate information sharing and public discourse, this project did not utilize classified, for official use only (FOUO), or law enforcement sensitive (LES) materials to identify or code cases. The project's use of open-source information is important for improving information sharing across the inter-agency; with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments; with civil society and violence prevention partners; and for broader public awareness of extremism in the armed forces. However, there is considerable value to using official records in research on this topic, which we discuss in greater detail below.

Project Scope and Limitations

This project includes all known cases of individuals who served in the U.S. military and committed extremist crimes in the United States from 1990 through 2023. An extremist crime is defined as an illegal act that is perpetrated by an individual or collective of individuals to achieve a political, social, economic, or religious goal and/or to promote an extremist ideology. The year 1990 was chosen as a start date for data collection because it provides a significantly long timeframe from which to observe longitudinal patterns and because sources from this period are generally accessible to researchers. By comparison, data from prior to 1990 often suffer from significant amounts of missing values due to poor source coverage and availability.

All the individuals who are included in this study committed criminal offenses in the United States that resulted in their arrests, indictments, or deaths.[5] Readers of this study should note that this project was not an attempt to compile a comprehensive accounting of all individuals in the U.S. military who hold, or once held, extremist views. Furthermore, this project does not include subjects who were honorably discharged, dishonorably discharged, or otherwise separated from the U.S. military for violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) due to their extremist affiliations unless those individuals were also charged with criminal offenses and were prosecuted in local, state, or federal courts. Individuals who were discharged through court martial were

[5] Qualifying events of perpetrator deaths include individuals who were killed by law enforcement who were responding to the scenes of crimes or executing arrest warrants, as well as individuals who committed suicide during or after their criminal acts.

only included in this study if the details of their criminal proceedings were entered into the public domain through news reporting or the online court records maintained by the Judge Advocate General's Corps. Similarly, while this study reviews criminal extremism in the military since 1990, it does not consider the extent to which DoD civilian employees or defense contractors may have also engaged in illegal extremist behaviors during that time frame. Thus, while the results of this study address an important aspect of extremism in the ranks, they do not cover all types of extremist behaviors that may be present in the military or DoD at any given time. A complete assessment of the scope and nature of extremism in the military requires a consideration of the behaviors that fall short of criminal prosecution but nevertheless constitute violations of the UCMJ. As we discuss below, this should be a focus area of future research on this topic.

PART I: THE SCOPE AND NATURE OF CRIMINAL EXTREMISM IN THE MILITARY

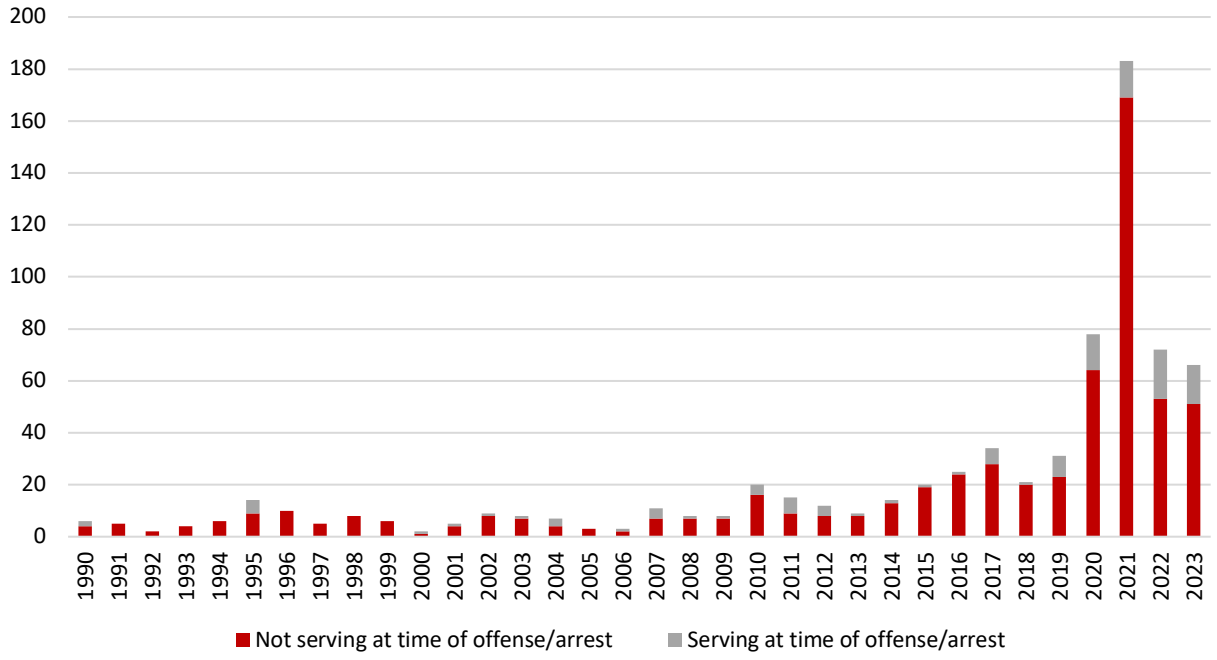
From 1990 through 2023, 730 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed criminal acts that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals. This includes 231 individuals who have faced, or are facing, charges for their involvement in the breach of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021. While previous versions of this report found that military service was only slightly more common in the population of criminal extremists than in the general adult population (11.5% versus 8%), recent increases in criminal acts committed by individuals with military backgrounds have widened this gap. Criminal extremists with U.S. military backgrounds now make up 14.7 percent of the subjects in PIRUS. Sources estimate that in 2023, 6 percent of the U.S. adult population consisted of veterans, while an additional 1 percent of the population was actively serving.[6] Thus, in the most recent year of analysis, the rate of military experience among criminal extremists in the United States was approximately double the rate of military service in the general U.S. adult population.

While the overall rate of criminal extremism in the U.S. military is moderate, the data show an upward trend in cases in recent years, suggesting that it is a growing concern. For example, from 1990 to 2010, an average of 7.1 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds were identified for inclusion in the PIRUS database. Over the last decade, that number has grown to 44.6 subjects per year. This increase is in part driven by the comparatively large number of subjects with military backgrounds who participated in the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021. However, even if Capitol offenders are excluded from the analysis, there has still been a notable recent uptick in the number of cases of criminal extremism in the United States that have a nexus to the military. Excluding Capitol defendants, our data show that since 2010, an average of 26.8 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds have committed ideological crimes, which is more than a 300 percent increase from previous decades. The recent increases in cases of criminal extremists with military backgrounds are largely confined to recent years in the data. These years have been marked by issues that have mobilized comparatively large numbers of U.S. extremists, including the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017; the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice protests, and U.S. Presidential election in 2020; and the Capitol breach of January 6, 2021. Whether the

[6] Katherine Schaeffer, *The Changing Face of America's Veteran Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2023). Jonathan E. Vespa, *Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror*, American Community Survey Report (Washington DC: United States Census Bureau, 2020).

upward trend in cases continues likely hinges on the extent to which mobilizing issues are mitigated in the coming months and years.

Figure 1. U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-2023

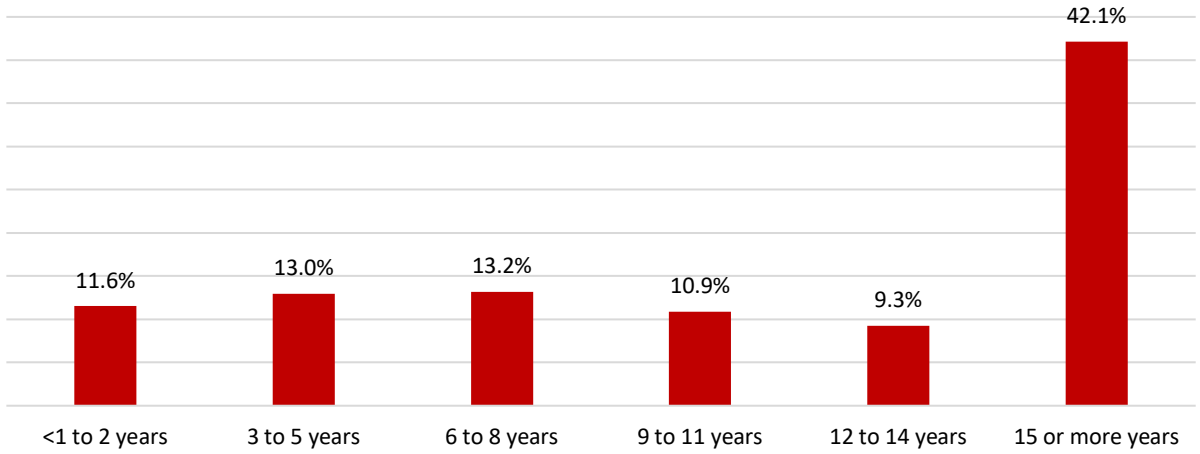


Military Status at the Time of Arrest or Offense

The vast majority of the 730 subjects with U.S. military backgrounds who committed extremist crimes in the United States since 1990 were no longer serving in the military at the times of their offenses and/or arrests. Specifically, 614 (84.1%) of the subjects in the data were no longer serving in the military when they committed their ideologically motivated criminal acts.[7] Moreover, many of the subjects in the data had been separated from the military for several years, and sometimes several decades, prior to their arrests. On average, the subjects in the data who were no longer serving when they committed criminal acts had been separated from military service for 15 years (median value is 12 years since separation). While there may be a growing public perception that most veterans who commit extremist crimes do so shortly after leaving the military, only 11.6 percent of the offenders in the data committed crimes within two years of separating from the armed forces (see Figure 2). This suggests that at the time that most extremist offenses are committed, the DoD has little contact with, or direct influence over, the perpetrators of the crimes. With that said, it is important to note that some of the subjects who offended after leaving the U.S. military showed signs of radicalization, including membership in extremist groups, posting extremist content online, and/or maintaining personal relationships with known extremists, while they were still serving. According to information in public sources, at least 86 (14%) of the 614 subjects who offended after leaving the military showed signs of extremism prior to separating from the armed forces. Of these, 27 subjects showed evidence of radicalization prior to enlisting in the U.S. military.

[7] This figure includes 35 individuals who are coded as entry-level separations, meaning that they failed to complete basic training and were not assigned to military units.

Figure 2. Years from Military Separation to Offense/Arrest



The majority (76%) of the subjects who committed criminal offenses after they were separated from the military received honorable discharges, general discharges under honorable conditions, or retired from military service. An additional 5 percent of past service members received medical discharges and appear to have been in good standing when they left the military. However, 12 percent of the past service members in the data received other than honorable, bad conduct, or dishonorable discharges, according to public documents. This figure appears to be substantially higher than the rate of disciplinary discharges in the general military community, which is estimated at around 3 percent.[8] An additional 7 percent of the individuals in the data received entry-level separations after failing to complete basic training. While the reason for separation in some of these cases appears to be related to the individuals' links to extremism, most subjects who received disciplinary discharges or entry-level separations did so because of behaviors that were not associated with extremism or hate-motivated beliefs and behaviors. The most common reasons for disciplinary separations in the data were drug use violations and going on leave without authorization.

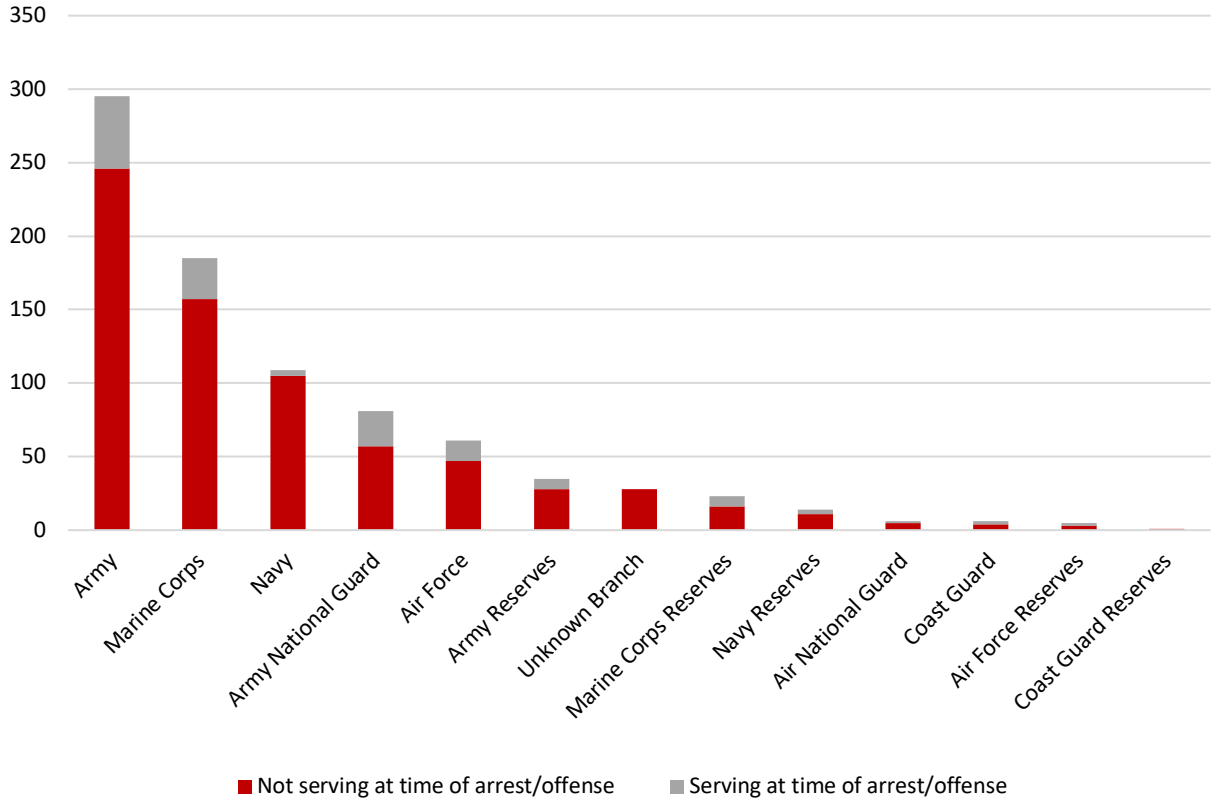
The remaining 116 subjects (15.9%) in the data were serving on active duty, reservist, or guard status at the times of their criminal offenses or arrests. The number of subjects who committed extremist crimes while serving are normally distributed across the years covered by the data with the exceptions of 2011 and 2012, when active service members made up the majority of the offenders who were identified for inclusion in the study. This uptick in cases from 2011 to 2012 is primarily driven by subjects who were affiliated with the Forever Enduring, Always Ready anti-government militia that organized out of Fort Stewart in Georgia. Eleven of the militia's members who had ties to the U.S. military, including seven subjects who were on active duty in the Army, were arrested in 2011 and 2012 after they plotted to commit terrorist attacks in the United States and killed one of their former group members. Despite the notable increase in cases in 2011 and 2012, over the 34-year span that was reviewed for this project, an average of just three active-duty service members per year were arrested for committing ideologically motivated criminal acts in the United States.

[8] John Ismay, "Minor infractions in uniform can keep vets on the street and away from VA," *KPCC News* (September 29, 2015), https://archive.kpcc.org/news/2015/09/29/54696/minor-infractions-in-uniform-keep-thousands-of-vet/.

Military Branch Affiliations of U.S. Criminal Extremists

Approximately 39 percent (287 individuals) of the subjects included in the data served in the U.S. Army, while 24 percent (117 subjects) served in the Marine Corps.[9] Thus, collectively, the Army and Marine Corps account for 63 percent of the branch affiliations of the subjects in the data. Given its smaller overall size, this figure makes the Marine Corps the branch of service with the highest per capita rate of criminal extremists. If Reservists and Army National Guard members are added to this total, affiliations with the Army and Marine Corps account for 73.4 percent (538 individuals) of the subjects in the data. The remaining subjects were affiliated with the following branches: 15.9 percent (116 subjects) were affiliated with the U.S. Navy or Navy Reserves; 8.8 percent (64 subjects) served in the U.S. Air Force, Air Force Reserves, or Air National Guard; and 0.9 percent (7 subjects) were members of the U.S. Coast Guard or U.S. Coast Guard reserves.[10]

Figure 3. Branch and Status at Time of Arrest/Offense, 1990-2023



Eighty-nine of the 730 subjects in the data had affiliations with multiple branches of the U.S. military. The most common mixed affiliations in the data were individuals who spent time on active duty in the Army and then served terms in the Army Reserves or joined Army National Guard units (32 subjects). Similarly, nine individuals in the data spent time in the Marine Corps and the Marine Corps Reserves.

[9] Three subjects served in both the Army and Marine Corps.

[10] Given subjects with multiple and unknown branch affiliations, these figures do not total 100%.

As noted above, most of the extremists identified in this study were no longer affiliated with their respective branches of service when they committed their ideologically motivated crimes. However, of the 116 offenders who committed extremist crimes while actively serving in the U.S. military, 68 (59%) of them were affiliated with the Army, Army Reserves, and/or Army National Guard. An additional 31 subjects (27%) who offended while serving in the military were affiliated with the Marine Corps and/or Marine Corps Reserves. Thus, jointly, affiliations with the Army and Marine Corps have accounted for more than 86 percent of the arrests of active service members who committed extremist crimes since 1990.

Ideological and Group Affiliations

The subjects who were included in this study were classified according to their ideological affiliations, which were determined by reviewing their public statements, their extremist group memberships, and their stated motivations for committing criminal acts.[11] The results of this classification exercise show that more than half of the extremists with military backgrounds who committed crimes in the United States over the past 34 years adhered to anti-government views or were members of organized militias. This figure includes individuals who committed criminal offenses to overturn the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.[12] Forty-five of the individuals in the data who were classified as "anti-government/militia" were affiliated with the Sovereign Citizen and Patriot movements, while 32 subjects were members of the Oath Keepers, 26 subjects were described as members of the Boogaloo movement, and 25 individuals were affiliated with the Three Percenters. While membership in, or self-identification with, national anti-government and militia movements was present among the subjects in the data, most of the offenders with anti-government views were associated with local groups. Indeed, the subjects who were classified as "anti-government/militia" in the data were tied to more than two dozen local organizations.

While anti-government views and membership in organized militias were the most common ideological affiliations of the subjects in the data, most of these offenders were no longer serving in the armed forces when they committed their extremist crimes. Indeed, only 39 of the 374 (10.4%) subjects in the data who were classified as anti-government were serving when they committed their extremist crimes.[13]

In addition to anti-government extremists, a significant percentage (31.6%) of the subjects in the data espoused views of white supremacy, white nationalism, and/or xenophobia. The individuals in the data who were classified as white supremacists/xenophobic were affiliated with no fewer than 50 extremist groups, including 26 subjects who were members of the Proud Boys, 16 individuals who were affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan, and 11 subjects

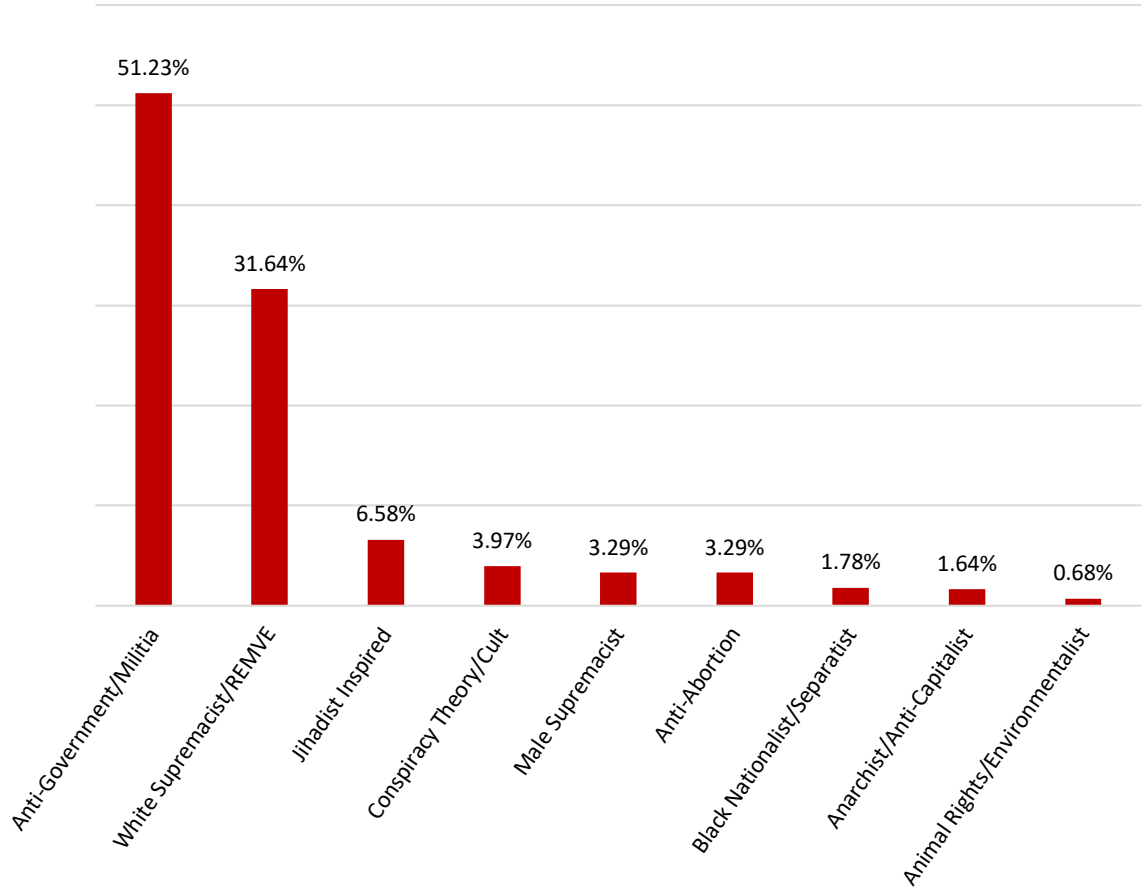
[11] Given that U.S. extremists often promote mixed ideological views (e.g., an offender might express anti-government sentiments and views of white supremacy), subjects were coded for up to three ideological affiliations. Thus, these percentages total more than 100%.

[12] While most of the subjects who are facing criminal charges for the events of January 6, 2021, were classified as having "anti-government" views, their inclusion has only a modest impact on the overall distribution of ideological affiliations in the data. For instance, if Capitol offenders are removed, the percentage of subjects who adhered to anti-government/militia views drops from 51.2% of the individuals in the data to 36.1%.

[13] These 39 offenders constitute 31% of the 116 subjects who were actively serving when they committed extremist crimes.

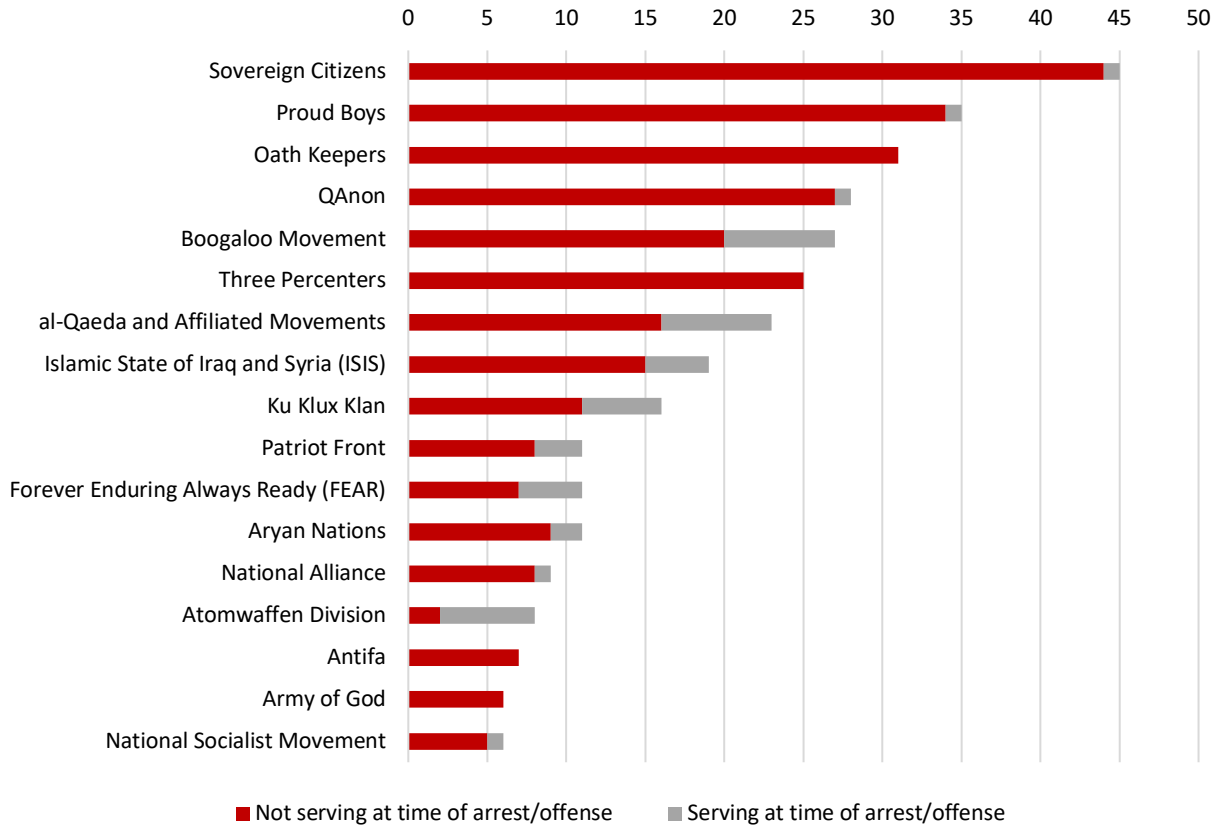
who were members of the Aryan Nations. Importantly, over half (51.7%) of the 116 individuals in the data who committed extremist crimes while they were actively serving were linked to white supremacist groups and/or movements.

Figure 4. Ideological Affiliations of U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-2023



Approximately 7 percent of the offenders in the data were connected to, or inspired by, Salafi Jihadist groups abroad. This includes 23 subjects who were connected to, or inspired by, al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements (e.g., al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, etc.) and 19 individuals who were inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Just over 10 percent of the 116 offenders in the data who committed extremist crimes while they were actively serving were linked to Salafi-Jihadist groups.

Figure 5. Most Common Group/Movement Affiliations of U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds



Overall, 408 of the 730 offenders in the data were affiliated with more than 120 organized extremist groups or named movements (see Figure 4 for the most common group affiliations in the data). However, it is important to note that the rate of extremist group membership among the subjects in the data is negatively skewed by the inclusion of Capitol offenders, many of whom were not tied to specific organizations. When subjects associated with the Capitol breach are removed from consideration, membership in, or affiliation with, known extremist groups or movements jumps from 55.9 percent of all subjects to 66.5 percent. This figure is consistent with membership in named groups and movements among extremists without military backgrounds, 69.8 percent of whom have been linked to organized groups or national extremist movements, according to data from PIRUS.

Criminal Acts

Extremists with U.S. military backgrounds have committed a range of criminal offenses over the past 34 years (see Table 1); although, the data reveal that nearly 50 percent of them plotted to commit acts of violence, which are defined as events that aim to kill or injure at least one person. An additional 6.9 percent of the subjects engaged in spontaneous violent crimes, such as initiating physical altercations at public protests. The participation in, and/or planning for, violence by criminal extremists with military backgrounds is comparable to, but slightly lower than, the rate of violence among extremists without records of military service. According to data from PIRUS, 57.8 percent of extremists without military service backgrounds are classified as violent offenders.

Table 1. Criminal Acts Committed by U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-2023

Crime Type*	Percentage of Subjects Involved
Premeditated violent plots	49.9%
Illegal weapons possession	10.5%
Spontaneous violence	6.9%
Harassment/intimidation	6.7%
Foreign fighter/material support	6.1%
Premeditate property crimes	5.2%
Financial crimes	5.0%

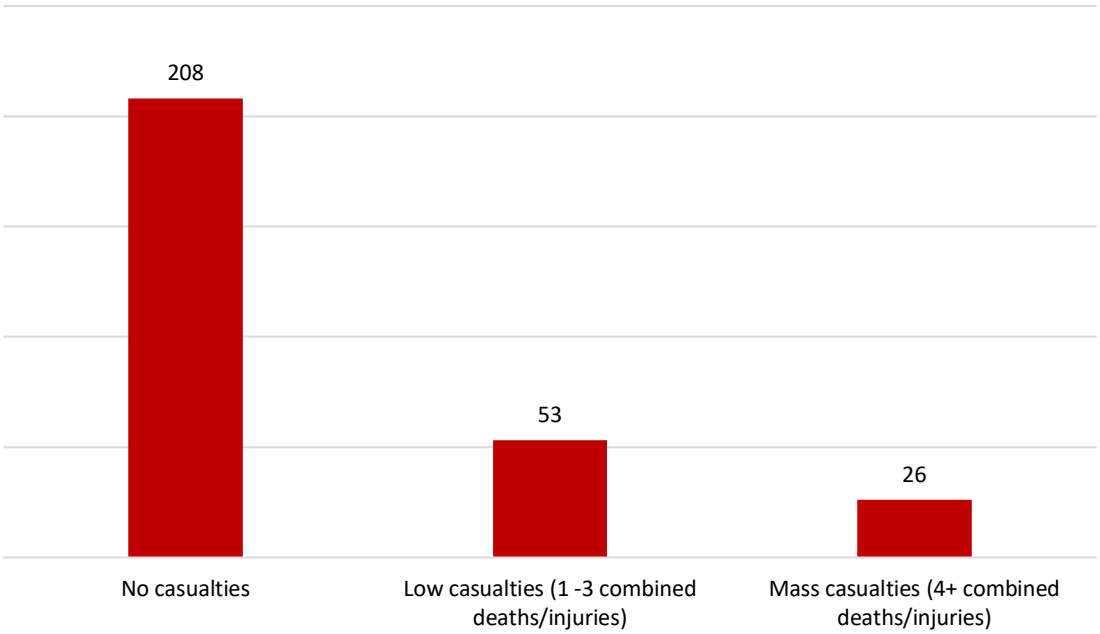
*Excludes crimes and defendants related to the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021.

Collectively, the subjects in the data were involved in 287 premeditated violent plots and 37 premeditated plots that were designed to damage property only from 1990-2022.[14] Approximately 55 percent of these plots involved two or more co-offenders. The co-offender networks that were responsible for these crimes often included a mix of subjects with military backgrounds and civilians with no military experience, indicating that extremists who served in the armed forces often radicalized alongside, and offend with, those who did not. Approximately 86 percent of the premediated plots in the data involved subjects who were no longer serving when they committed their crimes. Only 13.8 percent of the premeditated plots in the data involved individuals who were active service members at the times of the offenses.

While military service provides individuals with advanced knowledge of weapons and tactics, these skills did not translate into unusually high attack success rates among the subjects in the data. Indeed, of the 287 premeditated violent plots that were planned by the subjects in the data, only 32.8 percent of them were successful. Nearly two-thirds (63.8%) of the violent plots were interdicted by law enforcement before they could cause any harm to their targets. An additional 3.4 percent of the plots failed due to operational errors on the parts of the perpetrators. Interestingly, according to data from PIRUS, extremists without military backgrounds were more often successful (35.3%) in conducting violent attacks between 1990-2022.

[14] Complete data on extremist plots in the United States are only available through 2022. This report does not include plots that were planned to be, or were, conducted outside of the United States.

Figure 6. Outcomes of Premeditated Violent Plots Perpetrated by Subjects with Military Backgrounds

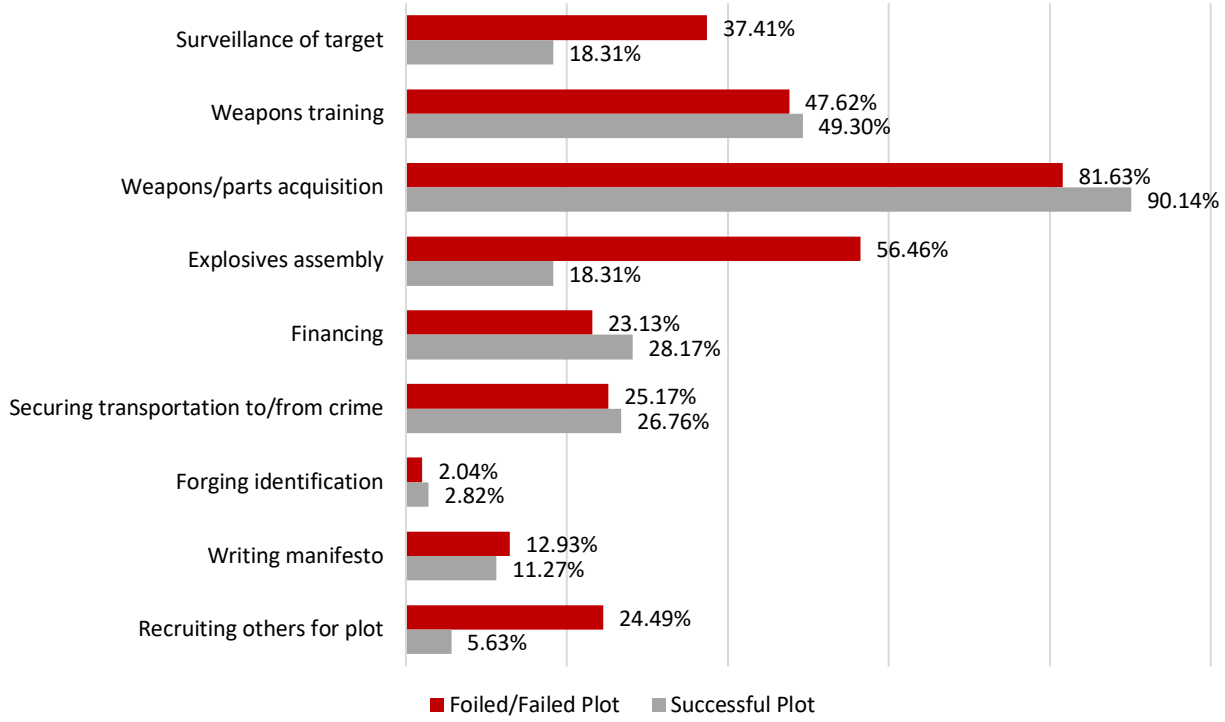


While only 63 of the 287 violent plots resulted in any deaths or injuries, 26 (41.3%) of them are classified as mass casualty incidents, meaning that they resulted in four or more combined deaths or injuries. In total, from 1990-2022, successful violent plots that included perpetrators with a nexus to the U.S. military resulted in 314 deaths and 1,978 injuries. (However, a significant number of these deaths and injuries were the result of a single event—the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995—which killed 168 individuals and injured more than 600 others.)

Approximately 40 percent of the premeditated violent plots in the data targeted government (federal, state, or local), law enforcement, or military personnel. The plots that were designed to kill or injure members of government bodies or the military were generally unsuccessful. The potential victims of these plots were often located in secure facilities or were accompanied by security, making accessing and harming them especially difficult. Indeed, only one of the 15 (6.6%) plots that targeted military personnel resulted in any casualties,[15] and only five of the 49 (10.2%) plots that targeted government representatives or employees resulted in any deaths or injuries. This stands in contrast to plots that targeted law enforcement or civilian soft targets (e.g., private citizens, restaurants, open religious facilities, etc.), 40 percent of which resulted in at least one death or injury.

[15] This attack is the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood in Texas by a Jihadist-inspired U.S. Army Major that left 13 dead and 33 injured. In 2019, a terrorist attack was carried out at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida. However, the perpetrator of the attack was not a member of the U.S. armed forces and, thus, the event does qualify for inclusion in this report. Similarly, in 2003, a Sergeant in the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army attacked his fellow soldiers at Camp Pennsylvania in Kuwait, killing two and wounding 14. Given that the attack occurred outside of the United States, it is not included in this report.

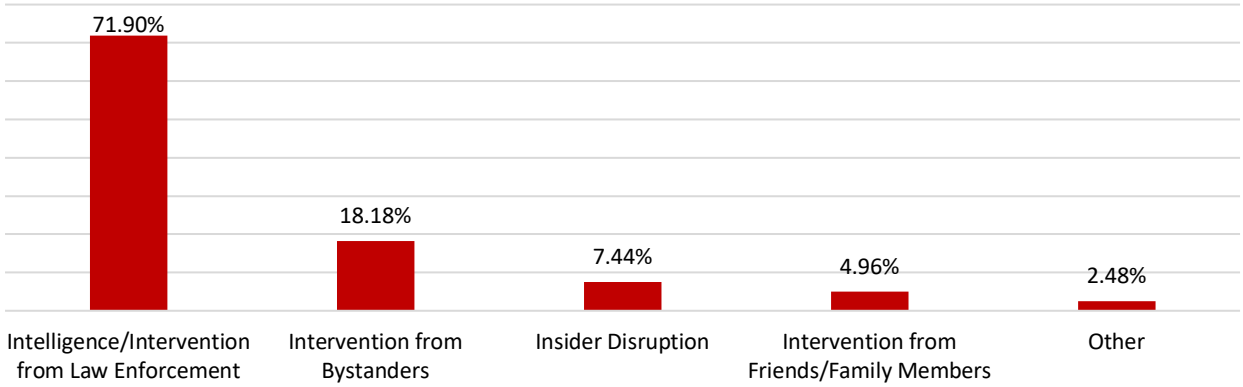
Figure 7. Mobilization Indicators of Violent Plots



The offenders in the data who plotted premeditated violent attacks engaged in several behaviors prior to their crimes that were potentially observable indicators of their mobilization to violence. Some of these behaviors were especially prevalent in the violent plots that were foiled by law enforcement or ultimately failed due to errors made by the perpetrators. For example, nearly 40 percent of the foiled and failed violent plots in that data were perpetrated by subjects who surveilled their targets in preparation for conducting attacks. By comparison, only 18 percent of the successful violent plots in the data included perpetrators that engaged in target surveillance. Similarly, more than 55 percent of unsuccessful violent plots involved offenders who attempted to acquire the materials needed to assemble explosive devices. Only 18 percent of successful violent plots included the acquisition of explosives-making materials. Finally, nearly 25 percent of the unsuccessful violent plots involved perpetrators who actively attempted to recruit others to help them carryout their violent schemes, whereas only 5 percent of successful plots included the recruitment of co-offenders.

The data indicate that these observable mobilization indicators can, and often do, alert law enforcement to violent plots that are in the early stages of planning or preparation. Indeed, more than 70 percent of the premeditated violent plots that were foiled in their planning phases were done so because of law enforcement intelligence gathering and related disruption techniques (e.g., the use of confidential informants). However, it is important to note that approximately 20 percent of these foiled violent plots were brought to the attention of law enforcement by civilian bystanders who were not connected to the perpetrators of the crimes. Finally, more than 7 percent of the violent plots were foiled because co-offenders turned-in their accomplices to police, while 5 percent were foiled because concerned family members or friends of the perpetrators reported their activities to law enforcement.

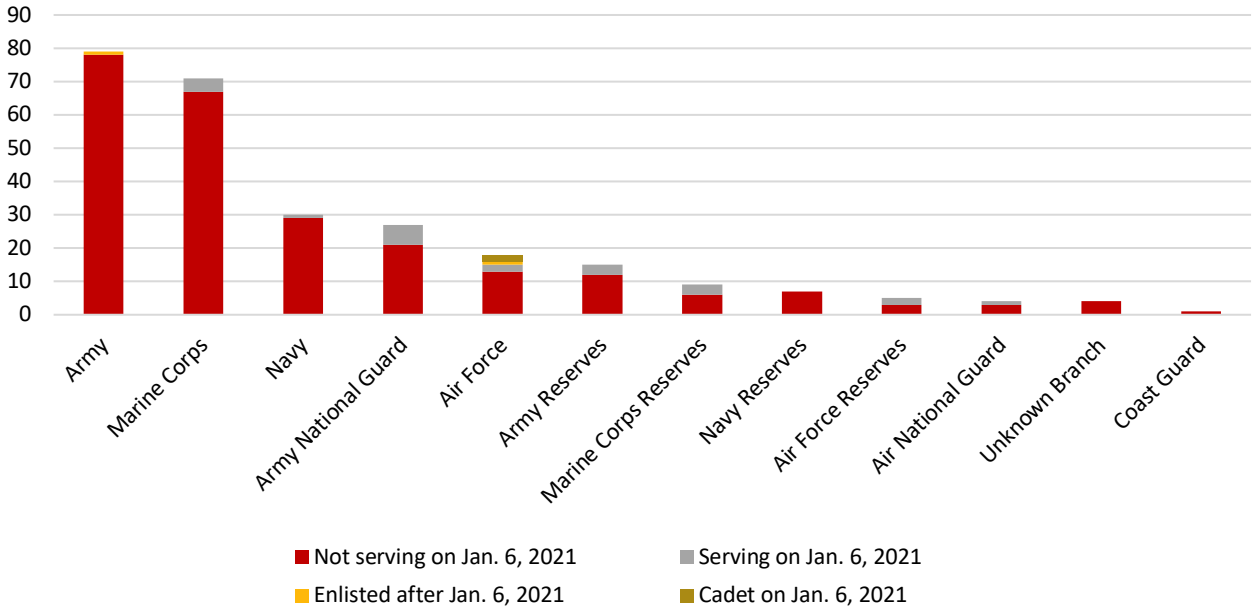
Figure 8. Reasons for Foiled Plots Involving Subjects with Military Backgrounds



Capitol Breach

Through 2023, 231 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds were identified as participants in the Capitol breach of January 6, 2021.[16] Even though their crimes occurred on a single day, these subjects account for 31.6 percent of all the cases in the data. Subjects with U.S. military backgrounds represent 14.8 percent of the 1,561 individuals who have faced, or are facing, charges for the siege of the Capitol building and related events, which is slightly higher but comparable to overall rates of military service among the broader set of criminal extremists that were reviewed for this study.[17]

Figure 9. Branch Affiliations and Military Status of Capitol Offenders on January 6, 2021



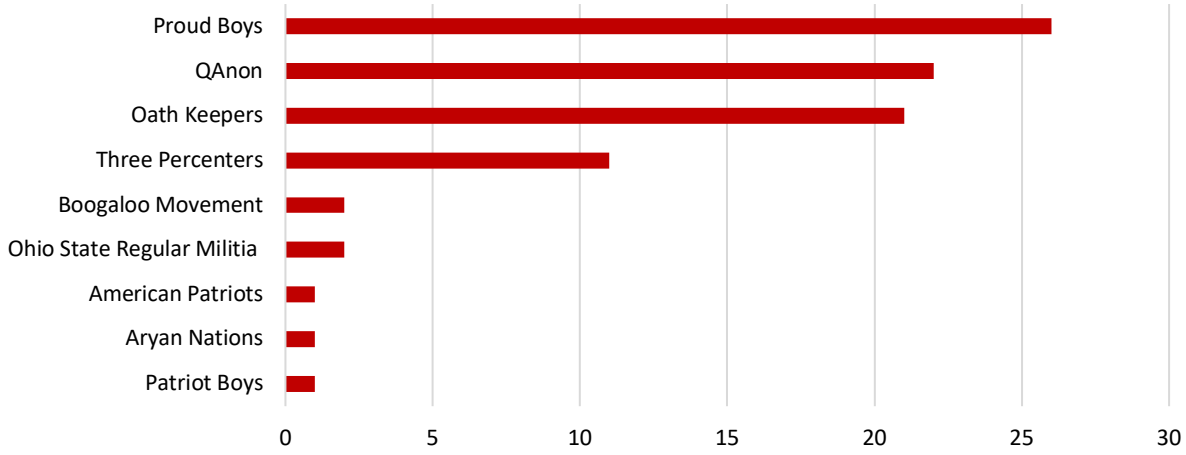
[16] This sample includes four individuals who are facing charges for refusing to leave Capitol grounds after a curfew was imposed on the evening of January 6th and one Air Force veteran who was killed while breaching the Capitol.

[17] "The Jan. 6 attack: The cases behind the biggest criminal investigation in U.S. history." *NPR* (December 16, 2024), https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories. Accessed December 16, 2024.

The vast majority (90%) of Capitol defendants with military backgrounds were no longer serving in the armed forces on January 6, 2021. In fact, on average, the subjects who are facing charges for the Capitol breach had been separated from military service for nearly 15 years at the time of the attack. Of the individuals who were no longer serving in the military during the Capitol breach, three were separated from the armed forces during basic training. The remaining 23 include four active-duty Marines, one active-duty Sailor, five Army National Guard members, three Army Reservists, three Marine Reservists, two Civil Air Patrol Cadets, two Air Force Reservists, one Air National Guard member, and one member of the Army and one member of the Air Force who enlisted after January 6th.

As is the case with the subjects who offended before and after the Capitol breach, the data reveal that the individuals who are facing charges for the events of January 6 most commonly served in the Army or Marine Corps. In fact, 107 of the Capitol defendants with military backgrounds served in the Army, Army National Guard, Army Reserves, while 79 served in the Marine Corps or Marine Corps Reserves.[18] Collectively, individuals who served in the Army or Marine Corps account for 80.5 percent of Capitol defendants with military backgrounds. Thirty-five (15.2%) Capitol defendants served in the Navy or Navy Reserves, while 21 individuals (9.1%) were affiliated with the Air Force. Only one former member of the U.S. Coast Guard has been charged for participating in the Capitol breach.[19]

Figure 10. Group and Movement Affiliations of the Capitol Offenders



As noted above, most (68%) of the individuals who have been charged with breaching the Capitol are not members of organized extremist groups or followers of named extremist movements. Most of the Capitol defendants appear to have been primarily motivated by overturning the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. However, Capitol defendants with U.S. military backgrounds include individuals who are tied to anti-government, white supremacist, and conspiracy theory groups. This includes 26 members of the Proud Boys, 22 individuals who expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy theory, and 21 members of the Oath Keepers.

[18] Six Capitol defendants have past service affiliations with both the Army and Marine Corps.

[19] Forty Capitol defendants have affiliations with multiple branches of military service. These defendants are counted for each of their affiliations in the statistics above and, thus, the overall sum is more than 100%.

PART II: RADICALIZATION RISK FACTORS

While research on radicalization has identified several individual-level risk factors associated with criminal extremism, scholars are generally in agreement that there is no single profile of an extremist. Risk factors for radicalization are present throughout the population generally, and most of the time they do not cause people to participate in extremist activities. However, in combination, these factors can produce radicalization pathways that lead to criminal outcomes. By analyzing how common these factors are in extremist populations, it is possible to identify potential vulnerabilities for individuals with respect to extremist recruitment and to isolate areas of focus in efforts to counter extremism. The statistics provided below show that while extremists with military experience are in many ways typical of criminal extremists more generally, they differ in some important respects. Furthermore, patterns emerge within this population when we compare rates of radicalization risk factors in recent cases to those of historical cases, as well as compare individuals who adhere to different ideological views.

Personal Background Characteristics

Scholars have frequently focused on personal background characteristics to explain criminal extremism. From this view, factors like being married, having children, acquiring an education, and maintaining employment have a protective influence against criminal and/or extremist activity. This is the case because these factors strengthen an individual's bonds to society and occupy time that they could otherwise spend engaging in delinquent activities.[20] They also reflect a person's established social status, which forms the basis of healthy social identities and ideas of self-worth.[21] In contrast, the absence of these factors, especially when combined with destabilizing elements such as drug or alcohol abuse, mental health concerns, traumatic experiences, and criminal histories, are often considered risk factors for extremist radicalization.[22]

Although there is general support for research on radicalization risk factors, studies show substantial variability in the extent to which individual risk factors are present in different extremist populations.[23] For example, research has shown that although anti-government and white supremacist criminal extremists tend to have low socio-economic standings in their respective communities, Jihadist and far-left extremists tend to be well-educated and are often gainfully employed when they radicalize.[24] This suggests that the specific dynamics of recruitment and radicalization often play out differently in distinct populations of criminal extremists.

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[20] John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson, "Turning Points in the Life Course: Why Change Matters to the Study of Crime," *Criminology* 31, no. 3 (1993): 301-325.

[21] Arie Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Michele Gelfand, Rohan Gunaratna, Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, Fernando Reinares, Edward Orehek, Jo Sasota, and Keren Sharvit. "Terrorism—A (Self) Love Story: Redirecting the Significance Quest Can End Violence," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013): 559.; Sampson and Laub, "Turning points in the Life Course."

[22] Gary LaFree, Michael A. Jensen, Patrick A. James, and Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States," *Criminology* 56, no. 2 (2018): 233-268.

[23] Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, *PIRUS Research Brief* (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2020), https://start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_ResearchBrief_May2020.pdf;

[24] Ibid.

Table 2. Radicalization Risk Factors Among Criminal Extremists with and without Military Backgrounds

	Non-Military Extremists (N=2,491)	Military Extremists (N=730)
Female	12.4%	2.46%
Marital status		
Single	62.4%	42.9%
Married	29.2%	40.2%
Divorced/Widowed	8.4%	16.9%
(% Missing)	(28.5%)	(18.3%)
Children	35.5%	53.6%
(% Missing)	(31.4%)	(19.7%)
Unemployed	22%	19.6%
(% Missing)	(43.2%)	(17.7%)
Mental Health Concerns	19.2%	34.9%
Substance Abuse History	19.6%	25.2%
Previous Criminal Activity		
None	58.6%	60.1%
Non-Violent	22.7%	22.6%
Violent	18.6%	17.3%
(% Missing)	(24.1%)	(10.4%)
Radical Family Member	24.4%	17%
(% Missing)	(53.8%)	(57.4%)
Radical Significant Other	16.9%	14.9%
(% Missing)	(45.7%)	(49.6%)

As an initial attempt to explore these dynamics, we analyzed whether the rates of radicalization risk factors among criminal extremists with military backgrounds are notably different than the rates of those factors in the population of extremists who did not serve in the military. Unsurprisingly, our data show that extremists with military experience are overwhelmingly male. Indeed, only 18 of the criminal extremists with military backgrounds in our data are women. Although this result is consistent with the common conclusion that extremist movements are male dominated, it is striking that the rate of female participation in the data is far lower than the rate of military experience in the female adult population. While women make up only 2.5 percent of criminal extremists with military backgrounds, they represent 9 percent of the adult population in the United States who have served in the U.S. military.[25]

[25] Jonathan E. Vespa, *Those Who Served.*

Our data show that the median age of criminal extremists with military experience is 40 years old at time of their offenses or arrests. The population of criminal extremists with military backgrounds skews older than extremists who did not serve in the armed forces, who have an average age at the time of offense or arrest of 34 years old. Not surprisingly, criminal extremists with military backgrounds were more likely to be both married (40.2% vs. 29.2%) and divorced and/or widowed (16.9% vs. 8.4%). Given the relatively high rates of marriage in this sample, criminal extremists with military backgrounds were also more likely to have children (53.6% vs. 35.5%) than extremists without military experience. These statistics varied, however, depending on motive. Military extremists arrested in the Capitol breach had an average age of 44, compared to 38 in the rest of the criminal extremist population with military backgrounds. Moreover, the Capitol defendants in the data have high rates of marriage/divorce (71.9%) and/or children (68.7%).

Extremists generally have higher rates of unemployment than the general population, and those with military experience are no exception.[26] Where employment status was reported in public sources, the data show that nearly 20 percent of the subjects were unemployed at the times that they committed their extremist crimes. Given that active-duty soldiers are considered fully employed, the rate of unemployment in the data is even higher among veterans (24%). This is in stark contrast to the unemployment rate among all veterans nationally, which prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had hovered around 4 percent.[27]

With respect to other destabilizing factors, the rates of prior criminal histories among both sets of extremists are comparable (39.9% for extremists with military backgrounds and 41.4% for extremists without military experience) but also slightly higher than the rate of non-ideological crime in the general population, which is estimated at nearly 30 percent of U.S. adults.[28] Over a third of extremists with military experience had reported mental health concerns (34.9%), a rate which is similar to the adult population generally.[29] Among military extremists, this data point is partially driven by the rate of PTSD related to military service, which accounts for nearly half of the cases in the data where mental health concerns were present. Finally, over 25 percent of extremists with military experience have documented histories of substance abuse, compared to 19.6 percent of extremists without military experience, and only 8 percent of the adult population in general.[30]

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Federal Reserve Economic Data: Unemployment Rate-Total Veterans, 18 Years and Over," (August 2021), https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNU04049526.

[28] Dan Clark, "How Many U.S. Adults Have a Criminal Record? Depends on How You Define It," *Politifact* (August 18, 2017), https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2017/aug/18/andrew-cuomo/yes-one-three-us-adults-have-criminal-record/

[29] Johns Hopkins University, *Mental Health Disorder Statistics* (Johns Hopkins University, 2020), https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/mental-health-disorder-statistics

[30] Although, U.S. veterans may be more inclined than the general adult population to abuse drugs and alcohol. See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Key Substance Use Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020), https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFFRPDFWHTML/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFW090120.pdf; National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Substance Abuse and Military Life DrugFacts" (October 2019), https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/substance-use-military-life.

Social Risk Factors in Radicalization

Radicalization is a social process. While the personal background characteristics discussed above may result in periods of vulnerability to radicalization, at a minimum, individuals must be exposed to extremist content, and frequently, socialized to extremist ideas through personal contacts. Existing research suggests that certain types of violent groups radicalize individuals through participation,[31] and that radicalization can occur at the group level.[32] However, more recently, online platforms have become sites for extremist recruitment.[33] As online interactions have become easier, more frequent, and more normalized, the relationships that are built in digital spaces are often strong enough to replace the socialization effects that were once the exclusive domain of offline groups. Although detailed online recruitment data is difficult to acquire in all but the highest-profile cases, available data show the critical role of online socializing factors in extremist radicalization among those with military experience.

One distinct pathway to radicalization is to engage with content and other extremists exclusively online. In the data overall, this was relatively rare, with 68 percent of extremists with military experience showing evidence of having met with other extremists in-person before being arrested for extremist activities. These face-to-face interactions typically occurred in the form of organizing in local extremist groups and/or small extremist cliques. However, the rate of face-to-face extremist interactions among individuals with military backgrounds has declined dramatically in recent years. Over the last five years, just half of the subjects in our data were known to have met with fellow extremists in-person, while the other half maintained extremist relationships that were completely virtual. Even in the recent cases of offline interactions, personal connections were typically established online first. The rates of in-person versus online interactions also varied by ideology. For example, 76 percent of anti-government and white supremacist extremists in the data showed evidence of meeting with fellow extremists in-person. By comparison, only 47 percent of extremists who were inspired by Salafi-Jihadist groups abroad had offline connections. As an indicator of risk, therefore, online extremist interactions are common to the radicalization processes of all extremists, but they may be particularly central to subjects with global, as opposed to local, orientations.

Finally, research suggests that family members and significant others can play a critical role in extremist radicalization.[34] However, the data show this has been the case less frequently for extremists with military backgrounds than it has been for subjects who did not serve. Approximately, 17 percent of criminal extremists with military backgrounds are known to have been exposed to the influence of an extremist family member, compared to 24.4 percent in the general extremist sample.

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[31] Stevan Chermak, Joshua Freilich, and Michael Suttmoeller, "The Organizational Dynamics of Far-Right Hate Groups in the United States: Comparing Violent to Nonviolent Organizations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 3 (2013): 193-218; Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Univ of California Press, 2002).

[32] Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[33] Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, "Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right "/pol" Boards," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2021): 65-80.

[34] Mohammed M. Hafez, "The ties that bind: How terrorists exploit family bonds," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 2 (2016): 15-18.

PART III: RADICALIZATION SUBGROUPS

As we noted in the previous section, there is a considerable body of prior research that suggests that radicalization pathways are complex and highly individualized.[35] One person's radicalization process is rarely identical to another's, and the experiences that act as radicalization mechanisms for one individual can serve as protective factors for someone else.[36] However, while individual radicalization pathways often differ in terms of the temporal sequence or relative importance of particular mechanisms, research has found that extremists often cluster around unique configurations of risk characteristics.[37] Thus, while radicalization cannot be distilled down to a single risk profile or trajectory, it is possible to identify clusters of risk factors and vulnerabilities that are common among certain types of extremists.

Using hierarchical clustering on principal components (HCPC), we analyzed whether similar groupings of radicalization risk factors can be identified among extremists with U.S. military backgrounds. HCPC, which is related to Principal Component Analysis (PCA), is an unsupervised machine learning method that is used to isolate patterns in heterogenous data that have many correlated dimensions (i.e., variables).[38] PCA combines related factors and reduces high-dimension data into a smaller set of uncorrelated principal components.[39] Using an iterative algorithm that creates a hierarchical tree (dendrogram), HCPC clusters principal components in a way that maximizes in-group likeness while also minimizing between-group similarities. HCPC, therefore, helps the analyst to not only identify groupings of variables that tend to co-occur with each other, but also to visualize the separation between one cluster of objects and another.

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[35] This section remains unchanged from the initial version of the report released in January 2022.

[36] For example, parenthood can be a protective or risk factor for radicalization depending on the individual. While the birth of children can steer some individuals away from extremism, others may be drawn closer to it after becoming parents. Some white supremacist extremists, for instance, are drawn into extremism because of the belief that they need to advance the white race for the future safety and success of their children. See Tore Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right," in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, Political Violence (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 30–48; Pete Simi, Robert Futrell, and Bryan F. Bubolz, "Parenting as Activism: Identity Alignment and Activist Persistence in the White Power Movement," *The Sociological Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (August 2016): 491–519; and Steven Windisch et al., "Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 9 (December 2016): 1–38.. On the complexity of radicalization, see John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (July 2008): 80–94; and Michael A. Jensen, Anita Atwell Seate, and Patrick A. James, "Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (April 2018), 1–24.

[37] Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert. "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, no. 2 (2014): 425-435; Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, Roberta Belli, Jeff Gruenewald, and William S. Parkin, "Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB)," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 2 (2014): 372-384; Michael A. Jensen and Gary LaFree, *Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalization (EADR): Report to the National Institute of Justice* (Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice, 2016).

[38] Naomi Altman and Martin Krzywinski, "Points of Significance: Clustering," *Nature methods* 14, no. 6 (2017): 545-547; Kassambara, Alboukadel, *Practical Guide to Principal Component Methods in R: PCA, M (CA), FAMD, MFA, HCPC, factoextra.* Vol. 2. Sthda, 2017.

[39] Hervé Abdi and Lynne J. Williams, "Principal Component Analysis," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Computational Statistics* 2, no. 4 (2010): 433-459.

Methods based on PCA are exploratory, not causal, with the goal of describing patterns in the data and generating hypotheses for future testing.[40] Given that very little is known about the radicalization trajectories of extremists with military backgrounds, HCPC is a useful first step in identifying the risk factors and vulnerabilities that link subgroups of offenders. The results of this section, therefore, are meant to serve as a guidepost for future studies that seek to establish the causal patterns in the radicalization processes of extremists with military backgrounds.

Table 3. Military Specific Radicalization Risk Factors

Variables	Present	Absent
Deployed	176	285
Deployed to active combat zone	138	323
Extremist clique with military members	124	337
Combat experience	89	372
PTSD resulting from combat	44	417
PTSD resulting from military service	64	397

We began our analysis by including all the general radicalization risk factors that were reviewed in the previous section, as well as a set of potential radicalization factors that are unique to extremists with military backgrounds. These include deployments to active conflict zones, documented evidence of combat experience, diagnoses of PTSD, and relationships with other U.S. service members who held extremist views or were tied to extremist movements (i.e., military cliques). The descriptive statistics related to these variables are presented in Table 3. As noted above, the coding of military specific risk factors reflects the evidence that was available in public sources and should be considered conservative estimates.

One advantage of HCPC over other clustering techniques is that it does not require the analyst to begin their data exploration with a pre-determined number of clusters in mind. Rather, hierarchal trees, like those generated by HCPC, allow the analyst to partition the data into the number of clusters that maximizes within-group similarities, as well as the distance between clusters. The results of our HCPC analysis show that there are three distinct sub-groups in the data of criminal extremists with military backgrounds (see figure 1). These subgroups are separated by several factors, but perhaps most important, the clusters tend to reflect one's military status at the time of their arrest/offense. That is, Subgroup A is entirely made up of active service members, while Subgroups B and C overwhelmingly include individuals who offended while they were no longer serving in the U.S. military. This suggests that the set of radicalization risk factors that are common among active-duty service members are likely to be different from those which are common to offenders who are no longer serving. Below, we describe the defining characteristics of each subgroup and note how they are distinct from each other (see Table 4 for frequencies for each subgroup).

[40] Ian T. Jolliffe and Jorge Cadima. "Principal Component Analysis: A Review and Recent Developments," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 374, no. 2065 (2016).

Subgroup A

Subgroup A includes 58 subjects, all of whom were actively serving at the times of their criminal offenses or arrests. Given that the subjects in this group were in the military when they committed extremist crimes and were comparatively younger than the subjects in the other subgroups, they have low overall rates of age-related risk factors for radicalization, including failed relationships, unemployment and related financial struggles, and non-ideological criminal histories. Rather, the subjects in this subgroup tended to radicalize and offend alongside fellow service members who also espoused extremist views. Indeed, this subgroup had the highest rates of co-radicalizing (36.2%) and co-offending (55.2%) with fellow members of the U.S. armed forces. Finally, while the subjects in this subgroup were all actively serving at the time of their offenses or arrests, the evidence that was available in open sources does not indicate that they have significant rates of PTSD or related mental health concerns.

Case Illustration

Justin Wade Hermanson was arrested in November 2020 and charged with participating in a conspiracy to manufacture and transport unregistered weapons, with the purpose of advancing "civil disorder." He was recruited into a cell of white supremacist fascists by a fellow Marine in the same unit at Camp LeJeune. His case is currently pending.[41]

Hermanson is one of the nearly 17 percent of criminal extremists in the data who adopted an extremist ideology and committed an ideologically motivated crime while on active duty, reserve, or guard duty. While this population represents a minority of the offenders in the data, they are of central concern given their potential access to resources, targets, and other recruits, as well as the power and influence they may wield over subordinate service members or civilians. The case of Hermanson, a young NCO in the Marines who was recruited into a cell of a white supremacist network while stationed at Camp LeJeune, reflects the challenges of countering organized white supremacist recruitment among active duty servicemembers.

Hermanson enlisted in the Marines in March 2017 after completing high school. He grew up in Swansboro, North Carolina, only miles from Camp LeJeune.[42] Little is known about his childhood, but there is no evidence to suggest that he had any mental health concerns, experiences with abuse, or other forms of trauma. Hermanson was 21 years old at the time of his arrest, and there's no evidence that he was married or had children. He had achieved the rank of Corporal in the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment.[43]

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[41] U.S.A. vs. Liam Montgomery Collins et al., No. 7-20, CR-167, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina. Indictment, Third Superseding.

[42] Hermanson was released to the care of a Carleen Hermanson in Swansboro, North Carolina, U.S.A vs. Justin Wade Hermanson, No. 7-20, CR-167, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina, Order Setting Conditions of Release.

[43] Christopher Matthias and Ryan J. Reilly, "The Marines And The Racist Porn Actor Who Tried To Start A 'Modern Day SS," *The Huffington Post, (*December 8, 2020), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marines-neo-nazis-targeted-black-lives-matter-idaho_n_5fcea785c5b63a1534542eae.

Given that he was on active duty at the time of his radicalization and arrest, he was not unemployed, and while he did not have an advanced education, he would have known that he would have access to educational opportunities in the future through the GI bill. He also had no criminal record.

According to public sources, Hermanson had never been in a combat zone or even deployed. Thus, as is consistent with many young extremist recruits on active duty, Hermanson did not have the service-related risk factors for radicalization that many veterans face. However, like many other active-duty offenders, he was recruited directly into a white supremacist cell by a fellow service member. Understanding Hermanson's engagement with this extremist network illustrates the complex ways that organized white supremacists recruit and operate among active-duty service members.

Hermanson was recruited into a group of white supremacists by Liam Montgomery Collins, a fellow Marine in his unit.[44] Collins was a radical ideologue who embraced neo-fascist white supremacism as a high school student. He was an active participant on the racist, fascist website Iron March, where leaked chat logs show he engaged in extremist dialogue and recruited other participants to join him on Facebook chat groups and to meet in-person. In these chats, Collins explained that he had enlisted in the Marines because it is the "whitest" service, and because he thought military experience was "a necessity" for white supremacists, who would, presumably, engage in a violent revolution against the state. He also wrote that after his service, he intended to get a job with a military contractor or start his own paramilitary group.[45]

Court records report that Hermanson expressed views that echoed the ideology of the neo-Nazi accelerationist group Atomwaffen (which other members of the cell had identified themselves with by using particular images and rhetoric).[46] White supremacist accelerationists are violent racists who believe that multiracial, capitalist democracies are inherently weak and doomed to collapse. They see violent terrorism as a strategy to hasten the imminent collapse of the United States and to install a fascist, white ethnostate.

Hermanson and other members of his cell undertook multiple actions to advance this terroristic strategy. First, they built an arsenal. Between 2017 and 2020, Collins stole military gear and distributed it to other white supremacists, while another Marine, Jordan Duncan, created a "library" of materials on weaponry, including some information that was "military owned."[47] Hermanson facilitated a particular sale of weaponry across state lines, accepting funds from one cell member and transferring them to another. He also communicated with other Marines on base about the possibility of other untraceable weapons sales. Cell members also met for training purposes. In 2020, Paul James Kryscuk, a civilian, moved to Idaho. After Collins was publicly exposed as a white

[44] U.S.A. vs. Liam Montgomery Collins et al., No. 7-20, CR-167, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina. Indictment, Third Superseding.

[45] Iron March (IM) SQL leak data, available at https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2019/11/06/massive-white-supremacist-message-board-leak-how-to-access-and-interpret-the-data/.

[46] U.S.A. vs. Liam Montgomery Collins et al., No. 7-20, CR-167, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina. Indictment, Third Superseding.

[47] Ibid.

supremacist and separated from the Marines, he joined Kryscuk in Idaho, along with the recently separated Duncan, who had started working for a military contractor. In Idaho, cell members video-taped themselves firing weapons and promoting neo-Nazi ideology. The indictments also describe conversations among the members discussing various terrorist attacks, including those targeting power substations. Hermanson reportedly discussed a previous attack (by another group) in detail, and suggested that by attacking a single substation, they could shut down the power to an entire region and cause national chaos.[48] These illegal weapons sales and terrorist plotting led to Hermanson's arrest and indictment.

Hermanson was one of at least three active-duty Marines that Collins successfully recruited into their white supremacist cell while at LeJeune. Hermanson, in turn, recruited at least one other Marine (and apparently discussed weapons sales with others). However, the cell they formed was not made-up exclusively of active-duty service members, it also involved at least one local civilian. Furthermore, after two of the active-duty members, Collins and Duncan, separated from the service, they continued their engagement with the group, coordinating weapons sales across state lines and communicating with Hermanson while he was still at Camp LeJeune.[49]

Hermanson's recruitment into violent white supremacism reflect several current trends in extremist mobilization among those with a nexus to the U.S. military. First, while the majority of criminal extremists in the data have separated from the services, those who were on active duty, reservist, or guard duty at the time of their arrest were more likely to have co-offenders, including other individuals with and without military experience, as Hermanson did. Second, while Hermanson became involved in a clique of white supremacists who engaged with one another over years, he was also part of a much larger extremist network, which existed offline, online, in the military, outside of the military, in the United States, and outside of the country. When the initial extremist recruiter of the cell was separated from the military on the grounds that "the character of his service was incongruent with Marine Corps' expectations and standards,"[50] he continued to actively organize and participate in illegal activities, and to engage with Hermanson and other active-duty service members. The nature of domestic extremism today is fluid and decentralized, with groups that are ephemeral. Hermanson's trajectory as a criminal extremist while on active-duty military service suggests that narrow counter-extremism strategies that target specific groups and actors on base will fail to effectively address the potential for extremist recruitment within the ranks, especially if the recourse is limited to separation.

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[48] Ibid

[49] U.S.A. vs. Liam Montgomery Collins et al., No. 7-20, CR-167, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of North Carolina. Indictment, Third Superseding.

[50] Paul Szoldra, *Task & Purpose,* "Ex-Marine exposed on neo-Nazi forum charged with allegedly manufacturing illegal guns while still on active duty," (October 28, 2020),

https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marine-corps-nazi-weapons-charges/.

Figure 11. Radicalization Subgroups

Subgroup B

Subgroup B is the largest cluster in the HCPC results and is one of two subgroups that are primarily made up of individuals who were no longer serving in the military when they committed extremist crimes. Indeed, 96.4% of the 336 subjects in Subgroup B were no longer in the armed forces when they offended. In contrast to Subgroup A, individuals in this cluster were older when they committed their crimes and they had higher rates of age-related radicalization risk factors. For instance, 25% of the subjects in this subgroup were unemployed at the times of their offenses and/or arrests and approximately 37% had documented records of committing non-ideological crimes. Most importantly, this subgroup's risk factors are ones that are commonly found in the general extremist population. In addition to higher-than-expected rates of unemployment and non-ideological criminal histories, this subgroup had the highest rates (17.3%) of family members or romantic partners that were also involved in extremism but also high rates (54.8%) of lone actor offending. Finally, this subgroup's radicalization pathways do not appear to be closely tied to their military experiences. The subjects in this subgroup had low overall rates of deployments to combat zones (21.1%), combat experiences (11%) and documented mental health concerns related to military service (0.6%).

Case Illustration

Daniel Baker, a self-described anarchist and anti-fascist, was arrested by federal agents on January 15, 2021, in Tallahassee, Florida, after he made repeated calls on social media for his followers to attack an upcoming pro-Trump rally at the Florida state capitol building.[51] Prior to his arrest, Baker posted dozens of statements, images, and videos on various social media platforms in which he threatened violence against police officers, military service members, and those he described as a white supremacists and anti-government extremists.[52]

Baker enlisted in the U.S. Army as an airborne infantryman in 2006 shortly after completing high school.[53] Baker testified in federal court that it was not his wish to join the military but that he enlisted because his father, with whom he had a contentious relationship, pressured him to do so.[54] By all accounts, Baker's training and initial entry into the armed forces were unremarkable. However, Baker went absent without leave (AWOL) a year into his military service after receiving notice that his unit would deploy to Iraq.[55] Baker reportedly objected to the Iraq war, claiming that U.S. forces were committing human rights violations in the country.[56]

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[51] United States Department of Justice, "Daniel A. Baker Indicted for Inciting Violence at the Florida Capitol Building, February 18, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndfl/pr/daniel-baker-indicted-inciting-violence-florida-capitol-building.

[52] United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker, Affidavit in Support of a Criminal Complaint, Case: 4:21-cr-00010 (January 2021).

[53] Michael Levenson, "Former Infantryman is Convicted of Threatening Right-Wing Protesters," *New York Times*, May 6, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/06/us/trump-daniel-baker-florida-capitol-plot.html.

[54] United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker, Excerpt of Defendant's Trial Testimony Before the Honorable Allen C. Winsor, Case: 4:21-cr-00010 (May 5, 2021), p. 4.

[55] USA v. Baker, Affidavit, p. 3.

[56] Natasha Lennard, "A Florida Anarchist Will Spend Years in Prison for Online Posts Prompted by Jan. 6 Riot," *The Intercept*, October 16, 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/10/16/daniel-baker-anarchist-capitol-riot/

Table 4. Frequency of Risk Factors Across Radicalization Subgroups

	Subgroup A	Subgroup B	Subgroup C
Status at Time of Crime/Arrest***			
Not Serving	0	**324**	**62**
Serving	**58**	12	5
Failed Relationship			
No	**53**	290	53
Yes	5	**46**	**14**
Children***			
No	**42**	96	21
Yes	2	**142**	**33**
Employment Status at Time of Crime/Arrest***			
Unemployed	0	**64**	**18**
Employed/Student/Retired	**58**	192	32
Mental Illness			
No***	**49**	**277**	0
Yes	9	59	**67**
Substance Abuse*			
No	**54**	260	47
Yes	4	***76***	**20**
Criminal History***			
None	**54**	212	38
Non-Violent	2	**65**	**15**
Violent	2	**59**	**14**
Radical Family/Romantic Partner**			
No	**56**	278	**63**
Yes	2	**58**	4
Military Clique*			
No	37	**248**	**52**
Yes	**21**	88	15

Lone Offender*			
No	**32**	152	22
Yes	26	**184**	**45**
Deployment to Combat Zone***			
No	**45**	**266**	13
Yes	13	71	**54**
Combat Experience***			
No	**55**	**299**	18
Yes	3	37	**49**
PTSD Diagnosis***			
No	**58**	**334**	4
Yes	0	2	**63**

Chi2 p-value = * < .05, ** < .01, *** < .001. **Bold** = Higher than expected frequency

There is no evidence that Baker applied for conscientious objector status prior to going AWOL. As a result, he received an other-than-honorable discharge and left the Army in 2007 having never deployed or experienced combat.[57]

According to news reports and court testimony, Baker struggled in his transition back to civilian life. Due to the nature of his discharge from the armed forces, Baker was denied Veterans Affairs benefits and he spent most of the next ten years homeless and unemployed.[58] As a means to survive, Baker would panhandle on the streets of Tallahassee, and he spent months at a time living in makeshift communes with members of the Rainbow Gathering—a group that Baker described as "hippies" who lived in the woods—and in the vegetarian temples of the Hare Krishna.[59] These communities appear to have had a notable impact on Baker, and during this period, his views and lifestyle changed significantly. He became a certified yoga instructor, began practicing Hinduism, and dedicated himself to a life without material possessions.[60] Moreover, Baker became interested in a number of social justice causes and became an outspoken critic of policies that he viewed as inherently unfair. In court, Baker noted that he was fired from several different jobs for demanding that his female and African American coworkers be paid as much as him.[61]

[57] James Clark, "He Went AWOL from the Army and Fought ISIS with the Kurds. Now He's Under Arrest for Threatening Trump Supporters," *Task and Purpose*, January 16, 2021, https://taskandpurpose.com/news/army-vet-arrested-violence-trump-supporters/.

[58] Ibid.

[59] USA v. Baker, Excerpt of Defendant's Testimony, p. 3-5.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., p. 3.

Baker's radicalization to violence began in 2017 when he learned of the People's Defense Units (YPG) and their fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in the northern parts of Syria. According to Baker, he was drawn to the YPG because of its "leftist" orientation and its professed goals of advancing women's rights and defeating the patriarchy commonly associated with Salafi Jihadism.[62] Baker was so drawn to the cause of the YPG that he contacted a former member of the U.S. Army who fought with the group and asked how he could join. Baker eventually contacted YPG fighters and made plans to travel to Syria to fight with the group. Baker spent approximately six months with the YPG in Northern Syria, but he testified in court that he only spent two weeks on the front lines and only experienced direct combat once.[63]

Upon returning to the United States, Baker attempted to become a certified Emergency Medical Technician through a local community college but due to his long-term unemployment, he had trouble paying for the courses and he never completed the training.[64] Baker's return to the United States also coincided with the violent demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia, by white nationalists that left one counter-protester dead. Baker stated in court that after Charlottesville he began joining groups on Facebook and other social media sites that were dedicated to countering far-right extremists, including white supremacists and those who he described as neo-Nazi fascists.[65] Baker began to post anti-fascist memes and videos online. Furthermore, after several high-profile police shootings, he became more outwardly critical of law enforcement. According to Baker, he always harbored animus against police, which he attributed to his father, who was a local police officer and would often tell him that law enforcement is made up of white supremacists and "bad cops."[66]

Baker not only engaged in anti-fascist online communities after the events in Charlottesville, but he also began attending public demonstrations against white nationalists and law enforcement.[67] After the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, Baker traveled to Washington state to join demonstrators in the Capital Hill Autonomous Zone—an area of Seattle that was occupied by anti-fascists who were squaring off with local police.[68] Baker returned to Florida after two weeks in Seattle, claiming that he witnessed police kill several protesters.[69]

Baker continued to post critical (and sometimes threatening) statements, memes, and videos online targeting law enforcement, members of the military, and far-right extremists.[70] Several of Baker's posts referred to the need for

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[62] Ibid., p. 7-8.

[63] Ibid., p. 10-11, 15-16.

[64] USA v. Baker, Affidavit, p. 5.

[65] USA v. Baker, Excerpt of Defendant's Testimony, p. 29.

[66] Ibid., p. 20-24.

[67] Ibid., p. 31.

[68] Jeff Burlew, "Daniel Baker, suspect in Florida Capitol threats, described as 'model tenant' by landlord," *Tallahassee Democrat*, January 16, 2021, https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/local/2021/01/16/daniel-baker-tallahassee-florida-capitol-threats-model-tenant-landlord/4148815001/.

[69] USA v. Baker, Excerpt of Defendant's Testimony, p. 53.

[70] USA v. Baker, Affidavit.

a violent revolution and they included statements such as "death to amerikka [*sic*]" and "voting from the rooftops" (an apparent reference to rooftop snipers).[71] After the breach of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, Baker turned his attention to those who he believed were responsible for inspiring the attack, including former President, Donald Trump. Baker believed that similar attacks were being planned to target state capitol buildings, including one that was scheduled to take place on January 20th at the Florida state capitol building in Tallahassee.[72] Baker encouraged his followers and friends on social media to join him at the state capitol building in what he referred to as a "call to arms." In his post, Baker reportedly shared an image that included the statement: "If you're afraid to die fighting the enemy, stay in bed and live."[73]

Unknown to Baker, the FBI had been monitoring his social media activity since October.[74] The day following his post encouraging action at the Florida capitol, federal agents apprehended Baker and charged him with transmission of an interstate threat. Baker was found guilty of the charges after a jury trial in the spring of 2021 and was sentenced to 44 months incarceration in federal prison.[75]

While Baker spent time in the U.S. Army from 2006-2007, his eventual radicalization does not appear to be closely tied to his experiences in the military, which did not include deployments or combat. Rather, Baker's radicalization illustrates how vulnerabilities associated with transitions back to civilian life can contribute to the mobilization of individuals to violence. Baker's life after the Army was marked by acute periods of vulnerability caused by unemployment and homelessness. To survive, Baker sought refuge in alternative lifestyle and religious communities. These groups influenced his views and helped to jump-start a process of radicalization that culminated in him fighting Jihadists abroad and threatening violence at home.

Subgroup C

The final subgroup in our analysis is also made up primarily of individuals who were no longer serving when they committed extremist crimes. In fact, of the 67 subjects in Subgroup C, only four were actively serving at the times of their crimes/arrests. Like Subgroup B, the subjects in this cluster displayed higher-than-expected rates of age-related risk factors for radicalization, including failed relationships (20.9%), unemployment (36%), and previous non-ideological criminal offenses (43.3%). However, in contrast to Subgroup B, the subjects in this cluster

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[71] United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker, Government's Motion for an Upward Variance from the Recommended Advisory Sentencing Guidelines, Case: 4:21-cr-00010 (September 8, 2021).

[72] United States of America v. Daniel Alan Baker, Motion to Reconsider Detention Order, Case: 4:21-cr-0010 (April 7, 2021); USA v. Baker, Excerpt of Defendant's Testimony, p. 66-67.

[73] USA v. Baker, Affidavit, p. 22.

[74] Brittany Shammas and Gerrit De Vynck, "The FBI warned about far-right attacks. Agents arrested a leftist ex-soldier," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/02/14/fbi-arrest-left-wing-violence/+&cd=22&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us.

[75] Department of Justice, "Tallahassee Man Sentenced to Forty-Four Months in Federal Prison for Communicating Threats of Violence," October 12, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndfl/pr/tallahassee-man-sentenced-forty-four-months-federal-prison-communicating-threats.

commonly shared radicalization risk factors that that were tied to their military service. This includes past deployments to combat zones (80.6%), past combat experience (73.1%), and service-related diagnoses of PTSD (94%). Given that mental health concerns were ubiquitous in this subgroup, it is not surprising that many (29.9%) of the subjects in this cluster also showed evidence of substance use disorders. Finally, the subjects in this subgroup typically committed their criminal offenses alone (67.2%), even though some had known connections to other extremists, including those with military backgrounds.

Case Illustration

On January 6, 2017, Esteban Santiago committed a mass shooting at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, killing five people and injuring six others.[76] His radicalization trajectory was marked by mental health concerns, including combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); previous criminal activity; and several other risk characteristics for violence. At the time of the attack, Santiago was 26-years old and living in Anchorage, Alaska. Previously, Santiago had a steady job working in private security, however, he was fired two months prior to the attack due to "documented mental illness."[77] He was unmarried but had recently become a father with his girlfriend, who gave birth to his first child in September 2016.[78]

Santiago joined the Puerto Rico Army National Guard in December 2007.[79] He deployed to Iraq with his guard unit from April 2010–February 2011 and experienced combat.[80] After returning home, he joined the Army Reserves and later the Alaska Army National Guard.[81] While in the Alaska Army National Guard, he allegedly went absent without leave (AWOL) several times and was demoted from the rank of specialist to private first class.[82] He received a general discharge for "poor performance" in August of 2016.[83] At the time of his discharge, Army investigators noted "strange behavior."[84] While Santiago was never professionally diagnosed with a mental

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[76] Jamiel Lynch and Ralph Ellis, "Fort Lauderdale airport shooter given 5 life sentences plus 120 years," *CNN,* August 17, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/17/us/fort-lauderdale-airport-shooter-sentenced/index.html.

[77] Kyle Hopkins, "2 months before airport shootings, Esteban Santiago lost security job due to 'documented mental illness,'" *Alaska's News Source,* February 14, 2017, https://www.alaskasnewssource.com/content/news/2-months-before-airport-shootings-Esteban-Santiago-lost-security-job-due-to-documented-mental-illness-413780783.html.

[78] Megan O'Matz, Paula McMahon, and Sally Kestin, "Esteban Santiago, identified as Fort Lauderdale airport shooter, suffered from psychological issues," *Sun Sentinel,* January 7, 2017, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/fl-airport-shooter-esteban-santiago-20170106-story.html.

[79] Fox 5 New York, "Who is Esteban Santiago?" January 6, 2017, https://www.fox5ny.com/news/who-is-esteban-santiago.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Camila Domonoske, "Fort Lauderdale Airport Shooter Is Sentenced To Life In Prison," *NPR,* August 17, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/08/17/639591328/fort-lauderdale-airport-shooter-is-sentenced-to-life-in-prison.

illness from combat, his family members claim that he struggled with PTSD from his experiences in Iraq.[85] His relatives noted that he had "flashbacks" of his deployment and stated that he was not "well" when he returned.[86] One family member reported that Santiago was "acting strangely" following his deployment and "he talked about all the destruction and the killing of children."[87] Six months after returning from his deployment, his father passed away.[88]

In January of 2016, prior to his discharge from the National Guard, Santiago was arrested for domestic violence.[89] According to the victim, Santiago was yelling, broke down a bathroom door, and proceeded to strangle her and hit her on the head.[90] Following the incident, he violated the terms of his release by visiting the victim,[91] and he was charged with two misdemeanors.[92] Additionally, Santiago was investigated for possession of child pornography in 2011 and 2012, however, it was deemed that there was not enough evidence to prosecute the case at the time.[93]

In addition to suspected PTSD related to his combat experience, Santiago was diagnosed and treated for schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder following the attack in Fort Lauderdale.[94] Both psychotic illnesses when left untreated can bring about hallucinations and delusions, as well as mania and depression.[95] In fact, prior to the attack, Santiago sought treatment at a psychiatric hospital following hallucinations.[96] Two months prior to the attack, Santiago voluntarily entered an FBI office in Anchorage with a loaded handgun magazine and reported "terroristic thoughts" and claimed that "the CIA was forcing him to watch ISIS videos."[97] The FBI assisted him in accessing a mental health facility, and he was released four days later and returned his gun—the same weapon the he would go on to use in the Fort Lauderdale attack.[98] Despite mental health diagnoses, Santiago was found

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[85] Jessica McBride, "Esteban Santiago: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know," *Heavy.com,* May 1, 2018, https://heavy.com/news/2017/01/esteban-santiago-fort-lauderdale-airport-shooter-shooting-active-gunman-suspect-photo-citizen-isis-florida-facebook-new-jersey-victims-military/.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Paula McMahon, "Airport shooting suspect is being treated for schizophrenia, defense team says," *Sun Sentinel,* March 13, 2017, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/fl-reg-esteban-santiago-diagnosis-airport-shooting-20170313-story.html.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Jeff Tavss, Andrea Torres, Glenna Milberg, "Official: FLL shooter told FBI that gov't controlled his mind" *Local 10,* January 6, 2017, https://www.local10.com/news/2017/01/07/official-fll-shooter-told-fbi-that-govt-controlled-his-mind/.

[97] Ken Dilanian, "Fort Lauderdale Shooting: Should the FBI Have Done More to Stop Florida Airport Suspect?" January 9, 2017, *NBC News,* https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/should-fbi-have-done-more-stop-florida-airport-shooter-n704871.

[98] Ibid.

mentally fit to stand trial.[99] Sentencing transcripts indicated extensive premeditation for the crime, rather than "a situation where somebody snaps mentally."[100] In fact, Santiago, purchased the gun case for the firearm he used eight days prior to the attack, booked his flight three days prior to the attack, and had been practicing shooting at an Alaskan gun range in November/December 2016.[101] The transcripts also noted that Santiago reported using several hallucinogenic drugs, such as "LSD, marijuana, ecstasy, mushrooms, and salvia," which likely contributed to his hallucinations and mental health concerns.[102]

While there were several risk factors present following Santiago's deployment in Iraq, it does not appear that he fully radicalized until after his military separation in August 2016. Following his separation, he allegedly began accessing jihadi chatrooms in which he would communicate with Islamic State members and sympathizers.[103] While he earlier stated that he carried out the attack because of "government mind control," he later admitted to planning the attack on behalf of the Islamic State following his conversations with jihadist sympathizers online.[104]

The results of this analysis in this section support the conclusion that education and prevention programming, as well as interventions to help those who may be radicalizing, will need to be tailored to specific configurations of risks and vulnerabilities. The presence or absence of particular risk factors will likely depend on whether subjects are serving at the time that they are receiving prevention or intervention services. Individuals who are no longer in the armed forces when they radicalize are more likely to face challenges associated with poor social mobility, past criminal convictions, and certain types of anti-social relationships, such as extremist family members. Moreover, some veterans and past service members are also vulnerable to radicalization because of their previous military experiences and related mental health concerns. By comparison, individuals who radicalize before or while serving in the U.S. armed forces appear to be less likely to have age-related risk factors and social mobility challenges, but they are more likely to radicalize alongside other members of the military. We discuss the policy and future research implications of these findings below.

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[99] USA v Santiago-Ruiz, Transcript of Sentencing, p. 30.

[100] USA v Santiago-Ruiz, Transcript of Sentencing, p. 29.

[101] Paula McMahon, "Esteban Santiago researched layout of Los Angeles airport days before Fort Lauderdale shooting, feds say," *Sun Sentinel,* May 21, 2018, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/fl-reg-esteban-santiago-plea-agreement-sentence-20180521-story.html; Alexi C. Cardona, "Officials: Fort Lauderdale shooter told FBI he talked with Islamic State group sympathizers," *Naples Daily News,* January 17, 2017, https://www.naplesnews.com/story/news/crime/2017/01/17/judge-orders-fort-lauderdale-shooter-esteban-santiago-remain-custody/96665958/.

[102] USA v Santiago-Ruiz, Transcript of Sentencing, p. 30.

[103] Paula McMahon, "Airport shooter Esteban Santiago said he visited 'jihadi chat rooms' online, prosecutors say," *Sun Sentinel,* January 17, 2017, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/fl-court-tuesday-esteban-santiago-airport-20170117-story.html.

[104] Ibid.

PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was an initial attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of the rate and nature of criminal extremism in the U.S. military. While our results cannot be used to determine how many current service members hold extremist sympathies, they do suggest that radicalization to the point of criminality is a relatively rare occurrence in the armed forces. Individuals with military backgrounds make up just over 11 percent of the broader sample of extremists who have committed criminal offenses in the United States since 1990. However, our data suggest that cases of criminal extremism with links to the U.S. military have become more frequent in recent years. The growing number of cases, as well as the evolving complexity of extremism in digital and physical spaces, underscore the need for the DoD to partner with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), veterans' organizations, and military families to devise an effective strategy to counter extremism in the military.

As we have noted throughout this report, whether it happens in the military or somewhere else, radicalization is a complex process that is driven by a host of individual, group, and structural risks and vulnerabilities. There is not a one-size-fits-all response to the problem that can effectively address radicalization among service members. Rather, countering extremism in the military will require a holistic approach that includes (1) an accurate appraisal of the causes of the problem and its inherent complexity; (2) an understanding of the range of possible responses and their anticipated effects; (3) an assessment of critical services and the ability of actors to provide them; and (4) a long-term plan for evaluating the effectiveness of policies and programs. In this way, addressing radicalization in the ranks is not unlike tackling public health problems through evaluation, education, and treatment. Indeed, adopting a public health model might provide the best opportunity to mitigate the risks associated with extremism in the military.[105]

Future Research: Data Collection and Analysis

A public health model for countering extremism in the ranks would start by emphasizing the need for data collection and scientific discovery on the scope and nature of the problem. This includes compiling data on the frequency of radicalization in the armed forces and understanding how the problem has evolved over time. Importantly, this needs to be a sustained, unclassified data collection effort that can be shared with VA partners and local community groups that are working to counter extremism among U.S. veterans. Moreover, rigorous research is needed to understand how radicalization among service members occurs, with a particular focus being put on the protective factors that help insulate people from harm and the risk factors that make them more susceptible to it. This study has been an initial attempt to fill these gaps, but considerable work remains to be done.

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[105] Stevan Weine, David P. Eisenman, Janni Kinsler, Deborah C. Glik, and Chloe Polutnik, "Addressing Violent Extremism as Public Health Policy and Practice," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 9, no. 3 (2017): 208-221; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Countering Violent Extremism Through Public Health Practice: Proceedings of a Workshop* (National Academies Press, 2017); Neil D. Shortland, Nicholas Evans, and John Colautti, "A Public Health Ethics Model of Countering Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and political violence* 33, no. 2 (2021): 324-337.

First, while public sources can be a useful tool to gauge the extent of criminal extremism in the military, there is no doubt that information in official service records could be of immense value for understanding the scope of the problem,[106] especially when it comes to accounting for the individuals who were investigated or discharged for violating the UCMJ because of their extremist beliefs or associations but were not criminally prosecuted. Furthermore, official service records are more complete than public sources when it comes to records of deployments, combat experience, and other important aspects of military service. Gleaning information from official service records could play a critical role in understanding if certain military experiences act as risk factors for radicalization during or after military service.

Second, sustained data collection and scientific study are needed to understand the causes of radicalization in the ranks and to anticipate how the problem may evolve in the future. Designing effective responses to extremism in the military requires understanding what the problem is, where it comes from, who it is most likely to affect, and how it operates. Thus, future research should continue to examine radicalization among U.S. extremists with military backgrounds, with a goal of understanding the protective and risk factors that play essential roles in the movement toward extremism. This requires not only a comparison of extremists with military backgrounds to those without military experience, but also comparisons between those in the ranks who radicalize and those who do not. Furthermore, future research should consider the ways in which radicalization processes change for actors across different age groups, social backgrounds, and ideologies.

Finally, robust data collection and analysis need to be at the root of the educational and training components of a future extremism prevention strategy. Empowering trusted voices to advise service members, veterans, and DoD employees about the risks and dangers of extremism means providing them with scientific evidence on the nature of the problem and its potential solutions. One area that needs greater academic attention is digital literacy as it relates to the role of online spaces and the recruitment of service members to extremism. Very little is known about how extremist narratives are crafted to specifically target members of the military, which makes it difficult to inoculate service members and veterans against extremist recruitment.

Policy and Practice: A Public Health Model for Countering Extremism in the Military

In addition to rigorous scientific analysis, a public health model for combating extremism in the ranks would emphasize preventing the problem rather than simply treating it when it appears. While detecting individuals with extremist sympathies before they join the ranks is an important component of countering extremism in the military, the improved vetting of recruits does not address all the ways in which extremism materializes in the military. As this study has shown, most service members who radicalize to the point of committing extremist crimes do not enter the military with extremist affiliations. Some individuals adopt extremist beliefs while they are active in the ranks, but many others radicalize after separation. A public health model of countering extremism suggests that targeting receptive audiences with prevention education at all points in their professional military

[106] Colonel Robert D. Payne, *Radicalization within the Ranks: Countering Military Extremism.* Strategy Research Project. (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2020).

experience is a more effective long-term strategy for mitigating extremism in the armed forces than simply targeting the problem at the point of entry.

A model for preventing extremism in the military should focus on four main objectives. First, programs should be initiated during entry-level training to inoculate incoming service members (and future veterans) against extremist recruitment. Inoculation theory is based on the belief that people can resist persuasion if they understand the dangers associated with messages that attempt to change their beliefs and if they are given the tools to effectively counter radicalizing narratives on their own.[107] Inoculation in the military would involve using respected voices to educate service members on the dangers of extremism and to provide them with a foundation of knowledge that is rooted in evidence that they can use to challenge recruitment narratives if and when they encounter them later on.

Second, preventing extremism in the armed forces will require continuing education at all stages of military service. Tailored awareness briefs about extremist narratives and recruitment techniques should be a normal part of the professional military experience. Moreover, education that focuses on extremism in the U.S. veteran community should be a standard part of exit programs as individuals leave the armed forces.

Third, a prevention model would focus on building organizational cultures that enhance trust and incentivize pro-social norms. In hierarchical organizations, there is often a disincentive to report concerning behaviors out of a fear of punishment or ridicule. Thus, establishing and promoting non-punitive responses to extremism can help overcome the bystander problem by incentivizing individuals to come forward when they witness concerning behaviors. Moreover, the option to use non-punitive responses to extremism opens the possibility for early interventions to help individuals who are flirting with extremist beliefs but who have not yet altered their behaviors.

Finally, a prevention model would include strong educational and public advocacy partnerships between the DoD, the VA, and community-based veterans' organizations. As this study has shown, the nexus between extremism and the U.S. military is strongest in the veteran community. Utilizing Public Affairs Officers to promote alternative narratives that highlight the positive, pro-social empowerment of veterans can help in countering the violent, anti-social narratives that are offered by extremist movements. The DoD should also support external partners who are in a position to access and influence former service members. Veterans' organizations may be particularly effective at delivering messages that seek to counter radicalizing narratives that target past service members for extremist recruitment.

While prevention programs are a hallmark of public health models, interventions and treatment play important roles as well. Countering extremism in the military requires addressing those individuals who have already radicalized. From a costs and complexity point of view, it is tempting to think of military separations as a quick fix

[107] Kurt Braddock, "Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019): 1-23.

to the problem of extremism in the ranks. However, it is important to consider that military discharges could result in transferring risk to local law enforcement agencies if they are not accompanied by rehabilitation support services. Furthermore, as an all-volunteer force that depends upon willing recruits, the DoD should be aware that veterans who engage in extremist crime cause significant damage the reputation of military service and undermine U.S. national security as a result. Simply put, separations from the military neither address the underlying issues that cause individuals to radicalize in the first place, nor shield the military from blame when violence occurs in U.S. communities. In raising these points, we are not suggesting that individuals who harbor extremist sympathies or engage in extremist behaviors should remain in the armed forces. Rather, we are suggesting that when military separations are used to counter extremism in the ranks that they be paired with referrals for rehabilitation services and that risks to community safety be effectively communicated to law enforcement partners.

This study has shown that the types of factors that can act as the underlying drivers of radicalization among U.S. service members can be social, psychological, or material in nature. Thus, effective intervention and rehabilitation programs are ones that are designed to address a wide array of radicalization risks and vulnerabilities, including mental health concerns, dysfunctional and anti-social relationships, substance use disorders, and challenges finding employment and educational opportunities. Rehabilitation programs can only be effective in addressing diverse concerns if they are well resourced and staffed by the appropriate experts, public health and medical professionals, and community representatives. The DoD can play an important role in supporting the providers of these services through funding, information sharing, and access to service members.

Finally, a critical component of a public health model for countering extremism in the military is the continual evaluation of policies and programs. The routinized review of prevention and treatment programs is made possible by considering success metrics and data collection needs at the outset of designing those programs. To evaluate counter extremism policies and programs, the DoD will need to track investigations of, and interventions with, service members and their related outcomes, use internal and public opinion surveys, review official records, and integrate external data from veterans' organizations, community programs, and academic entities into its reviews. The results of research on the nature of the problem and the evaluation of programs should be shared with stakeholders within and outside of the DoD. This includes insider threat programs within the DoD and the broader homeland security enterprise; federal, state, and local law enforcement; veterans' organizations and community-based service providers; and the public writ large.

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