

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States: Preliminary Findings

OVERVIEW

Preliminary findings from START's Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project highlight interesting and policy-relevant trends among individuals radicalized in the United States since World War II. These findings validate some elements of common wisdom regarding this phenomenon, while also revealing interesting new insights. The PIRUS project is a two-year study, currently in its first year, which will combine a quantitative dataset of radicalized individuals with in-depth case studies on radicalization processes.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project is a database of Islamist, Far Left and Far Right individuals who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States. Wave 1 of the project was completed in August 2013, with more than 600 individuals included in the dataset and 10 in-depth case studies. The analysis for this research brief draws on the Wave 1 dataset observations; it uses indexes measuring various risk factors for radicalization (see "Method" section for more information), as well as individual variables measuring specific conditions or events of interest to those studying radicalization.

INTERIM FINDINGS

The preliminary findings validated some elements of "common wisdom," while also revealing interesting new insights.¹ Among extremists, loners and individuals with psychological issues were more likely to be violent, while group dynamics, ideological factors and relationship issues were common among all extremists. These findings generally fit common wisdom on radicalization, but other findings diverge from prevalent assumptions concerning this phenomenon. Some of this involves differences among ideologies; for example, **Islamist extremists tended to be part of tight-knit groups, while Far Right extremists were more likely to be part of groups that experienced intra-group competition.** The findings also showed interesting and policy-relevant similarities across ideologies, such as the fact that the prevalence of loners, psychological issues and prison radicalization is equivalent among Far Left, Far Right and Islamist extremists.

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Waves of radicalization

Domestic radicalization appears to have occurred in three waves since World War II.

- Numerous extremists were arrested, killed or died in action from the late 1960s to early 1970s as a result of the surge in Far Left extremism in that time period.
- Another peak in radicalization occurred in the 1990s with the significant Far Right extremist activity in that decade.
- And after the 9/11 attacks, another peak of exposure occurred, comprised primarily of Islamist extremism. (See Figure 1)

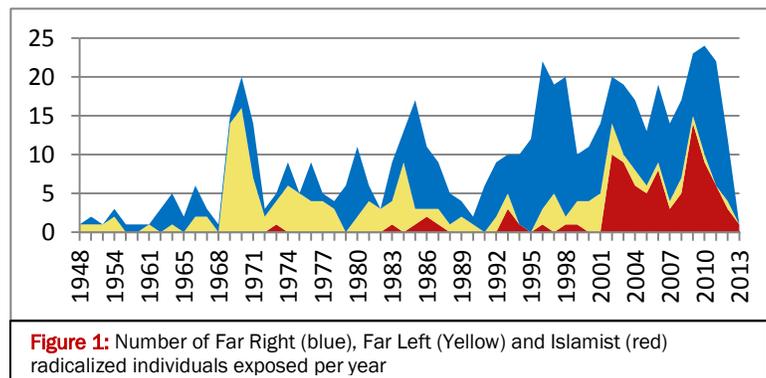


Figure 1: Number of Far Right (blue), Far Left (Yellow) and Islamist (red) radicalized individuals exposed per year

Risk factors

Several risk factors for radicalization were common among Islamist, Far Left and Far Right extremists, although Far Right extremists were distinguished by the prevalence of previous criminal activity. Group dynamics, ideological factors, relationships with other extremists, and platonic or romantic relationship troubles were common among all extremists. **Only Far Right extremists had extensive previous criminal backgrounds.**

¹ It must be noted that these findings represent one third of the complete planned dataset; the results may thus change when the full project is completed.

The risk factors relating to the use of violence varied greatly among ideologies.

- Among Islamist extremists, demographic factors—such as being between 18 and 28 years of age, not married, and/or not closely integrated into US society—were related to the use of violence.
- Among Far Right extremists, socioeconomic factors and a history of having been abused were related to the use of violence, while among Far Left individuals, relationship factors were related to the use of violence.
- Interestingly, religious activities and beliefs were negatively correlated with the use of violence among both Far Right and Far Left extremists.²

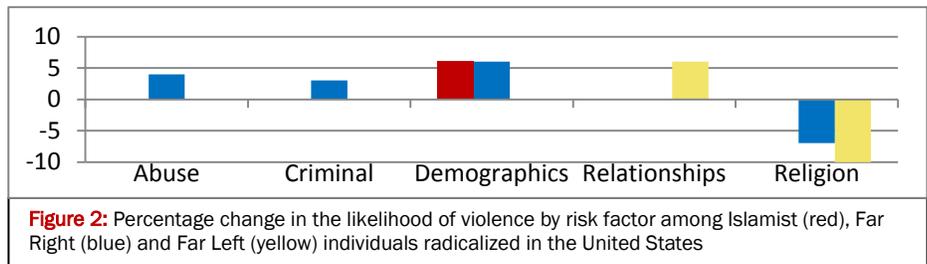


Figure 2: Percentage change in the likelihood of violence by risk factor among Islamist (red), Far Right (blue) and Far Left (yellow) individuals radicalized in the United States

Characteristics, Conditions and Events

A few specific characteristics seemed to correspond to violence among radicalized individuals. Loners and individuals with psychological issues were more likely to commit violence. Similarly, individuals who experienced a drop in social standing prior to their illegal extremist activity were more likely to use violence. Moreover, those individuals who spent a longer time radicalizing before engaging in illegal extremist activities were less likely to commit an act of violence.

Some specific conditions and events were more common among certain ideologies:

- Group dynamics were common among Islamist extremists. Islamist extremists radicalized in the United States were likely to have been actively recruited into an extremist group. Islamist extremists were also commonly part of cliques, and experienced little intra-group competition.
- Far Right and Far Left extremists demonstrated more diverse characteristics. Far Right extremists had the longest duration of radicalization out of the ideologies, and experienced the most intra-group competition. Far Left extremists, in turn, were more likely to have experienced a change in performance—in either work or education—prior to radicalization than other ideologies; Far Left extremists were also more likely to be students, although this is not surprising given the prevalence of Far Left extremism among college students in the 1960s.
- A few conditions prominent in policy and academic debates over radicalization were similar among Far Left, Far Right and Islamist extremists. There was little significant difference among ideologies in the prevalence of psychological issues, loners, and a loss of standing. All of these elements were more common among violent individuals, so their equivalent distribution among ideologies suggests no single ideology is more predisposed to violence as a result of these factors. Finally, there was no difference in the role of prison in the radicalization process among ideologies; given the concerns about radicalization of prisoners, this suggests prison radicalization is no more likely among any single ideological milieu.

METHOD

These preliminary findings draw on the PIRUS dataset, which when completed will include information on approximately 1800 individuals who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States and 60 to 120 case studies of a subset of these individuals (non-violent extremism refers to individuals who engage in illegal extremist activity short of violence or who belong to a violent extremist group but do not participate in violent activities). Researchers created additive indexes of risk factors based on prior theoretical work on radicalization and criminal behavior. The analysis made use of descriptive statistics and logit regressions to analyze the prevalence of these risk factors and their relationship with violence; it also used crosstabs with chi-square tests to analyze differences in specific conditions and events relating to radicalization among violent and non-violent extremists, as well as across Far Left, Far Right and Islamist ideologies.

The data coding and case study writing will progress over two more waves, extending through Summer 2014, with final analysis being conducted by the end of Summer 2014.

START ►►

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program headquartered at the University of Maryland. This project was supported by Award No. 2012-ZA-BX-0005, through the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu.

² Based on the results of logit regressions. Highlighted risk factors were significant at the 0.05 level except for religious activities among Far Left extremists; this was significant at the 0.1 level but is included due to the potential significance of the finding.