Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS)
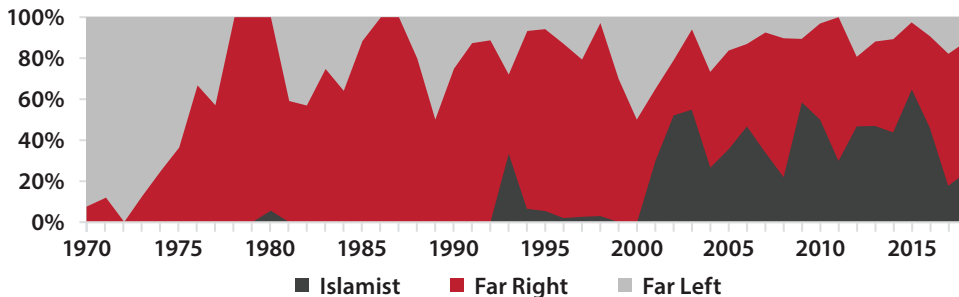
PROJECT OVERVIEW

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) is a database of 2,226 Islamist, far-left, far-right, and single-issue extremists who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States from 1948 through 2018. The database is freely available for download on START's webpage at https://www.start.umd.edu/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus-keshif. The analysis for this research brief draws on the full dataset and illustrates the important differences that exist across ideological groups, as well as those which distinguish violent from non-violent extremists.

COMPARING IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS

The PIRUS data can be used to explore the radicalization trajectories of individuals from far-right, far-left, and Islamist ideologies.

Extremism in the United States, 1970-2018 (%)
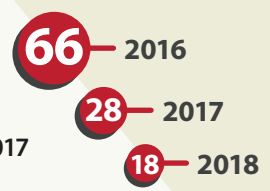

■ Islamist   ■ Far Right   ■ Far Left

Note: Graph above displays year of exposure of each individual in PIRUS by ideology. Exposure is most commonly the time at which an individual is arrested for or commits an ideologically motivated illegal act.

The data show that radicalization in the United States has generally occurred in several waves. These waves roughly correspond to the rise of far-left extremism in the 1970s, far-right extremism beginning in the 1980s and continuing today, and Islamist extremism becoming more prominent after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Far-right extremists make up the largest ideological group in the database (n=977), followed by Islamist extremists (n=511). The remainder of the individuals in the data are far-left extremists (n=374) or individuals in the "single-issue" category (n=364), whose beliefs vary, but include anti-abortion extremists, Puerto Rican nationalists, and members of the Jewish Defense League.

2018 PIRUS data continued to show a decrease in the number of individuals inspired by Salafi Jihadism, with only 18 cases. That is down from 28 in 2017 and 66 in 2016.

66 — 2016
28 — 2017
18 — 2018

	Far-right	Far-left	Islamist
Age at Public Exposure (Mean)	37.6	29.7	29.0
% Female	5.8%	25.7%	6.7%
Low Education (no college exp.)	51.2%	21.3%	42.9%
Low Socioeconomic Status	26.5%	23.7%	26.2%
Military Experience	23.0%	9.7%	8.4%
Criminal History	53.5%	30.0%	33.3%
Internet Radicalization	85.9%	94.2%	91.0%
Evidence of Mental Illness	13.5%	6.1%	14.9%

Table based on the analysis of 2,226 individuals in PIRUS and displays valid percentages. Internet radicalization is measured only for cases from 2005 to present.

Far-Right Extremists
The PIRUS data show that, on average, far-right extremists tend to be older, have lower rates of college experience, and higher rates of pre-radicalization crime than their far-left and Islamist counterparts.

Far-Left Extremists
Far-left extremists tend to be young and well educated and are significantly more likely to be female than far-right or Islamist extremists.

Islamist Extremists
Islamist extremists tend to be young and male and show high rates of internet radicalization (since 2005).
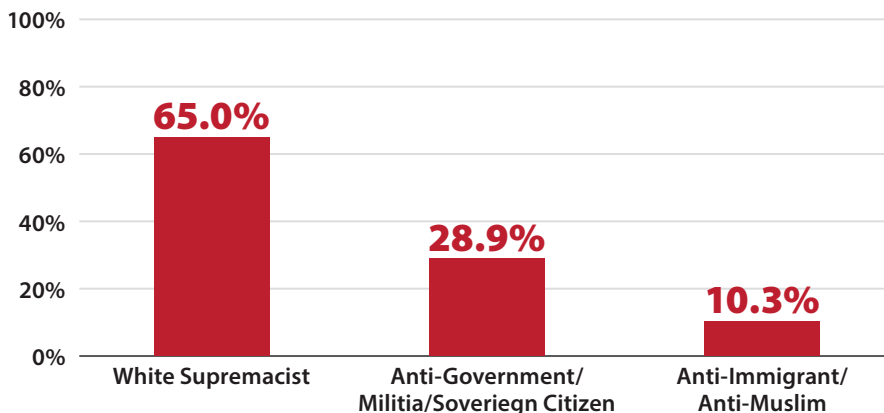
Sub-Ideologies of Far-Right Extremists in the U.S., 1948-2018 (N=977)

The PIRUS data also capture the sub-ideological affiliations of U.S. extremists, showing both distinct and overlapping views within the far-right and far-left movements.

Chart: Sub-Ideologies of Far-Right Extremists

- White Supremacist: **65.0%**
- Anti-Government/Militia/Soveriegn Citizen: **28.9%**
- Anti-Immigrant/Anti-Muslim: **10.3%**

Note: Chart reflects the percent of far-right extremists in PIRUS who are associated with specific sub-ideologies. Individual extremists may be coded for up to three sub-ideologies, so total percent of cases does not equal 100.

Among far-right extremists, the majority (65%) demonstrate some expression of White supremacism, a view that people of European descent (typically Christians and especially men) are inherently superior to others and should therefore dominate social, political, and cultural institutions.
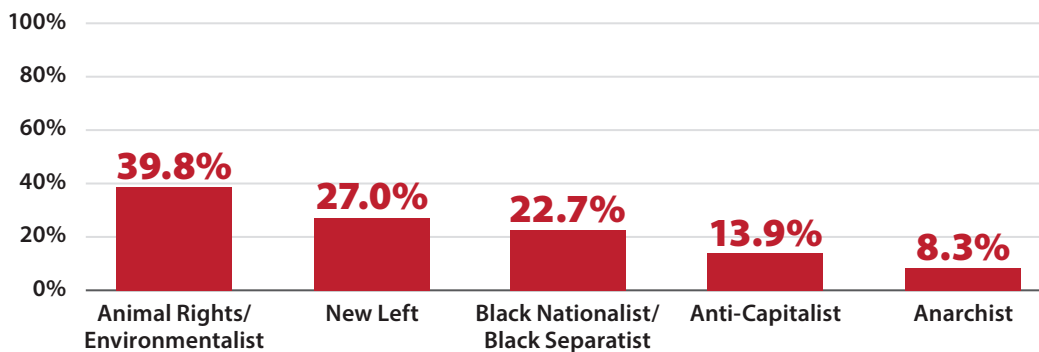
Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views are typically integrated into White supremacists' racialized definitions of religion, ethnicity, and nationality. However, some far-right extremists are animated directly in opposition to people who are or are perceived to be immigrants or are of the Islamic faith. Nearly 30 percent of all far-right extremists in the dataset from 2015-2018 were motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views compared to 8 percent from 2006-2015.

Finally, nearly 30 percent of the far-right extremists in the PIRUS database are or were members of the Sovereign Citizen movement, anti-government militias, and/or express anti-government views. While some anti-government extremists also subscribe to racist, nativist, and anti-Semitic views, others are motivated by a belief that the federal government lacks legitimate governing authority and they work actively to disrupt the enforcement of tax, land, traffic, and weapons laws.

Sub-Ideologies of Far-Left Extremists in the U.S., 1948-2018 (N=374)

Chart: Sub-Ideologies of Far-Left Extremists

- Animal Rights/Environmentalist: **39.8%**
- New Left: **27.0%**
- Black Nationalist/Black Separatist: **22.7%**
- Anti-Capitalist: **13.9%**
- Anarchist: **8.3%**

Note: Chart reflects the percent of far-left extremists in PIRUS who are associated with specific sub-ideologies. Individual extremists may be coded for up to three sub-ideologies, so the total percent of cases does not equal 100.

Traditionally, far-left ideologies in the U.S. have been oriented around an opposition to capitalism, as well as racial, gender, and other inequalities.

Black Nationalists and "New Left"
Beginning in the 1960s and through the 1980s, Black nationalists and "new left" movements dominated the far-left. Some members of these groups advocated for violence and other illegal activities to advance specific political agendas, including opposition to the Vietnam War and support for Black separatism.

Animal Rights and/or Environmentalist
However, beginning in the 1980s, far-left extremists were increasingly motivated by animal rights and/or environmental concerns. Animal rights and extremist environmentalists comprise the largest far-left group in PIRUS (nearly 40%).
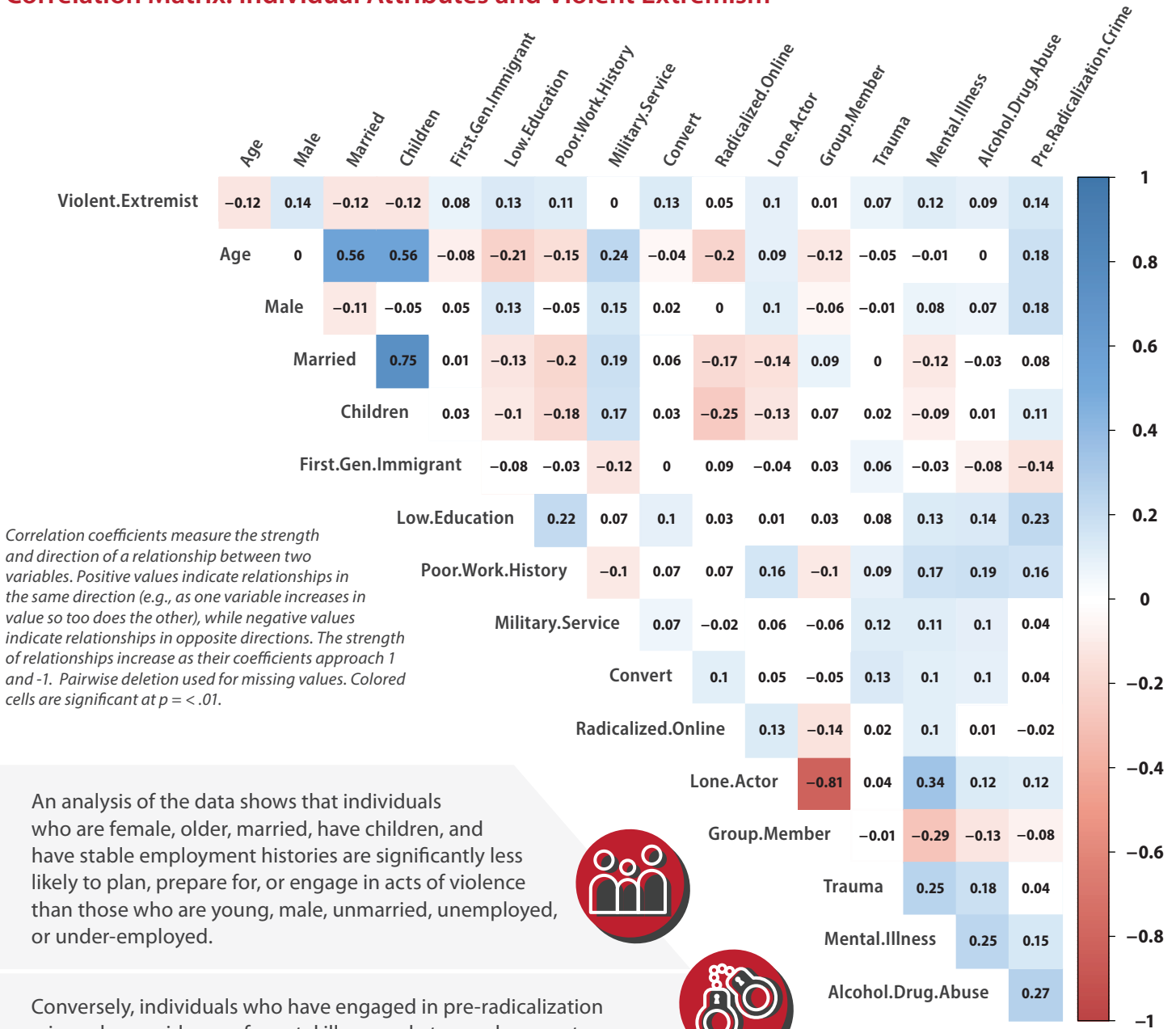
Anarchist
Anarchist movements, which generally argue that state power is oppressive and advocate for voluntary, collective social arrangements, make up 8.3 percent of total far-left cases in the PIRUS data. However, in 2018, the number of Anarchists in the data grew to 50 percent of all far-left cases.

The PIRUS data can be used to explore which factors are most strongly associated with violent or potentially violent outcomes (as opposed to non-violent criminality) when controlling for ideology.

Correlation Matrix: Individual Attributes and Violent Extremism

	Age	Male	Married	Children	First.Gen.Immigrant	Low.Education	Poor.Work.History	Military.Service	Convert	Radicalized.Online	Lone.Actor	Group.Member	Trauma	Mental.Illness	Alcohol.Drug.Abuse	Pre.Radicalization.Crime
Violent.Extremist	−0.12	0.14	−0.12	−0.12	0.08	0.13	0.11	0	0.13	0.05	0.1	0.01	0.07	0.12	0.09	0.14
Age		0	0.56	0.56	−0.08	−0.21	−0.15	0.24	−0.04	−0.2	0.09	−0.12	−0.05	−0.01	0	0.18
Male			−0.11	−0.05	0.05	0.13	−0.05	0.15	0.02	0	0.1	−0.06	−0.01	0.08	0.07	0.18
Married				0.75	0.01	−0.13	−0.2	0.19	0.06	−0.17	−0.14	0.09	0	−0.12	−0.03	0.08
Children					0.03	−0.1	−0.18	0.17	0.03	−0.25	−0.13	0.07	0.02	−0.09	0.01	0.11
First.Gen.Immigrant						−0.08	−0.03	−0.12	0	0.09	−0.04	0.03	0.06	−0.03	−0.08	−0.14
Low.Education							0.22	0.07	0.1	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.08	0.13	0.14	0.23
Poor.Work.History								−0.1	0.07	0.07	0.16	−0.1	0.09	0.17	0.19	0.16
Military.Service									0.07	−0.02	0.06	−0.06	0.12	0.11	0.1	0.04
Convert										0.1	0.05	−0.05	0.13	0.1	0.1	0.04
Radicalized.Online											0.13	−0.14	0.02	0.1	0.01	−0.02
Lone.Actor												−0.81	0.04	0.34	0.12	0.12
Group.Member													−0.01	−0.29	−0.13	−0.08
Trauma														0.25	0.18	0.04
Mental.Illness															0.25	0.15
Alcohol.Drug.Abuse																0.27

Correlation coefficients measure the strength and direction of a relationship between two variables. Positive values indicate relationships in the same direction (e.g., as one variable increases in value so too does the other), while negative values indicate relationships in opposite directions. The strength of relationships increase as their coefficients approach 1 and -1. Pairwise deletion used for missing values. Colored cells are significant at $p = < .01$.

An analysis of the data shows that individuals who are female, older, married, have children, and have stable employment histories are significantly less likely to plan, prepare for, or engage in acts of violence than those who are young, male, unmarried, unemployed, or under-employed.

Conversely, individuals who have engaged in pre-radicalization crime, show evidence of mental illness, substance abuse, or trauma, and act alone are more likely to engage in extremist violence.

Military experience, online radicalization, and affiliation with extremist groups do not appear to be significantly related in either direction to violent extremism.

The data show that there are notable clustering effects when it comes to the individual attributes of U.S. extremists. For example, there are strong positive correlations between mental illness, substance abuse, trauma, pre-radicalization crime and acting alone. Members of extremist groups are significantly less likely to display these characteristics.

ABOUT THE DATASET

PIRUS is a de-identified cross-sectional, quantitative dataset of individuals in the United States who radicalized to the point of violent or non-violent ideologically motivated criminal activity, or ideologically motivated association with a foreign or domestic extremist organization from 1948 to 2018. The PIRUS dataset was coded using entirely open-source material, including newspaper articles, websites (e.g., government, terrorist group, watchdog groups, research institutes, personal information finder sites), secondary datasets, peer-reviewed academic articles, journalistic accounts including books and documentaries, court records, police reports, witness transcribed interviews, psychological evaluations/reports, and information credited to the individual being researched (verified personal websites, autobiographies, social media accounts). PIRUS contains dozens of variables containing information on a wide range of characteristics, including the individuals' criminal activity and/or violent plots, their relationship with their affiliated extremist group(s), adherence to ideological milieus, factors relevant to their radicalization process, demographics, background, and personal histories. The dataset is not limited to a single ideological category, and includes individuals representing far-right, far-left, Islamist, and single-issue ideologies.

PROJECT TEAM

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START ▶▶ The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit www.start.umd.edu or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.