

Prevalence of Extremists with Military Background

Microlearning Accessible Transcript

Introduction

Targeted violence is a threat affecting the whole nation. Veterans and military family members are not immune from the threat—as targets or as perpetrators. This concerns everyone - the veteran community, all Americans, and the world.

Criminal extremist behavior among veterans is a limited phenomenon. Although in recent years data shows an uptick in cases involving perpetrators of criminal extremism with military backgrounds.¹ However, cases perpetrated by active military and veterans are more likely to draw media and public attention, “negatively impacting the public’s trust in the military while also harming the reputation of veterans.”² As a result, the Department of Defense (DoD) may face added challenges in maintaining a “cohesive force and recruit[ing] the next generation of service members.”³

As veterans and military family members, it is important to build our awareness, to monitor criminal extremism, and understand the how and why criminal extremists recruit veterans. As a strong civic-minded community with a long history of protecting this country and its citizens, we can and should do our part to help prevent criminal extremism, especially among our own.

Criminal Extremists and the Military Connection

Who are criminal extremists and what is the prevalence of criminal extremism among those with military backgrounds?

Criminal extremists are individuals who have committed “criminal acts that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals.”⁴

¹ Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. "Radicalization in the Ranks," START: College Park, MD (April). https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Radicalization%20in%20the%20Ranks_April%202022.pdf

² Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "PIRUS: Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds." College Park, MD: START (June). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/pirus-mass-casualty-extremist-offenders-us-military-backgrounds>

³ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "PIRUS: Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds." College Park, MD: START (June). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/pirus-mass-casualty-extremist-offenders-us-military-backgrounds>

⁴ Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. "Radicalization in the Ranks," START: College Park, MD (April). https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/Radicalization%20in%20the%20Ranks_April%202022.pdf

Criminal extremists with military backgrounds represent “a relatively small portion” of the overall number of criminal extremists included in the Profiles of Individuals Radicalizing in the United States (PIRUS) dataset collected by START, a research center at the University of Maryland. As of August 2023, 15.1% of all subjects in PIRUS had a U.S. military background. While this percentage is relatively low, it still represents at least 659 individuals with a U.S. military background who committed acts of criminal extremism between 1990 and August 2023.⁵ This includes 193 individuals who have been charged or convicted for their involvement in the breach of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021.⁶

The Profiles of Individuals Radicalizing in the United States (PIRUS) dataset is an ongoing project to collect comprehensive data on extremist offenders in the United States, including those with U.S. military backgrounds. “PIRUS is a representative sample of individuals who have committed criminal offenses on behalf of their extremist views and/or affiliations. To be included in PIRUS, a subject must have (1) radicalized (in whole or in part) in the United States; (2) adhered to or espoused views that justify the use of illegal means, including violence, to achieve political, economic, religious, or social goals; and (3) committed a criminal offense that was clearly motivated by their ideological views and resulted in their arrest, indictment, or death. All data are coded from public sources, including court records, public police reports, and print and online news media.”⁷

Military Status at Time of Radicalization/Arrest

Of the 659 subjects in the data most criminal extremists with military backgrounds were veterans.

- “83.5% or 550 individuals were no longer serving when they were arrested for committing extremist crimes.”⁸
- 5.2% or 34 individuals “were separated from the military during basic training (i.e., entry-level separation) and later committed extremist crimes.”⁹
- 17% or 109 individuals “were serving on Active Duty, Reservist, or Guard status at the times of their arrests.”¹⁰

⁵ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

⁶ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

⁷ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

⁸ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

⁹ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

¹⁰ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. “Extremism in the Ranks and After.” College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

Criminal Extremism among those with Military Background: Upward Trend

PIRUS data has shown an upward trend in subjects with military backgrounds in recent years. For example:

- In 2018, 11% of the offenders added to PIRUS “had U.S. military backgrounds, which is comparable to the rate of military service in the general U.S. adult population (8%).”¹¹
- In 2021, “21% of the offenders added to PIRUS had U.S. military backgrounds.”¹²

Further, consider that:

- “from **1990-2010**, an average of **7.1 subjects per year** with U.S. military backgrounds were included in the PIRUS data.”¹³
- Yet between **2012-2022**, this number increased to **39.1 subjects per year**.
 - Between 2017-2022, an average of 63.3 subjects with military backgrounds were added each year.¹⁴
 - While “some of this increase can be attributed to the comparatively high number (193) of Capitol breach defendants who have military backgrounds”,¹⁵ that is not the whole story.
 - Even “when *excluding* Capitol defendants, there has still been a notable increase in recent cases.”¹⁶
 - Not including Capitol offenders, **there has been more than a threefold increase in the average number of subjects (24.8) per year with military backgrounds that have been added to the PIRUS data since 2010.**¹⁷

No matter how you look at it, criminal extremism among those with military backgrounds has increased in recent years.

Implications and Call to Action

As a veteran and military family member, building and maintaining awareness of this threat to personal and national security is the first step. We should not overstate the issue while still acknowledging that there is cause for concern. We can be part of the solution by building motivation within the military and veteran community to protect each other and the community at large against extremism. We can help identify and connect veterans at risk with veteran service

¹¹ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

¹² Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

¹³ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

¹⁴ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

¹⁵ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

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¹⁷ Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. 2023. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." College Park, MD: START (August). <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after>

organizations. We can use our relationships to find each other, support each other, and lift each other up.