

RESEARCH BRIEF | Extremism in the Ranks and After

INTRODUCTION

On February 5, 2021, United States Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, announced a department-wide stand-down to address the problem of extremism in the ranks. This announcement, followed by one in April establishing the Counter Extremism Working Group, emphasizes the need for the Department of Defense to achieve a better understanding of the scope and nature of the problem. This research brief, which explores data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project, is intended to help in this effort by providing information on the military service backgrounds of individuals who committed extremist crimes in the U.S. from 1990 through the end of August 2023.

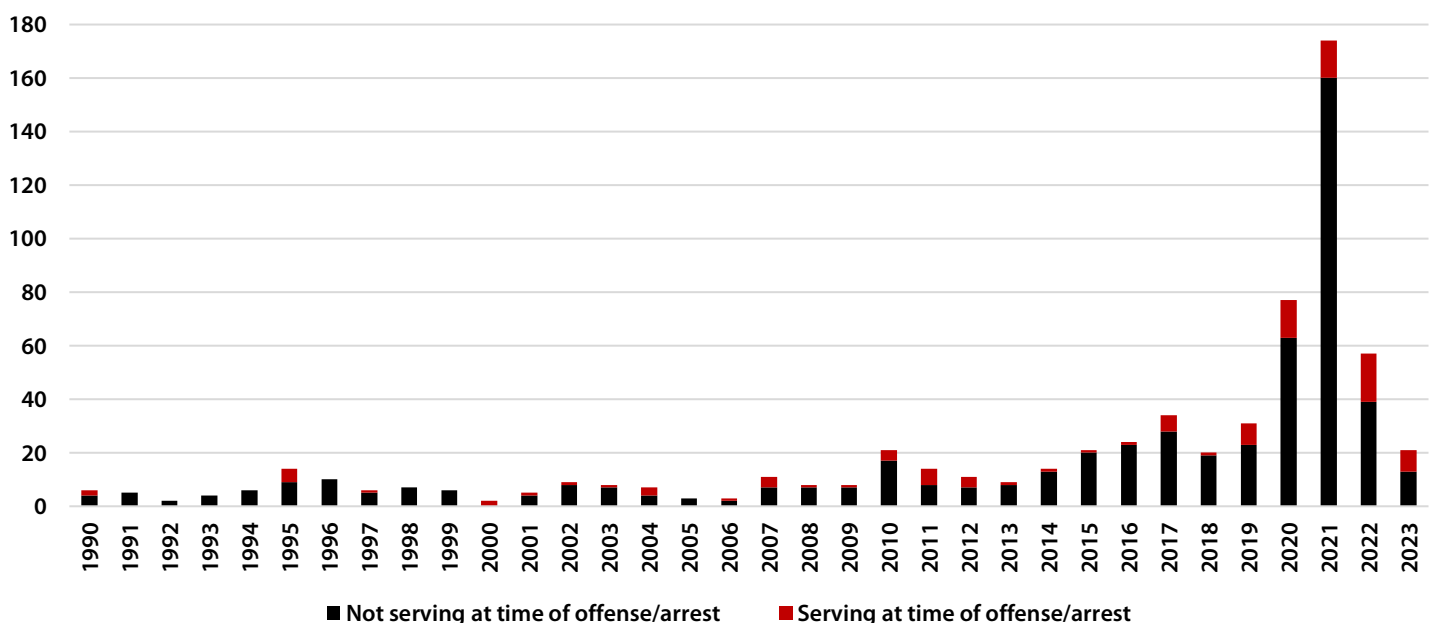
The data used in this research brief are from an ongoing project to expand the PIRUS database with supplemental information on the military backgrounds of U.S. extremists. This brief provides data on the rates of military service among U.S. extremists, as well as their branch, ideological, and extremist group affiliations. The brief also provides a closer look at the individuals with military backgrounds who have been charged with taking part in the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021. An analysis of the effects of combat deployment on the radicalization of U.S. extremists as well as specific radicalization risk factors, including online recruitment, mental health concerns, and substance use disorders, can be found in the full report at <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/radicalization-ranks>.

ABOUT THE DATA

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.

OVERVIEW OF THE CASES

U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-August, 2023 (n = 659)





Extremists with U.S. military backgrounds represent a relatively small portion (15.1%) of all the subjects in the PIRUS data.

- ▶ From 1990 through August 2023, at least 659 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed criminal acts that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals. This includes 193 individuals who have been charged or convicted for their involvement in the breach of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021.
- ▶ Recent data suggest that the rate of military service in the extremist offender population has increased. For example, 11% of the offenders added to PIRUS in 2018 had U.S. military backgrounds, which is comparable to the rate of military service in the general U.S. adult population (8%). In 2021, however, 21% of the offenders added to PIRUS had U.S. military backgrounds.¹
- ▶ The 659 subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military experience are overwhelmingly men. Indeed, the data include only 16 female subjects, seven of whom participated in the Capitol breach. The low percentage of female subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds stands in contrast to the rate of women in the general adult population who have served in the United States military. While women make up only 2.4% of the subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds, they represent 9% of the adult population in the United States with military experience.²

Military status at time of radicalization/arrest



Of the 659 subjects in the data, 83.5% (n = 550) were no longer serving when they were arrested for committing extremist crimes.

- ▶ Thirty-four individuals (5.2%) were separated from the military during basic training (i.e., entry-level separation) and later committed extremist crimes.
- ▶ Approximately 17% of the subjects (n = 109) were serving on Active Duty, Reservist, or Guard status at the times of their arrests.

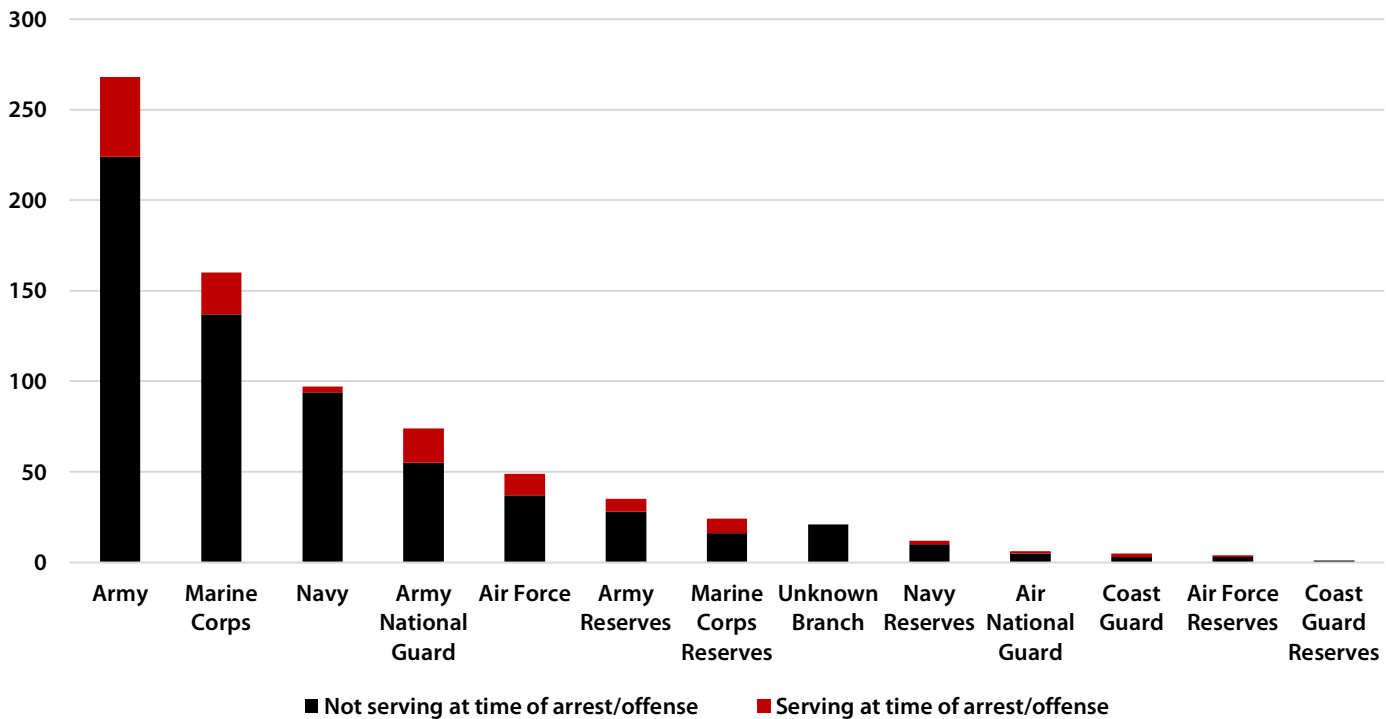
Rate of subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds

- ▶ The PIRUS data show a significant uptick in recent cases of individuals with military backgrounds who have committed extremist offenses.
- ▶ From 1990-2010, an average of 7.1 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds were included in the PIRUS data. Over the last decade, that number has more than quintupled to 39.1 subjects per year.
- ▶ This increase has been especially high in the last five years. From 2017 through 2022, an average of 63.3 subjects with military backgrounds have been added to PIRUS each year.
- ▶ Some of this increase can be attributed to the comparatively high number (193) of Capitol breach defendants who have military backgrounds.
- ▶ However, even when excluding Capitol defendants, there has still been a notable increase in recent cases. Not including Capitol offenders, there has been more than a three fold increase in the average number of subjects (24.8) per year with military backgrounds that have been added to the PIRUS data since 2010.

¹ Vespa, Jonathan E. *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.

² Ibid.

United States Extremists with Military Backgrounds: Branch and Status at Time of Offense/Arrest, 1990-August, 2023



▶ Approximately 65% of the subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds served in the U.S. Army and/or Marine Corps, making the Marine Corps the branch of service with the highest per capita rate given its smaller size. If Reservists and National Guard Members are added to this total, affiliations with the Army and Marine Corps account for 75.3% of the subjects in the data.

▶ Eighty-seven of the 659 subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds had multiple branch affiliations. The most common (33 subjects) multiple branch affiliation was those who served in the Army and then spent time in the Army National Guard or Army Reserves. The 87 subjects with multiple affiliations are included in the chart above for each of their branch affiliations.

CRIMINAL ACTS

Criminal Acts Committed by U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-August, 2023*

Plot Type	Percentage
Premeditated violent plot	42.6%
Illegal weapons possession	13.7%
Harassment/intimidation	10.9%
Spontaneous violence	6.8%
Foreign fighter/material support	6.6%
Financial crime	5.7%
Premeditated property crime	4.6%

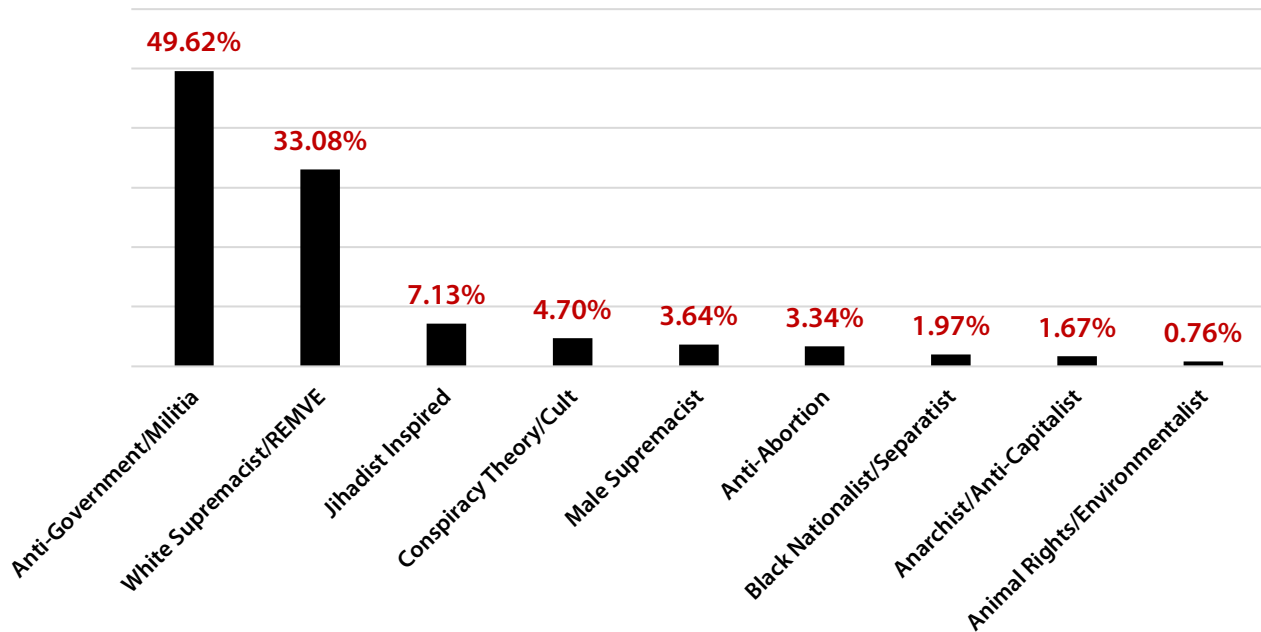
(*excludes the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021)

- ▶ Nearly 45% of the offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds plotted to commit acts of violence, which are defined as events that aim to kill or injure at least one person. Another 6.8% of the subjects engaged in spontaneous violent crimes, such as initiating physical altercations at public protests.
- ▶ However, a minority (35.3%) of the perpetrators who sought to commit premeditated violent attacks were successful in their attempts.
- ▶ Interestingly, the subjects in PIRUS without military backgrounds were successful in conducting violent attacks more often (51.6%) than the subjects with U.S. military experience (46.7%).
- ▶ 53.5% of the crimes that were committed by the subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds targeted U.S. government entities, the U.S. military, or law enforcement.



IDEOLOGICAL AND GROUP AFFILIATIONS

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



Note: subjects can be coded for up to three ideological affiliations.

- ▶ **Nearly half of the subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds adhered to anti-government views or were members of organized militias.** This includes individuals who were affiliated with the Sovereign Citizen and Patriot movements, as well as subjects who were members of the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and more than two dozen local militia groups. This category also includes individuals who were motivated to overturn the 2020 U.S. Presidential election results.
- ▶ **Over 30% of the subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds espoused views of white supremacy, white nationalism, and/or xenophobia.** These individuals were affiliated with no fewer than 50 extremist groups, including local skinhead gangs and several national white supremacist organizations.
- ▶ **Just over 7% of the offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds were connected to, or inspired by, Salafi Jihadist groups abroad.** This includes 19 individuals who were inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and 22 individuals who were inspired by, or affiliated with, al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements (e.g., al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, etc.).

177 of the individuals in PIRUS with military backgrounds were affiliated with known anti-government groups or militias, including:

- 45** subjects who were part of the Sovereign Citizen movement
- 31** members of the Oath Keepers
- 26** members of the Boogaloo movement

141 of the individuals in PIRUS with military backgrounds were members of known skinhead, white supremacist, or white nationalist groups, including:

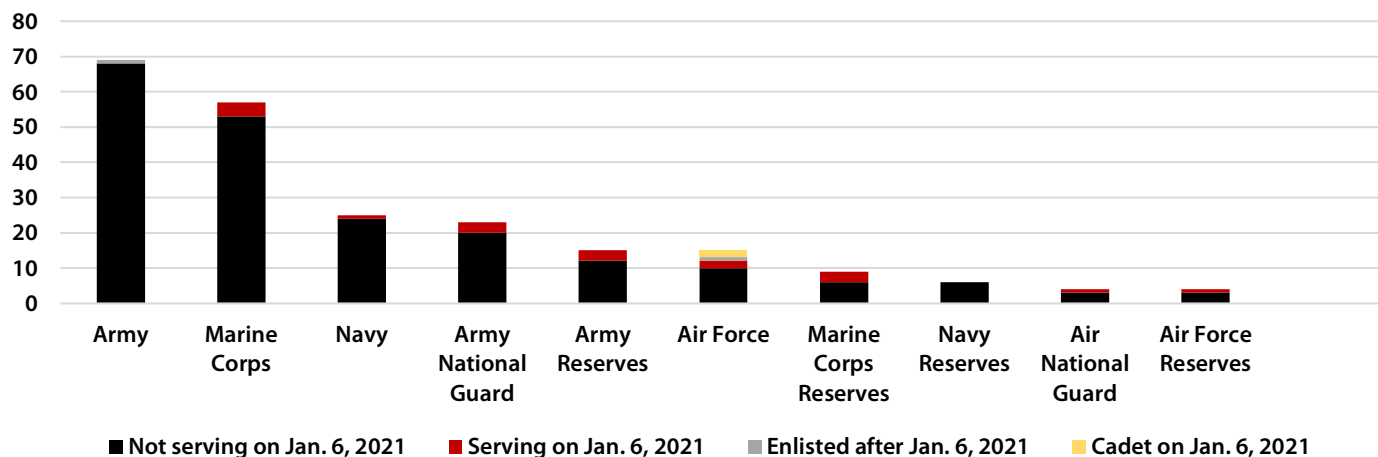
- 34** subjects who were members of the Proud Boys
- 16** individuals who were members of the Ku Klux Klan
- 11** individuals who were members of the Aryan Nations

Overall, 60% of the offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds were affiliated with more than 125 unique extremist groups or named movements. The remaining 40% of individuals in the data espoused ideological views but were not members of organized extremist groups or named movements.



CAPITOL BREACH

Branch Affiliations and Status of Capitol Offenders




Note: subjects were coded for up to three branch affiliations.

▶ At least 193 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds have been identified as participants in the Capitol breach of January 6, 2021.³

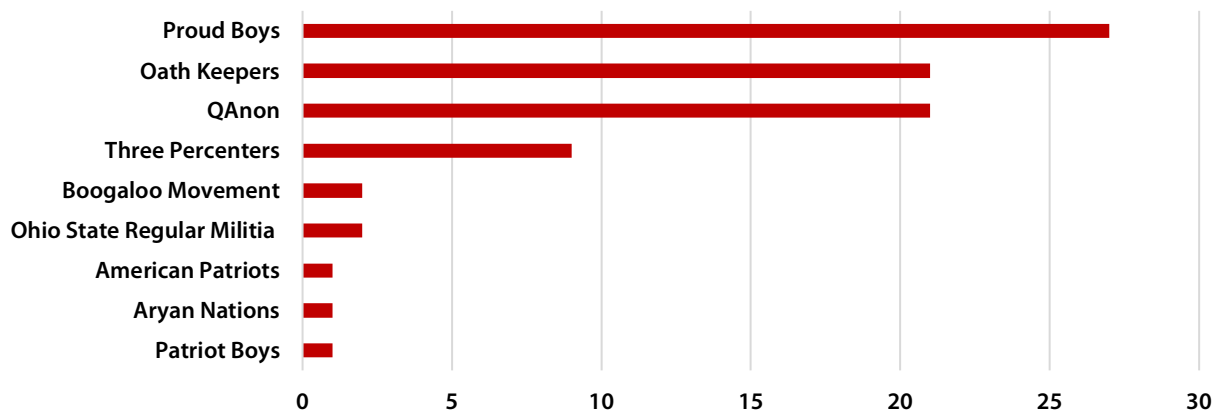
▶ The vast majority of these subjects (173/89.6%) were no longer serving in the armed forces at the time of the Capitol breach. In fact, many had been separated from military service for more than a decade.

▶ The remaining 20 subjects include 4 active-duty Marines, 1 active-duty Sailor, 3 Army Reservists, 3 Army National Guard members, 3 Marine Reservists, 2 Civil Air Patrol Cadets, 1 Air Force Reservist, 1 Air National Guard member, and 1 member of the Army and 1 member of the Air Force who enlisted after January 6th.



Individuals with military backgrounds represent 16.9% of the 1142 individuals who are facing charges for the siege of the Capitol building and related events.⁴

Group/Movement Affiliations of Capitol Offenders



Note: subjects can be coded for up to three group/movement affiliations.

▶ Most (62%) of the individuals with a nexus to the U.S. military who have been charged with participating in the breach of the Capitol are not members of organized extremist groups or followers of particular extremist movements.

▶ The remaining individuals are tied to a range of anti-government, white supremacist, and conspiracy theory groups, including 27 members of the Proud Boys, 21 members of the Oath Keepers, and 21 individuals who expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy theory.

³ 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.

⁴ "Capitol Insurrection Data Tool." START. <https://www.start.umd.edu/capitol-insurrection>. Accessed August 30, 2023.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This interim report is part of the START project, “Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS),” part of the Asymmetric Threat Analysis Center (ATAC), a joint program between START and UMD’s Applied Research Lab for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS). ATAC is funded by the Department of Defense under award no. HQ003421F0481. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense.

ABOUT 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.

ABOUT ARLIS

The Applied Research Laboratory for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS), based at the University of Maryland College Park, was established in 2018 under the sponsorship of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security (OUS-D(I&S)). As a University-Affiliated Research Center (UARC), ARLIS’ purpose is to be a long-term strategic asset for research and development in artificial intelligence, information engineering, and human systems. ARLIS builds robust analysis and trusted tools in the “human domain” through its dedicated multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams, grounded both in the technical state of the art and a direct understanding of the complex challenges faced by the defense security and intelligence enterprise. For more information, visit www.arlis.umd.edu/about-arlis or contact ARLIS at info@arlis.umd.edu.

To learn more about the PIRUS project, please visit: twitter.com/RaD_UMD



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