

# 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 first nine months of 2021.

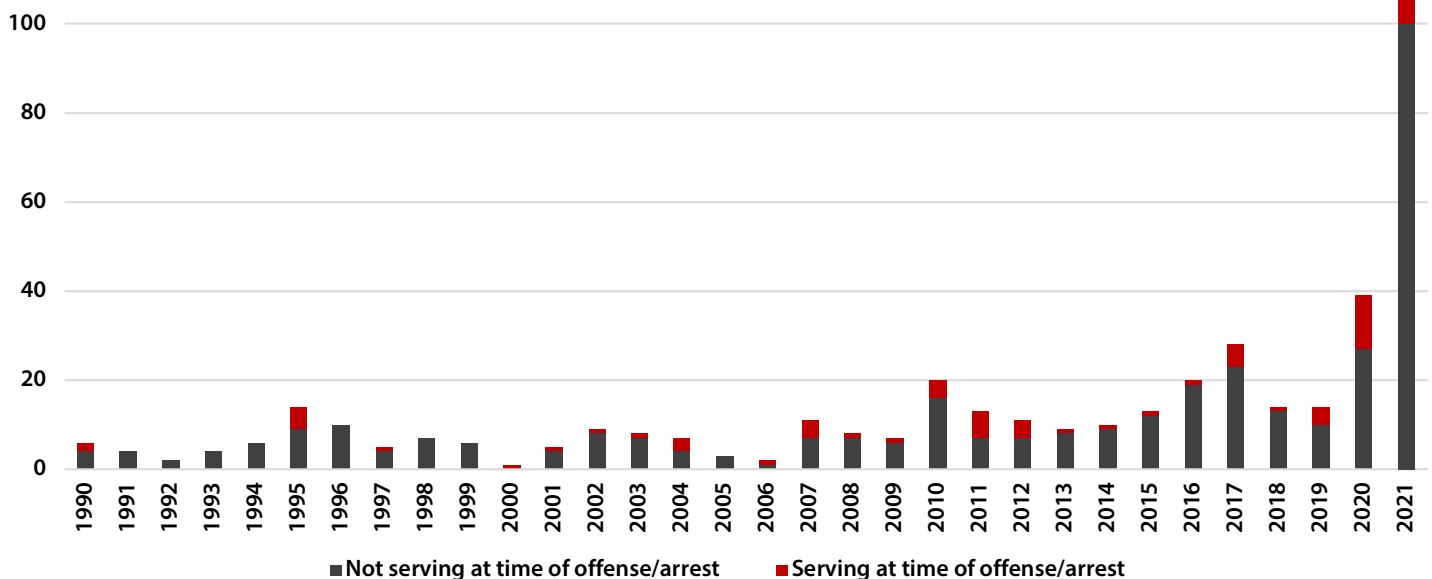
The data used in this research brief are from an ongoing project to expand the PIRUS database with supplemental information on the military backgrounds of U.S. extremists. This brief provides data on the rates of military service among U.S. extremists, as well as their branch, ideological, and extremist 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. Future stages of this project will analyze the effects of combat deployment on the radicalization of U.S. extremists and provide a closer look at specific radicalization risk factors, including online recruitment, mental health concerns, and substance use disorders.

## 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, 1990-2021 (n = 424)





**Extremists with U.S. military backgrounds represent a relatively small portion (11.5%) of all the subjects in the PIRUS data.**

- ▶ From 1990 through the first nine months of 2021, at least 424 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds committed criminal acts that were motivated by their political, economic, social, or religious goals. This includes 99 individuals who are facing charges for their involvement in the breach of the Capitol building on January 6, 2021.
- ▶ The rate of military experience among the extremists in PIRUS is comparable to the rate of military service in the general U.S. adult population. For example, 8.3% of the subjects added to PIRUS in 2018 had military backgrounds. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018, approximately 7% of the U.S. adult population had served in the U.S. military.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ The 424 subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military experience are overwhelmingly men. Indeed, the data include only eight female subjects, three 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 U.S. military. While women make up only 1.8% of the subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds, they represent 9% of the adult population in the U.S. with military experience.<sup>2</sup>

### Military status at time of radicalization/arrest



**Of the 424 subjects in the data, 83.7% (n = 355) were no longer serving when they were arrested for committing extremist crimes.**

- ▶ Twenty-three individuals (5.4%) were separated from the military during basic training (i.e., entry-level separation) and later committed extremist crimes.
- ▶ Approximately 16% of the subjects (n = 69) were serving on Active Duty, Reservist, or Guard status at the times of their arrests.

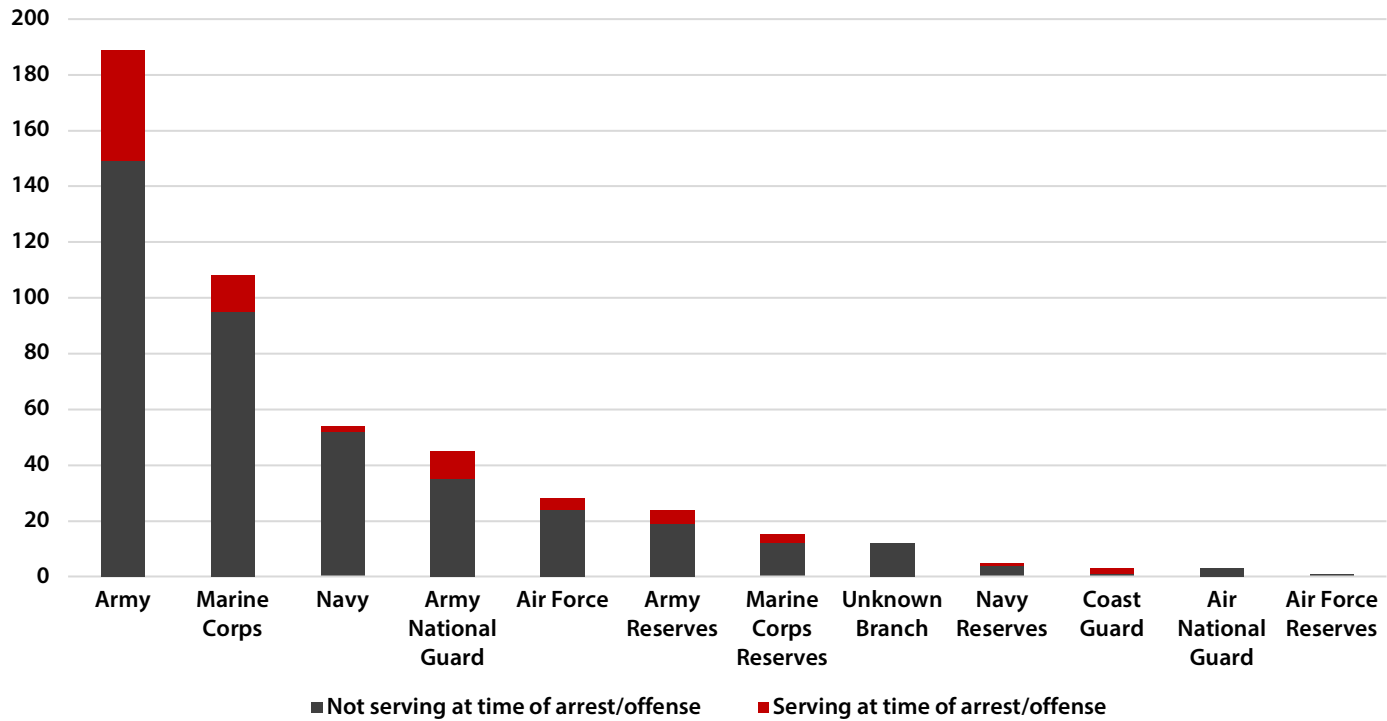
### Rate of subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds

- ▶ 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 6.9 subjects per year with U.S. military backgrounds were included in the PIRUS data. Over the last decade, that number has more than tripled to nearly 24 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.
- ▶ Not including Capitol offenders, an average of 16 subjects per year with military backgrounds have been added to the PIRUS data since 2010.
- ▶ It is important to note that the recent increase in subjects with military backgrounds in PIRUS is largely due to three years in the data—2017, 2020, and 2021. Each of these years were marked by issues that mobilized comparatively large numbers of U.S. extremists. These include 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## United States Extremists with Military Backgrounds: Branch and Status at Time of Offense/Arrest, 1990-2021



► More than 70% 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 79% of the subjects in the data.

► Fifty-nine of the 424 subjects in PIRUS with military backgrounds had multiple branch affiliations. These 59 subjects are included in the chart above for each of their affiliations.

## CRIMINAL ACTS

### Criminal Acts Committed by U.S. Extremists with Military Backgrounds, 1990-2021\*

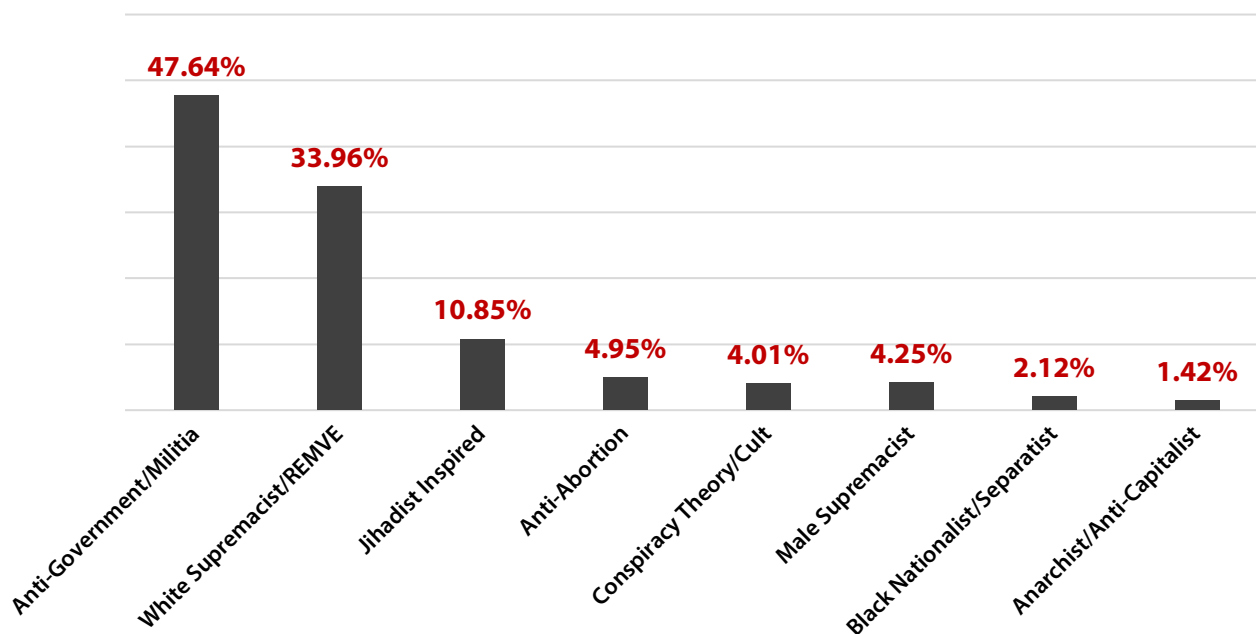
| Plot Type                        | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| Violent plot                     | 59.6%      |
| Weapons possession               | 10.3%      |
| Foreign fighter/material support | 6.5%       |
| Harassment/intimidation          | 4.3%       |
| Financial crime                  | 3.7%       |
| Spontaneous violence             | 2.8%       |
| Property destruction             | 2.5%       |

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

- Approximately 60% 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 2.8% of the subjects engaged in spontaneous violent crimes, such as initiating physical altercations at public protests.
- However, a minority (40%) 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 (55%) than the subjects with U.S. military experience (40%).
- 46.3% 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, 1990-2021



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.
- Nearly 35% 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.
- Approximately 11% 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.).

114

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

35

subjects who were part of the Sovereign Citizen movement

19

members of the Oath Keepers

15

members of the Boogaloo movement

97

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

18

subjects who were members of the Proud Boys

16

individuals who were members of the Ku Klux Klan

9

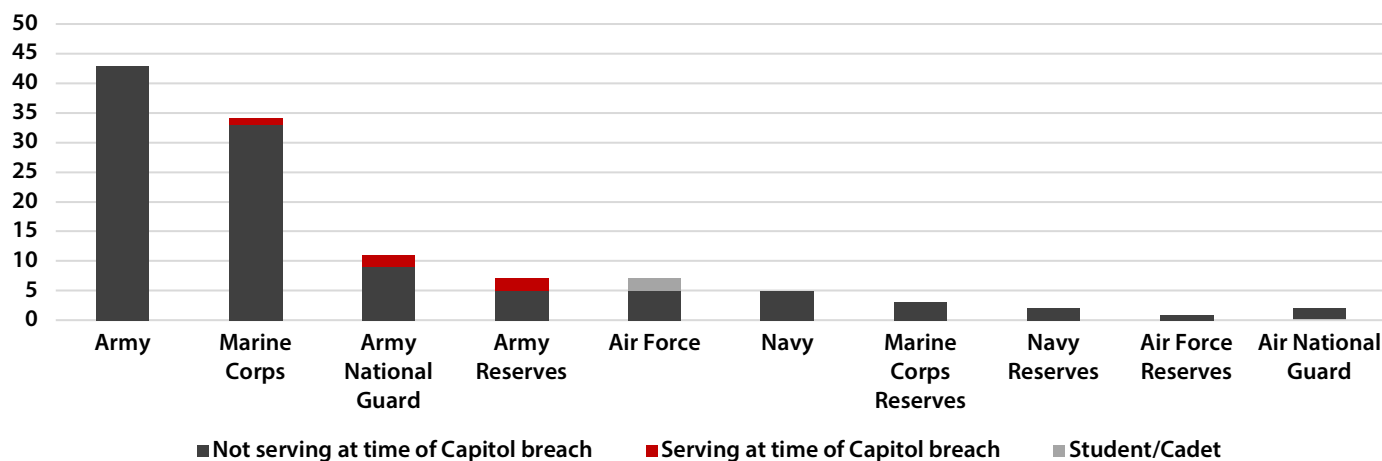
individuals who were members of the National Alliance



Overall, 68.1% of the offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds were affiliated with 120 unique organized extremist groups or named movements. The remaining 31.9% 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.

- ▶ As of October 12, 2021, 99 individuals with U.S. military backgrounds have been identified as participants in the Capitol breach of January 6, 2021.<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ The vast majority of these subjects (92) 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.

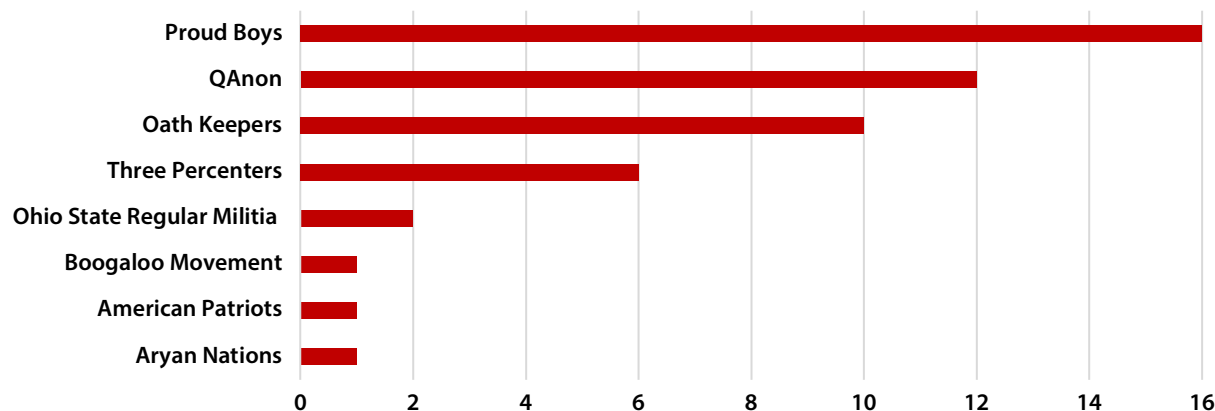
- ▶ Of the 92 individuals who were no longer serving in the military at the time of the Capitol breach, two had been separated from the armed forces during basic training.

- ▶ The remaining 7 subjects include one active-duty Marine, two Army Reservists, two Army National Guard members, and two Civil Air Patrol cadets.



Individuals with military backgrounds represent 14.8% of the 671 individuals who are facing charges for the siege of the Capitol building and related events.<sup>4</sup>

### Group/Movement Affiliations of Capitol Offenders



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

- ▶ Most (58.6%) 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 16 members of the Proud Boys, 10 members of the Oath Keepers, and 12 individuals who expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy theory.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Madison et al. "671 People Have Been Charged in the Capitol Insurrection So Far." *Insider*. October 8, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/all-the-us-capitol-pro-trump-riot-arrests-charges-names-2021-1>. Accessed October 12, 2021.

## PROJECT TEAM

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PIRUS data collection has been supported by the Applied Research Laboratory for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS), University of Maryland; the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, Department of Defense; the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice; and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this research brief are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense, the Department of Justice, or the Department of Homeland Security.

To learn more about the PIRUS project, please visit: [twitter.com/RaD\\_UMD](https://twitter.com/RaD_UMD)

**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](http://www.start.umd.edu) or contact START at [infostart@umd.edu](mailto:infostart@umd.edu).