Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS)
## Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Beginning in 2021, the Radicalization and Disengagement team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland began an ongoing project to collect comprehensive data on extremist offenders with U.S. military backgrounds. These data serve as an addendum to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database, which includes information on more than 3,000 subjects who committed extremist crimes in the United States. In this research brief, we take a closer look at the subset of U.S. extremist offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds who plotted to commit, or committed, mass casualty terrorist attacks in the United States from 1990-2022. A mass casualty plot is defined as an event in which the perpetrator(s) intended to injure or kill four or more victims. A successful mass casualty attack is one that resulted in four or more combined victim deaths or injuries, while a successful mass fatality attack is one that resulted in four or more victim deaths. In this brief, we analyze the characteristics that distinguish mass casualty offenders from extremists who engaged in less lethal or non-violent crimes. We also examine how often extremists with military backgrounds plot mass casualty attacks and how often they succeed in causing significant harm. Finally, we review the military branch and ideological affiliations of mass casualty offenders with U.S. military service backgrounds.

DISTINGUISHING MASS CASUALTY OFFENDERS FROM OTHER TYPES OF EXTREMISTS

Individual-Level Characteristics that Distinguish Mass Casualty Offenders in PIRUS from Other Types of Extremists, 1990-2022

Note: The chart below reports odd ratios that are statistically significant at p<.05 or lower.
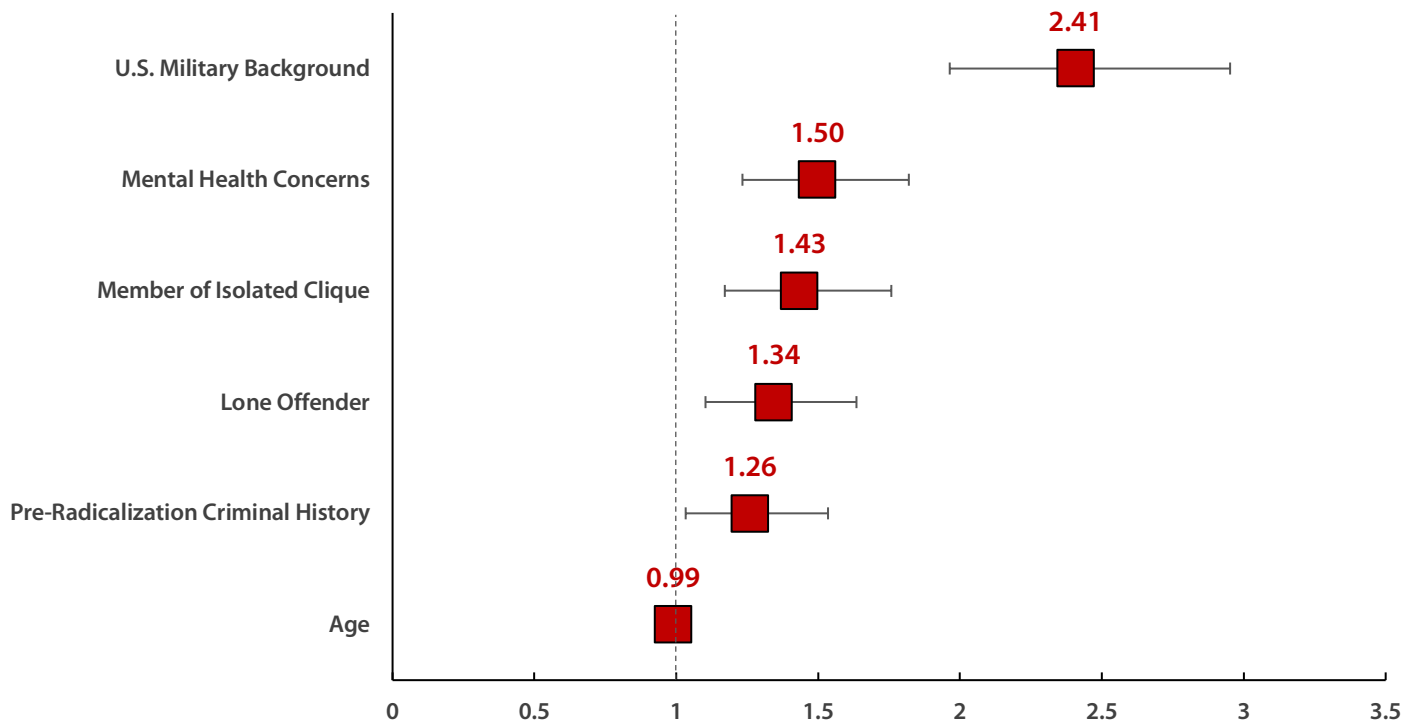
The results of a multivariate analysis reveal that having a U.S. military background is the single strongest individual-level predictor of whether a subject in the PIRUS data is classified as a mass casualty offender. Of the 451 subjects with military backgrounds in PIRUS who committed extremist crimes from 1990-2022, 170 (37.7%) are classified as mass casualty offenders. [1]

A record of military service is more reliable for classifying mass casualty offenders in PIRUS than factors that are more commonly discussed in the literature on mass casualty crimes, such as mental health concerns, offending alone or in a small group, and having a pre-radicalization criminal history.[2]

> Subjects in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds are 2.41 times more likely to be classified as mass casualty offenders than individuals who did not serve in the armed forces.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PLOTS

Outcomes of Mass Casualty Terrorist Plots in the United States, 1990-2021: Comparing Perpetrators with and without U.S. Military Backgrounds

Mass Casualty Plots Involving Perpetrator(s) with U.S. Military Backgrounds

Mass Casualty Plots Involving Perpetrator(s) without U.S. Military Backgrounds
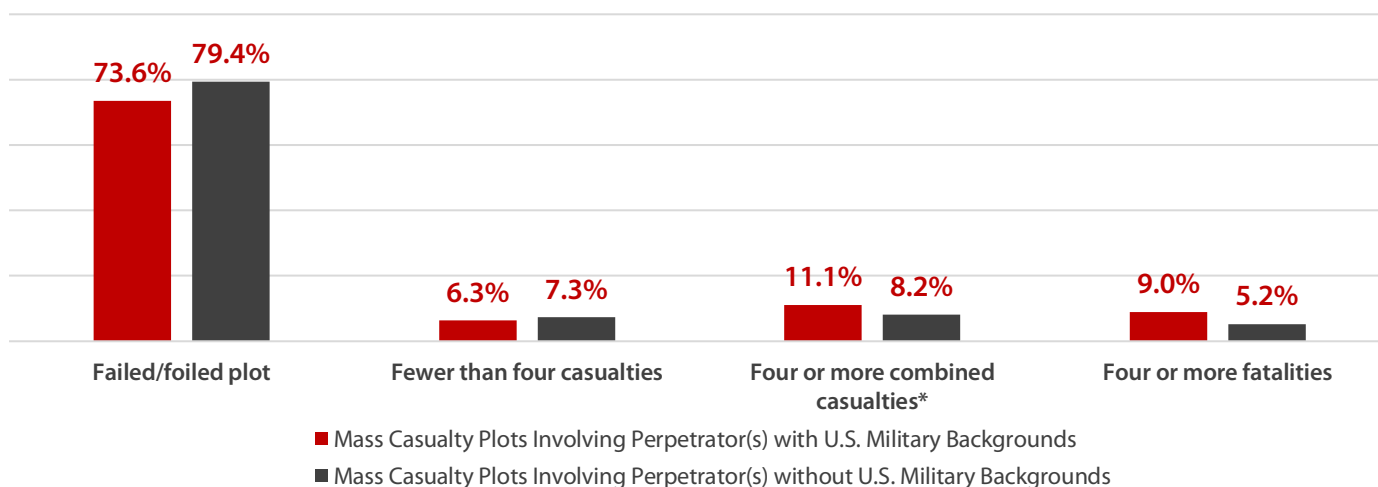
* This series includes events that resulted in four or more combined deaths or injuries, but fewer than four fatalities.

From 1990-2022, 170 individuals with United States military backgrounds plotted 144 unique mass casualty terrorist attacks in the United States. [3] These subjects represent approximately 25% of all individuals who plotted mass casualty extremist crimes during this period.[4] The rate of military service in the mass casualty offender population is more than three times that of military service in the general adult population, which is estimated at 8 percent.[5]

These 144 mass casualty plots with a nexus to the U.S. military resulted in a range of outcomes. While most (73.6%) of these plots were foiled by law enforcement before anyone was harmed, 20.1% (29 of the 144 plots) resulted in four or more victim deaths or injuries. An additional 9 plots that were intended to cause significant harm failed to reach the mass casualty threshold but did result in 1-3 victim deaths and/or injuries. While low, the rate of successful mass casualty plots perpetrated by offenders with U.S. military backgrounds is notably higher than that of plots perpetrated by offenders without records of military service (13% rate of success).

Thirteen of the 144 (9%) plots involving subjects with U.S military backgrounds resulted in four or more victim deaths and qualify as mass fatality crimes. The rate of successful mass fatality crimes involving perpetrators with military backgrounds is nearly two times higher than the rate of successful mass fatality events perpetrated by individuals without records of military service (5.2%).

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[1] Given the variation in the extent of the offenders' premeditation and their criminal behaviors, the statistics provided in this brief do not include individuals charged in relation to the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol building.

[2] Also included in this analysis was whether the subjects were married or had children at the time they committed their offenses; whether the subjects had advanced educations or stable employment histories; and whether the subjects were known to struggle with substance use disorders. None of these additional risk or protective factors were statistically significant predictors of whether a subject in PIRUS was coded as a mass casualty offender.

[3] To code mass casualty plots in PIRUS, we first identified those crimes in which four or more people were hurt or killed. Next, we reviewed cases to determine if the perpetrators intended to kill or injure four or more people but failed. In these cases, we reviewed the statements of the offenders, as well as the combination of their intended targets (e.g., soft or hard targets) and weapons (e.g., explosive devices, assault weapons, etc.), to determine if they qualified as mass casualty plots.

[4] See Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. "PIRUS: Mass Casualty Extremist Offenders." NC-START. 2023.

[5] 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.

Post-Separation Mass Casualty Plots: Time from Discharge to Attack/Arrest
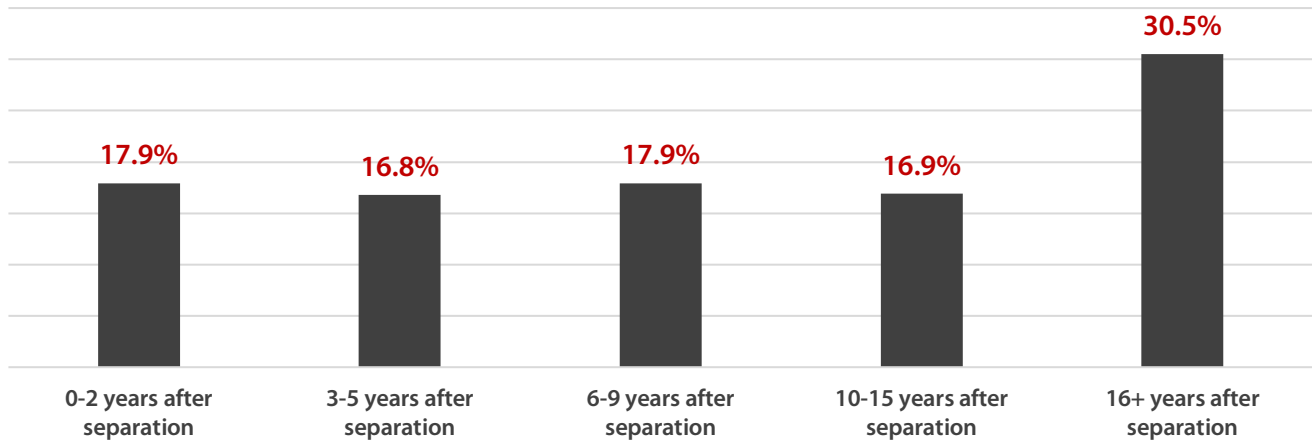
Most (78.2%) of the mass casualty offenders in the data with U.S. military backgrounds committed their crimes after leaving the armed forces. Of these subjects, 32.1% failed to receive honorable discharges from the military, which is significantly higher than the rate of administrative or punitive separations in the general population of the armed forces (estimated at 16%).[6]

Very few (17.9%) of the subjects who plotted mass casualty attacks after leaving the U.S. military did so within two years of separation. Rather, the majority (65.3%) of the subjects had been separated from the U.S. military for six or more years before they plotted mass casualty attacks. Nearly half of the subjects had been out of the military for a decade or more before they engaged in plots to commit mass casualty attacks.

Military Branch Affiliations of Extremists Who Plotted Mass Casualty Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 1990-2022 (N = 170)[7]
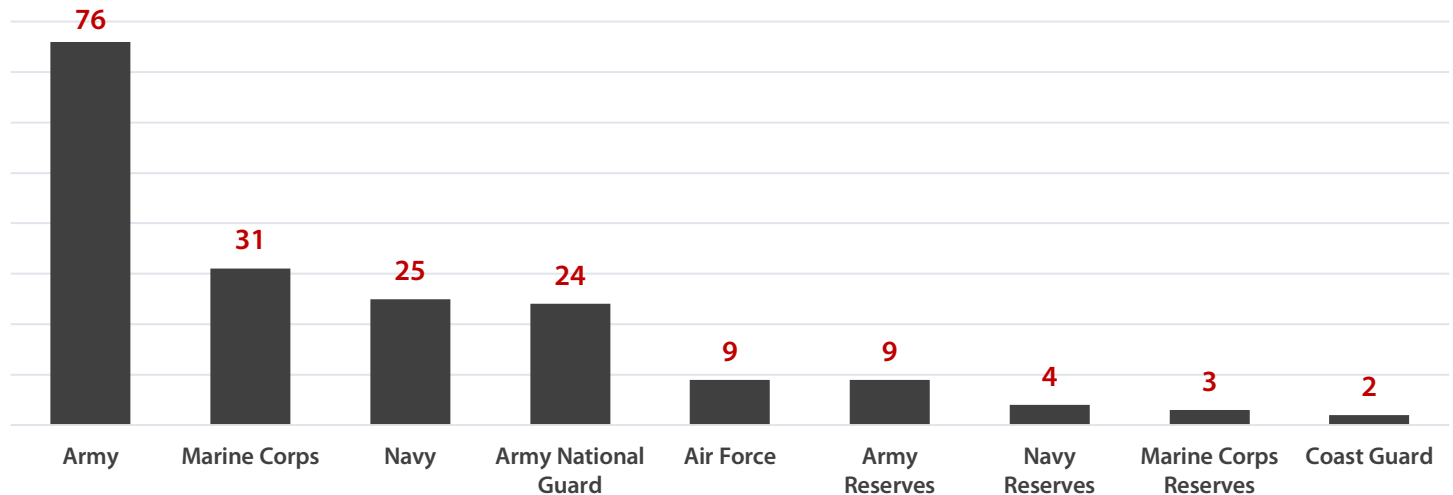
Approximately 22% (37 subjects) of the mass casualty offenders in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds were on Active Duty, Reservist, or Guard status at the time of their arrests/crimes. The rate of mass casualty plots by active service members is slightly higher than their rate of participation in other crimes (16.4%). Nearly 70% of the active service members involved in mass casualty plots were in the Army or Marine Corps.

Seventy-six of the 170 mass casualty offenders in PIRUS with military backgrounds served in the U.S. Army (44.7%). These offenders represent more than half (52.4%) of all Army-affiliated individuals in the data, which is the highest ratio of mass casualty to non-mass casualty offenders for any one branch. By comparison, 32% of the individuals in the data who served in the Marine Corps are classified as mass casualty offenders.
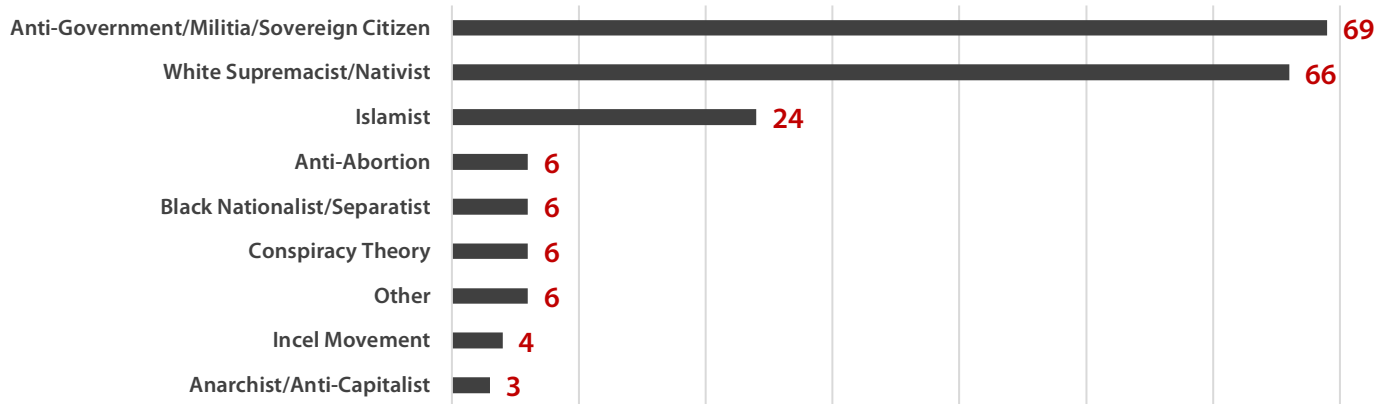
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[6] Veterans Legal Clinic. *Underserved: How the VA wrongfully excludes veterans with bad paper.* San Francisco, CA: 2016.
[7] Subjects who served in multiple U.S. military branches are included in the chart for each of their affiliations.

Mass Casualty Offenders with U.S. Military Backgrounds by Ideology, 1990-2022 (N = 170)

Note: Subjects in PIRUS can be coded for up to three ideological categories. Subjects with more than one ideological affiliation are added to the totals of each of ideology.

Ideology	Count
Anti-Government/Militia/Sovereign Citizen	69
White Supremacist/Nativist	66
Islamist	24
Anti-Abortion	6
Black Nationalist/Separatist	6
Conspiracy Theory	6
Other	6
Incel Movement	4
Anarchist/Anti-Capitalist	3

The majority (73.5%) of mass casualty offenders with U.S. military backgrounds in PIRUS were linked to far-right domestic extremist groups and movements. Of these, 40.6% were affiliated with anti-government groups and militias, such as Forever Enduring, Always Ready (11 subjects); the Boogaloo Movement (8 subjects), and the Oath Keepers (3 subjects). Another 10 subjects self-identified as members of the sovereign citizen movement.

Just under 40% of the subjects espoused white supremacist/nativist views and/or were affiliated with neo-Nazi groups, such as Atomwaffen Division (9 subjects); Ku Klux Klan (6 subjects), Aryan Nations (4 subjects), and Feuerkrieg Division (2 subjects).

Approximately 15% (24 offenders) of the subjects were inspired by or connected to foreign Islamist extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements (9 subjects) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (13 subjects).

OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

	Mass Casualty Offenders with U.S. Military Background	Non-Mass Casualty Offenders with U.S. Military Background
Married*	25.3%	38.6%
Parent	42%	49.1%
College Exp.	49.2%	48.8%
Unemployed*	26%	17.5%
Mental Illness*	40.4%	29.3%
Substance Abuse	27%	20.7%
Previous Crime	44.2%	38%
Lone Offender	37.2%	44.2%
Isolated Clique*	35%	13.3%

*Chi^2 test of independence $p < .05$.

A comparison of extremist offenders in PIRUS with U.S. military backgrounds reveals that those who plotted to commit, or committed, mass casualty attacks had lower rates of protective factors and higher rates of risk factors than those who committed lower casualty or non-violent crimes. The subjects who planned to commit, or committed, mass casualty attacks were less likely to be married or have children when they committed their crimes than the subjects who engaged in non-mass casualty crimes. Moreover, mass casualty offenders were more likely to be unemployed and have pre-radicalization criminal histories when they committed their crimes than the subjects who engaged in less lethal or non-violent crimes. Finally, the subjects involved in mass casualty plots had comparably high rates of diagnosed mental health concerns and substance use disorders, and they more often offended as members of isolated cliques, which has been identified as a significant risk factor for violence in the extremist offender population.[8]

[8] LaFree, Gary, Michael Jensen, Patrick James, and Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein. "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States." *Criminology* 56, no. 2 (2018): 233-268.

	Mass Casualty Offenders with U.S. Military Background	Non-Mass Casualty Offenders with U.S. Military Background
Deployed to Combat Zone	39%	38.8%
Evidence of Combat Experience	26.6%	27.2%
Service-related PTSD Diagnosis	23.2%	22.3%
Administrative/ Punitive Discharge	32.1%	25.6%

Mass casualty and non-mass casualty offenders with U.S. military backgrounds have similar rates of service-related risk factors for violence. Both sub-groups are comparable on rates of deployments to active combat zones, direct experience in combat, and diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to their military service. The only service-related risk factor that distinguishes mass casualty offenders from non-mass casualty offenders is their rates of administrative or punitive separations from the armed forces. The subjects in PIRUS who are classified as mass casualty offenders were approximately 1.3 times more likely to have received administrative or punitive discharges than the subjects who engaged in less lethal or non-violent crimes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

START and We the Veterans are collaborating to address the issue of extremism among military service members and veterans by providing an evidence-based understanding of the problem and designing violence prevention programs. This research was conducted in support of this partnership and has several implications for addressing extremism among current and past service members. As our previous research on the link between extremism and the U.S. military shows,[9] service members and veterans are not more likely to radicalize to the point of violence than members of the general population. However, this research brief illustrates that when service members and veterans do radicalize, they are more likely to plan for, or commit, mass casualty crimes, thus having an outsized impact on public safety. These types of crimes are more likely to draw significant attention, negatively impacting the public's trust in the military, while also harming the reputation of veterans and making it harder for the DoD to maintain a cohesive force and recruit the next generation of service members. Based on this research, START and We the Veterans recommend that DoD work in concert with elected representatives, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), and community partners to implement a public health informed strategy to address extremism in the ranks. This strategy should include:

- Robust data collection and analysis within and outside of the DoD to monitor and understand the problem. These data and analyses should form the empirical-foundation for threat detection, risk mitigation, and community-led violence prevention programs.
- Civic education during military intake training, as a part of professional military education, and as a central feature of the Transition Assistance Program.
- Strengthening efforts to combat the recruitment of service members and veterans into violent extremism by implementing inoculation training and providing service members the tools they need to identify and effectively resist extremists' manipulation tactics and their use of mis/dis/mal information (MDM).
- Pairing efforts to identify and disrupt already-radicalized service members with investments in veteran- and military family-led prevention programs.
- Creating prevention network that includes the VA, VSOs, MSOs, and community partners to improve access to veteran communities and raise awareness of the threat of extremist recruitment of individuals with military service backgrounds.
- Empowering VSOs and military family service organizations (MSOs) to build on the individual-, family- and community-level protective factors available to veterans and military families with the specific intent to increase positive civic engagement and to crowd out risk factors related to violent extremism and related MDM.
- Investing in programs that help the VA, VSOs, MSOs, and community partners assist individuals at risk of radicalization by connecting them with physical, mental, and economic health and wellness support programs. These programs should also be leveraged to provide positive social networks, help reduce political tension, and improve veterans' social and economic integration.

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[9] Jensen, Michael, Sheehan Kane, and Elena Akers. "Extremism in the Ranks and After." NC-START. April 2023. https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/extremism-ranks-and-after.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The research included in this brief was conducted through a partnership between START and We the Veterans, which is a non-partisan, non-profit, pro-democracy organization representing the veteran and the military family communities. Data for this brief come from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) 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 from 1948 to 2021. The PIRUS dataset is coded using open-source material, including court records and news media. PIRUS contains information on a wide range of variables, including the individuals' criminal activity and/or violent plots, their relationships with their affiliated extremist groups or movements, and factors relevant to their radicalization processes, including demographics, risk and protective factors, and personal histories. The dataset includes individuals who espoused far-right, far-left, Islamist, and single-issue ideologies.

PROJECT TEAM

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