

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States: Preliminary Findings

OVERVIEW

Preliminary findings from START's Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project highlight interesting and policy-relevant trends among individuals radicalized in the United States since World War II. The PIRUS project is a three-year study, currently in its third year, which will combine a quantitative dataset of radicalized individuals with in-depth case studies on their radicalization processes.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project is a database of Islamist, Far Left and Far Right individuals who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States. Data collection for this project occurred over three waves, beginning in Summer 2013 and concluding in Spring 2014. Over that time period, researchers and student interns gathered data for over 1,500 individuals and authored over 100 qualitative case studies. The analysis for this research brief draws on the completed dataset; it uses indexes measuring various risk factors for radicalization (see "Method" section for more information), as well as individual variables measuring specific conditions or events of interest to those studying radicalization.

INTERIM FINDINGS

The preliminary findings validated some elements of "common wisdom," while also revealing interesting new insights. Among extremists, individuals with psychological issues were more likely to be violent, while group dynamics, ideological

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factors and relationship issues were common among all extremists. Other findings diverge from prevalent assumptions concerning this phenomenon. Some of this involves differences among ideologies; for example, Islamist extremists tended to be part of tight-knit, insular groups, while Far Right extremists were most likely to be part of groups that experienced intra-group competition. The findings also showed interesting and policy-relevant similarities across ideologies, such as the fact that the prevalence of loners, psychological issues, and instances of prison radicalization are roughly equivalent among Far Right, Far Left, and Islamist extremists.

Waves of radicalization in the United States

Domestic radicalization appears to have occurred in several waves since World War II.

- Numerous extremists were arrested, killed or died in action from the late 1960s to early 1970s as a result of the surge in Far Left extremism in that time period.
- Another peak in radicalization occurred in the late-1980s with significant Far Right extremist activity continuing into the 1990s and the 2000s.
- Soon after the 9/11 attacks, a new wave of radicalization occurred comprised primarily of Islamist extremists.

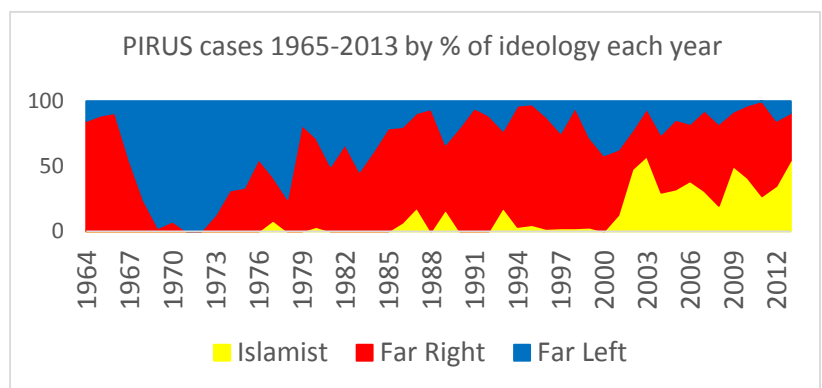


Figure 1: Exposures per year by percentage of each ideology in the PIRUS data. Exposure is defined as the date at which an individual's radical activity first comes to public attention, usually by arrest or plot attempt.

Risk factors

Several risk factors for radicalization were common among Islamist, Far Left and Far Right extremists, although Islamist extremists were distinguished by the prevalence of media-facilitated radicalization. Group dynamics, ideological factors, relationships with other extremists, and platonic or romantic relationship troubles were common among all extremists. Only Far Right extremists had extensive previous criminal backgrounds.

Some risk factors relating to the use of violence varied among ideologies; others similarly predicted violence among all three.

- Among Islamist extremists, demographic factors—such as being between 18 and 28 years of age, not married, and/or not closely integrated into US society—were related to the use of violence as well as having been abused and having a criminal history.
- Among Far Right extremists, demographic factors and a criminal history are related to using violence.
- For Far Left individuals, a history of abuse was a significant factor in predicting the likelihood for violence as well as criminal and demographic risk factors.
- Interestingly, participation in religious activities as well as the consumption of radical media were negatively correlated with the use of violence among both Far Right and Far Left extremists.¹

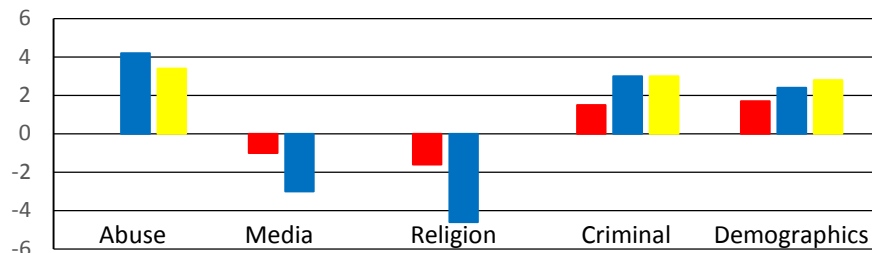


Figure 2: Percentage change in the likelihood for violence by risk factor among Islamist (yellow), Far Right (red), and Far Left (blue).

Characteristics, Conditions and Events

A few specific characteristics seemed to correspond to violence among radicalized individuals. Loners and individuals with psychological issues were more likely to commit violence. Similarly, individuals who experienced a drop in social standing prior to their illegal extremist activity were more likely to use violence. Moreover, those individuals who spent a longer time radicalizing before engaging in illegal extremist activities were less likely to commit an act of violence.

Some specific conditions and events were more common among certain ideologies:

- Extremist group affiliation was most common among Islamist extremists. Islamist extremists radicalized in the United States were also more likely than Far Right or Far Left extremists to have been actively recruited into an extremist group. Islamist extremists were commonly part of insular cliques, and experienced low levels of intra-group competition.
- Far Right and Far Left extremists demonstrated more diverse characteristics. Far Right extremists had the longest duration of radicalization and experienced the most intra-group competition. Far Left extremists, in turn, were more likely to have experienced a change in performance—in either work or education—prior to radicalization than those from the other ideological backgrounds. Far Left extremists were also more likely to be students, although this is not surprising given the prevalence of Far Left extremism among college students in the 1960s.
- A few conditions prominent in policy and academic debates over radicalization were similar among Far Left, Far Right and Islamist extremists. Radicalization appears to be a very social phenomenon, regardless of ideology. Approximately half of the individuals in the dataset belonged to a clique—a tight-knit, insular group of people. There was little significant difference among ideologies in the prevalence of psychological issues, loners, and a loss of standing. However, all of these elements were more common among violent individuals. This suggests that individuals that demonstrate these risk factors are equally predisposed to violence regardless of their ideological background. Finally, there was no difference in the role of prison in the radicalization processes across ideologies. Given the recent concerns about the radicalization of Muslim prisoners, this suggests that the risk of prison radicalization is roughly equal for Far Right and Far Left extremists.

METHOD

These preliminary findings draw on the PIRUS dataset, which includes information on approximately 1,500 individuals who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States, and 60 to 120 case studies of a subset of these individuals. Non-violent extremism refers to individuals who engage in illegal extremist activity short of violence or who belong to a violent extremist group but do not participate in violent activities. The PIRUS project defines an individual to be “radical” if they were 1) arrested for a crime, 2) indicted for a crime, 3) killed in action as a direct result of his or her ideological activities, or 4) a member or were associated with a terrorist or extremist organization. Moreover, they must have espoused an ideological motive for their behavior, and there must be credible evidence to link their ideological motive to the requisites listed above. Finally, the individual must have been either fully or partially radicalized within the United States. For the analysis, researchers created additive indexes of risk factors based on prior theoretical work on radicalization and criminal behavior. The analysis made use of descriptive statistics and logit regressions to analyze the prevalence of these risk factors and their relationship with violence; it also used crosstabs with chi-square tests to analyze differences in specific conditions and events relating to radicalization among violent and non-violent extremists, as well as across Far Left, Far Right and Islamist ideologies. Final analysis will be conducted in Fall 2015. It should be noted that the findings included herein are preliminary, and are subject to change upon the project’s final report due in December 2015.

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¹ Based on the results of logit regressions. Highlighted risk factors were significant at the 0.01 level.