VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

A YEAR IN THE LIVES OF 26 VETERANS ON THE STREETS OF LOS ANGELES PAGE 12

Seeking consensus on GUN POLICY in America

How COVID worsened the DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

WAR AND DISEASE: Lessons from the past
Racial Equity and Global Justice

Rhianna C. Rogers, director of the RAND Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy, presented to the 13th Geneva Forum in December 2021. Rogers noted that, around the world, organizations are making commitments to achieve racial equity and global justice—but to reach these goals effectively, it is critical to grow skills in intersectional research spaces.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/PTA1782-1

Crisis Response in a Changing Climate

RAND Europe research and analysis supported the Climate Change and Sustainability strategy of the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD), which focuses on enhancing operational capability in changing climatic conditions and on identifying and embedding sustainable solutions to help MOD meet its net zero carbon emissions target by 2050. Researchers identified challenges that are likely to emerge for defense logistics in the future, particularly with regard to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and military aid to civil authorities.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/RRA1024-1

Vulnerabilities in Water Management Plans

This interactive tool presents the results of a study that evaluated the performance of the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District water plans under a range of future conditions, including climate change, drought, and water demand.

MORE AT www.rand.org/t/TLA1284-1

Emergency Provisions During the Pandemic Prevented Mass Insurance Loss

New data from the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, among others, show that several temporary safety-net provisions enacted in 2020 helped keep the number of insured people stable. Untangling which were most responsible for this steady state, amid extreme job losses, will help policymakers determine how to proceed as the pandemic continues.

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The Digital Skills Gap
What workers need for the jobs of the future

Veterans Experiencing Homelessness
A one-year window into life on the streets

Jocelyn, a veteran of the U.S. Army, has lived for years on the streets of Los Angeles but hopes to move into a voucher-subsidized apartment soon. A recent RAND study of 26 veterans experiencing homelessness shows how difficult it can be to attain housing. Only three of the veterans in the study managed to find a permanent place to live during the year that researchers followed them.
Gray Market Use for Aging and Dementia Care

As more Americans age into needing long-term care, an informal market of home care workers has grown up to help them. Those workers—often unscreened, sometimes untrained—represent an important but hidden facet of American health care.

Nearly a third of the people in a RAND survey who arranged care for themselves or a loved one had turned to that “gray market” of caregivers. Researchers use that term to describe caregivers who find paid work outside of a regulated agency. That could include neighbors, friends, agency caregivers working extra hours on the side, or just people who answer an online help-wanted ad.

People who hired from the gray market were much more likely to be retired or unemployed, living on a limited income. That likely reflects the high cost of agency care.

People in rural areas—especially those who needed specialized help for someone with dementia—were five times more likely to use the gray market than people in urban areas.

RAND’s findings suggest the gray market could help close gaps in access to care, and provide a less-expensive, more-flexible alternative to formal agencies. As such, it needs more study to ensure it’s a safe and effective option. Clinicians who work with older adults or people with dementia should also consider gray-market caregivers as potential members of their patients’ care teams.

That will only become more essential as the American population ages. The demand for home health and personal care aides is projected to grow by 34 percent by 2029, much faster than other occupations.

The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities sponsored RAND’s survey. Researchers drew participants from RAND’s American Life Panel, a standing sample of more than 6,000 American adults who answer periodic surveys about important policy issues.

MORE AT
www.rand.org/n210621
Lessons from the 2021 Texas Power Crisis

Electric grids, water systems, and even the internet face a unique kind of risk that doesn’t get enough attention until something goes really wrong. Four days in Texas demonstrate the dangers of such complacency.

Winter storms in February 2021 started a cascade of disasters that left millions without water, heat, or power in freezing temperatures. Hundreds died. RAND researchers analyzing the events leading up to the blackouts found that the nature of the Texas grid obscured an inherent weakness. The grid seemed so reliable during normal operations that people trusted it would always heat their homes and power their pumps. In reality, the Texas grid is a network of 147 generation, transmission, and distribution companies that have to work together seamlessly to keep the power flowing.

As temperatures plummeted, oil wells and wind turbines froze just as demand for electricity spiked. The resulting power outages shut down compressor stations that supply natural gas, which could have been used to get power stations back online. Energy speculators seized on the supply crash and drove the price of gas 20 times higher.

The blackouts show what can happen when people depend on networks that seem reliable—but aren’t reliable enough under stress. That also describes some water systems, commercial supply chains, and the internet. They may seem like single entities, but they’re really hugely complicated networks of individual actors, none of whom has responsibility for the whole.

Making them resilient requires more than just hardening their physical infrastructure; it requires tightening the social and organizational connections that hold them together. Regulation can help, but it can also create its own interdependencies. What’s needed is a better understanding of what makes networks highly reliable—physically and organizationally—and what incentives and investments can help. The challenge, as Texas learned, is building reliable networks out of unreliable parts.

More at www.rand.org/t/EP68740

Reducing Risk and Impacts of Future Oil Spills

A new Coast Guard research center, developed with help from RAND, will soon be built on the shores of Lake Superior to confront an understudied threat to the Great Lakes: oil.

The science of responding to, and recovering from, an oil spill is well established—in saltwater. But the Great Lakes represent the largest surface body of freshwater in the world. That changes the dynamics of spill response; for one thing, oil sinks faster in freshwater. Parts of the Great Lakes also spend months every year under ice, further complicating any spill response.

The commandant of the Coast Guard warned federal lawmakers in 2017 that significant gaps in knowledge could hinder his agency’s response to a spill on the Great Lakes. Congress authorized the creation of a National Center for Expertise in response. The Coast Guard turned to RAND to clarify how the center could best accomplish its mission, and where.

Researchers interviewed experts and emergency responders throughout the region. They mapped oil pipelines and shipping transit points, as well as colleges and universities that could give the new center an academic base.

They cautioned that the center risks getting pulled in too many directions, especially in its early years. It should focus on coordinating research to close gaps in knowledge about freshwater oil spills. But it should also help translate that research into better equipment, more effective trainings, and new operating protocols for frontline responders.

The researchers identified Sault Ste. Marie, in Michigan, as a promising site for the new center. The Coast Guard agreed and announced plans in late 2021 to move forward with $4.5 million in federal funds to build the center there. Officials described it as a critical step toward protecting the “economic engine and ecological treasure” that are the Great Lakes.

More at www.rand.org/t/RRA1222-1
Building High-Performance Programs

William Shelton was a junior in high school when he got an unexpected call that set him on a path to RAND. The caller was an Air Force recruiter asking if he was interested in an ROTC scholarship. He was. One Air Force career later, having managed hundreds of millions of dollars in programs and initiatives, he retired as a colonel and went looking for new opportunities to serve.

He had spent a year at RAND as an Air Force fellow; one of the projects he worked on anticipated virtual air staff meetings 15 years before Zoom even existed. When researchers he had worked with encouraged him to return, he didn’t need much prodding. He joined RAND as an engineer.

He specializes in improving the process—he would say the art—of government acquisition, from purchasing to program management to quality assurance. His work has helped the Air Force, the Navy, and the Department of Homeland Security analyze poorly performing programs, assess rising program costs, and strengthen their acquisition workforces. One of his most recent projects provided guidance for the U.S. Space Force as it builds its acquisition programs from the ground up.
Q: How would you describe defense acquisition for a layperson?

A: People actually do acquisition and program management every day. If you’re buying a house, for example, you’ve got a set of requirements, a budget, a timeline that you’re working with. That’s what I was doing, only for fighter airplanes or the command and control systems for a ballistic missile.

In 2001, for instance, I was the program director for the Link 16 program at Hanscom Air Force Base. Link 16 was a data link that allowed U.S. and NATO forces to share information. I was there on 9/11, and we got a directive from the Chief of Staff that we were going to put it in all of the combat air forces, and we needed to get it done quickly. I’m a lieutenant colonel at the time, I’ve got a $100 million–plus budget, and I’ve got about 100 folks that work for me—and we got it done. I had team members who were taking boxes out into the field and putting them in F-15s, F-16s. It was a tremendous feeling of accomplishment: Give people the opportunity and they can excel.

What’s a lesson that you learned in the Air Force that you apply now at RAND?

At one point, I was working with a two-star general on the Joint Strike Fighter program. Instead of just calling me into her office, she came to mine, two buildings away, sat down at the desk with me, and we talked about the pros and cons of the program. What that really showed me was this: She went to where the information was. It doesn’t matter what grade or rank a person has; you go to where the information is.

Are there any overarching problems you’re trying to solve with your research?

“Acquisition reform” has long been a buzzword in Congress and the Pentagon and the newspapers. I’ve always thought the focus wasn’t on the right part. They all look at the laws, the policies, and the regulations, and say, “Change this, change that,” and it just piles up. It’s good, it’s necessary, but it’s not sufficient. You have to focus on what motivates people to behave the way they do. If you don’t have a motivated, focused team, no matter how simple the rules and regulations are, they’re not going to get it done. You can’t just try to regulate that with more laws and policies.

I was very fortunate to be part of a project looking at space acquisition in light of the stand-up of the U.S. Space Force. It has this clean slate, a unique opportunity to create a culture that will perform the way it wants it to. We looked at governance, we looked at how you build a motivated workforce, we looked at how you could break down some of the artificial walls that often separate the acquisitions community from the operations community. One of our recommendations was that all senior officers should do a tour in private industry. Just take a year or two, go work at a company, and then bring what you learn back to the Space Force.

What are you working on now?

I’m still working to help build the Space Force from an acquisitions perspective. But I’m also getting ready to go on a temporary assignment to support the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering. I’ve always had a few things I look for before I take a job, and this is what brought me to RAND, too. An opportunity to serve something bigger than myself—check. Being able to contribute to big solutions for big problems that are of national import—check. And being able to fit into the culture, to the ethos of the people there—check.
Mobilizing for great power conflict is hard enough, but with variants of COVID-19 still running rampant, the U.S. military would have its hands full if it had to fight tonight. Fortunately, today, the U.S. military is fairly well-postured to tackle a deployment during a pandemic, given its experience fighting COVID-19 over the past few years. Relatively few military personnel have been lost to the disease. The U.S. government is actively reviewing its efforts to counter biological attacks and the Department of Defense (DoD) is taking steps that could allow it to perform day-to-day operations during a pandemic, but it might not be preparing adequately for a future large-scale operation during a more-transmissible and lethal pandemic.

Imagine a war with China, with a deadlier virus decimating carrier crews and air bases in the Pacific. Would the United States and allied militaries slow operations to limit infection, at the risk of losing the war, or would they try to fight through the disease? DoD could do more to prepare for the next pandemic, which could occur within the next 60 years.

War and disease have a long and wretched history. The Athenians battled plague in addition to Sparta. In the late Middle Ages, disease contributed to the fall of the Venetian Empire. Napoleon benefited from Venice’s fall, but his own empire was brought low by disease. The Grande Armée that invaded Russia was hurt more by typhus than by the Russians.

Disease has also played a role in American military history. In 1777, George Washington inoculated the Continental Army against smallpox. More than 60 percent of casualties on both sides of the American Civil War were attributed to disease. In World War I, the 1918 influenza pandemic hampered efforts to mobilize the American Expeditionary Forces. Fortunately, advances in hygiene, antibiotics, and vaccination, along with the development of a world-class medical
corps, have made disease something of an afterthought. But has success produced a blind spot in the U.S. defense community? DoD, created in the wake of World War II, has only existed in an era when the deadliest opponent of the U.S. armed forces has been human.

The department’s structure and culture may not be helping it prepare for a future pandemic. Responsibilities are fragmented across different organizations, with entities such as the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, U.S. Northern Command, and the Defense Health Agency all playing different and potentially competing roles.

In addition, DoD personnel who create plans are not used to considering the impact of a pandemic, nor do DoD personnel who develop future forces build capabilities. Training, exercises, and wargames rarely take infectious diseases into account.

A deadlier pandemic could complicate combat operations and could even lead to defeat. Policymakers could be forced to choose between supporting civil authorities at home and the external fight. Another virus could be more lethal for younger adults, who make up most of the fighting force.

Most of the conflicts the U.S. military contemplates involve deploying forces far from the United States, which means that U.S. forces will likely be more affected by a pandemic than an adversary. An outbreak aboard a carrier, similar to what occurred aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, could be much more deadly and could kill more forces than an adversary.

Any place forces congregate, from airfields to staging facilities to forward operating locations, could be disease vectors, and measures to slow the spread of disease could negatively impact operations. Much of the U.S. military’s logistics network is dependent upon private industry and intertwined with civilian infrastructure, which may become unavailable during an outbreak. Mitigation measures such as social distancing, testing, and quarantines could slow deployment timelines.

For those who might seek comfort in the notion that a pandemic would hinder an adversary as much as it impacts U.S. forces, it would be good to remember that past pandemics have sometimes hurt one side of a conflict more than another.

Fortunately, the steps necessary to minimize the impact of future pandemics on military operations are not costly. For example, folding pandemics into scenarios, requiring new branch plans, procuring additional personal protective equipment, increasing the department’s medical corps, increasing the biosurveillance capabilities of military labs, improving information sharing with civil partners, dispersing forces geographically, or sending additional forces to theater would not, in the grand scheme, entail large levels of investment or significant changes in current practices.

One exception to these relatively “low-cost” propositions might be placing a greater emphasis on developing unmanned platforms.

But there may not be much of an appetite in the department for devoting additional resources to new initiatives like pandemic preparedness. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has declared COVID-19 a priority for DoD, but it remains to be seen what form this priority will take or how long it will last. After the 1918 flu pandemic, some argued that the American defense community ignored the episode. Will a similar argument be made this time?
Skills Gaps in the Modern Workforce

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

The COVID-19 pandemic quickened the pace of digital development around the world, as everything from meetings to movie premiers went online. That may sound like a silver lining. For tens of millions of workers, it’s not.

They don’t have the skills to compete. They’re the bookkeepers, the data-entry clerks, the executive secretaries, looking for work in a new economy in which the people getting hired have titles like “cloud engineer” or “growth hacker” on their resumes. Without a concerted effort to retrain them, researchers from RAND Europe found, they are likely to be left behind.

And not just them. The cost of that growing skills gap will be measured in trillions of dollars, and it will fall most heavily on places that don’t have reliable digital infrastructure, such as internet access, or widespread fluency in digital skills. As the world economy struggles to its feet after the knockdown blow of COVID-19, that skills gap threatens to keep pushing it down.

“There are just not enough people with the right digital skills to enable the transformation that companies are seeking,” said Salil Gunashekar, a research leader.
and associate director at RAND Europe, who focuses on science and technology policy. Sometime in the next few years, the world will pass an important milestone. The number of hours worked by machines will equal the number of hours worked by humans. A recent survey by Salesforce found that three-quarters of the world's workers feel unprepared for the jobs they might find on the other side of that milestone.

Those who plan to work in health care or financial services, for example, might need to know how to use artificially intelligent computers. Those who want to work in mining or metals might need to know how to operate robots and sift through big data.

Business leaders have warned for years that what they see on job applications does not match what they need in new employees. Europe’s Digital Economy and Society Index recently found that nearly 60 percent of employers are having trouble filling open digital positions with qualified candidates. And yet, pandemic realities have left them no choice: Four out of five global business leaders say they are accelerating the automation of their work.

The major economies of the world now stand to lose $11.5 trillion in potential growth by 2028 if they cannot bridge the skills gap, global consulting and professional services firm Accenture has estimated. India, South Africa, and Mexico will be hit especially hard. So will groups that can least afford the economic loss: women, older people, racial and ethnic minorities, and people living in rural areas.

The World Economic Forum estimates that 85 million jobs could be lost to automation over the next three years across more than a dozen industries. At the same time, it expects 97 million new jobs to emerge that are better adapted to the future of work. On paper, that should be a win. Without a major commitment to retain and retrain existing workers, RAND Europe found, it will be a loss for the employees and a loss for the employers.

There are no simple fixes here. Companies need to become more agile in distributing and redistributing their existing employees to better meet their needs, rather than trying to recruit their way out of the skills gap. They also need to do more to help those employees learn the technical skills, like coding, and the soft skills, like working in a team, that they need to succeed. National governments can help by investing in vocational programs and other supports for displaced workers.

One important step would be to develop a common “skills language,” the researchers wrote. That would ensure that applicants and employers all mean the same thing when they use a term like “cloud engineer.” That would help hiring managers quickly assess applicants based on the skills they bring to the job, and not just the name of the college on their resume.

Workers, meanwhile, need to change their mindset. Education no longer ends with a high school diploma or a university degree. The skills they have now might not be relevant in a few years. As one tech manager in Canada advised: “Get good at learning.”

There are signs the pandemic drove that point home. The online learning portal Coursera saw course participation quadruple as COVID upended normal life. Those who still had jobs favored courses on mindfulness and meditation. Those who found themselves unemployed were much more focused on shoring up their digital skills. They were taking courses on Python programming, algorithms, and artificial neural networks.

The Global Digital Skills Gap: Current Trends and Future Directions is available for free download at www.rand.org/t/RRA1533-1
Exploring the Disagreement Among Gun Policy Experts

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

More than 120 people die by gunfire on an average day in America. Yet the research that could help answer such basic questions as why and what to do about it is surprisingly thin. One 2017 study estimated that, for every dollar the federal government spent to better understand gun violence, it spent $142 to better understand sepsis.

For years now, researchers at RAND have been working to fill that vacuum. One of their most recent studies found something that might seem unthinkable amid the poisoned politics of the gun debate. Regardless of where they stood on the issue, experts RAND surveyed were not so dissimilar in what they thought gun policies should be trying to accomplish. There were places—not many, but some—where there might even be room for compromise.

“This is a debate where people think the other side is just wrong or irrational, and there’s no way to ever change their minds,” said Rosanna Smart, an economist at RAND who led the study as part of RAND’s Gun Policy in America initiative. “One of our main takeaways is that we’re maybe not as far apart as we think we are.”

Researchers surveyed nearly 200 experts for their views on policies ranging from weapon bans to stand-your-ground laws. They included gun policy researchers, advocates, and congressional staffers who work on gun issues—and, as expected, they split into two opposing camps. One favored tougher laws and more restrictions on guns. The other favored more permissive laws, with fewer restrictions.

For example: Should schools allow teachers and other staff members to carry guns? The permissive group thought that would reduce mass shootings by 15 percent. The restrictive group thought it would have no meaningful effect on mass shootings—but would increase accidental firearm deaths by 5 percent.

“A ban on the sale of “assault weapons” was either one of the worst policy ideas or one of the best. Acquiring a gun either put the owner and the owner’s family at higher risk of homicide, or sharply reduced their risk.

But reading through the results, the researchers found some areas where the circles around each camp touched.

“‘This is a debate where people think the other side is just wrong or irrational, and there’s no way to ever change their minds. One of our main takeaways is that we’re maybe not as far apart as we think we are.”

ROSANNA SMART
Some experts in the more-permissive group, for example, thought child-access prevention laws could be good policy, a 4 out of 5. So did most members of the more-restrictive group.

Other policies with some overlap included keeping guns out of the hands of anyone subject to a domestic violence restraining order; and requiring felons and others prohibited from owning guns to surrender any they already have.

In fact, the researchers found one policy that members of both camps thought would be a win. It would commit resources to prosecute anyone who cannot legally own a gun but falsifies paperwork or otherwise tries to acquire one anyway. The experts largely agreed that would reduce firearm homicides, mass shootings, and property crime, with no significant effect on hunting, defensive gun use, or the right to bear arms.

What the survey results showed, researchers realized, was two groups with wildly different opinions on gun policy—but not wildly different objectives. It wasn’t that one side was trying to prevent mass shootings at all costs, while the other wanted to protect the right to bear arms. Both sides put the highest priority on preventing firearm homicides, followed by preventing firearm suicides and protecting privacy rights.

They weren’t disagreeing on the “why” of gun policy—they were disagreeing on the “how.” One side thought establishing gun-free zones would be an effective way to prevent firearm homicides, for example. The other side thought gun-free zones would only invite more homicides.

The researchers found one other clue to what might be driving some of the dissonance. They asked what would happen to total homicides and suicides if tougher policies managed to reduce those caused by firearms.

“The very least, everyone agrees on what the stated objectives should be,” Smart said. “That alone gives me hope that there’s some path forward. It’s a lot different than trying to change hearts and minds about what gun policies should be trying to accomplish in the first place. There’s just a really wide-open opportunity to start trying to fill some of these holes.”

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RAND launched its Gun Policy in America initiative in 2016 to provide unbiased information that could support the development of fair and effective gun policies. At the time, congressional rules against using federal money for research that could support gun control had scared most agencies away from funding any gun research at all. As a result, researchers found a near-total lack of reliable evidence to support either side in the debate over gun policy.

The initiative, funded since 2018 by a grant from Arnold Ventures, has since provided a state-by-state look at firearm mortality and hospitalizations. It has developed lesson plans to help high school students think more critically about gun violence. And it has produced some of the most rigorous estimates to date of how many people own guns in America.

Congress responded in 2020 by clarifying its rules to encourage research into preventing firearm injuries and deaths. It also provided $25 million to jump-start nearly two dozen studies, the greatest surge of funding for gun research in more than a quarter century.
By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

Jocelyn joined the U.S. Army with dreams of putting herself through college and becoming a lawyer. It’s been a long and bitter journey from there to the streets of Los Angeles, where she scratches out a living selling handicrafts on the Venice Beach boardwalk. The closest thing she has to a bed at night is the front seat of a broken-down Mercury Mountaineer.

The United States pledged more than a decade ago to end veteran homelessness. “Those who have served this nation,” Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki said at the time, “should never find themselves on the streets, living without care and without hope.” The numbers have fallen by nearly half since then—but the latest count still found more than 37,000 veterans living in their cars, in temporary shelters, or in makeshift camps.

Researchers followed 26 of them for one year to see how they live and what keeps them on the streets. Their study provides a window into what it means to experience homelessness in the middle of a global pandemic. It found missed opportunities and needless barriers to helping veterans in need, all of it summed up in one glaring statistic. Of the 26 veterans in the study, only three managed to find a permanent place to live.

Jocelyn could feel that struggle in her bones. She had spent years living on the streets, and she was ready for a break to go her way. She was tired.

“The way people treat you when you’re homeless gets exhausting,” she said. Her name has been changed to protect her identity. “It’s like you’re not a human being anymore. That’s the worst part about being homeless. It’s mentally, emotionally, and spiritually degrading. Everybody wants to spit on you when you’re down.”
“If any one of us who are housed had to go through what a person experiencing homelessness has to go through, just to find housing, we might not make it either.”

SARAH HUNTER
Director, RAND Center on Housing and Homelessness in Los Angeles
Sarah Hunter lives not far from one of the largest VA centers in America, a sprawling campus set aside more than 100 years ago for needy veterans. She would bike past it and see the cluster of tents that locals called Veterans Row, spread across the sidewalk just outside the main gates. If there was a place that could symbolize America’s broken promise to its veterans, Veterans Row was it.

Hunter directs the RAND Center on Housing and Homelessness in Los Angeles. She wrote out a proposal and teamed up with researchers from the University of Southern California to make it happen. For one year, they would follow veterans trying to survive on the streets of Los Angeles, checking in at least once a month to see how they were doing, where they were sleeping, and what they needed to get by. The Daniel Epstein Family Foundation funded the project with a $1 million gift.

Hunter and other researchers recruited veterans for the study at city parks and libraries, at food lines and VA outreach events, and outside the flag-draped tents of Veterans Row. They walked up and down the Venice Beach boardwalk as well—where they could have seen Jocelyn hustling for food money. A former Army clerk, she had fled a series of abusive relationships, moving from city to city, from a friend’s couch to a church basement to the streets, never quite getting her feet back under her. Now she was selling poems she had burned into pieces of wood with sunlight through a magnifying glass:

*Look into my mirror. What do you see? Do you see the person you wanted to be? Are you happy with the you, you are right now; or could you change your life somehow?*

*We can all improve some facet of ourselves. If it was worth it, only time will tell. Look into my mirror, and all will be well.*

She had received an honorable discharge from the military—as had two-thirds of the veterans in RAND’s study. That made them eligible for an array of health care, housing, and employment services. But some didn’t know how to access those benefits, and others had given up trying. Community outreach workers who could help connect them to services were too often overworked and under-resourced, bailing out a ship that was already underwater.

Most of the veterans in the study said finding a place to live was one of their top life goals. But housing vouchers were hard to find, and getting a landlord to accept them was harder still. Many of the veterans had resigned themselves to staying on the streets. “I’m hoping for a miracle,” one told the researchers. “It probably won’t happen.”

“You sometimes hear people say that these folks are on the street because they’re ‘service resistant,’” Hunter said. “It’s really that too many services are client resistant. If any one of us who are housed had to go through what a person experiencing homelessness has to go through, just to find housing, we might not make it either.”

The veterans in the study were often in poor health, fatigued, struggling with physical ailments like arthritis or high blood pressure, and mental conditions like anxiety or depression. One in four had some kind of substance-use
problem. Most had been on the streets long enough to have been assaulted, robbed, or both. Then COVID struck. Services they needed shut down or went online. The emergency rooms they used became places to fear. Like everyone else, they worried about their health and the safety of others. They wore masks and tried to stay six feet apart. But even as case counts soared, their housing status caused them more distress than the fear of disease.

“That really points to how all-consuming it is to not have access to housing,” said Benjamin Henwood, a USC researcher and expert on housing and homelessness, who helped lead the study. “It even trumps these larger concerns that the rest of us were having, the largest shock of our lives.”

The pandemic forced cities and states to get creative. Many, like California, rushed to get people off the streets and into hotel rooms, where they could at least isolate and keep their distance from others. Five of the 26 veterans in RAND’s study found housing through that kind of initiative.

Twelve others also made it inside for at least part of the study year, most often in transitional housing programs. During the months they were housed, they reported fewer mental health symptoms, less fatigue and distress, and better health overall. They spent less time in the emergency room, more time on their medications—and many used the opportunity to pursue their VA benefits. One learned she had health insurance and an open bank account with a small amount of money in it. She had spent two years living in her car with her husband and young daughter.

For most of the veterans, though, the housing they found was only a temporary reprieve from the streets. Only three had moved into permanent housing by the end of the study year. And nine of the 26 veterans never even made it into stable housing for more than a week or two.

“Everyone says they’re practicing ‘housing first,’ getting people off the streets quickly, into stable housing, and then addressing whatever health needs they have,” Hunter said. “That’s not what we saw. People have to wait months, sometimes years, for a place to come open for them.”

The VA has since moved hundreds of veterans from the streets of Los Angeles into stable housing programs, including those who were living on Veterans Row. It handed out cell phones during the pandemic to keep homeless veterans connected to services inside and outside of its gates. But the work continues. The VA plans to build at least 1,200 units of supportive housing for homeless and at-risk veterans and their families on its West Los Angeles campus.

RAND’s study underscored the need for cities like Los Angeles to make significant investments in creating more affordable housing, to get people off the streets and break their reliance on expensive safety-net services like hospital emergency rooms. Officials also need to stop repeating the myth that people experiencing homelessness don’t want help, that not having a roof is just a trade they have made for the freedom of the streets. The veterans in RAND’s study wanted to come inside.

For Jocelyn, that goal seemed so close she could almost reach it as 2021 rolled into 2022. She had a VA voucher for an apartment, a ticket off the streets. She talked about expanding her artwork into jewelry or leatherwork, maybe even finishing that college degree she always wanted. Then she caught herself.

“I don’t… I just don’t trust that it’s going to last very long,” she said. “That’s my biggest fear, that I’m going to end up back on the street. It happens every time. Every time I get comfortable, something drags the rug out from under my feet.”

Her move-in date came and went. The apartment wasn’t ready. There were paperwork delays. A week went by, and then another, and then another. Just a process, she told herself as she pulled the blankets around her in the front seat of her car. Nothing she could do about it but wait.
What causes individuals to join violent extremist organizations? And why do some extremists end up leaving these groups? Looking for answers to these questions—and insights into addressing the threat of violent extremism—RAND researchers interviewed former extremists and their family members. The interviews uncovered 32 unique stories from 24 White supremacists and eight Islamic extremists.

Artist Gabrielle Mérite’s new piece for RAND Art + Data tells these stories of radicalization and deradicalization in a new way. She created collages by cutting out words and phrases used in RAND’s report. The resulting visual essays provide viewers with a deeper understanding of what might lead someone down the path toward extremism—and what could help them find a way out.

“Data visualization is a powerful tool to humanize statistics, deepen our understanding of the world and tell the stories that matter. With RAND’s data, I hope to push creative boundaries and shape new perspectives for those working towards the greater good.”

Gabrielle Mérite
The first essay highlights reasons why people may turn to extremist ideologies. The interviews conducted by RAND researchers revealed that negative life events—such as abuse or trauma, difficult family situations, or bullying—often play a part in one’s path toward extremism. However, these events are never the sole or most direct cause of radicalization.

About RAND Art + Data

Through RAND Art + Data, a selected group of artists will create visual stories inspired by RAND research. The result: a novel form of data expression that challenges us to think differently about policy analysis.

The RAND Art + Data residency—curated by Debbie Millman, host of the Design Matters podcast—is part of RAND’s NextGen Initiative, a series of projects to spark interest in public policy and cultivate civic engagement among 18- to 40-year-olds.
The second narrative highlights some reasons why extremists become deradicalized, leave their organizations, and in some cases, join the fight against radicalism. Notably, RAND research shows that heavy-handed attempts by intelligence and law enforcement agencies to deradicalize individuals often fail.

Describing (De)Radicalization

LEAVING EXTREMISM

HOW RESEARCH TALKS ABOUT IT    how people affected talk about it

DESIRING A MORE CONVENTIONAL LIFESTYLE
MATURED OUT OF THE MOVEMENT
being involved with that lifestyle became utterly exhausting
BURNOUT

DISTURBANCE OF GROUP LEADERSHIP
A CANCER DIAGNOSIS TURNED THEM TOWARD RELIGION

DISILLUSIONMENT
there's so much trauma and death and destruction and wreckage of lives

BETRAYAL AND HYPOCRISY BY OTHER GROUP MEMBERS
A DRAMATIC, CHALLENGING LIFE EVENT

STRUCTURED INTERVENTIONS
MARITAL RESPONSIBILITIES
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

PERCEPTIONS OF LOW ABILITY, LOW INTEGRITY, AND LOW BENEVOLENCE OF GROUP
MORAL QUALMS
GROUPTHINK

INTERVENTIONS BY FAMILY MEMBERS
STABILITY
it just started to seem more and more hypocritical
FAMILY BONDS

MEDIA LITERACY
I just went through a complete cognitive shift
OPEN ACCESS TO DIVERSE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

EXPOSURE TO PEOPLE WHO EXHIBIT KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY
INABILITY TO MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT

POSITIVE ROLE OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
RECOMMENDATIONS
EXHAUSTION
INCARCERATION

LIFE PARTNER
SPEAKING WITH NONRADICALS
BEING AT THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

RAISING CHILDREN
it just didn't make sense to me anymore
DISSATISFACTION WITH A GROUP'S ACTIVITIES

SENSE OF SECURITY IN NUMBERS
THE DEATH OF A PARENT WAS DESCRIBED AS A TURNING POINT

About the Artist

Originally from France, Gabrielle Mérite is an information designer specializing in empathetic data visualizations for truth-seeking, ethically driven organizations. Deeply passionate about social justice and humanity’s responsibility for one another, her work breathes life into numbers so that people can truly feel their importance.

After receiving an M.S. in biology and working several years as a scientific journalist, she exchanged words for illustrations, to communicate analytic findings visually, with honesty and compassion. Since then, she has worked with organizations like the United Nations, UNICEF, and WeTransfer, to help them uncover truths and share them with intention.

For more, visit www.rand.org/art-plus-data
The third and final essay combines both narratives to show the evolution and complexity of individual experiences with radicalization and deradicalization. You may notice, for example, that dramatic life events and highly meaningful social interactions (both negative and positive) play fundamental roles in both processes.
Gene and Gwen Gritton are supporters of the RAND Legacy Society, a group of donors who have made planned gifts to benefit RAND and the Pardee RAND Graduate School.

Gene Gritton was a young nuclear engineer when he came to RAND in the mid-1960s. In the career that followed, he helped clarify the threat of electromagnetic pulses, analyzed military systems from satellites to submersibles, and aided New York City’s efforts to clean the waters of Jamaica Bay.

He sees the same creative energy at work in the Tech+Narrative Lab at Pardee RAND. The lab has become a focal point for over-the-horizon research on advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality. For Gritton, it represents a continuation of what brought him to RAND in the first place: policy research that can improve the future.

He and his wife, Gwen, have become key financial supporters of the lab. They also have made it, Pardee RAND, and the RAND National Security Research Division a priority in their estate planning.

“Having spent most of my professional career with RAND, I have seen firsthand the independence, quality, and objectivity of its research,” he said. “It really is the gold standard. I hope our gifts can help RAND, Pardee RAND, and the Tech+Narrative Lab continue to do quality research on important national security and societal problems.”

For more information about giving, visit campaign.rand.org.
In 1972, amid a worldwide rash of bombings, hijackings, and hostage-takings, the U.S. government was wrestling with how to respond. How widespread were these violent groups? What security measures were necessary? Should the government ever negotiate with hostage-takers? To help the State Department answer these questions, RAND turned to its specialty: data.

Researchers immediately began creating the first international database of terrorist attacks, according to Brian Michael Jenkins, RAND’s renowned terrorism expert and a developer of this roster of radicals. In actuality, the first “database” was a chronology of terrorist events on index cards, filed in a long drawer like old library card catalogs.

The database soon went online, where it is still in use. Maintained until 2009, it chronicles more than 40,000 terrorist attacks since 1968. In 2018, one research team used the data to create a model that predicts how lethal a terrorist group might become in the future.

The database helped answer many of the government’s terrorism questions, but the researchers were less certain about whether never negotiating with terrorists was a valid response. In 1973, the United States adopted a “no-concessions” policy for abductions of U.S. citizens abroad. While the researchers did not argue against the policy, they found little empirical evidence that it affected the targeting of U.S. citizens. The policy still stands today.

Jenkins notes that the database evolved over time, as the government’s focus shifted from “terrorist incidents, to the types of groups that commit terrorism, to the attributes of people in terrorist groups, and finally to the types of mindsets that motivated and characterized those terrorists.” The government’s focus may be evolving again, as RAND researchers are currently helping the Department of Homeland Security assess its needs for data on domestic terrorism and violence targeting racial/ethnic, religious, or other groups.

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

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