

# What Do Former Extremists and Their Families Say About Radicalization and Deradicalization in America?

*Anonymously scrawled hate symbols. A mass shooting inside a house of worship. An armed group breaking through metal barriers in the nation's capital.*

**T**hese recent actions remind us that violent extremism has become a serious and complex threat in the United States. In response, the U.S. government and public and private organizations have made significant investments in attempting to understand and prevent it. Who is at risk of joining violent extremist organizations? How do they find groups of like-minded people to join with? Can families and friends recognize whether someone is becoming radicalized? How do individuals change their minds and walk away from extremism? What can communities do to stop the growth of extremism in their areas?

To assist with the nationwide effort to find answers, RAND Corporation researchers interviewed former extremists, as well as their families and friends, to gather and then analyze first-hand accounts of extremist radicalization and deradicalization. The research team took a public health and psychological, life-course approach to conduct the study. The results offer insights to policymakers and members of community organizations who are working to develop antiextremist policies and practices, as well as to other researchers who continue to look for answers to this growing problem.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Negative life events are part of, but not the sole cause of, radicalization.
- The enduring appeal of extremist groups seems to lie in attending to fundamental human needs.
- Recruitment to radical groups deliberately leverages personal vulnerabilities.
- Both radicalization and deradicalization can be triggered.
- Heavy-handed attempts by formal institutions to deradicalize individuals often fail.
- Stigmatization of groups seems mostly to push at-risk individuals further down the extremist path.
- Media literacy and open access to diverse sources of information appear critical for deradicalization.

## How the Study Was Conducted

The research team began by reviewing current studies focused on radicalized U.S. citizens residing in the United States. The team also reviewed information contained in the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database.

Using findings and insights from these sources, the team designed a semistructured interview protocol for former extremists, family members, and friends. The inclusion of family members and friends in the study allowed the team to collect in-depth information about the former extremist. This approach is based on the psychological autopsy, which is typically used by those seeking to understand cases of suicide. The interview protocol was designed to engage all participants in talking about radicalization and its prevention at four levels—individual, relational, institutional, and societal. This protocol derives from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s socioecological framework for violence prevention.

The team recruited interviewees through Parents for Peace and Beyond Barriers, two organizations that work with former members of radical extremist organizations and family members. The team conducted 36 interviews: 24 with former extremists, ten with family members, and two with friends. Together, these interviews covered 32 separate cases of radicalization and deradicalization. Of these cases, 24 were white supremacists (eight females and 16 males), and eight were Islamic extremists (one female and seven males). Seventeen cases concerned involvement with extremist organizations in the 2000s. Sixteen individuals had violent intentions, defined as engaging in or planning violent activities while in the organization. All but five interviews were conducted by telephone.

When reviewing the results, it is important to remember that the sample size is small and includes no control group. Additionally, as with all studies based on interviews, some participants may have shared information that drew from incorrect recollections.

## Study Findings

Analysis of the interviews offers insights into how individuals become radicalized, how they leave extremist groups, and what communities can do to stop the growth of extremism in their area. Summarized below are key findings from the study.

## Who Is at Risk of Joining Violent Extremist Organizations?

The interviews suggest that there is ultimately a wide range of factors, such as family dynamics and social backgrounds, that put some people at risk of radicalization. Three factors were mentioned most frequently.

### Financial instability (noted in 22 of the 32 cases)

Seven individuals noted that financial challenges pushed them into extremist beliefs. Interviewees also mentioned that they faced financial challenges when they participated in extremist organizations, which prompted some to work in jobs tied to the organization itself. This involvement led to delays in leaving the organization.

### Mental health (noted in 17 of the 32 cases)

Mental health challenges were cited as obstacles that individuals had to cope with throughout their lives. Some interviewees identified overwhelming anger and other symptoms as drivers of joining an extremist organization. Trauma or posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use, and physical health issues were also mentioned, but less frequently.

### Victimization, stigmatization, marginalization (noted in 16 of the 32 cases)

Many interviewees described how they felt one or more of these when growing up and that those experiences contributed to their radicalization. Most often, indi-

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I was like, yeah, getting out [of the military] with 11 years in, I should be able to get a job on base, no problem, as a contractor. Nah, that didn't happen. So, I decided to blame my problems on somebody else and say, "Oh, it's the black people's fault."  
—Former white supremacist

viduals mentioned feeling isolated and lonely in institutions (e.g., schools) or communities in which they were the minority race. Former white supremacists cited this factor, as did one former Islamic extremist. Only a few interviewees noted that their families held radical beliefs.

## How Are Individuals Recruited into Extremist Groups?

Research shows that online propaganda and recruitment are key pathways to joining extremist groups. Interviewees participating in this project cited these and other paths that led them in.

### “Reorienting” event (noted in 17 of the 32 cases)

Most interviewees described a dramatic or traumatic event that prompted them into reconsidering previously held views and considering alternative perspectives. These included a gun possession charge, rejection by the military, a friend’s suicide, and an extended period of unemployment. Some white supremacists discussed events involving black individuals.

### Direct and indirect recruitment (noted in 25 of the 32 cases)

The cases of four white supremacists and three Islamic extremists involved top-down recruitment—that is, recruiters from extremist organizations formally and proactively recruited them. The cases of 15 white supremacists and three Islamic extremists involved

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I always think that a lot of racism, and even discrimination not even from some white people but from other, other minority groups for being [South Asian], for being Muslim. Things that I didn’t even choose but I was, you know, and things I didn’t even like. But I was still hated for those things.  
—Former Islamic extremist

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So they listened to me, and then he [a member of a radical group] says, “Well, if you want to change the world, you do it with this.” And he picked up the AK-47.

—Former Islamic extremist

bottom-up entry, in which the individuals radicalized on their own and then sought membership in an extremist group.

### Propaganda (noted in 22 of the 32 cases)

Individuals described consuming online materials, as well as music and books, during the time of their radicalization.

### Social bonds (noted in 14 of the 32 cases)

Interviewees described how they were motivated to join a group by the social bonds they experienced with the group. Most noted feelings of family and friendship among group members, and some discussed how they felt a new sense of power as a member of a group. Some noted how they felt rewarded for contributions to the cause and group. Several cases were identified in which individuals “graduated” from one organization to a more extreme organization.

## What Are Signs of Radicalization?

Many interviewees cited instances of an observable behavior change in the early stages of radicalization. Two Islamic extremists showed outward signs of religious conversion; two others did not convert, but one became “extremely quiet” and the other started “voicing more-extreme ideas to family.” Among white supremacist cases, interviewees noted how the member began to create racist videos, use racial slurs, and display icons and symbols associated with white supremacy on their bedroom walls, clothing, and jewelry.

## Why and How Do People Deradicalize and Leave Extremist Organizations?

To date, there is no standard model of how people turn away from or reject previously held extremist views or why they leave extremist groups. Interviewees cited many reasons and ways they turned away, but two in particular stood out in the study.

### Disillusionment and burnout (noted in 14 of the 32 cases)

These feelings were noted in cases concerning 13 white supremacists and one Islamic extremist. All interviewees expressed that former members felt disappointment. Hypocrisy or other negative behaviors were cited as reasons for these feelings and, ultimately, for leaving.

### Individual or group intervention (noted in 22 of the 32 cases)

Interventions were typically conducted intentionally in the study sample. Individuals who helped people exit extremist groups were acquaintances, life partners, other former radicals, friends, journalists, children, other family members, religious authorities, current radicals, therapists, and school officials. The interventions consisted of diverse cultural and demographic exposures, emotional support, and financial or domestic stability. Some cases highlighted noxious or negative impact from radical individuals, which could be described as an inadvertent intervention. In 11 cases, the intervention was orchestrated and conducted by an institution, such as religious groups, law enforcement, and secular nonprofits. Twenty-two of the 32 cases also described processes of self-driven exiting from extremism.

### Deradicalization processes (noted in 20 of the 32 cases)

Interviewees discussed how they or their family members or friends had undergone psychological or social processes of deradicalization. Twelve of these 20 cases were activists, currently engaged in helping others deradicalize. Six cases concerned individuals who had formally exited a radical organization but were still undergoing cognitive and emotional deradicalization.

### Failed interventions (noted in 19 of the 32 cases)

When interviewees indicated that some interventions had failed, these cases most often involved family members who tried to intervene. Punitive interventions by law enforcement also often led to increased extremism. Upon leaving extremist organizations, six cases described feeling drawn back to organizations or ideologies. These interviewees discussed how they or their family members and friends missed the thrill and feelings of belonging, as well as other psychological benefits experienced by being part of an extremist group.

## Participant Perspectives on Mitigation Strategies

Interviewees were asked for ideas about preventing radicalization or promoting deradicalization, drawing on their personal experiences. They offered several suggestions about each.

### Childhood is key

Many interviewees noted the importance of childhood as a critical time to be exposed to diverse ideas, develop critical thinking skills, participate in social activities designed to promote positive behaviors and inclusiveness, and be exposed to members of different racial or cultural groups.

### Broader social treatment and action

Interviewees also mentioned the need to address media sensationalism and polarization, as well as the need for better access to mental health treatment and targeted outreach and support for military veterans.

### The right message at the right time

When asked about how to promote deradicalization, interviewees discussed the need to reach extremists at the right time and place. Interviewees also made recommendations about who should deliver messages and how to provide social support. Also, some respondents mentioned unplanned exposures to diversity, kindness, religious education, and mental health interventions.

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I was forced to travel . . . because of the nature of my work. And I found myself in situations where I was faced with things with my perceived enemy . . . and my perceived enemy was treating me normal. . . . It was like I just came from a black neighborhood or I just came from a Hispanic neighborhood and all this stuff that you're [other white supremacists are] saying, I didn't see it.

—*Former white supremacist*

## Recommendations

This study offers findings that may be useful to community policymakers who continue to work toward reversing the dangerous trend of homegrown terrorism and ideologically inspired violence in the United States. The full report offers additional recommendations for researchers continuing to investigate the phenomenon.

**Expand opportunities for mental health care.** The findings in this and previous studies do not support a causal effect between mental illness and extremism. However, the plausible connection may provide incentives to buttress mental health services in locales at high risk of extremist recruitment and activity. Additionally, targeting mental health care toward active extremist populations may provide an opportunity to directly support disengagement.

**Provide opportunities for expanding diversity exposure.** Exposure to diverse populations played a critical role in helping to deradicalize and reorient a number of former extremists in the study. This suggests that diversity-exposure efforts could be more systematically exploited to limit the risk of radicalization or possibly deradicalize already-extremist members.

**Help at-risk parents and families recognize and react to signs of extremist radicalization and engagement.** Some signals, such as observing youth consuming extremist propaganda or wearing or showcasing

extremist symbols and paraphernalia, serve as unambiguous signs of at least some interest in extremism.

**Present deradicalization messages at the right time and place.** Both radicalization and deradicalization can be triggered. An individual's experience of a dramatic, challenging life event, of being at a certain place at a certain time, can encourage both processes. Advertisements and public service announcements about existing resources for individuals who want to deradicalize can be delivered by the right person in ways and through multiple media that reach those at the cusp of changing or who are likely to change.

**Consider the trade-offs between punitive and "soft" law enforcement interventions.** The interviews and other studies suggest that heavy-handed attempts by formal institutions to deradicalize individuals often fail. Although interdiction of ongoing violent plots is an obvious target for traditional law enforcement responses, notification regarding the ongoing radicalization of individuals may warrant a different response.

**Organize community-based educational opportunities.** Media literacy and open access to diverse sources of information appear critical for deradicalization. These can cultivate media literacy and responsible internet use. Additionally, events that involve exposure to people outside the group who exhibit kindness and generosity seem to have positive effects.

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This brief describes work done in RAND Social and Economic Well-Being and documented in *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization*, by Ryan Andrew Brown, Todd C. Helmus, Rajeev Ramchand, Alina I. Palimaru, Sarah Weiland, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Liisa Hiatt, RR-A1071-1, 2021 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1071-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1071-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1071-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1071-1). RAND would like to recognize the support of the Ellen Hancock Impact Award for Social and Economic Well-Being, established by longtime Social and Economic Policy Advisory Board member Ellen Hancock. 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. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark.

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