



Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS)

January 2024

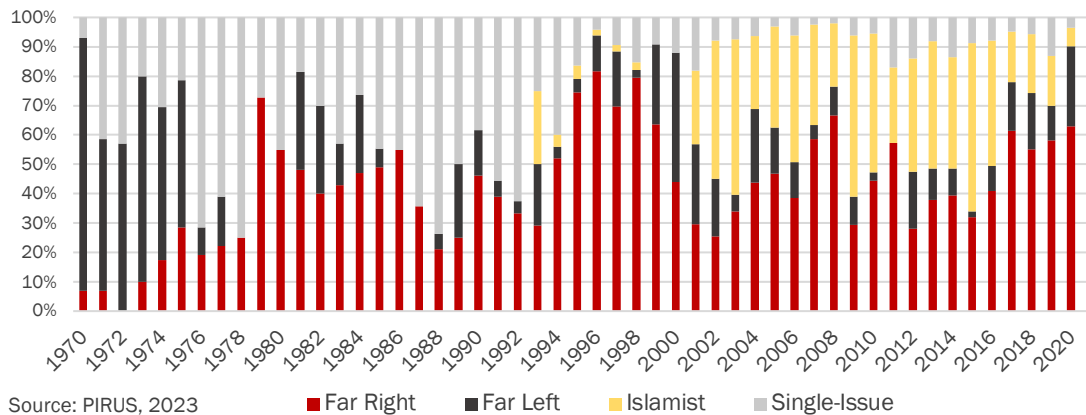
PROJECT OVERVIEW

PIRUS is a database of 3,203 Islamist, far-left, far-right, and single-issue extremists who have radicalized to violent and nonviolent extremism in the United States from 1948 through 2021.¹ The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) defines extremism as the use of illegal means, including violence, in the pursuit of political, economic, religious, or social goals. The PIRUS database is based entirely on open-sources and is freely available for download on START's webpage at <https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>. The analysis for this research brief draws on the full dataset and illustrates the important differences that exist across ideological groups, as well as those which distinguish violent from non-violent extremists.²

COMPARING IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS

The PIRUS data can be used to explore the radicalization trajectories of individuals from far-right, far-left, and Islamist ideologies.

Extremism in the United States, 1970–2021 (%)



Source: PIRUS, 2023

■ Far Right ■ Far Left ■ Islamist ■ Single-Issue

Note: Graph above displays year of exposure of each individual in PIRUS by ideology. Exposure is most commonly the time at which an individual is arrested for or commits an ideologically motivated illegal act.

The data show that radicalization in the United States has generally occurred in several waves. These waves roughly correspond to the rise of far-left extremism in the 1970s, far-right extremism beginning in the 1980s, and Islamist extremism becoming more prominent after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

¹ Islamist - For this project, we use the broad term "Islamist" in reference to the religio-political methodology practiced by Sunni Islamist-Salafists who seek the immediate overthrow of incumbent regimes, and the non-Muslim geopolitical forces which support them, in order to pave the way for an Islamist society which would be developed through martial power. Although there are a number of Islamist-Salafist thinkers who do not advocate for violent military strategies to achieve their goals (e.g., Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani), in the U.S. context, the individuals we classify as "Islamists" are most commonly connected to, or inspired by, violent Islamist-Salafist groups that have their roots in the onset of "global jihadism" of the 1980s, including al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements. There are a number of ideological tenets commonly elaborated by Islamist-Salafist groups, including the imposition of shari'a with violent jihad as a central component, the creation of an expansionist Islamic state, or khalifa, and the use of local, national, and international grievances affecting Muslims, which are aired in an overtly religious context.

Far-right - There exists a broad range of far-right beliefs and actors (often overlapping movements), including both reactionary and revolutionary justifications of violence. In its modern manifestation in the United States, the ideology of the far-right is generally exclusivist and favors social hierarchy, seeking an idealized future favoring a particular group, whether this group identity is racial, pseudo-national (e.g., the Texas Republic) or characterized by individualistic traits (e.g., survivalists). The extremist far-right commonly shows antipathy to the political left and the federal government. As a result of this heterodoxy, this category includes radical individuals linked to extremist religious groups (e.g., Identity Christians), non-religious racial supremacists (e.g., Creativity Movement, National Alliance), tax protesters, sovereign citizens, militias, and militant gun rights advocates.

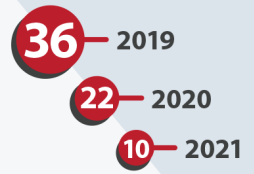
Far-left - The far-left in the United States is essentially class-oriented and consists primarily of individuals and groups that adhere to belief systems based on egalitarianism and the mobilization of disenfranchised segments of the population. With roots in the leftist student movement and radical prison reform movement of the late 1960s, traditional far-left extremists generally sought the overthrow of the capitalist system, including the United States government, in order to replace it with a new, anti-imperialist economic order that empowers members of the "working class". The traditional left included groups that maintained a distinct racial identity (e.g., Black Panther Party), which were motivated by a mix of economic grievances and race-based issues. Today, the far-left is more commonly identified by followers of animal-rights and environmental protection issues. While not all animal rights or environmental groups are inherently leftist in orientation (for instance, there are Green Fascists), the vast majority of these individuals and groups identify with leftist political positions and have thus been included in the far-left category for the purposes of this project.

Single-issue - Single-issue extremists are individuals who are motivated primarily by a single issue, rather than a broad ideology. Examples in the PIRUS data of single-issue extremists are individuals associated with the Puerto Rican independence movement, anti-abortion extremists that were not motivated by traditional far-right issues (anti-government, race superiority, etc.), members of the Jewish Defense League, and extremists with idiosyncratic ideologies (e.g., Ted Kaczynski).

² The original data collection effort and analysis was supported by Awards 2012-ZA-BX-0005 and 2017-ZA-CX-0001 through the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice; by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs through Award Number 2012-ST-061-CS0001; and by the Department of Defense through award HQ003421F0481.

Far-right extremists make up the largest ideological group in the database (n=1678)³, followed by Islamist extremists (n=579). The remainder of the individuals in the data are far-left extremists (n=537) or individuals in the “single-issue” category (n=409).

2021 PIRUS data continued to show a decrease in the number of individuals inspired by Salafi Jihadism, with only 10 offenders. That is down from 22 in 2020 and 36 in 2019.



	Far-right	Far-left	Islamist
Age at Public Exposure (mean)	37.3	29.8	28.7
Percent Female	7.3%	26.1%	7.6%
Low Education (no college)	47.1%	27.8%	41.9%
Low Socioeconomic Status	23.7%	27.7%	28.5%
Military Experience	25.3%	9.9%	8.1%
Criminal History	48%	32.2%	32.5%
Internet Radicalization (since 2005)	94.3%	98.1%	95%
Evidence of Mental Illness	20.7%	12.9%	18%

Far-Right Extremists

The PIRUS data show that, on average, far-right extremists tend to be older, have lower rates of college experience, and higher rates of pre-radicalization crime than their far-left and Islamist counterparts.

Far-Left Extremists

Far-left extremists tend to be young and well educated and are significantly more likely to be female than far-right or Islamist extremists.

Islamist Extremists

Islamist extremists tend to be young and male and show high rates of Internet radicalization (since 2005).

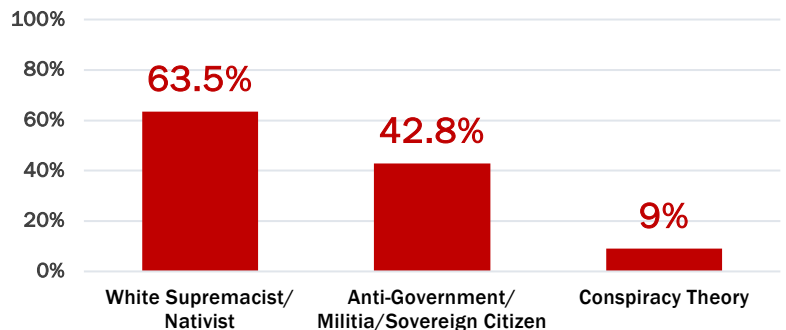
Table based on the analysis of 2,226 individuals in PIRUS and displays valid percentages. Internet radicalization is measured only for cases from 2005 to present.

Implications for Law Enforcement

The ideological motivations behind terrorist behaviors in the United States are exceptionally diverse, constantly evolving, often overlapping, and often difficult to assess. Clearly articulated intentions are the exception and not the rule. As such, law enforcement’s response to violent extremism in the United States should be based on empirical assessments of the relationships between ideology, risk and protective factors, and radicalization.

Sub-Ideologies of Far-Right Extremists in the U.S., 1948–2021 (N=1678)

The PIRUS data also capture the sub-ideological affiliations of U.S. extremists, showing both distinct and overlapping views within the far-right and far-left movements.



Source: PIRUS, 2023

Note: Chart reflects the percent of far-right extremists in PIRUS who are associated with specific sub-ideologies. Individual extremists may be coded for up to three sub-ideologies and thus the total percent of cases does not equal 100.

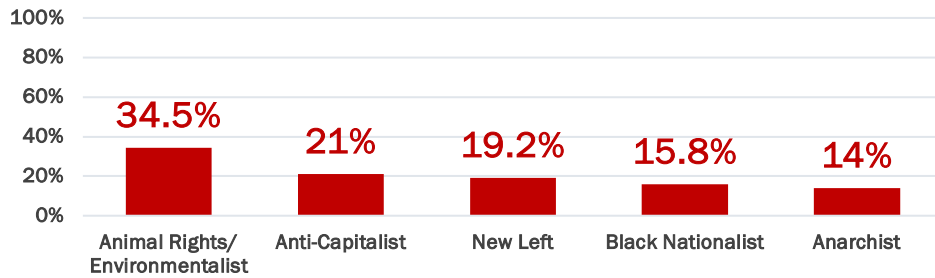
Among far-right extremists, the majority (63.5 percent) demonstrate some expression of white supremacism, a view that people of European descent (typically Christians and especially men) are inherently superior to others and should therefore dominate social, political, and cultural institutions.

Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views are typically integrated into White supremacists’ racialized definitions of religion, ethnicity, and nationality. However, some far-right extremists are animated directly in opposition to people who are or are perceived to be immigrants or are of the Islamic faith. Approximately 10 percent of all far-right extremists in the dataset were motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim views.

Nearly 55 percent of the far-right extremists in the PIRUS database are or were members of the Sovereign Citizen movement, anti-government militias, and/or they expressed anti-government views. While some anti-government extremists also subscribed to racist, nativist, and anti-Semitic views, others were motivated by a belief that the federal government lacks legitimate governing authority and therefore they worked to actively disrupt the enforcement of tax, land, traffic, and weapons laws.

³ N refers to the number of individuals included in the data.

Sub-Ideologies of Far-Left Extremists in the U.S., 1948–2021 (N=535)



Source: PIRUS, 2023

Note: Chart reflects the percent of far-left extremists in PIRUS who are associated with specific sub-ideologies. Individual extremists may be coded for up to three sub-ideologies and thus the total percent of cases does not equal 100.

Traditionally, far-left ideologies in the U.S. have been oriented around an opposition to capitalism, as well to as perceived racial, gender, and other inequalities.

Animal Rights and/or Environmentalist

Beginning in the 1980s, far-left extremists were increasingly motivated by animal rights and/or environmental concerns. Animal rights and extremist environmentalists comprise the largest far-left group in PIRUS (nearly 35 percent).

Anarchist

Anarchist movements, which generally argue that state power is oppressive and advocate for voluntary, collective social arrangements, make up 14 percent of total far-left cases in the PIRUS data. However, in 2021, the number of anarchists in the data grew to 52 percent of all far-left cases for the year.

Black Nationalists and “New Left”

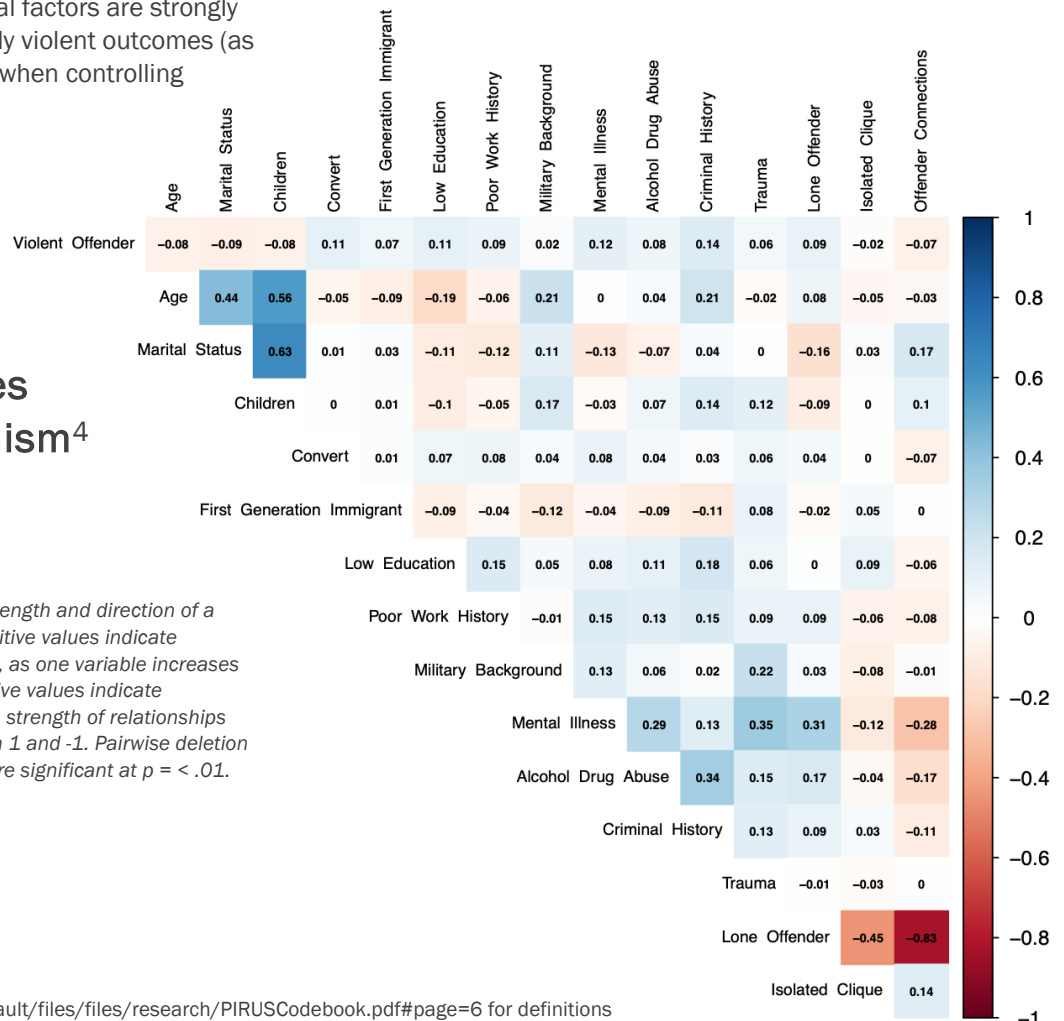
Beginning in the 1960s and through the 1980s, Black nationalists and “new left” movements dominated the far left. Some members of these groups advocated for violence and other illegal activities to advance specific political agendas, including opposition to the Vietnam War and support for Black separatism.

INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

According to the PIRUS data, several factors are strongly associated with violent or potentially violent outcomes (as opposed to non-violent criminality) when controlling for ideology, as detailed below:

Correlation Matrix: Individual Attributes and Violent Extremism⁴

Correlation coefficients measure the strength and direction of a relationship between two variables. Positive values indicate relationships in the same direction (e.g., as one variable increases in value so does the other), while negative values indicate relationships in opposite directions. The strength of relationships increases as their coefficients approach 1 and -1. Pairwise deletion used for missing values. Colored cells are significant at $p < .01$.



⁴ See <https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/research/PIRUSCodebook.pdf#page=6> for definitions

- Certain protective factors can help prevent radicalization to violence. Specifically, individuals who are older, married, have children, and have stable employment histories are significantly less likely to plan, prepare for, or engage in acts of extremist violence.
- Certain factors can increase the risk that an individual will radicalize to violence. For example, individuals who have engaged in pre-radicalization crime; have poor work histories or low educational achievements; show evidence of mental illness, substance abuse, or trauma; and act alone are more likely to engage in extremist violence.
- Military experience does not appear to be significantly related to violent extremism in either direction.
- There are notable clustering effects when it comes to the individual attributes of U.S. extremists. For example, there are strong positive correlations between mental illness, substance abuse, and trauma.

ABOUT THE 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, or ideologically motivated association with a foreign or domestic extremist organization from 1948 to 2021. The PIRUS dataset was coded using entirely open-source material, including newspaper articles, websites (e.g., government, terrorist group, watchdog groups, research institutes, personal information finder sites), secondary datasets, peer-reviewed academic articles, journalistic accounts including books and documentaries, court records, police reports, witness transcribed interviews, psychological evaluations/reports, and information credited to the individual being researched (verified personal websites, autobiographies, social media accounts). PIRUS contains dozens of variables containing information on a wide range of characteristics, including the individuals' criminal activity and/or violent plots, their relationship with their affiliated extremist group(s), adherence to ideological milieus, factors relevant to their radicalization process, demographics, background, and personal histories. The dataset is not limited to a single ideological category, and includes individuals representing far-right, far-left, Islamist, and single-issue ideologies.

PROJECT TEAM

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ABOUT START

START ►► 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 or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.

ABOUT SLATT

The State and Local Anti-Terrorism Training (SLATT) Program enables partnerships between law enforcement and criminal justice practitioners and the communities they serve by providing no-cost training and resources to state, local, tribal, territorial (SLTT), and federal law enforcement organizations, who serve as the front line of defense against acts of terrorism, targeted violence, and hate crimes. Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, the program uses strategic partnerships with federal, SLTT, and academic partners, to develop and deliver role-based training to ethically identify, investigate, prevent, and respond to acts of terrorism, targeted violence, and hate crimes.

Visit the [Home page](#) to learn more about the SLATT Program, find training opportunities, or request training through the “Contact Us” page. Access to secure SLATT resources may be obtained through the Regional Information Sharing Systems (RISS) or the Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal (LEEP) logon credentials, or by selecting “New Account” on the slatt.org website: [SLATT Website Registration Form](#).



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