

First comprehensive report examines Americans recruited by ISIS

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A new study offers the first comprehensive review of Americans who have been recruited by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) based on legal records and social media research conducted by the George Washington University's Program on Extremism. The report, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," examined social media accounts and legal documents of nearly 400 Americans who sympathize with ISIS.

"The phenomenon of Americans joining jihadist groups is not new, but the size of the ISIS-related radicalization and mobilization is unprecedented," said Lorenzo Vidino, director of the GW's Program on Extremism.

The study provides insights into the sympathizers in the legal system:

- Their average age is 26.
- More than 50 percent traveled or attempted to travel abroad.
- Authorities have made arrests in 21 states.
- 40 percent converted to Islam.
- 14 percent are female.

The report examined more than 7,000 pages of [legal documents](#) related to the 71 individuals charged with ISIS-related activities in the U.S. It found that the profiles of individuals involved in ISIS-related activities in the U.S. differ widely in race, age, social class, education and family background. Their motivations are equally diverse. The report says there have been active investigations in all 50 states, and U.S. law enforcement officials have made arrests in 21 states. It notes the highest number of ISIS recruits were charged in New York and Minnesota.

"Other than size, diversity is the other main characteristic of this phenomenon. We have seen cases in big cities and rural towns. The individuals involved range from hardened militants to teenage girls, petty

criminals and college students," Dr. Vidino said. "While some seek to join the self-declared caliphate in ISIS-controlled territory, others plan attacks within the U.S. It's a growing and disturbing phenomenon."

The Program on Extremism monitored nearly 300 Twitter accounts of U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers during the six-month study. This activity showed how [social media](#) plays a crucial role in the radicalization and, at times, mobilization of U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers.

"ISIS and its supporters are adept at using social media to radicalize and recruit Americans," said Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the GW's Program on Extremism. "A small number of Americans have wholeheartedly embraced their new-found ISIS support system online. The bar for Americans to join these terrorist organizations has been lowered, allowing a level of connectivity and interaction with recruiters and propagandists unheard of just a few years ago."

The Program on Extremism will publish some of the legal documents used to compile the report on its website. This will be one of the largest online collections of ISIS-related legal documents on American cases.

The paper concludes with policy recommendations, including increased resources devoted to countering [violent extremism](#), a framework for targeted interventions with radicalized individuals and legal guidance for people interested in sharing messages countering ISIS propaganda.

The report was made public at an event on Tuesday. Those attending the launch included Michael Downing, commanding officer of the Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau at the Los Angeles Police Department, and Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, former coordinator of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications at the U.S. Department of State, who offered their commentary on the report and its value to the law enforcement community.

More information: ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa.
cchs.gwu.edu/isis-in-america

Provided by George Washington University

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