

Gang members, domestic extremists vastly different, study says

May 18 2017

Domestic extremists tend to be much older, better educated, more affluent, more religious, and are more likely to be white than street gang members, according to a sweeping new University of Colorado Boulder study that systematically compares the groups for the first time.

The study, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and published today in the journal *Justice Quarterly*, also found that contrary to popular belief, U.S. [gang members](#) seldom go on to become radicalized and commit acts of terrorism.

The findings come as the Trump administration has named the large U.S. street [gang](#) MS 13 "one of the gravest threats to American public safety," and ideologically motivated extremism remains a national concern. The authors hope the paper, and related studies, will be used to help inform policies to counter both domestic terrorism and gang participation.

"Both criminal gangs, like MS-13, and domestic extremist groups, like neo-Nazis, pose great risks for crime and violence in the United States," said lead author David Pyrooz, an assistant professor of sociology. "This study gives us a much better statistical portrait of what such groups look like in relation to each other."

For the study, researchers compared data from 1,473 political extremists in the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset with 705 gang members from the National Longitudinal Survey

of Youth (NLSR) dataset.

PIRUS includes information, taken from interviews and media accounts, about members of violent extremist groups or terrorist organizations, and individuals who committed crimes motivated by far-right, far-left, Islamist, or other ideologies.

"Criminologists have been studying gangs for years, whereas the study of domestic extremists is relatively recent," explained co-author Gary LaFree, director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland.

"There has been some hope that if the processes by which individuals get into gangs resemble how they get into terrorist organizations, we might be able to use what we know from countering gang participation to counter participation in terrorism."

But the study suggests there are fewer links than suspected.

Only 82 domestic extremists - less than 6 percent - had gang ties. "This suggests gangs are not breeding grounds for extremism as previously thought," said Pyrooz.

On average, members of [extremist](#) groups are 34 years old; gang members are 19.

While females constitute nearly one-third of gangs, 90 percent of extremists are male. Eighty percent of domestic extremists are white, while fewer than half of gang members are. And just 1.2 percent of extremists have no religious affiliation, while 24 percent of gang members are not religious.

In all, the groups showed similarities in only 10 out of 27 measures.

"Overall, these preliminary findings suggest that, on an individual level, policies and programs designed to prevent and intervene in gang membership might not translate very well to domestic extremism," said Pyrooz. "The jury is still out for [group](#)- and community-level approaches."

That said, the researchers did find a few compelling commonalities that draw people to both types of groups, including strong attachments to like-minded peers and poor employment history.

For studies to come, they're conducting in-person interviews with gang members to compare their life histories with those of domestic extremists.

"We want to better understand how and why members from each of these groups enter and leave them, and provide this basic research to people out in the trenches dealing with these issues," Pyrooz said.

More information: "Cut from the same cloth? A comparative study of domestic extremists and gang members in the United States." *Justice Quarterly* (2017).

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

Citation: Gang members, domestic extremists vastly different, study says (2017, May 18)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2017-05-gang-members-domestic-extremists-vastly.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.