

Study of Google search histories reveals relationship between anti-Muslim and pro-ISIS sentiment in U.S.

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A trio of researchers from Duke University and the University of California has found that Google search data can offer insights into the

relationship between anti-Muslim and pro-ISIS sentiment in the U.S. In their paper published on the open access site *Science Advances*, Christopher Bail, Friedolin Merhout and Peng Ding discuss their study and what they found.

In the modern age, as travel and technology have improved, [global terrorism](#) has become a major threat. Because of that, those in charge of protecting people from terrorism have instituted policies and defense mechanisms. Sometimes, the researchers note, those policies involve targeting groups for special investigation. It is no secret that Muslims are the most highly targeted group because of the connection between Islam and groups such as the Taliban and ISIS. But, the researchers suggest, targeting groups in countries such as the U.S. might be causing home-grown [radicalization](#) to occur.

To learn more about radicalization of Muslim extremists in the U.S., the researchers accessed publicly available data from Google [search](#) engine queries. Queries, they noted, can be done looking for phrases such as "I hate Muslims" or "How do I join ISIS?" Data from the searches was then cross-checked with data provided by the U.S. Census, allowing the researchers to see where those searches were coming from at the community level.

The researchers found a common theme—in low income communities where there were a lot of anti-Muslim searches, there were also a lot of searches by people looking for more information about radical Islamic groups. Such communities, the [researchers](#) further noted, tended to be homogeneous in nature, mostly white, with few people of color. People from the Middle East, they point out, stand out in such communities. This finding, they claim, suggests that anti-Muslim activities such as discrimination and being targeted by government officials might actually be pushing some of those targeted people toward becoming extremists. They suggest that if the goal is to slow or stop radicalization of people

living in the U.S., another approach might be needed. They also point out that evidence from other studies has shown that assimilation tends to lead to reduced radicalization.

More information: Christopher A. Bail et al. Using Internet search data to examine the relationship between anti-Muslim and pro-ISIS sentiment in U.S. counties, *Science Advances* (2018). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aao5948](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aao5948)

Abstract

Recent terrorist attacks by first- and second-generation immigrants in the United States and Europe indicate that radicalization may result from the failure of ethnic integration—or the rise of intergroup prejudice in communities where "home-grown" extremists are raised. Yet, these community-level drivers are notoriously difficult to study because public opinion surveys provide biased measures of both prejudice and radicalization. We examine the relationship between anti-Muslim and pro-ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) Internet searches in 3099 U.S. counties between 2014 and 2016 using instrumental variable models that control for various community-level factors associated with radicalization. We find that anti-Muslim searches are strongly associated with pro-ISIS searches—particularly in communities with high levels of poverty and ethnic homogeneity. Although more research is needed to verify the causal nature of this relationship, this finding suggests that minority groups may be more susceptible to radicalization if they experience discrimination in settings where they are isolated and therefore highly visible—or in communities where they compete with majority groups for limited financial resources. We evaluate the validity of our findings using several other data sources and discuss the implications of our findings for the study of terrorism and intergroup relations, as well as immigration and counterterrorism policies.

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