

Radicalization to extremist ideologies is often triggered by negative life events

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People who radicalize to extremist ideologies often are triggered by negative life events or exposure to propaganda, and those who escape from extreme groups frequently are aided by an individual or group that

intervenes to help them reject the philosophy, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

Expanding access to [mental health care](#), creating opportunities for exposure to diverse cultural groups and media literacy education all are important strategies that may aid the battle against extremism, according to researchers. However, harsh law enforcement actions often are unproductive in changing people's extremist beliefs.

The RAND study describes personal accounts based on interviews with more than two dozen former white supremacists, Islamic extremists and their [family members](#) about what leads people to join extremist groups and, at least in some cases, leave these groups and their radical ideologies.

"Terrorism and ideologically-inspired violence represent persistent and serious threats to the security of the United States," said Ryan Andrew Brown, the study's lead author and a senior social scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "By better understanding the pathways individuals take to radicalization, we can improve our prevention and deradicalization strategies."

The study is one of the first public reports to incorporate the experiences of white supremacists, Islamic extremists and their family members to look for common factors and signs along the pathway to radicalization.

Events such as the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol underscore a growing threat to America's national security posed by homegrown terrorism and ideologically inspired violence. Domestic attacks have maintained a steady and growing pace in recent years, foreshadowing recent events.

The RAND study is based on interviews about 32 people who became

radicalized—24 white supremacists and 8 Islamic extremists. Those interviewed included 24 former extremists, 10 family members and two friends. To recruit study participants, the team worked with Parents for Peace and Beyond Barriers, two organizations that work with former members of radical extremist organizations and family members who have assisted with deradicalization efforts.

The study provides findings across four areas: background characteristics of radical extremists, pathways to radicalization, deradicalizing and leaving organizations, and participant perspectives on mitigation strategies.

The RAND interviews highlight several factors that may contribute to individuals becoming radicalized, including facing financial instability, mental health challenges such as trauma and PTSD, and social factors such as victimization and marginalization.

In more than half of the cases, a "re-orienting" event was described that prompted an individual to reconsider previously accepted views and embrace extremist ideologies. These events included a gun possession charge, rejection by the military, a friend's suicide and an extended period of unemployment.

In a majority of cases, individuals described consuming propaganda during radicalization, especially online materials, but also music and books.

In seven cases (4 white supremacist, 3 Islamic extremist), recruitment involved top-down action by recruiters from radical organizations. In 18 cases (15 white supremacist, 3 Islamic extremist), recruitment involved "bottom-up" entry in which individuals radicalize on their own and then sought membership in extremist organizations.

"It may be difficult to observe noticeable changes in individuals until they are radicalized and those changes often are a surprise to their family," Brown said. "It is only after the radicalization takes place that family members and friends may understand what has happened."

Individuals in the RAND study said they also benefited socially while participating in extremist groups, most notably finding friends and developing a sense of camaraderie and friendship that was previously missing in their lives. Some noted a new sense of power.

The most commonly mentioned factor for exiting a group was a sense of disillusionment and burnout. Hypocrisy or other negative behaviors by group members were often cited as reasons for these feelings.

Individuals or groups helped 22 of the individuals in the RAND sample to exit extremist groups, with such interventions most often conducted intentionally. The interventions included diverse cultural and demographic exposures, providing emotional support, and providing pathways to financial and/or domestic stability.

In half of those cases, the intervention was orchestrated and conducted by an institution, including religious groups, law enforcement, and secular nonprofits. Twenty-two of the 32 cases also described processes of self-driven exit from extremism, in which former extremists sought their own paths out of groups and ideologies.

A majority of the study participants also indicated that they experienced interventions that had failed, most often efforts that had been initiated by family members. Punitive interventions by law enforcement also often led to paradoxical effects of increased extremism.

"Our work suggests that the punitive approach should be used sparingly because it seldom ends radicalization and frequently has negative

consequences for [community members](#)," Brown said.

The RAND study provides recommendations that community organizations and researchers should pursue in the future to strengthen both practice and understanding of what works.

Those recommendations include expanding community based mental health services in areas at risk for radicalization and exploring whether interventions based on an addiction treatment model can help deter radicalization.

Community organizations also should consider ways to expand exposure to diverse populations, help at-risk families recognize and react to signs of extremism, and improve ways to present deradicalization messages at the right time and place.

Researchers should work to better identify geographic and demographic hot spots for radicalization, develop educational and outreach efforts to help recognize and address the signs of [radicalization](#), and explore social network approaches to deradicalization.

More information: The report, "Violent Extremism in America: Interviews With Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization," is available at www.rand.org

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