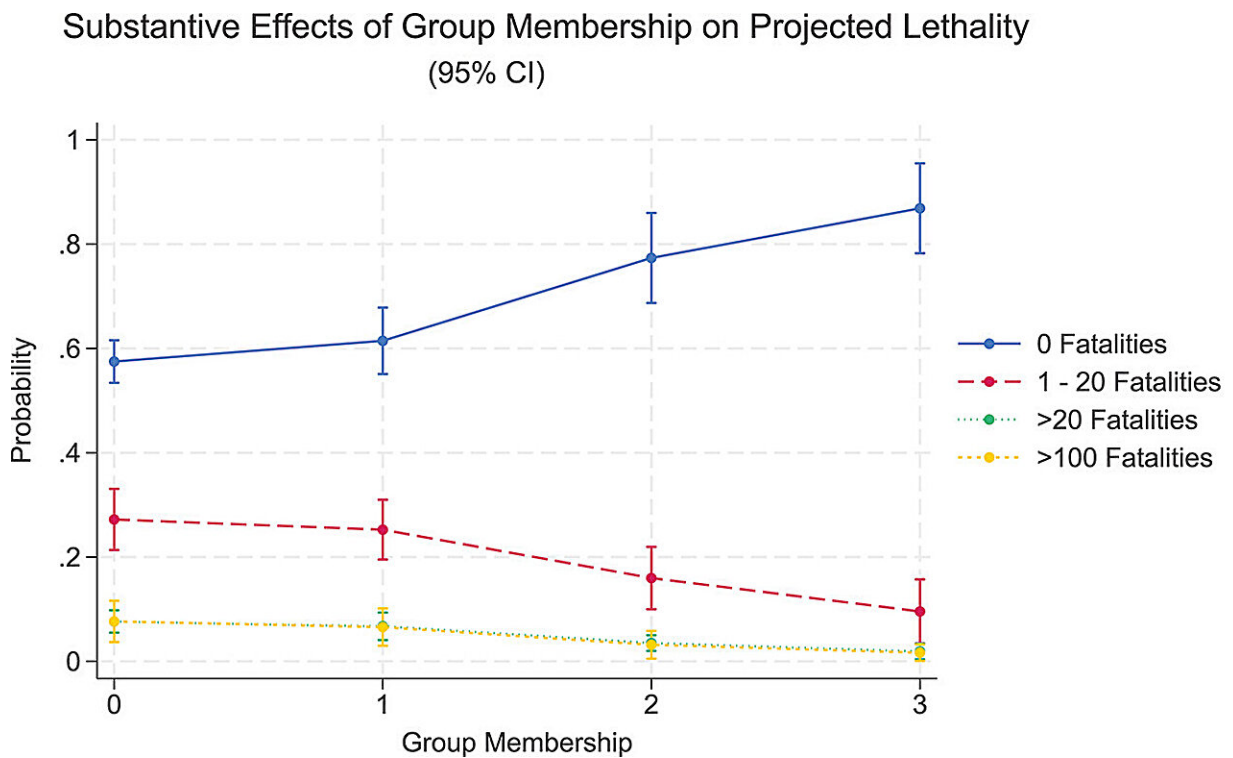


Analysis shows lone actors more likely to commit terrorist acts than US extremist groups

April 18 2024, by Josh McAuliffe



Substantive effects of group membership on projected lethality (95% CI).

Credit: *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (2024). DOI:

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Extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Proud Boys have long

been an ugly undercurrent of American culture. But despite these groups' hateful rhetoric, their ranks have largely refrained from committing violent acts over the past three decades, according to research conducted by Andrew Vitek, associate teaching professor of political science and director of the Department of Political Science's counterterrorism option at Penn State.

Using the University of Maryland's Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, Vitek analyzed a pool of 1,064 individuals found guilty of ideologically motivated crimes between 1990 and 2017.

He found that those who were involved in formal organizations were significantly less likely to commit a terrorist act because the groups have a vested interest in keeping their membership out of legal trouble. He [published](#) the study findings in the journal *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*.

The study draws a distinction between acts of extreme violence, or what Vitek calls indiscriminate violence, and other forms of violence that may not bring the same amount of attention from law enforcement.

"We tend to fixate on events like Jan. 6, 2021, but that's not indicative of what domestic terrorism in this country looks like," Vitek said. "It looks like the Buffalo grocery store shooting. It looks like the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. It looks like lone actors with automatic weapons attacking soft targets in mass shooting events.

"The article adds to what researchers on violent extremism have been saying for a long time—these movements aren't encapsulated within specific groups," Vitek added. "If you're trying to understand the vectors and pathways of violent radicalization, it's not enough to look at [hate groups](#) or formal organizations that are advocating hate. These

movements are highly decentralized and not dependent on a particular organization."

Through PIRUS, a cataloging of individuals in the U.S. convicted of ideologically motivated crimes, Vitek broke down the types of crimes committed—everything from planned [terror attacks](#) to drunken brawls to violent rhetoric—and examined the organizational affiliations of the perpetrators.

From there, he looked at the organizations in the context of law enforcement responses and research highlighting the strategic shift within the white power movement, including the concept of leaderless resistance, where the legal and paramilitary wings of an extremist group are kept separate. The concept came from law enforcement's extensive targeting of extremist organizations during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"During this period, many of these groups were infiltrated, a number of their key leaders were either arrested or killed, and there were numerous shootouts and standoffs with the FBI," Vitek said.

"The general consensus that these groups formed was that to avoid being targeted by law enforcement, the visible elements of the organization needed to be completely compartmentalized from any kind of violent activity—because violent activity brings the feds. If one of the members starts messing around, that's when the feds start looking at you and the organization becomes exposed in ways that could threaten its entire existence."

Of course, Vitek noted, the groups continued to engage in violent rhetoric. And thanks to the internet, there became less of a need for those with extremist views to join formal organizations.

"You don't need to attend a Klan meeting to be exposed to white power propaganda—you just need to be on the right websites," he said.

The findings show that those who committed [hate crimes](#) during the study period were more likely to be lone actors, or those working within unofficial small groups of extremists, as was the case with Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

Vitek also cited Dylan Roof, the mass shooter who killed nine African Americans at Charleston, South Carolina's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015. In his manifesto, Roof said literature published by an extremist group played a role in his radicalization.

"That group gave very clear public statements—'Hey, this guy is not a member of our organization. All we did was tell him the truth about Black on white crime,'" Vitek said. "Putting that propaganda out there is chum in the water for these lone actors."

Many [extremist groups](#) avoid publicity, while others are what Vitek calls "semi-public facing," like the Oath Keepers militia, which, like the Proud Boys, had several of its members charged and convicted of seditious conspiracy for their role in the Jan. 6 mob attack on the U.S. Capitol Building.

If anything, Vitek said, events like Jan. 6 and the 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" white nationalist rally have re-emphasized the need for caution among public-facing extremist groups.

"Combating [violent extremism](#) is going to come down to research that's being done on tools of counter-radicalization as well as a lot more digital and media literacy," Vitek said.

More information: Andrew Vitek, Keeping up appearances: US domestic extremist organizations and the effects of membership on domestic terrorism perpetrators, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/17467586.2024.2315411](https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2024.2315411)

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