

# Military veterans say extremism was preceded by negative service experiences

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Interviews with military veterans who expressed support for extremist groups or related beliefs on a prior survey show that many experienced a significant negative event during their military service, according to a

new RAND report titled "Veteran Narratives of Support for Extremist Groups and Beliefs: Results from Interviews with Members of a Nationally Representative Survey of the U.S. Veteran Community."

Researchers found that these veterans also often faced difficulties transitioning to civilian life and sometimes shared their beliefs with a wider social network.

RAND researchers conducted 21 interviews with veterans who had indicated support for one or more extremist groups or related beliefs to understand possible drivers and patterns of extremism among veterans. That support was expressed as a part of a nationally representative survey of nearly 1,000 veterans in the U.S.

Roughly three-quarters of those interviewed reported a negative or traumatic life event while in the military, ranging from interpersonal conflict (often leading to discharge) to combat trauma, as well as physical and sexual abuse.

"The main take-home lesson of our study is the tremendous heterogeneity underlying what may seem like cut and dried answers when they are compiled as a part of a national survey," said Ryan Andrew Brown, the study's lead author and a senior social scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization.

"It's important that there be future research that looks to tease out the relative importance of negative experiences in the military, transition stress and other potential risk factors that may help send veterans on the path to radicalization," Brown said.

Concern that the veteran community is at increased risk of radicalization to violent extremism increased since reports that a significant proportion of the people who attacked the U.S. Capital on Jan. 6, 2021, were

currently or had been affiliated with the U.S. military.

Furthermore, research by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism suggests that veterans increasingly are among those known to have committed political, economic, social or religiously motivated criminal acts.

RAND researchers in late 2022 conducted the first nationally representative survey of veterans' views about extremism and extremist groups. The survey found that veterans expressed support for extremist groups and extremist ideals at rates similar to or somewhat lower than the U.S. public in general.

To better understand those motivations, researchers invited a group of survey participants who espoused support for extremist ideologies to take part in structured video interviews. The study is the first to use systematic qualitative methods to examine the potential pathways to extremism among veterans.

Participants offered a wide mix of responses when asked whether they supported extremist groups or causes that they had affirmed during the original survey.

Virtually all participants who had supported the Proud Boys now denied such support, while nearly all the participants who affirmed support during the survey for the Great Replacement theory believed that the Democratic Party was attempting to purchase votes through lax immigration policies.

Many participants affirmed support for [political violence](#), though the responses suggested none were intent on acting on such support in the near future.

"While the number of participants who were willing to use the language of violence to discuss political change may be a harbinger of future strife, none seemed poised to act on violence in the near term," said Todd C. Helmus, a study co-author and a RAND senior behavioral scientist.

"All of this provides a caution to any straightforward interpretation of [survey](#) data on extremist beliefs and support for [extremist groups](#), whether with veterans or other groups. Survey responses alone may not be a predictor of future actions."

Twelve respondents described difficulties with the transition from military to [civilian life](#), including missing the pace and camaraderie of military life, having no resources, and not knowing where to turn, struggling with PTSD or depression, and even experiencing homelessness and becoming imprisoned.

In addition, 12 of those interviewed provided narratives of life experiences that helped push them toward more extreme political viewpoints, including specific events in U.S. or international politics and history, experiences during deployment or work settings, and life disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**More information:** Veteran Narratives of Support for Extremist Groups and Beliefs: Results from Interviews with Members of a Nationally Representative Survey of the U.S. Veteran Community, [DOI: 10.7249/RRA1071-4](#)

Provided by RAND Corporation

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