

Radicalism in America

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From the election of Donald Trump to the January 6th insurrection, radicalism has become an increasing salient issue in the United States. So much so that since the insurrection, both sides of the aisle in Congress have proposed [new bills](#) to establish a commission to investigate domestic extremism. Then on March 2, 2021, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated that violent domestic terrorism has been '[metastasizing](#)' in America and the trend is unlikely to change. And just five days prior to writing this sentence, President Biden allocated [\\$111 million dollars to combat domestic terrorism](#) in his first budget proposal. At this point in history, there is no doubt that attention to radicalism in America has reached a peak only preceded by the aftermath of 9/11.

Throughout history, stories of radicalism in the media have helped shape the American identity through the use of othering. For example, during the Cold War, the media paid careful attention to Marxists, and made sure that the world knew that Americans were completely against communism. Rather, we were the antithesis, the gold standard of democracy and capitalism. By media portrayals of radicalized individuals, we can be sure that we aren't one of 'them'. But how accurate are these media portrayals of radicalism in America?



Ahead of Pro-Trump Rally, KKK Member... nbcnews.com



Study: Threat of Muslim-American ...



Boston Marathon bomber's appeal set f... bostonherald.com



I was wrong. Period': QAnon Shaman ... news10.com



Oregon militia at wildlife refuge ... theguardian.com

Our study is driven by our assumptions regarding American radicalism and seeks to investigate the reality of these stereotypes within the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset from 1980 to 2018. Specifically, we will be focusing on the socioeconomic status, demographics of radicalized individuals. We will pose various hypotheses, justified through the media's major stories of radicalism as well as mainstream social and global narratives. We will then compare our assumptions to the PIRUS data. Before this however, we will review our datasets as well as our data cleansing strategies and sanity checks.

Primary Dataset

[Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States \(PIRUS\)](#) contains over 2,200 radicalized individuals from 1948 to 2018 in the United States. It consists of 140 variables, which describe each individual's plot, group nature, radicalization, demographics, socioeconomic status, relationships, and personal history. The dataset was last updated in October 2018. PIRUS defines radicalization as,

“the psychological, emotional, and behavioral processes by which an individual adopts an ideology that promotes the use of violence for the attainment of political, economic, religious, or social goals.”

This dataset was published by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), which works in tandem with the University of Maryland and the Department of Homeland Security. PIRUS is one of the first databases created for the purposes of studying domestic extremism in the United States.

To compile the dataset, researchers used open-sources and START research products. At a high level, the criteria for radicalized individuals are people within the US who have either committed ideologically motivated violent/non-violent acts, or people who have joined or associated with designated terrorist or extremist organizations. It is also important to note that this is not a comprehensive set of all individuals who have been radicalized in the US.

We find two main weaknesses in the PIRUS dataset. The first is that the data may reflect news reporting trends due to its use of open sources. Because the goal of our study is to evaluate the accuracy of the media’s portrayal of radicalism in the United States, we will have to trust in the sampling techniques used to create PIRUS. Additionally, our knowledge of radicalism in America is by no means exhaustive, we expect that our beliefs about radicalized individuals are based on a select number of stories. Therefore, we believe that PIRUS is appropriate for our research despite this limitation.

Additionally, PIRUS only records radicalism up to October 2018. We are disappointed that our data does not include more recent information as we expect a steep increase in radicalism over the past couple years. However, we do not believe this hinders our research in any way. In fact, it excites us to be able to revisit this analysis and compare it to more recent data in the future.

Secondary Dataset

In addition to PIRUS, we also utilized the dataset leveraged in [Losing Our Minds: Brain Drain across the United States - US Congress Joint Economic Committee](#). This secondary dataset contains information on the gross brain drain, gross brain gain, and net brain drain for all states in the US from 1940 - 2017. Only data from 1980 - 2017 was analyzed.

Sanity Checks

To ensure accuracy of the data, we performed a sanity check analysis on our main variables. Please note that for the sake of space we have limited this discussion to only a few checks. For a full list, please see the [sanity checks notebook](#). Additionally, given the sensitive nature of this data and the methods used to collect it, missing data is not uncommon, particularly around private information that is difficult to obtain publicly.

Our main variables are as follows:

- 'date_exposure': date at which the individual's activity/plot first came to public attention
- 'broad_ethnicity': the race/ethnicity of the individual
- 'extent_plot': the extent the violent plot progressed
- 'role_group': individual's role in the group at the time of public exposure

- 'ideological_sub_category1': the ideological categories that best encapsulate the individual's radical beliefs.
- 'age': age of the individual at the date of exposure
- 'marital_status': marital status at the date of exposure
- 'gender': individual's gender
- 'education': the highest level of education completed by the date of exposure
- 'employment_status': employment status at the time of exposure
- 'work_history': work history prior to their date of exposure
- plot location: the location where the first publicly known plot/activity was centered
- habitation location: the location where the individual spent most of their time in the US

The ideological subcategory contains 1,866 entries once the data is filtered by exposure date to be since 1980. One takeaway, Male Supremacists and the Irish Republican Army have less than 10 observations. We will need to keep this in mind when slicing data by ideological subcategory.

White supremacist/KKK/Neo-Nazi	529
Islamist	510
Anti-government/Sovereign Citizens movement	196
Animal rights/Environmentalist	149
Anti-abortion	128
Militia/gun rights	78
Other	69
Xenophobic/Anti-immigrant	60
Puerto Rican independence/Puerto Rican nationalist	30
Anti-gay	28
Black Nationalist/Black Separatist	25
Anarchist	19
Jewish Defense League	13
Christian Identity	12
Anti-capitalist/Communist/anti-Imperialist	12
New Left (primarily 1960's student movements/anti-Vietnam War)	11
Irish Republican Army	2
Male supremacist	1
Name: ideological_sub_category1, dtype: int64	

Figure 1: [Ideological Sub Category Value Counts](#)

While reviewing missing values, we noticed that the socioeconomic fields, education, employment status, and work history, were about 50% empty. If there was a required statistical component to this project, we would have worked to fill these fields using one of the four statistical techniques the PIRUS researchers recommended. However, given time constraints we decided it was best to drop those missing rows rather than extrapolate beyond the data.

subject_id	0
date_exposure	0
plot_target1	21
extent_plot	13
violent	0
role_group	129
ideological_sub_category1	0
radical_behaviors	77
marital_status	692
gender	0
education	1098
employment_status	972
work_history	1042
alcohol_drug	0
loc_plot1_lat	258
loc_plot1_long	258
loc_habit1_lat	747
loc_habit1_long	747
year	0
age	58
broad_ethnicity	146
dtype: int64	

Figure 2: [Number of Missing Values from Main Variables](#)

Data Cleansing

The following tasks were performed to prepare the PIRUS dataset for analysis.

1. Converted date/time for dates in PIRUS CSV
2. Converted all columns names into dataframe friendly names
3. Merged plot location coordinates and habitation location coordinates
4. Dropped all columns that were more than 50% empty
5. Removed years not between 1980 and 2019
6. Replaced all -99's with NaNs as per PIRUS recommendation
7. Created dummy variables to remove locations outside of the US

Analysis

Overall Trends in American Radicalism

An increase in stories similar to the January 6th insurrection and the deadly [events](#) in [Charlottesville, VA](#) in 2017 suggests an increase in radicalism. Furthermore, with the election of Donald Trump, it seems that [radicalization has become increasingly normalized](#) in the United States over the past five years. We expect that radicalization has increased over the years.

Radicalization has increased from 1980 to 2018

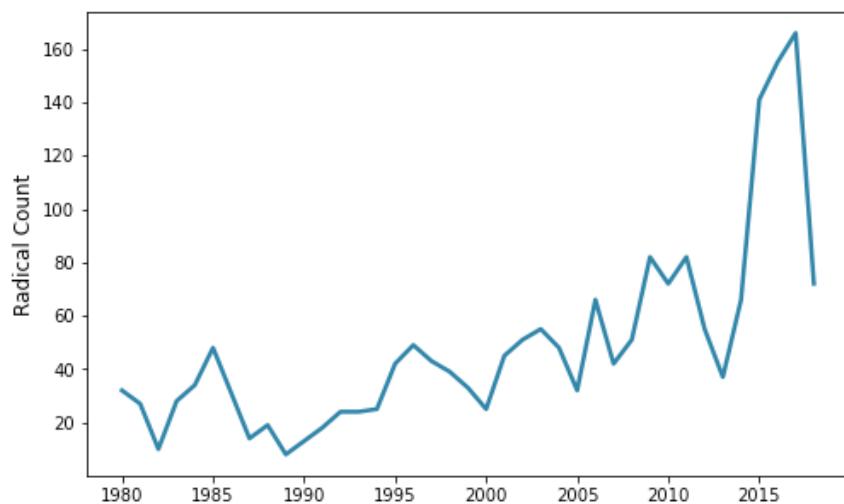


Figure 3: [*Trends in American Radicalism*](#)

Findings

Our hypothesis seems to be correct. Instances of radicalization have increased since 1980. We see a steep rise beginning in 2014 and peaking in 2017. We have a number of hypotheses to explain this phenomenon First of all, 2016 was the election of Donald Trump, and it is likely that his campaigning inspired radicalization. Secondly, from 2014-2017 ISIS saw a major rise in membership, which likely spread to the United States. Finally, we believe the overall rise could be attributed to the invention of the internet in 1983. With the internet, it became a lot easier to identify radicals and for radicals to become radicalized. One key example would be the rise of Qanon, which is largely attributed to [Facebook's algorithm](#).

Gender & American Radicalism

Social narratives suggest that men are more prone to violence than women. Furthermore, the media seems to portray men as radicalized more frequently than women. **We anticipate that there will be more male radicals than female.**

Increasing radicalization from 1980 to 2018 by Gender

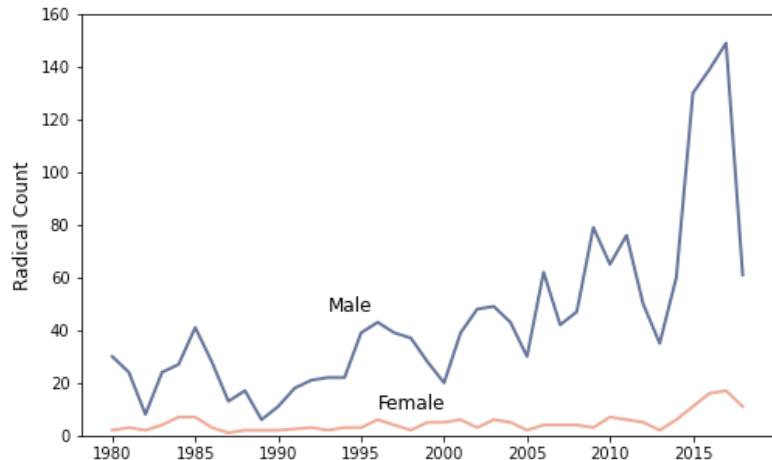


Figure 4: [Trends in American Radicalism By Gender](#)

Findings

It appears that men are radicalized far more frequently than females. However, it seems that trends for both genders increased and decreased proportionally to each other. We also hypothesize that our data may include more men because of bias in policing and news reporting.

Radical Ideology & American Radicalism

We have found that radicalism looks different between the two American political parties. Both sides seem to agree that Islamists pose a great threat to the United States. However, the two party's perception of left-wing and right-wing extremism are polar opposite. In left leaning media, we have been bombarded by videos and images from the January 6th insurrection. It is very clear that they believe that conservative radicalism is the more pressing threat. On the other hand, right-wing media characterizes BLM and the democrat party as whole as radicalized. Our image of radicalism has been predominantly informed by the liberal media, such as the New York Times, NPR, PBS, AP and CNN. **Therefore, we expect that far right extremists and Islamists will have more instances of radicalization than left-wing radicals.**

The Number of Far Right Incidents Surpassed Islamists Incidents in 2014

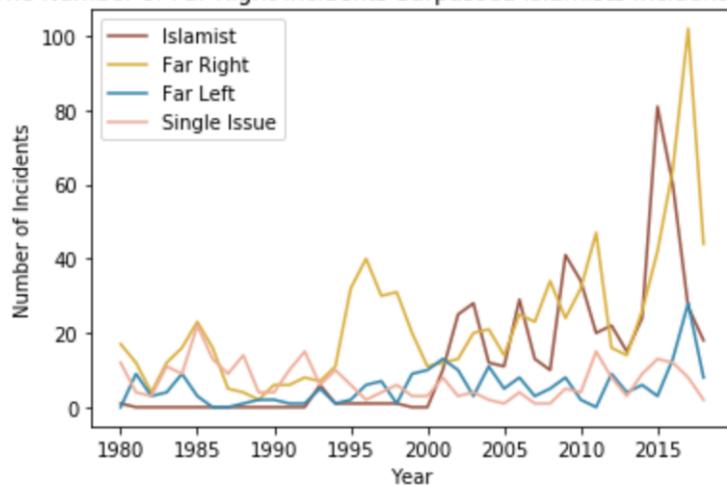


Figure 5: *Ideological Trends in American Radicalism*

Findings

It appears that our hypothesis was correct. Far Right and Islamist radicalization have been increasing together from 2000 to 2015. Conservative radicalism seems to be the most dominant ideology throughout the past forty years. On the other hand left-wing extremism seems to be reliably low throughout time.

Gender and Radical Ideology

To take the previous analysis further, we wanted to evaluate radical ideology by gender. **We expect that Islamists and White Supremacists will be the most common ideology among radicalized men and women.**

White Supremacy is the #1 Radical Ideology for Men

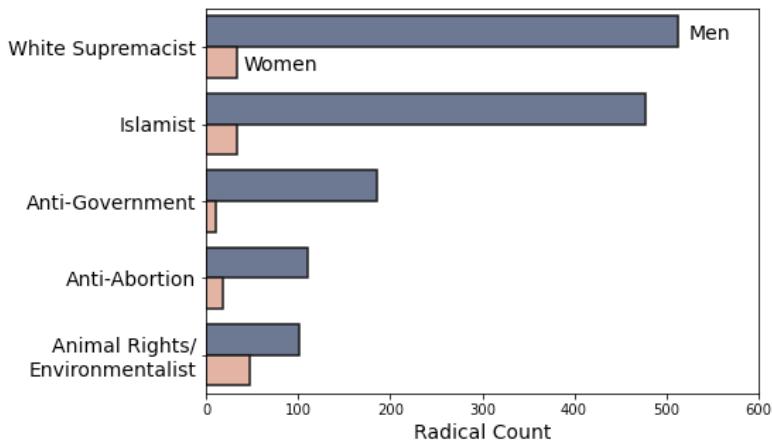


Figure 6: *Ideological Trends in American Radicalism by Gender*

Findings

It appears that the PIRUS dataset supports our hypothesis that Islamists and White Supremacy are two of the most popular ideologies for radicalized men in America. The top ideology for

women seems to be Animal Rights/Environmentalist. It also seems that Anti-Abortion is an ideology more popular amongst male than female radicals.

Gender, Radical Ideology & Age

To go even further, we wanted to explore the distribution of ages across genders in the top seven radical ideologies. Our general assumption is that radicals tend to be younger. We believe this because we imagine radicals would be relatively spry and would have less to lose than non-radicals. We expect that young people make up the majority of radicals in the top ideologies.

Age Distributions Vary Among the Top 7 Radical Ideologies

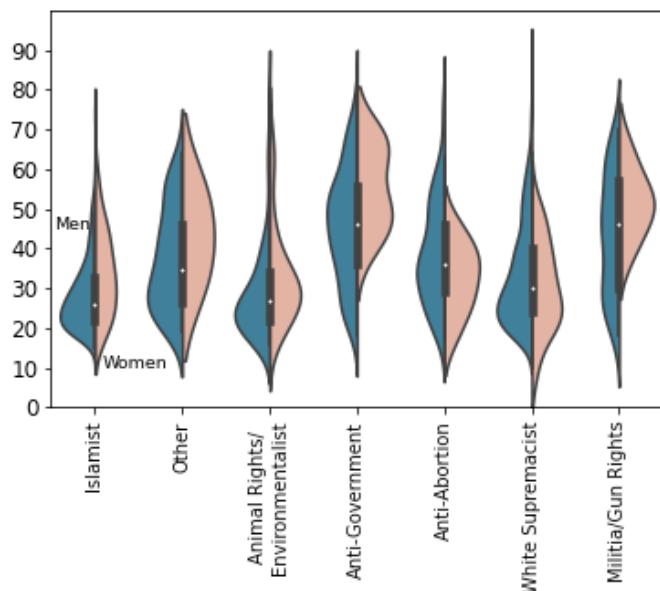


Figure 7: [*Ideological Trends in American Radicalism by Gender & Age*](#)

Findings

It appears that the age distributions are far more varied than anticipated. It seems that our hypothesis holds true for both male and female Animal Rights/Environmentalists, male Islamists, and male White Supremacists. Older women are more common within Anti-Government and Militia/Gun Rights ideologies. Anti-Abortion radicals seem to be mostly people between the ages of 20-40, the typical age range for new parents.

Gender, Relationship Status & American Radicalism

Again, we believe that it is more likely for a person who has less to lose to be radicalized. This would be due to a lack of community connection, contributing to a lack of empathy towards anticipated victims. **We expect that single people will be the most prone to radicalization.**

Single Men are most susceptible to radicalization

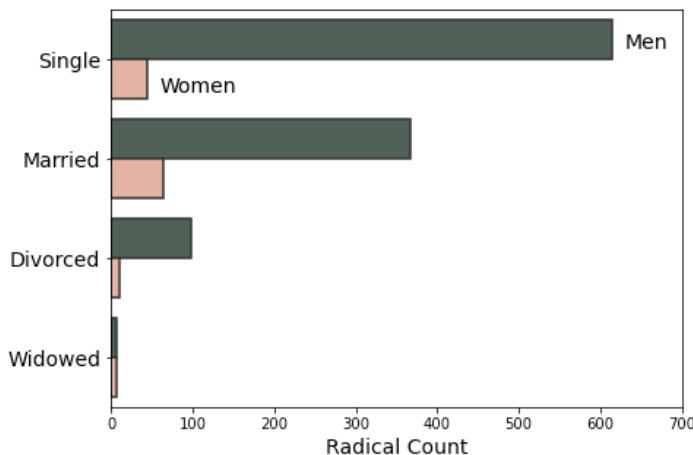


Figure 8: [Trends in American Radicalism by Gender & Relationship Status](#)

Findings

It seems that our hypothesis held true for men in the PIRUS data. However, the second most prone to radicalization is married men. Furthermore, married women are the most likely to be radicalized out of all radicalized women. This suggests that maybe radicalized women are influenced to radicalize by their husbands. These findings disprove our hypothesis that single people are more vulnerable to radicalization.

Racial Diversity in Terrorist Groups & Their Plot Outcomes

The prevailing literature on diversity in the workplace suggests that [diverse groups produce better outcomes](#). Therefore, we are curious if this logic holds true with terrorist organizations.

We expect that ethnically diverse terrorist groups enact more successful terrorist plots than single ethnicity groups.

Radicals in Single Ethnicity Terrorist Organizations Are More Likely To Carry Out Successful Violent Plots

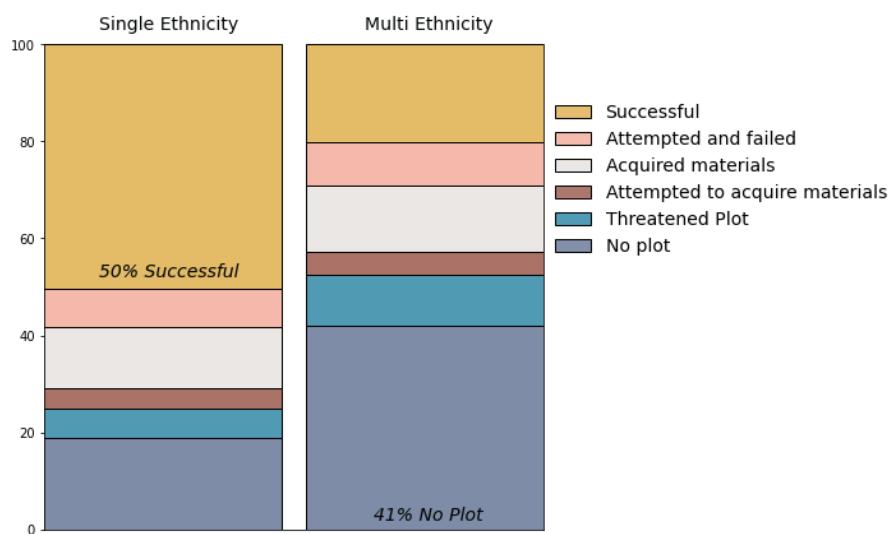


Figure 9: [Racial Diversity in Radical Terrorist Groups and Plot Outcomes](#)

Findings

Our hypothesis was incorrect. It seems that the violent plots of single ethnicity groups have a 55% success rate, far higher than the 18% success rate for multi-ethnicity groups. This finding suggests that the more racially homogenous an organization, the more likely they are to successfully carry out their violent agenda.

Socioeconomic Impact on Radical Habitation and Plot Locations

Since the 1980s, highly skilled American workers have been leaving their hometowns to go to a very specific set of US cities with the best and most job opportunities. This is American brain drain, and it has caused the geographic majority of America to be left out of economic gains. Because of this mass migration, we have witnessed increasing political, cultural and economic division in the United States. This division can be easily visualized by simply looking at [a map of the last presidential election results](#). We hypothesize that the [tension between predominantly democrat and republican states](#) may have an impact on radicalization. Right wing media has a tendency to frame [liberal states, like California and New York to be the villains](#) in their overall narrative. Therefore, we expect that radicals may travel from conservative states to target more liberal and economically influential areas. **We expect more violent interstate radical plots than violent intrastate plots.**

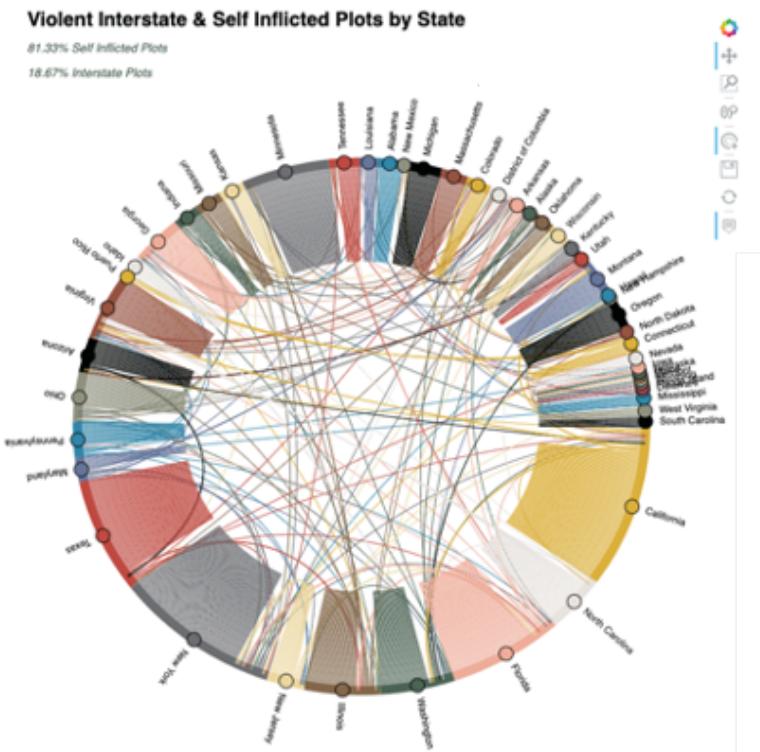


Figure 10: [Violent Interstate and Intrastate Radical Plots by State](#)

We highly recommend downloading this Jupyter Notebook to get the full interactive experience. Additionally, we have added a function in the third cell of the notebook, where you may filter PIRUS data by terrorist organization and generate a chord diagram to view the inter and intra state flows for that particular organization. We believe there are many insights yet to gain from this diagram, but due to our time constraint, we will leave this analysis to the better minds with more time on their hands.

Findings

Clearly our hypothesis was incorrect. Had it been correct, we should have seen an almost completely webbed circle. The thick blocks of color around the edges of the circle show us that the majority of plots are self-directed. It seems that radicals have a tendency to target their home state. In fact this graph shows us that 81% of violent plots in PIRUS happened in the radical's home state. Furthermore, there is a tight clustering of states, such as Delaware, Nebraska and Iowa, on the right side of the image. States in this cluster are more peaceful than states with a larger share of the circle, like California, New York and Texas.

To take this analysis further, we decided to compare radical habitations and radical plot locations by city. This approach is more in line with brain drain literature which states that brain drain is most apparent on district and county levels.



Figure 11: [Radical Habitations and Radical Plot Locations by City](#)

Findings

Looking at these two plots, we can see that output is virtually identical. It appears that radical individuals typically choose targets near their residence and around major metropolitan areas.

Finally, we took a closer look at brain drain and radicalization in 2017, the peak of instances of radicalization in PIRUS.

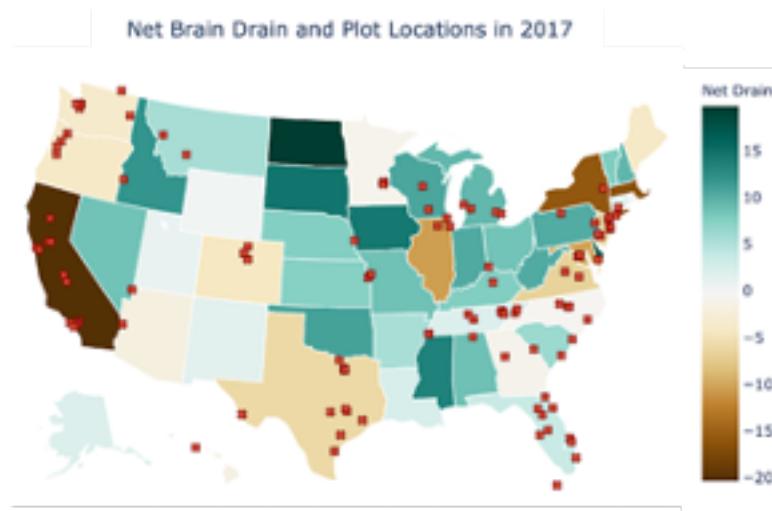


Figure 12: [2017 Plot Locations and Brain Drain](#)

Findings

Evidence of brain drain motivating radical plot locations is tenuous at best. Rather, we found that plot targets are typically in major metropolitan areas and radicalized individuals typically live near their plot target. Because of these results, we began questioning the relationship between education, socioeconomic status and radicalism.

Education by Ideological Groups

Radicalized individuals are typically portrayed in the media as uneducated and lacking critical thinking skills which makes them susceptible to radical beliefs. [Brookings](#) even recommends reforming education policies to combat extremism. Therefore, we hypothesized that **radicalized individuals are typically uneducated, especially along ideological lines.**

	education	counts	percentage
0	Did not attempt high school	10	1.270648
1	Some High school	114	14.485388
2	High school diploma	197	25.031766
3	Some College	194	24.650572
4	College degree	157	19.949174
5	Some Vocational school	8	1.016518
6	Vocational school degree	12	1.524778
7	Some Master's school	10	1.270648
8	Master's degree	40	5.082592
9	Some Doctoral/Professional degree	12	1.524778
10	Doctoral/Professional degree	33	4.193139

Figure 13: [*Radicals by Education Level Table*](#)

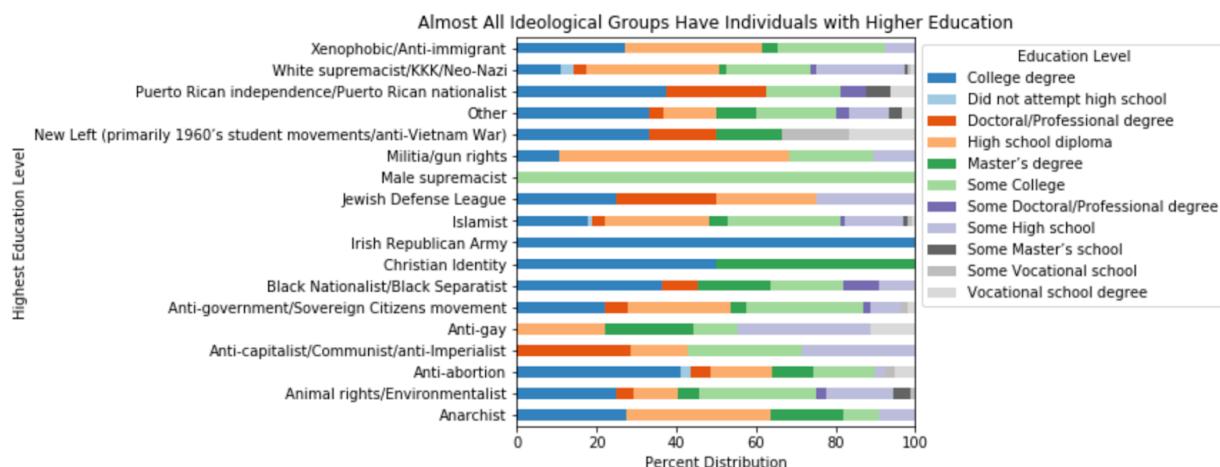


Figure 14: [*Radicals by Education Level*](#)

Findings

Contrary to our hypothesis, we identified that 34% of individuals have a college degree or higher in our dataset. If we include individuals with ‘some college’ nearly 60% of individuals have experienced some level of higher education. Also, upon further research, almost all ideological groups have individuals with some level of higher education from college degrees, master’s degrees, professional degrees, and doctoral degrees.

Radical Behaviors and Education

Individuals with higher education are stereotypically labeled as productive members of society. Individuals who would go on to support the economy, government, and society. Also, because they are intellectual, we hypothesize **radicalized individuals with higher education are less likely to participate in operational actions/plots intending to result in casualties**.

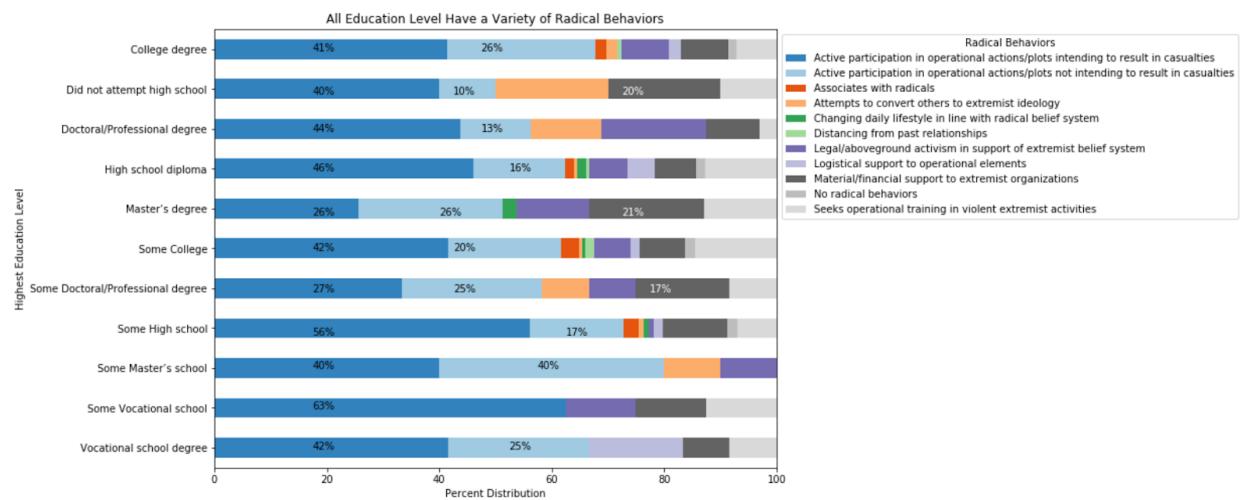


Figure 15: [Radicals Behaviors and Education Levels](#)

Findings

Contrary to our hypothesis, education level does not influence the maximum extent an individual will be radicalized. In fact, individuals from all education levels actively participate in operations or plots intending to result in casualties which is the maximum extent of radicalization.

Additionally, a substantial number of radicalized individuals with higher education are actively participating in operational actions and plots not intending to result in casualties which is the second maximum extent of radicalization. Lastly, radicalized individuals with Master’s degree, some Doctoral/Professional degree, and who did not attempt high school are providing material/financial support to extremist organizations.

Role in Group by Education

Due to their higher level of education, we hypothesize that **most leaders of radicalized groups have a high education level**.

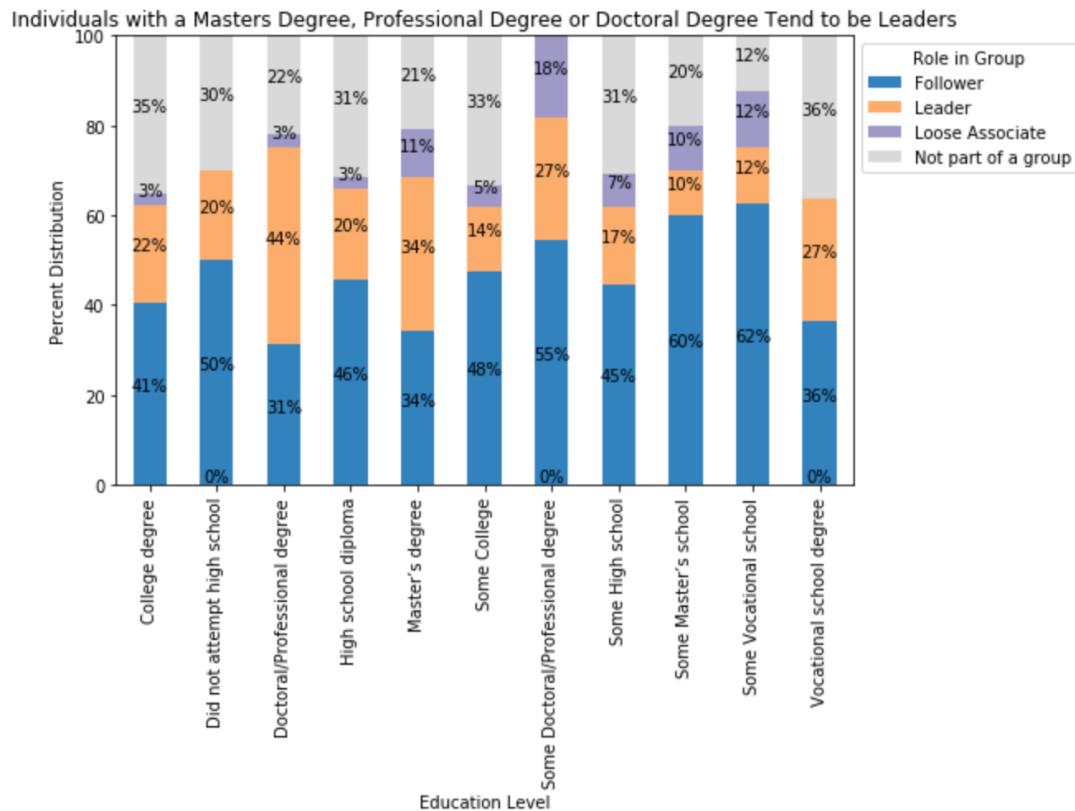


Figure 16: [Role in Terrorist Organization by Education Level](#)

Findings

Our hypothesis is partially correct. Radicalized individuals with a Master's degree, Professional degree or Doctoral degree are more likely to be leaders in the group. However, leaders come from every education level. For example, the percentage of leaders with a college degree and a high school diploma are both in the low 20's (column 1 and column 4).

Radical Work History by Year

Historically, radicalism has been discussed as a political movement that happens outside of the US. So, most research comes from analysis conducted in Middle Eastern countries. [Brookings](#) did research in 8 separate Middle Eastern countries about the relationship between unemployment and education. From this research, we hypothesize **radicalized individuals are individuals who have experienced long-term unemployment.**

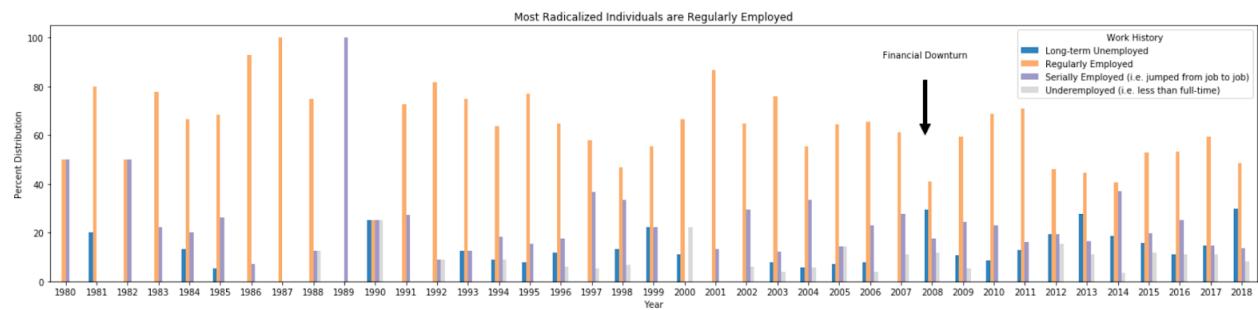


Figure 17: [Radical Work History by Year](#)

Findings

Our hypothesis is incorrect. Since the 1980's radicalized individuals in the US have typically been regularly employed before the date of exposure, the moment their radicalism became public knowledge. One exception is 2008, when the 'long-term unemployed' is at its highest compared to 'regularly employed'. This is likely due to the 2008 Financial Downturn.

Radical Employment Status by Year

Unlike work history, employment status is an individual's employment condition at the time their radicalism becomes public knowledge. If most radicalized individuals are regularly employed as we can see above, we suggest that sudden unemployment is a triggering response and therefore, we hypothesize **radicalized individuals are usually unemployed and looking for work on the date of exposure**.

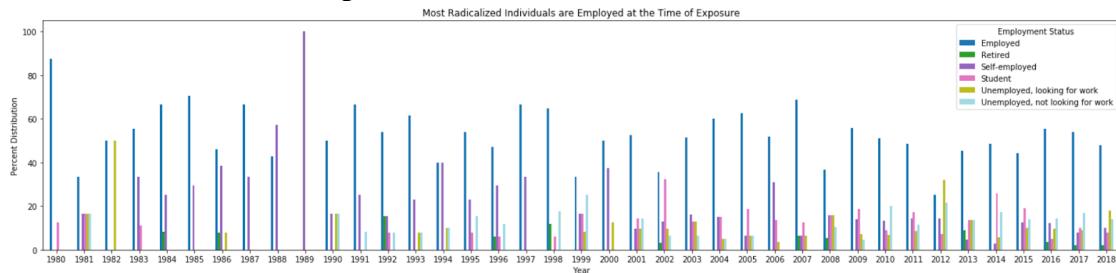


Figure 18: [Radical Employment Status by Year](#)

Findings

Contrary to our hypothesis, most radicalized individuals are employed during the moment of exposure. Except for 2012, where the greatest percentage of individuals were unemployed and looking for work. We are unsure as to why 2012's employment status composition is drastically different from all other years and would recommend conducting more analysis outside the confines of PIRUS.

Violent Behaviors by Employment Status

According to [USAID](#), individuals who are unemployed are the most frustrated and more likely to become radicalized. Therefore we hypothesize that these **radicalized individuals that have been unemployed for a long time are also more likely to enact violent behaviors**.

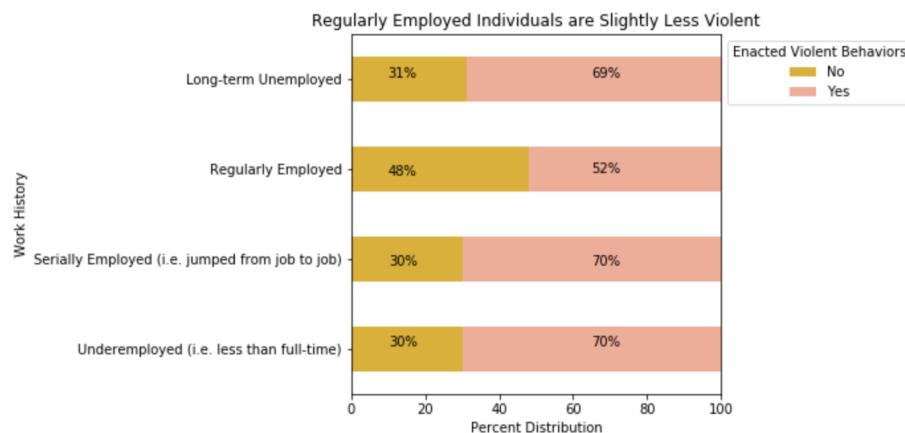


Figure 19: [Violent Radical Behaviors by Employment Status](#)

Findings

We found that individuals that did not have a regular employment work history were all substantially more violent.

Conclusion

We have only begun to scratch the surface of investigating the disparities between major media stories, mainstream social and global narratives, and the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset. It seems that there may be many misconceptions regarding radicalism in America. We expected to see mostly young, uneducated and unemployed people radicalized. Rather, we found that age range varies greatly amongst radicals and they are far more educated and financially stable than we imagined. Furthermore, our results show us potential sources and trends in radicalization that may be neglected due to stereotypes. For example, married people seem to be influencing each other to radicalize and educated individuals seem to be the main benefactors of radical plots. Without careful study of radicalized individuals, we may not be able to fully understand the breadth of radicalization and address it effectively. For example, our results show us that the traditional ‘tonic’ used to quell radicalism in other countries, access to higher education and jobs, will not stem the rate of radicalization in the United States. Clearly, there is still much more to learn.

Despite our findings, we remain hopeful. We are pleased that additional funding will be provided to institutions studying this phenomenon, as we see it as a necessary step to effectively mitigate increasing radicalization. We are also excited that more data will be collected to better understand radicalism in America and are interested to see if our findings align with the new data.

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