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Young guns: Understanding a new generation of extremist radicalization in the United States

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About this paper

This paper provides an overview of how a shifting landscape of youth radicalization is impacting a new generation, key trends in extremist mobilization and the broad range of extremist actors currently targeting young people, with a particular focus on the United States.

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Introduction

In the United States and beyond, the landscape of extremist ideologies (which goes beyond the narrow security challenges from terrorism) has been in constant evolution over the past two decades. Driving this shift is a new, younger generation of extremists gaining inspiration from a broad range of ideologies. These younger extremists are part of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) and they are challenging the prevailing orthodoxy of how we think about extremist radicalization, 'legacy' extremist organizations, and the relationship between online and offline influences. The clear lines that long demarcated what we tend to believe as oppositional extremist groups, such as Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists, are beginning to blur. A hybridized blend of extremisms is giving rise to an era of ideological fluidity, where young white supremacists venerate Islamic State tactics and doctrine, and young Salafi-jihadists leverage the aesthetics and language of a resurgent extreme right.

Hierarchical extremist organizations like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) that defined the post-9/11 era no longer represent the overarching violent extremism threats facing societies in the West. Increasingly, the extremist landscape has fragmented into an ideologically diverse array of groups, movements, subcultures and hateful belief systems all simultaneously playing off one another. Facilitating this fragmentation is the increasingly central role of digital communications in extremist strategies, with movements using a broad range of

mainstream and fringe digital platforms to organize, communicate, and plan in a decentralized fashion.

While the extreme right and Salafi-jihadism continue to pose significant threats, extremist and conspiratorial narratives are increasingly melding and metastasizing while infecting large swathes of populations online, resulting in a lack of clear demarcations of belief systems or ideologies. This 'hybridization' of extremism and increased ideological fluidity has significant implications for the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies.¹ In parallel, intra-extremist schisms are forming new, more virulent groups, that no longer abide by the hierarchical legacies of long-standing groups, contributing to the increased "balkanization" (fragmentation into smaller units) of extremist movements.

While there are internal dynamics within extremist groups that have shaped these trends, the internet and technology have hyper-charged them, and have emboldened a tech-savvy, ideologically fluid Generation Z. This generation is not only digitally native, it has also fundamentally altered the aesthetics and content that are used to support extremist groups. Extremists have long been early adopters of technology and have similarly exploited the fruits of the digital revolution.

In this paper, ISD will provide an overview of salient youth radicalization dynamics in the US and the key contemporary extremist movements recruiting among young Americans.

Understanding Extremist Radicalization

Before outlining the shifting extremist threat landscape, below we outline ISD's understanding of radicalization, the factors that drive it, whether people radicalize alone or in groups and what role social media plays in radicalization processes.

Violent radicalization can be understood as the process "through which an individual adopts an increasingly extremist set of beliefs and aspirations" that may or may not include the "willingness to condone, support, facilitate or use violence to further political, ideological, religious or other goals."²

However, beyond just violence, radicalization can also be understood as the process of embracing extremist belief systems. Extremism is understood by ISD to constitute the advocacy of a supremacist ideology, which posits the superiority and dominance of one identity-based in-group over all out-groups and advances a dehumanizing, othering mind-set incompatible with pluralism and universal human rights. This ideological supremacy can manifest through violence and the targeting of hate towards groups on the basis of their identity, as well as more gradualist social or political projects to undermine human rights, democratic institutions and civic culture. This absolute (rather than relative) understanding of extremism seeks to distinguish radicalization from simply describing the process of an individual adopting 'radical' or fringe views.³

In the literature on terrorism and violent extremism specifically, a frequent distinction is made between cognitive radicalization (adopting extremist beliefs) and behavioral radicalization (the process leading up to violent behavior).⁴ While these processes may occur in parallel, it should be noted that scholars have long argued that violence is not the pre-determined end goal of holding extremist beliefs.⁵

Radicalization research has demonstrated the complexity of this process, of which the outcome is dependent on multiple factors. Radicalization processes are naturally highly context-specific and dependent on personal experiences. Many scholars and analysts point to the importance of identity and belonging as key social concepts that help to understand why individuals – and young people in particular – radicalize.⁶

Adolescence is considered a period of identity development when young people explore who they are and where they belong in the world. At the same time, young people are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior and are over-represented among criminal offenders¹⁷ and drug users¹⁸. All these factors may create an opening for extremist groups and ideologies to help answer these questions.⁷ Research has shown that 639 of the 1,028 extremists active in the US between 2000 and 2019 were younger than 30 (including 24 that were 18 or under), demonstrating the susceptibility of young people to radicalization and the importance of early prevention.⁸

Factors which facilitate the adoption of extremist belief systems include identity processes, connections with extremists both on- and offline, dynamics within or between extremist groups, triggering events and political, economic and social grievances.⁹ Research suggests individual risk factors associated with the radicalization of both group-based and lone-actor¹⁰ terrorists (regardless of age) include a personal history with crime or violence, unemployment, lower socio-economic status, history of child abuse and social isolation.¹¹ While the relationship between mental health conditions and involvement in violent extremist activity is complex, research evidences that lone actor terrorists are more likely to have experienced mental health issues.¹² Additionally, data from the UK suggests that mental health conditions including depression and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are more common among extremist youth offenders.

Post-Organizational Dynamics: Lone Actors Versus Groups

The United States faces parallel threats of youth radicalization with structured groups playing a role through the deliberate targeting of young people, as well as individually driven radicalization which might involve little or no connection to formal extremist movements or groups.

In a bulletin from June 2022, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) wrote “that the primary threat of mass casualty violence in the United States stems from lone offenders and small groups motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances”, defining the US threat environment as “increasingly dynamic and complex”.¹³ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2021 similarly stated that the “greatest terrorism threat we face today is posed by lone offenders, often radicalized online”, referring to people inspired “by one or more violent extremist ideologies who, operating alone, support or engage in acts of unlawful violence in furtherance of that ideology or ideologies that may involve influence from a larger terrorist organization or a foreign actor.”¹⁴ In other words, the extremism landscape is becoming increasingly ‘post-organizational’, with considerable implications for how we understand, approach and respond to these changing threats.¹⁵

Data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the US (PIRUS) dataset, the largest database of open-source information on radicalized individuals in the United States, suggests that these trends apply to youth radicalization as well.¹⁶ The number of radicalized young people with no formal allegiances or ties to recognized extremist or terrorist groups has increased by 311% in the past 10 years alone as compared to the past 5 decades.¹⁷ In fact, more radicalized young people under the age of 30 in the United States have not been part of formal extremist or terrorist groups (54.1%) than those that have.¹⁸ Like the FBI, the DHS has raised concerns about the elevated threat of Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE), which involves individuals operating primarily in the US who seek to further political or social goals through violent means without inspiration or direction from a foreign entity.¹⁹ As “DVE attackers often radicalize independently by consuming violent extremist material online and mobilize without direction from a violent extremist organization,” prevention and intervention

strategies face new challenges in identifying individuals that may pose a threat.²⁰

However, this still does not account for the 45% of young people under 30 years old who were members of formal extremist or terrorist groups and continue to operate and recruit followers.²¹ Civil society groups have also flagged the continued relevance of centralized organizations. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) observed that “the number of white nationalist groups continues to decline after their numbers peaked at 155 in 2019, marking a movement away from sprawling membership organizations to highly centralized ones.”²²

The Role of Social Media

Since the late 2000’s, there has been increasing interest in studying the role of the internet and social media in facilitating radicalization processes. Between 2010 and 2020 (coinciding with the mass proliferation of major social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and since 2016, TikTok along with Gen-Z entering their teenage years), the PIRUS dataset shows a 413% rise in internet playing the primary role in the radicalization process for those under the age of 30 compared to the previous decade.²³ However, a recent study comparing violent Islamist perpetrators (including ones from the US) who were either radicalized online, offline, or some mixture of the two between 2014-2021, concluded those primarily radicalized offline present the greater threat of violence. While the role of online radicalization increased among young people, perpetrators who were largely radicalized offline were more likely to successfully carry out their attack plans.²⁴ At the same time, online radicalization affects much broader audiences and creates a permissive environment for extremist ideas to be normalized and pushed into mainstream public discourse. Additionally, radicalization should not only be viewed through the lens of violence. Radicalization can have a range of other impacts including personal isolation, societal polarization, proselytization, and non-violent forms of antisocial activity.

Online platforms provide opportunities for extremists to build community, disseminate propaganda, trade tactical material, orchestrate activism, and even announce and broadcast attacks. Similarly, these platforms offer a vector whereby curious or vulnerable young people can encounter extremist ideologies and communities, ultimately facilitating their radicalization.

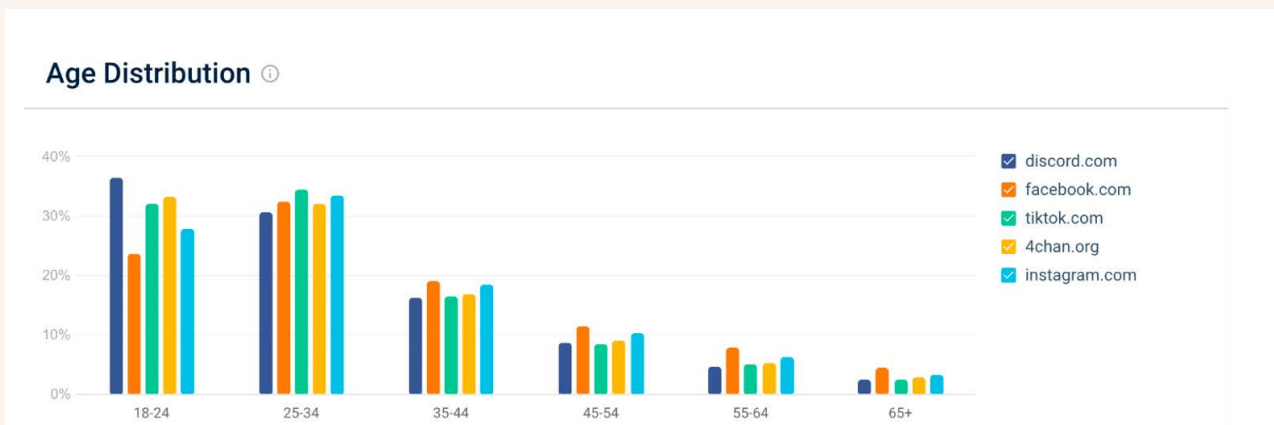
The extremist ecosystem online is multi-platform and multifaceted. While major social media platforms remain popular amongst extremists, a diverse ecosystem of alternative platforms has emerged in response to increased moderation efforts.²⁵ These fringe platforms, which have either been created specifically for extremist use, or have limited resources or desire to moderate content, are numerous. Although their user bases are often small, they represent a key resource capitalized on by extremist movements. These platforms fill different niches including livestreaming, hosting video content, communicating privately, building networks, and storing content banks of propaganda.²⁶

Extremist use of these platforms is opportunistic. They will frequently seize upon emerging platforms to try and reach a wider audience, with ISD analysis demonstrating how extremist influencers often use a multi-platform approach when broadcasting content to avoid moderation efforts and reach as large an audience as possible.²⁷

This is further compounded by the demographics of particular platforms – with 18-24 year-olds being more likely to use platforms like Discord, and less likely to use Facebook and Instagram than older groups.²⁹ Accordingly, youth specific counter-radicalization initiatives need to be shaped to match platforms with younger user bases.

One area which is of increasing interest to analysts is the role of gaming platforms in radicalization.³⁰ Although a wide range of demographics use these platforms, 76% of American youth are gamers.³¹ While analysis of extremism and gaming is in its infancy, initial analysis highlights a number of concerning trends relating to youth radicalization in games, and on communication platforms which are popular with gamers. On Roblox, a free online game which is primarily played by 16-year-old audiences and under,³² researchers found deliberate efforts by extremists to radicalize youth, though it is debated how widespread a phenomenon this is.³³ Similarly, an ISD analysis of white supremacist channels on Discord found that most of its users were minors, with an average age of 15.³⁴

Figure 1 Age distribution across social media platforms, drawing on data from Similar Web.



Contemporary Extremist Movements

The extremist threat landscape in the United States consists of a wide array of formal organizations, hate groups, loose networks and ideologies, but also overlaps with movements driven by conspiracy theories, anti-government sentiments and single-issue beliefs (e.g. Incels). In the process of youth radicalization in the United States, new communication platforms play a significant role in amplifying extremist content, facilitating the creation and maintenance of extremist networks and allowing extremist groups to recruit new followers.³⁵ It should be anticipated that extremists will attempt to use opportunities provided by future developments in technology such as the Metaverse, deepfakes, and artificial intelligence to promote their message. The following sections outline a range of contemporary extremist movements in the US, and their relationship with youth radicalization.

Far-Right Extremism ³⁶

White Supremacy and White Nationalism

White supremacists believe in the superiority of whites over non-whites and advocate that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. White nationalists may similarly hold supremacist beliefs but often advocate for white separatism instead of a society in which whites dominate over non-whites.

Based on these beliefs, some white supremacists and white nationalists advocate for violence against, or even the ethnic cleansing of non-white people. Whilst white supremacy and nationalism have strong historic roots in the US, analysts have recently noted an increased mainstreaming (or 're-mainstreaming') of these beliefs into US social life.³⁷

The US white supremacist movement is comprised of formal extremist organizations and loose networks of individuals. The number of active hate groups or established white supremacist organizations such as the KKK is in decline, though some have argued that this is a sign of a greater centralization of groups.³⁸

Modern white nationalist groups include outfits that often predominantly recruit among young Americans

and maintain a strong online presence. Tactics of choice for advancing their political cause diverge between these groups incorporating non-violent propagandizing and street violence. At the most extreme end, terrorist neo-Nazi groups like The Base and Atomwaffen Division organize paramilitary trainings, plot attacks, and seek to inspire their members and adherents to commit lethal violence.³⁹

From 2016 onwards, online alt-right⁴⁰ communities that were primarily active on message board websites like 4chan and 8kun employed memes and dark humor to push ethnonationalist and hateful ideas to the mainstream.⁴¹ This young generation of white supremacists incorporated contemporary internet culture into their messaging, producing extremist propaganda that was relevant to younger audiences. Tactically, this messaging often repackaged racist, hateful, and white supremacist ideas into more subtle, covert, digestible, humorous, and pseudo-intellectual forms of content.⁴² This 'chan culture' has developed as an online community of young people that centers around posting content that promotes white supremacy, misogyny, antisemitism, and racism. Chan culture has been referenced in real-world terrorist attacks, including those in Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Buffalo.⁴³

Accelerationism

First coined by far-left anti-capitalist groups, 'accelerationism' is a term used by white supremacists and other extremist groups to refer to their desire to use violent attacks to bring a racial civil war that will lead to the collapse of modern societal structures and political systems.⁴⁴ While accelerationism is an international phenomenon, accelerationist and youth-focused terrorist groups like the Atomwaffen Division and The Base were founded in the United States.⁴⁵

White nationalist worldviews and antisemitic conspiracy theories promoted within these extremist ecosystems formed primary sources of inspiration for multiple young Americans to commit mass terror attacks targeting people of color, immigrants, Jews, and Muslims.⁴⁶ This includes the Charleston shooting in 2015, the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue attack in Pittsburgh, the Poway synagogue shooting and El Paso Walmart shooting in 2019, and the May 2022 supermarket attack in Buffalo.

These attacks were all fueled by racist and antisemitic ideologies that were widely communicated in the toxic online environments in which the killers were immersed.

Similar attacks targeting Muslim and Jewish communities have been committed by extreme right accelerationists internationally. The 2019 attack in Christchurch, New Zealand (during which the perpetrator killed 51 worshippers at two Mosques)⁴⁷ was particularly influential: future attackers would often reference the attack, the ideas and humor expressed in the perpetrator's manifesto, or imitate the design of the livestream.⁴⁸

Interestingly, youth-focused accelerationist communities online heavily draw inspiration from the writings of US white supremacists from the 1980s, including James Mason and Louis Beam. For example, Mason's "Siege" writings (originally circulated as a newsletter, but later published as a book, which openly advocate for terrorism have become influential in inspiring young extreme right terrorist groups and lone attackers.⁴⁹ Beam's idea of 'leaderless resistance', calling on militant white supremacists to form smaller cells in order to avoid the impact of law enforcement crackdowns, has likewise triggered a renewed interest among a younger cohort of aspiring extreme right militants.⁵⁰

Anti-Government Extremism

For most extremist groups, opposition to the government is one element of their belief system, except for extremist movements that have formed the government, or groups whose activism is designed to preserve the status quo. Among these extremist groups opposed to their government, there is great diversity in terms of their specific ideology, ranging from the far right and far left to religious extremism. In the United States, however, there is a substantive field of research looking at and conceptualizing anti-government movements such as militias, sovereign citizens, and "prepper" communities as a distinct form of extremism. These movements do not just oppose specific government policies but believe that the government has been captured by a nefarious conspiracy, and has therefore lost all legitimacy; they consequently refuse to engage with the democratic system.⁵¹

Anti-government movements typically claim that the US government is an illegitimate and tyrannical force that infringes on personal freedoms and liberties.⁵² Examples of anti-government militias include the Proud Boys, Three Percenter groups, or Oath Keepers.⁵³ Similar narratives are also found among followers of the 'Sovereign Citizens', which comprises a highly heterogeneous anti-government ideology that originated in the United States. Adherents are united in their belief that the U.S. government illegitimately rules over them. They live under the assumption that by declaring themselves sovereign, they are not obliged to abide by government legislation.⁵⁴ Anti-government militias and groups played a key role in the January 6 Capitol riots inspired by a false narrative claiming that the 2020 elections were 'stolen' from former President Donald Trump.⁵⁵

While members of anti-government movements are typically older, youth involvement in militias does occur, and certain movements, such as the 'Boogaloo Bois'¹¹⁹, have adopted an internet-culture linked to ironic humor similar to that used by white supremacists. In total a third of those arrested in relation to the Jan 6 storming of the Capitol were younger than 35.⁵⁶ An analysis of 83 Proud Boys that committed these acts or were arrested, revealed that they were on average 35 years old at the time, with the youngest being 21.⁵⁷

Islamist Extremism/Salafi-Jihadism

In the wake of 9/11, the domestic threat arising from Islamist extremists became the primary focus for federal security, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies to combat. Often described as the key form of 'international terrorism,' it was also a phenomenon of 'homegrown' American extremism.⁵⁸ The state efforts to counter Islamist extremism since 9/11 have resulted in serious violations of civil liberties. These have included religious profiling of Muslims, authorization of large-scale surveillance of American citizens, the ability to indefinitely detain immigrants without trial and the use of torture in contravention of international law in military prison abroad.⁵⁹

From the late 2000s, American Salafi-jihadists⁶⁰ began to build out an increasingly effective machinery to propagate their ideas: the American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki became one of the most influential ideologues and digital propagandists for al-Qaeda. Through his blog, video sermons in English, and the Inspire magazine, al-Awlaki (who was living in Yemen after pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula before being killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011) aimed to make Salafi-jihadist ideas accessible to young Western followers online.⁶¹

The Salafi-jihadist threat continued to grow in the 2010s when IS began its violent expansion campaign. According to a UN estimate, the terrorist group inspired tens of thousands of individuals from across the globe – primarily young males – to join its ranks.⁶² According to a meta-analysis of 12 studies of Western foreign fighters for IS, their average age was 25.9 years, with female recruits being even younger. Although only three of the studies published data on average ages for females, they seem to have averaged between 21 and 23.7 years.⁶³ US citizens who traveled to join IS were slightly older, averaging 26.9 when they embarked on their journey.⁶⁴ The organization was successful in building out a sophisticated Western-oriented propaganda machinery to reach American audiences, reflecting the pivotal importance of the internet as a facilitator of extremist radicalization and recruitment. As of February 2022, at least 83 people traveled from the US to Syria and/or Iraq from 2011 onwards to join active jihadist groups, and three quarters of them joined IS. However, it should be noted that this is an extremely small number of recruits given the population of the US as well as compared to the number of recruits from many countries in the MENA region or even Western Europe.⁶⁵

Due to its reach and the accessibility of ISIS' digital content, the internet is highlighted as an increasingly important factor in the radicalization of foreign fighters. Specifically, the internet contributed to the radicalization of 83% of the individuals that attempted to travel abroad to join jihadist groups in 2015, compared to 27% in 2002.⁶⁶ It has also been argued that the internet has accelerated radicalization processes, thereby shortening the radicalization pathways. Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) shows that in 2002, the average radicalization duration for individuals was approximately 16 months. In contrast, the average duration was just

under 10 months for individuals that attempted to travel to join IS in 2015.⁶⁷

At the same time Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, became one of the key platforms for sharing IS propaganda and networking with fellow extremists.⁶⁸ Following a series of coordinated takedowns of jihadist networks on Telegram in late 2019 that reduced their presence on the platform, the jihadist ecosystem online fragmented to a range of other platforms, including Rocket chat, TamTam, Nandbox, and Hoop Messenger.⁶⁹

In addition to the issue of foreign fighters joining terrorist groups abroad, Salafi-jihadists have also targeted the United States. 'Homegrown' jihadist violence has resulted in the deaths of 107 Americans since 9/11, with some high-profile attacks being committed by attackers that pledged allegiance to IS, such as the Orlando night club shooter in 2016. One extremely influential piece of online content for IS-inspired attacks globally and in the US was a 2014 speech by the group's former spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in which he encouraged IS followers to kill Westerners in their home countries.⁷⁰

Today's violent threat deriving from Salafi-jihadism remains persistent, due to an extensive online network of IS and affiliated groups, which increasingly use evasion techniques to avoid moderation efforts and have seemingly reestablished a presence on mainstream social media platforms.⁷¹ Earlier ISD research demonstrated that 30% of the visitors of IS's largest known digital repository had US IP addresses, highlighting the prevalence and popularity of the group.⁷²

Recent ISD research has identified an emerging digital community of young Salafis called 'Islamogram' that merges Salafi ideas with the aesthetics, humor, memes, and visual culture commonly employed by youth-oriented extreme right movements. While 'Islamogram' is not an ideologically cohesive community, it is united by common enemies, especially liberal Muslims, feminists, secularists, atheists, and 'Zionists'. Although the young people who are part of this community do not always affiliate with formal extremist organizations some nevertheless express support for extremist groups such as Hamas, the Taliban, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and in some cases, the Islamic State.⁷³

Far-Left Extremism

The far left in the United States are mostly motivated by opposition to capitalism, Western imperialism,⁷⁴ and support for environmental causes⁷⁵ or animal rights, socialist or Marxist beliefs, anarchism or Black nationalism. Many of these causes and beliefs are of course not, in and of themselves, extremist as they do not promote a supremacist ideology or reject democracy. A distinction should therefore be made between left-wing radicalism and extremism,⁷⁶ where the latter groups are anti-democratic, and the former advocate fundamental political and economic changes without being anti-democratic per se. As causes such as environmentalism⁷⁷ and socialism⁷⁸ enjoy currency among young people in particular, it is important to further research whether and extremists to try to hijack these causes.

Additionally, the classification of Black nationalist organizations as extremist or left-wing is controversial, and in 2021, the SPLC decided to no longer list relevant groups as Black separatists, but rather as hate groups, especially in relation to antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ, misogynistic and xenophobic views.⁷⁹

In terms of violent extremism, the far left accounts for a relatively small number of fatal incidents. Between 2012 and 2021, 6% of the 443 registered extremist fatalities were linked to far-left ideologies, compared to respectively 75% and 20% of the murders linked to far right and Islamist beliefs, according to the Anti-Defamation League.⁸⁰ The fatalities related to far-left ideologies were all linked to Black nationalism which the ADL defined as left-wing extremist. Beyond this, the violent threat stemming from left-wing extremists is relatively small. Groups affiliated with far-left ideologies include Antifa groups, and environmental or animal issue groups like the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front.⁸¹

Beyond violent far-left actors, far-left extremists also attempt to influence broader public discourse. While there is no evidence they seek to overthrow democracy in the US, far-left extremists commonly support forces abroad that are opposed to human rights and democracy. There are various far-left alternative media outlets, such as The Grayzone or Breakthrough News,⁸² and organisations such as Party for Socialism and Liberation⁸³ or Workers

World Party⁸⁴ that will at times express sympathy toward authoritarian regimes perceived as hostile to the West and embrace conspiracy theories.⁸⁵

While these groups and outlets do not promote violence, their content and campaigns push pro-authoritarian positions towards mainstream audiences and undermine the credibility of human rights and democracy activists. The far-left media outlet The Grayzone is one of the key examples of this trend. Founded by journalist Max Blumenthal a month after a visit to Moscow, The Grayzone consistently takes a supposedly anti-imperialist position, regularly defending Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin and Venezuela's Maduro for their alleged resistance to U.S. hegemony⁸⁶ and denying the Uyghur genocide⁸⁷ as well as chemical gas attacks in Syria.⁸⁸ Blumenthal has also spoken at anti-lockdown and anti-vaxxer rallies.⁸⁹

Grey Area Threats

Violent Conspiracy Movements

The growing prominence of movements driven by a belief in conspiracy theories is a key characteristic of a changed extremist threat landscape, both in the US and internationally. The COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for the massive proliferation of conspiracy networks across international contexts. Anti-lockdown and vaccination protest movements driven by dis- and misinformation spread online connected a broad range of groups including anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, anti-government actors, and extremist movements.⁹⁰ While these movements were not youth-driven, research suggests that in many countries, including in the United States, young people were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about the pandemic, suggesting that they could be a susceptible audience to these movements.⁹¹ The relationship between conspiracy theory beliefs and violent action is complicated, and many adherents of these claims will disavow violence. However, there are a growing number of cases in which conspiracy theories seem to have inspired violent attacks. One of the main examples of such a violent conspiracy theory movement is QAnon.

Adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory believe that a network of liberal elites that is ruling the world is trafficking children to sexually abuse them and harvest “rejuvenation chemicals” from their bodies.⁹² The wide-ranging conspiracy theory was centered around claims that former President Trump had a secret plan in place to bring this group to justice. QAnon originated on the politically incorrect forum on 4chan in October 2017, when a user calling themselves Q claimed to have high-level security clearance and started posting a series of cryptic messages.⁹³

FBI listed QAnon and wider conspiracy theories as a domestic terror threat mid-2019.⁹⁴ Next to the 61 QAnon followers who were arrested in relation to the Capitol insurrection, 40 others have allegedly committed ideologically motivated crimes between 2016 and September 2021.⁹⁵ QAnon does not specifically focus on young people, however a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute suggests that 21% of QAnon believers are between the ages of 18 and 29 (which is broadly in line with the general population), suggesting that youth-centric intervention programming should be cognizant of this conspiracy theory.⁹⁶

It should be noted that even though QAnon has attracted the most attention in US context, other conspiracy movements have likewise inspired political and interpersonal violence, both in the US and abroad. This includes insurrectional violence (often centred around alleged election fraud conspiracies),⁹⁷ attacks on medical professionals,⁹⁸ kidnappings⁹⁹ and coup attempts.¹⁰⁰ In the social media age, youth can pick-and-choose different elements of conspiracy theories to form new hybrid narratives. It is therefore crucial to not reduce the threat from violent conspiracy movements to QAnon, or falsely conceptualize these loose movements as structured groups with a hierarchy and defined doctrines. Instead, researchers and policymakers need to look at the broader narratives and platform ecosystem through which potentially violence supporting conspiracy theories reach major audiences of young people online.

The ‘Manosphere’ and Incels

Another key facet of the current threat landscape is misogynistic violence. Online misogyny is as old as the internet and plays a considerable role in shaping offline

hatred and violence against women. In March 2022, the US Secret Service Threat Assessment Center published a report that raised concern about the increased threat of violent misogyny.¹⁰¹ While proponents of male supremacist ideologies are not inherently extremist actors, research by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has demonstrated considerable overlap between male supremacy and right-wing extremism.¹⁰² The SPLC also deemed male supremacy “a powerful undercurrent for white supremacy.”

The umbrella of online networks, groups, and actors that promote male supremacist ideologies is known as the ‘manosphere.’ The manosphere is an online ecosystem founded on and fueled by a hatred of women, ranging from groups, networks, or individuals that are anti-feminist to those that advocate for violence against women.¹⁰³ Individuals and networks in the manosphere express conspiratorial and often violent beliefs about women, where a woman’s only value is her ability to procreate or to fulfil the sexual needs and desires of men, where women are referred to as subhuman sexual objects, and where feminism is seen as an enemy of mankind.¹⁰⁴ The misogynistic umbrella of the “manosphere” encompasses groups like Men’s Rights Activists, Pick Up Artists, and Incels, or “involuntary celibates.”

Online Incel forums, which began as support communities to discuss concerns around romantic relationships and dating, are overwhelmingly male-dominated and rife with misogyny that ranges in severity from broader generalizations of women to pro-rape discourse. Members of online Incel communities forge a sense of identity around a perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. They might blame themselves or society for their shortcomings, but very often blame women (nearly all self-identified Incels are men), and therefore feel a bitterness towards women and themselves.¹⁰⁵ Individuals that consider themselves part of the Incel community often meet on dedicated online forums, where they express their hatred towards women using their own sets of vocabularies and terminologies. The Incel movement is particularly youth-oriented; survey data gathered by the ADL suggested that 82% of self-identified Incels are aged 18 – 30, with 36% aged between 18 – 21.¹⁰⁶

Suicidal ideation runs rampant in Incel forums, including graphic discussions around suicide and self-harm. In fact, researchers have noted that Incels are more likely to self-harm than to inflict harm on others.¹⁰⁷ This mirrors a worldview known as the “blackpill,” a deeply nihilistic belief that people’s life circumstances are broadly outside of their control. ‘Blackpilled’ thinking often includes hopelessness and violently misogynistic beliefs, alongside suicidal ideation or advocating for mass violence.¹⁰⁸

While Incels themselves are not necessarily extremist actors, Incel-related violence claimed at least 53 lives from 2015 to 2020¹⁰⁹ and is increasingly considered a form of terrorism.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, their online forums often contain references to racially or ethnically motivated extremism, including vehemently racist or anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and ideation. In October 2022, a 22-year-old man in Ohio pleaded guilty to attempting to commit a mass shooting; he was a highly active user on a popular Incel website where he posted hundreds of times. Online and in a manifesto he left behind, he made multiple references to the first known mass act of Incel-related violence which was committed by Elliot Rodger in 2014, indicating that he had radicalized online and was inspired by previous Incel-related attacks.¹¹¹

Mass Violence with Mixed, Inconsistent or Unclear Ideologies

One key phenomenon characterizing youth radicalization is the impression that extremism threats are becoming more ideologically multifaceted, defying traditional categorizations.¹¹² In the US and elsewhere we have seen miscellaneous political grievances, conspiracy theories, or blurred ideologies resulting in increasingly personalized or esoteric belief systems used to justify violence. This has led to a growing intersection of violent extremism and a wider landscape of communities lionizing the perpetrators of mass casualty attacks online.

The Highland Park shooting on July 4, 2022 presented researchers studying extremism and political violence with difficult definitional questions. A 21-year-old gunman killed 7 and injured 48 people after he opened fire from a roof using an assault rifle on an Independence Day parade in Highland Park, Illinois.¹¹³ As little evidence was found that the shooter had a coherent ideological worldview (although there was considerable evidence his violence

was antisemitically targeted), it could be argued that the attack was not a case of extremist or terrorist violence, but rather closer to non-political mass casualty attacks such as school shootings.

However, the case still fits a concerning pattern known from cases of extremist violence over the past half-decade and the shooter was active in nihilistic online communities that glorify violence. He produced and uploaded (music) videos that praised violence and posted cartoon versions of himself perpetrating mass shootings. He was also highly active in a so-called ‘gore forum’ – an online board dedicated to sharing graphic and violent imagery. ‘Gore-posting’ may function to create camaraderie between the users in these online ecosystems.¹¹⁴ Similarly, researchers have analyzed ‘dark fandoms’, whose adherents may lack a coherent ideology, but who are nevertheless fascinated by mass casualty violence.¹¹⁵ This may include events such as the Columbine High School Shooting or actors such as the Unabomber and inspire ‘copycat’ attacks among the followers of these groups. These communities may therefore provide fertile grounds for susceptible young people to facilitate disassociation from reality and normalize violence, even in cases in which ideological and political convictions may be unclear, inconsistent or non-existent.

The Highland Park shooting represents a case study of growing instances of violence in which there are ambivalent overlaps with extremist online radicalization. Rather than politics or ideology, it appears that the attack was inspired by antisocial digital communities which hold apocalyptic worldviews and actively promote the aesthetics of nihilism and violence.¹¹⁶ This challenges existing approaches looking for clear motivations or ideological entry.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of youth radicalization, key trends in extremist mobilization and the broad range of extremist actors currently targeting young people in the United States. It argues that there is a series of key trends that define the current extremist threat landscape on- and offline, including a decreased role of formally organized groups and a growing importance of social media within radicalization trajectories, especially among youth. While traditional extremist ideologies like white supremacy and white nationalism, as well as Salafi-jihadism, continue to attract young recruits, there is a much broader set of extremist and extremist-adjacent movements competing for young followers. This includes violent conspiracy movements, the Manosphere and communities that glorify violence but offer mixed, inconsistent or unclear ideological stances.

These developments have led to significant shifts in the dynamics of youth radicalization in the US – with young people encountering an increasingly complex set of movements and ideologies across diverse digital ecosystems. These shifts bring with them an increased range of narrative and technical opportunities to reach young people which will have significant implications for the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies.

To date, counter-extremism strategies have not fully evolved at the same pace as the challenge. It is therefore crucial that greater investment is made in programming designed to push back against the influence of extremists.

When developing these efforts, it is also essential that young people are involved in the design, and where appropriate, delivery of these interventions. To date, this has not fully materialized, with the result that programming likely lacks credibility. Meeting the next generation of extremist challenges will require the innovation brought by the next generation.

Endnotes

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