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**Document Title:** Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Insights from Family and Friends of Current and Former Extremists

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**Document Number:** 304318

**Date Received:** March 2022

**Award Number:** 2017-ZA-CX-0005

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# National Institute of Justice

Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Insights from Family and Friends of Current and Former Extremists

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Grant No. 2017-ZA-CX-0005  
Award Amount: \$588,672  
Project/Grant Period: January 1, 2018 – March 31, 2021  
FINAL REPORT

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## Summary

The January 6, 2021, attack at the U.S. Capitol, fueled by perceptions of a stolen 2020 presidential election, underscored a growing threat to America's national security: homegrown terrorism and ideologically inspired violence. For some, as reports and images flooded social and traditional media, the assault might have come as a shock. But for many others, the incident was not surprising. Domestic attacks have maintained a steady and growing pace in recent years, and such events as the 2018 mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were grim fore-shadowing of the latest incident.

Given this evolving, ongoing threat, the U.S. government, research institutions, and private-sector partners have made significant investments in attempting to understand and prevent violent extremism. What factors lead individuals to join violent extremist organizations? How and why do extremists become *deradicalized*, leaving their organizations, changing their minds, and in some cases joining the fight against radicalism? What can we do better to assist those who have been radicalized and prevent extremist organizations from recruiting new members? Efforts to answer such questions are closely tied to developing effective prevention and intervention measures. Researchers from the RAND Corporation approached questions of extremist radicalization and deradicalization from a public health perspective. First, we looked at radicalization and its prevention at four levels—individual, relational, institutional, and societal. This multilevel approach is based on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's socioecological framework for violence prevention. Second, we adapted the psychological autopsy approach, used to understand suicide, to talk with individuals formerly involved in extremist organizations, as well as family and friends of former, current, or deceased members of extremist groups. These two methods, along with a close review of current literature, offered insights that can be considered by policymakers and community organizations working to develop antiextremist policies and practices, as well as by researchers who continue to look for answers.

## Study Methods

The research team began by reviewing current studies focused on radicalized U.S. citizens residing in the United States. Most of the studies considered used primary data collection through interviews, surveys, or other targeted data with radicalized or deradicalized individuals, their family members, or peers. The team also reviewed information contained in the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database.

Using findings and insights from these sources, the team designed a semi-structured interview protocol for former extremists, as well as their family members and friends. The structure of these interviews is based on the psychological autopsy approach, which involves systematic interviews with family and friends used to learn about a person who died by suicide and events leading up to the death. To recruit respondents, the team partnered 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.

Through these efforts, the team was able to conduct 36 interviews: 24 former extremists, ten family members, and two friends. Together, these interviews covered 32 separate cases of radicalization and deradicalization. Of all 32 cases, 24 were whitesupremacists (eight females and 16 males), and eight were Islamic extremists (one female and seven males). Across all 32 cases, 17 were involved in extremist organizations in the 2000s, with six involved prior to 2000, and six across both eras (three did not provide this information). Sixteen individuals had *violent intent*, defined as engaging in or planning violent activities during their time in the organization. Seven of the focal individuals involved in these 32 cases were deceased, imprisoned, or otherwise unavailable for interviews; in these seven cases, interviews were conducted with friends or family members exclusively.

Most interviews were conducted via telephone. Five were conducted in person at an annual meeting for one of the partner organizations. To guide the interviews, participants were asked to begin by describing their (or their friends' or family members') early lives. They then were asked to describe major warning signs and turning points, any attempts to intervene, and processes of leaving the group and deradicalizing. Respondents were also asked to share ideas for intervention. The interviews were transcribed, deidentified, and systematically coded to produce key themes for analysis.

## Study Findings

Together, the interviews presented findings in four key areas: background characteristics of radical extremists, pathways to radicalization, deradicalizing and leaving extremist organizations, and participant perspectives on mitigation strategies, summarized below.

### Background Characteristics of Radical Extremists

Existing studies identify many factors that potentially contribute to radicalization. Individuals are made vulnerable by factors including social isolation, personal trauma, substance misuse issues, and more. Families also can influence the change: Family discord or lack of parental supervision or support are the two factors most cited. Finally, the literature describes several community, societal, and cultural factors that can influence radicalization. These include perceptions of discrimination or victimization, belief in the cause of an extremist group, living in underserved communities or those with elevated crime rates, and contact with recruiters or radicalized individuals.

The RAND interviews highlighted several factors that might have contributed to individuals becoming radicalized in this study:

- *Financial instability.* This factor was mentioned in 22 cases. Seven individuals noted financial

challenges as a driver to their extremism. Financial challenges were also mentioned when people were in extremist organizations, causing some to work in jobs tied to the organization itself and leading to delays in leaving the organization.

- *Mental health.* This factor was mentioned in 17 of the 32 cases. Mental health challenges were cited as presenting obstacles throughout the individual's life. Some identified such symptoms as overwhelming anger as a driver of their joining extremist organizations. Trauma or posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use, and physical health issues were also mentioned, but less frequently.
- *Social factors.* Victimization, stigmatization, or marginalization was mentioned in 16 cases. Many interviewees described feeling one or more of these when growing up and that these experiences contributed to their radicalization. Most often, individuals mentioned feeling isolated and lonely in institutions (e.g., schools) or communities in which they were the minority race; former white supremacists cited this factor, as did one former Islamic extremist. Radical beliefs in the family were only infrequently mentioned.

#### Pathways to Radicalization

To date, current literature suggests that online propaganda and recruitment are important pathways toward radicalization. Criminal activity and imprisonment are also cited as prevalent paths.

Our interviews highlighted several pathways that played a key role in radicalizing individuals:

- *"Reorienting" event.* More than half of the 32 cases described a dramatic or traumatic life event that prompted an individual to reconsider previously accepted views and reconsider alternative views and perspectives. These included a gun possession charge, rejection by the military, a friend's suicide, and an extended period of unemployment. For some white supremacists, the reorienting events involved black individuals.

- *Propaganda.* Twenty-two cases described consuming propaganda during radicalization, including especially online materials but also music and books.
- *Direct and indirect recruitment.* Seven cases (four white supremacists and three Islamic extremists) involved top-down recruitment, in which recruiters from radical organizations formally and proactively recruited them. Eighteen cases (15 white supremacist, three Islamic extremist) involved bottom-up entry, in which individuals radicalize on their own and then seek membership in extremist organizations.
- *Social bonds.* Creating and forming social bonds was identified in 14 cases as a motivating factor for joining extremist groups. Several cases were identified in which individuals “graduated” from one organization to a more extreme organization.

During the interviews, respondents also discussed positive experiences while participating in extremist groups. Most noted feelings of family and friendship. Others noted a new sense of power. As one study participant told the interviewers: “People switch the side of the street when they see you. It was a great feeling.” Some noted that they had felt they had a new mission in life, while others noted how they felt rewarded for contributions to the cause and group.

Among the 32 cases, many cited instances of an observable behavior change in the early stages of radicalization. Two Islamic extremists showed outward signs of religious conversion; two others did not convert, but one became “extremely quiet” and the other “started wearing religious clothing associated with extreme Islam and voicing more-extreme ideas to family.” Among white supremacist cases, interviewees noted how they began to create racist videos, use racial slurs, and display icons and symbols associated with white supremacy on their bedroom walls, clothing, and jewelry.

## Deradicalizing and Leaving Extremist Organizations

Like radicalization, there is no standard model of how people turn away from or reject extremist views or why they leave extremist groups. Nonetheless, the existing literature does identify factors that *push* and *pull* members out of such beliefs and related alliances. Among those that push people away is a sense of disillusionment with the group or belief, an inability to maintain employment, feelings of burnout, and distrust. Pull factors include a diminished sense of security when a group of members leaves together.

Among the RAND sample, most (20 out of 32 cases) had exited a radical organization and had undergone a process of psychological and social deradicalization. Out of these 20 cases, most of them (12) were also activists, currently engaged in deradicalizing others. Six had exited a radical organization but were still undergoing cognitive and emotional deradicalization.

The most commonly mentioned factor for exiting a group in the RAND interviews were senses of *disillusionment and burnout*. These feelings were noted in 14 cases (13 white supremacists and one Islamic extremist). Specifically, these cases expressed feelings of disappointment by the former members; hypocrisy or other negative behaviors were cited as reasons for these feelings.

### **Help and Intervention to Exit**

Individuals or groups helped 22 of the cases in the RAND sample exit extremist groups. Such actions were often conducted intentionally. Individuals who helped people exit these groups included acquaintances, life partners, other former radicals, friends, journalists, children, other family members, religious authorities, current radicals, therapists, or school officials. The interventions consisted of diverse cultural and demographic exposures, emotional support, and financial or domestic stability. Some cases highlighted noxious or negative impact from radical individuals, which could be described as an inadvertent intervention. In 11 cases, the intervention was orchestrated and conducted by an institution, including religious groups, law enforcement, and secular nonprofits. Twenty-two of our 32 cases also



described processes of *self-driven exit* from extremism.

### **Failed Interventions**

In 19 cases, interviewees indicated that they experienced interventions that failed. These cases most often involved family members who tried to intervene. Punitive interventions by law enforcement also often led to paradoxical effects of increased extremism. Upon leaving extremist organizations, six cases described feeling drawn back to organizations or ideologies. This was linked to missing the thrill and other psychological benefits of being involved in radical extremism, exacerbated by post-exit social isolation, and triggered by current events.

### Participant Perspectives on Mitigation Strategies

There is currently a lack of rigorous evidence evaluating interventions for preventing radicalization or promoting deradicalization. Nonetheless, there are organizations working to identify individuals at risk of extremism and working to assist community members.

Interviewees were asked for ideas about preventing radicalization or promoting deradicalization. They offered several suggestions about each.

In terms of preventing radicalization, study participants noted the importance of childhood as a key time to be exposed to diverse ideas, develop critical thinking skills, participate in prosocial activities designed to promote positive behaviors and inclusiveness and be exposed to members of different racial or cultural groups. Interviewees also mentioned the need to address marginalization more broadly, as well as polarization and media sensationalism. Also discussed was the need for better access to mental health treatment and targeted outreach and support for military veterans.

In terms of promoting deradicalization, study participants noted the need to reach extremists at the *right time and place*. They also made recommendations on who should deliver messages, how to provide

social support, and how extremists should be engaged. Also, some respondents mentioned unplanned exposures to diversity and kindness, religious education, and mental health interventions. Many also criticized the criminal justice system's approach to radicalization. Finally, some interviewees discussed the need to support families of extremists.

## Synthesis and Recommendations

### Strengths and Limitations

This study privileges the accounts of 32 white supremacists and Islamic extremists, drawing on interviews with formers themselves, as well as their family members and other social relationships. As evidenced by the dearth of firsthand accounts in the existing literature, such data are hard to come by. We believe that these narrative accounts are well worth the effort to obtain and analyze. As observed in this study, narratives from formers and family members both (1) throw descriptive and explanatory light on how factors that are often treated as quantitative variables have complex, time-dependent, and often counterintuitive effects on individuals' radicalization and deradicalization and (2) reveal novel causal processes and dynamics that may be missed by secondary-data analysis or survey-based data collection.

Of course, our approach also has several limitations. Relying on convenience sampling through existing activist organizations seeking to counter extremism brings inherent bias to our sample; quite simply, we spoke with and about individuals who were both (1) far enough "on the other side" of radicalization and its consequences (through deradicalization, imprisonment, or the violent death of the focal individual) and (2) motivated to help others avoid radicalization or deradicalize to a sufficient extent that they wanted to speak with us. Thus, by design, our study did not include cases in which focal individuals were still actively involved in radical activities or organizations.

Our interview approach was also loosely structured, to allow formers and their family members to focus on parts of the radicalization and deradicalization processes that they felt were most important. As a result, we did not systematically ask each respondent about the importance of mental health, substance use, financial struggles, religion, or any other topic; rather, we let respondents tell the story, mentioning factors and processes that they felt were most important along the way. Therefore, we do not have systematic quantitative data on the prevalence of various *candidate mechanisms* for radicalization or deradicalization.

## Main Findings

Our sample was highly heterogeneous, covering cases of radicalization occurring across multiple decades, in multiple geographic regions, and with a wide variety of groups and ideologies. Moreover, we interviewed a mix of focal individuals, family members, and other social contacts of former white supremacists and Islamic extremists. Although challenging for analysis, this heterogeneity was also in some ways a strength; covering such a wide variety of circumstances and viewpoints, we discovered many common features of radicalization and deradicalization shared across time, community, age, demographics, and life circumstances and experiences:

1. Abuse or trauma, difficult family life, economic struggles, bullying and discrimination, and other negative life events can lead to distress, as well as delinquency and mental health struggles. These life events and their psychological and behavioral consequences are sometimes implicated in radicalization pathways but are never the sole or most direct cause of radicalization. Furthermore, such factors are linked to many other life-course outcomes that do not involve ideological radicalization or joining extremist groups.
2. Recruitment to radical groups deliberately leverages personal vulnerabilities, such as psychological distress and

social marginalization. Radical groups develop ways to bolster ideological commitment through restricting access to information or circumstances that challenge ideological constructs and through social and cognitive strategies for reinforcing in-group bias and hatred toward people outside the group.

3. Extremist groups nurture a self-reinforcing social milieu that includes shared purpose, camaraderie, friendship, and joint activities that involve both risk and emotional rewards. Often, the thrill of violence and confrontation provides a ritual that bolsters group commitment.
4. Both the radicalization and the deradicalization process can be triggered by an individual's experience of a dramatic, challenging life event (e.g., death of a friend, life-threatening medical diagnosis, imprisonment) that causes them to rethink their life circumstances and priorities. Both radicalization and deradicalization often rely on other key individuals being in the right place at the right time (and having the right relationship with the focal individual) to encourage that individual to radicalize or deradicalize.
5. Radical ideology and involvement in extremist activities have addictive properties for many, whether such activities involve physical violence or trading insults online. These addictive properties appear linked to the experience of joint risk and struggle and likely involve core psychological rewards linked with thrill-seeking, righteous anger, and in-group belonging. As a result, support networks and "buddy systems" for deradicalizing and staying deradicalized appear to be crucial.
6. Attempts by formal institutions to deradicalize individuals sometimes work but often fail as well. In particular, heavy-handed attempts to derail radical activities and groups by intelligence and law enforcement agencies—while understandable to protect the public in many cases—can sometimes deepen ongoing radicalization processes and push potentially salvageable cases to more-extreme behaviors and involvement.
7. Stigmatization of groups, whether Islamic, rural white, or otherwise, seems mostly to push individuals with risk for radicalization further down the extremist path. Punitive measures, banned speech, and indignant public

discourse can backfire and increase the drive for radicalization.

8. Media literacy and open access to diverse sources of information appear critical for deradicalization. In certain cases, structured interventions that involve exposure to people outside the group who exhibit kindness and generosity appear to have dramatic transformative effects. Such effects also occur, occasionally, through happenstance life events.
9. Although radical ideological movements rise and fall over time, split and join with each other, and reinvent themselves in new guises, their enduring appeal seems to lie in attending to fundamental human needs (for social bonds, love and acceptance, meaning, etc.) that sometimes go unmet. Meeting such needs through less destructive means is thus crucial.

## Recommendations

On the basis of our literature review and interview analysis, we believe the following directions in research, policy, and practice are critical for research organizations, policymakers, and practitioners to pursue. We first present critical directions for future research, followed by changes to community policies and practices.

### Research Directions

1. **Further develop and formally evaluate intervention approaches that former radicals themselves have created and that they currently employ informally.** Throughout our interviews, formers talked about extracting (or being extracted) from radical organizations by other formers who have developed their own homegrown approaches to helping others deradicalize. These should be scaled up and tested. Our interviews highlight five types of interventions that deserve further attention, including funding to expand, formalize, and evaluate impacts:

- a. *Addiction-based programs countering hate and radicalization, including buddy systems to deter radicalization relapse.* Such programs treat radical involvement as a lifelong struggle using a chronic disease model, which matches the subjective experiences of many of our participants.
- b. *Educational and outreach efforts to help recognize and address signs of radicalization.* Our research identified several early signs of radicalization that friends, family, and others are able to notice. Organizations made up of former radicals currently run helplines and other efforts to provide support to family members, friends, and others, as well as provide them with tools to recognize potential signs of radicalization and suggestions for when, where, and how to (and not to) intervene.
- c. *Social network approaches to deradicalization.* Formers described how they used their own social connections to find and approach individuals in radical organizations who might be ready to leave these organizations and deradicalize.
- d. *Deliberate exposure to “optimal contact” with groups used as targets of hatred by radical groups.* Formers described strategic exposure to positive experiences with ethnic minorities or others whom radicals were taught to hate, creating sometimes transformative effects. Cross-group contact may, in fact, be an “essential” component of lasting change. However, there are conditions under which contact tends to lead to better outcomes and increasing recognition that cross-group friendship is especially important.
- e. *Programs that create a safe, mentored space for individuals to freely express themselves and challenge each other’s beliefs.* Former radicals described feeling marginalized and avoiding exposure to “mainstream” contexts after feeling stigmatized or targeted for their beliefs, leading to further radicalization in “niche” information environments. Ongoing work indicates that nonconfrontational challenges to incorrect beliefs are more productive than direct challenges or shaming. To the extent that such spaces can be created and maintained online or in other contexts, they are likely to help disrupt radicalization.

2. **Use both data science and ethnographic research to understand current processes of online radicalization to extreme right- and left-wing groups.** Most of our respondents were exposed to extremist propaganda online, and the internet also helped facilitate identifying and joining formal extremist groups. Some existing research has used creative strategies to interview budding radical extremists and understand more about (or even challenge) their thought processes. Although much radical discourse can be found on existing social media and discussion forums, this content is often removed by platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, and likely is only the surface layer of radicalization, with much of the ideological hardening and formal joining of organizations occurring in more-private conversations. Creative use of both online and offline interviewing and group observation will be needed to further understand these radicalization processes and how best to disrupt them.
3. **Conduct research on environmental (institutional and societal) influences of extremism.** Public health and demographic research is increasingly examining how institutional and societal factors, such as unemployment, segregation, and income inequality, are associated and might produce certain health outcomes, including obesity, drug misuse, and suicide. These forces were described either explicitly or implicitly in our case narratives and should similarly be explored as contributors to developing extremist ideologies, joining extremist groups, committing violence within these groups, or exiting these groups successfully. Thus, policies not directly focused on preventing extremism but rather on creating adequate and equitable opportunities and social safety nets may be important for curbing extremism.
4. **Better identify geographic and demographic hot spots for radicalization to white supremacy and other radical ideologies.** Not all communities are equally at risk of violent extremism. Our interviews provided some hints as to possible dangerous environments for radicalization, including poor rural environments with recent demographic and economic change, prisons, and high-density urban environments. The population of

the United States is too vast and the base rate of extremism too low to offer geographical conformity in detection and mitigation policies. It will hence be critical to more carefully identify community locales and demographic groups at risk of extremism and then ensure that those local governments and civil society organizations are properly oriented toward the risk and outfitted to properly address it.

### **Community Policies and Practices**

1. **Consider carefully the trade-offs and the appropriate balance between punitive and “soft” law enforcement interventions.** Many of our respondents were critical of harsh legal interventions, which in some cases had the iatrogenic effect of solidifying or strengthening extremist views or networks. Although interdiction of ongoing violent plots is an obvious target for traditional law enforcement responses, notification regarding the ongoing radicalization of individuals may warrant a different response. Since the death of George Floyd and other such incidents, law enforcement in the United States is currently facing a reckoning of “hard” versus “soft” interdiction for criminal activity more broadly. Such attention toward when, where, and how to intervene with individual cases and in communities could and should be focused on radicalization as well.
2. **Increase advertisements and public service announcements about existing resources for individuals who want to deradicalize,** including helplines, support groups, and related organizations. We heard that for deradicalization to be effective, those willing to exit an extremist group must be approached by the right person with the right message at the right place and at the right time. Wide dissemination of information about organizations that can help these individuals and their families may help accelerate this process. These community-based organizations, most of which are founded by former radical extremists who have dedicated their lives to making positive change and deradicalizing others, also need financial support to sustain and expand their operations.



3. **Organize community-based educational opportunities that cultivate media literacy and responsible internet use.** The fragmented media landscape has presented some challenging issues for the participants, especially when it came to understanding fundamental differences in content quality and veracity. This made them more vulnerable to manipulation. Many former extremists told us directly that less sensationalistic media coverage and educational approaches that emphasized critical thinking could be helpful in preventing radicalization. Educational efforts may cover the role of rules, codes of ethics, and editorial processes in the media, as well as the value of research and fact-checking in assessing the reliability of media content. Guidelines on how to recognize propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation may also be helpful.
4. **Expand opportunities for mental health care.** More than half our sample evidenced a past mental health problem, which is significantly higher than the proportion found in the general population. Other studies have also hinted at a comorbidity issue. For example, Moonshot CVE, an organization dedicated to supporting internet-based CVE initiatives, has conducted online experiments suggesting that right-wing violent extremists and those seeking to enter such right-wing organizations are significantly more likely to click on mental health treatment advertisements. Although it is not possible to establish the causal effect of mental illness on extremism, the plausibility may provide incentive to buttress mental health services in locales at high risk of extremist recruitment and activity. And targeting mental health care toward active extremist populations may provide an opportunity to directly support disengagement.
5. **Help at-risk parents and families recognize and react to signs of extremist radicalization and engagement.** A number of participants in this study highlighted examples of how their budding radicalization was signaled to family members, friends, and schools. Some signals, such as observing youth consuming extremist propaganda or wearing or showcasing extremist symbols and paraphernalia, serve as unambiguous signs of at least a dabbling interest in extremism. Others, including significant changes in behavior and social networks

and engagement in other secretive activities, are more general and could indicate the manifestation of various problems beyond radicalization, such as mental health problems. All these issues, however, require family and parental engagement. Efforts that can help at-risk families (or those families residing in locales at high risk of extremist recruitment and activity) identify and quickly respond to markers of extremism and other childhood behavioral problems may help reduce the risk of radicalization.

**6. Provide opportunities for expanding diversity exposure to those at risk of ideological radicalization.**

Exposure to diverse populations played a critical role in helping deradicalize and reorient a number of formers in our study. This points to the proposition that such diversity-exposure efforts could be more systematically exploited to limit the risk of radicalization or possibly deradicalize already-extremist members.

We note that diversity exposure has been a key component of community efforts to counter Islamic extremism. Several community and religious-based organizations have promoted interfaith engagement events that both served to undercut Islamophobic attitudes among non-Muslim participants and helped undercut the risk for extremism among the Muslim participants. Applying such an approach to countering white supremacy appears to have similar promising effects among formers in our sample.

## Conclusion

Violent extremism is a growing, serious national security threat in the United States and elsewhere. Efforts ranging from federal policies to community activism will be needed to address this threat. These will include efforts to prevent individuals from developing radical beliefs and joining extremist groups, that identify and interrupt threats before they occur, that locate and hold accountable violent actors and motivators, and that help individuals seeking a way out of extremist groups to exit and deradicalize. Research is needed to inform the most effective ways for achieving these goals. For this study, we spoke with individuals

who had participated in such groups or had family members or friends participate. We gathered their narratives and analyzed the data systematically to identify themes and constructs that can inform effective policies and programs. We are pleased to see research on extremism growing to include more firsthand accounts and for this report to contribute to this expanding and critically important body of work.

## Artifacts

Archived Project Data. Available at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/NACJD/index.html> by searching, “Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism”

Brown RA, Helmus TC, Ramchand R, Palimaru AI, Weiland S, Rhoades AL, Hiatt L, “Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization.” April, 2021. RAND Report RR-A1071-1. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1071-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1071-1.html)

Ellen Hancock Impact Award, RAND internal funding. February, 2021. Additional products forthcoming.

Helmus TC, Brown RA, Ramchand R, Schoep J. “Bum-Rushing Extremists From the Military Might Not Help: Interviews with a former neo-Nazi indicate that pre-discharge education and deradicalization might hinder extremist groups' recruiting efforts.” March 17, 2021. Defense One. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/03/bum-rushing-extremists-military-might-not-help/172740/>