

2017 Policy Brief: Extremism in the United States

Brendan Thorp, Researcher

FreeMuslim Association, Center for De-Radicalization and Extremism Prevention



WHY WE STILL NEED TO TALK ABOUT EXTREMISM IN THE US

- Extremism Remains Dangerous
- Extremism Polarizers Politics
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WHAT CAN BE DONE TO STOP EXTREMISM AT HOME?

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WHY WE STILL NEED TO TALK ABOUT AMERICAN EXTREMISM

Of all of the issues facing the United States in 2017, extremism has come back into the American consciousness thanks to a resurgence of hate crimes and extremist activities. Extremism in the United States has seen a renaissance in activity over the last few years. The numbers of hate groups spiked in opposition to the election of Obama in 2008 and galvanized by the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Neo-Confederate groups tripled the number of their groups in 2016 according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.¹ While these groups are not nearly as powerful as they once were in their heyday of the 1960's, extremism within the United States will remain a relevant topic so long as political violence and terrorism exist within our society. According to the Anti-Defamation League, 2016 was the second most deadly year in terms of attacks by domestic extremists.² This troubling phenomenon needs to be addressed properly or it can evolve into the national security crisis that it once treated as.

1. "Neo-Confederate." Southern Poverty Law Center. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 July 2017.

2. "Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2016." *Anti-Defamation League*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 July 2017.

Should the last few years point to a growing trend in extremist activities we should expect to see an increase in violent extremist acts on both sides. All Americans, no matter your political affiliation, should be concerned with extremist activities on both sides of the political aisle. It endangers all Americans and poisons our political process making compromise and nuance more difficult.

Extremism Polarize American Politics

As politics push more and more Americans to the extremes of both wings of the political divide, these people will be more susceptible to extremist organizations and rhetoric. This increases the recruiting pool for these organizations making it easier for them to find people who are susceptible to their dishonest messaging. Increasing the numbers of members makes these groups more powerful and more able to act upon their respective ideologies.

Extremism Encourages a Violent Reaction From the Opposite Side

Extremist organizations are not all made in the same mold. Since many of these extremists are on the opposite sides of the political aisle, this makes each other perfect targets for protest or violence. Controversial

protests by extremist groups historically have led to counter-protests that can easily become violent. One protest by the Klu Klux Klan in 2017 led to the stabbings of three people and thirteen arrests when both sides began assaulting the other.³ Controversial protests like these are common and protected by the constitution. These events can very easily escalate if one or more parties come with the intention to become violent.

What Can Be Done to Prevent Extremism in the US?

Over the history of American politics, there have been a number of responses to try to prevent extremism. These initiatives come from a variety of sources including governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and popular social movements. Although these groups have done an admirable job in the fight against extremism, their efforts have not been universally successful. In this section we will go over the methods that have been most effective at preventing extremism and what can be done to improve upon current anti-extremist efforts.

3. Queally, James. "Ku Klux Klan rally in Anaheim erupts in violence; 3 are stabbed and 13 arrested." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 29 Feb. 2016. Web. 10 July 2017.

Civil Suits Against Hate Groups

"The Southern Poverty Law Center is dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society. Using litigation, education, and other forms of advocacy, the SPLC works toward the day when the ideals of equal justice and equal opportunity will be a reality.

-Mission Statement of the Southern Poverty Law Center"

First pioneered by the Southern Poverty Law Center in the late 1970's, this method of confronting extremist groups was extremely successful in disrupting the actions of white nationalist organizations that had been committing crimes against minority groups. By suing the organizations that many of the members were inspired by or members of, the SPLC was able to bankrupt many white nationalist organizations like the United Klans of America. This strategy was so successful for several reasons. Firstly, the burden of proof in a civil court case is much lower than that of a criminal case. So less convincing evidence is required to be successful in court. Secondly, this destroys these organizations ability to find funding for themselves. These organizations often had to sell headquarter buildings in order to try to pay legal fees before filing for bankruptcy. This method is extremely effective at shutting down hate groups that are actively

participating in hate crimes. There are some problems associated with this method. The first issue is that these court cases require a massive amount of manpower and expertise to run properly. This can only be pursued by an organization specialized in pursuing such cases. The second issue is that the members who made up the organization still hold their hateful views and may begin new groups to replace the old one. So while the organization itself is gone, the members are still free to participate in hate crimes or start new organizations. The third issue is often time. Court cases can often take years before coming to a conclusion. This drawn out process gives hate groups time to continue to organize hate crimes and potentially attack or intimidate the prosecution's team.

FBI Investigation and Prosecution

Since their inception in 1908, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been one of the most effective and controversial actors in fighting to prevent the spread of extremism and domestic terrorism in the United States. The FBI have used a wide variety of means and methods to try to prevent the growth of extremist groups in the United States. The FBI's methods mostly involve traditional investigation methods including paid informants, criminal profiling, wiretapping and even public relations campaigns to educate the public on extremism. Though

the FBI has seen a number of successes throughout the years, their methods have been extremely controversial and often illegal or counterproductive. Sometimes the FBI would even use their methods against members of the Civil Rights movements. This was justified by the alleged support of pro-Soviet Communist groups and the general opposition to the Vietnam war from the Civil Rights movement.

"It's the FBI's primary responsibility—working with its many partners—to protect the nation from attacks by violent extremists. One important way to do that is to keep young people—the future of our country—from embracing violent extremist ideologies in the first place.."

~FBI's Statement on countering youth extremism

The result of these efforts have been mixed over the years. The FBI have had a history of successfully pursuing the KKK and other White Nationalists groups.⁴ Though in the past they spent a disproportionate amount of time pursuing leftist groups due to the Cold War and the Red Scares of 1919 and the 1950's. Thanks to the FBI being a Federal agency, it gains a significant amount of legitimacy in the eyes of many Americans.

4. "KKK Series." *FBI*. FBI, 21 July 2016. Web. 10 July 2017.

Independent groups like the ACLU and SPLC are often accused of having a left or right wing bias and allegedly target political enemies in their work. The FBI being non-partisan adds legitimacy to when it pursues far-right groups. The biggest problem regarding the FBI's fight against extremism is the threat of extremism from abroad. In the post-9/11 world that we live in, the FBI has to be wary of foreign terrorists. Although the responses from the FBI have been mixed in the past, it can be improved by refocusing their efforts towards domestic terrorists who commit significantly more terrorist acts than foreign threats.

Education and Awareness

"Well, for prevention, one of the most important things you have to deal with is raising awareness.

People need to know what they're up against and actually raise barriers the to entry, so you don't have youth actually wanting to engage in it in the first place."

~Humera Khan, Executive director of the anti-terror think tank Muflehun

In order for the public to be effective in the fight against extremism, there needs to be an ample amount of education to make them better able to address it in society. Education can be improved in a number of ways to help prevent extremism. The introduction of civic classes that teach how American political system works would do a

great deal to dispel many misconceptions that most Americans accept as facts. Increasing school budgets would also allow schools to better address the educational needs of their students. Better educating American citizens will help to prevent extremism in two major ways. Firstly, Extremist organizations often use propaganda and misinformation to bring people over to their own side. UNESCO advocates the use of education as important tool in the fight to prevent the spread of extremism.⁵ By becoming better informed citizens, Americans will become better equipped to challenge misinformation from extremist organizations. The second way that education can be used as a tool to prevent extremism is to empower people to become more productive members of society. People who join extremist organizations tend to be poor, not well educated or are going through a rough period of their life. Education can help to reduce the number of people in this vulnerable situation. Better educated people tend to live much more stable lives than their less educated peers, making them less susceptible to extremist literature and propaganda.

5. "Education as a tool to prevent violent extremism." UNESCO. United Nations, 13 Feb. 2017. Web. 10 July 2017.

Improving education in the United States will not only improve the lives of American citizens but also reduce the recruitment pool available to extremist organizations. By reducing their numbers, we can also reduce their influence and relevance to the American political process.
