



What We Know—and What We Don't Know—About the Presence of Right-Wing Extremism in US Law Enforcement

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Introduction

The alleged participation of off-duty law enforcement personnel in the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol has generated fresh interest in the broader issue of police participation in right-wing extremist groups and activities.¹ Such extremism poses obvious but significant challenges for police agencies and their communities. It can undermine the rule of law, damage police morale, compromise investigations, hinder successful prosecutions, and disrupt relationships between the police and the communities they serve (particularly communities of color).² In the words of one police captain, “whenever the police department shirks its unbiased responsibility. . . the community then is in for real trouble.”³

Although we know that there are right-wing extremists among the nation’s 800,000 law enforcement officers, we do not know the extent of that presence or the most common ideologies.⁴ We also lack a detailed understanding of the strategies and tactics right-wing extremists use to infiltrate and recruit within police ranks and the extent to which the extremist presence may imperil investigations, including those concerning criminal extremist activities. In addition, while much has been made of the threat posed by intentional infiltrations, a potentially greater concern is the organic and gradual radicalization of those already on the force.

This paper provides an overview of the current state of knowledge about police officer engagement in right-wing extremism, including the sustained use of racist, misogynistic, and homophobic language and stereotyping, both online and offline. After surveying the contemporary right-wing extremist landscape, this paper uses publicly available sources to explore in a preliminary way aspects of extremist penetration and recruitment, pre-employment screening challenges, police participation in extremist activity, and the role of social media platforms and the internet in enabling extremism. The paper concludes with a set of analytical questions that practitioners and policy-makers must answer if they hope to mitigate the right-wing extremist threat.

¹ US Department of Justice, “Two Off-Duty Virginia Police Officers Charged in Federal Court Following Events at the U.S. Capitol,” US Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, Jan. 13, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/two-duty-virginia-police-officers-charged-federal-court-following-events-us-capitol>; Eric Westervelt, “Off-Duty Police Officers Investigated, Charged with Participating Capitol Riot,” NPR, Jan. 15, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/15/956896923/police-officers-across-nation-face-federal-charges-for-involvement-in-capitol-ri>; “Capitol Attack Underscores White Supremacist Infiltration of Police, Military,” Center for Public Integrity, Jan. 15, 2021.

² William Y. Chin, “Law and Order and White Power: White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement and the Need to Eliminate Racism in the Ranks,” *Journal of Law and Social Deviancy* 6 (2013), pp. 53-56.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ Samuel Vincent Jones, “Law Enforcement and White Power,” *Thurgood Marshall Law Review* 41, no. 1 (2015), p. 104.

The right-wing extremist landscape

Right-wing extremism in America has deep roots. Historian and author Kathleen Belew traces the current incarnation of what she terms the “White Power” movement to the early 1970s, when neo-Nazi groups, the Ku Klux Klan, and other extremists coalesced into a loose paramilitary insurrection that reached its lethal apogee with the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.⁵

As Belew notes, while early incarnations of right-wing extremism (such as the Klan) claimed to “serve the state” by fostering vigilante justice, the post-1970s movement differentiated itself by “declaring war against the federal government.”⁶ The current movement appears to consist of groups embracing both pro- and antigovernment ideologies. Thus today, as in the past, right-wing extremism in the US is a heterogeneous phenomenon, a mixture of often loosely organized neo-Nazis, white supremacists, militias and other militant efforts (e.g., border patrol posses), and antigovernment activists. Membership and beliefs among apparently disparate groups and individuals are sometimes overlapping and interlocking, and patterns of belief can vary inside a formation.⁷ In other instances, though, there is little common ground. For example, the loosely knit Boogaloo movement, hoping to incite a second civil war, includes pro-gun activists, libertarians, and militia members who hold a variety of views on race, including white supremacist beliefs.⁸ The existence of these ideologically syncretic and even incoherent movements owes much to the global penetration of the internet and social media. Both have contributed to the spread of extremist ideologies, the building of national and international networks, and the shaping of the radicalization process (including self-radicalization).⁹

As suggested above, the boundaries between right-wing extremist groups, ideologies, and individuals are blurred. Extremists may belong to multiple groups and movements, and belief structures often vary from individual to individual.¹⁰ However, it is possible to identify two broad strains within the far-right firmament: white supremacy and antigovernment extremism. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI),

⁵ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For example, some, but not all, members of the anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and misogynistic Proud Boys also promote white supremacy and anti-Semitism. Some Proud Boys, who are not exclusively white, sometimes employ antiracist language. Anti-Defamation League, “Proud Boys,” ADL.org, accessed on Mar. 9, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/proudboys>; Cloee Cooper and Daryle Lamont Jenkins, “Culture and Belonging in the USA: Multiracial Organizing on the Contemporary Far Right,” Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies Working Paper Series, 2019, https://escholarship.org/content/qt1q86f20p/qt1q86f20p_noSplash_28e66e3e1ca21c4a3cae5d22483da0b9.pdf?t=pz0jxz.

⁸ Alex Newhouse and Nate Gunesch, “The Boogaloo Movement Wants to Be Seen as Anti-Racist, but It Has a White-Supremacist Fringe,” Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, Middlebury Institute for International Studies, May 30, 2020, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/boogaloo-movement-wants-be-seen-anti-racist-it>.

⁹ Daniel Koehler, “The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, Winter 2014/15, no. 1, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/viewFile/8/8>; US Department of Justice, “Online Radicalization to Violent Extremism,” Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014, <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/RadicalizationtoViolentExtremismAwarenessBrief.pdf>; Diana Reiger, Lena Frischlich, and Gary Bente, “Propaganda 2.0: Psychological Effects of Right-Wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos,” German Federal Criminal Police, 2013, https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/39._propaganda_2.0_-_psychological_effects_of_right-wing_and_islamic_extremist_internet_videos.pdf.

¹⁰ Daniel L. Byman, “White Supremacist Terrorism: Key Trends to Watch in 2021,” Brookings Institution, Jan. 15, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/white-supremacist-terrorism-key-trends-to-watch-in-2021/>.

the US Department of Homeland Security, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), academic specialists, and policy researchers, it is these two strains that are the most violent and lethal and pose the greatest security threat.¹¹

White supremacists include members of “traditional” hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and racist skinheads, as well as newer formations, such as the Base (a name purportedly taken from the English translation of al-Qaeda) and the Atomwaffen Division (also known as the National Socialist Order). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Base and the Atomwaffen Division are “accelerationists” that believe that “violence, depravity and degeneracy are the only way to establish order in their dystopian and apocalyptic vision of the world.”¹² These white supremacists seek to topple the state, incite a race war, and build a new order based on Nazi principles. In the case of the Atomwaffen Division, members have a near-spiritual reverence for both Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson, the leader of the murderous “Family” cult during the late 1960s. Some white supremacists, while careful to avoid explicitly racist terminology in their public discourse, are working toward the creation of a racially pure ethno-state that excludes non-white, Jewish, and LGBTQ individuals, along with others they deem inferior.

Antigovernment extremists include paramilitary (and typically hierarchically structured) militias; “three percenters,” who promote the idea that the American people and the Constitution must be defended against an overweening and tyrannical federal government; and the Oath Keepers, who claim that a one-world conspiracy known as the New World Order (NWO) is colluding with the US government to render Americans defenseless by taking away their Second Amendment rights, thus paving the way for an NWO dictatorship.¹³

What do we know?

The federal government has no database to track efforts by white supremacists to infiltrate law enforcement, or the participation of police officers in right-wing extremist activities more generally.¹⁴ It is also not clear how many (if any) of the nation’s 18,000 federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies systematically collect data on officers who have been dismissed or otherwise disciplined for participation in extremist movements or activities. Moreover, in most states, disciplinary records and investigations into police conduct are kept from public view.¹⁵ Sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss argues that such knowledge

¹¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021,” Mar. 1, 2021, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_0301_odni_unclass-summary-of-dve-assessment-17_march-final_508.pdf.

¹² Southern Poverty Law Center, “Atomwaffen Division,” SPLCenter.org, accessed on Apr. 3, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>. Ironically, the term “accelerationism” has been more closely associated with the Marxist left. Accelerationists maintain that “capitalism, or various processes attached to it, should be deepened or “accelerated” in order to prompt radical change. “Accelerationism,” *New Statesman*, Aug. 5, 2016, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/08/what-accelerationism>.

¹³ Anti-Defamation League, “Oath Keepers and Three %ers Part of Growing Anti-Government Movement,” ADL.org, accessed on Apr. 15, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/oath-keepers-and-three-ers-part-of-growing-anti-government-movement>.

¹⁴ US Congress, House Report 116-526, Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2020, Sept. 21, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/116/crpt/hrpt526/CRPT-116hrpt526.pdf>.

¹⁵ Jesselyn Cook and Nick Robins-Early, “Inside the Dangerous Online Fever Swamps of American Police,” *Huffpost*, June 17, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/police-protests-floyd-law-enforcement-today-rant_n_5ee3ef5fc5b699cea53196b4.

gaps fuel the “perception that the problem is limited to a few bad actors who need to be rooted out—and that notion hurts both law-abiding members of the police. . . as well as citizen groups seeking real reform.”¹⁶

However, academic researchers, journalists, and private groups have for years gathered anecdotal but compelling evidence about police participation in right-wing extremism, noting that extremists have long viewed law enforcement agencies as enticing targets for infiltration and recruitment. Scholars have also examined efforts to prevent extremists from joining law enforcement agencies, and to root out and discipline officers engaged in extremist activities. These findings, described below, are, for the reasons discussed above, incomplete, but they do help us begin to understand the nature of the challenge and the additional research and analysis it requires.

- In 1992, a retired Phoenix police officer, Gerald “Jack” McLamb, produced “Operation Vampire Killer 2000,” a 75-page screed aimed at recruiting police officers into the growing militia movement. In it, McLamb warned about the sinister machinations of the NWO, the federal government, and various “internationalists,” but found cause for hope, writing that “all over this nation Officers, Guardsmen, and military personnel are awakening to this oncoming planned disaster.”¹⁷ The effectiveness of the publication as a recruiting tool is impossible to gauge, but it did lay out ideological themes that have remained central in antigovernment right-wing extremist circles.
- Tom Metzger, a long-time Klansman, founder of White Aryan Resistance, and a major figure in neo-Nazi and racist skinhead circles for decades, declared in a speech at a 2004 hate-rock festival, “We have to infiltrate! Infiltrate the military! Infiltrate your local governments! Infiltrate your school board! Infiltrate law enforcement!”¹⁸
- Since 2000, police officers with alleged connections to white supremacists and antigovernment extremism have been uncovered in Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia.¹⁹
- The FBI warned in 2006 that infiltration and recruitment by white supremacist groups was particularly troubling with respect to law enforcement intelligence collection and exploitation, which can lead to “investigative breaches and can jeopardize the safety of law enforcement sources and personnel.”²⁰

¹⁶ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “When the Far Right Penetrates Law Enforcement: America Can Learn from Germany’s Response,” *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 15, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-15/when-far-right-penetrates-law-enforcement>.

¹⁷ “Operation Vampire Killer 2000,” *Police Against the New World Order*, 1992, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/79f30599-76ff-4e55-b25f-f012a44d4e4e?locale=pt-BR.

¹⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Tom Metzger,” *SPCCenter.org*, accessed on Apr. 7, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/tom-metzger>.

¹⁹ Michael German, “White Supremacist Links to Law Enforcement Are an Urgent Concern,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, Sept. 1, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/white-supremacist-links-law-enforcement-are-urgent-concern>. For more on the presence of right-wing extremists in one police force, see “Florida Town Stunned by News of Police Department’s KKK Ties,” *Tampa Bay Times*, Jul. 21, 2014, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/florida-town-stunned-by-news-of-police-kkk-ties/2189339/>. From the period of Reconstruction to well into the 1960s, law enforcement officers, as well as other government officials, particularly in the southern United States, were active members of the KKK. William Y. Chin, “Law and Order and White Power: White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement and the Need to Eliminate Racism in the Ranks,” *Journal of Law and Social Deviancy* 6 (2013), <http://www.lsd-journal.net/archives/Volume6/WhiteSupremacists.pdf>; David Cunningham, *Klansville USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 98.

²⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement,” Oct. 17, 2006 (Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) release), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB386/>.

- Also in 2006, the FBI warned that “ghost skins”—a term used by white supremacists to describe those who “avoid overt displays of their beliefs to blend into society and covertly advance white-supremacist causes”—were encouraged to seek employment in police agencies “in order to alert white supremacists of pending investigative action against them.”²¹
- According to press accounts, approximately 10 percent of the 25,000 people included in an Oath Keepers database were active duty police officers and military personnel. The database reportedly included a Colorado sheriff, an Indiana special weapons and tactics team member, a Miami patrolman, and the chief of an Illinois police department.²²

Police officers, like all Americans, have the right under the First Amendment to hold extremist beliefs and join right-wing extremist movements. But active *participation* in extremist movements (such as fundraising, attending demonstrations, or spreading propaganda) is a different matter. Because of their responsibility for protecting public safety, police officers can be subject to stringent rules that do not apply to other government agencies or employees, and they can be dismissed for not meeting the reasonable requirements of their jobs—as might well be the case for a police officer who participates in extremist activities.²³ Still, as described below, officers do engage in such activities, and at least some have faced consequences for doing so.

- Some law enforcement personnel, although not formally associated with right-wing extremist groups, have engaged in explicitly racist activities in public or on social media platforms, smaller websites, and encrypted chat apps such as Telegram and Signal.²⁴
- The Plain View Project is a searchable database of public Facebook posts and comments made by 3,500 confirmed active duty and retired police officers in eight jurisdictions across the US.²⁵ An analysis of the database revealed that roughly 20 percent of current officers and 40 percent of retired personnel have made posts or comments “displaying bias, applauding violence, scoffing at due process or using dehumanizing language.”²⁶
- Courts have looked favorably on police agencies that have fired police officers for engaging in extremist activities.²⁷ For example, a federal court confirmed the termination of a police officer for “distributing hate literature aimed at blacks and Jews, lying about his affiliation with the Klan, selling tickets to Klan-sponsored functions, and depositing the ticket proceeds into his personal account, all of which violated departmental policy.”²⁸

There is no clear strategy for tackling this issue. Contemporary pre-employment screening of law enforcement applicants may be inadequate. According to one scholar, some background checks “do not

²¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Ghost Skins: The Fascist Path of Stealth,” Oct. 17, 2006, (FOIA release), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB386/>.

²² Mike Giglio, “A Pro-Trump Militant Group Has Recruited Thousands of Police, Soldiers, and Veterans,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/right-wing-militias-civil-war/616473/>.

²³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, “White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement,” Oct. 17, 2006 (Freedom of Information Act release), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB386/>.

²⁴ Michael German, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement,” Brennan Center for Justice, Aug. 27, 2020, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/hidden-plain-sight-racism-white-supremacy-and-far-right-militancy-law>.

²⁵ “Methodology,” The Plain View Project, accessed on Mar. 10, 2021, <https://www.plainviewproject.org/>.

²⁶ Rashad Robinson, “We Can’t Trust the Police to Protect Us from Racist Violence: They Contribute to It,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/21/police-white-nationalists-racist-violence>.

²⁷ Chin, “Law and Order and White Power,” pp. 59-60.

²⁸ *Young v. McDaniel*, 664 F. Supp. 263, 265 (W.D. Ky. 1986).

capture an applicant's criminal history if the crime occurred over ten years prior, or in another state."²⁹ Polygraph examinations, he claims, can identify individuals who hold extremist beliefs.³⁰ As mentioned above, the First Amendment protects the right to hold such beliefs, but polygraphs could identify "red flags" that signal the need for additional or deeper scrutiny of a candidate.³¹ Moreover, more widespread use of the polygraph may deter some extremists from attempting to join law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, psychologists and other experts have long questioned the accuracy and validity of so-called lie detectors.³²

Conclusion

While some commentators have described right-wing extremism as "resurgent," the disturbing truth is that these groups and the central tenets of their ideologies have been part of the American political environment for many decades.³³ However, certain strategies and tactics have evolved, including what scholar Amanda E. Rogers calls a "remarkably effective strategic program of dissimulation, cooptation, and infiltration" of law enforcement agencies and other state institutions, including the military.³⁴

Although we have accumulated anecdotal evidence about the threat, much more data-driven research and analysis is required if we are to more fully understand, deter and root out the presence of right-wing extremists in law enforcement ranks. Key questions for research and analysis include the following:

- **How big is the problem?** What is the scale and scope of the presence of extremists within the nation's law enforcement agencies?
- **How do right-wing extremists infiltrate the ranks?** How systematic are efforts by extremists to infiltrate police ranks or radicalize serving officers? What strategies and tactics are they employing, and have those strategies and tactics evolved over time?
- **How is radicalization occurring within the ranks?** What are the primary forums and drivers for radicalization? What percentage of radicalization could best be described as self-radicalization (versus radicalization facilitated by friends and colleagues)?
- **Who are the right-wing extremists in the ranks?** Do they share significant traits? Are there any "markers" of extremist activity that can point to such individuals in the ranks?
- **How can we keep extremists out of the ranks?** What new or modified policies, and practices should be considered in pre-employment screening?

²⁹ Ryan J. McGovern, "The Manchurian Responder? How Military and Federal Government Practices Can Help State and Local Public Safety Agencies Prevent Malicious Insider Attacks," (Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018), p. 58.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

³¹ According to the ODNI, "mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics may not constitute violent extremism, and *may* be constitutionally protected" (emphasis added). Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021: Executive Summary," Mar. 1, 2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/domestic-violent-extremism-poses-heightened-threat-2021>.

³² See, for example, "The Truth About Lie Detectors (AKA Polygraph Tests)," American Psychological Association, accessed on Apr. 10, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/research/action/polygraph>.

³³ Amanda E. Rogers, "Dismantling White Supremacist Infiltration of the Military and Law Enforcement," Century Foundation, Jan. 25, 2021, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/dismantling-white-supremacist-infiltration-of-the-military-and-law-enforcement/?agreed=1>.

³⁴ Ibid. For more on the US military and right-wing extremism, see US House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, "Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military—How to Stop It?" Feb. 11, 2020, <https://armedservices.house.gov/2020/2/subcommittee-on-military-personnel-hearing-alarming-incidents-of-white-supremacy-in-the-military-how-to-stop-it>.

- **How do law enforcement recruitment, retention, promotion, and other organizational processes support or abet extremism in the ranks?**
- **How good are right-wing extremists at counterintelligence and security?** What measures are they taking to shield their activities from heightened scrutiny?
- **How can publicly available information help?** Could social media platforms be exploited more effectively to identify right-wing extremists and their tactics for infiltrating law enforcement?

Law enforcement leaders and those concerned about police officer engagement in extremism should consider targeted research activities that can help answer these questions, including the following:

- A national survey of law enforcement personnel (including local, county, state, and special agencies and sheriff's departments), involving interviews with a representative sample of agencies (stratified by size and region). Respondents would include chiefs, recruiting officers, training officers, and field training officers.
- Semistructured interviews with law enforcement personnel formerly engaged in extremism.
- A comparative analysis of case studies (again, stratified by size and region) of police officer recruit screening and testing.
- An assessment and evaluation of the National Decertification Index, which is managed by the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training.

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