

Contemporary Conditions for Domestic Terrorism in the United States: The Risk of Radicalization in a Post-Coronavirus World

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Abstract: This paper examines what factors create domestic terrorism in the United States. First, the paper establishes three key motivating factors, those being economics, identity and socialization, and ethnicity. These are surveyed through statistical and expert analysis and their role in radicalization are explained. Finally, the paper provides insight on legislative action that could reduce these inflammatory societal ills that are creating terrorists.

Keywords: Terrorism, Radicalization, Sociology, Immigration, Racism, Economics, Social Media

Introduction

This paper seeks to establish an understanding on the factors that, on a societal scale, cause radicalization and eventually acts of terrorism. This paper will operate on the definition of terrorism as defined by Title 22, Chapter 38, Section 2656f, of the United States Code, that being “...premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against

noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents". This definition is inclusive of terrorism events that are crucial to an understanding of the phenomenon in the United States such as the Charleston church shooting of June 2015, orchestrated by Dylann Roof, but excludes those events that are more effectively described as random acts of violence such as the 2017 Las Vegas shooting conducted by Steven Paddock, which to this day has no clear motive.

This paper identifies the current risk of radicalization based on findings from critical research and what the author believes are the key factors of economics, socialization and identity, and ethnicity, and presents tentative policymaking directions to combat domestic terrorism at its roots.

Economic

The first, and perhaps most obvious indicator that the United States is a breeding ground for domestic terrorists can be observed in its economic state. Despite the role of the U.S. as the global hegemon of trade for over half a century, its citizens do not share the same level of comfort that many of its other developed counterparts do. According to a UC Berkley study on income inequality in the United States, "Income disparities are so pronounced that America's top 10 percent now average more than nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent"¹. Further, worker hourly wages increased just 24 percent from 1979 to 2018, while worker productivity has increased 134 percent². The novel coronavirus COVID-19 has also been disastrous economically for the majority of U.S. citizens. Government aid was extremely sparse when compared to other countries, and the loss of income was felt significantly

¹ Emmanuel Saez, "Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States," *Inequality in the 21st Century*, 2018, pp. 39–42, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499821-8>.

² "The Productivity–Pay Gap," Economic Policy Institute, accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>.

as one study found that “the poverty rate increased by 2.4 percentage points during the latter half of 2020... nearly double the largest annual increase in poverty since the 1960s”³. Home ownership is also on the decline among young (20–34) adults. In 2017, after decades of continuous decline, only 34% of the young adult population owned a home (this figure includes those with mortgage payments)⁴. Home ownership is associated with a slew of benefits according to the PRB, including “Homes can create wealth for their owners that in turn can benefit families for generations. Homeownership can also reduce economic risk by protecting families from rising rent prices. Owning a home has also been associated with better psychological health and greater stability for homeowners’ children”⁵. The culmination of all these negative economic factors create a deeply dissatisfied population. According to the World Happiness Report, “...numerous indicators of low psychological well-being such as depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm increased sharply among adolescents since 2010, particularly among girls and young women. Thus, those from the iGen generation (born after 1995) have scored markedly lower in psychological well-being than the Millennials (born 1980–1994) did at the same age”⁶. Adults do not fare much better, and the general outlook for the American populace is a pessimistic one. This issue of happiness and mental health, as well as anxieties surrounding economic wellbeing were greatly exacerbated by the novel coronavirus COVID-19, as indicated by another World Happiness Report article stating “There is no doubt that the initial effects

³ “U.S. Suffers Sharpest Rise in Poverty Rate in More Than 50 Years,” Bloomberg.com (Bloomberg), accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-25/u-s-suffers-sharpest-rise-in-poverty-rate-in-more-than-50-years>.

⁴ Amanda Lee, Lillian Kilduff, and Mark Mather, “U.S. Homeownership Rates Fall Among Young Adults, African Americans,” PRB, accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.prb.org/resources/u-s-homeownership-rates-fall-among-young-adults-african-americans/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jean M Twenge, “The Sad State of Happiness in the United States and the Role of Digital Media,” The Sad State of Happiness in the United States and the Role of Digital Media, March 20, 2019, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2019/the-sad-state-of-happiness-in-the-united-states-and-the-role-of-digital-media/>.

of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental ill-health symptoms were large, negative, and remarkably consistent across the data and studies discussed here. It is worth reiterating that these relate only to adults and solely to wealthy industrialised countries. These effects were worst in younger age groups and women, ethnic minorities, and those with pre-existing mental health problems, thus reinforcing many pre-existing mental health inequalities”⁷. So how does this tie into terrorism?

A leading theory in the subject of terrorism research is the theory of relative deprivation, defined by W.G. Runciman with the following example: “We can roughly say that [a person] is relatively deprived of X when (i) he does not have X, (ii) he sees some other person or persons, which may include himself at some previous or expected time, as having X (whether or not this is or will be in fact the case), (iii) he wants X, and (iv) he sees it as feasible that he should have X”⁸. In layman’s terms, the theory of relative deprivation posits that one will compare oneself to an outgroup who they perceive as having something that they do not, thus creating action or sometimes pathologies. Those who can be categorized as suffering from relative deprivation often manifest pathologies such as violence to equalize this perceived imbalance. While this phenomenon seems negative, it can be applied to many situations and is in isolation an observation without moral judgment. Two examples are the Civil Rights movement in the United States, in which African Americans were without rights enjoyed by white Americans, thus they were compelled to act in order to achieve equal rights, or the rise of the Nazi party in Weimar Germany, in which white Germans perceived that they were disadvantaged compared to Jewish Germans, thus they were compelled to support the Nazi party in

⁷ James Banks, “Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic, March 20, 2021, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/mental-health-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

⁸ W.G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: a Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth-Century England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

order to achieve the desired effect of elevated social status. The second example highlights a key aspect of the theory of relative deprivation—its intrinsic subjectivity. Whether an individual suffers from relative deprivation differs from reality in that if one perceives that they exist in a state of deprivation, for the purpose of their psyche, they do. Hence the Nazi Germany example—while not exactly privileged, the average German was not meaningfully deprived when compared to the Jewish population of Germany. It is in this scapegoating that we can see the true usefulness of the theory in understanding radicalization as a tool to identify a population at risk of manifesting negative pathologies as a result of relative deprivation.

Relative deprivation's pertinence here and to the meaning of this paper as whole is to provide the first lens through which one can observe the American populace. The average American is highly likely to be a compelling case study for relative deprivation as they are becoming deeply unsatisfied, increasingly marginalized, and largely helpless as traditional safety nets (employment, housing, and insurance) disappear from under them. The most affected populations—young adults, and those with pre-existing health problems, according to the earlier World Happiness Report article, are especially at risk for violence^{9,10}. The effects of relative deprivation on a populace are well documented. One study titled "Income Inequality, Redistribution, and Domestic Terrorism" supported the idea of economic relative deprivation causing domestic terrorism, finding that "More income inequality results in more domestic terrorism; IV-approaches yield similar results"¹¹. Another study found that "Overwhelming evidence suggests negative impacts of relative

⁹ "Is Mental Illness a Risk Factor for Gun Violence?," RAND Corporation, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy/analysis/essays/mental-illness-risk-factor-for-gun-violence.html>.

¹⁰ "Prevalence Rate of Violent Crime, by Age U.S. 2019," Statista, September 15, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/424137/prevalence-rate-of-violent-crime-in-the-us-by-age/>.

¹¹ Tim Krieger and Daniel Meierrieks, "Income Inequality, Redistribution and Domestic Terrorism," *World Development* 116 (2019): pp. 125–136, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.12.008>.

deprivation on a wide range of health measures, such as life expectancy in developed countries (including Japan, the UK, the US, and countries in Eastern Europe); coronary heart disease and cancer in the UK; self-reported health status in China and the US; diet and exercise in the UK; mortality rates, health-related limitations, body mass index, and risky health behaviors in the US; psychosocial health in China; and health-compromising behavior among people in the US and psychosocial stress-induced injuries among non-human primates in the lab”¹².

In the history of the United States there has been a large number of terrorist activity with clear economic motivations. The evolution of peaceful leftist groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society into offshoots such as Weather Underground and the 19 May Communist Organization are strong examples of economically driven terrorist activity, as they conducted bombings, drive-by shootings, and robberies aimed at the redistribution of wealth and advancing communist goals. While leftist terrorist activity in the United States has been virtually nonexistent for the past few decades, recent concerns about antifa (anti-fascist) movements have been reignited following the 2016 presidential election and especially the riots following George Floyd’s death. The Center for Strategic and International Studies defines antifa as “...a decentralized network of far-left militants that oppose what they believe are fascist, racist, or otherwise right-wing extremists”¹³. While the “antifa” moniker is ineffective due to the “leaderless resistance” nature of its organization, the presence of violent leftists in the media zeitgeist has the intended effect of terrorism: generating fear in the populace. Both former President of the United States (POTUS) Donald J. Trump and current POTUS Joe Biden have condemned antifa in public

¹² Xi Chen, “Relative Deprivation and Individual Well-Being,” *IZA World of Labor*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.140>.

¹³ Seth G Jones, “Who Are Antifa, and Are They a Threat?,” *Who Are Antifa, and Are They a Threat?* | Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 26, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/who-are-antifa-and-are-they-threat>.

statements^{14,15}, and according to Google analytics, search queries for “antifa” peaked during and surrounding the January 6th capitol building riots¹⁶. The media sensationalism of antifa could be emboldening to future acts of terrorism and runs contrary to the idea of deplatforming terrorists.

It is clear that the income inequality in the United States carries with it sweeping issues of mental health and wellbeing, as well as all the associated pathologies. The economic situation in the United States is an extreme potential motivating factor for radicalization, and as the research suggest, an extreme indicator of upcoming violence. But economic inequality is not the limit of America’s concerns, nor the scope of relative deprivation, as will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Identity and Socialization

The populace of the United States is facing both an economic and identity crisis. A greater American identity can be ascribed to things like the democratic process and its presence in the world stage, but on a more micro scale is the identity founded on networks of high-trust neighborhoods, interpersonal relationships, church communities, and classrooms. According to pew research, trust in the government is near an all-time low, and has been since as early as 2007¹⁷. This trust is also greatly divided across party lines, exacerbating the lack of partisan

¹⁴ Barbara Barr, “One-on-One Interview with Joe Biden,” WGAL (WGAL, September 8, 2020), <https://www.wgal.com/article/one-on-one-interview-with-joe-biden-in-harrisburg/33944090#>.

¹⁵ “Amid Protests, Trump Says He Will Designate Antifa as Terrorist Organization,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, May 31, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-minneapolis-police-trump-antifa/amid-protests-trump-says-he-will-designate-antifa-as-terrorist-organization-idUKKBN2370LP>.

¹⁶ “Google Trends – ‘Antifa’ Search Query,” Google Trends (Google), accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.google.com/trends>.

¹⁷ “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2021,” Pew Research Center – U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>.

trust among U.S. citizens, with conservative respondents polling in at 5% and liberal respondents polling in at 40% in April of 2021¹⁸ amid widespread concerns of voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election. A third concerning statistic derived from the same source is that trust among the government is lowest among Gen Z respondents, and as previously established, young adults are the most at risk of violence and radicalization. A Princeton study found that not only is trust in the electoral process at an all-time low, its efficacy is as well. According to the study, “When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy”¹⁹. To corroborate this, an Oxford study found that “computational propaganda,” that being information with a political agenda spread on social media through the dispersal of automated ‘bots’, had significant influence in the 2016 U.S. election. On Twitter alone, bots made up “...over 10% of the sample”²⁰, constituting “17 million tweets from 1,798, 127 unique users”²¹, and reaching “...highly influential network positions within retweet networks during the 2016 US election”²². The study’s findings indicate that there is significant and outcome-shaping influence from Twitter bots, and closes with the statement that “Computational propaganda is now one of the most powerful tools against democracy”²³. Not only does the average American do not trust in their government, these

¹⁸ “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2021,” Pew Research Center – U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>.

¹⁹ Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): pp. 564–581, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714001595>.

²⁰ Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, “Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary,” *University of Oxford*, November 2017.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

study indicates that they are correct in their analysis of the situation. Further polling conducted by Politico finds that “Among Americans who identify as Democrat or Republican, 1 in 3 now believe that violence could be justified to advance their parties’ political goals – a substantial increase over the last three years”²⁴. Another poll conducted by the Braver Angels, a bipartisan organization, found that “Nearly half (47%) of the 1,999 registered voters surveyed disagreed that the election ‘is likely to be fair and honest,’” and that “56% agreed that ‘America will see an increase in violence as a result of the election,’ with only 11% disagreeing”²⁵. Further polling found that “Unbelievably, 61% of Americans believe the country is on the verge of another civil war”²⁶ What all of these polls and studies amount to is that confidence in the American identity, and its keystone, the democratic process, are at all-time lows in the history of the state.

Further degradations of what are traditional measures of community cohesion and identity are also observable. Gallup’s 2021 bi-annual pew research found that “Americans’ membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup’s eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999”²⁷. Churches represent a strong source of community, with regular attendance providing numerous well-documented

²⁴ Larry Diamond et al., “Opinion: Americans Increasingly Believe Violence Is Justified If the Other Side Wins,” POLITICO (POLITICO, October 9, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/01/political-violence-424157>.

²⁵ Jack Hadfield, “Poll: Majority of Americans See Possibility Of Civil War, Political Violence Following Election,” The Political Insider, October 7, 2020, <https://thepoliticalinsider.com/poll-majority-of-americans-see-possibility-of-civil-war-political-violence-following-election/>.

²⁶ Ryan Hughes, “NEW POLL SHOWS MAJORITY OF AMERICANS WORRIED ABOUT ANOTHER U.S. CIVIL WAR,” Engagious, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://engagious.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Back-to-Normal-10.1.20-FINAL.pdf>.

²⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup.com (Gallup, May 6, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

benefits. One such study found that “religious attendance has salutary longitudinal effects on depressed affect among members of the youngest generation. These cross-sectional findings... withstand controlling for the effects of health, age, and other known sociodemographic correlates or predictors of both religious attendance and psychological well-being”²⁸. A Duke University study found that “The positive influence of religious certainty on well-being, however, is direct and substantial: individuals with strong religious faith report higher levels of life satisfaction, greater personal happiness, and fewer negative psychosocial consequences of traumatic life events”²⁹. As religiosity in the United States continues to trend downward, concerns about isolation are raised. A pew research study found that those who identify as Atheist are the least likely to participate in their community, followed by Agnostics and “nothing in particular” respondents³⁰. The psychological effects of isolation are extreme, and the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic worsened this already serious situation.

Interpersonal relationships are declining as well, with marriages at an all-time low according to the CDC, who found that “From 2017 to 2018, the [marriage] rate dropped 6%, from 6.9 per 1,000 population to 6.5, the lowest of the 1900–2018 period”³¹. Not only is marriage on the decline, but dating is as well. According to a General Social Survey

²⁸ J.S. Levin, K.S. Markides, and L.A. Ray, “Religious Attendance and Psychological Well-Being in Mexican Americans: A Panel Analysis of Three-Generations Data,” *The Gerontologist* 36, no. 4 (January 1996): pp. 454–463, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/36.4.454>.

²⁹ Christopher G. Ellison, “Religious Involvement and Subjective Well-Being,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 32, no. 1 (1991): p. 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136801>.

³⁰ Aleksandra Sandstrom and Becka A. Alper, “Who’s Active in Community Groups? Often, Those with More Education or Income,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, August 18, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/22/americans-with-higher-education-and-income-are-more-likely-to-be-involved-in-community-groups/>.

³¹ Sally C. Curtin and Paul D. Sutton, “Marriage Rates in the United States, 1900–2018,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 29, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/marriage_rate_2018/marriage_rate_2018.htm.

in 2019, over half of young adults in America are single³². Further, birth rates in the U.S. are at an all-time low, as “The number of babies born in the U.S. dropped by 4% in 2020 compared with the previous year, according to a new federal report released Wednesday. The general fertility rate was 55.8 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44, reaching yet another record low... This is the sixth consecutive year that the number of births has declined after an increase in 2014, down an average of 2% per year, and the lowest number of births since 1979”³³. On top of the reduced birth rates, the United States also has among the highest abortion rates in the west, and while that number has fallen since 2014, on average 1 in 4 women will have an abortion in their lifetime in the United States³⁴. The number of families with a single mother has also been steadily trending upward³⁵, and overall, almost every conceivable metric for societal well-being is on the decline.

Given that, what we are left with is a mentally ill, isolated populace, who does not trust their government in the slightest. The risks of such a populace are clear. It is important to note that the theory of relative deprivation is not limited to economic envy but is also applicable to ideas like political representation and government treatment. It is clear that the individuals of the American populace are not only relatively deprived of political representation, but absolutely deprived as well. This generates concerns about the possibility of radical populist movements arising. A study conducted in France found that group

³² Emily Guskin Lisa Bonos, “It’s Not Just You: New Data Shows More than Half of Young People in America Don’t Have a Romantic Partner,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 22, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/03/21/its-not-just-you-new-data-shows-more-than-half-young-people-america-dont-have-romantic-partner/>.

³³ Bill Chappell, “U.S. Birthrate Fell By 4% In 2020, Hitting Another Record Low,” *NPR* (NPR, May 5, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/05/993817146/u-s-birth-rate-fell-by-4-in-2020-hitting-another-record-low>.

³⁴ “Induced Abortion in the United States,” *Guttmacher Institute*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states#>.

³⁵ “Number of Single Mothers U.S. 2019,” *Statista*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/205000/number-of-families-with-a-single-mother-in-the-us/>.

relative deprivation (abbreviated as GRD and defined as “comparing the ingroup to some other target outgroup and indicating the extent to which they judge their situation to be better or worse off”³⁶) was the strongest indicating factor in voting for the Extreme Right (ER) party. This paper draws comparisons between the ER platform in France and the “alt-right” (alternative right) platform in the United States, and use the findings of the French study to convey the risk of further radicalization in the U.S. The study finds that “Issues surrounding immigration and rejection of cultural diversity play a central role in the ER party programmes”³⁷, and posits that these ER parties seek to equalize GRD through “national preference in housing, employment, and state benefits to those who are of French citizenship”³⁸. There are obvious parallels between the French anti-immigrant party programs and the American alt-right’s, as observed in the rhetoric of former POTUS Donald J. Trump and the border wall policy he ran on. The conclusion of the study found that “the present research showed that in addition to prejudice and antiegalitarian attitudes, GRD is a significant factor to consider in ER voting”³⁹. While it is very difficult to gauge population data in France by ethnicity due to a law from the 1800s that prohibits census data by religion or ethnicity⁴⁰, data on refugees suggests that a tiny portion of France is inhabited by non-native French, with “A total of 79,746 decisions have been made on initial [refugee status] applications... 84 percent of asylum applications have been rejected in the first instance”⁴¹. This data indicates that the refugee crisis of which many

³⁶ Karolina Urbanska and Serge Guimond, “Swaying to the Extreme: Group Relative Deprivation Predicts Voting for an Extreme Right Party in the French Presidential Election,” *International Review of Social Psychology* 31, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.201>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “France”, Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency), accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/france/#people-and-society>.

⁴¹ “Refugees in France: Figures and Development,” Worlddata.info, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/france/asylum.php>.

ER parties across Europe made the platform for the populist, nativist sentiment surveyed in the French study consisted only of a tiny population amidst greater France. Compare this to the United States, which according to Pew Research data houses “...more immigrants than any other country in the world”⁴², making up “13.7% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.8%) in 1970”⁴³. If less than 100,000 refugees can cause an ER revival in France, then it is no surprise that almost tripling the immigrant population of 50 years ago has created a similar movement in the United States. While there are no guarantees that a resurgence of ER movements in the United States necessitate terrorism, if it is coupled with the previously discussed factors of mental illness, economic and ethnic GRD, and a lack of identity, it is highly likely that there could be a correlative increase. According to the Global Terrorism Index, “In North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks have increased by 250 per cent since 2014, with deaths increasing by 709 per cent over the same period”⁴⁴. The dangers of far-right, populist movements are apparent, especially with respect to the difficult situation of ethnic tension in the United States.

Ethnicity and Race

The degree to which ethnic tension is pervasive in the media, political discourse, and minds of America is difficult to overstate. A Gallup poll on race relations found that in 2020 the United States hit a 20-year low in “relations between Whites and Blacks,” with only 36% of African Americans responding that relations are very good or somewhat good, and 46% of Whites responding very good or somewhat good. Compare

⁴² Abby Budiman, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, September 22, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism,” accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources/>.

this to 2013, in which the same poll found that 72% of White adults found race relations very good or somewhat good, and 66% of African Americans found race relations very good or somewhat good⁴⁵. Further, a 2021 poll also conducted by Gallup found that 48% of Americans answered they “personally worry about race relations” “a great deal,” and 25% responded “a fair amount,” similarly, 46% of respondents indicated that they are “very dissatisfied” with the state of race relations, and only 7% indicated they were “very satisfied”⁴⁶. An Associated Press poll found that 84% of surveyed adults believe that racism is a problem in the U.S., with 30% of respondents indicating that it is an “extremely serious” problem⁴⁷. Search queries for ‘racism’ also more than quadrupled the previous 16-year high in 2020 according to Google Trends⁴⁸. From this, it is clear that American citizens are preoccupied with racism and race relations.

Measuring the media’s obsession with a topic is difficult, but to give some level of indication, the New York Times has published 3,693 “Race/Related” articles in the time between May 2020 and May 2021⁴⁹. Compare that to the May 2019–May 2020 timeframe, in which 1,483 articles were published in the “Race/Related” category⁵⁰. While the Washington Post doesn’t allow users to refine their search in the same way, in the last 12 months the Washington Post followed a similar

⁴⁵ Gallup, “Race Relations,” Gallup.com (Gallup, July 6, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1687/race-relations.aspx>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “George Floyd’s Death: One Year Later – AP-NORC,” AP, May 21, 2021, <https://apnorc.org/projects/george-floyds-death-one-year-later/>.

⁴⁸ “Google Trends – ‘Racism’ Search Query,” Google Trends (Google), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.google.com/trends>.

⁴⁹ “The New York Times,” The New York Times (The New York Times), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/search?dropmab=true&endDate=20210501&query=racism&sort=best&startDate=20200501>.

⁵⁰ “The New York Times,” The New York Times (The New York Times), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/search?dropmab=true&endDate=20200501&query=racism&sort=best&startDate=20190501>.

trend, publishing 3,682 articles on racism^{51,52}. Media interest in racism more than doubled in just a year. Searches into academia have similar results. A Google Scholar search finds that, since 2020, there have been 24,300 articles published with ‘racism’ in their title⁵³. The American Psychological Association has published 1,416 articles in the last year on racism⁵⁴. The 117th (2021–2023) Congress of the United States has introduced 132 bills that discuss racism in just 4 months, and the 116th (2019–2021) Congress introduced 146 bills⁵⁵. The 117th Congress introduced almost as many bills on racism in 4 months as the 116th did in two years. It is clear that race relations are of extreme pertinence to the future of the United States.

In the past there have been numerous instances of ethnic conflict bringing down states, or at least sparking violence. Rome is a go-to example, since the current state of the United States in many ways mimics the fall of Rome, but Yugoslavia, Rwanda, India, Ireland, Armenia, and China also come to mind as strong examples of disastrous ethnic conflicts. Given the earlier data regarding the looming threat of a second U.S. civil war and the increased acceptance of political violence, the escalation of small-scale ethnic conflicts in the U.S. such as those observed following the death of George Floyd is especially concerning.

The earlier discussion of GRD applies perfectly to ethnicity as well. High-profile theories of psychology and sociology such as Critical Race

⁵¹ “Search, racism” The Washington Post (WP Company), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/newssearch/?query=racism&sort=Relevance&datefilter=12+Months>.

⁵² The Huffington Post, The Guardian, and CNN showed similar results but did not allow the sorting of their articles by time in the same manner as The New York Times, so I neglected to include them as redundant examples.

⁵³ “Google Scholar Search Query ‘Racism,’” accessed July 12, 2021, https://scholar.google.com/scholar?start=0&q=racism&hl=en&as_sdt=0,26&as_ylo=2020.

⁵⁴ “APA PsycNet,” American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association), accessed July 12, 2021, <https://psycnet.apa.org/search/results?id=3f8b3bee-0e55-f2d9-4db6-46c8746261c6&tab=PB&sort=PublicationYearMSSort%20desc,AuthorSort%20asc&display=25&page=1>.

⁵⁵ “Racism,” GovTrack.us, accessed July 12, 2021, https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/subjects/racism/971#text=racism&congress=116&sort=introduced_date&terms=__ALL__&terms2=__ALL__.

Theory, White Privilege, and Systemic Racism, as well as policy decisions such as affirmative action, ethnicity-based scholarships and admission processes, and broader immigration and refugee programs can all lead to GRD manifesting in the populace. The group in question here is likely white Americans, who are at the butt-end of these policies meant to uplift minority groups, whether any negative effects as a result of these policies to white Americans is real or imagined. Abroad, white nationalism and nativist sentiment is very much on the rise, with populist parties seeing more support such as the French National Rally ER party discussed earlier in this paper with Marine Le Pen at its head, or the UK Independence Party that spearheaded Brexit. Militaries are also subject to radicalization, and one 2020 report from the Pentagon stated that “individuals with extremist affiliations and military experience are a concern to U.S. national security because of their proven ability to execute high-impact events,” and that “white supremacists are using our [the U.S.] military to further their hateful and violent agenda”⁵⁶. Concerns about extremism in the U.S. military are warranted, given examples from abroad such as the Ukrainian Azov Battalion, a militaristic neo-Nazi group that was accepted into the Ukrainian National Guard in 2014, or the recent German platoon that was withdrawn for racially-charged misconduct and extremist behavior⁵⁷.

Ethnically motivated extremism is not only present, but dangerous. According to the 2019 F.B.I. report on hate crimes as covered by the New York Times, “Overall, the F.B.I. collected data on 7,314 criminal incidents motivated by bias toward race or ethnicity or gender identity in 2019. It was the third straight year the metric surpassed 7,100 incidents and it was the highest number since the F.B.I. reported

⁵⁶ Megan Scully, “Pentagon Report Reveals Inroads White Supremacists Have Made in Military,” Roll Call (Roll Call, February 17, 2021), <https://www.rollcall.com/2021/02/16/pentagon-report-reveals-inroads-white-supremacists-have-made-in-military/>.

⁵⁷ “Germany Pulls Military Unit From Lithuania Amid Racism, Harassment Allegations,” Voice of America, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/germany-pulls-military-unit-lithuania-amid-racism-harassment-allegations>.

7,783 incidents in 2008. Experts say the F.B.I. data likely undercounts the number of hate crimes in America, both because many victims fail to report incidents and local agencies are not required to report hate crime data to the F.B.I.”⁵⁸, with only 2,172 agencies out of the more than 15,000 across the U.S. reporting. On top of the marked increase in hate crimes have been the numerous high-profile, racially-motivated shootings and other atrocities in the United States. The El Paso shooting and the Charleston church shooting are two examples of mass shootings conducted with racial motivation, and instances of police killings motivated by race such as the death of Breonna Taylor and, most notoriously, the death of George Floyd. The public increasingly believes that those in positions of power use their status to abuse ethnic minorities, and the ethnic majority (though that is quickly changing) feels that they are being unfairly persecuted for being white. We are entering a situation in which every ethnic group is experiencing extreme GRD, and the effects are clear. Riots, hate crimes, and shootings are pervasive in the news. As shown by the earlier polls, nobody believes that they are getting their fair treatment, neither white Americans nor African Americans, and we could very well be reaching a boiling point of violence and frustration. Sweeping policy changes need to be enacted to avoid disastrous outcomes.

Social Media, Censorship, and Recruitment

Recruitment into extremist groups or ideologies has never been easier. While online chatrooms are monitored with significantly more efficacy than in the past, extremists still congregate in forums such as 4chan or chatrooms such as Discord. Some are so conspicuous as to post on Facebook or Twitter. It is undeniable that social media represents a massive

⁵⁸ Tim Arango, “Hate Crimes in U.S. Rose to Highest Level in More Than a Decade in 2019,” The New York Times (The New York Times, November 16, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/us/hate-crime-rate.html>.

chunk of the average American's time-budget. According to 2021 Pew Research, "71% of Snapchat users ages 18 to 29 say they use the app daily, including six-in-ten who say they do this multiple times a day. The pattern is similar for Instagram: 73% of 18- to 29-year-old Instagram users say they visit the site every day, with roughly half (53%) reporting they do so several times per day"⁵⁹. Further, "YouTube and Facebook continue to dominate the online landscape, with 81% and 69%, respectively, reporting ever using these sites"⁶⁰. They also find that social media is significantly more popular among young people, "Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, that have an especially strong following among young adults. In fact, a majority of 18- to 29-year-olds say they use Instagram (71%) or Snapchat (65%), while roughly half say the same for TikTok"⁶¹. It is important to note that this sample only includes respondents 18 and older, so a real sample of even younger people, while not possible due to the moral and legal implications of conducting such a survey, would likely have even greater implications on social media usage. The question of whether the presence of extremist thought in these online spaces can influence radicalization remains understudied. Many creators that can be considered extremist use comedy or satire to veil their unmarketable views, such as comedian Sam Hyde, who has been falsely accused of numerous terrorist attacks by his fans in a way that disrupts journalistic integrity⁶². Social media companies, as well as other online platforms such as Google's search engine and YouTube's video-sharing service, have started enacting censorship measures intended to combat misinformation and extremism on a range of topics

⁵⁹ Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson, "Social Media Use in 2021," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech (Pew Research Center, April 9, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Never Believe Any Breaking Report on Twitter Naming This Comedian as the Attacker," Mashable (helios.web, June 19, 2017), <https://mashable.com/article/sam-hyde-shooter-twitter-finsbury-park-london-attack>.

from vaccination hesitancy to nationalist sentiments. European governments have also engaged in such campaigns, as observed in Germany, the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent, France, criminalizing and censoring extremist views and attempting to grant law enforcement backdoors through encryption. The legality, morality, and perhaps most importantly, the efficacy of such censorship measures has come under a large degree of criticism. One expert found that it is not the case “that individuals can find themselves on inevitable trajectories toward extremism if they go to the right place on the Internet and start hanging out with the wrong crowd. It’s nowhere near as simple as that”⁶³, indicating that mere exposure is not at all a substantial factor in radicalization, instead that “Self-radicalization is not new, and in fact represents the norm that we have dealt with”⁶⁴. Another article states that “the evidence we have indicates that online speech plays a limited role [in radicalization],” and that as such, these measures are “...simply an invitation to censor online speech, even more than some nations already do. Nations need no additional incentives, nor international support, for cracking down on dissidents”⁶⁵. Another article states that “...there is scant evidence that social media crackdowns will actually prevent terror attacks from happening,” and that internet censorship, even with good intentions, can lead to “Citizens fighting for their rights in disadvantaged or persecuted communities across the world must not [to] be deprived of their most effective tool for organizing and exposing lies and injustice”⁶⁶.

⁶³ Kathy Gilsinan, “ISIS and the ‘Internet Radicalization’ Trope,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, December 9, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/isis-internet-radicalization/419148/>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Molly Land, “The UK’s Plan to Deny Terrorists ‘Safe Spaces’ Online Would Make Us All Less Safe in the Long Run,” *The Conversation*, June 23, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/the-uks-plan-to-deny-terrorists-safe-spaces-online-would-make-us-all-less-safe-in-the-long-run-79323>.

⁶⁶ Rebecca MacKinnon, “Can Censoring Social Media Stop Extremism?,” *The Aspen Institute*, July 1, 2017, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/censorship-on-the-internet/>.

With the role of social media in radicalization being overstated, how does censorship affect potential radicals and the radicalization process? As was stated previously, free access to social media and the internet as well as free speech in general are vital not only for one's own personal liberty and sense of freedom, but for positive social change as well. Acknowledging that, governments and companies responsible for censorship must have an extremely profound reason to limit speech on their platforms or within their countries. Experts believe that censorship is ineffective, however, and rather than root out the problem of misinformation and extremism, it can vindicate the censored and cause misinformation to spread even faster. An article from the Guardian discussing censorship stated that "In fact, the history of censorship shows that it is completely useless in stamping out ideas: the fastest way to spread an idea is to censor it"⁶⁷. The article goes on to specifically mention examples of terrorist movements that were strengthened by censorship, including the Irish separatist movement and more currently, Islamist extremists. That begs the question, if states and non-governmental actors know the inefficacy of censorship, why do they make efforts to censor in the first place? It is unthinkable to assert that these groups lack the funding or know-how to inform themselves on their own programs. The Guardian article posits that it is due to the nature of censorship's efficacy in reinforcing negative aspects of the status quo, stating that "There is one thing censorship laws manage to do effectively: they do help leaders control and intimidate real grassroots dissent and democratic criticism of all kinds"⁶⁸. This once again brings to mind the earlier polling results and Princeton study that indicate our democracy no longer serves the needs or wants of its people. Quite to that point, we are observing the link between moderates and extremism as a product of censorship today, according to a USA Today article

⁶⁷ Naomi Wolf, "The Fastest Way to Spread Extremism Is with the Censor's Boot," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 7, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/07/extremism-censorship-ideas-charlie-hebdo>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

interviewing the Southern Poverty Law Center. They find that “Anger over perceived censorship by social media companies is bridging the divide between far-right extremist groups and Trump supporters,” which is “...largely to do with the rhetoric that we are seeing and the degree to which people are unifying around this issue of censorship or perceived censorship from tech companies”⁶⁹. Moderates and general U.S. conservatives are observably beginning to sympathize with more extremist thought as a result of its censorship, just as The Guardian article warned. The earlier data also indicates that Facebook and YouTube are the two most trafficked social media sites, which also happen to have among the most censorship efforts surrounding them.

From this research, it is clear that the effects of social media on radicalization are not as pronounced as academia initially presumed, but what is having a significant catalyzing effect on the proliferation of extremism is the censorship that these social media giants and governments have enacted to combat it.

Policy Recommendations

It is my firm belief that terrorism is a product of mistreatment, injustice, and misguidance. Counterterrorism in the modern age must not be a symptomatic response. No longer can America afford to prescribe band-aids for bullet wounds. Eliminating terrorists can be done with task forces and mass surveillance, but to eliminate terrorism requires a more basic approach. A simple truth is that happy people do not become terrorists; those with too much to lose and bright futures ahead of them do not throw it all away in order to get a grim headline and grieving families. The American people are quickly sinking into people

⁶⁹ Jessica Guynn, “‘They Want to Take Your Speech Away,’ Censorship Cry Unites Trump Supporters and Extremists after Capitol Attack,” USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, January 16, 2021), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/01/15/censorship-trump-extremists-facebook-twitter-social-media-capitol-riot/4178737001/>.

with nothing to lose, especially the youth. As debt peaks and income plummets, Americans feel they have no economic future. As they fail to connect with neighbors and classmates and lead childless, unmarried lives, the American people become isolated. And as they experience the frustrations of these societal ills, they become radicalized, with no family or future to lose. To avoid the overboiling of this populace the U.S. must have not only the sapience, but also the humility to bow its head and admit its current state of affairs.

Addressing societal health is an extremely daunting task. No government wants to admit that their society is riddled with the problems discussed in this paper, let alone a hegemon in decline like the United States. But the fact remains that without an extreme readjustment of not only the policy being created in the U.S., but the outlook of our legislators, the current trajectory of misery will remain. The depressed, poor, and beaten down American people need a government that looks out for them, or at the very least represents their interests, unlike the government in its current state as is easily seen by the evidence presented in this paper. The scope of U.S. policy in addressing these issues is far too small-scale. To make meaningful change, our politicians must not be content to simply pass meaningless resolutions or make shallow campaign promises as they have been. America's bread and circus is among the world's best, but it is not enough to distract the people from their reality for much longer. It is becoming increasingly clear that citizens are willing to take violent action for political change if our leaders are unwilling to take the peaceful route, as I am sure many of the supposedly PTSD-afflicted congresspeople would attest to following the January 6th capitol building riot.

To paint with broad strokes, the first steps towards making meaningful ground on improving the conditions in the United States is to kick the leeches that have attached themselves to our policymakers and government officials. As the Princeton study indicates, interest groups exercise

a hold over our legislative process that far more closely resembles an oligarchy than a democracy, and our current representatives may never be capable of severing their ties with their deep-pocket benefactors. Money is being funneled into politics like never before, and its impact is clear. The extent to which the government favors corporate interest over its own was made most apparent during and after the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. Billions of dollars in corporate bailouts were levied without hesitation, but it took months of filibustering, political maneuvering, and destroyed livelihoods for the American people to receive any semblance of aid. Most insulting was that which was trojan-horsed into the legislation. Not only did U.S. citizens receive a pittance compared to other countries in economic relief, the U.S. was bankrolling other countries in very same piece of legislation that was providing far too little relief to the millions whose lives were turned upside down here in the states. The almost 6,000-page coronavirus relief package contained \$500 million to Israel, \$10 million in Pakistani “gender programs,” and \$454 billion in corporate bailouts. This is but one example of the abhorrent levels of greed and fiscal irresponsibility our government exercised during the time that the citizens most needed aid.

Policy needs to be put in place to prevent the ludicrous influence of lobbyists and companies over our legislative process. American bureaucracy is notoriously nightmarish, and every step along the way creates opportunities for money to change hands obscured from the public eye. But good journalism is far from enough to put an end to that, as billionaires control more than just the lobbies, but also increasingly the media that reports on them. Jeff Bezos owns the Washington Post, Mike Bloomberg his namesake publication, Twitter bots swung the 2016 Presidential election, and Google can and often does sweep under the rug information that could inform voters of policies that are harmful to Google’s bottom line. The tech giants need to be brought under serious regulation, and possibly forced to become public entities.

Monopolies need to be broken up not only in tech, but also in food and entertainment. Corporate America is the ruling class.

The way to change this is through numerous limits. Limits or even a complete banning of donations and lobbying. Limits on terms and term lengths for congresspeople. Limits on the size and reach of companies. U.S. law has long been committed to treating companies as it would individuals, but it has never been more abundantly clear that corporations are a cancer on our democracy, and ought to be excised as such. The corporations have been pushing the Overton window for as long as they have been allowed to, shaping policy to their liking at the expense of voters.

To an extent, legislature that represents the will of the public will serve to heal the social ills that have been outlined, especially those concerns about political participation and trust in government. Killing the snake does not remove the poison, however, and further action must be taken. The United States must realize that the era of a “world police” is far over. Steps in the right direction have been taken as troops are withdrawn from the Middle East, but even if the U.S. turns away from imperialism, the vestiges of its once far-reaching influences will remain problematic. Military bases across the world need to be repurposed or abandoned, and the billions of dollars in foreign aid and military expenditures must be redirected to domestic programs. The issues of mental health and the striking lack of community involvement in the U.S. can be remedied in a number of ways. If money is directed into domestic support programs for universal healthcare, a significant portion of the anxieties that Americans currently face would be relieved. Funds also ought to be directed into mental health services and support structures for families wanting to have children. If predatory corporations are removed, securing basic necessities like food and housing will be much less burdensome and people will have more time and ability to engage in community activities. Community centers would be well within the financial capabilities of this theoretical legislative package, and they

would foster involvement and quell isolation. The means to equalize economic GRD would be within the scope of such a package, and as earlier established, the manifestation of the violent pathologies is a by-product of factors like mental illness and RD. Through minimizing the factors that inflame tensions, ethnic divides could also be lessened. Resolving ethnic tension is far outside the scope of this paper, and perhaps the scope of sociology as a whole right now. Favorable economic conditions and lessened inequality across the board would dismiss current inciting factors, however.

The funding for such an ambitious change of policy could come from a restructured taxation system. Currently, the super-wealthy pay almost nothing in taxes due to loopholes and subsidies. This egregious failure of the government must be remedied, and in doing so will alleviate income inequality and provide funding for essential programs like those outlined prior. Through a declining military presence and redirection of foreign aid to domestic aid, no shortage of budget will arise. It goes without saying that the United States military is an obscene mess of overspending and downsizing without significantly reducing military capabilities is a much more pragmatic solution than it may initially seem. While the United States government has not been as bad as much of Europe on surveillance and censorship, abolishing the Patriot Act as well as many of the current ineffective, fiscally irresponsible government measures as well as regulating the tech giants will allow free speech to continue unfettered in online spaces. This will alleviate the concerns of censorship, without creating so-called “safe spaces” for terrorism as was outlined in the earlier research.

In summation, the policy changes that I propose begins from the ground up. Corporations, especially tech giants, must face significant taxation and regulation to prevent censorship and to limit what is currently an overt control over our government processes. Our legislators must be banned from receiving money from outside sources, and their spending and terms must be severely limited from its current state.

The military ought to face substantial downsizing and the practice of policing the world with endless wars, coups, and diplomatic bullying has to stop in order to promote a more peaceful world both abroad and at home. Funds diverted from frivolous foreign aid and the gratuitous military industrial complex ought to be redirected to domestic programs focused on mental health and community involvement, as well as universal healthcare. These policies only begin to scratch the surface of the plethora of issues outlined in this paper. The key to these policies and developing into a more effective counterterrorism strategy in general is to put an end to the War on Terror, and to develop a human-oriented approach. As was stated earlier, happy people do not commit acts of terrorism. The solution lies not in task forces raiding the homes of U.S. citizens, but in the fulfillment and futures of the populace.

Conclusion

The United States is facing a surplus of epidemics and crises. Crises of mental health, identity, housing, epidemics of violence, hate crimes, and poverty, all of which are currently more likely to be effectively addressed by a GoFundMe page than a government program. The scope of these issues goes beyond what was already covered ad-nauseum in this paper, and while the policy recommendations provided sound almost positive towards the end, I insist that the discussion is heeded as a warning. If serious efforts are not made to substantially restructure the status quo in America, no amount of money and guns will solve the problems. To restate an earlier statistic: 61% of Americans believe that we are on the verge of civil war. Well over half of everyone you meet has a deeply set fear of imminent and disastrous conflict breaking out at the drop of a hat. This fear, and the many others discussed here, cannot be resolved with another pointless resolution. People can no longer be distracted and misled from the depths of America's illness.

My policy suggestions are echoed more succinctly in the words of black activist and poet Gil Scott-Heron in his song “Comment #1”.

“All I want is a good home and a wife—

And her children, and some food to feed them every night—”

The American dream is not yet gone forever. Happy people do not commit acts of terror.