

Hate speech or freedom of expression?

Extremist groups have weaponized social media to push agendas

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ARNOLT CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

A heavy metal guitarist from southern Indiana caught up in Donald Trump's false claims of widespread voter fraud joined election deniers storming the U.S. Capitol in a deadly riot. In Lawrence, Indiana, near Indianapolis, a man burned a cross on a fence facing his Black neighbor's home while blasting a recording of "Dixie," the unofficial Confederate anthem. A Jewish synagogue in Carmel, Indiana, was desecrated with a Nazi flag and swastika spray-painted onto a section of the building.

These incidents reveal a changing dynamic across America as extremist ideology and groups emerge from the shadows and push their way onto the public stage.

An investigation by the Arnolt Center for Investigative Journalism at Indiana University and the Indianapolis Star, part of the USA TODAY Network, found the phenomenon has been accompanied by a huge increase in hate-crime reports, which have nearly doubled across the U.S. since 2015, according to the FBI. Cases reported by state and local police in 2022, the most recent data available, climbed to 11,288 – an average of more than 30 incidents every day.

Experts say the U.S. is immersed in a new wave of extremism and there are several factors behind the escalation: Misinformation and disinformation, a growing gulf in education and income, and deeply ingrained prejudices – all exacerbated by extreme political partisanship, the reach of the internet, and social media algorithms that create a feedback loop flooding users with content reflecting views they already hold.

The broader, more vexing question is how to reverse course in an increasingly polarized nation based on the ideal of freedom of expression?

The rise of extremist individuals and groups is more prevalent among those with far-right beliefs and grievances, the investigation revealed, but also includes those on the opposite end of the political or ideological spectrum. Bearing the brunt of the targeted rhetoric, intimidation and violence are people of color and others marginalized due to sexual orientation and gender identity or religious beliefs.

Social media is driving extremism into the mainstream, experts say, with like-minded individuals connecting through online channels like Facebook, X, Truth Social, Reddit and 4chan. The spread of information and connections made on these platforms have culminated in events such as the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and thousands of other incidents.

As these groups grow their presence on social media, their views become more mainstream, with one expert explaining that more politicians are attaching themselves to these views. Adding to that expansion is the fact it no longer requires a person to make a local connection. They can easily forge relationships with like-minded people and groups across the U.S.

"The evolution of our technology has decreased the barriers to entry to extremism, and increased the ability for extremist groups to scale, both their ideologies and also their negative impact in the physical space," said Zachary Myers, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Indiana.

Hatred rises against Jewish communities

Hate crimes are defined as acts that target people based on their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity or national origin, said Pierre Atlas, a comparative political scientist and professor at Indiana University Indianapolis. The perpetrators' goals are to intimidate individuals who are a part of communities or groups they have an inherent prejudice against, he said.

Atlas experienced that firsthand in 2018 as a member of the Congregation Shaarey Tefilla, a Jewish synagogue in Carmel. On July 29, 2018, members of the congregation found two Nazi flags, and two iron crosses spray-painted on the synagogue's dumpster enclosure and a portion of the lawn scorched. It was one of 15 antisemitic incidents documented that year in Indiana, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

The FBI charged Nolan Brewer with the crime. His actions, according to court documents, were "the product of fervent beliefs in Nazism, anti-semitism and white nationalism." Brewer pleaded guilty in 2019 to a federal hate crime and was sentenced to three years in prison.

Atlas said the Hamilton County community showed support for the congregation.

"They saw this as an attack on Carmel," he said, "not just an attack on the synagogue."

Still, the state's small Jewish community continued to face intimidation. In 2023, reports of antisemitic graffiti and literature across Indiana climbed to 59, according to the ADL, and 44 more were reported in the first eight months of 2024.

In June, Jewish leaders in Indianapolis held a community meeting to address concerns over a new wave of antisemitic literature distributed in the city and surrounding suburbs by a white supremacist group.

The flyers, usually stapled to small bags of rice, were found on sidewalks, cars, in mailboxes and little free libraries, said Jacob Markey, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council.

Suzanne Rothenberg, an associate regional director for the Anti-Defamation League's Midwest Office, said the flyers are a "low-risk but high-impact" propagation of hate aimed at accomplishing multiple goals: to intimidate the Jewish community, spread misinformation and garner publicity for their groups.

Roots of extremism run deep, what's old is new again

The roots of extremism in Indiana and the United States run deep, but the ascension of the Ku Klux Klan



Members of several white nationalist groups carry torches and chanted slogans as they marched through the campus of the University of Virginia during a rally in August 2017. MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/INDIANAPOLIS STAR FILE



Jon Schaffer, right, is shown inside the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, riots. Schaffer, a heavy metal musician from Columbus, Ind., is identified in court documents as a founding member of the Oath Keepers. PROVIDED BY THE FBI

in the 1920s pushed the issue into the modern public consciousness.

"In the 1920s, the KKK viewed white, native-born Protestants as the only 'true' Americans," said James Madison, professor emeritus of history at Indiana University and author of "The Ku Klux Klan in the Heartland."

"This is where the phrase '100% American' originated."

Madison said the group built a powerful grassroots base that propelled them into U.S. politics, including the statehouse and governor's office in Indiana.

"The Klan was out to reform America and make it great again," Madison said. "That reform required not just putting Bibles in public schools, not just holding all kinds of rallies, programs and speakers, but also getting political power."

Madison said the Klan's power only waned in the 1950s and 60s amid the civil rights movement and the push for equal rights.

While the KKK is much smaller now, Madison said the ideology is far from "dead." He sees the parallels between newer hate groups in the U.S. today that echo the 1920s Klan.

"They are armed, they have short fuses and they're ready to engage in violence," he said. "But I think the larger danger is the people who are well-dressed and well-spoken. The people who propagate ideas and visions of America that are very similar to those of the Klan in these new groups are a fundamental threat to our democracy."

In June 2020, a Black family living in a subdivision on the east side of Indianapolis was targeted by a neighbor, Shepherd Hoehn, after removing a tree from their property. In acts reminiscent of the KKK, Hoehn made a swastika from duct tape on the backside of a wood fence facing the family's home, according to court documents, and "loudly played the song 'Dixie' on repeat as he burned a cross above the fence."

When questioned by police, court records say Hoehn denied threatening anyone, contending his actions were protected by the First Amendment. He denied being a racist, but "was aware of the specific racial connotations of his actions" and knew they would be disturbing to the family.

Asked why he lashed out against his neighbor, Hoehn was unapologetic.

"I wanted to piss him off," he told police. "I wanted to make him miserable."

Hoehn, 50, pleaded guilty in 2021 to felony charges of violating criminal provisions of the Fair Housing Act and possession of a firearm by an unlawful user and was sentenced to 46 months in prison.

Extremism moves into state and national politics

The changing profile of extremism was revealed by the hundreds of U.S. law enforcement officers, elected officials and military members appearing on leaked membership rolls of the Oath Keepers, a far-right extremist group accused of playing a key role in the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The ADL Center on Extremism pored over more than 38,000 names on purported members list and identified more than 370 people working in law enforcement agencies – including police chiefs and sher-

iffs – and more than 100 others in the military.

Some people on the list contacted by The Associated Press said they were members years ago but are no longer affiliated. Others said they were never dues-paying members.

More than 20 from Indiana have been charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol, including Jon Schaffer of Columbus, the leader of a heavy metal band and a self-proclaimed anarchist. Identified in court records as a founder and lifetime member of Oath Keepers, Schaffer traveled to Washington a week after the 2020 election for the Million MAGA March and talked openly about the prospect of violence in an interview he gave while walking.

"We're not going to merge into some globalist, communist system, it will not happen," he said. "There will be a lot of violence and bloodshed if it comes to that, trust me ... Nobody wants this, but they're pushing us to a point where we have no choice."

When he returned to Washington in January, Schaffer was armed with pepper spray and was accused of using it in the push to get past Capitol Police. He was the first Jan. 6 defendant to plead guilty, but has not been sentenced. Court records indicate he may be assisting prosecutors.

Isolation, grievances fodder for extremism's growth

Myers, the U.S. attorney, said targets of those espousing extreme beliefs are often marginalized groups, who also are reluctant to report incidents because they are fear or don't trust law enforcement.

"They don't think that we're going to care sometimes, or they don't think we'll do anything about it," he said. "Or they might even think we're going to take the side of the aggressor."

At the other end of the spectrum, Myers said, people are more vulnerable to fall prey to extremist groups now more than ever. This could be in part due to the pandemic when people were forced to isolate themselves. Social media served as an escape and made it easier for many to find someone they could relate to, even if that happened to be an extremist.

"It does real damage to us to be cut off from other people," he said. "If you're isolated, and you're grieved, and you are potentially sort of blaming others for things that you're not happy with, in your life, it's just easy to externalize that."

Videos and messages people see on platforms where they already spend time can help fuel the fire, he said.

"There may well be like-minded individuals, who will find what they're [extremist groups] putting into social media onto the internet and decide to then take it upon themselves to take action in keeping with the goals of those extremist organizations, without ever communicating directly with someone who's in it," he said.

External pressures – such as job losses or expectations to work harder and earn more money – also can make people feel left out or angry about perceived competition from others who don't look like them or have different beliefs and turn to those who share similar fears and grievances.

"Some people," Myers said, "experience that as sort of a loss of status."

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This story was reported and written by journalists at the Arnolt Center in partnership with the Indianapolis Star.

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