Researchers Shift Tactics To Tackle Extremism as Public Health Threat

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Rebecca Kasen has seen and heard things in recent years in and around Michigan's capital city that she never would have expected.

"It's a very weird time in our lives," said Kasen, executive director of the Women's Center of Greater Lansing.

Last November, a group of people were captured on surveillance video early one morning mocking a "Black Lives Matter" sign in the front window of the center, with one of them vandalizing its free pantry. That same fall, Women's Center staff reported being harassed.

A couple of blocks down East Michigan Avenue, Strange Matter Coffee, which supports progressive causes in the community, has been confronted by "First Amendment auditors" outside its storefront. Some toted guns or cameras, sometimes chanting slogans supporting President Donald Trump, generally unnerving customers and staff, Kasen said.

In many cases, extremist activities and conduct throughout the U.S. over the past few years have been driven by the deepening chasm of political partisanship and disinformation-driven rebellion against responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, backlash against immigration and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives has heightened tensions.

Last year, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented 1,371 hate and extremist groups nationwide sowing unrest through a wide range of tactics, sometimes violent. Over the last several years, the group writes, the political right has increasingly shifted toward "an authoritarian, patriarchal Christian supremacy dedicated to eroding the value of inclusive democracy and public institutions."

Researchers at American University's Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab, or PERIL, say that in online spaces, "hate is intersectional." (For example, Pasha Dashtgard, PERIL's director of research, explains, platforms dedicated to male supremacy are often also decidedly antisemitic.) Seemingly innocuous discussions erupt into vitriol: The release of "A Minecraft Movie"

prompted tirades against an alleged trend toward casting Black women and nonbinary people.

The continued escalations drove staffers at PERIL and the Southern Poverty Law Center to approach the problem from a different angle: Treat extremism as a public health problem. Community Advisory, Resource, and Education Centers are now operating in Lansing, Michigan, and Athens, Georgia, offering training, support, referrals, and resources to communities affected by hate, discrimination, and supremacist ideologies and to people susceptible to radicalization, with a focus on young people.

The team defines extremism as the belief that one's group is in direct and bitter conflict with another of a different identity — ideology, race, gender identity or expression — fomenting an us-versus-them mentality mired in the conviction that resolution can come only through separation, domination, or extermination.

Researchers who study extremism say that, as the federal government terminates grants for violence prevention, state governments and local communities are recognizing they're on their own. (CARE receives no federal funding.)

Aaron Flanagan, the Southern Poverty Law Center's deputy director of prevention and partnerships, said his organization and PERIL came together about five years ago to examine a shared research question: What would it take to create a nationally scalable model to prevent youth radicalization, one that's rooted in communities and provides solutions residents trust?

They looked to a decades-old German counterextremism model called mobile advisory centers. The objective is to equip "all levels of civil society with the skills and knowledge to recognize extremism" and to engage in conversations about addressing it, Dashtgard said.

"We're not about, 'How do you respond to a group of Patriot Front people marching through your town?'" Pete Kurtz-Glovas, who until June served as PERIL's deputy director of regional partnerships, explained during a training in January. "Rather, 'How do you respond when your son or a member of your congregation expresses some of these extremist ideas?'"

Michigan has long been considered fertile ground for extremism. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, convicted of the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, were associated with a militia group in the state. Some of the men charged in 2020 in the plot to kidnap Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer had ties to a militia group calling itself the Wolverine Watchmen.

The state's capital city and adjacent East Lansing, where Michigan State University is, are relatively progressive but have seen conflict.

Will Verchereau has a vivid recollection from the early days of the pandemic: a pickup truck speeding down the street in their Lansing neighborhood, a Confederate flag flying from it, music blasting, later joining a rolling protest that clogged streets around the Capitol to protest Whitmer's covid lockdown directives.

Incrementally, the community has responded to these expressions of extremism. After the confrontations at Strange Matter Coffee, Verchereau, a board member of the Salus Center, which advocates for and supports the LGBTQ+ community, said people banded together to talk about "how to be safe in those moments; how to de-escalate when and where possible."

The CARE initiative reinforces such efforts. The centers offer tool kits catered to specific audiences. Among them are a parent and caregiver guide to online radicalization, a community guide to youth radicalization, and "Not Just a Joke: Understanding & Preventing Gender- & Sexuality-Based Bigotry."

Flanagan said the team views this public health model as separate from but complementary to law enforcement interventions. The goal is to have law enforcement as minimally engaged as possible — to detect nascent warning signs and address them before police get involved.

The resources help identify conditions that can make people more susceptible to manipulation by extremists, such as unaddressed behavioral health issues and vulnerabilities, including having experienced trauma or the loss of a loved one.

Lansing resident Erin Buitendorp witnessed protesters, some of them armed, flood the state Capitol building during the pandemic over lockdown and masking orders. She's a proponent of the public health approach. It's "providing people with agency and a strategy to move forward," she said. It's a way to channel energy "and feel like you can actually create change with community."

Lansing and Athens were chosen for a number of reasons, including their proximity to universities that could serve as partners — and to rural communities.

In the small town of Howell, 40 miles southeast of Lansing, protesters waived Nazi flags outside a production of the play "The Diary of Anne Frank" at an American Legion post.

In nearby DeWitt, the local school district proposed a mini lesson on pronouns for a first grade class that involved reading the picture book "They She He Me: Free to Be!" Threats against school staff followed and officials canceled the lesson. Since then, the CARE team has helped provide support to teachers there in holding conversations on contentious topics in classrooms and in dealing with skeptical parents.

"It's really important that rural communities not be left behind," Flanagan said. "They persistently are in America, and then they're often simultaneously demonized for some of the most extreme, or extremist, political problems and challenges."

The CARE team hopes to expand its program nationwide. Similar public health initiatives have been launched elsewhere, including Boston Children's Hospital's Trauma and Community Resilience Center and the DEEP program, run by New York City's Citizens Crime Commission.

And in June a new tool, the Reach Out Resource Hub, went live, offering guidance to help prevent violent extremism.

Pete Simi, a professor of sociology at Chapman University and a leading expert on extremism, sees a daunting task ahead, with extremism's having become more mainstream over the past 25 years. "It's just devastating," he said. "It's really startling."

Simi said that while there was previously talk of shifts in the Overton window, the range of ideas considered politically acceptable to mainstream society, "I would say now it has been completely shattered." Violent extremists now feel "unshackled, supported by a new administration that has their back."

"We are in a more dangerous time now than any other in my lifetime," Simi said.

The Rev. Pippin Whitaker ministers the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens in Georgia, which last year received a package of ammunition in the mail with no note included. She embraces framing extremism, and people's lack of awareness of it, as a public health issue.

"If you have a germ out there," Whitaker said, "and people aren't aware that if you wash your hands you can protect yourself, and that it's an actual problem, you won't enact basic protective behavior."

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