

Don't Be a Puppet: Pull Back the Curtain on Violent Extremism

More and more, violent extremists are trying to radicalize and recruit our nation's youth, especially through the Internet and social media.

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

This website is designed to help do just that. Built by the FBI in consultation with community leaders and other partners, it uses a series of interactive materials to educate teens on the destructive nature of violent extremism and to encourage them to think critically about its messages and goals.

The site emphasizes that by blindly accepting radical ideologies, teens are essentially becoming the “puppets” of violent extremists who simply want them to carry out their destructive mission—which often includes targeting or killing innocent people.

The FBI encourages community groups, families, and high schools across the United States to use this site as part of their educational efforts. All Americans are asked to join the FBI in exposing the seductive nature of violent extremist propaganda and offering positive alternatives to violence.

- [Enter the Website](#)
- [Instructions for Teens](#)
- [Information for Discussion Leaders/Trusted Adults](#)
- [How Parents and Community Leaders Can Help](#)
- [Technical Support](#)

Violent extremism is “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.

Groupthink

Groups can be a powerful way to bring people together to achieve common goals. Groupthink happens, however, when those in the group stop stating their opinions or using critical thinking because they wish to avoid conflict. This can result in extremely poor decision-making.

Violent extremist organizations are highly vulnerable to groupthink. They are often headed or motivated by a strong leader who is rarely challenged. Different beliefs or ideas are not accepted. Violent extremist groups often work in secret, not only because their activities and plans are illegal, but also because they want to keep out other opinions.

Violent Extremism & Groupthink

Irving L. Janis, a social psychologist who performed important research on groupthink, wrote the words below in a 1972 book. His description of groupthink many years ago sounds very similar to how violent extremists are today.

"The members' firm belief in the inherent morality of their group ... enable them to minimize decision conflicts ... especially when they are inclined to resort to violence. ... 'Since our group's objectives are good,' the members feel, 'any means we decide to use must be good.' This shared assumption helps the members avoid feelings of shame or guilt about decisions that may violate their personal code of ethical behavior."

Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*

Getting Around Groupthink

Here are a few ways to avoid groupthink:

- Include a mix of people and perspectives in your group.
- Limit the leader's influence at meetings.
- Encourage different opinions.
- Discuss ideas with outside experts.
- Carefully consider all choices before making decisions.

Symbols

A symbol is something that stands for something else. For example, common American symbols—such as the U.S. flag, Statue of Liberty, White House, and bald eagle—represent this country and its freedoms.

A symbol can build pride or create a positive emotional connection. Symbols can also be used to create fear and to control people. Violent extremists have used various symbols over the years to fuel feelings of revenge and hatred. They have also attacked many symbols of America and other countries to make their actions seem more important.

Blame

Extremist groups and individuals often appear in communities struggling with social or political issues. Rather than improving these situations or their own lives through constructive actions, violent extremists often place the blame on another person or group. They argue that the only solution to these problems or injustices is to violently oppose and even destroy those they claim are responsible.

The Blame Game

Placing blame is an effective way to recruit people with feelings of frustration and turn them into a group united by a sense of purpose. It enables extremists to invent an “enemy” that must be destroyed. This makes violence seem like the best solution and even a moral duty.

Distorted Principles

Violent extremists are driven by twisted beliefs and values—or ideologies—that are tied to political, religious, economic, or social goals.

For example:

- Many violent extremist ideologies are based on the hatred of another race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or country/government.
- Violent extremists often think that their beliefs or ways of life are under attack and that extreme violence is the only solution to their frustrations and problems.
- Despite what they sometimes say, violent extremists often do not believe in fundamental American values like democracy, human rights, tolerance, and inclusion.
- Violent extremists sometimes twist religious teachings and other beliefs to support their own goals.
- Hate crimes are a type of violent extremism. They are directed at a person or group of people because of their race, color, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability. These crimes can take many forms—such as burning down a religious building or threatening or injuring another person.
- Hate crimes can be carried out by a single person or by small groups inspired by hateful beliefs. In many cases, an individual may commit a hate crime because of peer pressure. Many violent extremists wrongly blame their hate crimes on their victims, claiming the victims provoked them or were somehow at fault.

What Do Violent Extremists Believe?

Violent extremists have many distorted beliefs that they use to justify violence and hateful attacks. Read a few examples below.

White Supremacy Extremists

Example of distorted belief: Members of inferior races should be killed.

Environmental Extremists

Example of distorted belief: Destroying property and even harming people is needed to protect the environment.

Militia Extremists

Example of distorted belief: The U.S. government is a threat to the people and should be opposed by force.

Religious Extremists

Example of distorted belief: Violent attacks are needed to protect our beliefs from the corrupting influence of certain people or countries.

Anarchist Extremists

Example of distorted belief: Society needs no government or laws. Violence is necessary to create such a society.

Propaganda

Violent extremists often use propaganda—misleading or biased information that supports a particular point of view—to trick people into believing their ideologies. It's the primary extremist recruiting tool, and you could be a target. The goal of propaganda is to create a compelling story that people will buy into by twisting the facts.

Channels and Messages

Extremist propaganda can be found anywhere, but violent extremists today often use online tools like e-mail, social media, websites, forums, and blogs. You could also hear violent extremist propaganda directly from a friend, relative, or community or religious leader.

- *Western Nations Are Corrupt and Must Be Destroyed*
- *Our People Are Being Oppressed. No One Is Doing Anything. We Must Fight Back.*
- *Our Race and Traditions Are Superior. To Save Our People from Ruin, We Must Eliminate All Those Who Disagree.*
- *You Can't Trust Government or Law Enforcement. Arm Yourself and Be Ready to Fight.*
- *The Environment is Under Attack. We Must Stop This Abuse Through Economic Sabotage and Guerrilla Warfare.*

What are Known Violent Extremist Groups?

Groups that commit acts of violent extremism can have very different beliefs and goals. They are located in many countries around the world. Most have websites or use social media, so they can now reach and recruit people just about anywhere.

Keep in mind that some of those who carry out extremist attacks and hate crimes are only loosely motivated by these groups and may not be actual members.

Please note: You may know someone in this country who has radical beliefs or agrees with the actions or ideologies of violent extremist groups. That is their right under the U.S. Constitution. However, if a person seriously plans to carry out an act of violence or is strongly pushing you or someone else to do so, that is illegal.

International Violent Extremist Groups

More than 50 violent extremist groups around the world have been named terrorist organizations by the U.S. government. Just six of the many groups identified by the U.S. State Department are listed on the left. Thousands of violent extremists belong to these groups, support their beliefs, or are inspired by them.

Al Qaeda

Overview of Group: Al Qaeda, which means “The Base” in Arabic, is a global extremist network started in 1988 by the now deceased Osama bin Laden. It seeks to free Muslim countries from the influence of Western countries and attacks Muslim nations that don’t agree with its version of the Islamic religion.

Who or What They Target: Al Qaeda attacks those it believes are enemies of Islam. In 1988, al Qaeda said that it is the duty of its followers to kill Americans and citizens of other countries that support the United States. Al Qaeda has carried out many bombings and other acts of violence, including the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Al Shabaab

Overview of Group: Al Shabaab is a violent extremist organization based in Somalia that seeks to replace the current government through violence. Al Shabaab has recruited dozens of U.S. citizens to train and fight with them.

Who or What They Target: Al Shabaab has carried out many bombings and murders in Somalia and in nearby countries like Kenya. It not only targets government officials and military troops but also Somali peace activists, international aid workers, police officers, and others. Al Shabaab has a history of kidnapping and hurting women and girls.

Hizballah

Overview of Group: Hizballah, or “Party of God,” is an extremist group based in Lebanon. Hizballah supports the global rise of Shia, a branch of Islam, and it is inspired by the Iranian revolution. Hizballah also supports certain Palestinian groups in their struggle against Israel.

Who or What They Target: Hizballah targets Israel and its supporters, including the United States. Hizballah and its partners are responsible for some of the deadliest extremist attacks against the U.S. in history, including the bombing of a Marine base in Lebanon in 1983.

that killed more than 250 Americans. Hizballah has supporters worldwide, including in the United States.

ISIL/ISIS

Overview of Group: ISIL (DAESH) is a highly violent extremist group that has killed thousands of men, women, and children, mostly Muslims. The group calls itself the “Islamic State,” but its members follow an extreme, fringe interpretation of Islamic law. They do not represent mainstream Islam, and the vast majority of Muslims are horrified by their actions. ISIL members work to enslave or kill anyone who disagrees with them and have taken over parts of Iraq and Syria. ISIL continues to actively recruit U.S. citizens, especially young people.

Who or What They Target: ISIL has attacked the people of Iraq, Syria, and other nations—including government and military officials as well as journalists and school children. ISIL also has targeted Americans and has killed U.S. troops and civilian hostages.

Kahane Chai

Overview of Group: Kahane Chai (“Kahane Lives”) was started by the son of a radical Israeli-American rabbi named Meir Kahane, who was killed in 1990. The group seeks to expand the borders of Israel.

Who or What They Target: Kahane Chai has targeted Arabs, Palestinians, and Israeli government officials. Its last major attack was in 1994, when a Kahane Chai supporter opened fire at a mosque in the southern West Bank, killing 29 people.

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)

Overview of the Group: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (“Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”), or FARC, is a violent rebel group. Since it was created in 1964, FARC has tried to overthrow the Republic of Colombia, South America’s oldest democracy. It also sends a lot of illegal drugs into the U.S. and other countries.

Who or What They Target: FARC mostly targets the people and government of Colombia through bombings, murder, and other attacks. FARC sees U.S. citizens as “military targets” and has kidnapped and murdered several Americans in Colombia.

Domestic Extremist Ideologies

Violent extremists based in the United States have different beliefs that lead them to commit crimes and acts of violence. Some of the most common domestic ideologies are listed here. It is important to note that it is legal to have hateful or extremist beliefs as long as you don’t commit crimes or violence based on those beliefs. The right to assemble (or gather) in groups is also protected by the U.S. Constitution.

Sovereign Citizen Extremists

What They Believe: Sovereign citizens believe they are separate or “sovereign” from the United States even though they live here. They think they don’t have to answer to any government authority. Sovereign citizens use their beliefs to justify fraud and other non-violent crimes. But some sovereign citizen extremists turn to violence and commit murder, threaten public officials, and destroy property as part of their anti-government, anti-tax beliefs.

Who or What They Target: Sovereign citizen violent extremists usually target members of the government—including judges, police officers, and tax officials. In 2010, for example, a sovereign citizen extremist killed two Arkansas police officers during a routine traffic stop.

Abortion Extremists

What They Believe: Some abortion extremists believe that violence and bloodshed are justified to support their different beliefs on abortion. These violent extremists have turned to murder, bombings, assault, vandalism, kidnapping, and arson. They have also made death threats and sent hate mail and suspicious packages.

Who or What They Target: Violent anti-abortion extremists have targeted women’s reproductive clinics and the health care professionals and staff who work in these facilities, including doctors, nurses, receptionists, and even security guards. In one case in 2009, for example, a Kansas doctor who performed abortion services was shot and killed in his local church by an anti-abortion extremist. Those who use violence to defend abortion rights have murdered, threatened, and attacked those who oppose abortion.

Animal Rights Extremists and Environmental Extremists

What They Believe: Some animal rights and environmental extremists believe violence is needed to stop those they think are hurting animals or the environment. These violent extremists usually don’t seek to kill or injure people, but their crimes—which include property damage, vandalism, threats, cyber attacks, arson, and bombings—have caused millions of dollars in damages and disrupted the lives of many Americans.

Who or What They Target: Violent animal rights extremists attack those they believe are linked to the abuse of animals. Typical targets include the fur industry, companies and individuals involved in animal research, and businesses that ship animals. Violent environmental extremists target those they believe are destroying the environment, such as businesses and individuals involved in construction or automobile sales.

Militia Extremists

What They Believe: A militia is a group of citizens who come together to protect the country, usually during an emergency. Some militia extremists, however, seek to violently

attack or overthrow the U.S. government. Often calling themselves “patriots,” they believe the government has become corrupt, has overstepped its constitutional limits, or has not been able to protect the country against global dangers.

Who or What They Target: Violent militia extremists mainly target those they believe could violate their constitutional rights, such as police officers and judges. In one 2010 case, a Michigan militia group planned to kill a police officer and later attack the parade of cars in the funeral, hoping to start a large battle. The FBI and its partners stopped them from carrying out their plan.

White Supremacy Extremists

What They Believe: White supremacy extremists are motivated by a hatred of other races and religions. Some try to achieve their political and social goals through violence. These violent extremists often wrongly believe that the U.S. government is hurting the country or secretly planning to destroy it.

Who or What They Target: White supremacy violent extremists target the federal government and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Their methods have included murder, threats, and bombings. As just one example, white supremacists attacked a pair of Middle Eastern men on New Year’s Eve in 2011, punching one victim in the face and head.

Anarchist Extremists

What They Believe: Anarchist extremists believe that society should have no government, laws, or police, and they are loosely organized, with no central leadership. Violent anarchist extremists believe that such a society can only be created through force.

Who or What They Target: Violent anarchist extremists usually target symbols of capitalism they believe to be the cause of all problems in society—such as large corporations, government organizations, and police agencies. They damage property, cause riots, and set off firebombs. In some cases, they have injured police officers.

Why Do People Become Violent Extremists?

No single reason explains why people become violent extremists, but it often happens when someone is trying to fill a deep personal need. For example, a person may feel alone or lack meaning and purpose in life. Those who are emotionally upset after a stressful event also may be vulnerable to recruitment. Some people also become violent extremists because they disagree with government policy, hate certain types of people, don’t feel valued or appreciated by society, or think they have limited chances to succeed.

Personal Needs

Just about everyone wants to be happy and feel like they make a difference in life. Meeting these needs through violent activities is not the answer. Learn how unmet needs could lead to radicalization.

<u>Description</u>	<u>Personal Need</u>	<u>Risk If Need Not Met</u>
Feeling in control of life may lead to improved self-confidence or a sense of importance.	Power	Those who wish to control or feel superior to others may be attracted to violent extremism.
Mastering skills and accomplishing goals can provide a feeling of self-worth.	Achievement	Those who want to make a positive difference in life may falsely think that they can do that by taking part in violent or hateful attacks.
Having close relationships helps create a feeling of well-being and belonging.	Affiliation	Those who are looking for new friends may wrongly believe that they can find beneficial companionship in violent extremist groups.
Feeling significant and worthy of respect helps develop a person's self-image.	Importance	Those who seek recognition and attention may turn to violent extremism, even if it means hurting other people.
Believing in a higher calling or mission can give meaning and direction in life.	Purpose	Those looking for purpose in life may be drawn to the clear-cut yet twisted ideologies of violent extremism.
Having a strong set of beliefs can guide a person's decisions, especially in difficult times.	Morality	Those who are afraid of different viewpoints and lifestyles may be attracted to violent extremism or hate groups.
Having a new adventure can make life seem more interesting and inspiring.	Excitement	Violent extremism may offer a false promise of excitement and glamour to those who are bored with life.

Fears and Frustrations

Violent extremists may also try to recruit you by tapping into your personal problems. Remember that everyone experiences difficult emotions. Seek help or be supportive of others going through a tough time.

Social Alienation

Those who feel isolated can sometimes be easily convinced by violent extremist beliefs. Don't become a puppet for violent extremists by joining groups that want to hurt others just so you feel less alone. Consider healthy ways you can connect with others, including people that share your interests.

Anxiety

Teens can be stressed by problems at home, grades, peer pressure, bullying, and other issues. Blaming other people, groups, or the government is not a good way to cope with your anxiety, so don't become a puppet for violent extremist groups that do this. Look for other ways to reduce stress, such as talking to friends or exercising.

Frustration

It is natural to feel frustrated or angry when you are treated unfairly or rejected by others. But don't become a puppet for violent extremists to create an outlet for your anger and revenge. Find peaceful, constructive ways of dealing with feelings of frustration.

Painful Experiences

Painful experiences—including physical or emotional abuse, a romantic breakup, or the loss of a loved one—can upset a person and lead to lifelong challenges. Don't become a puppet for violent extremist groups just to mask your pain or grief. Seek help from a parent, teacher, or professional.

What Would Extremists Say?

Violent extremists use many different reasons to convince people to join them. Most often, they want you to become angry or upset about a certain problem in the world and to believe that hurting other people or destroying certain groups or the government is the only solution. They might even promise that you will be happier or more special if you support them.

1. Death and destruction are the only ways to take back our nation.
2. If you die for this cause, you will be admired by your family and rewarded in the afterlife.
3. Violence and terrorism are the best ways to change government policy.
4. We need you to join our fight and help us build the perfect world for our people.
5. You are one of us. You must join our struggle.
6. Governments that hurt our people or violate our beliefs must be destroyed.

Responses to Extremism:

1. No one is at war with my religion.
2. This is your fight, not mine.
3. Dying for a radical group won't make me a hero.
4. Just because I know you doesn't mean I agree with everything you say.
5. Our leaders aren't perfect, but we can change the system in peaceful ways.
6. There are other ways besides violence to get what we want.
7. People with different beliefs and values can still live together in peace.

How Do Violent Extremists Make Contact?

Online Forums & Chat Rooms

Online forums and chat rooms are places where violent extremists and hate groups find many new recruits. In these sites, young people often talk about things that interest them, sometimes in secret areas only for members. Violent extremists look for those who might be open to their beliefs.

Internet Games

Violent extremists are recruiting a growing number of young people through Internet games that promote violence and spread hateful messages. In these games, for example, you may have to kill a world leader or destroy a certain country and its citizens. High-scoring players may be referred to violent extremist recruiters.

Social Networking

Violent extremists have joined the many popular social networking sites that let you share pictures and personal information. On these sites, extremists create fake profiles and look for people who are vulnerable to recruitment. Violent extremists also spread propaganda on these sites through videos, pictures, and messages that glorify their causes.

Apps

Violent extremists are now using popular smartphone applications, or apps, that keep a person's identity and conversations totally private. On these apps, violent extremists may ask for money or share secret information. They may even start fake romances to trick teens into traveling to other countries to join them.

Cell Phone

Many violent extremists use cell phones to help convince people to join or support them. Once they make contact, violent extremists may want to send you texts or e-mails so no one else will know you are communicating with them. Some violent extremists buy cell phones that can't be traced to help hide their activities.

Immersion

A person becomes very interested in violent extremist beliefs and starts doing a lot of reading and research, often online.

Identification

The recruit starts to understand and accept the radical ideology. He or she may become increasingly isolated during this time.

Indoctrination

The individual fully identifies with the violent extremist ideology and is now ready for action. The recruit may be tested during training or given a chance to prove his or her commitment by helping with violent extremist activities.

Action

The new extremist actively plans and carries out a violent attack.

Flyer

Violent extremists may invite you to a meeting, a music concert, or even paramilitary training to start the recruitment process. This contact could come at work, at school, at home, at community centers, or at a church or other place of worship.

Free Speech vs. Violent Extremism

The right to free speech—as set forth in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—is one of the foundations of our nation’s democracy. Except in certain limited cases, people living in America are allowed to speak their minds on political and social issues, even when their points of view are unusual, unpopular, hateful, or anti-American. The crime occurs when someone takes talk to another level and either uses, seriously plans to use, or strongly advocates that others use force or violence to affect change.

Free Speech or Not?

You are walking through a public park and see a white supremacist rally out in the open. You hear the three statements below, one after the other.

“Our race is superior to other races.”

This statement is hateful and offensive, but it is free speech protected by law.

“We need to take a stand for our race and destroy those who stand in our way.”

The law allows for exaggeration and strong speech. The word “destroy” could suggest violence will be used, but it also could refer to political or social action. Without knowing more about the group’s plans, the speech is protected.

“Those opposing our race, like those people over there, are the enemy and must be attacked now!”

The situation is important to understand. Do members of the group appear ready and willing to take violent action right away? If so, the speech may be illegally inciting or encouraging violence or the threat of violence.

Warning Signs

There are signs you can watch out for if you think you're being contacted or recruited by members of a violent extremist organization.

Violent extremists are not all alike and say many different things. Based on what you've learned so far, beware of those who:

- Are convinced their cause justifies the use of violence;
- Use hateful words against a certain race, religion, gender, ethnic group, etc.;
- Try to isolate you and encourage you to leave your home—and even go overseas—without saying anything to your family;
- Promise you a better life with more money and even a husband or wife;
- Say that anyone with a different opinion is evil or is trying to trick you; and/or
- Pick out religious passages to justify hatred and violence.

How to Resist Recruitment Efforts

- Don't trust everything you read or hear as fact, even if several people say it. Ask hard questions, and think about and research what you hear.
- Keep lines of communication with friends and family open.
- Stay balanced. Hang out with people with a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints.
- On social media sites or apps, change your privacy settings to only share information with people you trust.

Where to Get Help

If you or someone you know is in trouble, there are many people who can help. You are not alone.

Let a person you trust in your family or community know if:

- Someone is talking about hurting you or others.
- You believe a violent extremist is contacting or recruiting you.
- You see suspicious behavior that might lead to violent extremism.
- You come across violent extremists on social media or the Internet.

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 or local law enforcement.

For information on how to prevent and report bullying, visit www.stopbullying.gov.

Conflict Resolution Tips

From the National Crime Prevention Council:

Whether you're in a fight with your best friend or angry at your parents, conflict is a part of everyday life. We all get mad at one another at some point in time. The real question is whether you can handle the situation in a non-violent way.

Understand your own feelings about conflict:

- Learn what makes you angry or emotional.
- Know these triggers so you can better control your reactions.

Practice active listening:

- Notice tone, body language, and other clues to what the person is saying.
- Pay attention to what the other person is saying instead of planning your response.

I'm right. You're wrong. How can we ever agree?

- Discuss the issue without insults or blame.
- Be honest about what you want and need.
- Be flexible and open-minded.
- Be strong enough to admit when you've made a mistake or hurt someone else.
- Offer an apology so you both can move forward.

Confront the issue head on:

- Keep your voice calm. Never yell or scream.
- Be direct about what's bothering you.
- Use "I" statements, not "You" statements, which put blame on the other person.
- Ask—don't demand.
- Once is enough. Don't keep repeating your point.

Come up with suggestions for solving the problem:

- Come up with your own suggestions.
- Brainstorm as many solutions as you can.

We just can't agree...

- Ask someone you trust to hear both sides and help decide what you should do.
- Take an anger management course to learn how to take control over your emotions before they take control over you.

When to Report Violent Extremism

Below are possible warning signs of someone planning to commit violent extremism. None of these signs alone mean a person will act. Use your common sense and consider everything you know about this person. Think about whether you have seen any sudden or suspicious changes in behavior. Maybe you have noticed something that doesn't seem quite right or you are worried or scared about what this person is saying or doing.

Please contact someone you trust if someone you know is:

- Spending a lot of time reading violent extremist information online, including in chat rooms and password-protected websites;
- Using several different cell phones and private messaging apps;
- Talking about traveling to places that sound suspicious;
- Researching or training with weapons or explosives;
- Studying or taking pictures of potential targets (like a government building);
- Using code words or unusual language;
- Looking for ways to disrupt computers or other technology;
- Staying away from friends or family while becoming very interested in violent extremist beliefs and propaganda; and/or
- Posting comments encouraging violence on social media sites or online forums.

Remember that extremist thoughts are not against the law. However, the warning signs above could mean that someone plans to commit violence. If you come across something suspicious, don't hesitate to report it.

Who to Contact for Help

Immediately tell a person you trust—especially your parents or other family members—if a violent extremist contacts you or you come across any suspicious or dangerous behavior. You can also talk with one of the following adults in a position of authority:

In your school: Teacher, principal, guidance counselor, coach, nurse, or administrator.

In your community: Community or civic leader, family doctor, faith-based leader, social worker, or crisis intervention specialist.

In local law enforcement: Police officer, county sheriff or deputy, FBI agent or FBI field office staff, U.S. attorney, or district attorney.