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Examining the Intersection of Radicalism, Activism, and Gun Violence

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ABSTRACT

Radicalism has been connected to violence, and firearms have become widely used in political violence. However, research has yet to examine radicalism in relation to firearms. This study fills this gap by examining whether radicalism and activism are related to gun beliefs and gun violence. This study included 372 high-risk adults ($M_{age} = 32.66$). Most participants were male (72 percent), and African American (80 percent). Studying violently injured individuals can help identify potential paths to radicalism, as exposure to violence can contribute to radicalization. Multiple regressions were performed to assess whether gun beliefs (i.e. safety, emotional risk, neighborhood concerns, gun presence, and social perception) predicted radicalism and activism and if radicalism and activism predicted gun behaviors, gun violence, and firearm violence while controlling for sex, age, and ethnicity. Gun safety and emotional risk beliefs predicted radicalism. Gun safety beliefs predicted activism. Radicalism predicted defensive and offensive gun behaviors, reactive and proactive gun violence, and firearm violence. Activism was unrelated to gun behaviors and gun violence. Radicalism is a risk factor for gun violence in adulthood that should be separated from activism, and guide the creation of policies that balance the protection of free speech and activism with the need to prevent violence.

KEYWORDS

Radicalism; activism; gun violence; firearm violence

Introduction

Understanding violent extremism, defined as the use of unlawful violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals,¹ is critical to addressing contemporary security challenges.² Growing attention has been applied to investigate radicalization, which encompasses a process through which individuals adopt extreme beliefs and attitudes, as it is a precursor to violent extremism and is linked to illegal or violent actions.³ Research suggests that increasing political polarization can also lead to more radicalized beliefs,⁴ which in turn may contribute to increased firearm violence⁵ (Byman & McCabe, 2025). This is particularly concerning considering the high polarization⁶ and firearm ownership in the U.S.⁷ This underscores the need to explore the intersection of radicalization, firearm behaviors, and belief systems to understand the pathways to extremist violence better. However, in democracies where activism plays a vital role in societal change and where the risk of some activists becoming radicalized poses a serious challenge,⁸ it is essential to examine the involvement of both activism and radicalism in the risk of gun violence. By studying these interconnected domains, researchers and policymakers can develop targeted strategies for intervention and prevention that uphold civic freedoms while mitigating risks of violent extremism.

Radicalism and activism, though often conflated, represent distinct forms of political engagement.⁹ Radicalism is characterized by a propensity for illegal and violent actions to achieve ideological or political objectives, whereas activism involves lawful, nonviolent participation in societal or political movements.¹⁰ While conceptually distinct, both forms of engagement may arise from shared psychological or structural antecedents, such as perceived injustice, marginalization, or identity threat.¹¹ In this sense, activism can serve as a protective outlet for grievance or, in some contexts, as a precursor to more extreme forms of political expression.¹² Including activism as an outcome allows for the examination of divergent behavioral responses to similar underlying drives, showing why some individuals engage in constructive civic participation while others adopt more radical or violent strategies. Studying these two phenomena in tandem is crucial to ensuring that interventions aimed at curbing radicalism do not inadvertently stifle civic responsibility or suppress legitimate advocacy.¹³ This distinction safeguards democratic principles while fostering informed strategies to address threats without infringing on fundamental rights.¹⁴

While radicalism is often framed as an ideological or religious process, there is growing recognition that marginalized groups may adopt radical beliefs as a response to structural violence, systematic disempowerment, or perceived state abandonment. In predominantly Black urban communities, experiences of racialized policing, legal cynicism, and community disinvestment may shape unique radicalization pathways that diverge from traditional ideological extremism.¹⁵ For example, the “Code of the Street” describes how youth in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods may internalize alternative moral codes around respect, self-protection, and justice in response to the perceived illegitimacy of formal social control.¹⁶

Recent advances in research on the risk of radicalism have revealed that it is deeply intertwined with a host of personal,¹⁷ social,¹⁸ political,¹⁹ and practical factors.²⁰ Importantly, while the specific profiles, motivations, and pathways to violent extremism may differ across ideological groups, research indicates that certain underlying mechanisms, such as perceived injustice and identity conflict, are broadly applicable across diverse ideological contexts.²¹ These mechanisms may stem not only from ideological commitments but also from experiences of social marginalization, political mistrust, and interpersonal victimization. Beyond identifying opportunities for prevention,²² prior research demonstrates that radicalism is connected to other forms of violence and crime.²³ This increases the importance of understanding the pathways to political violence²⁴ and demonstrates a need to better understand how these processes can lead to additional violence and crime.²⁵ Therefore, the study of community violence and the risk of radicalism should go hand in hand.

Several theoretical frameworks help explain how individuals may come to support or engage in political violence. Moral disengagement refers to cognitive processes that allow individuals to justify or excuse harmful action, such as displacing responsibility or minimizing consequences.²⁶ The significance quest theory posits that people pursue radical ideologies to regain a sense of personal or collective meaning after experiencing loss or humiliation.²⁷ Grievance-based models empathized perceived injustice and marginalization as drives of radicalization,²⁸ while General Strain Theory²⁹ presents how chronic stress, such as trauma, discrimination, or victimization, can lead to deviant coping responses, including violence. These frameworks provide a lens for understanding how personal and structural factors can contribute to both radicalization and nonviolent activism, depending on the context and available coping mechanisms. While they explain why individuals may be drawn to radical ideologies and political violence, it is essential to examine the specific tools with which such violence is enacted.

Firearms have become widely used in political violence, possibly due to their lethality³⁰ and the ease of concealment from law enforcement.³¹ While prior research has examined weapon selection, tactical use, and the logistical appeal of firearms in terrorist activity, relatively less attention has been paid to the psychological and social factors, such as beliefs, motivations, and attitudes, that underlie the use of firearms in politically motivated violence.³² Some research has attempted to model extremist behavior using approaches from private-sector technology companies and other structural assumptions (Jackson, 2001).³³ However, the lack of suitable data for testing key attitudinal and behavioral

hypotheses has been a barrier to examining how firearms and personal factors influence political and apolitical violence.³⁴ Given that gun violence in the U.S. has “uniquely high mortality rates,”³⁵ if there is a link between radicalism and apolitical gun violence, then the net lethality stemming from these beliefs may be much higher than currently estimated.

Combining data from various open-source datasets on violent and nonviolent extremism, firearm ownership and training are identified as key predictors of who within extremist movements engages in violence.³⁶ Taken together with research on the preparatory activities of those committing acts of terrorism,³⁷ these findings suggest that attitudes and actions related to firearms influence the mobilizations toward radicalism. Building on the observed overlap between violent extremism and other forms of violence,³⁸ this study explores whether gun beliefs and behaviors are related to radicalism and activism.

Versatility, radicalism, and firearms

This discussion of the behavioral versatility across acts of violence requires that the key forms of violence be defined. *Terrorism* refers to the unlawful use or threat of violence against civilians to achieve political, religious, or ideological goals.³⁹ *Political violence* is a broader category that includes acts of violence aimed at influencing political processes or institutions, whether or not they meet the legal definition of terrorism. *Violent extremism* involves the use or support of violence to promote extremist ideologies, which can be political, religious, or issue-focused.⁴⁰ *Hate crimes* are criminal acts motivated by bias against individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity.⁴¹ Although these types of violence are conceptually separate, research shows that individuals may shift between them over time or engage in behaviors spanning multiple categories, complicating prevention efforts and theoretical classifications.

In recent years, there has been a substantial rise in research on radicalization.⁴² Investigating the psychological, emotional, and behavioral processes through which individuals adopt ideologies that promote violence for political, economic, religious, or social objectives⁴³ has advanced our understanding of radicalism and debunked many myths about terrorism and political violence.⁴⁴ Given the long-standing recognition that terrorism and radicalism are deeply intertwined with a plethora of geographic, social, and personal factors, researchers argue that radicalism considerably overlaps with other forms of violence aimed at controlling others through fear.⁴⁵ This perspective aligns with the growing acknowledgment that traditional military and criminal justice approaches to curbing political violence have often fallen short. Public health experts have similarly called for broadening violent extremism research to encompass a wider array of factors.⁴⁶ This empirical approach has expanded the scope of available prevention methods⁴⁷ and, importantly, identified important physical and mental health consequences of political violence.⁴⁸

Terrorism as a subset of crime,⁴⁹ has been increasingly studied in the context of criminal versatility. Research shows that individuals who commit crimes often exhibit a wide range of offending behaviors over time.⁵⁰ While some may specialize in specific types of crime in the short term, their criminal activities tend to diversify in the long term.⁵¹ This tendency to “versatility” suggests that studies focusing solely on one type of criminal outcome may overlook important violent behaviors, thereby limiting the ability to fully assess the impact of interventions.⁵² When evaluations of targeted violence prevention programs do not consider other forms of violence, the scope of their impact assessments is artificially narrowed, hindering the ability to assess both diffusion of benefits and unintended negative consequences.⁵³ Consequently, by not examining the intersection of various violent behaviors (e.g., gun violence) and precursors simultaneously, existing studies of violent extremism may have missed crucial predictors of political violence and the versatility in expressions of apolitical violence.

The firearms used in violent extremism are often used in a wide range of other violent crimes. Clarke and Newman’s theory on terrorist weapon selection highlights that terrorists tend to favor multipurpose weapons, particularly firearms.⁵⁴ The ability to legally acquire firearms, justified by their multipurpose nature, complicates preventive efforts by law enforcement.⁵⁵ Coupled with their ease of

use⁵⁶ and availability,⁵⁷ it is not surprising that firearms were the primary weapon used in 41,757 terrorist attacks globally between 2000 and 2020.⁵⁸ These factors may partially explain the observed geographic overlap in the prevalence of different forms of violent extremism. In examining whether hate crimes and terrorism are “distant relatives” or “close cousins,” Mills, Freilich, and Chermak asserted that they are more likely “close cousins,” noting that U.S. counties with rising hate crimes also saw increased terrorism.⁵⁹ Additionally, evidence indicates that hate crimes can both be a precursor and a response to terrorism.⁶⁰ Clearly, there is meaningful overlap among different forms of extremist violence—geographically, temporally, and in terms of weapons used—that may extend to other forms of apolitical violence.

Radicalism and apolitical gun violence

The overlap in the incidence of terrorism and hate crimes across time and space does not necessarily mean that the same individuals are responsible for different forms of extremist violence. While longstanding evidence has identified patterns in terrorism driven by geographic,⁶¹ social,⁶² and seasonal factors,⁶³ much less is known about the within-individual overlap of different forms of extremist violence. This knowledge gap is due to several challenges, including the rarity of terrorism,⁶⁴ its covert nature,⁶⁵ and the high mortality rate of violent extremists.⁶⁶

To address these challenges, some studies have analyzed extremists’ autobiographies to explore individual actions and comorbidities, though these accounts are often affected by social desirability and recall biases.⁶⁷ While analyses based on prosecutions and histories of extremists have provided valuable insights,⁶⁸ the generalizability of these findings to the broader population of violent extremists remains unclear.

These issues are further complicated by methodological challenges in identifying and recording extremist violence. For instance, it is often unclear whether a criminal act is motivated by political animus or bias.⁶⁹ This ambiguity contributes to the underreporting of both terrorism and hate crimes⁷⁰ a problem worsened by some jurisdictions’ reluctance to record hate crimes, even when incidents meet legal criteria.⁷¹ The situation is exacerbated when the perpetrator is unknown, making it impossible to examine individual-level factors in these cases.⁷² As a result, many instances of violence throughout the U.S. recorded as apolitical crimes may be acts of extremist violence.⁷³ Given that there are identifiable factors that distinguish violent extremists from the general population, factors also linked to the undercounting of extremist violence,⁷⁴ this underreporting can bias estimates of the impacts of prevention policies, hinder identification of key risk factors, and obscure the full extent of the criminal activities association with extremist beliefs.

Focusing solely on individuals convicted of crimes related to extremist violence can lead to a skewed understanding of the factors contributing to such acts and their frequency.⁷⁵ Thus, researchers aiming to estimate the prevalence of extremist violence should avoid sampling based solely on individuals who have committed political violence, as this approach risks sampling on the dependent variable.⁷⁶ Because terrorism, hate crimes, and other forms of extremist violence are rare events,⁷⁷ general population samples are unlikely to include enough relevant individuals to reliably study radical behaviors and attitudes.

However, considering that individuals involved in crime are more likely to be victims themselves or suffer injuries,⁷⁸ examining violently injured patients offers a unique opportunity to gain insights into radical attitudes and outcomes without relying solely on samples of known violent extremists. By broadening the scope to include those who have violent injuries, researchers can compare individuals with extremist attitudes to those without, providing more generalizable findings. Estimates of violent injuries are also more accurate than those for extremist violence.⁷⁹ Building on these insights, this study examines the link between gun beliefs and radicalism and activism, as well as their association with gun behaviors and violence in violently injured adults. This population is novel to the field of political violence, as it includes individuals embedded in high-risk, violence-exposed environments without pre-selecting for extremist behavior. Prior research has often relied on samples drawn from

individuals already involved in terrorism or radical groups, which limits the ability to identify broader patterns of risk and early-stage radicalization.⁸⁰ By contrast, the current study offers a new understanding of cognitive and behavioral factors associated with radical attitudes and gun violence before involvement in ideologically motivated acts, contributing to a new methodological perspective in the literature on political violence and extremism.

The selection of violently injured patients as a study population is grounded in evidence linking exposure to violence with increased susceptibility to radicalization and violent extremism. Research by Finkel, McCauley, and Neureiter highlights how exposure to community violence fosters grievances, erodes institutional trust, and heightens the risk of adopting extremist beliefs or behaviors.⁸¹ Such individuals, often victims of systemic inequities and interpersonal conflicts, represent a population uniquely situated at the nexus of personal trauma and broader social vulnerabilities. For instance, Rios argued that criminalized Black and Latino youth may adopt oppositional attitudes not because of inherent deviance, but as rational responses to punitive surveillance, criminalization, and social exclusion.⁸² These dynamics, compounded by racialized harm and distrust of formal authorities, may influence both gun behaviors and openness to radical ideas. Violently injured individuals may experience heightened psychological distress, identity challenges, and social isolation and marginalization, all of which are recognized as universal precursors to radicalization.⁸³ Furthermore, this population often resides in high-risk environments where cycles of violence perpetuate susceptibility to extremist narratives.⁸⁴ By focusing on violently injured patients, the study taps into a critical demographic that bridges the gap between individual experiences of violence and broader societal trends in radicalization, providing valuable insights for targeted intervention and prevention strategies.

Hypotheses

This study aimed to examine whether radicalism and activism intentions are related to gun beliefs and gun violence in violently injured adults. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to examine this link.

H1: Based on the aforementioned research on criminal versatility and prior research suggesting that radicalism is related to violence,⁸⁵ it was hypothesized that radicalism intentions would relate to all types of gun violence.

H2: Based on prior research indicating that activism and political violence co-occur,⁸⁶ activism intentions were expected to relate to gun violence.

H3: However, it was not expected that activism would predict gun violence when accounting for radicalism.

Method

Participants

This study involved 372 adults ages 18–75 ($M = 32.66$, $SD = 12.78$) who had sustained violent injuries. The participants were from an Urban Level 1 Trauma Center in Virginia. The majority were male (72 percent) and self-identified as African American (80 percent), Caucasian (14 percent), Asian (0.8 percent), American Indian (0.2 percent), or mixed (5 percent). Eighty percent had completed at least a 12th-grade education. The types of injuries reported included gunshot wounds (55.5 percent), assaults (37 percent), and stab wounds (7.5 percent). Twenty-two percent had previously been hospitalized due to violence-related injuries.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the inpatient setting or the emergency department through daily screenings of live medical records at a level 1 trauma center in Virginia. After giving consent, participants completed a series of self-report assessments. They were informed beforehand that their involvement was strictly for research purposes and would not affect their medical care. This study is a segment of a larger research initiative aimed at evaluating a hospital-based prevention program designed to reduce retaliatory gun violence [Grant Number R01]. Participants were compensated \$160 for participation in the larger project. The study received approval from the institutional review board at Virginia Commonwealth University and a Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained from the CDC.

Measures

Activism and radicalism intentions

The Activism and Radicalism Intention Scale (ARIS)⁸⁷ includes two subscales (4 items each): radicalism intentions and activism intentions. Items are rated on a 4-point scale (1 = very unlikely, 4 = very likely). The activism intention scale (AIS) assesses readiness for legal or nonviolent political action (e.g., “I would join/belong to an organization that fights for my group’s political and legal rights”). In contrast, the radicalism scale (RIS) assesses readiness for illegal or violent political action (e.g., “I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group’s political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes resorts to violence”). Both scales showed good internal consistency (activism, $\alpha = .88$; radicalism, $\alpha = .88$).

Gun behaviors and beliefs

The Gun Behaviors and Beliefs Scale (GBBS)⁸⁸ consists of two main scales: gun beliefs and gun behaviors. The gun beliefs scale has 24 items, each rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale includes five subscales: safety beliefs (7 items; e.g., “Guns protect people from criminals”), emotional risk (6 items; e.g., “I would be extremely upset if someone used my gun to kill himself/herself”), neighborhood concerns (4 items; e.g., “In my neighborhood, you have to be seen as willing to use violence to keep from being a victim”), gun presence (4 items; e.g., “In my area, keeping guns is an important tradition”), and social perceptions (3 items; e.g., “If I did not carry a gun, my friends would think less of me”). The subscales demonstrated good internal consistency (safety beliefs, $\alpha = .90$; emotional risk, $\alpha = .85$; neighborhood concerns, $\alpha = .87$; gun presence, $\alpha = .85$; social perception, $\alpha = .78$).

The gun behavior scale includes 18 items rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (every day). The items have been found to cover both defensive gun behaviors (8 items; e.g., “I have pulled out my gun to prevent victimization”) and offensive gun behaviors (10 items; e.g., “I have pulled out my gun to get what I want”).⁸⁹ The total scale and the subscales had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$; defensive, $\alpha = .88$; offensive, $\alpha = .82$).

Gun violence

The Gun Violence Questionnaire (GVQ)⁹⁰ comprises 15 items rated on a 3-point scale from 0 (never) to 2 (often). The scale includes two subscales: reactive gun violence (6 items; e.g., “Felt better after firing a gun at someone”) and proactive gun violence (8 items; e.g., “Threatened someone with a gun”). The total and subscales had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$; reactive, $\alpha = .83$; proactive, $\alpha = .90$).

Firearm violence

The Firearm Aggression Questionnaire (FAQ)⁹¹ is an 8-item measure of aggressive firearm violence (e.g., “There are people who pushed me so far that I fired a gun at them”). Items are rated on a 3-point scale from 0 (never) to 2 (often). The scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$).

Data analysis plan

Table 1 presents the correlations between study variables, which are explained in Appendix A. Multiple regressions were performed in R⁹² to assess whether gun beliefs statistically predicted radicalism and activism, and to assess whether radicalism and activism statistically predicted gun behaviors (defensive, offensive), gun violence (reactive, proactive), and firearm violence. All models controlled for sex, age, and ethnicity. Defensive and offensive gun behavior and reactive and proactive gun violence were log-transformed before analyzing the data due to high skewness (<3) and kurtosis (<10).

Results

Gun beliefs, radicalism, and activism

Table 2 displays the regression results for gun beliefs. Gun safety beliefs positively predicted radicalism ($p < .001$), whereas emotional risk beliefs and age negatively predicted radicalism ($p = .001$, $p = .04$, respectively), and the model was significant, $F(8, 360) = 9.06$, $p < .001$. Additionally, gun safety beliefs positively predicted activism ($p = .004$), and the model was significant, $F(8, 360) = 3.28$, $p = .001$.

Radicalism, activism, and gun violence

Table 3 displays the regression results for gun violence. Radicalism significantly predicted defensive gun behavior ($p < .001$), and the model was significant, $F(5, 358) = 8.94$, $p < .001$. Similarly, radicalism predicted offensive gun behavior ($p < .001$), and the model was significant, $F(5, 357) = 6.00$, $p < .001$. Further, radicalism and sex predicted reactive gun violence ($p = .001$, $p = .03$, respectively), $F(5, 364) = 10.43$, $p < .001$, whereas only radicalism predicted proactive gun violence ($p < .001$), $F(5, 364) = 7.94$, $p < .001$. Lastly, radicalism and sex also predicted aggressive firearm violence ($p < .001$, $p = .03$, respectively), and the model was significant, $F(5, 360) = 21.91$, $p < .001$. Thus, radicalism predicted all types of gun behavior and gun violence, while activism did not predict any.

All models were tested for multicollinearity and regression assumptions. Variance inflation factors for all predictors were below 2, indicating no multicollinearity. Visual inspection of diagnostic plots and formal tests (e.g., Shapiro-Wilk and Breusch-Pagan) showed no violations of normality or homoscedasticity assumptions.

Discussion

Understanding the relationship between radicalism, activism, and firearm-related behaviors is essential for addressing the dual challenges of violent extremism and gun violence. This study provides valuable insights into how beliefs about firearms relate to both radical and activist ideologies and how these ideologies relate to various forms of gun violence. By focusing on a high-risk population of violently injured adults, the research sheds light on how firearm beliefs and behavior intersect with radicalism, offering critical implications for violence prevention and policy development.

The present study found that the perception of guns as enhancing safety was related to both activism and radicalism among violently injured adults. Van Prooijen and Krouwel⁹³ present that the belief that firearms may provide increased safety may emerge from a general sense of vulnerability or mistrust in institutional protections, prompting individuals to view firearms as essential for maintaining security and autonomy. Although this finding was consistent across activism and radicalism, previous studies suggest that the underlying mechanism connecting the perception of guns as safety enhancers varies. For activists, this perception aligns with lawful engagement, where firearms are necessary for self-defense or community protection within legal and social norms.⁹⁴ For example, activists may advocate for firearm ownership to ensure personal safety, safeguard communities, or uphold constitutional rights, particularly in low-institutional trust environments.⁹⁵

Table 1. Correlation and descriptive statistics for GBBS and GVQ for youth and caregiver separate

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Age	–																
2. Sex	–.06	–															
3. Ethnicity	–.07	–.06	–														
4. RIS	–.12*	–.09	.08	–													
5. AIS	–.04	.04	.12*	.51**	–												
6. FAQ	–.08	–.13*	.02	.47**	.27**	–											
7. GVQ ^b	–.02	–.14*	.02	.34**	.19**	.69**	–										
8. Reactive ^b	–.03	–.13*	.02	.34**	.19*	.70**	.97**	–									
9. Proactive ^b	.04	–.09	–.01	.30**	.17**	.59**	.88**	.77**	–								
10. GBBS B ^b	–.05	–.09	–.008	.31**	.15*	.55**	.69**	.66**	.62**	–							
11. Defensive ^b	–.03	–.12*	–.02	.32**	.16*	.55**	.67**	.66**	.58**	.98**	–						
12. Offensive ^b	–.07	–.06	.005	.27**	.14*	.50**	.66**	.62**	.63**	.95**	.87**	–					
13. Safety	–.05	–.12*	–.03	.31**	.20**	.42**	.31**	.32**	.24**	.35**	.36**	.30**	–				
14. Emotional	.05	.14*	–.19**	–.12*	.06	–.15*	–.14*	–.15*	–.09	–.16*	–.16*	–.14*	.18**	–			
15. Neighbor.	–.04	–.08	.14*	.28**	.14*	.37**	.36**	.35**	.28**	.31**	.30**	.29**	.43**	.07	–		
16. Gun pre.	.05	–.13*	.10*	.27**	.14*	.39**	.33**	.32**	.26**	.44**	.45**	.38**	.46**	.06	.64**	–	
17. Social	.02	–.009	–.03	.13*	.002	.26**	.27**	.28**	.25**	.26**	.26**	.24**	.27**	–.09	.33**	.34**	–
Mean	32.66	0.28	0.80	10.96	16.96	1.71	0.29	0.23	0.14	3.10	2.43	2.47	27.27	30.59	14.89	15.70	5.71
SD	12.78	0.45	0.40	6.68	7.29	2.56	0.66	0.53	0.45	0.38	0.42	0.34	11.58	9.31	7.68	7.30	3.45
Skewness	1.01	0.99	–1.52	0.75	–0.32	2.08	2.42	2.30	3.61	1.95	1.85	2.25	–0.08	–0.90	0.09	–0.06	1.43
Kurtosis	0.20	–1.02	0.32	–0.38	–0.95	5.40	5.35	4.56	13.09	3.17	2.53	4.81	–0.85	0.24	–1.24	–1.02	1.52

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .001^{**}$. Log-transformed^b. B = Behavior.

Table 2. Gun beliefs predicting radicalism and activism

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²
Radicalism Intentions				.15***
Age	−0.05	0.03	−.10*	
Sex	−0.36	0.74	−.02	
Ethnicity	0.36	0.84	.02	
Safety	0.14	0.03	.24***	
Emotional risk	−0.12	0.04	−.17***	
Neighborhood	0.11	0.06	.12	
Gun presence	0.09	0.06	.10	
Social perception	−0.03	0.10	−.02	
Activism Intentions				.05**
Age	−0.02	0.03	−.03	
Sex	1.09	0.85	.07	
Ethnicity	2.22	0.98	.12*	
Safety	0.11	0.04	.17**	
Emotional risk	0.02	0.04	.03	
Neighborhood	0.04	0.07	.04	
Gun presence	0.05	0.06	.05	
Social perception	−0.15	0.12	−.07	

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$. Sex = (0) male, (1) female. Ethnicity = (0) other, (1) African American.

In contrast, radicalism often involves illegal or violent actions, where firearms symbolize not only safety but also power and agency.⁹⁶ For people engaging in radicalism, firearms serve as instruments to challenge or resist perceived oppressors, express ideological grievances, or assert dominance in the face of societal threats.⁹⁷ This duality underscores the complex role of firearm beliefs in shaping political engagement, serving as a unifying foundation for different pathways to action.

The finding that lower concern about the emotional harm caused by firearm misuse is associated with radicalism highlights the role of moral disengagement in justifying violent ideologies. This finding reinforces previous research indicating that individuals with radical beliefs often rationalize or downplay the emotional consequences of their actions, including harm to victims or their families, as a way to justify violence.⁹⁸ This diminished concern reflects a psychological detachment that aligns with radicalization processes, where mechanisms like dehumanization and moral justification allow individuals to engage in extreme behaviors.⁹⁹ Importantly, these results highlight firearm beliefs, specifically a diminished emotional concern (e.g., feeling less concern if one's firearm was used in a tragedy or reduced feelings of guilt if one's firearm were used to injure or kill someone), as a important psychological marker of vulnerability to radical ideologies. These findings expand existing theoretical models of radicalization, including grievance theory, by demonstrating that firearm beliefs are not solely practical considerations but also psychological indicators of radical vulnerability. Grievance theory posits that individuals turn to radicalization in response to perceived injustices or threats.¹⁰⁰ Beliefs about firearms as tools devoid of emotional accountability may increase risk by providing both symbolic and practical means of addressing perceived grievances. Further, these results align with the Significance Quest Theory, which suggests that individuals seek meaning and empowerment through actions that affirm their ideological identity.¹⁰¹ Firearm-related behaviors and beliefs may serve as tools to achieve this sense of significance, providing a sense of purpose and control that amplifies radical tendencies. These insights underscore the importance of addressing firearm beliefs, particularly emotional disengagement, in efforts to prevent radicalization and its associated risks of violence.

Our key finding that radicalism, but not activism, was linked to *all* forms of gun violence reveals how extremist ideologies can permeate everyday behavior. Drawing on the General Strain Theory,¹⁰² individuals who experience trauma or marginalization (like violently injured adults) may adopt radical beliefs to cope with powerlessness. However, it should be noted that Agnew clarifies that these experiences would need to be “collective strains” in order for this to result in terrorism.¹⁰³ However, this would not be necessary for other forms of gun violence from this theoretical perspective.

Table 3. Extremism, radicalism and activism predicting gun behaviors, gun violence, and aggressive firearm violence

	Defensive Gun Violence				Offensive Gun Violence				Reactive Gun Violence				Proactive Gun Violence				Firearm Aggression			
	b	SE	β	R ²	b	SE	β	R ²	b	SE	β	R ²	b	SE	β	R ²	b	SE	β	R ²
Age	0.0001	0.002	.002	.10***	−0.001	0.001	−.04	.06***	0.0004	0.002	.01	.11***	0.002	0.002	.07	.09***	−0.01	0.01	−.03	.22***
Sex	−0.09	0.05	−.10		−0.03	0.04	−.04		−0.12	0.06	−.11*		−0.06	0.05	−.06		−0.60	0.27	−.10	
Ethnicity	−0.05	0.05	−.05		−0.02	0.03	−.02		−0.03	0.07	−.02		−0.05	0.06	−.04		−0.19	0.30	−.03	
RIS	0.02	0.004	.31***		0.01	0.003	.26***		0.02	0.005	.31**		0.02	0.004	.29***		0.16	0.02	.43***	
ALS	0.0004	0.003	.007		0.0003	0.003	.006		0.003	0.004	.04		0.002	0.004	.03		0.02	0.02	.06	

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$. Sex = (0) male, (1) female. Ethnicity = (0) other, (1) African American.

Firearms, in this context, may become tools to retaliate against perceived threats (reactive violence) or assert dominance (proactive violence), reflecting a cycle where grievances escalate into harm. The absence of a link between activism and gun violence underscores a critical divide: activists often channel frustrations through lawful means, whereas people with highly radical views may weaponize grievances.¹⁰⁴

This distinction is rooted in moral disengagement.¹⁰⁵ People endorsing higher levels of radicalism in our study showed less concern about the emotional harm caused by firearm misuse, suggesting they may dehumanize victims (“they deserve it”) or rationalize violence as necessary (“no other option”). These psychological mechanisms mirror patterns in broader criminal behavior, where offenders who engage in diverse crimes (versatility) often justify harm through similar cognitive distortions.¹⁰⁶ Notably, social isolation is a well-known risk factor for violent extremism and mass violence.¹⁰⁷ Victims of violence often face abandonment by friends or community members, particularly when police involvement stigmatizes them.¹⁰⁸ This isolation can deepen distrust in institutions and push individuals toward online spaces where extremist narratives thrive.¹⁰⁹ For example, polarized social media communities may frame firearms as symbols of empowerment for the “wronged,” amplifying radical ideologies among those lacking real-world support.¹¹⁰

Prior research and violence prevention initiatives have placed the hospital as an essential location to prevent retaliatory violence,¹¹¹ and the present study suggests this should extend to violent extremism and radicalization. Hospitals are uniquely positioned to intervene at critical moments when individuals are most vulnerable—immediately after experiencing violence. Hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) have been successful in reducing cycles of community violence by addressing underlying trauma, providing mental health support, and connecting patients with community resources.¹¹² Expanding these interventions to include radicalization prevention strategies could offer a novel approach to mitigating extremism and mass violence.

One avenue for intervention is targeted psychological and social support for violently injured patients, particularly those exhibiting signs of moral disengagement or social isolation. Trauma-informed care models that address psychological desensitization to violence, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs focusing on emotional accountability, could help counter the moral disengagement mechanisms that fuel radical ideologies.¹¹³ For example, intervention specialists trained to recognize cognitive distortions linked to radicalization (e.g., black-and-white thinking, dehumanization of perceived enemies, and justification of violence) could incorporate counseling techniques to disrupt these patterns.¹¹⁴ Integrating evidence-based approaches from deradicalization programs could provide individuals with alternative frameworks for processing their experiences without turning to extremist narratives. Another critical element is reducing social isolation among violently injured individuals, who often experience stigma and distrust in institutions, leaving them vulnerable to extremist recruitment.¹¹⁵ Peer mentorship programs, where survivors of violence are paired with trained community navigators, could provide prosocial alternatives to extremist networks.¹¹⁶ These mentorship programs could incorporate firearm safety discussions that challenge radical ideologies. Further, hospitals can also play a role in redirecting at-risk individuals away from online radicalization pipelines. Given that social media platforms often reinforce extremist beliefs,¹¹⁷ hospital-based intervention specialists could integrate digital literacy training into violence prevention efforts. By educating patients about online radicalization tactics and providing them with access to alternative social networks, HVIPs could disrupt extremist messaging and recruitment attempts. However, integrating radicalization prevention into HVIPs presents challenges, including the risk of mission drift, potential stigmatization of already marginalized populations, a lack of validated assessment tools, limited staff training, and ethical concerns around surveillance and civil liberties. Thus, these efforts need to be carefully implemented. To enhance effectiveness, multidisciplinary collaboration between hospitals, law enforcement, and community-based organizations could ensure that at-risk individuals receive holistic support beyond immediate hospital care.¹¹⁸ Partnerships with deradicalization initiatives, restorative justice programs, and social reintegration services could create long-term pathways to stability, addressing both ideological and structural drivers of radicalization

and the risk of gun violence.¹¹⁹ Hospitals could serve as neutral spaces where individuals receive non-punitive, trauma-informed support, helping to rebuild trust in institutions and steer individuals away from violent extremist pathways.¹²⁰

The study's focus on a sample of violently injured adults offers unique insights into the connections between firearm beliefs, radicalism, and activism. These individuals often experience significant social marginalization and direct exposure to violence, making them a critical demographic for understanding pathways to radicalization and gun violence.¹²¹ However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on a single urban trauma center may limit the generalizability of the findings. While we used a primarily non-white sample (African American [80 percent], Caucasian [14 percent], and other [6 percent]), we did not assess political or religious ideologies in radicalism intention. This may limit the findings to radicalism more generally, but differ for those groups that may not have been represented in the sample. Additionally, the use of only self-reported data introduces common method variance, which may inflate relationships between variables.¹²² Further, while this is the first study to explore the associations between gun violence and behaviors and radicalism, the data used were cross-sectional. Thus, longitudinal studies that examine how firearm beliefs and radicalization evolve over time, especially after hospital discharge, would provide deeper insights into these dynamics. Additionally, the use of regression limits causal inference due to potential omitted variable bias and unmeasured confounding.

This study found that radicalism, but not activism, was strongly associated with multiple forms of firearm-related violence. Individuals with radical beliefs exhibited lower concern for the emotional consequences of firearm misuse, suggesting that moral disengagement may play a role in the justification of violence. These findings expand our understanding of how firearm-related attitudes intersect with ideological extremism, reinforcing the distinction between lawful civic engagement and the endorsement of violent action.

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Data availability statement

This study was not pre-registered. The data presented in this study may be made available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the potential for personal identification of participants in the present sensitive population.

Ethics statement

The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC. The study received approval from the Virginia Commonwealth University Institutional Review Board.

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