

**A Toolkit for Social
Justice Advocates**



Why Treating White Supremacy as Domestic Terrorism Won't Work and How to Not Fall for It

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, President Trump refused to condemn white supremacists, even telling the far-right militia, the Proud Boys, to “stand back and stand by.” As the Proud Boys and other white supremacist groups rallied around Trump’s statement, teachers, psychologists, and other youth workers expressed an urgent need to “mitigate[] the influence of fascist ideologies on young people’s behavior” and “counter fascist recruitment of youth.”¹ In fact, the Department of Homeland Security published a 2020 report identifying “white supremacist extremists” as “the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.”² By defining white supremacists as domestic terrorist threats, both the federal government and youth workers have sought to apply antiterrorism methods, such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) framework, to white communities. Can these antiterrorism methods effectively fight white supremacist violence?

Formally launched in 2011, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is an umbrella of funding, partnerships, and initiatives that aim “to address the conditions and reduce the factors that most likely contribute to recruitment and radicalization by violent extremists.”³

Promoted by the Obama administration as a liberal alternative to more conventional counterterrorism methods like sting operations that primarily rely on law enforcement, CVE programs ask community leaders, mental health professionals, teachers, coaches, family members, and friends to identify, report, and work with individuals perceived to be vulnerable to terrorist acts, as well as develop “protective factors” to insulate community members from the lure of terrorist recruiters.⁴ To facilitate these practices, many CVE programs train communities on the risk factors, warning signs, and indicators of terrorist radicalization that they can use to identify vulnerable individuals. Although disproven by social scientists, these early warning signs target increased devotion to Islam, such as “giving up cigarettes, drinking, gambling, and urban hip-hop gangster clothes,”⁵ participation in political activism, such as “outrage over US or western foreign policy,”⁶ and vague behavioral and psychological profiles that only arouse suspicion when expressed by Muslims, such as “experiencing identity conflict,” “trouble in romantic relationships,” and “societal discrimination or injustice.”⁷

Given the explicit but unwarranted targeting of Muslim communities as imminent terrorist threats through CVE,⁸ security professionals and policymakers have rebranded this antiterrorism initiative as responsive to “all forms of terrorism,” including “right-wing terrorism.”⁹ Dylann Roof’s 2015 massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church intensified the urgency to rebrand CVE as responsive to the most pressing forms of violence facing the United States: white supremacist aggression.¹⁰ In this model, terrorism comes in many forms, which means that violence perpetrated by white supremacists is analogous to the violence enacted by political actors operating under dire conditions wrought by war, such as young people who travel to East Africa to challenge US military occupation.¹¹ But can antiterrorism tools that historically have treated all Muslims as budding terrorists effectively and ethically solve the problem of white supremacy?

To answer this question, this report examines how current antiterrorism initiatives treat white supremacy in its most exceptional form—individual white supremacists who engage in violence—and misses its more mundane manifestations that enact widespread violence through institutionalized racism, such as racialized policing. It also explores how the use of antiterrorism programs to fight white supremacy ultimately leads to the reinvestment in institutions and practices that harm communities of color. Lastly, this report investigates how the state’s proposed solutions to the problem of white supremacy, such as domestic terrorism legislation, risks criminalizing participation in or contributions to Black Lives Matter, Indigenous water protectors, and other social movement work.

Can White Supremacist Tools Like CVE Fight White Supremacy?

The short answer? No. Here's a case study from Chicago.

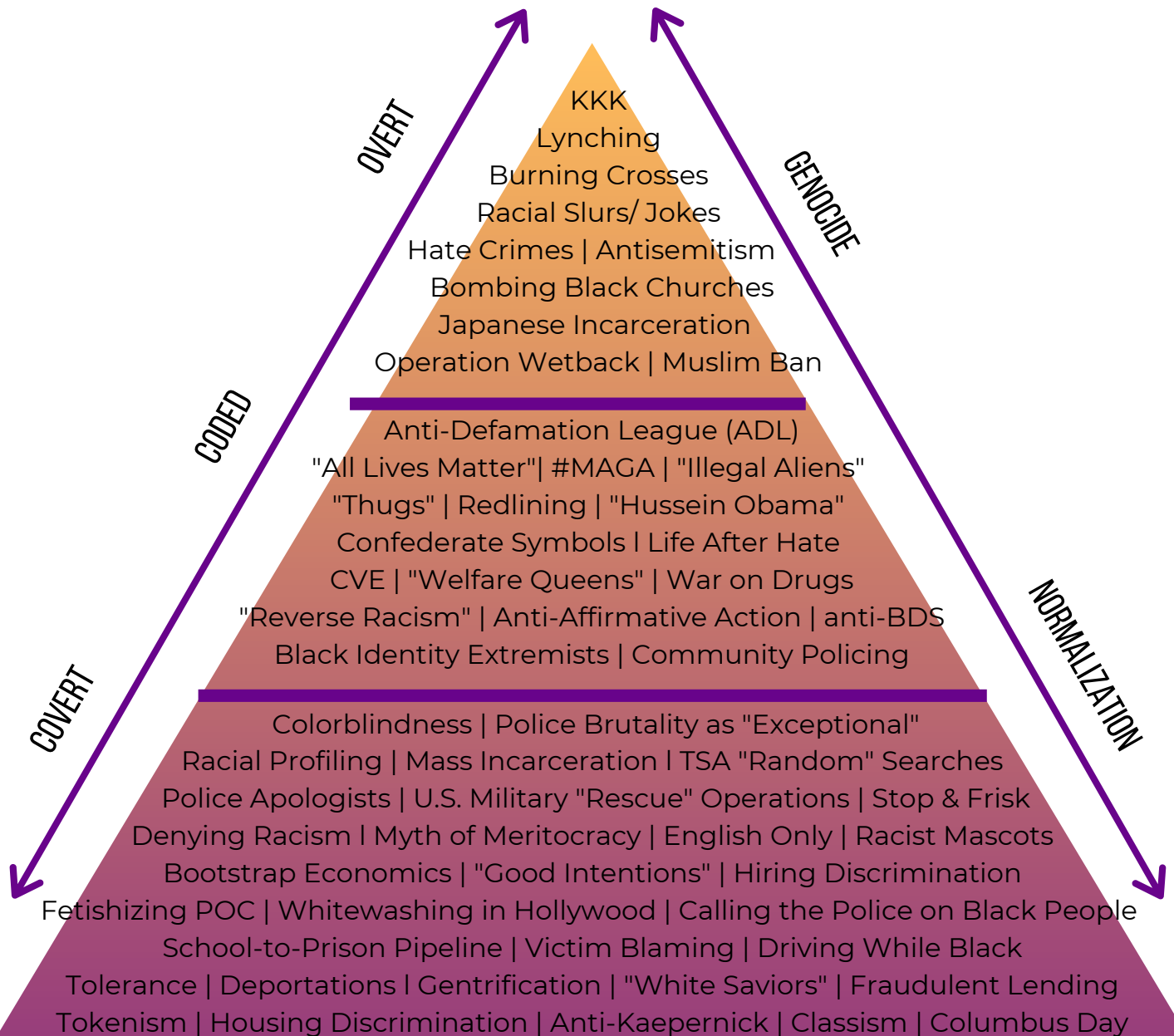
In 2017, thirty-two year old Stuart Wright pled guilty to a hate crime after he vandalized a synagogue in downtown Chicago, just four months after he held the pistol grip of a paintball gun hidden inside a chip bag and pointed it at some seventy-five patrons and employees at a popular fast food restaurant. Citing “mental health issues,” Judge Vincent Gaughan sentenced Wright to 30 months’ probation, 200 hours of community service with a predominantly Black church (St. Sabina), mental health treatment, and deradicalization sessions with prominent “former” white supremacist Christian Picciolini, the co-founder of the nonprofit organization Life After Hate, which “help[s] people leave hate groups, particularly white supremacy groups.”

Judge Gaughan’s sentence reflects a general understanding of white supremacist violence as the result of an individual’s psychological pathologies and extremist ideologies. To prevent future racial violence, the court must provide tailored interventions to deradicalize ideologically-inspired actors like Wright and resolve underlying mental health issues perceived to fuel such racial violence. By addressing white supremacy in its most extreme forms - violent hate crimes—this approach *individualizes white supremacy and reduces racism to a personal problem rooted in individual pathologies, rather than in structural inequalities.*

Popularized in the aftermath of World War II, this view of racism authorized the use of “educational programs to improve [discriminatory] attitudes and planned interracial contacts to promote intergroup ‘understanding.’”¹² This sense of “racial individualism” obfuscates the inherently systemic nature of racism in the United States, such that racial violence perpetrated by individual actors is seen as a psychological issue, rather than an expression of structural inequality.¹³ The focus on psychological interventions and educational programs often “discourage[s] both systemic and relational thinking on race and redistributive or structural reform.”¹⁴ These postwar era understandings of racism continue to haunt racial initiatives that focus primarily on “deradicalizing” individual actors, without ever addressing structural inequality.

Pyramid of White Supremacy

This image illustrates the historical foundation of day-to-day racist norms that work together to produce "extreme" or spectacular acts of white supremacy. It shows that individualized white supremacy stems from centuries of structural racism in the US.



Racial Capitalism = Foundation (Encouraged)

Settler Colonialism | Slavery | Wall Street | Great Recession | Corporate Interest
Indentured Servitude | War Economy | Stock Market | Sweat Shops | Neo-Liberalism
| Extractive Economies | NAFTA | CAFTA | APEC | Labor Exploitation
Trail of Tears | Outsourcing Labor | Oil Pipelines | Free Trade | Manifest Destiny
Migrant Workers | McCarthyism Military Industrial Complex | Land Exploitation
Corporate Media | War on Terror | Greed

Subscribing to “racial individualism,” Life After Hate’s Christian Picciolini directed Wright’s deradicalization treatment to “address the drivers that may be contributing to the client’s extremist views and/or violent behaviors.” Charging Wright \$3500 for these court-mandated services, Picciolini identified several interventions, including “immersion” sessions where “the Intervener will challenge the client’s doctrine and hateful narrative by introducing them to various types of people they believe they hate (i.e. a Holocaust denier with a Holocaust survivor, Islamophobe with Imam, Anti-Gay with LGBTQ community).” In this case, Picciolini specifically proposed “interpersonal immersion therapy” to “introduce Mr. Wright to various structured situations with people he believes he hates on principle alone, to develop a sense of empathy and understanding through the compassion of others.”¹⁵ In this approach, white supremacist violence is treated as the outcome of an individual’s psychological pathologies and extremist ideologies. Exposure to people of color could reconfigure such ideological commitments. By making their success dependent on the participation of oppressed peoples, such “interpersonal immersion therapy” makes anti-racism the responsibility of people of color who must demonstrate their humanity to and express compassion for their oppressors.

In addition, Picciolini offered sessions where Wright could “confront the underlying traumas that may have led to their extremism and/or violent behaviors.”¹⁶ This popular “deradicalization” approach treats white supremacist violence as an aberration—an unfortunate outcome of individual pathologies, often stemming from trauma—rather than an enduring feature of US society. Hate crimes reflect deeper political struggles to maintain (white) power and reinforce (racial) hierarchies. **Challenging white supremacist violence through unscientific interventions orchestrated by “former” white supremacists does little to disturb the social structures and cultural institutions that maintain, confer, and reproduce white supremacy.** In fact, they even strengthen the very institutions that harm Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, including a criminal-legal system that insulated Wright from a harsh prison sentence.

Despite these deradicalization services and the support of psychiatry professor and violent extremism expert Stevan Weine, Picciolini reported that Wright “continues to subscribe to neo-Nazi, white supremacist ideologies” and “remains unremorseful for his hate crime.”¹⁷ After working thirteen hours on this case, Picciolini determined that Wright’s commitment to white supremacist ideologies intensified throughout his treatment. Wright even showed up to St. Sabina to complete his community service hours with a neo-Nazi symbol - the number 88 - inked onto his forehead. Father Pflieger, who is white, reported that “It was obvious [Wright] did not want to be here. He didn’t enjoy taking orders from a Black man...When he came in with the Nazi stuff on, that was the last straw.”¹⁸ Father Pflieger dismissed Wright from St. Sabina.

Picciolini, however, offered a different description of Wright, reporting that his client “was very engaged,” “was prompt” and “always answered [his] questions.” Rather than hold Wright accountable for his actions at St. Sabina, Picciolini questioned placing Wright in a subordinate role, saying that “My experience tells me that we probably shouldn’t throw people - in their first experience with people they hate - in a subservient position. It probably reinforced his fear, his hatred, his prejudice.” Focusing on his client’s desire to reassert power and control, not the violence he perpetrated, Picciolini also insisted that Wright’s branding of his forehead with a Nazi symbol “was less of a way for him to show his ideology and more of a way to scare people.”¹⁹ Rather than question the effectiveness of his interventions or repair the harm done to Father Pflieger’s congregation, Picciolini concluded that Wright’s actions reflected the general racial animus and psychological pathologies believed to drive white supremacist violence.

The case of Stuart Wright demonstrates the limits of conceptual frameworks that individualize white supremacy and reduce racism to a personal problem, particularly by facilitating ineffective and unscientific deradicalization initiatives targeting the psychological pathologies and extremist ideologies of individual actors. Picciolini’s interventions draw from and contribute to broader countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives that explicitly target Muslims, especially Black Muslims.

Although the white supremacist violence executed by the Proud Boys and other such groups frightens us, we cannot turn to methods that strengthen institutions that harm people of color, obscure structural inequality, and refuse to address the systemic racism defined by the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”²⁰ The spectacular white supremacist violence that makes headlines misses the systemic sources of racial violence and death in the United States. Chipping away at white supremacy’s most extreme forms through ineffective and unscientific interventions--rooted in a racist antiterrorism framework--does little to address the mundane social processes that kill people of color every day.

Can We Legislate White Supremacy Away?

Elected officials wanting to show opposition to visible white supremacist violence are passing sweeping legislation that is a danger to social justice movements. Don't fall for it.

Given the increased visibility of white supremacist violence, policymakers have introduced legislation to give law enforcement agencies the same tools and authority used to fight designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), despite robust legal instruments already available. Such legislative maneuvers typically define white supremacist violence as one form of “domestic terrorism,” an exceptional status that requires specialized laws.

For example, Congressman Brad Schneider (D-IL-10) introduced H.R. 602, the Domestic Terrorism Act of 2020, arguing that “The rising tide of domestic terror across our country, particularly from violent far-right extremists and white supremacist organizations, demands a response from Congress.” Strengthening the very institutions that criminalize communities of color, H.R. 602, if signed into law, would “authorize dedicated domestic terrorism offices within the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to analyze and monitor domestic terrorist activity and require the Federal Government to take steps to prevent domestic terrorism.” Although policymakers argue that such legislation could empower law enforcement agencies to incapacitate violent white supremacists beyond the tools already available to them, domestic terrorism statutes do little to address systemic racism and, more pressingly, can devolve into tools to criminalize, arrest, and prosecute political organizers. This proposed legislation would expand policing agencies like the Department of Homeland Security and funnel more resources toward preemptive policing, despite growing calls to “defund the police.”

Recent trends in criminalizing political protest as domestic terrorism should give us pause about the intentions and impacts of proposed domestic terrorism statutes. For example, Energy Transfer Partners contracted the private mercenary company, TigerSwan, to disrupt the Indigenous water protectors contesting its Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL). TigerSwan classified the water protectors as “jihadists” with a “strong female Shia following.”

TigerSwan also described the overall movement as an “ideologically-driven insurgency with a strong religious component.” Both Energy Transfer Partners and TigerSwan determined that the water protectors posed an imminent domestic terrorist threat, which justified the “aggressive intelligence preparation of the battlefield and active coordination between intelligence and security elements.”²¹ Domestic terrorism statutes would allow the government to level charges against any supporter of #NoDAPL, including bringing material support charges against anyone who donates a small sum of money to a political organization.²²

Similar to the classification of Indigenous water protectors as domestic terrorists, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) established the “Black Identity Extremist” category in 2017. Drawing from its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) used to disrupt and discredit the Black freedom struggle in the 1960s, the FBI insisted that “incidents of alleged police abuse against African Americans” will continue to “feed the resurgence in ideologically-motivated, violent criminal activity within the BIE movement.”²³

The new classification of “Black Identity Extremists” and the purported terrorist threat they posed ultimately justified new coercive policing initiatives, such as “Iron Fist,” a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy to surveil, infiltrate, and disrupt Black political groups. Although the FBI abandoned the Black Identity Extremist label in 2018, this example amply demonstrates how the terrorist label is unevenly applied to political dissidents of color.

At the same time, policing practices to disrupt white supremacist violence rely on flawed sting operations that merely ensnare individuals vulnerable to police provocation. FBI whistleblower Mike German, for example, described his own fears that “the bureau is throwing a lot of effort into resource-intensive sting operations that target only the most gullible individuals in the movement, rather than investigating the multiple examples of far-right violence that are happening in plain sight.”²⁴ German’s concerns illustrate the marginal periphery of white supremacy yet the entirety of social justice movements caught in the FBI’s crosshairs. Domestic terrorism legislation would merely strengthen policing institutions that historically have criminalized and harmed communities of color, while allowing elected officials to claim that they are responsive to the problem of white supremacist violence.

CONCLUSION

Mobilizing against white supremacy on our own terms.

In the current political moment, vigilante violence, brash racism, and overarching chaos have generated anxiety and fear among many. As we watch elected officials encourage white supremacist violence, many of us feel an unsettling uncertainty about the future. However overwhelmed we may feel, it is this very uncertain and chaotic climate that demands an unwavering commitment to anti-racism and prison abolition. All too often, efforts to disrupt white supremacy target racial violence in its most extreme forms, such as Wright's hate crimes, without ever confronting the more mundane forms of white supremacist violence, such as racialized policing, that harm and brutalize communities of color every day.

As this report demonstrates, court-mandated "deradicalization" sessions with a former white supremacist is neither effective nor aimed at disrupting structural inequality. Similarly, legislation purporting to criminalize white supremacist "extremism" seems like a logical response to such frightening violence. Unfortunately, the individualized focus of proposed legislation sidesteps the most pressing forms of racial violence in the United States as countless people regularly experience discrimination, violence, and death through US political, cultural, and economic systems.

Focusing on individualized acts of white supremacist violence while failing to respond to structural inequalities that harm communities of color actively contributes to the reproduction of white supremacy. Such legislation also expands the government's power to police and surveil communities of color, ultimately increasing state violence against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. In these ways, legislation that treats white supremacy as one form of "domestic terrorism" risks criminalizing social justice movements currently challenging white supremacy and only responds to white supremacy in its most extreme and hypervisible forms. Instead of supporting domestic terrorism statutes and deradicalization interventions, we must organize against white supremacist violence on our own terms, without conforming to the logics, practices, and strategies of the state.

To challenge white supremacy in more meaningful ways, we must:

- **Reject the government's attempt to co-opt our righteous rage against white supremacy;**
- **Refuse frameworks that define white supremacist violence as exceptional "extremism" or "domestic terrorism" as these narratives reinforce anti-Muslim, anti-Black, and anti-immigrant antiterrorism initiatives and policing practices;**
- **Agitate against domestic terrorism legislation, which is one way we can challenge structural white supremacy;**
- **Name how white supremacist violence is a manifestation of this country's ideologies when speaking out against the individual actions of white supremacists;**
- **Monitor the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and other national security agencies when they create programming in your locale and prepare actionable responses with related community organizations; and**
- **Engage in political study to learn how others have fought white supremacist violence without relying on the police, such as the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee.**

For support in taking these actions, join, donate to, and support the growing movements against criminalization and policing:

[Vigilant Love](#)

Vigilant Love (VL) is a solidarity grassroots organization that integrates arts, healing, community education, & political advocacy to protect the safety and justice of communities impacted by Islamophobia and other state violences. VL's [#ServicesNotSurveillance campaign](#) addresses the racialized profiling and surveillance of Muslim, Black and brown communities in therapy, social work, school counseling and other related spaces funded by the Dept. of Homeland Security.

[Muslim Justice League](#)

a Muslim-led organization that advocates for communities whose rights are threatened under the national security state in the United States.

[Assata's Daughters](#)

an organization of young radical African-American women and girls in Chicago, protesting against police violence.

[Arab American Action Network \(AAAN\)](#)

an organization that works to improve the social, economic, and political conditions of Arab immigrants and Arab Americans in the Chicago area.

[Dissenters](#)

a national movement organization that is leading our generation to reclaim our resources from the war industry, reinvest in life-giving institutions, and repair collaborative relationships with the earth and people around the world.

For support in taking these actions, join, donate to, and support the growing movements against criminalization and policing:

[Palestinian Youth Movement](#)

is a transnational independent grassroots movement of young Palestinians and Arabs who are organizing in their communities across several cities in North America. As part of PYM's anti-repression work, PYM has developed extensive research on the Zionist underpinnings of the War on Terror and counterterrorism work. This research informs their campaign work, which includes combating Zionist surveillance programs in educational institutions and in community.

[Stop LAPD Spying](#)

an alliance of different individuals and organizations that come together to collaborate and take collective action together toward a common goal(s). The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition rejects all forms of police oppression and any policy that makes us all suspects in the eyes of the state. They have led the anti-surveillance work in LA county for years and are at the forefront of anti-CVE work today.

[Muslim Student Association West](#)

an organization that provides resources to develop principled Muslim students as catalysts for change. MSA West currently serves 3000 Muslim students across 30 campuses statewide in their spiritual, academic, advocacy, mental health, and social needs. It recently developed an [anti-CVE toolkit](#) for students to learn how CVE operates on university campuses and how to take action.

[Majdal Community Center](#)

The Majdal Center in El Cajon seeks to build a foundation for political power and secure a more just future for all members of the Arab community in San Diego through campaigning, advocacy, and educational programming. In partnership with [PANA](#), they released an [anti-CVE report](#) detailing surveillance activity in San Diego.

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