

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Shutterstock

Far right and extremist groups are targeting military veterans for recruitment. Does the ADF owe them a duty of care?

October 7, 2021 3.24pm AEDT

Carli Kulmar

Lecturer in Law, University of Canberra

Michael Jensen

Associate professor, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra, University of Canberra

Even before extremist group activity in Australia's 2021 anti-lockdown protests was exposed, concern about right-wing extremism in Australia was on the rise.

ASIO and the US annual threat estimate have noted right-wing extremism in Australia is on an upward trend. Ideological extremism now makes up 40% of the ASIO caseload.

Our research at the University of Canberra's National Security Hub is investigating online influence operations targeting Australia, including its veteran community. This is a global problem and was one of many issues noted at this year's International Terrorism and Social Media Conference in the UK.

For researchers like us, who focus on the wellness of veterans – particularly during the fallout from the military withdrawal from Afghanistan – such extremist groups present a complicated and dangerous threat to the community.

WAtoday 
@WAtoday 

#EXCLUSIVE Fears of neo-Nazis in military ranks after ex-soldier's passport cancelled



watoday.com.au
Fears of neo-Nazis in military ranks after ex-soldier's passport cancelled
A former soldier was prevented from travelling to fight for a far-right paramilitary group in Ukraine, according to authorities, amid warnings ...

8:52 AM · Aug 23, 2021 

 2  Reply  Share

[Read 2 replies](#)

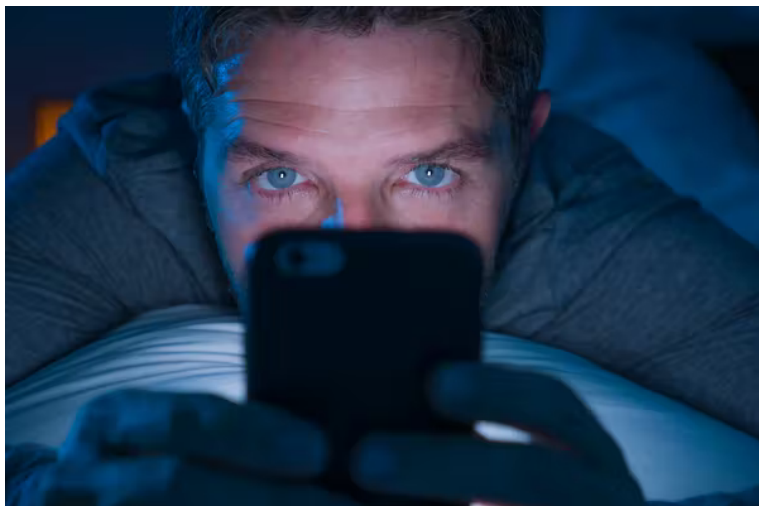
Transition to civilian life

The transition to civilian life can be a vulnerable time for many veterans. Rates of suicide, homelessness and incarceration are alarmingly high for Australian veterans.

Some veterans find their ideological beliefs are tested during transition to civilian life, when they feel most disconnected from the military community that has so far played such a fundamental role in their sense of self.

It is during this period, rather than during service, when veterans are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation.

In some cases, veterans have voiced being actively ostracised by their former colleagues for leaving the military. This has in turn caused them to feel disillusioned with the entire institution.



Well-designed prevention programs may help deter recruitment by extremist groups hoping to take advantage of military skill and knowledge. Shutterstock

This, unfortunately, can make these veterans more vulnerable to appeals and influence by extremist groups offering the mateship and camaraderie now missing in their lives.

Such groups often promote a mission-based approach, which may attract those lacking the feeling of purpose they valued in military service.

There's a risk this may lead to well-meaning veterans being enticed into participating in groups whose ideals they would normally have considered to be questionable.

A broader risk to the public

This is not a uniquely Australian issue.

Nearly one in five defendants in the prosecutions undertaken in response to the January 6 US Capitol attack had served in the military.

Escalation from participation in online forums to physically violent acts can happen quickly and sometimes without clear warning signs. These extremist groups aim to gain an already trained cohort of members who cannot only be immediately activated, but are also able to train others.

Those with military experience and training in combat, weaponry, or explosives are clear threats if radicalised by extremist groups. One study suggests some veterans tend to affiliate with such groups as instructors, rather than undertaking extremist acts themselves.

The newly established UK-based Veterans 4 Freedom (V4F) group even lists service in the military as a requirement for membership.

This group claims to be around 200-strong and is focused on “anti-vaccine” offensives, such as organising marches. In discussions on the group’s private Telegram account, however, it appears to be planning to escalate its activities.

Media reports suggest discussions on the platform even include awareness that currently serving military members may well become “enemy combatants” as a result of V4F’s actions. Not only are these “freedom defenders” anticipating a confrontation, they are prepared to fight their former brothers and sisters-in-arms to achieve their goals.

The New York Times  @nytimes · Feb 22, 2021 

Replying to @nytimes

More than a third of the militants were also known to have military experience, a far higher proportion than in the crowd as a whole. Of the 31 group members who have been charged so far, at least 11 had a military record. This may have been intentional. nyti.ms/2ZEUrw6

The New York Times 

@nytimes

Although people with extremist ideologies represent a small fraction of military veterans, far-right organizations heavily recruit them because of their skills, said Peter D. Feaver, a political science professor at Duke University. nyti.ms/2ZEUrw6

7:22 AM · Feb 22, 2021



651 Reply Share

[Read 45 replies](#)

Veterans in Anglo democracies are being targeted by both overt and covert online influence campaigns using fake military profiles to connect with and deceive defence contractors and current and former military members.

Veterans are also ideal targets for international online influence operations encouraging promotion of particular political candidates, parties or ideologies. Many of these operations originate in Russia or China.

A duty of care

So, what duty of care does the Australian Defence Force owe to its members — and the community at large — to better prepare veterans for threats they may encounter when transitioning to civilian life?

Organisations such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (a collaboration between the technology industry, government, civil society, and academia) are actively engaged in monitoring and preventing violent extremist content and activity on online platforms.

But military members and their families would likely benefit from awareness and prevention programs designed specifically for the community — particularly if offered *before* they transition to civilian life.

Support should also be offered to assist and protect veterans seeking to leave such groups.

Well-designed prevention programs may help deter recruitment by extremist groups hoping to take advantage of military skills and knowledge, and could be offered as part of military exit processing.

If this article has raised issues for you, or if you're concerned about someone you know, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Open Arms on 1800 011 046 or visit the Open Arms website.