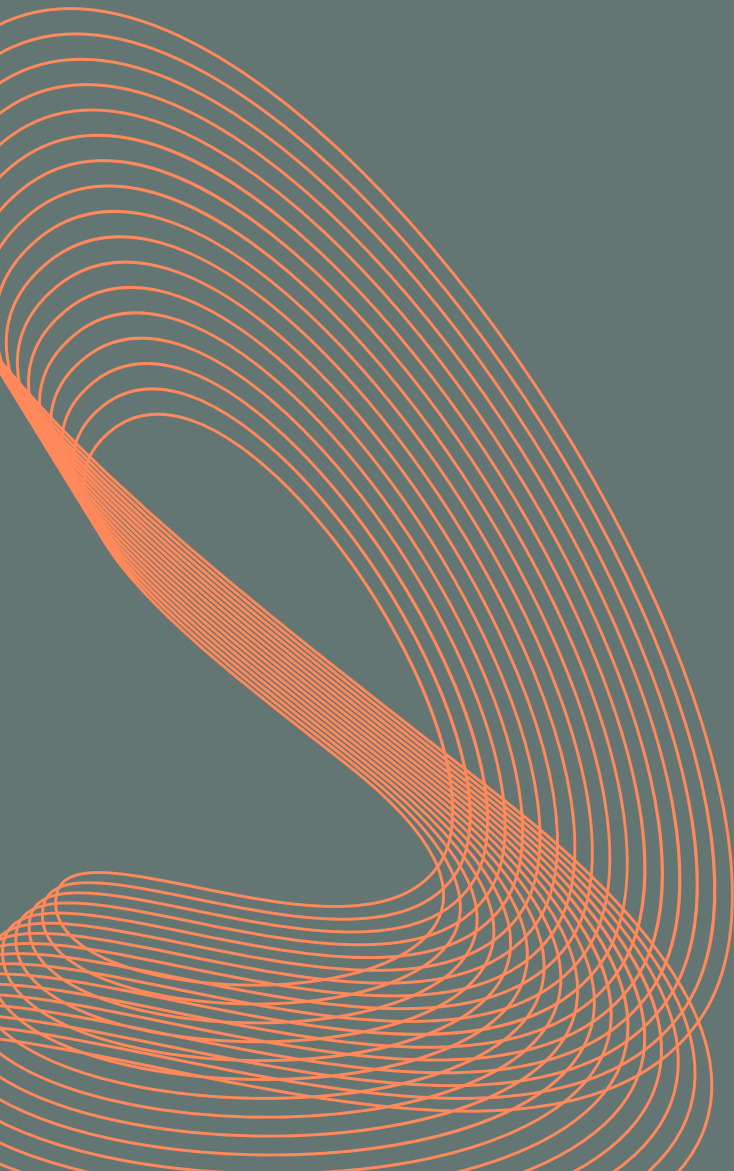


EXTREMISM FACT SHEET

Xenophobia & Anti-Immigrant
Extremism: From Fringe to Mainstream



In the United States, mainstream and fringe actors leverage xenophobic and anti-immigrant extremism to threaten immigrant and minority communities and undermine democracy.

WHAT IS XENOPHOBIA & ANTI-IMMIGRANT EXTREMISM?

Xenophobia and anti-immigrant extremism perpetuate the idea that immigrants, or people who are perceived to be “foreign” or “outsiders,” threaten America’s founding ideals and must be excluded from positions of power, citizenship, or even residence in the United States. Today’s xenophobic movement explicitly targets migrants and asylum seekers crossing the southern border and also seeks to further policies and violence against immigrant and non-white communities.

The movement and its ideology are reactionary. Movement leaders often leverage social anxieties about demographic shifts, social change, and political and economic uncertainty to fuel xenophobia.¹

The movement spreads negative stereotypes and disinformation that dehumanize and criminalize immigrants, people with recent immigrant heritage,² and communities of color, by portraying them as inherently threatening. This rhetoric has

inspired deadly terrorist attacks targeting LatinX, Muslim, Jewish, African American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

In recent years, mainstream actors—including politicians, elected officials, and media personalities—have escalated anti-immigrant sentiment by embracing extremist rhetoric and policies.

HOW EXTREMISM IS NORMALIZED: KEY MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES YOU MAY HAVE HEARD

This type of extremist rhetoric is now common among politicians and in public discourse, making it difficult to discern reality from extremist talking points that are used to fearmonger and spread disinformation. Three common mainstream narratives that are dog whistles for xenophobic and anti-immigrant extremism include: suggestions that immigrants are “violent criminals,” are “invaders” who pose a military and cultural threat, and are part of a conspiracy to “replace” white people and white voters.

01

Immigrants Are “Violent Criminals”: This narrative falsely accuses immigrants of being vectors of disease, drugs, and crime, even while extensive data shows that native-born Americans are much more likely to commit crimes than immigrants. For example, this propaganda blames immigrants for the fentanyl crisis, even though U.S. citizens are most likely to bring fentanyl into the United States.

02

Immigrants are “Invaders”: This narrative describes immigrants as “invaders” who pose an existential threat.³ White supremacists often warn of an impending “white genocide” or “race war” to portray a similar and imminent threat. Today’s mainstream version warns of a “migrant invasion,” suggesting immigrants pose a threat to American “culture,” or “traditions,” and implicitly calls for hate-fueled attacks to counter this imagined threat.

03

Immigrants Are Pawns in the “Great Replacement” Conspiracy: This narrative claims immigrants are part of a “great replacement” conspiracy to “replace” non-whites. It is rooted in the anti-Jewish Protocols of the Elders of Zion and has long animated antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe and the U.S. Today’s mainstream version expands on this by claiming immigrants are pawns in a scheme to replace Americans in the voting booth. Some versions implicitly question the legal status and voting rights of Americans with recent immigrant heritage. Dog whistles for this conspiracy include “voter replacement” or statements claiming increases in border crossings are “intentional.”

THE IMPACT OF XENOPHOBIA & ANTI-IMMIGRANT EXTREMISM IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The growth and normalization of xenophobic and anti-immigrant extremism has a wide-ranging impact, from an increase in hate in our neighborhoods and schools, to discriminatory legislation. It spreads bigotry; drives harmful policies at the federal, state, and local level; regularly inspires violence; and undermines our democracy.

Increases Anti-Immigrant Sentiment: Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies during the Trump Administration emboldened people with racist ideas and negatively impacted the mental health of LatinX people. Two-thirds of LatinX people said that advertisements with anti-immigrant rhetoric made them feel “anxious” or “scared,” according to a 2022 poll.

Furtheres Discriminatory Policies: Xenophobia drives discriminatory policies against immigrant communities and disproportionality harms Black and indigenous migrants and asylum seekers. For example, in 2020, the Biden Administration elected to continue the Trump-initiated policy of blocking asylum applicants from pursuing their legal right to seek asylum at the southern border. This policy resulted in over 13,480 incidents of murder, rape, torture, kidnapping, or other violent assaults committed against migrants forced to return to Mexico since President Biden took office. State policies and operations, such as Operation Lone Star in Texas illegally targeted migrants based on their race, ethnicity, or national origin.

Inspires Hate-Fueled Attacks: The number of hate-fueled incidents, crimes, and mass casualty terrorist attacks in the United States has skyrocketed over the last decade, driven partly by anti-immigrant sentiments and “great replacement” and “invasion” conspiracies. This includes attacks against Asian Americans in the wake of the pandemic, and attacks at religious institutions, public venues, and even in K-12 schools.



Undermines Democracy: This extremist movement undermines democracy in two key ways. First, conspiracies such as “voter replacement” or debunked claims of widespread voter fraud by unauthorized immigrants, undermine public confidence in elections processes. Second, it tries to limit the political power of immigrant communities by suppressing their vote through discriminatory laws and practices, such as Voter ID laws.

NETWORKS OF EXTREMISM: HOW ANTI-IMMIGRANT & XENOPHOBIC EXTREMISM DRIVE OTHER MOVEMENTS

Xenophobia and anti-immigrant extremism strengthens the broader antidemocratic movement⁴ by bolstering other extremist elements that promote bigotry and undermine democracy. It also creates opportunities for allyship between ideologically aligned groups including white supremacists, misogynists, and election denial extremists.

White Supremacy: White supremacists see anti-immigrant extremism as an avenue to mainstream their ideology and frequently embrace anti-immigrant slogans and policies to appeal to broader audiences who might be turned off by explicitly racist and antisemitic propaganda. For instance, prominent anti-immigrant organizations, including the Federation for Immigration Reform and the Center for Immigration Studies, were founded decades ago by the white supremacist John Tanton.

Misogyny: Anti-immigrant extremists often oppose women's reproductive freedom by arguing that women's primary roles are to birth and raise white children, so the white population is not "replaced." For example, members of the white supremacist group Patriot Front, who embrace the "great replacement" conspiracy, regularly organize in opposition to LGBTQ pride events and abortion rights events.

Election Denial: Xenophobia undergirds the growing election denial and broader antidemocratic movement, heightening anxieties about a changing electorate. For example, retired General Michael Flynn, a leading election denier, helped launch a series of private conferences around the country focused on a "migrant invasion." The series advertised the anti-immigrant "voter replacement" narrative.



Mourners gather in El Paso, Texas, where a white supremacist motivated by the "great replacement" conspiracy, targeted immigrants. Mike Hardiman/Shutterstock



In the wake of the terrorist attack in Buffalo, New York, targeting the Black community, members of Congress condemned colleagues for using the same white supremacist rhetoric that inspired the attacker. The House passed a resolution condemning the "great replacement" conspiracy. Drew Angerer/Getty Images News/Getty Images

TAKE ACTION: HOW YOU CAN RESPOND TO EXTREMISM

Reject the Mainstreaming of Extremist Narratives: We must name hate when we see it and refuse to let its purveyors whitewash extremism and monopolize public discourse. Describing immigrants as “invaders,” “replacers,” or “criminals,” mainstreams xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and more broadly, white supremacist sentiment. Whether you see it online, in your community, or among elected officials, call this rhetoric out for what it is: deliberate fearmongering and disinformation. For specific ideas about how to intervene online and in-person, consider [bystander training](#).

Get Involved in Your Community: A vibrant democracy that is reflective of its citizens requires your participation. At the local level that means getting involved with school boards, city councils, townhalls, and other elements of government such as elections administration. Express solidarity with communities that are under attack and join events that uplift their voices. We all have a role to play to ensure our communities remain open and welcoming to immigrants and reject hate.

Support Inclusive Policies and Reject Discriminatory Policies: Advocate for policies that support immigrants and other minorities. Make your voice heard at the state and federal level in support of inclusive policies such as voter protection, and in opposition to bigoted policies such as those undermining U.S. asylum law, blocking refugees or asylum seekers, and preventing immigrants from using public services.

ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST

We work to create a just world in which every person’s intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

CONTACT US

To learn more about our work, please visit humanrightsfirst.org or email us: ExtremismInfo@humanrightsfirst.org

ENDNOTES

1. Many immigrant communities have been targeted by [xenophobic movements throughout U.S. history](#), including Irish and other Catholics in the late 1800s and in the 1920s, Chinese Americans in 1900s, Japanese Americans in the 1940s, LatinX communities in the 1950s and 2000s, and Muslims and Arab communities in 1970s, 1990s and 2000s, among others. Xenophobia targeting many of these communities continues today.
2. Some extremists see the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 as a key differentiator in “American” heritage because the law repealed racial and ethnic designations as criteria for immigration, which increased the diversity of immigration applicants.
3. A body of research demonstrates that a [real or perceived “existential threat”](#) is one of the strongest drivers of [inter-group violence](#).
4. The Antidemocratic Far-Right Extremist Movement is an umbrella term for the movement advancing efforts to transform our current multiracial, pluralistic, democratic system into one that is largely authoritarian and organized hierarchically according to race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and/or culture. This includes but is not limited to the xenophobic and anti-immigrant movement, the election denial movement, the male supremacist movement, and the white supremacist movement.