Preliminary Findings on Risk and Protective Factors for Radicalization Across Extremist Offenders, Crimes, and Outcomes

Aidan Stuart, Jeff Gruenewald, PhD. University of Arkansas

TERRORISM RESEARCH CENTER

Abstract

Several preliminary findings are presented on the nature of indicators of offline and online radicalization and preparatory activities across multiple forms of violent extremism in the United States since 1990. Comparative data on right-wing extremists (RWEs) and radical Islamic perpetrators come from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB). We identify both similarities and differences in offender-level risk and protective factors across violent successful and unsuccessful plots, suggesting that the relevance of some factors are dependent upon the form of extremism. Preliminary findings suggest there is empirical value in comparing radicalization indicators across multiple types of offenders and outcomes of violent extremism. Our results can inform investigatory approaches and policies aimed at prevention of homegrown and domestic extremism.

Keywords: risk and protective factors, radicalization, right-wing extremism, radical Islamic extremism

Research Question

How do risk and protective factors compare across RWEs and radical Islamic perpetrators of violent successful and unsuccessful forms of homegrown and domestic extremism?

Methodology

Offender-level data on RWEs and radical Islamic extremists (n=627) come from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source database created in 2006 by Drs. Joshua D. Freilich (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) and Steven Chermak (Michigan State University). Variables include offender race, gender, citizenship, ideological affiliation, crime type, and offline and online radicalization and preparatory activities. Descriptive analyses are conducted. Of the preparatory and radicalization indicators, the four most prominent types were identified and compared across affiliation and crime type.

Findings

Table 1. Offender Demographics (n=627)

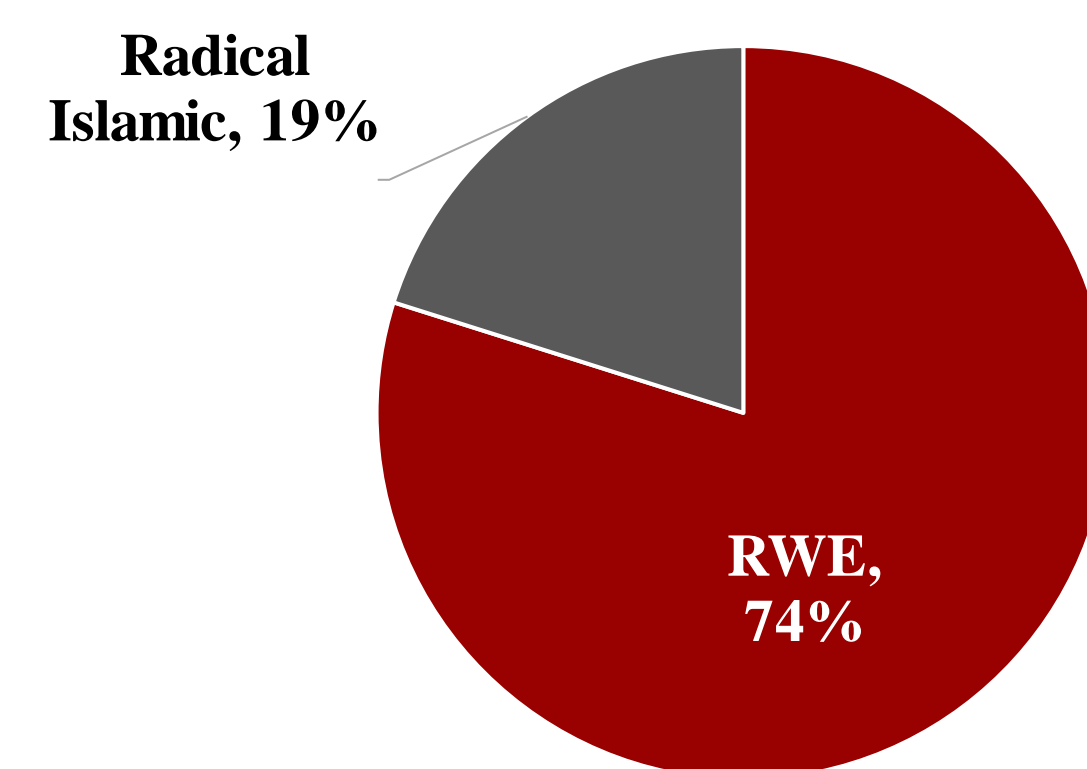|	n	%
Race		
White	532	84.8
Black or African American	25	4.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.2
Asian	9	1.4
Middle Eastern or North African	41	6.5
U.S. Citizenship		
No	46	7.3
Yes	567	90.4

Figure 1. Offender Affiliation

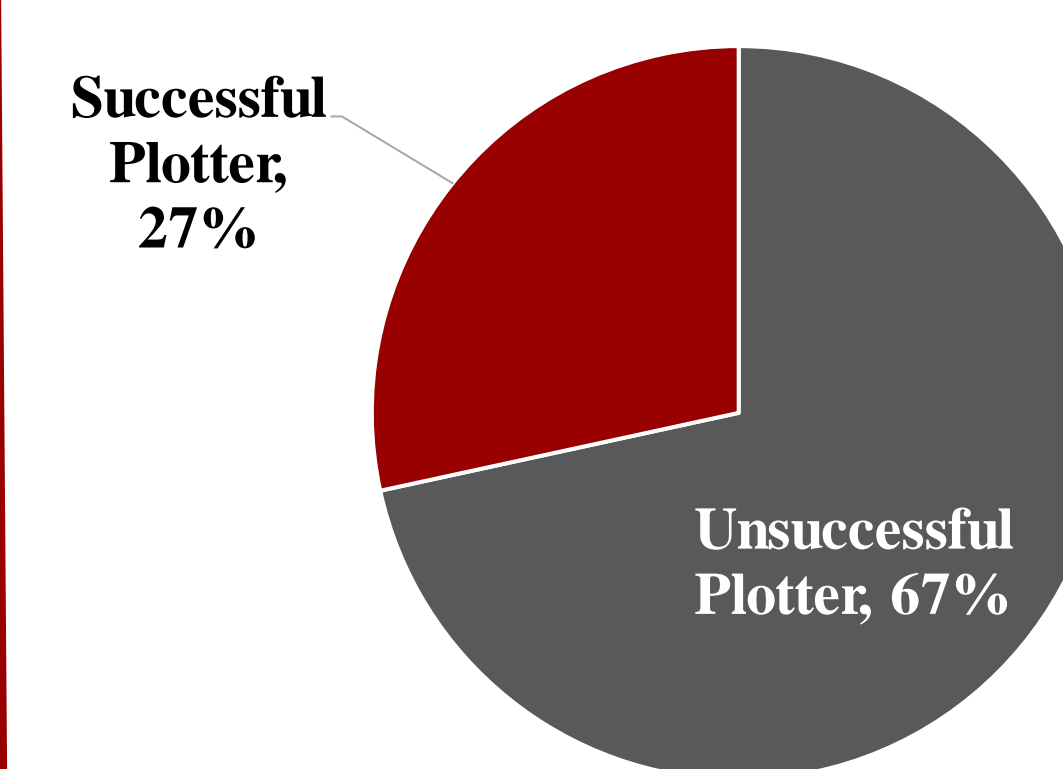Figure 2. Offender Crime Type

Figure 3. Affiliation & Offline Prominent Preparatory Activities
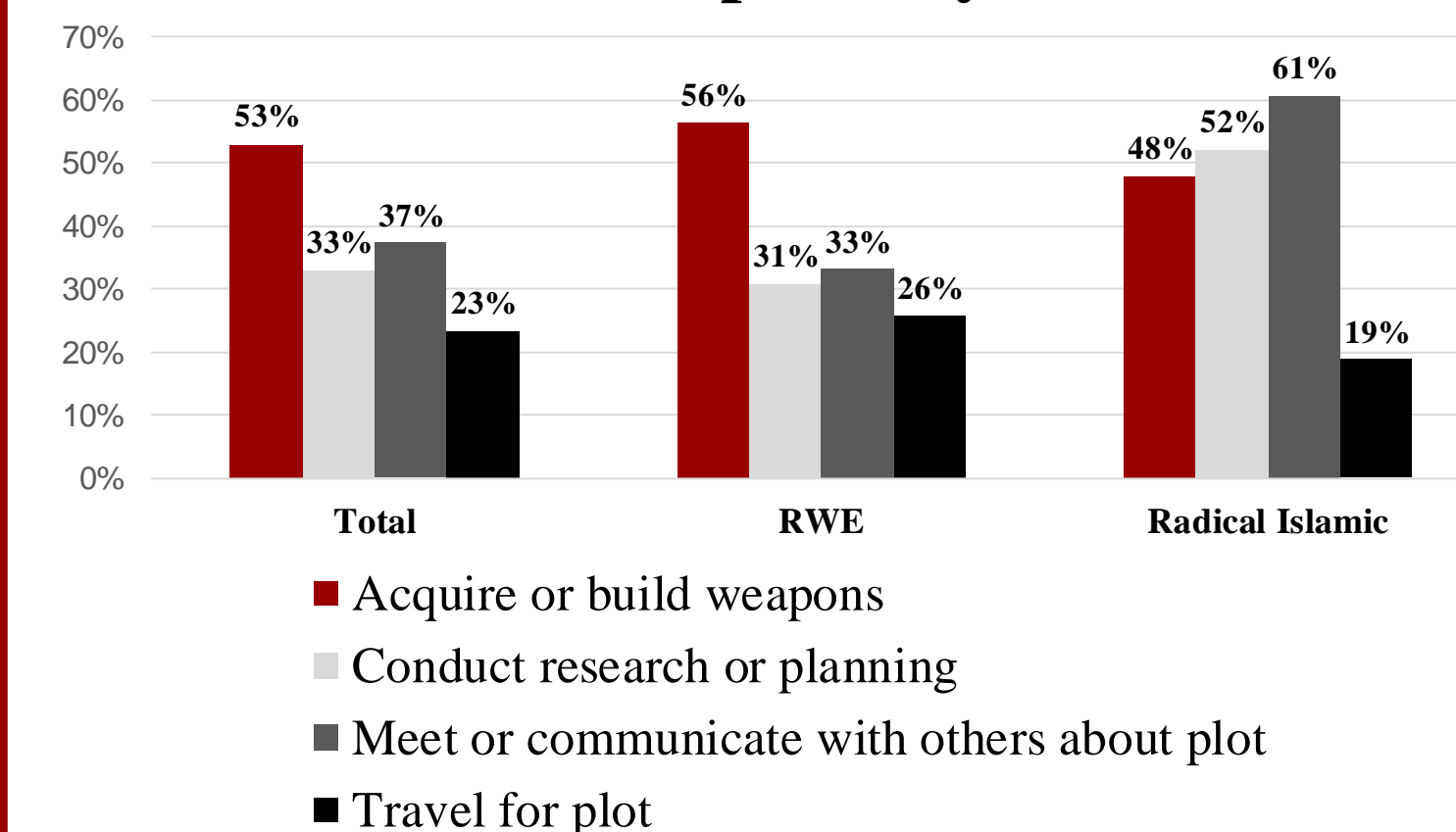

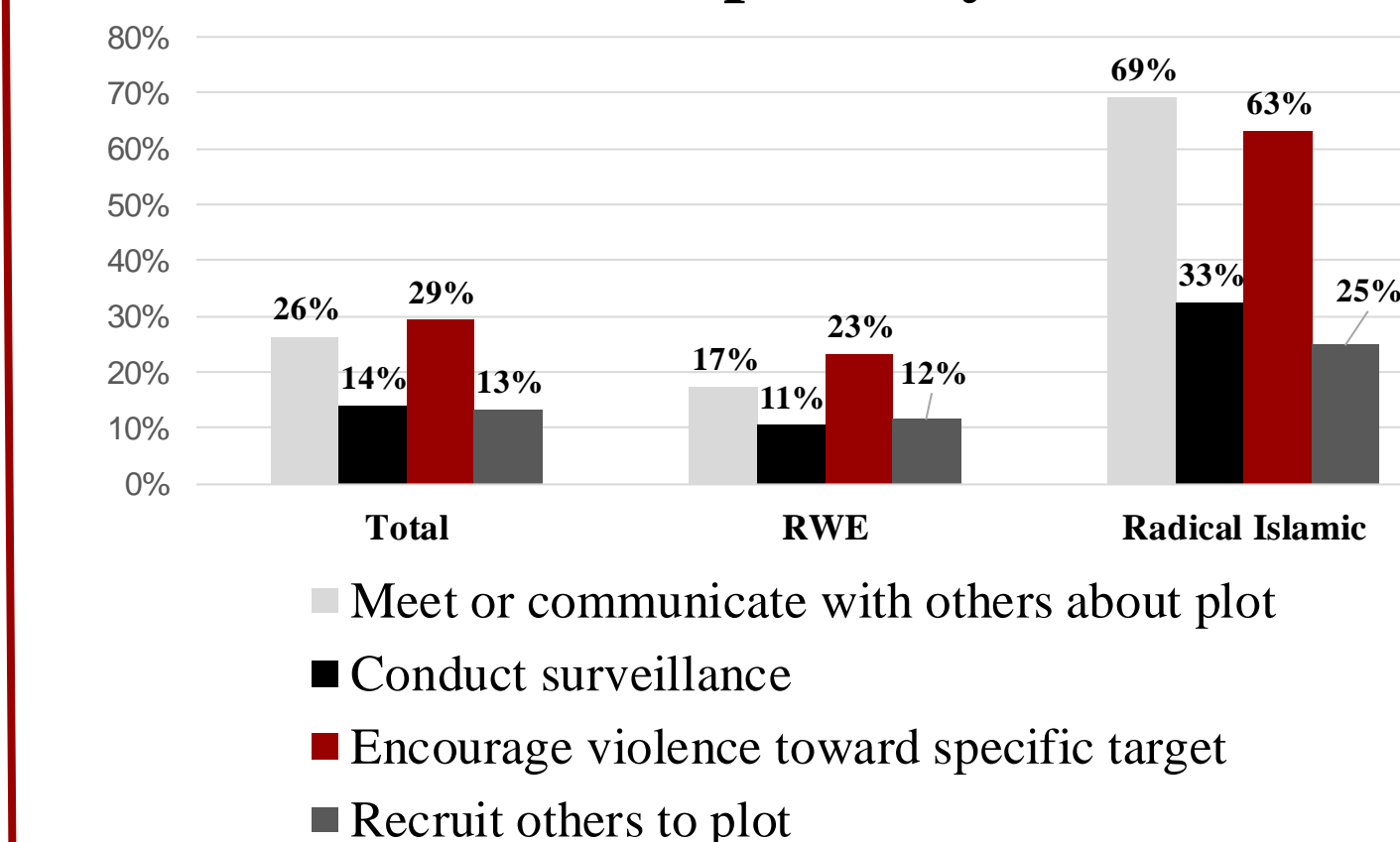Figure 4. Affiliation & Online Prominent Preparatory Activities

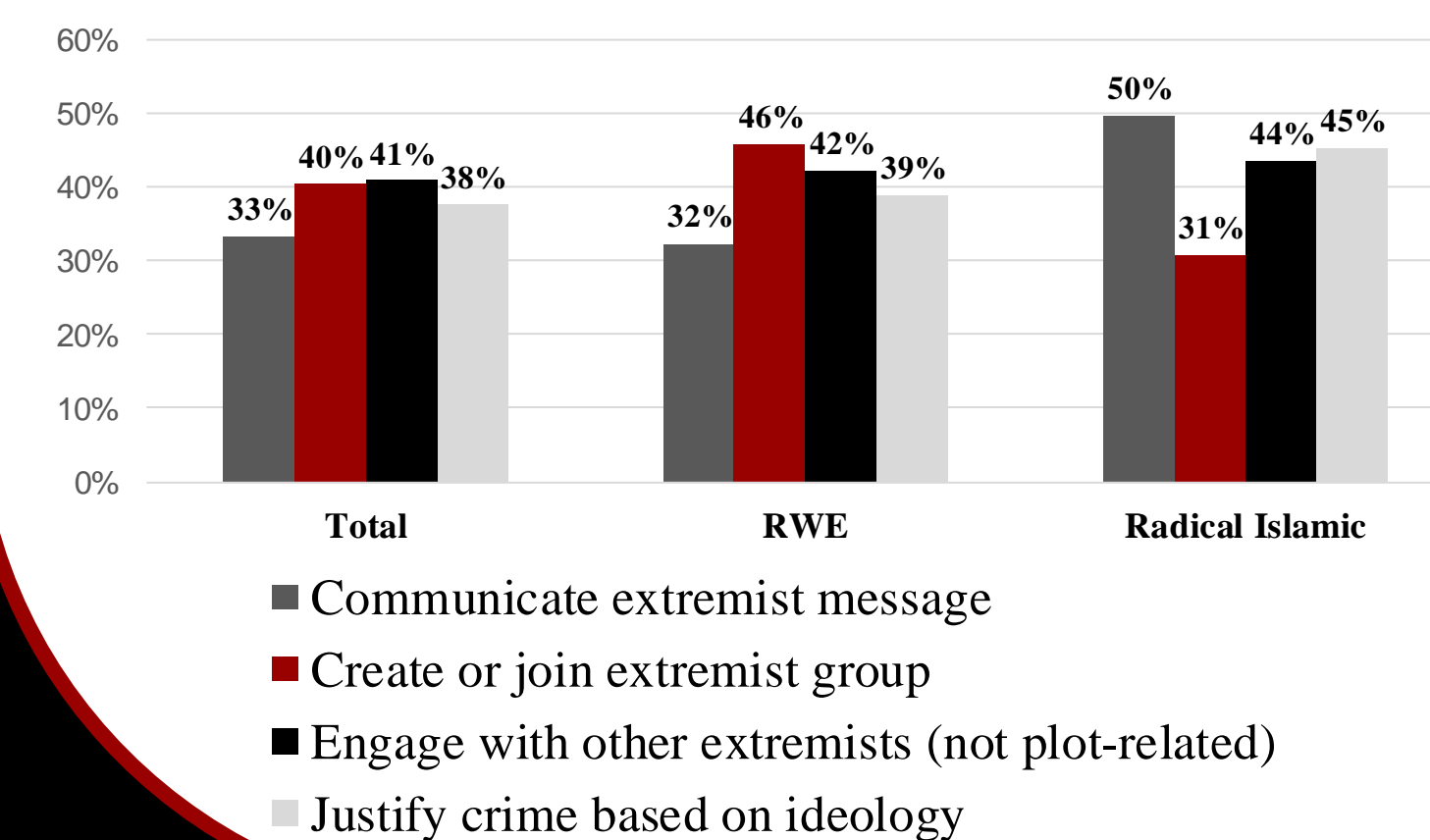Figure 5. Affiliation & Offline Prominent Radicalization

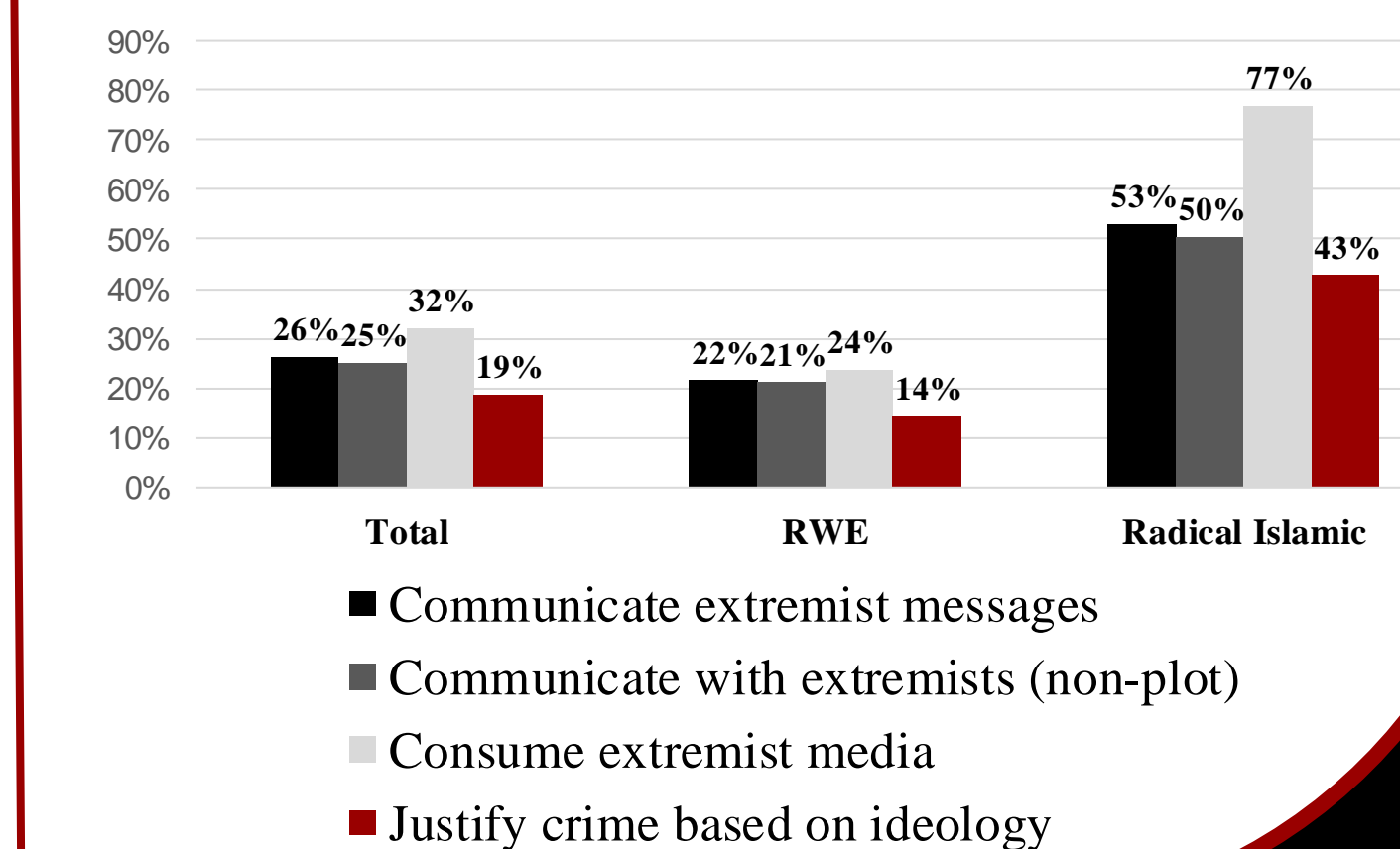Figure 6. Affiliation & Online Prominent Radicalization

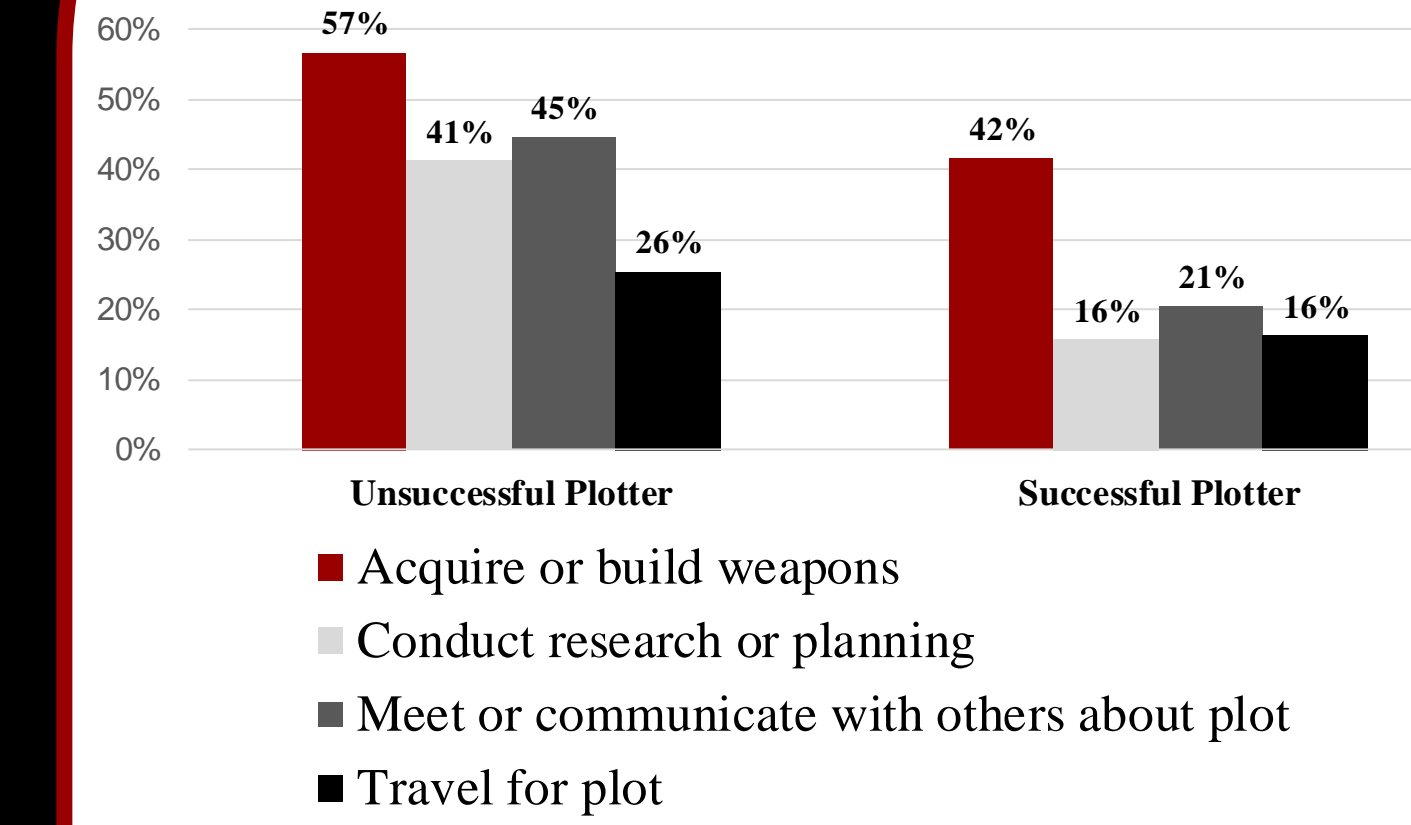Figure 7. Crime Type & Offline Prominent Preparatory Activities

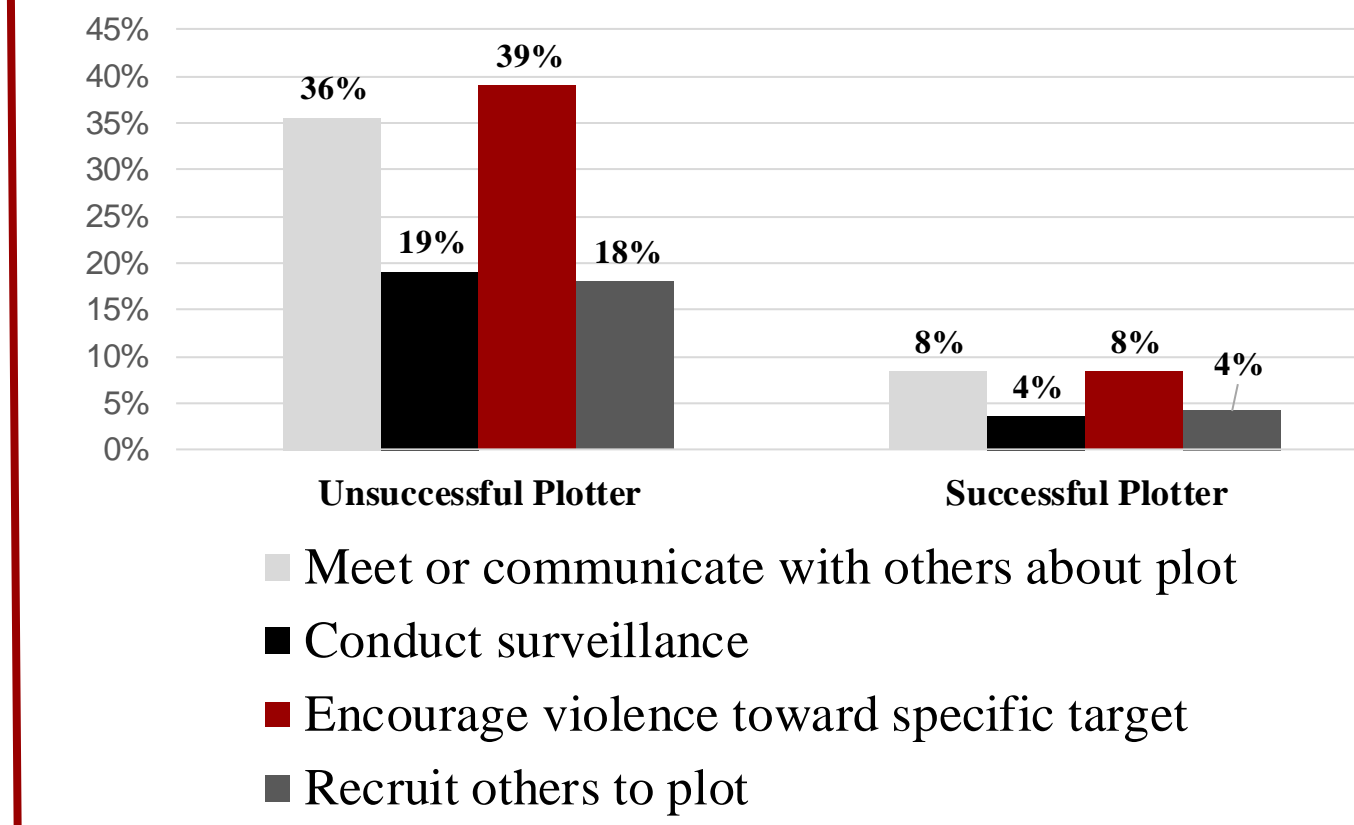Figure 8. Crime Type & Online Prominent Preparatory Activities

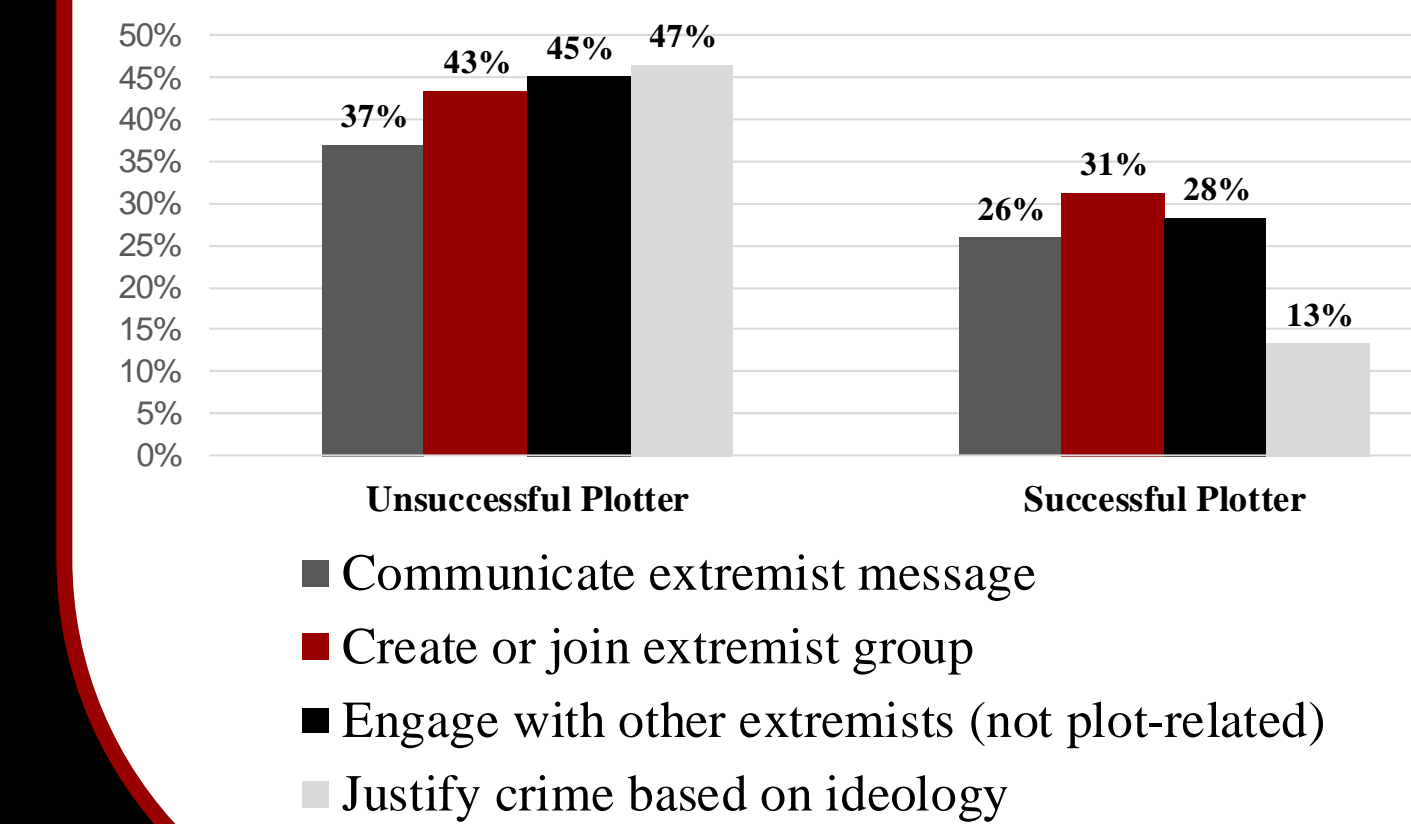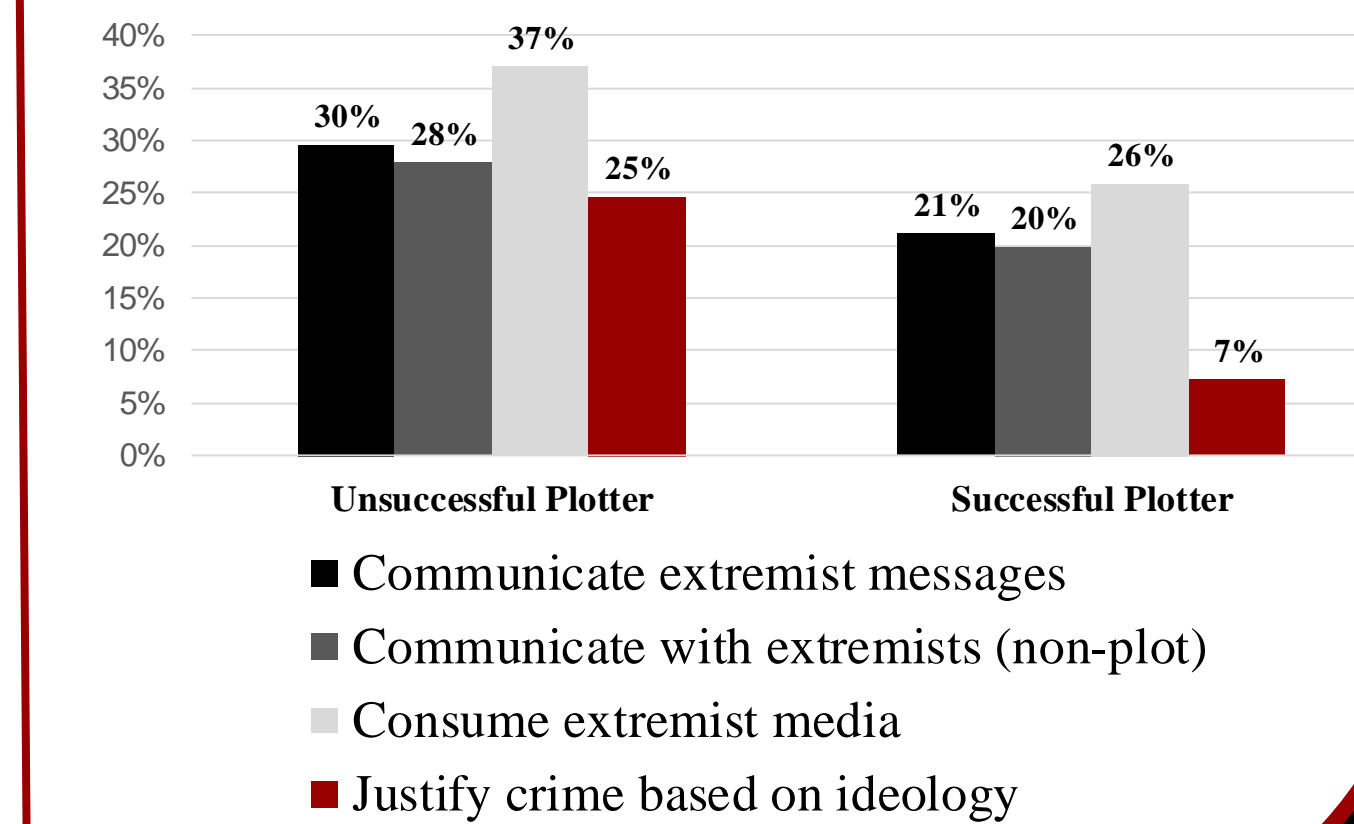Figure 9. Crime Type & Offline Prominent Radicalization

Figure 10. Crime Type & Online Prominent Radicalization

Key Findings

- **Overall**

  Indicators of offline radicalization and *preparatory activities* are observed at higher frequencies compared to indicators of *online radicalization* and *preparatory activities*.

- **Affiliation (Figures 3-6)**

  Radical Islamic extremists are associated with higher percentages of *offline communication*, and ALL *online radicalization* behaviors compared to RWEs. Radical Islamic extremists also *prepare for attacks* online compared to RWEs, while RWEs are more likely to *acquire/build weapons* and *travel* when preparing for an attack compared to radical Islamic extremists.

- **Crime Type (Figures 7-10)**

  The possession of a weapon is associated with the successful execution of an extremist plot. Also, a higher percentage of extremists communicate online with fellow extremists and express their desire to harm targets in successful incidents. Joining or forming an extremist group offline is proportionally more common in successfully executed violent plots. The consumption of extremist rhetoric online appears to be linked with the successful completion of a violent extremist crime.