

**Testimony of Margaret Huang**

President and Chief Executive Officer  
Southern Poverty Law Center and SPLC Action Fund

Before the  
House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism,  
and Homeland Security  
“The Rise in Violence Against Minority Institutions”

February 17, 2022

**SPLC** | **ACTION** 

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Chairwoman Jackson Lee, Ranking member Biggs, and members of the Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security Subcommittee, I am Margaret Huang, President and CEO of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the SPLC Action Fund.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today on “The Rise in Violence Against Minority Institutions.” The recent spate of bomb threats against historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is alarming and deeply unsettling. Of the 107 HBCUs in the United States, 44 are located in the five states where the SPLC has a significant presence – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi. These threats impact both our community and our staff. We have staff members who are proud alumni of HBCUs – including on our senior leadership team – and many others who have children who are HBCU graduates or current students. We condemn the targeted violence and threats aimed at these storied institutions and will do everything we can to support the HBCU community.

Established in 1971, the SPLC has been tireless in identifying and rooting out extremist groups to create a fair, inclusive, and unified nation. We are a nonprofit advocacy organization serving as a catalyst for racial justice throughout the South. We work in partnership with communities of color to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements through transformative policies and initiatives, and advance human rights of all people. We have deep expertise in monitoring the activities of domestic hate groups and other extremists – including the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazi movement, racist skinheads, antigovernment militias, and others. We currently track hundreds of extremist groups operating across the country and publish investigative reports, share key intelligence, and offer expert analysis to the media and public.

The SPLC employs a three-pronged strategy: litigation, policy advocacy, and public education. We work within the judicial system to compel systemic reforms on behalf of victims of bigotry and discrimination. Through “Learning for Justice,” our organization provides free resources to caregivers and educators to help advance human rights and inclusive democracy.

Separately, the SPLC Action Fund advocates for the implementation of policies and laws to eliminate the structural racism and inequalities that fuel oppression of people of color, immigrants, young people, women, low-income people, and the LGBTQ+ community. The Action Fund is dedicated to fighting for racial justice alongside impacted communities in pursuit of equity and opportunity for all.

**Historical Context for Recent Threats**

Educational institutions, houses of worship, and other community institutions have historically been regarded as safe spaces for all people – sanctuaries for communities to gather, share, learn, fellowship, and build a support network. This is particularly true for communities of color. Colleges and religious institutions have long played a key leadership and organizing role throughout the civil rights movement. The bomb threats against almost two dozen HBCUs over the last two weeks have been deeply impactful, shaking a sense of security and safety. The threats apparently timed to coincide with the beginning of Black History Month are reminiscent of this country’s long history of white supremacist attacks on Black churches – attacks with the explicit goal of terrorizing Black communities to assert control.

It has been almost sixty years since Ku Klux Klan members bombed the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, on September 15, 1963, killing four schoolgirls. At a time when states are passing laws

restricting teaching about racism, it is clear that much more needs to be done to teach our young people the unvarnished truth about American history – both good and bad – so that we can learn lessons from the past to shape a better world for generations today and those to come. To help the subcommittee understand the context for these attacks on HBCUs, our testimony will describe the nature and magnitude of the current extremist threat, suggest effective techniques to prevent hate crimes and address online radicalization, highlight evidence-based violence prevention initiatives, and underscore the necessity for digital literacy and inclusive education.

HBCUs have been essential for the education and elevation of Black leaders and intellectuals for over 150 years. As Raymond C. Pierce, President and CEO of the Southern Education Foundation, said in his statement<sup>1</sup> condemning the bomb threats:

HBCUs have been and continue to be central to Black scholarship and to the inclusion of Black voices in the American dialogue. The thoughts and theories of Black scholars, enhanced and sharpened by the freedom they enjoy on historically Black campuses, bring unique and needed perspectives to important national conversations....

HBCUs are an indispensable and undeniable component of any strategy to address the systemic inequities that persist in all areas in our nation – from income and employment to criminal justice to housing to healthcare and education.

If the perpetrators' threats were designed to send a message – that even *learning* while Black is not safe – they clearly underestimated the strength of these very special centers of scholarship, whose very existence is rooted in resilience.

Press reports indicate that the FBI has focused its investigation on six radicalized, “tech-savvy” youthful suspects<sup>2</sup> whose timing appears to have been set to disrupt Black History Month. One of the young offenders reportedly claimed a connection with the Atomwaffen Division (AWD)<sup>2</sup> – a terroristic, neo-Nazi organization we have been tracking over the past five years.

If true, the criminal acts committed by these persons of interest are deeply disturbing – and underscore the need for parents, educators, and communities to be attuned to signs of radicalization and help inoculate young people against being drawn into an extreme and hateful path. We are pleased that the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI have launched criminal investigations into this case.

But more must be done.

As institutions grapple with how to restore a sense of safety to their campuses and to prevent further education disruptions, we must work alongside them to address the underlying causes of the rise in extremism and violent behavior in the country. We must acknowledge that extremism and the harms it provokes cannot be solved by law enforcement alone. And we must do more to support victims, survivors, and their communities – addressing the harms caused by extremists. Congress and the administration must support programs and initiatives designed to prevent hate, bias-motivated criminal activity, and extremism.

### **Assessing and Contextualizing the Current Threat of Extremist Violence**

The young person implicated in the HBCU bomb threat who claims association with AWD represents a disturbing trend of the radicalization of young people. AWD believes that its fascist political vision cannot be achieved through the existing political system. Instead, it argues that only acts of violence aimed at the state, Jews, people of color, leftists, and antiracists can accelerate the collapse of “the system” and build a fascist state in its place. Because of these beliefs, this part of the white power movement refers to themselves as “accelerationists.” They embrace violence not just for violence’s sake, but as part of a political revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of Raymond C. Pierce, President and CEO, Southern Education Foundation, on Bomb Threats Targeting Historically Black Colleges and Universities, <https://www.southerneducation.org/in-the-news/statement-hbcu-bomb-threats/>, February 3, 2022

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/atomwaffen-division>

Atomwaffen is one of several accelerationist white power groups, along with hundreds of individuals who populated the neo-fascist Iron March forum, collectively making up what they called the “global fascist fraternity.”<sup>3</sup>

Atomwaffen’s roots, though, go back further in time to groups like The Order, a neo-Nazi terrorist organization active in the early 1980s. From 2017 through 2018, men associated with Atomwaffen were charged with killing five people in three different incidents. One of those was Devon Arthurs, an Atomwaffen member accused of killing two other members of the group in their shared apartment in Tampa in May 2017. Less than a year later, member Samuel Woodward allegedly stabbed to death Blaze Bernstein, a former classmate of Woodward’s who was Jewish and gay. Other men linked to the group have been convicted of other crimes, including possession of an unregistered destructive device<sup>4</sup>, possession of bomb-making components<sup>5</sup>, gun charges<sup>6</sup>, and federal conspiracy and hate crimes charges. The latter charges stem from a campaign carried out by four Atomwaffen members to harass and intimidate journalists and Jewish activists. The members printed and delivered posters to the victims’ homes, which included the message “Our Patience Has Its Limits... You have been visited by your local Nazis.”<sup>7</sup>

Due to the arrests of four members connected to the intimidation campaign — as well as repeated infiltration by researchers of the far right, antifascists, and journalists — Atomwaffen collapsed in early 2020. Since that time, some extremists have claimed affiliation with Atomwaffen, but it exists as more of a meme, a symbol, than an actual, officially organized group. In other words, people claiming an affiliation with Atomwaffen are expressing an affinity for the group’s violent ideology, as well as a connection to the broader white power accelerationist community.

### **Mainstreaming Extremism**

Radicalization cannot be disentangled from the larger cultural and political landscape in which it takes place. Indeed, focusing solely on organized extremist groups like Atomwaffen, or characterizing extremist movements as a paranoid fringe, obscures the great extent to which extremist thought originates in the political mainstream. Mainstream political parties and actors play an extremely important role in normalizing and spreading hateful ideas and actions. A study in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, for example, found a correlation between Trump’s 2016 campaign rallies and hate incidents. The authors found that “Trump’s rhetoric and rallies increased the perceived threat facing white Americans, heightening their white identity, all while justifying violence and extralegal methods to address their grievances and thereby increasing reported bias incidents,” and that “counties that hosted a Trump rally experienced an increase in hate-motivated events.”<sup>8</sup>

Dangerous and false conspiracy theories ideas like the “great replacement” theory now circulate widely both in extremist spaces and the political mainstream. This myth asserts that nefarious actors — Democrats, leftists, “multiculturalists,” and Jews — are systematically attempting to replace white people in the United States and broader Western world with immigrants from predominantly non-white countries in order to dilute white political power. This rhetoric lays the groundwork for violence or the threat of violence like we witnessed against HBCUs in the last few weeks. Since 2015, extremists inspired by the great replacement theory have committed terror attacks in Charleston, South Carolina; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Christchurch, New Zealand; Poway, California; and El Paso, Texas. Despite its clearly violent implications, politicians and pundits now

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<sup>3</sup> Cassie Miller, “Social Media and System Collapse: How Extremists Built an International Neo-Nazi Network.” *Antisemitism on Social Media*, ed. by Monika Hübscher and Sabine von Mering (Routledge, 2022), 93-113.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Justice, “Neo-Nazi Leader Sentenced to Five Years in Federal Prison for Explosives Charges,” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/neo-nazi-leader-sentenced-five-years-federal-prison-explosives-charges>, January 9, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Justice, “Las Vegas Man Pleads Guilty To Possession of Bomb-Making Components,” <https://www.justice.gov/usao-nv/pr/las-vegas-man-pleads-guilty-possession-bomb-making-components>, February 10, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Justice, “Former Atomwaffen Division Member Sentenced to Prison,” <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/pr/former-atomwaffen-division-member-sentenced-prison>, February 28, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Gene Johnson, *ABC News*, “Neo-Nazi Gets Seven Years for Threats to Reporters, Activists,” <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/neo-nazi-years-threats-reporters-activists-82205275>, January 11, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Ayal Feinberg, Regina Branton, and Valerie Martinez-Ebers, “The Trump Effect: How 2016 Campaign Rallies Explain Spikes in Hate,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2022, 1-9. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ps-political-science-and-politics/article/abs/trump-effect-how-2016-campaign-rallies-explain-spikes-in-hate/5665F542B16FC275D2761CE5ACB90A70>

repeat the myth regularly. Tucker Carlson, whose Fox News show is the highest-rated cable news program in the country, said on-air in September, “In political terms, this policy is called the great replacement, the replacement of legacy Americans with more obedient people from faraway countries.”<sup>9</sup>

The danger of racist violence is especially high in the United States because of the country’s growing polarization.<sup>10</sup> When people come to believe they face an existential threat, extreme measures like violence can appear more justifiable, and even necessary. In the wake of increased scrutiny by the public, media, and law enforcement and government officials, many extremist groups have purposely found ways to insert themselves into current social issues and shifted their focus to local politics. And trends suggest that intimidation, threats, and political violence are on the rise. U.S. Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger reported that members of Congress received 9,600 threats in 2021 — up from 8,600 the year before.<sup>11</sup> As distrust of elected officials, public health workers, and education officials erodes, threats against them have risen.<sup>12</sup> These threats are a clear warning that democracy in the United States is under attack, and violence and intimidation are increasingly seen as legitimate political tools.

### **The Nature and Magnitude of the Current Hate Crime Threat**

Criminal acts motivated by bias are very personal crimes, with unique emotional and psychological impacts on the victim – and the victim’s community. Because hate violence is intentionally, specifically targeted at individuals because of their personal and often immutable characteristics, these crimes wound and may effectively intimidate other members of the victim’s community, leaving them feeling terrorized, isolated, vulnerable, and unprotected by the law. By making the victim’s community fearful, angry, and suspicious of other groups – and of the power structure that is supposed to protect them – these incidents can damage the fabric of our society and fragment communities.

It is impossible to address our nation’s hate crime problem without measuring it accurately. Under the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990 (HCSA), the FBI is required to compile hate crime data from the approximately 18,000 federal, state, university, city, and tribal law enforcement authorities and publish an annual report. The FBI HCSA report<sup>13</sup> that came out on August 30 reports on 2020 hate crimes.

The HCSA report provides data on the full range of hate crimes – race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and gender identity – aggregated by states, cities, counties, and colleges and universities. Unfortunately, reporting is voluntary for state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies and many do not provide their information.<sup>14</sup> For the third year in a row, participation in the FBI data collection program declined in 2020.<sup>15</sup> Though clearly incomplete due to under reporting, the 2020 FBI HCSA report provides the most comprehensive national snapshot available of hate violence in America. According to the FBI report, there was a 13% increase in hate crime incidents in 2020, the highest numbers reported since 2001. Of the incidents reported (8,263), race-based hate crimes ranked highest, making up 63% of the total hate crimes, the highest number of race-based hate crimes since 2004, and a 32% increase over 2019. Fifty-five percent of the race-based crimes were directed at Black people, a 49% increase over 2019. This is particularly disturbing given the recent bomb threats against HBCUs. Religion-based crimes ranked second but experienced an 18% decline

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*, “How Republicans Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace ‘Replacement Theory’ – By Name,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/27/how-republicans-learned-stop-worrying-embrace-replacement-theory-by-name/>, September 27, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization,” National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Wilson, *CNN*, “US Capitol Police Chief Says Department Fielded 9,600 Threats Against Members of Congress in 2021,” <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/11/966498544/a-scary-survey-finding-4-in-10-republicans-say-political-violence-may-be-necessa>, January 5, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Zack Beauchamp, *Vox*, “We Are Going to Make You Beg for Mercy: America’s Public Servants Face a Wave of Threats,” <https://www.vox.com/22774745/death-threats-election-workers-public-health-school>, November 18, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020 Hate Crime Statistics Act Report, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-releases-2020-hate-crime-statistics>

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the ADL chart listing almost 70 cities in the United States with populations over 100,000 that either did not report any data to the FBI in 2020, or affirmatively reported zero (0) hate crimes. <https://www.adl.org/media/16764/download>

<sup>15</sup> Department of Justice, 2020 FBI Hate Crime Statistics, <https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2020-hate-crimes-statistics>

from 2019. Crimes directed against Jews and Jewish institutions were the most numerous among religion-based hate crimes – about 55% -- but declined by 28% when compared to incidents reported in 2019.<sup>16</sup>

These numbers do not speak for themselves. The impact of these crimes on communities can never be reduced to mere numbers. Behind each and every one of the 8,263 reported criminal incidents in 2020 is a victim of violence, intimidation, or vandalism – targeted for no other reason than their race, religion, national origin, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Improved reporting requires law enforcement agency capability and willingness to accurately report the data and trust from the community that reporting to the police will matter, that it will make a difference. If marginalized or targeted community members – including immigrants, people with disabilities, LGBTQ community members, Muslims, Arabs, Middle Easterners, South Asians, and people with limited language proficiency – cannot report, or do not feel safe reporting, law enforcement cannot effectively address these crimes, thereby jeopardizing the safety of all.

Enactment of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act,<sup>17</sup> which included the provisions of the Khalid Jabara and Heather Heyer National Opposition to Hate, Assault, and Threats to Equality Act (NO HATE Act) as Section 5, is an important step forward. The new law authorizes incentive grants to spark improved local and state hate crime training, prevention, best practices, and data collection initiatives and make grants available for state hate crime reporting hotlines to direct individuals to local law enforcement and support services.

Comprehensive hate crime data collection and enforcement of current laws are both essential. But the law is a blunt instrument to confront hate and extremism – it does not address the disparate root causes of hate, nor does it adequately mitigate future harms to historically targeted and marginalized communities. Simply put, we cannot legislate, regulate, tabulate, or prosecute racism, hatred, or extremism out of existence.<sup>18</sup>

Approaches to hate crimes and violent extremism should be de-securitized, focusing on investment in communities, education and prevention initiatives, and social and economic support rather than law enforcement agencies alone.<sup>19</sup> Education, far upstream of exposure to radicalizing extremist content, has also proven to be an important component of challenging and mitigating extremist harm.<sup>20</sup>

### **Supporting Victims and Focusing on Prevention**

There is a long history of threats and violence directed against Black Americans and their institutions. Though it has been almost 60 years since Ku Klux Klan members bombed the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, on September 15, 1963, killing four Black schoolgirls, the impact and harm of that horrific crime still resonates deeply today.<sup>21</sup> And over the past decade our nation has witnessed far too many other racist and antisemitic attacks on houses of worship and community institutions.

- On August 5, 2012, six people – including witness Pardeep Kaleka’s father – were killed and three others wounded when a white supremacist gunman entered the Oak Creek Sikh Gurdwara and opened fire.
- On June 17, 2015, a white supremacist joined a prayer group meeting at the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and opened fire, murdering nine worshipers and injuring one other in the historic Black church.
- On October 27, 2018, an avowed white supremacist entered Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue and murdered 11 Shabbat worshippers and injured two others from the three congregations that were

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<sup>16</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020 Hate Crime Statistics Act Report, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-releases-2020-hate-crime-statistics>

<sup>17</sup> Public Law 117-13, May 20, 2021 <https://www.congress.gov/117/plaws/publ13/PLAW-117publ13.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> SPLC, Hate Crimes, Explained, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-crimes-explained>, October 27, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Harsha Panduranga, Brennan Center for Justice, Community Investment, Not Criminalization, [https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021\\_06\\_DHS\\_Targeted\\_Prevention.pdf](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021_06_DHS_Targeted_Prevention.pdf), June 17, 2021

<sup>20</sup> *Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab and the Southern Poverty Law Center*, Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization, Assessments & Impact, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril-assessments-impact>, July 2021

<sup>21</sup> National Park Service, “16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church Bombing (1963),” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/16thstreetbaptist.htm>.

meeting there for Shabbat morning services -- the deadliest antisemitic incident in American history. Four law enforcement officials were also wounded responding to the shooting.

- On January 15 of this year, an individual seeking the release of an al-Qaeda operative held four Shabbat worshippers hostage at Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker's Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas.

When our religious communities and houses of worship are targeted for violence and vandalism, and when attacks similar to the bomb threats recently perpetrated against HBCU college students, staff, and family communities occur, it is imperative that the needs of victims-survivors are addressed first. It is understandable that one instinct is to increase physical security for our houses of worship and community institutions – higher walls, more cameras, more bulletproof glass, and even armed guards. But this cannot be our only response. Broad community cohesion and support is essential. Houses of worship and HBCUs are different from airports – and they cannot become armed fortresses, isolated and segregated from the broader community.<sup>22</sup> The challenge is to find a balance between the imperative that our institutions continue to be open and welcoming and efforts to ensure that they remain safe spaces for worship, learning, and community building.

There is considerable support in Congress for significantly increased funding for FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NPSG), which is currently funded at \$180 million. This program has helped fund bulletproof doors, shatterproof glass, secure entry systems, panic buttons, and security guards for many at-risk faith communities and essential public institutions. As Congress and the administration assess the proper budget for NPSG programs to deter and detect attacks, we urge you to complement this support with a parallel commitment to fund research and prevention initiatives to address what the administration labeled as "long-term contributors to domestic terrorism" in its May 2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Like other recent intelligence community reports,<sup>24</sup> assessments<sup>25</sup> and congressional testimony,<sup>26</sup> the review concluded the two most lethal elements of today's domestic terrorism threat are (1) racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists who advocate for the superiority of the white race and (2) anti-government or anti-authority violent extremists, such as militia violent extremists.

One of the four pillars promoted in the administration's holistic, government-wide National Strategy approach to addressing violent extremism is a commitment to confront long-term contributors to domestic terrorism:

Individuals subscribing to violent ideologies such as violent white supremacy, which are grounded in racial, ethnic, and religious hatred and the dehumanizing of portions of the American community, as well as violent anti-government ideologies, are responsible for a substantial portion of today's domestic terrorism. Tackling the long-term contributors to this challenge demands addressing the sources of that mobilization to violence – with leadership from relevant domestic-facing agencies, coordinated by the White House's Domestic Policy Council and in close partnership with civil society.

That means tackling racism in America. It means protecting Americans from gun violence and mass murders. It means ensuring that we provide early intervention and appropriate care for those who pose a danger to themselves or others. It means ensuring that Americans receive the type of civics education that promotes tolerance and respect for all and investing in policies and programs that foster

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<sup>22</sup> Juliette Kayyem, "A Synagogue Shouldn't Be a Fortress," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/colleyville-standoff-synagogues-risk-defenses/621280/>, January 17, 2022

<sup>23</sup> The White House, National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf>, May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021," <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>, March 1, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> FBI and Department of Homeland Security, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism," <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/20743448/strategic-intelligence-assessment-and-data-on-domestic-terrorism-may-2021.pdf>, May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Testimony of Christopher A. Wray, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Threats to the Homeland: Evaluating the Landscape 20 Years After 9/11," <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Wray-2021-09-21-REVISED.pdf>, September 21, 2021, and Testimony of Alejandro N. Mayorkas Secretary U.S. Department of Homeland Security Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, "Threats to the Homeland: Evaluating the Landscape 20 Years After 9/11," <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Mayorkas-2021-09-21.pdf>, September 21, 2021.

civic engagement and inspire a shared commitment to American democracy, all the while acknowledging when racism and bigotry have meant that the country fell short of living up to its founding principles. It means setting a tone from the highest ranks of government that every American deserves the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that our Declaration of Independence recognizes as unalienable rights. And it means ensuring that there is simply no governmental tolerance – and instead denunciation and rejection – of violence as an acceptable mode of seeking political or social change.<sup>27</sup>

The investigation of the bomb threats against the HBCUs is ongoing – and we appreciate the priority that federal agencies have attached to reassuring the targets of these threats and finding and punishing the perpetrators. The FBI has stated that these threats are being investigated “as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes.”<sup>28</sup> Reports that the investigation’s focus is on several “tech savvy” juveniles should prompt us to evaluate the threat of online radicalization for our youth – and examine best practices and evidence-based prevention initiatives that should be promoted.

### **Online Radicalization Myths: False Narratives Can Lead to Bad Policymaking**

Social media has created a vastly larger audience for extremist propaganda. It has also accelerated the radicalization process: People who become radicalized adopt these views at a younger age than in the past because social media makes it easy to encounter extremist material and network with the likeminded.<sup>26</sup> Mainstream social media platforms deserve blame for amplifying extremist voices. SPLC reporting revealed that Twitter, for example, does not enforce its own rules to stop users from spreading hateful content “with any discernable consistency.”<sup>27</sup> When tech companies do make an effort to remove hateful or dangerous content from their platforms, it is often only after they have received public pressure to do so. Facebook, for example, took down the original “Stop the Steal” page on its site in November 2020, but similar groups were allowed to proliferate in its place. Only after January 6 did the company pledge to ban all “Stop the Steal” misinformation<sup>28</sup> — but, even then, some groups simply changed their names to maintain their place on the platform.<sup>29</sup>

Given the growing role of digital and social media in society generally, active online involvement among extremists is a growing realm of research and concern. Especially in the aftermath of a targeted hate crime or terrorist incident, many sources routinely cite the internet as the “primary cause” of radicalization – especially among right-wing extremists. But these claims reinforce a sense that we know more than we actually do about the process of online radicalization. There can be no doubt, however, about the offline harms that online communities of radicalized individuals can inflict, like what HBCUs and members of the Black and African American communities are, again, being forced to endure.

Too often our discussions of online radicalization begin and end with a discussion of how much extremism exists online and the many and diverse social media platforms that extremists currently utilize. It is particularly troubling to consider the growing prevalence of online extremism as individuals – especially children and adolescents – have been spending substantial amounts of time on social media platforms, alone and with less supervision, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But prevalence alone does not answer the questions we have about whether individuals are being influenced by this easily accessible material and, if so, in what ways? We know far more about the extent or prevalence of online extremist material – and the availability of networking – than we know about how social media and gaming platforms facilitate the radicalization process. The paramount challenge, then, is to prevent harms related to radicalization from ever impacting our communities by fostering inclusivity, compassion, and appreciation of difference, or by moving safely to reduce their impacts as quickly as possible.

Too often we re-construct pathways backwards from the tragedies of hate crimes or acts of terror, scanning an individual’s or group of individuals’ lives for the abhorrent, the clearly anti-social, the alien. And then we assign those findings significance out of context, even beyond their weight. But many factors and influences could be involved: politics and media, personal life circumstances, financial considerations, or personal or family

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> FBI Statement on Investigation into Bomb Threats to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Houses of Worship, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-statement-on-investigation-into-bomb-threats-to-historically-black-colleges-and-universities-and-houses-of-worship>, February 2, 2022.

trauma.<sup>29</sup> We should be doing this in reverse, educating each other to recognize signs of contact with extremism as proactively as possible.<sup>30</sup>

In her July 2020 article, “We’re living in a perfect storm for extremist recruitment. Here’s what we can do to stop it,” Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss of American University noted how the father of the terrorist who attacked the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015 told a journalist, “I don’t know what happened, I just know that the boy wasn’t raised that way.” The parents of the juveniles now under investigation in relation to the bomb threats delivered to HBCUs, perhaps, feel similarly. “Parents whose children have perpetrated racist or extremist acts often respond with similar words,” Miller-Idriss notes. She continues, “Under ordinary circumstances, youth are already a vulnerable population for radicalization. Adolescents are prone to risk-taking and are in the throes of identity exploration, looking for answers to questions about who they are and who they want to be. They can be attracted to the sense of rebellion extremist groups offer as well as promises of belonging and purpose.”<sup>31</sup>

Well-meaning assumptions about “online radicalization” and its causal connections to violence online or offline have too frequently led to the development of resources that lack transparent, testable effective solutions.<sup>32</sup> There is an urgent need to expand prevention initiatives that address extremism and online radicalization proactively and through transparent, evidence-based resources rooted in community engagement and harm reduction.<sup>33</sup> This need exists in tandem with the need for far more funding streams for extremism, terrorism, and radicalization researchers working across disciplines to help us better understand how to ask the right questions toward the safest solutions.

### **A Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Youth Radicalization**

For almost two years, disruptions to support networks, polarizing narratives, and increased time online caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have provided extremists with an environment conducive to spreading hateful, radicalizing narratives. To help address this problem, the SPLC and American University’s Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL)<sup>34</sup> published a guide for parents and caregivers in June 2020. A year later, after collecting focus group feedback and testing the impact of the guide, our partnership published an updated version of the guide, as well as resources for mental health professionals, coaches, mentors, and educators. All of these resources are also available in German, Portuguese, and Spanish.

The guide, *Building Resilience & Confronting Risk*,<sup>35</sup> provides tangible steps to counter the threat of online radicalization, including information on the new risks during the COVID-19 crisis, ways parents and caregivers can identify warning signs that their children have been exposed to extremist propaganda, ways to build

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<sup>29</sup> Windisch, Simi, Blee, DeMichael, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, “Understanding the Micro-Situational Dynamics of White Supremacist Violence in the United States,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12 (December): 23-37.

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a2-windisch-et-al.pdf>, December 2018; See also Todd C. Frankel, *Washington Post*, “A majority of the people arrested for Capitol riot had a history of financial trouble,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/02/10/capitol-insurrectionists-jenna-ryan-financial-problems/>, February 10, 2021; See also Koomen and van der Pligt; See also Peter Roy Harmsen, “Lone Terrorists Not That Lonely: Aarhus BSS Researcher,” <https://bss.au.dk/en/about-aarhus-bss/news/show/artikel/lone-terrorists-not-that-lonely-aarhus-bss-researcher-1>, February 16 2016; See also Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner and Frances O’Connor, *Dynamics of Asymmetrical Conflict*, “Peripheral and embedded: relational patterns of lone-actor terrorist radicalization,” [https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/lasse-lindekilde\(c3a91343-f2ea-4695-8dc2-47bccf1d0887\)/publications/peripheral-and-embedded-relational-patterns-of-loneactor-terrorist-radicalization\(d7df55ac-af4f-4fd6-90fc-a1eb3e5dc661\).html](https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/lasse-lindekilde(c3a91343-f2ea-4695-8dc2-47bccf1d0887)/publications/peripheral-and-embedded-relational-patterns-of-loneactor-terrorist-radicalization(d7df55ac-af4f-4fd6-90fc-a1eb3e5dc661).html), January 2, 2019

<sup>30</sup> See SPLC/PERIL resources, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril>, June 2021

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, CNN, “We’re living in a perfect storm for extremist recruitment. Here’s what we can do to stop it,” <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/19/opinions/online-radicalization-risk-pandemic-miller-idriss-united-shades/index.html>, July 19, 2020; See also Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, Princeton University Press, pgs. 22-27, 2020

<sup>32</sup> Kieran Hardy, *Journal for Deradicalization*, “Comparing Theories of Radicalisation with Countering Violent Extremism Policy,” <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/150>, pgs. 76-110, Summer 2018

<sup>33</sup> See SPLC/PERIL resources, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril>, June 2021; See also Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Susan Corke, *USA Today*, “How parents can learn to recognize online radicalization and prevent tragedy – in 7 minutes,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/05/08/online-radicalization-parents-can-learn-to-prevent-tragedy-column/4958478001/>, May 8, 2021

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.american.edu/centers/university-excellence/peril.cfm>

<sup>35</sup> *Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab and the Southern Poverty Law Center*, Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Youth Radicalization, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril>, July 2021

resilience to those narratives, and proactive approaches that can help young people be less vulnerable to extremist rhetoric when they do encounter it.

### **Identifying Warning Signs and Inoculating Against Hate and Extremism**

It is necessary to emphasize that there is no singular path to radicalization. Rather, myriad factors unique to the individual contribute to their susceptibility to radical or hateful belief systems. Thus, there is no way to predict who will and will not radicalize to commit extremist violence.

However, as our guide points out, there are several warning signs that parents and caregivers can be aware of to confront burgeoning extremist views. For example, young people advocating the use of violence to maintain race-based hierarchies under the guise of oppressive campaigns against white people should spur parents and caregivers to action. Similarly, expressions of misogyny or the need to police or control women and girls' behaviors and bodies must prompt responses from adults and advocates for young people.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the omnipresent and instantaneous nature of media online can sometimes override values taught daily in our homes, even when reinforced in our houses of worship, our schools, and elsewhere. As PERIL and SPLC warn, "It can be all too easy for people to become radicalized without even leaving home. The proliferation of extremist spaces and content online has created new and powerful avenues for radicalization, especially for young people who are often the targets of radical-right propaganda."<sup>37</sup>

While being equipped with the knowledge to recognize and interrupt an emerging embrace of extremist beliefs is necessary for those who work with and care for young people, it is much better to inoculate young people against this kind of radicalization before it takes root. Preparing all young people with the tools and knowledge to be empowered participants in an inclusive community is the foundation of true violence prevention.

With that aim, the guide prompts parents and caregivers to stay engaged with young people's online activity, consumption of news, and social media usage. It provides the information and resources adults need to help young people understand how propaganda and misinformation can be used to manipulate people. These resources also help sow the seeds of inclusive and empathetic identity formation in the context of our diverse, multicultural democracy.

To measure the effectiveness of the guide, the PERIL team conducted an impact study with 755 participants. Results "demonstrated that the *Parents and Caregivers Guide* confers real knowledge to those who take the time to read it. A mere seven minutes of reading the guide resulted in subjects coming away with valuable information and increased confidence in their ability to talk with young people about online radicalization."<sup>38</sup>

Online radicalization is complicated because humans and our societies and cultures are complicated. If adults are to protect youth from the predation of extremist communities online, we must give them robust resources and tools that we continually test and improve over time. Diverse, sustaining funding streams must emerge to support more efforts for developing community-oriented solutions for protecting youth and others from extremism in ways that highlight assistance for victims-survivors and downgrade law enforcement and carceral systems to handle the breadth of such complicated social problems.<sup>39</sup>

As Dr. Miller-Idriss and Susan Corke, Director of SPLC's Intelligence Project, wrote in an opinion piece last May, "Helping all parents and caregivers recognize youth vulnerabilities to persuasive extremist rhetoric – particularly online – is key to preventing further tragedies. Parents can't solve the problem of rising domestic violent extremism alone. It will take far more than individual or community preparedness and resilience to address the root causes that can lead young people down extremist pathways. We need strategies to address the producers of extremist propaganda, reduce the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation, and

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<sup>36</sup> Lydia Bates, "Patriarchal Violence: Misogyny from the Far Right to the Mainstream," Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/01/patriarchal-violence-misogyny-far-right-mainstream> February 1, 2021

<sup>37</sup> See SPLC/PERIL resources, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril>, June 2021

<sup>38</sup> *Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab and the Southern Poverty Law Center, Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization*, <https://www.splcenter.org/peril>, July 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Daniel Köhler, *Foreign Affairs*, "A Plan to Beat Back the Far Right: Violent Extremism in America Demands a Social Response," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-03/plan-beat-back-far-right>, February 3, 2021

tackle rising adult radicalization into a range of conspiracy, anti-government, white supremacist and male supremacist extremist movements.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Teaching Truth and Promoting Inclusive Education**

The free educational resources available from the SPLC’s Learning for Justice<sup>41</sup> project help K-12 school communities advocate for safe, just, and equitable environments. These efforts include providing frameworks<sup>42</sup> and other resources for teachers to teach hard history,<sup>43</sup> drawing connections between the past and present,<sup>44</sup> ensuring students are digitally literate and championing an inclusive education.<sup>45</sup>

As we engage with educators across many platforms such as webinars, workshops, social media, surveys, podcasts,<sup>46</sup> and blogs, Learning for Justice continues to emphasize teaching an honest and complete history of the United States, from the enslavement of Africans and Indigenous peoples to the Civil War and civil rights movements. Teachers in classrooms across the country are committed to this work and they deserve our support.

Grounding our history in facts and emphasizing the stories of historically marginalized groups helps students think more critically about themselves and their place in the world. They can leverage that knowledge to make different choices in the future – choices that could yield a positive impact on their communities and the trajectories of their lives. Reckoning with our nation’s history, while sometimes uncomfortable, yields an exchange of ideas and solutions, improves empathy, and enables us to move toward a more inclusive democracy.

We know that schools can mimic what is happening in broader communities. For example, in our 2019 Hate at Schools report,<sup>47</sup> teachers told us that K-12 classrooms have become just as polarized as the world around them. Teachers are witnessing this polarization because progress has never been linear. There are twists and turns on the way toward a truly just society. As history reminds us, there is inevitable backlash against any semblance of inclusivity or justice for people who have been historically marginalized. It is such marginalization that led to the creation of historically Black colleges and universities. We have the power to intervene to prevent the extremism that reportedly drove several juveniles to terrorize HBCUs across the country with threats of violence.

Let us not forget why HBCUs exist: African Americans needed to carve out a space to ensure they could learn, embrace their cultures, resist white supremacy, and prepare for a prosperous future in an environment safe from physical violence and humiliation.<sup>48</sup> HBCUs are therefore more than just schools of higher learning. The fact that these communities are facing the same threats that were prevalent nearly 185 years ago when the first HBCU was founded is indicative of the hard work still ahead to disrupt the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Corke and Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *USA Today*, “How parents can learn to recognize online radicalization and prevent tragedy – in 7 minutes,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/05/08/online-radicalization-parents-can-learn-to-prevent-tragedy-column/4958478001/>, May 8, 2021

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.learningforjustice.org/>

<sup>42</sup> Learning for Justice Frameworks, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks>

<sup>43</sup> Hasan Kwame Jeffries, “The Courage to Teach Hard History,” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/the-courage-to-teach-hard-history>, February 1, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Bret Turner, “From MLK to #BlackLivesMatter: A Throughline for Young Students,” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/from-mlk-to-blacklivesmatter-a-throughline-for-young-students>, January 9, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Crystal L. Keels and Anya Malley, *Learning for Justice*, “Humanity, Healing and Doing the Work,” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2021/humanity-healing-and-doing-the-work>, Issue 1, Fall 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Learning for Justice podcasts, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts>

<sup>47</sup> Maureen Costello and Coshandra Dillard, “Hate at Schools,” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/TT-2019-Hate-at-School-Report.pdf>, 2019

<sup>48</sup> Teaching Hard History podcast, “Building Black Institutions: Autonomy, Labor and HBCUs,” Episode 8, Season 4, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history/jim-crow-era/building-black-institutions-autonomy-labor-and-hbcus>

As disinformation, radicalization, and acts of violence and terror have proliferated online, we must also invest at the K-12 level in students' digital literacy.<sup>49</sup> This includes teaching students how to seek out reliable sources and interrogate information. Ultimately, to achieve a safe, just, and equitable society, it is imperative that we embrace an inclusive education – one in which all students of various identities and abilities are valued, can learn without violence, and can realize their full potential to become active participants in our diverse democracy.

As leaders and students at HBCUs have noted, now is the time to grapple with our history.<sup>50</sup> In the recently released Third Edition of SPLC's *Whose Heritage?* report, we detail how the Confederacy fought the United States over the right to enslave African Americans during the Civil War.<sup>51</sup> Today, there are more than 2,000 Confederate memorials in the United States and its territories, glorifying the white supremacist values of the Confederacy. While the vast majority of these symbols are located in the South, Confederate memorials can be found across the Union states, including Civil War border states, states that were not yet admitted to the Union, and even Puerto Rico. They are ubiquitous, and worse, many of them are legally protected. Six states have preservation laws, making it nearly impossible for communities in those states to reject the Confederacy or heal the still-open wounds of the Civil War.<sup>52</sup>

SPLC believes that all Confederate memorials should be removed from public space, but we are especially concerned that more than 200 primary and secondary schools still honor Confederates.<sup>53</sup> No student – and especially no Black student – should be forced to attend a school named after a Confederate. Schools do more than teach students skills. They nurture the next generation of citizens and convey our national values. When students attend schools named after Confederates, they learn that these men are considered to be worthy of veneration and honor.

The legacy of the Confederacy is also with us on college campuses – not only in the heinous threats made against HBCUs, but also in the 14 Confederate memorials that can still be found on college campuses today.<sup>54</sup> Washington and Lee University, Nicholls State University, and Gordon State College are but a few of the institutions of higher education that honor Confederate figures.<sup>55</sup> The celebration of the Confederacy is especially offensive when it is adjacent to HBCUs like Morehouse and Spelman, where Lee Street borders the Atlanta campuses. While the origins of Lee Street's name remain unclear, the city is filled with Confederate symbols. Atlanta is home to Stone Mountain, the nation's largest Confederate monument.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it wasn't until 2018 that the city changed the name of Confederate Avenue.<sup>57</sup> This larger context impacts students of color who attend those schools. They are forced to confront the racialized terror promoted by the Confederacy and its supporters, just as the threats made against HBCUs were intended to intimidate Black communities.

Though SPLC is inspired by the activists who have removed more than 300 memorials since the Charleston Church Massacre in 2015, we know this is not enough. Renaming and removing Confederate memorials on or

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<sup>49</sup> Cory Collins, *Learning for Justice*, "Reimagining Digital Literacy Education to Save Ourselves," <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2021/reimagining-digital-literacy-education-to-save-ourselves>, Issue 1, Fall 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Esther Schrader, SPLC, "HBCU students and leaders 'lean into history' amid bomb threats," <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2022/02/09/hbcu-presidents-students-react-bomb-threats>, February 9, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy: Third Edition," <https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/whose-heritage-report-third-edition.pdf>, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

<sup>53</sup> To see the entire Whose Heritage? dataset, see [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1W4H2qa2THM1ni53QYZftGob\\_k\\_Bf9HreFAtCERfjCIU/edit?pli=1#gid=1205021846](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1W4H2qa2THM1ni53QYZftGob_k_Bf9HreFAtCERfjCIU/edit?pli=1#gid=1205021846).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>55</sup> Julia Arenstam, *Daily Advertiser*, "Nicholls State University Takes Aim at Confederate Ties, But Not University Name," <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/news/local/louisiana/2020/06/22/nicholls-state-university-strips-some-confederate-ties-but-not-name/3235669001/>, June 22, 2020; Lilah Burke, *Inside Higher Ed*, "Retaining Its Name," <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/07/washington-and-lee-maintain-name-face-opposition>, June 7, 2021; Gordon State College, "Gordon State College History," <https://www.gordonstate.edu/about/gordon-state-college-history/index.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Emil Moffatt, *NPR*, "Confederate Imagery On Stone Mountain Is Changing, But Not Fast Enough For Some," June 21, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Rosalind Bentley, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/just-atlanta-confederate-streets-get-new-names/uStM5kDRexOY5CmemAygrM/>, October 3, 2018.

adjacent to colleges and universities cannot stop the violent threats against HBCUs. Nor will it end structural racial inequality. But it will signal that we wholeheartedly reject symbols of hate in our institutions of higher education, and demand that America do better.

## **Conclusion**

We cannot allow white supremacy, racism, and bigotry to prevent our treasured and trusted HBCUs from maintaining safe spaces where students can embrace their shared experiences and cultures. We hope these hearings will spark congressional and federal agency action to authorize and fund long-term investments in anti-bias education, prevention strategies, and civic engagement initiatives that can help secure a future in which we can gather, worship, and live our communal lives safe from terrorist and extremist threats in a nation as good as its highest ideals.

Relatedly, we offer the following policies recommendations that outline ways Congress and the administration can act now to address hate and extremism in the U.S.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Speak out against hate, political violence, and extremism**

Words matter, especially from our leaders. It is impossible to overstate the importance of elected officials, business leaders, and military commanders using their public platforms to condemn hate crimes, threats to HBCUs, and vandalism and violence against houses of worship and other minority institutions.

### **Improve government response to domestic extremism**

The Biden administration and Congress should continue to closely track and assess the nature and magnitude of the problem of domestic extremism and should fund resilience and digital literacy initiatives and government and academic research on best evidenced-based prevention programs.

### **Enforce current laws**

Every state prohibits private militias, and many states have laws prohibiting political violence, restricting firearms in the state capitol/government buildings and near polling places, and banning paramilitary training in furtherance of, or in preparation for, a civil disorder. Federal and state authorities should take action to raise awareness about these laws – and enforce them.

### **Promote online safety and hold tech and social media companies accountable**

It is frighteningly simple for racists and extremists to disseminate propaganda, recruit followers, generate profits, and spread intimidation on the major social media platforms. Tech companies must create – and enforce – Terms of Service and policies to ensure that social media platforms, payment service providers, and other internet-based services do not enable the funding or amplifying of white supremacist ideas or otherwise provide a safe haven for extremists.<sup>58</sup>

### **Teach truth and fund prevention initiatives to steer individuals away from hate and extremism**

Disinformation and conspiracy theories are galvanizing attacks on democracy and government institutions. Many groups sharing conspiracy theories offer their potential supporters simple answers to complex questions. We must confront the insidious nature of this disinformation and conspiratorial thinking, which can lead to ideologically motivated violence.

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the sample policies promoted by the Change the Terms coalition <https://www.changethetterms.org/>