

## Combatting White Supremacy: A Sociological Perspective on Current Events

*November 20, 2019*

This week, Syracuse University is grappling with a “[white supremacist manifesto](#)” disseminated to students and now under criminal investigation. Two students at the University of Connecticut were arrested Monday for [shouting racial slurs in public](#). In September, sociology classes at Wake Forest University were cancelled outright after the department received “[emails calling for a national purge of nonwhite people](#).” Last week, the FBI reported that hate crime violence in the U.S, which includes white supremacist assaults, is at a 16-year-high.

Attempts to counter the spread of white supremacist ideology have mostly relied on legislation and the regulation of social media, and we encourage policymakers to bring sociological science to the table as well. Sociological research helps us to understand white supremacy at many levels—from how people are recruited to how the movement operates and spreads ideas nationally and internationally, and from how violence is cultivated to the structural contexts in which white supremacy emerges.

For example, sociologists can contribute to an understanding of how demography, politics, and technology, among other contextual factors, influence the content, form, and impact of this evolving phenomenon. Our scholarship on the issue goes back more than a century, when sociologist W.E.B. DuBois wrote that “the Ku Klux Klan is doing a job which the American people, or certainly a considerable portion of them, want done; and they want it done because as a nation they have fear of the Jew, the immigrant, the Negro.” More recently, sociologists Peter Simi and Robert Futrell documented that we are currently in a period of renewed white supremacist empowerment as “the shift from the Obama to the Trump presidency vastly transformed how white supremacists perceive their political power.”

“What is different now is that we are closer to the demographic changes that underpin replacement and genocide conspiracy theories,” says sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss. Sociologists Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep elaborate: “When racial and cultural identities overlap with our place on the economic ladder, [white supremacist] promises to restore power are even more potent, because they draw on cultural solidarity...and place blame on cultural outsiders.” And when it comes to technology, white supremacists are what sociologist Jessie Daniels calls “innovation experts,” using the latest developments in media to “situate their ideas alongside more mainstream political discourse—both conservative and progressive—and normalize their ideology.” These are just a few examples of sociological insight into the current context within which this problem is situated. With deep and broad understanding of white supremacy, sociologists can meaningfully inform policy discussions about what can be done to counter its growth.

As we face new and increasing contexts in which white supremacy is enacted, we must recognize that white supremacy, as sociologist David Cunningham notes, “disrupts the social fabric.” Cunningham’s research shows that “communities where the Klan once thrived exhibit higher rates of violent crime than neighboring areas...[which] demonstrate[s] the power of a movement that flouts established authority and weakens the bonds of respect and order within a community.” Sociologist Kathleen Blee sees the remedy “...on two levels: countering racist groups and fighting the racist ideas and institutions in mainstream America that ensure those groups a fertile ground for recruits.” In order to do that, one

must have a deep understanding of the conditions that allow for this phenomenon, and sociologists can contribute to that understanding.

The American Sociological Association (ASA) condemns white supremacy in all of its manifestations. We urge policymakers concerned with this issue to avail themselves of sociological research that will assist in responding to the problem, and to contact ASA for assistance.

## References

Blee, Kathleen. 2003. *Inside Organized Racism*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cunningham, David. 2016. "Five Myths about the Ku Klux Klan," *Washington Post*, March 11, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-myths-about-the-ku-klux-klan/2016/03/11/cddfa6f6-e55b-11e5-a6f3-21ccdbc5f74e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-myths-about-the-ku-klux-klan/2016/03/11/cddfa6f6-e55b-11e5-a6f3-21ccdbc5f74e_story.html).

DuBois, W. E. B. 1926. "The Shape of Fear." *The North American Review*, 223, (831): 291-304.

Daniels, Jessie. 2018. "The Algorithmic Rise of the 'Alt-Right'." *Contexts*, 17(1):60-65.

McVeigh, Rory and Kevin Estep. 2019. *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment*: pp 221-222. New York: Columbia University Press.

Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. 2019. "Gun Reform Alone Won't Address White Supremacist Extremism," *Boston Globe*, August 4, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/08/04/gun-reform-alone-won-address-white-supremacist-extremism/qCtKoRrDx01A2NHjbz7ILJ/story.html>.

Simi, Peter and Futrell, Robert. Forthcoming. "Active Abeyance, Political Opportunity, and the 'New' White Supremacy" in *Mobilization*, edited by Hank Johnston and Pamela Oliver.