



**Ideology, White  
Supremacy, and  
Violence in America**

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Dr Deena A. Isom

# IDEOLOGY, WHITE SUPREMACY, AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

The 2016 Presidential election in America sparked an increased interest in alternative-right ('alt-right') ideology, which depicts white individuals in the country as victims who are being discriminated against and deprived of their right to express racial pride. **Dr Deena Isom**, an Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina, has conducted extensive research examining the biases and perceptions associated with this far-right ideological movement and how such concepts have a broader reach beyond this extremist group.

## A Renewed Interest in Alt-right Ideology

While America, in many ways, leads the way in gender and racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and social justice, recent years have seen an exponential rise in individuals driven by far-right ideas. Alt-right (short for alternative right) ideologies are rooted in the belief that the culture, rights, and status of white American citizens, the majority ethnic group, are being threatened.

This idea has guided the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and other white supremacist groups for centuries. The number of individuals associated with these groups, which had decreased over time, started rising again around the time of the 2016 Presidential election.

More specifically, the rise in affiliation with white supremacist ideologies was reflected in the election of former President Donald Trump, who often expressed controversial, xenophobic, and misogynistic views. Even Trump's Presidential slogan, 'Make America Great Again', captured the essence of alt-right ideologies, implying that the country was no longer as 'great' as it had been in the past.

Dr Deena Isom, an Associate Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice and African American Studies at the University of South Carolina, has conducted extensive research to better understand the surge in interest in alt-right ideologies after the 2016 Presidential election as well as the implications of such notions beyond those affiliated with extremist groups. Her work sheds important light on the underlying components of these ideologies and their connection to violent crimes.

## The 'White Victim' Ideology

In exploring alt-right ideology, Dr Isom dissects its different components and inherent biases. Most notably, she has looked at the tendency of these ideologies to depict white people in America as 'victims' who are being discriminated against and socially threatened.

Extant research on white supremacist groups reveals five interrelated themes associated with perceptions of 'white victimhood'. Firstly, white supremacists believe whites face 'reverse' racial discrimination due to policies designed to level the playing field in different sectors prioritising the employment of marginalised groups over whites.



Secondly, these ideologies suggest that white people are denied the right to their own culture, which is often associated with patriarchal, oppressive, and outdated values. The white 'victim' ideology also emphasises the 'stigmatisation' of white people for expressing racial pride, as this will be perceived as racism or xenophobia.

White supremacists also claim that this inability to freely express their racial pride, along with racial discrimination, has caused them to lose their self-esteem or psychologically impacted them in other ways. Finally, they suggest that all efforts aimed at silencing pro-white groups and promoting racial equality threaten the existence and status of the white race.

In this pro-white ideology, Left-wing governments and the mainstream media are perceived as 'enemies' targeting white people and spreading



‘propaganda’ designed to eradicate white ‘cultural heritage’. This victim mindset is often used to justify violent acts and expressed by white supremacists in online chatrooms, as well as during TV debates and other discussions. In an examination of a recent survey of white Americans, Dr Isom found these perceptions of ‘victim ideology’ remain today and are significantly associated with affiliating with the modern alt-right movement.

### **A Gendered Look at Alt-right Sentiments**

Dr Isom also carried out a series of studies to better understand how the alt-right ‘victim ideology’ is experienced by men and women in America, and whether this white-victim mindset is conditioned by patriarchal beliefs. In one paper, published in 2020, she analysed survey responses collected by another team of researchers after the 2016 Presidential election, focusing on the answers of white respondents who identified with the alt-right movement.

The survey asked participants how much they thought discrimination against white people was a problem in America and how much they agreed or disagreed with different statements. Some of these statements touched on the white ‘victim’ ideology components, while others explored the extent to which they held patriarchal values or believed that women and men should not have similar societal roles.

Finally, participants were asked their gender, if they voted for Trump, and how their current economic situation was, as these variables could potentially play a part in their affiliation with the alt-right ideology. When she analysed the survey responses, Dr Isom found that while the alt-right movement is often associated with white angry men, many women also expressed their support for the movement.

While all alt-right-affiliated respondents with gender-normative beliefs were more likely to perceive themselves as victims of racial discrimination, men and women appeared to have slightly different perceptions. For instance, men with internalised gender normative values were more likely to believe that greater opportunities for minority groups were lowering their self-esteem by preventing them from taking on the role of the ‘provider’. On the other hand, women with internalised gender normative values were less likely to feel like they were missing out on professional opportunities, as they wished to take on the role of ‘mothers’ and ‘housewives’.

### **A Gendered Look at Anti-Black Lives Matter Sentiments**

In work published in 2021, Dr Isom and some of her colleagues also explored how the ‘white victim ideology’ is linked to negative perceptions of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which opposes police brutality against Black people in America. To do this, she analysed the same survey responses used in her previous study, but this time, she focused on the link between the alt-right victim ideology, support for Trump, anti-BLM sentiments, and gender normative beliefs.

Interestingly, Dr Isom found that most white male respondents who expressed support for the white ‘victim’ ideology also voted for Trump, while not all white women had. On the other hand, believing that racism is embedded in law enforcement increased the odds that women had voted for Trump, although the same was not observed for men.

Dr Isom observed that believing in the ‘victimhood’ of whites in America was also linked to opposition to the BLM movement, with respondents who also voted for Trump being even more inclined to oppose the movement. Gender normative beliefs, however, appeared to be only marginally associated with anti-BLM sentiments.



Overall, these findings suggest that support for Trump and alt-right affiliations were the key drivers of opposition to BLM. At the same time, the patriarchal values and gender normative beliefs of white respondents alone did not seem to be linked to greater anti-BLM sentiments.

### **A New Theory of Status Dissonance**

In 2018, Dr Isom introduced a theory to explain why some white Americans feel discriminated against and victimised. To do this, she used notions from Status Construction Theory, which outlines how structural factors influence the social interactions shaping cultural norms and beliefs.

According to this theory, society is based on a structure of inequality, where some individuals have greater resources than others. After repeated interactions with others around them, people develop various beliefs about how these resources should be allocated and what their status is in society.

If we are to achieve racial diversity at all levels of society, differences in how resources are allocated among individuals of different races must be eliminated. This can result in some white people feeling threatened by the social advancement of other minority groups who were previously disadvantaged.

Some individuals feel that there is a discrepancy between where they feel people with similar characteristics should be positioned in a social

hierarchy and where they believe they are currently positioned, a mental process known as 'status dissonance'. Using responses to a telephone survey by the Pew Research Centre in 2017, Dr Isom explored the idea that the perception of being discriminated against expressed by white Americans might be driven by status dissonance.

Her results partly confirmed her hypothesis, as she found that white men from a lower social class and more politically conservative respondents were more likely to believe that Black Americans had achieved equal status with white Americans and perceive an anti-white bias. Thus, feelings aligned with white 'victim' ideologies exist in the general white population and not just far-right extremist movements.

### **Links Between Perceived Anti-white Bias and Criminal Offences**

In a paper published in 2020, Dr Isom also tried to understand the link between a perceived anti-white bias and criminal offences committed by white youth. She specifically framed her study in the context of the General Strain Theory, which suggests that the experience of strain or societal stressors can induce some people to engage in criminal behaviour that they feel addresses the impact of this strain.

Here, Dr Isom tested the hypothesis that white youth who feel that their status in society is threatened, that they lost opportunities to minority groups, and that they are failing to achieve

their goals as a result, are more likely to commit violent crimes. To do this, she analysed data collected as part of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighbourhoods (PHDCN), a long-term research effort examining the development of young people in Chicago, collected between 1994 and 2002.

Overall, she found that white youths, particularly young men, who perceived an anti-white bias were significantly more likely to have committed serious crimes and violent offences. Her results suggest that anger can amplify this pattern, meaning that angry youths who felt discriminated against for being white were more likely to engage in violent criminal acts than youths who shared their perceptions but did not report feeling angry. Thus, notions of white 'victim' ideology are tied to violence, even for those not affiliated with far-right extremism.

### **Addressing the Concerning Rise in White Supremacist Ideas**

After President Trump's election, white supremacists have perpetrated a growing number of violent crimes, including aggressive protests, shootings and attacks targeting Black American citizens and other minority groups. If policymakers are to tackle this concerning social phenomenon and mitigate its devastating effects, they must first understand what drives individuals towards these ideologies.

The recent studies by Dr Isom offer valuable insights that could inform the work of policymakers, criminologists, and criminal lawyers by helping them better understand the factors and thought processes underpinning the growing interest in alt-right ideology among white people in America. In turn, this could inform the development of more effective strategies to mitigate racial tensions and prevent violent crimes associated with the alt-right movement and beyond.



# Meet the researcher

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Dr Deena A. Isom is an Associate Professor of African American Studies and Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Emory University and an MS in Criminology & Criminal Justice from Northeastern University, as well as a BS in Psychology and a BA in Criminal Justice from the University of Georgia. Dr Isom has conducted extensive research to expand and develop criminological and sociological theory, understand and dismantle social inequities, and investigate social psychological processes. She has authored dozens of papers published in highly regarded criminology and sociology journals and has a book on whiteness and crime forthcoming from Routledge. She is also a member of several professional bodies, including the American Society of Criminology, the American Sociological Association, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Sociologists for Women in Society, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and the National Council for Black Studies. Over the course of her career, Dr Isom has received several awards, including the 2023 Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Minorities and Women Section Becky Tatum Excellence in Scholarship Award, named a University of South Carolina McCausland Fellow for innovative research and teaching, and has also received the University of South Carolina Garnet Apple Award for excellence in teaching.

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## KEY COLLABORATORS

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## FUNDING

University of South Carolina College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Research Initiative Grant

## FURTHER READING

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