

Trauma as a Precursor to Violent Extremism

How non-ideological factors can influence joining an extremist group

OVERVIEW

Though violent extremism has recently begun to receive increased scrutiny, less attention has been paid to understanding how non-ideological factors influence the process of joining an extremist group and the onset of committing violent crimes. Violent extremism involves a variety of pathways and manifests itself along a broad continuum. Although there is no single pathway to violent extremism, this study empirically identifies a pathway where non-ideological risk factors accumulate over time beginning during childhood and serve to push the person toward a variety of violent behaviors including violent extremism.

Using life histories of violent white supremacists, START researchers based at the University of Nebraska at Omaha examined how non-ideological factors, including trauma, conduct problems and mental health issues, influence becoming involved in a violent extremist group. This study focuses on the individual's experiences leading up to entry into violent extremism rather than the person's experiences with violence during involvement in the group.

INTERIM FINDINGS

Involvement in an extremist group is often viewed through the prism of ideology, yet a number of non-ideological factors are important motivations for joining violent extremist groups. A large portion of the violent extremists in this study share many individual background factors such as child maltreatment and other risk factors with members of conventional street gangs and "ordinary" violent offenders.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

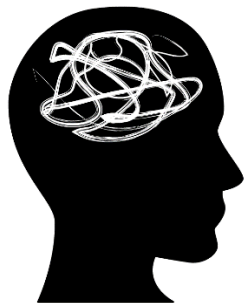
Childhood trauma and the onset of serious misconduct results in economic, educational, and social disabilities that isolate at-risk individuals from society.

- 45 percent of those interviewed reported being the victim of childhood physical abuse while 21 percent reported being the victim of childhood sexual abuse; 46 percent of those interviewed reported being neglected as a child.
 - These figures exceed rates of child maltreatment found within the general population, where a recent survey found 28.3 percent of American adults retrospectively reported being physically abused as a child, 20.7 percent reported being sexually abused as a child, and 12.4 percent reported being neglected as a child (Center for Disease Control 2014)
- In addition to childhood maltreatment, interview subjects also reported a range of other traumatic experiences to include: parental incarceration (29%); parental abandonment (31%); and family substance abuse (49%).



45% reported being abused as a child

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES



Subjects were asked whether a medical practitioner had ever diagnosed them with a mental disorder. In addition to self-reports regarding physician diagnoses, this study also coded self-reports of suicide attempts and other relatively clear instances of maladjusted behavior (e.g., self-mutilation) as evidence of mental health problems.

However, it would be incorrect to categorize subjects as "crazy." Mental health problems are varied and few, if any, individuals in this sample would meet the legal definition of "insanity" that involves severe psychosis and an inability to distinguish fantasy from reality.

59% reported a family history of mental health problems

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of the interview subjects reported attempting suicide and/or seriously considering suicide.
- 57 percent of the sample reported experiencing mental health problems either preceding or during their extremist involvement.
- A majority of subjects reported a family history of mental health problems (59%).

HIGH RISK BEHAVIORS

Early experimentation with alcohol and illegal drugs is typically an indication of a more general high risk lifestyle and predicts a variety of unhealthy outcomes, while problems with truancy and academic performance are one of the strongest predictors of delinquent and criminal behavior.

- 72 percent of the subjects reported having problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs.
- More specifically, 64 percent of the subjects reported experimenting with alcohol and/or illegal drugs prior to age 16.
- 58 percent of subjects reported truancy while 54 percent of the subjects reported academic failure in terms of either being expelled from school or dropping out.



72% reported having problems with alcohol and/or drugs

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Early interventions designed for at-risk youth and gang members should inform how we think about and apply countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives. Joining an extremist group provides a sense of social cohesiveness that may be otherwise missing in a person's life whose family background is characterized by dysfunction and instability. There are a number of individual, family, and community-level approaches that can be adopted to help address violent extremism, but only after systematic empirical evaluations will we know how well these interventions translate to different populations of violent extremists. Nonetheless, existing interventions offer an important starting place and the substantial commonalities we find in the backgrounds of former violent white supremacists and more generic violent offenders suggests that generalized programming may play an important role in CVE efforts.

METHOD

This study examines how different factors related to childhood trauma and adolescent conduct problems precede the entry process into violent extremism. The research team conducted intensive life history interviews with 44 former members of violent white supremacist groups who lived in 15 different states across all regions of the United States. Over the course of a 5-6 hour interview, subjects narrated their entire life histories beginning with earliest memories. A small segment of subjects participated in extended interviews that involved dozens of hours over several days. Life history interviews allow participants to explain, in their own words, experiences relevant to entry and exit from violent extremism. Initial contacts with former white supremacists were based on the long-term ethnographic fieldwork of the lead researcher, Pete Simi.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In future research, the teams intends to compare the North American-based sample of former white supremacists with similar samples from various European countries and also compare the existing sample with other types of domestic extremists such as former violent jihadists and left-wing extremists. The team is also using this sample to examine disengagement and deradicalization processes to help inform interventions designed to facilitate exiting from extremism and reintegration.

RESEARCH TEAM

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The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. Contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu. This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation (2012-2014). The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation or START.