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# Former Extremists in North American Research

*Ryan Scrivens, Steven Windisch, and Pete Simi*

## Introduction

During approximately the past decade, it has become common for practitioners and policymakers in North America—and indeed in the Western world generally—to draw from the perspectives of former extremists, known colloquially as "formers," to generate knowledge on and respond to the prevalence and contours of terrorism and extremism.[1] Although some have raised concerns about formers working in this space, including questions about their credibility and whether their inclusion could raise concerns in the public sphere,[2] others have argued that formers can provide valuable, pragmatic insight into key issues that terrorism scholars, among many others, are concerned with.[3] Researchers in North America, for example, have drawn from the perspectives of formers to better understand processes of radicalization to extremism[4] and processes of deradicalization and disengagement from extremism.[5] Researchers have also examined various aspects of the above mentioned processes via the insights of formers, including the role of the internet in facilitating violent extremism,[6] factors that minimize radicalization to mass-casualty violence,[7] the experiences of women in groups that advocate racial and political violence,[8] and an assessment of how formers think that extremism should be combatted.[9] Indeed, formers have played an increasingly important role in informing empirical research on terrorism and extremism-related issues.[10]

In what follows, we explore how researchers studying key issues in terrorism and extremism studies have incorporated formers into their work by tracing current trends in the empirical research in a North American

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context. First, we examine how those relying on interviews with formers have uncovered a complex web of overlapping push and pull factors that predispose extremist onset. Second, we explore how the use of formers to understand radicalization processes has provided valuable insight that would not have been available through secondary sources. Third, we discuss how formers have better informed our understanding of the processes of leaving extremism. Last, we describe some of the ways that formers have informed research on combating extremism. Highlighted throughout this chapter are key gaps in the empirical literature and suggestions for progressing research. But before proceeding, it is necessary to outline how we conceptualize "former extremists." They are individuals who at one time in their lives subscribed to and/or perpetuated violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology and have since publicly and/or privately denounced violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology. In short, they no longer identify themselves as adherents of a particular extremist ideology or are affiliated with an extremist group or movement.

## Extremist Precursors

It is generally understood in terrorism and extremism studies that ideological and non-ideological "push" and "pull" factors facilitate extremist onset. Push factors refer to adverse qualities in the environment that increase one's susceptibility to extremism, whereas pull factors refer to features that an individual finds attractive about the extremist group or movement.[11] Importantly, one of the most common push factors identified in the empirical literature involves grievances, which refer to real or imagined wrongdoings, especially unfair treatment. Researchers who have drawn from the perspectives of former extremists to better understand extremist onset have similarly highlighted a variety of grievances, including perceptions of injustice and discrimination, direct and war-related trauma, personal disaffection or loss, and disagreements regarding the foreign policies of states. However, this work has been conducted outside of a North American context. For example, during their interviews with 34 formers (extreme right and jihadist) from the Netherlands and Denmark, Sieckelinck and colleagues[12] found that pathways into extremism were characterized by a sequence of troubling social–emotional transitions (e.g., lack of emotional support) from childhood to adulthood. In addition, focusing on risk factors, negative

emotionality, and adolescent misconduct, the authors found that extremist onset does not begin with a single life event but, rather, is influenced by multiple factors throughout the life course. Similar conclusions were drawn by Drevon,[13] who relied on information collected from political ethnography and interviews with leaders and members of former radical groups in Egypt. Here, the author found that the adoption of Salafi jihadism by young Egyptians in Syria was facilitated by multiple factors, including the inability of mainstream Salafism to face post-September 11, 2001 (9/11) challenges; the absence of local militant groups; the availability of alternative literature on the internet; and the shared religious creed of jihadi and mainstream Salafism. From this perspective, extremist ideologies that advocate changing the status quo may appear attractive among populations who perceive themselves as threatened.

Of the limited empirical research conducted with formers on push factors in a North American context, Simi and colleagues[14] developed a risk factor model of extremist participation by examining the link between non-ideological grievances and childhood trauma. This study was based on life-history interviews with 44 former members of right-wing extremist (RWE) groups in the United States. Instead of focusing on extremism as a unique and specialized type of violence, the authors adopted a perspective that emphasizes the importance of contextualizing extremist participation within the broader realm of violent and criminal behavior. As a result, the focus of this research was on non-ideological experiences occurring throughout an individual's life, such as family mental illness, maltreatment, and affiliation with delinquent peer groups. Overall, the authors found that the cumulative effect of early childhood risk factors, negative emotionality, and adolescent misconduct creates a downward spiral that leads individuals to regard extremist groups as a support system, capable of addressing non-ideological needs. Notwithstanding this study, more research is needed to better understand the various push factors facilitating extremist onset in North America.

Related to but distinct from grievances are psychological propensities. Terrorism and extremism scholars often suggest that extremist participation is based on a social–psychological transformation in which emotions, cognitions, and social influences push someone to endorse and engage in extremist activities.[15] To better understand these push factors, researchers have examined a variety of psychological propensities that predispose individuals toward extremist involvement, such as narcissism, psychopathy, mental illness, and thrill-seeking behavior.[16] Whereas early terrorism and extremism

studies had little success in identifying a "terrorist mindset,"[17] later developments describe extremists as individuals with "normal" backgrounds whose rate of mental illness resembles that of the general population.[18] Interestingly, however, is that North American research that has relied on the accounts of former extremists has found otherwise. Bubolz and Simi,[19] for example, revealed substantial evidence of mental illness (e.g., depression) among former U.S. RWEs prior to their extremist involvement. Here, the authors argue that classifying extremists as "normal" is premature, and more research is needed before a consensus can emerge. Work by Brown and colleagues had similar findings when drawing from the insights of former U.S. RWEs and Islamists.[20]

In addition to push factors, terrorism and extremism scholars have examined ideological and non-ideological factors that pull people into extremism. Previous studies have found that extremist organizations—and movements more broadly—attract individuals for a variety of reasons, such as ideological alignment, protection, the prospect of thrill-seeking behavior, as well as the perception that it provides a substitute family and identity.[21] Some researchers in North America have become increasingly interested in the relationship between cognition and ideological propaganda as it relates to extremist participation. For example, Simi and colleagues[22] interviewed 20 former U.S. RWEs and found that "significance quests"[23] play a pivotal role in the onset of extremist participation. In particular, formers emphasized that they were performing a so-called duty by dedicating their lives to the preservation of the White race. As a result, they viewed themselves as "guardians," "heroes," and "warriors," which increased their level of personal significance.[24] The authors concluded that more work is needed to examine whether such pull factors extend to a wide range of extremist ideologies.

Social networks have also been found to pull individuals toward extremist involvement. Social networks refer to pre-existing kinship and friendship ties between ordinary individuals and extremists.[25] Here, terrorism and extremism scholars generally agree that the strength and number of networks with current extremists comprise one of the most influential factors pulling an individual toward extremist participation.[26] Nevertheless, research that has examined the influence of social networks on extremist precursors and has incorporated formers into their work is limited, especially in a North American context; only a few studies have addressed this relationship in depth. Ezekiel,[27] for example, conducted extensive fieldwork with neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan leaders and followers in Detroit, Michigan, and identified

several pull factors that facilitated extremist onset for vulnerable youth. These included a range of intersecting conditions linked to various social factors (e.g., social isolation, social dislocation, and the absence of democratic ideology) as well as family dynamics and personal psychodynamics. Extending beyond North America, Chernov Hwang and Schulze[28] drew on original fieldwork, which included interviews with current and former extremists in Syria, and found that kinship bonds with parents, uncles, and siblings expedited participants' entry process. In some cases, relatives targeted younger family members and systematically groomed them, drawing on in-family love and loyalty to ensure commitment. In other cases, simply having a parent who fought or was executed by the state was enough to prompt someone to join an extremist group. In this way, extremist involvement may be more a product of whom one knows rather than what one believes. Drevon,[29] who conducted extensive fieldwork with former radical groups in Egypt, similarly identified social networks as an influential pull factor in extremist onset. Nonetheless, this evidence base requires further exploration.

Overall, research relying on interviews with former extremists reveals a dynamic web of overlapping push and pull factors that predispose extremist onset. Capitalizing on ideological and non-ideological grievances, extremist organizations increase the appeal of their groups by offering acceptance and incentivizing sacrifice through heroic redemption. In some situations, potential recruits were deliberately targeted by peers and/or family members who tailored recruitment messages and systematically groomed vulnerable youth. It is important to emphasize that push and pull factors work in conjunction with one another. That is, without the presence of push factors, pull factors would likely be much less influential.

## Radicalization Toward Extremist Violence

Few issues have garnered as much attention in terrorism and extremism studies as that of "radicalization" to extremist violence, which is generally understood as the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs, whereas "action pathways" refer to the process of engaging in violence. As Borum[30] aptly noted, radicalization needs to be separated from action pathways because most people with radical beliefs do not engage in terrorism and violent extremism.[31] In recent years, radicalization has become a household term among the general public and media. Academics have

likewise spent substantial time investigating the dimensions of this process and developing theories to explain how and why radicalization occurs.[32] Importantly, one point of relative consensus across the empirical literature is that racialization is a multifaceted, gradual process.[33] Radicalization appears to be characterized by a slow marginalization away from conventional society toward a much narrower atmosphere where extremism becomes a "totalizing commitment."[34]

Much of the radicalization literature focuses on the channels with which extremist ideologies are both developed and reinforced. Although different types of media tools have been essential in the formation and growth of the extremist beliefs, including print mediums, films, radio broadcasts, and audio recorded speeches,[35] terrorism and extremism scholars highlight the role of music in the radicalization process.[36] For these individuals, music creates a "free space" in which extremists can gather to express hostility toward the powerful and share in their collective identity. In addition, music provides recruiters with an alternative way to educate new members about the group's ideological belief system by using a common form of culture prevalent across most, if not all, social systems.[37] Research that has drawn from the perspectives of former extremists has examined this particular issue in a North American context. For example, examining radicalization processes among former U.S. RWEs, Simi and colleagues[38] underscore the significance of White power music as a channel for expressing conflict, symbolizing resistance and rebellion, framing grievances, communicating power, and creating boundaries between members and nonmembers.[39] Music therefore functions as a propaganda tool used to spread an alternative lifestyle and various ideological messages to a much wider audience.[40] Gaudette and colleagues[41] interviewed former Canadian RWEs and similarly report the importance of exposure to White power music in facilitating processes of violent radicalization.

With advances in the way humans communicate on various levels, including anonymous online platforms and channels, the internet has also become a major point of focus among radicalization studies.[42] A growing body of evidence suggests that the internet is a key facilitator of violent extremism, with prior research indicating that extremist groups and movements use the internet for sharing ideology, propaganda, linking to similar sites, recruiting new converts, advocating violence, and threatening others, among other things.[43] It is surprising, however, that research in this space has rarely incorporated formers' experiences with the internet when they

were involved in violent extremism. A search using dedicated academic research databases produced just four studies in this regard[44]—and only one in a North American context.[45] Gaudette and colleagues[46] conducted in-depth interviews with former Canadian RWEs on their use of the internet during their involvement in violent extremism and identified an important interaction between their on- and offline worlds, which were intertwined with extremist activities, identities, and a need for security. Here, the internet served as a gateway for individuals to engage in violent extremist activities offline, connecting adherents in the online world to the offline world, often through the online promotion of offline events (e.g., concerts, rallies, protests, and gatherings). The authors also found that most study participants were concerned about their on- and offline security during their involvement in violent extremist groups, noting that they modified their on- and offline behaviors to avoid detection and infiltration from law enforcement and anti-fascist groups. Interestingly, however, is that despite their security concerns, most of them—unlike the newer generation of RWEs who are active and communicate anonymously in various encrypted online spaces[47]—maintained the same identities in both their on- and offline worlds and displayed their roles in the movement (e.g., as recruiters or promoters) similarly in both worlds. Discussed within this context was how the internet was flooded with "net Nazis" or "internet warriors" (i.e., adherents who are very active online but will not meet others offline).

Regardless, this emerging evidence base remains in its infancy and requires further exploration in a North American setting. Fortunately, a few studies have drawn from formers' perspectives on the link between the internet and radicalization outside of North America. For example, von Behr and colleagues'[48] interviews and ethnographic work with those previously exposed to radicalizing material as well as former extremists in the United Kingdom suggest that the internet may enhance opportunities to become radicalized and provide a greater opportunity than offline interactions by confirming existing beliefs. However, the authors did not find support for the concept of self-radicalization through the internet, nor did they find that the internet accelerates radicalization or replaces the need for individuals to meet in person during their radicalization process. Building on this work, Koehler[49] conducted in-depth interviews with German former RWEs, with the focus of the study on the role of the internet in individual radicalization processes. Koehler found that the internet was the most important driving factors in participants' individual radicalization processes because it provided members with a space in

which they could learn skills that were necessary to access online extremist groups. Koehler also found that the internet was a central hub for RWE groups, recruiters, and strategies to influence the radical views and subsequent behavior of others online (i.e., echo chambers). Sieckelinck and colleagues,[50] during their interviews with formers in Denmark and the Netherlands on their life courses into and out of extremism, also highlighted the key catalytic role of exposure to propaganda online. Following the 9/11 attacks, an individual in their study decided to search online for information about the war in Afghanistan. Viewing this content, the participant claimed, was a key push factor within their radicalization process. Although these studies provide valuable insight into the role of the internet in facilitating violent extremism, much more work is needed on the complex interactions between the on- and offline worlds of violent extremists.[51]

Extremist violence is another major investigative topic among radicalization studies. Whereas quantitative studies tend to focus on macro-level factors, such as economic and social structures, cultural understandings, and national politics, Blee and colleagues[52] qualitatively explored the micro- and meso-level dynamics of extremist violence via the insights of former extremists. In particular, relying on life-history interviews with former U.S. RWEs, the authors examined the pathways in which racist ideologies and violent practices were provoked and channeled through individual experiences, motivations, and actions as well as through organized group efforts. Overall, their findings suggest a complex, nuanced process in which their participants' trajectories to racial violence progressed through several different pathways, such as racial socialization, incarceration, and mental illness. Similar conclusions emerged from other studies utilizing life-history interviews with formers. In particular, Fahey and Simi's[53] investigation of the pathways toward planned (e.g., bombings and shootings) or spontaneous (e.g., "gay bashings") violence examined the differences in pre-entry risk factors (e.g., truancy). The authors found that participants who committed spontaneous violence possessed higher risk factors than the planned violence sample. No support, however, was gained for the identification of distinct pathways of homogeneous risk factors among either group of extremists. The high degree of heterogeneity evident among the pathways provides an important cautionary tale as to whether a clear trajectory toward extremist violence can be discerned.

Despite the enormous amount of research investigating how and why individuals radicalize to the point of committing extremist violence, the

terrorism and extremism literature is almost silent on the constraints or barriers that prevent radicalization.[54] To address this gap, Simi and Windisch[55] focused on internal and external mechanisms or barriers that serve to constrain individuals from moving toward mass-casualty violence, such as the belief that extremist violence was counterproductive and the inability to morally justify killing innocent women and children. Each of the five barriers identified addressed larger issues related to organizational and leadership characteristics, which hindered the generation of a shared vision among extremist members. Extending this work, Windisch and colleagues[56] examined the microsituational dynamics of extremist violence among a sample of former U.S. far-right extremists and found that irrespective of their ideological convictions, extremists experienced similar cognitive pressures (e.g., fear and anxiety) toward interpersonal violence as non-extremists. To overcome these barriers, participants utilized various cognitive and emotional suppression techniques, such as targeting vulnerable victims, adhering to an audience that encouraged violence, and utilizing clandestine attacks. Given that extremists experience similar constraints toward interpersonal violence as non-extremists, researchers should revisit long-standing assumptions that conceptualize terrorism as fundamentally distinct from conventional crime.

Although there is a general consensus among researchers that radicalization occurs through a process of deepening engagements that can be observed in changing overt behaviors, a review of the literature indicates a substantial amount of ambiguity regarding the conceptualization of this process. One of the difficulties in theorizing about extremist participation is the wide range of people who become involved in extremism. These individuals have been found to differ in terms of the communication channels they are exposed to, the pathways they take toward extremism, and the barriers that disrupt or constrain their violent tendencies. Furthermore, the factors that play a pivotal role in one person's decision to engage in extremism can play a peripheral role or no part in the decision-making of others. However, the use of former extremists to understand these processes has provided insight that would not have been available through secondary sources.[57]

## Leaving Violent Extremism

Although research in terrorism and extremism studies has tended to focus on processes of violent radicalization, particularly the motivations for

individuals joining violent extremist movements,[58] during the past two decades many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have turned their attention to how, why, and when individuals leave violent extremism.[59] Two concepts are often discussed in this regard: deradicalization and disengagement. *Deradicalization* refers to the process by which an individual is diverted from an extremist ideology, eventually rejecting an extremist ideology and moderating their beliefs.[60] *Disengagement*, on the other hand, is the process by which an individual decides to leave their associated extremist group or movement in order to reintegrate into society.[61] As Windisch and colleagues[62] distinguish the two, "deradicalization involves a change in belief; whereas, disengagement is characterized by a change in behavior." Although these two processes can occur separately or simultaneously depending on the context in which they take place,[63] Bubolz and Simi[64] correctly note that "a great deal of ambiguity remains about the underlying causes and correlates of exit." Understandably, there has been a growing interest among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop a more nuanced understanding of this complex process.[65] However, to date, far more is empirically known about why people join violent extremist movements than why they leave them.[66] Fortunately, some empirical research has emerged in this space, much of which has incorporated the perspectives of former extremists.[67]

Empirical studies that have interviewed formers about their pathways out of violent extremism tend to focus on processes of disengagement[68] or deradicalization[69] but not specifically on the interactions between both. A search using dedicated academic research databases produced nine studies[70] that interviewed or drew from the accounts of formers with an emphasis on the relationship between processes of disengagement and deradicalization—with five studies within a North American context. Bubolz and Simi[71] conducted life-history interviews with U.S. former RWEs and found that processes of disengagement and deradicalization were multifaceted and influenced by a variety of factors. Brown and colleagues[72] interviewed U.S. former RWEs and Islamists as well as their families and friends and also found a wide variety of journeys out of violent extremism. Horgan and colleagues[73] conducted an in-depth interview with a U.S. former violent RWE and similarly found that multiple push and pull interactions shaped disengagement and deradicalization decisions. Simi and colleagues[74] examined the challenges associated with leaving White supremacy via life-history interviews with former U.S. RWEs and found that extremists experienced several residual effects that were described

as a form of addiction. Altier and colleagues[75] drew from autobiographical accounts to examine terrorist disengagement and found that certain push factors, such as disillusionment with the movement and burnout, were more likely to drive disengagement decisions than deradicalization. Last, Gaudette and colleagues[76] interviewed Canadian former right-wing extremists on their pathways out of violent extremism and found that not only were processed of disengagement and deradicalization multifaceted and multidimensional in nature but also radical beliefs tended to persist beyond disengagement from violent extremism. Together, this research conceptualizes leaving extremism as a process that is impacted by several key events and not a single moment. Bubolz and Simi,[77] for example, found that a variety of complex factors influenced an individual's decision to leave, much of which was facilitated, at least in part, through self-reflection as a result of contact with law enforcement and the experience of incarceration—that is, "hitting rock bottom."[78] Through this self-reflection process, formers noted that expectations associated with being part of the extremist group (e.g., family, loyalty, and unity) were less genuine than originally expected, which influenced their decision to leave extremism. In addition, the combination of burnout,[79] encouragement from spouses or significant others,[80] and positive individuals outside of the extremist movement influenced these individuals' decision to disengage.[81]

Despite these foundational studies on why and how extremists disengage, several important research questions have yet to be explored in depth. First, little attention has been paid to how an individual's organizational role influences disengagement. In response, Altier and colleagues[82] examined English-language autobiographies and interviews with former extremists (i.e., former nationalists, RWEs, and Islamists) from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to determine how an extremist's role influenced their probability of—and reasons for—disengagement. The authors found that specific roles, particularly leadership and violent roles, resulted in fewer alternatives for making exit likely, whereas those experiencing both role conflict (i.e., a discrepancy between their abilities and assigned roles) and role strain (i.e., conflicting roles within or outside of the group), as well as those in support roles, were more likely to disengage. Also uncovered was an association between certain roles and the experience of different push and pull factors for disengagement. Altier and colleagues[83] concluded that a more nuanced understanding of the association between terrorist roles and disengagement is needed to inform policies

for responding to extremism—especially interventions that are tailored to individuals' motivations and circumstances.

Second, research on the general difficulties of leaving extremism is underdeveloped, but some work is beginning to emerge in North America. For example, relying on life-history interviews with former U.S. far-right extremists, Bubolz and Simi[84] identified numerous difficulties associated with disengagement, such as negative emotionality (e.g., guilt), ideological relapse, and maintaining social ties with current extremist members. Gaudette and colleagues[85] interviewed former Canadian RWEs and similarly highlight the challenges of leaving extremism wherein participants claimed to have disengaged from violent extremism but most still maintained radical beliefs. Comparably, Simi and colleagues[86] examined the challenges associated with disengagement via interviews with former U.S. RWEs and found that extremists experienced several residual effects that were described as a form of addiction. These residual effects were found to intrude on cognitive processes as well as involve long-term effects on emotional and physiological levels, and in some cases, they involved complete relapse into extremist behavior. The authors concluded by urging researchers to examine the differences between individual trajectories of disengagement involving substantial residual compared to those that do not, the situational dynamics related to specific episodes of residual, and the neurocognitive qualities of identity residual. They also recommended a comparison of former activists across an array of social movements, including jihadists and conventional street gangs.

Third, more comparative research is needed to understand the process of disengagement across extremist movements. Only a small number of studies, all of which were conducted in a North America context, have addressed this research question. Brown and colleagues[87] interviewed U.S. former RWEs and Islamists to examine, among other things, pathways out of violent extremism and found that disillusionment and burnout were the most cited reasons for leaving extremism. These were key factors and circumstances that motivated RWEs—and not Islamists—to leave extremism because, as the authors state, "they became disappointed by the hypocrisy or other negative behaviors (such as too much infighting or unproductive levels of violence) in the radical organizations they joined or became exhausted by their own involvement."[88] Windisch and colleagues[89] interviewed former left-wing extremists and RWEs to compare disengagement processes. Focusing on organizational trust, the authors found several important similarities and

differences between extremists' decisions to leave. On the one hand, both samples discussed feelings of distrust that stemmed from a lack of integrity and benevolence among leaders and fellow members. On the other hand, whereas left-wing participants discussed distrust as stemming from a lack of support following victimization from external entities, RWEs discussed internal violence between members as contributing to perceptions of distrust. These findings suggest that the organizational dynamics of each group are indeed different, which in turn impacted disengagement processes. More cross-case comparisons, however, are needed between different ideological groups to expand empirical observations and strengthen theoretical conclusions regarding disengagement processes.

Last, an important yet underdeveloped area of research in terrorism and extremism studies is the development of empirically based models of disengagement, both in a North American context and in general. One notable exception is Barrelle's[90] pro-integration model (PIM), which was derived from interviews with former extremists (e.g., jihadists, far-right extremists, and Tamil separatists) in an Australian context. In particular, PIM centered on five key domains: a fundamental change in the individual's social relations and an openness to the "other," disillusionment from radical ideas, processes of identity rebuilding, physical and/or psychological support, and prosocial engagement after leaving extremism. Based on these findings, disengagement from violent extremism was understood as an identity transition wherein sustained disengagement involves proactive, holistic, and harmonious engagement with the wider society after leaving extremism (i.e., pro-integration).[91] Although PIM has been adopted by some practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, a comparison of other disengagement models is needed across extremist movements (i.e., Islamist vs. right-wing vs. left-wing), across nations (e.g., the United States vs. the United Kingdom vs. Europe vs. Australia), and across time frames in which individuals disengaged (e.g., the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and the present).

## Combating Violent Extremism

A growing industry (i.e., research centers, consultancy groups, and government departments) is combating the problem of extremism, both online and offline. Known in academic and government circles as preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE), the former consists

of efforts to minimize the conditions (individual and/or environmental) in which extremism may thrive, whereas the latter is largely designed to divert individuals away from radicalization by using "soft" approaches rather than purely securitized and/or criminal justice responses.[92] Commonly, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers draw from the insights of former extremists in a number of P/CVE settings, including intelligence gathering, interventions, and counternarratives.[93]

For example, the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network is a global organization composed of formers and survivors of violent extremism that counters extremist narratives and prevents the recruitment of at-risk youth. In short, AVE utilizes lessons, experiences, and networks of those who have experienced extremism firsthand. The aim is to engage directly with individuals on several difficult issues as well as undercut violent groups' ability to contact and recruit young people.[94] Another initiative whose core members are reformed extremists is Life After Hate. In addition to conducting interventions to help people disengage from extremism, this nonprofit consultancy provides organizations with scalable frameworks needed to implement long-term solutions to combat all types of extremism and terrorism. Notably, it works with leaders in several sectors, including foreign and domestic governments, the military, international security and intelligence, policymakers, law enforcement officials, and the private sector.[95] Social media, tech companies, and think tanks have also been quick to turn to formers to assist in the development of online CVE campaigns. The "redirect method," which identifies those who are searching for violent extremist content on Google and then exposes them to counternarratives, is one illustration.[96] Formers have been involved in this process on at least two fronts: (1) A small group of formers has developed the list of targeted search terms, and (2) many of the counternarratives that have been offered to the target audience feature the stories of formers.[97] Formers have also served as intervention providers on online CVE campaigns, including the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's One to One pilot project, in which formers directly message an array of individuals' Facebook pages that are identified as right-wing or Islamist extremist.[98]

Although a growing number of entities—particularly in the West and in North America—have sprung up around the project of combating violent extremism, which often draws from the insights of and shares the stories of formers in general and former RWEs and Islamists in particular,[99] scholars in this space have been much slower to incorporate formers into research

designs that are specifically geared toward combating violent extremism. This is an important oversight because formers can provide firsthand accounts of, and insider's perspectives into, several key issues that terrorism and extremism scholars, among many others, are concerned with,[100] especially those related to ways of combating extremism.[101] Fortunately, a small body of research is beginning to take shape in this regard, particularly regarding the role of formers in combating violent extremism, the impact of formers in school-based PVE work, and formers' perceptions of P/CVE in general. Much of this work is in its early stages and has been conducted outside of North America, but it is showing signs of success. Clubb,[102] for example, explored the role of formers in preventing terrorism and political violence in post-conflict communities, interviewing former members of the Irish Republican Army, as well as Loyalists and community workers in Belfast. Clubb found that former combatants are in a unique position to assist in preventing terrorism and violent extremism, particularly through community activism. For example, formers may provide resources and access to communities that tend to be supportive or sympathetic to terrorism and political violence—communities that, on the one hand, the state may find difficult to engage with and, on the other hand, that alternative community activists may not have credibility with. Clubb also found that formers have much more influence on the communities because of the decades-long relationships that they have cultivated with them. As a result, formers are perceived as credible and legitimate in the community to, in turn, assist in preventing violent extremism. In their assessment of the impact of one former RWE in school-based PVE work, Walsh and Ganseweig[103] similarly found that the former was in a unique position to access juveniles during periods in their lives that adults had difficulty accessing. The authors did, however, note that the extent to which the former influenced the juveniles from PVE remains unknown, concluding that more research is needed to understand the impact of formers on PVE initiatives.

Last, Scrivens and colleagues[104] conducted in-depth interviews with 10 former Canadian RWE, asking them how they think extremism should be prevented and countered. Interestingly, although formers believed that they are in a unique position to educate stakeholders, experts, and the local community about what draws youth into extremism as well as the factors that give rise to and minimize extremism, they also believed that various key stakeholders—including parents and families, teachers and educators, the local community, and, in some cases, law enforcement officials—play

an important role in preventing young people from going down similar pathways that they did. In this study, formers suggested that parents and families can prevent their child's trajectory toward extremism if (1) families invest themselves in their child's life and are aware of potential warning signs and (2) families facilitate an inclusive home environment, which includes discussions of polarizing issues. Similar recommendations extend to the school and community setting, wherein schools and, by extension, the local community must be one of inclusivity—individuals, even if they maintain radical views that are counter to the mainstream, should not be judged, otherwise they may be further pushed toward extremism. Law enforcement, although it may face more challenges than previously, can assist in preventing youth from engaging in extremism. Similar to families and their community, law enforcement should respond to young people who are expressing radical views and/or drawn to extremist groups. Interactions between law enforcement and youth should be based on respect and free from judgment. Indeed, many of the views expressed by these formers echoed findings in previous empirical work that highlighted the importance of social and/or family support, awareness, and an openness to critical discussions.[105]

Scrivens and colleagues[106] also found that in discussing ways to counter extremism, formers believed that they should be central actors helping individuals disengage—a finding that is largely supported by empirical research on the psychology of victimology and the process of deradicalization.[107] In discussing the role of formers in this regard, however, the need for developing infrastructure was often mentioned. Such infrastructure involves multisectoral resources to combating violent extremism consisting of a team of "credible" and "dedicated" formers who are willing to put in the time to help people leave, as well as a group of key stakeholders who can assist these formers in helping people leave.[108] Because extremism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, grounded in both individual and social conditions, P/CVE initiatives must be multidimensional, building on the strengths and expertise of diverse sectors.

Although the previously mentioned studies provide useful preliminary insights into some of the ways that formers can inform research on combating violent extremism, little work has evaluated the effectiveness of formers in P/CVE initiatives.[109] As Koehler details in Chapter 1 of this volume, very little is empirically known about the effectiveness of formers in combating violent extremism beyond anecdotal and descriptive accounts.

In fact, Morrison and colleagues,[110] in their systematic review of post-2017 research on disengagement and deradicalization, found that research has yet to provide a clear-cut impact evaluation of the effectiveness of formers in P/CVE initiatives. Moving this research space ahead, some suggest that future work should use experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation designs to examine when, why, how, and under what conditions formers are effective in P/CVE initiatives.[111] Here, future studies should conduct evaluations of mechanisms (e.g., an understanding of how these efforts have an effect on different stakeholders), moderators (e.g., the contexts in which they work best), implementation burdens, and costs associated with formers working in the P/CVE space.[112] Doing so may provide practitioners and policymakers with a stronger evidence base on the potential effectiveness of formers in P/CVE.[113]

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted a variety of ways that former extremists have provided valuable insights into key issues in terrorism and extremism research in a North American context, ranging from push and pull factors that radicalized people to extremist violence to ways of combating violent extremism. Although we have identified several key research trends in this evolving space, much of this work remains in its infancy, especially the empirical research on combating violent extremism and the effectiveness of formers in the P/CVE space. Our hope is that this chapter sparks interest among those working in the field to consider including formers in their research designs. Doing so may provide them with a unique insider's perspective into an array of pressing issues in terrorism and extremism studies that may not be addressed without the insights of formers.

## Notes

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