



Right-Wing Terrorism: Pathways And Protective Factors

FULL REPORT

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This report is one of a series exploring *Knowledge Management Across the Four Counter-Terrorism 'Ps'*. The project looks at areas of policy and practice that fall within the four pillars of CONTEST. For more information visit:

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KEY POINTS

Right-wing extremists have attracted less attention compared with other extremists, however there is still a fairly robust evidence base regarding their pathways towards violence. The majority of research is qualitative with small sample sizes. It reveals common patterns and factors that shape right-wing trajectories. The role of background factors such as dysfunctional family environments, criminal histories, and substance abuse are well established by both quantitative and qualitative studies. That said, there is very little work that focuses on right-wing pathways to violence in a UK context.

There is considerably less evidence in regard to protective factors, or those issues that mitigate the risk of an individual engaging in extremism. Only a few studies have analysed protective factors in relation to extremism in general and fewer still have looked specifically at right-wing extremism.

- Ideology is not typically a strong motivator in right-wing extremists' decision to join extremist groups. By contrast, the violence, music and aesthetics associated with right-wing subcultures are often more influential.
- The pathways of right-wing extremists frequently begin in dysfunctional families. Whilst relatively few individuals have family members involved in violent groups, many report growing up in environments marked by racism, prejudice and extreme right-wing views.
- Most right-wing extremists enter radical subcultures at a young age, commonly younger than other extremists. Virtually all say they were socially isolated and that the need for belonging pulled them towards extremism. This is something extremist organisations often seek to exploit.
- Testimony from right-wing extremists downplays the role of the internet in their pathways towards violence. This may be because most research has been carried out with individuals who joined extremist groups before access to the internet was widely available.
- The internet appears to play a more significant role in the pathways of contemporary right-wing extremists. However, there is little research on how people transition through different online spaces and potentially into violence.
- The educational attainment of right-wing extremists is generally lower than societal averages. They experience more problems and drop out of school at a greater rate than other extremists.
- Right-wing extremists typically begin drinking and taking drugs at an early age and are more likely to have a history of criminal offending than their left-wing and Islamist counterparts.
- Pathways of female right-wing extremists are similar to those of men, although dramatic personal incidents are often afforded greater significance in their accounts.
- Stereotypes that women follow men into extremism do not appear to hold true. Most women are proactively involved in this process.
- There is limited understanding of protective factors that mitigate the risk of individuals becoming involved in extremism, especially relating to those from right-wing groups.
- Whilst school and family are commonly identified as potential protective factors, the testimonies of former right-wing extremists cast doubt on how effective these are likely to be.

The first section of this guide is primarily based on 24 studies that focus on violent right-wing extremists (white supremacists, neo-Nazis, violent skinhead groups), including terrorists. These studies are drawn from Scandinavia, Germany, the United States and Canada, as well as the Netherlands and Switzerland. Most are qualitative, drawing on small sets of interviews (between 1 and 10) with former extremists. In some cases, interviews with family members and open-source biographical information, as well as quantitative analysis are included.

Five studies include larger samples of 24 to 44 extremists. A report by the Norwegian security services, detailing the background information of 109 right-wing extremists is also drawn upon. Of the 24 studies examined, almost half include female right-wing extremists. However, these samples remain heavily dominated by men with women usually making up less than a fifth of those interviewed.

Given the relatively limited number of studies that interview right-wing extremists, two points of caution should be noted. First, those who take part in research studies may not be representative of other right-wing extremists. The vast majority of interviewees have disengaged and may be motivated to describe their engagement in extremism in a different way to those who are still active. One study by the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) focuses on those in prison, whilst a small section of other interviewees is still active within violent groups. These individuals

may engage with researchers for their own purposes including, as some openly state, to promote their beliefs or groups.

Second, the literature examined was produced over a long time period and covers a variety of far-right groups. This raises a number of limitations. In order to strengthen the more limited contemporary research, some of the literature reviewed includes interviews with those active in the 1990s. It is possible that pathways change over time. It is also not clear how comparable the trajectories through different right-wing groups or movements are. Many of these studies predate widespread access to the internet so the evidence about its role is less robust than the other features of far-right pathways. More research is needed to understand whether the conclusions of older studies are representative of contemporary right-wing extremists, particularly relating to the role of the internet.

INTRODUCTION

Most contemporary research seeks to understand how, as well as why, people become involved in violence. Although this is a complex and individualised experience, it is possible to identify similarities or patterns in the paths of far-right extremists. Pathways reflect certain risk factors believed to increase the likelihood that an individual engages in extremism. Protective factors, or those that mitigate the risk of involvement, have also been identified but have received considerably less attention in the literature.

Right-wing extremist pathways reflect similar dynamics to those of other extremists: there is no single pathway or 'conveyor belt' towards violence; the entrance to extremist groups is a long-term and highly complex process that involves a variety of motives and influences; and few describe transformative events that abruptly and radically transformed their beliefs and actions. Like other extremists, those from the far-right pass through a range of situations that gradually increase their involvement in extremism.

What is right-wing extremism?

Right-wing extremism is difficult to define and involves a diverse mix of parties, social movements, subcultures, militias, activists and actors. This guide focuses on individuals willing to carry out violence in support of 'an ideology that encompasses authoritarianism, anti-democracy and exclusionary and/or holistic nationalism' rather than those involved in other forms of right-wing activism, such as street demonstrations.

Many pathway models aim to apply to all forms of extremism, however there have been relatively few conceptualisations that are specific to the far right. Although individual pathways are unique, one typology of the far right has been frequently employed

BACKGROUND FACTORS

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and helps organise the patterns in the literature.¹

- Revolutionaries: Those with strong ideological motives who view the extreme right as an instrument to change the world.
- Wanderers: Those primarily looking for others who share their extreme-right ideology and a political home.

- Converts: Those who see themselves as having suffered wrongs and are driven by anger to find others in the extreme right who feel the same way.
- Compliant: Those whose motivations predominately relate to their relationships with others and participate to maintain friendships or relationships with other members.

BACKGROUND FACTORS

Right-wing extremists from various countries and involved in different groups appear to share a number of similarities in their early lives which mark the start of their pathways towards violence.

KEY POINTS:

- Many right-wing extremists' pathways towards violence begin in dysfunctional family environments marked by racism and prejudice.
- Problems at school are common and right-wing extremists typically have a lower than average level of education compared to the rest of the population and other kinds of extremist.
- Right-wing extremists frequently have criminal histories before becoming involved in political violence; more so than other extremists.
- Substance abuse is common amongst right-wing extremists who, on average, begin drinking and taking drugs at a younger age than other extremists.

FAMILY UPBRINGING²

The families of right-wing extremists tend to share similar characteristics which shape their pathways towards violence. Having another family member involved in an extremist group is not the norm. One study found just under 10 per cent were raised by parents who were members of extremist groups, whilst another records 18 per cent having a relative involved in extremism. These figures appear broadly similar to the familial involvement of those involved in other forms of extremism.

Pathways into right-wing extremism are often influenced by an older cousin or brother. Although these relatives may not directly introduce someone to an extremist network, they open the door to right-wing music or aesthetics. A desire to imitate the style and musical tastes of brothers or cousins is commonly reported as a reason for becoming involved in right-wing scenes rather than other 'rebellious' subcultures.

Comparative research in this area is limited, however these findings are consistent with a study highlighting the more prominent role older brothers play in right-wing pathways compared to other groups.

¹ The definition of 'right-wing extremism' is taken from a study that distils different uses of the term across the literature (*Carter, 2018*). The utility of using pathways to understand extremist involvement is outlined in a number of studies (*della Porta 1992, 1995; Horgan 2005, 2008; Viterna, 2006; Bosi & della Porta, 2012*). The typology of right-wing extremists was developed by Linden and Klandermans (2007) and has been used in a number of studies (*Blee & Linden, 2012; Froio & Gattinara, 2015; Pilkington, 2016, 2017; Blee, 2017*).

² Parental and wider familial involvement in extremist groups was analysed in studies of 34 (*START, 2016*) and 44 right-wing extremists from the US (*Simi et al., 2016*). Research on other types of extremism has found that just under 25 per cent of 1,214 Italian Red Brigade members had at least one relative also in the movement (*della Porta, 1995*). Kinship ties played a role in 14 per cent of global jihadists' affiliation with militancy (*Sageman, 2004*) and 20 per cent of jihadists from Europe (*Bakker, 2006*). *Copeland (2020)* identifies brothers as being influential in bringing younger siblings to German right-wing scenes and was something that recruiters recognised and exploited. The extent to which parents influence extremists' beliefs is contentious (*King et al., 2011; Sikkens et al., 2017*). The rates of maltreatment, abuse and dysfunctional family environments are taken from a study of 34 US extremists (*START, 2016*), whilst those of absent family members are from a sample of 20 US neo-Nazis (*Ezekiel, 2002*). The figures for the ideological influence of parents is taken from *START, 2016*, twenty-eight of 44 of interviewees in another sample were socialised during childhood with ideas relatively consistent with white supremacist ideology, racism and/or anti-Semitism (*Simi et al., 2016*).

Whilst family members are not typically directly involved in violent groups, far-right extremists commonly recall hearing racism, homophobia and anti-Semitism from close relatives. Almost 90 per cent of one sample of 44 right-wing extremists in the US report frequently being exposed to such attitudes during their childhoods. In other cases, parents expose individuals to extreme right-wing views and ideas including white supremacism and National Socialism.

The exact role of parental attitudes in pathways to violence is still not clear, however right-wing extremists commonly state that their families were important in shaping their underlying beliefs and increased their willingness to accept right-wing ideologies.

Aside from ideological factors, the family backgrounds and environments of many right-wing extremists share similarities:

- **Maltreatment and abuse:** The majority of 34 US right-wing extremists interviewed in one study reported challenging family environments including child abuse (35%), emotional abuse (10%), sexual abuse (20%) and neglect (20%). Interviewees also commonly recall violence and domestic abuse being a feature of their childhoods.
- **Dysfunctional family environments:** In addition to maltreatment, participants also reported chaotic living conditions such as parental incarceration (30%), parental abandonment (32 %) and family substance abuse (48%).
- **Absent family members:** Almost every participant in one study of 20 US neo-Nazis had lost a parent, usually their father, at birth or as a child, either to death or separation. Other studies find that 80 per cent of interviewees' parents had divorced whilst they were growing up.
- **Childhood trauma:** Just over 60 per cent of one study of 44 US right-wing extremists suffered some form of childhood trauma, such as the death of a sibling. This high occurrence rate is found across

multiple studies. Many right-wing extremists report having experienced multiple traumas, often with little familial support.

- **Poor relationships with family members:** Right-wing extremists rarely have strong relationships with their families. Many report feeling disconnected from relatives before they entered extremist groups. A significant proportion also left the parental home at a young age, which may have accelerated their immersion into right-wing scenes as they ended up living with extremists.
- **Permissive environments for extremism:** Many right-wing extremists report a lack of supervision during their childhoods, something that meant they were free to spend more time with right-wing peers. Uninterested or neglectful parents also meant that narratives put forward by extremist groups were not challenged.

EDUCATION AND SCHOOL³

It is common for right-wing extremists to have a lower than average level of education. Their pathways are marked by poor school conduct and attendance as well as high rates of expulsion or drop out and experiences of being bullied. One effect of these experiences is that they have more time to spend in right-wing settings.

One comparative study by the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) with 39 extremist prisoners found that right-wing offenders displayed more deviant or disruptive behaviour at primary school age whereas left-wing and Islamist extremists generally did so later on. Many right-wing extremists state that this was due to their difficult family circumstances. The secondary school performance of both right- and left-wing extremists declined whereas Islamists, even those from challenging family environments, continually improved.

³ The considerable body of research that has identified the lower educational levels of members of the extreme right is listed in *Koehler (2014)*. Of 44 US right-wing extremists in one sample, only three report not having problems with their conduct and attendance at school: 59 per cent recall significant episodes of truancy, whilst 55 per cent state that they were either expelled from school or dropped out before completion (Simi et al., 2016). The BKA study also found that Islamists were more enthusiastic about school and engaged in truancy at a much lower rate than both their right-wing and left-wing counterparts (*Lüttinger, 2012*).

NETWORKS AND BELONGING

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CRIMINALITY⁴

A notable feature of the pathways of many right-wing extremists is a prior history of criminality. Many were involved in crime, either petty or serious, before and during their transition into extremism. Long criminal careers are common and include theft, vandalism, assault, and drug-related crimes. Others had been arrested, although not necessarily convicted, multiple times throughout their youth and into adulthood. A study of 1,103 violent extremists found that almost 55 per cent of those from the right wing had a prior history of criminal offending. This was substantially higher than left-wing extremists (28%) or Islamist extremists (35%).

SUBSTANCE ABUSE⁵

Illegal drug use at a young age (13 to 14 years old) is a feature of those who go on to become involved in extremism. In general, right-wing extremists started

“I had already started drinking alcohol, I was 12 or 13 years old. I continued with heavier drugs at the age of 14. They did not stop me from using amphetamine, however.”

“We spent all our time drinking and fighting”

drinking and taking drugs earlier than left-wing and Islamist extremists, often resulting in addiction. Various studies identify an increase in alcohol and drug use and ‘partying’. This consolidates a feeling of belonging within the group and facilitates people’s entrance and trajectory through increasingly violent right-wing scenes. Whilst studies have found comparable histories of substance abuse amongst left-wing extremists, this behaviour generally stopped as they entered organised groups. By contrast right-wing extremists frequently report continuing to drink and use drugs heavily, even when this had to be concealed from more senior members.

NETWORKS AND BELONGING

Networks and social contexts are important in shaping individuals’ initial engagement and deepening involvement in the extreme right.

KEY POINTS:

- Right-wing extremists become involved in radical subcultures earlier than other extremists but can take years to progress to violent groups.
- Isolated individuals often find family-like relationships in right-wing groups, something these organisations often seek to exploit.
- Those who join right-wing groups are often susceptible to the influence of older, male

‘mentors’ because of the lack of such figures in their lives.

ENTERING RIGHT-WING SUBCULTURES AT A YOUNG AGE⁶

A feature of right-wing extremists’ pathways is the young age at which they entered right-wing subcultures. One comparative study found that right-wing extremists became involved with a subculture associated with extremism at a younger age (12 to 14 years old) to their left-wing (14 and 15) or Islamist (16 to 19) counterparts. This trend is borne out across

⁴ The high rates of offending amongst right-wing extremists are identified in some of the larger samples analysed (Simi et al., 2016; Bérubé et al., 2019; Fahey & Simi, 2019). For the comparative figures divided by ideological affiliation see, *START (2018)*.

⁵ Excessive drinking and drug use were identified across the literature. A comparative study of alcohol and narcotics use by different types of extremists was undertaken with prisoners in Germany (Lützinger, 2012).

⁶ The comparatively younger age at which right-wing extremists became involved with radical subcultures is identified in a study on extremists in prison in Germany (Lützinger, 2012). Data on the changing age at which right-wing extremists report their radicalisation is from a report by the Norwegian security service (*PST, 2019*).

What are subcultures?

Subcultures are groups within a larger culture that share an identity, values, practices and symbols. The beliefs or interests of those in subcultures are typically at odds with those of the wider culture.

Subcultures are a useful way to think about the range of actors and groups within the far-right, including extremists. The far-right is made up of many subcultures – some easily identifiable and some not – that exist locally, nationally and internationally.

Examples include the 'alt-right', football hooligans, racist skinheads and white power music scenes. Most people come to be involved in the far-right through radical subcultures.

the research, with one interviewee entering a right-wing scene aged 11 and a number of others from 12 onwards.

Many stay in these subcultures for a relatively long period of time, typically 2 to 3 years, before becoming more deeply involved in extremism. The extent to which individuals engaged in violence during these periods is difficult to identify with no dominant pathway observable. Some recall committing acts of ideologically motivated violence – commonly street violence or attacks on property targeting ethnic minorities – soon after entering right-wing subcultures. This is often done as a way 'to prove' themselves. Others saw involvement in these spaces as a means to escalate their engagement with violence, previously enacted through street violence and football hooliganism. However, for many, violence came later as they deepened their involvement and transitioned towards more extreme elements within right-wing subcultures.

Formal membership of extremist groups appears to come at a slightly older age. A study of Swedish neo-Nazis places the average age at 20, although some were

much younger. A long-term study of 109 Norwegian extremists suggests the age of right-wing radicalisation has increased from an average of 22.4 years old in the 1990s to 27.1 for the 2000s, and 30.9 for the 2010s. This trend, however, has not been confirmed elsewhere.

SURROGATE FAMILIES

The search for acceptance and belonging was one of the most prominent pull factors into right-wing groups. Many far-right extremists lack social connections and report being isolated and lonely before finding friends in the extreme right. The desire to maintain these links motivates extremists to deepen their involvement and helps them deal with extreme ideas or actions they might otherwise feel uncomfortable with.

Those involved in far-right groups commonly explicitly refer to finding a 'family', perhaps because of the disruption many experience in their own home lives. Nearly 40 per cent of people in one study said they hoped that white supremacism would provide them with a substitute family. This 'second family' narrative is emphasised by groups and is considered a successful means of recruiting new members. The familial role that these groups frequently occupy should be taken into account when designing and delivering interventions attempting to disengage individuals from right-wing groups.

MENTORS⁷

Many right-wing extremists describe the importance of older 'mentors' in facilitating their pathway into extremism by introducing them to the scene and shaping their right-wing education. One of the reasons for this seems to be an absent or difficult relationship with their own fathers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that recruiters exploit this vulnerability, deliberately playing the role of an 'older brother' before introducing recruits to ideological material.

⁷ This section draws on studies of neo-Nazis in Scandinavia (Kimmel, 2007) and Germany (Pisoïou, 2015) and other right-wing extremists in Sweden (Carlsson et al., 2020). A prominent German neo-Nazi's autobiography anecdotally records that recruiters sought to exploit the desire for family-like relations (Hasselbach, 1996).

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

Right-wing extremists typically diminish the significance of ideology in their move towards violence, instead placing greater emphasis on the attraction of cultural aspects of right-wing scenes. However, a long-standing fascination with Nazism is an important starting point for a minority.

KEY POINTS:

- Ideology is not typically a strong motivator in right-wing extremists' decision to join groups. Violence generally plays a more influential role in this process.
- Those who are ideologically motivated often display a fascination with Nazism from a young age.
- Most right-wing extremists emphasise the importance of music in providing their first encounter with right-wing subcultures.
- Music concerts provide the opportunity to network with like-minded individuals and explore right-wing ideas and identities.
- Clothing performs important functions for right-wing extremists, attracting individuals to radical milieus initially and cementing the sense of identity and belonging found in these subcultures.

THE ABSENCE OF IDEOLOGY⁸

Right-wing extremists commonly downplay the importance of ideology in their pathways towards violence. Only a small proportion can be classified as 'revolutionaries' who join groups to advance their ideological goals. Most recall being largely ignorant of right-wing ideology and many say they did not adhere strongly to a group's ideology during their initial involvement. Instead, they stress the importance of non-ideological factors, such as the need to belong.

"I actually did not feel very comfortable with the ideology, because I could not make much sense of the texts which were very radical at the time."

An interest in violence and a desire to fight can be a more important motivator than ideology. Some report trying to enlist in the military, but after being rejected joined an extremist group as an alternative. One interviewee states that their decision to travel from Sweden to fight with right-wing Croatian groups during the Bosnian war was motivated by a desire to experience combat. In these cases, "beliefs came after" as groups came to transform their ideas and targets of their violence.

FASCINATION WITH NAZISM⁹

Those who could be classified as 'revolutionaries' regularly display a fascination with Nazism, often from an early age, in some cases as young as 10 or 11. They show a particular interest in Nazi iconography and uniforms, spending hours watching war movies, TV reports and documentaries on Nazism and neo-Nazism, fascism, immigration, and race and culture. A number report 'devouring' extreme right-wing literature, either online or offline, before becoming involved in a group.

Some engaged with Nazi material alone but for many it was consumed with friends. Hanging out and reading with like-minded peers provided the opportunity to discover specialist hate material, especially mail-order books and magazines. Novels such as *The Turner Diaries* – a dystopian story of a white supremacist insurgency and race war which ultimately leads to the systematic extermination of non-whites – were

⁸ Right-wing extremists mitigate the role of ideology in their move to violence across the research examined (Blee and Linden, 2012; Lützinger, 2012; *Stern*, 2014; Tanner & Campagna, 2014).

⁹ A fascination with Nazism is described in detail in studies of neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists in Europe and North America (Stern, 2014; Tanner & Campagna, 2014; Gardell, 2018; Bérubé et al., 2019).

"It just started slowly forming in my mind and then he had mail-order books and everything and he was always like, "Here, read this!" And everything was so well written and so intelligent, I could read a novel in an evening. I just burned through the book."

often important in the move towards extremism. Some believed acquiring this knowledge was necessary before approaching a right-wing group.

MUSIC AND AESTHETICS¹⁰

Right-wing extremists frequently stress that music and aesthetics were important factors that influenced and facilitated their entrance into far-right subcultures:

- **Music as an entry point:** Music and the associated music scenes can be important gateways to right-wing subcultures, providing the first experience of the extreme right through the aggressive and angst-filled style of white power music. Most encounter this music through peers and for some it was music that attracted them to 'go Nazi' rather than choosing a different rebellious identity.
- **Concerts as a social context:** White power concerts can be an important catalyst providing people with the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals, further explore right-wing views and

"From a gut feeling there was a natural sense of belonging together and... this construction of identity continued in the right-wing scene, and when you enter you wear the insignia, and everyone can immediately see who you are...on the street. That's how it is. That was exactly the feeling."

feel like they're part of 'the brotherhood'. Music can play an important role in face-to-face settings, such as concerts and festivals, but is increasingly an important means of social interaction online via interactive music websites and webzines.

- **Clothing as an identity:** Dress is an important part of right-wing subcultures. Adopting particular aesthetics is a significant means of developing a shared identity. Projecting this identity and the standing it provides can strengthen the desire to become more involved in violent groups. Right-wing subcultures and groups often have very visible dress codes that serve similar roles for extremists in different ideological contexts: to signal commitment and status; to command respect or fear from others (both within and outside extremist subcultures); and as a form of rebellion.

¹⁰ The importance of music and concerts is highlighted in studies of neo-Nazis in Europe (Kimmel, 2007; Psoiu, 2015; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018) and right-wing extremists in North America (START, 2016; Bérubé et al., 2019). The importance of clothing is discussed in detail by right-wing extremists from various countries and groups (Kimmel, 2007; Koehler, 2014; Bérubé et al., 2019). Research has identified dress being afforded similar importance and playing this role in other extremist contexts (Sawyer, 2007; Hegghammer, 2017; Copeland, 2020).

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

KEY POINTS:

- Testimony from right-wing extremists often downplays the role of the internet in their move towards violence. However, many of these individuals joined extremist groups before access to the internet was widely available.
- The internet appears to play a more significant role in the pathways of contemporary right-wing extremists. Individuals are often very active and appear to find a sense of community in online subcultures.
- How individuals transition through different online spheres remains poorly understood, as does the relationship between online activities and violence.

The extreme right has a long history of online engagement, dating back to the advent of the public internet in the mid-1980s. However, the internet's role in pathways to right-wing extremism remains poorly understood. Research on the link between the internet and/or social media and violent radicalisation is heavily focused on the use of the internet by extremists or extremist groups, or analyses individuals' or recruiters' characteristics and behaviours online. Detailed empirical evidence about how contemporary violent extremists move through different online spaces is rare.

One of the reasons for the limited understanding about the internet's role in right-wing pathways is because much work predates widespread access to the internet and hence largely downplays its role. Only a few recall being recruited by groups after revealing their beliefs on forums or social media.

Early online engagement was dominated by right-wing chat rooms and forums. Whilst some of these spaces had restricted access, their scope was limited because groups were worried about monitoring from law enforcement. Although some sought out people with similar views to converse with via email or social media, few turned to the internet to find peer support from other extremists, primarily due to security fears.

Emerging research suggests that the internet may play a greater role in the pathways of younger right-wing extremists. For many the internet now provides the first step into the extreme right, occurring before any offline contact. Their pathways to this point still appear to be informed by offline factors and many look for interaction online having been stigmatised and isolated because of their right-wing views in other social settings.

Online spaces play an important role in developing and transmitting extreme right-wing ideologies. The internet provides an efficient way for individuals to interact, communicate and exchange ideas with like-minded others. Right-wing literature and music, as well as invitations to concerts and rallies, are now primarily encountered online rather than through extended social networks. Extremist attitudes have been shown to increase with participation in neo-Nazi online discussion forums.

The online extreme right inhabits a range of spaces, including the deep web, social media platforms, video sharing websites, public chat rooms, imageboards (such as 8chan/8kun, neinchan) and multi-player gaming environments. Each of these hosts numerous subcultures. New forms of digital activism can bring together different internet users, including those previously politically unengaged. For example, *Gamergate*, an anti-feminism protest movement, played a role in exposing a new audience to extreme right-wing ideology through fan culture and conspiracy theories.

Right-wing online spaces seem to provide individuals with a sense of community. However, the degree to which this translates into offline activities or relationships has yet to be established; whilst some right-wing forums also have meet-ups, these are infrequent. Recent high-profile acts of terrorism have been carried out by individuals who have been active online in the build-up, immediate aftermath or during their attacks. Some frame their violent actions as the 'logical' conclusion or continuation of those online. However, despite growing research on far-right

CASE STUDY: 'A5'

'A5' is a young person arrested by the UK police for inciting racial violence and has been identified as at risk of right-wing radicalisation. Whilst his father is a member of a right-wing group, he attributes much of his move towards violent extremism to the far-right friendships and rivalries that he had developed online.

His online pathway to extremism came primarily through communicating with others online in debates via web forums, video calling and messaging applications. He states that his online activities with other extremists gave him belonging and made him feel important, especially after being asked to act as an administrator for a number of right-wing forums. A5 recalls that he came to enjoy a 'friendly relationship' with his father after he told him what he had been doing online – something that he believes further exacerbated his radicalisation.

internet cultures, there is little understanding of how individuals move through different online spaces and potentially towards violence.

Studies analysing the consumption of right-wing materials on YouTube frequently mention 'radicalisation pipelines' whereby viewers are funnelled towards increasingly extreme content. Algorithms that recommend the next video are based on a user's viewing history but must also present something novel. Often this takes the form of increasingly provocative or extreme material, something that video creators produce in their desire to attract viewers.

Like offline pathways, the way individuals move through these spaces is thought to be unique. However, some studies identify certain cognitive phases in the YouTube radicalisation pipeline based on the anecdotal

accounts of former members of online right-wing milieus. These include:

- **Normalisation:** Statements expressed under the cover of humour and irony gradually introduce and normalise racist, sexist or xenophobic ideas.
- **Acclimation:** Individuals appear to pause at certain stages of their online radicalisation as they slowly become accustomed to new ideologies and beliefs. The speed and volume with which individuals consume right-wing material online results in claims and counterclaims being accepted uncritically and a desensitisation to ever more extreme content.
- **Dehumanisation:** The humanity of certain groups or individuals is gradually eroded through the compilation of thousands of soundbites, stereotypes, quotes, evidence and attacks until a picture of them as objects without rights is firmly entrenched. These groups can then be painted as legitimate targets for harm or mistreatment whilst maintaining moral superiority.

There are a number of limitations of this work, however. The extent to which this framework is representative of online pathways across those engaged in right-wing settings has not yet been demonstrated empirically. The degree to which it is relevant to online spaces beyond YouTube is also unclear, whilst the relationship between these three phases and offline violence has yet to be explored.

Research on extremist pathways struggles to capture the role of the networked online environment in the move towards violence. It is clear that the pathways of right-wing extremists are shaped by interactions that span both the online and offline spheres. The limited work that examines these dynamics suggests the idea of a firm divide between those who radicalise online and offline is not useful. However, significant further research is required to understand how they combine in the move towards violence.¹¹

¹¹ Whilst the internet is thought to often be important in moves toward violence among extremists, the issue of how it matters is still contentious (Conway, 2016; Ravndal, 2013; Hassan et al., 2018; Odag, 2019). A number of studies mention the limited role played by the internet in right-wing extremists' pathways towards violence (Tanner & Campagna, 2014; Mattsson & Johansson, 2018; Carlsson 2019; Bérubé et al., 2019) although this is now being challenged by recent research that focuses on younger populations (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Wojcieszak, 2010). Online far-right cultures and the role of YouTube in radicalisation pathways are examined in a number of studies (Munn, 2019; Tuters, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2019). The framework breaking down different stages of the YouTube 'radicalisation pipeline' is from Munn (2019). The case study of 'A5' is drawn from Edwards & Gribbon (2013).

FEMALE RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS

KEY POINTS:

- The pathways of female right-wing extremists are generally similar to those of men.
- Stereotypes that most female members of right-wing movements followed a man into extremism are not supported by the evidence.
- Dramatic personal incidents are often, however, afforded greater significance in drawing women into right-wing extremism.

Women are particularly active in neo-Nazi groups in a number of different countries, as well as skinhead groups in the US and anti-Islam movements in Europe. There is some evidence that women make up a greater proportion of anti-Islam groups, and are older, on average, than women in neo-Nazi groups. This may suggest that the pathways of women towards different extreme right-wing groups vary.

Overall, the pathways of female right-wing extremists are similar to male participants. A high proportion grow up in dysfunctional, often racist, family environments; enter right-wing milieus at an early age via peers and music scenes; and downplay the role of ideology in this process. There is limited comparative research on women in different kinds of extremist movements that includes those from far-right groups. However, female right-wing extremists are on average younger and less ideologically driven than those from violent environmental or animal rights groups.

Like other female extremists, women are commonly stereotyped as having either followed a man into extremism or being motivated by a desire to find a romantic or sexual partner. Whilst studies do contain accounts of women who were influenced by their partners, the extent to which this occurs is unclear and appears to vary by context.

Four of five Dutch female activists in one study were categorised as 'compliers', describing women whose initial participation was to support a partner who was already active in the extreme right. However, very few US interviewees in the same study followed a partner

CASE STUDY : ALICE

Alice is a racist skinhead convicted of a series of murders and robberies. She grew up in a household where she was taught racism by her parents on a daily basis. However, it was only after she was seriously injured in a car accident that she felt motivated to act on these beliefs.

She describes the loss of control she felt when bedbound in hospital and how this feeling became intrinsically linked to the African American nurses treating her. It was this incident she claims that led to her racial 'awakening' and subsequent move into neo-Nazi gangs.

into the movement. Over half were categorised as 'revolutionaries' and were motivated by ideological reasons; a finding replicated in a number of other studies. In the UK, most female members of the English Defence League entered the movement on their own initiative and also recruited others. Connections with parents, siblings, cousins or children appear to be as common as partners for women who engage in the extreme right.

Women are also influenced by violence. The opportunity to fight can be more important than ideology, and some women with a history of street-fighting see this as a way to prove themselves further. Although male dominated, there are cases of women progressing from violent football hooligan scenes to extremist groups.

Some pathways appear to be particularly relevant for women: the conversion pathway which involves a dramatic personal experience, such as a near fatal accident or being raped, trigger the decision to engage in extremism. Such turning points were generally not seen in male journeys, which instead involve a gradual process of engagement.

The subordinate positions and lack of respect that women commonly experience in right-wing groups, in comparison to those within left-wing groups, also shapes how some come to join extremist groups. Male dominance of right-wing groups has led all-female

groups to be established in Germany, the US, Norway, Italy and the Netherlands. Some women choose to contact and join these groups directly, bypassing right-wing subcultures entirely.¹²

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Research on pathways towards extremism is heavily focused on risk factors. There has been significantly less work on protective factors, or things that counterbalance or weaken risk factors. Despite this, a range of factors have been found to have a protective function against extremism and violent radicalisation. Many are similar to those identified in relation to more general violence committed by young people, such as employment or owning property. Most operate at the individual level. A review of the quantitative literature

found 21 studies that included protective factors against extremism. Over half focused on religious ethno-nationalism; only five investigated protective factors against far-right extremism.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Research on the role of individual characteristics and beliefs as protective factors is extremely limited. Some studies tentatively suggest that self-control – measured

Individual factors	Family factors	School factors	Peer group factors	Community/society factors
Self-control Empathy Value complexity Anxiety about getting incarcerated Acceptance of police legitimacy Adherence to law Political disinterest Low importance of religion Intensive religious practice Employment Perceived personal discrimination Subjective deprivation Dissatisfaction with quality of life Illness, depression Threatening life events	Appreciative parenting behaviour Ownership of residential property Family members not involved in violence Significant other not involved in violence	Higher educational level Good school achievement Bonding to school	Non-violent peers More social contacts/social network Contact with foreigners	Basic attachment to society Low social capital Migrant of the first generation

Table 1: Protective factors from Lösel et al.'s (2018) survey. Those in red are specific to right-wing extremism.

12 Whilst some studies include women, few disaggregate or identify gender-specific factors to indicate whether women's pathways differ. A smaller number focus specifically on female participants, although these include a wider range of right-wing groups beyond violent extremists. The greater presence and older age of women in anti-Islam groups is recorded in a long-term study of 109 Norwegian neo-Nazis (PST, 2019). In one study, ideology only appears to have been a central factor for half of the far-right women in their move to extremism. By contrast, this was the key driver for virtually all of those from environmental or animal rights groups (González et al., 2014). For the comparative study of Dutch and US extremists, see Blee & Linden (2012), and Pilkington (2016; 2017) on the UK. The stereotypes faced by women in the far right are identified in a number of studies (Fangen, 1996; Blee, 2003; Pilkington, 2016, 2017). Other research shows that similar issues are present in other contexts (Hamilton, 2007; Eggert, 2018). Women describe their entrance to the extreme-right through conversion narratives in a number of studies (Blee 2003; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Blee & Linden, 2012). The case study of Alice is taken from Blee (1996).

SCHOOL

Right-Wing Terrorism: Pathways and Protective Factors

as an absence of impulsiveness and thrill-seeking behaviour – may reduce the likelihood of engaging in right-wing violence. The same has been shown for other forms of extremism.

Holding favourable attitudes towards the law and society are thought to help restrain potential extremists from engaging in violence. Acknowledging the range and complexity of one's own values and beliefs can have a similar impact. This is particularly relevant for potential right-wing extremists given the inherent

conflict between an ideology that supports maintaining law and order, and personal participation in acts of political violence. Some studies indicate that holding strong beliefs about the legitimacy of the police may be a protective factor against involvement in right-wing violence. Research suggests that increasing the complexity with which people think about the issues that radicalisers seek to exploit, serves to reduce individuals' vulnerability to extremism.¹³

SCHOOL

Positive attachment to school and good school achievement are protective factors for right and left-wing extremists, although not for Islamist extremists. This is consistent with the idea that dropping out or missing school affords people more time to immerse themselves in right-wing scenes.

Schools may act as protective factors in two other ways: as spaces for pupils to explore ideas that relate to extremism, and to provide education to mitigate its attraction. Research on education and extremism suggests that schools should provide a safe, non-judgemental environment for debates that promote critical thinking. Educators must be willing to acknowledge that political differences exist and be able to engage in sensitive discussions on difficult topics. Former extremists highlight how judgmental responses from teachers about right-wing ideas pushed them further into violent subcultures.

Over half of those interviewed in one study said that they received little to no education about racism and discrimination at school. Participants believed that school programmes should avoid trying to counter right-wing ideological beliefs but instead warn pupils

of the personal dangers associated with becoming involved in right-wing extremism.

Education programmes should target all pupils, not only those identified as at particular risk of right-wing radicalisation, especially as they are often resistant to engage with staff. Anti-extremism and tolerance projects in schools in Sweden demonstrate that the attitudes of those who refused to take part in these programmes can be influenced through peers who did, as expressions of racism or anti-immigrant sentiments are publicly challenged.¹⁴

¹³ 'Value complexity' has been argued to strengthen resilience against extremism in a UK context (*Liht & Savage, 2013*). The association between positive views of society, law and the police and restraining from violence is taken from research that surveys the beliefs of young adults in Belgium (*Pauwels & De Waele, 2014; Pauwels & Svensson, 2017*).

¹⁴ School as a protective factor against extremism has received some analysis in the literature (*Sieckelinck et al., 2015*), including right-wing extremism specifically (*Boehnke et al. 1998; Baier et al., 2016*). The lack of school education about racism and discrimination was highlighted in a study of Canadian right-wing extremists (*Scrivens et al., 2019*). Interviews with those responsible for delivering education programmes in Sweden highlight how peers can positively influence those with extremist views (*Skiple, 2020*).

FAMILY

Good family relationships and an absence of relatives involved in extremist groups are important factors in preventing all forms of extremism. This role can be more limited when it comes to far-right extremists because of the number who report that family members hold right-wing or extremist views. Nevertheless, many former extremists describe conflicts with their parents about their beliefs and activities, with mothers often taking the most active role. Some would come to forcibly pick up their children from right-wing events and would destroy or remove clothing, music and materials with right-wing insignia.

Right-wing extremists emphasise that meaningful interactions with their parents may have deterred or even prevented them from joining a violent extremist group. Research suggests that a positive home environment where it is possible to have open, critical and reflexive discussions can be effective in challenging the appeal of these groups. However, some former extremists were sceptical that parents could perform a protective role, perhaps because of the weak relationships they have with their families.

The need for parents to be informed about the warning signs which indicate their child is being drawn into violent extremism is emphasised in the testimonies of right-wing extremists and the wider literature. This includes recognising clothing, tattoos and music associated with the far right and changes in demeanour or social affiliations. Many extremists recall becoming increasingly aggressive and antisocial as well as withdrawn from their family.

However, the capacity of parents to perform a protective role is still not fully clear. Some parents appear to be largely unaware of the level of violence associated with far-right groups or not understand the extent of their child's involvement. Others turn a blind eye either because they believe it is a fad or because of their own right-wing sympathies. A study of neo-Nazi groups in Germany concludes that parental monitoring is not a decisive protective control against individual participation. A former extremist also describes how right-wing group leaders encouraged recruits to maintain good relations with their family to keep their activities secret, making direct intervention less likely.¹⁵

ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE BASE

There are a number of gaps in the research on pathways into right-wing extremism. Much of the literature is based on individuals who engaged in violence in previous decades. It is not clear how applicable this research is to the pathways of contemporary extremists, for example in relation to the role of the internet.

The geographical focus of the research is somewhat limited. Most studies focus on North America or Scandinavia and there are no studies on the pathways of right-wing extremists (as opposed to those involved in protest movements, such as the English Defence

League) in the UK. Although there is some anecdotal evidence that the pathways of leaders of extremist groups, such as National Action, share some of the traits identified in this guide, including an early fascination with Nazism. Existing research also frequently fails to disaggregate the experiences of right-wing extremists from different movements. There is little comparative analysis of how the pathways of neo-Nazis vary from those of violent white supremacists or skinheads. Similarly, the research does not examine how pathways can differ by age or family background.

¹⁵ The potential for family to act as a protective factor is discussed in a number of studies (Kimmel, 2007; Koehler, 2014; Bérubé et al., 2019; Scrivens et al., 2019). A study of parental monitoring found no difference on the actions of members of neo-Nazi groups from East and West Berlin (Boehnke et al., 1998).

ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE BASE

Right-Wing Terrorism: Pathways and Protective Factors

Whilst the move towards violence among women has received some attention, gaps still remain as to why some forms of right-wing violence attract more female recruits than others and whether the entry processes are different for each.

Finally, research on protective factors against extremism is extremely limited, especially that which focuses on the far right. The work that does exist rests primarily on largely anecdotal testimonies drawn from former extremists. Quantitative analysis of the prevalence and impact of certain protective factors, in particular, is absent in the literature.¹⁶

¹⁶ The interest of National Action leaders in Nazism has been highlighted by *Macklin (2018)*.

READ MORE

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