

# RIGHT-WING TERRORISM: PATHWAYS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Simon Copeland and Sarah Marsden

## INTRODUCTION

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.

### 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 report 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.*

## KEY POINTS

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

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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 the full report 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.

### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This Executive Summary comes from the Full Report from the project *Knowledge Management Across the Four Counter-Terrorism 'Ps'*. You can find the Full Report [here](#).