

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

Ideas, beliefs and values in social context

Introduction

This programme of research examines the backcloth of economic, political, societal and global security perspectives that shape the perceptions and realities of security threats. Through original research, knowledge synthesis, workshops and roundtables, we aim to improve understanding of the conditions under which extremist ideologies are transmitted, individuals and groups are radicalised, and a minority make the move to violence.

Better knowledge of the process, locations, events and relationships involved in ideological transmission is vital for future development and targeting of interventions, disruption, and counter-narratives.



Where does ideology come from and how is it transmitted?

In a series of three linked reviews we are assessing what research tells us about how ideas, beliefs and values are transmitted, where and by whom? Our first review looked at **the role of families**. Despite assumptions that children often follow their parents, the available evidence is more ambiguous:

- Ideology does not automatically pass from parents to children. But transmission is more likely where multiple family members agree on an issue, and where beliefs are concrete (rather than abstract values).
- Children are not always passive agents, they are actively involved and can even influence older family.
- Security researchers see different forms of terrorism as having different relationships to family. Social revolutionary terrorism is in defiance of parents, whereas national separatist terrorism tends to continue established struggles.

Our second review was concerned with **peer transmission and influence**, and looked at relationships between friends, and at ideological socialisation in education and prison settings.

- People are more likely to form relationships with those who resemble themselves. Why this happens is difficult to establish and probably reflects both selection factors (the choice of friends) and a process of socialisation (becoming similar to friends over time).
- Schools have been suggested as training grounds for ‘good’ citizens, with classrooms seen by some researchers as acting as a rehearsal for wider society. Despite attempts to influence students through the curriculum, students also learn and share ideas, beliefs and values through ‘everyday dialogue’ with one another, e.g., in the playground and beyond the school gates.
- Imprisonment sits alongside other critical life events that can contribute to profound ideological change. There is little hard research evidence for ‘prison radicalisation’. Many accounts suggest that religion in prison is an important coping mechanism and potentially a protective factor against violent extremism. A radical dualist (us vs. them) mentality has been witnessed in *both* inmates and staff, but is attributed to the prison environment rather than radicalisation by extremists or literature.

Review three (in-progress) looks at how **political and religious groups** and networks transmit their ideologies, and seek to recruit and deepen activist involvement.

Team members and research areas

Kim Knott, Professor of Religious & Secular Studies, Programme Lead and Deputy Director
Benjamin Lee, Senior Research Associate (political communication, the far-right, digital media)
Simon Copeland, Doctoral Researcher (kin and peer involvement in extremism and terrorism)
Rosie Mutton, Doctoral Researcher (gender and violent extremism)
Matthew Francis, CREST Communications Director (radicalisation, sociology of religion)
CREST associates, Sarah Marsden, Donald Holbrook, Simon Mabon, James Lewis, Susie Ballentyne

Original research and connected projects

- **Kin and peer contexts, ideological transmission and the move to extremist involvement** This doctoral project will enhance understanding of the ideological and social impact of family and friends by connecting social network analysis of terrorist individuals and groups, psychological research on terrorist biographies, and studies of intergenerational and peer-to-peer transmission.
- **Refugees, social identity and resilience** This doctoral project examines what resilience looks like within refugee communities. What are the key social identities that operate, and how do they function together to influence a sense of self? How do social identities effect how adversity is perceived and experienced? Do social identities offer resources to draw from in meeting these adversities?
- **Grassroots counter messaging online** This project will deepen understanding of counter messaging and the types of content created by individuals outside officially recognised programmes. What are the motivations of activists who produce counter messages, and how effective is their content? What are the risks and rewards they face?
- **Gender and violent extremism** This doctoral project examines the gendered roles, mechanisms and practices which support violent extremism. Can underlying structures, drivers and beliefs be identified, and how and when do they differ for men and women? How have women’s roles as enablers of terrorist engagement or obstacles to disengagement changed?
- **Conspiracy theories and the far right** This project examines the role of conspiracy theories in newly emerging far-right networks.
- **Commissioned projects connected to the programme:** ‘**Sikh radicalisation in Britain**’ (Jasjit Singh, Leeds); ‘**Sri Lanka: When extremism gives way to moderate politics**’ (Chris McDowell, City London); ‘**The internal brakes on violent escalation**’ (Joel Busher, Coventry)

CREST Bite-size guides

- Expert reviews on ideological transmission: How? Where? Who? What? In families, among peers, in formal and informal education, and via religious and political organisations.
- Introductory primers on Islam, Sunni/Shia differences, beliefs and practices, jihad, conversion, and British Muslim communities.
- Short guides on far-right extremism, the counter-jihad movement, conspiracy theory, reciprocal radicalisation.

