



Links between childhood experience of violence and violent extremism

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15 December 2017

Question

What does the literature tell us about the relationship between being a victim of violence and radicalisation or undertaking extremist activities in childhood or adulthood?

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1. Overview

This rapid review synthesises findings on the link between childhood experience of violence and violent extremism from rigorous academic, practitioner, and policy references. Despite opening up the query to multiple disciplines including psychology, political science and criminology, this review identified a limited number of studies focusing directly on the topic. The 2015 RUSI report on the drivers of violent extremism confirms this point, making no direct links between childhood experience of violence and violent extremism (Allan et al., 2015). However, those studies that have focused on the topic found a high level of experience of childhood violence among adults involved in violent extremism (Ellis et al., 2015; Simi et al., 2016; UNDP, 2017). Nonetheless, early traumatic experiences do not determine who will engage in violent extremism; rather they culminate in greater risk of involvement.

As violent extremism is classified as having ideological motivations, traditional criminologist perspectives examining factors from childhood are largely ignored and there are limited studies utilising a life-course criminology framework¹ to understand violent extremism. However, violent extremists are a heterogeneous population and their life histories often resemble members of conventional street gangs, thus life-course criminology frameworks could be useful, drawing on lessons learned from their use with street gangs (Simi et al., 2016). Studies that explore the pathway to radicalisation highlight that this process is incredibly complex and unique and there is no profile of an extremist, or warning indicators and this is important to remember when examining the link between childhood experiences of violence and violent extremism (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

Key findings are as follows:

- A number of studies support that the number of risk factors experienced during childhood, rather than any particular combination, are associated with childhood misconduct and potential later violence.
- The accumulation of negative experiences over time can lead to the person becoming increasingly susceptible to the pull of violent groups.
- There is often a pathway towards violence, beginning with accumulated childhood experiences, leading to adolescent misconduct, and finally adult use of violence.
- Links have also been found with childhood unhappiness and the journey towards extremism.
- Traumatic experiences during childhood can lead to an increased need for identity, which can be fulfilled by extremist causes.
- Higher exposure to trauma leads to a greater likelihood of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is associated with increased anger and hostility and greater urge for revenge versus reconciliation and thus increasing the likelihood of supporting violent extremism.
- Higher exposure to trauma, as well as weaker social bonds, makes an individual more likely to engage in violent extremism.

¹ The aim of this framework is to explain offending by individuals through the analysis of the impact of different events at different stages of their life.

2. Violent Extremism

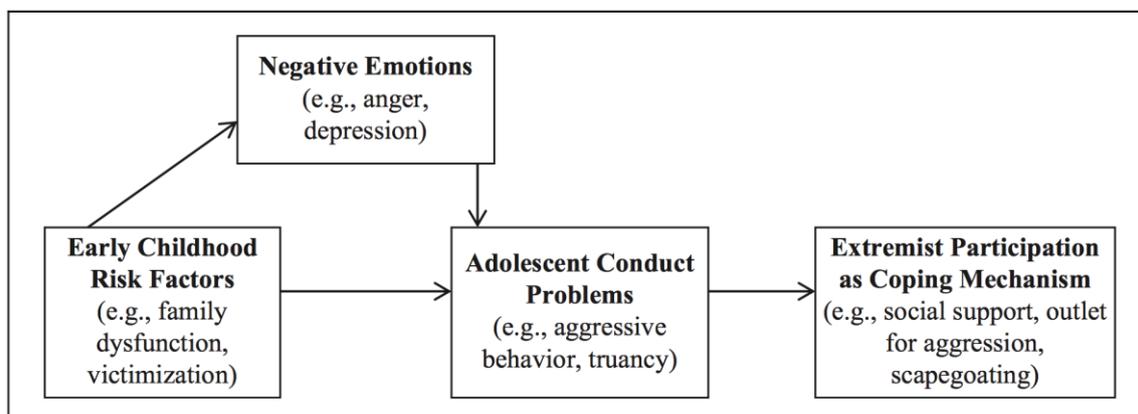
Violent extremism is defined as ‘violence committed by an individual and/or group in support of a specific political or religious ideology, and this term is often used interchangeably with terrorism’ (Simi et al., 2016, p. 537).

In a peer reviewed academic article using 44 in-depth life-history interviews with former members of violent white supremacist groups, Simi et al. (2016) found substantial presence of childhood risk factors and adolescent conduct problems as precursors to participation in violent extremist groups. They argue that social–psychological processes that implicate emotion and cognition mediate the effects of risk factors on future engagement in antisocial behaviour and criminally-oriented - including violent extremist - groups. Of the subjects interviewed by Simi et al. (2016, p. 544), 84% reported experiencing one or more of the following adverse environmental conditions:

Childhood physical abuse	43%
Childhood/adolescent sexual abuse	23%
Emotional and physical neglect	41%
Parental incarceration	27%
Parental abandonment	36%
Witnessed serious violence	64%

Additionally, over half of these experienced three or more of the above adverse environmental conditions, with cumulative influence of risk factors being seen as important in leading to future violent behaviour (Simi et al., 2016, p. 544). These elevated rates of childhood adversity far exceed the average population and are more comparable with youths in juvenile justice settings or in street gangs. The interviews further highlight the role of childhood risk factors as a series of destabilising and adverse conditions that can lead to future violent conduct, and that these adversities are conditioning experiences that gradually increase the subject’s susceptibility to negative outcomes. Figure 1 below maps out the potential pathway towards violent extremism.

Figure 1: Risk factor model of extremist participation.



Source: (Simi et al., 2016, p. 543)

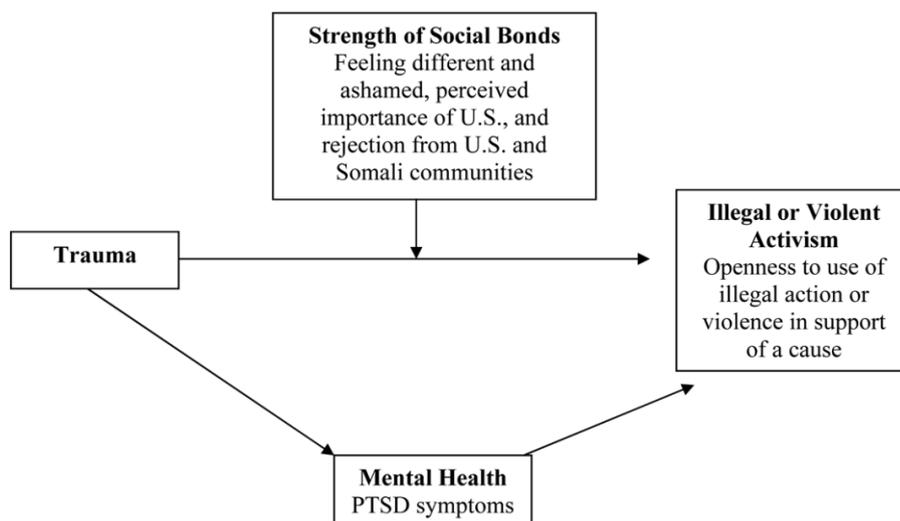
It is suggested that the pathways to radicalisation begin with emotional vulnerabilities that are often brought on by traumatic experiences, often beginning in childhood, which can lead to the individual developing a need for identity that can be fulfilled by extremist causes. Witnessing domestic violence as a child creates trauma that can contribute to youth and adult violence (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

UNDP (2017) interviewed a number of former members of Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Islamic State, Al-Mourabitoun, Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Al-Qaida in prisons and detention centres in Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, with smaller numbers in Cameroon and Niger. Their dataset found that childhood unhappiness may be a critical element of the foundational steps towards a journey to extremism. In the questionnaires with those who voluntarily joined extremist groups a low level of childhood happiness was recorded. These respondents also recorded high levels of both physical and emotional punishment as a child.

It is important to remember that involvement in terrorism is a process and that there are many different pathways towards terrorism. Ellis et al. (2015) argue that setting events, personal factors, and social-political-organisational contexts influence the incremental decisions that shape the pathway towards terrorism. They particularly highlight early experiences and culture, on impacting on the individual's attitudes, perceptions, decisions, and behaviour. However, early traumatic experiences do not determine who will engage in violent extremism; rather they culminate in greater risk of initial involvement in violent extremism.

Ellis et al. (2015) go on to argue that approximately one-third of those exposed to trauma go on to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and that higher exposure to trauma leads to a greater likelihood of developing PTSD. PTSD is important, as it is associated with increased anger and hostility and greater urge for revenge versus reconciliation and thus increase the likelihood of supporting violent extremism. Whilst exposure to trauma can lead to a re-evaluation of the world and one's place therein, PTSD can shape a hostile and aggressive response. Figure 2 below provides another potential pathway towards violent extremism.

Figure 2: Empirical model of pathways associated with illegal or violent activism.



Source: (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 8)

Ellis et al. (2015) carried out a study in the US with 79 young Somali males between 18 and 25 years old in which they examined key setting events and personal factors associated with openness to legal non-violent or illegal and violent activism.² The participants experienced a median of seven types of highly stressful events (out of 22). 33% reported no trauma, 41% reported experiencing either physical assault or serious injury, and 26% reported experiencing both types of physical trauma. 16% of the participants demonstrated a considerable openness to illegal and violent activism and 76% demonstrated a considerable openness to legal non-violent activism (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 13). The study revealed a significant association between trauma and openness to illegal and violent activism with increased trauma associated with increased openness to illegal and violent activism and this was even higher with those who reported weaker social bonds to their communities and the wider society. It is suggested that trauma can destroy a person's assumptions about themselves and the world around them, which in turn can lead to greater hostility and mistrust that facilitates openness to violent extremism. PTSD symptoms include a bleak vision of the future, which can lead to the idea of dying for a cause becoming more appealing and thus PTSD may be important in understanding what leads youths towards violent extremism. This makes increased efforts to identify and support mental health programmes to treat traumatised youth important, particularly in at risk communities where mental health services are missing. Moreover, programmes that strengthen communities and their place in society are important, as those with weaker social bonds are more likely to engage in violent extremism (Ellis et al., 2015).

² The average age of participants was 21 years and the average length of time in the US was nine years.

3. Violence

Although there are limited studies on the link between children's exposure to violence and violent extremism, there are significant studies and evidence that children's experience of violence can increase risk for a range of negative adolescent behaviours, including violence. In several studies over the course of children's lives and entrance into adulthood a clear relation between physical child abuse and later violence, including violent crime arrests, have been identified (Herrenkohl et al. 2003).

Herrenkohl et al. (2003) argue that abuse increases risk for behavioural and emotional disorders in children by harmfully shaping their understanding of relationships, diminishing their capacity to understand social cues and control their emotions; it drives problem behaviour and impedes prosocial development. Abusive discipline predicts violent behaviour indirectly as it reflects later social experiences and attitudes about the use of violence. However, there are other factors and a clear cycle, in that abuse predicts violent attitudes, which predicts involvement with antisocial peers, which, in turn, predicts violent behaviour. The link between earlier abuse and violent attitudes can be explained through cognitive and social interactional relations between the children and their parents. This can be further exacerbated when the children then interact with antisocial peer groups.

In a study by Keresteš (2006) circa 700 children were interviewed in Croatia three years following the end of war. The results of the study demonstrated that children who had been exposed to a greater number of war stressors and traumas in preschool and early school years considered themselves as more aggressive than their peers who had experienced smaller number of war stressors. These students were also considered to be less prosocial by their teachers. Students with more positive parenting situations were rated as less aggressive and more prosocial, however they were still affected by exposure to war violence.

In a 24-year follow-up study of 411 London males from ages 8 to 32 years old, Farrington (1989) examined predictors of violence. Those from the sample that were convicted of violence tended, by the age of eight, to have parents in conflict with each other and with cruel attitudes and discipline involving physical punishment. Their parents also expressed authoritarian child-rearing attitudes, paid scant attention to them, and had little interest in their education. The boys also tended to have parents who were separated before they reached the age of 10. Farrington found that separations predicted adolescent aggression, harsh parental discipline and poor supervision predicted teenage violence, and low parental interest in education was the best predictor of convictions for violence (Farrington, 1989).

4. Drivers of Violent Extremism

The pathway towards radicalisation is incredibly complex and involvement in violent extremism is a process that includes many different pathways. The studies examined for this report highlight that childhood experience of violence can influence the incremental decisions that shape the pathway towards terrorism, however they do not determine who will engage in violent extremism (Ellis et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to examine other drivers of violent extremism, especially as it is suggested that more than one driver is usually necessary on the pathway towards extremism (Allan et al., 2015).

Marginalisation: Blocked participation creates grievances that can be harnessed to promote extremist violence, however they do not necessarily lead to violent extremism and are rather a factor. In conflicts involving violent extremism marginalisation is a factor in extremist groups being able to recruit in large numbers. It is suggested that the lack of civil liberties is the most reliable predictor of terrorism. This includes civil or political society turning to violence when faced with political failure or repression (Allan et al., 2015).

Government Failure: The failure of the government to deliver services gives extremist groups a pathway in to the locality. Through delivering services they gain support and legitimacy at the cost of the government. At the same time, failure of the government to provide security and justice (or if they provide oppressive forms of security and justice) opens up a pathway for extremist groups, which they can then utilise to gain support and legitimacy. In situations of conflict and insecurity the population is more likely to accept extremist groups if they offer stability (Allan et al., 2015).

Identity formation: Identity-formation is important in radicalisation, as it can become 'maladaptive' and make some individuals more vulnerable to radicalisation. Radicalisation is also a social process and identity can play a key factor in individuals becoming involved in violent extremism and religion and ethnicity are strong elements of individual and group identity (Allan et al., 2015).

Poverty: Poverty and deprivation can play a role in pathways to violent extremism, particularly outside of the West and in areas involved in civil war. However, as poverty is often linked to other drivers it is important to examine the wider context. Additionally, extremist groups often recruit from the unemployed and underemployed groups, including the well-educated (Allan et al., 2015).

Inequality: Economic, social and political marginalisation of ethnic or religious groups enhances the risk of violent extremism. Additionally, the perceived victimisation of fellow members of the wider group can be used by violent extremist groups in order to gain supporters (Allan et al., 2015).

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Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

- Dr Heidi Ellis, HCRI, Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School
- Dr Anne Speckhard, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)

Key websites

- International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)
- RUSI

Suggested citation

O'Driscoll, D. (2017). *Links between childhood experience of violence and violent extremism*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

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