

Disengaging from violent extremism: what can we learn from crime desistance research?

by Sigrid Raets

People with a history of violent extremism face different obstacles than those who are convicted of other types of offences



Introduction

It now seems obvious that knowing how and why people leave extremism is just as important as knowing why they join. From being something of an afterthought in extremism research, the study of disengagement has grown immensely over the past 15 years. The main reasons driving disengagement decisions are now starting to emerge. However, we still have much to learn about exiting extremism. There is a clear and urgent need for more theoretically developed, more empirically wide-ranging, and more methodologically varied research in this area. To advance our understanding, this paper draws lessons from a literature review¹ on an extensive body of work addressing a similar topic: desistance from crime.



A number of scholars have pointed out the added value of examining extremist disengagement through a criminological lens.

Still, barring a few notable exceptions (see for example Cherney, Putra, Putera, Erikha, & Magrie, 2021; LaFree & Miller, 2008; Marsden, 2016;

Simi, Sporer, & Bubolz, 2016), desistance and disengagement have been the focus of separate literatures, resulting in knowledge silos. This paper tries to bridge these disciplinary and topical divides. Despite the differences between desisting from crime and disengaging from extremism, criminological research offers important insights both for understanding and supporting the process of disengagement.

Key lessons from the desistance literature

How much does desisting differ from disengaging? The short answer to this question would be “not much”. The slightly longer answer is that criminal desistance and extremist disengagement share far more similarities than differences. Disengaging, like desisting, is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional process of change. Both can take different shapes and take place under different circumstances. Both can occur naturally, with or without outside intervention. Both tend to involve lapses and relapses, stumbles, and successes. Social support is essential to both, as are shifts in maturity, cognition, emotions, and identity.



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While the mechanics involved in both processes of change overlap substantially, research does reveal some specifics for the process of disengaging. Crucially, these differences are differences of degree, not of kind. People with a history of violent extremism face different obstacles than those who are convicted of other types of offences. These obstacles relate to group membership and ideological convictions, but also to how these people are treated by the criminal justice system and society at large. Still, this makes disengaging from extremism no more distinct than desisting from other specific types of crime such as sexual offending or organised crime.

Clearly then, we can – and should – build on the knowledge that is already out there. Why reinvent the wheel when there is no need to do so? Moreover, interventions designed to prevent crime or assist desistance could inform efforts to prevent and coun-

¹ For the full review: see Raets, S. (2022A). Desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization: a cross-field comparison. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*. doi:10.1177/0306624X221102802

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new social network, or simply opening a bank account can all become major stumbling blocks on the road to reintegration. Reintegrating is not a one-man job but a two-way street. Recognising society's role in supporting change and fostering acceptance is therefore vital.

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Reducing stigma, supporting the (re-)building of prosocial relationships, and providing positive opportunities for self-development all emerge as instrumental in promoting change. But what about addressing extremist ideologies? Strategies aimed at changing these beliefs, also

ter violent extremism (CVE). In fact, many CVE initiatives already seem to be grounded in tried-and-tested crime prevention or rehabilitation practice (see also Shanaah & Heath-Kelly, 2022; Raets, 2022B). It must, however, be stressed that the effectiveness of generic crime reduction interventions in the context of violent extremism should be assessed rather than assumed.

While desisting and disengaging are similar, they are not the same. It is important that we acknowledge the barriers that can make disengagement difficult to achieve. Even when individuals are highly motivated to change, they often face serious challenges. Some individuals, like women and children, may encounter specific barriers during their reintegration (see also Bosley, 2020). Finding a job, building a



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referred to as deradicalisation programmes, might not always be necessary. Firstly, ideologies are not the problem – violence is. From a public safety perspective, giving up violence matters more than giving up beliefs. Secondly, more research is needed to assess to what extent lingering extremist beliefs influence one's chances of relapsing. As Horgan and colleagues note (Horgan, Meredith, & Papatheodorou, 2020, p. 17), “our knowledge of what precise ingredients comprise the best recipe for deradicalization is limited.” Recent studies suggest that addressing ideology can be helpful in some cases, but not all (Cherney & Belton, 2019). Supporting disengagement demands a holistic approach, and sometimes this includes assisting people in changing their beliefs.

Concluding remarks

Too often, extremist offenders are considered to be in some way ‘special’ or ‘unique’. Practitioners, policymakers, politicians, and the public continue to assume that there must be something very different about people with a history of violent extremism. The findings presented in this paper challenge this assumption. As demonstrated above, desisting from crime and disengaging from extremism are more similar than they are different. What the field of disengagement studies needs is less navel-gazing about “the intractable complexity of violent extremism” (Bosley, 2020, p. 34) and more engagement with its neighbouring research domains. Criminology, as we know, lends itself particularly well to the task. Continuing this research line

of criminologically unwinding and unspooling the process of extremist disengagement can therefore only be encouraged.

Besides bridging knowledge silos, connecting theory, research, and practice in this field is surely needed. Nowhere is this disconnect more evident than in the many worries, uncertainties, and inconsistencies surrounding efforts to counter violent extremism and promote disengagement. We know relatively little about how individuals may be encouraged to disengage. But we also know little about the effectiveness of current CVE efforts, as few initiatives have been evaluated (see also Glazard, 2022). Practice-based knowledge development and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of CVE efforts appear particularly valuable in answering these issues.

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