

What Practitioners Need to Know: Post-Exit Distress in Former Extremists

This series summarizes recent research with important implications for targeted violence and terrorism prevention practitioners. Some sections of these briefs were produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence, but all content was verified by research staff and authorized by the original authors. The discussion of implications reflects DVERT's analysis of how practitioners may apply the research findings.

Source article

Katharina Meredith Sengfelder and John G. Horgan, "After They Leave: Exploring Post-Exit Distress in Former Violent Extremists," *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 38 (2024): 165–210.

Key Takeaways

- Exiting extremism affects all aspects of the former extremist's life. To be effective, deradicalization interventions must be holistic: they should address not only harmful belief systems but also life circumstances, such as housing, employment, relationships, safety, and mental health.
- Exiting extremism can be a years-long, nonlinear process involving setbacks, speedbumps, and plateaus. Both practitioners and former extremists should be aware of the distress caused by this transition and take steps to prepare for challenges.
- To support former extremists effectively, practitioners should prioritize addressing safety concerns first, and they should adapt evidence-based strategies from other fields, including strategies related to intimate partner violence, substance abuse, and disengagement from gangs.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Much of the psychological research related to terrorism has focused on how people radicalize (acquire extreme views), mobilize (move from thought to action), and disengage (move away from violent extremism). However, even though most members of terrorist groups do leave eventually, very little is known about hurdles faced by former members as they transition back into mainstream society.

The main purpose of this study was to identify and understand the types of distress that former violent extremists (referred to as "formers") experience after they leave their groups. The researchers wanted to know what challenges formers face after leaving, what contributes to post-exit distress, and how disruptive these stressors are to their lives.

The DVERT Center is supported by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice under Award No. 15PNIJ-24-GK-00750-DOMR. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Methodology

The lead researcher conducted focus groups and individual interviews with 10 formers and six practitioners who work with exiting extremists. During the interviews, the formers shared their individual post-exit experiences. In separate focus groups, the practitioners reflected on post-exit challenges experienced by formers who had received support from the practitioners' organizations. When the researchers analyzed the data from the interviews and focus groups, they found a surprisingly wide range of post-exit stressors.

Findings

Former extremists face many kinds of stress after leaving. The researchers identified 97 specific stressors, which they grouped into four dimensions (Figure 1). *Daily life & social* and *psychological & physical well-being* stressors are more likely to overlap with those experienced by the general population, whereas *safety & consequences* and *transition & identity* stressors are more likely to be experienced by only those who have left extremism.

- **Daily life & social.** Many formers struggled with financial security, employment (i.e., finding or keeping a job), lack of education, and unstable housing. Their relationships were often strained or broken, and most formers were socially isolated, especially in the first year or two post-exit. Many reported struggling with social, communication, and conflict resolution skills, making it difficult for them to make and retain friends.

- **Psychological & physical well-being.** Participants discussed how traumatic experiences during involvement with extremism might result in anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, self-harm, suicidality, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and a strong fight/flight reflex post-exit. Relatedly, formers talked about experiencing intense emotions (e.g., self-loathing, shame, guilt, resentment, anger), physical health issues, and substance abuse challenges after exiting violent extremism.
- **Safety & consequences.** Participants said they were targeted with threats and assault by their former group, leading to paranoia, increased safety precautions, and isolation. The legal consequences of involvement in violent extremism, including incarceration, probation, and legal fees, were difficult and often a financial burden. Stigma associated with being a former extremist was also stressful to navigate.
- **Transition & identity.** The process of transitioning, including the pace of change in their circumstances, the pressure to transform their lives and outlooks quickly, and barriers to help (e.g., lack of therapists willing to work with this population), was often described as overwhelming. Formers also discussed the challenge of reconciling their past with the development of a new identity, especially while leaving an entire social circle and worldview behind.

Figure 1: Four dimensions of post-exit distress

Daily Life & Social	Psychological & Physical Well-Being	Safety & Consequences	Transition & Identity
Daily Life	Mental Health	Safety	Transition
Relationships	Physical Health	Legal	Identity
Social Interaction	Emotions	Public Image	Worldview

Source: Meredith Sengfelder and Horgan, "After They Leave: Exploring Post-Exit Distress," 165–210.

How can deradicalization and reintegration practitioners, probation officers, and case workers use these findings?

- Be aware that exiting is a years-long, nonlinear process characterized by a wide variety of stressors, barriers to reintegration, and potential setbacks.
- There are parallels between the experiences described by former extremists and other “exit” experiences, such as addiction recovery and gang disengagement. Leverage evidence-based elements from programs supporting those populations, but understand that none of these models will be a perfect fit for former extremists.
- Prioritize triaging and addressing former extremists’ personal safety concerns; adopt a holistic approach to deradicalization that covers not just belief systems but also other life circumstances affected by extremism.



About CNA

CNA is a not-for-profit analytical organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. Nearly 700 CNA scientists, analysts, and professionals provide data-driven, innovative solutions to complex problems. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses—the Department of the Navy’s federally funded research and development center (FFRDC)—as well as the Institute for Public Research, which supports federal, state, and local government officials advancing national and homeland security.

To learn more about the DVERT Center, contact our team at dvert@cna.org.

Any copyright in this work is subject to the Government’s Unlimited Rights license. The reproduction of this work for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. Nongovernmental users may copy and distribute this document noncommercially, in any medium, provided that the copyright notice is reproduced in all copies. Nongovernmental users may not use technical measures to obstruct or control the reading or further copying of the copies they make or distribute. Nongovernmental users may not accept compensation of any manner in exchange for copies. All other rights reserved. This report may contain hyperlinks to websites and servers maintained by third parties. CNA does not control, evaluate, endorse, or guarantee content found in those sites. We do not assume any responsibility or liability for the actions, products, services, and content of those sites or the parties that operate them.

CNA® is a registered trademark of The CNA Corporation and may not be used without prior written authorization.