

Choosing Credible Messengers for Preventing Violent Extremism

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

Daniel Koehler, Michael H. Becker, Gordon Clubb, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Michael J. Williams, "Lived Experience and Messenger Credibility: A Replication Study on P/CVE Messenger Credibility in Germany," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2025): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2545794>.

Key Takeaways

- Police may have a legitimate place in anti-extremism messaging.
- In Germany, former extremists and social workers were seen as equally credible as police.
- Anonymous or unattributed anti-extremism messaging campaigns may be less effective than collaborations with more credible messengers, including police, social workers, and former extremists.
- Though victims of extremism can be important partners in prevention efforts, they may not be seen as relatively credible messengers of anti-extremism messaging on their own.
- Preexisting audience attitudes such as conspiracy beliefs, lack of trust in institutions, and ethnocentrism significantly influence perceptions of credibility, hindering effective anti-extremism messaging campaigns.

Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Many preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs rely on credible messengers to warn about extremist propaganda and to support people deradicalizing from violence. Among these programs, there is a strong belief that people with lived experience—such as former extremists or victims of extremism—are especially powerful messengers. Police and law enforcement are perceived as less trustworthy than those with lived experience, though little research has been conducted on messenger credibility and the role that experience or vocation plays in it.

A previous study in the United Kingdom (UK) found a surprising result when it compared how credible various P/CVE messengers were perceived to be: police officers were the most credible, but former extremists and victims were either not clearly credible or not credible. That study explored the concept of credibility in only a limited way and was restricted to the UK context.¹

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This study repeats and extends that work in Germany. The researchers sought to understand whether the UK findings on messenger credibility could be replicated in a different country and to see what differences might appear. The authors also examined how people's own attitudes—especially ethnocentrism, conspiracy beliefs, personal political agency, and lack of trust in institutions—shape how credible they find various P/CVE messengers to be.

Methodology

The researchers surveyed 2,004 German adults. Each participant read the same short text about the threat of extremist recruitment and radicalization in Germany. The text was attributed to one of five sources: (1) no named messenger (control), (2) a former extremist, (3) a victim of extremism, (4) a social worker, or (5) a police officer. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the five versions.

After reading the text, the participants rated how credible they found the statement on a scale combining trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, completeness, and lack of bias. The survey also measured ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, political efficacy, and trust in institutions. The researchers compared credibility scores across messenger types and examined how these audience attitudes were linked to credibility.

Findings

- **Institutional messengers (police officers and social workers) and former extremists were similarly credible.** On average, statements from police officers, social workers, and former extremists were all rated as more credible than the overall average credibility score. These three messengers did not differ significantly from each other in credibility.
- **Victims were seen as less credible than other messengers.** The victim messenger was viewed as less credible than former extremists, social workers, and police officers, and this messenger ranked below the overall average credibility score.
- **Anonymous messages were less credible than most attributed messages.** When no messenger was named, the statement was viewed as less credible than statements attributed to police, social workers, or former extremists.
- **Audience attitudes explained much of the difference in credibility.** People with stronger conspiracy beliefs tended to see P/CVE messages as less credible, regardless of messenger type. People with higher trust in institutions tended to see the presented messages as more credible. Ethnocentrism lowered credibility overall but did not change which messenger was seen as the most credible.
- **Consistent results.** This study replicated and extended the results of the previous UK study, strengthening the evidence base related to messenger credibility.

How can practitioners working in early-stage prevention and program development use these findings?

- Prevention programs should include multiple credible messenger types that can speak to different aspects of extremist recruitment and radicalization.
- Practitioners should engage law enforcement and other institutional messengers as prevention partners. Doing so may help improve the efficacy of primary prevention messaging and establish effective secondary and tertiary prevention relationships.
- Practitioners should not assume that former extremists are more credible than institutional messengers; perceived credibility can vary by contexts and audiences.
- Current evidence suggests that victims of extremism are viewed as less credible messengers compared to other messengers.

- When possible, prevention programs should seek to understand the characteristics of their target audience to understand how a message might be received. If the audience has a lower perception of message credibility, prevention programs should tailor their programming.



¹ Koehler, Daniel et al., "Don't Kill the Messenger: Perceived Credibility of Far-Right Former Extremists and Police Officers in P/CVE Communication," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023), ISSN: 1057-610X, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2023.2166000>.

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