

The intersection of trauma and violent extremism: Future directions for research and policy

TAKEAWAY. Research and policy can help to address violent extremism through learning and teaching others about the scope of trauma and how it can mix with contextual factors to create “the perfect storm” for radicalization to violent extremism (VE). Trauma is a risk factor for VE, is experienced frequently in extremist organizations, and can offer a helpful framework for intervention and rehabilitation programs from extremism. Not fully understanding trauma, and its relations to these different areas of violence and extremism, undermines its usefulness. Our understanding of trauma should be broadened and the context in which trauma is experienced should be considered. This knowledge then needs to be incorporated into prevention and rehabilitation programs that use a whole-of-society approach.

THE NEED. Recruitment of vulnerable youth into extremist groups has emerged as a critical threat. Although there are no well understood definitive pathways that would indicate who is likely to commit violent acts driven by extremism, recent research has identified an association between trauma and support for VE along with mediating and moderating factors. Despite a majority of people having experienced trauma at some point in their lifetime, understanding trauma and contexts in which trauma occurs can help us better understand who specifically is at risk for radicalization to violence and how to prevent VE.

WHAT IS TRAUMA? Trauma is a direct or indirect wounding experience (a perceived or actual threat to life)

- Includes loss, violation, and disempowerment that may not be a threat to life, but still produces psychological consequences similar to, and even *more* detrimental than, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Involves individuals, families, and entire communities.
- Impacts of trauma go beyond symptoms of PTSD and includes other forms of psychiatric distress
 - o Traumatic grief
 - o Developmental trauma
 - o Moral injury

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT:

- Contextual factors, like sense of belonging, trust, or depression, influence the role trauma plays in radicalization to violent extremism.
- Trauma exposure is important to consider for risk of violence in individuals who feel alienation from society.
- Trust in government mediates the association of trauma and VE.
- However, experiencing trauma is associated with a reduction in trust in government, which in turn is associated with greater support for VE.

WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION:

- Current treatments for trauma target symptoms of PTSD – this is not enough
- Service systems (mental health, social services, education, law enforcement) need to:
 - o implement trauma-informed care to recognize trauma
 - o respond to the impact of traumatic stress on –
 - children
 - caregivers
 - service providers within the systems
- Acknowledge that traumatic stress is caused and exacerbated by an individual’s interaction with the environment, implicating social context as fundamental to healing and recovery

- Have awareness of and pay attention to:
 - o negative effects of trauma
 - o how people's needs change over time based on time of a traumatic event(s) and/or social context
- Intervene at multiple levels of the social ecology:
 - o sufficiently protect and heal those affected by trauma
 - o reduce the risk of further harm.
- Increase existing prevention and intervention models that use **phase-based, systemic, multidisciplinary** response to trauma

However, given that there is still limited understanding of the ways in which trauma may relate to violent extremism, none of these models have been formally incorporated into P/CVE efforts and systematically studied to uncover their unique contributions to preventing violent radicalization.

For this concept to be truly meaningful and useful, the field will need to embrace a more nuanced understanding of trauma, the context in which it occurs, and the ways in which trauma-informed services can be implemented. The complexity surrounding the ways in which trauma relates to VE need not be seen as an impediment to including it in research and practice; rather, the multi-faceted nature of trauma leads to a broader range of intervention strategies that can lead to both healing from, and the prevention of, violence.

WHAT ROLES CAN RESEARCH AND POLICY PLAY?

Preventing violent extremism requires both prevention and intervention activities, which research and policy can contribute to in different ways.

- Researchers need to learn more about what trauma is and what the contextual factors related to trauma are.
- Researchers need to be involved in leading, teaching, or investigating.
- Policy makers need to create and implement policies that encourage dissemination of knowledge in this field.
- Policy makers need to think about steps they can take to educate society.
- Practitioners also play an important role and need to become actively involved in providing services.

The companion guidance brief, **Trauma Informed Care and Violent Extremism Prevention**, provides more detailed information on this topic.

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