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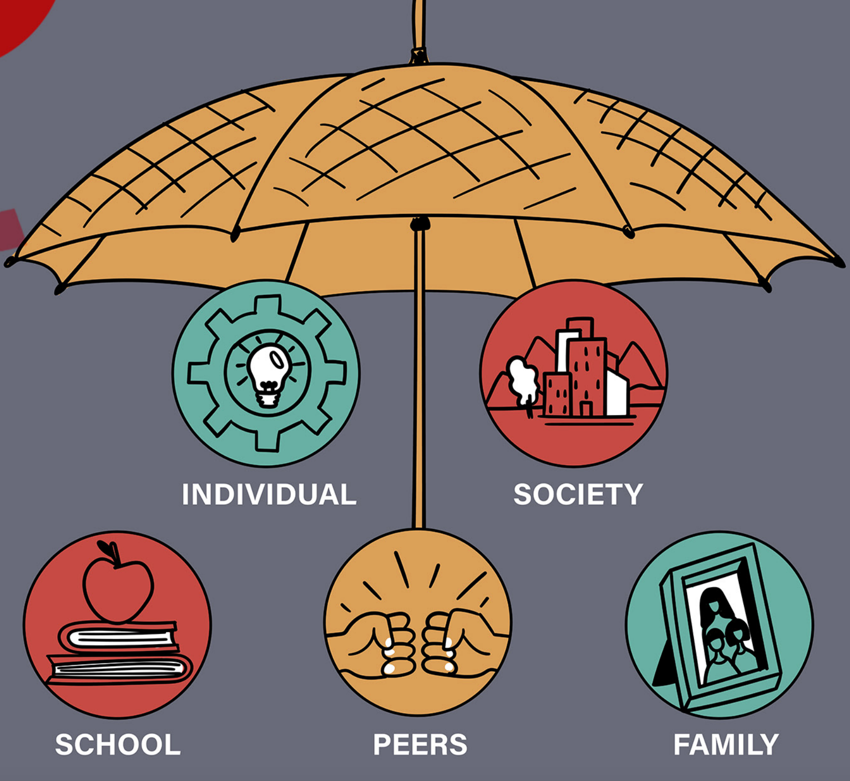

Protective Factors For Violent Extremism And Terrorism:
Rapid Evidence Assessment

FULL REPORT

JUNE 2022

Sarah Marsden
Benjamin Lee

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This CREST report was produced from the *Constraining Violence* project. The project looks at how individual, social, and subcultural factors constrain the potential for extremist violence. You can find all the outputs from this project at: *www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/*

ABOUT CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is funded by the UK's Home Office and security and intelligence agencies to identify and produce social science that enhances their understanding of security threats and capacity to counter them. Its funding is administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award ES/V002775/1).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research into protective factors in relation to violent extremism is in its infancy. Only modest efforts have been made to understand what protects against involvement or re-engagement in violent extremism (Lösel et al., 2018). Few studies have systematically examined the circumstances under which protective factors might operate, and there is considerable conceptual ambiguity about how they might work (Abbiati et al., 2020). In common with the wider criminological literature, the emphasis has instead been on risk factors which correlate with involvement in violent extremism.

The heavy emphasis on risk factors in wider criminological research and practice has been described as a deficit-based approach (Maruna & Lebel, 2003) which focuses on the negative features of an individual or their context believed to be linked to offending. Although understanding risk factors is a crucial part of assessment and management processes, the dominance of the risk model brings with it the potential to over-estimate the chances of harmful outcomes and can create a negative view of the person at the centre of the process (Rogers, 2000). To fully understand what shapes radicalisation and deradicalisation pathways, it is necessary to look beyond risk factors to understand what interrupts or mitigates risks, or actively promotes positive outcomes.

The promise of this area of work for researchers and policy makers is identifying factors that explain why an individual is likely to engage in violence when similar peers remain non-violent. In addition, paying greater attention to protective factors brings with it the possibility of more effective risk assessment processes; a greater chance of nurturing the motivation of those subject to criminal justice processes; enhancing the rapport between them and the clinicians, case managers and intervention providers they engage with; and supporting the development and planning of interventions (Cording and Christofferson, 2017).

To further these aims, it is not only necessary to understand the empirical evidence around which protective factors might reduce the potential for harmful outcomes, but also to examine conceptual issues associated with what constitutes a protective factor, and how, why, and when they work.

1.1 SCOPE

The report covers how protective factors have been conceptualised, reviews the evidence on them, and describes how they have been explained in the existing literature. It benefits from three existing systematic reviews that either focus on protective factors or include them alongside an examination of risk factors (Gill et al., 2020; Lösel et al. 2018; Wolfowicz et al., 2020). Taking these studies as its starting point, the report updates these analyses to include the most recent literature on protective factors and identifies the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the evidence base.

The report is organised in three parts. This introduction addresses key concepts, most notably describing how the idea of a protective factor has been defined in the literature. Part two sets out the results of the evidence mapping process and describes the methods used to identify the literature which informs it. The outcome of the evidence mapping process is summarised in a graphical evidence map. This is accompanied by a narrative description of different protective factors.

Part three focuses on how researchers have sought to explain how protective factors work. Many of these mechanics are implicit in how protective factors are conceptualised, but researchers have also offered a range of theoretically informed explanations as to how protective factors may prevent people either

supporting or participating in violent extremism. The report concludes by reviewing the report's findings and setting out the next steps for this research agenda.

1.2 CONCEPTUALISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

There are theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and practical challenges in analysing protective factors. There is considerable ambiguity about how to define and identify them and a lack of conceptual clarity over what protective factors are and how they work. Methodologically, protective factors can be difficult to isolate; and operationally, they have been analysed in the context of different points in the criminal life cycle, from prevention through to reoffending. There is also variation in how they are described, with researchers using terms including 'stabilisers', 'promotive factors', 'desistance factors' and 'strengths' (Serin, Chadwick and Lloyd, 2016).

These issues are informed by the lack of concerted research attention protective factors have received. Studies that include protective factors are often not designed to look for them explicitly. In some cases, protective factors are uncovered as part of a wider analysis, usually in work seeking to model risk factors. Additionally, protective factors against violent extremism are in a research space which has little agreed terminology, with concepts such as radicalisation and extremism often interpreted differently by researchers (Lösel et al., 2018: 89).

Violent extremism researchers have not been alone in grappling with the complexity of protective factors. Work on child development and resilience has long acknowledged the need to distinguish between different forms of protection. For example, Luthar et al. (2000: 547) suggested a distinction between directly ameliorating effects identified in research (protective factors) and more complex interactive relationships: protective-stabilizing[sic] when the factor provides a level of protection independent of risk; protective-enhancing, where a protection increases with risk; and protective but reactive where protection reduces as risk levels increase.

Conceptually, there is also a lack of consensus about how to define and interpret protective factors (Abbiati et al., 2020). The range of definitions reflected in the criminological literature has been said to 'relate to quite distinct things, be used in a range of ways in assessment and have various implications in terms of risk management and rehabilitation' (Whyman, 2019: 220). Their impact has also been examined in contrasting contexts including helping to explain why someone who might otherwise be considered high risk does not offend, and why people desist after they've been involved in crime (de Vries Robbé, et al., 2015). Similarly, assessment tools describe and operationalise protective factors in different ways (Klepfisz, Daffern and Day, 2017). One of the main assessment tools for protective factors, the Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors (SAPROF), defines them broadly as 'any characteristic of a person, his or her environment or situation which reduces the risk of future violent behaviour' (de Vries Robbé., 2012: 1259).

The relationship between protective factors and risk factors has been approached in different ways. Protective factors have been conceptualised as the absence of risk factors, where the lack of, for example, peers or family members with links to violent extremist networks might be considered protective. Protective factors have also been interpreted as the opposite of risk factors. For instance, where offending is linked to impulsivity, being higher on levels of self-control might act as a form of protection. Conceptualising factors as being positioned along a continuum is common in the wider literature and may be helpful in identifying differences at the aggregate level (Walker et al., 2013: 293). However, taking this approach when interpreting how protective factors work in individual cases is more complex. It is possible to imagine circumstances where an individual is in contact with people who exert both positive and negative influences (de Vries Robbé, 2014). Hence, 'even protective factors that are the opposite, or 'healthy pole' of risk factors are not

necessarily mutually exclusive entities from the risk factor' (de Vries Robbé, 2014: 41).

Lösel et al. (2018: 91) have argued that protective factors are more than simply the 'other side of the coin' to risk factors, suggesting the need for a distinctive set of methods to understand them (see also: Lösel & Bender 2003: 133). In line with this idea, protective factors have been described as buffers which mitigate the impact of risk factors or used to help explain why offending is less likely amongst individuals who might otherwise be considered high risk (Lösel and Farrington, 2012). Here, protective factors are found in the context of risk factors but ameliorate their effects. By implication, risk factors become more important in the absence of the kinds of protective factors that most people enjoy (Fitzpatrick, 1997). For example, low levels of parental supervision can increase the likelihood of offending in low-income families, whilst in higher income homes with similarly poor parental supervision, the chances of offending are reduced (Lösel and Farrington, 2012).

Finally, protective factors have been understood as conceptually distinct and unconnected to risk factors (O'Shea and Dickens, 2016). For example, although religiosity might act as a protective factor, having no religious commitments does not constitute a risk factor for violent recidivism (Pearce et al., 2003; de Vries Robbé, 2014; Klepfisz et al., 2017). The idea of protective factors as distinct from risk factors has been the dominant way assessment tools, such as SAPROF and the Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability (START), have approached protective factors to date (O-Shea and Dickens, 2016).

Criminological research is beginning to unpack the broader concept of protective factors both in terms of the period when protective factors might be relevant (e.g., pre-crime or in the context of recidivism), and with respect to their relationship to risk factors. This has been approached through the concepts of promotive and protective factors. Promotive factors are linked to a lower likelihood of becoming involved in harmful or illegal behaviour (known as preventive promotive factors), or of re-offending (remedial promotive factors) (Loeber et al., 2008). Protective factors mitigate or buffer the effects of risk factors (interactive protective factors) or are linked to lower rates of problematic behaviour in those who might otherwise be considered 'high risk' (risk-based protective factors) (Farrington et al., 2016).

Attention has also been drawn to the idea of interactivity and non-linear relationships, highlighting the presence of curvilinear relationships and how protective factors may work as buffers against risk factors (Lösel et al., 2018: 91). Taking account of these factors can help to interpret why findings differ between groups. For example, in general offending, doing well at school seems to act as a buffer (or interactive protective factor) for those from disrupted families more than for those from disadvantaged families (Jolliffe et al., 2016).

Related to this, from outside the study of violent extremism, protective effects in the context of resilience may develop in the form of 'chain reactions' over time where: "[u]npleasant and potentially dangerous events may even harden individuals if they cope with them successfully" (Lösel and Bender, 2003: 137). Recognising the value of understanding how risk and protective factors operate holistically, there have been efforts to develop more integrative theories explaining how they interact and inform desistance processes (e.g., Heffernan and Ward, 2017). This kind of approach has the potential to begin to untangle the complex, sometimes non-linear relationships between particular factors and involvement in offending, including in relation to terrorism.

The ways in which protective factors operate, interact and influence outcomes are not straightforward. Although a lack of risk factors can be considered protective, researchers have emphasised the need to go beyond the absence of risk and to understand protection as something conceptually distinct. However, there is a need for more work both to conceptualise and test how protective factors work in relation to violent extremism

and to understand the prevalence and relevance of protective factors in offending pathways.

1.2.1 DEPENDANT VARIABLE

Related to the concept of protective factors is the question of which behaviours are being protected against. In practice, this often translates to the dependent variable in studies i.e. the variable (e.g., support for violent extremism) affected by changes in other variables (e.g., educational attainment).

At its broadest, the variable of interest can be understood as violent extremism. The driving interest of many of the studies to look at protective factors has been violent behaviours associated with a desire for political, social, or religious change; often termed terrorism. Like any 'ism' the debate around what exactly constitutes terrorism is broad and ideologically fractured (see: Richards, 2015). More importantly, the lack of a universal definition, inherent illegality and secrecy, and a wider prevalent belief that terrorism follows radicalism means that many studies have settled for a broader dependent variable.

Existing systematic reviews of protective factors in the context of violent extremism takes a different approach to this issue. Lösel et al.'s (2018) study initially considered only studies focused on violent behaviours but given the limited research on this variable, they expanded their search to include what they thought of as precursors to violent behaviour such as sympathy for violent acts. Gill et al. (2020) expanded their search for protective factors outside of violent extremism research, considering protective factors against a range of violent and violence-adjacent behaviours such as dating violence and handgun carriage. Wolfowicz et al. (2020) offers the most stringent division between dependent variables, differentiating between radical attitudes, future intentions, and behaviours in their analysis. The studies included in existing reviews operationalise the dependant variable in different ways and vary in the extent to which they effectively capture the wider phenomenon of violent extremism. This is an important caveat to our current understanding and is discussed more fully in part two.

1.2.2 LOCATING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

In addition to basic conceptualisations of both protective factors and violent extremism it is worth considering how different protective factors may be organised across different levels of analysis. For example, grouping together those things that operate at the individual level such as psychological or socio-demographic factors. This is an approach common to the wider literature on risk and protective factors (Lösel and Farrington, 2012), and in two of the existing systematic reviews of protective factors against violent extremism (Lösel et al., 2018; Gill et al., 2020), which divide protective factors among the following categories.

- Individual
- Family
- School
- Peer
- Community

Separating out discussion of factors operating at different levels of analysis in this way has the advantage of parsimony and helps to organise a complex field of studies and findings. It also makes it possible to see which categories of analysis have received the least attention. However, given the salience of interactions between factors which can operate across levels of analysis, it remains important to take a holistic approach and not to assume different sets of factors operate independently. This is informed by calls from research on strengths-based approaches to offending that move away from the broader tendency within criminology (and terrorism studies) to focus on the psychological at the expense of other dimensions of analysis, such as social, moral, and legal contexts (McNeill, 2012; Kewley, 2017: 12-3).

Further, it remains important that in focusing on discrete variables, that more process-oriented factors are not overlooked. As Rutter (1987: 137) has argued 'instead of searching for broadly based protective factors, we need to focus on protective mechanisms and processes'. Heffernan and Ward (2017: 131) have directed attention towards this call for a more process-sensitive approach, making the case for looking in more detail at how and why particular factors emerge in particular contexts. Linked to this, the same authors have highlighted the importance of understanding how these processes are manifest through social practices, making it possible to 'shift the focus from risky [or protective] characteristics, behaviours and contexts (e.g., antisocial attitudes, associates, drug abuse), to the practices (i.e. goal-directed actions) to which these descriptions refer, which themselves are informed by values and human capacities.' (Heffernan and Ward, 2019: 312).

Drawing attention to the importance of values highlights a further issue with some of the research on protective factors in the context of violent extremism. That is, how grouping factors across levels of analysis can neglect the ideological and subcultural contexts in which those involved in violent extremism are embedded. Understanding these contexts and their role in shaping values, norms and preferences has the potential to provide insights into why the relevance of factors might differ across extremist subcultures. For example, there is some (albeit limited) evidence that good school attainment might act as protective factors for left- and right-wing extremist attitudes, but not for attitudes linked to Islamist extremism (Baier et al., 2016).

These issues underline the importance of context and meaning when interpreting how and why protective factors might be relevant for individuals engaged in different extremist subcultural contexts. Aggregate interpretations of protective factors are less able to articulate how context matters, bringing together findings from significantly different ideological, geographic, cultural, and socio-political settings, and overlooking the values and norms that inform how and why protective factors might be salient. This is one element that might inform a better understanding not only of the prevalence of protective factors at the aggregate level, but their relevance to the individual (Gill et al., 2020; Clemmow et al., 2020).

There are several implications of these argument. First, that a more holistic approach is needed which takes account of interactions between factors and which places as much attention on social and contextual factors as those located at the individual level. Second, that research will benefit from paying attention to the processes and practices through which protective factors unfold and exert their effect. Third, to take seriously extremist ideological and subcultural contexts and their role in shaping values and norms that help interpret how protective factors might work. And finally, drawing together these insights to go further than research has so far in trying to understand not only the prevalence of protective factors across groups of people but to understand their relevance in individual cases. These issues are explored in the report which accompanies this one entitled: Conceptualising Protective Factors: Strengths-Based Approaches.

1.3 SUMMARY

This part has provided the context for the report and addressed some of the basic issues surrounding the analysis of research evidence for protective factors. In summary:

- Protective factors have been only loosely conceptualised in the literature which is likely a consequence of the focus on risk factors.
- The relationship between protective factors and violent extremism is not straightforward. They are likely to interact with a range of factors as well as exhibiting nonlinear relationships to violent extremism.
- Violent extremism itself has been difficult to operationalise in relation to protective factors.

To account for this, researchers have expanded their focus to include different kinds of violent behaviour, or attitudes considered to be linked to violent behaviours.

- Researchers have been relatively consistent in how they have grouped protective factors across levels of analysis, which, although helpful has the potential to overlook interactions between factors, and the mechanisms and processes by which they work.

Part Two engages with the evidence base more directly by interrogating and updating existing reviews of protective factors to provide an overview of the research evidence on protective factors which is set out in a visual representation of the evidence base.

2. EVIDENCE MAP

This part of the report builds a map of the current state of the evidence on protective factors. It is based on analysis of 51 papers, published between 1998 and 2021. These were identified in two ways, either due to their inclusion in one of the three previous systematic reviews on protective factors (Gill et al., 2020; Lösel et al., 2018; Wolfowicz et al., 2020), or on the basis of forward citation searches from the papers and the systematic reviews.

Each of the existing systematic reviews had a different objective. Gill et al. (2020) expanded the search for protective factors outside of violent extremism to include other forms of violence such as dating violence and carrying of firearms; Lösel et al. (2018) focused only on violent extremism but included some work based on interventions designed to prevent violent extremism; and Wolfowicz et al. (2020) committed to a quantitative meta-analysis that included effect sizes, and included both risk and protective factors. This analysis differs from these reviews as it focuses only on violent extremism and protective factors rather than other forms of violence (e.g., Gill et al., 2020), or risk and protective factors (Wolfowicz et al., 2020). It is therefore more targeted in its approach and seeks to draw out the most robust evidence on protective factors relevant to violent extremism.

The aim of this section is to first collate the research evidence on protective factors and summarise it in graphical form through an evidence map. This helps to demonstrate the strength of evidence for different factors, and the relative attention different kinds and groups of factors have received. Throughout, the aim is to distinguish between the role of different factors in relation to three dependent or outcome variables: violent extremist attitudes, intentions, and behaviours. While this map is a useful guide to the research evidence, it should not be viewed in isolation from the wider discussion of protective factors that follows which adds important further details.

2.1 METHODS

Although there has been little research explicitly looking at protective factors against violent extremism, this report has benefitted from three existing systematic reviews of the literature (Gill et al., 2020; Lösel et al., 2018; and Wolfowicz et al., 2020) which provided the starting point for the development of the evidence map. This process involved:

- Compiling a list of papers from the existing reviews.
    1. For the study which reviewed both protective and risk factors (Wolfowicz et al., 2020), papers were read and searched using the following terms protect*; mediat*; negative. Where the papers did not refer to protective factors, they were excluded.
    2. For the research that included protective factors relevant to non-extremist offending (Gill et al., 2020), papers were reviewed and where they did not relate to violent extremism, they were excluded.
- Excluding papers not in English.
- Excluding papers that were not be accessible by the research team.
- Carrying out a forward citation search using Google Scholar on the remaining pool of papers. This involved reviewing any paper citing the paper of interest published after the date of the latest review a paper was included in.
- Filtering the results from the forward citation search by searching for explicit references to

protective factors. Where it was found to be relevant, the paper was included in the analysis.

- This process left a final pool of 51 papers that went forward to produce the evidence map.

2.2 CODING

Papers were coded on three variables:

1. The dependent variable of the study, either: attitudes linked to violent extremism; intended violent extremist linked behaviours; and/ or actual reported violent extremist behaviours.
2. The level of analysis of the protective factor either: individual, peer, family, school, society.
3. The protective factor identified.

Coding was carried out jointly by two members of the research team and any discrepancies were identified, discussed and resolved. From the total 51 papers that were included in the study, 84 findings describing protective factors were identified. These were then assessed by two members of the research team and where factors were considered substantively the same, but had been given different names in different research studies (e.g., educational attainment and higher educational level), they were consolidated under a single name. In total, this left 53 distinct protective factors.

The analysis of the existing studies was taken forward to produce an evidence map of the research on protective factors related to violent extremist attitudes, intentions or behaviours. In common with research on protective factors, this is laid out in different levels of analysis. Notwithstanding the points made above about the need to take account of interactions between factors, and the importance of avoiding treating groups of factors located across different levels of analysis independently, this provides an easy to interpret, parsimonious way of laying out the existing evidence base which helps to highlight where greatest research attention has been directed, and which areas have been overlooked.

2.3 EVIDENCE MAP

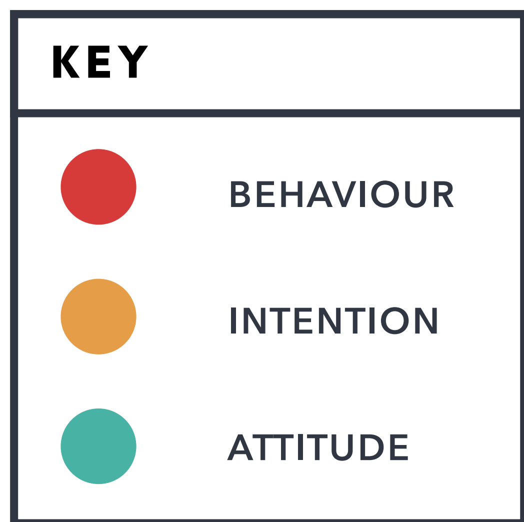
This evidence map provides a visual representation of research on different factors which protect against violent extremism. Each box represents one factor and factors are clustered according to different levels of analysis. These include individual factors and factors linked to the family, society, school and peer group. Individual level factors incorporated such a range of factors that these were further divided into psychological, socio-demographic, activism, religion and civic attachment.

A single factor could be identified in multiple studies, and each study typically refers to more than one protective factor. Studies are numbered and are colour coded based on the outcome that is being assessed in each study. These include violent extremist attitudes, intentions, and behaviours.

See next page for Evidence Map.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS EVIDENCE MAP

This evidence map illustrates a review of research on different factors which protect against violent extremism.



This evidence map on page 2 illustrates the findings of a review of research on protective factors against violent extremism.

The map is based on an analysis of 51 papers published between 1998 and 2021.

See Appendix A for full list of papers used to compile this Evidence Map.

ILLUSTRATIVE MAP BREAKDOWN

Each box represents one factor and factors are clustered according to different levels of influence. These include individual factors such as those relating to psychology, socio-economics, religion, activism, and civic attachment, and factors linked to the family, society, school and peer group.

A single factor could be identified in multiple studies, and each study typically refers to more than one protective factor.

Studies are numbered and are colour coded based on the outcome that is being assessed in each study. These include violent extremist **attitudes**, **intentions**, and **behaviours**.

Although it provides an overview of the factors researchers have identified to date, it does not include details on the strength or direction of the relationships, or provide other relevant information about non-linear relationships or approaches to sampling.

INDIVIDUAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SELF CONTROL	EMPATHY	DEATH OF CLOSE PERSON	MENTAL HEALTH	AGREEABLENESS	LIFE DISATISFACTION
37, 40, 41	18, 21	7	12	22	14

LIFE SKILLS	CONFLICT COPING SKILLS	EMOTIONALITY
34	31	33

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

EMPLOYMENT	AGE	GENDER
32, 1, 25, 26	47, 1, 32	47

FIRST GEN MIGRANT	ETHNICITY	INDIVIDUAL WEALTH
6, 28	13	4

ACTIVISM

LEGIT POLITICAL PROTEST	CHARITABLE DONATION	VOLUNTEERING
7, 3	7	7

BOYCOTTING	POLITICAL DISINTEREST	PEACEFUL RELIGIOUS ACTIV-	DEMOCRATIC VALENCE
7	14	39	27

RELIGION

RELIGIOSITY	LOW IMPORTANCE OF
11, 10, 30, 42, 51	6

RELIGIOUS STUDY	QURANIC AUTHORITATIVE-
3	1

CIVIC ATTACHMENT

ACCEPTANCE OF POLICE LEIGIT-	TRUST IN GOVERNMENT	TRUST IN POLICE	ACCEPTANCE OF CT LAWS
35, 36	13	11	11

PERCEIVED GOVERNMENT	OBSERVER JUSTICE SENSITIVITY	LAW RELEVANT MORALITY	POS ATTITUDE TO RESTORATIVE	LOW ID INCOMPATIBIL-	ANXIETY AT INCARCERATION
20	23	40	43	44	14

FAMILY

POSITIVE PARENTING	MARRIED	PROPERTY OWNERSHIP	NON-VIOLENT PARTNER	NON-VIOLENT FAMILY	INCARCERATION OF FAMILY MEM-
17, 18, 48	5, 26	2	24	14	14

SOCIETY

HOST COUNTRY ATTACHMENT	SOCIETAL ATTACHMENT	SOCIAL COHESION	GROUP EFFICACY	CROSS-GROUP CONTACTS	SOCIAL INTEGRATION
10, 11, 20, 50	49, 15, 49	9, 19	45	46	17

SCHOOL

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT
4, 8, 3, 16, 30, 38, 26

PEER

NON-VIOLENT PEERS	CROSS GROUP FRIENDSHIP	SOCIAL SUPPORT	MORE SOCIAL CONTACT
14, 24	29	42	6

2.4 FINDINGS

The following provides a narrative summary of the findings from the evidence review and mapping process and includes some important nuances about the effects of differing protective factors. It is divided according to different levels of analysis covering individual, peer, family, school, and society level factors.

2.4.1 INDIVIDUAL

Individual level protective factors were by far the most common in the research evidence. For ease of understanding we have divided individual factors further into five additional sub-levels of analysis: psychological, socio-demographic, religious, activism, and civic attachment. These categories should not be taken as entirely distinct as there may be overlap between them, for example, variables within activism and civic attachment are likely to be closely related to one another.

2.4.1.1 Psychological

Nine psychological factors were identified, with the most common frequent (n=3) finding being the protective effects of self-control on attitudes (n=1) (Rottweiler et al., 2021) intentions (n=1) (Rottweiler and Gill, 2020) and behaviours (n=1) (Pauwels and Svensson, 2017). This was followed by empathy (n=2) (Feddes et al., 2015; Doosje et al., 2013) and a series of findings related to other psychological factors including: the death of a close person (Bhui et al, 2014), the presence of a mental health disorder (Corner et al, 2016), agreeableness as a psychological trait (Feddes et al., 2015), life dissatisfaction (Cragin et al., 2015), life skills (‘psychological capabilities to comprehend and manage general daily life tasks and challenges’) (Ozer and Bertelsen, 2020), conflict coping skills (Muluk et al., 2013), and emotionality, specifically openness to experience (Obaidi et al., 2018).

Having a mental health disorder was identified as a protective factor but only against specific forms of terrorist offending, with some evidence that mental health problems are linked to a reduced risk of terrorist offending within groups, but not against lone actor or other forms of offending (Corner et al., 2016). This is an example of how protective factors can often be context specific, in this instance seemingly protecting not against violent behaviour, but as selection criteria for terrorist groups who are less likely to recruit someone with a mental health problem into their ranks.

2.4.1.2 Socio-demographic Factors

Eleven findings related to socio-demographic factors. The most frequent finding (n=4) was that employment was protective against both radical attitudes (Acevedo and Chaudhary, 2015; Nivette et al., 2021) and behaviours (Jensen et al., 2016; La Free et al., 2018). Another comparatively common finding was that age was also protective, with protection related to increased age (Acevdeo and Chaudhary, 2015; Trujillo et al., 2016; Nivette et al., 2021).

Less common findings were protective effects from gender (Trujillo et al., 2016), being a first-generation migrant (Miconi et al., 2021; Bhui et al., 2014), and individual wealth (Berger, 2016). The protective effect of wealth was found to be sample dependent, offering a protective effect for a sample of German Muslims, while in the UK sample higher wealth was related to an apparent increase in the belief that suicide attacks were justified (Berger, 2016: 218).

2.4.1.3 Religion

The most frequent individual finding (n=5) was that religiosity acted as a protective factor against radicalisation (Muluk et al., 2013; Cherney and Murphy, 2019; Rousseau et al., 2019; Zaidise et al., 2007; Charkawi et al., 2021). This encompassed a number of different variables such as frequency of mosque attendance and intensity of religious practice. Other findings related to religion describe additional characteristics of religious practice such as in-depth religious study (Bartlett and Miller, 2012), interpretation of the Quran (Acevedo and Chaudhary, 2015), and (contradicting earlier findings) the reduced

importance of religion in their lives (Bhui et al., 2014). Combined, the overall picture is one in which religious commitment, depth and scope of knowledge is held to be protective against radicalisation.

2.4.1.4 Activism

Activism encompassed several variables related to varying forms of political activism and the extent to which legitimate political participation protected against extremist involvement. Seven factors were identified across eight studies, with only legitimate political protest reporting more than one finding (n=2) (Bhui et al., 2016; Bartlett and Miller, 2012). There was some slight contradiction in the variables, with political disinterest also identified as being protective against adopting violent extremist attitudes (Cragin et al., 2015). This does not invalidate these findings, so much as act as a reminder that these are only statistical tendencies and not iron laws. For some, political disinterest may be protective, but in other instances finding legitimate forms of political expression seems to also reduce the likelihood of extremist participation.

2.4.1.5 Civic Attachment

The final sub-level nested under individual factors was civic attachment. This brought together several variables related to how individuals felt about the societies they lived in and how they were policed. Of the 11 findings, only attitudes to police legitimacy appeared in more than one study (n=2), both of which identified it as protective against engaging in violent extremist behaviours (Pauwels and DeWaele, 2014; Pauwels and Schils, 2016). Both findings are based on samples collected in Belgium, and potentially refer to the same project.

This sub-level includes several findings that may be loosely understood as trust in the state or law enforcement and the degree to which personal morality and the state and the law are aligned. These include trust in government (Costello et al., 2016); the police (Cherney & Murphy, 2019); acceptance of counter terror laws (Cherney and Murphy, 2019); perceptions of government justice (Ellis et al., 2019); and holding law-relevant morality (Rottweiler et al., 2021).

One factor, anxiety over incarceration, comes from a study of Palestinians in the West Bank undertaken by the Rand corporation (Cragin et al., 2015). This study was ground-breaking in its focus on the rejection of violence over risk factors, but it was also very context specific – focussing on youth in the West Bank specifically via semi-structured interviews conducted in Autumn 2012 (Cragin et al., 2015: 6). This is a good reminder that the studies reviewed here often base their analyses on data collected in places where local factors, in this case the experiences of Palestinians, may affect the result. This makes it difficult to generalise too much about how these findings may relate to other contexts.

2.4.2 PEERS

There were comparatively few factors related to the impact of peer relationships: five studies identified four factors. This is surprising given criminological theories that focus on the influence of peers in criminality such as social identity and social learning theory (see theoretical discussion in Part Three). However, many of these factors also plausibly overlapped with broader social factors related to overall trust and an individual's wider stake in society, which are likely easier to operationalise than variables focused on friendship groups.

Broader friendships outside of immediate social groups (Milla and Hudiyana, 2019); having non-violent peers (Cragin et al., 2015); having more social contact (Bhui et al., 2014); and access to supportive social relationships (Rousseau et al., 2019) were all found to be protective of developing extremist attitudes. In addition, Jasko et al.'s (2017) study considered a sample of people who had committed ideologically motivated crimes in the US, noting that having 'non-violent social connections serve as a protective factor, which prevents a person engaging in extremism' (p827).

2.4.3 FAMILY

There were nine findings in total that related to families. The most commonly identified protective factor was linked to parenting style, which is categorised here as positive parenting (Van Bergan et al., 2016; Doojse et al., 2013; Doojse et al., 2012). Family property ownership was found to be protective against extremist attitudes based on an analysis of family consent or refusal for a child to participate in jihadist activity in Pakistan (Asal et al., 2008). Families that owned property were found to be significantly more likely to refuse consent for a child to join jihad. Other findings identified protective factors based on a significant other being uninvolved in radical activities (Jasko et al., 2017); being married (Lafree et al., 2018; Berrebi, 2007); and having non-violent family, as well as having experienced the incarceration of family members (Cragin et al., 2015).

2.4.4 SCHOOL

The school level contained only a single variable: educational attainment, suggesting that educational attainment may be the most readily accessible variable related to education. Although it would have been possible to fold schooling into the broader peer and family levels, or perhaps a more top-level social category, we have maintained it as a separate category to keep open the possibility that schooling and school-place networks may be significant protective factors independent of other types of social networks an individual may be enmeshed in.

Despite the narrowness of the category, educational attainment was identified as protective by the greatest number of studies (7 in total, 5 against radical attitudes, 2 against radical behaviours).

One key study was Bartlett and Miller's (2012) comparison between (non-violent) radicals and terrorists where they found radicals more likely to attend university than terrorists, adding in the observation that of the terrorists, only one studied a non-vocational course of study while arts and humanities subjects were much better represented in the radical sample. The implication being that higher levels of educational attainment, especially in subjects that focus on complex ideas over black and white thinking, provided some protection against progressing from the 'radical' to the terroristic.

More straightforwardly, Berger (2016: 218) found in samples of Muslims in the UK, France, Germany, and Spain, that educational attainment reduced support for suicide bombing and Osama Bin Laden. Berger interpreted this not as protective, but instead suggested that the lack of educational opportunities was a risk factor for extremist attitudes.

2.4.5 SOCIETY

Six total factors were identified under the society heading, based on findings from twelve studies. The greatest number of findings was related to home country attachment. For example, Ellis et al.'s (2019) study of support for political violence amongst men of Somali origin living in North America tested several variables stemming from the idea that social connection to a society was protective against radicalisation (see discussion on Social Control in Part Three). To determine the level of attachment an individual felt to a host country, they used an eight-item scale which assessed the relevant importance of being either American or Canadian to individual identity and the importance of making a contribution to the host country (Ellis et al., 2019: 8). Greater attachment to the country of residence was found to be a mitigating factor in the relationship between perceived low levels of government justice, grievance, and trauma, and radicalisation (Ellis et al., 2019: 10).

Several closely related factors also provided evidence of the importance of forms of social integration as protective factors: societal attachment (Van Bergan et al., 2015; Decker & Pyrooz, 2019); social cohesion (Ellis et al., 2016; Cardelli et al., 2020); and social integration (Doojse et al 2012). Two further protective factors identified under the societal heading were group efficacy referring to a group's ability to improve

its situation and overcome difficulties (Tausch et al., 2011) and contacts with different ethnic groups (Tausch et al., 2009).

2.5 CAVEATS

There are several considerations when interpreting the evidence map. The division between dependent variables (attitudes, intentions, and behaviours), is designed to show that researchers took a variety of approaches to measuring violent extremism, but this masks considerable variation in the way they operationalised this in their studies.

Assessing violent extremist behaviours is the most challenging, as respondents may often be unwilling to admit undertaking violent acts. To get around this, researchers frequently worked from existing datasets. For example, Asal et al.'s work on family consent for a child to participate in extremist violence was able to identify family members of militants through reports of those killed in fighting (Asal et al., 2008:981). Whilst Bartlett and Miller (2012:3) compiled open source and secondary data (including interviews with those who knew terrorists) to develop a dataset of homegrown Islamist terrorists.

Capturing intentions and beliefs typically took place in a more standardised way. A relatively common tool was the Activism and Radicalisation Intention Scale (ARIS) which assessed a respondent's willingness to participate in both violent activism and legitimate protest (Jahnke et al., 2020). Other research focused only on the violent or illegal portion of the scale, composed of the following items (Miconi et al., 2021: 644):

- I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes breaks the law;
- I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes resorts to violence;
- I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent;
- I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating members of my group.

ARIS was also used by Ellis et al. in their work on experiences of trauma in North American Somali communities. However, they softened many of the items on the original ARIS in order to take a more participatory approach to research. Declarative items ('I would') were softened to ('I can understand someone who would') to make the research less challenging for participants (2015: 867). This is a fully defensible and well-justified decision in the context of the research. However, it highlights both the challenges researchers face when trying to operationalise highly politically sensitive dependent variables of interest, and the variation in how researchers approached the dependent variable in these studies.

As already noted in the existing literature on protective factors (see Part One), in several cases the relationships between independent and dependant variables were non-linear or highly context dependent. As an example, conspiracy theories, or the belief that small groups of people are working in secret to malevolent ends, are a common feature in extremist subcultures. The most notorious of these are anti-Semitic conspiracy theories embedded in many extreme-right and neo-Nazi influenced subcultures, including allegations of human sacrifice and the machinations of global capital.

However, conspiracy belief is a relatively common feature for subcultures that exist on the margins of, and in opposition to, mainstream society. Rottweiler and Gill (2020) examined the relationship between conspiracy belief and violent extremist intentions quantitatively. Based on a sample of 1502 respondents in Germany they examined respondents' reported willingness to engage in radical behaviours on behalf

of a self-defined group. They found that conspiracy belief was related to a higher readiness to engage in violent extremism, but this relationship was affected by other variables. Self-control was found to offer some protection by interrupting the relationship between conspiracy belief and violent extremist intentions: those who reported greater self-control were less vulnerable to conspiracy beliefs driving violent extremist intentions.

Empirical relationships were sometimes further complicated by their context, with protective factors present but only under particular circumstances. One example of this is Corner et al.'s (2016) work on mental health disorders within extremist settings. Corner et al. advocated for a more granular understanding of both terrorism and mental health, suggesting the commonly accepted finding that mental health and terrorism are unrelated depended heavily on the kinds of terrorism under consideration and the specific mental health diagnosis. Co-offending, or the degree to which a terrorist actor was engaged with others during their activities, was negatively related to mental health disorders; mental disorders were less prevalent in those involved with terrorist groups, and more prevalent among lone actors and mass murders (p.562). From this perspective, having a mental health disorder is protective against specific types of terrorist engagement but only when compared against less social forms of terrorism.

2.6 SUMMARY: EVIDENCE GAPS

So far, the research evidence on factors protective against violent extremism contains few surprises. From the consolidated evidence it seems that individuals who have higher levels of self-control and empathy, are older, employed, educated, and feel strong affinities for their countries of residence, are less likely to resort to violent extremism as a solution to grievances. As far as it goes, this is encouraging, but the evidence base developed thus far is unlikely to represent a comprehensive overview of protective factors. There are several reasons for this.

Most straightforwardly, most of the research reviewed above, with some exceptions (Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Cragin et al., 2015), is not focused on protective factors. Instead, the evidence largely comes from studies of risk which have identified protective factors as a by-product of efforts to model risk factors. There is little in the evidence base that can speak to protective factors as distinctive phenomena rather than the other side of known risk factors. There is therefore limited work which connects with the more developed understandings of protective factors discussed in Part One.

In terms of empirics, the focus of the research covered in this report has been heavily on quantitative studies. This is likely a function of the kinds of research evidence considered by the systematic reviews that have informed the process of developing the evidence map, at least two of which had a clear interest in quantitative data. Quantitative research of the kind set out in the evidence map provides an overview of protective factors at an abstract level, but offers less detail about the more granular factors and processes by which protective factors play out. To a significant extent, the evidence described above is built on survey research each with its own approach, sample, and variables of interest. However, it remains important to recognise the limitations of survey methods when trying to develop an accurate picture of inherently illicit and clandestine activities and counter-normative attitudes. Even with assurances of anonymity, survey research may fail to capture those who are more committed to extremist viewpoints.

Closely related to these issues are the differing approaches to interpreting and assessing the dependent variable. In common with other syntheses, we have disaggregated between violent extremist attitudes, intentions, and behaviours, in our reporting. However, these measurements often need further scrutiny before they can be properly understood. Conceptually,

extremist attitudes and intentions may present less of an immediate issue than they appear. A long-standing observation within terrorism studies has been that very few of those engaged in extremist settings will go on to engage in violence or commit a crime (Horgan & Taylor, 2011). Holding extremist views, or potentially even intentions, does not necessarily translate into a commitment to violence. Likewise, the specifics of many of the scales commonly used in research include items that could potentially include the mildly dissatisfied as well as the extreme.

Another critique which can be levelled not necessarily at individual studies but at the reporting of them in this study and the need to abstract results to provide this kind of overview. Many of the studies included in the evidence map are focused on specific contexts and it is important to question the extent to which protective factors identified in, for example the West Bank, are applicable in other places. Considering the research evidence in this way risks overlooking the specifics of different contexts and processes and thereby missing some of the subtler aspects of how protective factors work.

Overall, this evidence map helps to set out some of the general landmarks in the evidence base, but it lacks the detail needed to make it reliable for detailed navigation. More focused research work is needed to fill in the missing details and capture some of the larger landmarks yet to be discovered.

3. THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

Theory, as opposed to empirical work, speaks to broader patterns and mechanisms that help to explain relationships. Some of the most valuable research on risk and protective factors has sought to embed empirical analysis within broader theoretical understandings of radicalisation. These richer accounts of radicalisation are often geared towards identifying risks and largely neglect protective factors. In addition to the limited focus on protective factors, understanding how they have been used in the literature is made more challenging as theories are seldom clearly defined. Instead, studies refer to theories in passing, or draw on theories implicitly to support the development of hypotheses that are subsequently tested in empirical analysis.

Of the 51 papers assessed in the development of the evidence map, 32 referred to a broader theory of some type in their analysis. While some papers took steps to integrate existing criminological and sociological theories into their empirical analyses, others based their approach mainly on previous findings and implicit theories. These amounted to hypothesised relationships between different risk factors rather than more expansive accounts of the mechanisms at work and largely overlooked protective factors.

None of the papers deliberately and explicitly engaged with the concept of protective factors from a theoretical perspective. While several studies did take protective factors as the focus of their analysis, these were generally more empirically than theoretically oriented (e.g., Bartlett and Miller, 2013; Cragin et al., 2015; Milla and Hudiyana, 2019). Equally, the centrality of theory varied heavily between the papers. Of those studies that drew on broader theories, eight (Cardeli et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2019; Feddes et al., 2015; Obaidi et al., 2015; Ozer and Bertelsen 2019; van Bergan et al., 2015; van Bergan et al., 2016) were judged to explicitly reference theories that speak to protective factors, with the remainder referencing theory only in the context of risk.

Within these eight papers there were some distinct patterns. In general, researchers linked their work to social control theory (Cardeli et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2019), or social identity theory (Feddes et al., 2015; van Bergen et al., 2015; van Bergen et al., 2016; Obaidi et al., 2018). Ozer and Bertelsen (2019), by contrast, offered a 'life psychological perspective'. All these studies operationalised the dependent variable by looking at attitudes. The only exception was Obaidi et al. (2018), which focused instead on behavioural intentions. Together, this indicates that protective factors have not been explicitly integrated into the dominant theoretical frameworks used for understanding radicalisation.

3.1 THEORISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Despite the lack of attention paid to theorising protective factors, by reverse engineering some of the theories that are used to explain how risk factors are believed to function, it is possible to develop a slightly clearer idea of how protective factors might work. The following discussion outlines some of the key theories embedded in the literature and describes how they seek to explain protective factors. This includes those theories that were used to help interpret protective factors (social control theory and social identity theory), and those that were implicit in the wider literature that focused more clearly on risks (social learning theory, strain theory, anomie/anomia, and significance quest). Where possible, the means by which these theories seek to explain protective factors are described, although this is less straightforward and discussion more limited, for those studies which only refer to theory in passing or which are primarily

concerned with risk factors rather than on analysing protective factors on their own terms.

3.1.1 SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY

Social control theory originated in criminology at the neighbourhood level and suggests that social bonds and other connections to wider society are important for conveying social norms and expectations to individuals (Cardeli et al., 2020: 19). Social controls are also important at the societal level, as they are thought by some to prevent subterranean values from surfacing (Boehnke et al., 2008: 586).

Social control theory suggests the existence of both formal and informal modes of social control (Levesque, 2011). At the core of social control is the internalisation of prevailing norms from the surrounding society, where this fails to happen then individuals can behave outside generally accepted norms (Levesque, 2011). Bonds are factors which generally connect an individual to the wider community providing a conduit for norms to be maintained such as employment, marriage, and friendship groups, effectively "shielding them from deviance" (LaFree et al., 2018: 236).

For radicalisation, social control theories point towards an individual's bonds with the surrounding community and any bonds that they may develop outside the community, especially with social groups at odds with dominant norms (Cardeli et al., 2020). While radicalisation, and terrorism, can be interpreted as a loss of social control, with individuals failing to internalise prevailing norms and morals, it can also be looked on as the emergence of rival sets of norms vying with the dominant norms in society. Control is not so much lost as it is transferred to different groups.

Social control theory assumes that when individuals turn to crime, pro-social processes have broken down. Connection to one's community through different channels, and the presence of positive and accessible reward structures, can therefore be framed as protecting most individuals from straying far outside of mainstream norms and values.

3.1.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social Identity Theory focuses on the wider groups that individuals identify with and the emotional resonance and meaning of such connections (Charkawi et al., 2021: 177). Self-esteem stems from pride and contentment in one's group and making positive comparisons between one's own groups and outsiders, creating an in-group and an out-group (Tausch et al., 2009; Williamson et al., 2020). Where groups are perceived as being less well-treated than others (stigma) then this can turn to negative emotions such as anger and frustration (Feddes et al., 2015: 401; Williamson et al., 2020). Important variables in considering social identity focus on group identification and perceptions of group experiences such as discrimination and marginalisation (Charkawi et al., 2021).

Social identity, and other identities, are not monolithic. Individuals can have multiple identities and this is particularly the case in multicultural societies in which specific group identities co-exist alongside a broader national identity. This need not lead automatically to conflict, particularly where national identities are inclusive (Charkawi et al., 2021: 181).

Where individuals maintain multiple identities simultaneously, there is some evidence they may be protected against developing strong identification with a single group (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018: 92; Williamson et al., 2020: 212). Milla and Hudiyana's research focussed on the potentially protective effects of social relationships extending outside of the immediate in-group, noting that extremists often sought to limit access to outsiders (2019: 100). However, social identities that are under pressure can add to the development of extremist ideologies as attitudes within the in-group harden. For example, where negative media coverage and the development of counter terrorism laws are widely seen as unfairly targeting Muslims, then the resulting sense of marginalisation can have consequences for support for extremism (Charkawi et al., 2021: 181).

Where conflict does emerge then attitudes are liable to harden as people choose between identity groups. In-group and out-group conflict has been noted as a core theme of extremist propaganda that seeks to exploit social identities (Charkawi et al., 2021: 181). While social identity is notionally a social phenomenon, researchers have noted that social identities are very often affected by structural level factors such as media coverage and societal attitudes (Feddes et al., 2015; Charkawi et al., 2021).

In terms of protective factors, social identity theory could point towards multiple approaches to protection from radicalisation. At the structural level avoiding divisive national rhetoric and building strong and inclusive national identities with room for differing social identity groups is important. Individually, the capacity to negotiate multiple identities and the tensions between them without falling back on in-group and out-group dynamics would potentially reduce the essentialising of social identities to a them, and an us. Finally, at the social level protection comes from group dynamics and building social identities that are resilient and flexible enough to co-exist within a wider society.

3.1.3 SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory emerged from understandings of how individuals learn vicariously from observing models for different forms of behaviour. It was informed by a rejection of what was often seen as an excessive focus on individual psychology (Pauwels and Schils, 2016: 3). In criminological contexts, building on ideas about differential association and social identity, researchers suggested that small-group interaction may help to explain why criminal behaviours develop (LaFree et al., 2018: 239). Behaviours are transferred through imitation, modelling, conditioning and reinforcement; for example, having radical peers may expose an individual to ridicule for dissenting from the dominant opinion in the group (LaFree et al., 2018: 239; Pauwels and Schils., 2016: 5). Having radical peers can potentially remove barriers to individual participation in violent extremism (LaFree et al., 2018: 239).

Social learning also includes some insights into how individuals may enter extremist settings, described as ‘flocking’ and ‘feathering’. Flocking relationships are driven by common factors, in the case of right-wing extremism, those who distrust the government may be drawn to others who also distrust the government. Feathering in contrast is where individuals begin to take on the characteristics of the spaces they inhabit in order to fit in, learning the values and attitudes displayed for them by others (Costello et al., 2016: 313).

From a protective stance, social learning focuses heavily on peers, family, and anyone who may provide a potential model for a radicalising individual. Non-radical peers and family are therefore considered able to exert a positive or protective influence over those who might come to see engagement in extremism as a viable option.

3.1.4 STRAIN THEORY AND ANOMIA

Strain theory is a common feature of the research evidence (Rottweiler et al., 2021; De Waele and Pauwels, 2016). Strain theory originated in criminology research and argues that strains, more usually termed grievances in terrorism research and stressors elsewhere, are relevant to explaining terrorism, particularly as terrorists themselves have placed their grievances front and centre in their own terminology (Agnew, 2010: 133). Criminal activity is framed as a form of coping with these strains, offending either as a result of negative emotions such as fear or rage, or to actively reduce strain, for example, by stealing money.

Strains are not seen as a universal and individuals are acknowledged as having different abilities to cope with strains (Agnew, 2010: 136). Strains can be further divided between individual and collective levels, referring either to negative pressures on the individual or a wider group they identify with, for example, a collective experience of discrimination. Strains do

not have to be empirically verified by can be based on perceived injustices (De Waele and Pauwels, 2016).

Several of the papers in the research base refer to either anomia or anomie (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Delia Deckard and Jacobson, 2015; Rottweiler and Gill, 2020; De Waele and Pauwels, 2016; Boehnke et al., 1998; Pauwels and De Waele, 2014: 140; Rottweiler et al., 2021). Anomie and Anomia are social constructs that refer to norms within societies. Anomie is a societal level state in which rapid changes in norms can lead to an overall normlessness (Adam-Troian et al., 2020). Anomia exists at the individual level referring to a loss of societal attachment and "normlessness" that can arise from alienation (Rottweiler et al 2021: 5). Anomia is characterised by feelings of (Adam-Troian, et al., 2020: 219):

- "Meaninglessness (that one's life has no purpose),
- Powerlessness (that one's actions have no political consequences),
- Social isolation (that one's values do not fit with those of one's society),
- Normlessness (that behavior [sic] is not efficiently socially regulated), and
- Self-estrangement (that one's daily actions are motivated by external factors such as working for the wage only)"

For research in this space anomie and the related individual state of anomia are often used as synonyms for alienation, stress, and grievance, and serve as something of a root cause to explain radicalisation. Delia-Deckard and Jacobson (2015: 430) for example concluded their analysis by suggesting that religion itself was not a causal factor in radicalisation, but rather a frame through which anomie expressed itself. Rottweiler and Gill (2020: 3) used the idea of anomia to help explain why conspiracy belief appeals to some individuals – helping believers to overcome the sense of powerlessness associated with anomic states. In addition, legal cynicism was thought to be related to feelings of anomia brought on by perceived injustice and relative depravation (Rottweiler and Gill 2020: 5). Anomia has been operationalised in several different ways by researchers. For example, Rottweiler et al. (2021: 10) measure levels of individual anomia through a two-item scale: "Nowadays everything is changing so quickly that I do not know what is right or wrong anymore" and "Nowadays things have gotten so difficult, that I don't know how to cope with them".

Related to the idea of strains and anomie is the idea of subterranean values. This theory suggests that societies and cultures carry inherent subterranean values such as in-group favouritism and out-group violence. These values are seen as more likely to surface in times of weakened social control which usually keeps these tendencies in check. Likewise, individuals under the least influence from these tendencies, in particular young people not yet bound to the job market or family structures, are seen as most vulnerable (Boehnke et al 1998: 586).

Both Strain Theory and Anomia are difficult to interpret in light of protective factors as they both relate to adverse experiences undergone by individuals and groups. Protection would partly come from prevention, i.e. factors that would ensure individuals do not come under these types of pressures. A further layer of protective factors could be envisaged as an ability to cope with strains and loss of norms, either though psychological traits and personal skills, or through recourse to other forms of support such as peer and friendship groups.

3.1.5 SIGNIFICANCE QUEST

Significance quest theory argues that radicalisation and terrorist motivation can be subsumed under the concept of personal significance with individual terrorist motivations (e.g., following a charismatic leader or revenge) being reduced in one degree or another to a desire to assert an individual's own significance (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Humans do not invariably seek significance, this desire needs to be awakened through one of several processes such as the loss of

significance either individually or collectively (i.e. humiliation); to avoid a potential loss of significance; or as an opportunity for significance gain (Kruglanski et al., 2014: 75-76). Hence:

"When people perceive themselves as rejected, divested of control, or as victims of injustice, they feel belittled and disrespected; consequently, they are motivated to restore their sense of self-worth and meaning." (Jasko et al., 2017:817)

In this conceptualisation, the need to restore self-worth and meaning, particularly as a result of exclusion or marginalisation, is seen as a potential driver for the adoption of extremist ideologies and subsequent involvement in violence (Nivette et al., 2021). Significance quest has been operationalised as variables related to individual significance and situations that may bring about significance loss such as unemployment, socio-economic status, failure to achieve aspirations, or incidents of trauma and abuse (Jasko et al., 2017: 820), educational failure, or the breakdown of social and romantic relationships (Nivette et al., 2021).

Significance loss is presented here as an individual level theory but can be connected to broader social theories such as anomie – in which the state fails to enable citizens to meet goals thereby inducing a loss of attachment and normlessness (anomia). Kruglanski et al. (2014: 75) notes that such a state can "foster a feeling of helplessness and personal insignificance".

Interpreting significance quest in light of protection suggests that pro-social methods of protecting or attaining significance can effectively take the place of violence supporting ideologies. Kruglanski et al. (2014: 79) note that significance quest itself does not drive violence, only when is it filtered through a violence justifying ideology does it become a problem.

3.2 SUMMARY

In keeping with the empirical literature reviewed in the previous section, there is very limited theoretical work that explicitly discusses protective factors. Just as empirical findings have developed largely from researchers attempting to identify risk factors, so too have theoretical efforts focused on risks associated with radicalisation. The theoretical accounts concerned with explaining radicalisation borrowed heavily from existing criminological theories to interpret why some people were driven or chose to radicalise. Through this process, particular kinds of protective factors were identified, but were rarely theorised on their own terms.

The lack of theory relating specifically to protective factors makes it hard to relate the evidence base to the earlier discussion of how protective factors have been conceptualised in part one. Based on the available evidence, the mechanics of protective factors remain under-described; we are not much closer to understanding protective factors as being independent of risk factors, the absence of them, or the opposite end of a scale.

The review of how research has sought to explain protective factors highlighted a number of aspects that are helpful when trying to interpret these processes. First, that there are benefits of recognising the interactions between different levels of analysis. Although the division between structural, individual, and social explanations is useful for categorising theories and empirical research on the factors that seem to increase or inhibit risk, this approach overlooks the fact that radicalisation – and efforts to explain it – frequently involve interactions across different levels.

A number of the structural theories, such as anomia, are broad enough that they can conceivably extend to the social and individual levels. For example, the loss of social control can be interpreted as a form of localised anomia as individuals lose the social bonds that integrate them into wider societies. Social control theory attributes significance to early childhood development processes and suggests that self-control

(an individual level explanation), is developed through childhood developmental processes (Rottweiler et al., 2021: 5). Likewise, conceptualisations such as social identity theory work at both a social and structural level, with group level characteristics becoming more salient where groups are under stress or marginalised because of processes in wider society, for example, through negative media coverage (Charkawi et al., 2021).

The review has also highlighted the complex causal processes that need to be taken into account when trying to explain how protective factors might work. The literature that focuses exclusively on protective factors indicates that relationships between variables and outcomes are frequently non-linear. Protective factors have been described as working through more complex routes, such as mediating a known risk factor, or mitigating risk under very specific circumstances, such as mental health protecting against co-offending.

The source of protection is also complex. In some cases, outside interventions may help to enhance protective factors. These can emerge from efforts to address structural factors such as working to better integrate marginalised groups and developing societal attachments. At the individual level, protection can come from individual resilience to strains, helping them cope with negative experiences and perceptions.

Finally, although the least well explored in the literature, protective factors at the social level remain relevant. In the language of social learning theory, radicalising individuals need models for their new mind set, norms, attitudes, and behaviours; someone needs to teach them how to be an extremist. This can take place directly in the context of recruitment, but learning can also be vicarious through observation. If these influences are absent or contested the potential for radicalisation may be reduced.

Combined, these findings strongly suggest that protective factors can take differing forms depending on where an individual is in the longer process of radicalisation. The presence of discrete protective factors in the form of positive models and connections may offer a first layer of security, preventing individuals from seeking out different sets of ideas to explain the world and guide their actions. Where these break down, protection may be more about the absence of violent extremist risk factors for the vulnerable, such as easy access to extremist ideas and interpretation through friends and family, or alternate role models to idealise.

Even where individuals do radicalise and become embedded in extremist subcultures their paths through them are often dissimilar. While terrorists capture the headlines, they are in many ways aberrations, even within outwardly extremely violent subcultures. Much contemporary political violence falls short of terrorism, involving minimal planning, and motivated by animosity as much as in service of a wider strategy for political or social change. These disparities have provoked emotive debates over the nature of extremism and terrorism. They also suggest that extremist subcultures offer their protagonists far more than violence.

The scale of some violent extremist subcultures seems to belie the amount of real-world violence successfully carried out in their name. Given the number of people who engage in extremist subcultures but do not go on to engage in illegal or violent behaviour, it seems reasonable to suggest that the majority may be content to practice their extremism without resorting to violence, and in many cases solely through their computer screens. This suggests that even where individuals enter violent extremist subcultures, further layers of protection may exist between radicalisation and violence.

The literature reviewed so far suggests that work to interpret and conceptualise how protective factors work will benefit from paying attention to how factors across different levels of analysis interact; taking account of the role of values and norms; recognising the benefits people seek to achieve, or the obstacles they seek to

mitigate when engaging in extremist spaces; and acknowledging the constraints that are work within subcultures that have the potential to limit the scope of violent mobilisation.

Developing a better understanding of these issues will make it possible to address a range of gaps in our current knowledge, relating both to the empirical evidence about the nature of protective factors in the context of violent extremism, and the theoretical and conceptual means by which it might be possible to interpret how, when and why they work.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This report set out to conceptualise protective factors, summarise the extant empirical evidence base, and assess the extent to which current theoretical frameworks have been applied to protective factors.

Contemporary research on protective factors provides evidence for a range of factors that may offer individuals some protection from violent extremist attitudes, intentions, and beliefs. In general, the literature suggests that limiting grievances, developing skills and traits to cope with adverse events, and limited exposure to violent extremist settings may help explain to some extent why individuals do not engage in violent extremism.

However, the theoretical and evidential base to date is limited in several ways.

- No clear conceptualisation of protective factors has emerged, and much of the research suggests that individual factors may work in non-linear ways or function as components in dynamic processes that play out over time.
- The empirical research base has seldom looked explicitly at protective factors, and most findings have emerged from studies focused on risk.
- The theoretical basis for these studies is also typically focused on risk and there is little theoretical work which explicitly addresses protective factors within research on violent extremism.
- The evidence base, particularly when presented in a review such as this, lacks context and tends to overlook the specific social and subcultural features relevant to interpreting protective factors.
- Quantitative research methods, in particular a focus on survey designs, have often struggled to access key dependant variables, frequently asking sample populations about attitudes and or intentions, and seldom looking at actual violent or illegal behaviours.

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APPENDIX A: PAPERS USED IN EVIDENCE MAP

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