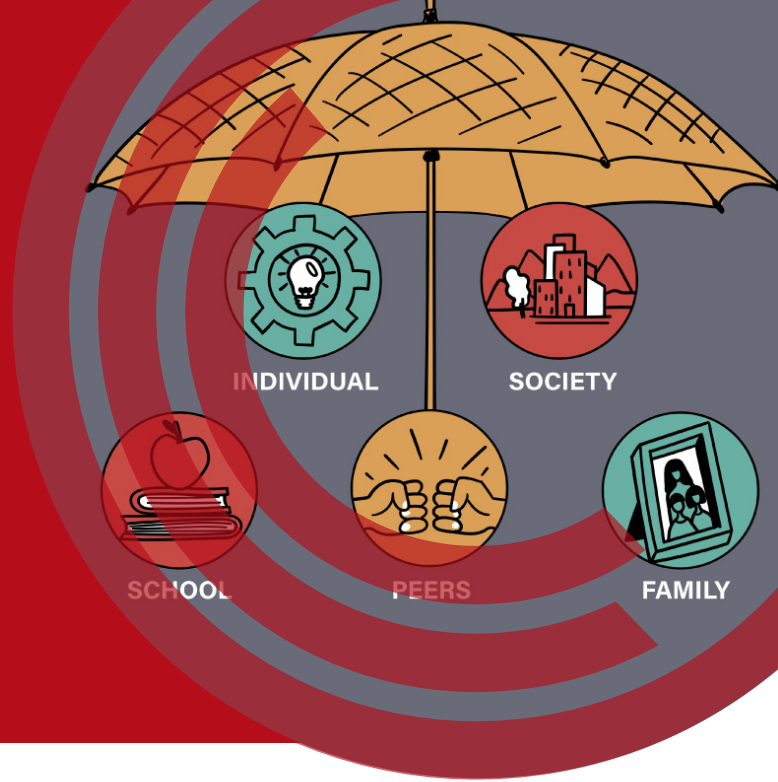# PROTECTIVE FACTORS: THEORY & EVIDENCE

This guide provides a very brief overview of recent research which has sought to assess understanding and evidence of protective factors within the field.

INDIVIDUAL

SOCIETY

SCHOOL

PEERS

FAMILY

> " **Protective factors are factors that prevent or reduce the likelihood of individuals engaging in extremism or violence** "

INTRODUCTION

Protective factors are broadly understood as features of an individual or their context that reduce the likelihood they will engage in extremism or violence. Research on protective factors in terrorism is in its infancy and is only just beginning to analyse which factors can play a protective role and how they might work. A great deal is yet to be understood.

This guide provides a very brief overview of recent research which has sought to assess understanding and evidence of protective factors within the field. It covers the conceptualisation of, evidence for, and theory behind, protective

factors based on a review of recent empirical research. Alongside this short guide is the full project report which provides more detail about the findings and an illustrated evidence map which gives a visual summary of the findings of the review.

This guide is relevant for anyone with an interest in protective factors, including practitioners with a focus on risk assessment and management as well as researchers whose work looks at risk and protective factors beyond terrorism and violent extremism.

WHAT IS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR?

Protective factors are factors that prevent or reduce the likelihood of individuals engaging or re-engaging with extremist settings and different forms of political violence. The current empirical evidence base on what informs pathways into and out of extremism is heavily focused on identifying risk factors, and protective factors are often a secondary research consideration.

Comparatively few researchers within terrorism studies have focused explicitly on protective factors. More advanced work from other fields such as violence prevention and child development have developed different ways of conceptualising protective factors, including:

- The absence of an established risk factor, for example the absence of radical views.

- The opposite of an established risk factor, for example being in an older rather than younger age category.

- Discrete factors in and of themselves, for example understanding religion in a more in-depth way.

Beyond these concepts, researchers have raised a number of additional considerations when thinking about protective factors.

Criminological research has sought to differentiate between protective factors, which work to 'buffer' or reduce the impact of risk factors, and promotive factors which refer to innate strengths linked to an overall risk of offending (Loeber et al., 2008).

Work on child development has highlighted the importance of interactions between risk and protective factors, for example where specific protective factors become more important as risk increases, or less influential where individuals are engaged in high-risk settings (Luthar et al 2000).

Some risk factors may become more important where protective factors are absent. For example, risk factors are likely to play out differently in households with low and high levels of parental supervision (Lösel & Farrington 2012).

Lastly, protection and risk may not be mutually exclusive: they may cluster, accumulate, and evolve over time. Some experiences which might be considered a risk factor may have the potential to act as a protective factor in the future. For example, overcoming an adverse childhood experience may develop resilience and serve a protective function in later life (Lösel and Bender, 2003: 137).

An added complexity in research seeking to understand the role of protective factors in violent extremism and terrorism is determining the most appropriate outcome to assess. The studies in our review often differed in how they operationalised outcomes. In some cases, research examined protection against extremist attitudes, other studies focused on intentions to commit violent acts, whilst others looked at behaviours, including actual claims to have committed violence. Much of the empirical research included in the review focused on attitudes and intentions. This is likely to be due to methodological reasons, as it is typically easier to capture data on attitudes and intentions than in relation to individuals that have engaged in violent extremism or terrorism.

Despite these conceptual and empirical challenges, a better understanding of protective factors is important for understanding what decreases the likelihood of engaging in violent extremism or terrorism. In particular, protective factors are relevant in the context of risk assessment and management, as well as when seeking to interpret the potential effects of law enforcement activities and interventions to counter violent extremism. Protective factors are therefore an important component in developing a better understanding of when and why individuals engage, offend, disengage, re-engage, or reoffend in extremist contexts.

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WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SHOW?

To develop a picture of the evidence base on protective factors we reviewed 51 studies sourced from three systematic reviews (Gill et al., 2020; Lösel et al., 2018; and Wolfowicz et al., 2020) updated with forward citation searches to identify additional studies of relevance.

The details of the methods we used and a more detailed description of the findings are available in the full report and a graphical illustration of the review and findings is also available (see Read More page 6).

THE STUDY

We coded studies by three variables:

- Dependent variable(s) of interest in the study, either attitudes, intentions, or behaviours.

- Level of analysis, either individual, peer, family, school, or society.

- The specific protective factor(s) identified.

In total we identified 84 findings across the papers which related to 53 distinct protective factors.

The results show that the evidence base on protective factors focuses heavily on individual level factors. We divided the individual section into several sub-headings: psychological, socio-demographic, religion, activism, and civic attachment. Examples of individual level protective factors include self-control, being in employment, religiosity, engaging in legitimate protest, and attitudes towards wider civil society.

Overall, there was less evidence relevant to other levels of analysis. Beyond the individual level, findings related to:

- Peers, for example, whether someone is part of cross-group friendships, or enjoys greater levels of social support.

- Family, including the influence of a positive parenting style and the extent to which family members are non-violent.

- School based factors were exclusively focused on educational attainment, which was found to fulfil a protective function.

- Societal level protective factors focused on attachment to home countries and included multiple variables related to social integration.

The research has limitations. Studies mostly concentrated on individual level factors, frequently measured by survey instruments and located in somewhat diverse political and geographic settings, ranging from those convicted of terrorism in Indonesia, to prisoners convicted of non-terrorism related crimes in the United States, through to adolescents in Germany. This suggests that the evidence may be hard to generalise from, and that social and societal level factors may be harder to research with these tools and methods.

In common with the wider literature, there was a clear focus on risk in the studies. With some exceptions, studies were primarily concerned with interpreting and analysing risk factors. Protective factors often emerged as relationships identified by multivariate models which were designed to identify risk factors. Overall, empirical evidence suggests that protective factors are something of an afterthought in terrorism and extremism studies, emerging as by-products of the search for risk factors. There has been little empirical work that has sought to identify and test protective factors specifically.

HOW DO PROTECTIVE FACTORS WORK?

The focus on risk in the evidence base extends to the theoretical assumptions made by many of the studies we reviewed. Of the 51 papers in the analysis, 32 referred to broader theories; of those, only eight suggested theories that might help explain protective factors. The theories themselves were primarily orientated towards explaining radicalisation and criminality rather than trying to interpret or explain protective factors. A fuller discussion of the theoretical assumptions and arguments embedded in the evidence base is contained in the full report. What follows provides a very brief overview of some of the theories used.

- Social control theory, originating in criminology, suggests bonds to wider society transmit norms. Where bonds break down, individuals are thought to be more at risk, whereas protective factors are found in bonds that tie individuals to wider social norms (LaFree et al 2018; Boehnke et al 2008).

- Social identity theory centres on the wider groups individuals identify with and the emotional connections they feel, as well as hostility that can arise towards outsiders (Charkawi et al 2021; Tausche et al 2009). Protective factors were informed by having multiple identities with the capacity to help protect someone against over-identifying with a specific group. Protection was also afforded by coming from social contexts that are inclusive and accommodate multiple identity

groups, avoiding the need to retreat to strong in-group out-group dynamics.

- Social learning theory focuses on how individuals absorb values by watching the experiences of those around them (LaFree et al., 2018). 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 considered able to exert a positive or protective influence over those who might come to see engagement in extremism as a viable option.

- Strain theory and the closely linked concept of anomia were more commonly used in the evidence base (Rottweiler et al., 2021). Strains are individual and collective level grievances. When strains cannot be addressed through legitimate means, individuals are thought more likely to turn to non-normative solutions such as criminality or extremism. Protection stems from increasing resilience and the ability to cope with grievances, as well as broader steps to address those grievances where possible.

- Significance Quest Theory argues that individuals are motivated to engage in extremism and violence in a bid to obtain significance, particularly where significance has been taken away through loss or humiliation (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Interpreting this in the context of protective factors involves identifying pro-social factors that can help restore significance.

Overall, the evidence base reflected a lack of theoretical frameworks that specifically related to protective factors. The theoretical landscape applied to terrorism and extremism is instead more concerned with explaining risk and radicalisation mechanics as opposed to reasons why these processes may not happen.

NEXT STEPS...

Reviewing the empirical and theoretical evidence base on protective factors reveals a field in its infancy. The next steps for this research agenda include more clearly conceptualising and theorising how and why protective factors work, and testing these frameworks to consolidate a more robust conceptual and empirical understanding of protective factors.

In this way it will be possible to develop a body of research that begins from a commitment to understanding protective factors in their own right, and which pays close attention to the social-ecological and subcultural factors that are at work to complement the heavy emphasis on the individual-level reflected in existing research.

READ MORE

About the authors

• Benjamin Lee, University of St Andrews

• Sarah Marsden, University of St Andrews

About the project

This CREST guide 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 the Full Report and all the outputs from this project at:

www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/

READ MORE

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