



# Conceptualising Protective Factors:

## Strengths-Based Approaches

**FULL REPORT**

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## FULL REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Understanding about what protects against involvement in violent extremism and terrorism is in its infancy. Little concerted attention has been paid to developing a conceptual, theoretical or empirically informed account of how, when and why protective factors work. To begin to address these gaps in the research base, this report presents a preliminary model for conceptualising how protective factors might work in relation to violent extremism.

- Research on protective factors in relation to terrorism and violent extremism is limited.
- Relatively little empirical research has focused specifically on protective factors.
- There is considerable ambiguity as to how protective factors should be conceptualised.
- They have been interpreted as:
  - Reducing risk factors
  - The absence of risk factors
  - Buffers that mitigate risk factors
  - Conceptually distinct and unrelated to risk factors
- The means by which protective factors might shape pathways into and out of terrorism are likely to be complex. Their influence may differ according to:
  - The stage of engagement in extremism at which they are experienced
  - The ways in which they interact with other factors
  - The potential to exhibit non-linear effects on levels of risk

- Rather than interpreting protective factors in isolation, there are benefits from approaching protective factors holistically, taking account of the ways they interact and operate across micro, meso and macro levels.
- To develop a better understanding of protective factors, it is helpful to examine the processes and mechanisms by which they work; situate risk and protection in broader social contexts such as subcultures; and understand how values and norms influence which and how protective factors might work.

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## CONCEPTUALISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- To address the conceptual challenges facing research on protective factors, this report sets out a preliminary model for interpreting protective factors.
- The framework is informed by a review of research on protective factors set out in an accompanying report: Protective Factors for Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Rapid Evidence Assessment (Marsden and Lee, 2022).

- Theoretically, the model is underpinned by strengths-based approaches to interpreting offending behaviour and reflects the following characteristics:
  - It follows research which suggests the Good Lives Model (GLM) has the potential to help explain how and why protective factors may work. The GLM assumes we all seek to pursue different configurations of ‘goods’, such as relatedness, community or agency. Offending (including terrorism offending) is considered a maladaptive means of achieving these goods and is influenced by obstacles to attaining them legally. This approach helps identify which goods matter in individual cases and may help interpret pathways into terrorism and violent extremism by identifying obstacles that make it difficult to achieve goods normatively and legally.
  - The GLM proposes that there are four obstacles that shape pathways towards offending: use of inappropriate means, for example using harmful or illegal ways of achieving goals; a lack of coherence in the way different goods relate to one another; a lack of scope, where particular goods come to dominate others; and insufficient capacity, when an individual’s internal capacities, or external circumstances mean it’s difficult to achieve primary goods legally.
  - Strengths-based approaches such as the GLM adopt a more holistic perspective than risk-oriented perspectives because they take greater account of the social-ecological context and how it interacts with individual level characteristics.
  - Engaging in extremist subcultures can be understood as a way of deploying strengths in pursuit of goods which might otherwise be difficult to attain.
  - Social-ecological and extremist subcultural contexts influence values and norms; shape which goods are important; and provide opportunities to pursue them.
  - Protective factors include individual cognitive, psychological or behavioural capacities and external capacities reflected in an individual’s social-ecological context which enable people to pursue goods legally.
  - Protective mechanisms are the broader processes by which protective factors operate. They are visible in relation to the four obstacles which undermine people’s ability to achieve goods normatively.
  - Protective mechanisms work to realign or rebalance the coherence and scope of someone’s goals; change attitudes or access to the means of achieving goods legally; and increase someone’s capacity to attain goods without causing harm.
  - The context within which goods can be pursued may be legal or illegal.
  - Participation in extremist subcultures is through goal-directed practices which provide direct or indirect routes to achieving goods. Violence or criminality are only some of the possible outcomes of this process.
  - Protection may be afforded through the opportunities extremist contexts provide to pursue goods through counter-normative but legal routes, where these satisfy the individual’s most significant goals. For example, someone’s desire to pursue the good of relatedness by developing close social ties in an extremist context could be met without the need to engage in violence or criminality.

### NEXT STEPS

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To assess whether this framework helps explain how protective factors and constraints on terrorist offending work, future work will benefit from:

- 1.** Understanding the subcultural dynamics that:
  - a.** Provide opportunities to pursue goods by mapping the roles or goal-directed practices they make available.
  - b.** Shape values and norms that might act as constraints and understand whether these provide opportunities for people to achieve goods in ways that sustain non-violent engagement and/ or perform a protective function.
- 2.** Test the assumptions of the Good Lives Model to determine:
  - a.** Whether involvement in terrorism can be understood as a means of achieving primary goods.
  - b.** If obstacles to achieving goods legally help explain pathways into terrorism.
  - c.** How protective mechanisms function in relation to terrorism offending.
  - d.** Whether obstacles to achieving goods help explain re-engagement.



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# INTRODUCTION

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This report sets out an approach to conceptualising protective factors in the context of violent extremism. Our previous report reviewed existing research on protective factors (Marsden and Lee, 2022). It drew attention, not only to the lack of empirical research, but also to the limited efforts to conceptualise protective factors undertaken to date.

This neglect of protective factors is in large part due to the heavy emphasis in research and practice on risk factors for involvement, or re-engagement in offending. This is the case for general (i.e., non-terrorism-related) offending, but is particularly acute in relation to terrorism because of the high risk these offenders are considered to pose.

One consequence of the focus on risk factors is that efforts to conceptualise protective factors have tended to be developed by starting from a risk-oriented perspective. Protective factors have therefore variously been described as the opposite of risk factors; as things which mitigate or counteract risk factors; the absence of risk; or at times, as distinct and unrelated to risk factors (Lösel et al., 2018; Lösel and Farrington, 2012; O’Shea and Dickens, 2016).

To develop a better understanding of how protective factors might be understood to operate, this report adopts a different starting point. Instead of beginning from a risk - or what is sometimes called a deficits-based approach (Maruna & Lebel, 2003) - to understanding why people engage in and disengage from crime, the conceptualisation of protective factors laid out in this report takes a strengths-based approach.

Broadly described, strengths-based approaches focus on identifying and developing individual and contextual strengths and skills that support desistance from offending (Maruna, 2016). These can be linked to protective factors, but are not necessarily the same thing (Jones et al., 2015) and have been described as a potentially useful means of conceptualising what protective factors are and how they work (Dickson et al., 2018).

This report takes these ideas as a starting point to develop a framework for conceptualising protective factors. Drawing on strengths-based approaches to explaining what supports and protects against offending, the framework pays attention to social-ecological and subcultural contexts, norms and values, and their role in enabling or constraining opportunities to live meaningful, fulfilled lives away from criminality and terrorism.

# CONCEPTUALISING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Our previous report set out the evidence on protective factors, and reviewed efforts to try and theorise them (Marsden and Lee, 2022). This included an overview of which protective factors have been identified in the literature and a brief analysis of theoretical efforts to explain how they work. Generally speaking, theoretical approaches to conceptualising and defining protective factors have been derived from existing sociological, criminological or psychological theory and imposed onto terrorism offending. These efforts have been somewhat uneven, with relatively limited attempts to derive more specific definitions or conceptualisations of protective factors in the context of terrorism. The main findings from our review of these conceptual efforts are that (Marsden and Lee, 2022):

- There is significant ambiguity over how to define, describe and identify protective factors.
- Very limited efforts have been made to clarify which protective factors matter and how they work.
- Protective factors have been considered across the offending life-cycle, from prevention of offending, through to reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. The role of protective factors at different stages of engagement has been developed to consider:
  - Preventive promotive factors which are linked to a lower likelihood of becoming involved in offending (Loeber et al., 2008)
  - Remedial promotive factors, associated with reducing the chances of recidivism
- Interactions between risk and protective factors have been considered in the following ways:
  - Risk and protective factors as opposite ends of a spectrum (Walker et al., 2013).
  - Protection being afforded due to the absence of risk factors.
  - Protective factors buffering the impact of risk factors (Lösel and Farrington, 2012). In turn, this process has been conceptualised as ‘interactive protective factors’, or ‘risk-based protective factors’ where they are associated with lower rates of problematic behaviour in those who might otherwise be considered high risk (Farrington et al., 2016).
  - Protective factors as conceptually distinct and unconnected to risk factors (O’Shea and Dickens, 2017).
  - ‘Protective-stabilising’ factors which perform a protective function independent of the presence or absence of risk factors (Luthar et al., 2000).
  - ‘Protective-enhancing’ where protection increases with the level of risk (Luthar et al., 2000).
  - Protective but reactive, which sees protection reduce as risk increases (Luthar et al., 2000).
- Efforts to interpret interactions between risk and protective factors have drawn attention to the presence of non-linear and curvilinear relationships (Lösel et al., 2018).
- Cumulative effects have also been noted, where protection is afforded through encountering and surviving adverse experiences in ways which may build protection (Lösel and Bender, 2003).
- Protective factors have been assessed in different ways, including in the context of Structured Professional Judgement frameworks such as the Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors (SAPROF).



To further research on protective factors, researchers have recommended:

1. Developing a distinctive set of methods to understand them (Lösel et al., 2018).
2. Recognising that protections can be conceptually distinct from risk factors.
3. Focusing on the mechanisms and processes by which protective factors function to help interpret how and why certain factors come to be relevant and how they work in particular contexts (Heffernan and Ward, 2017).
4. Moving beyond specific behaviours, contexts or characteristics, to consider the social practices through which protective factors are enacted (Heffernan and Ward, 2019).
5. Paying attention to the norms and values through which different kinds of protective and risk factors are understood and acknowledging the role of ideological and subcultural contexts and the way they shape what is experienced and understood to be protective (Fortune and Ward, 2017).

What follows pursues these recommendations to set out a framework for conceptualising protective factors rooted in strengths-based approaches. It recognises the benefits of treating protective factors as conceptually distinct, and deriving methods to develop this understanding by focusing on mechanisms, social practices, and norms and values. To set the scene for this, the next section reviews the dominant risk-based approach and the alternative strengths-oriented perspective before explaining how the latter provides a potentially valuable way of improving current approaches to conceptualising and assessing protective factors.

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# TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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Research on protective factors in respect of terrorism offending lacks conceptual clarity. Relatively limited work has sought to explain what protective factors are, how they shape behaviour, and how they and their effects might be identified. To begin to address some of these issues, it is necessary to develop a clearer means of theorising how protective factors work. What follows contributes to this effort by setting out a framework for conceptualising protective factors.

The framework draws on contemporary criminological research rooted in strengths-based approaches to interpreting protective factors and adopts the following starting points. First, that there are advantages to developing an account of protective factors that stands apart from dominant approaches rooted in risk-based perspectives and taking a strengths-based approach as its foundation (de Vries Robbé and Willis, 2017). It also argues that drawing on wider criminological theory, notably the Good Lives Model (GLM), provides a useful way of theorising how and why protective processes work (Dickson et al., 2018).

The framework assumes that it is important to adopt a holistic approach which takes account of interactions between the individual and their social-ecological and subcultural context (Maruna and LeBel, 2009). This includes recognising the role these settings play in shaping norms, values, and beliefs about appropriate behaviour (Strauss-Hughes et al., 2019). Finally, the following discussion argues that looking beyond characteristics and factors to examine the goal-directed practices people engage in, which are themselves made possible by the subcultural and social-ecological contexts they inhabit, has the potential to help understand what constrains or promotes involvement in violent extremism (Heffernan and Ward, 2019).

Developing these ideas does at least two things. First, it provides an alternative way of interpreting why and how people become engaged in violent extremism. The framework draws attention to the idea that people seek out or deepen their engagement in extremist spaces not solely because of the cumulative effect of risk factors, but instead in an effort to deploy certain strengths in the pursuit of meaningful lives, albeit in contexts and ways that violate wider societal norms. In this way, engaging in extremism may be considered an adaptive response to otherwise challenging experiences or contexts that represent barriers to pursuing goals, or ‘goods’ that have come to be meaningful to them. Developing this insight invites researchers and practitioners to be ‘looking out for the strengths in apparent deficits’ (Fortune and Ward, 2017: 3) and to reorient efforts to identify, interpret and assess the perceived risk someone is believed to pose.

Second, it provides a conceptual foundation for the empirical research needed to test the benefits of strengths-based approaches and in particular, to understand the utility of the GLM in relation to terrorism offending. More specifically, it provides a route to: 1) determining if the GLM is an appropriate framework by which to interpret what informs trajectories into terrorism; 2) analysing whether its assumptions are supported empirically; 3) assessing whether it provides a useful foundation for explaining how protective factors work; 4) understanding how practitioner understandings relate to the strengths-based approach reflected in the GLM; and 5) identifying the implications for risk assessment processes.



What follows first reviews the dominant risk-oriented approach that informs much research and practice before going on to consider strengths-based perspectives to general offending and terrorism, and assess their utility in interpreting protective factors. The salience of social-ecological and subcultural contexts in shaping norms and values and providing contexts through which people can pursue goods is then considered. This includes an account of how these processes can include constraints as well as factors which promote involvement in violent extremism. These insights are brought together to inform a framework for interpreting protective factors in relation to violent extremism.

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## RISK BASED APPROACHES AND THEIR CRITICS

Much criminal justice research and practice is informed by a risk-based approach (van Eijk, 2020). This ‘risk paradigm’ is reflected in the underlying theoretical and conceptual assumptions which shape policy and practice and is operationalised in the context of offender assessment, management, and intervention work (Trotter et al., 2016). Perhaps the most concrete example of this perspective is seen in the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model (Bonta and Andrews, 2017).

The RNR is based on three principle, taking an evidence-based approach to: matching the level of support an individual receives to the degree of risk they are believed to pose (the risk principle); directing interventions at dynamic risk factors believed to be linked to offending (the need principle); and matching the intervention with the individual’s characteristics (the responsivity principle) which can in turn be understood in relation to general responsivity which ‘promotes the use of cognitive social learning methods to influence behaviour’, and specific responsivity, which ‘provides that interventions should be tailored to, amongst other things, the strengths of the individual’ (HMIP, 2020).

The RNR approach is commonly linked to the ‘what works’ agenda that seeks to build and draw on empirical evidence to determine which programmes reduce reoffending (Wong and Horan, 2021). Several decades after this agenda was launched, there is now a substantial body of research underpinning different facets of risk-oriented practice. For instance, the RNR approach has drawn on a range of empirical evidence to shape risk assessment processes and inform the development of interventions (Polaschek, 2012). These ideas have come to inform case-management and intervention practice, including in relation to terrorism (van Leyenhorst and Andreas, 2017); a field which has been described as having become dominated by risk-based approaches to predicting, intervening, assessing, and monitoring risk (Mythen, 2020).

This emphasis on risk has been criticised for focusing too heavily on individual deficits (Ward and Maruna, 2007) and for neglecting protective factors (Nee and Vernham, 2017). It has also been accused of concentrating too narrowly on specific aims linked to risk reduction (see Ward et al., 2007; Wanamaker et al., 2017; Dickson et al., 2018). These features of risk-based approaches are argued to take a pessimistic and negative view of the individual at the heart of the process, with the associated risk of further stigmatising offenders (Kewley, 2016).

The emphasis on avoidance factors (i.e., avoiding risk), rather than approach-oriented work (i.e., pursuing goals) is said to neglect the goal-directed nature of much human behaviour (Ward et al., 2007). A further criticism is that risk-based approaches pay insufficient attention to the ecological and contextual factors that shape reintegration and rehabilitation processes and overlook individual agency and processes of sense-making that help people navigate the change process.

From a practice-perspective, critics suggest the risk-oriented approach is less well-equipped to develop individual motivation to engage with interventions because of its emphasis on what is perceived to be ‘wrong’ with them. Because risk-based approaches

are less focused on more positive, forward-looking goals, they are also believed to be less conducive to developing a therapeutic alliance between the individual and those working with them. Finally, critics have suggested that risk-assessment tools have the potential to overestimate recidivism risk, and are less able to explain why, for example, from a sample of people all categorised as high-risk, only some go on to reoffend (Dickson et al., 2018).

Many of these critiques come from those committed to an alternative, strengths-based approach to working with those who become involved with the criminal justice system. Strengths-based theory and practice is a broad framework informed by positive psychology (Dickson et al., 2018). It encapsulates work on resiliency, developmental life course perspectives, desistance and, perhaps most tangibly, the GLM (Wanamaker et al., 2018).

This approach is characterised by an emphasis on strengths which have been defined as ‘an umbrella term referring to positive internal and/or external variables – that is, characteristics of an individual and his/her environment that are positive or desirable on the basis of face validity’ (Wanamaker et al., 2018: 205). In this formulation, strengths encompass – but are not the same as – protective factors (Jones et al., 2015). The emphasis is on going beyond understanding ‘what works’ to reduce (re)offending to examining how and why interventions function to support positive change and in this way learning ‘what helps’ to support desistance (Maruna, Immarigeon and Lebel, 2004).

Advocates of risk-based approaches suggest many of the criticisms they face are informed by problems with implementation rather than conceptualisation, and that the RNR approach accommodates strengths-based perspectives and is more compatible than might appear to be the case (Polaschek, 2012; Wormith and Zidenberg, 2018). In practice, risk and strengths-based approaches are increasingly used in tandem (Hong and Mann, 2019), including in work with terrorism offenders (Dean, 2014; Marsden, 2017a).

Nevertheless, risk assessment processes, both in general, and in relation to terrorism, remain heavily focused on interpreting and assessing risk factors and pay insufficient attention to protective factors which are a central feature of strengths-based perspectives (Nee and Vernham, 2017). Although some risk assessments for terrorism offenders take account of protective factors, few do so systematically (Lloyd, 2019; Hewitt, Lee and Marsden, 2022), and the risk model remains the dominant approach to work with those convicted of terrorism offences (Marsden, 2017a).

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## STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACHES TO PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Advocates have suggested that strengths-based perspectives are able to help interpret why, how, and for whom, protective factors work (Durrant, 2017). The GLM is one of the more concrete manifestations of the strengths-based approach and has the potential to inform efforts to conceptualise protective factors (Dickson et al., 2018). Originally developed in work on sex offending, the GLM has since been applied across different offence types, including in relation to terrorism (Marsden, 2017a; 2017b; Dean, 2014).

The GLM adopts a different premise to risk-oriented models. It assumes that we are all motivated to achieve a range of what it describes as primary goods. Eleven of these goods have been identified, including life (healthy living); knowledge (being informed about things that are important to us); excellence in play (hobbies and leisure activities); excellence in work (including mastery experiences); excellence in agency (autonomy, power and self-directedness); inner peace (freedom from emotional turmoil and stress); relatedness (including intimate, romantic, and familial relationships); community (connection to wider social groups); spirituality (finding meaning and purpose in life); pleasure (feeling good); and creativity (expressing oneself through alternative forms) (Ward et al., n.d.).



The GLM assumes people are motivated to achieve primary goods through engaging in certain practices, described as secondary goods. Where routes to achieving goods in pro-social, normative ways are blocked, offending comes to be seen as an appropriate way of achieving primary goods (Ward et al., 2012). Offending can either be a direct attempt to achieve goods, for example, stealing food due to hunger; or indirect, for example, distress caused by interpersonal conflict, leading to excessive alcohol use, which results in a loss of control leading to theft.

Offending pathways are informed by obstacles that are argued to get in the way of achieving goods in pro-social, legal ways (Ward and Fortune, 2013). Four obstacles have been proposed: use of inappropriate means, for example using harmful or illegal secondary goods to achieve goals; a lack of coherence in the way different goods relate to one another in an individual's life; a lack of scope, where particular goods come to dominate, or some are neglected; and capacity, when an individual's internal cognitive, psychological or behavioural capacities, or external circumstances mean it's difficult to achieve primary goods legally.

Working from these foundations, the GLM has been used to support intervention design and delivery with the aim of enhancing strengths and skills so the individual is better able to achieve goods in prosocial, legal ways, and in this way increase the potential for desistance from crime (Laws and Ward, 2011). Underpinning this approach is a commitment to understanding the individualised nature of the desistance process, and the different conceptualisations of a 'good life' that individuals hold.

Initially criticised as lacking evidence and being based on ideology and intuition rather than empirical research (Bonta and Andrews, 2003), it remains the case that the empirical support underpinning the GLM is less robust than the better-established RNR approach, not least as it has a shorter history. However over recent years, a body of work has developed around the GLM that is growing in evidentiary strength.

A recent systematic review concluded there was support for the relevance of obstacles to achieving goods influencing offending and found that interventions reflecting the principles of the GLM were better able to motivate participants to engage in rehabilitation programmes and pursue positive change (Mallion et al., 2020). The same review found that interventions using GLM-based approaches produced comparable outcomes to more standard relapse prevention programmes, as well as being attractive to service users. However, there was only mixed support for the assumption underpinning the GLM that offending was a means of achieving primary goods, with half of the 12 studies included in this aspect of the review supporting this relationship, and the other half failing to find one (Mallion et al., 2020).

A further systematic review found six studies that assessed how effective GLM-based interventions were in reducing recidivism (Zeccola et al., 2021). Of these, half led to a reduction in risk, whilst half did not, leading the authors to conclude there was not yet sufficient evidence to say that the GLM was effective in reducing the risk of reoffending.

Despite the limited nature of the evidence base, research has identified a number of benefits of strengths-based approaches. This includes work that has found that incorporating strengths improves the predictive capacity of risk assessments (Wanamaker et al., 2018). More broadly, Dickson et al., (2018) suggest it has the capacity to reduce stigmatisation and increase the willingness of communities to support offenders because of its focus on skills and capabilities rather than risks and deficits.

## TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### Conceptualising Protective Factors: Strengths-Based Approaches

From a practice perspective, there is evidence that it orients practitioners towards the potential for positive change (de Vries Robbé and Willis, 2017); increases the scope for developing a positive therapeutic relationship; and creates the context for greater motivation to engage with efforts to support positive change (Dickson et al., 2018). Together these features of strengths-based approaches perhaps help explain practitioners' growing appetite to draw on this approach (Wanamaker et al., 2018).

The growing evidence base around the GLM and broader strengths-based approaches in relation to general offending is beginning to be echoed in research and practice on terrorism. The GLM is part of current intervention practice in the UK (Dean, 2014), and research suggests its principles underpin aspects of wider prison and probation work in this area (Marsden, 2017b). It is particularly relevant in relation to terrorism offending because of the goal-directed nature of violent extremism that is oriented towards achieving a subjectively defined alternative social and political order. In addition, the ideologies and subcultures that contextualise terrorism offending shape ideas about primary goods and justify particular forms of – often violent – secondary goods to help achieve them.

As well as a growing evidence base about the capacity of strengths-based approaches like the GLM to strengthen intervention practice, support risk assessment, and increase offenders' motivation to change, it also has the potential to contribute to theoretical debates about how to conceptualise protective factors and interpret how they might work. Most straightforwardly, 'protective factors can be conceptualized (sic) as prosocial means or strategies to achieve one or more primary human goods' (de Vries Robbé and Willis, 2017: 56). From a more conceptual perspective, Dickson et al. (2018) argue that:

**'[T]he GLM offers a theoretical lens from which to understand possible mechanisms underlying protective factors. More specifically, the GLM can help us understand how different protective factors might mitigate risk propensities or protect against reoffending, and in doing so provide explanatory/theoretical depth to the current empirical debate surrounding the nature of protective factors.'**

*(Dickson et al., 2018: 52)*

This potential is worth pursuing as there have been only modest attempts to explain how protective factors might work in research on general offending, and even fewer in relation to terrorism. There is therefore a need to interpret the processes at work and, through this, better understand the relevance and function of what protects against offending (Ward and Fortune, 2016).

Developing a conceptual framework will also help to address the challenge that because protective factors are typically analysed at the aggregate level, they are less able to explain why and how protective factors work in individual cases (Dickson et al., 2018). By drawing attention to which goods are relevant and understanding their functional role in individual trajectories, it becomes easier to identify ways of intervening to help increase individual strengths and bolster social contexts in ways which can increase the potential for positive change. Part of this effort includes paying greater attention to the social-ecological and subcultural contexts individuals inhabit to understand how they inform protective factors.



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## SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL AND SUBCULTURAL CONTEXTS

The evidence map of protective factors set out in our previous report (Marsden and Lee, 2022) illustrates the heavy emphasis on individual level factors. Although there is some evidence regarding the social and ecological factors with the capacity to play a protective role, factors linked to individual psychology, socio-demographics, religion, and civic attachment dominate. This reflects a wider feature of the literature on terrorism which has been described as reflecting a ‘strong form of methodological individualism where the ultimate explanation and arena for intervention and change are located in the individual, personal space ... [an approach which] tends towards psychological reductionism’ (Knudsen, 2020: 44).

Consequently, efforts to understand and interpret interactions between individual and social factors, for example, how changes in the social context impact people who might be considered at risk of involvement in violent extremism, are only now beginning to gain traction (Corner et al., 2019). Reflected in risk assessment and management measures that focus on individual level processes, this approach neglects the environmental and contextual factors that shape the nature of, and exposure to risk factors (Desmarais et al., 2017). A similar pattern is observable in relation to protective factors, where there is generally an emphasis on internal, rather than external resources and capacities (Whyman, 2019).

Efforts to develop more holistic and contextualised interpretations of violent extremism are beginning to gain ground (Dawson, 2017; Bouhana, 2019). Research is starting to draw attention to the interactions between an individual and their needs and motivations, and the ‘socio-political, social, cultural and societal environment in which the person exists’ (Kruglanski and Bertelsen, 2020: 17). This reflects a feature of the broader criminological literature that recognises the importance of social-ecological contexts in shaping offending (Weisburd et al., 2012) and has led to calls to go beyond psychological perspectives to take

account of moral, legal and social domains in crime and rehabilitation (McNeill, 2012).

Because strengths and desistance-oriented research and practice focus more heavily on social-ecological factors it is well-placed to provide a counterpoint to the dominance of individual level approaches (Maruna and LeBel, 2009). Strengths-based perspectives highlight the importance of recognising the resources that individuals have access to, both personally and in their social networks (Maruna, Immarigeon, and LeBel, 2004). As Maruna and Mann argue ‘people are more likely to desist when they have strong ties to family and community, employment that fulfils them, recognition of their worth from others, feelings of hope and self-efficacy, and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives’ (2019: 7).

Taking this broader approach shifts the focus from individual level deficits to ask questions about the extent to which social contexts provide opportunities for people to live meaningful, positive, and pro-social lives; how these opportunities interact with the goods people come to value and the strengths they are motivated to pursue; and therefore, the extent to which they act as forms of protection against offending.

An important feature of social-ecological and subcultural contexts is their influence on norms about appropriate attitudes and behaviours. Recent research has examined some of these dynamics, suggesting that social networks exert positive influence over those who might otherwise be at risk of engaging in violent extremism, in part, by influencing norms (Jasko et al., 2020; Kaczkowski et al., 2020).

Such normative features are beginning to be discussed in the context of general offending. Tony Ward and his collaborators have argued that the extent to which a particular characteristic is considered a risk factor or strength is, at least in part, informed by the normative context (Ward et al., 2017). Whilst Durrant (2017) has argued, ‘what counts as a protective factor depends on specific characteristics of individuals and the environments in which they are embedded’ (2017: 4). For example, motivations associated with violent extremism, such as those related to social justice, or competencies linked to terrorism offending, such as empathy with suffering, are not in themselves problematic, it is the means by which people try and meet them that breaks legal and social norms (Fortune and Ward, 2017).

In the context of the GLM, the values and norms that individuals encounter in violent extremist subcultural contexts can help shape perceptions about which goods are important and how they might best be achieved. In many cases, they also provide practical means – or secondary goods – that enable them to engage in behaviours reflecting those values and goals. This draws attention to the relevance of understanding how normative behaviours are enacted through roles and social practices that make those commitments visible, and the benefits of:

**‘Shift[ing] the focus from risky 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)*

This discussion has sought to highlight three aspects of social-ecological and subcultural contexts that are relevant to interpreting how protective factors might work. First, their capacity to enable or constrain people’s ability to fulfil primary goods. Second, their role in shaping norms and values about which goods are important and how they might be pursued. This helps interpret how preferences to engage in counter-normative behaviour might develop, what might constrain this process, and what the limits on this might be. And finally, by providing contexts within which people can enact particular kinds of practices it is possible to go beyond the focus on individual characteristics and risk profiles to observe how people try to pursue goods by deploying strengths, albeit in ways which violate social and legal norms.

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## STRENGTHS-BASED MODEL FOR INTERPRETING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Bringing together the arguments set out above, it is possible to derive a conceptual framework for interpreting how protective factors might work in the context of violent extremism. It uses the GLM as a foundation to explain how and why protective factors function and adopts a strengths-based approach that takes account of the way social-ecological and subcultural settings shape values, norms, obstacles and opportunities to achieving goods.

Figure 1 sets out this framework. It begins from the premise that everyone is motivated to achieve primary goods. Different configurations of goods or goals come to be important in ways that are informed by an individual’s developmental history, socio-political and cultural context, and life experiences, including exposure to extremist subcultures.



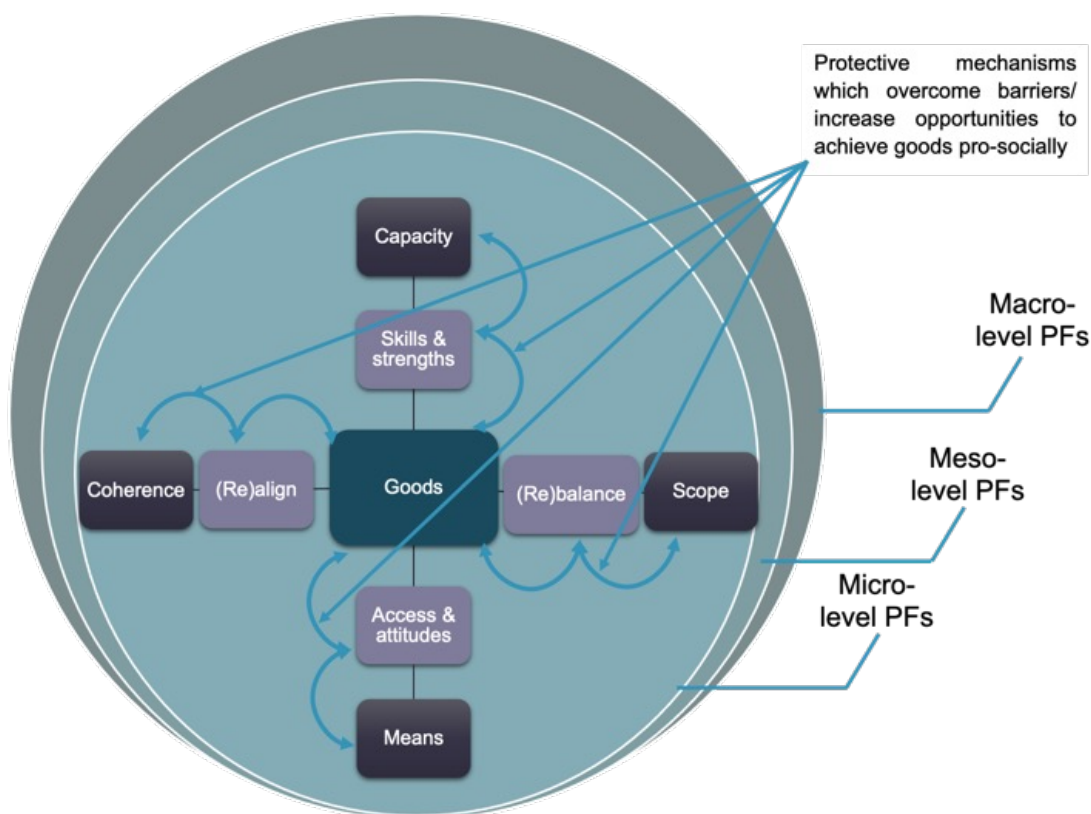


Figure 1: Strengths-based model of protective factors

Engaging in violent extremist subcultures can be understood as a way of pursuing primary goods which are hard to achieve outside of these contexts by deploying strengths through goal-directed practices. Protective factors are those things which enable people to pursue goods in legal ways and can be found both outside extremist subcultures and within them, and operate across different levels of analysis. For example, micro-level factors might include good mental health or higher levels of self-control; meso-level factors may be reflected in easy access to pro-social networks; and at the macro level through contexts characterised by high levels of social cohesion or procedural justice.

Protection can also be afforded at different stages of someone's process of engagement with violent extremism. They may reduce the likelihood that someone engages in illegal behaviour in the first place (through preventive promotive factors such as positive parenting) or may reduce the risk of re-offending (through remedial promotive factors, such as improving mental health) (Loeber et al., 2008).

Protective factors interact with risk factors. They can mitigate or buffer the effects of risks throughout the process of engagement and disengagement from violent extremism, for example where maintaining a more diverse social network helps mitigate the influence of violence-supportive peers (Farrington et al., 2016). There are also some protective factors that can act independently of risk factors, such as religiosity. However, the model does not privilege risk factors, but instead sees risks and protections as part of a wider field of interactions across levels of analysis, driven by a fundamental motivation to achieve certain patterns of goods.

## TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### Conceptualising Protective Factors: Strengths-Based Approaches

Protective factors exert their effects through protective mechanisms. These are the processes by which protective factors help people overcome the obstacles they face and can be understood in relation to the four obstacles the GLM suggests are important: the scope of goods, or the relative weight and range of goods in someone's life; their coherence, or the way they relate to one another; lack of capacity to achieve goods legally; and selecting inappropriate means of achieving goods. More specifically:

- **Scope of goods:** In the context of this obstacle, protective factors relate to mechanisms which help people rebalance goods so some do not come to dominate, and/ or lead to some being neglected. For example, in the context of the good of community, commitment to a particular identity group may become the most important feature of someone's life. This can mean other goods such as family relationships are neglected, and hostility may develop towards others who are not part of that group which in some cases may justify violence. Here, the protective factor of developing or maintaining a more diverse social network outside an extremist group may mitigate these drivers. This process may be interpreted through the protective mechanism of (re)balancing the scope of goods by shifting someone's pattern of social relations.
- **Coherence of goods:** According to the GLM, goods should relate to one another in a coherent way, so they are 1) mutually supportive rather than competing or conflicting (described as horizontal coherence); and 2) ordered or ranked so the individual knows which are more important and therefore how they shape their daily activities (known as vertical coherence). Protective mechanisms are those things which enable someone to realign or develop a coherent set of goods. For example, if someone was primarily motivated by asserting control over others to pursue political change (rooted in the good of agency), this may become less
- **Capacity:** Obstacles can occur when individuals lack capacity to achieve goods legally, for example, where someone finds it difficult to achieve a sense of community due to discrimination or where a lack of education means they do not have the capacity to think critically about arguments in favour of violence. Here, the protective mechanism by which protective factors function involves developing strengths and skills that improve someone's capacity. For example, the protective factor of enhanced coping skills may help the individual manage community conflict non-violently, or improved access to education may improve their cognitive skills.
- **Means:** The means by which people pursue primary goods can be through legal, or in the case of terrorism, illegal/ counter-normative secondary goods, for instance, using violence to achieve political change. Here, protective mechanisms can operate in two ways: 1) improving someone's access to legal means of pursuing primary goods, for example through the protective factor of engaging in legitimate, peaceful activism; and/ or 2) changing their attitudes towards the most appropriate way of achieving goods, such as through the process of developing or coming to accept the legitimacy of the authorities.

important, or come to conflict with the growing importance of a positive, stable, intimate relationship (linked to the good of relatedness). Here, the protective mechanism functions to realign or change someone's priorities so their relationship (considered an important pull factor out of terrorism, Altier et al., 2017) becomes a more significant feature of their lives, and their commitment to the previously central good of agency is reduced.

Protective factors can be at work even when the context is counter-normative, as with violent extremist settings. For example, engagement with a violent extremist group could be considered a maladaptive way of meeting core primary goods, such as relatedness met

through a feeling of belonging, or in some settings, the good of health through the group's capacity to meet basic human needs such as security and an income. Hence, the context and means by which goods can be achieved may be normative and legal, counter-normative but legal, or illegal.

Taking a strengths-based approach goes some way to providing a broader theory of motivation for involvement in violent extremism that stands apart from dominant approaches to interpreting radicalisation that often rely on decontextualised collections of push and pull factors, typically conceptualised as risk factors. In this way, the model helps interpret pathways into terrorism and violent extremism by providing a means of more systematically identifying the motivations, and the obstacles and opportunities, to achieving goods in pro-social, legal ways reflected in individual cases.

By recognising the range of goals or goods that can have meaning for someone, the framework is able to account for the scope and coherence of different goods in ways which better reflect the complex, often multi-faceted nature of motivations to engage in violent extremism, which can range from personal goals linked to a desire to belong, through to an ambition for radical social and political change.

This approach provides a number of insights into how protective factors might work in the context of violent extremism. First, it conceptualises protective factors and associated mechanisms as those internal and external factors that enable people to overcome obstacles and pursue goods legally. In this formulation, protective factors can have different kinds of relationships to risk factors. In some cases, acting as a promotive factor, and at others as a buffer against the influence of risk factors, or as independent of risk factors. Second, this approach offers a way of interpreting which goods matter in individual cases and hence which protective factors might be more or less salient.

Because it takes account of the role of values and norms in shaping which goods are important, the model takes seriously the role of subcultural contexts in providing not only the opportunities to achieve goods that might be absent in an individual's life, but also the justifications for pursuing them in counter-normative ways. In this way, it is better able to interpret the roles social-ecological contexts play in shaping violent or offending-related norms and what might protect against individuals identifying with them. This enables a more holistic approach to interpreting how risk and protective factors play out in the interactions between individuals and their social-ecological and subcultural contexts.

It is also possible to observe the influence of protective factors even within violent or extremist subcultures. If goods that come to have greatest salience for an individual are attained within these spaces, then the motivation to pursue other goals may be absent or decline. For example, if an extremist subculture affords someone a sufficiently powerful sense of belonging (linked to the good of community), this may be sufficient for them to maintain involvement without moving towards violence or engaging in illegal behaviour. Equally, extremist spaces can provide protection from other features of someone's life that may generate obstacles to attaining core goods, such as a context characterised by poor security negatively impacting someone's ability to live safely (associated with the good of health).

By providing a conceptual framework for how protective factors might operate in relation to violent extremism, this model has sought to enhance understanding, not only of which protective factors might be important, but also how they function. It also hopes to provide the foundation for the empirical work needed to further understanding of how these processes play out in practice.



# CONCLUSIONS

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This report has set out a strengths-based model of protective factors. Rooted in the GLM, this formulation understands involvement in extremism as an attempt to obtain goods which are difficult to access through pro-social, legal means. The model pays particular attention to the role of ecological and social influences in shaping norms and influencing which goods individuals should value. It suggests that neither violence nor offending is an automatic outcome of engaging in even violent extremist settings.

Counter-normative subcultures offer a range of different roles, or opportunities to engage in goal-directed practices; many of these are non-violent and legal. From this perspective, participation in extremist subcultures can be viewed as a means of obtaining goods for individuals who believe they have few other choices, or for whom the obstacles to achieving goals in normative contexts are perceived to be too great. While extremist settings are very often anti-social and non-normative, this raises the possibility that some forms of extremist engagement may perform a protective function.

These observations, and this framework suggest several directions for future research. By testing the model set out above through the analysis of individual cases it will be possible to assess whether and which primary goods are relevant to involvement in terrorism; analyse the role of obstacles and opportunities to achieving goods in pathways towards violent extremism; understand the scope of goal-directed practices particular subcultures make available; examine whether the scope and coherence of the values, norms and goods promoted within extremist subcultures has the capacity to act as a form of protection against violent or other forms of offending; and examine pathways into and out of terrorism to understand whether direct and indirect means of achieving goods are observable in individual cases. In this way it will be possible to understand whether the assumptions underpinning the GLM are supported in relation to terrorism.

Through this research agenda, it will be possible to address a range of gaps in our current knowledge, relating both to the empirical evidence about the nature of protective factors, and the theoretical and conceptual means by which they can be understood to work, and in doing so generate greater insights into terrorism offenders and the processes that lead to, and could potentially prevent, terrorist violence.

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