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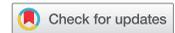
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Disengaged but Still Radical? Pathways Out of Violent Right-Wing Extremism

Tiana Gaudette [iD][a], Ryan Scrivens [iD][a], and Vivek Venkatesh[b]

[a]School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA; [b]Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

ABSTRACT

Research has overwhelmingly focused on pathways into violent extremism, but few empirically grounded analyses have examined pathways out of violent extremism. Even less is empirically known about the interactions between processes of disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism. To address this gap, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten Canadian former right-wing extremists who were actively involved in violent racist skinhead groups, with interview questions provided by thirty Canadian law enforcement officials and ten local community activists. Participants were asked about their pathways out of violent extremism with a particular emphasis on processes of disengagement and deradicalization. Overall, our study findings highlight the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of pathways out of violent extremism as well as how radical beliefs persist beyond disengagement from violent extremism. We conclude with a discussion of the study limitations and avenues for future research.

Purpose

This study examines pathways out of violent extremism in general and the interactions between processes of disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism in particular via in-depth interviews with Canadian former right-wing extremists (RWEs), and with interview questions provided by Canadian law enforcement officials and local community activists. This study represents an original contribution to the academic literature on disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism on three fronts.

First, research in terrorism and extremism studies has tended to focus on processes of violent radicalization—particularly the motivations for individuals joining violent extremist movements.[1] Yet over the past two decades, many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have turned their attention to how, why, and when individuals leave violent extremism.[2] Two concepts are oftentimes discussed in this regard: deradicalization and disengagement. "Deradicalization" refers to the process by which an individual is diverted from an extremist ideology, eventually rejecting an extremist ideology and moderating their beliefs.[3] "Disengagement," on the other hand, is the process by which an individual decides to leave their associated extremist group or movement in order to reintegrate into society.[4] As Windisch and colleagues[5] distinguish the two: "deradicalization involves a change in belief; whereas, disengagement is characterized by a change in behavior." While these two processes can occur separately or simultaneously depending on the context in which they take place,[6] Bubolz and Simi[7] correctly point out that "a great deal of ambiguity remains about the underlying causes and correlates of exit." Understandably, there has been a growing interest among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop a more nuanced

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understanding of this complex process.[8] However, to-date far more is empirically known about why people join violent extremist movements than why they leave them.[9] Fortunately, some empirical research has emerged in this space, much of which has incorporated the perspectives of former extremists.[10] The current study adds to this emerging evidence base by interviewing former RWEs about their pathways out of violent extremism.

Second, over the past decade it has become increasingly common for researchers, practitioners and policymakers in the Western world to draw from the insights of former extremists—colloquially known as "formers"—to generate knowledge on the prevalence and contours of extremism and terrorism.[11] While some researchers and practitioners have raised concerns about including formers in this space, ranging from discussions about their reliability and credibility to questions about whether their inclusion could raise concerns in the public sphere,[12] others have argued that formers can provide valuable insight into issues that terrorism scholars, among many others, are concerned with.[13] To illustrate, researchers have shown a growing interest in drawing from the voices of former extremists to address key questions in terrorism and extremism studies, including empirical studies focusing on processes of radicalization to extremism,[14] processes of deradicalization and disengagement from extremism,[15] or both pathways in and out of extremism.[16] Researchers have also explored various aspects of the abovementioned processes via the insights of formers, including the parental influences on radicalization and de-radicalization,[17] the impact of extremist online content and violent radicalization,[18] the experiences of women in groups that advocate racial and political violence,[19] factors that minimize radicalization to mass-casualty violence,[20] the role of formers in preventing terrorism and political violence in post-conflict communities,[21] and an assessment of how former extremists think that extremism should be prevented and countered.[22]

Despite these developments in terrorism and extremism studies, relatively few empirically driven studies have drawn from the insights of former extremists to examine the interactions between their disengagement and deradicalization processes. Instead, much of the focus has been on examining pathways into violent extremism and processes of radicalization.[23] For empirical studies that have interviewed former extremists about their pathways out of violent extremism, they tend to focus on processes of disengagement[24] or deradicalization[25] but not specifically on the interactions between both. A search using dedicated academic research databases produced eight studies that interviewed or drew from the accounts of former extremists with an emphasis on the relationship between processes of disengagement and deradicalization. Bubolz and Simi[26] conducted life history interviews with thirty-four American former white supremacists and found that processes of disengagement and deradicalization were multifaceted and influenced by a variety of factors. Sieckelinck and colleagues[27] conducted interviews with thirty-four Dutch and Danish former extremists (RWEs and Islamists primarily) and their families, and they similarly found that a set of complex factors played a role in disengagement and deradicalization processes. Brown and colleagues[28] interviewed thirty-six American former RWEs and Islamists as well as their families and friends and also found a wide variety of journeys out of violent extremism. Horgan and colleagues[29] conducted an in-depth interview with one former violent RWE and similarly found that multiple push and pull interactions shaped disengagement and deradicalization decisions. Barrelle[30] conducted interviews with twenty-two former extremists (e.g., jihadists, RWEs, and Tamil separatists) and concluded that sustained disengagement involves "pro-integration"—i.e., meaningful connections with civil society. Mattssona and Johansson[31] conducted in-depth interviews with two Swedish former extremists and found that disengagement involves a combination of "fateful moments" and interventions by significant others. Simi and colleagues[32] examined the challenges associated with leaving white supremacy via eighty-nine life-history interviews with former U.S. far-right extremists and found that extremists experienced several residual effects that were described as a form of addiction. These residual effects were found to intrude on cognitive processes as well as involve long-term effects on emotional and physiological levels and, in some cases, involved complete relapse into extremist behavior. Lastly, Altier and colleagues[33] drew from eighty-seven autobiographical accounts to examine terrorist disengagement and found that certain push factors, such as disillusionment with

the movement and burnout, were more likely to drive disengagement decisions than de-radicalization. Despite these foundational studies, there remains a need to closely examine the interplay between disengagement and deradicalization processes via the insights of former extremists.

Third, the study addresses an important missing data issue that limits many studies in terrorism and extremism studies relying on official and open-source data to generate knowledge on the prevalence and contours of extremism and terrorism in general[34] and research on disengagement and deradicalization in particular.[35] Drawing from the voices of individuals formerly involved in violent extremist groups or movements who have experience with—and insight into—the dynamics of violent extremism offer a first-hand account of why and how individuals leave violent extremism, among other things.[36] Notably, Morrison and colleagues[37] in their systematic review of post 2017-research on disengagement and deradicalization found that their sample was dominated by literature reviews and theoretical development, with a very small proportion of studies carrying out any form of data collection with disengaged individuals for the purpose of conducting interviews with them. There can be little doubt, then, that more empirical research is needed that is derived from primary source data to enhance our understanding of processes of disengagement and deradicalization. This is a critical area of research that many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers continue to be concerned with.[38]

Current study

Data collection and interview guide

This study is part of a broader project that draws from the perspectives of former extremists to develop empirically informed strategies to combat violent extremism.[39] Data collection efforts for the project consisted of two central components.

First, prior to conducting the interviews with formers, we consulted with key stakeholders, namely Canadian law enforcement officials and local community activists, and they developed a list of interview questions that they would ask formers and those questions were incorporated into the interview guide. The purpose of this approach was simple: rather than developing an interview guide that was derived from an academic perspective only, we included interview questions from key stakeholders for the purposes of developing a multidimensional, multi-perspective interview guide. Here a convenience sample of thirty law enforcement officials and ten local community activists were solicited through email communications with a letter of invitation and "word of mouth" tactics.[40] Approximately 550 questions were collected from these stakeholders which ranged from questions about the identities, roles, goals and activities of former extremists—both before, during, and after their time in violent extremism—to questions about formers' experiences with leaving extremism, to questions about their perceptions of law enforcement and anti-extremists, their use of the Internet, and how they think stakeholders can combat violent extremism. Given the sheer volume of interview questions that were accumulated during this process, questions were categorized and duplicate questions were removed. Here the interview guide consisted of a combination of approximately 275 open-ended structured and semi-structured questions and follow-up questions. Each participant was asked to answer the same initial set of interview questions, with follow-up questions asked depending on their response to an initial question.[41] Interview questions, however, did not focus specifically on violent right-wing extremism in Canada in an effort to have maximum impact within a Western context.[42] For more on the interview guide, see the Appendix.[43]

Second, once the interview guide was finalized, the next step was to recruit former extremists to participate in the study. Initially, we relied on our contacts from our research on right-wing extremism in Canada[44] to gain access to a few formers. We developed a level of trust with these formers over a period of time and through several discussions, and they eventually connected us with other

Canadian formers extremists who they believed would participate in the study. While we acknowledge the facilitation of snowball sampling to reach a wider group of former extremists, we understand the risk of selection bias which limits the extent to which we observe diverse points of view.

A total of ten former RWEs participated in the current study and were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Interviews were conducted voluntarily in person or via telephone or Skype between the months of March and September of 2018.[45] Interviews ranged from approximately ninety minutes to seven hours in length with an average of approximately four hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and all names were de-identified for the purpose of ensuring participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of individuals and the violent extremist groups they were associated with. But transcriptions were verbatim, all in an effort to stay true to the voices of each respondent.

Sample characteristics

Included in the current study were eight males and two females, ranging from twenty-seven to forty-four years old with an average age of thirty-eight. Each of these participants identified themselves as a "former extremist," meaning that were individuals who, at one time in their lives, subscribed to and/or perpetuated violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology and violent extremist group or movement. To illustrate, all ten study participants were actively involved in violent racist skinhead groups in Canada. Study participants are best described by Simi and Futrell's[46] conception of racist skinheads, which they defined as:

> . . . the youngest branch of the white power movement. They derive from a distinct youth subculture, and since the late 1980s racist skinheads have synthesized neo-Nazi ideals and symbolism. Racist skinheads persist in loosely organized gangs and activist networks that congregate in skinhead crash pads and white power music gatherings. The largest organized groups, such as the Hammerskin Nation, produce white power concerts and festivals and have active cells around the world and an extensive Internet presence.

Furthermore, our sample reflects Perliger's[47] understanding of racist skinheads, in that the former racist skinheads in our study tended to be incredibly violent and were amongst the most violent factions of the Canadian right-wing extremist movement. Seven participants, for example, discussed a number of instances in which they used violence or the threat of violence in support of the racist skinhead group's mission, which ranged from vandalizing mosques to violent attacks against minority groups to bombmaking efforts targeting government officials. Additionally, all study participants described several instances in which spontaneous violence was part of the daily routine of the group to which they belonged, which ranged from armed robberies against rival groups to acts of violence against specific minority groups. Together, these instances of violence align with Bjørgo and Ravndal's understanding of extreme-right violence, which they describe as "violent attacks whose target selection is based on extreme-right beliefs and corresponding enemy categories—immigrants, minorities, political opponents, or governments [. . .] [or] vandalism and spontaneous violence."[48]

Participants' roles in the violent groups ranged from presidents and sergeants, to enforcers, musicians, and spokespersons. The majority of the study participants described themselves as the "upper echelon" of Canada's racist skinhead movement and approximately half noted that they were group leaders. Most of the study participants were born in urban or suburban parts of Canada, but all were involved in group activity in major Canadian urban centers. While some participants were members of several racist skinhead groups throughout their involvement in the violent right-wing extremist movement, five of the study participants were mostly part of one particular group, which was arguably the most conspicuous racist skinhead group in Canada. Three participants were part another racist skinhead group and two participants were involved with another group, both of which were amongst the most violent right-wing extremist groups in Canada.[49]

Periods Active in Violent Extremism
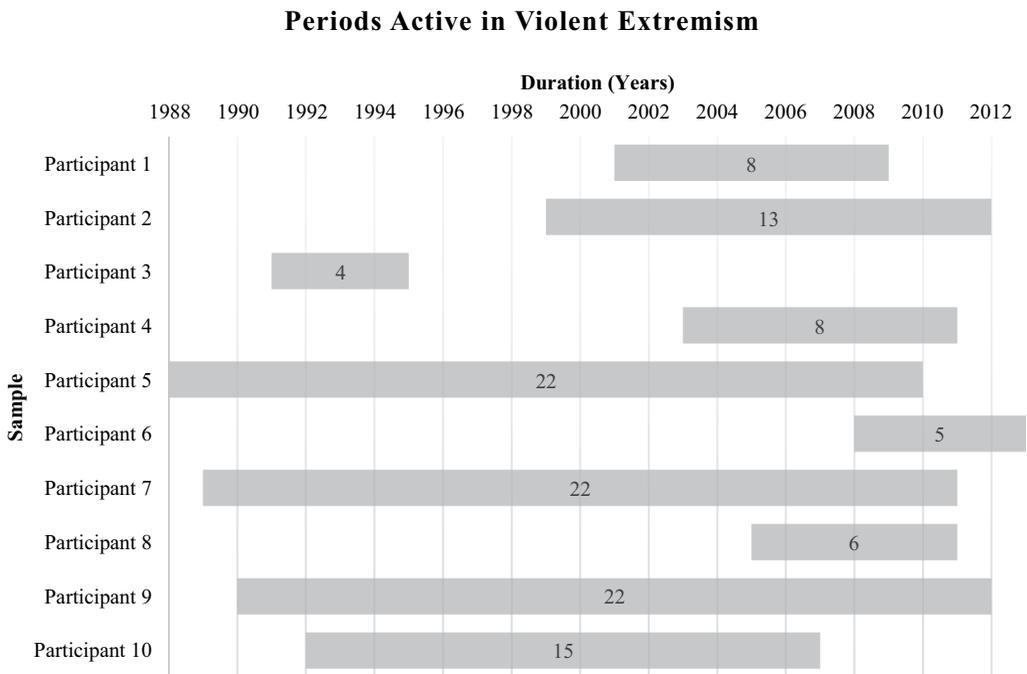
Figure 1. Time period that study participants were involved in the violent right-wing extremist movement.

The amount of time that each interviewee was involved in the violent right-wing extremist movement ranged from approximately four years to twenty-two years with an average of thirteen years in length. Participants joined violent extremist groups at approximately age eighteen on average (range of approximately sixteen to twenty years of age), and participants began to leave violent extremism at approximately age twenty-nine on average (range of approximately twenty-one to thirty-nine years of age). In addition, on average their involvement began in 1997 and they disengaged from the movement in 2009. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the time frame that participants were involved in the violent right-wing extremist movement.

As "former extremists," the participants have since publicly and/or privately denounced violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology. In short, they no longer identify themselves as adherents of a particular violent extremist ideology or are affiliated with an extremist group or movement. The majority of the interviewees also identified themselves as "off the grid," meaning that up until the point that they were being interviewed for the current study, never did they make it publicly known—either through media or public events—that they, at one point in their lives, were part of a violent extremist group or movement. Similarly, the majority of interviewees noted that they had never participated in a research study.

Analysis and coding procedure

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.[50] As we reviewed each study participant's interview, codes were assigned to the sections of text that related to their pathways out of violent extremism. This descriptive coding technique proceeded in a sequential, line-by-line manner,[51] which was a suitable choice for the current study because it allowed us to organize the vast amounts of textual data garnered from the interviews into more manageable topic-based clusters. As codes were later grouped into themes, we specifically focused on perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of study participants' pathways out of violent extremism. Central emergent themes which composed of respondents describing similar experiences or views were identified, and less relevant data were omitted (i.e.,

selective coding). Here we coded and analyzed the data independently of one another, identifying the themes and patterns with collaborative agreement, all of which reinforced each emergent theme. The use of multiple perspectives enhanced the reliability of our observations and our subsequent understanding of how former extremists in our sample left violent extremism. The purpose of this strategy was to authenticate our coding and to maximize the robustness of the results.[52]

Disengaging from violent extremism

When study participants were asked to describe their pathways out of violent extremism, most initially discussed the reasons for why they decided to disengage from the RWE movement, noting that they did not leave for one reason only. Rather, they outlined a number of overlapping reasons for leaving which ranged from birth of a child that drew them away, to fatigue and burnout from being involved in violent extremism, to disillusionment with the movement (see Table 1).

Importantly, interviewees also detailed several strategies that helped them disengage from violent extremism and suggested that it was a combination of strategies that played an important role in their disengagement process, which included taking time away from and placing physical distance between themselves and other movement adherents, being supported by family and friends, and reforming their identities—and with positive alternatives.

Reasons for disengaging

When asked to explain why they disengaged from violent extremism, four interviewees reported that the birth of a child played an important role in their decision to leave. These participants explained that they did not want to raise their child in an environment where violence and the threat of violence were the norm. In short, the RWE movement was described as a "bad scene to raise children," as one participant explained it. Another participant noted that they could not consider "putting my own children at risk, just because of . . . you know, wanting to be in . . . a cool group of guys. That's kind of stupid, isn't it? (Participant 2). Another factor that played a role in their decision to disengage from violent extremism following the birth of a child was that they did not want their children to "follow in their footsteps" into a violent extremist lifestyle and end up with a criminal record. To illustrate, when asked why he left the movement, one interviewee described that it was in part because he "didn't want them [his children] to be like me. I don't want them to have criminal records" (Participant 7). Similarly, three participants were concerned about being separated from their child(ren), either as the result of being arrested or imprisoned, or death. For instance, one participant discussed how they left the violent extremist movement shortly after realizing they had to avoid taking their child to the park out of fear of being identified and arrested by the police in front of their child. This was a scenario that was described by one former who was active in violent racist skinhead groups for approximately fifteen years as "devastating" (Participant 10). Another participant similarly explained that they "can't be a father" if they are imprisoned and unable to provide for their children:

> . . . once I had kids, I'm like, "okay, well if I do something and something does go stupid, or if I get injured and can't go to work, or if I'm in jail and can't go to work, I can't be a father." That was a major kind of thing for me leaving. (Participant 9)

Table 1. Study participants' reasons for disengaging from violent extremism

	Frequency
Birth of a child	4
Reuniting with family	1
Emotional burnout	3
Physical burnout	1
Disillusionment	6

In addition, another study participant noted that they were given a second chance to reunite with their family after being estranged from them for several years, which they described as playing a key role in their decision to disengage from violent extremism: "I give a lot of credit to my family for accepting me back, and . . . letting me come back home, even though I didn't deserve it. Like that was pretty big of them and it helped me leave the movement" (Participant 6).

Three of the participants noted that they disengaged from violent extremism in part because of physical and mental/emotional fatigue and burnout associated with being part of the movement. One participant, for example, noted that they left in part due to the physical toll that violence was taking on his body. As this interviewee aged, they described how it became increasingly difficult to keep up with the physical violence that characterized his role in the violent extremist movement. In particular, once this individual entered into his thirties, he explained that he generally felt "too fucking old for this shit," or as he explained in more detail:

> My neck was broken, and my back . . . I fucking torn *(sic)* it to shreds a couple times. My hands hurt because I got old, you know? I would just break [after a physical altercation]. When I was younger, I could get into a bar fight, break a couple of ribs, my nose, and my hand and be at work the next morning, laughing and joking about it. Now, you know . . . I get hurt and I'm a whining, complaining limp for a week. (Participant 10)

Two interviewees also noted that, after spending years—even decades—involved in an incredibly "negative" violent extremist movement, they in part left because they were feeling mentally and emotionally drained from their participation there. For example, when asked why they left the movement, one participant noted that, among several reasons for disengaging, one key reason was feeling exhausted from "all the hate, and all the negativity and the violence" that they experienced during their involvement in violent extremism (Participant 2). Similarly, another participant "just got tired of the violence." As this interviewee further noted:

> I just got tired of it – got tired of the negativity, got tired of the . . . bullshit, realizing . . . you know, that I was limiting myself because of the people that I know. So, I just basically said that "enough is enough." It's just a very negative movement! It's just constant pissing and moaning about how shit people's lives are, how crappy the world is and . . . you know, how crappy the world is perceived for white people and . . . you know, just it's a very negative. It's very narrow . . . narrow-minded, and I just got tired of that, just tired of the stupid idiots, tired of the ideology . . . tired of uneducated morons, tired of people with mental health issues, tired of . . . the constant drinking, and the infighting between the groups. I just got tired of . . . just, you know after two decades or so [of being involved in violent extremism], I was just tired of everything in general. It's just a bunch of people going nowhere, talking in circles . . . about an ideology that's dead. (Participant 5)

Six of the study participants noted that they left violent extremism in part due to disillusionment. Here they were motivated to leave after realizing that their relationships with other movement adherents were unexpected or, as one participant noted, "not what I signed up for." To illustrate, while these interviewees expected to join a close-knit "brotherhood" of like-minded extremists, they realized that members of the same group or movement could be unfriendly, and even hostile, toward one another. As an example, one participant explained that while they expected to join a "brotherhood who were all on the same side," in reality their experience was that other members would "threaten you or try to "blackmail" you over something really menial. You know, like, "I'll tattle?" type thing" (Participant 4). Another participant similarly described their so-called "brothers" in the movement as generally untrustworthy and even unreliable in times of need, including during violent altercations. This too played a key role in their decision to disengage, or as this participant put it:

> Well, people stab each other in the back who are supposed to be your brothers. And everybody's trying to one-up you or get something on you. [. . .] Or people . . . you know, they talk hard and when something goes down and you need backup, nobody shows up [. . .] It's just stuff like that [. . .] That bothered me. That just bothered me more and more, and I just had enough. I used to put up with it, but now I just can't deal with it. (Participant 9)

Strategies for disengaging

Interestingly, when discussing disengagement strategies, most study participants did not describe their disengagement process as "clean cut that happened all at once," as one interviewee explained. To illustrate, one interviewee who discussed the early periods in their disengagement process explained that "there was no . . . no incident, or one day I woke up and said, "I'm done", and hung up everything and walked away. That's just not how it worked for me." (Participant 9). Rather, participants oftentimes described their disengagement as a process that unfolded over an extensive period of time. Within this context, a key element of their disengagement process involved slowly decreasing contact with members of the extremist movement over time, according to four participants. This strategy enabled them to "fade out" of extremism, as two participants put it, and avoid potentially dangerous conflict that could arise from more overt attempts to leave a violent group or the movement in general. As one participant best explained it:

> It wasn't like, "I'm leaving the movement", and that's it. It was just like, "I kind of need to step away for a bit," and they're like, "Yeah, yeah, that's cool." And then I'd keep dodging phone calls, and then visits and stuff were less and less and less. I still saw them a little bit, and then it just kind of became less and less and less. And I think they realized, "oh my god, I think he's done!" I didn't want to have a big scene. I was worried about having a big incident. So, I just kind of wanted to . . . just kind of fade out, as opposed to being like, "I'm leaving because this is over!" I don't want to do that. I just wanted to kind of like . . . disappear. (Participant 1)

Along the same lines, two participants noted that moving to a new city or town, far away from the rest of the violent extremist group, not only helped them to disengage from violent extremism initially, but it also helped keep them disengaged once they decided to leave. In other words, the physical distance between themselves and the rest of the group gave these participants "a reasonable excuse," as one interviewee explained it, for not attending meetings and events, or not keeping in touch with members —not as frequently, at least. This too allowed them to fade out of extremism.

Worth further highlighting is that, at the early stages of their disengagement process, study participants were apprehensive about who they would ask for help. However, eight of the participants noted that they sought support from others—primarily family members and/or friends. These were described as the central figures who, on the one hand, the formers respected and trusted, and on the other hand, were those who would not criticize them about their radical views and instead would simply listen to them and communicate, free from judgment. In addition, at the early stages of their disengagement process, most began to invest their emotional time and energy—that they would have spent on extremist-related activities—in positive activities and experiences, such as post-secondary education, their careers, and family bonding. Importantly, most participants who invested their time in positive activities when they disengaged from violent extremism noted that it was helpful in rebuilding their identity outside of the RWE movement and it provided meaningful direction to their lives. Three participants, for example, pursued post-secondary education, which helped them develop an identity outside of extremism, or as one interviewee noted: "school helped me leave [violent extremism] and find myself a little bit" (Participant 4). Similarly, three participants became career-driven, either working countless hours or working multiple jobs to "stay busy," as one interviewee explained it. Immersing themselves in their careers offered them much-needed direction to their lives because they oftentimes "didn't know what to do after leaving the movement," as one participant described. As another participant added: "a huge part of my life was gone [after leaving extremism]. And like . . . there's no, there was no exit strategies to speak of [formal EXIT programs]. There was nothing in terms of support. So, I just worked" (Participant 7). Two study participants also noted that, when they left violent extremism, they invested much of their time in family bonding, with family becoming "all that mattered," as Participant 2 described it. Importantly, instead of participating in and investing their time and energy in movement-related activities, these participants spent "lots more time with family" (Participant 2). Another participant further added that their priorities changed once the left violent extremism, noting that their lives no longer revolved around the violent extremist movement but instead "life was just my family. So, everything was invested into my . . . you know my wife and kids" (Participant 1).

Deradicalizing from violent extremism

To gain insight into the relationship between processes of disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism, study participants were asked to describe how the two interacted. Commonly discussed in this regard was that much like disengagement, deradicalization was a complex, lengthy process that was influenced by pivotal movements and experiences. Worth noting, though, is that most participants admitted that they still maintained some radical views despite disengaging from the RWE movement.

Lengthy process

Eight of the study participants described their deradicalization as a lengthy, drawn-out process spanning numerous years and was linked, in large part, to what one participant referred to as "level of involvement" or the amount of time engaged in violent extremism. As one participant explained it:

> . . . [deradicalization] is such a process. And it's probably different for everybody, and that might depend on the level of involvement in something – the level of extremism, the number of years involved, you know? [. . .] Like . . . there were some people that were in there for twenty years. Bet that would be a lot tougher to get out of. (Participant 1)

Within this context, several participants noted that amount of time that an individual spent engaged in violent extremism plays a key role in their identity formation and in turn influences their deradicalization process. To illustrate, one interviewee described how it was "more than a decade I spent talking a certain way, thinking a certain way, doing certain things that most people would never do" (Participant 2). As a result, deradicalization was a lengthy process because it created what one participant referred to as an "identity crisis." Here their entire belief system and, by extension, their identity was put into question and in turn they were unsure of how, if at all, to rebuild or recreate themselves outside of violent extremism. One interviewee described this as "los[ing] the compass by which I lived my life" (Participant 3). Another participant noted that, during the lengthy deradicalization process, they had to figure out "who [they] really are" and further added that:

> . . . you've got to start all over again. But the problem is you don't even know who you are. You've believed in all of this garbage for so long that it's all you know. So how do you escape from that? And that . . . that's the hardest part [of leaving violent extremism] I think. It's just . . . breaking all of this down and rebuilding yourself, just kind of finding out who you really are. (Participant 1)

When asked about the relationship between their deradicalization and disengagement processes, participant responses were mixed. On the one hand, two participants believed that their deradicalization and disengagement processes were separate from one another and that their deradicalization process happened after they disengaged from the RWE movement. To illustrate, one interviewee described "officially" leaving the movement at age twenty-two, but it was not until they were "about to turn 23" that their process of deradicalization began (Participant 6). Further, these participants described their deradicalization process as linear in that their extremist beliefs slowly diminished, sequentially, over time. As one of these participants explained, they described their deradicalization process as "just day by day, just don't care as much about the whole race issue" (Participant 4). On the other hand, four participants described their deradicalization process as non-linear and complex, wherein their radical beliefs did not weaken over time, but instead were "all over the map," as one participant put it, and tended to resurface sporadically following their disengagement. For example, one interviewee noted that their interest in violent extremism would re-emerge after they disengaged and discussed using the Internet to visit extremist web-forums and conducted Internet searches of their former extremist group:

I would still be thinking about it [the extremist ideologies] from time to time, and I was still kind of . . . once in a while I would look at like . . . a Stormfront board or whatever, or I'd be looking up stuff about . . . just . . . what was going on in the movement. I'd be googling my former group and this and that. (Participant 1)

Furthermore, it became clear over the course of the interviews with the former extremists that their deradicalization process was not always followed by the disengagement process. As one participant who was involved in the violent RWE movement for over ten years explained it:

. . . deradicalization is not a linear process by any stretch of the imagination. I think it . . . I think there's different ways that people go through these things and, you know, some things can happen before other things [deradicalization before disengagement], or vice-versa, right? (Participant 2)

To illustrate, while four interviewees implied that their deradicalization process began before leaving violent extremism, two interviewees outright stated that they began to seriously question their extremist views while still engaged in the movement. One participant, for example, explained how they began to realize, while involved in violent extremism, that they "didn't believe what [they] was saying anymore. I didn't feel it—I didn't look at black people or Jewish people and say, 'there's the problem'" (Participant 7). Likewise, another participant began doubting some of their extremist beliefs before deciding to disengage from violent extremism, which was a key force in them leaving the movement. As they put it:

"I just realized I'm not white power. I'm friends with people that aren't white. I . . . I don't think that . . . you know, especially Jewish people . . . I don't believe that every single Jewish person is part of some Jewish master plan. So, it kind of poked holes in it [the extremist ideologies]. (Participant 8)

Pivotal moments and experiences

Eight of the ten study participants discussed pivotal moments or life experiences that raised serious doubt about their extremist views—most of which happened while they were still engaged in the violent extremist movement. For five of these participants, this involved interacting with coworkers from different races in what was described as "safe workplaces" away from other movement adherents. Here they could interact with what one interviewee described as "many different types of people, from like . . . all over the world" (Participant 1). It was through these interactions that participants found a common ground and, in some cases, even developed friendships with their coworkers. As one interviewee explained:

It helped to just crumble anything racist that I had learned before. [. . .] Socializing with different people helped. It was definitely the guys at work . . . like . . . that first work crew that I was with . . . like . . . just getting to know them, seeing the fact that we had more in common than we had in differences. (Participant 6)

Similarly, another interviewee noted that becoming "buddy-buddy" with non-white coworkers helped them recognize that, as they put it, "people are alright, and you know . . . being a nice guy or being a jerk comes in all sorts of colors" (Participant 4).

For two other participants, a pivotal moment that made them seriously question their radical views was linked to the consequences of violent extremism. To illustrate, one participant went on a tour of a Holocaust Museum, and there they were shown pictures of Holocaust victims and were particularly moved by what the interviewee described as:

This one picture of a little baby that was . . . it looked like any kind of Sears type portrait really, except from the 1930′s or 40′s and . . . you know, it shows this happy little kid sitting in a photo studio. The tour guide then said to me: "This baby died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz." Now you tell me what this kid had to do with any Jewish conspiracy? (Participant 3)

Another participant described how they met and interacted with a former black gang member and realized the impact that their violent RWE activity had on non-white communities. According to this participant, "the guy told me that their gang basically formed because of white supremacy … to protect his neighbourhood from us. That really meant something to me" (Participant 2).

Lingering extremist views

Eight out of the ten study participants maintained some of their extremist beliefs despite their efforts to disengage from violent extremism. However, three of these participants explained how they were trying to let go of what they described as "problematic views," which generally involved recognizing and suppressing radical beliefs when they emerged. For example, one interviewee claimed: "I still tell myself … from time to time, 'no, you can't think like that. That's not good.' […] But it still happens" (Participant 2). Another participant noted that, even if they could not stop thinking about the radical thoughts, they made efforts to avoid vocalizing them. For example, they claimed that they avoided making "even the odd [racist] joke. I'll say something like, 'No, I shouldn't even say that'" (Participant 1). Regardless, these participants commonly described how letting go of their radical beliefs was not an easy feat; rather, they described this process as a "never-ending struggle," or as one participant put it: "there's no way you can just all of a sudden forget the ideologies and be a fantastic human being, right? Especially after being around that [the extremist views] for that long" (Participant 2). Another interviewee similarly noted that: "the harder I try to become normal and think like normal people, the further I think that I've got to go. It's this ongoing, never-ending thing" (Participant 10).

On the other hand, unlike the previous three participants who raised concerns about their lingering extremist views, five participants made few, if any, attempts to fully let go of their radical views. As one of these participants explained it: "A lot of my belief systems are probably still intact. They're still pretty much all the same. The only difference is … is less overt racism" (Participant 7). In particular, one interviewee asserted that racism does not "truly ever leave a person," despite cutting ties with the movement (Participant 8). Another participant similarly noted that "some of the guys [former extremists] are … still have the same views. They just don't associate with anybody [in the violent extremist movement]" (Participant 9). One participant brazenly explained their views on the Holocaust:

> I've not been shown, to this date, enough proof or evidence to counter what they [adherents in the RWE movement] taught me about [the] Holocaust. […] Six million Jews? It's hard to swallow. I'm not in any way a Holocaust denier, but … I've still not been shown enough evidence to say, "yeah, six million Jews were targeted for extermination." Now, I'm not closed off to the idea of … like you know, showing me how that's possible. […] The right- wing have lowered it to 300,000 people who were killed in the concentration camps, but for most it was from typhus … and they have scientific evidence to back it up. (Participant 7)

Interestingly, half of the study participants made efforts to rationalize their extremist views, which was reflected in some of their behaviors after disengaging from violent extremism, such as listening to white power music, wearing RWE apparel, and refraining from interactions with and building relationships with non-whites. Specifically, three of the study participants admitted that they continued to listen to white power music by popular musicians among RWEs (e.g., Screwdriver, Blue Eyed Devils) as well as still wore the associated white power band t-shirts. Two interviewees also revealed their enjoyment for listening to the music and how it still resonated with them. One participant, for example, noted that "I'm telling you that I still harbor some of those [extremist] views. Like … I still own thousands of [white power] CDs. I still … I still wear the [white power] bands shirts. Like … I have Screwdriver shirts and I wear them" (Participant 8). Another participant admitted that the white power music satisfied their urge to re-engage in the violent extremist movement and provided them with an outlet during times of personal unease:

Sometimes I feel myself getting angry at . . . at things, and I'm almost going back [to violent extremism], but it's . . . but it wouldn't happen. But I just . . . in my mind I . . . like . . . I can't hang out with those guys because they're idiots, you know? [. . .] But I don't know, it's like . . . I still listen to some of the [white power] tunes. But it . . . I don't know, it's . . . like we talked about before, struggling with the thought process I guess [. . .] But at the same time, I'll still listen to . . . you know, George Lincoln Rockwell speeches, or Blue Eyed Devils, Screwdriver. I'll still, I'll still listen to that. (Participant 9)

Three participants also revealed that they were against any interactions or relationships with non-whites. For example, one interviewee claimed that they avoided interacting with those who they considered to be "scumbag people," or as they explained: "When I think 'nigger,' I think of a gangster and just scumbag people. If you're just a . . . you know, you're a black man and you're working or a family man or whatever, then okay, fair enough. But it doesn't mean I have to be friends with them" (Participant 9). Similarly, another participant acknowledged that, while there were "positive aspects to every sort of culture and every creed," they admitted that they "didn't want to have their values mixed with my values" (Participant 5). Another interviewee similarly noted that they thought "race mixing's a bit weird. I think people should hold on to their identities and their cultures" (Participant 8).

Discussion

This study examines pathways out of violent extremism in general and the complex interactions between processes of disengagement and deradicalization from violent extremism in particular by drawing from the insights of former extremists who were involved in violent racist skinhead groups and with interview questions developed by law enforcement and local community activists. Several conclusions can be drawn from this study.

First, our results suggest that disengagement from violent extremism is a multifaceted and multi-dimensional process involving various interrelated reasons for people deciding to leave, which comes as little surprise, given that empirical work has similarly found that there is no single cause associated with individual disengagement.[53] However, our findings reveal several overlapping and commonly described reasons for why individuals disengaged. Here the most common motive was disillusionment with the movement, followed by movement burnout, and the birth of a child and the subsequent need to protect them from movement-related activities (i.e., violence, criminal records, etc.). Previous research has similarly found that both disillusionment[54] and burnout[55] are largely associated with why people disengage from violent extremism as well as the birth of child.[56] Interestingly, though, is that our study participants not only explained why they left violent extremism, they outlined strategies that helped them leave. Commonly described in this regard was taking time away from and placing physical distance between themselves and movement adherents, which they described as taking time to implement and was done incrementally. Research has similarly shown that physical separation and time away from violent extremism has helped people disengage, with imprisonment being a common form of physical disengagement.[57] Our results, however, suggest that time away and physical distance in general are indeed helpful in leaving violent extremism. In addition, most study participants noted how they leaned on family and friends outside of the RWE movement for support during the early stages of their disengagement, which research has similarly found to be influential in leaving,[58] and over time our interviewees restructured their identities that were grounded in positive and meaningful activities and influences—a set of findings that aligns with previous studies.[59] Horgan and colleagues[60] have conceptualized this identity transformation as "proactive self-development."

Second, our study findings suggest that, like disengagement from violent extremism, deradicalization is a complex, multifaceted and lengthy process—a finding that mirrors previous research on the complexities of deradicalization.[61] However, in exploring the interactions between disengagement and deradicalization, our results generally suggest that both processes do not happen in isolation; instead, there appears to be overlap between the two. To illustrate, most study participants described their deradicalization process as non-linear and complex that began before they disengaged from violent

extremism and continued after leaving. Commonly discussed in this regard was the influence of pivotal moments or experiences that made them doubt their extremist views and begin to "think differently," as one participant put it, and before they decided to disengage from the movement—occurrences that Mattssona and Johansson[62] conceptualize as "fateful moments." Previous research that highlights the complexities of deradicalization processes have similarly found that some extremists may begin to deradicalize before they disengage from violent extremism,[63] while other research suggests that deradicalization follows disengagement for some.[64] Regardless, our study findings align with Altier and colleagues[65] who found that, while deradicalization may be an important factor for why some people leave, it is not the most prevalent cause nor a necessary pre-requisite for leaving; rather, disillusionment with the movement and burnout are more likely to drive disengagement decisions than de-radicalization.

Third and perhaps most importantly is that, although study participants claimed to have disengaged from violent extremism and were self-described as "formers," most still maintain radical beliefs, with some feeling ashamed by their persisting views but most embracing them. This finding may in part be the result of participants' degree of involvement in violent extremism, such as the number of years immersed in extremism, their roles there, level of embeddedness in extremist networks, or propensity for violence. Nonetheless, Horgan and colleagues[66] similarly found what they described as "hard-wired beliefs" that may persist well past the point of disengagement. Bubolz and Simi[67] similarly identified numerous difficulties associated with disengagement, such as negative emotionality (e.g., guilt), ideological relapse, and maintaining social ties with current extremist members. Simi and colleagues[68] also found that former extremists experienced residual effects that they described as a form of addiction. These residual effects were found to intrude on cognitive processes as well as involve long-term effects on emotional and physiological levels and, in some cases, involved complete relapse into extremist behavior.[69] Regardless, this evidence base remains in its infancy and requires further exploration.[70]

While this study offers a first-hand account of the pathways out of violent extremism and the interplay between processes of disengagement and deradicalization by drawing from the insights of former violent RWEs, this study is not without its limitations. For example, it is unclear whether those who participated in the current study were likely to or have since been drawn back into violent extremism. In other words, although most study participants maintain radical views despite leaving the violent RWE movement, the extent to which these hard-wired beliefs or identity residuals influences them to reengage with violent extremism is unknown. Although recent research[71] has suggested that retention of radical beliefs are strong predictors of reengagement in violent extremism, future research is needed to assess the extent to which lingering extremist views have an influence on whether (or not) an individual will relapse into extremist behavior.

In addition, the retrospective nature of the in-depth interviews with formers raises questions about the reliability of some of their accounts of past events, especially those described as significant in retrospect, due to memory erosion, distortion, and selective recall.[72] As a result, future studies may consider verifying the authenticity of formers' accounts by triangulating interview data with interviews with family members or peers as well as analyses of open source intelligence (e.g., court records, media scans, website analysis, etc.).

Our study also included a relatively small sample size and was focused on a specific type of violent extremist in one geographical context. The study sample also consisted of a group of formers who were deeply entrenched in violent racist skinhead groups for an extensive period of time and who may also be deemed the "older guard" of the violence RWE movement. Most participants also reported that they were leaders or held high positions in the movement. Although the purpose of this study was not to be representative or provide generalizations, future research should include larger sample sizes in an effort to better inform practitioners and policymakers on pathways out of violent extremism. Future studies should also incorporate different types of comparison groups to assess whether the study findings are unique to the ten former extremists who we interviewed. Here future research could compare former extremists' pathways

out of violent extremism across movements (i.e., former Islamist extremists versus RWEs versus left-wing extremists), across nations (e.g., the United States versus the United Kingdom versus Europe versus Australia), and across time frames in which they were active in a particular violent extremist movement (e.g., 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and now).[73] Comparison groups may also include non-violent extremists,[74] those who were involved in extremism for a relatively short period of time, or a younger generation of those who are currently active in extremism, as their experiences with leaving violent extremism may differ from those who participated in the current study. Together, all of these comparisons would provide a more nuanced account of the complex nature of pathways out of violent extremism and the complex interactions between disengagement and deradicalization processes.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Tiana Gaudette is a PhD student in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University and a Research Associate at the International CyberCrime Research Centre at Simon Fraser University. She studies far-right and far-left extremism, terrorists' use of fringe social media platforms, and school shootings. Her work has been published in *New Media & Society, Terrorism and Political Violence,* and *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.*

Ryan Scrivens is an Assistant Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, and an Associate Director at the International CyberCrime Research Centre at Simon Fraser University and a Research Fellow at the VOX-Pol Network of Excellence. He conducts problem-oriented interdisciplinary research with a focus on terrorists' and extremists' use of the Internet, right-wing terrorism and extremism, and hate crime. His research has been funded by Public Safety Canada, the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society, and VOX-Pol.

Vivek Venkatesh is an applied learning scientist, filmmaker, musician, and research-creator focused on building community resilience and tolerance against hate through a resolutely public pedagogical approach. He is the UNESCO co-Chair in Prevention of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV), President of the UNESCO Chairs Network in Canada, and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance (CSLP) at Concordia University, where he is Full Professor of Inclusive Practices in Visual Arts in the Department of Art Education at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

ORCID

Tiana Gaudette http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1351-4927
Ryan Scrivens http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7432-7370

Notes

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3. See John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

4. See Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge, 2008).

5. Windisch et al., "Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations," 4.

6. See John Horgan, Mary Beth Altier, Neil Shortland, and Max Taylor, "Walking Away: The Disengagement and De-Radicalization of a Violent Right-Wing Extremist," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 9 (2017): 63–77; see also Bryan F. Bubolz and Pete Simi, "Leaving the World of Hate: Life-Course Transitions and Self-Change," *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (2015): 1588–608.

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38. Brown et al., *Violent Extremism in America.*

39. For more on the project, see Scrivens et al., "Combating Violent Extremism."

40. Law enforcement officials who participated in the study were working in Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, Alberta and New Brunswick and were stationed in various law enforcement divisions, including research and innovation; crime prevention; major crimes; behavior analysis; federal policing; state protection and intelligence; hate crimes, and; the extremist threat division. Community activists who participated in the study were situated in Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta, and were active members of various anti-hate initiatives across Canada.

41. While certain terms, such as "radicalization" and "de-radicalization", were included in the initial interview guide, we were concerned that some of the study participants may be put off by these terms. Other participants may have been involved in violent extremism prior to such terms being used in the mainstream. As a result, our interview

guide, while systematic, was also flexible and dynamic. As but one way to account for the above concerns, within our interview guide we included a side list of alternative terms and ways of framing the questions. For terms associated with "radicalization", as an example, alternative terms included "indoctrination" or alternative wording such as "adhering to radical views" or "thinking differently than other people." For terms associated with "de-radicalization", alternative wording included "being open-minded" or "thinking differently."

42. It is important to highlight that, while the interview guide consisted of a set of questions that corresponded specifically with the interview guide categories noted above (such as "how old were you when you were first introduced to radical beliefs), the guide also consisted of a similar and rigorous set of questions within and across categories. For example, the guide included a systematic series of questions about friendship networks, belief systems, use of the Internet, and interactions with law enforcement (amongst many other topics of discussion) both before, during, and after being involved in violent extremism.

43. We acknowledge that some of the interview questions were quite detailed in nature and had the potential to prime respondents on certain factors. For example, interviewees were asked "Did family help you leave? If so, explain how they helped" followed by "Did friends help you leave? If so, explain how they helped" and so on. While this provided a measure on each of these variable types and for each study participant, the pointedness of these questions may have influenced participant responses. Having said that, interviewees did not appear to be primed when responding to these types of questions; they were quick to claim that community activists, for example, did not help them leave violent extremism. Relatedly, for another pointed question asked, "In the beginning of your disengagement process, how did you evolve in terms of your relationships and relational ties?", two participants made it clear that their relationships and relational ties did not "evolve." In fact, they corrected our language in this regard. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that some of the interview questions may have primed the responses of the study participants.

44. See Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019).

45. Data collection efforts followed the proper ethical procedures for conducting research involving human participants—our study was approved by Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee (certification number: 30008333). Here the former extremists were informed that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. They were also informed that they had the right to decline to answer questions or to end the interview/withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the formers were informed that they would not be identified by name in any publication, and that all data collected from the interview would be de-identified for the purpose of ensuring participant anonymity.

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Appendix. Interview Guide

Questions About Personal Experiences:

Before the radicalization process
- Prior to associating with an extremist movement:
    - Describe your upbringing and early family life.
    - Did you grow up in a home where your parents remain(ed) married? Divorced? Single parent?
    - Did you grow up in a rural, suburban, or urban environment?
    - How would you characterize your relationships with your family?
        - How would you describe your relationship with your: mother, father, siblings?
        - Did you have strong family relationships? Explain.
        - Did you consider yourself different from the rest of your family? Explain.
    - How would you characterize your relationships with friends?
        - Were your friends a diverse group? Explain.
        - Who was your closest friend? Explain why.
    - Who were your role models growing up? Explain why.
    - How would you characterize your time in school?
        - How were your grades in elementary school?
- Did you play competitive team sports in school or out of school? Explain.

Radicalization process
- How old were you when:
    - You were introduced to radical ideologies/beliefs?
    - Your radicalization process began?
    - You joined an extremist group(s)/movement?
    - You joined a violent extremist group(s)/movement?
- How did you get exposed to:
    - Radical ideologies/beliefs?
    - An extremist group(s)/movement?
    - A violent extremist group(s)/movement?
- What attracted you to:
    - Radical ideologies/beliefs?
    - The extremist group(s)/movement?
    - The violent extremist group(s)/movement?
- What significant factor(s)/event(s)/life experiences:
    - Led you to radical ideologies/beliefs?
    - Led you to becoming radicalized?
    - Led you to the extremist group(s)/movement?
    - Led you to the violent extremist group(s)/movement?
- Did you find support in your radical beliefs from your:
    - Friends? Explain.
    - Family? Explain.
    - Community? Explain.
- What impact did your decision to join the extremist group(s)/movement have on your:
    - Family? Explain
    - Friends? Explain?
    - Community? Explain.
- Did they know you were involved?
- If not, how did you conceal it?
- If not, what would they have done had they known?
- Describe your radicalization process.
    - Were there indicators of you becoming radicalized? Explain.
    - What/who was the most influential source of information during your radicalization process?
    - How did you spent/invest your time when you were becoming radicalized?
    - Where did you invest your emotional energy when you were becoming radicalized?
    - Did you self-radicalized or did someone assist you?
        - If self-radicalized, how did you educate yourself?
        - If someone assisted, what did they say/do that resonated with you?

- In the beginning of your radicalization process, how did you "evolve" in terms of your relationships and relational ties?
  - Did you have friends who knew about your ideology but did not joined the group(s)/movement?
    - Why didn't they join the group(s)/movement?
- While you were becoming radicalized, how did you build your identity? Describe this process.
- While you were becoming radicalized, did you consider yourself a leader or follower?
- Were you conscious about, or aware of, self-mechanisms that led you to become radicalized? Explain.
- During your radicalization process, describe the following circumstances of your life:
  - Job prospects and occupation
  - Economic status
  - School attended
  - Marks in school
  - Family life
  - Social networks
  - The law
  - Perception of self
    - Did any of the above circumstances play a role in your radicalization process? Explain.
- Once you were radicalized:
  - Who was in your circle of friends/social group? Explain why.
  - Who were your influential friends? Explain why.
  - Who were your influences or role models? Explain why.
  - Describe your relationships with:
    - Family.
    - Friends.
    - Non-radicalized individuals.
  - Did you try to convert your friends, family or acquaintances? Explain.
  - Did you change your physical appearance? Explain.
  - Did your demeanor change? Explain.
  - Did your general lifestyle habits change? Explain.
  - Did your religious habits/views change? Explain.
  - Did you talk about your radical beliefs online? Explain.
  - Did you ever have second thoughts about being radical? Explain.
    - If yes, describe those moments.
    - If yes, describe when and under what circumstances.
- Describe the importance (or lack thereof) of the following during your radicalization process:
  - Friends
  - Family
  - Employment
  - Internet websites
  - Social media
  - Gaming
  - Music
  - Media
  - Online contacts
  - Real world contact with members/recruiters
  - Other?
- Were you ever incarcerated?
  - If so, did it have an impact on your radicalization?
- Did the trust of certain people influence your decisions to join the group(s)/movement? Explain.
- What challenges did you face during your radicalization process?
- What, if anything, could have been said/done to stop/slow down your radicalization?
  - Did anyone try to stop you?
- Could police have done anything to deter you from becoming radicalized? Explain.
- Could anyone have done anything to deter you from becoming radicalized? Explain

In the extremist movement: Identity, roles, goals, and activities

- During your time in the group(s)/movement:
  - Describe your interests.
  - Describe your daily activities in general.
    - Did drugs or alcohol play a role in your daily life? Explain.

- o Describe the daily activities associated with the group(s)/movement.
- o Who were your role models? Explain why.
- o What was your source of income or way of sustaining yourself financially?
- o Did you openly espouse your views in public? Explain.
- o Did you rationalize your radical behaviour? Explain.
- o Did you have a guilty conscience? Explain.
- o Did you maintain a relationship with the person/people who recruited you into the movement? Explain.
- o To what extent were your extremists contacts national versus international?
- o What news-like information was the movement producing and distributing?
  - o Did it have an impact on you? Explain.
- o What was your role in the group(s)/movement? Explain.
  - o Did you seek to create a leadership role for yourself?
  - o Did you start your own group or join an existing one?
- o Describe the goals of the group(s)/movement.
- o Describe other members of the group(s)/movement.
  - o Were members of the movement:
    - o Naïve?
    - o Impressionable?
    - o Knew what they were doing?
- o Describe how you identified yourself/your identity?
  - o Were certain layers of your identity more important than others? Explain.
  - o Describe how others viewed you.
  - o Did you struggle with identity? Explain.
- o Did you ever feel concerned about:
  - o Your safety? Explain.
  - o The safety of your family? Explain.
  - o The safety of your friends? Explain.
- What factors gave rise the group(s)/ movement you were part of?
- What events would cause members of the movement to come together for a larger meeting?
  - o How would information about an upcoming meeting be sent out?
  - o To what extent did you make use of security precautions such as redirect points for meetings?
- To what extent were you aware of your group providing counter-intelligence to:
  - o Other extremist groups?
  - o Law enforcement?
    - o Did you participate?
- Have you committed:
  - o Criminal offences for the cause? Explain.
  - o An act of violence for the cause? Explain.
    - o If yes, when did you decide it was the course you wanted to take?
    - o If yes, what were you hoping to gain through this act?
- What would you have done for the group/the cause?
- Is there anything you wouldn't have done for the group/the cause?
- Was there any financial gain from being involved with the group or an extremist movement?
- Were you expected to provide funding or fundraising to the movement? Explain.
- Did you contribute any money to the cause?
  - o If so, how much?
  - o If so, how would did you come up with the money? Explain.
  - o If not, did you contribute in other non-monetary ways? Explain.
- Did you ever disagree with members of the group(s)/movement? Explain.
  - o How did you deal with it?
- Who were the primary competitors in the extremist space you occupied? Explain why.
- Was there cooperation between extremist groups/movements? Explain.
- When you became part of the group(s)/ movement, what kept you engaged in or part of it?
- What was most satisfying about being involved in the group(s)/movement?
- Was there a time where you attempted to join a group and were turned away from it? Explain.

In the extremist movement: Interactions with and perceptions of law enforcement and anti-extremists

- How did you perceive law enforcement during your time in the group(s)/movement?
- Describe your interactions with law enforcement during your time in the group(s)/movement.
  - Did these interactions influenced you to act in a particular way? Explain.
  - Did you ever interact with the RCMP or CSIS? If so, describe.
  - Did your friends ever interact with the RCMP or CSIS? If so, describe.
  - Did your family ever interact with the RCMP or CSIS? If so, describe.
- Have you ever had troubles at:
  - Country borders/with CBSA? Explain.
  - The airport? Explain.
- Have you ever been charged with a crime? If so, describe.
  - Did this affect your involvement in the group(s)/movement? Explain.
- Have you ever been convicted of crime? If so, describe.
  - Did this affect your involvement in the group(s)/movement? Explain.
- Did you ever feel you were being spied on by law enforcement or the government? Explain.
- If you had a good experience/relationship with a law enforcement member, what traits and characteristics did you appreciate?
- When, if at all, did you first begin to think the governments' intentions were legitimate?
- What would you change about the way the RCMP or CSIS does their job?
- Did anti-racists/anti-fascists/anti-hate activists or groups target:
  - You? Explain.
  - Your group(s)/movement? Explain.
    - What impact did they have on you and your group?
    - Which interventions worked to disrupt your group?
    - Which interventions didn't work to disrupt your group?

In the extremist movement: The Internet

- Describe your online activity(s) when you were in the movement.
  - Were you active in online discussion forums? Explain.
  - Were you active in blogs? Explain.
  - Were you active on social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)? Explain.
  - Did you share extremist material online? Explain.
  - Were you an administrator or owner of an extremist website? Explain.
  - Were you a forum or blog moderator? Explain.
- Describe what it was like to have a community of individuals to communicate with online.
- Approximately how much time/week did you spent online:
  - Immersing yourself in radical content?
  - Immersing yourself in non-radical content?
- Did the Internet play a role in your activism or was it mainly in person?
  - Describe who you were in the virtual world versus who you were in the real-world.
  - What was the percentage of your communications versus in person communications?
- How many people did you associate with:
  - Online who were involved in extremism?
  - In person who were involved in extremism?
- To what extent did:
  - The internet influenced your belief system?
  - In person contacts influence your belief system?
- Were you concerned that online or real-world contacts might be law enforcement or anti-extremists? Explain.
- How security conscious were you in online communication versus the real world? Explain.
  - Did you take active steps to conceal your involvement from family, friends, the law, or others?

Leaving extremism: Disengagement

- How old were you when you left the group(s)/movement?
- Why did you leave?
- Who influenced your decision to leave? Explain.

- o Who/what had the greatest influence on your decision?
- o Who/what moved you away from the violence (acts/attitude)?
- Who was the most helpful in helping you leave?
  - o Did law enforcement help you leave? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you leave?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
  - o Did community activists/groups help you leave? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you leave?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
  - o Did family help you leave? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you leave?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
  - o Did friends help you leave? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you leave?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
  - o Did others help you leave? If so, who helped, and explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you leave?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
- In the beginning of your disengagement process, how did you evolve in terms of your relationships and relational ties?
- How did you spend/invest your time when you started to leave?
  - o Where did you invest your emotional energy when you left?
- When you left extremism, how did you re-build your identity? Describe this process.
  - o Describe the layers of your identity when you left.
    - o Were certain layers of your identity more important than others? If so, explain.
- What did you do to de-identify yourself from the group(s)/movement?
- What challenges did you face when leaving?
- Did the trust of other people influence your decision to leave?
- Did having children or a relationship influence your decision to leave? Explain.
- What impact did love for someone else have on you leaving?
- Did law enforcement influence your decision to leave? Explain.
- Did people ever try to convince you to leave in a way that was ineffective or counterproductive? Explain.
- To what extent did you experience opposition when coming out of the group(s)/movement?
- Was there a specific program(s), event(s) or technique(s) that helped you leave? Explain.

Leaving extremism: De-radicalization
- How old were you when you began your process of de-radicalization?
- What led you along the path of de-radicalization?
- Were there indicators of you becoming de-radicalized? Explain.
- What experiences in your life were pivotal in your de-radicalization process?
- Who was the most helpful in helping you de-radicalize?
- What was the most influential source of information that:
  - o Redirected your radical trajectory?
  - o Introduced critical thinking?
- Who was the most helpful in helping you de-radicalize?
  - o Did law enforcement help you? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution to leaving?
  - o Did community activists/groups help you? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution?
  - o Did family help you? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution?
  - o Did friends help you? If so, explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you?
    - o If so, what did they perceive as the solution?
  - o Did others help you? If so, who helped, and explain how they helped.
    - o If so, what was their approach in helping you?

- o If so, what did they perceive as the solution?
- Did online sources have an influence on your process of de-radicalization? Explain
- Did new sources of information have an influence on your process of de-radicalization? Explain.
- Were you conscious about, or aware of, self-mechanisms that led you to become de-radicalized? If so, explain.
- Was there a specific program(s), event(s) or technique(s) that helped you de-radicalize? Explain.
- Did you find rehabilitation efforts helpful? Explain.
- Was your de-radicalization process linear? Explain

Reflections after leaving extremism and giving back

- Tell me about your belief system:
  - o When you were involved in extremism.
  - o After you left extremism.
  - o Now.
- Tell me about your religious beliefs:
  - o When you were involved in extremism.
  - o After you left extremism.
  - o Now.
- To what extent, if any, did religion play a role in drawing you to:
  - o The group(s)/movement
  - o The violent group(s)/movement
- What have you learned about yourself during:
  - o Your radicalization process?
  - o Your time in the group(s)/movement?
  - o Your exit from the group(s)/movement?
- What are your thoughts on the movement, now that you're out of it?
  - o Do you regret being involved? Explain.
  - o Do you feel guilty for being involved? Explain.
  - o Are you remorseful for being involved? Explain.
  - o Is there something you would have done differently? Explain.
- Thinking back on your time in the group(s)/movement, is there anyone who could have convinced you to leave?
- Do you ever feel concerned about:
  - o Your safety? Explain.
  - o The safety of your family? Explain.
  - o The safety of your friends? Explain.
- Do you still keep in touch with those in the group(s)/movement?
- Drawing comparisons between when you were involved in extremism versus what you may be seeing now, what differences have you observed between:
  - o The processes of radicalization? Explain.
  - o The processes of recruitment? Explain.
- When you left the group(s)/movement, what circumstances had to exist for you to share information with law enforcement about the group(s)/movement?
  - o For intelligence services?
  - o For anti-extremist groups?
  - o For NGOs and community groups?
- Did you ever interact with a reporter or journalist?
  - o During your time in the group(s)/movement? Explain
  - o After you left the group(s)/movement? Explain
- Have you given back in any way since leaving extremism? Explain.
  - o Are you interested in speaking at public events about your experiences in the group(s)/movement? Explain.
  - o Are you interested in speaking to young people about your experiences in the group(s)/movement? Explain.
  - o Would you get involved in proactive/support programs? Explain.
  - o Would you get involved in developing early intervention and prevention programs? Explain.
  - o Are you interested in working with academics? Explain.
  - o Would you be interested accompanying the Hate Crime Unit or other police units/divisions?
- If you could say anything to someone considering getting involved in the same group(s)/ movement you were involved with, what would you say to them?
- Do you have any suggestions for people working to combat extremism on educational campaigns that would have an effect on someone involved in this? Explain.

Miscellaneous

- How old are you?
- What is your current status (i.e., education, employment, volunteer work, etc.)?
- What is your current employment status?
- What is your current marital/relationship status?
- What are your interests, hobbies, other projects?

General Questions

Radicalization and extremist activity

- How do you define the term "radicalization"?
- What factors give rise to radicalization to:
  - Extremism?
  - Violent extremism?
- Are there indicators of someone becoming radicalized to:
  - Extremism? Explain
  - Violent extremism? Explain
- What personality traits make a person receptive to radical ideas?
- Do you think there are common characteristics that group(s)/movement recruiters look for when trying to entice people to join? Explain.
- What makes a person stay on the path of radicalized to:
  - Extremism?
  - Violent extremism?
- Does an individual's socio-economic background or status have an impact on their potential involvement in:
  - Extremism? Explain
  - Violent extremism? Explain
- Does an individual's demographics have an impact on their potential involvement in:
  - Extremism? Explain
  - Violent extremism? Explain
- Do you agree with the following statement? "There no single pathway to radicalization." Explain.
- What is one thing you want people to know about radicalization?
- What factors give rise to extremist group activity?
- What has the Internet done to facilitate extremist:
  - Ideology? Explain.
  - Networking? Explain.
  - Recruitment? Explain.
  - Violence? Explain.
  - Other? Explain.
- How is music used to recruit potential extremists?
- Is the university culture a platform for:
  - Extremism? Explain
  - Violent extremism? Explain
- Which Internet platforms should law enforcement be concerned about for monitoring the activities of extremists?
- What age group do you think is most vulnerable to being targeted by extremist groups/movements? Explain.

Leaving extremism

- Who do you see as the best actor(s) in helping extremists leave the group(s)/movement? Explain.
- At what point would the introduction of an intervention be most beneficial if someone wants to leave the group(s)/movement? Explain.
  - Where should intervention occur? (Probation office, shelter, home, community)? Explain.
  - By which organization, if any? Explain.
- Should law enforcement be involved in:
  - Leaving extremism/disengagement? Explain.
  - De-radicalization? Explain.
  - Counter-radicalization? Explain.
- When and in what forms would you view intervention by law enforcement as being most effective for:
  - Leaving extremism/disengagement? Explain.

- o De-radicalization? Explain.
- o Counter-radicalization? Explain.
- In what circumstances do you think law enforcement should be "central", "background", or more "invisible" in the delivery of programs for:
  - o Leaving extremism/disengagement? Explain.
  - o De-radicalization? Explain.
  - o Counter-radicalization? Explain.
- There's a general argument that CVE should be at the pre-stage (soft targets) before someone become radicalized, but law enforcement may not have information or be aware of it.
  - o How, then, do we get that information or to the stage where we can provide support?
- Assuming that radicalization and de-radicalization is not a linear process, how does law enforcement know that an extremist has reached a point in which they are not returning to radical behaviour? Explain.
  - o How does law enforcement know that someone is actually out of an extremist movement? Explain.
  - o What are the indictors or tangible pieces? Explain.
- Do formers extremists have to disassociate from current members in the movement all together, or can they still hang with them? Explain.
- Can individuals involved in extremism make amends with the people they once hurt? Explain.
- Is it possible to get people out of extremist groups/movements before they "age out?" If so, how?
- Are formers' networks or groups (such as Life After Hate and others, part of the new identity?
- During someone's de-radicalization process, do you think that their past and actions are needed to be made public in order for them to move ahead, or do you think it doesn't need to be shared?

Preventing extremism

- How can we prevent persons from following in your path to radicalization?
- How can we prevent other individuals from:
  - o Becoming radicalized to extremism? Explain.
  - o Becoming radicalized to violent extremism? Explain.
- In order to prevent extremism, what advice do you have for:
  - o Local communities
  - o Families
  - o Schools
  - o Community centres
  - o Religious leaders
  - o University/college associations
  - o Law enforcement
  - o Policy-makers
  - o Local government (city)
  - o Provincial government
  - o Federal government
  - o Other?
- How can we limit or prevent the development of radical views at a young age? Explain.
- What community or educational supports do you think could prevent radicalization? Explain.
- In what circumstances do you think law enforcement should be "central", "background", or more "invisible" in the delivery of prevention programs? Explain.
- Does the threat of arrest and/or imprisonment prevent or dissuade extremists from committing violence? Explain.
- What do you think about the media coverage of extremist movements?
  - o Would there be a more effective way for media to cover those who join these movements, and/or their acts? Explain
- What do you think we, as a society, are doing:
  - o Right in regards to preventing extremism?
  - o Wrong in regards to preventing extremism?
- Do you think former extremists have an important role in countering violent extremism? Explain.
- If you were in charge of developing a prevention program and had full authority (no budget constraints, etc.), what would your program look like?