

# Understanding How and Why Young People Enter Radical or Violent Extremist Groups

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# Understanding How and Why Young People Enter Radical or Violent Extremist Groups

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The process of (violent) radicalisation and subsequently joining of radical or violent extremist groups was studied using semi-structured interviews with (young) people who considered themselves as radicals or violent extremists in left-wing, right-wing or religious settings. The data was gathered in Belgium from March through November 2013. Though modest in number (12), the interviews tell us a lot about factors that play a role in (violent) radicalisation and the organisation of radical or violent extremist groups through online and offline recruitment and daily activities. The results of the interviews are linked to the existing theoretical frameworks on (violent) radicalisation, including factors underlying engagement and recruitment. They show that new social media are not as relevant as currently asserted, but that offline methods of recruitment are still uppermost. They also make clear that the content of the ideology is not the first impetus for searching, but that a general discontent with society comes first, a search for ways of dealing with this discontent, and an orientation associated with the search. This has implications for the way society should deal with young people and radical convictions and the alternatives that should be provided.

**Keywords:** radicalisation, violent extremism, new social media, internet, recruitment

Young people are seen as the hope and promise for our future. Their views and actions will shape tomorrow's society. With this in mind, it is even more disturbing and worrying when those same young people get involved in groups that reject existing society and, more specifically, when they use political violence to do so. This is illustrated by the current flow of young people wanting to join the "Islamic State" and fight jihad in Syria, a problem that represents a serious issue today in many Western countries.<sup>1</sup> Until now, the main response of

governments has been one of repression. In Belgium the BELFI project seeks to withdraw financial means and benefits from individuals and NGOs that financially or physically support the fighting in Syria,<sup>2</sup> while the Belgian federal government has adopted a series of laws that make it a criminal offence to travel abroad for terrorist purposes and permit identity documents of individuals planning to do so to be (temporarily) revoked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates show that currently about 400-450 Belgians are involved in the fighting in Syria, of which an estimated 120 have already returned.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/brussel-pakt-financiering-syriestrijders-aan/article-normal-274783.html>

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the new and amended laws concerning the fight against terrorism, see the relevant commission reports: law on the revocation of passports (<http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1200/54K1200004.pdf>); law on the fight against terrorism

(<http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1198/54K1198005.pdf>); law on access to Belgian territory (<http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1197/54K1197005.pdf>); law on the temporary revocation of national identity cards (<http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1170/54K1170007.pdf>).

However, if governments want to avoid the (violent) radicalisation of their own youth and thus the manifestation of radical or violent extremist groups within their territory, a repressive approach will not be sufficient.<sup>4</sup> Since these groups and their members reject the society they are part of, it is unlikely that they will respond to sanctions imposed by that same society. So, in addition to the repressive approach, a better preventive and deradicalisation policy is needed (Horgan 2009; Bjørge and Horgan 2009; Horgan and Taylor 2011). In order to develop a constructive and efficient prevention approach, is it necessary to unravel the process of violent radicalisation and get a better understanding of how young people come to make the decision to join a radical or even violent extremist group.

Why and how young people enter radical or even violent extremist groups remains very difficult to study, as getting the people involved to talk about their experiences is a challenge. In this article, we aim to present insights into the process of (violent) radicalisation of young people by analysing the discourses of those that have experienced this process, especially focusing on the relevance of the internet and NSM. As such, they give us insights into their mindsets, incentives and experiences. This analysis is carried out on the basis of twelve interviews with respondents from different backgrounds and with different ideologies: left-wing, right-wing and religious extremism. We aim to look at three issues more specifically: (1) what initiated the process of (violent) radicalisation, (2) why and how respondents joined radical or violent extremist groups, and (3) to what extent we can speak of online versus offline (violent) radicalisation. To grasp these issues, we first outline what is already known about the process of (violent) radicalisation (part 1), (self-)recruitment (part 2) and the role

of the internet and NSM (part 3). Then, we relate the interview results (part 4 and 5) to these theoretical points of departure.

### 1. Entering the Process of Radicalisation

Radicalisation as a process refers to the development of increasingly violent and extremist attitudes. Consequently, in this research we use the term violent radicalisation when referring to the process in which violent extremist attitudes are developed, ultimately resulting in the use of political violence (Borum 2011a; Schmid 2013). Violent extremism and radicalism refer to different phases in this process. *Radicalism* promotes a radical fundamental alternative to the status quo, which is seen as unacceptable. However, compromise and dialogue are possible. The means used to obtain this goal are in principle non-violent, although specific situations may escalate (Schmid 2013; see also Borum 2011a; Neumann and Rogers 2007). *Violent extremism* also opposes mainstream society, but unlike to radicalism it fully denounces pluralism, strongly emphasises ideology, and always accepts violence as a legitimate means to obtain and hold on to power. This manifests itself in violent attitudes, political violence, or both (Bartlett Birdwel and King 2010; Schmid 2013).

(Violent) radicalisation should be placed within a broader context (Kundnani 2012). Although there is discussion about the different phases involved,<sup>5</sup> researchers agree that the actual process of (violent) radicalisation is preceded by a “pre-phase” in which this broader context can create a breeding ground for further radicalisation (Bjørge 2002; van der Valk and Wagenaar 2010). The literature provides a long and diverse list of risk factors possibly contributing to this breeding ground (Bjørge 1997; Horgan 2004).

In order to address issues of causality through such a risk-factor approach,<sup>6</sup> Bouhana and Wikström (2008, 2011) make

<sup>4</sup> We refer explicitly to violent radicalisation since the process of radicalisation may end in violent extremism, but does not automatically do so (Borum 2011a).

<sup>5</sup> Examples of different explanatory models can be found in the cognitive opening model (Wiktorowicz, 2004), the staircase model (Moghaddam 2005), and the pyramid model (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008). See also the three-stage process model of Horgan (2004).

<sup>6</sup> The listing of risk and protective factors leading to violent extremism has resulted in a large knowledge

base on the individual factors and circumstances that can be linked to this phenomenon. However, most risk factors are common to a large number of individuals of which only a minority will resort to violent extremism. This indicates that the listing of risk factors alone is not sufficient to explain individual violent extremism (see also Sageman 2004). The risk factor approach is not capable of distinguishing between real causes and correlates, generating confusion about what is important and what not, and causing research to be random (Borum 2011b; Horgan 2008). So far, there is no

agreement on a general causal model of violent extremism (Christmann 2012). In order to address this issue, Bouhana and Wikström (2008 2011) propose to look for explanatory mechanisms, rather than risk-factors, 1) distinguishing background characteristics from real causal factors and 2) explaining what moves individuals to violent extremism. They do so by applying the situational action theory (SAT) framework to the explanation of violent extremism, or more specifically political violence (see Wikström 2014, 2004, 2005, 2010).

a distinction between the direct causes, or causal factors that directly influence action, and the indirect causes, or causal factors that influence the emergence of the direct causes, when explaining violent extremism (see also Wikström 2007, 2014). They argue that elements of individual propensity towards violent extremism and elements of exposure to violent extremist settings form, in interaction with each other, the direct causes of violent extremism. Elements of the breeding ground, influencing these direct factors, have to be seen as indirect causes, or causes of the causes.

Following this logic, risk factors found in the literature can be divided into (1) elements forming the breeding ground, (2) individual push factors (propensity), and (3) environmental pull factors (exposure). The *breeding ground* firstly encompasses contextual factors such as broad (global) structural, political, social, and economic processes, beyond the scope of individuals or even individual states, like segregation and overpopulation (Moors and van den Reek Vermeulen, 2010). Within this global context, local societal circumstances can arise, like unemployment and structural discrimination, which can provoke feelings of distrust, dissatisfaction, and (perceived) marginalisation (Coolsaet 2005, 2015). Second, individuals differ in the way they perceive and define these contextual circumstances, which influences their attitudes and actions (Buijs Demant and Hamdy 2006; King and Taylor 2011; van der Pligt and Koomen 2009). Social psychological mechanisms, like perceived injustice, perceived group threat, and perceived insecurity link the individual to the wider context by determining how individuals interpret certain societal and personal circumstances (Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos 2013; see also Riek et al. 2009). Third, social mechanisms determine the social situation of the individual in relation to others in the same group (Bjørge, 2002 2011; Doosje, Loseman and van den Bos 2013; Veldhuis and Bakker 2007). Poor social integration can lead to feelings of rejection and loneliness, leaving individuals unattached to society and thus free of constraints.<sup>7</sup> Especially individuals who are searching, either for social inclusion and belonging (Bjørge 2002, 2011) or for

meaning and identity (King and Taylor 2011), are particularly vulnerable.

*Individual push factors* entail (1) certain personality traits that can make individuals more susceptible to certain experiences, like impulsivity or a need for kicks (King and Taylor 2011; Victoroff 2005; Bjørge 2002), and (2) emotions like frustration, hate, anger and fear that may have an influence on behaviour and action readiness (Silke 2008; Veldhuis and Bakker 2007; van der Pligt and Koomen 2009). *Environmental pull factors* encompass (1) the attractiveness of the violent extremist group claiming to address certain issues and fulfil certain fundamental social and psychological needs (Mellis 2007; Bjørge 2002 2012), (2) ideological recognition (Silke 2008), and (3) significant others, like friends or family, that form a first link to the extremist ideology and extremist group (Olesen 2009; Sageman 2004; Bjørge 2002 2011; Atran 2010). In addition, the process can be facilitated by *catalysts* such as trigger events (Silke 2008), and violence (either by or against the group) (van der Valk and Wagenaar 2010; Bjørge 2002).

Literature suggests that the breeding ground for (violent) radicalisation is usually built upon experienced feelings of frustration and discontent with certain aspects of the individual's personal life, society in general, and/or specific policy. Individuals going through this pre-phase typically meet other like-minded individuals and continue the process of radicalisation together. Although ideological arguments are the most common post-hoc justification given for membership in a radical or violent extremist group, (violent) radicalisation seems mostly rooted in this more socially-orientated breeding ground (Bjørge, 1997; Buijs, Demant and Hamdy 2006; Venhaus 2010; Coolsaet 2015; Roy 2008; Murer 2011). Ideological recognition can steer the choice for a certain group, but in the majority of cases the specific ideological framework is adopted only after recruitment (Silke 2008; Doosje, Loseman and van den Bos 2013; Doosje et al. 2012).

Radical and violent extremists often frame their message on the basis of (perceived) grievances that are already present among the target group (Thompson 2011; Wiktorowicz 2004;

<sup>7</sup> See also Hirschi (1969) and Agnew (2004) on the importance of social bonds.

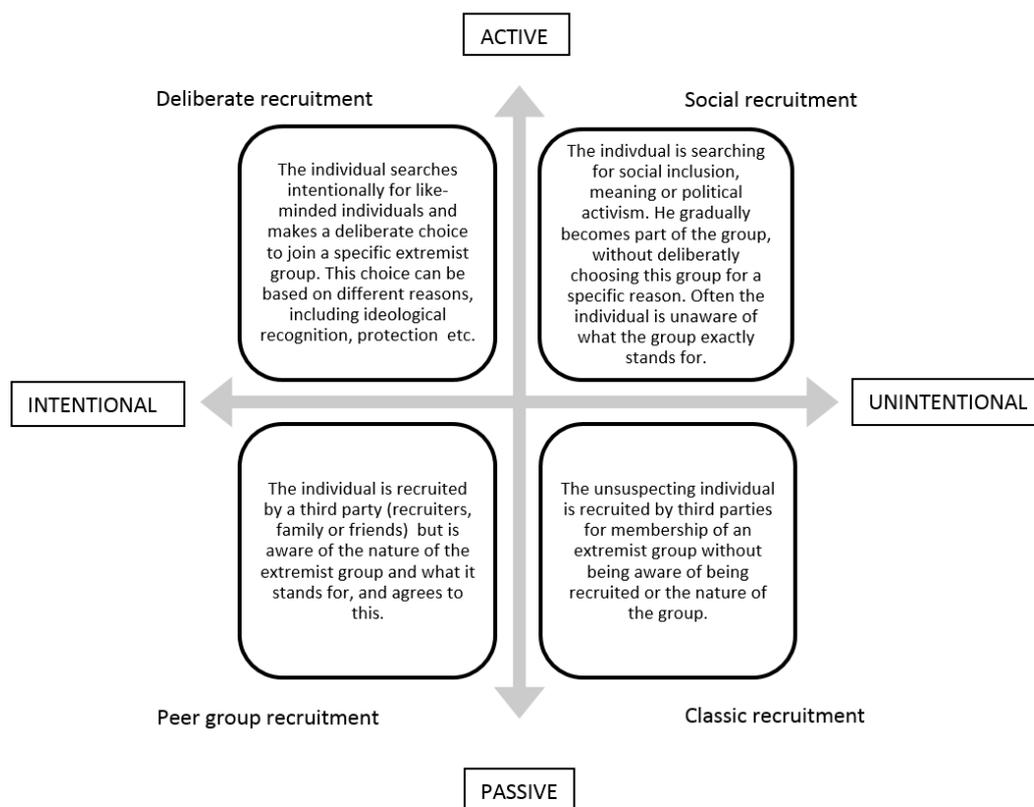
Adams and Roscigno 2005). If the nature of these grievances matches what a certain radical or violent extremist group has to offer, radicalisation can occur (Mellis 2007). These groups mainly target vulnerable individuals, who are susceptible to the simple worldview and clear identity they have to offer. In general, radical and violent extremist movements seem to offer three things (Fermin 2009): (1) an answer to existential life questions, (2) a political activist response to injustice, and (3) a sense of home and belonging. This corresponds to the three important grounds for (violent) radicalisation (Buijs, Demant and Hamdy 2006): (1) the need for meaning and significance, (2) a response to (experienced) injustice, and (3) the need for social inclusion. If individuals perceive these things as missing in their lives, radical and violent extremist groups can become

very attractive, especially when there are no positive alternatives perceived in regular society.

## 2. Recruitment and Contact with Extremist Groups

Recruitment is often seen as the endpoint of a simple process where innocent individuals are brainwashed and manipulated by criminal third parties (Neumann and Rogers 2007). However, in practice recruitment is more complex and cannot be entirely captured by this top down description. The recruited individual often plays an active role as well. According to Opp (2009), recruitment can better be described as the process of identifying oneself with a movement. This can take place within any social or political movement, including extremist ones. Research by Murer (2011) showed that

Figure 1: Ideal types of recruitment



Source: Pauwels et al. 2014

searching individuals can come into contact with extremist groups in different ways: (1) via third parties, (2) through peer pressure/family, or (3) by self-recruitment. Self-recruitment refers to searching individuals on the lookout for a group that can provide a response to their needs. This includes those that are not certain about what they are searching for and need the (extremist) group to shape their grievances.<sup>8</sup> Olesen summarizes this as follows:

Recruitment is the process through which individuals become part of a collective and come to share the views and goals of this collective. [...] Recruitment to activism is a voluntary decision on the part of the individual. The individual, however, can be more or less proactive in the process. At least three ideal-typical pathways to recruitment can be specified: 1) individuals identify an organization they sympathize with and approach it; 2) organizations actively seek out potential recruits; 3) individuals are recruited through friendship and family networks. (Olesen 2009, 8)

Based on the literature Pauwels et al. developed four ideal types describing different recruitment pathways according to the positioning on two axes, as shown in Figure 1 (Pauwels et al. 2014). The main distinguishing element is the presence of social relations (Neumann and Rogers 2007). The first axis represents the spectrum between active and passive recruitment. In case of passive recruitment, an individual is noticed by a third party and brought into the movement, even though this was not the subject's explicit intention. In the case of active recruitment, individuals actively search for a group or something the group has to offer (such as friendship, identity etc). The second axis displays the spectrum between intentional and unintentional recruitment. In case of intentional recruitment, the individual is aware that he is joining a certain movement and what the movement entails. In the case of unintentional recruitment, the individual more or less "accidentally" joins the movement.

It should be noted that this typology only addresses recruitment from the standpoint of the individual. However, the extremist group can also play an active or a passive role (King

and Taylor 2011). Active groups are those outside the initial social network of searching individuals that wait for the right moment to convince possible recruits of their ideas and convictions. The individuals that are most likely to be successfully recruited are carefully identified before starting recruitment efforts, in order to maximize results (Brady, Schlozman, and Hamdy 1999). Passive groups are created bottom-up by like-minded individuals who already know each other and group together around a common standpoint. Official ties with formal organisations are not always present but passive groups can be inspired by them. Although formal organisations are not responsible for the formation and recruitment of the members of these groups, they can supply them with information, training and ideological inspiration, making them more dangerous. Of course, it is possible for a bottom-up group to evolve into a more active group.

### 3. Internet and Online Radicalisation

Since the 1990s the internet has become an indispensable part of daily life and is extremely widely used among the general population. Large numbers of people have easy access to the internet, providing in a large and easily reached audience.<sup>9</sup> Especially online social networking, by means of NSM, has transformed the world into an "online village" with every offline actor represented online (Woolley, Limperos, and Oliver 2010). So it is no surprise that criminals, radicals, extremists and terrorists also use this medium to their advantage. The benefits that the internet entails for the general population in terms of communication, information exchange, networking and privacy hold the same advantages for these groups (Stevens and Neuhmann 2009; Weiman 2010 2004).

In general radical and violent extremist groups seem to use the internet in a similar way to other social and political movements,<sup>10</sup> as an extension of their offline activities (Kohlman 2006; Dean, Bell and Newman, 2012; NCTB 2010). These groups also try to organise communication and information exchange, reinforce solidarity, and build a

<sup>8</sup> This is not the same as self-radicalisation, which implies a complete individual radicalisation without any connection (online or offline) to an extremist group or movement (see also Pantucci 2011; Burton and Scott 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 81 percent of European households have home access to the Internet (Eurostat 2015).

<sup>10</sup> In essence, violent extremist groups are still social and political movements (see Klandermans and Mayer 2010; Olesen 2009).

collective identity. More specifically, three activities are of importance in the context of (violent) radicalisation and recruitment (Bowman-Grieve 2011; NCTB 2010; Zhou et al. 2005; Gerstenfeld, Grant and Chiang, 2003). First the spreading of propaganda and ideological frameworks (Browne and Silke 2011; Weimann and Tsfati 2002; Adams and Roscigno 2005). Second, networking and practical organisation (AIVD 2012; NCTb 2010; Benschop 2006; see also Adams and Roscigno 2005; Gerstenfeld, Grant and Chiang, 2003). And third, community formation (Simi and Futrell 2006; De Koster and Houtman 2009; Bowman-Grieve 2011, see also Evans and Boyte 1992).

Although it is clear that radical and violent extremist groups use the internet to their advantage, it is unclear whether or not this kind of internet usage, and exposure to it, has led to an increase in (violent) radicalisation and recruitment. Political actors and policymakers seem to agree that the internet facilitates the search for violent extremist information and contacts, making it easier to become involved in violent extremism (Conway 2012). The internet is perceived as a (dangerous) open haven of free speech where any kind of

Still, the internet and especially NSM are more interactive than any other medium, making real-time interaction possible in cyberspace (see Thompson 2011). Compared to traditional media, the internet, and especially NSM, are extremely well placed to provide for (1) easy and constant access to extremist narratives encouraging violent extremism and (2) the necessary social bonds and networks to sustain and develop initial interests, hence guiding the way to recruitment. Research by the RAND Corporation (von Behr et al. 2013) concluded that the internet can facilitate the process of (violent) radicalisation and recruitment by enhancing opportunities to (1) access information and communication and (2) confirm existing beliefs by forming “echo chambers” for violent extremist beliefs. However, Behr and colleagues conclude that the internet does not function as a substitute for in-person contact, suggesting it only supports offline processes of violent radicalisation and recruitment that are already taking place (see also Stevens and Neumann 2009; Simi and Futrell 2006; ISD 2012).

#### 4. Methodology

**Table 1: Survey respondents**

	Men	Women	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels
<i>Left-wing extremism</i>	5	2	5	-	2
<i>Right-wing extremism</i>	4	-	2	1	1
<i>Religious extremism</i>	1	-	-	1	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	10	2	7	2	3

information can be offered and found, including violent extremist speech, videos, contacts, etc. (Arts and Butter 2009; Benschop 2006).

However, researchers disagree over the causal relevance of internet exposure. They argue that messages of hate have always been around, including efforts to recruit others in the name of these messages and the use of new media to do so (Klein 2009; see also Trend 2007). Since both the context and the receiving audience are constantly changing over time, it is only logical that these groups try to stay up to date.

In this paper, we aim to build on the literature by sharing empirical results on the aforementioned three topics: (violent) radicalisation, (self-)recruitment, and the role of NSM. This paper draws on empirical data gathered in the framework of a two-year study, under the title RADIMED, assessing the role and influence of NSM in the process of radicalisation (Pauwels et al 2014).<sup>11</sup> The study consisted of a quantitative phase, in which an online survey was conducted among Belgian adolescents aged between 16 and 24 years, followed by a qualitative phase, in which semi-structured interviews were carried out. In this paper, only the results of the qualitative

<sup>11</sup> RADIMED is short for RADicalisation and social MEDIA. This study is also reported by Pauwels and

De Waele (2014) with a focus on extreme right groups.

phase will be reported because they provide most insight into the motives and backgrounds of respondents.

In the interviews, left-wing, right-wing, and religious extremists were interviewed, between March and November 2013.<sup>12</sup> After this period, a total of twelve interviews (five conducted in Wallonia and Brussels and seven conducted in Flanders) were deemed relevant and used for research purposes (Table 1). The target group profile was originally “preferably young people between 16 and 24 years (or older) who have radical or extremist convictions and are committed to a group in an online and/or offline context”. The main strategies used to find people matching this profile were the internet (extremist websites, forums, Facebook pages), a call for candidates as part of the online survey, and the use of key respondents. Most respondents were contacted through key contacts. Only two respondents were successfully contacted on online fora or websites. Leads from the online survey yielded two additional interviews.

The main technique used to obtain data was the semi-structured interview. Respondents were asked to discuss various topics and encouraged to tell their stories in their own words. Using a topic list, the interviewers guided the interview to ensure that relevant research topics were well-covered during the interview. All interviews, except one, were conducted face-to-face and recorded. The remaining interview was conducted through a Facebook account created for research purposes. Two interviews were “enriched” by e-mail, in addition to the face-to-face interview. On average, each interview took one and a half hours. Each respondent was reminded of the objectives of the research, the particularities of the interview and the promised anonymity of the data.

For this paper, all the interviews were recoded by both authors independently, using Nvivo. Nvivo is qualitative analysis software that allows interview materials to be structured and coded and supports analysis of the data. As the research question of this paper was very focused and was not part of the central question in the study in general, full recoding was necessary. We hence developed a new coding system and

structure on the basis of the research question for this paper. At fixed intervals, the authors put together their coding results and discussed the contents of codes and coding procedures to optimise validity and ensure that there was agreement on the content of categories (Weston et al. 2001). After this coding phase, results were discussed and ultimately combined in this paper. Some limitations of the data have to be addressed. First, interviews were conducted during a relatively short period. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, it would have been preferable to perform long-term fieldwork in order to build trust and expand access. At the time of the interviews the political discussion over young Belgian fighters in Syria had created a sphere of fear and hostility towards Islam, making most Muslim individuals who were approached during the research reluctant and suspicious of participating. Second, the respondents found online were not immediately inclined to participate in an offline interview, mainly because the anonymity guaranteed by online interaction would not be present in the case of face-to-face interaction. This resulted in one interview being conducted online, through Facebook. Third, selecting respondents on the basis of their level of extremism posed some problems in terms of inclusion and exclusion criteria. This resulted in the selection of different profiles, from radicals through genuine violent extremists. However, this did allow study of different pathways of (violent) radicalisation and comparison of the use of NSM within them.

## 5. Empirical Results

In this section we relate the results of the interviews to the three topics mentioned above. The results are organised in chronological order, starting with the search for inclusion (the pre-phase) and ending with in-group activities (online and offline). We relate some of the respondents’ answers to their ideology or the group they are connected with, but not for all themes. There is not always a link between the ideology they stand for and other variables, such as social relations, peer pressure, decision-making, and so on. It is therefore much

<sup>12</sup> The main focus of the research was on young people active in a movement outside the mainstream political field and holding the potential for extremism

more relevant to look at the processes these young people have gone through, irrespective of the ideological path they follow. However, we will of course mention differences between left, right, and religious extremism where relevant (for example when discussing views on society, group discrimination, etc.).

## 5.1. (Violent) Radicalisation: Pre-phase

### 5.1.1. Feelings of Injustice

The pre-phase of (violent) radicalisation is described in the literature as represented by factors of broad social issues that add to a feeling of injustice or relative deprivation. This leads to discontent and dismay with society (Doosje, Loseman and van den Bos 2013; Bjørge 1997; Fermin 2009; Buijs, Demant and Hamdy 2006). This general feeling of dissatisfaction could be recognised in the discourses of all respondents, although the reasons for their discontent, and the analysis of who is to blame, are different for each respondent, and are among the very rare issues that can be linked to the orientation of the respondent (left, right, religious extremism).

The starting point of (violent) radicalisation for almost all respondents is found in a growing perception of injustice and inequality in society. Respondents state that they are confronted with these issues on a daily basis. These feelings may be based on their own experience, such as direct victimisation or discrimination, but can also be based on more general tendencies, events on a meso- or macro level, close by or far away, sometimes not even involving the respondent him/herself. As stated earlier, these experiences seem to differ depending on the ideology they adhere to. For example, right-wing oriented respondents give concrete, personal examples of injustice that they have experienced personally as triggers for their involvement in or search for support from violent extremist groups. They consider themselves as part of a “white native Belgian” in-group group that is treated unfairly by others. They assert that a certain group, of foreign descent, is responsible for their perceived injustice and want this to be addressed. They do not want an entirely different society, but ask for certain amendments that rule out “taking advantage of things” and protect their own rights.

When I started attending high school, I saw people of all origins. Of course, I was always taught to be kind and that every individual is equal. I tried to get along with everyone, but after some time I learned that I was not at all welcome in the “diversified groups”. As time went by in school, I found myself in an exclusively white group, leaving aside some exceptions (two Turkish people who could speak and write Dutch perfectly). I often got into an argument with people of foreign descent as I was a blond guy and was assertive. They often got away with it, and told the principal that I was provoking them. I got punished for it a few times, because of those idiots. My sense of fairness was already affected in high school (...). These are just anecdotes and a small fragment of what me and my family had to endure with this scum. One would become racially critical for less. (Arthur – male, radical right)

I used to have a lot of confidence in the police when I was young (...) but this started to change when, after an aggressive attack in which I was forced to use my pepper spray, the police arrested me, handcuffed me, even though I was the one that had been victimised. (...) My doubts grew when the public prosecutor decided to force me to compensate my chief attacker, who, according to him, had to wear glasses after my attack with the pepper spray. The thesis of the public prosecutor was that I, on my own, had assaulted ten young Turks, in broad daylight, in the city centre, five hundred metres from my high school, and that they considered me a perpetrator, an aggressive actor, and my attackers as victims. Then I really experienced a great dysfunctioning of the Belgian judicial system. That motivated my entry into the group. (Geoffrey – male, radical right)

I often hear from my father and his colleagues that there are people who do not pay their debts or that social security is this high, that his pension is not enough and of course that the “browning” of our city makes the streets unsafe (which both me and my friends have experienced more than once). (Arthur – male, radical right)

On the other hand, left-wing respondents mainly refer to general social problems and injustice in society. This injustice is then linked to the perception of minorities in society as victims of the system – minorities of which the respondent mostly is not a part. The in-group is therefore inclusive and very broad, as every member of a minority in society is considered to be a potential “victim”.

Left-wing respondents seem to resist the system in general and strive for a totally different social model. They are disappointed with (what they call) capitalist society and do not understand why other people are not aware of how superficially they are living. Others refer to a perceived evolution into a gestapo-like society, or to the neglect of global warming. Some

of them say they were radicalised by what they read in school, or by their experiences in society in a broader sense (such as the gender gap).

You notice that when you work in a factory as a student and you get paid little for what you do, and you see that other people for... you see that people who do not have to work, who own capital, can live more easily, yes, that are huge inequalities (...). I am more, when I became more active around climate-related topics, this was because I was a privileged student, well, bourgeois, not really confronted with the larger problems in the world, but seeing problems in the third world and the climate... Other people struggle themselves or their parents struggle financially, and become engaged as a result. (Julius – male, radical left)

I had an easy childhood on a social level, but not in other domains. I already had to fight in my childhood and now I have to fight because I'm a woman. Everyone has a role pattern and there are certain expectations. Women are made to have children and to do housekeeping. But in this society that is almost impossible: housekeeping, have a social life, and a good career, and this, and that... sometimes it all becomes too much. (Mary – female, radical left)

Islam-related respondents refer both to their own experiences and to the experiences of the broad minority they are part of. This is very much linked to their identity as Muslims, both in terms of causes of deprivation, but also as a source of a positive self-image. They consider the worldwide group of Muslims as being treated unfairly. They have the feeling that they are continuously disadvantaged in relation to the general population. They feel they are not listened to – or positively ignored – by policymakers. This results in a perception that they do not have a chance of succeeding within the system, even if they play by the rules, which makes them look for alternatives.

Today, I'm in a state of mind where I do not want to wait any longer. With my children in mind, I do not want to wait another three or four generations to solve these questions. For certain sectors this has to be done through the law. Today, wearing a headscarf is prohibited in secondary schools. There is no argument: we will take legal action and revise school policy from within. After this, well, for issues like employment, we do realise that it won't necessarily be the law that will be able to resolve this. Here we need a compromise at the level of society. So, this is why these issues radicalised me, because today, when I speak to groups, I'm much more reserved about the elements I defend, clearly saying that if things continue this way, Belgian society only allows one possible voice of integration for Muslims, that being the Islamic pillar. (Harold – male, radical Islam)

It's easy to say it like this but... it is really a hard emotional burden because they see their brothers getting killed and feel as if nothing is being done about it, they are also sometimes in despair because of their social-economic status, the students at my school, they call it "trash-can school" ... (laughs). It's a last-chance school, where they go when they are transferred from other schools, in an area where there is between 40 and 50 percent unemployment among youth, and they know very well that when they leave school, they will probably have nothing to do. They are in despair... (...) They are often very open to religious issues and when it is suggested to them,... well... they are told: listen, you can fight for your brothers and they know how to do this, they are often well-paid, they are promised a lot, and all their crimes are forgiven because they fight for Allah. (Sebastian – male, radical left)

This injustice is not only an element of (violent) radicalisation in terms of the experience of injustice itself, but also in terms of the perception that perceived injustice is not tackled by society or the authorities. On the contrary, respondents feel that it is even sustained by society. Respondents state that they have started their "quest" when they failed to find suitable answers to their questions from traditional actors. This is a common denominator in all ideologies, but with different accents and consequences.

Sometimes this search for alternatives is complemented by a search for social inclusion, social connections and/or a positive identity. The feelings of injustice, in combination with a negative experience in the past, give respondents the idea of "not belonging" to the people around them who support the status quo and cannot provide answers for their problems.

### 5.1.2. Identity and Ideology

Research shows that it is not the specific ideology that is essential at the start of (violent) radicalisation, but rather the search for an identity and social inclusion (Bjørø 2012, 1997; Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy 2006; Sageman 2004; Roy 2008). As already mentioned, radical and violent extremist groups in general seem to provide three things: (1) an answer to injustice, (2) a positive identity, and (3) a feeling of belonging. This also seems to be the case for the respondents. Although certain characteristics seem to push them in a specific direction, the results of their quest seems to be more or less "coincidental". Most respondents did not start their search

from a specific ideology; the ideology was adopted during the search.

But if I had grown up in Lasnes and not in Saint-Josse (Brussels), and attended a different school and lived in a whole other environment, I could have been with the labour party, or militant, or with a sect, or,... I don't know! I could have done many things. Circumstances have brought me to the (anonymised) today, given my personal environment, etc. To be more precise, I went to a high school that was attended by a lot of hooligans. And I was the scapegoat, I was easily harassed, annoyed, etc. (Geoffrey – male, radical right)

All respondents start their search from a very critical view on society and from a disappointment with current politics, authorities and policymakers. Some refer to capitalism (ironically including a respondent who works as a banker) and exploitation, others refer to the meaning of life. It is also striking that they have invested heavily in gathering information from diverging viewpoints on social processes and institutions.

No matter what information I get, I ask a lot of questions (why? How did we get into this situation etc.). I ask a lot of relevant questions, friends and colleagues know me like this :). (Arthur – male, radical right)

When I was fifteen to twenty years old, I had rebelled against society, a rebellion against the systems, authorities,... and finally this turned me to the extreme-right groups, but it could have also turned me to the extreme-left groups, or somewhere else. It is also related to the people I met. (Geoffrey – male, radical right) Total disillusionment with the traditional political parties. In fact, the starting point of my commitment, I think, is that I was revolted by the fact that in terms of technology there is enough for everyone to live comfortably on the planet, but that this does not happen like this. (...) This was also the time of the war in Afghanistan, which I followed closely, afterwards there was the war in Iraq and in-between the two my political commitment really developed. (Lizzy – female, radical left)

Information is gathered in different places, both from sources within their own ideology and sources outside that ideology (or contrary to it). For example, left-wing respondents also look for information on right-wing websites. This does not mean that the ideological identity of the movement they sympathise with, in a broad sense, is chosen entirely arbitrarily. Rather, the ideological preference of the individual seems to determine what kind of groups are attractive and which groups are not.

This ideological preference tends to be shaped by the social environment, family history, certain experiences, emerging opinions etc. Once the person is engaged in the group, further ideological development takes place.

### 5.1.3. Social Environment: The Role of Family and Peers

During the interviews, respondents were asked how their surroundings reacted to their active involvement in radical or violent extremist groups. The responses differed little between ideologies, but depended on the individual circumstances and context of the respondents. Some of the respondents stated that they had adopted the ideology of their parents and families, and translated this into an engagement of their own. In these cases, they have been confronted with their parents' viewpoints on social issues and out-groups from a very young age, and have accepted their perspectives and points of view.

In some cases, this is learned at a very early age. Parents can be role models, and in those cases their ideology is adopted. However, there are differences with regard to the level of conviction and engagement, and the strength of their principles. For example, one respondent was very active in a right-wing group, while his parents, who held the same views, were not actively involved. The converse is also possible:

(interviewer: Do you talk about this a lot?)

No, it's just: they say "there's a demonstration about this and that, do you want to join us?" (...) My parents are both even more active and radical than I am. Yes, then you notice that you have been aware of this since early childhood and that you can be actively involved, instead of just putting your signature somewhere. (Mary – female, radical left)

For this to occur, the individual must agree with the concerns of their family and perceive them as fundamentally problematic, necessary and possible to influence through (their own) action. This means their engagement may contrast with a lack of engagement among siblings who have grown up in the same political family context. Respondents mention brothers and sisters who are not as politically active as they are because they do not see the problem in current society, do not think their actions will make any difference, or are too young to understand the gravity of the issue.

I think they still need a push. When I look at my sister, she's completely different from me, and she is not concerned about this. My brother is, but he is more like "I know, I will sign this, but is it useful for me to do that?" (Mary – female, radical left)

Their right-wing orientation is based on their upbringing and the ideas we were given. I think the fact that they are right-wing is based on following, and not thinking for yourself about what you are doing or thinking. They are not really good in arguing, and they can not explain why they think like this. They do not look for examples of how left-wing people think and that is why I am more open for other ways of thinking and why I am more left-oriented than they are. (Garry – male, radical left)

At the other end of the spectrum, there are also examples of respondents who have completely rejected their parents' and family's opinions, and have rebelled against their views and ideology. One of the respondents reported that he took a completely opposite stand to his parents. He was born in a right-wing environment and turned to a left-wing group around the age of fifteen. On the basis of a positive experience with a classmate of foreign descent, he decided that the vision he had been taught was not the right one for him. He developed a different vision and a different view of the future, which resulted in many discussions with his father on this topic, even today. Acquiring opposing information and knowledge on topics of discussion seems to provide empowerment and a feeling of control. Furthermore, membership in a group can provide a feeling of social inclusion that is missing when a person feels disconnected from the rest of their family.

Three-quarters of my family is also right-wing. My grandfather attends the "Ijzerwake" and I have joined him in the past but that is really... those thoughts are disgusting. There are also some good ideas, but it is almost extreme-right... (...) when I started to think about how the world is constructed and why certain things happen. But before that, I was raised rather strictly. My father is very right-wing and what he says was the truth – anyone with a different opinion was wrong. And then I started to think for myself and formed my own opinions. This resulted sometimes in very hard discussions and could lead to us not talking for a few days. (Interviewer: Now still?). Especially now... this is because, eeh... one hypothesis might be that people of foreign descent were my classmates, I remember our dad always talked about black people... not against them but... that they are worth less than us white people. And that boy in my class was a cool guy and there was nothing wrong with him, in contrast with what our dad always said. (Garry – male, radical left)

I live by my own principles, but that's not easy when your family is different. We all get along, but I can't live with their way of life. For now I have to put up with it, but when I am able to buy my own house, then I will be able to live according to my principles. (Cornelius – male, radical right)

Parents? Yes, what do you think? They do not... they are not very happy with it. But they also see that a lot of things in politics are not working. The immigrants, everyone is fed up with it. It has got out of control. They do as they please. But they [parents] do not agree with how I do this. And especially not with regard to the "thing about the second world war". That's a no-go for people above certain generation, they can't look any further. (Charles – male, extreme right)

Friends can also impact the choice of a specific group. Other respondents said they had moved a certain direction based on information obtained in school.

In the third year of secondary school, I had a teacher of cultural sciences who completely omitted his own personal opinion. But a class about communism set me thinking: what exactly is communism, what's positive about it and what's negative etc? This interest grew further through the annual camp of my youth movement, which was about the Spetsnaz. Those are the special forces. After this I started searching for more information and I gained knowledge on communism and socialism and this has triggered a lot. (Garry – male, radical left)

No, it really is a commitment that started, I would say, within the school environment. Starting from there, on an organized level, this started with my uncle starting his own association. (Harold – male, radical Islam)

In the group itself, I'm very active and discuss all kinds of things. (...). (Interviewer: and are you also able to discuss this with people outside the group?) At work there are some, they are very politically engaged. So my work partly also led to this. (Fonzie – male, radical left)

No, it is a bit "birds of a feather flock together". I can talk to someone who has other ideas, but I'm not really drawn to them. (Mary – female, radical left)

## 5.2. Active involvement

Initial engagement in a specific group seems to be largely dependent on what is (directly) available in the social environment. Most respondents get in touch with the specific groups and movements they end up joining almost accidentally. If the availability is rather limited, active

engagement is aborted or postponed until new groups form or the respondent changes setting.

I knew a few people who were a bit interested and lived in Flanders and where I went now and then. But not really people that were actively involved. I was alone for years. I did post on forums and eventually, when I moved to this area, then I joined a local movement that was active here. They are no longer active now. And that is how I got in contact with that world. The internet, that's not how you get to meet them. (Charles - male, extreme right)

There was a summer school, called Marxist university, that provided lots of training. So I went there out of curiosity, without aiming to become a member or anything. But when I was there [...], and by talking to them, little by little, at a certain moment I realised I wanted to join them. Because I was in phase in which I read a lot, and gathered information, but that was easy, in the end I did nothing. It is something else when you work in the field. So I said to myself that I wanted things to change, that if the whole world thought like me, and only read and informed themselves and thought that was enough, that nothing would change, and that it was necessary to take the plunge. (Sebastian - male, radical left)

A lot also depends on the extent to which available social groups are capable of providing an answer to grievances. Groups will be excluded if they do not address grievances sufficiently. So it is necessary not only for individuals to be looking for answers, it is also necessary that groups offering the right answers are present in the setting (opportunity).

For some respondents an engagement in general, mainstream political groups, or even political parties, precedes the joining of more radical/violent extremist groups. The switch occurs because of an awareness that the current group no longer fits their own needs, resulting in a more active search for a group better attuned to their personal viewpoints. This can be out of either ideological or practical considerations, or both. After initial engagement, respondents seem to undergo a further ideological development, guided by the ideological identity of the group. In the course of this ideological growth respondents can come to view the current group as no longer corresponding to their own specific ideological viewpoints, or to their ideas about the necessary changes and methods to achieve them. This can cause them to change movement as their own political and ideological consciousness grows and becomes more defined.

I'm now in my sixth year of study. It was only in the second year that I got in touch with ideas that are critical towards society (...) and only from the third year that I started to get involved a bit and became more critical. (...) Then I got active in a more radical climate movement that is not connected to any particular political forum, but several people who think that capitalism is the problem of climate change and that you need an anti-capitalist solution. (Julius - male, radical left)

Respondents also indicate having become disappointed with the envisioned social changes, the effectiveness of the group and the level of action undertaken to actually change the situation they perceive as problematic.

The difference was, at the green party they do not do a lot, but the climate activists try to make a forceful statement by getting on the streets and so on; apart from their ideas, which I knew little about at that time. But the more activist approach made me join them, and after that the more radical ideas also influenced me. (Julius - male, radical left)

But again, in this new and more active choice for a more suitable movement, respondents seem to be more or less dependent on what is available. This time however, their prior engagement provides them with a broader knowledge of which groups, within their ideological spectrum, are "available" and what they stand for and thus create a broader array of more specific options to choose from.

In one case, being disappointed and feeling betrayed by the group directly prompted the respondent to start his own movement, taking a far more radical stance.

That's the problem, that Muslims have capital gathered over at best twenty, thirty, forty years, where others have had capital almost since the creation of Belgium. But uh, I now have this vision whereas in the past I was like "No, pillarization is not the solution, we need a forum, we have to look at what we can put together." So I don't mind pooling our energy, but if at some point they lead you to believe that you are cooperating but it's only an nice way of saying "what you provide is unacceptable and what I provide is in the public interest," I cannot accept that any more. And so we created a structure now called [anonymised], so I am one of the founders of that, where we deal with those questions and try to put them on the agenda where we say: "We will no longer let it drag on, we must get ourselves organized." We put pressure on the centre because in our view the centre has not done enough on these questions. You cannot say they did nothing but they could have done more. We also see how the debate moves on

Islamophobia in France, so um, that's just where I am now compared to this. (Harold – male, radical Islam)

### 5.3. Online vs Offline

The internet and NSM are used by both the group and by individual respondents. In both cases the use of the internet is mainly practical and intended to support and facilitate offline activities and/or maintain offline social contacts.

According to our respondents the radical/violent extremist group mainly uses the internet as a means to inform and mobilise the general public. Especially NSM are seen as a good way to enhance visibility and provide information about the group's identity, mission, goal and upcoming activities to a large number of individuals. Still, the internet and NSM are not perceived as very successful in their mobilisation efforts. Respondents indicate that although they seem to reach a broad audience online, this is generally not translated into a growing offline engagement. The number of active core members of a group tends to be small and remains fairly stable. The number of, mainly online, sympathisers is larger but they are not easily persuaded into offline engagement. One respondent commented that although internet and Facebook pages do reach a large number of people, they only reach those who are already interested in the group's line of thinking. Individuals outside this political milieu are completely missed, implying that traditional offline and face-to-face recruitment (for example flyers, posters, bookstalls at events etc.) is still crucial.

We came to the conclusion that our Facebook page worked best and that we gained many members because of it. We now have about six hundred and it keeps growing. And eh, that's the most efficient way to communicate. But we also found that we only reach people who are already on our territory. We do not reach new students at [anonymised]. (Julius – male, radical left)

For example, there is this website and they have four thousand likes and when they go to a demonstration only fifty people turn up. So there is a lot of liking and "oh we will come and participate" but in the end, there are many that do not. (Fonzi – male, radical left)

No, it's more for the outside world because I see the people in our group at least once a month at meetings. So what we post online is mainly what we want to spread externally, either specific

information about the group or the community, or we use the internet for distributing information about [anonymized], but for people who live in our community and accidentally stumble on our page. (Sebastian-male-radical left)

Respondents also indicated that the internet and mainly Facebook are used by the group to extend its network, to allow members to keep in contact with each other and to announce (public) events. It is seen as an instrument, a mechanism like any other.

It's of course very complex and depends on which phase, in the phase in which people start to get more politically active, there offline contacts are important as you do not have those contacts on Facebook, and you do not know which websites to visit to find information.(...) I think we attract most young people through our stall, or through contacting people, young people who come to an activity. But once you are politicised, those social networks, Facebook – maybe it will evolve, but it is not a democratic medium, but during recent years it has become very important as a medium – once you're politically active, that's your medium to post and receive messages on all kinds of activities. (Julius – male, radical left)

Respondents also used the internet individually for mainly practical purposes. First, the internet is a useful source of contact with relevant groups and/or like-minded individuals. This is facilitated by the quick, easy, and anonymous access to online content on extremist websites, forums, Facebook pages etc. When the goal is to join an organised group, the internet and NSM are useful to find the group and its contact information. The use of the internet for this purpose seems to be only a gateway, as almost all respondents said they first heard of their group by means other than the internet, like meetings, events, word of mouth etc. In the first stage of making contact with a group, individuals have no preference between the use of online or offline access. However, when it comes to joining and being actively involved in a group, this requires an offline meeting. The respondents said that the offline meeting provides a guarantee of trust and good faith that the internet does not provide.

You can show you're interested. And through private messages, you can ask someone, can we... and you can end up meeting someone, but it will be a first meeting. You will not be directly... and then the next time you can join in somewhere. And if you stay active, you will start to fit in. If you show your face just once, then that's it. (Charles – male, radical right)

As well as websites of specific groups, respondents also use the internet to visit more community-based fora or websites. In some cases they say they look for only information, without being interested in engaging in online discussions. Other respondents do seek to exchange ideas online with others on community fora or websites. This is especially the case for those who the need to be in a like-minded environment, but are not yet part of one. The use of the internet to enable these kind of social contacts is restricted to those individuals who do not perceive the opportunity to meet this need in their offline environment or are having difficulty meeting offline. These contacts often remain anonymous. One respondent, however, reported using Facebook for getting in touch with personal contacts, by only accepting offline friends as Facebook friends.

The real thing is the most important. Online you're not effective. You only feel useful when you can really commit yourself on the streets or at a meeting or something. As long as you can achieve something, be in a demonstration or something, that does not happen too often, but still... but online that is nothing, for me that is just social talk with comrades that I have not seen for a while, a daily activity [...] But I only accept people that I know personally. (Charles - male, radical right)

Finally, the internet is currently the most popular alternative to mainstream media for searching for alternative information. Respondents indicated they had developed a mistrust against media and mainstream information along with a need for critical and correct information. The data show that even when faced with uncertainty about the reliability of information on the internet, it nevertheless seems preferable for the respondents to use this information to compare and criticise the "official" information.

Individuals select information of interest for themselves but this does not mean that only information defending their point of view is selected. Some respondents said they had looked for information on ideological trends or groups opposed to their own. However, this information is not absorbed or even considered, but mainly used as background information to counter possible criticism. Thus, even so, the self-selection of information narrows down the information fields that are accessed. No respondent reported ever having experienced a

dramatic change in opinion after being in contact with opposition information. This, together with the process of self-selection as a whole, leads us to conclude that the emergence of extremist beliefs is a prerequisite for a more advanced search for information and commitment in a group. (This, of course, does not prevent beliefs evolving within the group.)

## 6. Conclusion

First of all, all the interviewees demonstrate a high degree of social commitment, and worry about the state of society. They are searching for ways to deal with their worries and discontent and experience an urgent need for active involvement with a view to changing society. At this point, this is still individual conviction and belief. If they are unable to find a connection with a group, or there is no social structure to become active with these ideas, this remains an individual search. Only once they find an instrument, such as a group, this can serve as a vehicle to become active and do something with their discontent. By joining a radical or violent extremist group, individuals find a motor for change. This search is also discussed in the literature (Fermin 2009), referring to existential life questions, answers to injustice, and looking for a sense of home and belonging.

This implies that, although one can strive to ban radical and violent extremist groups, as long as the demand for these groups remains, this will lead to the constant development of new groups. The same goes for the websites run by these groups. This element of supply and demand can also be found in (violent) radicalisation models as developed by Mellis (2007). In settings where radical or violent extremist groups are present, more (violent) radicalisation will take place, as the settings provide a forum and a framework for (violent) radicalisation (and offer those involved the neutralisation mechanisms that go with it). In the long run, it might be more productive to (1) work on the breeding ground and (2) provide alternatives for the demand, by making mainstream movements accessible and responsive to the grievances of young people.

As can be seen among the respondents, many young people join more or less mainstream movements that try to find solutions within the margins of the current political system.

They make social change possible, and do not present a problem, on the contrary. It becomes problematic however, when they feel unheard and unimportant. Then the sudden (violent) radicalisation of a certain group, such as the Syria fighters today, can also be a sign of a problem that society cannot respond to satisfactorily.

As far as the internet goes, it is an important medium for gathering information and finding contacts, but where this is not combined with offline proximity, the online attraction soon fades. Peer pressure and family recruitment are prevalent in the stories of our respondents, both in the sense of following in their parents' footsteps and in the sense of rejecting their parents' ideology and searching for opposing beliefs.

The interviews also reveal that ideology is not the first impetus for searching, but that there is initially a general discontent with society, on the whole a search for ways of dealing with this discontent, and an orientation that comes along with the search. The content of the orientation (for example left- or right-wing) is not the first step towards these groups. Rather, it is feelings of general discontent and perceived injustice that bring people to search for alternatives, whatever these may be. The experiences of the young people in this study are strikingly similar across the three ideological orientations studied. A number of respondents stated that they could very well have ended up at the other end of the spectrum (although specific experiences can and do make a certain direction more likely than others). This has implications for the way society should deal with young people and radical/violent extremist convictions and the alternatives that should be provided.

These results imply that, in terms of prevention, perceived injustice rather than ideology is the first factor we need to work on. Also more attention should be directed to elements of perceived injustice and strain instead of to elements of relative deprivation and poverty (Coolsaet 2005). In studies addressing general offending this has already been recognised. This implies the need for a sound social policy and information provision, and the offering of alternatives to young people, in terms of mainstream groups that listen to them and help them build our society constructively.

Finally, some limitations of this study have to be addressed. First, the results presented here rely on a small number of interviews. This is not necessarily problematic if a high quality of interviews is ensured, and is not unprecedented in existing empirical research, given the nature of the topic and the difficulty of reaching the population (Linden 2009). However, additional interviews would improve reliability and validity. Second, religious radical or violent extremist respondents are underrepresented, possibly distorting the results. Additional research focusing on each type of (violent) radicalisation separately is recommended. Third, although the reported experiences are similar between the three orientations under study, it is unclear to what extent the conclusions are valid across other forms of (violent) radicalisation.

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