
Differentiating Violent and Non-Violent Extremists: Lessons from 70 Years of Social Control Theory

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Abstract

P/CVE programs engaging in primary (prior to radicalization) or secondary (following exposure to radicalizing influences) prevention are often predicated on delivering interventions to individuals or groups at-risk of engaging in violent extremism. Preventative actions must take place before the potential negative outcome; however, additional research is still required to identify and empirically validate the factors that distinguish violent from non-violent extremists. In the interim, P/CVE programs have instead targeted all individuals within a community or those deemed “at-risk” of adhering to extremist belief systems or movements. Due to resource limitations, this approach dilutes the allocation of resources to individuals and/or communities with higher propensities for extremist violence and may incidentally increase the likelihood of violence. This paper argues that empirical and theoretical insights from criminological theories of social control can enhance the understanding of violent extremism and can be used to tailor P/CVE programs. Unlike most criminological theories, social control theories focus on why people do not commit these acts, giving it a unique perspective on identifying how to prevent violent extremism. Drawing on 70 years of research, we explore how variation in various forms of control can explain differences in extremist offending. We hypothesize how the antecedents to low social control may be connected to violent extremism and propose a research agenda to test these hypotheses. Finally, we examine how existing measures of self-control can be incorporated by P/CVE programming to better distribute services to their target population and reduce the risk of adverse outcomes.

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Introduction

Programs aiming to prevent violent extremism and terrorism have become a major area of investment for many governments over the last twenty years. These programs, commonly referred to as preventing and countering violence extremism (P/CVE) have expanded dramatically, driven by increases in government funding across numerous nations (Selim, 2016). Due to the relative infancy of P/CVE compared to other terrorism reduction methods (Mastroe, 2016), early P/CVE programs were criticized for lacking theoretical models

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(Heydemann, 2014), an empirical basis for their design (Lösel et al., 2018), and clarity in what they were attempting to prevent (Horgan, 2014). Consequently, many of the central questions necessary for preventing and countering violent extremism remain unanswered despite the incremental progress that has been achieved (LaFree and Freilich, 2018). Responding to these criticisms, many P/CVE programs and the empirical literature have worked to clarify the impacts of different approaches and refine outcomes and goals. This has led to a trifurcation of the field into primary, secondary, tertiary prevention programs which aim to prevent violent extremism prior to exposure to radicalization influences, following exposure, and following engaging in violent extremism respectively (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, and Zammit, 2015). Each P/CVE approach has its own target population, priorities, and approach to prevention. As this precludes a one-size-fits-all approach, theoretically driven approaches have immense value for differentiating which practices are likely to be successful for preventing violent extremism across each of these three stages.

Criminology has had a growing influence on P/CVE (Mullins, 2010; Cherney, 2016; LaFree and Freilich, 2018), and brings with it long-tested theories and statistical tools (Fisher, 2021). Among criminology's theories, control theories may have great value in this space despite currently rarely being used to understand violent extremism (Becker, 2021). Stemming from Reiss (1951), control theories remain among the most influential theories of crime, being arguably the most empirically tested and scrutinized theories for seventy years (Costello and Laub, 2020). As these theories have value for explaining why most people refrain from criminal violence, why some are exposed to numerous risk factors and do not engage in violence, and how people desist from crime after persistent criminal acts, control theories have great potential for guiding P/CVE policy. Control theories are unlike all other criminological theories as these they seek to understand why people do not commit crime (Gottfredson, 2017). This unique theoretical perspective coupled with the depth of research on control theories provides numerous opportunities for driving empirically based P/CVE program design. Although additional research is still required to identify and empirically validate the factors that distinguish violent from non-violent extremists, this paper argues that control theories are well suited to assist in this process.

Especially as P/CVE interventions can also increase the likelihood of political violence (Grossman, 2021; Romaniuk, 2015), broad program engagement aimed at primary

prevention comes with risk. Further, delivering P/CVE programs and services based on radical beliefs can dilute resources and increase the risk of adverse outcomes given that, only a small portion of all ideological adherents are willing to engage in violence, and fewer still move from willingness to action (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Knight et al., 2017; Simi & Windisch, 2020). From the control theory perspective, this rarity of violent extremism is expected as it observes that most do not commit crime even when it is easy and lucrative due to either their internal self-control or external social controls. As non-offending is the likely expected outcome for many primary and secondary CVE programs, focusing on what holds people back from violent extremism may thus be a fruitful approach for enhancing prevention.

Using established theoretical knowledge to drive CVE research and program development can accelerate knowledge and help better target limited resources. To assist in the development of this approach to CVE, this paper presents how low self and social control may be connected to violent extremism and proposes a research agenda to test these hypotheses. This paper also examines whether the underlying assumptions of control theories are appropriate for understanding violent extremism and discusses why this theory may require some adaptations for the P/CVE domain. This paper then concludes by proposing how existing measures of self-control can be incorporated by P/CVE programming to better distribute services to their target population and reduce the risk of adverse outcomes.

Social Control Theory and Violent Extremism

Over the past 70 years control theories have been subject to theoretical debate, competition, and innovation as the field has adapted to scientific findings (Posick and Rocque, 2018). Despite theoretical divergences (Taylor, 2016), all control theories share common assumptions regarding the nature of humanity and why people commit crime (Gottfredson, 2017). Beginning with Reiss (1951), all control theories assume that people pursue their own self-interests through seeking pleasure and avoiding potential harm. From this perspective, crime is a means for achieving self-interested needs and desires, whereby all humans are motivated to commit crime (Gottfredson, 2017). Control theories concordantly view criminal

behavior as a natural part of humanity. Stemming from this, all control theories are concerned with understanding the factors which restrain people from naturally committing crime.

The nature of these restraining factors and their relative importance is the main differentiating factor across control theories. Social-control (Hirschi, 1969), self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and age-graded social control (Sampson & Laub, 1992) have emerged as some of the dominant perspectives in this theoretical space. Under social control perspectives, people are held back from committing crime because of social bonds through their involvement in and attachments and commitments to individuals, communities, and beliefs that incentivize pro-social conformity (Hirschi, 1969). Alternatively, self-control theorists (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) posit that most people do not commit crime because they develop an internal capacity for self-control, or they developed ability to recognize the likely negative longer-term consequences of their actions. Importantly, all these perspectives emphasize adolescence as a key period in which these restraining factors are developed and reinforced, particularly through parenting practices (Hay, 2001). As individuals mature into adults, their propensities for conformity or deviance remain stable compared to their peers, though criminal propensity does decline naturally as part of the aging process. The age-graded theory of informal social control however holds that is possible for an individual to desist from crime despite earlier persistent criminal acts (Sampson & Laub, 1992). Major life events including marriage or gaining employment can provide turning points (Laub and Sampson, 1993) or hooks for change (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002), that enable individuals to redirect their future behavior away from crime.

Each of these three branches of control theory provide their own hypotheses that have been extensively tested across a wide array of crime types (see Costello and Laub, 2020). Importantly for understanding violent extremism, recent studies have revealed that these theories have value in explaining criminal behavior cross-culturally (Vazsonyi, Ksinan, and Javakhishvili, 2021), indicating that this theory has value beyond U.S. and English-speaking contexts as well. While these theories have been empirically criticized (Agnew, 1991), they have still retained strong explanatory power across these empirical tests (Weisburd and Piquero, 2008). Further, despite the value to both criminology and studies of political violence (LaFree, 2022), few studies have applied any control theories to understanding pathways to and the incidence of terrorism and violent extremism (Fisher and Kearns, 2023). Indeed, the

early empirical work applying control theory demonstrates the potential of this perspective for understanding extremism and exhibits that low self-control and social control are related to violent extremism (Becker, 2021; Mills et al, 2019; Pauwels & Swennson, 2017).

The nascent research on control theories and extremist violence displays that the field can also be advanced by examining the vast majority of individuals who do not offend, rather than the exceptional few who engage in violence. The value of this approach is particularly important to the extensive research that has sought to identify the risk factors from violent extremism, particularly when both the risks for and protective factors are examined together (see Boehnke, Hagan, and Merkens, 2007). While the identification of risk factors in violent extremist populations has value, exposure to these factors has limited predictive value (Clemmow, et al., 2020). For example, exposure to extremist belief systems may provide motivations for violence whereby adherents adopt significant grievances, sharp divisions between in- and out-groups, and reject the legitimacy of conventional social systems (Jensen et al, 2020). Despite these motivations, few supporters of radical ideologies take the step of engaging in violence. Simi and Windisch (2020) propose that this relative lack of violence is due to social and psychological barriers that prevent progression from belief to action. Control perspectives would conceptualize these “barriers” as the social bonds and/or self-control developed as an adolescent and provide the ability to test numerous strategies for violence prevention that are the focus of primary and secondary P/CVE programs.

Bayes’ Theorem Implications for Primary and Secondary P/CVE Programs

The value of focusing on the factors that restrain people from violent extremism rather than focusing on risk factors can be demonstrated through the immensely influential Bayes’ Theorem (Efron, 2013). Stemming from the work of Thomas Bayes, this theorem describes the probability of an event occurring based upon conditions that are related to but precede the event. This theorem can be seen below in equation 1 where: A and B are both events, the probability of B occurring does not equal 0, $P(A|B)$ is the conditional probability that A occurs given that B is true, $P(B|A)$ is the conditional probability that B occurs given that A is true, and $P(A)$ and $P(B)$ are the probabilities of observing A and B respectively regardless of any prior requirements occurring.

$$(1) P(A|B) = \frac{P(B|A)P(A)}{P(B)}$$

Importantly for understanding violent extremism, the only way that $P(A|B)$ could be the same as $P(A)$ is if A and B are independent phenomena and do not impact each other. In studies focusing solely on those who have previously committed acts of violent extremism to examine risk factors for violence, this is akin to making the probability of A occurring (a violent extremist act in this case) equal to 1 (will always occur). Violent extremism however remains a rare event (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017), demonstrating that the $P(A)$ in general (violent extremism is rare) cannot be the same as $P(A)$ in a group comprised solely of violent extremists (violent extremism is constant). As such, any observed risk factors in violent extremist only samples may only be tangentially or spuriously connected to political violence. For example, if an entire sample of people who previously committed acts of violent extremism were male (or any other demographic factor or exposure), then $P(\text{violent extremism} | \text{male})=1$. However, the vast majority of males (or any other singular factor) have not and will not commit acts of violent extremism. It is particularly in these cases, that rather than viewing a factor as increasing risk erroneously, the focus instead should be upon understanding why in the vast majority of cases the incidence of this factor does not lead to violent extremism.

Specifically, when the goal is to identify prevention strategies, applying a control perspective to violent extremism holds much value. While much has been written on the difficulties of finding and identifying those likely to commit acts of violent extremism (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Fahey & Simi, 2019; LaFree et al., 2018; Knight et al, 2017), this approach provides an alternative to the over-sampling of demonstrated violent individuals. Collecting primary data on radicalized, non-violent individuals across the ideological spectrum would allow for the testing of control theories core premises and the better identification of the factors that restrain. As such, rather than examining violent extremism in all of society (where $P(\text{violent extremism})$ is exceedingly low), or solely in individuals who have previously committed these acts ($P(\text{violent extremism})=1$), a more fruitful sampling approach would be to examine the incidence of violence in those who have experienced a theoretically determined risk factor ($P(B)=1$). Using the above example regarding maleness and violent extremism, this would require a sample of

males to be used instead of a sample of violent extremists. By focusing on the risk factor instead of the outcome in sampling, one can then better observe whether there are any intervening or restraining processes that reduced the likelihood of violence. Further, if researchers were to find the probability of violent extremism among males ($P(\text{violent extremism} \mid \text{male})$) was indistinguishable from the probability of violent extremism in general ($P(\text{violent extremism})$),² this would indicate that this factor was irrelevant even though it would be possible to find a sample of demonstrated violent extremists that were all male. To that end, we pose the following research questions stemming from prominent control theories:

- How does social control / self-control develop among adolescents raised in a radical milieu?
- How do extremists and non-extremists exposed to radicalizing milieu vary in attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief? Are these values comparable to the general population?
- How do extremists and non-extremists exposed to radicalizing milieu vary in their level of self-control? Is this level of self-control comparable to the general population?

The Value of Studying Violent Extremist Populations for Tertiary P/CVE

The control theory approach also provides guidance for increasing the value of studying samples of violent extremists. The age-graded theory of informal social control (Laub and Sampson, 1993) specifically posits that specific turning points can increase the likelihood of desistance. For tertiary P/CVE programs, the primary goal is to minimize violent extremism recidivism, and determining whether turning points including employment are able to curb violence even when radicalized beliefs persist provides an important branch of research in this domain. It is important to note however that some turning points like marriage cannot be experimentally assigned, that the quality of the marriage matters (Laub and Sampson, 2003), and that divorce may also be detrimental for recidivism – particularly in long-term marriages (Bersani and Doherty, 2013).

² In this case $P(\text{violent extremism} \mid \text{male}) = P(\text{violent extremism})$, demonstrating that violent extremism is probabilistically independent of maleness.

For these research questions regarding desistance and recidivism, the age-graded theory of informal social control has much to offer the understanding of violent extremism, however this does require long-term follow-up and observation (Farrington, 1986). Lengthening periods of observation following P/CVE interventions is vital. First, studies that observe those who have committed violent extremist acts for longer periods would be more likely to see increased rate of recidivism as there are increased opportunities to offend (Fisher, 2021). Indeed, this is the primary reason why higher quality studies are more likely to observe recidivism compared to less rigorous studies (LaFree & Miller, 2008). In addition, examining the extent to which former violent extremists desist from violence “by default” where ceasing violent acts is not an explicit decision that is made, provides an important avenue of research as well (Sampson and Laub, 2017: 172). If desistance by default was likely following previous violent extremist acts, no additional interventions may be required to prevent recidivism, and without better understanding these processes, intervention programs may be erroneously concluded as the source of desistance when this would have occurred regardless of participation in P/CVE programming. Following these insights, this paper suggests the following important research questions for examination:

- What life circumstances act as *hooks for change* or *turning points* to desist from violent extremism? Do these turning points substantively differ from those identified for non-ideologically motivated violence?
- At what age do most violent extremists naturally desist from crime?

Limitations of control theories for studying violent extremism

One of the primary critiques of control theories stems from their conceptualization of crime³ as easy, pleasurable, and requiring low levels of skill. While Jugl (2022: 45) notes that “radicalized individuals tend to retract into black and white thinking, preference for easy

³ While this manuscript focuses on applications of social control theory to violent criminal offending, it should be noted that low social control does not exclusively manifest in violent or illegal behavior (see Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). In some cases, low social control can result in nonviolent illegal or legal but anti-social behaviors. Thus, this theory may have additional utility in explaining (1) the behaviors of ideological adherents who engage in non-violent but criminal behavior – such as money laundering – (2) or those who operate in legal “grey zones” to advance movement goals.

solutions for complicated problems, or belief in conspiracy theories” in line with control theories, this is not the case for all radicalized individuals (Lindekilde, O’Connor, and Schuurman, 2019). Scholars examining white-collar crime were among the first to note that this definition may not be applicable to all offenders. While certain types of white-collar crime are easy to execute – mail fraud, for example – a minority of offenses require a significant amount of planning, skill, and time to execute. While there is some evidence that white-collar offenders exhibit weakened social bonds (van Onna & Denkins, 2018), support for the relationship between white-collar offending and measures of self-control is mixed (Benson & Moore, 1992; Schoepfer et al, 2014; Simpson & Piquero, 2002).

Like white collar crimes, not all violent extremist offending fits the parameters of control theories. Specifically, some extremist attacks are planned over an extended period and require coordination between actors, making these attacks neither quick nor easy (Lindekilde, O’Connor, and Schuurman, 2019). In these cases, the explanatory value of control theories may suffer, however, even this would be an important finding for both the understanding of violent extremism and control theories more broadly. In addition, control theories may not be suited to describing the behavior of extremist leaders who direct violent action but do not directly engage themselves. Additional research is necessary to understand differences in extremist violence planning (or lack thereof) to determine the applicability of control theories to this body of offenses.

Social Control Lessons for CVE Practice and Research

While there remains a significant research agenda to understand how social control theories manifest among extremists, P/CVE programs can utilize the themes of control theories to guide programmatic decisions. First, P/CVE programs should acknowledge that most individuals who hold radical beliefs are not at risk for violence. Distinguishing between violent and non-violent remains a challenging yet important goal however (Bartlett, Birdwell, King, 2010). This is further complicated by recent research indicating important variation in extremist adoption of radicalizing ideologies (Obaidi, Skaar, Ozer, and Kunst, 2022) and some being categorized as benevolently radicalized as they aim “to benefit others in an objectively and consistently pro-social manner” (Reidy, 2019: 1). While there may be a

legitimate societal desire to influence radical belief systems, this is unlikely to move the needle on violent behavior. None of the existing literature on P/CVE programming explicitly tests or draws on social control theories. However, several program evaluations have shown that certain components of social control theories can be extremely useful for positive long-term outcomes.

Thus, primary prevention programs that seek to reduce exposure to radicalizing influences or increase ‘resilience’ to those beliefs are not well-suited to decreasing violence. Rather, social control theories support increasing social bonds and self-control through investments in schools, extra-curricular programs, and supports for parents. For example, an evaluation of a youth sports-based intervention created and led by law enforcement in Australia found that the program showed significant promise for building social bonds, generating resilience amongst the youth population, and improving self-control due to the discipline and collaboration needed to be successful (Johns et al., 2014). In addition, these programs may be able to influence levels of self-control by teaching techniques for impulse control and emotional regulation. An evaluation of a multi-faceted prevention program in the United States (WORDE) achieved some success in improving both resiliency and coping as well as emotional stability amongst its participants (Williams et al., 2016). Particularly for primary prevention, it is important to note that low rates of extremist violence following an intervention should be expected rather than necessarily being interpreted as a demonstration of program success. As noted within the counterterrorism literature, it may take years (especially for interventions aimed at children) before one would expect a potential act of violence (Lynch, 2011; Fisher 2021). Not only does this result in difficulty connecting an intervention to any outcome (Cherney and Belton, 2021b; Koehler, 2017; Williams & Kleinman, 2013), but if the expected incidence of violent extremism within a P/CVE program’s sample is zero then the only observable impact it could have would be increases in violence outcomes.

At the secondary level, in which individuals have already been exposed to and may have adopted some radical beliefs, control theories may help CVE programs identify those most at-risk of violence and target resources. There are several tools that can be utilized to identify adolescents or adults with low levels of self- or social control that would be well suited for intervention. Programs in the secondary space, particularly with adolescents, could

focus on promoting pro-social bonds with peers, teachers, influential community members, and family. The literature on secondary level programming is quite slim, as most program designers fail to distinguish between primary and tertiary levels when tailoring their interventions. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that improving relationships between youth and parents throughout interventions is an important part of prevention efforts (Cherney, 2022). In addition, Jugl (2022) highlights the promise of enhancing critical thinking skills, increasing one's tolerance of ambiguity, and fostering the ability to adopt other's perspectives as an additional opportunity to reduce the likelihood of extremist violence in line with self-control theory.

Finally, at the tertiary level, control theories provide insight into the moments in which a violent extremist is most likely to desist from offending. First, offending naturally decreases with age – tertiary programs should expect to work with individuals later in life (Nagin et al., 2011). Second, age-graded control theories propose that significant changes in social bonds such as marriage or having a child can serve as *turning points*, leading an individual engaged in crime to re-form commitments to society (Horney et al., 2001; Sampson & Laub 2001). Even when significant changes are not a part of formal program activities, the inclusion of family and friends as pro-social bonds is a very important part of the deradicalization process; with some exit programming showing success when families are heavily involved (see Bjørge, 2002; Christmann et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2021; Dalgaard-Nielsen and Ilum, 2020). In fact, some work suggests that involvement of these relationships can be useful even in assisting those who have already radicalized (Ellefsen and Sandberg, 2022). Work within the tertiary space shows that prosocial support during the reintegration process from prisons is essential to improve deradicalization and disengagement efforts (Cherney, 2021; Marsden, 2015; Schuurman and Bakker, 2015).

A systematic review of disengagement and deradicalization processes showed that families and friends often serve as a major catalyst in assisting those with existing lives of extremism (see Morrison et al., 2021; Silke et al., 2021). More specifically, participants engagement with family and friends (e.g., pro-social influences) during and after the disengagement process can help to solidify and sustain positive non-extremist identities (Morrison et al., 2021). However, some work shows that families and friends can be major drivers of extremism. For example, the evidence does show that becoming a parent is not

determinative of deradicalization, but it can positively influence decision-making; thereby indirectly incentivizing people to avoid violent crime (Silke et al., 2021). Other work shows that getting family members are often major push and pull factors for joining and leaving lives of extremism, respectively (Gill et al., 2013; Hafez, 2016; Jensen et al., 2020). Recent work on Islamic extremism in the United States, however, showed that marriage plays an important causal protective factor for radicalization to violence (McCann, 2023). Overall, the literature on the role of family and peer networks on extremist pathways is quite mixed (Jasko et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2020; LaFree et al., 2018; McCann, 2023; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2021).

Identity transformation is also an important part of the social control perspective, albeit many disagree about the order and role of said transformation (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). While the evidence base for P/CVE programs in this arena is quite inconclusive (Cherney and Belton, 2019; 2021a; Feddes et al., 2015), programs at all levels can bolster self-control by fostering a healthy identity. A process evaluation of a corrections-based program in the United Kingdom (Healthy Identity Initiative) found some promising results with regard to disengagement efforts via targeting social and personal identity needs through a robust practitioner-client relationship that leveraged a multi-module program format (Dean et al., 2018).

However, fostering an identity that is conducive to pro-social attitudes and values can occur at any of the three levels discussed here, as identity is often a major reason for entering *and* leaving extremist movements (Bérubé et al., 2019; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Silke et al., 2021; Simi et al., 2017). Programs can approach this subject through a variety of modalities. For example, some educational programs try to improve critical thinking skills and perspective taking amongst youth populations that may struggle with balancing difference identities due to cultural and social norms of society (see Boyd-MacMillan, 2016; Liht and Savage, 2013).

To date, most P/CVE programs are tailored to youth and younger adults (see Wallner, 2021). However, little is known about long-term outcomes for such programs. This is why more work is needed in the field to test the application of control theories to extremist populations; especially given some of the limitations discussed. Nevertheless, programs must still tailor their activities and scope to their local context with regard to program scope, activities, and target population (Brett et al., 2015).

Discussion and Conclusions

As P/CVE continues to professionalize and draw on an interdisciplinary body of knowledge, insights from criminology can be utilized to aid practitioners in their desire to “use research for social good” (Schlegel, 2022: 947). We believe that control theories, as one of criminology’s most empirically tested and validated sets of theories, presents a significant starting point in integrating criminological theories into P/CVE practice. In the short term, programs can use the concepts of social bonds and self-control to guide the development of interventions and target recruitment. Over time, as the theory is tested in the context of violent extremism, empirical results can be used to improve program activities and outcomes. To that end, we have proposed several research questions in this paper to guide future studies of extremist offending and social control.

While we believe that control theories have value for driving the development of theory-driven P/CVE programming, we urge experts in other theoretical domains both in and outside of criminology to engage in similar endeavors. Indeed, even if this theory was found to have little predictive value, we would have learned much about the extent to which violent extremism is unique from other forms of violence. If, however, control theories do have merit in this domain, then its 70 years of empirical research could be used to tailor and refine P/CVE programming and enhance our ability to prevent violent extremism.

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