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EX POST PAPER
Adjacent fields: gangs

Summary

In what ways do gangs resemble extremist groups? What can such adjacent fields teach us? What is the appeal of gangs? How do gangs and extremist groups keep their members attached and involved? How can members of gangs and extremist groups disengage? The RAN EXIT working group explored these topics in Prague on 11 and 12 September 2018.

Research data suggest that criminal gangs and radical groups are considerably similar. They are both organised groups committing acts that threaten the fabric of social life. They learn from each other, and adopt elements for their own cause. In some European countries, overlapping networks are the main recruitment channel for both criminal activities and violent extremism ([1]) ([2]).

When comparing criminal gangs and violent extremist groups, the broad definition of organised crime in Europe poses a challenge. It essentially encompasses all kinds of crimes committed by more than one person. This makes it

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The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission or any other institution.

([1]) Makarenko, 2004; Ceccarelli, 2007; Björgo, 2011; Nesser, 2006, 2012, 2016.
([2]) Rostami, Leinfelt & Brotherton, 2012.

difficult to use statistical data from the different Member States: while the data show that more than 50 % of foreign fighters from those countries have a criminal background, they lack clarification on gang involvement or type of criminal activity. In a relatively new research field studying the so-called crime-terror nexus, researchers have tried to map the connection between criminal activities and terror groups. However, the scope of this research covers all kinds of criminal activities, not criminal gangs specifically. This notwithstanding, research on criminality and the crime-terror nexus provides useful information for violent extremism practitioners.

The benefits of learning from adjacent fields are self-evident. Since there is a clear connection between criminality and radicalisation in Europe, there is most likely an overlap in the target group of practitioners working with criminal gangs and practitioners working on extremism: it follows that their knowledge is worth sharing. Adjacent fields can also provide different perspectives and information on recruitment processes and interventions, that could be transferrable.

However, before adopting and adapting interventions from adjacent fields, it is vital to fully appreciate both similarities and differences between gangs and radical extremist groups.

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Recruitment and drivers for joining

Four general drivers are commonly put forward for individuals becoming radicalised: ideology, a sense of belonging, frustrations/grievances, and sensation/adventure. Looking at radicalised individuals several of these drivers as contributing factors can be recognised and voiced. Similar drivers have been reported independently by numerous researchers studying gangs and political extremism in several countries in Europe and worldwide ([3]). Researchers all concur that both personal and contextual factors are at play. At times, it seems individuals almost haphazardly end up becoming involved with a criminal gang or being recruited for political/religious violent causes.

Research on both radicalisation and involvement in gangs suggests that there is seldom one single factor that serves as a driver, although one single event could trigger radicalisation or gang involvement. Similar mechanisms appear to be at play in the recruitment phase, for both political/religious extremism and criminal gangs. Recruiters tend to exploit people's needs and they often target specific individuals during vulnerable periods. They also tend to recruit in the same areas ([4]).

In many parts of the world, criminal gangs are linked to fulfilling basic needs like security and food, much like a state within the state, or an extended family that takes care of their members, comparable to clans and tribes. They provide shelter and food in the absence of anyone else to do so. There are even gangs that operate exclusively in prisons and whose sole purpose is to guarantee the safety of their members while in prison ([5]). Meeting basic needs is also an important driver for many foreign fighters, especially those from deprived socio-economic groups in societies suffering from inadequate support systems. Under these kinds of conditions, ideology appears to play a secondary role.

In Europe, however, where such basic needs are mostly met by social and health services, police and the state in general, the situation is different. Other explanations are needed to shed light on why people join gangs or radicalised groups. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one such way of understanding this phenomenon: gangs and radical groups meet human needs, but at different levels of the Maslow hierarchy, depending on where the group is located or recruiting. Recruitment promises to fulfil psychological and self-fulfilment needs in Europe, and security and material needs in other parts of the world.

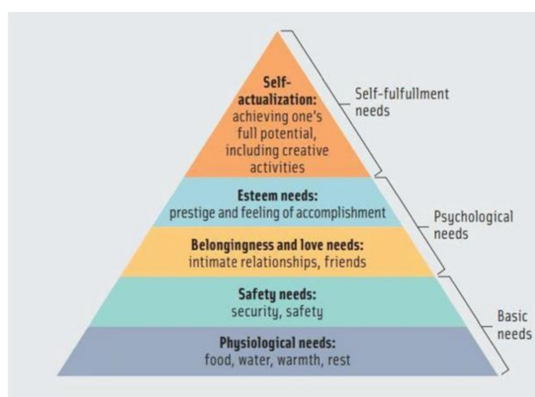

Figure 1 Maslow's Hierarchy Pyramid
Source: Talal Faris' (Hedayah) presentation

In England, there has been a definite change in the demographic profile of foreign fighters. Initially, people attracted to the idea of becoming foreign fighters were university educated (60 %), middle/upper class

([3]) Björgo, 2011; Brå & Säkerhetspolisen, 2009; Rostami, Leinfelt & Brotherton, 2012; Nesser, 2006, 2012, 2016; Sturup & Rostami, 2017.
([4]) Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017; Sarnecki, 2016.
([5]) Pyrooz, 2018.

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(75 %) and in skilled employment (over 50 %). This has changed over the course of time, and today, only 12 % of this group are university educated ([6]). The make-up of the group of people attracted to the idea of becoming foreign fighters has shifted from educated people to people with a criminal background. This trend is observable in many countries in Europe.

This phenomenon spotlights the crime-terror nexus. It is important to understand that the jump from criminal career to foreign fighter benefits both the individual and the terrorist organisation. As noted by several foreign fighters, one such benefit is that people can redeem their past sins by serving Allah. This can serve as a selling argument for recruiters. Moreover, people with a criminal background are likely to be more familiar with violence and may already feel ostracised by society, with not much to lose. For organisations, another attractive aspect of recruiting criminals is that they gain access to a means of financing the war. This has been actively promoted by spokesmen from Daesh and is framed as a win-win situation for them (both financing the so-called holy war as well as doing so from the pockets of their enemies ([7])).

Risk-taking

Risk-taking during adolescence is common to both criminal gangs and radicalised groups. Remaining aware of this is key when carrying out preventive work. Research on risk behaviour during childhood coupled with data from research on brain development indicate that the brain is not fully developed until the age of around 25 or 26 ([8]). The capacity for logical reasoning is not affected — the logical reasoning capabilities of 15-year-olds are comparable to those of adults. Adolescents and adults have the same capacity to assess the consequences of their behaviour and understand the risks associated with certain actions. However, the consensus is that individuals in the 16-to-26 age range are generally more prone to taking risks, the root cause being their lack of psychosocial maturity, due to the general process of maturation of the brain ([9]).

What these findings indicate is that attempts to reduce adolescent risk-taking through interventions designed to alter knowledge, attitudes or beliefs are not very effective ([10]). And this, in turn, has implications for work aiming to prevent individuals from joining criminal gangs and/or becoming radicalised.

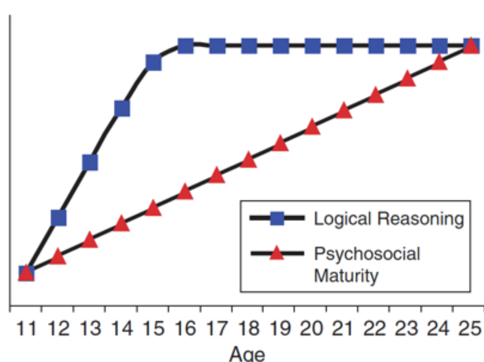

Figure 2 Hypothetical graph of development of logical reasoning abilities versus psychosocial maturation. Although logical reasoning abilities reach adult levels by age 16, psychosocial capacities, such as impulse control, future orientation, or resistance to peer influence, continue to develop into young adulthood.
Source: Steinberg, 2007.

([6]) Basra, 2018.
([7]) Basra, 2018.
([8]) Luna et al., 2001.
([9]) Steinberg, 2007; Luna et al., 2001.
([10]) Steinberg, 2004.

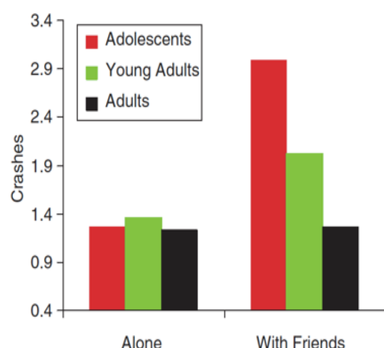

Figure 3 Risk-taking of adolescents, young adults and adults during a video-driving game, when playing alone and when playing with friends.
Source: Steinberg 2007 , adapted from Gardner& Steinberg (2004).

Research on criminality and antisocial behaviour seeks to determine if universal factors exist that could be targeted pre-emptively in the bid to prevent antisocial behaviour and violence. Results from the preventive programme PAX Good Behaviour Game, an intervention for school children aged 7, show a significant lowering of antisocial behaviour, psychiatric problems, depression, suicide and drug abuse, 10 years after the intervention ([11]). The intervention targets children's ability to self-regulate emotions and behaviours, as this seems to constitute an important factor (albeit not the only factor) in preventing all the above.

Based on the programme's outcomes, one might also conclude that the ability to self-regulate also affects vulnerability to radicalisation, and that interventions as early as the age of 7 targeting this factor could have significant results. It does not mean that such impulsive behaviour must be defined as clinical.

Neuropsychiatric disorders

One factor causing research in the radicalisation field to lag behind research around criminality and anti-social behaviour is the link to neuropsychiatric disorders like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism. There is ample evidence that many of the individuals sentenced for violent crimes in Swedish prisons have ADHD or some other neuropsychiatric disorder ([12]).

Furthermore, there are indications that the right-wing extremist group known as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR) actively targets people with autism, and that people with autism and/or ADHD might be overrepresented in NMR. This is supported by clinical observations, and is pending confirmation. Research on neuropsychiatric disorders and violent extremism is still in its early stages, but the first reports have been published ([13]). A research project in Sweden is working on this topic, but its results are not yet official.

Anger and anger rumination

Eduardo Vasquez (University of Kent) has researched one specific aspect of violence: anger rumination and its link to violence. Anger rumination refers to prolonged, pervasive thinking about events or situations, that intensifies one's anger. People who are prone to anger rumination are more likely to commit violent

([11]) Kellam et al., 2011.
([12]) Söderström, 2002; Lundholm, 2013.
([13]) Al-Attar, 2016; Faccini & Allely, 2017.

acts; it is also correlated with a degree of affiliation with gangs, although the causation is not clear — whether people in gangs tends to ruminate more, or if people who ruminate are more likely to join gangs.[14]

In exploring the link between anger rumination and violent extremism, studies on anger across many adjacent fields may be of interest, for instance, work on neuropsychiatric disorders. Research also indicates that anger is self-reinforcing, especially for young children with neuropsychiatric disorders. It is usually driven by a need for attention. Anger is one sure way of getting this (mostly negative) attention. This traps the individual in a cycle of both attention-seeking behaviour and rumination about the perceived injustices he or she experiences because of the negative response. This has implications for preventive work, because children with anger management issues are more likely to develop antisocial behaviour. Therefore, a general preventive approach like the Good Behaviour Game has proved very effective in countering these kinds of anger issues and antisocial behaviours.

The exit process

As discussed above, multiple factors come into play when people join both gangs and radical extremist groups. Research shows that similarly, multiple factors affect people leaving such circles. Disengagement from gangs seems to be influenced more by push factors like violence in the group, than by pull factors from society. The same can be said of many religious cults, where people first disengage because of abuse, and then become deradicalised after some time away from the abusive group. At the same time, it has been observed that gang members have difficulty taking the crucial step of disengagement, even when subject to abuse and death threats, unless they have a prosocial option offering them at least some of the same benefits and meeting the same needs that led to the engagement ([15]).

Looking at drivers for joining gangs and radical extremist groups, there is ample evidence that it is multifactorial — depending on the context, the group's pull factors and individual drivers. Work with gang members indicates that the solution should also be multifactorial, in order to prevent a relapse ([16]). The same experience can be drawn from the cultic field, where failure to reintegrate into society often results in a relapse into the same or other cultic groups. Extremist groups tend to satisfy many needs of their members, and therefore retain a strong hold on these individuals, even after they have left the group. Therefore, it is recommended that we should not rest assured that our objective has been accomplished once individuals have disengaged; rather, in order to prevent a relapse, we should also provide opportunities for individuals to reintegrate into society. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one way of structuring an exit intervention: to try to fulfil the kinds of needs that made the individual want to join the gang or extremist group in the first place. Exit work is time-consuming. The problem with reintegration, especially for those who committed crimes and violent acts, is that it is a long way back — not only from the individual's perspective but from the societal perspective, as well. The stigmatisation of political/religious extremists has been identified as one of the pitfalls in the reintegration process.

Another difference between the two groups is the role played by ideology. Table 1 below sets out these differences between criminal gangs and violent extremist groups.

([14]) Vasquez, Osman, & Wood, (2012).
([15]) Hastings, Dunbar & Bania, 2011.
([16]) Hastings, Dunbar & Bania, 2011.

Table 1

Organization	Political strategy	
	Yes	No
Strong	Elite-sponsored groups	Criminal networks
Loose	Autonomous groups/cells	Mobs/gangs/hooligans
Absent	Lone actors	Violent loners
Type of violence	Terrorism	Hate crime

Source: Ravndal, J. A. (2015). Thugs or Terrorists? A Typology of Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe. *Journal for Deradicalization, (3),* 1-38.

One could easily substitute political strategy for ideological strategy in Table 1. The ideological group has an advantage over the non-ideological group, especially if a religious element is involved. Groups have rules that keep their members coherent. In turn, abiding by the rules ensures members can enjoy the advantages of group membership (which differ across countries, situations and time periods). In religious groups, the policing of the rules is considered divine and omnipresent ([17]), while in secular groups this is not the case.

This has implications for exit work. Research has shown that ideological rules reinforced by distant and highly abstract consequences (rewards administered in the afterlife or by an omnipotent and ever-present god) are much more resistant to environmental inputs and are also more likely to be rigidly followed ([18]). In short, it is far harder to deradicalise someone holding a deep-seated religious belief than it is with a member of a non-religious radical group like the extreme right or left.

A comparison with addiction treatment can help clarify the problem further. Several methods borrowed from this field are used successfully all over the world to deradicalise and disengage people, from both gangs and radical extremist groups. Motivational interviewing (MI) is an example of one such method originally used in treating drug addicts, and now widely used in in the cultic field, in exit work with criminal gang members and in exit work with radical right-wing members. This method could be utilised more extensively in both fields.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a treatment method used in some arenas to aid reintegration into society. Research shows that the ACT tools can undermine the cognitive inflexibility resulting from ideological rules reinforced by distant and highly abstract consequences (mentioned earlier). By stressing

([17]) Wilson, 2002.
([18]) Hayes, 1989.

internal motivation, we can lessen the hold of the ideological rules governing the individual's behaviour ([19]). In fact, both MI and ACT are designed to focus on internal motivation; MI is already used widely in both fields, and ACT to a lesser degree.

Preventive and exit work: key points

- Exit work takes time. It is crucial to work in teams and obtain the authorities' cooperation. It is also important to build relations and work closely with those who have direct access to children at risk of radicalisation.
- Several key factors can speed up reintegration: getting the individual to meet new people, develop new skills, and use his or her existing skills; identifying and meeting the needs that prompted affiliation with the radicalised group; using the individual's energy, drive and motivation (previously used in the radicalised group) for something more prosocial; and providing a mentor and coach that can help the individual overcome common pitfalls.
- In working with the individual, it is important to recognise every person as unique and to dismiss rigidly scripted interventions or methods. There is often talk of counter-narratives, but it is probably better to think in terms of alternative narratives. This way, you will not oppose the group, and at the same time you will provide an alternative route for the individual. One should also be aware that relapse is common and not necessarily a sign of failure.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the question posed by this paper was whether it makes sense to compare and share knowledge and experience from adjacent fields. What are the differences and similarities between gangs and extremist groups? What can we learn from adjacent fields?

The answer seems to be that there are more similarities than differences, and that practitioners from both fields have much to learn from one another, and in own their own fields. Since research and work on criminal gangs and criminality in general have a longer tradition, it is safe to assume that there is more to learn from that side than vice versa.

Several areas could be explored further. One is the subject of anger and how this relates to violent extremism: there is much work here that violent extremism workers could benefit from. There are several treatment methods aimed at helping individuals manage their anger that could be of use for practitioners in exit work. Another is that of neuropsychiatric disorders and how they relate to both anger and extremism. Individuals with autism tend to respond differently to common treatment methods, and one needs autism-specific knowledge on the subject to make any progress. Also, as data from Sweden suggest ([20]), individuals with ADHD could benefit greatly from medication, and medication could also effectively speed up their reintegration into society.
A third area that could be useful is that of reintegration into society and the probation programmes used by the criminal justice systems in Europe and around the world.

([19]) Legault et al., 2009; Lee, 2011; Masuda et al., 2009.
([20]) Lundholm, 2013.

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