

**RAN REHAB**

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CONCLUSION PAPER*RAN Rehabilitation Working Group Meeting**18-19 November 2021, digital*

How to work with middle-aged target groups without socio-economic needs?

Key outcomes

It has become common knowledge that radicalisation processes are highly individual, in turn requiring tailor-made rehabilitation programmes. However, traditionally both, research and practice related to radicalisation have focused on adolescents and young adults as the key group being “at-risk” of radicalisation. While this likely adequately reflected the extremism- and radicalisation-related dynamics of the past two decades, a slight shift can be identified today, moving away from a primary focus on young people, and more prominently problematizing the radicalisation of and subsequent rehabilitation work with older target groups.

In light of these developments, it has become necessary to take stock of what practitioners know about working with a) middle-aged target groups and b) socio-economically stable target groups. While little experience has been made with these target groups in the scope of extremism-related rehabilitation work, other fields such as cult disengagement have gathered significant expertise regarding some of these aspects. This paper collects some of the key insights related to practical rehabilitation work with socio-economically stable and middle-aged target groups based on experiences and knowledge collected in P/CVE and adjacent fields. Some of the key take-aways include the following:

Working with middle-aged target-groups:

- Many methods and focus areas relevant for working with young people can also be used with middle-aged adults. There is nothing that should not or cannot be used.
- Themes and topics of rehabilitation work may be more substantial and existential.
- The older persons become, the more control over the process they might want to have.

Working with socio-economically-stable target groups:

- A focus should be placed on social (re)integration, especially for people who have stayed in movements/groups for a long period.
- Focusing on improving their perceived quality of life by understanding what makes them happy and what they are thriving for.
- Attempting to repurpose the skills and energy that used to be invested into the movement/group.

In recent years, an increasing number of older, that is: middle-aged, target groups have appeared on the radar of rehabilitation work. This is for example the case in the context of German sovereigntist movements (e.g. so-called 'Reichsbürger'), but also in the wake of the movements opposing anti-COVID-19 measures across Europe, a surprising amount of middle-aged persons seem to have radicalised, often in conjunction with globalised conspiracy narratives, such as QAnon. In the U.S., a study analysing the arrested rioters of the 6th January 2021 unrest on Capitol Hill found that they are on average 40 years old. This fact sets them significantly apart from other persons involved in right-wing extremist movements between 2015 and 2020. Another differentiating factor seems to be socio-economic stability. An increasing number of individuals active in extremist movements seem to be socio-economically stable, sometimes even wealthy. While not all past clients of rehabilitation work were poor or in dire need of economical support, many of them still had needs in this area, leading to social and functional (re)integration measures as one of the core tenets of rehabilitation work. The following text first describes some key insights from practitioners on this matter and then goes on to provide some recommendations on how to tackle this challenge both in the scope of daily rehabilitation practice and on a structural level in the future.

Highlights of the discussion

1. Older groups

a. Is there in fact a difference between younger and older target groups of rehabilitation?

The answer to this question seems to depend on a number of factors, specifically the question of at what age a person joined a movement or group, how long they remained, and at what age they left. For example, persons who only joined at an older age, have made substantial lived-life experience outside of an extremist environment. This personal past and potential skills developed during this period may become useful assets when wanting to leave and rehabilitate. On the other hand, persons who joined at a young age, and even more importantly those, who were born into extremist environments, lack this experience and the corresponding practical knowledge and skillsets. For them, the obstacles to leaving - the "exit cost" - may be (perceived as) being significantly higher than for members who joined at a later stage of their lives. For instance, they risk losing the only family and friends they ever had, their means of livelihood, their feeling of security - and all for an uncertain future in a society they have learned to hate for the most part of their lives. In these cases, rehabilitation work needs to cover a lot of ground, starting from fundamental skill development to substantial measures related to creating new social bonds and purpose-finding. They might also be particularly vulnerable to panic and fear in light of the perceived loss of control related to leaving the extremist environment.

Therefore, depending on the individual state of each person, different emphases may be necessary. Generally, however, many of the same methods and approaches used to work with younger individuals may still be relevant to working with older persons. There do not seem to be approaches used for young people that cannot or should not be transferred to older persons.

b. Practical help vs. Profound and existential dialogue

In general, older target groups of rehabilitation seem to be more in need of profound exchanges and conversations on existential topics than the majority of young people. Looking for the own identity, for 'self' will be harder if individuals have been longer in extremist groups. What is a personal characteristic and what is part of the environment you were in. Looking for a new identity also can be more challenging as this is not going parallel with pedagogical/biological processes as becoming adult/coming to consent. Feeling ashamed or guilt for being in an extremist environment seems to be more apparent as well. In some cases, this leads to looking for support years after the actual disengagement of the group as the feelings persist and are a mental barrier for closing the past.

c. The importance of networks and support structures

For many older cases, one of the most clear needs seems to be the (re)building of social networks and support structures. While this includes professional helpers and support structures (ranging from educators to the social welfare office), personal networks are of key importance. Regardless of whether the individual was a long-time member or only joined for a limited period late in their lives, their personal social network outside the extremist environment is likely either very limited (and possibly quite damaged) or lacking entirely. While this is also relevant for younger target groups, here again it is about the balance of measures. Practitioners' experiences show that generally, younger people are often more capable in forming new social bonds, whereas older individuals may need more professional support in this area. At the same time, younger individuals may require more work regarding professional education, whereas older individuals may be more stable in that regard.

2. Socio-economically stable groups

a. Different levels of influence of socio-economic factors and status for radicalisation and rehabilitation

Although living under more wealthy conditions makes life easier, it is not a remedy for not feeling accepted, fear of the future or (perceived) maltreatment by society or government. This can be supporting factors for radicalisation and it is probable that feelings like these still exist when a person is in a rehabilitation process. While for target groups with socio-economic needs part of the solution can be to offer perspective and practical support to face these uncertainties with less fear (e.g. by education, work), for target groups without such needs, promising pathways may focus working on a positive self-image, e.g. through biographical work. Severe feelings of deprivation without socio-economic roots might in some instances indicate an internal stressor. For example, research on the Capitol Hill perpetrators shows that a significant portion seems to have had pre-existing mental health issues.¹

At the same time, wealth and socio-economic position are not absolute. People considered established and respected by society can perceive their own situation differently. This can have an impact when weighing up the risks and benefits of joining an extremist group if this decision is made fully conscious or rather gradually.

From another perspective, in some cases the idea of being a highly successful and capable individual may also lead to thinking that 'the cause needs a thinker/leader like me'. Individuals who are easily flattered by notions of their own success may be easy targets of recruitment efforts. Especially during the protests against anti-COVID-19 measures such cases could be observed.

b. Fear of loss of status and stable socio-economic position

Socio-economic factors can play a role for joining an extremist environment (what is at stake), however also for leaving. In some instances, a positive perception of one's own status might be linked to extremist involvement (e.g. by being a festival organiser profiting of neo-Nazi music festivals, being a RWE boxing promoter, owning a clothing brand or a shop tied to the movement). In these cases, the social environment also can provide income and – at the very least – stability that might be lost when leaving. Additionally, in cases where extremist involvement took place more secretly, being 'revealed' as an extremist can have strong consequences for employees and entrepreneurs, even if one already is disengaged.

¹ R.A. Pape & Keven Ruby, *The Capitol Rioters Aren't Like Other Extremists* 2021.

Relevant practices

- There are not yet dedicated rehabilitation programmes especially for the target group(s) of this meeting.
- Some psychologists - like the speakers on the meeting - are specialised in rehabilitation of both members of cultic and extremist groups. See e.g. www.Kulte.de
- From the general rehabilitation programmes, [Exit Sweden](#) has experience with middle-aged target groups without socio-economic needs within their caseload. Apart from adjusting to individual needs there are no specific adaptations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were offered in the meeting by practitioners:

1. **Work on self-perception and ability to change:** "This is just who/how I am!" is an often-heard phrase when working with older individuals. Focusing on changing their self-perception towards an acceptance of their ability to change may be a necessary first step.
2. **Support the supporters.** In cases where individuals still have positive social networks who can support their rehabilitation, these may need increased support themselves.
3. **Prepare for existential conversations.** In many instances, older individuals have more needs on this matter. Looking for 'self' (who am I without the extremist group/ thinking pattern) will be more apparent and more complicated to work on.
4. **Reward the need for dignity/status.** Small forms of interaction like, e.g. sharing the costs for coffee when offered by the participant, can be helpful for creating ownership for the rehabilitation process
5. **Repurposing skillsets learned or applied during the time in a group/scene.** In order to avoid feelings of depression and hopelessness and to support stabilisation, participants should be encouraged to find ways to apply their skills positively in society.
6. **Liaise more closely with cult (disengagement) experts.** Experts and practitioners in this adjacent fields have often decades-long experience in working with older individuals, knowledge that can be highly valuable to rehabilitation in the context of violent extremism.
7. **Build close networks with psychotherapists.** Some practitioners are noting an increased likelihood of mental health issues in older participants of rehabilitation programmes.
8. **Undertake efforts to reduce societal stigma for extremists returning to society through rehabilitation.** Especially in the context of anti-vax movements and conspiracy myths, practitioners are noting that the societal stigma around former members/believers seems to increase in comparison to other types of extremism. If rehabilitation is to be successful, efforts need to be made to enable rehabilitated individuals to become part of society again.
9. **Be aware that feelings of unsafety, neglect, fear and instability individuals may raise in times of overarching societal crises** (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic) can have impact on those already vulnerable which might result in impact on the rehabilitation work, acceleration of the radicalisation process or relapse.

Follow up

In 2022, RAN Practitioners will focus on a number of issues that are related to engaging both socio-economically stable and older target groups. These focus topics include digital rehab work, which could provide an opportunity to reach clients that would otherwise not join regular programmes, as well as working in open, voluntary settings, a topic especially relevant to the target groups discussed here, since most of them are not part of the criminal justice programme.

Further reading

- RAN Conclusion Paper, Small-scale meeting “New offender types & appropriate measures of Exit work”, March 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-small-scale-meeting-new-offender_en
- RAN Rehabilitation WG Meeting “The Diversification of VRWE as Challenges for Rehabilitation, September 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/publications/ran-rehabilitation-diversification-vrwe_en