



# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

## FIVE THINGS ABOUT

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN DOMESTIC RADICALIZATION



Research on radicalization risks and processes consistently points to the importance of social networks and interpersonal relationships in motivating toward or protecting against individual radicalization. It is critical to interrupt the radicalization process before people's ideologies manifest into violence. Research, including studies funded by the National Institute of Justice, provides important insights into how social networks may either facilitate or prevent radicalization processes and disengagement efforts.

### **1. Radicalization is an inherently social process, even among so-called lone actors.**

In-person and online social networks and subcultures can play a significant role in individual lone-actor radicalization processes.<sup>1</sup> These networks can promote radicalization through on- and offline social interactions but can also provide an opportunity for prevention or intervention.<sup>2</sup> Peers, families, and community members might become aware of their loved one's radicalization through leakage (i.e., the person communicates information online and/or in person about their radicalization, extremist beliefs, or plans to carry out an attack).<sup>3</sup>

People in the social network of individuals on the path to radicalization should have access to support services so they recognize warning signs of radicalization. Some warning signs may include drastic changes in behavior, changes in an individual's relationships and associations, unemployment (or low socioeconomic status), previous criminality, mental health disorders, and leakage of information prior to an attack.<sup>4,5</sup>

Family and friends of those being radicalized can report to police and others. They can also aid in prevention and intervention efforts. While this may help interrupt the radicalization process, loved ones might be reluctant to report

to law enforcement due to a lack of trust and fear of the consequences of reporting.<sup>6</sup> Policy responses can facilitate increased reporting and intervention by building stronger partnerships between communities and law enforcement, implementing anonymous reporting mechanisms, and providing non-law enforcement resources to address concerns about radicalization within one's social circle.<sup>7</sup>

### **2. Social isolation from non-extremist groups and the size of extremist groups can both impact radicalization to violence.**

When combined with other factors like unemployment and prior criminal history, the absence of (and search for) strong social bonds may play a role in radicalizing individuals to violent extremist behaviors and ideas.<sup>8</sup> As an individual moves along the pathway of radicalization and establishes connections with other radicalized individuals, their bonds with *non-extremist* social networks can weaken significantly, potentially limiting opportunities for intervention and disengagement and strengthening their association with extremist social networks.<sup>9</sup> Connections to non-extremist social networks are important as they can provide alternative messaging, potentially helping radicalizing individuals to realize they are not alone.<sup>10</sup>

## Five Things About the Role of Social Networks in Domestic Radicalization

However, the size of the extremist organization also plays a role in radicalizing to violence. Contrary to what one may think, “individuals who are embedded in large [violent extremist] networks are less likely to radicalize to violence than those who are members of isolated cliques or act alone.”<sup>11</sup> This is in part because large networks “promote specialization that allow members to adopt non-violent roles,” while lone actors are left without opportunities to specialize, lack gatekeepers, and can often only draw attention to themselves or their cause through acts of violence.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. While important, family connections are not a reliable safeguard against radicalization.

Familial connections may not be a catalyst for (or safeguard against) individual radicalization. Radical beliefs within familial networks are not often cited as motivating factors in individual radicalization decisions.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, radicalized familial connections may function to motivate or strengthen radicalization propensities and could serve as obstacles to disengagement.<sup>14</sup>

Non-extremist familial ties, while important, may not be enough to help reintegrate an individual and prevent their radicalization. Family members may be unsuccessful when they become aware of and attempt to intervene in the radicalization of a loved one.<sup>15</sup> In addition, many factors may make peers and loved ones reluctant to seek support for someone exhibiting signs of radicalization. These include:

- Individual factors, such as personal experience with police violence or fear of being misjudged.
- Relationship factors, including care for person of concern or fear of precipitating harm to self/family.
- Community factors, such as available reporting modalities or access to mental health services.
- Societal factors, including institutional racial, economic discrimination, or availability of non-punitive justice remedies.<sup>16</sup>

### 4. Peers have a meaningful influence on pathways both into and out of radicalization.

Peer connections, particularly (but not limited to) those occurring in offline spaces, may influence an individual’s decision to commit violent acts.<sup>17</sup> Even in cases where social media played a role in the radicalization process, personal connections to individuals already radicalized seem to have greater impact on a person’s decision to participate in illegal activities.<sup>18</sup> Extremist social networks and ties, including extremist romantic partners, can promote pathways to radicalization and hinder efforts to disengage from terrorist or violent extremist activities and groups.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, these can also promote disillusionment and discord with the radical ideology, and lead to disengagement.<sup>20</sup>

While peers are the most likely to notice early signs of radicalization, they are the least likely to report it.<sup>21</sup> Strategies to encourage reporting a loved one who is possibly on the path to violent extremist radicalization include:

- Removing reporting barriers, such as distrust of law enforcement and lack of alternative reporting modalities.<sup>22</sup>
- Increasing facilitators to reporting, such as training officers to be supportive and respectful of intimate bystanders.
- Establishing community-based multi-disciplinary threat-assessment teams.
- Providing awareness about multi-modal and transparent reporting mechanisms to intimate bystanders/community members.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. The impact of social networks on both radicalization and disengagement varies.

We must shift from asking *whether* social connections influence radicalization to asking *when* those connections influence radicalization. Greater engagement with non-extremist social networks and perceived outgroups might play a role in facilitating disengagement from extremist groups.<sup>24</sup> But other factors — including ideological affiliation and commitment, identity construction, socioeconomic status, and history of incarceration — may affect the extent of the role these social networks play in the disengagement process.<sup>25</sup>

As each individual’s radicalization journey and mobilization to violence is unique, the disengagement process (if any) is equally distinctive. Only about a third of extremists fully desist from crime, disengage from an extremist group, and deradicalize from their extremist beliefs.<sup>26</sup> The time required to disengage varies, with approximately a third of extremists disengaging in less than a year, and a quarter taking more than 10 years.<sup>27</sup>

There is no one-size-fits-all model for effective disengagement, especially as it relates to extremists with and without incarceration histories. The exit barriers for those released from U.S. prisons are starkly different from those who have never experienced periods of confinement. People leaving incarceration require more assistance related to socioeconomic mobility, identity reconstruction, and developing positive social relationships.<sup>28</sup> In general, for disengagement strategies to work, they must support the “exit” process through effective monitoring of social networks, in combination with mental health counseling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and job and educational assistance. Developing tailored strategies that account for individual nuances and the role of social networks in each individual’s life is critical in preventing radicalization and facilitating disengagement.

#### Learn more:

[Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies](#)

[An Assessment of Extremist Groups Use of Web Forums, Social Media, and Technology to Enculturate and Radicalize Individuals to Violence](#)

[Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization \(EAD3\)](#)

[Social Learning and Social Control in the Off and Online Pathways to Hate and Extremist Violence](#)

[Dynamic, Graph-Based Risk Assessments for the Detection of Violent Extremist Radicalization Trajectories Using Large Scale Social and Behavioral Data](#)

[Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Insights from Family and Friends of Current and Former Extremists](#)

[Community Reporting Thresholds: Sharing Information With Authorities Concerning Terrorism Activity](#)

[A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Violent Extremism](#)

## Five Things About the Role of Social Networks in Domestic Radicalization

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America: Using Knowledge of Radicalization Pathways to Forge Prevention Strategies," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2012-ZA-BX-0001, NCJ 248691, 2015, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/248691.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> Hamm and Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America"; and Thomas J. Holt et al., "Loners, Colleagues, or Peers? Assessing the Social Organization of Radicalization," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 44 (2019): 83-105.
- <sup>3</sup> Hamm and Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America"; and Thomas J. Holt et al., "Loners, Colleagues, or Peers?"
- <sup>4</sup> Jensen and LaFree, 2022, "A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Violent Extremism," (NIJ Award #2017-ZA-CX-0001).
- <sup>5</sup> John G. Horgan et al., "Across the Universe? A Comparative Analysis of Violent Behavior and Radicalization Across Three Offender Types With Implications for Criminal Justice Training and Education," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2013-ZA-BX-0002, June 2016, NCJ 249937, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249937.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Eisenman et al., "Community Reporting Thresholds: Sharing Information With Authorities Concerning Terrorism and Targeted Violence," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2018-ZA-CX-0004, March 2022, NCJ 304119, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/304119.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> David P. Eisenman et al., "Community Reporting Thresholds."
- <sup>8</sup> See the discussion of findings from Colleen E. Mills, et al., "Social Learning and Social Control in the Off and Online Pathways to Hate Crime and Terrorist Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 9 (2021): 701-29, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/256024.pdf> and Ryan Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Insights from Family and Friends of Current and Former Extremists," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2017-ZA-CX-0005, March 2022, NCJ 304318, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/304318.pdf>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Hamm and Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America"; Mills et al., "Social Learning and Social Control"; Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Jytte Klausen et al., "Radicalization Trajectories: An Evidence-Based Computational Approach to Dynamic Risk Assessment of 'Homegrown' Jihadists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43 no.7 (2020): 588-615, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1492819>.
- <sup>10</sup> See Hamm and Spaaj, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America"; Mills et al., "Social Learning and Social Control"; Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Klausen et al., "Radicalization Trajectories."
- <sup>11</sup> Jensen and LaFree, "A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Violent Extremism."
- <sup>12</sup> Jensen and LaFree, "A Multi-Level Approach to the Study of Violent Extremism."
- <sup>13</sup> Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism," 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Holt et al., "Loners, Colleagues, or Peers?"; Klausen et al., "Radicalization Trajectories."
- <sup>15</sup> See Mills, et al., "Social Learning and Social Control"; and Klausen et al., "Radicalization Trajectories."
- <sup>16</sup> Eisenman et al., "Community Reporting Thresholds." See also Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan, and William P. Evans, "Evaluation of a Multi-Faceted, U.S. Community-Based, Muslim-Led CVE Program," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2013-ZA-BX-0003, June 2016, NCJ 249936, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249936.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> With potential variation based on the ideological motivation and desired target of the individual. See Mills et al, "Social Learning and Social Control."
- <sup>18</sup> Klausen et al., "Radicalization Trajectories."
- <sup>19</sup> See Mills et al., "Social Learning and Social Control"; and Michael Jensen and Pete Simi, "Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD)," Final report to the National Institute of Justice, award number 2014-ZA-BX-0003, January 2021, NCJ 256039, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/256039.pdf>.
- <sup>20</sup> See Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Jensen and Simi, "Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD)."
- <sup>21</sup> See Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Jensen and Simi, "Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD)."
- <sup>22</sup> Eisenman et al., "Community Reporting Thresholds."
- <sup>23</sup> Eisenman et al., "Community Reporting Thresholds."
- <sup>24</sup> Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Jensen and Simi, "Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD)."
- <sup>25</sup> Brown, "Research on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism"; and Mills et al., "Social Learning and Social Control."
- <sup>26</sup> National Institute of Justice, "Domestic Extremism: No One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Disengagement From Extremism Activity or Beliefs, Study Finds," April 18, 2022, nij.ojp.gov: <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/domestic-extremism-no-one-size-fits-all-approach-disengagement-extremism-activity>.
- <sup>27</sup> National Institute of Justice, "Domestic Extremism: No One-Size-Fits-All Approach."
- <sup>28</sup> Jensen and Simi, "Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD)."

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