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EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF DOMESTIC DISENGAGEMENT AND DERADICALIZATION
(EAD^3)

FINAL SUMMARY OVERVIEW

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Purpose. While observers note that exiting extremism is a common practice, there is a general lack of conceptually differentiated, empirically inclusive, and multi-method research on individual deradicalization and disengagement processes. This research gap has hindered our ability to make theoretically and empirically informed decisions about intervention, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs that are designed to assist individuals in exiting extremist groups. Addressing these needs requires developing a good understanding of the motivations to exit, their variation by type of exit process, timing, and ideology, and their compatibility with different intervention types.

This project has been an attempt to address these research gaps. Building on the evaluation of individual radicalization processes in START's NIJ-funded Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalization (EADR) project (2012-ZA-BX-0005), the Empirical Assessment of Domestic Disengagement and Deradicalization (EAD[3]) project employed a multi-method, interdisciplinary approach to evaluate the equifinite and multifinite processes by which individuals move away from extremist beliefs, behaviors, and associations. EAD[3] included a large number of cases from different ideological orientations in order to produce meaningful generalizations about disengagement, and it systematically compared and mapped the trajectories and motivations for exit across different subsets of extremists using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. The goal of the project has been to provide an empirical baseline from which to design, evaluate, and modify programs and practices that seek to help individuals exit from extremism and reestablish positive roles in their respective communities.

Subjects. This project analyzed the disengagement, desistance, and deradicalization processes of three samples of United States extremists, each of which will be discussed in detail below: (1) a quantitative dataset of 300 far-right, far-left, Islamist, and single-issue extremists, (2) qualitative case studies of 50 far-right extremists, and (3) 41 life-course interviews with former far-right, far-left, and Islamist extremists.

First, we reviewed the 1,473 cases that were included in the first data release of the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset for information that indicated that an individual had (1) desisted from criminal behavior, (2) exited from an extremist group, and/or (3) shed an extremist belief system. After removing cases in which the subject died while conducting an extremist attack, as well as those cases without sufficient open-source information, data were compiled on 300 individuals that achieved a desistance, disengagement, and/or deradicalization outcome. Data for the quantitative dataset were collected from unclassified sources, including court records, media accounts, and biographies.

Second, the research team at START conducted detailed case studies on 50 far-right extremists: 25 who disengaged from extremist groups and 25 who did not. These cases were drawn from the larger quantitative dataset and were chosen based on exit outcome, the extent to which they represent the characteristics of the larger sample of far-right extremists in PIRUS, and the availability of information in open sources. The decision to focus exclusively on far-right extremists was made to remove the characteristic dissimilarities that would be introduced by mixing ideological subgroups (e.g., far-right extremist tend to be significantly older than far-left and Jihadi extremists). If included, these dissimilarities could have masked potentially important mechanisms of extremist disengagement. Finally, the research team at Chapman University conducted 41 in-depth life history interviews with former extremists. These individuals were identified using a snowball sampling technique. After encountering significant hurdles to interviewing former Jihadi subjects, the Chapman team, with NIJ support, over-sampled former far-right and far-left extremists. The final interview sample included 21 former far-right extremists, 13 former far-left extremists, and 7 former Jihadi-inspired extremists.

Project Design and Methods. To accurately capture the complexity of desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization processes, EAD[3] utilized a mixed-method, inter-disciplinary approach. The project aimed to address the following research questions:

- What impact does ideology have on patterns of desistance, disengagement, and de-radicalization?
- How often are barriers to disengagement present in the exit trajectories of extremists?

- How often do extremists cite push/pull factors as critical to their exit processes?
- How often do individuals desist from extremist behaviors but remain involved in non-extremist criminal activities or radical social networks? Are these individuals at heightened risk for relapse into violent extremism?
- How do personal characteristics, social relationships, emotions, and beliefs combine to produce unique exit pathways?
- What impact, if any, do interventions have on individuals' extremist beliefs, behaviors and social networks?

To answer these questions, we relied on quantitative and qualitative research methods. First, the quantitative portion of the project drew on the disengagement and criminal desistance literatures to assess the frequency and impact of barriers to exit, as well as a host of push/pull factors that have been cited as important components of disengagement and deradicalization pathways. These data were analyzed using descriptive bivariate analyses across ideological sub-categories and Pearson's chi-squared tests. Given the relatively small sample size and the extent of missing information (see tables 1 and 2 in Appendix B), the research team was not able to run more sophisticated statistical tests.

Second, the research team at START conducted 50 case studies of far-right extremists in the U.S. using open-sources, such as news reports and court records. To facilitate a comparison with a control group, the sample was divided between 25 individuals who had successfully disengaged from extremist groups and 25 individuals who continued their involvement in radical groups after their initial exposure event. The 50 case studies were coded for the presence or absence of 24 exit barriers and push/pull factors, as well as whether the subjects had successfully disengaged from extremist groups. The coded case studies were then analyzed using multi-step crisp-set qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA).

Finally, 41 interviews were conducted with former extremists using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews included questions about broad phases of the subject's extremism such as entry, involvement, and disengagement, with probes to encourage subjects to elaborate on aspects of their life histories. Each interview concluded with more structured questions and scale items to collect comparable information across interviewees in terms of risk factors (e.g., history of child abuse, mental health problems etc.), demographic information, and criminality.

Data Analysis. For the quantitative analysis, we first ran descriptive tests on the frequency of exit outcomes (i.e., criminal desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization), disengagement barriers, and push/pull factors in the sample of 300 extremists drawn from PIRUS. We then performed bivariate and chi-squared tests to determine which barriers and push/pull factors are significantly linked to the different exit outcomes (see tables 1 & 2 in Appendix B).

The qualitative case studies were analyzed using multi-step csQCA, which allowed us to determine if exit pathways among far-right extremists are conditioned by the presence or absence of exit barriers, such as poor social mobility, substance abuse, or mental illness. In the next step, we used csQCA to show how push/pull factors interact with specific exit barriers to produce unique disengagement pathways.

The interview data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach, which allowed us to combine a more open-ended, inductive approach while also relying on existing literatures and frameworks to guide the research and help interpret the findings. Data coding involved reading entire interview transcripts line-by-line to determine differences and similarities within and across our subjects. After the initial codes were developed, we compared and contrasted data themes, noting relations between them, and moving back and forth between first-level data and general categories.

Findings. Our analysis of the quantitative data revealed a significant amount of diversity among U.S. extremists in terms of exit outcomes (see figure 1 in Appendix A), disengagement barriers, and push/pull factors. Of the 300 individuals included in our sample, 120 (40%) successfully disengaged from an extremist group and eventually desisted from all forms of criminal activity, but there was insufficient evidence available to determine if they had altered their underlying belief system. Moreover, while these subjects ultimately reached disengagement and desistance outcomes, the processes of arriving at these outcomes were often marked by periods of re-engagement or non-ideological criminal activity. More than 100 individuals (33.7%) in our sample showed evidence of reaching all three exit outcomes (disengagement, desistance, and deradicalization), while 65 (21.7%) successfully desisted from further criminal activity while staying engaged with an extremist group and/or continuing to adhere to extremist

beliefs. The rates of deradicalization were comparatively low across all ideological groups; however, this finding likely reflects the poor availability of information about the evolution of individuals' beliefs in open sources.

The average length of disengagement varied considerably for the individuals in our sample, with 32.7% disengaging within one year of their exposure event, 14.5% disengaging between 1 and 3 years, 27% disengaging between 3 and 10 years, and 25.8% taking 10 or more years to disengage. This variation generally holds across ideological subgroups; although, the disproportionate length of incarceration for, and isolation of, Islamist prisoners makes it difficult to accurately capture the length of time it takes for them to disengage.

The quantitative analysis shows that the average extremist faces multiple barriers to disengagement that can prolong or thwart their attempts to exit extremist groups (see table 1 in Appendix B). These include (1) being a member of a close-knit extremist group that included a friend, family member, or romantic partner (56.7%), (2) having a non-ideological criminal history (35.9%), (3) having poor educational attainment (60.6%) and/or (4) an unstable work history (31.1%), and (5) facing issues of substance abuse (17.7%) and mental illness (5%). Some exit barriers were disproportionately present within particular ideological milieus. For example, nearly 80% of the far-right extremists in our sample struggled with issues of social mobility, including limited educational attainment and poor work performance. Islamist extremists in our sample had the highest rates (77.1%) of membership in close-knit extremist cliques. Although far-left extremists had relatively low barrier rates compared to extremists from other ideologies, over half (58.3%) were members of extremist groups that included a close friend, family member, or romantic partner.

The quantitative results show similar patterns in how often push/pull factors helped to facilitate the exit processes of the individuals in our sample (see table 2 in Appendix B). Positive advancements in socioeconomic standing and the birth of children after radicalization were present in the exit processes of approximately 50% of the extremists in our sample. Furthermore, over 35% of our sample cited changed religiosity (i.e., an increase in, or reinterpretation of, religious beliefs/participation) as important to their

disengagement from extremism. A similar number ended relationships with extremists and/or began new relationships with non-extremists (36.1%). Nearly a quarter of our sample cited a decrease in substance use (25.9%) and/or disillusionment with their extremist groups (24.0%) as important factors contributing to their exit. Again, some push/pull factors were more common in particular ideological groups. For example, the development of positive personal relationships with non-radicals and/or the termination of personal relationships with radicals, was present in the exit processes for a large number of far-right and far-left extremists (43.9% and 41.1% respectively), but lower for Islamist extremists (14.3%). Similarly, disillusionment with an extremist group or cause was cited by many far-right and Jihadist extremists as a reason for disengagement (25.6% and 33.9%) but was far less commonly cited by individuals on the extremist far-left (18.3%).

The analysis of 50 case studies of far-right extremists sought to build on the quantitative results by showing how exit barriers condition the processes of disengagement from extremist groups. The goal of the first step in the csQCA analysis was to show how barriers to exit commonly interact within specific subgroups of extremists to determine the range of obstacles that must be addressed in order for disengagement to succeed. The results of this step of the csQCA analysis revealed a stark division between two subgroups of extremists: those with an incarceration record and those without prison experience. These groups faced unique barriers to disengagement. In particular, individuals who spent time in prison were most likely to stay engaged in extremist groups because of issues associated with poor social mobility, substance abuse, trauma, and mental illness. By comparison, individuals who did not have a history of incarceration faced obstacles to disengagement related to their identity associations and personal relationships. Instead of facing hurdles to social mobility, these extremists remained engaged in extremist groups because they generated personal prestige and wealth from their affiliations with extremist groups or because they were embedded in groups along with family members and romantic partners.

Using these results, the second step in the csQCA analysis showed how push/pull factors combined to produce exit pathways within the contexts of the prison and non-prison subgroups. These

results show that while factors such as disillusionment and severing relationships with radical family members can play a role in the exit processes of individuals with incarceration records, these factors only assisted in their exit processes when they were combined with conditions that improved the individuals' social mobility, such as career or educational advancements, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and mental health support services. In contrast, improvements to social mobility did not play a role in the exit processes of individuals without past experiences of confinement. Rather, these individuals successfully disengaged when developments in their personal relationships challenged their underlying extremist beliefs and sparked a process of identity reconstruction. The results of the analysis showed that the development of a positive relationship with a member of an outgroup (typically a racial or religious minority) was a necessary condition for disengagement among far-right extremists without a prison record. This factor often combined with the formation of other positive personal relationships, such as finding a non-extremist romantic partner, and a general sense of disillusionment with their associated extremist group that was caused by burnout, in-group conflict, or group hypocrisy, to form unique exit pathways.

The csQCA analysis also revealed that the causal roles of push/pull factors in relation to disengagement are inherently complex. In some cases, the presence of push/pull factors were critically important to helping individuals move away from extremist groups. Yet in other cases, the same factors had the opposite causal effect, reinforcing the individuals' commitment to extremist beliefs and causes. For example, while several individuals cited the birth of children as critical turning points in their movement out of extremist groups, childbirth only had a meaningful disengagement effect when the individuals had already begun to question their affiliations with extremist groups and movements. In cases where individuals had not experienced initial disillusionment with extremism, the birth of children reinforced their extremist commitments by endowing them with a sense of parental responsibility to protect future generations from perceived societal ills, such as ethnic integration and the deterioration of a white national identity.

Finally, our interview data was analyzed to better understand the complexity of exit processes, including the role that emotions play in fostering or blocking disengagement ambitions. In terms of basic characteristics, the subsample of former right-wing interviewees (RW) consisted of three females and 19 male participants whose ages range from 35 to 52 years of age. Childhood socioeconomic status and current educational attainment ranged across a wide spectrum. The length of involvement for these members ranged from 5 to 22 years (SD=5.17). The second subsample included 13 former left-wing (LW) extremists consisting of two females and 11 male participants whose ages ranged from 24 to 70 years of age. Two individuals described their socioeconomic status as lower-class, three as working-class, and eight described themselves as middle-class. In terms of education, two individuals received less than a high school diploma, one received a high school diploma, six attended college, and four received a graduate degree. The length of involvement for these members ranged from 1 to 37 years (SD=12.44). Finally, the third subsample included seven former Jihadi (J) extremists all of whom were male with ages ranging from 29 to 53 years of age. One individual described their socioeconomic status as working class, five described their socioeconomic status as middle-class and one described themselves as upper-class. In terms of education, two graduated from high school, one attended trade school, and four received a college degree. The length of involvement for these members ranged from 3 to 16 years (SD=7.5).

We relied on a systematic content coding system derived from the circumplex model of affect (CMA) to identify markers of emotion expressed by participants during intensive life history interviews. Specifically, we examined the emotional valence that characterize actors' disengagement event. In doing so, researchers coded each interview and identified as many affective markers that could be using the circumplex affect codebook. Based on the data, the most frequently identified affective expressions for right-wing participants were displeasure (M=3.80; SD=1.55) and unpleasant activation (M=2.30; SD=1.64). Alternatively, left-wing participants were identified most frequently as expressing negative affective states including displeasure (M=3.9; SD=1.85) and activated displeasure (M=3.00; SD=2.71). Comparisons between circumplex affect variables for left-wing participants and right-wing participants

showed two significant relationships. First, as compared to left-wing participants, right-wing participants were identified as expressing more unpleasantly activated statements (M_{RW}=2.30 vs. M_{LW}=.90). Second, left-wing participants expressed more activation during their disengagement event (M_{RW}=0.0 vs. M_{LW}=.30).

Regarding the cognitive variables, insight (M=3.80; SD=2.04) was identified as the most common cognitive variable expressed by right-wing participants followed by affiliation (M=3.40; SD=2.59), isolation (M=2.10; SD=1.91), uncertainty (M=1.90; SD=1.20), morality, (M=1.80; SD=3.01), immorality (M=1.70; SD=1.89), and finally, future orientation (M=1.00; SD=1.05). For left-wing participants, insight (M=3.30; SD=2.83) was identified as the most common cognitive variable expressed followed by future orientation (M=3.20; SD=2.97), uncertainty (M=2.20; SD=2.53), isolation (M=1.90; SD=1.79), affiliation (M=1.50; SD=2.17), immorality (M=1.50; SD=1.90), and finally, morality, (M=0.90; SD=0.99).

Comparisons between cognitive variables for left-wing and right-wing participants showed two significant relationships. First, as compared to right-wing participants, left-wing participants were identified as expressing more future orientated statements (M_{RW}=1.00 vs. M_{LW}=3.20). Second, affiliation was also found to vary between subgroups, with right-wing participants indicating more affiliation (M_{RW}=3.40 vs. M_{LW}=1.50).

Implications. Our quantitative, qualitative, and interview results yielded several important implications for criminal justice professionals and future research on extremist disengagement and reintegration. The range of desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization outcomes that were present in the quantitative sample suggest that the risks of recidivism and re-engagement among U.S. extremists are potentially very high and that many extremists are likely to be unsuccessful in meeting the lofty goals associated with full desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization. Similarly, exit pathways are rarely quick or linear. Instead, individuals often experience periods of re-engagement with extremist groups or transitions to non-ideological criminality before achieving a final desistance, disengagement, or deradicalization outcome. Policies and programs that aim to assist individuals in disengaging and

achieving their reintegration goals should be cognizant of this complexity and capable of providing the support services that are necessary to keep individuals on an exit trajectory. These services include, but are not limited to, mental health counseling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, job and educational assistance, and effective monitoring of social affiliations.

Similarly, our qualitative results indicate that disengagement programs are likely to fail if they introduce push/pull factors without first considering how exit pathways are conditioned by background characteristics and experiences. Factors that assist some individuals in leaving extremist groups may be ineffective for others or, worse yet, work to reinforce their extremist commitments. Specifically, our results indicate that extremists leaving U.S. prisons face significantly different exit barriers than those who have never experienced periods of confinement. The rehabilitation and reintegration of extremist offenders requires addressing both the social dynamics of extremism as well as the barriers to socioeconomic mobility. The processes of disengagement for extremists without incarceration records, on the other hand, is more intimately tied to identity reconstruction and the formation of positive social relationships. Put simply, our results indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all model of disengagement, and that criminal justice professionals should be skeptical of claims that push/pull factors are broadly applicable across extremist subgroups.

Finally, this project provided several insights into the challenges of studying extremist desistance, disengagement, and deradicalization within a scientific framework. Data collection for both the quantitative and interview portions of the project was significantly hindered by the lack of information on extremist disengagement in open sources and the difficulty in finding participants willing to be interviewed. These problems were amplified by the presence of administrative barriers restricting researchers' access to individuals who are currently incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Future research that seeks to apply an empirical template to the study of disengagement will have to devise ways to overcome these hurdles. The prospects for effectively researching the challenges of extremist disengagement and reintegration would increase significantly if researchers were given greater access to criminal justice data and correctional settings.

Appendix A: Distribution of Exit Outcomes in PIRUS-D[3]

Figure 1. *Exit Outcomes*
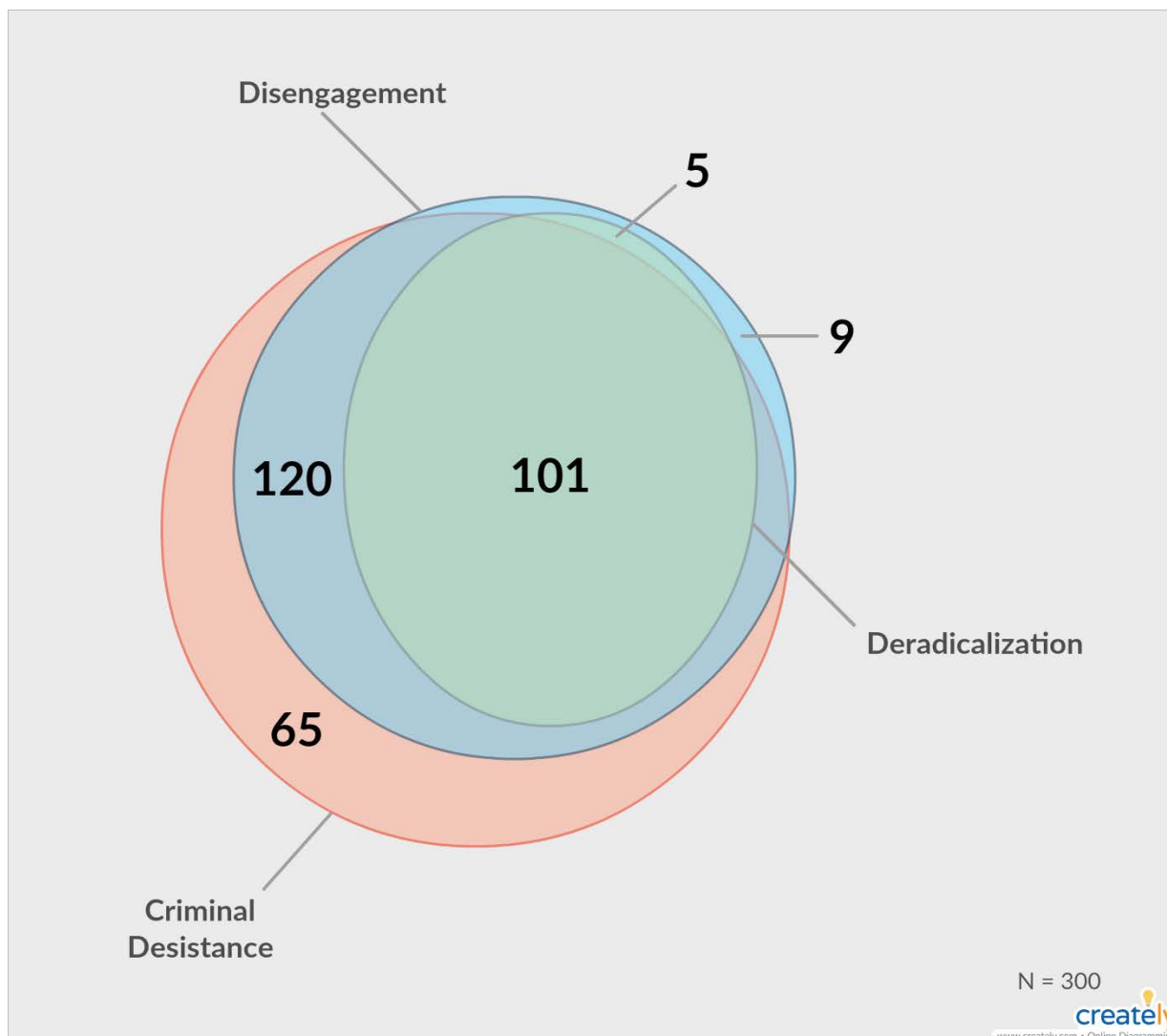
Appendix B: The Presence of Barriers and Push/Pull Factors

Table 1. *Barriers to exit by ideology.*

	Total Sample	Far-Right	Far-Left	Islamist	Single Issue	% Missing Data (Total)
Close-Knit Extremist Network	56.7%**	52.9%	58.3%	77.1%	36.0%	40.7%
Prior Criminal History	35.9%	42.6%	25.5%	48.0%	8.1%	44.3%
Low Educational Attainment	60.6%	77.8%	49.2%	71.4%	60.6%	48.3%
Unstable Work History	31.1%	35.8%	25.7%	35.0%	25.0%	46.7%
Substance Abuse	11.7%	14.4%	10.8%	12.8%	5.9%	N/A
Mental Illness	5.0%	6.8%	3.2%	7.7%	2.0%	N/A

*Results reflect valid percentages only.
**Significant at the .05 level when measured against the outcome of desistance and disengagement, using Pearson's Chi-Square Test.

Table 2. *Push/Pull Factors by ideology.*

	Total Sample	Far-Right	Far-Left	Islamist	Single Issue	% Missing Data (Total)
Increase in SES	48.6%	32.1%	12.2%	33.3%	44.4%	50.3%
Positive Relationship Change	36.1%**	43.9%	41.1%	14.3%	14.3%	51.3%
Increase in Children	50.3%	53.0%	54.3%	36.8%	54.3%	48.3%
Changed Religiosity	35.3%	40.8%	27.8%	28.6%	33.3%	66.0%
Decrease in Substance Abuse	25.9%	25.8%	25.0%	33.3%	25.0%	73.7%
Disillusionment	24.0%**	33.9%	18.3%	25.6%	11.8%	N/A
Geographic Distance	24.5%	15.3%	28.2%	29.2%	9.1%	12.3%
Rehab Program	9.6%	11.7%	11.1%	6.3%	4.2%	54.6%

*Results reflect valid percentages only.
**Significant at the .05 level when measured against the outcome of desistance and disengagement, using Pearson's Chi-Square Test

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