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START

Risk and Rehabilitation: Supporting the Work of Probation Officers in the Community Reentry of Extremist Offenders

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About This Report

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About START

Established in 2005 as U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence led by the University of Maryland, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) uses state-of-the-art theories, methods, and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics, and social and psychological impacts of terrorism. For more information, contact START at infostart@start.umd.edu or visit www.start.umd.edu

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Executive Summary

To date, very little research has examined the specific challenges that individuals with ties to extremism face when reintegrating into their communities after arrest or incarceration. This has produced significant gaps in the scholarship on extremism, including a lack of data on terrorist recidivism from which to devise effective post-release supervision and support strategies. The implications of this knowledge gap extend beyond the halls of academia to matters of national security. Indeed, the United States is currently seeing an unprecedented surge in the number of individuals being released from custody due to their involvement in extremism. Without a robust research literature dedicated to this population, probation officers and service providers are without the scientific knowledge they need to help formerly incarcerated individuals achieve reintegration success.

This project sought to address these challenges by focusing on three primary research objectives:

1. Build on existing NIJ-funded research to provide criminal justice professionals empirical data and rigorous analysis on the characteristics of U.S. extremists, their risks for recidivism, and their needs for reintegration success.
2. Gather evidence from in-depth interviews of pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals to understand the keys to successful reintegration.
3. Identify the training and education needs of pretrial services and probation officers to help them more effectively support the cases of formerly incarcerated individuals with links to extremism.

Our mixed methods approach leveraged: (1) an extension to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset designed to estimate instances of both ideological and non-ideological recidivism amongst system-involved individuals with ties to extremism; (2) interviews with pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and

system-involved individuals to understand the needs and challenges this population faces during disengagement and reintegration; and (3) a survey of probation officers to identify the training and education they need to better support their releasees. We summarize our results below.

Recidivism

- ❖ We analyzed more than 1,800 cases of individuals who spent time incarcerated or on probation for committing extremist crimes from 1990-2022 and found an overall recidivism rate of 18.1%.
- ❖ This rate is significantly higher than previous estimates, but lower than most estimates of recidivism among individuals who commit more typical crimes.
- ❖ Recidivism rates were more than twice as high for the individuals in our data who were prosecuted by state or local authorities (26.4%) compared to those who were prosecuted in federal courts (13.1%).
- ❖ Among individuals who recidivated, 59.2% committed new extremist crimes, 27.9% committed non-ideologically motivated crimes, and 12.9% committed both.
- ❖ Our detection of a higher overall recidivism rate than previous estimates is due to the inclusion of individuals linked to domestic terrorist groups and movements in our analysis.
- ❖ We find an exceptionally low rate of recidivism among individuals who committed crimes linked to their support of, or involvement in, international jihadism (7.7%), but a notably higher (19.8%) recidivism rate among individuals involved in domestic extremism.
- ❖ Individuals motivated by their opposition to abortion reoffended at the highest rate (44.2%) in our data, followed by individuals motivated by environmental and animal rights concerns (27.3%). White supremacists and those with anti-government beliefs—the largest subsamples within our data—had recidivism rates of 18.9% and 16.1%, respectively.
- ❖ The most important risk factor associated with recidivism is the presence of a criminal record prior to an individual radicalizing to their first extremist offense. For instance, individuals with a pre-radicalization history of violent crime were more than two times as likely to recidivate than individuals without a criminal record prior to radicalization (31.3% vs. 14.6%).
- ❖ Co-offending, extremist group membership, a family history of extremism, and past trauma are associated with committing new ideologically motivated crimes.
- ❖ Protective factors like being married, older, or having children did not significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism in our data.

Disengagement from Extremism

- ❖ Past incarceration is a significant obstacle to disengagement from extremism and tends to co-occur with related exit barriers, such as low social mobility, low educational attainment, unstable work histories, substance use disorder, and mental illness.

- ❖ The presence of a family member or romantic partner involved in extremism can be a barrier to disengagement as well. When present, this obstacle tends to co-occur with identity-related barriers, like social prestige and financial dependency on an extremist group or movement.
- ❖ Individuals who spent time in prison, but who did not have family members or romantic partners with ties to extremism, were more likely to disengage when they accessed support services like mental health counseling and substance use treatment and were able to find stable employment.
- ❖ Individuals who had extremist family members or romantic partners, but who did not experience confinement, disengaged when they became disillusioned with their ideology and severed personal relationships with extremists.
- ❖ When individuals had both family histories of extremism and periods of incarceration, they were significantly less likely to disengage from extremism. These subjects faced a complex set of psychological, emotional, economic, and social barriers to disengagement that were challenging to overcome.

Challenges to Successful Reintegration

- ❖ System-involved individuals face difficult obstacles to securing basic needs, like housing, employment, and financial security, due to their criminal records and the social stigma associated with their involvement in extremism.
- ❖ Severing anti-social relationships is an important part of successful reintegration, but it can be socially isolating, emotionally taxing, and traumatizing for system-involved individuals. Moreover, system-involved individuals often find it hard to establish new pro-social relationships upon release.
- ❖ Mental health concerns and trauma are common experiences among system-involved individuals, as is difficulty accessing needed care.
- ❖ Substance use, while not unique to extremism, can be a challenge among system-involved individuals after their release from custody. While some individuals may develop substance use disorders prior to entering prison, others describe turning to substances upon release as a form of self-medication and emotional coping.
- ❖ Stigma is a constant challenge facing system-involved individuals with links to extremism. Beyond undermining individuals' ability to find gainful employment and housing, social stigma also causes psychological distress due to public skepticism about the individuals' ability to genuinely disengage from extremism.

Case Management, Monitoring and Support Services for Successful Reintegration

- ❖ Currently, there is no systematic process for identifying and triaging cases of extremism among the federally incarcerated population. Some probation officers reported the use of inconsistent heuristics and strategies to identify potential cases. Other officers reported that their districts do not flag cases with a nexus to extremism.
- ❖ Probation officers do not always have well-established relationships with other law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, that may be monitoring the individuals under their care. This can lead to a lack of information sharing and an inability for officers to adequately assess risk.

- ❖ Pretrial services and probation officers often struggle to find support providers, like mental health clinicians, who are willing to work with individuals who have committed extremist crimes. This can be the result of providers lacking specialized training in extremism, but more often it is due to the providers' concerns about liability and safety.
- ❖ Service providers who have worked with this population view these anxieties as understandable but unwarranted. Most experienced providers reported that they do not consider the care needs of individuals with ties to extremism as being significantly different than the needs of their more typical clients.
- ❖ Officers generally do not trust low scores on the PTRA or PCRA risk assessment tools when the individuals under review have ties to extremism. Officers tend to manually override the assessments in these cases and flag the individuals as high risk. This may lead to over-supervision in some cases, which can unintentionally increase the risks of recidivism.
- ❖ Other risk assessment tools, such as the ERG 22+, could add additional dimensionality to the PTRA and PCRA, but they are time consuming for officers to complete and may not be practically useful.
- ❖ It was common for officers to compare system-involved individuals with ties to extremism to individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Both types of cases frequently have similar supervisory requirements, such as internet and GPS location monitoring. However, it is not clear that there is a sound evidentiary basis for engaging in this sort of comparison.
- ❖ Establishing rapport between officers and releasees was regarded as important for reintegration success by our study participants. Rapport humanizes system-involved individuals, facilitates reciprocity, and may help motivate individuals to disengage from extremism.
- ❖ The supervision of releasees frequently entails internet monitoring, GPS location monitoring, polygraph examinations, and drug testing. Some types of monitoring may help individuals access necessary services, such as mandatory drug testing leading to substance use counseling. Others, while routine, are not rigorously supported by evidence (e.g., polygraphs). Critically, internet monitoring, while increasingly necessary, has the capacity to significantly narrow the range of professional opportunities for system-involved individuals, while also burdening officers with the need to review voluminous catalogues of screenshots and recordings.
- ❖ It can be necessary for officers to find support services for the families of system-involved individuals to help them through the reintegration process. Additionally, peer mentorship could be an effective support service for officers to consider, but concerns were raised about the lack of professional standards among peer mentors and the inherent risks of putting releasees in contact with peer mentors who themselves have lived experiences with extremism.

Training and Additional Recommendations

- ❖ Most of the officers we spoke with did not receive formal training in working with system-involved individuals with ties to extremism, though most officers reported participating in trainings provided through informal mechanisms, such as presentations

and webinars hosted by researchers, practitioners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- ❖ Officers reported having a strong desire for more training specifically focused on extremism, including instruction on theories of radicalization and disengagement; behavioral warning signs of reengagement in extremism; signs, symbols, and language used by extremist movements; and different types of extremist ideologies.
- ❖ Officers said that they would prefer if a central authority, such as the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, led the identification, development, and administration of training rather than having the officers find it on their own.
- ❖ More research is needed on risk and protective factors as they related to recidivism in the population of individuals who have committed extremist crimes. It is especially important to establish what impact intensive supervision has on recidivism rates in this population.
- ❖ Addressing the challenges of post-incarceration reintegration in this population will require a multidisciplinary approach. Probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals should be involved in helping design and conduct research on this topic.

Introduction

The field of terrorism studies has grown at a rapid pace in recent years. Scholars from various disciplines, including political science, sociology, criminology, and psychology, have made important theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of the human causes and consequences of political violence. This work has produced valuable insights on radicalization and disengagement (Altier et al., 2017; Bjorgo, 2009; Horgan, 2009a, 2009b; Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2014; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008, 2017; Moghaddam, 2005), the nature of terrorist recruitment (Blazak, 2001; Bloom, 2017; Gerwehr & Daly, 2006; Hegghammer, 2007; Sageman, 2004a, 2008), the effects of social media and internet usage on extremist mobilization (Benson, 2014; Conway, 2017; Klausen, 2015; Soriano, 2012), and the outcomes of extremist plots and violent activities (Crenshaw et al., 2017; Dahl, 2011; Klein et al., 2017; Strom et al., 2016).

Somewhat surprisingly, however, very little research has focused on the challenges that individuals with links to extremism face reintegrating into their communities after arrest or incarceration. Fundamental questions about the characteristics of system-involved individuals, their needs, and their chances for successful reintegration have not been sufficiently addressed in terrorism scholarship, especially at the national level in the United States. There are no comprehensive data on recidivism rates in this population from which to assess risk, devise monitoring guidelines, or allocate resources. Indeed, Schuurman and Bakker (2016, p. 66) correctly characterize the available data on terrorist recidivism as “scarce and anecdotal.” Similarly, as far as we are aware, data on U.S. extremists have not been systematically used to inform pretrial and sentencing investigations of individuals accused of committing extremist

crimes or to shape the development of post-incarceration reintegration strategies.¹ As Monahan (2017) has forcefully argued, research has not been leveraged to support the critical roles that pretrial services and probation officers play in providing guidelines for the conditions of confinement and release, or to assist them in helping individuals achieve their reintegration goals (see also, Morton & Silber, 2018).

The lack of research on extremist reintegration not only represents a significant knowledge gap, but it potentially exacerbates a growing national security concern. The United States, like its European counterparts, is currently witnessing an unprecedented surge in the numbers of individuals that are being released from confinement for participation in extremist crimes (Center on National Security, 2019; Lowry, 2018; Morton & Silber, 2018; Office of the Inspector General, 2020; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). Research suggests that individuals who participate in extremism are different in important respects to those who commit more ordinary crimes (Jensen et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2016; LaFree et al., 2018), indicating that their risks for recidivism might be different as well. Not only can demographic characteristics and radicalization processes vary substantially across ideological groups (see, for example, Jensen et al., 2016, 2023), but some studies suggest that individuals who engage in extremism often lack common criminogenic risk characteristics (Goodwill & Meloy, 2015; Pressman & Flockton, 2012; Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021). Some studies have concluded that common crime correlates, such as age, unemployment, and substance use disorders, have weak explanatory power when it comes to cases of individuals who commit extremist crimes (Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021). Moreover, individuals who have engaged in extremist crimes may have higher rates

¹ Certainly, data on individual extremist perpetrators has been used to make the decisions about their sentencing and/or release. However, criminal justice professionals stand to gain significantly by leveraging national-level data on extremists that is comprehensive in terms of radicalization characteristics and is cross-ideological in nature.

of protective factors, including the presence of pro-social bonds in their communities, suggesting that standard reintegration approaches based on social mobility and positive relationship changes may not be effective (Nivette et al., 2017; Pauwels & Schils, 2016; Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021). The combination of high release numbers and a limited understanding of the reintegration needs of individuals with links to extremism increases the risks that they will re-offend, transition to other forms of criminality, or otherwise fail to meet their reintegration goals.

The immediacy of the demand for reintegration programs tailored to extremist offenders has compelled some local jurisdictions and community leaders to develop and pursue treatment programs independently (e.g., the efforts in Minneapolis to devise protocols for reintegrating Salafi-jihadist and white supremacist offenders back into the community [Lowry, 2018]).

However, the challenges of reintegration are a nationwide problem that requires a coordinated and cohesive federal response. Most importantly, to effectively develop a national-level reintegration strategy, we need research and data that both illustrate the problem and provide answers for how best to move forward. That research should form the baseline of the education that officers receive about how to effectively supervise individuals with a nexus to extremism.

This project was designed to help address these concerns and improve research on reintegration by (1) examining the risks for recidivism among individuals with links to extremism, (2) exploring the challenges to successful reintegration, and (3) addressing the needs of pretrial services and probation officers and service providers who make sentencing and confinement recommendations, administer reintegration services, and manage post-confinement supervision.

Specifically, this project had three primary goals:

1. *Build on existing NIJ-funded research to provide criminal justice professionals empirical data and rigorous analysis on the characteristics of U.S. extremists, their risks for recidivism, and their needs for reintegration success.*
2. *Gather evidence from in-depth interviews of probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals to understand the keys to successful reintegration.*
3. *Identify the training and education needs of pretrial services and probation officers and related reintegration support providers.*

To achieve these goals, we leveraged past NIJ-funded research (awards 2012-ZA-BX-0005; 2014-ZA-BX-0003; 2017-ZA-CX-0001; 2019-ZA-CX-0004) that produced a suite of datasets on extremism in the United States known as the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) project. These datasets are the nation's largest publicly available resources on the characteristics and behaviors of U.S. individuals who have committed extremist crimes. We pair these data with evidence collected from interviews with pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals with former ties to extremism.

This report proceeds in six sections. First, we review the previous research on reintegration and disengagement from extremism, paying particular attention to how that research applies to system-involved individuals. Second, we describe the project design, including data collection and analysis. Third, we examine the risks for recidivism in this population. Fourth, we examine the reintegration challenges that individuals with links to extremism face, drawing on our in-depth interviews with officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals. Fifth, we describe what officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals identified as the keys to successful reintegration. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the training and education needs of officers and provide recommendations for future research.

Previous Research

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research on disengagement from terrorist groups and extremist movements (Altier et al., 2017; Altier et al., 2014; Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo, 2009; Bjørgo, 2011; Bjørgo & Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009b, 2009a; Jensen et al. 2023; Oppenheim et al., 2015). This research has focused on the mechanisms through which people exit from extremism and desist from committing ideologically motivated crimes. However, few studies to date have focused on the post-release extremist population (Axelsson et al., 2024; Hodwitz, 2021; Kearns et al., forthcoming; Meredith & Horgan, 2024; Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023; Wright, 2019), resulting in a lack of data regarding general rates of recidivism and disengagement. Below, we review this research, paying particular attention to the extent to which disengagement research captures the challenges of reintegration for those individuals who commit extremist crimes. We also review the difficulties that probation officers encounter when managing these cases. Finally, we highlight the theoretical and empirical gaps that need more attention.

Traditional Reintegration Studies and Extremist Offenders

There is a robust literature in criminology and criminal justice on the reintegration of individuals who commit more typical crimes (e.g., MacKenzie, 2006; Maruna & Immarigeon, 2004; Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Visher & Travis, 2003). Much of this work focuses on strengthening rehabilitative influences in an individual's life, such as positive social affiliations, family bonds, and socioeconomic mobility. For example, traditional social control and life-course scholars argue that individuals develop bonds that connect them with pro-social society and shield them from deviance (Hirschi, 1969). Social bonds can act as “turning points” that alter or redirect behavioral trajectories (Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2006). These bonds are formed

through employment (Smith et al., 1992; Uggen, 2000), education (Blomberg et al., 2012), marriage (Bersani & Doherty, 2013; Hirschi, 1969; Kirk, 2012; Laub & Sampson, 1993), and military service (Bouffard & Laub, 2004; Bouffard, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1996). Likewise, social learning perspectives emphasize the roles that small-group interactions and communication play as causes of both criminal behavior and successful reintegration (Akers, 1998, 2011; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Warr & Stafford, 1991). Finally, other commonly studied factors in criminal offending and reintegration include mental illness and corresponding cognitive and behavioral therapy (Cocozza et al., 1978; Link et al., 1992), identity transformation (Giordano et al., 2002; Sampson & Laub, 2003), substance use and subsequent drug and alcohol treatment (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006; Seiter & Kadela, 2003), and stigmatization and the challenges of overcoming negative labeling (Becker, 1963; Bernburg, 2009; Braithwaite, 1989; Lemert, 1967).

Despite a long history of research on how these myriad factors affect criminal engagement and reintegration, numerous studies have cast doubt on whether they can adequately account for the challenges associated with individuals who have a nexus to extremism (LaFree et al. 2018; Pressman, 2012; Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021). For example, in contrast to social control perspectives, research specifically examining the relationship between employment status, educational attainment, and participation in terrorism has found that many members of extremist organizations have jobs in a range of occupations (Blee, 2003; Hewitt, 2003; Sageman, 2004) and that, on average, they are better-educated than the general population (Krueger & Malečková, 2003; Pape, 2005; Russell & Miller, 1977; Sageman, 2004). In a recent study of the extremist disengagement processes of 49 individuals, Altier and colleagues (2017, p. 323) found that only eight percent of the sample cited educational or employment opportunities as reasons

for leaving extremist groups. Similarly, pro-social institutions, including the military and marriage, may not have the same positive effect on individuals linked to extremism as they do on people who commit more ordinary crimes (Bakker, 2006; Belew, 2018; Cooley, 2002; Hasisi et al., 2020; Hafez, 2008; Mendelsohn, 2011; Sageman, 2004; Shapiro, 2013; Simi et al., 2013). Indeed, there is evidence that military training increases rather than diminishes participation in terrorism among some extremists (Cooley, 2002; Hafez, 2008, Jensen et al., 2023; Mendelsohn, 2011), and that individuals with military backgrounds may be more prone to planning mass casualty terrorist attacks (Jensen et al., 2023). Moreover, many individuals are married and have children at the time of their involvement with terrorist groups (Sageman, 2008; Jensen et al., 2023).

Similar concerns have been raised about the ability of social learning perspectives to explain extremist engagement and reintegration. For example, while there is general agreement that a key to extremist disengagement lies in breaking bonds with delinquent peers, there is less agreement on the role that strengthening family ties plays as a mechanism of reintegration (Cherney, 2021). Prior research has shown that the exposure to extremist beliefs and behaviors often occurs through familial connections. For example, in their interviews with members of the Irish Republican Movement, Morrison and Gill (2016) found that radical family members often facilitated group membership by socializing their relatives to the group, its ideas, and its goals. Similarly, white supremacists in the United States have long encouraged family-centered activities to normalize the movement's image, expand its ranks, and increase commitment from membership (Blee, 2003; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Simi et al., 2016; Simi & Futrell, 2010). Finally, recent research on extremist disengagement has found that the strengthening of familial bonds through marriage or the birth of children can be counterproductive to disengagement in some

cases by reinforcing an individual's ideological commitments (Altier et al., 2017; Hasisi et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2023).

There is also mixed evidence to support the claim that specific risk factors can explain why some individuals commit extremist crimes. For example, terrorism researchers have studied mental illness for several decades but have thus far failed to reach a consensus on its role in shaping violent political behavior (see Gill & Corner, [2016] for a review). McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) argue that terrorist perpetrators are psychologically stable, and recent research by Thijssen et al. (2023) finds that certain conditions thought to be more prevalent among those who have radicalized to violent extremism, such as personality disorders, are no more common among individuals convicted of terrorist crimes than the general population. However, other recent research suggests that mental illness may be related to extremism as an important causal factor that contributes to political violence (Gill and Corner, 2016; LaFree et al., 2018), especially for unaffiliated loners (Bakker & de Graaf, 2010; Gill et al., 2014; Gruenewald et al., 2013). Simi et al. (2015), for example, found that more than half of their sample (57%) of far-right extremists reported suffering from mental illness at the time of their involvement in extremist groups, and recent research highlights the high levels and varied forms of trauma and toxic stress experienced by system-involved individuals with ties to extremism (Kearns et al., 2024; Koehler, 2020). LaFree et al. (2018) found that the presence of mental health concerns was positively correlated with violent outcomes.

Finally, while a considerable amount of scholarly effort has looked at the effectiveness of punitive mechanisms on offender reintegration (e.g., Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; MacKenzie & Armstrong, 2004; Perelman & Clements, 2009; Petersilia & Turner, 1993; Renzema & Mayo-Wilson, 2005), such as mandatory drug and alcohol testing, GPS location monitoring, and

curfews, we are unaware of any studies that have systematically assessed whether these types of sanctions work when applied to individuals who have committed extremist crimes (Jensen & Akers, 2024). Some emerging research examining the impact of restrictive post-release conditions on system-involved individuals with ties to extremism, however, suggests that punitive measures may ultimately be counterproductive to successful reintegration by depriving individuals of the opportunity to independently reintegrate (Cherney, 2021). For example, strict communications blockades (e.g., against computer technologies, smartphones) may prevent individuals from establishing professional profiles on websites required for finding employment opportunities that align with their skills, undermining their reintegration (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023).

While no one doubts that reintegration can be bolstered by addressing common criminogenic indicators and applying appropriate corrective measures, nearly all research on individuals involved in extremism concludes that they face unique barriers in meeting even basic reintegration requirements. In recent years, the research on extremist disengagement has highlighted many of these factors, which are not commonly included as key variables in traditional studies of recidivism and reintegration. For instance, disengagement scholars often highlight the critical role that disillusionment plays in separating individuals from extremist groups and movements (Barrelle, 2015; Bjørgo, 2011; Cherney & Koehler, 2023; Harris, 2010; Koehler, 2023; Morrison et al., 2021; Windisch et al., 2016). Common causes of disillusionment include friends or leaders failing to live up to expectations (Bjørgo, 2011; van de Wetering & Hecker, 2023), betrayal of core values of community and comradeship (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; van de Wetering & Hecker, 2023), failure to achieve political objectives (Bjørgo, 2009), or the failure of experiences with violence to align with initial fantasies (Bjørgo, 2011; Decker &

Lauritsen, 2002; Horgan, 2009a, 2009b). Community-based intervention programs that are designed to help individuals leave extremist groups, such as Life After Hate or Parents for Peace, commonly include these findings in their programming (Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Vidino & Hughes, 2015; Weine et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016). These organizations often work to expose the failures and contradictions of extremist groups, as well as to connect extremist group members with disengaged formers and members of outgroups, to facilitate or reinforce disillusionment. The critical role that disillusionment plays in extremist disengagement suggests that efforts to reintegrate individuals who have committed extremist crimes may only succeed if they include programs designed to challenge individuals' perceptions of self and other, as well as their underlying commitments to group norms.

Importantly, as individuals become disillusioned with, and disengage from, an extremist identity, evidence suggests that finding a positive alternative identity into which they can derive meaning and purpose is crucial to fortifying their rejection of extremist beliefs over the long term (Morrison et al., 2021). Even when disengaging individuals express a desire to change their beliefs, they often experience “identity residuals” associated with extremism. Anything from iconography in movies to negative social encounters with individuals of a different ethnicity can cause unwanted thoughts and urges to occur, not unlike those arising in individuals recovering from addiction (Simi et al., 2017). System-involved individuals with ties to extremism report feeling shame about these triggers, and express concerns that they may lead to reversion (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023).

There is also evidence to suggest that individuals involved in extremism face greater hurdles to reintegration because of the effects of negative labeling and the terms of their release. While the social stigma associated with confinement has the potential to negatively affect the

employment prospects of all individuals, the public hostility associated with the labels “terrorist” and “extremist” may exacerbate this problem for individuals who have been incarcerated for committing extremist crimes (Altier, 2023; Cherney, 2021; Clubb et al., 2024). Several studies have found that disclosing their crimes to potential employers has a severe negative impact on the employment opportunities for individuals linked to extremism (Dwyer, 2013; Kearns et al., forthcoming; Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023; Weggemans et al., 2017). Moreover, onerous probation or parole conditions, such as limited internet usage and curfews, or obvious surveillance by law enforcement, makes employment especially difficult, as employers are simply unwilling to accommodate the terms of the individual’s release (Marsden, 2016; Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023; Weggemans and de Graaf., 2017). These findings are particularly troubling given that recent research has found that employment opportunities are critical to the disengagement success of individuals who have been incarcerated compared to those who have not (Jensen et al., 2023).

Negative labels not only impact the ability of individuals to find work and housing, but they can also block the formation of new positive social relationships, which some research suggests is a key to successful reintegration (Altier et al., 2017; Bjørgo, 2011; Marsden, 2017; Weggemans and de Graff, 2017). For example, Cherney (2021) found that the families of system-involved individuals often expressed anxiety and uncertainty about how best to engage with them after incarceration, as the families themselves face stigma and worry about potential negative attention from law enforcement. Meredith and Horgan (2024) similarly find that former extremists often face isolation as they try to socialize upon exit. Weggemans and de Graaf (2017), for instance, detail how some individuals were asked not to return to their places of worship upon release from prison. Not only did faith leaders fear unwanted attention, but system-

involved individuals themselves worried about inadvertently bringing others to the attention of law enforcement or that they would unknowingly befriend extremists (Marsden, 2017; Weggeman and de Graaf, 2017).

The challenge of understanding the reintegration needs of individuals with a history of participating in extremism have been exacerbated by the critical lack of data on recidivism. While one study found that U.S. federal probation officers routinely expressed the belief that individuals with links to extremism return to prison at higher rates than individuals who commit more typical crimes (Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023), there are no data that we are aware of that conclusively support or contradict this claim. Some research finds that individuals with a history of participating in extremism have relatively low rates of recidivism (Morrison et al., 2021; Thijssen et al., 2023; Wright, 2019). Hodwitz (2021), for instance, found the recidivism rate among individuals convicted in federal terrorism cases to be just 3.1 percent (also see Renard, 2020). However, preliminary research on some domestic extremists found recidivism rates closer to 50 percent (Jensen et al., 2019). More important than national rates, however, the lack of recidivism data has hindered research on the factors associated with successful reintegration. Without data that allows for the comparison of individuals who recidivated to those who did not, it is difficult to isolate the factors that are correlated with reoffending.

Challenges for Probation Officers and Support Providers

In addition to the unique reintegration challenges encountered by individuals who have committed extremist crimes, parole and probation officers also face significant obstacles when providing monitoring and support services. Although only a small number of studies have examined the critical role that officers play in reintegration (Axelsson et al., 2024; Cherney, 2018, 2021; Kearns et al., 2024; Marsden, 2017; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al. 2023), several

challenges have been noted, indicating a need for more research. First, parole and probation officers must overcome an initial hostility and deep mistrust to their roles as enforcement officers and support providers (Cherney, 2021). This is a significant challenge, as rapport between officers and system-involved individuals with ties to extremism is routinely highlighted in the recent literature as a core component of successful reintegration (Axelsson et al., 2024; Cherney, 2021; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023; Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). Extremist ideologies frequently challenge the legitimacy of state authorities, and individuals with ties to extremism may express hostility towards those tasked with supervising their reentry into the community (Marsden, 2017; Morrison et al., 2021). This tension may be exacerbated if release conditions include intensive monitoring or surveillance, and the individuals under supervision (or their family members or associates) view officers primarily as agents of surveillance and control (Cherney, 2018, 2021; Marsden, 2016; Weggemans and de Graaf., 2017). While hostility from releasees is not unfamiliar to officers, most are not trained in how to respond when the interactions are steeped in ideological justifications for violence and expressed political grievances.

Second, officers are likely to feel the effects of public disapproval for the reentry of individuals labelled as “terrorists” into the community. For example, public perceptions have the potential to make officers overly “risk-averse” in supervising extremist offenders (Cherney, 2018, 2021). Consequently, several recent studies show that officers will frequently override the results of risk assessment tools, which often score system-involved individuals with ties to extremism as low risk, to a higher risk category due to their fears that extremist offenders will commit a violent criminal act during release (Cherney, 2021; Kearns et al., forthcoming; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). Other studies have shown that individuals deemed especially

dangerous make it more difficult for officers to find effective community partners (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). Weggemans and de Graaf (2017), for instance, found that public pressure on security agencies made supervision conditions onerous and counterproductive (see also Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023).

Third, given the numerous agencies with an interest in reducing recidivism among individuals with a history of involvement in extremism (e.g., court representatives, law enforcement, policymakers, community leaders, etc.), officers often must overcome the challenges of coordinating between a diverse set of actors. Studies have shown that officers are especially concerned about navigating relationships with representatives of intelligence agencies and law enforcement (Cherney, 2018; Weggemans and de Graaf, 2017). In some cases, this is complicated by the partial and incomplete information that intelligence officials provide to probation officers (Cherney, 2021; Weggemans and de Graaf, 2017, p. 118). More broadly, officers have described clashes related to differing organizational cultures, especially in terms of reintegration priorities (e.g., deradicalization versus disengagement, and monitoring versus rehabilitation [Cherney, 2018, 2021; Marsden, 2017; Weggemans and de Graaf, 2017]). Beyond law enforcement partners, officers often must identify service providers in their communities who can provide mental health care, substance use treatment, job and housing assistance, and social support for their releasees. Recent studies have found that officers often struggle to find service providers who are willing and able to work with individuals who have a history of participating in extremism (Kearns et al., 2024; Stern et al., 2023).

Fourth, there is currently a lack of training for probation officers when it comes to supervising releasees with links to extremism. Although some local jurisdictions and community leaders have been compelled to develop and pursue training independently (e.g., Berkell, 2017;

Lowry, 2018), officers are not typically trained in identifying and addressing the specific needs of this population. Training needs include a range of areas. A basic requirement is for officers to be educated in the practices of extremist subcultures (Cherney, 2021). For example, research shows that white supremacists rely on a range of coded symbols and language to identify themselves (Simi and Futrell, 2010), suggesting the need for specific training to alert officers to these symbols. Other training needs include understanding and implementing extremist risk assessment tools (Berkelle, 2017; Cherney, 2018; Koehler, 2019; Weggemans and de Graaf, 2017), specialized techniques for challenging radical ideas (such as encouraging critical thinking, cognitive dissonance, etc. [Marsden, 2017]), as well as information on the central dynamics of radicalization, deradicalization, and disengagement (Berkell, 2017; Lowry, 2018).

Finally, there is a critical lack of resources for designing and implementing reintegration programs specifically designed for system-involved individuals who have committed extremist crimes (Berkell, 2017; Lowry, 2018). Weggemans and de Graaf (2017) have shown that success only occurs when long-term, highly intensive reintegration programs are advocated for by dedicated practitioners and policymakers who are willing to fight to divert substantial resources to reintegration programs.

Key Research Questions

Based on our review of the literature, we identified the following questions that need more attention from the research community:

1. How often do individuals who have committed extremist crimes reoffend? How often do they transition to non-ideological criminality after committing extremist offenses?
2. What types of unique disengagement barriers do individuals with links to extremism face? What are the unique risk characteristics that should be considered when making pretrial, sentencing, and release decisions for individuals with ties to extremism?

3. What individual, network, and community-level variables are significantly linked with the following reintegration outcomes: recidivism; transitions to non-ideological crime; and reintegration success?
4. What pre-release and post-confinement characteristics of individuals with ties to extremism are associated with successful community reintegration and/or desistance?
5. What do system-involved individuals regard as the major barriers to successful reintegration? How do their views compare to the viewpoints of probation officers and service providers?
6. How familiar are probation officers and service providers with the nature of extremism in the United States? What do officers see as their main training and educational needs when it comes to supporting individuals with ties to extremism?
7. What existing post-release programs, support services, and interventions can be used address the needs of individuals disengaging from extremism? What is the range of monitoring activities and support services that need to be considered for the population individuals who committed extremist crimes?

Project Design

This study was designed to address these questions and provide training recommendations for officers and service providers supporting individuals confronted with the dual challenges of disengaging from extremism and reintegrating into their communities after incarceration. There were three components to the project's research design. First, we used data from the PIRUS project to better understand the characteristics of individuals who have committed extremist crimes, focusing on the risks for recidivism. Second, we collected additional evidence on these topics by conducting in-depth interviews with federal pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals who were formerly involved in extremism. Finally, we participated in a survey of federal probation officers that asked them about their training and education needs when it comes to supervising individuals with links to extremism. Below, we briefly review the methodology that we used in each of these three phases of the project.

The Analysis of PIRUS Data

In 2013, with support from the National Institute of Justice (Grant Award #2012-ZA-BX-0005), our research team at START began work on a database of individuals who have committed extremist crimes called Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) (for more information, see Jensen & James, 2016; Jensen et al., 2016). Since then, PIRUS has evolved into the largest individual-level dataset on ideologically motivated extremism in the United States, and it has proven to be an increasingly valuable resource to academic researchers, practitioners, and journalists seeking to better understand the complex processes of radicalization and relevant risk factors for violent extremism. Currently, the PIRUS dataset contains individual-level information on over 3,500 individuals who committed violent and nonviolent extremist crimes in the United States from 1948 to 2022. At the individual level, PIRUS includes more than 120 variables that cover a wide range of micro-level attributes relevant to radicalization processes, such as basic demographic information, group membership, interaction with online extremist content, prior criminal history, mental illness, substance use, and other important background characteristics.

Starting in 2020, with an award from NIJ (grant # 2019-ZA-CX-0004), our research team began construction on an auxiliary event-level dataset—PIRUS-Plots—that includes details about the crimes that were committed by the subjects in PIRUS. This dataset includes information about the preparatory activities, target characteristics, and outcomes of violent and nonviolent attacks. For the purposes of this study, the PIRUS-Plots data were used to identify instances of ideological recidivism (i.e., committing a new extremist crime after release from custody) among the subjects in the PIRUS data. We then reviewed every case in PIRUS from 1990-2022 to identify instances of non-ideological recidivism (i.e., committing a non-ideologically motivated crime after being incarcerated for an extremist offense). This process

allowed us to: (1) estimate the recidivism rate among individuals who have committed extremist crimes; and to (2) isolate factors in the PIRUS data (e.g., criminal history, substance use disorder, etc.) that could help explain why some individuals recidivated while others did not. We also conducted a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) on a subset of individuals in the PIRUS data to determine how obstacles to leaving extremism combine with “push” and “pull” factors from the disengagement literature to create pathways to exiting extremism (Jensen et al., 2023). We review these findings in part one of the results sections below.

Interviews with Officers, Service Providers, and System-involved Individuals

We conducted in-depth interviews with 28 federal pretrial services and probation officers, 14 service providers, and eight system-involved individuals who were formerly involved in extremism.² These interviews were designed to generate a better understanding of reintegration processes, barriers, and strategies for success. They were also designed with a specific focus on the training and education needs of officers. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the respondents to speak freely and provide relevant details about topics related to reintegration, disengagement, and recidivism.

When research participants consented, audio of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed by the research team. More than 57 hours of audio were recorded for this project. Once the transcriptions were complete, the audio files were deleted from an encrypted server. In the few cases where participants did not consent to audio recording, detailed notes were taken by the researcher(s) conducting the interviews. Transcriptions were loaded into the NVivo qualitative data analysis program, which allowed us to annotate segments of text corresponding

² We conducted follow-up interviews with some officers to see if their thoughts on supervising individuals with ties to extremism had changed since we first spoke with them. We did not include these follow-up interviews in these counts.

to key themes of the research. These themes and their corresponding codes were detailed in a codebook that was used by the members of the research team who were analyzing the interview data.

A modified version of grounded theory was used to guide the initial analysis of the semi-structured interview data. Grounded theory facilitates the “discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1) and “involves interpretation of meanings, functions, and consequences of human action...and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3; see also Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The goal of a grounded theory approach is to develop a conceptual explanation that closely fits the data which the concepts are intended to represent. Grounded theory is not meant to generalize beyond the data, but the hypotheses developed can be tested at a later point for application to related phenomena during the other phases of analysis or by future research.

Federal pretrial services and probation officers were recruited using our existing networks and a “snowball” sampling technique, whereby officers would suggest additional research participants. Given our interest in speaking with officers experienced in supervising individuals with links to extremism, a snowball method increased the likelihood of identifying a relevant sample of participants. The officers we interviewed included 18 probation officers, nine pretrial services officers, and one officer who specializes in writing presentence investigation reports. We made concerted efforts to identify participants from all major regions in the United States. Officers from 15 federal districts in all four census regions and seven census divisions of the United States were interviewed for this project. It is important to note, however, that some districts, particularly those located in the southern United States, lacked an awareness of the extremism cases in their jurisdictions and were not able to identify relevant officers to participate

in the study. When asked to interview officers who have supervised these cases, a common response we received from these jurisdictions was “we do not have any extremism cases here.” While data indicate that these districts have undoubtedly provided supervision and support services for extremism-affiliated individuals, these districts appeared to be unaware that these individuals had been under their supervision and care, indicating a critical need for better information sharing and case management support in some areas of the country.

The officers who participated in the project had varying levels of experience supervising individuals with links to extremism, ranging from extensive (e.g., the officer specializes in working with this population for their district) to limited, including officers who had just begun supervising their first case. Officers were asked about their educational and professional backgrounds, their impressions of the key obstacles that make reintegration challenging for this population, their thoughts on the monitoring techniques and support services that increase the odds of reintegration success, and their training and education needs to better support the community reentry of individuals with ties to extremism.

The service providers who participated in this study fell into two broad categories: (1) traditional service providers, such as mental health experts and treatment providers, reentry program managers and specialists, social workers and case managers, and individuals who help administer peer support services; and (2) individuals who were formerly involved in extremism and now work as peer support providers helping others disengage from extremist groups and movements. Our interview sample included 14 “traditional” providers—seven who work in the field of mental health, four who work for mentorship and reintegration programs, and three who support jobs assistance and rehabilitative programs. Of the eight system-involved individuals with links to extremism who participated in this study, five have provided, or are currently

providing, peer support services. As we did with officers, we identified service providers for this study through our existing networks and through recommendations from colleagues for additional research participants. Support providers were asked about their professional backgrounds, their experiences working with this population and supporting their reintegration and/or disengagement processes, their hesitations or concerns working with individuals involved in extremism, and their training and education needs.

Finally, we interviewed eight system-involved individuals who were formerly involved in extremism. Four of these participants were involved in far-right movements, including white supremacy and anti-government groups; three were connected to Salafi jihadism; and one was involved in far-left extremism. As we noted above, five of these participants have at some point provided peer support services to others attempting to disengage from extremism. We recognize that by including individuals who have provided peer mentorship, our sample might over-represent subjects with similar experiences and views on what is required for successful reintegration. Our initial intention was to interview more system-involved individuals who have not acted as peer mentors or publicly identified themselves as “formers.” Despite considerable effort, these attempts were unsuccessful. There are three primary reasons for this. First, this population is notoriously difficult to access, as most do not maintain public profiles and can be difficult to contact. Second, some potential participants expressed hesitation to participating in government funded research. And finally, service providers were blocked from providing access to their clients due to confidentiality rules, and probation officers were similarly constrained in giving our research team access to the individuals they are supervising. While officers acknowledged that it is important to hear the perspectives of system-involved individuals, they

noted that judges might need to agree to give researchers access to the individuals under their supervision, and that there was no process in place for making this type of request.

In speaking with system-involved individuals with prior links to extremism, we asked how the period of incarceration impacted their reintegration processes, including whether correctional-based service programs were provided. Furthermore, we asked subjects about their post-release experiences with finding housing, securing employment, and reengaging with family, and what they experienced as the major obstacles to achieving their reintegration goals. We asked questions related to negative labeling, post-confinement restrictions, and any other barriers that may have impacted their ability to achieve reintegration success. Finally, we asked subjects for their thoughts on the types of services that would have been most beneficial to them during their reintegration processes.

Survey of Officers

In addition to these interviews, we partnered with researchers at Harvard University's School of Public Health who were engaged in a similar project and contributed questions to a survey of federal probation officers. These questions focused on officers' training and education needs related to supervising releasees with links to extremism. The Harvard team administered the survey to officers between April and June 2021. More information about the survey can be found in Stern, McBride, Baker, et al. (2023). The survey had more than 200 respondents, and we used the results to help guide our discussions with officers on matters related to training and education.

Results

Part I: Recidivism and Disengagement From Extremism

Recidivism

Studies focusing on the reintegration of individuals who have committed extremist crimes are rare in comparison to research that explores how those individuals radicalized in the first place. This is especially true in the U.S. context, where the lack of quality data on recidivism has made it challenging to determine what risk and protective factors correlate with different reintegration outcomes. While there have been some recent attempts to address these data limitations (e.g., Hodwitz, 2021), most of this work has focused on establishing the rate of recidivism among subjects convicted on federal terrorism charges, which disproportionately consist of international terrorism cases linked to jihadism (Jensen & Akers, 2024). For example, using original data, Hodwitz (2021) found the recidivism rate among individuals convicted on federal terrorism charges to be just 3.1 percent. Moreover, Hodwitz (2021) also observed that most of the individuals who reoffended after their release from federal prisons committed non-ideological crimes, effectively rendering the terrorism recidivism rate null. Wright (2019) found a slightly higher (6.5%) but still low recidivism rate among U.S. individuals who committed international terrorism crimes.

While the Hodwitz and Wright studies provide important insights about recidivism in the population of individuals who have committed terrorism offenses, both rely on restrictive inclusion criteria. By limiting the scope of their analyses to individuals who pleaded guilty to, or were convicted of, federal terrorism charges, their data fail to consider cases of individuals who engaged in terrorism crimes but were prosecuted using non-terrorism charges. As we have shown elsewhere (Jensen & Akers, 2024), due to the statutory limitations of the U.S. code, most

individuals who engage in domestic terrorism are not charged using terrorism laws, such as providing material support to terrorist organizations. Rather, these cases are typically prosecuted using common criminal charges, like weapons violations. Moreover, extant research on terrorist recidivism has not considered the cases of individuals who were prosecuted at the state and local levels. Thus, by effectively eliminating domestic it is possible that current estimates of recidivism in U.S. terrorism cases are inaccurate, misleading, or both.

Indeed, not everyone agrees that individuals convicted of terrorism reoffend at low rates. Altier et al. (2019) analyzed 85 individuals involved in terrorism from various countries and found that 64.1% re-engaged in terrorist activities after a period of disengagement (for critiques of this claim, see Renard, 2020; Sageman, 2021). Hasisi et al. (2020) found a five-year recidivism rate of 60.2% among individuals convicted of terrorism who were based in Jerusalem. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2024) estimates that as many as 31.9% of former Guantanamo Bay detainees have reengaged in terrorist activities. Finally, our team found that nearly 50% of the subjects who participated in white supremacist gangs committed multiple crimes before they successfully disengaged from extremist groups and movements (Jensen et al., 2019).

To establish a better understanding of recidivism in U.S. terrorism cases, we reviewed all individuals in the PIRUS data who were prosecuted for committing extremist crimes between 1990-2022 ($n = 2,950$). We included cases that were adjudicated at the federal, state, and local levels.³ We removed individuals from our analysis if: (1) they died while committing their first

³ It is not uncommon for extremist crimes to result in both federal and state/local charges. Often when this occurs, the federal prosecutions move forward while the state/local charges are dropped. In some rare cases, prosecutions will move forward in both federal and state/local courts. The judicial outcomes of the federal cases typically take precedent over the state/local ones. Therefore, when these situations occurred in our sample, we treated the cases as federal prosecutions.

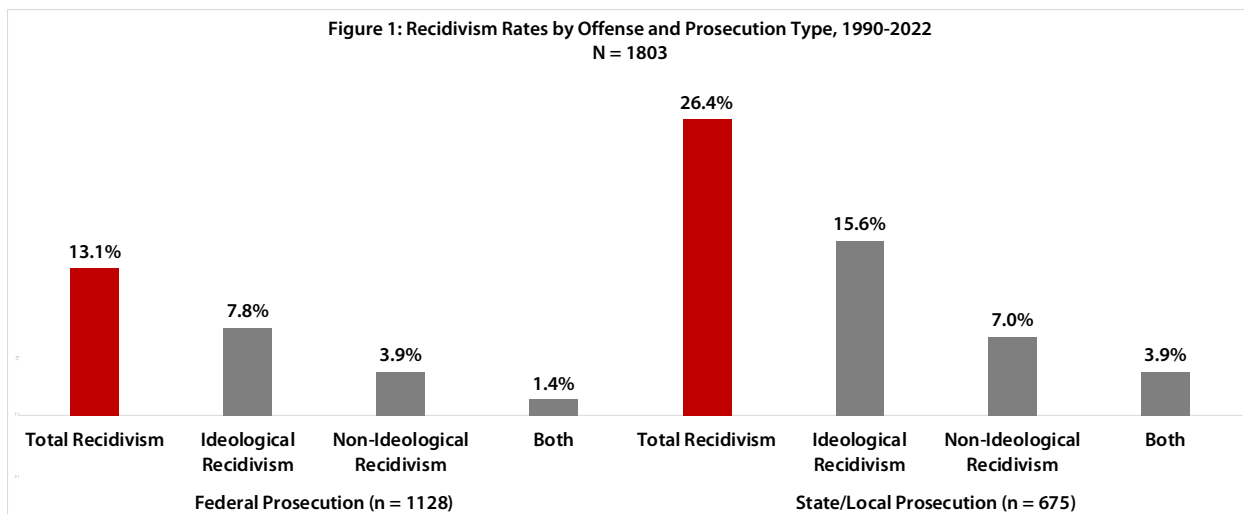
extremist crime; (2) they died while in custody after committing their first extremist offense; (3) they were deported to another country after committing their first extremist crime; or (4) they are currently incarcerated for committing their first extremist crime.⁴ This left us with a final sample of 1,803 individuals who were released into U.S. communities after serving time in state, local, or federal jails and prisons, as well as those who were sentenced to probationary terms.

Using the PIRUS-Plots data and supplemental court documents, arrest records, and news reports, we reviewed these remaining cases to identify the subset of individuals who committed new crimes after they experienced criminal justice interventions (i.e., incarceration or probation) for their initial extremist offenses.⁵ We specifically looked for two types of re-offending: (1) new crimes that were connected to an individual's pursuit of political, economic, social, or religious goals, what we refer to as ideological recidivism; and (2) new crimes that were not motivated by extremist ideologies or affiliations, such as drug offenses or domestic violence (i.e., non-ideological recidivism). We counted the following as evidence of recidivism: (1) crimes and/or arrests that resulted in custodial sentences, probation, community service, and/or fines (with the exception of traffic violations); (2) crimes and/or arrests that resulted in the revocation of bail and/or supervised release; and (3) crimes and/or arrests that resulted in significant revisions to an individual's terms of supervision in lieu of a new custodial term.⁶ These conditions include GPS location monitoring and polygraph testing, among others.

⁴ While it is possible for individuals to commit new crimes while incarcerated, we decided to focus on individuals who recidivated after leaving prison or jail due to the project's focus on probation officers and community reintegration.

⁵ Some of the subjects in our data were released from prison or jail in the last 12 months. More time is needed to determine if these individuals will successfully reintegrate or reoffend. Thus, our estimates of recidivism should be considered conservative. In future research, we plan to review recidivism rates at set intervals (i.e. 5 years, 10 years) after release.

⁶ While some studies suggest that treating technical violations as recidivism can inflate overall recidivism rates, we feel is important to include them here since the primary audience for this study is probation officers (see, for example, Ostermann et al., 2015).

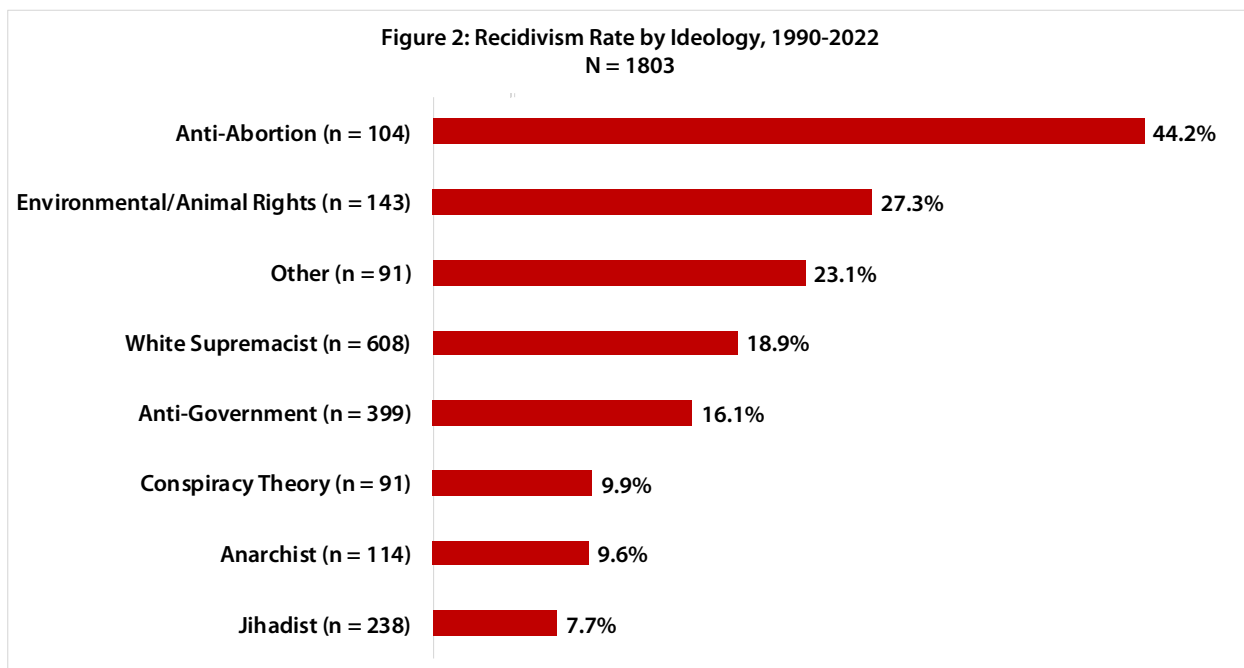


Of the 1,803 individuals we reviewed, 326 committed new crimes after being released from custody or serving probationary terms for their initial extremist offenses. This equates to an overall recidivism rate of 18.1%, which is substantially higher than previous estimates based on the examination of international terrorism cases alone, but still lower than many estimates of recidivism in the population of more typical offenders, which are often around 50 percent (Hunt & Dumville, 2016). As Figure 1 shows, recidivism rates in our data varied considerably depending on whether the individuals’ initial extremist crimes were prosecuted by federal or state/local authorities. The recidivism rate among individuals who committed extremist crimes that were prosecuted in federal courts was 13.1%. However, this rate was more than two times higher (26.4%) in the population of individuals whose extremist crimes were prosecuted by state or local authorities.⁷ While there are potentially a host of reasons for this disparity, including the imposition of lighter sentences in state and local cases, lower recidivism rates in federal cases could be a result of the resources that are expended for the monitoring and support of extremist releasees, which tend to be more significant in the federal system. For instance, several officers

⁷ Our finding of higher recidivism rates in state and local cases mirrors what other studies have found for more typical crimes. See, for example, Bureau of Justice Assistance (2023).

we spoke with who previously worked for state and local probation or parole services remarked that those systems are hampered by unmanageably large caseloads, limited formal training, and a general lack of awareness of the individuals under their care who have committed extremist crimes.

Of the individuals in our study who recidivated, 193 (59.2%) committed extremist crimes, 91 (27.9%) committed non-ideologically motivated crimes, and 42 (12.9%) committed both. The ideologically motivated crimes that were committed by the individuals in our sample who recidivated ranged from non-violent offenses, including vandalism and property damage, to more serious violent crimes, including homicide. The non-ideologically motivated crimes that were committed by individuals who reoffended consisted mainly of drug offenses and incidents of domestic violence, simple assault, and theft.



The higher overall recidivism rate in our study compared to other estimates is a direct result of our decision to include individuals in our sample who committed domestic terrorism offenses. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, the individuals in our sample who committed crimes linked to

jihadism, which make up the vast majority of international terrorism cases in the United States, recidivated at a rate of just 7.7%, which is comparable to previous studies (Hodwitz, 2021; Wright, 2019). Like other studies, we find that 31% of the cases of recidivism in this subgroup consisted of non-ideologically motivated crimes.

Domestic extremists, on the other hand, appear to reoffend at significantly higher rates. For example, while they make up a small portion of the individuals in our study, releasees who committed crimes because of their opposition to abortion had a recidivism rate of 44.2%, which is comparable to the re-offending rate in the population of individuals who commit more ordinary crimes (Hunt & Dumville, 2016). Similarly, individuals who were affiliated with the extremist environmental and animal rights movements recidivated at a rate of 27.3%, which is nearly four times as often as the subjects who were prosecuted for committing crimes linked to international jihadist terrorism. Individuals whose initial extremist crimes were tied to their involvement in white supremacist and anti-government movements made up the largest subsets of subjects in our sample and they had comparable recidivism rates of 18.9% and 16.1%, respectively. While these numbers are low in comparison to the population of individuals who commit more typical crimes, it is worth pointing out that they are more than double that of the individuals in our study who committed crimes linked to Salafi jihadism.

We next consider the relationship between common criminogenic risk factors and recidivism in our sample of individuals who committed extremist crimes. We start by including all forms of recidivism (i.e., ideological and non-ideological) in our comparison, and then limit our analysis to the smaller subgroup of individuals in our data who committed new ideologically motivated crimes after being released from custody or serving probationary terms. Before describing these results, a note of caution is warranted. Due the limitations of court records and other source

materials, the risk and protective factors discussed below were coded relative to the time of a subject's initial extremist offense. From a statistical point of view, it is not currently possible to determine how the onset of these factors after incarceration influences an individual's likelihood of successful reintegration. However, we did discuss this topic in the interviews we conducted with system-involved individuals and probation officers. Findings from these interviews are discussed in results sections II and III below.

Table 1 shows the results of our analysis when recidivism is conceived of broadly as any type of new criminal activity. As the results show, the nature of an individual's initial extremist offense can have an impact on their likelihood of committing a new crime after being released from custody. As we noted above, individuals who were prosecuted by state and local authorities for their initial extremist offenses appear to recidivate more often than individuals who were prosecuted in the federal system. A chi-square test reveals that the gap in these recidivism rates is unlikely to be due to chance. While the individuals who were initially prosecuted by state and local authorities make up just 37.4% of our sample, they represent nearly 55% of the subjects in the data who committed new crimes after being released from custody or probation.

Similarly, individuals whose initial extremist offenses were non-violent in nature were more likely to reoffend after being released from custody than individuals who committed violent extremist crimes. Releasees who committed non-violent extremist crimes make up 47.3% of the subjects in our sample, but they constitute 53.1% of the individuals who recidivated. While more research is needed to better understand this finding, it is worth noting that individuals who commit non-violent extremist crimes generally spend less time in custody than violent offenders, and they are not typically subjected to restrictive monitoring conditions (Jensen & Akers, 2024), which potentially gives them more opportunities to reoffend.

Table 1: Recidivism (Any) Attributes (N = 1803)

	No Recidivism (n = 1477)		Any Recidivism (n = 326)		Missing Data	Chi-square/ <i>t</i> -tests
	N (%)	Mean (SD)	N (%)	Mean (SD)		
Case Attributes						
<i>Prosecution Type</i>						
Federal Prosecution	980 (66.4%)		148 (45.4%)			***
State/Local Prosecution	497 (33.6%)		178 (54.6%)			***
<i>Offense Type</i>						
Violent Crime	796 (53.9%)		153 (46.9%)			*
Non-Violent Crime	681 (46.1%)		173 (53.1%)			*
Group Member	440 (29.8%)		104 (29.2%)			
Lone Offender	547 (37.0%)		111 (34.0%)			
Co-Offenders	930 (63.0%)		215 (66.0%)			
Ideological Attributes						
Jihadist	222 (15.0%)		16 (4.91%)			***
White Supremacist	493 (33.4%)		115 (35.3%)			
Anti-Government	335 (22.7%)		64 (19.6%)			
Anti-Abortion	46 (3.1%)		58 (17.8%)			***
Eco/Animal Rights	104 (7.0%)		39 (12.0%)			**
Anarchist	103 (7.0%)		11 (3.4%)			*
Conspiracy Theory	82 (5.6%)		9 (2.8%)			*
Other	70 (4.7%)		21 (6.4%)			
Risk/Protective Factors						
Age		35.2 (13.5)		36.6 (14.4)	26 (1.4%)	
Gender (male)	1289 (87.3%)		289 (88.7%)			
<i>Marital Status</i>						
Single	683 (46.2%)		144 (44.2%)		443 (24.6%)	
Previously Married	104 (7.0%)		23 (7.1%)			
Married	332 (22.5%)		74 (22.7%)			
Children	381 (25.8%)		100 (30.7%)		505 (28.0%)	+
Low Education	299 (20.2%)		59 (18.1%)		922 (51.1%)	
Unemployment	168 (11.4%)		45 (13.8%)		730 (40.1%)	+
Military Service	226 (15.3%)		36 (11.0%)			*
Mental Illness	284 (19.2%)		68 (20.9%)			
Substance Use	316 (21.4%)		71 (21.8%)			
Trauma	188 (12.7%)		51 (15.6%)			
Extremist Family	247 (16.7%)		57 (17.5%)			
<i>Pre-Radicalization Crime</i>						
Non-Violent Crime	238 (16.1%)		70 (21.5%)			***
Violent Crime	167 (11.3%)		73 (22.4%)			

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Interestingly, when considering all types of reoffending, additional risk factors related to delinquent peers or extremist group membership do not appear to have much of an influence on recidivism. Indeed, the prevalence of individuals who committed their initial extremist offenses alone, with co-offenders, or as members of organized extremist groups is remarkably similar in the subgroups of individuals who recidivated and those who did not.

When considering the characteristics of the individuals' ideological beliefs and their likelihood of recidivating, our results generally reflect the patterns discussed above. International terrorism cases linked to Salafi jihadism were significantly less likely to result in recidivism in comparison to cases linked to domestic groups and movements. Indeed, individuals who committed crimes linked to jihadist extremism make up just 4.9% of the recidivism subgroup. By comparison, individuals who committed extremist crimes linked to the anti-abortion movement make up nearly 18% of the recidivism subgroup even though they represent less than 6% of the subjects in our data. Individuals with links to white supremacy appear in both subgroups at similar rates. However, it is worth noting that when looking only at the cases of individuals who were prosecuted in federal courts, cases linked to white supremacy appear more often in the subgroup of recidivism than they do in the subgroup of individuals who did not reoffend (35% and 25%, respectively).

Our preliminary results are mixed when it comes to the relationship between individual-level risk and protective factors and recidivism. The classic criminological finding that recidivism is more common among young men does not appear to hold for extremist releasees (e.g., Huebner & Berg, 2011). The subsets of individuals in our data who recidivated and those who did not are made up of similar percentages of men (88.7% and 87.3%, respectively). The subjects in these

subgroups were, on average, of nearly identical ages when they committed their initial extremist crimes and they both belonged to older age cohorts.

Our preliminary results also fail to provide strong support for claims that individuals with low educational achievements, documented mental health concerns, or substance use disorders recidivate at higher rates than individuals who do not have these risk factors. The percentage of individuals in the two subgroups with documented substance use disorders or low educational achievements are strikingly similar. Moreover, similar segments (21% and 19%, respectively) of our recidivism and non-recidivism subgroups had documented mental health concerns at the time that they committed their initial crimes. More research is needed to establish what this finding means for reintegration strategies and programs that prioritize addressing these concerns. For instance, in our data, mental illness stands out as a potentially important risk correlate when looking only at the subgroup of individuals who were prosecuted in federal courts. In this sample, nearly 30% of the individuals who recidivated had documented mental health concerns, while mental illness was only documented in 22% of the cases of individuals who did not recidivate. Again, due to source limitations, it is not currently possible to statistically assess how the onset of particular risk factors after incarceration impacts reintegration. In our view, this is an important topic for future research.

Beyond these risk factors, our results suggest that there could be an association between unemployment at the time of an extremist crime and recidivism after being released from custody. Just over 15% of our sample of individuals who recidivated were known to have been unemployed when they committed their initial extremist offenses. However, it is important to note that finding employment information in open sources was a challenge, resulting in many

missing values on this measure in our data. Thus, more research is needed to determine the nature of the relationship between work history and recidivism in this population.

According to our analysis, the most important risk factor for recidivism is whether the individual had a criminal record prior to radicalizing and committing their initial extremist offense. Individuals who had a pre-radicalization criminal history consisting of non-violent crimes make up 21.5% of the subgroup of individuals in our data who recidivated, while they constitute just 16.1% of the subgroup in our data who did not. Similarly, 22.4% of the subjects who recidivated in our study had pre-radicalization criminal histories that included violent crimes, while only 11.3% of the non-recidivism subgroup has similar prior convictions. These results hold when we focus more narrowly on the individuals who were prosecuted in federal courts. Nearly 54% of the subgroup of individuals who were prosecuted in federal courts and later recidivated had criminal histories that predated their radicalization. By comparison, subjects with similar backgrounds constitute just 24% of the subgroup of individuals who did not recidivate.

In terms of protective factors, we find a significant but weak association between prior military service and the absence of recidivism in our sample. Individuals with military backgrounds make up more than 15% of the subjects in our data, but they only constitute 11% of the subjects who recidivated. Contrary to expectations for more typical offenders, we do not find an association between marriage or belonging to an older age cohort and the absence of recidivism in our sample. Older individuals and those who were married at the time of their initial extremist crimes constitute similar segments of the recidivism and non-recidivism subgroups. Interestingly, rather than acting as a protective factor, we find that individuals with children were slightly more likely to reoffend than individuals who were not parents when they

committed their initial extremist crimes. Given data limitations, however, it is not possible to determine how the birth of children after release from custody impacts the likelihood that someone will reoffend. Thus, more work is needed to determine if parental responsibilities and prosocial relationships with children reduce the risk of recidivism in the population of individuals who have committed extremist crimes.

Extremist criminal behavior has the potential to cause significant public harm and thus it is important to better understand the risk factors associated with ideological recidivism. To generate preliminary findings on this topic, we repeat the above analysis but limit the recidivism sample to only those individuals who committed ideologically motivated crimes after their first extremist offenses. Table 2 reports these results. We again find that individuals who were originally prosecuted in state and local courts were more likely to commit new extremist crimes after serving time in prison or being on supervision than individuals whose original cases were adjudicated in the federal system. Subjects who were first prosecuted in state and local courts make up more than 55% of the subgroup of individuals whose recidivism was tied to their involvement in extremism. We also find similar results when it comes to the nature of the individuals' extremist crimes. While individuals who committed non-violent extremist crimes are not as common in our data as those who committed violent crimes, they represent a disproportionate (57%) number of the individuals in the subgroup of ideological recidivists.

Table 2: Ideological Recidivism Attributes (N = 1803)

	No Ideological Recidivism (n = 1568)		Ideological Recidivism (n = 235)		Missing Data	Chi-square/t-tests
	N (%)	Mean (SD)	N (%)	Mean (SD)		
Case Attributes						
<i>Prosecution Type</i>						
Federal Prosecution	1024 (65.3%)		104 (44.3%)			***
State/Local Prosecution	544 (34.7%)		131 (55.7%)			***
<i>Offense Type</i>						
Violent Crime	848 (54.1%)		110 (46.8%)			*
Non-Violent Crime	720 (45.9%)		134 (57.0%)			*
Group Member	462 (29.5%)		82 (34.9%)			+
Lone Offender	590 (37.6%)		68 (28.9%)			***
Co-Offenders	978 (62.4%)		167 (71.1%)			***
Ideological Attributes						
Jihadist	226 (14.4%)		12 (5.1%)			***
White Supremacist	535 (34.1%)		73 (31.1%)			
Anti-Government	354 (22.6%)		45 (19.1%)			
Anti-Abortion	61 (3.9%)		43 (18.3%)			***
Eco/Animal Rights	109 (7.0%)		34 (14.5%)			**
Anarchist	107 (6.8%)		7 (3.0%)			*
Conspiracy Theory	86 (5.5%)		5 (2.1%)			*
Other	80 (5.1%)		11 (4.7%)			
Risk/Protective Factors						
Age		34.9 (13.4)		39 (15.1)	26 (1.4%)	***
Gender (male)	1375 (87.7%)		203 (86.4%)			
<i>Marital Status</i>						
Single	738 (47.1%)		89 (37.9%)		443 (24.6%)	*
Previously Married	107 (6.8%)		20 (8.5%)			
Married	342 (21.8%)		64 (27.2%)			
Children	401 (25.6%)		80 (34.0%)		505 (28.0%)	**
Low Education	314 (20.0%)		44 (18.7%)		922 (51.1%)	
Unemployment	177 (11.3%)		36 (15.3%)		730 (40.1%)	+
Military Service	232 (14.8%)		30 (12.8%)			
Mental Illness	305 (19.5%)		47 (20.0%)			
Substance Use	343 (21.9%)		44 (18.7%)			
Trauma	199 (12.7%)		40 (17.0%)			+
Extremist Family	255 (16.3%)		49 (20.9%)			+
<i>Pre-Radicalization Crime</i>						
Non-Violent Crime	258 (16.5%)		50 (21.3%)			***
Violent Crime	186 (11.9%)		54 (23.0%)			

+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

As Table 2 shows, there are additional case-related features that are potentially important risk factors for recidivism when looking only at the individuals who committed new extremist crimes. While our previous analysis that examined all re-offense types did not find an association between co-offending, extremist group membership, and recidivism, these factors do appear to have an impact on the risk of ideological recidivism. For instance, 71.1% of the individuals in our data who committed new extremist crimes originally took part in extremist offenses with co-offenders. By comparison, individuals who acted alone when they committed their first extremist offenses make up just 28.9% of the ideological recidivism subgroup. Similarly, individuals who were members of organized extremist groups at the time of their initial extremist crime were more likely to reoffend than individuals without similar extremist associations.

The effect of extremist beliefs on recidivism remains the same when limiting our analysis to the individuals who committed new extremist crimes. The recidivism rate for individuals whose initial extremist crimes were linked to jihadism drops from 7.7% to just over 5% when recidivism is defined more narrowly as new crimes that were motivated by ideological goals. This recidivism rate is within the range (3.1% to 6.5%) estimated by Hodwitz (2021) and Wright (2019). Our results show that individuals with links to the anti-abortion and environmental/animal rights movements recidivate at similarly high rates, regardless of how recidivism is measured.

Our findings on the links between individual-level risk and protective factors and recidivism change in interesting ways when recidivism is more narrowly limited to the perpetration of new extremist crimes. While pre-radicalization criminal behaviors remain associated with an increased risk of recidivism, the presence of family members involved in extremism and a history of trauma now appear as potentially important risk factors for recidivism. Having a

military service background is no longer significantly associated with a reduced risk of recidivism in these results. Moreover, while we continue to observe the unexpected association between having children and recidivism, in these results we also find that being married at the time of an initial extremist offense slightly increases the likelihood that a person will commit a new extremist crime. However, as we noted above, these protective factors are coded to the time of an individual's first extremist offense, and thus it is not possible to determine how marriage or the birth of children after release from custody impacts someone's likelihood of successful community reintegration.

Disengagement from Extremism

Our preliminary analysis of recidivism in the population of individuals who committed extremist crimes reveals that the failure to disengage from extremism is a potentially important aspect of reoffending. Ideological recidivism was higher in our sample for the subsets of individuals who co-offended with likeminded peers, were members of organized extremist groups, and had family members who were involved in extremist groups and movements. In an early phase of this project, we analyzed the conditions that are necessary for successful disengagement from extremism given the presence of disengagement obstacles, like poor social mobility, incarceration, and close personal relationships with individuals involved in extremism. These results are detailed in Jensen et al. (2023). However, given the potential association between continued involvement in extremism and recidivism, we think it is important to provide a brief overview of the study here.

For this analysis, we reviewed life-history information for a sample of 50 individuals in the PIRUS data who engaged in far-right extremism, including 25 individuals who successfully disengaged from extremism and 25 individuals who remain engaged or were still active in extremism at the time of their deaths. We then used qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to

determine how commonly cited disengagement “push” and “pull” factors combine with exit obstacles to produce unique pathways out of extremism. Our analyses revealed several findings that are relevant to reintegration and the work of probation officers and service providers.

First, we found that two obstacles to disengagement—past incarceration and family members or romantic partners involved in extremism—were present in every case in our sample where an individual failed to disengage from their affiliated group or movement. Moreover, these barriers tended to co-occur with related obstacles to form the environments in which disengagement either succeeded or failed. For instance, past incarceration tended to co-occur with poor education or work histories, substance abuse, and mental illness. The presence of family members or romantic partners with links to extremism, on the other hand, often clustered with identity-related obstacles, such as individuals deriving their social prestige from their involvement in extremism.

Second, we found that different combinations of exit obstacles can determine which push and pull factors must be present for disengagement to succeed. For example, we found individuals involved in far-right extremism who spent time in jail or prison, but who were not tied to movements through their family or romantic partners, disengaged when they were exposed to support services that addressed underlying mental health concerns and socioeconomic disadvantages, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, mental health counseling, and education and work assistance programs. For this subgroup, disillusionment with their extremist group or movement was neither necessary nor sufficient for disengagement to succeed.

By comparison, the individuals in our sample who were tied to extremist movements through their family members or romantic partners, but who did not have experiences with confinement, disengaged after they became disillusioned with their extremist groups and severed their personal

relationships with fellow extremists. This often occurred after the individuals had found alternative sources of income, identity, and social prestige. We found that for this subgroup, rehabilitation services, such drug and alcohol counseling, had no effect on their ability to successfully disengage.

Finally, the individuals in our sample who spent time in prison and had family members involved in extremism were the least likely to disengage. These individuals faced a set of barriers to disengagement that were often insurmountable. Those who did manage to leave extremism had access to a broad range of support services, including job assistance, mental health counseling, substance use treatment, and social support programs, and they were able tap into a network of pro-social actors who were willing to assist them with their exit from extremism. As we note below, in our discussions with federal probation officers, they cited familial connections to extremism as the most challenging cases to supervise.

In combination with our findings about ideological recidivism, our results from this earlier phase of the project suggest that successful reintegration likely depends on whether an individual's basic needs are being adequately met when they return to their communities after incarceration. At the same time, reintegration success is more likely if an individual is receiving the support they need to sever their ties to extremism. In the next two results sections, we focus on what pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals told us about the obstacles to reintegration, as well as the monitoring conditions and support services that improve the chances for reintegration success.

Part II: Challenges to Successful Reintegration

In this section, we further explore the obstacles to successful reintegration that individuals face while under supervision. Specifically, we look at how an inability to adequately address basic material needs, the presence of anti-social relationships, strained family dynamics, mental health concerns and trauma, and community stigma can present obstacles to reintegration for individuals who were previously incarcerated for committing extremist crimes. This section provides evidence from our interviews with pretrial services and probation officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals, each of whom had direct experiences with these challenges or with helping others overcome them.

Basic Needs

Upon release, system-involved individuals routinely face challenges fulfilling even the most basic tasks of everyday life. Securing essential needs like employment and housing is hindered by their extended absences from the workforce, their inability to establish financial security during adulthood, and the stigma attached to their criminal records. One of the system-involved individuals we spoke with described their challenges finding stable and decent-paying work, saying:

“Finding employment was really hard. Just about every company you go to, they'll background check you. So, my obstacle was to find a field where they didn't really care about background checks, and that was a decent job. The first job I was able to get was washing dishes. But you can't live on washing dishes, you know?” – System-involved Participant #1

Other system-involved individuals expressed frustration at “wanting to live a normal life” and “wanting a job” (System-involved Participant #2) but being fired after their criminal records came to light to their employers. Employment barriers also extend beyond criminal records, however. Multiple system-involved individuals we spoke with indicated they did not have access

to any job training or skills acquisition during their incarceration, leaving them to start from “essentially nothing” (System-involved Participant #1) upon release.

Housing, too, was a consistent challenge mentioned by several participants. For example, some service providers mentioned that even when programs are available for short-term housing for individuals upon release from prison, access is not guaranteed. Open spots come and go, and service providers note they have trouble maintaining lists. In another instance, a service provider told us about a system-involved individual who they were working with who failed to secure housing and consequently fell-back on couch surfing with other individuals involved in extremism. Such a situation is far from ideal and hinders the ability of system-involved individuals to sever ties with other extremists and remove themselves from anti-social relationships.

System-involved individuals also face difficulties with the skills required to navigate contemporary social life. For example, some system-involved individuals lack the knowledge and resources to secure government documents, like driver licenses, or to open bank accounts. If they were imprisoned for a long time, individuals might lack fluency with contemporary technologies like smart phones, which are becoming increasingly important to finding and maintaining employment, housing, and other critical services (Kearns et al., forthcoming).

Stringent post-release conditions—such as internet monitoring—can also foreclose certain professional opportunities that may have otherwise been available as potential pathways to social mobility (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). For instance, one of the system-involved individuals we spoke with was subject to intense monitoring conditions after their release from prison where they were not allowed to possess or access an internet connected device. They mentioned that finding employment was incredibly difficult because they were not allowed to

view websites that post job opportunities, fill out online job applications, or participate in virtual job interviews.

Overcoming these obstacles is paramount to reintegration success. Research shows that when system-involved individuals are fulfilling their basic needs, they are more likely to successfully disengage from extremism (Jensen et al., 2023). To this point, several of the system-involved individuals we spoke with who were able to secure jobs upon release noted how working with diverse coworkers had a positive effect on diminishing the influence of their ideological beliefs. By engaging in an environment that required cooperating with people different from themselves, system-involved individuals were forced to confront their extremist beliefs about race and ethnicity. In cases such as these, employment opportunities can be the source of disillusionment that leads to disengagement. Beyond creating disengagement opportunities by establishing pro-social relationships, Jensen et al. (2023) show that basic material subsistence can also facilitate disengagement by eliminating an individual's financial dependence on extremist groups. Such independence can stimulate social mobility that incentivizes individuals to separate themselves from their former extremist network, allowing them to chart a path that disavows support for violent extremism.

Social Relationships

A crucial aspect of successful disengagement from extremism involves severing anti-social relationships and forging new pro-social ones. The formation of pro-social relationships after incarceration allows system-involved individuals to derive new identities distinct from those associated with their past involvement with extremist groups and movements (cf. Morrison et al., 2021, p. 26-28). Indeed, Kearns et al. (forthcoming) note that disengaging individuals may consciously decide to “knife-off” by severing ties with previous extremist support networks. This often happens when individuals experience cognitive shifts rooted in identity transformations

that provide them with opportunities to acquire and build “‘new meaning’ for themselves” (p. 14).

The system-involved individuals we spoke with recognized the importance of severing ties with their extremist networks:

“I knew that if I continued to hang out with those guys, that I was going to wind up back in prison. Like when everything you do is to be underneath the government, everything. There's nothing like, ‘Hey, let's just have a barbecue.’ It's always like, ‘Hey, let's have a barbecue and sell these guns to someone.’” – System-involved Participant #5

Another system-involved individual was candid about their feelings regarding the perceived negative influence of their former extremist peers: “The type of people that you encounter when you’re living that kind of lifestyle aren’t the most favorable or upstanding members of society” (System-involved Participant #6).

While identity transformations can provide the motivation for establishing new positive social relationships, it is also crucial to note that disengaging from extremism is a form of loss for system-involved individuals—of status, community, and identity—that often fuels post-exit isolation (Jensen et al., 2023; Meredith & Horgan, 2024). The anxiety that often accompanies exiting extremism can lead to substance use, transitions to other forms of criminal activity, and an inability to form new positive relationships (Meredith & Horgan, 2024). Indeed, as one service provider told us about the challenges of forging healthy relationships post-exit:

“[It is difficult] to break away from relationships and friendships that you’ve had for sometimes 20, 30 years, and make new friends. It’s harder to make new friends as an adult to begin with, and they [i.e., system-involved individuals] struggle with that.” – Service Provider #10

System-involved individuals expressed similar sentiments. One individual shared the struggles they experienced establishing new friendships after exiting an extremist movement:

“This [making new relationships] is one of the hardest things for all of us...I lose all my friends if I leave this movement, you know. These are all the people I have been around

for the last seven years who I built my whole life around and my whole ego and my whole self-esteem.” – System-involved Participant #5

When individuals do succeed in forming new pro-social friendships and embrace positive social activities, it can accelerate the process of disengaging from an extremist ideology. For example, one probation officer we spoke with shared their experience with a system-involved individual who, upon release, took up recreational basketball at a local YMCA, which supplanted their need to engage in exploration of their extremist identity and helped them avoid “going back down the negative path” (Officer #2). Similarly, a service provider we spoke with noted how if system-involved individuals can learn to control their internal ideological impulses while also forcing themselves to engage in pro-social behaviors, then the influence of the ideology over their life can wane:

“Sometimes it's starting with don't say it out loud, don't do that behavior and don't say it out loud, and eventually, they're forced to engage with other people who have different beliefs, who see the world in different ways, they're forced to have new experiences, and they have the opportunity to have really positive, rewarding other relationships and roles in life that ultimately end up pulling them away from the beliefs.” – Service Provider #12

In other cases, individuals might struggle to disengage because their extremist relationships serve as their primary mechanism for achieving social status. Several officers noted that individuals who held high-ranking positions in extremist groups or who had some level of celebrity in prison often find it difficult to reintegrate. One officer, for instance, spoke about their experience supervising a well-known individual who was admired by other formerly incarcerated individuals. In prison, this individual was afforded a level of social status that they could not achieve once back in the community. System-involved individuals working through disengagement, therefore, require assistance establishing and maintaining pro-social support networks so that they can form healthy, non-extremist identities.

Family Dynamics

The role of families in the disengagement process is complicated. In some cases, re-establishing relationships with family members can be an important aspect of an individual's successful reintegration. Families can provide non-extremist social support networks, material support (e.g., jobs), and accommodations like housing and transportation that help reintegrating individuals satisfy their basic needs (Cherney, 2021). This was true for some of the system-involved participants we spoke with, such as one individual who was able to utilize their familial networks to obtain a job almost immediately upon release. Similarly, most of the officers we interviewed emphasized that good family support systems can make the difference between successful and failed reintegration. Likewise, the system-involved individuals we spoke with who did not have family support generally experienced more reintegration challenges at the beginning of their process than those who did. Family members can also act as informal monitors of an individual's post-release behaviors and social connections, allowing them to identify concerns early on and get their loved one the help they need.

However, in some cases, families are the source of an individual's radicalization to extremism, and therefore can hinder their disengagement efforts when they rejoin their communities (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Harris-Hogan, 2014; Jensen et al., 2023). Service providers and probation officers frequently mentioned how the presence of extremist family members and romantic partners can reintroduce individuals to extremist views or reestablish their social bonds with extremist groups and movements. Several providers and officers told us that extremism in the family unit makes it especially challenging to help releasees establish pro-social connections:

“Let's say I'm meeting with someone an hour weekly, to what extent is that helpful if they go home and they're in a toxic environment where pro-criminal extremist ideology is being espoused? I liken it to, yeah, you may learn a lesson in school, but like, really, it's

about homework, going home and practicing it. That's where that skill set really gets instilled and cultivated.” – Service Provider #3

“The biggest difficulty is if it’s entrenched in the family... ‘Oh, this is the cool group to hang out with, they’re always having parties...’ that’s easier to work with and get the individual going to the YMCA...instead. But when it’s Christmas and Thanksgiving, and you live with them, and your dad’s a racist, and your mom’s a racist...that’s harder.” - Officer #16

Moreover, several probation officers reported that, in their personal experiences, it was not uncommon for family members to have participated in extremist crimes together.

Family dynamics can also introduce other stressors into an individual’s life that makes it harder for them to reintegrate successfully. This is especially true if there is a history of substance use disorder; physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; or criminality in the family unit. One of the service providers we spoke with said that these types of dynamics are present in most cases of system-involved individuals who engage in extremism:

“No one gets into this sphere of life because things are going well. I've not encountered an extremist who had a pro-social social support system, had a respected 9 to 5 job, had a relationship that they felt was reciprocal... They are not coming from homes that any of us are envious of.” – Service Provider #3

In other cases, families may worry about their ability to accommodate the needs of system-involved family members, experience second-hand stigma themselves, and struggle to reestablish supportive relationships with their reintegrating loved ones (Cherney, 2021; Meredith & Horgan, 2024). Indeed, one service provider told us they have seen system-involved individuals become estranged from their family members due to their radicalization, leading to family members cutting ties with the individuals. At the same time, service providers said that system-involved individuals may *themselves* decide to sever ties with family members due to past traumatic experiences, such as abuse they suffered from their parents as children. In short, families do not necessarily have purely positive nor purely negative causal effects on reintegration: their role is highly contingent on the particularities of different familial dynamics.

Mental Health and Trauma

Recent research examining the mental health obstacles system-involved individuals experience suggests that there are often unique concerns associated with radicalizing to and disengaging from extremism. For example, Meredith and Horgan (2024, p. 195) show that disengaging individuals experience “post-exit distress” rooted in a “dual isolation from both former group and mainstream, fear of retaliation, guilt for past actions, and grappling with one’s identity and worldview” that triggers multiple stressors that contribute to the deterioration of mental wellbeing. Similarly, system-involved individuals with ties to extremism are frequently the victims of various forms of trauma—from childhood abuse, to the violence experienced with extremist groups, to betrayal trauma, and beyond—that significantly affects their mental health (Koehler, 2020; Meredith & Horgan, 2024). For individuals rejoining their communities, experiences of confinement in prisons and jails can be their own source of trauma that make reintegration more challenging.

Several of these themes emerged in our discussions with service providers and probation officers. Multiple officers told us that many of the system-involved individuals they worked with had untreated mental health issues that contributed to their adoption of extremist beliefs, such as childhood trauma or a lack of emotional regulation, that, when confronted and worked through, reduced the significance of their extremist ideologies. Indeed, these officers often described extremist ideologies as a “coping mechanism” for individuals struggling with psychological distress. As one officer told us:

“More often than not, there's going to be some aspects of, whether it's anxiety, depression, whatever the case may be, that there is some mental component that is kind of separate from the extremist ideology.” – Officer #7

Likewise, several service providers reported that the system-involved individuals they work with frequently have a variety of mental health concerns, including depression, bipolar disorder, neurodivergence, and schizoaffective disorder.

Others emphasized the challenges they experienced adapting to free life, reporting that they felt discomfort being in public spaces, occupying shared spaces with strangers, and simply being overwhelmed by the amount of free space they have access to outside of prison. As one system-involved individual we spoke with reported about a friend of theirs: “he couldn't leave his place, because he was conditioned to just be in a cell and found it very overwhelming to just do basic tasks” (System-involved Participant #8).

As these examples from our interviews illustrate, in many cases, successful reintegration will require that system-involved individuals have access to trauma-informed mental health care (Kearns et al., forthcoming). This is particularly important in light of some quantitative research showing that mental health concerns can contribute to engagements with violent extremism (Corner & Gill, 2015; Gill & Corner, 2017; LaFree et al., 2018). Despite their mental health needs, however, disengaging individuals routinely face significant problems accessing necessary treatments (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). This can be especially true of individuals living in rural parts of the United States, where support services are less prevalent and difficult to access.

Substance Use

Substance abuse is not a unique challenge faced by system-involved individuals with ties to extremism, but individuals impacted by substance use disorder may require drug and alcohol support services to facilitate their successful disengagement from extremism. Service providers stressed the importance of proactively assisting system-involved individuals with substance use

disorder prior to their release to prevent relapse into anti-social behaviors, which requires empathy and support from officers:

“We try to help them before they get out, but people slip through, and they get out before they've had any help. Why would we be surprised if somebody continues to have the same issue? Nobody wakes up and says, ‘you know what, today I'm going to destroy my life.’ And so, I get that, as a mental health practitioner and a substance abuse counselor, I understand that. I don't know that people working with folks that have been sentenced, probation officers included, often understand that.” – Service Provider #5

Sometimes the use of substances accommodates an individual's radicalization into an extremist group, where widespread drug and alcohol abuse can be common (Koehler, 2020, p. 461-462).

This point was highlighted by several probation officers, one of whom noted that individuals' drug use is often blamed on “being around the same people who had the same ideology” (Officer #4). Similarly, a system-involved individual we spoke with emphasized that substance use within extremist movements functions as a form of control that keeps individuals trapped: “Shame keeps someone stuck. Self-sabotage keeps someone stuck” (System-involved Participant #4). The negative influence of extremist social networks on substance use was also mentioned by probation officers, including one who told us about a case wherein the individuals they were working with had to request a change in the location of their supervision due to their concerns of being re-exposed to their former peers and falling back into substance use. While a proactive action on the part of the system-involved individual, this shows the risks that individuals with a history of substance use disorder face upon release if they reengage with their former extremist social networks.

Substance use may also develop as a response to the traumas and difficulties associated with the reintegration process (Kearns et al., forthcoming, p. 11). Indeed, as Meredith and Horgan (2024) show, system-involved individuals with ties to extremism often turn to substances to “shut of all emotions or drown them out” as they experience the stress associated with

disengaging (p. 186). As one system-involved individual we spoke with told us, they turned to alcohol for the purposes of self-medication to suppress the trauma and guilt they experience due to their past involvement with an extremist group:

“Once I quit drinking - I was really kind of self-medicating the harm I had done to myself and other people - and without the numbness of alcohol, it was really front and center in my life that I needed to reconcile my past somehow.” – System-involved Participant #7

Despite these challenges and the clear need for substance use treatments among this population, these services are not always available. The officers we spoke with often reported that they could not always secure high-quality substance abuse counseling for their clients. One officer noted that this may be a consequence of how the federal government handles contracts and procurement: “procurement makes that more difficult because we lose vendors and gain new vendors, and it's based upon the cost, not based upon the quality per se” (Probation Officer #19). A lack of access to high quality substance use treatment can have significant negative impacts on system-involved individuals' likelihood of successful reintegration. In addition to the strain that substance use puts on an individual's physical health and social relationships, illegal substances can also act as a pathway to reoffending and a return to prison.

Stigma

Weaved through all the challenges just discussed is the core issue of stigmatization. System-involved individuals with ties to extremism face profound challenges rooted in the stigma of being associated with extremist groups or terrorist activity, which can generate public hostility and negative sentiment in their communities (Altier, 2023; Clubb et al., 2024). The stigma associated with being involved in extremism can block an individual's access to jobs, educational opportunities, housing, places of worship, and other pro-social communities.

“You will have to take 10,000 ‘No’s before you ever get a single ‘yes’.” – System-involved Participant #4

“[Landlords] are very hesitant or outright unwilling to allow someone as a tenant that has a felony conviction.” – Service Provider #2

“Getting back into the community...was difficult because [the system-involved individual] had to hide who he was, because he was easily Googled.” – Officer #13

Indeed, in one particularly traumatizing instance of stigma, a system-involved individual we spoke with recounted how he was let go from a company that had agreed to hire him after they learned of his past involvement in extremism. The company subsequently called in the bomb squad to sweep their building, leading to the involvement of the FBI. Experiences such as these create a stigma of presumed guilt that continuously casts doubt on system-involved individuals' trustworthiness around their ability to disengage and reintegrate. This can be frustrating for system-involved individuals, as well as the officers and service providers who assist them, as many of these individuals are not seeking to commit acts of violence upon release: “Look, you could run into, you know, a murderer or a drug dealer or a sex offender, a jihadist, at Wegmans, and you're not going to know. It's not like they're out to hurt everybody all the time” (Officer #10).

Another probation officer we spoke with described what they perceived as unevenness in how stigma is apportioned by the type of criminal charges. For example, they noted how in one case, an individual who was convicted for providing material support to an international terrorist organization was fired from a ridesharing service, whereas in another case, an individual who was convicted for constructing explosives for a domestic extremist group obtained an adjunct teaching position at a university. As this officer notes:

“I think that's what I've noticed in the community response to someone that is providing material support or having anything to do with international extremist ideology is kind of, for lack of a better term, blacklisted compared to other people who are given a second chance.” – Officer #4

One service provider we spoke with shared what they perceived to be a double standard in the social norms governing redeemability around different types of offenses: “Over time we’ve become more forgiving of people with substance use issues, but I don’t think that we’re very forgiving of people who have done some of these extremist things” (Service Provider #5). Rather than treating involvement in extremism and terrorism as a complex social and psychological process deserving of empathetic understanding, similar to addiction and substance abuse, involvement in extremist crimes is often seen as *exceptional*, and reintegrating individuals are considered worthy of persistent mistrust, skepticism, and stigmatization.

These sentiments are similarly expressed by the system-involved individuals we spoke with:

“I’m not the extremist that they paint me out to be, but it takes a person to actually sit down and try to understand that...it’s pretty harsh when people just get the paperwork and run [with] what the paperwork says. Paperwork is cold. It’s direct. And oftentimes it comes from court documents that were meant to accuse you. And that, to me, is huge. The court documents were meant to accuse you to put you in prison, [and] you are now leaving prison. Please do not judge me as if I [just got] charged, because that’s what you’re reading.” – System-involved Participant #2

As this individual shares, the residuals of their criminality, recorded in legal proceedings and court documents, made them feel as if they were reduced to the essence of their criminal charges. Court documents reflect a prosecutorial point of view that leaves little room for the public to feel comfortable expressing empathy towards those convicted of extremist crimes. The inability to navigate around deep-rooted social stigma intersects directly with system-involved individuals’ capacity to provision their most basic material, social, and psychological needs, which can contribute to their failure to disengage from extremism and successfully reintegrate into free society.

Other mechanisms of stigmatization can include post-release monitoring conditions, which can undermine system-involved individuals’ ability to acquire fundamental basic needs like jobs

and housing. Restrictions that forbid an individual from having technologies like a smart phone, or which require them to have constant computer monitoring (which also extend to prospective employers' systems), for example, can eliminate opportunities for securing material subsistence and social mobility (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). While some system-involved individuals report that employment opportunities in the trades are more accommodating of their extremist criminal history (Kearns et al., forthcoming, p. 10), these jobs are not always a good fit with individuals' skills and professional experience. For example, Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al. (2023) describe a case of an individual who earned an MBA during incarceration, but who could not secure employment that matched his skills due to cumbersome monitoring as part of his release conditions. Similarly, one of the system-involved individuals we spoke with described struggling to find employment that matched their skillset and preferences after their release from prison. While they eventually found work opportunities, they were in high-risk positions, such as working in nursing facilities during the Covid-19 pandemic and removing asbestos from buildings that were being renovated. The inability to apply new, or even past, professional skills not only degrades the emotional wellbeing of disengaging individuals through stigma, shame, and guilt, but also eliminates prospective pathways of social mobility. Beyond material gains, restrictive monitoring conditions can make it difficult for an individual to see themselves as something other than a "criminal," thus increasing the likelihood that they will reoffend.

Part III: Case Management, Monitoring, and Support Services for Successful Reintegration

Overcoming the challenges associated with reintegration often requires support from various community actors. Aside from an individual's family members, probation and parole officers are often the first members of the community to engage with a system-involved individual as they are leaving prison, and they play a vital role in identifying the monitoring and support services that increase the odds that the person will reintegrate successfully. As law enforcement officers, they also have a primary responsibility to protect their communities from harm. In wearing dual hats as agents of public safety and social service providers, probation officers often must strike a delicate balance between traditional law enforcement techniques designed to protect the public and strategies that empower formerly incarcerated individuals to form new pro-social identities. In this section, we review what officers told us about managing the post-incarceration cases of individuals with links to extremism, what role monitoring plays in the process of successful reintegration, and what support services they rely on to help individuals achieve their reintegration goals. We also provide the views of the service providers and system-involved we spoke with on each of these topics and address the lingering challenges officers and support providers continue to face in helping this population successfully reintegrate.

Case Management

Identifying Cases of System-Involved Individuals with Ties to Extremism

As an initial step in supervising releasees, officers must identify the services an individual needs and assemble a relevant case management plan. This begins, first and foremost, with successfully identifying cases of extremism amongst the incarcerated population. A recent federal audit found, however, that there continue to be unidentified cases of system-involved individuals with a nexus to violent extremism in U.S. prisons (Office of the Inspector General,

2020). Indeed, our interviews revealed that the strategies used to identify potential cases of extremism among system-involved individuals are often ad hoc and inconsistent, and in most districts, they continue to disproportionately focus on identifying cases of individuals who were involved in international terrorism. As one officer told us, “there’s 94 judicial districts, so there’s 94 ways to do things” (Officer #9). Others noted frankly that there simply is “no uniform way we’re identifying these cases [of extremism]” (Officer #11).

As we mentioned above, when we asked to interview line officers for this study, several chief probation officers told us that their districts do not have any cases linked to extremism. When we probed this response by asking about specific groups and movements, such as white supremacists and sovereign citizens, many of these officers acknowledged that they do routinely supervise these cases but that they do not typically flag them as “extremist.” Some chiefs remarked that while their line officers were likely supervising individuals with ties to domestic extremism, they did not have a system in place to identify the cases. This aligns with the experiences echoed by the officers we spoke with:

“I don’t think there’s any protocol for how that’s done. It’s like just a gut feeling kind of thing from upstairs.” – Officer #14

“It’s again, not even something that shows up in the data. We don’t have a good system that informs us [of potential cases of extremism], even though we all share the same case management system.” – Officer #17

“You just had to stumble into it.” – Officer #26

When we asked line officers who are supervising individuals who were formerly involved in extremism how those cases were identified, we heard a variety of responses. Some officers noted that their districts use criminal charges to flag cases with links to extremism. Given the disproportionate use of terrorism charges in international terrorism cases, however, this approach means that officers who supervising extremist releasees are primarily supervising cases of

individuals with links to jihadism. Other officers noted the importance of the presentence investigation reports (PSI) written by their colleagues to identify cases with possible links to extremism. However, they noted that if an individual's criminal offense was not extremist in nature, the PSI might not include information about their participation in extremist groups or movements. In rare cases, officers mentioned that cases with a nexus to extremism were flagged by the Bureau of Prisons before the individuals were released from custody or they were brought to their attention by the FBI after the individual was no longer incarcerated. Finally, some officers said that their cases were not flagged prior to receiving them and that they only learned of the individuals' prior involvement in extremism after supervising them for weeks or months. While identifying cases with a nexus to extremism in the federal system has flaws, officers noted that the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts (AO) is taking a more active role in identifying these individuals and notifying the districts that will be supervising them.

Relationships with Law Enforcement

While devising case management plans, probation officers often seek to establish relationships with law enforcement agencies that may be monitoring the activities of their releasees. It is common for police and intelligence agencies to be aware of additional information that is unknown, and perhaps unknowable, to probation officers (Cherney, 2021). For example, the FBI may become aware of potential violations of release conditions before probation officers do. In some cases, probation officers may have direct lines of contact with agencies like the FBI, and even participate on Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs). However, from our interviews with officers we learned that this is not a universal experience. Some officers reported having close working relationships with the FBI and noted that information sharing was common and relatively easy. Other officers said that communicating with the FBI is cumbersome until

they acquire a security clearance and are eligible to receive sensitive information about their releasees. But even when officers do have clearance, information sharing is not guaranteed:

“As officers, we get top secret clearance through the same entity that gives them [i.e., agents] the same top secret. But they treat us like arm’s length sometimes with information, and it's crazy. But they expect us to do our job with not a lot of knowledge.”
– Officer #13

This may vary from field office to field office, as one officer who has frequently worked with the FBI recounted to us:

“I've worked in districts where the FBI were open and welcoming and you call them, you call your agent, you ask them for anything and they're like, Yeah, sure, I'll send it to you. What's your email? Whatever over the phone, they'll answer questions. I'll meet you. I'll come over whatever. But then I've seen here in [state] that I call an agent to ask questions like, ‘Hey, can you send me this?’ ‘I can't talk to you about this over the phone. No I can't email you that, no, I can't do that now. No, no, no, no, no.’” – Officer #15

This can lead to officers feeling as if there is a lack of reciprocity between FBI and federal probation, as well as a sense that probation officers are not appreciated as a focal component of law enforcement:

“They were totally willing to take all the information I was passing on to them...but I got zero information coming my way...so I felt like I'm operating at a real disadvantage here. You know more of what's going on than I do, and I'm the person who's in their house every other week.” – Officer #8

“I don't think most law enforcement agencies view institutional corrections as a branch of law enforcement, and they're fighting their own battles.” – Officer #19

Finally, some officers said that they do not currently have a working relationship with FBI agents in their jurisdictions and expressed a desire for open communication about the individuals under their supervision.

Finding Service Providers

In addition to forming partnerships with law enforcement, case management plans often involve identifying local service providers to work with individuals to address concerns related

to mental health, substance use, unemployment, and antisocial relationships. Officers are tasked with helping system-involved individuals secure these services, which in turn requires that the officers have the resources necessary to assemble an appropriate support team. Every officer we spoke with mentioned that this is one of the more challenging aspects of supervising individuals with links to extremism. For example, officers noted that finding mental health providers who are willing and able to work with system-involved individuals with ties to extremism is extremely difficult. Not only is it rare for mental health providers to have specific knowledge about, or training in, extremism, but officers also noted that many providers express hesitancy about working with individuals tied to extremism out of fear for their personal safety, concerns about their liability if an individual were to reoffend, and worries about how these cases could impact their professional reputations (cf. Kearns et al., forthcoming). For example, one officer we spoke with remarked that:

“There were a lot of providers that said ‘hey we’ll help out’ and then they found out what the population was and what that entails. And yeah, there were counselors that backed off, because they didn’t want their name, or their company associated with that type of case.” – Officer #2

The service providers we interviewed echoed these points, saying that a lack of familiarity with extremism and liability concerns are the primary reasons their colleagues have avoided working with this population. However, providers noted that clinicians’ anxieties typically go away when they realize that individuals who were formerly involved in extremism have many of the same mental health care needs as their typical clients:

“Terrorism is a very spooky word. But when you then look at how that transcends with suicidality, homicidality, anxiety, depression, psychosis, personality disorders, like all of that stuff, the clinicians will say like, ‘Oh, yeah, I’m competent in all that, I get clients all the time that deal with that.’” – Service Provider #8

Service providers also noted that concerns about liability in working with this population can usually be ameliorated by providing training for clinicians that includes the participation of attorneys or other legal advisors who can explain what is legally required of care providers in these cases.

Finding appropriate mental health providers can also be challenging due to the nature of insurance regulations and the requirements of establishing contracts with the federal government.

As one officer remarked:

“Getting a therapist to invest time in this or to do a contract with us has been very difficult...if we want to do some virtual thing or pool our resources regionally, insurance doesn't cover it. So how do we get funding for that? Do I have to have two providers in my state that take different types of insurance ready to go? Providers don't really want to contract with us, because it's a lot of work for like five clients thrown their way. So that's been a huge challenge.” – Officer #3

We heard from several officers and support providers that while system-involved individuals with an extremist criminal history typically qualify for health care through programs like Medicaid under provisions in the Affordable Care Act (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023), it can take months to establish the coverage. Individuals typically do not receive the services they need while they wait for their coverage to take effect. Even individuals who procure their own private health insurance can struggle with access to services. For example, if appropriate care providers are not available in their jurisdictions, system-involved individuals may face limitations in going outside of their insurance networks to secure the services they need. Officers also noted that due to federal rules, establishing contracts with new care providers can be cumbersome and slow, and that providers often lack an incentive to navigate the bureaucratic process of working with federal agencies.

While access to service providers remains a challenge, the practitioner community has begun working on ways to link individuals formerly involved in extremism to experienced providers.

For example, the Prevention Practitioners Network (PPN) has assembled a national directory of clinicians and licensed professionals who are willing to work with system-involved individuals with ties to extremism to offer mental health and other services. PPN also organizes workshops, seminars, and other events to educate professionals about issues of ethics and liability when working with this population, and it has also developed practice guides and information packets that service providers can access online.⁸ Similarly, through a grant from the Department of Homeland Security, researchers at Boston Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School are working with PPN to provide free training for mental health providers in the use of the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Strengths, Needs, and Risks: Assessment & Management Tool (T-SAM; Cardeli & Christopher, 2024). The T-SAM helps providers understand their role in violence prevention efforts, provides practical guidance for treatment planning, and offers a framework for identifying partners to assist in case management. While probation officers could benefit from engaging with these programs, those we talked to were generally unaware of them, suggesting that more outreach is needed to educate officers about the services that are currently available to them.

Risk Assessment

As part of their case management plans, probation officers often utilize risk assessment tools to identify the service and correctional needs of system-involved individuals, as well as to assess their risks of recidivating. In the federal system, officers supervising defendants who are awaiting trial are required to complete the Pretrial Risk Assessment (PTRA) protocol, while those supervising individuals after they are released from federal prisons are required to complete the Post Conviction Risk Assessment (PCRA). Importantly, these tools look for

⁸ See: <https://www.oneworldstrong.org/prevention-practitioners-network>

common criminogenic risk and protective factors, but they are not explicitly designed for assessing system-involved individuals with ties to extremism. Even though the PTRAs and PCRA are scientifically validated (U.S. Courts, 2018), all officers we spoke with said they have concerns about the utility of the tools when working with clients who have committed extremist crimes. This is especially true in the instances where system-involved individuals with ties to extremism score low on the PTRAs and PCRA. In these cases, approximately one half of the officers we spoke with told us that they typically override the assessments and flag their clients as high risk (see also Kearns et al., forthcoming; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). Officers noted that they override these assessments due to the nature of their releasees' convictions, even if they have never encountered an issue with the clients:

“Once we put that label on someone as extremist, we basically throw out the PCRA and just say, let's call him a high, I don't know if that's good or not either. I mean, I guess our rationale for that is let's...pump resources into where it looks like there's a high risk.” – Officer #3

“I don't think I ever went below a moderate, though, just because there's yeah, people have worries and they don't want something to happen, and then come on to us like, why were you treating her so lightly? Even though there was never an issue.” – Officer #8

Considering that officers are responsible for protecting the public from future terrorist crimes, it is easy to understand their anxiety when PTRAs and PCRA assessment scores are low. However, it is important to note that we are unaware of any scientific evidence that supports the practice of overriding these tools. Moreover, most of the service providers we spoke with expressed the feeling that prioritizing the common criminogenic risk factors that are included in the PCRA and PTRAs tools is just as important for individuals with links to extremism as it is for people who commit more typical crimes. Indeed, we got a general sense from the service providers we spoke with that reintegration failures are too often assumed to be the result of

extremist beliefs, when in fact they are more likely to be the result of a failure to address basic human needs. As one provider put it:

“...issues related to basic needs, issues related to mental health, issues related to social functioning, to social problem solving skills. That’s what matters. The ideology is not irrelevant, but it makes a lot of noise that clouds our judgment in terms of what might actually be problematic.” – Service Provider #12

The act of overriding PTRAs and PCRA assessments also has the potential to lead to the over-supervision of releasees who may legitimately be at low risk of criminal reoffending or reengaging with violent extremism. This practice also goes against officers’ own beliefs that “the worst thing we could do is generalize and not give everyone their own [individualized] assessment” (Officer #13). As previous research has shown, individuals who are put under intensive supervision tend to recidivate at the same rate as those who are not (Deschenes et al., 1995; Erwin, 1986; Gendreau et al., 1999; Hyatt & Barnes, 2017; Nath et al., 1976; Petersilia & Turner, 1990; Turner et al., 1992). In some cases, over-supervision can increase the likelihood that some individuals will reoffend. For instance, in their study of individuals who were supervised by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Duwe and McNeely (2021) found that intensive post-release supervision was effective for decreasing recidivism among violent, high-risk subjects. However, when applied to lower risk populations, intensive supervision led to increased technical violations and the revocation of parole.

While the PCRA was designed for assessing risk in cases involving more typical crimes, other tools specifically tailored to extremism exist. For example, the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+) risk assessment is a structured professional judgment tool designed by the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Justice for use in cases with a nexus to extremism. While the ERG 22+ could be potentially useful for U.S. probation officers, those who were trained in using

it told us that it requires significant time to complete and suffers from issues of inter-rater reliability:

“Just for one person to go through the interview process and write up everything that they ask you to write up for the ERG [22+], it took almost two and a half weeks.” – Officer #4

“I mean, we just don't have time to do a giant report. I don't know if the costs outweigh, you know, I'm just not sure we're getting that much good information if I spend a whole day doing this report...if there's going to be an effective research tool, it just can't take like three days to complete.” – Officer #3

Moreover, officers and service providers expressed concerns that the tool was developed in a different country and may not translate to the U.S. judicial context, with one participant telling us that risk assessments based on European models “totally missed the mark on U.S. culture and dynamics” (Service Provider #7). Participants also mentioned that they believe the tool lacks scientific validation, which is consistent with the current research literature (Elliott et al., 2023; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). While some experts recommend the use of the ERG 22+ in conjunction with the PCRA (see Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023), it is not clear from our interviews with officers that an additional risk assessment tool is necessary. It is also important to note that other tools, like the TRAP-18 and the VERA-2R, are not specifically tailored to assess the likelihood of recidivism among system-involved individuals with ties to extremism. Rather than have officers invest more time and resources on completing additional risk assessments, better training on extremism risk characteristics and when to use manual overrides of the PTRAs and PCRA tools may be a more effective use of time and resources.

In assessing the needs and risks of their clients, we also learned that it is not uncommon for officers to compare system-involved individuals with ties to extremism to other types of criminal offenders who they see as high-risk. Officers mentioned that they see releasees with a nexus to extremism as comparable to individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Individuals convicted of these crimes often have similar monitoring conditions as the individuals involved in

extremism, and officers often referred to the management of their cases as a blueprint for managing cases with a nexus to extremism. Officers and service providers noted that:

“Most of our individuals charged with child pornography are category ones. They're employed, minimal or no criminal history...educated, so they score very low [on risk assessments]. But because of the charge, boom, they rise to the top. Much like for extremist cases, whether it's jihadists or white supremacy, if there are concerns based on their alleged conduct, we would still potentially treat it [the same].” – Officer #6

“The true believer is gonna offend. Just like a sex offender is gonna offend. So it's not a matter if, it's a matter of when.” – Officer #9

“They're [i.e., extremists, sex offenders] all the same. It's just slightly different flavors of maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. And I think there's a kind of probably common vulnerability across them.” – Service Provider 12

“I think of [extremists] as sex offenders, and sex offenders have very specific treatment... and I feel like extremists deserve the same thing. They deserve specific treatment and options designated specifically for them because it's...almost like some of them have it ingrained, like they can't help themselves.” – Officer #15

Some officers also viewed gang-involved individuals as similar to extremists due to their shared involvement in antisocial community support networks and the importance of symbolism, but they more often cited an assumed shared impulsivity and inability to change as the common ground between extremists and sex offenders.

While the comparison to individuals who have committed sexual offenses might be useful as a heuristic, we are unaware of any data or evidence to suggest that managing cases of extremism in a similar way is an effective strategy for facilitating disengagement and reintegration.

Moreover, one of the system-involved individuals we spoke with noted that after they were released from prison, they were placed in housing with offenders who had committed sexual offenses and were required to see a therapist that specialized in sex offense cases. The interview participant cited this as a source of strain with their supervising officer, as they did not feel they were receiving appropriate services.

Establishing Rapport

Officers noted that establishing rapport with their clients is necessary for any case management plan to work. Rapport building is routinely highlighted as a critical factor for facilitating successful disengagement and reintegration within the context of extremism (Axelsson et al., 2024; Stern, McBride, Baker, et al. 2023). While rapport building is a general strategy that probation officers use for all types of releasees, in the context of cases involving extremism, it is a particularly effective way for officers to communicate openly with their clients, gather information, and even allow officers to make inroads with the individuals' families (Cherney, 2021). As one officer put it:

“[I try] to gain their trust as much as I can, show them that I'm not just every other law enforcement agent that they've worked with, and trying to learn more about them just by asking them questions. I find that's helpful. And if they're willing [to] understand the fact that I'm going to be in their life for a while, then they're a lot more receptive to my questions, and they're willing to have a conversation. And I found a lot of success with that, to be honest with you. Just asking them flat out about their history, their religious beliefs, their family, everything.” – Officer #10

The system-involved individuals we spoke with echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing the importance of trust and reciprocity for motivating change:

“When you feel that somebody wants to catch you, it ruins the relationship. There's no trust. It's, you know, and I feared that, and luckily, I didn't get that, but the thing that meant the most to me, that made me actually want to work with my probation officer and had me feel pretty good about my future in dealing with him, and even after, was the fact that he treated me like an actual human being, and I could tell it wasn't an act.” – System-involved Individual #2

Service providers told us similar things, urging officers to focus on building positive social relationships with their clients:

“You have to have a relationship. And you know this... You'll only want to buy what I'm selling if you believe that I care about you. And that I deeply care about you. And that I'm willing to listen to you.” – Service Provider #7

Most officers reported that they did not find rapport building with individuals who participated in extremism to be any more difficult than developing connections with releasees who commit more typical crimes. The one possible exception to this, however, is the supervision of sovereign citizens. Indeed, as one officer stated frankly, “there is nothing worse than a sovereign citizen” (Officer #14). Officers noted that members of the sovereign citizen movement often expressed open disdain towards them and were challenging to manage due to their refusal to adhere to legal requirements, sign paperwork, or cooperate with officers on simple tasks:

“Most sovereign citizens are difficult to manage because they don't want government intrusion. They don't recognize the authority of the probation officer.” – Officer #19

“I think it was one of the ones that I was not successful interviewing because with them, you can't even get through the dang consent forms. You can't even get there, explain [things to] them without them interrupting you 10,000 times about them - I don't remember what they would say - but they're very difficult to interview.” – Officer #22

In these cases, officers said they often had to take a hardline and less patient approach with the individuals to garner their cooperation. This sometimes involved asking the courts to add additional conditions to their supervision.

Monitoring

Nearly all system-involved individuals with ties to extremism will be subject to various forms of monitoring as part of their release conditions. This could include internet monitoring, periodic polygraph testing, GPS location monitoring, review of financial records, and drug testing. In most cases, these conditions are recommended to judges during the presentence investigation process and are officially established in the judgments issued by the courts. Officers said they periodically ask the courts to add or remove supervision conditions after an individual is released from prison and under their care. Probation officers noted that in most cases, such as a probation violation or evidence that an individual is making significant progress in meeting their reintegration goals, the courts are amenable to their requests. However, pretrial

services officers said that because they are supervising clients who have not been convicted of a crime, they can face more strident opposition to their requests for additional monitoring conditions.

Internet Monitoring

Given the spread of extremism online, internet monitoring was most frequently mentioned by officers as an important aspect of post-release supervision. From our interviews with officers, we learned that they view the monitoring of online activity to be necessary to detect violations and to gauge if their releasees are continuing to support extremist groups, movements, or causes. When internet monitoring is a condition of release, the electronic devices of releasees are monitored with software that takes screenshots and recordings of individuals' devices at designated intervals. This results in a large volume of images that officers must review for potential violations—a cumbersome task that multiple officers described to us as looking for “needles in a haystack.” While the technology has evolved to allow for the identification and flagging of keywords to make reviewing materials more efficient, officers noted that the software is not perfect and can result in false positives and false negatives. As a result, officers told us that they typically feel the need to review *all* of the screen images they are sent despite not having the time to do so. As one officer put it, internet monitoring is “frustratingly tedious and time consuming” (Officer #10).

Beyond time constraints, officers noted that they often encounter conceptual problems pertaining to what counts as “extremist content.” For example, one officer described that an individual under their supervision, who was prosecuted for trying to travel to Syria to join ISIS, would frequently view mainstream news articles about the group on their devices. They reported being unsure of what to make of this activity or if they should consider such content violative. Similar challenges are present in the domestic extremist space. For example, some officers noted

that it was unclear to them how they should react when individuals who participated in the January 6th assault on the Capitol building engages with content that, while legally protected speech, questions the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

In addition to these specific examples, officers generally reported that it is hard for them to keep up with the constantly evolving nature of extremism, especially when it comes the signs, symbols, and language that extremist groups and movements use online. There does not appear to be a simple solution to this problem. For instance, one officer we spoke with mentioned that they outsourced the analysis of their releasees screen images to a company that claimed to have subject matter expertise in extremism, but upon doing their own evaluation of the content, the officer found that the company had missed content that they considered concerning.

Overall, officers acknowledged that internet monitoring is an important supervision tool but cautioned that it should not be viewed as a panacea. Moreover, officers acknowledged that restrictive internet monitoring can impose reintegration hurdles on system-involved individuals that can compromise their ability to find educational opportunities, secure employment, or engage with pro-social communities. For instance, one officer relayed a story of a releasee who was prevented from pursuing a degree in computer science because the terms of their supervision would not allow them to accept a job where they would have to work with internet connected devices. In another case, an individual was required by their supervising officer to quit a job they had acquired because the company had internet-connected computers. They were required to do so even though they themselves did not have access to the computers. Similarly, one of the system-involved individuals we spoke with mentioned that the restrictions they faced in using the internet after their release from prison meant that they had to ask their defense attorney to help them search for jobs and use printed paper resumes, which significantly delayed their

progress in finding employment and limited their range of opportunities. Finally, officers acknowledged that many companies will not hire an employee if they must allow federal officers to monitor activity on their private business systems (Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023).

In other cases, restrictive internet monitoring conditions can have implications for system-involved individuals' families. For example, one officer shared an instance where they discovered that a smart TV and video game console within the home had internet access, with no possibility of password protection, which led to the removal of the devices even though they were used by other family members. In a separate instance, an officer described how a system-involved individual could not use a shared family computer due to internet monitoring requirements and advised that the individual acquire their own computer to set up proper monitoring. A few officers told us about how they help individuals navigate these challenges, such as helping them acquire older video game consoles without an internet connection or allowing them to use more modern equipment but deploying signed evidence tape over an ethernet port that could be checked during every visit. Even with these measures, however, officers expressed suspicion that many individuals under their supervision managed to secure secret devices or find other means to access the internet. As one officer said, "[Any] time you're dealing with the internet, I'd be the first one to tell you: if someone wants to access the internet, they can" (Officer #3).

Polygraph Examinations

When discussing internet monitoring, officers also frequently mentioned the value in using polygraph exams as a complimentary monitoring tool. Specifically, officers reported that they felt that polygraphs provide important information about the state of mind of system-involved individuals. For example, one officer told us that if an individual were to fail a polygraph, that

this would be “unnerving” (Officer #2). Likewise, another officer noted that polygraphs are a “great tool” for understanding individuals and for surfacing mental health concerns (Officer #4). Multiple officers told us that they found polygraphs especially useful when they suspected that their releasees had access to unauthorized devices, had acquired multiple cell phones, or were viewing extremist content on the internet. Consistent with the discussion above, several officers noted how the use of complementary polygraph testing mirrors the strategy used with individuals convicted of sexual offenses. Indeed, as one officer told us, the only other individuals who are routinely subjected to polygraph testing are those convicted of sexual offenses (Officer #4).

While officers generally supported the use of polygraphs as a monitoring tool for system-involved individuals with ties to extremism, we are unaware of a strong scientific basis in support of this practice. Research on the efficacy of polygraph exams is mixed, especially in criminal justice settings (e.g., Elvin et al., 2021). In our view, more research needs to be conducted on the efficacy of polygraphs as a monitoring strategy for system-involved individuals who have committed extremist crimes. It is also important to note that the use of such tools may have a negative impact on officers’ ability to build rapport with releasees. The use of these tests implies a need to probe the truthfulness of a releasee’s statements because of an assumption that they cannot be trusted. As one provider told us: “nobody likes the fact that you [have] to do a polygraph test” (Service Provider #7). Finally, some officers said they do not have access to polygraph examiners in their jurisdictions and must absorb the costs of flying them in from other districts.

GPS Location Monitoring and the Review of Financial Records

Officers also reported that GPS location monitoring can be useful in the supervision of individuals with ties to extremism. Location monitoring is primarily used to make sure that releasees are not intentionally or inadvertently crossing paths with co-defendants or known

members of extremist groups. Some officers did mention that GPS monitoring can present issues when releasees have jobs that require them to be mobile. For instance, one officer said they had to be flexible with the terms of an individual's location monitoring so they could keep a job they had recently acquired:

“Ideally, when you're on location monitoring, we like you to have a stationary position. So, if you work in a store, I will always find you in that store. Always, always, always, always. But with this case, you know, it was like, ‘I'm on a job site, I'm at another job site,’ you know, things like that. So, it wasn't the most ideal thing. But like I said, we kind of gave them a bit of a cushion because how many places were really going to take this kid on?” – Officer #13

The officers we spoke with expressed a willingness to loosen GPS restrictions as system-involved individuals earned their trust during release. Similarly, one system-involved individual we spoke with noted how after they successfully obtained a job, their probation officer removed their ankle bracelet, saying they “proved themselves reliable” (System-involved Participant #1). Positive interactions between officers and system-involved individuals such as these can be significant for shoring up rapport and helping set individuals up for successful reintegration. As other research has found, from the point of view system-involved individuals, positive interactions like these could be the difference between success or failure (e.g, Kearns et al., forthcoming, p. 18).

Officers also noted that the review of financial records can help determine if individuals are meeting their terms of supervision when fines or restitution are a part of their cases. Officers told us that monitoring financial records can also be helpful in detecting if individuals have purchased unauthorized electronic devices or internet service plans.

Drug Testing

Finally, system-involved individuals with ties to extremism are also frequently subject to periodic drug testing. Many system-involved individuals have access to drug treatment services

during incarceration, such as the Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) offered by the Bureau of Prisons (Stern, McBride, Baker, et al., 2023). However, some officers told us that it is often necessary for a judge to order mandatory drug testing so that they can help their clients obtain access to substance use treatment upon release, and even indicated that an individual may first have to fail a drug test before being provided with treatment. Importantly, while failed tests may constitute a violation of supervision, most officers noted that when this happens, they work to get their clients the help they need as opposed as to petitioning the courts for the revocation of their probation.

Support Services

Mental Health Support Services

The officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals we spoke with all mentioned mental health support services as potentially pivotal to a person's reintegration success. Mental health interventions, like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), can help individuals directly with processing negative emotions and developing an empathetic understanding of their past actions. They can also provide individuals with the skills necessary to increase their self-sufficiency, build confidence in their ability to independently regulate and manage their lives, and therefore help reduce their need to rely on extremist ideologies for cognitive support (Ellis et al., 2024).

Trauma-informed therapy was also cited by the service providers we spoke with as a potentially valuable care approach for individuals who have participated in extremism. Individuals can experience trauma in childhood, in their interpersonal relationships, during their time with extremist groups, while in prison, and, crucially, during reintegration (Lewis, 2022; Meredith & Horgan, 2024). Indeed, several officers we spoke with noted observing untreated mental health issues stemming from trauma in many of the cases they supervised. Officers

reported that when individuals worked through their past traumatic experiences with treatment providers, their extremist ideologies gradually became less useful as a coping mechanism.

Some service providers, however, noted that insurance restrictions can make it hard for them to provide appropriate care if an individual has not been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. One provider referred to diagnosis as the “gatekeeper to services,” and expressed frustration about how insurance rules limit the ability of clinicians to effectively treat individuals involved in extremism:

“If you take the comparison, for example, to suicide...we know people can be suicidal without a mental health diagnosis on record. We know that some people literally hit a period of their life where they start thinking they'd rather be dead, and that it's not tied to mental illness, that is human distress and suffering. They can get access to suicide-focused services because of that. To me, this is the exact same thing. Why can't we give people access to services when they've hit a point in their life where ultimately, they feel like violence is justified to solve a problem?” – Service Provider #11

The system-involved individuals we spoke with all mentioned previous traumatic experiences as integral to their radicalization. The traumatic experiences of these individuals ranged from childhood physical and sexual abuse, to parental neglect, to experiences with violence during their time with extremist groups. However, some participants noted that while engaging with extremism can itself be traumatizing, their membership in extremist groups initially helped them cope with psychological distress from past trauma. For some of the participants we spoke with, extremism gave them a sense of belonging that inspired meaning in their lives at a time when they felt isolated and alone. Addressing trauma outside of extremism, therefore, was regarded by these participants as an important part of their reintegration.

It is also important to note that disengaging from extremism itself can be a source of trauma. Exiting extremism typically requires abandoning old friendships and social support networks, navigating stigma and negative public opinion, and trying to secure housing and employment

while having a criminal record tied to extremism. Trauma-informed mental health treatments can help individuals manage these experiences, empower them to effectively process emotions and suppressed feelings through introspective practices, and facilitate personal healing (Kearns et al., forthcoming, p. 24).

System-involved individuals are not the only ones who can benefit from access to appropriate mental health care. Several officers we spoke with noted that their own mental health suffered when taking on cases of individuals with ties to extremism. This was often the result of acute anxiety over the potential for public harm and burnout from intensive supervision.

“As a probation officer, you live your life feeling responsible for these individuals...you can't help but absorb that. If I'm supervising a case and that individual goes out and shoots somebody...I feel like I do everything I could do to prevent that. You carry that with you.” – Officer #11

Secondary trauma, or the repeated exposure to the details of someone else's traumatic events, can also affect those who work in support roles, such as mental health providers and social workers, or those who work in law enforcement and intelligence (Lewis et al., 2012; Sudkamp et al., 2022). One service provider we talked to had insights into how to help officers and other caregivers navigate mental health and trauma, stressing the importance of self-care, implementing boundaries, and building partnerships as ways for to effectively navigate difficult cases and benefit from community support.

Support for Families

As discussed above, families can be an important source of support for assisting system-involved individuals with disengagement and reintegration. Indeed, most officers we spoke with said that a strong family support system is the most important factor for reintegration success. Service providers generally agreed with this assessment, noting that:

“The family has a way of truly reining the behavior in, without the threat of incarceration, without any sort of potential for something that could change this person's life for the worse...if they come together, they can create an environment in which the individual is able to understand themselves and better understand what their behavior is rooted in.” – Service Provider #13

Some officers we spoke with, however, noted that their clients remained estranged from their families after being released from prison due to their prior involvement in extremism. In some of these cases, familial separation had a significant impact on the individuals’ ability to secure their basic needs. Officers confronted with these situations reported that they had to step in to play a role that might otherwise be fulfilled by the family, including finding their releasees temporary housing or spots in shelters, helping them find and access food pantries, and assisting them more closely in finding jobs.

While families can be a source of material and social stability for an individual, many of the study participants we spoke with mentioned that families can experience their own struggles after a loved one is released from prison due to second-hand stigma and concerns about their ability to effectively provide material and emotional support. Service providers pointed to a need for mental health and counseling support services to be extended to family members to help them cope with the stress of their loved ones returning home:

“You can't do a service for these men and women coming out of these institutions if you don't understand what the families need as well...we have to teach them how to help this person, to support this person also, and a lot of them would probably be victims of something or another, and so they also probably need services. So, if you're going to deal with the whole person, which I think you have to, you've got to deal with the family side too.” – Service Provider #7

Everyone we spoke with noted that it is important for officers and service providers to tap into resources that can help families understand extremist beliefs, the process of radicalization, and the social and emotional functions that extremist social support networks provide for their loved ones. Organizations like Life After Hate and Parents for Peace have created tools for families,

such as family-focused research guides, a helpline, and support groups (e.g., Life After Hate, 2020; Parents for Peace, n.d.), to help educate them about effective communication strategies and how to foster reciprocal relationships with family members who have radicalized to extremism.

Peer Mentorship

Of all the services we discussed with officers, providers, and system-involved individuals, they were in the least agreement over the efficacy of peer mentorship. Perhaps not surprisingly, providers who work in the space of peer mentorship, including those with former ties to extremism, told us that peer mentors who have lived experiences with extremism and subsequently disengaging—colloquially called “formers”—are a particularly effective resource for system-involved individuals to engage as they seek to forge pro-social relationships upon release. Peer mentors, like those who partner with Life After Hate or Parents for Peace, provide mentorship to individuals exiting violent extremism (Life After Hate, 2023; Parents for Peace, n.d.), and they may be able to establish credibility, rapport, and trustworthiness with mentees due to their first-hand experiences and insider knowledge (Malet et al., 2024). As one peer mentor told us:

“I found that I had a very unique way of bonding and building a foundation of support and trust with these individuals. I wasn't an authority figure. I wasn't somebody that they were talking to who went to college for this, I was somebody who lived it, and that builds a lot of trust and a lot of safety with the individuals working you're working with.”
System-involved Participant #6

While peer mentorship programs in educational and workforce settings are generally believed to have a positive impact (Lunsford et al., 2017; Kram, 1985; Hansford et al. 2002), there is less evidence on how they perform in correctional and post-incarceration environments. There is some evidence that state and local level programs that provide peer support to formerly

incarcerated individuals are effective (Kjellstrand et al., 2023; Koschmann and Peterson, 2013), but there is little more than anecdotal evidence that peer mentors are effective in helping individuals disengage from extremism and reintegrate after incarceration (Kearns et al., forthcoming; Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). As we understand it, there are ongoing efforts to systematically evaluate the peer mentorship programs designed to help people leave and stay out of extremist groups (e.g., National Opinion Research Center, 2021), but the results of these efforts have not yet been released.

While peer mentorship may be effective with this population, there are risks associated with this type of service due to a lack of formalized training and the adoption of shared standards of practice. In their assessment, Kearns et al. (forthcoming) note that more needs to be done to professionalize peer mentorship to ensure mentors possess the appropriate “knowledge and skills to facilitate disengagement and reintegration” (p. 41). We agree with this evaluation. Several of the service providers we spoke with, and even some of the peer mentors, suggested that a code of ethics or formal processes for vetting peer mentors should be established before the service is widely adopted by federal probation officers supervising the cases of releasees with links to extremism. Officers themselves voiced similar concerns and were generally dismissive of the idea of using peer mentors with their releasees:

“[Peer mentorship] can be a very powerful message and with the right person, it could probably have a great impact. But you also have to remember, unless they develop themselves with a formal education and counseling and do other things to develop themselves...and really prove themselves, it can be dangerous.” – Officer #1

One of the providers we spoke with who has helped design and lead a large state-level peer mentorship program for formerly incarcerated individuals acknowledged these concerns but suggested there are practical steps officers can take to be feel more comfortable working with peer mentors. For instance, officers could limit peer mentors to those who have been fully

compliant with their terms of release and have been recommended to them by their colleagues. A prospective peer mentors could also undergo a formal review, interview, and training process before working with newly released individuals, such as the certified peer specialist training required by Georgia’s state-level Forensic Peer Mentor Program (GMHCN, n.d.). Finally, some of the service providers we spoke with suggested that officers do not have to limit themselves to peer mentors who were formerly involved in extremism. These study participants noted that the post-incarceration needs of individuals with ties to extremism often have more to do with securing basic needs and navigating life after prison than addressing extremist ideologies. Thus, formerly incarcerated peer mentors could be effective in working with individuals with links to extremism even if they themselves were not involved in ideologically motivated crimes. Existing state and local post-incarceration mentoring programs also utilize volunteer community members with no criminal record, who can still provide prosocial support and valuable access to resources in the community (Kjellstrand et al., 2023; Koschmann and Peterson, 2013).

Basic Needs

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the officers, service providers, and system-involved individuals we spoke with all highlighted the role that securing basic material needs—particularly employment and housing—plays in successful reintegration. Officers and service providers told us that by finding housing and jobs, individuals felt less of the stress that accompanies reintegration, had new opportunities to forge pro-social identities, and kept busy, lowering the likelihood they would have the time to reconnect with their former extremist peers. As one provider put it: “When you’re fully employed, you’re not likely to go back to the Klan. You don’t have time for that” (Service Provider # 13).

Some of the participants we spoke with noted that during incarceration, system-involved individuals may receive job and educational training, but these services can be focused on trades that may not align well with the individuals' professional backgrounds (see also, Stern, McBride, Mellea, et al., 2023). Officers and service providers noted that the most common types of employment that were available to their clients were “back of house” service jobs (e.g., dishwashing), trucking, factory jobs, and construction. Officers said that one of the ways they have improved access to other types of employment for their clients has been to cultivate relationships with prospective employers in their jurisdictions to educate them about the requirements of post-release supervision and calm their anxieties about working with this population. Overall, the participants we interviewed all agreed that it is critical that officers establish a plan for their clients to secure the necessities of life as they prepare for release—ideally prior to their clients' release from prison.

Conclusion: Training, Education, and Additional Recommendations

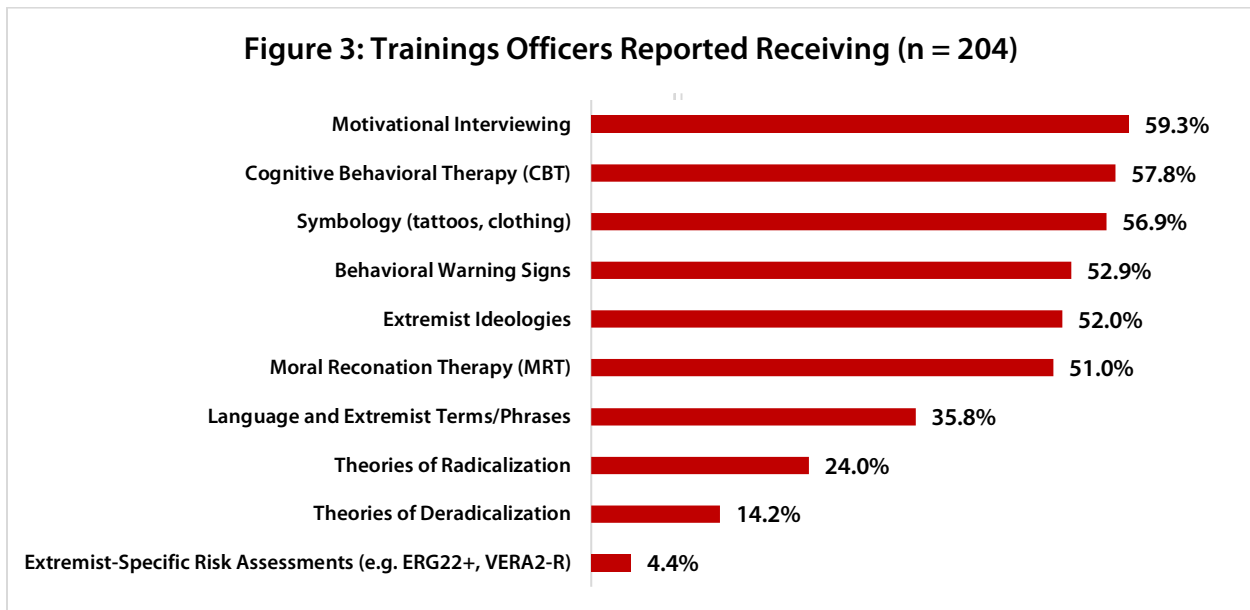
The preceding analysis suggests that supporting the reintegration efforts of individuals who have previously committed crimes linked to extremism is a complex process that requires the active participation of the formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and various members of their communities. This population faces significant challenges to reintegration that are less common, and in some cases absent, from the reintegration experiences of people who commit more typical crimes. Moreover, extremism is a constantly evolving phenomenon, which puts tremendous strain on officers and service providers, as they must be continually engaged in educating themselves about the nature of the extremist threat. Training on extremism, therefore, is an important part of preparing practitioners to assist this population and keep our communities safe. As we discussed above, a focus of our discussions with officers and service providers centered on their training and education needs when it comes to supporting the reintegration efforts of this population. We review what officers and service providers told us about training and education here, and we provide additional recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

What Training Have Officers Received?

Nearly all of the officers we spoke with said that they did not receive formal training in working with individuals who have committed extremist crimes, either as a part of their onboarding when they joined federal probation or when they first received cases with a nexus to extremism. However, most officers did report that they have participated in trainings on extremism that were offered through more informal mechanisms, such as presentations to their networking groups, webinars provided by university researchers and think tanks, and information made available through NGOs. In most cases, officers said their education about extremism was

self-guided, but they did also mention that some of their training was the result of opportunities they learned about from the AO.

The responses to the survey that we co-developed with researchers at Harvard’s School of Public Health show that the training opportunities that officers have sought out have covered a range of topics—from the symbology used by extremist groups, to the behavioral warning signs of radicalization, to the use of different therapies (see Figure 3).



As part of this project, our team developed and provided one of these trainings. In partnership with the Federal Judicial Center (FJC), we created a series of asynchronous videos and eLearning modules that were offered to officers free of charge on the FJC website. The training introduced officers to extremism in the United States, looked at key concepts and findings in the research literature on radicalization, and reviewed the obstacles that individuals with links to extremism can encounter when attempting to disengage.

While informal trainings, like the one we provided through the FJC, have helped fill an important knowledge gap for officers, they have some disadvantages in comparison to more formalized education. First, many of the trainings that officers find on their own are not designed

to explicitly address the challenges and requirements of federal probation. Because of their more general nature, approximately 10% of the officers who received the trainings displayed in Figure 3 said they did not find them helpful in addressing their specific needs. Second, most of the informal trainings that officers receive are not typically offered more than once, and those that are made available more frequently may not be updated to reflect the constantly changing dynamics of extremism or new research findings from the field. Thus, the officers who are finding and attending these trainings might not be getting the most up-to-date or practically useful information from them. Finally, as informal trainings, officers cannot rely on an official body, such as the AO, to tell them which trainings are useful, and which are not. As a result, officers may not be targeting the trainings that are most relevant to them. We, therefore, consider the development of a robust and centrally guided training initiative as perhaps the most important thing that can be done to support officers.

What Training Do Officers Want?



All the officers we spoke with indicated a strong desire to receive more training on extremism, especially as it relates to the reintegration of individuals leaving U.S. prisons. Indeed,

the results of our survey show that while there is some desire for training on more general topics, like motivational interviewing, most officers want training that is specific to extremism (see Figure 4). This includes training on the behavioral warning signs of ideological recidivism, theories of radicalization, the content of extremist ideologies, and the language and symbols that are used by extremist groups and movements.

When asked how they would like to receive these trainings, the officers we spoke with overwhelmingly said they would prefer in-person events where they can ask questions to the experts presenting the information. However, officers noted that, given the decentralized nature of federal probation and the constraints on their time, in-person training events may not be feasible. Some officers said that leveraging the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers, where they periodically go to receive training, could be a way of offering in-person events. Others noted that virtual trainings, including webinars and asynchronous courses, are a useful substitute. Above all, officers expressed a strong desire for these trainings to be organized by a central authority, such as the AO, who has vetted them for quality and made sure they are tailored to the needs of officers. Finally, in addition to training events, officers generally supported the idea of the AO issuing standard guidance on the supervision of individuals with ties to extremism in the form of a manual, handbook, or other type of user guide.

Training and Additional Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey and our discussions with officers, we think there is an immediate need to provide officers with more training and education to help them effectively supervise individuals who have committed crimes with a nexus to extremism. In particular, we believe the following should be considered:

- ❖ Officers who are being assigned to supervise releasees with ties to extremism should be required to complete a training course dedicated to the management of extremist cases. The training should cover:
 - Defining extremism and identifying cases in the federal system;
 - patterns of extremism in the United States;
 - groups, movements, and ideologies;
 - signs, symbols, and language;
 - the pathways of radicalization and disengagement;
 - risks for recidivism;
 - case management;
 - monitoring; and
 - service provision.
- ❖ The development of this training course should be led by the AO in partnership with officers experienced in the supervision of individuals with ties to extremism, violence prevention practitioners, and experts from the terrorism research community.
- ❖ This training should not be limited to line officers but should also be made available to chief probation officers, judges, prosecutors, and public defenders.
- ❖ Ideally, the training course would be delivered in-person, but if that is not feasible, the AO should partner with experts in adult learning to identify the most effective ways to deliver the training online.
- ❖ The training should be tailored to officers based on their roles (e.g., pretrial services, probation, presentence investigations).
- ❖ The completion of the training should count towards the satisfaction of the officers' annual training hours requirements.
- ❖ The training should be resourced sufficiently to allow for annual updates to the course content and the addition of new topics.
- ❖ The training course and supplemental materials provided to officers should identify the violence prevention programs they can contact to inquire about identifying service providers and experts to assist them with their cases.
- ❖ The AO should codify the core content of the training in a handbook officers can reference as they are devising case management plans for their releasees.
- ❖ As needed, the AO should identify, organize, and vet secondary trainings on more discrete topics, such as the effectiveness of different psychotherapies in helping people disengage from extremism and reintegrate after incarceration, public health approaches to tertiary prevention, and evidence from state-run programs that provide peer mentorship to formerly incarcerated individuals.

- ❖ The initial training provided to officers upon joining federal probation should include a section dedicated to cultural competency, thus preparing officers to help clients with diverse backgrounds.

In interviews with service providers, it became clear that they, too, desire more training on extremism. For instance, one provider noted that:

“We don't actually get training in this [extremism]. And...our ethics codes are built into the licensing laws - we can only work with populations for whom we are competent to work with. That means we've had education, training, and supervised practice experience [with this population].” – Service Provider #12

While training in working with clients who were formerly involved in extremism is provided by outlets like the PPN, many service providers are not aware that these resources are available to them. Thus, extending training to service providers may be more a matter of advertising available resources than developing new ones. For instance, some mental health service providers we spoke with suggested that leveraging professional associations, like the American Psychological Association, would be a relatively easy and effective way to make more service providers aware of the training that is available to them.

Additionally, our interviews with officers indicated that there is a greater need for mental health and self-care support services aimed at helping officers navigate the difficult nature of their work. Lack of training often seemed to go hand in hand with increased anxiety about managing high-risk cases. Thus, pairing mental health support services with training in supervising extremist cases could have a positive effect on officers and their ability to effectively support releasees.

Beyond these training recommendations, the findings from this project suggest that there are additional areas of research that are needed to better assist officers and service providers in helping formerly incarcerated individuals disengage from extremism and successfully reintegrate

into their communities. First, there is a critical need for more research on recidivism in the population of individuals who have committed extremist crimes. As it stands, data on recidivism is limited, making it difficult to provide rigorous, but practical guidance to officers and service providers working with individuals with ties to extremism. Due to the absence of data and analysis on recidivism in this population, service providers and officers must base their decisions on important aspects of supervision, such as assessing an individuals' risks and needs, case management, monitoring, and service provision, on their professional instincts as opposed to scientific evidence.

Second, research is needed to determine if there are cognate populations of formerly incarcerated individuals that officers and service providers can reference when designing case management plans, identifying appropriate monitoring techniques, and administering services for individuals with ties to extremism. The current practice of comparing individuals with a nexus to extremism to those who have committed sexual offenses should be supported by research demonstrating its utility before it is more widely adopted.

Third, an external evaluation of the PTRAs and PCRA tools is needed to determine where they fall short for assessing risk in the population of individuals with links to extremism, when they can be trusted, and when officers should be overriding their results and classifying individuals as either high or low risk. This evaluation should be paired with research that seeks to determine if intensive supervision lowers the risk for recidivism in this population or if it unintentionally increases the odds that an individual will fail to meet their reintegration goals.

Fourth, scientific evaluations of peer support programs that focus on extremist disengagement are critically needed. While individuals who have successfully disengaged from extremist groups and movements could have powerful and positive impacts on individuals who

are attempting to reintegrate after incarceration, probation officers are wary of including them in their case management plans. Stronger scientific evidence that peer mentorship works with this population would help calm their concerns and potentially give them a valuable resource to leverage when supervising cases of individuals with links to extremism.

Finally, we believe that future research in this area must involve the active participation of officers, service providers, and those who have lived experiences of disengaging from extremism and rejoining their communities after incarceration. Members of the terrorism research community, us included, often do not have intimate knowledge of the day-to-day requirements and challenges of supervising releasees or administering support services. Thus, we run the risk of designing research projects that do not address the critical needs that officers and service providers have. By working together in designing and conducting research, we will be more effective in assisting individuals with links to extremism than if any one of us attempts to do it alone.

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